The Accidental Husband

by panda_shi

Summary

Tony Stark discovers, that during his lowest point when he had been almost-twenty-one, he had married the King of Wakanda. Except he doesn't remember how. Now, trying to get a divorce is going to be one challenging thing -- how is this his life, even? It's almost unfair!

NOTE: CACW tags added as suggested.

ON HOLD/HIATUS UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE
I am my own Beta, might have some typos, yadayadayada. Work is inspired by the amazing marvelingjules @ TUMBLR. Because if it wasn't for her fics that I stumbled upon, I would not have known how much I ship these two.

I have no willpower.

See the end of the work for more notes.
When the headlines hit, Tony, quite literally, *vomits*.

*Iron Man, secret husband to the New King.*

Although Tony can probably blame the street burrito he had picked up on the way to the office the night before, the headline does a rather spectacular job of getting his stomach in knots, a fine addition to the magnificent headache he already has from the binge-rage drinking he had subjected himself to the night before. He can’t even remember the reason why he had done that, except that his soldering gun had done a fantastic job in pissing him off; the darn thing wouldn’t hold *still* in his hands and goddamn if Tony is going to acknowledge the fact that the quakes and shakes that are like chills buried so deep into his bones had not left him since Siberia. No-siree, the soldering gun had been faulty; he had a sneaking suspicion that his bots might have jostled something while handling it during a clean-up.

He remembers throwing the stupid thing across the room, remembers starting a mini fire of sorts that Dum-E had taken care of - it’s somewhere between the clouds of monoammonium phosphate settling and Tony giving up in dusting the white residue off his hair that his old bestie Jack Daniels and Captain Morgan decides that they were better company than the upgrades Tony had been working on, anyway.

Honestly, Tony didn't mean to throw up at the photo of him and the soon-to-be-crowned-King.

In fairness, the burrito is also to blame.

The vomiting comes out wretched, wet and chunky, like acid that reminds Tony of the sourness of really old batteries -- it’s a miracle that Pepper does not turn on her heels and walk the other way. Tony swears he sees stars when he thinks he’s done regurgitating. He takes one look at the cheaply photo-shopped image of himself and the fucking King of Wakanda on the trashy tabloid one more time – and nope. Apparently his body still had more give. Well, like they say, better out than in.

“You know, he’s not that hard on the eyes. You can’t be *that* disgusted,” Pepper says dryly, holding out a box of tissues towards Tony with lovely, perfect French manicured fingers, her button nose wrinkling.

The smell is quite atrocious.

Tony holds up a visibly quaking finger towards Pepper to give him a minute to get his shit together, as he tries to wrap up the entire vomiting-my-entire-digestive-tract thing done and over with. He hears Pepper call the cleaning staff, and asks one of the pantry attendees to bring in some tea and some other crap that Tony knows is going to do jack in getting rid of his hangover. But well, Pepper wouldn’t be Pepper if she didn't do these things.

“That is a vicious lie,” Tony manages to croak, as he presses his head against the edge of his office desk, the cool glass a comforting sensation against the clammy skin of forehead, as he sucks in vomit-scented air before he finds some measure of bravery to sit straighter, leaning his head back. It would seem his digestive tract will live to see another day. “If I were married into royalty, trust me, I’d *remember*. Do we still have Yoh in legal?”

“Can I borrow her? I want them in shreds. No, I want them in glorious, fine-as-sand little particles,” Tony says tiredly if not a little vindictively, a little breathless as he fists and releases his left hand a couple of times. “I want them begging for mercy. Stock market will plummet with that published farce. You, as CEO, do not want that. Yoh and her team handle it.”

Pepper doesn’t move to agree immediately, green eyes flickering over the newspaper she had unceremoniously slammed down on his desk in a fit of outrage and irritation just minutes ago. “I’ll let her know. Clean up, Tony. We’ve got a press conference in an hour and Happy should be here with the kid soon.” Pepper picks up her purse and then pauses. “What if it’s true?”

“What is true?”

“The marriage.”

“Oh come on! You’re looking at the guy with commitment issues; you know that,” Tony bites, a little rough around the edges, sprinkled with a little bitterness, and maybe, he almost feels just a tinsy-weensy-bit guilty when something crosses Pepper’s features. “It isn’t true because – seriously, Pep. The King of Wakanda? They're no fans of the Starks.”

Tony picks up the newspaper and flips a few pages to the main article, eyes scanning words upon horrid words of lies, until he reaches the part about the wedding date and location. That is where Tony visibly, if anything, hesitates, and all the hairs at the back of his neck stands on edge.

Tony can count on literally, one finger, the amount of times he doesn’t remember much of what had transpired. It had been late winter, on January 28, 1992, a little after Jarvis had been put in the ground. If Tony is being honest with himself, every party after that date had been the best series of parties he had ever been a part of. He had hopped from one city to another, all the way to the West Coast, dragging an entire entourage with him like some sort of fucking rock star. He remembers the before and he remembers the after, but not much in between. A cocktail of coke, heroin, alcohol, questionable sex, peppered with a little weed and a few dubious chemistry experiments can do that to a person.

Not that Tony had been much of a person before and after the whole partying, per se.

Still.

The date on the tabloid easily falls post-Jarvis burial and the day he woke up at a hospital in New York after a severe overdose and flat lining for thirty seconds. Hell, he doesn’t even remember how he ended up in New York to begin with. Obie never told him at the time and Tony had been too inebriated by grief (Ana at first, then his parents, then Jarvis) to ask or pay attention to fine details.

So, he may, or may not have been indeed married to the King of Wakanda.

Tony doesn’t fucking know but he makes Friday find out if it’s all slander, indeed.

Hell, Tony doesn’t even remember ever praying for something to be unreal than he did in the space of one hour between getting his shit together and Peter turning down his offer to be an official Avenger. He gets his confirmation the minute Peter leaves, seconds after Pepper bursts in asking where is Peter and there he is, standing there like the biggest fucking idiot in the entire world, legally married under the governing law of the United States of America and he had no bloody clue this entire time.

Tony wonders, not for the first time, if this may just be divine punishment, if this is Karma taking a
bite off his head. Dying under the good Captain’s shield may have been a better option because no, Tony doesn’t want to deal with this goddamn cluster-fuck. He’s vividly aware of how many bad decisions he's made over the past, but really, one would think that a grieving almost twenty-one year old boy would be given some slack. For fuck’s sake, he had lost everything in the span of a month, had buried everything that he had held remotely dear to him (questionable at times i.e. Howard), he had no idea how to cope, had wanted to feel something other than the gaping hole of a mess in his chest long before the Ten Rings actually, literally, put a hole in his chest. If the need to feel at his lowest point made him a villain, Tony snorts to himself as he comes up with a ah-eureka! level solution, well, it wouldn’t be the first time.

Sooner or later, the world was going to crucify him (again) over one thing or the other. It just had to be the Wakandan Crown Prince, this time.

Clearly, even inebriated, the Starks does not do anything by halves.

Pepper looks unsure when Happy pulls out the ring. She had every right to be. They had discussed that an engagement-announcement is only to be used in very dire circumstances. It had been their agreement, some sort of honored pact between them as friends, and two people who deeply care for each other even when their romantic relationship had not worked out for the best. Tony isn’t sure if he’s willing to utilize that card just yet.

The text message from Yoh is all the affirmation Tony needs.

When he steps out to the podium and the eager journalists from local and international networks stare up at him like hungry gremlins, Tony blurts out the first thing that he knows is a sure-fire to divert attention from the non-existent and pitiful team that is the ‘Avengers’, the so called superhero ‘Civil War’ and hopefully, the rampant and forevermore talks of the recent Raft breakout. Tony might as well make it all about him.

As always.

“Soooo, I’m married to a King and I have no idea how that happened!”

The chaos that erupts from that one line alone makes has the after effects of Tony running twenty marathons in the space of two minutes. He stands there, astoundingly speechless, as he is bombarded by questions being yelled at him simultaneously. A moment of disgust fills Tony’s stomach as he stares at the vultures before him; one would think he’d be used to being treated like a public figure. He doesn’t even know what the word privacy even means - let alone feels like - anymore. Growing up, he had been under the media’s scrutiny for the longest time. He should own balls of steel by now when it comes to something like the fucking circus in front of him. He holds his hand up for the ferocious beasts to calm down, long enough for him to actually spit the words out and hopes that the truth would keep the media spinning on something else other than what had happened two months ago.

“When I say I have no idea how that happened, I actually mean it. I was almost twenty one, I lost my entire family and felt, like all smart kids going through a loss and crisis, that drinking and drugs will solve all my problems. Obviously, it didn’t. I was in a bad place, and you know, when you’re in a bad place, you don’t exactly make the smartest decisions.”

The seed is planted.

Tony throws in St Francis’ Hospital in the mix before he steps out, just as the guards push back the chasing reporters and he shuts the door behind him.
It’s going to be a long-ass day.

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Obviously, pissed off Wakandan Kings gave little to no shits about private property or trespassing. Tony is in his workshop, Friday’s security protocols momentarily scrambled long enough for the King and his Dora Milaje to step into his workshop, faces unreadable, dressed to the nines and giving off vibes of a murdering mobster gang ready to spill blood.

Tony knows that the only reason he doesn’t react is because he had switched his coffee in favor for something stronger. There is an empty bottle of Irish whiskey on his desk, the last of it in the glass he’s been staring at for the past hour or maybe six, he’s not sure, to be honest. He’s not sure of a lot things, these days.

Tony doesn’t bother to get up from where he’s sitting on his desk chair, opting instead to rest his head back and cast the pokerfaced King a weary glance.

“Legal gave me the papers this morning; you just have to sign it,” Tony slurs and the unimpressed look on one of the Dora Milaje makes him snort and suddenly, he’s laughing his ass off. It is a little funny, how Tony is asking a King for a divorce. Of all fucking things. That actually deserves to be on his bucket list.

“I suppose it’s a good thing that you’re taking this in stride,” T’challa says, hands slipping into his pockets, power and measured temper roiling with the fluid and graceful movement of shifting stances.

“It is a little funny.” Tony says and picks up his glass, draining the contents. “We were fucking children. Please tell me you’re not actually upset about this. How old were you then – like, what nineteen? Twenty? If anything, I feel cheated. I was married to a Crown Prince and I never got my fucking dowry. Was the sex good, at least? Did I even make it to that part of the wedding?”

Tony knows he’s digging his own grave, if T’challa's head-shake and the Dora Milaje's intensifying glares are anything to go by.

Who said Tony Stark had any self-preservation, anyway?

“You remember nothing?” T’challa asks, quirking an eyebrow.

“Not a damn thing,” Tony shakes his head and shoves a thick folder of his diagnosis and emergency treatment record that he had received from St Francis’ Hospital archives a few days ago. “It’s all in there if you don’t believe me.” If T’challa looks horrified by what he reads, Tony doesn’t see it. Nor does he care. He’s making his way around the workshop towards the small pantry because he is quite sure he had a bottle of cognac somewhere. “Also, if you could just sign the divorce papers on the table, that’d be great.”

The silence that follows is only broken by the soft thump of the folder being dropped on the desk.

“I can’t,” T’challa says.

And that is pretty much the very moment Tony loses his shit inwardly. “You’re fucking kidding me, right?”

“Perhaps when you’re less inebriated, we can discuss –“

“Why?”
“Mister Stark –“

“Don’t insult me by questioning my rationale here, even if it is the lack of it years ago that had landed me and you, apparently, in this situation. Why can’t you sign the papers? As far as I know, you’re only married in the United States. There is no record anywhere that it’s been attested at a foreign consulate, let alone Wakanda, so it shouldn’t even be honored –“

“It’s been registered,” T’challa says, back straightening. All the color drains from Tony’s face in that instant. “So, yes, maybe the United States does not have it on their record, but the fact remains that our marriage is mentioned in the royal registry of Wakanda, even if it has been sealed. There are legal procedures, red tapes –“

Tony picks up something from the counter – it feels like a wrench – and just hurls it across the shop with everything his shaking arm can manage. The monitor on his left meets its destruction and the glass cracks as Tony pauses and stares at the ground, weighing this in.

Well, there goes that plan.

“Oh, sorry, you were saying?” Tony says, when he catches his breath and looks up to find the pitying looks of the Dora Milaje is directing at him.

Fuck his life.

“Mister Stark, in a few weeks, I will be crowned King. It is a sensitive time for my people and my family; Wakanda takes deep pride in its culture and heritage. Divorce, in our belief, is not common practice, nor is it socially acceptable, especially among the ruling monarch. A king must respect his culture, his people’s beliefs and practices, he must show that he gives a fuck, even when it is the most… inconvenient.”

Tony just blinks, suddenly incredibly sick to his stomach; somewhere in his head, a petty part of him thinks that vomiting all over T’challa might be the gesture he fucking deserves, because really, is he for real right now? "What in the flying fuck are you even saying?"

“Our marriage can only be annulled if family members of both parties have witnessed significant effort of discussion and have taken part in attempts to ‘save the marriage’. They must draw conclusion that there is absolutely no hope for our bond, deem us unfit for each other. These ‘interventions’ usually last at least a month to six. Seeing as you and I are on the same page, I will give it three weeks at most. Unfortunately, this is a formality that even a King cannot escape or bend. So, you’re stuck, I’m stuck." Really, Tony wonders how T’challa does it; there is nothing on his face. “Seeing as you have no family to represent you, you will have to deal with mine. When can you travel to Wakanda?”

Tony wholly believes that walking out on T’challa in that very moment had been incredibly justified, thankyouverymuch, maturity be fucking damned.

TBC
Yes, T'challa is aged up. Had to otherwise it would be Tony robbing the cradle. In this story, when Tony was almost-21, T'challa is 19.

I'm aging Tony down just a little. Instead of him in his early fifties, I'm gonna make him 39.
Two

Chapter Notes

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In all fairness, if Tony is being super honest with himself, his expectation on the level of treatment he had expected from T’challa’s family is about the same level as the the ocean bed of the Mariana Trench.

He is not a goddamn child to think that just because he is going to be whisked away to Wakanda to play the role of a fancy peacock in a cage, parade around like the technically fucking royal consort that he is (literally, imagine that!), that he is going to be liked by, well, anybody, really. Contract after contract had to be drafted and basically, in a fucking nutshell, if Tony fucks up and endangers the crown in any way, he loses Stark Industries. It is only fair considering that the marriage - goddamn, inconvenience - is something Tony wants out of his way completely; it had been his idea to gamble with something that meant a lot to him. Forking over Stark Industries seemed to have been an over the top gesture, much to Pepper’s very vocal and very loud protests, his lawyer’s unbidden panic and Rhodey’s incredible shock (and later on, a very loud earful). Tony had assured T’challa that he wanted nothing more than to have this over and done with as quickly as humanly possible so that they can all move the fuck on. Tony gambling with what is left of him, considering that Tony didn’t have parents or blood relation, Stark Industries plummeting stocks, is a a good risk and a display of his extreme seriousness on the matter, in Tony’s humble opinion. There is no competition against a King of a country, but Tony would like to think that on levels of seriousness, him gambling Stark Industries is similar to T’challa's crown being questioned by his people as King for wrongdoings done during the stupidest time of their lives. He said it rather candidly too, silencing T’challa’s party so effectively, it had been kind of funny, in a twisted and round about way:

"I got nothing left to offer other than trouble and maybe a handful of bad decisions, but you all already know that otherwise we wouldn’t be here and you would actually believe my word . I mean Stark Industries is at least worth something, right kitty-cat?"

T’challa was exceedingly and exceptionally, hilariously quiet the entire fucking time the negotiations was taking place. He had spent the entire time directing a look at what Tony decides to categorize as silent observation in his direction, until their agreements had been signed and Tony is scheduled to arrive in Wakanda before the month ends.

When Rhodey poses the question of why the Kingdom of Wakanda, knowing that the marriage had been in the royal registry, did not come forward earlier, the entire delegation had stiffened, like someone suddenly stabbed their asses with a giant needle. It had been a sight to behold. Tony's fingers had itched to pull out his phone and snap a fucking picture of their stupidly shocked, constipated faces.

It is the only time T’challa had responded and had uttered a word. He ha said (surprisingly soft, given what a stiffie he was being the entire time), “I will explain once you’re in Wakanda. You have
my word."

So really, Tony’s expectations are abominably low.

He arrives in Wakanda after what had to be the longest flight of his life, because there is something to be said about marching to your own torture chamber willingly. Tony lands in a private airport in Addis Ababa, where the royal family’s jet had been waiting for him and his belongings. The connecting flight is shorter and if anything, Tony is expecting some sort of driver at most, maybe a truck for all his stuff.

What Tony had not been expecting is the entire fucking family to be standing there, in a little setup that looks far too ceremonious on attendance for his arrival. Tony would have understood if he had flown in with T’challa or any of his delegates; he didn’t. It would have definitely justified the flower petals scattered on the path between the jet’s door and the royal family some two meters away. There is a smell of sandalwood and something that reminds Tony of jasmine hanging in the air of the hangar, which is saying something because they are standing in a very, very large hangar wedged somewhere in the mountains.

He steps out of the plane, gets flanked by two Dora Milaje, walks down the path of flower petals and is embraced and kissed on both cheeks by the Queen Mother. Shuri, the sister, is equally lukewarm bordering on cold compared to the Queen Mother, her face looking about as friendly as a blank slate. With a tiny grimace of a smile, that is.

T’challa simply shakes his hand in a very firm business-like handshake, welcoming him to Wakanda, all charm and smile and schmooze that Tony returns.

Others - who are introduced to Tony as relatives and council members - are less warm and makes their discontent obvious from their tart greeting from the get go.

Tony wishes, from the depths of his corroding and despicably hated soul, that he had been drunk for this.

Tony then suffers a short car ride in what had to be the thickest silence of his existence.

Talk about awkward.

There is nothing more jarring that being eyed up and down by T’challa’s entire family, pleasant expressions on their faces, even if Tony knows better; he sees the tension that is lining their shoulders, can see the cold and distant guard in their eyes. He had been practically raised in what could be called as modern day royalty. He knows and understands fake kindness and politeness, knows schmoozing and small talk and tittering behind palms or expensive cigars. He is by himself, smack in the middle of territory he knows so little about, surrounded by people who would probably much prefer to see him dead rather than lawfully wedded to their beloved King. No amount of research or understanding of Wakanda’s culture is going to save him from what he could assume - politely speaking of course - is going to be outright political bullying.

His legacy is on the goddamn line; it had to be put on the line because his reputation preceded him and his word, to foreigners and people who really knew nothing about him, is as valuable as infertile dirt. Of course, it goes without saying that it had meant jack to the team who had abandoned him to clean up the Civil War mess and dance to the musical numbers Ross and every other person like him on World Security Council had lined up for him, but that is beside the point. Tony had figured sometime between packing his suitcases and finishing a bottle of tequila that this is definitely payback for all the shit he had done, people he had killed, weapons he had sold and all something he probably deserves, anyway. Not that he is planning to just fork over what is left of him so easily and
that willingly, are you kidding? He isn’t gonna go down without a goddamn fight. Tony had sworn to himself the moment he walked away from Happy, Rhody and Pepper from the tarmac, that no matter what happened, no matter what they do, no matter what they say, he is going to say nothing. He needs that signature so, so bad, that he is willing to bow his head down and swallow his tongue dance to yet another tune like a goddamn puppet, let them walk all over him, if they need to; the quicker and agreeable he is going to be, the sooner he is going to get out of his fancy prison and go home.

And what a fancy prison it indeed is.

The palace is all sharp lines, gleaming marble and metal, with statues of the Bast flanking both main entrances. There are carvings of what Tony is going to assume are tales of old over the ceiling that opens up to the clear blue Wakandan skies, the royal banners hanging in swathes of beautiful colors. Tony can see the new and old, between tradition and modernization. Guards stood bedecked in their guards uniform, spears held tight in their fists, donning rich, red and platinum armor pieces on their persons, hair braided and held up, dyed a vivid phoenix red - the symbol of warriorhood. Tony recognizes African culture as they walk by the lines of guards, from the way they the visible knots of their robes, and the markings on their skin; familiar and yet not. He remembers seeing something just a touch similar during his trips to Kenya and Ethiopia.

They escort him to a large private room and there he is presented with things he is going to need during his stay in Wakanda: a box that contains a beaded bracelet they call Kimoyo Beads, which works like a cellphone, a map, a health and fitness monitor and a remote control all in one. If it had been fashioned in the hot rod red shade, Tony pretends not to notice.

They sip cold refreshing drinks that reminds Tony of lemonade and minty tea, talk some more of the schedule they had prepared on Tony’s behalf to orient him with Wakanda, introduces him to his personal attendant and guards and then like on ceremony, everyone gets up and leaves Tony and T’challa to themselves.

Of course, Tony’s life isn't complete if a welcoming dinner banquet isn't being held the next night.

Yup, sounds like another day on the job.

The doors clicks shut, the lingering warmth of the queen’s hand still on Tony’s cheeks. He wants nothing more than to release a long resigning breath, slump on the cold ground and maybe pretend that he is dead for a week or so. Preferably until T’challa signs those papers. Tony brings a hand to his temple, rubbing at the exhaustion that had settled there, as he lowers himself on a chair.

“I never asked for any of this. You must know that,” Tony murmurs as he closed his eyes for just a few seconds.

The long sigh from T’challa sounds exhausted too. “I know, Mister Stark. Neither did I.” Tony looks up at him then, and while T’challa still wore a mask of collected grace, the pinch between his brows marred the whole I-don't-care vibe he's been trying to maintain since New York. “I didn't know we were married either. None of us did. Until that press conference you made. That was the only time we looked it up and investigated. You know what followed…”

The silence that falls then, surprisingly, isn’t as uncomfortable. There is something easing about knowing that someone else is equally fucked as you, if not worse. Tony at least isn’t a to-be-crowned-king. Huh. Small graces, indeed.

Tony almost pitied T’challa right then and there.
“Do you remember anything? Because you know I don’t.”

Something crosses T’challa’s face then, something Tony recognizes as uncertainty peppered with what looks like, dare he thought, embarrassment?

“I remember a good time. Parties, drinks. I remember bits and pieces of Las Vegas. I remember meeting you, yes. I also remember you hijacking the rock band stage of the bar we met at; I remember you singing and getting the crowd wild. I also remember us leaving together, in your car. I remember the wine we shared during the drive, and later, the coke and weed. After that, I am not so sure.” T’challa shrugs. “I was upset; I didn’t want to be king; I didn’t want to feel like I was going to be a king. Nothing like Vegas to take your mind off things, is what they say. Meeting you was just the icing on the cake. You were a very charming man.”

To say that Tony is stunned is putting it kindly; it’s like the chair under his ass isn’t even there.

Well would you look at that.

“That’s all good. I recognize none of that. It still doesn’t answer the question of why or how our Vegas ‘romance’ ended up sealed in your royal registry.”

“I had a guard and appointed right-hand then, who was later accused of treason to the crown. He was present during that… adventure; up until I got away from him, of course. We thought his crimes to sabotage my father’s rule was over; we were wrong. He put our marriage in the registry; even in death, his will to sabotage runs deep. Obviously, by the time he found me, the deed was already done. He told me the next morning that he took care of ‘my party friends’. I suppose that was how you ended up in New York.”

There is one piece of a puzzle that Tony had always wondered about; the staff of St. Francis never got the name of the foreign black gentleman who brought Tony in and neither did Obie. As far as Tony is concerned, it could have been anybody.

“I take it enemies or rebels against the crown didn’t like your father. Or your family.”

T’challa sighs again, this time a little heavier. “We have enemies within too. The threat when you’re in politics ever rests. You know this best. It’s hard to trust anyone at the moment, given the reveal. Hence the need to make face. You can imagine what the discovered treason may have triggered within the royal walls.” T’challa rubs at his temple then, the only sign that he is worn with the entire ordeal. Tony didn’t have to imagine. He is going to assume that they are re-vetting every single person within the palace; he is probably just a distraction to save face, as T’Challa had said. “I apologize, Mister Stark. I am aware my behavior towards you has not been kind, at best. It’s nothing personal -- I am told I can be quite unkind when my temper runs free.”

Tony shrugs, the apology going over his head. He is past caring over spilt milk. “Don’t worry about it. Nothing you said is new to me.” He throws T’challa a beaming smile, the perfect look of a peacock spreading its feathers, seemingly unperturbed.

“I could have signed it, you know?” T’challa said, and tears his gaze away from Tony, getting up on his feet and pacing towards the stretch of the window, lines of his body rigid, jaw tight. “But I needed you here.”

“Yup, well, wouldn’t be the first time I’d be forced into places and corners that I wasn’t willing to go to. Running trend these days, that.” Tony murmurs, and tilts his head back to press against the plush
“Mister Stark --"

"Go fuck yourself, your royal fucking highness," Tony snaps. "You could have fucking asked. Contrary to popular belief, I do and can play nice with a team. Jesus! I wouldn't have maintained my fortune if I didn't know how!" Tony sucks in a slow breath and presses both heels of his palms to his eye-sockets.

"I could have asked, you are right," T'challa says, even if he keeps his chin up. "Would you have come? You wouldn't have had the obligation to do so. You wouldn't have had anything on the line."

Tony stands up then, a little quick, a little sharp, and regards the king like he would a person who is not worth his time. "I guess we'll never know, hmm?"

"No, we won't."

Tony watches T’challa swallow, like he is unsure. Then just like that, the uncertainty is gone and the magnificent wall on his face is back.

"You said three weeks? I’m more ambitious. I’ll give it two. So how does this work? How can we speed up the process? Am I supposed to be an unreasonable old bridezilla here?"

"You and I must maintain an air of disregard for each other. We must portray that there is nothing between us but malcontent," T’challa says, hands tucking into his pockets.

"Piece of cake. I am malcontent-ing right now when I say go to hell. What else?"

The smirk on T’challa’s face changes him completely; it's like watching a flower bloom under the moon. "Mostly you will be dealing with members of the court, my family as I said. Banquets, conversations about our non-existing relationship, what do you think of the king, do you think he is worthy, do you feel he makes a good ruler -- questions like that. People are aware it was an accidental marriage, but they will ask anyway because that’s what they do. I never said that this old tradition was something I agreed to. But it is what it is."

"Old things rarely make any sense. I’m surprised you even keep this so called practice, given how advanced and modern Wakanda is," Tony mutters

"You and me both," T’challa murmurs and makes his way towards Tony, picking up the box that had the Kimoyo Beads from the nearby table. He takes it out, holds it out for Tony who in turn presents him with left wrist. T’challa takes his time slipping the accessory on. "But I am not King yet. With time, maybe, as we move forward to a more modern way of thinking, it will change. Any other questions?"

"What’s there to do in Wakanda?" Tony asks, just as the clip clicks and T’challa flicks his glance up at him.

“Plenty,” T’challa puffs a little proudly at that. “I may have brought you here against your will for my own gain, but you are no prisoner here, Mister Stark. I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve taken liberties in arranging meetings for you with our R&D team. After the banquet tomorrow, of course.”

“Ah.” Tony eyes the beads on his wrist. “Fun times!”

“Shall I be seeing you at dinner, tonight?” T’challa asks, as Tony stands and they both walk towards
the door that parts automatically as T’challa approaches.

“Sure thing, kitty-cat,” Tony says, as he joins his previously introduced attendant -- Kojo -- at the door.

If Tony notices how the guards, Kojo and the rest of the palace staff stiffens at his outright lack of disrespect in addressing their king, he pretends not to notice when he gestures towards Kojo to lead him to his room.

If Tony notices the suppressed, amused smirk on T’challa’s lips, he pretends not to notice that too.

—

Now, really, Tony is all up for playing face, playing house, schmoozing and whatnot. Hell, up until dinner is actually served at the table, Tony plays nice and shakes hands, embraces and kisses cheeks of whoever had approached him and had made introductions. That includes babies, grandfathers, grandmothers, generals and ministers.

T’challa is somewhere in the room and Tony has a glass of what had tasted like delicious dessert wine in his hand. He had lost count of how many people he had already sucked up to and this is only his first night. He is fucking exhausted and if he is being honest with himself, he isn’t even that hungry. The bed back in his room - and Pepper would have had a field day if she gets word of this complaint -- feels a lot more inviting that this dinner gathering that really feels more like a banquet than just a dinner. Tony shudders to think of what tomorrow’s banquet is going to be like. The trip had killed his entire appetite, the tension he is trying so hard not to acknowledge squeezing him dry, his fucking face hurt from the broad grin and charming, cute smile he tries to keep glued to his face because oh god forbid he steps out of fucking line. The constant reminder of what is at stake stands just several feet away, dressed in semi-formal dark denims and button down shirt, pearly whites peeking out from full lips as the queen mother pats her handsome's son’s cheek.

Tony is watching T’challa from across the room, minding his own business when he feels a hand suddenly grip the curve of his left ass cheek, causing him to nearly choke on his drink and wine to snort up his nose at his shock.

Tony doesn’t have to turn to see who had done just that. The hand is still on his ass.

The tiniest, most hunched-back woman who looks about two hundred years old, had about ten pounds worth of beads hanging around her neck, clothed in dark yellow fine bead-work embellished dress comes within Tony's field of vision. She had a walking stick that is about two feet over her slightly bowed own head; Tony wouldn’t be surprised if it is a hidden weapon. Despite her old age, her graying eyes are sharp under the carefully applied kohl. She looks like cataract had taken her eyesight away, but Tony had severe doubts when she walks around to stand in front of him, manhandling him to her height -- cataract or not, she looks at Tony like she is ripping his soul apart to see who he is.

Tony’s breath hitches in an undignified yelp when he feels her hand on his goddamn balls.

Wow. Okay, just wow.

Great-grandma-balls grips him, massages his jewels through the fabric of his slacks, eyebrows narrowed and all Tony can do is just stand there, a little hunched as she just -- what is fucking happening?

Then she is nodding.
“Mister Stark,” T’challa says suddenly, a hand on his shoulder just as great-grandma-balls releases her surprisingly strong grip on his balls and pats him on his hip, like she approves. “This is my great-great-aunt. And she --” Great-grandma-balls starts talking in raspy Wakandan, syllables shaky that would have fooled anyone. Except Tony had felt his balls in her grip that does not match her vocal chords function. She is a trickster if he hasever seen one -- do not let the old hunched, poor grandma vibe fool you!

T’challa ducks his head and Tony cocks an eyebrow at the sight of T’challa looking severely embarrassed, if not ashamed, trying to suppress an awkward laugh.

“What? What did she say?” Tony asks, genuinely curious. He thinks he deserves a damn answer after that free pass at coping a feel of him, thank you. No one had even batted an eyelash at him and his earlier squeak of a noise in surprise.

“She says -- “ T’challa cuts off when great-grandma-balls tries to grab T’challa’s hand to attempt to place it on Tony’s fucking crotch. Tony takes a step back, holding his hand and wine glass up. There is mild pacifying that sounds polite but firm coming from T’challa, before he holds a hand up at his great-great-aunt to stop her from saying more. She surprisingly listens and nods. “She says that you are incredibly fertile and she has no doubts that you will be able to father strong sons and daughters; good warriors.”

Tony swears to everything powerful that he almost fucking fountains from the lack of oxygen when he bursts out laughing. And doesn’t stop for a long, long while.

T’challa looking incredibly embarrassed and not knowing just what to do with himself in front of his great-great-aunt insisting he cops a feel of Tony’s jewels just makes it even funnier.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

No Avengers here for now. I would like to think that T’challa never housed them in the royal grounds to begin with and are probably somewhere far away in some ... I dunno, private facility somewhere.

But WOW, yeah, thank you for reading? Your response to this wtf-fic honestly surprised me! I didn't think it would get this much attention. I'm sticking to cliche plotlines here. Whether avengers will make a visit, I am yet to decide.
Tony Stark is hiding.

Holy shit is he hiding. Behind a heavy lush red drape in one corner of the room, right behind the lavishly arranged fruit table.

The goddamn fruit table.

If only Pepper and Rhodey can see what level he had sunken into -- hell, Howard himself is probably turning in his goddamn grave.

The actual banquet - a fine affair, all regalia, proud tribe banners, jewels, sparkling wine and copious amounts of schmoozings, how are yous, what do you think of Wakanda, what do you think of our king, blah, blah, blah - had started about an hour ago, with guests from the unified tribes, a few familiar faces he had seen in last night’s dinner, delegates and ambassadors who had flown in from their mission posts abroad to meet this scandalous accidental husband, all gathering around him and meeting him. Talks of Ironman had popped up here and there, some had been severely impressed, some deemed the technology primitive (the audacity!) while in the same line commending him on his bravery and attempt to influence clean energy upon the world. Some, had many words to say about his lack of tact, even if it had phrased in the most polite way possible. It isn’t something Tony isn’t used to, so he takes it all with a little grain of salt. But otherwise, Tony had gotten into the swing of things. Kojo had been a godsend beside him, ensuring that when conversations had gotten tough, Tony’s empty glass of wine is replaced with another.

In a way, Tony can divide the room’s opinion in exactly two halves; half thinks he’s shit, the other thinks he’s not that shitty. It is definitely a better outcome than what he had forecasted. Honestly, Tony had left his room in his slate gray suit expecting the entire gathering to just think he’s shit.

Apparently, he can still be surprised.

So really, it had been going a lot better than Tony had been mentally prepping himself for since breakfast.

Up until grandma-balls and her friends -- oh my god, she had friends - had made their appearance.

Grandma-balls had started to introduce her friends to Tony as the elders of the unified tribe, all of them ridiculously old, hunched over, with questionable visual and hearing abilities. One of the male elders had no visible teeth and Tony thinks that the mechanized belt around his middle is the only thing keeping him upright, like some sort of prosthetic. Really, Tony had sort of tuned out the rapid wakandan conversation being exchanged among the old people surrounding him along with Kojo’s attempt to translate everything in favor of trying to analyse the belt. Up until, that is, hands had come
to grip his bicep, the elderlies nodding and murmuring in what sounds like approval? Tony had started to look around him for a getaway, spots T’Challa all the way across the room, engaging with one of the generals and -- yup, that is a hand on his hip.

Tony blurts out the first excuse that comes to mind: he needs to go pee.

As soon as Kojo had translated his words, Tony all but brisk walks in what he thinks is his rather graceful escape. He deserves an A for effort for not outright bolting like a terrified cockroach.

That had been about fifteen minutes ago, and Tony refuses to leave the comfort of his hiding space behind the drapery, nursing his glass of wine, enjoying his peace amidst the hum of the banquet hubbub beyond. Every now and then, his hand would sneak from the side, stealing a peach or an apricot from the fruit table. He wonders, if he stays long enough, maybe the entire royal gathering will forget about him and start a search party preferably far away from his curtain and fruit table. Tony had to laugh at himself (maybe a little pityingly, too); funny how it would take someone like grandma-balls and her firm belief that he is virile and ripe to intimidate the wits out of him. He had faced tougher adversaries than the helpless looking woman and her friends who can barely stand, for goodness sakes!

Virile and ripe! That had been Kojo’s poker faced translation (at some point, even Kojo had looked like he had been struggling to look for right and polite translation. Poor guy. Stuck with this shitty job.).

And now he is out of wine. Great. Just great.

Tony steals a look from between the drapes and finds grandma-balls and her friends walking the gathering hall like they are in search of something – possibly him. Whatever bravery Tony had been trying to muster to step out and rejoin the masses promptly diminishes when he sees them and he retracts, slumping against the cool marble floor and craning his head to the high ceiling with a slow sigh. Yeah, he thinks he can hold out in his little hiding space for a little longer. He is perfectly fine where he is.

When the curtain rustles all of a sudden, and a hand shoots in with a glass of wine, Tony catches sight of Kojo holding it casually, face blank, trying to look like he’d not fiddling with anything behind the drapes. Tony takes the wine and thanks him, shoos him away and tells him to come get him when it’s time for dinner.

Kojo listens and leaves; that genuinely surprises Tony, to be perfectly honest. He had assumed that Kojo would tattle on him.

A minute later the drapes rustles again and Tony briefly entertains ducking under the fruit table like a child. Because the hand that sticks in does not belong to Kojo. Tony stares wide eyed, holds his breath and pales a little when the person that steps behind the drapes is none other than T’challa. The king had deemed it appropriate to join him behind the drapery and fruit table; he also looks like he is trying to escape something.

“Good evening,” T’challa whispers, and then clamps a hand on Tony’s mouth, bringing a finger to his lips in a hushing gesture, because sure enough, Tony hears grandma-balls and her party conversing at his fruit table (not theirs, his. Tony commandeered this hiding spot first!).

Goddamnit!

This is T’challa’s fucking fault! Out of every possible nook and cranny in the entire palace, T’challa
just had to pick Tony’s spot? Really?

Tony **glares** at T’challa with all the intensity of wishing he would melt into a puddle of nothing right there and then, just as the king pulls his hand away from him and keeps very still. Except, grandma-balls and her friends are now oohing and ahhing in what sounds like excitement and agreement, and really Tony can care less what they may have been talking about; he doesn’t speak Wakandan and doesn’t plan to learn it when he’s is going to be out of the country in two weeks. Wakanda had been closed off to the world for a long time, so it’s a dead end and moot effort from the get go. But T’challa isn’t even breathing next to him, looking like he wants to die and sink into a hole in the floor. It’s hard to ignore the king when he is so close, smelling like heady musk and sandalwood, visibly looking very uncomfortable, if the tugging of his collar is anything to go by.

Tony takes his phone out, types out a quick message and turns the screen to at T’challa:

*Are they talking about my ripeness and virility? Or is it the size of my dick and the strength of my seed and its ability to father warriors, again?*

T’challa had the grace to **flush**; he takes the phone and types:

*They are convinced our children will be the future. My great-great-aunt genuinely wants this marriage saved. She has taken a keen liking to you. She thinks that I have chosen well in my youth and wonders why I have kept you from joining our family.*

Tony reads the message, flushes as well and grabs the phone, typing furiously:

*WHY! THEY DO KNOW THAT I SOLD WEAPONS, AM RESPONSIBLE FOR SOKOVIA AND ULTRON, THAT I HAVE FUCKED MY WAY ACROSS THE WORLD IN BOOZE, DRUGS, WOMEN AND MEN -- LOOK AT OUR FUCKING MARRIAGE. ARE THEY FUCKING HIGH ON SOMETHING -- WHO IN THEIR RIGHT MIND WOULD WANT ME TO REMAIN AS YOUR GODDAMN HUSBAND?!?!?! THAT IS A THREAT TO YOUR CROWN ALL ON ITS OWN! JUST HOW MISINFORMED IS YOUR GREAT-GREAT-AUNT?!*

T’challa reads the message and his eyes widen a fraction, flicking from the screen up to Tony’s genuinely confused expression. It’s the most expressive thing Tony has even seen on the young king: confused, bewildered, astonished at the harshness of Tony’s judgment on himself. Tony rolls his eyes, erases the message and types again. He holds his phone up and silently tells T’challa, whilst punctuating the typed message with a sharp get-out-of-here tilt of his chin:

*It doesn't matter; this was a mistake. Now stop looking like I’m about to shoot your mom, Bambi. Man up and get the fuck out there and get grandma-balls away of my fruit table and drapes. Skedaddle!*  

It happens so fast.

T’challa’s throat allows a noise to slip that sounds suspiciously like indignation and Tony’s hands jerks forward to silence the king’s lips. In doing so, the wine glass falls, shatters, thereby drawing attention. The drapes are pulled apart and there by the fruit table, is grandma-balls and her elderly friends **staring** at what looks like something more fitting for a scandal. Tony and T’challa stare right back with baited breath, as Tony’s hands slide off T’challa’s mouth.

The group of ready to lie in the grave elderlies then applauds.

They fucking clap and cheer, flashing toothless smiles that makes their eyes crinkle like a fucking overhappy emoji. Grandma-balls is talking excitedly, looking giddy and suddenly too young for her...
age, spine actually straightening in all her excitement. God, she looks so goddamn happy, that it catches Tony off guard. It starts to gather attention, too and people are looking over, making their way towards Tony’s fruit table.

“Go, Mister Stark. Just get out of here and head to the banquet table. I’ll distract them,” T’challa whispers furiously, and Tony doesn’t even think twice.

The moment T’challa stands, Tony sidles against the wall and abandons ship, working his way down the lines of hanging drapery far away from that particular conversation and comes out from the other corner of the room.

When he looks behind him, he sees T’challa surrounded by grandma-balls’ party, hunched and looking like he wants to really die.

Tony gives no fucks and makes a beeline for the banquet table, where the queen waves him over and asks him to sit beside her at the head of table. When the queen asks him if he had seen T’challa, Tony tells her he is engaged in a meaningful conversation with his great-great-aunt. He pretends not to see the queen trying to suppress her amused giggle.

In return, she pretends not to notice how he downs another glass of wine as if it were water.

Tony also pretends that the hand rubbing a brief circle on his shoulder blade in what is an attempt at comfort by said queen is nothing but an act for the people who are looking his way as they take their assigned seats.

All an act; god, where is the hard liquor when you need it?

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In all honesty, Tony thanks the wine for helping him relax.

Dinner is a quiet affair and a five-course-meal, with murmured conversation and endless flow of locally brewed white and sparkling rose wine; the meal goes by smoothly, and Tony is glad that even if grandma-balls is seated across him, there is enough distance and oak table between them for him to be able to enjoy his meal. All that hiding had exhausted him. For the most part, grandma-balls is quiet as they go through the first three courses. Tony keeps his eyes on the plate, picking through his meal until the entree arrives. When they lift the silver lid off Tony’s plate, he notices how he is served something different compared to everyone else.

When Tony looks over at T’challa, he sees him eyeing his own plate too, thin lipped, the set of his jaw sharp.

The couple, apparently is getting special treatment. At this, grandma-balls speaks and the hush that falls over the table fades to murmurs of light agreement and appreciation, peppered with a little huff of amusement and some pointed looks.

“A gift, from our fellow allying tribesman elders. The kill was made this morning in your honor,” Shuri translates. “They wish you and my brother good strength and many bountiful blessings. They hope it is to your liking.”

“Thank you,” Tony says, dipping his head and picks up his fork when grandma-balls urges him to tuck in and eat.

Tony eats, finding the meat juicy and tastefully flavored. The artfully decorated plate before him is
very meaty; since Tony is still quite famished, he finishes the contents of his plate faster than most at the table. For some reason, it greatly pleases grandma-balls, who flashes him a thumbs up sign and toothless smile that would have looked harmless and adorable if Tony had not been aware of what a true public menace she really is. T’challa does not finish his plate, in fact he takes three polite bites and proceeds to drink a lot of water. Grandma-balls notices this and tells him something that ends up with T’challa finishing his plate with a little reluctance. Shuri and the queen looks like she is trying to maintain a straight face. Grandma-balls clearly, is very pleased and does not stop talking.

“Was your entre satisfying, Mister Stark?” Shuri asks.

“It’s quite good, yes,” Tony comments. “It’s very tender.”

“Excellent!” Shuri exclaims, lips parting to a roguish and wide grin that makes her look more like a cheeky warrior than a princess. “My great-great-aunt and the elders will be very pleased to know that you have enjoyed the penis of the wild bull; I am told that it was a thrilling hunt and that it was a fine beast.”

The noise that leaves Tony tapers off to a slightly high pitched laugh, his face breaking into a smile so wide even when he can feel his insides just shrivel and die at the realization of what he had so easily devoured like a starving peasant. He looks over at T’challa who had his elbow propped on his armrest and his fingers rubbing his temple as he holds Tony’s gaze.

Bountiful blessings suddenly makes a lot more fucking sense.

“How wonderful! Please thank them once more on my behalf,” Tony says, which Shuri does and grandma-balls grins at him and this time gives him not one, but two thumbs up.

God, his stomach is starting to turn.

Dessert is served and Tony can honestly say that his appetite had flown out the window, that for the first time in his life, he is seriously entertaining idea of turning vegan. He takes a look at the green blob before him that looks like ice cream. The glass is cold, like that of ice cream. Tony tells himself that actually sniffing the damn thing might be frowned upon. After that entre though, Tony wouldn’t put it past the elders if his dessert and T’challa’s happens to be laced with something else. They are the only ones being served green ‘ice cream’.

“Not a fan of pistachio, Mister Stark?” Shuri asks.

“Is that what this is?” Tony asks casually, forlornly staring at his empty wine glass. If anything, he is going to walk out of Wakanda and straight into rehab if he keeps this up.

“It is brother’s favorite. Don’t worry. It is not laced with bull sperm,” Shuri says, as she takes a bite of what looks like a fruit tart on her plate.

Tony had something clever at the tip of his tongue, but tastefully decides to swallow it with a mouthful of delicious pistachio ice cream. When the queen offers him to try her favorite cocktail, Tony thanks her from the bottom of his wretched soul after the first sip. It is strong, packing quite a punch and he doesn't miss the small smile dancing around the corners of the queen’s full lips just as they wrap up dinner and move to the courtyard for tea and coffee.

Tony is sitting on a bench nursing a cup of coffee when grandma-balls comes his way and deposits T’challa beside him. She presses a warm wrinkled hand over Tony’s cheek, says something that sounds wistful and kind before she kisses both his cheeks and gives him what Tony thinks resembles an affectionate look before she hobbles away with her surely-a-weapon-walking-stick to join her
friends.

“What did she say?” Tony asks after a careful sip of his very, very good coffee, still off-guard from whatever that had been.

T’challa doesn’t answer; he drains his coffee cup instead and stands. “Would you like to retire for the night?”

“God, yes. Wait, is that acceptable? People haven’t left yet,” Tony asks; the last thing he wants is to step on any toes and make his situation more difficult.

“It is winding down. Walk with me and say your good nights. It'll be quicker that way.” T’challa looks at him, expectant and eager to retire for the evening too.

Tony is not above taking advantage of this opportunity.

So Tony stands as well, handing his cup and saucer to a server walking by. “Wouldn’t leaving together beat the whole purpose of us maintaining an air of malcontent?”

“You’re right. I should not care for you at all and abandon you to the elders, who still have a lot of advice to impart towards you in the ways of sheets and romance. If that is what you want --”

“Who do I say good night to first?” Tony cuts him off, and follows T’challa around the courtyard. Tony pretends not to see the amused smile on the king’s face as he walks around and bids the important men and women a pleasant night and journey ahead.

With T’challa beside him, it takes about fifteen minutes for the entire ordeal to conclude before Tony is led out of the courtyard and through the garden to one of the side entrances. Weather in Wakanda, given its location, is incredibly pleasant. Tony attributes this to the mountains that surround the small country; there is a cool breeze, the skies incredibly clear that opens up to the starry stretch beyond. Tony doesn’t remember seeing the universe so close like this when he is on the ground. He had to give it to T’challa – Wakanda is a beautiful country. It’s just too bad it is closed off and the circumstances of Tony’s visit is more or less, unsavory. From several paces behind them, the Dora Milaje follows in T’challa’s footsteps, Kojo and Tony’s appointed guards just a few feet behind them.

“We will part here,” T’challa says, as they come to stand under the dome with a spiraling staircase.

Tony hums, the weight of exhaustion increasing ten-fold now that he is away from all the noise and crowd. He knows where they are and it is at least another two minutes to the privacy of his room. “Well, see you later, your highness.”

Tony turns and takes a few steps up the flight of stairs before he stops at T’challa’s words:

“Wakanda is not misinformed,” T’challa suddenly says, and this makes Tony look down at him from where T’challa remains at the foot of the staircase. “Everyone present is aware of who Tony Stark is. The opinions of the people tonight does not stem from them being ignorant of what goes on beyond our walls. If anything, they are too informed.”

Tony shrugs and spreads his hands out a little in a what-am-I-supposed-to-do-with-that gesture. “Well, it’s a good thing that I could care less what your people think of me, your highness, seeing as I’ll be gone soon enough.”

“I think you sell yourself too short, Mister Stark,” T’challa says.
“Realist.” Tony holds a finger out. “I’m a realist. So why don’t you just shove it where the sun doesn’t shine. It’s been a really long day. And you stole my hiding place. That is unforgivable in my book,” Tony says and gives the king his back as he climbs up the rest of the steps; he really doesn’t care what the people expects of him, he is an outsider, he doesn’t belong (and hasn’t belonged anywhere in a while, if ever) and really, Tony knows his track record. Sooner or later, the good very-informed-people of Wakanda will realize what they lacked when they had passed judgment on his person. He pauses at the top of the landing and turns around, expecting T’challa gone. Except the king is standing right where he is, flanked by the Dora Milaje on either side, looking up at him with an unreadable expression. “I do have one question, though.”

“How many more bull-dicks or any-animal-dicks do I have to consume during my stay here?” Tony asks, lips pressing into a thin line as he watches T’challa duck his head and try not to grin, the line of his jaw shifting with the effort, trying to disguise the dimples and laugh lines from being more visible.

“I’ll make sure that what happened tonight doesn’t happen again, Mister Stark. You have my word,” T’challa says, and looks up with mirth in his eyes, and lips pulled back in a handsome (how about that) smile. “I promise.”

“All righty, then…” Tony quips, and clears his throat, blinking the sight of the smiling king away as he turns to continue down the connecting hall.

Kajo and his guards ascend the stairs and are about three steps behind him when T’challa says, “Good night, Mister Stark.”

“Nighty-night, kitty-cat,” Tony responds back. He thinks it a little strange that T’challa waits for him to disappear out of sight before their footsteps echo down the opposite direction.

Really, if Tony hadn’t known better, he’d think T’challa is behaving too much like a gentleman.

--

Tony jerks awake at the sudden, sharp, spiking pain on his chest that is being sliced upon by the edges of an indestructible shield, bath water filling his nostrils. Tony blinks away the water, coughs it out as the image of deep space and thousands of battalion ships fade from memory and he’s taking in the familiar gray marble walls and sleek dark flooring of his bathing room, water sloshing everywhere and draining through said flooring as he struggles to get out of the water and over the rim the sunken tub.

One look at the stretch of the jungle, mountains and starry skies beyond the window fuels Tony's panic even more, the breath lodging in his throat like metal fingers around his neck, as he pushes and slips a few times against the tiles, hitting his elbow and the side of his face before he manages to press himself against the far wall, staring at the edge of the marble sink across from him and trying to get his shit together.

Tony had fallen asleep in his exhaustion, the bathwater freezing and clear of any suds that had been present earlier. The back of his head thump against the wall, as he scrunches his eyes shut and brings quaking hands against his temples, elbows on his knees as he rides out the panic, breathing harsh against gritted teeth, counting numbers, as far as he needs to go, pronouncing each syllable clearly under his breath.

He's come to terms with the fact that this - him shaking, choking in his own breath, trying to
distinguish reality from memories - will never, ever leave him.

That it will always come surging any time he damn well wants, without any say from Tony.

There had been a time where taking a bath had been near impossible after Afghanistan.

Silver-lining though, is that he's made significant progress trying to get over this fucking thing! And progress is always good in his book!

But Tony cannot help but be annoyed at the fact that it takes a lot longer to calm down in the current bouts of nightmares and attacks these days. Logically, he can understand why. Still, he'd think that he’s better and tougher than this simply because, come on, it’s the story of his life. He’d expect himself to have numb-nuts to shit like betrayal, getting stabbed in the back, torture, and getting left behind.

Apparently not.

How inconvenient.

Tony lets out a shaky breath and finds that sleeping is completely out of the question.

With great effort, Tony gets on his feet and tugs the robe he had left by the sink on. One side of his arm is turning red from the slip earlier and so is a part of his jaw. He hopes it doesn’t bruise to the point of questioning and decides that taking a bath is not going to be on his agenda at all until he departs. He is going to blame the wine for making him think it had been a good idea some hours ago.

Unfortunately, Tony doesn’t have a workshop to seek refuge in within the palace walls. He certainly doesn’t have much he can work on remotely; he had done all that after breakfast and before the banquet. Pulling on some clothes, Tony takes another look at the time and thinks screw it. He is going to entertain himself somewhere outside.

The moment he steps out of the room though, his guards straighten and regard him with curiosity and mild apprehension.

“Hi,” Tony murmurs, stepping out and keeping his voice low.

“Mister Stark, you should be resting.” One of his guards with the corn rows and high ponytail says. “It is many hours still to sunrise.”

“Yeah, can’t. Love to, but can’t. So!” Tony shrugs. “What is there to do at this hour? Gatherings? Activities? Late night underground parties?” The two guards exchange looks. “Oh come on, there’s gotta be something? Hell, even a library would work!”

Another look is exchanged.

“We can escort you to the royal library if you wish, Mister Stark,” The one with the braided top-knot says.

“Fantastic! Lead the way!” Tony says, gesturing with his hands.

The royal library, as it is, is on the west wing of the palace. At this time, there is no one but the posted guards wandering the halls of the palace, all of whom, as they walk past, blink and give poker-faced curious looks (how is that even possible) as Tony follows his guards. The doors are about as high as the ceiling and are mechanized, parting as they approach, lights automatically turning on to illuminate the large space within. Volumes upon volumes of books line the walls and
shelves in systematic rows. Tony doesn’t remember the last time he had done any reading that’s old school since his days at MIT, but well, no time like the present.

Tony picks the first three books from the first shelf closest to the leather and plush seating area next to the ceiling high window he commandeers. He gets comfortable, feet up, back against the arm rest and window and flips the heavy text open. He finds that he had picked up a biography on one of the leading and successful medical researchers of Wakanda, a pivotal couple who are an inspiration to the current day individuals who seek to enter the world of medicine.

So Tony reads, and continues to until dawn cracks over the horizon. The guards had long since picked comfortable spots to do their duty when they realize that Tony is not moving from his spot on the large leather sofa.

Tony supposes if he takes his time reading, he can go through the entire library in two weeks. Providing that he only does his reading at night. If he decides to read during the day too, his estimated time of remaining occupied cuts down to approximately five days. Sometime during the third book, Tony wonders if there is a second library somewhere. He makes it a point to ask Kojo or T’challa himself when he gets the chance.

It is the odd sensation of the book slipping from his hand that sort of jars Tony to the present. When he opens his eyes, the library is illuminated by the morning sun pouring from the window behind him and Kojo and his guards are standing beside him.

“Mister Stark, are you all right?” Kojo asks, a frown tugging between his eyes.

“Yes, yes, sorry, I uh...” Tony looks around and straightens from his seemingly uncomfortable slump against the sofa with a grimace, his joints and shoulder blades popping with the motion. “What time is it?”

“Breakfast is about to be served. Shall I go ahead and inform their highnesses that you’ll join them shortly or...”

“Ten minutes, tops. I just...” Tony stands and looks at his rumpled t-shirt and denims, looking sleep worn and so unfit to be presented before royalty. The whole on-ceremony thing is going to be rather tiring, isn’t it? “Just give me ten minutes to look presentable.”

“You’re plenty presentable enough, Mister Stark,” Kojo soothes, and waves over a flock of curious library attendants, gesturing at the table full of books that Tony had already finished reading to be cleared away. They scurry in, murmuring greetings and bowing towards Tony out of politeness before collecting the books into neat piles. “However, if you insist, I will go ahead and inform their highnesses.”

“Please do,” Tony insists and follows the guards in a quick jog to the other side of the palace, bypassing the morning hubbub, and paying no heed to people turning their heads in his direction in curiosity as to why the king’s husband is in such a rush so early in the morning.

Tony tidies up, changes into something more presentable and just as the servants are bringing in the coffee and tea, he joins Shuri, T’challa and the queen at the table, slightly breathless from the rush and a part of his left arm just a touch tingly and almost-numb. He is apologizing for being late and really, had it been anyone else, Tony would not have given two shits. But he is out of his turf and at the mercy of people who are always put together, always on point and have been attending to him on-ceremony since his arrival; the least he can do is kiss ass and show that he regrets being what, about fifteen minutes late to breakfast that he had no interest in consuming.
Well, maybe except the coffee.

He tells himself to do it for the coffee.

“My dear boy!” The queen admonishes, standing all of a sudden from her seat, the chair scraping loudly as T’challa and Shuri look up from their morning reading and holographic displays, eyebrows cocked. “What happened?”

Tony isn’t even sure what the queen is fussing about up until she presses perfectly manicured fingers against the underside of his chin, tipping his head to one side.

Oh. Right.

“Erm...” Is Tony’s very intelligent reply.

The queen clicks her tongue and turns to one of the servants and says something that has one of them bowing and rushing out of the dining room. She then urges Tony to take the seat beside her, shaking her head the entire time.

Tony did not think the bruise is that bad, per se. At most, there is only a slight discoloration along one side of his jaw. It’s not even purple or greenish-yellow. If anything, the fuss had seemed rather uncalled for.

"Really, brother, must you be so rough with your husband? What a shame you had to mar his handsome face with your lack of self-discipline," Shuri says, and T’challa rolls his eyes at her.

Okay. What?

“He didn’t...” Tony blinks and either he is exhausted or he’s missing a joke here.

“It’s called a teasing joke, Mister Stark. Relax,” Shuri says and says nothing else after that, tuning out the rest of the table and returning to her reading and hot morning beverage.

“Please excuse my sister. She is clearly not herself yet so early in the morning,” T’challa says, with a pointed look thrown at Shuri who remains uninterested in the excuse.

The servant returns with someone dressed in dark green robes, who greets the royal family with a bow before coming to stand beside Tony. The woman in green holds out something in a pressurized container, explaining that she will be spraying the contents on the affected area. Within seconds, the scentless, cold spray is applied, the woman looking at her watch before spraying something else that smells just a touch sweeter, but not enough to distract anyone within Tony's proximity. She looks at her watch again before nodding and taking a step back, dipping her head towards Tony and the royal family before leaving the room all together.

Tony had no clue what just happened and shrugs as he asks for coffee.

“Ah,” The queen says, when she turns around to glance at Tony. “There. Now, that is a lot better. Did you hurt yourself last night, Mister Stark?”

“Slipped,” Tony murmurs, reaching up to press his fingers against his jaw; he is surprised that the tenderness is gone and when he looks closely at his rounded reflection on the silver dish holding steaming bread on the table, his eyes widen just a fraction when he notes that the discoloration is completely gone. “Wet tub, uh, didn’t see – what was that?”

“Our own concoction for minor bruising,” T’challa answers, not looking up from his reading.
Tony thinks its brilliant. Questions of what is it made of starts to spin in his head, what is the consistency, the chemical make-up of something that clearly boosts tissue healing and absorbs into epidermis quick enough to work within the isolated and affected area. Tony doesn’t think there is anything anywhere that has come close to something like this, not beyond laboratory trials, anyway.

