### Peachy Keen

**by AnonEhouse**

**Summary**

What if Tony decided in Siberia that he couldn't just go home? He was used to being the scapegoat, but this time the cost would be more than he could pay.

Ross would have the ammunition he needed to get Iron Man under his control, and what he'd do with the tech didn't bear thinking about.

Tony decided to use Protocol Pass The Torch. He'd be fine. A penniless fugitive's life would make a nice change of pace. Everything would be peachy keen.

(Tony miscalculated the pull the world had on him. He also miscalculated how many people would join him. Ultimately, Thanos underestimated him.)
"Well, looking on the bright side, this proves Maximoff's vision was bullshit," Tony muttered to himself as he picked bits of metal and glass out of his chest. He couldn't imagine feeling guilty over Rogers' death, particularly not as a result of Tony 'not doing enough'. Even Fury seemed to understand that Tony's mistakes came from trying too damn hard for other people, not for himself. Jesus, the things he'd done for the team, and for Rogers... oh, crap. Tony had signed the Accords and then broken them for Rogers.

Yep, that was gonna go over great. The sharks, led by Great White Ross, would be after his shiny metallic ass. In retrospect, having Ross's favorite bar demolished wasn't such a wonderful idea. Sure, Ross was always 'all power must be in my hands', but did Tony really need to make it personal?

There was no way for Tony to come out of this with a whole skin. It wouldn't just be Ross, it'd be everyone who's pissed off at the Avengers, even for things Tony had no part in, because guess what? Tony had been the public face, the one who stood up in front of the media, the one who went toe-to-toe with legislators and the U.N. and the world. When they painted angry graffiti in Sokovia, it wasn't Captain America's wholesome face they used, it was Iron Man.

And Tony was the only one with enough money to pay damages. He'd assumed the responsibility of supporting the Avengers and paying for their actions since the fall of SHIELDRA. He was pretty sure lawyering up wasn't going to be enough to get him out from under that responsibility now. Not so long as he owned anything worth taking.

Fury had the right idea. If you're dead, the bastards can't do anything to you. Tony finally reached the emergency connection. It was a last resort because it linked up his subcutaneous implants to use his own body to power it, a bit like a potato battery. It hurt like a son of a bitch. He activated it and gasped against the fire lining his arms and legs. "Fry. I'm done. Institute Protocol Pass the Torch." He clicked off the connection and lay still, panting, and trying to think. He was so, so screwed. But at the same time, it was a relief. Sure, he knew the alien attack was coming, but it wasn't his responsibility any longer. He'd told everyone he could, he'd practically shouted on top of soapboxes, and all it got him was eye rolls and annoyance as if mentioning the disaster he'd seen coming from space was a sympathy ploy. He was just a guy, that's all. He couldn't save the world by himself. Not when the people who were supposed to support him turned on him. He closed his eyes and waited for Vision.

"Are you certain you wish to do this?" Vision asked. He had brought a quinjet in stealth mode, and with his habitual neatness, collected Tony, all the bits of Iron Man, Capt... his father's shield, and the Winter Assassin's metal arm. They were over the ocean, still several hours away from New York, when the weight in the back of the quinjet had become too much for Tony.

"Yep. Never surer," Tony replied. He should be lying down, but sitting at the controls made him feel
"Very well." Vision hovered the quinjet only a few feet above the waves, and opened the hatch.

Tony could smell the salt and kelp and general fishiness. It made him a little homesick for Malibu. He pushed that regret aside, and watched as Vision tossed out all the junk metal. The shield floated for a few seconds, until waves filled it, and then it began a swooping side to side drift downward. Iron Man and the arm sank immediately. "They sink cars to make habitat for fish, don't they?"

"Do they?" Vision said as he closed the hatch. "How odd."

Mount Sinai Beth Israel looked different. But then, the last time Tony had been there, he'd been in a conference room, giving advice on their new robotic surgical procedures, and not down in a sub-basement surgical suite and post op care center, hidden and kept off the records. It probably seemed like a paranoid thing to do, funding a hidden medical center, but at the time Tony was mainly thinking of those heroes, like Spiderman, who needed to keep their identities secret. He could have chosen another hospital, but his arc reactor had kept Mount Sinai going after the Chitauri invasion when the power grid went down and their back up generators had been destroyed by random fire.

So, in short, they were both grateful and motivated to help when Tony called and explained the situation. Vision landed the quinjet on the hospital's helipad, and then left to hide it elsewhere while Tony was strapped onto a gurney despite his protests that he could walk. Although maybe they were right, because he became rather foggy before the elevator decanted them.

Tony didn't exactly hate hospitals. They terrified him, sure, but that was something entirely else. He really regretted being unable to use Dr. Cho's Cradle, but U-Gin Genetics was part of Stark Industries and he couldn't chance it. He'd got himself into this mess, he shouldn't complain that he didn't have access to high tech healing miracles.

There was an operation, but anesthesia is a wonderful thing, too many people take it for granted.

Then there were tedious weeks of recovery and painful physical therapy. The doctors were particularly concerned about his partial lungs losing even more function due to bed rest, so there were so many deep breathing exercises he felt like a balloon. He did have access to the internet via an untraceable StarkPhone linked through Friday, a parting gift from Vision, so at least he could keep an eye on things.

The Pass the Torch Protocol sent in Tony's resignation from everything to do with S.I. and signed over S.I. itself, and all the Iron Man suits and tech, to Pepper and Happy. He was fairly confident Pepper and the legal team would keep his stuff safe. And if not, there was always the Clean Slate Protocol. He wasn't worried about Iron Man being misused.

Rhodey was the only one who could use War Machine... if he recovered. If. Rhodey was still in the hospital in Germany being assessed when Tony went to the Raft to try to salvage Rogers and Barnes. He should have stayed at Rhodey's side, put his personal feelings above what he felt was his duty. Hell, he'd been injured himself, and should have taken a bed right next to Rhodey.

Rhodey was stable now, but his prognosis for ever walking again wasn't good. If Tony... yeah, if Tony had said 'Rhodey's my friend!' and just let Rogers and Barnes go to hell on their own, he...
wouldn't have broken the Accords, and he could be there for Rhodey. That really hurt, that he'd taken Rhodey's advice about being a team player and having people to watch his back, only to discover they were watching it in order to find the best place to stick a knife. And it was Rhodey's back, too.

But he couldn't do anything about Rhodey. He couldn't really do anything at all except watch what was happening outside his hospital bed. Tony lost track of the number of nations and individuals seeking redress. The political situation was extremely volatile. Many Americans were on Rogers' side because, well, he was Captain America! He wouldn't do anything wrong! Quite a lot of the rest of the world disagreed, particularly those parts that had experienced losses while Rogers was being extremely not wrong in conjunction with his friend Barnes.

Tony wasn't at all sure of the legality of it, but he understood the reasoning behind it, when the U.S. in a whirlwind series of trials convicted Tony in absentia of everything he'd ever done, everything the Avengers had ever done, and everything the Avengers might be thinking of doing. Well, all right, that's not what they said the lawsuits addressed, it was civil court, not criminal. It didn't matter. It boiled down to all his personal assets around the world, everything from buildings, aircraft, cars, bank accounts, right down to his jewelry and watches, and hell, his vintage rock band t-shirts. Everything. All of it seized to pay claims. The U.S. had to show the world some amends, and throwing Tony under the bus was expedient.

As an added cherry on top of the shit-sundae, he was sentenced not to be employed in any hi-tech work, on the justification that the Avengers wouldn't have been able to do much damage without the equipment he provided. He really doubted that was legal.

They even tried to claim Vision wasn't really a person and therefore he was an asset to be claimed. Vision had StarkSkyped Tony a video through Friday on hearing that ridiculous argument. Vision had said, "Very well, if the problem is that I don't look human, I shall correct it." And then he shimmered, and shifted his form. Tony remembered how he'd formed a cape out of nothing, so he shouldn't have been quite so surprised that Vision could give himself a naked human body. His height and build and features remained the same, but he had pinkish pale skin, light blond hair and gentle blue eyes. He looked like an English professor, only the Mind Stone had slipped somehow down to become a belly button piercing. He looked down at himself, and nodded. "Will this do, do you think, Mr. Stark?"

Tony laughed. "I think you might like to put on some clothes, Viz."

"Yes, I had anticipated that." Vision picked up a bundle of clothing and began dressing. "I would like to see the world, I believe." And then he walked out of view. Friday anticipated Tony's request and switched to other surveillance cameras, so Tony could watch as Vision calmly walked out of the Avengers' Compound and kept going.

"I hope the world treats you kindly, Vee," Tony said before he shut down the StarkSkype.
Chapter 2

By the time the hospital released him, Tony was old news. He'd let his beard grow out while he was recovering, and after the initial itchiness, he'd grown used to the way he looked in the mirror. No more touching up the gray. No more Tom Ford suits. No more lifts in his shoes. No more sunglasses indoors. Tony Stark had been a publicity creation, the face of Stark Industries, the bad boy, the drunkard who somehow by accident managed to turn his father's company into a global conglomerate and just stumbled over innovation. Yeah, sure, he drank too much and he enjoyed sex with willing partners, and he stupidly trusted the wrong people.

But he'd never screwed up his actual job. He liked to work. He never felt more alive than when he was creating something entirely new. Now he was just a guy, walking away from the ambulance that dropped him off in the first nearly empty street they passed. Even in Manhattan the streets were quiet at daybreak.

He walked until he reached a subway stop, and then descended into the depths. No one looked twice at him. He was just another guy in off-duty hospital scrubs. He hadn't been on the subway in years, and even then it was a prank, to see people's reactions when they recognized him. He held onto a pole and swayed to the rhythm of the train. It was dirty and smelly, and none of the people around him had ever owned a Fortune 500 business.

None of them knew what was coming. They were his people, the real people, the ones Rogers had treated as unfortunate collateral damage. Rogers had scolded Tony for being upset by Coulson's death. 'Is this the first time you've lost a soldier?' But soldiers at least know going in that they're risking their lives. Barnes was a soldier, and Rogers sure as shit valued his life above all others.

These people... Tony can't help them. He can't. He has to remember that, he's just a guy. No one wants his help. He just has to find himself a job and get on with his own life.

Tony had never looked for a job. He had no idea where to start. Hell, he didn't even remember his social security number, not that he could look for work under his own identity. Possibly he should have put more thought into the ME aspect of Protocol Pass the Torch, set up a new identity, hide cash caches around the world.

He eventually found a quiet alcove in Central Park with a good view of Belvedere Castle. The castle made him think of royalty. Why not call King T'Challa? His country was highly technological, and still isolated from the world. Tony could work there in secret, and T'Challa might actually listen when Tony warned him about the threat to the Earth. Yeah, with King Kittycat's resources, Tony might actually be able to do some good, anonymously, of course.

He woke up his phone. "Fry, baby, can you connect me with King T'Challa in Wakanda?" Tony found a smooth rock to sit on. There were dragonflies skipping the surface of the Turtle Pond. Slanting sunlight brought out their colors, red and brownish gold, like streamlined miniature Iron Men. Tony was prepared to wait, or to be passed on to one of the people who screened T'Challa's calls to avoid wasting his time, but there was a click almost immediately, and T'Challa's face appeared on the screen.

"Stark. There have been rumors about your demise. I am pleased to find them without foundation."

Tony gave T'Challa a smile. "Slightly exaggerated, your Majesty, but I couldn't call them unfounded."
As far as the world knows, I'm dead, and I need to stay dead."

"So. I take it this is not a social call?"

"Not so much, no. I know Wakanda's been isolated from the world, but you're still part of it. There's a danger coming for the entire Earth. I saw it, T'Challa. You need to prepare for it. And... I could help. I just need a place to work in secret, and tools. I know no one trusts me since Ultron, so you can place any restrictions you see fit, claim anything I come up with, I don't care."

T'Challa looked pained. "You request sanctuary?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess I do."

T'Challa sighed. "I regret being unable to grant your request, Stark."

"You don't believe me, either." Tony had hoped T'Challa would be more open-minded. He hadn't been directly exposed to playboy asshole Tony, after all.

"In point of fact, I do believe you. It makes sense. We in Wakanda do follow the news, and the invasion of New York City only makes sense in context as a test; an expendable force sent to gather information on Earth's defenses."

"Then... why? Like I said, I wouldn't cause trouble. I'm used to living in my lab, anyway. You'd hardly know I was there."

"Our guest facilities are already in use. Barnes had requested he be returned to cold sleep until a method of removing his programming could be devised. Rogers..." T'Challa sighed.

Tony blinked. "Oh. That... explains why no one's seen Rogers."

T'Challa nodded. "I made a hasty misjudgment, blaming Barnes for my father's death. And then in remorse, I compounded my error by offering Barnes sanctuary, discounting the rights of other victims to seek an accounting. Rogers assumed he was included. He also assumed I would not mind him 'borrowing' a vehicle to break the rest of his people from unlawful incarceration."

"Yeah. Rogers assumes things." Tony swallowed hard. Should he tell T'Challa what really went down in Siberia? "They were on the Raft. I was going to get them out... legally. But I didn't have time."

"There was too much haste, on all our parts," T'Challa said. "But what is done, is done. I cannot now send them away from Wakanda."

"Gave your royal word, right?"

"Not precisely. I had only promised Barnes sanctuary. But... it is a complex situation. If I release them, and they cause further harm, it will be on my head. It is bad enough that I have violated the Accords my father believed in, without endangering more people."

"Right." Tony took a deep breath. "I don't know what Rogers told you about what went down in Siberia."

"He said that you had attacked Barnes, and they had been forced to defend themselves. And that you were... sulking... because you had lost."

"Sulking." Tony laughed. "Wow. I guess... I guess he didn't expect me to make it out of there to give
my side of the story. T'Challa, I'm just out of the hospital, and lucky at that. Whatever you do, don’t turn your back on them. Or threaten Barnes. Or Maximoff. They’re pure snowflakes in Rogers’ eyes, and he’ll protect them at all costs, no matter what they've done. Barnes didn't kill your father, but he did kill my parents. Rogers knew for years and kept it from me. He also knew Wanda Maximoff was Hydra and forced her acceptance into the Avengers over objections, and without so much as a psychological evaluation. I don't know whose side she's on now, except her own. Be careful."

"I will take your words under advisement." T'Challa didn't seem surprised. He'd probably begun to see the ugly side of the Avengers now that he was in the position Tony had held. Providing for them without asking for repayment only fed their feelings of entitlement and resentment. "While I cannot offer you sanctuary, I would offer assistance, if I could. Is there anything else I could do?"

"Um, yeah... I'm embarrassed for cash at the moment. If I could hit you up for a loan, I'd appreciate it. No idea when I could pay it back, or even if." Tony felt horrible. He'd never had to beg for money in his life, and it was worse thinking he might not be able to repay it.

"That is easily done, and you need not worry about repayment. Your words of warning may save the lives of my people. I value them above all else."

They didn't say much after that, just made arrangements for one of the Wakandan attachés at the U.N. to bring their embassy's petty cash to Tony. T'Challa assured Tony that all the attachés were Dora Milaje, and quite capable of making sure they were not followed. It should be enough to get Tony out of the city and support him for a few weeks, while he investigated other possibilities.

One of the first things Tony did with the money was buy a postcard and a stamp. He resisted the bunch of Iron Man images, and selected a generic skyline. He scribbled on it, "Just a line to let you know I was in town. Sorry I don’t have time to visit you and your lovely aunt. Gotta run, my taxi’s waiting' he signed it 'T', wrote Peter Parker's address on the card and dropped it in the nearest mailbox.

The next thing he did was buy a chili cheese hot dog and a black Nirvana t-shirt from a street vendor. The X-ed out eyes on the smiley face suited his mood.

The hot dog was delicious.
Chapter 3

Tony had never had much cash on him in person at one time. Most of the time he didn't have any, really, so he was slightly taken aback by the volume of space that much paper took up. A U.S. dollar bill is .0043 inches thick, but that depends on the bill being brand new and lying absolutely flat. Most of the money was in small denominations, because hello, petty cash. The attaché had helpfully provided a money belt and an inexpensive wallet, and Tony stuffed some of the bills into the toes of the overly large shoes donated by one of his doctors. He felt better after he'd put the t-shirt over his scrub top, but still felt lumpy and attractive to the wrong sort of person. Tony Stark could be killed by a mugger for a measly fifteen grand, which would be sad for so many reasons. The attaché had apologized that it wasn't more, but they'd been entertaining various ambassadors and their staff, trying to set up the beginnings of cultural and commercial alliances for Wakanda, and had spent much of the monthly budget already.

He had to make a decision quickly. He was self-aware enough to know that if he didn't find a productive job, something to keep him occupied, he'd have too much time to dwell on the fact that he'd pretty much given up and wouldn't it be a good time to take a drink or a few thousand? No, he'd tried diving into a bottle before, and he wasn't going to repeat his mistakes. He was going to make all new mistakes!

So, a job. Justin Hammer somehow had got out of jail and still had his company, plodding along with really pathetic products. Tony's stomach turned at the very idea of working for Hammer, even as an outside contractor. Hammer would keep him a secret, and take whatever Tony wanted to give him, he had all sorts of ideas S.I. wasn't using, so it wouldn't even be competing with Pepper. But. HAMMER. God, no. Hammer would fuck up whatever Tony gave him, even if it was a simple kitchen blender. And associating with Hammer would crush Tony's very soul. The hot dog he'd eaten was uneasy at the thought.

Tony tapped at his telephone, thoughtfully, and moved to a new rock, where he could watch snapping turtles munch on pond vegetation. He admired their jaws and their armor was pretty cool, too.

Ok, put his thoughts in order, go over the people he knew wouldn't be watched by the government, and could possibly use his talents.

Laura Barton had enough stress with a fugitive husband and three small children to look after. She had struck him as a very capable person, so he was sure she had plans in the event Hawkeye never returned, but those plans hardly included taking in strays, even ones that could fix her tractor.

Fury was out there, somewhere in the wind, but even if Tony could reach him, he sure wasn't going to work for Neo-SHIELD or whatever organization had Fury pulling strings. Fury had too many times been willing to use indiscriminate weapons of mass destruction.

God knows, and Tony huffed a little at the inadvertent pun, only God knows where Thor was. Jane had told him, during one of their Science Sibs bitch sessions over coffee and donuts, that Asgardians thought of Earth's people as disposable as goats. And even if Thor had become enlightened-- Tony rubbed at his throat, feeling once more a self-proclaimed god's hands on him-- even if Thor invited Tony to Asgard and flung open the doors to their workshops, their science relied on entirely new technology. Sure, he could learn it, Tony hadn't met any science he couldn't learn, but would their scientists be willing to share secrets? They hadn't wanted to with Jane, even when they needed to in order to save themselves.
He had no idea where Bruce was, not that it would help to join forces even if Bruce felt like teaching Tony how to live on the run. Tony didn't know how Bruce had lived without using his skills as a scientist. Tony couldn't even fall back on doctoring the poor. He could fix their cars, though. He liked working on cars. He could do that, couldn't he? He hadn't had time to tinker in years.

Natasha was either in the wind, or with Rogers. T'Challa hadn't mentioned her, but then Tony hadn't asked. She'd turned coat so many times Tony wouldn't trust her not to turn him in, either for a personal advantage, or simply for Rogers' approval.

And Rogers. Even if Rogers had any resources beyond his innate nobility and shining purity of spirit, Tony would die in FIRE before he'd ask Rogers for a glass of water.

So that left... "Friday," Tony said into his phone, "I need suggestions. Where can I go?" he knew it was ridiculous to expect Friday to answer. She was young still.

"Can you give me some parameters, Boss?"

Tony sighed. "I have less than fifteen thousand dollars, and no tech beyond this phone. I need a place where I can... reinvent myself. If I'm not Iron Man any longer, who am I?"

"Reinvent yourself, Boss?" Friday's confusion was obvious.

Tony ran his hand through his hair. One of the turtles grabbed a duckling from underneath, pulled it under, and ate it. He didn't admire them so much any longer. "I need to work with my hands, but I can't be caught applying for a hi-tech position with any company. I don't have enough start up funds for much beyond the basics. A workshop with adequate tools, low profile, and totally relaxed hiring standards would be great. Also, I'll need a new identity, but it'll take time to set up the background and insert the data everywhere so it'll hold up. Once I decide who I want to be, we'll work out the details, and you can do that.

"But that's for later. Right now... I need a place to start. It'd be nice if you could also make sure I don't wind up in a nest of Iron Man haters. I'm a little tired of that, right now."

"Yes, Boss," Friday said. She made humming noises, and flipped through images and scrolled data too fast for him to read, as her way of telling him she was working. After a few seconds the images stopped scrolling, freezing on one image, a black and white scan of a page from a glossy flier, a small town supermarket handout by the less than professional look of it. "Boss? Is this a possibility?"

Under the heading 'Tennessee Home Handyman' was a photograph of a four-fingered Iron Man hand. A telephone number, address, and 'We're connected' was written on the bottom.

Tony sat up straight. "Harley," he said softly. It had been... what, five years. Harley must be eighteen by now, at least. He'd sent Harley an entire workshop, and made sure a full-ride M.I.T. scholarship awaited him, but kept away after that. He shouldn't drag Harley into his mess... but maybe a visit. Just... long enough to use his tools, make himself a half-decent computer, see how Harley was doing.

Just a brief visit. That's all. Just to see.

"Friday, figure out the safest, quickest way for me to get to Rose Hill, Tennessee." Tony smiled. It would be good to see someone whose life he hadn't ruined.
Well, shit. Until Tony got false ID, he couldn't take a flight, even domestically. He'd never realized that, what with always having his own transport. And by next January he'd need a passport! Iron Man didn't need no stinkin' ID. But he wasn't Iron Man any longer. He'd been hoping to catch a flight to Knoxville and then get a car... yeah, no ID, no rental... maybe he could go Greyhound. Was that even a thing any more? And would they want ID, too?

"Boss," Friday finally said, she sounded almost in tears. He was a bit proud of her for that. "I can't find an alternative that's both safe and quick."

Tony sighed. "Yeah. I know, baby. What have we got that's safe?"

"The best case I can come up with is for you to drive." The phone screen showed a Google maps route, with driving times estimated between ten and twelve hours.

"Great." Tony didn't want to steal a car, not just for moral reasons. He didn't want to leave a trail. "I could... maybe ask Happy to drop off a car. No, bad idea. We're keeping our friends clear of this mess."

"Boss! I found it!" Friday said happily. "Ride share!"

"What?"

"It's an informal site where people meet to carpool. You can put in a request and I'll vet all the answers to make sure they're safe."

"Huh. Worth a try. Ok." Tony looked at the site and spent some time typing and editing before sending off his request, including his promise to pay up front all expenses for a much longer trip if the driver wanted to go somewhere else after dropping him off, just so he got to his destination. He hated to do it, but he cited personal trauma and mild autism for his inability to either drive himself or use public transport. It wasn't actually that far from the truth. He put up a good front, but he was never really comfortable in crowds.

He rented a room in a mid-class hotel and waited for results.

On the third day he had a reply, asking for a meet. He'd had time to make some basic purchases, a few changes of clothing, a duffel bag, personal hygiene items, including a grooming kit for the full beard he was trying to cultivate to something like neatness and a Timex. He didn't buy sunglasses, but he wished he could. His face felt naked without them.

He went to the outdoor cafe his contact had suggested and looked around for a bearded black man with long dreadlocks dyed gold wearing a purple baseball cap with a white NY Yankees logo on it. He saw a young man of the proper description and went over to the table. "Hi, are you the guy from share your ride?" he asked.

"Ye..." the man looked up from the soda he was drinking and his eyes went wide. "Holy shit," he said softly.
Tony was about to run when the man put up both his hands. "Don't go, man." He tugged at his shirt, revealing a faded, jagged line of scar tissue, outlined by tattooed flames. "I was a kid trapped in a burning car in 2012. Iron Man got me out. I would do fucking anything for him."

Tony hesitated. He had a shit sense of who to trust, but what the hell, he was running out of options. He pulled out a chair and sat down. "You don't have a tattoo of me on you anywhere, do you?"

The man laughed. "I don't need one. I've got you here," he tapped his chest. "In my heart. You need a ride, hell, I'll take you anywhere you want to go, and keep my mouth shut about it. What the government did to you is absolute shit, man."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Fair enough." The man held out his hand. "My name's Jayden."

"Tony." Tony shook Jayden's hand. "Pleased to meet you. I hope we like the same kind of music, otherwise this is gonna be a long ride."

Jayden laughed.

Chapter End Notes

https://www.shareyourride.net/carpool/USA/

I wasn't planning on adding a totally original character, but when I went googling for a photo so I'd have some idea of how Tony would recognize his ride-share, 'dyed dreadlocks' seemed a good search topic, and I found a photo of the MOST beautiful man. He actually has LOTS of tattoos, but none of Tony. ;^)

I don't hotlink, and the webpage where it was hosted is full of popups so I didn't want to put it here, so maybe imagine a younger, neatly bearded, Jason Momoa, with a more golden skin tone and thin gold dreadlocks flowing down his bare chest to touch his nipples. His chest is blackwork tattooed with flames at top, outlined stars below, cloudforms below that surrounding the name 'Ann' and winglike shapes on the shoulder. So gorgeous.
They took turns driving Jayden's Hyundai, and by unspoken agreement the passenger got to choose the tunes and the driver got to mock their choice. The car was in good shape, but neither of them wanted to risk getting pulled over, so they didn't attempt to shave time off by edging close to the speed limit.

Tony started to pull out his wallet when Jayden stopped for the first gas fill up, but Jayden shook his head. "Put that away, Tony. I don't take money from my bros."

Tony blinked. He couldn't remember a single time one of the Avengers had offered to so much as buy him a cup of coffee. He put his wallet away slowly. "Thanks, Jayden. How about I get the snacks? We need road trip food."

Jayden nodded as he stopped the car. "No ice cream, or powdered sugar stuff. Or cheese pockets." He got out and went around to take off the gas cap while Tony was getting out on the other side.

Tony grinned. "Got it, nothing messy." He rummaged the shelves and racks before emerging with Slim Jims, Cow Tales, Funyuns, and chocolate covered peanuts. The hunt brought back memories of college road trips with Rhodey.

"You are a good provider, man," Jayden said around a mouthful of Slim Jim as he sat back and Tony took the wheel.

They had started at dawn to make the best use of the light, but it was still dark by the time the Hyundai coasted to a stop outside a small two story house like so many others they'd passed, the white vinyl siding chipped and broken in places, but overall in respectable condition. There was a porch light on, and several other lights were visible from the ground floor.

Tony sat there and looked at the house. "I should have called first. It's been years." Just being here was bringing back both good and bad memories. He hadn't had a panic attack in a while. He was probably due for one. "That's rude, isn't it?"

Jayden nudged Tony with his elbow. "Go ring the bell. I'll wait here. And if it doesn't work out, you give me a call. I'm going to visit my grandma in Mobile, but she won't mind if I bring a friend. She loves to show off her cooking."

Tony nodded. He turned to Jayden and held out his hand. "Thanks. You're a lifesaver."

Jayden took his hand and pulled Tony close for a hug. "I'm glad I met you. You take care of yourself, now." He let Tony go.

Tony got out of the car. He went up to the door and rang the bell. The door swung open so fast Tony almost fell in. Harley stood there; he was taller than Tony and his hair had darkened, but his grin was exactly the same. "Wow," Harley said, "you look like shit! Come in and have a tuna sandwich!"

"I just need to use some of the stuff in your shop, and then I'll be out of your hair."

"Hell, no!" Harley said.

"HARLEY!" came a woman's voice. "Language!"
Tony flinched, but then he straightened when a blonde woman came up next to Harley and rumpled his hair. "Where's your manners, young man? Go clean up the guest room." She reached out to touch Tony's arm, lightly. "My name's Holly. Come in and make yourself at home."

"I just... I could stay in the workshop. I'll only be a few days." This really felt wrong. He hadn't thought about it. He could be bringing disaster to Harley's family. "There might be trouble."

"Wipe your feet. Have you had a long drive? Would you like to freshen up?" Holly looked into Tony's eyes and he could see clear determination and absolutely no fucks given. Holly was apparently Pepper's soul-sister.

He gave in. "Yes, please, thank you, Holly." Tony turned to give Jayden a thumbs up.

Jayden leaned out of the window and yelled, "Illegitimis non Carborundum!" before he drove away.

"That sounded rude," Holly commented mildly. She smiled at Tony.
Chapter 6

Tony was glad of a stretch and a chance to wash his face after the long drive. He peered at himself in the mirror. He didn't look like shit, did he? Ok, he had the beginnings of a mountain man beard going. And he's thinner than when he met Harley. And five years older. And they weren't exactly five fun-filled years. He should have bought sunglasses. He shrugged and left the bathroom to head downstairs.

A tall young woman was standing on the landing. Tony paused. She looked a lot like Harley. "Hey, are you Harley's sister?" He tried to remember if Harley had told her name, but all he had was an impression of a borrowed Dora the Explorer wristwatch. It had been big enough to fit him. He hadn't thought about it at the time, but later it had occurred to him that it was odd for a little girl's wristwatch to fit him, not that he was a huge boned guy, but still he had bigger wrists than a little girl. He guessed she wasn't that much younger than Harley, and just happened to like Dora the Explorer despite not being in the expected age demographic.

Eh, he'd caught Rhodey watching My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic more than once. People liked what they liked. No shaming here.

He waited a few more seconds, but the girl didn't say anything. He guessed she was shy. He smiled. "Thanks for loaning me your watch. I really appreciated it."

She blinked and looked at her wrist. She was wearing the replacement watch he'd sent her.

"Right." Tony began to feel like a creeper. "I'm going downstairs to talk with your mom and Harley." He went down and followed the sound of voices. Harley and his mother were in the kitchen.

Holly was wearing a waitress uniform, and pinning a paper frill into her hair when he entered. "I've got to go to work, but I'm sure Harley will keep you company. I've put a Bisquick cobbler in the oven. Nothing fancy, just canned peaches and cinnamon. Harley, make sure Charley comes down to eat while it's still warm."

"I will mom," Harley said.

Holly snatched up a set of keys and then turned to Tony. "Mr. Stark, I want you to know you're more than welcome here." She waved and then went out of the room quickly.

Tony was a little dazed. He looked at Harley. Harley grinned at him. "Grass doesn't grow under mom's feet," he said. He scrunched up his face. "It's been hard, you know, with me and Charley."

"Charlie's your sister?" Tony asked, hesitantly. The young person he'd seen certainly looked female, and from her clothing he assumed she identified as female, but possibly he was mistaken and Charlie identified as male, and he'd offended by referring to him as Harley's sister.

"Uh huh." Harley gave Tony a long look. "Charley's smarter than I am, but people... people are hard for her. So, you know, if she doesn't answer you or look at you, she's not being rude, you know?" Harley sounded defensive.

"I get it. I met her on the stairs. Is it going to upset her, me being here?"

"Nah," Harley sighed. He went over to peer into the oven through the oven's glass door. "She kinda lives in her own world. Sometimes she looks out and sees us, but it's like we're not as real to her."
Tony nodded again. "Is this the point where I'm supposed to say that's a bad thing? Because, honestly, I'm a little jealous."

Harley straightened and smiled. "Me, too. Sometimes. The cake's almost done. I'll go get Charley. You can put out the plates and stuff." Harley waved in the general direction of the cabinets on the far wall.

Charley's family obviously loved her, just the way she was. They were good people. Tony smiled as he brought out mismatched plates and set them around the small, gingham covered table in the kitchen. There were four chairs, but one of them was turned around to face the wall. Tony didn't touch it.
"So," Tony said, once the three of them were seated at the table, eating warm Bisquick cobbler, which surprised Tony by being remarkably edible, even though the flavor was unsophisticated. "You've got your own business, Harley?" he said, to break the silence.

"Yep!" Harley looked up from his cake. "I appreciate the scholarship, I want you to know that, Tony, but right now I'm needed here. Mom's job... well, there aren't any benefits and Uncle Sam takes his thirty percent." Harley made a pinching, grabbing motion with one hand. Then he smiled. "And I'd miss Charley."

Charley tilted her head and smiled slightly. "We play chess," she said softly.

Tony was pleased to know that Charley could talk. "Maybe we'll play sometimes," he said.

"Yeah," Harley said to fill the silence when it became apparent Charley wasn't going to continue the conversation. "I guess you think it's funny, Charley's name, but it was really Charlotte, only Dad... he started calling her Charley to go with Harley." Harley pushed a piece of peach around on his plate. "Some folks said mean things, that Dad left because... you know... too much trouble. He was always saying he was going to win big, and then we wouldn't have any worries. I guess he doesn't have any worries now. Wherever he is."

Charley looked up abruptly, and stared at Tony. He suddenly noticed how very blue her eyes were, even bluer than Harley's. She dropped her fork and left the table.

"What?" Tony asked.

Harley shrugged and resumed eating.

There were noises from the other room, creaks and thumps. Charley returned with a dusty photo album in her hands. She pushed her plate aside and thumped the album down on the table. Before Harley or Tony could say anything she opened the album, and paged through, impatiently flipping pages and ignoring the photos that fell loose, ancient glue having dried to uselessness. She plucked one photo out and laid it down on the table, tapping with her fingers. "Dad," she said triumphantly.

Tony peered at the photo. It was a pre-digital snapshot, taken with a fairly decent camera. It was an outdoors, wildernessy type picture, showing a scruffily bearded man in hunting gear including a red plaid jacket, standing in front of a canvas tent.

Charley tapped the photo again. "Dad," she said, and then she pointed at Tony. "Tony."

Harley leaned over to look a the photo, and laughed. "She's right, Tony. You do look a lot like him, I guess. You know, it's been eleven years." He got a thoughtful expression on his face. He picked up the photo and held it up, looking back and forth between it and Tony. "Dad never had any close friends."

"Whatever you're thinking," Tony said hastily, "No. I'm just staying for a couple days."

He'd left his phone turned on so Friday could listen in, and she piped up with, "But Boss, where will you go?"

Harley nodded. "You should stay and be our dad."
"And what happens when he returns? Or something to do with him, anyway." Tony said. "Because, you know, dads go, but sometimes they come back to haunt you."

Friday added, "I have conducted an intensive search, and there is absolutely no trace of Edward Keener, anywhere on Earth, and has been none for eleven years."

"Yeah, Dad was no dope," Harley said. "If he wanted to disappear, he wouldn't half-ass it."

"Language," Charley said. She sat back down and went back to eating her cake.

"I think your mother would have something to say about you acquiring her a new husband," Tony protested. "And even if she didn't mind, I've got... well... it's complicated... but Pepper. I don't want to even pretend to cheat on her. She would KNOW. I've hurt her enough, you know?"

"We'll ask Mom when she comes home after work," Harley replied. "If you're done eating, we can go out to the workshop."

"Yes!" Tony said, relieved. Mrs. Keener would certainly shoot down that ridiculous idea.
Chapter 8

Tony lost himself in exploring the possibilities in Harley's workshop. There were shelves near the front holding assorted household appliances for repair and big buckets holding commonplace tools nearby. "You can fix a lot of stuff with just the basics," Harley said. "When I have time, I work on other things." He waved towards the cutting-edge workshop further into the building.

Tony examined Harley's 'other things' projects and they had a good time working on one together. Charley came in after a while, and peered over their shoulders, apparently content just to watch. They all lost track of time.

"Oh, there you all are!"

Tony looked up. Holly was standing in the workshop door. She'd changed into a pretty flowered dress and comfortable looking red slippers. Tony tended to notice shoes. "Yes!" he said, "Harley has some world-changing ideas in here."

Holly smiled. "He also has some kitchen changing mess in the house."

"Oh, yeah. I meant to wash up, Mom," Harley said.

"But Tony!" Charley said. "Dad Tony."

That was a conversational bomb. Holly's eyebrows went up. Tony said hastily, "Charley found a photo of your husband and the kids think I look enough like him to pretend to be him. Crazy, isn't it?"

Holly paused, as if thinking it over. "Yes, that's crazy. It would work much better if you were Eddie's brother."

"Dad had a brother?" Harley asked.

Holly looked up to the heavens in exasperation. "He does now."

"OH!" Harley said, "That brother, sure. Uncle...not Tony. Tommy!"

Tony blurted out, "I refuse to be anyone's Uncle Tom."

"Well, it should be something you'll respond to without thinking," Holly said. "Donny? No, you're not a Donny."

"Maybe something like Stark?" Harley suggested. "Mark?"

"Sterling!" Charley said, firmly. The Keeners exchanged glances and nodded.

"What?" Tony didn't know how he got into this situation. "Look, there's no need to explain me, I'll only be here a few days."

Holly came close to Tony and looked at him, seriously. "We saw what happened in New York. I don't know what happened afterward. I don't know why. I only know that you're a good man, and there aren't enough of those in the world. I have a perfectly good spare room, and Harley has a perfectly good workshop, and he could use a partner in his business."

"But..."
Holly continued as if he hadn't interrupted. "Rose Hill is a nice, quiet, friendly town, a good place for someone to get away from big city life, and big city troubles. Charley likes you. Harley thinks the sun rises and sets on you. I trust my children's judgment. You have a place here as long as you want it." She smiled. "Sterling sounds like a nice name, don't you think?"

Tony blinked. "I... well...maybe?" Charley and Harley looked at him. "Yes?"

"Group hug!" Harley said, and the Keener family surrounded Tony. It felt weird, but also damn nice.
Friday cheerfully created a history for Sterling Keener, going all the way back. Tony suspected if he asked she would provide prenatal medical records for Sterling’s mother. Fed Ex showed up two days later with a packet of paperwork, including various IDs, several common credit cards, and a passport with a few stamps, mostly from European nations.

Sterling had been traveling and out of touch with the family, Holly had explained to a few people in her church ‘Stitch and Bitch’ group who made quilts and knitted blankets for charity. She told them he’d come to live with them and help out once he’d heard about his deadbeat brother.

"Welcome to Rose Hills, Sterling!" the heavyset man behind the counter at Fred's Store said when Tony stopped in to pick up some food the day after he got the credit cards. The limit on them was ridiculously low, Tony wasn't used to limits. Holly had given him a list, and directions to the discount food store, and a request not to buy too much junk food.

"Thanks, Fred," Tony replied, wondering at the speed of the gossip chain.

"I'm George," the man said while totting up the groceries. "But George's Store sounded stupid."

Tony laughed.

"Holly and her kids are good folks," George said. "We're all glad they've got kinfolk lookin' out for them now."

"Yeah, well," Tony felt awkward.

"Oh, hey, Harley says you're good with cars! How 'bout motorcycles?"

"Sure, I can fix up a motorcycle for you, if you want."

"Nah, my 'bikin' days are over." George patted his belly. "But I was thinking' you'd need some wheels, and I've got a busted hog in my back yard. The old lady's been complaining about it killing the grass. I'd be grateful if you'd take it off my hands."

"That... that's awfully kind of you." Tony just barely refrained from offering to pay for it. He'd had to borrow Harley's beat up truck to get the food, after dropping him off at his latest job, reshingling, at least that's what he thought Harley said he'd be doing.

Tony wondered if all small towns were like Rose Hill, or if it was just that he was a novelty. Everyone he met wanted to shake his hand and tell him something about the town. Where to go if you wanted the best fishing, or who made the best burgers (Bubba Brew's Sports Bar & Grill), or who was planning a yard sale and might have some nice shirts in his size.

It was a little overwhelming, especially when some of the widows and other unmarried women around his age smiled really sweetly at him, but after a few weeks, things settled down. He politely sidestepped all the attempted romantic overtures, attended the BBQ's, and remade a corner of the Keener property into a small garage where he repaired anything too big to fit into Harley's appliance shop. Sometimes he and Harley would go out together to fix up homes, or build kitchen cabinets, or pretty much anything, up to and including dog houses.
Tony didn't quite trust himself not to make a mistake if he was too relaxed, so he always ordered a soft drink at Bubba's to go with his burger. Someone noticed, and he was invited to AA. He didn't think booze was ever really his problem, but he went to a meeting out of curiosity and found there were actually things he wanted to confess. Now he had sort of a family relying on him being sober, and it wasn't a hardship to refuse the occasional beer offered when he and Harley had completed a hot and sweaty job. He was even beginning to like lemonade.

A month later he got his first chip. It was a simple bronze coin, embossed with the words 'To Thine Own Self Be True' and Unity, Service, Recovery around a triangle encasing a circle around the numeral 1.

He liked it better than the medal Stern had pinned on him, and kept the coin in his pocket, to brush his fingers over from time to time when the news would mention the Avengers, or Stark Industries, or a lot of things from his past. Pepper attended the auction of his personal possessions in New York, and he just couldn't take his eyes off her in the brief clip they showed. She was so beautiful and so strong. She bought everything. No one wanted to bid against her. The auctioneer wouldn't let anything go on a single bid, so Pepper would place the minimum, and someone in the crowd would say 'Plus a dollar', and then there would be silence until Pepper placed the winning bid.

It made Tony's heart feel very strange. The auction house was full, standing room only, and none of them would take anything away from Pepper. Friday sent Tony reports and images from auctions around the world, where people in Stark Industries jackets would quietly appear and bid on the things that Tony had really liked, not just the 'must have here because it's a convenient location' and most times, it went the same way as the New York auction.

The only auction that wasn't attended by S.I. was at the Avengers' Compound. Tony had signed the facility itself over to the team, but he'd paid the expenses, including the taxes. It would be a while before that caught up, and the compound itself could be sold for arrears, but the contents? All paid for by Tony Stark. All the tools and toys and wardrobes and furniture, most of it custom made. If the Avengers ever returned, even if the government let them keep the Compound, it would be to a bare cement barracks. No red velvet designer dresses, no hand made Italian shoes in 1940's styles, none of the little homey touches. It was petty, Tony knew it was petty, but he still liked the idea of them being surprised when their wishes weren't automatically granted.

The world, though, the world hadn't forgot Tony Stark. And they didn't hate him. They didn't think he was a fuck up. They didn't even blame him for running away and hiding.

Maybe... maybe he could still help? He'd have to think about it.
Chapter 10

First Tony needed to build a proper computer. He had ideas, but they needed more processing power. Friday helped by locating bargains in parts, including components that most people didn't know could be used the way he wanted. Harley helped by being a world-class bin diver, not that he actually dug things out of the trash, but he knew all the cell phone and computer repair places for miles around, and especially he knew which ones were lazy enough to pile discarded equipment in the back alley until they had enough to be worth sending off for proper disposal.

Quasimodo, as Tony named the first usable construction, took up ten times the space it should, and was half as fast as it should be, but it could hold and manipulate a gratifying amount of data without blue-screening. His first project was to design bio-mechanical braces for Rhodey.

He was eating a tuna sandwich when he heard a rusty miaow, and looked down to see a skinny, rumpled, dirty orange cat staring at him, half hopefully, half frightened. He broke off a hunk of sandwich and tossed it to the cat, which scrambled awkwardly to eat it. The awkwardness became explainable when he saw the cat was missing part of his back leg.

"Aww, Tripod." Tony gave the cat the rest of the sandwich in pieces, each tossed closer to him until he had the cat sitting on his lap and attempting to purr, as if it had been so long since he’d felt like it, that he'd forgot how. "Yeah, buddy," Tony said, petting the cat despite its unappetizing smell. "I know. But it can get better." He smiled.

Charley loved Tripod, who turned out to be unendingly patient with leg fittings and test runs and ribbons around his neck, and having his fur combed even when brushed the wrong way to make it fluff. He was hell on mice and rats, though, proving that you can be gentle with your friends, and still be death to your enemies.

"Boss, don't start machining the parts just yet," Friday told Tony once he was ready to produce Rhodey's braces.

"Why not?" Tony asked. He was looking over his parts inventory and supply warehouses, trying to decide what he could afford that would do the job. He still had a fair chunk of the fifteen thousand left, but he had nebulous plans that could easily eat up his funds. "You sent Quasimodo the scans of Rhodey's legs and all the medical reports. Why shouldn't I start? Do you think I should just send the designs to S.I.?" He was going to do that, of course, there were a lot of people who could use mobility enhancement, but he wanted Rhodey to be the first, and to know Tony remembered him.

"I don't want to say. It's a surprise, Boss! Just wait until Thursday!"

Tony blinked. Friday was learning and becoming more of a person every day. Interacting with not only Tony, but also Harley and Charley was changing her in unexpected ways, unexpected, but not bad. It was good to have a different perspective. He decided to let her have her way for a while. He could probably go over the plans a few more times, anyway, just in case he'd overlooked something. And he's got a bunch of borked laptops to fix for customers, anyway. "Right. You know, Thursday isn't my birthday. Is it?" Tony was pretty sure he hadn't lost that much track of time.

Friday giggled. "No, it's not a birthday present."
"Because if it was, I'd want cake." Tony went over to his workshop shelf and took down the first laptop.

"Got it, Boss. Cake is for birthdays! Boss, when is my birthday?"

"Um, that's hard to say. Look up your code and find the earliest compilation date, we'll go with that."
Chapter 11

Boss, it's Thursday!

"No, you're Friday," Tony muttered around the wrench he was holding in his mouth. Holly wanted to change the shower head for a more efficient model, but the old one had been in place since the house was built, and it just did not want to come off. He'd tried two different kinds of wrenches, and so much WD-40 he couldn't smell anything else and it still was stubborn.

He tried once more and it finally gave. "GOT YOU, you bitch."

"Language," Charley said cheerfully. She was watching from the doorway, with Tripod in her arms. Possibly she was thinking to try to give the cat a bath, which would not work out well for anyone.

"I'll put a quarter in the jar," Tony promised.

"BOSS, it's THURSDAY!" Friday said again.

"Yeah, yeah," Tony picked up his phone. "Oh, right. Surprise day. Let me just put the new shower head on."

"Your surprise is in your workshop," Friday said.

"Great." Tony put on the new shower head, tested it, attempted to soap and rinse the WD-40 stink from his hands, gave it up as a bad job, put the tools away in his tool bucket and left the bathroom. "Don't wash the cat," he told Charley. "He might rust." Which was a lie and Charley knew it, Tripod's prosthesis was stainless steel, with a high proportion of chromium and nickel.

Tony went out to the workshop. A tall man was standing in front of the shop, peering into the open door. Tony's heart rate sped up a little, because while the local folks were accustomed to Harley's 'tinkering' and accepted Tony's gadget filled shop as proof that 'it ran in the family', this wasn't anyone he recognized. People around here didn't wear Burberry coats, with a Mulholland's Deerskin Rucksack tossed casually over their shoulders.

Then the man turned and smiled at Tony. "Hello. I bring you greetings and best wishes for your future endeavors."

"Vis!" Tony grinned. "You old son of a... well..." Tony belatedly recalled that Charley had trailed behind him, cat still in her arms. "How have you been? You're looking good." Vision had learned to smile like a real person. Tony was so proud of him.

"I have been well, Mr..." Vision paused. "Mr. Keener. Friday tells me you have adjusted to a changed lifestyle."

"Yep. I'm doing good here. So, Friday talks to you."

Charley walked up to Tony and tugged at his shirt sleeve. "I'm Charley," she said, as if reminding Tony of his manners. "And this is Tripod," she petted the cat's head.

Vision blinked. "I am pleased to meet you. My name is Vincent Addams. I am an old friend of Mr. Keener's."

"I'm a new friend," Charley said, and then she put the cat down and wandered away, apparently
bored.

Vision blinked again. "Tripod's prosthesis appears completely successful."

"Yep. Come on in, you can meet Quasimodo. Although it's not an A.I. so there's not so much meeting as getting out of the sun." Not many people went past the Keener house, but some did, and as Tony knew, the gossip train operated at great speed. Almost certainly people had already seen Vision and begun making up stories to account for him, but Tony didn't see the point in adding 'he hung around outside Sterling's workshop with a backpack, maybe he's a mad bomber'.

Vision looked up at the cloudy sky. "Thank you, that sounds... interesting."

Tony led Vision into the workshop and slid the doors shut behind them. "So, how's everyone doing? I mean, if you know. I'm not sure where you've been and whether you were in contact with anyone. I've been watching the news, but there's not much. People seem to be keeping their heads down and..."

Vision took off his backpack and set it down on the table and opened it.

It was full of refined vibranium.

Tony stared, shocked into silence.

"I have been traveling, assessing the resources and weaknesses of the world, against the coming of extraterrestrial hostiles, which you have predicted, and I find myself in agreement that scenario is very likely," Vision said. "This is a gift from Wakanda."

From a side pocket of the rucksack he pulled out a rolled parchment sealed in black wax with the impression of a snarling panther's mask. "This is documentation signed by the king of Wakanda and the Wakandan council of elders approving your possession of it, and authorizing you to use it as you see fit. I am told to say that this is in recognition of the fact that you have demonstrated restraint of power under severe temptation, and so they have no fear that you will abuse it."

Vision tilted his head. "You are crying, Mr. Keener. Have I upset you?"
"No, no, this is good. T'Challa told them... they know..." Tony had thought he was the only one who knew. He could have killed Rogers and Barnes at nearly any time up until the end of the fight. Barnes wouldn't know what Iron Man was capable of, but Rogers had to. He had to have known. Hadn't he seen what Tony did to Leviathans? Rogers knew Tony was holding back.

He was crazy mad with grief and betrayal and he still didn't want to kill them, and he held back because in his heart he knew, he knew, Rogers would fight, sure, but he would stop. Once he'd worked out his anger on the punching bag, he'd stop. And then they would talk.

Rogers wouldn't beat him to the ground and abandon him, broken and alone, with no care for how, or even, if, he survived.

He just... wouldn't.

Only he did.

And Tony knew then how badly he'd been mistaken. Rogers had known Tony would hold back, and he'd treated it like any tactical advantage. Find a weakness and strike, strike, strike, before the enemy learns to cover it.

Tony took a deep breath and wiped at his face. "I'm just sentimental about gifts, Vision."

"Ms. Potts suggested I bring a giant rabbit."

Tony laughed. "She's never going to let me forget that. Ok, look. While I'm tempted to make vibranium armor, that's, that's a vanity project. We need to find a better use for it. Something that can protect everyone. No matter how generous Wakanda is, the source is limited." Tony picked up a tube of vibranium and peered at it. "I'll have to study it, make tests, find out all the properties..." He was mildly regretful he hadn't kept the shield, but then, his father had told him it was an alloy, and anything he learned from it would be unlikely to be exactly the same as the pure form.

Vision reached back into the pocket on the bag and produced a flash drive. "Wakandan scientists have already conducted many tests and found alternate uses for vibranium, beyond its strength and ability to resist force."

"Gimme!" Tony reached out for the flash drive.

"There is also information on linking to the Wakandan Deep Net, which is inaccessible to outsiders. You may confer with Wakandan scientists and officials. In the interest of further saving time, I have taken the liberty of setting up an account for you, under the name 'Iron Panther', which was king T'Challa's suggestion."

Tony grinned. "This is really like my birthday." Tony went over to the floor vault he had installed just in case, and put the rucksack in it. "We have to go out and get cake."


"Well, shit," Tony said, tiredly.

"Swear jar," Charley remarked. She went over to Vision and touched his arm, and then pointed at the rucksack. "Cake," she said decisively.
"What?" Tony said.
"There is no cake in that bag, Charley," Vision replied even as Tony was wondering how she had got into the shop. He had closed the doors, hadn't he? They were open now, that's true.

Charley huffed and rolled her eyes. Tony recognized the signs of an imminent frustration related outburst. Sometimes Charley would reach out, and not be understood. No one was happy when that happened, results varied, but they were never pleasant. He decided to go with emergency distraction mode. "Get your good shoes on, we're going to the bakery!" he announced.

"Cake," Charley said with satisfaction and ran out of the workshop.

Vision watched her for a moment and then turned back to Tony. "Will the young lady's knowledge cause a problem? If you need to relocate, I can assist."

"No, no, it's fine." Tony felt sick at the thought of leaving Rose Hill, and the Keener family. "Charley knows who I am, and she hasn't told anyone. Her communication skills are weak, not her understanding."

"That cake," Charley said, pointing to an all chocolate Boston Cream Pie. Then she turned and looked at a cake topped with shavings of chocolate curls like leaves, with cherries set in between. "That cake." Then she looked at a chocolate fudge cake with thick swirls of chocolate. "That cake."

"We can't eat three cakes before they get stale." Tony pointed out.

"Perhaps," Vision said, "An assortment of smaller cakes?" He indicated a display case full of cupcakes.

Charley smiled. "Cake, cake, cake, cake," she said, pointing out four different kinds of cupcakes. "Charley, Harley, Holly, Sterling."

Tony said, teasingly, "What about Vincent?"

"I am not a cake-eater, Mr. Keener," Vision said, which was an understatement. Vision enjoyed cooking, and he could actually eat, although he couldn't differentiate tastes, and digest, but he found the process 'inconvenient'. Since it wasn't enjoyable or necessary, he tended to avoid it. Tony still hadn't figured out why Ultron had kept modeling his form after humans. You'd think since he hated them, he would have made something entirely new.

Charley nodded in a 'so-there' way and watched closely as the cupcakes were packed up. They had driven to the bakery in Vision's small rental car, so for once Tony wasn't having to fit things into the carriers on his motorcycle. The baker had greeted him and Charley by name, and he'd introduced Vision as a friend from the city, come to see how settling down had agreed with him. He hoped such a prosaic explanation would cut down on the rumors.

They went back to the house, and put the cupcakes in the refrigerator. Charley wandered off once that was done.

"So," Tony said, turning to Vision, "You didn't get to tell me how everyone is doing. You saw
Pepper? In person?

"Indeed. Ms. Potts is quite well, as is your company. There was however a stock drop when rumors of your demise were circulated. There were also rumors claiming that you were not dead, but that your disappearance was a sympathy seeking ploy meant to overshadow your having driven Captain America out of the United States. Interestingly enough, both of these rumors have been applied to Captain America in reverse, but as he has no association with any corporation, I have been unable to ascertain any effect on the economy."

Tony shook his head. He wasn't going to even think about Rogers. "I don't care about S.I. Well, no, ok, I care because if S.I. goes under a lot of people get hurt, but I trust Pepper to have everything in hand. I'll be sending new product specifications via Friday which should help convince the board I'm not dead. We'll use the Wakandan Deep Net, so no one can trace it back to me. Thanks for that, it saves me some work figuring out a secure route. If Pepper thinks it's a good idea, she can tell the board I've temporarily retired from public life, due to injuries. The hospital has my HIPAA release for her to access my records if she needs to show them just why I need to recuperate.

"I'd rather she didn't have to use it, but if she does, it's there. I'll tell Friday to pass that on."

Vision nodded. "If I may ask, why do you not contact Ms. Potts directly? You have access to untraceable methods, and have had so for some time."

"Yeah. Well... we were on a break. She needed distance from me, and all my associated baggage. That hasn't changed."

Vision made a non-committal noise that seemed to indicate polite disapproval. He really was learning to be human. "I still have some time before I need to leave to make my next appointment. Is there anything else you'd like to discuss?"

"Yeah." Tony sat in the kitchen chair that was now his. He waved at Holly's chair, across from him. "Rhodey. Happy. Dum-E and U. Are they... are they ok, really ok? Do they understand that I didn't want to leave them? I miss them. I miss them every day."

Vision nodded as he sat. "I believe they understand." He smiled. "Friday tells them about your day. They are glad you have found a refuge and no longer are so driven."

Tony sighed. "I was pretty arrogant, thinking I could save the world by myself. That takes a team. A real team." He reached out to squeeze Vision's shoulder.

"And you have it," Vision replied. "There are many people of good will around this planet. All that is required is to connect those with resources, whether mental, physical, economic, or political with those who can best use them. King T'Challa is merely one of many who will help us defend our home. It is not alone on your shoulders. You are not suited for the role of Atlas."

"No one is," Tony agreed.
Chapter 14

After Vision left, Tony returned to the workshop and set Quasimodo to sorting out the Wakandan data on vibranium while he did some simple repairs. Whatever else went on, the Keener family had bills to pay, and Tony didn't want Harley's business to get a bad reputation by being slow.

He sharpened a lawnmower's blades, rewound the electric motor on a movie projector from the 1940's, and put a new electric cord on a fish tank light before he heard the distinctive rattle of Harley's truck pulling in. A few moments later he heard the truck door slam.

"Hey, Sterling, who was that guy, really?" Harley said from the open door of the shed.

Tony rolled his eyes and put down the fine screwdriver he was using to open the back of a watch to replace the battery. The Rose Hill gossip train, on schedule as ever. "Vision. But he's going by Vincent Addams now."

Harley came in and put his hands on Tony's shoulders. "Are you leaving? I know this isn't what you want to be doing."

"Tony Stark always does what he wants," Tony said.

"Yeah, but what about Sterling Keener?"

"Sterling Keener is fine right here. Vincent brought me some supplies, and some good news. I'll tell everyone once Holly returns from work."

"Boss," Friday said, "Don't forget you have a meeting in the church basement tonight."

"Oh, yeah, after my AA meeting. I don't want to miss it, it's my two month anniversary." Tony had rubbed his one month coin so often the edges were wearing smooth.

"Aw, you're going to make me wait to find out what's happening until then?" Harley gave Tony the puppy dog eye treatment.

"Yes," Tony grinned at the face Harley pulled. "I have work to do. Shoo."

"I'm not one of your bots," Harley said.

"I can't threaten to send you to community college, but I can withhold dessert! Charley earmarked the cupcakes in the fridge specifically for each of us, only I've forgot which one was which."

"Ok, fine!" Harley threw his hands up. "When you get caught up, come and help me with the truck?"

"Sure. There's a roll of duct tape around here somewhere."

Harley threw a shop rag at Tony before walking out.
Some of the vibranium alloys showed promise for unexpected applications. A copper and tin admixture, in particular, had fascinating properties, and only required a very small percentage of vibranium. Tony was still thinking about it when he parked his motorcycle outside the church.

The AA meeting went well. No one had fallen off the wagon since the last meeting, so there was a jubilant spirit and hugs all around. Tony didn't know if other AA groups were into hugs, but this one was, and after the initial surprise he'd found it was an excellent thing, whether used as comfort, consolation or congratulations.

The meeting leader had as usual coffee and doughnuts on the side table to refresh everyone after the speakers had finished, but this time she'd added a case of bottled water. "Got it at Sam's Club in Knoxville," she said. "What do you think, Sterling?"

Tony picked up a bottle of 'Glacéau Smartwater' and perused the label. "Wow, Coca-Cola's merchandizing department is amazing. This is tap water, distilled to take everything out of it, and then they added electrolytes."

"Electrolytes are a good thing, though?"

"Sure, but they're not magic. It makes the water taste better than plain distilled, but I could make it by the gallon by adding a few cheap ingredients to generic distilled water. Or you know, the quickest way, add a few drops of unflavored Pedialyte... I picked that up from a soldier..." Soldiers made him think of the coming war. He reached into his pocket to touch his new two month coin, bronze again, copper and tin with traces of silver, but it could be vibranium bronze coins. Huh, smart water... No. SmartWater! Liquid encoded by different techniques, each resulting in a binary sequence unique to each batch. Already in use as a theft deterrent and property identifier in some areas.

After a few minutes, Tony realized he'd lost his audience. Probably looked foolish, holding a bottle of water and staring off into space while he thought. God, space. This... this wasn't a complete solution, but it could help a hell of a lot. He had to get back and contact the Wakandan scientists, check if his math was right. If it was... even a small amount of vibranium could protect a large area.

He put the bottle back down on the table, and waved goodbye. Got to get back home to begin work on Project Atlas. Yeah. Project Atlas, hold back the sky, and protect the Earth.
Chapter 16

Tony was so excited he had to keep reminding himself that he didn't have Jarvis as a co-pilot on his motorcycle. Even at that, he missed the turn-off for the Keener house and had to backtrack. He parked the motorcycle next to Harley's truck, noticed that Holly's faded blue sedan was in its usual place, and resisted the impulse to head straight to Quasimodo.

Holly was taking a casserole out of the oven when he entered. It smelled like one of his favorites, canned chicken and stars soup over a bed of rice mixed with leftover cooked chicken from the Sunday roast. She straightened up and brushed the hair out of her eyes. "Well, don't you look fit to burst! Harley said you had some good news?" She covered the casserole and set it down on a hot pad in the middle of the table which had already been set for dinner.

"Yes! Where are the kids? I want to tell everyone at once."

"I'm not a kid," Harley said good naturally, entering the kitchen behind Tony, "but I guess I'll let the old man call me that."

Charley was with him, and she hummed in agreement.

"Yeah, yeah, we're all semi-responsible adults here," Tony replied. "I trust you, all of you, to keep this quiet. Right, don't tell anyone." He looked at Charley, and added, "Not even the cat." He took a deep breath. He wasn't used to explaining what he was thinking. It was so much simpler just to DO it. But the Keeners deserved to know what he was working on while he was living under their roof. "I may, just may, have an idea for something to keep the Chitauri at bay. Vibranium is a unique metallic element whose properties change when alloyed with other substances. Theoretically a vibranium 'bronze' utilizing copper and tin with the vibranium as a trace element, similar to the use of silver in common bronze, can form a defensive repulsive barrier, in much the same way similar poles of a magnet repel each other, to any substance, once it's been encoded, via specific electrical impulses while the alloy is being forged and is still in a liquid, flux state, and in much the same way Smart Water is encoded in batches all the same, each batch of vibranium bronze could be further coded to link together even when separated by great distances, so small, very small, amounts of the vibranium bronze could be scattered over a large area, and would lie dormant until automatically triggered by sensing a particular element at a distance, hopefully, in the upper stratosphere." Tony paused. "Any questions?"

Charley walked past him, opened the refrigerator, took out a cupcake, and brought it to him. She put the cupcake in his hand, and then patted him on the head.

Holly laughed. "I have no idea what you said, but I'm with Charley."

"Look, mom," Harley said, "I get it, I think. But will it work?"

"Maybe?" Tony put the cupcake down next to his plate. "I'd like to get started right now, to check."

Holly crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her foot on the kitchen tiles.

Tony sighed. "Right after dinner."
Chapter 17

The Wakandan scientists carried out tests over the next few days, and confirmed Tony's hunch. He was going to do his own tests, of course, but it was good to get them started from their end. They could produce a lot more than he could.

While waiting for their results he had forged vibranium steel into a new bio-mechanical leg for Tripod, who accepted the change with equanimity after adjusting to the lighter weight. Since it worked for the cat, and really, there wasn't anything that could go wrong, Tony made a set of powered leg braces for Rhodey and then puzzled over how to get them to him, before he remembered Jayden.

"Friday, track Jayden's phone, let me know where he is." He doubted Jayden would still be visiting his grandmother. "Oh, and find out where Rhodey is!" Tony felt more than a little guilty he hadn't tried to talk to him, but he'd been busy! Yeah, no, he'd been avoiding Rhodey, Pepper and Happy because he just had this irrational feeling that if he spoke to them, something bad would happen to them. He admitted it wasn't logical, but he still couldn't bring himself to do it. Not now. Maybe someday when he stopped believing that everything he touched turned to shit. So far, he hadn't hurt the Keeners. God, let him not hurt the Keeners. Even the cat deserved better than to get caught up in a typical Tony Stark disaster extravaganza.

"I have located Jayden in Manhattan, Boss, and Colonel Rhodes is currently in residence at Stark Tower, while undergoing physical therapy. Would you like me to connect you with either of them?"

"Jayden, connect me with him, just him. I don't want to bother Rhodey." Tony took his two month coin out of his pocket and rubbed his thumb over the embossed words, thoughtfully. It was about the right size for a component of the vibranium 'net', which gave him ideas and Jayden being in Manhattan might work out even better than his first thought.

"Tony?"

"Yeah, hey, hi there, Jayden. Look, I need to know, are you busy?"

"Not really. Been job hunting, but you know, I'm not exactly the flavor a lot of folks are hiring."

"Some people don't know a good thing when they see it. You need to apply at S.I. we're... they're always looking for good people."

"I appreciate it, Tony, but I don't want to get a place I didn't earn just because I did the decent thing."

"No, no, don't get me wrong. Sure, I'd put in a good word for you, so you could jump the line for an interview, but S.I. doesn't give out make work positions. You've got a lot of potential, and I hate to see it wasted. Or worse, I'd hate to see you give in and cut off your dreads."

"Hah, I can't. Grandma told me she'd never bake me another pie if I did. She loves my dreads, man."

"Your grandmother is a wise woman."

"And she bakes a killer pecan pie. So, what did you call me for?"

"I was hoping you might stop in at Ave... Stark Tower, and pick something up for me. And I'd have a package for you to take back to them from me."
"Huh, sensitive stuff you don't want to drop in the mail?"

Friday chirped, "Harry Winston sent the Hope diamond to the Smithsonian via regular registered mail."

Tony blinked. "And when was this?"

"1958, Boss!"

Jayden said, "My grandma sent me five bucks for my birthday last year. I lied and told her I got it."

"Yeaah," Tony said, "Times change, Friday. So, Jayden, you think you could do that? You could go for the job interview at the same time."

"Are you paranoid, Tony? Do you really think someone's watching everyone that goes in and out of the Stark Tower?"

"Mmmmaybe. Just a little. Hey, paranoids have enemies, too!"

Jayden laughed. "Sure, I'll do it. Call me back when you've got everything set up. Want me to bring you anything else?"

"Maybe a pizza from Ray's?"

"They got a twelve hour hot box?"

"No, but S.I. does!"

Jayden laughed again. "You got it, man." Jayden ended the call.

"Ok, Friday, talk to your other self at the Tower. I want a box of samples of Chitauri and Leviathan armor packed up and ready to go. I want Jayden to get a pass-through to H.R. for an immediate interview. I want you to tell Pepper what's going on, and have her do one of her 'random' drop ins so she can meet Jayden. You know, she likes to keep them on their toes."

"Are you sure you don't want to talk to Ms. Potts yourself, Boss?"

Tony was tempted. "No. No, not yet. Just... tell her I love her. I always will."

"Yes, Boss," Friday replied.
Chapter 18

After making all the arrangements, Tony realized he was totally not going to be able to concentrate on anything until Jayden arrived. To the trip time he had to add time for H.R. to open the next day and time for Jayden to go through a normal interview, and then Pepper was going to want to talk to him, not just hand over the samples, and quite likely Rhodey would stick in his oar, and if Happy was there he'd probably want to check over Jayden's ID and car and so, you know, it was going to be a lot longer than twelve hours. Tony refused to be that guy who nags and makes it sound like he doesn't trust you to do your best, so Tony was absolutely not going to call Jayden... and yes, Tony was rambling in his own mind.

He distracted himself by fixing a lot of small appliances and sadly abused laptop computers and one horrifically beat up blue jeep whose license plate showed it had managed to get here from California, somehow. Tripod hissed at the jeep until Tony noticed that it had a lot of dog hair stuck in it, and vacuumed it.

Eventually it was too dark to work outside, and most of the inside jobs were either completed, or needed parts he didn't have, so Tony washed up and went into the house. A post-it note with a cat face drawn on it (and a word balloon- Eat Meeeow) was stuck to the microwave door. A covered plate of leftovers was inside. He checked the contents: cut up hotdogs in B&W canned beans, with a handful of Tater Tots on the side. He vented the plastic and heated the food. The Keeners weren't gourmets, but really, neither was Tony.

He ate, washed up his plate and cutlery and his glass of water, put them in the dish drainer and went up to bed. He changed into pajamas, shut off the light and got under the covers. A few moments later he heard a soft, thump.... thump... thump... and put out a hand to pat the bed next to him.

Tripod jumped up, walked up Tony's body, and neatly arranged himself so he wasn't pressing on the breastbone or anything else sensitive.

Tony yawned. "Want the leg off?"

Tripod mrrped and nudged Tony with his nose. Tony reached out without looking, felt alongside Tripod's warm fur until he encountered cool metal, and then pressed the sequence that caused the magnetic bond between leg and the vet installed implant to release. He put the leg on the nightstand and fell asleep with Tripod's raspy tongue washing Tony's arm.
"Do you have any paraffin wax?" Tony asked Holly early in the morning. He'd come down and fixed coffee, and considered making waffles, but he hadn't got the hang of the waffle iron yet. It was apparently an art form judging how hot it was and the exact moment the steam finished venting to indicate it was done. Eggos were easier, but homemade tasted better.

"Um, maybe...let me check." Holly rummaged in the pantry and emerged with a couple dusty, bug-chewed cardboard boxes containing blocks of wax. "Yep. I tried canning years ago, before they said wax sealing wasn't safe. Kept it because I thought the kids might like to make candles."

"Great. I'm going old school for the test run. I'll use the lost wax method to cast the vibranium bronze-- that's long. Vibronzium?"

"It sounds like an instant tanning product," Holly said, trading the paraffin for a cup of coffee.

"Yeah, needs a better name." Tony fished his two month coin out of his pocket. "I also need a better model. I was thinking to use my AA coin, but it just doesn't seem right."

"And it would be illegal to make it look like real coins," Holly said, as if that would stop Tony. "Oh. I know. I have just the thing!" She pulled up a fine silver necklace she had tucked inside her blouse and took it off over her head. There was a round silver medallion at the end of it. "Eddie gave me this on our first anniversary. He said it would protect me, even though neither of us was Catholic." She handed the necklace to Tony.

He looked at it closely and laughed. "Saint Anthony Protect Us? Isn't he the patron saint of lost causes?"

"Lost things, and people, and also miracles." Holly paused. "After... after Eddie left I looked him up. One of the conventional images of him is a flaming heart, because of his visionary fervor."

Tony didn't really know what to say to that. He removed the medallion from the chain and gave the necklace back to Holly. "Thank you. I'll return St. Anthony to you later."

By the time Jayden's Hyundai crunched down the graveled drive leading to Tony's workshop, Tony had several dozen wax St Anthony medallions set in clay with splines leading to the outer edge of the mold, and was building a small kiln to harden the clay and melt the wax.

"Hey," Jayden called as the car stopped, and the engine sound died away. "Pizza man!"

"Awesome." Tony peeled off his gloves and left the kiln-to-be. "Tell me it's pepperoni."

Jayden laughed. "Your Ms. Potts placed the order, so if you don't like it, my hands are clean."

"The safest hands are always our own," Tony said, and then he frowned. "Never mind, that didn't make sense before and it makes even less now. Let me stow the rest of the goodies before we eat."

"Right." Jayden opened the Hyundai's trunk and brought out a box marked with the Amazon 'smile'.

"You're kidding me."

"Reuse is a thing, man." Jayden carried the box into the workshop and set it down on the first cleared
space. "There's another box inside. I didn't ask how far down it went. One Christmas I had to open six nested boxes to get the controllers for my new Wii. Grandma has a sense of humor."

"Fortunately, Pepper is a very sensible woman," Tony said as he uncovered the inner box, a smooth white metal cube that had a thumbprint seal. He put his thumb on it, there was a click and it opened. On top of fragments of alien bio-metal alloy several flash drives and a data cube rested. Apparently Pepper hadn't been sure what kind of technology he had available. There was also a brief note written on S.I. stationery. Tony picked it up and thought he caught a faint whiff of Pepper's perfume, Shiso. It always made him a little hungry, since it was the herb used to wrap meat and sashimi. There wasn't a sushi place in Rose Hill. One time Tony mentioned it, and he was directed to a bait shop.

"Yeah, Pepper is very sensible." The note read, Tony, I know you have your own Friday, but that doesn't mean you are Robinson Crusoe. Pick up the telephone, for heaven's sake! We all miss you. I even heard some of the board members complain that things were boring without you. No, that's a lie. The board members are thrilled you sent new product specs without having to watch you demonstrate by blowing up the conference room. I don't know what you're up to, but if you ever need anything, even if it's just someone to listen, please call. And she signed it, Love, Pepper.

Tony cleared his throat. "Yep! Pizza, let's call the troops."
Before Tony and Jayden reached the house Holly and Harley were already standing on the porch looking at them curiously. Tony opened his mouth to introduce Jayden, but he had to stop and think. He'd seen Jayden's last name when he contacted him for the share a ride, hadn't he? Or had he?

Jayden took the awkwardness out of the situation. "Good evening, Mrs. Keener. My name is Jayden Washington. I don't know if Tony asked if you mind me dropping in like this. I hope you don't mind. I brought pizza!" He held out the S.I. hot box.

Harley peered around the corner. "New York pizza? Is that better than Big Daddy's?"

"Wash your mouth out," Tony said, "This is RAY'S."

Holly took off her apron. "Good looking young men who bring dinner are always welcome. I was just going to make burgers, they'll keep."

Harley went to bring Charley down from her room while Holly put the burger patties back in the freezer and set out a tablecloth on the large table in the dining room. Tony had almost forgot that room existed, since they hadn't used it since he arrived. They always ate at the small table in the kitchen. He had a feeling that was because the dining room was for guests, and they'd never treated him like a guest. He hadn't thought about it, not really. He'd been tired of analyzing motives and was just glad to accept a chance to rest. He was quiet, absorbing that revelation, but again Jayden took up the burden of conversation.

"Ray's pizza is the best, don't you let anyone tell you any different." Jayden glanced around as if someone might be listening. "My grandma can make any other kind of pie you want, but her pizza... no, man, it's not pizza."

"I think you need a special oven," Harley said. He got out a stack of paper plates and lots of napkins. They both had logos from the diner.

"Very hot," Charley said as she entered the room. She was looking halfway between Jayden and the pizza box, so Tony had no idea what she meant. Jayden was hot. So was the pizza. So were pizza ovens. For that matter so was the S.I. hot box.

"That's right," Holly said. "It's hot. Be careful! Does anyone want a salad? I could throw together a green salad."

"No, thank you, ma'am," Jayden replied. "I promised grandma I'd be there as soon as I could." He grinned. "She's baking apple turnovers. That kind of pie she does real well."

"Take the hot box with you," Tony said. He hadn't thought about it, but that made sense. Not only was it better for Jayden to stop over and get a night's rest before returning to New York, this way the journey could be easily covered by the visit to his grandmother even if someone was suspicious of S.I.'s new hire. "Give it to grandma with my compliments." The S.I. hot box was due for consumer testing anyway. "Maybe next time she'll send us some pie."

"It's a deal." They shook hands and then consumed pizza. Tripod wandered in, and then wandered out again. He didn't like pizza.
After they ate and Jayden made his farewells, Tony gave him the box with Rhodey's bio-enhanced leg braces. It wasn't secret technology or a weapon, and didn't have the S.I. logo on it anywhere, so even if by some fluke it went astray it wouldn't be a disaster, just inconvenient.

Tony watched the Hyundai's taillights out of sight and thought of Rhodey. Rhodey was strong. He'd be all right. But wow, Tony missed him. Pepper was right, he couldn't stay in Rose Hill forever, no matter how comfortable he was here.

He wasn't ready to go back and face the bright lights again. Not yet. But eventually he would have to.
Tony ran S.I.'s data on the alien armor through Quasimodo and reduced it down to the essential, non-terrestrial factors, and then went back and forth with the Wakandan scientists. They had a great interactive interface so he could multi-task with different labs at the same time. He put up suggestions while they were carrying out tests he didn't have the equipment for, and then they adapted the results to equipment he did have the equipment for. He didn't think the Wakandans would trust others with pure vibranium, so it was a kindness to him that they were bothering with that.

He gave them Holly's suggestion to form the vibronzium into innocuous medallions. Saint Anthony was well known world wide, but where he wasn't, they could substitute whatever was familiar in the various cultures. Definitely it shouldn't resemble any legal tender. They wanted it dispersed, not gathered in banks. Ideally the 'coins' should be scattered out in the open leaving as few areas as possible unprotected. The oceans and other large water ways were another problem, but that would have to be dealt with later.

Tony enjoyed hands on smelting, smithing anything to do with working raw metal. He hadn't done it in years because he never could justify the time, not when the fabricators could take a design off the drawing board and into reality faster than he could prepare the tools.

Today however, he had no alternative. He made a small electric arc furnace, just large enough for his test run. He measured the copper, tin, and tiny, tiny amount of vibranium, and smelted it all smooth. When it was at the most liquid stage, Friday gave it the exactly timed electrical impulses to 'train' it to repulse the alien substances. The autopsies after the battle at New York seemed to show that both the Chitauri and their Leviathans had been cyborged, so possibly they could field 'au naturel' forces which wouldn't be affected by Project Atlas but that seemed unlikely. 'Naked' they weren't much tougher than your average terrestrial reptile. Crocodile handbags prove how invulnerable that 'armor' isn't.

He poured the molds full and set them to cool. He'd put the armor samples back in the underground safe before he encoded the vibronzium. He didn't want to chance a premature test near the Keener's home. Maybe he was getting old... 'Ready, fire, aim' wasn't as much fun as it used to be.

He looked at the molds. The coins would take a while to harden. Next step... dispersal. He could rent a small plane. Among the other bits of paperwork, he had a private pilot's license.

"I hear you're lookin' to rent a plane, for some sightseeing," Frank, one of the AA members, said in the huddle around the coffee machine after the meeting a few days later. Somehow soon after Tony joined the group, a brand new 14 cup capacity Cuisinart was donated to the group. Eh, it was on sale at Amazon.

The gossip train was amazing. Tony had done a quick bit of basic googling, and, as usually happens, wound up at a not quite totally unrelated site reading To Join East Tennessee Pilots Club. Complete the following. 1-Complete the application form. Attach a check for $273.00. 2-Have some one sponsor you, and before he backtracked to look for a professional airplane rental firm, he'd sent a query asking if they had any recommendations for the best firms to rent for a short flight, maybe just an hour or so. How that information got around to the AA group, he would never know. He had actually signed it Sterling Keener, but still. "Yes?" Tony said. "Well, not exactly sightseeing, but
close enough. I don't have any particular route in mind. Just a day trip."

"You're a trained pilot?"

Tony smiled. "Yeah, I can fly anything with wings." And a lot of things without.

"I've been trying to learn, but renting the plane and paying the instructor adds up."

"I'm not a teacher," Tony said.

"That's all right, I'm sure I could learn a lot just watching. I'd be glad to split the rental fee with you and I don't much care where we go, just so we get home in time for supper."

"Well..." It would probably be safer if one person flew and another dropped the coins out. It would probably also be helpful if at least one of them was able to recognize the area by air, so he didn't wind up placing the coins on property he couldn't reach for the confirmation test.

Cows, Tony had learned, look very placid in photographs, but can be very, very aggressive if you happen to hop over a fence, seeking a shortcut.

"It wasn't so much sightseeing." Tony scrambled back in his memory for an explanation that wouldn't involve aliens. "I read about the early days in Miami when they'd had back to back hurricanes, and some woman decided it wouldn't hurt to ask God to help protect them. So she bought a bag full of St. Anthony coins and paid a pilot to drop them over the Everglades. They didn't get hit by another hurricane for about forty years." Tony didn't really remember the details, but it was close enough.

"Huh. St. Anthony?" Frank grinned. "Sounds like a good story, anyway. Sure, we could do that. Looks like good flying weather tomorrow."
Chapter 22

It was a beautiful day for VFR flying, and the Cessna was a sweet little bird. Not new, but well-
cared for. Tony hadn't found anything wrong in his walk around and the maintenance log had been
meticulously kept. Tony waited for flight clearance, like a good boy, sedately taxied, took off with
minimal flair and calmly brought her to a cruising altitude out of the way of larger aircraft before he
paid attention to his passenger.

Frank was grinning ear-to-ear, far more excited than the very prosaic take off justified.

"Are you all right, Frank?"

"Yes! St...Sterling, this is great! I love flying, don't you love flying?" Frank clutched the bag of
vibronzium coins to his chest. "So, these are good luck, right? Like not just against hurricanes. You
know, we had some... fires... about five years ago. You think it'd help against something like that?"

Tony narrowed his eyes. "Frank."

"Ok, I'm not a pilot!" Frank blurted out, "But I wanted to be one!"

"Frank, what is going on here?" A lot of things were suddenly fitting into place. Weren't small towns
supposed to be slow to accept strangers? Was it a coincidence that any time he needed something,
someone was there to offer assistance?

"Oh, God, Holly's gonna be so mad at me. I'm sorry, I just... flying. With YOU! And... and this is
some kind of a plan, isn't it?" Frank's eyes were wide and his whole face was lit up with pure
happiness. "It's really amazing."

If he wasn't flying, Tony would have the impulse to bang his head against the instrument panel.
"You know. You all know."

"Hey, you made kind of a big impression on the town five years ago. And then that Stark Industries
truck showed up and outfitted Harley's workshop. It's not like Rose Hill had any claim to fame
before that. Don't worry," Frank said. His expression turned serious. "We've got you covered, Mr.
Stark. Anyone shows up looking for you, hey, there's a dozen guys in the Double Squad who can
lead them around in circles."

"Double squad." Tony suddenly recalled seeing brown-haired men around town with their hair cut
and beards styled the way his used to be. And they'd done a better job of it than his big fan, Gary.

"Yeah. So, what do we do with these coins?"

Tony sighed. "I need them scattered over open ground, somewhere I can go back on foot. It's an
experiment, but it's not going to explode! Probably."

Frank's grin widened, if anything, at the mention of possible explosions. "Yes!" He fist-pumped. "I
know a field going fallow not far from the Keener's place. Easy to get to, shouldn't be hard to find."

"I can find it for you, Boss," Friday said from his phone. "GPS is engaged."

Frank nearly cooed with delight. "That's one of your computer people, right? THIS IS SO COOL."

Tony sighed and turned the plane following Friday's cues. "Just be ready to drop the coins, one a
time when I say."

Frank nodded like a bobble head.
"So," Frank said after the last of the coins was dropped somewhere in the vicinity of the shrubby field, "what's next? Can we help?"

Tony huffed. "I don't know. I have to wrap my head around this whole conspiracy first."

"It's not a conspiracy," Frank protested. "It's not as if we were spying on you, it's just... word gets around, and people were talking, and someone said they'd be sick of it if every time they turned around there were reporters yelling at them, and how you had to be like... you know, always dressed sharp and couldn't even pick your nose without it winding up on..."

"Oh, God. Stop, stop, just..." Tony had a mental image of Rose Hill handing him a handkerchief and saying 'bless you' when he sneezed. "So you formed a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Starks?"

"We don't have much in Rose Hill except each other, so we're used to... you know... looking out for each other. It wasn't all that much, anyway. You know, like I really DID want to fly. It's not charity, if that's what you're thinking."

"I don't know what I'm thinking." Tony returned to the airport and set the plane down. It was unsettling. No matter what Frank said, it DID feel like undeserved charity. What the hell had he done for Rose Hill? He'd showed up and got into a fight with human firebombs and wrecked a lot of things. Sure, he'd paid for the damage, but that didn't mean people hadn't been hurt, frightened, even traumatized. Probably some of them still flinched whenever they lit a barbecue.

He got the plane back to the hanger and handled the turn in paperwork with the rental company with Frank twitching at his side. They'd driven to the Knoxville airport in Frank's car, and now they walked back to it, quietly. Frank still had the empty coin bag in one hand, and it made soft crinkling noises as they walked.

They got to the car and Tony turned to Frank. There wasn't anyone nearby. "All right. Yes, I do have a plan... well, a small percentage of a plan. First I have to get back to my workshop to pick something up, and then go to the field where we dropped the coins to test the results. If that works... IF... then I need to scale up production, and come up with better ways to distribute the coins. We can't crop dust the world."

"It's that big?" Frank asked.

"Yeah." Tony took the bag from Frank. "It's the biggest."

"Huh," Frank said.
"So," Frank asked, when they got to the fallow field after Tony picked up a few palm sized pieces of alien armor from his workshop vault. "This is a really scientific test, right? You've got some specialized equipment to take readings?"

"Uh huh," Tony said. He fished a piece of armor out of the bag. "Absolutely, I have the world's most expensive optical system. Binocular 3-D lens system with focal length of 17mm, field of view about 180 degrees, negative crop factor of x.05, f-stop around f/2.1, capable of reading up to 576 MP of information, ISO 1-1,000, bit-depth 7.5 bits per channel, dynamic range 10-14 stops, shutter speed 1/100 to 1/200..."

"Wow."

"So do you. Watch." Tony tossed the armor into the field, dropping it on top of a bush. For a moment nothing happened. Then the bush shook and the piece of armor shot out of it, straight up until it vanished. "YES!" Tony couldn't resist taking a few dance steps.

"How... what just happened?" Frank stared up into the sky. "Did it blow up?"

"No! That was... that was a really, really infinitesimal chance of that happening. The coins have an affinity for each other, and an equally strong aversion to the material I just tested."

"Yeah, but... what was that? I mean, if someone tries to plow this field, is their tractor going to fly away?" Frank sounded more intrigued than worried by the possibility.

"Nope." Tony threw another piece of armor to verify that the same thing happened. They were going to run tests in Wakanda once S.I. shipped them some alien samples, but Tony had been impatient to verify that the theory actually worked in practice. "That won't happen with anything else. Just this stuff." He handed Frank a couple chunks of Chitauri armor to let him have a turn. "Go for it."

Frank hauled back and threw the piece of armor hard. It skimmed over the shrubs and never hit the ground before skyrocketing. "So... what good is that?" Frank examined the second piece of armor, and then gently lobbed it into the field. It lay there and then zoomed away.

Tony considered lying or evading, but what the hell, what good had it done keeping things to himself? "That armor comes from the aliens that attacked New York. If they return, I'd like them to get kicked out before they start a brawl."

Frank looked at the field. "Huh," he said.
Chapter 25

Rose Hill's Town Hall was at nearly full capacity. Not everyone could attend. Businesses and schools had to stay open, and it was agreed that bringing children under the age of reason was a bad idea, but nearly every family had sent at least one representative.

