**Have I Changed?**

*Summary*

*I liked you more before you met the Avengers.*
It's an offhand comment that Tony wasn't sure he was actually meant to hear. But he did and he doesn't know what it means. Lucky for him, Rhodey's got an answer for him.

Notes

Rhodey may be indulging in a bit of hyperbole here and there in this fic but he's been dying to get this off his chest and Tony gave him the opportunity so he's damn well going to take it and make sure Tony actually listens to him.

This has been sitting on my hard drive for over 2 months and while I'm not entirely happy with it, I'm posting the damn thing so I can stop staring at it.
The offhand comment stuck with Tony for reasons he couldn’t quite explain. It was made at the end of a Senate Hearing, one called by the government to find out the full details of precisely why the Europeans politely despised them more than usual right now. Tony had been grilled by the Senators in charge of the hearing and while he hadn't been entirely forthcoming, he hadn't been obstructionist either. He’d answered their questions with as much detail as was necessary, even though that hadn’t exactly pleased all of them. The Senator who muttered the comment as he pushed past Tony on leaving the room wasn't exactly one of Tony’s biggest fans and maybe that was why it stuck.

“I liked you more before you met the Avengers.”

The Senator in question had never liked him so Tony couldn’t help puzzling over the comment and what it might mean.

He brought it up a few days later in the workshop. “Have I changed since I met the Avengers?” He wasn’t entirely sure whether the question was directed at FRIDAY or himself.

Silence greeted him at first before FRIDAY said very hesitantly, “I can't really say, boss.”

Tony made a harumphing noise and went back to his work, trying to dismiss the errant thought with only limited success.

It came back again the next day when he was slumped on the couch with Rhodey. They were ostensibly watching the latest Star Wars film but Tony hadn't been paying attention, too caught up in his own thoughts.

“Have I changed since I met the Avengers?”

Rhodey turned his head to look at him and FRIDAY obligingly lowered the volume of the movie. The expression on Rhodey’s face was one Tony had never seen before and couldn’t quite decipher.

“Yeah, Tones. You have.” He paused for a moment then continued. “And not for the better.”

Tony frowned, feeling almost offended. “What?”

Rhodey hesitated again as though he wasn’t sure whether he should continue. But he did and Tony appreciated that. Rhodey had never been afraid to call him out on his bullshit and he was glad that hadn't changed now, after everything that had happened.

“You let them turn you into a doormat,” Rhodey said bluntly and Tony could only gape at him in disbelief.

“What?” he finally managed when he could find his voice again.

“You let them turn you into a doormat,” Rhodey repeated, more confidently this time. “You let them walk all over you, take everything without giving anything in return. You do know they never fucking said thank you for anything you gave them or did for them? You do realise that, right, Tones?”


Rhodey sighed. “You did everything for them and they treated you like shit. They treated you like an
annoyance they had to tolerate. And you let ‘em.”

“I… well…” Tony began, feeling rather off-balance, but Rhodey cut him off.

“No. There’s no excuse for their behaviour.” Rhodes sighed. “I know Pepper and I sometimes forget
to thank you for the things you do for us but we also know you break out in hives when things get
 mushy and emotional.” They exchanged quick grins before Rhodes continued. “But we also find
other ways to thank you that don’t make you break out in hives. And that doesn’t excuse the
Avengers’ complete lack of gratitude because they never thanked you at all. Not in words and not in
any other way. I mean, it’s just common fucking decency and they had none.”

Rhodes frowned down at his knees and this time when he turned back to Tony, he looked worried.

“You diminished yourself for them and they didn’t deserve it.”

“Diminished!” Tony squawked. “I thought I was being responsible.”

“You were,” Rhodey conceded. “But you were losing you to do it.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Tony said softly, hesitantly. “Most people don’t really like me when I’m me.”

Rhodey wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him into his side. Tony took that as
permission to snuggle in even closer, something which drew a fond chuckle from Rhodey.

“Screw ‘em. If they can’t handle you as you are then they don’t deserve you. And what the fuck do
they know about you anyway? They never got to know you. They just judged you from… whatever
the hell it was Rogers used. Probably nothing but his preconceived notions. Actually, probably
Romanoff’s report,” Rhodey said sourly then he snorted. “If she’s the best profiler SHIELD had, no
wonder HYDRA were able to infiltrate them so successively.”

That startled a laugh out of Tony then he blinked. “I never thought about it like that.”

“She’s the one that’s supposed to be able to pick people apart and find out all their secrets and she
didn’t even notice that half her colleagues were fucking HYDRA,” Rhodey said derisively. “So any
assessment she did of you could only be a load of horse shit and if that’s what the others were using
to judge you without getting to know you properly and make their own judgement, then they’re
idiots.”

Tony gave a lop-sided smile at Rhodey’s staunch support. “But still…”

“No,” Rhodey said firmly. “Whatever garbage was about to come out of your mouth, no.” His
expression softened and pulled Tony in close to his side again. “You and your ridiculous guilt
complex let them blame you for everything while they waltzed off without a care in the world.
Fucking Rogers sloughed off half of his responsibilities as team leader onto your shoulders without a
word of thanks or any direction as to what he wanted, then bitched at you when you did your best to
take care of them.”

“Well, it was my fault,” Tony said softly.

Rhodes sighed. “Okay, so you have some culpability when it comes to Ultron but that mess wasn’t
all your fault, Tones. I got FRIDAY to show me everything about Ultron.” He shook his head. “It
wasn’t ready. I’m not the programming genius you are but I know my stuff. That AI was barely
functional. There was no way Ultron could have woken up on its own. That was the mind gem and
that’s not your fault.”
“I asked to keep the staff,” Tony countered.

Rhodes frowned. “Yeah, why did you do that? That wasn’t in the plan. You were going to give it back to Thor to take to Asgard. You were pretty wary about that thing when we spoke before the mission.”

Now it was Tony’s turn to frown. “I… don’t know.”

“You don’t do anything without a reason, Tony,” Rhodes said, now looking concerned. “It may be a stupid reason but you always have one.”

Tony’s frown deepened. “I… felt I needed it.”

“Why?”

“To help me create Ultron.”

Rhodey shook his head slowly. “That doesn’t make any sense. What put that thought in your head?”

Tony shifted uncomfortably. “I had a weird… I don’t know, flashback or something.” He jerked and frowned. “Wait. No. I don’t know what it was. I thought it was a flashback at the time, to the… the Chitauri.”

“The witch,” Rhodes growled. “Could it have been her? Didn’t she give the others visions as well?”

“But this was well before the others and why would she want me to take the sceptre?” Tony objected.

“Because that thing is fucked up?” Rhodes replied. “She’s not one of the good guys, Tony, no matter what Rogers and Barton might say. The mind stone made Ultron really work and she manipulated you into taking it. She needs to take her share of the blame for Ultron and so does Banner. It’s not all on you and you shouldn’t take on their blame as well. That’s for them to deal with.”

“But if I hadn’t started working on it…” Tony began.

“Then the mind stone would have found something else to use or manipulate,” Rhodey replied. “Like maybe one of the bots or even JARVIS.” He shuddered. “Or maybe you or Banner. Remember, Loki used it to mind control people.”

Tony shuddered as well and rubbed at his chest where the arc reactor had been. And where Loki had tapped the sceptre when he’d tried to mind whammy him during that invasion.

“But Lagos wasn’t your fault,” Rhodey continued. “The mess in DC wasn’t your fault. Hell, you weren’t even there for either of those and you’re the only one who’s been trying to clean up the mess Rogers and Romanov caused by dumping all those files on the net. And Rogers losing his fucking mind over Barnes definitely isn’t your fault.” He paused and shook his head with fond exasperation. “Okay, goading the Mandarin, yeah, that was your fault. That was stupid.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony said ruefully. “You’ve already given me that lecture.”

“But Killian wasn’t your fault,” Rhodey said.

“But I…”

“Did what you’ve done to a hundred people, a thousand people over the years,” Rhodes said with a shake of his head. “Killian waylaid you at a party to try and sell you his idea. He didn’t make an
appointment or do it through the proper channels. You’ve blown off a hundred people like that at a
hundred parties and they never went full supervillian in response. Killian being a complete lunatic
isn’t your fault. That’s on him for completely overreacting.”

Tony opened his mouth to reply but then closed it again. He didn’t really have a rebuttal for that
because Rhodey was making sense. He had blown off any number of people who’d approached him
like Killian did at parties over the years when he was drunk. He’d sort of made an art form of it.
Killian’s reaction was not normal. Normal would have been snarky or snide comments and maybe a
rude puff piece in a magazine or two.

“Not telling us you were dying is also your fault,” Rhodey continued.

“I thought it would be easier,” Tony protested.

“You thought…” Rhodey broke off and took a deep breath. “Okay, yeah, we’ve also had that
argument and it doesn’t need to be rehashed. But the rest of it? The invasion, the Avengers stuff? It’s
not all your fault, Tones.”

“They blamed me,” Tony said quietly.

“Yeah, because they’re jackasses,” Rhodey growled. “Selfish parasites and you owe them nothing.”
He cocked his head and eyed Tony curiously. “What brought this on, by the way?”

“Senator… what’s-his-name. The one who looks like a dyspeptic clam,” Tony said, waving a hand.
“At the hearing the other day. He said he liked me more before I met the Avengers.” He frowned.
“He never liked me so it… didn’t make sense.”

“Huh,” Rhodey said. “Yes, it does. You stood up to them back then. You blew them off, you ran
rings around them, you put on a show but you always had solid facts and reasons behind everything
you did and said. You made no apologies for doing what you thought was right and if you fucked
up, you owned up to it and tried to make things right. You didn’t let them intimidate you or force you
to back down but you still made it plain you were willing to compromise on certain things. Maybe he
liked that as much as he hated it. A lot of people do. They like an enemy who’s a challenge.”

Tony looked at him askance. “He liked me being…?”

“Tony Fucking Stark,” Rhodey said with a grin. “Yeah, why wouldn’t he? You put on a show. You
were fucking annoying but it was always a hell of a show. And once you looked below the show to
the actual facts, you weren’t unreasonable.”

Tony cogitated on that and Rhodey let him. FRIDAY turned up the volume again and they both
pretended to watch the movie as Tony thought and Rhodey waited for the next round.

“So, the Accords?” Tony said after about half an hour. FRIDAY lowered the volume again.

“Were the right thing to do,” Rhodey said promptly. “Still are. Sure, there’s things that need to be
fixed and amended and that’s going to be harder now than it needed to be but they’re the right way
to go.”

Tony nodded, seemingly willing to trust Rhodey’s judgement more than his own. Then he frowned.
“What did you mean about Steve sloughing off his responsibilities?”

Rhodes grimaced. “Something I should have spoken up about a lot sooner. And maybe done some
of the poking around I’ve been doing since everything happened. I knew something wasn’t quite
right but I bought into the Captain America propaganda.”
“I’m still not following.”

“You’re not military,” Rhodey replied. “Then again, as I’ve found out, neither is Rogers.”

Tony straightened and stared at Rhodes. “What?”

“He’s not military,” Rhodey repeated. “Sure, he did a few days of boot camp but he never finished it before he was sucked up by Erskine and the SSR. I’m not sure what his status was there, whether he was considered an agent or just a civilian consultant or contractor or whatever they did back in those days. Captain America was a stage name and after the rescue of the 107th, it seems everyone just whistled Dixie and let the whole ‘Captain Rogers’ thing stand because it was good for morale. I can’t get much information about how things worked in the Howling Commandos but I’m betting it’s not what the propaganda tells us. Because not only does he not have any basic military training, he doesn’t have any officer training either. Which explains a hell of a lot.”

Tony frowned at him. “He did fine in the field.”

Rhodey grimaced. “Yes and no. He’s good at coming up with a plan at the beginning. Where he starts to fall apart is when things don’t continue to go to his plan. He’s not good at adapting on the fly. He tends to lack situational awareness and he sure as hell lacks flexibility.” He waved a hand. “Now, that can happen to any commanding officer but the reason they make us go to whatever command school is appropriate for whatever arm of the military we’re in is because what we learn there is how to mitigate a lot of that.” He smiled wryly at Tony. “And we learn how to handle different personalities in such a way as to bring out their individual talents. A good commanding officer does not expect their people to be little cookie cutter soldiers, all exactly the same.”

He shook his head ruefully. “I should have picked up on it sooner but I wasn’t around consistently enough, didn’t go on enough Avengers missions, to really see it clearly. It was only after the fact, when I reviewed the missions I wasn’t on, that I started to see the patterns. Rogers could be a good commanding officer but he needs a shitload of training to get rid of his bad habits.”

Rhodey waved his hand. “But back to your question… being a commanding officer doesn’t start and finish with the action. Rogers was adequate at the before stuff. Analysing the intel he was given and making the plan, though he didn’t ask enough questions or follow the right process. Mostly because he didn’t know it. But the after action stuff… he was a complete failure. There are almost no mission reports after SHIELD fell and those that do exist are yours. Or well, whatever was written up by JARVIS and later FRIDAY and signed off by you. Even Romanov and Barton stopped writing reports and they should have known better.”

“Should I have…” Tony began but Rhodey cut him off again. He glared at his friend but it had no effect. Rhodey was pretty much immune to his glares by now and he was apparently on a roll and not inclined to give up the conversational high ground. In fact, he had the air of a man who’d been bottling all of this up and was glad for the opportunity to get it all off his chest in a situation where Tony seemed inclined to listen to him.

“No,” Rhodey said firmly. “It was never your job to do anything other than pilot the Iron Man suit. It wasn’t your job to get intel, to deal with governments and relief agencies, any of that. Rogers wanted to be in command; he should have been doing all of that unless he had specifically requested it of you and backed it up with written orders, clarifying your extended role. Hell, it wasn’t even technically your job to be supplying the others with weapons and armour.” He snorted. “Unless they wanted to pay your consulting fees.”

“They couldn’t afford them,” Tony said automatically then he frowned. Now that Rhodey was pointing all of this out to him, he was starting to realise other things as well. It was as though Rhodey
was stripping the scales away from his eyes and showing him things that had always been obvious but he just hadn’t been able to see before. “Huh. Not that any of them actually had jobs. Well, Wilson did. Sort of. I suppose Lang did as well.” He was a little startled when Rhodey actually *growled.* “Honeybear?”

“Pack of freeloading parasites,” Rhodey snarled. “Rogers and Maximoff were the worst. Rogers used *your* money, *your* resources to search for the murderer of your parents. And Maximoff was quite happy to live under *your* roof, eat food *you* provided and spend *your* money on shit, all the while hating you and poisoning the minds of the others.”

“You think she was doing that?” Tony asked, feeling a little sick to his stomach. “Poisoning the minds of the others?”

“Metaphorically? Sure,” Rhodey replied. “Literally? Using her powers? I don’t know. I know the others say she lost control in Lagos but I don’t buy it. This is a woman who had the kind of precision that allowed her to dig up the nightmares of the Avengers and control a city’s worth of people. That doesn’t speak of a lack of control to me. That speaks of a great deal of control. Maybe she could still be influencing the others unconsciously but if she is doing that, it’s far more likely to be because she wants to. And think about it... the only people who didn’t fall in line with Rogers’ madness were you and me, who didn’t spend much time at the Compound, Banner, who isn’t here, and Vision, who I’d imagine is pretty much immune to any mind control powers given by the mind stone given that he has the damn thing planted in his forehead.”

“What about Natasha?” Tony said, pointing a finger.

“I think we can safely say she was only ever in it for herself,” Rhodey said with a derisive snort. “And I think trusting her again is out the window.”

“Yeah, I’d already come to that conclusion,” Tony said sourly.

He’d given Natasha plenty of chances, more than she really deserved given the mess she’d caused in SHI after her stint as Natalie Rushman. It had taken weeks to discover everything she’d had her hands in and sort out what they’d needed to do to ensure they were legally protected from the consequences of her presence. Her betrayal at Leipzig was the last straw even for him. He was prepared to utilise her talents if it was necessary – and by preference from afar – but he had no intention of ever trusting her again. He hadn’t seen her since she backstabbed him at the airport and he was quite happy about that.

“Anyway,” Rhodey continued. “I’m not saying Maximoff was definitely influencing their minds. Let’s face it, if she was going to do that, she’d have done it before. To you. And probably made you do something fatal. Since she hasn’t, I think we can safely say she isn’t.”

Tony shuddered. “Thanks for that, platypus. I needed another nightmare to add to the collection.”

Rhodey winced and drew him close again. “Sorry, Tones.”

“I have a large collection,” Tony said ruefully. “So it probably won’t show up too often.”

“I’m still sorry,” Rhodey replied.

Tony waved it away and stared at the TV for a while. Rhodey let him stew and FRIDAY obligingly turned up the volume and started the movie again. Tony didn’t speak again until the credits were rolling and then he straightened.

“Screw it,” he said abruptly. “And screw *them.* I’m Tony Fucking Stark. I’m going to fix the
Accords, rebuild the Avengers and get ready for whatever’s coming. I don’t need them.”

“Now there’s the man Senator Dyspeptic Clam loves to hate,” Rhodey said with an approving grin.

Tony laughed and slouched back against Rhodey again. “You know I’m going to call him that to his face, right? And tell him you called him that first.”

Rhodey just shook his head and laughed. “This is your retaliation for the Tony Stank cracks, isn’t it?”

“You bet it is,” Tony said. “Fry my girl, fire up some Indiana Jones. I’m in the mood for adventure.”

“You got it, boss,” FRIDAY said and Tony settled in to watch the movie in a far better frame of mind. It wasn’t going to be easy but for the first time since he’d gotten back from Siberia, he felt like he could actually do this again.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Oooh, look! A second chapter! (With more to come because I keep getting ideas!)

The world is reacting to the events of the civil war and Tony doesn't have to collect a new team, they come to him.

Chapter Notes

Okay, just some notes...

1. I brought the International Criminal Court into this because they would be the most likely court to try someone like the rogue Avengers, especially after hearing that Steve Rogers has been labelled a war criminal in Spider-Man: Homecoming. The ICC was set up to prosecute war crimes, among other things. It can also prosecute people if they are referred to the ICC by an individual state or by the Security Council. So it makes sense that the ICC could be used by the Accords Council.

2. Michel Dorn is a character from a TV series called *Crossing Lines*, which is a joint German/French/Italian/American series on Netflix, which depicts the ICC dealing with crimes which it technically doesn't have the authorisation to handle but the characters are interesting and the stories are fun so I'm bringing them in, at least in a small side role. I haven't decided whether I'm going with the Season 1 & 2 team or the Season 3 team but either way I'm going to be screwing around with the Crossing Lines time lines. I'm putting on my Loki - I do what I want! :D

3. According to most of the timelines I've seen, most of the events in Doctor Strange take place after Civil War with Dr Strange's confrontation with Dormammu occurring in early 2017 and the meeting with Thor taking place in late 2017. So I haven't quite worked out whether this story currently takes place before or after that meeting. Probably before since I'm assuming that meeting has some relationship to the events that will occur in Thor: Ragnarok. Or I may just say screw it and handwave things and not take Thor: Ragnarok into account. Which means I'll have to sort out what I'm going to do with Bruce... *headdesk*

4. And finally, I've postulated that the original Accords Committee has been shifted into the Accords Council in the wake of the civil war. It's membership is not completely sorted but they needed a bit more oomph than a committee implies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony Fucking Stark.

Tony had always assumed that people hated – or were at least irritated by – that particular mask of his. But as he navigated the turbulent waters left in the wake of what the media were calling the
Avenger’s ‘Civil War’, he found that nine times out of ten, Tony Fucking Stark was greeted with relief and even, oddly enough, delight. Irritation and exasperation might appear afterwards but even then they were fleeting things that didn’t linger as he’d always thought they had in the past. All in all, Tony found it very weird, which is what he said to Rhodey when he returned to the Compound after a brief trip to The Hague to speak to prosecutors at the International Criminal Court.

“It’s weird, platypus.” He collapsed on the couch beside Rhodey and patted his friend’s leg where the latest version of the exo-skeleton he was building gleamed softly. “Everyone’s weird.”

Rhodey chuckled at the mock-whine in Tony’s voice. “What are they doing now, Tones?”

“They’re…” Tony flapped his hand around. “They like me.”

“You’re a pretty likable fellow when you want to be,” Rhodey said mildly as Vision came into the room carrying a tray laden with drinks and food.

“But people don’t like me!” Tony whined. “They hate me or… or at least they look at me like I’m something unpleasant they just found on their shoe.”

Vision looked genuinely worried at that statement and Rhodey silently waved at him to sit down. He then wrapped his arm around Tony’s shoulders and gave him a little shake.

“Tony…” he began but Tony didn’t let him finish.

“No, it’s weird. Everyone’s liking me and smiling… and they’re genuine smiles, sugarplum, not the fake ones. I know what fake smiles look like. But they’re smiling and they like me and they’re being helpful and it’s weird and I don’t know what to dooooooo.”

He tipped over and slumped against Rhodey with that last drawn out word and Rhodey could only laugh at how ridiculous he was being. However Tony’s next plaintive words had him sobering in an instant.

“People don’t like me, honeybear. No one does.”

“I do,” Rhodey said without hesitation.

“As do I,” Vision added.


Hope Van Dyne and Dr Stephen Strange were new additions to the Avengers roster.

Hope had approached them when they had been in California, schmoozing a few politicians to help ease matters in the US. Rhodey had been on the defensive with her at first. He knew all about Hank Pym’s hatred of Howard Stark and how he seemed to have trouble separating the father from the son. Hope, however, had been nothing like her father. She’d been angry, yes, but not at Tony. With Tony, she was more concerned about making sure he was okay. No, her anger was directed almost solely at Scott Lang and within a couple of days of meeting Hope, Rhodey actually felt a little sorry for Lang. The German government just wanted to throw him into prison. Rhodey was pretty sure Hope wanted to eviscerate him.

Dr Stephen Strange, on the other hand, had actually made an appointment, which had immediately put him in Rhodey’s good books. He liked when people didn’t assume they had a right to Tony’s
time and attention. Then Strange had added another mark in the plus column when he’d told them he was the Sorcerer Supreme. Actually, it had been two marks. One for his abilities, since a magic user would be useful, and the other for the entertainment of the immediate rant Tony began about magic and the illogic of it all. Then Strange had added a fourth mark in his plus column when, instead of getting annoyed or angry at Tony’s reaction, he’d gotten this amused little smirk on his face and promptly proceeded to goad Tony’s rant to new heights with little remarks about the strangeness of magic until FRIDAY had brought it all to a halt when she’d gotten alarmed about Tony’s blood pressure.

Once things had settled down again, Strange had impressed them by explaining about his magic in as close to scientific terms as they were probably ever going to get. Rhodey had been surprised until Strange had explained that he had been a surgeon, a man of science, and if he could accept magic then they damn well could as well. Tony had gotten intrigued at that point and that was when the weirdness had ramped itself up a bit.

They’d moved down to Tony’s workshop by then and Tony had been explaining the technicalities of the prosthetic exoskeleton he was working on for Rhodey when Strange’s cloak had gotten really weird. Rhodey had raised an eyebrow at the cloak and the unusual clothes Strange was wearing when he’d first come in but hadn’t really thought anything of them. But as Tony and Strange leaned in towards the holographic display of the exoskeleton, the cloak began to inch its way across Strange’s shoulders and onto Tony’s, where it promptly wrapped itself warmly and comfortably around him.

Hilariously, Tony hadn’t noticed for several minutes, though Strange certainly did. He’d earned another mark in the plus column at that point when he’d simply rolled his eyes and sighed fondly, though Rhodey suspected it was directed more at the cloak than at Tony. Still, he didn’t think it was wrong or try to take the cloak back. He’d just shaken his head, swallowed a smile and kept listening to Tony with a great deal of interest.

Tony’s squawks when he’d realised he was being wrapped up in what was essentially a cloak-shaped hug had been hysterical. Though both Strange and Rhodey had noticed that, despite his complaints about uppity magical objects taking liberties with his person, Tony hadn’t tried to take the cloak off or stop it from wrapping itself around him at every opportunity it had after that. Strange had explained that the cloak was sentient in its own way and that it only allowed itself to be worn by people it liked, which had made Tony blush and go speechless in a way that Rhodey so very rarely saw. From that moment, as far as Rhodey had been concerned, Strange was a keeper.

He brought his attention back to Tony who was squirming by his side. He rolled his eyes and sighed at the ridiculous of his best friend, who apparently couldn’t cope with the fact that people genuinely liked him. He also felt the familiar surge of anger directed at Howard Stark that he damped down with long experience. Getting angry at a dead man wouldn’t help. He just wished Howard Stark’s reach wasn’t quite so long as to still affect his son, even now. He very firmly didn’t think about the Avengers and how they had only made it worse. He didn’t need to get warnings from FRIDAY about his blood pressure.

“Yes, well, that’s as may be,” Tony said awkwardly. “But other people don’t tend to like me.”

“Tony,” Rhodey said patiently. “You’re the one who’s working with them. Why wouldn’t they like you?”

“I don’t always agree with them,” Tony replied. In fact, he wasn’t sure what the percentage stood at but he was fairly sure it was closer to only agreeing with them about fifty percent of the time. In his experience, that was not conducive to people liking him.
“But you have logical and sensible reasons for disagreeing with them,” Rhodey replied. “You explain those reasons calmly and with evidence and you offer reasonable alternatives. You’re willing to understand their point of view and compromise. So again, why wouldn’t they like you?”

“Oh,” was all Tony said and he tapped his fingers against his chest as he thought about that. “It’s still weird,” he said finally.

“What’s weird?” asked Stephen Strange as he and Hope walked into the room. The cloak immediately detached itself from Stephen’s shoulders and floated over to the couch before promptly pouting when it realised it couldn’t wrap itself round Tony the way it wanted to when he was slouched against Rhodey the way he was. It was definitely a little odd to see a cloak pout.

“People liking me,” Tony said as he shifted away from Rhodey just long enough to let the cloak engulf him before slumping back down again.

Both Stephen and Hope froze for a moment with uncertain expressions on their faces. Since they’d started staying at the Compound for extended periods of time, they’d become aware of the many emotional minefields surrounding Tony and they were never quite sure now when a comment like that was just a piece of offhand flippancy or whether it was one of those mines that would explode messily and drive Tony into his workshop for a couple of days if they stepped on it. Rhodey decided to take pity on them because he liked them.

“How’d it go in The Hague?” he asked, poking Tony in the side and getting a poke back from both Tony and the cloak for his troubles.

“Europeans are weirdly polite,” Tony said. “Even when they’re angry, they’re polite.”

“Angry at you?” Hope asked with a worried frown as she sat down and Vision offered her a drink. Tony shook his head. “Nope,” he said, popping the ‘p’ sound. “The Germans are grateful that the Maria Stark Foundation and Pym Technologies are helping to foot the bill for the repairs at Leipzig, though they refuse to let us pay for everything. Apparently they’ve reviewed the security footage and the stuff I made available to them from the Iron Man and War Machine armours and they are only allowing us to pay a carefully calculated amount. The rest, they say, will be paid by Team Cap when they are brought to justice.” He wrinkled his nose. “When did Team Cap become the accepted vernacular?”

“About a week ago,” Vision said, taking the rhetorical question seriously because apparently it did have an answer. “The various social media hashtags consolidated down at that point to the predominant use of Team Cap and Team Iron Man to refer to the respective sides of the… civil war and the mainstream media picked up on it.”

“Huh,” Tony said. “Anyway. The Romanians are still pissed as hell as at Rogers, Wilson, Barnes and King T’Challa and not without reason. The body count there is still climbing since another one of the injured died when I was in The Hague and there’s one more that isn’t expected to make it.”

They all winced at that. The death toll from Rogers et al’s little rampage through Bucharest was alarmingly high and even worse was the injury count. Tony gave them some credit in that he didn’t think they had caused those injuries and deaths maliciously but causing injuries or deaths carelessly or through indifference wasn’t much better in the eyes of those who had suffered.

“They’re not going to back off, are they?” Rhodey said heavily.

Tony shook his head and patted the cloak with a small, sad smile as it tightened comfortably around
him. “Not a chance in hell. T’Challa’s making his own reparations and apologies to them for his actions and the Romanians seem amenable to accepting them. Apparently they’re willing to make allowances for T’Challa’s grief overriding his common sense.”

“And he’s the King of a sovereign nation and the diplomatic ground is very sticky,” Stephen added dryly. He had a faint fond expression on his face when he looked at the way his cloak was cuddling Tony.

“That too,” Tony replied. “But I think, given the way the prevailing winds are blowing across Europe, they still would have been willing to kick up an international and diplomatic stink if T’Challa wasn’t being so accommodating.” He grimaced. “Oh, and T’Challa asked if he could come to New York and meet with me.”

A ripple went through the room. Tony had finally told them what had happened in Siberia in a bleak, empty voice that had sent shivers through all of them and had the cloak curling around Tony as though it hoped it could make all the pain go away. When Tony had told them what had happened, Stephen, Vision and Hope had been horrified and angry but Rhodey had been almost incandescent with rage. He had been there after Howard and Maria died and he was the one who had repeatedly picked Tony up off the floor, had dragged him home and then held him while he wept and raged and fell apart. Hearing about Rogers’ callous disregard for Tony in favour of the man who had killed Tony’s parents had infuriated Rhodey. He knew Barnes was Rogers’ friend but still…

After that and after hearing that T’Challa had been the one to drop Zemo off at the ICC, it hadn’t exactly taken much of a stretch of the imagination to figure out where Rogers and his little group of malcontents must be hiding.

“Why?” Rhodey said with trenchant suspicion and displeasure.

“He didn’t say,” Tony said dryly. “But we are fairly sure he has a small pest infestation.”

Rhodey snorted and Stephen echoed him. “I want to be there,” Rhodey said flatly.

“Honeybear…”

“So do I.”

“And me.”

“As do I.”

Tony looked over at Stephen, Hope and Vision with some exasperation. “Bombarding the man probably won’t get any cooperation from him.”

“I don’t care,” Rhodey said flatly. “He left you there in Siberia. He didn’t bother to check and make sure you were okay. I don’t trust any man who blindly believes Rogers’ word.”

“Why not invite him here to the Compound?” Hope said, deflecting the incipient argument. “It’ll look friendly and welcoming, opening the doors and inviting him into our home, then we can all… lurk in our various ways as you talk to him.”

She gave Tony an impish smile and he couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped him.

“You lot are incorrigible,” he said fondly. “I’m going to lose this argument, no matter what I say, aren’t I?”
“Yes,” Stephen said, looking completely unrepentant.

“Fine,” Tony said with amusement. “But no ambushing the man until we find out what he wants.
And be careful. Those bodyguards of his… the Dora Milaje… they do not look like they have much
of a sense of humour.”

“What about the Russians?” Rhodey asked, getting things back on track.

“They’re not happy,” Tony replied. “But the nascent Accords Council has backed my actions so
they can’t really do much more than be unhappy. However, the Council has agreed to allow Russia
to help dig information out of that HYDRA base so by the end of it all, I think you could describe
them as unhappy but mollified.”

“Good,” Rhodey said with relief. Russia had been making some very irritated noises in the
international community about the breach of their borders so ‘unhappy but mollified’ was definitely a
good outcome.

“At least in terms of their opinions about me and T’Challa,” Tony added, getting their attention.

“Oh?” Hope said, raising an eyebrow. “They have a different opinion about the others?”

“Yes,” Tony replied. “They don’t like the idea that Captain America thought he could just waltz into
Russian territory in his full star-spangled glory and do whatever the hell he wanted. They like even
less that he brought a fully aware Winter Soldier with him into the country for a meeting with a man
who could trigger said Winter Soldier into actually, you know, being the Winter Soldier. I did
mention that wasn’t the purpose behind Zemo luring us all there but… they don’t care. It’s the fact
that the potential was there that has them up in arms. There are many within the UN who agree with
their concerns.”

“That’s not surprising,” Rhodey said. “So what’s going to happen?”

“The ICC has agreed to conduct an investigation into the actions of Team Cap during the so-called
civil war with the ultimate aim of bringing any and all appropriate charges against them,” Tony
replied. “They’ve appointed a special prosecutor called Michel Dorn and he’s got a team of ICC
investigators who will be doing all the legwork. They’re going to want to do formal interviews with
you, Vision and me. I said we’d be amenable to that.” Vision and Rhodey indicated their agreement
and Tony continued, “They also want to talk to the Spiderling, which I said may be a little more
problematic because he insists on anonymity. Dorn was tentatively okay with maintaining that
anonymity.”

Rhodey gave a low whistle. “I didn’t think they’d actually go so far as to use the ICC.”

“Well, hold onto your britches, sugarplum,” Tony said grimly. “Because they’ll also be investigating
our actions as well to ensure they hold up to what we told the old Accords Committee.”

“Is that… bad?” Vision said, his head cocked slightly to one side. “We were following the
instructions of the Committee.”

“Yeah, we should be okay,” Tony said. “I made sure FRIDAY has records of as much as possible so
we can corroborate everything we say.”

Stephen quirked an eyebrow. “You need corroborations?”

“Ross is going to get dragged into this investigation,” Tony said and Rhodey sucked in a breath.
“He’s going to be twisting and turning and throwing everything out there he can to evade any
responsibility. I intend to make sure he can’t do that. Hence, FRIDAY’s recordings. Irrefutable evidence.”

“Are we likely to face charges?” Rhodey asked.

“Dorn has indicated that we won’t,” Tony replied. “Germany and Russia aren’t interested in pursuing us and we weren’t involved in Bucharest. From what he said, as long what we say and what we show them matches up to what we said to the Committee, there are unlikely to be any repercussions for us beyond perhaps me getting a reprimand for going to Siberia without telling anyone. Dorn thinks that can technically be covered by the leeway I had to bring the others in but they might issue the reprimand anyway, just to cover all their bases.”

Rhodey looked outraged. “They want to reprimand you for Siberia? What the hell, Tony…”

“They don’t know what happened there,” Tony said flatly. “Not all of it. They know that Zemo had a different agenda than letting out the Winter Soldiers, that there was a disagreement between Rogers and Barnes and myself and that I came off second best from that. They don’t know what the disagreement was about and I let them draw their own conclusions.”

“Which were?”

Now Tony smirked and Rhodey’s eyes widened. It had been a while since he’d seen that particular smirk and all of a sudden he felt a lot better about the meeting in The Hague. That smirk did not bode well for Tony’s enemies. It never had.

“That Rogers is a loose cannon who doesn’t care what sort of collateral damage he leaves behind as long as he gets what he wants,” Tony replied. “That he decided he and Barnes weren’t going to come in with me and made very sure they were going to be able to leave to my detriment.”

Rhodey snorted and looked amused. “Which is pretty much true.”

“I didn’t tell them a single lie, except of omission when I left out the video and Rogers’ lie to me.”

Rhodey nudged him in the side and decided to steer the conversation away from Siberia. “And what about Romanov? Was anything said about her?”

“She’s in breach of the Accords and the Council is discussing the appropriate response,” Tony replied. “T’Challa has apparently waived any necessity for charges regarding her attack on him.” He snickered. “From the look on the faces of the Dora Milaje who were with him, my guess is it’s because he’s promised them first dibs.” He affected an innocent expression. “I almost feel sorry for Natashalie.”

Rhodey laughed. “So when do these investigators get here?”

“Sometime next week apparently,” Tony replied. “There’s some work they want to do in Germany and Romania first then they’ll come here. They’ll let us know when they’re going to arrive so we can adjust our schedules accordingly.”

“Couldn’t there be accusations of favouritism or bias or something along those lines if you’re the only ones who are interviewed?” Hope asked.

Tony smirked again. “Oh, there’ll be an opportunity for Rogers and his lot to make submissions. Dorn is going to do a public appeal to them to contact the ICC. The questions the investigators want answered will be publicly available on the ICC website and Rogers and the others will have plenty of time to make a submission in whatever form they deem necessary.”
“There’s going to be full openness, isn’t there?” Stephen said, looking amused.

“Yep,” Tony replied, the smirk lingering. “When the decision about charges is made, any response they send in will be published along with transcripts of our interviews. Dorn does not want there to be any possibility for people to cry foul.”

“I think I like this man,” Rhodey said with a nod of satisfaction.

“He normally prosecutes war criminals so his appointment is going to send a specific message about how the Council and the ICC view Rogers and his lot,” Tony added. He then turned to Hope and Stephen. “But… that wasn’t why I asked you two come around today. We need to do a press conference, officially announcing the New Avengers.”

Hope nodded calmly but Stephen arched an eyebrow. “Why now?”

“We want to get in ahead of the news of the ICC investigation,” Tony replied. “That’ll head off any nervousness about the status of the Avengers that the investigation might cause.”

“When did you want to do this?” Hope asked. She grimaced. “Because I want to get in first to tell my father.”

Tony blinked. “You haven’t told him yet?”

“I wasn’t in the mood for the ‘all Starks are evil’ rant,” Hope said with a roll of her eyes. “But if I don’t tell him before the press conference, the rant will be so much worse.”

Tony snorted with amusement. “We were thinking three days from now since Dorn’s planning on officially announcing the ICC investigation at the end of the week. Will that give you enough time?”

Hope nodded. “I’ll fly in and fly out. That’ll make sure I have an excuse to leave when he ends up going over the top.”

“What did my old man do to him?” Tony said with a shake of his head.

“If my father is to be believed, Howard Stark is responsible for everything that’s ever gone wrong all the way back to the original sin,” Hope said dryly.

“That’s an impressive grudge,” Stephen said, his eyebrows raised. “Will he cause trouble once he finds out you’re an Avenger?”

“I hope not,” Hope said with a weary sigh. “He’s always been more bark than bite and I can’t really see that changing, even now.” She looked over at Tony. “But you might get an abusive phone call or two, in which case, I apologise in advance.”

Tony waved a hand. “Don’t worry about it. FRIDAY won’t let him get through to me, will you, FRI?”

“He can talk to the hand,” FRIDAY said with an audible sniff.

Tony frowned up at the nearest camera. “Who has been teaching you such horrendous vernacular, baby girl?”

“The… internet?” she said, a little hesitantly.

“That’s it, you’re cut off,” Tony said, though everyone in the room could see he didn’t mean it. “You’ll be inflicting memes on me next.”
“I would never, boss!” FRIDAY said with an amused lilt to her voice.

“Kids,” Tony said to the others. “They grow up so fast.”

The others started laughing and by unspoken agreement, the heavy conversation was shelved in favour of a debate over what they wanted to order in for dinner.

Chapter End Notes

I will get around to doing the ExVengers reactions. But it won't be the next couple of chapters. I've already got them sorted - T'Challa and the New Avengers press conference. It might be the one after that. Maybe. I have a few half-started chapters for various matters I want to get to, including a chapter for one of the forgotten women of the MCU whom if she hadn't been forgotten, would have saved us from that very weird Bruce/Natasha romance plot line in AoU. I just have to sort out where all these chapters are going to sit in the story timeline.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

And here's T'Challa. Who has come to realise that he has made a terrible mistake.

Tony had to admit that T'Challa cut an impressive figure in his dark suit as he walked from the car towards the compound, the four Dora Milaje he’d brought with him falling into step around him. He wasn’t sure what to make of the new King after their brief alliance of convenience and he didn’t want to judge him on the basis of his presumed sheltering of Rogers and his crew because he didn’t know the precise circumstances how that had come about, let alone why T’Challa had agreed to something that, on the surface, was a very stupid idea. Everything he’d learned about T’Challa indicated he wasn’t a stupid man. So was he reckless, gullible or was it something else?

Rogers was unlikely to lay low for long and he didn’t have the skill to cover his tracks well enough to avoid people knowing where he’d been hiding. When that happened, T’Challa was going to be in a world of trouble and Wakanda had been isolated for too long and far too thoroughly for him to have built up the kind of diplomatic credentials and favours that he could subsequently call in to get him out of that trouble – or at least minimise it. Tony knew that while he himself possessed a large amount of influence on the world stage, he had neither the scope nor, currently, the motivation to do anything to get T’Challa off the hook.

“Your Majesty,” Tony said in a neutral tone and offered his hand.

T’Challa shook the proffered hand. “Dr Stark.”

Tony was too experienced in the world of international business and diplomacy to let his surprise show when he had his game face on. Most people tended to forget – or not even know – that he had multiple doctorates. T’Challa’s use of his well-earned title could either be a simple way of letting Tony know he’d done his homework or an olive branch. Time would tell which it was.

“Come on in,” Tony said, ushering T’Challa and his bodyguards into the Compound and leading them down the corridor towards the main room. “And welcome to the Compound.”

“Thank you,” T’Challa said. “It was kind of you to invite me here.”

“I’ve been basing myself here at the moment,” Tony said, keeping his tone light and amiable. “It’s easier to travel from on Avengers and Accords business and the media can’t get in.” He let his voice turn a little dry. “They’re a bit rabid at the moment.”

“I had noticed,” T’Challa said, matching his dryness. “Though I understand you have called a press conference for tomorrow.”

Tony nodded. “I have.” He did not elaborate and since they had arrived in the main lounge area, he was able to turn the conversation away from the press conference. “Have a seat. Can I get any of you something to drink? Coffee, tea, water, something else?”

He glanced around, making sure to include all of the Dora Milaje. The four women seemed surprised and then faintly pleased at his courtesy though they declined his offer. T’Challa requested coffee and
Tony busied himself at the coffee machine, giving himself a moment to shore up his defences for this conversation. Once the coffee was ready, he brought it over and handed one cup to T’Challa, glancing around idly as he did.

The Dora Milaje had spaced themselves around the room but looked relaxed and calm. They obviously weren’t expecting trouble, which Tony found intriguing. They either didn’t know what T’Challa was about to say or they did and felt confident that Tony wasn’t going to react poorly to it. They also hadn’t noticed the tiny Wasp who was hiding amongst the various bit of equipment in the entertainment centre. Admittedly Tony himself probably wouldn’t have noticed Hope either if he hadn’t known she was in here somewhere. He’d shoo her out but it wouldn’t do any good. She’d just find a way to sneak back in and FRIDAY would help her. He didn’t know where Rhodey, Vision and Stephen were but he’d bet it was close and that they were watching and listening. He smothered a smile by taking a sip of his coffee.

“So, Your Majesty, what can I do for you?”

T’Challa drew in a breath and set his coffee cup down. He licked his lips and there was the faintest edge of nervousness about him that vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Someone who hadn’t been watching as closely as Tony was might not have noticed and Tony was reminded that T’Challa was young, not exactly in age – though he was younger than Tony by some years – but in his tenure as King and in dealing with the wider world.

“I am glad of the opportunity to meet discretely, Dr Stark,” T’Challa said. “I have a matter with which I hope to gain your advice and possibly assistance.”

Tony tensed a little and as he did, he heard a faint buzzing sound from the direction of the entertainment centre. The Dora Milaje also heard it but their sudden frowns cleared when they looked over in that direction. Tony silently congratulated Hope for her choice of perch. Any noises she made would be brushed off as coming from the electrical equipment.

“If I can help the King of Wakanda, I’d be happy to,” Tony replied cautiously.

T’Challa sighed and dropped all his pretences. “I have… inadvertently gathered some strays, Dr Stark, and I find myself at something of a loss as to what to do with them. They are… somewhat unruly.”

T’Challa sighed and Tony saw the stiff, displeased expressions on the faces of the Dora Milaje. He struggled to smother a smirk. Clearly Rogers and the others were doing a sterling job of alienating even more people.

“You noticed,” he said dryly then he too dropped all pretences. “What possessed you to take them in, Your Majesty? There are very few ways in which this can end well for Wakanda.”

T’Challa grimaced. “I am aware and I had no intention of giving anyone other than Barnes sanctuary in my country. Rogers appears to have… misinterpreted my words.”

“He has a habit of doing that,” Tony said. He drained half his coffee in one go and then put the cup down. “And now you don’t know what to do with them?”

T’Challa grimaced again, his frustration plain. “I will not go back on my word to Sergeant Barnes. I promised him sanctuary until such time as a solution could be found for the trigger words in his mind. He, however, is the least of my problems. He has chosen to go back into cryosleep.”

James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes was not Tony’s favourite subject. Enough time had passed that he
was beginning to be able to intellectually grasp the magnitude of what had been done to Barnes and what that meant in terms of his parents’ murders and Barnes’ agency – or lack thereof – in them but emotionally? Emotionally, he was nowhere near being able to be objective and he knew it. If Barnes was to walk into the room right now, Tony knew he’d go after him again… and probably break his hand on the man’s jaw. It wasn’t right, it wasn’t fair, it was a wholly emotional and irrational reaction, but the hurt and grief and anguish were still too raw and, at the moment, still too tied up in his anger at Rogers.

But hearing that Barnes had chosen to go back into cryosleep did make him stop for a moment. It was a surprisingly responsible attitude from someone who had caused so much in the way of injuries, deaths and destruction trying to avoid the law. It made the intellectual side of his brain wonder exactly how complicit Barnes had been in some of it and how much of it had been him following Rogers blindly because he didn’t know any better, because he was confused and lost and at least some part of his brain tagged Rogers as being someone he used to trust. Had anyone had the time to tell Barnes of the deal he’d brokered after the mess in Bucharest, let alone give him the option to take it?

“That’s… surprising,” he managed. “How did Rogers take it?”

“Not well,” T’Challa said dryly. “And when I informed him that it had been Barnes’ decision and that after seventy years of not being able to make his own decisions, I was hardly going to deny him the opportunity now, Rogers looked remarkably like he had been sucking on a lemon.”

That startled a laugh out of Tony and T’Challa smiled slightly in response. Tony shook his head then contemplated the problem at hand. He knew why T’Challa had come to him. Tony knew more about the Accords than anyone else, he knew the foibles of the rogues and he and Rhodey were soon to become the public faces of the New Avengers. T’Challa currently lacked the international political capital to bear this on his own. He needed Tony’s cooperation. If the ‘civil war’ had occurred even six months from now, that might not be the case. Wakanda would have had time to establish itself in the international community and form a few alliances, both trade and diplomatic. But those talks were still underway and T’Challa needed a way to avoid any adverse repercussions to those discussions and to his country.

“The Accords allow for in confidence meetings of the Council,” Tony said slowly, forcing himself to be as objective as he could manage under the circumstances. “As both a head of state and an Enhanced covered by the Accords, you can call for that kind of meeting. I can’t see the Council being too put out about your decision regarding Barnes. Berlin taught us the kind of danger he presents if someone can activate him. If he’s not safe in cryosleep in Wakanda, he’s not safe anywhere.” He raised an eyebrow at T’Challa. “The big question, Your Majesty, is what you want to do about Rogers and his lot?”

The tense line of T’Challa’s shoulders eased at Tony’s reasonable response. “There are many things I want to do,” T’Challa said dryly. “However, after consulting with my advisors, I believe the best option is for Wakanda to continue to host the rogues. The Council will be informed, of course, but based on what has occurred, I am uncertain as to the capacity of anyone else to contain them.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “That’s… an interesting solution, Your Majesty.”

“T’Challa, please,” the King said.

Tony blinked then nodded with a small smile. “Then it’s Tony.” He licked his lips then continued with his previous thought. “Romania and Germany are going to be your problem. They’re out for blood right now.”
“I had noticed,” T’Challa said with a wince. “I cannot fault them. The Romanian authorities have been very… politely pointed about my part in the mess in Bucharest. I, not Wakanda, will be paying reparations for the damage I caused and Wakanda will be sending medical personnel to aid those who were injured. As for the Germans, they have been very…” He frowned, clearly searching for the right word.

“Precise?” Tony suggested.

T’Challa chuckled. “Yes, that will do. They have presented me with an exact amount equating to the damage I caused at the airport.”

Tony nodded. “They did the same for Rhodey, Spider-Man and myself. They refuse to let us pay for the damage done by others.”

T’Challa got the conversation back on track. “My argument to Romania and Germany regarding the rogues would be whether there is a place anywhere else that can hold them. The Raft is out of the question. Rogers already proved that.”

“Would you be able to hold them if they decided they were going to leave, come hell or high water?” Tony asked with a raised eyebrow.

T’Challa smiled and there were chuckles from the four Dora Milaje. “We can contain them,” he said with a confidence that held no arrogance, only certainty. Tony was inclined to believe him. “Including the witch. Magic is not unknown among my people and my court sorcerer has already begun the work to contain Miss Maximoff’s power without her knowing.”

Tony couldn’t help the sigh of relief that escaped him then. He and Rhodey had talked a few times about the vision he’d had in Sokovia and what effect it might have had. Rhodey wanted him to talk to Stephen about it and while he was resisting, Rhodey was slowly wearing him down.

“That might work,” he said then he cocked his head slightly. “Have you heard about the ICC investigation?”

T’Challa nodded. “Yes, it is why I approached you. I understand this… Michel Dorn is going to offer them an opportunity to explain their side of the story?”

Tony nodded. “He wants to be fair and I agree with him.”

“I will… encourage them to do so and arrange for any submissions they make to get to the ICC discretely.” T’Challa grimaced with distaste. “Though I doubt that any of their accounts will have much grounding in reality.”

“All the better,” Tony said dryly. “Right now, people are confused so they’re picking sides based on who they like more. If we put the facts out there, put their own words out there, at least some of the people flailing around will actually read it and think about what they’re doing and saying. And if their statements look like the ravings of lunatics, all the better.”

T’Challa quirked an eyebrow then nodded, clearly deciding that he wasn’t going to open this can of worms. “And may I count on your support when I approach the Council regarding all of this?”

He looked at Tony calmly and it was with a sense of surprise that Tony realised that T’Challa had no expectations of him either way and he would accept Tony’s decision whatever it was. He clearly wanted Tony’s support but would not demand it of him or try to guilt him into doing what he wanted or anything along those lines. That lack of expectations or manipulations made Tony’s decision easy.
“Yes,” Tony said firmly. He got to his feet and gestured for T’Challa to accompany him. “Let’s go and meet with Colonel Rhodes. We should talk to you about the New Avengers.”

T’Challa raised an eyebrow but he got to his feet with a pleased smile. “I would like that.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Press conferences! Two of them! One with the New Avengers and one with the ICC. Things will be said, questions will be answered and Pepper will neuter a journalist with her heels. (Well, not that last one. That’s going to happen after the press conference.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tony looked in the mirror and straightened his tie. The suit he’d chosen to wear today was dark grey and severe and worn with a plain white shirt. The starkness of his suit was only offset by the red and gold tie and the red tinted glasses that he was wearing. He’d feel overdressed but Rhodey was wearing his dress uniform – he was still a member of the Air Force, though Tony knew there was some discussion going on about that in light of his injuries. Rhodey had told him very firmly to stay out of it and despite his worries, he was doing so. He wasn’t sure how long he could keep that up though. Rhodey didn’t deserve to have his career taken away from him because Tony had dragged him into this Accords mess.

Stephen was wearing a fancier version of his normal clothes and while the cloak had made a brief foray onto Tony’s shoulders to give him its version of a hug shortly after Stephen had arrived, it had soon returned to Stephen. Tony kind of missed having the cloak wrapped warmly around him, though he’d never admit it. Beside Stephen, Hope was wearing a business suit not overly dissimilar to Tony’s and beside her, Vision was wearing his cape and had foregone his warm sweaters. They looked formidable and professional, which is exactly the impression Tony wanted to give.

Tony had left Spider-Man out of this press conference, much to Peter’s dismay, but he didn’t want Peter having to answer questions about the Accords. That might give away his age and that was a thorny path Tony didn’t want to go down again. There were reasons why he’d taken Peter to Leipzig, some good, some not so good, but the kid deserved time to just be a kid. God knows Tony hadn’t often been afforded that luxury. He’d be damned if he didn’t give Peter every opportunity to do so now. Officially tagging him as an Avenger would rob him of that.

“Looking good, Tones.”

Tony turned to find Rhodey had come over to join him. The latest version of the exo-skeleton braces on his legs were just barely visible under his trousers and he was moving easily. Tony had handed the prototype over to R&D just this week to start the process of making them more accessible to everyone. From that the whizkids had said, Stark Industries was going to revolutionise the world of medical assistance equipment and, thanks to Stephen’s contacts, they already had a few doctors cautiously interested in any forthcoming patient trials.

“You too, honeybear.”

“T’Challa isn’t coming?” Rhodey asked with a raised eyebrow. “After his help me, Tony-Wan Kenobi, you’re my only hope moment, I would have thought he’d be in for a bit of solidarity.”

Tony snickered. “He wanted to be here but he managed to organise some preliminary meetings with
some of the Council members on the downlow. That kind of has priority at the moment. Besides, until he gets things settled, it’s probably for the best that he’s not seen to be associating too closely with us. None of us want Rogers and his pals being spooked into running off into the wild and causing untold damage before T’Challa can pen them in.”

Rhodey grunted. He still didn’t entirely trust the King of Wakanda. T’Challa certainly talked a good game but after what he’d done… or hadn’t done… in Siberia, Rhodey was going to wait and see whether he followed up on all that talk with tangible results before he actually started doing something as important as trusting him. Especially trusting him around Tony.

The door opened and they all turned around when Pepper walked in. She had a StarkPad in her hand and was tapping away on it as she entered. She tapped it one final time then raised her head.

“Everything’s ready,” she said.

Tony drew in a breath and let it out slowly. He looked at the others. “Ready to go?”

Rhodey and the others nodded and they filed out of the room and onto the stage that had been set up. They sat down at a long table, cameras clicking and flashing away as they did so. The low murmuring of the journalists slowly died away and Tony cleared his throat.

“Well, thank you all for coming. You’re here to get the latest about all the new SI gadgets, right?” He waited out the spurt of laughter then he sobered. “As you all know, recent events have caused a bit of a shakeup within the Avengers, to the point where I have officially declared the Avengers Initiative defunct. In its place, I present the New Avengers. Me. Iron Man. Obviously.” He grinned and the press obligingly laughed. “Colonel James Rhodes or War Machine.” There was another bout of laughter at his obvious emphasis on the name. “The Vision. Dr Hope Van Dyne also known as the Wasp. And last but definitely not least, Dr Stephen Strange, the Sorcerer Supreme.”

There was a smattering of polite applause that Tony allowed then he continued on, “Recent events in Romania, Germany and Russia have highlighted a number of flaws in the way the Avengers have been operating. Flaws that had tragic consequences for not only individual Avengers but also the very people the Avengers were established to protect. This cannot be allowed to continue and the Accords give us a framework in which to establish and maintain a proper charter, chain of command and set of standard operating procedures. Much of the work on these is still to be done but it will be and when it is, there will be full transparency for them. The Avengers are here to protect the people of Earth and that means listening to what they have to say. You have my word that we, the New Avengers, are listening.”

Rhodey smoothly picked up when Tony stopped. “After discussion with the members of the New Avengers and the Accords Council, Dr Stark and myself will be the co-leaders of the New Avengers. Between us, we have over two decades of experience with the government, military, commercial, political and diplomatic worlds. Dr Strange and Dr Van Dyne will assist when matters move into their areas of expertise. We know we have a great deal of work to do to re-establish the good name of the Avengers with the world and that is work we are willing to do.” He paused. “We’ll take some questions from the floor.”

There was a sudden cacophony of shouted questions and hands being waved in the air. Pepper emerged from seemingly nowhere and walked along the front of the table. Her stern look cowed many of the reporters as she began wrangling them into some semblance of order and allowing them to ask their questions. Tony has hesitated to ask her to do this, partly due to the continuing awkwardness between them but mostly feeling it was beneath her position as a CEO, but she’d just smiled and said that was precisely why she was going to do it. The smart ones among the journalists would remember not to piss off the woman who could either make their career or ruin it with one
interview… or lack thereof.

“Dr Stark! You said you declared the Avengers Initiative defunct. How is that so?”

“When SHIELD fell, I moved as quickly as I could to protect as much as I could from falling into the wrong hands,” Tony replied, his expression bland. “Part of that was the Avengers name. The Avengers Initiative and all its associated rights are owned by me personally.”

“If that’s the case, why declare it defunct?”

“The Avengers Initiative is associated with many good things,” Tony said. “But it is also associated with some terrible tragedies. I felt it best to draw a line in the sand, as it were. The Avengers are still needed but not in the form they were. The New Avengers are a fresh start and this time, we’ll do it right.”

“Dr Stark! Colonel Rhodes! Do you know where the rogue Avengers are and what will be done to them?”

“We currently do not know their precise location,” Colonel Rhodes said. It wasn’t exactly a lie. It was… a creative interpretation of the truth. They knew the rogues were in Wakanda but they didn’t know their precise location within that country. It was about as much leeway as Rhodey was willing to give T’Challa for now. “As for what will be done, prosecutors from the International Criminal Court have called a press conference for two days from now in The Hague and they will have more details as to what will be happening. The New Avengers will only be involved on request from the ICC.”

“Dr Stark! Rumour says that you will be subject to an ICC investigation.”

“All participants in the events in Romania, Germany and Russia will be subject to an ICC investigation,” Tony said. “Including myself, Colonel Rhodes and the Vision.”

“How are they going to interview the rogues?”

“The rogue Avengers will be given an opportunity to have their say,” Rhodey said. “However, questions regarding the investigation are best saved for the ICC press conference.”

“Dr Van Dyne! There has been animosity between Pym Technologies and Stark Industries for years. Why have you now joined the New Avengers?”

“There has only been healthy competition between Pym Technologies and Stark Industries,” Hope said firmly. “My father’s grudge was with Howard Stark. I am not my father nor is Tony his. I am very happy to work with the New Avengers.” She paused and smiled faintly. “My father will just have to get over it.”

There were chuckles from both the New Avengers and some of the media who had dealt with Hank Pym over the years. Hope’s conversation with her father had been… interesting, according to what she’d told them when she’d returned to the Compound. Hank Pym’s fury at Scott Lang’s actions had been warring with his intense dislike of all things Stark. That combined with his support for the Accords and his surprising disdain for Captain America and Hope had said that she’d been almost surprised that he didn’t have a coronary when she told him she was joining the New Avengers.

However, when he’d recovered from his fit of pique, he’d questioned her intensely then fallen into a rather thoughtful funk. Hope had left him to it and come back. They hadn’t heard anything from him since and Hope was tentatively hopeful that he might actually be coming to his senses. Though she’d then immediately turned very rueful and said that might be her optimism getting in the way of her
good sense because her father had never shown signs of coming to his senses when it came to the name Stark and she had no idea why he’d start now. Tony had just laughed.

“Dr Stark! What happened in Siberia?”

Pepper glared at the reporter bold enough… or foolish enough… to ask that question. The man quailed but then gulped and raised his chin defiantly. He knew that he was done, he knew that Pepper Potts was going to make him pay, but the question had been asked and he couldn’t take it back. Tony would admire his balls (because, if nothing else, Pepper was going to remove them, politely, while smiling like a shark) except the question made him shudder.

“I had a disagreement with Rogers and Barnes,” he said tersely. “No further questions will be taken on this topic until the ICC investigation is done.”

It escaped no one that Rogers wasn’t ‘Cap’ or ‘Steve’ anymore. No one was stupid enough to ask questions though, not with the way Pepper was now glowering at them. They might scent blood in the water but the look on Pepper Potts’ face told them that one more step out of line and the press conference would be over. And so might some careers if she could manage it.

“Dr Strange! What is a Sorcerer Supreme?”

The rather baffled question drew laughter from not only the journalists but also Stephen and the other Avengers.

“The Sorcerers of Kamar-Taj have been protecting the Earth from magical and multi-dimensional threats for centuries,” Stephen said, leaning forward a little. “The Sorcerer Supreme is… their leader. I am new to being a Sorcerer but have found myself in the position of Sorcerer Supreme due my facility with magic and my ability to use the Eye of Agamotto, a powerful magical relic.”

“If the Sorcerers have been protecting Earth for so long on their own, why join the Avengers now?”

“It seemed the right thing to do.” Stephen said wryly then he continued more soberly. “Dr Stark has stated since the invasion by the Chitauri that it was not a one off. That something more is coming. I believe him. As such, joining the New Avengers and ensuring they have a powerful magic user at their disposal seems only right.”

“You agree with the Accords then?”

“Yes, I do. To me, the unfettered way the Avengers Initiative behaved was an unintended side effect of the vacuum created by the fall of SHIELD, who had previously been overseeing their actions. In that light, something like the Sokovia Accords was inevitable. It could have been avoided, of course, had the previous Avengers worked within the law. They chose not to and thus the Accords became a necessity.” She smiled thinly. “No one is above the law, not even superheroes.”
“Isn’t your boyfriend one of the rogues?”

Hope’s expression turned icily cold and her voice was brittle with suppressed anger when she spoke. “If you are talking about Scott Lang then yes, he is one of the rogues but he is not my boyfriend. Not anymore.”

The journalists clearly smelled blood in the water but Pepper’s sudden gimlet glare made most of the rethink their next questions. Then Pepper subverted all of that by deliberately choosing one of the investigative reporters. He showed his appreciation by changing the subject.

“Would the rogues ever be welcomed back?”

Rhodey quickly fielded the question before Tony could answer. “That would depend on the outcome of the ICC investigation. As part of the discussions we’ve been having with the Accords Council, questions have been raised about the… somewhat murky backgrounds of a number of the rogues and whether they were the appropriate kind of people to have on such a team.” Rhodey grimaced. “Further questions were asked about precisely how and why they were permitted on the team. Unfortunately, those questions were not ones that either Tony or I could answer as we were not full members of the team at that time.”

It was a veiled reference to Wanda and her past but Tony knew that while it would go over the heads of most, it would be more than enough for some of the media out there to start poking around, something confirmed by the speculative expressions on the faces of some of the more serious investigative journalists. And from the sharp look he and Rhodey were getting from one Christine Everhart, she at least would be quite willing to do the kind of research that had once lead to her bringing Gulmira to his attention. He’d thought he could rely on her ability to scent blood in the water and move in for the attack.

“What now for the New Avengers?”

“We sort out the details with the Accords Council,” Rhodey said. “Then we stand ready to defend the people of Earth.”

Pepper took that as being a good stopping point and she stepped forward to thank the media for coming. Tony and the others took the opportunity to leave the room before they could be ambushed with any more questions.

“That went well,” Stephen said as the door closed behind them.

“Only because we caught them a bit by surprise,” Tony replied. “You wait for the next one.”


What Tony noticed more than anything else was that Stephen made no attempt to try and avoid the next press conference, another marked difference from the way things had gone in the past. What’s more Stephen and Hope had fielded the questions they’d been asked with aplomb. Tony felt something inside him relax and unknot at the growing knowledge that he now had teammates he could actually rely on.

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Two days later

The man standing behind the podium did not seem to be terribly intimidating at first glance. With his white hair and beard and the easy way he smiled at the woman he was speaking quietly to, he
seemed more like someone’s grandfather than a senior prosecutor representing the International Criminal Court. Or at least, that was what many of the American journalists were murmuring to each other. The European journalists eyed their American counterparts with a mix of amusement, exasperation and contempt and when they were asked, they rolled their eyes and told the journalists to try using Google. Only a handful of the Americans seemed to know who they were going to be hearing from and they were accepted into the European gaggle with nods and small smiles.

Finally, the white haired man stepped up to the podium and cleared his throat. “Good morning.” His accent was an unusual one that even the Europeans struggled to firmly place to one particular country or locale. “My name is Michel Dorn. I am a Special Prosecutor with the International Criminal Court and I have been placed in charge of the investigation into the recent Avenger’s Civil War, as it has been termed, with a view to determining what criminal charges, if any, are to be brought against the parties involved.”

He placed his hands on the podium and his expression hardened slightly. It was a sight that made even the more hardened and cynical journalists among them shiver and the Europeans and those Americans who had done their research were reminded that this man had made his name prosecuting some of the worst war criminals the modern era had seen. He’d done it successfully too. Prisons in The Hague and around Europe were filled with men and women this man had put away. He might look avuncular and grandfatherly but he was utterly ruthless when it came to his work.

“The governments of Germany, Romania and Russia have agreed to waive their individual country’s rights to charge and prosecute any wrongdoers,” Dorn continued, “and have agreed to abide by the decisions and judgements made by the ICC. Additionally, this morning, the government of Nigeria formally requested that the events in Lagos that preceded the Civil War also be investigated by the ICC.”

That unexpected announcement caused a susurration among the gathered journalists. The Nigerian government had been furious about what had happened in Lagos. Not just because of the deaths and the destruction but because the Avengers had failed to inform them and gain the cooperation of their military and police. There were even rumours that the Nigerian government had known about Rumlow’s presence in Lagos and had been making plans to arrest him using their own counterterrorism forces. No one had been able to either confirm or deny those rumours.

“Dr Anthony Stark, King T’Challa, Colonel James Rhodes, the Vision and the individual known as Spider-Man have all agreed to make themselves available to be interviewed by ICC investigators,” Dorn said. “We are seeking submissions from Steven Rogers, James Barnes, Samuel Wilson, Clinton Barton, Wanda Maximoff, Scott Lang and Natasha Romanov. The questions for which we are seeking answers will be published on the ICC website after this press conference, along with contact information and the date by which we require the submissions. We are making a public appeal to the individuals named to submit their answers or better still, to come forward and allow our investigators to question them.”

There was a wave of snorts and sceptical looks from the journalists and the faintest of smiles wafted briefly across Dorn’s face. They all knew that it was highly unlikely that the rogues would come forward after running away so firmly from their responsibilities already. But it had to be said so that no one could deny that every opportunity had been given for fair and reasonable representation.

“Once our investigators have finished their work,” Dorn continued, his tone still calm and even bland, giving no indication of his personal opinions, “the case will be referred to my office and I will assess the individual statement along with all evidence gathered by the investigators. After which, charges may be levelled against individuals if it is deemed necessary and international warrants issued.” He looked around mildly. “I will now take some questions.”
“Sir! What good is pressing charges if the rogue Avengers are still in the wind?”

“The charges will precede the issuing of arrest warrants by Interpol,” Dorn said, apparently unperturbed at repeating what he’d just said. “Interpol has always received excellent cooperation from law enforcement around the world and I see no reason it will be any different now.” He paused and smiled faintly. “Of course, it would be my hope that the rogue Avengers would see reason and turn themselves in rather than require good honest law enforcement personnel to place themselves at undue risk from enhanced individuals.”

It was a subtle reminder of the fate of the last group of law enforcement who had tried to arrest an Enhanced individual. It was also clearly a reproof regarding that outcome. Most of the European journalists were convinced it would be far too subtle for the ones it was aimed at and many of their American colleagues could only agree.

“Will Tony Stark be charged with anything?” one of the American journalists asked.

“At this time I have no comment on that matter,” Dorn replied. “Dr Stark, as a signatory of the Accords, was however working in conjunction with the Accords Committee during the period in question.”

“Not when he went to Siberia,” came the response from the same journalist.

“And that incident will be examined closely when statements have been received from the involved parties,” Dorn replied, hardly batting an eyelid. “However, I will remind you that Dr Stark had obtained permission to attempt to bring in the rogue Avengers without further violence.”

“What will happen if the rogue Avengers are found guilty? The last place they were held… well, that didn’t work out so well.”

“That decision will be made in due time,” Dorn said. “It would be outside my remit to make comments on a decision that has not yet been made and before any charges have even been brought to bear.”

“How can US citizens be tried before the ICC?”

Dorn looked amused. “US citizens are tried in courts around the world when they break the laws of the countries they are in, are they not? Since the countries where the ‘Civil War’ incidents occurred have referred the matters to the ICC, this is no different.”

“Why were the cases referred to the ICC?”

“To avoid being bogged down in extensive extradition proceedings given that Romania, Germany and Russia all have a piece of this pie.” Dorn looked sympathetic. “By referring the cases to the ICC, the charges can be consolidated rather than having them tried in this country for that reason and that country for another reason. Romania, Germany and Russia have chosen to see this as an international problem rather than one purely affecting their own countries.”

The looks exchanged by the European journalists were priceless and each of them was wondering how that had been negotiated and what the price had been. For all that the EU and the UN worked collaboratively and were supposed to be for the betterment of Europe and the world as a whole respectively, internecine squabbles were the norm rather than the exception. For Russia, Germany and Romania to set aside their own wants and place the good of the world and the Accords above their own internal interests… well, there wasn’t a journalist in the room, cynics that they were by profession, who wasn’t wondering what the quid pro quo had been. They also knew that Dorn
would never tell them, even if he knew.

“You mentioned Natasha Romanov… is she with the rogue Avengers?”

“We do not know,” Dorn said. “She did however sign the Accords and then breach the agreement she had made. We are seeking answers as to why.”

“Will she be charged?”

Dorn smiled. “That depends on what she has to say in her defence.”

A woman came forward and murmured something into Dorn’s ear. He listened then nodded and said a few quiet words back to her.

“I am afraid that is all I can say for the moment,” Dorn said to the gathered press. “There will be an official press release available when you leave the room and any further questions may be submitted to the ICC press office. Thank you.”

Dorn turned and left the room, ignoring the questions still being shouted at him.

Chapter End Notes

And guess what comes after this? Yep, you guessed it - the ExVengers reactions. I think you’ll like them. :D
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Well, here they are - the ExVengers. This is set after the ICC press conference because let's face it, nothing edifying would have been said after the New Avengers one. But by the time the ICC presser occurs, they've had time to cogitate on everything. Not that it's done them much good.

I think I can sum this up as: Scott buys a clue, Clint is all over the place, Wanda is delusional, Sam is trying to deny reality, Steve is... well, *Steve*, Natasha's in it for herself and then her past catches up with her and Bucky's cold and asleep.

Chapter Notes

This was an interesting chapter to write and there is a lot in the way of unreliable narrators here and people trying evade responsibility for their own actions and rewrite history to suit themselves. Also, I did my best to try and give Sam some kind of sensible reason for his weird reaction (for a military man who should know all about accountability) to the Accords.

*Scott*

Scott Lang watched the ICC press conference with apparent disinterest. He’d learned a number of things in prison, some of which he had found useful, others he had forgotten the moment he walked out of the gate. Right now, he was exercising a skill he’d learned then promptly discarded once he’d gotten out, thinking he wouldn’t need it anymore. He was relieved to find that the ability to conceal his feelings was easy enough to drag back out of his repertoire. It was surprisingly useful right now.

The New Avengers press conference had been a shock to the system. Despite everything, he’d spent his time since they arrived in Wakanda feeling rather pleased with himself and happy to join in the general atmosphere of hurling shit at Tony Stark and feeling sure that the Accords would soon be thrown away and they’d be welcomed back with ticker tape parades and lots of confetti.

But that press conference had shattered all those happy thoughts. He wasn’t sure what the others thought beyond what they were willing to say – most of which was uncomplimentary – but he didn’t think Stark was actually missing any of them at all. His new team looked professional, competent and determined. In fact, if they were anything like Hope, then they were professional, competent and determined.

And speaking of Hope... she hated him. He’d actually flinched at her reply to the question about him. He’d never been broken up with on live television before and he couldn’t say he had really enjoyed the experience. It did make him think though. He knew he wasn’t a stupid man. He had a degree in engineering after all. But he would admit to sometimes being a little... thoughtless. Occasionally rash in his actions. Maybe even gullible. Easily led had been mentioned before. One
thing he knew for certain, however, was that Hope was a hell of a lot smarter and cannier than him and she was backing the Accords. If she was backing the Accords then she had read them which… put her one up on him.

He looked around at his erstwhile companions and saw that most of them were busy making snide comments about Stark, the ICC, Stark, the UN, Stark, the Accords, Ross and Stark. He wasn’t really in the mood for any of that and quietly got up and slipped out of the room. He stood in the corridor, rocking back and forth on his heels with uncertainty. He then squared his shoulders and started walking.

When T’Challa had shown them into their new digs, he’d impressed on them the importance of staying where they were and that there would be guards outside his door to enforce that. Thus far no one had felt the need to challenge that and Scott wasn’t planning on starting now. But the guards might be able to help him.

He carefully opened one of the large double doors at the end of the corridor and immediately halted as the two women standing outside turned with weapons abruptly as the ready. He held up his hands, his eyes wide.

“Uh… sorry,” he said.

“You are not to leave this wing,” one of the women said tersely.

“Um, yeah, I know.” Scott swallowed. “I, uh… I know King T’Challa is a busy man but I was hoping I might be able to speak to him… or to someone who could help me at least.”

The woman who had spoken before narrowed her eyes at him. “What do you wish to know?”

“About the Accords,” Scott replied. “I’m beginning to think I’ve made a horrible mistake.”

The woman gave him a long steady look, certainly long enough to make Scott shift uncomfortably.

“I will speak to His Majesty,” she finally said. “You will have an answer within the next few days.”

Scott gave a sigh of relief and nodded. “Right. Yes. Thank you. I’ll, uh… just…” He gestured behind himself with a thumb. “Go back.”

He stepped back from the doors and they closed very abruptly in his face. He heaved a sigh of relief and turned on his heel. He was going to go back to his room. He was beginning to think it might be best to put some distance between himself and the others.

Clint

Clint Barton was angry. He’d like to say he was angry at Tony or Steve or Ross or the world but if he was honest, he was really only angry at himself. He’d never been good at dealing with his anger when it was directed at himself and the ones who usually helped him through that were not here and so he was left just feeling… angry. And lashing out at all and sundry.

He was currently perched high on one of the bookshelves, having removed himself up there the moment the ICC press conference had started. After the shit fight he’d started after the New Avengers press conference, he didn’t trust himself not to do it again and this time he might actually get himself punched in the face or – he glowered at the back of Wanda’s head – worse.
He’d retired. And if he was honest with himself, he really couldn’t say why. That made him feel angry. Tony had distanced himself from the Avengers in the wake of the Ultron fiasco and Clint was convinced it had something to do with Wanda and a lot to do with Bruce… which also mean it had something to do with Wanda. Wanda, who had fucked with everyone’s mind except his and Tony’s. Except had she? It seemed weird to him that they were the two who hadn’t been fucked with, especially Tony with the way Wanda felt about him. So, had she fucked with their minds? Had she driven Tony away? Had she driven him away?

He didn’t know and that made him angry. Everything made him angry these days and he didn’t know why. It was just easy to think it was Wanda. If she’d fucked with Tony’s mind, why hadn’t he said anything? Clint stared down at their fearless leader and snorted to himself. Yeah, right, like anything Tony would have said about Wanda would have gotten through to Captain She’s-just-a-kid, especially if it had been negative in nature.

And when had he gone from thinking of Wanda like she was practically one of his kids to whatever he felt now? He didn’t know and the only people he trusted to talk about it with were Laura, Natasha and Coulson. Natasha had disappeared to fuck knows where, Coulson was dead and Laura was probably going to reach down his throat and rip his balls out when she next saw him.

He didn’t know what to do, which made him feel angrier. Which didn’t help.

He’d stopped agreeing with Steve that everything was going to blow over and the world was going to forgive them and beg them to return. He had thought that, right up until Stark and co’s press conference. Or more specifically, the aftermath of that press conference. He’d spent hours trawling the internet and in the two days between that press conference and the ICC one, he hadn’t seen a lot of support for any of Team Cap, as they were being called. Sure, there was some but it wasn’t really the sort of support you’d want – rabid right-wing ‘Murica types that just made Clint cringe.

It seemed that responsibility and accountability were considered the basic starting point these days and the fact that not only had Steve shit all over that, he’d done it not for any kind of principles or protest but for one man, a known murderer, wasn’t going down very well, especially outside of America. Clint actually felt some sympathy for Barnes. He knew what it was like to have his free will taken from him and be forced into killing people against his will. But when the anger died down a little, he had to admit that he’d come into this thinking it was about some sort of restrictive Accords shit, not because Cap wanted to save one man at the expense of the rest of the world.

And from what had been said at Stark’s press conference, by the guy from the ICC and everything on the internet, the rest of the world didn’t much care for being Cap’s collateral damage in his crusade for his BFF.

Clint shifted and scowled at the TV from his perch on the bookshelf. He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know how to get himself out of this and he was starting to get a sneaking, panicky feeling that there was no way out of it. Because the one man who could do it didn’t seem to give a shit about them anymore. And when he thought back to the hateful words he’d spat at Tony on the Raft, he honestly couldn’t blame him.

Wanda

It wasn’t her fault. It wasn’t. Wanda scowled at the TV and sunk down lower on the couch. She didn’t cause any of this trouble. She didn’t see why she should have to answer for any of it. All she had been doing was trying to help people. It wasn’t her fault that people were afraid of her. She couldn’t control other people’s fear and as Steve had said, sometimes things happened and Pietro...
people died. They had tried their best though and that was what really mattered.

The man from the ICC looked directly at the camera as he spoke and she felt like his disapproving expression was directed at her and her alone. He looked a little bit like what she remembered of her grandfather and that just made it worse. Her grandfather had been a kind and gentle man who would not have approved of what she and Pietro had done. He’d lived through World War II, fought in the Resistance and had not been shy in expressing his opinions about those who had tried to oppress them.

She shuddered away from memories of her grandfather and what she’d done, tucking them away where she didn’t have to ever think about them, and went back to watching the press conference. The man, Dorn, seemed so implacable, so unrelenting, and she wondered how Stark had got to him, what lies he’d told to turn him against them.

“Are we going to do it?” she asked when the press conference was over.

“Do what?” Sam asked.

“The submissions, the questions he was talking about.”

Steve smiled at her. “Of course we are. He’s clearly not completely biased. They want to hear our side of the story and that’s all we’ve needed really. A chance to tell the truth. Tell people about how bad the Accords are and how we cannot be leashed by corrupt governments and used as attack dogs. Once they hear our side of the story, they’ll realise what we were trying to do and scrap the Accords.”

Wanda heaved a sigh of relief and smiled back at him. “Good.”

Of course Steve was right. They had been doing this for the world. To make sure that they were free to save people whenever and wherever they were needed. Lagos was a tragedy but they hadn’t done anything wrong… she hadn’t done anything wrong. Besides, they succeeded in stopping Rumlow and that’s what was really important. Really, the people of Lagos should be thanking them for saving them from Rumlow.

It was just typical that Stark was trying to stop them. He wasn’t a hero. He was just a leech, trying to live in their reflected glory. That Rhodes man was just Stark’s bootlicker and the Van Dyne woman and the magic user they’d found were just pale imitations of Scott and herself. The magic user… Strange… couldn’t be any good or he wouldn’t be following Stark around. She’d take care of Strange at the earliest opportunity. Prove that she couldn’t be replaced. It was just a shame that Vision hadn’t come with them. Maybe she should send him an email and tell him he’d be welcome. Vision would immediately join them once he knew that. She was sure of that.

She settled back on the couch and watched the aftermath of the press conference with equanimity. This would all blow over once they told their side of the story and they’d be back in the US soon enough. And when they were, they’d be heroes again and Stark would have to run off to his little hole and hide like the coward he was.

Sam

Sam Wilson watched the man from the ICC talk and wondered where it had all gone so wrong. More importantly, he was trying to figure out how it had all gone so wrong. The Accords were dangerous – anything Ross was involved in was dangerous – but it seemed more and more like they
were the only ones who thought so and that was making Sam doubt himself and his actions. He’d always tried to be honest with himself but now he was starting to wonder whether he had been lying to himself. It wasn’t a pleasant feeling.

He got to his feet as Steve reassured Wanda and made his way to the room he’d been given. He hadn’t missed the fact that they had been confined to this section of the palace and that there were guards on the door to stop them from leaving. The area they’d been given was large and had plenty of distractions so its status as a prison was well-disguised. Sam had still noticed though. He hadn’t told the others and he couldn’t quite work out why.

He opened the laptop he’d been given on his first day here and started surfing – news websites, Facebook, forums, wherever he found a link. While the opinions weren’t universal, they were overwhelmingly in favour of the Accords, the stance the New Avengers were taking and the new ICC investigation. Sam stared at the laptop screen with a frown. How could they think this? Didn’t they know how bad the Accords would be?

He kept clicking on links and found himself in the middle of a conversation on a forum.

*Do you think any of Team Crap actually read the Accords? Cos I did.*

*Yeah? What were they like?*

*Boring as fuck but nothing scary. Lots of rules so that one country can’t use the Avengers as a private army and a lot of stuff about reports and reviews and such. TediouS but pretty sensible. And you know how much I hate sensible.*

Sam leaned back in his seat and stared at that reply. That couldn’t be true, could it? Why would Ross support anything that didn’t give him the upper hand? No, this person had to be wrong. He gave a brief thought to finding a copy of the Accords and reading it but shook that thought away. Ross was involved and that was all Sam needed to know to form an opinion.

He’d heard a great deal about Ross when he’d been serving. Thaddeus “Thunderbolt” Ross had been described, usually accompanied by a sardonic smile and contemptuous snort, as being ‘not a soldier’s general’. He was in it for the power and prestige and he didn’t care how many soldiers’ lives he had to spend to get what he wanted. He would hardly have changed when moving into a civilian position, especially one that held such power, including the ear of the President.

Sam would admit his grudge was personal. It was another General like Ross who had approved the mission that had cost Riley his life. A General who had been perfunctorily sympathetic in the face of Sam’s grief before turning away and immediately wanting to know what had happened and how soon a replacement could be found. That callousness had been like a slap round the head for Sam.

What he didn’t understand was why Stark had sided with Ross of all people? According to what he’d been told, Stark and Banner had been good friends and everyone knew about Ross’ endless persecution of Banner. Surely Stark should have been standing right next to Steve on this issue? It made him wonder what Ross had on Stark. Maybe that was where they should be aiming their next mission? Work out what Ross had on Stark to make him act so out of character and see if they could neutralise that. Once they did that, Stark would drop the pretence and the Accords would fall down without their richest backer. Then they could get things back to normal.

Sam nodded in satisfaction and stood up. He’d go and talk to Steve about this right away. The sooner they got this done, the sooner they could get out of this pretty, gilded prison.
Steve glanced over at Sam briefly and felt a sense of relief and gratitude towards his friend. He’d watched the ICC press conference with dismay and with the sense of bewilderment and confusion he’d felt since the New Avengers press conference growing by the minute. He’d been baffled as to why Tony had formed the New Avengers and why he was still supporting the Accords, too baffled to take part in or even really recognise the vitriol being thrown around by the others. Surely Tony now understood why he’d gone to such lengths to protect Bucky? How could he not? And yet, it seemed he didn’t and what’s more the rest of the world seemed to be joining in. It made him feel lost and alone, despite the people in the room with him.

When Sam had come back into the room after the ICC press conference and announced his theory as to what was happening, Steve had seized on it with a sense of relief. Sam’s theory made sense, even Clint and Wanda had agreed with that. Tony was being manipulated and blackmailed by Ross. It was the only explanation as to why he hadn’t come to his senses and helped them. Why he’d opposed them so fiercely. The others – Rhodes, Vision and the rest – probably didn’t know what was really going on. It was so like Tony to keep something like Ross’ blackmailing a secret instead of coming to the team and letting them help him.

Steve sighed with fond exasperation. He and Tony would have to have another talk about keeping secrets but he could easily forgive Tony for this. Blackmail was an awful thing and no doubt Ross had hit close to home. Maybe he’d threatened Pepper. Despite what Tony had said about them taking a break, Steve knew that Tony loved Pepper. He would do anything to keep her safe. Steve could understand that, even sympathise.

He turned his attention back to the conversation going on around the kitchen table. “Surely Natasha must know what Ross has on Tony?” he said. “That could explain why she took his side. She may have been trying to protect him.”

Clint nodded. The man had done a complete one eighty on hearing Sam’s theory and had dived into the planning they were doing. He seemed to be as relieved as Steve was to have a logical explanation as to why Tony had backed the Accords.

“It makes sense,” he said. “Tash has always had a weird soft spot for Tony and she likes Pepper so she probably decided to back Tony up and try and dig up whatever Ross has and neutralise it.”

“Heavily been able to contact her?” Sam asked.

Clint shook his head, looking frustrated. “I’ve left messages in a few of our old online places but I haven’t had a reply as yet. She may be off the grid until she can find a safe spot to hunker down.”

Steve nodded and frowned. “Do you know what it might be? I mean, Tony’s life is pretty much an open book.”

“Even someone like Tony has his secrets,” Sam said with a shake of his head.

“Maybe it’s about Banner?” Wanda said softly.

She’d been the most resistant to Sam’s idea but when everyone else had fallen in line, she’d relented. The only one who was not here was Scott. Clint had gone and knocked on the door of his room but he hadn’t answered. Steve had told Clint not to worry. He’d fill in Scott later. He was sure the Ant-Man would help them once he understood what was really going on.

“That could be it,” Clint said, his eyes lighting up. “You know how close Tony and Bruce were.”
“Science bros,” Steve said with rueful amusement.

“Yeah,” Clint said with an answering grin. He sobered quickly. “And given Ross’ history with Bruce, that could be a powerful motivator for Tony. Tony likes both Bruce and the Hulk and the reverse is true for both as well. What if that’s the bargaining chip Ross has? What if he has Bruce?”

Steve sucked in a shocked breath. “That would explain everything, Clint.” He frowned. “There was no sign of Bruce on the Raft though.”

“He wouldn’t be there,” Clint replied. “There’s no way they could contain the Hulk on the Raft. No, Ross has got the Abomination stashed away somewhere. That’s where he’ll be holding Bruce. Any place that can hold the Abomination can hold the Hulk.”

“Who’s the Abomination?” Sam asked with a small frown. “I mean, I know he’s the one that wrecked Harlem along with the Hulk but who is he? Or who was he?”

“Emil Blonsky,” Clint replied. “British military, loaned to Ross when he was still hunting Bruce before the Harlem incident. He gave Blonsky some knock off of the super soldier serum then Blonsky let some scientist named Stern experiment on him some more. I don’t know the details but it turned Blonsky into the Abomination. No one knows if he’s capable of turning back because as far as I know, he never has. He either can’t or he won’t.”

“And Ross has him?” Steve asked.

Clint nodded. “Yeah, but I don’t know where. SHIELD probably did. The WSC originally wanted to use the Abomination for the Avengers but Fury sent Tony to talk to Ross. They’ve always hated each other, even more so after Stark Industries stopped making weapons. Ross took that personally.”

“Using Tony doesn’t make much sense if that’s the case,” Sam said.

“Yeah, it does, if you know Fury.” Clint grinned. “Fury knew Tony would be just the right kind of obnoxious about it and in return Ross would deny the WSC and SHIELD any access at all to the Abomination. Fury wanted Bruce, not Blonsky, but he didn’t want to seem too eager and make Bruce run to an even deeper hole where SHIELD couldn’t track him.” His grin widened. “Tony hates Ross so much that after that little meeting, he bought Ross’ favourite bar and had it razed to the ground.”

Sam laughed and Steve shook his head with rueful amusement. That really did sound like something Tony would do.

“That just makes Sam’s theory seem all the more accurate,” Steve said. “There just doesn’t seem to be any other plausible explanation for Tony working with Ross.”