Huh.

"I am told you’ve spent the evening at the library,” The queen says.

“Yes, your highness. I hope that is not an issue.” Tony nods, setting his cup of coffee down and waving a hand when a servant offers him something off the dairy tray. He also turns down the fruit and bread and anything remotely solid and isn’t caffeine.

“No, no, not at all. Still feeling the jetlag, hmm?” There is a small smile on the queen’s lips as she takes a bite off her fruit.

“More or less,” Tony responds politely, swallowing past the slight uncomfortable tick prickling around the corners of his eyes.

The conversation stirs towards the activities and tours that Tony had lined up ahead of him. He will be given the complete palace tour which, not to his surprise, will be taking the entire day; apparently, there is a small research facility within the vicinity that T’challa had suggested – according to Shuri’s input – be left open and the last agenda on the day’s itinerary. He had a few university visits lined up, with offers to speak to students if he wishes. Apparently, his September Foundation speech and presentation of BARF is held in high regard among scholars and students. He also learns that he is free to attend whatever class he finds interest in, and that scholars, mathematicians, astronomers, physicist and engineers alike would be more than willing to converse with him if he wants to.

That’s all good and dandy, Tony thinks. He draws conclusion that with everything lined up, he had more than enough ammunition to kill time and not be oh so bored.

Tony also wonders if this whole program is part of the whole people-putting-effort-to-save-the-marriage thing.

Now, his only issue is trying to figure out what to do at night when – hopefully not – the whole reading thing runs its course and stops becoming a solution.

“Oh, brother, will Mister Stark be present at the fighting arena?” Shuri asks.

_Fighting arena– what – what arena?_

Tony pretends that he didn’t just swallow his coffee the wrong way. No one said anything about no fighting pit! He looks up from his coffee and _stares very, very pointedly_ at T’challa. The guy had a nasty habit of sticking him in situations he had no desire to be a part of.

“Oh, of course,” T’challa looks up and meets Tony’s gaze, the corner of his lips curving just the tiniest bit upwards in a ghost of a smile. “A week from now, I will be engaged in combat among skilled warriors who can present themselves as a challenge to the king.”

Tony _blinks_. “For…?”

"My worth to wear the crown,” T’challa answers without skipping a beat and like he’s reciting the weather readings for the day.

_Uh._ “They can do that?” Tony asks, eyebrows going up to his hairline. “Aren’t you the one and true
“I am,” T’challa says, and tilts his head to one side. “It’s tradition and in a way for many of Wakanda’s warriors from the unified tribe to come forward and test their skills against the king. It’s more of a show of good sport, can be a bit ceremonial.”

“And if you lose?” Tony asks.

“I lose the crown,” T’challa answers without a beat and Tony swears he sees something glint in his eyes then.

“Well, we wouldn’t want that, now, would we, your highness?” Tony says, and he knows T’challa understands the undertones of his statement. Tony is not going to suffer two weeks (or three) of this entire thing only to have T’challa get his ass handed to him during a ceremonial fucking challenge.

“Do not worry, beloved,” T’challa pointedly states, clearly malcontent-ing with the way the syllables roll off his tongue and his words land upon the ears of anyone within earshot. “Your king won’t lose. I take it then that you will be present at the games? A week from now?”

Tony’s nose wrinkles in absolute distaste as he suppresses a twitch with much difficulty. “Of course. I would want nothing more than to witness and ensure that my darling husband maintains his hold on his crown. I will be present. Should be a lot of fun, hmm~?”

“Your presence will surely give me strength, my lovely morning star~” T’challa responds, outright smirking.

The fucking asshole!

“Good grief, aren’t you two just a match made in heaven, wouldn’t you agree mother?” Shuri asks, waving a hand in T’challa’s direction.

The queen humming and raising both eyebrows that makes T’challa chuckle and Tony roll his eyes openly (he catches himself later) is her only response to the entire exchange.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is interested in knowing what Tony's bath-area looks like, this is my visual inspiration.

I am blown away by the response to this fic; thank you for giving this a try! If I've made your day even the slightest bit better or if I've made you laugh even just the tiniest bit, then that is my reward! It's so humbling whenever I read your reviews and that is mentioned.

Thank you so much and hope to see you all next chapter :)
Four

Chapter Notes

I am my own Beta, might have some typos, yadayadayada. Work is inspired by the amazing marvelingjules @ TUMBLR. Because if it wasn't for her fics that I stumbled upon, I would not have known how much I ship these two.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

If anything, Tony thinks that his first week goes by surprisingly quick. The grand tour and state university visits help fill the time. He had been mostly very interested in Wakanda’s robotic department and while they had very interesting discussions, Tony cannot help but feel that there is an invisible wall that when he pushes forward too much. He had known from the get-go that while he’s been given a lot of liberty to wander the palace grounds, visit the capital city, explore the surrounding temples and whatnot, he knows that he’s moving within a controlled environment, with all the false pretenses of open liberty and freedom.

Tony is a lot of things but a delusional idiot is not one of them.

From the first palace tour, he had seen just how so far – so many light years, even – ahead Wakanda truly is. The Kimoyo beads on his wrist that he had taken apart and put back together had been his biggest clue. And while his inspiration and ideas to start new projects had hit an all time high – honestly, Tony had countless of digital blueprints already drafted into his digi-pad to review when he gets home, what with Wakanda being candy-tech-land – Tony knows it's useless because Wakandan technology all is all centered down to having vibranium as its base core. With that being the rarest metal on earth, a measly gram costing about ten-thousand American dollars in the black market, not only is it redundant but also just useless unless Tony can figure out how to use a different element. Wakandan tech is nowhere near compatible with anything outside her walls.

Which really, is what he had been busying himself with at night.

He takes the opportunity of his inability to not sleep to re-orient himself with his chemistry, plowing through volume after volume of anything related to sustainable elements that he can find in the royal library.

Of course, it doesn’t escape him that if the Wakandans doesn’t want him to find something, he probably won’t with his very ‘limited access’.

He does not let that negativity stop him from trying; what is he going to do otherwise?

Sulk in his room?

So, basically Tony evades sleep like it’s the black plague and while Kojo and his guards expresses some concerns, they mostly keep to themselves. Tony joins the royal family everyday for breakfast and dinner, except for the past four days where T’challa had made himself scarce, leaving his seat at the table empty.

Not that he and T’challa communicate often since the day of the banquet.
If anything, Tony just assumes that the giant kitty-cat is out panthering his way across his country like the appointed warrior that he is.

Tony doesn’t care.

It’s none of his business.

It is after dinner that Tony had consumed in silence with the queen-mother and Shuri, a night before the arena fight that Tony is pointedly not entirely sure is very wise, that he gets a soft knock on the door by one of the queen’s chambermaids.

She is a tall and slender thing, looks about as intimidating as one of the Dora Milaje and is dressed in light yellow robes, the color appointed to those serving and answering directly to the queen mother.

“Her highness requests your presence in her chamber gardens for tea,” She says, hands on her side and back straight.

“Uh – isn’t it a bit late?” Tony asks, looking at the time. It’s a little before midnight.

“Sleep evades her highness and she would like for you to keep her company,” She says again in a monotone that betrays no emotion.

“Okay, then.” Tony nods, and looks at his state of undress. “Give me a minute?”

The nod is all he needs before he turns away and pulls on a shirt.

The walk towards the queen mother’s chambers is a bit of a long one, considering the queen mother had one portion of the palace all to herself. Really, calling it a ‘chamber’ is about as inaccurate as calling a lemon a tree. Said chamber is about as big as three-quarters of Tony’s Malibu home and that home had been huge. The receiving area is so wide that it stretches about a good ten meters ahead of him and is decorated in gold and blue motif. Chiffon and silk drapes hang from the windows, accentuating the marble carvings and numerous symbolic artwork of the Bast. The scent of fresh flowers hang in the air, and Tony spies a study and another gathering room as he is escorted across the way towards two ceiling high doors that opens up to the queen’s private garden. The garden is illuminated by several mood spot lights, shadows dancing around its corners. If Tony squints, he can make out the posted guards on duty. Tony spots a large fountain in the center, of which is surrounded by manicured greenery and thousands of blooming roses, carnations, hypericums, alstromeria and lillies.

At the bottom of the steps, a table and comfortably cushioned chairs had been set up for this late night rendezvous. Tony walks forward when his escort gestures for him to go ahead.

Only to skid to a screeching halt when a pair of golden eyes look up at him.

Because holy shit, the panther that is lying like a giant docile house-cat by the queen’s feet yawns in his direction after a stare down, flashing very large teeth in his direction.

Tony is sure there is no proper protocol for something like this. He thinks a good loud what-the-fuck is the best protocol there is.

“Don’t be afraid, Mister Stark. Chagina won’t bite unless I tell her to,” The queen says, amusement in her tone, decked in silk embroidered robes and an elaborate night cap that is fitting for someone of her station.

Right.
Easier said than done, Tony thinks before he picks up his surprised balls off the ground and carefully makes his way to the empty seat beside the queen, knees about as steady as jelly and keeping as much distance as he can manage between himself and Chagina the panther without looking like a little chickenshit. The panther’s eyes follows his every movement, staring at Tony for a long time as he sits there very stiffly on his chair before it deems him not much of a threat and resumes to pillow its head on its paw.

“Good evening, your highness,” Tony says, swallowing past the bolus of what-the-fuck in his throat.

“I would think that a week in, the jetlag would have settled. But it isn’t jetlag that keeps you up at night, does it, Mister Stark? Honey in your tea?” She asks, as the attendant on standby starts pouring Tony a cup of tea.

He nods at the offer of honey and gives the large cat one more wary glance before he purposely tears his gaze away from it. “You are observant, your highness.”

The tea is placed beside Tony on the table, along with a tray of dried fruit and nuts before the attendant steps away to give them their privacy.

“May I inquire as to why that is the case, Mister Stark? Or should I go ahead and make uncomfortable guesses?” The queen asks, turning her sharp gaze towards Tony.

There is nothing intimidating about the inquiry, nor Tony can spot a hint of malice in it either. But he knows that the walls and ceilings of Wakanda have eyes and that the question is out of politeness rather than anything. He also knows that the queen probably knows or can make a very good guess to why Tony evades sleep like a plague, or why his sleep, if anything, is about an hour at most here and there during the day, or why it’s become a norm for the library staff and the guards to see him make his way to the library in the middle of the night, or on some days, right after dinner.

“Indulge me in a bit of fun at my own discomfort – take a wild guess, your highness,” Tony responds, keeping his tone polite even if his words do not exactly fall within the bracket of ultimate respect.

How did T’challa phrase it? Right, his people are very informed.

“You are wounded animal, Mister Stark. One that has been caged and its spirit almost faded,” She says after a long pause and there is a small if not sad smile tugging around the corners of her lips as she takes a sip of her tea.

“That’s… putting it very… poetically,” Tony mutters, even when goosebumps break all over his arms and under the fabric of his t-shirt. He wonders if this is the talk, wonders if he’s going to feel stripped naked by the queen’s gaze the entire time.

“My son, if anything, when he is not too clouded by his emotions, is a sound judge of character. I can see why he may have agreed to your union all those years ago.”

“We were drunk and high; I doubt even the best judge of characters would have been in their right minds when they thought getting married in Vegas is the most ingenious idea ever,” Tony says a bit dryly, as he takes a sip of his tea.

“Ah, but he wasn’t intoxicated when he met you, was he, Mister Stark?” the queen counters, finely shaped eyebrow raising just a touch. It is enough reason to give Tony pause. “My son never truly wanted to be a king; he was always more fit to be warrior and protector than someone who would dip his hands into politics. He craved the freedom to choose like many of us do, but often do not.
When you are a monarch, things like freedom is a privilege that must come after duty. He is, however, breaking norms that even his father and his father before him had not been able to. Why, to this day, I am unsure how T’chaka had agreed to allow him to pursue his education in the United States! What a feat!”

Tony blinks and stares at the tea in his cup, watching the ripples distort his message.

“He still doesn’t want to be king?” Tony asks, after a long pause.

“My son thinks he isn’t ready, that the crown had come too soon, especially after the passing of my late husband.” Tony looks over at that statement, sees the queen’s brows furrow for just a second before it smooths over and she takes a sip of her tea. “He is going to be the youngest king to be crowned yet. T’chaka was actively grooming him for the crown before the attack in Vienna. T’challa was supposed to be warrior first, and then king. My dear late husband believed that you can only be a good ruler, if you understand and see what is on the other side. T’challa was supposed to be student, then warrior first, so he can understand the value of what it means to protect and to be protected. Only then, maybe, he’d have a sure chance to turn out to be a good king. Be on both ends of spectrum. Being a good student is easy, a great warrior easier still. But a good king – there is no I in being a king or a queen. It is always we.” The queen pauses and exhales a soft sigh, slender fingers coming up to rub at a spot behind her neck; if anything, it is a break from her grace, the gesture a reminder that she is just a woman too, with a family who means a lot to her. “To be honest, Mister Stark, I believe that nobody is ever truly ready. No amount of preparation can ever prepare you for what is to come ahead.”

“There’s no harm in trying,” Tony offers, looking back at his tea. God does he know that there is no harm in trying; Ultron had been him trying, even if he had not even been remotely close to any interface at the time. The agreement to the Accords is also him trying, even if he knows the sheer amount of red-tapes that would have kept his wrists bound behind his back and his ankles under his knees. Him even saying yes to the Avenger’s initiative had been him trying too, for himself, to not play the lone-gunslinger-act, as Rhodey puts it.

Pepper had been him trying.

Rhodey’s friendship, after more or less a distorted jaded view on personal relationships, in a way, had also been him trying.

“No,” The queen sighs, something distant in her gaze. “There is none. It is mankind’s most persevering trait, to try. You, of all people, understands this best.” She looks at him then, and smiles. “I regret that our meeting is under these circumstances.”

“Don’t, your highness. If you aren’t already aware, I have a spectacular track record of getting myself into trouble without fully realizing it. One way or the other, you would have probably met me in equally ridiculous circumstances.” Tony smiles, and winks the queen as he takes another sip of his tea. “I don’t think I ever got the chance to, but please know, for what it's worth, I am sorry for any trouble any of this may have caused.”

The queen turns then, facing Tony completely. “Oh my dear boy,” She says, shaking her head and chuckling without humor. “There is no need for apology. Given the circumstances at the time it was made, I can only imagine. If T’challa had been anyone else other than who or what he is now, perhaps this separation would not have been necessary at all.”

“Oh come on, your highness…” Tony says, huffing a laugh.

“Do you know why our great-aunt is so fond of you?” The queen turns to look at Tony.
“That is an absolute mystery.” Tony grins. “Are you going to share the secret?”

“She senses your spirit. Underneath all the playboy tendencies, the fortune, the arrogance and every other label the world had pinned on you, you are, undeniably, a brave man. Sometimes a little foolishly brave. But there is strength and kindness born from fire. A lesser man would have shattered after Afghanistan alone. I have known men and women who do not recover from severe betrayals.”

The queen arches a brow pointedly, enough to make Tony shift uncomfortably in his seat. “Most outsiders may view our ways as backwards. We Wakandans may still practice a few old traditions, but we recognize the strength of a soul when we see one. And you, Mister Stark, are one of the brightest there is. We do not limit ourselves to the ideals of gender, race, color or societal stature -- the fact that T’challa is going to be challenged tomorrow, giving other warriors a chance at the throne is a testament to this. That is why she likes you; she sees past your cracks and flaws, she sees the things that matter. Some of us do.”

What do you say to something like that, honestly?

Tony opts to respond in the only way he knows how. He sasses, “I thought you said I was caged and wounded animal.”

The queen laughs, hearty and loud that makes Chagina perk up. “A caged and wounded panther will never forget the freedom and power of having the earth under its paws.” She reaches out with her hand, gesturing for Tony give her his. She then tugs at him to stand and with Tony’s heart in his throat, the queen gently presses his palm against the top of Chagina’s head. Chagina gives Tony a slow blink, before the tips of her ears press against her skull, as the queen guides Tony’s hand over the length of her spine. “The truly strong and brave will always recognize those who are like them.”

When Tony pulls his hand back, he waits for Chagina to change her mind and chew his arm off, going as far as pressing his left arm against his middle, staring at the giant cat like it is a suspicious carrier of anthrax.

But Chagina does nothing, only swishes her tail a few times, before closing her eyes.

Tony stands there, staring at it for the longest time before he looks up at the queen, who in turn, is staring at him with a look he had no fucking clue what to do about. It’s the kind of look that makes his insides turn a little bit in guilt, the kind that doesn’t seem to betray judgment for what he had done, the troubles he had caused; there is understanding and some sort of acceptance. Had it anyone else who knows Tony Stark, maybe he’d buy what she’s selling. But this queen knows nothing of him, doesn’t know what demons haunt him, what guilt-gremlins chew at him when he goes to sleep at night. She probably can’t comprehend the amount of deaths that lines the ledger of the Merchant of Death himself. Hell, if she had an inkling of just how much a terrible alcoholic he is, she’d have a hundred thoughts before agreeing to have her son be taken away by this poor excuse of a broken man, the man with everything and nothing. There is no reason for her to like him, it isn’t even about his money, his intelligence or Stark Industries. Tony knows he can’t offer Wakanda anything that they don’t already have, which sucks and kind of hurts his ego in a way, but Tony takes it with a grain salt because, hey, it’s Wakanda, the city that had running electricity long before the pyramids of Giza had been an idea.

“What are you doing, your highness?” Tony asks, sighing because he’s tired. Goddamnit, he’s exhausted with this fiasco and had so much garbage waiting for him back in the United States. “I’m gone in a few days; even if kitty-cat and I had some torrid love romance that blooms like a flower in spring, I can’t give him heirs. Even if you have the solution to that, which hey who am I kidding, you probably already do and are hiding it. Why - what is the point of all this?”
“I am just having a conversation and enjoying a cup of tea with a son-in-law that I am about to lose,” She answers softly, and Tony wonders if he’s seeing and hearing things; there is no reason for her to be so disappointed. She’s not missing much.

Really, how do you even respond to that?

For real. How?

“I’m okay with tea…” Tony answers lamely, feeling like a nobel prize winner for that rather apt response. It could have been worse. The queen hums, smiling up at him and setting her cup down, reaching forward to pour them both more tea. “So uh, about this challenge for the crown…”

“Oh! Yes, I’m glad you reminded me. I have taken liberties in choosing your ceremonial garb for the day! Forgive an old woman, we like to dote. Usually, a day before combat, there is a cleansing ritual. You will be a part of it, of course. Your ceremonial garments will be brought to you after the ritual. Think of this ritual as a very, very long day at the spa, if you must.”

“I like spas…”

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It had to be the best ‘spa’ treatment ever. Ever.

When Tony wakes the next morning, his attendant tells him that he will be escorted to the bathhouse on the northern wing of the palace, where his husband will be joining him. Kojo then allows a servant to bring him a tray of tea that tastes like tar – god, it was disgusting – and that had been it.

Tony then finds himself standing inside a large marble building, surrounded by guards, the smell of ripening lemongrass a little noxiously thick within its dim walls. The place is incredibly silent, save for the brush of bare feet against marble and the distant sound of running water. Smoke from the burning incense dances like shadow-dragons, as Tony is lead into the bathing area where he finds T’challa already waiting for him, a white cloth that falls till his knees wrapped around his waist.

“I am told that mother has informed you of this?” T’challa says, turning his head briefly as Tony is guided to stand beside him.

“Called it a long day at the spa, something about washing off evil, the bad energy of the world, restoring balance, etcetera, that the crown prince and his spouse, or king and his spouse must go through the ritual together,” Tony answers, as he lifts his hands off his sides when two attendants start to disrobe him completely and wrap a similar white cloth around his waist.

“And usually mate after, yes,” T’challa adds, turning his gaze ahead.

“She didn’t mention that part.” Tony replies, without preamble.

“Don’t worry Mister Stark; I don’t bite.”

“Biting, he says. Honeybuns, you haven’t even taken me out on one date yet. Rules are rules~” Tony sing-songs, unperturbed by the exchange.

“What a travesty,” T’challa sighs, and Tony catches him rolling his eyes.

They move forward into a bathing hall, where they both sink into the heated, steaming pool that is
filled with oiled water that smells of lavender and quite possibly something else. Tony doesn’t know what else might have been in the water, but the longer he sits, the more heavy his eyelids become, the more the carvings on the ceilings start to look unfocused. The perfunctory soak lasts for about thirty minutes, before Tony is escorted out of the pool and towards a room where he is made to lie on his front on a flat slate of cool, polished stone. It is surprisingly cold and the last thing Tony remembers are hands on his back and the scent of something herbal being rubbed and scrubbed all over his skin, the stone slab gradually warming. The last thing he sees as he is scrubbed from top to bottom, his limbs amazingly compliant is T’challa’s eyes lingering on him from the slate next to his, strangely focused and sharp.

Tony goes with the motions of the mud wrap, followed by the massage around his neck and the base of his scalp, eyes finally closing as he promptly passes out from the resulting boneless sensation seeping into his body. Scientifically, he knows it’s his body adjusting to the rapid alteration of heat and cold, of pressure points being pressed and peppered with almost two weeks of being on constant edge and restlessness. There is some measured science in the herbal concoction that hangs in the air and in the substances they use in their scrubs, muds, soaps, oils and whatever the hell else.

Tony distantly remembers drinking very bitter tea after all that, remembers sitting somewhere dark with a stream of light pouring from the ceiling as hands maneuver him and the feeling of cold ink make goosebumps rise all over his entire body.

Tony had no clue how long the cleansing ritual lasts.

But when he wakes up, it is late into the evening and he is lying in swathes of white linen, shrouded from the rest of the room with a thin veil of hanging white silk drapery. Tony blinks and sits up, feels no stiffness, no pain, no popping of joints and feeling like a trillion bucks. He can still smell the lingering scent of the oil on his skin as he carefully gets up from the bed and stands on knees that feel strong and steady. Usually, Tony would feel a slight chronic pain on his left knee; there is not even a trace of it.

He wonders if Wakanda will at least let him have whatever it is they slathered him with that had gotten rid of the aches.

It is probably wishful thinking.

Tony steps out of the room and finds T’challa seated on the ground facing the gardens, his back to Tony and a cup of steaming tea beside him on the polished stone steps, moonlight spilling over him, bathing him in white light. On his back are patterns and swirls of ink, inscriptions that means nothing to Tony; he assumes it’s the decorative and symbolic ritual painting for tomorrow’s combat. Like Tony, T’challa had a white cloth wrapped around his waist.

“How long was I out?” Tony asks, looking down at himself and noticing that he too, had swirls of ink painted on him. It isn’t as elaborate as T’challa’s, but it’s there, plunging like a V on his chest all the way to his abdomen, his wrists and forearms ankles and no doubt, on his spine too. Oh well.

“Very long,” T’challa responds, reaching out with his hand to pick up the tea cup beside him.

“Oh.” Tony looks around the room, and notices the bathhouse some yards away from the open balcony doors. “That’s it, right?”

“Yes,” T’challa answers, emptying his tea cup and carefully setting it down. He stands on his full height then, all fluid grace with not a sound to betray his movement. When he turns to face Tony, the ink patterns covers a part of his chest and hip bones in a V, too. Tony’s gaze flickers over them
quickly, before returning to meet T’challa’s focused but slightly amused gaze.

“I don’t suppose you’d let me have some of the whatever it is they used, would you?” Tony prompts and gets chuckles from the young king for his efforts. “Yeah, didn’t think so. You Wakandans are so secretive.”

“It’s part of the charm.” T’challa arches his eyebrow at the statement. “Would you like to return to your room, Mister Stark?”

“I would like that very much, kitty-kat-highness.” Tony nods.

“Allow me to escort you then,” T’challa says and turns as he dips his head towards the door on the far right, picking up something folded from a chair they walk past, carefully draping it over his painted arm.

They say nothing as they cross the palace grounds to head to another wing, the stillness of the grounds only disturbed by the brush of their sandals against polished, gleaming marble. When they reach Tony’s door, the guards on post dip their heads and steps away, putting good distance between Tony and their king.

“Can I ask you something?” Tony asks, as he reaches for the doorknob but doesn’t turn it. When T’challa nods, he asks, “You’re not really gonna lose tomorrow, are you?”

“Not without a good fight, no.” T’challa canters his head to the side a bit, eyes gleaming with amusement. There’s something else to. Something a little brighter. It may have been just a trick of the light, Tony isn’t sure. It’s hard to be sure about a lot of things when in Wakanda. “You shouldn’t worry.”

“I’m not worried,” Tony says rather dismissively, lips thinning, unamused at the accusation. Why should he be worried? It's not his crown. “It’d be a darn shame if you do, though.”

“Losing is a matter of perspective,” T’challa says as Tony turns the doorknob and steps into his room. T’challa follows, but doesn’t go beyond four paces from the door that he doesn’t close all the way behind him.

“What if you do?” Tony asks, sudden and turning, no joke, no humor, just real genuine curiosity. “What if you lose your crown? What would you do then?”

T’challa’s lips pull back briefly in a smile that doesn’t quite fully form on his lips. It's not quite a grimace, but not one full of confidence either. Tony thinks, despite his extremely relaxed state, that it may be the kind of smile he knows. It's the kind Tony himself wears when someone points out what a disappointment he is, the kind that says, yeah, well, I'm never good enough, anyway. It's almost a little raw, a crack in the immaculate royal and warrior facade; Tony thinks he's out of his goddamn mind if he's overthinking what hidden message that king might be having just because he looks torn at being amused or constipated, what the actual fuck. Tony blinks rapidly a few times, tearing his gaze off the king and shooing all stupid thoughts away from his mind before focusing on how T’challa is now looking at the folded fabric on his arm, chest expanding as he sucks in a slow and full breath, before he exhales. Steady dark fingers unfurls the folded white cloth, silver weaves catching in the light, but not quite visible. T’challa takes a step forward and carefully wraps it around Tony’s bare shoulders, bunching it like how one would hang a scarf around Tony’s neck, letting it fall over Tony’s folded arms. Tony’s eyebrows knit in question, just as his folded arms unfurl and comes to rest on his sides, and T’challa’s finger smooths one of the fabric folds on his left, just above his chest.
T’challa’s gaze flicks up to meet Tony’s with a small smile that Tony isn’t sure what to make of. Hell, Tony isn’t even sure why his heart suddenly decides to pound in his chest.

“I’ll tell you if I lose,” T’challa says and takes a step back, putting a very polite distance between them. “I promise.”

Tony feels his throat go a little dry, “Well you’re no fun.”

“Good night, Mister Stark. See you tomorrow at the royal stands,” T’challa says, and takes another step back to turn.

“I’m not cheering for you!” Tony calls out, and spots the flash of white teeth when T’challa ducks his head to hide his amusement and eye-roll, as he quietly steps out of the room and closes the door behind him.

Later, when Tony is being roused and rushed from his over-sleeping ass, he learns that the cloth T’challa had placed on his shoulders is a symbolic gesture from king to queen (or in his case, the king consort?) that means something along the lines of, *I draw strength from that of the Bast and my other half.*

Tony had flung the cloth somewhere on his bee-line to the bed and what a fuss he had been given because of *that.*

Really, it isn’t a big deal.

It’s all ceremonial *anyway!*

--

Tony had imagined the fighting pits to be… well, the fighting pits.

He thinks of Gladiators, sandy grounds, benches lining the stands, riots, banners and loud cheers from the crowd going wild in support of their favorite fighter (or King).

Wakanda really had the bar up in the stratosphere.

How is this country even a real *thing,* to be honest?

If Tony had to pitch forward a traveler's guide to Wakanda, it would just simply say: just go and what-the-fuck at everything.

He had also been expecting some sort of Game of Thrones-esque feel to the whole thing.

Instead, Tony gets a hole in the mountain, with picturesque waterfalls surrounding the areas and flat beds carved into said mountains to act as the spectator’s stands. The fighting pit below is uneven ground, perhaps something of an added challenge to those who are to engage in battle. Tony is standing next to the queen and flanked by tens of guards, just as some five feet below, in the ‘pit’, T’challa is being escorted in with the Dora Milaje from one side, and his opponent – big, burly sized man with bright turquoise paint patterned over scars on his torso and a clean shaved skull – comes out of the other. When the crowd cheers, it is ten times as loud because of the roar of the waterfalls.

Tony smooths down the white fabric his attendants had thrown a fit over against his chest, tugging it a little closer around him for a little more coverage and warmth. The ceremonial garb the queen had
picked out of him had turned out to be something that had required assistance in fastening and wrapping, a cross between shorts and a kilt; the spouse of the king is to be the only person dressed in white during these challenges, so Tony, much to his dismay, is like a beacon, sticking out like a sore thumb in the color swatch all around him. Tony can’t say he minds traditional clothing, hell, just some weeks ago, he had been in a salwar kameez of different colors the entire time during his trip to India.

He didn’t mind the attention, the looks – some sharp, some curious, a good chunk of them unamused – he gets, except when he does.

Tony attributes it to the fact that he is practically defenseless in Wakanda, as bare as a babe, no matter how many times he tugs at the fabric on his shoulder around himself.

The crowd hushes when what sounds like a horn cuts through the space, and the queen is the first to take a seat, followed by Shuri who slumps in her chair, before leaning forward to rest her elbows on her knees, her eyes sharp on the duo below. When Tony sits as well, the guards around them form a defensive wall behind them, as both king and challenger give each other their salutations and respect.

And then they promptly proceed to try to rip the other person’s head apart.

Tony had seen Natasha, Clint and Steve spar. He knows fluid grace and power behind each fist that is meant to crush and break bones in however many pieces. What he sees below him feels like a step above that; it is vicious and gnarly, like wild cats reinstating territorial dominance. With each step and blow, water rises and cuts through like a shower of shattered glass. T’challa’s opponent is strong, but he is no match for a king.

With a quick feint and a liver blow, T’challa grapples his stunned opponent and flips him over his head like he weighs no more than a pound, bringing him down to the ground with a resonating thud-splash that sends the crowd roaring in victorious cheer for their king.

The opponent lies unmoving on the ground, stunned and staring at the glare of the sun above them, before he lifts a hand in surrender and is helped up by the king, their words being drowned out by the cheer.

The next three fights more or less, ends up with the same result.

Until someone by the name of Erik steps into the pool with two spears, tossing one in T’challa’s direction before they both shake hands and smile at each other like they are the best of friends. Tony hears the murmurs break around the watching crowds, looks around and above him at the curious hum before Tony focuses back at the pit, catching a brief stiff look from the queen and Shuri’s smirk.

The sudden clang of spears makes Tony’s head turn in a whiplash, unaware that he had been distracted from the fight, and nothing prepares him for what he sees below. He had seen a grainy footage of Captain America going up against the Winter Soldier during the entire Project Insight debacle. Maybe it had been the graininess of it that had watered it down, but T’challa and Erik both exhume raw power. It is nothing short of watching gods duke it out and T’challa had already gone through four fights prior. That is a handicap to the challenger all on its own.

There is nothing fair about the fight, Tony thinks, especially now that Erik is giving T’challa a run for his crown.

The bend of Erik’s spear connects solidly with T’challa’s jaw, sending him flying and twisting in the air, landing on the ground with a splash with not much grace as he had when this entire thing had started, almost looking like he had bellyflopped, flesh smacking loud and hard on stone and water.
And Tony finds himself getting up from his chair sharply, heart in his throat, back rigid and far too taken and absorbed into the fight, looking down at the king whose lips are stained red as he gets up like he is unhurt. Tony knows better though; he can see the slight waver, because T’challa is strong, but he’s got no armor anywhere to protect him from all the blows, from fights before and now. It would have been a different game if he had his suit on.

There is a sudden hush that falls when the king looks up at the royal family, and meets Tony’s wide eyed and alarmed gaze.

T’challa blinks and has the audacity to smirk in Tony’s direction, are you kidding right now? This guy is handing your ass to you and you could lose your crown and there you are bleeding and acting like you’re in some fancy ass Paris perfume ad? Really?!

Tony blinks and barely sees the movement when T’challa surges forward. They dance around each other, raining blow after devastating blow before T’challa ducks and swipes Erik’s ankle from under him, a successful parry that throws Erik off-balance. T’challa goes with the momentum, and brings Erik down, his foot on Erik’s bruising, bare shoulder and the tip of his spear against his throat.

The waterfall hushes the crowd.

And Erik drops his grip on his spear, holds up both hands with a toothy, cheeky bruising grin on his face and the crowd roars.

Tony lets out a breath he doesn’t know he’s holding, blinks his gaze away from the duo below him and carefully sits his numb ass on his chair, jaw tight and lips pressed into a thin line.

Whatever else follows after – the speech, the cheer, some prayer to the Bast, blah, blah, blah – Tony hears none of it, trying to shake off the intensity of the fight off his nerves; he had been so entranced by the entire ordeal, as if bewitched. T’challa joins them later, standing between the Queen and Tony, wrapped in a rich red cloak and still wet from the fight, before the rest of the challengers give their respects and pledge their still strong allegiance to the king and the royal family. They bow, every single one of them, except Erik who grins. Erik who makes T’challa roll his eyes, a touched amused.

And Erik who turns to look at Tony pointedly in the eye, before bowing to only him.

“May you continue to inspire strength in our king,” He says and maybe Tony’s ears are a little deaf from the cheer and the continuous roar of the waterfalls, but it comes off like a mockery, if not an insult.

Tony knows mockery like the back of his hand. Is this guy for real? Did he have a death wish or something, because the queen had a very blank look on her face.

And Tony’s throat goes a little dry when he feels T’challa’s warm hand on the small of his back, his poor heart suddenly jumping up to his throat. For no fucking reason Tony can comprehend.

“Erik, I believe you haven’t had the opportunity to meet Tony Stark, my husband,” T’challa says, voice cool and even.

Erik steps in close as his voice drops to a level only meant for T’challa and Tony to hear, “Not for long surely,” Erik whispers. Tony stares at the nerve of this guy, watching as Erik straightens and T’challa’s face remains neutral, undisturbed as Erik’s lips quirk and he dips his chin, “An honor to meet you in person, your highness.”

Tony manages a tight, “Sure thing, Elvis,”
It’s a pathetic jab at Erik’s ridiculous bangs, but it makes him throw his head back in a barking laugh, that also results in the queen chuckling in amusement and Shuri rolling her eyes. Tony wishes he had something a lot more clever.

But Tony can’t say he’s comfortable.

And he can safely say that neither is T’challa, what with how the hand on Tony’s lower back had switched to something more of a protective and territorial hold on his hip.

Tony doesn’t dare move.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

I read somewhere that Erik and T’challa’s relationship is like Charles/Erik from the X-men. Since this story is pre-black-panther, I’m gonna go ahead and headcanon and assume they were still friends-or-something before Killmonger becomes well, Killmonger. Or maybe it’s a façade, IDEK. I am making up shit based on info released SDCC and Marvels photo releases. I am world-building in the dark here.

Chagina – Brave one

THANK YOU FOR READING YAYAYAYAYYAAAA
Five

Chapter Notes

I am my own Beta, might have some typos, yadayadayada. Work is inspired by the amazing marvelingjules @ TUMBLR. Because if it wasn't for her fics that I stumbled upon, I would not have known how much I ship these two.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The ride back to the palace is quiet.

The queen and Shuri had boarded a separate vehicle, whilst Tony now sits next to T’challa in a vehicle of their own, a fine sleek piece of machine in black, its motor almost as silent as a vacuum, all leather seats, soft gold panel lights, really, Tony would want nothing more but to sink his hands into its engine, take it apart slowly and study it. He knows for a fact that all transportation systems in Wakanda (well, like everything, really) runs on clean energy. There is zero emissions and carbon footprint – it’s nothing short of amazing. If anything, Tony likes to think that he’s not really walking out of this trip empty handed. He’s never felt more fired up to push forward with all the visions he had (and had left so far in the back-burner from his younger years) and grand plans for the arc reactor than he does now.

“I don’t suppose you’d let me buy a car manufactured here, would you?” Tony suddenly asks, turning to look at the king who now sits in dry clothes, cloak crisply folded across his still bare arms.

“I take it your stay isn’t completely unpleasant, then,” T’challa says, amusement lingering on his lips.

“Circumstances of my stay will always leave a sour taste. But, I’m a big boy. I can entertain myself. Besides, the amount of technology you have here – it’s candy land!” Tony says, cocking both eyebrows at the bemused king, before asking, “You could easily not only monopolize the world, but the amount of good your hidden gem of a country can do, you’d be able to keep the world safe from outer threats, put everyone ahead of their game, and yet…”

“For a long time, the world’s safety has not been our concern.” T’challa’s expression is somber, and for a no longer than a heartbeat, conflicted. “My people still believe that the world and their problems is no concern of ours. To a point, it isn’t. We’ve been able to thrive by not meddling in other people’s affairs, choosing to continuously evolve our own methods, way of living, technology. But the world is changing, people are changing, heroes, mutants, super-powered beings – they’re everywhere.” T’challa turns to look at the glass, watching the stretch of the greenery and rocks surrounding the proud palace just beyond. “My father believed not just in our people, but the world. The Accords had been the first step. We are a proud race, always have been. My father… he saw things many of my people still refuses to accept or acknowledge, even when they see it. He truly believed in so many things and sometimes I wonder if he ever felt alone in those beliefs, too…”

Tony watches something glisten in T’challa’s eyes; he sees the devotion towards a man long gone, love like no other, a bond that must have been irreplaceable, because within the space of no more than ten seconds, Tony hears it in T’challa’s voice, the quake of the syllables that tries to remain neutral and even, possibly from years of grooming under the royal thumb. He sees the pinch between his eyebrows, of how he must still try to swallow past the loss that swells up to the size of a baseball in your throat. Then Tony sees how T’challa blinks that all away, and a small smile twitch over his
handsome face, as if none of what had transpired in those ten seconds of vulnerability had ever happened. Nothing to see here, T’challa’s expression says, just me shoving my shit down because well, why would any of you care, I’m the king, my personal problems is of no consequence to you.

Yeah, Tony recognizes the dance number happening before him.

He’s danced it his entire life.

“He sounds like he was a great guy,” Tony says, and holds T’challa’s gaze when the king looks at him, blinking a touch owlishly but with more poise. “You worried?”

“About?” T’challa cants his head, curious.

“Filling shoes far too big for you?” Tony points out, and watches something completely unguarded flash in T’challa’s gaze. “You’ll probably be fine, anyway.”

“Is that your attempt at trying to comfort me?” T’challa asks, teeth peeking from between full lips and chest rumbling with amused laughter T’challa is failing to suppress.

“Uh no, I was getting to the part where I give you advice. The same advice which went swimmingly well with my last attempt at recruiting an Avenger, if I do say so myself. So listen up, husband, here be the royal advice from your spouse.” Theatrics is necessary, so Tony clears his throat and turns a little in his seat, gesturing with his hand. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. And also don’t do anything I would do. Somewhere in the middle, there’s this puddle of gray, that’s where you should operate. Don’t go beyond the gray. Beyond gray is where terrible, terrible things happen and you get stabby-stab in the back or worst, left behind with nothing.”

“Puddle of gray…” T’challa repeats.

“Big puddle of gray.” Tony nods.

“As my still legal husband, I am obligated to be honest with you. So therefore, beloved, this advice is of questionable repute,” T’challa says, not even bothering to mask his amusement now. The smile blooms like a spring blossom on his lips, making him look even younger, more relaxed and less of an uptight asshole.

Tony gasps, pointing at himself. “Dearest, that is no way to converse with your husband. I am hurt. You’re couched for the night. No arguments, nothing you say or do shall change my mind.”

“Oh I don’t know about that,” T’challa says, leaning back and bringing a hand up to rub a spot on his neck. “This is coming from the same person who said he wouldn’t cheer for me. And yet did so, anyway.”

“That was not cheering. What part of anything that I did can be considered cheering?” Tony asks, challenging.

“You got up from your seat. You thought I was gonna lose. You should have seen your face. You looked a little under the weather with your concern for your king’s wellbeing,” T’challa says, which makes Tony shamelessly guffaw in T’challa's smug face. “Still won.”

“Barely,” Tony says, breathless and laughter dissolving to chuckles. “You are so full of shit. And yourself.”

“And you’re not?” T’challa asks, the smirk no longer suppressed and just there, dancing on his lips for the world to see.
“Touche~” Tony says, as he chews on his lower lip and slouches a little more comfortably on the car seat, tilting his head back and closing his eyes, not paying heed to the silence that falls between them like a warm blanket.

Their car drives past the first gate, going through the winding road until they slowly come to one of the palace’s entrances, where a line of attendants stands on ceremony, waiting for the royal family to disembark.

“I worry, you know,” T’challa suddenly says, head ducked as he tugs the cloak around his shoulders some more. “Big shoes to fill?”

“Well, if you drink your milk before bed and ensure that you eat all your green vegetables at lunch and dinner,” Tony says, rearranging the fussed-about white ‘shawl’ on his shoulders. “You will grow big enough to fit daddy’s shoes~” T’challa stiffens in his seat and when Tony looks at him, he had the strangest expression on his face. Tony purposely blows a disgustingly loud and cheesy kiss his ways, full with pouty lips and a four finger wave.

Tony doesn’t wait to hear what T’challa had to say, if he had something to say.

He had already stepped out of the car and is following the queen.

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Dinner – as it always is from his first night in Wakanda – is mostly quiet and peppered with off-beat conversations and Shuri being a smartass. Tony had the distinct impression that while she remains civil and sasses around him on his expense, while she still maintains some form of politeness (if you can call it that, but really, Tony had been in the company of hooligans; Shuri is a saint compared to them), Tony cannot help but feel that she truly – from the depths of her core – does not like him.

Which is no skin off his nose.

He sasses right back, anyway.

Today’s dinner is no different.

“Considering how you had resisted being here, you are actually looking a lot more relaxed, Mister Stark. A lot younger, less hollow; like you’ve done botox.”

“Why, thank you Princess Shuri; your compliments truly makes a man’s heart soar. Is that a new hairdo? Or am I just really noticing how intelligently large your forehead is?” Tony forks a forkful of salad into his mouth, pointedly chewing in her direction.

“Oh, isn’t it just marvelous? I have attendant who does it for me, real talent, that one. This is more than what I can say about yours when you first got here. Too bad Wakanda isn’t that advanced to reverse the signs of aging,” Shuri says, teeth flashing as she takes a sip from her glass.

“No really, your forehead to hairline ratio…” Tony says, propping his chin on his palm, purposely throwing Shuri a very inquisitive look.

“Which is more than what I can say about your very imbalanced face.” Shuri says, leaning forward with her elbows on the table. “Since this entire thing started, I’ve been trying to figure out what dearest brother saw in you.”

“I’m told I have a bright spirit,” Tony announces, puffing his chest and then cocks a brow at Shuri’s direction. “Otherwise, beats me, Princess. I wouldn’t know either. I can tell you why I would have
agreed though. He’s not so bad on the eyes.”

T’challa’s gaze flicks up at that, pointedly pinning him with a *look*. “Mister Stark…”

“Really? *I* get the behave-yourself look—“

T’challa looks suddenly very puzzled, caught off guard by the statement. “This is not a behave-yourself look.”

“—when she started it! She always starts it. I was just sitting here, innocently eating my – I’m sorry your highness, what did you say was in this again?” Tony asks, leaning a touch to his right to address the queen.

“Spinach and squash,” The queen quips without a beat.

To which Tony gestures with a hand to further emphasize his point. “And you’re still doing it, Nyan-cat.”

Shuri chortles a little and flicks a glance at the confused looking king. “He’s not wrong.”

“I’m not wrong.” Tony nods.

“I am *not* making a behave-yourself expression,” T’challa emphasizes and gets, at best, three pointed looks for his efforts, including the queen who starts to chuckle. “*How* am I making a behave-yourself face?”

“Your forehead gets incredibly wrinkled,” Shuri pipes out, just as she takes a bite from off her fish.

“And you get this thing around the corner of your mouth, like a quirk upwards to the left, makes your chin crinkle in what I’m assuming is absolute distaste….” Tony trails off, realizing just what is rolling off his stupid mouth. T’challa is *looking* at him, eyebrows knitting and a touch surprised, like the words are unexpected. Tony doesn’t blame him. He doesn’t remember when he had made that observation. “What? It’s true! Oh close your mouth, Hello Kitty.”

Shuri looks like she had a quip ready, possibly a hit – as always – on the state of their relationship; it doesn’t quite form when a harried messenger suddenly enters the dining room, speaking in rapid Wakandan – Tony is going to assume they’re apologies – before moving to stand on T’challa’s right to whisper something.

It’s always a vision to watch how all the walls go up in T’challa’s face. They’re very subtle changes, if you don’t count the swift aura change at all. The said lines of worry on T’challa’s chin and forehead smooths out, his eyebrows settling on a more neutral stance, lips pressing together briefly before they relax with one single exhale. Then, he stands, expression as blank as a slate. Any humor or playfulness – if one can call it that – from Shuri drops from her expression as well, when T’challa gestures for her to stand, too.

She is on her feet without question, wiping her lips with the pressed napkin and draining the rest of her drink.

“I’m sorry to leave so early, but something needs my attention. Mother…” T’challa leans over, pressing lips to crown of his mother’s head and then gaze flicking towards Tony. “Mister Stark, as agreed, two weeks. Tomorrow, we shall finalize all the necessary paperwork.”

Tony can only nod.
There is a very short moment where T’challa looks like he wants to say something more, but opts against it when he turns and leaves the room with Shuri and his messenger.

The room is suddenly empty and devoid of noise, as the queen places her cutlery on the table and takes a slow sip of her wine. Tony looks at his plate, at the curved reflection of his confused face on the decanter on the table, how he looks like he’s frowning, when there’s not much to frown about. He can finally fuck off on home, get back on the grind, and turn into another tap dancing idiot for Ross. Super fun times ahead -- the only silver lining is his plans to adjust Rhodey’s leg braces.

“Would you like to take a short stroll with me, Mister Stark?” The queen asks, just as she sets her wine glass down.

“Sure, why not?” Tony clears his throat, blinking the expression away and setting his napkin on the table, getting on his feet just as the queen stands.

They walk through the palace gardens, the breeze mild and cool. Chagina walks lazily between Tony and the queen, tail curled and paws as silent as cotton brushing against marble. Tony watches as Chagina walk, one strong and heavy paw in front of the other.

“You have one too, you know?” The queen says, looking his way as they descend down a few steps to walk on open grass.

“One…?” Tony blinks and looks down at Chagina and then back up at the queen. “Panther?”

She hums, as they keep walking. “It’s customary for the spouse of the king to receive one. They are loyal, fierce guardians, our last line of defense against harm, when all other guards around us have fallen. It’s an old tradition that we still practice. Chagina is a descendant form a line of guardian panthers to Wakanda’s kingdom. There is an old legend, long before the meteor hit, that one night, the chief, during a hunt, slipped and fell from the mountain.” The queen points towards north-east, where Tony knows the picturesque mountains, the highest peak of it, stands. “He was saved by a pair of panthers, dragged from the water and was carried back to the village. The pair never left his side again and the chief remained the chief for a long time, until he unified the tribes and was crowned king.”

“Sounds like an excellent bedtime story,” Tony murmurs, watching as Chagina turns to look at him, blinking golden eyes at him at his words.

Well, that is not creepy at all.

“It is, isn’t it? Those kind of stories are always the most magical. So imagine our surprise when Chagina and my late husband’s Amari brought forward a pair of cubs not too long before his passing.” Tony blinks at her and it makes her chuckle. “We thought perhaps Shuri or T’challa had some keen interest somewhere on someone. But when confronted, there was none. And now here you are.”

“Uhh… so you have magic cats --” Tony slows to a stop when Chagdina sits on her hind legs, just to stare at him. “-- who pops babies when the crown prince or crown princess are about to wed?”

“No, no, no.” The queen shakes her head. “These particular panthers only bring forth cubs when a new king and his spouse is to ascend the throne. When I married T’chaka, he didn’t have a panther yet. It came many years later right before his father took ill and opted to crown him first, so he can live the rest of his days watching his son rule. Oh my dear husband had taken it as a sign that T’challa is ready to be Wakanda’s youngest king, took it as a blessing.”
Tony doesn’t point out that it had been probably a heads up to his upcoming death. The sad look on the queen’s face is all the confirmation he needs, and like T’challa, it comes and goes.

“He must have felt quite proud, though, all things considered.”

“Oh yes,” The queen chuckles. “That silly old man couldn’t keep his wits together with his excitement.” She says, with so much fondness and adoration.

Tony’s lips quirk at the sight before him, the queen mother and her crown of silver braids glowing at just the memory of her late husband’s antics. Once upon a time, when life had been good and Howard had remembered not to be an ass, Tony had seen his father look up at his mother in the same adoring light. Howard had been a lot of things, a piss-poor dad possibly at the top of the list, but Howard knew devotion. He had been devoted to his work, to his darling Maria. Their marriage had not been the very best and it had gotten worse before it even started to get better. But Tony can’t think of a single time where his father didn’t look like a stranger (from his usual ass-self) when he had looked at Maria.

Howard had been a changed man every time he had looked at Maria.

Tony swallows and wonders if Howard would have worn the same look the queen does now, when he thinks of his darling wife, if Maria had died before him.

Maybe it’s a small blessing that Tony doesn’t know the answer to that question.

“You must miss him…” Tony says, barely above a whisper, tearing his gaze away and swallowing the proverbial wad of dry cotton in his throat.

“Oh, very, very much…” The queen adjusts her shawl and takes a seat on a garden bench, patting the space beside her for Tony to join her. “I didn’t always love him you know? Not at first. I didn’t want to be queen, I wanted to be a warrior, especially when T’chaka already had an heir, I certainly had my reservations for caring about a child that wasn’t mine at the time. But our families came together, our marriage arranged -- it was very political. And just as I was beginning to come to terms with my new station, T’chaka, in his little ways, became my first friend in the palace. And then he was my best friend. My equal in every way. At the beginning, I could imagine a life without him so easily. And then I couldn’t.”

“Wait -- back up, he had an heir before you were married?”

The ever beautiful Queen Ramonda chuckles, shaking her head. “Oh, you didn’t know? I’m the second wife. Shuri is my daughter. T’challa my step-son. His mother passed during child-birth. He was probably about eight months old when I first held him? Not as a mother yet, but I was introduced and I was being courted by a quirky little king at the time with so many ideas…” The queen shakes her head, a soft smile on her lips. “He was excited, you know? When he heard the infamous Ironman signing the the Accords. Said that it must have taken the Bast’s bravery for you to sign that document.”

“Yeah well,” Tony looks away, staring off at a spot by the fountains. “We all know how that turned out.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” The queen says, taking his hand and giving it a gentle squeeze.

“Nor theirs either,” Tony murmurs and there is a long silence that feels like a vacuum before he looks up and finds the queen looking at him with an expression that makes him squirm in his seat. Not uncomfortably, but in a way that he isn’t sure what to make of it.
“He would have liked you, my T’chaka,” She says, pressing a hand to his cheek. “I will miss our conversations and your company, Mister Stark.”

Her hand is warm, soft around the center of her palm and callous around the base of her fingertips, a silent confirmation that she is indeed a warrior under all her grace and beauty. Her eyes glitter with affection that Tony doesn’t think he deserves. But then again, this is coming from a person who had been a pawn in a political game and somewhere down the road, had been possibly the sole winner of it all.

“Me too,” Tony says and finds that the words aren’t a lie. “Surprisingly?”

The queen **laughs**, head back and loud, good and strong and so unlike her usual measured grace.

Tony thinks it’s a sight to behold, indeed.

--

Tony is in the middle of conversing with Pepper, making arrangements for his arrival, trying to dodge meetings and listening to her berate him for wanting to dodge those very meetings when the sharp knock cuts Tony off mid-sentence.

“Pep, I’m gonna call you back in a sec,” He says, sounding confused, looking at the time. It’s a little past midnight.

Pepper doesn’t question him and tells him to get her something nice; she knows he won’t call back. Which says a lot.

Really, Tony wonders sometimes how on earth did he ever stumble upon a rare gem that is Pepper Potts.

The knock sounds again and Tony is up and crossing the distance when the door just opens, Shuri letting herself in and huffing.

“Uh, privacy!” Tony bites out.

“Oh do be quiet. It wasn’t like you were asleep. Late night talks with your ex?” She asks, blinking and batting her naturally long eyelashes.

Really, Tony had known that they had been keeping a very close eye on him. But he didn’t think any of this is necessary.

“Seriously?” Tony deadpans.

“I have been sent ahead by my brother to let you know that if he is not present a breakfast tomorrow, there may be a delay in finalizing the paperwork.”

“Ohhh, it must **bite you** to play pigeon-messenger for your brother, doesn’t it?” Tony croons.

“No more than you being the outsider in a place that you know you’d thrive in, hmm?” Shuri steps forward and as she does so, Tony can smell the sweat and the sharp tang of copper that is oh so familiar. In the dim light, he sees her soiled outfit, patches of dirt visible and gear a disarray. “God, what does he see in you?”

“Beats me. Now get the fuck out.” Tony tips his chin at the door.

“You should be grateful to my dearest brother. Do not ever mistake our generosity and civility for
affection. Even if this marriage had worked out, you, Mister Stark, will always be an outsider, even if everything lines up to your favor. You’d do well to remember that the only thing keeping you upright on your feet in Wakanda is the word and protection of the king. Had it not been for my dearest brother, you’d be dead before you even flew into Wakanda’s airspace,” Shuri says, voice even and not a glitch in her tone; she pretty much confirms all of Tony’s suspicions.

It’s good thing Tony doesn’t give a damn.

“Fantastic! Now, as the husband to the king, I’m telling you to fuck off and let the door hit your ass on your way out. It’s my word against yours, little princess. And mine, holds more weight.” Tony grins, and calls for the guards who appear at the door, looking stiff and severely uncomfortable. “Get out before I ask them to take out the trash.”

Both guards visibly stiffens and look incredibly alarmed.

“You don’t have the balls.” Shuri irks on, daring him, goading him.

“Spouse of the king, ergo king consort, technically. Until those papers are signed.” Tony points at himself then points at Shuri. “Spoiled bratty princess with attitude. Not a queen. Uh, you really want to know how big my balls are?”

Shuri is still for about two seconds before her chin juts out and she turns around to leave.

“Unworthy.”

“ Heard that one before. You’re gonna have to do better than that to hurt my feelings, oh my dear god,” Tony mocks, fanning a hand to his face and pressing it to his bare chest like those over zealous beauty pageants.

Shuri doesn’t look back and simply pushes past the guards and turns around the corner. The guards shuffle at Tony’s doorstep, looking at each other, at the clearly unimpressed princess and then at Tony. Tony simply waves a hand in their direction, bids them a good night and goes back to bed once the door closes, flexing and rubbing his left arm as he stares at the ceiling.

Unworthy, she says.

Well, she isn’t really wrong.

He doesn’t call Pepper.

He also doesn’t see T’challa in the morning. Right before breakfast ends with just him and the queen, a messenger comes in telling him that the king will see him after lunch at his study. Tony figures that he had enough time between breakfast and lunch to hop into town and find a present for Pepper and Rhodey and if he isn’t feeling like the piece of shit that he is, maybe he’ll pick something up for Peter.

The Friday Market apparently is a thing.

So that is where Tony finds himself exploring that sunny afternoon in Kojo’s company, his guards following him around discreetly, baseball cap tugged over his forehead as he looks past stone wares, embroidered cloths, glittering diamonds and precious stone jewels, silver and gold, tech accessories that is about as useless as a dial up modem anywhere in the world except Wakanda and rows and rows of snacks and fresh fruit delicacies. Tony consumes more wild fruit than actually looking for a present for Pepper, talking to the locals, listening to stories and really, he’s having a good time being a fucking tourist.
The locals don’t clamor around him, don’t bother him and only speak to him when he asks a question.

So when he asks where can he get a really beautiful necklace for a friend, they point him down the street to an old jewelry store that had been in business for generations. Tony makes his way towards it, crossing the busy street and eyes the glimmering display of diamonds, rubies, sapphires and emeralds, topazes and a bunch of other stones that resemble each other. He spots a lovely emerald necklace that he thinks would flatter Pepper's lovely green eyes, would sit nicely on her delicate curve of her neck, something fitting for someone so beautiful. Tony looks up from it with the intention to turn and walk into the shop.

Except he finds himself staring at a reflection of a bearded man looking at him from across the street, wide blue eyes framed by loose bangs from the slightly tousled combed back blond hair. Tony recognizes those eyes anywhere; he sees them almost all the time when he goes to sleep, holding a shield up and bring it down on his arc reactor. He knows that face, thick beard or not. And for a moment, Tony thinks he’s seeing things, that the numbness and suddenly sticky breath in his lungs is just another panic attack, that if he shuts his eyes and, open them again, he’d be gone.

Steve isn’t.

And Tony turns to look at the frozen and shocked face across the street staring at him too, unable to look away.

Tony had words. A lot of words. A bajillion of them. He takes a step forward and then another, and another, to just deliver those words once and for all. Tony wades through what feels like a world of syrup, footsteps heavy, slow and not quite quick enough. There is something razor sharp in his chest, digging at the softest parts of him when Tony watches that man - that goddamn man - lift his hand up in alarm and warning, lips parting as the beginning of Tony’s name start to form.

Then there is a hand grabbing Tony by the collar of his jacket, yanking him back as a large vehicle zips past him, inches away from his toes and feet, making him stumble back against someone solid and strong, just as Kojo’s fretting face dances into his field of vision.

“Whoah~ You got a death wish, your highness?”

Tony turns and looks up at the man who steadies him for a moment before stepping back. “Erik…”

“You remember me. How flattering,” He says, roguish and handsome grin on his face, which falls off as a more serious expression takes over. “Hey, hey you alright there? You look ill.”

Tony looks around him, the entire length of the street, up and down, and scanning every vehicle in the premises.

Steve is gone.

Well, in all hindsight, Wakanda kind of would make sense to hide in, wouldn’t it? No one could get in.

“Yeah,” Tony says, but not convincingly as his breath slowly starts to come out in short fits that he tries to clear and calm down, shaking his head, cradling his left arm close to him. “Sorry, I mean uh, thanks. That would have pancaked me.”