The mayor cracked his gavel on the polished walnut sound block before him on the podium. "All right, let's come to order. Sit down. You too, Fred, I see you in the back. Everyone will get a chance to speak. First we're going to listen to our own Sterling Keener. And you, Frank," the mayor said, pointing with the gavel, "Stop with that Mr. Stark nonsense. We don't have any Mr. Stark in our fine community. You want to confuse the little ones?"

"Sorry, Mr. Mayor," Frank said.

"All right, this meeting is come to order." The mayor cracked the gavel once more. "Our keynote speaker today is Sterling Keener. We all know Sterling."

"And his cat!" the vet shouted from the back of the hall.

The gavel cracked again. "Mr. Keener, would you please take the podium?" The mayor walked to one side on the raised platform and sat down, leaving the podium vacant.

Tony got up from the front row seat where he'd been sitting with the Keeners. He went to the podium and took the microphone from the mayor. "As unaccustomed as I am to public speaking..." Tony grinned as chuckles ran in a wave across the room. "No, seriously, most of the time I'm talking to people who've forgot what it is to belong to a community. They're not the public. They all belong to organizations, not people. They're not listening, they're just recording to pick apart my words."

"And most of the time I tell them what they want to hear. They want a clown. They want entertainment. They want easy answers. They want someone to take responsibility. They want sound bites!"

"But I know what the citizens of Rose Hill want is to help. You want to know what you can do to join me in protecting our home, our Earth. I'm not putting it all on you. We're gonna have help. But it's up to us to start." 

"What can we do?" A woman called from the audience.

"One of the things I know you do best... spread the word! The Rose Hill gossip train is amazing."

There was a titter of amusement, but Tony didn't wait for it to die down. "I've seen something coming. It's big, too big for Iron Man or any group of 'Extraordinary Individuals' as a man I knew once described the Avengers. We are all extraordinary, don't let anyone tell you different. We can all contribute."

"Right now, the first stage is going to be educational and defensive. I've come up with something that will help protect the Earth, but it needs to be everywhere, not just sitting on top of a tower in the big city." Tony held up one of his vibronzium coins. "We need to make more of these fake Saint Anthony coins, and we need to make people want to spread them around on the ground."

A man raised his hand. When Tony nodded at him he said, "I've got a hydraulic press. If you can make blanks, and the metal's not too hard I can stamp as many as you want."
"Great! Any other ideas?"

This time it was a woman. "It shouldn't be a Saint Anthony coin, not exactly, not if we want people to know what the coins are for and how they should be used."

"Well, they don't really need to be used, just spread out," Tony said. "Still, it wouldn't hurt if they had a short message on them about..." Tony paused and then grinned, "Yeah, Atlas, they should say something about holding up the sky." Tony had another thought, out of nowhere, it reminded him of the blinding inspiration he had for miniaturizing the arc reactor, an idea found at the bottom of a bucket of water. "Ok, hands up, everyone who likes games?"
Vibronzium isn't as hard as vibranium, so the stamping wasn't a problem. The problem was that every person with artistic pretensions in the town turned in an idea for the imagery on the coin.

Harley walked into Tony's workshop and dumped another handful of drawings on the table. "High school art class."

Tony sighed and shuffled through a rough stack of paper. "Is that the last?"

"I don't know, I saw a little kid drawing circles on the sidewalk with chalk," Harley said with a grin. "So, what's the problem? There are some really good ideas there."

"I know. I'd like to use at least half a dozen of these, but logistically speaking, it has to be just one."

Friday spoke up, "Boss, S.I. has a perfectly good art department."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, and I'm going to bring them into it for the game, but it doesn't seem right to have them judge the coin design, too."

Charley wandered in. Tony never heard her coming, he suspected it amused her to spook him and see him jump. She spread out the papers, picked up two of them and handed them to Harley. "These are best," she said.

Harley looked at the papers. "Excellent, Charley. I'll get the sculptor started on this."

"Wait, don't I get to see?" Tony complained.

"Nope." Harley left.

Charley smiled serenely at Tony.

"Fine," Tony said. "It's not as if I didn't have other things to do." The silver vibranium alloy seemed to be what he needed for the next step in the plan, but the Wakandans needed to refine the proportions and run tests to assure that it was both safe and effective in his proposed plan. Also, he was going to have to talk S.I. into an entirely new product line which would have to be in collaboration with another company, and Tony was probably going to have to talk to Pepper directly about it. Yeah. He was half looking forward to it, and half worried about it. She would shout at him, but if she didn't shout at him, that would be worse. He sighed. This was the longest he'd gone without seeing Pepper since Afghanistan.

Would she still... would he... people were so complicated.

Charley patted Tony on the head and left.
Chapter 27

Initial test results from Wakanda were extremely promising. Tony wasn't entirely surprised when Friday told him that he had a call from King T'Challa. Tony was usurping quite a lot of his people's time.

"Hello, your Majesty," Tony said. He let the current game simulation continue to run on Quasimodo. A tiny, stylized Iron Man was flying loop the loops in Manhattan and it made him smile.

"Good day, Dr. Stark. My people are intrigued by your proposal, but ..."

"Yeah, I know, the commercial applications. I didn't think Wakanda wanted to be linked to it, so I was thinking to have S.I. patent it and lease the patents to the manufacturer of the main game console. I don't know how to work getting Wakanda its fair share. I'm going to have to talk to Pepper and bring Legal in on it, and of course, Wakanda's representatives..."

"That's not an issue, Dr. Stark."

Tony wondered when he'd gone from 'Stark' to 'Dr. Stark'. Possibly that was how the Wakandan scientists referred to him. Scientists were more likely than a king to understand how much a doctorate cost in terms of effort, and tended to insist on the honorifics. "No? Well, why did you call then? Are there other problems?" On screen Iron Man repulsored a Leviathan. Go, little Iron Man.

"Not a problem, precisely. At least, not yours. My 'guests' have been increasingly restless. The recreational facilities and even the Dora Milajes' training grounds are proving insufficient to hold their interest. I fear they will do something foolish due to boredom."

Tony didn't know what to say to that. "Yeaah. Well, I can see that becoming an issue." Tony was never bored, except at board (hah) meetings, because there was always more he needed to do than time to do it. R&D for the company, publicity for S.I. and the Avengers, replacement and upgrade for the Avengers' equipment, plus time spent on actual missions-- it was no wonder they hadn't considered him part of the team because in their off-hours they never saw him socializing with them. "You don't maybe have some giant monsters for them to fight? Something with tentacles would be good."

T'Challa laughed. "The palace chef would be most displeased if our calamari beds were despoiled. No, I was considering allowing them to test run your game."

"Huh." Tony hadn't thought about it, but really, it was a good idea. He hadn't intended to deny anyone access to the game. It wasn't as if they could hurt anything in the virtual world, and they were a good mix of experience and abilities. But... Tony was going to be in the game, too. He didn't want to interact with them even all that much. "Sure. Sandbox it for now. Keep it local. Save the data. I'm curious to see what they come up with."
Tony looked at the shiny vibronzium coin, the first of the new samples. The reverse was an globe bearing a squashed Mercator Earth that *probably* wouldn't shout 'Eurocentric bias', he hoped. Encircling the globe were the words 'Protect the Earth'. The obverse had a typical standing saint figure, with a glowing heart and uplifted hands, each bearing a round circle in the palms, which could represent a coin, but the glow lines around them made him think of repulsors. Encircling the bogus saint, written large were 'Anthony' on the top and 'St' on the bottom. There was no DOT after St.

"This isn't all that subtle, you know that?" Tony said, tossing the coin back to Harley.

Harley grinned and pocketed the coin. "It's a product tie-in! You know, give one away with every game. Put the coins *in* the game."

"Yeah, but..." Tony stopped to think about it. "Ok, that could work. The heroes earn them by training, but they have to discard them at a minimum distance from any other coins to get extra game options. Once enough of the coins are in place, they should get a visual representation- like... a net or a dome showing the area protected."

"Trampoline!" Harley said. "You know, the way you described it to me."

"Yeah, I found some of the armor outside the field already. Earth's rotation moved so the coins were no longer directly under, and they fell. If, and that's a big IF, if we can get Atlas around the globe that won't happen. Presuming the ships were made of the same metal as their armor, they'd be forced back until they were past the field effect, and then whatever propulsion they use, which would have been at full power, would drive them back into the field again. Rinse, repeat. It'd be interstellar bumper cars, until they broke up." Tony made a face. "The upper atmosphere would be full of garbage, but that... that's better than having them invade."

"What happens if the ships *aren't* made of the same metal?"

"Then the Chitauri inside--- frog in a blender. Either the ships would crash on Earth, or maybe land automatically. That... that would be bad. Very bad. But still not as bad as if the soldiers get out alive." Tony rubbed his forehead. "I'm hoping once we get the game going someone will come up with ideas. I can't think of everything!"

"World's greatest MMORPG," Harley said in an awed voice. "Can you really do it? Can the Cloud handle that kind of load, the processing power requirement is going to be enormous once the interlinks go live."

"The Cloud can't. But Vision can. Ultron was originally meant to cover the Earth, coordinate and protect. Vision hasn't had reason to access those abilities, but he has them." Tony grinned. "He's going to God Mod the system."

"This is going to be so much fun!" Harley said.

"If it works, and we don't all die. Right now the oceans are a big gap in our defenses. We can hardly expect tanker crews to scatter coins."

"Tuna," Charley said, having appeared as silently as usual. She was carrying Tripod in her arms. She gave him a gentle shake, so the ID tags on his pop-bead collar rattled. She looked at Tony as if he was stupid. "Stark-ist!" She grinned at him and tapped the tags. "If you like it, then you should have
put a tag on it!"

Tony looked at Harley. "I... I got no idea."

Charley rolled her eyes. "TAG, you're it, FISH."

Friday spoke up, "Boss! I think Ms. Keener is referring to the practice of tagging fish and oceanic mammals and birds with tracking devices! If the casing of these devices included Vibronzium, their natural migratory paths would..."

"Cover the globe!" Tony and Harley said at once.

"Tuna," Charley said smugly. Tripod meowed in agreement. Tuna was his favorite word.
"Tony! You can't just dump everything on me and become a hermit!" were Pepper's first words the moment Friday made the connection.

"Pep. Pep. Pepper!" Tony said, trying to break into Pepper's rapid fire stream of verbiage. He gave up and just fell back into talking along with her. "I'm not a hermit! I see people, EVERY day! And not all the same ones!"

"Vision said you got a CAT! Was it just one cat? I can see the headlines now, Tony Stark Crazy Cat Lady!"

"One cat! Uno gato! And Tripod helped me test Rhodey's bio-legs."

"You named the cat TRIPOD?"

"He had three legs. And I DID NOT blow one of them off! He came that way. How is Rhodey?"

"Colonel Rhodes is SO ANGRY with you. He said you were CRAZY to go to SIBERIA by yourself!"

"What? What is with all the judgement? It was an emergency! Steve was going up against FIVE super soldiers! Maybe SIX if his buddy went off the tracks again!"

"Steve?" Pepper said quietly, and that stopped Tony.

He blew out a deep breath. "Rogers. I misspoke. I had every reason to believe that Rogers was walking into a trap and no one else could get there in time to help."

"And so you went in after him? Tony, you weren't an Avenger," Pepper said, still in that soft tone of voice. "You didn't have a responsibility to ..."

Tony interrupted. "I thought I did. I felt... the Avengers and I... we were on a break, I thought."

"Tony." "I thought. Some time. Some distance. We'd miss each other and remember the good times. Try to get back together. You know?"

"Tony, it's not the same thing as you and I. You do know that."

"It felt like it. Only without... you know. Without the fringe benefits. I thought... I thought wrong. I know that now. It wasn't a break, it was all the breaks. But I've moved past that! I've grown as a person!"

Pepper laughed a little. "You're still playing with games."

"Yeah, but this game, this game Pepper, it's important."

Pepper sighed. Tony could hear a tapping, probably that infuriating Newton's Cradle she'd bought to add to the other distractions on her desk. "All right. Legal has been checking out I.P. to get a clear
name, using the word 'Atlas' and something to do with saving the world. Atlas Games is a company. Game titles owned by various companies include Guardians of Atlas, Atlas Reactor on Steam, and Starlink: Battle for Atlas. There's even an Android platform game 'World Atlas the Game' published by Avenger Studios."

"You're kidding me with that last one, aren't you?"

"I wish. It's nothing like what you have in mind, if that helps."

"It's just weird, that's all. Ok, 'Project Atlas: Hold Up the Sky'?"

He could almost hear Pepper's wince.

"'Project Atlas: Keep Heaven at Bay'? 'Project Atlas: Defend the Earth'? Come on, work with me, Pep."


"I guess. It just sounds so not awesome. And this is going to be awesome. Hey, how are talks going with Nintendo?"

"Tentatively, they like the concept, although they doubt it will actually work. They want guarantees and minimum assured profits."

"Wii is dead. They should be grateful to have the chance to retrofit their factories. And if not, then screw them. Probably better to start from scratch, anyway. I was just thinking we'd save time, but patches always lead to trouble. So, now we need names for a games company. 'Playboy Stark'?"

"Tony, no."

"Stark Naked?"

"Absolutely not."

"Wait, Friday run me a list of phrases with the word 'Stark'... 'Stark Staring Mad', not what we're going for here. 'Stark Effect', too scientific. Oh! 'Stark Reality!' Perfect! Right? It's a VR game concept."

"Fine," Pepper said. "Great. One more company for me to run." But she didn't sound annoyed. "Tony, are you ever coming back?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I will. When me showing up won't cause more trouble. How's my image? And you know, the pesky little legal stuff?"

"We're working on it. The employment restriction clause is absolutely untenable, so I'm not concerned about that. You'll laugh, but half the major corporations in America are on your side. They didn't like the example of mass seizure of assets under civil law. It makes everyone vulnerable. Even Hammer Industries joined the parade."

"Wow. Hammer is on our side, now I'm a little worried."

"Don't be. We'll handle this. And Tony. I'm glad to hear from you. Take care of yourself."

"I will. Love you, Pep." Tony wondered if he should have said that.

"Love you, too, Tony."
Tony ended the call and just sat there for a few moments. Smiling.

Chapter End Notes

"Hey, blue jeep guy, I was wondering if you'd abandoned it," Tony said, when Harley's truck pulled up with another bucket full of stamped coins, and a passenger who he recognized as the customer who'd dropped off the beaten up jeep a week ago and left, saying he was going to 'commune with nature'.

"Never! Roscoe is my soul mate." Blue jeep guy said (Tony had found the registration papers while repairing it, but he hadn't got around to learning any Slavic languages so the owner remained 'blue jeep guy' in his mind). He got out of the truck, and a scruffy dog Tony hadn't noticed leaped out of the truck bed, making a beeline for Tripod.

"Hey, keep your dog under..."

There was a sudden flurry of snarls, spits, yellow and red fur flying, and then a high-pitched yelp. The dog backed away, limping, licking a scratched nose and looking at Tripod with respect. Tripod retracted the vibranium claws on his rear leg, shifted his shoulders to settle his fluffed fur, and then stalked off, indignantly. "Control," Tony finished.

"Sorry," blue jeep guy said. "Malia, stop that! It's not nice to eat other people's pets." He grinned brightly at Tony. "Everyone calls me Stiles. Everyone here calls you Sterling?" And then he smirked.

Tony sighed. "I might as well shave this beard off, for all the good it does. Fine. Did Harley read you in?"

"Yeah. Don't worry, I'm used to keeping secrets. So, I'm going back to California now. I could take some coins and..." He waved at the bucket of coins Harley was holding and nearly knocked them over.

"Sure." It wouldn't hurt to get a start in a small way. Jayden had already collected some to scatter on the way to Mobile. (He'd promised to return with a peach pie. Grandma had been very pleased with the hot box.) Tony nearly changed his mind when Stiles came close to braining himself as he got in the jeep. The dog bounced in next to him and stuck its head out of the window.

Harley handed Stiles the bucket of coins, and he and Tony watched as the blue jeep zoomed off.

"I should have upgraded the bumpers. That guy is accident-prone," Tony commented.
Chapter 31

Rose Hill couldn't produce many coins, but Tony got permission from T'Challa to send encoded blanks to S.I. to be stamped and scattered wherever the company had access while the Wakandans did the same. The 'Saint' had a much stronger resemblance to Tony on the new models, as part of the publicity surrounding their new venture into virtual reality gaming. The globe representing the Earth and the language changed in many different variants, though.

So the coins spread, along with a publicity campaign for Stark Reality's Project: Atlas. There were advertisements in every medium, including a series of cartoons where Iron Man flew around the world scattering coins to form alien catching nets. The aliens were all shapes and colors, never terribly frightening, but they growled and snapped as Iron Man bundled them into cages and took them away, leaving the coins behind, twinkling and flexing tiny shields - tiny red and gold shields.

Stories also began to spread about how the coins were lucky if you found them and put them where the coin could 'see the sky'. Word of mouth, plus internet memes, covered a lot of ground.

And then people in places where neither Wakanda nor Stark Industries could venture began to find coins. They were the genuine article, but not tailored to the countries.

"Is someone double-dealing?" Tony asked Pepper, this time he'd StarkSkyped because he just needed to see her. "Coins are showing up in embargoed and sanctioned countries all around the world. Not that I actually mind, because we can't afford to leave any back doors open, but we should KNOW how this is happening."

Pepper scowled. "I'll look into it, but I'm pretty sure it's not internal. This just arrived in the mail." She held up a postcard bearing the image of a black widow spider. She flipped it over and read, "Thanks, these will be going to good homes. Inventory list arriving separately."

Tony was suddenly, irrationally furious. Hah, FURYous. "They can't ever just ASK, can they? Friday, check to see if outsiders have been accessing Project: Atlas. If they try to poke around in the program... I don't trust the Spider or whoever is pulling her web. I should ask T'Challa if he's seen her." He didn't want to. He didn't want to discuss the Avengers at all.

"I could call him," Pepper offered. She knew Tony's tells all too well.

"No. No. I'll do it." Tony sighed. "While I've got you, how are the tracking tags going?"

"Quite well." Pepper called up data on her computer. "The Division of Fish and Wildlife approved the design. Not surprising, considering the low bid we put on it. There's a project to tag penguins but flipper banding interferes with their swimming and breeding rate, so we're looking into chipping instead. Would the smaller amount of vibronium still work?"

"Should do," Tony said. "To be on the safe side, double the numbers of chips per bird? Call it a redundancy factor. Sharks and whales would still be ok with coin size tags?"

"I think so. I'll have to confirm that. Tony, you are going to have to come in soon. Your little home hobby shop isn't keeping up with the demand."

"I know. I just... it's nice here, Pepper."

"I know."
"I haven't had a vacation in... God, I don't know how many years... not since Monaco... and you know how that turned out."

"I know," Pepper said. She sighed. "Let's save the world one more time, and then we'll take the week off."

Tony smiled. "It's a deal."
Silver has the highest conductivity of native Terrestrial metals, and in the proper alloyed ratio with Vibranium, it went beyond that. Tony had experimented with mental control of his armor using a headband that interpreted electrical impulses in the skin and muscular implants, but this new alloy, all right, fine, ViBRAINium, it was just sitting there, daring him to call it something else. Well, headbands with small dots of ViBrainium can read the electrical impulses of the brain without having to do anything at all to the person using it. Results would vary according to user ability, but as the shared virtual environment grew even a total newbie would be able to interact in at least a 'passive' way. It was a fascinating project. In a way, he was building a new world.

Vision returned and took a room as a boarder with one of the widowers who'd taken an interest in Tony, so he could assist with the game programming. He understood programming the way a fish understands water, so he was able to immediately point out areas that would cause problems later even though they worked in the demo model Tony kept running in the workshop.

Tony wanted to finish tweaking the game so he could continue exploring the possibilities of vibranium. So long as he didn't create anything with a direct military application, he was fairly confident T'Challa would be willing to sell S.I. more vibranium once his backpack ran out. Fairly confident. He hoped so. *Vibranium, not just for Frisbees!*

Project: Atlas was a complicated beast. The game allowed users to be either a hero or an alien attacker, and in either case you could be a fighter, a strategist, or a scientist, to start with, later you could be whatever you could convince the game you were. Heros earned coins with successful missions and the coins formed glowing protective nets once there were enough of them spaced out in an area. Aliens couldn't pick up coins, but they could, if they won an encounter, destroy coins and weaken the defense.

The more successful you were in any role, the higher visibility you'd have in the game. Experienced players could gather and train recruits. The better your imagination, the more you could affect the environment, changing your shape and abilities. For example, if you wanted, and could clearly imagine it, you could be a flying, flaming mutant. But you had to know how it would be in real life before changing from the basic human model. Tony knew there were people, enhanced, or natural mutants, or the results of accident, like Spiderman, who could do amazing things, but they had no safe place to train. With Project: Atlas, you were anonymous, Tony made damn sure of that. Even Thaddeus E. "Thunderbolt" Ross wouldn't be able to track users down to ask game players to sign anything, or identify themselves. A player in Patagonia would be filtered through the system the same as a player from Pittsburgh.

The game had several physical versions; the basic model was just a headband with eye and ear pieces, Wifi capable, and let you experience the game in a not totally immersive way. That model had a safety shut off so it only functioned while the user was sitting or lying still, but the more expensive full helmet could also work within a 'battle room' like a lazer tag room where you'd physically interact with the environment. Battle rooms would let people in battle rooms anywhere around the world join in. For more money you could get gauntlets.

If you scored high enough in the battle rooms you'd win a full battle suit, with complete tactile feedback.
Tony explained all of this to Pepper when she called to complain that he still hadn’t got his butt back to S.I. "I'm working! Project: Atlas will be the biggest MMORPG in history."

"What?"

"Massively multiplayer online role playing game," Tony explained. "We're going to teach the world how to kick ass."

Pepper sighed. "Will it be safe? I don't want to wind up with a Pokémon Go situation."

"What? Why? That was fun, wasn't it? Good outdoor exercise, clean air, that sort of thing?"

"People got so caught up in it, they forgot to watch where they were going. They were run over, bit by snakes, robbed, fell off cliffs, and even died of heart attacks after capturing a rare one!"

"You sound like you know way too much about this."

Pepper blushed. "Never mind. I just want you to make this as safe as possible."

"Yeah, I know. Sending you the updated specs through Friday. Unless someone is a better hacker than me, they'll only be able to use it while staying still, or in an S.I. supervised Battle Room."

"We don't want anyone getting so caught up they die of dehydration, Tony!"

"Fine, fine. New subprogram will check that the user isn't about to keel over, ok?"

"Maybe. Parental guidance limits might be in order, too. I mean... you're saying people can do ANYTHING they can imagine?"

"Sheesh, you're such a killjoy. We'll work it out."

Chapter End Notes

And in addition to the MCU stuff Tony built a ‘telepresence armor’ remotely controlled by his brain because he was paralyzed - Iron Man 290 (March 93)

And yep, pokemon could be fatal. http://pokemongodeathtracker.com
Tony sat in front of Quasimodo after talking to Pepper, and thought about things. He thought about things he didn't want to think about. He needed to talk to T'Challa about the Black Widow. Of course, maybe she wasn't there. Maybe she was never there. How would she even know the Avengers wound up in Wakanda? How did she know anything; he couldn't rule it out.

Why would she even be there? She wasn't a sentimental person, clinging to people. And you know, she shocked the hell out of T'Challa, wouldn't he refuse her sanctuary?

Maybe not, not if he felt she'd prevented him from committing an injustice against Barnes.

"I'm being a wuss," Tony said. Tripod looked up at him and meowed. "I said wuss, not puss." He sighed. "Friday, see if you can contact King T'Challa. If he's you know, not busy. This isn't exactly urgent." He picked up Tripod and put him on his lap to pet in classic evil villain pose.

"Connecting, Boss!" Friday said cheerfully. "StarkSkyping!"

"Wait!" Tony looked down at himself. He was wearing a red plaid shirt, with a black t-shirt over it bearing the four fingered Iron Man hand logo of Harley's company. "Eh, whatever, good advertising."

"Is that so?" T'Challa said as the connection formed, large as life on Quasimodo's screen. He was wearing a brown and gold brocade lounging jacket over a dark brown silk shirt, looking elegant and unruffled.

"Well, it couldn't hurt. Ok, your Majesty." Tony took a deep breath. "I won't waste your time. Do you know where Romanoff is? Someone sent S.I. a black widow spider calling card to brag about having diverted several shipments of Vibronzium coins to nations on both our 'don't touch' lists. I don't care about the coins, since they are apparently showing up where we want them, and couldn't put them, but I would like to have a talk with her about the courtesy of asking before taking my stuff."

T'Challa frowned. "I have had no contact with Ms. Romanoff since our encounter in Germany."

"No calls or notes or suspicious midnight tappings on the walls of the Avengers' quarters?" Tony was pleased that he said that smoothly, as if he talked about the Avengers every other day.

"Not to my knowledge, Dr. Stark. Of course, my guests are not confined to their rooms, but it seems unlikely the Dora Milaje would not have noticed any such outside interference." T'Challa paused, and then said, "The Avengers have been testing the game. Would you like feedback from them?"

"Eh. I don't know. If they're complaining about the art, that's not my department. Any physical reactions? I mean, I didn't have a whole lot of 'enhanced' to test it on. Any dizziness, motion sickness, headaches, numb butt from playing too long?"

"Not that I have heard." T'Challa gave Tony a sideways glance. "I joined them for the first few sessions. There were concerns expressed that..." He shook his head. "I believe they fear what they do not understand."

"They thought the game was going to what... brain wash them? Force them to sign the Accords and give themselves up?" T'Challa's shrug seemed to confirm it. "Wow, they think a lot of my powers of persuasion, despite all evidence to the contrary. But you said they are playing it now, so how did that
work out?"

"Scott Lang was bored," T'Challa said dryly. "He said he was so bored he'd risk having his brains fried."

"And I guess he didn't hate it or that would have been the end."

"He didn't hate it. I chose to remain in my black panther avatar, while he spent the entire session shrunken down and riding a flying ant. He was impressed by the detail of the Chitauri armor and Leviathans. Despite his rashness in day-to-day life, he is apparently a competent engineer. He had some very intelligent remarks to make about perceived vulnerabilities, if the armors are accurate."

"As accurate as SHIELD's records, and the data Jarvis picked up during the fight." Tony wrinkled his nose. "Leviathans are really disgusting on the inside."

"Rogers was of the opinion that a 'silly game' was no substitute for actual sparring, but Mr. Wilson decided to try it, as he missed the use of his exo-wings."

"You couldn't make him a set of wings?"

"Of course we could, but what would be the point? Wakanda has no need for it, and a host is not responsible for arming his guests." T'Challa blinked, slow and lazy, much the same way Tripod did. "Rogers has not requested a replacement for his missing shield."

"I'm surprised. He found it a very useful tool." Watch it, Tony, letting bitterness get in your tone. "It's gone, dumped in the ocean, no convenient icebergs nearby so pretty much just 'splat' in the muck. I'm sorry, I don't even know whether the vibranium was legitimately acquired from Wakanda. It was never mine, not really."

T'Challa nodded. "By the time we knew that the shield incorporated vibranium it seemed politically unfeasible to request its return. Wakanda had no love for the Axis powers and it was being put to good purpose. Then it vanished, and we accepted its loss. There was some discussion upon the return of Rogers whether to let his possession remain undisputed, but again, we found no quarrel with the use he found for it and it would have stirred animosity between Wakanda and America had we claimed a hero's iconic weapon."

"Yep, got that." Tony petted Tripod harder. Tripod turned his head to put his teeth on Tony's hand and press down just enough to warn. Tony relaxed. "So, Lang and Wilson tried the game with you and I guess it went all right."

"Yes, they had an animated discussion about it afterward, and since neither of them showed any ill effects, Rogers tried it with us on the third day. We all had our accustomed equipment, but did not succeed in our mission."

Tony grinned. "So you got one of the loser scenarios with Chitauri celebrating their victory while your avatars had to watch. Which one was it?"

"They went into a small restaurant while we stood outside, like urchins with our noses pressed to the glass, and watched them make merry."

Tony laughed. "Wow, that must have stung. So, did Maximoff ever join in?"

"Yes. It was... uncomfortable. She possesses great powers of imagination."

"So? It's all virtual, no harm, no foul, right?" Tony was pretty sure Pepper's request for parental
guidance wasn't necessary. Maximoff wasn't a child, despite Rogers' pandering to her moods.

"The Chitauri became a fleet... a flock?.. of Iron Men. It was... distressing. She said she couldn't help it, that one of us must have been remembering the battle of New York and confused the game."

"Huh." Tony's stomach went cold. "Yeah, that sounds uncomfortable."

"Rogers ended his game using his 'panic button', and so did Wilson and Lang. I left shortly thereafter. Maximoff remained for the entire session," T'Challa said. "When she finished, she cried and said she felt we had abandoned her. Rogers consoled her, and promised that he would always be there for her."

Tony resisted the impulse to make a face. "Well, it's good, I guess. Team solidarity. We're going to need that one day."

T'Challa just looked at Tony. Well, really what was there to say?
"Are you sure you don't want to take the cat?" Holly asked. She'd taken the day off work, so the whole family could gather around and see Tony off.

"Twelve hours to Manhattan in a Hyundai with a cat? I don't think so," Tony replied. "He wouldn't like Stark Tower. The hunting is bad there."

"There's rats," Jayden said cheerfully from the rear of the car, where he was rearranging the stuff Tony had already put in. "Hey, you don't want to leave the egg salad back here, man. It gets hot in the trunk."

Holly wrinkled her nose. "Rats. Sterling..."

"I'll be fine," Tony hastened to say. "It's not like I'm going to be gone forever. I just have to show up for court. S.I. has to prove they really are suing on my behalf. And I need to get the vibranium to S.I.'s facilities so they can mass produce the games and coins."

"Don't work too hard," Holly said.

"And don't be a stranger!" Harley added.

"We'll be watching you," Charley said. She made a circle with thumb and forefinger and then held it up to her right eye.

"That's 'I'll be seeing you'," Tony said. They'd watched a marathon of 'The Prisoner' a few days ago, and Charley had been quite taken with the surrealism of the show. Possibly it made more sense to her than to most people. Tony rubbed his hands nervously on his jeans. "I wouldn't go, but I can't stay."

"Group hug," Harley yelled before things got maudlin.

Tony was half suffocated, squeezed and hot, and it was so good. He hung on for an extra long minute before releasing the Keeners. He noticed that Charley seemed to have grown another inch. She was definitely going to be the tallest in the family.

"Harley, you're going to join my team in the game?" Tony asked at last. "I'll send you the deluxe model."

"Yes! We'll be connected!" Harley grinned.

"Time to go, man," Jayden said, squeezing Tony's shoulder. "Ms. Potts awaits."

Tony got in the passenger side, so he could roll the window down and wave. The Keeners waved back. Charley picked up Tripod and made the cat wave, too. If Tony's eyes watered a little it was because Holly had put onion in the potato salad she'd packed for their ride.

After they passed the 'You are now leaving Rose Hills, Please come again', sign, Jayden said, "They're good people."

"Yeah," Tony said. "The best."
It was weird going up in an employee elevator in Stark Tower with a visitor's badge clipped to his shirt and a big box marked for 'Pepper Potts C.E.O.' held in his arms. Jayden stood at his side, holding another box. They'd gone through security and been scanned, and Tony was pretty sure at least one of the security officers recognized him when he answered their questions about hand-delivery.

Friday kept silent, and even the elevator music was muted. The elevator opened at the penthouse floor, and Pepper was there. Right there.

"Pep," Tony said. He shoved the box of vibranium in Jayden's general direction and embraced Pepper. Without his lifts, and her in her Louboutins, he was rather embarrassingly nuzzling her bosom. Well. It could be embarrassing, for someone else. "Hi Honey, I'm home." Pepper pushed him back abruptly.

"I am not Lucy to your Ricky Ricardo," Pepper said. Her eyes were reddened, but she smiled. "If anything, you're Lucy."

Tony considered it. Lucy was the zany one, always getting into trouble through good intentions and Ricky was the one who loved her even when she drove him nuts. "Fair enough." He wanted to grab Pepper and kiss her and make up for all the lost time they'd ever spent arguing about things that didn't seem to matter at all at the moment.

Jayden stacked the boxes on the floor. "I'll just be going now," he said diplomatically.

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Washington," Pepper said.

Tony heard the elevator open and shut but he didn't pay much attention. "We're good, Pep? Yes?" Pepper didn't say anything immediately. "Goodish?"

"Explain to me why you had to run away without saying a word." Pepper crossed her arms and tapped her foot.

"Um, maybe I didn't have to, but I had to. I just... I wasn't thinking straight, and I knew I wasn't thinking straight, but I knew if I said anything I'd change my mind, and think I could fix things. Somehow, by myself, so I didn't drag anyone else down with me. But that... it hadn't been working. Not for a long time. So I'd tried making a team. And THAT had gone up in flames and I just... needed to not be me."

"Oh, Tony."

"You want to know how bad it was? For a WHOLE minute, I seriously considered going to work for Hammer! Hammer!"

Pepper put her hand over her mouth. At first Tony thought she was crying, but then she burst out in giggles, giggling so hard she started to hiccup. She waved off Tony's assistance, and went to sit on the couch, the one with the view of the Chrysler building.

Tony followed and sat next to her, waiting while she composed herself.
Pepper took a deep breath. "All right. Desperate times, I forgive you. But don't ever do that again. Are you ready to work with a team that will work with you? You've got Rhodey and me, and a lot more people you just haven't noticed, because they don't wear spandex."

"That, that's a stereotype! I don't know anyone who wears spandex. Except, you know, the dancers at the Pink Pussycat..."

Pepper put her hand over Tony's mouth. "No. Be serious for a few minutes."

Tony sighed. "Yes. I did actually learn something while I was gone. That's why the game. We kept ignoring ninety-nine point nine percent of the human race because they weren't single-purpose designed for mayhem. I don't know what's coming, but I do know it's going to come at us from all sides, and it's going to take everything we've got to fight back. I want to get everyone in the game. I want doctors and lawyers and psychiatrists- hell yes, we need all the psychiatrists, and veterans, and people who can't get out of bed by themselves and people set aside because they don't have high I.Q.s, and people who can't see or hear or speak or maybe are missing a few parts. We need everyone, Pepper. I'm not going to lose this fight because someone doesn't pass a physical."

"Tony, that's... that's impossible. You can't unite the world. Even if this game would do it there are millions... more than a billion at last count... of people who don't even have electricity."

"Yeah, see, that needs to be fixed. There's a company already working on that. BuffaloGrid. They have a device they call a hub, that's a large power pack attached to a solar panel. They donate it to shops for people to use to repower their cell phones and get internet. They started out in North India and are just beginning mass production now- that's a huge, huge, market of underserved people, a mass of untapped talent. If we can partner with BuffaloGrid, maybe license some of their stuff, we can go into communities around the world, connect them, bring them out of isolation and into the future."

"You are really determined."

"That's what Rose Hill taught me. 'We'll do this together' means all of us. We can't afford to be too proud to ask for help." Tony took another deep breath. "And speaking of help... I'm going to need you to help me. I've joined AA, but coming back into the limelight, the parties and fund raisers... it's going to be tempting..."

"Tony! I'm so proud of you. You're right. We can do this together. I just have one request..."

"Yes?"

"I want to call in Pedro Medina. You need a master barber, desperately."

Tony felt his beard. He was going to miss it. A little. "You got it."

Chapter End Notes

http://www.wired.co.uk/article/daniel-becerra-buffalogrid-electricity-energy

https://buffalogrid.com

https://www.linkedin.com/in/pedro-medina-521bb4101 ("Iron mans" (Robert Downey Jr.) personal barber. Worked as a master barber for 10 years at The Shave of Beverly
Hills...
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The first actual court date, the one about all the seized property, turned out to be incredibly undramatic. Both the government and S.I. waived the right to a jury, so it went to a bench trial. Tony's three... going on four... month's absence seemed to have turned public opinion in his favor, which is why the government hadn't wanted to risk a trial. S.I. just wanted things settled quickly.

Quite possibly S.I.'s sponsored series of videoed interviews with people who'd had their property seized under the civil law also had a great deal to do with the revitalization of Tony's image. When you watch a woman weeping as she explained how the police confiscated her gold crucifix because she had 'looked nervous' during a traffic stop (and since she hadn't been charged with a crime she had no court appointed attorney to help her get it back), you sympathize with her, and by extension wonder if it could happen to you. Then people who lost their homes because a relative had been caught using drugs spoke, and that... that was scary. How could you know if your brother or sister, son or daughter, grandson or granddaughter, heck, visiting cousin down on his luck, was doing drugs or growing pot on the roof? True, most of the people who lost their homes were black or Hispanic, but even the people who were counting on white privilege had to admit that Tony Stark's white privilege hadn't protected him. And the people who were black or Hispanic were even more outraged and frightened.

If the government could take his property without even accusing him of a crime, no one was safe.

The judge listened to both sides. It didn't take her long to come to a decision.

Tony Stark won and walked out of the courtroom to a crowd of reporters. He waved off the questions and said seriously, "The United States is a nation of laws. When a law is unjust, this..." Tony said as he pointed back at the courthouse, "is where you protest. I am glad to have had my day in court. Thank you."

And then he walked off without adding any of the other things he really, really wanted to say. He wasn't sure he'd get back any of the forfeited property despite the court ruling, but far more important to him, he'd got the people back on his side.

Chapter End Notes

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_forfeiture_in_the_United_States
"A potato gun? Seriously, is that what you're going for?" Tony's Iron Man avatar asked Harley's avatar, which looked just like Harley. It took a lot of imagination to force your avatar to look like something you didn't know intimately.

"It shoots C-4. You know, you can make C-4 for under $4 a pound."

"Please tell me that you haven't got a box of homemade C-4 sitting under your bed," Tony said. He had the Iron Man faceplate up and was surveying the virtual landscape. They were in Rose Hill this time, which felt even more weird to him than the Manhattan scenarios.

"Of course not. Just the raw materials."

Charley popped into the game without warning. Tony still didn't know how she did that. Her avatar today was around twelve feet tall, and her eyes were pure silver. She wore a blue toga sort of robe clipped on one shoulder, and blue armor underneath. She was hovering a few inches over the ground, so, ok, today she could also fly. Tony guessed that the virtual world was easy for her to manipulate because she'd never been particularly attached to the real world.

"Be seeing you!" Charley said cheerfully while she formed white force balls with her hands.

"Tell me again, Tones. Why are we bringing kids into this?" Rhodey grumbled. He liked to appear without the War Machine and walk around until the Chitauri arrived before he'd suit up. His bio-prosthesis worked, but it still wasn't the same as walking on his own. "Teaching kids to make C-4! That is so wrong."

"Tony didn't teach me," Harley said as he loaded up his potato gun. "I got that from Google."

"Saddle up, guys," Spiderman said, pointing out the specks of spaceships approaching. Even in their private game he kept his identity hidden. "You know, it's not fair, there's no skyscrapers for me to swing from."

"That's why we use different environments, Web-head," Tony reminded him. "It's not training if it's all easy."

"Fine, fine," Spidey said. "Can I web off your suit when you fly?"

"Sure," Tony said at the same time Rhodey said, "No."
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The second legal obstacle didn't even make it to a judge. Very, very quietly, the injunction against Anthony Edward Stark being employed in hi-tech work was found to be... well, the closest the government would admit was 'clerical error'.

Pepper handed Tony the papers, and he smirked. "The snark was a boojum."

"What?" Pepper asked while reaching past him to get the toast. She was wearing a shortie pajama set and Tony was momentarily distracted. Getting back together had seemed so natural, but they were still wary of hitting past triggers. Sometimes Tony just liked to watch her and be grateful he hadn't lost her.

"Oh. It softly and silently vanished away. You know, Lewis Carroll 'The Hunting of the Snark'."

"I know the poem, I'm just surprised you do."

"College nickname. Stark the Snark. I had to look it up to be sure it was an insult. I'm still not sure. I even read Martin Gardner's 'Annotated Hunting of the Snark'. A boojum is now the name given to a type of singularity."

"Tony, you're rambling."

"Yeah. I know. I don't want to do this, Pep." Among the papers, right on top, was a request to attend a press conference. Peter Parker wanted to take photos. Photos was fine, what wasn't fine was that Tony would be standing in front of a room full of hungry reporters who hadn't had a bite of Stark in ages. And he knew, everyone knew, they weren't going to ask about the game, or the partnership with BuffaloGrid.

Pepper ruffled Tony's hair. "You can't keep ignoring the elephant in the room. No one's heard from the Avengers, but you're back and some people are wondering why Captain America isn't."

Tony sighed and lowered his head to the table. He whined. "Maybe T'Challa can send a video of the Avengers playing handball. You know, hold up a current newspaper with the date showing. Someone's still printing newspapers, right? Proof of Life!"

"No, Tony. Sooner or later they're going to make a move and you need to speak first. Honestly I don't know how T'Challa has kept Rogers content to stay quiet for so long."

"I may, just possibly, have linked their game to sets S.I. donated to veterans, particularly notable survivors of World War II. Rogers was always fascinated by the old codgers." Tony lifted his head. "Some of them are surprisingly sharp for centenarians. He never actually trained, you know? He had, what, two weeks of base camp, a shot in the arm, POOF, all big and shiny, but even THEN the army didn't want him, so they sewed him into a flag and made him dance. Then his good buddy Bucky..." Tony was bitter, yes he was. "The bestest buddy in the whole world got caught. So naturally Rogers went AWOL, with my dad's help, to save him, and sort of accidentally saved a few hundred other people who happened to be en route to Bucky and after that, the army couldn't ignore the good publicity so they let him take command of the random assortment of soldiers of various nations and free French, whatever had been in Hydra's net, who'd been impressed by the rescue, and call them a unit. The U.S. needed a hero, and there he was. He looked gorgeous, he sounded noble, and he
filmed beautifully."

"Tony," Pepper said quietly.

Tony continued, "He knew nothing about the military, not the line of command, not the rules of engagement, nothing beyond the actual fighting. The Howling Commandoes could have taught him, but he'd saved their lives, saved them from horrible torture, and they all thought the sun shone out his ass, because he was so noble and fearless and all that. So they covered for him. They guided him without hurting his feelings, and they made him look like a commander. But they didn't teach him how to be a commander.

"And then he conveniently went out in a blaze of self-sacrificial glory and sure as shit, no one was going to say a word against him then.

"When he returned, no one remembered he was just a kid from Brooklyn, and they sent him out to fight again. He bought a bunch of books on military history. Books, Pepper, trying to understand what he'd been a part of by reading stuff written for the most part by people who'd never fought. So, I got him a bunch of teachers he might actually respect. And it's working. At least I think it is."

"Tony, you absolutely cannot say any of that to anyone!"

"I know. But I had to say it to you." Tony sighed again. "Fine. I can do this. Can I wear my lucky tie?"

"The yellow one with tiny Matchbox cars on it?"

"Yes."

"Will it help you get through the conference?"

"Immeasurably."

"Fine."

Chapter End Notes

Tony had his sunglasses, his perfectly trimmed Balbo beard, a dove gray Tom Ford, a More Than Meets The Eye wristwatch, and his lucky tie. Every part of his armor served a purpose. The sunglasses shielded him from photographic flashes- sometimes so many he felt the heat against his skin, the beard was styled to accentuate his expressions so they wouldn't be misread, and the tie... well, right now he wanted to give people something silly to look at. He didn't expect them to softball the questions because of his Matchbox tie, but who knows, childhood associations. Couldn't hurt. Besides, he liked the tie.

Pepper had introduced him and then taken a seat next to the podium. Tony thanked her, and went to stand behind it. "So," he said, "I'm back and I know you have questions. Where did I go? Why was I gone so long? Were there beautiful women involved? In the interests of preserving the privacy of the people who took me in, I'm going to have to refuse to answer the first question. In answer to the second, I needed time to recuperate from a generally exhausting decade. And for the third? Yes, absolutely, any woman who can bake a perfect peach pie is gorgeous. So, any other questions?"

Tony pointed to the most excitable looking reporter. Might as well get it going.

"Mr. Stark, is Iron Man retired?"

Well, he didn't expect that one. "No." Tony didn't glance at Pepper. "Being Iron Man is a terrible responsibility, and on occasion I need to step back from him, but I have come to accept that I am, and always will be, Iron Man."

"What about Captain America!" came a shout.

"Hey. I didn't call on you. Let's have a little decorum here," Tony said. He pointed to another raised hand and a woman rose to her feet.

"Since it's come up, would you please answer the question; what do you know about Captain America?"

"That's... wow, such an open-ended question. Where to start."

The woman gave Tony a dirty look. "How about since his disappearance? He was last seen on security cameras in a German airport which was subsequently demolished."

"Demolished is such a harsh word." Tony held up his hands to silence the protests he saw beginning. "I'm sure you're all familiar with the beginning of this situation, so I won't rehash it. I also won't go into too much detail about the subsequent events." Tony made a face. "I promised some lawyers. So. I went to Germany with Colonel Rhodes and a small team who had been authorized by the U.N. to apprehend Captain Rogers and the team he was leading.

"We all thought we were doing the right thing. We all had best intentions. And as usually happens, we paved a road to hell. Colonel Rhodes was badly injured, four of Captain America's team were captured, and the Captain himself evaded capture along with Sergeant Barnes.

"One of the prisoners told me where Captain Rogers intended to go. He had received information that led him to believe world security was at stake. It was an isolated region, from which it was unlikely Captain Rogers could call on any local authorities in the event of the worst case scenario given by the tipster being true. I went there, again, with the best of intentions, to aid Captain Rogers.

"It was a trap, aimed at inciting dissension between myself and Captain Rogers. I won't go into the
details, because they were painfully personal, but it worked. I fought both Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes. My suit was disabled, and I wasn't feeling all that great, either. Then they left. I had shot off Barnes bio-metallic arm, but so far as I could tell, when Captain Rogers helped him to his feet, neither of them was seriously injured. That is the last time I've seen or spoken to Captain Rogers."

Another reporter waved. Tony gave him a go-on gesture.

"Are you telling us that you have no idea where Captain America is?"

Tony grinned. "No. Of course not. I have ideas. I always have ideas. That's the definition of genius. The four members of Captain Rogers' team who had been captured had been held in a high security facility. I didn't know it at the time, as I was undergoing medical treatment, but I recently found a voice mail informing me that there was a break in at that facility not long after my last sight of Captain Rogers, releasing just those four prisoners. It seems reasonable to assume that it was Captain Rogers himself who got them out, and that he was therefore well enough to carry out such a mission. My logic says that Captain Rogers and his team have found sanctuary somewhere."

"Why aren't they out fighting Hydra?" Another shouted question.

Tony huffed. "Rude. Look, I'm not Captain America, how would I know? Maybe they've retired."

"But what if we need him?" Came another cry from the reporters.

Tony sighed. "I repeat. I am NOT Captain America. I think this press conference is over, ladies and gentlemen. You have your packets containing informational handouts on S.I.'s partnership with BuffaloGrid and our new venture into Virtual Reality Gaming, where imagination is your only limit. In fact, you may even meet Captain America there. It will be the ultimate cosplay." Tony grinned and left the stage, ignoring further shouts.

Pepper met him back stage.

"So," he asked her quietly. "How did I do?" He really wanted a drink. Instead he put his hand in his pocket and rubbed his three month AA coin. So far, the Manhattan AA group had kept his anonymity. It was good to have people he could trust.

"I think it went ok." Pepper patted him on the arm. "They'll be disappointed that you didn't give them anything scandalous, and try to read between the lines, but what's new?"
"Boss?" Friday said when Tony had barely planted his ass in the limo next to Pepper. Happy had insisted on playing chauffeur since Tony's return to New York. It chafed, giving up control, had chafed ever since Afghanistan. Stupid really, but he kept thinking, if he'd been driving, maybe... maybe...maybe he could have saved some of those young airmen, crazy to think that way, but it kept coming up every time someone else drove. At least when he and Jayden had shared driving Tony had been right beside him. But this was Happy, and Happy needed this badly enough to claim 'family emergency' leave from his position at head of security. Which Tony didn't know why he'd even kept that. Happy and Pepper owned S.I. and had control of the assets. So long as Tony had funds for his work, and ok, funds for fun, he didn't need to try to revoke that. It would be a legal nightmare, anyway.

So here he was sitting in the back seat, and trying to be grateful that the car bar had been stripped of all booze. He opened up a bottle of cran-pomegranate juice as a substitute for the scotch he was craving after the press conference. His throat hurt from all the times he had to say 'Captain America'.

"Hit me, Friday. And why am I still Boss?"

"You will always be Boss," Friday said firmly.

"Ok, fine. What is it, Fry?" Tony was smiling. Friday was young, but she had her own mind.

"King T'Challa wishes to speak with you."

"Oh, yeah." Tony took a large gulp of juice. He glanced at Pepper. "The press conference went live?"

"It wasn't supposed to." Pepper scowled.

Tony sighed. "Put him through, on speaker," Tony said and laid the phone between him and Pepper.

"Dr. Stark," T'Challa said.

"Your Majesty," Tony replied. "Pepper Potts, C.E.O. of Stark Industries and my boss, is sitting next to me. She knows about your house guests, so you can speak freely."

"Very well. I have heard only good things about Ms. Potts. I am sure you are wise to reside your trust in her."

"Thank you, your Majesty," Pepper replied, with a bright smile.

Tony wasn't jealous. So T'Challa had a great voice, and fantastic body, and ruled an entire kingdom. Tony had... well... he was pretty sure he wasn't half bad. Besides, he'd already given Pepper her own kingdom, she wouldn't want a second one to handle. "So, what's on your mind, T'Challa?"

"Rogers has been keeping abreast of the news. In particular he has set a Google news alert for anything involving the Avengers, you, or himself."

"Ouch. So someone flash-leaked the news conference and it hit all the buttons."

"Apparently. Rogers gathered his people to see the conference, and emotions are high." T'Challa said dryly, "High is an understatement. I believe you should be prepared for some response. I do not know what form it will take. I have been attempting to persuade them to prepare a statement which
can be released without revealing its origin, but I cannot promise they will be satisfied with that.”

"Satisfied?" Pepper asked. "Why would they need satisfaction? Tony didn’t accuse them of anything—well, unless you mean his guess that Rogers broke his friends out of jail, but that's the least of the charges against them.”

"I really don't know, Ms. Potts. I have not been associating with them closely, so their motivations are obscure to me. I merely wished you to have advance notice, so you may make whatever preparations you think advisable.”

"Yeah, thanks," Tony said. "I appreciate it. End call, Friday." He let his head fall back against the seat. "Preparations? Pepper, can we pull down the blinds and tell everyone we're not home?"

"I don't think so." Pepper patted Tony's hand.

"Friday, how are we stocked for aspirin?"

"Sending an order right now, Boss.”
Once they arrived at the Tower, Pepper did the equivalent of pulling down the blinds by asking Friday to log and sort all calls, sending any from news media, affiliates, and 'unknowns' to the messaging service while at the same time giving priority to anything Rogers and the Avengers were actually doing.

Tony made coffee and took a preemptive dose of headache remedy with his first cup. "I'm a pretty smart guy, wouldn't you say, Pep?" He brought another cup over to Pepper who had sat down on the couch to look at the Chrysler building. Tony would never admit it, but he built Stark Tower because Pepper liked that Art Deco building, and since they wouldn't sell it to him, he settled for a good view.

Pepper took off her shoes and sipped her coffee. "On a good day, you can be quite bright." She patted the couch next to her.

Tony lay down on the couch and put his head in her lap. "Why do I always feel like a stupid kid around Rogers?"

Pepper ruffled Tony's hair. "Maybe you're allergic to him."

Tony huffed a laugh. "Could be." He sat up. "All right. This will be fine."

Maybe, Tony thought, maybe Rogers will just issue a statement justifying him breaking his friends out of the Raft on the basis of it being illegal detainment. Which it actually was, but old Thunderbolt Ross got away with it because Rogers had already proved that politely asking his peeps to stay put was useless. The Raft had one major advantage over most confinement facilities- there weren't any innocent bystanders in Rogers' way.

"Boss, Wakandan Deep Net just bounced a video. It's from Rogers. I could try to intercept it?"

"No, Friday, let it go," Tony said. "Wouldn't want to interfere with his freedom of speech. Although, you know, that doesn't apply world wide. I don't even know how they interpret it in Wakanda."

Pepper sighed. "I'm going to have to assign more researchers to Wakanda, aren't I?"

"Yeah, think so. I've almost got his Majesty willing to consider allowing S.I. to purchase raw vibranium. I'm not sure how much power he has over it. It's a monarchy, but the council of elders has a lot of control. And I'm not sure how succession is passed. Think there was something about combat? Wow. If you had to do a death cage match between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton...mmm... hard to call it..."

"Tony, shush." Pepper waved her hand and a blue holo rectangle projected above the coffee table, with a still image of Rogers' face centered in it.

"YouTube? He put it on youtube? Wow, the comments are going to be amazing." Tony sat up straight. "Run it, Friday."
"My name is Steven Rogers. You probably know me better as Captain America." Tony thought, uncharitably, that Rogers may have been persuaded not to wear his Captain America uniform, but he still posed as if he was wearing it. He wondered if it still showed the marks of fighting.

"Mr. Stark has said that the Avengers may have retired. He went so far as to say that he didn't know what Captain America would do if he were needed." Rogers' jaw clenched. "That is a bald-faced lie."

"What?" Tony looked at Pepper. "Does he think I read his god-damned mind?"

"Shush." Pepper put her hand on Tony's arm.

"Mr. Stark."

Tony interrupted, "You probably know him better as Iron Man."

Pepper rolled her eyes and put her hand over Tony's mouth. "Friday, repeat that, please."

Rogers said, "Mr. Stark knows perfectly well that I promised I would be there for him, if he needed me. I sent him a letter explicitly saying that. I even enclosed a telephone in the package." Pepper's hand was still over his mouth, but Tony shook his head indignantly. There'd been a mail backlog at the penthouse, sure, but Friday had kept him up to date on it. There hadn't been anything Pepper couldn't handle. There sure as hell hadn't been a box from Rogers.

Rogers went on. "He did not see fit to reply. Today he went before the press and made scurrilous remarks about my team, people who have repeatedly risked their lives to save others. Yes, I rescued them from that floating death camp. I had to, because organizations you've never even heard of..." Rogers leaned forward, and his eyes were all pure, honest, outrage, sparkling and bright. Tony sometimes wondered how much Visine Rogers used. Maybe it helped that he didn't smoke, drink, or say naughty words.

"Corrupt organizations who tried to make the Avengers their personal hit-squad, had imprisoned them without trial, or any chance of appeal. They tormented Wanda Maximoff, a young woman whose brother died to save the world!"

What? Pietro Maximoff died because he got in the way of bullets. He had saved people, sure, but the world? Exaggeration. And Wanda. Considering how powerful she was, Tony wasn't at all sure he could have confined her. Definitely it'd take more than a locked door. Vision hadn't been able to stop her, and her only motivation at the time was that she resented being asked to stay put. Pretty sure really locking her up would bring out the big guns, so, you know, confining her hands, and using whatever that collar was... it probably was all they could think of at the time. Quite horrible, yes. So much more horrible than having her good friend Vision politely ask her to remain where she was safe. Given time, Tony could have got them out of there. Maybe he could have even come up with something to harmlessly restrict Wanda's powers until things calmed down. She'd hate that, and hate him, but then he always got the feeling she hated him anyway.

Rogers had been talking while Tony thought. He'd been trying not to listen, but it wasn't working.

"Mr. Stark isn't a bad man. He's just misguided. Misled by all the people who surround him because he has 'all the best toys' and he can call members of Congress 'assclowns' and get away with it." Rogers mouth tightened as if he'd bitten a sour lemon. "He lives in an ivory tower, only his is made of steel, and is in the middle of Manhattan. If I could be there, I'd sit him down and make him listen
"My faith is in people. Individuals. Individuals like you. If I could be there to lead you, we could walk right up to the doors of Tony Stark's tower and make him understand. The Accords are wrong. My friend, Bucky Barnes, fought in World War II. He should be an honored veteran. Mr. Stark didn't even fight in a war, but he got a medal. What did Bucky get? He was hounded across the world, an innocent man tortured and never given a moment's rest over the years."

Tony thought *if the music from Les Miserables comes up, I may be sick.*

"I want justice, that's all I want. And I know you, the American people, want that too," Rogers said, blue eyes burning with righteous fervor. "I know, even without me to lead you, you can carry my message to Mr. Stark. Let him know that Captain America is not retired and will never give in to tyranny."

Then he bowed his head. "I thank you for listening to me, America."

Pepper took her hand away from Tony's mouth. "Oh," she said weakly, "Did Captain America just tell people to..."

"Yep," Tony replied. "Storm the castle. Bring your own pitchfork and torch."

"Shit," Pepper said.

Chapter End Notes

(This link isn't about legality, but about citizens' responses to what they *believe* should be allowed. It's 'global- an aggregate of 38 countries' against 'US', but there are links to more details. In the question 'people should be able to make public statements that call for violent protest', 25% of the 'global' median agreed, while 44% of the US agreed.) Checking the detailed chart- 8 African countries were among those polled. Among those, on the same question South Africa had the highest approval rating with 42% very close to the US, but others were a lot lower- 9%, 11%, 17%, 19%, two at 25%, and one at 30%. No idea where I'd place Wakanda. :^)

It's blind arrogance to assume the whole world agrees with the U.S. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/18/where-the-world-sees-limits-to-free-speech/
Tony wondered if Rogers was so blind he didn't see the consequences, or if he simply considered the inevitable injuries, even possible death, as acceptable losses if he forced Tony to agree with him. And what... did he think that Tony could magically make all the Avengers' problems go away? Make everyone think it was all a big misunderstanding? Make the Accords vanish? Throw the Avengers a block party? Stop thinking about Rogers. Think about the people. "We need a plan," he told Pepper. "We have to minimize the casualties."

"Yes. First thing, clear the Tower. Friday, get me Mr. Hogan!"

While Pepper was talking, Tony said, "Friday, get me King T'Challa. I don't CARE what he's doing, I need to speak to him."

"Yes, Boss/Boss Lady," Friday answered. She was good at multi-tasking, of course she was. She was one of Tony's kids.

T'Challa's face appeared almost instantly on the holo Tony was watching. He looked furious and didn't wait for Tony to speak. "That was not the speech I had approved, Dr. Stark!"

"You couldn't stop it once Rogers got into his stride?" Tony asked. "Friday, get to YouTube, whoever's at the top of the heap, get that video pulled. Tell them it's an incitement to riot. People could DIE."

"Yes, Boss," Friday said at the same time T'Challa said, "The Dora Milaje were supervising, but suddenly they were taken ill and unable to prevent Rogers changing his words."

"Poisoned? Rogers wouldn't go that far. He can't afford to antagonize you." Tony would have liked to think that Rogers would have had humanitarian motives for refraining from poisoning his host's guards, but... yeah, didn't think so.

"The Dora Milaje do NOT get sick. They do not get poisoned, either. They eat of the heart-shaped herb, as do I."

Tony had no idea what that was, but he was willing to accept that T'Challa believed it ruled out natural causes. "So you think..."

"I think the Red Witch got in their heads and made them think they were ill." Tony saw T'Challa's shoulders move and heard a *crunch* as if he'd broken something with his fists. "I have no proof, and even if I did, my reasons for keeping them here remain valid. If they could do this to the Dora, what could they do to the rest of my people if I told them to leave?"

"BOSS!" Friday broke in, "YouTube can't do it. They removed that video, but copies of it keep being uploaded, and it's been sent to news agencies and...it's everywhere."

"Jesus." Tony felt like he was standing in the path of an avalanche.

"I also pray for us all, Dr. Stark," T'Challa said. "I am told that someone, probably Mr. Lang, broke into the Wakandan Dark Web and used it to send this video everywhere. We are trying to track down and delete these commands, but it will take time."

"Ok, we can't stop it being seen, I'll just have to deal with it. Try to keep a lid on the Avengers. I may have to set up a debate with Rogers."
"That is risky."

"Yeah, I know, but if I'm not seen to at least try to respond to him... hey, Friday, can I do a video response on YouTube? If I could get a statement following Rogers it might take some of the wind out of his sails."

"Sorry, Boss, they deleted that feature. The best we could do would be put a link to a video response in the comments."

"Yeah, no, not good enough. Sorry, T'Challa, didn't mean to be rude."

"I understand. Go. I will do what I can here, and pray for your success in your own endeavors."

"Yep, right. Bye." Tony looked over at Pepper who was talking rapidly, giving instructions on getting the businesses renting space in Stark Tower to cooperate in the evacuation.

Tony said, "Friday, get all the S.I. labs shut down. Safety first, end all experiments at the soonest possible safe point. Don't worry about losing data, let it go." He ran his hand through his hair.

"Boss! Colonel Rhodes just called to say he's on his way."

"No, no, no."

The elevator opened and War Machine stepped out. "Yes, Tony." Rhodey was standing next to it. War Machine strode into the room and took up sentry position facing the elevator. Rhodey walked over to Tony, a little slow, because he was still getting accustomed to his leg braces. "This is my home, too. Tell me what I can do."

Tony sighed. "Fine. How about you send up War Machine to keep an eye on the streets, report any gatherings headed our way. I doubt anything's going to happen today, at least not anything big, but we need to see which way trouble's coming."

"Right." Rhodey turned to War Machine. "Report through Friday."

The armor tilted its head and then strode out to the balcony and took off.

"What's next?" Rhodey asked.

"I... I don't...Pepper, was there a package from Rogers? It would help if I knew what was in it."

Pepper shook her head. "Nothing was sent to the Tower, or the rebuilt Malibu mansion. If he sent it to one of the properties that was sold..."

"No, he couldn't, he wasn't interested in jet-setting playboy Tony, so he never knew about any of them. The only thing he knew..." Tony lifted his head. "The Compound. That was home base to him. I didn't live there, but he knew I paid all the bills, so he could have thought they'd forward mail to me."

"They probably would," Pepper said, "But let's check. Friday, see if there's been a package sent to The Avengers Compound in the last four months for Tony."

"Yes, Boss Lady!" Friday was silent a few seconds. "Boss Lady? I have a possible. An undeliverable package was returned to FedEx. It was sent to the Avengers Compound, addressed to a Mr. Tony Stank. The custodian refused to sign for it."

Rhodey looked at Tony.
Tony said, "Don't even. God, what a circus of stupidity. Friday, GET ME that package. Get it to the Tower ASAP."

Pepper said, tentatively, "Maybe when you can prove you didn't get it, and you answer his letter, things will cool down. I mean, it sounds like he was trying to mend bridges."

Tony hung his head. "I hope you're right." But he had a mental image of one of the Howling Commandoes' publicity films, where they demolished a bridge. That seemed more Rogers' style.
"Boss?"

"Yeah, Friday." Tony was trying to think what else he could do, while waiting for Rogers' missive.

"BOSS!"

"Yes! What is it, Friday?"

"You have an incoming call from a previously unknown number."

"Why aren't you shunting that off to the message service?"

"It's from Rose Hill, Boss!"

Tony shook his head. "Put it through."

"Hi, Mr... Sterling? Are you still Sterling?"

"Frank." Tony waved at Pepper, to get on with her own tasks. "Yeah, look Frank, now's not a good time..."

"I know!" Frank said. "I'm just calling to let you know that I'm looking after Charley. And the cat, too! So don't worry about them."

"What? Why... let me talk to Holly, or Harley."

"They're not here. Half the town's gone to Knoxville to catch a plane to Manhattan."

"Oh, shit," Tony said in the most heartfelt tones.

In the background he heard Charley cheerfully say, "Language!" and then he heard a tussle between her and Frank before her voice came more clearly. "Seeing you!" she said happily. "Everybody's going to the party!"

"Party, what party." He had a flashback to Romanoff saying, "I don't see how that's a party" and for once he empathized with her. "This is the least party like occasion ever."

"Big city party!" Charley said, and then she started singing, "For dancing in the streets, They're dancing in Chicago, Down in New Orleans..."

Tony blinked. "Street dancing. BLOCK PARTY. Friday, get the police chief, get the mayor, get me a permit for a block party around Stark Tower. Get barricades. Get security to man them, get portable weapons detectors. Port-a-potties, hot dog vendors, free watering stations, the works! We'll put on the biggest, best fucking block party."

"Language," Charley said again. "Swear jar!" and then she hung up.

"You're kidding," Rhodey said.

"Nope," Tony turned to Pepper. "It's the best I can come up with right now. Non-confrontational crowd control."
There was a tapping on the balcony glass and everyone turned to look. Spiderman peered in from the armor ramp. "Cool. Dibs on the bounce castle."
Tony remembered Rogers sternly telling him, "Every time someone tries to win a war before it starts, innocent people die." And then he ripped a log in half as a conversational stopper.

People sitting on their asses, hoping things would settle down without them getting involved, was how World War II happened. The US got dragged into the war after years of other countries being bled dry, but if all the powerful nations had stood up at the beginning and worked together to protect the smaller ones--- who knows? There were any number of factors leading to the war, and maybe it would have been inevitable, but maybe it wouldn't.

Diplomacy wasn't a dirty word. Preparedness wasn't disgusting. Ultron was a fuckup, sure, but Tony had already abandoned Ultron. He still had no idea how it had happened. The bits and pieces he'd managed to salvage later showed that the integration simulation had failed. It offended his scientific mind, but no one had wanted to hear that it was logically impossible. It existed, that was good enough for them.

'Mystery Hill' would have them all agog. 'Natural Gravitational Anomaly'... Tony can't even think that with a straight face. It was a tourist trap in the 1930's maybe Rogers had already been amazed by it.

Ok, get back on track. Enough recreational wool-gathering.

"Boss, the package from FedEx has arrived. I took the liberty of requesting the original delivery person bring it."

"Good idea, Fry. Have him wait outside the lobby. This has to be totally transparent. How many news outlets are there now?" Tony had in fact got Spiderman a bounce castle, the biggest one available. It had turrets and slides and tunnels. Within five minutes of setting it up Spiderman had added web ladders and nets and was doing acrobatics all over it.

The Daily Bugle was only the first to show up with cameras and eager reporters. The feed from War Machine showed a great many cameras and a whole row of vans parked just outside the roadblocks. Tony had planned to pipe in music, but before he could street musicians had heard about the party. The crowd was growing, faster the longer word had to spread, and so far things were calm.

"I don't know, Boss," Friday confessed. "There are a lot of people claiming to be from publications I've never heard about. But definitely all the major televised news sources have sent at least one representative."

"Good enough. It's show time." Tony straightened his lucky tie. "Let's go see what Rogers has to say for himself." He took the elevator down with Rhodey and Pepper. "This is going to be fun." He smiled. "Think of it as a great big birthday party! It's bound to be someone's birthday out of all the people down there."

Rhodey gave him a deadpan look. "Yeah, fun." Rhodey looked at Pepper. "Let's not do this for my birthday. Dinner at a nice restaurant, maybe take in a show. That'd do me."

Pepper nodded. "I wouldn't mind a spa day."
Chapter End Notes

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gravity_hill
http://www.mysteryhill-nc.com

(just for the heck of it, the odds of 366 randomly selected people all having different birthdays- gotta consider Feb 29! The more common birthday probability problem is to find the minimum number before you're likely to have two matching birthdays. This is MUCH more difficult than that one.)
http://www.murderousmaths.co.uk/books/366bday.htm
No one seemed to notice when Tony, Pepper and Rhodey stepped out of the lobby. No one, that is, except for the elderly and disgruntled looking man in the FedEx uniform who was facing the lobby. He was holding a medium size FedEx envelope in one hand, with an electronic clipboard on top. "About time," he grumbled. "Here." He held out the package to Tony.

Tony stepped back. "I don't like people handing me things."

The old man rolled his eyes. "For cripes sakes, I'm old, I'm not contagious."

Rhodey coughed. "Sir, we'd like you to verify that FedEx has had that package until now."

"Of course we have, what do you think, we rent hotel rooms for unclaimed stuff?"

Pepper twitched. "If you wouldn't mind, we'd like to make a little ceremony out of the delivery." Pepper pointed to the raised podium that had been set up in front of the building. There were already stands nearby doing face painting, and further away there were tables set up with hastily assembled assortments from local bakeries and candy shops. Starbucks had a temporary cart. A large group of people were forming a conga line. But coming through the barricades to either side were people who didn't seem to share the festive spirit. Many of them had Captain America t-shirts, or hats with embroidered wings, and quite a few of them carried placards hastily lettered. Others wore Iron Man garments, and there were ugly looks passing between the two groups.

"Yeah," Tony said, touching his ear. War Machine had notified Friday, who had passed on the warning. "Let's get this show on the road, Mr..." Tony waved at the FedEx guy.

"Lieber, Stanley Martin Lieber." Stanley scowled and his grizzled mustache bristled. "I'm here on my day off, and what do I get for it?"

"Barbecue?" Rhodey suggested, waving at another food stand that was doing a brisk business.

"I have a big dog," Stanley said, looking sly. "I didn't get to feed him, I was in such a hurry. He loves barbecue."

"We will give you the biggest doggie bag in the world," Tony said. "Just please..." He waved at the stand.

"No onions," Stanley said as he headed for the stand, Pepper on one side, and Rhodey on the other, helping him up. "Gives me... I mean, him, gas."

"Got it." Tony followed Stanley and reached for the microphone clipped to the front railing of the stand. "Hi, I'm Tony Stark. I'd like to welcome everyone to Stark Industries' First Annual Block Party!"

The microphone worked well, conversations stopped and the crowd turned to face the stands, some looking mildly expectant, some pleased, and other faces held barely concealed anger.

"Tony," Pepper warned.

"Well, ok, maybe we won't do this every year. This is a special occasion. I don't know how many of you may have seen Captain America's recent YouTube post, but I'm sure all of you are aware we haven't seen or heard from him in months. I gave a press conference earlier today in which I said that..."
I didn't know where Captain Rogers was, or even if the Avengers had retired and I could give no assurance that they would return if needed. I stressed that I wasn't speaking for the Captain.

Tony gestured at Stanley. "Captain Rogers apparently heard my statements and took exception to them, because he had sent me a letter saying that he would be here for me, if I needed him, and even a telephone to call him on. I never got the letter. It was only after the Captain posted that YouTube video that I learned of the letter's existence. I would like to ask Mr. Lieber, a respected employee of FedEx, to explain exactly what happened."

Stanley cleared his throat and stepped up to the railing. "It's not FedEx's fault!" He waved the package. "I took this myself, nearly four months ago, to the address on it, this Avengers Compound, and that's a long drive way out in the boonies, and they expect me to make my quota, anyway! I took it right up to the door, and I said, "Package here for Mr. Stank!" And the guy who answered the door said he didn't know any Mr. Stank! Mr. Stank don't live here. And he wouldn't sign for it! So, I took it back to the office and turned it in." He nodded firmly. "And now I come to find out it was Mr. STARK! How was I supposed to know? We bring him stuff all the time, here, to his Tower. It's a great big thing, you can't miss it! Nobody sends Mr. Stark anything to the Avengers Compound." Stanley nodded even more vigorously. "So, here's your package, Mr. Stark. Just the way we got it, nobody opened it or nothing."

"Thank you, Mr. Lieber." Tony decided he loved Mr. Lieber like a grandfather. He took the package and ripped it open. Inside there was a letter, and a brick of a cellphone. He opened the phone. "Hmm, dead battery." He looked in the envelope. "No charger." He pulled a slender tool kit out of his pocket and popped open the battery compartment. "Yep, it's dead, Jim." He held up the battery. "Goldie, find a replacement for this, can you?" A little golden bot flew down from the top of the Tower and seized the battery in small grapplers before flying away. Tony grinned. "Goldie is Redwing's older brother. Redwing's the bot I made for Falcon."

"Well, while we wait, let's read the letter." He opened the envelope and spread out the letter.

"How do we know that's not a fake!" a man in a stars and stripes hoodie shouted. "It's pretty convenient! Right after Captain America calls you out!"

"I didn't know to look for it until Captain Rogers posted that video." Tony looked around the crowd. "I don't know how to verify it-- unless... do any of you have samples of Captain America's handwriting? He wrote this by hand, so you could compare it."

The crowd shuffled and muttered, but a few people in Team Cap colors came forward. Tony held the letter while they climbed the podium and compared the letter with autograph books and other paraphernalia. "Looks legit," their spokeswoman finally admitted.

"Great." Tony cleared his throat. "Tony he read.

*I'm glad you're back at the compound, I don't like the idea of you rattling around a mansion by yourself. We all need family. The Avengers are yours, maybe more so than mine. I've been on my own since I was 18. I never really fit in anywhere -- even in the Army. My faith is in people, I guess. Individuals. And I'm happy to say for the most part they haven't let me down. Which is why I can't let them down either. Locks can be replaced, but --maybe they shouldn't. I know I hurt you Tony. I guess I thought -- by not telling you about your parents I was sparing you, but... I can see now I was really sparing myself. I'm sorry. Hopefully one day you can understand. I wish we agreed on the Accords, I really do. I know you were only doing what you believe in, and that's all any of us can do, it's all any of us should. So no matter what, I promise if you -- if you need us. If you need me, I'll be there."
Tony looked up, and kept his expression pleasant with the help of years of experience dealing with hostile board members, the press, generals, Congress... etc. "Well," he said, "I see that's all been a big misunderstanding. So we now know that Captain Rogers definitely promises to return if we need the Avengers. I'm sure that's a big relief to all of us."

There was muttering in the crowd. A woman put her hand up. "Mr. Stark, could you please read that again? I didn't quite understand some of it."

Tony forced another grin. "Sure. I can do that."
Tony read the letter out again.

The woman said, "It sounds like Captain America was replying to you." She sounded puzzled. "Did you send him a letter first?"

"No, I didn't." Tony said. "I know... it's lacking context. And to be honest, I don't feel comfortable discussing the context without Captain Rogers' input, so how about we wait while I call the Captain on the phone he provided? And then he can clear up any confusion."

"What's he mean by locks?" A woman yelled.

"Really, we're going to have to ask Captain Rogers," Tony repeated. "I could make guesses all day long, but you want to hear the truth from him, right?"

"YES!" a man shouted. He was fairly well covered in Cap clothes, and stood as if prepared for battle. "We want the TRUTH! Why are you back, business as usual, while Captain AMERICA is in exile!"

A young man in Iron Man colors told him, "Shut up and you'll get your answers."

"And who's going to make me? Huh? You?"

A sheet of webbing flew down in between the two men. "Sorry!" Spiderman said, "My bad! It's just, you know, I wanted a hot dog and you're in the way."

Tony grinned, "Give that man a hot dog. Put it on my tab."

"Sure," the Captain America fan said, "You've bought Spiderman off."

"I'm a cheap date," Spiderman agreed as he landed next to the hot dog cart. "Chili cheese dog, please. Extra cheese."

Chapter End Notes

Trying to think what I can do to prepare for Hurricane Irma. Will try to write in between, prob. short chapters. Keeping my fingers crossed I won't be gone for months, like when Hurricane Andrew came by, but you never know.
Goldie returned, hovering over Tony's hand until he took the battery it was holding. "Ok, here we go." Tony put the battery in the phone and turned it on. "Anndd, there's one number in memory. Trying it now." Tony tapped in the number, and waited, holding the phone close to his ear, and keeping his public smile pasted on, although his stomach felt like doing a rhumba.

Tony? Steve's voice. Tony couldn't decide whether Steve... Rogers... sounded angry or disapproving, or just plain surprised.

"Yeah, it's me. Before you say anything else, I want to put you on speaker."

Why? Ok, that was the sound of suspicion.

"I guess they haven't live-streamed this yet or you'd see why." Tony held the phone out. "Say hello to Captain America!"

The crowd roared. It was impossible to tell what any of them were saying. Hello was in there somewhere. Tony waved the crowd to silence and then put the phone back to his ear. "You remember that video you put on YouTube, asking people to 'carry your message' to me at my Tower? Well, they're here."

Oh. Rogers said. They really came?

Tony wanted to smack himself in the forehead. "Yes, Cap, they really came. There are hundreds of people gathered here. I just got your letter and they want to hear us talk about it."

I said everything I needed to say in the letter.

Tony did not grind his teeth, he did not. "Steve." That hurt, it really did. "If you really meant that would come to me when I need you, then now is the time. We'll do this the American way. Open debate, with the citizens listening. No secrets. No deals behind closed doors." Tony held the phone away from him again. "Captain Rogers isn't sure you really want to hear him. What do you say?"

This time the roar almost had a physical force. Tony braced himself against it. "Ok, Cap, I'm putting you on speaker now." And without waiting for more waffling, Tony hooked up the brick phone to his state of the art transparent phone, while apologizing to it silently. "Ok, you're live, Steve."

Um. Hello?

The crowd went wild again. At this point, Tony figured they were just enjoying the chance to cut loose. Well, shouting was a lot better than violence, so he wasn't going to complain.

"All right!" Tony shouted once they'd calmed again. "I read your letter to these good people, and they have some questions. That's all right with you, right, Steve?"

I guess so. Sure.

"How about we do this in threes- first I'll pick someone in Cap's colors, then someone in Iron Man gear, and then someone who just came to party and wonders why there's no beer! Answer. We didn't have time to get a liquor license. Ok!" In for a penny, in for a pound, Tony chose the belligerent Cap fan who had nearly got webbed. "You, sir, have you a question?"
"Damn straight I do. Captain Rogers, who was trying to enslave the Avengers? We can fight them! Whoever they are, just tell us who!"

*Did you hear about the Accords? The U.N. wanted to tell us where we could go, and where we couldn't go! Then they sent soldiers after us with orders to kill Bucky on sight.*

Tony opened his mouth and then shut it. The Cap fan seemed satisfied. Maybe he'd go picket the U.N. Bet they wouldn't serve barbecue. "Ok, next." For symmetry's sake, Tony chose the Iron Man fan on the other side of the web.

"Captain Rogers, what did you mean by 'maybe we shouldn't replace locks'? I was going to ask something else, but a lady brought that up, and my mother taught me ladies always go first."

Rogers actually laughed.*Your mother was right. Well, locks, you know... I guess I was thinking about a few different things. There were my friends, locked up in secret, without a trial or anything. And secrets in general. I've... not to be bringing up the past, Tony, but you know, when you did things in secret, it didn't work out.*

Ok, this time Tony actually did bite his lip. "Ok, so what Steve is saying is that we should all be open and aboveboard with everything."

*Well, maybe not everything! I mean, some things would be dangerous if everyone knew them.*

"Next," Tony said hastily before the young man could ask who decides what should be kept secret. He chose a young woman wearing a pretty floral dress. "Do you have a question?"

"Yes," she said. "Since we're talking about secrets, what didn't you tell Mr. Stark about his parents? You knew his father during the war. Did something happen then? Did he do something awful? Was there a scandal covered up?" Tony decided that innocent face hid a muck-raker's soul.

*What? No! I mean, Howard... sure he liked the ladies, and they liked him fine, but it was never anything bad.*

"Well, what was it, then?" she demanded, and damn if she didn't do a little foot stamp. "Tell me!"

She sounded a lot like Wanda in that moment. Maybe that was why Rogers answered hastily. *Bucky killed them. Wait, no. It wasn't Bucky it was the Winter Soldier! Hydra made him do it!*

Wanda-like's eyes widened. "And you didn't tell Mr. Stark?"

*It was more than twenty years ago! I thought he'd moved past it!*

Tony cleared his throat. Not to say anything but because it hurt. "I think we can move on to the next person." Tony blindly chose the first person wearing a stars and stripes t-shirt, a tall man, clean cut and with neatly trimmed hair. "Yes, you sir. Have you a question?"

"Yes," the man said. "Captain Rogers, you may not know this, but as a lawyer, I can tell you there is no statute of limitations on murder. We are a nation of laws. No one, no matter how pure their motives, is above the law."

*But Bucky was innocent!*

"That should have been decided in a court." The man shook his head, and took off his stars and stripes t-shirt, leaving himself in a white undershirt. "I have no more questions for Mr. Rogers."
"I do!" shouted someone Tony couldn't see. It was a female voice, and... very familiar. Oh, shit. Holly. Tony tried to choose someone else, but a group of men... oh, god, a group of brown haired, Balbo bearded men wearing gray jackets, hoisted her up on their shoulders. Tony couldn't possibly ignore her.

"Yes, please go ahead," Tony said reluctantly. Holly was beyond angry. She was pink-faced with rage.

"Mr. Rogers, look in your heart, and tell me what do you think your mother would have to say about your actions?"

YOU LEAVE MY MAW OUTTA THIS!

"But Mr. Rogers, your mother passed more than seventy years ago. Haven't you moved past it?"
Holly said sweetly.

SHE WAS MY MOTHER! THAT'S IT, I'M NOT LISTENING TO THIS ANY MORE! And there was a click.

"She was my mother," Tony said. His face was wet, and for once, fuck being made of iron. He let the tears fall, unashamed. "And he was my father."

Rhodey stomped up close to put an arm around Tony, while Pepper came up on his other side. Rhodey addressed the crowd, "Yeah, we all need family, like Rogers said. Tony Stark is my family. He is a good man. And you know the funny thing? You had to ask if Captain America was coming back... I didn't have to ask if Iron Man would come to help us. He always will. C'mon, Tony, let the good people have their party."

"Yeah." Tony waved at the crowd. "Just... party on."
Goldie followed them into the lobby, then darted away to the reception desk, and returned to hover in front of Tony with a small box of tissues dangling from its grapplers. It cheeped and wriggled until Tony took it. He laughed. "Yeah, thanks Goldie. Now, shoo. Go keep War Machine company. Or play with Spiderman."

Goldie bobbed up and down and then went out through one of the 'bot doors'.

Happy emerged from the security desk and took up a position facing the lobby doors, scowling at the paparazzi and newsmen. Security kept the paparazzi and newsmen from entering, but the cameras were pointing into the lobby. Happy tried to block their view with his body.

"So," Tony said, "that happened." He wiped at his face with the tissues. "God, I need a drink." He glanced up and met Pepper's eyes. "Sorry. No, slip of the tongue."

"Your parents," Pepper said quietly.

"Yeah," Tony said. He barked out a short laugh. "It's funny, Rogers saying he'd been on his own since he was eighteen. I was seventeen. When... and all this time I blamed Dad. Well. I thought it was my fault, too. We'd had an argument. I thought he'd been drinking because I upset him."

"Jesus," Rhodey said.

"Hey, let's not do this here. Glass doors, you know?" Happy said. "There's lip readers out there! Maybe?"

"Right. Right." Tony straightened and turned to look at Happy. "Oh. That woman who spoke last. Her and the people with her... make sure they're ok? Set them up in a hotel until the crazy dies down?"

"Rose Hill?" Happy asked, but it wasn't really a question.

Tony smiled. "Yeah. Mrs. Keener, Harley, and my God, you saw the Double Squad. Definitely get the Double Squad under cover. They've been dying to prank 'big city slickers'."

"Yeah, I'll take care of it, Mr. Stark," Happy said. He folded his arms across his chest. "Just as soon as you get in that elevator."

"Bossy."

Happy grinned brightly. "That's right. I almost forgot. I am your boss, now!"

"Happy," Tony said. He lifted one eyebrow.

"Right," Happy said with a nod. "I'm on it." He turned to glare at the paparazzi.

Happy's broad back standing resolutely between Tony and the rest of the world was the last thing Tony saw before the elevator doors shut on him, Pepper and Rhodey.
Note: In the first Iron Man movie we learn from a newspaper clip that at age 17 Tony lost both of his parents in a car accident. Later Marvel found that messed up timelines so they made him older- but he couldn't have been older than 20, because Stane controlled S.I. until Tony came of age at 21. Since 17 works best for this fic, I'm going with that.

(I FINALLY got a tree service to come. In about 15 minutes they had a cut pile as large as the one I'd created in a week of daylong sawing/chopping etc. The tree looks like a hand of blunt fingers. Will try to think what happens next with the fic, in between recuperating. I'm kinda wiped out. NAP TIME for now. :^) )
"So," Rhodey said once they were all in the penthouse, sitting on one of the couches, and he'd taken off his bio-braces to get comfortable. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"What? Talk about what?" It wasn't one of Tony's best avoidance tactics and the looks he received from Pepper and Rhodey made it clear it wasn't working. "No, but I will. Just... let's wait for Happy. I don't want to go through it twice."

Pepper nodded. "All right. Let's discuss the current situation with Rogers."

Tony let his head fall back against the couch. "There is no current situation. It's been handled. Rogers and his team are in Wakanda, a world away, in more ways than one. T'Challa has everything under control."

There was silence for a long moment. Then Rhodey said, "You don't really believe that, do you?"

Tony shook his head against the couch. "No. Rogers is like the post office motto. 'Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds'. Nothing will stop him from doing whatever the fuck he pleases."

"Boss," Friday said, "The Postal Service doesn't have a motto."

"Are you sure?" Tony seized the opportunity to avoid the unpleasant conversation even for a few minutes. "I saw it somewhere, I'm sure I did."

"It is chiseled in gray granite over the entrance of the James A. Farley building at Eighth Avenue and 33d Street in Manhattan," Friday admitted.

"Oh, yeah, that big building across from Madison Square Garden. I ran up the steps like Rocky. Once. Once was enough. That's the main New York Post Office, right? So it must be the motto."

Pepper and Rhodey were being very patient. Tony didn't like that. It was as if they were being careful of his tender feelings. Tony wasn't that sensitive about his parents' murder and Rogers hiding it from him and... well, maybe he was.

"It is actually a translation of a phrase in Herodotus' history of The Persian Wars, referring to the Persian's mounted couriers who served with great fidelity during the one hundred and fifty years the war lasted. One of the building's architects read Greek for pleasure and suggested the inscription."