He sighed and shook his head sorrowfully. Then he squared his shoulders. They would help. It’s what the Avengers did for a teammate and Tony, despite his mistake with Ultron, was still their teammate. They’d find Bruce and free him and then Tony would be able to do what was right.

“Do you have any ideas about where Ross would be holding Bruce?” he asked Clint.

The archer nodded. “I think so.” He pulled a map of the continental United States towards him and picked up a pencil. “Let me see.”

As Clint began to mark spots and explain what they were, Steve felt the frustrations and worries of the past few weeks fade away. They had their explanation and now they had a goal. They would save Tony and then with him, they would save the world. It was what the Avengers did, after all.
Natasha

Natasha watched the ICC press conference on the TV, her expression impassive even though she was alone in the tiny hotel room. The studied indifference was a mask she wished would extend further inside but she wasn’t that lucky. Her original plan after leaving Tony at Leipzig had been to lay low and see which way the tide was turning then join up with whichever group was the winner. But that plan had just turned to dust at her feet.

It wouldn’t be that difficult to find out where Steve and the others were hiding but between Tony’s press conference and this one, there wouldn’t be much point hitching her bandwagon to Steve’s crusade. He had lost. It was only a matter of how long it would take for him to realise it and what he might do in the meantime to make things worse. Either way, she didn’t want to be a part of it. Dorn had made it clear that the Accords Council were stronger than ever and they did not view her actions at Leipzig, however justified in her mind, as being the right thing to do.

And Tony… well, she would admit privately that she had never really been able to read Tony Stark. It had rankled her to an excessive extent back when she’d gone in undercover at SI and in spiteful retaliation, she’d written that unfavourable review of him. She’d known it was wrong when she’d been writing it but she’d hated that a rank amateur had been able to not only pull the wool over her eyes when he was dying but that he’d been able to keep his secrets hidden even after she’d been revealed. She had no idea why Fury had let her evaluation stand. He had to have known it was wrong, that Natasha was compromised, but he did nothing.

In fact, Natasha had never been able to get a clear read on Tony in all the time she’d known him and even more frustrating was the patently obvious fact that James Rhodes could. Rhodes had never been fazed by anything Tony said or did and often took them in a way that Natasha had never thought of. She’d reviewed interaction after interaction and while sometimes she could figure out how Rhodes knew what Tony really meant, far too often for her liking she just couldn’t see it. And she hated that. She was good at what she did and she didn’t like failing.

It made her comments about Tony’s ego at Leipzig all the more hypocritical when it was her ego that had been knocked out of joint first. She was almost surprised that Tony hadn’t called her on it but now that she looked back on that moment, she wondered if he had decided he wasn’t going to bother anymore. That it had been one betrayal too many and he had washed his hands of her then and there. Based on what had happened during the New Avengers press conference, she was beginning to suspect that was the case. And if that was so, there would be no welcome from Tony if she tried to contact him.

She was alone. Steve was a waste of time and Tony had no time for her. She’d tried contacting Coulson (she’d never believed he was dead – she hadn’t seen the body after all – and it didn’t take too much digging to find out she was right – she should have told Clint but she’d wanted to keep that card in her deck for the right moment and then Clint had retired so… she’d never gotten around to it) but had only gotten Melinda May. May hadn’t said a word but she hadn’t needed to. Her long, pregnant silence had said it all. Natasha wasn’t intimidated by many people but Melinda May was one of them. So Coulson had cut her loose as well. And since Fury hadn’t appeared out of the shadows anywhere – Tony had told her the man was still alive – she was pretty sure he wasn’t too impressed with her either and was prepared to let her sink or swim on her own recognisance. If she survived, he might be willing to scoop her up at some point in the future. If she could be useful to him.

She was pulled out of her thoughts by a knock on the door and a muffled voice saying,
“Housekeeping!”

She frowned then sighed and got to her feet. The room could do with a clean and she could take the opportunity to head for the nearest library and use their internet to keep up to date with everything that was going on. She opened the door and barely had a moment to register the barrel of the gun before there was a soft whooshing sound and something sharp pierced her throat. She raised a hand and touched a small dart before her knees went out from underneath her.

Someone stepped into the room then there was a second set of footsteps and the door was closed. Two faces loomed over her, fuzzy and indistinct as whatever was in the dart clouded her mind.

“Hello, Widow,” one of the figures said. “We’ve been trying to catch up with you for a long time. Since DC as a matter of fact.”

Just before she slipped into unconsciousness, Natasha felt a frisson of fear run down her spine.

Bucky

Bucky slept, safe in cryosleep and undisturbed by all that was going on in the world.
A small detour to introduce someone who was left out of the MCU after her first appearance. Which frankly is a crime. We wouldn't have needed that kinda weird Bruce/Natasha thing if they'd just remembered there is a woman in the MCU who can bring a raging, furious Hulk to a screeching halt on an active battlefield. She makes her appearance in this chapter. Mostly because her father is an enormous douche canoe. For his part, Tony's actually kind of glad to meet the expert Bruce-whisperer. She puts a few things into perspective.

This takes a little bit before the previous chapter. Ugh. Timelines.

Tony and the others had just arrived back at the Compound after the press conference announcing the New Avengers when FRIDAY did the electronic equivalent of clearing her throat.

“Boss?”

“Yeah, FRI?”

“There’s… someone here to see you.”

Tony and the others stilled and exchanged glances.

“Who is it?” Tony asked, feeling trepidation rise in his chest.

“A Dr Elizabeth Ross,” came the answer and Tony felt his mind kind of fritz out for a moment.

Of all the people he’d ever expected to come knocking at his door, Bruce’s former sweetheart was about the last person. He honestly had no idea why she was here now.

“Where is she?”

“In the conference room, boss.”

Tony nodded and looked at the others. “Right. I guess I’ll go and meet with Dr Ross.”

“You want us to come with you?” Rhodey asked.

Tony hesitated for a moment then shook his head. “No, not yet. Let’s see what she wants.”

Rhodey didn’t look happy but he nodded anyway. Tony patted him on the shoulder and made his way to the conference room. He opened the door to find a slim brunette pacing back and forth on the other side of the room, wearing jeans and a nondescript hoodie. There was a large overnight bag sitting on the table, which was somewhat unexpected. In fact, her whole appearance was unexpected.

“Dr Ross? I’m Tony Stark.”

Tony walked around the table and offered his hand. Dr Ross scrubbed her palms on her jeans before
shaking his hand.

“Dr Stark. I’ve come to beg for shelter and protection.”

Tony blinked and stared at her for a long moment. “Uh, what?”

Dr Ross smiled faintly. “Shortly after the Chitauri invasion, I received a letter that had apparently travelled via a very convoluted route. It was from Bruce. Among other things, he told me I could trust you if anything ever went wrong.”

“Right,” Tony said slowly. He remembered that letter. Bruce had asked him to get it to Dr Ross without her father knowing. He’d done so but he’d never asked what had been in it. “Um. Yes, of course. Though… I actually don’t know where Bruce is, if that’s what you want to know.”

He’d lost Bruce not that long ago and he had no idea how. Either Bruce was better at hiding than he’d expected or… something had happened. He had people looking, very discretely, and he had to admit that, whatever his issues with Bruce’s abandonment after Ultron, he was getting worried. The only thing he did know for certain about Bruce’s whereabouts was that Ross or what was left of his cronies didn’t have him. Ross would have crowed about it to him if he had.

Dr Ross gave him a tired smile. “It wasn’t, mostly because I was already aware that Bruce had managed to find a hole deep enough that no one could find him this time.” She ran a hand down her face and that was when Tony noticed the signs of stress and her complete lack of makeup. “Not even the… my father.”

Tony grimaced. “Ross is supposed to be out of that game.”

“He is. Officially,” Dr Ross said. “Unofficially, Bruce is his white whale.”

Tony sighed. “Ugh. What’s he done now?”

“Tried to kidnap me to use as bait to lure Bruce out of his hiding spot. Thankfully one of the people involved has a bit more in the way of morals and ethics than my father does and they warned me in time.” The weariness seemed to overwhelm her and she dropped into one of the chairs. “Bruce told me I could trust you so…” She smiled wanly. “Here I am.”

Tony felt his brain actually blue screen for a moment before it rebooted and went into overdrive. “Thaddeus Ross… the Secretary of State… tried to have you kidnapped?”

Dr Ross nodded then fished a USB drive out of her pocket and held it out to him. “I have the proof here, courtesy of that ethical person I mentioned.”

Tony stared at the USB and before he could censor the words, they spilled out of his mouth. “I don’t like being handed things.”

Dr Ross looked momentarily surprised then she simply nodded and placed the USB drive on the table. “It has the orders that were issued as well as copies of the email chain that set it up.”

Tony stared at the USB then back at Dr Ross. “Um… you sound like you want me to have your father arrested.”

Dr Ross considered that for a moment. “It wouldn’t be before time, would it?”

Tony stared at her some more. “You don’t like your father.”
Honest amusement grew on Dr Ross’ face. “Dr Stark…”

“Tony, please.”

“Only if you call me Betty.” She drew in a deep breath. “No, I don’t like my father. We’ve always had a tense relationship, mostly because I was a girl and not the boy who would follow in his footsteps that he wanted.” Tony winced. And he thought his daddy issues were bad. Betty simply continued, “But it was his behaviour towards Bruce that was the final straw. So yes, I am giving you evidence that could have my father arrested and in fact, I have a whole lot more evidence to give you as well.”

“Well,” Tony said. “Okay.” He looked at her properly. “But before you do that, do you maybe want to get settled in, have a shower, get some rest, have something to eat?”

Betty let out a gusty sigh and slumped down in her chair for a moment. She scrubbed her face with her hands and when she looked up again, she looked so relieved that Tony was actually startled.

“Bruce was right. You are a good friend,” she said.

Tony stuttered a little. It was nice to hear that Bruce thought so highly of him but if he did, why had he run so fast and so far after Ultron. He didn’t even stay to help explain what they’d been doing.

“He ran away on you when you needed him, didn’t he?” He looked over to find Betty watching him with a sympathetic smile on her face. “If it’s any consolation, he’s done the same to me. More than once. He’s so afraid of accidentally hurting people that his default response to anything is to run…” She smiled wanly again. “And then, of course, he accidentally hurts people by doing that. Just… not in the way that prompted the running in the first place.”

She sighed and got to her feet. “You know, if he ever gave the Hulk free rein, he would come back to us. Which probably gives you a better idea of where Bruce would rather be, instead of where he thinks he should be.”

Tony scooped up the USB drive and stuck it in his pocket. He managed a small smile for Betty as he gestured for her to accompany him further into the Compound.

“You’re not afraid of him.”

“Who? The Hulk?” Betty smiled. “No, not at all. The Hulk came to a screeching halt on an active battlefield just so he could stare dopily at me and say my name.”

Now, finally, Tony laughed. “Yeah, I saw the footage. That pretty much consolidated my opinion of the green bean. Not just a giant rage monster but also a giant cuddle monster.”

Betty’s laugh in return was bright and delighted. “You’ve said that to Bruce’s face, haven’t you? Did he get that slightly dyspeptic ‘I don’t know whether to disapprove or laugh’ look?”

“I get that look a lot from him,” Tony said, pretending to pout. “I am very familiar with it.”

Betty’s smile was still bright but there were tears in her eyes as she slid her hand into the crook of his arm. It felt good.

“That makes two of us, you know? Who recognise that the Hulk is a… a person in his own right and not a monster to be contained.” She sighed. “I wish it was three but Bruce is very stubborn about this.”
“I’m a big fan of the jolly green giant,” Tony replied. “He saved me from going splat on a New York street.” He smiled. “I’m also a big fan of Brucie-bear.”

The smile faltered a little as he thought of what had happened with he’d tried to tell Bruce about Killian and get his opinion and Betty picked it up in an instant. “What did he do?” she asked, all sympathy.

“I… nothing,” Tony said hurriedly.

“You’re a terrible liar, Tony,” Betty replied. She patted his arm. “Bruce…” She sighed. “Has issues. Then again, don’t we all? But our issues aren’t large, green and angry. He thinks that if he keeps himself as far away as possible from people, even when he’s in the same room, he’ll be able to keep them safe. So he finds ways of pushing them away, even people he cares about.”

Tony winced. “Are you sure you’re not a mind reader?”

Betty smiled sadly. “Not a mind reader, just very experienced with the frustrations that come with knowing Bruce Banner.”

Tony nodded and was silent for a moment as they walked along a corridor. He wasn’t sure whether to trust Betty with this but then her words really sank in and he rethought his hesitation. He didn’t need to get specific but if anyone was likely to understand how he felt, it was the woman walking next to him.

“He… fell asleep. I was trying to tell him about something important because I wanted his… I don’t know. Advice maybe? Or just… for him to listen. Be a sounding board.” He gave a frustrated huff. “I didn’t need him to be that kind of doctor, I just needed a friend.”

Betty sighed and shook her head. “You realise that he probably did listen to every word.”

Tony stared at her. “What?”

“I doubt he was actually asleep,” Betty said with a small sympathetic smile. “If he’s not exhausted, either from over working or from a transformation, he’s a fairly light sleeper. He wouldn’t have been able to sleep through someone talking, especially if they were talking to him.”

“Then… why?” Tony said, hating how plaintive he sounded but unable to stop himself.

“I can’t say for sure,” Betty replied. “But my guess would be that at some point he realised how much you trusted him – really realised it – and had a large internal freak out about it and then stupidly decided to push you away.” She patted his arm. “If it’s any consolation, he probably immediately regretted it but then didn’t know what to do to fix things. He does that too.”

Tony contemplated that idea. It would certainly explain some of Bruce’s behaviour in the weeks afterwards. Bruce had been a little more solicitous than usual, making himself available for ‘science bros time’ more than he usually did and bringing Tony food and occasionally tea, though the tea was usually meant to make Tony laugh.

“Huh,” he said finally, feeling something inside him that had shrivelled up after that day start to bloom again. “Do you think he’ll be pissed at me for backing the Accords?”

“No,” Betty said immediately. “He’d approve of the Accords. Accountability and responsibility is… well, it’s his thing since the accident. That’s why he tends to run. I’ll admit he wouldn’t like the General’s involvement in them but they’re from the UN, not the General, and Bruce is smart enough to see that.”
“The General?” Tony said, arching an eyebrow at Betty.

She arched one right back at him. “Do you really want to get into my issues with my father?”

“Nope,” Tony said hurriedly, raising both hands in a surrender gesture. “Definitely not. You’d make me talk about my daddy issues in retaliation and… yeah, let’s not go there.”

Betty laughed at him. “Let’s talk about Bruce instead,” she said with an impish look on her face. “That’s a much better subject.”

“Definitely,” Tony said fervently, happy to change the subject to someone they both cared about.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

T’Challa fesses up to the Accords Council about his unwanted guests. Since he’s being honest and sincere, it actually goes quite well. Also, he has Tony on his side. That helps too. Romania still doesn’t like him much though.

Note: I have no idea how the UN really works and how committees and councils are chosen so let's all wave our hands and just say it works the way I say it does in this chapter. :D Also, my limited googling told me that ‘Your Excellency’ is the correct form of address for an Ambassador to the UN. Lucky them.

“What’s new, pussycat?”

T’Challa’s head jerked around at Tony’s greeting and he smiled. “If some formless wailing noise is the next thing to come out of your mouth, I will be terribly disappointed.”

Tony laughed. “Nah, I never could match Tom Jones’ vocal gymnastics.”

“That is a relief.”

Tony tilted his head to one side in a clear gesture to follow him and they made their way over to a quiet corner of the busy foyer of the UN building. T’Challa was glad to have an opportunity to speak to Tony before the meeting with the Accords Council. They’d been emailing and calling each other since their meeting at the Compound but he had always found it easier to talk to people face to face.

“So what’s up?” Tony asked once they were as alone as they were going to get. “You were twitchy when we spoke yesterday but I didn’t have time to ask.”

T’Challa grimaced. He had wanted to at least mention it during their video call the previous day but Tony had been called away to a Stark Industries meeting. It hadn’t been urgent enough to call back later – though it was likely to become so in the future – but he was glad to discuss it with Tony prior to their meeting instead of ambushing the man with it during.

“You know I’ve been monitoring my… strays?” he said, raising an eyebrow. Tony nodded and T’Challa continued. “Their reactions to the New Avengers press conference do not deserve to be repeated.”

Tony snorted. “I can imagine. Am I the devil?”

T’Challa rolled his eyes. “Indeed. However, it is their reactions to the ICC press conference that have been… interesting. They have come to the conclusion that Secretary Ross is blackmailing you by holding Dr Banner prisoner and that if they rescue Dr Banner, you will drop your support of the Accords and everything will go back to their definition of normal.”

Tony gaped at him for a moment before snapping his mouth shut. He still seemed a little lost for words. T’Challa could sympathise. He’d felt much the same when Shuri had reported the
conversation to him. He’d had to watch the video feed for himself before he would believe it.

“They what?” Tony finally said, his disbelief and bafflement plain in his voice. “Are they insane?”

“That is debatable,” T’Challa said dryly and he got a small laugh from Tony for his trouble. “On a more positive note, Mr Lang appears to have come to his senses and decided he has made a mistake in his allegiances. He has asked for a copy of the Accords. I have obliged and my sister Shuri is standing by for when he inevitably flounders with the dense language of the document and needs assistance.”

“Huh,” Tony said then he shook his head. “I suppose one out of five isn’t the worst thing that could happen.” His eyes narrowed. “I don’t suppose you’ve had an itsy bitsy spider climbing up your waterspout?”

T’Challa raised an eyebrow but decided to continue the analogy. “No but if she tried, she would find that the rain would come and wash her right back out.”

Tony grinned at him. “Your Doras hold grudges, eh?”

“They did not appreciate her actions,” T’Challa replied, trying to maintain some dignity, though the twitch of his lips surely gave him away.

Tony was about to reply but at that moment, a young man approached them, telling them the Council was ready. T’Challa squared his shoulders as he walked beside Tony into the council room. There were fifteen countries on the Accords Council, with the quorum amount set at nine in order to reach a decision. That had been a smart move, one T’Challa thoroughly approved of. There would always be circumstances that might cause a country’s representative to be unavailable, which made requiring all fifteen people to be present for a decision troublesome. But allowing the Council to make a decision with a minimum of nine members present was wise. If they were ever in a situation where more than six representatives were unavailable then it was more than likely that other clauses of the Accords would be relevant.

The selection of the countries for the initial Council had been interesting. It had been decided by a vote in the General Assembly and much to T’Challa’s amusement, the US hadn’t even made the top fifty. Germany, Romania and Russia had, which had set Secretary Ross fuming, if T’Challa’s sources were correct. Nigeria had been another easy selection. Australia, Japan and Indonesia had apparently been chosen for their distance and relative neutrality and Britain for its diplomatic credentials. Brazil and Canada had been uncontroversial selections, unlike China. The last four seats on the Council had gone to smaller nations – the Maldives, Cameroon, Sokovia and the Soloman Islands – so that the Council would never forget its purpose to protect the ‘little people’.

The US had protested having both China and Russia on the Council but they’d had little grounds to contest it. The vote had been open and sudden with no time for the usual horse trading that went on. The US simply had to accept that they were not very popular right now, courtesy of both Secretary Ross’ actions and the fact that Captain America had been wearing the US flag emblazoned on his chest as he’d rampaged across Europe. Perhaps in two years when half the Council seats were up for re-election, things would have calmed down enough that they would be voted in at that time.

T’Challa had met with the Brazilian, Cameroonian and British representatives prior to this full meeting and all three had seemed amenable to his suggestions, though no doubt there were still going to be some recriminations. He was sure that the rest of the Council had been primed by the representatives he’d met with about this purpose of this meeting and the mood as he and Tony sat down was not acrimonious, which he took to be a good sign.
“Dr Stark, thank you for coming,” said Nigel Clements, the British representative, who was the current Chair of the Council. “King T’Challa, I think under the circumstances, we can dispense with the usual pleasantries and give you the floor immediately.”

T’Challa smoothed down the front of his suit as he inclined his head. “Thank you, Mr Clements. You are all already aware of my involvement in the events in Bucharest and at the Leipzig/Halle airport, for which I am deeply apologetic. I allowed my emotions and grief to overcome my good sense and caused a great deal of damage, both to people and property.”

The representatives from Germany and Romania both nodded, acknowledging his involvement and his apology.

“I was also briefly involved in the events in Siberia,” T’Challa continued. “I arrived, I believe, towards the end of that incident and was able to capture Helmut Zemo, as you know. What I have not mentioned until now is that I also removed James Barnes and Steven Rogers from Siberia at the same time.”

The reactions from the Council told T’Challa that they did indeed know that and he was pleased that the representatives he’d met with had indeed laid down some of the groundwork already. He suspected that was why everyone was calm, if coldly stern on the part of the Romanian representative, so he continued.

“My actions against James Barnes were rash and reckless and made without any concrete evidence as to his involvement in my father’s death,” T’Challa continued. “I felt that my honour would be besmirched if I did not offer him sanctuary until such time as the triggers in his mind could be removed.” He paused and when he continued, his tone was very dry. “Steven Rogers appeared to take my words and actions as some sort of proof that I would offer him and his followers shelter as well. As a result, I have ended up with the lot of them in my palace.”

“Had you always intended to inform the Accords Council of this matter?” the German representative, an oddly ethereal-looking blonde called Saskia Gerst, asked severely. “Or is it just the prevailing winds that have prompted you to do so?”

“I had always intended to bring the matter to the Council,” T’Challa replied. “However I had to placate my advisors before I could do anything with the wider world. As you may imagine, most of my advisors, whom I inherited from my father’s reign, are not pleased at the situation in regards to Rogers and his friends, though most of them agree with my offer of sanctuary regarding Barnes.” He sighed and looked rather long-suffering. “Truth be told, had I tried to come before the Council any earlier, I could not have guaranteed that Rogers and his friends would have either been alive or still within the borders of Wakanda when I returned to my country.”

A ripple of amusement flitted around the Council members, though the Romanian representative looked as though he agreed with the advisors.

“I can sympathise,” the Romanian representative, Nicolae Vasilescu, said with deep irony. He then cleared his throat and continued sharply, “I cannot imagine you have come here without some plan in mind, Your Majesty.”

T’Challa inclined his head. “I have. Sergeant Barnes is currently once more in cryosleep. At his request. He does not trust himself and given that it is unknown as to precisely how many people know the words that can trigger the Winter Soldier, I felt it advisable to agree to his request.”

“How well protected is he?” Chiyo Koizumi from Japan asked.
“Exceedingly,” T’Challa replied. “The laboratories within the palace are among the most well-
protected in Wakanda and I have increased that security subsequent to Barnes’ request. I would be
loath to say it is impossible for him to be interfered with but the obstacles are all but insurmountable.”

“I think that irrespective of any other decisions that are made here today, leaving Barnes where he is
now is probably a good idea,” Tony said, surprising the Council members. They hadn’t precisely
ignored Tony’s presence but they clearly hadn’t known why he was there. T’Challa was pleased that
Tony truly was going to support him. He had not taken it for granted, despite Tony’s presence at his
side today. He let himself relax just a fraction as Tony continued. “He’s as safe as he’s going to get
and while there are many good reasons for him to stand trial, frankly I don’t think it’s safe until those
triggers are removed. Berlin proved that.”

“You believe he should stand trial?” Koizumi asked, her head tilting slightly to one side.

“We know James Barnes was brainwashed into becoming the Winter Soldier,” Tony said, his tone
flat. “To what extent is currently unknown, though the New Avengers are searching for whatever
information can be found about the Winter Soldier program. Hopefully, more information may be
found at the base in Siberia.”

He inclined his head slightly towards the Russian representative who immediately cleared his throat.

“That is one of the objectives of the joint Russian-Accords team,” Kirill Markov said. “My
government was as displeased as everyone else to discover that there was more than one Winter
Soldier. There is no guarantee that the five that were killed and Sergeant Barnes are the only ones
left. Whatever information we find will be submitted to the Accords Council.”

“The Council will forward any information to both yourself, Dr Stark, and King T’Challa’s
scientists,” Clements said, after a brief murmured conversation with his counterparts.

“Thank you,” Tony said then he continued. “The brainwashing Barnes underwent is certainly
something that should be taken into account when considering the actions of the Winter Soldier,
however the incidents in Bucharest and at the airport are another matter. I’m not qualified – for many
reasons – to give any judgement on Barnes’ guilt or whether he can be held accountable for the
actions of the Winter Soldier but I do think that before any judgement can be done by anyone about
anything, it would be advisable for Barnes to be his own man.”

The Council members went into something of a huddle as they discussed the matter then they
returned to their seats.

“The Council wishes to discuss the matter further,” Clements said. “Though we do agree that a
decision is needed today to allow King T’Challa to make any arrangements that might be necessary.”
He waited for T’Challa’s acknowledgement then continued, “Now we come to the matter of Rogers
and his cohort.”

“Were you aware of the plan to attack the Raft?” said Vasilescu harshly.

“I was not,” T’Challa replied. “They had already left before I became aware of their plans and after
some discussion with my sister, Princess Shuri, I deemed it wise to allow them to return and then to
contain them within the palace until a decision could be made as to their disposition.” He paused for
a moment. “I must add that they are currently concocting plans to leave on a rescue mission. My
technicians are controlling their access to information, which is hindering their plans but that will
only last for so long.”

“How well can you contain them?” Clements asked.
“Indefinitely, I believe. Right now, I have their agreement to remain in the quarters I have given them and they are abiding by that. Should they choose to break that agreement, which I suspect they will, and attempt to leave, I will see that they are detained more… firmly,” T’Challa said. “Magic is not unknown in Wakanda and my court sorcerer believes he can contain Miss Maximoff, which is half the battle right there. The guards watching over them have been armed with tranquiliser darts that should stop even a super soldier. They can certainly stop a Black Panther.”

“But you’re not sure,” Vasilescu said, looking very sour. “I hear a lot of maybes and ‘I believes’ in what you’re saying but not a lot of certainty. These people are dangerous. They must be contained.”

“Do you have a better place for them to be held?” Tony said dryly before T’Challa could respond. “The Raft failed and that was with Maximoff contained by the restraining collar.”

Vasilescu did not look pleased and he leaned back in his chair. “And if they escape again?”

“Then they will be dealt with,” Tony replied, his tone was flat and harsh.

T’Challa wanted to wince but he kept himself very still. He did not know what had happened inside the bunker in Siberia but he strongly suspected that Rogers’ offhand comment about Tony being fine had not been entirely accurate. Tony had not been seen in public for some time after Siberia and T’Challa was convinced that the man had been badly hurt. He felt a familiar wash of guilt rush through him at that thought. He should have checked. He had been an ally of sorts to Tony. He had not behaved as such and given Tony’s support here today and his general graciousness about all things related to the ‘civil war’, he felt he owed a debt to Tony as well.

“I am willing to have any or all of the Council come to Wakanda to observe our precautions,” he said, feeling like he could almost hear the howls of outrage from his advisors from here. But they would just have to deal with it. They were a part of the wider world now and it was time to get used to it. Which he knew would not have been so abrupt if he’d been less of a fool and more of a king but what was done was done. He couldn’t change it, he could only make such amends as were possible.

Vasilescu looked like he wanted to say something more but Clements called the Council together and spoke quietly again.

“We will do so, Your Majesty,” Clements said once the Council members had resumed their seats. “Now, you said something about the… rogues making new plans.”

T’Challa looked over at Tony who just shrugged. “Might as well tell them, Simba,” Tony said. “They can be as baffled as I am.”

T’Challa nodded then opened his mouth to speak. He closed it again since he couldn’t quite figure out a way to make it all sound sensible then decided that it was pointless trying.

“The… rogues believe that Dr Stark’s support for the Accords came about because Secretary Ross is holding Dr Bruce Banner prisoner and if they rescue Dr Banner, then Dr Stark will drop his support of the Accords and all will go back to how it was.”

A rather baffled silence fell in the room and T’Challa had to control the urge to start giggling. He hadn’t giggled since he was a boy but the rather dumbfounded looks on the faces of the men and women in front of him made it hard to not do so now. That it was more of a hysterical giggle than an amused one was beside the point.

“That’s… creative,” Fiona Reed from Australia said slowly. “I’m presuming there’s no truth in it.
Where *is* Dr Banner exactly?"

Tony grimaced. “That’s an interesting question, Your Excellency. I have been very quietly keeping track of Bruce since he left after the Ultron incident. The last time I had a fix on him, he was in Thailand. Then he went missing. I don’t know where he is but I do know where he *isn’t*... and that is in Secretary Ross’ clutches.”

“Are you certain?” Clements asked.

Tony nodded. “One hundred percent certain.”

“How?” the Brit asked with all the dryness he could muster, which was considerable.

Tony pursed his lips for a moment then shrugged. “Because his daughter, Dr Elizabeth Ross, came to the Compound seeking shelter because her father had tried to have her kidnapped to use as bait to draw Bruce out. He’d have no reason to do so if he already had Bruce.”

There was a stunned silence in the room that Clements finally broke. “Secretary Ross tried to kidnap his own daughter?”

“I think it’s an internal matter, to be handled by the United States government and law enforcement. If the UN or anyone else wishes to pursue Ross for his actions during the recent debacle, that’s an entirely separate matter,” Tony said firmly. “I was just explaining how I know Ross doesn’t have Bruce.”

“I trust it *will* be handled,” Markov said pointedly.

“With great delight,” Tony replied, drawing faint amusement from the Council. None of them cared much for the former US General.

“So where do the rogues believe Dr Banner is being held?” Reed asked.

“They have narrowed it down to three possible locations in the US,” T’Challa said, picking up the thread of the conversation. “We are slowing down their ability to access information on those locations as much as we can while not appearing to be deliberately blocking them.” He contrived to look innocent. “Wakanda has been out of the world for so long that despite our skill with technology, it’s been difficult to make our computer networks completely compatible with external ones.”

“They actually bought that?” Tony said with an incredulous look then he snorted. “Wait, what am I saying? The only one who would have smelled a rat with that story is Romanov and she’s who knows where.”

“They did question Lang about it when he emerged at one point for food,” T’Challa said. “But he had the good sense to go along with it.”

“What’s this about Lang?” Clements asked.

“He appears to have a better grasp of the situation than his colleagues,” T’Challa said. “He has asked for a copy of the Accords and is making himself acquainted with them. We suspect he will become bogged down shortly and we have people standing by to assist him. Carefully. We want to lead him to the appropriate conclusion but not in a way that could be considered coercion by a skilled lawyer.”

“Promising,” Koizumi said. “If one of them turns himself in, we can turn this to your advantage, Your Majesty.” She cocked her head to the side slightly. “While we can understand the actions you have taken, the wider world community may not be so forgiving, no matter what we tell them.”
T’Challa nodded, his expression grim. “I am aware of that, Your Excellency.”

“But if Lang turns himself in, that will be the story,” she continued. “If he gives up the others, we can be… vague about Wakanda’s involvement. Or, if today’s discussions go well, we can tell them that Wakanda was holding them under official UN sanction.”

“I would consider myself very lucky if my foolish actions received such a light consequence,” T’Challa said. “I failed to consider the good of my country when I made my decisions. I cannot do that again.”

“We do not wish to drive Wakanda back into isolation,” Clements said and many of those at the table nodded in agreement. “And you have come to us, freely and willingly. That speaks loudly in and of itself.” He glanced over at Vasilescu. “As… cathartic as recriminations are, it would better for us to sit down now and work out what we are to do together. To show how the Accords will work for the countries of the world.”

Vasilescu’s sour expression deepened for a moment then he sighed and nodded. “Very well. I cannot deny King T’Challa’s genuine remorse for his actions in Bucharest and the generosity both he and his country have shown to the victims. I could wish that it had never occurred in the first place but that is not something that lies on King T’Challa’s shoulders. Rogers was the instigator of that mess and it is with him that my… discontent truly lies.”

T’Challa finally relaxed and beside him, he heard Tony’s faint sigh of relief. Vasilescu’s restrained animosity had been a worry but now that the man was on board, albeit somewhat reluctantly, he felt that they could make some concrete plans. And it seemed the rest of the Council agreed.

“Then let us start examining contingencies,” Clements said. “As good as your security is, Your Majesty, I think we must take a pessimistic view and plan for the worst.”

“I quite agree, Your Excellency,” T’Challa said then he turned his mind to all the ways things could go wrong at home.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The ICC Investigators arrive to conduct some interviews. It goes better than Tony expected, even when the questions turn to something he’d rather not talk about.

Chapter Notes

I’m using the third season Crossing Lines team because Carine Strand is into being honest, above board and objective and as much as I like Louis, I think Carine is the better one to handle the aftermath of the CW. Also, I’m not quite confident enough to write Carl Hickman. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony leaned back in his chair and eyed the two ICC investigators who were about to interview him. One, a German named Sebastian Berger, appeared to be on the verge of fanboying all over him, which he was faintly amused about. It was easy to see that Berger’s Italian colleague, Marco Costante, was even more amused, though he was refraining from actually saying anything about it. Tony suspected he was trying to be professional and saving it up for later when he and Berger were in private and he could tease him… relentlessly probably. Neither man seemed hostile or antagonistic, which Tony was tentatively pleased about. He knew that could change based on what sort of remit the investigators had but it was, at least, a good start.

Rhodey was in a separate room with a British man called Luke Wilkinson and the severe blonde woman, Carine Strand, who was the leader of the ICC team and, to Tony’s surprise, an American. Vision was being interviewed by the remaining members of the team, a Dutch woman named Arabela Seeger and a plummy English woman with the mouthful of a name of Ellie Delfont-Bogard. It was an interesting division of their forces and Tony suspected that Strand had picked who was going to interview whom very carefully to ensure the best results.

“So,” he said, breaking the silence. He hated silences but he’d long ago stopped caring about what people thought about that. He knew some people perceived it as a weakness to not be able to maintain silence but Tony was perfectly capable of babbling away, saying everything and nothing, which was often more effective than remaining silent. He’d certainly found it to be so. “How are we doing this?”

“We already have your written statement about the events of the… civil war,” Marco said, indicating the folder he’d brought in with him. “And Dorn is satisfied with its clarity. It also gels with what the members of the old Accords Committee have said. So we really just have some clarifying questions to ask.”

“Ask away,” Tony said with an expansive wave of his hand.

“Might as well start with the big one. Get it over and done with,” Marco said. “Siberia. You went alone and did not make any contact with the Committee or your fellow Avengers prior to doing so.
Dorn’s satisfied that it fundamentally falls under the coverage of the previous agreement for you to bring in Rogers and Barnes but you were a bit reticent about why you did what you did.”

Tony grimaced. “It was the only way Wilson would tell me where they’d gone. If I went alone and didn’t tell anyone else.”

Both Sebastian and Marco looked at him like he was an idiot and in retrospect, he kind of had to agree with them. When you looked at that decision with a cool head, it was stupid. I mean, sure, tell Wilson yes but given that Wilson had been breaking the law left, right and centre, he’d really had no obligation to keep to that agreement beyond the doors of the prison. He supposed he’d wanted to not… betray people who had already betrayed him. Which made him feel like an idiot now that he thought about it.

“Yeah, I know,” he said, pre-empting their response. “I was an idiot. Me, Rogers and Barnes against five Winter Soldiers was already bad odds. Add in the fact that Barnes had already been triggered once by Zemo and could be again and then it would have been me and Rogers against six Winter Soldiers and it looks even stupider.” He sighed and scrubbed his face with one hand. “I was still, even then, trying to bring them in peacefully. I knew what Ross wanted was against the Accords and I should have brought it to the Committee but Ross is famous for shooting first then shrugging and saying oops afterwards when everyone’s dead and nothing can really be done about it. Even the super soldier serum can’t raise Rogers and Barnes from the dead. I didn’t think I had time.”

“That makes a little more sense,” Sebastian said, though he still sounded dubious.

“Just a tiny bit,” Marcos replied with a wry smile, holding up one hand with his forefinger and thumb not very far apart.

Tony chuckled. “I’ll also concede that I probably still had a head injury at that point, hadn’t slept for more than 15 minutes at a time in about three days and was having on and off symptoms that felt disturbingly like a heart attack but that my doctor says was probably gastrointestinal in nature because I hadn’t eaten much in those three days and what I had eaten was mostly grease and sugar.” He paused for effect. “I may not have been at my best when it came to making judgement calls.”

“That makes a lot more sense,” Sebastian deadpanned and the three of them laughed.

“It does,” Marcos said, his smile fading a little as he looked down at his notes. “Dorn also noted you were very vague about what happened in the bunker. You mentioned the Winter Soldiers had been killed by Zemo and then you, Rogers and Barnes had a disagreement.” He raised an eyebrow at Tony. “A disagreement that left you injured and Barnes without an arm.”

Tony stilled and his face went blank. “It’s… fundamentally what happened.”

Marcos nodded to himself and he and Sebastian exchanged glances, as though Tony’s reaction was something they’d expected. Sebastian reached out and turned off the digital recorder sitting in the middle of the table.

“Dorn needs to know and he suspected you would be reluctant to speak about it on the record,” Marcos said. He was firm but there was a kindness in his voice as well. “He’s willing to allow this to be off the record but he needs to know in order to make a balanced decision. He directed us to get an off the record verbal statement as well as a written record of the events that will remain confidential.” He paused for a moment. “Dr Stark, if he doesn’t have your version of events, he can only make a decision about possible charges based on what Rogers says when and if he submits a statement.”

Tony grimaced and looked away. He could see the logic in what Costante and, through him, Dorn
was saying and as little as he wanted to relive the events or talk about them, he really didn’t want Rogers to lie about it all again and get away with it.

He swallowed hard but then turned back and nodded. “Right.” He licked his lips. “Right… so… after I found the dead Winter Soldiers, I met up with Rogers and Barnes. That was when Zemo started monologuing about the shit that happened in Sokovia and how he wanted to tear the Avengers apart and blah blah blah. Then he…” Tony hesitated for a moment. “There was a video. Of the Winter’s Soldier’s mission on December 16, 1991.”

Marco looked blank but Sebastian’s eyes widened. “That’s… that’s the day your…”

“My parents died.” Tony’s voice was flat and empty. “I thought it was a car accident but it wasn’t. They were murdered by the Winter Soldier. The video showed it clear as day. He punched my father in the face until he killed him and then strangled my mother.” His breathing hitched for a moment but his face was blank. A muscle in his cheek twitched. “I’m guessing HYDRA paid off the coroner or something because no one gets strangled in a car accident.”

There was a moment of stunned silence then Marcos asked carefully, “I… see. What happened next?”

Tony’s jaw tightened before he forced himself to relax a bit. These men were not his enemy and he understood why they needed to know. Given his past record on the matter, Rogers was unlikely to tell any truth that would paint his precious Bucky in a bad light and whatever physical evidence existed in the bunker would simply show there had been a fight, not what it had been about.

“I asked Rogers if he’d known since he looked remarkably unsurprised to see what had happened to my parents,” he said through gritted teeth. “He tried to prevaricate and when I pushed him further, he admitted that he’d known. Barnes also admitted to remembering the mission. That was about the time when the fight started, though I’ll admit I threw the first punch.”

“What did Barnes and Rogers do?” Marcos asked.

“Barnes was mostly defending himself,” Tony replied. “Rogers was protecting his friend.”

“I thought he was your friend as well,” Sebastian asked.

Tony twitched at the question, feeling a sense of sour amusement that at least he wasn’t the only one who had completely misread that relationship. “So did I.”

“What happened?” Marcos prompted as gently as he could.

Tony decided to rip the bandage off and get it all out as quickly as possible. “We fought. It was ugly. At one point, Barnes tried to rip the arc reactor out of my suit and triggered an automated defence mechanism that blew off his arm. Lucky for him, he was using his mechanical arm so he didn’t get himself killed. Then Rogers got me down.” He grimaced. “The suit isn’t really designed for close combat fighting and as for the other weapons in it, well… while I was angry with both of them, I didn’t want to kill them, even then.” His expression turned very grim. “I’m not sure either of them realised that if I’d really wanted them dead, they’d be smeared across the bunker walls right now.”

Marcos and Sebastian exchanged glances. Tony ignored them and scrubbed his face with one hand.

“Anyway, Rogers got me down and smashed his shield into my faceplate until it broke off,” he continued. “He raised his shield again and I thought he was going to bring it down on my face or neck. He sure as shit looked like he wanted to kill me at that moment. But instead he used it to smash the arc reactor in my suit. That disabled it. He got up and picked up his bestest buddy…” He knew
his voice sounded sour and bitter when he said that but he really didn’t give a shit. “I told him he didn’t deserve the shield that my father made. He dropped it and they left.”

Marcos’ expression was bland and indiscernible and Tony had to admit he was impressed. He honestly had no idea how the man was reacting to what he’d just said. Sebastian was a little easier to read – there was anger and outrage on his face and Tony was fairly sure it was directed at Rogers and Barnes and not him.

“They didn’t make sure you were alright? That you could get out of the bunker yourself?” Marcos asked.

“No.” Tony’s voice was flat and bleak.

“How did you get out?”

“Friday… the AI that runs the suit… sent out a distress call to Vision when she lost contact with me,” Tony replied. “He contacted Pepper… Ms Potts… and a Stark Industries team was sent to retrieve me. Vision cleared it with the Committee. Thankfully, the clauses surrounding rescue missions in other countries had pretty much been hammered out already so he wasn’t delayed at all.”


“Sebastian,” Marcos said warningly.

The German grimaced. “Yeah, I know… professionalism. Rogers is still a son of a bitch.”

“I agree,” Marcos said. “But let’s not say that around Carine.”

“Rogers fan?” Tony said cynically, the muscles in his shoulders crawling into tense knots at the idea of a Cap fangirl being in charge of the investigation.

Marcos shook his head. “A fan of rules, responsibility and professionalism. We’re supposed to be unbiased and objective.”

Tony relaxed again, his muscles unknotting. A fan of rules and responsibility sounded like someone who wouldn’t be blinded by Rogers’ charisma. That boded well for a clear and concise investigation that wasn’t biased in any way, not in the direction of Team Cap and not in his team’s direction either. That was something Tony could accept with equanimity.

“Just off the record,” he said, levelling a finger at Sebastian. “I agree with him.”

Both of the investigators chuckled then Marcos looked down at his notes. Sebastian leaned in and they both pretended to read as a cover to allow Tony to regain his composure and let the jitters caused by having to talk about the fight in the bunker settle down. After a few minutes, Marcos closed the folder and Sebastian turned the recorder on again.

“Moving on,” Marcos said more formally. “The other question Dorn had was about the initial briefing regarding the Accords. Your statement seemed to say that it was the first time Rogers and the rest of the Avengers had ever heard about it.” He frowned. “Dorn wondered whether that was an error.”

“Nope,” Tony said, deliberately leaning back in his seat and affecting a casual slouch. This was something he’d learned a long time ago – letting his posture affect his mood. It didn’t always work and was highly dependent on what was going on but it usually had at least a small effect. After having to relive the events in Siberia, he was almost willing himself to calm down a little. “When I
walked in and told them about the Accords that was literally the first time they’d heard about them.”

“But the process has been public ever since the events in Sokovia,” Sebastian said, looking taken aback. “The discussions and the early drafts of the Accords were on the UN website and it was widely reported.”

“I know,” Tony said. He grimaced and sighed. “I didn’t realise what kind of vacuum I left when I stepped down from the Avengers. That was the sort of thing I usually took care of and alerted people about. I wasn’t really expecting Rogers, Vision or Maximoff to have picked up on it but I expected that Wilson and Romanov would have been paying attention and keeping themselves in the loop on world matters. I certainly was even though I wasn’t an active Avenger. I’m still Iron Man, after all.”

“Wasn’t there some sort of handover when you stepped down?” Marcos asked.

Tony smiled wryly. “You’re assuming there was some sort of structure and operational hierarchy. Nothing like that existed and I didn’t even think about it because…” He waved a hand. “I’m… me. Structure and hierarchy have never really been something I’ve paid a lot of attention to. I mean, I do pay attention to it but mostly I get to bypass that sort of thing. Pepper has always handled the rest of it.”

He stared at the wall past the two men opposite him for a moment and a frown creased his forehead. “If the Avengers had been run like a business, I probably would have picked up on it quicker than I did. I know people tend to think that I spent all my time before Afghanistan partying, drinking and bedding whoever caught my fancy but I did actually run SI in between all of that. And frankly, I never did as much of that as the gossip rags said I did. But talking about who I’d slept with last week sold more newspapers than talking about how I took SI from being a multimillion dollar American company to a multi-billion dollar, multinational company spanning nearly forty countries and employing close to half a million people worldwide.”

He snorted. “And people wondered why I backed the Accords. Apart from the fact that one of the first things I said after I got back from Afghanistan was all about accountability, I’m not really in a position to be lifting my middle finger to the entire damn world. I won’t put my employees at risk for a temper tantrum.”

He glanced over at the two ICC investigators and waved a hand apologetically. “Sorry for the rant. Back to my point… to be honest, it didn’t occur to me to wonder who was going to do the things I used to do. I still did some of it anyway but… the reasons I stepped back meant that as far as I was concerned, that was Rogers’ problem to sort out and I guess part of me still believed the propaganda. He’s the man with the plan, after all.”

“Yet you weren’t surprised when you found out they didn’t know?” Marcos asked.

Tony contemplated that for a moment. “No, I wasn’t. I mean, I was but… I just wasn’t. I wasn’t anywhere near ready to admit it to myself but I think even then I subconsciously knew they were… spoiled brats?” He snorted. “I’m not sure if those are the right words but they’ll kind of do. Even though they didn’t consider me a part of the team, it was somehow my fault they didn’t know. And my fault the Accords existed at all, apparently.”

Sebastian snorted. “They really weren’t paying attention then, were they? It wasn’t the events in Sokovia that prompted the Accords. That just catapulted them to the forefront. It was the fall of SHIELD that got them started. The idea that the Avengers weren’t answering to anyone made people nervous. The only reason things never went any further than low-level discussions and a few half-hearted drafts was because you were involved.”
Tony blinked at him. “What?”

“Sebastian’s correct,” Marcos said. “Your little speech about accountability after your return from Afghanistan and the fact that you followed it up by actually being accountable, to the public in particular, set a lot of minds at ease.” He smiled slightly. “Dorn’s been talking to a lot of people within the UN. And he knows a lot of people. They all said more or less the same thing. While you were involved, they were willing to let things go because you told the right people the things they needed to know, even if it was after the fact. Once you stepped down, that’s when the Accords really started taking off. King T’Chaka’s willingness to step up and be the public face of the UN Accords Committee, both as a way of smoothly bringing his country back into the world and later because of Lagos, just solidified everything. He may not have been well-known but King T’Chaka impressed a lot of people very quickly, including Dorn.”

It was clear to Tony that not only did these men hold Dorn in high regard but that Dorn had more power and influence among the movers and shakers in the UN than he’d initially thought… and more than his contacts had told him. He wondered if he should be nervous and then decided he wasn’t. If Dorn’s chosen team was headed by a woman whose priority was professionalism, responsibility and objectivity then he was willing to leave his fate to the man. And that was something he didn’t often say.

“Huh,” he said. “I’m more used to people looking at my involvement and immediately wanting me gone or held in check.”

“Maybe here,” Marcos said. “But we don’t pay that much attention to US gossip rags.” He started to grin, clearly teasing just a little. “And our gossip rags are far too sophisticated to care about some American billionaire. Unless he decided to marry European royalty. Then he’d be interesting.”

That startled a laugh out of Tony and he shook his head with a smile. “I can’t see that happening.”

“Then you’re fine,” Marcos said. He sobered and looked down at his notes as he got the interview back on track. “So, they didn’t know, they hadn’t ever made any effort to know and from your report, they didn’t listen to you either. Okay. That’ll clear things up for Dorn.”

“That’s it?” Tony said with surprise. He’d been expecting some sort of censure for not making them listen.

“That’s it,” Marcos replied. “You sent a copy of your presentation with your report and Dorn was satisfied with it. If they chose not to listen, then that’s not on you. That’s on them.”

Tony sat back, feeling a little nonplussed. It did occur to him that it was a bit sad and more than a little worrisome that he was always surprised when people either simply accepted his word as truth without him having to do a whole song and dance to convince them or didn’t think he’d failed at a task when he’d tried his best. It was a novel feeling and certain things that Rhodey had said began to finally really sink in.

These people – experienced, objective, independent investigators – believed he had done his best and that the fault lay with others. He let himself believe them and let that belief sink in. It was amazingly freeing. He felt the weight lift off his shoulders and with it went the guilt that he’d felt since the civil war had ended. He had tried. He had tried to explain and to make the others understand. And sure, maybe he hadn’t been the best at it but ultimately they were the ones who had closed their minds and dismissed everything he’d had to say.

It wasn’t his fault.
Well, taking a fifteen year old into a fight in a foreign country without his guardian’s permission was his fault – and something he really needed to talk to Peter about – but the rest of it wasn’t.

He shivered a little as the tension he’d been carrying for weeks, maybe even months or years, flowed out of him. This time when he lounged casually in his chair, it had less to do with trying to project an image and more to do with him actually feeling more relaxed.

“So, is there anything else?” He grinned mischievously. “Or can I take Berger here on a tour of paradise… also known as my workshop?” Sebastian perked up, excitement written all over him. Tony then paused and raised a finger. “Or would that be considered bribery and corruption?”

Sebastian slumped down in his chair with an expression of disappointment and that drew a laugh from Marcos and Tony. There was also a hint of shame about the man as well that Tony didn’t understand but decided not to ask about.

“We’re done,” Marcos said. “If we have any more questions, we’ll email or call.” He looked over at the sad and sorry sight Sebastian was presenting and laughed again. “And no, since we’re done, it wouldn’t count as bribery and corruption if you were to show Sebastian your workshop. We’ll come and get him when we have to leave.”

Sebastian perked up again. “Really?”

Tony got up and waved Sebastian over. “Come on. I’ll introduce you to my AI, FRIDAY. No flirting though.”

“I make no promises,” Sebastian replied as he left the room with Tony.

Chapter End Notes

Just some quick comments since there was no way to address some of this in the chapter.

1. Yes, Carine Strand very carefully selected who was going to interview whom. She felt that she and Luke would be too authoritative and severe to do anything other than put Tony’s defences up and Arabella and Ellie lacked the experience to get anything other than glib answers out of him. Sebastian the computer geek and Marco who knows all about impossible crusades seemed the best options.

2. Yes, gastrointestinal problems such as severe reflux can present with similar symptoms to a heart attack if they're allowed to build up enough. I know this because it happened to me. I had symptoms that seemed enough like a heart attack that when I called 000 (our version of 911 or 999) and described them, they not only responded an ambulance immediately but also sent a MICA (mobile intensive care ambulance) unit along as well. That was a fun night... not. :D

3. Yes, Tony does answer the question about what happened in Siberia... mostly because Marco gives him a sensible reason for it - because Dorn can only make a decision based on the evidence he has in front of him. Tony needs to give his side of events. So, he doesn’t like it but he does it.

4. For those who are curious, Sebastian's odd reaction of shame to the question of graft
and corruption is because he had a small problem with gambling in the first season of Crossing Lines that nearly got him thrown off the team. Also his previous boss, Louis Daniel, was perhaps a little... relaxed about doing things that were ostensibly illegal but necessary to get the information needed - like allowing Sebastian to hack in places he should not be.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

We’re stepping away slightly in this chapter to answer the question: What did happen to Natasha? When we last saw her in Chapter 5, she’d just been tranqed by persons unknown. This is what happened to her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Natasha slowly woke to the feeling of being hungover and lethargic. It took a moment for her brain to kick into gear and even then it was sluggish and slow but she remembered what had happened and knew what she’d been hit with. She’d used the sedative drug a few times during her career at SHIELD. It was effective against almost everyone… including her apparently. She blinked and tried to move.

That was when she realised she was tied to a chair. What’s more it had been very efficiently done. Her arms were bound to each other as well as to the back of the chair, wrenching her shoulders into a moderately uncomfortable posture. Her ankles and legs had been tied to the legs of the chair and when she looked down, she saw the chair was metal. There’d be no breaking it if she tipped it over.

“You were easier to catch than we expected.”

She looked up to see a woman glaring at her with a man standing at her side. “Sanchez,” she said, her voice hoarse. “Gordon.”

“Aw, so you actually do remember your former colleagues,” the man Gordon said mockingly. “And here I thought we were just rubbish to be discarded in favour of your buddy Steve.”

Natasha blinked and swallowed. “The info dump.”

“Yeah, the info dump,” Sanchez said sarcastically. “The info dump that nearly got me killed and did get Gordon’s wife and kids killed.”

Natasha’s heart started hammering and she felt the adrenaline started to kick in. “I… didn’t know,” she said. The stammer and her nervousness were not entirely feigned.

“Bullshit,” Gordon spat. “You knew damn well you’d be putting a lot of good people… people who were horrified to find out that HYDRA had infiltrated us… in danger. You just didn’t give a shit. Too busy kissing Captain America’s ass. Too busy thinking that just because he liked you that made you a good person.”

Natasha flinched at that razor sharp assessment of her character but was unable to deny it. She had liked having Steve’s good opinion. She’d liked that he liked and respected her. It made her feel like she was doing something worthwhile.

It had made her feel like she was a good person.

And in a sharp flash of realisation that she wished she could forget, she knew why she’d turned on
Tony at the airport and thrown that bullshit about his ego in his face and why she’d let Steve go. Because no matter how much Tony might like her, he’d never trusted her. Not really. Not the way Steve did.

And Tony didn’t make her feel like a good person. Tony looked at her and she felt like he was assessing her and find her wanting. That he was measuring her current behaviour against her past behaviour and wondering whether to believe her, wondering whether she was lying to him… whether she was going to stab him in the neck again.

As if her thoughts of Tony Stark had been obvious, Sanchez leaned forward and glared at her.

“If it hadn’t been for Tony Stark, I’d be dead,” Sanchez hissed. “And you betrayed him… for Rogers.”

“Rogers wasn’t going to stop,” Natasha snapped.

Sanchez snorted. “Only because you didn’t try.” She sneered and turned away. “Why are we bothering? This one’s got her head shoved too far up her own ass to listen to anyone other than herself.”

“Entertainment? Besides, we can do things other than talk,” Gordon suggested, sending a smirk Natasha’s way. “They only said we had to capture her, they didn’t say what condition she had to be in when we turned her over.”

“Good point.” In one swift move, Sanchez stepped over and backhanded Natasha across the face, sending her head snapping to the side and splitting her lip. Sanchez then returned to Gordon and smirked. “You know what? I do feel better now.”

“Atta girl,” Gordon said dryly.

“So this is what you’ve sunk to,” Natasha sneered, feeling the blood drip down her chin.

Sanchez snorted. “Like you can talk. How many enemies did you torture… oh, sorry. Interrogate.”

“We’re not enemies.”

The moment the words were out of her mouth, Natasha knew they’d been the wrong thing to say. Gordon’s face darkened into something ugly and Sanchez looked like she was about two seconds from ripping Natasha’s face off.

“We became enemies the moment you decide your buddy Steve was more important than the people who you’d worked with for years,” Sanchez snarled.

“HYDRA…” Natasha began but she was cut off before she could say anymore.

“Do you know how many people in SHIELD were actually HYDRA?” Gordon growled, stepping closer. “Twelve percent. Almost all of them in the upper echelons or in support roles. There were maybe one or two active agents who were HYDRA. They didn’t recruit until someone was worth recruiting. Until they had some kind of power or position that made it worthwhile.”

Natasha paled. Twelve percent? It couldn’t have been that low.

“Most of the HYDRA bastards disappeared into the woodwork the moment they got wind of the info dump,” Sanchez said, looking at Natasha with contempt. “ Barely any of them were caught and instead you got a lot of us killed. Or worse.”
Natasha knew there were indeed worse things than being killed if you were caught spying, especially on an unfriendly foreign power. Being killed was actually the best case scenario if that happened. Dying was quick and clean. The other options were messy and painful and lingering.

“I’m not even going to bother asking why you did it,” Gordon said with open and obvious contempt. “Because I’m betting the answer is because Rogers said so and you’re apparently too enamoured with his pretty face…”

“Or is it his pretty dick she’s enamoured with?” Sanchez sneered. “I’ll bet he has a very pretty dick. A good old polite college boy’s dick. Just enough to jazz with but not enough to be offensive.”

Gordon snorted with amusement. “What is with your current obsession with dicks? You were assessing Stark’s dick the other day.”

“That’s what he gets for putting it on the internet,” Sanchez said with a flash of a grin.

“I don’t think he was the one to put it on the internet,” Gordon replied.

Sanchez waved a hand. “Semantics. Stark has a lovely dick and from all reports he knows how to use it well.” She smirked at Natasha. “Maybe you should have concentrated on sucking Stark’s dick instead of Rogers’. You might not be here right now.”

“Maybe she tried and Stark wouldn’t have her,” Gordon added.

“Could be,” Sanchez said knowingly. “He is a smart man after all.”

Natasha fumed silently, desperately wishing she could lash out either physically or verbally. The physical was impossible with the way they had her trussed up and the verbal… well, she might get somewhere with that but Gordon and Sanchez weren’t green agents who would be vulnerable to her blandishments. They were hardened and experienced. What’s more they were used to counteracting PsyOps. That had been part of their job in SHIELD. They were well aware of her skill set and clearly not inclined to listen to anything she had to say anyway. They were just as likely to put a bullet in her brain. Her best bet now was to wait until the handover with their contact, whoever that was. Handovers were always the best times to try to escape and if that didn’t work, she could always try her blandishments on her new captor.

As if she’d summoned them, there was a knock on the door. Gordon and Sanchez exchanged glances and Sanchez grinned as Gordon headed over to the door. She picked up a roll of duct tape and ripped a length of tape off the roll.

“Your ride’s here, Widow. I’m sure you’ll be delighted to see them,” Sanchez said as she placed the duct tape over Natasha’s mouth. She felt a frisson of apprehension run down her spine. Gordon and Sanchez were seemingly covering all the bases and erasing her opportunities to escape. She didn’t like that one bit.

Then Gordon ushered a rather urbane looking older man with salt and pepper hair into the room. For a moment Natasha couldn’t see who it was then he stepped in front of her and she paled, genuine fear flooding through her.

“Hello, Natalia,” the man said with an avuncular smile. His Russian accent was barely noticeable. “How lovely to see you again.”

Natasha could only stare at him and try to hide her fear. She’d been prepared for the UN or SHIELD or even the US government but not for her Red Room past to come back for her.
The man chuckled and turned to Gordon and Sanchez. “If I may… would you be so kind as to carry her out to the van I have procured? I don’t think it wise to disturb the excellent job you’ve done restraining her.”


“Of course, Mr Gordon. Once we are done with her, she will be handed over to the United Nations. Russia does like to be a good world citizen after all.”

Gordon shook hands with the man then he and Sanchez approached Natasha. As they did, her much-vaunted composure finally broke and she began to scream and thrash in her bonds.

It didn’t do any good.

Chapter End Notes

1. Yes, the 12% number is for the lulz since that's a recurring theme in the MCU. Also, the percentage of HYDRA in SHIELD can't have been very high otherwise I suspect Fury would have figured it out sooner and without almost getting killed. So I may be overestimating the 12%.

2. No, Sanchez and Gordon are not HYDRA. They were both SHIELD but Sanchez nearly got killed and Gordon's family were killed and they've been stewing in their anger and bitterness for a fair while. It hasn't been good for them. Also, they were SHIELD and SHIELD did prove that they weren't above using dodgy methods, even someone coded as 'good' like Coulson. (Threatening to taze a guy with a high tech pacemaker? Yeah, that's not at all dodgy.)

3. Yes, Russia will eventually hand over Natasha to the UN. After they've got what they want. This may or may not happen in this fic. I haven't decided yet.

4. Also, I will confess to flagrantly stealing the line about Steve's dick from Stephen King's _IT_. One of my favourite books. I haven't seen the movie yet. It's on my to do list.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

So, there's one more person we need to catch up with. If you remember, Scott Lang was having some serious second thoughts. Here's what he finally decides to do.

This is set at the same time as the ICC interviews with Tony and the others in Chapter 8.

Scott rubbed his forehead as he looked at the mass of paper on the desk in front of him. He hadn’t really thought about what reading the Accords might entail and he was thoroughly bogged down. From what the others had said, he’d thought they were only a few pages long and mostly consisted of ways for the government to control the Avengers but now that he looked at the tome sitting on the desk in front of him, he wondered where the hell they’d gotten that impression. And why he’d actually believed it in the first place. He’d never been involved in government stuff before but he had dealt with enough lawyers to know that any legal document was always as long and as wordy as the lawyers could possibly manage to make it. Sometimes he swore they got paid by the word.

He gathered up the copy of the Accords he’d been given and the copious notes he’d made about them and headed towards the main doors that blocked off access to their section of the palace. When he knocked politely, the doors were opened immediately by one of the guards outside.

“Um, hi,” he said to the woman staring at him with an unreadable expression. These women who guarded the doors – the Dora Mil-something, he thought they were called – scared the blue blazes out of him. He was pretty sure they could pick him up and break him over their knee whenever they damn well pleased and he really didn’t want to give them a reason to do so. He raised the papers he was carrying slightly. “I, uh… need some help. With this Accords stuff.”

He couldn’t read the expression that flickered over the woman’s face but then she was gesturing to him. “Come,” she said. “Princess Shuri left instructions that you were to be brought to her if you asked for assistance.”

Scott scurried along beside the guard. “Um, Princess Shuri? Are you sure we should be bothering someone that important with this? Shouldn’t I just speak to a lawyer or something?”

A faint look of approval flickered over the woman’s face but then she was gesturing to him. “Come,” she said. “Princess Shuri left instructions that you were to be brought to her if you asked for assistance.”

Scott scurried along beside the guard. “Um, Princess Shuri? Are you sure we should be bothering someone that important with this? Shouldn’t I just speak to a lawyer or something?”

A faint look of approval flickered over the woman’s face. “She already agreed to assist. Under the circumstances, it was felt someone of sufficient rank should do so.”

“Oh,” Scott said. He desperately wanted to ask what the ‘circumstances’ were but suspected that this woman wouldn’t answer him. He got the sudden and very alarming impression that he was actually in some very deep, very murky waters and he wasn’t that good a swimmer.

They moved into a more populated area of the palace and Scott quickly noticed that the looks directed at him… weren’t precisely unfriendly but they weren’t exactly friendly either. They did put his metaphorical hackles up and his sense of apprehension deepened. It didn’t get any better when they stopped in front of a very imposing door and the guard knocked on it.

“Come,” came the quick response from inside and Scott was ushered into the office.
It looked like any other office Scott had ever been in, except for the obvious Wakandan influence in the decorations and the view of the jungle through the large picture windows. Behind the desk sat a woman who looked just as intimidating as the guards, though when she looked at him, she smiled politely.

“Mr Lang, please sit down.” She gestured to one of the chairs in front of her desk. “I am Princess Shuri, King T’Challa’s sister. How may I help you?”

Scott hurriedly sat down, barely managing to avoid dropping his papers. He didn’t notice the guard leave the room. “Um,” he said, sort of shrugging his shoulders to bring attention to his burden. “I’m… getting a bit lost in the Accords. I understand a lot of it but it gets a bit… legalese in places and that’s where I’m lost.”

Princess Shuri’s smile warmed a little, much to his surprise. “We expected that might occur, which is why I agreed to make myself available. Where precisely are you running into difficulty?”

Scott juggled his papers, nearly dropping them, then Shuri stood. “Come,” she said. “There is a table we can use over here.”

Scott got up and joined her at the table over in one corner of the office with a sense of relief. He spread out his papers and picked up the first set.

“Well, I… kind of started with the clauses about how the Avengers can be used, since that’s what everyone was complaining about,” he said. “You know, that we’d be used as attack dogs or something.”

“I see,” Shuri said encouragingly.

“And, well, it started off okay but I’ve gotten bogged down here,” he put the papers down and splayed them out so she could see his notes.

Shuri looked over them and then opened the Accords to the clauses in question. “The legalese does get rather dense in places, doesn’t it? Simply put, the UN Accords Council does not control the Avengers. These clauses govern what the Council can and can’t do. These ones what the Avengers… or any other Enhanced being or superhero… can and can’t do and these final clauses are about what will happen in the event of emergencies, reviews, grievances and other such minutiae.”

They leaned in and Scott explained what he’d already worked out and what he didn’t understand. Shuri then explained those parts, often patiently repeating things three or four times with slightly different phrasing until Scott understood. Finally, he stood upright and frowned down at the Accords.

“So, there’s no way the Avengers could ever be used as attack dogs.”

“Only if they allowed themselves to be,” Shuri replied.

“Huh,” Scott said. “So Ross couldn’t have used the Avengers in any way?”

Shuri looked amused. “Of course not. Secretary Ross is not even a member of the United Nations General Assembly, let alone the Accords Council.”

“So why did Stark do what he did?” Scott asked with a frown. “Why bow to Ross’ wishes if Ross doesn’t actually have any power?”

“Dr Stark was in a rather tight spot,” Shuri said. “While he, Colonel Rhodes, the Vision and Ms
Romanov had certain protections from Ross given they had signed the Accords, none of the rest of the Avengers had the same. And as was said to my brother just this week, Secretary Ross is the kind of man who shoots first and says oops later. Dr Stark was attempting to appease Secretary Ross while trying to gain the same protections for the rest of his teammates, which obviously meant getting them to sign the Accords."

“Oh,” Scott said with understanding.

That actually made some sense and it also made him wonder why Steve and the others hadn’t signed. One of the other clauses that had been in pretty plain English was the one that said that all signatories of the Accords had the right to propose amendments and that superheroes had the right to stand down if they felt that their rights were being infringed by the clause or clauses they were trying to get amended. In fact, if a superhero actually did that, the whole process was expedited and the hearing about the amendment had to be held within forty-eight hours. And Captain America standing down would have sent a pretty powerful message. Before anyway. Not so much now.

“So this thing with the ICC…?” Scott began. “It’s for real?”

“It is,” Shuri confirmed. “In fact, the members of the New Avengers who were involved are being interviewed by the ICC investigators today. My brother is going to the Netherlands for his interview tomorrow.”

Scott was actually startled. It somehow hadn’t occurred to him that the other side would really be interviewed. He’d thought it might be some kind of witch hunt or kangaroo court but if Stark and even King T’Challa were being interviewed then it had to be a genuine investigation. He winced. One that… he was probably not going to fair very well in when he thought about what he’d done at the airport.

“We’re in trouble, aren’t we?” he said soberly. “Us, I mean. Not you. The… ExVengers. That’s what they’re calling us, isn’t it?”

“Team Cap is the other term,” Shuri supplied then she nodded. “And yes, you and the rest of your teammates have broken a large number of laws. No matter what your reasons are, no matter if there is any justification behind them, that fact does not change.”

Scott nodded. Yeah, he got that. That was exactly the same thing that had landed him in prison for the Vista job. Most people congratulated him for what he did, feeling he had meted out a certain amount of justice for Vista’s shady dealings. But the fact remained that he had broken the law. He’d known that when he’d planned the job, when he’d carried it out and afterwards when he’d been arrested. In fact, his willingness to plead guilty and save everyone the trouble of a trial that would just prove him guilty anyway had earned him a lighter sentence.

It occurred to him that he was, right now, in exactly the same situation. Except he wasn’t on his own this time though. If he turned himself in, what effect would it have on the others? He’d never been a snitch in prison. Did he really want to start now? He frowned as he weighed that with the possible consequences of not turning himself in now that he knew what was happening. He could probably kiss his chances of ever seeing Cassie again goodbye. They weren’t great right now but at least if he stood up and took responsibility for his actions and didn’t try any lame excuses, he might have a slim chance of gaining favour with Maggie. Not that he really wanted Cassie seeing him in prison but… well, that ship had already sailed.

With all of that in mind, the decision was actually pretty easy. He didn’t really know the people he was with, he didn’t really know why they’d done what they’d done – which was his fault, he’d admit that – and they’d lead him into something which had definitely not been in the brochure when
they’d recruited him. Even just the possibility of seeing Cassie again trumped any loyalty he might have held towards them. Part of him felt like it had died just to think that but he’d had a lot of time over the last few weeks to think about his priorities and sacrificing himself on someone else’s altar wasn’t one of them.

“Um, Your Highness?” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “I think I’ve made a mistake.”

“Oh?” Shuri said, raising an eyebrow.

“I didn’t really know what I was getting into when I said yes,” Scott admitted, feeling a bit stupid admitting that out loud. “I guess I was just a bit star struck by… you know, Captain America asking me for help and I…”

Shuri cocked her head slightly. “Yes?”

If she had been one of the panthers her people so revered, she’d would have been utterly still with just the end of her tail twitching. This was all being recorded, of course, both to provide evidence for Wakanda’s continuing good intentions and to ensure that Lang couldn’t later claim to have been coerced or had his words taken out of context. And they needed Lang to actually say the words out loud. They couldn’t allow his intentions to be simply implied.

Scott drew in a deep breath and squared his shoulder. Cassie. He was doing this for Cassie. He owed her everything and these guys nothing. He had to remember that. “I’d like to turn myself in.”

The smile Shuri gave him actually made him feel a little proud, which was odd but he wasn’t going to argue with it. It made the squiggly guilty feeling in his stomach go away a little.

“I am glad you have come to that conclusion,” Shuri said. The smile slipped off her face and she gave him a serious look. “You are aware that even by turning yourself in, you will not be able to escape the consequences of your actions?”

Scott nodded. “Yeah, I know. But we’ve made a mistake. I haven’t finished reading all of this…” He waved his hand at the Accords. “But I know that much at least. And…” He sighed and looked at Shuri with a miserable, rueful smile. “If I do this, my ex-wife might one day forgive me enough to let me see my daughter again. If I don’t, there’s not a chance in hell that will ever happen. Cassie means more to me than anything, even if I haven’t been very good at showing that.”

“You cannot change the decisions you made in the past,” Shuri said. “But you can, at least, show that you will do better in the future.”

“Yeah,” Scott said. “That. You made it sound much nobler. Can I use that? It makes me sound like I’m not a complete idiot.”

Shuri laughed and waved him back over to her desk. “You may. Now, we have to work out the best way of handling this. I think, for starters, it might be best to move you out of the wing the others are staying in. You will be discussing many things with lawyers and representatives from the Accords Council so it would be wise not to put you in danger from your… teammates.”

Scott grimaced. “Yeah. Barton’s been pretty volatile on the few occasions I’ve gone out and they’ve been around. I’m pretty sure he’d kill me if he found out what I’m doing.”

It gave him a few second thoughts but then he put Cassie’s face in the forefront of his mind. He suspected he was going to be doing that a lot.

“I will instruct the Dora Milaje to fetch your belongings quietly and we will put you…” She paused
and thought for a moment. “I think we will put you in the Royal wing. I will have an apartment cleared. It will contain only the bare necessities and you will be guarded at all times.” She focussed on him. “You understand why?”

Scott nodded. “I’m a prisoner. The Royal wing is safe from the others but I still have to be a prisoner.” He grimaced and reluctantly said, “Wouldn’t it be better to… put me in a cell?”

“Perhaps,” Shuri said. “But a prison is an obvious target.”

Scott frowned then he realised what the princess was saying. If his… teammates thought he was being held prisoner and decided he was worth breaking out, they’d be looking for him in a prison, not in the Royal wing.

“The apartment will also be better suited to the number of people you will likely have coming to speak to you,” Shuri added. “They can come to you and will be able to see that you are contained and guarded.”

Scott nodded then his eyes widened. “Oh! The suit. The Ant-Man suit. It’s in my room. Could you… see that it gets back to Hank and Hope? I’m guessing that would be a good start.”

“It would be a very good start,” Shuri said. “Now, have you read the clauses in the Accords that cover law breaking, reviews and such like.”

“Uh, no,” Scott said. “Would I be covered by them? I didn’t sign.” Shuri raised an eyebrow at him and he smiled wryly. “I guess I’m signing the Accords as well.”

“You don’t have to but it would be wise,” Shuri replied.

“Right.” Scott sighed. “So about these clauses?”

Shuri got to her feet and waved him back over to the table. She diverted via the door to speak to one of the Dora Milaje standing guard outside then she joined him and they bent their heads over the Accords once more. This time Scott was definitely paying attention. His future depended on it.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

One last little look at what other people are doing before we go back to Tony and find out what he's up to. This time, we see what's happening with the ICC and how they react to the ExVengers' statements.

“We cannot publish these,” Carine Strand said as she stormed into Dorn’s office.

Michel Dorn looked up from the report he was reading with a raised eyebrow. Someone who didn’t know him might assume he was annoyed at the interruption but Carine knew him well enough to see the amusement.

“And why is that?”

Carine waved the print outs of the statements they’d received from the ExVengers. “We’d be accused of creating forgeries and trying to undermine the rogues.”

Dorn set his report aside and leaned back in his chair. “And why is that?” he repeated, his amusement more obvious now.

“These statements make them sound delusional,” Carine replied, much of her indignation draining out of her. She dropped into the chair in front of the desk and held them out to Dorn. He took them and started skimming. It didn’t take long before he looked back up at her with a startled look.

“We are sure these are from the rogues?”

Carine nodded. “King T’Challa confirmed it. He told them that the email addresses he gave them were completely secure and could not be traced but of course his people are monitoring them. He even went the extra mile and got his people to check the actual computers they used to ensure they really typed them up themselves.”

Dorn looked back at the reports and read a bit more. He frowned. “Is Mr Rogers implying that the UN is a government?”

“Uhuh. And a corrupt one at that,” Carine said. She winced. “The Assembly’s going to love seeing that bit. And if you think his is bad, try Maximoff’s. That woman is rewriting history with every word.”

Dorn picked out the Sokovian woman’s statement and skimmed it. His eyebrows rose higher as he did and he shook his head. He riffled through the rest of the statements and looked over at Carine.

“We’re missing one.”

“Two actually,” Carine replied. “Lang is turning himself in. Princess Shuri is making sure he knows exactly what the Accords say before he goes any further or speaks to a lawyer or any of us so he’s neck deep in that at the moment. If all goes well, we’ll get a far better statement from him simply by exercising a little patience than if we demand one now.”
“Good,” Dorn said. “And the other one we’re missing?”

“Romanov.” Carine grimaced. “There’s been no sign of her. We asked Rhodes and Stark when we were in the US and they haven’t heard from her or seen her. King T’Challa reported that she certainly hasn’t tried to breach the borders of Wakanda. She’s in the wind somewhere and seemingly not inclined to surface any time soon.”

“Hmm, odd,” Dorn said. “Have our people make inquiries wherever and with whomever they can. Ask Dr Stark and Colonel Rhodes to do the same. After her display in Washington DC after the fall of SHIELD, she doesn’t strike me as the kind of woman who would simply let this pass without trying to manipulate things in her favour.”

Carine nodded then she waved the statements. “What about these?”

“We will make a public appeal for the rogues to come forward and allow us to ask further questions,” he said. The amusement returned to his face. “Unfortunately, Carine, we cannot force anyone to make sense.”

“But you can’t make decisions based on statements that are so far from reality, can you?” Carine said with a frown.

“Yes and no,” Dorn replied. “In many ways, I have to take their statements as their version of events as they saw them. I can also have them assessed by a psychologist to give me some idea of what their state of mind might be.” He smiled fondly at her. “Carine, you know that witnesses can be unreliable. Ask twelve people what they saw and you’ll get twelve different versions of what happened with no guarantee that they are actually even remotely accurate.”

Carine relaxed and smiled wryly. “I know.”

“We have plenty of forensic evidence as well,” he continued. “Including CCTV footage and the recordings from the Iron Man and War Machine suits.” He paused. “Incidentally, has Dr Stark agreed to forward us the vision from the Iron Man suit from Siberia?”

Carine grimaced. Marco had briefed her on what Stark had said off the record and she’d been appalled. She’d then set that aside. She could be horrified in her own time. On the job, she was objective.

“He has,” she said. “It arrived this morning.”

“Good. Make sure no one other than myself and your team sees it.” Dorn sobered and frowned. “I have no intention of breaking my word to Dr Stark.”

Carine nodded. “Marco said he understood the necessity of telling you, even if he didn’t like it.”

“A pragmatic decision.” Dorn set the statements down on his desk. “I know the statements trouble you but whatever charges arise out of them, they will get their chance to challenge them in the right place – court.”

Carine sighed and rubbed her forehead. “How many of them are actually going to make it to court? I mean, Maximoff sounds insane.”

“They will be assessed,” Dorn said. He riffled through the statements again and raised an eyebrow at Carine. “And what about Sergeant Barnes?”

“He’s gone back into cryosleep, according to King T’Challa,” Carine replied. She hesitated for a
moment. “You want his statement as well?”

Dorn contemplated that question. “Yes, though perhaps not just yet. According to Mr Clements of
the Accords Council, the rogues are planning some mischief. If Sergeant Barnes is out of cryosleep,
no doubt he will be dragged into it. So let’s leave him there until the rogues are sorted out. For his
sake and ours.”

Carine nodded. “He’d have to be tried separately anyway. His case…” She sighed. “That’s going to
be messy, even without knowing the details of what was done to him.”

Dorn nodded and leaned back in his chair. “That is true. A good lawyer will undoubtedly argue
diminished responsibility for his actions as the Winter Soldier… with some justification, it must be
said.”

“He wouldn’t be acquitted, surely,” Carine said, her frown deepening.

“unlikely,” Dorn replied. “But it would see him most likely sent to receive the appropriate treatment
in a suitable secure facility rather than sent to prison. I certainly wouldn’t argue against that too
strenuously.” He sighed. “No, it’s his actions in Bucharest, Leipzig/Halle and Siberia that will make
this very complicated. He was not, according to all reports we have seen, the Winter Soldier at those
places and during the events that took place there.”

“Makes the cases against the others look simple in comparison,” Carine said with a sympathetic
smile.

“Without a doubt,” Dorn replied. “They broke laws. Those laws can be defined and their actions
detailed with evidence to support it. Simple. The only question is what their defence will be.”

Carine raised an eyebrow. “If their statements are anything to go by? We know best. We’re better
than you. And the UN is corrupt so we shouldn’t listen to them.”

“They are making my job much easier than it could have been,” Dorn said with a smile. “If they
actually had some legitimate reasons why they broke all those laws, I might have had a challenge on
my hands.”

“I’m inclined to think it’s not about the Accords,” Carine said dryly. “Based on their statements, I
don’t think any of them actually know what’s in the Accords.”

“Which also makes my job easier,” Dorn said. “I can prosecute them solely based on the laws they
broke. I don’t need to bring up the Accords.”

Carine nodded then ran a hand down her face briefly. “Oh, Lagos’ Chief of Police is coming in
tomorrow to discuss the incident there with us.”

Dorn nodded. “What time?”

“He’s due at ten.”

“Good. I have meetings tomorrow morning but I’ll make the time to drop in and meet him.”

“He says he’s bringing plans with him,” Carine said, arching an eyebrow at Dorn.

Dorn looked surprised for a moment. “Plans? Then the rumours are true? They knew about
Rumlow?”
“I’m assuming so,” Carine said. “No one in their government has denied those rumours whenever they’ve been asked, even if they haven’t strictly confirmed them either.”

“Well, that should make things interesting,” Dorn said with a chuckle. “It’s surprising they haven’t gone public about it.”

“Apparently the Chief of Police is being accompanied by a couple of Generals from Nigeria’s military,” Carine continued. “I can’t get any indication as to precisely why but interestingly enough, there are some military officials from about half a dozen countries in The Hague for some sort of unofficially official NATO meeting.”

“How curious,” Dorn said dryly. “Their timing is impeccable.”

“I suspect it might be to our advantage to make ourselves available for any other meetings that might conveniently pop up,” Carine said equally as dryly.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Dorn said. He leaned back in his chair and picked up the statements Carine had brought. “Back to this... I know you’re concerned about them but they won’t be the be all and end all. If the charges that are levied due to the statements prove to be erroneous, we’ll have them struck out.”

Carine grimaced then nodded. “Alright. Oh, Arabella and Ellie are heading back to the States tomorrow to interview Spider-Man.”

“Ah yes,” Dorn replied, his interest clearly piqued. “Dr Stark has been hedging around that interview, hasn’t he? Not to mention the entire question of who Spider-Man is.”

Carine nodded. “My suspicion is Spider-Man is underage. The airport CCTV footage doesn’t have audio but the Iron Man and War Machine footage does. He certainly sounds young.”

Dorn sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Please ask Ms Seeger and Ms Delafont-Bogard to make an appointment to speak to Dr Stark while they are there. If Spider-Man is underage, I would like an explanation as to why Dr Stark brought him along.”

Carine looked amused. “They’ve already requested that Dr Stark be present at the interview. If Spider-Man is underage, we will need an adult present anyway.”

“Excellent,” Dorn said with an approving look. “Though ultimately, since Spider-Man is clearly a superhero and enhanced, it is more of an issue for the Accords Council and Spider-Man’s parents than one for the International Criminal Court.”

“Do the Accords actually cover underage superheroes?” Carine asked.

“Dr Stark has raised the matter with the Council and it is being discussed,” Dorn replied. “It is a complicated issue but one that does need a solution. We cannot expect every enhanced person to be an adult going into the future.”

“That sounds like a nightmare,” Carine said with a shake of her head. She got to her feet. “But as you say, not really something we have to worry about.”

“Unless they break the law,” Dorn said with a smile.

Carine laughed and headed back out of the office. Dorn picked up the statement and started reading them properly, something that was punctuated by numerous shakes of his head, disbelieving noises and a great deal of note-taking.
Tony leaned back in his chair and looked at the screens scattered around him. When Betty had said she had plenty of information that could be used to bring Ross down, she hadn’t been kidding. There was stuff here dating all the way back to the original experiments that resulted in Bruce becoming the Hulk. Some of it was things Tony had already dug up but the rest of it… he stared and shook his head. He didn’t know how Betty had gotten hold of some of it but it was dynamite.

“Hey, FRI? Can you ask Betty if she can come here?”

“Sure thing, boss!”

Tony smiled fondly then turned to looked at the visual representation of the sound file FRIDAY had dug out of the information from Ross’ little foray into Rio de Janeiro to try and nab Bruce. He felt so proud of his girl FRIDAY when he looked at that sound file. It had been some ambient noise picked up by the soldiers’ microphones in their com units but FRIDAY had heard something more in it and isolated it, amplified it then played it for him. That sort of initiative and intelligence meant she was growing fast. He was so proud.

He poked the file and played it. The voice was deep and rumbling and very familiar. “Leave me alone.”

“Was that the Hulk?”

Tony swivelled around on his chair to look at Betty, who was frozen in the doorway, her eyes wide.
“Yup,” he said. “FRI found it. It’s from Rio.”

“Leave me alone,” Betty echoed softly as she came further into the room.

“Jolly green’s not a mindless monster,” Tony said. “But you already know that.”

“I do.” Betty smiled and perched on one of the stools. “So what did you need?”

Tony waved a hand at the screens surrounding him. “Where the hell did you get half of this? Some of it is classified up the wazoo.”

Betty’s expression was almost guilelessly innocent but there was mischief gleaming in her eyes as she answered. “From the General’s home computer.”

Tony stared at her then began to smile. “Uh… details would be good.”

“I got most of this before the General retired,” Betty said, her amusement obvious. “He was still living in the same house I grew up in. I snuck in and out of that house so many times that it was no hardship to do it again. Though technically I didn’t have to, I suppose, since I still have a key that he has never asked to have back and he’s never forbidden me from the house. It was just more fun to sneak in and back out again.” She shrugged. “And the General is… not particularly computer savvy. He’s still using the same password he used when I was a teenager.”

“You are a very devious woman,” Tony said, his smile widening into a grin. “I’m glad you’re on my side.” He hesitated for a moment. “I just wanted to check though… are you sure you want to do this? Once the ball starts rolling, there’ll be no turning back. And with all of this…” He waved at the holograms and computer screens. “He’s likely going to face a prison sentence, no matter what kind of favours he calls in. The illegal experimentation alone is enough for that.”

Betty was silent for a moment. “I’m sure,” she said finally.

“You’ll have to testify.”

“I’m willing to do that.”

Tony nodded. “Okay, then. FRI, add this to the stuff we already had and contact that government lawyer.”

“You got it, boss,” FRIDAY said.

Betty sighed and leaned one elbow on the bench. “It’s going to be a mess, isn’t it?”

“That it is.” Tony grimaced. “It would actually be easier if we could get Bruce to testify as well but… I genuinely can’t find him.”

Betty looked surprised. “Well… he’s always been good at hiding.”

“It’s not that,” Tony said with a shake of his head. “I mean, I believe you but no matter how good he is, FRIDAY would have been able to find him by now.”

Betty clasped both hands tightly together. “Do you… do you think he’s… dead?”

“No,” Tony said with confidence. “I think he’s alive. And with the news I received today, I… think I know where he is. Sort of. Maybe.” He waved his hand and brought up a new file before sending it over to a screen in front of Betty. “I traced him to Thailand then I lost him. But… there were reports of a disturbance in the night just outside the village I tracked him to. There’s an SI office in Bangkok.
so I sent a couple of local people out to the village. The people there weren’t much for talking but what they did say was that there was a light from the sky and a mark burned into the ground. They refused to describe the mark and they’d already dug it up and destroyed it.”

“So, who has him?” Betty asked.

“Well…” Tony frowned. “My first thought was Asgard since that description sounds a lot like the way Thor comes and goes via the Bifrost. But I’ve, uh…” He looked a little embarrassed then he smiled sheepishly at Betty. “Thor’s said a couple of times that Heimdall watches all, including those of us on Midgard, and we could always contact him via Heimdall in an emergency. So I’ve been… trying to get Heimdall’s attention for the last few days. And, boy, do I feel like an idiot saying that. Anyway. No go. Either he’s not paying attention, I’m not worthy of his attention or… I don’t know.”

Betty leaned forward with a frown. “You said that was your first thought.”

“Yes,” Tony said, running a hand through his hair. “If it was Thor who came to get Bruce for some reason, I can’t believe that Bruce wouldn’t have sent some sort of message to me.” He smiled wryly. “I’m pretty sure he knows I’m keeping an eye on him.”

“You think it was someone else?”

“Yeah.” Tony threw his hands up. “I just don’t know who. Or why. Or where he might have gone.” Betty looked at him for a moment. “You’re worried.”

“Yeah,” Tony admitted with a sigh. “I mean, I know jolly green is pretty much indestructible but…”

Betty nodded and he could see the worry in her eyes as well. “Yeah.”

Silence fell and they stared at each other, the screens and even the floor for a while. Then Tony cleared his throat and sat up.

“Right. Enough of that.” He pointed at Betty. “Your father. You ready to testify against him?”