“Yeah, no problem. Listen, maybe you should go back.” Erik reaches forward and turns Tony’s right wrist, where one of the beads is flashing a red warning. “Get him help,” He says, looking at Kojo. “Move or this is treason against the king!”
Kojo doesn’t need to be told twice and skitters away, calling for their vehicle.

“Hands off, seriously, no touchy!” Tony murmurs and his head swim a little bit as he rides out the rest of his panic, taking in deep breaths through his nose, and much to his dismay, doesn’t even realize he’s taking comfort on the warm hand rubbing circles between his shoulder-blades.

The silver car they had come to the market center with pulls to a silent and sharp halt in front of Tony, back door throwing open as Erik gestures for him to go in.

“You should talk to your husband, Mister Stark,” He says and then closes the door before his figure rolls past the glass as the car drives forward to the palace.

Tony sits in his seat, breathing hard and heavy, keeping his eyes closed as the panic drenches him in cold sweat and the quakes start.

He doesn’t remember having a panic attack this intense since after New York.

It’s fucking ridiculous.

They arrive in the palace far too soon and Tony finds himself walking down its halls in a daze on his way to the see the palace physician before he comes to a grinding halt, right there in the middle of the hallway. No, he thinks, shaking his head and clearing it. Tony asks where the king is and is given a generic response. He demands where the king is and he is told that he is currently meeting with his generals. They point the direction to the meeting hall by the king’s study and Tony doesn’t wait, doesn’t knock, brushes past the guards and steps in, as all conversations screeches to a grinding halt and god, he doesn’t care. Holy shit he can’t give two fucks right now as he looks at T’challa straight in the eye, all color gone from his face and temples damp from cold sweat.

T’challa doesn’t even bat an eyelash when he dismisses the entire room.

There are mild grunts and murmurs of protests but the room clears and the double doors shut with an audible click.

And then T’challa is standing before Tony, eyes wide, mask gone and concern suddenly all over his face, takes one look at the Kimoyo beads on Tony’s wrist and slowly and very carefully places warm and large hands on the curve of his shoulders, lips parting to give voice to the concern that had absolutely no fucking business being all over his goddamn face. T’challa's one hand comes up - with a tremble - to press against Tony's jaw and neck.

“I am leaving this afternoon,” Tony says, voice quaking, much to his distaste. Really, could he sound any more like a sore loser? “Not tomorrow, not tonight, this afternoon.”

“The papers --”

“I don’t care.” Tony shakes his head, and keeps shaking his head. “I don’t give a fuck -- what the fuck were you thinking!” Tony shoves T’challa off him, who takes it and goes with the motion, forcing him a step back. “Go on,” Tony says, blinking spots off his vision and staring up at the ceiling, like he’s trying to gather strength from the carvings of the fucking Bast up there to stop him from wanting to bash the king’s head in because he deserves it. “Tell me I’m over reacting. Tell me I see things that aren’t there, that you aren’t in fact harboring criminals that my ass is getting roasted for on all fucking fronts. Tell me what a little shit I am for overreacting, for seeing ghosts, lie to my face just a little more like you haven't already when I came here in good fucking faith, when I have everything on the line. Go on, please fucking do!”

T’challa looks nothing short of devastatingly angry and sad at the same time. The expressions war on
his face, it’s almost sickeningly beautiful that Tony wants to punch it square in the middle, break that
goddamn perfect teeth with his fist.

“Tony, please…”

“No.” Tony shakes his head and clears his throat. “No, T’challa. No.” He brings both hands up to his
face and swipes it down viciously. “God and to think that - that I was actually starting to actually
kind of like this place. And you! You -- god, you are just a piece of work!” Tony throws his hands
up and turns around to leave. “This afternoon. Make it happen or I will.”

“Please, Tony.” T’challa sounds and looks like he’s begging, syllables wavering.

Tony doesn’t listen, throws the doors open and walks down the halls, people skittering out of his
way as he returns to his room and finishes all his packing. The door had slammed so hard that Tony
wouldn’t be surprised if he damaged some of its mechanism.

No one bothers him.

T’challa doesn’t follow.

He receives a call some thirty minutes later that his car is on standby to take him to the airport. He
thanks the caller, throws the phone and watches it smash against the wall into smithereens before he
starts dressing for his departure. He is in the middle of tugging his t-shirt on when he hears a knock
and ignores it.

When he hears the door open, he yells, from the connecting room, with vehemence and poison in his
throat, “Go fuck yourself, T’challa!”

“Well,” The queen says, padding in with Chagina. “I can’t say I’ve ever had that thrown in my face
before.”

Tony straightens a little too quickly and regards the queen, the anger melting away just the tiniest bit
as he swallows past the excuses that rises up. It’s like getting your hand caught inside the cookie jar.
“Your highness.”

“Mister Stark, I’m here to say goodbye and wish you a safe journey ahead,” She says and side steps
as a small, black, long tailed ‘house kitten’ trots its way up to Tony’s feet, looking up at him and
mewling, flashing sharp incisors despite its little frame.

There is nothing natural about the panther cub; it is enough to make Tony wonder if the stories is
remotely true. That something mystical indeed is rooted deep in Wakanda’s lands.

“I can’t.” Tony sighs, defenses crumbling as the cub plops down on his shoes, tail swishing. “I can’t,
your highness, please. I don’t deserve this. Give this to someone more fitting to be your son’s
spouse.”

“I am,” The queen says and tilts her chin. “Regardless of what has transpired, this is your right. What
is yours, is yours. No, he won’t die. He also will not leave your side anymore even if we tried. He
will find ways to find you. No matter how long it takes, whether you are king consort or not.” Tony
looks up from the pair of bright gold eyes looking up at him. “If anything, he’ll at least protect you
from your dreams.”

Tony jerks a little at that and sees the most apologetic look on the old woman’s face. If anything, she
had been the kindest to him. He thinks maybe he should apologize, say something, anything. Instead,
he says, “I gotta go…”
And she just nods, moving close and pressing both her hands on his cheeks, kissing both cheeks. “Take care of yourself, Anthony Stark. May the Bast continuously watch over you.”

Tony half expected talk of we will meet again, or may our paths cross or some such nonsense.

He gets none.

Which is probably why he liked the queen; she doesn’t bullshit or waste time on false promises. In the end, he gets in his car, the drive is quiet, and boards his plane, a tiny cub trotting by his feet and refusing, as in stubbornly refusing to stay away from him. The plane takes off as the attendees remained bowed as they taxi on the runway. Tony doesn’t see Shuri, nor does he see T’challa. Once he is in the sky, he tries to place the cub in the next room, shuts the door and is subjected to listening to pitiful mews that turns to yowls and then growls before the cub just crashes through the foldable door, breaking it with strength that quite frankly freaks Tony the fuck out.

It then proceeds to sit beside him, like it didn’t just make a hole and proceeds to take a nap.

Tony wonders how and why is this his life, as he gives his left arm a little shake and rubs the numbness off his fist.

“I am not giving your crazy ass a fancy fucking name,” He mutters, and gets an ear twitch for his effort. “I’m calling you Bob.”

Bob’s ears twitches again.

Tony thinks the name is a nice big fuck you to his soon to be ex-husband miles and miles away.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Amari - Strength

Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh - okay bye!
物业服务的重新定位

随着时代的发展和人们生活方式的改变，物业服务也在不断地进行着变革。过去，物业服务主要以维护住宅区的秩序和提供基本的生活服务为主，但现在，物业服务的内涵已经发生了深刻的转变。

首先，物业服务的内涵已经从过去的物理维护和基本服务，拓展到了精神文化层面。现在的物业服务，不仅要满足人们的日常生活需求，还要提供文化娱乐、艺术教育等各类精神文化产品。

其次，物业服务已经从过去的服务提供者，转变成了服务的组织者和创新者。现在的物业服务企业，不仅要为客户提供服务，还要根据市场需求，不断创新服务模式，提升服务质量。

最后，物业服务已经从过去的线下服务，发展到了线上服务。现在的物业服务，已经可以通过互联网，为客户提供各种服务，包括物业服务、社区活动、健康咨询等。

综上所述，物业服务已经从过去的物理维护和基本服务，发展到了精神文化、组织创新和线上服务，这是一个重要的转变。
before he notices the wide grin on Rhodey’s sweaty face.

“These are great!” Rhodey says, absolutely breathless and handsome and looking about as young as the first time Tony had met him all those years ago in his joy and excitement.

It’s all Tony can do to not out right sob and have a full on meltdown at the sight.

That joy disappears though, with slight acceptance and no judgment, and just so, so much understanding when Rhodey sees just how everything must have pooled in a large hideous lump all over Tony’s face. Rhodey says nothing, just murmurs a soft, Oh Tones, and brings stronger, thicker arms around Tony, rubbing his back as they both remain there on the floor while Tony, like a little shit, sobs whatever that’s left of his heart out.

To be fair, the only and last time Tony had remembered even crying his eyes out like this had been after Obie. After the man had been buried, and things had settled in Stark Industries. In the privacy of his Malibu home, Tony had sat by his baby grand piano and just wept. It had to have been some rite of passage, the last of his past and family finally putting to rest and completely gone. For goodness sakes, he certainly didn’t weep when he and Pepper had gone their separate ways (and really, the initial ‘break’ had been brutal and hurt like a motherfucker). He certainly didn’t have a breakdown after what he mockingly calls the Steve-story-arc, even though he had been oh so sweetly close to losing his shit after that. To be fair to Rhodey, he had felt the telltale prickles of salt in his eyes when he had visited him in the hospital the first time post-surgery, watching his best of friends lie there like a frail thing when he’s anything but. Rhodey is War Machine for fuck’s sake.

Of course, Wakanda and T’challa and god, the queen had been the icing on the cake.

But Rhodey can now move on his own.

Maybe with more therapy, those two and half steps can turn into more!

And really, maybe it’s everything that has happened since Obie up-to this current point of his life coming up in sob-vomit and cascading fat tears. Tony cries like a broken thing, wounded and keening -- god, the queen had been right. He is a wounded animal. He certainly sounds like it. Rhodey hushes him gently, letting him muffle the throat grating hysteria against his shirt, a hand pressing gently against the back of his skull, and really, Tony just lets it all out, the breathlessness making him cough and his heartbeat rage against his ribcage, as if all that pent up losses, betrayals and emotions wants to break bone and rip past his flesh.

It’s a little hard to breathe, but the tears eventually stop leaving Tony panting breathlessly (goddamn, limited lung capacity since the arc reactor), sniffling wetly and bracing himself against Rhodey’s shoulders, head ducked, carefully positioning himself in a stance that would help Rhodey get on his feet, both their arms locked as Tony tries to center himself.

“Feel better?” Rhodey asks, some - quite possibly - a good half an hour later. Tony manages some sort of a nod. “Man, if my legs weren’t numb, I bet they’d hurt like a bitch right now.” Tony stiffens at that statement and looks up to see Rhodey grin at him sheepishly. “Too soon? I - hey, did you get a cat?”

“Panther cub. That’s Bob.”

“What?”

“The King consort's guardian, there may be - I can’t believe I’m saying this - magic involved; I don’t know. The little shit won’t leave me alone, follows me everywhere like a goddamn baby.
Shoo! Go away, Bob!”

Bob only inches closer, trotting like those adorable kittens on Youtube and presses paws against Tony’s knee. There is a sweet mewl and of course, Rhodey is sold.

The bastard.

“Aww, hey Bob.” He says and holds a hand out to him. Bob gives him a measured look, blinking owlishly at him before swatting the hand with his tail and letting it curl around Rhodey’s wrist. “I thought the divorce would be finalized? Why give you a King’s-Consort-Magic-Panther-Guardian if you’re not King-spouse anymore?”

Tony shakes his head, bringing a hand up to his chest as he sucks in one deep breath after the other. “Don’t ask. Nothing in Wakanda makes sense and I don’t give a damn. Let’s get you on the couch, buddy. On three.” Tony sucks in a wet snotty snuffle before he adjusts his grip on Rhodey’s forearms, bringing a knee up.

At three, they both grunt and stand, Tony taking most of Rhodey’s weight and helping him up.

The exertion, clearly, must have been the trigger.

Because Tony can feel the color drain from his face, like water sluicing down his cheeks and chin, cold sweat forming at the back of his neck like icicles as he wavers in his support to keep Rhodey upright. Somewhere in the background, he hears Bob mewling, and he watches as Rhodey’s face - that face that deserves to always look happy and excited and totally bad ass - dissolve to outright panic. Tony’s chest compresses inwards, then expands all of a sudden, like his ribs are suddenly too small, his heart claustrophobic within its confines, like it’s going to burst from under his ribcage and at some point, even when he’s actively trying to breathe in, Tony's body refuses to cooperate.

Well. Shit.

Tony takes Rhodey down with him again, falling against his side as he quakes like a leaf in the wind, his chest being split open from within. It’s like the pain of having the arc reactor yanked out, except this is a thousand times worse. Out of habit, Tony manages to bring a quaking hand to feel what he thinks really is a hole in his chest - delusional of course, because that happens when you’re technically dying, Tony is aware. Distantly, he hears Rhodey yell and shout and just lose all of his marbles and all of his shits getting Friday to get help.

Somewhere between giving into the spots blotching his vision, black circles growing bigger and bigger, Tony finds himself looking at a pair of golden eyes when his head lolls to the side. And right before he loses consciousness, he thinks he see actual tears in those golden eyes.

Wakandan-magic-panthers cry?

Tony idly wonders if it would be considered appropriate to text the queen and ask, since Bob isn’t exactly your everyday average animal.

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The first thing Tony thinks off when he wakes up to the world around him and is assaulted by the sharp tang of disgustingly gross antiseptic is, “Can someone get me a Shackburger?”

There is minor chaos around him as soon as he says that out loud, hands and arms going overhead
and him gagging as something is yanked out of his throat. He sees more hands and more unfamiliar faces, feels them all over him and god, what the hell are they fussing about now - he remembers dropping the white-cloth-thing T’challa had given him the night before somewhere in the drawing room, possibly on a chair and Tony tries to tell them that. Tony even tries to point at the general direction of said chair and gets nothing except for his hand being pushed away for his efforts.

How rude!

Tony doesn’t realize how he conks out like the dead until he’s actually waking up again and this time, with a little more clarity.

The first person he sees is Rhodey seated on a chair, crutch propped against the wall beside him. The words are leaving his mouth before he can stop it, “Buddy, I’m dying of hunger. Where’s my Shackburger?”

Rhodey’s face wrinkles as he reaches for his crutches to move, except there is a hand coming down on his shoulder, patting Rhodey gently to stay put. That is when Tony’s gaze follows the length of that arm, up to a familiar face that had no business to look worn and tired, worried and pallid. Over him, no less.

Tony finds himself blinking owlishly at T’challa who comes to stand beside him on the bed and carefully, like he’s handling fine crystal, helps him adjust so he’s sitting just a touch upright, enough to have a decent conversation and take a sip from a straw without choking. The water feels like soothing ice down Tony’s parched throat, and he drinks a good portion of the glass before he leans his head back heavily on the semi-propped pillow. Moving, Tony discovers, is like swimming in molasses. It’s quite difficult. And draining.

“You wanna repeat what you just said? Because, this is what you said earlier.” Rhodey makes a bunch of random muffled and strangled noises.

“I said,” Tony tries again, this time hearing how raspy his voice sounds. Maybe Rhodey isn’t bullshitting after all. “Where’s my Shackburger? I asked for it earlier.”

“When you woke up?” Rhodey asks, cocking both eyebrows.

“Yeah.”

“The first thing out of your mouth - no, the first thought out of your head, after hours of heart surgery, two stints and a pacemaker is Shackburger?” Rhodey laughs, throwing his hand up in the air just as Tony asks, very tartly, asks in between Rhodey’s breathless guffaws on what exactly was wrong about wanting a burger? “It’s good to have you back, man. For a minute there…”

Whatever tension that had been lining Rhodey’s shoulder slowly melts away to relief, and it’s all over his face, how terrified it must have been watching your best friend sort of and kind of die in your arms when you’ve got a broken spine and can’t do jack. Guilt wells up in Tony's chest like the rise of a quick tide, churning something as hot as molten lava wanting to erupt out of an angry volcano because god, he didn’t have to do that to Rhodey. Rhodey did not deserve to go through that; trust his heart to pick the worst time to choose to fucking fail, the stupid, broken piece of shit.

“So… burger?” Tony asks again, pathetically hopeful, and feels his stomach sort of bubble in hunger at the thought of it.

Rhodey is shaking his head as he grabs his crutch and carefully stands with a lot more ease. “Let me go ask,” he says, with a roll of his eyes, throwing one last measured look at the other elephant in the
The door clicks shut behind Rhodey and that is the only time Tony turns his head to look at his husband -- or ex-husband.

“How long was I out?” He asks, clearing his throat in an attempt to get the gritty feeling to subside. It doesn’t.

“It’s been two days since your surgery. I was told you came to within the first twenty-four hours, partially coherent, mostly dazed. That was when they took out the respirator. And since then, fourteen hours has passed.” T’challa tugs on a chair and sits beside him, elbows on his knees.

There is a stretching pause between them, Tony being the subject to T’challa’s concerned gaze; he sees how the lines around the corner of T’challa’s eyes deepen, how his eyebrows knit together and how the tension lines the entire width of the king’s shoulders.

“Why are you here, T’challa?” Tony asks, tired. “If it’s not to deliver a signed document.”

“That was the reason,” T’challa answers and ducks his head. “Called in to make an appointment and was told you were indisposed. Did a little digging and…” There is a loud and shaky sigh before T’challa looks up and Tony sees an ocean of emotions in his dark eyes that he had no idea what to do with. “Tony, I tried to tell you. Tried to reach you, to warn you to go see a doctor.”

“Oh.” It is all Tony can manage to say, gaze dropping down to the collar of his shirt. “Yeah, well, didn’t feel like talking.”

T’challa pulls out something from his pocket, a gleaming transparent card that is about the size of a hotel-key card. He gives it a slight shake, little dots illuminating across it before he places it on Tony’s bed.

“A scrambler. You can speak freely. No one will hear you if walls have ears,” T’challa says, allowing the silence to fall between again.

Tony just looks at him, takes everything he sees before him, the rumpled shirt, the slight puffiness around T’challa’s eyes that belays exhaustion and lack of sleep. There is no need for it. There certainly is no place for it. Tony doesn’t think they’re friends, even if once upon a time, when their minds had been mush, they may have been very attracted to each other. Which is all useless information because Tony doesn’t remember shit about that particular attraction. He sees the appeal though: nice smile, incredibly sexy booty, intelligent, bad boy attitude, there had to be a partier under all that royal pomp because it takes a special breed to keep up with Tony’s partying at the time. Tony had the seen the charm, the wit, the charisma during his stay in Wakanda. He had caught glimpses of his devotion and love to his mother (who isn’t even his real mother, imagine that!), along with his fondness and tolerance for his half-sister. He had seen how achingly heartbroken still the man before him is at the sudden loss of a father he had so much respect and love for.

Really, Tony gets it.

Maybe if their situation hadn’t been so messed up, maybe if everything with the media dubbed ‘Civil War’ hadn’t happened, maybe if Tony didn’t have his heart and trust crushed so many times repeatedly over the course of his life, maybe, just maybe, he can see himself possibly, liking this guy or at least attempting to try with this guy.

“You were in Siberia,” Tony says, and takes just the tiniest pleasure in seeing T’challa falter, even though he doesn’t deny his presence and nods.
“I was,” T’challa agrees, and shakes his head, looking at his hands. “I knew of your fight, knew of the extent of the damage done on Rogers and Barnes. I had granted them coordinates and safe passage to Wakanda, while I returned to the United States with Zemo. What I had not known was the damage done on you. Perhaps, it is a mistake on my side having not looked into it further. But Rogers was in one piece and I had assumed you were too. Despite your differences, you would have not ended each other.” T’challa looks up then, chewing on his lower lip, one of his display of weaknesses, nothing measured or controlled about it. “Rogers should have just finished the job, hmm?”

“Yeah,” Tony exhales, and finds that the breath he takes feels fuller, better; it’s the pacemaker, Tony thinks. “He should have.”

“I’m glad he didn’t,” T’challa says, lips trying but failing to smile. “Then we wouldn’t be where we are now.”

“Where exactly are we, your highness?” Tony asks, a little sharp. “What else are you not telling me? You know it’s not fair.”

“It’s not. So let me even the playing field,” T’challa says and squares his jaw. “At the moment, Rogers and the rest of his team is no longer my concern. The only thing I am keeping safe in the basement is the Winter Soldier, until a time comes my team can come up with a solution to HYDRA’s programming, he will remain in cryostasis. It had been his idea. When you departed, Rogers and his team did too.” T’challa pauses, and gives Tony a minute to absorb that.

“Oh-kaaay…” Tony feels quite intelligent with that response. He thinks he should be angry, thinks he should be vindictive and demand and what-the-flying-fuck. instead, Tony feels nothing.

Absolutely nothing except wariness and fatigue, and an emptiness where his love, affection, and care had once been, tucked stuttering, but still beating, under his ribcage.

If Tony actually sits and thinks about all this very seriously for a second, if he looks past the anger and the bitterness, he knows, no matter what, if he needs to, he’d find a way to help his friends. If they needed him. Which they didn’t, at the moment. Maybe ever. Who knows? But Tony would have helped them, would have had their backs, regardless. The fact that he’s keeping his mouth shut and that he’d melted the phone Rogers had given him before heading out to Wakanda had been an subconscious act of protection all on its own. No, wait, he didn’t actually melt it. He hid it really well. Huh, he should tell Friday to have Dum-E or You go do that immediately.

God, he’s just so tired of it all.

Does it even fucking matter, anymore? The world will always need Steve Rogers and superheroes. Tony knows that. Steve is a symbol of hope, the kind that made people see and believe the best in themselves. That had been Steve's purpose, why he was chose for Project: Rebirth, uniform and shield or not.

Really, does it even truly matter?

“Where Rogers is, along with his team, on my father’s honor, I swear to you that this time, I do not know,” T’challa adds, and gives a bit of a one shouldered half-shrug, the gesture rather dismissive.

“But you can find out.” Tony points out. Come on, Wakanda can find anyone if they put minimal effort.
“When I feel like it. When I need to.” T’challa ducks his head then, rubbing the back of his head with long, strong fingers. “Right now, I don’t care.” Tony doesn’t respond, so T’challa continues. “This is not the only reason I’m here,” T’challa adds, as he reaches into his inner jacket pocket and pulls out an envelope that Tony recognizes, the edges a little dog-eared and crumpled. T’challa sets it on the bedside table. “I’m here because while a part of me may have felt much inconvenienced by this marriage, a very small part of me had also felt okay with it. I remember what you were like, deep down. High and drunk yes, but that didn’t take away your charm or your intelligence. Your vision of a world of clean energy, people integrated and seamlessly working with technology. You saw a world that was like Wakanda; rather than keeping it to yourself, the way my people had, you wanted to share it. At heart, you had the interest of the people. I remember, before the coke in your car that is, the joy under so much grief. And I thought to myself, this here, is an incredibly strong young man. I remembered you to be a different person than the one that had come out not long after that to be the face of Stark Industries.”

“Yeah, well, sticks and stones. That naive kid is gone, Felix,” Tony says, closing his eyes. Yeah, he remembers, how Stark Industries stocks had plummeted down after Howard’s death, that they almost faced bankruptcy. He remembers how many of the giants at the time had tried to buy it off. Tony also remembers putting his vision into a box and shoving it to the very back of his mind where it still sits collecting dust-mites in favor of gaining the United States’ military contract. It had stayed there, untouched, even to this day, except in his weakest moments, usually post-emotional-drinking, where Tony would look himself at the mirror and drown in nothing but raw hate and absolute disgust with himself. He’d see that boy that T’challa remembers and then he’d have to call someone to fix the bathroom mirror. Every single time.

And then before he had realized it, he had been called the Merchant of Death.

No one will ever know, except Tony's conscience, how veering into weapons-manufacturing had been a desperate move to save the company and to gather the much needed funds for his vision, because hey, money is still money.

Well. Apparently, he had been wrong about his conscience being the only knower of all the things that had laid buried in iddle-widdle Tony Stark’s heart, vision-wise, that is.

“No,” T’challa says, and this makes Tony direct an unimpressed look T’challa, king or not. T’challa had a small sad smile lingering around the corners of his lips. “He lives still. And I’m glad. He had been, what I felt, was an equal in every way. But this marriage -- this is not the way to be in any relationship.” T’challa looks at the envelope on the table. “I would have never taken Stark Industries from you.”

“Well, begging your pardon, your majesty,” Tony mutters in his haughtiest imitation of a British accent, not holding back on the bitterness. “Not all of us are blessed with having the access to the prequel DVD to this unlikely love story.”

“Was it really that bad?” T’challa asks. “Because I --”

“Don’t.” Tony shakes his head. He shakes his head one more time for good measure and is pleased to see that T’challa doesn’t say more; instead, T’challa gives a slow and accepting nod instead and lets it go. “It’s done, then? No more issues back home? Free man to marry anew and have many, many little panther-babies?”

“Our marriage is annulled. I have to thank you for your cooperation; I owe you a great, great favor. Your copy of the royal annulment is in that envelope,” T’challa confirms. “This… is all a first in the royal history, but the world is changing, and so is Wakanda. My country and laws will adapt and
“Right, right, you don’t believe in divorce.” Tony nods, lifting a hand and waving. “Well, what’s done is done. Go break some eggs with that crown, Garfield.”

T’challa nods and right then Rhodey returns, rather conveniently too. “Yeah, so, no burger for you. But the nurses were nice enough to say that you can have some juice.”

Tony holds his breath for about three beats before piping out a: “Okay… Shackburger tomorrow, then?”

T’challa laughs, full bodied and unbridled, his entire face lighting up and wow, Tony just had not expected that. Rhodey chuckles too, shaking his head as he drops back to his chair. T’challa stands then and reaches out to take Tony’s hand in both of his, his hands warm and large and really, Tony just watches as the king bows his head to him, bringing the back of his still swollen hand from when they had probably poked it a few times with a cannula during his procedure, and presses soft lips to the bruised skin.

“Take care of yourself, Mister Stark,” T’challa says, words so, so soft and with devotion that is so, so utterly misplaced. “May the Bast always watch over you.”

T’challa straightens, sets Tony’s limp and boneless hand back on the bed with one last gentle squeeze before he picks up his little card-audio-scrambler-thingy, turns and leaves, nodding at Rhodey’s direction before the door clicks shut.

And just like that, it’s over.

Tony is officially a divorced man – well, once he submits the papers, that is.

The silence that settles is long and oddly empty; how strange.

“You gonna be okay?” Rhodey asks.

Tony finds himself staring at the window, feeling strange. So very, very strange and drained.

“Always…”

Really, what else can he do?

--

There are days where Tony honest to god, thinks of just retiring as a consultant and on-call-field-duty-hero for the Avengers.

There are many times in the past several weeks that follows his discharge from the hospital where Tony finds himself staring at the ceiling of his office, getting heady as he spins his chair round and round and round, as the red light on his phone continues to blink with Shitty-Ross waiting on the other end. Tony lost count of how many times he finds himself so incredibly disconnected, uninspired, not wanting to get out of bed or even leave his mansion. Meetings are dry, recruitment slow, and honestly, his highlight is possibly just hanging out with Rhodey and seeing his steps-without-a-crutch increase from that initial two-and-a-half to now ten steps!
Never mind that Rhodey is almost completely winded after that, never mind that he almost faints that one time. Still! Ten steps in four weeks – fucking amazing.

Like right now, it’s approvals-time for all the heroes they’re scouring the fucking earth for in hopes to recruit and fill the void the former members had left behind.

On the dot, at eleven-thirty, a member of the recruitment team walks in with two others, armful of dossiers in their grip as they set them in three neat piles on his desk. Tony’s chair stops spinning, the red light continues to blink and he starts going through them one by one, telling the team to wait as he starts sorting them into new piles as he power-reads through the first few pages.

“Nope, nope, fuck no, no, look into this, look into this, no, never ever, look into this, hell no, no, who screened this, no!” Tony continues, his team deflating just a little bit until the three piles is now divided into two. One very high no-pile and one pathetic look-into-this pile. Tony picks up the last dossier and pauses when he sees Black Panther. “Uhh… who screened this?”

“I did, sir,” George – or is it Joseph - says, back straightening, hands behind his back in an at-ease stance done out of habit. Tony remembers him being an ex-marine and former Shield agent who had worked under Fury.

“What, did you google him?” Tony asks.

“Kind of, sir. King T’challa submitted an application when we opened the pool as you instructed two weeks ago,” George-Joseph says, pausing for a beat, and before Tony can point out that the Avengers facility is not American Idol or some job center, therefore not open for fucking auditions or applications, Joseph-George adds, “He sent us an e-mail, sir.”

“An e-mail,” Tony parrots, quite tartly.

“Yes, sir,” Joseph-George says, blinking once. He’s the only one who doesn’t fidget. “It was a very good e-mail.”

Wow.

Tony honest-to-god debates keeping the file on his desk and handling it himself.

And promptly decides against it.

Black Panther ends up in the tiny look-into-this-pile, along with Wasp, Captain Marvel, Doctor Strange, Beast, Goliath, Sentry, Black Knight, Firebird, Justice, Firestar and Hercules (ha ha!).

“Okay, lunch time. Bye~” Tony sing-songs, and just like that, after some shuffling, his office is once more empty.

Tony is not hungry. Hell, he’s not much of anything these days, but he grabs his jacket and leaves the facility all together in favor of maybe bugging Pepper or Rhodey. Whoever is doing something less boring.

--

Whoever is doing something less boring turns out to be Rhodey, because he had just wrapped up his physiotherapy for the day and had been on the way to grab some lunch and run some errands. Tony picks him up and they end up sitting at some ramen shop in the East Village, with Tony staring disinterestedly at the steam wafting up from his less than twenty-bucks giant bowl of piping hot
noodles and broth, and having little to no desire to eat it whatsoever.

Unlike Rhodey.

Tony watches Rhodey plow through his ramen like a starved man. His physiotherapies are always exhausting so Tony doesn’t blame him. The bowl is emptied in less than ten minutes, and when Rhodey looks at him with both eyebrows almost touching his non-existent hairline, Tony pushes his bowl towards him.

Rhodey picks through that as well.

In the end, Tony nibbles an edamame or two and accompanies that with a few bites of his carrot-orange salad. Thankfully, he had managed the itching resistance to order an entire bottle of shochu and chug it all down like water. It is only after their table gets cleared, and their bill comes that Rhodey asks, while shooing Tony’s hand away and digging through his wallet, “Did Bob die?”

“No!” Tony says, with a sour face. “What the fuck?”

“Okay, so why do you look like someone spat in your baloney?”

“First of all, no one uses that reference anymore.” Tony points out, which gets him an eye roll at best.

“Tony—“

“And I am not upset, I am stressed. There’s a difference. They got me on this goddamn juice cleanse for two weeks and everything is just boiled and tasteless that I swear my tongue is numb and I am just so exhausted ---“

“That was five weeks ago,” Rhodey points out, as he thanks the waiter and tells him to keep the change.

“— which is so weird, because I breathe better. Technically, the pacemaker is supposed to be a solution to a lot of my problems, I don’t know why I didn’t just get one before—“

“You didn’t need it and there was no way to know because you’re an asshole and don’t like hospitals.”

“— but the point is, things are finally back to normal. I got my papers from The Shark about, three days ago and—“

“That was three weeks ago. I was there. You said fuck it to boiled chicken breast and ate pizza,” Rhodey points out.

“—honestly, things are just so normal and blah right now —“

“Call him.”

The statement makes Tony pause. Like he’s finally listening. “What?”

“You heard me. Or text him. Whatever.” Rhodey shrugs.

“Who?”

“Your Ex-husband. Who else?” Rhodey rolls his eyes, shaking his head as he stands up.
“What kind of a best friend are you? That title should be revoked. Who the hell would tell their best friend to call their ex-husband after a divorce?” Tony asks, as they exit the ramen shop into the New York hustle bustle, a blow of mildly-stinky cool fall air hitting them in the face.

“Dude, do you hear yourself sometimes?” Rhody asks, and starts listing things of. “You stare at walls a lot. I’ve seen you spend more hours with Bob playing fetch - and I dunno how you even got him to learn that, he’s not a fucking dog – the past few weeks than you going on a work binge on the suits. In fact, your last work binge was about two weeks ago. That’s a record! Your longest period had been five days and thirteen hours –“

“How did –“

“Friday tells me because you gave me clearance,” Rhody points out as they reach their car.

“When the hell did I do that?” Tony asks, because he specifically remembers revoking all accesses to everyone since that fiasco in the Stark Expo some years ago.

Rhodey throws his hand up in response as he pulls the car door open. “You’ve been different since Siberia,” He says, face falling serious, “I know that. I know why. But you’re a complete stranger after Wakanda.”

“Carebear—“

“And while it may be a better at a microscopic level, because yes, I noticed, yes, Pepper noticed, we’re the only ones with Tony Stark PHDs in the world and yeah, it’s different. I know you’re seeing a therapist, which you honestly should have immediately after Siberia, I told you to. This version of you, is new. So –“

“I don’t miss Wakanda,” Tony bites.

“I didn’t say you did.” Rhody says after a very measured pause, looking like he’d been slapped with live, wriggling squid on the face.

“You did.” Tony nods, and glares. Really, Rhody didn’t have to beat around the bush. Tony isn’t going to get butt-hurt if Rhody decides to accuse him of missing the pomp and ceremony, tea with the queen and her conversation of her fucked up situation that ended up being the best family she can ever have.

“When the fuck did I say that!” Rhody's voice goes up a decibel louder, completely indignant.

“Uh with your face! I’ve got a James Rhodes PHD too!” Tony points out the truth, that Rhody really should acknowledge, thankyouverymuch.

“Oh my fucking god, you are unbelievable!” Rhody says very loudly, causing a few heads to turn as he stuffs himself into the passenger seat with a very annoyed huff. His door slams shut with a little force and when Tony gets in and his door closes, mouth opening to argue but Rhody cuts him off.

“Would you please just call or text the motherfucker or I will?”

“Uh, empty threats are not very becoming of you – what are you doing?” Tony asks, as he pulls out of their parking space, mildly distracted as Rhody had taken out his phone and begins to text.

“I am texting his highness.”

Tony laughs; Rhody had always been a shitty bluffer. So Tony doesn’t take it seriously as he pulls out of their parking slot and gets onto the main street. “No you’re not.”
Rhodey is silent before his phone dings and he is typing again. “Oh look. He’s going to be in the United States for that Green Summit! Let me ask him if he wants to hangout.”

“You’re making that up,” Tony says.

“I am not,” Rhodey counters.

“You don’t even have his personal and direct number!” Tony laughs the words out rather incredulously, not wanting to believe that Rhodey would go so far. It’s not Rhodey’s style at all.

“Oh, yeah I do. He gave it to me while you were Sleeping Beauty-ing away to glory at the hospital,” Rhodey clarifies.

“Show me!” Tony challenges. Rhodey flashes the phone far too quickly and then holds it out of reach. “Was I supposed to see your shitty War Machine wallpaper or what?”

“Hey!”

“Show me the damn number or you’re a fat liar forever! Oh my god, just hand it over, already!” Tony reaches forward, trying to get the phone from Rhodey, who tries to hold it away, slapping Tony’s hand out of the way and out of reach. “James Rhodes!”

“Eyes on the fucking road, man!” Rhodey shouts, with just a little panic.

“Give me the damn phone!”

Tony releases his grip on the wheel, and like every time since their MIT days, it gets to Rhodey and he forgets all about his phone in favor of grabbing and steadying the wheel. Cars drive past them honking because the AUDI Spider is being driven by an asshole, but hey, Tony had the phone in his hand, so horay, victory!

The car steadies as Tony’s right hand returns to the wheel; Rhodey may or may not have been shouting his throat off. Which is predictable, because that’s just what Rhodey does that every single time Tony pulls this below-the-belt trick. Tony is an excellent driver. Rhodey should know better than to think he’d ever let the car go out of control. Racing in Monaco had been his thing for years, did Rhodey forget that? Sheesh.

And would you look at that.

Rhodey indeed had T’challa’s private number. That is T’challa, in fact, responding that he is going to be playing diplomat in New York next month. Tony knows because he had gotten an invite too. That is also, in fact, T’challa saying yes to a hang out if he can squeeze time.

Of course it’s T’challa.

Tony had his direct number memorized from the moment he had looked at the documents in that dog-eared envelope. There had been a post-it with neat block handwriting that read T’challa’s direct number. Of course he recognizes the number; he’s a genius with brilliant memory.

So Tony does the first thing that comes to his mind once the panic and worry out of fucking nowhere settles.

He throws Rhodey’s phone out into moving traffic as Rhodey watches, jaw wide open and hanging, as a garbage truck runs over his poor phone, crushing it to pieces.
Of course, Rhodey loses his shit in the car and Tony goes deaf in one ear when he yells at how that phone had some very private numbers, *are you fucking insane? What are you, like two?*

And of course, Tony pulls over, walks down a few yards and picks up the broken pieces when he can. A dangerous feat and see, there's a reason Tony tells people not to do what *he* does. Even if he's done this a thousand times since he hit the age of fifteen, Tony always yells out apologies and disclaimers, like those people who says, *stay in school or don't try this at home.* Tony just rephrases it to, *outta my way, yeah sorry, fuck you buddy, people who are not Tony Stark, don't ever do this please, thank you!*

Eventually, when he hands the broken pieces in both of Rhodey’s cupped hands, he gets strangled for his efforts and a very hard conk to the head.

Okay, so, maybe Tony kind of deserved that.

“How, uh, you wanna go get tea and sip it on a bench in a park?” Tony asks.

“*Fuck no!*”

“Okay, there’s this tea place I saw – you need to try their African blend. With honey. It’s the *best.* It’ll calm you down so your throat doesn’t hurt from shouting too much~”

“Oh my god, I don’t know you!” Rhodey bellows.

In the end, they purchase tea and Tony rents a wheelchair and wheels Rhodey along a stretch of green.

Battery Park is *nothing* like the queen’s or palace gardens of course, but Tony feels, if anything, just a tinsy-weensy *touch* better.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

I keep hearing Celine Dion singing in this chapter.

As suggested by one reviewer, POST CIVIL WAR TAGS has been added.

Also, very mild references to Extremis here. That part where Tony wants a world with tech, that’s from Extremis if you haven't seen/read it.
Imagine Tony’s surprise when he discovers that Kings, apparently, do hang-out with the commoners and it didn’t have to be orchestrated or rehearsed.

The idea of it had seemed so preposterous because sure, well, T’challa is a king. Tony doesn’t ever recall getting to hang out with the queen of England, for example and really, Tony is very fucking rich. When it comes to tapping royal ass, Tony had only ever reached duke and duchess status. He can honestly say that anything beyond duke and duchess had not been attainable.

The fact that they are having coffee, at a little ‘trendy’ café that had colorful cartoon splashes on all their walls (god, it’s dizzying), that serves neon colored desserts and iced teas that changes color as the ice melts is enough to make Tony go into some sort of catatonic state. He fucking hates the Lisa-Frank inspired place, what with the unicorn and bunny shaped throw pillows in their offensively hideous pastel (but very comfortable) couches. Tony had his ultimate judging-face on, eyeing the cup of coffee that had been placed before him – it had been the safest thing to order off the menu – like it would plague him with Ebola. His coffee, along with T’challa’s, is the first thing they had served their table with. The mug is huge, something more appropriate for soup or cereal, its handle a splash of color that is meant to be a unicorn tail and on the other end, there’s a fucking yellow horn sticking out. T’challa’s coffee cup is also on the table, equally as big, except it had curled bunny ears for a handle and what Tony is assuming, is a bunny tail on the other end.

It is the most impractical design in the entire fucking world.

Tony is genuinely offended.

The café is completely empty save for a couple working on their laptops with BEATS covering their ears on the other end, soft cheerful concerto playing in the background and T’challa’s Dora Milaje escorts seated by the exit and glass windows, acting like patrons. Rhodey sits like an awkward duck right next to Tony, right there like the smug bastard he is, in his fucking pastel blue single-sofa. Across from them, in his sharp as blades suit and her clean cut business one piece dress and blazer, is T’challa and Shuri. And for the past ten minutes, they’ve all been staring at each other, checking their phones (Rhodey) or leafing through a health magazine (Shuri). T’challa, is as still as the decorative pot on the table, watching Tony stare at his mug, as if staring at it with so much vitriol would it to something better.

Their server shows up with Rhodey’s and Shuri’s rainbow Frappuccino that literally looks like a unicorn took a goddamn dump in a glass that is just as big as the mugs, only taller, complete with the sprinkles that would make a bakery run for their money and far too much whipped cream to be considered safe for human consumption. Tony wonders how they even had gotten the necessary approval to serve that nonsense. Really, Tony is all for style and originality, but this isn’t even classy. This is just outright tacky.
Rhodey takes a sip of his drink and hums in approval. Tony looks at him like he’s the devil. When Rhodey asks him if he wants to try the monster in his ugly as fuck glass, Tony turns around and looks at T’challa instead, the only sane one in their little and considerably private corner.

“So, we got your e-mail,” Tony says, starting the small talk. Ten minutes and twenty-eight seconds of awkward silence is more than enough, not that Tony is keeping a mental tab. Of course not, that’s not his style.

“What e-mail?” T’challa blinks.

“That nice e-mail you sent, about applying for a spot on the Avengers’ team?” Tony points out, quirking an eyebrow.

T’challa, honest to god, looks confused. “But I…” Then Tony watches, with equal parts hilarity and equal parts annoyance as understanding dawns in T’challa’s gaze (Tony sees it, how his gaze darkens, how the pupils blow so wide), and with the most neutral face in the world, casts Shuri a glance, who pointedly starts sipping her Frappucino, pausing in between sips to stir some of the sprinkles at the bottom of the glass. The irritation must have been quite high, because T’challa’s lips thin and Tony can guess that T’challa is pushing his tongue against the back of his teeth, before he just smiles at Tony.

Ah. Tony understands what had happened.

T’challa had no interest and Shuri is a fucking troll.

“I don’t suppose you were responsible for picking this place either?” Tony politely inquires.

T’challa picks up his bunny-mug and takes a sip of his coffee. He doesn’t drop dead after a few seconds, so Tony sucks up his issues and picks up his goddamn unicorn mug. The coffee, surprisingly, is actually quite good.

Rhodey cuts in right there before Shuri’s glare could get any sharper. “So, Bob has grown quite a bit since his arrival.”

“Bob?” T’challa raises an eyebrow, head canting a little bit to the side in question.

“Oh, the cub your mom gave me,” Tony says airily.

“You named him Bob?” Shuri asks, looking incredulous and so very offended.

“What the fuck is wrong with Bob? What would you have named yours? Rainbow Dash?” Rhodey chortles a little bit, because he understands the reference, he had a lot of young distant relatives who at some point had him buying all kinds of My Little Pony merchandise as Christmas presents, but T’challa hiding his smile behind his mug is something Tony didn’t expect.

“That’s a pony. It’s an unfitting name for a panther of incredible strength,” Shuri sniffs.

“How is Bob?” T’challa asks, looking curious.

“He’s great!” Rhodey says, a little loud and obvious attempt to silence the brewing argument between Shuri and Tony. He then proceeds to narrate stories of Bob’s love for fetch, how Tony had potty-trained him to use the toilet like a human being and how he enjoys pizza.

“Brother, he’s turned him into a clown-dog of sorts!” Shuri sounds mortified.
“Hey!” Tony protests. Bob is most definitely not a clown of any kind.

“He made him a suit. And when Bob puts it on, he calls him Iron-Panther.” Rhodey, bless his heart, tries to make it sound cool, because it had been *quite* cool. One night some weeks ago, after Tony had completed the armor for Bob, the three of them had flown all the over to Dallas for dinner. It had been the most incredible experience ever and Bob, that freakishly *abnormal* cat, had looked and sounded like he had enjoyed too.

The armor itself is *huge*, making Bob look like absolute bad-ass *beast* in silver and red, eyes glowing white like the arc reactor on his chest.

“He has cast the Bast’s blessing into the dark-ages with that armor! Brother!” Shuri says, setting her empty glass down sharply.

“Hey, first of all, it is not primitive! Maybe it is to Wakandan tech, but guess what,” Tony drops his voice down to a harsh whisper, “not all of us have the luxury of sitting our asses on a pile of vibranium! We’re commoners remember?”

And then Shuri promptly steers the conversation to talks of boosting the output of the arc reactor; the conversation is such a sharp turn from the bickering that for the next fifteen minutes, Tony and Shuri forget that there is any spite between them and talk like a bunch of scientist-soulmates meeting each other. They brainstorm idea after idea, how to boost more power out of the arc reactor, how to make it even smaller and the possibility to fuse it with human biology, its application in the medical field. The leap up and down in topic, uncaring if Rhodir and T’challa are sitting there, watching them yack like a pair of excited second year university, so full of inspiration, and somewhere between them jotting down formulas on a napkin, T’challa shakes his head and says:

“So you *can* get along,” T’challa points out rather candidly.

Just like a candle blowing out, whatever spark that had been there, disappears.

Shuri sits back and crosses her arms, glancing at the time on her delicate wrist watch, while Tony huffs and slumps in his chair sipping his coffee.

“So uh, I gotta go.” Rhodey says, and carefully prepares himself to stand.

“Let me give you a ride buddy, I’m sure their highnesses –“

“Colonel Rhodes, allow me to escort you to your place of destination. I am sure my brother and Mister Stark have much more to converse about. Please, I insist,” Shuri says, standing up and offering her arm to the good Colonel.

And without preamble, the pair leaves, leaving Tony just sitting there, in the ugly-ass café chair and staring at T’challa as his fingers tap the rim of his mug.

“You look good, Mister Stark,” T’challa says, expression soft and relieved.

Tony supposes compared to the first forty-eight hours post heart surgery, yes, he does look good. What with the classy pompadour and mid-fade haircut, the groomed beard, and more color to his cheeks, Tony knows he looks good. He doesn’t take it as a compliment; he takes it as an observation. “So do you, Sergeant Tibbs~”

“Your heart –“

“Is as good as it can be, given the circumstances. Age, lifestyle, these things catch-up and god, do I
love a good drink. You know that.” Tony blinks, and grins in the king’s face. “Oh come off it, don’t look at me like that. Nice beard. It’s very… kingly.”

T’challa clearly isn’t sure how to proceed. Tony does that to people when he’s being honest about his self-deprecating well, self. It’s almost hilarious to see that someone like T’challa, who always had an iron grip on his facial expression kind of falter.

“Thank you?” T’challa blinks.

“So about that e-mail you didn’t send, for the sake of conversation, what do you want us to do? Scrap it? No Avengering for you? I mean, really, we’re looking to put you on reserve status because well, you are a king, you’ve got duties and kingly things and panthering things to do, we’re not savages, we understand obligations.” Tony takes another sip of his coffee. “Ball’s on your court. You’ll only be ‘summoned’ – can I say summoned? Or is that offensive? It’s basically only when needed severely oh-god-help-us-dear-king-we-can’t-handle-this-no-other-choice kind of… summoning.”

Tony tries not to grin to wide. Really, he needs to tone down the glee, but gosh, is it fucking hilarious to see T’challa just look so… well, not an arrogant prick. Or king.

It’s cute.

And as if Tony had sat on hot coals and had ice poured down his back, he stiffens at that realization.

Well. Fuck.

“I don’t mind. It’s… I believe it should foster a positive impact on the World Security Council, given everything that has happened. It should boost the importance of the Accords and, well, I suppose it would be in both of our interest to keep a united front. Don’t you think?” T’challa says, like he had fucking queue cards on hand. Ever the diplomat; he is shaping up quite well.

“Sure…”

“Then, I accept, being a reserve-Avenger. Thank you for considering me,” T’challa says, and smiles, and well, isn’t that just lovely. “Even if it is by accident, I would be honored.”

“Good. Now drink your goddamn coffee so we can fuck off out this Unicorn ass,” Tony grumbles. “You didn’t pick this place, did you?”

“No, my sister did. She says it would be the last place in New York City anyone would think to find me,” A beat. “Or you.”

“What a fiend!” Tony claps and points before he deflates a little bit and shrugs. “Well, she’s not wrong.”

T’challa laughs, deep and rumbling, and so very amused.

And Tony, without shame, just watches, like T’challa is the biggest blockbuster production of the year.

--

So.
The ‘hangout’ at the unicorn’s ass, while seemingly planned and civil (not that Tony had any part in its planning, of course) had gone well.

It had also been the start of… something, for the lack of a better word.

Tony would like to dub the unicorn-ass-hangout as the proverbial fist-sized snowball that had started it all, ergo, leading it to be the proverbial giant snowball, snowballing down the proverbial snowy mountain.

It starts with a text after Star Expo had concluded. That year, Stark Expo had been such a smashing success that it literally had left nothing else to smash. So successful it had been, that Tony had gotten multiple appreciation awards and invitations after it, what with him pushing more clean energy projects after his inspirational binge from his little trip to Wakanda. Tony’s schedule after the expo is about as busy as One Direction’s world tour; it is ridiculous. Meeting after meeting, country and city hopping all over the damn place.

It had been after the first honorary award from UNICEF that the text comes in from T’challa’s private number and reads one word:

_Congratulations._

It wouldn’t have been a big deal except some five minutes later (while Tony had been occupied trying to think of an awesome, cool and hip reply), like it had been some sort of afterthought, the balloon emoticon had followed.

So Tony responds (jokingly, of course):

_Really? A balloon emoticon? You cheapskate._

Of course, Tony thanks him, he’s not rude and still had his manners and one he had sent a plain old boring ‘thank you’ that had been that.

Except, when Tony returns to his office after hopping all around the world collecting his awards like Pokémon, he finds that his office had been filled with _hundreds_ of red balloons, all in various shape and form. He finds out from his poor assistant that the balloon arrangement comes in everyday, that the company had been instructed ‘to only stop once Mister Stark has returned from his trip’. The day Tony shows up in his office, is the day both his assistant Katherine and the delivery boy Mike had sighed in relief.

By the heavens, there isn’t a single empty spot on his ceiling or part of his wall (some of the balloons had lost its helium and had started to deflate, floating around pathetically and ghost like, much like Tony’s energy these days) that is not covered by a red balloon.

Tony had found it so ridiculous that he couldn’t – _at all_, despite Pepper’s warning – resist it when he hears that T’challa had successfully made progress with the annual Peace Summit talks in Geneva.

Tony doesn’t text the king. Tony doesn’t even congratulate him.

Tony just spams the shit out of T’challa’s palace with irises, because according to a popular flower website, the iris is a _must_ when wanting to compliment someone with a job well done at the workplace. Tony provides the local florist with the same instructions T’challa had provided the local balloonist. Stop delivering once T’challa _himself_ says so.

T’challa texts not one but _two_ weeks later with a:
Thank you. Mother was most amused. However, I dislike irises. I prefer Gladiolus.

Tony looks up the symbolic meaning of said flower, because he’s no florist or botanist, and as per Wikipedia, gladiolus stands for strength of character, honor and conviction. Tony thinks it’s a little personal, so he doesn’t spam the king with bouquets of gladiolus. Instead, he responds to the text with a very simple:

*I’m a genius but I’m not psychic – next time, Doraemon.*

And thus, the snowball continues rolling down the hill.

Tony had been the proudly-unfortunate recipient of not only over a thousand red balloons, but countless bouquets of gladiolus (like Tony needed the reminder of what the king’s favorite flower is), a giant customized eighty pound Shackburger (Tony had laughed to the point of stitches at that one), several stuffed brown bears with little stitched hearts on its chest in all the colors of the rainbow, heinous amounts of chocolates from all over the goddamn world (that one from South Africa though, with the cured orange had been Tony’s favorite; it had paired really well with the bourbon in his office), and one day, three truck fulls of donuts (oh what a hoot that had been).

Not that T’challa hadn’t been the recipient of anything per se. Because Tony had taken the game and contest to heart and had sent the king a chocolate fountain, a giant thirty foot stuffed black panther customized by a company in Japan (that had gotten Tony an amused text from the queen herself), an endless supply of coffee from that godforsaken unicorn café that Tony still cringes whenever he thinks of it, some ten gallons of ice cream from Madagascar with a note that says, *I hear kittens loves vanilla* and several phallic shaped very blue balloons that may or may not have been intentional after a successful speech on world health in some forum in Sydney.

Honestly, it had reached a point that Tony had started to scheme with Friday, always trying to think of one-upping the king, who gives back as much as he gets, if not worse.

So imagine Tony’s surprise when his sort of impromptu lunch date with Pepper after a meeting gets interrupted by his very fed-up assistant and an equally haggard looking man from FedEx. There is a large box that required a dolly-trolly waiting for his attention, a little dilapidated on the sides from the shipment but otherwise intact. Tony blinks, signs the digital clipboard and watches as they hurry away and leave him with Pepper giving him a very strange look, eyebrows all the way up to her hairline.

“Another present from the King?” Pepper asks, rather tartly as her nose wrinkles. “I hope it’s not perishable. The entire company is still recovering from those donuts. I can still smell it in the hallways.”

“Donuts are the food of the gods,” Tony corrects, and braces himself as he lifts the box with a bit of a grunt and places it on the table, pulling out a letter opener and cutting the tape free. “You gotta admit though, the king knows his…”

Tony trails off when he blinks at the lined jars in the box. He picks one of them up and breaks the seal, turning the cap and taking a sniff of the creamy substance within.

And the memory hits him like a punch in the nose.

Tony remembers that smell, remembers how he had been lathered with the stuff during that ceremony. He also remembers how he had asked for some and had gotten the look that had told him, *nope*, you can’t have any. Tony digs further into the box and picks out a tin canister, breaks the seal open and takes whiff of the tea leaves within.
“Tony, you are suddenly very silent,” Pepper points out. "That is very strange."

“Here.” Tony hands her the tea canister. “Wakandan tea. Special. Don’t share. Just for you. I was shitting a lot more regularly and feeling so cleansed when they gave me that stuff –“

“Ugh, god, Tony!”

“And here.” Tony hands her three of the cream jars. “Don’t ask what’s in it, just use it. Remind me to give Rhodey some – it helps with chronic pain.”

Pepper takes all of it in her arms and brushes away some of the packing foam, staring at the things within and picking up a small piece of paper, reading the scribbled note out loud. “With mother’s blessing,” Pepper says, “Wow. I thought you said they didn’t share any of their stuff?”

“They don’t.”

“He’s not interested in you, is he?” Pepper asks, setting the note. “I mean, I know it’s a contest...” Pepper trails off because Tony is very quiet again. “Tony, it is still a contest, right?”

“Let’s ask the king,” Tony says, and pulls out his phone to text one line:

Are you courting me?

The first text response comes in under a minute, and it reads: No. If I were courting you, I would resort to what is socially acceptable these days. Something like this.

Tony is about to read out the answer and ends up chortling a laugh that tapers off to wheeze because T’challa sends him an image of himself, loosening his tie, looking straight ahead at the camera in a selfie-shot, collarbone peeking out from the rumpled shirt. The wheezing and Tony slapping a hand against his thigh repeatedly in laughter makes Pepper quirk an eyebrow as she looks at the selfie-shot.

“He is very photogenic,” Pepper comments and starts rapping Tony’s back when he starts to choke on his laugh. “It’s not that funny, Tony.”

“It is. It so is. Oh my god Pepper, if you even knew this guy in person, how he acts, the sanctimonious asshole he is capable of being, you’d be laughing too! Oh my god, that is – I can’t – “ Tony clears his throat and blinks away the tears from his eyes, chuckling. “How do I do better than that?”

“Send a nude,” Pepper shrugs.

“That is too easy. It’s gotta be better, smarter, something that is pocket-change worthy.”

“Pocket-change by your standards?” Pepper asks, picking up her bowl of salad and crossing her legs as she takes a forkful.

“Pep, this is a contest. I cannot lose. Come on, brain storm with daddy! How can I one-up that?” Tony asks, sitting down with a whump on his chair and spinning once. “Nudes are good but nudes with purpose are better. Ugh, this is getting hard, I am so out of my game! Help me!”

“I am not wasting time on your ego-contest with the King of Wakanda. If I’m going to help you, I’d rather it be productive and beneficial to Stark Industries,” Pepper huffs. “If you want nudes with purpose, then do a photoshoot and launch your own, I don’t know, scent line or something. Or shaving cream.” Pepper pauses, and blinks, meeting Tony’s gaze as several beats of silence passes
between them. Tony can feel himself straighten with excitement, ears perking. “Tony, that was a joke.”

“We’ll call it Naked by Stark. The slogan will be, this is my armor. Pepper, you are a genius! Let’s do it! Friday, compile a list of contacts in Paris who would be willing to design my scent.”

Pepper’s weak protests are drowned out by Tony’s endless chatter.

Tony doesn’t reply to the King’s text.

Because six weeks later, the king receives a bottle of the signature perfume that is all dark and sleek, with notes of oak, tea-tree and musky undertones along with an envelope containing a photo from one of the many shots taken for the marketing campaign of Naked by Stark. The photo has Tony standing in his birthday suit, eyes looking straight up at the camera, chin tilted down, artfully shadowed and eyes sharp, lines of his clavicle, chest, chiseled stomach and dips of his hipbone all visible with very little left to the imagination.

There is a sticky note smack in the middle the photo Tony signs with a smiley that says: like my selfie?

The king doesn’t respond till the next evening, and when he does, there is a selfie of him standing in what looks to be a hotel bathroom mirror, towel draped dangerously low on his waste, with a thumbs up for the ‘like’ and the bottle of Naked perched on the bathroom marble-top.

It’s the first thing Tony wakes up to.

And he can’t say he’s complaining.

The king, indeed, is very photogenic.

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“Quick, take photo of me eating a hotdog,” Tony says, shoving his phone at Rhodey.

“No!” Rhodey says, “No, no way! Keep me out of your obsessive –“ Rhodey starts slapping and smacking Tony’s hand away. “No freaking away! Good god, why am I still friends with you? Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Rhodey takes the phone and takes a photo of Tony obscenely taking a big bite of his hotdog and makes a sound of disgust as he shoves the phone back.

“Nah, take another one, the light here is not right.”