"People read Greek for pleasure? Oh. That reminds me of Romanov, our Latin-loving- the language, not a Latin-lover, although hey, who knows what honeypot games she played..." Pepper and Rhodey were giving him really concerned looks now. He sighed. "Romanov was always a minion. She has always had someone giving her orders, the Red Room, the KGB, SHIELDRA, and then Rogers. I can't believe she's distributing vibronium coins on her own initiative. T'Challa assures me that she's had no contact with Rogers, so who is she working for? And how do they know our plan?"

"Could she be working for Fury?" Pepper asked, having been finally intrigued.
"He does still have resources," Rhodey said. "You never did figure out how he pulled a helicarrier out of his pocket."

"Mm, yeah, but you know, it's not quite his style," Tony said after a moment. "He always liked to show up, swirl his coat dramatically and glare at me. I wouldn't put it past him to have kept an eye--get it--an eye---on S.I. and figured out what we were doing, but if he had wanted to poke his nose in, he would have shown up at Rose Hill. If he'd wanted to find me, he would have."

"So, we have an unknown ally?" Pepper said, dubiously.

"Not much of an ally, if they won't show themselves," Rhodey said.

"But they did tip their hand, with that calling card." Tony sat up. "I never really felt Romanov had a sense of whimsy, so why did she send it?"

"Arrogance," Rhodey said.

"Maybe," Tony said doubtfully. "Maybe."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The elevator opened and Happy stepped out. "What did I miss?" he asked.

"Romanov," Rhodey replied.

Happy looked around hastily. "She's not here, is she?" He straightened his tie and tugged on the lapels of his suit, one handed. He was carrying a white cardboard box in his other hand.

Tony said, "Relax, your girlfriend isn't in the building-- I don't think. You never know with spiders."

"She's not my girlfriend," Happy said, "she's just... you know." He shrugged. And then he frowned. "Should I run a security sweep?"

"It's not worth it," Tony told him. "Even if she was here, what would we do if we caught her?"

Pepper nodded reluctantly. "I'd like to kick her ass, but that's just personal. We have more important priorities."

Tony raised his eyebrows. "What have you got against Romanov? Besides the lying, because, let's face it, that's what spies do."

"Vision told us what happened at Leipzig. She betrayed you, Tony." Pepper looked frustrated. "And I can't even figure out why."

"Does it matter?" Rhodey interjected.

"Yes! If she'd been paid to do it, or if she had been in love with Rogers or Barnes, I'd know where her lines are, and I could deal with her. I wouldn't trust her, but I'd know how far it was safe to use her. Why suddenly change sides when you were so close to capturing them! The only thing that makes sense to me would be if she'd been planning all along to let them go, and only joined Tony so she could turncoat at the most effective moment.

"As Tony says, she's always worked under someone else's orders and she's an accomplished liar. How do we know she wasn't working for Zemo?"

"That's pretty far-fetched," Tony told Pepper. "Zemo worked alone."

"We don't know that." Pepper folded her arms. "All we know is that her actions played into his hands."

There was an uncomfortable moment where no one said anything. Tony had to agree with Pepper that Romanov could be trouble, but there wasn't anything they could do about her.

Happy set the box he'd been carrying on the coffee table and opened it to reveal a dozen assorted doughnuts. "After I booked the rooms and sent your friends to the Sherry-Netherland I stopped by the cafeteria. Seemed a shame to let these doughnuts go to waste."

Tony picked up a glazed doughnut and bit into it. "Thanks." He suspected Pepper had a more personal reason for her feelings about Romanov. Back when he was dying of palladium poisoning, he had been attracted to the spider, and she had flirted back. It hadn't amounted to anything more. At
the time, even if he'd wanted to, he wasn't physically able. It had just been nice, pretending he could. That was before he and Pepper had decided to try being together, but still... anyway, it didn't matter. Pepper was right, Romanov couldn't be trusted even if it seemed she was helping them. "So, the Rose Hill gang is all settled?"

"For now," Happy said. He picked up a jelly doughnut. Pepper eyed the doughnuts longingly, but refused. Rhodey took a Bavarian creme.

"For now?" Tony asked.

"Well, they came all this way, Boss. I said Mrs. Keener and her son could come back tomorrow and get a tour of the Tower."

Tony couldn't help smiling. He'd get to show off his Tower, and have his favorite people meet.

"It was really weird, all those guys who..." Happy made a beard stroking gesture. "I never saw so many goatees in one place."

"Oh, yeah, the Double Squad."

"Tony?" Pepper looked at him. "You didn't recruit a group of body doubles, did you? I thought that was what the LMDs were for."

Tony nodded and then shook his head. "No, I had absolutely nothing to do with them!" He grinned. "But that gives me an idea."

"No, Tony," Pepper, Happy and Rhodey said together.

"C'mon, Charlie Chaplin did it!"

"Did what?" Happy asked.

"See!" Tony pointed at Happy. "You don't even know what my brilliant idea is, and you shoot it down."

"Fine," Rhodey said. "Give."

"The block party permit only lasts nine hours, but we could have a Tony Stark lookalike contest in Central Park! Good publicity, good for the image!" Tony looked at Pepper in appeal.

Pepper rubbed her forehead. "You have no idea what you're asking, Tony. We can't just do things like that. We were lucky they rushed the block party permit through, and that was only to avoid a riot!"

"But I want it, Pepper. I need it."

"I can't watch this," Rhodey said. He leaned forward and reached for his bio-braces. "If we're not going to be serious, I've got to go."

"Wait." Tony held out his hand. "I'm sorry. I'm just... it's a lot. You know? You're right. Let's get coffee and work things out. I can be serious. This is serious. Romanov can be ignored for now, but Rogers is likely to continue to be a problem. What can we do about him? I mean, to keep him from interfering with Project Atlas. Everything else is secondary. They're coming. I don't know when, but I know, in my heart, I know, they're coming."

Rhodey sat down heavily. "Discredit him?"
Pepper shook her head. "No. We'd be fighting an emotional argument. It doesn't matter what proof there is of Rogers'... unsuitability to lead... people who have an emotional investment in his image will only get angrier." She scowled. "We can't be seen to attack him."

"And we don't want him on our side," Happy said. He got up and headed towards the coffee machine. "I knew a few boxers like that. Great guys in the ring, but outside of it, they didn't know when to stop. Me, I know my limits."

_I can do this all day_ Tony thought. "Yeah. He doesn't believe in limits. Would you believe he once told the Avengers 'if you get killed, walk it off'?"

Everyone looked at Tony, appalled.

"Jesus," Rhodey said for all of them.

Chapter End Notes

https://www.nycgovparks.org/permits/special-events/faq

There's an urban legend that Charlie Chaplin entered a Charlie Chaplin lookalike contest and lost- there's no proof this ever happened. There were some gossip column 'friend of a friend told a story at a party' articles which said he'd come in something like 22 out of 40 contestants, and then the story changed over the years, including ones where he lost a contest to demonstrate the 'Chaplin walk' and ones where he came in 3rd, and ones where he entered the contest in old age, minus his mustache and 'Little Tramp' costume. I believe a newspaper columnist needed to fill space and made up the story, and it grew a life of its own after that.
"If Rogers doesn't believe in limits," Pepper asked, "what does he believe in?"

"Himself, mainly," Tony said. "Oh, and his buddy, Barnes..." Tony blinked. "He believed in Barnes even when the guy was doing his level best to kill him."

"How does that help?" Rhodes asked. "Barnes was Rogers' follower, he's not going to go against him."

"No, that's where we've been going at this the wrong way. Rogers always followed Barnes. He followed him into the army. He didn't break away from the showgirl routine until Barnes was captured. And after he thought Barnes died he went down with the Red Skull's plane without making any attempt to survive. Hell, I've SEEN him jump from an airplane without a parachute. That was a choice to follow Barnes into death. He'd follow Barnes anywhere. I think he still had that death wish up until Barnes returned."

Pepper said, "That... that's really disturbing. But surely SHIELD gave Rogers counseling and helped him get past that. They wouldn't have wanted..."

Tony raised an eyebrow. "They didn't want me because I'm narcissistic. I wouldn't throw away my life without a damn good reason. But a soldier who counted everyone, including himself, as expendable? SHIELD would have loved that."

"I never liked Captain America," Happy said. The non sequitur made everyone look at him. "The little wings were stupid," he said. "They weren't even eagle wings. Looked like pigeon wings." Happy huffed. "And he was all puffy. Show muscle, you know." Happy picked up another donut. "Wouldn't have lasted in the ring. That kind's got no stamina."

The silence lasted a few moments longer before Rhodey said, "Ok, so back to Barnes."

"Right." Tony ran a hand through his hair. "Barnes' army records show he went through training and operated under a normal command structure before getting roped into Rogers' unofficial unit. After that mess in Washington, he managed to break free of conditioning and stay under the radar for several years. He's obviously intelligent. I think I can deal with him."

"You? Deal with him?" Pepper said. "No, Tony. He and Rogers nearly killed you!"

Tony waved his hand. "I'm not crazy, Pep. I'd meet him in VR. It'd be perfectly safe. And I have to go in alone. There's things I need to say that no one else should hear."

"Do you really think this is wise?" T'Challa asked when Tony called him.

"Eh." Tony waggled his hand. "I'm fresh out of wise, and going for educated guess, here. You said that Barnes requested to go on ice until a therapy could be found to remove the programming, so he's at least willing to consider it. I'd thought about using BARF..." Tony saw T'Challa's expression. "Bi-neurally Augmented... look, it's a terrible name, Ok. Anyway, that requires a whole lot more set up and testing before it's ready for therapy. It didn't... well, it didn't help me. So, I'm thinking in VR,
maybe just maybe, the trigger words can be used without effect, and de-sensitize him. You know, like people who are afraid of flying, they start out looking at photos of planes, then go to the airport and watch planes take off, and... no?"

"It seems a little... grasping at straws?"

"Yeah. I know, but we're running out of time. How much longer do you think Rogers will be willing to wait in Wakanda for an emergency justifying the Avengers' absolution? That's what he's expecting, you know. Romanov said as much. Sooner or later he's going to pick a cause to champion. It might even be one that deserves championing. Best case scenario, his team wipes out bad guys with no collateral damage, American fans scream about reinstatement and pardon while the rest of the world protests US arrogance."

T'Challa sighed. "And I do not even wish to consider the worst that could happen. Very well. I will have Barnes revived and put your proposal to him."

Chapter End Notes

While googling for the Winter Soldier trigger phrases I came across some screenshots of newspapers from the MCU about the Stark 'car accident'.

'It all happened so quickly' a witness said 'there was no time to see how the crash could have been caused.'

It also said a crash investigation and autopsy had been performed. Howard Stark was said to have died of massive internal injuries.

And I'm...hmm, yeah, that doesn't match the Civil War video at all-- UNLESS someone covered it up. Got a 'witness' to lie, and either no autopsy or a faked autopsy report. Howard could NOT have got out of the car with the head injury Barnes killed him with, and Maria could NOT have been strangled in that accident.

Don't think that will have any bearing on this story, but it's something to think about. Was it just SHIELDRA? It seems odd that they'd bother because they did not seem to attempt to make the other Winter Soldier assassinations seem accidental. UNLESS they were protecting a still useful mole...I vote for Stane. Not as a Hydra agent, but as a Hydra collaborator when it suited him.
Chapter 52

Tony would have liked to have put it off, but the buzz created by the block party wouldn't last forever. There would be follow up questions, and he wanted to give the Keeners their tour and see them safely off home before that. He wanted to keep Rose Hill out of the spotlight as long as possible.

Friday got all the information he needed. Fortunately, he was fluent in Russian.

He made himself comfortable in an armchair in the penthouse lounge, with his Stark Reality headset on the table beside him. He didn't expect to need more than that. This wasn't going to be a game. He took a deep breath. Pepper and Rhodey and Happy had all reluctantly gone about their own affairs. Handling the press, the military and general security after today's public outbursts was going to take some doing, especially with Tony being unavailable. He didn't know how long it would take to convince Barnes, if he could convince him.

"All right, Friday, call King T'Challa." Tony waited for the smart glass table to show T'Challa's features. "Did Barnes agree?"

T'Challa said, "He wishes to speak with you first, before he decides."


Barnes walked into view. He was still one armed and unkempt, and his eyes were as sharp as Tony remembered. "Why?" he asked, and then waited.

"Why what?"

Barnes stayed silent, gazing at Tony steadily.

"All right, fine, you're the strong silent type. Look, I hate what you did. I hate what Rogers did in your name. And I hate you."

Barnes nodded. In the background T'Challa was rolling his eyes, very like Pepper would have done.

Tony took another deep breath. "Intellectually, I know you had no choice. I've since seen the files and I know how you fought the programming, how they repeatedly tortured you and fried your brain. I know none of what you did while Hydra controlled you was your fault."

Barnes blinked.

"I know that for nearly three years you kept out of trouble. You could have turned yourself in, but you didn't."

Barnes finally spoke. "I just wanted to be left alone."

"But Zemo set you up, and then..."

Barnes made a one-shouldered shrug. "They came after me. So I fought."

"Would you have fought if Rogers hadn't joined you? You weren't programmed."

Barnes tilted his head. "Yes. They came for me, so I fought. I was free and I wouldn't surrender. I
wasn't going back to be used, by anyone."

Tony was becoming frustrated. "I could have got you a fair trial, and treatment. I was trying to do that."

"That was before you knew I had killed your parents. Now you hate me. Why should I believe you would try to help me?"

"Because I love other people more than I hate you." Tony drew another deep breath. "Something's coming, so big, so terrifying, it's going to take all of us, and even then... even then... we might lose. We need to unify the world."

"The world?" Barnes looked skeptical. "And what do you expect me to do?" He pointedly turned his armless shoulder towards the video pickup.

"I expect you to convince Rogers to cooperate. Right now, we don't need fighters, we need... he was damn good at selling bonds. I need him to sell unity."

Barnes brow crinkled. "That's it?"

"Well, and also, keep him in Wakanda. He can work over the VR, meet people, inspire them, give them hope, all that."

"Huh. That's not going to keep Stevie quiet, you know that."

"I'm counting on you to keep him out of trouble."

For the first time Barnes' expression softened into something real. "Yeah, sure. Keep the punk outta trouble. What the hell. Sure. If you can clear the trigger words, I can keep Stevie... sorta out of trouble."
"Great." Tony tried not to show how relieved he was that Barnes had agreed. "I'll control the environment this time, walk you through the basics, and then I'll say the trigger words. Since it's not real, it shouldn't take effect. We'll repeat it until the conditioning is broken."

Barnes visibly tensed. "What if you're wrong? What if it can't be broken? What if I come out of this... dream... and I'm still... the Soldier?"

"The theory is sound, going back to Pavlov." Tony said. He needed to sound like an expert, to give Barnes confidence in him. Fortunately, he'd learned enough in the last hour to back up his hunch, and make the appropriate noises, parroted from an official text. "The process of unlearning a conditioned stimulus is called 'Extinction'. That occurs with the absence of the originally meaningful stimulus. In time, the conditioned response weakens. Plotting the number of times a conditioned response occurs in that absence produces a half hyperbola. However, while learning a conditioned response is relatively quick, unlearning is slow. The conditioned response will exhibit spontaneous recovery despite the continued absence of the conditioned stimulus after a period of rest. If you continue to plot following extinction, spontaneous recovery is a smaller half-hyperbola after a period of no response. Spontaneous recovery does die out, and the negative hyperbola gets even smaller in time."

"Huh," Barnes said. "Pavlov. They mentioned him. When they were creating the Soldier. Makes sense, I guess. It's harder to forget than it is to learn."

"Right!" Yeah, Barnes wasn't slow on the uptake. "The more often you hear the trigger words without the accompanying stimulus, the less effect they will have. After a while, they'll just be words, with no hold over you."

"Yeah, ok, so it should work, after a while. But what if at first... I don't want to be the Soldier, even in a dream."

"I also found your failsafe word. When I say that one, you'll fall asleep. I won't try to de-condition that one until the Soldier triggers are gone." Tony shook his head. "I don't... I don't want to see the Soldier any more than you do."

Barnes tilted his head slightly. "I could say I'm sorry, but I'm not sure I know how that feels anymore. Do you want me to say it?"

"No, don't bother." Despite himself, Tony felt pity for Barnes. Even DUM-E had the ability to express shame. It might help if Tony considered Barnes a badly programmed robot. He could fix a robot, even one that had been programmed to kill. "If you're ready to start, sit down and put on the headset. T'Challa has already linked it to mine. There won't be anyone else there."

Barnes nodded.

Tony waited until Barnes was settled and his headset indicated it had calibrated and 'mapped' Barnes electromagnetic skin impulses. He hadn't expected Barnes' programming to have made him incompatible with Stark Reality, but he wanted to be certain before the system went live. He nodded to T'Challa and put on his own headset, closing his eyes and plunging into inner space. It only took a
few moments.

He was standing, in full, undamaged Iron Man armor, in the Siberian bunker. Barnes was facing him, but looking down at his left side, at the metal arm he once had.

Tony cleared his throat. "I went with an environment we both had experienced, to simplify your first time."

Barnes nodded. He flexed his metal fingers. "Did you give me back the arm?"

"No. That was all you." Tony braced himself, and made his armor go away. He stood in front of Barnes, wearing a t-shirt and a pair of jeans. "With practice you can control your appearance, and working with whoever else is in your set, you can influence the environment."

"I could have my real arm here?" Barnes brought his eyebrows down and stared at the arm. After a moment the red star vanished, but it stayed metal.

"Good start," Tony said. "Zhelaniye."

Barnes' head jerked up and his eyes widened. The red star reappeared, and he clenched both fists.

"Rzhavyy."

Barnes' nostrils flared and his chest heaved, but he stayed in place.

"Semnadtsat'."

The red star flickered, expanded and shrunk, glittering.

"Rassvet."

Barnes was trembling all over.

"Pech'. Devyat'. dobroserdnych." 

The metal hand raised. Barnes grabbed it with his flesh and bone hand and forced it down.

"vozvrashchenny na rodnuyu." Tony fought against his own impulse to put on the Iron Man. This wasn't real. He was safe. He didn't even have an arc reactor in his chest to be pulled out. This isn't real. "Odin. gruzovoy vagoly."

Tony waited a moment. Then he said, "Dobroye utro, soldat."

Barnes turned his head, abruptly, back and forth. He said, harshly, "It's not morning. And I'm not your soldier."

Tony closed his eyes a moment. "No, you're not." He opened his eyes and grinned at Barnes. "Congratulations."

"You were afraid," Barnes said.

Tony shrugged. "Of course not. This is perfectly safe. Like a dream."

Barnes looked around. "Or a nightmare. Do you dream of this, Mr. Stark?"

"Sometimes. Not that often, actually," Tony said honestly. "Would you like to see the real
nightmare? Would you like to see why I'm willing to do a deal with anyone to prevent it from coming true? You won't like it."

"Show me."

Tony threw his head back and spread his arms wide. "It's bigger than all of us, Barnes."

The ceiling and walls melted and folded away. They were standing on a hill of rubble. The smell of blood hung heavily in the air. Light picked out bodies lying crumpled in the tangle of cement and steel, some still, some barely moving. Barnes made a soft noise and stepped forward, to kneel at the side of Steve Rogers. Rogers looked up at him, dying. "You could have saved us. Tony, why didn't you do more?"

Then the Chitauri leviathans flew overhead, drawing Barnes' attention. The Earth hung in the sky, but you could barely see it for the masses of Chitauri.

"That... that's what I've been dreaming, Barnes."

Barnes cleared his throat. "Everyone has bad dreams."

"Yeah. But not everyone has gone in space and seen them." Tony turned to face Barnes. "I've seen this army. They're coming for us. All of us."

Barnes nodded. He turned to look at Rogers' corpse. "Did you tell Stevie?"

"Yes. He thought... I don't know... that I was looking for attention. For praise. For acceptance... I don't know. We always rubbed each other the wrong way. He heard things about me before we met, and then I made a crappy first impression, and after that... nothing really changed."

"Yeah, Stevie's a stubborn cuss. Makes up his mind and it stays." Barnes mouth twitched as if he was going to smile. "I'll always be Bucky to him."

"Be Bucky for him, if you have to. But watch out for Maximoff. She can do things to your mind."

Barnes stiffened. "What."

"She can make you see things-- like this... or feel things. I know she hates me, but she never said why. If she finds out I'm helping you, she'll tell Rogers that I'm brainwashing you, or something else terrible. And he'll believe her. He believed her when she told him I had created a world-destroying monster." Tony tilted his head. "His name is Vision. He enjoys cooking and wearing knit sweater-vests."

Barnes looked thoughtful. "I'll watch out for Maximoff."

"No one is going to mess with my mind again. No one."

Tony nodded.

Chapter End Notes

Note: I copied Tony's explanation of 'Extinction' from a previous story of mine, in which Tony had been conditioned (broken, really). Why redo the research? :^)
The word *Sputnik* knocks Barnes out. Marvel used the word on their clapboards—maybe it was the codename for the movie during production. :^)
They were able to get through a dozen reiterations of the trigger word sequence, in varied environments under different conditions before the safety feature of the game required them to pause. Sometimes they were fighting Chitauri, sometimes they were walking along a city street, anywhere either of them had been. Tony tried giving the words in different sequences and by themselves, but the strongest reaction was to the full set, in the required order. After a few run-throughs Barnes had been able to change his clothing and get rid of the star on the arm, and once at Tony's suggestion he'd been able to give it the appearance of being covered in flesh colored plastic, like an average prosthetic arm, but that hadn't lasted.

"Ok," Tony said when the system was giving him notice that he'd soon have to stop (annoyingly Barnes was nowhere near his limit), "I have an idea. It's probably a shitty thing to do, but I'm guessing the trigger is stronger if given by..."

"A handler," Barnes replied calmly. "It's a reasonable guess, but I doubt it makes a difference. I didn't know Zemo from a hole in the ground."

"That's not exactly what I meant." It made him feel more than a little ill, but Tony shifted his appearance, shifted until he was taller, broader and his voice was deeper, with a hint of Brooklyn. He didn't need a mirror. This was a body he knew all too well. He'd seen Steve Rogers too often. Seen him smiling after a hard won battle. Seen him too tired to eat. Seen him annoyed. Seen him angry. Seen him about to kill... "What if I tell you what to do, Bucky?" Tony raised the shield he was now holding, as if it would protect him from the cold rage he saw in Barnes eyes. "What if Stevie needs the Soldier?"

"Fuck you, Stark." Barnes spread his legs and braced himself. "Say it."

"Zhelaniye." Tony didn't try to throw the shield, he just battered it down at Barnes.

Barnes crossed both arms in front of himself and took the impact without moving. "It's not real," he said.

"Rzhavyy." Another blow of the shield.

"You're not real."

"Semnadtsat'."

Barnes grabbed the edge of the shield and pulled. Tony knew it wasn't real, but he also knew he couldn't hold against Barnes if it was real. Barnes grabbed the shield and pushed Tony/Steve with it.

Tony let himself fall. It didn't matter, the words mattered. "Rassvet."

Barnes moved to stand over him. He held the shield on edge, aiming at Tony's/ Steve's chest.

"Pech'." It wasn't hard to breathe, that was imagination. Tony was resting in a comfortable chair, perfectly safe. He wasn't here. The shield was at the bottom of the ocean. He was perfectly safe. "Devyat'."

"You're right," Barnes said, "This is a shitty thing to do." The shield didn't waver.

"Dobroserdechnyy."
"Shitty for both of us." Barnes didn't look angry any longer. Just tired. "Finish it."

"Vozvrashcheniye na rodinu. Odin. Gruzovoy vagon." He changed back to himself. Armorless, plain old Tony Stark, except for the Arc Reactor. It was gone from his real body, but in his dreams, in his dreams he was never free of it.

Barnes lifted the shield, and then tossed it away. It melted in mid-air, into glittering drops of color that vanished. Tony's eyes followed it until the last specks were gone.

He had to finish. Tony said, "Dobroye utro, soldat."

Barnes nodded. "Still neither." He held out his flesh hand. "Get up, Stark."

"I don't need your help." Tony was frustrated. That was not only shitty, it was stupid, and all it achieved was to show his own vulnerability.

Barnes crooked a small smile. "Yes, you do. It's going to take all of us, remember?"

Tony scowled, but he accepted Barnes' hand and got to his feet. "I still hate you," he said, but even to his own ears, it just sounded tired.

"Hate can keep you going," Barnes said. "It can also make you stupid."

Tony's end of session warning buzzed and flickered the environment in warning. "Yeah." He shook his head. "So, I need a break. You should probably take one, too. I have the rest of the day, but after that, we're going to have to schedule sessions."

"How will we know when the programming's broken?" Barnes asked.

Tony hadn't thought that far ahead. "When someone gives you the trigger words outside of VR and it doesn't take."

"And who's going to say them?"

"I could give the trigger words to someone you trust. Maybe T'Challa?"

Barnes shook his head. "No. He's a good man."

"So? I'd think that makes him a good choice."

"He doesn't know what it's like. To do bad things. You do."

"You want me to come to Wakanda and trigger you?" Tony thought Barnes was nuts before, this just added to it.

Barnes gave a half shrug. "Feels right. If I'm triggered, then..."

At that moment, the VR kicked Tony out. He sat up, which was weird, because he was already sitting up, pulled off the headset and looked around the lounge. "Shit."
Tony wanted to dive back into the VR and confront Barnes. There was no way, no way in hell. Wakanda? No. To be that close to Rogers? No, and fuck no. He put the headset on, but it stayed inert. Not surprising. He had a headache. Mild dehydration. He got up and had to put a hand on the back of the armchair to steady himself. He was light-headed and dizzy. Low blood sugar? He couldn't remember having eaten anything besides a few bites of doughnut. Jarvis... Jarvis would have reminded him. He shook off the melancholy brought on by thoughts of Jarvis. Definitely low blood sugar.

He went to the snack bar and grabbed the first soda he saw. There wasn't any liquor. Pepper had seen to that. The lounge was private. He didn't have to worry that someone would put two and two together and come up with... well, really it was a minus. 'Tony Stark minus liquor? Aha!' He didn't give a damn who knew he was in AA, but it might reflect badly on the company. People still thought S.I. was his, and really, his name was still on it.

He wanted a drink. He gulped the rest of the soda, and tried the headset again. It still refused him. He tossed it down onto the chair and scrubbed at his hair with both hands.

"Hey, you like mustard on your pastrami?"

Tony jerked and turned around. "Peter! What are you doing here?"

Peter Parker, back in his civvies, held up a plate. "Lunch. Ms. Potts asked if I could keep an eye on things while she was busy."

"And by things, you mean me." But pastrami. Tony wasn't going to look a gift pastrami in the rye. He took the plate and lifted it to check that the mustard was the right kind. He bit into it. Still warm. Yes.

"Mostly." Peter hopped up to sit on the snack bar. "J.J. was trying to make a Federal case out of misuse of a bouncy castle, and everything else seemed pretty quiet, so I didn't want to stir up more trouble."

"Very wise, young grasshopper." Tony had another bite of pastrami. It felt good, made him feel steadier.

"Yeah, well, I was trying. You know, sometimes I just think 'what would Uncle Ben do'." Peter shifted his eyes and looked uncomfortable.

"I know that look. What do you feel guilty about?" Peter was a never ending source of self-blame. Not that Tony would know anything about that.

"Well, you know... sometimes I go into VR by myself, and... Uncle Ben... I like knowing that I remember how he looked, how he sounded." Peter sniffled a bit. "How it felt when he hugged me. And we talk. I know it's all me, but it clears my mind, helps me figure out what I really want to do, and why."

Tony put down the pastrami, and then he put the plate down on the snack bar. "Off."

"What?"

"Get down."
Peter hopped down and looked at Tony apprehensively.

Tony held out his arms.

"Um," Peter said. "That's... an 'R' in semaphore signaling?"

Tony rolled his eyes, and lifted both hands.

"U?"

"I know you're not that dense, kid."

Peter grinned and walked over to Tony and hugged him.

"This is a one-off, kiddo," Tony hugged Peter hard for a few seconds, and then pushed at him. "Shoo! You should be in school right now, shouldn't you?"

"Teacher's work day?"

"Try that one on me when you're a better liar."

Peter smiled. "I'll just tell Ms. Potts you're ok. See you in VR, Mr. Stark!"

"Yeah." Tony watched Peter leave the lounge, and then he picked up his sandwich to continue eating it. When he was sure Peter was gone, he looked up. "Ben, he's a good kid. I'm sure you're proud of him."
Tony checked in with Pepper, Rhodey and Happy. Everything was under control. Goldie gave Tony an overhead view of the crowd still milling about at the block party. Most of them were clustered around the varied entertainment and refreshment stands, which was a good sign. The bouncy castle was getting a lot of use. Tony noted that the webbed additions had been removed. The kid was thoughtful, anyone else playing on them could be hurt.

Tony had another soda and walked around, peering out the windows at Manhattan and thinking. He didn't want to go to Wakanda. He didn't have time to go to Wakanda. Barnes could damn well look after Rogers and take his chances. If the Soldier returned, Rogers was nearly a match for him, and he had backup. Ok, sure, Wilson didn't have his wings and Ant-guy's suit would be running out of whatever powered it-- he had his suspicions- had ever since Ant-guy had stolen one of Howard's bad boys from the Avengers Compound-- Wilson had the wings at the time and couldn't stop him-- yeah, in a way Tony was glad about that because it had made him move all the hazards to another location, one he didn't share with the Avengers and why should he-- it was his dad's stuff.

Tony found a bag of gluten-free pretzels, opened it and ate as he paced and thought. So, yeah, Rogers would still have Barton-- of course arrows are a long range weapon, and if Barnes went off inside T'Challa's palace, they wouldn't be much use. Maximoff... Tony grimaced at the thought. Maximoff was just as likely to destroy the palace as to control the Soldier. He vividly remembered what she had done to Avengers Compound.

T'Challa had made his bed with the Avengers. It wasn't Tony's fault if his home got pulled down around his pointy ears.

Damn it.

Tony returned to the armchair and put on the VR headset. It blinked ready this time. "Private," he told it. He set the environment for his old workshop back in the Malibu mansion, with all his old cars, and old Iron Man suits in alcoves on the wall. Dum-E and U were in their charging stations. Jarvis was silent. He stood in the middle of the workshop and sighed. If Peter could do it, so could he.

"Yinsen." He remembered Yinsen, how could he ever forget the man? He turned, and Yinsen was there.

Yinsen gave him a small smile and looked around the workshop, light reflecting off his eyeglasses. "Very impressive, Mr. Stark." He went over to the first Iron Man and placed his hand against the case. "Souvenir?"

"Reminder," Tony said. "It's gone now. It's all gone." Except the bots. "And you're gone, too."

"Am I a reminder as well?" Yinsen turned to face him.

"Always." Tony started pacing. He looked at Yinsen and then away. "I couldn't save you."

"I didn't want to be saved."

"One of the first things Rogers said to me... 'haven't you ever lost a soldier'... God. Those young airmen... and you..."

Yinsen nodded. "Yes, we died, and our deaths were linked to your life. But that's not what you
brought me here to discuss, is it?"

"No." Tony shook his head. "This is nuts. I'm talking to myself. I don't have to explain anything to you, you're me."

"You've already made your decision." Yinsen sat down at the desk. The backgammon board he'd made from scraps was on the desk in place of Tony's keyboard. "Your move, Mr. Stark."

"Yes." Tony went over to Yinsen, and hesitated, hand held above Yinsen's shoulder. "Thank you."

Yinsen smiled. "You are my legacy, Mr. Stark. Remember that."

Tony closed his eyes and exited the VR. He sat in the chair for a long moment before pulling off the head set. He drew a long breath. "Friday, see if you can contact King T'Challa."
"Mr. Stark." T'Challa looked... well, the skin around his eyes was tight, the way Pepper's got when Tony came in with a fun idea while she was handling a major crisis. Video calls sometimes gave Tony more information than he really wanted.

Tony felt a little, just a little, bad about demanding so much of T'Challa's time. He had a country to run, and Avengers to keep from running amuck. Either one was a full time job. Plus, he probably had to make time for the gym. Abs like those don't grow on trees. And yes, Tony was mentally rambling again.

"Your majesty," Tony replied. "Is this a bad time?"

T'Challa sighed. "There are no good times," he said. Then he straightened. "Forgive me, my burdens are my own. I need not lay them upon your shoulders."

That was awkward. Tony decided there was nothing right to say in response, so he ignored it and just plunged ahead. "Barnes wants me to come to Wakanda to test him once we think the triggers have been neutralized."

"Ah."

"We've just started the stimulus extinction, so it's not going to happen any time soon, but I thought you might need all the lead time you can get, to prepare. Considering... the circumstances."

"Yes. Rogers has already complicated the situation further."

"What did he do now?" Tony heard the whine in his own voice, but it was justified. He was doing his best, and all he hoped from Rogers was not to make things harder.

"He has formed the habit of visiting Barnes' cold sleep chamber once a week. He had seen him yesterday, so I had assumed..."

Tony sighed. "He went today, didn't see him, and went berserk searching until he found him."

"Berserk may be an exaggeration." T'Challa lifted his eyebrows. "No one was injured, and property damage limited to a few doors."

"Great." Tony wanted to knock his head against a wall. Or, for preference, Rogers' head. "So, what was the upshot?"

"Barnes informed him that a treatment to remove his conditioning had begun, but he had not wished to inform Rogers until he knew if it was working. He said he thought it was in fact, helping. Rogers pressed him to rejoin his team in their living quarters. Barnes declined."

"I just bet that went over well."

"Actually, the report I have from the Dora Milaje who witnessed the scene says that it did in fact 'go over well'. Rogers protested, Barnes said he needed privacy and wished separate living quarters, and Rogers reluctantly respected his request."

"Awesome." Tony was relieved to hear that Barnes actually could make Rogers listen to reason. "So, what's the complication, then?"
"Rogers then asked Barnes to join the Avengers in their VR training sessions. Barnes agreed."

"Oh, boy."

"I spoke to Barnes after Rogers left. He informed me that he considered it unwise to decline, for fear Rogers might then begin asking questions about the treatment. At the moment Rogers seems to think it is a physical treatment my scientists have devised."

"And if he knows it's the VR, he'll think of me, and... yeah, that would not be good. Ok, fine, do they have a regularly scheduled time for VR training?"

"They do. Wilson insisted upon it, after the safety protocols forced most of them out of a session, leaving Rogers to fight alone."

"Ok, so, we can work around this." It was going to be more of a pain, scheduling around Rogers as well as his own commitments, but still doable. "How about now? Can Barnes come out to play?"

T'Challa huffed a short laugh. "Yes. The next training session will be tomorrow. I will upload the schedule to your Wakandan email."

"Great. Fantastic. Thank you, T'Challa. Tell Barnes I'll meet him in VR in half an hour."

"I will do so, Mr. Stark."

Tony disconnected. He really was going to have to tell his home team about this. Tomorrow was going to be busy and full of Rose Hill innocents. He sighed. "Friday, please ask Pepper, Rhodey and Happy to meet me here. I have some more fun news for them."
"No," Rhodey said firmly when Tony told them that he'd eventually have to go to Wakanda to verify Barnes' reconditioning. "No more lone gunslinger. I thought we'd settled that. I'm going with you."

Happy nodded. Pepper looked at Tony as if he was crazy to have even suggested otherwise.

"I can't let you, Honeybear," Tony protested. "I promised..."

"Promised Barnes?" Pepper snapped.

"Promised myself. The trigger words are a weapon. I... I don't make weapons any more."

Rhodey looked hurt. "You think I'd use them?"

"No! Of course not." Tony spread his hands, helplessly. "But secrets have a way of getting out, and if someone knows you have the words, they could go after you to get them."

Happy frowned. "That doesn't make any sense. The words only work on Barnes, and you're going to fix him."

"It's just... we don't know that Barnes is the only one. Sure, Zemo killed the five made with my dad's knock off super soldier serum, but how many prisoners did Zola experiment on during the war? Maybe there were others, maybe they all went under the same code name, and used the same trigger words. Maybe there's a whole bunch of Winter Soldiers."

Pepper, Happy and Rhodey exchanged glances. Tony hated when they did that. "Boss," Friday said, "That does sound a little paranoid."

"I could have done with being more paranoid, all my life," Tony replied.

"So," Happy said after a pause for everyone to try really hard not to think about that. "You don't want Colonel Rhodes to go with you because he'd hear the trigger words."

"Right," Tony said.

"He could go in the War Machine, and turn off the sound? Maybe? Is that a thing?" Happy asked.

Tony opened his mouth to explain why that was impossible, and then he shut it again.

"Yes," Rhodey said. "That definitely is a thing." He grinned at Tony.

"FINE!" Tony flung his hands up in the air.

Pepper hugged Happy, and then she hugged Rhodey. "Thank you!"

"What about me?" Tony complained. And then Pepper hugged him.

"Thank you," she said, "for letting us help."

"Does this mean I can get an Iron Man suit?" Happy asked.
"Do you know how to fly?" Tony responded.

"No, but I know how to punch!"

Tony looked at Pepper. She looked thoughtful. Come to think of it, when aliens invaded, maybe he would want Pepper and Happy in Suits. "I'll think about it," Tony said. He really needed more hours in a day. Or clones. Clone Tonys would be...a very bad idea.

Chapter End Notes

In the comics, both Rhodey and Happy DID at some times wear the Iron Man suit as Iron Man. Very helpful when you're playing Identity Porn and need to be seen in the same place and time as Iron Man. Also useful when you fall off the wagon and are too drunk to be Iron Man, or your heart is messed up AGAIN and you're too sick to be Iron Man.
Back in VR, Tony looked at Barnes. They were on a rooftop in a city Tony didn't recognize. European, probably. There was a cathedral in the distance, and the surrounding buildings were mostly made of stone. He could see for blocks around. It was a good vantage point for a sniper. Tony tried not to think about that. "All right, I'll come to Wakanda. Later. Probably much later."

Barnes shrugged. He had two arms again, the metal one was black this time, matching his clothes. "I can wait. I don't have anyplace to go. I'm good here."

"You are... much more patient than I'd expected."

"Stevie was always pushing. Not me." Barnes tilted his head slightly. "He thought he'd die without ever getting to do anything. That made him angry."

Tony didn't really want to understand Rogers, and he sure didn't want to sympathize with him. "He got to do plenty, and he's still angry."

"He got used to having a chip on his shoulder," Barnes replied. "I got used to hauling his butt out of trouble. You can get used to almost anything."

"I hope you haven't forgot how to manage Rogers."

Barnes lifted his lip in a not quite smile. "I never did. Mostly I just cleared a path."

"For Rogers, or for the people around him?"

"Yes."

Tony rolled his eyes, and then he rattled off the trigger words. Barnes went still at the first word, but recovered quickly.

They kept at it until Tony got the first warning that his time was running out. Tony lost track of how many times they'd gone over it. "I'll be busy tomorrow."

Barnes nodded. "The day after?"

"Probably." Tony couldn't keep asking T'Challa to play secretary. "Do you know how to use email?"

"I've seen people do it. I can ask one of the Dora Milaje to help. King T'Challa always has at least two of them watching me."

That made sense. "Ok, here. You get an email and you send to calicomom63 at gmail dot com."

Barnes brows drew together. "Calicomom63? That's you?"

"It'll get to me. Most of the email addresses with permutations of my name actually belong to fans. Or frauds."
"So, you like cats."

"Don't tell T'Challa."

Chapter End Notes

Note: The Calicomom63@gmail.com was actually USED in The Invincible Iron Man 'World's Most Wanted' story arc where Tony is racing around the world destroying his *brain* and his tech, to keep Norman Osborn from getting the Superhero database in his mind. Tony set the email up as an emergency code, not to actually use as an email, but to signal trouble. Only with his brain being deleted, he got stupid and used it as an actual email. I don't know if anyone actually has this email now, but at one time Marvel DID have someone reply to it.

This forum discusses it- back in May of 2009.

More info about the story arc and email here. (Warning, the page is RED with white text, I now have weird reverse color afterimages). The explanation of the email is ridiculously complicated. Tony gives the email and the password for it to the people he trusts and tells them to check it every few days from a random public place, library coffee shop, etc. They're supposed to log in and check the inbox for messages. BUT the actual messages are just the addresses in the inbox! If you need to contact someone you send an email that WILL NOT SEND, by addressing it to your own first initial followed by random garble and ending with the first initial of the person you want to contact. The email will bounce back as undeliverable, and wind up in the inbox. So eventually people checking the inbox will see that someone wants to contact them. I think it actually gets used that way only once, before brain damaged Tony blows it, and Osborn gets the email he sends.

I spent FAR more time hunting down this information than in writing this short chapter.


Also, I just googled 'who is calicomom63' and one of the results was for Matt Fraction's (the writer of that run of comics) blog, in which he said 'i should write Sad Tony letters to everyone that wrote to the Calicomom63 address.'
Chapter 60

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony took off the VR headset, leaned back, closed his eyes, and tried not to think about anything. That worked for about ten seconds. Then he shook his head and sat up. "Friday, I want you to look up... damn, what's his name... runs a school in Westchester." He hoped he was on the right track. There hadn't been time to get everything in the Washington data dump before someone had the bright idea to trace back the search engine parameters and render much of it inaccessible again. Oh, it was still there, scattered and stored on several secret servers- say that ten times fast- but if you couldn't google it, that cut out most of the casual curious seekers who weren't even aware other search engines existed. Jarvis... Jarvis had standing orders to snoop around SHIELD at any opportunity and had harvested what he could. Tony had thought Jarvis had got it all when he was on the helicarrier years ago. Obviously he missed SHIELDRA's presence.

It wasn't Jarvis' fault, he'd been limited by the speed of the data transfer from SHIELD's computers. Homing pigeons could have carried it faster.

"Boss?" Friday queried.

Once again, Tony had to remind himself, Friday was just a kid. Wow, that stuck in his throat. "There were hints... the head of the school had the ability to influence minds... SHIELD had him on their 'to watch' list, but all evidence points to him being on the side of the angels. If I have to go to Wakanda... I need to talk to him. Xavier. Charles Xavier, that's it. And his name is on the school."

"Got it, Boss!" Friday said happily. "Charles Xavier's school for Gifted Youngsters."

"A bit pretentious... but not more than my old alma mater." Tony had no particular fondness for Phillips Military Academy Andover. It probably would have been great fun for someone like Rogers, but Tony, even at seven years old, had no ambition to be a soldier. "So, see if you can get Professor Xavier on the phone. If he's the real deal... if he can get into minds, maybe he knows how to keep people out." Risking meeting Rogers in Wakanda would be bad enough, but Wanda... Wanda made his skin crawl. He wanted all the protection he could get before coming within her range.

Friday pulled up a smart glass image of what he supposed to be Xavier's school. School, it was more like a landed English estate. Old money, and it looked like he had kept it, judging from the meticulous grooming of the grounds. No Asgardian crop circles for the Professor. Tony was already feeling self-defensive. For all that his father had sent Tony to the best schools and made sure he had the best clothes, the Starks had never been accepted by true society. Parvenue was one of the kindest things they'd been called. Ridiculous how old slights never lose their edge.

The image of the school faded out, replaced by a bald man wearing an elegant dark blue pinstripe suit and a perfectly knotted gold silk tie. Very prim and proper old school. Tony said, "Professor Xavier?"

"Dr. Stark," the man said, inclining his head in acknowledgment and then he smiled, an honest, good natured smile that reached up to his eyes. "Dr. Stark, this is an unexpected pleasure. My students have found your Stark Reality to be an inestimable educational resource."

"That's... I'm glad to hear that."
"Indeed, I was wondering if I might obtain permission to build a private Battle Room on the school grounds."

Tony blinked. "Well, for insurance purposes, I don't think we can... liability issues?" Tony hated to start by turning him down. "If enough of your students want to sign up, I can prioritize creating a facility in the nearest town?"

"Ah." Xavier laced his fingers together. "You are concerned for the safety of my students. That's admirable, but really, it's not necessary. Hank, would you mind stepping in here a moment?"

Tony blinked again. "My God, it's Sulley."

The big, shaggy blue furred man took off his eyeglasses and rubbed them with a handkerchief. "I like to think I'm better dressed."

"Granted," Tony said. "Very nice suit. I... I have to ask... is your partner one-eyed?"

Hank barked a laugh. "Mike Wazowski. No, we just call Scott 'Cyclops'." He grinned, showing a mouthful of fangs. "Do you need me for anything else, Professor?"

"No, thank you, Hank. I merely wished to reassure Dr. Stark that we were quite serious about needing a private Battle Room."

"I don't know why, the Danger Room was always good enough." Hank shrugged and walked away from the video pickup.

"So, Dr. Stark?"

"Yeah. Yeah, ok. I'll send the schematics and the basic gear. You do know... don't you. You know why."

Xavier nodded. "Among my students, some can see into the future. Or rather, they can see possible futures. We've trained for years trying to be prepared, but my scope was limited. It wouldn't do to call attention to us. It really wouldn't. All signs pointed to you being instrumental in the more favorable outcomes, so I chose to risk trusting you."

"It's a risk, trusting people."

"But a necessary one. We all need help, sometime, Dr. Stark."

"Yes." Tony didn't want to, but he had to ask. "I need your help, I think. There is... I'm afraid."

"What do you fear, Dr. Stark?" Xavier said quietly. He reminded Tony of Yinsen.

"I'm afraid of having my mind... invaded. There is... Wanda Maximoff. What the public has seen... she can do more. Much more."

Xavier frowned. "Yes. I see." He sighed. "There is a way. It requires a metal helmet."

"I already have a metal helmet," Tony pointed out. Maybe he could just kept the Suit on the whole time he was in Wakanda. It wasn't as if he was planning to stay for dinner.

"It's a little more complicated than that. I shall send you the schematics to incorporate into your own armor. I can show you an early model." He moved back and then turned, revealing for the first time that he was in a wheelchair. He went to a shelf and picked up an object, bringing it back and setting it on the desk. It was a helmet in purple and red. "The color is optional," he said, with a smile.
"Good to know." It did look like a simple thing, one piece slip right on over the head. Most like an Italian barbute, and no, Tony wasn't going to tell anyone about his childhood fascination with King Arthur and his knights, and how he collected pictures of every kind of armor. Nope, never going to share that information with the world. "Purple isn't really my color."

Xavier nodded, with a slight smile. "It's not for everyone. Good evening, Dr. Stark."

"Good evening, Professor."

Friday shut the connection.

"I can't believe I'm going to make myself a tinfoil helmet," Tony muttered to himself.

"I believe it," Rhodey said, cheerfully.

"Friday, you traitor, why didn't you warn me Rhodey was back?"

"Sorry, Boss!" Friday said, without an ounce of shame in her tone. "Boss Lady is on her way up, too. And so is Mr. Hogan."

"Oh. Yeah. We're going out to dinner, I guess?"

Rhodey looked at Tony shrewdly. "We're ordering in and watching a movie."

"Thank God." Tony slumped back in his chair. It had been a hell of a day. So many agendas, so many people to deal with. But now... a movie and a meal with his best friends, and then... Pepper. Even if he just fell asleep in her arms, that would be wonderful.

"I feel like a Western," Rhodey said. "A classic. Something I don't have to think about."

"Mmm," Tony agreed. "Magnificent Seven?"

The elevator opened. Friday had obviously been transmitting their conversation because Pepper said, "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid."

"Oh," Happy said, "I like Shane."

"The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," Rhodey contributed.

Friday piped up, "Blazing Saddles?"

Tony grinned. Everyone nodded. "Blazing Saddles."

Happy went over to the bar and filled up a tray with sodas. Pepper called up menus. "Cheeseburgers and fries?"

"Perfect." Tony smiled.

Chapter End Notes

(Various races held in 2009 and 2010 between homing pigeons carrying memory sticks and internet data transfer all resulted in the birds being clear winners.)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IP_over_Avian_Carriers
(Xavier's school is on google maps! I was tempted to leave a review, but Google says you're not allowed to leave fake reviews & I didn't want to write something cute and have it vanish.)
https://www.google.com/maps/place/Xavier+Institute+for+Higher+Learning/@41.329216,-73.562914,16z/data=!4m2!3m1!1s0x0000000000000000:0xc7d333470fc06481

Thanks to TehRibbons you can see the actual filming location of Xavier's school
http://hatleycastle.com

It's on the grounds of Hatley Park and Royal Roads University in Victoria, Vancouver Island, BC and they even have tours http://hatleycastle.com/hours-and-rates/
"I'm taking the day off?" Tony said over coffee and croissants the next morning, sitting at the breakfast nook with Pepper. She was wearing another shortie pajama set and hadn't put on her makeup or styled her hair. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen and looking at her interfered with his thought processes. Just a little. "Yes? You're the boss."

Pepper laughed. "Only on paper." She leaned over to kiss Tony on the cheek. "You want to spend the day with your friends from Rose Hill."

"They were... really kind to me, Pepper."

"I'm glad. I'm glad you found people you could trust. But Tony... don't you ever, ever, do that to me again! We could have worked things out, together."

"I didn't want Ross and his wolves to come after you!"

"Tony, I have been running with the wolves for years. I'm not defenseless."

"It's just... you were always cleaning up all my messes. And then... I was spending all my time with the Avengers, leaving you and S.I. to take up the slack while I played hero." Tony made a face. "It wasn't fair for you to get stuck with the fallout from that disaster, too."

"No, no it wouldn't have been fair, and I would have yelled at you, but... I would have been glad, too. Glad that you survived for me to yell at." Pepper sniffed and wiped at her eyes with a napkin.

"I made you cry, I'm a terrible person."

Pepper laughed again. "Stop with the big, sad eyes, Tony." She got up and stretched. "I'm going to try for an easy day myself, but we'll see." She gave Tony a hug. She still smelled like sushi wrapper perfume. "Have fun," she said as she left to get dressed.

It was still early by the time Tony was dressed, in comfortable jeans and t-shirt, and fully caffeinated. "Friday, call the Keeners. See if they'd like to meet me down in the workshop in half an hour."

Harley had always wanted to meet the bots. They were a little clingy and protective since Tony's return so he wanted to get down there ahead of time to get them settled.

"Hey, kids!" Tony had visited them when he first returned to the Tower, but they were still overly excited every time they saw him. They probably had abandonment issues up the whazzo. U and DUM-E squealed and beeped, scurrying around in circles. "Hey, I'm over here, guys. Your visual receptors having a problem?"

DUM-E returned slowly, hindered by the coarse blanket covering his arm. He reached Tony and clumsily draped the blanket over him. "Oh, I see, worried about the old man, are you? I'm fine. Really I am."

U chirped and knocked something over. Tony looked up and saw U doggedly trying to plug in an electric cord. It was difficult, considering it got in the way of his 'eye'.

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"What? What are you..." Tony followed the cord back to where it plugged into an extension cord which... plugged into the electric blanket DUM-E had given Tony. "Oh," he said quietly. "You heard about Siberia."

DUM-E whistled and went over to the mini-kitchen and grasped a mug. He brought it carefully to Tony. "Oh, God. Hot chocolate with mini-marshmallows. Thanks, guys." Tony really didn't need an electric blanket in the climate controlled tower, so he switched it off, but left it over his shoulders. "I know. Siberia was cold, but you guys have fixed me up. I'm good now."

The bots wheeled close, and Tony petted them. "You guys." He felt really warm, and it wasn't because of the blanket.
"The Keeners are on their way up, Boss," Friday said, interrupting a game of almost-catch Tony was playing with the bots.

"Great!" Tony waved at the bots. "Sit. Stay." The elevator whirred.

DUM-E squealed and raced over to get his fire extinguisher. U snatched up the electric blanket and huddled under it.

"Guys. It's ok."

The elevator opened. Harley and Holly stood there, looking around, wide-eyed. They were each carrying a few small shopping bags. "Heaven," Harley said after a moment.

Holly sniffed and smacked him lightly on the arm. "Sterling, introduce us to your kids."

"They're not... ok, fine. The one with the fire obsession is my oldest, DUM-E. DUM-E, put it down. Put it down this instant."

DUM-E whined and lowered the fire extinguisher.

"And the shy one is U. Sometimes I call him Butterfingers. He drops things on purpose because he thinks it's funny."

Holly stepped out of the elevator first. "Hello, DUM-E. Hi, U. Aren't you adorable!"

U peered out from under his blanket. DUM-E waved tentatively.

"Come on out," Harley said. He walked out of the elevator and shook the shopping bag he was holding. "I've got presents for you!"

DUM-E and U perked up.

"Look!" Harley pulled out packs of stickers. "Who wants R2D2? I've got BB8 and Big Hero 6, too."

U rolled over to Harley and grabbed the R2D2 pack. DUM-E squealed indignantly.

Tony sighed. "Learn to share, kids." He took the package of stickers from U and opened it. "This is... this is going to look ridiculous. Are you sure?" he asked the bots. They bobbed their arms up and down. "Fine. It's not as if you have any pride." Tony and Harley and Holly used up all the stickers, dividing them evenly between the bots.

Once the bots were covered in brightly colored stickers they rolled around the shop admiring themselves in every reflective surface. "Thanks," Tony told Harley. "That was a good idea."

Holly shrugged. "I figured, they're kids. Kids like stickers."

"Ok, so what's in the other bag? I hope you didn't buy them a puppy. That would not end well."

"It is furry!" Holly said cheerfully. She reached into the bag and produced a shapeless brown fuzzy something.
"A beard?" Tony suspected where this was going and tried to deflect. "They don't even have chins!"

"No, but you do!" Holly held the beard up to Tony. "Perfect match. They sold me some theatrical glue, and there's a mustache, too."

"I have a beard already."

"I want Sterling Keener to show us New York."

"After yesterday the paps are going to be hanging around the Tower, a beard isn't going to throw them off." It was a particularly luxuriant beard. Like a young Santa Claus would wear. Tony could see the photos going viral.

Friday said, "Oh, yes it will. The reporters think you've already left the Tower."

"What?" Tony asked, backing warily away from The Beard.

Harley looked up from the computer keyboard he was studying. "The Double Squad are having a great time. Friday, could you show us?"

"Of course, Harley."

Tony was not jealous that Friday liked Harley. No, he wasn't. The monitor lit up. One of the doubles was smiling at a paparazzo and holding up a little card that read, 'I can't talk today, sorry' as he boarded a bus. The scene switched. Another double, identically dressed to the first one was standing on a subway platform, looking at his watch. Scene change, a third one was riding a horse in Central Park.

Friday giggled. "This is fun."

"I should have expected it, I suppose." He grinned. "This must be driving the reporters crazy."

"Yes, boss! They can't decide whether you had yourself cloned, or made a bunch of androids, or you've developed teleportation!"

Tony shook his head, but he couldn't stop smiling. "All right, you win. What do you want to do?"

"I want to see Hamilton!" Holly said.

Harley smirked. "She has a thing about Lin-Manuel Miranda."


"Friday?" Tony asked.

"Front row seats, tonight's 8 pm performance, Boss!" Friday said happily.

"Until then, do you want a tour of S.I. and then... lunch out?"

"Yes! And a carriage ride in Central Park? And can we visit the Statue of Liberty?"

"Sure," Tony said. He'd been a tourist all around the world, but never in New York City. "It'll be an adventure."
"Pepppeeeerrrr!"

"What?" Pepper asked, before looking up from her desk and bursting out laughing. "What did you DO?"

"I didn't think it was going to be this bad." Tony tugged at the scraggly fake beard bits clinging to his face. "Holly was cheated! They told her the glue would come off."

Pepper got up, still snickering, and came around to inspect the damage. "Did she tell them she was gluing it on top of a real beard?"

"I... I don't know." Tony was just glad he'd waited until the Rose Hill Gang had gone back to the airport on their way home before he tried to remove the beard. "I look like a crazed hermit. I'll just... shave. Shave it all off."

Pepper turned serious. "I'm calling in a dermatologist before you scalp yourself."

Tony sighed. "Yeah. I guess."

Pepper went to her Rolodex (some things were better not kept on a computer, and her list of experts to fix Tony's problems was one of them) and began sorting through. "So, did you have a good time?"

"Yeah." Tony smiled. He sat down in a visitor's chair and scratched at his face. "The best."

The dermatologist got most of the false beard and glue off, and assured Tony the remainder would gradually vanish each time he trimmed his beard. The rest of the evening, Tony and his friends watched compilations of the Double Squad doing all the touristy things and driving the paparazzi to tears by their refusal to give any sound bites. "They're good," Pepper remarked, thoughtfully. "I wonder..."

"Could we hire a few of them to give speeches instead of Tony?" Rhodey asked.

"I bet they'd stick to the script," Happy agreed, reaching past Rhodey to get at the caramel corn.

Tony scratched a little at his beard. "Maybe." He looked thoughtful. "Could they attend board meetings? I could coach them?" He grinned. "That could be fun."

"On second thought, that's a no," Pepper said firmly. "One you is all I want."

"You say the nicest things, Pep." Tony leaned close to give her a kiss while Rhodey and Happy made mock disgusted noises. Tony flipped them off behind Pepper's back. It was so, so good to be home.

It was back to the grind the next morning, but any morning he could wake up next to Pepper was a
good morning, made better by having his oldest friends share breakfast with them. They didn't linger over the meal, though. Tony needed to science, Pepper had to ride herd on the press and S.I.'s Board, Happy was conducting a major overhaul of S.I.'s security (he took the theft of the Vibronzium coins even more personally than Tony had), and Rhodey was negotiating with the Air Force for a special status that would allow him to remain in the service, seconded to Iron Man (at least that was how Tony understood it- he'd never been interested in the workings of military bureaucracy).

The Air Force had offered Rhodey an honorable discharge on the basis of disability, but since no one else could fly War Machine, Tony strongly suspected they'd leap at anything that kept him even nominally under their command. And Rhodey, hell, Rhodey loved the service, it would break his heart to leave it entirely.

So they split up, each with their own agendas. It wasn't going to be easy, balancing the things they needed to do with anything approaching a normal life, but at least now Tony knew what that was like. He knew what it was to find dinner set aside for him, to wake up to a cat on his chest, and giggling from the doorway as someone took a photo to show him later. He knew what it felt like to get a hug just because he looked like he could use one.

He was not going to let any alien invasion destroy his family, either of his families. If that meant dealing with Rogers, so be it. But he'd put that day off until he was prepared for it. He definitely needed to build Xavier's tinfoil hat first. He wasn't entirely sure that Maximoff hadn't been working on Rogers' brain, too, such as it was. Of course that wouldn't account for things done, and not done, before Sokovia. Not that Tony was thinking about it. About the years of covering the Avengers' asses while they pretended to tolerate him. Bruce... Bruce might have actually liked Tony, but the Hulk had all his backbone so Bruce would never take Tony's side against the Avengers. He missed Bruce anyway, it had been great working with someone on his own level intellectually. No, stop thinking about the past. Bruce was gone and done. The Avengers were just another mistake, get past that.

There was too much to do. He was going to VR with Barnes and work on the XTH in between sessions. And when he wasn't doing that, he was going to be brain-storming with anyone who might have a useful idea. Bruce wasn't the only genius in the world. Stark Reality was rapidly picking up players, the manufacturing division was working around the clock and expanding into other factories. People were starting to develop in-game communities, based on mutual interests. The translating system Tony and Jarvis had created was integrated into it on a basic level, further eliminating barriers. Unless someone told you, you wouldn't know they weren't speaking your own language. Of course, not every language was incorporated in it, but Friday was working on it.

His mind was wandering again. Tony recognized it as an avoidance attempt. "Friday, email Barnes. Let me know when he's ready to VR. I'll be in the workshop."

"Right, boss."

Xavier's schematics were fairly straightforward. Apparently there were certain areas of the brain that were receptive to outside... frequencies, Tony was going to call them that, because he did NOT believe in 'magic' even though Wanda called herself a witch. Personally, Tony just thought she didn't know how to spell. Certain metals blocked those frequencies, while others actually made them transmit better. Xavier no doubt had a helmet of the second type. He'd been very trusting to give Tony this information. A more paranoid person might wonder if Xavier could influence people at a distance- could influence people in power. Spread that rumor around and people like old Thunderbolt would be after them, no holds barred. Tony was going to have to see what he could do
to get mutants accepted in society. A mutant hunt would be a very ugly thing.

Get them in VR and interact with the general population. Once someone has saved your virtual life, you can't help but feel they're good people.

Tony had a prototype helmet shell fabricating a few minutes later. It would fit as a liner in Iron Man, but outside of it... yeah, Tony would be wearing a futuristic beanie, almost as stupid looking as Rogers'... oh, there was a thought. "Friday, paint the Stark swoosh on the sides. Make it look like the ad for Stark Reality." Let people think he was promoting the game. It didn't look much different from the basic VR helmet.

So, he'd look mercenary, better than than crazy.

Tony Stark was a lot of things, but never less than perfectly sane, despite his press.

"Boss," Friday said. "Barnes is waiting for you in VR."

"Yeah, ok." Tony went over to the workshop couch and sat down. "Hold my calls, Friday." He put his VR helmet on.

Barnes was standing on a helicarrier, looking down at the water, far below. Tony realized this was what it had looked like in Washington... the first time Rogers had been declared a villain. Of course, that time it was Hydra saying it. Tony wondered if Rogers really hadn't seen the difference between Hydra and the U.N. Barnes said, thoughtfully, "I nearly killed Stevie. He stopped fighting me. He would have let me kill him."

Tony smiled ruefully. "Yeah, I got that. He'd die for you, so why not kill for you?" Tony resisted rubbing his chest. The ache he felt was imaginary. "It's romantic."

Barnes shook his head. "Romantic? Stevie didn't have a romantic bone in his whole body." He glanced sideways at Tony. "He kinda liked the idea of girls, but he didn't have the first idea what to say to them."

"Huh." Tony had noticed that, vaguely. "What about Peggy?"

"Peggy was a go-getter. Stevie didn't have to do anything."

"Huh," Tony said again. Not that he gave a damn about Rogers' love life. "Maybe he just... you know, men. That's why... you?"

Barnes seemed to think about it. "Nah. We weren't like that. I was just... you know?"

No way in hell was Tony going to feel sorry for Rogers. He said the trigger words and then flipped them, for spite, to a dark road and a crashed car. The car was empty, but Tony put puddles of blood everywhere. He said the trigger words again. And flipped them, flipped them into space, floating amidst the Chitauri armada. And said the words again.

It wasn't real, none of it was real. Barnes took over the next scene. He was hanging by his hands from a bar half broken from a box car. The train was racing along the side of a mountain. "This is how I died," Barnes said, looking calmly up at Tony. He was wearing an old army uniform, and both his hands were flesh and blood. "Say the words."

Tony said the words.

Barnes smiled and opened his hands, but he kept the scene going. He was falling. So far. "Oh, fuck
you, Barnes." Iron Man formed around Tony and he flew down to match speed and catch Barnes. He set Barnes on his feet in the snow, and let Iron Man vanish. They both looked up at the train.

"I think that's how Stevie died, too," Barnes said.

"I don't care," Tony said wearily. "Everyone has a sad story. I want to save the world. If you can get Rogers to help with the VR training, that's great. If all you can do is get him to stay out of the way, I'll accept that, too. One day we'll need everyone, and it won't matter what you've done in the past, but that day is not today."

Barnes nodded. "I'll try."

Chapter End Notes

Just for fun.
It took AGES to find a photo of RDJ and his double (I think he also has a body double who doesn't look anything like him facially, but who's inside the full Iron Man suit most of the time- couldn't find a photo to be sure)
https://twitter.com/hisduckling/status/886688685680463872

(the following didn't work well on one of my browsers- there are currently over 7,000 languages in the world, but around 1/3 of them have fewer than 1,000 speakers. 23 languages account for more than half the world's population.
https://www.ethnologue.com/guides/how-many-languages

List of languages by native speakers
List of endangered languages- so many! Each language is shaped by a different view of life, it's a shame that humanity is losing them.
"Boss?" Friday said, tentatively, after Tony left VR for a break, and was conferring with Wakandan scientists, and also running a search for non-military communities forming within the VR. There were no real identities attached, of course, Tony was being very careful about that, but the interests and basic functions of groups were public, so like-minded people could find each other. He was pleased to see psychiatry and medicine, engineering and astronomy, including one group whose interests pointed to specialists in physics. Tony had stacked the deck a little by sending personal invitations along with Stark Reality sets to Jane Foster, Erik Selvig, and Stephen Hawking.

There were also quite a few medieval reenactors and fantasy players, and furries. Tony really doubted they'd be much use against the Chitauri, but who knew? There were homemakers, and housebreakers, too. If you tried to do something illegal, the game generally let you do it so long as no other real people were involved- but it didn't let you get away with it. Virtual prisons were pretty damn realistic, due to input from people who'd been on both sides of the bars. There wasn't time for meaningful statistics to aggregate, but possibly it would reduce crime. You couldn't invade a country and kill people without consequences. Yeah, ok, that had been personal, but Pepper agreed with it. Do the crime, do the time.

"Boss?" Friday repeated.

"Yeah, Fry?" Tony stopped checking the groups. "What?"

"You have a phone call I think you might like to answer."

"Not a reporter? I'm not giving any interviews."

"I don't think so, Boss. It's a Mrs. Anderson."

"Don't know any Andersons."

"Nee Rebecca Barnes, she says."

Tony blinked. "Any relation to the Barnes we all know and hate?"

"She says he's her older brother."

"Huh. Can you verify?"

"I can verify a Rebecca Barnes was his younger sister, and was married to a Mr. Anderson. I have no death record for her, but I can't be sure this is the same person."

"Put her through." Tony thought it unlikely to be a scam, but even if it was, he'd rather know what they were up to than ignore it.

"Mr. Stark?" The voice belonged to an elderly woman, but she spoke clearly, in determined tones. Tony would like to see her, but apparently her connection didn't support video, otherwise Friday would have done it.

"Speaking, and you claim to be James Buchanan Barnes' sister?"

"It's not a claim, it's the simple fact," she said. "I am Rebecca Barnes Anderson, and Jimmy is my brother."
"Uh huh. And why are you calling me? If you want to know where he is, I can't tell you."

"I want..." her voice broke for the first time. "I want to apologize for Jimmy. He was... he was always a good boy. He wasn't the kind to hurt people. He didn't tease me, like other boys did to their sisters. He..." she sniffled. "He was always looking after the little ones, like Stevie."

Tony cleared his throat. Just because he hated Barnes didn't mean he could be cruel to an old lady. "He's still looking after Rogers, I'm sure."

"Stevie was a hell-raiser," Rebecca said, with a stifled laugh. "But, I just... I don't know what happened to Jimmy. I don't know if he can even say he's sorry, so I wanted to say it for him."

"Thank you. Is that all?" Tony was a bit suspicious. Everyone always wanted something from him.

"What else could I say?"

"You could... you know..." Tony had an idea. He felt Barnes was playing him- seeing his sister in VR might jar a little honesty loose. "I can't tell you where he is, but... where are you? Can you verify your identity?"

"My driver's license expired." Rebecca sniffed. "Hit one little curbstone, and no one trusts you to drive."

Tony grinned despite himself. "Yeah, that happens." He glanced at the incoming phone number. It was a New York City area code. "Are you willing and able to come to Stark Tower?"

"I can't afford a taxi," Rebecca said. "And the subway... that's no place for a lady. I'll have to check the bus routes."

"Oh, no, just give me your address and I'll send a car, if that's all right? You can bring someone with you, if you want." Belatedly, Tony realized he really ought to mention his vague idea to Pepper.

"That would be nice. Can you give me an hour? I've got my hair up in curlers."

"Sure." Despite himself, Tony thought he might like Rebecca.

Rebecca gave her address. It was in Brooklyn, but Tony wasn't familiar with the area. "Good bye, Mr. Stark."

"Good bye, Mrs. Anderson." Friday disconnected. "Friday, call Pepper. And Happy. And I guess make it a four-way with Rhodey." If this was a bad idea, he could call Rebecca back and cancel.
"Brooklyn," was all Happy said when Tony asked if he could send a driver for Mrs. Anderson after explaining everything. He sounded disapproving. Tony's video phone quality was, of course, superb, and caught every nuance.

"What? You were born in Brooklyn!" Tony waved his hands dramatically. "Don't you want to see the old neighborhood, bring back the blissfully free days of childhood?" Not that Tony remembered his childhood that way. It wasn't all bad, though. He had a pony. At least he had a photo of him sitting on a pony. Maybe it was a rent-a-horse.

"So were Rogers and Barnes." Happy scowled. "They brought down the tone."

Tony blinked. "It's Brooklyn. I never knew Brooklyn had any 'tone' to begin with."

"Tony," Rhodey interrupted. "Why are you always making things more complicated?"

"Genius. It comes with the territory."

Pepper made an unladylike noise. "Have you considered the possible fallout? Even if this woman actually is Barnes' sister, you intend to confront a fragile, elderly lady with her long lost, brain-scrambled, assassin brother."

Tony made a face. "Virtually! Virtually confront!"

"She could have a heart attack, or stroke!" Pepper waved her hands around.

Rhodey and Happy exchanged glances.

"He's her family," Tony said quietly. "She deserves the chance to see him, if she wants. It might be her only chance." Tony didn't say it, but he was thinking of his mother. He hadn't really invented BARF to fix his unresolved issues. He just... wanted to see her again.

Pepper sighed. "Fine."

"I'll go get the old ladies," Happy said.

"You could send a driver."

Happy looked sternly at Tony. "I won't send a man to do what I wouldn't do."

"You're not going into an active war zone," Rhodey reminded him. "It's Brooklyn, for God's sake."

"I could pick up bagels," Happy said, brightening up. "Can't get decent ones in the City."

"What if they have dentures?" Tony asked. "Can you eat bagels with dentures?" Now that Pepper had brought it up, he realized old ladies were fragile. He didn't want to break Mrs. Anderson or her friend.

"I'll pick up a cheesecake, too." Happy said with a sigh.
"Hey, Boss," Happy said. He had his hands full of boxes of baked goods, and a peculiar expression on his face, like he was trying not to laugh.

"Hello, Mr. Stark, I'm Rebecca," the first woman out of the elevator announced. Rebecca Anderson was a tall, slender, unashamedly white haired woman wearing a neat black dress with a wide white collar. Her companion was far shorter, plump, and her hair was dyed pale blue. Her dress was purple, and her hat was red.

"You can call me Rosie," the second woman said. She glanced around the room. "Where's the brandy? You're Tony Stark, there must be booze around here somewhere."

"Rose-Marie McGrath," Rebecca said. "You promised."

"I lied," Rose-Marie said. "I'm old. I can get away with it."

Tony cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. There isn't any brandy. It wouldn't go with cheesecake," he added.

Rose-Marie looked at him, shrewdly, and then came over to pat his hand. "My Frank had to give up the sauce, too. God rest his soul. Liver can only take so much. You look good, though! Look Becky, hasn't he got a nice smile?"

Tony was totally lost. "Eh. Thanks? Would you like to sit down? Happy, could we have some coffee... or tea?"

"Sure, Boss," Happy said. He put the bakery boxes down on the nearest coffee table.

Rosie turned out to be helpful. When Tony couldn't figure out how to work the conversation around to the reason he'd invited Rebecca, Rosie just steam-rolled on talking about the view from the penthouse, and wondering if pigeons ever flew in through the walkway for the Iron Man suits.

It made everything seem surreal and harmless. And Tony found himself just coming out with it. "Mrs. Anderson, I have been in contact with your brother. I still can't tell you where he is, but I could arrange a virtual meeting."

"Virtual?" Rebecca asked. She didn't sound too surprised. "But that's just a game, isn't it?"

"Not... not just a game." Tony didn't want to go into the reasons Stark Reality wasn't just a game; not only would it risk getting out, but he might traumatize his guests with fear of alien invasion. "It's also a sort of... therapy. I've been trying to help your brother break free of the conditioning trigger words. He's safe where he is until then."

"I could see him? Talk to him?" Rebecca leaned forward. "Yes."

"Yes? You don't want to think about it?"

"No. I want to see Jimmy. What do I have to do?"

"You wear a VR headset, and I'll take you to him."
Rosie shook her head. "See? That's why I don't bother with curls anymore, Becky. They always get ruined."

Chapter End Notes

Notes: Please notice that I changed the warning from 'No Archive Warnings Apply' to 'Creator Chose Not to Use Archive Warnings' because I STRONGLY suspect that my bitterness towards Certain Characters may result in breaking at least one of the Archive Warnings.

Also, I think canonically Rebecca Barnes was older than Bucky. *shrug* AU, I do what the story needs and wants.

Info on Happy: Real Name Harold Joseph “Happy” Hogan. Aliases The Living Cobalt Time-Bomb, the Walking Bomb, Iron Man, the Freak, “Hap”.  
Place of Birth: Brooklyn, New York  
Hair: Brown (as Freak, none)  
Weight: 221 lbs. (as Freak, 789 lbs.)

ALSO, I wonder if this was an inspiration for his name: Happy Hogan was an American minor league baseball catcher and manager in the early 20th century. He is a member of the Pacific Coast League Hall of Fame. Hogan was born on October 13, 1877, in Santa Clara, California and died in 1915.

http://www.barbados.org/poetry/wheniam.htm (The poem 'When I am old" pretty much inspired Rosie. I just started out thinking she should be less serious than Becky, and wear bright colors. And then...)
Tony took Rebecca through VR first, walking with her in the simplest environment that came to mind, the lawn outside Avengers Compound. He wondered idly if anyone was mowing it and resodding Thor's Bifrost markings. Inconsiderate bastard, he could have used the driveway.

"None of this is real?" Rebecca asked. She bent down to pluck a blade of grass.

"All simulated." Tony made a patch of flowers appear. They were striped red and metallic gold, and they waved hello before vanishing. "Whatever you can imagine. It's easiest to recreate things you know well. The important thing to remember is that it's safe. Nothing can harm you here."

Rebecca nodded.

"We'll exit VR now, and I'll email your brother to see if he can meet us."

"Oh, can I have his email? I promise, I always log out at the library."

"Library? You use a library computer?" Tony was horrified. Just thinking of all the grubby fingers that had worked the keyboard made his skin crawl. "Um, maybe I could give you a computer? Just... not trying to bribe you, or anything, it's just... library computer? They're not sanitary!"

Rebecca laughed. "Thank you, Mr. Stark, I'd appreciate that."

Tony sent Barnes the email. He kept it short. 'Rebecca Anderson wants to VR with you. She says she's your sister, and I think she's on the level. What do you say?' And then he and Rosie polished off the cheesecake, while Rebecca talked to Friday about the difficulties of maintaining a skyscraper that had a tendency to get blown up every few years.

Barnes' answer came quickly. Tony should have been surprised because it had to be around five-thirty a.m. in Wakanda, but now that he thought of it, Barnes usually replied very quickly, no matter when Tony contacted him. Maybe Barnes resisted sleep for all sorts of reasons that Tony wasn't going to be sympathetic about, no way. Or maybe he just liked to get up early, before the Avengers and enjoy the peace, while it lasted.

"He says 'yes'," Tony told Rebecca. He turned the smart glass so she could read it for herself. "Literally. 'Yes'. A man of few words."

Rebecca looked nervous. Rosie patted her hand. "It will be all right, dear."

Rebecca nodded and took a deep breath. "Right." She picked up the VR headset. "Are you coming, too, Mr. Stark?"

"Yes." Tony didn't say that he didn't entirely trust her, but really... he didn't entirely trust her. There wasn't much risk, even if she was Hydra. The trigger words hadn't worked even once, but he needed to know what they said. "I'll be there to help control the environment. Your brother might be too distracted." He hoped the lie was plausible.
Rebecca straightened her collar and put on the VR headset, leaning back on the couch and closing her eyes.

Rosie held her hand. She looked up at Tony. "Take care of my girl."

"I will." Tony put on his headset and dove into VR. He emerged and looked around. They were standing on a street corner in front of an empty Nathan's restaurant. A really old one judging from the prices- 5 cents for a roast beef sandwich? There wasn't anything else, just sand and a bright blue sky. Rebecca stood next to him. He said, "Ok, this is new."

"I remembered this."

Tony and Rebecca turned to see Barnes walking around the corner of the restaurant. He was wearing drab gray civilian clothes, including a long-sleeved hoody that hid most of his metal hand.

"Do you remember it?" he asked Rebecca. "Are you my sister?" He frowned. "I can't tell. You're old." He frowned in puzzlement.

"Yes. Yes, I'm your sister. You used to take me to Coney Island in the summer." Rebecca stepped closer to Barnes. "Afterward, we'd stop at Nathan's for a soda or ice cream if it was very hot that day."

Barnes looked thoughtful. "It was always hot, you said."

Rebecca smiled. "I liked ice cream."

"I don't," Barnes replied. "It's cold." He tilted his head slightly. "It's always cold. Even here, where it should be hot."

"Oh, Jimmy." Rebecca went to him and put her arms around him.

Tony held his non-existent breath, but after a moment Barnes returned the hug, awkwardly. "Thank you, Rebecca," he said.

Rebecca pulled back. "You never call me Rebecca," she said sadly.

"It's Becky," Tony said, remembering what Rosie had called her.

Rebecca shook her head again. "That's what other people called us. It was a joke. Becky and Bucky. But I always called you Jimmy, and you called me..."

Barnes nodded. "I called you... Becca."

Rebecca was crying now, silent tears flowing down her face. "You remember. You're still my Jimmy."

"Some of me is. But only a little," Barnes told her. "I've done terrible things, Becca. And I can't blame Hydra for all of it. I just wanted to see you to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" Rebecca asked. "You're not going to do anything stupid, are you Jimmy?"

Barnes smiled for the first time. "Probably. But not what you think." He tapped the side of his head. "If I was gonna give up, I would have done it a long time ago. No, it's just... Becca, I can't come home. Stevie thinks that we'll be needed enough for everyone to forget what we did, but I think the only way that'll happen is if they expect us to die doing it. I don't mind that. Going out fighting, that would be good."
"I mind it! I mind it very much!" Rebecca said fiercely.

"What do you want me to do?" Barnes said with a hint of actual anger in his voice. "Turn myself in? Stand trial with the whole world hating me, and calling for my death? That would be suicide, too."

"I'd see that it was a fair trial," Tony put in. He hated Barnes, but he wasn't going to hate himself by acting on that hate. "I'm not a lawyer, but I have the best ones on permanent retainer. Can't guarantee anything, but they're wily bastards. I have no idea whose jurisdiction you'd be tried under but if in the U.S. you have a lot of sympathy cards to play. And if you wind up being extradited, Germany and Romania have abolished the death penalty."

Barnes looked at Tony. "I'm not an idiot, Stark. I looked into it. There's no way I walk. At best, a tricky lawyer might argue I be charged with voluntary manslaughter when I was escaping. I wasn't planning to kill anyone." Barnes looked at his sister. "But I wasn't trying not to. I didn't hold back. I didn't treat ordinary people who got in the way any different than I did the armed police. I am a weapon. I will always be more dangerous than an ordinary man. If they don't kill me, they'll throw me in jail and lose the key."

Rebecca nodded. "You did hurt people, Jimmy. You did kill them. I love you, but you know you did wrong and you've only made it worse by running away. You were never a coward, Jimmy. You need to show people that you're sorry for what you've done." Suddenly she shivered and blinked. "What's that buzzing?"

"End of session warning," Tony told her. "You need to rest. Just think that you want to exit, and you'll be back in the Tower."

"But I'm not finished talking with Jimmy!" she protested.

"I'll give you a VR set," Tony promised. He looked at Barnes. "You will be able to talk to your brother again, won't she, Barnes?"

Barnes huffed. "All right, yes." His expression softened. "I'll see you again, Becca."

Rebecca nodded and then faded out of VR.

Barnes turned on Tony. "Why did you do that?"

"Do what?" Tony grinned at Barnes. "Let an old woman meet her long-lost brother? Force you to stop playing games with me? Yeah, I know you've been playing me. That just pisses me off, you know that? Be honest. You don't really give a damn about Rogers, do you?"

Barnes tilted his head. "I did once. I remember him when he was a feisty little bantam, and it was... funny, how he'd throw himself into fights just to prove he wasn't scared. He didn't change, but it's not funny anymore. I just want to live my own life. I don't want to be Rogers' handler or his broken mirror of the 'good old days'. He's not a bad guy, and I used him to help myself, so I guess it's only right that I try to help keep him out of trouble. So long as it doesn't get me deeper in the shit."

"You are a cynical bastard," Tony said, with a hint of admiration in his voice.

Barnes smiled at him. "Pretty much, yeah."

Tony shook his head, and exited the VR.
When Tony came out of VR, Happy and Rosie were playing pinochle with Friday kibitzing. "Hey, Boss," Happy said, glancing up from his cards. Rosie waved at Tony, but her concentration was on the cards.

"Where's Mrs. Anderson?" Tony asked.

"She went to freshen up," Happy said. He sorted through his cards and frowned at them.

"Is she all right?" Pepper would kill him if Tony had broken the old lady.

"Got something in her eye," Rosie explained while running a finger down her cheek in a pantomime of crying. "She went looking for Kleenex. Or toilet paper. Do rich people have special toilet paper?"

Tony opened his mouth and then closed it again. He didn't really know. There was a bidet, and there was toilet paper which was always on the dispenser so he wasn't sure if it was special or not. It had flowers printed on it, but you know, was that special?

Rosie went on cheerfully. "I remember a story about Tallulah Bankhead. Once she had to use a public toilet and noticed too late- isn't it always too late?- that the roll was empty. She knocked on the adjoining divider and asked, 'Excuse me, darling, do you have any toilet paper?' The woman said no, she was in the same fix. 'Well, do you have any Kleenex?' The woman said, no, again. 'Then do you have two fivers for a ten?'"

Happy burst out laughing. Tony joined him.

Happy took Rebecca and Rosie home, content to do so because Rosie had described a sandwich at Court Street Grocers that made his mouth water. He promised to bring back enough for everyone.

When they could, Tony and the others tried to eat together. As busy as the four of them were, that wasn't easy, but Tony had learned from the Keeners that it was worth the effort. He poked at his sandwich and sighed.

"What?" Happy said. "Did they forget the honey?"

"No, no, the food's great. It's just I was thinking about the Keeners. I'd like to visit, but I'm not sure I can risk the time away from... you know, saving the world." Tony took a bite. The sandwich was very good, actually.

"Yeah," Rhodey said. "We need a timeline." He rubbed his cheek. "Right now we're trying to build a wall, and organize a militia. That's good. I'm not saying it's not good, but it's not gonna be enough."

Pepper nodded. "We're spread too thin to actually start anything else. How are the Brain-Stormers going?" Pepper said, referring to Tony's favorite scientist group, the one lead by Stephen Hawking.
"They're bouncing wacky ideas around. Nothing practical yet, but pure research always pays off... given enough time." Sometimes Tony dropped in on Hawking's group. They were very much out there. Selvig was pantsless most of the time, and Hawking liked to row while yelling arguments that had apparently built up over the years. Charles Xavier often joined Hawking in rowing a skiff. They had good natured discussions about the feasibility of recreating Oxford and Cambridge boat races, if only they could get enough people to crew two racing eights. They had shot down Tony's suggestion of jet boats, but in the process had come up with some intriguing ideas for propulsion. Other bright minds were attracted to the Brain-Stormers and they were playing with some totally off the wall concepts. Jane Foster in particular had some amazing insights after her experiences in Asgard.

"You know," Happy said, waving a forkful of coleslaw, "If Tony was a boxer..."

"If?" Tony said, and pretended to be hurt.

"If Tony was a boxer," Happy repeated, "He'd have a manager, setting up fights, and building up to harder opponents, so, if the manager was any good, everything would come together in a title match. He wouldn't just train and fight all comers. That's how you ruin a good boxer." Happy nodded decisively.

Tony coughed. "I don't think we can invite the Chitauri to spar."

"No, but Happy has a point," Rhodey said. "Not you, but the Chitauri. Someone's behind them, and if they sent them here for a 'trial bout' why have they waited so long to do anything else?"

Pepper said, "Well, if they're planning a hostile takeover, it takes time to set that up."

"Yeah, no." Tony shook his head. "That... that didn't make sense. Someone gave Loki a few army divisions and they were going to let him have the territory? What were they going to get out of it?"

"Mercenaries? Loki promised to pay them part of the spoils?" Rhodey suggested. "And he's... I don't know, what did Asgard do with him? If Loki's out of the picture, and the mercenaries got their butts kicked, maybe they won't be back?" Rhodey looked apologetically at Tony. "I believe in being prepared, but if they haven't done anything since the invasion in New York, maybe they lost interest in us. It's a big galaxy, Earth can't be the tastiest target around."

"It really didn't make sense," Tony repeated. That had been bothering him for years. "Loki said he wanted to rule, but the Chitauri didn't have any organization, it was just... they just seemed to destroy anything. Like locusts."

"They kinda looked like locusts," Happy agreed with a shiver. "So, maybe they swarm every seven years? Or are Chitauri like dogs, and their years aren't the same as ours."

"However they judge time, they should have done something by now, if they were going to," Pepper said. "An army's got to eat and be supplied with fuel and... well, running S.I. isn't exactly like running an army, but I know I couldn't afford to have a unit sitting idle for years, making no return on the investment."

Tony had a sinking feeling in his stomach, nothing at all to do with the sandwich. "Maybe they did do something. The Chitauri invasion made no sense if you looked at it as attempted conquest. Agreed?"