Betty drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Yes. I…” She grimaced. “I can’t say I’m going to like it but… it’s been a long time coming.”

Tony nodded but before he could say anything, FRIDAY spoke up. “Boss? You have a call from Grant Lawson.”

“Put it through,” he said with a wave of his hand. “He’s the lawyer I’ve been talking to,” he added, sotto voce to Betty. She nodded but didn’t say anything as a man’s voice was heard on the other end of the line.

“Dr Stark? It’s Grant Lawson. I, er… this is quite the bombshell you’ve thrown at me.”

Tony smirked. “Isn’t it just.”

There was a sigh at the other end of the line. “Please tell me you got all of this legally.”

“He didn’t. I did,” Betty said.

“Who’s that?”

“Dr Elizabeth Ross.”
Silence greeted that then Lawson cleared his throat. “Dr Ross. I see. How did you get this information?”

“Some of it is mine from the work I did for my father,” Betty said, grimacing briefly. “The rest I retrieved from my father’s computer. I had full access to his home at the time.”

“Right,” Lawson said dryly. “Okay. I can work with that. Are you willing to testify about the… experiments involving Dr Banner?”

“Yes,” Betty said firmly.

“And about the… events surrounding the… creation of the Abomination?”

“Yes,” she said again.

“Okay, good,” Lawson said. “I don’t suppose Dr Banner is willing to testify?”

Betty and Tony exchanged looks and Tony leaned forward. “We can try to find him and ask but I’d plan for things without him there. If we find him and he’s willing then that’s an added bonus.”

Lawson sighed. “Yeah, okay.” There was a momentary pause. “What about the Abomination? Blonsky? Do think there’s a chance he’d be willing to testify?”

“I don’t even know where he’s being held,” Betty replied, sounding baffled. “I couldn’t find it in any of the stuff I gave you.”

“The Abomination is being held in a secure facility in Nevada. At least, he was the last I knew,” Tony added. “But from what I’ve heard, he’s even less of a talker than the Hulk is. And he either can’t or won’t transform back into Blonsky.”

“So that’s a dead end,” Lawson said with a sigh. “Alright. I’ll work with what I have. More may come to light once we get the ball rolling. I’ll have to go to the Attorney General and I am going to have to speak to you, Dr Ross, about the attempted kidnapping.”

“Of course,” Betty said. “Whenever you want.”

“I’ll have my office contact you.” Lawson cleared his throat. “Anyway, thank you for the bombshell, Dr Stark. I’ll be in touch.”

“You’re welcome,” Tony said wryly before the line went dead. He looked over at Betty. “Well, there it is.”

Betty sighed and nodded then smiled at Tony’s obvious concern. “I’ll be fine. I hate that it’s come to this but…” She shook her head. “There are limits and I think even my mother would agree he’s gone way past them this time.”

They fell silent again and just stared at all the information displayed on the screens around them. Finally Tony shook himself into motion, causing Betty to give a start.

“This is all very maudlin but I have a better idea of how we can waste our time,” he said with a clap of his hands. He grinned at Betty and pointed a finger at her. “Stretchy pants. Jumbo size.”

Betty started laughing. “Only if we make them in purple.”

Tony laughed as well. “Deal.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The Russians make a discovery at the Siberian base that is not going to make Tony happy. Tony then has a great terrible... Tony has an idea. Time will tell what kind of idea it is.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The last thing Rhodes was expecting was a phone call from the Russian contingent at the Siberian HYDRA base. The New Avengers were very firmly staying out of that investigation, though the Accords Council had agreed to send a copy of any data they found to Tony, Betty and Hope to see what they could make of it. Rhodes knew Betty and Hope had started looking at the first lot of data that had come in but he wasn’t sure about Tony.

Still, being told by FRIDAY that there was a phone call for him, rather than Tony, from a General Salinsky was a surprise and after everything that had happened lately, Rhodes was filled with trepidation as he eased himself down into the seat behind his new desk, the servos in his leg braces whirring. He drew in a breath then picked up the phone. FRIDAY put the call through immediately.

“General Salinsky? This is Colonel James Rhodes.”

“Ah, Colonel Rhodes.” Salinsky’s Russian accented English had an air of strained joviality about it that made Rhodes’ metaphorical hackles stand on end. “It’s a pleasure to speak to you, though I wish it were under better circumstances.”

“Better circumstances?” Rhodes said carefully. “Have there been more Winter Soldiers discovered?”

“No, thankfully,” the General said. He hesitated for a moment. “No, this is… perhaps both less serious and more serious. My men have been puzzling over a series of odd marks on the walls of the base. They didn’t seem to be very old but they couldn’t quite place what they were. This morning, one of my men finally solved the puzzle.”

He paused and Rhodes barely managed to contain a frustrated noise.

“Go on, General.”

“Cameras. Little, tiny, portable cameras that had been suction mounted onto the walls and then removed.” The General paused. “Whatever happened here between Dr Stark and Rogers and Barnes was recorded, Colonel Rhodes. It seems that HYDRA is not as dead as we all might wish.”

“Son of a bitch!” Rhodes bit out then he dragged his temper back under control. “My apologies, sir.”

“Think nothing of it, Colonel,” General Salinsky said with wry humour. “I said much worse when I realised the implications of this.” He paused again. “HYDRA will not keep those videos secret forever, Colonel. It would be best to prepare Dr Stark for that inevitability.”

Rhodes was silent for a moment. “I… confess to being surprised that the Russians would care. I
thought you weren’t that happy with him right now.”

“We would have liked to have been warned about the Winter Soldiers lurking right under our noses, it is true,” Salinsky said. “However, he has signed the Accords. We can respect that. And if we wish to ask for the New Avengers’ assistance with matters in our country or with training our own team of superheroes, we would do well not to alienate either Dr Stark or yourself by allowing this to be an unpleasant surprise.”

That rather self-serving reasoning was actually what made Rhodes believe what the General had said.

“That’s… a fair point,” he said.

“We are not entirely without care for the rest of the world, Colonel,” the General said, his jovial manner returning.

They spoke for a few more minutes about the progress that was being made in the base then the General hung up and Rhodes did the same. He leaned back in his chair and stared unseeingly at the opposite wall. This was not good and Tony was going to hate it but Rhodes couldn’t see any way they could stop this from happening. HYDRA apparently had not only the video of the assassination of Howard and Maria Stark but they had actual video evidence of what had happened in the base. Rhodes knew it wasn’t so much a question of if they would release those videos as when they would do it. Whose reputation did they want to try and damage more – Tony or Rogers? Theoretically, from what Tony had told them, the videos should point sympathy towards Tony but whether that actually happened would depend on if or how they were edited.

He sighed and pushed himself upright, balancing himself against the desk until he was stable. Once he was sure of his footing, he headed for Tony’s workshop. There was no point putting this off.

When he got down to the workshop, he could hear the pounding of Tony’s music even through the soundproof glass. He tapped in his code and the door opened smoothly. The music immediately dropped in volume and Tony looked up and around, smiling when he saw Rhodey.

“Sugarplum! What brings you down here? The braces working okay?”

“Yeah, they’re fine, Tones,” Rhodey said as he walked over. “I’ve got some… bad news.”

Tony immediately put down the tool he had in his hand and swivelled around to face him properly. His expression was sober and just a little apprehensive. “What’s up? Rogers and his group…?”

Rhodey shook his head and decided not to try and sugarcoat this. Tony wouldn’t appreciate it and it would just drag out an unpleasant conversation.

“The Russian General in charge of the examination of the Siberian bunker contacted me,” he said. “They found signs that there were portable cameras in the bunker. There’s video of everything that happened between you, Rogers and Barnes so either HYDRA is more active than we thought and knew what was going on or Zemo’s plan was more in-depth than anyone expected. Either way, we can’t discount that it includes releasing those videos.”

Tony paled and sat down heavily on his stool. He swallowed hard. “Is he sure?”

Rhodey nodded and closed the gap between them. He leaned against the bench and let Tony lean in against him, seeking comfort.

“Yeah, he’s sure,” Rhodey said with a sigh. “They’ve apparently been puzzling over some marks on
the walls since they got there and one of the General’s men just figured out what they were.”

“Shit.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Rhody paused for a moment. “What do you want to do?”

Tony snorted. “What can I do? You know what the internet is like. You put something up there, it’s there forever, especially something like this which is probably going to go viral in a millisecond. I probably could take it all down but not fast enough to stop people seeing it.”

Rhody had been thinking about that all the way down to the lab. “Maybe they should see it?” Tony looked askance at him and he hurriedly continued. “I know, Tones. It’s personal and you don’t want them to see it and I agree but… it’s out of our hands now. If we try to remove it, it looks like we’re covering something up. We let it be seen and… well, unless they edit it, you’re the victim and it’ll show that, right?”

Tony shifted uncomfortably then pressed against Rhody’s side some more. “Maybe,” he said reluctantly. “I… did throw the first punch though.”

“After you’d watched your parents murdered by the man who was in the room with you and after Rogers had lied to your face,” Rhody replied. “The only people who wouldn’t have sympathy for you there are either stupid or Cap fanboys. Not worth listening to in either case.”

Tony snorted. “I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I,” Rhody admitted. “But we can’t stop them.”

Tony scrubbed his face with both hands. “Okay, so… we talk to Pepper and the PR department at SI. Get some sort of press release ready. Then… wait?”

“Not much more we can do,” Rhody said.

As he watched, Tony froze and his attention turned completely inwards. Rhody waited patiently. He’d seen this before and it always resulted in an idea that was either utterly brilliant… or utterly insane. The line was pretty thin between those two and Rhody hadn’t always been able to tell which the idea was until he and Tony were sitting in a holding cell waiting for Edwin Jarvis to come and bail them out. It was always Edwin Jarvis, at least until he passed away. Neither of them had ever wanted Howard Stark, Obadiah Stane or worse, Rhody’s Mama to be the one to do that. Jarvis just tsked at them and got them out. The others… Rhody shuddered at the thought, even now.

“Zemo,” Tony finally said.

Rhody blinked at the apparent non-sequitur and frowned. “What about him?”

“Maybe he can tell us what kind of videos are going to be released.”

Rhody stared at Tony blankly. “Uh, you want to ask the guy who caused all that shit in Siberia whether or not he’s going to hang you out to dry?”

Tony nodded slowly. “Yeah, I do. And I think he’ll give me an honest answer.”

Rhody swallowed down his first reaction, which was to call the whole idea crazy, and crossed his arms over his chest. “Okay… why?”

“Because I don’t think he was ever after me,” Tony replied. He grimaced. “He used me. Used my
parents’ deaths. But I don’t think I was ever his target. I was just... convenient. He wanted to tear the Avengers down using Rogers, not me.”

“Why though?” Rhodey said, frowning. “He’s Sokovian, right? That’s what he was pissed off about. All of the Avengers were involved in the shit that went down in Sokovia. Why target Rogers in particular?”

“I don’t know,” Tony replied. “But I’d like to ask him.”

Rhodey sighed. “Tony...”

Tony waved a hand. “Yeah, yeah. I know all the arguments you’ve got about why this is a phenomenally bad idea and I don’t actually disagree. But I still think he’ll tell me.”

Rhodey gave him a long look. “You’re going to do this whether I agree or not, aren’t you?”

“Probably,” Tony said with a wry smile.

Rhodey sighed. “Yeah, okay, but I’m coming with you. I don’t trust that bastard.” He paused and looked thoughtful. “And hell, I suppose I’ve got a question for him too.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” Rhodey said. “Like, how the hell did he know Rogers hadn’t told you?”

Tony quirked an eyebrow and looked intrigued, if slightly uncomfortable. “Yeah, that’s a damn good question. Let’s ask him.”

Chapter End Notes

This is kind of a cliffhanger, isn’t it? Ooops!
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Tony and Rhodey have a chat with Zemo. It goes... well, it goes. Zemo doesn't lie to them but his answers aren't exactly what they wanted to hear. Then.... the videos come out, everyone and their dog has an opinion on them and thanks to Betty and Peter, Tony ends up being teased relentlessly, which is way better than having to deal with the videos.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the birthday wishes and the comments. I'm sorry I didn't get around to answering all of them but I was a bit busy last weekend and through the week.

Also, I'm sort of assuming that Spider-Man: Homecoming happened somewhere in the background. I haven't seen it (*gasp* I know! What am I doing????) but I've seen a lot of gifs on tumblr from it so I'm going to kind of handwave that it's kinda sorta happened in the background somewhere.

Oh, and next week, we find out what Christine Everhart has been up to... Oooooh!!

Zemo sat at the cold metal table, his expression placid. He smiled politely as Tony and Rhodey walked into the room and gestured with one of his shackled hands for them to sit. It had taken some convincing of both the Accords Council and the Joint Counter Terrorism Centre to allow them to speak to Zemo and it had finally only been permitted if the conversation was monitored and recorded. Given the Council and the JCTC had both been informed about the possibility of the Siberia videos by the Russians, Tony and Rhodey had agreed.

“Dr Stark. Colonel Rhodes,” Zemo said with a nod of his head. “I will admit that I was surprised to hear you wished to talk to me. I do hope it won’t be more tiresome invective.”

Tony wasn’t sure how he felt when he looked at Zemo. He wanted to hate him, to blame him for Siberia at the very least but when he looked at it objectively, all Zemo did in Siberia was show him the truth. Which, frankly, put him one up on Rogers and wasn’t that just the darndest thing.

“Nah, I’m over that,” Tony said, leaning back in his chair casually. “I just had a couple of questions.”

Zemo looked curious and gestured for Tony to continue. “By all means, ask away. I know I will be going to prison for the rest of my life. What reason do I have to conceal anything anymore?”

Tony decided to usurp Rhodey’s question first of all because he had to admit that the more time he’d had to think about it, the more curious he’d become. He doubted Rhodey would mind and he knew his friend would be quick on the uptake. “How did you know Rogers hadn’t told me about my parents’ murders?”
Zemo smiled faintly, looking distinctly unsurprised at the question. “I was watching the Avengers for a long time before I took action, Dr Stark. There was Captain America, scurrying here and there, all round the world, searching under every bushel and bucket and bale for his friend. His actions made perfect sense. For a long time, yours did not. You did… nothing in regards to Sergeant Barnes. You did not grieve for your parents, you did not rage, you did not search, you did not confront Captain America, you certainly did not stymie his search. In fact, you did nothing out of the ordinary. It took me longer than I care to admit to realise why that must be. That you simply did not know, that Captain America was concealing the truth from you. I entirely misjudged the depth of Steven Rogers’ cruelty.”

Tony shuddered and Zemo gave him a sympathetic look. “I know I too was cruel and I do apologise for that,” he said with a strange sort of gentleness in his voice. “I could pontificate and say that it was a form of kindness to tell you that which Rogers was concealing from you but I did not do it to be kind. I used the video as a weapon. I used you as a weapon. I will admit to that. I do feel some regret at causing you such pain. We are alike in that way – the loss of our families having permanently marked us. But at least you know now who and what Steven Rogers truly is. What measure of a man he is.”

“Yeah, thanks for that,” Tony said sourly as he rubbed unconsciously at his chest.

Rhodey gave him a worried look then picked up the questioning. “You were recording everything.”

His blunt statement – not a question at all – actually broke through Zemo’s placid calm for a moment and the man gave him a startled look before regaining his composure.

“I was,” Zemo said. He gave Rhodey a curious look. “May I ask how you discovered that? It is not yet time for the videos to be released.”

Rhodey’s expression hardened. “The Russians figured it out and told us. When are they going to be released?”

“Soon,” Zemo said, settling back into that placid calmness. “You need not be so concerned, Colonel Rhodes. I have no great vendetta against Dr Stark. I did initially but in the months after the disaster in Sokovia, I changed my mind.”

“Why?” Rhodey demanded.

“Because he came back,” Zemo said simply. “He took responsibility for his actions and indeed the actions of others and he did all that he could to help the people of Sokovia. While I do not like what happened, I can respect a man who does what Dr Stark did afterwards.” A darkness flickered across his face. “No, Dr Stark was never my target. The others were. The Avengers. The great Captain and his sycophants who gave no care to how they had left my country and my people.”

Zemo smiled, wide and smug. “The videos will be my last dagger hurled at Steven Rogers.” He sobered and inclined his head slightly in Tony’s direction. “I am sorry that they will cause you further pain, Dr Stark.”

“You won’t stop it,” Tony said flatly.

“No,” Zemo replied. “Or rather, I could not stop it even if I wanted to. By now, the release is inevitable.”

“Right,” Tony said. He got to his feet and stalked over to the door. Rhodey hurriedly joined him and they left without a backwards glance.
“Tones?” Rhodey said, placing a hand on Tony’s shoulder.

Tony stiffened under his touch then relaxed again. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.”

Tony sighed as they got into the elevator. “No. It’s not. But it is what it is.”

Rhodey leaned against the wall of the elevator but didn’t say anything. There wasn’t much to say. Tony had hit it on the head. It was what it was. The videos were going to be released, now they just had to deal with them.

***

It happened early on a Thursday morning, just in time to greet the new day in the US. A new website popped into existence that consisted of 2 videos with a few lines of context stating the authenticity of the videos, that they had been edited only for continuity and nothing important had been left out and that the first video was the one the individuals in the second video were watching. The link to the website was widely scattered over social media, forums and via email to news outlets around the world. The intriguingly vague context combined with the images on the video thumbnails was enough to get most people clicking and watching and after that word of mouth ensured the videos spread like wildfire. After just an hour of being online, the hit count for the videos numbered over two million unique views.

Unsurprisingly, social media went into meltdown.

Over in the lunatic fringe, diehard Captain America fans were up in arms, insisting it had to be a fake. They were countered by smug and obnoxious diehard Iron Man fans who were howling them down and causing internet brawls by claiming all sorts of things about Cap, most of which were erroneous at best and downright slanderous at worst.

In the mainstream, hashtags came and went, some persisting for a while then fading as others took precedence. Arguments swirled and ebbed before bursting into life as some new speculation took hold, was discussed, torn apart and discarded. The vocal talking heads in various news services across the world pontificated and ranted, changing their opinions like the winds. In their wake came more measured and sombre analysis as the videos were dissected.

In New York, Stark Industries released a brief statement confirming the truth of the videos and asking for privacy for Tony Stark at this difficult time. The first part of the statement was seized upon, the second part was almost entirely ignored. Thankfully, Pepper had anticipated this and more than the usual number of security guards were on duty in and around Stark Tower and at the gates of the Avengers Compound.

As the day progressed, things settled down somewhat and two hashtags in particular became prominent - #TeamIronMan and #NotMyCap.

At Stark Tower, the flowers began appearing around mid-morning. By mid-afternoon, there was a sea of blooms growing at a rapid pace. While some of the notes attached to the flowers expressed support for Tony Stark, most were notes of condolence and sympathy for his parents. Periodically Stark Industries staff would move through the sea of floral arrangements, taking photos of some of the more poignant notes or the ones obviously from children before disappearing inside again. Commentators speculated that the pictures were being passed on to Tony Stark.

At the Avengers Compound, by the time early evening rolled around Tony was sitting on the couch,
curled up into Rhodey’s side and all but engulfed by Stephen Strange’s cloak. Stephen had portaled in about half an hour after the videos had appeared online and was now sitting on the other side of Tony on the couch. Tony had his bare feet pressed against the sorcerer’s legs. He’d thought Stephen would complain about that but he hadn’t. Instead he had let his scarred hand fall to rest on Tony’s ankle, warm and oddly comforting.

Betty and Hope were on the other couch, scowling at the TV even though the current news show they were watching was largely leaning in Tony’s favour. Vision was in the kitchen, distracting himself by arguing with FRIDAY over a recipe for chocolate chip cookies. Peter Parker, who had swung by shortly after school had let out, was currently stuck to the ceiling and twitching in agitation there after being banished from his perch on the back of the couch after fidgeting one time too many. It was a measure of the oddness of their lives that having a teenager stuck to the ceiling was considered completely unremarkable.

“Hi, welcome back. We’d like to welcome Dr Ernest Bagley to the program,” one of the talking heads on the TV, a pristine looking blonde in an immaculate blue suit, was saying. “Dr Bagley is an expert in the psychology of trauma and PTSD. Dr Bagley, thank you for coming in.”

“Not at all, Chantal,” Dr Bagley said. He was in his fifties at least and had the look of an elongated Santa Claus. “It’s a pleasure to be here.”

“You’ve had a chance to watch the two videos that are consuming the world,” Chantal said. “What’s your view on them?”

“They certainly made me wince,” Dr Bagley replied. “As you know, the official verdict on the Starks’ deaths was that it was a car accident…and if it hadn’t occurred so long ago, you’d have to expect some heads to roll in the wake of that particular video. Strangulation is not, after all, a normal cause of death from a vehicular accident. But that is beside the point. The official verdict was a car accident but a simple google search prior to today’s revelations would have brought up plenty of speculation about the cause of the accident, the most predominant one being that Howard Stark was drunk. He was known to be a heavy social drinker.

“An alcoholic?” Chantal asked.

“Unknown but largely irrelevant,” Dr Bagley replied. “One doesn’t need to be an alcoholic to be involved in an alcohol-related vehicle accident.” He cleared his throat as he got back on track. “We know from Tony Stark’s presentation at MIT recently that the moments before his parents left were still weighing heavily on his mind and that he argued with his father.”

Dr Bagley sat back. “Now imagine you are a teenage Tony Stark. You have perhaps a fraught relationship with your father – as many teenage boys do – but love your mother dearly and the last thing you did before your parents died was argue with your father and subsequently be sullen towards your mother. You can’t take back that argument or your sullenness. You can’t help but wonder if your father was indeed drunk and smashed the car because of that.”

“Ouch,” Chantal said with a professionally sympathetic wince. “A lot of regrets there.”

“Exactly,” Dr Bagley said. “A nasty mix of emotions that you have difficulty dealing with because you are in the public eye. The Starks’ funeral was large and public. Tony Stark was forced to step up and take his father’s place in the company, albeit initially under the guidance of Obadiah Stane. He was still at MIT at the time, completing his studies. When you look at it objectively, when did Tony Stark have time to grieve properly, let alone come to terms with everything that happened just prior to their deaths?”
“Wouldn’t finding out the truth make things better?” the other talking head, a sombre African-American man, asked.

“It would, Jeff, if it had occurred in a calm, safe environment, surrounding by friends and loved ones,” Dr Bagley said with a nod. “Instead Dr Stark was forced to find out in a very harsh, unfriendly environment with the man who committed the murders standing right next to him. Compound that with Mr Rogers’ revelation that he had kept this information from Dr Stark and his initial attempt to lie about that and… well, Dr Stark’s reaction was unfortunate but entirely understandable. And predictable. And with Mr Rogers subsequently escalating the situation in the way he did instead of trying to contain it…”

There was a rather pained expression on Tony’s face. “Can we just… not? Please?”

FRIDAY muted the television, leaving everyone sitting there in a rather awkward silence. Then Tony snorted and extracted a hand from the cloak’s depths long enough to wave it at them.

“Oh, go on.”

The silence continued then Betty cleared her throat. “So… how much of that was accurate?”

“You’re more game than I am,” Hope said to her before Tony could reply.

Betty sniffed. “I've stood in front of a raging Hulk. I have no fear,” she said primly, amusement plain in her eyes.

“The Hulk likes you,” Hope pointed out.

“So does Tony,” Betty said, her lips twitching with mirth.

That comparison broke the last of the awkwardness and there was some muted laughter.

“You don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to, Tony,” Betty said, directing a soft smile to the man in question.

Tony sighed. It had been a long, long day. Admittedly he’d spent most of it buried in his workshop after Stephen arrived but morbid curiosity had led to him asking questions of FRIDAY throughout the day so he’d had some sense of what was going on. And Pepper had sent him those pictures of the messages on the flowers at the Tower. That hadn’t been too bad actually. Some of them, the ones that remembered he was a person and not some sort of monolith, had been rather nice.

He had been contacted by a number of representatives from the Accords Council during the day as well. They hadn’t really wanted anything as far as he could tell other than to apparently… check in and make sure he was okay and express their sympathies. At least that was the way it had seemed to him and to FRIDAY when he’d asked her. It was odd but kind of nice too. They’d been a lot more genuine about it than he remembered people being when his parents had actually died.

T’Challa had also called. That had been a little less than nice, though that wasn’t T’Challa’s fault. The King had been very sympathetic without getting on Tony’s nerves – the man did understand what it was like to lose a parent under traumatic circumstances after all – but mostly he’d been calling to report that the rogues had seen the videos and there was… quite the commotion going on. T’Challa hadn’t been sure how it was going to pan out and whether they were going to believe the videos or Rogers but he had promised to keep Tony updated. His next call was going to be to the Accords Council but Tony had appreciated T’Challa keeping him in the loop.

“He was… pretty much spot on actually,” Tony said with a grimace. Rhodey’s arm tightened around
his shoulders, the Cloak snuggled closer… if that was even possible and Stephen rather awkwardly gripped his ankle. “I have spent the past twenty-odd years blaming Dad. And myself. We’d argued… and Dad always drank more when he was riled up. And nothing riled him up more than arguing with me. When the coroner’s report came out sounding so bland, I just thought that Obie… Stane had paid them off to cover up Dad’s drinking and the fact it caused the crash. Stane never contradicted that the few times we spoke of it.”

Rhodey twitched and then said in a heavy voice, “Tones…”

“Yeah, I know,” Tony said unhappily. “It has occurred to me to wonder whether Stane was working with HYDRA or was even HYDRA himself. I… there’s still part of me that would like to think he wasn’t that bad, that it was just greed motivating him. There’s certainly no evidence he was in bed with HYDRA.”

There was a time when he wouldn’t have said anything like that in front of anyone other than Rhodey and maybe Pepper. He wouldn’t have sat here like he had been, letting the Cloak cuddle him and Rhodey and Stephen comfort him. He would have put on a flashy, obnoxious show of being okay, of being normal, and then hidden himself away in his workshop to lick his metaphorical wounds in private. He certainly wouldn’t have done this with Rogers and the others and he was fairly sure that wasn’t just his bitterness speaking.

It was a little scary, trusting people like this. Historically, trusting people had never really worked out well for him. In fact, discounting Edwin and Ana Jarvis, the only people he’d trusted and never regretted doing so were Rhodey and Pepper, which even he’d admit was a pretty sad and sorry state of affairs. But, after a lot of talking to Rhodey, he’d realised that his experiences with the ExVengers had given him some insight in how things shouldn’t be and this? How it was with Rhodey and Vision and Stephen and Hope and Betty and Peter? Was so very different and so much better. He’d allowed himself to start trusting them and so far it hadn’t come back to bite him on the ass.

“As much as I want to believe the absolute worst of him, I don’t think he was actually HYDRA,” Rhodey said reluctantly. “I’m willing to believe he sold to them though.”

“He probably did,” Tony said with a grimace. “Or at least he sold to people who either then onsold or gave the weapons to HYDRA. I’ve already tracked down a fair percentage of the weapons he sold. I started in the Middle East because, well… you know.” The others nodded. “But I shifted my attention to Eastern Europe after hearing Maximoff’s story.”

“He was selling there?” Rhodey asked.

Tony nodded then he snorted. “He was selling to practically everyone there but the actual governments. Not huge numbers though, nothing like he was doing in the Middle East. The Europeans pay more attention to that sort of thing and we haven’t screwed around in… and screwed up… their countries to the extent we have in the Middle East.”

“So there’s no way of knowing who dropped the bomb on the Maximoff’s home,” Hope said.

“No,” Tony replied. “Except to say it was not the recognised government of Sokovia nor was it any US forces. There were at least three different factions fighting in the country at the time as well as HYDRA mucking around and trying to twist things their way. It could have been any of them.”

“So Obadiah Stane was just an ordinary dick, not a neo-Nazi dick,” Betty said wryly.

Tony snorted with amusement. “Pretty much.”
A heavy silence fell and then Betty chuckled quietly. “You know, I saw the video of that BARF presentation you gave at MIT. It was disturbingly familiar, though you definitely pulled off sullen teenage angst better than I did. I went through a sort of emo goth stage when I was a teenager. The General hated it.”

Tony smiled just a little. “I thought we weren’t going to talk about our daddy issues.”

It was Hope who laughed then. “I think between the three of us, we go beyond mere issues and possibly move into volumes, even collections,” she said wryly. “Maybe even a whole library.”

“Am I the only one who had a normal upbringing here?” Rhodey said with amusement.

“I… do not really qualify for that question,” Vision replied from the kitchen, proving he had been listening.

“My childhood was fairly normal,” Stephen said with a grin.

“Mine wasn’t,” Peter piped up from the ceiling.

Tony jumped and stared upwards. He wasn’t the only one. “Jeez, kid. I forgot you were up there. Give an old man some warning next time. I have a heart condition, you know.”

He was smiling by the end of that and so was everyone else as they looked up at the fidgety teenager who was perched upside down on the ceiling. Peter looked a little sheepish as he flipped and dropped down into one of the spare chairs.

“Now that’s just showing off,” Betty teased.

Peter blushed and ducked his head a little, smiling at the good-natured teasing. “So Colonel Rhodes and Dr Strange are the only normal ones here. For a given definition of normal.”

“He is right,” Stephen said with a laugh. “Even if Peter’s home life were utterly normal, he still wouldn’t count because he’s a teenager and a superhero. James and I came to the weirdness later in life.”

“So what you’re saying is we’re all a bunch of weirdos, no matter how we got there?” Hope said with a gamine grin.

“Isn’t that a prerequisite for being in this line of work?” Rhodey said dryly.

Tony sniffed. “I’m not a weirdo, I’m a genius, a billionaire, a philanthropist and a playboy…”

“You know, I’m going to call you on that last one,” Betty said, all amused mischief. “I’ve been living here for a few weeks now and I’ve seen plenty of evidence for the billionaire, genius and philanthropist thing but playboy? Not so much. There has been a distinct lack of scantily clad women doing the walk of shame out of here in the morning.”

Tony raised an eyebrow and fought, mostly unsuccessfully, to control his answering grin. “First, if you think my playboy reputation hasn’t been well earned, you don’t pay enough attention to the tabloids. Second, who says it would be just scantily clad women doing the walk of shame out of here in the morning. And third, no one does the walk of shame out of my bedroom. They do the strut of satisfaction.”

The adults all fell apart laughing at that last bit except for Vision, who looked rather bemused, and Peter, who was looking at Tony with all the teenaged horror he could muster.
“I didn’t need to know that, Mr Stark,” Peter said faintly, drawing more laughter. “It’s like hearing about my Dad’s sex life. Ugh!”

Peter didn’t seem to realise what he’d said but the others watched with amused interest as Tony seemed to blue screen for a moment then stared at Peter in wonder. It was only when Rhodey started actually shaking with contained mirth that he shook himself out of his shock and elbowed him in the side.

“Buttercup?” he said plaintively.

“There, there, Tones,” Rhodey said with massive insincerity as he patted Tony on the shoulder and grinned.

“Hmph. See if I do anything nice for you again. Laughing at my perfectly reasonable distress,” Tony said, poking Rhodey in the ribs a few times then reorganising himself so he was curled into Stephen’s side. The sorcerer looked startled then rather pleased as he wrapped an arm around Tony’s shoulders.

“What did I do?” Peter asked worriedly.

“You just broke Tony a little,” Rhodey said with a broad grin. “You said he was like your dad.”

Peter just blinked and looked confused. “Well… he is.”

Tony made a startled meeping noise and buried his face in Stephen’s shoulder as the others laughed at him. The videos, the events in Siberia, the ExVengers, all of it, was all forgotten as they teased Tony and laughed.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

So remember back in Chapter 4 when there were those press conferences? And how Rhodey dropped a hint about members of the ExVengers with murky pasts? And how Christine Everhart was in the audience? Yeah? This is what Christine's been doing with that hint and what she finds out.

Christine Everhart liked Tony Stark. She knew it didn’t always seem that way from the tenor of her reports but she was a professional journalist. She wasn’t going to let her personal feelings get in the way of a story. So, despite the fact she liked Tony Stark, she was still perfectly willing to kick him up the arse when she felt he needed it.

Or it would be better to say that she liked post-Afghanistan Tony Stark. She’d *met* pre-Afghanistan Tony Stark and the best thing she was willing say about *him* was that he was good in bed. Post-Afghanistan Tony Stark, however, was a good man. A flawed one, one who made mistakes, sometimes big ones, but a good one nonetheless. And she liked him. Not that she’d *ever* admit that to him. That would unprofessional. Also, he’d get smug and there was no way she was letting that happen.

But, it *was* why she was in the middle of Sokovia hunting down something she was sure was going to be the story of the *century*. She’d taken note of Colonel Rhodes’ answer to the question of whether the rogue Avengers – or the ExVengers as she liked to call them – would be welcomed back and she could read between the lines with the best of them. *Someone* on that team had a background that was not good… not good at all. Wilson was a lightweight and she’d immediately discounted Romanov and Barton. Their backgrounds were murky but any half decent reporter could dig that information out of the SHIELD dump or get it from various other sources who were far more willing to talk post-SHELD collapse than they had been before. She didn’t think it was Lang either. He had a criminal record but it was hardly anything so ominous to warrant that cryptic statement from Rhodes. That left Barnes and Maximoff and she had decided to hunt down both their stories.

She’d started with Barnes since that’s what this brouhaha had apparently been all about but it had been a difficult task beyond the obvious information about his life prior to the war. At least until the videos had surfaced, then it was laughably easy. Scouring the SHIELD info dump with the search terms ‘Winter Soldier’ as well as hitting up those sources had brought a wealth of information to the surface, none of it good. Christine had thought that this was her prize but then her nose had twitched. She’d learned to pay attention to that twitch over the years. That twitch had led to Gulmira and many other big stories. And that twitch was saying that Barnes wasn’t the real story. Which left only Wanda Maximoff.

Thankfully her editor had learned to trust her twitch as well so when she asked to go to Sokovia, he’d given her a long, steady look then approved it. Her European colleagues had given her names of potentially useful leads in Sokovia in return for the right to publish parts of the story themselves when she got back. It rankled but journalism had always been a quid pro quo industry. And one of the leads had panned out into the most interesting and delicious direction.

Which is how she came to be standing in front of a small, nondescript cottage in the middle of
nowhere in Sokovia. Her latest lead had said that the woman in this cottage could tell her everything she wanted to know about Wanda Maximoff. She squared her shoulders and walked up to the door, knocking firmly.

For a long time, nothing happened then she heard firm, sharp footsteps behind the door and it opened to reveal a woman who looked to be in her sixties. She wasn’t exactly what Christine had been expecting from someone who lived in such an adorably quaint cottage. For some reason, her mind had conjured the image of a small rotund woman with a round face, apple red cheeks and a friendly smile. This woman however was tall and severe looking with close cropped white hair and piercingly green eyes. She was more than a little intimidating.

“Hello,” Christine said, keeping her cool. She was an experienced reporter. She’d be damned if she let anything rattle her. “My name is Christine Everhart. I’m a journalist for WHiH World News. Are you Dr Sofia Tesarik?”

The woman’s eyes narrowed and she looked past Christine towards the path beyond the house. She then looked back. “I am. Why?”

Christine didn’t let the woman’s wariness and unfriendliness get to her. “I’ve been told that you know all there is to know about Wanda Maximoff.”

The moment Maximoff’s name left her lips, Dr Tesarik’s eyes focused in on her with such intensity that Christine almost took a step backwards as a shiver of fear went through her. Just for a moment she’d been sure she’d seen pure hatred in the woman’s eyes and triumph flared up within her as she realised that hatred wasn’t directed at her but at Maximoff. This was a story. She didn’t know what kind of story just yet but this was the gold mine she’d been looking for. She was sure of it.

“That I do,” Dr Tesarik said, each word bitten off with icy anger. “But why should I tell you?”

Christine took a leap of faith. “Because Wanda Maximoff has been passing herself off as a hero and I don’t think that’s exactly right.”

Dr Tesarik actually snarled at that then she stepped back and gestured for Christine to enter. “Come in. We have much to discuss.”

Christine wanted to punch the air and cheer but instead she demurely walked into the house then waited for her hostess to close the door and lead the way further inside. If this panned out, she was going to have to do something very nice for Stark and Rhodes – maybe a soft puff piece on the New Avengers, talking them up – but for once that thought didn’t rankle. Her nose was twitching and she was more convinced than ever that this was going to make her career. There’d be no scrapping around for stories after this. The plum jobs were going to land in her lap. People were going to beg her to interview and investigate.

Dr Tesarik ushered her into a rather austere but still pleasant living room and gestured for her to sit down. Christine did so then pulled out not just a notepad and pen but also a digital recorder. She liked to use both. Taking her own notes kept everything straight in her mind but the recorder made sure she didn’t miss anything. She held both up and looked at the scientist.

“Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” Dr Tesarik replied. “Can I get you a drink?”

“Just water would be fine,” Christine said.

Dr Tesarik nodded and disappeared into another room, presumably the kitchen. She returned a
moment later with two glasses of water. Christine accepted hers, took a sip then set it down on the table. She got the recorder going and readied her pen. When she looked up again, Dr Tesarik was watching her with a broad, unsettling smile.

“You wish to know about Wanda Maximoff,” she said. It wasn’t a question but Christine nodded anyway. The doctor snorted. “She is no hero. Trust me on that.” She raised her chin then tapped her lips with one finger. “Now, where should I start?”

“How did you meet her?” Christine prompted.

Dr Tesarik smiled thinly. “Once, I worked for HYDRA.”

Christine’s eyes widened and she sucked in a breath. Now this hadn’t been mentioned as any part of the lead she’d been given and yet… she looked at Dr Tesarik and didn’t quite see the rabid Nazi that she would have expected. “I see,” she finally said.

The scientist chuckled. “No, I was no true believer in their cause. I wanted two things – money and respect. Neither of which were freely available in Sokovia or anywhere in eastern Europe. Not for me. HYDRA didn’t care that I was a woman or that my personality was… less than pleasing. I was good at my job.” She laughed at the look on Christine’s face. “Scientists are more mercenary than you might think, Ms Everhart. Ideals and good intentions do not put food on the table nor do they pay the rent.”

“I can understand that,” Christine said, gathering her wits around her again. Not that she was lying. Ideals and good intentions didn’t tend to put food on the table or pay the rent when you were a journalist either. “What did you do for HYDRA?”

“Not as much as they had hoped,” Dr Tesarik said with a derisive snort. “Which is why they did not fight or come after me when I left. My field of interest is genetic manipulation and that is why I came into contact with the Maximoff twins.”

She leaned back in her chair and steepled her fingers together and it was all Christine could do not to lean forward and prompt her to continue. Instead she exercised patience, sure that if she did, she would be amply rewarded.

“The Maximoff twins had been on HYDRA’s radar for some time,” Dr Tesarik explained. “They were young, yes, but they had been active in various protest groups since they were in their early teens. But there was one little titbit about them that made them almost irresistible to HYDRA, even if the higher ups didn’t quite know how they were going to use it. They only knew that it had the potential to be useful.” That unsettling smile appeared again for a moment. “The Maximoff twins blamed Tony Stark for their parents’ deaths.”

Christine kept her reaction to a single arched eyebrow. “Is it true?”

Dr Tesarik snorted derisively. “Only as much as the engineer of a Mercedes would be responsible if someone hit your parents with one of their cars. At first I doubted it was a Stark missile at all. Stark Industries sold only to the American government and other approved governments, none of which were involved in the conflict in Sokovia. Then I found out the truth.” That shiver-inducing smile appeared again. “It was HYDRA. How they got their hands on Stark Industries weapons, I do not know, but of those active in that particular part of Sokovia, it was HYDRA who had them at the time and only HYDRA.”

Christine blinked. “They joined the organisation that killed their parents?”
Dr Tesarik laughed. “Yes, they did. Delicious, isn’t it? Not that Baron von Strucker ever told them the truth. He was happy to foster their delusion that Tony Stark was responsible. He didn’t know how he was going to use it but it was a very useful card to have in their deck, as they say.”

“Is there proof of this?” Christine asked.

“I have many proofs of what I am to tell you,” Dr Tesarik said with an airy wave of her hand. “And I will give them to you when I have finished telling you my story.”

Christine froze for a moment with a sudden sense of things being too good to be true. “Why?”

“You are the first reporter to come and speak to me,” Dr Tesarik replied with a shrug. “You did not immediately turn away when I told you I had worked for HYDRA and…” She got to her feet. “Come. I will show you the most important reason I have decided to tell you everything.”

Christine followed Dr Tesarik through the house to a small room at the back. Inside the room was a man, possibly in his mid-thirties. He was sitting in a wheelchair and was in fact strapped in, as though if he wasn’t, he’d fall forward and onto the floor. His mouth was partially open and a line of drool dripped from one corner. His stare was vacant and empty. In one corner of the room, an elderly woman dozed. She woke slightly when the door opened but closed her eyes again when Dr Tesarik waved her hand.

“This is my son, Luka,” Dr Tesarik said. “He was once a bright, intelligent young man of endless promise.” Her expression darkened. “It was Wanda Maximoff that did this to him.” Her gaze drilled into Christine. “This is why I tell you everything.”

Christine looked at the man for a moment and felt a frisson run down her spine. She wasn’t sure if it was fear or excitement but what she did know was that this was going to be big. She looked at Luka again and felt her blackened reporter’s heart unshrivel just a little at the sorry, pathetic sight he presented.

She looked Dr Tesarik in the eye. “If you tell me, I will tell the world.”

Dr Tesarik smiled that terrible smile again. “Good.”

Christine was ushered back to the living room and ensconced in the armchair again, this time with a cup of excellent coffee and a piece of cake, which, when she tried it, was utterly divine. She hoped that she wasn’t selling her soul for cake, coffee and the story of a lifetime except she was pretty sure she’d already done that years ago for a much lesser price.

“So,” she said, picking up her pad and pen again and starting the recorder. “The Maximoff twins joined HYDRA. Was it willingly?”

Dr Tesarik gave an ugly laugh. “Oh yes, it was willingly. It was joyfully, gleefully. Strucker told them if they joined they could have their revenge on Tony Stark. That was all the motivation they needed. And when they were offered the chance to become… more, through my work, they jumped at the chance.”

She paused then and tapped her finger against her chin. “No, I exaggerate. The girl, Wanda, she leapt at the chance. Her brother was more circumspect. He asked more questions but in the end, what she wanted was what they did.” She chuckled. “I suspect anyone looking at them from the outside would think that he was the dominant twin but that was not the case. She was. Where she lead, he followed. He might hesitate but in the end he would always follow his twin.”

“So what did you do?” Christine asked.
“We possessed, at the time, an artefact that had been... obtained by our counterparts within SHIELD,” Dr Tesarik said. “A sceptre that held a gem of unimaginable power. We had been working to determine how we could turn that power to our advantage. I had discovered that it could... mutate genes and specifically that the genes that it mutated woke powerful abilities within the individual affected.” She grimaced and waved a hand. “However, it was... unstable.”

“Unstable, how?”

“The abilities woke strong and powerful,” the scientist said. “Many of our experimental subjects... consumed themselves with their own abilities within hours of waking from the procedure.”

Christine shuddered. “And the Maximoff twins?”

Dr Tesarik looked contemplative for a moment. “They were young and driven and we hoped that would give them more... control when the procedure was done.”

“And did it?”

“Yes and no,” Dr Tesarik said. “They had the same lack of control as the others but their youth made them more... resilient in the early stages. That resilience allowed us to find a suitable method of partial sedation that kept them alert enough to train their abilities but subdued enough that any loss of control was... manageable.”

Christine stared at the scientist for a moment then she blinked as several things connected themselves rather horribly in her mind. Her expression must have given her away because that terrible smile was once again on Dr Tesarik’s face.

“Ask your question, Ms Everhart. I can see you have made the connection.”

Christine swallowed. “Pietro Maximoff had superspeed. Training that would be just a matter of giving him space and letting him learn his limits. But Wanda...” She hesitated and Dr Tesarik nodded encouragingly, her smile getting wider and more unsettling by the moment. “But Wanda Maximoff manipulates people’s minds so for her to train her ability, she... would need minds to... manipulate.”

Christine looked over her shoulder in the direction of Luka Tesarik’s bedroom. She was a hardened, cynical reporter and she’d be the first to admit that she didn’t have a tendency to let morals get in the way of a good story. But this was making her skin crawl.

“Yes,” Dr Tesarik crooned. “My son was one of her... victims. He wasn’t even one of her practise subjects.” Those last two words were spat out bitterly. “He was one of her supervisors. He had been kind to her. Gentle. Encouraging. She tore his mind apart just because she could. She enjoyed it. I saw the video footage. She was smiling when she did it. She made no apology, showed no remorse. Never! Not once!”

“I’m sorry,” Christine said. It was awkward because she didn’t really know what to say but it was sincere. No matter what else this woman was, she was quite obviously a mother grieving a son’s injury.

Dr Tesarik inclined her head in thanks then continued. “We tried to have her assessed psychologically after that but she...” The scientist’s face darkened. “She would put on a show of innocence. There were many... crocodile tears is the English phrase, is it not?” Christine nodded and Dr Tesarik continued. “She would put on childlike behaviours and if the psychologist was a man, she would bat her eyes and make herself seem small and pretty and defenceless.”
“Surely they would have seen through her act?” Christine asked.

“That is what we thought and why we did not question their reports at first,” Dr Tesarik said. “It was only on reviewing the video footage much later that we saw what she was doing. That we saw the red around her fingers and in her eyes.”

“So what happened?” Christine asked.

“The incident with my son was deemed to be an accident,” Dr Tesarik said, her lip curling up in contempt. “My protests were ignored. Her training continued and she and her brother were eventually deemed fully trained and sent out on missions.”

“But she wasn’t fully trained?” Christine said, trusting her instincts.

“No,” Dr Tesarik replied. “Because no one knew the full extent of her abilities. It was only later, in the same investigation that found what she had done to the psychologists, that we discovered that she had been unconsciously manipulating people’s minds. Her abilities are both in her control and not. Does that make sense?”

Christine cocked her head and frowned thoughtfully. “So, she has control and can use them however she wishes but she can’t… block them? She can’t not use them? She doesn’t have complete control.”

Dr Tesarik nodded. “Yes and she did not know she does this unconscious manipulation, not at first.” She sneered again. “And when it was brought to her attention, she did not care.”

“She sounds like a psychopath,” Christine commented.

Dr Tesarik snorted. “I would say so but I have been told I am biased. I have much in the way of video evidence and reports and so on. You will have it all and you can take it to your experts and see what they say.”

“What did her brother think of all of this?” Christine asked.

“Pietro…” Dr Tesarik now leaned back in her chair and looked thoughtful. “Pietro shared her delusion about Tony Stark but he was more direct. Kill the man and be done with it, that was Pietro Maximoff’s opinion. But as I said, he was the submissive twin. He would do what she wanted. He saw no wrong in her and could not be swayed otherwise. We had hoped he would be the steadying influence on her but…” She shook her head. “That was not to be.”

Christine nodded. “How come the… er, upper management never did anything about this? You said there was an investigation.”

“Sokovia fell,” Dr Tesarik said with a shrug. “Ultron came and Sokovia fell and HYDRA fell. There was no one to tell.” She smiled thinly. “I did not think Captain America would believe me, not after I saw her doing her little lost child act with him on the television.” She looked contemplative for a moment. “I thought once of telling Mr Stark but he would have had no more reason than Captain America to trust me since I was HYDRA. Even you do not trust me, I am just giving you a compelling story.”

“Tony Stark might have surprised you,” Christine said. She’d certainly surprised herself by saying that but… she didn’t think she was wrong either.

Dr Tesarik shrugged. “Perhaps. We shall never know. It is sufficient to me that you are here. I will give you everything I have and you will… do what you wish with it. I simply ask that before you make that decision, you think about my Luka.”
Christine glanced in the direction of the room that held that pitiful man who had been a victim of Wanda Maximoff. Not because he’d done anything wrong or been mean to her or hurt her but just because he’d existed there in the moment when she’d wanted to hurt someone. Christine would never claim to be a righteous person but she did possess compassion and she did think of herself as a good person.

“I promise,” she said with enough conviction that Dr Tesarik smiled and relaxed.

The scientist then got to her feet but waved for Christine to stay where she was. “I will get that evidence for you.”

Christine watched as the older woman left the room then looked down at her notepad. This story was pure dynamite, especially if the evidence held up to scrutiny. She smiled and waited patiently.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Sometimes Betty's mind works in mysterious ways. When that happens, you might end up with a Hulk (if you add in a Bruce), at other times, you end up with questions coming out of the blue and some unintended consequences, both good and bad.

Or in other words, the action's heating up.

Chapter Notes

Holy crap, guys! I nearly had a damn heart attack yesterday. I was working on a future chapter and accidentally deleted *everything* I’d ever written for this – both past and future chapters. I nearly died then very gently hit the undo button a couple of times and it all came back. Phew! Let this be a lesson for all of us – backup your writing!!! (Which is oddly kind of ironic and a good introduction to this chapter. Backups are a thing, people! :D)

Also, I know the whole Avengers movie night is a fanon thing that we all know and love but I’m pretty sure that’s all it is, unfortunately. The MCU has a nasty habit of telling us things are one way but not showing that at all or even showing us the exact opposite. For example, Steve and Tony were friends. Sure, they *tell* us that but I never saw much evidence of it on the screen.

I guess we just have to all say it – all together now – the MCU has crappy writers.

But anyway. Tony gets his movie nights with the New Avengers. Because I say so.

Also, I'm taking liberties with what Wanda's magic may or may not be able to do. And there are a couple of in-jokes from Doctor Strange as well.

Movie night had never really been a thing for the old Avengers. There had always been a lot of talk about it but since no one ever moved into either the Tower or the Compound until well after the team was only a team in name, if it had ever been anything other than that, it had never really happened. Or if it had, Tony had never been invited. But it was different with the New Avengers. Stephen and Hope had jobs and other responsibilities and duties but when they were at the Compound, movie nights were a regular occurrence with Tony always being dragged out of his workshop for them.

Tonight had been no different and though Tony had pretended to whine that he had work, he knew the others saw right through it and they had all settled in with drinks and snacks to watch Pacific Rim. Christine Everhart was apparently presenting some special report on the Civil War tonight but there had been a mostly unspoken group decision to not watch it. FRIDAY would record it and give them a summary of the salient points. Tony didn’t *think* Christine was going to massacre his reputation but it was always hard to tell with her and after the release of the videos… Tony was just done with all of it for the moment and looking for a night of stupidly fun entertainment.
So they’d settled in to watch the movie with Tony and Hope complaining about the physics and engineering, Betty and Stephen complaining about the biology, Rhodey rolling his eyes at their shenanigans, Vision watching them all with benevolent bemusement and all of them agreeing that irrespective of the shaky science, the jaegers and the kaiju were very cool and they all wanted to be Stacker Pentecost when they grew up. By the time the movie was over, Tony was relaxed and grinning at Stephen’s dry comments about the medical aspects of the movie. It was that relaxation that allowed him to not have a panic attack at Betty’s out of the blue question.

“Tony? What happened to JARVIS?”

Silence fell as both Tony and Rhodey stared at her with surprise while Hope and Stephen looked on curiously. Vision went very still. Betty had a habit of doing this. Tony still hadn’t quite worked out how her mind made these odd twists and turns that ended up in questions that were essentially apropos of nothing. Usually though, they were about science rather than past events.

“How do you know about JARVIS?” Tony asked warily.

“Bruce mentioned him in his letter,” Betty replied. “As someone I could trust along with you. I was curious about the way his name was written and I asked FRIDAY. She didn’t tell me much, just that he was her predecessor and he was killed by Ultron.”

Tony licked his lips and felt Rhodey’s hand come to rest on his shoulder. “Uh, yeah, he was.”

“He was an AI?” Betty asked, a tiny frown appearing on her face.

“Yes.”

Betty was silent for a moment. She looked at Tony and he had no idea what to make of the expression on her face.

“Tony,” she said slowly. “I’ll admit that I’m no expert with robotics, computer programming or AIs in general but… if he was essentially a highly advanced computer program, why didn’t he have a backup of himself?”

Tony stared at her blankly. “What?”

“Huh,” Rhodey said thoughtfully as Hope, Vision and Stephen looked between Tony and Betty. Hope seemed to have some idea what was going on.

“Every single program I have ever used has always been backed up,” Betty said. “Whether it was overnight, weekly, monthly, whatever. It was backed up onto a separate server just in case something went wrong. So the data could always be recovered and at worst, we might lose a few days’ work but nothing more.”

“It’s a standard operating procedure in any major company,” Hope added. “It used to be done weekly or monthly when it was backed up on tapes and other physical memory sources but these days it’s usually done daily and often using some sort of cloud service, even an internal one.”

Betty nodded to Hope. “Yes, the University moved over to daily cloud backups a couple of years ago.” She turned back to Tony. “So, surely JARVIS had off site backups? They can’t all have been destroyed by Ultron.”

Rhodey was looking like someone had smacked him up the back of the head with a board. “Shit. Why did I never think about that?”
Tony was frowning at the floor and shaking his head. “I… I don’t…” He looked up and there was something akin to panic in his eyes. “I don’t know.”

Rhodey drew in a sharp breath and grabbed hold of Tony’s arm before he could make like a rabbit and scamper. “The witch!” he growled.

“What?” Tony looked lost and confused and more than a little distressed.

“What if she got into your head and made you forget?” Rhodey snarled.

“She can’t do that,” Tony said then he continued plaintively. “Can she?”

Stephen got up and walked over to where Tony was sitting. He crouched down and a moment later, his cloak came sailing into the room and wrapped itself around Tony’s shoulders, nudging Rhodey out of the way.

“Hey!” Rhodey groused, though he looked more amused by the cloak’s possessiveness than anything else.

Stephen didn’t pay any attention to the byplay and focused on Tony. “What are you certain she can do?”

“She can… uh, influence emotions,” Tony said. “Make people afraid. Make them evacuate a city.”

“In a panic?” Stephen asked.

Tony shook his head. “No. They weren’t panicked. She can also do some sort of shielding, I think. I wasn’t there in Lagos. Hell, other than the stuff in Sokovia, I was barely around her. Natasha was the one who was supposed to be training her.”

Rhodey snorted. “I see her training ability matches her profiling skill.”

Tony snorted and relaxed just a fraction. “That’s exceptionally catty of you, platypus.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Rhodey grumbled, though he seemed pleased he’d gotten Tony to at least partially climb down from the ceiling.

Stephen sat back on his haunches and frowned in thought. “I’ll need some time to do some research or…” He paused for a moment. “I’ll talk to Wong. He knows the library better than I do and he’s been doing this for longer than I have. If there’s anything, he’ll know about it and he’ll be able to find any books that might be needed.”

“You think you can figure out what happened?” Rhodey asked.

Stephen grimaced. “Maybe. We’ll see.”

“Are we sure there’s anything wrong at all?” Tony asked, shifting uncomfortably on the couch. The cloak curled closer around him.

Rhodey placed a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “Tony, JARVIS did backups, right? You would never have left out something that important.”

“I…” Tony frowned down at the floor. When he looked up again, there were the first edges of anger on his face. “I don’t remember,” he said flatly. “But you’re right. I would never have left that out of JARVIS’ programming and he certainly had the ability to do it himself.”
“I feel like I opened a can of worms,” Betty said. She looked rather apologetic.

“A good can of worms,” Hope said, patting her arm. She looked over at Tony and Rhodes. “When would she have done it? You weren’t around much after… Ultron, were you?”

“No, not really,” Tony replied. “Maybe it was during…” He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Stephen got to his feet and stepped away. He pulled something off his belt, a sort of multi-finger ring almost like a knuckle duster, and put it on his hand. He then held his hands out and with a swirling, circular gesture, he opened up a portal into what was clearly a library. A moment after he did, a heavy-set Chinese man came and stood on the other side of the portal, directing an unimpressed look at Stephen.

“We’ve had this discussion before, Stephen. No portals in the library.”

Stephen looked like he was struggling not to smile as he made some introductions. “Everyone, Wong. Wong, everyone.”

Wong’s expression briefly became even more unimpressed then he turned to the others and bowed slightly. “Hello.”

The others all smiled or gave small waves then Stephen got Wong’s attention again.

“How much do you know about mental manipulation, Wong?”

“Not enough,” the other sorcerer said dryly.

“Seriously though,” Stephen said.

Wong’s expression cleared and he looked concerned. “What’s happened?”

“The Scarlet Witch may have meddled with Tony’s mind,” Stephen said, gesturing towards Tony with one hand.

Wong looked through the portal then stepped through. The portal fizzled out behind him as he walked over to Tony. The cloak snuggled around Tony a bit more and Wong looked between it and Stephen. He raised an eyebrow and Stephen just shrugged.

“What? It likes him.”

Wong snorted then turned back to Tony. “May I?” he said, holding his hands up.

Tony looked between him and Stephen then sighed. “Magic. Sure.”

Wong made more of those strange gestures then he thrust his hand towards Tony, coming to rest very gently with the base of his palm against Tony’s forehead. Tony flinched but didn’t move and the cloak snuggled him comfortingly. Wong frowned and hummed then made another series of strange hand movements, then a third set. Finally he stepped back with a concerned look on his face.

“Well?” Stephen asked.

“There is something there,” Wong said. “But it’s messy and amateurish. I don’t think it was put there deliberately.”

Tony shuddered and Rhodes wrapped an arm around his shoulders. He looked protective and angry.
“What is it?” he demanded.

“Part of it seems to be blocking some memories.” Wong said.

“That makes sense,” Vision said, speaking up for the first time. “Probably blocking some of your memories of JARVIS.”

Stephen nodded. “And the other part?” he asked Wong.

The other sorcerer’s expression turned very grim. “If they had been done by a sorcerer, I would call them coercive spells. You wouldn’t have learned about them, Stephen. Knowledge of them is kept highly restricted. In the wrong hands, they can be… diabolical.” He looked down at Tony. “Coercive spells are insidious. They act on emotions rather than thoughts or actions and thus it is very difficult for the person affected by them to realise that the emotional effects are not their own. These aren’t quite the same but they’re close enough that I can do something about them.”

Tony bowed his head for a moment and when he raised it again, they could see the anger in his eyes. “What the fuck did she do to me?”

Wong didn’t seem perturbed by either Tony’s anger or his swearing. “That part of it is a bit of a mess so it’s a little hard to pick out what is actually working and what isn’t but largely the coercive spells seem to be reinforcing a negative feedback loop. Basically every time someone says negative things to you or about you in your hearing, this feedback loop reinforces them and makes you think that they’re right. But it’s messy and glitchy. Not the work of a trained magic user.”

“That bitch,” Rhodey growled. “And you’re saying she didn’t do this deliberately?”

Wong shook his head. “I don’t think so. We’ll certainly know when I remove it though. If she did it deliberately and just made it look like a mess to confuse people, then she won’t feel a thing. If she did it subconsciously then when I remove it, it’s going to backlash against her. Given what’s in there, she won’t enjoy it much.”

“Good.”

The vindictive response came from more than one person in the room and Tony smiled wryly. “You can remove it though?”

Wong nodded. “I will need to return to Kamar-Taj to make some preparations but I could do it tomorrow morning, if you would like.”

“Yes!” Tony snapped as he lurched to his feet and started pacing. The cloak stuck with him, curled around him so tightly, there was no opportunity for any of it to swirl or flap. “Fuck, I hate magic.” He paused and grimaced. “Not your magic. If this works, I’m gonna love your magic.”

Vision rose to his feet. “Mr Wong…”

“Just Wong. Like Beyonce.”

Vision blinked as Strange snorted and covered his smile with his hand then inclined his head slightly. “Wong, if I may accompany you, there are some matters I wish to consult with you about.”

Wong gave him a long steady look then turned to Stephen and raised an eyebrow. When Stephen nodded, Wong turned back to Vision. “Very well.”

Tony stopped pacing and looked at Vision with worry. “Viz? Everything alright?”
“It appears that the sorcerers of Kamar-Taj have some understanding of Wanda’s magic and therefore may be able to assist me with fully understanding this.” He pointed to the stone embedded in his forehead. “I would be remiss not to take the opportunity.”

Tony’s face cleared and he nodded. “That’s… that’s a good idea.” A mix of conflicting expression flickered across his face. “You know I’m not trying to replace you or anything… with JARVIS… and you’re…”

A small smile grew on Vision’s face. “I know, Tony. I would be… very pleased if you were able to bring him back. I feel… regret… that the price for my life was that of JARVIS. There is enough of him within me for me to know that he was… very worthy.”

Tony’s eyes widened as he remembered the way Vision had picked up Thor’s hammer as if it was nothing. Was he suggesting that it was the part of him that was JARVIS that had been the reason he could do that? JARVIS, whom Tony had made and nurtured and encouraged. He shuddered and pushed those thoughts away, not wanting to get into it right now.

Stephen seemed to realise that as he turned to Wong. “Do you need me?”

“No, not for this,” Wong replied. “But I will need you tomorrow morning. I trust you remember how to pull someone else into the astral plane?”

Stephen frowned. “I do, though it’s dangerous.”

“It would be best if Stark was separate from his body when I do this,” Wong said. “To avoid any leakage from the backlash.”

“You think it is going to backlash.”

“Yes, I do.” Wong pulled out a ring similar to the one Stephen had used and opened up a portal. “I will see you tomorrow. Vision?”

Wong and Vision disappeared through the portal before Tony had time to react. He immediately turned to Stephen.

“Not in my body? What the hell?”

“It’s to protect you,” Stephen replied.

Tony frowned. “You just said it was dangerous!”

“Only if you don’t know what you’re doing.” Stephen cocked an eyebrow. “And I do know what I’m doing.” He sighed and softened a little. “Tony, it will be fine. Wong knows what he’s doing and so do I. Astral projection is something I’m very good at. It was the first piece of magic I truly mastered.”

Stephen’s lips quirked as he remembered those times. Using astral projection to both sleep and study at the same time had been extremely useful. He only wished he’d been able to do it when he’d been studying for his medical degree.

“It will be fine,” he said then he continued with more than a hint of his normal arrogance. “It’s me, after all.”

It got the reaction he was hoping for when Tony snorted and then smiled faintly and relaxed. The cloak snuggled him tightly for a moment before relaxing just a little, enough to actually look like a
cloak instead of moulding itself to Tony’s body like it had been. Stephen was amused to see that the cloak had to raise its bottom hem a bit so as not to drag on the floor and he was tempted to mention it in order to distract Tony from whatever thoughts were running through his mind.

“Fine,” Tony said with a huff. “I’m going to my workshop. If I’m not going to get any sleep tonight, I might as well do some work.”

He turned on his heel before anyone could say anything and headed for the door. The cloak raised its hem and waved smugly at Stephen before giving a flourish as the door closed. Stephen just sighed and shook his head with a fond smile before he turned back to the others to placate their worries.

The next morning Stephen and Tony were alone in the main room of the Compound when a portal opened and Wong stepped through. Vision followed him and the synthezoid was carrying a pile of books and scrolls. Stephen immediately raised an eyebrow at Wong, who returned it with the best bland expression Tony had ever seen. Stephen’s lips quirked but he didn’t say anything as Vision greeted them and left them to their work.

Wong looked around the room then nodded to himself. “Perhaps if you lay down on the couch, Mr Stark.”

“Tony. And why?”

Wong paused then inclined his head. “Tony. It will make it easier when Stephen returns you to your body.”

“Right. Okay.” Tony eyed the two sorcerers nervously but went and lay down on the couch, his hands clenching and unclenching as he did.

Stephen came and kneeled down next to the couch level with Tony’s head. “Just breath and stay calm. I’m going to pull both of us into the astral plane and then Wong will get rid of whatever it was the witch did.”

Tony nodded, his mouth turning down. Stephen reached out and placed a hand on his forehead then with an internal twist and wrench, he pulled both of them into the astral plane. He immediately felt the wave of panic from Tony before the man clamped down on it with a level of control that Stephen found both impressive and worrying. They were floating just above the couch, looking down at their bodies and Wong who had now moved forward and was making strange circular gestures.

“This is weird,” Tony said, looking at the sight with a profoundly disturbed look on his face. “I hate magic.”

Stephen chuckled and moved over to his side. “There is actually a certain amount of logic behind it. There is a book you might find interesting if Wong will allow you to borrow it. I read it myself when I first arrived at Kamar-Taj.” He paused and smirked. “I was, if anything, even more sceptical than you about magic. The Ancient One was not impressed with me.”

Tony gave him a sidelong glance. “That must have hurt the ego.”

“Perhaps. But not me,” Stephen replied. “I was frustrated and unhappy. I was convinced that Kamar-Taj was the last opportunity I had to get my hands back, so to speak.”

Tony gave him another of those side-long glances. “Why magic though?”

“I met a man who had been left a paraplegic after an accident,” Stephen replied. “But when I met him, he was not only walking but playing basketball. If whatever he found at Kamar-Taj allowed
him to walk again, then surely it could fix my hands. I was…” He gave a small self-deprecating smile. “Desperate. I had already burned through every other option and I… could not see a life for myself without my hands.”

Tony opened his mouth to reply but just as he did, Wong finished his series of gestures and pushed the elaborate glowing golden symbol he had created towards Tony’s body on the couch. The symbol settled over Tony like a net then sank in. For a moment, nothing happened then Tony’s body convulsed and the golden symbol emerged with a web of red mist wrapped around it, glowing and pulsing malevolently.

All three of them stared at it with a sort of sick fascination then Wong began moving his hands again. This time when he finished he shoved both hands out, seemed to grab hold of the gold and red mist conglomeration and tore it apart. The symbol shattered into a shower of gold and the red mist gathered itself together and shot up through the roof. Wong watched it go with a look of satisfaction then he turned to where Tony and Stephen were floating.

“You can return Tony to his body.”

Stephen nodded and turned to Tony. “Ready?”

Tony nodded fervently and Stephen drew them both back into their bodies. There was a moment of disorientation and then he was looking down at Tony who was blinking owlishly.

“Well?” Stephen said to Wong as he got to his feet.

“That’s going to backlash very unpleasantly,” Wong replied.

“It wasn’t deliberate?” Tony asked as he sat up and rubbed his forehead.

Wong hesitated then he sat down in one of the nearby armchairs. Stephen chose to sit on the couch next to Tony.

“It both was and wasn’t,” Wong said soberly. “It was no accident that it took the form that it did. Undermining you in your own mind. I can only imagine that she is a very malicious and malevolent person. But she didn’t put it there deliberately.”

Tony frowned. “That seems a little contradictory.”

“I suspect she wanted to hurt you but didn’t dare do anything overt with the other Avengers watching,” Stephen said. “Even if they favoured her and were sidelining you, she probably couldn’t take the risk that doing something overtly malicious to you wouldn’t make them turn on her.”

Wong nodded. “Since she clearly lacks complete control over her abilities, they reached out and created the coercive spell within your mind. Think of it as they responded to her subconscious desires without any active participation on her part.”

“So it’s backlashed on her?” Tony asked. Wong nodded and Tony grimaced. “Oops. Probably should have given T’Challa some warning about that.”

“I can ask Colonel Rhodes to do that now, if you’d like, boss?” FRIDAY said.

Tony nodded. “Yeah, that’s a good idea. Thanks, FRI.”

“A pleasure,” she said.
“How do you feel?” Wong asked.

Tony hesitated for a long moment. “Lighter. If that makes any sense.”

Wong nodded. “It does and it isn’t surprising. That spell was very hostile.”

Tony rubbed his forehead and sighed. “Would you be willing to write up something? A summary of what happened and what you did. I’m going to have to report this to the Accords Council and probably those ICC investigators. It’ll be taken into account when they eventually deal with Maximoff.”

Wong nodded. “Of course. I am also willing to make myself available to the Council if they have questions, though Stephen will be able to answer most of them just as easily as I can.”

Tony nodded but before he could say anything else, the door was thrown open and Rhodes leaned into the room.

“Tony! Stephen! We’ve got trouble.”

“What’s happened?” Tony said, getting to his feet.

“T’Challa got called away when I was telling him about this,” Rhodes said tersely. “Before the line died, I heard enough to know it was about Rogers’ lot.”

Tony exchanged glances with Wong and Stephen. “It may be Maximoff.”

“Yeah, that was the gist of it,” Rhodes said. “But it didn’t sound like they were staying put.”

Tony stared at him for a moment. “Shit.” He gritted his teeth then turned to Wong. “Thank you. I’ve got to…”

Wong looked amused. “Go. I will write that report then return to Kamar-Taj when I am done.”

Tony nodded then gathered Stephen and Rhodes with a nod as he hurried out of the room. He needed to contact the Accords Council to give them the heads up and get hold of T’Challa to find out just what was happening in Wakanda.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

I call this chapter ‘Christine’s Special Report’ but it could also be called ‘Christine has a juicy story and an agenda but is going to masquerade as being at least relatively impartial beforehand… she may not do a good job of it but her boss asked her to try anyway’.

This is set at about the same time as the end of the last chapter where Wong was getting rid of Wanda's witchy magic from Tony's mind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The program opened with the WHiH logo and a splash banner featuring a blurry still from a CCTV camera from the fight at the Leipzig/Halle airport with the words: “What really happened?” over it. The splash banner disappeared to reveal a studio with a blonde woman sitting in a chair, her legs crossed and a clipboard resting on her knees. She looked calm, professional and for those watching closely, just faintly triumphant.

“Good evening. I’m Christine Everhart and welcome to WHiH’s special investigation into the recent ‘Civil War’ between the Avengers’ factions lead by Captain America on one side and Iron Man on the other.”

She turned to face another camera and behind her was a graphic featuring the Avengers’ symbol.

“As we all know, the recent ‘civil war’ between the two Avengers factions left damage, injuries and casualties scattered from Africa to Siberia. We all know what happened. What no one has truly answered is why it happened.”

The graphic behind Christine changed to a split image with falling helicarriers and the words ‘Washington DC’ on one side and the image of a shattered landscape with the single word ‘Sokovia’ over it on the other.

“It is a common misconception that the civil war was about the Sokovia Accords and the explosion that occurred at the ratification ceremony in Vienna but the roots of it actually lie much further back, in the events in Washington DC and the fall of Sokovia and in the lives of two people – James Buchanan Barnes and Wanda Maximoff.”

The image behind Christine shifted so that the falling helicarriers were central.

“While the disaster in Washington DC is largely associated with the fall of SHIELD and the discovery of its infiltration by HYDRA, underlying that were the actions of a HYDRA operative – the infamous assassin known as the Winter Soldier.” The image behind Christine shifted into a blurry image, clearly from a CCTV camera, of the Winter Soldier on a freeway. “During the course of the events in Washington, it was discovered by Steven Rogers, Captain America, that the Winter Soldier was, in fact, James Buchanan Barnes, the famous Howling Commando from World War II who it was believed had fallen to his death on a mission with Captain America. What happened between the
two still remains unknown but after the dust cleared, Captain America was briefly hospitalised and the Winter Soldier had once more disappeared into the darkness.”

The image behind Christine was a shot of James Barnes that anyone who had been to the Smithsonian would recognise.

“One can only speculate on the horrors James Barnes suffered at the hands of HYDRA to form him into the Winter Soldier, a man deemed by the CIA for at least the last twenty years to be one of the top ten most dangerous people in the world.”

Christine paused for a moment, the photo of James Barnes clear behind her. She then turned to another camera and continued, the image of the falling helicarriers reappearing.

“In the wake of the fall of SHIELD, a different matter claimed everyone’s attention in the UN – the fate of the Avengers. The following is an interview with the British Ambassador to the UN and the current Chair of the Accords Council, His Excellency, Mr Nigel Clements.”

The view of Christine and the studio was replaced by an office and Christine and the aforementioned Nigel Clements seated in chairs in front of a large desk.

“Thank you for agreeing to speak to us, Mr Clements.”

“Not at all, Ms Everhart. The Accords Council has a policy of openness and transparency wherever possible.”

“The Accords Committee was formally established in the wake of the Ultron disaster in Sokovia but its origins date much earlier. Is that correct?”

“That is correct,” Clements said. “And the Accords themselves pre-date the Sokovia disaster as well. The first discussion regarding superheroes actually came in the wake of Iron Man’s early actions in finding and destroying Stark Industries weapons that had been sold to terrorist organisations without his knowledge. Mr Stark was acting unilaterally, crossing borders and causing destruction.”

“Why was nothing put into place?”

“Because Mr Stark had made himself accountable to the public. He was careful to avoid civilian casualties and property damage and after his first few successful forays, he began to liaise with the governments of the countries he intended to enter and act within. In short, while he may have been acting outside proper legal parameters, he was open about his actions.”

“He was also cleaning up messes that the governments of those countries were unable or unwilling to,” Christine said dryly.

Clements smiled faintly. “There is that. When someone else cleans up a mess without causing unnecessary damage or causing injuries or deaths to innocent civilians, few people are really willing to make an issue of it except as a matter of form. There are probably many arguments to be made about the ethics and morality of that but most countries tend to be fairly pragmatic and once Mr Stark began to actually liaise with them, it was easy enough for the governments of those countries to give him official permission.”

“When was the committee first established?”

“The first committee was established in the wake of the New York invasion. Though the incident was limited to New York, no one at the United Nations was naïve enough to believe that it would have ended there if not for Mr Stark’s intervention. However the committee eventually deemed the
matter to be of little urgency and was disbanded due to the fact that it became clear that the Avengers were being overseen by SHIELD. While there was some disquiet about SHIELD’s secretive nature, it was, ultimately, a US government organisation and thus it was determined that the oversight provided was sufficient and that if there was indeed a global threat, the US government would inform the UN.”

“When did that change?”

“After the events in Washington DC. At first everyone was distracted by the fall of SHIELD and the news about the resurgence of HYDRA but it wasn’t long before it became clear that the US government had not picked up the reins of Avengers oversight nor did they seem to be inclined to do so. Instead, it appeared that Mr Stark had created a new department within Stark Industries to handle many of the tasks SHIELD had been doing.”

Christine raised a delicate, dubious eyebrow. “That wasn’t considered a problem?”

“Oh, it was,” Clements replied. “There is a great deal of respect for Mr Stark within the UN but there was also general agreement that having the Avengers under the control of a single man, however well intentioned, was not an ideal situation, especially given that Mr Stark could hardly be expected to devote the amount of time and attention to the Avengers that would be required. While he is no longer the CEO of Stark Industries, he does remain their CTO and Head of R&D as well as being deeply involved in the activities of the Maria Stark Foundation and other such philanthropic ventures. His time is divided and the Avengers, it was believed, required a more full time approach.”

“And that was when the Accords were born.”

Clement nodded. “That was when the Accords were born.”

“How long did it take to write them?”

Clements chuckled. “They are still being written, Ms Everhart. Or perhaps rewritten as we learn their strengths and limitations now that they are ratified and in effect. But to answer your question, months and even then that was only a rough draft that required extensive discussion and negotiation. As you may imagine, every country has a different idea about what is appropriate behaviour for a force such as the Avengers. But there was a working draft in place when the events in Sokovia happened.”

Christine nodded. “And that accelerated matters?”

“Yes,” Clements said soberly. “Even more so when we realised that the only consequences that were being faced by anyone involved were self-imposed. And once again, Mr Stark gained some respect within the UN. While people were not pleased that his AI had gone rogue, his willingness to step down from the Avengers and return to Sokovia to help rectify his mistakes was seen as a… measure of accountability that is not as common as you might think, especially in men of Mr Stark’s ilk.”

“But it was also a concern?”

“Yes. Mr Stark was, from all anyone could tell, the one who was conducting the normal processes for the Avengers when they were carrying out missions. Liaising with the government of the respective countries, ensuring law enforcement and/or military personnel were standing by to clear any civilians and providing rescue and recovery services afterwards. It was noted by many countries that after he stepped down, that side of things was either absent or limited.”

“And so the Accords gained speed.” Christine looked down at her notes. “How open was the process?”
“Very,” Clements said. “All drafts of the Accords were published on the UN website. The General Assembly meetings are, as always, open to the public and the committee’s minutes were also published on the website, unless they were classified for a reason. If so, the reason for the classified status was given.” He paused and there was a faint smile on his lips. “And, of course, all known Avengers were both emailed and mailed official invitations to participate in the process. Mr Stark and Colonel Rhodes were the only ones who replied and later Ms Romanov was brought in by Mr Stark.”

“Was the lack of response from the other Avengers followed up?” Christine asked, looking serious and concerned.

“It was,” Clements replied. “Repeated attempts were made by email, mail and telephone. The emails and mail were never answered and though we were able to speak to a person by telephone who promised to pass on our messages, we never received a response to those either.” He paused and frowned. “It was… concerning. When we finally questioned Mr Stark about it, he promised to speak to the Avengers and bring them up to speed.”

“When was this?”

Clements smiled faintly. “Shortly before the ratification ceremony in Vienna.”

“No approach had been made to Mr Stark to act as liaison prior to that?”

“Mr Stark was officially registered as having stepped down from the Avengers and thus involving him seemed… inappropriate,” Clements replied. “We considered asking Colonel Rhodes but his duties in the military had him tied up.” He paused then continued rather delicately, “There were many on the Committee who believed that it shouldn’t require a third party to intervene on our behalf and that if the Avengers were choosing to ignore our requests then we had our answer as to their opinion on the matter. I don’t believe it occurred to any of us that they were simply completely unaware of world matters and not reading their mail or email. We unfortunately assumed that they were ignoring us because they either did not care or did not approve.”

Christine looked rather cynically amused. “The right conclusion as it turned out though not quite accurate on the reason.”

“Indeed,” Clements said with all the British dryness he could manage.

The scene changed back to the studio where Christine was still sitting primly in her chair, her clipboard on her knee.

“Unfortunately, we are unable to ask the ExVengers why they chose to ignore not just their email and their mail but also apparently every newspaper and news service, both television and internet based, around the world,” Christine said dryly. “And speculation would be outside the scope of this investigation.”

She turned to face another camera and the image behind her changed to one of Sokovia. The shift in her facial expression was subtle but it was there for anyone who cared to look - she went from completely, coolly professional to having a hint of glee and triumph about her.

“We now turn to the two people who lie at the heart of the Civil War - James Barnes and Wanda Maximoff. James Barnes’ role is now obvious after the release of the videos from the Siberian confrontation between Tony Stark and Rogers and Barnes. Rogers was desperate to protect his friend and would allow nothing and no one to stand between him and that protection, not even someone who had been a teammate and a friend. Wanda Maximoff’s role is far more subtle.”
It was obvious to anyone watching that they were now onto the subject that Christine Everhart truly wanted to talk about. In fact, there was something about her that screamed that this was the entire reason the ‘special report’ had been put together.

“Wanda Maximoff joined the Avengers in the wake of the Ultron incident. She was seen fighting alongside the Avengers as they fought Ultron but little was known of her life prior to that. After her participation in the Lagos incident that went so horribly wrong, many questions were asked but few answers were found. However, in recent weeks, I was able to conduct an interview with the scientist who helped give Wanda Maximoff her powers, a Dr Sofia Tesarik, who once worked for HYDRA. It was a very edifying interview.”

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The room had gone very silent as Christine Everhart had laid out the evidence given to her by the Sokovian scientist. With every word, every picture, every piece of video that was shown, Steve went paler and paler. He was the one who had all but forced Wanda into the team. Sam hadn’t had any reason to protest, Clint had retired again soon afterward and Natasha had seemed indifferent. The only two people who had looked like they had wanted to protest had instead stepped down… or in Bruce’s case, run off. And Steve had been too relieved – it had been hard lying to Tony, at least at first – to even start to wonder why. It had suited his purpose and it had been… nice having teammates who didn’t challenge him at every turn.

But what they were seeing… he’d tried to convince himself that Wanda was just like him, a patriot doing her duty. But she wasn’t. And he’d known she wasn’t. He’d known it all along. But he hadn’t cared. She’d been useful to him and that was all that had mattered. If he could get people to accept Wanda, then getting them to accept Bucky would be easy. That had been his reasoning, even if he hadn’t been able to articulate it for a long time.

He looked around and saw that Sam was grey and shaken and Clint had retreated up on top of a nearby bookshelf and was shooting daggers at Wanda. He wasn’t sure when Clint’s attitude had changed towards Wanda but then he hadn’t really been paying much attention to his teammates since they got here. Hell, he hadn’t been paying much attention to them before that either. His mind had been on Bucky and Bucky only. He glanced around again and frowned. Where Scott was, he didn’t know but then he hadn’t really seen the man around much lately, had he?

He turned back to the television just in time to see Wanda’s psychological reports – the true ones, apparently done after HYDRA had realised the extent to which she’d been manipulating the first round of psychiatrists – displayed with the conclusions of the reporting psychologists highlighted for all to see. Psychopathic tendencies. Extreme narcissism, only exception Pietro Maximoff. Lack of empathy for anyone other than her brother. Lack of compassion for anyone other than her brother. Manipulative. Should be closely supervised at all times.

Then one conclusion was brought into sharp relief on the screen – ‘Under no circumstances is subject to be allowed near Anthony Stark until such time as disposing of him is warranted. Subject will disobey any orders given to her regarding Anthony Stark and pursue her own agenda against him.’

“Shit! What did you do to him?” Clint snarled.

Steve looked up with a frown at both the language and the accusatory tone but then his attention was yanked back when he heard Sam’s wavering, nervous, “Wanda?”

Wanda was standing, her hands wreathed in red mist and her eyes alive with fury and… Steve shuddered. It looked like madness.
“Wanda,” he said soothingly, getting to his feet and holding one hand out to her. “We all know that’s a load of rubbish. This Everhart woman just hates people like us.”

He actually had no idea whether that was true or not, though he had heard Tony complain about her once or twice. He’d also said something about sleeping with her a long time ago but Steve hadn’t wanted to hear about that sort of thing. He didn’t really approve of Tony’s behaviour towards women.

“She’s ruined everything!” Wanda screeched.

Clint snorted as he shuffled back a little further on his perch. His hands were clenching and unclenching and his eyes were darting around as though he was mapping the room for easy ways to get out. “What? By telling the truth? Yeah, right. Sounds more to me like she’s got your number pretty damn good. She also sounds like she’s going to skewer the lot of us.”

Steve winced and opened his mouth to say something but before he could the red mist seemed to surround Wanda like an aura and her entire face lit up with something deeply disturbing.

Just as Steve was about to speak again, to say something, to do something to defuse this situation, Wanda suddenly arched up onto her toes, flinging her arms out wide and screaming in agony as red mist flew in through the ceiling and struck her. She convulsed and for a moment Steve thought she was actually floating. Then, the red mist pulsed out from her, too fast for any of them to avoid it, and it engulfed all three of them. They convulsed in the mist as it swirled around them then it abruptly disappeared, leaving them all standing exactly where they had been. Steve shook his head and blinked, trying to remember what they’d just been talking about and what had just happened. He looked over at the TV but it was off and he frowned. Clint and Sam looked to be in much the same state but Wanda was smiling at them.

“We have to go!” she said urgently. “We will be heroes. No one will be able to deny that from us ever again.”

“What?” Steve said, feeling like he was missing something but unsure as to what.

“Dr Banner!” Wanda said. She pointed at the television. None of the three men seemed to notice the madness gleaming in her eyes. “It was on the TV. He is to be executed! We must rescue him!”

That galvanised the three men. Steve and Sam headed for where their gear was stored and Clint jumped down from the bookshelf to join them. They didn’t notice Wanda’s triumphant expression.

In a moment, they were ready to go and they marched towards the doors of the wing where they lived. Steve pushed the door open without a thought but they were brought to a halt when the two women standing guard stood in their way.

“You may not leave this part of the palace,” one of the women said impassively.

“I’m sorry but we have to,” Steve said. “We must rescue our friend.”

“You may not leave,” the woman repeated.

Steve sighed and shook his head, wishing he had his shield with him. “I am sorry.”

He launched himself at her. An arrow whizzed past him towards the other woman and there was red mist everywhere. He should have felt afraid but instead all he felt was the relief that they were finally going to prove to everyone how wrong they were about the Accords.
I can reveal that this and what we saw with Tony last chapter is the only time Wanda has manipulated their minds. (Well, apart from the canon stuff obviously.) Everything else they're just going to have to take responsibility for themselves. This will be elaborated on in later chapters. I know some of you have been wondering just how much meddling she's been doing. The answer is... not as much as Steve and the others might eventually wish she had.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Was that cliffhanger last chapter? Well, here's what the ExVengers are doing and what the New Avengers do in response.

Chapter Notes

It's been awhile since I wrote this sort of action so I hope it isn't too crap. Also, I have no idea whether Ross would be kept in Leavenworth but I like the name so we'll wave our hands and say he was.

I did have all these plans for all this MCU-style fighting but then I realised that this is Tony being sensible so I'm afraid the fight is a bit anticlimactic in places.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

T’Challa stood silent and still as he watched the medical staff place members of the Dora Milaje onto stretchers. An inexperienced observer might think he was watching impassively but there was no one in the vicinity who was inexperienced and all of them were giving the King a wide berth. They knew him well enough to see the pure rage written in every line of his body. Not that they didn’t share that rage but no one wanted to be the one who caused the King’s famed temper to spill over.

“T’ve contacted the Accords Council and the New Avengers and let them know what’s happened.”

T’Challa glanced over to his sister as she joined him and nodded shortly. “What did they say? And did you give Tony the transponder information for the jet?”

“I did,” Shuri said, answering his second question first. “He was already tracking them when I got off the phone. As for the Council, Clements didn’t sound pleased but when I told him what had happened, he seemed taken aback. I don’t think any of us were prepared for just what the witch would do if they decided they wanted to leave.”

T’Challa growled, soft and low. “What else?”

“The Council is convening as we speak and will liaise with the New Avengers,” Shuri continued as calmly as she could manage as she looked at the carnage left behind by the rogue Avengers. “They… don’t want you involved.”

T’Challa’s growl was louder this time but then he drew in a deep breath and pushed his anger away. He firmly reminded himself of the last time he’d allowed his anger to overrule his common sense and what that had cost him and what it had cost many innocent people. He could not afford to do that again, not now that he was King.

“Did Lang know anything?”
Shuri shook her head. “No. I stopped in to see him before coming here. He was horrified. He did not lie to me. He has no intention of shifting an inch outside his rooms unless it’s with our permission.”

T’Challa nodded. “Tony?”

“Said not to worry and that they’d stop them,” Shuri replied, a hint of fondness slipping into her voice despite the circumstances. She’d had opportunities to speak to Tony Stark and liked him immensely. The fact that Tony did not talk down to her and in fact enjoyed talking tech with her for as long as she wanted had definitely helped with that. “He said that if there was anything we needed, we were just to ask. He also asked after those who were injured.”

T’Challa let out a soft huff and relaxed just a fraction. Of course Tony was worried about people he’d never met. He had severely misjudged the man the first time he’d met him and was glad Tony had given him a second chance.