Rhodey gives Tony one incredulous look before he wheels himself away down the park path, quick and fast like he’s being chased by a madman. The tea in his cup holder jostles, sloshing a bit of the liquid because it’s a thing now, coming to the park and drinking tea from the tea shop across the street from the parking lot. It has been a thing since Tony’s recovery after his trip to Wakanda months ago. Every Tuesday, on the dot at twelve, Tony would go fetch Rhodey from his physiotherapy session, grab lunch and then go to the park for a stroll. It is safe to say that other than working-lunches with Pepper on Thursdays, Tuesdays tea-and-buddy-time is the only thing Tony honest to god looks forward to.

That and T’challa’s selfies.

He had a collection of it by now, and his inventory keeps getting bigger. Tony had T’challa putting on his jacket, taking off his jacket, shirtless, shirt half hanging open, one shot of him in his boxers, some under the sheets, a shit ton of him in suits and business meetings, eating, signing, putting on a
new pair of sunglasses, sipping wine – and really, it’s not like Tony doesn’t one-up each shot either. It’s become a thing to exchange at least one selfie-shot a day, and so far, Tony has sent T’challa shots of him in the tub, in the pool, driving his car, fresh out of the shower, after a suit fitting, taking off said suit, and just yesterday, he had sent T’challa the I-just-woke-up selfie of him in a tank top amidst rumpled blankets, sleepy grin on his face and a half-assed peace sign to boot.

It has reached a point where if either of them fails to send a stupid selfie to each other, a text would follow with an inquiry if the day has gone south.

It has happened three times from Tony’s end, only because on those three occasions, he had spent his entire day fielding off accusations and fighting fire with fire with an army of attorneys at the accusations Ross is still trying so hard to pin on him.

Tony had gotten so drunk on those nights and the replies would never come in a form of verbal response, but a continued exchange of selfies. Because these games are nice, these games are harmless and it’s something no one can touch and Tony likes it that way.

Tony is chasing after Rhodey, and catches up to him, patting his shoulder, taking over the wheeling and tucking his phone away. The shot of the hotdog goes through and Tony tosses the grease-paper and napkin into the nearby bin before he takes hold of Rhodney’s wheelchair and wheels him to their favorite park bench that overlooks the pond, under the shade of an old oak tree.

“Did you send your goddamn selfie?” Rhodey asks.

“Yup~” Tony says, popping the P in his answer.

“Are you gonna stop anytime soon?”

“Nope~” Tony pops the P again and takes a sip of his tea. “It’s harmless fun.”

“Sending half nudes and receiving equally half nudes from a king is not fun. I’ve got a nephew who does the same with this girl he’s seeing since college and there’s talk of getting engaged before he goes on tour. So this is the kind of thing you share with someone you’re intimate with. And he, may I remind you, is your ex-husband,” Rhodey says and holds a hand up when Tony looks like someone had just run over a sack of kittens right before his eyes. “I’m not raining on your parade, but if this is not courting then what the fuck is?”

“Not courting?” Tony says helplessly, feeling a little cornered.

“Dude, for real, do you even like the guy?” Rhodey asks, throwing his hand up.

Tony blinks and thinks for a moment, and then shrugs. “He’s not fugly.”

“Yeah, we know. TIMES magazine and several other tabloids across the freaking globe knows too. That’s not what I’m asking,” Rhodey huffs. “Man, I’m telling you that you’ve been different since Wakanda.”

“They’re harmless selfies and it’s a healthy competition on who can outdo the other. If anything, I would say this arrangement and competition has been beneficial to Stark Industries and the global market. I am told that Naked sold out within an hour of it being launched at Macy’s and Sephora.” Tony sounds proud. “And it’s not all nudes –“

“Dude!” Rhodey tries to shove Tony away.

"Smile, bestie-selfie!” Tony wraps an arm around Rhodey’s face and catches a candid moment of
Rhodey’s expression shifting from indignation to surprise. “Nice! Aww, look buddy, you’re photogenic too!”

“Give me that!” Rhodey attempts to grab Tony’s phone, but makes an empty swipe at air as Tony starts typing a message. “Don’t send it! I’m serious, Tony, I don’t want to be dragged into this —”

“And sent! See, told you. Not all nudes. I sent him one just last week of me trying on a new suit I made. Oh and that time I saw a cat-café. Took a photo with the barista who was wearing a black-cat uniform; adorable.” Tony shakes his head.

“Who are you?” Rhodey says, gawking just a little bit.

“Come on, Jim, where’s your sense of fun?” Tony rolls his eyes and plops his ass down back on the bench.

Convincing Pepper that the whatever-the-fuck it is that’s between him and T’challa is beneficial had been easy because Pepper had looked at it from a business and public relations perspective. Whether or not she sees it from a personal point of view is up in the air; so long as Tony is staying out of trouble, attends his meetings, fulfills his obligations both to the Avengers and Stark Industries while not aggravating Ross’ feathers more than he already had during the ‘Civil War’ (which he is still fucking recovering from, really, Ross is like a rabid dog hell-bent on getting all the chew sticks there is in the yard), she had seemed quite fine with it.

But Tony knows better.

Sure, sending not-really-nudes to your ex-husband as a joke may be a little out there. But then again, all those bouquets, chocolates, balloons and trolling he had sent and had received in return, while still ‘pocket-change’ in terms of costs (to someone like Tony Stark or even T’challa who is a king) is equally out there too. Selfies, from a costing point of view, amounts to nothing. When did selfie ever increase caloric intake (those donuts and chocolates, for instance) or take up much needed space and cause disturbance of the peace (those balloons and all those teddy bears)?

So maybe, Tony thinks he may have been spending more time scheming on how to get on his highness’ nerves. Maybe, he enjoys the laughs he gets from the ridiculousness of it all. Maybe the fact that there’s no end game, there’s no pay backs, there’s no condition to any of it – it’s just them being silly and breaking away from the sick reality the Accords and the rogue Avengers had thrown the world into. It may be bordering towards unhealthy, but then again, Tony keeps odd hours, doesn’t sleep (or rather he hasn’t slept since Siberia and that one long evening in Wakanda during that particular ritual), barely eats on time if at all, and no longer had a functioning biological clock with how frequently he hops from one time zone to the other.

Getting his laugh-out-louds for the day, Tony thinks, for all the shit he had put up with the burden of trying to run and consult a barely existing team and fielding political backlash off Ironman’s back, is worth it and much deserved right?

And if T’challa happens to be good at making hilarious tongue-in-cheek captions and actually looks very damn good in almost anything (even a potato sack), then who the hell is Tony to not enjoy something that is being offered to him so freely?

It’s just… fun, right?

It’s not like they’re friends.

Or worse, teammates.
It’s not like there’s trust issues there beyond the secret Tony is willingly keeping to himself, of course.

Right?

Tony’s phone beeps and he stares at the picture that pops up. It’s late evening in Wakanda right now and there is T’challa, lying in bed with a panther that looks way bigger than Bob, eyes narrowed to sleepy slits and chin pillowed over two massive paws. T’challa had an arm around its flank, is lying shirtless with the sheets pooled around his waist, looking right at the camera and a smirk dancing around the corners of his lips. The shot shows nothing Tony has not seen before, be it in pictures or in Wakanda itself during his stay. The picture comes with a caption that reads:

_Nyo is a cuter bestie._

It’s the first time Tony is ever lain eyes on Bob’s other half, the other magical cat that had come at a time that brought forth a bad omen. Tony had assumed, since no introductions were made at the time, that it is none of his business. Tony had received countless selfies with babies, household pets and colorful parrots native to Wakanda, but this one seems personal.

Even more personal than the voice notes they send each other debating nuclear physics or astronomy, or thermodynamics and creative uses for magnetic energy, which, Shuri – surprisingly! – had joined in on. On more than one occasion!

It’s a lovely picture all things considered, because nothing belays trust than a giant cat that may bite your head off lounging with you in bed. Bob does the same, climbing into Tony’s bed or sitting to pool around his feet when he falls asleep in his chair or on the stool in his lab or in the kitchen mid-meal. Bob, which Tony will never admit except perhaps under torture, has been the proverbial buoy he grips on to during the nightmarish sway of his ocean-like-reality every time he so much as tries to catch some shuteye. Even with the sleeping aids he had gotten on prescription fails him. Aids that that he throws away the second time he takes a little too much out of panic and desperation, because god, _fuck_, is he just _exhausted_. Of course, within seconds of realizing how many he had swallowed, he had thrown himself to the toilet and forced a finger down his throat to get it all out.

The regret that comes after makes him panic just a little bit and he books extra sessions with his therapists the next day.

Tony knows he’s far from okay.

That happens when you’re a victim to garbage like Afghanistan or Siberia. Or when you carry the Stark name, to be honest. Drizzle that a little with betrayal-syrup and trust_powdered_sugar and a side of buttery-guilt, and really, it’s a _miracle_ Tony hasn’t tried to kill himself the old fashioned way.

Which would be so _boring_. Why would he do that? It’s not his style.

_(And you’re all about style, aren’t you?)_

“Hey…” Rhodey says, a warm hand coming to Tony’s knee. Tony looks up from the photo, and gives Rhodey a tight smile. “Look, I’m just … I’m not trying to be a killjoy here.” Tony wrinkles his nose and rolls his eyes because who is Rhodey trying to fool? “I’m serious, listen, okay, I’m just – I’m worried, all right? I know there’s a lot on your plate, I know you’re getting hit from all sides, and I’m not worried about you having a good time. I like that you’re having fun for a change, despite Ross being the colossal asshole that he is. I’m glad _someone_ pushes you to do something fun because let’s face it buddy, you don’t even fly for kicks anymore. It’s either PR or some assignment or asshole causing trouble. Hey, hey, no, let me finish, I’m making a point here.”
“Blah, blah, blah…”

“Cut it out!” Rhodey smacks the side of Tony’s knee, and makes an expression of distaste. “It’s all hunky dory when it’s good old fun as long as it’s fun. But I’ve been your friend for a very, very long time. And I can tell when the fun ends and when the attachment starts. You’re not in the fun pool anymore, do you realize that?”

“I am so in the fun pool, platypus.”

“Waking up to his text makes your day?” Rhodey asks and when Tony blinks because, well, yeah, it’s eye candy. It must have been all over his face because Rhodey sighs and pats his shoulder. “Just as long as you’re aware…”

“I’m aware.”

“Sure.”

“Plenty aware!” Tony justifies. “I mean, who wouldn’t want to wake up to a hot guy first thing in the morning? And sure, his lame-ass jokes are a nice break from droning meetings or worse, Ross’ mission briefs. And you know, you gotta admire a guy who looks like he’d be a natural in a toothpaste ad. It’s a bonus that he’s quite responsive, and you know, it’s not all selfies and trolling each other, we do have meaningful conversations too, I’ll have you know. Just a week ago, we had a heated debate on thermo-dynamics, and honestly sometimes I have to wonder why his sister behaved the way she did, like I was the world’s biggest menace. But she’s actually really nice to science with! She is almost as smart as me! So yes, it’s all good fun! And you know T’challa doesn’t seem to mind, I mean, I’m not that ugly. I make a mean model!”

“Have you jacked-off to any of his pictures?” Rhodey asks, dead serious.

And it stops Tony right in his tracks.

_Huh._

“If you are insinuating that all this fun is actually a hidden crush or attraction in disguise, well I’m gonna prove you wrong. With science,” Tony says, standing up and carefully maneuvering Rhodey’s wheel chair down the path that would lead to the parking lot.

“Science? How the fuck are you going to science that?” Rhodey asks.

“I’m gonna go jack off to his pictures,” Tony says, like he’s reading the newspaper.

“Motherfuck – that’s it! No! I’m done! I. Am. Done! I did not need that – get away from me, I’m wheeling my ass home by myself!”

“I’m gonna prove it to you that you are blowing this way out of proportion!” Tony says, not letting go of Rhodey’s wheelchair and running after him as he speeds him down the path to their car, startling a few pigeons and joggers out of the way.

Tony gets an earful the entire trip back. Even after he drops Rhodey back to his apartment, Tony’s ears continue to ring with that lecture until he gets home, takes a shower, shoves himself into bed, sticks his hand under the covers and gets to work.

It had to be the _best orgasm_ Tony has had from jerking off in a long while.

And that’s saying something.
Tony supposes he should be worried about how easy it had been to think of lips against his throat, to feel the warmth on his back or to feel the brush of smooth and dark skin on his chest. He supposes he should freak out at the fact that imagining having T’challa’s cock in his mouth, or in him, or hell, just feeling T’challa's big dick (Tony remembers the outline of said dick with crisp clarity) in the center of Tony's palm had felt so... easy. He didn’t even struggle with the imagination bit.

Eventually, Tony does freak out.

Because he tries to jack off again some hours later (in the name of science, because multiple tests must be conducted in order to draw optimum results) to the thought of T’challa pressed against his back and the sound of his voice whispering his name and well, that had him coming in rivulets of white within seconds.

Third time is a charm and this time he imagines T’challa in his Black Panther armor.

Needless to say, Tony’s bedroom ends up absolutely thrashed when he loses his shit and instead of opting for coffee in the morning like a normal human being, Tony heads right for the liquor cabinet. And some hours later, when he misses two meetings and several calls from Pepper, eventually wakes up with a hangover the size of Jupiter, Tony discovers that he had drunk texted the fucking king himself with a pathetic little message that makes him want to stab his own balls with a goddamn spork:

So I jacked off to you three times last night and it was fucking great. But I don’t think this is a good thing, all things considered. Thanks for the orgasm though. Can you fork the bill of my room damage? I kind of thrashed it in despair at my old-man-crush on your stupid ass.

Except the response that comes after is a voice note and Tony takes forever to hit play. When he does, the remaining alcohol roils in the pits of his stomach.

“What if I told you that the attraction is mutual? That perhaps even I have secrets I keep between the sheets? Would you have even spared me a second chance? All things considered? If I asked you right now, Tony, let me take you out to dinner, what would you even say? Go fuck yourself, T’challa?”

Tony types out his three lettered answer. Because the truth is simple; he would have said yes.

Then proceeds to throw up for a good fifteen minutes or so.

And if Tony is comforted by the warm fur that drapes over his middle, right there from where he is lying on the bathroom floor, flat against the cold tiles, if he is comforted with the fact that he can wrap his arms around Bob’s flank and shut his eyes and pretend his life, his work, his efforts and his everything isn’t just a horrid fucking mess, well, then, it’s a good thing Tony lives by himself.

Besides, no one needs to know.

Friday isn’t a tattletale anyway.

TBC
LA LA LA~ WHAT THE FLYING FUCK LA LA LA~ IDEK IT GOT SERIOUS
DAMNIT UGH

I'm PinkCatharsis @ TUMBLR. If anyone has nice IronPanther things to share TELL
ME PLS. I also accept WinterIron and Stony and all things Tony Stark.
Eight

Chapter Notes

I am my own Beta, might have some typos, yadayadayada. Work is inspired by the amazing marvelingjules @ TUMBLR. Because if it wasn't for her fics that I stumbled upon, I would not have known how much I ship these two.

Please read end notes for Author's comments on this chapter and its making.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

T'challa is reading the same sentence for what is probably the tenth time in the space of fifteen minutes, his concentration having gone out of the window since the previous night. He will not say that he is sleep deprived, but rather is unrested, his sleep turbulent after his latest exchange with his ex-husband. T'challa had much to ponder on during the night, his thoughts swimming at the admission that had been oh so unceremoniously thrown in his face in a jumble of misspelled and miscapitalised words. The sheer amount of typos on the text had lead T'challa to the conclusion that either Tony had been severely angry when he had been composing the message in haste, or he is severely inebriated with substance.

Either way, it had fueled a fierce anger in him, an anger that even to this moment remains festering in his belly like a bad stomach flu. Had he been in his younger years, T'challa would have no doubt lashed out a lot stronger, would not have held back the way he had in that voice note. He would have given Stark a piece of his mind, for daring to be accusatory, for making it even sound like it had all been T'challa's fault, when they are both to blame for their weakness and folly of their younger years.

Really, the admission is just the kind of thing he needs right now.

(Goddamnit.)

T'challa is up to his neck in the business and affairs of his kingdom, what with the unified tribes coming forward and putting agenda after agenda before the king, agendas that he needs to address, from budgets to schooling to medical plans and the state of their army, the safety of their borders and now, after the so called media-dubbed Civil War, their stance on the Accords and the fact that his people had seen – after specific and very strict instructions to stay put within their designated compound – what they think to be is Captain Steve Rogers, walking among Wakandan citizens, in a shoddy attempt of a pitiful disguise. Beard or no beard, hat or scarf or sunglasses, a man of Steve’s size, color and features would still stand out in Wakanda. Wakanda isn’t exactly open to tourism, so Steve, in his desperation or what T’challa had come to accept as the Captain's moment of weakness, had broken free in an attempt to see his friend, to really see if the so called spouse of the king is truly Anthony Edward Stark, the legendary Ironman.

T’challa slams the pen down on the table non too gently, with a short exhale to release the tension building in his arm and all the way the length of his spine, blinking a few times before he picks up the document before him and takes another shot at reading it.
Steve had a lot of good in him, means well, can see logic in the long run far quicker than others. T’challa too, had grown up with stories of Captain America and his many heroic missions throughout the war. A man who is willing to give his life up for the safety of the people is no feat; it takes special courage and a certain kind of guts to go that far, especially with someone like Steve’s background, someone who had faced failure and rejection far too many times to count in two hands. And while Steve is a master tactician, talented in hand to hand combat, and a thorough team leader, he is still, to a point, young and naïve. T’challa admires him, respects him and gives him credit where it is due. But it is his exact lack of care for the authorities, his lack of – can you even call it understanding? – of concern for consequences for his actions that had lead T’challa to ask the renegades to seek shelter elsewhere.

Much to T’challa's chagrin, of course and the relief of his tribesman and nearly half of the council.

They had one rule in place when T’challa had accepted them into his country's borders and that is to not be seen in public and to be contained within the walls of their designated compound outside the city. T’challa still remembers how he had gone all the way to the compound the day the headlines about his apparent marriage hit the global media. Before T’challa had even flown to New York to sort the horrid mess out, the renegades had been the first to bare witness on how the stiffness and tension had lined T’challa’s entire frame, how it had locked his jaw and had turned him to something as menacing as the panther sentinels that stand guard around Wakanda’s borders. He had told them to their faces that there are protocols to be followed if one is to seek an annulment in Wakanda and that these must be respected, whether it makes them comfortable or not. He had given them ample warning to stay put, had told them Mister Stark will not know their location, that Mister Stark he doesn’t need to know and when he had gotten pensive nods and twitchy hesitating affirmatives, T’challa should have known better than to take it on their word.

It had been T’challa's mistake from the start.

Tripling the guards may not have been useful but a part of T’challa still feels a lot of things may have been avoided if Steve had just held on to his horses, so to speak, for just one more fucking day.

God, that devastation, that betrayal on Tony's face that day still haunts T’challa when he is on his own. He still remembers how those brown eyes had been blown wide, almost black, an endless stretch of nothing, like a dying star just sucking all the light from around the room, morphing to a black hole of bitterness and vivid anger. T’challa remembers feeling like a heel, remembers feeling shame like no other and then right after it, a serene and almost inhumane calmness.

Asking the renegades to leave and fend for themselves may not have been the smartest thing to do, but T’challa had to act as king. Had he not done what he had done, had he not acted upon the conditions he had put into place before the tribal leaders, the council and his family, then he would be seen as a weak king. He would be seen as a king who puts his personal interests before that of the kingdom.

Well, the get-the-fuck-out, while still worded diplomatically, had been almost liberating. Especially after he hears it from Kojo and Erik that his husband, in his shock and daze, had stepped into oncoming traffic upon realizing it had been the good Captain on the other end of the street. Whether or not that had been a catalyst to T’challa's implosion no longer mattered in the long run.

T’challa had looked Steve in the eye, watched the man blink and nod. Steve knows the conditions of his stay and T’challa is not worried he’d find shelter elsewhere, especially when he had Romanov and Barton on his team, two skilled master spies and assassins, who knows how to get through border cracks if need be.

They had left without a word.
And with them, a good portion of T’challa’s headache.

While the council and tribal leaders had come up with ways to field the people’s curiosity about sighting what had looked like a Captain Rogers amidst their throngs, while that had eventually died with more media distractions and the official crowning of T’challa as king, it had done nothing to bring peace to T’challa’s mind. How did the saying go? Out of the boiling pot and into the frying pan?

The sudden rise of security concerns had escalated quickly, what with parties questioning his legitimacy as king, his way of ruling the kingdom the moment his agendas had been made public; Shuri had the Hatut Zeraze contracted and are currently investigating the causes of these sudden surge of disturbances in their borders, or how copious amounts of Vibranium is suddenly making their presence in the global Black Market. T’challa had his plate full and with the Accords still undergoing review after review; with the constant back and forth and everything seemingly attacking him from all corners, he finds himself questioning his ability to be a good king.

He wonders if it makes him a bad king when all he wants to do these days is is scream his head off half the time in frustration.

His father had always said it is easy to be a good warrior, a good man, even.

A good king is a different ballgame all together.

Reading the same line for what now had to be like the hundredth time, T’challa gives up and stands, pacing over to the window and taking in the stretch of capital, just beyond the palace walls, the late afternoon still high in the sky and painting everything before him in a bright golden glow. His mind strays as he scoffs at his lack of control (oh how his tutors would give him a good earful for that if they could), to his ex-husband.

Suffice to say, their little game had been a most needed distraction, a thing for T’challa to tut and click his tongue at in amusement, something to ground him when he keeps hitting wall after wall in the affairs of his kingdom. T’challa takes his duties seriously, and only plans his comebacks to Tony when he is retired for the day and never during the times he is acting as King. But sometimes, T’challa finds himself catching the slight rustle of the iris’s petal from the corner of his eye and that little movement, that brief second would always be enough for him to break from the mounting irritation, fatigue, wariness or whatever it is he feels about the sometimes pointless agendas the tribes are pushing forward for his attention. Sometimes, that little movement is enough to restart his mental concentration, refocusing him rather than completely distracting him.

The palace had smelled sweet and had been a wondrous sight of beautiful purple for weeks. T’challa isn’t fond of irises but they had been a vision to look at nevertheless.

He appreciates the thought in those gifts, while mostly done in jest.

Oh how he had laughed in the privacy of his room when he had seen the perfume (lovely scent, he had taken to using it on some occasion) and the photo print. Seeing that had been a reaffirmation of just how truly attractive Tony is. That one photograph that is now plastered all over the globe since the launch of Naked, is a testament to Tony’s strength and confidence, a phoenix from the ashes, how despite what Tony is getting hit by from all angles, despite him being the shock-absorber of all backlashes directed to the Avengers (current and rogue), still, Tony manages to look put together, look strong and quite beautiful, if T’challa is being honest, and absolutely nothing like the cracking and haunted man that had stormed into his office that one afternoon.

T’challa admires Tony’s bravery, his resilience, for this man is nothing more than a civilian. Tony is
no military man, has no training in combat like some of his military friends and teammates, nor is he a field agent or a spy like his former teammates.

But Tony is a warrior who deserves respect.

Tony is a survivor who bares his scars to the world with no shame, no care, takes what he can and remains up right no matter how deep it cuts him.

It’s… mind-blowing.

And ridiculously attractive.

T’challa had admired – and had preened maybe just a tiny bit – when Tony had told him to fuck off with little to no care for his station and certainly no regard for the fact that disrespect to the king is not to be tolerated by his people.

Tony had paid no mind to the stiffening of the Dora Milaje, nor his mother or anyone else within earshot.

It had been quite refreshing.

Tony’s short stay in the palace grounds, if T’challa is being honest, had put him at ease in ways he hadn’t felt since the passing of his father. T’challa attributes this to the fact that he had known what Tony had started off as, and what he is now is the by-product of his life’s circumstances. The strong only gets stronger, hot iron cooling to something more unyielding, and that is what T’challa had seen in Tony. It’s the little things, like his tolerance for a culture that he, quite frankly, had no business in tolerating. It’s Tony having long talks with his mother, and putting Shuri in her place when she had been purposely behaving like an uncharacteristically spoiled princess towards T’challa’s ex-husband, testing Tony’s boundaries, see what makes Tony tick, or how on earth did a Stark catch the eye of her very stubborn brother. It had been the way Tony had communicated with Kojo, the guards and the palace staff, how despite Tony’s bitterness and irritation at the entire ordeal, Tony had been civil, willingly without being told to be, unlike T’challa’s people who he had to verbally order (diplomatically) to accept his spouse and to support the ‘mending of the marriage’ as per their traditions and laws even though everyone and their damn dog had known it had been about saving face, a gesture and nod of respect towards their long standing tradition. T’challa had expected his people to respect his wishes, he just hadn’t been sure if Tony would have done the same.

Tony had; tenfold and beyond.

It had been unexpected, to say the least; then again, Tony isn’t foreign to dancing to cultural necessities, what with Stark Industries' global expansion and business relations all across Asia and the Middle East.

T’challa remembers being impressed, something stirring in him like all those years ago in glamorous, glorious Vegas, before he had taken that first hit of cocaine and promptly lost his bearings of reality. It had been a whisper of wonder, like feathers brushing against T’challa's stomach.

And then that moment when T’challa had seen concern painted all over Tony’s face, how Tony had stood up sharply from his seat during the challenges, when Tony’s eyes had been wide and his chest had heaved with a breath he had looked like he had been struggling with – T’challa had felt something. Something that had made him stand up quick, the need to appease that expression boiling in his veins, hot and burning like the roar of a great fire in the dark.

The look of relief on Tony’s face after though, how that expression had slackened, possibly without
Tony even realizing it, had felt even more … T’challa isn’t sure how to word it.

It is a foreign feeling.

Just like what he feels now.

It leaves him restless, unable to focus, and just extremely frustrated.

T’challa takes a look at his desk once more, gives the stack of papers a forlorn look before he sighs and leaves his office all together in favor of the training grounds.

By the time he had caught his breath, sweat clumping his curls and sliding down his temples, the sun is gone and it is dark. Standing right there by the door, flanked by the Dora Milaje, stands his mother, a frown on her beautiful face, and her arms crossed over her chest.

“Mother – everything all right?” T’challa asks, straightening and bringing the back of his hand to brush the sweat off his brow.

“I was worried when you didn’t show up for dinner, given that upon inquiry, I was told you are within the grounds,” She says, tilting her head as she turns towards the door. “Clean up and join me. I shall have tea and if you wish, I can have your dinner brought to the study. I think you’ve worn a good portion of the guards and most if not all the equipment in this room this evening; give them some consideration, hmm?”

“Of course.” T’challa nods, dipping his head just as the queen mother turns to leave, but not without quirking an eyebrow at him.

If his sparring partners sag in slight relief, T’challa doesn’t notice.

When T’challa steps into the queen mother’s study, his skin still warm from the sparring session and cooling from the cold shower he had taken, he finds her sitting there and flicking through some hologram-projected articles, which she promptly waves away in favor of looking up at him and smiling when he leans down to kiss her cheek.

“Shall I ask them to bring you dinner?” She asks, and when T’challa shakes her head, she waves for the tea instead. T’challa sits there in silence, slouched on his chair and absently watching the tea being poured as his fingers work the tension on his temple. The servant takes a bow and leaves mother and son to their tea. T’challa watches as the queen picks up her tea cup and takes a careful sip. “Feel better? I think I overheard relief when I made my presence known.”

“The solution to the disappearing Vibranium is most… trying. We have traitors amidst us and the haystack is far too large. It can be anyone facilitating the smuggling,” T’challa says, picking up a handful of nuts and dried fruit, popping a few into his mouth.

The queen hums softly in acknowledgment, as she shakes her head, a melancholic expression crossing her face. “It would have been only a matter of time. Your father believed that one day, no matter our vigilance, or how strong our belief or our ways may be, the outside will come knocking on our doors. The world hasn’t been the same since the second world war, not when heroes were made from bottles. Even now, our people, no matter how advanced we are, have not been able to replicate the Super Soldier Serum. Advanced and ahead we may be, but there are… brighter stars beyond our borders. You remember Dr. Pym, or the more iconic Professor Charles. Ah, Dr. Hank McCoy is another person that comes to mind; evolution is inevitable.”

But T’challa isn’t thinking of Henry “Hank” Pym or the rumored allegations of The Antman and The Wasp, their involvement in the war. Nor is he thinking of the mutant who sits in his mansion
schooling many more young stars in hopes to preserve balance and peace, or the blue beast that is actively working with the government to ensure fair treatment of all humans — mutants and non-mutants alike. Hell, he isn’t even thinking of the newest ‘Doctor’ that had popped up in their radar, when reports of sudden deaths and people appearing from walls and buildings had emerged amidst the public. That Stephen Strange is the newest blip on the radar, according to their spy network.

He thinks of brown eyes and a cheeky-toothy grin, of gesticulating hands and endless talks about mathematical theories and astrophysics. He thinks, instead, of a man who has gotten so, so good at compartmentalizing, so good at hiding and keeping himself together even when the odds are stacked against him. He thinks of a man who is always going against said odds, shows no sign of stopping, a man who, despite his shortcomings, his issues and the demons that rob him of peace and sleep, continues to do his job in keeping the world safe.

“Father had many beliefs,” T’challa says, the whisper of grief clawing at his chest once more, something he’s been trying so hard to shove down because even if he wants to mourn more, T’challa can’t. There is no time for that anymore, not when his responsibility has exceeded beyond warrior. T’challa wonders when will the day come when the thought and memory of his father wouldn’t hurt this painfully. “His shoes are too big…”

“One day, if you get a son or a daughter and they are crowned ruler, when you are gone, believe me, they will say the same,” The queen says. “Well, unless you turn into a tyrant and a mad king, that is.” She chuckles, and reaches forward to take T’challa’s hand in hers. “A word of advice from someone who’s been in the political and royal circle for far too long? Heed your counselors, heed the tribal leaders and the people, but never let them influence or force your hand to fuel conflict or something petty. Never mold yourself to be lesser than of what you are deemed worthy to be by the Bast. There is a reason you are the chosen to be the Black Panther; trust that reason.”

T’challa looks at the wrinkled hand in his, at the perfectly shaped nails and the muscle and tendon under the aging skin. “Sometimes… I have doubts. My purpose, my ability, and father – he –”

“Had his doubts too,” The queen says, thumb rubbing small circles on the knuckle of T’challa’s hand. “Your father took a long time to recover from the death of your mother. He wasn’t always what you had come to know him to be. He loved her dearly and there had been a time when looking at you had caused him great pain – he may have been blessed by the Bast, may have had the power and strength in his fist, but he wasn’t always a strong man. No single man or woman ever is,” She says, as T’challa goes very still in his seat, breathing measured and calculated. “She was your father’s first love, your mother. Even when your grandfather took ill and our marriage was arranged, T’chaka wasn’t always ready. But he found peace in his friendship with me, and then… well.” The queen smiles and pulls away in favor of her tea cup.

“I didn’t know… about mother. About Baba…” T’challa trails off, his voice soft, a frown tugging at his face.

“Nothing external to you has power over you. Nobody can hurt you unless you give them permission to. And the best fighter is never angry,” The queen says.

“Those your words, mother?” T’challa tilts his head.

“They were your father’s. His advice to me when I was crowned queen. And now in his absence, I pass them to you.”

Something in T’challa stills, his eyes widening as he looks up at the only mother he knows, sees how her eyes gleam with the grief she still feels from losing a husband. She reaches forward to press a palm on his face, and T’challa is powerless to that warmth, powerless to remain king and warrior
“I miss him so much, mama…” T’challa’s voice cracks just the tiniest bit, for he is reminded yet again of a loss that is far too vast.

“I miss him too,” She responds, voice barely above a whisper and T’challa can do nothing but press her hand against his cheek a little more, closing his eyes. “Oh my boy, give it time. It will pass, but not so easily.”

“Yes, mama…”

T’challa can do nothing but nod, his head bowed and allowing himself this moment of weakness. He doesn’t rush the flare of pain in his chest from the wound that will take forever to heal to subside, nor does he pull away from his mother’s comforting hand. When he does, their tea is cold and there is a cool end-of-summer breeze blowing through the open window, billowing soft gold chiffon. They do not ask for more tea, nor do they call for any of the attendees, instead sitting in silence and watching the clear night sky beyond the window of the study.

“Your father grew wary of some of the agendas being pushed forward; particularly the redundant traffic-control-system for the western region of the capital,” The queen sighs, picking up dried plums from the tray, and starts to chuckle. “Where there is no traffic.”

“Did he feel like ripping those dossiers and setting them on fire too?” T’challa asks, because that had been the dossier he had been trying to read all afternoon.

“Worse. He wanted to punch the tribal leader for wasting his time,” The queen says.

They exchange one look and dissolve into uncontrollable chuckles.

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T’challa is wrapping up his notes on the Accords review, having a few more pages to read when there is a knock on his office door and then the clack of hurried heels once said door opens. Only one person ever dares to barge in this way, sure of herself and almost always unguarded when in the comforts and privacy of T’challa’s company.

Shuri walks in and throws herself on the chair, propping her feet up on the low table and sighing in what sounds like frustrated exhaustion. She doesn’t even wait but immediately launches into her report of the day, informing T’challa that the latest aerospace satellite repairs have been completed remotely, new software uploaded from the last bout of space debris damage. They weren’t very major, but controlled nanite technology that Shuri had designed to withstand space environment, apparently had been more than enough to repair whatever blows one of their satellites had taken. While their communications had not suffered greatly, weak signals had been quite a hindrance; a price to pay when battling against nature, apparently.

Shuri then launches into another report of their findings and research on nanite technology and tissue regeneration; not much progress there considering recent renders show a very high fatality rate.

When she concludes her report, T’challa doesn’t even pause in writing his notes.

“How are you, T’chala? I’m fine, Shuri. Thank you for asking, Shuri. How about you?”

Shuri rolls her eyes. “Quite well, and starving. Can we get lunch? I feel like curry today,” She says,
drumming her fingers on the table and picking up one of the loose pages of the accords from the neat pile and reading through his notes.

“Dinner is in three hours,” T’challa points out. “While the crown appreciates your efforts, binge-working serves no higher purpose other than harm.”

“Go tell your lover boy that, then. At least I am seeking sustenance in the form of curry. And perhaps some freshly baked buttered bread, too. Are you coming with me or not?” Shuri huffs, and picks up another page from the pile, eyes not once breaking from her reading despite how her jaw continues to run with nonsense.

T’challa’s scribbling only pauses momentarily, before he continues with his train of thought on the current subject at hand. “Curry sounds good.”

Shuri hums like she’s pleased, and just picks up the entire pile, reading through her brother’s notes. For a while, she doesn’t say much except to inquire clarification on some of T’challa’s notes. They work like that, back and forthing a few time and T’challa adding more points for better clarification. He is on his last page of the accords when Shuri arranges the pile on her lap and stacks them back neatly on the table and quite candidly asks:

“Do you have any more of those chocolate cat-eggs Stark sent you lying around?” She asks.

“No. As I recall, you had taken that entire basket to your workshop and laboratory.” T’challa points out, eyes remaining on the document.

“Take a hint, brother. Ask him for more. I tried to track the origins of that chocolatier, and believe it or not, I am unable to replicate that custom order.”

“How sad for you, my little princess,” T’challa murmurs, with no bite.

“You know you want to.” Shuri points out, blunt nails drumming against the edge of T’challa’s desk.

“If you care for those chocolate-cat-eggs so much, why don’t you ask Mister Stark himself? I am sure he’d very much oblige you and your requests,” T’challa says, punctuates his current note, gives it a quick read and places it on the neat pile on his desk. He calls in his assistant and hands him the pile, with instructions to send it to the board.

Only when his assistant steps out of the office does Shuri continue, “I’m giving you an excuse to initiate contact.”

“I do not need an excuse,” T’challa says, standing and stretching his back.

Shuri doesn’t respond and just directs a pointed look at him. “I found the lack of presents coming to the palace odd, but then what I find even odder is the fact that you haven’t snapped a selfie or any form of picture in the past four days.”

T’challa visibly stiffens and this makes Shuri laugh, rather unbecoming of a princess because apparently she finds it funny. The laugh is almost annoying, what with how she grows out of breath and snorts like a panting horse, slapping a hand on her knee a few times. “Stop that nonsense you sound like a horse. It’s unbecoming of a princess,” Tchalla gripes out; Shuri doesn’t stop of course, and it grates just a little (affectionately) on T’challa’s nerves. “Oh for Bast’s sakes!”

T’challa throws his hands up and picks up jacket, slipping it on and heading for the door for their agreed upon curry.
“Oh my dearest, brother, you are like a schoolboy with a ridiculous crush. You think I didn’t notice your selfies? You may have fooled others, but I am your sister, I know you far too well,” She says, clearing his throat and laughter finally subsiding. “I’ve been dying to point that out to you. You should have seen the look on your face.”

“Listen to my applause at your apt observational skills,” T’challa mutters sarcastically, hands in his pockets and lips thinning.

Shuri had no qualms for teasing her brother endlessly when they are in each other’s company and within privacy. The moment they step out of the office, the words stop. But the cheeky barely suppressed smile doesn’t leave her face, her dimples quite visible. The smallest provocation would probably send her into a laughing or giggle fit, so T’challa refrains from uttering a single word. Not until they are within the privacy of Shuri’s car and driving out of the royal grounds to Asha’s, their favorite childhood curry house downtown.

“Troubles in paradise, brother?” Shuri asks, the laughter more or less calmed down; she doesn’t look at T’challa, keeping her eyes on the road and her hands on the wheel.

“Stop fishing for stones, Shuri.” T’challa mutters, frowning and keeping his gaze on the window.

“I’m your sister. Royal duties aside, it’s my job to inquire on my sibling’s well being,” Shuri chirps, despite the sarcasm, still managing to sound concerned. “No one else will and mother is far too lenient with these things. You think I don’t notice how tense you are, how your words during your meetings have gotten stiff, how you have gotten just a touch more brutal when you put on the armor? I miss Baba too, you know?”

“Shuri, if you are looking for a fight, I will give it to you,” T’challa warns.

“I am looking out for my brother, because no one else will. There’s a difference,” Shuri says, jaw tight and eyes remaining straight ahead; she doesn’t even turn to meet T’challa’s gaze.

“I tolerate your teasing, but this is –“

“You’re different,” Shuri cuts him off, and honestly, it gets on T’challa’s nerves a little. “You’ve been different since Baba’s passing, but that’s to be expected. But you’re more different after your return from New York and your visit to Stark. No, brother, please let me finish and voice my concerns because Mama won’t hear any of it!” Shuri snaps, putting a cork to whatever protest T’challa had brewing at the tip of his tongue. “If you had any doubts in signing those documents in the first place, then why on earth did you even sign the annulment?”

“You must be jesting right now.” T’challa sighs; he had no interest in addressing his personal concerns. He had no wish to even talk about it; despite what others may think, he is quite content in keeping himself busy in not screwing up in his task of running the entire country.

But then again, Shuri had always been better at perception, better at hunting down her prey and holding it under her claws until she is satisfied with the hunt and had gotten what she wants out of it. Sometimes, in T’challa’s weakest moments, when his resolve starts to disintegrate – much like how it is now – T’challa wonders why Shuri won’t just take the damn crown and run the country. Why the Bast had picked him instead of her.

The thought – as always – goes as quickly as it comes.

“I am not,” Shuri responds, “Why, T’challa? Why sign at all? You could have just courted him, even after his sudden departure. I don’t blame him for that. Nor do I blame the Captain for not being able
to hold still. They were quite close, after all. But you, brother, are something else. Imagine my
surprise when the courting – and it **is** courting, no matter how you *look at it,* stop pretending, you are
insulting my intelligence – actually started *after* the annulment! Who does that?"

T’challa tilts his head back and closes his eyes, suddenly just *so exhausted.* Sleep remains elusive
and he and Tony had not exchanged a single text after that one ‘yes’ he had gotten from Tony in
response to his voice note.

“It is a mere contest of who can outdo the other. That is all,” T’challa murmurs, the lie thick on his
tongue because certainly, it had stopped being a contest to him after the first few selfies. It had
become a little personal the moment he had asked if everything on Tony’s end is well when he
hadn’t received a picture or a text the first time.

It had stopped being about ego and pride when it had started to become something T’challa had
looked forward to seeing the moment he wakes up in the morning.

Imagine that.

“Do you think Stark feels the same way? I’ve seen the way he looks at you, brother. At that Unicorn
Café,” Shuri points out.

“I’m sure he feels the same,” T’challa sighs, and this time, it sounds like he’s trying to convince
himself.

“Well, if that is the case, then you **must** be the better man. Stop using Stark as a distraction for your
frustrations and focus on your duty. It may all be in good fun, and it may be pocket change for the
both of you, but you are above using someone else’s ego and pride to your advantage. If he feels
nothing and you are adamant in behaving like the stubborn bull that you are, then end it and behave
like your marriage is truly annulled or otherwise, make your intentions clear.”

“You don’t even **like** him!” T’challa snaps, feeling the tension break free. “You treated him no better
than the traitors locked up in our prisons, and now you say *this?* I have no time for your games,
Shuri. Perhaps, out of the two of us, you are the one who must make your intentions clear.”

“I think he is a broken man.” Shuri says, calm and collected, “But he is unbelievably brilliant and
intelligent and I will never be able to wrap my head around why my brother, my king, would fall for
such a broken man, why he is reduced to this blubbering *fool* who dares raise his voice at me and my
reasoning like I am a common and uneducated street thug.” Shuri cocks an eyebrow in his direction,
her pointed look making T’challa clamp his jaw tight. “I am not beyond understanding and accepting
your choices. You can’t be a firm king when you aren’t even steadfast in the things you want, or the
things you need. Do you realize that other than disagreements with the affairs of the kingdom, this is
the first time you’ve raised your voice at me on things that are *personal*?”

T’challa wisely decides to keep his fat mouth *shut.*

Shuri is many annoying things, but she is far from stupid and a fool. They had exchanged many
heated words like angry chickens when she had made her distaste quite known for harboring the
fugitives in their country. She had also made no efforts in restraining herself when she had pointed
out to him, one night after the good Captain’s departure how she thinks that Wakanda isn’t a
charitable intuition for people who had made their own choices in their stance *against* Accords and
over a hundred countries, that she finds it *hilarious* that it had taken Stark’s anger for her brother to
come to his senses and wash their hands clean of it all. T’challa had lashed out rather viciously then,
pointing out that keeping them in their walls would ensure that shit like Lagos doesn’t happen again,
that they can provide a safe ground for the Witch to train and control her powers further without
making the body counts rise. That for the greater peace, some of them had to swallow their pride. Shuri had countered each and every argument with logic and when T’challa had allowed the weakness of his emotions get the better of him, Shuri had gone straight for where it hurts; *Baba would be turning in his grave*, she had said.

And then it had stopped being about logic and talk of the countries defense and had resorted to just two siblings bickering endlessly about opposing opinions.

“I want you to be happy, T’challa. That is almost impossible when you are a monarch, but Baba managed it, and so did Mama.” Shuri wrinkles her nose, and rapidly blinks whatever it is away from her eyes before she sucks in a breath and keeps her gaze on the road, taking the exit and heading into the smaller adjoining roads that would lead them to Asha’s. “Half the time, I think the greatest reason Baba was a good leader, despite his unorthodox views on opening our borders to the world, the reason he had been so strong despite the garbage and oppositions he had to face from the tribes, was because he had Mama’s support. Mama believed in his views, believed in the future he saw for our country, our safety and our people.”

“Baba was the futurist of his generation, and even today, they still laugh at him,” T’challa says, a little bitter because a good portion of the agendas on his desk are protests from his people not wanting to have anything to do with the world. After all, if the world and their governments cared for their people, none of the conflicts happening globally would even exist; how did one tribal leader put it? *Their fight is not our fight.*

“They’ll laugh at you too,” Shuri says. “Especially when you pick the world’s futurist to be the object of your affections.” Shuri looks at the side mirror and makes a turn into Asha’s parking lot. “Oh wait, you already have.” T’challa blinks at that statement, and finds the resonating twang of a chord it had struck within to continuously resonate even as Shuri switches the engine off and turns to look at him. “You are king, and we will follow you so long as you guide us well; if you care for Stark, if you are serious about him at all, then I am behind you through and through, you have my word. And if you are afraid that choosing Stark would be a threat to the crown and country, be at ease and do not worry. I am here, the Dora Milaje is here, and Mama is here. If and when your heart weakens because of your affections and love for him, if your hands become not strong enough to strike down the threat Anthony Stark may become to the crown and our country, believe me, I’ll slice his head off myself and it feed it to the alley street dogs with the greatest pleasure. And when you’re done grieving, when you see reason after, if it even comes to that, you can thank me and I will say, you are welcome, brother.”

T’challa stares at his sister wordlessly and then steps out of the car the moment Shuri opens her door, all talk ceasing and instead, she is talking of what curry to have.

Well, that’s one way of receiving the ‘talk’, he supposes.

T’challa ends up indulging his beloved sister in far too many curries for their early-dinner-late-lunch. For once, he refrains from teasing her on her voracious appetite when she polishes off the numerous curried dishes that come to their table.

Just for today.

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T’challa is lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, sleep once more evading him as if he is the embodiment of the revered black plague of old. Nyo’s head is pillowed on his bare belly, his hand
carefully stroking Nyo’s flank as his thoughts continue to wander restlessly; he thinks of tomorrow’s tribal meetings and the conference call with some of the Accords representatives. He thinks of the health-care budget that still needs additional review; he thinks to the first dud-report from the Hatut Zeraze he had received that evening, stating that they are still following leads on the Vibranium issue.

When those thoughts are exhausted to the point that they had become as fragile as the frayed ends of woven cotton, T’challa finds himself thinking back to Shuri’s words.

Considering the time difference, by tomorrow afternoon, it would mark the fifth day by Wakandan time-zone since he had not returned Tony’s text.

T’challa sighs at the ceiling, closing his eyes as Nyo shifts under his hand. Golden eyes regard him in question, long tail swishing and brushing against his bare shoulder.

“What do you think, Nyo?” He murmurs, and gets a purring rumble for his efforts and a yawn in his face.

Once more, T’challa is left to his thoughts and when he shifts his trying-to-sleep position for the tenth time in an hour, he gives up and gets out of bed all together, picking up his phone from the dresser, padding barefoot across the stretch of marble to the balcony. He leans against the railing, sighing into the cooling night air, now that the season is seguing from summer to fall. Soon, the nights would be chilly and the fields even greener before they turn to gold and rich reds and oranges. T’challa finds himself staring at the last exchange between himself and Tony, at that one measly yes from soon-to-be five days ago. His thumb hovers over the letters, pausing and hesitating before they swipe to exit and he initiates a call instead.

It is about late afternoon in New York, if his math serves him right.

And the call rings for about three times before Tony’s AI assistant answers, informing him that Mister Stark is currently unable to take your call and gives him the option of leaving a message.

T’challa leaves no such thing and hangs up instead, sliding down to sit on cold marble, thumping his head once against the icy carving of the marble railing.

So imagine his surprise when some ten minutes later, his phone rings and Tony’s personal number stares at him from the screen, a number that he had long ago memorized.

The phone rings five times before T’challa swipes the accept-call, “Mister Stark.”

“Hello, Lucifer.” Tony greets.

And boy does it make T’challa’s resolve stutter and his concentration snap in half. “The King of Hell?”

“The cat. Cinderella. Walt Disney, 1950,” Tony responds, without pause or hesitation and mutters ‘king of hell my ass’ with amusement under his breath. T’challa hears it all the same.

“I see,” T’challa blinks away the surprise, finding it almost appalling how gathering his wits takes longer than necessary. “I have to ask, Mister Stark, do you keep a list of fictional cat names on hand every time we converse?”

“Wouldn’t you wanna know~” Tony sing-songs, and then clears his throat. “How can I help you, your highness? Everything all right? The Accords conference call—“
“This is a personal call. Not business,” T’challa corrects, capping the barrage of business talk before it gains full momentum; he does not want to talk about business or worldly affairs at all.

“Oh-kay…” Tony sounds hesitant and then he falls quiet and waits patiently, saying nothing more.

“Our last exchange, you said yes.” T’challa swallows and pauses when he sees Nyo stepping into the balcony, his warm presence a nice and steady ring-float that T’challa holds on to in the turbulent sea of his hesitation and surge of emotion.

“To both dinner and calling you an asshole,” Tony clarifies.

“Then if you’d indulge me, I would very much like to take you dinner,” T’challa says, and clears his throat. “And make my intentions known that I would like to court you.”

“Court... me...”

“Yes. It’s this thing we do in our culture, when we like someone and are serious in acting upon our affections. I believe you Americans refer to it as dating.”

The pause that follows is so long that T’challa wonders if Tony is even still on the other end. T’challa actually glances at the screen of his phone to make sure that line is indeed, still connected.

“I am at a loss for words. That’s a feat. Well done, by the way. Rhodey and Pepper would love to learn your techniques in shutting me up and stunning me in one go.”

“I try,” T’challa chuckles, amused that the shutting up bit falls flat because Tony is talking a mile minute, clearly nervous. “Will you allow me to court you, Mister Stark?”

“Not when you’re calling me that you’re not; Tony will do,” Tony says, and his chuckle is a pitiful attempt in remaining calm and unperturbed. He sounds like he had the ground yanked out from under his feet. "Jesus, your highness, are you high?"

T’challa can almost imagine Tony’s expression, fearful and hesitant, cracking around the edges; it makes him smile widely at the ground, something like soft feathers brushing against the pits of his stomach.

“Will you allow me the honor of courting you, Tony?” T’challa amends, no humor, no hint of him even lying or being sarcastic, and waits with baited breath.

“Get me more of that magic cream for my knee and you got yourself a square deal,” Tony says, clearing his throat in probable hopes that the shakiness and shyness of his tone is hidden under the sarcasm.

T’challa’s laugh at the joke, the oh-so-Tony-Stark response, much to his surprise, relaxes something in his chest, leaving T’challa feeling infinitely better.

The first thing T’challa does the next day is make sure that he sends word for a box of said ointment to make its way across the globe to Tony; the second thing is to let his mother know at breakfast.

When his mother expresses her absolutely relief with a cheer and a clap of her hand, and tells him that he had been quite slow on the uptake, you silly boy, T’challa finds himself a touch surprised. He also barely refrains from reaching out and smacking his sister upside the head for the horribly unbecoming eye roll and the exaggerated god-you’re-so-stupid expression she is openly directing at him.
It is also Shuri who sends the fist photo of the day to one discombobulated Anthony Edward Stark.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

When I am typing from Tony's POV, I am a lot faster when it comes to updating. Now, look, with T'challa's POV, that only took like a week? A week and a half? UGH! Had to watch a few of his movies (I do recommend 47 and Message from the King – amazing amazing!) just so that I can watch Chadwick Boseman in motion; according to him, he is using his accent from Message from the King during his role as BP. Had to also reread/re-watch a lot of the BP press releases, interviews and panel coverage.

Sooooooo, here we go. A mourning and transitioning king, to the best of my ability, what with so little to work with. I didn’t want to make him the perfect king, because he is still a man with personal wants and needs. I’m still not so comfortable with my ability to write T’challa, hence this is probably going to be the only chapter with T’challa’s POV. I’m pretty sure I’ll feel less hesitant once BP comes out, but that’s a long way ahead. I am also sure that once the movie comes out, this characterization has a high chance of falling very flat on its ass. But well, A for for effort, hopefully. I am posting this NOW because if I don’t, I’ll end up rewriting and rewriting some more and then I’ll make no progress.

Thank you for reading, if you’ve read this author's babble. Cheers!

Feel free to hit me up at tumblr @ pinkcatharsis. I'll try to respond as quick as I can. I reblog a lot of Tony crap :)))
I am my own Beta, might have some typos, yadayadayada. Work is inspired by the amazing marvelingjules @ TUMBLR. Because if it wasn't for her fics that I stumbled upon, I would not have known how much I ship these two.

WARNING: DISTURBING GRAPHIC IMAGES/THEMES/CARNAGE AHEAD. Hints of child abuse.

See, the public, media and to some degree, Tony’s former teammates, former girlfriends and boyfriends (barring Pepper), is quick to accuse Tony of not putting in significant effort to make his relationships work.

Tony is almost always the propagator of trouble, either because of his ego, his playboy tendencies, his lack of communication, his manipulative way or just his outright need to just get things done his way (thanks, Steve) or him keeping secrets (thanks, Steve), or him just being an overall ass and outright selfish and ambitious individual that always ends up being the reason the relationship goes south. To some degree, Tony can say that he had agreed to all those accusations wholeheartedly once upon a time. At some point, he had started to grow thicker skin against the media and magazine and tabloid splashes. At some point, all the sensationalized headlines and cover titles had gone over his head and outright ignored; it’s effect on Stark Industries stocks aren’t exactly directly proportionate because despite Tony’s overall behavior, Stark Industries is the only constant ‘family’ he’s ever had.

Tony damn right cared.

Tony also worked.

It had taken a lot of chasing, a lot of begging from his assistants, Pepper, Happy and countless others, sure; his erratic behavior and unconventional work ethic had been the reason why almost everyone had wanted to work for Stark Industries; the health care insurance is the best out there. It had to come with the package if one chooses to work with Tony Stark because one had to be on their toes all time, if only because Tony is always on his toes; Pepper Potts can attest to that.

So, It isn’t like Tony didn’t want to make his relationships work – Pepper, the team, Steve, hell, even Barnes before all hell had broken loose.

At some point, Pepper had grown tired of always being on her toes, of being threatened, of being used as way to get to Ironman, for being vulnerable, for being someone in her position, and later, she had admitted, for making him – Ironman – vulnerable. At some point, the fear of loss had gotten the better of the both of them, the fear of being each other’s weakness. At some point, the exhaustion of always being on guard to not only the media and market sectors but also to enemies who may or may not crawl out of the cracks of the earth had gotten the best of them; they had tried, sincerely, honest to god and all things holy, tried.

But Tony had always known better when to not push.
He had known from a very young age that sometimes, it’s better to have something from a distance than none at all. It had been the first life lesson he learned at four years old, when Howard had stopped being present around him for his birthdays, his Thanksgivings, his Christmases and New Years. When all Tony had gotten at most, had been his toys, his books and later, just outright money that had been automatically wired to his personal account. Tony had grown up watching and hearing kids talk about their holidays, boast about their birthdays and what mom and dad had gotten them for that occasion or that occasion. And when it had come to Tony's turn, and they would ask, hey Anthony, what did you do for the summer?

His second lesson at four, had been to bullshit, to uphold an image that doesn't exist.

Because Tony would say, my dad took me to the Maldives. Or, mom let me hang out in Milan.

They didn’t need to know that it had only been him, Jarvis and Anna present in their private beach house in Lankanfushi. They didn’t need to know that later, after Anna’s passing, it had only been him and Jarvis roaming the streets of Milan for the best gelato, or having a Crème Brûlée in a little café in Paris, or walking down Ottawa during the Tulip Festival, or being part of the Mardi Gras parade while Tony sits on Jarvis’ shoulders. Technically, if his mom and dad hadn’t funded those trips, Tony wouldn’t have been able to go — so technically, one can argue, that it is his mom and dad’s doing? In a way? It didn’t make him love (or love-hate) his parents any less; if anything, Tony had learned to love from a distance.

Because the world, in all honesty, had always shied away from Tony, even when they seem to flock around him constantly.

The Avengers had been no different; he had been the volatile one, the one who didn’t like rules, who would take great lengths in avoiding orders and making uncalled for decisions (for the better, in his humble opinion) in the field, or the one who almost always deviates, the oh so keeper of great secrets in the name of fucking science. There is a reason Tony Stark had failed his assessment to be a crucial member of the Avengers Initiative, not because he isn’t intelligent, brave, or an asset – but because he just didn’t know better.

Tony still remembers the day Rhodey had outright told him to his face that emotionally, he is the most stunted if not outright stupidest man Rhodey has ever met.

The difference between Rhodey and his former teammates though, is that Rhodey is secretly Mother Theresa and that Rhodey had bothered to look beyond the stunted-emotionally-developed-futurist. Rhodey, unlike Pepper, isn’t vulnerable, isn’t helpless and most certainly isn’t just a civilian. Rhodey, unlike Pepper, is a high ranking military man, with military training, and can punch a person’s living daylight with one fist tied behind his back. Rhodey, unlike Pepper, is a lot more equipped to deal with dangerous threats, even more so when he had taken on the title of Iron Patriot and now, War Machine. Crippled or not, Rhodey still, comparatively, isn’t helpless.

If Tony had to count the amount people who had come into his life and had actually stayed despite threats to their person just by being associated to him, threats to their health and career, well, he can only count three: Rhodey, Pepper and Happy.

No one really, truly sticks around – the ex-Avengers riding off to the sunset pretty much had cemented that fact, whether or not they had their stories straight.

Tony knows he always gets the short end of the stick, even if he is – as his therapist says – giving most, if not all of his 1000% maximum effort.

The world just isn’t wired for pedigree of Tony's kind.
So when T’challa had proposed to court him and the date doesn’t even happen for the next year and a quarter, Tony honestly had his reservations.

Granted, it hadn’t been T’challa’s fault when his country had fallen to the siege and threat of War Monger’s challenge.

It also hadn’t been T’challa’s or Tony’s fault when Thor and the Guardians had touched down on earth to warn them of the oncoming threat.

It definitely hadn’t been either of their faults when Thanos had decided to take a picnic trip to earth.

And because Tony knows that destiny, the heavens, and all the deities that control the universe had always kind of, in a roundabout way, worked against him, it really shouldn’t surprise him that when he finally regains consciousness, Tony is trapped within the suit he is wearing and the sky above him is a hideous color of orange and twilight, like the afterglow of a great forest fire.

It takes a while for Tony's suit to try to muster enough power for him to disengage it and crawl pathetically out of its confines as if he had just consumed three crates of hard liquor. Tony collapses on debris and broken concrete with a thud, falling chest first as fluid collects in his lungs, his chin jutting against the rubble, fine gravel digging into his skin. Tony finds it difficult to breathe, and thinks that the wheezing and what sounds like is a whistling noise in his chest can’t be a good sign. The last time he had felt something even remotely like this had been in Siberia, after Captain-Goody had rammed his shield down on him repeatedly. Something bubbles in his chest and when he manages to push himself up to his knees, he catches sight of the horribly mangled suit.