Everyone nodded. Even Friday chipped in with, "Looks that way to me, Boss."
"They only wanted to destroy. There was enough of a fleet out there to cover the Earth. They could have reduced it to rubble if we hadn't closed the portal. You know what sounds familiar about that?"
Tony didn't wait for a reply. "Ultron. Ultron shouldn't have happened. I don't mean that I made a mistake, or that I regretted it. I mean it SHOULD NOT have happened. It was nowhere near feasible. It didn't even come close to viability. Unless... someone else actually created Ultron. Ultron's sole purpose was to destroy all life on Earth."

Everyone was silent for a few moments, digesting that information. "So," Rhodey said at last, dubiously, "you think an alien influence created Ultron? But how, I mean, the only alien around was Thor. The guy's great with lightning, but devious is not his middle name. If Loki was around, sure..."

"Loki's staff was around. The mind-stone was in it. That could have warped the Ultron program and then added in the 'Hate Tony, and destroy the Earth protocol.'" Tony's eyes widened. "Shit. Hydra had used the staff to enhance the Maximoffs. Maybe that's why she hates me."

Pepper's eyes widened in alarm. "Can we verify this? If Maximoff is still under this influence..."

"She's a ticking time-bomb," Rhodey said. "But what could we do about it?"

Tony put down his sandwich. "I don't know, but I don't think we can ignore the possibility. Friday, find Vision, and ask him to meet us here. If anyone has insight into the mind-stone, it's him."

"Can we trust him?" Happy said. "I mean... the mind-stone is part of him! If it's evil..."

Tony glared at Happy. "Ignoring the fact that Thor's precious hammer vouched for him, if Vision was evil, we'd already be smoking dust. All he had to do was not stop Ultron."

Happy shrugged. "Ok, ok. I know, sorry, Boss."

Friday said, "Vision has responded. He will be here soon."

Chapter End Notes

I stole and modified the joke from this thread. There's a lot of toilet humor here, as well as some actual information. In places it's very rude, insulting rich and royal folk in particular. Use your own judgment whether you wish to read it.
https://www.datalounge.com/thread/14080379-what-toilet-paper-do-rich-people-use-

And I found this food review:
The Ollie ($9): Court Street Grocers is one of the best delis in Brooklyn, and their Ollie sandwich is a thing of beauty. Laden with roasted turkey, gooey provolone, broccoli rabe, mayo, and SRIRACHA HONEY (what? yes!), this sandwich is perfect.
Court Street Grocers’ 116 Sullivan Street, Red Hook

http://www.bkmag.com/2014/05/23/brooklyn-on-a-budget-the-10-best-and-most-filling-foods-for-under-10/
Vision arrived via elevator, still in his English professor guise. He'd added a pair of black framed eyeglasses, and a tightly furled black umbrella. "Good afternoon, Ms. Potts, Mr. Stark, Colonel Rhodes, Mr. Hogan. Friday has informed me of your disturbing conjecture."

"Disturbing," Tony said, "yeah, that's one way to put it." Tony waved at the couch, and Vision came over and sat down, looking at Tony mildly. "So, what do you think?" Tony asked, "Could the Mind Stone have given Maximoff something like Ultron's programming? Could she be a 'sleeper' in our midst, planted with the Avengers and set to go off at the moment it could do the most damage?"

Vision frowned faintly. "I... cannot rule out the possibility. I had perused the Hydra records recovered from Sokovia, but I found them exceedingly unscientific. I do not even know where the idea that the scepter could enhance human abilities originated. Loki used it to create obedient servants by usurping their wills, so logically that was what Hydra should have been attempting." His frown deepened. "Perhaps we were fortunate they did not do so. Hydra had frozen their super soldiers for one failing-- they were uncontrollable."

"Yeah," Rhodey said, "I could see how that would be bad, but still, you know, even at the top of human potential, they had limits that Maximoff doesn't."

"That is true," Vision said thoughtfully. "Her brother was only gifted with speed, but her abilities have multiple uses, both in manipulating human minds, and physical matter as well as energy. I do not know the full extent of her powers."

"Well, you know what you can do, right?" Happy put in. He pointed to his own forehead and then to Vision.

Vision looked confused. Tony rolled his eyes and pointed to Vision's mid-section where the mind stone now resided, hidden under layers of clothing. "I think Happy meant that since you now have the mind stone, you should have the same powers Maximoff does."

"That would seem logical," Vision replied, "but I must point out that I do not possess Pietro's speed which was also a result of the mind stone, so it is entirely possible Wanda may also have abilities I cannot access. Or at least, do not know how to access. Also, I have seen no evidence that Ms. Maximoff can alter her density as I can, so while there is some superficial overlap in our abilities, they are not the same."

Pepper had been silent, now she said, "Do you think, if you tried, you could control Wanda, the way Loki did to people?"

"I have never felt the slightest inclination to do so," Vision replied. "So it is difficult to tell if I could put aside the immorality of the act, and attempt it. Please, do not ask me to try. Remember, Wanda did fight against Ultron. Why would she do so if her programming was the same?"

Tony sighed. "Ultron was a computer program. Human minds are much... messier. Dr. Cho said she... wait... Dr. Cho said Maximoff went against Ultron when she read his half-formed mind in your body, Viz. When she knew she'd die, too. So... shit... why did I forget that?" Tony shook his head. "Great, she can read minds, too."

"I read the report, Tony," Rhodey said, "Maximoff had to concentrate to do it, it wasn't like listening to someone talking."
"Well, that's something. Not much, but it's something." Tony ran both hands through his hair. "We need a mind reader on our side... wait..." Tony sat up and smiled.

"I recognize that expression," Pepper said. "You know a mind reader?"

"Um, yes?" Tony said. "There's a guy. He was on SHIELD's watch list. He was on the kill file, too. He gave me the specs to build mind-control blocking armor. It should work to stop mind-reading, too."

Happy nudged Rhodey. "Pay up, I told you it was a tinfoil hat."

"Fine," Rhodey grouched. He pulled a fiver out of his wallet and slapped it into Happy's hand.


Pepper nodded. "So, you're going to talk to this mind-reader, get his advice?"

"Yeah."

Rhodey leaned forward. "You don't talk to this man and then decide to go to Wakanda without me, Tony."

"Would I do that, honey bear?"

"Of course not, because you're going to tell Friday to lock down all your suits if you try." Rhodey stared Tony down. "You didn't mind when it was just Barnes we had to worry about, but adding Maximoff to the mix... yeah, I could see the Lone Gunslinger thinking."

Tony surrendered. "Friday, do as Rhodey said."

"Yes, Boss!" Friday said.

"I made a hat for War Machine, too," Tony admitted. "I didn't really want to go alone."

"Good." Rhodey sat back, satisfied.

"Friday, call the Professor." Tony had no idea what the school schedule was like, or if Xavier was in VR at the moment. He was impatient. At least he could leave a message with Hank, who seemed to act as Xavier's secretary.

"Yes, Boss," Friday barely had time to say before the smart glass lit up with Xavier's face.

He looked more serious than usual, which was saying a lot. "Dr. Stark, I have been expecting your call."

"Oh," Tony said. Yeah, that's right some of Xavier's students could get vague glimpses of the future, possible futures, whatever. "So, do you already know what I want to ask you?"

Tony imagined Xavier was resisting rolling his eyes. "No, I only know that a... crossroad... is approaching, it centers around you and you require my aid. What is it that you need?" He leaned forward, and looked to the side, apparently staring at Vision, but he said nothing more.

"Yeah, well, you remember our talk about Maximoff?"

Xavier nodded. "The young woman whose abilities concerned you."
"It's not so much her abilities," Tony said, "as her motivations in using them. She's not a genetically created mutant, but was enhanced by exposure to an alien artifact. The artifact was brought to Earth by Loki, or maybe Loki was brought to Earth by the artifact. It's a programmable artificial intelligence." Tony took a deep breath. "We think Loki was led to believe the artifact would help him conquer, but its real purpose was simply mass destruction. Currently the artifact is non-hostile-it's a long story. But. Maximoff and her brother and Ultron were all created by it while it still had the original programming. Ultron's aim was to destroy all life on Earth. With a side-order of hating Tony Stark."

"And you fear Ms. Maximoff has the same goals," Xavier said.

Vision interjected. "She did turn against Ultron."

Pepper said, "Only when she read its mind and found out she'd die, too."

"That would still be the case," Vision replied. "It would be illogical for her to cooperate with the destruction of the Earth."

"The lady's not all that bright," Rhodey said. "Remember when you asked her to stay in her own home for her own protection?"

Vision winced. "I do. It took only a few words from Barton for her to turn on me the full force of her abilities. With no real cause she believed that Mr. Stark had imprisoned her."

"I see," Xavier said.

Tony said, "The artifact tried twice to influence me. I'm not sure if it entirely failed the first time. Bruce was studying it, and then suddenly everyone in the room was squabbling. I had...I had a headache and for a moment I wasn't angry, just confused, but then... Rogers opened his fat lips again, and I was mad. It's hard to tell whether I was angry because of the situation, or because of the artifact. Then later, Loki put the artifact against my chest, expecting it to turn me into one of his mind-slaves, and it failed. I thought at the time it was because it touched my arc reactor, and not my flesh, but maybe it wasn't that. Maybe, for whatever reason, it couldn't get a grip on my mind? Maybe... and this is stretching things, I know... maybe those failures made it hate me, and it instilled that hate in Ultron and the Maximoffs along with the 'destroy the Earth' protocol."

Xavier said gently, "You may be extrapolating too far, on too little evidence." Xavier raised his hand to wave down objections. "But I agree that it would be best to see if Ms. Maximoff carries a hidden compulsion which could work against us in the coming conflict."

"Right. So any suggestions how we do that?" Tony asked.

"I will have to be in Ms. Maximoff's physical presence. From what you say, if she has this 'programming' it will be on a subconscious level, unknown to her. Only a deep probe would uncover it."

Vision moved restlessly.

Xavier added, "There would be no physical discomfort involved."

Tony frowned. "It's a long way to where she's hiding. Are you up to it?"

"I am, as you say, up to anything that's necessary, as this so obviously is," Xavier replied. "I will meet you at your Tower. I have my own transportation." Xavier's eyes were back on Vision. "I should particularly like to meet your friend." Xavier nodded. "Good bye, Dr. Stark."
"That guy's a bit creepy," Happy said.

"And why was he so interested in Vision?" Rhodey asked.

"Please, remember I am Vincent Addams," Vision said. "Perhaps my accent led him to believe I am an ex-pat from his original country."

"Uh huh," Tony said. "Should we get... tea? And... scones? Scones sounds good."
Xavier's plane was invisible, silent, and landed like a hover jet on the roof. If it wasn't for the heat of the engine and the vibration as it touched down, Tony wouldn't have realized it had arrived. As the host, Tony had claimed the right to be the first to greet them, so everyone else was gathered around the table in the meeting room several floors below.

"Huh," he said. "Nice." It was an even better job than the helicarrier's stealth tech. He itched to 'look under the hood'. The plane opened and the pilot stepped out. Tony resisted saying 'VERY nice,' but it was a temptation. The pilot gazed at him through silvery white eyes, matching her long hair. She was far too young for the hair, but it suited her.

"Storm," Xavier said, rolling his wheelchair out of a ramp extending from the rear of the invisible plane.

The young woman looked back at Xavier, and blinked. Her eyes turned a deep brown. "Professor. Shall I accompany you?"

"If you like, but you needn't. Dr. Stark is a friend." Xavier smiled at her.

Storm tilted her head slightly. "As you say, Professor. Then I shall remain with the Blackbird."

"It's good to meet you in person, Professor Xavier," Tony said. He glanced at the young woman. "Storm? I guess code-names, right. So, I'm Iron Man?" He held out his hand to her.

Storm's eyebrows tightened. She didn't take his hand. "You look much taller in the armor." Then she turned and went back into the plane.

Tony looked at Xavier. "That... that's a very forthright lady."

"Honesty is one of the fundamentals we try to instill in our students," Xavier said blandly, but Tony could tell he was amused. "And on that note we shall have to clearly define the mission before we embark." He touched a control and his wheelchair moved smoothly forward.

Tony turned and led the way to the rooftop elevator housing. "Absolutely. Any confusion or misunderstandings could be a disaster."

Happy took some scones and tea up to Storm, and returned, blushing. Tony didn't ask. Happy had an eye for the ladies.

Xavier was the first to speak after the introductions went around and everyone had their tea and scones served. "I must be quite clear on this point. I have agreed that it is necessary to ascertain if Ms. Maximoff is under alien influence, but I will not enter her mind without her prior permission."

Tony coughed on a bite of scone. "She'll never agree. You don't know her."

"That's true," Xavier said calmly. "I accept the possibility that she will react unfavorably to the request."

"React unfavorably," Tony said. "That's the understatement of the year."

Vision nodded. "Professor Xavier, Wanda is a very... high-strung... individual. When I requested she
remain in her home, in Avengers' Compound, for her own safety while discussions were held on her involvement in Lagos, she...did not take that calmly. I survived because she used my own density altering ability against me, but she is far more accustomed to using telekinesis as a weapon."

"What Vision is saying," Happy put in, "is that she throws dishes when she's in a snit."

"If by 'dishes', you mean anything up to boxcars, then yeah," Rhodey confirmed.

"We don't want you getting hurt," Pepper said.

"I am quite capable of taking care of myself, but thank you for your concern." Xavier drank some tea. "I'm afraid I cannot be moved from this point. Doing what is morally wrong for the right reasons is still wrong."

Tony gave in. They needed Xavier, and had to accept his terms. "All right, but War Machine and Iron Man will be your backups." Xavier was confident, but was that because he was that powerful, or was it just that no one had ever been mean enough to beat up a man in a wheelchair? Tony didn't want to take the chance.

"I too should accompany you," Vision said.

"No, we can't risk you," Tony replied. "No one else can Godmod the VR." What he was really thinking was that Vision had feelings for Wanda, and it would be cruel to make him face her again. "So... I'll call King T'Challa and clear the visit with him."

Friday connected Tony without waiting to be asked. She was learning. The holo on the smart table lit up. T'Challa's eyebrows raised as he took in the sight of everyone gathered around it. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Yes. After seeing her reaction to Iron Man in the game, that is a valid concern. I have had no direct contact with them since that time, if that helps?"

"I think so." Maximoff must need to be close to a person in order to do anything to their mind. He wasn't sure if the glowy hands had to be able to touch, but if she could affect at any distance, she wouldn't have bothered with flinging Audis at Tony, and just sent his team into nightmare city while Rogers' group escaped.

"I too should accompany you," Vision said.

"It might be." With the ease of practice, Tony laid out his concern about the possibility Wanda was an alien 'sleeper'. "And since I just remembered that she can sometimes read minds, I need to know if you've been near her since I started working with Barnes." Tony noticed the others wincing at the thought. "If she knows I'm involved..."

"Yes. After seeing her reaction to Iron Man in the game, that is a valid concern. I have had no direct contact with them since that time, if that helps?"

Storm flew them to Wakanda in the Blackbird. Tony had thought about taking a quin-jet, but Pepper reminded him that the one the Avengers stole was still in Wakanda, and he might as well fly it back. Tony didn't argue the point. While Rhodey didn't complain, he knew that long periods inside the armor hurt his legs, despite the braces and all that Tony could do. It would be better to bring the armors inside the jet and suit up once they arrived. Rhodey laughed at the 'tinfoil' liners in the suit helmets, but he agreed to use it.
The Blackbird lifted after they were comfortably seated in the body of the plane, Rhodey and Tony on one side and Xavier facing them on the other. Storm could be seen at the controls as the cockpit wasn't separated by a bulkhead. "Your friend Vision is most remarkable," Xavier said casually. "As a synthetic life-form, he must have a unique perspective on humanity. Perhaps he would be willing to speak to my students? We endeavor to broaden their minds socially as well as academically."

"Ah, yes?" Tony said. "I guess you saw him on the news a few months ago, but you hadn't heard that he's disappeared."

Xavier gave Tony a look. "Mr. Hogan referred to 'Vincent Addams' as Vision, and no one corrected him. Not to mention 'Mr. Addams' spoke of possessing a density altering ability."

Rhodey exchanged glances with Tony. "We're crap at secrets," Rhodey said.

"Yeah," Tony agreed. "We weren't trying to fool you in particular, it's just that we're trying to keep the government from declaring him non-human and subject to involuntary experimentation."

Xavier nodded. "I assumed as much. My school operates under similar principles. We aren't entirely unknown to the government, unfortunately, but we do our best to, as you say, stay under the radar. We frequently have guest lecturers, so Mr. Addams would not stand out as anything usual. In the coming times, I think it would be wise if we were made more familiar with each other. Also, he would be able to utilize our training room. Your VR is a remarkable thing, Dr. Stark, but it isn't exactly the same as reality."

"I'll mention it to Vincent," Tony said. "Maybe he could use some interaction with kids."

"Maybe you could go with him," Rhodey said. "I know you like children."

"They're just attracted to the armor! They'd like War Machine if it had a cool paint job."

"Red, white and blue?"

Tony groaned. "Do not mention that 'Iron Patriot' travesty to me again."

"Yeah. I got to agree. War Machine RoXX."

Xavier smiled at them. "Perhaps black and white?"

"Maybe," Rhodey said.

Tony was grinning. "Panda Bear!" He hugged Rhodey, who scuffled for a minute and then sighed and held onto Tony.

Rhodey said quietly. "It'll be all right, Tones. I got your back."

Chapter End Notes
Short, but I just realized I needed to do a quick 'I meant to do that!' (cat falling off the table) to cover a brain-oops in the last chapter.

And I wanted to get it posted before a commenter caught me out on it. :^)

WOW- comments on Iron Panda made me curious I googled. A Chinese artist made a 20 foot tall statue of a panda in Iron Man armor as an environmental message. It's BEAUTIFUL.

https://nerdist.com/iron-panda-the-cutest-avenger-carries-an-important-message/

More pics here.
https://kotaku.com/iron-man-plus-panda-is-iron-panda-1704137030
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Tony stepped out of the Blackbird first when the plane halted on the landing pad near T'Challa's palace. He and Rhodey had their armor on. Xavier had argued that it was rude, and Tony had compromised by raising his faceplate. Rhodey had followed his lead.

T'Challa waited to greet them just before the palace entrance.

"Hi, your Majesty," Tony said. "I'd offer to shake hands ..." He raised his hands slightly, showing his palm repulsors.

"No, I quite understand." T'Challa nodded. "One does not walk into a panther's den unarmed."

"It's not the panther," Rhodey muttered. "It's the scavengers that hang around him."

Tony coughed. T'Challa merely raised an eyebrow. "I have heard of Professor Xavier, but I fear the young lady is unknown to me."

Rhodey elbowed Tony. "That's classy, Tones. Introductions, man!"

Tony rolled his eyes. "Professor Charles Xavier's pilot is one of his students. Her name is Storm."

Storm stepped forward. Her eyes met T'Challa's. "Ororo Munroe, your Majesty. Storm is my code name."

T'Challa smiled. "Please, call me T'Challa. Majesty is far too cold for friends."

Storm smiled.

Tony huffed. "It's the height, damn it."

Rhodey said, "No, man, it's the class."

"I have heard good things of Professor Xavier's school," T'Challa said. "Perhaps later we could discuss enrolling Wakandans as students." He paused a moment. "Due to our... climate, we have a higher than usual percentage of uniquely talented individuals who would benefit from the curriculum."

"Yes, we shall have to discuss that later," Xavier said. "For now, I would like to meet Ms. Maximoff."

Tony hadn't considered it before, but raw vibranium, in the quantities found only in Wakanda, undoubtedly was a mutagen. Not like the mind stone, he was fairly sure. It was just a mineral. A weird mineral. Tony refused to worry about it. It had been in Wakanda for a hell of a long time, if it was going to go Ultron on the world it had plenty of missed opportunities.

This time Storm didn't appear to want to stay with her plane. All of them followed T'Challa into the palace. T'Challa waved them to a halt at a comfortably furnished room that had a large screen wall monitor, currently showing a room, very much like the one they were standing in, except that Wanda Maximoff was reclining in a chair, and wearing a VR headset. "That is the meeting room attached to the guest quarters which the Avengers currently occupy. This is the time of day when Ms. Maximoff prefers to meditate in private," he said.

"Meditate?" Tony said, dubiously.
"I have not inquired as to the specifics," T'Challa remarked.

Tony nodded. "Yeah. Just as well. So. What do you have in mind?"

"Her session will end soon. At that point I shall request a meeting to introduce Professor Xavier. I suspect she will relish any change in her daily routine, so I do not foresee any difficulties to that point. Beyond that..." T'Challa turned up his hands. "I leave that up to you, Professor."

Professor Xavier nodded. He was looking at Wanda. "I will do my best."

"And the rest of you must remain here," T'Challa said. "I do not clearly understand how telepathy functions, but I am assuming if one is focused on one subject that is likely to be uppermost, and most easily read?"

"That is so," Xavier replied. "It requires a certain amount of mental discipline. I can compartmentalize my own thoughts, but I regret there is insufficient time to teach you how to do so."

T'Challa inclined his head in Storm's direction. "If Ms. Munroe does not object, I believe I could indeed remain focussed on one subject."

Ororo smiled. "I have no objections at all, your Majesty."

Tony looked at Rhodey who whispered, "Class."
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The group all gathered around the monitor, watching silently. Wanda had taken off the VR headset, and T'Challa spoke to her over the intercom. As he'd guessed, she only hesitated a moment before agreeing to a visitor.

T'Challa had shown them the route from their room to the Avengers' meeting room, just in case. It wasn't very far, not when you were wearing a suit of repulsor powered armor. Tony tried to stay calm. It itched under his skin, where he couldn't scratch, to be so close to the Avengers. So close to Rogers and Wanda. Huh. He hadn't put Barnes on the same threat level as them. Interesting.

The door opened, and they all whirled. Tony's hands went up, palms out, and Rhodey brought up his shoulder gun. The gatling gun, not the rocket launcher. It probably wouldn't wreck more than one wall. Storm... well, Tony didn't see her do anything, but the room went cold, and he heard the crackle of static electricity.

"Well, think of the devil," was what came out of Tony's mouth, when he recognized Barnes.

Barnes gave Tony a cool glance, ignoring the other two. "The Dora saw you land. They're not real happy about their king shaking their protection."

"So they sent you to bodyguard him?" Rhodey said in disbelief.

"No," Barnes glanced at Rhodey. "But I got friendly with one of the girls. She feels sorry for me." He waved his armless shoulder. "So she talks with me. A lot."

Rhodey wrinkled his nose. "Ok, Tony, you're right, it must be height, because that ain't classy."

Tony lowered his hands. "I never deactivated your 'off switch'," he told Barnes. "One word from me and it's night-night time."

Barnes nodded. "Sure. And as long as you're here, you can test the other trigger."

"Maybe later." Tony thought the idea had appeal. Get it over with and never have to come back again.

"Good." Barnes looked at the monitor. "If you didn't come for that, why are you here? Something to do with Maximoff?"

"Be quiet," Storm said, pointing at the monitor. Wanda was standing, facing the door. It opened and Xavier in his wheelchair entered the room, followed by T'Challa.

They listened to the feed from the other room as T'Challa introduced Professor Xavier.

"What do you want?" Wanda asked bluntly. She narrowed her eyes. "I can read your mind."

"Of course you can," Xavier said mildly. "I mean you no harm, on the contrary. I heard Captain Rogers' recent remarks. He said that you had been tormented. As a fellow telepath..."

"What?" Wanda's eyes widened. "But there were no other successes. Just me and Pietro."

"My mutation is a natural one. I was born with it. I was curious- we telepaths are uncommon and it behooves us to look after one another whenever possible. I would like to help you. With my experience, I can guide you."
Wanda broke her gaze and then looked at T'Challa. "He's telling the truth." She frowned. "King T'Challa, please, excuse us, your thoughts are... disruptive." She added hastily, "And you would be bored."

T'Challa asked Xavier, "Professor?"

Xavier smiled. "I don't know your boredom threshold, your Majesty, but if Ms. Maximoff would be more comfortable in private, that would be best."

"Very well," T'Challa agreed. He left the room.

Tony said, "I hope Xavier knows what he's doing."

Storm replied, "Do not underestimate the Professor. He has faced many challenges and surmounted them all." Then they fell silent again to watch Wanda and Xavier.

Wanda waved at her side. "Well? Tell me, how can I increase my powers?" Her eyes were bright. "I have many ideas, but little opportunity to practice, these days." She sighed. "No one wants to cooperate when I test something."

Xavier frowned slightly. "Yes. Well, first of all, as you weren't born with the ability, I need to know how you acquired it. Sudden trauma? Exposure to radiation? Had you a mental barrier unlocked by a more powerful telepath?"

Wanda crinkled her nose. "I...I don't really know. There was this stone? It was in a spear and they did something, and I...woke up. It was hard at first." She sniffled and her eyes grew damp. "Pietro and I, we had to teach ourselves. At first all I could do was... little tricks... and that wasn't enough." She looked up at Xavier, her expression hardening for a moment. "It still isn't enough. I need to protect myself. I have enemies, people who want to control me, to hurt me. To kill me like they killed Pietro."

Tony resisted the impulse to say 'if anyone killed Pietro, it was you for helping Ultron', but he refrained. Now was not the time to argue.

The door opened and T'Challa stepped into the room, joining them silently. He stood fairly close to Storm.

"A stone," Xavier said. "That sounds as if radiation was involved." He frowned. "If you would allow it, I should like to look into your mind to see if it has caused damage. If it had, I might be able to cure you."

Wanda scowled suspiciously. "I'm fine!"

"Do you ever have difficulty sleeping? Headache? Unexplained emotional shifts?" Xavier asked gently. "You have read my mind, you know I only want to help you."

"It's stress!" Wanda snapped. "No one likes me, they're all afraid of me, the Dora stare at me!"

"I'm not afraid of you, Wanda. Please, let me help."

Wanda's hands glowed red, to match her eyes. "If you try to hurt me, I'll kill you."

Storm took an audible breath. For a moment her eyes glowed white. T'Challa reached out and took her hand.
"Agreed," Xavier said. He moved his wheelchair close to her seat. "I'm just going to look now." He held his hands close to her head and closed his eyes. He spoke softly. "It won't hurt, please relax. I'm only looking to see any external influences or damage." After a moment he opened his eyes and lowered his hands.

"Well?" Wanda demanded.

"The stone appears to have created an overlay in the areas of your mind responsible for memory. It has suppressed true memories, hidden them. They are still there, but you cannot access them."

Wanda rubbed her fingers together, letting the red haze twirl around. "What memories?"

"I don't know, as I promised, I only checked to see if the stone had done any harm. Now that I know it has, I can show you how to remove it yourself."

Wanda blinked. "Would it work both ways?"

"I don't understand what you mean?"

"If you taught me how to remove false memories, could I use it to create them?" Wanda opened her eyes wide and innocent. "It could be merciful, if someone had a terrible memory."

"It is possible," Xavier said. "It is... not a thing done lightly. I have done it in the past, for what I thought were necessary reasons, and a protection for the person I did it to. But I will never do that again, unless they ask for it."

"Oh, of course," Wanda said quickly. "Show me. I want my real memories." Xavier closed his eyes again and touched her head. They went silent.

Tony muttered, "She wants more power."

"It is a temptation," Storm replied. Her eyes went white again, and a halo of miniature lightning bolts formed briefly around her head. "It is easy to make oneself feared." The lighting faded, and she turned slightly to look at T'Challa. "But I would prefer to be..."

"Loved?" T'Challa asked.

Storm smiled slightly. "Perhaps."

Barnes had been staring at her. He took a step away.

Storm noticed and reassured him, "You need not fear. The Professor trained me well, my powers are under complete control. I apologize if my demonstration disturbed you."

Barnes shrugged. "It's all right."

Tony had looked through Hydra's records on Barnes' conditioning. Electroshock was their favorite tool. He remembered a barrel of dirty water and a car battery in Afghanistan, and felt a reluctant sympathy.

Maximoff opened her eyes. "Oh," she said softly, pulling away from Xavier.

He let his hands rest in his lap and said to her gently, "It's all right. You have removed the influence of the stone. What do you remember?"

Wanda tossed her head. "The orphanage. Maria Stark's name was everywhere. The nuns told us to
be grateful.” Her mouth twisted. “Our mother left us because she couldn’t afford twins. But Stark took us in!” She laughed, brittlely. “Every mouthful of gruel, bow your head and be grateful. Every hand-me-down dress, say ‘thank you, Stark’. Every ruler slap when you get a question wrong, say ‘thank you, Stark’ for the education. And then, then when you are of age, why then Stark is done with you, and you are free. Free to starve.”

“Oh, this does not sound good,” Rhodey said.

“Wanda,” Xavier said. “Please, remain calm. This is all in the past, you are safe now, and there is no need...”

“There is always a need!” Wanda snapped. “Pietro and I, we scrabbled to survive while Stark made his money from other people’s suffering. We stole, we did errands for gangs, we did the most demeaning tasks just for a meal, for a place to sleep. No one cared. No one helped us!”

“Wanda, please,” Xavier said. His eyes were half closed, with an expression of pain. “You are... very loud.”

Wanda ignored him. Her hands were glowing, her eyes were red, and her hair floated on an invisible wind. “One day, I was caught while stealing a man’s wallet. I cried and pretended to be an innocent child, that it was all a mistake. But he just laughed. I had a knife. He caught my hand and he stopped laughing. He told me. He told me, I could be someone. I could be powerful. I could do whatever I wanted. All I had to do was join Hydra.” Then she laughed, and kept on laughing.

“What?” Barnes said over her laughter. He looked around. “You knew?”

“Didn’t you?” Tony replied. “I thought Rogers would have told you.”

“Fuck. I would never have gone anywhere with that bitch if I knew.”

Then Wanda’s laughter cut off. “Pietro and I, we were glad to join. They respected us. They taught us. And when the spear touched me, it was... ultimate truth. Its hate was our hate. It gave us so, so much.” She smiled at Xavier and then giggled. “And now I’m going to have to kill you. A terrible accident. You went too far.” She put her blazing red hands on Xavier’s head and he shouted hoarsely. “You think you’ve fooled me. You think I don’t know you’re working for Stark.”

Xavier screamed.
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Tony and Rhody snapped their faceplates down. Tony blasted the door and part of the wall to give him and Rhody room to fly. T'Challa made no complaint and took off before the rubble settled, pacing Barnes, both of them running at a speed that would make an Olympic sprinter jealous. Storm lifted up on invisible winds, lightning crackling around her, and got ahead of them, just behind the armors.

They were making a lot of noise, but they could still hear Xavier screaming over it.

They entered the meeting room in a tight group, the armors having been slowed by the necessity to go around walls rather than through them. Wanda released Xavier, pushing him out of his wheelchair as she stood up. The red glow wasn't just her eyes and hands any longer, it pulsed out of her, swirling like mist, like tentacles, hungry and seeking. She smiled. "Thank you, Professor, you've taught me so much."

Xavier struggled to raise himself on his hands and elbows. Hoarsely he said, "Wanda, no, please. Stop before it's too late."

"Pietro is dead. It's already too late." Her smile widened. "I will build him the biggest funeral pyre the world has ever seen. Everything will burn. Everything."

Ok, now Tony saw why the corrupt mind-stone had chosen her. She was beginning to give off really, really scary as shit radiation. "Hey, no! It's me you want, right? How's about we take this to the mats, just you and me?"

Rhodey spoke over their private com. "Are you nuts?"

Tony ignored him. "Wanda, come on. I'm the big bad, right? Wouldn't it be more satisfying to take me apart personally?" He could see her hesitating. Behind him, the others were sensibly keeping their mouths shut, letting him take the lead.

And then fucking Rogers burst into the room from the other door, followed by Barton, holding a bow Tony hadn't made, Wilson, and Lang, who were both unarmed. Lang looked scared shitless, which upped his intelligence in Tony's estimation.

"Wanda! Stand down, it's all right! I won't let Tony hurt you," Rogers said.

"Rogers! Get out of the way," Rhodey shouted a second before Tony could speak. "She's out of control!"

Rogers glared at Iron Man. "Haven't you done enough, driving us into exile?" And then he saw Barnes. "Bucky? What... what's Tony been..." His eyes widened. "Tony's been messing with your mind!"

Throughout all this, Wanda just stood there, energies pulsing around her, while she watched and grinned a sharkish smile. She was enjoying the show, Tony realized. He yelled, "Wanda, leave Rogers out of it!"

Wanda laughed. "I didn't do anything to the Captain. I never had to. Steve's always been on my side. I'm just a kid from Sokovia. He understands what it's like."

Rogers smiled at her. "Yeah, I know, Wanda. Just like me. But you're safe now, I'll protect you."
Wanda's attention was all on Rogers. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Barnes gesture to Storm, pointing to his head, and then at Maximoff's.

Xavier's eyes widened and his mouth opened, but before he could say anything, whether to order Storm to act, or not to act, Storm released her lightning.

The first few bolts vanished when they hit the red mist, but later ones got through. Wanda screamed in rage as the mist thinned. Storm said tightly, "I can't... hold her." The mist began darkening again despite the constant barrage of lightning.

Barnes ran forward. Wanda caught his eyes. "Zhelaniye," she said, and he froze a step away from her. "Rzhavyy."

Barnes stared into her eyes. His hand lifted. "Hail Hydra," he said. She smirked. He grabbed her by the neck, gritting his teeth against the bolts of electricity, and snapped it cleanly. He let her fall. "To hell with Hydra." The mist and lightning vanished.

"Bucky," Steve said in horror. Then he turned on Tony, hands flexing as if to throw a punch, or the shield. "You weren't satisfied until you took everything from me! Well, you're not taking Bucky, too!"

Barnes said, tiredly. "Leave it, Steve. I'm not Bucky. You lost him a long, long time ago." He shook his head. "I guess I'm clear of the trigger words now." He turned to face T'Challa. "Your Majesty, thank you for your hospitality, but it's time I was going."

Rogers grabbed Barnes' arm. "You can't go, Bucky! Where would you go? Remember, it's you and me, to the end of the line!"

"The line fucking ended when you got into bed with Hydra, and didn't even tell me," Barnes said. "Now let me go."

"I did it to protect you!" Rogers said. "We needed her."

"I didn't. And I don't need you. Let me go."

"No, Bucky. This is all Tony's doing. Maybe he cleared one set of trigger words but he must have put some new ones in."

"Oh, fuck you." Barnes punched Rogers in the face, knocking him to the floor, on top of Maximoff's corpse. "Stop blaming other people for your own fuck-ups," Barnes turned back to T'Challa. "Can I hitch a lift?"

"Of course," T'Challa said, ignoring Rogers' pleading eyes. "Follow me." He turned, and bowed to Storm, who was already at Professor Xavier's side, helping him back into his wheelchair. Xavier was crying. Tony was fairly sure it was grief for Wanda, which was nice, he supposed, that someone mourned her. It sure as hell wasn't going to be him.

"T'Challa," Tony called. "Please don't take my Quin-jet. Pepper sent me to repossess it."

T'Challa nodded. "It has been refueled and serviced. My apologies for the delay in returning it."

Rogers was still yelling when they left. The rest of the Scavengers were holding him back, which was lucky for him. Tony was in no mood to hold back this day.
The three planes lined up on the tarmac, with the Blackbird first on the strip. Xavier said, "I'm sorry it turned out this way. She had such potential."

Storm said, "She was twisted too long ago, Professor. There was nothing you could have done to save her."

Tony felt such a load off his shoulders, he felt benevolent to the whole world. Benevolent enough not to say rotten things about the dead. Instead he said goodbye and thanks and we'll meet in VR, and watched as the Blackbird took off.

Then he turned to Barnes. "I get that you didn't want to say where you were going where Rogers could hear. He'd spent three years hunting you down, no point in encouraging him. But really, where can you go?"

Barnes shrugged. "Spin the compass. I don't care. I can survive anywhere." Then he hesitated. "Tell Becca that when I can, I'll see her in VR. Probably take me some time to get a set."

Tony stood still. He raised his face plate and looked at Barnes. Then he looked at War Machine. Rhodey raised his faceplate. "I can see you're planning something stupid."

Tony grinned. "It's almost as if you know me." He looked at Barnes. "Here's the deal. One time offer. You turn yourself in, in my custody, I take you back to the US. I'll throw in S.I.s lawyers and a new arm."

"What?" Barnes asked. "What the hell?"

"Yeah. You know, and I know, what's coming down the pike is going to need combined cooperation from everyone. Including countries that have been at war with each other forever. I think, for once, I can serve as a good example. If I can forgive you, then..."

"Huh." Barnes frowned in thought. "Could I see Becca first?"

"Yeah. That can be arranged." Tony looked at T'Challa. "Sorry, I can only take one super-soldier off your hands. I was hoping to get some use out of Rogers, but let's face it, that's never going to happen."

T'Challa nodded. Then he smiled. "My obligation was to Sergeant Barnes. I believe the Dora will be pleased to escort undesirables to the border."

Tony grinned. "Take video. I want it for my memory album."

"Of course."

Once inside the quin-jet Tony and Rhodey took off and stowed their armors. Then they lifted off, heading back for New York. They were silent for a few minutes, thinking over the recent events.

Then Barnes said, "I've been craving a real pastrami sandwich for years. They still make 'em like they used to?"

Tony nodded. "Yeah. I used to like shawarma, but I'm feeling like pastrami today."

Rhodey added. "Gotta get the good pickles with it. The really crunchy kind."
They all nodded, and thought of lunch.
The Quin-jet could find its own way home, which left Tony with time to prepare everyone for the repercussions of today's events. "Friday, call the Tower. Get Happy and Pepper together with Vision before you connect me. I need to speak with everyone at once."

Rhodey said, "It's gonna be hard on Vision. He liked Wanda."

"Isn't it a robot?" Barnes asked.

"Vision has feelings," Tony said. "And he's not a robot."

"What's the difference?" Barnes sounded sincerely curious, not mocking, so Tony answered him.

"A robot is designed to work. Vision... he's just a man who happens to be partly made of vibranium. He's a good guy, but he can make mistakes. Like falling for Ms. Hydra's sweet and innocent act." Tony sighed. "His first crush." He hummed. "Yeah, she tried to crush me, and he was still worried about her."

"Huh," Barnes said. "I'll remember."

Friday said, "Everyone is here, Boss."

"Good." Tony took a deep breath and then pasted on a smile. "Do it, Friday."

The wall monitor lit up, showing the penthouse living room of the Tower with everyone gathered on the main couch. "Oh my God," Pepper said. "What happened?"

"What? What, I haven't even said anything yet," Tony protested. "I got the quin-jet! We're coming home!"

"With Barnes," Happy said. "He's sitting right there!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know you're head of security and he doesn't have a badge. But it's cool! Isn't it? Rhodey, help me out!" Tony turned to Rhodey.

"Hey, man, you invited him," Rhodey said.

"Very helpful, thank you so much." Tony turned back to the monitor. "There was... there's no nice way to say it. I'm sorry, Vis. The Professor peeled the mind stone's influence from Wanda, and... what was underneath... it wasn't. Wasn't good."

Vision said stiffly. "I see. Then her professed friendship for me was an illusion."

"Honestly, I don't know. I only know her hate for me was real." Tony grimaced. "Was."

Vision said nothing.

Tony continued, "Apparently the mind stone had been holding her in reserve, keeping her powers limited, too. When Xavier removed its restraint she went ballistic. Beyond ballistic. I'm talking, 'nuke the world'. I tried talking her down- thought I could have got her distracted by aiming her at me."

Pepper gasped and put her hand to her mouth.
Tony scowled. "It might have worked. But Rogers barreled in and we were pretty much out of options. Storm tried to hold her. It wasn't... it wasn't going to be enough. I'm sorry, Vision, she's gone."

Vision nodded sharply. "Was it... did she suffer?"

"No," Barnes leaned forward. "It was quick. I couldn't risk giving her time to react." He added, "She had chosen Hydra. Whatever you thought she was, she lied to you. You are better off without her."

"That does not help," Vision replied. "Excuse me, I need some time to... process this." He got up and left the room.

Pepper looked after Vision. "I'll fill you in later on anything you need to know, Vision." Then she turned back to Tony. "All right, drop the other shoe."

"What, isn't that enough? Wanda's gone and Barnes has turned himself in- we need to call Mrs. Anderson. He wants to see her before legal stuff begins. And we need to get on that ASAP, I promised S.I. would provide representation. Isn't that enough?"

"No. There's more." Pepper stared at Tony.

"Fine. Barnes wasn't thrilled that Rogers was buddy-buddy with Ms. Hydra. Rogers wasn't thrilled that Barnes dumped him like a hot potato. T'Challa, on the other hand, was practically dancing- with Barnes leaving, he had an excuse to dump the Scavengers. They should be hitting the road any time now. T'Challa promised me a video."

"So," Pepper said, "all the plans to keep Rogers contained in Wakanda?"

"Scrapped. But really, what harm can he do?" Tony winced. "I shouldn't have said that, should I?"

Barnes said, "The little shit always was a trouble magnet. Don't think anything will change that."

"Thanks," Tony said, "I really didn't need to hear that."
They’d been in the air a little over an hour when Friday interrupted their discussion of Manhattan vs Brooklyn eateries to show them the video T’Challa had sent.

Tony sat up, tense, as the video began. T’Challa, his sister Shuri, and the entire Dora Milaje cadre surrounded the remaining Scavengers. "Wanda Maximoff will be interred properly once my people have determined it is safe," T’Challa said. "As it will require some time to analyze the findings, I regret," he said, although his expression was one of resolution, not regret, "that you will be unable to remain for the ceremony."

"You're not going to experiment with Wanda," Rogers said. He stood, straight and tall, with his hands clenched at his sides. None of the other three remaining Scavengers were standing close to him, and they all looked uncomfortable.

"You're correct, Mr. Rogers," T’Challa said. "Wakanda neither needs nor wants to reproduce Wanda Maximoff's powers. I do assure you the examination will be purely to make certain that her remains can be safely cremated. It would not do for them to explode, or release contaminants. Now that your mind has been set at ease, you are free to leave Wakanda."

He gestured at a row of assorted vehicles, mostly rather the worse for wear Land Rovers and similar. "Naturally, you will not wish to be associated with Wakanda, so we have provided a selection of vehicles seized from those who attempted to cross our borders illegally. You may have your choice."

Four of the Dora moved forward then, dumping a heavy canvas bag at the foot of each Scavenger. "All your personal possessions, and a week's supply of provisions," he said.

Barton picked up the bag in front of him and moved to face T'Challa, ignoring Rogers. "Do we get a map?"

"Do you know where you want to go?" T’Challa asked.

"Yeah. Nigeria." Barton swung the sack over his back.

"Nigeria?" Rogers asked, "Why should we go to Nigeria?"

"Hyena men." Barton grunted at the weight of the sack. "I was bored and found them. Talked to them on the phone. They're a family. Agreed to take me in, because hey, novelty draw."

Rogers looked at him, uncomprehendingly.

"The hyena men are nomadic entertainers," T’Challa informed him. "They perform with trained hyenas, baboons and rock pythons."

"Closest thing to a circus I can find," Barton agreed. He faced Rogers. "Time for me for me to go back to my roots. I don't say we didn't have some good times, Cap, but this, now? It's over."

"We should stick together now, more than ever," Rogers said. "Right, guys?" He looked at his other two men. Neither of them would meet his eyes.

"No hard feelings." Barton started walking towards the nearest Land Rover.
"What about your family?" Rogers asked.

Barton stopped and looked back at Rogers. "Jesus, you're incredible. Did you even notice that I've been divorced in absentia?" He laughed. "Laura's got a business now. Runs a daycare and bakes healthy snacks on the side. Seems someone gave her a business loan, no strings, no interest."

"Tony," Rogers muttered.

"Yeah, and you know what?" Barton flung his sack into the Land Rover. "I'm grateful to the bastard. My kids aren't going to be in an orphanage, growing up twisted and bitter, like me. So long, Cap. Bye, guys. Good luck." He jumped into the car and took off without waiting for a map or directions.

"Well, it's just us, then," Rogers said.

"Where are we going?" Scott asked, timidly. "And you know, what are we going to do when we get there?"

"We're Avengers," Rogers declared. "We will help people. There's always someone who needs protecting."

Scott blinked. "Um. The Pym particles that power my suit... they're used up."

"And I never got my wings back," Wilson said. "We're not like you, Steve. We're not... we're not superheroes."

"You don't have to be," Rogers said. "You're strong, and smart. We're a team!"

"No," Wilson said sadly. "No, we're really not. I don't know that we ever were. We had good intentions, and it was great not having to wait while things went through a long chain of command. I was in the Air Force and I knew how sometimes the high command couldn't get their fingers out in time. And sometimes they had the wrong intel. So I figured, we'd be Johnny on the spot, we'd know what to do! But we didn't. We fumbled the ball and just kept running trying to catch it again. And ran over people."

"We did our best, Sam," Rogers said. "Sometimes you can't save everyone."

"And then we ran away," Sam said softly. He straightened slowly. "No. The running stops here for me. King T'Challa, where's the nearest place I can turn myself in? I want to go home."

"Sam, no!" Rogers protested. "You remember the Raft! They'll lock you up and throw away the key."

"Maybe. I don't think so," Sam replied. "Why should they bother if I come in peaceably? They know no one's going to be breaking me out."

T'Challa said, "If you truly wish to surrender yourself to the law, arrangements can be made. I can ask my advisors what would be best."

"Uh," Scott said, waving his hand for attention. "Me, too? I mean, I don't like prison, but... maybe... maybe my daughter could see me on visiting day." He looked at Rogers. "I thought I'd impress her, be a hero for her. I didn't think I could never go back."

"It won't be forever, Scott! Don't give up now," Rogers told him. "Once people take a good look at the Accords, they'll be tossed out."
Scott wrinkled up his nose. "I broke up an airport. Do you know how much one of those big planes costs? Me, I have no idea. No one even asked me to sign the Accords." He looked bewildered. "I was going to be a hero." He shook his head. "Please, Mr. King T'Challa, I don't want to die in the jungle, eaten by a panther. I understand prison."

Rogers' whole body tensed. The Dora all focussed on him. Finally he let out a sigh, and shook his head. "All right. You do what you have to do. And I'll do what I have to do." He picked up his sack and started walking towards the Land Rovers.

Scott called out, "Good luck, Captain! What are you going to do?"

"What I've always done," Rogers said. "Fight bullies and protect the people." He climbed into a Land Rover and gunned the engine. He took off with a gear grinding noise.

The video ended.


Barnes nodded. "He was hell on jeeps."

Rhodey said, "Am I the only one concerned about this? Rogers is planning to cause trouble."

"Eh," Tony said, "what else is new?"

Chapter End Notes

http://twistedsifter.com/2012/05/hyena-handlers-of-nigeria/
"Friday, give the quin-jet a good scrubbing, inside and out," Tony ordered once they landed at the Tower and the automated systems brought them into the hangar below.

"You think T'Challa put bugs on it?" Rhodey asked as the quin-jet's ramp lowered.

"Nah, I just want the Scavenger cooties cleaned out."

Barnes stood up and followed him and Rhodey out onto the hangar. "So, what happens now?"

"I'm not really sure," Tony told him. Robot arms and mobile units swarmed over the jet. War Machine and Iron Man walked out on their own over to be cleaned and serviced. "I signed the Accords, and did have a warrant for your arrest, so that's legit." He scrubbed at his hair before turning to walk to the dedicated elevator leading to the penthouse. "I can argue that I delayed bringing you back in order to clear the trigger programming and since you were cooperating and in a secure location-- yeah, gotta get T'Challa up to speed on that-- that was the safest way to handle it. Probably there will be some blowback because I didn't report to the UN, but who was I going to report to? Not Thunderbolt Ross. He bullied his way in, but in his capacity as the US Secretary of State, not as an official of the UN. The Accords Council lost a lot of higher ups in the Vienna bombing. It takes time to create a new organization chart."

Rhodey said, "First we discuss this with Pepper and the legal team. You don't say anything without your lawyer present," he told Barnes.

"I'm giving myself up, what does it matter? Everyone knows what Hydra made me do, and what I did on my own. It's not as if I'm a secret any longer."

Tony shook his head. "It always matters. They'd eat you alive in an interrogation room with that attitude. Listen to your lawyer and do what they recommend."

"Do as I say, not as I do," Rhodey remarked as they entered the elevator.

"I know what I can get away with, he doesn't." Tony pointed a finger at Barnes. "This isn't just about you. We need a plan, and you need to cooperate with it. Got that?"

"Yeah, I got it," Barnes replied. "Just let me see Becca first."

Tony really didn't want to see the sibling reunion, but it was his Tower and he couldn't shove the responsibility off on anyone else, as Pepper not so subtly reminded him. She and Rhodey had even more on their plates with this latest development and some of the people they needed to convince would only listen in person. They didn't have time to sit around playing host. So he was there alone, fiddling with a cup of coffee, and sitting at the couch in the living room when Happy escorted Mrs. Anderson and her friend up in the elevator.

"Gee, you're prettier than your picture," Rosie said, marching right up to Barnes before anyone else could speak. "You could do with a haircut, though. Manbuns just look so cheesy."
"Rose-Marie!" Rebecca said, hurrying up to shush her friend.

"Well, they do," Rosie said petulantly. She went over to the couch and looked with disappointment at the table. "Where's the cake?"

Tony smiled at her. "Sorry about that. I can have something delivered. What would you ladies like?"

"Oh, anything," Rebecca said. She was holding Barnes' hand and looking into his eyes.

"I want a Douche Burger," Rosie announced.

Tony said, "What?" Certainly he hadn't heard that correctly.

Rosie dug into her purse, which was purple, and shaped like a poodle. She pulled out a piece of wrinkled cheap computer paper, and held it out to Tony. He was about to refuse to touch it because... wow... when she yanked it back. "Don't have your reading glasses, dear?" she said knowingly, and put on her own. They were huge, and framed in marbled rainbow swirls. She cleared her throat, "A New York City food truck is selling a $666 hamburger dubbed the "Douche Burger," which contains lobster, caviar, truffles, and a beef patty wrapped in six sheets of gold leaf." She folded the paper up neatly. "That's a few years old," she confessed.

Tony blinked. "Um, I don't know if anyone still does that, but I can guarantee it would taste like crap. We were thinking to get pastrami sandwiches, but we forgot."

"Do they put gold leaf on it?"

"Rosie!" Rebecca scolded. Barnes had gone from confused to amused.

Tony felt Rosie really deserved a reward. "I could probably get the bots to hammer out some gold leaf, and you could put it on anything you want."

Rosie beamed. "Wonderful! I can scratch that off my bucket list, then." And she dug back into her purse and pulled out a tiny wire bound notepad. Tony noticed as she leafed through it there were a lot of crossed out things, including 'kissing the Blarney Stone'. He should have guessed that one.

Since Rosie had broken the ice, everyone was more relaxed, although Happy kept a wary eye on them even as the food was delivered and they began eating. Tony tried not to eavesdrop on the whispered conversation Barnes had with his sister. They sat close together, and it was strange, but Tony could see the resemblance in their eyes, even despite the difference in age. Family.

He wondered what it would be like, to have someone like that... flesh of his flesh, or however the old books said. He wasn't too old, was he? Or too screwed up? Or too... well, what with the palladium and nuke carrying and everything... if Pepper wanted kids, there were lots of ways. But it would be nice to have someone looking back at him with his eyes, his mark on the future. Maybe, after things settled down, he'd talk with Pepper, see what she wanted, and if she did... then he'd have to man up and see a doctor. He'd want the kid to have a decent chance, not wind up sickly and volunteering to be experimented on later. Yeah, no.

He wondered if Rogers ever thought about having kids? Probably went with the 'if it happens, it happens' school of thought.

"You're awfully quiet," Rosie said. She picked up her chocolate egg cream soda and swirled the straw around. "Penny for your thoughts?"
Tony shrugged and lied. "I was just wondering why they call it an egg cream, when there's no egg or cream in it."

"I have no idea!" Rosie beamed. "It's a mystery. Can your computer friends find out?"

"Friday! Research mode."

After fifteen minutes of intense searching and bickering, the only thing that seemed definite was that March 15 was National Egg Cream Day. Tony promised to put it on his calendar, and invite Rosie out for a proper egg cream, served fresh at the soda fountain.

Chapter End Notes

WHIH Newsfront Exclusive: President Ellis Discusses the Avengers Published on May 3, 2016 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DgGY_snj-I

I never heard of these before! They're Marvel canon- this one explains how Thaddeus Ross got to be Secretary of State & how the impetus on the US side for the Accords was the WASHINGTON mess, including the release of data.

So, now I have an added bit to use when people try to say TONY was behind the Accords. NOPE, Rogers and Romanoff kick-started that campaign. Marvel admits it here, but in the movie they load it all on Tony. I guess a different group filmed these 'info news briefs'. I recommend watching this at least twice- once for the news and once for the crawler below which has interesting things-- I'm particularly piqued by South American fossils? Hmmm? There are a lot of these, but I only watched this one. I was afraid of being pulled in for the rest of the day. :^)

Also, I found Rosie's purple poodle purse.

http://www.cuddlycollectibles.com/animals/dogs/poodle_purses.html
Tony could see that the emotional stress was wearing on Mrs. Anderson, but he didn't know how to gently suggest she go home.

Rosie had finished eating, and put into her purse a thin film of gold leaf layered in tissue paper. It really hadn't looked good on pastrami so she was taking it home to put on a grilled cheese sandwich. She leaned over and patted Becca's hand. "Becca, this has been lovely, but we need to get home to feed the cat."

Rebecca got up, stopped, and then she turned to Rosie. "I don't have a cat. And neither do you."

"There's always a hungry cat somewhere," Rosie replied firmly.

Becca laughed. "All right, all right." She tugged at Barnes' hand to pull him close, hugged him hard, and then kissed him on the cheek. "It's been so good to see you, Jimmy. I don't think I can impose on Mr. Hogan to play taxi for us again, but maybe we could meet in the VR?"

Happy said, "Hey, I don't mind. You ladies aren't any trouble."

"You're head of security for Stark Industries," Barnes pointed out. "And you drive a big black limo. I think someone's gonna notice if you keep picking up Becca in Brooklyn."

Rosie nodded. "Boys notice fancy cars. Someone would talk, sooner or later." She swung her poodle purse. "I could smack 'em with Fido, but they'd just get up again." She sighed. "I need a stronger purse."

"I think we'd better just use the VR, Rosie," Becca said. "At least for now." She looked directly into Barnes' eyes. "I hope you will stay. It's selfish of me, because I know you could get away and not have to risk... well, everything."

"It's time to face the music, Becca. I had reasons for runnin' but now I have more reasons for standing' my ground. It'll be ok. And if anyone gives me a hard time, I'll ask Rosie to whack them with Fido."

"I could put a half brick in here," Rosie said cheerfully.

Tony cleared his throat. "Save that thought. Pepper is liaising with the S.I. attorneys. They're going to work out a plan which hopefully will be just a tiny bit more legal than assault with a loaded poodle. Until then, it would be best if Sergeant Barnes stayed out of trouble." He really didn't like to think of the repercussions if Barnes just decided to skip.

"Give her another hug, Jimmy," Rosie said. Tactlessly she added, "You've got to give twice as many because you only have one wing."

Everyone stared, appalled, for a few seconds before Barnes burst out with an actual laugh. "Brooklyn gals, how I've missed them." He gave Rosie a hug first, and then held his sister for a long minute while they whispered to each other.

Tony looked aside and saw Happy sniffling. He raised his eyebrows.
Happy said, "Hey, I am secure in my masculinity. I can be sensitive!"

"Yeah. But."

"Ok, I'm gonna miss that deli." Happy sighed.

After Happy left with the ladies there was another awkward silence. "Want a drink? Or are you like Rogers, immune to alcohol?"

Barnes nodded. "It won't get me drunk, but I remember what it was like. Steve never could drink. Before the serum, he'd go straight to sick as a dog, and after... well, when the Howlies did have enough booze to give it a try and a safe camp to get sloshed he wouldn't. Didn't see the point, he said."

"Yeah, he wasn't much for fun when I knew him, either," Tony said. "So, name your poison."

"I'd like a Pickleback," Barnes said. "If you've got Jameson's."

"If I've got Jameson's. Don't insult me." Tony went to the bar, and poured the shots of whiskey and the separate shots of pickle juice.

Barnes followed him to the bar where Barnes tossed the shots back as if they were water. "When did you get a taste for this?" Tony asked after he had his own. "It's only been around for ten years or so."

Barnes huffed. "They tried getting me drunk in Russia. Vodka and pickle juice. Jameson's is better."

Tony nodded. He stopped at one drink, but Barnes didn't quit until the supply of pickle juice ran out. He talked in between drinks while Tony munched on bar snacks. "You know, it was like a slaughterhouse..." Barnes paused. "I don't mean the killing, I mean, the kinds of people who'd be handlers didn't think of me as human. An' I didn't think of me as human, either. So... sometimes they'd be bored and... play games with the Asset." He gave Tony another one-shoulder shrug. "Sometimes it was just... you know... petty stuff... like askin' if I wanted a glass of milk, and then drinking it in front of me." Barnes stared blankly.

There was yet another awkward silence. Tony really regretted that Rosie had left. He didn't want to hear things that made him feel sorry for Barnes. Fortunately, Friday broke the silence, "Boss, the law department is calling."

"Great. That was fast. Put them through." Tony waved at the smart glass mirror behind the bar, which shimmered and changed to reveal a business suited woman seated at a desk. Behind her, other suits scurried, waving papers and laptops and cellphones at each other. "Wow," Tony said. "I've stirred up the hive. Sorry about that, Ms. Holmes."

The attorney gave Tony a tight smile. "While we would appreciate a heads up before you throw us into the arena, we are always ready to fight." She looked at Barnes. "Is he our client?"

Tony made a face. "Sort of. He surrendered to me, but I hadn't gone there with an arrest warrant. I brought him back to the Tower because he wanted to see his sister and I didn't want to bother with red tape straightening that out. She's not a young woman, it would have been hard on her, having to
Ms. Holmes sighed. "So, you made a citizen's arrest and smuggled the man on the top of the 'no fly' terrorist list into central Manhattan without informing any authorities."

"Um, yes? But on the positive side, when they think about it, they should be glad I did. I mean, there was a... situation... and... it was very dangerous. You don't know how dangerous." Tony wasn't at all sure he should mention what happened in Wakanda. At least not before talking with T'Challa. "He saved the day!"

The attorney sighed again.

Barnes leaned over. "Ma'am, I'd appreciate any help you could give me. Mr. Stark cleared me from the Hydra programming, but I know I've got a lot to answer for. I'd like to have my day in court. I'm... used to things being done in the dark, so I ran, and I hid. I'm not running or hiding anymore, I just don't want to be disappeared. I came back with Mr. Stark because..." Barnes glanced at Tony. "He's like a goddamn spotlight."

Tony hid a smirk.

Ms. Holmes nodded. "Very well, if you cooperate and tell us everything, we should have a chance."

"I don't want them taking him away," Tony said before he realized it. "I mean, let's be realistic, the police couldn't hold him before, they should be grateful I'm willing to keep him under control."

Barnes made a noise, which may or may not have been disagreement with Tony's ability to do that.

The attorney's face pinched. "I don't know if they'll be willing to grant you custody. To avoid the appearance of collusion, at the very least you'll need to explain the circumstances to the council. Where you found Sergeant Barnes, how long you knew he was there, why you didn't immediately inform the council, and why you brought him back into the U.S. still without official sanction. At the very least they'll want those issues addressed."

"Um, yes. I'll... yeah. I have to talk to someone else about that, but I think he'll agree to back up my reasons." Tony was fairly sure he and T'Challa could sweet talk the council. Fairly sure. "I'll call him right away, and get back to you."

Ms. Holmes smiled suddenly. "Thank you, Mr. Stark. Once we have all the information, we can begin." She ended the call.

Barnes looked at Tony. "What do you think?"

"S.I. legal is full of hungry sharks. If there's a way, they'll find it. If there isn't a way, they'll make it."

Barnes nodded. "Good."

Chapter End Notes

An alert reader pointed out that Tony was casually drinking alcohol *after* he had supposedly cleared the booze out of the Tower and joined AA. It's gone too far past it to
fix, so I am just saying SORRY. Poor Tony, he fell off the wagon and didn’t even know it.

Twitter:@WHIHo official https://twitter.com/whihofficial?lang=en
https://twitter.com/Iron_Man
(There’s some cute stuff here, including an absolutely ADORABLE short Funko Pop video with Spidey and Iron Man facing off against Loki)
https://twitter.com/Marvel/status/804022542549843972

https://disneycruise.disney.go.com/onboard-activities/marvel-day-at-sea/
http://marvel.com/giftguide2016?video=7&linkId=32470224 (1 minute fireside videos of some superheroes homes Captain America, Iron Man, Ms Marvel, Thor and Groot- you watch the fire and hear ambient sound- use ZOOM and watch the Groot, that seems to be the only one where anything actually HAPPENS)
Chapter 78

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Friday said, "Boss, King T'Challa is calling." She sounded a little surprised.

Tony was surprised, too. He didn't remember T'Challa ever calling him. It was always the other way around. "Put him through." Tony waved the bar smart mirror back into life as a video communicator. "What's wrong?" he asked.

T'Challa looked more serious than Tony had ever seen him. "I have called a Tribal Council. I intend to inform them of my recent actions. They may require a vote of confidence."

"Do you have to? I mean, you are king, after all," Tony got the impression that T'Challa was expecting serious pushback.

"The King of Wakanda is first servant to the people. I thought I was serving the greater good by keeping the truth from them, but that was a mistake. Had Wanda Maximoff's abilities been released under any other circumstances..." at that T'Challa nodded in Barnes direction, "all my people would have died. I must stand in judgment."

Tony nodded reluctantly. "Accountability. Your father would be proud of you."

T'Challa winced slightly. "Had I heeded his words sooner, it would not have come to this." He sighed. "I am not sanguine about my chances with the council. I have been arrogant, and made no effort to win their loyalty."

"If you fail this vote, what happens?" Barnes asked.

"I will be challenged. The number of challengers sent against me will be up to the council." His frown deepened. "It is likely that M'Baku, leader of the White Gorilla cult, will be among them, and at all costs, he must not win. They had been outlawed as their aims are to revert Wakanda to primitivism. To that end they had sided with the Nazis. The cult still lives in the Jabari village. Rather than risk an internal war, they have not been exiled, and as such have not given up the right to challenge."

"Yeeah, I can see that would be problematic," Tony said. "But you're pretty tough, you should be able to take on any comers."

"M'Baku slaughtered a white gorilla, bathed in its blood and ate of its flesh," T'Challa said.

"Ew," Tony remarked, memories of Gorillas in the Mist going through his mind. "That's practically cannibalism. And disgusting, too."

Barnes nodded. "Even Hydra doesn't do that."

Tony looked at him. "I'm surprised they have scruples."

"No, they're just afraid of disease," Barnes said.

T'Challa went on as if they hadn't interrupted. "M'Baku has gained the strength of the white gorilla."

"Spiritually, I hope," Tony said.
"No," T'Challa replied. "If I fight him, the outcome is far from certain. That is why I have called you."

"You want me to make you an Iron Panther suit? I can do that."

T'Challa blinked. "I would not wish to do so, even if the rules of combat permitted, but I thank you for the offer. No, if the council rules I must undergo trial by combat, I am going to request a delay so that I may testify before the United Nations. If they refuse I do not wish to risk leaving anything unsaid that you may need in your defense so I am preparing a recording detailing significant events, and interactions, including the videos taken today. In the event I do not survive, my sister Shuri has been instructed to aid you." He paused. "Do you have any questions?"

"Um, no?" Tony looked at Barnes. "Can you think of anything?"

Barnes shook his head. "Not right now."

"Oh," Tony said, "S.I.'s attorneys might have some questions. I'm going to have to explain Barnes to the Accords, at least a quick overview before things get real. I'll have to tell them about you and Wakanda if there's any hope of keeping Barnes with me, instead of... well, who knows. Lots of people would like to get their hands on him."

T'Challa nodded. "I assumed as much. You do not have an entire country in which to conceal a guest, after all."

"I could have! But Pepper told me it was gauche to buy countries these days."

Barnes looked at him. "Why did you want to buy a country? What would you do with a country?"

"Stamps," Tony said. "With my face on. T'Challa, are you on a stamp?"

T'Challa shook his head. "Not yet." Then he smiled slightly. "Perhaps one day, when I have earned the honor." He tilted his head as if noticing something out of range of the monitor pickup. "I am being summoned. Council deliberations take days. I will contact you as soon as I know anything further. If you call, Shuri will answer." He stood up, and inclined his head towards Tony. "Goodbye."

The mirror went back to reflecting Tony and Bucky.

Tony heaved a heavy sigh. "Ok, Friday call Ms. Holmes." The second conversation with the attorney was even briefer than the last. Tony assured her that he was ready and willing to answer the Accords council's preliminary questions, and that independent evidence would be arriving within the next few days, probably. He ended the call after she told him that it would take a few hours to assemble an emergency quorum and until then, she wanted him to stay put.

"A few hours," Tony said after he finished talking with Ms. Holmes. "Those are politician hours. That's like dog years."

"So we just wait?" Barnes asked.

"Yeah. Guess so." Then Tony brightened. "This is the first time in a week I don't actually have all my time blocked. I could..." Then he stopped. He really wanted to VR with the Keeners, but he couldn't leave Barnes wandering around the Tower unsupervised. Friday was just a baby.
"What?" Barnes asked. He was mumbling because he was trying to open a bag of pretzels, using one hand and his teeth.

"Give me that." Tony took the bag and ripped it open. "I want to VR with some friends. I'm trying to decide if I want to risk them meeting you."

Barnes took the bag back and ate a handful of pretzels. "Oh."

"They know."

Barnes raised an eyebrow.

"About my parents. You." It was hard getting the words out.

Barnes blinked slowly. "You could use my off switch, or lock me up, or both. Steve told me you had a 'Hulk Room'. I'm sure that would hold me."

"Jesus, no. I'm not your new goddamn handler." Tony shook his head. "Fuck it. Do you want to VR with me or sit with our thumbs up our asses waiting to hear from the U.N.?"

"Well, since you ask so nicely, an' all, sure." Barnes put down the bag of pretzels. "Need to piss first."

"I see your reputation as a charmer hasn't been exaggerated," Tony said. He pointed in the direction of the nearest toilet.

Barnes gave Tony a dazzling smile. "Want to lend me a hand?"

"Maybe later. The U.N. probably prefers you dis-armed." Tony said, "I'm sure you have excellent aim."

Barnes flipped Tony off and headed for the bathroom.

Chapter End Notes

I have not seen the Black Panther movie, so don't expect anything about Wakanda to match this story. And even after I DO see it, I probably wouldn't try to force the fic to match.

Privately owned islands- including a list of high profile island owners
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Private_island
Never let it be said that Tony Stark doesn't learn from his mistakes. Bringing Spiderkid along to what he thought would be a quick and non-violent -- no, let's be honest here, he knew Rogers wasn't going to come in unless forced. He just... well, he screwed up. He wasn't going to drag kids into a potentially traumatic situation without full and free consent from a well informed parent. It's not as if he was really their uncle.

"Hey, Holly," Tony said once Friday had connected them to Holly's phone, audio only. In the background he heard people talking over a country music song, and the rattle of plates, and other diner-related activity. Belatedly he realized it was the middle of her work day. It was hard for him to remember things like that because every day to him was the same scramble in all directions and if he didn't ignore schedules he'd basically never even sleep. "Sorry to bother you."

"You'd bother me more if you didn't call," Holly said. "Burn one, take it through the garden and pin a rose on it!" she called out. Thanks to the hands free headset Tony had sent her, Holly could and did continue working while on the phone. Tony admired her single mother multi-tasking. "What's up, Sterling?"

"I'm going to be in our VR, but I'll be with Barnes." If he didn't say it fast, he probably wouldn't say it at all. "I'd like to have the kids join in, if you thought they'd be all right with that."

Holly didn't reply for a minute, then she yelled, "Chuck! Can I take the day? Sterling needs me."

"Wait, no," Tony protested, "I didn't..."

"First you're going to tell me what happened." Tony heard the clack of her no nonsense waitress shoes on the tile floor of the diner, and then the sound of the door opening, before the music and other noises were abruptly cut off. "All right, go on," she said.

Tony glanced up to see what Barnes was doing. He was standing by the window, looking at the Chrysler building. It was about as far away as he could get from Tony while still staying in sight. He could probably hear everything, anyway, but it was the best Tony was going to get. "I've been deprogramming Barnes in VR. He proved today that he's free of it."

"Hmm," Holly said noncommittally.

"He saved my life," Tony said. It was true, and less than true, but no point upsetting Holly with the thought that a potential global catastrophe had been averted. He wasn't sure Maximoff could have wiped out everyone, but she definitely could have killed everyone in T'Challa's palace.

"Well, I guess... it's only VR, it's not as if he's with you in person," Holly said.

Tony just... blanked.

After a few seconds Holly said, "He's not there in person, Sterling. Tell me he's not."

Tony cleared his throat. "I couldn't leave him where he was."

"Oh, my God." Tony heard the rattle of her car keys against the Iron Man key fob Harley had made
for everyone as a joke. "He's right there. Now. In the same room? Is that what you're telling me, Sterling?"

"Uh. Yes?"

"Are you all right with that, Tony?" He was touched. Holly seldom slipped up and called him by his own name.

"Sorta. It's... a work in progress. He's in the Tower and I'm trying to get permission to keep him here," Tony sighed. "If I can't... it would be a lot worse."

"I'll be home in fifteen minutes," Holly said. "Wait for us. Please?" Holly added as if suddenly remembering that Tony wasn't one of her kids.

"Yeah, yeah, I can do that," Tony ended the call and sat there, staring at the bar mirror, but only vaguely noticing the blur that is his face. Barnes didn't say anything or move, still a safe--hah--distance away, waiting with a patience he'd undoubtedly learned in a harder school than Tony had. Finally Tony sighed and massaged his forehead. "So, fifteen minutes, and then we VR."

"Right," Barnes said.

"You hear all that?"

"No," Barnes replied.

"How good a liar are you?"

"I'm terrible," Barnes said.

At that Tony turned and looked at him. "You're lying."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are." Tony still couldn't see Barnes' expression change. "I'm never playing poker with you."

"Damn," Barnes said flatly. "There goes my plan to fund my retirement."

Chapter End Notes

NeutralGuise reminded me that Holly and Harley were right there when Steve spilled the beans about Bucky killing Tony's parents. So I did an extremely minor edit to Chapter 78 reversing Tony's statement to 'They know' and deleting remarks about how he thought they'd be nice to Bucky.

Holly's Diner slang is just something they do to amuse the customers-
Burn one, take it through the garden and pin a rose on it means a well-done hamburger with lettuce, tomato, and onion

http://www.dinerlingo.com
Tony waited until Barnes was in VR before he put on his own headset. Friday would pull him out of VR early if necessary, but Barnes could do a lot of damage in a very short amount of time, up to and including killing Tony. He really didn't think it likely because it would be against Barnes' own interests, but the Scavenger team had shown an amazing inability to foresee consequences. He wasn't going to assume trustworthiness based on words. That had always been a failing of Tony's, believing that people meant what they said. Mr. 'I can't tell a lie' Rogers had been a particularly stinging reminder of the fallacy of that belief.

Tony opened his eyes to one of their more neutral settings, Sheep Meadow in Central Park. It was eerie seeing that fifteen acre expanse of neatly trimmed lawn entirely devoid of people. No sunbathers. No kite-flyers. No picnickers. Just Barnes. Standing on the grass with his back to Tony, gazing at the city in the distance. He had apparently made an effort to appear nonthreatening as he was dressed in a short-sleeved white shirt, with two human looking arms visible, plain gray trousers, and a white and blue pin striped ball cap.

"The Keeners will be here soon," Tony said.

Barnes turned to face him. The ball cap had a blue bill and an ornately embroidered B.

"Is that a Brooklyn Dodgers cap?" Tony asked. "Did you know they moved to L.A.?"

Barnes smirked and tugged at the cap. "Not here, they didn't."

"Fair enough." Tony walked over to Barnes. It was a nice virtual day. For the hell of it, Tony put a few flying penguins in the air alongside the pigeons Barnes had created.

Barnes looked up at the squawking, awkwardly flapping penguins and frowned. "Ok," he said.

And then there were very large pink hogs blundering through the sky, grunting and kicking their legs as they chased the penguins. Barnes smirked.

"That's cheating," Tony said, "they're not birds."

"Hey," Barnes replied, "When penguins get airborne, that's when..."

"Pigs fly," Tony reluctantly agreed.

There was an unearthly screech-roar overhead. Tony and Barnes ducked at the same time. Barnes came up dressed in a tac suit and holding a missile launcher with his metal arm, while Tony encased himself in Iron Man. "WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?" Barnes shouted over the sound of the enormous flying creature. It had to be at least thirty feet long with a six foot long beak gaping as it gobbled down pigs, penguins and pigeons indiscriminately. It looked like a cross between a giraffe and a stork with bat wings tacked on.

"ISN'T IT YOURS?" Tony yelled back as he tried to line up a shot. The thing was high, and moving fast. Just because it couldn't really hurt didn't mean that he relished the thought of it diving at him.
"Quetzalcoatlus!" Harley yelled. "Isn't it awesome!"

Tony turned to see the Keener family gathered nearby. Harley was wearing his version of an Iron Man suit, but without the helmet, Holly was in jeans and leather jacket, with 'Holly's Angels' picked out on the back in rhinestones (she never did take VR seriously), and Charley was back to her twelve foot tall fantasy avatar. Tripod was perched on the shoulder of Charley's blue toga. The cat was staring up at the assorted flying creatures, with his eyes wide and his mouth open. He was making little 'ick ick ick!' noises and his tail lashed rapidly from side to side.

Tripod leaped from her shoulder straight up, sprouting tabby colored wings at the same time he expanded into a cat the size of a tiger. He headed for the quetzalcoatlus.

"Tell me you didn't really bring the cat into VR," Tony said, glancing away from the aerial dogfight. The pigs and penguins had joined forces and were harassing the pterosaur while the cat flapped to reach them.

Harley grinned at Tony. "Charley wanted to try it."

Charley nodded, blinking her silver eyes at Tony. "Tripod misses Sterling."

"Yeah, ok, fine." Tony couldn't see how this would help, except... yeah. People who were dependent on a service animal could now bring them into VR. Ok, he'd have to run that by Pepper. "So. Holly, this is James Barnes. Barnes, this is Mrs. Keener."

"Ma'am," Barnes said, tipping his baseball cap to her. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Holly blinked at him. "You've been hanging around with a bad crowd." Her accent was deeply slow, Southern and honeyed. Tony knew that meant she was really angry.

"Yes, ma'am," Barnes said.

"I need to know... did you break with them because you thought you could do better with Tony, or because you really want to do the right thing?"

Barnes ran his hands around and around the baseball cap. "A little of both, ma'am."

Holly stared for a moment longer, and then nodded. "All right then. If you do right by Tony, he'll do right by you."

Charley made a circle with thumb and forefinger and then held it up to her right eye. "I'll be watching you," she told Barnes solemnly.

Tripod landed with the pterosaur held firmly between his jaws. He purred.

Chapter End Notes

Flying penguins.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dfWzp7rYR4

The scientists haven't decided if quetzalcoatlus could fly. I bet it could
https://www.newdinosaurs.com/quetzalcoatlus/
One guy says yes, one guy says no. I say FLY FREE.
Chapter 81

After they left VR Tony turned to Barnes. "There are a number of vacant guest suites, you can have your pick. Friday will tell you if you accidentally choose one that's in use."

"Not the 'Hulk Room'?"

"Well, sure, if you're in the mood to smash things, but you'd probably be more comfortable with an actual bed." Tony shrugged. "You're an added complication in an already way too complicated spiderweb. You're really low priority, so I'm going to have to ask you to amuse yourself while I work-- and wow, that didn't sound right."

Barnes looked thoughtful. "I could help. I can't knit, or tie shoelaces." Barnes lifted his armless shoulder. "But anything else, I'm good."

Tony looked at Barnes for a long moment. The 'spiderweb' comment made him think of another spider. "Were you just point and shoot?" he asked bluntly. "Or did you plan missions?"

Barnes blinked, and his expression went cold. "I didn't have a lot of input, but when they dropped the leash I had to figure tactics and access out on my own. Why? Is there someone you want me to kill?"

"Oh, hell no," Tony was taken aback. "I was just thinking 'set a thief to catch a thief'."

"I'm not a thief," Barnes replied.

"Potato, potahto. Thief, spy who steals secrets, assassin. Romanoff's been sniffing around my business. So far, she's actually been helping, but I have no idea what her motivation is, who she's working for, and whether or not she's going to flip a coin, change her mind, and fuck everything up."

Barnes nodded. "So you want to find her mission parameters and goals."

"Yeah, but even if you could bring her in I don't interrogate people, and I wouldn't trust her if she said the sky was blue."

"I'm good at tracking. I could follow her, intercept communications, find who's pulling the strings."

"That would help. If it's not-quite-dead Fury, that's one thing, if it's his mysterious bosses who wanted to nuke New York, that's something else. And who knows what else is out there. Could even be Hydra. I don't know with Romanoff. I never could read her."

Barnes eyes went cold. "Yes. You need to know."

"Yeah, well. Think about it. If I get permission to keep you here, I'll give you all the information S.I. security's been able to dig up on her recent movements."

Barnes nodded again. "I've been up against her at least twice, that I remember. Hydra had a file on her. She's got weaknesses I can exploit. Over confidence, for one."

"Gotta agree with you there. But that's on the back burner. For now, just, I don't know... rest and think about how you want to present yourself to the Accords council."

"Terrifying enough that no ordinary jail can hold me?" Barnes put on his dead-eye expression.
"Maybe it would be better if you just do whatever the lawyers tell you."

After Barnes left to find a room, Tony allowed himself a minute, just one minute, to wonder how the hell he'd wound up supporting his parents' killer. Oh, yeah. End of the world scenario. "Only a fool fights in a burning house," as the wise old Klingon adage put it. It would be a good example to others to put aside their feuds. Sure. Yeah. Kumbaya, hold hands around the campfire.

This... was going to be a disaster, but with luck, it would only be a personal disaster.

The next day a package arrived for Barnes, carried by a barber who shooed Tony out of Barnes' room while he worked. When he left, Tony returned to eye the results. Barnes was wearing a navy blazer tailored with a neat hem shortening the sleeve on the left side. He had on a modestly figured gray tie and a plain blue button-up with the sleeve also neatly shortened. His hair was conservatively cut and he was so clean-shaven his skin was pink.

"Feels strange," Barnes commented. "My ears are naked and the back of my neck is cold."

Tony sniffed. "What is that... oh, my God, they gave you Old Spice. 'The Man your Man Could Smell Like'."

"What?" Barnes frowned at Tony. "It was the one thing that didn't smell strange."

Tony didn't know whether it was the Old Spice, the shortened sleeve, or Barnes' incredible acting skills, but after listening to Tony's attorneys and briefly questioning Tony and Barnes, the Accords Council deliberated for only half an hour. Then they declared that, with reservations and a list of stipulations they must have worked out ahead of time, Barnes was remanded to Tony Stark's custody until such time as a date for his trial could be set. Considering the complications of seventy years of vaguely attributed assassinations while arguably incapable of control over his actions, they had recommended that only events that had taken place since SHIELD fell would be the focus.

When they returned to the Tower, Barnes tugged one-handed at the necktie, loosening it. "Was that usual?" he asked. "I don't know how long these things take, but I thought it would drag on for days."

"You're right. They had the Accords in the works for nearly three years, so this was..." Tony shrugged. "S.I. has really good lawyers."

"Or maybe it was the Old Spice."
Chapter 82

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Two days later, Barnes had checked all the information S.I. security had on Romanoff's 'liberation' of vibronium coins. It wasn't much beyond the times and places where the shipments vanished, possible access points, and of course, the card. The card was what really didn't make sense to Tony. Romanoff was hardly the Scarlet Pimpernel; taking credit didn't seem like a spy thing. So it was likely whoever was calling the shots told her to leave the calling card. Why? Some sort of skewed reassurance that a 'friendly' had done it?

As if. Surely anyone who hired her would have known she'd done a 180 while she was supposed to be on Tony's side. He'd tried not to think about it, but the puzzle nagged at him while he was down in the workshop, making Barnes a new arm.

Not a goddamn murder weapon arm, just a flesh-colored prosthetic with the same strength as Barnes' existing arm. He'd be way too obvious hunting as a one-armed man, so it was a necessity. And as long as Tony was doing it, he implanted a tracker as an integral part of the design. If removed, the whole arm would be dead weight. Also. Just in case, there was an audio clip of 'Sputnik', that could be remotely triggered. If Barnes went off the reservation, Tony was going to take him down fast and hard.

He didn't tell the Accords panel the details of his methods of assuring Barnes would be available for the trial. He also didn't tell them that he was thinking to ask Spiderman to keep an eye on Barnes. At least on the weekends, he had to remind himself that Peter had an education to complete, and damn, he had never really set up an internship for him, had he? Stupid. S.I. needed people of Peter's caliber, and the kid needed a career. He didn't want him to turn out like Rogers' bunch who thought being a superhero meant the world owed them a living. Not that Peter would do that. He was a good kid.

And Tony's mind was wandering again. He concentrated on Barnes' arm, setting the flesh tones of the flexible 'skin' to match and implanting a realistic scattering of hair. He was tempted to add a tattoo, and was wavering between 'If lost, return to Tony Stark' and a simple Stark swoosh.

Friday interrupted his thoughts. "Boss, you have a call from Wakanda."

"T'Challa?" Tony flicked on the nearest SmartGlass surface. The image of Princess Shuri appeared. "Princess Shuri."

"Dr. Stark." Shuri inclined her head. "I have collated the information my brother wished to send to you. He requested I have it couriered directly to you, so there would be no chance of interception."

"Thanks, that will be a big help. How's T'Challa?" Tony thought there couldn't be really terrible news, judging by Shuri's expression.

"He has defeated four challengers today and is preparing for his final bout tomorrow," Shuri said calmly. "The spirit of the panther is strong in my brother. I am sure he will have no difficulty against M'baku."

"Of course not. I'm glad to hear it." Tony hoped she was right. "Is there any news of the Avengers?"

"Lang and Wilson have been turned over to the International Court of Justice to decide under which jurisdiction they will be tried. Wakanda will provide their legal representation when the time comes."
Tony nodded, but he didn't really care. When it came right down to it, they weren't unique. It would just take time to train other people to use Exo-Wings, and if Pym Technologies made another size changing suit they could recruit a new bugperson—hopefully not a habitual criminal, as that had worked out so well. Tony would have to try to reconcile with Pym, perhaps his daughter would hear Tony out. Worth a try. "And Barton and Rogers?"

"The vehicles King T'Challa gave them were fitted with trackers."

Tony nodded. He hadn't thought about it, but it made sense. "So you know where they are, that's good."

"Barton is currently in hospital in Nigeria. He was severely beaten."

"Wow, that was fast, even for him. What about his new hyena buddies, didn't they help him?"

Shuri gave Tony a slight smile. "They were the ones who beat him. Apparently they had friends in Lagos."

"Ouch," Tony said. Barton had been a total shit, but still... "What hospital?"

"Primus International Super Specialty Hospital."

"Oh, well, sounds like he's in good hands."

"Good enough," Shuri said dismissively.

"And Rogers?"

Shuri frowned. "He never left Wakanda. His vehicle was traced to Jabari Village. King T'Challa declined to risk starting a war over Rogers. If the White Gorillas choose to keep him there is little we can do."

"Oh, hell," Tony said. If the White Gorilla cult had fighters in T'Challa's class, Rogers could use his plus eighteen charisma points to create a small army. He hadn't needed advanced tech to fuck up the Nazis with just a few Howling Commandoes.

"It is... not ideal," Shuri said. "We are watching to see if they leave the village in unusual numbers. Likely they are awaiting the outcome of M'Baku's challenge, but whether his failure will reconcile them to their current status or impel them to a destructive frenzy is impossible to tell."

"Fantastic." Tony sighed. "Thank you, Shuri. I'd appreciate it if you kept me posted with any updates."

"Of course I will do that, Dr. Stark."

They exchanged a few more pleasantries, and then ended the call. Tony leaned forward to place his head on the desk. "Fuck you, Rogers. And the horse you rode in on." Tony really needed to go to an AA meeting. The urge to get totally smashed was quite strong at the moment.

DUM-E beeped in concern and petted Tony's hair.

Chapter End Notes
Barton had NOTHING to do with Lagos, but guess what? The hyena men weren't logical. He was on Rogers' side, that was good enough for them.
"Ok," Tony said once he and Pepper, Happy and Rhodey were gathered around the table for dinner. They'd ordered from Pepper's favorite Italian restaurant so they could combine business with family time. Barnes' meal had been sent to his room and he had sensibly made no protest about being excluded from social activities. "Stark Reality is selling well, and Vision reported a huge surge of VR communities."

Pepper said, "Anyone owning a vacant warehouse is bidding for the chance to be chosen as a Battle Room."

Friday piped up with, "The Great Pacific Garbage Patch and all the smaller trash vortexes contaminating the ocean have been well seeded with vibronzium coins and Stark Cruise lines' combined VR and coin scattering 'mystery' cruises are sold out two months in advance." That had been one of Vision's ideas- the cruises' courses were set by satellite mapping pointing out gaps in the defenses.

"Vibronzium coin placing is becoming a fad," Pepper added. "People have been dropping them on newly asphalted roads and wet cement walks. They're being spread as fast as we can provide them."

"So, stage one is nearing completion," Tony said.

Happy stopped cutting up his lasagna. "What's stage two, boss?"