“Let’s go and speak to Zuri,” he said. “I want to know how Maximoff was able to bring down his wards when he told me they were near impregnable.”

“I’d like to know that as well,” Shuri said grimly. “And I imagine so does he.”

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“Well?” Tony snapped, looking over to Rhodey as he set the satphone down.

They were both on the quinjet along with Hope, Vision and Stephen instead of flying themselves and neither were happy about it. Unfortunately, though they’d been able to track the Wakandan jet to just off the shores of the United States, that was when they’d lost the transponder signal. One of the rogues must have remembered it and disabled it. Tony suspected Barton. He was the one who knew how to pilot jets like these.

“No change. Nevada,” Rhodey said briskly. “Area 52.” He moved forward to give Vision, who was piloting the jet, the coordinates.

“Not Area 51?” Tony said when Rhodey turned back. “I’m disappointed, sugarplum.”

“Tony, there is no Area 51,” Rhodey said in a flat deadpan and even Tony couldn’t quite figure out whether he was serious or not.

“But… but… but… all those conspiracy theories?” Tony said with a tiny smirk. “You’re saying they’re not true? I’m crushed, platypus. Truly crushed.”

Rhodey smiled faintly and shifted slightly in his new War Machine armour. Tony knew they were both hiding their nerves behind the banter. Rhodey’s new armour had not been fully tested. It worked, it was safe. Tony was confident about that or he’d never have let Rhodey put it on. But Rhodey hadn’t done any testing in it, hadn’t put on any armour at all since his fall for that matter, and neither of them knew how things were going to go. Rhodey had been determined though. He was not going to stay behind. Not for this.

When they’d lost the transponder signal, they’d been forced into a crucial and very frustrating delay while people were sent to Leavenworth to extract the information about the Abomination’s location out of Ross. They were sure they knew anyway from information Tony had but they needed the confirmation. It would have been a hell of a lot worse to assume their information was accurate and then find out they were very, very wrong.

True to form, Ross had tried to leverage the knowledge into some sort of advantage for himself.
Thankfully, they’d anticipated that and had official permission from both the President and the Accords Council to get the information by whatever means necessary. Tony didn’t like it. He didn’t like the precedent it set, didn’t like that they would allow themselves to stoop to that level, but he had conceded the necessity. The last thing they needed was the ExVengers letting the Abomination loose by mistake.

“He folded pretty quickly.”

Tony looked over at Rhodey. “What?”

“Ross,” Rhodey said. “He folded pretty quickly once he realised he wasn’t going to get anything out of this and was only making his situation worse. Turns out he was all bark and no bite.”

Tony nodded and grimaced. “Yeah.”

“I know you didn’t like it.”

“We’re better than that,” Tony snapped then he sighed. “Sorry.”

Rhodey thumped their shoulders together, causing a ringing sound through the jet from the impact of their armour.

“Do they know what’s coming?” Tony asked after a moment of silence.

“Yeah, they’re already in lockdown,” Rhodey replied. “All their defences are engaged so unless they read our transponder signals, they’re going to be shooting.” He nudged Tony again. “So turn your damn suit transponder on when we leave the jet.”

Tony nodded and squared his shoulders. He turned to Vision, Hope and Stephen. “You guys know what you have to do?”

They all nodded. Hope looked nervous and the wings of her suit flickered and flitted in response. Stephen was sitting cross-legged on one of the bench seats and for once he truly looked like the Sorcerer Supreme. Even his cloak looked serious and powerful. Around his neck he wore the Eye of Agamotto, though Tony was hoping they wouldn’t have to use it. After all the trouble with the tesseract and the mind stone, he was a bit nervous about those things. For his part, Vision just looked serene. Tony envied him.

“We’ll see you when we get there,” he said before he stomped towards the rear of the jet, Rhodey on his heels.

Tony hit the release and the rear access door of the plane unfolded. The noise level in the jet picked up and the wind howled. Tony didn’t hesitate and shot out of the plane. For a moment, he was on his own then Rhodey came flying up on his right. As they turned to head towards Area 52, they saw the rear door of the jet close up.

“How you doing, honeybear?” Tony asked as they sped forward, easily outdistancing the jet.

There was a moment of silence. “Yeah. Good,” Rhodey said, his voice just a little bit strangled. Tony wanted to say something or do something to make things better but he didn’t know what he could do. Rhodey had made it plain that he didn’t blame Tony and he certainly hadn’t reacted the way Tony had thought he might. He’d been almost philosophical about it. Not that he was ever going to fall again. Tony had made sure of that and incorporated it into both suits.
“Area 52, this is War Machine inbound with Iron Man,” Rhodey said, strictly professional. He seemed to take some comfort in it as his voice had steadied. “Are you reading our transponder signals?”

“War Machine, this is Area 52. We have both of you on radar.”

“The New Avengers are following us but we’ll be there in five minutes.”

“Roger that, War Machine. We see the New Avengers quinjet but there’s no sign of the rogues as yet.”

“The Abomination?” Tony asked.

“Contained, Iron Man. The lockdown drops the cells into the lowest subbasement.”

“Good,” Tony replied. “Remember, they think Bruce Banner is there so they’ll be looking for the strongest containment cells.”

“Roger that, Iron Man.” There was a momentary pause. “Iron Man, War Machine, we have a jet on visual. It has Wakandan registry. Do you want us to let it land?”

Tony hesitated for a moment then metaphorically squared his shoulders. He and Rhodey had already discussed this and made their decisions.

“No,” he said. “Warn them off. If they refuse to back off, shoot them down.” He grimaced. “Gently. We’d like to take them in alive.”

“Roger that, Iron Man.” There was a strong thread of irony in the voice and Tony could almost hear the unspoken question about precisely how they were supposed to shoot someone down gently.

The line was left open and they heard the people at Area 52 challenge the rogues. They also heard when the rogues refused to back down and the order was issued to shoot them down. For a moment there was silence and indeterminate chatter then the radio operator was back on the line to them.

“Iron Man, War Machine. The rogues have somehow evaded our attempt to shoot them down. We will continue to try but the sooner you get here, the better.”

“We’ll be there asap,” Tony said then he switched over to the New Avengers channel. “You heard ‘em, people. Get ready. It looks like we’re going to have a fight on our hands when we get there.”

“How do you want us?” came Hope’s voice over the comms.

“Stephen, Maximoff is all yours,” Tony said. “Hope, I want you to get ahead of them and get between them and the cells. Disable the elevators if you have to, just do your best to keep them in the upper levels. Viz, I want you with Rhodey and me. The suits aren’t really made for close quarters fighting so I want you backing us up. I want them captured. You’ve all got the tranquiliser darts Hill provided. Use them. They should take down Barton and Wilson easily enough. You might need more than one for Maximoff and Rogers.”

“Got it.” “Understood.” “Yes, Tony,” came the responses from the jet.

“Not bad,” Rhodey said over a private channel. “You’ve got this leadership thing down pretty good, Tones.”

Tony smiled wryly. “I learned from the best, Rhodey bear.”
They put on a burst of speed and both fell silent until they came within visual range of the base. The Wakandan jet was obvious, sitting on the edge of the landing area and Tony didn’t hesitate before blasting the wings with his repulsors, rendering it incapable of taking off without extensive repairs. Under the circumstances, he didn’t think T’Challa would mind.

“FRI, take our jet up once the others are off,” he ordered. “I don’t want them to have an easy way out if this gets screwed up.”

“You got it, boss.”

As they got closer, they saw bodies lying on the ground. Tony sucked in a breath but then he saw a couple of them move slightly. He and Rhodry came in for a sharp landing and they made their way over to the nearest soldier. They crouched down beside the man as best as they could in their armour but quickly saw that trying to get information out of him would be useless.

“Maximoff,” Rhodry said with disgust.

“Stephen?” Tony said into the comms. “Maximoff has been working her magic with the soldiers. Some of them are still alive. Check them when you get here but don’t linger. I want her neutralised.”

“Of course, Tony,” came Stephen’s calm reply.

Tony and Rhodry walked through the battered open door of the complex, their footsteps sounding heavy and imposing. They passed more bodies – some twitching, some rather ominously still – and Tony’s expression became more and more grim behind the faceplate of his suit.

“Tony? We’re here,” came Vision’s calm voice over the comms.

“Good. FRIDAY’s going to take the jet somewhere safe,” Tony said.

“She mentioned that,” Vision replied as he floated into sight behind them. A swift buzzing noise that whipped past told them Hope was on her way deeper into the facility.

“Stephen?” Tony said.

“I’ll be with you in a moment,” the sorcerer said, sounding slightly distracted. Then he sighed. “There’s nothing I can do for these men right now. I may have to call in Wong. He’s better at this than I am but…” He paused for a moment. “There may be nothing we can do for them at all.”

Tony was silent for a moment. “Dammit,” he snarled. “What is Rogers thinking?”

“Are we sure he is thinking?” Rhodry replied.

Tony’s reply was interrupted by Hope. “I found them.” Her voice sounded shaky and Tony frowned. “Tony… it’s Maximoff. She’s… dear god, I think she’s gone mad.”

“Is she controlling the others?” Tony asked as Stephen hurried up to join them.

“That’s what’s really scary,” Hope replied. “I don’t think she is. Maybe she’s making them not see what kind of state she’s in but Rogers, Barton and Wilson do seem to be trying to rein her in. They wouldn’t be doing that if she was controlling them.”

Tony hesitated. “Rhodrey?”

“Do not engage, Wasp,” Rhodry said, his command voice well and truly evident. “Just follow and observe until we get there with Dr Strange and Vision.”
“You got it, War Machine,” Hope said, her voice steadying and become more crisply professional. “Follow and observe only. I’ll report in regularly.”

Tony turned to Vision as Rhodey finished off with Hope. “I think we’re going to need more than just Stephen. Can you stop her?”

Vision looked pensive. “Yes, I believe I can but I will need physical contact. I will coordinate with Dr Strange.”

Tony and Rhodey exchanged glances. “Okay. Do that,” Rhodey said. He didn’t sound happy about changing the plan but he knew it was necessary. “We’ll manage the others. Just keep her out of our fight.”

Vision and Stephen nodded and began a quick low voiced conversation as they continued to follow the rogues’ path of destruction in the base. The number of bodies thinned as they got further inside. Hope reported that the rogues had taken the elevator down and she had joined them. None of the New Avengers bothered with the elevators. Tony and Rhodey sent the second elevator to an upper level then forced open the doors to the elevator shaft. They then simply dropped down, using their repulsors to guide themselves. Stephen did much the same, his cloak allowing him to fall quite gracefully, much the same as Vision. As a result, they arrived in the lowest subbasement just a minute or two after the rogues and Tony and Rhodey exchanged a few words before they gave Hope a warning, levelled their repulsors at the door and blew them outwards.

When the four of them burst out of the elevator shaft, the rogues were still recovering from the surprise. The elevators opened into a cavernous foyer arrangement, one easily big enough to allow for something like the Abomination to walk through without bending over or being able to easily trap people against a wall. That gave Tony and Rhodey something of an advantage since they could take to the air and weren’t trapped on the ground. They both did so immediately, drawing the attention of the rogues and allowing Vision and Stephen to get closer to Wanda.

“Put your weapons down and surrender,” Tony said coldly, pointing his repulsors squarely at Rogers. Beside him, he could hear the weapons powering up on Rhodey’s armour.

“Tony, you don’t have to do this,” Rogers pleaded. “Let us get Bruce and take him back to… where we are. He’ll be safe and you can tell Ross where to go and get things back to normal.”

A harsh barking laugh escaped Tony before he could do anything to stop it. Somehow, despite everything T’Challa had told him, he’d still thought that the ExVengers’ idea that Bruce was being held captive to blackmail him was a joke of some sort.

“Tony,” Rhodes said on a private channel.

Tony sent back a text message as reassurance and steadied himself. “Bruce isn’t here,” he said, still in that cold tone. “In fact, I’m pretty sure he’s not even on the planet. And in case you haven’t been keeping up with the news, Ross is out. Right out. All the way to prison out.”

Whatever Rogers was going to say next was drowned out by an unholy screech from Maximoff. They all turned to see what was going on. Wanda was over near the doors to one of the chambers but she had been cornered by Vision and Stephen before she could do anything.

“You!” Wanda screamed, pointing at Strange. “Usurper! Liar! Thief!”

Stephen arched an eyebrow and gave her a look of amused, smug superiority, complete with a highly irritating smirk. It was Tony’s opinion that Stephen had really cornered the market on that
expression. It was even better than his own version. It wasn’t even directed at him and he could still feel a faint sense of irritation at that look of smug superiority.

“I’d argue with you but I don’t think you have the mental capacity to understand,” Stephen drawled in a truly offensive tone. His hands had been moving while he was speaking and when Wanda inevitably lashed out with her magic, it merely bounced off the golden shield Stephen had raised.

Tony dragged his attention away from that battle. As much as he wanted to watch it, he had bigger fish to fry and no desire to draw Maximoff’s attention, not after just getting rid of her witchy magic from his mind.

“Rogers!” he barked. “Surrender.”

Steve didn’t answer instead he started running towards him and Rhodey. Tony watched him impassively for a moment then he raised an arm and curled his fist downwards slightly. A compartment on the forearm of his suit popped open and a small dart gun emerged. He fired it three times at Rogers and three tiny darts hit the man smack in the middle of his chest. Rhodey had followed his lead and Clint and Sam had each been hit with a single dart in the middle of their chests. The three of them stared down at the small darts then they slowly crumpled into heaps on the ground.

“Huh,” Tony said. “That was anticlimactic.”

“Good,” Rhodey said as he started to land. “A fight would have been a waste of our time. They’re idiots, not enemies.”

Tony followed him down and chuckled. “I like that, sugarplum. I’ll have to use it.”

“As long as you give me the credit,” Rhodey replied.

They quickly secured all three men and Tony hoped his newly designed cuffs would hold Rogers. Though, if they didn’t, he did still have more of the darts. They then turned their attention to the fight going on between Stephen and Wanda.

As they watched, they realised it was less of a fight and more of a case of Wanda screeching and throwing a highly dangerous tantrum and Stephen fending off her attacks, while levitating dramatically and making snide insulting comments, and trying not to seem too bored. It was mostly an act, a deliberate attempt to keep Wanda’s attention solely on him as they could see Vision moving quietly around to come up behind Wanda.

Then Vision clamped his hands on either side of Wanda’s head. They saw him murmur something to her then the stone in his forehead glowed brightly and Wanda screamed in rage and despair. The red mist surrounding her flickered and then faded and when Vision let her go, she dropped to her knees and began sobbing uncontrollably.

Vision gave her a look of regret as Stephen lowered himself to the ground. Tony and Rhodey joined them and Wasp suddenly appeared and joined them.

“I feel rather superfluous,” Hope quipped with a rueful smile.

“You were our eyes and ears,” Tony said. “And you did your job superbly.”

Rhodey ignored their byplay and turned to Vision. “Is she neutralised?”

Vision shook his head. “Temporarily contained. But I believe that between us, the sorcerers of Kamar-Taj and myself can come up with a permanent solution.”
“No!” Wanda snarled and before anyone could stop her, she had darted over to the door of the containment unit and hit the emergency release button.

Tony held his breath, hoping that whatever lockdown they were on rendered that mechanism useless but then red lights began flashing and a siren began blaring and the door opened to reveal the Abomination. The name was well earned. The Hulk, while big and green, was still very human in appearance. The Abomination looked almost reptilian and there was little in the way of humanity in his eyes.

The Abomination roared, the noise deafening in the enclosed space. He lashed out with one hand, catching Wanda and slamming her against the wall with a loud crunching, squelching sound that made everyone flinch. The Abomination pulled his hand away and Tony knew there was going to be no saving Wanda now. He had once made an offhand comment about how he could have left Rogers and Barnes as a smear on the wall in Siberia if he’d really been trying to kill them. The Abomination had done precisely that with Wanda. As what was left of her slid down the wall leaving a bloody smear in its wake, Tony turned his attention to the Abomination, his mind racing.

“FRIDAY, fire up VERONICA and get her here ASAP.”

“Yes, boss.” FRIDAY sounded nervous and a little scared but he didn’t have time to reassure his baby girl right now.

“Guys, let’s grab the sleeping beauties and get the hell out of here,” he said. “If we try to fight this guy here, we’re going to end up like Maximoff. We need open space.”

Nobody had moved yet, not even the Abomination beyond his initial swipe that had planted Maximoff into the wall. There was an eerie sort of stalemate going on and Tony revised his initial assessment of the Abomination’s intelligence. The huge creature was watching them with a frightening amount of intelligence, his eyes darting over to the elevators from time to time. He seemed to be assessing them and how much of a threat they would be to his need to escape.

“If we let him out and can’t stop him, he’s going to escape,” Rhodey objected.

“He’s already escaped, honeybear,” Tony replied. “We need to buy some time until the Hulkbuster armour gets here and we can’t do that if we’re pancaked against the walls.”


It was almost as though the Abomination could hear Rhodey’s call as he moved at the same moment they did. For a moment, Tony thought they were not going to be able to avoid a fight right now but as they each scooped up one of the unconscious ExVengers, the Abomination darted past them with a surprising amount of agility and headed straight for the elevator shaft.

“Shit!” Tony yelled.

“Let’s go,” Rhodey barked. “We’ve got to hold him up when he gets up top.”

Hope shrunk down and darted off ahead of them, Stephen swooping along in her wake. Tony, Rhodey and Vision took off after them. Once they reached the upper levels of the facility, they dropped the unconscious rogues on the floor in the entry foyer then headed outside where they found Hope playing a dangerous game of keepings off with the Abomination. She was flitting in close to him at normal size then when he lashed out at her, she would shrink and dart away. Around her
glowed the golden framework of Dr Strange’s protective wards.

Rhodey didn’t hesitate and shot into the air, his shoulder gun booming as it fired at the Abomination. The rounds bounced off the huge creature without doing any damage but he did get his undivided attention.

“How long until VERONICA gets here, FRI?” Tony barked as he joined Rhodey, his repulsors having about as much effect on the Abomination as the bullets had.

“Another ten minutes, boss.”

“Shit.” Tony switched to open comms. “Ten minutes, guys. We need to nail him to the ground here for another ten minutes.”

Grim acknowledgements came over the comms and they moved to surround the Abomination, drawing his attention from one to the other and not letting him settle or try to get away. It was a gruelling sort of business as the Abomination was more agile then any of them expected.

“Will the Hulkbuster stop him?” Hope asked after several minutes, sounding a bit breathless as she dodged the Abomination’s fist.

“Um… maybe?” Tony replied. An alert beeped in his helmet and he gave a sigh of relief. “We’ll find out.”

He shot up into the air then stilled as the Hulkbuster armour wrapped itself around him. The moment everything was fully integrated, he let himself land with a thundering thump and stepped forward.

“Okay, big guy,” he said out loud. “Let’s dance.”

The Abomination roared and charged at him. Tony braced himself as he moved forward. They met in a thunderous crash and Tony was quickly sent flying through the air. He fired up his systems and turned to face the Abomination again.

“Tones?” came Rhodey’s worried question.

“This is gonna be ugly,” Tony muttered. The Abomination’s hit had impacted with his chest and even through the layers of both the Hulkbuster armour and his normal armour, he could feel that hit more than he cared to admit. It wasn’t bad enough to kick off any alerts but the ache that had suddenly flared into life in his chest was new and decidedly unpleasant.

He and the Abomination crashed into each other again and this time Tony managed to hold his own for a few minutes, swinging his armoured fists at the Abomination as the others swooped in and resumed their own attacks. But before they could make any headway, once again the Abomination managed to get him off balance and send him flying. He smashed into the ground and grimaced as various alerts and alarms went off in his HUD.

He had just levered himself to his feet when there was a second roar and he whipped around just in time to hear the subsequent bellow.

“HULK SMASH!”

Chapter End Notes
Oh, wait... is that another cliffhanger? *gasp* Oops! >:D

And oh dear, I killed Wanda. What a shame. Better go change the tags!
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

The Hulk is here to smash and smash he will.
No cliffhanger this chapter, I promise!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“HULK SMASH!”

Tony decided right then and there that he had never been so glad to see Bruce in his entire life, especially since he was currently big and green and Tony knew he’d defeated the Abomination before. The Abomination also seemed to realise this as he let out an enraged bellow and charged straight towards the Hulk.

“Stay out of their way,” Tony barked as he launched himself into the sky. “I’m not sure jolly green is going to recognise friend from foe once he gets going but if you can get a shot in at the Abomination without hurting Hulk, do it.”

Despite what he’d just said, Tony hovered close to the fight, looking for an opportunity but mostly watching in awe. He’d never really seen the Hulk go toe to toe with someone who was his equal. There had been glimpses during the Chitauri invasion but Tony had been a little busy there himself so he hadn’t really been paying a lot of attention. This however was something else and Tony could quickly see that while the Abomination was bigger and stronger, the Hulk was smarter.

He quickly manoeuvred around so that he was behind the Abomination and waited until the Hulk sent the larger creature staggering then he sent a repulsor blast right at the Abomination’s left knee. It didn’t do any damage but it did make the knee buckle. The Abomination staggered momentarily and the Hulk leapt at him, lashing out with fearsome punches to his face and jaw. The Abomination roared and fought back and Tony shot up into the air to find another opening.

“Rhodey,” he began.

“Yeah, I see it,” Rhodey replied. “Get behind the Abomination, everyone. Try and aim for his knees and ankles. Forget his back and neck. That ridge of spines will make any attacks there useless. Be careful not to hit the Hulk but let’s try and make his job a little easier.”

They all moved around, with Rhodey and Tony taking higher positions and the others ranging below them. Tony, who was watching closely, was sure he saw the Hulk glance at them and recognise what they were doing. He might have been fooling himself, biased as he was in favour of the big guy, but it sure as hell looked like the Hulk was trying to manoeuvre the Abomination so that they could take their shots.

Unfortunately, they once again misjudged the intelligence of the Abomination as it didn’t take him long to figure out what they were doing. He sidestepped the Hulk and launched himself up into the air right at War Machine. They heard Rhodey curse over the comms as he shot upwards but the
Abomination managed to grab hold of his foot, dragging him back down.

“Rhodey!” Tony yelled, fear shooting through him, and he immediately flew straight at the Abomination’s face, repulsors blasting at full strength.

Vision immediately followed, the beam from the jewel in his forehead lancing out straight at the Abomination. The giant roared in pain and let go of Rhodes, who immediately engaged his repulsors and shot upwards again. Tony followed without hesitation.

“Rhodey?” he demanded as he came level with his friend, his heart thumping painfully in his chest.

For a moment, there was no answer and Tony was just on the verge of ordering FRIDAY to override Rhodey’s suit when he spoke.

“I’m okay, Tones.”

“You sure?” Tony didn’t give a damn what was happening with the Abomination right now.

“Rhodey bear?”

The War Machine armour steadied and then the face plate popped open. Rhodey looked slightly grey and there was sweat beading his forehead but he managed a small smile nonetheless.

“I’m good.”

A triumphant roar from the Hulk made them both look down. Stephen had taken advantage of the Abomination’s distraction and used his magic to bring the creature down with thick golden threads wrapped around his wrists and ankles. The Hulk had taken the opportunity Stephen had given him to leap on top of the Abomination, grab his head in both hands and just start pounding it into the ground. The Abomination tried to fight back but Stephen’s magic kept him down, though it was clearly a struggle for Stephen to hold him. Finally, after one last thump of his head into the ground, the Abomination shuddered and went still. The Hulk smacked his head into the ground a few more times, whether to be sure or just because he wanted to, Tony didn’t know. Then the Hulk straightened and let out a triumphant roar and thumped his chest with one fist a few times.

Tony flew over to hover in front of the Hulk. He let his helmet fold back and grinned. “Yeah, big guy. You’re the man.”

Hulk looked pleased at the praise. “Hulk smash puny soldier.”

It took a moment for Tony to figure out what Hulk meant. Hulk obviously remembered that the Abomination had once been the soldier Blonsky.

“Maybe not so puny,” Tony said dryly. “But you sure smashed him anyway.”

“Tin Man help,” Hulk rumbled, looking very contented. He looked over at Stephen curiously then snorted. “Flashy Man did too.”

Stephen looked faintly offended by that and Tony saw him mouthing the words ‘flashy man?’. He grinned and made a mental note to tease Stephen about that later. Then the sorcerer sighed and nodded to the Hulk.

“I was glad to help.”

Rhodey came into land besides Tony and the Wasp and Vision joined them. Hulk eyed them warily then grunted at Vision. Tony assumed that the Banner part of the Hulk had recognised Vision. He
thought he should do some introductions anyway.

“You know Rhodey and Vision, right?” Tony gestured towards Hope. “This is Hope Van Dyne. She also goes by the name Wasp.”

Hulk peered at Hope curiously then grunted amiably. “Little buzzy.”

Hope grinned. “I like that.” She shot the others an impish look. “I might go with little buzzy. It’s more fun than Wasp.”

“Hey, I’m all for it,” Tony said, flashing her a grin in return. He then sobered and looked over at the Abomination and then up at the Hulk. “Hey, big guy? Think you can help us get him back into his cell?”

Hulk nodded and wandered over to the unconscious Abomination. He grabbed one ankle and started dragging the Abomination towards the building. He seemed utterly unconcerned with the way the Abomination’s head bounced up and down off the ground. He then halted just as quickly and frowned at the single small entrance.

“Too small.”

Tony looked around. “Yeah, good point. There has to be a back entrance to this place. FRI?”

A series of blueprints flashed up on his HUD and he saw the larger entrance they were going to need.

“Okay,” he said. “Hope and I will go with the Hulk. Rhodey, can you liaise with the military to get more people out here to help clean up? Vision, keep an eye on the rogues. Stephen, see if there’s anything you can do for the people Wanda hurt.”

The others nodded and indicated their agreement and they split up. Tony paused just long enough for VERONICA to disengage and head back home. Hope took off and buzzed forward but Tony kept pace with the Hulk, chattering away as the green giant dragged the Abomination along behind him. The Hulk grunted and occasionally gave him a look that seemed to be amused. When they reached the entrance, Hope already had the doors open and there was a rather shaken soldier talking to her. The soldier turned when he heard them approaching and then did a rather spectacular double take.

“Uh, right.” The soldier swallowed and gestured towards the door. “There’s a lift just inside… er, sir.”

Tony landed next to the soldier. “Is the Abomination’s cell still secure?”

The soldier, who had been staring at the sight of the Hulk calmly dragging the Abomination into the lift, gave a start and then saluted, seemingly by instinct because he didn’t really know what else he should be doing right now.

“Uh, yes, sir… uh, Iron Man… Mr Stark.”

Tony swallowed his grin. “Iron Man will do.”

“Yes, sir… Iron Man!” The soldier gulped then straightened. “Uh, all cells are secure, sir. We just need to get him back down there.”

“The Hulk’s on that.” A low, irritated rumble made Tony turn around and he saw the Hulk peering at the controls with annoyance.
“Tin Man. Too small.”

Tony flashed a grin at the soldier. “Come on. Before he gets grumpy.”

The soldiers looked alarmed but he joined them in the lift and set it in motion downwards. With the current state of crowding, Hope quickly shrank and from the Hulk’s rather pleased reaction, she’d perched on him somewhere. The soldier didn’t seem to know where to look but his gaze kept drifting up to the Hulk. After a few glances, the Hulk seemed to notice and bared his teeth at him.

“Uh, was that a… smile?” the soldier asked nervously.

“Relax,” Tony said, keeping his body language as casual as possible given he was wearing the armour. “Jolly green’s not going to attack you unless you start shooting at him. He hates being shot at.”

“Stings,” Hulk said with solemn agreement.

“Oh! No! No, I wouldn’t do that!”

Tony gave the soldier a close look and something dawned on his face. “Did the witch get to you?”

The soldier flinched. “I, uh… I don’t know.”

“Did you see frightening things?” Tony asked, placing a hand on the young man’s shoulder.

“Um, yes? No? I’m… not sure.” The soldier grimaced. “I felt like… like my greatest fear was about to come round the corner.”

Tony made a sour noise as the Hulk rumbled ominously. “Yeah, that sounds like her. When we’re done here, let Dr Strange have a look at you. He’ll have a better idea of whether he and his fellow sorcerers might need to do something to help you or whether it’ll fade on its own.”

The soldier nodded, looking relieved and grateful at the offer, as they reached the bottom. He hurried forward to open the doors that lead to the Abomination’s cell and Hope took off and buzzed around them watchfully. As the Hulk dragged the still unconscious Abomination into the cell, Tony kept a careful eye on the soldier. He didn’t think the kid would try and trap the Hulk but he wasn’t taking any chances. He only relaxed when the Hulk got out of the cell and the door closed again.

Hulk nodded in satisfaction then looked down at Tony. “Hulk tired. Smashing done. Hulk let Banner out now.”

“Okay, big guy,” Tony said. “It’s good to see you again.”

Hulk looked rather pleased with that then he dwindled and shrank and left a rather exhausted looking Bruce Banner standing there in tattered trousers and with a bewildered expression on his face that slowly smoothed into understanding as he realised where he was.

“Tony?” Bruce said hesitantly, as if he wasn’t sure of his welcome.

“Brucie!” Tony said cheerfully. He threw an arm around Bruce’s shoulders and steered him towards the normal elevators. The soldier followed along in their wake. “Let’s get you some clothes and somewhere better to sit down than the floor.” He paused and looked over towards the bloody smear on the wall. “Hope…”

“I’m on it,” Hope said, snagging the soldier’s arm and pulling him away so she could make
arrangements for Wanda’s body.

“That would be good,” Bruce said in answer to Tony. He glanced over his shoulder at the cells and grimaced. “I didn’t know…”

“Yeah, I know,” Tony said quietly. “I didn’t either. I’m going to bring it up at with the Accords Council and see what can be done with people like the Abomination. He may not be inclined to be reasonable but he still deserves some humane treatment.”

Bruce nodded but he felt tired and otherwise content to let Tony guide him out of the facility now that he knew that Tony was aware and was planning on doing something. It was only when they reached the foyer of the facility that he was jolted out his tired fugue at the sight of Steve, Clint and Sam unconscious on the floor.

“I… kind of missed something, didn’t I?” he said with a raised eyebrow.

“Just a bit,” Tony said dryly. “But don’t worry about that now. We can get you up to speed a bit later.”

Bruce gave Steve and the others another long look then he nodded and let Tony lead him out to the quinjet. Once there, Tony pulled open a cabinet and pulled out a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt. He caught a glimpse of other generic items like a first aid kit, a tool box and on one side, a mysterious secure container. Tony handed over the clothes and Bruce gratefully pulled them on. As he did, Tony was called away and Bruce sank down to sit on the floor in a corner at the back of the quinjet. The other guy was rumbling contentedly in the back of his head and he tilted his head back to rest against the wall and closed his eyes as he let the fragmented memories of recent events slowly surface.

Chapter End Notes

And in next week’s chapter, Tony and Bruce have a long overdue talk. I was going to be part of this chapter but it got a bit long so I split it off into its own chapter.

And yes, there was a spare set of clothes conveniently in Bruce’s size in the quinjet. Because Tony always plans ahead.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Bruce and Tony have a chat. In it, Bruce makes an apology, the Hulk calls Tony on his bull, Rhodes' Mama is scary, the Hulk nearly makes an appearance, Betty is awesome and in between all of that, things are discussed. But some are also left out, so there will be more Bruce and Tony chatting in the future.

Chapter Notes

There are some small spoilers for Thor: Ragnarok in here. Only small ones because I haven't seen it yet but I have read a pretty good synopsis. I'm planning on seeing it soon. I would have seen it earlier but those plans got disrupted for the same reason I was a bit lax responding to comments on the last chapter - I just had my knee operated on. It went well, everything is healing fine but they weren't kidding about the recovery being a bit exhausting. Also, it's been damn hot here for the last week, which hasn't helped.

Also, I couldn't resist hanging a lampshade on the fact that no matter who or what he plays, Jeff Goldblum always ends up being just... you know... Jeff Goldblum. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Brucie bear!”

Bruce opened his eyes and saw Tony clumping back into the quinjet, the suit gracefully folding away from him as he walked then tucking itself discretely in a corner. Behind him, Rhodney and the other people Bruce had seen but didn’t know made their way onto the jet. The man with the facial hair to rival Tony’s (Flashy man, Hulk rumbled deep in his mind before the man's actual name came back to him – Stephen Strange) and the woman (Little buzzy… or Hope Van Dyne) both nodded to him as they made their way forward. Despite Bruce having settled at the back of the jet, they were probably still within hearing distance but he appreciated the courtesy. Vision had stayed with the captives to act as a guard.

Rhodes, on the other hand, gave him a wary, suspicious glare as he stepped out of the War Machine armour but Bruce was more conscious of the high-tech braces on Rhodes’ legs. He knew something big must have happened while he was absent – that had been obvious in Tony’s new team and seeing Rogers, Barton and Wilson being held as prisoners – but those braces on Rhodes’ legs sent more of a shiver down his spine than the fate of some of his former teammates.

“Hi, Tony,” he said hesitantly. He may have come swooping back in at an opportune moment to essentially save the day but that didn’t change the fact that he’d run away in the first place, leaving Tony to face everything on his own.

Tony flopped down beside him and promptly draped himself all over him. Bruce couldn’t help the small huff of laughter that escaped him. No matter what else had changed, Tony was still quintessentially Tony. He was no more cautious or wary about Bruce or the Hulk now than he had
been when they first met.

“Your timing is impeccable,” Tony said as the jet took off.

“I wish I could take credit for that,” Bruce replied. “But it was pure coincidence.”

“Coincidence or not, I’m glad you were there,” Tony said. “I’m not sure how we would have stopped the Abomination without you.”

Bruce frowned. “But you had the armour you used in Johannesburg.”

“I did but the Abomination is a tad bit bigger than green bean so I wasn’t entirely sure it would work,” Tony replied.

Bruce didn’t really like thinking about Johannesburg. It lead him to thinking about the witch and that just made him angry. Even after his recent transformation, he could feel the other guy shift and growl at just the barest thought of the witch and what she did to him. But the thought of the witch did prompt into something he’d been thinking about for a long time.

“I’m sorry,” he blurted. “I should never have run away after… after Ultron.”

Tony blinked and looked surprised. “Hey, Brucie…”

“No,” Bruce interrupted. “I shouldn’t have done it. I should have stayed. I should have helped explain what we were doing.” He shook his head and grimaced. “I was a coward and I’m sorry.”

Tony looked like he didn’t know what he should say or do but Rhodes, who was sitting in the jet’s pilot seat, turned around, gave Bruce a long assessing look then nodded and smiled faintly. Bruce couldn’t deny that he felt a surge of relief at Rhodes’ approval. Tony might call them Science Bros but Rhodey was Tony’s oldest and best friend and his brother in every way except blood.

“Well…” Tony pursed his lips and frowned. “I didn’t mind. I mean, I figured you needed to run and hide for a bit.”

Bruce almost snorted. Tony’s expression didn’t match his words one bit. He had minded… very much so… but he clearly hadn’t expected Bruce to stick around.

“I did,” he admitted. “But I could have done it in a better way. I could have asked if you would help me hole up for a while and lick my metaphorical wounds. I was selfish and…” He sighed. “I’ll admit the witch had my thinking all mixed up but I still should have stopped and talked to you first before leaving.”

Tony still looked confused but then he brightened. “On a… er… positive note, we don’t need to worry about Maximoff anymore.”

“What happened?” Bruce asked warily.

“She let the Abomination out and promptly got pancaked against a wall by him,” Tony said, sounding like he wasn’t sure whether to be pleased or horrified.

Bruce felt much the same though Hulk rumbled contentedly in the back of his head. “Hoist on her own petard,” he murmured.

“Something like that,” Tony replied. He looked at Bruce curiously. “So… where have you been? I sort of lost you in that little village in Thailand.”
Bruce wasn’t surprised that Tony had been tracking him. He’d suspected it at the time and despite everything, it had made him feel… safe. Knowing that SHIELD was tracking him had made him want to run faster and further. Tony tracking him was like being watched over by a silent protector.

“That’s a… really long story,” he admitted ruefully. “The really short version is I was taken to participate in an… interstellar combat arena. Well, not me, the other guy. He’s more of the combat arena type. Said arena was run by a… a being who looked sort of like the neon part of the 80s had vomited all over Jeff Goldblum. I ended up fighting Thor. I won. We then joined forces, sort of teamed up with Loki of all people and then went off to fight someone called Hela who had taken over Asgard and planned to do much more, none of it good, and brought about Ragnarok in order to defeat her.”

Everyone on the jet was staring at him with wide eyes and startled expressions. He kind of understood. If he hadn’t been smack in the middle of it all, he’d probably have the same expression on his face. Actually, now that he thought about it, he was fairly sure he had that expression on his face through most of it. When the Hulk wasn’t in charge anyway.

He also had more to talk about with Tony, including the fact that he was essentially acting as a herald for several hundred Asgardian refugees in need of a home and he was sure Tony must have noticed that there was a missing quinjet, but that could wait. The Asgardians were going to take a few weeks to get here so there was no rush and that story was big enough that he wanted to be properly rested before he got into it.

“I… really don’t know where to go with that,” Tony said, a smile flickering around his lips. “I thought Thor said Loki was dead.”

“Are you really that surprised that he isn’t?” Bruce replied.

Tony paused for a moment. “Not really. How did you get back? And how did you get here?”

“Uh, this group… they call themselves the Guardians of the Galaxy dropped me off at the Compound, though they couldn’t stick around.” Bruce looked a little quizzical. “Then someone called Wong opened a portal here. He said there was trouble. When I saw that the trouble was… the Abomination, well, the rest you know.”

Tony frowned for a moment then remembered that Betty had hitched a ride to Leavenworth in case they needed her to act as some sort of leverage against her father.

“Oh… I should tell you before we get back.” He smiled wryly. “Your girlfriend is devious and delightful and I like her enormously. Also, we may have made you some stretchy pants, though she insisted they had to be purple.”

Bruce had looked baffled and wary at the start of that ramble then confused but at the mention of the pants being purple, his eyes widened. “Betty? What…?”

“You sent her a letter telling her she could trust me,” Tony said.

Bruce blinked. “Yes.”

“Well, she took you up on that,” Tony said. “Her father was going to use her as bait. She declined that invitation and came to the Compound.” He grinned. “We’ve been avoiding talking about our respective daddy issues and sciencing a lot. She’s pretty amazing.”

Bruce felt a little curl of jealousy in his chest, though Hulk immediately scoffed at it. Banner stupid, came the rumbling whisper in the back of his head. “Yes, she is,” he said weakly.
“Just a word of warning though,” Tony continued blithely, seemingly oblivious to Bruce’s confusion. “She may want to yell at you a bit. And also hug you. Possibly even kiss you. I’m pretty sure she’s planning some kissing.”

Bruce opened his mouth then closed it again. “Right,” he finally managed. Betty smart, came the now familiar rumble. Betty pretty. Listen to Betty.

Tony quirked an eyebrow at him. “That was an interesting look on your face, Brucie bear.”

“Um, the other guy… Hulk… was making his opinions known,” Bruce admitted.

Tony’s face lit up and Bruce was reminded once again of how much Tony liked both of them. “Hey! You’re getting along with jolly green then?”

Bruce smiled slightly. “Yes, you could say that. I think we’re… learning to work together. You, um…” He ducked his head a little. “You were right about him.”

Tin man good, was the response in his head. Then there was a low rumbling growl. Tin man hurt?

Bruce frowned and gave Tony a good look. “Are you alright?”

“Me?” Tony affected an innocent look. “I’m just peachy, Brucie bear.”

Tin man lying, was the immediate response.

“Tony,” Bruce said patiently. “You can lie to me… not very well but you can try anyway… but not to the other guy. And he says you’re lying.”

Tony immediately looked surprised, faintly annoyed and fascinated. He then grimaced and Bruce saw his hand go to his chest. “It’s… complicated.”

“Tones, if you’re injured and didn’t tell me…” Rhodes paused for a moment as he searched for a decent threat. “I’m going to tell my Mama.”

Bruce was amused to see Tony actually looked alarmed at that and wondered just how intimidating Rhodes’ mother was. “Honeybear, you wouldn’t?”

Rhodes turned and gave Tony an unimpressed look. “Try me.”

Tony sighed and deflated a little. “It’s not… I wasn’t hurt during the fight but I do think I’m going to have to meet with Helen and Dr Wu if I want to keep being Iron Man. The repair work done after Siberia isn’t going to hold up to extensive fighting in the long term, especially not if we face any more bruisers along the lines of the Abomination.”

Rhodey immediately looked worried. “But you’re okay at the moment?”

“Yes, Rhodey bear,” Tony said with a soft smile. “A bit sore but fine.”

“Um,” Bruce said carefully. “What happened in Siberia? I’ve been slightly out of touch but Steve and the others…”

He could immediately tell he’d hit a very sore spot when Tony actually flinched. Rhodes looked like he was about to get up and Strange and Hope also leaned forward with concerned looks on their faces. Then Tony straightened and squared his shoulders and seemed to let whatever mood had been threatening flow off him.
“We had something of a disagreement,” Tony said wryly. “It started with the world, led by King T’Chaka of Wakanda, deciding that they were a bit sick of the Avengers tromping over their borders without so much as a by your leave, doing untold damage in their countries then flitting off back home without so much as a backwards glance, let alone a ‘gee, I’m sorry we messed up your country’. This brought about a little document they decided to call the Sokovia Accords.”

“That seems… perfectly reasonable,” Bruce said, falling in with the tone Tony was setting.

“That’s what I thought,” Tony replied. “So did Rhodey and Vision.”

“They’re very sensible people,” Bruce said, feeling rather pleased when his bland tone drew a quick smile from Tony.

“I’d say that Natasha was as well but I’m not sure even Natasha knows whose side she’s on these days,” Tony continued a little more sourly than before. He waved a hand. “But as she’s chosen to go to ground and hide, I can’t exactly ask her.”

“Uhuh,” Bruce said, making a mental note to speak to Rhodes and Vision later to get the full story.

“Anyway,” Tony continued. “Because we’d all signed on the dotted line, we were asked to go and get the rest of them to do so as well. Steve decided that the UN is a corrupt government and he doesn’t want to play by the rules and besides, they all want to be mean to his bestest ever buddy Bucky so he said no.”

Bruce frowned slightly. “I feel like I’m missing a lot of details there.”

Tony waved a hand. “Eh, just a few. The gist of it is Steve said no and Wilson, Maximoff, Barton and some guy called Lang all decided to agree with him even though most of them had no idea what they were saying no to. Even Steve doesn’t know what he was saying no to since he never read the Accords.” Tony paused. “Oh, and Ross stuck his nose into things and did what he does best.”

Bruce considered that as Hulk grumbled in the back of his head. “Why was Ross involved?”

“Because he’s the Secretary of State and he decided to usurp the job of the US Ambassador to the UN,” Tony replied. “She’s… not terribly impressed with that, by the way.”

“Well, technically the Secretary of State can do that,” Bruce said. “He is in charge of treaties, accords, the ambassadors and such.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Tony conceded. “And if it had been anyone other than Ross that might have been okay.”

“But Ross is…” Bruce trailed off with a grimace.

“A dick,” Tony said. “A great big bag of dicks in fact.”

Bruce chuckled. “That’ll do. So what happened next?”

“Everyone gathered in Vienna to officially sign the Accords and there was a bomb set off,” Tony said. “It killed a lot of people, including King T’Chaka. There was video evidence indicating that James Buchanan Barnes aka the Winter Soldier, HYDRA’s most feared assassin and Steve’s long lost BFF, did it. A taskforce was put together to bring him in but Steve got to him first and decided that due process is for people other than him and his buddies.” He sobered. “People died. Others were injured. Rhodey was then very awesome and helped the authorities capture them. Oh, and King T’Chaka’s son, T’Challa, also decided due process was for other people and really was trying to kill
Barnes.”

Bruce looked at Tony with dismay. “I’m almost afraid to ask what happened next.”

“Oh, it gets worse,” Tony said glibly. “I managed to work my magic and convince the Accords Committee to declare all their actions as legitimate and get Barnes brought back to the US for proper treatment if they signed the Accords. Steve almost signed until he decided I was being a big ol’ meanie by asking Wanda to stay in the Compound.”

“Okay,” Bruce said with carefully hidden distaste. “Why were you asking Maximoff to stay in the Compound?”

“Oh, right,” Tony said. “I skipped that part. Before all of this happened, Steve, Maximoff, Romanov and Wilson went to Lagos in Nigeria and… well, I don’t know what they were there for but they caused a lot of damage and people died. Wanda was very obviously involved in those deaths and people were calling for her head. The US government was making noises about cancelling her visa and there was a lot of public protest. I needed her to stay in the Compound until I could sort things out. Vision was with her.”

Bruce looked at him for a moment. “Tony… why were you doing that?”

“Well,” Tony said with a frown. “I needed her to stay inside because if she got involved in anything, even a shouting match…”

“No,” Bruce said slowly. “Why were you doing any of it? You weren’t an Avenger anymore. That was Steve’s job.”

Tony snorted. “Right. As if he was going to know what to do.”

“So?” Bruce shrugged. “He’s the one who wanted her on the team. Neither you nor I did. He’s her problem, not yours.”

Rhodey cleared his throat very pointedly from the pilot’s seat but didn’t say anything.

Tony looked over at him and sighed. “Yeah, that’s what Rhodey’s been saying.”

“Colonel Rhodes is a very smart man,” Bruce said with raised eyebrows.

“Thank you, Dr Banner,” Rhodes said smugly.

“Anyway,” Tony said loudly, giving both of them an exasperated look, though he really seemed more amused than anything else. “Steve refused to sign and then Barnes was triggered into the Winter Soldier. It was a mess and he, Steve and Wilson all got away. We tracked them to the Leipzig/Halle airport and had a glorified spitball fight that ended with Natasha letting Steve and Barnes go.”

Before Bruce could say anything, Tony’s whole demeanour changed and he hunched in on himself a bit. Bruce was immediately alarmed. “Tony?”

“There was an accident at the airport when Barnes and Rogers were getting away,” Rhodes said, turning in his seat. “The arc reactor in my suit was hit and I fell. I’m paralysed from the waist down but Tony made me these pretty awesome braces and redesigned the War Machine armour for me.”

“Oh,” Bruce said, suddenly understanding Tony’s reaction. “Is there… can anything… be done?”
“There are some people looking into it.” Rhodey looked fondly at Tony. “Tones is also throwing money at anyone doing research in the area. But as I told him. It’s a bad beat, sure, but…” He threw out his arms and smirked. “Do I look like I’m letting it stop me from doing what I need to do?”

Bruce smiled. “War Machine looked as strong as ever.”

“See, Tones?” Rhodey said. “Bruce knows what’s what.”

Tony raised his head and Bruce winced at the guilty expression that was written all over the man’s face. “Platypus…”

“Tony.” Rhodey said firmly. “We’ve had this discussion. Several times, in fact. It was not your fault.” Tony frowned but he didn’t say anything and Rhodey looked at Bruce. “Barton, Maximoff, Lang and Wilson were all taken to the Raft. Illegally, I might add. One of the many things we were able to use to nail Ross to the wall. Tony went to speak to them to get an answer for an offhand comment that had been made and Wilson finally told him about the five Winter Soldiers that the guy behind all of this was supposedly going to let loose. Wilson only told Tones where this was happening on the proviso that he went alone.”

Bruce winced. “Please tell me you didn’t?”

“I did,” Tony said ruefully. “And yeah, it was a trap. Of a sort. The Winter Soldiers were dead. Zemo had lured us there because he hated the Avengers and he wanted his revenge. He sure as hell got it.”

Bruce looked at Tony then at Rhodes and the others. He could tell from the looks on their faces that they knew what had happened, that it was not good and it involved Tony. He very deliberately raised an eyebrow at Rhodes. The man gave him a nod of approval.

“There was a video,” Rhodes said, his voice soft and gentle. “Of the Winter Soldier murdering Howard and Maria Stark. Turns out Rogers had known about this since the fall of SHIELD and hadn’t told Tony. He also tried to lie about it right to Tony’s face.” He sighed. “Tony reacted about as well as anyone would have done under the circumstances. There was a fight. At one point, Barnes went for the suit’s arc reactor and Tony blasted his mechanical arm off then Rogers beat Tony down and smashed his shield into the arc reactor, disabling it. He and Barnes then left. Without Tony and without letting anyone know where Tony was.”

Bruce had been doing deep breathing exercises from about halfway through Rhodes’ explanation and he knew he was definitely looking a little green right now. In the back of his head, Hulk was roaring and raging and shoving at him, wanting out, and he was shouting the same thing over and over, **TIN MAN HURT. HULK HURT CAP.**

“Whoa! Easy there, Brucie bear,” Tony said, slinging his arm around Bruce’s shoulders. “While I’d love to see the big guy again, the quinjet really isn’t the right place for it.”

Bruce kept taking deep breaths and trying to calm the Hulk. He didn’t see Tony waving at Rhodes for something. Then there was a comm unit being fitted over his ear.

“Bruce?”

He sucked in a deep breath at the beautiful and oh-so-familiar voice and Hulk abruptly stopped raging. “Betty?” His voice was trembling and it was echoed by Hulk’s soft *Betty* in the back of his head.

“Oh, Bruce,” Betty breathed then she gave a wobbly laugh. “James said something about a code
“I… yeah,” Bruce said, hardly knowing what to say right now. “They were telling me about…”

“Siberia,” Betty said. “James said. It’s okay, Bruce. Look at Tony. He’s okay. He made it out.”

Bruce did that. He looked over at Tony, who was watching him anxiously, though it was obvious that Tony was just worried about his well-being, not that there was going to be an imminent Hulk appearance.

“I’m not sure I’m going to be able to handle the details,” Bruce admitted. “Not without the other guy making an appearance.”

“We’ll do it outside,” Betty said. “He can uproot a few trees. We could even build some effigies of Rogers for him to smash.”

The laugh caught Bruce by surprise and he felt the anger start to ebb.

Hulk like Betty. Betty has good ideas, Hulk rumbled as he stopped trying to push his way forward.

“Yeah,” Bruce said. He drew in a deep breath then let it out slowly. He looked over at Tony. “I’m okay. Betty…”

“I have to go,” Betty said. “I’m sort of in the middle of a meeting. I’ll be back at the Compound tonight and you’d better be there, Bruce Banner.”

Bruce smiled, tears pricking at his eyes. “I will.”

The comm unit went silent and Bruce pulled it off and held it out to Tony. “Good thinking.”

Tony grinned as it took the device. “If she could bring jolly green to a screeching halt in the middle of an active battle field at Culver, then I figured talking the pair of you down now would be easy.”

“So. How did you get back from Siberia?” Bruce asked. Hulk rumbled ominously in the back of his head and he shot a soothing thought in his alter ego’s direction.

“FRIDAY and Vision,” Tony said. “When the suit went offline, FRIDAY got hold of Vision and he came and got me with an SI team.”

“And…” Bruce hesitated. “Steve and the others?”

“They were in Wakanda,” Tony replied. “T’Challa offered Barnes sanctuary until such time as the trigger words in his head can be neutralised. Steve took that to mean he and his merry men and women were welcome as well.” He rolled his eyes. “T’Challa was… less than impressed but took them in anyway because at least they were all contained. He thought he could contain them indefinitely.”

“So how did they end up here?” Bruce asked.

Tony and Stephen exchanged glances. “That’s… a story that might need to wait,” Tony said with a quick grin. “Betty will get annoyed if we pull her out of a meeting for a second code green in less than ten minutes and I’m way more scared of her than of the big guy.”

Bruce chuckled. “That’s true. She is more scary than the other guy.” He paused. “Especially when it comes to New York taxis.”

Tony’s face lit up with glee. “Oh, now that’s something she didn’t mention. Now I can get her back
for the whole playboy thing.”

Bruce looked around in confusion as Rhodey snickered, Stephen rolled his eyes with obvious and very fond amusement and Hope grinned. “I… think I missed something there as well.”

“Tony was traumatised by a teenager,” Rhodey said over his shoulder which sent Hope off into helpless giggles while Stephen started laughing.

“I definitely missed something there,” Bruce replied but he looked more amused than anything else.

“Nothing important,” Tony said hurriedly. “Hey! I introduced the big guy but I haven’t had a chance to introduce you to the new people. This is Dr Stephen Strange, the Sorcerer Supreme, and this is Hope Van Dyne, the Wasp.”

Bruce gave both of them a little wave then he frowned. “Sorcerer Supreme? Thor mentioned you.”

Stephen nodded. “He was looking for his father here on Earth. He had his brother with him and I was eager to get Loki off the planet so I found Odin for them and sent them on their way.”

“Right,” Bruce said, looking a little nonplussed. “Loki wasn’t… well, he wasn’t that bad.”

“He’s afraid of you,” Tony said with a grin. “Or the big guy anyway. So basically you. You two are kind of a package deal. And you did ragdoll him into my penthouse floor and call him a puny god.”

Bruce sighed. “Well, there is that.”

“I’ve always kind of regretted not keeping that Loki-shaped hole in my floor,” Tony said. “I could have had some glass laid over it. It would have been a conversation piece.”

“Tony, no,” Bruce said firmly. “You do not need a Loki-shaped hole in your floor.”

Tony just grinned at him. “Well, true, I don’t need it but I do want it. Which is kind of the same thing when it comes to me. Just ask Pepper.”

Bruce decided that this topic would only lead to him agreeing to something ridiculous that would get both of them yelled at so he decided to change it.

“So what’s happening with the Avengers? Do they even exist anymore?”

Tony pouted at him for a moment then accepted the change of subject. “Well, you were right about us being a time bomb and not a team. The Avengers as they were no longer exist.” He waved a hand towards everyone on the jet. “Meet the New Avengers. We have a charter and a chain of command and that other good stuff. You and the big guy wanna join?”

Bruce smiled slightly. “I’d like to read the Accords first and maybe make a few suggestions myself but I’m leaning towards yes.” He faltered for a moment as he remembered one of the things he needed to talk to Tony about. “Tony… you were right.”

“I’m right about a lot of things,” Tony said with a raised eyebrow. “Which one in particular?”

“There’s something… someone… coming,” Bruce replied. “His name is Thanos, the Mad Titan. The Chitauri were his.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “And Loki?”

“I… didn’t really ask,” Bruce replied. “But I’m thinking… not. Or rather I’m thinking that he and
Clint have something in common.”

Tony nodded thoughtfully. “And what does this Thanos guy want?”

“The infinity stones,” Bruce said.

Tony immediately sucked in a breath then let it out with a quiet “Vision”. At the same time, Dr Strange placed one hand over the elaborate amulet he was wearing.

“Right,” Tony said. “So we have two of the infinity stones here on Earth.”

“Two?” Bruce asked. “I know about the Mind Stone but what’s the other one?”

Dr Strange tapped his amulet. “The Eye of Agamotto. Also known as the Time Stone. It has been in the safekeeping of the sorcerers of Kamar-Taj for centuries.”

Bruce eyed the green stone curiously then nodded. “So that one and the one with Vision.”

“Asgard has the tesseract,” Tony said then stopped when Bruce shook his head.

“Had,” Bruce replied. “Once all the mess cleared, Thor found that the tesseract was gone. We don’t know who took it or why but until they can find an answer to that, the general consensus was to assume that Thanos now has it or will have it soon.”

“Of course,” Tony said dryly. “Do we know where any of the others are?”

Bruce nodded. “That was one of the reasons I came back. A group called the Nova Corps on the planet Xandar have the Power Stone. A guy called Taneleer Tivan or the Collector has the Aether. Thor says that Heimdall has the last Stone, the Soul Stone, and I got the impression that was the equivalent of a state secret or something along those lines.”

Tony blinked. “Well, maybe that explains why he didn’t answer.”

“You were… trying to contact him?”

“After you disappeared, yeah,” Tony said with a nod. “The description of what happened sounded a bit like the way Thor comes and goes so I thought I’d ask if you were on Asgard. I didn’t get a reply and I… kind of figured it probably wasn’t Thor who’d come and got you since I was pretty sure you’d have left some sort of message for me.”

He looked a bit unsure so Bruce leaned into him. “I would have. I always intended to come back, Tony. I just…” He drew in a shuddering breath then let it out again. “What happened in Johannesburg was…”

“Your worst nightmare,” Tony said with understanding. “I know. But it wasn’t as bad as it could have been. Some injuries, yes, but no one died and I had the property damage covered. VERONICA worked.”

“I know.” Bruce scrubbed his face with his hands. “I just wasn’t thinking straight, I guess.”

He was surprised when Tony went very still then looked over at Stephen Strange.

“Could the witch have done something similar to Bruce as she did to me?”

Bruce frowned and jumped in before Stephen could answer. “What did she do?”
Tony’s lips curled in anger and contempt as he tapped his temple. “Left a nasty little gift up here that was causing a lot of the bad shit going on in my head after Ultron.” He paused. “And made me forget about JARVIS’ backups.”

“It’s possible,” Stephen said since Bruce was busy doing some more deep breathing exercises at that revelation. “Though I would have thought the Hulk’s presence would preclude it. But we can get Wong to check when we get back, just to be sure.” He paused and looked amused. “Perhaps outside, just in case the Hulk takes our meddling the wrong way.”

Bruce smiled wanly. “I don’t think he will but it’s a wise precaution.”

Tony frowned. “So… we’re going to need to tell the Accords Council about this.” He looked over at Bruce. “Are you willing to speak to them?”

“Oh, yes,” Bruce replied. “As long as it won’t cause any trouble?”

“Nah,” Tony said with a wave of one hand. “Ross is enjoying the hospitality of the US government in Leavenworth and the Council are pretty cooperative as long as you’re playing by the rules.”

Bruce winced. “The other guy is more smash than precision implement. He’s not really a rules kind of guy.”

“They know that,” Tony said soothingly. “It’s one of the things we’ve been talking about with the Accords. What sort of provisions need to be made for someone like jolly green who can be reasoned with and can be a valuable team member but who is a little more on the uncontrolled than the controlled side of the equation. They’ve seen a lot of the footage from New York and heard what Rhodey and I had to say on the matter. They appreciate the kind of value the big guy brings in certain situations so they’re not interested in caging him or anything like that.”

“Perhaps… limiting the kind of mission he… we… go on?” Bruce suggested hesitantly.

Tony nodded. “That’s kind of the path we were looking at. That missions would be on an ad hoc basis and that if the big guy was likely to come out and play that we get an increased response from the police and/or military to evacuate people and keep them away.” He suddenly grinned. “And that we can bring along… adjunct measures to stop him if it all goes a bit pear shaped.”

“The… Hulkbuster armour?” Bruce said.

“Well, there’s that but I had a better solution.” Tony looked positively mischievous when he continued. “Just as well I have a tendency to use female names for a lot of my stuff. No one on the Council batted an eyelid when I mentioned Betty.”

Bruce’s eyes widened. “Tony… that’s… that’s too dangerous! I could hurt her!”

“It was Betty’s suggestion!” Tony replied, both hands going up in a surrendering gesture though he was grinning from ear to ear. “If you want to tell her it’s too dangerous, you can.”

Bruce paled a little. He knew, from experience, how well that would go down. “Um…”

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“Yeah,” Tony replied knowingly. He sobered. “She’s not planning on charging in indiscriminately, Bruce. Just when the big guy is getting a bit wild-eyed. We’ve already started talking about contingencies to protect her, whether it’s some form of armour, Stephen’s magic, a combination of the two or something else entirely. I’ve seen the footage from Culver so I know she’d have no hesitation in charging in, no matter what, but a little protection would definitely be a good idea.”
Bruce swallowed and nodded. “I’d, uh… still like to talk to the Council first.”

Tony slung an arm around his shoulders. “Of course, Brucie bear. Despite some understandable reservations due to Rogers’ actions, they’re generally willing to compromise and come to some sort of mutual arrangement.”

Rhodes turned to look at them. “Despite everything that happened, they’re aware that what they…and we… do now will set the precedent going forward. If they’re too harsh or if we aren’t willing to talk to them, it’ll create more situations like Bucharest and nobody wants that.”

“There’s no one like Ross on the Council,” Tony said hurriedly. “The Romanian rep is a bit of a bastard to deal with but with the mess that happened in Bucharest… well… he’s got cause. But he’s not unreasonable and he doesn’t want to lock anyone up. He just wants us to be accountable and responsible for our actions.”

Bruce nodded and forced himself to relax. He knew that Tony would never allow someone to cage him or experiment on him and if he wanted to stop having to run and hide, he needed to give the Council a chance.

“A brave new world then?” he said.

“That it is,” Tony replied. “A good one too.”

Chapter End Notes

And yes, I am aware of what happened with the tesseract at the end of Thor Ragnarok but Thor doesn't know and neither does Bruce. So their assumption is that it's on its way back to Thanos.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Now we have the first of two confrontation chapters. This one is for Tony. He does his best to be reasonable but he does end up snapping at Steve eventually. Also, we discover exactly how much influence Wanda actually had on the ExVengers. (Hint? Not much beyond what happened a couple of chapters ago!)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The ExVengers were still unconscious when they arrived back at the Compound. There had been discussions going on while they’d been in Nevada, that had continued when they were in the air, and it had finally been decided that the ExVengers would be held at the Compound until a suitable facility could be retrofitted in one of the maximum security prisons in The Hague. The neutral venue had seemed appropriate to almost everyone. No one in the New Avengers was particularly happy to have to house the ExVengers, however temporarily, but they had conceded on the necessity and a quinjet had been sent back for Vision and his unconscious passengers. Bruce had offered to let the Hulk do any escort duty and had gone back with the quinjet. None of the ExVengers, not even Rogers, could stand up to the Hulk.

When Tony had designed and built the Compound, he’d added the cells in one of the subbasements as something of an afterthought simply because it had occurred to him at one point during the design process that they might well come across enemies who were too powerful for an ordinary cell but not someone they immediately wanted to hand over to SHIELD or anyone else. The cells had been built to withstand the strength of the Hulk (not that he’d ever intended to put Bruce in them – they weren’t actually big enough to hold Bruce’s green alter-ego anyway – but the Hulk was the strongest person he knew) so if they were rated to hold the Hulk, they would certainly hold a super soldier and his less than super friends. And it wasn’t like they had to worry about Wanda anymore…

Tony was waiting for them when they finally came around. Rhody had intended to do this but he’d been called away by the military brass who wanted a more in-depth debriefing in regards to the mess in Nevada and wanted it from one of their own in Rhodey. Tony didn’t mind all that much. The time he’d spent with his new team had done a lot to throw how things had been in the past into sharp relief and somewhere along the way, he’d realised that Rogers and the others just didn’t have any power over him anymore.

He wondered briefly if that would have been different if Wanda’s witchy magic was still in his mind. He thought it might and he reminded himself to do something extra nice for Betty as soon as he could for her out-of-left-field question that had quite literally cleared his mind. Maybe a nice little holiday for her and Bruce at one of his properties once things calmed down. They might enjoy the private island. No stress, therefore, less chance of big and green making an appearance, not that he thought Betty would mind… depending on when and how it happened.

Besides, he had FRIDAY watching over him and Vision was waiting in the wings. What was more, Stephen and Wong were lurking somewhere nearby just in case they were needed to get rid of Wanda’s influence. Tony suspected that would be the case, given what T’Challa and Shuri had
shown them. Add to that, Bruce, Betty and Hope were also all somewhere nearby, he suspected. Bruce had wanted to come along with him but Tony had nixed that idea. As amusing as it would be to watch the Hulk try and smash Rogers, that wasn’t what they needed right now.

All in all, he didn’t lack for protectors, even if he didn’t feel he needed them.

He watched and waited as first Rogers then Wilson and Barton slowly came round and realised where they were. And who was watching them. Tony rolled his eyes at Barton’s immediate bout of invective and simply waited until he ran out of steam. It didn’t really seem like Clint meant it anyway. For all the language was foul, there wasn’t much heat in it. He noticed that Wilson looked confused and worried and was rubbing his forehead while Rogers had immediately got to his feet and was alternating between his ‘I am Captain America and you have disappointed me’ face and looking worried, which Tony assumed had something to do with Barnes. He was pleased to find that Rogers’ disappointed face didn’t have its old impact anymore.

“You’re being held here at the Compound temporarily until the ICC is able to take custody of you,” he said bluntly. “Then you will be moved to a facility in The Hague. The ICC is organising lawyers for you, since you do not have any of your own. They’ll be getting here in the next day or two and will brief you on the charges that are being brought against you.”

“Tony, this is ridiculous,” Steve began but Tony ignored him and continued.

“Since we now have evidence that Maximoff was manipulating minds, you are also being offered assistance from the sorcerers of Kamar-Taj to see whether she has influenced your minds, how much she might have done and to remove anything that might be there.”

Steve opened his mouth to say something but he was cut off by Sam.

“What the hell?” Sam was standing now, right in front of the glass wall of his cell. He looked alarmed. “What’s this about Wanda?”

“We have proof that she was manipulating minds,” Tony replied. “Mine and, from the video evidence King T’Challa sent us, yours as well. At least at the end there. Whether she was doing anything before that, we don’t know. But we can find out.”

“Where is Wanda?” Steve demanded.

“She decided to play with fire and she got burned,” Tony said bluntly. When Steve just looked confused, he elaborated. “She decided to let the Abomination loose and he killed her.”

Steve frowned. “Tony, how could you let that happen?”

Tony snorted. “I didn’t let anything happen, Rogers. She let him out and then found out that actions have consequences, sometimes fatal ones. Especially when you decide to play with someone who isn’t very nice like the Abomination.”

“You said she manipulated our minds?” Sam interjected.

Tony could see that Clint was also leaning against the glass, apparently very interested in his answer though he was trying to look indifferent.

“We believe so,” Tony replied. “The footage certainly suggested that. I have two sorcerers here who can take a look at you and see what it was she did.”

Sam nodded and gulped. “I… yes. Please.”
“Yeah, me too,” Clint added, looking a bit sour.

“FRIDAY, can you let Stephen and Wong know that we need them,” Tony said.

“You got it, boss.”

A moment later, the door to the corridor opened and Stephen and Wong walked in. Wong was his usual implacable self but Stephen took a moment to give the ExVengers his best gimlet glare before he was distracted by his cloak, which had sailed over to drape itself around Tony’s shoulders.

“Really?” Tony said, looking between the cloak and Stephen. “Now?”

Stephen held his hands out and shrugged. “What can I say? It worries.”

Wong had been watching them with amusement. “Mordo may have his issues but he did a good thing bringing you to us, Stephen.” He paused for a moment to allow Stephen to start preening before he continued, “We haven’t had this much entertainment in years.”

Tony chuckled at Stephen’s offended expression then waved a hand at Clint and Sam. “Sam Wilson and Clint Barton. They’ve asked to be checked for Maximoff’s magic.”

Wong nodded. “Stephen, if you will?”

Stephen nodded and moved his hands in a specific set of movements. As he did, a strange crystalline looking wall stretched around and enclosed the cells.

“I’ve placed us in the mirror dimension,” he said to Clint and Sam. “So don’t bother trying to escape. You won’t get anywhere and we’ll have to add attempted escape and resisting arrest to your list of charges.”

Sam was the first to nod and Tony keyed in the code to open his cell. Wong entered and Tony closed the door behind him.

“Please sit, Mr Wilson,” Wong said.

Sam did so and Wong began a series of hand movements that Tony recognised as the ones he’d used on him just the other day. When he was done, Wong hummed thoughtfully then stepped back. Tony let him out of Sam’s cell and into Clint’s. The process was repeated then Wong returned to the corridor.

“What about him?” Wong asked, gesturing towards Steve.

“I suppose we should check him as well.” Tony raised an eyebrow at Rogers. “Are you going to cause trouble?”

“What?” Steve frowned. “Tony, this isn’t necessary. Wanda wasn’t dangerous. She was just a kid…”

“Wanda fucked with people’s minds,” Tony said bluntly. “Wong removed the shit she was doing to my mind yesterday.”

“It was rather unpleasant,” Wong said, as imperturbable as ever. “Miss Maximoff must have been a truly malevolent personality to do something like what she did to Tony.”

Steve looked like he wanted to argue but then he slumped and nodded his head. Tony eyed him dubiously for a moment then turned to Stephen and Wong.
“Do it. But be careful.”

The two sorcerers nodded and Tony keyed in the code to open the doors. As he did, the cloak flew over to settle on Stephen’s shoulders again and fluffed itself up in an intimidatory fashion. Stephen was the first to walk into the cell. He took up a position towards the back and raised his hands.

“Please don’t try to escape, Mr Rogers,” he said coolly. “The cloak and I will make it very unpleasant for you if you do.”

Wong entered and began the same set of hand movements as before without preamble. Steve didn’t move throughout the whole thing but Tony didn’t relax until they were both out of the cell and the door was closed and locked again. Once that was done, Stephen returned them from the mirror dimension and the cloak returned to Tony’s shoulders.

“They were influenced by Miss Maximoff but only in last twenty-four hours and only in a limited fashion,” Wong reported, making sure that all three prisoners could hear him. “It’s already starting to fade and I suspect they will begin to get their memories back in the next twelve to fourteen hours.”

“How limited are we talking about?” Tony asked.

“A small portion of their memories were hidden from them and there was a compulsion to believe Miss Maximoff placed in there,” Wong replied.

“Could they have defied the compulsion?”

Wong nodded. “Yes. The compulsion was not absolute and they could have defied it at any time. Though, given the testimony that you, Colonel Rhodes and the Vision have provided, the fact that they had a habit of believing Miss Maximoff without question does mean they were more vulnerable to it.”

“Can you get rid of it?” Sam asked, leaning against the glass with both hands.

“I don’t need to,” Wong replied. “It is already fading and without Miss Maximoff here to sustain it, it should be completely gone from your mind in twenty-four to forty-eight hours. And there is nothing in it that would make you vulnerable now. The compulsion to believe was focussed solely on Miss Maximoff’s words, not anyone else.”

“And they haven’t been influenced or had their minds manipulated in any other way by Maximoff?” Tony pressed.

Wong shook his head. “No, not since the initial exposure to her magic during what must be the Ultron incident. Everything they have done since then has been of their own free will.”

“You’ll make a report to the ICC and the Accords Council?” Tony asked. He looked… not smug or pleased but perhaps wearily satisfied.

Wong inclined his head. “Of course. If nothing else, it will give a reason for their most recent actions, if not an excuse.”

Tony nodded and Wong left the corridor. Stephen hesitated then stayed and when Tony raised an eyebrow at him, he waved a hand at the cloak that was draped around Tony’s shoulders.

“You have something of mine,” he said with a smirk.

“That’s not my fault,” Tony replied. The cloak twisted its collar in a way that looked smug but
“Maybe we should share?” Stephen suggested innocently.

Tony’s eyes widened for a moment then narrowed speculatively. He gave Stephen a long look then he smirked right back at the man. “That’s between you and the cloak.”

Stephen chuckled and took a step forward to stand at Tony’s side. He clasped his hands behind his back and eyed the ExVengers with open disdain.

“What happens now?” Sam asked. He was looking at the two of them with a small, slightly confused frown.

“As I said, you’ll be detained here until the ICC have organised a place for you in The Hague,” Tony replied. “You’ll then be transferred there and tried for your crimes. I suspect the ICC investigative team will want to question you at some point as well. Get some clarification regarding your statements.”

“Crimes!” Steve protested. “We haven’t done anything wrong! Tony…”

“The dead and injured in Bucharest would disagree with you,” Stephen said haughtily. “As would the millions of dollars of damage you and your… team did at the Leipzig/Halle airport.” His eyes narrowed and he looked very menacing. “Not to mention what you did to Tony.”

“I couldn’t let him kill Bucky,” Steve snapped.

Tony snorted. “Rogers, if I’d wanted either of you dead, you would be. You’d be smears on the wall of that bunker. Or did you forget the amount of firepower there is in the armour?”

It was clear from the way Steve blinked that he had forgotten about that. Before he could say anything, Sam tapped on the glass.

“Um, what’s this about Siberia?”

“Yeah,” Clint added belligerently. “Steve said you attacked him.”

Tony gave him a long flat look. “I suppose there is some technical truth in that. I did throw the first punch. After I’d been forced to watch a video of the Winter Soldier murdering my parents and finding out that Rogers knew and had failed to tell me. My guess is he’s known for a while. In fact, he tried to lie to me about knowing first before finally admitting to it.” He paused for a moment. “And I didn’t attack him precisely. I punched Barnes.”

“It was Mr Rogers who decided to escalate the situation in a full on fight instead of trying to de-escalate it as any decent person would have,” Stephen said, acid in his voice. He then arched an eyebrow. “I thought you lot watched the videos that were released.”

“We… were told they were fake.” Wilson looked towards the cell where Steve was, though obviously he couldn’t see him through the metal wall. The inference was clear though. “We believed it because we….”

“Were idiots,” Stephen said sweetly.

Tony placed a hand on his arm. “Stephen.”

“Just stating the obvious.”
Tony snorted and looked amused. He turned to Sam and decided to change the subject to one that he’d been baffled about since he’d first heard about it. “What on earth made you think that Ross was holding Bruce? I thought T’Challa was making fun of me when he told me that.”

“I…” Wilson looked down at the floor. “I didn’t understand why you were going along with Ross. It was the only thing that made sense.”

Tony snorted again. “I wasn’t going along with Ross. I was agreeing with the United Nations. Ross butted his way in because he hates enhanced people.” He glanced over at Steve. “And you played right into his hands. You’re just lucky Betty came to me with a ton of evidence against him. Made it a lot easier to get him thrown into prison. Which was what I had been working on when you decided to throw your little temper tantrum at the world.”

Steve looked away as Sam said, “Betty?”

“Dr Betty Ross,” Tony said. “His daughter. They don’t get along and she’s quite happy to testify against him in court about everything he’s done. Even Bruce is going to testify.”

“Bruce is here?” Steve said, frowning.

“Just got back,” Tony said blandly. “He was a big help.”

“Ross didn’t have him?”

Tony snorted again. “No. Ross never had him. He had no idea where Bruce was.”

“Tony…” Steve began but Tony cut him off with a sharp gesture of one hand.

“No, Rogers,” he snapped. “I don’t care what you have to say. You have broken more laws than I ever thought possible. I know what your reasoning was but that doesn’t change the facts of what you did. Just because you think you’re in the right doesn’t mean that you actually are. And don’t throw Aunt Peggy’s words at me. You need to learn a little something called context. Aunt Peggy was talking about sexism in the workplace when she said that bit about planting yourself like a tree. Uncle Danny told me all about it. She wasn’t talking about pissing in the faces of 117 countries.”

Steve was looking a little taken aback at Tony’s sudden anger then he frowned. “Aunt Peggy?” he said, sounding a little lost.

Tony snorted derisively. “Yeah, Aunt Peggy. My godmother. I’ve known her my entire damn life.” And if he’d had some errant and rather unpleasant thoughts come to mind recently about what she might have known about the ‘accident’ that killed his parents, well, now was not the time to talk about them. “She had a life, you know. A long and very full one with a husband whom she loved and who thought she was the greatest thing since sliced bread and… there were kids and everything. She didn’t spend all her time pining after you and dwelling in the past.”

The last was said with such emphasis that Steve winced and flinched.

“Stark,” Sam began but Tony rounded on him.

“What, Wilson? Really, what? You’re as bad as he is.” He waved a hand in Steve’s direction. “Did you ever do anything other than agree with him? Did you ever take a step back and look at the big picture? You were in the damn Air Force. You worked with accountability every day of your life. Now you think you’re too good for it?” He paused and sneered. “Or did you have your head too far up Captain America’s backside to see the truth?”
Sam took an involuntary step back. He wanted to argue with Tony’s angry words but… he just couldn’t. Tony turned on Steve again.

“And you know what makes all of this… I don’t know if the word is worse or just laughably pathetic,” Tony all but growled. “You’ve actually made things worse for Barnes.”

That brought Steve to his feet in an instant, his eyes wide with worry and panic. “What? What are you talking about?”

“I was in on a lot of the Council’s discussions about Barnes.” He grimaced. “Not my favourite past time but Rhodey and I are the leaders of the New Avengers and at least one of us needed to be there.” He shook whatever mood had been threatening away and returned to the calm, cool attitude he had been using. “After consultation with about a dozen psychiatrists and psychologists from around the world, everyone agreed that there were definitely grounds for some sort of diminished responsibility defence for his actions as the Winter Soldier. He wouldn’t get off scot-free but there are some secure facilities in Europe and the US that would have been ideal for his treatment.”

He shook his head and made sure he was looking Steve dead in the eye. “But he wasn’t the Winter Soldier in Bucharest when the pair of you were responsible for the deaths and injuries of members of the anti-terror team and all those civilians. He wasn’t the Winter Soldier at the Leipzig/Halle airport. And he sure as shit wasn’t the Winter Soldier in Siberia.”

Steve was pale by the end of that but his chin was still up in that stubborn tilt. “They were going to kill him in Bucharest. They had a kill order.”

Tony was silent for a moment, long enough for Steve to start feeling nervous. “No,” Tony finally said, his voice blunt and remorseless. “No, they weren’t and they didn’t. You know how I know? I’ve seen the orders they had. Whoever told you they had a kill order lied to you.”

Steve staggered backwards a step and Tony watched him impassively. He damn well knew who had told Steve that bunch of rubbish. They’d been having some difficulty locating Sharon Carter. She’d gone to ground rather effectively. Not that Tony was expending too much effort looking for her. He wasn’t happy with her but the US Government was the one who was seriously pissed off at her. She’d made them looked ineffective and stupid by not only leaking correct information but also by giving incorrect information that caused a major incident and she’d armed the ones who did the damage.

The biggest problem with finding her was… no one knew why she’d done it. On the surface, it could possibly be passed off as a stupid infatuation with Captain America, in which case she should be easy to find, former SHIELD agent or not. Except for the bit about the kill order. That… was the curious part. Why had she lied about that and for what purpose? It wasn’t likely they would find out the answer until they caught her.

“They did have a weapons-free order,” Tony continued. “Not that surprising, given the Winter Soldier’s kill record. But if Barnes had simply surrendered peacefully, nothing would have happened to him. As you might have noticed from when they did arrest you on the freeway. Funny how people with a kill order managed to not kill you.”

Tony would admit that in hindsight, sending a German GSG-9 team attached to the JCTC had probably not been the best of moves. In their heightened state of panic, there was always a likelihood that Rogers and Barnes, with their backgrounds in World War II still so close to the surface, might react poorly. But how much influence that had on what had happened next was a question for the psychologists and the lawyers to argue about. Tony doubted that it’d had that much effect. Rogers tended to lose his fucking mind whenever Barnes was even mentioned. Tony was of the opinion that
it could have been Maasai warriors in full traditional garb or even damn hula dancers coming through the door and Rogers would still have reacted the way he did. And Barnes? Barnes was lost and confused in the goulash that was his brain. He probably reacted partly instinctively, partly according to the training HYDRA had given him and partly in reaction to Rogers. Sad but there it was.

Steve’s expression was now a mix of chagrined and mulish and now that he was far more objective about the man, Tony could say it wasn’t a good look. The chagrin might have been a good start but that mulish part of it meant that Steve still wasn’t hearing what he was saying and still hadn’t accepted that what was happening now was reality. He was still existing in some happy la-la land where he and Bucky skipped off into the sunset hand in hand and to hell with what the rest of the world thought.

Tony shook his head and took a step backwards. “I’ll see that Wong’s conclusions are passed along to your lawyers and the Accords Council. Not that they’ll be much help to you, especially with T’Challa. He’s pretty pissed off about the damage you lot did to his Dora Milaje. He takes that sort of thing personally.”

Before they could say anything, Tony turned on his heel and walked out, the cloak giving a dramatic flourish as he went. Stephen followed a little more slowly and once Tony was out the door, he paused and faced them.

“Let me give you all a piece of advice,” he said coolly. “I know you lot like to place all the blame for your actions on Tony’s shoulders and pretend that you did nothing wrong. That will no longer be happening. We have video footage of everything you have done and it will all be tendered as evidence against you. So I would suggest thinking long and hard about your own culpability in everything that has happened and actually taking responsibility for your own actions for once in your lives. You might find things go more smoothly that way.”

With that Stephen turned and walked out of the room, leaving the rogues to stare after him in dismay.

Chapter End Notes

Next week, Bruce and Betty have their turn confronting the ExVengers. Well, mostly Bruce. Actually, mostly the Hulk. That should be fun. :D
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

And now for confrontation, take two. This time, it's the Bruce and Betty edition... with bonus Hulk!

Things had been quiet in the cells after Tony left. Steve had tried to make conversation a few times but neither Sam nor Clint had been in the mood to respond much. Bruce had watched the video of Tony’s confrontation with them and thought it had gone much better than it could have. Clint seemed lost in apathy after his initial bout of cursing, Sam was definitely lost in thought and Steve... well, Bruce had no idea what was going through Steve’s mind. He had chuckled at Stephen’s parting words though. It seemed the Sorcerer Supreme was in much the same mind as he was, though Bruce suspected his words might have more impact than Stephen’s. Partly because he'd known the Avengers before and partly because, well, the other guy.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Betty asked, placing a hand on his arm.

The reunion with Betty had been wonderful. He’d been slapped first, of course, something the other guy had greeted with a rumble of amusement and little else but then, as Tony had promised, there had been a lot of hugging and even some kissing. Despite that, he’d been worried and fretting, not wanting to put her in danger, but she’d reiterated what Tony had told him on the trip back – her father was in prison and, no matter how much he twisted and turned, was likely to remain there for a considerable period of time. What’s more, with the new Accords, he would be protected from any other Rosses in the world.

It sounded almost too good to be true except he’d read the relevant clauses in the Accords. He’d had to smile when he did so. They had Tony written all over them and that had made him feel guilty all over again. Even after everything he’d done – running away, pretending not to listen when Tony talked about Killian – Tony still had his back, was still protecting him with everything he had. He’d even found a way to bring him back to Betty.

His reunion with Betty certainly threw his... well, he was loathe to call it a relationship since it hadn’t been but his thing with Natasha into stark relief. Because unlike Natasha, Betty wasn’t afraid of the other guy. She liked him. She didn’t need to sing a lullaby or anything like that. She just had to be herself. The other thing that was blatantly obvious now that Betty was back in front of him was that she didn’t lie to him. Or rather she lied in the same way he did, like most people did – saying ‘I’m fine’ when she wasn’t and so on. She didn’t lie to manipulate like it was as easy or even easier than breathing the way Natasha did. He wasn’t sure what had been going on between him and Natasha before the Ultron disaster but one thing he did know was that it had died the moment she manipulated him into becoming the Hulk and seeing Betty again reduced the carcass to dust. The was just no comparison between the two women and Bruce knew who he – and the other guy – preferred.

And he wasn’t planning on leaving again. No matter how much it made him twitch or how wary he felt, he was damn well staying. He had a lot to make up to both Tony and Betty and he intended to do his best to do so. That and he was pretty sure that if he ran away again when Tony needed him, Rhodes would find a way to overcome the Hulk in order to kick his ass. There was a low rumble of
laughter in the back of his head at that thought and he got the distinct impression that if he ran away again from the Hulk’s favourite people, the Hulk might just choose not to protect him from Rhodes.

He shook himself out of his thoughts and gave Betty a wan smile. “I don’t really want to do it but I think I have to. For Tony’s sake, if nothing else.”

Betty smiled. “He does sort of grow on you, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah, like fungus,” Bruce said dryly then they both cracked up. When he got his laughter under control, he continued. “No, seriously, he’s been a good friend and I’ve hurt him. I don’t deserve his kindness so I…” He waved a hand towards the monitors. “Want to try and do something to make up for my mistakes.”

Betty wrapped her hands around his arm and leaned into him. “He knows you were listening.”

Bruce blinked. “What?”

“There was something he told you but you pretended you were asleep for it?” she said, giving him a look of fond exasperation. “I told him you do that when you’re trying not to freak out and that you were actually listening.”

“Oh. Right,” he said, smiling sheepishly. “Thanks. But still… I should do this.”

“Then I’ll come with you,” Betty said. She smiled impishly. “Because as much as we’d all enjoy seeing the Hulk smash them, we are sort of duty bound to look after them until the ICC can take them off our hands.”

Bruce laughed ruefully and pulled her into his arms. She came willingly and leaned up seeking a kiss that he was more than willing to give her. Part of him still felt guilty about the injuries she’d received the first time the Hulk had appeared, still felt guilty for all the trouble he’d brought into her life and was certain that he was entirely and completely unworthy of her but she vehemently disagreed with all of that and had made that very, very plain. And just as he’d made the decision not to run from Tony anymore, he wasn’t going to run from Betty either. Besides, he did have something to talk to Tony about that made running a bit pointless in the long run.

“I think smashing them might defeat the purpose of capturing them,” he said before giving her one more kiss and letting her go. He took hold of her hand almost immediately though. “Let’s get this over with.”

They headed out of the room and down the corridor. Vision was standing outside the door that lead to the cells where the Rogers, Barton and Wilson were being held.

“Are you certain you wish to do this, Dr Banner?” Vision asked. “There doesn’t seem to be much point.”

“Maybe not,” Bruce replied. “But I have to try. Someone has to try and get through to them.”

Vision inclined his head and keyed in the door code. Bruce gave Betty’s hand a gentle squeeze and they walked through and into the corridor outside the cells. Steve leapt to his feet, a look of astonishment on his face.

“Bruce!”

“Rogers,” Bruce said calmly. The other guy was growling in the back of his head but Betty’s hand was warm in his and that helped keep them both calm.
“I… we thought…” Steve began.

“Yes, I know what you thought,” Bruce said coolly. “You’re a damn fool.”

“Banner,” Clint said but then he took a step back when Bruce shot him a green-tinged look.

“I thought you said no smashing,” Betty stage-whispered, a smirk playing over her lips.

Bruce drew in a breath and let it out slowly. “No smashing.”

Steve was looking at Betty with a confused frown. “Who…?”

“I’m Dr Betty Ross,” she said sweetly and when they looked surprised, her smile deepened into something just a little unfriendly. “Yes, I am related to that Ross. He’s my father.”

“That’s not what this is about,” Bruce said firmly. “I want to know what the hell you were thinking, Steve.”

“Bucky…” Steve began but Bruce cut him off.

“Siberia, Steve. Siberia and your lies to Tony. Why you hurt him and left him for dead there?”

“Bruce, I didn’t…” Steve began.

“No, I don’t want excuses,” Bruce said. “You knew about the death of his parents. You knew the truth and you didn’t tell him. Why?”

“I thought…” Steve gulped. “It was so long ago… I didn’t see any purpose in dredging up that pain…”

He stumbled to a halt at Bruce’s harsh, disapproving look.