Holy fuck, he doesn’t even know how he had survived it.

The Superior Ironman suit is barely recognizable; the arc reactor on its chest now nothing but a dark and cracked hole, the last of its power having fizzled out when Friday had rerouted whatever had been left to unlock the suit. The crushed chest and left side would explain why Tony feels ten times worse than that of Siberia, and would definitely justify his bleeding right arm. Tony doesn’t think there is much he can do at this point to power up the suit, but his technology is still his technology and there’s nothing a little tender-loving-care can’t fix.

The scene around him is what remains of New York; Tony can still hear the ringing in his ears from when the communication line with the entire team had exploded when each of them had started to drop down like flies. Tony doesn’t know if the strategy to destroy the gauntlet had worked, if that portal that Dr. Strange had opened to shove Thanos fat purple ass into had worked, if Thanos had even fallen through said portal like the giant garbage bag he is. There’s nothing Tony can do without any weapons, or his suit. Tony looks around him and thinks he needs to find a working vehicle and haul himself and suit back to base, or at least find a working line enough to get through FRIDAY so he can call for another suit. The watch on his right wrist is mangled and had no juice in it whatsoever.

And like he had all those years ago, after the Mandarin had destroyed his Malibu home, Tony pushes himself to his feet, grabs the leg of his suit and starts to drag it down Lexington Avenue. He passes by about three pay phones after walking for what seems like a decade and none of them had been of any use. Tony assumes it’s probably because key communication towers must have sustained great damage during the battle; to make his dilemma even worse, Tony is yet to spot a car that isn’t totaled by either huge chunks of broken buildings or other cars. Tony trudges his way down 75th, and somehow manages to catch a glimpse of what remains of the Hewitt School and later on, what used to be a bunch of high-end stores.

Tony doesn’t see anyone or anything, nothing but dust and broken pieces of whatever it is that had
remained of New York City.

By the time he reaches 5th Avenue, Tony sees – what he sincerely hopes is not the entirety – Central Park ablaze. Soot particles and ash floats in the air, dusting 5th Avenue in a fine, light gray like Christmas morning. Tony had been coughing sticky phlegm the entire walk and drag from Lexington Avenue; the moment he stops and inhales all that dust, his lungs seize up under his rib cage, leaving him double over and hacking up like a dying senior citizen. Tony spits crimson colored matter on the sidewalk and manages to bring up the neckline of his sticky, bloodied shirt up to his nose in a desperate attempt at a makeshift mask and continue his trudge towards the The Plaza, where he knows for certain that there should be a response team waiting there, assuming they are even alive.

Manhattan had been the epi-center of the battle.

Tony really should not have been surprised to find the bodies that lay like scattered confetti the closer he gets to The Plaza. He spots a few volunteer civilians, several cops and paramedics, tens and tens of military men, all lying and decorating the ashy sidewalk like unmoving marionettes – dismembered, torn, their faces gone, chests open, limbs missing, everything around him a scene of absolute carnage. Tony trips over something as the horror catches up to him, when his chest starts to heave, the suit starts to weigh like an entire cargo ship, when none of them, even the whole looking ones, respond to him when he tries to shake them awake, when none of them had a fucking pulse beating under their clammy, ashy and bloodied skin.

It’s too much.

Tony remembers falling on the ground and vomiting, heaving whatever it is that’s left in his stomach from his last solid meal from four days ago, and whatever protein bar he had stuffed down his throat since then. He vomits and coughs out blood, and what honestly feels like particles of his failing lungs, as he sobs at the scene surrounding him, salt prickling in his eyes, cursing every tyrannical existence there is because they didn’t fucking deserve this. The human race, in all its fault and their tendencies to bicker among each other, to rip each other apart, honest to god didn’t deserve this kind of attention from the skies beyond their own stratosphere.

Tony screams in rage. Weeps in desperation.

And no one hears him.

In the midges of it all, Tony still manages – barely – to get himself together, manages to cross another block at most when he sees another whole body lying under a vehicle. Tony knows the person probably won’t have a pulse, but it doesn’t stop him from limping towards that body and feeling for one anyway.

Except this is trickier.

Because it’s not just any fucking body.

It’s the Black Panther, and he’s surrounded by two very mangled and most definitely very dead members of the Dora Milaje, their red armor and gold spears in tattered pieces, just like their limbs and portions of their face and skull.

Tony vomits all over again, unable to stop the sob that escapes his throat as he reaches forward for T’challa’s shoulders and pulls him out from under the rubble. Tony curses, screams and wheezes as the pieces of metal from what looks like the remains of a tow truck groans at the movement.

T’challa slides free, and drops like a sack of potatoes against the cracked concrete, taking Tony
down with him. Tony hears himself gag, hears himself curse a little more as he blinks the blurriness away from his eyes, trying for the life of him to figure out how to fucking get the Black Panther’s helmet off his Long-Distance-Boyfriend’s head. Tony can see his fingers tremble, weeps through ash snot and panic as they fail to honestly grip anything. And just like that, Tony is a helpless four year old, struggling to take apart the circuit board his father had barely given a glance at, before Howard had proceeded to verbally rip Tony a new one for it being not good enough.

The latch pops free and Tony slides the helmet off, only to find T’challa out cold, but at least with a pulse.

Tony shakes him awake, reaches up and swipes the tears of his eyes and shakes T’challa again, and when T’challa doesn’t respond, Tony screams for help, calls out for someone, or anyone, and gets nothing but silence and sound of the roaring fires of Central Park.

It takes perhaps about two minutes to make a decision to abandon and hide the suit behind a nearby convenience store, stacking it with stone and torn off road signs before Tony trudges his way back to T’challa’s unconscious body, plops on the Black Panther helmet in hopes that it will at least block out some of the soot and ash, and miraculously, without somehow passing out from the effort and the fact that his lungs isn’t even working right anymore, manages to prop T’challa over his shoulder in a fireman’s carrying position.

It had to be the longest fucking walk of Tony’s entire fucking life.

Several times Tony had wanted to give up and pass out.

Several times he cursed T’challa and his heavy ass, cursed him for liking those rolled pastries with pistachios that Tony had seen him nibble a few times during their video call conversations. Tony curses hT’challa for being the height that he is, almost three-quarters of a head taller than Tony. He curses him for not waking up, for not taking him on a fucking date, for leaving him anyway, because they all leave don’t they?

Tony doesn’t hear the footsteps that approach him, he doesn’t even see the people that approach him because his feet catches on loose cables and he goes down with T’challa and his humongous and heavy as fuck ass.

Tony honest to god doesn’t think he’s ever, ever been happier to see Steve’s bearded fucking face and Bucky’s lost puppy eyes than he did in that very moment.

“Help him –“ Tony chokes, as Bucky kneels before him and picks the King of Wakanda off the ground like he weighs nothing more than five pounds. “—please help him, oh my god help him – he just – he was – he was not – I don’t know if he’s breathing – please hurry, oh my god –“

“Hey, hey, easy, go Buck, go! Go!” Steve says and Bucky doesn’t need to be told twice, taking off in a sprint with the King of Wakanda in his arms and it’s all Tony can take before he literally falls into some sort of melt down, right there in the middle of the goddamn street, with Steve keeping him upright. “Tony, hey, Tony – it’s okay, it’s okay, just breathe all right, I got you, you’re safe.”

“They’re dead. They’re all fucking dead – Jesus Christ –“

Tony had assumed that the tremble in his chest is related to a panic attack. Steve’s voice dulls out, even though Tony can see his lips move, can see it form and press down to a thin line as a curse rolls past it, and Steve grits his teeth as he calls Tony’s name over and over again. Tony watches as Steve bodily picks him up, tries to get him to stand and keeps him standing, even when most of Tony’s body refuses to cooperate whatsoever.
The ringing in his ears gets louder until it reaches deafening levels and Tony scrunches his eyes and brings his palms up to cover them.

“—Tony! Tony, hey – you with me?” Steve says, and Tony blinks in his direction and finds the Winter Soldier approaching them, the King of Wakanda gone and no longer in his arms.

“He’s with the paramedics, they’re prepping him for flight,” Bucky says.

“Is he okay? Is he going to be okay? Is he —” Tony can feel the hysteria, can feel the shakes in his limbs that feels like fever chills even as parts of him disassociates from it completely. Tony's knees buckle, his chest suddenly constricting, like a fist is wedged in there somewhere, wrapping around Tony’s weakened heart and squeezing and squeezing and squeezing. Tony grabs onto Steve, one hand coming up to his chest as panic takes over and every part of his body starts to shut down. “Can’t – I can’t –”

Tony had never seen the color drain so fast from both the super soldiers’ faces than it did in that very moment.

Because it is in that second that Tony's heart throws in the towel and gives up all together, right along with his lungs and probably a few more organs.

Tony doesn’t even realize when Steve just sweeps him off his feet, like a groom would to a bride before Tony's world fades to complete black.

Tony's last though is that if he makes it out of this alive, he is so going to roast T’challa and then break up with the asshole himself.

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Turns out, Tony doesn’t quite die yet.

But his pacemaker had completely failed and while he gets a nice brand new upgraded one, the damage he had sustained had more or less left him while still sort of functioning, but compromises in ways that Tony had to be careful with how much strain he puts on himself now: blunt chest trauma, severe pulmonary contusions, broken sternum and fractured ribs (again), further aggravated by the walk (really, doctors are still trying to figure how on earth did Tony even manage to lug around a suit for blocks and on top of that, carry the King of Wakanda), multiple ecchymosis, hematoma, lacerations and the worst of it all, myocardial contusion. He gets warned that there are signs of systolic failure, which, within hours and further tests after Tony pretty much conks out again only to wake up a whole day later, is further confirmed that yes, his heart if anything is beyond fucked.

And the first thing Tony does, when he is alone in the room once more, is push himself up to a sitting position (very painfully) and attempts to leave.

Tony doesn’t get far but thinks he deserves an A for effort.

“Where are you going? Are you insane?” Steve says, just as Tony steps out the door. He gets shooed in by the beef-cake and gets helplessly ushered back to bed when he starts to feel the strain on his entire chest area. “Jesus, Tony.”

“Bob,” Tony wheezes, and presses both hands to chest and shakes his head, slapping Steve’s hand away. “Bob, I need Bob – where is Bob! I left him at home and I wanna know if he’s okay, I don’t have a phone, I don’t have a tablet, I’ve got nothing — where is Bob?”

“Okay, okay, I’ll go get Bob. Calm down, just – oh god, Tony -- you’re losing - fuck!”
Tony gets maneuvered, a warm arm rubbing circles on his back as the hiss of oxygen finally registers just as Steve puts the mask on over Tony’s nose, holding it in place as Tony feels oxygen fills his lungs and the erratic beat of his heart eventually slows down. Tony is powerless to stop his eyelids fluttering shut as he listens to Steve’s voice, telling him to breathe, to take it easy; Tony manages to get his lungs to cooperate, to calm the panic in his chest and somehow manage to make the black spots dancing around the corners of his vision kind of disappear.

“Can I borrow your phone?” Tony asks. Steve gives him one look that clearly says you’re unbelievable but hands the phone to Tony anyway. Tony enters a coded digit sequence and hits the call button, waits for a few seconds until he hears Friday chirrup a little brokenly on the other end and then asks, “Is Bob okay?”

Friday honestly sounds apologetic. “I am sorry, Mister Stark, but I cannot confirm Bob’s current status. The estate has lost all communication, including back-up power. At this time, I am unable to reach and scan – apologies, Mister Stark, but it would seem my reach isn’t very broad at the moment; two of our satellites had gone down in the wake of the invasion –” Friday crackles and Tony just hangs up.

“How bad is it?” Steve asks, oddly soft.

“I need to get upstate,” Tony says, as a ginormous hole stretches right there in the middle of his stomach. He doesn’t wait for Steve to say anything and simply takes two more long gulps of air from the oxygen mask before Tony stands again.

Steve, because well, it’s hard to eradicate all signs of a good boy scout from one’s shitty back-stabbing DNA, gets up all in his face and Tony braces himself for an argument and a long ass lecture. What he gets instead is this:

“You know I can’t just let you out of here in your condition. If you’re gonna go, then I’m coming because I can at least make sure you get help if and when you need it,” Steve says, holding his hands up in a placating gesture.

“I don’t need your shitty help, Steve. Go do something useful other than babysit. Shoo,” Tony murmurs, waving a hand.

“Take it or leave it, Tony. Or I go alert the nurses and the doctors and you won’t get to find Bob.”

“You’re a fucking asshole, through and through!” Tony snaps, and picks up the mask again to suck in a few more breaths.

Steve says nothing, but crosses his arms and stands there like the goddamn Great Wall of China, blocking Tony’s way to the door. “Well?”

Tony counts from one to ten very slowly, picturing Bob lying somewhere under the rubble, alive or dead. Tony knows that without a suit, he won’t be able to do much; given his ability to move without feeling like he’s run ten triathlons, he figures he can use the muscle power that Steve is oh so fucking kindly insisting on giving. Arguing with Steve will get him nowhere, Tony knows this rather intimately. The more he sits there trying to get Steve to fuck off, the more Tony wastes precious time. If Bob is lying somewhere bleeding and in pain, well, Steve is honestly prolonging that.

Steve really does cause a lot of trouble, doesn’t he?

Tony scoffs and mutters a few curse words.

“Fine. Get me a fucking shirt,” Tony bites out grudgingly.
He doesn’t think he’s ever seen Steve look so fucking excited, the fucking over-sized golden retriever.

Steve manages to find them a Prius rental off the street and a blanket from the storage room. He wheels Tony out into the dusty air, past the cracked glass doors of the hospital and into the parking lot, snagging two oxygen tanks on his way out. Tony says nothing until they reach the horrid grey Prius, proceeds to say nothing as Steve makes sure he’s buckled in to the front seat. Steve fusses about some more with checks, loading the tanks and setting it up for use, before he gets into the driver’s seat, finds the keys in the compartment and starts the engine.

“I wasn’t aware you owned a Prius,” Tony mutters under his breath.

“I’m borrowing it,” Steve corrects him.

“Oh? From the totaled Orbitz across the street?” Tony points at the rental office, which resembles pretty much nothing now, its sign torn in half.

Steve just gives him a look and Tony proceeds to say nothing else as they pull out of the hospital parking lot and drives off.

Except Steve stops at what looks like an absolutely thrashed American Eagle Outfitters outlet store, pulls up the breaks and tells Tony to stay put. Tony watches with equal parts irritation at being told to stay put (as if he’s stupid enough to get out of the car – no matter how tempting – and drive away – huh, that’s an idea – without possibly, killing himself from over exertion) and amusement; Steve runs into store, takes about a minute and comes back out with a bundle under his arms. Tony watches as Steve unrolls what looks like a t-shirt, sweatpants, a pair of socks and a sweatshirt (Tony also notices how mismatching in colors they are) two sizes too large for him and rips the new tags out, tossing them out of the open window.

Steve then thrusts the bundle at Tony, looking at him rather expectantly.

Tony just stares right back at him, not moving a muscle.

“I agreed to take you to get Bob because clearly he means something to you, but I’m not doing it with you dressed in a hospital gown and a damn blanket. I’m not risking pneumonia when there’s enough on the line as it is.”

“Are we just going to sit here pretend that you didn’t just steal a Prius, steal from – of all places – A.E.O and littered?” Tony points out, honestly just curious at how Steve will respond. He didn’t even honestly care if Steve stole.

“Put your fucking clothes on, Tony,” Steve grits out, dropping the bundle on Tony’s lap and reaching for the lever under Tony’s seat, pushing the seat all the way back, giving Tony more leg-room to maneuver.

Tony starts by putting his socks on, wincing as he bends forward, forcing his hands to work faster because bending forward after a heart surgery and a healing broken sternum, yeah, not so wise. When Steve attempts to help, he stops midway at the glare Tony throws in his direction. Tony takes longer than he wants to dress and reluctantly allows Steve to help him tug the sweat pants up when he lifts his ass of the seat. The entire ordeal leaves Tony ridiculously winded that he says nothing when Steve just hands him the oxygen mask.

“I don’t have shoes,” Tony points out. “Steal me a pair. There’s a Payless down the road.”
“Borrowing!”

“Oh shut your trap, Rogers. You and I both know that deep down you’re a shitty asshole who pretends to be fucking saint. Go get my goddamn shoes!” Tony gripes.

“Really, Tony? Right now? We’re doing this right now?” Steve knuckles white against the grip he had on the steering wheel; any harder and the thing would probably snap in half.

“Uh, did you leave me a choice? You pretty much cornered me into going with you – so yeah, suck it. Shoes?”

“Why is it so hard for you to just accept help?”

“Because it’s you!” Tony yells, and falls into a coughing fit so vicious that it leaves Steve cursing.

Tony’s lungs bubbles dangerously from within again and fuck, his chest hurts. Tony curls in on himself, arms wrapping around his chest in a protective gesture, trying to breathe despite the coughing fit. Tony sounds like he’s been submerged in water for far too long, suffocating as his lungs struggle to keep up with the demand. The sound of his loud and desperate breathing fills the small space of the car. God, he’s furious, he’s beyond livid, as he glares at Steve who looks about as white as the ash coating the entire city. Tony manages to gather enough breath to lose his entire shit within the confines of the hideous Prius.

“You don’t – you don’t get to lecture me about help. You lost that right, you sanctimonious asshole! When you fucking left me to gallivant around the world to satisfy your need to be a goddamn hero, when you took the entire team with you and had the fucking gall to tell me they’re mine when I had no one but my crippled best friend and a toddler of a not-human-person of sorts with me and a very angry Secretary of State after my ass! If I wasn’t a billionaire and a philanthropist, if I hadn’t contributed so much to the United States military, government and so much more, if i was just a regular person, hero or not, I would have been arrested a long fucking time ago and possibly be on death row for fucking treason! I was threatened by arrests because you couldn’t just fucking compromise for a second! The very laws you and your best friend and millions of others bled for during the wars, our goddamn freedom, our laws, that was what was after me, you jerk! You couldn’t just take one for the team and trust me enough to protect your ass, which oh, I did anyway even when you were fucking gone! How do you even think you’re still on American soil and being called an Avenger! Yes we’re doing this now!”

“Tony please stop –“

“I will not listen to you lecture me like you’re still my team leader! No! I’m allowed to freak out a little bit, given everything that has happened! You don’t get to sit here and talk about help, okay? Because I sure as hell got none from you! Just because you stole me a Prius and we hopefully defeated Thanos, we don’t get to be super-BFFs and sing Cumbaya! You horrible, horrible man!”

Tony’s world suddenly begins to fade in and out of existence, as his hand fiddles with the door handle, pushing it wide open and long enough for him to cough out fluid from his lungs that spills past his lips along with a sob, splattering crimson all over the ashy asphalt. Tony’s world spins dangerously as Steve grabs him by the shoulders and pulls him back inside, strapping the oxygen mask on and holding it in place as Tony sucks in one desperate breath after the other, gradually just sagging heavily against the chair.

Tony doesn’t have a clue how long they stay there, with him staring at the ashy road ahead and Steve holding him down gently, keeping the mask in place. He doesn’t even know if he passes out for a few seconds or if it’s just a trick of the headlights and shadows around them, but the silence is
cut in half by the shrill ring of Steve’s phone. Steve curses rather viciously as he fiddles with the phone with one hand, while keeping his grip on the mask. Tony watches with a weakly cocked eyebrow as Steve switches to the Bluetooth connection and takes the call.

“Steve, Tony is missing and I’ve got a king here who is going bat-shit nuts. Where the hell are you?” Bucky’s voice hisses, like he’s whispering state secrets to someone who shouldn’t know.

“Oh uh, well…” Steve looks at Tony, and Tony would laugh if he could, because Steve looks like he’s realizing exactly what he is a part of.

Steve’s tone must have spoken volumes because the Winter Soldier suddenly sounds -- well, not very Winter Soldier like.

“No. Don’t tell me -- you didn’t! Are you fucking kidding me? The guy just went through grueling surgery! Are you out of your mind, Rogers?” Bucky hisses to the point of hoarseness.

“I gotta do this, Buck,” Steve says and locks gazes with Tony. “It’s important to Tony.” Tony blinks when Steve adds, with determination and conviction. “I need to do this for him.”

“If something happens to him –“

“Then it’s on me,” Steve says and swallows, and Tony can only stare owlishly as Steve hangs up on his best friend’s face, and starts the car, stepping on the gas pedal and swerving back onto the road.

Tony says nothing and turns his gaze to the window, watching the mask mist from his peripheral vision as the scenery darkens the further away they drive from what he’s realizing is the edge of Harlem. He doesn’t know how long it takes to get to his estate, especially with reroutes due fallen debris and collapsed buildings, but dawn creeps over the horizon by the time Tony feels a hesitant, gentle hand on his shoulder and blinks awake to Steve’s concerned and very apologetic face.

Tony understands why the moment he takes a look at his estate.

The once proud, modernized, all glass house is nothing by shambles, half of it cracked and now black from the burn because of the fallen F6 fighter jet that now sits on Tony’s backyard in a heap of metal. Tony stares helplessly for the longest moment before he registers the squeeze Steve is giving him on his shoulder.

“Oh my god…” Tony says and pushes the door open and steps out, grey espadrilles that Steve had ended up picking up on the way leaving ashy footprints on the white grass.

“Tony, wait!”

“Bob?” Tony calls out, walking forward up the front lawn and past the ripped, dilapidated gates. It seems rather silly to cry now, isn’t it? “Bob! Buddy?”

Steve joins in the search, calling out Bob’s name when Tony can no longer muster the ability to call out further. At some point, Steve had carefully and tentatively stepped under Tony’s arm, hoisting him up when Tony can no longer stand after about three minutes of searching and calling out. The entire area of his vast property remains about as quiet as the deceased pilot of the F6. There is no power source anywhere, no light but the dawn crawling higher up on the horizon and gleam of the Prius’ headlight. At some point, Tony wants to sink to his knees and honest to god weep at the loss he suddenly feels, about as vast as the Grand Canyon, when Steve suddenly just presses a hand to his lips and gives him an alarmed look. Tony can do nothing but be bodily hauled into the shadows of a fallen tree, hidden, as Steve wraps himself protectively around him, poised to fight.
Steve tilts his head to the direction of the jet. It takes a solid minute for Tony to realize that it’s the enhanced hearing; Steve must have heard something.

Hunched like children behind shrubbery and a fallen tree, Tony waits, and wishes he had something to fight with, a gun, a knife, anything.

The sound of failing mechanized limbs eventually fills the space. Tony's vision strains in the dark in an attempt to see beyond the shadows. Steve presses against him and whispers firmly against his ear, his breath warm, soft, dark with the will to protect, no matter what the cost. “Wait here.”

Steve gives Tony's shoulders one last squeeze before he gets up and leaves.

Tony watches as Captain Shithead crawls through the shadows without a sound; Steve doesn’t get very far though, because the moment Tony catches sight of the source of the sound, he gets up so fast that his head spins with the sudden change of position. Tony doesn’t even try to hide because he recognizes the Iron-Panther armor anywhere, that gleam of silver and black, that glow of gold eyes and what looks like the fizzing arc reactor. Relief floods Tony's body like a morphine, as an almost triumphant nervous laugh sputters out of Tony's cracks lips, a half smile, half sob forming on Tony's face as watches Bob hobbles carefully on unsteady legs across the ashy white lawn. Bob doesn’t get far because Bob just collapses on the ground, armor and all, as the arc reactor fizzles out completely and Steve is beside Tony in an instant, picking him up and hauling him over to the fallen armor.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck –“ Tony says and starts feeling around the severely dilapidated armor, noticing the offline jets. The armor had been a fun project and Tony had not taken it too seriously, had only built it for flight and nothing more. As he reaches forward to manually release the armor, Tony wishes with all his pathetic heart that he had given it some form of artillery fire. Or back up. Or some sort of evacuation protocol. Or something.

Bob had a large gash on his flank, bleeding and raw, smelling quite horrible from what Tony can only hope is still a containable infection. Bob's front left paw is fractured, pieces of bone sticking out from the fur. Tony had never felt more self hate than he did at that moment, when Bob looks up at him and gives a throaty and weakened purr, blinking heavy-lidded golden eyes at him.

“This is Bob?” Steve asks, sounding a little surprised.

“Oh buddy…” Tony says and can do nothing to stop the devastation from taking over, from clogging his nose and throat as he blinks away the tears gathering around the corners of his eyes. “I’m so, so sorry, buddy…”

“Hey,” Steve grabs Tony by the shoulder, careful and gentle. “Listen, he’s gonna be fine, okay? I’m gonna go get the car and then we’re gonna get him help, all right? Just – just wait here, okay? I’ll be back in a jiffy and Bob’s gonna be good as new. The hospital will fix him right up!”

Tony can only nod helplessly, salt tracks streaking down his face, as Steve gives him one last look and takes off down the lawn, leaving Tony there to just helplessly pet Bob’s head, thumbing the curve of his ear as Bob’s eyes gets heavier and weakened with each ticking second.

“I know it hurts. But I kind of really need you to not die, okay?” Tony says weakly, and watches as the pupils focuses on him. “I really, really need you to not leave me, okay buddy? Please?” Tony begs, as hurt fills every cell of his body, contracting, squeezing hard and vicious, as Tony watches Bob genuinely try; Bob had probably used the last of his efforts to get up from wherever it is he had been hiding behind to get to Tony. So Tony tells him it’s okay to take a nap now, that he’ll be okay, as long as he doesn’t go away, he’ll be fine, I promise, I’ll do better, I’ll do right by you, please don’t
The roar of the car bouncing over the lawn and pavement doesn’t make Tony flinch. Nor does the sudden glow of light and the roar of a jet engine that lands a safe distance away. Tony doesn’t bother listening to Steve talk loudly with someone, who turns out to be Okoye. Okoye kneels beside Tony, places a hand on Tony’s cheek and effortlessly lifts Bob off the grass.

Tony doesn’t bother to fight Steve when he too, lifts Tony off the grass and carries him towards the jet.

When Tony wakes up, he finds himself being glared at by a very, incredibly pissed off King, arms crossed and looking intimidating as hell, even in his hospital gown that Tony knows is backless, the kind where you feel a breeze against your ass.

“You are a fool!” T’challa says, biting every syllable out, a decibel just below shouting. “A goddamn and impatient fool!”

“Where’s Bob?” Tony gasps, and watches T’challa suck in a very, very long breath through his nose – like he’s trying to contain his temper and a rant – before he exhales softly and tilts his chin to the left side of the room.

Sure enough, a spare cot had been erected on the corner of Tony’s room under the window and there lies Bob, out cold and bandaged, but flank rising up and down in what looks like constant breathing, paw in a cast. The relief washes over Tony is so strong, that it tempts him to just pass out once more.

“He’s going to be fine,” T’challa says and steps forward to help Tony get more comfortable on his bed, adjusting the incline angle so he’s half sitting and slightly upright. T’challa then pulls his chair closer towards the bed and sits down, legs out stretched as he crosses them at the ankles.

Maybe it’s the antibiotics or the steroids, or whatever the hell it is the doctors had deemed it necessary to lace Tony's IV line with, but Tony swears he had something clever and witty forming at the tip of his tongue, before the door opens and in steps Steve, balancing three paper cups in his grip. He hands one to T’challa, places one with a dangling tea-bag by Tony’s bedside table (tea? Really? Asshole!) and then proceeds to stand a good feet behind T’challa, taking a sip from his cup.

Tony promptly decides to ignore the golden Adonis on the other end of the room, in favor of his possible (kind of) favorite person sitting on the chair. “What are you doing? Shouldn’t you be in bed? I dragged you down 5th street and you were out cold.”

“I am enjoying my first date,” T’challa responds, and after a beat, he adds, “With you. And a hot beverage.”

One can almost hear the pin drop silence that suddenly falls in the room.

Tony supposes he should thank Steve, for taking a loud sip of his coffee to knock Tony back to his senses after that remark, because well, T’challa is just sitting there, bandages peeking from the V-collar-line of the hospital gown, butterfly clips on his temple and fingers taped, bruises blooming over his shoulder and around his jaw – it’s unfair, Tony thinks. Because even with all the injury, T’challa looks so ridiculously handsome, with the way the corner of his lips is curling up, teeth peeking out from between his lips that he hides gracefully with a sip of his no doubt terrible as fuck hospital coffee.
“This date is terrible,” Tony responds, all wit and smart sass flying out the window as he watches the corners of T’challa’s eyes crinkle in amusement and Steve clears his throat, ears going an interesting shade of red. “Hey, Cap, you’re disturbing our terrible date. Fuck off, bye.”

“Okay! I’ll just be outside then. Your highness. Uh – enjoy your date uh, yeah, bye...” Steve stammers awkwardly, flushing a darker shade of red (seriously, Steve?), before shuffling awkwardly before he shows himself out.

They regard each other for a moment, heartbeats passing between them before T’challa just dissolves to a fit of chuckles. “You are something else.”

“I am not accepting this as our first date. I don’t care what you say – wanna trade?” Tony says, holding out his paper cup of peppermint tea towards T’challa.

“No. Drink it, it’s good for you,” T’challa says and gives no indication that he’s swapping, forcing Tony to reluctantly drink his flavored water. Twinings isn’t even a very good tea brand, but beggars can’t be choosers, he supposes. “Don’t scare me like that again, all right?”

Tony looks up from where he had been watching the tea bag float and meets T’challa’s haunted look. Gone is the mask from earlier, the one of amusement and control, of gracefully arched brows that can speak a thousand words with just that minuscule gesture. What sits before Tony is a man he had been exchanging gifts with for over a year, the man whose voice has lulled him to sleep on countless occasions, the man who had stuck by him with continents between them, always talking, always swapping theories if time allows, coordinating team strategies or even just comparing lunches. This is the man who had listened to Tony when he had gotten shitfaced drunk after almost getting arrested for allegations that Ross had managed to scrape from the bottom of a rusty barrel and based on heresay, the man who had nothing but kind words when Tony had needed it the most and razor sharp ones when Tony thinks he didn’t need a slap back to reality. T’challa didn’t fear him and he had no issues getting up in Tony's face, telling him exactly what is on his mind after the second month of their... thing.

And now T’challa is sitting there, chewing on his bottom lip like he’s worried, most definitely over thinking. Tony recognizes the signs, knows how to read the small facial expressions, subtle changes in T’challa's face and man oh man, if it isn’t the nicest thing to see it happen in person, making Tony feel like he's floating on air, like a happy little balloon.

Their long distance relationship had been far from easy, with a lot of cold showers in between and thousands of dollars worth of international calls. A relationship between a businessman and a king is hardly a walk in the park; Tony knows this and had come so close and out right retiring just so that he can go and live as a palace husband in Wakanda where his knees don’t hurt as much.

It is a little sad that after so, so long, this is the first time they're actually sitting in a room and not talking business at all.

One would think Tony would get used to this kind of thing -- none of his relationships had been easy. And god he is still trying to make it fucking work.

Which is precisely the reason Tony shrugs weakly, opting not to lie because well, realistically, it's a rather impossible request.

“I promise to try not to scare you like that again…”

T’challa nods sharply, ducking his head and taking another sip of his coffee.
When he stands to his full height and bends over the bed to press their lips together, Tony doesn’t expect it. When he feels the lingering warmth and bitter taste of cheap coffee coat his tongue, Tony thinks he doesn’t give a fuck anymore, this is the best tea and coffee date he’s ever had in his life.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Boooooooooooobuuuuuuu!

YEAH IDEK OK. BYE.
Chapter Notes

I am my own Beta, might have some typos, yadayadayada. Work is inspired by the amazing marvelingjules @ TUMBLR. Because if it wasn't for her fics that I stumbled upon, I would not have known how much I ship these two.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

If Tony thinks back really, really hard, and breaks down his emotional growth in a very detailed flowchart, he can safely say that he had only ever been in love quite possibly once in his entire life.

The number is quite dismal, but it is what it is.

Thinking back to little moments, Tony can easily tick off the classic (and cheesy) symptoms of being in love, the latest subject being none other than the one and only (and quite amazing) Pepper Potts herself.

Pepper Potts had been the person who can dim all the light in the world by her mere presence. Tony can count countless moments where she had literally robbed him of words and breath, stunning him and the crowd by her tall, elegant and modelesque beauty, all leggy and sharp lines and soft curves, supple breasts and firm booty that Tony had countless wet dreams of, dainty ankles and equally dainty wrists. Pepper had put the beautiful in haute couture, outshines Dior, Louis Vuitton, Versace and countless others just with her form alone, the expensive fabrics, heels and accessories paling in comparison to her smooth, creamy, peach skin and absolutely stunning green eyes. Pepper can ignite fire in one’s heart, one’s stomach and one’s loin just by meeting one’s gaze. She is gorgeous in any color, any fabric, in anything; it had reached a point where Tony had been convinced that Pepper would rock a grocery bag.

Tony had been in love with her physically from the moment he had set eyes on her.

To him, she had embodied beauty like no other, had been Venus herself.

But when she had smiled at him, that is when the world had lulled to a hush, disappearing to nothing but distant whispers until all sound dies out, leaving nothing but silence, as all of Tony’s focus would zero in on her. That smile would reach her eyes, crinkling it around the edges, curling the corner lashes further up, cheeks dimpling, perfectly scaled and polished teeth peeking out and contrasting with her soft pink lips. That smile had been the one thing Tony had always wanted to see on her face, which is probably the reason he had always thrown the silliest jokes at her, always goofing around no matter how annoyed or how pissed off she may have been due to business delays, Tony missing meetings or upsetting the board. He does it because when Pepper had smiled at him, no matter how small and how reluctant, Tony had felt whole.

He had felt wanted and so worth it.

Pepper's laugh had been another thing that Tony chased like a heroin addict.

There had been times where he would say the most inappropriate things in the most unacceptable setting (usually and almost always in long drawn board meetings), just to see how her mirth would
bubble up as she tries to contain her laughter. It had turned to a game at some point, the how-can-I-
make-my-most-beautiful-CEO-laugh-during-a-meeting. Tony is yet to win that game. Tony's favorite
laugh is the one where Pepper is breathless, with hiccups in between and sounding like a deflating
balloon, a dorky laugh that had gone hand in hand with his own high-pitched and slightly wheezy
one.

When Tony had a bad day, all he had to do was look at her, no matter what the distance is between
them.

Tony remembers how clarity would settle in his thoughts, as priorities aligned itself in his head when
he had looked at Pepper with glass walls between them, or from across an office or a boardroom
table, sometimes from a distance as she steps into a car and drives away. The very visual of her had
been more than enough to put his over thinking thoughts to a grinding halt for a few needed
seconds, as his lungs fills with breath and he remembers why he even gets up in the morning in the
first place.

Just looking at her had been more than enough; at some point, Pepper and her presence had been the
reboot and pause button Tony had needed very much, especially after Obadiah Stane.

Pepper and her laughs, her smiles, her little touches and stunning beauty, her wits and smarts, her
ability to be an unyielding wall in the face of their competitors, the vicious media, the way she leads
their legal team like a warrior in a battle field, how her voice would turn as sharp as guillotine blade
when she cuts through bullshit demands and unrealistic expectations and accusations from the board
or the public. Tony had lost count at how many times Pepper had proven herself to be the stronger
than anyone he knows, and that is saying something considering the company Tony had kept when
the Avengers Initiative had been put to action.

Even now, Tony still thinks she is one of the strongest people he knows.

If Tony had to describe what being in love is, he would have simply said: Pepper Potts.

So, imagine Tony’s surprise when he finds himself spacing out and staring at T’challa like a halfwit;
it hits him like a speeding fucking train as obvious and as blue as Thomas the Tank Engine.

It is one of the post-battle meetings, one that Tony had finally been able to attend after being
discharged from the hospital; the subject of what to do with the renegades had finally come up. At
some point, the discussion had degenerated to a battle of egos and pomp, of who had more authority
over logic and reason, especially considering that they had just put a stop to pretty much earth’s
fucking Armageddon. At some point, amidst the heated discussion of both those who are present in
person and those who are present via teleconference, the exhaustion starts to bother Tony; he chalks
it up to his still ongoing recovery. Tony had taken a seat after making his point across, still sticking to
his guns that the renegades had done what they had to do in protecting the world and that their
actions against Thanos had to be taken into consideration.

Now, while they all yack, argue and bicker like hungry mice, Tony finds himself staring at T’challa’s
ass.

It’s a nice ass, Tony thinks, firm like a perfect bubble-peach, round and all strength and muscle
under the fabric of T’challa’s no doubt expensive and bespoke trousers. Tony doesn’t even realize
how his head tilts to the side a little bit, watching muscles flex when T’challa continues to make his
argument while he shifts his footing, fingers pointing at the dossier on the table, a revised motion for
the Accords to be amended as per their last review before all hell had broken loose, and god,
even T’challa’s fingers, the flick of his wrist, the strength in his arms, how those muscle coil like
tensile steel – Tony is unable to look away. His gaze rakes all over the arguing king, watches how
the full shape of him just makes it seem like he’s going through heart failure again.

Tony can tell exactly when the proverbial crash of said Thomas the Tank Engine happens.

It had been in the moment when T’challa had all but rolled his eyes at the general of Germany, turning his attention away as someone continues to argue in his place. T’challa had plopped down heavily on his seat and in the moment of shuffling the documents before him, had caught Tony’s gaze from way across the table.

And T’challa had smiled.

Small, private, just a mere quirk of the corner of his lips, his eyes twinkling, as if silently saying, *look at these fools and their blind lack of logic, I can’t believe I’m wasting my time here.*

It is that minute quirk of his lips that promptly hushes the blur of angry and heated words around Tony. It is like someone turning the volume knob down, the world around him fading to a hush of nothing but the slowly speeding up beat of Tony’s heart. And just a second after it, everyone else seems to disappear in the dark, the stage flood light is purely on T’challa, the center of Tony’s focus and entire world, the argument and high ranked officials in that fucking meeting be *damned.*

Tony had known in a instant that not only did he have it *bad,* there’s just no turning back after this.

Because turning back after *Pepper* had been terrible and almost impossible.

Tony doesn’t think he can do *all that* a second time around.

Not when Tony can still taste T’challa on his lips, almost a week later. Not when Tony can still smell the cologne and whatever body wash or soap T’challa favors as if it had been his own scent. It takes nothing but *seconds* for Tony to connect the dots.

“Shit,” Tony mutters, a touch breathless, tearing his gaze away from the king, the attraction and apparently, *love,* splitting open like the red sea for Moses and paving the way for fear and apprehension.

Tony doesn’t wait for the meeting to conclude.

He just gets up and leaves the room, stepping outside to the airier corridor and making his way towards the elevator, to what he hopes can be the observation deck, or parking lot, or well, somewhere where there is a breeze because right now, he can’t breathe and fuck – just *fuck* this heart, fuck these lungs, fuck this entire body, just *fuck everything.*

Tony is in the elevator and is hitting the ground floor button when he spots a hand stop the closing doors and well, lo and behold, there is T’challa.

 Fuck Tony's life.

“Uh…” Tony opens his mouth to question and if he had any doubts earlier about maybe considering the idea that he is in love with the king, he just gets his latest confirmation.

Ability to turn Tony to not only a hopelessly blubbering inner idiot, but also a staring buffoon and make his heart explode under his rib cage just by being in Tony's personal space? Check.

Fuck.

*Фишишишишишишишиши.*
“Are you all right?” T’challa asks.

And god, Tony wants to jam a pen into his windpipe or something because now that he actually recognizes how deeply attracted Tony really is to this man (not that he didn’t know before, that is, but knowing the depth of it now is jarring), it’s just really annoying getting distracted by that smooth and lovely accent, those deep tenors that makes Tony’s imagination run a riot in his mind like he’s fucking fourteen, topped with the whole cheesy butterflies aflutter in his stomach, weak joints, headiness and noticing how the world seems just that much brighter when T’challa looks at him.

Yeah. Fuck Tony's life.

Just.

Fuck.

“Yeah, yeah – uh, I just –” Tony patted his chest, and shrugs helplessly. “I need some air, that’s all. Besides, I don’t think they’ll reach an agreement any time soon. We’ve only been there like what, two hours?”

“Unfortunately, as much as I wish to be optimistic, I will have to agree,” T’challa sighs. “Forgive me, I was – I worried. You left so abruptly. I thought…”

“Relax, your highness,” Tony says, just as the elevator dings and the door opens to flooding sunshine and a quiet lobby of The International Court of Justice. “Like I said, I just needed some air.”

“May I join you?” T’challa asks, and regards him with an expression that Tony doesn’t quite know what to do with. It’s open and warm, too soft for a warrior and king, and if Tony doesn’t know better, he’d think it’s vulnerability.

“I think there’s a bench somewhere…” Tony says, absolutely powerless and smitten.

They make their way outside the palace grounds, bypassing lush greenery, flora and fauna and all the chirping birds that comes with it; Tony realizes his bias when he starts comparing the Peace Palace grounds to the Wakandan Royal Gardens. It’s almost a little funny and Tony finds himself smirking at his own thoughts, as they find a bench and take a seat, the quiet and distant buzz around them a pleasant break from the stiff and quite frankly, suffocating air of the room they had been cooped up since the morning.

No conversation happens between them, per se. They sit beside each other with nothing but a few inches between them on the slab of carved marble and warmth of the sun on their faces. It isn’t until Tony feels calloused finger tips brush against his knuckles that he turns to look at T’challa. T’challa who is regarding him with an expression that robs Tony of breath. There is affection in that dark gaze, as warm as the sun over their heads and soft as the gentle breeze that billows across the palace grounds. Tony finds that nothing around him matters as he looks at the king, the man who once upon a time, had fallen for the little broken boy within the confines of an expensive Ferrari, and now, once more, looks like he’s falling for a shattered man with a long list of health problems and an even longer list of personal issues.

Tony wants to tell T’challa that he deserves better, wants to push him away, wants to pretend that he can’t see the promise of devotion and forever gleaming in the depths of T’challa's, as obvious as the soft set of his mouth, as the King of Wakanda looks at the Merchant of Death with all the love there is in the world.
It’s just so, so fucking unfair.

“I want nothing more than to take you to dinner,” T’challa says, words as soft as fine cotton and as heavy as lead with the hidden apology behind it.

“You really are noble. Being a king and all,” Tony quips, to hell with politeness and shit, they’ve been dancing around each other for over a year and half. “I want to Netflix and chill.”

T’challa’s cheeks darken and the bark of laughter that rips past his throat, as he throws his head back in partial shock at the directness is sudden and unexpected. Tony is thrown off once more at just how surreal T’challa looks, how bright his eyes are, how the hard lines of his armor completely vanishes when he is like this, simply unmeasured and uncaring, body language so relaxed, nose and chin not held high as his station demands him to have it so at all times. Tony doesn’t know if the ache in his chest is from his lack of breath because T’challa just keeps managing to take it all away, or it is because there’s a yearning so deep in Tony's body at the realization that this little moment on a damn marble bench, in a foreign land and an almost fairy-tale setting of flora and fauna is temporary and probably all he’ll ever have. There is no guarantee that when they walk back in that meeting, when said meeting eventually concludes, that they’ll even have time to spend in each other’s company after it, if at all. There’s no saying when they’ll even be this close to each other again, not after Thanos, not when there’s so much clean up to do, so much to pick up, so much shit.

Tony thinks this moment is all he’ll ever have to feel the warm fingers against his skin, to hear T’challa speak without technology and distance between them, and to have the option to actually reach out and feel soft curls under his fingertips, to feel the line of T’challa’s strong jaw against his palm, or to savor the taste of his lips.

After their meeting, that option too will be gone.

“Netflix and chill, huh?” T’challa says, not even trying to hide his grin at all.

Goddamn, if it isn’t a sight to behold.

And this is the moment where Tony tears his gaze away, smiling almost self depreciatingly at the floor. It’s all fun and games, all pleasant thoughts that will probably keep them both warm at night when they’re too far away from each other, but that’s all they’ll ever be.

“All the netflixing. Like one hour episode long and at least three seasons in length,” Tony whispers, actually managing a euphemism of some sort to forever-wanting-to-climb-you-like-a-tree, or about as loud as Tony will ever admit into wanting something so bad.

“Tony...“

“We should probably head back, huh?” Tony says, cutting him off with a rogueish grin, washing away the insecurity in his chest and just preparing himself for the reality of their… relationship.

Or whatever.

Which is to say -- well, there’s really not much there.

“I wanted to say –”

“Your highness!” Ross’s voice cuts from some few feet away, footsteps heavy with relief, his cheeks flushed from being harried and rushed. “Oh there you are. Goodness. You are needed, your highness.”
When T’challa stands, Tony remains on the bench, tilting his head up to watch T’challa button down his suit jacket, tugging at his sleeve and adjusting the cuffs. Yet another thing T’challa does makes it to Tony’s list-of-shits-T’challa-does-that-looks-so-sexy-and-hot-as-fuck. Another point also makes it Tony’s I-am-such-a-loser mental board as he stares at the man he wants nothing more but sit on a park bench with and listen to birds chirp. Netflixing is probably too much of an over-reach and while Tony is always about striving for the future, this is one future that he knows won’t be going too far.

Tony is also a realist.

And having T’challa to himself is about as unreal as Jupiter becoming habitable for all of mankind.

“I’ll follow in a bit. Go on,” Tony says softly, watching as a pinch appears between T’challa’s brows.

“Don’t leave the meeting without speaking to me,” T’challa murmurs, before he takes his leave with Everett Ross, walking briskly down the path, heels of his dress shoes audible, disappearing around the corner.

Not leaving without speaking to T’challa, however, proves to be quite difficult and again, it’s not like Tony doesn’t make the effort. He always tries, and waits when he can. But when the meeting concludes and T’challa is all but dragged aside by the Middle East and North Africa representatives, when the conversation goes on and on with no end in sight, Tony concludes that while he is content to remain on his perch like he had since his return to the meeting and continue to stare at T’challa’s ass and his entire being of perfection, he had pending video conference meetings to attend to and he’s already missed one. On purpose.

Tony picks himself off his chair and leaves without a word.

It’s better this way.

It’s not like they had any chance of working out anyway.

Tony thinks it’s time to really put an end to things.

--

Of course, jolting from his sleep at his phone insistently ringing at two in the morning is never pleasant. Tony jerks away from his pillow and takes a moment to remember that he is in the Hotel Des Indes, as it clicks somewhere in his mind - like an annoying pop-up reminder - how much he hates the curtains in his room. Sleepy and unsteady fingers reaches forward, feeling for his phone on the nightstand, answering the call without even looking, just to shut the ringing up. God.

“What?” Tony grouches, voice rough from sleep he had really needed, as he rolls to his back, keeping his eyes closed.

“Open the door,” T’challa commands.

“Uhh…” Tony thinks he sounds rather intelligent, all things considered, as he grunts with the effort of getting out of bed, clearing his lungs with a short, sharp cough as he pads down the suite, goosebumps breaking all over his bare chest and back, rubbing sleep from his eyes the entire way. “Aren’t you supposed to be on a plane back to Dubai or something?”

“Open the door, please,” T’challa repeats, still quiet, still soft but unyielding in his firmness.

Tony thinks it’s just another one of their games, another present waiting for him at the door, hand
delivered by the Dora Milaje. It wouldn’t be the first time Tony is waking up in the middle of a night, in a foreign country, to receive a semi-troll present from the object of his affections. The first time it had happened, Tony had received fresh pastries baked at four AM from a small, family owned bakery in Nice. It wouldn’t have been so bad if Tony hadn’t fallen asleep just an hour ago having been so exhausted that the delivery boy had waited for over thirty minutes outside his chalet, panicking as the warmth of the pastries had started to disappear when dawn had began creep over the horizon.

Except there is no bakery delivery boy outside Tony’s hotel door when he opens it.

Or a chocolate fountain.

Or even a bouquet.

T’challa is standing right there, in the middle of the carpeted hallway, under the soft corridor lighting, tie gone, shirt rumpled, untucked, and jacket unbuttoned. It looks like T’challa had rushed all the way from the airport to Tony’s hotel door on foot, except his chest isn’t heaving at all with the effort.

The first thing that hits Tony is concern.

“May I come in?” T’challa asks and Tony doesn’t even ask why. Hes simply steps aside holding the door open as the king of Wakanda enters.

Tony shuts the door, forcibly rubbing the sleep off his face as the locks click into place. “Everything okay?” Tony asks.

And really, Tony had to give himself A for effort for not squawking like a surprised ostrich or moaning like a cheap, wanton, street whore when T’challa all but corners him against the wall, all towering and over two hundred pounds of lean muscle surrounding Tony with sudden warmth, soft lips claiming Tony like he’s the source of life and breath itself. Tony doesn’t even fight it, doesn’t even question it. Tony goes with it, breathlessly moaning as T’challa’s hands rakes down the scars on his chest, glide over the lines of his hipbones to grip Tony there, yanking him forward sharply until their groins are pressed flushed against each and Tony is made aware that it isn’t just him that’s ridiculously turned on by this wet dream.

It must be a wet dream.

Those wet dreams comes in all shapes and sizes, and really, Tony doesn’t peg T’challa as the cheap movie pornstar with a not so over-reaching plot, if any at all.

So when Tony’s world spins when he tilts his head back and T’challa drags a hot tongue down the side of his neck, teeth nipping at his throat and laying a trail of smattered kisses all over Tony’s collarbone, the need for air catches up and Tony finds himself – with a lot of horror – breathless.

And not in a good, sexy way at all.

Tony dismisses the first ten seconds as a by-product of being ambushed by the throes of passion (much needed, of course).

But then his chest starts to pinch from within, and suddenly, there's a nasty bubbling sensation, a horrid buildup of fluid rising like the morning tide in Tony’s incapacitated lungs. That’s when the panic gets triggered. Tony tells T’challa to stop, pushes him away and doubles over, a hand on his chest as he shakes his head and tries to clear the sensation away, forcing sharp coughs, something, anything, so he can get this show back on the road and sink to his knees and fucking finally take T’challa’s cock in his mouth like how he’s been dying to for the past year and half.
But it doesn’t exactly subside.

And when the sensation gradually subsides to some degree (but not completely), whatever space it had cleared in Tony's lungs to hopefully fuel his desperately-needing-attention-libido, instead gets filled with regret, core shattering shame, and worst of all, pity.

The want and heat disappears like a candle being snuffed. Tony now understands why terminally ill people, once they give up, feel like the world is not worth living anymore. He now understands the full weight and meaning of absolute self-pity.

It’s terrible.

What makes it even worse is that T’challa envelopes Tony in an embrace, keeps on holding Tony in an upright position, to help him get more air in without bad posture getting in the way. Tony's eyes stings with bitter-salty heat, because this is ridiculous. This just can’t work. Tony's never hated himself so much than that very moment, because he knows T’challa’s time constraints, knows T’challa's schedule like the back of his hand, knows that his presence in Dubai to meet with the Middle East and North Africa leaders is crucial. Unlike Tony who is a wealthy civilian, T’challa is a king. Tony doesn’t even what to think of what the consequences are going to be like for T’challa now that he is here instead of a plane.

“You need to go,” Tony stammers, choking on his words, forcefully swallowing all the regret and shame, as he takes a forceful step back and shakes his head when he sees T’challa's expression -- hurt, crushed, stubbornly refusing, god, this guy is impossible. “You need to be on that plane, T’challa…”

“I know where I need to be,” T’challa firmly answers, fingers tightening in their grip around the curves of Tony's shoulder. “And I’m there.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake!” Tony snaps, shrugging T’challa's hands away viciously, allowing the anger to keep him from falling to pieces right there on the floor. “Look at me, your highness! I can’t even – I god!”

“I am looking at you,” T’challa's voice is so, so soft, so fucking gentle, so goddamn loving as hope glows in his eyes.

A look like that can kill a man and Tony, well, there's not much of him left, so he fights back by putting distance between them, makes the conscious decision to just kill that look once and for all.

“Well, look again! I mean geez, I know they said limited lung capacity. I didn’t know it had dwindled down so bad that even off the fucking table!” Tony brings his hands to his face and presses the heels of his palms to his eyes, forcing the tears back because he is not doing this. He is not going to fall apart now, in front of T’challa, at the fucking Des Indes of all fucking places.

“Jesus, this is not gonna work. This can’t – I can’t – no matter how much I want you, or how much I need you, contrary to popular belief, I am not selfish. I can’t saddle you with this.” Tony gestures at himself, at the scars on his torso, at his still mildly heaving chest, at the cold sweat that is beading on his neck and temples. “You deserve better than this shitty almost obsolete piece of shit!”

“I will caution you to measure your words, Tony,” T’challa warns, eyes darkening with something Tony can't stand to look at. “Do not speak that way.”

“Why?” Tony grits out, swiping his hands viciously down his face. “I’m serious, T’challa. Why? Look at me, man.” Tony's voice cracks, as he stubbornly blinks away at the moisture collecting around the corner of his eyes, tearing his gaze from T’challa who is looking at Tony like he’s been
slapped across the face. “I’m no good for you. You gotta realize that you’re not thinking right. Down the line, how long can you honestly keep this up? This long distance relationship -- we barely see each other, and now this? I mean, unless you have a few spare vital organs lying around in Wakanda that will be compatible with me, or you have some sort of magic healing serum, this is pointless! Come on! You need to see reason! You are not a stupid man!”

The silence that falls between them is like a vacuum.

Tony thinks it’s better this way, better that they begin to put distance between them.

Except the only answer Tony gets is warmth of T’challa’s hands are on his.

It startles Tony, forcing him to look and watch with treacherous salt in his eyes as T’challa presses his lips against his knuckles, long and lingering and god, Tony cracks to a hundred pieces at the gesture, as all his armor and defensive anger comes off his skin bit by bit as T’challa just pulls him close and wraps his arms around him, protective, possessive, needing and wanting all at the same time.

T’challa doesn’t respond to the words Tony had unceremoniously thrown in his face. T’challa says nothing as he leads Tony down the hallway and towards the bed, where the king strips down to nothing, rumples clothes discarded in a heap on the floor, leaving nothing but warm, rich dark skin and the tiniest scars to Tony’s eyes. T’challa gets in bed, tugging Tony in with him, no distance between them, as the wondrous scent of sandalwood and musk floods Tony's senses. They lie there, with T’challa spooning against Tony’s back, vulnerable and unprotected, bare as the day he was born. Tony isn’t stupid and knows that T’challa had done it on purpose, a gesture of leaving himself too open and far too vulnerable.

Exactly how Tony feels like, with his failing, broken body.

“I don’t have spare organs in my freezer. But I promise to find a cure that’ll make you strong again,” T’challa whispers, lips brushing against the back of Tony’s neck. “I swear to you, I will not stop until I do. And when you are well, when you are strong, when you rise from the ashes like the phoenix that you are, I will do nothing but make love to you, over and over again; let the world burn for a while. There is nothing that I want more but to hold you like this.”

“Goddamnit, T’challa…”

“Please trust me,” T’challa begs, almost too quiet to be heard. “You saved my life, you’ve spared my family and country an unusual amount of grief. Come back to Wakanda with me. Let me and my people take care of you now.”

Tony closes his eyes, shuddering a choked sob, swallowing thickly when T’challa’s arms tightens around him, soft lips dropping a lingering kiss on the nape of Tony's neck.

Tony doesn’t agree immediately, and T’challa doesn’t push (he never pushes).

But Tony thinks that the fact that T’challa doesn't let go, the fact that he doesn’t get up and leave some hours later, should be a testament to his dedication.

Then again, Tony has had many promises given to him, promises of family and what feels like forever.

And well, that didn’t really turn out so well in the end.

Regardless of everything, despite wanting to believe, a small part of Tony prepares himself for
disappointment, anyway.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter.

Soooooo, our of curiosity, who wants porn?
Eleven

Chapter Notes

I am my own Beta, might have some typos, yadayadayada. Work is inspired by the amazing marvelingjules @ TUMBLR. Because if it wasn't for her fics that I stumbled upon, I would not have known how much I ship these two.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony wakes up with a sharp inhale, sudden and almost gasping, the burning heat from the flames and Pepper falling into the orange and scorching abyss disappearing completely in his mind's eye, replaced by the sight of the drapes Tony absolutely hates and thinks is hideous, the sunlight pouring in from edges of the blackout curtains. Tony has no shortage of worst-moments of his life, has an endless supply of dream reels ready to be played the moment he closes his eyes; last night, no matter how comfortable, deeply (and secretly) happy he had been about having T'challa fall into bed with him, Tony knows that he’ll never forget his mistakes, the regrets, the fear.

He didn’t with Pepper, and he had been happy in that relationship.

It makes perfect sense that he wouldn’t with T’challa either, even when the Black Panther is currently lying on his back, head turned towards Tony, one arm flopped loosely on Tony’s middle and his other arm, semi-hanging off the bed. Tony is careful to turn, not wanting to disturb T’challa, who looks deeply asleep, only shifting the tiniest bit, arm sliding off Tony’s middle to fall on the mattress. Looking at T’challa now, amidst cotton linen and morning light dancing over beautiful dark skin, Tony can’t think of any other place he’d rather be other than here, this very moment. T’challa doesn’t lose an ounce of his charm and handsome beauty even when asleep, with lips slightly parted, lashes long and curled against his cheeks, breaths deep and bare chest rising in a slow and relaxed rhythm. Looking like this, no one can ever tell that T’challa can rip your head off with his bare hands. Fast asleep like this, Tony thinks he can write songs about him, can design works of art about the king of Wakanda lying asleep.

Tony spends the rest of his waking hours lying there and watching the man he is so helplessly in love with continue to sleep. He watches the little changes that unfolds before, how his T’challa twitches just the tiniest bit, his body adjusting to the morning light creeping up his toes and over the outline of his bare thighs, naked hipbones and bare stomach. Tony can see just what he is missing, can see the outline of the healthy erection, an erection that he would want nothing more but to have sliding past his throat, to have T’challa’s fingers slide against his scalp to grip at Tony's hair for anchor, and to hear the tenors of T’challa's voice tremble with need.

Tony wants a lot of things.

But when you’re a Stark, you learn at a young age that you don’t always get what you want. Every ounce of happiness you feel as a Stark has to be paid for in blood, sweat and tears. There is no break even point; Tony has lost count of how much he had been willing to give, only to always end up severely, hilariously, short-changed.