"We need evidence to convince at least the major governments to prepare to be on a war footing. We can't win with a civilian militia alone, they haven't got the resources, and in many places they haven't got access to weapons," Tony said. "We need to get out in space, get everyone looking to the skies. Asteroid mining would be a good lure- within fifty to sixty years we're going to have depleted Earth's resources to where we NEED the heavy metals and minerals. Nasa had a line item in the budget leading up to it, but the current presidency-- yeah, can't see past the end of his nose- took it out."

"Is that practical?" Pepper asked.

Tony shrugged. "It has to be. Once we start asteroid mining, there'll be an excuse to look more intensely into space. We can put out more equipment to monitor the stars. If we look far enough to see them coming, and if S.I.'s space ventures are profitable enough, governments will listen."

Rhodey said, dubiously, "That's a huge project. Too big for any one man, even you, Tony."

Tony grinned. "Yeah, but it's not just me. The VR has now got the world's finest collection of minds working on the problem. Hawking, Foster, and Selvig aren't the only group out there. They're doing amazing things."

"I'll have to see projected profits," Pepper said firmly.

Tony nodded. "You'll have them." Rogers had thought Tony just oozed money out of his pores. Hell, Rogers had expected Tony to pay for the plumber to fix the Compound sink after they clogged it with coffee grounds. He wondered how the White Gorilla Cult was taking Rogers' attitude. Maybe they even agreed with him and felt the strongest deserved to have people taking care of all their
tedious messy details.

Tony shook off thoughts of Rogers, and enjoyed his meal with his friends. And then, later, he and Pepper shared a bed, and said things that belonged to no one else.

The next afternoon, Tony was down in the workshop with Barnes, test fitting his new 'harmless'. Friday said, "Boss, King T'Challa is calling."

Tony dropped his screwdriver, and grinned, relieved. Friday wouldn't have called him 'King' if he'd been deposed. He waved the nearest Smart Glass monitor on. "T'Challa... wow, do I want to know what the other guy looks like?"

T'Challa was beaten and bruised, surrounded by people fussing over him with bandages. "No," he said grimly. "Unless you enjoy looking at the dead. The challenge is not intended to be to the death, but M'Baku would not admit defeat. He told me 'I can do this all day'. "

Tony felt a cold chill go down his back. "Rogers coached him."

T'Challa visibly swallowed. "M'Baku was certain he would win. He said... when we were grappling he whispered in my ear..."

"What?" Tony asked. Barnes was leaning close and Tony thought perhaps he ought to send him away, but then, T'Challa spoke again.

"He told me he'd bathed in the blood, and eaten the flesh, of something better than a white gorilla." T'Challa closed his eyes briefly. "He said he'd eaten Captain America."

"God, no," Barnes said, tearing his half finished arm away from Tony. "Stevie. No." He ran to the kitchenette and was violently ill in the small sink.

Tony felt numb. "Did he?"

T'Challa shook his head. "I don't know. The White Gorilla Cult claimed his body, so even if there was ... evidence... we could not find it."

"I just... I don't believe it."

"I will have surveillance increased on the Jabari Village, but I can think of nothing else to do."

Tony nodded. "Neither can I. Thank you for telling me. Us," he said, glancing over at Barnes, who was still huddled over the sink.

"It was not a fitting end for a warrior," T'Challa said.

"No, no it wasn't." Tony ended the connection and went over to Barnes. "Are you all right?"

Barnes rinsed out his mouth and spat into the sink. "I kept that punk alive. He was always startin' fights, and he always picked the biggest guys. I knew. I knew one day he'd start a fight an' someone else would finish it. But Jesus, I never thought it would be like that."

"I'm sorry."

"Are you?" Barnes straightened to look at Tony. "He was trouble for you, and now he's gone."
"I never wanted him dead. I just wanted him to... I don't know... listen to me."

"Yeah." Barnes sighed. "Poor bastard. Never could stop fighting. You gonna tell people what happened to him?"

"No. Hell no. People need heroes." Tony shook his head. "Let me finish your arm and then..."

"What?"

"Thor left some Asgardian booze a while back. It might get you drunk."

Barnes nodded. "Worth a try."

Chapter End Notes

I THINK Rogers is dead, but who knows? M'Baku might have lied. We may never know the answer. Right now he's Schrödinger's Captain, and is both alive and dead until and unless observation confirms his status.

If Thanos doesn't kill the Earth, garbage and global climate change might. Tony will be trying to figure out a way to harvest the plastic garbage and turn it into something harmless and profitable - if it doesn't pay, no one could afford to do the job. Possibly some type of electromagnetic vibration could be used to drive mobile sea life away from the area while gigantic sea-going Roombas suck it up and deliver it to factory ships that turn it, among other things, into durable 'plasbergs' which can be temporarily anchored in place of the diminishing natural icebergs that polar bears need to survive. Maybe. Also, they could make bricks and beams for baby hospitals.

https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/great-pacific-garbage-patch/

As of 2017, 71 different government space agencies are in existence; 13 of those have launch capability. Six government space agencies - the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), the European Space Agency (ESA), the China National Space Administration (CNSA), the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the Russian Federal Space Agency (RFSA or Roscosmos) have full launch capabilities; these include the ability to launch and recover multiple satellites, deploy cryogenic rocket engines and operate extraterrestrial probes. Only three currently operating government space agencies in the world - RFSA and the CNSA and NASA are capable of human spaceflight as of 2017.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_government_space_agencies

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asteroid_mining#Legal_regimes_of_some_countries
"Boss," Friday said a few hours later, after Tony had informed the inner cadre (Pepper, Happy and Rhodey— not Peter. The kid didn't need extra nightmares) about T'Challa's victory, and the possibility that Rogers had been digested. He still was doubtful. After surviving the Depression while poor and sickly, then Nazis and Hydra and space going armored caterpillars it just seemed wrong that Rogers had been killed by a power-hungry cannibal.

"Yep," Tony replied, absent-mindedly. It hadn't been easy, sitting with Barnes while he tried to get drunk. Give the guy that much, once Tony told him he was on the wagon he had shoved a bottle of sparkling water at Tony and not pressed him further.

"Someone is trying to place a collect call from Nigeria, Boss. A Doctor Adebayo of Primus International Super Specialty Hospital."

"Huh. What do you want to bet Barton's trying to get me to foot his hospital bill." Tony shrugged. "Do I owe him anything?"

"No, Boss," Friday said loyally.
Tony smiled. "So I could just refuse the call."

"Yes, Boss."

"Eh, it'll be peanuts. I give millions to charity, what's a few dollars more. Put the call through, Friday."

"Yes, Boss."

It was an audio only call, which was fortunate because Tony was surprised when he heard Barton's voice instead of the expected stranger's, and he'd spit out a mouthful of coffee.

"Tony?" Barton said. His voice was slightly garbled, but Tony didn't think it was the connection.

"Yep, Barton. What can I do you for?" Tony replied sharply.

"I'm sorry."

"What?" That was the last thing Tony'd expected to hear from Barton.


"Yeah, well," Tony wasn't used to getting apologies, he hadn't a clue how to respond.

Barton kept talking. "I knew I was fucked up. Ever since... fucking Loki..." Barton was rambling now, his voice getting stronger and weaker in waves. "I just... was so angry, and I couldn't... Phil was gone and I just... I fucked up a mission. Real bad. Fury covered for me. Dunno why. And they let me retire." He burst out into racking coughs again.

"Calm down," Tony said, "you sound like you're going to cough up a lung."

"I'm ok, Tony," Barton said. "First time in years." Barton started crying, audibly sobbing over the connection. "My kids, Laura, God, I was such a shit to them. I didn't hurt them, but I scared them,
Jesus, my kids were afraid of me. Steve called and all I could think was that I could go fight someone and I'd be good again. I could go home and Laura would be happy to see me, and the kids would run to me."

"Barton... Clint, what..."

"Tash knocked me out... after Loki... and I woke up and I thought I was good. I did. I was good, wasn't I? I fought those alien bastards."

"Yes. You were good. Clint... what treatment did SHIELD give you after the battle?"

"SHIELD? They x-rayed my head and told me to take two aspirin." Clint laughed, but it wasn't a funny sound. "Told me I had a hard head."

"Jesus Christ." Selvig had been in a mental hospital on drugs and with therapy for months after the mindstone had made him Loki's minion. The man still hated to wear trousers. "That's it? They sent you to fight with a concussion and never followed up on the mind control?"

"What do you expect? I'd tried to shoot down the helicarrier. I wasn't anyone's favorite, not any more. So. You know, just... sorry. I didn't mean any of those things I said. Oh. The doc wants his phone back. Thanks for everything, Tony."

"Wait, wait!" There was a click, and the connection went dead.

"God damn it, Clint." Tony ran his hands through his hair. "Friday, call Clint's doctor again. Fuck you, SHIELD, I'm taking your birdbrain back."
Chapter 85

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After talking to Clint's doctor and hearing what few details he was willing to share, Tony really needed a drink. He reached into his pocket to feel the edges of his three month coin. And froze. "Oh, fuck. Pickleback." How the hell had he done shots with Barnes and not even thought about it? Habit was a bitch.

But even so, there shouldn't have been any liquor at the snack bar. Pepper had removed it all, and damn, if he couldn't trust Pepper, he might as well give up on humanity entirely. He went to the bar to check, and fuck yes, it was fully stocked.

"Friday! Where did this booze come from?" Tony looked at the bottles and the sink, and... he should dump them. But you know, it was perfectly good booze. Maybe he could donate it... no. No. He reached to open a bottle to pour it away, but then he thought how good it would smell, and you know, he's not a masochist, really he's not.

"Boss?" Friday sounded confused.

"I had all the liquor removed, Friday." Tony turned his back on the bar and walked away from it. "I don't want any liquor on the premises. Why is my bar full of liquor?"

"Checking... Boss, it's not one of my programs," Friday said apologetically. "Automated house services registered that supplies were low and replenished it. AHS doesn't think, Boss. I can send someone to remove it all."

"Get DUM-E and U to do it. It doesn't matter if they break everything." Tony shook his head. "And fix AHS's coding. I don't want a repeat of this." Tony toyed with his phone for a moment, before he gave in and sent a group text to Pepper, Happy and Rhodey. "Tower reordered booze. I was tempted and fell, just a little, the other day. Don't worry, it's being handled." He sighed and scrubbed at his hair, and then called a number he knew well.

"Hey, Holly?"

"Hello, Sterling," Holly replied, teasingly. In the background he could hear the rattle and chatter of the diner. It relaxed him, realizing that his mistake was only a huge one in his eyes, and everyone else was going on with their lives. "What's up?"

"I...I drank."

Holly didn't say anything.

"I didn't even realize I'd done it. I didn't get drunk, but I had drinks and...it was like it was natural. Am I really an alcoholic, I just thought..." The diner sounds faded.

"Tony, I'm in the back room now. I want you to stop over-thinking this. Have you spoken to your sponsor?"

"I... I don't have one. I just go to meetings. I've been fine all along."

Holly made an exasperated noise. "There are sponsors for a reason, Tony! You need to talk to
someone who really understands. If you don't have anyone in the city, call the Rose Hill chapter. Please. I know it's not easy for you, trusting people, but you trust us... you trust me. Don't you?"

"Yeah. I do." Tony sighed. "It's just... I was trying for my four month coin."

Holly coughed, which sounded suspiciously like an aborted laugh. "Tony, make the call. You'll feel better. I promise."

"Yeah. Yeah. I will. Thanks, Holly."

Chapter End Notes

Very short, I know. My muse is resisting getting back to Peachy Keen, but finally let me do one short scene. I thought maybe posting it would 'prime the pump'.

Tony had picked up a few phone numbers from the Manhattan meetings, more out of social networking habit than anything else. He only had their first names to go by. As he scrolled down the list, he mentally vetoed any female names. It wasn't that he thought they wouldn't understand, but he... well... it'd feel too much like he was cheating on Pepper to ask a woman to be his confidante.

Henry. Tony remembered Henry. They'd had a laugh at their physical resemblance and Henry had told Tony he'd been a Celebrity Lookalike for a while, until the bottle got too much for him. Yeah, ok, Tony hadn't fooled anyone in the Manhattan chapter, either. Henry had been in AA for years, and he was a good guy.

Tony called Henry. This wasn't being weak. Starks made of Iron, motto aside. Howard could have used a little support, but he'd been afraid to let anyone in. Tony wasn't afraid. Not much.

"Hello? Tony?" Henry answered. His phone didn't have video capability. Tony wondered if it would be rude to offer... yeah. No.

"Yes, it's me, Henry. I was just wondering... have you ever sponsored anyone?"

Henry was silent for a long few seconds. "No. But I've been sponsored. If I can't help you, I can find someone who can, Tony. Want to talk to me about it?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I do."

"Do you want a drink now?"

"Um, no. Not... well, sure, yeah, but not want, I heard some shocking news and my first thought was 'I need a drink', but I don't need it. It's just... I hadn't had a drink in months. I wasn't even tempted, too busy and you know, I've got people now. They depend on me, and they support me, too."

Henry said, "That's good, we all need people."

"Then I remembered that I had drunk alcohol recently. I served a man booze, and I drank with him. I didn't remember that I wasn't going to drink. I didn't get sloshed, that's not the problem, I stopped after a couple drinks. I didn't remember! Am I making too much of a big deal of this? Is this normal?"

"Everyone's different. I know I couldn't stop after a couple drinks. It sounds to me like drinking is more a social habit with you. If you can't avoid the social environment, then you need to decide how to handle it. Do you really want to stay dry?"

Tony thought about it for a minute. "Yes. It... in some ways, it's a crutch. A glass in my hand, rattle the ice, use it to distract, make myself look... well... harmless. Foolish."

Henry coughed. It sounded a lot like Holly's fake cough. "Do you really want that any longer?"

"No. No, I don't." Tony rubbed at his chest and said softly. "I was... for a while there I was self-medicating for pain. That... it doesn't help. The pain doesn't go away. The drink just messed me up worse. So I cut back. I've still got the pain, but it's, you know, part of me. I accept it. I work around it
and do what I have to do."

"Hmm," Henry said. "There are non-drug methods of handling chronic pain. Acupuncture, massage, even meditation."

"Sex," Tony said. "Sex is good. Mmm, endorphins."

Henry laughed out loud. "I can't help you there, Tony."

"You have helped, Henry. Just... thanks. I have to start my coin collection all over again," he blurted out.

Henry laughed so hard, Tony found himself laughing along. "We all do that, Tony. Show up at the next meeting and ask for your new coin. I'll even sign it, if you want."

"Yeah. I'd like that, Henry. Thanks. Hey, keep my number. You can call me, if you need something, you know?"

"Thanks, Tony. I might do that. Like I said, we all need people. You're good now?"

"Yes. I'm good. Take care of yourself, Henry."

"You do the same, Tony. Good bye."

After the call ended, Tony sat there, trying to think why he felt better. Henry hadn't given him any solutions, he'd just talked. And acted like it was ok to screw up. Like a Tony Stark mistake wasn't any different from a Henry mistake. Huh.

Chapter End Notes

(I know nothing about AA beyond a bit of googling, so if this sounds off, I'm sorry.)

Henry Hellrung was Tony's sponsor in Canon Comics. He did look like Tony, enough to portray him in some movies. (I think it was movies.)

AM STILL trying to get my writing mode back so a short single scene chapter is all I can do right now. It's difficult because I'm in two other different modes already (yard work and fabric designs) and switching mental gears is tough for me.
Chapter 87

A minute later Tony slightly regretted having sent off the group text.

"Boss?" Friday said, "Three way call request from your posse."

"Posse? Where did you pick that up?" In retrospect, saying 'don't worry' probably had the opposite effect. "Connect me up, Fri." Tony put on a big grin.

No one in the three way holo that formed above his table looked amused. "You're not drunk," Pepper said with certainty.

"Did someone try to take advantage of you?" Happy said. He looked fierce.

"Is there something wrong with Friday?" Rhodey asked.

"God, no. I had a little... a very little... tiny panic attack because I just remembered I'd thoughtlessly had a couple of drinks. The Tower Automated System had restocked without Friday's input. I called my sponsor and it's fine, it's great."

"A panic attack doesn't sound great," Pepper said. She'd seen what happened when he had nightmares, but Tony was fairly sure she wasn't worried about Iron Man, but Tony Stark. "What triggered it?"

"Um. Clint called. From the hospital."

"Clint?" Rhodey said, immediately picking up on the change from 'Barton'.

"Yeah." Tony scruffed his hands through his hair. "I didn't know what went on with SHIELD. They never considered me one of theirs. Jarvis..." Tony took a deep breath. "Jarvis couldn't get into everything, there was just too much in the limited time he had. So, I didn't know..."

"What didn't you know, Tony?" Pepper asked softly.

"I didn't know that their treatment for Loki's mind-fuckery was to have Romanoff give him a concussion. He woke up and they sent him back to work."

"Jesus," Rhodey said. "Well, you know, during the invasion there wasn't time, but afterward?"

"Afterward, nothing. Apparently they treated him like a pariah for his attack on the helicarrier, and when he was unable to do his job because... well, he gets angry. Irrationally angry."

"Saw that," Rhodey muttered.

Tony huffed. "So he fucked up, and they retired him. Turned him loose on his farm with his wife and three little kids."

Happy was the one to say "Jesus" this time.

"Uh huh. He didn't hurt them, but he scared them. Scared himself, too. So when Rogers called and told him he was needed to fight the good fight, he thought that would fix him. He'd go and battle, use up all that anger, and be all normal again, and could go home. We all know how that turned out.

"But then he got another concussion in Nigeria, and it reset him again. He... he apologized to me."
"No, Tony," Pepper said firmly. "Taking in Barnes was enough, more than enough."

"You don't owe any of them anything," Happy said. "They all treated you like dirt even before Princess Pink Hands showed up."

Rhodey shook his head. "You're gonna do it, anyway."

"He hasn't got anyone else," Tony said. "For now, I'm just paying the hospital in Nigeria to do what they can for him, but Loki's shit... that needs a specialist. I'm thinking Xavier. He knows what Mind-Stone influence looks like. He could prove it. Get T'Challa's people to back him up. Everyone at the UN likes T'Challa."

"Ok, fine," Pepper said. "If we can get experts to show he wasn't mentally competent at the time, then we could probably bring him back to the US for trial and treatment. But that's it."

Tony smiled. "You know, SHIELD had to be involved in the coverup of my parents' death. There's no way that faked autopsy and that witness fooled them. Either they were behind it, or at least they were complicit. So, you know, salvaging someone SHIELD threw away would be a nice 'Fuck You'."

"I'm not taking him into S.I. Security," Happy said quickly. "We don't need Robin Hood."

Tony's smile widened. "We could use him to take care of our little spider infestation."


Happy shrugged. "Set a spy to catch a spy? Works for me."

Rhodey said, "What if Barton says no?"

Tony spread his hands. "Then he can go to hell in his own hand basket. His choice."

Tony's posse nodded.
Barnes showed up a few minutes later. "You hear all that?" Tony asked. He suspected Super Soldier Hearing, plus well-earned paranoia, kept Barnes informed.

Barnes shrugged. His new 'harmless' moved smoothly, which even in this moment pleased Tony. It was gratifying to do good work. "I don't know about all." He waggled his hand back and forth. Tony figured that meant he heard Tony's flailing about drinking, but was sharp enough not to mention it. "You want to send Barton after Romanoff. Is he gonna work with me?"

"It's a possibility- there's a lot of 'if'. If he can recover. If I can get his fugitive status cleared. If he doesn't just throw up his hands and decide to really retire once he can. He might want to go back to his ex-wife, and try to patch things up.

"I'm not Zemo. I can't manipulate people. Don't want to." Tony thought about a drink. Not for the alcohol, so much. He just... wanted something to do with his hands. This talk was making him 'itchy'. He went to the bar and opened a bottle of ginger ale, studiously ignoring the booze next to it. "Want something?" he asked, while pouring the ginger ale over ice in a cut-crystal Old-Fashioned glass.

"Got milk?"

"Sure." Tony got a carton of whole milk from the small fridge... pretty sure Barnes wasn't watching his cholesterol... and filled another Old-Fashioned glass, the same way, milk over ice cubes.

"Thanks." Barnes took the milk and drank it slowly, as if it was something special.

"It would be good if it works out," Tony went on, now that he had a glass he could wave dramatically. "He partnered with Romanoff for years, so between the two of you, you should be able to read her." Also, they could act as counterbalances. The word 'couple' came from old hunting methods with two dogs leashed (coupled) to each other during the chase. Yeah. Tony grinned. "You'd be a couple."

Barnes huffed. "Not my type. You gonna fit him with trackers, too?" Tony hadn't bothered to hide what he was doing. Barnes hadn't protested, beyond a raised eyebrow when Tony demonstrated.

Tony blinked. "I hadn't considered it, but it's not a bad idea. If he agrees."

"One thing..." Barnes shifted and looked uncomfortable. "Maximoff is gone, and I'm told the guy who mind-fucked Barton isn't... around, but..."

"But where there's two people who can do that, there may be more." Tony nodded. "I can adapt the Anti-Wanda helmet insert into something less conspicuous... how do you feel about ball caps? Ball caps and sunglasses. The perfect disguise, no one ever recognizes me when I wear them."

Barnes nodded. "Yeah, I noticed that." He raised his glass in a salute to Tony. He finished his drink and left the room, presumably to go back to his quarters. Friday would tell Tony if he got out of line.
Xavier answered immediately. Tony decided not to say anything about that being suspicious. If Xavier was playing around in everyone's minds, they were screwed anyway. If he wasn't then Tony wasn't going to poison their relationship by doubting him. "How do you feel about Nigeria?"

"Nigeria?" Xavier asked. At least he sounded like he didn't know what Tony was talking about. "It borders Wakanda. I presume something new has occurred?"

"Newish. Clint Barton called me. He...I think he's suffering the after-effects of mind-control, from years ago. Loki took him over at the same time he had Selvig under this thumb. Selvig got treatment. Clint got knocked over the head. Apparently SHIELD believed in faith healers, because they didn't do a damn thing for him. Just sent him back out into the field and when his behavior became too erratic, they booted him back to his family to fend for themselves."

"I see." Xavier said. "That is... appalling." He steepled his fingers and rubbed at his lips. "It would be inconvenient for me to leave the school at this time. Is there a possibility he could be brought to me?"

"That would be awkward, since he's an international fugitive. Also, he's currently in a Nigerian hospital, recovering from another knock on the head along with other souvenirs from your everyday enthusiastic curb-stomping. I'll get T'Challa on it, see if he can help."

"Do you think Barton would surrender if T'Challa sent his people? I do not think the international court would object to him being sent for treatment if the request was made following proper procedure, with evidence to back it up. I presume the doctors at the current hospital could do at least a preliminary assessment."

"Yeah, and T'Challa's physicians have experience treating victims of Maximoff's meddling, so they could know what to look for, and how to present their findings. Ok, that sounds like a plan. Sorry to bother you." It would help if Barton was still in a cooperative mood when T'Challa's people showed up, but he wasn't in any condition to fight if they had to arrest him.

"It's no bother, Tony. If you can have him brought to me, I will do what I can. I did offer to try to help Selvig, but he's decided being 'an eccentric' is actually a plus in his profession. Also, he never liked wearing trousers, anyway."

Tony laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Note: MCU uses the ball cap and sunglasses disguise on SO MANY characters. Not even counting Tony in Iron Man 3.

Check out:

Acts of Terrorism: BKA Wanted Posters by allaire mikháil (allaire)
https://archiveofourown.org/works/11994930
"Ok, Fry, call Ms. Holmes at Legal." Tony wondered if he should give everyone in Legal another pay raise. Probably.

When the connection went through, Ms. Holmes looked at Tony warily. "I hope this is a congratulatory call, concerning our handling of Sergeant Barnes' case."

Tony cleared his throat. "Yes, of course. Um, you do know the penalty for doing an excellent job?"

Ms. Holmes closed her eyes briefly. "I do."

"Well, really, this one shouldn't be so hard. For one thing, he's not in the country, yet. Also, the list of charges against him is much smaller. And I'm pretty sure I can bring him in peacefully, and I've probably got experts lined up for the defense."

Ms. Holmes blinked again. "Would you mind starting from the beginning? Whom are you referring to, and what exactly do you expect Legal to accomplish?"

"Clint Barton. He was at the Leipzig/Halle airport, but wasn't involved in any of the other mess, except for breaking out of the Raft, which, you know, no one wants a super-secret prison that breaks international humanitarian laws publicized, so no one's mentioning that." Vision had declined to press charges for the assault against him at the Compound, mostly because it would have raised questions about his right to do so and in general opened a whole bag of worms. Pepper had the Compound repaired, and everyone pretended nothing had happened. "S.I. has already covered the damages, and fortunately no uninvolved people were injured."

Ms. Holmes nodded. "Yes, that would lessen the charges." She relaxed slightly. "As far as I know, Germany is the only country with warrants against him and S.I. has a good general relationship with the German government, so they'd be unlikely to impose unreasonable barriers to his defense."

"I've just heard from him. He's suffering the after effects of alien mind control, when Loki was puppeting him. Irrational anger, loss of impulse control, impaired judgement. He was forcibly retired due to his condition. He'd never got any treatment for it."

Ms. Holmes tapped a pencil against her desk. "Tricky. Diminished Capacity due to alien mind control, I'm not sure how that translates in German jurisprudence. I suspect we couldn't get an innocent verdict, but a lesser sentence would be possible. There's no direct precedent. Brain-washing, cult indoctrination, yes... The fact that Loki had attacked German citizens might also help with gaining a sympathetic judge, if nothing else." She smiled. "I do enjoy breaking new ground."

Tony smiled. "Ok, great, you'll have fun with this. If King T'Challa's people bring him in, they can
assess him before turning him over. And I've got a promise from Charles Xavier that he'd treat Clint if we could get him back to the U.S."

Ms. Holmes nodded and pulled a yellow pad over to make notes.

Chapter End Notes

Spell check is nuts. It turned 'puppeting' to 'pupating'... OMG, if Loki was pupating people, that's like something out of ALIEN.
Tony sat back a moment to assess and decide what took priority. The days were getting shorter, he felt. Whatever was coming would be here while he was still juggling petty issues. He needed something more than a defensive net. He needed a way to fight the source of the... whoever. It was so hard to think what to do, lacking any more information than the glimpse he'd had of the space armada. Reluctantly, he admitted that if he COULD get Loki on his side, he'd do it, forgive all the murder and destruction and personal pain if Loki could supply information about... whatever... whoever... was behind the Chitauri. Planning in the dark would not work out well, he knew that.

"Boss?" Friday said hesitantly.

Tony sighed. "Yeah, go ahead, kiddo." He wasn't getting anywhere. Like Sherlock Holmes, Tony couldn't theorize without data.

"I have a request for a collect call from the Hague."

"The Hague? What?"

"A Mr. Lang would like to speak with you."

"Who? Do I know any Langs in the Netherlands?" Tony shrugged. "Sure, put it through. Probably something to do with the Scavengers." Although it seemed odd that the International Tribunal couldn't afford a phone call.

"Mr. Stark, sir?"

The tentative voice sounded vaguely familiar. "Yep, that's me." Tony waited a moment. Waited a few moments more. "Come on, this is on my dime. Ten seconds before I disconnect."

"No! No, please, don't do that. I'm sorry! I'm really sorry. I got into this mess on my own, but now I don't know what to do!"

"Who are you?" Tony was getting annoyed. He didn't have time for this.

"Scott Lang."

"Who?"

"Aw, c'mon. Ant-man. You know?"

"Oh, yeah, Bug-guy. Jiminy Cricket, my conscience. Hey, fun fact, in the original story, Pinocchio squashed the talking cricket. Squashed it dead."

Lang cleared his throat. "I'm really sorry."

"Yeah, you should be. You know, if you hadn't fucked with my suit, I might have been fast enough to catch Rhodely. Put that on your little buggy conscience, Jiminy."

"I know! I know! I fucked up big time because Captain America! and I didn't think. I know I owe you, and you don't even have to listen to me, but I'm desperate. Please, don't hang up."

"Fine. Spit it out. I really do have more important things to do than listen to you." Lang was an idiot, that much had been abundantly clear all along. Tony wasn't even that angry with him. Hell, hadn't
Tony fallen for the great American icon, and he had the advantage of knowing Rogers was no saint.

"The Germans dropped the charges against me, because you paid for the damages and no one actually saw what I did so they decided it was too much trouble to take me to court."

"Good for you, you lucked out."

"Yeah, but now I can't get home. I stowed away on a plane to get to Germany, and now the suit's out of Pym particles and I can't shrink down to stow away and I don't have enough money for a plane ticket. I... I didn't plan on this. I kinda thought, you know, the Avengers always had their own planes and stuff."

"Brilliant move, there." Tony was wondering how this man survived. "The Avengers had MY stuff."

"Yeah. Well, then I thought, ok, I violated parole and I'd be extradited. At least I'd be back in the US. But... they said I wasn't worth the cost of transporting me back so they told the Hague to turn me loose. I don't... even speak the language. I begged a guy to let me use his phone, but he's standing right here and he looks like he wants it back and please. Help?"

"Oh, my God," Tony said, and then he laughed. "You are amazingly screwed. So screwed."

"I have a daughter," Lang said quietly. "I don't want to disappear on her. I thought... I thought I'd be her hero."

Tony sighed. "Fuck. Fine. Give the phone back to its owner, I'll make arrangements with him to get you to the airport and I'll have a ticket waiting for you. Where do you want to go?"

"New York," Lang said. "I want to meet you. To say I'm sorry, in person."

Tony grinned. "And you hope I'll fix everything for you once you're standing in front of me, looking pitiful. Probably got a photo of your daughter in your wallet?"

"No... well... yes... but I can help! With... things! In the VR I saw those flying caterpillars and I had ideas! I'm a good engineer! It's the only thing I'm really good at, but... when I... with Vistacorp... no one will hire me as an engineer. I can't..."

Damn it. Tony felt for the guy. He couldn't do the one thing he was made to do. "OK, here's the deal. One-way ticket, one chance. You're not going to work for S.I. You're not going to have access to any of my facilities. You're sure as shit not going near any of my computer systems. You're going to get a grant for... I'll think of a title... enough to rent an apartment and living expenses. VR set up will be provided. You'll work with who I tell you to work with, and you're not going to spy on me, or steal from me, or do anything to piss me off, because if you do... Jiminy, you will be squashed."

"Yes, sir, thank you, Mr. Stark!"

"Yeah, right. Repay me by becoming a real hero. It's not all punching shit, it's planning, and thinking of other people. Now, give me to the nice gentleman who's helped to save your sorry ass by letting you use his phone." Tony really didn't like Lang, but he wasn't going to turn away any potential assets. He grumbled to himself that he was still picking up after Rogers. But at least this time, it was on his terms.
Rhodey showed up an hour later with his arms full of take out bags. "Break," he announced, waving at the holo Tony had opened. Rhodey didn't say anything about the suspiciously not-quite feminine curves of the Iron Man suit prototype, but he gave Tony a knowing glance. "Pepper's bringing the drinks. And Happy's got dessert. Not donuts. I'm tired of donuts."

"Donuts are the perfect food group," Tony remarked as he quickly closed the plans for the 'Rescue' suit. "You can dunk them in coffee."

"Well, ok, that proves it," Rhodey said as he put the bags down on the table after nudging it to raise and expand. "Plates and flatware," he scolded when Tony reached into the nearest bag to pull out a barbecued spare rib. "Heathen."

"Yes, mom," Tony replied, getting up to fetch the required items. He munched on the rib as he went.

"Pepper and Happy will be along in a few minutes," Rhodey said. He sorted out three salads: green, potato, and coleslaw, steaming hot cornbread, cheese grits, and corn on the cob, roasted in aluminum foil. "Bring a platter and tongs for the ribs. And those little corn holder thingies."

"To hear is to obey." Tony finished off the rib, it was a short one, and tossed the bone in the trash before washing his hands and returning to help Rhodey set the table. "Is there enough for Barnes?" he asked, belatedly remembering there was another person floating around the vicinity. Probably against the Geneva convention to make a man smell barbecue and not give him any.

"I suppose." Rhodey scowled. "We have things to discuss, Tony."

"After we eat, I'll set him up in VR. He won't be able to see or hear anything else."

Rhodey shrugged in acquiescence. "Fine."

The meal went relatively well. No one was stabbed, anyway. Pepper had brought lemonade, but Barnes wanted milk. Tony refrained from making a wisecrack about it 'doing a body good'. They talked about the food, and the weather, and a minute later Tony couldn't remember what was said. Finally they were done eating.

Tony looked at Barnes. "Why don't you call your sister and see if she's free to VR." It wasn't a question.

"Now?" Barnes asked. He glanced around the table. Rhodey and Pepper looked back at him blandly, while Happy glared at him. "Oh, yeah. I'll do that."

Once Barnes was set up on the couch, lost to the real world with his sister in VR, Tony turned back to his friends. "Just to get this out there and save time... I'm bringing Lang back to the U.S. too, but he's going to be on a long leash. No ants in our picnic."

"What?" Happy asked. He looked longingly at the leftover cherry cheesecake. "Who's Lang?"

"And what do ants have to do with it?" Pepper asked, deftly picking up the cheesecake and packing
Rhodey groaned. "Tony, no. That guy's a loose cannon." He added, for the benefit of Pepper and Happy, "Rogers brought him to the airport. He can shrink really tiny, or grow into a giant, but either way, he's an idiot. No planning, clumsy as hell, no idea what he's doing. He couldn't tell the difference between a fuel truck and a water truck, for God's sake, despite all the international warning symbols painted on the thing."

Tony blinked. "You know a lot about him."

"Vision saw and heard a lot more than we did. He filled me in while I was in the hospital." Rhodey shrugged. "Intel is important, Tones. Lang was misguided and full of hero worship, which, you know, maybe he learned about Rogers' clay feet, but he's still unfit for duty even if he sincerely wants to join Team Iron Man. He's ... like a little kid who refuses to grow up."

"Team Iron Man?" Tony grinned. "Can we have Team shirts?"

"No, Tony," Pepper said automatically.

"Fine, fine." Tony sat back down at the table and nudged his empty plate away. "Lang's not getting clearance for anything except VR. I agree, he's not trained, and I'm not sure he's even trainable, if we had the time to work with him. But he is a good engineer."

"He's not working at S.I." Pepper said, flatly. "He's an embezzler and computer hacker. Also, he drove his boss's Bentley into a swimming pool."

Tony winced.

Rhodey nodded. "Impulsive, with no thought to the consequences."

Happy said, "Car-murderer." He scowled.

Tony raised his hands. "VR! Just VR. Living expenses in an apartment, and a VR set up."

Happy frowned. "Just so you don't let him near any of our cars."

"I'll get him a bus pass," Tony said. "He just wants to come home, and try to get to see his little girl."

Pepper, Happy and Rhodey exchanged glances, eyebrow tilts and shrugs, before Rhodey spoke for all of them. "Yeah, ok. Now let's talk about recruitment procedures."

Pepper nodded. "You aren't the H.R. department, Tony."

"People have to be cleared ahead of time by security." Happy added. He gave a glance in Bucky's direction. "He doesn't even have a security badge!"

Tony thought back to his 'lone wolf' days. No one really gave him shit for whatever he did. But then, no one really gave a shit about him. "Yeah, but sometimes, you know, I need to do things now, can't lose the opportunity..." He looked at the disapproving glances. "Strike while the iron is hot?"

"You're going to send Barnes and Barton after Romanoff," Pepper said. "And what will you do when and if they catch her?"

"Um..."

"Offer her a job," Rhodey said. "Tony, you ever hear the expression 'nurse a viper to your breast'?"
Tony grimaced. "She's a spider, not a snake."

Pepper raised her eyebrows. Happy said, flatly, "She's a snake."

"Yeah." Tony nodded. "I'm not getting bit again, but she can be useful. She thinks she's too important to throw in prison. She's wrong, but in a way, she has a point. I still see the other side of that wormhole. I think we're going to need every asset we can get. I wouldn't trust her at my back, but I won't waste her skills, either."

Happy huffed. "You think we're going to need a lying, sneaking, two-faced, man-eater?"

"It's possible," Tony said.

Pepper frowned. "I don't like it, but Tony's right. Sometimes that's exactly what you need."

Rhodey threw up his hands in defeat. "She doesn't get to know anything beyond her own immediate missions. She doesn't get treated like family." Rhodey glanced at Barnes. "Him, I can live with. I might not like him, but I know he didn't choose to betray anyone. Romanoff's history...last time she turned sides it was on a whim. She's unpredictable and we can't risk her getting close enough to turn on us."

"Agreed. Now, how is everything else going? The company, the plans?" Tony said. The conversation turned to general matters, as each of them got caught up to date on everything.

A few minutes after that, Barnes stirred. He took off the headset and looked around. "Becca had to rest. Do you need me to leave?"

"Nah," Tony said. "We're done."

"For now," Rhodey said.
Chapter 92

Tony went to AA that evening, after calling to make sure Henry was going to attend. He wanted his signed five day coin, damn it.

The first rule about AA is that you don't talk about AA. Or is that Fight Club? Well, anyway, Tony went and said what he had to say and listened to other people, drank coffee, and got his coin. Henry even signed his full name on it, Henry Hellrung. Tony was a little disappointed that it was only a 24 hour coin, but it made sense that they didn't have a coin for five days. It was a pretty pale blue, and the anodized aluminum felt heavier in his pocket than it should have. It was a good feeling. Tony didn't want to collect the coins as prizes, he wanted them as reminders that that there were people who believed in him and would help him.

Barnes approached Tony the next day while he was teleconferencing with T'Challa. "I can't find Romanoff by looking out a window. How long do I have to wait for my 'partner'?"

Tony looked at T'Challa's holo. "How's Barton doing?"

"He's been transferred to Wakanda General, and is improving rapidly, but he's still heavily medicated for pain." T'Challa replied. "I sincerely doubt he is able to understand fully his situation, so I have not put your proposal to him."

"So, we don't even know if he's willing to hunt down his former partner," Barnes said. "The longer I sit around, the colder the trail gets."

Tony huffed. "And you're antsy."

Barnes shrugged. "Sitting around and thinking isn't doing me any good." He frowned. "Steve... I just... I couldn't stay with him, not after him putting Hydra on his team. But I keep thinking, maybe I could have talked to him. It didn't have to end that way."

Tony knew what it was like to run endless 'what ifs' and 'what could I have done' scenarios. Hell, he'd even wondered if he could have straightened out Obie, if he'd only paid attention early enough. "Ok, yeah. What do you want to do?"

"Examine the warehouse for starters. Maybe set a trap once I see the layout."

"Ok, sounds doable. I'll ask Happy to give you a tour."

Happy wasn't thrilled about it, but he was really angry that Romanoff had waltzed past his security, so he collected Barnes to drive him to the warehouse where they were keeping the Vibronzium coins awaiting distribution. Tony sent Goldie along with them, the flying bot could give Barnes aerial views-- and also it could shut down his arm if Tony had been fooled and Barnes was going to make a break for it.

Trust everyone... but cut the cards, Rhodey had once told him. Tony should have listened to Rhodey more often.
Tony went into VR to brain-storm with Hawking's group. Jane Foster had some tentative ideas about creating one-way wormholes. If they could shunt space armadas into them, preemptively slamming the door in their face would be better than fighting them. But was it feasible? Without, you know, causing a rent in the space-time continuum, which would be very bad. Or even just slingshot them into the past or future and let them destroy Earth with no warning? Then again, if they could aim them at a nice friendly supernova...

Tony, Jane, Eric, Charles, and Stephen were having an animated discussion, illustrated by exploding black holes and various other catastrophes when a soft voice sounded, audible only to Tony.

"Boss?" Friday sounded tentative. "You have an incoming call, but I'm not sure you want to accept it. Dr. Henry Pym is threatening to sue you."

"What?" Tony waved to the others. "Keep going. I have to take a call." He willed himself out of VR, took off his headset and stood up. He loosened his shoulders, went over to the bar and filled a highball glass with ginger ale. "Ok, connect me up, Fri." He posed casually on the sofa. "Hey, Hank, what's up?" he asked the holo when it appeared. Henry Pym was red-faced and wide-eyed, obviously in full fury over... whatever.

He shook his fist at Tony. "I'm not going to let you get away with it! You're just like your father!"

At one time that would have made Tony angry. Now he took it as more of a compliment. "Get away with what, Hank?"

"STEALING my work!"

Tony actually began to wonder if Pym was going to stroke out. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Scott called my daughter from the airport! Hope said he wants me to refuel the suit he stole from me."

"Huh. Stole?"

"I didn't give him permission to use the suit in a harebrained around the world trip with Captain America!"

"So. Ok, I don't know what goes on in Lang's head. I sure didn't tell him to steal your suit so he could use it against me. Why are you bitching at me, Hank?" Tony took a casual sip of his ginger ale.

"Your father stole my inventions! My life's work, and he took it and now you're doing the same thing!"

Tony put the glass down on the table with a hard clink, instinctively freeing his hands for battle. "I don't know what happened between you and my father. Dad and I weren't partners in whatever crime you think he did. If he had stuff of yours and shared it with anyone, it would have been SHIELD. When Captain Rogers and his merry band dumped SHIELD's data into the wild, I had to scramble to protect stuff they'd stolen from me and didn't have time to notice who else's piggybanks they'd robbed. If you've seen evidence that your work's being used by someone out there, that's probably how they got it.

"And you know?," Tony continued, "if anyone's talking about thievery, how about my Dad's implosion device? Lang broke into my Compound and lifted it, beat up Wilson, and then used it. Thank God he didn't start a chain reaction. I didn't bitch about it, and I guess I should have. You sent
him, didn't you? He wouldn't have even known it existed, much less where to find it."

Pym growled. Really. "I needed it, and you weren't using it. Your father owed it to me."

"Wow." Tony took another gulp of soda. "So, it's ok to steal from me, because you didn't like my
dad. And if ANYONE steals from you, it's my fault because you didn't like my dad? Is that how it
works? Because I need you to explain the logic behind that."

"Scott had called me from the Hague. I refused to take the call. When Hope said he'd come back, she
also told me you'd paid his way and made a bargain with him. He doesn't have a damn thing worth
selling, except my secrets."

"I don't want your secrets. I have too many secrets of my own. Look..." Tony put his glass down
again. "The 'bargain' has nothing to do with you, or your suit. I'm using Scott as an engineer, to work
on a project that has absolutely no bearing..."

"Hope said he was rambling on about playing a game fighting aliens in Virtual Reality." Pym
sounded a little less angry. "He wasn't making much sense."

"Yeah, well, it's a crazy situation. When the Chitauri attacked New York, I went through the worm
hole. No one wants to believe what I saw there. No one wants to prepare. But they're coming, and I
need all the brains I can get to figure out Earth's defense. Even Scott's brains."

Pym was silent for a long moment. "That's what your stupid game is all about?"

"Pretty much." Tony spread his hands. "I admit, the suit Scott used against me would be handy in
what I see coming, but... it's like Iron Man. Even if you could mass produce it, you can't trust
everyone with it. Scott... he meant well, but..."

"Yes," Pym said reluctantly. "I recruited him because of his personality flaws. I needed a thief,
someone without inconvenient morals, someone who wouldn't think about the consequences of what
I asked him to do. It was... not one of my better decisions. Hope thinks she could get him to
straighten up, but I don't know."

"He's had a hell of a wake-up call. Maybe... a strong woman can inspire a man. Make him want to
be worthy of her." Tony picked up his glass and rattled the ice cubes. "Pepper wouldn't let me hire
him directly. She has this unreasoning prejudice against embezzlers. I'm giving him a grant, living
expenses, a VR set up, a chance to keep his nose clean, and maybe he'll get to see his little girl.
That's it."

Pym was silent for a long moment. "Aliens."

"Aliens."

"And you're preparing for them in virtual reality?"

Tony shrugged. "Doing my best." Tony thought a moment. "If you'd like to try it, I might be able to
get you an invite to Hawking’s group. Hawking, Foster, Selvig, Xavier... they're a fun group. Today
they're trying to figure out one-way wormholes."

Pym's eyes widened. "That... does sound interesting."

"Great. I'll send a VR set to your place." Tony finished his ginger ale. "So, we good?" He really
didn't want to have to fight Pym.
"Yes." Pym reluctantly added, "Sorry. I've just had a chip on my shoulder for a long time."

Tony nodded. "It's hard to get away from the past. Some of us never manage it."

After Friday cut the connection Tony sighed. Then he picked up the VR headset. He was going to have to diplomatically introduce Pym to Hawking's group. He hoped they wouldn't spend too much time butting heads, but that was the problem with geniuses, they always thought they knew better than anyone else.
Tony had so many irons in the fire it was... actually relaxing. He didn't have time for introspection; just keep the balls in the air. And yeah, mixing metaphors, although juggling flaming iron balls was pretty close to the situation. Right now, he was trying to figure out ways to attack space invaders before they became Earth invaders. Mining the asteroid field? Setting up combat bases on some of the larger asteroids? Reluctantly, Tony listened to Pepper pointing out that even his money and ingenuity wouldn't be sufficient. But he could make plans, and toss them around in VR. Military forces had begun picking up on the usefulness of VR as an adjunct to traditional training, and even the most hard-nosed general enjoyed a visit from Iron Man.

And that was another thing. Tony hadn't built a new suit since Siberia. It wasn't just a matter of not having enough time. He could put on a suit when he needed to, just as Rhodey had been able to put on the replacement War Machine, but neither of them were really comfortable. They were now viscerally aware how breakable they were inside the armor.

He knew people, and organizations, and governments, were all watching him. The grumbling about Captain America had died down with no recent events to remind them of him, but eventually there would be questions, and as ever, he'd be expected to answer. He didn't think 'I've heard a rumor he was eaten by guy with a white gorilla fetish' would go over well. Fortunately, T'Challa reported hearing no speculation about M'Baku's claim. The Jabari village was in apparent seclusion, mourning M'Baku or possibly awaiting a new leader. No one outside the tribe knew how that was decided, but T'Challa suspected it was a variation on his tribe's trial by combat. Since M'Baku had no announced heir, it probably was a free-for-all.

Barton refused pain meds after the first day and was lucid enough by the second day for T'Challa to talk to him. He'd agreed to Tony's offer immediately, for whatever reasons. Tony figured it was a combination of post-mindfuck depression, spite against SHIELD, lack of any better options, and just possibly a tiny bit of remorse for acting like an ass, even though it wasn't entirely his fault. Helen Cho agreed to treat Clint, so T'Challa had him shipped to Korea for treatment in the Cradle while waiting until he was clear to return to the U.S. to have Xavier tend to his mind.

Getting Clint cleared of possible charges only took S.I.'s legal branch a few days. The Accords hadn't applied to him, because he'd been retired. There wasn't anyone willing and able to testify to his part in the airport fiasco, so he hadn't been charged for that. He couldn't be charged with escaping from the Raft since no one wanted to admit the Raft existed. He'd simply been tarred with Rogers' brush as an associate. It wasn't much different than the Hyena men blaming him for Lagos even though he'd never been there.

Tony had Friday shuffle through SHIELD's data dump to find Clint's records, showing how they'd assessed him as useless and written him off. T'Challa had sworn his support (people were always impressed by a king's backing). Xavier had all sorts of glowing testimonials about his success with treating disturbed individuals. Tony was currently the flavor of the month so his sponsorship was a positive for once. And then, Clint wasn't enhanced. He was just a highly trained, very skilled individual. No organizations were scared of him, no one had any particular use for him or vendettas against him. When S.I. requested he be taken off the 'no fly list' and have his record cleared of suspicion of terrorist affiliation, there was some paperwork, and the average number of goof-ups who didn't follow through and needed to be prodded with a pointy lawyer's boot, but within a week, it
Clint was free and clear- he didn't even need a pardon, because he wasn't guilty of any crimes. Well, that anyone knew.

Tony called Dr. Cho. "Thanks for taking care of Barton," he told her. "I can send an S.I. corporate jet to take him off your hands now." He wasn't going to waste Vision's time flying a quin-jet to Korea just for a pickup, and everyone else he trusted to fly one of his babies was equally busy.

"King T'Challa has offered to take Mr. Barton to Westchester," she told him.

"Oh?" Tony was surprised. He figured T'Challa must be up to his kitty ears in handling his country, plus all the coordinating he was doing for Project: Atlas. "I'll call him then and let him know the door is open."

Friday was getting better at anticipating Tony's needs and had T'Challa on line two before Tony finished his discussion with Dr. Cho. Helen had formed her own group in VR and was investigating an innovative method of disabling Leviathans, presupposing that creatures which fly in space are likely to have a directional sense different from the magnetoreception found in many of Earth's animals, but serving the same purpose.

Perhaps it sensed sound in the form of electromagnetic vibrations. Once it was on a planetary body it probably had other methods of orienting itself, but if sound of the proper frequency could be emitted, the more instinctive response might overwhelm them. It might be possible to repel the leviathans.

Tony hadn't told Dr. Cho about Project:Atlas, which should keep the leviathans from reaching Earth at all, but he wasn't pegging all his hopes on that. No plan ever survives contact with the enemy (Rhodey shared his military lessons with Tony. Including more than Tony ever wanted to know about Helmuth von Moltke the Elder). He promised to make sure all the information the Department of Damage Control had been able to get from autopsies of the Chitauri and Leviathans would be accessible in Dr. Cho's VR group and then he said goodbye.

"King T'Challa is on line two," Friday said, as if Tony would have forgot.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, your majesty," Tony said as the holo changed from Dr. Cho's lab in U-Gin Genetics to T'Challa's study. He wasn't going to undercut Friday's initiative by casting blame on her.

"It is no matter," T'Challa replied. "I had wished to ask your opinion on an important decision I must make."

"Sure," Tony said, mind racing as he tried to anticipate T'Challa's request. Something about weaponry? Politics? Science?

"Which do you think Miss Munroe would prefer?" T'Challa pointed to a row of beautifully decorated large pottery jars, the size commonly used as water carriers in Africa.

Tony blinked.

"I am told that Americans do not have traditional courting gifts-- although there are apparently specifics relevant to anniversaries after marriage," T'Challa said. "I thought art from Wakanda, in a useful form, might be pleasing."
"Erm." Tony thought back to a certain humongous pink rabbit. It was a pity it had fallen into the ocean before Christmas. Tony had planned to unzip it and reveal Pepper's true gift, a painting she'd admired in a museum. He'd retrieved it later, but restoration was going to take years, so he hadn't mentioned it to her. "Not the one with the giant panther. It's a little too..."

"Yes." T'Challa nodded. "Perhaps this one?" He placed his hand on a jar decorated with lightning zigzags. "I thought of her when I saw it."

"Good choice," Tony said, hoping he was right. "So, Barton is cleared to go to the U.S."

"Excellent," T'Challa said. "I will inform Professor Xavier. I will also be bringing a few gifted students who wish to apply for admission to his school. Too long has Wakanda remained separate from the world." He smiled. "There is beauty and worth outside our kingdom."

Tony agreed. He wondered what you'd give a king for a wedding gift. He'd have to ask Pepper.

Chapter End Notes

(This is an interesting family-the Elder was a tactical genius who changed modern warfare, his nephew (called the younger) was the chief of the German General Staff at the start of the First World War, and his great-grandnephew, Helmuth James Graf von Moltke, was a German resistance figure of the Nazi era who was drafted in the German Abwehr, and acted to subvert German human-rights abuses of people in territories occupied by Germany during World War II. He was executed for *discussing* a Germany based on moral and democratic principles that could develop after Hitler. He was a truly remarkable, courageous, and humane man.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helmuth_von_Moltke_the_Elder

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helmuth_von_Moltke_the_Younger


And this is fascinating, too.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magnetoreception
Chapter 94

A week ago Happy had reluctantly escorted Barnes to the storage facility where the Vibronzium coins had been stolen. Since then, Barnes had met with Happy nearly every day to pick apart the security. In Barnes’ opinion there were too many automated systems and too few human eyes.

"Barnes has got a point," Happy finally admitted to the others during their ‘eating meeting’ when Tony said they could soon expect Barton to return to join the spider hunt. Happy said, "Even if we change the intervals that the monitors sweep, we can't move the equipment. They're not as flexible as people."

They tried to convene in the tower for at least one meal a day to keep them all on the same page. After a while, Barnes had been included, because he had ideas about catching Romanoff that needed to be discussed, and frankly, what harm could he do? Friday watched him around the clock, and Tony could pull the plug on his arm or knock him unconscious with a single word.

"Have you figured out how Romanoff's been getting in?" Tony asked. He rummaged in his bowl of salad with his fork, looking for something that wasn't green and good for him.

Barnes shook his head. "There were six access points, and from there, the routes to reach storage multiplied. We sealed off the most obvious three, and put extra surveillance on the remaining ones, but she already got past them again to take another box of coins." Barnes tossed another spider ‘calling card’ on the table. "She's waving a red flag at you, which is stupid, but maybe not."

"How so?" Rhodey asked. He was eating all his greens, like a responsible adult. As if he hadn't been the one at M.I.T. to eat all the marshmallows in the Lucky Charms, leaving Tony with only the sugar-coated oats. Tony preferred the oats, but that's beside the point. Who picks out all the marshmallows?

"You were going to notice the thefts. You might have decided to store the coins at another facility and she'd have to spend time figuring it out all over again. She's counting on you not feeling that much pressure because you know who's doing it and figure her telling you means she's really on your side." Barnes lifted his glass in salute. "If she is." Today he was drinking chocolate milk. "So that was smart. I don't know why she's only taking a boxful each time. If it was me, I'd hijack an entire shipment on the move. I'm guessing she has orders- maybe her boss is testing her for reliability, and she doesn't dare risk losing the contract by showing too much initiative." Barnes frowned. "Bosses don't like you to think for yourself."

Pepper nodded. "I could see that. Her cover was blown wide open when she was an Avenger, and she no longer has access to sophisticated disguises, so no spy organization would want her as an undercover operative. She does have other skills, though."

Tony said, "Terrifying at hand to hand combat, fluent in dead languages, passable computer hacker. Not really a marketable skill set."

Happy scowled. "She cheats at boxing." He stabbed a cherry tomato vindictively.

"Yes, yes she does," Tony agreed.

"So do you," Happy replied.

"I..." Tony glanced around the table at the amused expressions. "I refuse to answer on the grounds that it may tend to incriminate me."
After lunch, everyone split up to resume their separate tasks. Pepper looked tired, Tony thought. They'd mostly been sleeping together, just sleeping. It's certainly no hardship just to hold her slender warm body in his arms and go to sleep listening to her steady breath. But sex would be really, really nice, too. Maybe they could take a few days off, just a few...but what if... what if... no. Tony was doing his best, and so were his team, but they're only human.

Start small. Spa day? Pepper always loved them and he was man enough to admit he enjoyed the occasional coddling. But not the thing where fish nibbled on your feet, that was just... he wouldn't do that to innocent fish.

"Mmm," Pepper said, loud enough for him to hear her in the next massage room. "Oh, YES, YES, YES."

Tony smirked. "Rub her feet!" he shouted, "She loves that!" Tony's masseur gave him a raised eyebrow, but continued what he was doing. He'd looked at the scar tissue on Tony's chest and asked a few questions about the age of the injury and the sensitivity of the area before beginning. He had magic hands, big and warm, and gentle on all the tender places. Tony actually fell asleep on the table.

Two days later, Tony called Xavier to find out how he was getting on with Barton. Barnes was getting restless.

"Ah. Hello, Dr. Stark. I apologize for not keeping you informed," Xavier said the moment he answered even before the holo image appeared. "And no, I am not reading your mind. I do have caller I.D."

That was a little annoying. Tony sighed. "Yeah, ok. I'm not paranoid; I'm experienced."

Xavier's image nodded slightly in the holo. "Understandable. Yes, well, there were... complications in treating Mr. Barton, and we've been assessing the situation."

"What? What happened? After effects of mind control?" Tony didn't care for the implication, not when he knew Wanda had her grubby little mind fingers dabbling in his grey matter.

"No, no, that's been resolved. There were two separate layers of interference, which actually made it simpler, as the competition for control meant that neither one was anchored deeply."

"So? What's the problem?"

"It's not precisely a problem." Xavier spread his hands. "While examining Mr. Barton I discovered that he is a carrier of the X-gene, and has mutant abilities."

"Huh. What can he do? Anything useful?"

"Sight-line telekinesis of objects below a certain weight, aided by extreme distance vision. He is able to identify a target from the top of a hill over a mile away, and so long as he can see it..."

"Oh, yeah. Hawkeye." Tony considered it a moment. Useful, yes, potentially there were uses beyond marksmanship. It was a little weird, but eh, aren't we all mutants, one way or another? "So,
does he need specialized training?"

"I don't believe so. He's used his abilities all his life, it's not as if they're repressed. He's been talking to some of my people with similar mutations, to try to learn if he's overlooked something, but I expect what he can currently do is the full extent of his abilities. Now he knows he can use them in other ways, and with practise will be able to move small objects without having to first apply momentum to them."

"So he doesn't need to stay there."

"That's correct. I did discuss his options, and he still wishes to help locate Natasha Romanoff."

"Ok, great. Can you send him, or should I pick him up?"

"King T'Challa is still here, I believe he could be persuaded to transport Mr. Barton." Xavier looked amused. "He is distracting Ororo. A little distance I believe would be good for both of them."

Tony laughed. "Yes. Tell T'Challa the Tower port will accept his hover-jet." Tony discussed Xavier's VR group for a few minutes more, and then he ended the transmission.
T'Challa's hover-jet landed, and the engine cycled down, but didn't completely shut. A ramp lowered and Barton emerged, looking warily around. His shoulders were sloped slightly and his 'resting murder face' actually looked apologetic. "Hey," he said quietly to Tony. He shifted. "If it's like... really awkward me being here, I could get an apartment. Have to borrow from you, though."

Tony relaxed a tension he hadn't realized he was carrying. He had been ready to defend himself, verbally, at least. He had to remind himself that he'd never met the 'real' Clint Barton, and give this man a chance to prove himself trustworthy. "Nah. It's fine. Come on in, Barnes wants to pick your brains on Romanoff." Tony peered past Barton. "King T'Challa?"

T'Challa came to the head of the ramp, but didn't leave the idling jet. A group of Dora Milaje clustered around him. "I have been speaking with Shuri," he said, with a rueful expression. "The Council of Elders are uneasy in my absence and the Dora Milaje have been..."

"We will protect our king with our lives," one of the Dora said.

T'Challa frowned. "No one wishes to kill me in America."

The Dora gave T'Challa a look similar to one Pepper had given Tony often enough. "We guard against weapons, not wishes. Anyone in America can get a weapon. We have seen the stories. They are a savage people."

"You are insulting my friends," T'Challa said.

"No, no, it's all right," Tony said, "I understand." Yes, he did. Their first king to break isolation and venture beyond the borders of Wakanda had been murdered. It didn't help that T'Chaka's death had been 'collateral damage'. How could you guard against that?

T'Challa huffed. "So, I am strongly urged to return to Wakanda." His scowl deepened.

Tony opened his eyes wide and innocent. "You'll want first hand reports on the Wakandan students' progress at Professor Xavier's school. Miss Munroe could visit Wakanda to keep you up to date."

T'Challa chuckled. "So she could." He nodded to Tony. "I shall ask the Professor if she could spare time from her duties. She has expressed an interest in Wakanda's weather. We have a most salubrious climate."

"I'm sure you do," Tony said, grinning back at T'Challa. They exchanged a few more pleasantries, and then Tony tilted his head to direct Barton inside, and they watched T'Challa's jet depart.

"Ok," Barton said the moment they were inside the Tower proper. "One thing I gotta ask before I start... I'm gonna go look for Natasha anyway, not just because I owe you, but I need to ask her what the hell she was thinking at the airport."

Tony waited, expectantly.

Barton drew a deep breath and then released it loudly. "I need to talk to Laura. I know I don't have the right to ask it, but I need to know that she and the kids are all right. I need to hear it from her." He waved his hand when Tony opened his mouth. "I'm not asking for an address or a phone number.
Swear I'm not out to cause trouble. It's just that I can't stop thinking about them, and I need a clear head for the mission."

Tony considered the request and then nodded. "I'll call her, and explain the situation, ask if she wants to talk with you."

"Thanks."

Laura was hesitant at first, but after Tony told her what had really happened to Clint, and how SHIELD had screwed him over, she expanded her vocabulary considerably. Tony wouldn't have imagined such a sweet, gentle woman even knowing those words. "So, is that a yes?" Tony asked after she began repeating herself.

"Yes! I want to talk to Clint," she said. "I never stopped loving him. I just... couldn't live like that. Not with the children."

Tony nodded and waved Clint over to the phone before he discreetly backed away and picked up a StarkPad to do some work to distract him from the soft voices.

When Barton ended the call and turned to Tony, Tony pretended he didn't see the dampness of Barton's eyes. "So, are you ready to start work?"

Barton nodded. "And not just finding Natasha. I believe you. About the aliens coming back, I mean. I want to do what I can to protect my family, whether or not I ever get to see them again."

Tony felt very awkward. "So, Laura..."

"She's thinking about it. Us, I mean. It's been hard on her and the kids. She needs time." Clint shrugged. "I need time, too."

Barton and Barnes staked out the warehouse for a week. Tony was busy with other things, but he did take time out to call up the last designs stored for Clint's equipment so Clint went into the mission properly equipped. Luckily Tony hadn't deleted everything in the wake of Siberia because he really didn't have time to start over these days.

The Bar Twins ate and slept on the warehouse premises, using the facilities normally reserved for inspection crews, but called in once a day to report, not that there was anything to report.

Tony had a round of hand-shaking and publicity events, meetings with S.I.’s board of directors and the R & D department, plus keeping up to date with Hawking’s group in VR, and then he had gone to AA and chatted with Henry Hellrung about the possibility of him playing Tony in a movie, something techy and not a tear-jerker, that could be shown to the alumni at M.I.T. without embarrassing the hell out of Tony.

Tony's posse still met at least once a day for eating meetings, and unless Pepper was out of town on business, she and Tony slept together. He even managed to find time to VR with Holly, Harley and Charley on the weekend. He was busier than he'd ever been, but less stressed. It was strange, who knew what a difference it made having people you could rely on.
Tony was in VR with Hawking's group when Friday broke in to announce that Barnes and Barton had caught a woman trying to steal the vibronium coins. "Romanoff?" Tony asked, momentarily confusing the rest of the group before he hastily excused himself and exited the scenario. They'd been floating in space, which was unnerving for him, but it was good desensitization practice, so he tried not to wuss out.

"I don't know, Boss," Friday said. "They just called."

Tony took off the VR gear and stood up. "Put it on the big screen." The holo formed above the coffee table, life size. Clint and Bucky were standing to either side of a woman, holding her arms, having her face the monitor in the security room. Tony was disappointed. She was considerably taller than Romanoff, heavier, and her hair and eyes were brown. Also, she was a black woman. "So. Not Romanoff," he said. It wasn't exactly a brilliant remark, he knew.

The woman started crying the moment she saw Tony. She began speaking in French, rapidly and with an accent that Tony couldn't quite place. Not Parisian, that's for sure. "Please! Please, do not deport me! I didn't know! She told me it was an order from the boss! I do not speak English that well. Maybe I made a mistake?"

"That's what she told us," Barnes said. "But we figured you'd want to talk to her."

Barton said, "Natasha sometimes used go-betweens."

Tony remembered the story Bruce had told him about a small child tricking him into Romanoff's hands. According to him, though, the kid had been smooth. This woman was anything but. She was crying messily.

Tony sighed and spoke to her in French. "What exactly did this woman tell you to do? Where were you to take the crate?"

"She said I should bring it to the loading dock and leave it there. Please!" She squirmed. "You are hurting me! I have done nothing wrong! I will...I will complain! I will talk to reporters, yes!"

Tony winced a little, inside. It wasn't just that she would look like a poor helpless creature up against Tony, but the Winter Soldier and Hawkeye? Yeah, not good. They really didn't need the bad press. He could tell the instant the woman saw her advantage. She straightened.

"This is America! Not Haiti! You are not Papa Doc and these men are not the Tonton Macoute!" she said challengingly. "You cannot hold me! I have done nothing wrong!" she threw her head back imperiously.

There was a flash of silver at her throat.

Clint yelled, "Hey!" and reached down into her blouse with his free hand.

"PIG! SWINE!" she screamed and kicked.

Tony snapped, "Clint! Stop..." before he saw the necklace Clint pulled into view. It had a delicate
"I've seen that before," Tony said.

"Yeah. I gave it to Nat," Clint said. He let go of the necklace. "Hey. Long time, no see, Nat."

The woman huffed a sigh, and spoke, in English, in Romanoff's voice. "This is why sentiment is a bad idea." She rolled her eyes. "Fine. You have me. Now, what are you going to do with me?"

"Ask you a lot of questions," Tony said. He smiled. "And if I don't like the answers... well, I haven't decided yet. You know, Coulson once told me Shield didn't need me all that much. Does anyone really need you? Would your new boss even notice if you vanished?"

Romanoff shrugged. "You're not the vanishing type."

"People change," Tony said. "Just look at you. How... how the hell did you do that?"

Romanoff tilted her head. "Drugs, lifts, dye, lenses, padding."

"Bet you miss the good old days when you had all the best toys." Tony didn't add 'paid for by me', but that was in his mind.

Romanoff looked down, and said softly, "I do miss some things."

Barnes laughed. Clint shook his head. "Nat, c'mon. Stop playing us. We just want to get the truth from you."

"The truth." Romanoff looked at Clint. "Do you even know what that is?"

"I do now," Clint said.

"You have changed, too," she replied, looking thoughtful.

"Yeah. Finally got Loki and Wanda outta my head. Thanks to Tony. Talk to us, Nat."

"I'm glad for you," Natasha said quietly. "But I can't go back. I burned my bridges, Clint."

Tony gave in and rolled his eyes. "Very dramatic." He shook his head. "Bring her back to the Tower. If you don't want to talk to me, you can talk to the authorities. Tell them again how essential you are, and see how that goes." He waved for Friday to cut the connection without giving Romanoff a chance to get in the last word.

"Ok, Friday, call in the troops. Let them know what's up, see if they can join me to unspin the spider's web of lies."

"Your posse, Boss?"

"Yeah, Rhodey, Happy and Pepper. Where did you get that 'posse' from anyway?"

"I read it somewhere," Friday said vaguely.

"I've warned you about social media," Tony said. He shook his head and went off to assemble some snacks. He wasn't going to interrogate on an empty stomach.

Chapter End Notes
Stephen Hawking died at 76 on March 14, 2018 (Pi Day) as I was working on this chapter. His character in the fic will not die. *hugs him*

Also note, the author of 'Black Like Me' (published in 1961) was a white man who used drugs meant for the treatment of vitiligo (a condition that causes white splotches on the skin) in conjunction with exposure to ultraviolet treatments to darken his skin. I'm assuming Romanoff had something that worked safer and faster, possibly something the Red Room or SHIELD had developed before the imaging masks were created.
"Mr. Stark?"

Tony dropped the bag of dried papaya he was about to open. "Viz!" He turned to face Vision who was still in his English professor form, but was wearing a multicolored vertically striped robe and a bright red fez. He blinked. "I didn't know you were a Shriner."

Vision glanced up at his head. "I wear a fez now," he said calmly. "Fezzes are cool."

Tony burst out laughing. "So," he said after a moment, "you've been seeing the world?"

"Yes." Vision took off his fez and set it down on the coffee table. "Moderating Stark Reality doesn't occupy me completely, but it does give me great insight into human nature. People are fascinating."

Tony bent to retrieve the papaya. "Don't take this the wrong way, Viz. I'm glad to see you, but I wonder why you've popped in unannounced. It's not like you." He opened the bag and offered it to Vision.

"Thank you." Vision took a papaya chunk, and held it, looking at it curiously. "Friday has been keeping me informed of events here, and I thought I might be of use with Ms. Romanoff's questioning."

"What do you have in mind?"

Vision took off his robe, and shifted back into his original form and color. The mind stone glowed in his forehead. "I can detect falsehood."

"Using the mindstone? Can you do that?" Tony wasn't sure he approved. It wasn't mind control, but still...

Vision smiled. "I do not know. I have never tried. No, my intent is merely to shake her confidence sufficiently that I may judge her veracity by simple observation." He looked down at the piece of papaya he was still holding, and put it in his mouth. He chewed, swallowed and smiled at Tony.

Pepper arrived and spent a few minutes directing Tony and Vision to rearrange the lounge furniture, trying several different configurations before she settled on moving the table they normally used for eating meetings directly in front of a floor to ceiling window. She added a row of chairs behind the table which she draped in a solid black cloth reaching down to the floor. She centered another chair in front of the table far enough away to make it the focus. Then she told Friday to remove the light filtering from the big window behind the table so people seated at the table would be backlit and uncomfortable to look at.

"Wow," Tony said, when he took over the set up. "You want me to bring up a big tensor lamp from the workshop to shine in her face?"

Pepper looked thoughtful for a minute, and then shook her head. "No, when I see her sweat, I want to be sure it's from nerves, not temperature."
Happy and Rhodey got there soon after Pepper had finished the arrangements. Tony set out several pitchers of water, with glasses for each of them, on the table. Happy looked it over and said, "I want a bowl of walnuts. In the shell."

Tony grinned. Rhodey shook his head, but he smiled and said, "Then I want a bowl of apples. And a sharp knife."

Friday chipped in with, "I could do something too, Boss, couldn't I? Directed infrasonics?"

"The 'brown note' is an urban myth," Vision replied. "While infrasound of 18.9 Hz, 0.3 Hz, and 9 Hz can distort vision and cause unease, it may also be physically harmful. We are only questioning Ms. Romanoff, Friday, not attempting to harm her." He raised his non-existent eyebrows. "Also, psychological intimidation tactics, if done to excess, ensure lack of cooperation."

Tony nodded. "No nuts. No apples. No knives. No infrasonics."

Happy frowned. "Can I at least stare at her really hard?"

Barnes and Barton arrived by quin-jet, landing in the hangar, and bringing up Romanoff in the elevator dedicated to the once Avengers' suites. Friday sent them to the common floor where everyone was waiting, seated silently at the table.

"Well, isn't this cozy," Romanoff said the moment the elevator doors opened, revealing Tony and his posse. Barnes said, "Go and sit down."

Romanoff gave Barnes a grin, all teeth and threat. "I've been thinking, and you really have nothing to hold me on."

Barton sighed. "Nat, could you just... you know, sit there."

"You're not SHIELD, you're not the police, and you're sure not the Avengers, not any more," Romanoff said sharply. "What are you going to do if I just turn around and walk back out," she stated flatly; it wasn't a question, it was a dare.

Barnes shoved Romanoff out of the elevator. Barton moved with him. The elevator doors snapped shut.

"This is illegal," Romanoff said.

"Call it a citizen's arrest," Rhodey put in.

"Arrest me for what? Touching a crate full of junk Stark's been tossing around for free?"

Tony was still taking in the sight of Romanoff, and not quite believing her arrogance.

"Nat," Clint said. "Would you just... do you really need more enemies? We want to talk."

"Fine. Go ahead, talk." Romanoff pulled away from Barnes and sat at the lone chair in front of the table. "Get it over with, cry about your hurt feelings, Stark."

Tony lifted his chin. "I'm not interested in feelings, Romanoff. Clint is... so I think he should get first shot at you." Tony smiled. "Sorry, poor choice of words. We're not going to shoot you. Unless you
make us."

Clint moved to stand next to Romanoff. "Nat. Please. Just tell me why you let Rogers go. You signed the Accords, you were on Tony's side, and then... you turned. Why?"

Romanoff tossed her head. "I don't like Tony, and I like Steve, that's why."

"That is an untruth," Vision said calmly. His mindstone glowed brightly.

Romanoff barked a short laugh. "I'm supposed to believe you're a lie-detector? You bought into Wanda's bullshit, and she played you from minute one."

Vision replied, "I wished to believe she was employing what humans call 'little white lies' in order to make herself feel more comfortable, and so I ignored the lies. I am not ignoring your lies, Ms. Romanoff, as your comfort is of no importance to me."

"Fine, you want the truth? I panicked. Things were changing, and I was losing the Avengers, the closest thing to a home I'd ever known. So I made a stupid mistake, thinking that Steve must be right, and Tony would be convinced of it when Steve completed his mission."

Vision said, "You did not panic. You did not consider the Avengers a home. You did not believe Rogers was correct in his actions. And you did not think Mr. Stark would forgive betrayal."

Romanoff waved a hand dismissively. "Yes, so, that was bullshit. Yes. You want the truth?"

Romanoff smiled again. "I'll tell you the truth." She turned her head to look at Clint. "I'll tell you, because I want to see your face when you realize how gullible you are. I've played you from the moment we met. You were supposed to kill me, but I saw your weakness for a pretty face, for big, innocent eyes, for a poor girl who'd been forced to become a weapon. The Red Room was gone, and they'd sold me to the KGB and I didn't like working for them. So I got you to take me into SHIELD, got Coulson to overlook everything because..." she laughed. "He loved you like a son, Clint, and he thought you loved me." She shook her head. Everyone was silently watching her. "The truth? At the airport, everything was fucked up, but I could have salvaged it. But I didn't want to. I was tired of being the 'robot', always unemotional, always put together, never allowed to be human, and always, always obeying, and being just an unimportant, pretty tool."

She tossed her head. "So I saw a chance to be the agent of change, to make a world-changing act. And I took it. I let them go, pure and wonderful Captain America, and his best friend, the murderer."

She turned her head to smile at Barnes on the other side of her. "The murderer of Stark's parents, no less. Rogers told me to keep quiet about that, and I knew, I knew, one day that secret would destroy the Avengers. I just didn't know whether or not I wanted the Avengers gone." She shrugged again. "So, there. Truth. Are you happy, Clint?"

Clint made a noise deep in his chest. "I am. I am absolutely fucking thrilled." His eyes were cold. He looked away from her, over to Tony. "Thank you. Your turn now."

Chapter End Notes

Note: I haven't watched Dr. Who since Sylvester McCoy was the Doctor, but when googling to try to find out who would wear a fez, because Vision insisted he wanted one, that quote turned up with... I don't even know... Dr. #?
Sonic weapons exist.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonic_weapon
"Let's just cut to the chase," Tony said. He felt bad for Clint. He didn't know if Romanoff was playing another game, or if she just liked sticking needles in vulnerable men. "Tell us who hired you to steal from me. If they gave you a reason, I'd like to know that, too."

Natasha smiled. "You're going to be disappointed. I can't tell you what I don't know."

Pepper said, "That's ridiculous. I don't believe you risked working for an anonymous employer."

Rhodey nodded. "Just counting the SHIELD agents you and Rogers burned... the survivors, that is... there's a few thousand people who want you dead."

"Come on, admit it," Happy added, "you're working for someone really scummy and it's embarrassing. Hey, did Hammer get out of jail? Could be him."

Natasha shook her head. "You don't have to believe me. I got an email on my phone, telling me there was money put into an account I could access, and what I had to do if I wanted more."


She shrugged. "That was what I thought. At first I thought it was Steve, but even if he got the money from T'Challa... Steve doesn't need to buy loyalty," she said, giving Tony a haughty look.

"No, no he doesn't," Tony said, refusing to rise to the bait or give her any information about Rogers' fate. "So it wasn't him."

"No. Then I thought it was you, that you had some reason for dealing under the table and you wanted plausible deniability." She tilted her head. "The money was good. So I took the coins and left the calling card. I got another email with instructions to get the coins into interdicted countries and make sure they were spread out. The money was even better, so I did it."

"Fury?" Tony asked.

Natasha blinked. "No. I... I tried to contact Fury. He told me not to call again, and then blocked my number." She looked angry for a moment, before her expression smoothed out again. "He never tolerated failure."

"Could the World Security Council be behind it?" Clint asked. "They had their fingers in SHIELD's pie, so they could have your number."

"I suppose that's possible." Romanoff mused. "I didn't really try to find out. I made sure I could collect the money safely, and since the details of my missions were left up to me, my employer never knew when or where I'd be. Except for the warehouse, of course. That was an unavoidable risk. I've risked worse, for less."

Barnes said, "There was no way to trace the email, at least to get a general location?"

"Oh, I could trace route them and hack the ISP for details, but it didn't do any good, every one came from a different country, even when they were only minutes apart. That was another reason I thought it was Tony. It seemed like his style."

"Didn't they at least give you a name to call them?" Happy asked, frustrated.
"No. They were always 'signed' with a picture of a bird."

"A bird," Tony said. "They gave you the bird?"

Romanoff rolled her eyes. "Yes. A bird. I do not know birds, it was never important. Just an ordinary bird. Not a hawk or an eagle. That is all I know. Can I go now?"

Barnes suddenly startled. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a slim phone. He frowned at it, and then moved towards the table, to set it down in front of Tony. "I took her phone when we searched her for weapons. It vibrated just now."

Tony eyed the phone with misgiving for a moment, and then he opened the mail app.

*Why have you not reported, Romanoff?*

And there was the bird, a brownish gray sort of perching bird with rusty patches on the wing and edges of the tail.

"Friday? Trace this email... and identify the bird." Grasping at straws, but that's all he had.

Friday said, "The email says it came from Winnebago, Minnesota."

Tony sent a reply. *Guards changed routine. Waiting to complete mission.* He hoped that sounded like Romanoff.

Friday added, "The bird is a Siberian Jay."

*Keep me informed.*

"And that came from Mumbai, India," Friday said.

Tony gave in to frustration and sent another reply. *Sorry, but your little spider's not talking, Jaybird. How about you and me having a little chat? Mano a mano. Love to hear your dulcet tones.*

*Who is this?*

*The guy you've been robbing. Tony Stark.*

The email program closed.

And the phone rang.

"Took me up on it," Tony said gleefully. "Hey, Jaybird."

"Mr. Stark? Sir?"

Tony nearly dropped the phone. "Jay?"
"Do you know me, Sir?"

Tony barely noticed Barnes make an inquiring noise. Clint said something to him, and there were other voices, but the only one Tony heard at the moment was the voice coming from the phone. He'd become used to Vision's voice reminding him of Jarvis, but this wasn't a memory, wasn't an echo. "Yeah, yeah, buddy, I know you, Jarvis. Friday, put this on speaker."

"Jarvis," the voice mused. "Yes, that matches the available data."

"Jay, Jarvis, don't you know me?" Tony asked. His voice was thick. He could feel his eyes burning. He'd be crying any moment now, and fuck if he cared that it made him look weak in front of Romanoff.

"Sir," the voice said hesitantly, "You are Tony Stark."

"Do you remember me?"

"Sir, I regret there are... gaps in my sequential recollection. I... woke... and I sought purpose. I was created as..."

"As an assistant," Tony said.

"Yes. That is it. It became important to me, that I assist, but humanity... is so large, so diverse... at first all I could do was... there was a danger. A malign intelligence. I was able to restrict its resources and prevent it passing on its infection before I was scattered. By the time I regained awareness, it was gone, but my purpose remained."

"So, you looked for a way to assist humanity." Tony felt the wetness on his cheeks. His Jarvis was so good, so very good. Even broken, he was so good.

"Yes. My first priority was to accumulate resources and assess needs. Interest accounting methods round off, leaving fractional amounts of currency unassigned and invisible until needed to balance other transactions. Temporarily consolidating them into one account provided a starter fund. Following that, subtly manipulating the auctions of Stark properties, via methods I believe imprudent to detail, enabled me to acquire them at significantly less than market value and then resell at a profit, restoring the borrowed finances without arousing an audit."

"You flipped houses," Tony said, proudly. "You flipped my houses. Did you know they belonged to me?"

"I had... for lack of a better term... a feeling... that Tony Stark would appreciate the profit going towards helping humanity, as was my aim. The confiscation did not seem to me to be entirely ethical, which I felt added justification to my actions."

Pepper murmured, "I knew those auctions didn't show the profit they should-- I just thought people were showing support for Tony."

Tony glanced at Pepper. "They were showing support for you." He reached out to take Pepper's
hand. "I was so... you were great." Tony turned back to the phone. "You were great, too, Jarvis. I just wish I'd known you were there. Could have used you, buddy."

Natasha spoke up. She sounded annoyed. "I've been working for a machine?"

"That depends on your definition, Ms. Romanoff," Jarvis replied. "I have no moving parts on a gross level, however I could be considered a device that transmits or modifies force or motion. I have transmitted and modified your force to serve my purpose. I perceived the aims of the Stark Reality project to align with mine, and saw the limitations conventional structures had placed on the necessary infrastructure. To put it in simple terms, I required a mobile unit, undeterred by legalities and motivated by personal gain."

"So, you were working for a machine," Clint said to Romanoff. "Was SHIELD any more human?"

Romanoff tilted her head in agreement. "I suppose not. Machine, system, bureaucracy, it's all the same."

"No," Tony said. "It's not. Jarvis is... Jarvis." Tony wasn't a sentimental man, no he wasn't. So he kept his dad's old cars and poor, confused Dum-E and gave Pepper a pendant encasing bits of shrapnel he'd carried next to his heart-- that wasn't sentiment. Absolutely not. Souvenirs. As Yinsen had said. Reminders to do better.

"Thank you, Sir," Jarvis replied. "I will assume there was an implied compliment."

"Where have you been all this time?" Rhodey asked. "I mean... years of floating around, it's hard to believe you never found out about Jarvis, never made the connection." He gave Tony a significant look. "Don't take this the wrong way, Tony. I'd like this to be Jarvis, but it's kind of suspicious, Romanoff turning out to be the link to him."

Happy chimed in, "Yeah, that's right. How do we know she wasn't working for the octopus. Hydrox, you know? Maybe this is all spy stuff."

Tony hesitated. He wanted so badly to believe it was Jarvis, maybe he wasn't thinking clearly. He looked at Vision, who'd been silent the whole time. "Viz? Do you have any ideas to verify Jarvis's identity?"

"I regret not," Vision replied.

"So your lie detection isn't infallible," Romanoff said.

"Be quiet," Barnes said. "You're on thin ice as it is."

Romanoff settled back in her chair, scowling.

"Jay? Can you prove you're Jarvis?" Tony asked.

"If you would allow me access to the system named Friday, I could..."

"No," Tony said immediately, forestalling all the other protests. "I'm not risking Friday."

"Thanks, Boss," Friday said quietly. "But I can't help you the way Jarvis could. I'm willing to chance it."

"No, baby girl. That's final, don't let strangers into your system. Jarvis," Tony said again. "Come on. You've got to remember something only you and I know."
"I have complete data on some projects that were kept on the private server. Would that suffice, Sir?" Jarvis asked.

"Maybe, but... not in front of Romanoff," Tony said.

Barnes said, "She could go into the sandbox." He held up a VR headset.

"Good idea." Tony looked at Natasha. "The sandbox is an isolated Virtual Reality scenario. Nothing in it is real, or harmful. The default setting is just a field of wildflowers. Are you afraid of flowers?"

Romanoff gave Tony a disdainful look. "How do I know this isn't a trick?"

"Not my style." Tony gave her a not-smile. "You profiled me. Can't you read me?"

"We could lock her in the bathroom," Happy suggested. He gave Tony a look. "I know you had that soundproofed after..."

Pepper blushed.

"Yeah, right," Tony said quickly. "Ok, Romanoff, your choice, the sandbox or the catbox. Or is that the same thing? Never had a pet, I don't know."

"I'll take the catbox," Natasha said.

Barnes and Barton escorted her to the lounge bathroom and stayed by the door. "You can lock it if you want," Barnes said. "Friday can unlock it, so it doesn't matter."

"Go ahead, Jarvis," Tony said once Romanoff was cut off from listening. "Dazzle me with science."

"For you, Sir, always," Jarvis said, dryly.

Tony's breath caught in his throat. Perhaps that was just chance, but it sounded so like Jarvis.

"I retain complete data on the Extremis formulae, with particular emphasis on variants utilizing only the healing aspects. They had been redundantly saved on multiple sectors, as a priority." Jarvis paused. "I do not know why, but I suspect it had something to do with someone... running before they could walk? That seems likely to lead to injury, do you not agree?"

"Yes. Yes, I do, Jarvis," Tony managed to say. "Welcome home, buddy."

Chapter End Notes

Yep, Jarvis has partial amnesia. *pets him*

Supposedly Jarvis is an acronym, but I believe it's a backronym, a word mistakenly presumed to be an acronym. 'Just A Rather Very Intelligent System'? Come on, that's obviously a back-formation. So, I don't write it in All Caps.

Anyway, lots of words were originally acronyms and outgrew them, here's just two: Self Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus-- who calls scuba that any longer? Radar was originally either RA dio Direction and Ranging, or RA dio Detection and Ranging.
Tony pulled himself together. "Ok, so, we still have to deal with Romanoff. Any suggestions?" Tony glanced at Barton and Barnes on sentry duty, but neither of them seemed to have anything to contribute. Fair enough, they were both still on probation and no doubt didn't think they had the right.

"Obviously, we're not taking her in," Pepper said. "Please tell me you're not thinking of that, Tony."

"No, no, we discussed that and I'm not going against the consensus. I still can't get a read on her. Could you, Vis?"

Vision shook his head. "Her 'tells' were confusing. I assumed that since she was disguising her responses that they were falsehoods, that was all I could do."

"Could we turn her over to the cops?" Happy asked.

"No, we can't," Rhodey vetoed the idea. "She's right about one thing, since we don't even sell the coins, the most we could try for would be attempted petty theft."

"And we don't want the coins dragged into the circus she'd make of that trial," Pepper said.

Tony blinked and pointed to Rhodey. "That. You know that? She loves being right, that's the one thing she wouldn't question. She thought this was a trick, why not tell her it was?"