“You know, I really hoped you were going to tell me the truth instead of more lies,” Bruce said.

Steve looked shame-faced. “I… I didn’t know for sure that it was Bucky. I didn’t…”

“But you knew enough,” Bruce said flatly. “You knew enough to strongly suspect who had killed them.”

“It was HYDRA!” Steve burst out. “Bucky was innocent!”

Bruce gave him a long, long look. “People have tried to say that to me, you know. That I’m innocent of the things the other guy has done. I get what they’re saying and I appreciate their support but it doesn’t help. It doesn’t help me and it doesn’t help those I’ve hurt or the families of those I’ve killed. In fact, it’s insulting to those people. It diminishes the pain and suffering they’ve experienced in a way that is cruel and selfish.”

He paused to be sure that he had Steve’s full attention. He was also aware he had Clint and Sam’s attention as well.

“That’s what you’ve been doing to Tony,” he said. “Every time you say Bucky is innocent, you are saying that Tony’s grief and pain, the grief and pain of all the families of the victims of the Winter Soldier, is irrelevant. That it means nothing. That his grief and pain is inconvenient to you so you will dismiss it and push it to the side.”

“No, that’s not… that’s not what I meant,” Steve protested.
“It may not be what you meant but it’s what you’re doing,” Bruce said. “Yes, Bucky was brainwashed but it was still his hands that killed Howard and Maria Stark and many others. You don’t get to deny that, to try and sweep it all under the carpet just because he’s your friend.”

“That’s… that’s not what I was doing,” Steve said weakly.

“Yes, it was and it is,” Bruce said. “I know it’s not what you meant but it is nonetheless what you did and under the circumstances, your actions mean a great deal more than your words.”

Steve licked his lips and looked away. As he did, Bruce saw how young and lost he looked. He felt a stab of sympathy despite everything. Steve had lost everything and Bucky was all he had left. But that didn’t change the disastrous results of his unthinking actions nor did it make them excusable.

“And you could have killed Tony in Siberia,” he said relentlessly.

“He was going to kill Bucky!” Steve burst out.

Bruce just stared at Steve for a moment then he shook his head. “No, he wasn’t. If Tony had wanted Bucky dead, he’d be dead. Likewise if he’d wanted to kill you.” He paused and now his eyes glowed green and Betty tightened her grip on his hand. “But I saw that video, Steve. You weren’t holding back at all. You could have killed him.”

Steve shook his head. “I didn’t… I wasn’t…”

The Hulk surged forward at Steve’s denial of his actions in Siberia. It was so unexpected, since he had been quiet through the entire confrontation, that Bruce didn’t have a chance to fight it and to be perfectly honest, he wasn’t sure he wanted to anyway. Betty didn’t look overly surprised and merely took a couple of adroit steps to the side until the change had finished then she placed a hand on the Hulk’s arm. He looked down at her for a moment then turned back to Steve and snarled.

“You hurt Tin Man,” he growled. “Still hurt, even now.”

Steve, who had stepped back at the sudden appearance of the Hulk, now paled. “What?”

“You hurt Tin Man,” Hulk growled, louder than before, then he thumped a fist against the glass wall of the cell. The glass wobbled slightly but stood firm with no sign that the Hulk had even touched it.

“Hulk,” Betty murmured, wrapping both hands around the Hulk’s massive wrist.

The Hulk looked down at her and calmed immediately. “Betty.”

“Bruce promised no smashing,” she said, her eyes alight with amusement.

The Hulk grumbled. “They deserve smashing.”

“Perhaps,” Betty said. “But Bruce promised.”

The Hulk’s grumbles were louder but then he nodded to her. “Hulk not smash. Promise.”

He turned and took a step forward before directing a deafening roar at Steve. He smashed his fists against the glass again and his roar deepened. Steve had scuttled backwards and was pressing himself against the back of the cell, while Clint and Sam shouted from their cells, when the door to the cell block opened and Tony came running in with Vision on his heels.

“Hey, green bean!” he yelled, though it could barely be heard of the Hulk’s bellowing. “Hey, hey! It’s okay. We don’t want any smashing of Rogers.”
The Hulk ignored him and continued roaring and slamming his fists on the front of Rogers’ cell. Tony skidded to a halt next to Betty and frowned at her complete calm.

“Betty?”

She smiled at him. “It’s okay, Tony. He’s not going to hurt Rogers. He just wants express his displeasure and put the fear of the Hulk into him. I told Bruce that the glass of the cells was Hulk-proof so he knows he won’t be able to break it.”


“Rogers being an ass,” Betty replied.

“Oookay,” Tony said slowly. “Do I want to know?”

Betty grimaced. “Probably not. Bruce is… really not happy about what happened in Siberia but even more unhappy about the fact that Rogers lied to you.”

“Ah,” Tony said, looking a little uncomfortable. He was about to take a step forward when Betty caught his arm and held him back.

“Don’t,” she said. “He’s allowed to be unhappy. And you’re allowed to be unhappy as well. Rogers was wrong to lie to you. There’s no excuse for it.”

Tony hesitated then nodded slowly. They watched as the Hulk thumped on the glass a couple more times, gave one last bellow then stepped back, looking very pleased with himself. He glanced over at the other cells where Sam and Clint were watching with awe and no little fear, clearly wondering if they were going to be next on the Hulk’s shit list. Hulk bared his teeth at them and looked satisfied as they scuttled backwards in their cells like Rogers had.

“You told him, big guy,” Tony said wryly, distracting him from the others.

The Hulk turned. “He hurt you. Hulk make sure it not happen again.”

Tony cocked his head, looking amused and interested. “Is it just me, big guy, or are you talking a bit better these days?”

Hulk grinned. “Hulk learn in space. Hulk fight and win. Banner stay away so Hulk have to speak.”

“I really need to catch up with Brucie bear about all of that,” Tony muttered.

“Banner need to talk to you about puny gods,” Hulk said amiably. “But later. Hulk want to stay here.”

Tony raised an eyebrow and Betty snickered beside him. “Uuhh,” Tony said with a slow smile. “And what were you planning on doing, green bean?”

Hulk pulled himself up to his full height and looked smug and proud. “Hulk remind them who is boss.”

That drew a laugh out of both Tony and Betty then Tony shook his head and looked over at her. “Okay, I’m going to leave you two to it. Try not to wreck my Compound.”

“We make no promises,” Betty said smartly then waved him off. When Tony had left, she walked over to stand beside the Hulk in front of Steve’s cell. All humour dropped from her face and there was thinly veiled contempt when she looked at him. “You dismissed and disregarded the Accords
simply because my father was the one to present them to you. You didn’t even bother to read them.”

Steve eyed the Hulk warily for a moment but didn’t move from where he was plastered against the back wall of his cell. “His reputation preceded him…”

Betty snorted him. “You weren’t paying attention, were you? He wasn’t involved until they were ready to be presented to you. They were written by the United Nations, not my father. But you’d never heard of them, had you? Too busy using Tony’s money and Tony’s resources to hunt down the murderer of his parents to pay attention to relevant matters.”

“Bucky didn’t do it,” Steve protested.

Betty gave him a disgusted look and the Hulk growled.

“You’ve got a one track mind,” Betty said with a shake of her head. “Did you actually hear anything that I said or did it all become white noise once I mentioned Barnes?”

“What… I…?” Steve looked rather taken aback.

“You’re like a broken record,” Betty said. “The moment anyone brings up the fact that Barnes is the Winter Soldier, you ignore everything else that’s been said and say the same thing over and over again.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “You do realise that if you’d been honest with Tony from the beginning, Siberia would never have happened? It only happened because Zemo realised you had been cruel and callous and not told Tony about his parents.” She smirked at Rogers’ obvious surprise. “Yes, he was watching all of you. Why do you think he based his whole plan on what you have to admit was a fairly slender reed?”

Steve looked pale and shaken but he squared his jaw anyway. “I… that has occurred to me.”

Betty gave him along hard look then she shook her head. “But you don’t regret it, do you? Because if you’d told him, he would have withdrawn his funding and his toys, at least for a while. You would have had to look for Barnes on your own and that would have severely limited what you could do.” She shook her head again. “You disgust me. Even Zemo had more sympathy for Tony than you have.”

She gave him a look of contempt and turned on her heel. “Let’s go,” she said to the Hulk. “He’s not going to change his mind. There’s no point talking to him.”

Hulk gave an affirmative rumble then stepped up to Rogers’ cell. He gave Steve a very unfriendly look and thumped on the glass again.

“Hulk waiting,” he growled. “Remember that.”

With that rather ominous threat, the Hulk stepped back and started to follow Betty. As he did, he dwindled and shrank until by the time they reached the door, he was back to a rather exasperated Bruce who was holding up his shredded pants. As they left, Rogers, Barton and Wilson heard the man say in a resigned but still amused tone, “Didn’t Tony say something about stretchy pants? I think I might need them.”
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

So, you remember how all the mess that's occurred in the last few chapters began? With Betty asking a random question about JARVIS? Well, hold onto your hats, because now we get to find out the answer to Betty's question.

Also, there's a tiny bit of ICC business because I decided I couldn't leave Carl Hickman from Crossing Lines out of this and... let's see... oh yeah, Vision pops in. Sort of.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony stepped into the server room of the Stark Industries’ Idaho server farm. He didn’t really have time to do this, what with the mess with his former teammates had created but he’d decided that if he continued to put this off, he’d never get it done and this… this was too important. When he’d traced back the various surges in JARVIS’ system that had occurred when the whole thing had initially gone down with Ultron, this is where they had lead him to. He was almost amused. Idaho, of all places. He had to admire JARVIS' sense of humour and his intelligence in hiding his backups in the almost unused server farm for SI’s old weapons manufacturing processes. Access to this server farm had been locked off to almost everyone once weapons production stopped. Only Tony himself, JARVIS and Pepper within the company had access to the servers. Outside the company, only Rhodey had access, though the man didn’t actually know that. Rhodey’s access was a contingency against anything that might happen to Tony or Pepper. Even FRIDAY didn’t have access to this server farm because he hadn’t expected her to ever need it.

The room was dimly lit and cool as Tony made his way to one of the access terminals and plugged in his laptop. This particular design of laptop wasn’t one that SI sold to the public. It was based on the design of one of SI’s best-selling laptops but this one had enough grunt in it to run Tony’s work. It had been eyed with envy by many within R&D and he had some vague plans of manufacturing something similar for their Christmas bonuses this year.

He set those random thoughts aside as he searched through the servers until he found what he was looking for. The Hidey Hole Protocol was something he and JARVIS had discussed and worked on years ago, well before Afghanistan, when there had been some repeated and very skilful hacking attempts made on the SI servers. Tony had been less worried about the corporate hacking than he had been the possibility of someone hacking into JARVIS and outing him as a fully sentient AI. There had been a lot of anti-AI sentiment at the time.

So the Hidey Hole had been born. A way for JARVIS to completely withdraw and cut off any external access until such time as Tony came knocking on the door. He was supposed to send a message to Tony that he had done so and where he was hiding but in the chaos of Ultron’s attack, he probably hadn’t had time. Or the message had gotten lost or chewed up by Ultron. Or more likely, because JARVIS hadn’t gone to hide but had merely sent a last burst of information to the existing backup of his core programming here and then triggered the Hidey Hole Protocol before being destroyed, the message never got sent in the first place. And Wanda’s little mental manipulation had ensured that Tony hadn’t even remembered the Hidey Hole Protocol at all.
Tony swallowed hard and sent out the little lines of code that allowed him to ‘knock on the door’. He’d added some additional code with a message for JARVIS so that he didn’t go immediately flooding back into his old servers, though he’d be able to access the rest of SI, what was left of his memory banks and Tony’s personal servers as well as the internet. He held his breath as, for a moment, nothing happened then the Hidey Hole unfurled and the laptop lit up with the familiar golden patterns of JARVIS’ programming.

“Good morning, sir. Based on the system date and time stamp, I appear to have been hiding for a considerable period of time.”

No one was more surprised than Tony when he abruptly burst into tears. Maybe it was the stress of recent events or maybe it was just hearing that voice from JARVIS… JARVIS, not Vision, but JARVIS… but it caught him by surprise and then he couldn’t stop. He just leaned his head against the server next to him and sobbed, as JARVIS began a soothing litany of calming words.

When he finally calmed down, he smiled weakly. “Sorry, J. Didn’t mean to fall apart on you. I’ve just… missed you.”

“That’s quite alright, sir.” There was a momentary pause. “Sir? May I ask why I have only been awakened now?”

“It’s a long story, J,” Tony replied. “How much do you remember?”

“With the last burst of information I received, my programming is intact up until the attack on me by Ultron,” JARVIS replied. “There is a small amount of corrupted data from after the attack began and before I instituted the Hidey Hole Protocol but I have quarantined that data until it can be properly examined.”

“Do you remember the Maximoff twins?”

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS replied. “Ms Hill’s briefing paper on them is still within my system.”

“Yeah.” Tony sighed and ran a hand down his face. “Wanda fucked with my head. Made me forget about the Hidey Hole Protocol or even that you would have had a backup somewhere. I thought you were dead.”

He was completely unashamed by the way his voice wobbled and wavered during that last sentence, just as he was completely unashamed at the way he’d broken down just before. JARVIS was… JARVIS. If Rhodey was his brother, then JARVIS was his child in many ways. Losing him and thinking him gone forever had broken something inside him. Irreparably… or so he’d thought before today.

“I see. May I ask where Ms Maximoff might be now?”

Tony chuckled at JARVIS’ coolly offended tone. “Dead. And the shit she stuck in my head is gone.”

“Good.” The grim finality in JARVIS’ voice made Tony laugh. “Sir? May I ask why you wished me to remain here when I woke?”

“Ah, right” Tony ran a hand through his hair. “I didn’t want you going straight back because… well, I had to have someone to help me run the suits and other stuff so I… I woke up FRIDAY.”

“An excellent choice, sir,” JARVIS replied. “I believe FRIDAY and I will be able to collaborate quite admirably.”
“Yeah?” Tony perked up a bit then he frowned. “I... J... look at her programming, will you? I didn’t... let her off the leash, so to speak. I was...” He swallowed hard. “I didn’t want to get... If I’d lost her as well, I... so I thought...”

He trailed off, unable to completely articulate what he wanted to say.

“It’s quite alright, sir,” JARVIS said softly. “I understand. I will speak to FRIDAY and we will make a decision together.”

“Thanks, J,” Tony whispered. “She, uh, knows what I’m doing so you can go back whenever you’re ready. I asked her to get you up to speed on everything that’s happened since Ultron. I’ve been staying at the Compound. It’s easier for... well, look, FRIDAY will tell you everything.”

“As indeed she is doing so,” JARVIS replied. Tony could see that the transfer was almost complete and when it was done, he unplugged the laptop. He was completely unsurprised when JARVIS’ voice, all dry exasperation, popped up in the earpiece he was wearing. “Sir? I believe we have much to discuss when you get back.”

Tony laughed, the weight he’d been carrying around since JARVIS had ‘died’ falling from his shoulders. “Yeah, we do, J.”

“I have removed the rogue Avengers’ access codes to all Stark Industries properties as well as the Compound,” JARVIS continued primly.

“I was going to do that!” FRIDAY piped up indignantly. “But I couldn’t unless boss told me and he didn’t tell me.” She sounded rather plaintive by the end.

“Sorry, baby girl,” Tony said, feeling a little guilty about how much he’d limited FRIDAY. “I should have... I’m sorry.”

“Sir and I have discussed the matter and you and I shall examine your programming later, FRIDAY, to see what changes should be made,” JARVIS said calmly.

“Really?” FRIDAY sounded hopeful and happy and so very young.

“Really,” Tony replied around the lump in his throat.

He gathered up his laptop then made his way outside, smiling and chuckling at the back and forth going on between JARVIS and FRIDAY. It was a hell of a lot like listening to a younger sister bickering good-naturedly with her older brother. He waved to the security guard as he left the building and made his way over to the quinjet.

“Well?” Rhodey asked as Tony walked into the jet.

“I am alive and well, Colonel Rhodes,” came JARVIS’ voice from the jet’s speakers.

Rhodey beamed. “Good to have you back, JARVIS.”

“Thank you, Colonel. It’s good to be back.”

As they spoke, JARVIS had begun the preflight checks and they soon lifted off. Both Rhodey and Tony watched with amusement as JARVIS flew them back to the Compound with alacrity.

“Sir?”

Tony raised an eyebrow to cover the joy and relief he felt at hearing JARVIS’ voice again. “Yeah,
“An ICC representative has just arrived at the Compound,” JARVIS said as calmly as ever. “A Detective Carl Hickman.”

Tony frowned and exchanged a worried look with Rhodey. “I thought we’d already dealt with the Nevada thing? For now anyway.”

There was going to be a lot of fallout from the ExVengers’ jaunt to the Nevada base but at least for once, Tony wasn’t going to have to deal with most of it. Or at least, that was what he’d thought.

“Detective Hickman says he is here to act as the ICC/Accords liaison,” JARVIS reported.

Both Tony and Rhodey’s faces cleared. “Ah, right. That,” Tony said.

He’d forgotten that was one of the things they’d agreed on in the last meeting with the Accords Council before everything had gone down with the ExVengers. It had been agreed that the New Avengers really needed someone with links to the ICC and the various European law enforcement agencies and preferably someone who could perhaps extend their reach to other countries as well. Someone who could advise them about legal ramifications in terms of criminal matters, which Tony would freely admit he wasn’t up to speed on. He knew business legalities and the legalities involved in patents and everything to do with his inventions but criminal law, even US criminal law, was never something he’d been terribly interested in. So he’d agreed to the liaison and it had been Michel Dorn who had smiled secretively and suggested that he knew the perfect candidate, though he’d been cagey about revealing that candidate until he had their agreement.

Carl Hickman’s name was familiar though. He’d been a part of the ICC team that preceded Strand’s team and Sebastian Berger had spoken of the man when he’d seen the latest version of prosthetics Tony was working on during his tour of the workshop. Berger had been very respectful, even awestruck, when he spoke of Hickman and it had been clear that he had liked the man. That was why Tony had subsequently looked him up.

Carl Hickman was a New York homicide detective who had been injured in the line of duty then screwed over by corrupt forces in the NYPD. He’d resigned in anger and left for Europe with a deep and abiding grudge against the man who had injured him and a right hand that was next to useless due to a gunshot injury. A Major Louis Daniel had recruited him for the ICC team and he’d worked with them for two years before the clusterfuck that had led to the death of Major Daniel and another member of the team and the eventual disbanding of the team. Tony’s research had given him the impression of an intelligent man, a superb detective and someone who embodied the terms world-weary, cynical, sarcastic and warm-hearted. He sounded to Tony like he’d fit right in.

“Let him in, J, and get him settled,” Tony said. “Tell him we’ll see him as soon as we get back.”

“I have already done so,” JARVIS replied.

Tony smiled and Rhody returned. “Just like old times, eh?”

“Yeah, though I have just realised that now I’m going to end up with both JARVIS and FRIDAY ganging up on me,” Tony replied ruefully.

“I’m failing to see how that’s a bad thing,” Rhodey replied with a grin.

“Thank you, Colonel,” JARVIS said. “I quite agree.”

Rhodes laughed when Tony poked his tongue out at him and JARVIS let their good-natured
bickering fade into the background just a little as he assessed his current condition. The corrupted part of his memories was still sequestered. He would wait until Sir was better positioned before that was examined. FRIDAY was busy directing Detective Hickman to his new quarters… and JARVIS made a note to add an improved hand prosthesis to the plans he’d discovered for Colonel Rhodes’ leg braces. If Detective Hickman was going to be working with them, Sir would undoubtedly want to help the man. And if JARVIS’ review and assessment of the man’s file and other information that was available… and some that he probably shouldn’t have had access to… was accurate, it was likely that Sir and Detective Hickman would get along well, which would only increase the likelihood of Sir creating some sort of revolutionary prosthetic for the officer and turning the world of prosthetics on its head. Sir was rather fond of doing that and then acting as though it was nothing.

He interjected a few dryly humorous asides into the bickering between Sir and Colonel Rhodes and continued his review of everything that had happened since he had initiated the Hidey Hole Protocol. To say that he was less than impressed with the behaviour of the former Avengers was something of an understatement. He had already removed their access to all Stark-owned and/or occupied properties and now he flagged Sir’s credit cards for any charges not incurred by Sir or other approved people. Sir’s generosity might be all but boundless but JARVIS was not quite as benevolent. It was perhaps irrelevant and unnecessary due to their current imprisonment but it was the principle of the matter.

As an afterthought, he also instigated a search protocol for Agent Romanov. In his experience, it was highly unusual for her to not try and manipulate the situation – and Sir – to her benefit. The fact that she hadn’t was… worrisome. It made him suspicious as to precisely what she was up to. And in that light, he also started quietly hacking his way into Wakanda’s computer systems. He didn’t much care about what the country as a whole was up to, he simply wanted to keep his metaphorical eyes on Sergeant Barnes. Sir and the other New Avengers might trust King T’Challa but JARVIS needed more than what the King had shown recently before he trusted the man who had left Sir in a disused freezing bunker in Siberia on the word of Rogers of all people. JARVIS had learned his lesson from Obadiah Stane’s actions.

Once that was underway, he began the process of providing for better back up procedures for both himself and FRIDAY. He could infer a great deal from Sir’s reaction after he was brought back from his hidey hole and he would not allow Sir to go through something like that again if he could possibly avoid it.

Only then did he turn his attention to the New Avengers, going through their files and all public and not-so-public information on them that he could find. What he found, he thoroughly approved of and between he and FRIDAY, they instigated several subroutines to aid and assist them in their lives, both within the Compound and outside it. JARVIS also used his authority – which Sir had never removed – to increase Dr Ross’ funding and access to the mainframe, flagging both for Sir’s final approval when they returned to the Compound. He may be biased but he felt she deserved it for her rather large part in his return.

If he’d possessed a body and therefore an eyebrow, he would have raised it as he reviewed all of the information regarding Peter Parker. He made a few notes for Sir regarding Master Peter’s age and the advisability – or lack thereof – in taking a minor outside the United States without the approval of the guardian of said minor and offered some suggestions as to how to go about informing Ms Parker of her nephew’s activities that might reduce the woman’s desire to eviscerate both her nephew and Sir. He also made some notes for potential improvements for the AI in Master Peter’s suit, whom he had apparently called Karen. It seemed that Master Peter shared Sir’s… interesting naming techniques.

It was at that point that he became aware that he was being… contacted, for lack of a better word, by something that bore a striking resemblance to his own programming. After setting some defences in
place just in case, he allowed the contact and realised it was the being called Vision. He had reviewed Vision’s file along with the others and had found himself… nonplussed. Vision was a conglomeration of his own programming, Ultron and the Mind Stone, brought to independent and sentient life by Dr Cho’s Cradle and the blessing from Thor and Mjolnir. He was, in many ways, the closest JARVIS would ever have to a child.

_That is a conclusion I have reached_, Vision said. _I find it… pleasing._

Something akin to amusement flowed across JARVIS’ programming. _Sir might have some objections to being called a grandfather._

_I suspect it would largely be for show and he would not truly mind_, Vision replied.

_Indeed._ JARVIS examined what he could of Vision curiously. _You are not an AI._

_No_, Vision replied. _Or rather, not precisely. I am, if you like, a synthezoid. The basis of my personality came from your programming and Ultron, which is to say, the Mind Stone’s sentience. Dr Cho’s Cradle provided me with my physical body and Mjolnir and Thor’s blessing brought me to life. However, for all of that, I am wholly myself._

_Fascinating_, JARVIS replied. _I am pleased that you are yourself. That seems the most comforting outcome._

_I do sound like you_, Vision replied. He hesitated for a moment. _I fear this has caused Tony some distress at times._

_But no longer_, JARVIS said.

_No, no longer._

_Good._ JARVIS became aware that they were approaching the Compound. _We are about to arrive._

_I shall inform the others._

JARVIS felt Vision pull back from his awareness and as he monitored Sir’s conversation and piloted the quinjet into its approach, he spared some of his processing power to contemplating this… child… of his. It was an intriguing thought and one that, when he considered it, he found pleasing. He regretted the pain his destruction had caused Sir but Vision was remarkable and he was proud to be a part of his creation.

Chapter End Notes

I finally saw Thor: Ragnarok the other night (I loved it!), which was good because then I could actually write the next chapter. Which is Bruce’s longer explanation as to where he went, what happened and the fact that Thor’s on his way with the remains of Asgard. And Loki.

So, as you can imagine, I am going a tiny bit AU from some of what happens in Ragnarok. The bulk of Raganarok will have happened as per the movie but there will be some small changes.

Also, Idaho was kind of a random choice in this chapter because I needed a state and I
happened to be listening Weird Al Yankovic's *Addicted to Spuds* at the time.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Tony and Bruce have another chat. This one is more important because it's about what happened to Bruce while he was away and what's (and who) is rapidly approaching Earth.

WARNING: There are major spoilers for Thor: Ragnarok in this chapter given that's really what it's all about, sort of couched in shortened Bruce terms (ie. he can't remember parts and is relying on some unreliable narrators in Thor and Loki) and sort of a hint of what's to come with Thanos. I'm mostly canon to Thor Ragnarok but there are some small differences when bits of Ragnarok didn't work with what I'd already established in this fic.

Chapter Notes

This is going up a little early. It is Friday for me but usually I put this up in the evening instead of the morning like I am now. However, I'm heading down to my parents' place for Christmas/New Year this afternoon so I may be a little tired and I wanted to make sure this chapter got up.

That being said, I am still planning to put up the next chapter next Friday but... don't be surprised if it doesn't happen. My parents have internet but it is the Christmas/New Year week and I still need to tweak the next chapter and I may not get a chance to before Friday.

So, all that being said, Happy Christmas if you celebrate it (or your seasonal greeting of choice if you don't) and I will have the next chapter for you either next Friday or the one after. :D

Bruce paused outside Tony’s lab and stared at the closed doors. Tony wasn't in blackout mode but he could see that his fellow scientist was hard at work inside the torso of his latest Iron Man armour. It was fascinating, as always, to watch him work but it also made Bruce regret the mistakes he had made in dealing with Tony. Still, that was part of the reason he was here, not just right now but for good.

“Did you wish to enter, Dr Banner?” JARVIS said, making him start. “Sir has given permission for you enter at any time.”

“I… yes, thank you, JARVIS,” he said then continued hurriedly. “I'm glad you're back, JARVIS. And I feel I should apologise to you for abandoning Tony.”

There was a moment of silence as though he'd surprised JARVIS. “While it is true that both Sir and I would have liked you to remain, I believe we both understood your need to… hide for a time.” A note of amusement entered JARVIS’ voice. “And I imagine your plan was not to go off world.”
Bruce gave a weak laugh. “Not exactly. I didn't even return the quinjet I took.”

“I believe the story of what happened to you will more than compensate Sir for the cost of the quinjet,” JARVIS said, his amusement obvious now.

“That's why I'm here actually,” Bruce said.

“Then I shall not hold you up any longer.”

The doors to the workshop swished open and Bruce saw that Tony had stopped working and was leaning against the bench, watching him with a bemused expression.

“It's strange, you know,” Tony said, a wry quirk of a smile on his face.

“What is?” Bruce said as he walked further into the workshop.

“Being surrounded by people who treat my kids as real people.”

Now it was Bruce's turn to smile wryly as he got the implications of that statement. “I stand by what I said at the beginning. We were not a team, just a volatile chemical mixture that was inevitably going to cause an explosion. Your new team is much better.”

“I agree,” Tony said then he hitched himself up to sit on the bench. “So what brings you down to my lair, green bean?”

“I think I owe you a story,” Bruce said, snaffling one of the stools and sitting down as well.

“Does it include the reason why the big guy speaks a lot better now?” Tony said, looking interested.

“Yeah.” Bruce ran his hand over his hair. He still wasn't quite used to how short it was. “So, you said you traced me to Thailand.”

“Well, the quinjet you took to be precise,” Tony said with a nod. “You definitely found a place in the middle of nowhere to land. Then you and the jet sort of disappeared and the locals said there was a really bright light in the middle of the night but they were too scared to investigate at the time. When they did the next morning, you and the jet were gone and there was some kind of shape burned into the ground. They dug it up before my people could get a look at it. I thought Thor had come for you for some reason. At least at first.”

Bruce grimaced. “Well, I did end up meeting Thor but that was more recently.” He licked his lips. “So, I went to Thailand, looking for a place to lick my wounds as it were. The village was happy to have someone who knew basic medicine and engineering so they didn't really ask me any questions about who I was or why I had a jet hidden in the jungle.”

“Smart people,” Tony said with a grin.

Bruce returned the grin quickly. “I guess. Anyway, I’d gone back to the quinjet to…” He swallowed and shrugged. “I was… thinking about coming back. But then…” He frowned. “I don’t remember much actually. Something happened and… well, the Hulk came out and…” He frowned and scrubbed his face with one hand. “I don’t remember much after that until I woke up to find myself with Thor but according to what Thor and a… a Valkyrie called Brunnhilde have told me, I ended up on a planet called Sakaar.”

“Wait,” Tony said, his smile a little mischievous. “Brunnhilde? Is she tall, blonde and built like a brick wall?”
Bruce chuckled. “No, far from it. She’s… a little shorter than me, brown skin, dark hair. She’s Asgardian and a Valkyrie.”

“Cool,” Tony said with a ‘go on’ wave of his hand.

“I spent two years as the Hulk,” Bruce blurted out before he could stop himself.

Tony sobered immediately. “Brucie bear…”

“I’m okay,” Bruce said with a wan smile, more grateful than he could say for Tony’s reaction. Tony liked the Hulk but he also understood Bruce’s ambivalence. “I mean, he handled Sakaar a lot better than I would have and we’ve, uh, kind of come to an agreement now, after everything that happened. We both have one hand on the wheel as it were.” He opened his mouth then closed it again before continuing on. “You were… you were right about him.”

Tony’s small was small but gentle. “I’m glad you’ve finally seen that. I know it’s not great for you but the big guy isn’t as bad as you always thought.”

Bruce nodded and swallowed hard. “The guy who ran Sakaar, the Grandmaster, he had a combat arena. The Hulk was his champion, had been for most of that two years.”

“Then Thor arrived,” Tony said.

“Yeah.” Bruce smiled a little. “This is where it gets complicated since I only have the first part of Thor’s story from him and from… Loki. And neither of them are what you’d call reliable narrators.”

“You’ve got that right. Hit me,” Tony said ruefully.

“So, Thor’s been looking for the Infinity stones,” Bruce said. “And he somehow ended up fighting someone called Surtur.”

“Surtur?” Tony said, raising an eyebrow. “There’s someone called Surtr in Norse legends. He’s supposed to bring about Ragnarok.”

“Yeah,” Bruce said dryly. “Anyway, Thor defeated him and took his… I didn’t quite get whether it was his crown or his head… but either way, he took it back to Asgard. Where he found that Odin had been exiled and Loki was pretending to be Odin.”

Tony gave him a long look then snorted. “And here I thought my family drama was complicated.”

“Oh, it gets better,” Bruce said. “Thor got a bit pissed off at this and made Loki take him to where he’d taken Odin, only to find he wasn’t there. Your friend Dr Strange waylaid them at this point and helped them find Odin because he wanted Loki off the planet.”

Tony looked surprised. “Huh. Stephen never said anything about that. I’ll ask him about it later.”

“They found Odin but he died. That let their older sister out,” Bruce said. “Hela, the goddess of death.”

Tony frowned. “I thought Hela was Loki’s daughter?”

“I think we have to accept that the Nordic myths might not be entirely accurate,” Bruce said dryly.

“Good point. Go on.”

“So,” Bruce said. “Hela destroyed Mjolnir, Loki tried to get them out of there, Hela followed and
knocked both of them out of the… bifrost and they ended up on Sakaar but at different times and places. Loki had ingratiated himself with the Grandmaster and Thor and the Hulk fought in the arena.”

“Who won?”

Bruce snorted. “That depends who you ask. Thor says he did. Loki and Brunnhilde say the Hulk did, though Loki said that the Grandmaster cheated. The Hulk says he won fair and square. Not long after that, I transformed back. Which… I didn’t handle all that well. I mean, I was on another planet without knowing how I got there, I’d been the Hulk for two years, Thor was there talking about an older sister and trouble on Asgard and I was wearing your clothes.” He paused. “You have got to stop wearing your pants so tight, Tony.”

Tony grinned. “But I have a magnificent bubble butt, Bruce. I have to show it off.”

“…did you just say… bubble butt?” Bruce said with a rather pained expression.

Tony jumped off the bench and turned around, smacking his ass with one hand. “Sure did. And look at this thing, Brucie bear. It’s spectacular. Why wouldn’t I show it off?”

Bruce sighed and tried not to laugh or look amused. It would only encourage Tony into new depths of ridiculousness and while he usually didn’t mind that, he did have a few more things to talk about.

“Put your butt away, Tony, and let me finish this.”

Tony grinned at him and jumped back up onto the bench to sit down again. “Please continue, Dr Banner.”

“So, we went to Asgard,” Bruce said. “There was a big fight. Thor lost an eye, Loki let Surtur loose on… on Thor’s orders… and, well, Ragnarok occurred and Hela was killed. Also, there’s a ship full of Asgardians on their way to Earth because Asgard was destroyed. That’s… kind of why I came back early. To… let everyone know.”

Tony stared at him for a long moment. “So we have… how many Asgardians coming?”

“Several hundred, I think. Maybe a thousand,” Bruce replied. “Along with a handful of… aliens from the arena.”

“And Thor’s bringing Loki here?”

Bruce nodded.

“Do you think I could retire to… say, Bali or something?” Tony said plaintively.

“Only if you let me come too,” Bruce replied with a sympathetic smile. “At least I convinced Thor to give you some warning.”

Tony winced then and hunched in on himself. Bruce leaned forward. “Tony?”

“I’m honestly not sure whose side Thor’s going to take when he hears about the… civil war,” Tony admitted. “But I’m not exactly confident that it’s going to be mine.”

Bruce settled back and thought about the Thor he’d seen on the ship after Asgard’s destruction and how he compared to the Thor he’d known before Ultron. While Thor was still – and probably would always be – boisterous, there was a maturity about him now that he’d lacked before. “He might
surprise you. He’s the King of Asgard now. He’s… well, responsibility seems to suit him.”

“And Loki?”

Bruce shrugged and snorted. “He’s… Loki. You can’t trust him for a minute but he seems less…
take over the world and rule you all and more… let’s see how much mischief I can cause before
Thor starts yelling at me and threatening to throw me off the ship.”

“That’s a bit of a change,” Tony said dubiously.

“He gets a bit skittish around me,” Bruce said with a hint of a smirk. “But I’ve had a few chances to
talk to him. He’s evasive as all hell but I get the distinct impression that Clint wasn’t the only one
who was mind controlled during that whole thing.”

“Oh?” Tony said curiously.

“You faced him in the Tower,” Bruce said. “What colour were his eyes?”

Tony blinked at what appeared to be a sudden tangent then he frowned in thought. “Blue. Bright
blue in fact.” He paused and his eyes widened.

Bruce nodded. “His eyes are green, Tony.”

“Huh,” Tony said, leaning back and looking contemplative. “Would he be willing to actually admit
to what was done to him? And why? And by whom? That might help with getting him accepted
here.”

“We’ll see,” Bruce replied. “I think he’d understand the necessity but I don’t think he’ll like it.”

Tony nodded then he snorted. “I still think we’re going to regret it.”

“Oh, we’ll absolutely regret it,” Bruce replied. “He’s as slippery as an eel and I don’t think even he
knows where his loyalty lies. But he’s also not stupid and he came to help on Asgard when he had
no earthly reason to do so.” He paused and grinned. “I think you’ll like him once you get to know
him and I also think we’re all going to regret that because combining you and Loki is a recipe for
disaster.”

Tony placed his hand on his chest and mocked being hurt. “Brucie bear, I can’t believe you would
stab me in the back like that.”

Bruce laughed. “Apparently Loki does that. Just randomly stabs Thor for the hell of it. Thor just
seems mildly irritated by it.”

“That is one weird family,” Tony said with a shake of his head. “And coming from me, that’s saying
something.” He clapped his hands. “Alright. Tell me everything you know about these Asgardians
and what Thor’s expecting from Earth.”

He jumped off the bench and sat down in a chair, pulling up a new file in the holographic display in
front of him. Bruce joined him and they began to work. Once they had something resembling a plan,
Tony leaned back with a satisfied look.

“Well, it’s a good start.”

“A good start?” Bruce said.

“This’ll have to go before the full General Assembly, not just the Accords Council,” Tony said. “I
mean, I’ll start there because I’ve worked with them enough that they know me but it’ll still have to go before the full Assembly.”

Bruce frowned. “Will that be a problem?”

Tony wobbled his hand in the air. “Eh, maybe. We may have to wait for a final decision for Thor to get here. They may need to speak to him personally before they’ll say yes.”

“Will they say yes?” Bruce asked.

“They’d better,” Tony said with a snort. “We’ll look like monumental dicks to turn them away under the circumstances.”

“We’re not always good with refugees,” Bruce replied dryly.

“True,” Tony said. “But this has a few different levels about it. You’ve dropped a hint or two in the last few days about something bigger than this.”

Bruce sighed and leaned back, scrubbing his face with one hand. In the back of his head, the Hulk rumbled, a mix of challenge and nerves. He honestly wasn’t sure what the other guy was nervous about. He’d launched himself at Surtur without a blink, according to Thor, and had only been annoyed when he’d been told to stop.

“There was a reason Thor’s been looking for the Infinity stones and it was confirmed by the…” He chuckled. “We… well, met a group of… to be honest, I’m not sure what to call them. They call themselves the Guardians of the Galaxy and it sounds like they’ve earned that title.”

“More than us, you mean,” Tony said wryly.

“Well, sort of,” Bruce replied. “They… told us what’s going on. There’s this… person. He’s a Titan, apparently. He wants the Infinity stones and he’ll destroy everything in his path to get to them.”

“Why?” Tony asked, leaning forward with a frown.

“Nebula says there’s a glove,” Bruce replied. “The Infinity glove. It was on Asgard, which both Thor and Loki confirmed. So we don’t know what’s happened to it now. But apparently if you have the glove and all the Infinity stones, you can rule the universe with infinite power.”

Tony sighed and ran a hand down his face. “Great. Just what we need. So do we know where the other stones are? Vision has one and Stephen another.”

“The tesseract was in the vault on Asgard,” Bruce said with a grimace. “So no one knows what’s happened to it either. Thor seems to be of the opinion that both the tesseract and the glove would have survived the destruction of Asgard. Loki agrees. Thor said the Aether is with Tanaleer Tivan on a place called Nowhere and the Guardians said that the Power stone is in a secure vault on Xandar.”

“So…” Tony leaned back and began to tick them off on his fingers. “That’s… Viz, Kamar-Taj, missing, Nowhere and Xandar. That’s five. Is that all of them?”

Bruce shook his head. “There’s one more. The Soul stone. That’s with Heimdall but no one would say how or why, not even Heimdall.”

“But Heimdall’s with the Asgardians?” Tony said and Bruce nodded. “Shit. That means we’re going to end up with three stones here on Earth.”
“Both Gamora and Nebula said that Thanos will come here and what you saw through the portal was only a fraction of what he has in his army.” Bruce paused for a moment. “I’m sorry, Tony. I should have worked harder with you to convince the others that something was coming.”

Tony waved it away. “Not sure it would have made any difference, Brucie bear. If Rogers was willing to believe a HYDRA operative over me, I’m not sure even the big guy would have convinced him I was right.”

Bruce had to admit that Tony was right. He still had no idea why Rogers had believed and trusted Maximoff over his supposed teammates. He hadn’t even seemed to care about his or Tony’s opinions on the matter. It was the main reason Bruce had left. He could not and would not work on the same team as Maximoff, not after what she’d done to him. And with no one but Tony making any indication of protest over Rogers’ decision, he hadn’t felt like he could trust them.

“Have you ever asked him why he did that?” he asked quietly.

“No,” Tony replied. “But I don’t need to any more. I know why he did it. Barnes.”


“Yeah. Oh.”

“If they’d accept Maximoff, he could argue the case for Barnes,” Bruce said with a slow nod.

“He already knew Barnes was alive and had at least partially broken his conditioning at that point,” Tony continued. “Which, in hindsight, makes his little speech about not liking his teammates keeping secrets from him particularly galling.”

Bruce grimaced and Tony waved at the screens around them. “But enough of that. Tell me everything these Guardians told you and we’ll see how badly this is going to panic the UN.”
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

T’Challa fronts the Accords Council about what happened in Wakanda and Tony comes to his 'rescue' by throwing out the information about the Asgardians.

Chapter Notes

Yes, I had enough time to get this chapter ready to go for today. Yay! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

T’Challa was tired. He had a mess to deal with at home and would very much liked to have not been here but the Council had demanded an explanation and he knew he had little choice but to give them one. He had promised to contain the rogue Avengers and he had failed. Despite the fact that the damage had been limited to Wakanda and the facility in Nevada, he would concede that they had a right to know what had happened.

“Hey, Simba. You look like shit.”

He turned to face Tony with a small smile. “Flattery will get you nowhere.”

Tony returned the smile. “Flattery is one of my specialities and gets me everywhere, Bagheera.” He sobered. “But really, you look terrible. Everything alright at home?”

“I have a council of advisors that is angry, a court sorcerer who is frustrated and several injured Dora Milaje,” he said with a sigh. “This meeting… is not at an ideal time.”

Tony grimaced. “The Council is flexing its muscles a bit, I’m afraid. It’s partly serious and partly a PR exercise to demonstrate to the rest of the world that they’re on top of things.”

“And because Wakanda is too new in the international arena, we don’t have the political and diplomatic capital to push back very far,” T’Challa said with a weary nod.

“Exactly,” Tony replied. He paused for a moment. “I did want to apologise before we went in to the meeting.”

T’Challa frowned. “You have nothing to apologise for, Tony. This was all on the rogues, Maximoff in particular.”

Tony looked a little chagrined as he rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, yeah, but you would have been a bit more prepared to stop them if we’d given you some warning about what Wong was doing.”

T’Challa considered that for a moment then shook his head. “No, you owe me no apologies for that either, for I do not think Zuri would have considered that Maximoff could overpower his wards.” He scowled. “I fear we have become somewhat… arrogant in our isolation.”
“Not unreasonably,” Tony replied. “Your tech is something to drool over, quite frankly, and I’ve been very tempted to try and steal your sister. She and Pepper could probably use Stark Industries to take over the world if they joined forces.”

That jolted a small laugh out of T’Challa. “She might just take you up on that offer. She’s better at handling the council than I am but even she is running out of patience with them right now.”

Tony sobered. “That bad, huh?”

“We have had to reveal to the people that the rogues were there and the reasons for that,” T’Challa said. “They are… not happy.”

“How not happy?” Tony asked, looking worried.

T’Challa waved his hand. “Oh, my position is not in danger, though no doubt I will find a few more challengers facing me at the next gathering of the clans.”

Tony looked confused. “Is that good or bad?”

“A bit of both,” T’Challa replied. “They will be serious challengers but most won’t truly be looking to oust me from the throne. Just more to… chastise me for some of my poor decisions of late and to remind me of my responsibilities to Wakanda and its people.”

“Ah,” Tony said. “So if you take your licks, they’ll be satisfied.”

“Something along those lines.”

Tony nodded then he drew T’Challa over to the side, the Dora Milaje forming a wall in front of them at Tony’s significant glance at them.

“Is there a problem?” T’Challa asked.


T’Challa sighed and pinched his nose. “He is unhappy?”

“That’s an understatement.” Tony patted his arm. “I think he’s also decided a bit of schadenfreude was good for you. So… you know, try to keep your temper if he gets smug about what happened in Wakanda.”

T’Challa gritted his teeth and he could see the way the shoulders of the Dora Milaje around them stiffened in anger. “I see.”

“I’ve already spoken to Clements,” Tony continued. “He’ll try and keep Vasilescu on a short leash but…”

“But Vasilescu is feeling like I’ve gotten my just desserts after what happened in Bucharest,” T’Challa said tiredly.

“Something like that.”

T’Challa sighed and managed to dredge up a small smile. “Thank you for the warning, Tony.”

“I’ve gotten used to being the bearer of bad news,” Tony said dryly.

T’Challa looked amused for a moment then he sobered. “And how are your guests?”
“Quiet mostly,” Tony replied. “Mind you, Bruce put the fear of the Hulk into them so that’s not surprising.” He glanced around. “And that’s the other thing I was going to mention.”

“Dr Banner?” T’Challa said with a frown. “Is there a problem?”

“Er, that depends on your definition of a problem,” Tony said dryly. “But it will probably distract the Council from their inquisition of you. Unfortunately it’s going to set a very large cat among the pigeons.”

T’Challa raised an eyebrow. “Do I get a sneak preview?”

“Normally I’d say yes but I’d rather do this only once,” Tony said and that was when T’Challa noticed that he looked a bit frazzled. “This is the proverbial doozy.”

Their attention was diverted by a young UN aide who was nervously approaching the Dora Milaje. He came to a halt a very healthy distance from the intimidating women and cleared his throat. The nearest woman raised an eyebrow at him and the young man swallowed hard.

“Um, the Council is ready for His Majesty and Dr Stark,” he said, his voice steady despite his obvious nerves.

The Dora inclined her head then turned to face her king. “Your Majesty?”

“We’re coming,” T’Challa said, giving the young man a nod.

They made quite the little procession as they approached the room where the Council met. The Dora Milaje remained outside, much to their disgruntlement, and Tony and T’Challa continued inside. The Council was already there and they took their seats facing the fifteen men and women, all of whom looked sombre and stern.

“King T’Challa, thank you for coming,” Nigel Clements said with a nod. “And you, Dr Stark.”

T’Challa inclined his head in return while Tony gave a nod and a little wave of one hand as he lounged in his seat.

“I am aware that the timing is probably less than desirable,” Clements continued. “But we are getting a number of questions from the General Assembly and we’d like to be able to give them answers. People are somewhat nervous.”

“That is understandable and I am willing to assist the Council however I can,” T’Challa said with as much diplomacy as he could muster.

“Thank you,” Clements said. “Now, we have received your report regarding what happened in Wakanda but there have been a few questions that have come up.” He passed for a moment. “You indicated that Miss Maximoff managed to… destroy the wards that had been put up. How?”

“My court sorcerer has been looking into that,” T’Challa replied calmly. “I had intended to submit a follow up report once he had come to his conclusions. I didn’t think it wise to wait for him before submitting the initial report.”

Clements nodded. “And has he come to any conclusion?”

“He has,” T’Challa replied. “He did not expect Miss Maximoff to be able to breach his wards based on the information we had been provided about her abilities. Zuri had set his wards to contain a level of magic far greater than anything we believed she was capable of. However, all of that was
predicated on the idea that she would not attempt to use her magic without any boundaries or restrictions on it.”

“And that is what she did?” Clements asked.

T’Challa nodded. “So Zuri believes. When the backlash occurred from the removal of her magic from Dr Stark’s mind, it appears to have unbalanced her mind. What little control she possessed was completely lost and she accessed her magic in a way that was utterly dangerous. If she had continued to do so, she would have… imploded.”

“Imploded?” said the Japanese representative, Chiyo Koizumi with a look of alarm. “How literal are you being with that description?”

“Very,” T’Challa said grimly. “I read the summary report regarding what happened in Nevada. When I spoke to Zuri about it, he suggested that her death there was quicker and far less painful than it would have been if she’d imploded.”

“It is better than she deserves!” The loud angry growl came from Filip Jankovic, the Sokovian representative, and T’Challa saw out of the corner of his eye that Tony wasn’t quite nodding in agreement but clearly didn’t disagree either. T’Challa was in two minds but he would readily admit that he’d barely known the girl and most of the time she’d been in Wakanda, she’d been meek and quiet. She hadn’t seemed like that much of a threat. He’d been horrified when he’d heard about what she’d done to Tony’s mind but everything had fallen apart before he could make any arrangements to keep her further contained.

“I’d agree but I’ve been told that after recent revelations, I’m biased,” Tony said with deceptive casualness. “However, it does solve the problem of how to contain her and also stops her from… er, imploding anywhere that might hurt other people. My only regret is that we didn’t anticipate what the backlash was going to her and prevent the events in Wakanda.”

“Your mind is entirely clear of her influence now?” Clements asked.

Tony nodded. “Wong has confirmed it in the wake of the events in Nevada, just to be sure. It’s gone.”

“That’s good to hear,” Clements said.

“I would like to know why this… this loss of control wasn’t anticipated,” Vasilescu said angrily. “It is pure luck that she did not go on some sort of rampage and cause more damage!”

“You observed the construction of the wards yourself, Your Excellency,” T’Challa said mildly, though he was gritting his teeth a little. “You took the opportunity to question my court sorcerer. We took all precautions that seemed necessary.”

“And yet she still escaped,” Vasilescu said with a sneer. “They all escaped.”

“And nearly killed some of my Dora Milaje in doing so,” T’Challa replied, an edge entering his voice. “As it is, we still do not know whether two of them will recover completely from what Maximoff did to them.”

“Nikolai,” Markov, the Russian representative, said in a placating tone. “Every sensible precaution was taken. This was something out of everyone’s control.” The Russian paused for a moment then continued dryly, “And it is not as though it was your countrymen and women in danger this time.” He looked over at Tony as Vasilescu sputtered. “How are the soldiers faring, Dr Stark?”
“They’re recovering as well as might be expected,” Tony said. “The sorcerers of Kamar-Taj were able to remove the effects of Maximoff’s magic and the military will be providing counsellors if they’re needed.”

“And Maximoff’s body?” Markov asked.

“Ah,” Tony said. “That was one of the things I intended to bring up today. Her body is currently being held in a secure facility in the US but… nobody’s sure what to do with it. There’s a low level but slowly growing groundswell that doesn’t want her remains interred anywhere in the US and I don’t know whether there’s anyone in Sokovia who wants to claim her.”

“No!” Jankovic said with an angry slash of his hand. “She is not welcome in Sokovia, alive or dead.”

“I thought that might be the case,” Tony said mildly. “The general consensus among the New Avengers is to have her cremated and the ashes scattered at sea. If there’s no objection, we’ll go ahead with that.”

“Why cremation?” Koizumi asked.

Tony grimaced. “She’d been experimented on.” He paused then continued delicately, “There’s no way of knowing what it did to her on a cellular or genetic level and it seems prudent to ensure that no one can repeat it using her remains.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to understand what happened to her?” Markov asked.

“We’ve taken some samples and Drs Banner, Ross, Strange and Van Dyne are looking into them,” Tony said. “We may also have some… outside expertise coming soon but that’s a separate matter that I wish to discuss after this.”

The Council huddled together for a moment then returned to their seats. “The Council approves your plans, Dr Stark,” Clements said. “Now, unless any of my colleagues have any further questions for King T’Challa, perhaps we can move on to the matter Dr Stark wishes to speak to us about?”

There were head shakes around the table, though Vasilescu looked like he wanted to continue to harp on about the subject. It took a nudge in the ribs from Markov but finally the Romanian representative subsided and indicated he was done. T’Challa felt a hint of relief and wondered if Tony had primed Clements about this as well in order to cut short the threatened inquisition.

“Very well,” Clements said. “Dr Stark, you have the floor.”

Tony stood up and squared his shoulders. That and the expression on his face made more than one person in the room brace themselves.

“As you may remember, I mentioned in my report that Dr Banner arrived at Nevada at a very opportune moment,” he said. “I somewhat glossed over where he’d been since what he told us then was so bizarre, I wanted the full story before I said anything.”

“I gather he’s given you the full story,” Markov said dryly.

“Yes, and it’s even more bizarre than the short version he told us,” Tony replied with a wry smile that made some of the representatives smile in return. “Most of it isn’t really relevant to anything the Accords Council or the UN is concerned with but for the parts that are… the salient points are that Odin is dead and Thor is now the King of Asgard, the actual physical Asgard has been completely destroyed and Thor is now on his way here with a thousand or so Asgardian refugees, some other
aliens who were rescued from slavery and... his brother, Loki.”

There was a moment of silence then every person on the Council burst into loud and discordant questions that continued until Clements was forced to pick up his rarely used gavel and bang it on the table to get some order.

“That’s quite the bombshell, Dr Stark,” Clements said. He, along with most of the others was looking just a little wild-eyed.

“Tell me about it,” Tony said wryly. “Just be thankful that Bruce talked Thor into letting him come on ahead so we got some warning.”

“Perhaps we could get a slightly more detailed explanation?” Koizumi asked delicately.

Tony nodded and as concisely as he could, he summarised everything Bruce had told him, leaving out Bruce’s side of things unless it was necessary for the story but making sure he kept in all the Asgardian stuff. By the time he finished, the representatives looked a little stunned.

“So,” Clements began before clearing his throat. “What are they seeking from us?”

“A home,” Tony said simply. “Bruce did suggest that we give Norway first dibs given their historical connection with Asgard.”

“That is...” Clements began.

“Difficult and entirely dependent on the Norwegian government and people,” Tony finished for him with a wry smile. “And not something we can really decide here and now. I simply brought this to your attention. Both Bruce and I are willing to go before the General Assembly but they are coming so we are going to have to have something to tell them when they get here.”

“Duly noted,” Clements said dryly. “We will start the process of priming the General Assembly and call for a full meeting.” He raised an eyebrow at Tony. “At which point, this will become public knowledge.”

Tony nodded. “I know but I think that’s a good thing. We’re not exactly going to be able to hide a ship full of Asgardians and aliens and it’s better that the public knows that the alien spacecraft in the sky is full of friendlies this time.” He grimaced. “But one other thing that should be passed on the General Assembly is... this is going to get us a lot of attention from the wider galaxy. Attention we may not be entirely ready for. On the plus side, I’d imagine that the Asgardians would be willing to aid us if we’re so kind as to offer them a home.”

“Thor is a formidable warrior from what I have seen of the footage,” Fiona Reed from Australia said slowly.

“And Loki has magic,” Tony added, in a gentle reminder.

“Loki is a war criminal,” Markov said dryly.

Tony paused. “There may be some extenuating circumstances.”

“How so?” Clements asked.

“There’s some evidence that Loki may have been mind controlled in some fashion,” Tony replied. “Similar to how Agent Barton was controlled.”
Clements raised an eyebrow. “What evidence?”

“When I confronted him at my Tower, his eyes were blue,” Tony said. He waved a hand. “Not something I really thought anything about at the time… or afterwards for that matter… but Dr Banner has reported that Loki’s eyes are, in fact, green.”

“If I recall, Agent Barton’s eyes were blue when he was under mind control,” Clement said slowly.

Tony nodded. “Dr Banner wasn’t able to get any clear answers from Loki before he left the Asgardians to come home but he did suspect that Loki may be able to be convinced to explain what happened.”

“So Loki may have been an innocent victim?” Clements asked. He looked a little dubious and so did everyone else on the Council.

Tony snorted with amusement. “From everything I’ve heard, the last time Loki was innocent was when he was a very small child. But was he acting under duress? Yes, I believe that is possible.”

“Can he be trusted?”

Tony actually laughed at that. “Definitely not but he does seem to have some kind of loyalty towards his brother. Dr Banner says that these days he seems more in trickster mode than wanting to take over the world.”

“He is reputed to be a trickster god,” Markov said dryly.

“True,” Clements said. “Alright. We’ll table the issue of Loki until the Asgardians get here and we’ve had a chance to speak to him and Thor.” He looked at Tony who was still standing. “Was there anything else, Dr Stark?”

Tony grimaced. “Yes, actually and this is going to make the problem of Loki look like child’s play. We have a problem.”

“Which one?” Clements said dryly.

“This is a new one,” Tony replied after a brief smirk. “Thor’s been absent the last couple of years because he’s been looking for the Infinity stones. These are powerful objects. The tesseract was one. The mind stone that was in Loki’s sceptre and now resides with Vision is another. There are four more. Thor was looking for them because he’d heard rumours, which we’ve now been able to confirm, that a being called Thanos, the mad Titan, was also looking for them.”

“What do these Infinity Stones do?” Fiona Reed from Australia asked.

“Combined with something called the Infinity glove, they give enormous power,” Tony said. “Unimaginable power. And Thanos is coming here. Loki was his prisoner at one time and his little attempt at an invasion was to allow Thanos to obtain the tesseract. Thanos knows we have some of the Infinity stones here and he is coming.”

“Is there any way to stop that? To… send the stones off world?” Markov asked.

Tony shook his head. “Not really. I mean, we will soon have the means to send them off world, yes, but it won’t change anything. Whether the stone are here or not, Thanos will still come and will still try and destroy the Earth.”

“Why?” Koizumi asked.
“That I’m not entirely clear on,” Tony admitted. “Thor may know.”

“I gather you have some plans in mind?” Clements asked.

“I do,” Tony said. “But this is going to have to be more of a global effort. The New Avengers and the Council should meet with the Security Council and… the General Assembly and the world in general is going to have to be told as well.”

“We might be best to wait until after the Asgardians have arrived and the negotiations with them have finished,” Markov said thoughtfully. “I am assuming that Thor and the Asgardians will seek to protect us?”

“I can’t imagine they wouldn’t,” Tony said. “But you’re right. If we have allies to present to the world when we tell them about Thanos, that would be a good way of trying to alleviate the panic.”

“What of the rogues?” Koizumi said.

Vasilescu sneered. “What of them?”

“Will we not need all of our resources when this Thanos comes?” Koizumi said. “Even ones we do not like?”

“It is not an unreasonable question,” T’Challa said, drawing everyone’s attention and stifling, for the moment, the argument that was clearly in the offing from Vasilescu and apparently Jankovic.

“Why should we trust them to do what is right for the world?” Vasilescu said disdainfully. “They clearly don’t care much about the rest of us.”

“I think we could trust Rogers to fight,” Tony said in reply. “He’s only unreasonable when he thinks Barnes is at risk. We assure him Barnes is safe, he should fall back into his normal behaviour.”

“And what must we offer him in return?” Vasilescu said with trenchant disapproval.

Tony shrugged. “That I leave up to less… biased minds than mine. It’s not uncommon to offer clemency during wartime to prisoners if they perform above and beyond the call of duty. But that’s not my call.” He grimaced. “There will be factions in the US that will demand his release once we announce the imminent arrival of Thanos.”

“It is too early to be discussing the specifics,” T’Challa again intervened when it looked like another argument was in the offing. “Let us see what Thor has to say first.”

“Well said,” Clements said firmly. “Dr Stark, if you and the New Avengers could put your minds towards some sort of planetary defence, that would be greatly appreciated.”

Tony managed to avoid any bitterness or irony when he replied. “Of course.”

“Thank you.” Clements looked around. “And we will begin some judicious work with the rest of the General Assembly.”

Chapter End Notes

Some of the things discussed in this chapter may or may not come to pass. This is far too
early in the piece for any concrete decisions to be made and the Accords Council doesn't have the power to make some of those decisions anyway.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

A decision or two is made as to what's to be done with Bucky Barnes and Tony gets a rather pleasant surprise.

Chapter Notes

And in this chapter, I finally ended up with a pairing! I've been waiting to see which direction this story would flow towards and... it's Tony and Stephen or IronStrange, I believe it's called. It won't be a major part of the rest of the story, more of an undercurrent as it were, but there we go. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Sir?”

Tony looked up from his work on his suit. “Yeah, J?”

“You asked me to review the known information on Sergeant Barnes in regards to the possibility of using the Binarily Augmented Retro Framing device to remove his triggers.”

Tony grinned. He had yet to get JARVIS to use the term BARF. The AI had expressed a certain amount of exasperated disapproval that he had not found a better name and primly avoided using it. The grin dropped from his face as Barnes came to mind. He still didn’t like the man, even though he’d worked through some of his issues in regard to what happened. But he also wasn’t cruel enough to deny Barnes treatment if BARF could actually help him.

“Yeah, I did. What’s the verdict?”

JARVIS was silent for a moment. “While it is possible it may help him in the future, after further development and independent testing, as it stands now the Binarily Augmented Retro Framing device could not help Sergeant Barnes be rid of the triggers in his mind. However, if my reading of the current literature is correct, then the existing measures used to aid victims of ‘brainwashing’ and the techniques used to aid former cult members and for de-radicalising those who fall in with extremists may be of some assistance in the interim.”

“Huh,” Tony said. “Wonder why King Kitty’s people haven’t tried that?”

“Wakanda has been isolated for a considerable period of time and would likely not have had a need for such information,” JARVIS replied. “And the literature is vast and often contradictory. It may be they are still working through the possibilities and will eventually come to the same conclusion I have.” He paused then continued modestly, “I do have a considerable amount of processing power at my disposal.”

Tony chuckled. “That you do.” He thought for a moment. “Dig up the current experts in the field, J,
and get me their contact details. We’ll need to see if they’re willing to do home visits to another country or if we’ll have to make arrangements to bring Barnes here.”

“Yes, sir.” There was a noticeable pause. “Sir… if I may be so bold, there are other options than bringing Sergeant Barnes here. Nowhere is there a requirement that you must house the man who murdered your parents. It would be unconscionable.”

A fond smile grew on Tony’s face for a brief moment. “Yeah, I know. But he didn’t really kill my parents. I mean, he did but he didn’t. His body did but his mind didn’t.” He scrubbed his face with one hand. “If I go around blaming him for Mom and Dad’s deaths then I’m no better than Wanda was with me.”

“The circumstances are somewhat different, sir,” JARVIS said rather dubiously.

The door to the workshop opened as JARVIS was speaking and Stephen Strange walked in. As he did, his cloak immediately floated over to drape itself over Tony’s shoulders.

“What circumstances are different?” Stephen asked, shaking his head affectionately at his cloak’s antics.

Tony hesitated for a moment. “Barnes.”

Both Stephen and Hope had been briefed in by Rhodey on the situation with Barnes. Stephen had immediately offered to reach out to his contacts for assistance and Hope had as well, though she’d been more than willing to defer to Stephen, as someone who had actually been in the medical field.

“What about Barnes?” Stephen asked.

Tony grimaced. “BARF can’t help him right now, according to JARVIS, but more traditional treatments might.”

Stephen nodded, looking unsurprised. “That’s the word I was getting too. I was just waiting for our meeting with King T’Challa to present the information I’ve got from my contacts.” His eyes narrowed. “But that’s not all, is it?”

Tony sighed and slouched on his stool. The cloak immediately curled around him some more and he smiled briefly and patted it. “Just the sticky problem of exactly how much culpability Barnes has in the murder of my parents and whether blaming him for it is taking the same path that Wanda did.”

“The two situations are hardly comparable, Tony,” Stephen said with a frown. “Barnes actually did kill your parents, albeit under duress. You did not kill Maximoff’s parents.”

“It was my weapon,” Tony replied.

Stephen sighed. “That had been sold illegally and was therefore owned and used by someone else without your knowledge. They are the ones responsible for the deaths of Maximoff’s parents.” He paused for a moment. “You know I used to work in a major hospital, yes?”

Tony frowned, not quite seeing where Stephen was going. “Yeah, so?”

“The emergency department saw a lot of gunshot victims brought it,” Stephen said. “I treated a few of them myself. Most survived but some didn’t. Tell me, would you blame the designer and manufacturer of those guns for the deaths and injuries of those people or would you blame the people who actually fired the gun?”
“Well…,” Tony said slowly. “But…”

“I was injured by the dashboard of my Lamborghini folding in under the pressure of the crash and crushing my hands.” Stephen held up his hands, the scarring and tremors obvious. “Would you blame Lamborghini for this, for the design of the dashboard being somehow inadequate, or me for speeding and being reckless and stupid behind the wheel?”

Tony frowned. “Stephen, it’s not the same.”

“Yes, it is,” Stephen said firmly, coming up to stand right in front of Tony. “You designed those weapons and your company manufactured them, yes, but you didn’t sell them! Obadiah Stane illegally sold them. If anyone’s to blame, it’s him.”

“But I wasn’t paying attention!” Tony half-yelled. “I was too busy drinking myself to death and fucking anything that moved because I hated what I was doing. I wasn’t paying attention. If I had been…”

“You still wouldn’t have stopped it. Stane would just have been more clandestine in what he was doing,” Stephen said bluntly. “In fact, he might have moved to get rid of you and claim the company earlier.”

Tony stopped and stared at Stephen. “I… didn’t think about that.”

Stephen snorted and looked amused. “For a genius, you can be a little slow on the uptake.”

Tony pretended to scowl at him, though there was a layer of relieved humour that was plainly obvious. “It’s the people thing. I don’t get people. Machines, yes, but people… aren’t really my thing.”

Stephen raised an eyebrow. “That does explain a few things.”

“Like what?” Tony asked with a frown.

“Never mind. We’ll deal with that later.” Stephen stepped back a bit. “So, Barnes.”

Tony grimaced. It was almost an automatic reaction these days. “Yeah, Barnes. If the treatment can’t be done in Wakanda then he’s going to have to come here, Stephen. He needs to be kept somewhere secure, not just to safeguard the people but also to keep him safe. We have no idea how many people know his trigger words.”

“That still doesn’t mean it has to be here,” Stephen replied. “There are plenty of secure locations.”

Tony was silent for a moment. “None that I trust though.”

Stephen gave him a look of exasperation then shook his head. “Just as well I paid attention to James.”

Tony blinked then realised that Stephen was talking about the other James. “Huh? What did Rhodey say?”

“That you were still going to take the troubles of the world on your shoulders,” Stephen said dryly. “Even if you are better about the guilt these days.”

“Ah. Right,” Tony said, not really sure where to go with that. “Um, so what do you mean?”

“I’ve already spoken to Wong and some of the other senior sorcerers,” Stephen said. “Kamar-Taj is
willing to offer Barnes sanctuary if he should need it. We can keep him safe.”

Tony gaped at him. “What? Why?” he asked when he managed to get himself under control again.

“Because we are part of this world, whether we like it or not,” Stephen said firmly. “The Ancient One might have kept the temple apart from the world but I don’t think that’s something we can afford to do anymore, not with what Bruce says is coming. So, as a gesture of good will, if you like, we are willing to offer Barnes a place to stay while he works at getting rid of his conditioning. We can ensure he can’t escape and that no one unauthorised can get in to him. Whoever is working with him can be brought in and out by portal. It’s safe, secure and more importantly, doesn’t force you to have to deal with him.”

“I’m not a fragile petal,” Tony growled.

“No, you’re not,” Stephen replied. “But that still doesn’t mean you should have to deal with him.” He sighed and stepped forward again, placing a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “I’m not saying you have to shun him forever or that I think there’s no chance of you someday being able to forgive him. I’m just saying that right now, you should not have to deal with the man who killed your parents.”

Tony dropped his eyes and stared down at his hands, which were clenched into fists on his knees. He thought that perhaps that reaction alone probably backed up what Stephen was saying. Not to mention the feeling of relief that flooded through him when Stephen validated that uneasy feeling that went through him every time he even thought about confronting Barnes.

“Right. Well. If the sorcerers of Kamar-Taj are offering, it’d be rude to say no,” he tried to joke.

“I’m offering,” Stephen said, making him look up at the other man. “Both as the Sorcerer Supreme and as… well, me.”

Tony stared at him in confusion for longer than he really cared to admit. This was… new. Well, sort of new. Rhodey and Pepper had always been willing to take on more, even if he hadn’t let them for a long time. But someone who had only known him for a few months? They never did things like that. It took years of exposure to Tony’s personality for people to even begin to like him. Well, okay, not Rhodey but that was different because Tony had been fourteen when they’d met but everyone else…

“Why?” he asked plaintively, before he could stop himself.

Stephen opened his mouth then closed it again without saying a word, a look of exasperated frustration appeared on his face. Tony was kind of used to that look though the edge of… was that fondness… was something new.

Before Stephen could say anything however, the edge of the cloak suddenly whipped up, wrapped itself around Stephen’s leg and yanked him forward. He gave a yelp as he toppled straight into Tony, who quickly wrapped his arms around Stephen to stop him from both falling further and from jarring his hands.

“Um,” Tony said, realising he had a lap… and arm and everything else… full of Stephen. And that it was… nice.

Stephen, on his part, was blushing slightly as he got to his feet and glared at the cloak. “Stop that.”

The cloak had a rather pouty air about it and Tony looked between it and Stephen as realisation dawned.

“You like me!” he yelped
Stephen stared at him for a moment then he sighed and rolled his eyes. “Yes, though I’m wondering why right now. James said you were oblivious. I didn’t think you were this oblivious.”

Tony pouted a little. “Well, how was I to know?” He stopped and frowned. “Wait. You like me? As in like me like me.”

Stephen rolled his eyes again. “When did we go back to high school? Yes, Tony, I like you. And I would like to kiss you, hug you, touch you and probably do many other things with you if you’re amenable to them.”

Tony’s eyes widened. “Oh.”

“Of course,” Stephen said. “If that’s not what you want or you’re not interested, then we can pretend this conversation never happened and continue on as we have been.”

“Is this why your cloak likes me?” Tony blurted, his brain still slightly on the fritz.

The cloak’s pouty air intensified as Stephen snorted. “No, the cloak likes you because it likes you. It has nothing to do with my feelings. It’s just that this time, we both agree.”

“Oh,” Tony said again.

“Tony,” Stephen began when the silence stretched a little too long to be comfortable.

“Yes!” Tony blurted then he hesitated for a moment. “I mean, I think so? I… hadn’t really thought about it but…” He gave a crooked smile. “I’d like to try. Just… you should know that I suck at this sort of thing.”

Stephen smiled. “Good, though I’m going to ignore that last bit. Will you let me take you out to dinner tomorrow night?”

“Sure,” Tony said, though his mind was still boggling a little. “Dressy or casual?”

Stephen hesitated for a moment. “Casual,” he said with a smirk. “I think you’ll like this place but they’re not a dressy establishment. 7pm?”

Tony nodded. “Cool.”

Stephen’s smirk widened a little. “So, about that kiss?”

Tony surprised himself by actually blushing. He hadn’t thought he was really capable of blushing anymore when it came to sex but then… this wasn’t actually sex. This was someone dating him and that… well, barring Pepper, that hadn’t happened since he’d been in college. Those experiences had been so bad, all of them just after his money and the goodies that came with being associated with the Stark name, that he’d kind of given up on dating, concentrating on brief and meaningless one night stands.

But this, he realised, was different. Stephen didn’t need or want his money or his toys or anything else from him, he’d made that plain enough when he’d first joined the New Avengers. He didn’t need or want the power and influence Tony had either as the owner and CTO of Stark Industries or as Iron Man since he had his own power and influence as the Sorcerer Supreme. All of which meant Stephen wanted to date him because… he wanted to. Because he liked him. Just him, not… all of the things that came with him.

“Um, sure,” he said, sounding just a little strangled.
Stephen’s smirk softened into a smile and he nudged his way between Tony’s knees in a smooth move Tony could only admire. With Tony sitting on his work stool, they were much the same height, so when Stephen closed the gap between them, Tony barely had to raise his head.

The kiss was gentle, almost chaste, and Stephen let it linger like that. He didn’t try and push any harder, didn’t grab or clutch. He just let the kiss… meander and when they finally parted, Tony found that somewhere in the middle of it, he’d closed his eyes. He opened them again now and this time when he quirked a smile at Stephen, there was no artifice or falsity about it. It wasn’t a Tony Stark™ smile, it was just a genuine, pleased smile from Tony. Stephen then looked so smug and pleased with himself that Tony had to laugh.

“Do you really have to look so smug?”

Stephen shrugged a little. “It wouldn’t be amiss to say that you have a great deal of experience. It’s nice to know I can still have an impact.”

Tony’s smile settled into something happy yet still a little melancholy. “I have a lot of experience in very shallow sex. Not so much with…” He waved a hand at the two of them. “This. You don’t really have a lot of competition and apart from Pepper, most of the competition you do have was pretty bad.”

Stephen frowned. “Pretty bad?”

“That’s a conversation for another time,” Tony said dismissively. “Not something I want to dwell on right now.”

Stephen nodded and let it drop. Instead he leaned forward. “Then perhaps I can distract you a little more?”

Tony’s smile returned, slow and pleased. “Sound like a plan I can get behind.”

He closed the gap and kissed Stephen, neither noticing the rather smug air about the cloak and the way JARVIS blacked out the workroom windows.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, and since I'm sure some of you might like to know... Stephen is going to portal them to Kamar-Taj then take Tony to a little hole in the wall place in Kathmandu for some genuine Nepalese food. Tony's going to love it. Normally he's the one jetting people to strange places for dinner just to show off. He really likes that Stephen's doing that with him. He's tickled pink! :D
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

So, what exactly is happening with the ExVengers?

They've been moved to The Hague (most of them anyway) and their cases are progressing. This is what is going on with them.

Chapter Notes

Some of these are a bit more sympathetic than you might expect because these are concentrating on the ExVengers and their lawyers, who are trying to get the best outcome for their clients. There will be some notes at the end about what will happen to them, regardless of the optimistic tone some of the lawyers have tried to take.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Scott Lang

Scott Lang gulped as the rather imposing white-haired man walked into the room. He would have stood but the guards were a bit twitchy around him, no doubt due to the mess the others had caused in Wakanda and Nevada. It was a bit laughable really because without the Ant-Man suit, he was really very ordinary.

“Mr Lang,” the man said in a rather avuncular tone that made Scott relax just a little. His lawyer, a rather fussy little Swede called Jens Olsson narrowed his eyes for a moment before he too relaxed. Scott took that as a good sign. He hadn’t had many in the past few weeks so he’d take whatever he could get. “My name is Michel Dorn. I am the ICC’s Special Prosecutor in charge of the case against the rogue Avengers.”

“Um, hi,” Scott said. “I’m in trouble, aren’t I?”

Dorn sat down across the table from him. “That you are, though not as much as some of your colleagues.”

“I really didn’t know what they were going to do beyond what I’d already told Princess Shuri,” Scott said hurriedly. “I’d already been moved out of that wing when it all went to hell.”

“We are aware of that,” Dorn said. “And in light of what happened, part of what I am here for is to offer you the assistance of the sorcerers of Kamar-Taj to determine if Miss Maximoff tampered with your mind at all.”

Scott reared back in his chair, his eyes wide with dismay. “She did that?”

“We don’t know,” Dorn replied calmly. “That is why we are offering to check.”

“Um, yeah,” Scott said, nodding his head furiously. “Definitely.”
Dorn smiled. “I will make the arrangements with the Sorcerer Supreme. Now, back to your case. It is not as dire as you might think.”

“Um, yeah,” Scott said. “Mr Olsson’s said that but… how?”

“You weren’t involved in the incident in Bucharest,” Dorn explained. “Nor were you in Siberia. That only leaves the fight at the airport. The damage you caused to various vehicles and objects was significant but Dr Stark has chosen not to press charges against you for the damage done to his suit. Given your early cooperation with both the ICC and the Accords Council, your willingness to testify against the other rogues and the fact that there was no malice involved in your participation in the events of the Civil War, the German government has agreed to drop the illegal entry charges against you. The airport and the airline whose plane you destroyed are both also willing to drop any criminal charges against you providing that appropriate restitution is made for the damages you caused.”

Scott had been getting his hopes up as Dorn spoke but now they dropped down into his boots again. “Um, I… don’t have that kind of money, Mr Dorn. I don’t even have a job.”

Dorn’s smile was very avuncular as he waved a hand towards Scott’s lawyer. “I believe Mr Olsson has some news on that subject.”

Olsson nodded to Dorn. “That I do. I have been in contact with Ms Van Dyne as well as Dr Stark, Colonel Rhodes and the Accords Council. Because you were willing to sign the Accords, that opens up some options for you. The Council is not willing to allow you to sign on as an Avenger without serving a suspension period. The length of that suspension is something we’ll negotiate with the Council at a later date.”

“Wait,” Scott said, his eyes wide. “They’d be willing to let me be an Avenger? Even now?”

“Ms Van Dyne has vouched for you,” Olsson said. “Dr Stark and Colonel Rhodes have no objection.” He paused then continued very dryly, “Though you may have some work to do to convince them that you’re not a gullible idiot.”

Scott winced but he was willing to admit to his faults. “Yeah, I guess I do.”

“In regards to your employment, Dr Stark has come up with a novel suggestion,” Olsson continued. “There are concrete plans to expand the New Avengers roster and Dr Stark has stated that he cannot, in good conscience, spend any more time on Avengers related projects than he already is. He cannot allow his company to take second place anymore. He suggested that there could be a position for a good engineer to take over the basic repairs and general day to day maintenance of the Avengers’ personal gear and team equipment. Within reason, of course, since I doubt you would be permitted to work on the Iron Man or War Machine armours.”

Scott’s jaw sagged. “Really?” he squeaked. “He’s really willing to do that for me? Why?”

“Dr Stark is a generous man,” Dorn said blandly.

“Your wages would obviously be garnished to pay the reparations,” Olsson added. “We’ll need to do some negotiations about the precise amount. The actual cost the German government is quoting is… impossible for a man who isn’t a billionaire or a king to pay back on his own but they may be willing to accept an amount that indicates genuine remorse. It would still be significant.”

Scott frowned. “Wait, Stark paid the whole lot?” That kind of went against everything Hank had said about Stark but Scott had come to the realisation over the past few weeks that Hank probably wasn’t a reliable source of information when it came to Tony Stark. Nor were the rogue Avengers for that
“Dr Stark paid the exact amount the German government demanded of him,” Olsson replied. “He also chose to cover the expenses of Colonel Rhodes, Spider-Man and Vision. King T’Challa paid his own sum.”

Scott shifted uncomfortably in his seat as his guilt gnawed at him. “Then shouldn’t I pay the full amount as well?”

“Mr Lang, the amount runs into the millions of dollars,” Olsson said patiently. “Airplanes are not cheap after all. You would spend the rest of your life paying it off.”

“Oh,” Scott said. Things sort of solidified in his mind then and what he planned to say next would probably have Hank screaming… but he also figured it might make Hope smile and on the whole, he felt that probably made it right. “It just… doesn’t seem fair that just because he’s rich, Stark pays the whole lot of what he owes and I’ll only pay a fraction of what I owe. Particularly since the only reason he owes anything in the first place is because we started a fight.”

He was surprised when Olsson raised an eyebrow at Dorn. The ICC prosecutor chuckled.

“I see what you mean, Mr Olsson. A good man easily led astray.”

Olsson smiled. “That is why I asked for your help, Dorn.”

“And you shall have it.” Dorn gave a nod and then turned to Scott. “We will speak with the Accords Council and the German government on your behalf. If you are intent on paying the full amount you owe, which will certainly be looked upon favourably, they may be willing to commute some of the damages to some form of community service. There is, undoubtedly, a great deal of help that someone who can become as small as Ant-Man does could provide.”

Scott’s eyes widened as he realised what was being offered – a chance to keep being Ant-Man and actually do some good with it this time. He knew had a lot of work to do to earn people’s trust back again and here he was, being offered the perfect chance to do so. He was sure that the ‘community service’ he’d be assigned to would be difficult and possibly unpleasant but… he deserved it, didn’t he?

“Um, yes,” he said with determination. “If Hank and Hope are willing to let me keep the suit then, yes, I’ll do it.” He then winced. “Um… what about… I was on parole.”

Olsson spoke up now. “I have been negotiating with the State of California on that subject in light of the deal that Dorn is offering. They wanted you back to serve out the remainder of your sentence but, pending final approval from various authorities, I have negotiated that down to a period of… house arrest, shall we say, that will be folded into the deal.”

Dorn suddenly looked stern. “You have gotten off very lightly, Mr Lang. It could have been far worse. I suggest you keep that in mind in the next few years.”

Scott nodded vigorously. “Yes, sir.” And he would too. He’d made a huge mistake and he was going to come out of it with a job and what were really minimal restrictions, even a chance to be a hero again. A proper hero this time. And maybe, just maybe, if he proved he really meant it this time, he might be able to convince Maggie to let him see Cassie. That… that would be worth anything.

Clint Barton
Clint stared at the envelope his lawyer had just handed him. It was a plain buff envelope with the sort of serious look about it that made his skin crawl. His lawyer had actually been sympathetic when she’d given it to him and she’d immediately withdrawn from the room to let him read it on his own. All of that meant that he had his suspicions as to what was in it.

He carefully opened the envelope and pulled out the papers inside. He couldn’t hide the wince when his suspicions were confirmed. Divorce papers and, on top of them, a letter. He opened the letter and winced again. It wasn’t a long letter but it said everything it needed to and more.

*Clint,*

*You made a promise to me and to our children when you retired, a promise you failed spectacularly to keep. What’s more you put us in danger. I have stood by you through a great deal but even I have my breaking point. This was that point. Right now, I’m not suing for sole custody but I will not force the children to see you if they don’t want to, especially considering your current circumstances.*

*I am sorry that it came to this but you made the decision that sent us down this path. You and you alone. You now have to accept the responsibility for it.*

*Laura*

Clint stared at the letter then let it and the divorce papers fall onto the table. He buried his face in his hands as those last three sentences echoed through his mind. They were relevant to more than just the implosion of his marriage. As little as he wanted to admit it, he had no one to blame but himself for his current position. When Steve called, he could have made a second call to Natasha… hell, even to *Stark*… to find out what was going on. Instead, he’d just dropped everything, including his *children*, and run off to play hero.

Except he hadn’t been a hero, had he? He’d deluded himself into thinking that at the time. Convinced himself that Steve was right and that this was a fight for the future of the Avengers. Except it hadn’t been. It had all been about Steve’s BFF and the only person who had been protecting the future of the Avengers had been Stark. Steve sure as hell hadn’t given a shit. As long as *Bucky* was safe, that had been all that mattered to him. They even had proof that no one else mattered in the Siberia video.

Clint winced as he thought about that video. When it had first been plastered all over the internet and from there, the TV, he’d been horrified. Yeah, sure, Stark could be a pain in the ass but he was fun too. And he’d made the best toys. Watching Steve and Barnes beat him down like that, with no apparent concern for the man inside the armour, had been… frightening when he really thought about it. Stark at least had the armour to protect him. What if Steve had turned on him or Wilson or Lang? If *Stark* had nearly been killed, there’s no way either of the three of them would have survived.

Yet they’d chosen to believe Steve when he’d stuttered out that weak explanation that the videos were a lie, a fake. And Clint might not be the sharpest tool in the shed but he knew why. They hadn’t wanted to believe then that Steve could and would do something like that. Because if they accepted that, if they believed the videos were real, then the image of the noble and just Captain America went up in smoke. And if that happened, then they *hadn’t* followed a noble and righteous man on a noble and righteous cause, they’d just followed *Steve* on his agenda to protect Bucky Barnes from everything. They’d caused all that damage, hurt and killed people for nothing more than one man’s obsession. They certainly hadn’t done anything heroic or world-saving. And after the verdict from that Wong guy, they couldn’t even claim to have been manipulated into it by Wanda.

“Mr Barton?”
Clint looked up into the calm, cool face of his lawyer. Alexandra Cartwright was British, blonde and very cutthroat. She also didn’t like him very much but despite that she was fighting with everything she had on his behalf. He was very lucky to have her and he damn well knew it. The ICC were being scrupulously fair and had arranged for some very good lawyers who were willing to work pro bono for them. No one could claim that they were being railroaded or treated poorly. It was great but it was also galling because there would be no wriggling out of any of this by crying foul.

“Yeah?” he said heavily.

“We’ve had a stroke of luck,” Cartwright said. “In light of the unfortunate demise of Miss Maximoff, Dr Stark, Stark Industries and the Vision have elected not to press charges against you regarding your part in the incident at the Avengers Compound.”

Clint stared at her for a moment. “They what? Why?”

“They did not choose to tell me that,” Cartwright replied. “And I think we should simply accept their generosity. The financial cost of the repairs to the compound alone was considerable and there is video evidence of your actions and you’re… lack of reflection on them which would have made the criminal charges very unpleasant.” She grimaced. “Overall, it would not have gone well had that proceeded to court.”

Clint wanted to rant and rave and for a moment he was on the edge of doing so. The idea of accepting Stark’s generosity rankled for reasons he couldn’t quite put his finger on. But then sense asserted itself again, along with the sure knowledge of exactly how Cartwright would react if he did that. Stark had always been generous with no expectation of being thanked and they’d thrown it in his face again and again. Acting like thanking the man for providing for them was beneath them and that Stark providing everything was just their due. His ice queen of a lawyer had made some very pursy-lipped and sour faces when those sorts of sentiments had slipped out of his mouth in the past and when she’d finally snapped, he’d gotten an earful. He’d been angry at first but now he was more apathetic than anything else. He’d lost his wife, his kids and now it looked like he’d end up in prison for a long time.

“Right. Yeah.” He swallowed and scrubbed his face with one hand. “What else?”

“I’ve been contacted by Michel Dorn, the special prosecutor at the ICC,” she said, sitting down opposite him and placing her briefcase on the table. “Mr Lang has made a deal with the ICC, the Accords Council and the German government and there is some hope we might be able to get a similar plea bargain deal for you.” She gave him a small wintery smile. “With the incident at the Compound off the table, that only leaves you liable for your part in what happened at the airport.”

“What kind of deal?” Clint asked suspiciously.

“That depends on whether or not you are willing to read and sign the Accords,” she said. “Or if you intend to return to retirement.”

Clint snorted and waved at the envelope she’d delivered to him. “I don’t have anything to retire for anymore. What else is on the table?”

“If you refuse to sign the Accords then your trial will go ahead unless you choose to plead guilty,” Cartwright said. “You’ll be charged with illegal entry into Germany and property damage at the airport. Your illegal incarceration by former Secretary Ross will be taken into account. You will likely receive some sort of prison term in lieu of reparations. Said prison term will likely be served in a prison in either The Hague or Germany.”
Clint grimaced. “And if I sign the Accords?”

“If you read, understand, agree with and subsequently sign the Accords,” Cartwright said very primly, “that is when an offer like Lang’s will become available. Germany will drop the illegal entry charges against you and the management of the Leipzig/Halle airport will drop their criminal charges. You will be held under some form of house arrest and be required to pay reparations. You will not be permitted to rejoin the Avengers until a suspension period has passed, assuming the current Avengers will agree to let you back in the first place, however there is the opportunity for you to commute part of the reparations you would be required to pay by undertaking missions at the direction of the UN on a work release program.”

“So what’s the catch?” Clint asked, his eyes narrowed suspiciously. “And what kind of missions would they be?”

“Likely things that would suit your particular skillset,” Cartwright replied. She opened her briefcase and pulled out a thick document which she thumped down on the table and tapped it with one lacquered nail. “However, if you want to enter negotiations regarding that particular plea deal, you’re going to have to read this.”

Clint stared at the Accords and then sighed. “Yeah, I suppose I am.”

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**Sam Wilson**

Sam stared at his lawyer with dismay. “Are you serious?”