In hind sight, if Tony thinks about it, losing someone over a disagreement (Steve, Natasha, Clint, Wanda, Sam) or over distance (Thor, Bruce) or simply because of circumstances (Pepper) is better than having to put them on the ground. The nightmare is still fresh in Tony’s mind, how Pepper’s
eyes had been wide as she had fallen into her pyre, contaminated, alone, and in the ugliest way possible; there had been nothing Tony can do in that very moment other than watch her scream as she had disappeared into the flames.

To this current day, the feeling of that moment had never left Tony.

He can still hear her screams.

When you care about someone, you don’t forget shit like that.

Tony can still feel the last breath shuddering out Yinsen as Tony held him in his hands, when he had tried - had begged him - to not die, only to realize that had been his plan all along.

He can still feel the coldness of his parents’ bodies in the morgue under his palms, like touching ice, how hollow and empty the vessel of their souls had been.

Jarvis had been no different.

Tony looks at T’challa now and remembers how he had found him, unconscious, barely breathing and unmoving under metal and dust. How heavy the body of the Black Panther had been on Tony’s shoulders.

Tony is a lot of things, but even iron eventually bends out of shape, loses its luster and rusts. Rust eventually cracks and comes apart, turns to dust with years of wear and tear and lack of care. Tony knows that losing T’challa, would not only hurt, it’d be the end of him. Just like how losing Pepper had felt like almost the end of him, stretched thin like butter spread over too much bread, because saving Pepper hadn’t stopped from just that one fall. Tony remembers pouring gruelling hours for months that had felt like fucking forever trying to reverse the bullshit Extremis virus Killian-the-asshole had infected Pepper with. Tony remembers very well how even through flu and fever, he had not once stopped fighting for Pepper.

Had it not been for Extremis, Pepper would have never survived that fall, she would have been nothing but ashes and another body Tony would have to put into the ground.

Had it not been for Extremis.

Tony stills, stiffening as he watches T’challa shifts in his sleep.

It hits Tony like a pile of fucking bricks to the face.

Tony closes his eyes and thinks of Wakanda, of the comfort he had started to feel there, the conversations and tea sessions he had with the queen, the bickering with Shuri and her smart dumb ass, thinks of Rhodey and his top of the line leg braces and before Tony knows it, he makes a decision.

Shoving himself off the bed like he is on fire might not have been Tony's most shining moment, especially when he does it so quickly, so recklessly that Tony actually falls to the ground, taking the sheets with him with a resounding whump. That whump jerks T’challa awake, makes him sit up like a mechanical doll at a county fair, looking around, body tense and springing into action immediately to look over the edge of the bed where Tony is picking himself up and getting on his feet unsteadily. T’challa is suddenly there, helping him up and placing steadying hands on Tony’s shoulders. Tony takes one long look at the king’s nakedness and groans, deep and guttural, looking at the ceiling and what Tony imagines would be the sky beyond the concrete and paint, for mercy.

T’challa, generally speaking, should be deemed illegal, with how beautiful he is.
T’challa naked is an outright menage to society.

Tony's heart, body and libido can't handle all this stud-muffin material.

“Are you all right?” T’challa asks, so concerned, bless his soul.

“Yes, no, oh my god, please cover up, you are so distracting I need to actually go because I just remembered I have something to fix that is really pertinent and…” Tony loses all trail of thought as his mouth goes dry. T’challa is standing before him like a model spread, all hard lines and muscle, cock hanging and semi-hard, curved and thick with a lot of girth, the head gleaming under the sunlight and really, Tony can’t not look.

In fact, how can anyone not just look?

The knowing smirk curling on T'challa's lips doesn’t help with making the blood and heat race in Tony’s veins, doesn’t help in killing Tony’s own growing and visible need and want under the fabric of his sweats. But Tony knows that neither of them are going to get far, not with his fucked up lungs, his fucked up heart and his fucked up body.

Not if he can do something about it.

“By the Bast, Tony, do you have any idea how much I want you right, now?” T’challa's voice is thick, deep and curling with heat; Tony can only swallow as he watches with a shaky inhale how that half-mast hardness swells to a full erection, high and proud, and as just hot and hard as it looks like when it presses against Tony’s lower abdomen, as T’challa takes his hand and pulls him up into an embrace. T’challa is perfectly still, doesn’t even rub against Tony to relieve some of the mounting tension, his hips as steady as an unmovable bed of rock. Instead, T’challa presses kisses to Tony’s neck, gentle and as soft as a brush of butterfly wings on Tony’s skin.

“What if there is no cure?” Tony asks, closing his eyes and wrapping his arms around T’challa’s middle.

“We will find a donor,” T’challa answers, with not a second's hesitation, like he's actually already thought of that possibility.

“And if it fails?” Tony counters.

“Then I’d rather have you like this, by my side, hold you at night than not have you at all,” T’challa whispers, words murmured against Tony's shoulder. “I’d rather be able to spoil you, pamper you, argue with you, contest you and have a companion who understands me, cares for me, can be brave enough for me, than not have you at all. Tony,” T’challa pulls back. “I want to try to find a solution. I want to really try rather than just give up and not try at all. Do you understand?”

Tony smiles, resolve strengthening his spine like molten iron hardening to gleaming metal.

“Yeah... y-yeah, I understand,” Tony says, and when T’challa kisses him, he doesn’t push him away.

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If there is one thing T’challa has come to understand when he had learned to read between the lines when it comes to Tony Stark, is that Tony’s primary use of distraction are his projects and his workload. They aren’t just empty workloads per se, nor are they useless projects because a good chunk of them actually do make it to Stark Industries' product list, upgrade list or it gets shoved under the September or Maria foundation as a donation of good will to rebuild war stricken villages and
towns all across the globe.

When they part that morning and Tony seems harried to rush back to the drawing board, T’challa thinks nothing of it at first.

T’challa too, had to catch up on a string of meetings in the Middle East and North African region and play his role as a politician that before he realizes it, a week had gone by with a jam packed schedule with not a word from Tony.

Which really isn’t strange, if he thinks about it.

The thing is, what T’challa has also realized is that the whole workload and projects thing with Tony is also a double edged sword. While such binges and sudden bursts of inspiration is what keeps a lot of the wheels in Tony’s very broad circle of influence moving, it is also, much to T’challa’s annoyance, Tony's way to hide from something he doesn’t exactly want to deal with. T’challa is forced to recognize this trait while he is sitting on a flight back to Wakanda as he goes through his messages, hoping to find something from Tony. Except he doesn’t find anything.

T’challa can count on one hand the number of times Tony had not remained in contact with him without giving him a warning of some sorts, or even a half assed heads, and both times, Tony had come out of the radio silence withdrawn, haggard and a lot worse for wear. To this day, T’challa still thinks bitterly of Ross because of that.

The only difference now is that there is no Ross or anyone like Ross in the picture.

If Tony had a lingering threat over his shoulder that he didn’t tell T’challa, then T’challa would have been aware of it from Wakanda’s own vast network of spies scattered all around the world. A blip in the radar would have made his ears perk up in curiosity.

Here’s the thing when it comes to the world facing a threat as big as Thanos.

It takes a long time to weed out who is who because this would have been the perfect opportunity for the termites to start crawling out of the woodwork in search for their self-gain. Logically, T’challa understands that it may take time for even the best of his spies and security to uncover something big, if anything at all. It would take long observations, months if not weeks of it to even find a millimeter high blip in what is an otherwise steady line.

T’challa thinks he’s blowing things out of proportions by over thinking, but something in his gut is telling him that something is off.

The feeling is further fueled when he finally arrives in the royal grounds he finds a commotion on his side of the wing and his mother harried and looking at him with alarm and a pallid features. Confused and with tension roiling through his nerves, T’challa walks past her and the ring of armored guards surrounding his wing of the palace and finds destruction and claw marks everywhere. Warnings of him to be careful falls on deaf ears as he rushes down the hallway and into his room where he finds Nyo lying on his side like he’s ill, snarling and eyes wet.

T’challa can feel the world disappear from under his feet as he approaches the mourning panther and presses a hand to his flank. T’challa isn’t sure what to make of the destruction around him, isn’t even sure why there is destruction around him.

Nyo’s harsh breathing eventually calms down, but his tears do not stop.

“What’s wrong?” T’challa asks, and carefully brings the panther’s head up, pressing their foreheads together. “Whatever it is, it’ll be okay? I’m here…”
If T’challa had to think back to that very moment, he would say that everything that transpired that evening had been written somewhere.

T’challa remembers taking his suit jacket off, his phone slipping and clattering down the marble steps of his room as he puts his jacket aside. He remembers turning to only spare it a momentary glance, a subconscious reaction when one hears something fall. He remembers seeing the message alert on the screen, remembers seeing Tony’s name.

And then then he remembers smiling, remembers grinning like a teenager so drunk in love as he reaches forward with excitement and picks the phone up, hitting the play button to the video that quite literally had been the proverbial spear to his heart.

Tony’s face appears on screen, hollow, haggard, as white as a sheet with bags under his eyes and sweat on his brow. He doesn’t look like he’s been running, but rather he is still and dressed in an old Iron Maiden tour t-shirt with his hair in a complete disarray.

It isn’t his poor state of dress that gives pause to T’challa’s thinking; it’s his eyes.

“Hey, T’challa.” Tony begins, hands in front of him and a smile creeping up his lips, something he tries to smother as he ducks his head down. It is one of the many heartwarming gestures T’challa so dearly loved seeing, that charming boyish shyness and softness that is hidden under all that iron peeking out only when Tony had all his guards down. The smile is there for only a moment and then it drops completely, replaced by Tony’s shaking hands coming up to press against his eyelids, a gesture that makes ice form in T’challa’s stomach because Tony isn’t rubbing sleep, or blurriness, or fatigue or even a damn eyelash; Tony is brushing tears from his eyes.

This is where T’challa sees beyond the veil of happiness that he had gotten a sudden surge of at seeing Tony’s message.

Now that the veil is off, T’challa can see how Tony looks absolutely terrified and scared and so unsure in that moment that T’challa finds himself standing up slowly without realizing it, breath coming out slow and measured as he tries to contain the panic.

“If you’re seeing this – god! – if you are watching this right now, then I was unsuccessful in my attempt to use the Extremis virus to what I had hoped and meticulously calculated and engineered to be a permanent fix for my failing body. This message will only be sent to you if Friday reads a flat line and all fail safes that I - obviously - have in place has failed to resuscitate me after the virus which,” Tony reaches for something off screen and waves a vial filled with dark charcoal like solution on the screen, “is right here is to be administered through the back of the neck. In theory, I should not explode or catch fire the way the initial trials did when these were administered on the Mandarin’s victims, and well, Pepper didn’t either when I reversed engineered it, which is why I’m confident I’m not going to be a pile of ash.”

Tony sets the vial aside and brings his hands to his face, swiping down once in an attempt to focus and ground himself; except his voice is starting to shake, his eyelashes are clumping with how the tears that clearly stems from nervousness and him trying to say goodbye.

“If you’re seeing this it will also mean that you and Shuri will have primary possession of Extremis. My notes, my programming, everything will be uploaded to you into the private servers Shuri had set up for us a year ago and you, and only the both of you will know just what this virus can be capable of. I can’t trust this with anyone else other than the two of you. Maybe Shuri can make something of it, maybe you can, maybe one day it’ll be of some use when something bigger and more horrid than Thanos comes knocking on our little blue planet’s door -- the world isn’t ready for something like Extremis, so I’m trusting you and Shuri to safeguard that. No place safer than Wakanda, right~?
God, what the fuck am I saying...”

Tony buries his face in his hands and pushes past the hairline on his forehead in what looks like a manic gesture. T’challa doesn’t know when he had slowly sunk back to the ground, doesn’t even know when he had wrapped an arm around Nyo’s flank like he’s some sort of anchor, the screen on his hand trembling in his shaking and terrified grip because he must be so fucking tired if he’s dreaming something like this.

“This was supposed to be a short and sweet hey, I didn’t make it but please know that I love you. Because --” Tony’s voice cracks and he throws a hand up in the air and shakes his head. “Because I do love you. I am so in love with you that I wish -- I wish so much that we had what we have now all those years ago. Not a day goes by that I wish I never signed those papers in the first place. I am doing this without your knowledge because I am scared, and I am frustrated, and I can’t wait for a transplant, to go through surgery after surgery, to wait and watch as everything else fails -- I can’t. I just can’t. I can barely get out of bed on most days, all these medications and nausea and the -- the goddamn blackouts and exhaustion. I just -- I’m not as brave as I thought I would be. I don’t want to watch you watch me waste away, weaken, become redundant and just -- I can’t.” Tony shrugs helplessly. “I trust my creations, I trust me.” Tony’s voice hardens with confidence, a spark coming in his eyes that outshines the fear for just a moment. “I am sure this will work. Like ninety-eight percent. And all I needed, to be honest, was fifty-one percent. That’s how much I was willing to gamble. But if you’re seeing this, well…”

Somewhere in the room, T’challa sees movement. Somewhere in the back of his throat as the video continued to play and Tony says the last few words he’ll ever say to T’challa, something raw and unbridled comes out, like the gush of lava after an eruption, hot and salty like the tears gathering around the corners of his eyes, as his fingers digs into the flank of his panther, who in return makes a mewling and wounded noise that reflects that of his master.

“I want you to know that when I’m with you, or when you look at me, I don’t feel like the world’s biggest loser, alone, hated, disliked, forgotten, used -- no. T’challa, being with you and around you made me feel like a nice, good solid and worthy champ.” T’challa can’t even see the watery smile on the screen. He can’t even hear the words properly when Tony ends the call with his last few words. “And it’s a really, really nice feeling. Please take care of Bob. He likes thin crust meaty pizza; please continue to give him that so that he doesn’t feel I’m really gone, okay?”

The video cuts off and the Kimoyo beads blinks on his wrist signifying an alert that something has been uploaded into his private server.

None of it mattered.

Because T’challa is getting to his feet and crossing through the hallways as he dries his eyes with a vicious swipe of his dress shirt sleeve, Nyo trotting behind him in his shadow. He doesn’t heed the cries of his guards, his counsels, his mother or even his general when he heads straight to the hangar and commandeers their fastest plane. He barks an order to clear the airspace, and shuts down any signs of protests with nothing but a firm no, or a solid I don’t care.

T’challa doesn’t think as he pulls out of the runway and the jet cuts through the skies, engines on over-drive as he crosses continents and oceans on altitudes that wouldn’t be recommended at all. All attempts to reach him goes ignored and he doesn’t care to answer Shuri even after she hacks into the airplane’s communication system to initiate contact.

Shuri gets nothing but his silence and a threat that if she attempts to try to take control of the plane, T’challa will consider it treason against the crown and she will be tried for it.
Shuri knows when to stop pushing and promptly does not because she is afraid of a thread, but because T’challa’s voice is devoid of emotion, like the sudden calm and laser sharp focus he currently had in that moment.

The flight takes too long.

And when T’challa lands on the front lawn of Tony’s lush and estate in upstate New York, when he crosses the lawn and barges into the empty mansion and follows the directions Friday gives him, he finds himself stepping into Tony’s laboratory and workshop, where Rhody is sitting unmoving on a stool with Pepper sitting in a heap on the ground against the wall, both of them staring at the mess of a human being on the floor, Bob standing guard beside the unmoving body, ears pressed down to his skull.

Right there, in the middle of black and sticky matter that smells like charcoal, oil and human innards is Tony, whole, unmoving and smeared in blood and body fluids, half cocooned within something that feels like dried banana leaves when T’challa touches it and pushes it away. It crinkles and comes apart, sticks all over his hands with the consistency of golden syrup, and T’challa doesn’t care. He can’t care because he’s pulling Tony out of the shell pressing his hands on his face and giving him a slow shake.

Except Tony doesn’t respond and simply shakes with the motions, limbs lifeless and unmoving and when T’challa shakes him again, and gets no response, something comes apart then and there. Something that feels like denial and desperation and even more denial when T’challa asks Tony to open his eyes, to please, please open your eyes, please look at me, goddamnit look at me I beg you, please. Please.

But Tony doesn’t respond.

And doesn’t open his eyes.

T’challa wonders amidst the silence and his heart turning to ash under his ribcage if this is what it feels like to be the world’s biggest and most helpless loser.

Up until Friday interrupts the silence when she announces a pulse has been detected.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

I did nothing but cry while writing this chapter #Loser

This chapter is so short but I wanted to just give ya'll something to show that this has not been abandoned. I am working on it. I am just a bit of a potato right now.

Life and work hit me so fucking hard that I just yeah okay, BYE! SO SORRY NOT SORRY!
Twelve

Chapter Summary

I am my own Beta, might have some typos, yadayadayada. Work is inspired by the amazing marvelingjules @ TUMBLR. Because if it wasn't for her fics that I stumbled upon, I would not have known how much I ship these two.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It all happens in instant.

One moment T’challa is kneeling there second guessing what he hears and holding Tony’s body in his arms, the next second he’s staring at the digital projection of Tony’s vitals coming to life. What had read as nothing but a flat line and zeroes gradually increases, one number at a time, until it sky rockets to alarming and abnormal readings that punctuates with Tony gasping and shoulder arching up from where he had been a lifeless marionette in T’challa’s arms. His eyes are wide open an unseeing, mouth parted in an O of breathlessness.

T’challa doesn’t think twice and picks him off the ground and onto the work table, the gesture snapping Rhodey back to the present as they start shouting questions at Friday to where the first aid kit is stored and to get help.

And that’s when Tony’s skin starts to burn as hot as fire, so hot in its ferocity that T’challa isn’t able to hold on to him, dropping him in an involuntary reaction as his own skin scorches, like he had been holding heated iron.

The burns sears into T’challa’s palms; they hurt.

But it is nothing in comparison to watching Tony scream in agony on the table.

T’challa doesn’t think he’ll ever forget what he sees, how Tony arches off the workbench and his body coiling in tension, tendons and muscles and bone sticking out from under skin that burns about as bright as molten lava, veins blazing in luminescent red. Tony burns and burns, almost as bright as the sun before the red fades to something even hotter, as white as a dying star, only to taper off to something else. T’challa watches with helpless horror and his heart in his throat, as white fades off to blue, about as bright as copper being burned in a flame until it fades to nothing. It fades like Tony’s screams trails off.

And just when T’challa thinks it’s over, Tony is arching off the workbench and wretching blood and body fluids, sticky matter that smells like rot and oil, heinous amount of it. They splatter on the tiles like body chunks of flesh slapping on a flat surface, thick and horrid and so, so much of it that T’challa wonders for that brief second if Tony is expelling his dissolved insides from all that heat.

It could have lasted for a minute, or maybe more, but it stops about as abruptly as it begins.

And then Tony is slumping again, lifeless as he had been minutes ago, his entire weight tipping over
the edge of the work bench.

T’challa is quick to move, and catches Tony head and face first as he slips and almost lands on his ass when he skids across the mess of vomit on the floor, just as his arms catch Tony and prevent him from falling face first into the pool of human waste on the floor.

T’challa doesn’t think he’ll ever forget the almost acidic smell of it all.

Rhodey is on the other side of the work bench, helping T’challa in getting Tony’s unmoving and unconscious body properly back on the bench, Tony who, after glancing at the vital readings, seems to look like he’s enjoying a lovely summer nap, asleep and looking at least fifteen years younger. T’challa looks past the mess and sees the missing prominent lines that used to be under Tony’s eyes and along the corners of his lips, and the finer ones on his forehead and between his brows. Gone is the hollowed look, the circles that had looked like bruises that never heals from under his eyes and while Tony’s built remains similar, T’challa notices how the scars on his chest, and finer ones on his arms, his shoulders and some on his legs are completely gone. There is nothing but a stretch of smooth and scarless plains of skin and T’challa isn’t even sure how to absorb all this.

It is Pepper who speaks first.

“F-Friday?” She asks, now on her feet and against the far wall, as white as the painted wall behind her.

“Vital readings are normal. My scans tell me that Mister Stark’s brain falls within normal range of one who is asleep.” Friday responds.

“You know this place more than I do. Where can I move him?” T’challa asks, looking at both Rhodey and Pepper.

“Upstairs.” Rhodey answers and nods at T’challa to follow him.

T’challa picks Tony up like he weighs nothing, following Rhodey and Pepper up the curving flight of steps and into the room down the hall. They move in sync as Pepper flicks the switch and pulls the covers off the bed, opening a closet door and pulling out clothes. Rhodey steps into the connecting bathroom and fills the tub with water, standing on one side of it and assisting T’challa as they lower Tony down to wash off the oil, blood, and plasma off his skin. It is nothing but a perfunctory rinse, a mild rush of warm water on skin and scalp and through it all, Tony doesn’t even flinch. There is no outwardly reaction as they practically manhandle and clean the gunk off his skin, no flutter of eyelashes as they lift him off the tub and carry his sopping wet form into the cool room. Tony’s breathing doesn’t shift, doesn’t stutter nor fluctuate as they wipe him down and dress him and then tuck him into bed.

And as they stand there, with Pepper still looking as white as a sheet and Rhodey’s dress uniform about as sopping wet as T’challa’s wrinkled suit, they watch as Tony look like the picture perfect form of a man in his most comfortable sleep. Tony looks like he’s the new poster-boy for Zzzquil.

“I – I need to go. I can’t – please call me when he wakes up.” Pepper says rather wetly as he turns around and her heels stomp off.

T’challa turns to look at Rhodey, who is looking at where Pepper had disappeared past the open door, a forlorn and disappointed look on his face, and something else.

T’challa thinks he recognizes that look. He’s seen reflections of it on himself, when one worries and watches something they care about leave without a second glance back, and yet still so powerless to
do anything because it isn’t their place.

“Go.” T’challa says, nodding, encouraging. “I’ll stay here.”

“You sure, your highness?” Rhodey asks, swallowing and looking hesitantly at Tony’s sleeping form.

“I am.” T’challa nods and reaches out to clap a hand firmly in a brotherly gesture on Rhodey’s shoulder. “Make sure Miss Potts is okay. It has been a very… challenging evening.”

“You are so fucking polite.” Rhodey says, breathless and huffing an awkward laugh that doesn’t quite form. “Call me?”

“Immediately, once he’s awake. Yes.” T’challa promises.

Rhodey doesn’t say another word as he throws one more look at Tony’s sleeping figure and exits the room.

T’challa would love to think that as soon as he sits on the plush chair he drags towards the side of the bed, propping his ankles around the edge of the mattress to wait, this would be how their new beginnings would start. T’challa would also love to imagine that the most trying part of all this had been over.

Of course, he had to miss the truth by a mile wide in distance.

Tony doesn’t wake up in a few hours, or the next day, nor does he steer or twitch the day after.

Tony remains asleep, unmoving, unflinching even when T’challa accidentally drops a glass on the ground, or in the span of two days, Pepper in her attempt to bring in a tray of coffee from the kitchen downstairs, trips over the edge of the decorative carpet and the entire thing comes down in a deafening crash amidst the pin drop silence of the mostly empty estate; that crash would have jolted awake anyone who isn’t in a coma or some form of a coma.

It certainly had made Bob and Nyo glare in her direction.

Rhodey had taken the tray and purposely banged it so loud against the foot of the bed that T’challa had flinched. And then had proceeded to stare at Rhodey like he had lost his mind.

Rhodey had simply shrugged with a shifty-eyed look and had said, “What? It was worth a shot.”

T’challa agrees.

He had taken the same metallic tray and banged it against he headboard, right above Tony’s head and not even an eyelash had shifted, not a twitch, nothing.

He had also gotten a flash of fangs from both the panthers lying on either side of the bed for his efforts.

No amount of shaking or speaking or Rhodey accidentally playing loud thrash metal on his phone had done the trick.

By the third day, T’challa can no longer outright ignore his duties to the crown. The first thing he does is to call in medical specialist, one he trusts from Wakanda and Bruce Banner. Doctor Strange is called in as an afterthought, if only because Strange is extremely well versed in neurology, despite his current occupation as Sorcerer Supreme.
The night they all arrive at the mansion and had taken one look at Tony, T’challa realizes, in the haze of his still ever growing nervousness and paranoia that he had practically invited a circus. Between the three of them, test after test is made. Bruce finds nothing; Strange finds nothing; his own fellow Wakandan specialist finds nothing. And while they can be trusted to hold their tongue (sort of), their curiosity (and seeming concern) can only be contained for too long. Mitigating them works, and in a way, Bruce and Strange know that there’s something the king isn’t telling them and seem to respect that.

That it is, apparently, until one of them (Bruce is most terrible, it seems, when using the new Stark phone) had slipped and mentioned Tony is, officially, in a mysterious coma.

The word coma comes with a lot of negative connotations, because the circus turns to a Fourth of July parade when members of the team starts barraging Rhodey, Pepper and Friday. T’challa had worked with the Avengers closely, during and after Thanos and he is extremely well versed in their… stubborn streaks.

It is on the fourth day that the good Captain and the Winter Soldier shows up at Tony’s door step, with Clint in tow along with Sam, Scott and Hope. T’challa had to hand it to Pepper for trying to keep the situation contained but when the demand to know why Tony is in a ‘coma’ gets too strong from a bunch of stubborn individuals, there is only so much she and even Rhodey can do.

“What happened?” Steve asks, concern etched deep into his features; the look is mirrored by the entire party.

T’challa sees the look from the top of the stairs landing, and the closer he gets to the gathered circus at the bottom, the more it cements in him that despite all the shortcomings, the disagreements, their difference in opinion, these people, in their very core, cares about Tony. Trust never mends, T’challa knows this, had experienced it first hand as the crown prince and even more so now as king.

Turning them away had been at the top his list.

Turning them away when they look like that suddenly feels like grinding newborn kittens under his heel.

It is a little pathetic.

T’challa doesn’t answer and that seems to have put the good Captain into some sort of emotional turmoil, which feels a little strange, watching it unfold before his eyes. Steve doesn’t follow up his silence with another question and T’challa stands there watching how his lips press to a thin line and how he keeps his gaze directed elsewhere.

"Is there anything we can? Anyone we can find that can help?” Hope speaks instead, her question echoed by agreeing nods from the fourth of July parade crowding in Tony’s foyer.

T’challa doesn’t answer again and finds himself swallowing thickly as he shakes his head.

In that moment, T’challa can see why Tony’s irrational and slightly skittish ‘fear’ (in between air quotes, of course) towards Pepper Potts is justifiable. She swoops in like she is an entire entourage of an HR-team, shuffling the guests towards another room and feeding them whatever information she had already fed them when the word of Tony’s “coma” had gotten out. T’challa watches them all crowd into the connecting kitchen, where several stacks of six packs that Rhodey had brought in the night before is quickly distributed and more questions are fielded out.

T’challa eventually joins them, worn and bone weary, all the beads on his wrist dotted with red,
flagging important things he had put on hold for the past three days, now going on the fourth. Being a ruler isn’t easy, especially during this rather vulnerable period post Thanos’ war. He takes a sip of beer he doesn’t taste, feels liquid slide down his throat that is about as parched as the desert. He watches Hope, Scott, Sam and Pepper talk about Avengers publicity and the best way to handle this if word of anything gets out. Strange and Bruce continues to discuss neurology and current existing studies on comatose patients, which leaves T’challa to sit elbow to elbow with Rhodey with the island between them and Steve and Bucky.

It goes on like this, all of them sitting like they’re old friends, one can disappearing after the other. The first one to depart after their conversation is Pepper and Hope and they leave with Scott and Sam in tow to prepare for the inevitable; T’challa is not worried, especially if more arsenal like Hope Van Dyke and her experience in handling Pym. Technology’s publicity is in the mix. Strange takes his leave with them, offering them a portal-ride to the new Avengers facility. Bruce excuses himself to another room, answering a phone call on his way out and then there is nothing but the slow distant fizz of bubbles evaporating from the open beer cans on the island.

“I must leave tonight.” T’challa says, his voice like sandpaper. The words are as heavy as lead and voicing them out sounds like abandonment.

T’challa feels anger bubble in his chest, horrid and ugly, hissing and bubbling like acid that it takes great control from the depths of his being he hadn’t known existed to carefully set the half empty can on the counter and press his palms on the surface of the island.

“He’ll be safe here, your highness.” Steve says, dipping his chin carefully. “No one’s gonna get past any of us if that helps in putting your mind at ease…”

“It does not.” T’challa responds and watches something flicker across Steve’s face. “But I appreciate it all the same, Captain Rogers.”

Because T’challa doesn’t want to leave, he doesn’t want to be anywhere but beside his beloved’s bedside. Like a selfish and petulant child, he wants to be the first thing Tony sees when he opens his eyes. He wants to be there to yell at him for being ridiculously irresponsible to feel the warmth of his body in his arms. T’challa doesn’t want distance between them when all they’ve had between them all these long months and over a year is nothing but goddamn distance. T’challa is tired of it, he wants none of it, and yet his hands are bound by chords as strong as Adamantium behind his back.

Self loathing tastes about as sharp as envy.

He envies the captain before him, envies his friend before him, hates them for petty reasons because they can stay and he can’t.

Fate, it seems, continues to test him.

Because it is in that moment that the single red dots on his Kimoyo beads tripled, a warning that the king’s presence is a must.

T’challa doesn’t even say goodbye, doesn’t even spare the people in front him a second glance back or another word as he stands and the stool scrapes harshly with a cutting noise on the kitchen tiles. He doesn’t go up to say goodbye to Tony, because right now, he doesn’t think he had the strength to walk out of his room if he sees him lying between the sheets.

Not like this.

So T’challa leaves, and doesn’t bother to take Nyo with him. It puts his mind at ease that at least, in
his absence, Nyo would hopefully be some sort of comfort and message to Tony that his thoughts and pretty much all of him remains by his side.

And if he arrives in Wakanda with rage that had turned into some sort of geostorm in his chest during the duration of the flight, he doesn’t bother to try to hide it.

--

T’challa never freezes.

Being the crown and ruler of his kingdom means he is always under scrutiny and that the smallest of mistakes -- like him suddenly fucking off to handle ‘personal issues’ - does not go unnoticed, no matter how Shuri or the Queen Mother plays their cards and dances to the front line tune. Being the face of the crown also means T’challa is constantly under pressure, he is constantly being questioned, his rule under microscopic observation. The fiasco with the Civil War and his apparent engagement and divorce to Tony Stark (and now the sudden wooing following the divorce -- how dare he bring such insult!), his involvement with other parties like the Avengers, things that has nothing to do with Wakanda -- Wakanda and her hypocrisy, as Killmonger and Klaus had called it -- does not help T’challa’s reputation.

One of the most annoying rules of the crown is that people will always wait to watch you fall, just as much as they will rejoice when you are raised up. It's a thing apparently.

T’challa knows there is no room for error and contrary to the opinion of some that his behavior portrays a weak king, T’challa actually knows how to do his job extremely well. There had been no time for rest upon his arrival that morning. He had gone straight to his room, had cleaned himself up, changed into something more fitting for his station and had gone straight to work.

What happens in the next four days is beyond T’challa.

Six flights and countless meetings, contract signing and discussions later, T’challa finds himself sitting in a car, on his way back to the palace grounds and staring at the floor upholstery, counting the fine fibers of the wave and the flow of the white light of the car’s sleek interior. His mind is a whirlwind of tasks being ticked off, of crisis and agreements being averted, speeches delivered and trade agreements completed. T’challa is aware of the things that happened in the past four days as far as his kingdom is concerned. Anything else beyond that remains a blank mystery to him. If he had eaten, he doesn’t recall what it had been. If he had taken a nap, he isn’t sure how long ago it had happened or if it had happened at all.

He doesn’t get enough time in between to worry about himself because before he knows it, the door to the car is being opened and that is his queue to step out and head into the next big thing that requires his attention.

The next few hours is spent with his generals and tribal leaders, discussing skirmishes across the continent and eradicating the rogue remnants of Thanos’ followers, individuals and armies who had been controlled by the mind-stone. It is a global effort and as always, talk about the outsiders and Wakanda comes up and it is the same spiel all over again. It is the same men and women speaking against and for the sharing and opening up of Wakanda’s resources to the outside, the same words going in circles and nothing that T’challa hadn’t heard before. Had it been a normal day, he would have sat through it because usually, by the end of the cycle of their favorite verbal exchange, they would stop and look to their king and wait for him to reiterate what he has been for the past almost-two-some years of his rule. These men and women before him are his most seasoned, skilled warriors and scientists, tacticians and economists - it will always surprise him that despite how advanced and educated Wakandan’s are, they remain human, flawed and imperfect.
Much like any monarch party elsewhere on the globe.

Honestly, T’challa would let their egos be appeased on their own. Normally, he would sit and watch this with amusement, fondness and wonder how the fuck did his father even do any of this. It is in small silly moments like that T’challa can think back to his father with fondness and wonder what had gone through his mind, if he had felt the same he always feels when this dumbass conversation keeps resurfacing. It is usually his time for reflection and reminiscence.

This time, he slams his pen down quite sharply.

It is enough to bring sudden silence to the table and room. It is enough to make tongues still in their throats as T’challa carefully stands up, straightens his jacket tugs at dark royal plum fabric of his tunic straight.

“You know what you must do.” T’challa simply says, this time not repeating himself and watches as all spines straightens and chins dip in respect as he turns and leaves without a second look behind him.

There is no hesitation in his step, no pause or stutter in his stride as he heads straight to his next meeting, flanked by his assistants who hands him virtual documents to glance at as he asks to be reminded what he is walking into. He isn’t sure whether he is to be relieved that his next meeting is a milder one, as it is simply another summit he must prepare for. The fact that it is taking place in Cairo only means another three hour or so flight that he must prepare for by the afternoon.

T’challa looks at the time and waves of his assistants, telling them to prepare the flight. If he sees the concern or their faces, the moment of hesitation crossing their features, he pays no heed to it and walks straight for his study where he knows he had a few mountains to tackle.

His hand trembling on the door handle of his study should have been his warning.

Shuri -- who had been waiting for him in his study for a chance to speak to him, no doubt about Extremis -- and her very openly concerned expression should have been his second warning.

His hand missing Shuri’s in their usual handshake and greeting that they’ve had since they had been children should have been his third warning.

When the sudden flare at the back of his skull intensifies and with it the sudden nausea, T’challa is barely aware of Shuri’s alarmed call of his name and her hands on his shoulder as the world around him dims and his legs give out underneath him.

If anything, T’challa is going to blame the travel time.

He might have overdone it this time.

Just a little bit.

--

T’challa wakes up to the familiar purples skies and open fields of what he had come to associate as the spiritual plane, the garden of the Bast where in stories, this is where everyone goes to in the afterlife, where they drink from rivers of crisp crystal waters and feast on the sweetest fruits of the gods. This is the second time T’challa sees this in his dreams, the first time being during Eric Killmonger’s threat to the throne and him trying to understand what kind of ruler he wants to be.

Now this.
It seems that when he is at his lowest point, the Bast would bless him with relief by allowing him to visit the gardens in his dreams.

The grass is cool to the touch as he walks through them, fingers splayed and brushing against the tips that tickle the healed and long faded burns on his palms, as he feels the soft earth under his feet. He walks to the familiar tree and stands under its shade, staring up at the spread of stars and stretch of iridescent twilight. Here, where there is no need to be anything, no need to play king, T’challa finds himself leaning against the tree and sliding down the trunk, rumpling the tunic he had on until he feels the ground under him and he draws his knees to his chest, pressing his forehead on his knee caps and his palms at the back of his skull.

Here, alone and in private, with no one watching him, no one waiting for him to make a mistake to challenge him when he had no energy to deal with that kind of garbage right now, here in the privacy of the spiritual planes, T’challa feels the exhaustion seep deeply into his bones. Here, where there is no one to see him be weak, be afraid and be so goddamn needy, he is reminded of the numbness that he had almost forgotten had been sitting like a crevice in the middle of his chest. He thinks of the unmoving figure under the swath of expensive cotton weave, remembers the sound and look of sheer agony on Tony’s face and feels something in his throat tighten as he bites his lower lip and scrunches his eyes shut to stop the grief from spilling out.

He can understand why Tony had risked what T’challa is starting to think is the most foolish endeavor ever.

Foolish because there is guarantee if Tony will wake up, despite there being some sort of comfort that he is at least alive.

T’challa can understand the logic behind Tony’s thinking, why he would not want to be a liability to a king, a weak and sickly man tied to a ruler of one of the most - if not the most - powerful and advanced nation in the world. He can almost see the thought process going on in Tony’s mind and why he had taken the calculated risk. Tony had absorbed Wakandan culture and beliefs like a sponge, had experienced the political game first hand and not in the most ideal way. Tony had known this entire time that if push comes to shove, Wakanda will comes first before anything else. Tony had also known that T’challa would have insisted in having him as his partner and equal and if he had, Tony would be the one thing a lot would pick on and - may the Bast forbid - twist T’challa's arms to compliance. Tony certainly isn’t a foreigner to T’challa’s persistence and stubbornness; their little games and wooing had been a testament to that. And T’challa knows -- gods, how he fucking knows - that Tony had seen the weak link that he would become to T’challa and had chosen to take action instead of just waiting, instead of just trusting T’challa to find a way for him. T’challa knows that Tony did not want to be the one of the choices to pick from if T’challa had to choose between the kingdom and him. Because Tony knows Wakanda comes first.

Tony knows that T’challa does not have the luxury of choosing what his heart decides, of being selfish when he is king. No matter what T’challa tells himself, if the choice had to be done, he knows that Tony knows he’d pick Wakanda.

T’challa is the bravest, the toughest, the most persevering and courageous to many things and willing to make the toughest choices -- this is why he is a good king. When Tony had asked him if he is afraid on the day before they would part ways with their teams to march into Thanos’ fight, he had not been; there is no room for fear when you are fighting for survival, and T’challa had not been worried about Ironman, just like how he had not worried about the Hulk or Doctor Strange or the Guardians from space and countless other heroes because they are the bravest heroes he had ever come to meet. He had not worried about Tony because Tony is a fighter, just like him.
He had told Tony that there is little he fears, little he would hesitate for, that he never freezes.

Tony had smiled at him soft and all understanding on that night, hands on his shoulder and had said in the softest of whispers, "And I hope you never, ever do." Now when T’challa thinks back to it, he realizes Tony must have seen something instinctively that he had missed.

But when it comes to Tony, the man who is etched into ever fiber of his being and his heart, apparently, he freezes.

T’challa hesitates.

If Tony had just fucking waited, if he had just come back to Wakanda with him, T’challa is sure between him, Shuri and the rest of his entire goddamn team, they would have found a safer and less destructive, less painful and torturous way of helping him with his physical limitation.

If Tony had just waited, if he had just goddamn waited.

But here, with the sudden presence before him and a warm familiar hand on the top of his head, T’challa freezes too.

And that is when he cracks.

T’chaka is smiling at him, understanding and sympathy in his eyes and lining his greying features. T’challa feels his heart ache, and shatter and churn and crush under his chest because the truth his, he will never stop missing his father, particularly in times when he feels the most alone, the most weak and the most helpless.

“Baba…” T’challa says shakily, the two cracking syllables a cry for desperate help, begging for strength, and a prayer for some sort of solution and a miracle.

T’chaka looks at him with forgiveness, and god, there is just so much understanding, so much ache in seeing his son in pain on the poor old man's face, and all T’challa can feel is shame. Shame that even spiritually, he can make his father look and feel this way.

In the quiet privacy and blessing of the Bast’s stretch of beautiful land, T’challa gets on his feet and doesn’t measure himself when he embraces his father as tight he is able, and weeps on his shoulder, apology after apology spilling wetly from his lips as he shakes his head and just allows himself to be human.

It’s not like anyone can use this moment of weakness against him anyway.

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The first person T’challa sees is his mother, who is reading an old book with yellowed pages, manicured nails carefully flipping the pages. There is a faint smell of orange tea hanging in the air, and right there on the table, T’challa can see steam wafting up from the cup. His mother’s favorite dates from the Middle East is in a crystal bowl, along with her favorite fresh pistachios from Tunisia. There is a fond smile on her lips as she leafs through her book, something melancholic about her expression.

“You are worse than your father.” She suddenly says.

T’challa blinks and is surprised to feel moisture in his eyes that he quickly reaches up to wipe away his wrist as he carefully sits up on the bed. His mother passes the cup of orange tea towards him without looking up from her book. He takes a careful sip and realizes then how his throat feels a little
swollen. There is a faint ache in his joints but a deep breath tells him that he has no flu-like symptoms and that it is probably just fatigue and exhaustion and his body fighting off something.

“How long have I been asleep?” He asks, and hears the deep raspiness of his faded voice.

“Anymore and you’d be hitting twelve hours. But, I am told by our physicians that you should be back on your feet after another day’s rest. Please finish the tea. You need it.” She says and continues to read.

T’challa does as he is told and understands that he isn’t just drinking orange tea. It isn’t uncommon to have a few drops of the heart-shaped-plant included into their teas when they are at their weakest. T’challa drains the contents of his cup and carefully sets it back on the bedside table. Only then does the queen place a mark in her book and turn to look at him.

“I guess I missed the Cairo summit. How bad do you think that’s going to be?” T’challa asks.

“So-so.” The queen answers, picking a pistachio from her bowl. “Shuri had gone in your place and by extension will be standing in your stead at the Security Council meeting in New York. You, my boy, must gather your strength. Even kings of advanced nations get sick when they are reckless. You are still man, T’challa, even if you are the Black Panther.” She says, punctuating her sentence with a cocked eyebrow.

T’challa says nothing and simply nods as he sinks back under the covers with a soft sigh, closing his eyes. He can still feel the warmth of his father’s embrace. It is enough to make his throat tighten as he manages to ask, “I don’t suppose there’s anything the elders can whip up to make you stop missing the dead?”

“The elders? No. But I hear Cannabis and Heroin has the same effect. We don’t need the elders for that.” She responds, rather tart and with a huff of amusement.

“I wish Baba was here.” T’challa says suddenly, and closes his eyes in hopes to clear the moisture he can still feel behind his eyelids. The loss of his father is still fresh, and with the fall of so many warriors and friends in the war and now Tony who no one knows whether he will wake up or not -- it’s too much. The queen is right; he is only man, after all. “I wanted to marry him.”

“Well what’s stopping you?” The queen asks and T’challa thinks it is expression that robs his mother of her usual witty and sharp responses because he must look rather devastated if his mother is starting to look alarmed. “My boy, what happened?”

T’challa shrugs, meek and helpless under the covers and tells her what happens. He calls Tony selfish, calls him horrible things in his petty anger and helplessness, feels vitriol take hold of his tongue and every fiber of his being. “I wanted to bring him here. I wanted to help him. And now…”

“What was the state of Bob when you left him?”

“Fine.” T’challa answers, scoffing and turning his head away from his mother, suddenly rather irritated with the question.

“Where is your faith, T’challa?” She asks, as she unfolds her legs and carefully stands. “I do not think you are a weak king, nor did you choose your partner poorly. There is hope still. So long as Bob continues to remain strong and alive, then Tony is not lost. Trust in the Bast’s plans, trust in time. There is no shame in being weak when you are hurting. But don’t lose your faith to blind rage and despair or say things you will regret later. This is not the way of the Panther. Have you forgotten?”
T’challa doesn’t answer.

He closes his eyes instead, listens to his mother shuffle about and press a kiss to his temple, murmuring a prayer before she takes her leave, urging him to rest more before the kingdom’s demands comes knocking again.

T’challa sleeps and when he wakes up, he is back on his feet and attending to his duties as king. He checks in with Rhodey and the physician he had left behind in Tony’s care and feels his faith wane a little bit when they tell him there had been no changes in Tony’s state since his departure.

Before he hangs up, he asks Rhodey how Bob is doing.

When Rhodey tells him that Bob had been asleep for the past several days, whatever hope T’challa may have had, diminishes to almost nothing.

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The first thing Tony thinks of when he opens his eyes is how much he would kill for a fucking taco.

He sits up with a little jerk, a little sudden, like a marionette popping up all of a sudden at the waist to a sitting position and okay, maybe it had been a little out of the blue. He’d be scared shitless too if someone who had been lying down had suddenly sat up robotically like the way he had, flanked between two large panthers.

Rhodey is the first to scream, all squawk and loud and freaking out somewhere on his left.

Which makes him jerk a little bit at the scrambling footsteps rushing towards him.

The next thing Tony knows is that his nose hurts and he’s got hands up cradling the bleeding as he looks up at Rhodey who had just, without much thought, punched him squarely in the face.

“What the hell!” Tony yells, and winces as he cradles his nose and keel over, feeling moisture and tasting copper at the back of his very, very dry as sandpaper throat.

“You what the hell!” Rhodey snaps right back.

And really, had it not been for the tears Tony sees Rhodey viciously wipes back with the sleeve of his shirt, Tony would have argued back. It takes ten seconds for the dots to connect and then Tony realizes why.

“Oh.” Tony murmurs and feels his heart drop to the earth’s core. “Oh fuck.”

“Yeah. Oh fuck, fucker!” Rhodey hisses and inhales wetly as he blinks away the tears in his eyes and stares at Tony. Tony watches how his eyes widen, how alarm settles into Rhodey’s features and shakes his head at him. “Oh -- Oh god, Tony. What -- what the hell did you do to yourself?”

“What?” Tony blinks and brings his hand up to his face. Beside him, Bob stirs and yawns widely, while Nyo -- oh my god, oh my god, ohfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck! -- stirs and hops off the bed to stretch.

“Your eyes man…” Rhodey says, and looks a little freaked out. And Rhodey never freaks out.

Tony doesn’t even think twice when he scrambles off the bed only to collapse in a heap on the floor as his legs tries cooperate from heavens knows how many days of no use. Tony is barely aware of Rhodey helping him up and to his feet as he tries to scramble for the mirror on the other end of his room.
It takes a moment to get there, amidst panic and unsureness fueling said panic; the rapid beat of his heart under his ribcage should have hurt, it should have made everything pinch and feel like it’s collapsing inwards the way Tony remembers and likely will never forget. The absence of pain the shortness of breath from a failing heart should have been Tony’s clue that it had worked.

But he stares at the mirror instead and finds himself looking at the unexpected and most obvious change in his appearance that he is not sure how he is even going to justify it anyone, let alone the public.

Staring back at him is his thirty-something younger looking self, smoother skin and thicker hair, scarless chest, arms and shoulders and the sea of his amber eyes flecked with very visible bright eerie blue. He watches as his broken nose stops bleeding, feels it start to repair itself, feels the burn starts to numb in the space of the minutes Tony spends staring at himself and trying very hard to not have a heart attack at the implications of everything he had woken up to, particularly Rhodey’s very vicious reaction.

“Shit …” Tony says and thinks the panic he is starting to feel is definitely justifiable.

“Yeah. Shit is fucking right, asshole.” Rhodey mutters as he carefully sets Tony down to the ground and flops down with him.

“Where’s T’challa?” He asks, thick and unsure.

“He had to go. King-stuff.”

“On a scale of one to ten, how mad are you?” Tony asks.

“Infinity.” Rhodey answers and crosses his arms across his chest. Bob and Nyo takes that moment to nose at Tony, sniffing him before curling around like giant warm pillows and pillowing their heads on his lap.

Tony’s hands finds automatic purchase on the top of their heads, smoothing out the soft black fur under his fingers. “T’challa is gonna dump me, isn’t he?”

“Dude.” Rhodey holds his hands up. “I’d dump you! Listen, no more theatrics. Just call him, okay? He’ll be happy and possibly relieved and I’m hoping he’ll punch you square in the fucking face too.”

“Well, he can’t do that over the phone. I’ll just go fly to him and surprise him instead.”

“Tony, no.” Rhodey says, shaking his head. “I’m serious, no. You flat lined! You were dead! This is not a joke! You had no pulse! Do you think that’s funny?”

“None of you were supposed to get that.” Tony says, standing up all of sudden, feeling tingling in his legs that subsides rather quickly as he begins to pace in front of the closet mirror. “That was wrong and a miscalculation on possibly Friday and maybe, my algorithm--”

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?” Rhodey roars, voice raised and unbridled anger filling the room that it makes both panthers snarl at him. “Please tell me you’re joking --”

“I would never put any of you through that grief for nothing. I didn’t forget Afghanistan, Rhodes! It was wrong, a miscalculation --”

“But you died, Tony!” Rhodey says, sharp and biting and desperate. “You had no pulse! Miscalculation, wrong, whatever it may be, you had known it was a possibility otherwise you would
have never prepared your goddamn half assed of a goodbye! You knew there was a possibility, don’t bullshit me, Tony! You knew!”

“I couldn’t okay -- I couldn’t -- I just -- I couldn’t, okay, James?” Tony says holding his hands out and bring them down sharply to slap soundly against his thighs in a I-give-up motion. “I was dying. I was a dead man anyway, it was only a matter of time. I had to fucking try.”

“Well, good fucking job then! You’re alive! You’re breathing! Hip-hip-fucking-horay! You scared us -- shit man, you scared me -- are you even able to comprehend just what that feels like? Or are you so far gone in your self hate that you think we wouldn’t give a rat’s ass if you were gone?” Tony freezes and looks away, swallowing thickly and unable to look at Rhodey and the tears welling around the corner of his eyes. It's emotional talk. Tony knows this. Tony knows that all this anger, all this yelling and rage and shit is Rhodey coping with the new reality that he didn't just lose his closest friend and brother. Tony knows this and that is the reason he doesn’t fight back; he actually deserves this dressing down. “Don’t you ever, ever, put me through that again. You hear me, Tony?”

Tony clears his throat and dips his head, swallowing past the trembling tightness in his throat. “Y-Yeah…”

Being enveloped in an embrace so tight had been the farthest thing from his mind, but Rhodey does it and Tony is unable to let go. He clings to his friend, feeling alive and well, the aches gone and looking young and different, if not a little alien. It takes one deep breath to remind Tony just what a breath should actually feel like -- he had forgotten what that had felt like after Afghanistan.

“Shuri is here in the big apple. Let me call her and see if we can hitch a ride.” Rhodey says and Tony can only nod against his shoulder. “She might kick your ass. He might dump your ass.”

Tony looks at Nyo who is looking up at him from the ground, ears pressed to his skull.

“I hope he doesn’t…” Tony says and Rhodey’s embrace tightens.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

WHAAAAAAANDAAAATTTTTTTT?!?!?!?!?!?

I am alive; I had posted this last night after having some time to myself and was half asleep. Now that I've revised it, am like WTF HOW DID I POST THIS WITH MISSING WORDS/SENTENCES WTF POTATO SELF! Anyway, this took longer because i wanted to write a wee bit more T'challa POV. Hoping updates can be faster now.

ALSO WHO SAW THE NEW BLACK PATHER TRAILER?! WASN'T THAT JUST BOOOMB!!!!

Also #RoyaCouple anyone? I mean, COME ON! LOOK AT THESE TWO
Thirteen

Chapter Notes

I am my own Beta, might have some typos, yadayadayada. Work is inspired by the amazing marvelingjules @ TUMBLR. Because if it wasn't for her fics that I stumbled upon, I would not have known how much I ship these two.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To say that Tony is surprised that Shuri had agreed to give him a lift to Wakanda is an understatement. To say that Tony is even more surprised that all he had gotten from her when he had boarded the jet is a gold-melting heated death glare and not a single word of greeting is a bigger understatement, considering that the people he is leaving behind on the landing pad had punched him the face (Rhodey) and slapped him across the face (Pepper) for the dick move he had just pulled off. He doesn’t fault the two of them for it; their friendship and bond is a lot deeper and had lasted a lifetime for him to take something like that so personally. Pepper had cried for hours; the slap and the angry reaction had been the catalyst and Tony had done nothing but hold her tight and apologize sincerely from the depths of his heart.

The slap and punch, he can handle (and truth be told, he had deserved it).

Them walking away from him, not so much (definitely; Tony is sure).

Now that the plane is lifting off the landing pad of his estate, Tony can only look from the window at the two faces of whom he can truly - without a shred of doubt - call family lift their palms and wave at him, smiles on both Rhodey and Pepper’s faces, while he waves back with not quite a smile but a grimace that he hopes they don’t really notice through the thick glass of the jet.

The jet fires up into the sky and then there is a humming silence with Shuri looking straight ahead and not sparing him a glance, her jaw tight. The two Dora Milaje remains as tight-lipped as the princess, and had only dipped their heads out of respect and greeting to the former king’s spouse when he had boarded the plane.

Tony welcomes the silent treatment with open arms, keeping to himself towards the back of the jet, where he leans back and cranes his neck to stare at the skies beyond the glass ceiling, as Bob hops up to sit beside him and Nyo begins wandering and sniffing around before finding a seat across and arranging himself for a long nap. Bob doesn’t plop his chin down on Tony’s leg as he always does when Tony is sitting and instead is looking up at him with what Tony thinks is worry. Tony will never stop being surprised at how empathic and connected to him Bob really is. He will never understand the science (no, he is not using the word magic, he is not freaking five) behind Bob’s attachment to him, but he is deeply grateful for his presence. He hadn’t expected the little annoying panther cub that had been gifted to him to be his solid anchor during the times when he had been truly alone.

Even now, despite the presence of his former sister-in-law and the two familiar faces of the detail that had followed him around in the palace grounds when he had been in the same vicinity as the queen, king and princess, Tony still feels alone in his nervousness and apprehension that is escalating the more distance the jet puts between itself and New York.
“I’m glad you’re here, buddy.” Tony whispers and Bob’s ears flattens to the back of his skull in response as he brings up a large and most certainly very dangerous paw on Tony’s knee cap; Tony takes the offering and carefully starts smoothing down the fur, feeling the softer and smoother pads under it as he works through the nervousness that he really can’t shake off.

T’challa had seen that message.

T’challa had been there to see his indeed flat-lined self in all its shitty glory.

Tony had gone through the surveillance, had watched the horror on the faces of both his friends and ex-husband and really, his current nervousness is justified. Tony isn’t afraid of the anger, or the punch he may or may not get (he’s still on the fence on that because his bond with T’challa is not like what he and Rhody shares), the angry words and accusation he may hear, or being called selfish, self-centered, callous, uncaring – he had a list a mile long of things people had accused him of, and Tony doesn’t truly disagree. Tony isn’t afraid of any of that; he’s been subjected to accusations and name calling since he had learned to walk for fuck’s sakes.

Tony is afraid of T’challa turning his back on him, of throwing in the towel and realizing that he, Tony Stark, is indeed, a waste of his time. Tony is dreading to see T’challa’s back walking in the opposite direction, to see the look in his eyes when that realization sinks in.

God, he doesn’t want to get dumped.

He doesn’t want T’challa to leave him (which, okay, is a little selfish on his part, considering the stunt he had just pulled off with Extremis; he can justify the ninety-eight percent success rate).

Tony wants this like he’s never wanted anything before.

He wants to maintain whatever it is that he and T’challa had managed to build between them, wants to strengthen that bond, wants to hold him and kiss him and feel his warmth under his palms and taste the sweetness of T’challa’s favorite hibiscus tea at the tip of his tongue. Tony wants the bickering, the snark, the incredible intelligence inside that brain of his, the confidence, strength and the sheer beauty of T’challa’s physicality to be within his reach. Always, always within his reach because shit, if T’challa dumps him, maybe, just maybe Tony will be able to recover (yeah, no you won’t, stop kidding your stupid ass self; not this time). But if T’challa is to disappear from his life completely, not even a whisper of him, Tony doesn’t think there’s any amount of cushioning that can prevent him from breaking, well, everything in his body from that fall.

Not like T’challa dumping won’t be the bad fall per se.

Bob’s sudden rumbling and throaty whine makes Tony blink and he quickly releases the death grip he had on Bob’s paw and wraps his arms around his neck instead, apologizing for the treatment.

Well. If T’challa dumps his stupid wise ass, he hopes he can still keep Bob.

He’ll at least have Bob.

Bob will never leave him and will love him unconditionally, right?

The stretch of the Atlantic Ocean beneath them goes on for what feels like hours. Tony knows that as opposed to the over twelve-hour regular flight time, Wakanda’s jets do not take as long. He knows that it will only be in a matter of hours before they land and as the minutes tick by, his nervousness does not cease in its continuous escalation.

Like the intelligent man he is, Tony decides to distract himself with work and pulls out a StarkPad to
go through the changes Friday had managed to log with regards to his new… evolution.

He had tested the speed of the healing factor while packing light for his trip, anticipating a more negative outcome rather than positive one, when he had used a pen knife to cut open his palm. The cut that wouldn’t require stitches per se but enough to wear a tight dressing would normally take a week maximum to heal (give or take); it had closed up and healed itself in thirty minutes. Given how the cut is about as bad as getting skinned knees after a bad bike fall, Tony thinks that the speed is quite brilliant. It isn’t comparable to the Super Soldier serum or Steve and Bucky’s ability to just bounce back up even with fractured ribs or what have you, but Tony will take what he can. At least the aches and bruises after using the suit in battle (and getting thrown and knocked around like a doll) would fade faster or within a day or two. Tony remembers being sore for weeks at a time and really, he is not going to miss that. So hooray for minimized physical pain (somehow).

He looks at the data Friday had compiled, sees how he looks more like he isn’t a day over thirty. A slide show had been prepared comparing his old public photos with the ‘mug shots’ he had taken in his lab. The difference is that the person in those public photos had been a heavy drinker and a little more bulky as opposed to Tony’s current self; Tony is slightly more slender after all the surgeries and his twenty-five pound weight-drop recovering and lack of ability to sustain prolonged resistance training to maintain his former strength and bulk after the surgeries. The man in the paparazzi photos may have had looked good, but his drinking habit had shone through, if his slightly pasty skin is anything to go by. He may be smaller compared to the photos, but he looks healthier and a whole lot better. Tony supposes that a fully functioning liver does that to a person.

Tony can bullshit his way through a so called healthy lifestyle to justify his younger looking self.

But he cannot bullshit his way through the newly acquired color of his irises.

At first, colored contacts had been the obvious solution and it had worked in covering up the specs of eerie blue up until Tony had decided to try out the other feature he had included in his programming: accessing his networks. With a thought.

Like, psychic level kind of shit.

Tony loses all his shit when it actually fucking works.

Accessing his own network and Stark satellites had been… Tony isn’t sure how to describe it. It is like opening a door to unlimited possibilities, the World Wide Web about as vast as outer space. His thoughts and commands are about as sentient as Friday, except he is responsible for everything he dishes out. He can perform mathematical calculations, prototype simulations, server upgrades and repairs, commanding the suits and his Iron Legion all while also watching funny cat videos and streaming music from his playlist. Somewhere in all that, he had even temporarily reprogrammed his coffee machine.