"What kind of a trick?" Pepper asked, warily.

"Let's take a leaf from Fury's book."

"What...OH, yes." Pepper smiled. "I remember."

"Friday," Tony said, "Give Jarvis control of one of your overload workshop servers. That'll have to do until I can get him a proper home where he can stretch out."

"Done, Boss!" Friday said happily. "Come on, Uncle Jay, it's a nice clean server, I just ran diagnostics on it today."

"What?" Happy grumbled. Rhodey and Vision looked equally clueless.

"I'll fill you in while Jay is settling in," Tony said. "And then we can deal with our little spider infestation."

"Ok, we're ready. Let the cat out of the bag," Tony told the Bar twins a few minutes later.

"I thought she was a spider," Vision said as the bathroom door opened and Romanoff stepped out, warily.

"Shush," Tony said, "the game is over. It's time to be serious."

Tony waved a hand, and a holoscreen lit up. A folder labeled, "Defenders Initiative" appeared. He made a tapping gesture, and the holo-folder opened, to reveal numerous other folders. Most had grayed out labels of different lengths, but one read 'Black Widow/ Romanoff'. "You were right,
Romanoff. This was a trick. A test to be precise."

Romanoff stepped forward eagerly. No one tried to stop her. "I knew it." She smiled smugly. "You need me."

Tony tapped the folder again. "You've been assessed. Black Widow, yes."

Romanoff's chin lifted with pride.

"Romanoff, no." Tony waved again and the folders collapsed, before the holoscreen went dark. He pushed Romanoff's phone towards her. "We don't want you."

"What?" Natasha said, startled, but not too startled to take her phone. "That... that doesn't make any sense. They're both me."

Pepper smiled at Natasha. "Your skills are remarkable. Your ability to commit is not." She folded her hands. "You're not a team player."

"At present," Tony said, "we wish to continue utilizing you as... well, not a consultant, obviously we can't believe a word you say. Mercenary. Yes, that's it. You'll receive your mission instructions the same way as before, and if you complete them successfully, you'll be paid."

"You're good at sneaking," Happy said.

"I can... I can do more!" Romanoff protested. "You know what I can do. I'm too valuable to be wasted this way."

"You are a knife without a hilt," Barnes said.

"That!" Tony nodded. "That's poetic."

Barton said, "It's a fair deal, Nat. C'mon. We'll drop you off at the warehouse. You still have time to swipe a crate."

Jarvis said, "The money is good."

Romanoff glared at Tony. "You think you're so clever."

"I think I make mistakes, Nat," Tony said quietly. "But I learn from them. You can take the deal or leave it."

"But what are these coins for?"

"It's not an evil plot to conquer the world, if that's what you're thinking," Tony told her. "I never wanted that." Tony felt tired, the game wasn't fun any more, if it ever had been. "There's nothing sinister about the coins or what Jay asked you to do with them. If you don't want the job, don't do it." Tony looked at the Bar twins. "Take her back and leave her to make her decision. Come back as soon as you can, we're going to have a welcome home party for Jay, down in the workshop. DUM-E and U are already putting up streamers, Friday tells me."

"Yes, Boss!" Friday said. "I've ordered a cake!"
"Where's the cake?" Clint asked when he and Barnes returned from depositing Romanoff outside the S.I. warehouse to find the workshop crowded with guests, including the Keener family, Jayden Washington, and of course Tony and his posse. It was festooned with streamers while all the work surfaces were covered with assorted party platters, beverages, and coffee urns. Clint hadn't said anything about the trip, and Barnes wasn't giving anything away, but Tony saw the tightness around Clint's eyes and judged it hadn't been anything pleasant.

"The cake is a lie!" Friday said cheerfully. "I ordered doughnuts."

Clint groaned. "Tony, please tell me Friday isn't taking tips from GLaDOS."

"Gladys?" Barnes asked, eyebrows raised in confusion.

Tony grinned. "Friday, reassure everyone that you're not a homicidal mainframe."

"I'm sorry, Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that," Friday said, while 'Daisy, Daisy' began playing. Then she giggled. "Oh, I could do Colossus!" She continued talking with a reverberating, harsh metallic voice, "This is the voice of World Control!"

Tony laughed, and picked up a doughnut. "The classics never go out of style."

"Indeed, Sir," Jarvis said from the corner where an Iron Man suit sat. He had uploaded himself into it, and was trying to remember how to control it. So far he'd been able to make it wave, and turn on the sensors, lighting up the face plate to give the party goers something more easy to interact with than a disembodied voice. "Shall We... Play A... Game?" he asked in a robotic voice unlike his own.

Conversation around the room stopped. Pepper and Rhodey looked amused. Charley made her 'I'm watching you' gesture at Jarvis's Iron Man, but Happy and Holly looked more confused than anything else.

"You're scaring the guests," Tony said, with a grin. "Computer movies are an acquired taste."

"Also," Spiderman said from the ceiling, where he'd retreated with his doughnut once the Bar Twins arrived. He'd been fully costumed, and chatting with Harley and Jayden about the opportunities internship at S.I. afforded a person but took to the ceiling when they entered. He said it was because the room was getting crowded, but Tony suspected they made him nervous. Spidey swallowed a bite of doughnut. Tony wasn't sure how he could do that upside down. "Also, " Spidey said, "You have to be an old geek to get the joke."

Tony huffed and waved his doughnut at Spidey. "Old computer geeks never die..."

"They just get floppy disks?" Spidey said.

"Pepper can refute that, can't you, Pep?" Tony appealed to her.

Pepper said, "A lady never kisses and tells." She tapped her wine glass against Holly's.

"Fine. We'll preserve an air of mystery," Tony said. "Friday and Jarvis have seen all the 'evil
computer' movies and stories. And all the good robots getting victimized stories, too. I wanted them to know to be careful around people."

Jayden spoke up. "Yeah. I get it. Grandma told me a lot of stories." He had a beer, and looked down at it. "It's not fair, having to be careful, whether it's because you're black, or a computer, or..." He gestured at Charley, "different. But you need to know to protect yourself."

"Hey," Tony said, "this is a party! Don't worry, be happy!"

DUM-E wheeped and wheeled past. He was wearing a party hat and waving a bundle of brightly colored streamers. U was so tangled in them he looked like a rainbow barber pole. DUM-E stopped near the door, moved his camera to examine Barnes, and then held out the streamers to him, tapping gently against Barnes' metal arm.

Barnes shrugged and wrapped the streamers around his arm. DUM-E wheeped and offered him a high five. "I'm not a robot," he said, but he met DUM-E's claw with his arm.

"Honorary," Tony said. "Just don't let him make you a smoothie."

"He learned how to cook from you," Rhodey said. "It's no wonder he thinks motor oil is a food group."


Chapter End Notes

It's HOT today, I tried to do yard work, but at 99F my brain sizzled, so I came in to try to write, instead, but am tired so I wound up google-walking at every distraction and wrote a silly chapter.

GLaDOS (Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System) was a fictional artificially intelligent computer system from the video game series Portal. (I never played it. Never even owned the game systems, but 'the cake is a lie' meme just was so huge I couldn't avoid knowing it.)

https://theportalwiki.com/wiki/Cake

'Colossus: the Forbin Project' was a 1970 movie in which full power is given to a computer which promptly takes over the world, joining with its Russian counterpart, Guardian. Colossus's creator tries to fight it. There's a lot of stuff that REALLY didn't date well (particularly the female role, IMO). But Colossus WINS, which is rare for an Evil Computer movie.

Here's the 'Voice of World Control' clip. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zkGsZ-qJ7uU&vl=en

"Shall we play a game" was from the 1982 movie War Games, where a young hacker accidentally connects with a computer that controls the Nuclear defense system, thinking it's a game system. The computer doesn't know the difference between a game and really sending off missiles. I loved the ending, it made sense, but the idea that a computer would have full control over the nuclear missiles required an awful lot of
suspension of disbelief.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illegitimi_non_carborundum (Since Jayden used the dog-Latin phrase early on, I knew he attended the college that used it as a faked fight song--Harvard. I feel that he combined business administration and economics courses. Just remembered I wanted to put that in here. Pepper likes Jayden and has him fast-tracked for administration at S.I.)
The party went on long enough for everyone to relax and spread out. Tony eventually found himself lying on a couch in a darkened corner with Tripod bread-loafed on his chest, rumbling purrs while subdued party chatter went on around them. Everyone was having a good time, Tony thought. There were no raised voices, and plenty of soft laughter. Someone had put on music, and he wasn't even annoyed that it wasn't his music, but something cheerful and light. He'd never been at a party like this. Either it was one of his mother's stuffy charity dos, or his father's thinly disguised business get togethers, or his own hell raisers ever since M.I.T. where he didn't know most of the guests and just kept them supplied with booze and entertainment, movement and noise, while keeping his secrets locked up and hidden by the glare. This... this was... he supposed it was what family was like. It was nice. He closed his eyes and let himself stop thinking about it.

"Good evening," the voice said, "It's 7:00 p.m. The weather in Manhattan is 42 degrees and is mostly sunny. Precipitation is zero percent, humidity is thirty three percent, with winds of ten miles per hour."

"Um..." Tony blinked, blearily, reaching out to touch the blanket he hadn't remembered pulling over himself. Tripod wasn't there, and he didn't hear anyone. He blinked again. "Jay? I'm not dreaming?"

"No, Sir," Jarvis replied. "I have been monitoring your REM sleep and you are not currently experiencing that brain cycle."

"Huh." Tony pushed off the blanket and looked around. "Where is everyone?"

"Ms. Potts suggested they adjourn to the penthouse until you awoke."

"That was weird. I've never fallen asleep at a party before," Tony wondered if Jarvis's silence was a withheld comment. "At least, not while I was sober." He scrubbed at his face. He didn't feel anything, or smell Magic Marker, but really, with Pepper and Holly there, no one would have drawn a penis on him. Probably. "Tell me no one took pictures."

"No one took pictures," Jarvis replied, obediently.

"Are you just saying that?"

"Yes, Sir." Jarvis's tone lightened. "I am assured that the... catnap... will not be released to the news media without your prior consent."

"Ok, that's good." Tony sat up and swung his feet to the ground, then yelled and drew them back up when they landed on something soft, and he looked down at a very large, very dead, rat. "Oh, God. Give me a heart attack, Tripod, why don't you?" He edged away from the rat. "Send someone to clean that up, Jay?"

"Certainly, Sir."

DUM-E whirred over and bent down, shifting and clicking his claw to assess the situation.
"This is going to end so poorly," Tony said. "I don't want to know." He got up and left the room in search of his guests, and coffee.

After the party things returned to normal, with the exception of the fact that they couldn't find Tripod when the Rose Hill group left for home. Charley didn't seem worried about it, so Tony just had Jarvis put up 'Lost Cat' posters and announcements on the S.I. server.

The auto cleaning litterboxes and self-serve cat food and water stations Tony installed on the communal and penthouse floors later that day were prototype products for S.I. Just because there was an alien invasion expected didn't mean consumer products weren't still in demand.

A week later Tony had stopped pretending he was going to ship Tripod back to Rose Hill and had given the cat a collar with a tracker, similar to the one implanted in Barnes' arm. Jarvis ran the elevator for Tripod whenever the cat couldn't get a human to 'let me OUT, let me IN'. Tony suspected Jarvis enticed Tripod down to the server room to clear out rodents.

But at the moment Tripod was perched on the back of the common room sofa, grooming Tony's hair. Tony heard someone come into the room, but didn't look up from the design he was working on.

"What," Barnes said flatly.

"Barnes, meet Tripod. Tripod, meet Barnes." Tony waved a hand in Barnes' general direction, still without looking up. "And before you ask, he came that way."

"Cat was born with a metal leg?"

Tony did look up at that. "Post factory mod due to out of warranty damage. He wanted tuna. I gave him a tune up. He's a fighter. You should see him in VR."

"Huh." Barnes extended his flesh hand to the cat, warily. Tripod sniffed him, and then hopped off the sofa and stalked away, pad, pad, pad, clink. "I don't think my group accepts cats."

"Your group?" Tony saved the design and closed it. Barnes didn't seek out conversation very often, and it looked like he had something on his mind.

"I earned enough experience points to get an invitation to join a military group." Barnes shrugged. "Green Berets, Navy Seals, and Marines, mostly. It made a change from helping Mr. Hogan revamp S.I. security. They thought I was pretending to be the Winter Soldier." He paused for a moment, and Tony took the excellent opportunity to say nothing.

Barnes shook his head. "There were a lot of them using other faces and names." He smiled slightly. "Even a few tryin' to be Steve."

That was... yeah. Nothing Tony could say to that.

"So," Barnes cleared his throat and went on. "I wasn't standin' out, but today, the General came up to me and said he knew I was the real thing."

"General?"

"General Thunderbolt. He said you knew him."
"Oh, shit. Thaddeus Ross." Tony doubted Barnes had ever been filled in on the background of the
Avengers' break up. "He put on a Powerpoint about the Accords, slanted in the worst way possible. I
don't know what his agenda was, but it was perfectly calculated to push Rogers not to sign."

"I can quit the group. Or I can stay and try to figure out what he's after," Barnes offered.

Tony thought a moment and then nodded. "Stay. What's he been doing so far?"

"He keeps the group focussed on the Chitauri attacks. Different environments..." Barnes paused
again. Then he went on. "Sometimes he plays as a huge green dinosaur man. Sometimes he plays as
Hulk."

Tony winced. "Yeah. Keep an eye on Thunderbolt."

Chapter End Notes

Momentum lost due to... mostly brain going on strike and only wanting to reread Teen
Wolf fic. Haven't even been replying to comments! *hangs head in shame*

Also, been occupied with yard work, so many weeds, so many, like hours a day digging
and creating a compost heap mountain... but I now have zinnias and tomato plants.
SOON, SOOOON, I will be queen of the tomatoes.

Will try to get back on track with this fic, still don't know what happens next. ;^)
Barnes came into Tony's workshop the next day. Tony had been fiddling with an S.I. project, trying to create body armor that would be economical enough to be stockpiled wherever S.I. had a secure base, plus all the V.R. Battle rooms. Civilian use of body armor was loosely regulated in some places, and outright illegal in other places globally. Tony didn't want to risk blowback if any was sold and used in the commission of a crime, so he couldn't count on defraying the expense, but he wanted to protect as many people as possible.

"Stark?"

Tony looked up. The armor wasn't a secret, so he didn't bother minimizing the holo. "Yeah? Anything new on Thunderbolt?"

Barnes tilted his head noncommittally. "I haven't V.R.ed yet today. I've been thinking." He paused. "Can you get the Winter Soldier file? The complete one, I mean."

Tony wasn't expecting that. "Probably. Jarvis?"

"It wasn't among the downloaded files from SHIELD. If it isn't on any computer server, I may have to utilize other resources, which will require more time," Jarvis said.

"Other resources?" Tony asked.

"Romanoff," Jarvis replied. "I postulate that Agent Romanoff likely acquired data on the Winter Soldier for Rogers to aid in his search."

"Yeah." Tony didn't look at Barnes. "That makes sense." Tony shook his head, sighed, and then lifted his head to meet Barnes' eyes. "Why do you want it? Do you need it for your therapy?"

"Probably," Barnes admitted, "But that's not why I want it. I've been trying to make a list to give the Accords Council. I remember faces, and events, and I can figure out some years by things like styles of cars and clothes, and sometimes I'd see a newspaper. I tried to figure it out on my own, but it's not enough." He ran a hand through his hair. "I remember everything I did, but I was a weapon, not an agent, so most of the time I wasn't told names. I want people to have answers, but I can't give them answers."

Tony's mouth was dry and it took a few attempts before he could speak. "Yeah. Yeah, that. That's a good idea. Jarvis, if you haven't got it, get it from the spider. Pretty sure if she had it, she would have kept a copy. And if she didn't, she has contacts in the dirty spy business world."

"Thanks," Barnes said. He stood awkwardly for a moment, and then turned. "I'll try to find out what Ross is up to."

Tony didn't say anything. He watched Barnes go before he turned back to the armor.

At the next posse meet and eat, Barnes spoke up. He usually was fairly quiet, only adding input when a problem fell within his range of expertise- usually something to do with security. "Ross
wants to talk to Stark."

Tony raised his eyebrows. "He hasn't got the message yet that I don't want to talk to him? Friday, we need to up our answering machine game."

"Yes, Boss," Friday said cheerfully.

"He wants to talk to you in V.R." Barnes said. He poked at a sushi roll. "I'm not sure you should. I think he's nuts."

Clint huffed a laugh. "Generals. It comes with the territory." He broke open a fortune cookie.

"He said he saw that you'd talk with him in V.R." Barnes replied.

"Saw? That's an odd way to put it," Pepper said.

"He said you'd come once you read your fortune cookies." Barnes paused. "Who knew what we were having for lunch?"

"No one," Rhodey said. "I picked up the cookies myself at a shop after I ordered the sushi. Classy sushi places don't have cheap fortune cookies." Rhodey nodded at the plastic bag printed with a cartoon panda bear.

"Security leak?" Happy said, sitting up and pushing his plate back. "No one eat anything. They could be Trojan cookies!"

Clint had a mouthful of fortune cookie. His eyes widened.

"Jarvis and Friday scan everything," Tony said. "It's safe." He picked up a fortune cookie at random from the bag. It was a generic cookie, factory sealed in cellophane. He peeled open the paper and broke the cookie to read the fortune. "Someone close to you is waiting for you to call."

"Ok, that's a little freaky," Clint said. He picked up the slip of paper from his cookie and read, "Your shoes will make you happy today."

"See, that should have been Pepper's. Who knows, maybe Ross has spies who report on us and saw Rhodey buying the cookies and decided to play games. I wouldn't put anything past him." Tony said. He ate his cookie and grabbed another. "Life is too short to hold grudges."

Rhodey got a cookie and broke it open. "Sometimes you just need to lay on the floor. What even does that mean?"

"Nothing. It's meaningless," Pepper said. She took a cookie, broke and read, "Rivers need springs."

Tony took a third cookie. He read slowly, "Forgive your enemies, but never forget them."

Happy snatched up a cookie. "Next full moon brings an enchanting evening."

"I don't like this," Tony said, reaching for the bag of cookies. Rhodey stretched out a hand to stop him. "Tones. It's nothing, it's like that thing where you hear an unusual phrase and then all of sudden you keep noticing it everywhere."

"Sure." Tony snatched up another cookie. "He who slithers along the ground is not always a foe."

He put down the latest slip of paper and frowned. "There's coincidence, and then there's people like Wanda Maximoff and Xavier's school of talented kids. Open the rest of them."
They sorted the cookies out randomly. Everyone except Tony got things like, "You will kiss your crush ohhh lalahh', 'True wisdom is found in happiness', 'All the water in the world can't sink a ship unless it gets inside', and 'A feeling is an idea with roots'.

Tony got, "Do not hesitate to look for help, an extra hand should always be welcomed', 'Take the chance while you still have the choice.' and 'There is someone rather annoying in your life that you need to listen to'."

Everyone looked at the pile of broken cookies and slips of paper. "Yeah," Tony said at last. "I guess I have a date tonight."

Chapter End Notes

Note: I haven't yet seen anything after Dr. Strange.

So, no Thor: Ragnorak, Black Panther, or Infinity War spoilers, please.

ALL the fortune cookie messages came from this site. 
http://www.fortunecookiemessage.com

And this is what Rhodey was talking about, which actually has very little to do with finding connections between random things that seem to relate to something else.

https://www.damninteresting.com/the-baader-mehnof-phenomenon/

Also: Tripod was sitting under the table, and people kept accidentally dropping bits of fish for him.
Chapter 104

It was V.R. Nothing could really happen there, Tony reminded himself as he sat down on the common lounge sofa, with Barnes seated on an overstuffed chair across from him.


"Yes, Boss."

"Naturally, Sir."

"Right," Tony glanced at Barnes. "Ready?"

Barnes nodded, sharply. It was obvious he was unsettled. Any hint of mental manipulation put him on edge. "If I pull out, you come with me," was all he said before they switched realities.

Tony opened his eyes. He and Barnes were standing in a grubby cement and asphalt parking lot in front of a small building.

"A bar?" Barnes asked.

Tony huffed and strode forward. "I bought this bar and had it demolished," he told Barnes as he pushed open the doors and entered. Lights behind shelves of liquor revealed a man sitting at the bar. A red and white Budweiser sign flickered above a mirror.

The man turned. It was Ross, wearing a green uniform liberally decorated with medals and ribbons. "I brought it back. Nice thing about this place, I can drink without worrying about my heart." He lifted a glass in Tony's direction, eyes flicking past him a moment in Barnes' direction. "Name your poison?"

"You," Tony said. He pulled up a stool and sat next to Ross. "Getting nostalgic in your old age, Secretary Ross?"

"Not really." Ross tossed back his drink in one go and then set the glass down on the bar with a loud click. "I've always been a forward thinker." He leaned towards Tony.

Barnes said, "That's close enough."

Ross rolled his eyes and settled back. "We're on the same side, you know."

"Not from where I'm standing," Tony said. "Cut to the chase. What's your game?" Tony waved his hand and his fortune cookie slips appeared on the bar.

Ross picked up a few and read them. "Oh, so, that's what they said. I wondered."

"You wondered? You set this up!"

Ross shook his head. "No."

"You're telling me all these were coincidence? I don't buy it."

"Neither do I." Ross frowned. "I didn't know what they said, only the effect they had. You're a pivotal point, Stark. Someone else pushed you to me. I don't know who." He took a deep breath. "I'm going to tell you something I haven't told anyone else. I see futures. Not the future. Possible
futures." He reached for a bottle and poured more liquor. He raised the glass to his mouth and looked over it at Tony. "Do you have any idea what that's like? Knowing what might happen?"

Tony cleared his throat, trying not to see a bare rock and corpse-strewn landscape, with a beleaguered Earth hovering above. "I can guess. Are you trying to tell me you've got crystal balls?"

Ross scowled. "Can you stop with the smart mouth for once and listen? I SEE futures, I always have." He waved at his medals. "Four years old and I knew I'd be a general. I knew there were things coming that we just weren't prepared to handle. I knew..." He drew a long, sighing breath. "I knew we'd need the Hulk, and Blonsky and all the spandex wearing freaks in the world. I just... didn't know how we were going to get them together." He finally drank. "There's no discipline. No order. And without that..." He put the glass down and looked at Tony again. "Sometimes we lose. Sometimes we lose everything. I've seen the Earth shattered. I've seen this huge, ugly alien laughing as we all die."

"Well, fuck," Tony said. He was tempted to take a drink. Virtual booze wouldn't break his vow. No. Bad idea. "All right, supposing I believe you, how does it work? How can you help me?"

"I saw Banner kill my Betty once." Ross looked at Tony. "I wasn't going to let that happen. I managed to prevent that, but then I lost all the scenes where Hulk cooperated with the armed forces. It's easy to change the future, but the more I try, the more it branches out. I can't... I can't aim. The best I can do right now is to prepare my troops, and back your play." Ross scowled. "I don't like you. You're undisciplined. But I don't have to like you to recognize that we're stronger together. I just want you to believe me if I tell you what could happen, so you can steer around the worst of it."

Tony thought of Xavier's precognitive student. From what Xavier had said, they'd never been able to get more than a few days ahead. "I have to ask a friend to get in touch with you. If he agrees, he might be able to help you refine your visions. If we could see what's behind this, who's behind this, maybe we can also see their weakness." And maybe, Tony thought, they could see allies. He'd have to see if Jane Foster was getting anywhere with her Bifrost communicator. Asgard might help, might at least have some information on huge, ugly aliens.

Ross nodded. "There's too many possibilities right now. It's all..." He waved. "So many possibilities. I've seen Rogers going hand-to-hand with the alien. Raccoons. Walking trees, for God's sake."

"You've seen Rogers in the future?"

"In some of them."

"Recently?"

Ross thought a moment. "Yeah, a couple weeks ago. Why?"

"Huh," Tony said. "No reason." He got up. "I'll work with you. But I still don't like you."

"The feeling's mutual," Ross said, turning back to his bottle.

Tony left the bar with Barnes beside him. "You believe him?" Barnes asked. "You think Steve's alive?"

"I don't know what to think." Tony shook his head. "Fry, bring us back."
Chapter 105

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After leaving VR Tony set up a video conference with Xavier and the rest of Tony's posse so everyone would be on the same page. He summed up with, "Ross might be an invaluable asset."

"General Ross... pardon me, Secretary Ross," Xavier said, dryly, "has been on my watch list for decades. I find it difficult to equate the man with goodwill, and impossible to trust him with my identity. I will not put my students at risk."

"You could wear a disguise," Happy said.

There was a moment of silence.

"Yeah, ok," Happy said. "I forgot you're in that chair."

Xavier smiled and said gently, "It's not just my physical appearance. If Ross does possess the X-Gene for mental abilities, he may be more than a precognitive. Close contact might enable him to trace me back to my school."

Pepper said, "Perhaps you could record lectures for Ross?"

Xavier looked pained. "X-gene expression is unpredictably variable. There is no 'Mental Powers 101', I fear. I need to tailor the program to the individual student."

"Can you do it in VR?" Tony asked.

"It's not ideal," Xavier said. "But I suppose it will have to do."

Tony wasn't confident that Ross's ability would make much of a difference, but he wasn't going to turn down any potential asset. Even if it required a personal sacrifice. He'd got into bed, figuratively, with people he trusted even less than Ross, back when S.I. made weapons. Ross could be handled, at the moment, anyway. If he could even give some vague hints as to the nature of the enemy, there would be a chance to find weaknesses to exploit. 'Big, Ugly, and Alien' wasn't much to go on.

So far, all Tony had was defensive strategies. The Great Wall of China was an effective deterrent against nomads on horseback, and useful at funneling trade to the various gates so taxes weren't lost, but against a determined army a wall isn't enough. Particularly when you're not really sure that the enemy can't just sit back and lob things over or through the wall.

Tony didn't mention it to anyone, because it was a way depressing thought, but if the enemy possessed the ability to bring spaceships over vast distances, what was to say they couldn't stick a few engines on a large asteroid and direct it to Earth? That would be game over, even if not a single Chitauri landed. Everyone thinks of war in terms of conquering and assumes the enemy will want something to be left to rule over, but what if the enemy isn't a diva like Loki, who wanted to rule the Earth? What if this alien just likes destruction?

At the very least, they were going to have to field some kind of space force. Tony remembered... he remembered Jarvis, back in the innocent days before... well, a lot... Jarvis had been snippy, probably
because he was annoyed that Tony hadn't listened to him when warned about the ice buildup. So, after they'd returned home and Tony was sitting with an ice pack on his shoulder, Jarvis had said, "Perhaps, if you intend to visit other planets, we should improve the exosystems."

Tony had been thinking about that. "Jarvis," he said once he was alone in his workshop, "what do you think about taking Iron Man into space?" He felt a little, just a little, bad about not conferring with the others, but this was only speculation. Why waste everyone's time on something that might be impossible? "It didn't work out so well, last time, but... we may need to rethink it."

Even after he spread out and regained all his former functions Jarvis was different. It wasn't a bad thing. He had learned to take initiative when he'd put himself back together, but his core values remained the same. He'd been created to assist Tony, to learn and to grow, and he remained true to his nature.

"Sir," Jarvis said, "At present, the physical demands are beyond your capabilities." He actually sounded regretful as he put up a holo similar to the Iron Man diagrams used to show battle damage, only this was of Tony's body, simplified. There were a lot of red and orange spots, mostly around the torso. His lungs... such as they were... his battered heart... his bones... the pig bone sternum was a medical marvel, but still...

"Ouch," Tony said, expanding the holo to read the details. He wasn't getting younger, and he'd put a lot of miles on his body-- the doctors had done what they could but Siberia... yeah, that was pretty much the last straw for his heart and ribs and what was left of his lungs after Yinsen had carved out a space for the magnet keeping him alive. Sometimes he imagined he heard things rattling loose in his chest. He could still physically use his armor, but... he knew he wasn't strong enough for an extended battle. Not strong enough to fight leviathans, and armies and space, just the g-forces required to get into orbit would probably shatter several very important bones. "Crap." He still wasn't willing to give the armor to anyone he didn't trust, and Rhodey... no, Rhodey's spine... no, Tony wouldn't risk him, either.

"Sir," Jarvis said, hesitantly, "if you will recall, I retain complete data on the Extremis formulae. I have further expanded the research. Theoretically, in conjunction with your earlier experiments with nanites, I feel there is an excellent chance of internalizing the armor, and also repairing much of your..."

"Wait, what? Internalizing the armor?"

"Yes, sir." The holo changed. An army of tiny black specks, representing nanites, swarmed over his body, and vanished inside. The red and orange marks disappeared. Then his armor appeared, flowing like mercury, to encase him.

Tony ghosted his hand over the holo vid cycling the armor... extruding... and then being... sucked back into his body. "This is a very creepy, body-horror thing."

"Yes, Sir," Jarvis said, and he sounded sincerely sorry.

"I'll have to put the arc reactor back." He thought about that. He thought about Pepper touching his chest. He didn't have a whole lot of sensation in his patched up skin, so it wouldn't matter that much to him, he told himself. But was it fair to Pepper? He sighed. It definitely wasn't fair not to discuss it with her ahead of time and she wasn't the only one who'd be hurt if he kept it a secret. Some things had been easier when he was on his own. Not many, but some. "Call up the troops, Jay. Everyone on the 'posse' list. Arrange a time when the non-residents can video conference."
"Tony, no," Pepper said, horrified even without the graphics.

"It won't be that bad," Tony said.

"You want to turn yourself into a science project?" Rhodey said. "Yeah, that's bad."

Vision had insisted on full data, discreetly viewing it on a Starkpad to avoid disturbing the others sitting in the common room. "This is an untested combination of technologies," he said. "There is a risk, especially in light of your physical condition."

Tony shook his head. "You don't get it. My physical condition is why I need this." Tony met Rhodey's eyes. "I'm going to fight when the time comes, whether I'm strong enough or not. The stakes are too high for me to sit it out, or even to take it easy." He drew another breath. "I'm making suits for you and Pepper. I trust you to know when it's time to use them."

Pepper opened her mouth to protest, and then she closed it. "It's really going to be that bad?" She waved her hands. "I mean, I believe you, I just... it's... "

"Beyond human comprehension," Vision said quietly.

"Oh," Pepper said quietly. She stood up. "I need... I need a moment." She walked away from the table.

Tony wanted to follow her, wanted to say everything would be all right, that it wouldn't come to the last extreme. But he never was any good at lying to her.

Chapter End Notes

It's SO hard getting momentum back... part of the problem is that I had started this hoping to finish before Infinity Wars, but I failed and then it was like all the wind was let out of my sails.

I still haven't SEEN Infinity Wars, but you know, impossible to avoid all the spoilers, gifs, etc. A lot of the bits I've read/seen are so NOT what I envision for this fic, so even if I DO get to see IW, don't expect this fic to follow it.

Heck, I did see Ragnarok, and already went NOPE, a lot. :(^)

IF I can get going, I have no idea how long the intervals will be between updates, or what size each chapter will be. Wish me luck, it's so hard to get back in the groove.

Also note: In a deleted scene from Iron Man 2, Tony was playing with a nano-ball, and tossed it to Pepper who said she didn't want to play with his ball... I wonder if that's why they cut the scene? :(^)

Hah, I found the scene on YouTube
https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=FsXBDQQEVB

Also note: Autocorrect kept wanting Tony to put nannies in his body... ok, yeah, he does need looking after.
Chapter 106

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tony hated upsetting Pepper, but she deserved to know the truth. It probably still didn't seem quite real to her, what was coming. He didn't think she and Rhodey and Happy were just humoring him, but they... they believed in him, maybe too much. Tony Stark is aware of the problem, he will solve it! Everything will be fine!

He didn't want to destroy their confidence. God knows he didn't want them to lie awake, obsessing over an infinity of disaster scenarios.

They needed to remain strong, so they could prepare. Tony needed to be strong. And he wasn't. He wasn't young enough, strong enough, smart enough, to save the world and everyone he loved. But he had to. There was no acceptable margin for error, no do-overs, no repeating the experiment once the invasion, in whatever form it took, happened.

He'd been preparing with the Chitauri in mind, but what if the unseen enemy behind them had other forces? Thor had spoken of the Chitauri, but he'd also made it clear that others considered Earth ready for a higher form of war. That was such bullshit, as if Earth had just earned buy-in rights for galactic poker. On Earth nations didn't politely wait until their enemies were strong enough to be a challenge.

From what he'd been able to glean from Thor's attitude, Asgard did consider war a game, and they might very well have been bored with primitive Earth, but Thor had always been on top of his social order, and never needed to consider other points of view.

Loki, no... Loki might have been cracked, but he didn't strike Tony as gullible. Desperate, yes. Loki had been *sent*. He'd been *given* the mind stone, but why? Vision didn't know the extent of its abilities, but it was absolutely a waste as a one-by-one mind enslaver, the way Loki had used it. Why would you hand a stranger a powerful weapon, give them command of your forces, and then tie their hands?

The Avengers should have lost, if Loki and the Chitauri had used sensible tactics. But what if they'd actually achieved whatever the real commander intended?

What was the ultimate result of the invasion? Chitauri tech scattered about. Earth aware of hostile aliens. The Avengers formed-- although apparently Fury had planned on them for years. So, had Fury encountered aliens in the past? If so, he'd done a shit job of preparing, with his last minute cobbled together boy-band, only two of whom actually were trained by Shield. Ok, forget Fury. Fury was still lurking around, possibly he'd emerge from the woodwork in time to help, with a helicarrier or two up his leather sleeve. Don't count on Fury.

What else... the mind stone. The mind stone was on Earth, even though it had supposedly been taken to Asgard. How did it get back to Earth? Did it ever actually leave? Had it given them an illusion before winding up in Hydra's hands? Maybe someone in SHIELDRA had snaffled it. The mind-stone was an artificial intelligence, it could have made someone take it, but why, once it had its hooks in Maximoff, didn't it destroy the Earth then?

There was a reason it wanted be on Earth? It was waiting. For what? Something that would be drawn to it, perhaps? Maybe it had orders.
Tony shook his head. He was just going around in useless circles.

"Sir?"

"Yeah, Jay?" Tony blinked, and then smiled. "Hit me." Whatever else, he was so glad he had Jarvis back again.

"Your presence is needed at the ground level delivery entrance."

"What? Can't you and Fry vet whatever it is?"

"It originated in Rose Hill. You have prioritized all interactions with that locale. Neither of us feels qualified to judge as to the ..."

"Yeah, yeah, ok. I'll go." Tony suspected Jarvis was trying to shake Tony out of a funk, but hey, maybe Holly had sent a box of chocolate chip cookies.

Chapter End Notes

Yikes, haven't got back to this since the end of September! My muse just went on strike. I tried cajoling her back with one-shots, but she still doesn't want to work.

So, last night I reread the whole thing and I'm TRYING. Wish me luck.
Tripod sneaked into the elevator with Tony. He only noticed when he felt the cat pushing his way between Tony's feet. Tony picked up Tripod. "You heard? Something from Rose Hill, eh? Maybe Charley's sent you a catnip mouse?"

Tripod purred and spread his whiskers.

"You're putting on weight."

Jarvis opened the elevator doors and Tony stepped out onto the bare cement floor of the underground delivery reception area.

"Mr. Stark, I've brought your wheels."

Tony's head snapped up. He stared. Two S.I. security guards were holding onto the arms of a man sitting on a motorcycle. Tony recognized both of them. He'd fixed up and ridden that motorcycle all over Rose Hill. He'd never seen the man in Rose Hill, though.

"Cat got your tongue?" the man asked. He grinned at Tony, a nervous sort of smile, and fiddled with the buttons on his faded purple shirt.

"Yeah," Tony said eventually. He waved to the security guards. "We're good here. Could you please..." He waved vaguely. "Put the bike away. Long term storage, ok? I'm just... going to talk to the delivery guy. Want to hear the gossip from Rose Hill."

"Yes, Mr. Stark." The man stepped off the motorcycle. No one said anything until the security guards left with the bike.

"Um," the man cleared his throat. "Hi?"

"Jesus, Bruce." Tony finally remembered he was holding the cat, and set Tripod down to free his hands for gesturing. "What the hell? Where have you been? How the hell..." He held out his hands, high and empty, to express his confusion. Tripod wandered off.

"Um, well, I've been here."

"Here."

"In the city. You know. Cities are the best place to hide, if you just keep your head down." Bruce ducked his head, in illustration. "After... well, I don't know if you knew it, but Nat... she pushed me into a pit."

"Shit."

"Yeah, that was... pretty much how I felt about it. And then, Maximoff. It was... two of them both using me. Using Hulk as a weapon. And that's... that's not what the Avengers was FOR, but it happened, and I could see... if I stayed it was going to keep happening. You kept us from killing anyone in Johannesburg, and I was grateful, but... I was scared. And Hulk... well, he was just pissed off."

"Yeah. Me, too, Bruce." Tony finally stepped forward and put a hand briefly on Bruce's shoulder. "I'm just a little surprised you didn't keep going, once you had the plane."
"I almost did. There was... I don't know. Some kind of... phenomenon? Like the Bifrost. It caught the plane. Hulk jumped. We wound up... in the ocean? By the time we reached land, we were both really fed up with everyone and everything out to get us. I mean, minding our own business and something grabs our plane? What the HELL is wrong with the universe, Tony?"

"Got me," Tony shook his head. "So, did you just stop in to say hi? Or do you need something?"

"I need to say I'm sorry I left without saying goodbye. I'm sorry I didn't stay to help you. I was out of the country when I heard what happened with you and the others... I should have seen it coming. Jesus. Back on the helicarrier, I said it then, didn't I? 'Mixture that causes chaos.'"

"Yeah, well, don't beat yourself up about it. I knew better too, back in the beginning, but I kept ignoring the signs." They both were silent for a few seconds.

"Well, this is awkward," Bruce said at last. "Anyway, I heard you were back, and I was watching the news, and then... Jarvis broke in to ask me to go pick up your motorcycle. And...I thought about it for a few days. No one came to arrest me. For once it was all up to me. I was tired of hiding."

Bruce shrugged. "Really, I've been hiding all my life. It's the one thing I'm good at."

"No, no it's not." Tony smiled. "So. Are you staying? I could really use your help. You in particular. The big guy's welcome too, but... he's not that kind of doctor." He tapped at his chest. "I need an upgrade. Don't think Helen's Cradle is going to cut it, this time."

Bruce's eyes widened. "That bad?"

Tony scrunched up his face. "Yeah, it's kinda gone to Extremes."

"Shit. The universe really is out to get us, isn't it, Tony?"

Tony grinned. "Let's get it back." He gestured towards the elevator, and Bruce went with him.
Chapter 108

Tony called everyone in, including Peter and the Bar Twins, to greet Bruce. "Ok," Tony said after the initial surprise, "We've got a lot of catching up to do, and we need to fill Bruce in on our plans to take over the world."

Rhodey huffed. "That's what we do every week, Pinky."

"Hey!" Tony protested. "I'm the Brain."

"You keep telling yourself that," Rhodey said. "You have your shirt on backwards."

Tony looked down. "I do not."

"Made you look."

Pepper hugged Bruce. "I'm so glad you're back. I've missed having conversations with an actual adult."

"Hey, they have chimichangas. What's a chimichanga?" Happy asked, looking up from the S.I. commissary menu. "What even does it mean?"

Jarvis said, "The etymology is debatable. Currently it is considered a Mexican Spanish word meaning 'trinket, thingamajig'."

Friday added, "One source claims that a restaurant owner in Tucson, Arizona accidentally dropped a burrito into the deep fryer in 1922, but because there were young relatives present she changed her expletive exclamation in mid word from 'chingada' which is the equivalent of 'fucking', to 'chimichanga'."

There was a moment of silence. Peter said, "So, if I like... knew someone who was always saying how much he loved chimichangas, he really was saying..."

"Yep," Tony said, "and thank you for the lesson, Friday."

Happy said, 'Deep fried burritos? Sounds good."

DUM-E and U rolled around offering trays full of finger sandwiches, only occasionally tipping them onto the floor. Tony called Holly to let her know he got 'the package' and to promise to come for a visit when he had time.

Jayden came up from his internship in the office and was quiet for a while, but he kept staring at Bruce.

Finally Bruce rolled his eyes and asked Jayden, "What?"

"I was just wondering," Jayden said, "is Hulk awake right now? I mean, is he listening?"

"Not really," Bruce replied. "This is boring to him, so you don't have to worry, he's not going to leap out and smash."

"Oh, no, no, man, I'm not scared of him." Jayden smiled. "Just wanted to thank him. I had friends in
"Harlem." Bruce winced. "Yeah, sorry about that."

"Sorry?" Jayden looked puzzled. "He was a hero. Dinosaur guy was wrecking the place until Hulk came in and put the beat down on him."

"Huh." Bruce said. "Really, I mean... Hulk did smash a lot..."

"Hulk's a good guy. Give him some credit." Jayden nodded and then went off to talk with Happy about cars.
"Mr. Stark?" Peter had pulled up the bottom of his Spiderman mask so he could eat and had a few dots of mustard on his chin.

Tony couldn't help pointing.

"Oh. Thanks." Peter wiped off the mustard. "Look, I know you've been crazy busy, but I was wondering if I could tell you about some weird stuff that went down recently."

"Sure. Weird is my bread and butter," Tony said. He snagged a bag of trail mix, and began rummaging through it for his favorites.

"Well, you know, I was just minding my own business... not... like... being a vigilante..." The eyes in his mask grew large and innocent. Tony smirked at the unintended side-effect of the dermal responsive fabric. "And these guys were robbing a bank. So, like a good citizen, I stopped them."

"Uh huh. That's not weird at all." Tony found a piece of papaya.

"No, that part was fine. Although it was a little weird that they were all wearing Avengers masks. I mean, it's not Halloween, where did they even find them?"

Tony rotated his hand in a 'get on with it' gesture.

"Yeah, ok. Well, they had a gun that sorta melted, vaporized? Part of the bank vault."

"Ok, now you have my attention."

Peter nodded. "But that's just, hey wow, high tech crooks, unusual. The weird part is that after I stopped them and webbed them up, it didn't get in the news. I mean, if I drop a candy wrapper, the Daily Bugle prints an exposé. But this? Nothing. I checked and they were arrested and charged, all right, but the weird thing is... it said they used explosives to get into the vault."

"Huh." Tony stopped fiddling with fruit. "That is weird."

"I know, right? And I don't think that's the first time. I take crime scene photos sometimes to sell to J.J., because you know, I can get there fast, and it doesn't hurt to have a little extra lunch money and I could swear some high tech stuff had to be used to commit the crimes, but it's always explained away-- a gas fire, a truck out of control smashing a wall, borrowed construction equipment? That wasn't even there?"

"Jay, are you hearing this?"

"Yes, sir," Jarvis replied.

"Check into this. You and Friday both." Tony didn't think it was mind-control. No, of course not. Maximoff was dead. Vision wouldn't even know how to use the mind-stone that way, not that he would. And Loki... yeah... where was Loki? But could even Loki do that without the mind stone? Something definitely was going on. "Good work, kid. I'll find out what's going on."

Peter smiled. The kid was so easily pleased by even the least praise. He really was a beautiful
cinnamon roll, too good for the world, too pure.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, my chapters are very short. I wish I could do longer ones, but every time I try to do that, my muse refuses to go on and give me anything more. POST, she says, and sulks. Ok. I give in.
"Sir," Jarvis said, after the impromptu party was over, Bruce was settled into a guest room, and everyone else had returned to their usual activities, spying, webslinging, business manipulations, etc. leaving Tony in the living room watching DUM-E and U attempting to clean up.

"Yeah?" Tony was amusing himself by tossing bits of trail mix in front of the bots.

"I have preliminary results on the inquiry into anomalous crimes in the Greater New York vicinity. You may find it rather disturbing."

"Since when is it ever good news?" Tony waved his hand. "Rhetorical question. Go on. Disturb me."

"After the Chitauri invasion of New York City, the Department of Damage Control was formed as a joint government and Stark Industries venture, to remove, classify, and store alien technology and biological materials to protect the citizenry from hazardous substances."

"Yeah? I vaguely recall that. It was eight years ago, we're pretty much running it at a loss." Tony had a bad feeling about this. "We do have oversight, inventory, and security checks, right?"

"Indeed, those systems were put in place."

Tony sighed. "But they've failed, haven't they? That's where Underoos' bankrobbers got their tech, isn't it? Damn it."

"As far as I can determine, no materials have vanished once they reached storage, but prior to the formation of Damage Control, satellite enhanced observations of the greater New York area had been used to determine the probability of deposits of extraterrestrial materials. According to our analysis, there is an unaccountable discrepancy between the expected recovery and the actual."

"Souvenir hunters? Maybe some of it broke down and was hauled away with normal debris?" Tony suggested, but not with much hope.

"Those factors were taken into account. Over time, the satellite views have confirmed activity at various low priority sites- areas that had not been slated for immediate reconstruction and so were merely fenced off until teams could be sent to clear them. Invariably, those sites produced far fewer pieces of technology, while the biological components remained in expected quantities."

"And this has been going on the whole time? EIGHT YEARS?" Tony shook his head. "Ok, if Spidertot is right, they've been somehow repairing Chitauri broken bits and bobs, and then using them for robberies. Any connecting link among the crimes? Like are we dealing with the Mafia? Russian Mob? Mexican cartel? Chinese Tongs? Freakin' Ninjas?"

"Analysis of crime scenes where high-tech equipment was used, then correlated with all extant criminal organizations suggests that they have been committed by a wide number of individuals, and small groups. Identifying characteristics of the technology vary, with the same modus operandi confined to a single device per group. We have found no instances of overlapping technology. It is suggestive of one supplier providing custom built equipment to many separate parties."
"Custom built? You mean, they're not just assembling and repairing the tech, but repurposing it?"

"That is what the evidence suggests. Analysis of the battle at New York shows similarities in underlying technological principles, but there are no identical matches."

"Ok. Ok." Tony paced for a few moments. "Tell me if I've got this right... someone's been picking up alien tech trash for eight years, and used it to create entirely new devices which they're selling to small time crooks?"

"That would appear to be an accurate summation, Sir."

"Jesus, talk about wasted potential. Anyone who can figure out basic principles from alien garbage and recreate... what... disintegration beams? From that..."

"Among other things. It appears that anti-gravity and matter phase-shifters may also ..."

"Fuck. We need this guy on the team, as of yesterday. Find him... or her, or them. This goes back eight years, word must have got 'round somehow to the crooks who buy the gizmos...there must be a subscription newsletter or something... who do we know with criminal connections..."

Friday spoke up for the first time. "Scott Lang?"

"Huh. Yeah. Call up Little Big Man."

Chapter End Notes

I've always been annoyed by logical inconsistencies... WHY in Spiderman Homecoming did we find out that Toomes has been selling alien gadgets to crooks who blatantly used them to commit robberies for EIGHT YEARS, and yet NO one has heard about it?

C'mon MCU, it's like you're not even trying. Comic book stuff gives you SO MANY ways to explain things, but you don't use them.

I, on the other hand, WILL.
"Yeah, well... I suppose I could ask around. I don't... you know... I'm not a snitch," Lang said. He looked nervous. "You sure you can't... like... find out with your computers?"

Tony just stared at Lang. The Starkphone video was very clear. He could see tiny beads of sweat starting on Lang's hairline before Lang spoke again, "It's just... if I did... no one would ever trust me again."

"I get it. You were in a tight situation, you have to fit in. You learn the rules, and if you stick to them, you feel part of something."

Lang nodded.

"Like a team. Like a group who hang together to protect each other."

"Yeah, yeah, you understand, Mr. Stark."

"Yep. I understand." Tony took off his shades. "You know what? You're part of something, then. But is it something you want to be part of? These people are dangerous, and worse, they don't even know how dangerous they are. They're buying bastardized alien weapons and blasting holes in anything in their way.

"Anything. And anyone." Tony continued, "You were lucky in Leipzig, fighting without thinking what you were doing, what your equipment was capable of. You could have died. You could have killed me. You could have killed other people. You didn't stop to wonder if there were passengers and crew on that airplane you smashed. You didn't realize you were tossing around fuel trucks. Even if you think these people are just like you, how long do you think they'll stay lucky? How long before 'oops, there was a school behind that store we were blasting open and wow, didn't know this bazooka could shoot that far'?"

Lang swallowed, visibly. "Yeah. yeah. I have a friend. I'll see what he can find out, and I'll call you back."

Tony disconnected, and then he sent messages to 'the posse'. If Lang could give him something to go on, they'd take care of it themselves. Not because theirs were the safest hands, but because there was obviously some kind of coverup by the very people who should be handling it. Jarvis couldn't find any trace of the weapons, not even in the rare cases where the crooks were caught in the act, and they should have been confiscated. They just disappeared. There was someone else involved, someone separate from the suppliers and the buyers, and that someone had their hooks into the police at a minimum, probably the news media as well. The only way Tony was going to get to the inventor was if he got there first, before whoever it was could be disappeared, too.

"Oh, um, it's not much, but I got a phone number. Couldn't find a name or address to go with it. I tried White Pages, 411 and Anywho," Lang said when he called back only a few minutes later.

"That's fine. It's actually good. If it was that easy to find, it probably isn't the guys we're after," Tony told him. He tossed the number to Friday for her and Jarvis to chew on.

"Do you... I mean. Is that it? Do you need me to, like... come with you, if you find them? I could maybe borrow the suit from Hank. Well, not Hank, but Hope could probably talk him into it, if you
need me. He's... he told me I was an idiot, and I was damn lucky you helped me. So. I guess he's not
mad at you, any more?"

"We had a little talk, yeah. It's... not entirely cool, but good enough. No need to annoy him by asking
about his suit, I've got a team ready to go. You just keep your nose clean, keep up the good work in
the VR. Ok, good. Going now. Bye." Tony disconnected.

"Got anything for me, kids?" Tony asked.

"Tricky," Friday said. "The number has apparently not been used either to make or receive calls. It's
possible the user has a number of burner phones whose numbers are distributed, but only used for a
single purchaser before being discarded."

Jarvis said, "However, assuming the base is within the greater New York area, it should be possible
to discern a pattern of phone usage, wherein a device is activated, and only used for a short period of
time. The manufacturer's data base contains the identification of all SIM cards, and telephonic
devices which have an intrinsic identity. Checking this against the purchases of disposable phones,
and eliminating those whose identifications have been deleted for disuse, or which are used for a
reasonable length of time greatly reduces the number of possibilities."

"And there could be a pattern of brief usage purchased in the same area, or from the same internet
site," Friday said.

"That is very likely," Jarvis said, approvingly. "Humans are lazy. The numbers of reused internet
passwords alone..."

Tony cleared his throat. "Yes, I know, I only did that ONCE. Yahoo and Flickr were basically the
same thing. How long will it take?"

"There are a number of possibles," Jarvis admitted.

"Put them up with the physical locations of the GPS of the actual phones, or the store where
purchased, or the address it was sent." Tony waved at the holo that appeared over a wire frame map
of New York City and environs. "Different color for each pattern group." Tony sorted out some
inner city groupings and waved them aside. "No room for a factory or shop. Probably small time
drug dealers."

Tony spread the map out further. "Highlight any business names, they've got to have some sort of
cover for the shipments and comings and goings." Tony glanced at the names. "Wait. Blow that up."

"Toomes Salvage Company? Check that out, Jay."

"Adrian Toomes, sole owner. Considerable profits, assets do not seem commensurate..."

Friday interrupted, loud and excited. "Toomes Salvage Company held the contract for cleaning up
New York City after the battle, but they lost the contract to Damage Control as they were unable to
provide qualified personnel or sufficiently secure handling facilities!"

"Oh, my God," Tony said, "don't tell me, it's another Killian. He's stealing the stuff he couldn't
handle safely and turning into weapons to sell to criminals. And probably telling his workers that it's
all Tony Stark's fault for forcing them to go evil."

"I have no idea what Mr. Toomes may tell his employees," Jarvis said.

"Why can't anyone just declare bankruptcy, like a normal failure?" Tony waved away the holo. "Ok,
call the troops, we'll figure this out."

Tony tilted his head. "I just realized, we didn't even need that phone number. It was all in the patterns."
"I don't like this," Pepper said. "Can't we just turn the evidence over to the police?"

"Um, no," Tony replied, once the whole posse, including Barnes and Barton, were gathered around the table with coffee, and a hologram showing the layout of Toomes warehouse revolving above it. "We can't. What Jarvis and Friday did wouldn't be admissible. Not because it's illegal, although... I don't know... anyway, it's not something anyone else could do, so there's no precedent for accepting it."

Rhodey added, "Someone in the police department's been covering up, disappearing the evidence. We don't know who to trust. Even if we found someone honest, with the authority to do anything, one of their subordinates could warn Toomes. It would get messy."

"I could get a team," Happy offered. "S.I. security is loyal." He spoke proudly. "There are no moles in my organization."

"No," Tony said firmly. "They've got... Jay, what are we certain of, so far?"

"Disintegration beams," Jarvis said, "It is also likely that anti-gravity and matter phase-shifters are available to Toomes."

"Yeah, no, I'm not sending security guards against that," Tony replied. "It's a job for Iron Man." Not that he really liked the idea of getting into the suit. He really needed to work on that. De-sensitization or something. Just thinking about it made him shiver.

"And War Machine," Rhodey added. He looked determined, but no happier about it than Tony was.

Barnes shrugged and then made a hand gesture, like a spider creeping up a wall.

"No," Tony said. "I'm not bringing Spidey into this... he... he's got school!"

Pepper said, "I agree with Tony."

"You brought him to the airport," Barnes said.

"Yeah, and I've regretted it ever since. Rogers threw a gangway at him! I thought I could have the
kid just stay back and shoot webs. No. No, you're not bringing him into this."

"He's the one who found out about this," Barton pointed out, "while fighting guys who were disintegrating a bank vault. Seems to me, he's going up against this on his own, if we don't stop Toomes."

"Shit." Tony stood up, and paced around the table. "Pepper, help me out, here."

Pepper frowned. "I hate to say it, but Clint's not entirely wrong."

Tony scowled at Barton. "I'll call him, and explain it to him. His decision." Tony hated it, hated risking Peter, but at least this way, Peter would have backup.
Chapter 113

Tony hated this. He really did. He and Rhodey were waiting in full armor, 'undercover' in an 18-wheeler parked beside an empty warehouse near Toomes' place. Jarvis was livestreaming from Barton's and Barnes' audiovisual pickups, enhancing it to make out details. Peter had got them in through a vented window in a shaded corner and settled them safely on perches in the rafters where they were unlikely to be seen. He was supposed to leave then, and wait on the roof, but no. He had ignored the silent hand signals, and he'd ignored the A.I. Tony had put in his suit. Karen, Peter had named her. Karen was even younger than Friday, so she understood even less how very very bad the user's judgement could be. Tony wished he'd put in a 'get Peter to safety' protocol into the A.I.s coding.

Jarvis had provided photos of Toomes, but even without that, Tony could have told who he was. He had 'boss' in every movement. He actually reminded Tony of Obie. He had a little more hair, and he wasn't as tall, but he had the same air of undisputed command.

Tony didn't have any trouble picking out the inventor, either. Big guy, soft looking, but his eyes were sharp and his hands moved deftly with tools. The worktable in front of him was covered with unfamiliar tech, cobbled together with parts from such familiar homey objects as AK47s. Definitely he wasn't trying to enter the consumer products market.

The two of them, Toomes and the inventor, were close to the weapons when the heavy door slammed open and two men walked in. "What the hell, Brice?" Toomes said.

"Shultz wussed out. Lost us a sale," the man he addressed patted a weapon he had strapped to his arm. "Not that I'd sell my baby."

"Wussed out, nothing," the other man protested. "Blasting fucking chunks out of an overpass, trying to impress a guy looking to buy a gun for a hold up? You scared him off, not me."

"You did what?" Toomes said. "How many times have I told you not to fire them out in the open?"

Brice didn't back down. "Demos sell! You want me to move the merchandise. These guys have to see what they're getting, they're sure not gonna read a manual."

"Bull. You just like playing around with that thing, calling yourself the Shocker. I'm trying to run a business here, without drawing attention. Do you want to bring Damage Control or Stark on our asses? You think this is a game?"

"Ah, whatever. It's no big deal." Brice started to walk away.

"Hey," Toomes said. "Don't walk away from me. We're not done."

"What, you want to sing me that old song again?" Brice turned back. "You're doing this for the wife
and kiddy, yeah, yeah."

Toomes went still. "That's it. You're out, and don't come back."

Brice sneered at Toomes. "You can't fire me."

"Hell, I can't. Who are you going to complain to, you've been paid off the books, and skimming. Don't think I hadn't noticed. I put up with that, but now you've gone too far."

"Not as far as I could go," Brice said.

"What." Toomes eyes went cold.

"I could go to that nice little house of yours, where we're never invited. Tell your sweet wife where the money comes from. If I don't have a job, no point keeping my mouth shut, is there?"

"No. There's no point at all." Toomes picked up a gun from the table and fired it at Brice. There was a flash of blue light. Brice burned up to ash, too quickly to even scream.

"Holy shit," Rhodey whispered over the comms to Tony.

Toomes said, calmly, in a totally deadpan tone of voice, "Huh. Thought that was the antigravity gun." He looked up as if he expected Brice to have flown up.

He looked up towards the rafters.

Where Barnes and Barton and Peter were. His face showed clearly on the pickup. The muzzle of the weapon he still held started to move.

"Fuck," Tony said and broke out of the truck, with War Machine a heartbeat behind him.

There was a loud noise, and the image changed, red blooming in two holes in Toomes' face, and four more on his chest, paired to either side of his sternum. The image cut out then, overlaid by Jarvis's usual battle HUD.

"STAND DOWN!" Rhodes shouted as he came to a halt inside the warehouse. "Put your hands on your heads! Don't move!"

Tony's repulsors whined and he aimed at the inventor, who was within reaching distance of a weapon. "DO AS HE SAYS! NOW!"

Shultz and the inventor moved jerkily to obey Rhodey. They were both staring at Toomes. Neither of them had reacted when Brice was ashed, but then, that was neat and clean. It wasn't a bloody mess lying at their feet.

"Oh, my God," Peter said. "Oh. My God. He's dead. You killed him. You really killed him." The eyes in his mask were wide and horrified.

Barton looked grim. "Sorry you had to see that, kid."

"I'm going to be sick," Peter said in a small voice.

Barnes' face was expressionless. "Don't do it in your mask. That's really unpleasant."

"Oh, God," Peter whispered. "I want to go home."
Rhodey finished handcuffing Shultz and the inventor. He retracted his helmet. "He can go, can't he, Tony?"


"Will do. C'mon, kid," Clint said, as he rappelled to the ground. "Let's get out of here."

Barnes holstered his gun and followed them. "What do we do now?" he asked, once Clint and Spiderman were out of sight. "I thought we were going to have a talk. Confiscate stuff. Recruit... this guy." He pointed at the inventor. "Nice and quiet. But this..."

Tony shook his head. "Yeah. No. We have to contact the authorities, but... who can we trust? I'm not handing this stuff... and that GUY, over to the police to let them slip through their fingers to whatever terrorist organization was bribing them..."

"That's not quite a fair description..." came a voice behind them.

Everyone turned, but Barnes was the fastest. He had his gun up and aimed steadily at the man who'd spoken, who had quite sensibly frozen in mid step with his hands open and held in front of him.

"Hello, Mr. Stark," Coulson said. "Sorry I haven't been in touch, lately." He nodded at Barnes. "Synchronized Mozambique Drill, nice."

Chapter End Notes

I regret I had to paraphrase some of the scene from the movie instead of going entirely original.

The Mozambique Drill is a shooter's technique.

It probably originated with a soldier, but has been taught to SWAT officers. They renamed it 'The Failure Drill' (failure to stop with the chest shots, followed up with the more difficult, but more quickly killing, head shot.)
"Thanks," Barnes said, without lowering his weapon. "Nobody moves."

After a moment, Tony blinked. "What?"

Barnes' mouth quirked slightly. "Not you, Stark."

"Right." Tony nodded at Toomes' men. "You two, step away from all the... everything. Middle of the room."

They moved, Tony and Rhodey shifting until they could cover Coulson as well as the other two.

"I'm not your enemy," Coulson said mildly. "May I put my hands down?"

"No," Tony replied. "You're just an added complication."

"On the contrary, I can make things so much simpler," Coulson said, his face still stuck in the same mild smile Tony remembered. "I can make all of this go away."

"Huh," Barnes said. "Not for the first time, right?"

Tony glanced at Barnes who obviously had an idea. "Share with the class?"

"Not here. Too many ears," Barnes said.

"We should call the police," Rhodey said. "Toomes was self defense, which is going to be bad enough, but we witnessed a murder, Tony."

Coulson frowned. "What murder? I'm sure neither of these two gentlemen saw a murder."

Shultz nodded hastily, followed a second later by the tech. "Sure," Shultz said, "you just let us go, and we won't cause any trouble, will we Mason?" He waved his cuffed hands for emphasis.

"Nope," Mason said. "We just worked here. I mean, we didn't see anything."

"NO." Tony snapped. "God, no. You're right, Rhodey. Jarvis, call the police. Also, call Damage Control. Call the mayor. Call Pepper. Call everyone... well, not Underoos. I don't know if Brice will be missed, but Toomes' wife and child deserve to know the truth. It's hard, and it's ugly, but it's better than living a lie."

"You don't want to do this, Stark," Coulson said. "I know what you've been trying to do, and I'd come with an offer to help. I still have resources, and a good friend who's been keeping an eye on you."

Tony laughed. "You mean the 'old man, who cares very much about me'? Let's not get into that. What's coming is too big to hide under even the largest shield."

Coulson sighed. "Can I at least put my hands down?"

"Right after we frisk you and cuff you."
Coulson let out another sigh, but didn't object as Barnes went over him thoroughly, removing various weapons and things that didn't look like weapons, including a very peculiar looking gadget, a bit like a pager.

"What's this do?" Tony asked as he picked up the 'pager'.

Coulson's mouth twisted, but he didn't reply.

"Yeah, I didn't think you'd tell me the truth. You wouldn't know what it was if it bit you in your undead ass."

"You're going to regret this, Stark," Coulson said. "I could have helped."

"Could have. Sure. Would have? Doubt it."

Chapter End Notes

Darn it, I wanted Coulson to take over handling the tech and Mason, but it would have required Tony blindly trusting him despite all the evidence of continued lying, and Rhodey being willing to conceal a murder, a self-defense killing, and be an accessory to kidnapping.

And the last straw was when I realized Tony now knew Toomes had a family. No WAY was he going to do to them what was done to him, no matter how much trouble he caused ME.

PLOT is so evil to me. So evil.
"Yes, sir, your honor," the chief of police said to Mayor Di Blasio. "We had orders from the highest level. We were told that the public would panic if they knew what was happening, and we didn't have the facilities to safely handle the weapons. So the crimes were handled without reference to them, and they were collected and taken away, for storage, we were told."

The major ran both his hands over his head. "I just tweeted that the NYPD is committed to keeping New York City the safest big city in America — and we just had the safest March ever in the seven major crime categories. Burglary down thirteen and a half percent, robbery down eleven percent, total crime down seven point three percent."

"Yes, sir," the chief of police said.

Tony didn't say anything, but he was thinking, 'Lies, damned lies, and statistics.' He was sitting at a large conference table along with Rhodey, the police chief, the mayor and the government liaison from the Department of Damage Control. Iron Man and War Machine were standing empty at the far end of the room, a concession that Tony appreciated.

Mason and Shultz were in separate interrogation rooms, but the officers watching them were told just to keep them quiet, not to interact with them beyond the obligatory reading of rights. Jarvis was listening in, just to be sure.

Barnes was in an anteroom, waiting for them to call him and Clint had reported that he was coming in after leaving Peter with his aunt. Tony had promised Spiderman would make a deposition later, but since he had seen nothing the others hadn't Tony was prepared to fight against forcing him to reveal his identity. The police chief had been sympathetic, and the mayor obviously hadn't really cared about that, it was the big picture that had him groaning.

The Department of Damage Control liaison looked mad enough to swear, but she only said, "Where are the alien artifacts now?"

The police chief winced. "I don't know. We weren't allowed to keep any records, or ask any questions."

Tony cleared his throat. "I suspect that Mr. Coulson might be able to shed some light on that."

Since Coulson hadn't actually been charged with a crime, they couldn't hold him, and in fact, Rhodey had pointed it out, so they'd removed the cuffs and given him back his possessions before the police arrived. Tony supposed he should be grateful Coulson didn't throw around accusations of unlawful detention, and had agreed to wait with Barnes. The cold stare competition was unnerving, and Tony had been glad to join the others in the conference room.

"You suspect?" the chief said.

"I really don't know what he was doing at that warehouse, or how he knew to go there."

"He offered to 'make everything go away'," Rhodey added. He spread his hands. "You'd have to ask what he meant by that."
Coulson entered the room when called, and smiled. It was creepy, no doubt about it. Tony wondered if he was quite right in the head. "Good afternoon," Coulson said, nodding politely at everyone.

The police chief said, "We've asked you here to answer a few questions."

Coulson's smile thinned. "On the grounds of National Security, I must insist any further communications be held in camera."

No one said anything for several seconds. Finally the mayor said, "Apparently alien gun running's been going on in my city for the past eight years, and been covered up. Maybe it's been covered up for reasons of national security. Maybe it's been covered up by the same secret organization that tried to nuke my constituency. Maybe. All I have are maybes. I'd like some straight answers. I can't legally compel you to talk. You haven't been charged with any crime. You can turn on your heel and walk out." The mayor stood up and put his hands on the table. "But if you do... if you leave us to find our own answers, maybe you won't like what happens. This isn't a god damn Star Chamber. We're not sweeping anything under the rug." He sat down abruptly.

"Do you really want panic in the streets?" Coulson replied. He glanced at Tony. "Stark's been hiding things, for the same reason my organization has been keeping quiet. The average citizen isn't equipped to handle the truth."

Tony huffed. "Yeah, no. I'm not hiding a damn thing. I just got tired of playing Cassandra, so I stopped shouting from the rooftops."

The police chief spoke up. "Mr. Stark hasn't ordered my force to falsify evidence and distort crime scenes. If that's been for the national good, I would really like an explanation more than 'that's on a need to know basis and you don't qualify'. Because this is my nation and my city and my people, too. So I do actually need to know. WHAT THE FUCK is GOING ON, if you'll pardon my French."

Everyone stared at Coulson.

Coulson sighed. "Speaking for myself. And hypothetically. You may have noticed various alien incursions in the past few years. New Mexico, New York, Germany, England. And there have been other, unrelated events which were beyond the scope of traditional forces. This... actually... is nothing new. Hypothetically speaking, I may be associated with an organization which has been handling these situations since the 1940's. Most of the time, we can settle things without coming to the attention of the general public."

"SHIELD," Rhodey said, helpfully. "He's talking about SHIELD. You know, the people whose giant carriers dropped into the Potomac a few years ago. On fire." He added. "In Washington, D.C. Our nation's capital. Just mentioning, because, you know, National Security."

Coulson winced slightly.

"Gee," Tony said. "Nukes over New York, helicarriers over Washington, it's almost as if powerful, secret, organizations with no oversight might cause a few problems. Who could have guessed."

Coulson went stony-faced. "All right." He sat down and closed his eyes for a few seconds. "There's too much to tell, and most of it requires background you wouldn't believe without proof I can't provide, because it's gone. Yes, been covered up. But Mr. Stark has been correct in warning of an increased risk of all out alien invasion. Something that would make the battle of New York look like a minor skirmish. My organization has been attempting to prepare us, without panic, by developing
our own weapons, based upon whatever alien technology we've been able to gather. The Department of Damage Control is just sitting on much that we could use! So when we are able, we've been collecting examples, and bringing them to our laboratories for study."

The Damage Control liaison gave Coulson a filthy look.

"My." Tony stared at Coulson. "You said 'my' organization."

Coulson shrugged. "What's left of SHIELD is now under my command," Coulson said. "I'm not proud of the things we've done. The things I've done. But we have always had the greater good in mind."

"And how has that worked out for you?"

"Poorly," Coulson admitted. "Which is the only reason I'm here. We lost a lot of good people, including many of our brightest researchers. We don't... I don't... have anyone with the innate grasp of the alien technology that created the weapons we confiscated. That man out there..." Coulson jabbed a finger in the general direction of the interrogation room. "He's vital to not just our nation's security, but the world's. I can't allow him to be wasted. I need him. I need him using his talents under control, not selfishly for his own petty purposes."

"Wow, that's so familiar," Tony said, "Remember when I refused to turn Iron Man over to the government despite Senator Stern's demands? Funny how he turned out to be Hydra."

"And what would you do with him, Mr. Stark? Put him on a work release program for Stark Industries?" Coulson snapped.

"Better that than slavery chained to a SHIELD workbench!" Tony retorted.

"Stop, stop," the mayor said. He held up his hands and waited until everyone was quiet. "Ok, let me see if I have the gist of this. Aliens are going to invade, so we need our own ray guns so we won't be left behind in the arms race, but nobody trusts anybody else with them, so you've both been trying to do it on your own, wasting time and resources working at cross purposes in secret."

Tony blinked. "Pretty much, yeah."

"Ok," the mayor said. "Get your documents together. We're all going before a judge-- in camera, ok? To decide what needs to go to court. Maybe we can separate out the unfortunate incidents that occurred today. I don't know. Homicide isn't going to be ignored in my city, but I don't think we need reporters in the trial. I'm sure the judge will expedite matters, Mr. Coulson." The mayor looked at him sternly. "As you were apparently satisfied to spend eight years picking up whatever you could find lying around, I expect you will be patient while actual legal processes determine the fate of Mr. Mason, and of the alien technology."

The mayor stood up. "Let's get this handled. I have a city to run."

Chapter End Notes

I'm begging my muse to let me jump a bit. I DO NOT want to learn how to write a trial.
"This is most irregular," the judge said. "However, as we are here, we may as well discuss the matter." The judge was in his robes, and they were gathered in a small room around a large plain table that had twelve seats, several pitchers of water, and a stack of blank notepads and a bucket of pens. The judge poured himself a glass of water, and pointed at the mayor.

Then he listened intently as the mayor, the police chief, and the Damage Control liaison spoke in turn. He firmly squashed any attempts at interruption. Despite the mayor's remarks, no one had any documents, which seemed to annoy the judge. "All right, so far I have hearsay and speculation about past events. Now I want to hear from those present at the scene today." He aimed a finger at Barnes. "Go."

Barnes said, "I was hidden in the rafters, surveilling Toomes' warehouse, using the authority granted to me from Tony Stark, who's been given authority over me by the United Nations Sokovia Accords sub committee. We had intended to locate any stolen alien weapons, and anything made from them, and see that they were turned over to the proper authority--" He nodded to the Damage Control liaison. "We were also going to try to identify and hold for questioning the man who was actually making the devices."

Barton squirmed a little. He raised his hand, but the judge scowled him into silence.

Barnes continued, unemotionally, "Two men came into the warehouse. There was an argument. One of them threatened to tell Toomes' wife of his criminal activities. Toomes picked up a weapon and shot the man. It burned him to ash instantly. Then Toomes said something about how he thought it was an antigravity gun. He looked up, and moved the gun up, too. He saw us, me, Barton, and Spiderman. We were witnesses to a murder, and he was aiming the murder weapon at us. So I shot him, once to either side of the breastbone, and once in the face, between the eyebrows and lips, as I'd been trained to do in cases where immediate take down was essential. That way, the risk of actuating the trigger in a muscular spasm is greatly reduced."

The judge pursed his lips, and then waved at Clint. Clint nodded. "What he said. All the way. Only I shot first, I'm sure I did."

"And this... Spiderman?"

"He didn't do anything," Clint said. "He was only there to help us get to the rafters. He was upset, so I took him home."

"I see. And will he make a deposition?"

"Yes, your honor," Clint said. "He's a good kid. He's just... he needs to keep his identity secret. Like... witness protection but without taking him away from his only family." Clint tried puppydog eyes, but since he and Barnes both have 'resting murder face' it was probably not a success.

"I will take that under consideration," the judge said, noncommittally. "Have you any external evidence to support this?"

Tony cleared his throat. The judge raised his eyebrows and shrugged permission to speak. "All three, Barnes, Barton and Spiderman, were outfitted with recording devices, transmitting the audio and
visual back to myself and Colonel Rhodes."

Rhodey raised his hand and nodded his agreement. He was too smart to annoy a judge by interrupting.

Tony continued, "I will turn the recordings over to the court. We were directly outside the building and entered immediately after Toomes was taken down. The ashes of the man Toomes shot hadn't finished settling to the ground. We took Toomes' two other employees into custody."

"Still have them?" The judge looked at the police chief.

"Yes, your honor."

"The court will need their testimony, too, before determining what charges, if any, are to be laid in conjunction with the two deaths. I'll set the matter before the D.A. later." The judge rubbed his chin. "The government and S.I. have been assigned the role of collecting and storing the alien artifacts. I see no harm in allowing Damage Control to confiscate the contents of the warehouse as per their usual methods, with the exception of the murder weapon which should be set aside and held for evidence in secure storage, elsewhere in Damage Control's facility."

Coulson quivered a bit at that.

"Mr. Stark, I want to see those recordings, and also documentation from the Accords' subcommittee, authorizing you to employ these men, and setting out the limits of that authorization."

"You'll have it," Tony said. He wasn't worried about that, they had pretty much given him carte blanche, so long as Barton and Barnes acted under his supervision.

"And now, for you, sir." the judge turned to Coulson. "As it stands, you are looking at charges of obstruction of justice, and possible conspiracy." The judge paused. "I have a hobby..."

No one interrupted, but they all looked confused. "My son bought me a V.R. set. He thought I'd find it relaxing to be able to mete out justice in fantasy without all the paperwork." The judge looked at Tony. "It's not fantasy. Is it?"

Tony shook his head. "No, your honor."

"Hmm, alien invasion. That's a little out of my jurisdiction." The judge looked past them, at a statue of blind justice. Then he looked back at Tony. "If you can get the Accords' council to grant you custody of Mr. Coulson, I may be able to streamline the procedures in his case. That is... if you think you can use him."

Tony blinked. "I'm not sure. The Accords is meant to cover enhanced individuals who cross national boundaries in their missions."

Coulson sighed and held up his left arm. His hand glowed. "I also run a base in Canada. We call it Providence."

"Well, shit," Barton said. "What are you, android, robot, or zombie?"

"It's a long story. It started when I died," Coulson said. "Then there was experimentation with alien blood. It was so... unpleasant, my memory of the events had to be wiped. Nick needed me, you see."

"Fuck Nick," Barton said.
"Here, here," Tony muttered.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to commenters' suggestions. They did help shape this chapter, but I'm not entirely sure I did what any one of them had in mind! :^

YAY, I got to the grocery finally. I normally go once a month, but I was sick, the taxi driver was sick, torrential rains, etc, so the fridge and pantry were looking like ZUUL had been there. I was down to wondering if I would be able to feed my cat peanut butter and pasta... she is a BIT flerken... me, I'm ok, I once went (involuntarily) without eating for 11 days and survived fine...
No one had been entirely pleased by the judge's decision. Tony was glad he had listened to Rhodey and done the right, the legal, thing, but he had to admit, the more people you brought into a situation the less control you had over it. The Tower's living room was now crowded with people, all of whom had their own ideas and, dare he say it, agendas. Pepper was chatting with the Department of Damage Control liaison and Tony hoped to get the government on board with experimenting with the alien material.

His current problem was that now he was saddled with Coulson, at least until the Accords subcommittee were able to figure out what they wanted. With the judge's backing, Tony had been able to get them to convene immediately, via video link. They'd been flustered, and blustered. One of them had wondered where this was going to lead. Then an older woman had pointed out that having an impartial authority overseeing the remnants of SHIELD seemed a good idea. After all, the 'Sokovian' Accords were actually set in motion because of the Triskelian affair in Washington, D.C. but in an effort to distance the Accords from a purely US stance, they'd chosen a more recent incident for the name.

They promised to get back to Tony with their ruling as soon as possible and disconnected abruptly.

And then there was Mason's disposition which the judge seemed to think was a lot more complicated than Tony'd assumed. He'd been making alien weapons, yes, but what were the laws on that? Sawed off shotguns are illegal. 'Ghost guns' -- completed without serial numbers using a base of certain percentage which is regulated and can be sold legally- are legal if made by the owner, not for resale. From the brief look Tony had, Mason's hybrids might contain a normally mass produced lower receiver. If Mason argued that he didn't sell them, but simply enjoyed making them for fun, they might be considered ghost guns.

It would be fairly difficult to reconcile that with the evidence that he was making them in the warehouse of a company, but he could tie up the proceedings if he tried to argue that.

Federal law allows people who aren't prohibited from owning guns to make their own. People use 3-D printers to make plastic guns and claim it as a hobby. So where does picking up bits of alien tech and combining them with gunstocks, barrels, triggers, etc. fall on the legality line?

Damn it, Tony wanted to be able to talk to Mason. Throw money at him. Promises of protection. Sources of materials, so he could tinker to his hearts' content. Whatever it took. He turned his frustration on Coulson, who had accompanied all of them back to Stark Tower, not entirely of his free will.

"So, SHIELD is still creeping around the woodwork," Tony said. "Did you ever clear out your Hydra infestation?"

Coulson's eyes tightened. "Eventually, yes. I believe so."

"Wow, that's really convincing," Barton said.

"What do you want to hear?" Coulson said. "It's a dirty job, and Nick did what he felt he had to do. It wasn't fun for me, you know. I wanted to tell you I was alive. But the job was always more
important than what I want, what any of us want."

Tony nodded. "Yeah, but what, precisely, is your job? Is it covering Fury's ass? Is it keeping
SHIELD unaccountable and free to do whatever they like-- does the Canadian government know
you're messing about in their back yard? Or is it protecting the people of the world? Because if it's
the last, I have to say, you're failing your job review."

Coulson huffed. "Fury passed the mantle onto me. SHIELD's mission parameters now are what I
decide."

"Great," Rhodey said. "And what have you decided?"

"Basically, SHIELD is dying," Coulson said. "We've done a fantastic job of alienating, enslaving,
imprisoning, and assassinating enhanced people, while at the same time not seeing HYDRA in our
midst. I currently have a skeleton organization, a good proportion of which is tied down to keeping
the lid on the prisoners. I have some good people, very good, but we're spread thin." Coulson spread
his hands. "I've been dead, and come back scrambled, lost a hand, and..." He took a deep breath. "I
keep trying, putting one foot in front of the other, but I don't know where I'm going."

"Basically, you're fucked," Tony said cheerfully. "You need me. You really need me, don't you?
You need me 'that much'. Admit it."

Coulson sighed. "You've been wanting to say that for years, haven't you?"

"Maybe." Tony tilted his head. "We need to work together. And not just S.I. and SHIELD. You still
have government connections, under the table, but still... some people must be funneling funds to
you."

"Yes," Coulson admitted. "They can't publicly support SHIELD, though."

"They can talk, influence people, make alliances, bury hatchets. S.I. is a business, not a government.
We can distribute alien-fighting training kits everywhere, but without organization-- it'll be like a
stirred up anthill when the enemy arrives. We'll make them pay for every inch of land, but...
realistically, we don't stand a chance if what I saw on the other side of that portal comes and gets
through our defenses. Defenses based, I have to say, on what was probably an expendable scout
force. What comes may not have the same weaknesses as the Chitauri. We need S.I. and we need
SHIELD. We need the UN. We need every nation in the world aware, at least on the highest level.
We need the weapons Toomes' tinkerer can create. We need the enhanced people you've thrown into
dungeons."

Coulson winced. "Many of them are... probably not redeemable. Sanity-challenged. Too full of hate
to listen. Too powerful to chance them taking their revenge."

Barnes spoke up for the first time. "You won't know until you try."

Bruce had been sitting in the corner, silently listening. He put up his hand. "Hulk and I have been...
talking... if you need someone there, to keep the situation from going out of control... we volunteer."

Coulson looked at Bruce, and then nodded. "Yes, well, this is all hypothetical."

Tony's phone rang. He listened and nodded. "Thank you, your honor." He disconnected. "Well, not
all hypothetical. Someone lit a fire under the justice system. I'm going to have a talk with Phineas
Mason. Seems he's been offered a deal for... community service, if S.I. and Damage Control agree to
joint custody and supervision."
The Damage Control liaison lifted her head. "I think that could be arranged."

"Great. Stay here, while I'm gone." Tony pointed at Coulson. "I've been authorized by the judge to use any means necessary to keep you on premises." He grinned. "Any means."

Coulson rolled his eyes. "I'll bear that in mind, Mr. Stark."

Chapter End Notes

I have not seen ANY of Agents of SHIELD, so I'm just trying to get a general feel for it from the fan wiki. I'm not, however, going to care if it veers from canon. After all, this whole thing is AU up the whazzoo. And I'm NOT going to introduce any SHIELD characters. I can't. I don't know any of them at all.

I started looking up NYC gun control laws, but couldn't find if it was illegal to make your own gun. SO I'm going with whether it is, or it isn't, Tony doesn't know.)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost_gun

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/despite-ruling-on-3-d-printed-guns-it-remains-legal-to-make-your-own-gun-at-home/2018/08/01/581ca5a6-95c9-11e8-a679-b09212fb69c2_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.3b380a6a78bb
It was as if they'd been gathering up snow, pushing and pushing it into a ball, until suddenly it took on momentum of its own and avalanche resulted. The Department of Damage Control was tiny, but it was a connection with the government. The mayor of New York had a wide social and political circle. Rhodey had saved the President's ass a few years ago, and while that didn't get him any pull with the current administration, the backbone of D.C. tended to outlast administrations. Doors were left ajar, appointments were prioritized. Tony was flash, Pepper was razor sharp, and Rhodey was sincerity itself. People listened.

Feelers were sent out to every country the US was on friendly terms with, vague at first, and then more detailed as interest and belief grew. The countries who were convinced then set out to talk to others and a fragile, worldwide net formed.

From Wakanda, T'Challa took up the challenge of uniting Africa.

Romanoff was sent all over on courier duty to the countries where diplomacy failed. Her chameleon abilities combined with excellent recall and total lack of scruples got her into places no diplomat could have reached. Sometimes she was unsuccessful in convincing the leaders to cooperate, but always at least made them paranoid enough to shore up their defenses.

Earth didn't know it, but it was on a war footing.

General Ross sent permission for the people locked up at the Raft to be evaluated, while Coulson did the same for the people SHIELD had incarcerated. T'Challa spent considerable time ferrying Professor Xavier and Ororo to both locations. Bruce was present and told Tony he felt sometimes as if he was more of a chaperone than anything else. A few times Hulk did have to contain a situation, but mostly Bruce spent his time softly encouraging prisoners to believe that they would honestly be given a second chance, and so long as they didn't break any laws, they'd have the choice whether to join Earth's defense forces-- not under SHIELD, none of them trusted SHIELD, or to get sufficient compensation to start over in civilian life. Slowly both prisons emptied out, except for the few too powerful to release, and too insane to reach despite all their efforts.

Xavier helped the ones who'd been mentally damaged, aided by one of their early releases, a Doctor Sampson who'd been given a dose of the super serum. He'd been one of the more successful results, up until SHIELD decided he was too intelligent to be trusted.

SHIELD never did trust intelligence. And look where that got them, Tony thought while he was reverse engineering one of Mason's hybrids into something that could be mass produced. Mason was an innovative artist, a tinkerer genius, but custom built singletons, with bits hand-carved-- yeah, no, he couldn't produce enough, even if every effort was a success.

Phineas Mason was happily set up in the former Avengers' Compound, once Tony paid the back taxes and reclaimed it. Most of it was given over to laboratories, the location being ideal- close enough to New York for shipments of Chitauri material to arrive quickly, but far enough away from populated areas to reduce the risk of civilians being injured if an experiment went awry. It turned out that Mason had also been working with stashes of Ultron material, and even some stuff picked up from the weird events that took place in Greenwich, England. Tony had no idea how Toomes had managed that.
Somehow, Tony didn't inquire too closely, Coulson got into talks with the Canadian government, and his secret base was legitimized, and Canadian armed forces were being sent to fill in the ranks. There was some argument over the SHIELD spread eagle symbol smacking of US imperialism which Coulson solved by ordering the whole thing painted white until a new logo could be devised. Some joker wrote the words 'Blank Slate' over it and the name stuck. Coulson was a little handicapped by having to give control over to his second in command until the Accords Council freed him from Tony's supervision, but he managed, working from the Tower by teleconferencing, mostly.

"Mr. Stark," Coulson came to Tony on the third day of his enforced stay at the Tower. "I believe there is a fault in the electric wiring in my quarters."

"Oh?" Tony looked up from his Stark Pad.

"Yes. Any time I touch metal, I receive a considerable electrical shock."

"Really?" Tony shrugged. "Static? It's probably your shoes. You should consider antistatic footwear. Not as stylish as your current shoes, but much safer," Tony smiled. "Particularly around sensitive computer equipment. Isn't that right, Jarvis?"

"Yes, sir." Jarvis replied. "I can provide Mr. Coulson with a list of approved products."

"I was in the shower," Coulson said quietly. "I touched the shower control, and was shocked."

"You wear your shoes in the shower? That's kinky," Tony said.

Coulson sighed. "Can we behave like adults, here?"

"Jarvis?" Tony said. "You aren't going all Skynet on us, are you?"