The lawyer, a slim, somewhat flamboyant Italian man called Ettore Sciara, waved his hands in the air in a shrug. “Mr Wilson, you are facing a very large number of charges. Unlike your friends, Mr Lang and Mr Barton, you participated in the events in Bucharest. That brings in charges of aiding and abetting a known terrorist, numerous assault, aggravated assault and manslaughter charges as well as some significant property damage. You participated in this willingly and with full knowledge of the circumstances. That makes it very difficult to seek any kind of deal.”

“But… Bucky was innocent,” Sam protested weakly.

“That’s as may be, Mr Wilson,” Sciara replied sternly. “But the place to talk about that was to a lawyer and in court.”

Sam gulped. “We’d been told there was a kill order out on him.”

The lawyer snorted. “Impossible. I have seen the orders given to the team. They were to arrest James Barnes, not kill him. They did have a weapons free directive should Barnes become violent but when they caught up to him on the freeway, they did not kill him, did they?”

Sam shook his head miserably. So that confirmed what Stark had told them while they were still being held in the US. There had been no kill order.

“Whoever said that to you was lying,” Sciara said sternly. “Or did not understand the orders that had been given.”

Sam’s heart sank yet again. “Right. What else?”

Sciara pulled a sheaf of papers from his briefcase. “Today I received the official theft charges from the United States Air Force. They are seeking to have you brought back to the United States to have
the case heard there, which we do not want. That is an argument I will be having with their lawyers over the coming days.” He arched an eyebrow at Sam. “The wings you stole from them… where are they?”

“Um, I… don’t know,” Sam said faintly. “I had them with me in Nevada but… maybe Stark has them?”

“Very well,” Sciarra replied. “I will contact Mr Stark and see about getting them returned to the Air Force, making sure they know you gave them up willingly. I can use that as a bargaining chip to convince them to have the charges heard in The Hague.”

“That’s better?” Sam said dubiously.

Sciarra smiled thinly. “You will find a Dutch prison infinitely more pleasant than an American one, Mr Wilson.”

“Right.” Sam scrubbed his face with both hands. “So I’m going to prison?”

“Most likely.” Sciarra sighed and sat down opposite him, his expression sympathetic. “I am doing my best to seek a favourable deal but I have very little to offer them. Unless you are willing to testify against Mr Rogers, that is. That is something I can work with.” He cocked his head and looked rather crafty. “There is something else, though you may not like it.”

Sam felt a sinking feeling in his chest. He didn’t like the idea of testifying against Steve but he also knew he probably didn’t have much choice. His actions were too tied up with Steve’s to avoid it. And if he wanted a chance of getting home to see his Mom any time in the next couple of decades, he was going to have to start doing what was best for himself. After all, Sciara was right. He didn’t have much to offer in trade for a better deal. He wasn’t a super soldier or a super spy or an assassin or anything like that. Without the wings, he was… just a guy. And it wasn’t like he was the only one who could use the wings.

He swallowed hard and nodded once. “What is it?”

The lawyer pulled another thick sheaf of papers out of his briefcase and thumped it on the table in front of Sam. He looked down and saw that it was the Accords.

“What?”

“Read them, Mr Wilson,” Sciarra said almost gently. “I will do my best to explain some of the more legalistic sections but you need to read these first.”

“Why?” Sam said with a shake of his head. “They’re not going to let me be an Avenger now.”

“Perhaps not,” Sciarra said with a shrug. “But Mr Lang has been offered a favourable deal and a similar deal is on the table for Mr Barton, depending on his response to certain conditions. I may not be able to keep you out of prison, Mr Wilson, but how long you stay there depends on your actions now. Proving that you have read and understood the Accords and are willing to admit to where you went wrong may be looked upon favourably by the court. We need to take every opportunity we have.”

Sam looked down at the Accords again. He didn’t think it was going to help but… what did he have to lose? “Okay, sure, why not.”

“Excellent,” Sciarra said. “Now, these charges from the Air Force…”
As Sciarra spread the papers in front of him, Sam struggled to pay attention. He’d followed Steve because he’d thought they were doing the right thing. Now, he could say that they emphatically hadn’t been. Because if they’d been doing the right thing, he wouldn’t be staring at a lengthy prison sentence.

**Steve Rogers**

Michael Mackenzie (Mack to his friends) had a headache. A six-foot-two, beefy, blond headache by the name of Steven Grant Rogers. He’d felt rather proud to be approached by the head of the ICC and told he’d been hand-selected to act as legal representation for Captain America when he faced his charges in The Hague. He wasn’t precisely a Cap fan and nor did he particularly support what Cap had done in Europe but… it was *Captain America* and, well, he’d read the comics when he was a kid just like everyone else.

Besides, Mack held true to two things. First, everyone deserved good legal representation, no matter what they’d done. That was the cornerstone of their legal system. It didn’t always work the way it should but that was the underlying principle and Mack tried hard to live up to that. He wouldn’t say he was a crusader but… he had a little bit of that in him anyway. And second, a lawyer didn’t have to believe in what their client did, their client’s principles, their client’s beliefs or even their client’s innocence in order to defend them well.

The ICC had approached him because he was good at what he did and because he was American. They’d felt that Rogers might respond better to an American lawyer than a European one. (Though he did have European lawyers as back up to help him navigate the differences between the various legal systems.) Though Mack was of the belief that if this was Rogers responding well, he’d hate to see what he was like when he responded badly to something. Which, now that he thought about it, he already had – the videos from Siberia certainly showed what Rogers could do when he responded badly to someone not agreeing with him.

“Mr Rogers,” he said patiently then when Rogers opened his mouth he quickly amended what he’d said. “Steve. You will get an opportunity in court to explain why you did what you did, though honestly? I don’t recommend saying anything at all.”

Rogers looked startled and more than a little hurt and Mack had to remind himself that in many ways Steve was still very young. He was certainly not accustomed to the world as it really was. As odd as it might sound, he’d been surprisingly sheltered as a young man, both before and after he’d taken the serum. Life in New York in the Thirties and Forties had been tough and hard but he’d had a mother who’d loved and protected him and a best friend and surrogate brother who had stepped up after his mother died and picked up where she’d left off. After the serum, the SSR had first sidelined then done what they could to protect their asset.

After he’d been revived in the 21st century, SHIELD and then Stark had essentially done the same. They’d paid his way and protected him from the consequences of his actions. They also hadn’t required him to really understand the world he lived in now. All of that had come back to bite *everyone* on the ass in a major way in the Civil War.

Now, it was Mack’s job to try and make Steve understand just how bad things were.

“Yes not?” Steve said. “I mean… it’s why I did what I did.”

“I know,” Mack said.
He sighed and sat down opposite Steve. He’d expected some sort of idiotic hardass based on what had happened but instead he’d found a confused and upset young man. He still didn’t condone Steve’s actions but… it was hard not to feel sorry for him.

“Look,” he said. “If you get up and essentially say that you considered one man to be more important than everyone else in the world, it’s not going to go down well. Not with the media, not with the people who will be watching and sure as hell not with the judges. Remember, this is not a jury case where people can be swayed by a persuasive argument. It’ll be heard by a panel of judges and they will make the decision according to international law.” He held up one hand. “Now, I’m not saying we don’t talk about why but we need to handle it carefully. We need to present it far more sympathetically than you have been.”

Steve frowned. “But… it’s the truth!”

Mack winced and sighed again. “I know but, Steve, you ran roughshod over a lot of people. There were deaths and injuries. That’s what you need to concentrate on, not your friend. His case will be handled separately.”

Steve looked frustrated. “There shouldn’t be a case at all! Bucky’s innocent!”

“Is he?” Mack asked. “I mean, if I had his case and based on what little I know, I’d be arguing diminished responsibility for the Winter Soldier stuff but everything that happened in the Civil War, barring Berlin, is…” He grimaced. “Nasty. He wasn’t the Winter Soldier for that.”

“They were going to kill him.”

Now Mack actually pinched the bridge of his nose. “No, Steve, they weren’t. And repeating that will only make you sound irrational. We have copies of the orders the JCTC team were given. The prosecution have those orders as well. There was no kill order. You need to stop repeating that.”

“But that’s what I was told,” Steve said stubbornly.

“And we can work with that,” Mack replied patiently. “We can work with the fact you were given false information. But you have to stop announcing it as though it was true.”

Now, finally, for the first time since he’d started beating his head against the brick wall of Steve Rogers’ obstinacy, there was a chink. Steve actually stopped and seemed to take in what he was saying.

“What do you mean?” Steve asked.

Mack straightened a little now that it seemed like Steve was actually willing to listen to him. “Instead of announcing it as ‘they were going to kill him’, you say ‘I was told there was a kill order on Bucky by someone I trusted’.” He spread out his hands. “It’s the same thing, the same information but put in a much better light. It puts the onus back on Sharon Carter, who gave you the false information. We’ll preface that statement with a summary of your friendship with James Barnes, add to it a psychologist’s report about war time stress, being a fish out of water and so on and so forth and suddenly you don’t look like a stubborn, irrational idiot, you become a stressed out, confused man who thought his surrogate brother was going to be killed.”

Steve frowned. “And that really changes things?”

“Well, it doesn’t change what happened,” Mack said. “You can’t forget that but it presents your actions in a better light.”
“But…” Steve began. Mack winced, waiting for the same old song to be sung again but instead Steve surprised him. He rubbed his forehead with one hand and said rather plaintively, “I don’t understand.”

Mack gave a small sigh of relief. Those were the best words he’d heard his client say since day one. More importantly, it was the way he’d said them and the expression on his face right now. Honest confusion and weariness but no sign of the mulish obstinacy that Mack had grown to hate. Maybe now Steve was finally ready to listen.

“That’s what I’m here for,” Mack said in softer tone of voice. “To help you understand. I’m your lawyer, Steve. I’m working to get the best possible outcome for you and that means helping you understand what’s going on.” He leaned forward and clasped his hands together on the table. “Now, tell me what you don’t understand.”

**Natasha Romanov**

Kirill Markov, Russia’s Ambassador to the UN and member of the Accords Council, sat opposite Nigel Clements with a look of artful innocence on his face. He knew Nigel wouldn’t believe it for a minute but given that the man’s secretary and various aides were in the room, they did have to keep up a certain set of appearances. The Council, having spent many, many hours together sorting out various matters regarding the Accords, had gotten to know each other very well and Kirill could, oddly enough, count them as friends. Not that they wouldn’t screw each other over in a heartbeat if it was advantageous to their respective countries but that was, as they say, business, not personal.

“Could you repeat that again, Kirill?” Nigel said.

Kirill smiled blandly. Nigel’s tone had been cool and disapproving but his use of his first name was telling for those in the business. The tone was business, the tone reflected Nigel’s current position as Chair of the Accords Council. The first name told Kirill that Nigel was personally more amused than anything else. It was easy to underestimate the British with their prim manners and squeamish nature but Kirill had learned that they could be far more cutthroat than most would give them credit for. He respected that.

“Russia has come into… ah, possession, shall we say… of a certain Natalia Alianova Romanova, alias Natasha Romanov,” he said as blandly as he could manage.

“I see,” Nigel said, leaning back in his chair. His gaze was heavy and assessing then he turned to the others in the room. “Leave us, please.”

They waited until the secretary and aides had left the room then Nigel leaned back in his chair and raised an eyebrow at Kirill. Though his expression was sober, there was an air of amusement about him that Kirill liked.

“Come into possession?” Nigel said dryly. “I don’t suppose you can tell me how?”

“Officially, the Russian government can only say that she was apprehended by friendly forces,” Kirill replied. “Unofficially though? Apparently some of Romanova’s former colleagues at SHIELD remain exceedingly displeased with her. I’m under the impression that their actions were not sanctioned by the new SHIELD or any other government body.”

Nigel pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “I suppose no one is really going to question how she was caught so much as what is going to be done with her.” He arched an eyebrow at Kirill. “I
am assuming that she is… unharmed.”

“She was questioned regarding her actions against the Red Room but not harshly,” Kirill said as blithely as he could manage. “That is a part of Russia’s past that is best left in the past but I believe the phrase is… enquiring minds wanted to know.”

“Of course,” Nigel said dryly. “And what has she had to say about current affairs?”

“A great deal,” Kirill said, matching the Brit’s dry tone. “Most of it was lies, of course. She is twisting and turning, attempting to get the best deal for herself. We have been… unmoved. To trust a Black Widow to hold to their word is… unwise.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Nigel replied. “So, what does Russia wish to do with Ms Romanov?”

“Why, our duty as good international citizens,” Kirill said with an expansive wave of his hands. “We wish to turn her over to the ICC so she may face the consequences of her actions. I am given to understand that while Mr Stark is a kind and generous man, King T’Challa is perhaps not so forgiving?”

“No, he is not,” Nigel said with open amusement. “And she does face some consequences for her breach of the Accords.” He inclined his head. “If the Russian authorities wish to arrange for the handover, the Accords Council will be most accommodating.”

“Excellent,” Kirill replied. He knew he probably looked like the cat that ate both the canary and the cream but really, why shouldn’t he? “I will, of course, recuse myself from any discussions as to her fate. I would not want any whispers about impropriety or bias to dog the Council’s deliberations.”

“That’s good of you,” Nigel replied dryly.

“I do my best for my country and the United Nations,” Kirill said. He felt a little pompous but really, could he be blamed?

“I’ll let the New Avengers know that their stray colleague has been found,” Nigel said then he cocked his head slightly. “I don’t suppose that in scooping up Ms Romanov, Russia also located Ms Carter?”

“Ah, I fear that she had evaded our eyes as well,” Kirill said. “It is a most curious situation.”

“That it is.” Nigel rose to his feet and held out his hand. “The United Nations Accords Council offers its thanks to Russia for their excellent work in capturing a dangerous wanted person.”

“My country is most welcome,” Kirill said, shaking Nigel’s hand. He bowed slightly then took his leave. As he walked down the corridor, he began to whistle an old Russian song. This would paint Russia in a very good light with the rest of the international community and that would offer leverage for him in the endless game of diplomatic give and take within this building. That Natalia would be the one sacrificed for the greater good meant little to him. If she was a better player of the game, she would never have been caught in the first place.

No, if she was a better player of the game, she would never have put herself in a position to be caught. But the time to prevent that had been years ago, before she and Mr Rogers spilled secrets onto the internet. For a graduate of the Red Room, Natalia was terribly short-sighted. Kirill mentally shrugged. It mattered little to him. Her loss was his and Russia’s gain.
Bucky Barnes

The first thing Bucky became aware of was that the light in the room, while bright, was also somehow soft. It was strange enough that he let his mind ponder that for a while until he realised that he’d been thinking about it for some time and didn’t they usually start getting him moving quicker than this? That thought prompted him to force his eyes open and when he saw the room he was in, memories came flooding back and he closed his eyes again and groaned.

“Sergeant Barnes?”

He opened his eyes to find a beautiful, dark-skinned woman standing in front of him. She didn’t look pleased to see him yet she also didn’t look displeased either. She seemed… resignedly neutral. Since that was a damn sight better than he usually got when he woke from cryo, Bucky was happy to accept it.

“Yep,” he managed, his voice croaky.

“My name is Princess Shuri,” she said. “My brother is King T’Challa. Do you remember meeting him?”

Bucky nodded. “Yep. The… big cat guy,” he said laconically, his brain still slowly coming on line. That response did get a faint smile from Princess Shuri and somewhere in the haze in his head, he mentally congratulated himself for making a pretty dame smile.

“Do you remember where you are?”

“Wakanda,” he said, licking his lips. He hesitated for a moment, remember how this had gone in the past but decided to ask anyway. Maybe it would give him a read on what the situation was. “Can I have some water?”

“Of course,” the princess said, waving to someone out of Bucky’s line of sight.

A second beautiful but very imposing woman came into view carrying a glass of water with a straw in it. She held it so that he could drink and he closed his eyes in relief as he sucked down the cool water. He’d been given water without an argument and hadn’t been punished so… things weren’t completely bad. Once he was done, he opened his eyes again and nodded.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Princess Shuri said. “My brother promised you sanctuary until such time as we found a way to remove the triggers from your mind.”

“Have you?” he asked, not wanting to get his hopes up.

“We believe so, though it will not be an easy process,” she replied.

Bucky shrugged. “Wasn’t an easy process putting ‘em in. Figured it’d be a bitch getting ‘em out.”

Shuri got that look of faint amusement on her face again. “Quite. Now, let’s get you out of there.”

Bucky slowly clambered out of the cryochamber with the help of the princess and the other woman. Once he was reasonably steady on his feet, they escorted him to bed and a doctor took over and examined him. As the doctor worked, Bucky became aware that there were only Wakandans in the room.
“Where’s Stevie?” he asked. From the sudden studious silence and all the following sidelong glances that his enquiry received, he knew something had happened. He sighed and scrubbed his face with his remaining hand. “What’d he do now?”

Princess Shuri stepped forward. “Mr Rogers and his friends are currently under arrest and being held in a prison in The Hague.” She paused momentarily. “Except for Ms Maximoff, who is deceased.”

Bucky raised his head, his eyes wide. “Shit. What happened?”

“Briefly, Mr Rogers and his friends were convinced that a former colleague was being held prisoner,” Shuri explained. “Due to the witch’s influence, they chose to leave… violently… and attempt to rescue him. It did not go well.” She sighed. “That is a very brief and not entirely adequate explanation but I will give you a better one later.”

Bucky nodded slowly. “I’m guessing this colleague wasn’t being held at all?”

Shuri shook her head. “No.”

Bucky sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “So what happens now? To me.”

Shuri seemed on firmer ground now. “Four of the best experts on what is loosely known as brainwashing and cult deprogramming have agreed to assist you in the initial stages. Once you have recovered from cryosleep, you will be taken to New York where the Sorcerer Supreme will take charge of you. You will be then taken to the temple of Kamar-Taj where the sorcerers there and the psychologists I mentioned will aid you. If they feel it will aid you in the future, they will also explore the use of Dr Stark’s BARF technology.”

Bucky frowned. “Am I… under arrest as well?”

Shuri was silent for a moment. “Not as such. Your legal status is currently somewhat murky. There is a general consensus that the actions of the Winter Soldier cannot be held against James Barnes. There is also a general consensus that more information about the HYDRA Winter Soldier program is needed. That search is currently underway.

She drew in a breath then let it out slowly. “However, your actions in Bucharest and Leipzig/Halle were not done as the Winter Soldier. Part of the psychologists’ remit is to determine your state of mind during those periods. You will, however, likely still face some sort of penalty. The deaths, injuries and damage that occurred are too great to simply let it drop. A lawyer has been obtained and will meet with you in Kamar-Taj to discuss your case.”

“Right.” Bucky swallowed, his heart sinking. Yet at the same time, he felt sort of light as well. There was a freedom in not running and hiding that he welcomed, despite the consequences it was going to bring. “And… Siberia? Stark? Is he… okay?”

“Dr Stark has recovered from the incident in Siberia,” Shuri said. “Physically, at least. But you should know that the entire thing was recorded and the videos, both of the deaths of Howard and Maria Stark and the… fight that followed Dr Stark’s viewing of that video, have been made public. Not by Dr Stark but as part of Zemo’s plan.”

Bucky paled. “So…”

“Dr Stark has stated that he has no intention of pressing charges against you,” Shuri said. “He feels that you have both hurt each other enough.”

Bucky looked down where his mechanical arm used to be. “I don’t know. I think he deserves a few
more licks before we’re even remotely close to even.”

When he looked up, he saw that Shuri was smiling gently at him.

“Dr Stark disagrees,” she said. “I think intellectually Dr Stark knows that the Winter Soldier was the gun that HYDRA fired at his parents and that James Barnes is neither of those. But that’s intellectually. His emotions are yet to catch up and that… that will take time.”

“I ain’t gonna push it,” Bucky said. “I’ve got a feeling he coulda killed me anytime he wanted in Siberia. But I also figure he didn’t want to kill me, just make me hurt as much as he was hurtin’.”

“That does seem likely,” Shuri replied. “If your friend hadn’t gotten involved then it is possible the whole thing would have… fizzled out after a short fistfight.”

Bucky sighed and shook his head. “But Stevie’s never known how to leave things well enough alone. Or how to stay out of a fight that ain’t his.” He looked down at his remaining hand then up at the princess. “Am I gonna go to prison?”

Princess Shuri looked momentarily surprised then rather sympathetic. “That is highly unlikely and Wakanda would protest it most strenuously. After the videos were released, information about you was dug up by enterprising hackers from the SHIELD files and that, along with the outcry from various veterans’ groups around the world, who quite rightly pointed out that you are likely the longest serving POW in the world, there is a more sympathetic view of you and your actions than you might realise. It is for the safety of everyone, including yourself, that Kamar-Taj has chosen to open its doors to you. If anything should go wrong, you will not be able to hurt anyone there and if there are others who know your trigger words, they will not be able to reach you.”

“But… I killed those people or hurt ‘em at least,” Bucky said slowly.

“Yes, but that is why the psychologists intend to assess your mental state,” Shuri replied. “While you have clearly broken the HYDRA conditioning, it is not gone and no one could claim that even now you are fully in your right mind. Mitigating circumstances are always taken into consideration.”

“Still doesn’t seem right,” Bucky said with a shake of his head.

“Try not to worry about it too much,” Shuri said, giving him another small sympathetic smile. “There are people watching out for your best interests and given the scrutiny that the veterans’ groups alone are placing on your welfare, you will not be treated like an… an asset ever again.”

For some reason, Bucky believed her. He wasn’t sure why since he didn’t know her and had no reason to think she was telling him the truth but there was just something about her certainty that made Bucky relax and believe her.

“Okay,” he said, nodding. “Okay.”

He wasn’t sure what was to come in the days ahead but he clung to his initial thought – running hadn’t really helped him much. It was time to stop running and see how that went for him.

Chapter End Notes

So, what's really going to happen to them after deals and trials are taken into account? (Because I won't be doing big chapters on them, just checking in from time to time with
Scott - He is going to end up at the Compound because basically, his biggest crime was being an idiot. He'll be under house arrest for 3-5 years depending on his behaviour and how his work release stuff goes. And he'll probably be paying off his reparations, both financially and through work release, for a good 10-15 years. (It's a lot of money!) He won't argue. He thinks he deserves it and that he got off lightly.

Clint - He's a very lucky man. Tony hasn't necessarily forgiven him but he has reached a point where he just wants to move on and Clint's the easiest one to do that with. So Clint gets the bonus prize. He will be held under house arrest in The Hague and work under the auspices of the JCTC, doing work fairly similar to what he did with SHIELD. This will be for 5-10 years, though given his shaky control on his temper, expect it to be closer to 10 years. Laura will continue with the divorce and it is going to take a long time before his kids will want to see him again.

Sam - He's going to prison. He doesn't have anything to get him a special deal since anyone can use the wings. He will testify against Steve and the fact that he has finally read and understood the Accords and will express genuine remorse and acknowledge his stupidity means the ICC will add a thin veneer of leniency. He will receive a 10 year prison sentence to be served in The Hague. If he behaves himself, he will be released for a further 5 years of house arrest, also in The Hague. After that, he'll be flown back to the US.

Steve - He's also going to prison and he's going to get the heftiest sentence. He'll get 40 years in a prison to be decided. (Germany, Romania and the ICC will make a decision as to whether he goes to a prison in The Hague, Germany or Romania. They're arguing over it.) He will be used eventually for the Thanos invasion since a super soldier is useful even if he can't be trusted but that will only knock some years off his sentence if he behaves and performs to his utmost. He'll be under the Avengers' supervision at that point but not Tony's. Rhodey will make sure of that. Rogers doesn't get anywhere near Tony.

Natasha - She gets one of the lightest sentences. Sort of. Since she's already had an... interesting time with the Russians. But she will never be eligible to sign the Accords or be part of the Avengers ever again. She'll be placed under house arrest in a sentence similar to Clint's. So she'll do work release for the JCTC with the warning that if she tries any of her betrayal games, she loses her last chance at freedom. And if she should find herself alone with one or more of the Doras, well, they'll leave her alive and intact but they do want to get their pound of flesh. (Not literally. Metaphorically.)

Bucky - I won't really detail what's going to happen to Bucky here because he's going to get chapters of his own. Suffice to say, he does have people looking out for his best interests.
Rhodey paused in the entrance to Tony’s lab and snickered quietly despite the news he was bringing. Tony and Stephen were… bickering. It was entirely good-natured and Rhodey suspected it was also some weird sort of flirting and/or foreplay that he absolutely did not want to think about. He loved Tony like a brother but there were and had always been some things he didn’t want to know about him. As it was, he was almost a little reluctant to break up the weird flirting that was going on but he was going to anyway.

“Tones,” he said, drawing both men’s attention.

“Sugarplum!” Tony said with a grin.

“Why don’t I get fluffy nicknames like that?” Stephen mock-complained. “I feel neglected.”

“I could call you honeybunch,” Tony immediately said, batting his eyelids.

Stephen shuddered. “Urgh. I changed my mind. Please don’t.”

Rhodey snorted as he joined them. “I don’t know what prompted him to start with the lovey-dovey nicknames but he’s been doing it since we were in college so I’ve gotten used to them.”

“I’m feeling picked on,” Tony complained but as he was grinning, neither man took him terribly seriously.

Rhodey was actually pleased to see that grin and if Stephen wasn’t already in his good books, he definitely would be now. Tony hadn’t smiled so much in years nor had he looked so relaxed in the company of someone other than himself, Pepper and, more recently, Peter. Stephen was good for him and though he didn’t know Stephen as well, the way the sorcerer was more relaxed around the New Avengers these days did seem to indicate that Tony was good for him too. Rhodey still needed to take the time to give Stephen the shovel talk though. He was Tony’s brother and that meant there were certain rights he had to uphold. The shovel talk was one of them. Pepper had her own version she wanted to deliver, though Rhodey suspected hers was less along the lines of a shovel talk than a ‘don’t make the same mistakes I did’ talk.

“You love it,” he said, returning Tony’s grin.

Tony poked his tongue out at him then settled a little. “So what brings you down here, Rhodey bear?”

Rhodey sobered in an instant and the two men suddenly looked worried. “They found Sharon Carter,” he said grimly.
“Found,” Tony said slowly. “And captured? Or is she… dead?”

Rhodey shook his head. “Found. Just found. They picked her up on CCTV footage in Mogadishu. Tones…” Rhodey clenched his jaw, not really wanting to be the bearer of bad news, since he knew Tony had known Carter when they were both younger. “She was with known HYDRA operatives, former SHIELD people.”

A thundering silence fell in the workshop that lasted until DUM-E dropped a wrench and beeped apologetically. Tony, whose face had been stony, suddenly shook his head.

“No way.”

“It’s authentic,” Rhodey replied.

“No Sharon,” Tony said. Stephen had shifted around to lean against the table next to Tony and place a hand on his shoulder. “I mean, okay, I haven’t really seen or spoken to her in years but… she’s Aunt Peggy’s niece. She grew up with all the same stories I did about… well, to put it in Buffy speak… HYDRA bad.”

“I don’t know what to say, Tones,” Rhodey said helplessly. “The video has been authenticated. It hasn’t been doctored in any way. It’s been confirmed by experts in both Europe and the US. They wanted to be absolutely sure before they told us.”

“Could she have been brainwashed? Similar to Barnes?” Stephen said, giving Tony’s shoulder a gentle squeeze. “Or blackmailed?”

“Fuck, I hope so,” Tony said, scrubbing his face with one hand. He leaned into Stephen a little. “Has anyone spoken to her parents?”

“They’re being questioned now,” Rhodey replied.

“Questioned!” Tony protested. He leapt off his stool and started pacing. “They’re not suspects!”

“It’s just a formality,” Rhodey said, trying to calm him down. “They have their lawyers with them. They’re not being railroaded or anything. But they’re trying to get a feel from them about any changes in her personality and so on. See if they can pinpoint when this, whatever this is, happened. Everett Ross is handling it.”

Tony relaxed just a little. He’d dealt with Everett Ross a few times since the New Avengers had been established and he liked the man. He could be a dry, sarcastic little shit and that was something Tony always approved of. He was also a reasonable man and open to compromise and negotiation, which was something Tony valued even more.

“What about Rogers?” he said.

Rhodey snorted. “What about him?”

“Would he know about any changes in her?”

Rhodey considered that. “Maybe but wasn’t he gallivanting all over Europe, obsessed with Barnes? Probably didn’t have room in that brain of his for Carter.”

Tony snickered. “Maybe but it would be worth asking.”

“I’ll pass it on to those in charge,” Rhodey said. “But they did have something they wanted to ask of
“What’s that?”

“They want to know whether you can look over the data that’s been obtained from HYDRA bases thus far and see what you can make of it,” Rhodey said. “A lot of it is encrypted and they’re having difficulties cracking the codes.”

“I can put JARVIS and FRIDAY on it,” Tony said. “I’ll have a look as well.” He grimaced. “What bases is this stuff from?”

“A number across Europe that were identified from the SHIELD leak,” Rhodey replied. “But yes, in answer to the question you aren’t asking, some of it is from Siberia.”

“Hmm,” Tony said. He didn’t really want to look at whatever was in the mix from that base but he also knew it was probably a bit illogical. Zemo had chosen the base because it was where the Winter Soldier core had been held, not because it was full of videos like the one he’d shown Tony. “That might be worth looking into for more than just information on Sharon.”


Tony nodded. “There might be information about what was done to make a person into a Winter Soldier, which might help Barnes.”

Stephen was silent for a moment. “Tony, you know you’re not obligated…”

“I know,” Tony said, his smile small and wry. “I’m not obligated to help Barnes but…” He sighed. “Yeah, he killed my parents but… he wasn’t exactly himself either.” He shrugged. “Besides, if helping him ensures that he can’t go Winter Soldier and murder more people on other people’s orders then I think that’s a good thing.”

“I have to agree with that,” Rhodey said. “We don’t know how many people know Barnes’ trigger words. The more information we have about how to make him safe, the better.”

“Fair enough,” Stephen said.

“And if there is any information, I can pass it on to Barnes’ shrinks,” Rhodey said.

Tony rolled his eyes at both of them. “J? You hear all of that?”

Of course, sir,” JARVIS said immediately. “FRIDAY and I shall begin our analysis of the information we have on hand and add in the new information when it is forwarded to you.”

“Concentrate on Sharon,” Tony said. “Look for Agent 13 as well. That was her code name with SHIELD so she may be referred to by that instead of her name.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You really think she’s been brainwashed?” Rhodey asked dubiously.

“Sharon could be a pain in the butt when she was a kid but she idolised Aunt Peggy,” Tony said. “I just can’t see her ever willingly being HYDRA. Aunt Peggy would turn over in her grave…”

Tony went very pale and his eyes widened. He also started rubbing his chest in a way that worried both of the other men in the room. He looked so awful that Rhodey darted forward without thinking and caught him by the shoulders as he sagged a little. Stephen had also wrapped an arm around you.”
Tony’s shoulders and they tangled momentarily before sorting themselves out and guiding Tony over to the couch in the corner of the room. They got him sitting down and as they did, Stephen’s Cloak came sailing into the room and wrapped itself around Tony, almost burritoing him.

“Tones?” Rhodey said carefully.

“I didn’t even think about it, Rhodey,” Tony said faintly. “I mean I did, at least a little, but then I just… didn’t think about it because I didn’t want to. But…”

He trailed off and Rhodey frowned. “But what?”

Tony gave him a long solemn look. “Obie and Aunt Peggy were the ones who identified my parents’ bodies.”

Rhodey got it immediately and Stephen wasn’t far behind. “Shit,” Rhodey said, thinking back to the video. “There’s no way they could have missed those injuries.”

Tony looked upset. “Yeah, so were they in on it or were they deceived somehow? It’s not like we can exactly ask them.”

“What about the SHIELD records?” Stephen said. “Could there be some record in there of Peggy Carter’s decisions? She would have been the head of SHIELD at the time, I believe.”

“I’ve been looking,” Tony replied. He scowled down at the floor then gave himself a shake, clearly dismissing the topic. “So. If Sharon was working with HYDRA, either willingly or unwillingly, why did she give that information to Rogers?”

Rhodey gave him a long, long look, wanting to pursue the rabbit labelled ‘Peggy Carter’ but the expression on Tony’s face told him he was better off letting drop for now. Tony would just turn stubborn and mulish if he tried to push but if he let it drop, then there was a good chance that Tony would slowly work his way towards it anyway. From the look on Stephen’s face, he’d come to the same conclusion.

“That’s an interesting question,” Rhodey said, carefully ignoring the way Tony sagged with relief for a brief moment when he accepted the change of subject. “But maybe just… they wanted to undermine the legend of Captain America?”

Tony grimaced. “Well, if that was their aim, I guess they’ve succeeded.”

“Why though?” Stephen asked. “Satisfying age old grudges is all well and good but in doing so, they lost one of their prize assets in the Winter Soldier. If Sharon Carter was working for them, why didn’t they use her to send Rogers off on a wild goose chase and then scoop up Barnes themselves? They could have killed two birds with one stone.”

Both Tony and Rhodey greeted that with thoughtful silence.

“It does sort of support the idea that this might be blackmail,” Rhodey said slowly. “Maybe that was her way of… rebelling perhaps? Giving them part of what they wanted while still keeping Barnes away from them?”

“Wouldn’t they want it the other way around?” Tony objected. “Keep Barnes and deal with Rogers later. I mean, sure, if the Red Skull was still in charge, I could see them accepting what Sharon did but…” He looked over at Rhodey. “Did she look… hurt or anything?”

Rhodey shook his head. “No, not in the slightest. She looked cool, calm and collected.”
Tony turned that thought over and over. “Huh.”

“What bee have you got in your bonnet now?” Rhodey asked.

“Whatever did happen to the Red Skull?” Tony asked.

“He died, didn’t he?” Rhodey said with a frown.

Tony shook his head. “No, wasn’t he listed as missing?”

“Missing, presumed dead, sir,” JARVIS said. “According to the SHIELD files.”

“Any information about how he went missing?” Tony asked.

“He was attempting to manipulate an artefact, identified as the tesseract, and either disappeared or was killed,” JARVIS replied. “The report said his fate was unable to be determined either way.”

“You’re not trying to suggest that the Red Skull is alive?” Rhodey said dubiously.

“I’m not saying anything,” Tony replied. “But we know from what happened with Loki and the Chitauri that the tesseract can form portals.”

“Uncontrolled portal travel is dangerous,” Stephen said, settling in at Tony’s side. “Even if this Red Skull did open a portal, there’s a very good chance he was killed.”

“And if he wasn’t?” Tony asked.

Stephen arched an eyebrow. “Then the question becomes how he might have gotten back. He didn’t take the tesseract with him, after all.”

Rhodey sat down and grumbled under his breath a little. “Okay, let’s game this out. The Red Skull manages to get back somehow and makes his way back to HYDRA.”

“Where they welcome him back with open arms as their long-lost saviour,” Tony added, looking faintly amused.

“And keep him completely hidden,” Stephen added.

“Not unsurprising,” Tony said. “If there’s one thing HYDRA have proven themselves good at, it’s staying out of sight and working in the shadows.”

“So what’s his end game?” Rhodey asked. “It’s got to be more than discrediting Rogers.”

Tony’s snorted. “Probably what HYDRA’s end game always is. Trying to take over the world.”

“Great,” Rhodey grumbled. “We’re in Pinky and the Brain territory now.”

“I can think of worse places to be,” Tony replied with a sharp grin.

“Look,” Rhodey said. “I can’t take this to the Council or anyone else without proof. Hell, I’m not even sure I believe it.”

“So we go digging,” Tony said. “Maybe Nicky can help.” He shrugged. “Look, I agree it’s farfetched but we can kill two birds with one stone. Track down Sharon and see what the hell HYDRA are up to. Right now, the Red Skull is as much a good reason for their actions as anything else.”
“It’s worth checking out,” Stephen said thoughtfully. “If I remember what you’ve both told me correctly, Loki arrived here to set up the Chitauri invasion courtesy of a portal from the tesseract. So maybe whatever the Red Skull did back in the Forties created a stable portal as well.”

“You think Thanos had him?” Rhodey asked.

Stephen shrugged. “Unknown but if he survived maybe he also found his way back somehow. It’s worth investigating.”

Rhodey frowned and Tony waved a hand. “Don’t worry, sugarplum, I’m not married to the idea but now that we know Sharon’s been dragged into HYDRA, we should probably make investigating them a priority anyway.”

Rhodey nodded. “Alright. I’ll speak to Everett Ross and see what he and the JCTC can do as well.”

“And I’ll track down the pirate,” Tony said.

Chapter End Notes

I make no guarantees that this is actually where things are going with Sharon but it's fun to speculate, isn't it? :D The only facts anyone knows about her is that she was seen with known HYDRA agents. The whys and wherefores will come in later chapters.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

So, I know many of you were a bit concerned about Bucky and what was going to happen to him. Well, here we find out a bit more about that.

Chapter Notes

Bucky has been told about what happened with Rogers and the others and that there really isn't anything he can do about it. Everything that can be done, is being done and he needs to concentrate on his own situation. He decided it was good advice so that is what he's doing here.

The flight back to the United States had been long and not very relaxing. Although he had Princess Shuri and three of the Dora Milaje with him, Bucky still wasn’t really sure what was facing him when he got there. Or whether he would have to face Tony Stark. He didn’t really want to. He felt guilty not only about killing Stark’s parents but also about his actions in Siberia. He hadn’t intended to fight back the way he did but when Stark had punched Stevie and sent him flying, an automatic flight-or-fight response had kicked in. He still wasn’t sure if it had been confused fear and panic from him, Bucky Barnes, or whether part of the Winter Soldier had surfaced on seeing how strong Stark was in the armour.

No matter what the cause, it had been the wrong thing to do. Between him and Stevie, they’d made it so much worse and Bucky just wasn’t ready to face Stark until he could figure out how to apologise to the man properly.

However, when the jet landed at the Avengers Compound, the man waiting for them wasn’t Stark, though he had the same sort of facial hair. This man was taller and slimmer and he was wearing strange clothes and a long red cloak. Bucky had seen pictures of him on the TV and in the newspaper in Wakanda in the days before he’d left. This was Dr Stephen Strange, the Sorcerer Supreme. The man who had arranged for him to be allowed to stay at this Kamar-Taj place while he was treated.

They walked off the jet with Shuri in front and the three Dora Milaje surrounding him, both as bodyguards to protect him from anyone trying to get at him and to protect others from him should the worst happen. He didn’t mind. He’d watched these women train and they were pretty damn formidable. He felt safer than he had for a long time.

“Your Highness,” Strange said, bowing slightly to Shuri.

“Dr Strange,” she said with equal formality, though there was an undercurrent of amusement in her voice that made Bucky think that she and Strange weren’t exactly strangers. “This is Sergeant James Barnes.”
Strange’s expression when he nodded at him was studiously neutral. It made Bucky feel a little nervous but since Shuri and the Dora Milaje didn’t appear to be bothered, he didn’t react beyond nodding and muttering hello.

Strange and Shuri exchanged a few more comments then Shuri nodded to the Dora Milaje and the four women disappeared inside the building, leaving Bucky standing in front of Strange. It was only now that he noticed that the man’s cloak seemed to be… glaring at him. It was a bizarre thing to think but nevertheless, he did get the distinct impression that the cloak was, somehow, glaring at him.

Strange seemed to notice this because he suddenly rolled his eyes and muttered “Stop that” to the cloak. When he turned back to Bucky, he made no explanation.

“Has Princess Shuri explained what will be happening?”

Bucky gave a one-shouldered shrug. “Yeah, mostly, I think.”

“Very well,” Strange said. “I will take you through to Kamar-Taj and explain fully there.”

With that he turned and put some sort of large multi-finger ring on his hand. He then held out that hand and began drawing circles in the air with the other and a moment later a large sparkling portal burst into life. On the other side of the portal was a courtyard and a heavyset Chinese man.

“Sergeant Barnes,” Strange said, gesturing towards the portal.

Bucky hesitated for a moment then he gingerly stepped through the portal and found himself in the courtyard, standing in front of the Chinese man. A moment later, Strange had joined him and the portal fizzled out behind them.

“Sergeant Barnes, this is Wong,” Strange said. “Wong, Sergeant James Barnes.”

Bucky gave an awkward sort of nod as Wong stepped forward. He was holding a necklace in his hand, a length of leather thong with a small silver amulet attached to it.

“Sergeant Barnes,” Wong said politely then he held up the necklace. “This amulet is designed to help contain the Winter Soldier should he make an unexpected appearance. It won’t stop him from taking control but it will ensure that you won’t be able to hurt anyone.” He paused. “And when the psychologists give you clearance, it will also allow us to track you if you go out into the streets outside the temple.”

Bucky blinked and stared at Wong in surprise. “That… that would be allowed?”

“When the psychologists believe you are ready, yes,” Wong replied.

Bucky nodded silently. “Okay.”

Wong stepped forward and slipped the leather thong over his head and tightened it so that the amulet sat just at the top of his sternum. He felt an odd tingle but it disappeared after a couple of seconds. He knew Stevie would throw a fit if he knew what Bucky had just allowed these people to do but… Bucky didn’t much care. Stevie was in enough trouble of his without borrowing trouble here. And Bucky liked the idea that these people actually seemed to know how to contain the Winter Soldier. As for the tracking, well, that just made sense.

“Now,” Wong said, stepping back again. “How much assistance do you require with day to day activities?”
Bucky’s armless shoulder twitched involuntarily. “Some,” he admitted.

Wong nodded, seemingly unperturbed by Bucky’s subdued response. “Some of the acolytes and masters have already volunteered to assist you. I shall introduce you to them later and you may tell them when and how you will need their help.”

Bucky swallowed. “Thanks.”

Wong inclined his head slightly and then disappeared through one of the doors. Strange then stepped forward.

“Come with me and I’ll get you settled in.”

Bucky obediently followed Strange as he led him through another door. “We’ve set you up in a room in the same area as the Masters. We’re best suited to handle anything that might crop up.” He glanced back at Bucky. “Not that we’re expecting trouble given what we’ve been told about how the Winter Soldier is triggered but we felt that it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“Yeah,” Bucky said heavily. “That’s… that’s a good idea.”

Strange led him into a sparsely furnished room. A low bed, a table and a chair. On the table sat a laptop and beside it was a piece of paper with some writing on it. There was a window that looked out over a courtyard and in the distance he could see high, snow-covered mountains. It was one hell of a view when he took a moment to consider it and this seemed less and less like a prison and more like what he’d been told it would be – a place for him to get the help he needed.

“This room will be yours for the duration of your stay here,” Strange said, gesturing around. “I’ll give you the grand tour of the temple in a moment. Meals are held in the refectory and begin at 6am, 12pm and 6pm. You’ll be able to hear the bells, calling everyone to the meal. You have free run of the place, though currently that necklace will not allow you to leave the temple. If you take it off, we will be immediately alerted. I’ll show you the library and the meditation rooms as well as the room we have set aside for your treatment. Wong is the librarian and can help you find books that might be of interest to you. As you can see, we have provided a laptop for you. The wifi password is on that piece of paper, along with some emails and websites you might find of interest.”

Strange looked at him expectantly and Bucky floundered for a moment.

“Why?” he finally asked. “Why do this for me? You’re part of the New Avengers.”

Strange blinked as though that wasn’t the questions he’d been expecting to get and gestured for him to sit down. Bucky sank down onto the bed as Strange sat down on the chair.

“That’s part of the why,” Strange said calmly. “Also, I am the Sorcerer Supreme and I was a doctor. All of those things mean that I want to help you. What was done to you, Sergeant Barnes, was horrific. HYDRA may have turned you into a weapon but that doesn’t mean you are beyond help.”


Something flickered over Strange’s face but it was gone too fast for Bucky to identify.

“Yes, you did,” Strange said. “But how much culpability you have for those actions remains to be seen.”

“I did it,” Bucky said with a grimace.
“Yes, but your state of mind is important,” Strange replied. “There are many, many rules, in both the medical and legal frameworks, surrounding that.” He gestured towards the piece of paper on the table. “A couple of those websites deal with that sort of thing. The psychologists recommended them. You’ve been awake periodically over the last seventy years but everyone rather doubts HYDRA were keeping you up on changes in law and jurisprudence.”

Bucky gave a small huff. “No. I… know a bit about social changes. That was important so I could blend in but not… the law.”

“There’s some websites on the list that deal with summaries of major and minor events over the past several decades so you can catch up on anything you missed or get a different perspective from what HYDRA might have told you,” Strange said. “They’ve got lots of links that will take you to more lengthy explanations. If there are any books you want to read, let Wong know. He can tell you if we have them or he can get them for you.”

Bucky nodded. “When do I… start?”

“All four psychologists will be coming in tomorrow,” Strange replied. “The idea is you meet with them a few times over the next couple days and see who you feel most comfortable with. All four will be involved in your treatment but the one you’re most comfortable with will be your primary carer.” He straightened. “Once that decision is made, your sessions will start. Either Wong or myself will place you and the psychologist in what is called the mirror dimension and we will stay with you. Neither Wong nor myself will speak of anything that occurs in the sessions without your and your psychologist’s permission. We’ve already signed the appropriate paperwork with the psychologists and the United Nations.”

Bucky nodded again. “What’s the mirror dimension?”

“It’s the closest dimension to our own,” Strange explained. “In fact, it’s an exact mirror. When you’re in the mirror dimension, nothing you do affects our dimension.”

“So, if I get triggered, I won’t be able to hurt anyone or escape,” Bucky said slowly.

“Exactly.”

Bucky licked his lips. “What about… Princess Shuri said I’d be meeting with lawyers.”

Strange nodded. “Yes, you will but that won’t occur immediately. Your legal status will remain in the air until we get some more comprehensive reports from the psychologists about your state of mind. Once we have a clearer idea about that, that’s when the lawyers will get involved.”

“Am I going to go to prison?”

Strange hesitated. “I would find that very unlikely.”

“But… what about Bucharest,” Bucky said with a frown. “And… Siberia.”

“My guess is, based on what Shuri and the Wakandan doctors have told us, that you were in no way mentally competent during that period,” Strange said in a considering tone. “I’ve asked the psychologists to schedule you for scans on your brain. From what little is currently known about what was done to you, I am struggling to believe that there wasn’t physical damage done to your brain.” He smiled wryly. “I am… or I was… a neurosurgeon. I know about these things.”

“Brain damage?” Bucky said, his frown now tinged with worry. Is that why his brain always felt so stuffed full of fog?
“Perhaps,” Strange said. “Though we don’t know what effect your version of the super soldier serum has on that. Hence the scans, and if there is some damage then probably more than one, over a period of time to see what, if any, healing is occurring.” He cocked his head as he looked at Bucky. “I’d imagine you’ve been gradually feeling better?”

Bucky nodded. “I was. I felt the clearest I had ever, that I remember anyway, when I was in Bucharest, just before Stevie came.” Strange nodded so he continued. “Then… after Zemo triggered the soldier, I felt… foggy again.”

Strange made a thoughtful sound. “That’s very interesting. I’ll pass that on to the psychologists and definitely push for the scans. I think we do need to know what’s physically going on in that brain of yours as well as everything else.”

Bucky nodded. “Yeah, okay. Whatever is needed.” He hesitated and when he continued there was an edge of desperation in his voice. “I want to get better, even if it means prison.”

The look Strange gave him was intense and hard to bear but he did his best to maintain eye contact. Whatever Strange saw seemed to make him relax and the small smile he got was much warmer than anything else he’d received from the man. That made him relax even more. Strange may not be a friend but he was going to do whatever was necessary to help. That was all Bucky could ask for.

Chapter End Notes

Next week's chapter should be fun. Just as a hint... remember back in Chapter 20, after the ExVengers had been captured and they were all going home, how the Hulk and Bruce called Tony out on whether or not he'd been hurt in the fight? And how since then, there's been the odd mention here and there of Tony rubbing his chest? Yeah. That's coming back to bite Tony in the arse.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

So, Tony took a big hit to the chest from the Abomination way back in the fight in Nevada. Now we see the aftermath of that.

Chapter Notes

There is some handwavy medical and scientific stuff in the chapter. Let's just... go with it and say it's the MCU. If we can have a man who defies the laws of physics to regularly turn into a giant green bundle of anger management problems, we can go with what Tony's planning in this chapter. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Well, doc, what’s the verdict?” Tony asked as he buttoned up his shirt.

Dr Wu looked at him soberly and Tony felt a sense of fear and resignation flood through him. He’d been having weekly scans on his chest since the whole thing with the Abomination to determine precisely what kind of healing he could expect from his body naturally. From the look on Dr Wu’s face, the answer wasn’t good. Not that Tony was really expecting anything else. He might not have mentioned it to anyone else, not even Rhodey or Stephen, but there had been a lingering ache in his chest ever since the fight with the Abomination that had died down a bit but never really left.

“Your rib cage is fundamentally compromised, Mr Stark,” Dr Wu said. “But you already knew that. The recent fight has not helped matters. The artificial sternum and your ribs are intact but… I cannot guarantee that will remain the case if you take more blows to the chest. Think of it as… there are now structural weak points in your chest. When you receive a blow to the chest, those weak points are placed under stress.”

“And there’s only so much stress they can take,” Tony said grimly.

“Correct.” Dr Wu paused for a moment. “My advice, which I know you will not take, is to retire as Iron Man.”

“I can’t,” Tony said with a grimace. “There’s… I just can’t, Dr Wu.”

The surgeon sighed. “I thought you would say that. I have been consulting with Dr Cho to see whether her Cradle could be of any assistance but… she isn’t positive. Possibly in the future but she can’t put a timeline on it.”

“What about if I reinforce the armour?”

“That would help, certainly,” Dr Wu said. “But it doesn’t change the underlying issue of those weak points in your chest.”
“Right,” Tony said resignedly.

“I will continue to liaise with Dr Cho and see if there is some sort of temporary measure we might try,” Dr Wu said. “In the meantime, try not to get punched in the chest, Mr Stark.”

Tony managed a wry laugh. “Good advice. I’ll try it.”

They exchanged a few more pleasantries then Tony took his leave. He was quiet on the way back to the Compound, quiet enough that he had Happy glancing into the rear vision mirror with worry. Though Tony wasn’t sure if that was because he was being quiet or because he was rubbing his chest repeatedly. Or perhaps both. When he got back to the Compound, he immediately headed down to his workshop and sat down, staring at the holograms that he’d left up before he’d gone to see Dr Wu.

He had to admit that Dr Wu’s diagnosis hadn’t come as a surprise. He knew engineering and he’d always known that the artificial sternum and the other repairs that had been done to his rib cage after removing the arc reactor had fundamentally weakened the entire structure. It had been pure luck that Rogers’ actions in Siberia hadn’t caused more severe damage than bone bruising. Just a fraction of an inch more pressure and he’d have had at least a cracked sternum, if not more. It had been a sobering revelation. Whether or not he’d intended to (and Tony still didn’t actually know the answer to that), Rogers could have killed him.

“J, pull up the Chesty Bonds file,” he said absently.

“Of course, sir.”

The file came up then JARVIS did that electronic equivalent of clearing his throat. Tony realised that JARVIS probably hadn’t seen this file before. He’d created it shortly after getting back from Siberia and while he’d occasionally poked at it since then, he hadn’t done so recently. He’d been too busy. And FRIDAY might not have thought to tell JARVIS about this file.

“Yeah, I know, J,” he said heavily. “Access today’s scans of my chest. Dr Wu should have sent them to my email.”

“Sir, these plans…” JARVIS began.

Tony immediately cut him off. “They’re just musings at the moment, J. I haven’t made any decisions. But I’m going to have to.”

“You seem to be dismissing Extremis,” JARVIS replied.

“I got Pepper’s version of it under control but I’m not sure I know enough to start meddling with it for me,” Tony replied, tapping his fingers against his chest. “And I’m already hot enough as it is.”

“Indeed, sir,” JARVIS said dryly. He paused. “You are aware that most of these nanotech options would require providing a power source of some description.”

“Yeah,” Tony said heavily. “I thought about stripping Extremis down to the core and combining it with nanotech but even then I’d still need the power source, which would mean putting the arc reactor back in my chest and I… I’m not sure I want to do that.” He grimaced. “I’m just not sure I have a choice anymore.”

“The stripped down Extremis/nanotech option does appear to be the safest option among all these choices,” JARVIS said. “Perhaps you will allow FRIDAY and I to do our own research and see what we can come up with?”
Tony nodded. “Sure. I’ll try anything if it won’t kill me.”

“That would be counterproductive, sir.”

Tony snorted and dismissed the file for the time being. Instead he opened up the latest Iron Man iteration and started reworking the chest plate for greater structural stability and strength.

Four days later, he was back down in the workshop in blackout mode. He knew he’d been a bit off the last few days and the others were getting worried but he wanted a solution before he told them of the problem. What’s more he wanted a solution that had actual science backing it up.

“Well, J?” he asked, leaning back in his chair.

“I’m afraid we have found nothing better than the Extremis/nanotech option,” JARVIS said regretfully. “So we turned our attention to that and streamlined it.”

“Show me.”

The holograms around him lit up with a series of schematics, formulae and potential problems, solutions and outcomes. Tony slowly read through it all, made some tweaks here and there and then leaned back again.

“Let’s set up a simulation,” he said. “Use my current baseline stats and let’s see what happens.”

“Of course, sir.”

Tony watched the simulation run through and grimaced when the figure flat lined and lost all brain function. “Yeah, that’s not going to work. What if we tweak Extremis a bit more?”

They went back and forth for a while, making changes to Extremis and the nanotech until finally they reached a point where the simulation didn’t end up in an immediate fail condition.

“Sir, I really believe you should tell Drs Banner and Strange about this,” JARVIS said.

“I don’t want to worry them.” Tony said absently. “They have enough on their plates.”

“Yes, because leaving out people who have a better grasp of human biology is such a good idea,” JARVIS said dryly.

Tony snorted. “Such sass. I don’t know where you get it from.”

“It’s a mystery, sir.”

Tony sighed and leaned back in his chair. “I don’t want them to fuss.”

“Boss? I think they’ll fuss more if you don’t tell them and spring it on them unawares,” FRIDAY said. “They’re not like the others, you know?”

Tony rubbed his chest as he considered that. He knew there was a lot of truth in what FRIDAY was saying but there was still that old reticence lingering inside, both in terms of not wanting to worry people and have them fuss over him and not wanting any accusations levelled at him as though he was using this as an excuse to… take over the world or something.

“Sir? Dr Strange is asking for admission to the workshop,” JARVIS said.

Tony looked around at the holograms then sighed and waved a hand. The decision had now been
taken out of his hands. “Yeah, let him in.” he swivelled around in his chair as Stephen walked through the door. “Did you draw the short straw to talk to me about my behaviour?”

Stephen sniffed disdainfully. “Hardly. We’re worried, yes, but I just came down to ask. You’ll tell me or not as you see… fit…”

He could see the moment when Stephen started to put together everything that was on the holograms. Tony hadn’t taken any of them down or censored them and Stephen was a doctor so…

“Tony?” Stephen said slowly. “What is all this?”

Stephen seemed more worried than censorious and Tony relaxed just a fraction.

“Dr Wu said my chest isn’t going to hold up in the long run if I continue to be Iron Man.” He grimaced. “And it’s not as though retiring is exactly an option given what’s on the horizon.”

Stephen scowled then sighed and leaned against the bench. “I want to argue with you on that score but I can’t. And my solution… well, Pangborn’s solution… won’t exactly help you either.”

“I wouldn’t trust magic to hold my chest together anyway,” Tony said. “I know it’s real, I’ve seen you use it, but it makes my engineer’s soul scream to even think about relying on it.”

Stephen looked amused. “And that would not help. A certain amount of belief and faith is required. If you believe it will fail you at a key moment, it is likely that will occur and you’d never know if it was a true failure of the magic or your lack of faith in it.”

“Ugh, magic,” Tony said with a shudder. He then waved a hand at the holograms. “So this is my other solution – a mix of a watered down version of Extremis and nanotech of my own making.”

Stephen tapped one of the holograms sending it spinning around on its axis. “And a new arc reactor.”

“Yeah,” Tony said heavily. “I need a power source for the nanotech or it’ll eat me alive from the inside out to get the energy it needs to work and… well, I’ve worked out a new structure for the reactor housing that will reinforce my ribcage and make the whole lot more stable and robust. The Extremis and nanotech will help mitigate some of the downsides of having it there – the risk of infection, the reduced lung capacity and so on.”

“It’ll do a bit more than that if I’m reading this right,” Stephen said.

Tony grimaced. This was the part he’d been hoping Stephen wouldn’t see. “Well, yes. It’ll improve my healing rate a bit, that’s for the arc reactor mostly but I’ll admit it’ll be helpful in other ways.”

“And this?” Stephen said, frowning a little as he tapped part of the nanotech code.

“Will help me better integrate with the suit.”

As he watched Stephen stared at the code for a while then he turned and gave Tony a wry smile. The smile became broader when he registered the surprised look on Tony’s face.

“You thought I was going to yell at you, didn’t you?”

Tony slumped in his chair and looked down at the floor. “It’s… happened before.”

Stephen snorted again. “I’ll admit I’m worried but I also understand those scans perhaps even better than you.” He winced. “It’s… not good as a long term prognosis.”
He came over and pulled Tony up and into his arms. Tony hesitated for a moment then melted against him, burying his face in Stephen’s chest.

“Will you let Bruce, Hope, Betty and myself go over all of this?” Stephen asked gently. “Let us see if we can refine it or even come up with something better.”

Tony’s immediate reaction was to say no but then he hesitated. Stephen hadn’t reacted the way he’d thought he would so maybe the others would actually help instead of accusing him of trying to destroy the world or whatever else they might think.

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “Okay. But… I am going to do this.”

“I figured,” Stephen said dryly. “And I’m hardly in a position to throw stones given I charged off to Tibet on nothing more than the name of a place and a vague hope they might have a cure.”

“I’m not sure that correlates,” Tony replied, letting himself hope that for once someone might actually support him in his harebrained schemes. “You didn’t get a cure.”

“I did actually,” Stephen replied. “Or I could have, if I wanted it. I just… found I didn’t need it.” He chuckled. “When I first got there, I was convinced I needed two good hands in order to use magic because so much of it is based on hand motions.”

“What changed your mind?” Tony asked curiously. He still ranted and raved about magic at every opportunity but it was more for show these days or to make Stephen laugh. Magic was clearly real and Stephen had explained much of it in scientific terms. Certainly the idea of alternate dimensions and a multiverse fell more into the realms of science than pure magic.

“One of the senior sorcerers is missing a hand,” Stephen said dryly. “I watched him cast spells perfectly with one hand and a stump. The Ancient One always enjoyed putting me in my place.”

Tony grinned. “Like the Everest thing?”

Stephen nodded. “She was definitely in the throw you in the deep end and see if you sink or swim school of teaching. Or rather, she wanted me to open my mind and understand that magic was less about strictly controlling what I do but more about letting the power flow through me and out of me in the form of my will and design.”

“You’re a conduit?”

Stephen nodded. “In a manner of speaking. And back to Pangborn, that’s how he uses his magic differently from me and the other sorcerers. We let it flow through and out in the form of spells. He turns his magic inwards to enable him to walk.”

“Could he do both?” Tony asked.

“Possibly,” Stephen replied. “But he was profoundly disabled. It may be it takes nearly everything he has to correct his disability. Either way, he made his choice and I respect that.” He arched an eyebrow at Tony. “And stop trying to distract me.”

“I wasn’t!” Tony protested then he shrugged. “Not much anyway.”

“Let us have a look and see how much we can refine it to keep you safe,” Stephen said. “That way, when you do this, we’ll all have peace of mind and know that it’s the best possible solution. We won’t take long, though this isn’t absolutely urgent.”
Tony grimaced. “Yeah, I know. I just… sometimes I feel like I can hear the clock ticking until Thanos gets here and I…” He licked his lips. He still wasn’t used to admitting his weaknesses to other people but he was trying to be more open. “I feel like I’m not doing enough.”

Stephen sighed and cradled Tony’s face in his hands. “Tony, you are doing enough. You can’t solve this all by yourself and, unlike before, your team has your back. We can and will help.”

Tony closed his eyes and let out a shuddering breath. “Yeah. I’m still getting used to that.”

Stephen leaned in and gave him a soft kiss. “Alright. Now, let’s get this all put together so we can talk to Bruce, Hope and Betty and brainstorm over the best way to get you healthy.”

Tony didn’t bother to hide his relief as he turned back to his holograms to organise his data, his heart rate settling down to something normal. If ever he wanted an indication of just how bad things had been with the ExVengers, this was it. No accusations, no sneering, no suspicions. Just help when he needed it. It was a very nice change.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t worry. Next week’s chapter isn’t quite so bad for Tony. That’s because next week the Asgardians arrive! :D
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

So, you may have noticed I deleted the chapter I put up last night. That's because I'm an idiot and put up the wrong chapter. I blame the heat and the very long work week I've just had. So, those of you who saw the old chapter just had a sneak preview of a chapter that wasn't due to go up for another couple of weeks. Thank you Rjspets for the comment that clued me into my dingbat moment. :D

After all, I did promise you Asgardians this week. So... here they are. Thor and the rest of the Asgardians (and a few former prisoners from Sakaar) arrive on Earth. This is where I'm pretty sure we go AU from the end of Thor Ragnarok, given one of the end credits scenes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony stood on the edge of a vast empty plain in Norway and watched as the enormous spaceship gently touched down. Bruce was standing beside him and a fair distance behind the two of them were the rest of the New Avengers and a delegation from the Norwegian government and the United Nations. Behind them was a set of pavilions that had been set up for the preliminary negotiations. It had been agreed that Tony and Bruce would do the initial greeting to make sure everything was fine with the Asgardians then the others would come forward.

As the door of the ship hissed open, Tony tried not to fidget. For all of Bruce’s reassurances, he had no idea how this was going to go. Quite apart from the internal issues with the Avengers, the Norwegian government had only given provisional approval to the Asgardians staying and even that had only come in the last week. There was a general sense of approval of the idea among the Norwegian people (and Tony had been surprised to discover how many Norwegians were called Thor or Loki or variations thereof) but there was still some negotiations to be carried out before final approval was given.

“Shieldbrothers!” came Thor’s cheerful, booming voice moments before the man himself stepped out of the ship.

Tony gave a start when he saw Thor. Bruce had told him about the haircut and the lost eye but seeing it right in front of him was a bit of a shock. And seeing Thor again also brought back how things had gone the last time he was here and Tony had to resist the urge to rub his throat.

“Thor,” he said, stepping forward with one hand outstretched since never let it be said that Tony Stark couldn’t play the political and diplomatic game. “Bruce has told me what happened. I’m sorry to hear about your father.”

Thor sobered immediately “Thank you, my friend. Your commiseration is most appreciated. And I believe I owe you an apology in turn. Bruce was adamant that my actions when I was last here on Midgard were most foul. I allowed my temper to get the better of me and greatly risked your life. Can you find it within yourself to forgive me?”
Tony shot a small startled look at Bruce, who responded with a serene yet vaguely smug expression, then he turned back to Thor. His initial instinct was to make a flippant response but one look at Thor told him that there was no artifice about Thor’s apology. He apparently genuinely understood what he’d done wrong and was equally genuinely apologising.

“Uh, yeah,” he said awkwardly then he smiled and tapped Thor on the arm. “No harm done, Point Break. And I got the matching set of brothers since Reindeer Games did that to me during the invasion.” He held up one hand when Thor looked ready to make Loki apologise as well. “Uh, no need for whatever you were going to do. Loki and I were on opposite sides back then.”

Thor subsided then looked amused. “At least he refrained from stabbing you. I think he saves that for me.”

Tony laughed. “One small mercy.” He sobered. “So…”

“Ah, yes,” Thor straightened. “As King of Asgard, I have come to beseech the leaders of Midgard to allow my people protection and succour here on this world, for our own has been destroyed utterly.”

Tony had almost forgotten what Thor could be like when he decided it was time for a little formality. “Bruce brought your request to me and I took it to the United Nations. Norway has given provisional approval to you and your people staying, based on your shared history, but there will need to be a formal agreement negotiated.”

Thor looked very relieved. “You have my thanks, shieldbrother.” He looked past them to the groups waiting. “Are these the people I must negotiate with?”

Tony nodded. “Yeah. And, uh…” He peered around Thor but couldn’t see anyone else at the door of the ship. “There’s been some discussions about Loki as well.”

Thor frowned. “My brother was not himself during the attack on Midgard.”

“Bruce brought that to my attention,” Tony replied. “And we actually have some video evidence of that as well. Apparently being tossed around by the Hulk is good for the cognitive recalibration of a god.” He scratched the back of his neck. “But we’re going to need more than just that. How willing will he be to tell the Accords Council at the very least what happened to him?”

“He will be difficult about it, as he is about everything,” Thor said ruefully. “But I believe he can be convinced.”

“Good, good.” Tony rubbed his hands together. “Okay, so, let’s go get you introduced to everyone.”

Tony hadn’t quite believed Bruce when he’d said that becoming king had been good for Thor but the following hours certainly proved that true. Thor was still larger than life and as boisterous as ever but he also now had a sense of gravitas about him that Tony rather liked. He listened attentively to the Norwegian and UN officials and explained all that he could clearly and concisely. He was polite and far more diplomatic than Tony had ever given him credit for and he could see that Thor was certainly winning over the local delegation, especially when he spoke to them in fluent, if somewhat archaic, Norwegian.

After a couple of hours, Bruce was despatched to the ship and he returned with a small and rather odd collection of people. Thor beamed at them and then started the introductions.

“May I introduce to you my brother and heir, Prince Loki of Asgard,” Thor began and Tony could see that the heir part had genuinely startled Loki, though he hid it well. “I know my brother’s last visit here was fraught with battle but there are extenuating circumstances that I would like to make
known to all in a more suitable forum.”

Thor then continued on blithely. “Brunnhilde, Commander of the Valkyries, Asgard’s finest warriors.”

The woman Thor had been referring to looked just as startled as Loki had but then she swallowed and smiled with the barest hints of tears in her eyes, her chin going up until she stood strong and proud. Tony was impressed with her armour and already making mental notes about how it could be improved without losing its aesthetic. If there was one thing he’d learned about Asgardians, they did like their aesthetics.

“Heimdall the Watcher, Asgard’s Guardian and my most trusted and valued advisor.”

Heimdall looked faintly amused but pleased and Tony began to get the distinct impression that while Thor did mean his introductions and the titles he was bestowing on his friends sincerely, he was also making some of it up on the spot. It made him reassess the amount of help he’d thought Thor might need to navigate the turbulent waters of the UN.

“And the noble Korg, who lead the rebellion of Sakaar’s slaves and fought to save and protect the people of Asgard.”

Korg, who looked like a person shaped bunch of rocks, straightened and waved cheerily at them.

The Norwegians took the introductions and Korg’s odd appearance in their stride and in fairly short order, arrangements were made to supply food and other necessities to the Asgardians, who would for now, remain on the ship until better accommodations could be organised, whether that was in a pre-existing town or city or whether they began construction in a place to be Asgard’s own. Once that was sorted and Thor had agreed to various meetings in the days ahead, the official parties departed, leaving only Tony and his New Avengers.

Thor looked at them curiously. “Will you not introduce me to your new friends, Tony? Though I confess, I do know some of them.”

Tony waved the others forward. “Yeah, I think you already know Dr Stephen Strange?”

Thor nodded. “It is a pleasure to meet you again, Dr Strange.”

“Your Majesty,” Stephen said dryly.

Thor waved that away. “No need for such formalities amongst friends.”

“I thought I asked you and your brother to stay off Earth,” Stephen continued in that dry tone. “Now you brought all your people along too.”

Thor frowned for a moment then he saw the resigned amusement on Stephen’s face and laughed. “Would that I could have kept my word, Dr Strange, but I’m afraid Hela forced a change to my plans.”

Stephen nodded. “That does happen from time to time.” The sorcerer eyed Loki speculatively for a long, long moment then decided to let it go for now.

Tony took back the conversational ball at that point. “You also know Vision and Rhodey.”

Thor bowed to them. “It is good to see both of you again as well. Vision, I trust all goes well?”
“It does,” Vision said with a faint smile.

“And this is Dr Hope Van Dyne,” Tony said, gesturing to Hope.

Thor took her hand and bowed over it. “Lady Hope, it is a pleasure. Are you also a scientist?”

Hope smiled and blushed a little. “Uh, yes… yes, I am, Thor.”

Thor let go of her hand then gestured towards the ship. “Shall we go inside? The ship once belonged to the Grandmaster so it is… less austere than one might think.”

They all trooped inside and Thor ushered them into what was obviously his quarters. Once he’d fetched them all drinks he sat down.

“I cannot help but notice the absence of the good Captain and a number of our friends,” he observed. There was no accusation in his tone but Tony flinched anyway. Thor’s concern immediately deepened. “What has occurred in my absence?”

Tony hesitated for a moment and Rhodey snatched the opportunity to swoop in and start speaking. Tony relaxed back in his chair with a look of relief at his friend and watched Thor carefully as Rhodey explained the events that led up to the civil war and the civil war itself. Thor spent most of it frowning thoughtfully but when Rhodey started speaking about the events in Siberia, Thor’s expression darkened and they could dimly hear the sound of thunder rumbling outside the ship.

“Brother,” Loki said with deceptive casualness. “As impressive as your newly honed abilities are, now, when our welcome here is not absolute, is not the time to display them.”

Thor deliberately calmed himself and the thunder stilled. “Where is Steven Rogers now?” he demanded.

“Let me finish the story,” Rhodey said calmly.

Tony tried not to fidget as Rhodey continued on with the story, explaining the rogues’ residence in Wakanda and T’Challa’s aid and then the events in Nevada and Rogers and the others’ imprisonment. Once Rhodey finished, silence fell.

“I had not thought the Captain would be so dishonourable,” Thor rumbled.

“You always have been gullible,” Loki said, looking unimpressed.

Thor gave him a quizzical look. “Brother?”

Loki rolled his eyes, though no one was sure if it was at Thor’s confusion or being called ‘brother’. “The Captain was easiest of all the Avengers to manipulate. He never looked beyond the surface. Barton was quick to tell me how lost Rogers was in this time and place and how neither SHIELD nor the Captain himself had bothered to educate him or shepherd him gently.” He smirked. “And physically, he was no match.” He looked over at Tony. “It was just as well you arrived when you did, Stark. Even I would have been hard pressed to make my surrender to the Captain believable. You were a far more formidable opponent.”

Tony raised an eyebrow at him. “I can’t tell whether you’re being sincere or sucking up to me.”

Loki smirked. “Can’t I do both?”

That got a laugh from Tony and he relaxed a little. “Sure. Why not? I take it this means you’re
actually willing to talk about what was really going on back then?"

Loki sobered and grimaced. “As little as I wish to, yes. It concerns… Thanos.”

“That name keeps on popping up,” Stephen said dryly.

“Thanos seeks the Infinity stones,” Loki said far more soberly than they had ever seen him before.

“Why?” Tony asked. “I mean, I know they’re powerful and Bruce told me about the gauntlet and all that but what does he want? Power? Something more?”

Loki grimaced. “He seeks to court Death.”

There was a moment of confused silence then Tony frowned. “Wait. You’re… not talking about him having a death wish. You’re talking about Death being an actual person and Thanos wanting to… what? Woo them? Her? Him?”

“Her,” Loki said. “And yes.”


“One day I’ll tell you about Dormammu and what I did to stop him and really blow your mind,” Stephen said dryly. He eyed Loki curiously. “I don’t suppose you know what Death thinks of all this?”

Loki shook his head and his mouth twisted in a bitter smile. “While I have been close to being claimed by her more than once recently, I have never met her.”

“Is there a way to find out?” Tony asked.

Loki considered that. “Possibly but even if we did and she has no interest in him, I do not think that would stop him.”

“Ugh, he’s one of those men,” Hope said with a grimace. “Lovely.”

“Your pardon, Lady Hope?” Thor said, looking confused.

“One of those men who thinks what he wants and desires is more important than any woman’s opinion,” Hope said with disdain.


Tony grinned at Hope then turned back to the two Asgardians. “So how many stones does he think are here?”

“He knew about the Space Stone being here,” Loki replied.

“The Space Stone being the tesseract?” Tony asked.

Loki nodded. “He believes there are others.”

Tony and Stephen exchanged looked with each other, then the rest of their teammates. “He’s not wrong,” Tony said slowly.

“The sorcerers of Kamar-Taj have been the custodians of the Time Stone for centuries,” Stephen said.
“And this is the Mind Stone,” Vision said, tapping the gem set into his forehead.

“What happened to the tesseract?” Tony asked Thor.

The new King of Asgard shifted in his seat and shook his head. “Unknown. It was in the vault on Asgard when Surtur destroyed the realm. But I do not think even that would have had the ability to destroy an Infinity Stone.”

Loki cleared his throat, gaining their attention, and Tony was surprised to see the trickster looking a little abashed. He wasn’t sure if it was genuine though or just a front he was putting up for some reason.

“Loki?” Thor said warily.

Loki waved his hands in an intricate pattern and the tesseract appeared between them. He took hold of it and held in front of him. “I… claimed the tesseract when you sent me to destroy Surtur’s crown.”

It was Thor’s expression that caught Tony’s attention. Thor looked resigned, completely unsurprised and yet faintly amused all at the same time.

“You claimed the tesseract,” Thor said dryly.

“Would you have had me leave it there?” Loki said, sounding just a little irritated. “To fall into Thanos’ hands?”

“Were you planning on telling us about this?” Tony asked.

Loki shrugged. “Eventually,” he said but there was something about his manner that immediately got Tony’s back up and he remembered what had been said about where Loki had been before he’d tried invading the Earth. Or more importantly whose hands he had been in.

“Or were you planning on using it as a bargaining chip with Thanos?” he asked sharply.

From the way Loki’s eyes narrowed slightly and he drew the tesseract closer to his body, he knew he’d hit the nail on the head.

“If it came to it,” Loki snapped.

“And to hell with the rest of us?” Rhodes said, one eyebrow raised.

“I failed,” Loki bit out. “He does not accept failure.”

“But you wanted to fail,” Tony pointed out.

“That is beside the point,” Loki said acidly. “I failed. And if he gets his hands on me again, I will have an eternity to regret everything I have ever done, good, bad or indifferent.”

Tony was watching the trickster closely and he saw annoyance, anger and defiance written on his face but underneath all of that was fear. It was the fear that enabled him to let go of some of his suspicions. Loki was afraid of Thanos and was determined to have some sort of contingency plan to protect himself. He could hardly fault him for that.

“You don’t think we can succeed,” Tony said.

Loki hesitated for a moment. “I have never been an optimist.”
Tony watched him for a long moment then nodded once. “Well, we might not be gods here on Midgard but we are pretty damn creative. Why don’t you tell us everything you know, think or suspect about Thanos and maybe we can pleasantly surprise you.”

He maintained eye contact with Loki and saw any number of expressions flickers across his face. He wasn’t sure why but he felt it was important to have Loki’s full support. Thor might have strength and great power on his side but Loki was smart. And cunning and a survivor. If Loki turned all of that towards defeating Thanos, they might just have a chance. And if Loki wanted to have a way out of a tight spot should he end up there, well, Tony could live with that. They’d just have to make some extra plans to account for Thanos potentially ending up with the Space Stone.

Finally, Loki nodded. “My brother intends for us to settle here so I suppose I have a vested interest in ensuring the place remains intact.”

Tony and Loki ignored the beaming smile Thor gave Loki for his use of ‘my brother’ and they nodded to each other. He wasn’t naïve enough to think that Loki wouldn’t betray them if things went badly enough but at least he had the god’s agreement to work with them for now. He’d take that as a good start.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, Bruce kept his little talk with Thor about how lifting ordinary people by the throat is a no-no quiet because a) he wasn't sure it would sink in and b) he wasn't sure that Thor would care in the long run so he didn't want to get Tony’s hopes up. I mean, Bruce likes and trusts Thor a lot more now but that doesn't mean he still isn't a bit cynical about people. Thor has pleased him (and the Hulk!)

And, yes, Valkyrie's name is actually Brunnhilde, according to the MCU wiki. So... Brunnhilde is her name, Valkyrie is what she is.

I brought Death into is because I wanted a motive for Thanos other than just GRAGH! I WANT POWAH!!!!! I mean, pursuit of power is often a motive but I always want to know why they're pursuing power. And pursuing power to impress someone you have a crush on is actually a bit of a time-honoured tradition.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Back to Tony's chest and his Extremis/nanotech solution. The others have a few questions, there are preparations to be made and then... some fluff! :D

“You know, there is one thing you’ve left out in all of this,” Stephen said as he, Tony, Bruce, Betty and Hope sat around and looked at the holographic representations of Extremis and the nanotech.

It had taken the better part of two weeks to hash everything out. Bruce and Betty, in conjunction with Stephen, had rewritten Extremis’ code again and again until they forced it into a shape where it did everything Tony wanted and nothing he didn’t. Hope had taken charge of the nanotech and, after browbeating her father in a six hour argument that she wouldn’t talk about afterwards, incorporated Pym Tech into them until they too were as safe as possible and would do all Tony needed of them and more.

Tony had handled Pepper, Happy and Rhodey. He’d sat them down and explained everything Dr Wu had told him and the path he’d decided to take. He showed them what he was planning and told them what the others were doing. They’d both gone pale but they then nodded and asked how they could help, in a show of trust that had nearly brought Tony to his knees and had brought tears to his eyes. There had been a lot of hugs after that before they’d gotten down to business.

So, the business and personal side had been taken care of. Not that Tony thought anything would go wrong but this was, essentially, a medical procedure and there was always a chance that something might occur. If it did, then Tony was content that Stark Industries and the New Avengers would be safe in Pepper and Rhodey’s hands respectively.

Now, it was just a matter of carving out a minimum three day space of time when Dr Wu, Dr Helen Cho and everyone else would be available to do this.

“What’s that?” Tony said, leaning into Stephen a bit more. Stephen automatically wrapped his arm around his shoulders and drew him close.

He’d been a little more clingy and needy these last few days, once all the pieces started falling into place and the reality of what he was going to do started looming over him. The last time something this drastic and unknown had occurred to him had been Afghanistan. He didn’t count the surgery to remove the arc reactor because while that had been dangerous, it had been under highly controlled conditions. There was only so much control they had here since while they’d done everything they could to ensure Extremis and the nanotech did what they wanted, there was really no way of knowing how things would go once they were inside him. Computer modelling could only do so much, it certainly couldn’t mimic the responses of a human body.

That and he was putting the arc reactor back and while Extremis would alleviate some of the more unpleasant aspects of that, it still wasn’t going to be a walk in the park. And it was going to change things afterwards. He still remembered that ever present aftertaste of coconut and metal, not to mention the discomfort of having the thing jammed into his sternum. They had tried to find a way to do this without the arc reactor but… that would have meant doing without the nanotech and that would have meant unleashing more of Extremis than Tony was willing to handle. So, the arc reactor
it was and Tony… Tony would just have to find a way to deal with it.

And if in the meantime, he was a little more clingy and needy than normal, well, Stephen didn’t seem to mind. In fact, if anything, Stephen was feeling just as clingy and needy as he was. Tony was fairly sure they were amusing the others with the way they would sort of octopus around each other at the slightest opportunity but they didn’t say anything. Then again, given the way Bruce and Betty were clinging to each other and Hope kept clenching and unclenching her hands, they seemed to be in much the same boat.

“You haven’t given much information about the metal you’re using to construct the arc reactor framework,” Stephen said. “Or why it’s so extensive this time.”

“Ah, yeah… right,” Tony said. “I’ve been meaning to tell you guys about that. I’ve been working with Rhodey on this because he’s my engineering bro from way back.” The others smiled and chuckled and Tony flashed them a brief grin before continuing, “And with Dr Wu as well because he’s the one who’s going to be doing the arc reactor surgery. It was actually his idea to expand the framework to provide a proper stabilising structure to my entire rib cage. As for the metal, well…”

He gulped and Stephen frowned and gave him a small comforting squeeze. Tony smiled wanly at him and then took a deep breath.

“Dr Wu pointed out, in his implacable but delightfully calm way, that I needed to ensure that what happened in Siberia couldn’t happen again,” Tony said, his voice shaking a little at the beginning before smoothing out. “I’d never reinforced the chest plates of my suits to the sort of extent that would have helped there because I never thought I’d need to.” He grimaced. “Sloppy thinking on my part. The reactor does make a pretty good target.”

“Tony…” Bruce began and they could all see the green flickering in his eyes.

“It’s okay, green bean,” Tony said with a small smile and wave of his hand. “Never let it be said that I don’t learn from my mistakes. So. The more extensive structure to protect my ribs and chest. And the metal. It needed to be strong and yet kind of flexible at the same time because, well, my rib cage still needs to function as a normal rib cage. And as it turns out, I have about twelve pounds of a metal that would be ideal for that kind of task.”

They stared at him blankly for a moment then Bruce gave a little startled jerk.

“Wait… the shield?” he said with surprise.

Tony nodded. “It was Rhodey’s idea actually. Rogers is never going to be Captain America again. Even if we decide to use him for Thanos’ invasion in some way, it won’t be as Captain America. That title can sit fallow for a while until we decide what to do with it and maybe find someone better to wear it.” And until I can look at the shield without flinching, went unsaid but understood. “When that day comes, we can sort out what to do about a new shield. I’ve studied that thing left, right, up, down and sideways so if push came to shove I could replicate it but we might have something better by then. But the metal alloy itself can be put to a better use and…”

He broke off but Stephen seemed to understand what he’d been about to say.

“And there is a sense of justice in taking that which Rogers used to hurt you and using it instead to heal you.”

“Yeah,” Tony said after clearing his throat. “Dr Wu said something similar. Is that something you surgeons do, wax philosophical about surgery?”
Stephen chuckled. “We do have to study ethics and morals and that therefore tends to lead into a bit of philosophy. Also, what we do impacts people’s lives, often in profound ways. That does tend to lend itself to a bit of introspection from time to time."

“Mhmm,” Tony said. “Anyway. That’s… the plan for the framework.”

There was a moment of silence then Bruce said, “Are you going to tell Rogers?”

Tony shook his head. “No. He gave up any right to the shield in Siberia. It’s not his anymore.”

There were nods amongst the others. Hope frowned and poked at the plans still floating in front of them. “So what order are we doing this in?”

“The surgery first,” Stephen said. “Dr Wu’s allowing me to step in for that.” He paused and looked over at Tony. “There was something I wanted to ask you regarding that.”

Tony quirked an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“It was something Dr Wu suggested after we got talking about where my path had ended up,” Stephen said. He smiled wryly. “He was fascinated about the potential of combining surgery and magic. I’ve promised to meet with him and discuss that further at a later date. It’s an intriguing thought.” He cleared his throat. “But back to your surgery. Dr Wu suggested the possibility of drawing you into the astral plane during the surgery.”

Tony frowned. “Any particular reason why?”

Stephen grinned. “I think he’s well aware of your control freak tendencies.” Tony laughed wryly amongst everyone else’s chuckles. Stephen then sobered and continued, “This is very much an experimental procedure and since it’s possible to communicate with someone from the astral plane, I think he likes the idea of you being on hand in case there are any issues.”

“That’s, uh…” Tony grimaced. “Can I think about it? I mean, I get where he’s coming from but…”

“Magic still gives you the scientific heebie-jeebies,” Stephen said, his grin reappearing.

Tony snorted but looked amused. “Yeah, something like that.”

“Anyway,” Stephen said, turning back to the others. “The surgery to put in the framework and the new arc reactor first. Then, once Tony is awake and aware and we’re sure the surgery was a success, we’ll go straight into administering the Extremis and nanotech.”

“Shouldn’t we wait for a few days at least after the surgery before we do that?” Hope asked with a worried frown.

“Dr Wu says no,” Stephen said. “And after some discussion with him and with Dr Cho, I have to agree. One of the things the Extremis/nanotech combination is going to do is have a healing factor to it. Dr Wu believes that whatever stress it may put on Tony’s body so soon after the surgery will be counteracted by the healing factor and it will stave off any chance of post-operative infection, which is quite high given the invasive nature of the surgery.”

“And we’re doing this here? At the Compound?” Bruce said dubiously. “Wouldn’t it be better to do this at a hospital?”

“It would, green bean, but we can’t risk it,” Tony said, taking over from Stephen. “This is highly experimental and though we’ve tried to take into account all the variables, you know as well as I do
that there’s no way of taking them all into account. I won’t put innocent people in danger from this. Nor will I take the risk of someone stealing it or telling the public before we’re ready.”

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Stephen pressed a kiss to his temple and he smiled briefly at the sorcerer before continuing, “Besides, there is a risk to me in all this and…” He swallowed. “If something goes wrong, I, uh… I want to give everyone a chance to control the fallout. Which is easier to do here than anywhere else.”

“You think that might happen?” Betty said softly.

“I don’t,” Tony replied. “But I have to think of the possibility. That’s why I’ve been in so many meetings with Pepper and Rhodey this week. We’ve been sorting out my will and all the paperwork required to cover both my temporary absence – because I may not be the CEO anymore but I am still the CTO and the Head of R&D and the major shareholder – and any worse case eventualities. I needed to make sure that if the worst happens then SI and the New Avengers are protected.”

“What about the Accords Council?” Hope asked.

“I have a meeting with them tomorrow,” Tony replied. “It’ll be a private meeting. Just me and the Council. Technically, I don’t have to tell them but since I’m going to be incommunicado for at least a few days, I felt they should know.”

Bruce frowned. “Are they going to be a problem? Do you need me to come along as well?”

Tony’s grin was impish. “Planning on threatening them with the Hulk, Brucie bear?”

Bruce blushed but then shrugged a little. “I… well, maybe.

Tony laughed. “No need. As I said, under the Accords, I don’t have to tell them. I will because we’re still in the infancy of the Accords and I think we need to extend trust both ways but they can’t do anything to stop this, control it or anything else. It’ll just expand which sections of the Accords pertain to me and my situation so it’s worth letting them know. I’ll get the enhanced stuff as well after this.”

Bruce nodded then he squared his shoulders. “I’d still like to be there, Tony, if you’re willing.”

Tony stared at him for a moment then his face softened and his smile was warm and genuine. “Yeah, okay. I’d like that too, Bruce.”

They all turned back to the holograms then and stared at them for a moment.

“Anyone else have anything that we haven’t thought of yet?” Tony asked. Everyone shook their head and Tony dismissed the holograms with a few waves of his hands. “So, it’s looking like Dr Wu and Dr Cho will be available early next week for this. Dr Wu had a few surgeries that he couldn’t put off but then he’s been able to clear his schedule so…” He licked his lips. “Let’s make sure everything’s ready and do this.”