The downside had been the freaky blue-irises, which apparently just comes out when accessing Extremis in general; hence, Tony’s lovely and fully developed prototype glasses with holographic masking had been born. Comes in all of his favorite shades too! Tony had been so proud of the little chip he had installed in all his eyewear. It isn’t like Tony had enjoyed wearing contacts. Having been at the receiving end of having so many foreign objects in his bodies had put him off even that since Afghanistan, anyway

Possibilities are always endless if you’re brave enough to think outside the box and Tony had always thought outside of the said box.

That and if Tony is being honest with himself, there is no way he can call himself human with this
particular upgrade; after Thanos, he’ll take the healing factor and his newly ‘installed’ ability to access his networks with open arms.

He reads the reports on himself one more time before attempting to actually respond to Stark Industries related work and the PR nightmare still surrounding the Avengers. He reviews what had been flagged to him and in his attempt to respond; his access to a Stark network is masked and blocked by the confines of the jet.

Wakandan tech.

Right.

Tony forgets how ridiculously incompatible Wakandan tech is with anything that isn’t… well, Wakandan. He tries to access the jet’s network and when that doesn’t work, he sighs and decides, well, if his StarkPad won’t do the job, he certainly can now with his new upgrade. Tony is confident that he had a couple of satellites that is within range from the damn Atlantic Ocean. So he straps on his big boy boots, clears his throat, sucks in a few breaths and mentally gives himself a mini pep-talk before leaping through the mental door and accessing Extremis.

Of course, if Tony’s life had been simple, he wouldn’t be Tony Stark.

This is where it all goes to absolute shit.

What should have been an open doorway to the white space of Stark Network, or even – in hindsight – should have been the black as space and dotted with all the pockets of information of the World Wide Web, Tony gets slammed with static that feels like a physical blow, jarring and horrendously painful, that for a moment, Tony feels his world go black. Tony reels back from the force of the blow, feeling his head jerk back and his shoulder blades slam against the backdoor of the jet. The mental slam had felt like a sudden burst of something psionic, like a sudden blast of a mind numbing migraine, amplified a thousand times. Tony feels his mouth open, feels his lungs contract and expand out with a scream as he drowns in the static of the jet’s security and firewall, and all he can think is off, off, turn it off, turn it off, out of my, out of my, out of my fucking way!

It happens in an instant, and then Tony is seeing the insides of the jet through the crisp HD feeds of the cameras. He sees himself suspended midair, along with the Dora Milaje, Shuri and both Bob and Nyo. He watches with horror as the jet had gone completely offline, thrusters and engine switched off and they are plummeting at alarming speeds straight for the Atlantic Ocean. Tony watches himself slam against the ceiling, unmoving and lifeless, eyes glowing a brilliant blue, his palms pressing against his head in an attempt to drown out the deafening static and that’s when he panics.

His survival instincts kicks into over drive, and his initial thought is to fire up the Ironman suit and get Shuri to safety. What should have been the suit activating and coming to him does not take place.

Tony watches with horror as nanites begin to assemble around him, encasing him in red and gold in what he recognizes as his Bleed Edge Armor Concept. He watches as they crawl out of his skin and go online, arc reactor glowing like an SOS beacon.

And the panic turns to sheer terror.

Tony hears himself scream at the sight of the freak of nature he had become, finds himself tearing through the sea of static and taking the entire Wakandan security down like a child tearing through Christmas wrapping. He sees it all, all the fine binary weave, fueled by Vibranium-based technology and he cuts through them. He shreds those coding apart because Wakandan tech is strong, impenetrable, but Extremis makes Tony sentient when he is latched onto a network; it stands no
chance against Ironman.

The screams from Shuri and Dora Milaje comes to a startling halt when the jet sputters back to life and the thrusters fire up, suspending them with a jolt midair, a hundred feet above ocean level and holding steady, and only holding steady because Tony is barely keeping a hold on the controls.

Let it not be said that things don’t explode in epic proportions when Tony Stark is involved.

The intention to connect to the Stark Network happens just as Tony manages to scramble hold of the jets control through its own networks, whatever is left of the jets security is now nothing but a wasteland of broken and shredded digitised codes. When the static of the jet’s firewall had been deafening, Tony goes mad when he is hit by the noise from all across the globe. He drowns in bank transactions, registry tills, restaurant orders and army codes, school exams, traffic feed in languages that scramble until it dissolves to loud simultaneous noise, car engines, cellphone conversation, freaking landline conversations – Tony can’t handle it. It invades every nook and cranny of his mind until he can’t even hear himself anymore.

Tony screams for help.

He screams for T’challa.

(Turn it off, turn it off, turn it off, turnitoff, turnitoff!)

One moment, Tony is drowning in billions worth of binary data and network noise, the next he is falling from the ceiling of the jet and onto the floor, armor gone and flesh and bone slamming against metal and sharp lines, just as the jet drops belly down onto the Atlantic Ocean. Waves rise and crash against the glass, and Tony finds himself curled on his side, palms against his ears and absolute blessed silence.

The hands on his person makes him scramble backwards, blinking away the last of the mental images of the World Wide Web from behind his eyelids as he finds himself being man handled and picked up off the floor by Okoye and Shuri, who he starts to push away, noise of protests leaving his mouth as he slaps and shoves away hands that are trying to help him until Shuri grabs him by the face and holds him steady.

She is saying something, Tony can see her lips move, a pinch between her brows as she repeats something to him, over and over again. Tony is staring at the gash on her temple, bleeding from where she must have hit something as the jet had been thrown left and right as he had tried to gain control of it. Sound gradually returns to his ears and he hears her calling his name, a hand on his cheek.

“—can you hear me? Tony!” Shuri asks, giving him a gentle and very tentative shake.

Tony opens his mouth and the first word leaves his mouth is an apology. “I’m sorry —” Tony looks around and spots Naeema assisting the panthers, first aid box beside her and Okoye looking like she won’t exactly be bruise free after their little air tumble. “Oh my god, I am so sorry — your highness, are you okay?”

Shuri exchanges a look with Okoye and they both help Tony to his feet, which, he is surprise to notice, isn’t exactly working because one of his legs is still encased in the Ironman boot. Tony is able to lift the powered off metal with ease, which makes him blink in open shock because that thing alone weighs a lot.

It should have been impossible for him without the power coursing through its circuitry.
Okoye sits him back on the passenger bench, as Shuri dismisses her to the jet’s controls. Tony holds perfectly still, gaze still locked on the Ironman boot of his left leg and listens to the jet fire up and come to life, thrusters activating and water being pushed out from under them. It takes a few minutes but they are airborne in no time like nothing fucking happened.

Tony doesn’t dare move.

“Do I want to know?” Shuri asks, giving Tony a pointed look.

“Extremis…” Tony says, and feels himself slowly deflate like balloon rapidly losing all its air. He brings his hands to his face and shakes his head, fingers clenching until his knuckles go white. “I think I might have messed up the coding.”

“I see.” Shuri murmurs, and Tony shudders when he feels the warmth of her palm on his back. “Well, let’s try not using Extremis while on a plane over water. Let’s wait till we’re on dry land, okay?”

“Y-yeah…” Tony nods, a shake in his voice that he can’t quite stop.

Well.

It’s not like he ever does anything by fucking halves, right?

--

Wakandan air is about as sweet as Tony remembers it to be years ago. The moment it fills his lungs, dare he say, it had felt like coming home. He takes a moment to stand under the embrace of the setting sun, staring at orange glow of the horizon until he feels Okoye’s fingers on his shoulder, and a small barely there amused smile on her face when she tells him that the car is waiting for him.

Tony follows confident strides of the Dora Milaje and steps into the vehicle, sitting himself next to Shuri, both panthers lounging across from them on the bench and expansive leg space.

The ride from the hangar to the royal grounds is short, no more than five minutes at best and Tony’s nervousness, if anything, had reached new peaks. Shuri must have sensed it because she starts talking about Extremis, her study of it and her opinion of how it is quite possibly the beginning of evolution, going by what had happened in the plane and how Tony had used it on himself.

It is like opening a magical door and out spills the unicorns, hopping bunnies, sparkles and magic.

Because Tony stops thinking of the impending doom that is T’challa dumping his sorry ass that is possibly minutes away from happening and instead starts brainstorming the thousands of possibilities he can think of from the top of his head.

“Organs can be grown from it! Think about it, we can minimize organs being rejected by the body for those that require transplants! If developed and properly programed, the nanites can fuse and utilize the person’s tissue and regenerate! I can think of a hundred things apart from organs! Think about it! Infertility, cancer, maybe even comatose patients, brain damage from accidents – our soldiers and veterans don’t have to be freaking limbless, blind or deaf! Holy shit, I think Rhodey can actually fucking walk! Like really walk! He wouldn’t even need the brace no matter how small I’ve managed to reduce it to – he’d walk!” Tony can’t stop the giddiness in his tone. “Even Barnes’ limb can be freaking regrown and if anything, Extremis can probably flush out the programming for goddamn good and –“

Tony shuts up abruptly when he sees Shuri look at him with the softest look on her face, a smile that
isn’t quite there as his brain catches up to what just rolled past his tongue.

The fact that it had even come to him isn’t lost to Tony.

He looks away, staring at weave of his denim pants and swallowing thickly, past the large sizeable lump that tastes a little like embarrassment and a little like bitterness.

“You are a good man.” Shuri says and takes hold of Tony’s hand. “My brother really has chosen well.”

Tony feels himself smile for a second before it just falls from his face. “Don’t hold your breath, princess.” Tony swallows. “I’ve learned that sometimes, keeping your expectations extremely low or non-existent cushions the blow a little bit more.”

“Tony –“

“But hey, uh, if it doesn’t work out, which I will say won’t surprise me considering what a dick move it had been, we’re still good right? I mean, we can still talk and you know, brainstorm and shit, I mean you’re great, and you know, I’d love to continuously hear your ideas and –“ Tony feels the word still when Shuri wraps her arms around him in a tight embrace.

“This is not goodbye.” Shuri says, firm and with conviction. “After you’ve met my brother, we can discuss about maintaining communication if necessary.”

Tony wants to say he’s scared, wants to say he isn’t dreading the meeting. The car had come to a stop a while back, and he can see the attendees waiting for them on ceremony to exit the car.

“Wish me luck, then?” Tony asks, unsure.

Shuri pulls back and presses her hands on Tony’s face, nodding and smiling at him. “He will be in his study. Your presence will be announced beforehand. Good luck…”

Tony sucks in a breath and turns to exits the car the same time Shuri pushes her side of the door open.

Kojo’s familiar face appears and Tony finds himself smiling widely when he sees him, as he is assisted and escorted into the royal palace. When asked if he wishes to retire to his room for the moment, Tony shakes his head and asks if it is possible to see the king first. The look Kojo gives him is one of sympathy and uncertainty and he is promptly dismissed as Okoye asks Tony to follow her to the king’s study.

Tony can feel his feet turn to lead with every step of the way. He can feel his heart start to race under his ribcage and if he hadn’t known better, he’d say that the pinch he’s feeling is nothing but phantom pain from having lived for over a decade with a failing heart and it really is just his nervousness that this is it. This is the end of the line, the deciding the factor, the last bunny out of the proverbial goddamn hat. It is going to be now or never and really, he’s had people and therapists tell him that his coping mechanisms are rather self-destructive. Well. It works. So Tony tells himself that the outcome of this conversation is hardly going to be positive, tells himself until he believes it (no matter how painful) witch each step he takes that T’challa would be better than having some billionaire fuck boy in his arm. T’challa would do better to move on from him and look elsewhere, to maybe consider taking on a lover who can be an optimal spouse because as king, there is no room for self. T’challa is going to need – at some bloody point – to cough up some heirs that doesn’t involve DNA and a laboratory. That heir can actually be created the good old fashioned way, without hassle and a headache and an entire team to keep watch.
Really, the reasons on the Why-T’challa-Should-Just-Dump-Tony list makes a whole lot more sense that the reasons listed under Why-T’challa-Should-Continue-With-Tony.

Love doesn’t win everything.

Love is for children.

And even though Tony knows, from the depths of his being that he loves T’challa, cares for the smug, intelligent, hard working, fair and just, honest and fearless man, love is never, ever good enough.

Never.

Tony promptly walks into Okoye’s back when she halts before T’challa’s door, his heart suddenly leaping to his throat, because shit. Shit. This is happening. It’s really happening.

Tony finds himself praying that T’challa isn’t in.

Hopes that he is in the middle of something that he can’t interrupt at the moment, because goddamnit, why didn’t he just go to his room? Why didn’t he just take a moment to gather and compose his shit so he can be at a better mental state and capacity to handle this fucking conversation? Tony is not ready to have his heart trampled on. Especially not after that freak out on the jet!

Who is he kidding?

He deserves every goddamn stone pelted in his direction.

Okoye pretends that he didn’t just walk into her and knocks and walks in to announce her arrival to the king and whatever else she needs to say. Tony hears her say that she had brought company and that T’challa should attend to this company now.

Tony hears T’challa sigh and agree and when Okoye opens the door for Tony to step in, Tony feels the ground suddenly disappearing from under him.

He remains frozen by the doorstep, just like how T’challa is frozen by his desk, eyes wide and looking absolutely stricken. Tony watches as the color drains from his face, watches as he remains like an unmoving ice sculpture, and how his chest stills, no breath going in, and nothing coming out. He watches as T’challa looks at him like he is seeing a ghost, even as Tony steps into the office, and even as Okoye leaves and shuts the door behind her. Tony remains where he stands, feeling his throat go drier than the sands of Afghanistan, his eyes get hotter than the iron he had melted and shaped in that god forsaken cave. And god, T’challa is standing, he’s fucking standing from his seat very slowly, taking unsure steps around the desk and closing the distance between them. T’challa isn’t fucking walking in the other direction, he isn’t even turning his back against Tony.

God, Tony can’t stand it.

He can’t.

So he’s shaking his head, shaking his head as T’challa closes the distance between them, wraps his fingers around the curves of Tony’s shoulders and all Tony wants to do is just put more distance between them, bracing himself for what is to come.

I’m so, so sorry, Tony wants to say.

Except he can’t.
The words doesn’t form.

Because he watches T’challa come apart right before his eyes. He watches as all that control, all that air of regality leave him, watches a confident man reduced to something incredibly small and vulnerable, as T’challa shakes him, shakes his head at Tony as something rolls past his tongue, something so incorrigible that Tony finds himself just standing there as T’challa sinks to his knees, arms wrapping around his middle as the sounds that wrenches itself past his throat drows around the fabric of Tony’s shirt.

The king is on his knees before Tony, weeping like a child amidst chaos and Tony can feel guilt seep into his bones. Tony is on his knees too, gathering the king into his arms and pressing his face against his shoulders, cocooning him in an embrace. He is on the floor because the floor is no place for a king, no one should ever have to kneel for the likes of Tony Stark.

(You don’t deserve him.)

Tony can only apologize over and over again, the words lost amidst the sobs that tears past T’challa’s throat, as Tony simply swallows whatever it is that comes out in waves from T’challa’s body, absorbs the quakes and shudders as if they are his own and just holds on tight.

He doesn’t let go, because T’challa doesn’t let go.

Tony doesn’t think he ever can let him go.

Not after this.

T’challa pulls back when he manages to gather some form of wit to press their foreheads together, his face wet, eyes swollen and with a shaking voice, he says, “I held you in my arms. You were dead. You left me.” T’challa shakes his head, and Tony watches as T’challa’s lower lip trembles and the words come out garbled and wet, thick and so, so shattered. “You left me.”

“I didn’t meant to…” Tony says, his vision blurry with the moisture gathering in his eyes, because what else can he say?

Tony thinks it might have been the right-wrong thing to say because T’challa just shakes his head at him.

But doesn’t let him go.

--

One would think, after such a reunion, that they would be inseparable.

They do not fall into each other, they do not get a fairytale evening.

What happens is this:

When T’challa manages to dry his face and Tony had managed to gather his wits, they both pick themselves up from the floor and part ways. T’challa tells him that he will see him at dinner, that he hopes Tony can join them at the table.

Truth be told, Tony had every intention of showing up at dinner once he had left T’challa’s office to be escorted to his room by Okoye, who, he finds out, had stood like a sentinel outside the door and refused to budge to have anyone disturb the king. He had taken a shower, had picked out the attire for the evening and had taken a seat in one of the chairs. He had a few hours to kill and honestly, it had not been his fault that he had passed out without realizing, Bob’s head pillowed on his lap and
Nyo lounging by the foot of his chair. Nyo had not left his side at all, when Tony had assumed he'd return to his master.

He wakes up to a hand on the curve of his neck, stiffening and reacting in a way fitting for someone who's had a hand in his chest, and really, he hadn't meant to slap T'challa’s hand away. The moment his mind catches up to what he is seeing, Tony is on his feet and looking at the time.

Dinner had been four hours ago.

“Shit. I - I didn’t mean to miss dinner -- fuck .” Tony brings both hands to his face and presses the heels of his palms to his eyes. “Goddamnit.”

“If it’s alright with you, I would like to stay here tonight.” T'challa says, and Tony looks at him like he’s grown two heads.

“Here.” Tony looks around his lavish room, at the bed that is far too big for him and the dim lights and the fact that he had fallen asleep in his robe in anticipation to actually go to dinner after looking through a few e-mails or something. “With me .”

“Yes.” T’challa says, stepping closer. “With you. I do not wish to have any more distance between us, I don’t want to be away from you, I cannot bear to be away from you. Leaving you while you were in a coma had to be the hardest thing and I just --” T’challa bites his lower and looks at the floor. “-- I can’t be away from you, not when you’re here. Forgive my weakness . I --”

Tony doesn’t even think twice when he closes the distance between them, doesn’t even hesitate when he brings his hands to the back of T’challa’s head and kisses him. He doesn’t think twice when he deepens it, tastes the familiar and distance sweetness of hibiscus, and he thinks that T’challa must have washed his dinner down with a warm cup of it earlier. Tony kisses him and steals T’challa’s breath for himself like he is the only thing he’ll ever need.

Tony half expects T’challa to pick him off the ground the way he had in that hotel room weeks ago and slam him down the bed.

Instead, the kiss slows down, until they gradually part for breath and they’re standing there, under the glow of the lamp light, in each other’s arms with their foreheads pressed together.

“When I thought I lost you…” T’challa begins, closing his eyes and shaking his head. “I felt like I had been someone else.” Tony opens his mouth to protest but T’challa covers his lips with a finger and shakes his head. “Do you know how much you’ve come to mean to me? Do you understand that I can only be myself when I’m with you? Do you know how much that means to me? How much you mean to me? When you said your goodbye, you said being around me made you feel like a champion.” T’challa shakes his head and pulls back, and Tony watches as T’challa slowly lowers himself to his knees.

Tony can feel something that he can’t name start to rise from his stomach and bloom in his chest, as his breath comes to a standstill somewhere in his throat. “T’challa --”

“You bring me joy, Tony Stark. Joy in this role and title and that is a rare thing. You’ve always brought me joy, even back then, all those years ago. You always had that ability. I am tired of distance, I am tired of dancing around each other, of not being able to have you, and there is not a day that I wish I never signed those papers.” Tony hears his own words, hears his goodbye in T’challa’s words and feels his head shake at their own accord. “I wish to change that, I’ve wanted to for a long while and I never hid this from you. And if you’ll have me, all of me, everything that I am, all this , the pomp, the responsibility, the weight of the crown, me , my family, my people, my name
and my country, if you would have me, then marry me.” T’challa says, breathless and flushed, eyes wide and nervous, a man baring every bit of himself to no one other than the Merchant of Death himself and Tony can the ground under him start to open up.

This is unexpected.

T’challa is supposed to dump him!

“Yes,” Tony says, blinking at himself as the syllable rolls past his tongue; it is quickly followed by incredulous gasp and a choking breath as he brings his hand to his mouth. “Holy shit, you’re not dumping me, you’re fucking proposing.” Tony laughs, laughs as the dread and fear melts away to leave nothing by joy and headiness in his wake. “Yes. And before you question my answer and blame it on emotions, I know what I’m walking into, I’m stronger, I’m better, I can be the partner who will always have your back. By god, I will always -- always have your back. I promise.”

T’challa’s smile and the sound of his relief, Tony thinks, is something he will never, ever forget.

That smile, that look on T’challa’s face, makes everything worth it.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

OMG WHEN WILL THIS FIC END I DON'T EVEN KNOW ANYMORE. THAT LAST BIT WAS UNPLANNED TBH -- THIS FIC HAS A MIND OF ITS FUCKING OWN AND I AM JUST -- IDEK OK.

Sooooo, I was expecting smut but I got this instead. Wedding hijinks anyone? I mean it's supposed to be a rom-com.

THANK YOU FOR READING. GOOD LORD, I AM JUST SO GRATEFUL YOU GUYS ARE STILL READING! <3
Fourteen

Chapter Notes

I am my own Beta, might have some typos, yadayadayada. Work is inspired by the amazing marvelingjules @ TUMBLR. Because if it wasn't for her fics that I stumbled upon, I would not have known how much I ship these two.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“This is an outrage! You cannot marry him!”

It takes strength that T’challa does not know where it stems from to simply just sit there on his chair at the head of the table, canting his head to the side and regarding the disgruntled council member who, much to his steadily mounting disappointment, remains a thorn on his side. He had been one of the more vocal members to outwardly reiterate Wakanda’s closed off borders to the world, with traditionalist thinking that Wakanda owes the world nothing, that they shouldn’t meddle with the world’s politics and had also been – surprise, surprise – a thorn on T’chaka’s side. He is all bark and no bite, likes to stir up discussion when there shouldn’t be any, enjoys ruffling feathers and honest to god deserves a very powerful high five to his smug and shitty face.

Technically, one cannot be deemed harmless if one is being annoying; Itshe is a very annoying person and just to give himself comfort as opposed to actually punting his empty goblet at his head, T’challa tells himself that his name suits his personality. Itshe is about as immovable as a rock in his ways of fueling controversial fires.

And while his marriage to Tony stands to gain rather than lose, it is, at the end of the day, a rather controversial marriage. Unlike the first time around, one may excuse said controversy to T’challa sowing the last of his oats, of wild youth and a threat at the time to desecrate the crown. That marriage had caused quite the conversation, and while getting Tony to divorce had been quite easy (all things considered), the truth of the fact remains that they had parted ways, they had gone through the entire ordeal of divorce, only to want to walk right back into a marriage that in all likeliness, isn’t exactly feasible. T’challa had duties to the crown as well as his future spouse; loyalties to Wakanda must be unbending and true, where the crown and her people comes first above all else. Someone like Tony Stark would instantly clash because Tony Stark’s first and foremost had his priorities and fortune elsewhere. Never mind that he answers to the world security council, never mind that he had actively pushed for the Accords, to honor borders, respect world leaders and their people and push for accountability and still walk out of it willing to serve his country guns blazing after being stabbed in the back – hell, never fucking mind that he had saved Wakanda’s fucking king.

Itshe gets yanked back down to his seat and gets a pointed look from one of the strongest women T’challa knows. Ngonyama gives Itshe a glare, a look that is cautioning as it is silencing as T’challa watches, with very slight amusement in the stormy sea of his rising temper, how Itshe actually freaking listens.

“Your highness, while we are aware that you have cautioned us of your intentions to woo Tony Stark, we were under the impression that while his highness is no doubt a worthy partner to anyone who catches your attention, we had not expected Tony Stark to reciprocate. After all, if the intention
is to stay married, why get divorced at all? I believe I can address Itshe’s concerns, as well as some, that while it is your right to choose your partner, we believe that past actions have made us... concerned.” Ngonyama is also a snake. “If your intention is to stay married, if you had foreseen the extent of your affections to begin with, if there had been even the slightest percentage that your affections—Itshe scoffs at the word and gets a glare for his efforts. “—were to be returned, then why divorce to begin with? This isn’t a behavior that is condoned by our people.”

“We are not Hollywood!” Itshe comments.

There are slight murmurs around the table and shifting of asses on chairs, fabrics shuffling and throats being cleared. T’challa sees then and there that if he wants this marriage to work, if he wants to truly be Tony Stark’s lawfully wedded spouse, to have no distance between them, not only does he have to go through this entire table, he had to convince the entire kingdom.

And that’s only the Wakadan can of worms.

T’challa does not want to think of what Tony will have to face if they are to go globally public.

T’challa is king and Wakanda a safeguarded haven, he won’t be the one bearing the brutal front of that publicity; it’s going to be all on Tony.

(You’re starting to wonder if your selfishness and want is worth putting Tony through all that.)

“Is it his loyalty that you are questioning?” T’challa asks.

“Forgive us, your highness, but yes.” Ngonyama responds and there are collective nods from around the room, the council meeting his gaze unflinchingly.

“It is not an unfounded concern.” T’challa says.

“Even if he is what you say, even if he is loyal and wouldn’t bring harm to the crown, there is still the matter of him being a worthy warrior. He may be Ironman, but a man who relies solely on technology and a primitive Iron suit is not a warrior. He – no, your highness, Tony Stark is first and foremost a civilian despite his current status of Superhero.”

T’challa manages to not roll his eyes; he had been warned by his mother. When it is time to choose a royal spouse, it is a given that the council will find every excuse in the book to stop a marriage from happening in favor of pushing forward one of their tribes’ own to be the crowned spouse. It is primitive politics despite all their advancements and T’challa wishes he can fault them. He truly does. But there is no written rule about how one can go about choosing their spouses. Technically, he can rebuke every one of them with their own laws that are filled with loopholes that can work in his favor if he chooses his words right.

T’challa knows it’s misplaced hope for their own eligible daughters and sons.

T’challa knows it’s all static noise.

And yet he also knows that he is obligated to address these concerns – concerns that should have been raised when he had made his intentions to woo back his divorced husband months ago. Apparently, Tony Stark doesn’t merit the courtesy of being taken serious by his council. One can look at it this way: Tony Stark is T’challa’s booty call.

The council falls quiet, several pairs of eyes regarding T’challa’s every movement. It is Zuri who carefully stands, all grace and voice steady, taking attention away from his age and the slight hunch of his shoulders. “If Mister Stark can prove his dedication, I am sure the council will be appeased and
by extension, the people, will give your union its deserved blessing. If Mister Stark is willing to learn
the ways of our people, then to make him less of a threat and a liability, I am willing to step into the
role of mentorship and raise him up to the status of warrior that the council and our people can
accept. You must understand, your highness, that it is not lost to us that he is intelligent, ahead of his
time with a mind that will benefit Wakanda and her people. We are aware of his father’s sins and
treachery; we are also aware that he is the last of the Starks. When you had announced your
intentions to us, you had granted us permission to look into his background for unsolicited heirs he
may have had. I would like to remind the council that Tony Stark’s background checks results
remains the same. If he can prove himself a true Wakandan warrior, if the Panther gods deems him
worthy, then he can most definitely best some of our own, and prove to stand on equal footing with
you, your highness.”

T’challa blinks. “Me.”

“Well, surely this can be a compromise even on your end, hmm?” Zuri asks, smiling serenely.

T’challa can feel his world spin. “I shall speak to him and convey this. Do the terms gain a
unanimous favor from the council?” There are collective if not a touch hesitating nods and gestures
of respect, wrists being crossed to signify their unanimous agreement. “Then once I have a response
in favor of this, training is to commence immediately.”

The council chambers empty swiftly, with hushed and hurried footsteps leaving T’challa behind with
a lingering Zuri. T’challa gives him a look and shakes his head, picking up the legislation documents
they had been reviewing earlier before the shit-storm of his proposal had hit the proverbial fan.

“Your father would be proud of you,” Zuri says, voice raspy from age and likely from the pipe he so
favors these days. “Keeping that straight face for so long. I have no doubts even T’chaka would have
cracked in the face of that.”

“Even if he accepts your mentorship and he makes it through the training,” T’challa tucks the papers
under his arm and turns to regard Zuri with the anger and irritation he had been keeping a tight lid
on. It pours out in heat waves, unbridled and raw, raking in his tone and make his throat sting. “I will
not raise a fist against him. I will not bring him harm, not intentionally. And certainly not for fucking
sport to appease minds of fools who still think living in a box after everything that has happened,
after Thanos and his children had practically come bashing on our front doors, is the way to truly
live!”

“Then you better hope he can hold his ground better than you clearly think, because my boy, getting
them to agree to openly marry a foreigner is going to be an ongoing battle. You’ll have more chances
aging and seeing fifty, if you live that long, than be able to call Tony Stark your husband, so long as
you remain king.” Zuri shakes his head at T’challa, grasping him by the shoulders. “This is an
opportunity. The council agreed to something thinking that Tony is weak, tired and too
damaged.

Don’t you think this is the perfect time to prove them wrong?”

T’challa blinks.

Oh.

Oh.

“I will return to you with a response.” It is all T’challa says as he feels hope swell like a hot air
balloon in his chest.

“If he agrees, tell him to meet me at dawn in the north-western training grounds. Best if he sticks to
tea and fruit for breakfast.” Zuri says, reaching into his inner pocket and pulling out his long pipe,
shoulders hunching further as he begins to hobble down the hallway, purposely showing his age as he adjusts his grip on his cane and completely fooling the entire world around him. T’challa knows better than to believe the front; Zuri still remains one of Wakanda’s best trackers and warriors. “Good evening, your highness.”

T’challa sighs and turns to stare out at the sun that is almost gone from the horizon before leaving the room through a separate door and hurrying to Shuri’s wing of the palace. He finds them both hunched over some codes and watching test render runs of tissue being re-grown with a reformulated version of Extremis. T’challa only knows of this because it had been the hottest topic at the breakfast table, with Tony and Shuri filling the dining hall with their excited formulae chatter and barely touching a thing from their plates. The chatter ceases when Shuri catches the expression on his face, straightening from where she is hunched over the holographic projections on the table. Tony’s chatter trails off and when he turns, the confusion drops and makes way to the brightest smile that does nothing to slow the quickening beats of T’challa’s heart.

By the Bast, T’challa had it so, so bad.

“Hey Crookshanks,” Tony greets and T’challa’s gaze is drawn to the barely visible dimpling of his cheeks. The smile doesn’t hold though and gradually falls from his face to match the pensive look on Shuri’s. “You okay?”

“You’re going to have to fight me.” T’challa says. And then adds, “Without the armor.”

Tony laughs. Laughs like it’s the funniest joke and keeps on laughing when T’challa’s face doesn’t betray any humor and oh my god, T’challa thinks it may be an oncoming panic attack. When T’challa doesn’t move and simply remains straight backed in the face of Tony’s laughter, the laughing eventually ceases and Tony’s expression falls like a collapsing pile of bricks. “Holy shit, you’re serious.”

“The council.” T’challa closes his eyes. “The council recognizes your worth and understands the contribution, growth and influence Stark Industries has globally. But worries that you will be a liability because without Ironman, you are a civilian.” T’challa watches the color just drain from Tony’s face as he turns around and looks back the holographic codes on the table. “They deem you not a warrior, thus unable to fight and protect your own, by extension the kingdom, should and if your armor fails or is nowhere nearby.”

Tony says nothing, eyes fixed on the table and refusing to meet T’challa’s gaze.

“What is the council’s proposal, then?” Shuri asks.

“Zuri has volunteered to be Tony’s mentor, to help elevate his status in the council and the people’s eyes from civilian to warrior; he must prove to be on equal footing with me, must demonstrate – “ T’challa cuts himself off as he looks off to the side, staring at the pile of slightly dog eared documents under his arm and inhaling measurably through his nose. “His skill will be demonstrated and I am obligated to not hold back.”

“So when is this training?” Tony suddenly asks.

“Tony –”

“It’s a test to my loyalty isn’t it? To you, the crown, your entire belief system, your traditions, and most of all, your people? I get it you know? Why they’d think I’m weak and they’re not wrong to think to that. I am a civilian. Without the armor, I’m just an intelligent and well educated
businessman. I can hold myself in a fight, maybe, for like what, a minute, maybe, without the armor? I don’t even have any sort of military training. So I get it. I don’t blame them. I honestly don’t. I didn’t expect this to be a walk in the park.”

T’challa is once more stunned to almost silence. Shuri is the one who speaks and says, “Tony, T’challa had spent years training to be a warrior, from the day he can walk. We all have. At best —”

“At best, I should at least try. I’m agreeing to this because I want to prove to your people that I love your brother. That I love their king and I’d do anything for him. Anything.” Tony swallows, dipping his head and shaking it. “I’m better now. I’m stronger. I think I stand a 51% chance in succeeding. I gotta at least try. I’m not just marrying your brother – I’m practically marrying your kingdom. Come on, you didn’t think I didn’t realize that when I had said yes? This isn’t a fairy-tale; Starks never get a fairy-tale ending.”

T’challa can honestly say the thought had not even cross his mind. The warmth in his chest feels a little like pride at Tony’s unwavering response, at the whitening of his knuckles and the tension that slowly melts off his back when he straightens and carefully turns to face them, fire in his eyes and determination making him stand so, so beautifully tall; it is almost like seeing Ironman armor. Except there is no red and gold here; just casual Roberto Cavallis and Massimo Tutti.

(But isn’t he just a vision of gold and red anyway – Tony Stark is Ironman.)

“It will be difficult. Zuri is tough, one of the best. It will be so, so hard, and if at anytime it gets too much, please know that I will never fault you for not wanting to be a part of this any further. You must understand that forcing your hand into this is not my intention, but marrying a king —”

“—comes with conditions. I know.” Tony says, and the smile, god that smile, the way it softens the corners of his eyes, the way his teeth peeks from between the curve of his lips, the way the adoration just oozes out of him generously, openly, and unbiden – T’challa is powerless to the flutter in his stomach, and the breath that taste so incredibly sweet.

By the grace of the Bast, he can’t love this man enough.

Looking at Tony now, T’challa can’t even imagine how he’d tolerate even being apart. Not after Tony had agreed to be his spouse, and certainly not after seeing the fire ignite as bright as a star and his willingness to do this.

To do this for T’challa.

For his people.

(Tony owes Wakanda nothing and yet look how far he’s willing to go for her people.)

“Forcing you against your will – I need you to understand how uncomfortable I am with this. I need you to understand that I would never rob you the autonomy of making decisions and choices. I had not – I did not think it would get to this. Perhaps, in that sense, I have been blinded and naive. But I am unhappy about this outcome and I will not stop looking for another way.” T’challa shakes his head, feeling something constrict in his throat because willing as Tony may be, T’challa cannot find any fairness in this.

“T’challa.” Tony says his name and T’challa’s thoughts come to a grinding halt, his chin raising as he looks at the man who regards him with nothing but affection. “I think I have a chance. I’ll be okay. Let me do this and show you, your family and your people how much you mean to me.”

T’challa can only swallow and nod weakly.
“I believe you.” Shuri says, and then turns them both around and ushers them to the door. “Please get out of my lab and workspace before you defecate rainbows and small woodland creatures with your blinding romance.”

T’challa doesn’t say a word, and instead takes Tony by the hand, leads him out of the lab and towards a corner where he tugs him between the towering pillars and envelopes him in his arms.

“You owe me nothing. You owe my people nothing.” T’challa whispers. “You don’t owe us a damn thing.”

“But I love a king.” Tony murmurs back, the warmth of his lips brushing against T’challa’s neck. “That kinda’ changes things...” T’challa can only sigh as he tightens his hold on Tony. “I’ll be fine.”

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The sharp clang of china and silver causes a ruckus and the first thing Tony feels is the sharp pain in his nose.

The second thing he feels is the warm seafood curry soup that is now all over his face from where he had slipped and passed out right there in the dinner table, during the first course of their meal. He sits up and blinks warm broth off his face, licks the top of his lips and stares at his fiancé, Shuri, his new mentor Zuri (fucking crazy ass old man, don’t let the gentle grandpa look fool you!) and his mother in law, along with the lined up Dora Milaje, all regarding him with wide eyes, surprise and worry on their faces.

Which is eerie because the Dora Milaje are damn good at keeping a poker face. How they manage shocked poker faces, Tony admits, is clearly a talent to admire and deserves an Oscar.

“Well, uh, that’s never happened to me before.” Tony says and clears his throat as he picks up his napkin and the servants scramble, coming at him with a silver bowl of water and stacks of freshly pressed napkins and warm scented towels, quickly clearing the mess on the table with efficiency that Tony would love for his bots to have. It takes a minute and Tony is wiping the last of the broth from his face and front with a warm towel and soon, his part of the table looks like nothing had spilled and that he, Tony bloody Stark, had not just nodded off right into a bowl of soup. Great. “Soup is delicious by the way.”

“Mister Stark –“ Zuri pauses at the look Tony gives him and smiles, nodding his head before he corrects himself. “Tony has been making great progress in his training. It has only been three days but it has been, easily, the most impressive five days I’ve had the pleasure of being a part of. I would say, your highness, that you may just have a worthy contender by the end of this. Provided, of course, Tony survives his training.”

Tony catches the knowing look Zuri throws his way and openly rolls his eyes back in response. “You are so dramatic.”

When Zuri had been made of aware of the new... enhancements (which Tony is still trying to adjust to and understand), he had changed his game plan on the spot and forced Tony into what he is going to consider the most physically trying combat training he had ever been through. Ever. Considering he had only boxed and sparred with Natasha and Clint (some of the best non-enhanced SHIELD agents), which had been a challenge on its own, that is saying something. Tony had vomited the first time, his muscles going into shock and forcing him on his knees as they had mended within minutes. He remembers the acid like feeling of his tea and dried fruit coming up his throat and spilling all over the stone floors of the training grounds. Tony had never considered himself an athlete and he did not exactly keep a clean regimen and lifestyle. Extremis or not, three days of gruel training is a shock to
his system. Zuri had cautioned him about pushing himself too hard, had hesitated midway through it all by the second day when Tony can barely move, but Tony is of the opinion that one should run before they walk.

He like’s Zuri. He’s like Yoda only meaner and such a faker in a lot of things. in hindsight though, maybe he should consider listening to Zuri’s advice about slowing it down a little.

Then again, Extremis is on his side.

Ah, the dilemma.

The sooner he gets used to getting beaten up, the faster his brain can calibrate with Extremis to master countermeasures. That and well, if T’challa does beat his ass – which he will, anyway, no doubts about that – technically, isn’t it really good to be used to getting beaten so that it kind of hurts less?

Well.

Tony really doesn’t cut corners when it comes to making hard decisions. What’s another crazy one, right?

Another bowl of soup is set before Tony and he takes one look at it and feels his insides churn. The fatigue is winning over everything and god, that soup is starting to look and smell like vomit. Tony pushes the bowl away, wrinkling his nose as the color drains from his face. The soup is immediately taken away and water is poured, along with a cup of warm ginger tea which Tony also shakes his head at. The sudden overwhelming smell of the entire dinner is suddenly too much to handle, and he feels nausea slam right into his gut as he makes the decision to get out of the room and head to a place that doesn’t smell of food or, well, anything, really. He had some calls he had to make anyway.

“‘I’m gonna call it a night.’” Tony says, and watches the visible concern on the queen mother’s face. “Don’t worry, I’m fine.” Tony re-assures, and pushes the chair back as he shakily gets up on his feet. Which doesn’t give out from under him, even if everything just hurts right now; it’s like that time when Thanos had pretty much smacked him around in his suit, rattling him in said suit. So hip-hip-horay that he doesn’t pretty much ends up chest first on the entire bloody table. That would be a waste of good lamb chops.

His victory lasts about thirty seconds, and runs out after he says his goodnights and accepts whatever herbal tea (that he knows is most definitely warm liquid tar) that Zuri suggest to help with recovery to be brought to his room (Zuri is worse than Dummy and his creations, the worst because it can’t be tea – how can it be tea when it’s almost blue in color!). Tony covers about four paces in distance before he sees spots appear around the corners of his visions, confusion tugging at his features at the horror on T’challa’s face, just as the what-the-fuck rolls past his tongue and everything tilts to one side and goes black.

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Tony wakes up to the smell of lemongrass and ginger, and the first thing he sees is smoke curling up towards the carved ceiling from the burning incense. All around him is a swath or smooth and rich white, dim lights lining the sides of the very familiar room, and beyond it, the equally familiar form to T’challa sitting by the steps, shirtless and elbows propped on his knee, staring at dawn just about to line the sky beyond. Tony sits up a little straighter on the bed, the soft and smooth cotton rustling, the aches that he had been so familiar with the past almost one week since his training from hell had begun barely even present; he feels great, his skin smooth and smelling of something distantly spicy and sweet, body completely relaxed and dare he say, almost boneless. The sound of him shifting in
bed is barely audible, but it is enough to make T’challa turn and look over his shoulder. It is enough to make T’challa carefully stand, body rolling with the motions, like a large dangerous predator. Tony watches how the muscles shifts and coils under taut smooth skin, how T’challa’s bare feet makes no sound, as silent as the silk drapes brushing against the marble floors. Tony watches as T’challa sits himself on the side of bed, how he reaches forward and presses a hand to Tony’s face, eyebrows knitted and self-blame and undeniable guilt marring his handsome features.

“I remember this place.” Tony says, bringing a hand that much to his surprise, isn’t trembling, to hold on to T’challa’s elbow. “We were here years ago, the day before your sparring with the country’s strongest. There was a ritual…”

T’challa nods slowly. “I remember you.” T’challa says, so soft and barely above a whisper. “I remember wanting you like nothing I’ve wanted before when you woke up and stepped into the open.”

Tony feels goosebumps break all over his skin, as T’challa’s hand trail down from the side of his face to the nape of his neck, tracing the entire column in a gentle and sweeping caress that is enough to make Tony’s throat feel as dry as the Sahara desert.

“And now?” Tony asks, a little to meekly, a little too uncertain and so unlike his usual self. He doesn’t remember feeling this vulnerable, except for that time where he had almost died, maybe.

T’challa doesn’t answer immediately, but pulls away and turns to the foot of the bed, where a folded white fabric embellished in gold and bare hints of red is folded over the wooden frame. He picks it up and carefully unfolds the swath of fabric and ever so carefully, like he had all those years ago, wraps it around Tony’s bare shoulders. The gesture is so familiar, and so, so intimate, even as he slides his hands down the curves of Tony’s shoulders and arms, finger tips brushing against the edges of the weave. It takes a moment too slow, but Tony recognizes the cloth. T’challa had it on him that day he had to ‘fight’ for the right to wear his crown.

Tony knows that it is not an empty gesture.

That wrapping the piece of cloth around him, in this place, exactly like this, symbolizes something he probably really needs to go and find out. And remember for good. He really needs to get his head around all of Wakanda’s practices, old and new, as soon as fucking possible.

“And even more.” T’challa whispers, gravel in is throat, eyes downcast, as he visibly swallows.

And when he looks up, Tony sees the heat in those dark eyes, sees the need and palpitating want that stabs him right in his gut. Tony doesn’t even think twice when he closes the distance between them, when he leans forward and presses his hands against the sides of the king’s face and slants their mouths together. Tony doesn’t hesitate in letting the unbridled need take over, doesn’t even fight back when T’challa all but throws him down against the bed, the gold and embellished cloth spreading over the white sheets as the king of Wakanda reaches forward and pulls the sheets aside, pressing their hips and groins together and grinding down against Tony.

There is little to no grace in the gestures that follows. There is nothing remotely intimate or slow, or loving in how they tear each other apart, in how T’challa all but rips the loose linen pants on Tony’s hips or how Tony shoves T’challa’s linen pants off. Tony doesn’t think he’s ever been this overwhelmed by desire before that he chokes on hit when he feels T’challa’s hands on his hips, when he feels himself slide down pillow as T’challa grips him and manhandles him, when warm hands fists around both their cocks and strokes.

It happens far too quickly for Tony’s liking and when he comes and comes and the nearly pained-
like gasp spills from his mouth and into T’challas as he *arches* off the bed, his fingers *digging* into T’challa’s shoulders in a grip that will most definitely *bruise*, he thinks he can just die like this.

Like this, as he slumps back against the pillow, heat and moisture on his skin, hot come on his stomach and T’challa’s panting breaths against his lips.

Like this with T’challa all over him, and leaning forward to kiss him.

To kiss him like he loves him.

Truly, *truly* loves him.

Tony’s eyes flutter open when T’challa pulls away, when he looks down at him, flush darkening his cheeks as his lungs slows down and the first rays of the sun begins to peek over the horizon. And Tony thinks that T’challa is the most beautiful man in the world. He thinks, in the peak of his pleasure and the clarity of his mind, the stillness of the world around him, this man, this brilliant, *brilliant* man, will pave the way to the world’s new era.

He’s a good man.

And a good man can be good at *anything*.

Tony can’t think of a better way to dedicate the rest of his life making that a reality.

“It’s going to beat your ass dead in that fight.” Tony says, voice and words unwavering and full of conviction and promise.

The smile that tugs on T’challa’s face is incandescently *beautiful*.

“I wouldn’t expect less from my husband.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

**Itshe – means Stone in Xhosa**

**Ngonyama - Snake in Xhosa**

According to websites I found, yes? Those websites could be wrong.

I AM FUCKING ALIVE. I SWEAR THAT I AM!

THIS CHAPTER IS SHORTER THAN THE REST BECAUSE I WANNA TELL YA’LL THAT I AM ALIVE AND I HAVE NOT ABANDONED THIS LIKE EVER OMG I AM SORRY I JUST GOT DISTRACTED LOL ALL CAPS

I AM SO READY TO SEE THIS BLACK PANTHER MOVIE OMG JUST TAKE MY MONEY OK
OKAY THAT'S ALL -- THANK YOU FOR READING I LOVE YOU ALL
XOXO
Tony does not simply rely on Zuri’s training to better himself.

At a young age, he had learned that good things like victory doesn’t come to those who simply stand and wait. If he had wanted something, he had to figure out a way to get himself. Wishing upon a Star can o lay go so far and hey, wishes may be for free, but they aren’t realist (Jimminy cricket had lied because if he had any truth In His words, Tony’s life growing up would have turned out completely different). If there is one thing that Tony is good at, it is preparing for a fight he knows he may not exactly walk out of in one piece and thinking quick on his toes. The training to be a better fighter, despite him thinking that he’s floundering like a limbless baby, is progressing well, according to Zuri; Zuri isn’t one to mince words in Tony’s direction so when he offers praise, Tony knows that he isn’t bullshitting (even though deep down, Tony does think Zuri is money high on whatever ‘tobacco’ he smokes). Within two months of constant physical exertion, Tony had managed to regain half of the bulk and lean muscle mass he had lost and feels a hundred times stronger. Tony knows he is progressing because things start to hurt less and he spends more time on his feet as opposed to always kissing the goddamn floor. The jut of his collarbones and jawline is also no longer as sharp, the clean cut lines of his back, arms and torso more visible; the strict diet and physical regimen had also opened the doors to an appetite Tony doesn’t remember possessing.

Apparently, that is a good thing.

If T’challa’s heated gaze raking down his frame from across dinners, breakfast and anytime they actually do manage to see each other is anything to go by.

Which is a dick move in Tony’s opinion; if T’challa had no plans in joining him in bed, he had no business looking at him that way and oh so shamelessly and with that sickly adorable and incredibly sexy hidden smirk that he saves for only Tony’s eyes.

What a douchebag king.

It is somewhere in the third month into his training when Zuri had deemed Tony ready to handle weapons training that Tony had decided to study the ever living shit of T’challa’s fighting style. Which is why one night, after dinner and with FRIDAY successfully uplinked into the network within his quarters of the palace (seriously, it had to be done; Tony may be training vigorously to be a worthy royal spouse but he had a company to run and a team to consult with back home. He still had to actually work.) Being the smart man that he is, Tony had found himself a comfortable spot on the chaise by his bedroom window, had planted his ass down and connected through Wakanda’s network to plow through for any footage and CCTV feed of the Black Panther in action.

Connecting through Wakanda’s networks does not get easier even with practice (that admittedly, Tony hasn’t had much of).
Tony wades through what feels like an ocean of loud and vicious static, his mind drowning in loud noise that feels like a thousand blades scratching against his ear drums. The ordeal lasts no longer than a minute but feels like a lifetime by the time Tony manages to bypass the security firewalls and reach the 'waiting room' (as he likes to dub it) that would lead him to the endless spread of the World Wide Web. FRIDAY pulses a bright and intricate rose gold ever evolving code, puffing wide like a preening bird when Tony mentally stumbles and curses and admires Wakandan security all in the same mental breath.

Stepping into the space of the World Wide Web though, is like walking through a park and not as difficult.

Up until Tony realizes that digging out footage of the Black Panther (other than the fight in Europe during the entire Accords and Winter Soldier fiasco) is like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

It doesn’t stop Tony from digging deeper and deeper.

It certainly doesn’t hinder him from trying harder.

And this is where he learns that excessive use of Extremis had its severe backlashes. Because once he had what seems to be nothing more than a handful of data to study, once Tony remembers that he should actually haul his ass into bed or he wouldn’t be able to handle whatever it is the old man is planning to throw his way the next morning, Tony only remembers sitting up after he disconnects ends up not quite sitting up and instead turns into a rolling off the chaise when he feels the back of his head explode with what feels like white hot heat before his face plants right into the marble floor, the illuminating light of sunrise (what the fuck?) already bright and beautiful beyond his bedroom window.

Tony remembers thinking oh shit because he refuses to be late during his trainings, lest his tardiness gives the kingdom more fuel to aggravate their king further with how unworthy he truly is of being a royal spouse (which Tony doesn’t exactly disagree with, but still).

In all honesty, Tony tries to get up.

He really does.

Except he can’t because his head hurts so fucking bad, that the back of his head fells about as heavy as a truck with the built up pressure and he can barely keep his eyes open as the glow of the sun rising over the horizon and reflecting on gleaming marble floors of his room fades to black and he is left with dreams that makes no fucking sense.

Or so he thinks.

He dreams of an open field, as beautiful and surreal as a desktop wallpaper, peaceful and serene with twilight lining the sky. It is the same skies he remembers T’challa telling him about, the fields of the Bast where the afterlife lies beyond. Tony walks amidst tall and cool grass, the earth warm under his bare toes until he reaches the edge of the plane where twilight purple melts to a sky of fiery orange and when he looks up, he sees Thanos and his children, titan like and destructive. He sees the fist encased in gold swinging in his direction and with nothing but his bare arms and fisted hands, Tony braces himself on the ground and brings his arm up in an on-guard defensive position, that he knows is nothing against a creature who can destroy worlds.

Except the hit doesn’t quite come the way Tony remembers it.

Instead, Tony feels the force of that fist land right in the middle of his chest.
The impact sends Tony flying, makes bone and muscle and flesh cave inwards, shattering and squelching as Tony falls against the earth and finds himself unable to breathe. Tony hears himself scream at the sky, wet and sticky as his fingers claw at his chest and comes away wet and grainy, as blood and tissue and finely shattered bones coats his fingertips and he is looking at the open mess of his chest just like how he sometimes remembers in dreams all those years ago when the Ten Rings had dragged him through the burning sands of the desert and had left him to feel the softest parts of him exposed for the entire world to see.

Tony sees his crushed sternum, sees and feels the suffocation climb up his throat as he tries to shout and scream and oh god, no, no, no!

Except he doesn’t quite choke on his own breath the way he remembers choking all those years ago. Tony doesn’t feel the sharp jagged edges of death grabbing him by sides of his vision and yanking him backwards and away from his body.

What he feels instead is a fist against his throat, sharp and claw like, as black as the night and as unyielding as vibranium alloy.

What he sees instead is the Black Panther looming over him, with skies beyond turning gray and ashy white, burning cold like the harshest winters and the Black Panther’s fist raised, a shield fanned out on his forearm. Tony realizes too late how that fist is raised into a striking position, how it is aimed at the center of his open and exposed chest that isn’t even hooked on to a car battery yet. Tony watches, with a scream that barely forms as that fist comes down once, twice, and one more final time, the force of it making him jerk off the ground.

And right up into the concerned face of the king, Shuri and the palace physician who had not left Tony’s side since his training had started.

Tony’s gasping breath is loud, panicked and choking somewhere in his throat as he registers the sight of the Black Panther, recoiling so violently that he feels the sharp edges of the carved wooden bedframe dig against his back and the sheets pool around his feet as he kicks himself away to put distance between himself and the Black Panther, throwing himself away from T’challa’s warm hands and hold, because he doesn’t want to feel that fist strike.

He sees T’challa’s face fall.

He sees the fear on his face mirrored in the depths of T’challa’s gaze, pallor pallid as the whiteness of Siberian winter.

Somewhere in between panic and the sudden rise of what feels like asphyxiation, Tony hears Shuri speak, hears the physician call for his team and sees the blood stain all over the front of his shirt as his hands come up to his chest and tears it open to expose nothing of the mess that had felt so, so fucking real but smooth and sweaty skin instead. Tony hears his lungs wheeze under his ribcage as he tries to clamber out of bed and get himself together, pushes the hands of his lover, his king, his princess and all but crawl-stumble to the other end of the room, feeling his knees hit marble a few times when his limbs don’t cooperate.

Tony hears himself scream in desperation, hears his head fill with that familiar white noise that is Wakanda’s firewalls as he unwillingly reaches out for help. It takes a few more steps before he feels the armor wrap around him like a comfortable blanket and the sound of glass shattering reaching his ears as he vaults out of his room and into the Wakandan sky, away from the shouts of what would have been his new family.

The sky turns darker as he goes higher and higher, reaching new peaks as the temperature readings
on the hud’s screen keeps on dropping. It lulls to a stop at a negative just as Tony feels his head swim with nausea at the stretch of the earth beneath him and the sky looking not quite like space but not quite fully the sky either. Tony hears himself suck in breath after breath, until he focuses on the burning glow of the sun just over the not-quite-horizon.

From where he is, the sun is beautiful and bright, an ever present warmth that doesn’t quite burn from this distance. It’s a focal point that helps him calm down, as the quick succession of panicked and almost manic breath slows down to long and fuller gulps. They eventually taper down and hush to something softer, until Tony thinks that he’s breathing the way the earth does, serene and calm and basking in the warmth of that fiery light.

Tony hears himself breathe. He tastes the slight tang of metal and something a little sweeter fill his lungs, as his ribcage expands outwards and the calmness feels like the after effects of a heady tonic. He watches the endlessly beautiful stretch ahead of him slowly dim.

And then he falls.

He plummets downwards to the earth like a marionette with no strings holding him up, limbs outstretched towards the sky, as the alarms sounds off in the hud, flashing red as he descends dangerously fast, faster and faster.

Tony thinks of home, thinks of warm dark eyes and sure strong hands. He thinks of the steady heartbeat that he had fallen asleep to, the almost sweet spiced musky smell of aftershave that belays royalty. He sees a strip of green and the splash of gray rocky mountains before he shakes his head and the thrusters of the suit fires forward, bounding for Wakanda where he crashes through the forest and lands with a solid metallic thunk against rock, soil and greenery.

Tony doesn’t know how long he stares at the canopy of the trees above him.

He doesn’t know when the smatter of blue and green colored birds take flight above him either except that they do, dotting the golden light above in a kaleidoscope of colors. He doesn’t feel the suit retract and his back dig into rock and debris. He doesn’t think when he closes his eyes and just lies there, listening to the sound of jungle until he drowns in it and he knows nothing else.

The sudden wet warmth on his face stirs him from the soft hum his thoughts had been reduced to. Tony finds himself flinching as he turns his head away, peeling his eyes open to focus on the source of his disturbance. He sees Bob looking down at him, blinking eyes that looks furrowed. Tony blinks back, trying to clear his head and when he opens his eyes again to try to focus on Bob, he watches him step away and the familiar face of the old king loom into view.

Tony watches as the king smiles down at him with partial awe and confusion, watching as the dimples that Tony knows T’challa had inherited from the still handsome gentleman hollows, as T’chaka holds out an outstretched helping hand. Tony finds himself staring, unsure if what he’s seeing is real or not, dazedly accepting the helping hand and feeling the gentle tug. He watches T’chaka’s mouth move, watches as he says, stand up, my boy, and right after it, the strong and sharp tug that drags Tony back to his feet makes his head spin at the sudden change of position.

And then finds himself standing in the middle of the forest, with Bob looking up at him curiously, his tail swishing lazily back and forth.

Tony looks around and spins in circles, looking for the old and most definitely dead king only to find nothing but the stretch of the thick jungle and the sound of distant animals and birds.

“Buddy,” Tony says, feeling the hairs on his arms and neck stand on edge, his heart thundering
under his rib cage. “You know the way back?” He asks, not quite trusting himself with Extremis just yet. Bob purrs under his hand, and Tony shakily tightens the ripped shirt around him, tucking the torn edges under his armpits as he swallows and takes a carefully step forward, and then another. When his knees don’t buckle, Tony clears his throat once more and keeps his hand on the warmth of Bob’s back. “Lead the way, buddy.”

Bob does.

It is the longest fucking walk of Tony’s life.

Until it becomes the most painful one when Tony hears the scrunched rustle of leaves, and he finds the Black Panther cut through the foliage and come to a screeching halt, Nyo on his heels.

Of all the reaction Tony had expected from himself, recoiling and taking several involuntary steps back as the armor encases over his fist and he holds it out in defense to fire had not been one of them.

Tony knows it’s ridiculous to be afraid, knows it’s downright unreasonable because T’challa wouldn’t hurt him, he wouldn’t do anything even remotely close to the word hurt. Yet here stands the Black Panther, posture easing from the rushed run to something more open, unguarded, hands coming up to pull the helmet off to reveal T’challa’s haunted features, about as pallid as the wild jasmine blooming around them. Tony sees his hand shake, sees the red and gold metal encased fingers tremble as he calls the armor off and he takes another step back, shaking his head as apology after apology spills from his mouth and he continues to takes step after step backwards until he feels Bob’s head gently nudge him from the back of his knees.

“Did I hurt someone?” Tony asks, and T’challa shakes his head. “Did I hurt you?”

T’challa doesn’t respond immediately, but then shakes his head. “No one is hurt.”

“Except you.” Tony says, reading the tense and almost defensive poker face on T’challa’s face, the kind of expression he only directs to delegates who gets on his nerves, the ones who pushes his buttons. “T’challa…”

“What did you see?” T’challa asks, tone eerily measured.

“Nothing –”

“Do not lie to me and take me for a fool. I saw your fear.” T’challa says, helmet dropping carelessly to the ground. “You feared me, Tony. What did you see?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Tony snaps, “Why would I be afraid of you?”