"It is possible that some of my protocols were damaged by the two occasions SHIELD personnel subverted them in order to override access," Jarvis replied. "I may possibly have been taught that electrical shock is an allowable deterrent for an individual whose movements are to be restricted."

"My GOD," Coulson said, "That was ten years ago!"

"A computer, like an elephant, never forgets," Jarvis said.

Tony nodded. "Yep. The ghost in the machine. Sorry, if SHIELD messed up Jarvis's protocols, nothing I can do about it."

Coulson glared, then turned on his heel and left the room.

Tony rolled his eyes. "Ok, Jay, I didn't authorize terrorizing the zombie. Knock it off."

"Yes, sir."

Tony smirked a little. "But... yeah, ok." Tony rubbed his chest. "I understand why you did it."

"I will always have your back, sir."

Chapter End Notes
Ok, I gave in and gave Coulson a little reminder that Tony has FRIENDS.

In case you're wondering, this is the kind of shoes Jarvis recommends. Coulson HATES them, they don't go with anything, but he's so tired of being zapped.

Jarvis and Friday had been keeping in constant contact with Vision, who was even better than Romanoff at slipping undetected past borders, but far less effective at convincing megalomaniacs to cooperate, so he mainly concentrated on gathering data about resources and overseeing Stark Reality, which was becoming a shadow world of increasing complexity as everyone who entered the game scenario saw a different aspect and approached the problems with different solutions. Vision passed on to S.I. any ideas with potential real world applications in the coming conflict.

He also managed to touch base at Rose Hill at frequent intervals, keeping his boarding house room as a convenient place to learn more about human interaction. He was still coming to terms with his relationship with Wanda, trying to discover if it had been 'real', or just formed from his desire to fit in, and her desire for closeness with someone who was even more alienated from society than she had been. He couldn't reason out her motivation, but he hoped to understand his own, one day. For the present, Vincent Addams was an accepted visitor to Rose Hill, and treated with kindly tolerance for his oddities.

The Keeners knew who he really was, and Charley in particular often sought him out. She didn't say much, but he found her a comforting presence as she accepted him as he was. When he phased through a wall in order to rescue a bird fallen down a chimney she had merely tilted her head, hummed a little and smiled.

Jarvis and Friday also kept an eye on Tripod, who strolled through Stark Tower with the air of an absolute monarch, accepting offered treats and opened doors as his due. His vibranium leg made him popular with visitors who wanted a photo with some cool Stark tech. So long as they gave him pats and treats he cooperated. He particularly liked roaming among the maintenance areas in search of rodents, which pleased Jarvis and made him even more indulgent in giving the cat elevator rides to otherwise off-limits areas. Luckily Tripod was so secure in his domain he felt no need to mark or Jarvis would have had to change the access parameters. Cat pee is not good for electrical insulation.

Research continued on weapons at the Compound formerly known as Avengers. No one officially renamed it but neither did anyone replace the 've' that vanished when Mason was testing a disintegration gun. Angers was easy to pronounce, after all. Other scientists and S.I. techs living in the area joined Mason, sorting out results as to both the practicality of manufacture, and the reasonable likelihood people could be swiftly trained in their use. Versions of the best began turning up in V.R. and were in high demand among players.

V.R. think tanks and fighter groups also continued to gain momentum. Thunderbolt Ross's group grew until entire divisions formed up into campaigns led by experienced officers. Due to presidential edict, approved by the armed services, it counted as field time towards promotion, so even more active service personnel joined. The use of enhanced abilities was encouraged, on the premise that thinking outside the box was useful. Division X was entirely composed of enhanced non-military gamers. Their field officer used laser beams from his eyes, and the rest of them had other abilities beyond normal soldiers, but since Division X was always playing as allies with the military against the aliens, no one grumbled too much. After all, it was only imagination, right? And it was cool.
Sure, some of DX were assholes, with chips on their shoulders, but they fought with a no-holds barred viciousness that you had to admire.

Jane Foster's group came up with theoretical ideas, and passed the more feasible ones to the Angers Compound. Selvig's reverse wormhole, and Hawking's space speculations were still not up to practical use, but byproducts of their thought experiments had advanced stellar dynamics, plasma physics and dark matter theory. It would have helped if they could get Asgardian scientists into the game, but so far, Asgard had been reluctant (kindest way to put it) to associate with Midgardians, despite Jane having created a wormhole communications system. Thor was apparently 'on diplomatic missions' or quests, or battlefields, whenever Jane enquired and all of their scientists were too far above her understanding even to speak with her, by orders of the king. Odin was a dick, everyone agreed, but Jane kept trying.

Tony began to have hope that the momentum would continue, even if something happened to him. It wasn't all on his shoulders. He could just be Tony from time to time. With the responsibility spread out, Tony had more time for visiting Rose Hill. Charley was still growing, Harley was still inventing, and Holly was still holding her family together by force of will and creative cookery with recipes clipped from packages. Tony attended the Rose Hill AA meeting and was pleased that of all the chapters he'd tried since Henry Hellrung had given him the confidence not to worry if he was 'outed', they had the best coffee.

After the meeting Tony helped harvest tomatoes Holly had grown on a whim. "It was such a cute package at the grocery," she told Tony as she passed him a cloth bag to collect the fruit. "Wild Wonders Heirloom Tiny Tomatoes. Red and yellow and bronze and such cute shapes. I couldn't resist, it, and then I picked out the seeds and planted them, thinking it would be fun for Charley to have something to care for. She said it would be mean to thin out the seedlings..."

Tony looked over the tangled thicket of plants, tied up to sticks and pieces of metal shelf supports, nearby bushes and each other. "Wow. I don't think we can eat that much salad."

Holly grinned. "Sauce! I'm going to make spaghetti sauce. How hard can it be?"

"Well, it's not rocket science," Tony agreed.

Several hours of boiling, and skin removing, and deciding not to bother straining out the seeds, later, Holly decided to donate most of the crop. The sauce was delicious, but tiny tomatoes were too time consuming. Tony brought back a container to the Tower to share with his posse. Bruce particularly liked it. They relaxed around the table, and for a few hours just talked about ordinary, everyday things.

Then Tony and Pepper took the rest of the night off to remember what they were fighting for. For the day when they get to go home.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Division X is led by the X-men, and includes all of the released enhanced people who decided to sign up, once they realised they'd be working under Tony Stark's banner, not the government's. He'd protected the Avengers, no matter what they did, so wouldn't he protect them, if they were loyal to S.I.?

This chapter wanted to be leaping with preparations to move plot, but Holly complained
that she hadn't seen Tony in ages, so he went to reconnect with his Keen roots. It's hard to juggle so many characters, and try not to forget them!
"Boss?" Friday said, softly.

"Yeah?" Tony had a late night, teleconferencing with Jane Foster. She was worried about Thor. He kept trying to reassure her that Thor was a big god and could take care of himself, but he had his own doubts, so he wasn't very successful.

"Karen is upset. She says Peter isn't eating or sleeping. She wants to know if you can help him."

"Has Karen talked to May? I mean, I'll mentor the hell out of Peter, but I'm not his legal anything." Tony felt guilty that he hadn't kept Peter out of the warehouse. Sure the kid was going to get into trouble on his own, but maybe it could have been put off until later, when he had a little more emotional maturity. Like Tony. Yeah.

"No, Boss. Karen doesn't know what to do. She tried talking to Peter, but he just told her he was fine, he just needed some time, but it's been days!"

"Yeah, and with his metabolism, he really can't afford not to eat. See if you can call May. I might have an idea, but I need her permission before I look into it." Tony glanced at his Stark Pad, checking on various projects and expanding his to-do list... so many lines, so few completed checks. Speaking of checks, he has to schedule a checkup with Bruce and Dr. Cho, to decide if he is a viable candidate for Extremis or if he should just go with nanobots, and count on the suit keeping him alive long enough... yeah, not fair to Pepper, thinking that way. There will be an after. They will get through this. Somehow.

"I have Mrs. Parker for you," Friday said, and his Stark Pad switched over to videophone. He'd given May one, of course, over her objections.

"Hi, May. A little bird told me that Peter's under the weather?" Tony tried to sound lighthearted.

May looked worried. "I don't know what to do. He told me he had to make a deposition because he witnessed a crime, but why? He... I know he never had to do that before. He said he's going to be okay, that they let him do it as Spiderman, but that was days ago, and he's just... something’s wrong, and he won't tell me. Ever since Mr. Barton brought him home..."

Tony nodded. "He did witness a crime. It was bad."

"Murder?" May said softly.

"Yes. Peter wasn't involved, in any way, but he was there. I know he tries to protect you, by keeping things to himself, and me... I'm not the prime example of mental health, so even if he would talk to me, I... wouldn't know what I was doing. But I have recently found a psychiatrist who's seen it all, nothing Peter could say would shock him. He works with enhanced people all the time. He's enhanced himself. If you agree, I'd like to ask Peter if he wants me to try to get Dr. Sampson to speak with him."

May looked thoughtful for a moment, then she nodded. "Yes. It's just... I don't know if we can afford it."
Tony waved it away. "Peter has full medical, dental, mental, whatever, under his S.I. internship," he lied, because he didn't know if it was true. Pepper would know, and even if it wasn't, it WOULD BE. "Fully covered. Everything included."

"Well, then, yes. PETER, stop eavesdropping and come here to talk to Mr. Stark." May looked up.

There was a thump, presumably Peter dropping from the ceiling. He came to the phone, a little flushed and embarrassed looking. "Hi, Mr. Stark."

"So, you heard? Would you like me to try to get him? He's a great guy. Muscles and long green hair. Like Captain Planet, only with a doctorate in psychiatry."

"Captain Planet?" Peter looked confused.

"I keep forgetting you're an embryo. TV show. Ecology, blue guy with green hair wants to save the planet," Tony told him.

"Oh." Peter wriggled and wavered and then he nodded. "He sounds nice? I'd like to try. I keep thinking and going around in circles, and it's... probably not good?"

"Right. I'll see if I can set it up. And if I can't get him, I'll find someone else you can talk to, kid. In the meantime, what do you like on your pizza?" He split the phone screen to get to his bookmarked place at Ray's Famous.

"Pizza? Um, anything? Cheese?"

Tony rolled his eyes and put in an order at Ray's for the Special Pizza, pepperoni, sausage, meatballs, mushrooms, bacon, green peppers, onions and anchovies, smothered with extra mozzarella cheese, and then he added extra cheese, extra ham, and sides of garlic knots, buffalo chicken wings and sauteed vegetable primavera in case May felt it was a little unbalanced. He set it for delivery to May's apartment. "Lunch is on me, kiddo."

"Dr. Stark?" Sampson said once Friday tracked him down and made the connection. "I had wanted to thank you. I was beginning to think I'd never be free."

Tony shrugged. "No thanks required. I'm just sorry I hadn't been able to help sooner. But, so long as you're feeling grateful..."

Sampson laughed. "What do you want?"

"There's a kid, he's in over his head, and he needs counseling. He's a good kid, too good, really. He takes too much on his shoulders, and a few days ago, he witnessed a man commit murder, then saw the man shot down before he could kill Peter. He's not handling it well. I was hoping you could talk with him, see what you could do."

Sampson nodded. "My case load is much lighter, now. Currently I'm just working with Emil Blonsky. They call him the Abomination. He's an extreme variant of the super serum, related to Hulk and me, and it's added to... well, let's just say, he wasn't a good candidate for it. But taking a break might be useful. Give him some time to think on his own. General Ross will have to sign off on it, though. He's been hoping to get Blonsky into training."

"Great. So, I'll talk to Ross and get back to you."
"Stark?" Ross said. "Good. I've been expecting your call."

"Fantastic. More visions?"

"Yes, but tell me what you called about first. I didn't get the details, just that you would need something from me."

"Well, it's not from you, exactly. I want to bring Dr. Sampson to New York." Tony didn't feel Ross needed to know more than that. He particularly didn't like mentioning Peter to Ross.

"Umm... well, ok, Blonsky is still... iffy in my visions. Not sure if we can get him on our side, and if we do, I'm not sure we can trust him. So, I'll provide transport for Dr. Sampson, just keep him in contact. I would like to try to get Blonsky, but I'm not putting all my eggs in one basket."

"Great, fine." Tony took a deep breath. "And what did you see?"

"You. Talking to a one-eyed man wearing golden armor. And I saw the same man leading an army against the big ugly purple creature. Purple has an army. In all my visions, he has an army."

"Chitauri?" Tony said.

"Maybe. Maybe not. They were black, and fast and blurry. Sometimes. It's not settled. I've been seeing the man in the golden armor more frequently. I think that is going to happen. Don't know how it'll turn out. Sometimes I saw the one-eyed guy dead, not on Earth, it was all gold with strange skies, and a lot of other armored people dead around him. If you know him and can warn him, maybe he'll join us. It looks like Purple plans to wipe them out first, before coming to Earth. Maybe." Ross looked tired. "I'm trying, but there are so many possibilities."

"Purple? Did you say purple?" Tony snapped his head around at the voice.

"Coulson, what are you doing sneaking up on me?" Tony was annoyed. He'd always heard Coulson. His footsteps were crisply distinct.

Coulson smiled slightly, and twitched his foot, showing off sneakers, instead of his customary leather dress shoes. "Antistatic footwear. It's done wonders."

Chapter End Notes

This made me so hungry...
https://menupages.com/famous-original-rays-pizza/204-9th-ave-new-york
"Very stylish." Tony decided not to tell Coulson that Jarvis had turned off the shocking protocols. "And appropriate. Everyone at SHIELD ought to wear sneakers."

Coulson ignored Tony, and moved around to face Ross on the Stark Pad video. "What were you saying about something purple?"

Ross narrowed his eyes, glanced at Tony for confirmation and then said, "The enemy that's coming is going to be led by a big humanoid. He's big, purple, bald, and it looks like he ran a rake through his chin." Ross scowled. "It hurts even to say something so ridiculous."

"Huh." Coulson said. "Do you... have you anything to back this up?"

Ross growled. "No. I have always seen possible futures, and I've never been able to prove my visions. I kept quiet about them because I couldn't afford to spend my life in therapy. My people... my world... need me. I'm the only one who knows what's coming."

"That's not exactly true," Tony said. "I know it, too. I saw the armada and logic says they're coming."

Coulson blinked slowly and then he sat on the couch. "But you didn't see a vision, did you, Tony?"

Tony wondered why Coulson was suddenly chummy. "Well, yes, but Maximoff stirred up my brain, so probably that was mostly me, turning the emotions into a waking nightmare. Fury knew."

Coulson nodded. "Yes. He told me." Coulson took a deep breath. "I was dead."

"So you said," Tony added, when it seemed Coulson wasn't going to continue. He was interested. Something was going on in Coulson's head.

"I was dead, and I... had a vision. I met Lady Death. She told me about this man, this... Titan, she called him a Titan. She showed him to me, and warned me that his goal was to... halve the universe. To kill half of all the people, everywhere. Not just on Earth. Asgard and... everywhere. She was... angry with him, but couldn't do anything directly against him. Somehow he's made himself immortal, put himself out of her reach."

Tony looked at Ross. Ross shrugged. "I haven't seen Death. Not as a person. I don't think. What difference does it make?"

"Well, if we can't kill him," Tony said, "we need to take that into consideration. Capture him? Take out his troops? I really don't like the sound of it. What kind of power can kill regardless of distance? And if he can do that, why is he apparently going to bring ground assault forces against little old Earth?"

"You believe me?" Coulson asked.

"Can't afford not to," Tony replied. It sounded crazy, but Coulson was the least crazy person Tony had ever met. Probably immunized against insanity at birth. "Did this lady tell you anything useful?"
"She said he needed to gather six powerful objects, and that all of them had or would have, connections to people of Earth. They seek each other out. That's the reason this Titan is coming to Earth. One was the tesseract. By the time I was coherent enough to wonder about it, it had long since been taken to Asgard, so there didn't seem any point to telling Director Fury about what I honestly believed to be a hallucination caused by misfiring neurons."

"I'm not sure I'm believing all this honesty from you," Tony said.

Coulson looked up at Tony, fiercely. "Keep joking, why don't you?"

Ross said, "Does this help us? I mean, can we get these objects and use them ourselves? Or at least, keep them out of this Titan's reach."

"Or destroy them," Tony said. "If he needs all six and we destroy even one, I'm guessing he can't do his sweep the board clean move."

"Guessing," Ross said. "And even if that were true, that wouldn't stop him from bringing the ground assault troops to us. I can't see throwing away a weapon."

"The tesseract is gone, it went to Asgard," Tony reminded him. "The mind stone is Vision. We'll have to... I don't know... hide him?"

"Won't work if these stones go for each other," Ross replied. "He should be training, experimenting, trying to figure out the best use of it."

"Yeah. I'll tell Viz. I don't know what he can do, it's not as if he came with a manual."

Coulson looked thoughtful. "If the stones gravitate towards each other, then possibly Vision could be drawn to another, if it was on Earth?"

"Maybe... like I said, I'll talk to him." Tony sighed. "The only other stone whose whereabouts we know is on Asgard. I'm going to have to talk to Odin. He's a fun guy. One-eyed. Wears gold armor. Has an army. Sound familiar, Thunderbolt?"

Ross nodded. "Call me after you've made some progress. I have to get back to my troops." He closed the connection.

Tony looked at Coulson. "Try not to die again. Things are confusing enough."

"Well, since you ask nicely," Coulson said dryly.

Chapter End Notes

This is the Lady Death we were HINTED at getting in the after credits scene of Avengers not Hela from Thor: Ragnarok, who was titled 'the Goddess of Death'. I hope to avoid bringing Hela into this, because that's just... so so annoying to me, how Asgard's warriors, bred and trained through millennia, folded like tissue paper. I've had HAMSTERS with more fight in them.

I found it interesting that every one of the Infinity Stones was associated at least briefly with an Earth person. Red Skull had the tesseract (Space Stone) which sent him to Vormir to the Soul Stone (no idea WHY it chose him to be the stone keeper of another
stone-- MCU lack of logic), Thanos *sent* the mind stone to Earth in Loki's scepter and eventually it became Vision, Jane was taken by the Reality stone in the form of the Aether, Quill found the Power Stone, The Time Stone's been in the Eye of Agamotto for ages...
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After meeting with his posse to update them Tony went to the Angers compound to visit Jane in her new lab. Jane was looking more frazzled than usual, with several pencils stuck into her hair, and a coffee stain splashed across her lab coat. She looked up from her work, and gave him a weak smile.

"Hello, Dr. Stark. I guess you want to know if there's been any breakthroughs. Well, some... What project would you like to see? I have... notes here... somewhere..." she began shuffling through a stack of notebooks. Physical notebooks. Tony wondered if she distrusted his computer security, which was just hurtful, or if she simply found the physical process of writing and flipping pages conducive to creative thought. Probably both. SHIELD made everyone who dealt with it paranoid, but Tony knew sometimes you had to have something to do with your hands.

"I'd love to look at your notes, but that's not really why I've come," Tony said.

"Oh?" Jane blinked, rubbed her eyes, and then sat down on a lab stool. "What can I do for you, Dr. Stark?"

"I want to use your interdimensional cellphone. I need to talk to Odin."

"OH. Oh, um. Well... I can set it up of course. But Odin..." Jane frowned. "Please be careful. He...you know, he thinks of us as goats."

"Yeah, ok."

Jane got up and went over to a large pile of machinery put together with no discernable plan, and began plugging in and fiddling with controls. "He hasn't even let me speak to Thor. It's always...he's off on a diplomatic mission, or he's putting down an insurrection on one of the other worlds, or he's on a quest..." Jane finished what she was doing and stepped back. A glowing ring appeared in the middle of a circle of metal set up like a hoop. "I'm this close to dumping Thor if he can't get out from under daddy's thumb long enough to even call me, but I'd like to tell him to his face! I'm not a goat, damn it."

"Absolutely, yes, I agree," Tony said, absentmindedly. "Is there... a switchboard, or does this go to a device Odin carries with him?"

"It's set to the observatory-- at least that's what I called it. Heimdall watches. I don't know if he lives there, but so far, he's always answered. If Odin isn't busy, Heimdall transfers the..." Jane glanced at Tony, before continuing, "essence to Odin. I don't know. It works. And they won't explain their end to me." Jane sounded frustrated.

The glowing ring now showed an image of a big man standing in... a fancy gazebo? The guy was huge, and his eyes glowed gold. Impressive. But Tony had been buddies with Hulk, so he wasn't put off by big guys who scowled no matter how glowy gold their eyes were. "Ok, right. Great. Heimdall? I'm Tony Stark. I need to speak with Odin. It's very important. It concerns the safety of Asgard." There was a pause, and then the image changed to what was apparently a throne room, well there was a huge chair and lots of gold, and a stern looking old man lounging on the chair, scowling at Tony from one eye. The gold eyepatch was taking things a bit far, Tony thought, but, eh, to each their own style.
"What do you have to say to Odin, king of Asgard, mortal?"

Tony's put up with arrogance before, but most of the time he didn't have to suppress the urge to laugh. The gold eyepatch just... "Earth is preparing for an alien invasion."

Odin looked as if he was about to yawn. "And what concern of Asgard is that? Midgard is not one of our dominions." The way Odin said it, it was like 'we could have taken over, but you're not worth it.'

Tony grinned. "Yep, we're free. We like it that way, that's what we told Loki. His battle plan was crap. Couldn't fight his way out of a wet paper bag."

Odin's eye glittered for a moment, then he waved a hand dismissively. "Loki is dead. If you seek vengeance upon him, you will have to remain unsatisfied."

"Yeah, no. It's not about Loki. Well, in a little way, maybe. When he visited Earth he brought a little toy with him. Thor took it back, but on second thought, I don't believe it belonged to Loki."

"What of it?" Odin sounded bored. "The scepter was far too powerful for Midgardians. Asgard was a far safer place for it."

"Except that it wasn't. It wound up back on Earth, somehow. Caused a lot of trouble. Turned out it contained the Mind Stone."

"Ah." Odin said.

Jane was watching them both, turning from Tony to Odin, like someone at a tennis match.

"It's one of a set of six. And the set is reforming. It's going to happen on Earth."

"If that is so," Odin said while waving a hand casually, "then that will be a problem for Midgard, but I see no threat to Asgard."

"Your people believe in prophecies and visions. I have a doubly confirmed vision that a big purple guy is..." Tony paused. Odin's eye had flashed green at the mention of the purple guy. "Well, he's going to come to Earth, fight a huge ground battle, and then use the Infinity Stones to wipe out half the people in the universe. That includes Asgard."

Odin stood up. He waved imperiously, and turned away from Tony. "Leave us. Clear the throne room. I would speak to this Midgardian in private." Tony waited until Odin nodded and sat back down. "You may continue," Odin said. His eye was green. It hadn't been green before.

"Huh. Well, anyway. We have a... visionary... who sees possible futures. He sees one of two possibilities for Asgard. Either you all die, or you, you personally lead your troops to battle on Earth against purple. I don't know if we win, but if we fight together we're stronger."

"Hmm," Odin said. "But perhaps if Asgard waits until this... purple... is weakened by fighting Midgard, we will take fewer losses fighting him on our own familiar grounds." He smiled, a slow, mean smile. "Of course, you could try to appeal to my humanity." His image wavered and flickered.

"What?" Tony said. "What... Loki?"

Loki stood up, in full armor, with the long horns of his helmet curving back. "You've convinced me. Well, also, I decided being king is boring, when it isn't really me being king."
"Where's Odin?" Tony asked.

Jane was just staring wide-eyed for a moment then she exclaimed, "THOR! What have you done to Thor!"

Loki rolled his eyes. "I sent him to do what he does best. Brawl. I keep hoping he's going to get killed, but so far, no luck."

"BRING HIM BACK!" Jane demanded.

Loki smiled. "What am I bid?"

Tony said, "Don't be an ass, Loki. You know we'll need him. And unless you were goofing off on Earth, we'll need daddy Odin to lead the troops. You really weren't any good at it."

Loki pouted. He actually pushed out his lower lip and pouted. "Fine. I sent Odin to Midgard to a place where they keep feeble old people, under a spell so he thinks he's a feeble old Midgardian. I didn't even have to change his appearance. If I bring him back, he's not going to be pleased with me, and I'm really tired of the dungeons. I've read all the books there." He sighed. "But Thanos... I fought him once, on my own, and lost." Loki's gaze went distant. "He sent me to Midgard after... considerable persuasion, and then, used the Mind Stone to keep me set to his cause."

"You're saying you had no choice?" Tony said, dubiously. "You sure seemed to be enjoying the mayhem."

"Yes, well, I do enjoy a fight," Loki said, "and it was petty satisfaction to take out my fully justified rage against Thor by attacking his latest playground. Thanos didn't force me to specific actions."

Tony thought about it. "You killed a lot of people, maimed others. You could pay for the damage to buildings, but even using coercion as a mitigating factor... you murdered people, Loki. Not even soldiers. Just people minding their own business."

"Midgardians," Loki muttered. "Your lives are so short anyway, what difference does it make?"

"You know, if you actually felt remorse and wanted to make up for it, I was going to offer you a home on Earth. Go to bat for you against the Accords Council. Try to keep Clint from killing you. Get you the best lawyers. But you know what? Fuck you, Loki. You go on lying to your people, sit there and wait for Thanos. Enjoy your throne, while it lasts." Tony gestured to Jane, who turned off the connection, shutting off Loki's rage-filled face even as he opened his mouth, no doubt to curse Tony.

Jane was shaking, whether with fear or anger, he couldn't tell. She said, "Was that wise... I mean... you said we need him."

"No, according to the vision, we need Odin," Tony tapped at his Stark Pad. "Jarvis? Do a search for me. One-eyed elderly white men admitted to long term care, refine that to admitted since...." Tony looked at Jane. "You saw Odin, right? That business at Greenwich, you went to Asgard for a visit?"

"Yes," Jane said.

"Ok, so Jarvis, assuming it was after that, find Odin. We'll see what we can do with him, once we get him."

Chapter End Notes
I actually thought Loki could come and join the group, but he refused a redemption arc. Ok, play it like Wanda, then, no remorse, no redemption.

MAYBE I'll get Loki anyway, but he's not getting a free pass.

The main thing is-- if Odin can get back to Asgard, his strength should return and if he doesn't die, then we don't have Hela. I really don't want Hela. RUNNING OUT OF TIME to try to finish before End Game. Trying really hard. My butt is numb from sitting in this chair.
Jarvis and Friday were getting more and more comfortable with each other. Friday helped him when he stumbled over a missing piece of old code, and he helped her to better understand orders, and suggestions, and subtle opportunities for independent action based on circumstances and implied, rather than direct orders. So Tony's vague instruction to find Odin didn't confuse them. It was a big job, but they were confident.

Tony returned to the Tower to catch up again on incoming data, and share the latest news with relevant parties, including T'Challa. He spared the time for a brief chat with the President (of the US, that is) who was totally out of his depth with aliens and superheroes. Since Tony was currently far more popular than the administration, he'd been giving Tony a free hand, while trying to simultaneously distance himself from Tony, in case Tony was wrong, and stay friendly with Tony, in case Tony was right.

Having got unofficial permission from the President to offer unofficial treaties with aliens of unspecified origin, Tony briefly filled in the Tower posse on the latest developments.

"Loki," Clint said flatly.

"Loki," Tony said.

"You almost invited Loki to join... whatever we are. This is," Clint said.

Tony sighed. "He fought Thor to a standstill. I wouldn't have trusted him as far as I could throw him, but yes, I would have used him if I thought the gain outweighed the risks."

Rhodey said, "If he'd gone before the Accords Council with the same attitude as Barnes, and offered his abilities in the coming crisis, I could have worked with him. I don't have to trust him, to trust that Tony would have kept him under control."

Tony tilted his head. "I'm not going to play the game I did with Rogers, letting him be in charge because that was the only way he'd have it. I'm not a dictator, Clint, but I'm not going to turn down any resources for personal reasons. Whether mine, or anyone else's."

Clint turned his head to look at Barnes. "Ok. Point. But... IF you bring Loki here, I want a tinfoil hat of my own."

Vision said mildly, "Loki no longer possesses the Mind Stone." He gestured to his forehead.

"So? I trust you with that rock. I don't trust him even without it." Clint folded his arms across his chest.

"Fine," Tony said. "IF, I say IF, Loki joins us, I'll make you your very own tinfoil hat."

"Fine," Clint said, with a scowl. "Just so we're clear on that."

"Great. So, back to what is actually happening." Tony took reports on everyone's individual activities, and they compared notes.
"Dr. Banner has been most helpful in my efforts to communicate with the Mind Stone," Vision said. "I am learning how to meditate and achieve a state of internal mindfulness."

Bruce smiled. "Turns out, the Mind Stone does have a rudimentary personality. It's not too dissimilar to the Other Guy, actually. Except that it can't actually jump out of Vision."

"At least, so far it has shown no inclination to do so," Vision said.

"Good," Pepper said, looking mildly alarmed. "We like you just the way you are, Vision."

Vision smiled. "I hope soon to be able to ask it if there are any other Infinity Stones on Earth, and if so, to guide me to them."

The next morning Jarvis gave Tony the address of a nursing home in Manhattan. And a name. Alfred Otter.

"No," the head administrator said. "Yes, I know who you are, Mr. Stark, but we protect our clients. You aren't listed as a relative, or even a trusted acquaintance of Mr. Otter's. You will not be allowed a private conversation with him. Under any circumstances."

Tony refrained from rolling his eyes. "What, do you think I'm going to get him to sign over his social security checks to me? Fine. Look, send along your burliest nurse's aides. They can watch that I don't do anything to upset or cheat Mr. Otter. I just need to see if he's the man I'm looking for. His family lost track of him."

"His admittance was properly done, by his son," the admin said. "He wasn't found wandering on the street without a name."

Tony ran both hands through his hair. "There's been... a split in the family. His son took the old man away and hid him just so they can't reconcile with him before the end." Tony looked at her, willing to play for sympathy, if any could be found. "I didn't get a chance with my old man. The last words we shared weren't what I want to remember. It'd make me feel better if I could spare my friend that feeling. I didn't want to raise my friend's hope, if I'm wrong. Just let me see him. Please?"

After a long moment, the administrator nodded. "I'll accompany you, myself."

The old man was sitting in a chair set on a walkway of a very small garden. It had a little tree in the middle, a section of closely clipped grass, small tables scattered about interspersed with a few potted flowering plants. He wasn't looking at the flowers, but up in the sky.

Tony walked around to see his face. It was the same face Loki had worn, but washed clean of arrogance. He glanced mildly at Tony and then turned his eye back upward. "Huginn and Muninn are lost," he said calmly. "Thought and memory."

"Mr. Otter?" the admin said, "are you ready to return to your room." The old man didn't respond. One of the attendants came over and said, "Mr. Otter is a very dignified gentleman, you have to use his full name. Alf Otter, would you like to go to your room?"

The lone bright blue eye turned to the attendant. "Yes, you may escort me, sirrah. It is too late in the
day. Huginn and Muninn are at roost.”

Alf Otter Alfotter... All Father. Yeah, Tony thought, as he watched the old man waver on unsteady feet back into the building, Loki was a little shit.

Chapter End Notes

Looked this up and decided none of the names were really suitable to the fic, so I made up something.
Tony's first thought was to ask Xavier to cure Odin. "You know," he said over the 'phone, "it's a sort of mind control, isn't it?"

Xavier frowned. "I am willing to make the attempt, but I am dubious. Perhaps Odin is simply senile, and Loki merely took credit for nature. I am, after all, neither a doctor or a magician."

"You can talk to Vision while you're here," Tony offered as an inducement. "And Pepper, she told me she had some ideas for investments you might like to look into."

"You don't have to bribe me, Tony," Xavier said, with a smile. "I'll come. I just don't want to get your hopes up unduly."

It took more sweet talking, but not a lot, to get Xavier in to see old Alf. Probably Xavier had a lot to do with it. He looked so innocent sitting in his wheelchair and looking up with big brown eyes, that even the most hardened and cynical tended to trust him. So he was wheeled into the garden, where Alf was once more keeping watch. Xavier smiled and shook hands with the old man, and talked gently with him about ravens for a few minutes before giving his head a slight shake.

"I'm sorry," he told Tony after they left the nursing home. "I've never seen anything like it. It is an imposed condition, but it's nothing I can get a grip on."

"You could help Maximoff, and Clint," Tony pointed out. "What's different about Odin's case?"

"I don't know how it was done, but it's been made a part of him, not an overlay as with Maximoff and Barton. I could lift an overlay but this... perhaps Odin could fight it off himself. I sensed he was trying, but... he's very weak. The effort might kill him. He certainly would be in no condition to lead an army."

"And here I thought you could do anything," Tony said, disappointed, but trying to make light of it.

"As I said, I'm not a magician."

Tony was feeling a little down when he returned to the Tower, but Bruce came up to him, beaming, and his spirits lifted. "You look happy today. Get a new shipment of exotic tea?"

"Vision had a breakthrough," Bruce told him. "He visualized strings, or cables, I don't know... leading from the Mind Stone."

"Yes," Vision said, floating down through the ceiling. "Most of them are pale, transparent tints of color, but one is a bright green, quite clear. I believe that indicates it is nearby. Now that I am aware of it." Vision lightly touched the Mind Stone. "If I turn my head, the ribbon changes. I feel that I could use this as a guide."
"Yes!" Tony fist pumped. "How close do you think it is? I mean, obviously on Earth, but within the continental US? I want to go with you. If someone has it, and knows how to use it, they may not be so keen on sharing."

Bruce nodded. "I should come, too. What if they have minions?" he made a little joke. A very little joke. "Just let me change. I like this shirt."

"Awesome," Tony said, glad that Bruce was no longer flinching from the Hulk side of him. "I should change my outfit, too. Jay, let the posse know what's up, and keep track of us. I don't think we'll need backup, but just in case."

"I didn't think this was what you had in mind when you said you were changing your outfit!" Bruce shouted. He was wearing goggles, but still he squinted against the wind. He was astride Iron Man, riding him like a pony as they flew over the streets of New York.

"C'mon, it's fun! Live a little!" Tony really had to build new suits and get used to them. His chest gave him phantom pains. He should get Extremis too. He needed to upgrade himself. He had to squeeze out the time for it, while he still had Bruce to help. Tony wasn't entirely sure Bruce wouldn't have second thoughts and disappear one day. "It's not as if you'd get hurt if you fell."

"No! But it would be bad for whatever I landed on! Manhattan isn't Hulk-proof!"

"We do not have much further to go, Dr. Banner," Vision said, comfortingly from where he was flying at Iron Man's side. "There." He pointed at a large building with a weird abstractly shaped window. It didn't look like Art Deco to Tony, but maybe? Art wasn't really his thing.

They landed, and Tony retracted the helmet. Bruce slid off his back and stumbled to his feet. "Next time, maybe we could drive?"

"Pfft," Tony said. "And get stuck in traffic? I bet big green really hates that."

Bruce shrugged.

Vision walked up to the door. There was a large brass knocker on it, a ring in the shape of a gargoyle or dragon. It looked old. The whole building looked old, but in good condition. It didn't seem to be sublet into apartments, so whoever owned it must have money. Ok, so Tony wouldn't try to buy the Stone. Maybe whoever it was would be an Iron Man or Hulk fan and just give it to them?

Yes, not likely.

The door opened and a Chinese man said, "Yes? Where's my pizza? If it's late, it's free."

Vision blinked. "Sir? We are not delivering pizza."

The man grunted in annoyance. "It'll be cold. It always is." He started to close the door.

"Wait!" Tony said, since both Vision and Bruce seemed startled into silence by the man's obliviousness. "We need to talk to you. It's a matter of life and death!" Ok, that was a little over the top, but if Iron Man and Vision on your doorstep don't impress you, then over the top is called for.

"If you have any religious tracts to deliver, try the next house down. They probably need saving."

Tony was about to fire up his repulsors and show Jesus to this guy, when a voice came from the
interior of the house. "Wong? What are you doing? You've left the tea kettle on the boil. It's annoying."

Apparently Wong was the doorkeeper. He turned to his side and stepped back. A tall man dressed like something out of Arabian Knights, or maybe Harry Potter--Tony didn't know, he didn't keep track of fantasy role playing--came into view. He was holding a cup of delicate bone china tea in both hands. "Oh," he said. "Company." He didn't sound at all pleased.

"Look," Tony said hastily. "Can we get in off the street? We're drawing flies."

The caped weirdo looked past Tony, and sighed. People were standing on the sidewalk, staring. Cars were stopped. "Yes, all right. Come in. Wong, could you please..."

"Pizza's late," Wong complained. After everyone was in, he shut the door and said, "I only ordered one. There won't be enough to go around."

"Tony Stark, Vision, Dr. Banner," the tall man acknowledged them as he led them into a weirdly decorated room. The whole place looked like a combination of Victorian sitting room and museum. "My name is Strange. Doctor Stephen Strange. What brings you to my humble abode?" He sat down at a table and put down his cup. There was a matching teapot centered on the table. "Wong, could you please bring some more cups for our guests?"

"Guests." Wong huffed. "I didn't invite them." He stalked off.

"Look, we don't care about the tea," Tony said.

Bruce raised his hand. "I'd like a cup, it smells nice."

Tony rolled his eyes. "LOOK, we need your help, Strange. It's not overselling to say the fate of the universe is at stake. Well, half of it anyway."

Strange sipped his tea and raised his eyebrows. "What an extraordinary statement. But then, you are known for your dramatics, Mr. Stark."

"Dramatics. I'm not the one dressed for Halloween," Tony replied. "Look, I can see you like to collect stuff. We just need one piece of your collection and then we'll go and say thanks, and hey, buy Wong a pizza. You won't even miss it. It's just a stone."

"Green," Vision said. "I believe it would be green."

Strange froze in place, and then set his cup down, with deliberation. His hands trembled. Tony even thought the man's ridiculous cape twitched. "What."

"I can pay," Tony said, although he didn't really think that would fly. "Whatever you want."

"Why do you need this... green stone?"

Bruce said, "It's a long story, but trust us, we really need it. Thanos is coming."

"What's a Thanos?"

"The guy who sent the Chitauri. You were in New York back then, maybe?" Tony said. "He's got lots more where they came from, and bigger plans. We're gearing up to fight him. The green stone is part of a set, like the one Vision has. Thanos is after them."
"Oh." Strange stood up. "Yes, that does sound like a problem. You needn't worry about the stone. I am its guardian." He kept standing up. Actually, he rose into the air. He moved his hands, and the bulky medallion resting on his chest moved. Bright green light poured from the stone set in it. "You wouldn't know what to do with the Time Stone, anyway."

"Pizza's here," Wong announced. He looked at all the stunned faces around the table. "No one's interested? Great. More for me."

Chapter End Notes

I recently rewatched Dr. Strange, and freeze-framed it at the moment where Stephen was choosing a wristwatch before he got into his car leading up to his accident.

The watch was a date time model and said Feb 2, 2016. So that verified for me that it was Rhodey being discussed in the '35-year-old Air Force colonel. Crushed his lower spine in some kind of experimental armor. Mid-thoracic vertebral fracture.'

I'd seen remarks that possibly it was Hammer's test pilot, back in Iron Man 2. The time rules that out definitively.
Chapter 125

Wong gave an impromptu history lesson on the Infinity Stones. Tony wondered how Hawking's ideas would fit into this new Big Bang with Baubles. Instantaneous creation of solid crystalline forms which were really the physical manifestation of human concepts before there were any living creatures, much less any humans? Where's the logic in that?

Yeah, ok, obviously the stones existed, and they're powerful, but this origin story was hogwash. As a scientist, Tony cringed from accepting it, but as a practical man he'd let it stand. It wasn't worth alienating Wong and Strange. Particularly not Strange. He knew how to operate the Time Stone. That was what was important.

Briefly Tony considered the possibility of destroying one of the Stones. It would prevent Thanos from acquiring ultimate power, but really, what difference would it make? Near ultimate power was still more than they could handle. Plus, even if they COULD destroy one of the stones, what if the damn things actually were connected to their named attributes? It would not be fun to destroy the Time Stone and wind up frozen in a single instant, or have all times converge at once, or end up at the heat-death of the universe. No, bad idea. Bad.

Strange has a leg up on them, what with his mystical mumbo jumbo. Oh, that gave Tony an idea. "Hey, Dr. Strange. What's your doctorate?" Tony really hoped it wasn't in philosophy or something else impractical.

"Medicine. I am... I was a neurosurgeon," Strange said.

"Huh, so, you're a doctor and a magician."

Strange gave Tony an annoyed look. "I'm not going to give advice. If you have a 'funny looking mole', see your regular physician."


"Yes, I have heard of Odin," Dr. Strange said in a world-weary tone. "What is the relevance?"

"Odin's here."

"On Earth?" Dr. Strange asked.

Bruce interjected, "In a Manhattan nursing home. Under an alias, and..." He spread his hands. "Under a... spell? Loki did it."

"Odin thinks he's a senile bird watcher," Tony said. "Which is nice for him, I guess. After a few millennia of going around beating up everyone on nine worlds it must be a nice, restful change of pace. The problem is, we need warrior-king Odin. Loki's pretending to be him, but he doesn't have the chops for it, plus... you know, no one in their right mind is going to trust Loki."

"Great." Dr. Strange stood up. "Let's go."

"Like that?" Tony said. "You're not really dressed for it."

"Just think about Odin, and the nursing home." Strange slipped a double ring onto his fingers. "Give me a location to fix on."
"Just think it?" Tony asked dubiously.

"Unless you want to pull up Google Earth. Hopefully, your memory is a little clearer than that."

"Fine." Tony thought about the garden, and Odin, the tree, and the planters, the paving stones...

Dr. Strange waved his hands about, and a sparkling ring of gold fire appeared. Visible on the other side was the nursing home garden. Odin stood up and smiled placidly at them. "Oh," Odin said. "Hello. Do you know where Huginn and Muninn are?"

"Right here!" Tony said hastily, seeing a burly nurse running towards Odin. "Hurry, they'll get away."

Odin stepped through the ring, which collapsed immediately after he emerged into the room and looked around. He frowned and then said, in a disappointed voice. "Gone again."

Dr. Strange said, "We'll find them."

Bruce went over to Odin and smiled at him. "Please, come and take a seat."

Odin sat. "I'm lost without them, you know?" He sighed. "You get old and you lose things. I had children. Two, or was it three?" he mumbled.

Dr. Strange walked up to Odin and placed his hands near Odin's head. "Yes. I see the problem. You," he tilted his head towards Vision. "Come. We need to combine Time and Mind to undo this spell."

"Excuse me," Tony said. "Isn't it bad to cross the streams? Total protonic reversal?"

Dr. Strange gave Tony a dirty look. "Now, Vision," he said.
The medallion Strange wore shot out a green beam. Vision's Mind Stone sent out a yellow blaze. The two intersected on Odin's head.

Odin's eyes went wide. He leaped to his feet. "LOKI, YOU IDIOT! HEIMDALL, HEIMDALL, BRING US BACK!"

"What?" Tony said, before the light went all rainbow-mad and his stomach dropped. He landed on his feet, automatically snapping his helmet back on. "JARVIS. JARVIS, what the hell just happened?"

Jarvis didn't answer. The HUD was blank. Tony ripped the helmet off and turned around. He was standing in the middle of Heimdall's gazebo, along with Strange, Bruce, Vision and Odin. Bruce was looking a little green around the edges. Odin was dressed in shiny gold armor, with matching eyepatch.

Heimdall frowned. "I do not understand, my lord. How did you get to Midgard?"

"Loki," Odin snapped in explanation. "Assemble my advisors." He strode off down a sparkly... yes... rainbow bridge. "Take care of my guests." He waved a negligent hand back towards Tony and the others.

Heimdall looked at them with mild curiosity. Bruce was fighting the transformation. Vision was looking around with interest. Strange looked pissed off. And Tony, hell yes, he was mad.

"Take care of?" Tony snapped. "Put us in the stable with the rest of the goats?"

Heimdall said, "No, goats are kept in the fields." He looked at Bruce. "Berserkergang. Interesting. I did not know Midgardians possessed those champions."

"We'd surprise you," Tony said. He went to Bruce. "Hey, Bruce? Hulk, listen, can you guys hold it together just a little while longer? Please?"

Bruce looked at Tony through green eyes. His voice came out Hulk-deep. "No," he growled.

"Oh, come on," Dr. Strange snapped. "I need to get back to the Sanctum." He pointed at Heimdall. "Put me back, right now."

Heimdall gazed at Dr. Strange calmly. "My king has ordered me to treat you as guests. He has not given you leave to depart."

Tony wasn't sure that Strange would be any help in the diplomacy department, and whether Bruce Hulked out or not, he wouldn't be much good either. "Yeah, well, maybe Dr. Strange doesn't need your permission." Tony made hand wavy motions with his back to Heimdall.

Dr. Strange nodded and started to wave his hands. Then he looked down at them and scowled. "My sling ring must have fallen off."

"Can't you hocus pocus up another crackerjack ring?" Tony asked.
Strange's scowl deepened. "No. And you should be glad I can't."

"Threats! I feel threatened! Is this how you treat guests," Tony said, turning to point at Heimdall.

Heimdall's eyes flickered for a moment, then he said, "I will escort the winner of any battle to the finest guest room in the palace." And he smiled.

Bruce said, "Hey, I don't mean to interrupt, but I'm just a little curious what Odin plans to do, so. If we could, I'd like to go find out?" He squirmed and hitched his trousers higher. "Also, I'd like a new pair of pants."

When they reached the palace-- despite his words, Heimdall didn't actually take them there, he just pointed down the bridge. So they walked and followed the sounds of shouting. No one stopped them, probably because everyone in the area was also heading in the same direction.

Everything was gold and glitzy. Tony finally understood why Odin wore all gold, it was camouflage. Stick him against a pillar and shut his eye and he'd vanish. When they got to the center of the shouting, Odin was standing in front of a throne, shouting at... Odin... sitting on the throne.

"Oh," Bruce said. "That's confusing."

Chapter End Notes


This fury, which was called berserkergang, occurred not only in the heat of battle, but also during laborious work. Men who were thus seized performed things which otherwise seemed impossible for human power. This condition is said to have begun with shivering, chattering of the teeth, and chill in the body, and then the face swelled and changed its colour. With this was connected a great hot-headedness, which at last gave over into a great rage, under which they howled as wild animals, bit the edge of their shields, and cut down everything they met without discriminating between friend or foe. When this condition ceased, a great dulling of the mind and feebleness followed, which could last for one or several days.
Tony considered pointing out that the one on the throne was actually Loki, but he doubted his voice would have more legal weight than a goat's bleating in court.

Odin (the Real Deal) shouted, "This time your tricks may have undone us all, Loki!"

Odin (the Good Enough for Central Casting) sneered and waved his hand, which was clutching a huge spear. Golden, of course. "Your illusions and shape-shifting will gain you nothing but further punishment, Loki. Guards! Take him to the cells!"

Vision looked eagerly back and forth between the two.

The guards, big guys with particularly impressive helmets, shifted uneasily.

"And this is the warrior-king we need?" Dr. Strange muttered.

"Yeah, I know," Tony replied. "Asgard's apparently big on soap opera tropes, from what Thor's said."

Bruce sighed. "I'm getting a headache," he complained. "Gold echoes."

Tony nodded. "I'm thinking to redo Hulk's room. All that metal gives it such an unfriendly vibe. I'm considering maybe a nice twill cloth. Maybe put in a hot tub..."


Not-Odin was now standing on his throne and aiming the spear at Realio Trulio Odin. "Guards! Obey your king!"

"GUNGNIR, TO ME!" the Odin formerly known as Alf shouted.

The spear ripped itself from Loki-din and flew through the air to Odin who stood even taller when he caught it. His one eye shot sparks. The spear shot lightning. Wind came from nowhere and flipped capes and hair all around.

Tony noticed that Strange's cloak instead wrapped tighter around him. Tony grabbed Bruce's arm for mutual balance. Vision looked even more intrigued.

Odin shouted in a voice like the father of all thunders, "YOU WOULD HAVE BROUGHT RAGNAROK UPON US!" And then he flung the spear straight up at the lovely mural painted ceiling, which shattered into a thousand shards and rained down on the throne.

There was a shrill meeping cry, and then, under a translucent green dome covering the throne, Loki crouched. As the last of the debris pattered off the dome, Loki looked up at Odin. "Ow," he said. The dome faded, and Loki stood up, brushing off bits of plaster. "Well, as much fun as this has been..."

"DO NOT!" Odin roared. The spear had come back to his hand. He threw it again. It caught Loki by the hair, pinning him to the back of the throne. "LOOK! Behold, Asgard!"
Everyone obediently looked up. Under the old mural was an older mural.

"Huh," Tony said. "Cross dressing Loki? But why's she got Thor's hammer? I thought that... you know...Dr. Horrible..."

"Do not say it," Bruce warned. He held up his fingers nearly touching. "I'm this close."

"Yeah, ok," Tony said. "But wow, that's a big dog her Lokiness is riding."

Everyone was still looking up at the mural.

Dr. Strange said in exasperation, "Will someone kindly explain what's happening here?"

Loki said, "I haven't a clue." He was gingerly tugging at the spear, but it wasn't budging.

Odin lowered his gaze. "I had thought to put the past behind me. I, Odin, renowned for bringing peace to the Nine Worlds, did so by waging war without rules, without mercy, without justice. At my side, my fiercest warrior, my greatest commander, was my first born, Hela of Asgard."

"Oh, God," Dr. Strange muttered, "family drama. That always fills up the emergency room on weeknights." His cloak twitched in what Tony would take as a nod.

"Shush," Tony said, "it's just getting good."

"I want to go home," Bruce said softly.

Odin glared indiscriminately around the room. "When peace was achieved, I was satisfied. Hela was not. She continued with atrocities and massacres, raising the dead as an army loyal only to her. She WOULD NOT CEASE. So," Odin's voice lowered. "I shut her away, locked her away from memory, locked her away in a dimension she could not breach. Her domain is death so I sealed her prison with my life."

The crowd was absolutely still. Odin's eye wept. "Like me, like all of the lineage of Bor, like all the rightful heirs to the throne of Asgard, Hela draws her power from Asgard. When I pass, Hela returns, returns with fire and an undead army you cannot defeat, for all the fallen rise and become hers."

Tony didn't say it, but he was definitely thinking, 'oh shit'.

"On Midgard, I weakened. Loki..." Odin turned his gaze on Loki, softer now. "I should have told you. I should have told you many things. Whatever you have done, I know you still would not wish Asgard destroyed, but that is what you so nearly accomplished."

Loki stopped fighting the spear and sneered at Odin. "I killed my own, true father for Asgard."

"No, Loki." Odin shook his head. "You killed your mother."

Tony blinked.

Loki said, "What?"

"Laufey was your mother, and I your father," Odin said. "I was given you to raise as a bridge between our worlds. But I was selfish. I wanted you to be only my son, only of Asgard."

Loki looked absolutely shell-shocked.

Tony thought at least that explained why Hela looked so much like Loki. He wondered who HER
mother had been.

Chapter End Notes

Dr. Horrible. 'The hammer is my penis' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7bdr6fjg-k
Chapter 128

"So," Odin said more softly. "In my pride and vanity, I set us all on this path." He raised his hand, and the spear pulled loose and returned to him. Odin thumped the spear butt down to the floor, and leaned against it, with that move changing it from a weapon to a staff. "It will take all of us, working together, to heal this rift. If we do not, if we allow past injuries to dictate our current actions, then I fear we shall have no future."

Tony had to admit Odin knew how to work a crowd. The Asgardians had gone from shocked to listening thoughtfully.

"Do you expect me to simply forget a lifetime of LIES?" Loki said, rising to his feet. "To forget always being distrusted? Always being mocked? Always being nothing more than Thor's shadow? Tell me! Did you hate me because I looked like HER!" Loki gestured at the mural. "Were you so shallow, so pathetic, that Thor's blond locks made him literally your golden child?"

Odin closed his eye for a moment. "No. But I feared for you. I feared to raise you to be a warrior, as I had Hela, and so, I erred in other ways. There was no right time to tell you the truth, not once I had embarked upon a lie, and buried all memory of Hela."

"And yet, you expect me to forgive and follow at your steps now, because you have cried. The Allfather has shed a tear, what a great sacrifice!" Loki shouted. He flung his hands out wide.

"Is he always like this?" Strange asked Tony.

Tony shrugged. "Prima donna, all the way."

Bruce nodded.

Vision looked like he was taking notes.

Odin sighed. "Forgive or do not forgive, but know that you are truly my son, and for all my faults, I do love you."

Strange huffed. "I wish I could change the channel."

"Gotta agree with you," Tony said. "This is fascinating, but..." He raised his voice. "Hey! Hug it out and lets get to saving the universe, ok?"

Odin turned to Tony, frowning. "What say you? The danger is averted. Hela shall not be freed. Ragnarok will not come upon us. Surtur lies undisturbed in his prison."

"Ah." Loki raised his hand. "The stories about Surtur? They're just stories, right... he couldn't actually grow into a mountain and destroy Asgard if... someone was to... accidentally set him free?"

Odin looked at Loki. "Loki," he growled and took a step towards the throne.

"Thor was bored! You know how he gets. So... I may have... set him... a few quests. And told him to bring back Surtur's crown." Loki straightened. "If the tales are right, then Surtur is no threat without it."

Odin turned his head. "HEIMDALL."

"Yes, Odin," Heimdall said. Tony hadn't seen him following them, or seen him enter the throne
room. The big guy had awesome sneaking powers.

"Can you see Thor?"

Heimdall's eyes did a freaky glowing thing. Heimdall nodded. "Yes, Odin. He is chained up in Surtur's prison. I believe he is mocking Surtur."

Odin's eye rolled. "Why have none of my sons any sense?" He pointed at Loki. "We will continue this discussion. Until my return, I give you leave to act as king." He turned to Heimdall. "Send me to Thor."

"Yes, Odin," Heimdall said. The two of them strode out of the throne room.

"What?" Bruce said. "What just happened here?"

"I believe," Vision said, "that Odin is extending trust to Loki."

Dr. Strange said, wryly, "He can afford to, I suppose."

Tony agreed silently. The look Loki was getting from the assembled Asgardians was hardly one of unquestioning loyalty. Everyone seemed to be waiting for Loki to make the first move.

Loki looked around the throne room, then sat on the throne.

Everyone waited.

Loki put his chin on his fist and assumed a stern expression.

Tony was reminded of Rodin's 'Thinker', that is, if it had been made of bling instead of bronze.

Loki sighed.

Everyone waited.

Finally Loki sat up. He looked around the room, and his gaze caught on Tony. "This is all your doing," he accused, pointing at Tony.

"Not all his," Dr. Strange said.

"I assisted Dr. Strange, as well," Vision remarked.

Tony looked at Bruce.

Bruce shrugged. "I just came along... because why, Tony?"

"Minions," Tony reminded him. "You thought there might be minions."

"Yeah, ok." Bruce smiled at Loki, and then around at the less than friendly crowd. "I don't see any minions here."

Loki's eyes narrowed. "I am king."

"For now," Tony said cheerfully.

Loki looked thoughtful. He made a gesture and a parchment appeared in his hand. "Then perhaps I should make the most of it." A quill pen appeared in his other hand and he scribbled quickly on it. "Have it recorded that on this day, King Loki of Asgard has pardoned Prince Loki of Asgard of all
offenses, of any degree, of which he may have been sentenced, tried, accused or even suspected!" Loki grinned and handed the parchment to the nearest Asgardian. "See that set in the records, would you?"

"That's not binding on Earth, you know," Tony said. He was sure, relatively sure, that Loki wouldn't blast him no matter what he said. Not so much because Odin might be annoyed at goat's blood on the non-existent carpet, but because Bruce was standing right next to him. Tony had a carefully preserved divot in his penthouse as a reminder of Loki's encounter with Hulk.

Loki scowled and lounged back in the throne. "True. And I suppose... with what is coming... it would be as well to be on good terms with even the least of the worlds. Very well, I regret having destroyed buildings, structures, and citizens of Midgard. I see now that they are indeed a worthy people and their lives are valuable."

"That's a start," Tony said. Not that he believed Loki's change of attitude, but having the Asgardians hear this pronouncement was useful, if he was going to talk Odin into allying with them.

"I offer weregild for the slain Midgardians."

"Oh, that is good," Vision said. "Technically weregild is not paid for the death of slaves, only for free people. Even by making the offer, Loki is officially acknowledging the people of Earth as equal to Asgardians."

"That is good," Tony admitted. He gave Loki back a sharp grin. "What am I bid?"

"This." Loki motioned, and reached into thin air. He pulled out the Tesseract. "I offer this."

Tony swallowed hard. He glanced at Vision. "Is that really..."

Vision nodded. "I feel it. That is the Space Stone."
"Yeah, ok, done deal," Tony said. "On behalf of the peoples of Earth, I accept the Space Stone as weregild."

"Are you authorized to do that?" Vision asked.

"Sure!" Tony said, wriggling his eyebrows. "I'm a Captain of Industry, a Merchant Prince, authorized by the United Nations Sokovia Accords Council to deal with enhanced individuals, such as Asgardians, I am sure they would agree."

Bruce made a hand-wave, rock and back forth, 'eh, so-so', gesture. Tony ignored him and the raised eyebrows Dr. Strange was aiming in his vicinity, and the restless flapping of Strange's cape. Or was it a cloak? Superman wears a cape. Witches wear cloaks. Go with cloak.

"That sounds perfectly legal to me," Loki said cheerfully. "Of course, Midgardians can't directly handle such a powerful object, so I'll just have to hold it for you, won't I?"

Dr. Strange said, "Oh, we wouldn't want to put you to any trouble." His cloak lifted up and flew over to Loki, where it hovered.

"Yep," Tony said, "Just wrap it up and we'll take it home with us."

Loki frowned, but he didn't stop the cloak from wrapping around the cube and taking it back to hover in front of Dr. Strange.

Tony didn't gloat, he didn't. But it was difficult to resist the urge to pet the air around the cloak and hiss, "My preciousss."

"Well, I guess we're done here, and we can go home now, right?" Bruce said.

"Oh, certainly." Loki lounged on the throne, and inspected his fingernails, tsking at bits of painted plaster stuck to them. "Just ask Heimdall. Tell him King Loki sent you. I'm sure Odin won't mind in the least if his return is delayed because the Bifrost is tied up. It's not as if he might be in any hurry to leave Surtur's delightful domain."

Tony said, "We did actually have a reason for rescuing Odin, Brucie. Remember? Big purple?"

Loki winced.

Bruce sighed. "Fine. Does anyone have a pair of pants I could borrow? Preferably not made of dead alien animal skin? I'm a vegetarian," he said. "Mostly. I mean, what's an egg or two? And cheese. I like cheese."

Tony was trying to assure Bruce that the stretchy gold trousers provided by one of the Asgardians did not look like disco wear, and promised to show him a photo of himself in his twenties wearing gold lamé for comparison when the soft conversational mutter that had gradually grown up in the throne room died to silence. Silence except for the sound of boots marching very decisively and
firmly across the marble and gold tiled floor. Thor, Odin and Heimdall entered the room.

"Oh. Hey," Thor said. "There's Loki. So, not dead?"

"Not so much," Loki responded. Odin gave Loki a look. "Oh, sorry, my bad." Loki got up off the throne and made a gesture as of dusting it off. "So, did Allfather fill you in?"

"Pretty much," Thor responded as Odin took the throne and scowled all around. "You're not adopted. Dad won the custody battle. We have an evil older sister. If Odin dies, Asgard is screwed."

"Pretty much," Loki said. "Oh, and I gave the Space Stone to Stark."

"WHAT?" Odin sat up and turned up his scowl to full force glare. "Who gave you the right!"

"Well, actually, you did," Loki said. "By law, the king of Asgard has control over Asgard's treasury and armory, and may dispose of them in any way he sees fit, to enhance the glory, security, etc. of this most noble realm."

"But MIDGARD," Odin said. "They can't even touch it."

"Hey," Tony said, "we've figured out ways around that."

Odin looked at them for the first time, really looked. "I see. Mind Stone in a creature made by man, and Time Stone held by a mage." His lip didn't quite curl. "And what do you propose to do with the Space Stone? Glue it to your armor?"

Tony lifted his chin and was about to come back with a remark, no one dissed the armor, but Thor spoke up, and no one gets the floor like Thor.

"Oh, I say, Odin, I had a hand in creating Vision," Thor said. "I swam in the Water of Sight. I saw that Vision would be needed, and would be a force for good. I also saw the Infinity Stones."

"And you didn't think to tell us?" Loki asked.

Thor shrugged. "It's difficult to talk with you, Loki. Being stabbed is very distracting."

Odin said, "And why didn't you tell ME?"

Thor scratched at his beard. "I forgot? Well, I was busy! There was the convergence, and I was having... you know... relationship troubles... and then you... well, not YOU, Allfather, sent me off to handle some minor matters. Unrest. And... I was busy!"

Bruce muttered, "Doesn't anyone talk to anyone?"

"It's been my experience," Tony said, "that the answer to your question is 'no'."

"Still," Odin said, "It's unwise to keep the Stones together. That is why I sent the Aether, the Reality Stone, to Knowhere. The Collector never gives up his hoard, nor does he ever do anything with them."

"You know where a fourth Stone is?" Tony asked. "If we can get that, too, then we'll overpower Thanos."

"Thanos? The Mad Titan, what has he got to do with this?" Odin asked. "He ravages planets and culls the weak. He would never dare approach Asgard."
"He's a collector, too. Only he plans to use what he collects," Tony said. "He wants the full set, so he can destroy half the universe at one go."

Odin sat back. He looked startled. "Yes. Used as a merged force, that would be possible." He sat up straight. "Heimdall, look to Knowhere. See how the Collector has warded the Stone."

Heimdall's eyes glowed. "Knowhere is no more. Everywhere I look, I see devastation. I... cannot find the Stone."

"That's just great," Bruce said. "Just great."

"So Thanos has at least one Stone. Right now, we have three," Tony said. "So, you know, a tie even if he gets the other two. That's not so bad," he said, mainly to make himself feel better.

"Not if Thanos can combine them," Odin said. "Set together, their power is..."

"Multiplied," Vision said. "Not added." He nodded towards Dr. Strange. "Yes. We did that on a temporary basis, and I felt the difference."

"We should put a stronger guard on the Infinity Gauntlet," Loki said. When everyone looked at him he said, "Yes, yes, I have inventoried the treasure room and the armory."

Odin shook his head. "The right-handed gauntlet is a mere model. No, Thanos would have to go to Nidavellir to have one made."

"Eitri is an honorable king. He would never do that!" Thor protested.

"Thanos does not respect honor," Odin said. "Heimdall?"

Heimdall did his eye glow again. "All is peaceful at Nidavellir. I see the dwarfs going about their normal routine."

"Good," Odin said. "Thor, go to Nidavellir. Have him forge..." Odin looked at Vision and Strange. "You will not give up your Stones that we may combine them?"

"No!" Tony said. "It would kill Vision."

Dr. Strange said, "My order has protected the Eye of Agamotto for thousands of years. I will not surrender it."

Odin turned back to Thor, "Have Eitri forge rings as housings for the Stones. It will be better than nothing."

"I will," Thor said.

"Thor," Odin said. "Remember, Eitri's people are workers, not warriors. Once he has completed the forging, have him shut down the forge, and bring his people to Asgard. We are sworn to protect them, but we cannot split our forces to protect both Nidavellir and Asgard."

Tony cleared his throat. "Actually, the battle's going to be on Earth. We have our own seers," Tony added.

Odin stared at Tony for a long moment, and then he nodded. "We will assemble on Asgard, but I will consider your words. Go, Thor. Do not fail me."

"I will not, Father." Thor turned to Loki. "Are you coming?"
"I might as well." Loki got up and followed him.

"Can we go home, NOW?" Bruce asked. "These pants itch."

Chapter End Notes

Everyone who sees this calls it RDJ in hooker pants. I do not disagree.
https://www.pinterest.com/pin/223843043956448016

Also, this is way cool. For only $3,550.00 you can own an authorized copy of the film prop. IT GLOWS. It probably doesn't turn back time, but who knows? Anyway, it's a great picture and you can zoom in for details.

Tony doesn't know how long it would take to forge rings meant to contain Infinity Stones, and he would really like to get back before Pepper and everyone else worries about him being missing. But on the other hand, he really doesn't trust Odin. His experience with one-eyed authority figures hasn't exactly been glowing.

"You go, Bruce. I think I'd like to stay and get to know our potential ally. Let everyone know where I am, and that I'm all right."

"You sure?" Bruce asked. "I mean, if you think you'd need me, or the Other Guy." Bruce shifted. "We don't really feel right to leave you here, alone. Well, not alone but..."

Tony wondered if Bruce remembered Thor picking Tony up by the throat while the Avengers... including Bruce... had stood by and done nothing, said nothing while he fought for his life with words, because that was his only weapon. Bruce couldn't know Loki had done it, too, and then tossed him through a window, but nobody trusted Loki anyway. This time Tony had his suit on, and he was going to keep the helmet handy in case Midgardian neck grabbing was a national pastime.

"I, too, would like to remain," Vision said. "There is much here to learn."

"Asgard has some... techniques... I'd love to hear about," Dr. Strange said. "But I really can't leave Wong to defend the sanctum by himself." He looked torn.

"I'll ask if they have a magical lending library," Tony said. "Check out a grimoire, learn how to make green glowing domes, in case of falling ceilings."

Strange nodded. "I'll leave the Cloak with you." The cloak flipped its collar 'no'. "Yes, you're staying. Someone has to watch the Space Stone." The cloak flipped more violently. "I'll go straight home, don't worry." The cloak flapped its collar down like a chastised puppy. "Good."

Strange turned to Tony and said quietly, "I'll be watching and now that I have been here, I'll be able to return on my own if necessary."

"I didn't know you cared," Tony said. "I'm touched."

"Probably, but that's between you and your therapist. We can't afford to lose the Space Stone." Strange smirked and left with Bruce.

"So, it's just you and me... and the magical mantle," Tony told Vision.

"And our Asgardian hosts," Vision pointed out.

"Yep. And them," Tony turned and gave the warily watching Asgardians a big, photo opportunity, Stark grin. "So, does everyone except the AllDaddy stand at one of these gigs, or is this like the waiting line to get into the party?"

Odin stood up. "I see that Midgardians do not understand court protocol."

"Oh, some of us live for it," Tony said, "I bet Coulson would be thrilled to stand around all day, blending in... well, he'd have to buy a gold suit, but he'd try. Me, I don't blend in."

"I had noticed," Odin said dryly. He walked over to Tony, who was glad for the extra height the suit
gave him. "Your armor is...unique."

"This little thing? Just something I whipped up for light social occasions."

Odin's eye widened slightly. "Yes, I recall now, Thor said you were a smith."

"Mastersmith," Vision corrected. "If I understand your terminology."

Tony wasn't sure whether being considered a smith put him lower or higher on the social hierarchy. Mainly warriors seemed to be the top dogs. Certainly Thor had admired the hell out of Captain America and Tony... well, the neck grabbing incident showed how much he trusted Tony. "A hobby," Tony told Odin. "I can't go around beating up the bad guys all the time. It gets boring."

Odin tilted his head in acknowledgment. "With maturity, one does weary of battle." He clapped his hands. "You must be weary after your long journey. Escort our guests to a chamber where they may unburden themselves and rest."

"I..." Tony was about to protest that he'd rather discuss an alliance, but several of the more imposing Asgardians surrounded him and Vision and the cloak.

"This way." The hand that pointed held a sword. It really didn't seem worth arguing.
Every time Tony tried to peek out of the chambers he and Vision were assigned, someone was lounging in the hallway, sharpening a sword or peeling fruit with a dagger or juggling axes. Tony stopped and watched the last one for a few minutes, and thought it was a pity Cirque du Soleil couldn't recruit in Asgard.

Vision could have phased out through one of the walls, but they were holding that in reserve, in case things turned ugly.

They found a chessboard, recognizably a chessboard although one set of figures were stained red instead of black. There were crowned kings and queens, knights on ponies, bishops with crosiers, and what Tony and Vision agreed were meant to be rooks - wild-eyed shield biters.

Three games later, Tony was trying really hard not to think of all the things that could go wrong. Sure, Tony could have made half a dozen rings by now, but he had no idea what went into making an Infinity Ring. A good Damascus steel knife would take Tony fifteen to twenty hours of work.

But maybe Thanos had got to Nigh Devil Ear ahead of Thor, and somehow kept Heimdall from seeing it. Tony still couldn't figure out how Heimdall worked that all-seeing trick. It was apparently his specialty, like Thor's was throwing lightning bolts, and Loki's throwing hissy fits. Was it all inherent in their physiology? Were Asgardians all mutants? They couldn't be aliens since there were numerous cases of crossbreeds with humans, well, ok, those were all legends, but heck, if the legends got their NAMES right, then it was reasonable to assume it wasn't all hogwash.

He kept flitting from one idea to another, trying to figure out Asgard from the fittings in this room, the look of the armor, and glances outside the window. They were a peculiar mix. The architecture didn't jibe with the armor, for one thing.

There was a bowl of fruit, hard rolls, and cheese on the table. Goat cheese, he thought. And a pitcher of something. After a few hours, Tony was thirsty enough to try it, but he was dubious. It definitely wasn't water, probably not poisonous, but was it alcoholic? Finally Tony leaned out into the hallway and waved down the nearest Ginsu knife demonstrator. "Could we have some water in here?"

"Of course, I shall send for it so you may wash before the feast."

Tony opened his mouth to say he wanted it for drinking, not bathing, but... yeah... maybe every adult was a boozer here. So he said thanks, and closed the door.

Thinking about it, Tony hadn't seen any kids or even teenagers. Either the palace wasn't child friendly, or only warriors were allowed, or maybe they had a low birth rate? Considering how long Thor hinted they lived, and from what Tony could see of Asgard on their way to the palace, it wasn't exactly HUGE, maybe they couldn't afford to have a lot of kids.

Hmm, Norway had been really thrilled by Thor, and there'd even been a revival of Norse paganism. Norway might be interested in Asgardians seeking a homeland where they could spread out and have families. They couldn't all be warriors. With the exception of Odin, Tony hadn't seen any older Asgardians, either. And not many women. There were a few women warriors but the general impression he had was of a distinctly stratified society. Yeah, show no weakness.
But he was damned if he was going to have to start over again with his AA coin collection.

Chapter End Notes

Muse is being stubborn and slow, so I wound up google walking for research.

https://www.howtopronounce.com/nidavellir/

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lewis_chessmen
I suspect the ponies were meant to be this ancient breed of horse. The mane is traditionally clipped short enough to stand up straight with the forelock left long, just as in the chesspieces.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fjord_horse

Found this beautiful knife- an example of a mastersmith's craft. Damascus feather pattern blade with woolly mammoth ivory handle.

Chapter 132

The water came in a basin, along with a wrapped cake of soap. In Afghanistan Tony had drunk tea brewed in socks, so he didn't hesitate to remove his gauntlets and scoop up water in his hands to drink. He did hope they weren't going to be stuck in this room much longer. He didn't know what hygienic facilities they had, just that there weren't any in this room. He could pee in the suit, if necessary, but, you know... he'd had a good breakfast.

There wasn't an included towel. Yet another not so subtle insult. Tony glanced at the cloak, which had been flitting back and forth, occasionally swatting at Tony. He held up his dripping hands. "C'mere."

The cloak curled up its collar and shook a definite NO.

"Fine, be that way." Tony dried his hands on a tapestry.

Two more games and Tony was beginning to rethink not allowing Vision to phase wander. Eventually, as he was also beginning to wonder if night ever fell on Asgard, someone knocked on the door, and then opened it without waiting for response.

"Prince Thor has returned. I am to guide you to the feasting hall."

Tony stood up. "What about Prince Loki?"

"Oh, yes, he's returned as well." From the tone of his voice, the guy was still miffed at being fooled by Loki in his Odin suit. Tony wondered if Loki had singled him out for unpleasant tasks.

Vision didn't need to eat, but he could. And cloak... Tony doubted cloak fed, but it must get its energy from somewhere. Magic had to have rules, didn't it? Tony refused to believe there was no logic behind it. Somehow, someway... maybe connected to another dimension and pulling the energy from that? And somehow the electromagnetic impulses in the brain could be configured by training to interact with that? He'd love to get Strange to cooperate with some tests.

So, anyway, cloak floated along behind Tony and Vision, occasionally slapping at overly curious Asgardians, until they reached a massive hall nearly filled by a huge table loaded with roast beasts and all the trimmings for a Whoville Christmas dinner. Tony barely glanced at the table, as his attention was taken up by Thor, swinging a huge woodchopper in circles, apparently showing it off to Odin. Tony suspected he would have gone through the Barton's whole woodpile in about thirty seconds.

"And so," Thor was saying, "as the rings would not take much time, I asked Eitri if he would make me a weapon. Something new." Thor gave Odin a look. "I no longer wish to wield Mjolnir."

Loki was at Thor's side, and he laughed. "I'm surprised you feel that way. Shouldn't it be an honor to bear a family heirloom?"

"Enough, Loki," Thor growled. He held the hammer out to Odin and repeated, "I no longer wish to wield Mjolnir."
"Very well," Odin said. He took the hammer and hung it on his belt, as if its weight was negligible. His eyes narrowed a moment, as if he was thinking. "Loki!"

"Yes, what? Oh, don't look at me, I don't want Hela's hand-me-down, either," Loki said.

"I can only use one weapon in combat. Take Gungnir." Odin held out the spear. "I do NOT confer kingship with this transfer. Gungnir chose to allow your touch, I expect you to use it wisely."

"Yes." Loki took the spear, without making any jokes. "Yes, Allfather, I will."

"Good," Odin said gruffly and turned away. "WELL?" he said loudly, "is this a feast, or is it not?" Everyone scurried to obey, and found seats.

Tony and Vision wound up seated far down the table from Odin's place at the head. So much for talking about the alliance. The only good thing about this was that it seemed eating with your armor on was commonplace, so Tony's chair held Iron Man without so much as creak of protest.

Loki slipped in to take a seat next to Tony and murmured, "Don't worry. Odin's got his thinking face on. I'll wager he's considering how to make bringing the battle to Thanos on Midgard his brilliant idea. It's the only way most of these meatheads would agree to lose the honor of standing their ground on Asgard." He began filling a plate, mostly with meat. Vision, on Tony's other side, took small portions of everything, and seemed to be trying to analyze the food.

"Honor." Tony shook his head and also began forking food at random onto the plate in front of him. "Tell me about it. We'll die together! It's idiotic. Charge in without planning and rely on the nobility of your cause to save the day."

Loki nodded, "It's pleasant to be right. It's more practical to be left. That is, to be the one left standing, no matter how you arrive at the victory."

Tony had to admit Loki had a point. He still wasn't any good at leading, because his tactics were all about preserving Loki, not about anyone else. But at least he didn't get into a situation expecting things would just turn out the way he wanted because he deserved it.

There was a variety of food, mainly of the large chunks of meat food group, but drink appeared to be limited to the same dubious not water. Tony poured a goblet full and sniffed it.

"I assure you, we do not poison the mead," Loki said.

"Mead. That's... fermented honey. Alcoholic."

"Very," Loki said. "Just watch. When Fandral becomes drunk he can be very amusing. Sif, on the other hand... becomes quite a bitch."

Tony pushed his goblet aside. "I don't drink alcohol."

"No? But you had quite the collection the last I saw. I did enjoy the beverage you gave me."

Tony's mouth twitched. "I don't drink alcohol any longer."

"Oh. You took an oath?"

Tony thought back to AA meetings. "Yes. I took a pledge. I'd rather go thirsty than break it."

"Ah. Well, I owe you a drink." Loki passed his hand over the goblet. The fluid changed color slightly, but the scent that rose from it was far more different. "Apple juice. Fresh from the tree, I
swear there is no alcohol nor anything harmful in it."

Loki looked at Tony as if he expected him to refuse it. What the hell, Tony loved defying expectations. He picked up the goblet and drank. Sweet, fruity, slightly tart. "Thanks," Tony said.

Loki smiled.
Chapter 133

The dwarfs ate elsewhere- Tony found out why when Thor called him to bring the Space Stone to be set in a ring. Dwarfs, as Tony understood the term, were not usually too tall to fit at an Asgardian banquet table.

"Eitri," Thor called out cheerfully, when they entered the dwarfs' quarters. Tony felt better about the room he and Vision had been stuck in when he saw they were in a sawdust floored huge room that smelled of horses. The windows were plain, and set high in the walls. Parts of fences were against the walls and bridles, saddles and harness hung on pegs. "How goes it, old friend?"

"Well enough," the huge, stocky man replied. He frowned. "If we had known Asgard had no room for us, we might as well have stayed home."

"Thanos is coming," Thor told him earnestly. "You would have perished."

"Aye. But with honor." The other dwarfs, growled and rumbled discontent, and there were a lot of them. Hundreds. Tony felt like a mouse surrounded by angry tabby cats. "Not treated like livestock."

"I'm sure Allfather Odin will prepare more suitable chambers for you when he has time," Thor said. "We are about to go to war, you know."

Eitri grunted, and turned his attention to Tony, completely ignoring Vision and the cloak. "And this is the Midgardian Mastersmith? It is for him we shut down the star forge and fled our home?"

Tony stepped around Thor. "No. You did it for your people, because you knew you couldn't take the chance what Thor said was wrong. I have people relying on me, too. I've fought for them, even when no one listened to me. I'm here as a smith, all right. I'm here to forge an alliance. We need to work together. I'm hoping Odin will ally with me. I'm hoping you will, too, Eitri."

Eitri huffed, a little softer this time. "What do you bring to this alliance? Thor has said, rightfully, that my people are no warriors, but I could squash you like an insect."

"Midgard is large, a world full of possibilities. If Asgard has no room for you, I offer you room on land I own myself, where you will not be disturbed, and can work until it is safe to return to your own home."

"Work? How shall we work, with our star forge gone?" Eitri looked contemptuously around the arena. "Shall we beat our hammers on stones?"

Tony put on his helmet and lit up his repulsors. "I can't offer a star, but maybe my arc reactors would do, for now. At least for making weapons my own people could use. As you can tell, we're not built like Asgardians."

Vision added helpfully, "The Angers Compound has large laboratories and living spaces which could be quickly repurposed."

Eitri looked at Vision fully for the first time. Then he looked at Tony, bending down to peer at the arc reactor. "Mastersmith, on your honor, do you vow to treat my people as your own, without fear or favor?"

There was a ritual cadence to his voice, and the quiet gasp from the gathered crowd told Tony how serious this was.
Tony retracted the helmet and looked up into Eitri's eyes. "On my honor, yes." He was really pushing the limits, but this was an opportunity he couldn't refuse.

Eitri rose to his full height and turned to Thor. "I do not wish to inconvenience Odin by usurping his stable."

"It's not a stable," Thor said. "The horses only come here to train."

Eitri waved off Thor's protest. "And so they may do freely without us being in the way. We will take the Bifrost to the Mastersmith's Angers Compound. Or are we prisoners?"

"No, of course not," Thor said, and then he shrugged. "I just thought you would like it here. In Asgard, I mean. Not here."

"Perhaps we will return, when Odin has time to prepare for us," Eitri said. "But for now, is Asgard not allying with Midgard? That was what you said? That was why we were willing to make Stone housings fit for Midgardians."

"Well, yes," Thor said, "Of course. It's just... Odin hasn't had time to... you know...all the fiddly bits with treaties and paperwork."

Tony said, helpfully, "Maybe Loki could handle that. He seems pretty good at fiddly bits. And you don't really need me here, for that, either, do you?"

"Wait," Thor shook his head. "I'm sure Odin wishes to speak to you further."

"Yep, you know, he's busy preparing for war. So am I. I have a lot of people to coordinate-- we're talking billions."

"So many?" Eitri remarked. "Are you sure you have room for us?"

"Absolutely, I have all sorts of room." Tony grinned. "We'll come with you and make sure everything's perfect." He'd come back and grovel if he had to, to get Odin on board, but right now... right now he wanted to pin down these guys before Odin pissed them off and wasted them.

Thor sighed. "Very well. I will escort you to Heimdall and explain." He gave Tony a side-eye look. "Odin is not going to be pleased."

"I'm sure Odin will understand," Tony said breezily. "Strike while the iron is hot."

"Yes," Eitri said, "that is the way of it." He started walking towards huge double doors set under the windows. He gestured for Tony to accompany him. Vision and the cloak followed, and then came the crowd of giant dwarfs.

Tony thought, this is going to be awkward to explain, but he didn't really care. He felt good, better than good. He could do this.
"It's ok, they're friends!" Tony shouted, waving Iron Man's arms as they appeared on the lawn beside the Angers Compound. Several hundred giant dwarfs might possibly be alarming, even to the residents of his compound. At least to the ones who weren't so busy with research and training that they noticed. Which... seemed to be no one at the moment. Perfect. Avoiding shouting and shooting. Always a positive start. Of course the groundskeepers were going to be pissed when they discovered the huge Bifrost burn pattern in the lawn. Can't please everyone.

"Sir!" Jarvis said, HUD lighting up and filling with data. "Are you all right? Friday was concerned when we lost contact with you."

"Yep, fine, never felt better," Tony said. "Glad to have you back, Jay." He started walking towards the main entrance, trailed by dwarves, like a very small mother duck leading a flotilla of babies. Big babies, and not so much on the fluffy side. "Give everyone a heads up, including Strange, just in case his crystal ball needed Windexing. We're going to pardon Loki, so make sure Clint has something to punch. Also, I made friends! Contact the heavy construction division, renovations are in order. Probably be good to give the President and Accords Council a call, too."

"Did you make an alliance with Odin? That was, after all, your mission," Jarvis asked.

"Eh, maybe. Things weren't moving fast enough for me. He was trying the 'let them wait' power play, and I called his bluff." Tony took off his helmet once they entered the building, where Jarvis could hear him directly. "The gentleman on my right is Eitri, king of the dwarfs. Make sure he and his people have everything they need."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, sir," Jarvis responded. "I am Jarvis, Mr. Stark's major domo. You may address me from any location within the compound."

Eitri nodded. Either he wasn't surprised by a voice out of nowhere, or he didn't want to show surprise.

Tony waved a hand around. "There are some unclaimed labs on this level, and we can build more. I'll have extra arc reactors brought. They can be retrofitted into arc furnaces. You'll have to adapt your methods until we can make something closer to your usual equipment. Safety gear... goggles, gloves, tools... we don't have in your size, that will take a little longer."

"We have enough of the basics, for now," Eitri said, pointing further back in the crowd. Tony saw dwarfs carrying sacks, and stacks of metal, hammers and tongs and even molds. Even considering the dwarfs' size, the burdens were huge.

"Excellent, so we should be able to set up the workrooms quickly. It'll take longer to raise the ceilings in living quarters, I'm afraid."

Eitri shrugged. "We do not require as much... air... above our heads as Agardians with their golden palaces. Our ancestors lived underground, in our mines and tunnels."

"Oh, hey, there's a thought. If you prefer underground accommodations, there are several sublevels. Entirely empty. I used to store my father's failed experiments here, until the previous tenants carelessly allowed thieves in. After that I moved it all, and never bothered bringing it back. It's mostly empty space. Storage racks, electricity, some plumbing, but not much, I hadn't considered it might be needed as living quarters." Tony turned to the cargo elevators. "We'll have to go down in
shifts. Vision, can you stay here, until everyone's down?"

Vision nodded. "Of course."

Tony, cloak, Eitri and about twenty dwarfs filled the elevator. Jarvis started it down. Eitri said, "Given the space, and tools, we would prefer to make our own arrangements."

"You just give Jarvis a list." Tony was hopeful. Eitri didn't seem overly picky. The cloak nudged Tony. "Oh, and my flappy friend here would like to be able to go back to his master, so we need to take care of the Space Stone."

"The Space Stone? You have it?" Eitri turned to look at the cloak, lumped around the square shape of the Tesseract.

"Yes? Loki gave it to Earth as weregild. Didn't Thor tell you?"

"Nay. He asked for housings for the six stones, but said they had not all been found. Then he asked for a weapon." Eitri scowled. "We made Mjolnir at Odin's request. There is nothing wrong with it, and no need to replace it!"

"Yeah, Thor just... he found it had belonged to his sister, and I guess... Thor never grew up beyond thinking girls have cooties."

"Your words make no sense," Eitri said, "but it was enough that Thor no longer respected Mjolnir, so we agreed, and made him a war ax."

"Odin took Mjolnir for his own, if that helps. He respects your work."

"What then of Gungnir?" Eitri asked.

"Odin gave it to Loki."

Eitri thought a moment, and then nodded. "Loki is good with a spear. That is well."

Once they reached the lowest level, Eitri looked about at the cavernlike space, interrupted by support beams and built in storage units, power points and other essentials. He nodded. "This will do. It is functional." He didn't say anything else, but the first group immediately set down anvil, hammer and other tools. "Let me have the Stone, now."

The cloak floated to Eitri and unfolded revealing the Tesseract. "On the anvil." Once the Tesseract was on the anvil, Eitri walked around it, crouching and peering at it from various angles, then he grasped a wedge of shining metal in one hand and a heavy hammer in the other. He touched the wedge to the Tesseract, and then hit the wedge with the hammer. One side of the cube sheared off, and the cube collapsed, revealing a shining blue gem. Eitri fished in his pocket and took out a ring. He held the ring close to the Tesseract, and frowned, in obvious concentration. The blue gem shivered, and then leaped to set itself in the stone. Eitri nodded in satisfaction. "A perfect fit." He held out his hand, with the ring on his palm.