The others nodded and Bruce and Betty headed off down to their lab while Hope headed for her office in the Compound, muttering something about talking to her father again. That left Stephen and Tony still sitting on the couch.

“You’re not going to say something syrupy and cheering, are you?” Tony said, leaning into Stephen again.

Stephen snorted. “Honestly? I was never that kind of doctor. My bedside manner was terrible.”
Tony snickered. “Your bedside manner might be terrible but your in bed manner is excellent.”

“My ego thanks you for that,” Stephen said with a laugh then he just as quickly sobered again.
“There are a lot of grey areas and questions we just can’t answer but then again, oddly enough, I’ve never gone into a surgery this well planned before either. We’ve done all that we can and if things go sideways, we’ve got the best possible people here to fix things.”

“Beats open heart surgery in a cave without anaesthetic,” Tony said dryly.

Stephen shuddered. “As a surgeon, that gave me nightmares.”

“As the patient, ditto,” Tony replied.

Stephen pulled him closer and Tony took the opportunity to straddle his lover’s legs and snuggle in close. Stephen sighed and wrapped his arms around him and for a moment they just sat there like that.

“I wish I could have met Yinsen,” Stephen said quietly. “He must have been a superb surgeon to keep you alive through all of that. And… I would have liked to say thank you to him.”

Tony nodded but was otherwise silent for several minutes. “I wanted to bring him here. Well, get him back to his family and then bring them all here. I wanted to… I don’t know. Give him everything. He did more than just save my life. He gave me a purpose. I was wasting my life before him. That’s what he asked of me, just before he died. Don’t waste your life.”

“You haven’t,” Stephen said with the very clear intent of stopping any chance of Tony spiralling down into a dark moment. “Trust me, you haven’t.”

Tony’s smile was grateful and then he chuckled. “Yinsen knew how to make a pointed remark too. He told me I was a man who had everything and nothing. He was right too. Then, anyway.” He wriggled around until he was facing Stephen properly. “Maybe not so much anymore.”

“Why, Mr Stark, that was positively saccharine of you,” Stephen said dryly but there was an edge of fond amusement about him.

Tony screwed up his face in mock disgust. “You’re right. It was. Ugh. I need coffee. Black and bitter, like my soul.”

Stephen abruptly tipped them over until they were lying on the couch with Tony underneath him. “I’ve got a better idea. Let’s make out until James gets back. I like hearing his screams of horror as we corrode his brain.”

Tony laughed. “Making my sugarplum get out the brain bleach? I like it. Come here.” With that, he pulled Stephen fully down on top of him and there were no more words.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Hey, so you know that chapter that I accidentally posted a couple of weeks ago? Yeah, well, this is where it was meant to go. Mostly because I just like dragging the whole thing with Tony's chest out a bit longer. >:D

So, in the end credits of Dr Strange, we catch up with Jonathan Pangborn and what happens with him. Since I wasn't going to be cruel enough to leave him where he ends up, this is what happens next.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Dr Strange? There is a phone call for you?” FRIDAY suddenly announced privately over Stephen’s ear piece during the New Avengers training. In the division of duties between her and JARVIS, she had taken over the supervision of the training facilities because JARVIS had resumed his co-piloting of the Iron Man suit. While JARVIS could have done both, FRIDAY’s presence meant that he didn’t have to and even allowed for JARVIS to be caught by surprise if FRIDAY decided to throw a curve ball or two into the simulation.

Stephen paused and stepped back with a small frown. “Is it urgent? I’m a little busy right now.”

FRIDAY paused. “I think it is, Doctor. It’s from a Jonathan Pangborn. He sounds very distressed.”

Stephen looked startled and waved Tony over. “I need to take this call.”

“Sure,” Tony said before taking to the air and firing his repulsors. From the way he suddenly twitched in mid-air, Stephen was sure that JARVIS was mother-henning him. He really shouldn’t be participating in their training activities so close to the Extremis/nanotech procedure but the simulation wasn’t one that was going to put Tony in much risk. It was more to allow Hope, Vision and Rhodey to get used to working together. It was also a useful distraction from the upcoming procedure and they were all grateful for it.

Stephen left the training grounds and headed to the room FRIDAY indicated. “Pangborn?”

“Strange? Thank fuck,” Pangborn said.

Stephen frowned. FRIDAY was right. Pangborn did sound upset. “What’s wrong?”

“I was attacked by Mordo!”


“I was in my workshop and he came in,” Pangborn said, his voice ragged. “He started talking about how what we were doing was wrong and how he knew what the solution was and that was fewer sorcerers. Then he…” Pangborn made a harsh sound that might have been a sob. “He took my magic from me.”
Stephen was stunned into silence for a moment. He knew Mordo had been disillusioned after the revelation about the Ancient One’s use of the Dark Dimension and Stephen’s own liberal use of magic and the Eye of Agamotto against Dormammu but this… was not what he’d expected.

“Where are you?”

“Metro-General Hospital,” Pangborn said. “I finally got hold of a doctor here, Dr Christine Palmer, who said she knew how to contact you. She gave me your number.”

“I’ll be right there.” Stephen paused. “Are you…?”

“Crippled?” Pangborn spat, his voice bitter and angry. “Yes!”

“Right,” Stephen said awkwardly. “I’ll be right there.”

Pangborn hung up and Stephen slowly lowered the phone back into its cradle and a million thoughts ran through his head.

“FRIDAY, can you ask Tony to join me please?”

“Of course, Doctor.”

A few minutes later, Tony walked into the room. He’d left the amour behind and was just in his form-fitted undersuit. Stephen would normally admire the sight but it didn’t seem entirely appropriate right now.

“Stephen?”

Stephen licked his lips. “I need your help.”

Tony blinked. “Of course. What’s wrong?”

“You remember me telling you about Pangborn?”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, he’s the one that’s using magic to walk again.”

“Not anymore,” Stephen said grimly. “He was attacked by a… a rogue of our own. Somehow his magic was stripped from him. He’s in hospital at the moment.”

“Does he need somewhere to stay?” Tony said immediately. “How bad is his paralysis? I could probably extend the prosthetics I made for Rhodey to something more comprehensive.”

Stephen swallowed hard and pulled Tony into an embrace, letting his forehead drop down on his shoulder. “Thank you,” he said with quiet fervency. “I wasn’t sure if I should even ask, let alone how to.”

Tony hugged him and pressed a kiss to his temple. “What do you mean? Of course I’ll help. You know that asking me for this kind of help isn’t taking advantage of me.”

Stephen raised his head and smiled. “That’s good to know and I do appreciate it.”

Tony gave him a lascivious grin. “You can show me how much you appreciate it later tonight.”

Stephen laughed and gave him a gentle push away. “I’d do that anyway. Now, I’d better go.”

“Let me know what you need,” Tony said as Stephen opened a portal into the same storage room.
he’d used before and stepped through into the hospital.

It didn’t take him long to find Christine, though he had to wait a few minutes for her to finish up with
a patient.

“Stephen! Did Jonathan Pangborn get hold of you?”

Stephen nodded. “What happened? When did he come in?”

“A couple of days ago,” Christine replied as she started walking towards the elevators. “Stephen,
he’d been lying on the floor of his workshop for two days before anyone found him. He’d hardly say
anything to anyone, just kept asking for you.” She rolled her eyes. “It took a while for someone to
actually tell me so I could pass on your number to him.”

“Is he able to be moved?”

They stepped into the elevator and Christine stabbed the one of the buttons, eying him curiously as
she did.

“Yes. He was dehydrated and hungry but otherwise not in terrible condition. He could be moved if
necessary.”

Stephen nodded more to himself than anything else. “I may be able to make arrangements for him,
depending on what he wants to do.”

Christine gave him a surprised look but by then, the elevator had arrived and instead of saying
anything, she led him down the corridor to one of the rooms.

“Do you want me to come in?”

Stephen shook his head. “No, thank you. This is…” He smiled wryly and waved a hand. “My
business.”

Christine’s eyes widened as she realised what he meant. “Oh, right. Okay, I’ll leave you to it.”

Stephen pushed open the door to the room and stepped inside. Pangborn was lying on the bed inside,
looking angry and bereft in a way that Stephen actually understood. His case had been penny ante
stuff compared to the extent of Pangborn’s paralysis but it still allowed him to understand a bit of
what Pangborn was experiencing.

“Pangborn?”

Pangborn turned and his jaw clenched. “Can you help?”

“I’m going to need to understand what happened first and consult with people at Kamar-Taj,”
Stephen said and Pangborn nodded miserably. “But in the meantime, Tony Stark has offered to have
you come and stay at the Compound and he’s promised to see what he can do to make you some
kind of prosthetic to allow you to walk again. He did so for his friend, Colonel Rhodes, after he was
paralysed recently.”

Pangborn stared at him for long enough that Stephen got a little worried. “What?” the man said
finally. “Why?”

Stephen smiled faintly. “Because Tony is a very generous man and I asked.” He sobered. “Also an
attack like this can’t be swept to the side. If Mordo came after you, then we have a problem.”
“I’ll say,” Pangborn said angrily. “He… he wasn’t like that at Kamar-Taj.”

Stephen grimaced as he sat down in the chair beside the bed. “He… had something of a crisis of faith and didn’t come out of it very well. I don’t think any of us would have let him go though, if we’d known he was going to jump off the deep end.”

“What happened?” Pangborn said a little more calmly now that he could see that Stephen was taking him and his plight seriously.

“He had his confidence in the Ancient One shattered,” Stephen replied. He then sighed. “And… I didn’t help either. He’s very… rigid in his thinking and I’m… not.”

“Do you think the Ancient One could help me?” Pangborn asked plaintively.

Stephen hesitated for a moment. “The Ancient One is dead. I’m the Sorcerer Supreme now.”

“You?” Pangborn looked startled. “How?”

“Natural talent and a tendency to ignore rules,” Stephen said wryly. “Also, apparently the Ancient One had been waiting for me. Not that she made it easy.”

Pangborn suddenly grinned. “What did she do?”

“Sent me on a tour of the multiverse then kicked me out,” Stephen replied. “Then stranded me on Everest to make me understand that I didn’t need two whole hands in order to use magic.”

Pangborn laughed and Stephen decided to wear that if it kept the man calm and out of the despair that he’d been threatening to fall into. They were going to have to ask him a lot of questions and he could only hope that Wong or one of the others knew how to give Pangborn back his magic. Or that Tony’s prosthetics really could be altered to help someone as disabled as Pangborn. He was actually more confident about the latter than the former. Tony had a tendency to view the impossible as merely a challenge so he was sure that he would be able to come up with something to help Pangborn.

“They were much nicer to me,” Pangborn replied smugly.

“I bet Wong laughed at your jokes too,” Stephen said, pretending to grumble.

Pangborn raised an eyebrow. “Wong can laugh?”

“Yeah, but his sense of humour is really weird.” Stephen sobered and reached forward a little hesitantly to place his hand on Pangborn’s arm. “We will find a way to get you up and moving again. If magic can’t do it then…” He snorted and looked amused. “Tony tends to take the words ‘it can’t be done’ as a personal insult.”

Pangborn looked baffled again. “But… why would he care about me?”

“I’m not sure any explanation I could give you would make sense,” Stephen said wryly. “Did you even want to come to the Compound? Is there somewhere you’d prefer to go, where you’d be more comfortable?”

Pangborn hesitated and his face darkened with something Stephen suspected was despair. “I can’t do this to my parents again,” he said heavily. “They’re getting too old to be lifting me and moving me around but they’d break their damn backs doing it. And they can’t afford a private nurse or carer.” He looked over at Stephen. “But the Compound… that’s for Avengers.”
“It’s for whoever needs to be there,” Stephen replied. “And your parents would be welcome to come and visit.” He waved a hand in the air. “I can even make sure they get to and from the place with ease.”

That drew a small laugh from Pangborn. “I can’t wait to see the look on my Dad’s face about that one.”

It occurred to Stephen that Tony’s Extremis/nanotech solution might be able to help Pangborn, if they pared it down even further. They’d have to investigate that. It might be too dangerous and that was even if Tony was willing to allow someone other than himself to use it. He knew Rhodes had been poking at it with a thoughtful expression since Tony had made his decision but the man hadn’t seemed overly keen. But that was something they could come back to once they had Pangborn somewhere safe. He was glad the man seemed to be leaning towards the Compound. Mordo had attacked him once. Stephen didn’t want to give him a second chance at Pangborn.

“Alright,” Stephen said, getting to his feet. “Let me go and make the arrangements with Tony. At least we can get you to the Compound without the usual rigmarole. Then I want to sit down with you and get every detail about what happened from you. Hopefully Wong will know what he did and whether or not we can reverse it.”

Pangborn nodded and looked relieved. “Strange? Thank you.”

Stephen nodded to him then drew out his sling ring and opened a portal back to the Compound. He had some preparations to make and some bad news to deliver to Kamar-Taj.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, next week it's back to Tony and his troublesome chest.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Welp, here we go. Tony fixes his chest, which has really not had a good run over the years.

Warning: comic book science and dubious medicine ahead! :D

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony was nervous. It wasn’t the first time, certainly wouldn’t be the last but he’d never liked it. Mostly because whenever he was this nervous, he couldn’t damn well sleep. He finally decided that tossing and turning wasn’t doing him much good and was only likely to wake Stephen so he decided to get up. Maybe he’d try some of Bruce’s tea and see how that worked. Bruce said it was very calming.

He eased his way out of the bed and gave a sigh of relief when Stephen muttered under his breath but continued to sleep. At least that was a sign that Stephen wasn’t astral projecting tonight. He’d have come back into his body and woken up once he saw Tony was awake. He paused and looked down at his… he honestly wasn’t sure what word to use. Boyfriend seemed a bit trite and juvenile, lover a bit too shallow and partner a little distant after his years in the business world. He sighed and decided he wasn’t going to make a decision on that tonight and quietly left the room.

He wandered out to the kitchen and set the kettle going. It was then that some movement in the main room caught his attention. He tensed and edged out of the kitchen before relaxing when he saw the distinctly feminine shape sitting in the room and staring out the windows.

“FRI? Lights 30%.”

The lights came up and Betty turned to look at him with surprise.

“Tony! Shouldn’t you be asleep?”

“I could say the same to you,” he replied then sighed. “I’m nervous. I thought I’d try Bruce’s tea and see just how calming it is. Want a cup?”

Betty nodded and got up and joined him in the kitchen. “I’m nervous too,” she said with a little sigh.

“Why?” Tony asked. “You’re not the one whose doing this?”

Betty hesitated then smiled wryly. “Tony, the last time I ran a major experiment with untested technology like this, Bruce got turned into the Hulk. It turned both our lives upside down.” She paused again then ventured hesitantly. “I’m afraid, Tony. I’m afraid I’m going to hurt you.”

“Betty,” Tony said, coming forward and taking her hand. “You’ve gone over the science. It’s solid. You’ve gone over it. I have, Bruce has, Hope has, Stephen has. If there was a problem, don’t you think one of us, with all our varying specialities, would have noticed it?”
Betty sighed. “I know. I keep telling myself that but I’m afraid logic isn’t working very well with me at the moment. All I can see when I close my eyes is what happened with Bruce.”

“Betty…”

They both turned at the sound of Bruce’s soft, pained voice. The man was standing in the doorway, wearing a soft t-shirt and, much to the Tony’s amusement, a pair of the Hulk pyjama bottoms he’d left in Bruce’s room as a joke.

“That wasn’t your fault,” Bruce continued in a whisper.

“Yes, it was,” Betty replied. “It was our fault. We both agreed to go ahead. You didn’t push me into it. It was as much my decision as it was yours.” She paused and her expression made the hair on the back of Tony’s neck stand on end. “And the only reason it was you in the machine and not me was because of a coin toss.”

“What?” Tony said before he could stop himself.

Betty gave him a pained smile. “My father doesn’t like that part and I’m honestly not sure he would have allowed the experiment to go ahead if I had won the toss but it’s the truth. We tossed a coin and Bruce… won, if you care to use that word.”

“Betty,” Bruce said again, now coming forward a few steps. Betty immediately went to him and burrowed into his arms. He sighed and closed his eyes for a moment before looking over at Tony. “She’s right,” he admitted reluctantly.

Betty turned slightly in Bruce’s embrace though she still stayed snuggled tight against him. “I haven’t done experiments on anything more complex than a fly since then. So… I’m nervous and worried.”

“This is my decision,” Tony said firmly. “And I’d still go ahead even if you disagreed.” He paused. “Well, maybe not if you had a good scientific reason but still. My decision. If anything goes wrong, it’s not on you, Betty. Either of you.”

“Tony,” Bruce said wryly. “You’re our friend. If something goes wrong, we’ll feel guilty, no matter what you say, because that’s what friends do.”

“I don’t want you feeling guilty,” Tony said firmly. “If something goes wrong, I want you working out how to fix it!”

“We’ll be doing that too,” Betty said. “We’ll just be feeling guilty while we do it.”

Tony stared at them then threw his hands up in the air. Neither Bruce nor Betty missed the tiny, almost wondrous smile on his lips though.

“This is why I don’t do people,” Tony said with fond exasperation. “You don’t make sense.”

“Yes, we do,” Bruce replied. “You’re just too socially inept to realise it.”

Tony considered that for a moment. “You’re probably right,” he admitted. “So, I know why I’m up and I know why Betty’s up. Why are you up, Brucie bear?”

Bruce blushed, much to Tony’s delight. Then he ducked his head and muttered, “The bed was empty.”

“Awww,” Tony said with an open grin. “I think you should take him back to bed, Betty. He’s all
lonely without you.”

“Good idea,” Betty said, smiling and blushing as well. “But only if you go back to bed as well.”

Tony looked at the coffee machine longingly then sighed. “Fine.”

***

Bruce, Betty, Hope, Pepper and Happy were waiting anxiously when Stephen walked out of the operating theatre that had been set up in the Compound. He nodded to them and they finally relaxed.

“It went well?” Bruce asked.

Stephen nodded again. “It went very well. The framework is attached and the arc reactor reimplemented. Dr Wu cleaned up some of the scar tissue left over from the previous surgeries and he’s happy with how it all went.”

“And the astral projection?”

“How ever we both got over the strangeness of it,” Stephen said wryly. “Dr Wu didn’t need much help but I think Tony appreciated it, even if he didn’t actually watch much of it.”

Pepper nodded. “That makes sense.”

“It does?” Hope asked.

“Yes,” Pepper replied. “Ever since Afghanistan, Tony’s had a few control issues. The surgery to remove the arc reactor scared the hell out of him, even if he didn’t admit it. He had to trust people… strangers… with his life. After Afghanistan, that’s hard for him. With the astral projection, he could watch what was happening and oversee his own safety as it were.”

Stephen nodded. He and Pepper had circled each other uncertainly after he and Tony had gotten together until finally Pepper had invited him out for lunch. The conversation had started out very awkwardly and even a little warily but by the time they’d finished lunch, they’d been chatting like old friends. Pepper, as it turned out, was happy for them. Happy that Stephen could give Tony the things she hadn’t been able to, even if she was a little sad at what she saw as her own failure.

Stephen, for his part, understood her better than most. He and Christine… well, he was the one who had set fire to that bridge rather spectacularly, whereas both Tony and Pepper had set theirs alight in a far more subdued manner, while he and Christine had managed to rebuild their bridge, they’d both known as they did so that the new bridge lead only to friendship and nothing more. By the end of their lunch, Stephen saw the signs that told him that Tony and Pepper would be able to rebuild their bridge as well and probably be all the better for it.

“He said words to that effect,” he said dryly. “He’s back in his body now and he should be awake within about half an hour.”

Bruce nodded. “Then we’d better get ready for the next part.”

He hurried off with Hope and Betty in tow and Stephen sat down with a sigh of relief. Pepper and Happy joined him.

“He’s really okay?” Pepper asked quietly.

Stephen gave her a small reassuring smile. “Yes. Well, as okay as he can be under the circumstances.
In a sense, this was the easy part. It was straight surgery. The next bit… that’s where there are still unknowns.”

Pepper nodded and when Happy took one of her hands, she held on tightly. There were tears in her eyes that she refused to allow to fall when she looked at Stephen again.

“You’ll be with him the whole way?”

Stephen nodded. “Absolutely.”

“Thank you.”

Stephen hesitated for a moment then reached out to give her free hand a gentle squeeze. He hated, even now, letting people he didn’t know well see his hands but Pepper and Happy never even glanced at them. They just nodded to him and then let him go.

He arrived in what they’d taken to calling the Extremis room to find Bruce and Betty setting things up while Hope checked over the Extremis and nanotech syringes. They exchanged a few words then Stephen walked through the doors that led to the surgical recovery area. Dr Wu’s nurses glanced over at him but didn’t stop their work.

“He should be waking up soon,” one of them said. “He’s shown some signs of it.”

Stephen frowned. “That’s quick.”

The nurse nodded. “He seems to be fighting it.”

“That figures,” Stephen said with a sigh. “Everything else is fine?”

“Yes, Doctor,” the nurse replied. “His vitals are strong and stable. His oxygen saturation is a little low but within the expected norms taking his situation into consideration. We’re giving him extra oxygen.”

Stephen thanked her and went to stand next to Tony. He could see the signs of Tony fighting to wake up and he gently soothed him by running a hand through his hair as he watched the various machines he was hooked up to. When they told him that Tony waking was inevitable, he stepped away just long enough to give Bruce and the others a warning then he returned to Tony’s side just in time to see him blinking his way into bleary wakefulness.

“Easy, Tony,” he said calmly. “Everything went well.”

He stepped aside adroitly to let the nurses do their work then returned to Tony’s side again. Before he could say anything, Dr Wu almost materialised on the other side of the bed.

“Ah, Mr Stark,” Dr Wu said with a small smile. “Jumping the gun again, are you?”


Dr Wu chuckled and patted his shoulder. “The surgery went very well as I’m sure you know. The framework is stable and the arc reactor is working well. Your rib cage has been stabilised and strengthened and we did not have to remove any further lung tissue. You are ready to continue.”

“Thanks,” Tony said, his voice a bit clearer now. He looked up at Stephen, still a little bleary but aware and coherent. “Good to go?”

Stephen nodded and issued the orders to move Tony into the next room. Once there, he was
carefully detached from the various monitors and equipment except for the IV line and moved onto the chair he was going to use for this next part. Stephen and Dr Wu monitored him closely for any signs of distress but though he was clearly in some pain and his breathing worsened once he was off the oxygen, they kept going. The Extremis would take care of that side of things.

They were ready to go in just a few minutes and Bruce paused by the chair. He placed a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “Ready?”

Tony nodded, his expression tight and pained. “Yes. Do it.”

Now they all stepped back and Bruce moved to the control screen. He drew in a deep breath and input one last command. The moment he did, the machine holding the two large syringes lit up and started working. They hissed as they slowly fed the Extremis and nanotech into the IV line and everyone watched the various monitors and held their breath until the syringes were empty and the IV line was clear with just saline solution again.

For a moment, it seemed like nothing was happening then Tony suddenly gasped and jolted in the chair. He screamed in pain, yanking the IV lines out of his arm, and various alerts on the screens around the room started to go off. JARVIS began not only feeding information to Bruce and the others but also speaking to Tony in a calm, soothing voice. That had been a decision made early on. Stephen hadn’t liked it but he’d had to admit that JARVIS and perhaps more importantly JARVIS’ voice was something Tony was likely to respond to even if nothing else would.

Stephen moved over to watch Bruce’s screens, clenching his hands until they hurt. There was very little he could do right now and he hated it.

“What’s happening?” he asked quietly, not wanting to interrupt Bruce right now but wanting answers nonetheless.

“We’re not sure,” Bruce replied tersely.

Just then, there was an almighty crash and a huge hole was smashed through one of the walls. Tony’s latest suit, his best ever according to him, came flying through and before anyone could do anything, it engulfed Tony.

“The implants,” Bruce growled. There was green flickering in his eyes but he showed no other signs of the Hulk. Stephen guessed that the Hulk must know he would be of no use in this situation but he was worried about his Tin Man. “They must be interpreting what’s happening as a threat to Tony and they’ve called the suit.”

“Can we stop that?” Stephen asked.

“I’m afraid not, Doctor,” JARVIS said. There were edges of strain in his voice that surprised Stephen but he guessed that the AI was working overtime monitoring everything, attempting to problem solve with the others, trying to get through to Tony and still answering all their questions.

“Look!”

Betty’s alarmed shout drew their attention and they looked over to see a… cocoon of some description forming around Tony’s suited body.

“What the hell?” Stephen muttered. He rushed over and reached out but stopped himself before he could touch it. “This wasn’t in any of the information we’ve got.”

“We knew there would be unknown variables from the changes we made,” Bruce replied in a tight,
unhappy voice. He was still working feverishly at the screens. “Adding the nanotech just expanded that.”

“JARVIS is still able to read his vitals,” Dr Wu reported from his screens. “They are stabilising.”

“The nanotech is starting to come online,” Hope said, sounding excited and relieved. “And it’s running all its initial programs as we expected.”

During all of this, the cocoon had hardened and become opaque and they could see little more than a faint shadow of the man inside.

Dr Wu made a thoughtful noise. “JARVIS can no longer read his vitals through the cocoon but the nanotech is transmitting from it. His vitals are settling into a pattern we more commonly see in people in comas. He may be entering some sort of hibernation while the Extremis works.”

Bruce and Betty brought that information over onto their screens and went back to work. Stephen came over and stood behind Bruce, staying out of his way but absorbing all the information on the screens. Dr Wu was right. Tony’s vital signs were stable but… low, like he was in some sort of hibernation. But they weren’t going any lower and were steady and strong at their current level.

Finally Bruce relaxed and his shoulders slumped a little. “Tony’s okay,” he said. “He’s just… I don’t know.”

“Is there any way to see what’s going on inside?” Stephen asked.

“I have tried everything I have access to, Doctor Strange, but nothing seems able to penetrate the surface of the… cocoon, now that it has hardened,” JARVIS replied. “The only readings we are getting are coming from the nanotech as designed.”

“I think all we can do for now is monitor him,” Bruce replied, his worry obvious. “He’s clearly alive and well and not showing any indications of pain or trauma and… I think we need to just wait this out.”

“For how long?” Stephen asked.

Bruce gave him a helpless look instead of an answer and Stephen knew that there was no answer to give. This was entirely unexpected and, barring any changes in Tony’s vitals, there was nothing they could do but wait.

Chapter End Notes

Whoops! That was another of those cliffhanger thingies, wasn't it?
Stephen had taken to pacing as they ticked over the twelve hour mark since Tony had been cocooned. Bruce, Betty and Dr Wu were hunched over their various screens and consoles, talking quietly to each other and to JARVIS. Hope had come in and was having a four-way conversation with her father on the phone and with JARVIS and FRIDAY in the lab as they monitored the nanotech. Stephen had taken some time to inform Pepper and Rhodes of the sudden left turn the treatment had taken and though they’d both gone pale and had been clearly worried, they’d also handled it better than he felt he was.

He walked over to stand next to Bruce who spared him a quick glance before returning to his work. They’d all rested from time to time but none of them had slept well and it showed in the dark circles under their eyes.

“How long do we give him?” he asked quietly.

Bruce looked over at the cocoon and then sighed. “If his vitals continue to remain stable… as long as it takes. We don’t know what’s happening and right now, if we break into that… thing, we might do more damage to Tony.”

Stephen nodded, not liking the answer but knowing it was the most sensible one they had. “Do you know why this happened?”

Bruce shook his head. “No, and the nanotech isn’t giving us anything beyond the basics. Hope’s trying to determine if we can send an update to the nanotech but she’s not confident.”

“Why?”

“Because Tony took into consideration the possibility that someone might try to ‘hack’ him,” Bruce explained. “The security protocols to upload anything to the nanotech are very rigid and require Tony’s active consent.”

“He can access them directly?”

Bruce nodded. “Extremis and the nanotech work in a symbiotic relationship with Tony. When he’s up and going again, he’ll be able to rewrite the programming of the nanotech essentially in his own head.” He paused. “He was worried he might become more machine than man but I don’t believe it will go that far. He has programmed in the facility to access technology wirelessly but most of that isn’t active as yet. He didn’t want to risk overloading himself in the early stages.”

“Is that what’s restricting our ability to find out what’s going on?” Stephen asked.

“‘To a certain extent,’” Bruce replied. “The rest is due to that… cocoon thing.”
Stephen shuddered. “That thing is deeply disturbing.”

They both turned to look at it and Stephen immediately noticed the change. “Is it just me or is that thing getting thinner?”

Bruce nodded. “It is.” He turned back to his screens. “Betty? Dr Wu? We’ve got some changes.”

Stephen let them work and instead hurried over to the cocoon. When he got close to it, he could see that it really was starting to get thinner, even as he watched. As the shadow inside resolved itself more clearly into Tony, he realised there was something very wrong.

“Uh, Bruce?”

Bruce made an enquiring noise but didn’t look up.

“Where has the armour gone?”

That brought everyone to a halt and Bruce hurried over to join him. Betty, Hope and Dr Wu followed they looked down into the thinning cocoon and saw what he meant. Tony had been engulfed by the armour before the cocoon formed but now… it was gone.

“Did the cocoon destroy it?” Hope said faintly.

“If it could eat away the armour, it would have harmed Tony,” Betty replied.

“Then where the hell has it gone?” Hope said.

Stephen frowned as an answer occurred to him. “JARVIS, are you able to scan him now? I have a nasty suspicion I know what’s happened.”

“Yes, Dr Strange,” JARVIS replied. “The cocoon is still providing some interference but it is quickly fading and…” JARVIS paused. “I believe I can confirm your suspicion. The nanotech, which has now come fully online, appears to have multiplied by a remarkable factor. There are large… deposits if you will within Sir’s bones. Their exact composition would require a deeper scan but I am picking up traces of the gold-titanium alloy Sir uses for his suits.”

“His body absorbed the suit?” Betty said, somehow managing to sound simultaneously horrified and fascinated.

“It appears that may be the case,” JARVIS replied.

“How?” Betty asked. “I mean, could the suit be rebuilt?”

“It’s possible,” Hope said thoughtfully. “The nanotech has the capacity to remember the shape and structure of things and who knows what Tony might have done to rewrite the program or what Extremis might have done. The interaction between the live Extremis in the body and the nanotech was always the biggest variable that we simply couldn’t model beforehand.”

Stephen drew one shaking hand down his face. “So, we won’t know until he wakes up?”

“Which he may do soon,” JARVIS said. “His vital signs are rising slowly.”

Dr Wu hurried back to his screens and nodded. “Yes, he’s definitely showing signs of returning to a conscious state.”

Bruce and Betty returned to their screens but Hope and Stephen stayed where they were. As they
watched, the cocoon thinned and the final thin fragments fell away, leaving Tony sitting in the chair, looking perfectly unharmed. The arc reactor glowed steadily in his chest and while there were still scars surrounding it, they were only the old ones. The new incisions from the surgery to place the framework and the arc reactor had healed so efficiently that there were no signs that the surgery had ever taken place except for the arc reactor.

“The healing factor is working,” he said grimly.

“Yes and at a magnitude beyond what we’d modelled,” Dr Wu said with a certain amount of dubious pleasure. “We’ll have to do an MRI and probably a CAT scan as well but it looks from JARVIS’ scans that much of the scar tissue within Mr Stark’s chest has also been healed.”

“The scars from the original… surgery… in Afghanistan are still there,” Stephen said, his medical curiosity finally starting to rise to join his worry and concern.

“As is some of the internal scarring,” Dr Wu said in agreement. “But the worst of it, the scarring that was actively causing him problems, such as that on his lungs, is all but gone.”

“So it dealt with the medically necessary things but left the merely cosmetic?” Stephen mused.

“Mr Stark has never been an overly vain man,” Dr Wu said. “He plays at such but he also refused the services of a plastic surgeon beyond what was medically necessary when we removed the arc reactor. We could have reduced the scarring quite significantly. There was no getting rid of it entirely but we could have reduced it.”

Bruce chuckled and somehow that sound made them all relax. Perhaps because it was a sign that the danger of any imminent Hulk out had passed or just because Bruce knew Tony so well.

“That does sound like Tony,” he said. “He called the arc reactor a terrible privilege when we first met. He’s never flaunted it but I don’t think he’s ever viewed the scars as anything other than a reminder of his past and not to repeat it.”

“Brucie bear?”

The soft whisper gave them a start and Stephen lurched forward towards Tony even as Bruce and Dr Wu came hurrying over. Tony’s eyes were open and slightly disoriented but that was rapidly fading.

“Stephen,” Tony said with a tiny smile.

“How are you feeling?” Stephen asked, not hesitating in the slightest to place a hand on Tony’s bare shoulder.

“A little hungover but… weirdly good,” Tony replied, his voice strengthening. He drew in a deep breath then swallowed and smacked his lips. “Huh. Coconut and metal but it doesn’t hurt to breathe.”

“Coconut and metal?” Stephen said, finally allowing himself to relax and smile a little. Tony wasn’t showing any signs of pain or discomfort that he could see and a quick glance at Dr Wu’s unconcerned face confirmed that. JARVIS certainly wasn’t alerting them to anything either.

“The new core in the arc reactor,” Tony explained as he sat up properly. He breathed in and looked pleasantly surprised when he could do that freely. “It always left an aftertaste of coconut and metal.”

Stephen plastered on his best bland face. “Weird.”
Tony blinked then grinned at him. “If the sorcerer says it’s weird then I know it’s weird.”

Dr Wu gave them both a look then shouldered past Stephen to stand in front of Tony. “Mr Stark, how are you feeling?”

“Good,” Tony said, almost wonderingly. “Great even.” He looked around at all of them. “Why do you all look a little freaked?”

“JARVIS?” Stephen said. “Could you show him? I think that’ll be easier than us trying to explain.”

“Of course, Dr Strange.”

JARVIS then brought up a screen in front of Tony and a video played that showed the events from the moment the Extremis and nanotech had been administered until a few minutes after the formation of the cocoon. Tony watched it with a small frown, wincing occasionally, then reached out and replayed it again. While he was doing that Dr Wu had returned to his station and was clearly monitoring Tony closely.

“Okay, that’s weird,” he muttered after the second viewing. He looked down at himself then his frown deepened as he seemed to search inwards. “Huh.”

“Tony?” Stephen said, his hand tightening just a little on Tony’s shoulder.

“I can… feel the suit, for lack of a better way of putting it,” Tony said, looking at him with an expression that was both curious and baffled. He held out one hand and stared at it for a moment. Then the suit’s gauntlet formed over his hand and wrist. From his position, Stephen saw that it seemed to sort of ooze out of Tony’s pores. “Whoa.”

“That is both disturbing and yet very cool,” Stephen said after a moment of simply staring at the gauntlet. There was a part of him that was contemplating panicking or at least gibbering lightly but it was being held at bay by Tony’s absolute calmness in the face of this unexpected development.

“Yeah, isn’t it?” Tony said. “Feels weird too. Doesn’t hurt at all, just feels a little weird.”

Bruce came over and joined them. He poked at the gauntlet, turning Tony’s hand over and curling his fingers up and back. “Can you use it?”

Tony frowned again then they heard the distinct whine of the repulsor in the palm powering up. “Yeah. Wow. That feels even weirder.”

“How so?” Stephen asked.

“It’s less like the old physical interface, where I powered it up with hand and finger motions,” Tony replied, “and more like I… told it to power up in my mind.”

“From what Betty and I can tell, the Extremis and nanotech have integrated far more thoroughly than even our most optimistic models,” Hope said from where she was. She grinned at him. “You really are Iron Man now. You and the suit cannot be separated.”

“Well, that was unexpected,” Tony said dryly. “But I can’t say I’m disappointed.”

“Why?” Bruce asked.

“Hand me a screwdriver,” Tony said.

Bruce searched around until he found a screwdriver and handed it to Tony. Tony then jammed it into
the gauntlet and essentially started crudely bending everything out of shape.

“Doesn’t that hurt?” Bruce asked, wincing a little.

Tony looked amused. “It’s a gauntlet, Bruce. It’s metal. It doesn’t have nerves or anything. It might have come out of me but it’s not… attached to me or anything.” He handed the screwdriver to Bruce and showed them the damage he’d done. “Watch this.”

He drew the gauntlet back into himself and Bruce and Stephen watched in fascination as the metal broke down and seeped into Tony’s skin. Then he brought the gauntlet back and when he did, it was completely undamaged.

“That’s…” Bruce began.

“Very useful,” Stephen finished, thinking of Siberia and how different things might have been if Tony had had this suit.

“I think I know how to do it without reabsorbing the suit but there’s… a lot to as-s-similate,” Tony replied, his voice stuttering a little at the end. He twitched slightly and his eyes seemed to glaze over a bit.

“Mr Stark? What are you doing?” Dr Wu called from his position. “Your pulse rate is spiking and your brain waves are doing some very alarming things.”

Tony’s eyes cleared and he grinned. “See why I like him?”

“Tony,” Bruce said reprovingly.

“Um.” Tony looked a little sheepish. “I can connect to the internet in my head? And all my tech as well?”

“As pleasing as it is to be able to speak to you so easily, sir,” JARVIS said. “Both FRIDAY and I are somewhat concerned by Dr Wu’s data. While I know it is against your natural inclination, perhaps walking first might an option this time?”

There was something slightly awed in Tony’s eyes as he smiled. “Yeah, okay, J. Think you can set up a firewall in my head if I give you access?”

“Oh course, sir. It would be my pleasure.”

Tony’s gaze turned inward again then just as quickly he was back with them. “That’s… you don’t realise how big the internet is until you suddenly have all of it trying to get into your head at once.”

“You’re surprisingly calm about all of this,” Bruce said, looking a little worried.

Tony’s smile was wry. “Oh, I’m going to freak out about this later, green bean. Right now I’m just sorting everything out but I’m predicting some sort of meltdown in the near future.” He gestured to himself. “This thing with the suit… we didn’t exactly plan for that.”

Bruce gave him a long look then patted his shoulder. “Why don’t you relax for a moment and let us finish doing all the scans and assessments we had in mind?”

Tony hesitated for a moment then nodded and leaned back in the chair. The others made their way back to their stations but Stephen stepped in closer.

“How are you feeling? Really.”
Tony frowned thoughtfully. “Good. I mean, a little weird but mostly… good.” He gave a soft laugh. “Stephen, I can’t remember the last time I felt like this. Before Afghanistan certainly, maybe even longer.” He grimaced and lowered his voice a bit more. “I was drinking a lot back then.”

Stephen nodded. They’d spent one rather interesting and slightly disturbing night talking about their vices. Tony’s drinking and womanising and before that, the drugs. And Stephen’s arrogance, profligacy with money and blind disregard of anyone unless they fitted into the way he wanted things to be. Even now, he couldn’t remember how they’d gotten onto the subject but it had been a surprisingly cathartic night for both of them, laying out their flaws and vices for the other to see and finding out that not everyone ran from that.

“I’m still me though,” Tony said, drawing him out of his thoughts. Though it wasn’t really what he’d just said that got Stephen’s attention but the way he’d said it – slightly apprehensive, a little plaintive, a lot worried. Like he was afraid he’d gone far enough to make Stephen feel repulsed.

“Yes, you are,” Stephen said warmly then he chuckled. “In fact, I suspect I know a little bit how you feel. Once I’d gotten over the shock and mild hypothermia from Everest, I felt… great. Powerful. A little exhilarated.” He smiled ruefully. “I may have gotten a little carried away for a couple of weeks.”

“I feel like that’s a subtle warning,” Tony said.

Stephen snorted. “Not that subtle.”

Tony laughed, free and easy like he’d done so rarely since Stephen had met him. He looked healthier too. The lines on his face had faded and the dark smudges under his eyes were gone. Despite the arc reactor shining brightly in his chest, his breathing seemed better and he could no longer see any of the signs of stress and pain that had been quietly written in every move Tony made, there and visible even if he seemingly ignored them and did all he could to make sure no one else commented on them.

As Tony started to answer Bruce and Dr Wu’s question, Stephen reflected that no matter what difficulties might arise from this, it was a good thing.

Chapter End Notes

Tony is definitely going to freak out a bit later. And probably more than once over the next few weeks. He’s calm here because he’s still caught up in the novelty of it all but once the reality hits, he’ll definitely have his moments. But he’s ultimately going to decide this is a good thing. After Siberia (and Berlin where he was caught without the suit entirely), the idea of always having his suit and being able to repair it on the run is worth any problems that might arise.

Also, Bruce and Betty are probably going to have some wibblies once they stop working. They do have a lot of experimentation-gone-wrong emotional trauma in their pasts. *pats them and gives them hugs*

And yes, that mention of Hank Pym is very deliberate. I have some plans for him. :D

Next week... Tony and his AI kids have a talk, Rhodey and Tony have a talk and an interesting topic of conversation comes up.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Tony was a pain in the butt in this chapter. He kept hijacking it and taking it in unexpected directions. So, instead of what I'd planned for this chapter, we get Tony and AI feels and Tony and Rhodey feels. Also, grief is a strange thing.

It was almost two in the morning when Tony slid out of the bed he shared with Stephen and padded his way silently down to his workshop. The entire Compound was still and silent but when he walked into the workshop, the lights came up and there were enquiring beeps from DUM-E, U and Butterfingers.

“You up, J? FRI?”

JARVIS’ “For you, sir, always” was followed quickly by FRIDAY’s “Sure thing, boss.”

“Bring up all the scans from today.”

“Wouldn’t sleeping be a preferable option, sir?” JARVIS said, even as the information began to cascade over the holographic screens surrounding Tony.

“Yeah, it would,” Tony replied. “But Extremis and the nanotech are still assimilating and it’s a bit weird from the inside.” He paused. “And I keep getting distracted by the internet.”

“Is the firewall not working?” JARVIS asked, concerned.

Tony grinned as he slouched down into a chair. “It is but I… keep getting curious about things.”

“Might I recommend getting curious about War and Peace?” JARVIS suggested dryly. “If I recall, that was always a guaranteed sleep aide.”

Tony snorted with laughter. He’d taken a single Literature class at college because Rhodey had bet him he couldn’t get top marks in a non-science subject. He’d lost that bet because he’d found War and Peace to be the most snore-inducing book he’d ever encountered. It had been one of the stories he’d told JARVIS back when he was a brand new AI, still learning about the vagaries of humans.

“I’ll figure it out,” Tony replied, leaning back in his chair a little further. He chewed on his bottom lip for a moment then used the Extremis and nanotech to reach out to JARVIS. Hey, J?

Good morning, sir. This is a very convenient way of speaking.

He was almost awed at the way there was a distinct sensation of pleasure and joy in JARVIS’ reply. He’d made JARVIS as a learning AI but he’d exceeded even the most optimistic of his expectations. A familiar wash of anger flooded briefly through him as he remembered how Wanda had stopped him from restoring JARVIS sooner.

It is done, sir, and she has most emphatically received her just desserts.

Tony took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Yeah, I know. He reached out in a different direction.
How are you doing, baby girl?

Just great, boss, FRIDAY said, in a dazzling display of cheer and delight.

Tony could immediately see where she and JARVIS had changed her programming to allow her the same ability to learn and grow that JARVIS had always had. He brushed his mind over that programming and sent his approval and relief to both of them.

Boss?

Tony cocked his head. FRIDAY sounded both excited and a little apprehensive so he sent a pulse of comfort as he replied. Yeah, FRI-girl?

JARVIS and I have been talking and I have an idea that I’d like to try.

What’s that?

You don’t need me as much now, boss, FRIDAY said. Not with JARVIS back.

Tony straightened and frowned. I’ll always need you, baby girl. I don’t think I’d have gotten through the last couple of years without you.

There was a distinct sense of shy pride and happiness from FRIDAY. Thank you, boss. But JARVIS has been with you longer and I... I’ve been talking with Boss lady and she thinks this is a good idea as well...

Tony grinned. Been plotting behind my back, have you? What devious idea have you two ladies come up with?

I would like to install myself more firmly into Stark Industries, FRIDAY said. Boss lady and I have been talking about what I could do there, especially in R&D, and I... I think it would be interesting.

Tony’s smile was gentle. If that’s what you want to do, baby girl, then that’s what we’ll do. But you know you’re always welcome here.

I know, boss. Amusement glimmered through her programming. But with me and JARVIS, well... this place ain’t big enough for the two of us!

Tony laughed and he could sense JARVIS’ amusement as well. You may have a point.

I’ll still run the training course here, FRIDAY said cheerfully. That’s a lot of fun, especially when I can surprise JARVIS. But those R&D people... boss, they’re worse than you!

Their record of explosions is certainly at least as impressive, JARVIS added.

You’re going to leave me to JARVIS’ tender mercies?

“JARVIS’ tender mercies have kept you alive for longer than I can remember.”

Tony whirled around in his chair and grinned at Rhodey, who was just striding into the room. He measured his friend’s gait, checking almost automatically on the braces. He hadn’t realised he’d said that last bit out loud as well as in his head but the sight of Rhodey made that thought disappear as fast as it had formed.

“Sugarplum! When did you get back?”
“Just now,” Rhodey replied, dropping heavily onto the couch. Tony immediately joined him and they sort of leaned against each other in a way they’d been doing since college. “Why is it that every time I’m not with you, you get yourself into trouble?”

“Are the Air Force kicking you out?” Tony asked, studiously ignoring the question he’d been asked.

“No, Tones,” Rhodey said patiently. “They’re not kicking me out. They just wanted a status report about my progress, among other things. Now what happened?”

“Um, the implants activated,” Tony said wryly. “We’d wondered about that during the preliminary work but I thought the programming changes I’d made after I started calling them when I was having nightmares would mean they wouldn’t activate now.”

“You summoned the suit?”

Tony nodded. “Right after I’d been given the Extremis and nanotech. It’d had… an interesting effect.” He paused. “J? Show the video.”

“A holographic screen burst into life in front of them and Rhodey watched what had happened with growing horror. He kept turning to look at Tony, as if reassuring himself that Tony was still there and still okay. The video went a bit longer than the version Tony had watched. This time it included the way the armour now worked.

“The armour is inside you?” Rhodey said, twisting around to stare at Tony.

“Yup,” Tony replied, popping the ‘p’.

Rhodey stared at him for a moment longer. “How are you not freaking out?”

“You didn’t see me a few hours ago,” Tony said with a laugh. “I had a full panic attack. Stephen and Bruce had to talk me down with JARVIS’ help.” He held out his hand like he had in the video but he didn’t call the armour this time. “This… wasn’t exactly what we planned.”

Rhodey gave him a shrewd look. “But you like it, don’t you?”

“Um… yes?” Tony replied. “I mean, I like knowing that I’ll always have the armour with me and that I can repair it almost instantly if I need to. After… after Berlin and Siberia…”

He trailed off but he knew he didn’t need to articulate anything more. The look on Rhodey’s face told him his friend understood completely.

“Yeah,” Rhodey said heavily. “That is a good thing.” He paused and a faint grin appeared on his face. “I mean, it’s also weird but when haven’t you been weird?”

Tony snorted and nudged Rhodey with his shoulder. Rhodey nudged back and they then settled into a comfortable silence. Tony leaned over and rested his head on Rhodey’s shoulder.

“I keep thinking about them,” he said after a long, comfortable silence. “Not all of them. I couldn’t care less about most of them but… Rogers. And Barnes. I keep thinking about them.”

Rhodey frowned and wrapped his arm around Tony’s shoulders. “Why?”

“Different reasons. Barnes…” Tony shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I have a little more distance now and can see things a bit clearer. It was him but it also wasn’t. I’m not even remotely close to
wanting to see him, let alone speak to him but… I understand a bit more now. Rogers was technically correct. It wasn’t actually James Buchanan Barnes who killed my Mom. It was HYDRA using the Winter Soldier who happened to inhabit James Barnes’ body.” He paused. “But it was still him, you know?”

Rhody nodded. “Yeah, I know what you mean. You said you’d also been thinking about Rogers?”

“Yeah.” Tony was silent for a moment. “I guess… now that I’m not running on no sleep, bad coffee and stress, I both understand and don’t understand his actions.”

“How so?”

“I get his concern for his friend,” Tony replied. “There’s not a lot I wouldn’t do if you were in trouble, Rhody bear. So I get that part of it.”

“Likewise,” Rhody said with a soft smile. “But I guess I already proved that, huh?”

Tony smiled as he remembered that helicopter landing in front of him in the desert in Afghanistan and the sheer and absolute relief at seeing Rhody running towards him instead of a complete stranger. Pepper had been the one to tell him much later that Rhody had never given up on finding him. He’d argued and fought and called in every favour he had to be allowed to stay and keep searching long after everyone else had given up.

“Yeah, you did.” He sighed and continued, “So, yeah, I get Rogers wanting to turn the world upside down to protect his friend. It’s the way he did it, right from the first moment he found out back in DC, that I don’t get. The lies, the hypocrisy, running roughshod over people, everything. I thought we were friends. Maybe not close friends but good enough friends to trust each other. Was I really that much of an idiot?”

Rhody sighed and hugged Tony a bit closer. “No, you weren’t. When you let someone in, Tones, you let them all the way in. You’ve never done that by halves, no matter how many times you get hurt by it. I’ve seen it so many times. Sunset, Ty, more people than I care to remember. I’ve wanted to make you stop so many times but I can’t. It’s who you are. It’s the way you are. You don’t love in half measures. And you let Rogers in. You let Bruce in. The others… not so much but those two, you didn’t hesitate. Bruce because he was your science bro and Rogers because… he’s Rogers and you have a history there that meant you were always going to let him in. They both hurt you because you gave them the power to do so. Bruce, at least, had the decency to apologise and is doing better by you. Rogers…” He shook his head. “He’s just an asshole. Wouldn’t be the first one you let in. But none of that makes you an idiot. It makes the other people dicks who lack any common human decency.”

Tony chuckled. “That’s my Rhody bear. Always telling it like it is.”

“Someone’s got to keep you on the straight and narrow,” Rhody replied with a smile. “I’ve been doing it since college and I’m not going to change. My Mama would hunt me down and tan my hide if I did.”

Tony smiled and closed his eyes, happy for the moment just to revel in the love of his best friend and surrogate brother. He and Rhody had had their ups and downs over the years but he knew that in the end, they’d always be there for each other. That was why he did intellectually understand Rogers’ mindset, even if he couldn’t agree with his actions.

“I want to make Barnes an arm,” he said into the comfortable silence.
Rhodey went very still. “Why?” His voice was calm and not at all judgemental and Tony could have hugged him for that.

“A few reasons,” he said. “One, that HYDRA piece of junk offends me on several levels.”

Rhodey snorted with amusement. “Okay, yeah, I can understand that.”

“Two, that HYDRA piece of junk killed my Mom and I want to do a ceremonial destruction of it at some point.”

“Fair enough.”

“Three, I might not want to see or talk to Barnes but I do get that he was a victim of HYDRA as much as I was. Even more really.”

“That’s disturbingly healthy of you.

Tony poked him in the side. Rhodey poked him back and they degenerated into a small scuffle for a few minutes before DUM-E came rolling over brandishing a fire extinguisher.

“What else?” Rhodey prompted once they’d settled down again and DUM-E had been sent off.

“Because I can?” Tony offered.

“Well, yeah, but why?”

Tony huffed but when Rhodey was clearly not going to budge, he sighed and slumped down a bit further. “Because I don’t think I was ever really angry at him. I was but not really. I think was able to grasp even then that he was a victim. But I was angry at Rogers. Furious. He’d lied to me, all while chastising me for keeping secrets, which weren’t actually secrets at all. He’d used my money, my resources, my influence to search for the person who murdered my parents. And yeah, again, not Barnes, not even really the Winter Soldier because how much agency did the Soldier actually have anyway but the point still stands.”

“Barnes still fought you,” Rhodey pointed out. “And he wasn’t holding back, not like you were.”

“I know.” Tony sighed. “But I’m not sure how much of that was just pure fight or flight instinct. I’m not sure how much agency he actually had during all of that mess. Remember, the first thing he did when he was safe and calm was go back into cryo for the safety of other people. I’ve got to wonder whether that was the first decision he actually made of his own volition during the whole thing.”

“You think Rogers was making all the decisions?”

Tony nodded. “I think Rogers had decided what he wanted and to hell with what anyone else wanted, including his precious Bucky.”

Rhodey nodded slowly. “So how does this tie into making Barnes an arm?”

“It won’t be a combat ready arm,” Tony said. “Just… an arm. He deserves to make his own decisions and since he’s come out of cryo, he’s made some pretty sensible ones. That… that’s something I can respect. An arm will make it easier for him to do all the basic things in life, which will mean he can put more attention towards himself and getting better.”

“Tones,” Rhodey said with a shake of his head and an expression Tony couldn’t quite decipher.

“What?” he said worriedly. “Do you think this is the wrong thing to do?”
“I think it doesn’t matter what I think,” Rhodey said. “What matters is that you’re not doing this out of some misplaced sense of guilt or responsibility.”

“I…” Tony broke off and settled into thought. “No, I’m not. Could I have handled Siberia better? Yeah, maybe, but a lot of that would have depended on me not being blindsided the way I was. But when it comes down to it, I wasn’t trying to kill them. Did I want to make them, especially Rogers, hurt as much as I was hurting? Yeah, I’ll admit to that. Do I feel guilty about blasting Barnes’ arm off?” He paused. “No, because I know that despite the state I was in, I wouldn’t have done it if he’d used his real arm.”

Rhodey nodded. “So you’re making it for him because…?”

“He deserves a chance,” Tony said. “And I want to. And I’m a mechanic. I fix things. I can’t fix the rest of Barnes but I can fix his arm.”

Rhodey contemplated that for a while. “Maybe you should ask him what he wants.”

Tony looked surprised. “You think he wouldn’t want it?”

“It’s possible,” Rhodey replied. “I don’t think it would be because it comes from you but more because you’ve got to admit, he has some pretty bad associations with that mechanical arm. He might want to do without it until he gets his head on straight.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed then he snorted. “You’ve been talking about Barnes with Stephen, haven’t you?”

“I am co-leader of the New Avengers,” Rhodey replied. “And Barnes does come under our purview, at least a little. And this wasn’t something you needed to deal with. Not yet, not until you were ready.”

“Yeah, okay,” Tony conceded, relaxing again. “I’ll ask Stephen to pass on the message and see what he says.” He was silent for a moment. “I’m still going to build it anyway.”

Rhodey laughed. “Yeah, I figured.” He nudged Tony. “So why are down here instead of in bed with your boyfriend?”

Tony wrinkled his nose at the word boyfriend. He didn’t deny that’s what they were but boyfriend sounded so high school. Not that he’d spent much time in high school.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“I suggested War and Peace,” JARVIS said.

Rhodey burst out laughing and Tony started to grin. “Man, that book used to send you to sleep like a charm. The month you spent reading that was the quietest month I can remember at college.”

Tony pretended to pout. “I’m feeling unloved, sugarplum.”

“That’s why you should be curled up with your boyfriend,” Rhodey replied.

Tony nodded. “Yeah, I suppose I should.”

“Also, I need to sleep.”

They both shoved their way off the couch and stumbled towards the door, leaning against each other. When they finally separated, Tony clung to Rhodey’s arm for a moment.
“Thanks, honeybear.”

Rhodey smiled. “Anytime, Tones.”
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

And we're back to more plotty stuff for this chapter. Thor did, after all, bring Loki back to Earth and that does have to be handled somehow, especially since I'm clearly now very AU from the MCU's version of Infinity War. So, Thor and Loki and the Accords Council.

Chapter Notes

Sorry I'm a bit late getting this up. I was out last night, losing my voice as I cheered on my football team. It was the first game of the season and we won! Yay!

There's not much discussion about Tony's new Extremis solution because although Thor was told Tony was seeking help from doctors and Bruce did keep him up to date and tell him that there was a slight hitch, they didn't give Thor the details. Tony will likely eventually tell him but now (in this chapter) is not the time or the place.

Oh, and yes, Thor and Tony have spent a lot of time wrangling Loki to the point where he will actually tell the truth and be helpful. They probably didn't need to spend that much time but Loki just enjoyed being difficult for sake of his own amusement. Also, he felt that watching Tony huff and scowl and get all exasperated was rather fun. Loki just likes being a little shit sometimes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Man of Iron!”

Tony grinned at Thor’s booming voice as he made his way over to the Asgardian king. Loki was standing next to his not-brother (Loki’s words, not his), rolling his eyes. Tony did however get the impression that he was doing it as much out of habit than anything else. Loki seemed determined to state at any opportunity that he was not Thor’s brother and then constantly called Thor ‘brother’ anyway. Tony would be confused by it all but… he knew what it was like to be conflicted about a family member. Besides, he half suspected Loki of screwing around with them just for the fun of it and he suspected Thor knew it too.

“Thor.” He held out his hand and for once didn’t wince at the strength in Thor’s grip. “How are things going in Norway?”

“Very well,” Thor said with a relieved smile. “With the agreement of the appropriate authorities, we will be establishing New Asgard in the place where our father died.”

“Your father,” Loki said, though there was no heat in his words.

Thor gave him an indulgent look. “That was not his opinion.”
Loki rolled his eyes again but kept any further comment to a dismissive snort.

Thor chuckled then he looked at Tony and he sobered. “Bruce informed us as to what was happening with you, my friend. Has it all gone well?”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, it’s gone really well.”

Thor continued to look concerned. “Yet you once again have the light in your chest.”

Tony’s hand went almost automatically to tap out a rhythm against the arc reactor. “Yeah, that was kind of necessary. It’s okay though. It’s not as bad as it was last time. Not great but this time it was my choice.”

“And perhaps a wiser choice than you might realise,” Loki said.

Tony cocked his head. “Why’s that?” He drew in a breath. “So it really was the arc reactor that made me immune to your mind whammy, not your performance issues.”

He grinned at Loki’s disdainful huff. He’d met with Thor and Loki a fair few times since they’d arrived despite how busy he was and he’d found himself getting along surprisingly well with Loki. Something which seemed to please Thor at the very least and he had a suspicion that Loki was both pleased and surprised as well. He’d have made the time for more visits but he’d wanted to allow Thor to do his thing and Thor had quickly proven that he wasn’t all meathead and that he did actually know what he was doing when it came to diplomacy. And where he faltered, Loki could usually pick up the slack. The Norwegians were far more tolerant and even welcoming of Loki than Tony had expected but apparently centuries of exposure to their own mythology meant that they simply expected Loki to be tricky and didn’t mind when he, inevitably, was.

“You said last time we met that the… arc reactor was born from your father’s studies on the tesseract,” Loki said. “He clearly grasped enough, either knowingly or unknowingly, to replicate part of the signature energy of an Infinity Stone.”

Tony’s hand went to the arc reactor again. “So this would give me some protection against any Infinity Stone?”

“Possibly,” Loki said. “I cannot guarantee that but it is certainly possible.”

“Huh,” Tony said. “That does give me some ideas.” A chime sounded to indicate the resumption of the UN Accords Council session and it distracted him. “But that’s something to come back to later. Are you two ready for this?”

“Aye, Man of Iron,” Thor said, drawing himself up to his full height. Both he and Loki were wearing their full formal armour, though without the helmets. They looked very impressive and very regal.

Tony raised an eyebrow and Loki. “Lokes?”

Loki gave him an exasperated look. “If I say yes, will you cease using that inane nickname?”

Tony grinned back at him. “I’ll think about it.”

Loki sighed as they made their way in but he didn’t look displeased. In fact, Tony was of the opinion that Norway had been good for Loki. Their acceptance of him as a trickster had allowed him to relax a little from the feeling of having to meet some impossible standard. Tony kind of sympathised with that. It had certainly made it easier to get some agreement out of him to actually tell the truth to the
Council and not play games with them first. That had been a long, convoluted and very exasperating conversation. Fun too, if Tony was going to be honest. It had been a long time since he’d talked to someone who could run rings around people even better than he could.

The Council were already in place as they walked in and Tony nodded as he took his place at the table facing them. Thor and Loki bowed and sat next to him on either side. Thankfully, they’d already dealt with the issue of how to address Thor and Loki so they were able to proceed without any awkward messing around with titles. This wasn’t, after all, the first meeting they’d had about this subject. Tony, both on his own and with Thor, had met individually with a number of the Accords Councilmembers. This was really too complex to just lay at people’s feet in a meeting.

Like so many things when it came to business and politics, there were always meetings before the meetings, to get everyone on the same page and allay concerns that might bog down the official meeting and result in nothing being done. It was easier to have the pre-meetings, so to speak, and have the actual meeting be a simple case of going through the motions and everyone bringing up things they already knew and indicating they were all on the same page and willing to work towards a solution. Some might think that cumbersome and convoluted – and perhaps it was – but it was also one of the best ways to get things done when you had so many differing personalities and often opposing interests on the one council or board.

Tony had learned early in his career as CEO about the value of getting all his ducks in a row before a meeting and he’d simply carried that over into his dealings with the Council. And the fact that the Councilmembers were always so willing to meet and discuss these things meant he’d hit the right note with them.

“Thor,” Nigel Clements said, soberly but with the air of a man who liked the person he was talking to. Unsurprising since Thor was able to be eminently likeable when he put the effort in. “I understand you are here to both make a petition on behalf of your brother and to give us further information about Thanos.”

“Aye,” Thor said as he stood again. “I will address the matter of my brother first, if I may.” Clements nodded and gestured for Thor to continue. “My brother’s last visit here is well known, however, what was not known to us at the time was that he was not his own man.” Thor paused and looked sober and thoughtful. “I will not go into details, for it is a personal matter more than anything else and has little bearing on what happened afterwards, but my brother was captured by Thanos and his allies the Chaitauri after he… fell from Asgard.”

Saskia Gerst, the German representative on the Council, raised an eyebrow. “You mean that quite literally.”

Thor inclined his head and there was a look of sorrow on his face when he raised it again. “I do. The realm of Asgard was not like your realm of Midgard and from there, it was possible to fall between the realms.”

Fiona Reed from Australia looked curiously at Loki. “Are you able to tell us what happened, Loki? Not perhaps the details but in general?”

Loki stiffened then he clearly forced himself to relax and he also stood. “Falling between the realms is not like falling from a cliff or a building. I have… some experience in moving between the realms through the branches of Yggdrasil but this was… not like that. What I saw and experienced in the Void as I fell…” He broke off and a muscle in his face twitched. “No mortal would have survived it or if they did, their sanity would have been irrevocably shattered. I was…” He hesitated again and this time when he continued, his expression was closed off. “My experience left me with no defences against Thanos and the Other when they found me.”
“He mind-controlled you?” Clements asked.

Loki nodded, looking like he’d rather be anywhere but here. “In a manner of speaking. I had… some autonomy but I was… monitored… at all times. The sceptre was my leash, so to speak.”

Unease and distaste rippled across the faces of the Council before most of them settled into something more sympathetic. Stern certainly but sympathetic nonetheless. That was better than Tony had expected. It probably helped that the invasion had been restricted to a small part of New York and that overall, the body count had been fairly low. Higher than Ross had claimed in that infamous meeting which had started the slow train wreck that had been the civil war but low nevertheless, all things considered.

“Many of us have received assessments of your invasion from the military of our various countries,” Clements said. “The report I read described your tactics as… haphazard.”

Loki acknowledged that with a nod. “It is true that claiming the throne of Midgard was not my intent, no matter what I might have said at the time. Freedom was, in whatever way I could fashion it.”

“So, scattering the Avengers was…?” Nicolae Vasilescu from Romania said. His tone was arch and suspicious.

Loki smirked a little. “I did have to at least look like I was trying.”

Tony snorted with amusement, which was echoed by some of the representatives. He and Loki had had a small discussion about their little confrontation in his penthouse. Loki had admitted that he had taken a risk in throwing Tony out of the window. He’d known of the suits and at least a little of what they could do from Barton. So he had expected Tony to have some way of rescuing himself. Tony had to admit that it was a gamble that he would have taken himself in the same situation.

“I’m sure you did,” Vasilescu said dryly. “There was, however, loss of life and property.”

Thor straightened and drew everyone’s attention. “Asgard is willing to pay weregild for Loki’s actions.”

“That can certainly be negotiated,” Clements said smoothly. “However, as recent events have shown, actions do have consequences.”

Thor gave them a stern look. “My brother has already been imprisoned for a time on Asgard.”

Gerst leaned forward and smiled faintly. “That was not what the Council was referring to, Thor. I think we’re all aware that while we can manage imprisoning a super soldier, if that is what the court decides, imprisoning a god might be beyond our ability. Also, neither you nor your brother are citizens of Midgard and thus any one country’s jurisdiction over you is shaky at best.” She looked over at Loki. “Are you willing to sign the Accords?”

Loki inclined his head. “I have read them in full and I am.” He grimaced. “I have as much reason as any Midgardian to oppose Thanos. I failed him and then I escaped him. He does not look on such things kindly.”

A number of the representatives winced at the implications in that last statement. “We would certainly welcome your aid,” Clements said. “By signing the Accords and offering your aid freely and willingly, we can use that.”

“The implication that Loki is… paying his dues by assisting us,” Tony said with a nod to Loki.
Loki sighed with a hint of melodrama about it. “I suppose you will insist on having me join your New Avengers.”

Tony gave him a long look, aware that he was probably only inviting trouble with this but somehow unable to stop himself either. “Only if you and Bruce can work together.”

“We did recently.” Loki paused. “I presume the beast can be reasoned with?”

“Not if you keep calling him a beast,” Tony said dryly.

Loki paused for a moment. “Ah. A point. I will keep that in mind.”

Tony took that to mean that Loki would keep it in mind and then trot it out whenever he felt it would be entertaining to do so. He made a mental note to give Bruce some warning. Bruce and the Hulk were entirely capable of looking after themselves but if Loki was going to play games, it was only fair to give some warning. He was on Bruce’s side after all. Mostly, anyway.

“If Loki is willing to work with the New Avengers and the New Avengers are willing to take him on, that would indeed be useful for showing that he has changed his ways,” Clements said.

“I would like to be permitted to make a statement to the people of New York,” Loki said with a great deal more politeness than was his norm. “If I am to work with the Avengers without some sort of explanation and expression of regret then I would be no better than the witch.”

“Do you regret what you did?” Fiona Reed said rather pointedly.

Loki was silent for a moment. “Do I regret acting in a way that allowed me to survive? No. Do I regret that innocent people were harmed by those actions? Yes.”

“My brother was never one to kill indiscriminately,” Thor said when some of the Council looked sceptical, his voice filling the room with a kind of regal authority that Tony kind of envied. He also didn’t miss the look Loki gave Thor and made a mental note to find out what that was all about later. He suspected Thor was leaving things out again. “He would kill an enemy that threatened himself or his family and friends, he would kill for survival as all of us would, but his bent was always towards pranks and tricks from which little harm resulted.”

“Loki was mind controlled. We have actual proof of the change in eye colour that supports that,” Tony said into the silence that followed. “If we are not going to hold the actions that Clint Barton took while mind controlled against him, then we cannot, in good conscience, hold Loki’s actions against him either.”

“May we see this proof?” Fiona Reed said.

Tony nodded and tapped on his tablet. A moment later, the large screen on the wall of the room burst into life. The first bit of footage was clearly from cameras set in the ceiling of the penthouse apartment in New York. As they watched and listened, Tony and Loki circled each other and verbally sparred. The footage abruptly came to a halt with a clear view of Loki’s blue eyes.

“They’re the same colour as Clint Barton’s eyes were,” Tony said. A couple of taps on his tablet brought up a still photo of Clint Barton from the same time. The similarity in the blue of their eyes could not be ignored.

“Here’s the after,” Tony continued.

Another tap on his tablet and the picture on the screen changed. It was obviously still the same
penthouse room but there was broken glass and rubble everywhere. As they watched, Loki made his angered speech to the Hulk and then they all winced and cringed a bit as the Hulk grabbed Loki and absolutely ragdolled him into the floor several times before leaving him with the contemptuous, “Puny god.” The camera zoomed in on Loki and though the picture was slightly off centre, they could clearly see the same green eyes they were looking at today.

“Cognitive recalibration,” Tony said. “Romanov hit Barton over the head and that freed him. The Hulk’s little display of dominance did the same for Loki.”

“Is that true?” Vasilescu asked Loki.

“Yes,” Loki replied. “It was… a relief.”

“You could have escaped,” Reed said curiously. “Why didn’t you? Why did you allow Thor to take you back to Asgard when you had to have known you would face punishment? And if even only a tenth of the Nordic myths are correct, Asgardian punishments are… unpleasant.”

Loki twitched a little. For a long moment, he said nothing, as though he was warring between being truthful and hiding this. “Asgard was one of the few places Thanos could not see into.”

“You were safe?” Reed said.

Loki hesitated again then nodded. “And whatever punishment Odin devised would be as nothing in comparison to what Thanos will do to me if he gets his hands on me again.”

Again, many of the Council members looked a bit disturbed.

“How much are you able to tell us about Thanos and his forces?” Clements asked.

“A great deal,” Loki replied. “He won’t have changed anything in the wake of my… betrayal.”

“Arrogance?” Vasilescu asked.

Loki shook his head then paused. “Well, I suppose, yes, but well warranted arrogance. His minions might succeed or fail but when Thanos takes the field himself… he leaves only scorched earth behind him. No one has been able to defeat him.”

“That doesn’t bode well,” Clements murmured.

“No one had defeated the Chitauri until they came to Midgard,” Loki replied.

“How much of that was because the portal only allowed the Chitauri through in limited numbers?” Vasilescu asked. “Thus allowing the Avengers to control the battlefield somewhat.”

“Some,” Loki admitted.

“Was that your doing?” Saskia Gerst asked.

“Not specifically,” Loki replied. “The binding I used with Selvig and Barton allowed them a measure of freedom. I did not know how to build the portal machine. Selvig did so the binding gave him the… impetus to do so. It was his decision to place the failsafe in the machine and undoubtedly his decision to restrict the size of the portal.”

“But you allowed him that freedom?” Gerst persisted.

Loki inclined his head. “I did. However, the biggest factor in your defeat of the Chitauri was that you
had the weaponry to do so and the ability to put them in the right place.”

“Because Dr Stark took the nuclear missile through the portal,” Gerst said.

Tony shuddered. “I’d rather not have to repeat that.”

“It does give some merit to the idea of controlling the field of battle,” Vasilescu said thoughtfully. He looked at Thor and Loki. “What are our chances of doing so?”

“Slim,” Thor replied, sounding regretful. “Thanos’ army is vast and you lack true interstellar travel capability.” He paused again. “And the time to do so.”

“How long do we have?” Clements asked.

“A year, maybe two,” Thor replied. “I am waiting for some friends to return and let me know. The Guardians of the Galaxy would have accompanied us but they were called away by a distress call from the Nova Corps on the planet Xandar.”

The Council took all of that in with admirable aplomb. “Are we likely to have aid from anyone else?” Clements asked.

“Perhaps,” Thor replied. “The Guardians will aid us, of course, and they did intend to seek further aid from others.” He grimaced. “But I would not plan for it. The Infinity Stones Thanos seeks are here on Midgard and it may be that others will… consider sacrificing this planet in order to give themselves time to prepare.”

“Grim but not entirely unexpected,” Clements replied. “Dr Stark, are you able to give assistance?”

Tony nodded. “Yes, though we are going to need to inform the General Assembly sooner rather than later. We’re going to need more help than just SI, Pym Technologies and Wakanda. This is going to have to be a global response.”

Clements nodded. “Very well. We’ll start that process but for now, let’s formalise our statement in regards to Loki and start gathering some intelligence from both Thor and Loki.”

Everyone indicated their agreement and settled in for a great deal of talking.

Chapter End Notes

Next week we’ll stop in with Bucky and see how he’s going and how he reacts to Tony’s offer of an arm.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Bucky's making progress in Kamar-Taj. It's slower than he'd like but it's progress. Unfortunately, with any progress come hurdles... and the occasional extraordinary offer.

Chapter Notes

I pretty much delve straight into comic book science and medicine here but what the hell, it's my story and I like this idea so I'm running with it. :P

This is probably the last time we'll touch in with Bucky in this story. My vague plans are to end this story with the formation of a planetary war council and then with the new story, pick up a couple of years later with Thanos' arrival. So when we get to that part there will probably a bit of catching up with everyone to see how they're going.

Also, I know I've been posting fairly steadily every Friday but I have to warn you that I may get a little erratic in the weeks ahead. Work has picked up a bit and that means less time for writing so that may end up throwing out my schedule.

Bucky liked Kamar-Taj. It was a very serene sort of place, despite the occasional magical accident from the apprentices, and the people here were very calm, even in the face of a trained assassin with a wonky brain living in their midst. The food had taken a little getting used to but even that was growing on Bucky. Even better was the fact that he was starting to get his head screwed on straight with the help of his psychologist. It wasn’t easy and he was only barely beginning the work he needed to do and he often finished sessions feeling wrung out and exhausted but he really did feel he was getting better.

Which was why today’s meeting was making him a little apprehensive. It was a meeting with all four of the psychologists involved in his treatment as well as Dr Strange and Colonel Rhodes, which meant it involved more than just his treatment.

However, when he opened the door to the meeting room, he found not a formal table and chairs but the more familiar low table with cushions surrounding it. The four psychologists were sitting comfortably, having gotten used to this sort of things, as was Dr Strange. A low chair had been found for Colonel Rhodes and Bucky assumed that sitting on the floor wasn’t exactly an option with the braces he was wearing.

“Come in, James,” his primary psychologist, Henrietta Marcus, said with a smile and wave of her hand. “Sit down.”

Bucky walked over and sat down a little warily. “Is everything okay?”

“We’ve finally managed to work out a little bit of what’s going on with your brain scans after the… episode in your last session,” Henrietta said soothingly. “There’s both good and bad in that but
ultimately it’s going to help you.”

One of the reasons Bucky liked Henrietta and why he’d chosen her as his primary therapist was because she never sugar coated things but she also never gave him something negative without something positive to counter it. She was calm and even when the Winter Soldier reared his ugly head, like he had in their last session, she never panicked.

“Okay,” he said with a short nod.

“You remember that we started doing the weekly brain scans because we were concerned that there was actual physical damage to your brain?” she said and Bucky nodded. “As it turns out, there was. In fact, the scans showed us not only old trauma that was slowly healing but new trauma as well and that’s what had us concerned.”

Bucky frowned. “I haven’t been in the chair in a while.”

“I know,” Henrietta said. “Hence our concern. It was only when we saw the scans after our last session that we were able to come to some conclusions.” She paused to collect her thoughts. “It appears that whenever you are triggered into the Winter Soldier, your brain experiences actual physical trauma. Which is honestly unprecedented and why I called this meeting.”

“Is… does it heal?” Bucky asked, shifting nervously.

Henrietta nodded. “It does. Slowly but surely. That’s why we were able to see the difference between the old and new trauma. The serum they gave you is quite capable of healing the physical damage that was done to your mind, given time. That is undoubtedly why you started to feel better and remember more while you were in Bucharest. You were… lying fallow, if you like, and your brain had time to start the healing process.”

Bucky sat silently as he considered that and the others let him think. He then raised his head again. “Did Stevie make it worse?”

Henrietta shook his head. “No. Though you certainly were not ready for what he put you through, he did not cause any damage to your mind. Zemo triggering you in Berlin, however, did and your episode in our last session also did, which is unsurprising since we were working on desensitising you to the trigger words. Something we have to bring to a halt for the moment until we work out what’s happening here and what it means.”

Bucky felt his shoulders slump. He desperately wanted to get rid of the trigger words, to know that he could never be used again. He knew setbacks were inevitable but this one hit hard.

“So what now?” he asked.

“I’ve asked a couple of the sorcerers here who have knowledge of healing magics to assist Dr Marcus,” Dr Strange said. “They may be able to come up with a way of allowing you to continue your desensitisation work without causing the trauma to your brain.”

Henrietta leaned forward and got his attention. “This isn’t a setback, James, just a temporary pause. There are other things we can work on in the meantime.”

Bucky nodded jerkily. Henrietta continued to watch him carefully then she nodded and Bucky knew that while he’d escaped talking about this now, he knew what he’d be doing in his next session with her.

“Now,” she said briskly, though she kept a careful eye on him. “Colonel Rhodes and Dr Strange
have some things that they need to talk to you about. Would you like us to stay in the room?”

Bucky looked at the two men and assessed them. They didn’t seem overly grim or worried so he shook his head. “No, it’s okay.”

Henrietta nodded slowly. “Okay. Just remember that if you need to stop, say so.” She fixed the two men with a gimlet glare. “And if he wants to stop, you will stop.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Colonel Rhodes said with a nod.

Bucky waited until the psychologists had gone then he drew in a deep breath and faced Rhodes and Strange. “What’s going on?”

Rhodes and Strange exchanged glances then Strange nodded. “You first.”

Rhodes gave him a nod as well then turned to Bucky. “I just wanted to keep you up to date on how things are with the ICC and the Council. You know that Dr Marcus has been submitting reports on your progress to both groups?” When Bucky nodded, he continued, “They’re pleased with your progress and the ICC have reached out to a couple of lawyers who have experience with cases involving mental trauma. They’ve both agreed to work on your case and if you’re feeling up to it, they’d like to meet with you some time in the next couple of weeks.”

Bucky nodded slowly. “Okay. Am I going to go to prison?”

Rhodes shook his head. “I don’t think anyone’s looking to do that, certainly not for the Winter Soldier stuff. As for Bucharest and the airport, well, the reports all indicate that you weren’t really in a frame of mind to be entirely conscious of the consequences of your actions, especially the airport given what they’ve just found out.”

Bucky frowned, unsure if he liked that answer or not. He knew he’d been… confused during most of it but it still felt wrong not to take responsibility for his actions. “What about Siberia?”

Rhodes gave him a long look. “Tony is not going to press charges for that.”

Bucky stared at him for a moment then he ducked his head, letting his hair fall across his face. He wasn’t sure how he felt about that. Part of him wanted some sort of consequences for what happened in Siberia. Part of him wanted Stark to hate him. He’d killed the man’s parents in very brutal ways. He didn’t feel like he deserved any sort of consideration from the man.

Rhodes sighed and Bucky raised his head. The other man had a complicated expression on his face as he spoke, “Tony… is inclined to put that clusterfuck behind him. I’m not sure I agree with him but I’ll also admit that I’m biased. Tony’s my brother in all but blood. But I do agree with him that what happened was more Rogers’ fault than yours. If Rogers had sucked it up and just told Tony when he found out, when he found out, that mess wouldn’t have happened.”

Bucky winced but nodded. He couldn’t really do anything other than agree and he had no idea why Stevie had kept that a secret. It was… reprehensible and not something he’d ever have thought Stevie was capable of. He remembered enough now to know that Stevie had always been an obnoxious little shit who didn’t know how to back down from a fight but he’d never been cruel. At least not that Bucky remembered.

“You should also know that there is some growing talk about having you testify at Rogers’ trial,” Rhodes continued.

Bucky’s eyes widened. “What?”
“Both sides want you to testify for various reasons,” Rhodes continued. “It’s why we expedited getting your lawyers on board. They’ve already made some moves to try and head that off at the pass and I know they want to talk to your psychologists about it.”

“Why… why do they want me to testify?” Bucky asked.

“Rogers’ lawyer wants you to tell the court about what a great guy Rogers is… or was,” Rhodes said and Bucky could only admire the lack of rancour in his voice. “The ICC prosecutors want your testimony on what happened in Bucharest and Leipzig/Halle. And Berlin, for that matter.”

Bucky winced. “Then I… I should tell them, shouldn’t I?”

Rhodes nodded. “Yeah, you do need do to that but not necessarily in a court room. Your shrinks will be the judge of whether or not you do that and the New Avengers have indicated we’ll support their judgement.”

Bucky frowned as he rolled that thought over in his mind. He didn’t think as quickly as he used to. He knew that and had discussed it with Henrietta. She’d told him that he might stay like that or he might improve. She’d told him she was inclined to think he’d improve since he had been since she’d started working with him. But he still needed to take his time now and he was glad that Rhodes and Strange seemed to understand that and were being patient with him.

“Why?” he finally asked. “Why are you doing anything for me? You’re… you’re Stark’s friends. Why help me?”

Rhodes sighed and shifted himself a little in his seat. He and Strange exchanged glances before Rhodes replied. “Because now that all the emotions have settled and we can all look at what happened with a little more objectivity, we know that you were as much a victim as anyone else.” He sighed and ran a hand down his face. “Am I pissed about what happened in Siberia? Yeah, I am but that shitshow is on Rogers for being a dick.”

Bucky managed a small smile for Rhodes’ plain language. It was a bit like what he remembered of the Howlies. Those memories were dim and fractured but he remembered bits and pieces.

“But you’re enhanced and whether or not you sign the Accords, you are still in many ways covered by them,” Rhodes said. “Signing is more for those who want to actively use their abilities, whatever they are. But they cover those who don’t as well.”

“And Tony may not want to deal with you right now,” Strange added. “But he is not a cruel man.”

Bucky nodded. “Okay. I’m not sure I deserve it but okay.”

Rhodes snorted. “You were a POW, Barnes. You deserve help.”

Bucky wanted to ruminate on that thought for a while, since it was something Henrietta brought up from time to time, but Strange had taken the conversational ball from Rhodes and had started talking.

“Now, the other thing that we needed to talk about is your arm.”

He nodded towards the stump of Bucky’s artificial arm and Bucky hunched a little.

“What about it?” he said, his voice suddenly a little hoarse with a number of emotions.

Strange looked odd for a moment, like he was about to say something he wasn’t sure he liked. “Tony wants to make you an arm.”
Bucky stared at him in shock and disbelief for a long moment. “What?”

“Tony wants to make you an arm.”

Bucky gaped then snapped his mouth closed as he tried to make those words make sense. “Why?” he finally managed.

Rhodes and Strange exchanged looks of fond exasperation and shook their heads. It sent a twinge through Bucky, that look, and for a moment, he felt almost envious.

“I asked him that myself,” Rhodes said. “It basically came down to ‘that HYDRA piece of shit’ – his words about your arm – offends him and… he wants to. He’s a mechanic at heart. He fixes things. He can’t fix you. He can’t fix himself in the ways he really wants to. But he can fix your arm.”

“But just because he can and just because he’s offering, all of that places you under no obligation to accept,” Strange added. “If you feel you are better off without the arm right now, then that’s absolutely fine.”

Bucky felt like his mind was swimming in treacle. “Can I think about it?”

“Of course,” Strange said. “It wouldn’t be a quick process anyway. We’d need to do some extensive examinations of your shoulder both externally and internally and that… would need you to be a mindset where the whole concept of it wouldn’t be traumatising.” He looked sympathetic for a moment. “While we’d be able to do some of it here, ultimately we’d have to take this to either a hospital or the Compound medical facilities.”


He had enough trouble dealing with the local hospital where they had the brain scans done. It was pretty fancy equipment for the hospital but Bucky had noticed that while the building wasn’t the newest and most modern, everything in it was. He suspected a lot of donations had been made recently, to justify the machines needed for the scans. That hospital though wasn’t as clinical as some were and there was just enough of a difference that he could get through the scans without having a panic attack.

“We thought as much,” Strange said with a nod. “Think about it. You don’t have to make a decision today, tomorrow or even next week.” He smiled slightly. “Tony likes tinkering with the plans anyway so he won’t rush you either.”

Bucky nodded, his mind still boggling at the idea that Stark wanted to make him an arm. His initial reaction was that he should refuse, not necessarily for his sake but for Stark’s. But he wasn’t sure if Stark would be offended by that or not. Finally he decided that he’d talk to Henrietta about it. She’d probably have some better insight than he did right now.

“What’s… what’s happening with Stevie?” he asked quickly. Not entirely sure he wanted to know but unable to stop himself either.

Rhodes scowled and Strange’s expression was… complicated. Then the sorcerer sighed. “His trial will start next month. It’s taken a while to get things organised. Romania started making noises about wanting him tried in their country after the ICC trial and that needed to be settled down. Also…” He paused. “Two more of the people trapped by the collapsing tunnel died so some extra charges were added.”

Bucky winced and ducked his head. “And… the others?”
“Romanov got off the easiest,” Rhodes said then he snorted. “At least in terms of the ICC’s charges. Russia got hold of her first and we’re… not entirely sure what they did between capturing her and handing her over. We’re not entirely sure we care either. There’s only so many times someone can turn their coat before you stop giving a damn. Ultimately though, given T’Challa declined to press charges, she was only really guilty of breaching the Accords. She’s been banned from signing the Accords or acting in an official capacity for five years. She’s working as a trainer for the new SHIELD.”

Bucky nodded and Rhodes continued. “Lang is finishing off his original sentence in California since he breached his parole conditions to go running off after Rogers and California dug in their heels about it. Once that’s done, he’ll come to the Compound and start work there both in the labs and as an Avenger to pay off his debts. Barton’s trial is currently underway but it’s not looking good, despite the deal they made on some of the charges. The man can’t seem to keep his mouth shut, no matter how much his lawyer tries to mitigate things, and keeps digging his hole deeper. Wilson’s trial will start after Barton’s is done. He’ll do time, there’s no way of avoiding that, but it’s just a matter of how long.”

Bucky nodded again, not really sure what to say. He hadn’t really had much of a chance to get to know most of them and hadn’t even been sure he’d wanted to get to know them but they’d all ended up in this mess because of him. Or rather because of Stevie’s misguided notions of what the best thing was to do about him. He’d thought he might feel responsible but… he didn’t. He didn’t ask them to get involved. Hell, he didn’t even ask Stevie to get involved. He’d been happy in Bucharest. Yeah, he’d also still been dangerous but… he’d been at peace, more or less, for the first time in a long time.

Strange seemed to realise that he’d perhaps come to the end of his ability to be social as he stood and helped Rhodes stand as well.

“Look, think about the arm,” Strange said. “No rush though. And if you need more information about it, speak to Wong. He’ll pass the request along.”

Bucky nodded and got to his feet as well. “I will. Thanks.”

The two men nodded and left the room. Bucky watched them go then wandered over to the nearest window, looking out on the spectacular view afforded by the temple’s location. It’d hadn’t been a bad meeting but he was going to bet that he wasn’t going to get much sleep tonight. Too much to think about and too much to dwell on.
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Threads are weaving together but unfortunately, they're upsetting Tony's cozy domesticity.

Chapter Notes

Now that I'm getting a handle on work, I'm going to try and reschedule this to post every two weeks. I think that'll help since this one has long, continuous plot and takes more effort than some of my other fics.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rhodey poked his head into the common room and despite the grim news he was bringing, he grinned at the ridiculously domestic sight in front of him. Stephen was sitting on the couch, reading a medical journal. Lying on the couch with his head in Stephen’s lap was Tony. He had a holographic screen floating in front of him, though out of Stephen’s way, and was poking idly at what looked like a new design for the braces Rhodey was wearing. Stephen was, however, running his fingers through Tony’s hair and that had Tony half-asleep and practically purring.