The Black Panther is quick, far too quick and Tony finds himself face to face with T’challa, with but a breath between them and the sudden memory of his claws around his neck. Tony’s gaze involuntarily flickers to T’challa’s right arm, where the shield that Tony knows doesn’t belong to T’challa had been in that crazy ass fucking dream that is just that; a dream.

The small pause and hesitance and mildly panicked look is enough for T’challa to take a step back, putting distance between them.

“What did you see?” T’challa asks again, this time softer, a tremble at the end of his sentence.

“Your hand and a shield. Your fist in my chest.” Tony says and whatever bravado he had melts away at the admittance of the truth because he is scared, he is quite terrified of something that had long past, of a fist and shield that doesn’t even belong to T’challa at all. “And you angry…”
T’challa’s face remains eerily blank.

“I do not carry a shield…” T’challa says, careful and almost too soft that the words are almost lost to the sounds of the jungle around them.

Tony looks down at his exposed chest, at the healing red marks from where he must have raked his nails against the skin. “I know.”

T’challa says nothing on the matter anymore, and instead turns around to pick up the helmet he had dropped so unceremoniously on the ground. “May I lead you back?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t – I don’t know –“

“I cannot control your fear. Nor can I control your insecurities.” T’challa says and visibly swallows past the emotion Tony knows must feels like needles around the base of his throat. T’challa is good in hiding his emotions, is so good with keep the walls up strong and high, when all he wants to do is yell and demand for what is right. “But I want you to know that if that fear continues to fester, I still wouldn’t leave you. I will remain at your side, whether you are in my arms or if we are continents apart. I am always on your side.”

“Unless I become a threat to Wakanda.” Tony says, and watches the color drain from T’challa’s face completely.

Tony feels a little wretched.

No one says the truth never hurts.

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Zuri’s staff connects solidly with Tony’s jaw when he fails to block the blow. It sends Tony flying across the room, his jaw cracking as he lands with a harsh and painful wet thump against the stone floors of the training ground, the short blade clattering free from his grip. Tony feels his vision swim as he scrambles dazedly, quickly, and is back on his feet, weapon in his hand as he drops back to a defensive position, crimson heat dribbling down his nose and the side of his head. Tony knows better than to stay down for too long; he had learned the lesson too quick the hard way within the first month of his training. Never stay down, Zuri had said, not for too long. Always, always get back up.

Zuri, however, doesn’t move from his spot, going to what resembles a parade rest, his staff resting beside him on the ground.

It’s been two weeks since the freak out.

Two weeks of Tony remaining tight lipped and silent, unwilling to talk about what had happened, dismissing the freak out as an anxiety attack when after studying the feeds and running diagnostic after diagnostic, after looking into Extremis even more, he discovers that excessive use of the virus means that his organic brain isn’t able to keep up with the demand and strain Extremis puts it through. Excessive use apparently amounts to over eight hours because Tony doesn’t feel time pass when he’s connected, when an hour feels nothing more than a few minutes. With FRIDAY’s confirmation and proof, Tony had watched the insides of his head more or less swell from the strain and develop symptoms similar to that of a dangerous concussion and a migraine mixed in all at once. It would explain his lack of coordination, the nausea and his lack of ability to process his surroundings; the bleeding nose and ears had been the icing to the cake – had he been connected to the network longer, Tony thinks he’d do more damage than good, no matter what information he had managed to extract. Extremis heals but also damages — it is a double edged sword.
His brain, apparently, can’t process the information as fast; damn organic matters, right?

Which would explain the bizarre dreams and what Tony can only assume had been the hallucination of the old king. The excessive information and whatever garbage is stored in his subconscious mind had to be processed and come out eventually. It comes out in one hell of a cocktail.

It comes out in the form of ghosts that Tony sees from the corners of his eyes, why the ends of the palace hallways always have figures fleeting by, most of them familiar. It would also explain why Tony would see the dead king in between his sleeping and waking moments, or why he’d think T’challa lies beside him on his bed when he is nowhere close and not even in the country. Sometimes, Tony would see reflections of his teammates in the least likely places. Tony remembers breakfast time one day, when he had jumped so high that he had startled the poor lady serving him his coffee, only because he had seen the reflection of the Winter Soldier on glass bowl of fruit on the table, leaning over his shoulder to whisper something in his ear.

(I remember all of them, Bucky says.)

One time, Tony had been bent over the sink after a gruelling day of combat training, washing off the wound that when he straightens up, he recoils from his reflection because there stands no one else but Steve and the remorse on his expression when he says, yes to Tony’s did you know?

Tony had nearly slipped and hit his head on the tiles then.

And all that from a few (yes, anything less than twelve hours is considered few in Tony’s book) hours of Extremis’ use.

(Makes you wonder what you’d see if you continue to use Extremis on a more ‘full-time’ scale.)

Tony thinks his assholery can be blamed on his disorientation because T’challa had made himself scarce after Tony had lost his temper and had seen his mother’s reflection on the dresser, arranging her pearl earrings that she so loved back then. And on the days when Tony isn’t losing his shit completely, how could T’challa even stay when Tony can barely restrain the flinch every time the resident hottie had tried to be supportive, emotionally and physically.

It had been weeks since T’challa had made him scarce from the palace, opting to address pressing concerns in the region – duty calls and all that jazz. Tony hasn’t seen him at either breakfast or dinner or even had heard a peep of his presence in between.

It makes him feel a little like an abandoned and dying turtle on an empty beach.

This sucks and it is his fault.

Goddamn.

This is also the second week that Tony gets his ass royally handed to him, getting smacked around and unable to quite focus because of withdrawal symptoms and galactically copious amount of self-hate and guilt. Zuri hits all his weak spots, targets them like a missile with purpose, remaining unrelenting in his training as Tony barely keeps up. Tony doesn’t remember a night where he had gone to bed feeling like he had taken a beating from the Hulk, doesn’t remember how many times he had fallen asleep in the hot tub if only because he had been so fucking sore and bruised and Extremis (while fast) isn’t exactly that fast.

“You will lose.” Zuri says, his raspy voice steady despite the age behind it.

Tony doesn’t drop from his defensive position, but wrinkles his nose to ease the tickling sensation of
blood dripping down his face. “If I do, then I don’t deserve the honor of being by the king’s side.”

“No, you will lose because you choose to lose.” Zuri says, shuffling and shoulders drooping, now looking like a complete old man as opposed to the killing machine he had been earlier.

Tony still remains on guard. He’s not falling for the old fart’s tricks. “Come on, old man, we still got a few hours. I’m not done yet.”

“You are.” Zuri says, sighing and sounding disappointed. “You have been for a while now.”

“Hey.”

“You are afraid and I cannot help you if I do not know what you are afraid of.” Zuri says, making his way to the bench and setting his training staff down, reaching into the inner pocket of his tunic to pull out his pipe. “Fear is life’s greatest illusion, my boy.”

“I guess it is officially lecture time.” Tony says, dropping out of his stance and bringing the back of his arm against his nose. It hurts like a bitch and a tentative touch tells him that it’s completely shattered, and that Extremis is kicking in and mending the damage. Tony doesn’t even realize how his eyes are watering involuntarily from the pain and the pressure.

“Come, sit.” Zuri gestures says, and then points at the cooler by the stack of towels. “Break time.”

“Really?” Tony says, sounding apprehensive and a little nasally.

“Really.” Zuri chuckles and points at the cooler. “Bring an old man his drink. Go on.”

Tony doesn’t stop the roll of his eyes, muttering old man, my foot under his breath as he sets his short blades down by the cooler and takes out two containers of iced teas and a cool towel. Tony doesn’t know what’s in them, but they taste incredibly good and resemble freshly steeped hibiscus tea, except it isn’t – it’s got some chemistry going on there and Tony, apparently, is not privy to its recipe. He takes two of them out and hands one to Zuri as he presses the cool towel to his face, wiping the crimson mess off him and going around his nose and temple carefully before he takes a long swig from the tea.

They sit there in blessed silence with Tony pressing the cool towel against the bridge of his nose as the sun starts to lower over the horizon and the pain in Tony’s jaw and nose start to lessen. It’s hilarious how quick Tony had gotten used to the pain. He remembers the first day of his hand-to-hand combat training and compared to then, he thinks his threshold for pain had come a long way. Tony is staring at his empty tea canister when he sees the blue light illuminate on one of the kimoyo beads on his wrist; T’challa is back and it is enough to make a twitch of a smile bloom around the corner of his lips. The knowledge of having T’challa back on the ground is comforting. Tony thinks of his smile and the warmth in his gaze with fondness, thinks of his laugh and how beautiful he looks in Wakanda’s traditional tunics, how his voice trembles with the deep dialect of his native language and how he simply is, easily, the most beautiful being on the face of the earth.

(Makes you wonder if you even deserve him, right?)

“This is gonna sound really dumb, but I haven’t had the time to actually go and read up on it on my own. You know that white weaved cloth that the king gives to his … spouse?” Tony asks, and Zuri hums as he puffs smoke out of his pipe. “There’s a message behind it, isn’t there?”

“Devotion.” Zuri responds, “I draw strength from that of the Bast and you to face the adversaries I may face in protecting this sacred land and our people.”
“Isn’t it just ceremonial, though?” Tony asks, because he remembers the fuss the aides and servants had kicked up the first time around T’challa had draped it on him prior to their divorce. Most cultural practices tend to be ceremonial, where meanings had long been lost to the people.

“Yes and no.” Zuri says, puffing smoke again. “If I may be bold with my opinion, I believe his highness simply does not see it as ceremonial. Not with you. I’ve lived and worked with the royal family for as long as I can remember. I’ve seen his highness grow from infancy to the man he is today. Perhaps he doesn’t show, perhaps it is his training to restrain such outwardly projection of his emotions, but our king is taken by you, my boy. And where lies the king’s happiness, my duty is to that. Because a sad king, or a lonely king, or even heartbroken man can pave the way to miscalculated decisions and by extension endanger the country and its people. My king is a good king, I know this well. It’s easy to be a good man. It’s also easy to be just a good king. But to be both is most difficult. To be both, being a good man is not enough. It is, after all, just a man behind the crown, hmm?” Zuri pauses to take a deep breath from his pipe, and then quirks an eyebrow at Tony. “Much like how in your case, to be a hero, you must be an exceptional man behind the armor. You must be the man that not everyone else can be, yes?”

“Sounds tiring.” Tony mutters, staring at his empty tea canister once more, no malice in his tone despite the almost-mocking words. Zuri has long learned how to deal with his speech patterns because he simply chuckles.

“It is a challenge. My old friend and king managed it. Now his son tries, too. Be an exceptional man, that is.” Zuri draws his last breath and then extinguishes his pipe. Tony says nothing, falling silent as Zuri continues to drink his tea until the canister is empty and Tony’s nose had stopped bleeding completely. “So, are you going to tell me why you’re distracted, or must I make uncomfortable guesses?”

“You ever feel like you don’t deserve things?” Tony asks after a long pause and debate, rubbing the side of his temple.

“I sometimes think that I have lived far too long and that my friend and king had passed away too soon. Sometimes at night, I find myself thinking that T’chaka would have served more purpose being alive now, than myself.” He smiles, a little sad, a little melancholic before he shakes his head. “Is that a good answer?”

Tony hums, shrugging a shoulder. “I’m not afraid of your people, the kingdom, the crown. The politics even, god know Ross has given me enough training just by dealing with him in that department.” Tony huffs, rolling his eyes. The humor only last about a solid minute, before Tony’s expressions goes about as blank as stone. Zuri notices because he lights his pipe again. Tony feels his lips twist in a sardonic smile, “I’m afraid that half way through this, your fabulous king would realize how truly compromised I am, because he’s in love, and you know, it’s all fluff and rainbows right now – but when he does, there’s no outcome of anything that follows where I walk out of any of this okay. Do you execute traitors or threats here? Because if you do, then I wouldn’t be as worried. That’s about as good as a sentence I can ever hope for.”

It all sounds so sarcastic and uncaring.

Zuri or T’challa will never fully understand how terrified Tony truly is. How he knows the ghosts will only keep coming the more he puts the virus in him to good use. Tony knows that he comes with metric ton worth of issues and trauma, knows that he isn’t exactly okay, that his methods and approach to a lot of things, including handling things, aren’t exactly stellar and usually means parties involved would be affected in one way or the other. T’challa knows this; he had experienced it firsthand.
“Do you love him, Anthony?” Zuri asks, tilting his head.

“Really?”

“Would you die for him?”

“I … am pretty sure I kind of almost did?”

“But would you die for your king?” Zuri asks, pointing the edge of his staff against Tony’s sternum with a little force.

Tony doesn’t budge from his spot on the floor. “Yes.” He says it with iron in his voice, spine rigid and strong, unflinching and without any hesitance. “I am not a protector of the kingdom, he is. But I’ll be damned if someone even dares to try to touch a goddamn hair off his head.”

Zuri blinks, “You are afraid of things that may or may not happen. Healthy paranoia is a good thing, keeps us on our toes, keeps us creative and willing to be prepared for what threat may come. But too much of it can blind a man and turn him mad. And right now, you are nothing but blind.” Zuri applies calculated pressure and Tony is sent sprawling backwards on his elbows. Zuri stands then, extinguishing his pipe. “I cannot control your fear, but I can help you face it. And if all else fails, you will not walk out of this entire ordeal okay, I agree. But you will walk out of this with the knowledge that you have faced your fears, that you have overcome a perceived failure, that you have tried without holding back, because right now, T’challa isn’t your opponent. It’s you.”

“Pep talk. There it is.” Tony murmurs, pushing himself to his feet. “I got it, Yoda.”

“If you love him, Anthony, then fight.” Zuri urges, “Fight, not like your life depends on it, but because the world does. Because you and T’challa, in time, will accomplish wonders that the world has never seen before.” Zuri says and stands then, staff resting on the ground. “This is my belief, this is why I want you to win.”

“That’s not even fucking realistic, and you know that!” Tony says, scrambling to his feet. “He’s got years of training that I don’t have. Words are pretty, Zuri, but you have to admit that even that is delusional. I am going to lose.”

“You won’t.” Zuri says, simple and confident, smiling cheekily. “Because I know you are too stubborn to let your fears get the better of you. Now get up, we have work to do.”

Tony does.

And this time, he refuses to be a punching bag.

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The council, however, is relentless in their demands.

The fight gets scheduled within eight months since the agreement and Tony finds himself shitting bricks on the day of the fight. As a general rule, opponents are not meant to be in each other’s company, so Tony does not see T’challa. Nothing but a ghost of him anyway.

Which doesn’t help his confidence exactly and he had a feeling that is exactly the point of the separation. He doesn’t have the energy to think of the whys and what, if this is simply another rule the council who are not in the favor of the marriage have cooked up to make him more of an underdog. Tony is to fight in the outskirts of the city within the same grounds he had watched T’challa fight for his right to the crown. The day had gone by in a blur, leaving Tony sick to his
stomach and nervous enough to think that his knees are made of cotton.

Tony gets escorted to the fighting grounds alone, whisked away from his room and straight into an awaiting vehicle once he is dressed and traditional gold-plated arm guards secured on both his wrists. It is the only metal he had on him, his only defense against weapons, for whatever shirt he had on is removed and he is left barefoot, barechest and only in weaved bottoms that he had seen Wakandan soldiers wear during their trainings. Tony thinks of Rhodey’s good luck the night before, thinks of Pepper’s worried smile, and Zuri’s confident words of, you are ready as you can be.

When he feels nothing but ill prepared.

From beyond the opening of the intricate networks of caves, Tony hears the crowd’s chatter echo amidst the soft pitter-patter of rain. Tony wonders if even the skies or the Bast thinks he isn’t worthy, because rain is exactly what he needs at this point for unstable footing against a man who is far more a groomed warrior than he will ever be. A lifetime of training trumps eight months; a moron knows that.

Okoye comes in to tell him that the king is ready, that he is to walk out in two minutes to present himself to the crowd. She tells him the rules of the fight: Tony must only strike or disarm the king three times to gain victory. She then leaves as quietly as she had come.

This is when Tony feels ridiculously alone in this fight.

He also knows that T’challa is under oath to not hold back at all.

And before he can wallow in more self pity and feel more sorry for himself for even believing that he can do this, that he had a chance, Zuri appears, hobbling amongst the polished stone, staff echoing with each step he takes.

“I’ve come to wish you well.” Zuri says, a disarming smile on his face. Tony’s never going to get used to that.

“That’s nice.” Tony says, “How much of shit are you going to get into by doing that, exactly?”

“You are a stubborn, stubborn child.” Zuri chuckles before he holds a hand up to clasp at Tony’s shoulder, holding him firmly. Tony watches as something flickers in the old man’s gaze, hope and conflict and thousand emotions that makes him look older than he already is. The smile softens to something fond (Tony wonders if he’s seeing things, there) as Zuri sucks in a deep breath and presses his thumb against Tony’s forehead. “May the Bast give you the strength to face what is head of you.”

Tony closes his eyes, feels Zuri’s warm thumb leave his forehead and when he opens his eyes again, Zuri is gone.

The hush outside falls like a blanket and Tony knows that is his queue to step out.

He steps out into the open and feels cold rain fall on his shoulders like icicles, the sky above him bleak and dark, making the jungle around them look a lot more lush and thick, more sinister and dangerous as they should be. There is nothing beautiful about anything around him, not the crowds that watches from the stands above him, not the queen mother who is dressed in white, nor the princess who is also in white, and not the lined up Dora Milaje who stands on guard around the entire circle of the arena. The ground is icy cold and when Tony closes his eyes, he tries hard not to think of Siberia, of the cold bunker that he had been beaten down to, how one of the closest people he had held dear to his heart had chosen to walk the opposite way.
And when he opens his eyes again to the murmur, he sees T’challa standing before him, as tall and strong as he can remember, in white and gold and barefoot, with gauntlets on his forearms and thick band on his neck signifying his rank above everyone else around him, his body decorated in the traditional marks that Tony remembers from years ago.

T’challa holds out a red sash, thin and delicate, before he extends it to the Okoye who stands on his right. Tony watches T’challa’s face remain unreadable as Okoye steps forward to tie that sash around her king’s right upper arm, his dominant arm, before stepping back. T’challa taps the sash on his arm with a fist, and Tony knows that he’s been given another option to win.

He doesn’t know if he can disarm T’challa thrice.

He doesn’t know if he can even land three hits on him at all without the suit.

But Tony can try to get that thing off his arm.

They both get handed a short spear and when the hush falls, there is no warning when T’challa surges forward with speed Tony can’t even begin to imagine to match without his suit.

T’challa’s first blow is aimed for the center of Tony’s chest, and Tony barely gets enough to time to block it before T’challa is spinning and is in the air bringing the spear down to his head. When the blow gets blocked, Tony’s arms shakes with the force behind T’challa’s blow, feels his ankles quake as he tries to keep his balance and not slip on the wet stone floor of the arena. T’challa’s face is unreadable, nothing but focus and the more blows he rains, the slower Tony gets as he is forced back and back, and hundred steps back with no opening to strike.

The first blow to his face comes from T’challa’s elbow, and Tony feels his lip, cheek and nose split as blood splatters in a arc and his entire body goes sideways with the force of the blow. He falls face down with a hard smack, teeth grinding at the sharp pain that makes him sees stars. Tony gets nothing but a second before he is rolling himself over to the side, dodging the sharp end of T’challa’s short spear, as his shout echoes and cuts through the wind and rain and metal punctures stone.

Tony rolls back up to his feet, nose wrinkling as he tastes copper. Tony barely recovers from the first lethal blow before he feels T’challa’s spear swing, the wind cutting with a sharp noise and his arm coming up to block the strike with his arm guard with a deafening and resonating clang. Tony grabs the spear then, and yanks, and manages to successfully stun his king with a punch to the chest, forcing him back and sluicing water.

It had been the opening Tony had needed.

Because he doesn’t hesitate when he surges forward and rains blow after blow, swinging with whatever he can manage even if T’challa manages to block them and dance around them quite effortlessly. There is no way he will ever knock the spear off T’challa’s hand, but Tony tries. He tries and, fucking tries and ends up on his back and side more times than he can count.

Until T’challa plants a fist straight against his sternum and Tony feels his shoulder’s hunch and something crack under the force.

He flies back several feet from the blow, landing with a thud on his back as blood spills from his mouth and his vision clouds with black spots that keeps on expanding. For a moment, Tony doesn’t see the sky. He feels his breath comes out in deep and dangerous heaves, feels his chest hurt like all those years ago and well, isn’t that just peachy, that T’challa would hit him right where it fucking hurts.
Tony closes his eyes for a second and thinks, *no*, he tells his thoughts, *he wouldn’t.*

T’challa wouldn’t.

Because T’challa is an *exceptional* man.

Tony coughs and rolls over to his side, planting his hands on the ground and forcing himself back up on his feet. He manages to stand and catch sight of the alarmed and still poker faced expressions on the Dora Milaje, catches the reflection of his messed up face and smatters of red all over his chest and arms. He doesn’t have to fucking do this, he doesn’t have to fight, he doesn’t even have to let T’challa continue to beat him down because he *had* to, because he *must*, because what would come after would be worth all the heartache, the physical ache and this entire fucking trouble.

Tony turns to face the king once more and gets only a second to see the anguish on his face before he is raising his arms again to block the oncoming strike. It comes without mercy now, T’challa’s blow accompanied by the forceful cries tearing past his throat as his fists land on Tony’s side, his elbows against his jaw and his spear forcing him back step after step.

And when Tony falls back and he sees the oncoming tip of the blade heading straight *for* his face, his arms come up to block the blow with his gauntlets, T’challa hovering above him, anguish as clear as day and his eyes brimming with thick pools of bitter tears as he grits his teeth.

Something falls into place then, as Tony tastes the salt against his lips and he *pushes* back.

Tony pushes back and picks up the spear from the ground and swings with the intention to stop this madness, to stop this fucking idiotic and *stupid* need for a fight. Tony strikes with the will to end everything, and feels focus settle between his eyes that he hadn’t had before.

T’challa’s spear comes straight for his chest again and Tony spins out of the way, remembering all the times Zuri had forced him to avoid those fucking painful blows of his staff and manages to land a fist against T’challa’s side. T’challa crumples for a second, and it is enough for Tony to cock his elbow and land a blow against the side of the king’s jaw.

The unexpectedness of it all throws the crowd off as the collective gasps *echoes*, and Tony doesn’t waste his chance as swings his spear and catches the king between the shoulder blades. A lucky strike, if anything.

T’challa dances away, to recover, to gather his foothold, but Tony chases after him, aiming to strike him down, refusing to be relentless and *forcing* T’challa into defensive maneuvers, as Extremis side effect of quicker reflexes comes to good use and Tony fights back like his adversary is Ultron. He fights like he is pushing Steve back after he had said *yes*, strikes like when the Mandarin had *dared* to try to take Pepper away from him. Tony sees the faces before him flash with each rain of his blows, feels his throat go numb from the cries that leave him as he hits, hits, hits, hits, stay down, stay fucking *down*.

Until he feels the punch to the face that makes him stumble, the spear dropping from his hand as he reaches forward to grab T’challa by the arm, a desperate and a mad scramble for purchase and attack, fingers *digging* into flesh as he plants an open palm against the inner crook of T’challa’s elbow and *lifts* with everything he had in him to throw T’challa off. Tony hears the dual thud of himself and T’challa, and then later the scramble of limbs as they both get back on their feet.

Tony is on guard again, and tries to catch his breath through his broken nose and cracked sternum, blinking rain from his face as he stares at T’challa bleeding lip, at his empty hands and at him staring at the fallen red sash on the ground, the ringing still loud in Tony’s ears from the multiple blows to
the head and jaw.

T’challa doesn’t move, as still as the statues of the Panther gods that watch over Wakanda.

Until he raises his eyes from the fallen red sash to look at Tony, eyes wide and chest *heaving* with something he is trying to keep under control, as the rain continues to fall down without mercy.

It is then that Tony watches T’challa’s lips *tremble*, watches how the water continues to sluice down his face that looks too much like tears as his lips pull back into something breathtakingly *beautiful*. And when T’challa stands straight, acknowledging the fact that Tony had fulfilled the requirements to claim victory in a fight that he can never hope to win, when he brings his arms up and crosses it in front of him in a warrior’s salute, his head dipping in respect, Tony watches with stunned and frozen silence as the Dora Milaje echoes the gesture, and high above him, in all the stands, the queen mother, Shuri and Zuri does the same.

Tony feels knees *quake* then, as one by one, the people begin to salute him.

It isn’t exactly victory, it is far from it.

So Tony falls to his knees then, as shock and grief and guilt for forcing T’challa’s hands to hurt him sinks in, feels ice under his knees as he brings his hands to his face and without shame, without any control, he *weeps* with anguish and in sheer relief that it is finally *over*.

TBC

**Chapter End Notes**

* I AM ALIVE, YES. JUST GOT BACK FROM A TRIP LAST WEEK AND THEN I AM OFF AGAIN TO ANOTHER TRIP OMG IRL WHAT

To anyone who cares, inspired music score for the fight scene (that i feel is so half-assed but god, I suck at this) is this: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MiLOB1zzYo

Especially that bow in the end.

* I AM SO READY TO SEE BLACK PANTHER OMFG I AM READY I AM SO SEEING IT TOMORROW UGH FSDBHJFDHBJFSDFHJFSDFHJSFD WHO IS EXCITED
Chapter Summary

The fight does not end on the wet grounds of the arena.

T'challa had to hold himself still, frozen in his stance as he orders Ayo and Aneka to get Tony to a healer immediately. He watches, with his heart sinking to the pits of the mountain, fingers itching to reach out and cup this exceptional man’s face between his hands, as he is all but carried, almost hanging off the Dora Milaje’s arms concussed, disoriented, blood dripping down his face as he disappears into the entrance of the jet, Shuri jumping down from the stands and clamoring after them. With Shuri by Tony’s side, T’challa feels part of his worry ease the tiniest bit.

Once the jet takes off and disappears over the mountains and down the river, this is where T’challa turns to face the tribal leaders.

This is where his stance goes stiff with reason because he can see the arguments already forming to flow past their lips, their objections to the marriage and the results of the fight, no doubt. T’challa lifts his hand, waving it to dismiss everyone. The council members shifts to move too but T’challa’s voice booms over the sound of the waterfall, ordering them to stay. The crowd scuffles away even quicker as the council stays put, chins tilted up with his mother and Zuri standing off to the side.

Only when the silence descends over the arena, when the last of the crowd whispers disappears and the final boat had sailed and the plane had flown, does T’challa allow the anger to lace into his voice. He can still taste the blood on his lips, can still feel the heat of Tony’s flesh breaking against his fist, the crimson warmth turning to what feels like ice on his knuckles.

“Does that satisfy you?” T’challa asks, gesturing to the arena, arms spread as he walks over to them, addressing them from where he stands below them, his voice thick with the rage and grief for doing what had just done. On his feet, the red sash floats along the water and drops down the bottom of the waterfalls.

“Your highness --” Itshe begins, but T’challa cuts her off.

“My question is simple. Does that satisfy you?” T’challa asks and when the council gives half assed nods and murmurs, T’challa loses it. “I cannot hear you!”

“Yes, your highness!” The council echoes.

“Do not mistake my willingness to listen to your demands as a sign of weakness. Do not think that I am unaware and naive, a mere boy, to think that any of this will be easy, that it will not come with its challenges. Do not mistake my choice as a sign of abandonment of my duties, my people and my country!” T’challa snaps, his voice echoing all across the planes. “Because I have not. You know this!”

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“You highness…” Zuri begins.

T’challa’s brings up a shaking fist to sharply to silence what he knows will be words to dissipate his anger, to calm him. “We have an agreement. Your requirements have been met. If there is anything else to be discussed with me and our meetings, it will only be how we can move forward with this union in a direction that will benefit Wakanda’s interest or any other business related to our country’s safety, our trades, and our people.”

A few seconds pass and when no words are voiced, T’challa turns around and takes his leave.

The plane ride to the palace is terse and quiet, with T’challa brushing away Zuri’s concern along with the queen mother’s. He sits on the bench with his face buried in his hand that is still crimson, as he sucks in long breath after long breath through his nose, trying to remain calm as Okoye takes them back to the palace.

This will haunt him for the rest of his days; T’challa will never forget the feeling of having bone yield under his fist, or the feeling of having his weapon slice against skin, how blood had arched in the air, splattering against his face and lip, thick and hot and bittersweet. He will never forget the dazed look in Tony’s eyes as he gets up, and gets up again, refusing to stay down, how those brown eyes had clouded over, as if diseased with the early onset of cataract, had looked at him and had not seen him.

T’challa presses the heel of his palm against the socket of his eye, where the burning salt starts to gather and trickle down his cheeks. He sits there, head bowed, with the sun against his back from the jet’s glass panels warming his skin but unable to ease the pain and guilt in his heart. T’challa brings his other hand in a fist against his mouth, teeth biting into it to keep him quiet as his shoulders start to quake with the horror of what he had just subjected Tony to, even if it had been Tony’s choice.

It is selfish to love someone this way.

It is selfish to want Tony Stark for himself.

(It is foolish, moronic, and some may even say it is unhealthy, for Tony to even want to go this far.)

T’challa does not hear nor feel when the plane lands on the palace’s landing pad or when the engines are switched off. He doesn’t hear Zuri’s slow and hesitant footsteps pause and walk away, giving him the space he needs. He doesn’t even realize when his mother had pressed a gentle hand to his head, murmuring a short verse of prayer before she too, leaves him alone.

It is only Okoye who lingers, her back turned to him as she stands on guard by the jet’s entrance, spear firm on the ground and eyes staring straight ahead. She says nothing about the time T’challa takes to calm the hitching of his breath, says nothing when he coughs out the congestion in his sinuses to clear it, nor does she even makes a sound when he sighs audibly after a long time and gets to his feet to face the world once more, swiping the tears from his face and putting on an unreadable expression.

“My king,” Okoye says, when T’challa pauses by the door as he slips his over robe on. “Your fiancé fought well.”

“Pray to the Bast, Okoye,” T’challa says, as he arranges the collar of his over robe, as he takes the first step out of the plane. “That I still have a fiancé.”

The palace grounds is quiet when T’challa enters, heading straight for Shuri’s lab where he finds her looking over a panel of diagnostics, overseeing the healing process of Tony’s injuries. Tony lies
deathly still on the table, still in his ceremonial combat pants, blood already crusty and dried on his face. He is about as pallid as a sheet of paper, breaths so soft and quiet that had it not been for the projections of his very much functioning organs, T’challa would think him dead. Lying under the radiating golden glow of the healing apparatus, Tony looks almost peaceful in his sleep.

(And you know the weight of the dead, know how Tony feels like in your arms with no breath in his body; it is not something you will ever forget. It is not something you will never not fear.)

“He is stable, brother.” Shuri assures, eyes flicking up from the projection before her to Tony’s body and then back to her wrist. “Extremis is -- it is accommodating our tech. The vibramed-rays are speeding up its performance. He should look as good as new within the hour. He lost consciousness mid-flight.”

“Thank you, Shuri…” T’challa murmurs, unable to move from his spot as he watches the injury disappear, bruises fade and molten and sunken and swollen skin from the blows slowly smooth and even out.

“He fought well.” Shuri acknowledges, tapping her kimoyo beads and dismissing the projection on her wrist as she casts a look at Tony’s sleeping face. “I would be proud to call him brother.”

“He did not have to do this, you know?” T’challa says, shaking his head. “He really didn’t have to fight for me.”

“But he did.” Shuri says, and offers T’challa a small smile. “Not all who loves you apparently would.” T’challa knows a jab when he sees one and a pointed look at Shuri’s inappropriate reference is enough to silence the subject. “Go and clean up, brother. You are dirty, bloody and this is not the sight you want to present your fiancé with. I will be finish here and make sure that Tony is comfortable in his room once I’m done.” Shuri must have seen the hesitance in T’challa’s face before she grabs him by the arm and bodily escorts him out of his lab. “Go. Just go clean up.”

T’challa listens for once and doesn’t argue.

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Halfway through pulling a clean tunic on, with the blood clean from his fist and face, T’challa is interrupted by a sudden call. His mother’s face appears at the palm of his hand when he answers, an unreadable look on her face.

“Are you well, my son?” She asks, with a slight cant of her head.

“Yes, mother.” He answers, blinking and wondering if something is afoot. Normally, his mother keeps this particular neutral face for council business purposes.

“Excellent. If you could spare a few moments, I must converse with you on an urgent matter. Come to my chambers once you are ready. I will wait.” She says, and without warning, ends the call.

T’challa is left with more confusion than naught. Worry settles at the pit of his stomach as he finishes dressing with a little more haste and speed before he directs himself to the queen mother’s wing of the palace. Upon entry, he is greeted by her attendants, heads dipped and words of greetings murmured as they gesture to her study. And right there, by the desk, is his mother staring out at the vast stretch of her garden, with the warmth of the sun casting a golden glow on the apex of her beautiful cheekbones, sipping on a cup of tea that smells a little strong.

“Mother,” He murmurs, dipping his head in greeting.
“Your rage has calmed, I see.” She says, setting her cup down and turning to face him, and unlike the call earlier, her face had more expression now. T’challa sees understanding that is far more vast than the universe, peppered with sympathy that she would never show the world. “It is not over yet.”

“I know, mama…” T’challa says, nodding and swallowing past the sudden swell in his throat.

“I’ve called you here to give this to you.” She says, turning to tug a large wooden box that is slightly withered and chipped around the edges, but still preserved and maintained. She pushes the box towards T’challa, and then picks up her cup of tea once more.

The safety latch of the box unlocks when it recognizes T’challa’s signature and touch, the glow of purple Wakandan letters on the length of his wrist flashing momentarily before the soft hiss of something more high tech than the seemingly harmless and antique box pops free. T’challa lifts the wooden lid to find cool and smooth metal under it, only to find himself staring at a large chunk of raw vibranium, a good forty pounds in weight, enough to make hundreds of weapons staring up at him through the safety of the glass seal and casing. He presses fingers against the glass, and blinks up at his mother. He’s heard stories of old, when the first warrior had been made king, of how the first Black Panther ring had been forced by the first chunk the warrior himself had pulled out from the earth.

T’challa had paid very little belief to the stories he had grown up listening, knowing that some of the ‘extras’ are more decorative rather than fact.

Staring at the chunk of rock before him, T’challa finds himself wondering why his mind goes back to the history and legend.

“Is this…?” He asks, unsure, leaving his question open.

“The first ore the first Panther had pulled from the ground.” The queen mother says, nodding. “It is passed down from generation to generation on the night before the king or the crown prince is to be wed.”

“But we haven’t decided yet, Tony and I – and this – I…” T’challa feels words fail him. As far as he knows, there had been no discussion of the wedding or the ceremonies that require an insane amount of planning.

The queen mother laughs, amused and shaking her head. “What, you didn’t think it was real? Well, to be fair neither did your father. Or me!” The queen seems to find that ridiculously funny because she keeps laughing to the point of breathlessness until she sits herself down and dabs around the corner of her eyes with a pinky finger. T’challa isn’t able to relate to her level of humor, and clearly there is a story there; the laugh is infectious all the same and T’challa finds himself, for the first time in weeks, chuckling alongside his mother as he takes a seat, a softer expression on his face. “Oh, excuse me, my boy. Oh, I haven’t had a good laugh like that in a long while.” She says, clearing her throat, but unable to keep the mirth from her eyes. “The legend is true, but the rings for the title of Black Panther is not forged each time from this. That ring is handed down from king to king. Which you already have.”

T’challa looks at the ring on his finger, feels his fingers rotate it around the digit as he looks at the chunk of rock. “So what is this for?”

“Well,” The queen mother says, a little haughtily with a quirk of her eyebrow. “You do have a fiancé and will be wed. You didn’t think about the ring to give to my soon to be son-in-law, did you?”

T’challa blinks and feels his mouth drop and words freeze about as solid as the tips of the alps
because no, he hadn’t thought about it. He hadn’t dared to think about it because a part of him had been preparing himself for the worse, to cushion the disappointment and what he knows will be a far more painful heartbreak than the one Nakia had left him with all those years ago. He hadn’t dared to think about it because he had been taking this entire ordeal a day at a time, praying and kneeling at the temple grounds instead of resting or catching up on his much needed sleep, praying that all will be well, that he would still have a fiancé, that Tony, would not think his countrymen so little and so backwards in their beliefs and demands and decide to fuck it all to hell and back.

“I did not.” T’challa answers, after what feels like hours and there it is again, the sympathy and ever so warm understanding on his mother’s face. “I couldn’t.”

“I know,” She says, soft and kind as she reaches for his hand and holds it between hers. “But now, you must. In what little time you have for yourself, think well on the symbol you wish to present to your love. Think well, because this is yours. This ore was dug up from the ground by the first warrior, the first panther rings forged thousands of years ago, along with the crown. And after that, the symbol for the warrior worthy to stand by the king’s side. Some believe that the first warrior had dug it up with his bare hands for his queen. Not for the crown and the Panther rings.”

T’challa grasps his mother’s hands with both of his. “It’s a nice sentiment, mama…”

“Isn’t it?” She says, and looks at the ore beyond the glass casing. “Your father and I have talked about this day too, almost as much as the day you would become king. He was always excited every time someone had caught your eye, the silly old fool. He would speak of it at length. My heart is heavy that he isn’t the one to give this to you, because I know how much he had wanted to give it to you. But I know he is with us, he is watching this and I know that his heart is filled with so much joy.” She reaches forward to press a hand to T’challa’s cheek, “As is mine.”

T’challa doesn’t respond, but falls to his knees instead and wraps his arms tight around his mother, a soft murmur of thanks flowing past his lips as he closes his eyes and hopes, that his father, if he is really watching this, approves of his choice.

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Getting past Tony’s door to see him should have been as easy as one, two, three.

It isn’t.

T’challa remains rooted to his spot, fist poised above the door of Tony’s room, alone in the empty corridor and possibly looking a lot like the decorative statues in the palace gardens. In those very few minutes of him hanging like a holiday wreath on someone’s door, he finds himself incredibly nervous and unsure of just what to say or how to begin to even say… well, what do you say?

How do you say I’m sorry I had to beat you down? How do you say, I’m sorry that I love you so much that I would go this far for you and I realize how twisted that sounds considering I just beat you to a bloody pulp? How do you say, I cannot wait to spend the rest of my life with you, to have you by my side, to see the world more through your eyes, to have you create and build and put forward the vision you’ve always had for a world of cleaner energy, where there is equal opportunities for others. How do you say, I am so, so sorry, I’m so selfish, forgive my weakness?

And worse, how do you say, I promise this is the end of it, that we’ll have our happily ever after, that it’s all up, up and away from now on, when you know damn well that it’s only the beginning?

How do you make a promise that you know you will never be able to keep?
T’challa drops his fist down from the door, shoulders drooping before he turns and walks away from the door. He hears his Dora Milaje shuffle in after him, silent as the air and walls around him before they pause when he pauses. They turn around when he turns around to walk back to the door, and halt when he suddenly halts midway. This goes on and on before one of the Dora Milaje clears her throat and T’challa turns to look at Ayo’s face, unreadable and as blank as a clean slate. T’challa doesn’t miss however, the slight almost ghost like rise of one of her eyebrows.

It is enough to feel a little chastised for behaving like a foolish boy.

Feeling the heat rise to his cheeks, T’challa straightens his back and walks right for the door, and before he loses his nerve, he knocks three sharp times, loud enough for Tony to hear even if he is at his room’s terrace. Tony doesn’t answer him, but FRIDAY does, her voice smooth and courteous.

When T’challa steps in, he sees a few smudges of blood on the floor, trailing all the way to the bathroom. Concerned and feeling a little apprehensive, he follows the trail in quick strides and finds Tony sitting in the tub, water till his upper lip and staring dazedly at the window. The sharp smell of eucalyptus, aloe vera and mint hangs in the fogged up space of the bathing area and T’challa recognizes the scent as one of the relaxing remedies provided by the physician to counter fatigue and promote relaxation. Tony doesn’t move from his spot on the tub, but makes air bubbles.

“Are you all right?” T’challa asks, and gets an air bubble for his concern. “Tony, should I be alerting the palace physician? Shuri had mentioned healing you and I know she does a thorough job and delivers…” There’s a series of air bubbles before Tony closes his eyes and brings a hand from under the water to make a thumbs up a sign. “Tony…”

Tony shifts and rises just a touch above the water, enough for him to verbally say, “You cannot make me leave this tub right now. No matter how lovely you look in that dashing outfit you have on, even with the puppy eyes you’re making – stop it, don’t be an ass – you are not making me leave this tub. I love this tub and these bath salts, shhhhh, I’m relaxing. Shuri said to relax, I am listening to the princess. See? Relaxing.”

T’challa feels something in him come undone and go lax then, as he lowers himself to the ground by the tub’s edge, fingers reaching forward to press against Tony’s forehead, sweeping wet hair back. Tony’s eyes close then and remain close until the steam stop rising from the surface of the water and T’challa watches the last rays of the sun disappear over the horizon.

The water is only lukewarm when Tony shifts and stands from the tub. T’challa’s follows his movement, mouth going dry as it always does with the stronger built, the straighter back and more defined muscle. T’challa cannot remember seeing Tony this strong, this sure in his strides, where his bones aren’t sticking out from his joints or his shoulder isn’t hunched forward from fatigue. The fatigue, it seems, is a permanent feature in Tony’s stance, forever lingering around the corners of his eyes, but it had become less pronounced during his stay in Wakanda. T’challa watches, with nothing sort of warm affection as Tony scrubs as his scalp body, thick white suds sluicing down the length of his body in ways that leave T’challa’s stomach incredibly warm.

And when Tony steps out of the shower, wrapping a towel around his waist, wet and relaxed and relieved, T’challa finds himself rising slowly to his feet, standing his full height as he steps into Tony’s orbit and presses the palms of his hands against the beautiful, beautiful, face.

“I fear nothing except losing you.” T’challa finds himself saying, nothing short of raw honesty, and meaning every word from the depths of his soul.

“Isn’t that something?” Tony says, tilting his head and smile creeping up the corners of his lips. “I feel the exact same thing.”
T’challa wraps his arms around him then, uncaring if the front and sleeves of his tunics ends up wet. Tony is warm and smells like citrus and musk, Energizing and fresh and it’s all T’challa can do but press his face against the crook of Tony’s neck, feeling the quickening pace of Tony’s pulse beat against his lips. The water on Tony’s skin is sweet and not bitter, the scent of blood clean and washed away.

“You’re my entire world.” T’challa murmurs against warming skin, and feels and hears Tony’s sharp inhale at the words.

T’challa pulls back then to look at Tony’s face, finds incredibly blue and deep molten brown eyes staring up at him with wonder along with something he’s never seen before, something a little small, a little too vulnerable and raw and it’s the last straw in the control T’challa had managed to keep all these long months.

The kiss is visceral, searing in its urgency as T’challa claims Tony’s mouth. They stumble in their steps backwards, with T’challa almost bodily picking Tony up to hasten their journey from the connecting bathroom to the bedroom, a hand swiping over the counter for oils clumsily, breaking several and making the decorative pieces fall to the ground with an echoing noise, just as the towel comes off in one vicious downwards yank. T’challa leaves an uncaring and horrid mess behind, a testament to the fucked up storms spinning in the middle of his gut from having to beat his entire world down just moments ago, when now he’s got him in his arms, clawing at his back, raking fingers down his neck that leaves T’challa hissing into their kiss. T’challa isn’t able to keep the gasping noise from tearing past his throat, almost keening when Tony jerks his head back from the vicious kiss, only to plant equally shaky hands on the collar of T’challa’s tunic. The little buttons pop and clatter to the ground, lost in the harshness of their exhales as Tony’s hands pushes away the fabric off the curve of T’challa’s shoulders. T’challa lets it fall like the rest of his control, because the moment the fabric slips free from his wrist, he is cupping Tony’s face once more and meshing their lips together. The hunger is uncontrollable, because this is months dragging into years worth of distance and starvation for each other’s physical present, weeks of watching Tony grow stronger, stand straighter, seeing the visible progress of taut skin over lightly tanned, jacked and juicy arms that belongs to a warrior. It is weeks of watching Tony look at him from under his lashes, feeling the heat of his gaze and the want that T’challa dares not look back to because if he had, by the Bast if he had, he would have not been able to keep his control and wits about him at all.

This is unparalleled need and too much deprivation, desperation for warmth and reassurance, nails dragging along skin to leave raised red marks and clear white lines as Tony moans under him when his teeth sinks against his neck, marking him because you’re mine, you’re all mine.

There is no gentleness in their touch. They tear each other down, as T’challa worships the body underneath him like the countless times he had knelt by the temple steps, spreading Tony’s legs as he trails teeth and hot wet tongue down the length of his stomach and over the swell of his cock. This is T’challa sinking his teeth into Tony’s inner thigh, eyes flicking upwards as he watches Tony arch off the carpet, a muted and strangled cry catching somewhere in his throat as he almost crushes the vial of oil in his hand in his attempt to open it, coating fingers, spilling it on the carpet and all over the length of his arm as he maneuvers the entire ordeal with one hand. It’s a quick swipe and not the gentlest of probes as he maneuvers Tony stutter in his breath, fingers gripping the edge of the reading chaise. There is a growl at the base of Tony’s throat, a demand for his royal fucking highness to hurry the fuck up.
It is in those few seconds that T’challa finds himself pausing, staring at the spread before him, his fingers buried as deep as they can go in what he thinks is the most beautiful man he’s ever seen, the arch of Tony’s cock tall and pulsing, precum gathering around his stomach and spilling over, trickling down his stomach because Tony is gone, he’s barely coherent from the almost half pretzel like position he’s in, one shoulder against the chaise, an elbow propped on the carpet, legs wide and so wonton, chest heaving and a thin sheen of sweat dotting his shoulders, chest and temples -- but those heated eyes, the most beautiful eyes is what holds T’challa prisoner, because they relooking right at him and seeing T’challa not for his title or crown, but for the man that he is.

T’challa blinks and they move in sync, bodies drawing towards each other as he pulls his fingers out and watches as Tony shudders and moans at the loss, adjusting himself and propping his elbows against the chaise as T’challa kneels before him, grabs him by the hips and with barely any control left, pushes himself into the warmth that he’s fantasized about over countless nights, that warmth that sometimes leaves him waking up sweaty and needy and cock heavy and hard and dazed.

The world feels like it stops spinning for a moment when T’challa looks up with a gasp and finds himself staring at the slack jawed and dazed and almost heady expression on Tony’s face.

There is no thought, no doubt, no concern or any of the loud noise in T’challa’s head when their eyes meet, no hesitation when T’challa brings a hand to Tony’s face and moves, watching his entire world jerk with each slow and measuring thrust, watching Tony’s teeth grit and flash as moans rumble past his throat.

And when the kimoyo beads on T’challa’s wrist flash in an incoming call, because a king is almost always on duty, T’calla watches as Tony turns his gaze towards it, watches with a smile lingering around the curve of his parted lips when Tony reaches up and yanks the bracelet free, clattering beads all around them and tossing the fist full as far as he can to one side.

It is enough to turn T’challa into an absolute savage, primal instincts taking over as he yanks Tony against him, pushing Tony’s arms around his shoulders as he thrusts upwards, tasting the breath against his lips, feeling the heat against his skin and the rub of Tony’s rock hard cock against his abdomen. T’challa fucks him like he doesn’t care about anything save for the rough keens tearing past Tony’s throat, fucks him because the sight of the almost blissed out smile around the corners of Tony’s lips is something he knows will keep him incredibly warm for hte nights they are apart again. He fucks Tony like he’s been deprived all his life, crass and vicious, skin slapping against skin audibly as the carpet sears into his knees and his throat vibrates with guttural moans that he is past caring if anyone dares hear their king sound like an animal.

And when T’challa comes, he comes into a blinding whiteness that leaves him crying out against Tony’s mouth, as he grips Tony’s cock with fingers he can barely feel, fists it against that beautiful length and strokes until Tony is coming too, head craned back and syllables of his name broken and in utter pieces spilling past his lips, as the heat between them thickens and T’challa feels he’s got nothing left in him to spill into the beautiful body he wants nothing more but to hold forever.

T’challa doesn’t remember what follows next, but remembers the salty-sweetness of Tony’s mouth
as they roll onto the carpet in a heap and stare at the ceiling, their breaths asing to something softer.

And when they turn to look at each other again, when their lips pull back almost simultaneously in what T’challa feels is the cheekiest and most victorious grin ever, T’challa feels young like all those years ago, when they had first rolled a join within the interiors of a a limited edition Ferrari, and they had looked at each other and grinned, too.

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T’Challa wakes up before dawn, sprawled on the carpet with a throw blanket over his middle. He wakes up not because he is disturbed, but because he feels emptiness beside him, when there should be warmth and the presence of the only body he ever wants to feel by his side. He blinks his eyes open, finding the space on the carpet indeed, void of Tony’s presence. A look around the room tells him that Tony is standing by the balcony door, a silhouetted against the colors of dawn, a cup in his hand as he stares beyond the glass the stretch of the gardens and beyond the palace walls, the thriving metropolis.

Like this, T’challa thinks Tony is his most beautiful, with dawn glossing over the planes of his chest, the lines of his stomach and casting shadows over the curve of his ass and length of his thighs, the glowing lights of the vehicles beyond and sky scrapers dancing over him like little blinking stars. Tony is staring at nothing, gaze distant as he takes a sip from his cup, tea, T’challa realizes, when he notices the little dangle of the tea bag handle, before his gaze drops to his cup. Like this, Tony looks alone, a weight so large on his shoulders and a vulnerability that seems so unfitting for Ironman, or even a Stark. Like this, Tony is simply himself, with sins he continuously blames himself for, guilt he refuses to forgive himself for, and solitude that feels like a solid presence. Like this, Tony looks like he’s fighting the world, except this time, he doesn’t have the luxury nor the grand illusion that he isn’t alone.

T’challa watches as Tony looks up towards the city again, lips parting in a sigh and his tongue darts out to moisten what must feel like dry lips.

It’s about all T’challa can take before he carefully and quietly rises to his feet, barely making any noise beyond the city’s distant hum as he wraps his arms around Tony’s middle, pressing the warmth of that bare and solid back against his chest as he presses lips to Tony’s shoulder.

“You’re thinking very loudly,” T’challa mumurs against skin, feeling pleasure at seeing goosebumps break all over.

“That’s a very husbandy thing to say, given the cliché setting.” Tony answers, and T’challa can hear the amusement in the tenors of Tony’s voice.

“It woke me up. What a distressing thing to do to your king, leaving him alone,” T’challa kisses the shoulder again, trailing lips up to the side of Tony’s neck. “And cold. And alone.”

The laugh that leaves Tony is soft and so incredibly warm, that T’challa feels the brush of butterfly wings against his stomach. “We haven’t had the honeymoon yet, look at you~”

“Oh the things I will do to you,” T’challa murmurs against the warming neck, trailing kisses up to the shell of Tony’s ear. “On our honeymoon.”

“Promises, promises, my king.” Tony says, tilting his head and leaning further into the touch. “I was thirsty. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Hmm,” T’challa hums and tightens his arms around Tony just a little more, before looking out to the
city, reaching for Tony’s cup to tilt it just enough for him to see the contents; he catches the faint whiff of Wakanda’s infamous rooibos tea. “Your expression worries me. Dollar for your thoughts?” T’challa asks as he snakes an arm under Tony’s own to take sip of the tea.

“Looking at that,” Tony says, tilting his chin at the city. “Thinking of that.” Tony falls quiet then and from the reflection of the glass, T’challa watches how his eyebrows knit for the briefest second even when his lips pull into what feels like a melancholic smile. “You ever look at something you didn’t think you can have, or didn’t think you can ever be a part of, because you never stood a chance, you don’t deserve it, and suddenly realize that, hey, that’s your future?” T’challa watches as Tony’s gaze remains lowered, the slight shudder that goes through him not lost on T’challa. “That’s your home?”

And if T’challa can think back on the day he had watched Tony walk through the doors of his office, alive, whole and not the pulseless body he still remembers holding in his arms, T’challa thinks the answer to that question is undoubtedly yes. It had been in that short moment that he had seen a glimpse of his future. Some may say he is foolish for wanting an outsider, may say he’s even crazy for choosing a Stark of all people. T’challa thinks he sees endless possibilities, limitless bravery and so much humanity and understanding of suffering that maybe, perhaps, he is indeed crazy to want someone so flawed and dare some say, broken.

T’challa continues to watch Tony’s face through the glass, and carefully reaches around his shoulders to tilt his chin up, so he can look him in the eye and whisper his answer. “Maybe.”

“I’m a hot mess, you know.” Tony says, almost like a warning.

“I’m aware.” T’challa nods, and presses their cheek together.

“I’m not going to ditch you at the altar, so to speak. I’m not going to leave you, I’m not running away. I’m sticking to my guns and that’s because I said yes and I love you.” Tony says a tremble in his voice. “I have no illusions about the difficulty that lies ahead, what international media may sic upon you and your people which is why –“

T’challa knows what’s coming. “Tony, stop –“

“—if the council and your kingdom thinks it’s best we keep our marriage once it’s done within Wakanda, I’m all for it. Whatever makes it easier – I uh – I come with a lot of media hate and it’s not something Wakanda deserves.” Tony says.

T’challa hears himself sigh as he presses his forehead against his Tony’s shoulder. He had his reservations that a conversation like this would pop up at some point, and he isn’t naïve to think that the council won’t want to keep the marriage silent, at least for a short period of time before they can officiate an international press release and have outreach and project to go with it. T’challa do so loathe the politics behind a lot of things, this apparently, happens to be on the list.

“I pray, one day, that you would understand that you are your harshest judge, jury and executioner.” T’challa says, a slight pinch in his heart. He pulls back and turns Tony to face him, watches the distraught expression paint on his face, the twist of Tony’s lips in a show of bravado, because admittance to something like is to expose the softness within and Tony, well, if anything, is a giant marshmallow of a man under all the iron. “I am aware of the politics. The drama and paparazzi trail that will follow. I am also aware of the amount of pressure that’s going to be put on you when you are crowned. I am not afraid of headlines, of the media, of talk shows and stocks dipping. I am not afraid of slander, of talk that is nothing but static noise and opinions of countries beyond my own. A wise leader will always know when not to mix something personal with the business of their country. If those leaders pull back from arrangements, treaties and agreements, Wakanda is ready. We are
“Could you please dial down the sexiness just a tiny bit? It’s distracting.” Tony mutters.

And T’challa simply brushes the attempt to derail the conversation, reading the tight lines of discomfort all over Tony’s body. Instead, he tightens his hold around Tony, pressing their foreheads together.

“I am afraid of losing you.” T’challa admits, carefully whispered words almost nothing but a soft exhale of breath. “Do you understand this?”

“But why?” Tony asks. “I stand to lose far more by losing you. I can’t wrap my head around the fact that you’re so afraid of losing me when I’m the one trying to keep a unsteady grip on everything that is you. So tell me, why, T’challa?”

“Because you don’t love a king, and you do not love the warrior.” T’challa says, and shrugs a little, feeling a touch helpless and suddenly, incredibly shy, almost naked than his current state as he feels his lips twitch in a slight smile. “You just the love me. The man.”

(It’s all you’ve really wanted growing up, wanting someone to know you, love you for who you are beyond the veils of all the titles you have on your shoulder and head.)

“And you’re okay with that?” Tony asks, voice thick as he blinks at the emotion that is glistening around the corners of his eyes.

“More than you can imagine.” T’challa says, “I don’t promise an easy life. I cannot delude you with a fairy-tale promise. But I know you, Tony. And what I can promise you that no matter what happens, before I act as warrior and king, to you, I will always be a man first. Whatever difficulties we may face, whatever hard choices we may make. I am your husband first, before I am your king and your warrior. This,” T’challa swallows, and presses his hand to Tony’s jaw, thumb trembling before it steadies against the curve of Tony’s lips. “is my oath to you. Bast be my witness.”

Tony closes his eyes and swallows, nodding slowly in understanding.

T’challa’s hand slides down to the side of his neck as he pulls Tony close and slants their mouths together, kissing him with nothing like the ferocity of the previous night. He kisses him until dawn brightens the sky and the lights of the city dims, the warmth of the sun casting a glow over them as the tea cup lays forgotten on a ledge and they fall in a slow tangle against the sheets, lazy and warm, gentle hands caressing over the expanse of skin and as he T’challa deepens the kiss, crawling between Tony’s legs and humming deep in his lungs when he feels the press of Tony’s hardening cock against his.

T’challa slides down then to take that length into his mouth, feeling a smirk tug against his lips when Tony keens on the bed at the feel of having his cock swallowed whole. T’challa doesn’t even think twice in taking all of him in, feeling the tip of that already rock hard length tickle the back of his throat. It’s a slow burn of mounting pleasure, with Tony’s hips rocking against his lips, fingers clenching against the short curls at the back of T’challa’s head, and Tony’s moans echoing against the walls of the room as the sun rises fully to the sky.

And when Tony comes undone, when the heat of his release coats T’challa’s mouth, glosses over his lips and trickles down his chin, when he taste the salty and almost ghostly sweetness against his tongue, when he looks down the wanton mess in the spread of the sheets before him, at Tony’s heaving chest and his slack lips, it takes nothing but a few strokes to come too, quick and efficient and almost effortless.
It’s FRIDAY’s voice that breaks the morning glow between them, sounding almost sheepish and hesitant.

“Your highness, boss, I am instructed by the princess and the queen mother to let you know that that they are expecting your presence at breakfast to discuss your ceremony arrangements.” FRIDAY pauses. “That you must not be late.”

T’challa huffs as he rolls to his back to stare at the morning sky beyond the stretch of glass.

“Is that bad?” Tony asks.

“You haven’t seen drama and politics until you’ve been involved in a royal Wakadan wedding.

Tony rolls his eyes.

T’challa decides that it is probably best he finds out the long way.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

HAHAHA?????

IDEK? THANK YOU FOR READING. NOT MY BEST SMUT BUT HEY?!!??!??!!

End Notes

This is going to be about people and relationships; just think of it as a chickflick. With feels.

Works inspired by this pnp FANART FOR THE ACCIDENTAL HUSBAND by sukuido

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