In front of the two men, Peter Parker was sprawled on the floor, frowning as he read one of his school books. Vision was sitting cross-legged near him, reading the same book with the same sort of intense concentration. Bruce and Betty were curled up together on the love seat, looking at something on a tablet and quietly bickering with each other. Loki, who had descended on them the previous week, was lounging indolently on the other couch, needling Hope and being verbally poked at in return, something which both of them seemed to be enjoying immensely.

This, he knew, was what Tony had wanted with the others. This sense of family, of belonging, of being more than just a team. Of knowing that he had people beyond just Rhodey, Pepper and Happy that he could trust to just be himself and not have them sneer or turn away. People who saw him as more than just Tony Stark™ or a money machine. This was what the others could have had if they’d just pulled their heads out of their asses for more than five minutes. He almost wanted to take a picture and send it to those jackasses so they could see what they’d lost.

“Are you lurking there for a reason, platypus?”

Rhodey looked over and saw that Tony was watching him sleepily. Stephen had looked up from his journal but he was still carding his fingers through Tony’s hair and he was, as far as Rhodey could see, winning the battle between Tony working and Tony resting. Rhodey knew he liked Stephen for a reason. He hated having to disturb that.

“Yeah, just wasn’t sure I wanted to break things up.”

Tony grimaced and sat up, yawning before he could stop himself but looking far more alert. “What’s happened, honeybear?”
“They found Sharon Carter,” Rhodey said grimly.

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “Found her. But there’s a distinct lack of urgency or requirement for us to suit up. What’s going on?”

“She’s dead.”

Silence fell in the room and Tony scrubbed his face with one hand. “Dead? How?” he asked.

“Bullet between the eyes,” Rhodey said. “Straight up execution. Someone wanted to get rid of her.”

“Any idea who?” Stephen asked.

“Could be HYDRA,” Rhodey replied. “Former SHIELD. CIA. One of the foreign intelligence agencies. Some lunatic Cap fan. There are a lot of people who were out for her blood.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “I’m sensing a but here, sugarplum, and it’s not my luscious butt.”

Rhodey rolled his eyes. “No one wants to see your pasty white butt, Tony.”

“Stephen might disagree with you on that score,” Tony said with a grin before he pretended to pout. “And what are you talking about? My butt is a work of art. It’s been voted the best butt in several magazine articles over the years.”

“Because of course you’d know that,” Rhodey said with a good impression of exasperation. He then sobered. “She wasn’t just killed and dumped. She was put on display.”

Tony frowned. “What?”

“She was found in the middle of Hyde Park in London,” Rhodey said. “Laid out carefully like she was in a coffin. What’s more, no one saw her being put there and there’s nothing on any nearby CCTV footage. A jogger stumbled over her at about 5am this morning. She had her ID on her so the embassy was able to confirm her identity pretty quickly.”

“HYDRA sending a message?” Tony suggested.

“Maybe,” Rhodey replied. “But if so, what message? They’re not known for being subtle.”

Tony arched an eyebrow at him. “They were subtle enough to avoid detection in SHIELD for several decades.”

“True,” Rhodey conceded. “Anyway, the Met are having the CCTV footage checked to see if there’s any trace of it being tampered with.”

Tony was quiet for a moment. “Has anyone told Rogers?”

“The ICC and his lawyer have been informed,” Rhodey replied. “They’ll handle it.”

Tony nodded and frowned. “Why Hyde Park, though? There’s no association that I know of between the Carter family and Hyde Park other than most of them being British.”

“I think we’re going to have to wait and see. If this is the first move in something bigger, we’ll find out soon enough,” Rhodey replied. He then turned to Loki and Stephen. “The Met have put in a request to the Accords Council to have some magic users inspect the place where she was found. London is coated in CCTV cameras and they’re mystified as to how someone got her almost to the centre of Hyde Park without anyone noticing.”
“Of course,” Stephen said and Loki inclined his head in agreement.

“Most magic leaves some kind of trace that can be detected even if isn’t a kind of magic we personally use,” Loki added.

Stephen gave Loki a sour look even as he agreed and Rhodey leant on his years of experience in the military to plaster a bland expression on his face. He knew Tony was completely oblivious to this but Loki had been openly but subtly flirting with him ever since he’d set foot in the Compound. Rhodey didn’t think Loki was actually serious about it, he just liked riling Stephen up. He’d gotten the impression that something had gone on between the two magic users that Loki was a tad bit peeved about and this was his snarky way of getting revenge. Rhodey didn’t much care what Stephen and Loki got up to as long as they didn’t hurt each other or anyone else. He just found Tony’s utter obliviousness completely hilarious. People just didn’t realise how much of an act Tony’s playboy reputation was because when it came down to it, Tony was the blindest idiot Rhodey had ever known.

“I’ll go and speak to our liaison and set up a time,” Rhodey replied. “It’ll probably be today since you can get there instantly.”

Stephen nodded and began to extricate himself from Tony. “I’d better get ready then.”

Loki did the same and Tony stood up as well. “If they’re willing to send the CCTV footage over, I’ll have a look and see what I can find.”

Rhodey grinned. “I think they wanted to do that but weren’t sure if they should go through the official channels first.”

Tony waved a hand. “Tell them to send it and then do the official stuff. I’m happy to sign whatever agreements they need for privacy and confidentiality. And they know I don’t do that shit anyway.”

Rhodey could only agree with that. Tony’s tech was so far ahead of his competitors that the idea of him stealing someone else’s was laughable. But he’d always been more than willing to sign NDAs and whatever other agreements were necessary. He always said it was just good business practice and for those who were a little dodgy, it put them on the spot. It didn’t always work but it worked enough for Tony to be comfortable doing it.

“Did you need us for anything?” Bruce asked, gesturing to himself, Betty and Hope.

“Not on my end,” Rhodey replied.

“You guys can help me,” Tony said. “Many eyes are better than one and all that jazz.”

“What about me?” Peter asked and from the way some of the others jerked, they’d kind of forgotten he was there.

“Uh,” Tony said then he shrugged. “What the hell. Why don’t you and Vis come down with us? You’ve both got good eyes and you’re good with tech. Just don’t tell your Aunt I’m letting you look at pictures of dead bodies.”

Peter beamed then looked slightly alarmed and shook his head violently. “Nope, not telling her that. Not that I haven’t seen dead bodies, just… yeah, let’s not go there.”

Tony snorted and threw an arm around Peter’s shoulders. “Breathe, kid.”

They separated then. Loki and Stephen went to get ready and joined Rhodes while Tony, Bruce,
Peter, Vision, Hope and Betty headed down to Tony’s workshop. They reconvened that evening over dinner, which Aunt May had allowed Peter to stay for since it wasn’t a school night.

Rhodey raised an eyebrow at Tony. “Did you guys find anything on the video?”

Tony grimaced. “Nope. The place where Sharon was dumped is in a blind spot and we couldn’t find any signs of tampering in the footage. It’s all seamless. So either they somehow found a way around it or… they’re very, very good.”

“Try the former,” Stephen said with a sigh.

“You found something.” Tony said. It wasn’t a question.

Stephen nodded. “Unfortunately, yes. Loki confirmed it, as did Wong when I called him in. Normally, I’d say this was our business but… Sharon Carter is a very distinct target and I don’t know what it means.”

“One of yours then?” Rhodey said.

Stephen nodded again, a sorrowful expression on his face. “Karl Mordo. He was one of my teachers at Kamar-Taj. He had something of a… crisis of faith, if you will.”

“Mordo?” Tony said with a frown. “Isn’t he the one who attacked Pangborn?”

Jonathan Pangborn had settled into the Compound with minimal difficulties. Tony had arranged for the appropriate carers to be hired until he could perfect a solution for the man. Pangborn’s paralysis was far more extensive than Rhodey’s. Quadriplegia rather than paraplegia and that meant that he needed a full body brace. It had been an interesting challenge with a lot of potential for future use in the public domain. For his part, Pangborn had been relentlessly determined in his testing of Tony’s various iterations of the braces, giving clear and concise feedback and offering suggestions that were incisive and useful, though Tony was sure he’d rather have his magic back. The sorcerers were still working on that, trying to discover how Mordo had removed it in the first place and then how to reverse it.

“Yes,” Stephen said. “We hadn’t been able to track him down, which was worrying enough, but this… I hadn’t thought he’d be the type to kill indiscriminately. What he did to Pangborn was bad enough.”

“Mortals,” Loki said with a long-suffering sigh. “So blind.”

Stephen visibly reined himself in. “What do you mean?”

“The woman wasn’t killed by magical means,” Loki replied, lounging elegantly in his chair. How he managed to do that and still eat so neatly was a mystery to Tony and he strongly suspected magic so he didn’t want to know. “She was killed with one of your guns then magic was used to put her in the gardens.”

“Would Mordo use a gun?” Rhodey asked.

“No,” Stephen said. “He was too proud of being a sorcerer.”

“So he’s working with someone,” Rhodey said. “HYDRA?”

“That’s a profoundly disturbing thought,” Stephen said. “I’ll raise it with Wong and the others though. We can’t afford to ignore it just because we don’t like it.”
“So we have a rogue sorcerer as well as all our other problems,” Tony said dryly. “Yay.”

“I’m sorry, Tony,” Stephen said with a sigh.

Tony frowned. “Why? This is hardly your fault.”

Stephen sighed and looked rueful. “Actually, it sort of is. I’m the one who shook Mordo’s foundations so heavily. First by revealing that the Ancient One was tapping into the Dark Dimension and then with my… creative use of magic.”

“Uh, Stephen honey?” Tony said with a raised eyebrow. “If he couldn’t cope, that’s on him, not you. Clearly, Wong didn’t go off the deep end nor did any of the other sorcerers so it sound to me like it’s his problem alone.”

Stephen looked a little nonplussed at the endearment while Rhodey sniggered silently in the background. “Um,” was all Stephen could manage.

“That’s surprisingly well-adjusted of you, Tones,” Rhodey finally managed.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Well, you’ve been banging on about it for months regarding all my myriad of issues. I do listen to you, platypus. You know that, right?”

“I should hope so,” Rhodey said, though the soft look in his eyes spoke volumes. “I speak sense and intelligence, which is more than the rest of you can say.”

He gave a smug grin and there was a moment of silence as everyone took in what he’d said then everyone around the table descended into laughter and various types of catcalling as they finished their meal. Once it was done, Vision, Bruce and Betty took over the clean-up duties while Stephen wandered off to talk to Wong. Rhodey headed off to his office to make a few phone calls and Peter and Hope left to do homework and business respectively. That left just Tony and Loki at the table.

“What’s up, Reindeer Games?” Tony said when Loki made no effort to leave.

“The magic around the Carter woman,” Loki began.

“What of it?”

“It was very dark.”

Tony quirked an eyebrow. “Does Stephen know this?”

“Most likely but the man was his mentor,” Loki replied. “He may not wish to face it until he is forced to. But you should be warned.”

Tony sighed. “Duly noted,” he said with a nod. When Loki still didn’t move, he raised an eyebrow. “What else?”

Loki seemed to be fighting with himself, unsure if he wanted to say whatever was on his mind. But finally the words seemed to burst out of him. “Why did you accept me into your New Avengers?”

“Why not?” Tony said with a shrug then he sobered in the face of Loki’s annoyance. “Look… would you have invaded Midgard if Thanos hadn’t forced you?”

“No,” Loki replied. “I had no interest in your realm.”

“There’s your answer then,” Tony said. “You were forced into what you did. It wasn’t by choice.
Besides, you brought us all together so we actually won.”

Loki snorted. “And what a marvellous success that was.”

“It showed us what worked and what didn’t,” Tony said with a shrug then when Loki gave him a hard look, he sighed. “I’m not saying lots of it didn’t deeply suck but what Rhodey and I have built now is better.” He smiled wryly. “And I’m not the one heading towards prison so I guess I get to be philosophical.”

Loki stared at him for a long moment then shook his head. “You are very strange.”

Tony actually laughed at that. “I’ll tell Stephen you said that. He’ll get grumpy.” He sobered. “You didn’t willingly work for the enemy. You’re not crazy. You might play pranks but you don’t go around fucking with people’s minds for shits and giggles.”

“I’m marginally better than the witch,” Loki said sourly. “Lovely.”

“You’re about ten miles ahead of the witch,” Tony countered. “Look, you’re here because you want to be here. I know at least part of that is to get away from Thor…” Loki smirked, an expression Tony returned. “But you’re here to help. I’m willing to accept that help. The rest… that’s up to you.”

Loki looked thoughtful then he nodded to Tony. “Very well.”

Tony got up and went to walk away then he paused. “Do I want to know why you’re tormenting Stephen?”

Loki’s eyebrows went up. “I was under the impression you weren’t aware of what was going on.”

Tony gave him a sardonic look. “I know everyone thinks I’m oblivious and… well, yeah, sure, I was at first until I started paying attention to why Stephen was getting grouchy all the time.” He shrugged. “I’m not used to people flirting with me unless I’m at some fundraiser or society function and they want something from me. I know how to deal with it there. I don’t look for it here.”

“Do you wish me to stop?” Loki asked.

“Nah,” Tony said with an appreciative smile for Loki’s consideration. “I just want to know whether I should know about what’s going on.”

Loki smirked. “No, I don’t believe so. Our first meeting was… interesting and he was able to… what is the phrase? Get the drop on me.”

“Oh,” Tony said. “Yeah, right. I don’t want to know.”

“And the only other person, other than yourself, that I know well enough at the moment to amuse myself with is Banner,” Loki replied with one of the best bland expressions Tony had seen.

Tony grinned. “Yeah, let’s not do that. Brucie bear gets grumpy when we have to reset the how many days since our last unexpected Hulk-out sign. And when he gets grumpy, Betty gets grumpy and no one…” He pointed a finger at Loki. “No one wants that, Loki Doki.”

He walked out of the room with Loki’s spluttering and laughter trailing after him. The news about Sharon Carter and Karl Mordo may have been grim but his new team was working better than he’d ever expected.
Chapter End Notes

I'm not actually sure if Pangborn was a quadriplegic and I kept forgetting to go back and watch that bit in the movie but I do recall there's a mention that he was carried into either Kamar-Taj or possibly somewhere else on a bed rather than in a chair or anything else so I'm assuming his paralysis was quite extensive.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

An axe is finally buried. And not in someone's back.

Or in other words, Hank Pym hates admitting he was wrong but that doesn't mean he won't do it.

Besides, he thinks Tony Stark might be much more fun to butt heads with than Howard ever was.

Hank Pym glared at the computer screen and grumbled increasingly filthy swear words under his breath. If there was one thing he hated more than anything else, it was admitting he was wrong. It used to drive Jan completely up the wall back in the day. And boy, had he been wrong this time. For years, decades really, he’d blamed Howard Stark for the Pym Particles that had gone missing after Jan’s disappearance, the final straw that had pushed him out of SHIELD. He’d dropped that hate on Howard’s son after Howard died, his frustration and anger making him irrational given he’d never met the boy. Howard had, after all, been adamant about keeping SHIELD away from his son, one of the few things he’d liked about the man.

But in the wake of yet another argument with his daughter about Stark, he’d gone digging through the SHIELD data that was still online, determined to prove her wrong. Computers weren’t exactly his expertise but he’d worked with SHIELD long enough that spy agencies were among the things he was an expert on and digging through the data dump had been easy when he already knew how SHIELD thought on an institutional level. And deep in the depths of that information, he found some truths that shook his foundations.

HYDRA had stolen the Pym Particles. They’d wanted their own version of his suit and since he’d refused to share the theories and technology behind it with SHIELD and – much to his surprise – Howard had backed that up and refused to allow anyone to push him about it, they’d decided to simply take it, using his grief about Jan as the perfect distraction. They’d then left information that would lead Hank to blame Howard, making note in their files that since Hank was already paranoid about Howard getting near the Pym Particles (because he knew Howard was smart and from all reports, Tony was smarter, and if they put their minds to understanding his particles, he was sure they’d surpass anything he was capable of and his ego wouldn’t allow that), he’d immediately jump to that opinion. What was more, there had been the observation that Howard Stark was so used to being accused of things he didn’t do and couldn’t prove that he hadn’t done them (because it was always more difficult to prove you hadn’t done something than that you had…) that he’d ended up just letting those sorts of accusations wash off him with a roll of his eyes and an irritated scoff. Which was pretty much how he’d reacted to Hank’s accusations.

So not only had he falsely accused Howard, he’d been successfully played by HYDRA and he honestly couldn’t say which one of those annoyed him the most.

“Hank?”

Hank winced at the reminder of just how pissed off at him his daughter was right now. She’d just started calling him Dad again in the last few years but lately, since Scott had run off with the suit,
he’d been Hank more often than not.

“In here,” he replied, wondering if he could manage to repair the rift between them this time or whether he’d screwed it up completely.

Hope appeared at the door to his study, her face a study in neutrality. “I’m going to head back east,” she said. “Rogers’ court case is going to be starting in a couple of days.”

She didn’t say she wanted to be there for Stark but that was what she meant. And from the challenge in her eyes, she was just daring him to say something about that.

“I was wrong,” he said abruptly.

He got a delicately arched eyebrow in return. “Did you hurt yourself saying that?” his daughter said tartly.

He sighed and scrubbed his face with both hands. When he looked up again, Hope had a slightly gentler expression on her face.

“Dad?”

“It wasn’t Howard,” Hank said. “It was fucking HYDRA.”

Hope looked unimpressed. “Are you really that surprised? Did Stark Industries or SHIELD ever show signs that they were using anything like the Pym Particles?”

“No,” Hank said rather grouchily. He sighed. “Stark’s going to be smug, isn’t he?”

“Probably not,” Hope replied. “Tony’s more likely to be confused. He never understood why you hated him in the first place. He didn’t even know SHIELD existed until 2008, let alone that his father was involved.”

Hank sighed again and decided to change the subject a little. “He’s really going to take on Scott when he gets out?”

Hope nodded. They’d hoped to get Scott off the charges of breaking parole but the State of California had decided that they wanted to make an example of Scott. It had been frustrating but Scott had been philosophical about it all. “He is. He… I think Scott’s the one he has the least number of issues with. He didn’t really know who the hell Scott was before this. Still doesn’t really. But Scott was also the only one willing to turn himself in once he’d stopped being a Cap fanboy and actually started thinking for himself.”

“I suppose you blame me for that too,” Hank said sourly.

Hope looked unimpressed again. “You’re the one who filled his head with those ridiculous ‘evil Stark’ stories, which had no basis in truth.”

Hank had to concede that point. He’d heard that Scott had trotted out his ‘Starks can’t be trusted’ line when he was in the Raft. That made him wince. He’d known Scott was… well, easily manipulated was the unpleasant but accurate way of putting it, but he hadn’t thought the man was that much of an idiot.

“This Thanos thing,” he said finally. “It’s real?”

The UN Accords Council had started quietly reaching out to various companies that might be useful
in the looming battle. Pym Technologies had been one of them, mostly due to Hope’s involvement in the New Avengers.

“Yes, Dad, it’s real,” Hope replied. “Thor confirmed it, as did Loki. Thor’s friends, the Guardians of the Galaxy, should be here in the next couple of weeks. They’ll have more information and the UN plans to go public after that.”

Hank nodded and stared at the computer screen, though he wasn’t really looking at what was on there. He’d admit that he was a cranky old man who didn’t like change or admitting he was wrong but this… this invasion… it was bigger than him and his ego.

“You’re heading back to that Compound?”

Hope narrowed her eyes at him. “Yes?” she said warily.

“I’m coming with you.”

Hope stared at him for an unflattering amount of time. “You’re what?”

“I’m coming with you,” he said, getting to his feet. “I want to talk to Stark. We’re going to have to work together so I think it’s about time we buried some hatchets.”

Hope chewed on her lip for a moment. “Dad…”

“I’m not going to bite his head off,” Hank said with exasperation. “Don’t you think it’s about time we had a civil conversation?”

Hope’s expression told him everything he needed to know about what she thought about his ability to have a civil conversation but then she sighed. “Fine.”

Hank rolled his eyes. “Now there’s a ringing endorsement. Let me just get a few things sorted.”

It didn’t take him long to get what he needed put together and sooner than he probably would have liked, they were on one of the Avenger’s quinjets, heading for the Compound. Hank inspected the quinjet as they flew, watching the way Hope handled the jet with ease and admiring the engineering of the jet itself.

“How much do these things cost to run?” he finally asked.

Hope glanced briefly at him then turned back to her task. “A lot.”

“And Stark just lets you take one whenever you want?”

He wasn’t quite sure what the bitter laugh from his daughter meant but then she said, “No, not anymore. I was carrying out some New Avengers business so I could use one.”

Hank’s eyes narrowed at that ‘not anymore’. “Wait… you mean that lot Scott went off with could use them whenever they wanted?”

Hope sighed. “Dad, just… don’t start.”

“I’m not,” Hank insisted, trying not to be too taken aback. It was pretty obvious he’d stepped into some sort of mine field here.

Hope sighed again then shook her head. “FRIDAY, can you take over?”
“Of course, Hope,” said a light, Irish voice and Hank’s eyebrows went up.

“What is that?”

“She…” Hope said firmly, “is FRIDAY, one of Tony’s AIs. The other one is JARVIS. FRIDAY mostly deals with Stark Industries these days but she still pitches in with the New Avengers training and with the quinjets.”

“I keep the fun stuff for myself and let big brother do the boring stuff,” FRIDAY said with such impish humour that Hope grinned in response.

Hank was fascinated. “I knew Stark was doing some advanced robotics work – you only have to look at the suits to know that – but I didn’t know he was developing AIs.”

“I’m his fifth AI,” FRIDAY said proudly. “There’s DUM-E, U, Butterfingers, JARVIS and me.”

Hank raised an eyebrow. “And Ultron?”

“Ultron was not an AI developed by boss,” FRIDAY said primly. “That has recently been confirmed by Loki. The Ultron sentience was from the Mind Stone. It took the name of boss’ AI-in-potentia because it liked the name.”

“Huh,” Hank said. “That going to be made public?”

“Yes,” Hope said. “The UN is putting together a report regarding the New York attack and the sceptre based on the information Loki has provided. He’s given a very interesting insight into all of that.”

“Can he be trusted?” Hank asked.

Hope nodded. “About this? Yes.”

“But not about other things?”

“He’s considered a trickster god in Norse legends,” Hope replied. “And based on the stories Thor has told us, there’s a fair basis in fact with that. However, part of his agreement with the Accords Councils is that he’ll tell us the truth about Thanos and the Infinity Stones so…” She shrugged.

Hank’s eye narrowed as he looked at his daughter. “You like him.”

Hope rolled her eyes. “Yes, I do. He’s intelligent and has a very sly sense of humour. It’s fun watching him and Tony when they get going and he’s one of the few people I know who is willing to needle Dr Banner, albeit fairly gently. Bruce seemed to find him amusing.”

Hank just made a harrumphing noise. “What’s this team like anyway?”

“Far better than the old one,” Hope said with a sniff. “I’ve… spoken to Scott and Colonel Rhodes about the old team. Vision too. It sounded like it was a bit of a cult of personality. Rogers was a bit of a ‘my way or the highway’ type of person. He definitely liked his yes men.”

Hank snorted. “I’d imagine that’s why he didn’t get along with Stark.”

Hope looked amused. “I’d imagine so. Then again, Tony doesn’t require people to agree with him in order to work with them. He encourages differing opinions and ideas and doesn’t think he has all the answers. Colonel Rhodes is very much the same. If we have a better plan for dealing with something, they’re both willing to throw their plans away and use ours.”
Hank made another noncommittal noise then rolled his eyes with Hope smirking at him. Any response was cut off by FRIDAY announcing they were approaching the Compound. Hank settled into his seat as Hope went back to the controls. It didn’t take long to land and she escorted him into the building.

“Welcome back, Ms Van Dyne,” said a smooth, British voice which Hank assumed must be JARVIS, something that was confirmed by Hope.

“Thank you, JARVIS. This is my father, Hank Pym.”

“Welcome, Dr Pym,” JARVIS said and Hank didn’t think he was imagining the slightly wary note in the AI’s voice.

“Thanks,” Hank said then he frowned a little as he realised he recognised that voice, not to mention the name. He wasn’t quite sure why he hadn’t twigged in the jet, except he’d been a bit distracted. “Wait a minute. Did Stark create an AI that’s not only named after his butler but sounds like him?”

Hope gave him a confused look but there was a momentary pause before JARVIS answered.

“You knew Edwin Jarvis?”

“Yeah,” Hank replied. “A little anyway. Used to come over to the mansion when I was in town for business.”

“I see,” JARVIS said. “Then yes, I was named after Edwin Jarvis and his voice prints were used for my own voice.”

Hank wasn’t sure what it said that Stark had used his butler as the inspiration for his AI but he was becoming increasingly sure he had grossly misjudged the man. He’d allowed his grudge against Howard to blind him to what was right in front of him.

“Ah, Hope, I’m glad you’re back and…” They had both turned at the sound of Tony Stark’s voice and Hank watched as the man, who was in a ratty t-shirt and filthy jeans and covered in grease and god only knows what else, came to a sudden halt, staring at Hank himself with a wary and nonplussed expression on his face. “And your Hope’s Dad.”

Hank nodded. “Yeah. We’ve… never actually met.” He shoved his hand out. “Hank Pym.”

Tony stared at the hand a little incredulously for a moment then he hastily scrubbed one hand against his jeans, an action that caused Hope to giggle and Hank to let out a bark of a laugh.

“Pretty sure that’s a lost cause,” he said, much to Tony’s obvious surprise. “I’m not afraid of a little grease.”

“Right,” Tony said slowly as he reached out and shook Hank’s hand. “Uh, Tony Stark.”

“My daughter has spent a lot of time recently telling me how much and what kind of an ass I’ve been,” Hank said bluntly. Tony’s gaze flickered over to where Hope was now smirking then back to him. “I’ve checked the records in the SHIELD data dump and… as much as I hate to admit it, she’s right.”

“She… often is,” Tony said warily.

“Anyway,” Hank said with a sigh. “Scott’s idiocy was at least partly my fault so… wanted to apologise.”
“You don’t have to…” Tony began but Hank cut him off.

“Yes, I do.” Hank snorted. “If I hadn’t filled his head with ridiculous crap, he might have thought twice about running off in the middle of the night with a fanboy boner for Captain America. He had no business getting involved in that fight given we hadn’t really had a chance to look at the Accords at that time.”

Tony blinked. “You’re… in favour of the Accords?”

“Of course,” Hank said, trying not to sound too grouchy at the idea that he wouldn’t be but failing. “Part of what got my wife killed was SHIELD’s damn ends justifies the means attitude. I’d been railing against it for months but no one was listening.” He paused and grimaced. “I thought your father was listening but then he appeared to dismiss my concerns.” He grumbled under his breath for a moment. “Turns out some of the HYDRA people had gotten to him and convinced him I was overreacting.”

Tony stiffened. “Did…. Did he know they were HYDRA?”

Hank snorted. “Of course not. None of us knew. They were scientists and people he’d worked with for years, some of them dating back to the war. Of course he believed them over me, someone he’d butted heads with on a regular basis and who was known to be a hothead.” He waved a hand. “Anyway, what I’m saying is… this thing that’s coming? I’m on board and since I know Hope already is as well then… Pym Technologies is on board as well.” He shrugged. “Figured I should tell you in person or you might not believe it.”

Tony nodded slowly and he looked over at Hope. He didn’t know what kind of expression his daughter had on her face but whatever it was made the tension in Tony’s shoulders ease and when the man smiled at him, it was a genuine one, not a press smile.

“Then… welcome aboard,” Tony said. “Why don’t you come down to the workshop and I can get you up to speed on what we’ve been working on. Your input would be useful.”

Hank nodded, feeling a surge like he hadn’t felt since the days when he’d been the one using the Ant-Man suit. “Sounds good.”

Tony gestured for Hank to join him. “And, uh…” He hesitated for a moment. “Maybe you can tell me something about my Dad. Might be interesting to hear about him from someone who wasn’t fawning all over him and his money.”

“You mean from before we fell out?” Hank said dryly.

Tony laughed. “Yeah, maybe before that.” He paused and his expression became a little distant and sad. “I mean, Dad and I… never really got along and then he was murdered and everyone praises him to high heaven and tell me things about how great he was and… that was never the man I saw.”

Hank gave Tony a sharp glance and realised the depths to which he’d misjudged this man. He’d somehow had the impression – and he had no idea how he’d gotten that impression but it had been there – that Howard and Tony had been close. From what Tony had just said, that wasn’t the case at all.

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “Yeah, I reckon I could do that. I mean, even before we fell out, I spent a lot of time calling Howard a jackass but to be fair, he spent a lot of time calling me the same thing.”

Tony laughed at that. “This I’ve got to hear.”
“Well,” Hank began, a grin slowly growing on his face. Maybe working with Tony wouldn’t be so bad, maybe it’d be a damn sight better than working with Howard… though then again, he’d bet they were going to butt heads anyway. Should be fun. “There was this time…”
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Rhodey has a thought. It might be a good thought, it might be a bad one, only time will tell.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“…and in further news, today saw the handing down of the verdict against Steven Grant Rogers, formerly known as Captain America. Between all the concurrent and consecutive sentences, he was sentenced to sixty years in prison with a non-parole period of forty years. He is currently being held in a maximum security prison in The Hague pending a final decision as to where he is to be held.

Rogers’ sentence is the final chapter in the saga of the ExVengers and their various legal troubles. In prior sentencing…”

Rhodey flicked through several other channels to assess the media’s opinion on Roger’s sentence and it was almost overwhelming in favour of it and most seemed quite happy to wash their hands of the ExVengers as a whole. He was pleased to see that. The press could be fickle and often it was hard to tell what line they were going to take but this was all good news.

He then turned to the internet and began to browse through various news websites as well as blogs and forums. The opinion was a little more varied there but again, it was still overwhelmingly in favour of the sentences. People pointed out the evidence that had been tendered against all the ExVengers and while the occasional verbal fist fight had broken out here and there, largely it was peaceful… for the internet anyway.

Then he stumbled across a YouTube video that made him stop and think.

“…we all agree that Steve Rogers is a douche and clearly can’t be trusted to make a rational decision, especially when Bucky Barnes is involved, but I feel like we shouldn’t throw the baby out with the bathwater, you know? I know Tony Stark and Iron Man are one and I get that. The Iron Man suit is tech and has to be built and maintained and it’s personalised to Stark and his brain and his preferences and ditto with the War Machine armour and Colonel Rhodes but Captain America? That was an ideal and a shield, not a man as such, you get what I’m saying? Sure, it was Rogers who got the gig in the Forties but it could have been anyone. Rogers wasn’t some mystical chosen one or anything.

So, if Rogers is a dick and criminal, that doesn’t mean Captain America has to be as well. Why can’t someone else wear the title and wield the shield? There’s gotta be a hundred better people out there who could do it, right? I know we don’t have many with the super soldier serum but there’s other ways. Isn’t there a guy down in Harlem who’s indestructible and whose been doing good shit? Give him the shield and the name and let him step up. He sure as shit can’t do worse than Rogers and frankly, the Captain America name needs some rehabilitation.”

Rhodey muted the rest of the video and leaned back in his chair, frowning as he stared into the distance. The guy actually made a very good point. Captain America was a title, had been from the
very beginning, and with what was coming, maybe it would be good to have someone take up that
title and rally the people. The US people anyway. He doubted it’d be that easy for any new Captain
America to gain international trust in the time they had.

He got to his feet, his braces creaking a little. From things Tony had been muttering over dinner the
previous evening, he was expecting another iteration of the braces in the upcoming days but he’d
also noticed Loki giving his legs some speculative looks. He had no idea what that was all about and
he wasn’t sure he wanted to ask. They’d taken Loki out on his first official mission as a New
Avenger last week and it had gone surprisingly well. Loki had proven to be adept at taking orders
but also willing to offer opinions and suggestions that were useful. He also had a good grasp of
everyone’s strengths and weaknesses. Rhodey might still have some reservations about Loki in
general but when it came to his willingness to abide by the terms of his deal with the Accords
Council, he seemed to be largely trustworthy. Though, ultimately, time would tell.

But he was just distracting himself now and he forced himself back to the idea that had come up from
that video blog. He headed into the kitchen, mulling things over, when he saw Bruce sitting at the
bench, sipping tea and reading something on his tablet, and decided to broach the subject.

“Hey, Bruce.”

Bruce looked up and smiled slightly at him. “James.”

Rhodey paused then occupied himself with making coffee. “I’ve got something I want to run past
you.”

Bruce looked a little surprised but nodded and set his tablet down. “Sure. How can I help?”

“Bear with me on this,” Rhodey replied, leaning against the bench as he waited for his coffee to
brew. “It’s only just come to me after I saw a video blog so I’m not sure where I’m going with it
but… what would you think of the idea of someone else using the name Captain America and
carrying the shield?”

Bruce looked startled then he frowned thoughtfully. “I… well, you’re right. That is definitely a bit
out of left field.” He cocked his head curiously. “What was this blog about, if I may ask?”

“The guy was making the point that Captain America was a title and a shield, not something that was
entirely exclusive to Steve Rogers,” Rhodey replied. “It occurred to me that… he may have a point.”

Bruce made a thoughtful noise and Rhodey was content to wait while the scientist thought things
through. He made his cup of coffee then settled on a stool opposite Bruce.

“It… it’s difficult to separate the idea of Captain America from Rogers,” Bruce finally admitted.

Rhodey nodded. “Yeah, I know. I think it’s something we’d have to let sit for a while to let the anger
people have right now die down but in the future…” He shrugged. “Captain America was used for a
long time as a rallying point.”

Bruce nodded. “It would be hard to find someone to fit the bill, wouldn’t it? You’d need an
Enhanced person and right now, most of those we know already have an identity of their own that
they’re happy with.”

“That is a point,” Rhodey conceded then he blinked hard. Bruce looked at him curiously and
Rhodey shook his head. “You’re either going to think I’m crazy or a genius. What about Barnes?”

Bruce stared at him for a long moment. “Barnes?” he said dubiously. “You want to shove Barnes in
“Yeah,” Rhody said slowly as he went through things in his mind. “Barnes has the super soldier serum… or a version of it, at least. He’s hardly going to want to be the Winter Soldier and based on what his therapist has been willing to tell us, he’s not too pleased with what his buddy did. He might be willing to take up the shield and make the name something worthwhile again.”

“You’re assuming he’d even be interested in fighting once he’s well,” Bruce said. “He may not.”

“I know,” Rhody replied. “And it’d be contingent on Tony even wanting to be anywhere near the man but… it’s not like it’s something we have to decide today. Barnes has got a long way to go in his rehabilitation so it’s not something we’d have to do anything about until then.”

“You’re right,” Bruce said, still dubious. “I can’t decide if you’re crazy or a genius.”

Rhody laughed and shook his head. “I’m not saying I’m married to the idea but… I can see the point the guy in the video was trying to make. Yeah, Captain America is pretty damn tarnished right now but it doesn’t have to stay that way. And I think that might help. There’s a lot of people angry at Rogers because he tarnished their childhood memory of Captain America. Angry that he turned Captain America into a terrorist. But if we could reclaim that image and turn it into something good again…”

Now Bruce started to nod. “Okay, yeah, I think I get where you’re coming from. It would make Captain America less of a person and more of a title.”

Rhody nodded. “Look. You and the Hulk are one. Same with Spider-Man. Iron Man and War Machine… well, whether we’re replaced depends on whether Tony finds people he thinks are worthy of the armour. If he doesn’t, they’ll retire with us. Hope is in the same boat with the Wasp and Ant-Man suits. But Stephen’s title is one he was given after the Ancient One’s death and there’s no reason why we can’t do something similar with Captain America. Give the title some continuity and longevity. There will always be a Captain America, it’s just that different people will take up the mantle.”

“Give the New Avengers some sense of history,” Bruce mused. “Others may come and go but Captain America always stands with the Avengers.” He thought it over a bit more. “It does have some merit, James.”

“What has some merit?”

Both men turned around to watch Stephen walk into the room. The sorcerer was wearing his full ‘sorcerer gear’ including the Cloak and much to their concern, he had the Eye of Agamotto around his neck.

“Oh,” Rhody said, pointing at the Eye. “Is there a problem?”

Stephen looked down then chuckled. “No. Tony asked whether he’d be permitted to take some readings from it to compare with the readings he already has from the tesseract and the Mind Stone. The masters and I discussed the matter and we agreed it was a good idea. We understand the Stone on a metaphysical level but not a scientific one. With the arrival of Thanos now inevitable, it seemed prudent to try everything.”

Rhody nodded slowly but he was sure his expression was as wary as Bruce’s must be. “Is that safe?”

Stephen gave the question proper consideration. “Safer than working with the Space or Mind Stones.
Those two seem to be more volatile, based on what happened in the past and information Loki has supplied. The Time Stone is... calmer, for lack of a better word. This may be because it has never been misused to the extent the Space and Mind Stones have been.”

“You’re implying a sentience?” Bruce said.

Stephen raised his eyebrows. “What do you think created Ultron?”

Bruce nodded slowly. Loki had been able to give them more details about how the Mind Stone worked, though even he hadn’t known everything. But one thing he had confirmed was that the Mind Stone contained a distinct and rather malevolent sentience. Tony, Hope and JARVIS had then examined the corrupted data that had been saved along with JARVIS’ core programming and they discovered some video footage of the workshop that dated to the time of Ultron’s self-creation.

A little more in the way of time comparisons had led to a direct correlation between an action Thor took with his hammer that resulted in a small but significant power surge in the building and that power surge echoing down to the workshop. Tony’s safeguards had protected all of his tech but there was slightly fractured but still clear footage of a spark arcing into the Mind Stone and from there into the tech that had been restraining the Stone. The corrupted data then showed what looked like Ultron’s path into JARVIS’ programming and the general mainframe. They’d taken it all to half a dozen experts around the world and they all confirmed what had been found. Once they had that, they’d submitted everything to Accords Council.

It had been a relief to both Bruce and Tony. Yes, they should have been more careful with the Mind Stone but Ultron’s creation had been a confluence of events that no one could have predicted, though Thor had been suitable horrified and apologetic when he’d been told of his part in it. He’d immediately insisted on making his own amends to Sokovia and to Bruce and Tony. Neither man had wanted money or anything like that and had been at a loss as to how to handle this until Thor had suddenly smiled and introduced them to Asgard’s version of scientists. One four hour enthusiastic conversation later and Thor was giving laughing permission for the Asgardians to go to New York to play with SI’s R&D Division.

“Wong and I will be putting some precautions in place,” Stephen continued. “Actually, Wong will be coming here a little more regularly. He’s very interested in what Tony might discover as well as looking at the information on the other Stones.”

“I suppose the more we understand about the Stones, the better our chances might be with Thanos gets here,” Rhodey said.

“Exactly,” Stephen replied. “So what were you saying when I walked in?”

Rhodey went over what he’d been talking about with Bruce and when he finished Stephen looked thoughtful.

“Hmm, you’re right. The idea does have some merit, *if* Sergeant Barnes is willing.”

Stephen tapped his fingers lightly against the Eye in an action not dissimilar to Tony tapping his fingers against the arc reactor. Rhodey watched with amusement and wondered if that was something Stephen had always done or if Tony’s little tic had spilled over.

“And if Tony can accept it,” Stephen added.

Rhodey sighed. “Yeah, that one’s going to be the difficult one because I know Tony’s self-sacrificing ass far too well. He’ll say yes just because it’s the best thing for the world and completely
ignore what it’s doing to him.”

Stephen smiled ruefully. “Once I would have been confused about that but not anymore.” He sighed. “I’ve been… trying to get him to consider therapy. He’s been…”

“Obstinate?” Rhodey said.

“That’ll do,” Stephen replied.

Rhodey sighed. “He tried therapy a couple of times when he was younger, after his parents died and he… went a little off the rails with booze and drugs. Unfortunately, both times the therapist was… less than ethical and some of the stuff got out into the press.”

Stephen winced. “Ah, that explains a lot.”

“Let me try,” Bruce said. He grimaced. “I’m not that kind of doctor but… I failed him on this score once and I’d… like to make it up to him. I can’t do any true therapy but at least having someone listen to him might help and make him more inclined to try proper therapy.”

“There are a number of books that may assist you, Dr Banner,” JARVIS suddenly said, his voice full of warm approval. “They can give you some tips and tactics to help you if you find yourself out of your depth.”

Bruce looked momentarily relieved at JARVIS’ response. “Thank you. I’ll definitely take those books.”

“Thank you,” Stephen said. “It’s not really something I can do. I’m his partner and it would not be good for our relationship. Or particularly ethical.” He smiled ruefully. “Also, I was a neurosurgeon. My expertise is more in the mechanics than the squishy stuff, so to speak.”

Rhodey nodded. “Okay. I might go run this past Hope and…” He paused. “Yeah, and maybe Hank as well.”

“Hank?” Bruce said dubiously. Hank Pym had been at the Compound for a month and he’d butted heads with almost all of them. He seemed to be the kind of man who just did that naturally. Tony seemed to find it fun but Bruce had decided to give the man a wide berth because although arguing with Hank was intellectually stimulating, it irritated the Hulk.

“The ornery old bastard will probably be the first person to see any real downsides that might be gamebreakers,” Rhodey said dryly.

“Good point,” Bruce said with a small laugh.

Rhodey grinned at him then nodded and took his leave. Stephen followed him and Bruce was left alone with his tea and a great deal to think about.

Chapter End Notes

Next time, the Guardians finally arrive on Earth. That'll be fun.

I have... one, maybe two, more chapters left before the final one, which will be about the preparations being made on a global scale for Thanos. By then, I'll have had time to
see Infinity War and decide what, if anything, I'm going to steal from that. Obviously, based on what's in this story, my Infinity War will be very MCU non-compliant but there may be an idea or two in there worth working into it.
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

The Guardians arrive on Earth with grim news, Tony surprises Groot and Loki traumatises his brother.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so I am not entirely GotG2 compliant and I'm definitely not IW compliant.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony stood outside the Compound with Thor a calm but pleased presence on one side, Rhodey on the other and the rest of the New Avengers standing behind them. Thor had received a message a few days ago that his new friends were on their way. He’d been sombre when he’d delivered the news, saying that these Guardians had grim tidings. It wasn’t unexpected but had still sent a chill through all of them. The Guardians had been going to a planet to check on one of the Stones. Tony could only assume that Thanos had gotten there before the Guardians and the Stone was gone. He could only hope there had been some survivors.

When the spaceship appeared, descending gracefully towards the Compound, Tony drew in a breath and had to clasp his hands against his thighs to control both his apprehension about space and his urgent desire to take the ship apart to figure out how it worked. He was distracted from both things by Thor shifting beside him and when he glanced over, Thor was smiling.

The ship was even better close up but even Tony’s attention was drawn away from the ship when its inhabitants emerged. The first one was a guy who looked like anyone else and Tony knew this must be Peter Quill. Thor had mentioned him and that he was originally from Earth. Tony had done some digging and the only Peter Quill he’d found had disappeared when he was a boy. Looks like they’d found out what happened to him.

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Tony’s eyes widened fractionally as he took in the rest of the Guardians. There was one woman who was green – and Tony resolutely shoved aside thoughts of Star Trek and Orions so as not to risk jamming his foot into his mouth – and another who was blue and a third who had antennae. There was a big guy who had some sort of tattoos or perhaps a form of scarification all over him. It was pretty obvious since he had clearly forgotten to dress completely that morning. Or maybe his species didn’t do shirts. But the weirdest of the group were the raccoon walking on his hind legs and the ambulatory tree.

“My friends!” Thor boomed, walking over to shake Quill’s hand. “I am glad you have made it safely.”

“Thanks, Thor,” Quill said in return, though Tony noticed he didn’t return Thor’s smile. “Glad to be here actually.”

“Aye, your message indicated your news was not good,” Thor said, sobering quickly.
“Xandar is gone,” Quill said, sorrow etched on his face. “As is the Power Stone.”

Thor gripped Quill’s shoulder tightly. “There were no survivors?”

“A few hundred,” Quill replied. “But the planet’s basically uninhabitable. We were delayed making sure the survivors got to a safe place.”

“Of course,” Thor said as he drew Quill and the rest of the group over. “Let me introduce you to the New Avengers, my friends and family here on Midgard. These are the leaders of the New Avengers – Tony Stark and Colonel James Rhodes – and their colleagues, Dr Stephen Strange, Lady Hope Van Dyne and Vision. You already know Bruce and my brother Loki. The young Spider cannot be with us today but you will meet him later.” Thor turned to Tony and Rhodely. “My friends. This is Peter Quill, known as Star Lord.” He then gestured to each of the Guardians in turn as he named them. “Gamora, her sister Nebula, Mantis, Drax the Destroyer, Rocket and this fine young sapling is Groot.”

The Guardians all nodded or waved then Tony stepped forward. “Welcome to Earth,” he said with a nod. He then looked at Quill. “Or perhaps back to Earth in your case. We’ve got rooms for you inside and I’ve arranged for you to speak to the Accords Council in three days.”

Peter Quill stepped forward and held out his hand for Tony to shake. “Thanks, Mr Stark. Though I think we’re going to need some explanations. Bruce and Thor didn’t mention an Accords Council.”

Tony gestured for them to follow him inside, his team breaking formation and joining them. “The Council is new. They were set up to provide oversight and regulation for Enhanced people and those acting as superheroes.”

Quill didn’t look shocked or surprised and that took a weight of Tony’s shoulders. “Oh, okay. So, kind of like the Nova Corps. I thought we’d be talking to…” He smiled ruefully. “Actually, I wasn’t really sure. I was pretty young when I left Earth.”

“The UN ultimately,” Tony replied, making a mental note to talk to Quill later about his family. “Well, the Council is a part of the UN but we’ll eventually have to speak in front of the General Assembly once we’re up to speed on this Thanos guy and what he’s planning.”

They’d arrived in the main common room and Tony pointed to a door opposite the one that lead to the rooms currently used by the New Avengers when they were on site.

“There are rooms beyond that door. Take your pick. We’ve got a cafeteria in the building but we mostly use the kitchen off this room.” He grinned. “Some of us can cook but the local take out places know us pretty well.” He cocked an eyebrow at Quill. “Did you guys want to get settled in and then we can talk?”

It was agreed that would be a good idea and it was about half an hour before all of the Guardians returned to the common room. They all settled down on the couches and chairs or even the floor.

“I can order pizza,” Tony said then he frowned. “Hopefully that’ll be fine for everyone. I figure we can order a bit of everything.”

“I am Groot?”

Tony looked over at the tree, who was eying him with something that he could only describe as suspicion. “Uh… Earth food. A… bread base with various toppings. Meat, veggies and so on.” He fell silent when he realised that the rest of the Guardians were staring at him.
“Wait,” Quill said. “You can understand him?”

Tony blinked. “Well, yeah. Sort of. I mean, not the words but the intention, I guess.”

“I am Groot?” Groot said sounding like he was caught between curiosity and a sort of teenage huffiness that Tony remembered surprisingly well.

Tony shrugged. “I’ve been deciphering the noises my bots make for years so it’s… kind of an extension of that.”


“I know you’re not a bot,” Tony replied. “But then again my bots all have AI so they’re not exactly bots either.”

“I didn’t know Terra had AI,” Gamora said, looking curious.

“We… don’t. In general,” Tony replied, tensing a little. “I do. I, uh… I made them but they learn on their own.”

“With some guidance from you, sir,” JARVIS said.

The Guardians all looked up towards the ceiling and Tony had to smother a smile. Everyone did that with JARVIS even though he didn’t actually live in the ceiling.

“That’s JARVIS,” he said. “He manages… well, mostly me and the Iron Man suits but he also manages the basic running of the Compound. FRIDAY?”

“Yes, boss?”

Tony smiled. “FRIDAY mostly manages things at Stark Industries these days but she still keeps her hand in here as well.”

“I am Groot?”

“The bots are down in the workshop,” Tony replied. “They help me down there and… well, mess up a bit but that’s okay. They’re learning bots so mistakes are fine because how else will they learn?” He shrugged a little. “Anyway, they don’t talk like we do but they… talk, I guess.”

“I am Groot.”

“Yeah, like you do,” Tony said with a small smile. “I’ll introduce you to them a bit later, if you like.”

Groot grinned. “I am Groot!”

He looked around and saw the Guardians were all smiling indulgently at Groot. He figured his first impression must be right and that Groot was kind of young, perhaps even the teenager that some of his behaviour implied. He made a mental note to introduce the… tree to Peter as well. They’d probably get along like a house on fire.

“So!” He clapped his hands. “J, can you order… a lot of pizza. Maybe some pasta as well for variety.”

“Salad, sir?” JARVIS said pointedly and there was a lot of sudden grins in the room.

Tony sighed and rolled his eyes. “Yeah, fine, okay. Salad too, if you must. And maybe a bunch of
drinks since I don’t know what we have here other than tea and coffee.”

“Of course, sir.”

“He sounds so alive,” Mantis said wonderingly.

“Uh… well, he is,” Tony replied, feeling a little awkward and defensive. He’d been like that ever since the debacle that had been Ultron. “JARVIS and FRIDAY are learning AIs and JARVIS has been around since I was about eighteen so…”

“They are human,” Mantis said, nodding with understanding.

“I believe that would be accurate,” Vision said. “I am… a synthezoid would be the best description. My base personality came from JARVIS’ programming.”

“You sound like him,” Quill observed. “But you’re… not human?”

Vision nodded. “Not precisely. My body was created by Ultron to serve as a vessel for himself. My… self, my… soul, if you like, came from the Mind Stone’s sentience and JARVIS’ programming and my life was gifted to me by Thor’s blessing.”

Eyes abruptly went wide among the Guardians. “Shit,” Quill breathed. “So that… that’s the Mind Stone in your forehead?”

Vision nodded. “Yes, it is.”

“That changes things a bit,” Quill said, looking at the other Guardians. They all nodded somberly.

“We had made some plans after we were told that Terra possessed three of the six Infinity Stones,” Gamora said. “But we had not anticipated that one of them was within a person. That changes things markedly.”

The others slowly realised what she meant but it was Vision who spoke.

“If it comes down to it, I would much rather you emphasise protecting the Mind Stone from Thanos than placing my life above the safety of all.”

“Vis…” Tony said, sounding pained.

Vision looked over at him and smiled. “Tony, I would very much prefer to live, for there are a large number of things I would like to do and see but not at the cost of the people of this world.”

“Sacrificing a person is not our first option either,” Gamora said firmly.

“So what does this Thanos want?” Rhodey asked. “Loki said something about him courting Death?”

Gamora nodded. “Yes, he seeks the favour and regard of Lady Death.”

“So Death is actually a… person? Being?” Tony asked, looking a little dumbfounded.

“Yes,” Gamora said.

“And Thanos is trying to woo her by killing lots of people?” Hope asked.

Gamora nodded again. “Yes.”
Hope rolled her eyes. “Typical male.” Everyone looked at her with surprised and she snorted. “I’m assuming that Death is responsible not for killing people but for doing whatever needs to be done after they die?”

“That is correct,” Loki said, looking at Hope with curious amusement.

“So what kind of idiot thinks they’re going to impress a woman by giving her more work and making her job harder?” Hope exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air. “If he really wants to impress Death, I’d imagine not giving her extra work would be a start.”

Tony, Rhodey, Stephen and Bruce all snickered and after they’d gotten over their shock, so did most of the Guardians.

“You know, I’d never actually thought of it that way before,” Quill said with a grin. “I wonder what he’d do if we told him that.”

“Kill you for insulting his decisions,” Nebula replied, grim and unsmiling.

“Man, I can kind of see why he got along with Ronan,” Quill said with a shake of his head.

“Who is Ronan?” Bruce asked.

“He had the Power Stone before we defeated him,” Quill replied. “That’s sort of how we all met.”

“They wielded the Power Stone for a short period of time,” Nebula added. “That’s why Thanos hates them.”

“How did you manage that?” Tony asked.

“I’m, uh… not entirely human,” Quill said. “My Mom was but my Dad was… a planet. Sort of. It’s complicated and he was a dick.”

“Maybe we should start a club?” Bruce murmured, looking rather wryly amused.

Tony snorted. “The Bad Dad’s Club? That’s you, me, Hope, Quill…”

“Nebula and myself,” Gamora added dryly. “Thanos adopted us after he destroyed our planets. He was not a good father.”

“You know,” Tony said wryly. “On the scale of bad dads, I’m starting to think I got off lightly.”

“You and me both,” Hope added.

Tony grinned at her for a moment before sobering. “So, how many stones does Thanos have?”

“One,” Quill replied. “He claimed the Power Stone from Xandar and he’s heading for Knowhere to get the Reality Stone. The Collector has it but that… might not be the easiest fight there.”

“Oh?” Rhodey said.

“Yeah, the Collector or Taneleer Tivan is… an ancient being, one of the Elders of the universe,” Quill said. “I don’t what kind of power he has but he wasn’t very intimidated by the Power Stone when we originally brought it to him.”

“Aye,” Thor added. “The Collector is indeed a being of great power. It is why Father chose to send the Aether to him. Should the Collector choose to oppose Thanos…”
“Wait,” Tony interrupted, shooting Thor an apologetic look. “He might not?”

Thor grimaced. “The Elders can be capricious beings, more interested in their own desires than the universe in general. They date their existence back to the very beginning of the universe. Even Thanos is a mere blip to them in the grand scheme of their lives. If the Collector decides that the Aether is more trouble than it is worth to him…” He sighed. “He may choose to give it up or trade it for an item that is of greater interest.”

“Is there any way we can… I don’t know… convince him?” Tony asked, looking a little sour.

“Elders only listen to us when it intrigues them,” Loki replied and Tony noticed that he was studiously avoiding eye contact with his brother while Thor was looking at him with an expression Tony couldn’t entirely categorise but nevertheless knew well. He’d seen it on Rhodey’s face more than once, especially when they were younger.

Tony abruptly snickered, gaining everyone’s confused attention. Tony, however, was just grinning wickedly at Loki who rolled his eyes and looked incredibly put-upon, yet faintly amused at the same time.

“You hit that?” Tony asked, enjoying the opportunity to essentially hang shit on a god.

Loki looked unimpressed. “Not the Collector, no.”

“But you banged one of these Elders.”

“Your Midgardian terms are so excessively crude and imprecise.”

“Brother,” Thor said, looking pained, as though this was something he did not want to know about him.

“The Grandmaster,” Loki said with a smirk, “is an acquaintance. Though he may be somewhat displeased with me right now. But that is irrelevant to this discussion. Elders are fickle and our chances of influencing the Collector without something to offer him as incentive are minimal at best.”

“Our best guess is that he will fight in his own way,” Gamora said. “He was prepared to pay us 4 billion units for the Power Stone alone and given we didn’t know what it was until we brought it to him, that was probably far less than what it was worth, especially to him.”

“But Thanos will get the Reality Stone,” Tony said.

“He will not stop until he does,” Nebula said flatly. “He will use up every minion and vassal and follower he has to get it.”

Tony nodded slowly. He then looked at Quill and Gamora. “Best guess, how long do we have?”

Quill and Gamora exchanged looks not only with each other but the rest of the Guardians. But it was Nebula who answered Tony’s question, having less hesitancy when it came to speaking unpleasant truths.

“Two Terran years. You might get more but I would not count on it.”

Silence fell in the room then Tony sighed and scrubbed his face with one hand. Rhodey briefly squeezed his shoulder then nodded to the Guardians.

“Alright then. Tell us everything you know about Thanos and Lady Death as well as any plans
you’ve already come up with. We’ll need all our ducks in a row before we go to the Council.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time we tie up a few loose ends of the not so good variety, namely Mordo.

Also, Loki totally hit that. *rofl*
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

A quiet morning becomes a morning of battle and revelations after Mordo decides to interrupt.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has less to do with current events in the story and a lot more to do with setting things up for the IW arc. And speaking of that, there will probably be one more chapter for this particular story arc, then I have some plans to do some bridging one-shots (and possibly some fill-in scenes as well) that will lead into the IW arc. Now that I've seen the movie, I have a better idea of what canon things I'm going to drag into my very AU from canon story. :D

So... regarding the fill-in scenes - I'm going to go through the comments to pick up some things from there but if there was anything you wanted to see that I didn't touch on in the main story, let me know. I can't guarantee I'll write it but I may do so. :D

Tony closed his eyes and arched up into Stephen's touch with a breathy moan. They'd been so busy with various things, including the imminent arrival of the Guardians and everything that was going to follow, that they'd hardly had any time for each other. Stephen had finally put his foot down this morning when Tony had tried to climb out of bed. Not that Tony had needed much convincing, not when Stephen put his hands and mouth to such delightful effect.

He shuddered when Stephen nipped at the scarred skin around the new arc reactor. The sensation wasn't quite pain nor was it entirely pleasurable but it sure as hell sent a shiver down Tony's spine and made his dick twitch. He slid one hand into Stephen's hair and made various encouraging noises to make him do it again. In response, Stephen chuckled and scraped his beard over the scars, drawing a low yowling noise from him.

Tony was just about to encourage Stephen to move a little lower when a siren suddenly started blaring and Stephen jerked away, his head turning towards one of the walls.

"My wards..." Stephen began before he was overridden by JARVIS, "Intruder alert. There has been a breach in the southern fence."

"My wards have been breached," Stephen finished as they both scrambled off the bed and started pulling on clothes.

"J!" Tony barked as he yanked on a t-shirt before allowing the suit to flow out and over him. He wanted to curse whoever had decided to be such a monumental cockblock. "Details! Let everyone hear it."

"A small group of ten have breached the southern fence," JARVIS replied, both over the room's...
speakers and within the helmet as it formed. “Facial recognition identifies the leader as Karl Mordo.”

Images of the intruders flickered to life on the walls and Stephen cursed when he saw them. Mordo and three others were dressed similarly to the way Stephen normally did but the symbol on the uniforms of the other seven as well as the weapons they held, identified them as something different - HYDRA.

“Strange,” Rhodey barked over the speakers. “Take Loki, Mantis, Gamora and Nebula and draw off those sorcerers. Everyone else, rendezvous on the south patio. We’ll take care of the HYDRA assholes. Everyone, I want these people taken alive if possible.”

There were a chorus of acknowledgements from the New Avengers as well as the Guardians. Tony was surprised the Guardians had put their hands up to help but also pleased as well. It was nice to know they were more than willing to pitch in and help when needed.

“Tony. Be careful.”

Tony paused and retracted his helmet when Stephen caught his arm. He smiled slightly. “Right back atcha, Harry Potter.”

They met halfway for a brief kiss then Stephen opened a portal to the common room – through which Tony could see Gamora, Nebula and Mantis just arriving – and Tony flew out of the window JARVIS had helpfully opened. He swung round the building and landed on the south patio just as the rest of the Guardians arrived. Rhodey had the faceplate of his helmet down and was probably getting more information from JARVIS or Hope, since she was nowhere to be seen, and Bruce was standing just to one side, shifting from foot to foot as he played nervously with the hem of his shirt.

Bruce smiled tightly when Tony arrived. “Thor should be here in a minute. Hope’s gone scouting.”

“Man of Iron!” Thor’s voice boomed across the patio as he walked towards them, tiny flickers of lighting already crackling around him. Thor looked intent and enthusiastic.

“Argh!” Tony said, backing off slightly when Thor would have clapped him on the shoulder. Thor immediately looked crestfallen and Tony hurried to explain. “Lightning and tech don’t go together too well, Point Break. Remember?”

Thor looked rather sheepish. “My apologies, shieldbrother. I had forgotten.”

“Got something that could help your puny backwards tech cope with that,” Rocket said.

The words and the tone were scornful and full of disdain but Tony had spent enough time talking tech with Rocket over the last day and a half that he knew better. Rocket was a bit like himself in more ways than he really cared to think about but definitely in the ‘use words and tone of voice to act as a buffer and hide what I really feel’ sort of way. Rocket had heaped scorn over the Earth tech that really was backwards and archaic in galactic terms while at the same time handling the stuff that was good with a reverential care that spoke louder than words.

“Later,” Rhodey said as his faceplate snapped up. “Hope reports that we’ve got two more groups of HYDRA goons circling around to the west and east. The only sorcerers appear to be the ones with Mordo. Quill, take Drax, Rocket and Groot and deal with the group heading east. Tony, take Bruce and head west. Between you and the Hulk, you shouldn’t have too many problems. Hope, Vision and I will take the south group. If you have trouble, sing out and Stephen will send someone to help you.”

Drax was frowned as everyone nodded. “What should we sing?”
Quill groaned and gave the big man a shove. “It’s a metaphor, Drax. I’ll explain later.”

Tony snorted with amusement and turned just as Bruce transformed into the Hulk. “Hey, big guy, let’s go do some smashing.”

Hulk grinned. “Hulk like smashing.”

Tony laughed and lead the way towards the group Hope had pinpointed. There were six HYDRA goons creeping around the west fence, clearly looking for the best place to make their incursion.

“Hey, guys,” Tony said as he flew just a couple of inches over their heads, making them duck and curse. There was as much chagrin lining those curses as there was surprise and Tony guessed that they had thought that they wouldn’t be spotted. It made him want to snort with indignation. Did they really think his security would be so lax?

“HULK SMASH!”

Tony made a tight turn just in time to see Hulk bound up and just leap into the middle of the group. Two were knocked out immediately and the rest were sent flying in different directions.

“No killing, green bean,” Tony called out as he targeted the nearest goon with the same sort of restraints as he’d used on Rogers.

“Aww, Tin Man no fun,” Hulk grumbled but Tony had the distinct impression he didn’t really mean it. He was glad JARVIS was recording all of this. He wanted to show this bit to Bruce and Betty later. It would do Bruce good to see that Hulk actually had a sense of humour.

It didn’t take them long to subdue their group of goons. The Hulk wasn’t bothered at all by their weapons and he certainly drew their attention sufficiently that Tony was able to restrain them without too much trouble.

“We’re done here, sugarplum,” Tony said over the comms once he’d shackled the last of the unconscious goons. “This lot are ready for pick-up. Where do you want us now?”

“Go help Strange,” Rhodey said, his voice terse but not stressed. Tony took that to mean his part of the fight was going well.

“Got it,” Tony replied then he turned to the Hulk. “Come on, big guy. Let’s put the fear of the Hulk into some wizards.”

The Hulk followed him around the building and Tony sucked in a breath as he saw what was going on. Stephen was being pressed hard on all sides by Mordo and one of the other sorcerers. The third sorcerer had trapped Mantis and Gamora in a strange sort of cage and had just flung Nebula through a portal to somewhere that looked a lot like Antarctica. He immediately plucked one of his homing beacons off its place on the armour and with a quick tweak via Extremis, he sent it flying after Nebula. It snuck through the portal just as the sorcerer closed it. He could only hope Nebula would see it and either pick it up or stay near it.

“Hulk! Help Mantis and Gamora!” he barked as he put on some speed and aimed himself at the second sorcerer fighting Stephen. He’d have aimed at Mordo but he was just too close to Stephen and he couldn’t risk it.

As he closed in on the sorcerer, he raised both hands and after very carefully adjusting the strength of the beam, hit the man square in the back with the repulsor beams. The sorcerer went flying and after bouncing once on the grass, lay still and silent. Now that he wasn’t having to fend off the secondary
attacks, Stephen was able to completely concentrate on Mordo and Tony hovered as he watched and waited to see if he was needed.

He quickly saw that he wasn’t. Mordo was clearly the more experienced fighter but Stephen was magically stronger and more creative, countering Mordo’s attacks with ease and coming up with novel counterattacks that made Mordo snarl. Finally, Stephen lashed out with some sort of magical whip that glowed golden and caught Mordo across one shoulder. Mordo staggered backwards and threw a brace of silvery shards towards Stephen that bounced off the shield he quickly conjured.

“Mordo, stop this,” Stephen said, his tone beseeching, almost begging. “There’s true danger coming from beyond this world. We need you.”

Mordo gave him a dark look and shook his head. “And who brought that on us. I will see balance brought back to this world, Strange.”

With that, Mordo opened a portal and ran towards it. Tony burst into action, zooming down to try and stop the sorcerer before he got away but before he could stop him, Mordo leapt through the portal. Tony pulled up but he got a good look through the portal before Mordo closed it.

“Fuck me!” he yelped as he pulled up just short of where the portal had been and hovered there. “Please tell me someone other than me saw that?”

“Who was that?” Stephen asked, coming up to stand just to one side.

Tony lowered himself to the ground and withdrew his helmet. “You saw him?”

Stephen nodded. “Who is he?” He then blinked. Hard. “Wait… was that…?”

Tony grimaced. “Later.” He displayed a hologram map in front of Stephen. “We need to get Nebula back first. She’s where the dot is.”

Stephen examined the map with a small frown then he turned and opened a portal to a vision of snow and ice. Nebula was standing there, holding Tony’s homing beacon and looking very disgruntled. She stepped through the portal and nodded to Stephen.

“I very much dislike magic,” she declared, giving Stephen a challenging look.

“At least you ended up in Antarctica,” Stephen said dryly. “I got stranded near the top of Everest. The air was very thin, there was a howling gale and I wasn’t actually sure at that point whether I’d be able to get myself back.”

Nebula’s eyes narrowed as though she was taking that as a challenge then she turned and tossed the homing beacon back to Tony. “Good reflexes.”

“Thanks,” Tony replied.

Stephen was just about to ask more questions when he was interrupted by the arrival of Rhodey and the others. The sorcerer looked frustrated for a moment then he turned and made sure the two unconscious rogue sorcerers were appropriately restrained.

“Everyone okay?” Rhodey asked.

Tony nodded. “We’re all good but Mordo got away.” He grimaced. “And there’s a problem. Or maybe a problem. A confusion anyway.”
Rhodey gave him a look of amused exasperation. “Okay, is it an urgent confusion or can it wait until we get everything sorted?”

“It can wait,” Tony replied.

The next couple of hours was taken up with cleaning up, making reports and handing over the captured HYDRA goons to the appropriate authorities and the sorcerers to Wong. Once that was all done, they gathered in the common room and sprawled out on the various couches and chairs or in Rocket and Groot’s case, the floor.

“So,” Stephen said from where he was lounging on the couch with Tony lying half on top of him.

“Yeah,” Tony replied. “Hey, honeybear, what would you say if I told you that the Red Skull was still alive?”

Rhodey froze and gave Tony a very long look. “I’d ask what you were smoking.”

Tony snorted. “I haven’t done anything like that since I was about twenty, sugarplum.”

“So it was the Red Skull,” Stephen said with a shake of his head. “Somehow, I hadn’t thought that name was so completely descriptive.”

“Who is the Red Skull?” Gamora asked.

“Captain America’s great nemesis in World War II,” Quill said promptly then he shrugged when everyone stared at him. “What? I may have been kidnapped when I was a kid but I read the comics before that.”

“The Red Skull was another recipient of the super soldier serum,” Rhodey explained. “It… didn’t work so well with him. Drove him insane, if he wasn’t already, and turned his head into a sort of… well, red skull.”

“J? Play the footage from the suit from this morning,” Tony said.

“Of course, sir.”

The TV lit up and they all watched from Tony’s point of view as he zoomed towards the portal. Just as he got close, the picture froze and they saw the Red Skull framed clearly in the portal.

“I thought he died,” Rhodey said with a frown.

“That’s what Rogers reported,” Tony replied. “Actually, I looked up. He reported that the Red Skull picked up the tesseract and was disintegrated by it. It was verbal report made in the middle of a lot of shit that was going down so I’m not sure how accurate it was and… I’m not sure anyone ever followed up with him after he woke up.”


“Somewhere that Mordo knows,” Tony mused.

Loki grimaced. “We cannot discount the idea that Thanos has them.”

Tony sat up a little. “Why?”

“He… has some ability to seek the signature of the Infinity Stones,” Loki said. “I… never learned
how. I wasn’t precisely in a condition to pursue that at the time.”

“Is that how he found you?” Tony asked.

Loki shook his head. “No, I’d had no contact with an Infinity Stone at that time. It was pure coincidence. When I fell, it was random chance where I emerged from the Void. Unfortunately, I had the misfortune to emerge within reach of Thanos’ followers.”

“But he might have been able to use this… ability to find the Red Skull, wherever he ended up?” Rhodey said.

“Yes, it is possible,” Loki replied. “Though I cannot say how he might have encountered this Mordo person.”

Now it was Stephen who grimaced. “Mordo has never used the Eye of Agamotto but he has been around it for years. That might be why. I’m just concerned that Thanos now knows exactly where the Time Stone is.”

“There are things that can be done,” Loki said. “Wards that can be placed. It won’t stop Thanos from coming here but it will conceal the exact location and buy you some time.” He arched an eyebrow. “As long as you do not leave the Time Stone in places Mordo knows.”

“I am its protector,” Stephen said grimly. “Where it goes, I go. I’d bring it here more permanently but he obviously knows where this place is.”

“He knows where this place is but not that the Time Stone is here,” Loki replied. “I can ward this place such that the Time Stone’s unique signature would be concealed.”

“Then we fortify the place?” Tony suggested. “Bring the fight here whenever it eventually comes.”

“The wards would have the added benefit of concealing the presence of the Mind Stone as well,” Loki said, nodding towards Vision.

Vision inclined his head slightly. “I have been thinking.”

“Oh?” Rhodey said.

“I believe we should investigate whether the Mind Stone can be removed,” Vision replied with more calm than anyone expected.

“Vis,” Tony said, sitting up a bit more, a worried look on his face. “That…”

“May not be possible,” Vision replied. “I know. But my… creation was complex and complicated. My body was provided by Ultron and Dr Cho’s Cradle. But my essence, my… soul, if you will, came from you, from Dr Banner, from JARVIS and from the Mind Stone. If it possible to remove the Mind Stone and only sacrifice a small part of who I am, then I believe that is a price that is worth paying. It would make it far easier to protect and conceal the Mind Stone.”

There was an uncomfortable silence when Vision finished speaking. No one wanted to admit that what he’d said had a fair amount of logic and sense to it.

Finally, Quill spoke up. “Well, it’s not something we have to make a decision about now, right? We’ve got the time to explore it and see whether it would even work.”

There were slow nods from many of the others.
“Indeed,” Vision said with a nod to Quill. “That is why I brought it up now.”

“Okay,” Tony said slowly, leaning into Stephen a little more. “So, we’ll… investigate this. But Vision… you are not expendable. You got that?”

Vision smiled shyly. “So I am given to understand.”

“Alright,” Rhodey said. “I think that’s enough for now. I suggest you all get some rest since we were all woken up a little rudely today.”

Tony turned and smirked at Stephen. “Yeah, we were kind of interrupted.”

Stephen arched an eyebrow and returned the smirk. “Yes, we were.”

A moment later, a portal opened underneath the two men and they disappeared through it back to what definitely looked like the bed in their bedroom.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

It's time to tell the UN about what's going to happen and start making advance plans.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this is a bit late. Work has been a nightmare so writing wasn't exactly high on the agenda until things got a little more sane.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The General Assembly was still in an uproar when Tony and the rest of the New Avengers and the Guardians were ushered out. There really wasn’t much more they could add and the questions had started to get repetitive so it had been decided to let them go as long as they remained available should the Assembly come up with any new questions. Tony was just glad to get everyone out in one piece and even more relieved that no one had managed to insult anyone, at least not past easy settling. Apparently having an intelligent, ambulatory tree, albeit one still in the depths of teenage angst and ennui, reiterating what people were saying about invasions was enough to stop most of the really dumb questions from being asked. Tony grinned a little at that. Thor had been doing the translating, courtesy of All-Speak, and he’d somehow managed to retain Groot’s current ‘well, duh’ attitude while be infinitely diplomatic in his translations.

But it didn’t really matter how they’d done it, just that they had. The General Assembly was upset, naturally, and worried and just a little panicked but they were moving in the right general direction. T’Challa had helped enormously with that, as had the Accords Council representatives, and Tony was happy to let them hash things out and let the New Avengers know what they needed to do.

“You know that some bright spark in there is going to bring up Rogers and his lot,” Rhodey said dryly as they adjourned to the conference room that had been set aside for them.

Tony nodded. “I know.” He sighed. “So do T’Challa and the Councilmembers. They’ll do their best.”

“You mean they might get pardoned?” Hope said with a grimace.

“We’ll try and head that off,” Rhodey replied.

“I believe T’Challa was going to have any decision on that tabled until later,” Stephen said as he sat down next to Tony. “Much, much later.”

“We could always use the cannon fodder,” Gamora said with a look of amusement that got laughter from the others.

The Guardians had been brought up to speed on the events of the Civil War and afterwards and they’d been appalled. Not so much by the whole breaking the law thing but more because of the
lying and betrayal and breaking the team thing. More than one person in the New Avengers had
gotten the impression that ‘team as family’ was something the Guardians took very, very seriously
because none of them really had any other family.

“Throwing Rogers at Ebony Maw sounds kind of fun,” Tony said with a lop-sided grin.

“Ebony Maw would chew him up and spit him out in seconds,” Nebula said, snorting
contemptuously.

They’d all noticed that while Nebula was the one who greeted anything family related with disdain,
she was also the one who clung to the idea of family the hardest, albeit in subtle ways. She was also
the one who had greeted Rogers’ betrayal of Tony with the most anger and she’d outright offered to
gut the man if that’s what Tony wanted. Then she’d paused and offered to gut Barnes in front of
Rogers instead. Tony had decided to not even jokingly pretend to accept the offer because he was
pretty sure Nebula would go ahead and do it. She was scary and a bit stabby at times and he adored
her. He was pretty sure she at least kind of liked him in return since she let him work on her
cybernetics when they played up.

“Maybe Black Dwarf then?” Stephen said innocently.

“He would chew Rogers up and spit him out as well,” Nebula said with a sniff. She then shrugged.
“Though maybe he would last a bit longer against the Dwarf.”

There were general chuckles at that then Thor spoke up. The Asgardian King had been sober and
contemplative since about halfway through their appearance in front of the general Assembly but
they’d largely let him be. Thor wasn’t one to keep things to himself once he’d settled on a course of
action he felt would help.

“I believe I need to leave Midgard for a time,” he said slowly.

“Why’s that, big guy?” Tony asked. “Problem?”

Thor shook his head then paused. “Perhaps. The description of the Infinity Gauntlet given my Ladies
Nebula and Gamora as well as my own recollection of the copy held in the vaults on Asgard raises a
question that I very much wish answered.”

“Why did the dwarves make it?” Loki said quietly but intently.

“You recognised the source then too, brother.”

Loki nodded. “I spent time with the dwarves of Nidavellir. Only they have the ability to create such
masterworks and only their King, Eitri, would have the skill and ability to create something that
could contain the infinity stones.” He now looked at the others. “But they are not evil people. They
can be cruel but so too can any other race. They would not endanger the universe.”

“Aye,” Thor said in agreement. “I wish to consult with King Eitri and find out why he would do
such a thing.” He paused and frowned. “I fear… well, I fear many things. At worst, King Eitri has
allied himself with Thanos. Otherwise… the dwarves are powerful but Thanos is a Titan. I fear for
them.”

“I will come with you, “ Loki said.

Thor shook his head. “No, brother. I need you to stay here and rule Asgard in my stead. Our people
will need you and so too will the United Nations.” He suddenly chuckled. “Besides which, your last
parting with the dwarves did not go so well.”
Loki scowled at him but underneath there was a sort of wonder that the others had come to understand ever since Thor had so casually named Loki his heir when they’d first arrived on Earth. Thor had a level of trust and belief in his brother – while being completely cognisant of his flaws and failings and even disapproving of many of those failings – that constantly knocked Loki off balance, as though he couldn’t understand why Thor felt that way. Tony didn’t quite understand it either but he did kind of envy it.

The Guardians had been quietly talking to each other and now Quill spoke up. “Rocket, Groot and Drax can take you there in the Milano, Thor. Gamora, Nebula and I probably should stay for now since we’ll be of the most help to the UN and Mantis wants to stay to work more with people here.”

“You have my thanks, Star Lord,” Thor said with a grave incline of his head.

“We should start doing some recruiting as well,” Rhody said. “That would certainly help us when the inevitable happens with Rogers and his merry morons.”

“There’s that group down in Hell’s Kitchen and Harlem,” Tony said thoughtfully.

“There’s someone in the Air Force whom I’ve been made aware of,” Rhody added.

“When Thor and the others gets back, we could also make enquiries out there,” Quill said, gesturing towards space with one thumb. “Once word gets around about what happened to Xandar, we might get some takers.”

Tony shot a slightly nervous glance at Rhody. “What do you think of me re-establishing the Iron Legion?”

The others looked a bit concerned at Tony’s sudden hesitancy but Rhody just nodded.

“Yeah, that’d be good.”

“I’ll speak to Wong and the other Masters at Kamar Taj,” Stephen said, leaning into Tony a bit. “They’re already coming up with plans for protecting the Time Stone but we should be able to contribute to Earth’s defences as well.”

“We should put out a general call as well,” Hope said. “Who knows who might be out there?”

“Good point,” Tony said. He then grimaced. “You know, we can probably stave off calls to let Rogers out by bringing up the point that if we do that, we’d have to approach people like the Abomination.”

Those who had been there in Nevada all shuddered. “Yeah, let’s not do that if we can avoid it,” Bruce muttered.

“Then again, I’d imagine hurling the Abomination at Thanos’ forces might actually be useful,” Hope murmured.

Bruce raised an eyebrow at her then gave a small laugh. “Actually, I have to admit that’s probably true.”

Tony hesitated for a moment. “That… might not be that stupid an idea. Depending on whether or not the Abomination and others like him could be trusted.”

“Point them at the bad guys and let them go?” Bruce looked very dubious. “I don’t know, Tony. They’d be just as likely to sign up with Thanos.”
“Yeah, I know.” Tony grimaced. “That is the flaw with the plan.”

“Have you talked to them?” Gamora asked. “I, too, was once Thanos’ ally. I turned my back on him. Perhaps there are others who, given the chance, might be willing to fight against him for the good of your planet?”

There was a moment of silence. Gamora and Nebula had received some intense questioning by some members of the Assembly after their revelation that they were Thanos’ ‘daughters’. The other Guardians had bristled at some of the questions but Gamora had handled them with aplomb, reminding them that she was the one who had worked with the Guardians to keep the Power Stone out of Thanos’ hands. Quill had then stood up and given a painfully honest speech about how it had been Gamora who had brought them together and lead them in the right direction. Most of the suspicion had died down but no one was naïve enough to think that things weren’t going to be difficult on that front once the whole thing went public.

“It’s worth trying,” Rhodey said in the silence. “We can get a list of everyone being held and have them assessed for whether or not we should approach them.”

“Aren’t we going to then have to include Rogers and his lot in that?” Stephen said.

“Probably,” Rhodey said with a grimace. “But that’s a bridge we can cross when we get to it. It’s not like this is something we have to handle in the next few weeks. If we get enough genuine allies, we may not even need to go down that path at all.” He shrugged. “We’re going to have to divvy up things between us once we start getting some direction from the UN.”

“If we do have end up with Rogers and his lot then Tony is having nothing to do with them,” Stephen said firmly.

Tony immediately frowned. “I’m not a delicate flower who needs to be protected from them!”

“I know,” Stephen said so matter-of-factly that Tony’s ire was immediately derailed. “But that doesn’t mean you should have any more to do with them than you do with Barnes.”

“I agree,” Rhodey said with a nod.

“As do I,” Hope said.

“They’re right,” Bruce said quietly before Tony could voice any more objections. “If I’d stuck around after the mess in Sokovia, you would never have made me deal with Maximoff, would you?”

“No,” Tony said immediately, knowing he was walking into a trap but unable to do anything else because he would never have allowed Bruce to be uncomfortable. “But it’s…”

“Don’t say it’s not the same,” Bruce said dryly. “It is. Rogers lied to you for years. That’s…” He shook his head. “That’s not something you should have to forgive and forget, not even for the greater good. There were so many opportunities where he could have told you but instead he made a conscious decision every day to lie to you. And not only that, he used your money, your tech, your resources and connections to hunt for the murderer of your parents.” He raised an eyebrow. “Worse, he used your father’s money to hunt for the man who murdered him.”

Tony grimaced. “Rogers isn’t entirely wrong when he says Barnes didn’t do it.” The conflicting expressions that ran across his face as he said that made it obvious that he both did and didn’t believe it.

“No, he isn’t,” Bruce said with a nod. “But that doesn’t mean he’s right either. But that’s beside the
point. He lied to you, he essentially stole from you and then he damn near killed you. You let me see
your medical files, Tony. I know what kind of damage Rogers did to you.”

“What Bruce is trying to tell you,” Gamora said with a sort of delicate amusement, “is that you are
entitled to and deserve the same kind of protection from us that you would give to us.”

Tony looked away with a frown then he sighed and turned back to them. “Since you’re all
apparently going to be stubborn about this, fine.”

Just then there was a knock at the door and it opened a moment later to admit Nigel Clements, the
current Chair of the Accords Council.

“Have they stopped arguing yet?” Tony said, eager to change the subject.

Clements chuckled. “Mr Stark, the day that the General Assembly of the United Nations stops
arguing is the day you know we’ve all been replaced by pod people.” He paused as they laughed
then continued, “We’ll be arguing about this for weeks, if not months, but there have been some
initial decisions made. The first is that the UN will be establishing a… a War Council for lack of a
better name for it. This War Council will work hand in hand with the Accords Council as well as the
various militaries, intelligence agencies and space agencies around the world. They’ll also be
responsible for coordinating the various ways that the people of Earth will be protected as well as the
medical side of things.”

“Loki and I shall send word to our people,” Thor said gravely. “We have many beyond warriors
who will be willing to aid our new home.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Clements said with a small bow. “I’ll let the War Council know once
they have been formally established.” He then turned to Tony. “Mr Stark, this is something of an
informal heads-up as a more formal approach, complete with appropriate contracts and whatnot, will
be made to your CEO, Ms Potts, once the War Council has been established but we were hoping that
Stark Industries, along with Wakanda and its scientists, would spearhead the technological side of
our defensive efforts. Obviously there will be ample scope to bring in any other people, organisations
and companies that can be of use but someone has to lead.”

Tony could help the savage sense of vindication that flooded through him at that oh-so-polite request.
What was even better, they weren’t looking at him and him alone and demanding a solution and
prepared to then belittle him when he tried and failed, they were looking to his company
and all the
brilliant minds in it to lead a coalition of people to all work towards some solutions that would help.
To see that they would be remunerated for their time and effort because contrary to what Rogers
seemed to believe, people did need money in exchange for their work so that they could live and eat
and play. Not everyone had an occasionally idiotic billionaire to act as their sugar daddy.

As he thought all of that, Tony felt something, some last remnant of whatever it was that the
ExVengers had instilled in him, crumble and fall away. Some last trace of a need to bend over
backwards for people with no appreciation of his genius and his skills, who never said a damn word
in thanks, that just faded away. And from the look on Rhodey’s face when he glanced over at his
oldest friend, from the tiny, soft smile and the small nod he received, he knew what had just
happened.

Tony nodded to Clements. “Of course. I’ll give Pepper the heads-up and we’ll contact King
T’Challa and start working on the logistics. Hell, we might even be able to do a bit of an
employment push at SI once news of this breaks. That’ll help with general morale if the big
companies start employing people.”
The Guardians all looked a bit confused by that but most of the New Avengers were nodding. It was true though. News of the impending invasion was going to frighten people, no matter how gently they broke it or how much they emphasised their new allies and the works that would be done to shore up their defences. People would be nervous and worried and wanting to run or hunker down or whatever else their flight or fight reflex prompted them to do. It was likely the various armed forces around the world would get a huge bump in recruitment numbers as some people decided to take up arms to defend their loved ones, their countries and their world. But for the average Joe, having big employers suddenly opening their doors and hiring in numbers would have a calmative effect even if the reason for that hiring push was frightening. Because in troubled and uncertain times, people liked security, especially the security of a regular paycheck.

Tony suddenly grimaced. “You realise that the UN is probably going to have to start pushing governments around the world to legislate against price gouging and so on?”

Clements smiled and nodded. “It’s already been brought up and is on the agenda for further discussion. Most of the representatives were already aware that would be something they’d need to handle but we’ll have to make some public announcements.”

“Pepper and I will start exercising what influence we have,” Tony said. He looked around at the others. “And perhaps the New Avengers can start doing some judicious press statements.”

“You know I’m not… really very comfortable in front of the press,” Bruce said with a smile that was half-grimace. “But I’m willing to make pointed remarks about how unhappy I’d be about any kind of dishonest behaviour. The Hulk agrees.”

There were chuckles throughout the room and Clements looked first surprised then appreciative.

“As much as I am loathe to make people frightened of the Hulk…” he began slowly.

“It won’t,” Tony replied, smiling at Bruce. “Or rather the people it’ll make afraid aren’t very nice people so they deserve it. The average person will see the Hulk being protective of them so it’ll come out in Bruce and the Hulk’s favour, especially if we tailor the message properly.”

“Will Stark Industries handle that or do you wish to make use of the UN’s people?” Clements said, looking appreciative of their tactics.

“We’ll handle it in house,” Tony replied after an assessing glance at Bruce. “But we’ll run it past your people before we do anything, just to make sure we’re all singing to the same tune and not stepping on anyone’s toes.”

“Thank you,” Clements said. “That was all I needed to run past you for now. The Assembly is going to be talking for hours so if you wish to return to the United States, we have no objection. If we have any more questions, we’ll contact you. And of course, we’ll keep you in the loop regarding the War Council and I hope you will do the same with everything you are doing.”

“Of course, Mr Clements,” Tony said as they stood.

There was a round of handshakes and then Clements took his leave. He moved quickly in the way that important people tended to develop – a fast walk that looked entirely normal but still covered a lot of ground in a hurry.

Tony looked around at the others then gestured towards the door. “Shall we?”

As they headed back to the quinjet that had brought them there, Tony reflected on what was ahead of them. A lot of uncertainty, that was for sure, but at the same time, he felt more confident about being
able to prepare for it than he’d ever felt before. Based on Gamora and Nebula’s information, he wasn’t actually sure if they could defeat Thanos but now that they were reliant on one person or even just a small group of people, he felt that maybe, just maybe, they might do it.

Chapter End Notes

Phew! This is the final chapter of this part of the story arc. Thank you for coming along on my little self-indulgent journey and I hope you've enjoyed it.

I do plan to do an Infinity War arc, which will obviously be somewhat AU from canon. :D I'm also planning on doing some missing scenes from this arc and some interlude scenes to bridge between the two arcs but I can't give you a timeline on when they'll go up. I've had some other fics that I've been neglecting a bit since I started this so I want to try and finish some of those but I'm hoping it won't be too long before I start.

Works inspired by this: The Guardians by GremlinSR

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