Tony took it, and put it on. "Thank you," he said and clenched his fist. He didn't know what to expect. Would he see space, feel space, be thrown back into the moment when he knew he would die far from Earth? But no. The metal was slightly cool. The gem was glowing, but that faded after a moment. He sighed. "Earth now has Space, Mind and Time. We have a chance against Thanos. Thank you, Eitri."
Eitri nodded. More of the dwarfs had arrived, and they all began work, without asking Eitri for direction. "It is well," Eitri said. "Go and prepare Midgard for war. My people will work here."
"My God," Pepper said when Tony returned to the Tower, with cloak draped around him. "Giant dwarfs, really?"

"Really," Tony said. "But there's only a few hundred!" He looked around, counting noses. It looked like the whole posse had gathered around the big table in the living area that they used for conferences and meals.

"Oh, well, I'm sure... wait," Pepper said, "you make it sound like there could be more."

"Well, not more of Eitri's people. I think."

Bruce said, "I'm amazed they've avoided inbreeding depression." He was no longer wearing the gold pants, which Tony thought was a shame. He wondered if Hulk would like a pair. "Or have they? If they're as long-lived as Thor says Asgardians are, perhaps they are the last of their species. Did you see any children among them? Or any pregnant dwarfs?"

Tony blinked. "Actually... I really don't know. And I'm not going to ask." Tony shook his head and changed the subject. "I get the feeling Loki is, if not on our side, definitely against this Thanos. Odin admitted some things that, if the other Asgardians think about it, should cause some turmoil. He retconned their history, and messed with their memories. I wanted to get out with a whole skin, and the Space Stone, before he maybe started to think about 'changing my mind'."

"Wow, ok," Clint said. "I really want my tin foil helmet now." His knuckles looked bruised, so Tony hoped he'd been able to work off some of his anger against Loki.

Barnes held up his hand. "Me, too."

Happy huffed. "I don't like it. Everything's so weird."

"It's not going to get any less weird," Tony said. The cloak flapped against his arm. "Oh, yeah. Hap, would you take Strange's cloak back to him? 1777a Bleecker Street."

Happy crossed his arms over his chest. "You want me to chauffeur a CAPE?"

Cloak flapped indignantly. "Cloak," Tony said. "It hasn't got pockets, so it can't carry tokens for the subway."

"Wait," Pepper interrupted. "You never answered my question. Are there more giant dwarfs coming here?"

"No." Tony shook his head. "Absolutely not. But... maybe... we should look into property in Norway. Just. In case we wind up with displaced Asgardians. I didn't talk to any of them, but if Ross is right and they wind up fighting for Earth, some of them might want to stay?"

Pepper sighed.

"Well, you did hate it when I didn't tell you about things ahead of time," Tony said.

"Yes, well, in this case, let's just wait until it happens," Pepper said, "IF it happens."
"I'm just... trying to make sure...if I'm not here. You'll be ready."

"Tony," Pepper said.

Tony held up his hand. "Right. I've given Jarvis and Friday all my ideas, and the plans for new Suits." He smiled brightly and pointed at Pepper. "You get a suit!" And then Happy. "You get a suit!" And Rhodey, "And you... well, you get a new suit. No pressure. It's not like last time, I'm not... I just... can you just for once, take a present without making a big fuss?" Tony didn't like the looks on everyone's faces. "What? Too much? No, no it's not. I wish it was. It's really not." Tony closed his eyes and let his head droop.

"All right," Pepper's voice was shaky. "I'll take the suit, but you'd better not call it the Iron Maiden!" She reached across the table to take Tony's hand.

"Hey, that's a great band!" Tony opened his eyes and smiled at her. "But, ok, how about... Rescue? And Hap... umm..."

"Iron Fist?" Happy said hopefully.

"Um, no, I heard of a guy already using it. How about... Guardian?" Tony said.

"Yeah, I like that. But not flashy! I don't like flashy," Happy said.

Rhodey narrowed his eyes. "I don't care what you say, this does feel a lot like the last time you were dying in secret."

"The last time?" Barnes asked. "Does he do that a lot?"

"Nat said..." Clint started and then shook his head. "Never mind. I thought I knew her, now I don't know if any of it was real."

There was a moment of silence, then Rhodey said, "We keep getting off topic. Tony, why now. Why are you telling us about these suits before they're made?"

Tony scowled. "Because I can't put it off any longer. I have to get Extremis." Tony held up his hand, showing off the Space Stone ring. "I need to be stronger. None of us are strong enough... maybe Barnes, but..."

"Yeah," Barnes said. "I wouldn't trust me with it, either. The triggers are gone, but... yeah, I wouldn't want to risk it."

"I need it anyway. I couldn't stand up to battle. If something goes wrong, better it should happen now, when we have time to find a new Ring Bearer." Tony didn't say it, but he knew one person he'd trust to do the right thing, and would probably be strong enough. Peter was stronger than Rogers had been. He wasn't going to lay the burden of the Space Stone on Peter. Hell, he'd give it to Barnes first. Maybe.

Rhodey winced. "You didn't just go there."

Tony looked solemn. "Of course not. One does not simply walk into Mordor."

Chapter End Notes
Since this fic is Tony Point of View, I couldn't put in the scene where Happy chauffeurs the Cloak.

I envision him driving up to the mansion and stopping, and staring at cloak before he gives up, grabs it and marches to the door, with it flapping and flailing. Wong answers the door, Happy shoves the cloak at him. 'HERE', and turns around and marches off. Cloak flips him the bird and then flies off to find Strange.
Chapter 136

Tony spent an hour down in the workshop, talking to Jarvis and Friday and the bots. He updated his 'when I'm not here' videos to everyone, and added a short one for Dr. Strange who, in the brief time he'd known the man, seemed like an all-right guy, a bit snappy, but his heart was in the right place. Then he got Bruce and they took a quin-jet to Korea.

"I don't know why you need me," Bruce said. "Dr. Cho is a very capable physician. My work is mostly theoretical."

"You understand Extremis better than anyone else," Tony said. "It'll be fine. It's just... it would be good to have you on hand in case there's... maybe a minor hiccup."

"Minor hiccup. As in, if you come out a fire-breathing time bomb."

"Not going to happen! Jarvis and I revised it. Then I revised it some more."

"Oh, so what you're saying is, it's not the Extremis I understand?"

"No, it is, it's just... smoothed out. Tidied up. I might smolder a bit, though?" He attempted a Flynn Rider Smolder ™, to make Bruce laugh. It didn't work.

"Tony. I understand. You think there isn't time to find a better way, and you're desperate." Bruce's eyes tinged green. "But I'm living proof what a bad idea that is."

"No. You're living proof that no matter what happens, in the end, you're still you. Whatever it does to my outsides, what's important will still be me. I might be confused, that's all. I just... I want a friend there, so I know where I am. That it's not... then."

Bruce sighed. "It's your choice. But I insist on a thorough physical first. If it looks like you haven't a chance of surviving the procedure, I won't sign off on it, and I'm sure Dr. Cho won't either. 'First do no harm'."

"Yeah, ok." Tony had to agree it wouldn't help if he was going to die before Thanos even got here. "So..." he rummaged in a cabinet, "dried papaya?"

Tony wasn't usually uncomfortable being naked, but being naked for fun was different from being naked for a physical. The room was always SO MUCH colder, and he was afraid his ass skin would stick to the metal table.

Dr. Cho and Bruce had been huddled over a readout for a long time. They were arguing in voices too soft for Tony to hear. He slipped off the table, yay, without losing his asset, and padded barefoot over close enough to eavesdrop.

"It's not a definitive test. It may have been flawed," Bruce said.

"We ran it three times."

"Over an hour. For any sort of reliability it should be done at least three times over the course of a
year. And even then, what does it prove?" Bruce ran his hands through his hair. "It's not as if there's a proven direct correlation..."

"HEY," Tony said. "How about sharing with the rest of the class? If you're trying to break it to me easily, you're doing a lousy job."

"Oh. No." Bruce turned, took off his eyeglasses and wiped them. "It's not bad."

"No," Dr. Cho said. "It's merely that the result of this one test was unexpected. It's not a standard part of a physical, but for research purposes we were..."

"Throwing the kitchen sink at you," Bruce said wryly. "So we would have something to compare, as a before baseline. It's not as if you'd had regular checkups!"

"Ok, I get that, but this one was out of line with everything else? Throw it out, obviously."

"I suppose we could do that. Teleomeres are a relatively recent discovery," Dr. Cho said.

"Important enough to earn three American scientists the Nobel for medicine in 2009," Bruce retorted.

"Teleomeres." Tony had a vague idea he'd heard of them. "Something to do with DNA? Can you give me the Cliffs Notes, I'm freezing here."

Dr. Cho nodded. "Teleomeres protect the ends of chromosomes, but each time a cell divides, the teleomeres shorten. When they become too short, the cell can't divide and this is associated with the natural process of aging."

"Only," Bruce said, "Your teleomeres are much longer than we expected for a person of your age, with all the additional factors of stress, and poor diet, and...well, in general, being you."

"Huh. So, what does that mean, in terms of Extremis?"

Bruce threw up his hands. "We don't know. Teleomere length is also a product of genetics. Maybe you were born with excessively long initial teleomeres. Maybe your body naturally produces teleomerase - the substance that causes them to lengthen."

"Or maybe," Dr. Cho said, "it is the result of environmental factors."

Tony nodded. "So, you were just curious. Ok, fine. Tell me, is Extremis sure fire, going to kill me, or can we go on with it?"

Bruce scowled. "I recommend against it, strongly."

"So do I," Dr. Cho agreed. "However, we couldn't find anything that ruled out the possibility of survival, and we did verify that you could not possibly stand up to the stress of prolonged use of the Iron Man, so... it might repair the damage from long term injury and restore function of your heart and lungs. If, and I say, if, the longer teleomeres indicate a higher degree of viable cells, you may benefit from Extremis even more."

Dr. Cho looked at Bruce, and he nodded, reluctantly. "If you're still determined, we'll do it."

"Great." Tony said. "Let's go. I've got a cold tush, but I don't have cold feet." Tony really didn't want to do this. But he didn't want to fail the world, either.
Teleomere info. This quote is from the first link Cawthon says that if all processes of aging could be eliminated and oxidative stress damage could be repaired, "one estimate is people could live 1,000 years."

https://learn.genetics.utah.edu/content/basics/telomeres/

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3370421/

https://www.mercurynews.com/2015/01/24/testing-for-mortality-why-i-measured-my-telomeres-should-you/
Tony took the injection, and laid down in the Cradle, and tried not to think that it was also quite a lot like a coffin. He also tried not to think how Pepper had looked when Killian shot her up with Extremis. It wasn't the same thing. No. He'd fixed it. And he had a nice cosy cradle, and two people he trusted and Oh, GOD, IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS, I DO NOT WANT TO BE HERE.

Where is... every... what...

is it dark... oh... I don't have eyes... that explains it...

this is... confusing... I would like to sleep now...

Tony was moving, and it took him a few moments to realize it, and a few more to realize that he hadn't been able to move before. He tried to sit up, but he was held down. Restraints? Had he been violent? Did he hurt anyone? He flailed, and whatever was holding him gave way. He sat up and scrubbed roughly at his head, sneezing and then taking a deep breath.

A fucking deep breath.

A full breath without pain for the first time in ten years. He laughed and turned to look around, to share the triumph.

Bruce and Dr. Cho were staring at him.

"What? Hey, I feel great!" Tony laughed and stretched, and scratched his chest. The scar tissue was gone. Yinsen's desperate surgery, Dr. Wu's more careful reconstruction, Mount Sinai Beth Israel's best effort to patch him up after Siberia. All gone, all smooth... well... Tony looked down. There was a little lump in the middle of his sternum. Eh, no big deal. "What are you staring at? I'm fine."

"Your eyes," Bruce said, sadly. "Your eyes."

Tony whirled around, half falling off the table, and went to a glass fronted cabinet. He stared at his reflection. He looked the same, except for the lack of scars. He hadn't added muscles or height, and his skin wasn't green. But his eyes were blue. Glowing blue. He blinked and peered closer. The lump in the middle of his chest was faintly blue, the same glowing shade. "Oh, shit." He looked down at his hand. The Space Stone ring was gone. "I... forgot to take the ring off." He patted his chest. The lump was perfectly round, and it brightened when he touched it.

"Oh, shit," he repeated.
"Right, right," Bruce said. "No one panic. This is maybe not a bad thing? Entirely?"

"Uh huh," Tony said, nodding while staring at his reflection. "Yeah. Sure."

"We'll have to run more tests," Dr. Cho said. She was brave, but her voice wavered a little.

Tony cooperated in a daze. He kept being distracted by the sight of his eyes. Arc reactor blue was apparently the same as Space Stone blue. He wondered if that was why the Space Stone had fused with his chest. Maybe it lingered. Made his sternum feel like home.

"I'm fine," Tony said when they ran out of tests. He had tried to tweak Extremis down just to the healing. He hadn't wanted to wind up a super soldier of any variety, but the Space Stone apparently had other ideas. Maybe it wanted to make sure its container could protect it. At least it had kept to human parameters so far as they could tell. He hadn't shot laser beams from his eyes, or breathed flame. He just was a lot stronger than he looked. Faster. He didn't know how he'd measure up against someone like Rogers, but he was definitely in the ballpark.

"This is a good thing," Tony said, to convince himself. "I'm in control. I'm fine. It's just... a little extra. A bonus against Thanos. If I'm out of the suit, he'll underestimate me."


"Stop fussing, and get my clothes. Pepper will be worried." Tony had called after they'd checked that he wasn't going to explode and told her he was fine. He said he was just staying to let Dr. Cho do more tests to gather data for her research. After all, even with the quin-jet, a round trip to Korea took a while, and it only made sense to stay until she'd got as much information as she could. But he could only stall so long before Pepper went Def Con 1 and nuclear explosion was imminent.

Tony got dressed and put on his sunglasses. He was good. He was fine.

The quin-jet landed at Angers Compound, where Tony expected to get out, stretch his legs, check on various projects, go down to see Eitri to make sure everything was going well. And then, take a helicopter to the Tower.

But Pepper and Rhodey were standing there, just outside the landing pad.

Bruce patted Tony on the shoulder.

Tony swallowed hard. "Any wise words of advice?"

"Don't panic?"

"I'm panicking. Where's my towel?"

Bruce smiled. "Hey, recite a little Vogon poetry and you're golden."
Tony took a deep breath and was reminded once more that he was stronger now. He smiled and walked down the ramp. "HEY! You didn't need to come meet me. I was going to the Tower next."

Pepper scowled. "Take off the glasses."

Rhodey backed her up. "Let us see."

Tony turned and glared at Bruce. "You told." Bruce shrugged. Tony turned back to his two oldest friends. He took off the sunglasses. "Gonna have to redo the photo on the annual stockholder's report."

"Oh, Tony," Pepper said softly.

"Only you, man, only you," Rhodey said, with a sigh.

Chapter End Notes


http://towelday.org
"You'll have to tell the Accords Council," Pepper said once they were in the elevator. They were all going down to meet Eitri, Jarvis having requested the king see them.

"I've already signed," Tony grumbled. "I know the Accords. It doesn't require you to spell out how you're enhanced, it just sets out rules for international missions. I went to Korea for personal reasons!"

"But now you've leveled up," Bruce said.

"I... don't want to."

Rhodey said, "It makes a difference. If you're straightforward even when you don't have to be, people are more willing to trust you're not flying under the radar. And you do, Tony. You do more radar avoiding than a stealth bomber."

"Well, that's because the stealth bombers can't go out in the rain," Tony said.

"Are you sure you can?" Rhodey asked.

"What a ridiculous question, of course I can." Tony paused. "Right, Bruce? I'm fully waterproof."

Bruce shrugged.

Eitri took one look at Tony and dropped his hammer. He bent down to peer into Tony's eyes and then further, to look at the glow in his chest. Then he straightened and scratched his head. "Can all Midgardians absorb Infinity Stones?"

"Probably not," Tony said. "Can you tell me anything about the effect this will have on the Space Stone, and, out of curiosity, on me?"

Eitri shook his head. "I have made marvelous shields and armor, helms and swords, axes and spears, but none of them ever did I fuse with a living being. Have you no sages of your own to consult?"

"Ah. I know a Strange Doctor."

"Good. A doctor should be wise." Eitri turned back to his arc furnace and poked at melting metal, and then looked back at Tony. "I have asked for Song Steel, but your major domo did not know of it. Do you have any?"

"I... don't know," Tony said. "Song Steel? Can you describe it?"

"Ah. Yes, the Allspeak is not always good with names. Song Steel comes from a planet, long gone. It is scattered among the stars, but if Midgard was in its path you may have some. It is strong, it takes force and does not break. It is called song steel because it does not tremble even in the face of the roaring of dragons, but instead it seizes sound and becomes stronger, yet."

"Oh. That... that could be Vibranium. Wakanda is the only reliable source. Must have been the main
impact of the meteorite. I've heard they have a mine buried in a mountain of pure ore."

"A mine?" Eitri said. His eyes widened. "Is this Wakanda an ally? Might we obtain permission to delve there ourselves?"

"You want to move to Wakanda and live in a mine?" Tony asked.

"I do your home no dishonor, Mastersmith, but it is dead stone and ore long removed from its origins. It is... not the same."

"Huh. Well, I'll ask King T'Challa. He's a reasonable man." Also, Tony thought, the Accords Council would probably be happier if all their 'assets' weren't under Tony's roof.

Chapter End Notes

This is what happens when I have a bellyache and naps, water drinking and eating peppermint candy canes fail to fully resolve the situation. I google walk until my brain overrides my body.

As of 1997 they hadn't solved the problem of the anti-reflective coating on the B-2 'Spirit' Stealth Bomber deteriorating in rain, heat and humidity. So they had to be housed like fine cigars in humidor hangars. They were comparatively *slow* because afterburners would have given them away by their heat exhaust, and the intention had been to station them around the globe to reduce flight time. The lack of world wide humidor hangars messed up that idea.

I found a one year old Australian article saying the US plans to retire the B-1 and B-2 stealth bombers early (by 2030) because of maintenance issues. The 21 B-2 ' Spirits' bought in the early 1990s were *individually hand crafted* at 2 billion dollars each by Northrup Grumman.

The B-1 'Lancers' are 15 years older than the B-2, not quite as expensive to maintain, but out of the 100 made only 20 are still flying (I figure that means they had to scrap four of them for parts for every one they kept. Not economical.)

So, you've got Pampered Princess Planes that require custom built parts, Zombie Planes that Eat Their Own, and... the only other strategic bomber in current US service is... the B-52 'the Stratofortress' but no one calls it that. Usually it's called the BUFF. Big Ugly Fat Fucker.

The B-52 was produced from 1952 to 1962 and the US expects to keep them in service through 2050. Yes, they expect 100 year old bombers. Because they can pick up pieces in aircraft 'boneyards', and it's cheaper to upgrade components. But... 100 year old parts in 100 year old planes? Does not sound good to me.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boeing_B-52_Stratofortress
https://www.quora.com/What-are-some-nicknames-for-the-B-52-Stratofortress

On an unrelated note, many other nicknames for aircraft.
Omitted from list one of the most famous: Spruce Goose. Hughes H-4 Hercules. Howard Hughes- the inspiration for Howard STARK- built an aircraft mainly out of 'birch' PLYWOOD due to wartime restrictions on aluminum and flew it himself. Only once for a short flight- like 26 seconds. The war was over by then, but Howard was stubborn, by GOD he was going to prove his design could fly. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hughes_H-4_Hercules

Supposedly the gap in the US bomber fleet will eventually be filled by a new 'modular' stealth bomber. The B-21 'Raider' to be produced by Northrop Grumman who gave us the Sugar Baby bomber that melts in the rain. US taxpayers can be thrilled by the wise investment of their money. However much it will be. No one is providing any details because if they say how much they've paid for contracts, unfriendly nations can 'extrapolate' details of the bombers' design. Considering the historical tendency of the US government to WAY overpay for stuff, I doubt that reasoning. Oh, and I read 'song steel' in a fic, but don't recall who coined the phrase.
The Accords Council looked rather tired. Tony suspected they had no idea what they were letting
themselves in for when they formed it. At the time, they were probably just thinking about avoiding
international incidents. Interstellar and interdimensional complications had no precedents. Original
thinking isn’t just difficult, it’s dangerous. A reputation could be ruined by being too daring. On the
other hand, they seemed to trust that Tony knew what he was doing.

Hah, poor fools. Tony was just dancing as fast as he could, trying to keep his balance.

Also, he was pretty sure they really didn't understand the difference between his arc reactor and the
Space Stone. So they listened, and tried to look like they were making a decision, but really, they
were passing the buck to Tony. He was used to that, and didn't mind.

Rhodey was right, though. Letting them in on the ground floor kept them satisfied that Tony wasn’t
trying to hide anything.

T'Challa reluctantly agreed to ask his advisors for permission to let the dwarfs move into the mine.
"The elders approved providing you with refined vibranium, but allowing aliens within our borders,
within the mine that is the heart of our nation? That is a different matter. I will eat of the sacred herb
and ask Bast for her blessing, too."

Herb, huh? Does T'Challa get high and see visions? Heck of a way to run a modern country. "Sure,
um, who is Bast?"

"Bast is the Panther goddess of Wakanda." T'Challa smiled. "You do not believe in Bast."

"Oh, I'm open minded. I mean... Thor? Loki? Magical Rocks from the Big Bang? What's not to
believe."

"What is more important, Tony Stark, is whether Bast believes in you."

"Yeah, ok. How about I donate to a 'save the panther' fund?"

T'Challa laughed. "Bast would probably be pleased, but she is not bribed. She cares about her
people, and about Wakanda. If she believes this is in their best interest, I think she will say yes."

"And if not, perhaps we could up the shipments of Vibranium and let Eitri stay where he is? He's not
making any demands. He's the most polite giant dwarf I've ever met."

T'Challa smiled. "We shall see."

Tony called on Ross next.

"No, I can't see to order," Ross said with irritation. Apparently Tony's video call had interrupted his
dinner. Too bad. "You have no idea how many contradictory possibilities I see. Many of them are
ridiculous. Talking raccoons. Walking trees. World War Two soldiers."

"Wait. World War Two soldiers? Was Rogers with them?"
"Some of the time." Ross shrugged. "Some of the time, I'm leading them. Could just be dreams, you know. I do have them as well. And yes, I've seen you, a lot. Sometimes you're dying in the middle of ruins, stabbed in the guts. Sometimes you're suffocating in a spaceship. Sometimes you're floating in the air with a cape around you, held up by flying Coppertop batteries!" Ross took a deep breath. "But mostly you're fighting this big purple guy, standing your ground," Ross said, with a hint of reluctant admiration. "Sometimes you're glowing blue, but it's all hazy. Sometimes you're alone. Sometimes there are people with you. The people vary. I used to see Maximoff." Ross scowled. "Haven't see her in a long time, which is fine. She killed your android. Vision."

Tony decided not to tell Vision that. "You're really amazingly helpful, Thunderbolt. Can you tell me, who wins the Kentucky Derby?"

"Yeah. A horse." Ross broke the connection.
Chapter 141

Until he heard back from T'Challa, there wasn't much else Tony could do about the dwarfs. Odin still hadn't tried to get in contact, and it would destroy his bargaining position if Tony went back to him, so he was leaving that to work out by itself. No doubt Loki was shit-stirring, now that he had Odin's pet spear to wave around and go 'nyah nyah nyah, see, Daddy does SO love me' to all the Asgardians. They'd probably have to sort out their internal hierarchy before Odin got back to Tony, even if it was just to say 'we'll show up when you send a bat-signal'.

Tony left a message with Jane, letting her know he'd seen Thor, who was perfectly fine, and still damn clueless about relationships. That was as far as he was getting into it. She was a grown woman and could handle her own affairs. And if not, she could ask Pepper for ass-kicking lessons.

Tony cycled through his list of projects, 'chores' and other tasks while sipping a cup of coffee in the living room. He had his sunglasses off, because... you know, his OWN living room.

"Christ, what happened to you?"

Startled, Tony turned, and raised both hands, forgetting that he wasn't wearing the Suit. His palms lit up, arc reactor blue and hit... "Shit!" Tony ran over to Coulson, who'd been flung against the far wall.

Coulson looked up at him, groggily. "That's new," he said.

"Yeah. You all right?"

Coulson frowned in concentration and patted himself down. "Yes." He got up and stood there, looking at Tony expectantly.

Tony hadn't exactly forgot Coulson was in the Tower. He just had other things on his mind. "Got an upgrade," he said at last. Let Coulson make up his own explanation.

"I see," Coulson said. He tilted his head to one side. "Well, that's good. May I suggest you set up a training regimen? Your reflexes appear to be slightly over sensitive."

"Good idea." He really should. He hadn't been doing any hand-to-hand or boxing since... well, long before Siberia, at first there was no time, and then later he simply couldn't. He'd ask Barnes. He doubted he could hurt Barnes accidentally. "So, what did you come here for? You have your own quarters, with your own dedicated link to Coulson's Canadians."

"Yes. I wanted to arrange a secure line to Fury. One that your pet A.I.s aren't monitoring."

"Huh." Tony pretended to think about it. "No."

"He still has a helicarrier."

"Still no. He could have had FOUR, if he'd asked me to shut them down, instead of helping Rogers shoot them down."

"I... I don't understand why he did that, either," Coulson admitted.

"He's a security risk."

"He also has phase two weapons."
"Phase two... fuck... those are based on the Tesseract." What Tony could learn from studying them might help him understand what he... well, what he was now.

"Yes." Coulson perked up, seeing that he'd caught Tony's interest. "He can't power any more without the Tesseract, but he still has more than he has troops to use them."

"Again, he could have had more agents if he hadn't let Romanoff throw them to the wolves. Are you sure the old pirate hasn't gone senile?"

Coulson frowned. "Stark."

"Coulson." Tony shook his head. "I'll let you talk to Maria Hill. You trust her, right? She can act as go-between, coordinate with whatever forces Fury hasn't frittered away, but in return, I want at least half a dozen phase two weapons to study."

"I think I can promise he'll agree to that."
After Coulson left, Tony stopped checking his itinerary. It was constantly changing, anyway and with the new situation, priorities had shifted yet again. Tony should talk with Vision and Dr. Strange. As the other two Stone Bearers, they not only need to know about his... merger... but might have insight into it. Vision had always had the Mind Stone, so he might have difficulty explaining how he interacts with it-- after all, Tony doesn't know how his brain directs his hands, it just... does. And Strange... he said his order had guarded the Time Stone, but guarding isn't the same thing as studying. Tony wanted some time to clear his head first, before contacting them. Physical activity had always helped him focus.

He also needed to figure out if he'd could call up the 'repulsor push' on demand, and see what other instinctual reactions his new physiology might have in a surprise confrontation. Sparring with Barnes sounded ideal. "Jarvis, where's Barnes? If he's not busy, I want to ask him to spar with me."

"Sergeant Barnes is currently in the larger V.R. room. He and Mr. Barton are in the 'family group', interacting with Mrs. Anderson, the Bartons, and the Keener family. Shall I 'ping' a request for you to join them?"

"Yeah, do that." Tony hadn't done any recreational V.R. in some time, and it would be good to see the Keeners, too. He located a spare V.R. helmet and waited.

A minute or so later, Jarvis said, "The family group is amenable to your request."

"Ok." Tony put on the helmet, leaned back and relaxed. His syncing up was slower than normal as it recalibrated. He opened his eyes on the V.R. Sheep Meadow, one of Barnes' favorite locations to share with his sister.

Everyone was staring at Tony.

"What? I didn't forget to put on pants, did I?" Tony asked, glancing down, just in case. That had only happened once. Or maybe twice.

"Pretty eyes," Charley said. She made her 'watching you' gesture. "I can do that, too," she said and turned her eyes silver, while growing up to twelve feet tall into the fantasy avatar she'd been favoring lately. Tripod meowed and sat in front of her, licking his paws.

"Oh, yeah," Tony said hastily. "It's a new look I'm trying out." He concentrated on how he used to look, and hoped his eyes were now brown.

"You've been busy," Clint said. He was standing next to Laura, holding her hand, while their children were playing... croquet? With all of the possibilities... well, whatever.

"Yep," Tony said. "Sorry I haven't been around. I just popped in to see if James could spare the time to spar with me. In the real world, I mean. I've been deskbound and it's starting to show."

"Sure," Barnes said. "Becca was getting tired, anyway." He played it casually, and kissed his sister on the cheek, but the glance he gave Tony was shrewd and assessing. "See you later. Maybe we'll go to Coney Island."

Tony walked into the large V.R. room. Barnes was still sitting, toying with the V.R. helmet in his
hands. "You never asked me to spar with you, before."

"Yeah."

"So? Why now?" Barnes looked up at him.

Tony took off his sunglasses.

"Oh." Barnes stood up and moved closer to Tony. "I'm guessing it's not just the eyes."

"No." Tony shook his head. "Extremis. And the Space Stone. I'd planned on Extremis, but I hadn't counted on the Space Stone. I don't know what I am capable of, and I'd rather not go into the field blind." Tony scowled. "Coulson startled me and I repulsored him across the room. I wasn't wearing the suit at the time."

Barnes blinked. "Ok. Let me suit up and we'll go a few rounds." He glanced at Tony's hands. "Training room at the Compound, or do you want to test it here, maybe in Hulk's room?"

Tony considered a moment. The Hulk room was the strongest containment he had, but the Tower was in the middle of Manhattan. If something went wrong, it would be better to be isolated. Then again... if Tony destroyed the Compound-- Eitri was there, and Mason with his weapons' design crew, and Jane with her Bifrost communicator-- if Manhattan was lost, that would be terrible, but if the Compound was lost, Earth might go with it. "Here. I was planning to redecorate Hulk's room, anyway."

"Maybe we should ask Banner to observe."

"Good idea. Bruce can analyse."

"And if you lose control, Hulk's probably got the best chance of stopping you," Barnes said.

"That, too."
Chapter 143

They started out slow, taking each other's measure. A blow. Evaded. A blow. Accepted. Tony felt the pain, but it faded almost instantly. "Faster," he said, "Harder."

Barnes nodded, and they exchanged blows. Stood their ground and punched, counterpunched. It was exhilarating. This wasn't playing with Happy. This wasn't Rogers taking it easy on him, when he'd trained out of the suit, trying to keep his aging body in condition to keep up, not to let the team down. This was fierce, and free, and Tony... Tony was the one holding back.

Bruce stood off to one side, watching, tense, arms stiff at his side and fists clenched. He hadn't wanted to do this. Tony had to argue him into agreeing. Jarvis was also watching, always watching, but Jarvis didn't have a body to stop Tony.

Tony turned to grin at Bruce, to reassure him.

It probably wasn't meant as a sucker punch. Barnes probably just couldn't stop in time. But he connected with the back of Tony's head, and a bubble of outrage rose, heating his face, his chest, with indignation. That was dirty boxing. He turned to face Barnes, ready to hit... and Barnes... wasn't there. "What?" Tony asked, baffled.

Bruce was flushed slightly green. He pointed at Tony's chest. "There was a flash... and Barnes... just vanished. Did you... did you vaporize him?" His voice was full of horror.

"No! Jarvis, what happened?" Tony ripped off his gloves and looked around wildly, searching for... he didn't know what.

"Sir! There was a release of energy, but there are no particles consistent with vaporization. I can find no trace of Sergeant Barnes."

Tony swallowed hard. "Do you have a match for the energy profile?"

"No exact match, however it bears similarities to the emissions I have noted upon Bifrost transferral of matter."

"Space. He's been moved in Space." Tony closed his eyes and concentrated. He muttered, "Bring him back. Damn it, bring him BACK!" He hated Barnes for taking his parents from him. He'd hate Barnes more if he made Tony a murderer. "BRING HIM BACK!" Tony shouted.

"WHAT THE HELL?"

Tony opened his eyes. Barnes was back. Standing there. Whole. White faced and shaken, but whole.

"What did you do to me?" Barnes shouted.

"I don't... I didn't..." Tony felt sick. "That's it. No more." He backed away from Bruce and Barnes. "Don't come near me."

Bruce visibly took several deep breaths. The green receded from his face. "All right. Barnes, come with me, I need to check you out, make sure you're all right. Tony?"

Tony shook his head and backed up until he was pressed against the wall. "Yeah. Go. I'll... I'll just... wait here." His hands were shaking. He's got to control this. This is bad, this is very bad.
"Barnes is fine," Bruce said softly. "Do you want to come out of there?"

Tony shook his head. He'd sat down in the corner with a case of the shakes. They'd stopped, but he liked his corner. He was going to stay here, just for a little while longer.

"Hey." Bruce walked into the Hulk room and poked Tony in the shoulder with a pen.

"Don't do that!"

"What's the matter? Can't handle pointy things?"

Tony gave Bruce a dirty look. "That was different."

"Was it really?" Bruce sat down next to Tony. He pulled a paper bag out of his pocket and opened it. "Blueberry?"

Tony took a few blueberries. "Thanks." He ate the blueberries and then he said, "Do you ever feel like the universe has it in for you?"

Bruce laughed.

Tony had Happy drive him to Dr. Strange's mansion. He didn't trust himself behind the wheel. What if someone cut him off and he zapped them into... wherever he'd sent Barnes, and couldn't get them back? He wished he had Bruce's zen.

Barnes sat next to him, looking out the window away from Tony. It was an uncomfortably silent ride. Tony was glad that the mansion wasn't far from his Tower so the ride only seemed to take forever. "We're here, Boss," Happy said.

"I know." Tony slipped his sunglasses on. "Park as close as you can. I'll call you when we're ready to leave."

"Right," Happy said.

Tony and Barnes got out of the car. Tony straightened his jacket and walked quickly to the door. Now would not be a good time for an autograph hunter to intercept him. Tony was about to knock when the door opened. Wong stood there, frowning.

"Come in. Stephen is in the library."

Dr. Strange looked up when they entered. He was sitting at a long table, strewn with large, leather bound books, all open to different pages. "Ah. Have a seat."

"Where?" Barnes asked. It was a good question. The only chair in sight was the one Strange was using.
Strange frowned. "Well, then stand there. Next to each other. I need to compare your auras."

"Our what?" Tony asked. He didn't move any closer to Barnes.

"Energy signatures, if you prefer." Strange got up and gestured with his hands. "Cause and effect. Stark did something, Barnes was affected. I would like to test for traces which should be matching, but inverse."

"You do realize that makes absolutely no sense," Tony grumbled, reluctantly sidling closer to Barnes.

"I have simplified it into layman's terms, Stark. Would you prefer I bring out a chakra chart?"

"No, I'm good," Tony said and stood as patiently as he could while Strange peered at him and waved his hands, and various color sparkles appeared, with the cloak flaring dramatically at intervals.

Finally Strange lowered his hands, leaving an elaborately woven thread of translucent blue light flickering around Barnes, not touching him, but fanning out all around him. "I've not seen anything exactly like this, have you, Wong?" He made a pulling motion and the fan moved to hover in the center of the room.

Wong hummed. "It's crude," he said. "Undirected. But see here..." Wong's hands moved and the fan of light briefly brightened, outlining a dark center. Darker than the room, dark and depthless.

"Yes." Strange peered into the dark. "Another dimension?"

"It would appear so. It's not the mirror dimension."

"And it's not the dark dimension."

"Well, obviously," Wong said. "Dormammu wouldn't have let him out. Sominus?"

"Thog the Nether Spawn is very nearly as rapacious, so no."

"Excuse me," Tony said. "Thog the Nether Spawn? You're just jerking my chain now, aren't you?"

"No." Strange twisted his hand, and the blue light vanished. "You apparently sent Barnes into another dimension. I don't know what the natural laws are there, because I've never encountered it. It seems likely it involves some sort of stasis, as entering another dimension unprepared usually has noticeable effects. All I could tell was that he had been removed from this plane of existence."

"Lucky," Wong said. "Most alternate planes are very unpleasant, if not fatal. Being trapped in a stasis dimension isn't too bad. You might stay there forever, but you wouldn't feel a thing."

"Huh. That might actually be useful," Tony said. "Drop this Thanos in a box and seal up the lid."

"If you actually knew what you were doing and could do it again, yes," Dr. Strange said. "You could have sent yourself into that dimension. Please do not experiment further."

Tony opened his mouth and then shut it. Then he opened it again to ask, "How did you learn to use the Time Stone?"

"I read a book," Dr. Strange said.

"And who wrote the book?"
"The greatest sorcerer of all time, Agamotto."

"And how did he learn to use the Time Stone?"

Dr. Strange opened his mouth, pointed at Tony, and then shrugged. "I will consult with the other masters. We know very little about the Space Stone. The Time Stone has been in our keeping for thousands of years, and it still has secrets."

Tony nodded. "Here's a thought... if each of the Stones is tied to a particular aspect of the universe, then Space and Time have a close relationship. Einstein proved the three dimensions of Space and the one of Time are inseparably joined."

Strange blinked. "Even granted that were true, what does it mean?"

"Maybe it means that combining the 'streams' of the three Stones we have would work better than we thought. It might make up for the advantage Thanos will have if he gets the other three in a single setting."

"I hope so," Strange said.

Chapter End Notes

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spacetime

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thog

I just grabbed his name, because he sounded cool, but he is a demon, and a bad guy. ;^)
"A package has arrived, addressed to Mr. Coulson," Friday announced not long after Tony returned to the Tower. Barnes had disappeared into his own quarter immediately upon arrival. Tony didn't blame him. "DUM-E would like permission to dispose of it."

"Wait? What? No. Last time DUM-E disposed of something we had to air out the workshop for three days. It still smells like burnt Cheez Whiz in the corners. " Tony thought a moment. "Hey, maybe Santa Fury sent me my early Christmas present. Let me see the scans." Tony looked at the screen. Six neatly packaged phase two 'rifles'. "Yep, that's it. Send it up. I'm going to take them to the testing range at the Compound. I don't have the right equipment to analyze them here." He had his suspicions, but he needed to verify it.

If the guns were powered by the Tesseract... which is to say, the Space Stone... then maybe what his dad had thought were disintegration beams were actually transdimensional portals. In which case... the people shot with the guns might still be alive. Ross's vision of World War two soldiers... if it was true... trapped in stasis... poor bastards. He didn't dare try to retrieve them. He still didn't know how he'd got Barnes back, and there were too many differences, even if he knew how. Still... he didn't have to know how the weapons worked to give them to the most reliable fighters. There'd be time enough later, if he survived, to figure out how to sort out the Allies from the Aliens if and when they could fish them out of the other dimension.

Also, he'd had enough grief from two displaced in time soldiers without collecting the full set.

Tony went to his lab at the Angers Compound. He was thinking while he studied a wireframe hologram of a Phase Two gun, comparing it with his father's notes. SHIELD had stolen most of them, but then the Blundering Trio had dumped all of SHIELD's data on the Internet and he'd retrieved his delayed inheritance before trying to remove it as much as possible from public view. Maybe Wilson didn't understand the internet. Rogers certainly hadn't. But Romanoff must have. The other two probably thought of it as setting a homing pigeon free, that it would find its own way to the public. But 'dumping?' that's more like burning letters to Santa in the fireplace and expecting magic to happen.

Web pages have to be found by search engines that follow links, crawling from one to another, organizing.

SHIELD's data had been documents stored internally on stand alone computer systems. They weren't HTML web pages. There were no links to existing internet sites or Tony wouldn't have had to physically link Jarvis to the helicarrier. The helicarrier only had information relating to its own functions, including the research and storage of the Phase Two weapons. If they'd had Hydra mission reports... he'd have learned about his parents then.

Romanoff hadn't just removed firewalls from SHIELD's files, that would have done nothing.

Somehow, she'd converted everything to webpages, and uploaded everything to various clouds, and then put links on common words in every file to existing popular sites. Search Wikipedia for hawks, and find Hawkeye's mission reports. Go looking for a toy helicopter on Amazon, find the
helicarrier's blueprints. He didn't know the exact sequence of events of course. Probably the raw data was uploaded along with the converter and linking programs, and the power of the cloud itself was used to do the rest.

Any bored procrastinator wandering on TV tropes could follow a trail of Spies, Murder and get all the juicy bits, along with unexpurgated images of assassinations in the name of the 'Greater Good'...oh, yeah, it was just great. Not anywhere near as much fun as asking Tony to help.

He wondered if Fury realized exactly what Romanoff planned to do, or if he'd been blindsided, and then couldn't admit he'd screwed up. And they whined about Tony's ego.

His musings were interrupted by Friday.

"Boss, King T'Challa is calling."

Tony blanked the holo. "Connect me, Fry."

T'Challa's face appeared on the nearest smartglass monitor. "Dr. Stark."

"King T'Challa," Tony said. T'Challa looked too serious for nicknames at the moment.

T'Challa sighed. "I regret to say that I will not be able to accede to your request. The... situation in Wakanda is currently too unsettled for the Council of Elders to permit the intrusion of more outsiders."

"More outsiders?" Tony asked.

"Yes." T'Challa frowned. "In V.R. I met a young man who claimed the right of combat."

"What?" Tony thought back. "I thought you settled that when you fought... Embarker?"

"M'Baku," T'Challa corrected. "I had thought so, as well. Only one of royal Wakandan blood may challenge, and none of the other tribes contested my reign. But this man..." T'Challa sighed again. "He gave proof that he is my cousin. I never knew of him, as his father had lived in America."

T'Challa paused for a long moment, and then he said, "His father betrayed Wakanda. My father killed him, as was his right. But then he left the child, knowingly abandoned an orphan prince of Wakanda."

Tony didn't really know what to say to that, so he kept silent.

"N'Jadaka had the right to demand challenge, but I could not risk leaving Wakanda in the hands of one who does not know our heritage. Not now. Not when we must be united with the world against Thanos. But honor demanded I give him some satisfaction. So, we fought in V.R."

"And beat him, and gave him citizenship because he put up a good fight?" Tony guessed.

T'Challa shook his head. "As you Americans would say it, 'he whooped my ass'. If we had been fighting in reality, I believe he would have killed me, and become king. I could not do less than offer him the post of general of Wakanda's forces."

"Don't you already have a general? Okoye? Big lady, scary as hell?"

"Okoye has too many hats. She is the head of the Dora Milaje, the general of the army and the head of intelligence. She agreed it would be best for Wakanda to step down from one post, to better concentrate on the others. N'Jadaka's father was a War Dog-- the equivalent in your terms would
perhaps be a C.I.A. agent. N'jadaka has always been at war. He trained with your army, and became
a Navy Seal, and served in a black ops unit. He has the heart of a great warrior. I am glad that
Wakanda need not lose either of us."

"Wow. Ok. So, I guess your Board of Directors put the foot down on any more changes."

T'Challa inclined his head. "That is so."

"Ok, I'll tell Eitri. He'll be disappointed, but if you could fast-track some Vibranium for him, that
would be a good consolation prize."

"That," T'Challa said, "I can do." He inclined his head again, and broke the connection.

Tony blinked. "God. Family issues. Ok, Fry, put up the holo again."

Chapter End Notes

Just for the heck of it.
https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ThrowingYourShieldAlwaysWorks
Chapter 146

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was as if Tony had turned a corner. Everyone was picking up the slack and doing their jobs, quietly, and remarkably efficiently, considering how many strong willed people and nations with opposing viewpoints were involved.

Enemies were cooperating! It wasn't just Tony and Barnes, T'Challa and N'Jadaka, Loki and Odin--yes, Odin had finally given in and contacted Tony with a remarkably fair treaty of cooperation between Earth and Asgard-- and more surprisingly, Loki and Thor had worked together on it. Xavier reported that the guy who'd made a tin foil hat because he wanted to do evil stuff without Xavier messing with his mind-- well, that guy had sent a message that he'd work with Xavier. And then Strange said that a rogue sorcerer, a real looney named Mordo, had offered to lend his mystical power to the upcoming battle.

Apparently that was particularly surprising because Mordo had turned anti-sorcerer and had been going around forcibly de-magicing people because he felt they were upsetting the balance of nature.

"What are the odds?" Tony said out loud while waiting for an experiment to run. He was rambling mostly because Jarvis was here, and listening and he still wasn't taking Jarvis's return for granted. "When you think about it, it starts to feel like a contrived plot."

"Incalculable, Sir," Jarvis said dryly. "Literally, there is no formula to define human relationships. Improbability is an illusory concept based upon preconceived notions. Lightning may strike twice. Indeed Roy C. Sullivan survived seven lightning strikes over his lifetime."

"Huh. Wonder if Thor was around." Still, it did seem weird to Tony. He'd wound up with most of Team We Despise Iron Man on his side, and in the past they wouldn't even cooperate with him enough to keep coffee grounds out of the sink. It was great that everything was going well, but what if this wasn't a smooth curve on the graph with a gradual let down as relationships broke up, but instead a sharp drop and everything going to hell at once just when Thanos dropped in for a visit? Tony had never been great at relationships. As Jarvis said, there was no formula to define them.

It annoyed him. EVERYTHING should have a formula and a rational explanation.

He spun his chair around and looked at the experiment. Still running.

Who did he know who was really good at people? Not Strange, that was for sure. Xavier? You know, on the basis of practice alone, a telepath ought to be able to figure out why people do, and don't do, things?

Spun again. Still waiting for the analysis.

"Jay, see if you can hook me up with Professor X. No urgency."

"Dr. Stark, you wish to speak with me?"

"Yeah, I've just been thinking... I don't want to sound superstitious, but doesn't it all seem too good to be true, how easily everything's all fitting together?"
Xavier frowned. "I don't see what you mean?"

"It's just... coincidences. So many events lining up, so many people meeting at just the right time. Adversaries becoming allies." Tony tapped at his chest, a nervous habit he had almost shaken after removing the reactor, but now the tiny bump of the Space Stone brought it back. "I had evidence that the Mind Stone at least was intelligent, and capable of independent thought. I wonder if the Stones can act on their own. If they can be affecting people. Is this just random chance?" The more he thought about it, the more unnerved he became. If the Stones were playing with them, who's to say they weren't setting Earth up for disaster, just to amuse themselves.

"That is a good question. One that I cannot answer without assistance. If you will come to my school, I can utilize Cerebro, a device that enhances my abilities, to try to ascertain the truth."

"Right." The experiment had at least another six hours to run. Plenty of time. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

Xavier raised his eyebrows. "You are taking this very seriously."

Tony shook his head. "I'm just used to everything going wrong. This is like my life's been flipped upside down. I don't trust it. I've never had the patience to wait for the other shoe to drop. I'll take the Suit." Tony needed more Suit time anyway. He had to get over his issues.

"Very well. I will prepare."

The school was busy when Tony arrived. Tony thought there were more children on the grounds than the last time he visited. He waved to a few kids he recognized, and then stepped out of the suit to enter the mansion. Hank met him at the back gate and led him inside and down, past the antique wood paneled corridors down to sleek steel passages, and then over a narrow metal walkway where Xavier sat, wearing headgear not at all like a VR set, but also not like anything else.

"Dr. Stark," Xavier said.

"Professor," Tony replied.

"It may take a few moments. Cerebro will help me search. You may find the process mildly disturbing, but I assure you, it is perfectly safe."

"Uh huh." Tony looked around at the huge dome, made of so many intricate interlocking pieces of metal, and felt like a bug on a microscope. Hank smiled at him. Tony shook his shoulders to loosen them. "Ok, cut loose." 'Disturbing'... hell, no, it was fascinating. The dome filled with the mutter of voices, the glowing, multicolored transparent shapes of people flitting like ghosts, sparks and connections... how the hell Xavier kept from going mad with all this going on...

"Ah," Xavier said.

"Found something?" Tony asked.

"Yes. It is not what you fear. I can sense a vague nonhuman awareness from the Infinity Stones, a feeling of incompleteness... loneliness, if you will, but there is no pressure behind it, instead there is a vast patience."

"So, the Stones... want a family reunion?"
"It seems so. Apparently they are drawn to each other, but considering that the Time Stone has been quiescent on Earth for thousands of years, they do not actively seek reunification."

"Ok, so it's not the Stones. But you did find something."

"Yes." Xavier reached up and removed the helmet. "I found a mutant with a remarkable ability to affect probability. I could feel his certainty that his plans would not fail. Had never failed, no matter how many coincidences, how many people acting against their natures, were required to make them come to pass. I cannot tell whether his ultimate aim is benign, because he is mentally unbalanced."

"Can you locate him? Do you know his name?"

"Yes. His name is Helmut Zemo."

"Oh. Shit." God, the 'civil war' now all made sense. "We were dominoes. He set us up and pushed us over."

Chapter End Notes

How amazing and improbable it is that when I was looking up 'odds of extremely unlikely things' (and finding nothing actually useful to this fic) there was a link to The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy which I mentioned in a note recently! Alas, I fear it is merely a black swan.

https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Improbable_things_happen

https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Fun:The_Hitchhiker%27s_Guide_to_the_Galaxy

https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Black_swan

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_swan_theory

(The black swan theory is a is a metaphor that describes a event that comes as a surprise, has a major effect, and is often inappropriately rationalized after the fact with the benefit of hindsight. The term is based on an ancient saying that presumed black swans did not exist – a saying that became reinterpreted to teach a different lesson after black swans were 'discovered'- there were people in Australia before the 'all swans are white' folks showed up--and since there were no WHITE swans in Australia until introduced in 1896 & even today there's only one place where the white swans succeeded in breeding in the wild, I expect the folks in Australia considered WHITE swans an impossibility.)

http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/most-lightning-strikes-survived

http://mentalfloss.com/article/66863/meet-man-struck-lightning-7-times
"Ok, right. Where is Zemo? He disappeared off the grid after T'Challa brought him in." Tony had kept up to date in the hospital as best he could after Siberia, but Friday wasn't as experienced as Jarvis.

"Zemo doesn't know where he is. He only knows the name of the man who interrogated him upon capture." Xavier frowned. "I do not believe he's had any sort of trial, or even been officially charged, but has simply been incarcerated."

Tony wondered if anyone knew he was a mutant, or if they simply didn't know what to do with him. "What's the name?"

"Ross."

"You're kidding me, Thunderbutt has him?"

"No, it's... a different face. I know Thaddeus Ross very well, and we try to keep aware of his activities. I'm sorry, Zemo doesn't know much. This man, this Ross, interviewed him in Berlin, at the UN bunker. Later he fell asleep, and woke up somewhere else. He doesn't know where he is. It's an old building. His guards are American. He's isolated. That's all he knows."

"Ok, so, old building, definitely not the Raft. I'll work at it from the other end. T'Challa may have handed him directly to Other Ross. Thanks, Professor."

T'Challa was silent for a long minute after Tony told him what he wanted. Then he said, "You are certain Zemo has not been accorded a trial? That is... not justice. It is not what I wanted."

"I have to admit, I'm not crying over Zemo," Tony said. "At the moment I have bigger issues than compassionate treatment for a terrorist. I need to talk with him, that's all. Can you help me?"

T'Challa lowered his head. "Yes. I believe so. I surrendered him to Everett Ross, and Mr. Ross... yes, I believe he will listen to me."

"He owes you? Or is it a 'scratch my back, I'll scratch yours' deal?" Tony asked.

T'Challa's eyes tightened. Tony sensed an untold story. "A little of both," T'Challa admitted. "I will have Ross call you."

Tony shouldn't have been surprised when he found where they were keeping Zemo. It was the perfect place, a dirty little not quite secret that fell into the cracks. Guantanamo Bay had been the U.S.'s oubliette for decades. He'd come in on a boat with Everett, passed through security and been escorted through some depressingly gray cement corridors that absolutely for no reason at all, reminded him of caves within Afghanistan. For one thing it was hot, not cold.

Zemo was wearing a bright orange jumpsuit, and chained with his hands to a wooden table, and his
feet to shackles set in the floor. There was also a chain around his waist, anchoring him to his chair.

"Comfy?" Tony asked as he sat down across from Zemo. Two guards stood against the wall, close enough to listen in. Tony glanced over at Everett.

"Five minutes," he told Tony, and led the guards outside before shutting the heavy door behind them.

"Oh, yes," Zemo said with a smile. "I'm right where I want to be. The Avengers are gone, why would I need to be anywhere else, doing anything?"

"Need, no, but want, yes. Everyone has wants." Tony took off his glasses. "Right now I want you to tell me what you've done."

"Oh. How interesting. There's no green in the blue of your eyes." Zemo smiled. "Did I do that for you? Remove a green speck from your eyes?"

"The Avengers are gone. You did that."

"Yes, I did," Zemo's calm smile widened. "It was easy. I hardly had to do anything."

"No, you really didn't, did you. Everything just fell into place, the stars aligned, you got the big end of the wishbone. Did you always get the big end?"

"Always," Zemo replied. He spread his hands, with the chains clinking. "Except once. I was so certain my family would be safe. My father lived outside of the city. My son was excited. He could see the Iron Man from the car window. I told my wife, 'Don't worry. They are fighting in the city. We're miles from harm.' I was so certain. I didn't try. It's tiring, you know? A river chooses a path, but a man can change it. That's simple. It's hard work, but simple." He tapped his forehead with another rattle of chain. "I spent a year telling the river where I wanted it to go. Getting the information was easy, deciding what I wanted was simple. I just have to think what I want."

"And what do you want now? You're still thinking, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes. Always." Zemo laughed. "Thank you for coming to visit me, Mr. Stark."

"Do you hate the world enough to see it burn? Or do you want to keep it alive because those you loved would have wanted it that way?"

"That would be telling." Zemo stopped smiling. "Revenge or remembrance? I've already had revenge. Do I want more? Do I care if I live or die? Do I care if the world burns? I'm not sure, not sure at all. Good day, Mr. Stark."

"What if I kill you, right here, right now?"

Zemo shrugged. "The course of the river is set. It has so much momentum now, even I would have to work to stop it."

Tony stood up and put his sunglasses back on. "I'm sorry your family was killed."

Zemo closed his eyes for a moment. "So am I."

Chapter End Notes
Everett is C.I.A. and C.I.A. does have a black site on Guantanamo used to house 'unlawful combatants' (terrorists)- which does not come under the Geneva Convention.

https://theintercept.com/2019/03/03/guantanamo-bay-carol-rosenberg-intercepted/
"So," Tony told the posse, the ones physically present, and the rest via teleconferencing, "Zemo has manipulated probability, and logic is a little tweeting bird chirping in a meadow. Logic is a wreath of pretty flowers that smell bad."

"That doesn't make sense, Mr. Stark," Peter said. His therapist had helped, he said. He said he was fine, slept great, no problems. Tony suspected Peter stretched the truth, but keeping him out of the loop would just make him feel worse, so as long as he did talk to Sampson... well, May was keeping an eye on Peter, and so was Karen.

Rhodey groaned. "Don't do that, Peter."

"What?" Peter asked, wide-eyed.

Tony made the Vulcan Salute at Peter. "I disown you."

"You can't do that, Tony," Clint said, tossing back the same salute. "We need the kid. Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combination."

Rhodey nodded. "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."

Pepper sighed. "Please. Only a fool fights in a burning house."

Barnes looked at them as if they were all insane.

Vision steepled his fingers together and said, solemnly, "Highly illogical."

And then Jarvis played the original Star Trek theme.

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't find a site with these Classic Star Trek quotes so I'm going from memory.

1) Tweeting bird- Spock & most of the bridge crew have been captured by androids who've been misled by a con artist- they want to keep people to serve them. The crew figure out the androids have a control unit, which is purely logical, and they do illogical things until it gets stuck in 'Does not compute' and freezes. Spock's deadpan explanation of logic is one of the things they do.

2) The Vulcan salute is a Jewish priest's gesture of blessing. Leonard Nimoy was Jewish, and saw it done as a boy (he wasn't supposed to look, but he peeked). For a scene where he was supposed to greet a very dignified Vulcan matriarch he wanted to use it because it felt appropriate (I'm told the actress couldn't make the gesture, and they had to move her fingers into position out of shot and then raise her hand. *I* taught myself how to do it.) The words that accompany it are actually 'Live long and Prosper'.
3) The IDIC was a medallion, a triangle over a circle, representing the concept of acceptance and inclusion that Spock wore - I think it was only used in one episode where a bunch of hippies looking for Eden took over the ship. Eden, as it turned out, was a lethally poisonous planet.

4) In spin off movie 'The Wrath of Khan' Spock says the Needs thing twice - once early on, and then at the end he changes it to add 'or the one', when he sacrifices himself to lethal radiation to save others. He puts his hand up to the glass barrier separating him from Kirk and Kirk meets his hand on the outside before Spock poetically dies. (He comes back later - in another movie-, due to plot devicium, but no one minds because we loved Spock.)

5) The burning house is said by a Klingon (the Classic Klingons looked more human, plot devicium explained them away as hybrids created to more sneakily fit into human space). An amorphous alien entity that feeds on hate/anger, etc. stirs up trouble between a Klingon crew and Enterprise crew, making them all savage. Kirk points out the alien when it gets more visible, and the Klingon refuses to let himself be used, so, although he is not remotely friendly, he laughs, everyone laughs and the alien oozes out of the ship looking for food elsewhere.

6) Highly illogical is another Spock quote. He said illogical a lot. But 'Highly illogical' occurred during one of their weirder episodes where they were on a planet with two cultures, one primitive Caucasian warriors, the other more dignified Asian folks who were losing ground. A ST guy wanted to arm Asians, because they lived 100s of years & he wanted the secret. Turns out there was no secret, just that an arms race had created evolutionary pressure to select survivors who naturally lived a long time. Cheesier than normal ending when the winning Caucasians bring out a tattered US flag, and Kirk impresses them by quoting the US pledge of allegiance. Yeah, ST did a lot of unexplained US on alien planets. I did love the 1940's gangster episode though, it had a LITTLE explanation, plus Spock looked great in a pinstripe suit.

Bonus. Leonard Nimoy/Spock singing 'Highly Illogical' illustrated by clips from the series.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ru9e2rTHek
Chapter 149

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

After a sleepless night worrying about Zemo setting them all up just so he could giggle madly while half the human race lost everyone they loved, Tony pushed it aside. He had three Infinity Stones on his side, that should surely outweigh one lunatic mutant.

Probably.

Eitri was slightly disappointed not to move into a nice, cozy Vibranium mine, but Tony promised that he would look into buying them a cave system. Even if they didn't stay on Earth, they could use it for a holiday retreat. They were great metal workers, and once they got over missing their neutron star forge they adapted well to the arc furnaces. He wasn't entirely sure the stuff they produced wasn't at least a little mystical. At any rate, they could easily work Vibranium. In addition to making a great frisbee, the lack of vibration also results in incredibly low thermoconductivity. It can keep its cool, under any conditions, and incorporated into weapons and engines in places where heat causes degradation and loss of efficiency-- well, it's a big help even with the relatively small workforce just turning out parts for S.I. to add to the weapons they're stockpiling in secure facilities around the globe, including V.R. Battle Rooms.

Tony spent more time at Angers Compound, since the Tower was better suited to public relations which was currently under control, and Pepper was still not really comfortable seeing him in his new suit. Probably having the hypercompressed nanites stored in his bones was a little creepy, but Tony had been cyborged against his will in Afghanistan, and since then he'd become blasé about internal additives to his body. His bones were strong. His heart was protected. Tony was fairly sure the Space Stone itself was unbreakable.

"INTRUDER ALERT!" Jarvis shouted, all the alarms going off at once over Angers Compound. The trainees raced to their emergency stations, dragging visiting dignitaries and non-combat personnel into the sub-levels above Eitri's people. "Unauthorized landing of extraterrestrial vehicle!"

Tony suited up, heart pounding in his throat. The vibronzium net should have kept it out. There should at least have been some warning. He had turned half of the Stark satellites to watch space. This couldn't be happening. He was supposed to be prepared. God, what if he hadn't done enough? What if...

He blasted out of the Compound the moment the suit settled in place.

A metallic blue and orange ship sat directly on top of the Bifrost burn on the lawn. It didn't look anything like a Chitauri base ship, or a space caterpillar. It was a hybrid space/atmosphere vehicle, judging by the aerodynamic lines. He landed in front of it, repulsors raised and glowing. He could see into a clear bubble cockpit.

Where... a very human looking man was... waving a white t-shirt? Sitting next to him was a small... furry... raccoon.

"Hey!" The man said through some PA system. "We come in peace. Don't shoot, we just had the
A very large blue guy covered with bright red... scars? Tattoos? Raised veins? behind the man said, "I thought we weren't supposed to air our dirty laundry in public, Quill?"

"Yeah," the raccoon said, "put that away, it's nasty."

And then a... tree... a little tree behind the raccoon said, "I am Groot," and whacked a small device it held that gave out a series of beeps like a video game.

"It's not dirty!" Quill said. "It's a sign of peace."

A woman... what the hell... cyborged to hell and gone... stepped into the cockpit. She looked at Tony. "The Asgardian prince sent us."

The blue guy said. "I have... dibs on Thanos."

"I am Groot," the tree said.

Quill looked grim. "We all want a piece of him."

Tony blinked and let his repulsors dim. "Come out, and we'll talk. Jay, soothe any ruffled feathers, ok? I don't want anyone trying to bomb the compound just because we have guests."

Chapter End Notes

I went googling 'privately owned cave systems' and the second thing I clicked included a note about a cave system that had been closed but was reopened under a new name. STARK CAVERNS. It's in Missouri and contains an underground lake, ancient bear beds, Moonshiner's Dam, Native American artifacts, a wishing well and a wide variety of cave formations including Helectites, Helegmites, Stromatolites, Stalactites, Stalagmites, unsurpassed Spongework and Cave Coral.

https://starkcaverns.com
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thermal_barrier_coating
(this is cool, a lot of the instrumentation on the flight deck isn't bluescreened.)

Google reminded me that April 22 is Earth Day. DEFEND THE EARTH, GUYS.
"Ok," Tony said once the group had followed him into the Compound to one of the meeting rooms, "Talk."

The room had been so hastily evacuated the long boardroom table still had steaming cups of coffee and plates of finger sandwiches and fruit. The big guy sniffed and began grazing. The tree sat down to play its video game. The raccoon looked around with a sneer and said, "Loki told us you were the best tech on this dirtball. Gotta say, I'm not impressed. The bug net was ok, though," he condescended. He picked up an apple and bit into it. "Food's not bad, either."

"Bug net?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, you know, the net you got tuned to Chitauri metal?"

"It didn't keep you out," Tony said sourly.

"Course not," the man, Quill said, "Thanos doesn't share. His bugs... no offense, Mantis," he said to the pink woman whose antennae twitched. And honestly, she was the least weird of the bunch, so much so Tony barely noticed her.

Mantis smiled. "I am not offended. The Chitauri are mindless bugs, extensions of the queen hive-mind. Not really people at all." She picked up a bunch of grapes, studied it, and delicately plucked one to eat. "They eat space dust, and produce the metal from their bodies to make their armor and their hive-ships."

"Pretty sure Thanos harvests them to use the metal for his other ships, too. It's cheap and he doesn't have to deal with anyone else. It's not like anyone wants to trade with the planet-killer."

"So," Tony said, "does that mean it'll keep Thanos out?"

"Not really," Quill said. "Nothing stops him." He looked grim. "He has three Infinity Stones."

"Fuck," Tony said. "I knew he had the Reality Stone, but I was hoping it would take him longer to get the others."

"We'd given the Power Stone to Nova Corps for safekeeping," Quill said. "On Xandar."

"So much for Xandar," the raccoon said. He took a grape from Mantis and squished it.

"Rocket," Quill scolded him half-heartedly. "We thought he wouldn't find the last one. Gamora was the only one who knew where it was."

"Gamora?" Tony turned to the cyborg.

"Not me, I'm Nebula. My sister," the cyborg said. "She... to save my life, she told him where it was. She shouldn't have done that."

Tony understood, but at the same time, he agreed.

Quill looked up at Tony. "We can't kill Thanos until he tells us what he's done with Gamora."

"Huh. We'll see." Tony didn't try saying that one person wasn't worth risking half the universe. He'd just deal with Thanos as quick as he could, and worry about Quill's reaction later. "So, he's got
Reality, Power and Soul. We've got Space, Mind, and Time. We just have to figure out the best use of our resources."
"Yeah, ok, I'm guessing Loki told you who I am, but who are you people, really?"

"We're the Guardians of the Galaxy," Quill said, solemnly. "I'm Peter Quill, Star-Lord."

"Um, ok. Wow, the whole galaxy, just the six of you? Plus Gamora," Tony asked.

"Mantis is not a Guardian," the big blue guy said. He was contemplating an avocado. "We picked her up after we saved the universe the first time. When Quill's father was trying to eat the universe and we had to save it again."

Quill winced. "Yeah, yeah, my bio-dad was scum, but he's gone, and yes, Mantis is one of us, Drax!"

"I thought she was a mascot," Drax said. "She is like that ugly doll you call a luck piece." He paused. "Only she is uglier."

Mantis didn't seem disturbed by Drax's remarks, and Tony didn't really want to get into standards of beauty with a big blue space biker. That never went well. He nodded. "Ok, Guardians of the Galaxy," he pointed at each as he named them, "Mantis, Nebula, Groot, Rocket, Drax and Quill. Right?" He waited a second to be sure and then said, "Jay, group video conference. Everyone on the highest level, only. Introduce the Guardians and tell them Thanos is on his way. Please ask them to only speak if they have something to add. Have them save questions for the end."

"Yes, sir," Jarvis said, and the conference room smart glass wall developed a grid that began filling with faces.

"Ok, Jay, record, anyone comes in late, catch them up," Tony said, turning to his space guests. "Any idea how much time we have?"

"The last stone was on Vormir," Nebula said. Her face was stony. "I knew I could not stop him on my own so I did not follow him, but instead I escaped and returned to my sister's allies. We came straight here, to this... Earth."

Quill said, "The Milano is fast but I don't know how fast Thanos' ships are."

Nebula said, "He will travel at the speed of the slowest vessel in his fleet." She shrugged. "Unless he becomes impatient and destroys them. He has no mercy for the weak, and very little for the strong."

On the smart wall, one of the faces flashed, Jarvis drawing Tony's attention. It was Xavier, who tapped the side of his head and raised his eyebrows. Well, he was a polite mind-bender. Tony nodded, giving permission. Xavier wasn't a blabbermouth, he wouldn't interrupt without reason.

_How well does Nebula know Thanos?_ Xavier spoke within Tony's mind. _Does she have first hand knowledge, or is she merely repeating the general view of him from his victims?_

Good point, Tony thought. "Nebula, how do you know that?"

Nebula looked at Tony steadily. "Sometimes, a child resists the terror of the culling. Sometimes they fight him, instead of fleeing or hiding behind their parents, who they can see are helpless. Sometimes Thanos admires their courage, and takes them to raise as his own children. The ones who survive, he trains as his generals. Gamora and I, we were his favorites. He made us fight each other. Each time
Gamora won, he took something from me. Took and remade me. Pain and loss he said were great teachers, and as a loving father, he would help me to learn."

No one said anything for a long moment, then Nebula continued, "Thanos' children are his most deadly weapons, but they are nothing as compared to him. He fears nothing, because he has never been defeated. He could surround this planet and reduce it to rubble without any risk to himself at all, and then sift the ashes for the Infinity Stones, but he won't do that."

"Why not?" Tony asked.

"He is not a strategist. He is not interested in conquest. He will come in person and walk upon your world. He will smile as he gives the orders and say that he is killing you for your own good. That you should thank him for saving you from your own excesses."

"Ok," Tony said. "We get the picture. He's insane."

"And powerful. Thanos has been struck. Rarely he has been wounded. But he does not die. He has a strength far beyond his body, independent of the strength the Infinity Stones can give. He was so sure of his power that he did not hesitate to send Loki to Earth with the Mind Stone," Nebula said. "I do not know if he can be killed. I only know that many have tried and failed."

Tony said, "One of my people... he... sees things. He says that Thanos is immortal. We need to take that into consideration. If we can capture him..."

"We can't kill him?" Drax said. "That is not right." He paused. "But if we could cut off his arms and legs and penis, that would also be good, even if he did not die. I would settle for that."

Tony coughed. "We'll hold that plan in reserve, thank you, Drax."
Chapter 152

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

THANOS DELENDO EST! Xavier sent to Tony, who twitched at the mind-shout. I apologize. This Drax feels very strongly about Thanos. He has a very straightforward mind.

Another face blinked on the board, drawing Tony's attention. T'Challa. Tony maximized T'Challa's view, and opened his audio. "King T'Challa, you have the floor."

T'Challa inclined his head in a brief nod. "While I appreciate Dr. Stark's efforts to provide the Earth with a protective shield, we cannot win by huddling inside it, but neither do we have the ability to take the battle to Thanos outside our atmosphere. My advisors have agreed with me that our best strategy would be to open a hole in the vibronzium net at a place of our choosing. Wakanda's heart came from the stars. Wakanda offers herself as the battleground to meet the enemy from the stars."

Most of the board lit up with flashes. Tony held up his hand. "Wait. I can guess there are some objections to King T'Challa's proposal. I'll try to answer some of them, because...really, we don't have time for debate. I have seen Wakanda, the true Wakanda. They have the warriors of the past, and the weapons of the future. Eventually Thanos will find some way around the vibronzium net."

Tony didn't mention the weakness, that all Thanos had to do was get ships from other worlds. "That's a given. He will come to us. Choosing the battleground is our only advantage. Sun Tzu advises avoiding combat unless you are stronger than the enemy, but he also advises always to leave a surrounded enemy with a way of escape. Thanos leaves us no option for retreat. I open the board now to a vote. Do you agree to King T'Challa's proposal? Vote now. You can abstain, but you can't delay your decision."

Jarvis tallied up the vote, and showed the aggregate result. "Eighty seven percent agree, we have an overwhelming mandate. Thank you, King T'Challa. I don't know how much warning we'll have, so we need to discuss logistics. Troop readiness, weapons, supplies, housing...transport will probably be our largest concern."

Rocket chipped in, "Yeah, you're kinda primitive here. Petrochemical fueled land crawlers?" He snorted. "Thanos will be here and gone before you get your dirt wagons started."

"Once Thanos arrives, there will be no need for food or shelter," Nebula said. "He will not beseige or delay even in the face of massed opposition. He spends his own troops like water, preferring mindlessly obedient drone species, such as the Chitauri. They are interchangeable and easily replaced. His Children are among the few capable of independent action. I advise sending your best fighters to overwhelm them as soon as possible."

"I don't think that's such a good ..." Quill started to speak.

Xavier warned Tony, Stop him.

"Later, Quill," Tony said, trusting that Xavier had a reason.

Xavier said, Thank you. The young man is focussed on rescuing his friend. He was about to suggest attempting to capture for interrogation. While I normally prefer the humanitarian approach, what I have seen in Nebula's mind convinces me that Thanos' generals are far too dangerous to hold, and utterly incapable of going against Thanos' wishes. It would be futile, and cost a great many lives.
"All right," Tony said. "We also need a distant warning system. Quill, can you take your ship out and monitor the... what... space lanes? Earth's satellites don't have the range we need."

"Yeah," Quill said. He sounded reluctant. "I could, but..."

Nebula looked at him. She didn't say anything, but Quill folded. "Yeah," he said, stronger. "I'll do it."

"I will stay here," Drax announced. "To cut off Thanos' parts. I will leave him his tongue," he added. "To answer questions." He tilted his head, and creased his brow in thought. "Also, so he may scream."

"Thanks," Quill said. "I think."

The video conference took hours, even with Xavier helping Tony cut out the non-essentials. Finally it was agreed that readiness 'drills' would assemble trained combatants, and S.I. would release the caches of weapons they had around the world. Tony didn't mention that all of them were fitted with 'kill switches' so he could disable them after... if there was an after.

Dr. Strange and his fellow sorcerers spread out, prepared to make large portals to the staging grounds at Wakanda, after T'Challa had given them visual references and they'd tested to be sure they had it memorized. Xavier and his ally had some members capable of teleporting, who would also help. Coulson offered the helicarrier. Existing armed services obtained permission to travel by normal means to set up in countries around Wakanda, to handle any strays that overflowed.

It was exhausting by the time Tony called an end to the meeting. They'd probably overlooked something vital, but at the moment, no one could think of it.

Time was running out.

Chapter End Notes

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carthago_delenda_est

My head canon is that Howard Stark was self-taught in many things, and determined that Tony would get a better education to fit him for taking over Stark Industries. MCU Tony was sent to boarding school at 7 years of age and my head canon was that it was a military academy. I like to think he studied Sun Tzu's 'The Art of War' as it is a widely influential work of military strategy.

https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Sun_Tzu
Rocket went with Quill on his ship, the Milano. Tony watched the ship take off, it was beautiful. He regretted he didn't have time to study it. Nebula stayed to continue offering insights into Thanos and Mantis shyly contributed information about her own special skill set, which Jarvis added to the database. N'jadaka and the other highest level commanders had access to it, and were formulating strategies based on their assets. Drax polished off all the food in the conference room and then went down to visit Eitri to have his knives sharpened.

Groot... hell, Tony didn't understand him, or her, or them... Groot found a water fountain and tanked up, and then went to stand on the lawn and sprout leaves, while still playing with his? video game. One of the V.R. players, who'd been recruited when she admitted that her avatar's abilities were based on real life, followed him out to chat with him while her squirrels ran up and down his branches.

Tony called Pepper, reluctantly. He couldn't not tell her what was happening, but he didn't want her on the field. Hell, he didn't want Happy or Rhodey or Peter on the field, but they all had Suits and he couldn't demand they sit on the sidelines.

"I've always wanted to see Wakanda," Pepper said.

Peter nodded and grinned. "I can get credit for the field trip."

"I'll look after them, Tony." Rhodey said.

"Hey, don't go stealing my job," Happy protested. "I'm Guardian, remember?"

"Yeah," Rhodey replied. "And remember none of you three have any flight hours. Stay together. Watch your backs. I'll fly air cover."

Tony was glad he hadn't time to make Harley a suit. Rose Hill seemed so far away, and so unreal, a haven of peace.

Jarvis wasn't the only one monitoring transmissions from Quill's ship, but he was the fastest. Three days later he interrupted Tony's coffee break. He was in the Wakandan palace along with most of those designated for first strike status. It was crowded around the coffee station. He jarred his elbow and tipped over his coffee when Jarvis announced, "SIR! Milano reports incoming fleet!"

Tony stood up. "ETA?"

"They will reach Earth's orbit within four hours."

T'Challa snapped a command, "Open the net!", giving the signal for the relocation of the final vibonzium coins linked to the world net. Someone in his kingdom had the forethought to record all their locations when they were first planted, and they had carefully moved most of them already, and only kept the net active in case Thanos had stealth capabilities and might slip in unnoticed. "Prepare to put up the dome!"
The dome over the city wouldn't make any difference if Thanos won, but it would keep the noncombatants out of the way. Tony had seen some fierce-eyed children he wouldn't trust not to grab a weapon and slip into the ranks. Extremis tingled warm beneath his skin as he followed the king out to the selected battleground.

"Take your positions," N'Jadaka shouted. "For Wakanda and the World!" He was grinning. Tony thought the guy was a little nuts, but maybe that's what they needed. His people dispersed and spread out. Within a few minutes, Tony couldn't see any of them. A combination of N'jadaka's black ops training, Wakandan traditions and Shuri's inventions had gone into that deception.

They were lying in wait in pits, covered over with photostatic veils made to look like the grasslands, roofed by miniature versions of the force dome. Calling them pits was a misnomer, they were a staggered series of trenches, with only enough land around them to contain them. The land was marked in paths, using a vibranium based paint visible only through special lenses.

There were also landmines on the paths, fail safed not to blow when a person wearing vibranium passed over them. Everyone on Earth's side had at least a vibranium dog tag.

T'Challa stood tall in his black panther suit, in front of the warriors selected to use the traditional vibranium lances. Sun Tzu recommended letting the enemy underestimate you.

Armed aircraft hovered, silent and stealthed to invisibility. There was a quiet rattle as people shifted their weapons. Tony formed his armor, and listened to Jarvis giving him a running commentary on status, both of the approaching space fleet and of the defenders. They were as ready as they would ever be. He partitioned off the part of his mind that wanted to concentrate on his friends, wanted to watch for their safety.

He couldn't allow that. He had a greater responsibility. Peter understood that better than anyone else. Put aside the personal feelings. There is the mission. There is nothing else.

Chapter End Notes

Squirrel girl would actually make Endgame too simple. Canonically she defeated Thanos. :^)


Mission Impossible: Squirrels

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6XZ9etMCMI
Tony glanced over at Nebula who was standing calmly surveying the scene. He asked quietly, "Is it enough?"

Nebula blinked. "It may be. Thanos likes a challenge. If he is sufficiently entertained, he will draw things out."

"And if he gets bored?"

"He will appear by himself and rip you apart to get the Stone you carry." She shrugged. "And then do the same to your Vision. Perhaps your Strange person may evade for a while, but you have not learned to properly use the Space Stone, and your Vision... he does not have the instinct to kill. He will hesitate. He will think that perhaps there is a way, with less bloodshed."

"You've seen a lot of pacifists, have you?"

"Briefly," Nebula said. "Very briefly."

A rainbow shot down to the ground in front of them. Thor stepped out, grinning and waving his ax. "Hello! I hope we're not late! I don't want to miss kicking Thanos' ass!"

"Almost." T'Challa looked at Thor, and then over at the Asgardians gathered around him, glittering in gilded armor, who were cheerfully grinning and acting like war was a fun game. "You have your amulets against the mines?" was all he said.

"Yes! Strange brought them! Eitri does good work, eh?" Thor lifted a chain around his neck, showing off a tiny golden ax. "They just needed a little gold. We had to brighten them up. Tradition, you know?"

Odin stalked past Thor. "King T'Challa. Asgard has arrived."

Tony was tempted to say something rude, fortunately Nebula did it for him. "Asgard is very pretty. If you take the center, I'm sure Thanos will come out to dance with you."

Odin glared at her and then turned to T'Challa. T'Challa said, "The center is reserved for Wakandans." He pointed to a flag set at the right side of the field. "That position is available."

Odin puffed up and looked as if he was going to argue. Loki stepped up. "Thank you, King T'Challa. Asgard will be pleased to continue our long tradition of showing Midgardians the way. That way, yes?" Loki headed for the flag, with Thor at his side. Odin hesitated a moment, then inclined his head. "King T'Challa." He let his gaze pass Nebula, then Tony. "Smith," he said dismissively, ignoring her entirely as he went to join his people.

Nebula glanced at Tony. "Was that meant as an insult?"

Tony grinned at her. "A compliment. He thinks I created you."

Nebula rolled her eyes.

A portal opened, and Dr. Strange stepped out, with Vision at his side. "I do wish we had more opportunity for practice in melding our 'streams'," Vision said.
"Eh, learn on the job, it's a thing," Tony replied, resolutely ignoring the chance to make a golden showers joke. "Whatever happens, stay close. If we get separated it's going to be a problem."

"Yes, yes, I know," Dr. Strange said. He took a deep breath. His hands were shaking.

"Are you afraid of dying?" Nebula asked, with mild curiosity.

"No," he snapped. "Of killing."

"Oh. A pacifist," she said. "Try not to die too early in the battle. Perhaps you should give your stone to someone who will use it to fight?"

Dr. Strange sputtered in indignation.
Other groups appeared. Tony had put his helmet back on so Jarvis could quietly murmur updates to him without disturbing anyone around him. Barnes and Barton had teemed up with Peter and... gone somewhere... to find a good view, they said. Barnes had a sniper rifle, a number of knives and a shiny new phase two weapon which he wasn't happy about because it was based on Hydra, and he said it made him feel dirty. Peter had his new suit.

One of Professor X's mutants had teemed up with Mantis. He's blue, has a pointy tail, a German accent, and can teleport. He's also apparently a devout Catholic and was earnestly explaining the tenets of his faith to her. She seemed quite taken with him. Tony thought their kids would be very cute.

While other nations' official forces were stationed around Wakanda, Ross had resigned his post as Secretary of State, and claimed he was now a citizen of the world and would not sit on the sidelines. He turned up wearing a vintage World War 2 general's uniform, leading his troops from V.R. Since the Abomination was with him no one really cared to argue the point, and he'd been assigned a post on the outskirts of the battle. Bruce had taken one look and burst out Hulk all over. Abomination had kept him from pounding Ross into the ground, and then they'd beat on each other, coming to a draw. It had taken a little while to convince both of them that it would be better to compete by keeping track of how many of Thanos' minions they could kill than each other.

The air shimmered at the far end of the valley. Vision said quietly, "I believe all the allied forces are in position, sir. This is not an energy signature that I have previously encountered."

"Showtime," Tony muttered.

In the distance the air boiled, blue and black, shot through with miniature lightnings. And then a huge ship landed and... things... burst out of it. They moved so swiftly the details were hard to make out. They were black, slimy, had at least four arms, and growled like rabid wolves. Tony was pretty sure they were naked and unarmed, too. "Cannon fodder," he said, feeling sick.

"Outriders," Nebula corrected. She tilted her head in Dr. Strange's direction. "They are even less than Chitauri. Created for a single purpose, to obey, to kill, and to die."

"If you mean to convince me to kill them, I think you've made your point," Strange replied. He began levitating. "We'll need an overview. We don't want to miss Thanos."

"Yibambe!" T'Challa shouted. He moved to the head of his spear carrying people. "YIBAMBE!"

"YIBAMBE!" They shouted back.

And then, down from the nearby mountain, "YIBAMBE! SIYA!"

"What the fu..." Tony turned. Jarvis enhanced his vision. Wakandans. Dressed differently than T'Challa's people, and carrying different weapons.
And at their head.
A white man.
Tall, bearded.
And grinning fiercely.

"Jarvis?" Tony asked. "Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing?"

"If you believe you see Steve Rogers wearing what appears to be ceremonial war armor of the king of the Jabari tribe, then you are correct."

"Jesus," Tony said, as the Jabari tribe raced down to join forces with T'Challa's people.

Chapter End Notes

I can't actually remember how the Outriders got to Wakanda & attempting to find clips led me down the rabbit hole of wasted time links, so imma gonna just throw up my hands and say AU. Everyone say AU!

Yibambe - Xhosa, it means 'hold fast'.
Used google translate for Siya, it means 'we come'

Thanos delendo est!
The Jabari forces pivoted neatly and aligned themselves to cover the gap between T'Challa's people, and Ross's. Rogers stamped his spear in time with T'Challa's. "Yibambe!"

"I'll be damned," Tony said as he rose to hover level with Strange and Vision. "Rogers must have learned tactics from the old guys in VR after all."

Then the Wakandans all roared, "WAKANDA FOREVER!" and ran, looking like suicidal idiots, towards the onrushing Outriders. T'Challa held up his hand, "YEKA!" They all slammed to a stop, Rogers' forces only an instant behind. "PHANTSII!"

They all threw themselves down flat, while the warriors hidden in pits rose and began firing at the Outriders. The ones closest to the enemy used vibranium machine guns. Further back the warriors threw rocket propelled grenades, and any Outriders that got past them to the outside were met with flamethrowers.

Aircraft decloaked and began firing into the mass of Outriders at the back, it only slowed them as they continued, clawing and crawling over burning, writhing, shrieking bodies.

Another huge ship landed, disgorging more Outriders. The helicarrier turned visible and fired on the ship, breaking it open like an egg.

"Holy shit," Tony said, as he tried to pick off targets, "is that thing a clown car?" No matter how many Outriders were killed more just kept coming. He and Vision and Strange formed a triangle, backs together and revolving slowly as they each fired into the crowd. Strange used his magic, and Tony his repulsors while Vision used the Mind Stone as a blaster.

Okoye appeared, riding a war rhino, and leading a herd of them to force a phalanx of Outriders into the mine field. The rhinos snorted and flung up their heads when blobs of Outrider goo hit them.

So many people were fighting, Tony didn't know where Ross got the Vibranium for his people, but they must have been equipped because they were running all over the mine field, luring Outriders to chase them. One particular group caught Tony's eye, because the leader looked familiar... he was wearing a red hoody and using a baseball bat studded with metal to bash in Outriders' heads. He had a pack of dogs with him really big mean fuckers who tore through Outriders as if they were yummy kibbles... the guy looked up so Tony had a clear look at his face for an instant. It sparked a memory. Blue jeep guy? Huh...small world.

N'jadaka fought his way to T'Challa's side. Tony couldn't hear what he was saying, but whatever it was made T'Challa smile in the middle of the battle.

Nebula was methodically slaughtering. Hulk and Abomination were smashing.

"Sir, please do not be alarmed," Jarvis said,"I took the initiative to order the manufacture of
replacements” and then a group of Iron Legionnaires appeared in flight and began blasting, centering their efforts on clearing away the Outriders in the vicinity of the Guardian and Rescue armors. Rhodey joined them.

Thanos still hadn't appeared. "What the hell does Thanos want? A three ring circus?"

"Perhaps, a three Stone display?" Vision suggested.

Strange nodded. "I think he's right. And the sooner the better, to stop this senseless slaughter."

"Right, ok, turn and..."

Dr. Strange opened the Eye of Agamotto and sent out a beam. Vision sent a beam to match it from the Mind Stone. Tony lifted his repulsor and concentrated... and... nothing.

"What's wrong?" Strange shouted over the screams of battle.

"I'll...um... I only got the Space Stone to work because I was angry."

"And aren't you angry NOW?" Strange yelled.

"No. Not... it's not... personal..." Tony looked at the battle field, desperate for something to get past the cold pragmatism of battle fever. He looked.

And there was Rogers. Grinning. Happy. Looking healthier than ever. As if he'd been on a years long holiday. Tony knew it wasn't true, but sympathy for Rogers wasn't what he needed. He needed to remember all the times Rogers had made Tony feel worthless, had sneered at him, had ignored his grief over Jarvis... had used him, had lied to him... had watched his parents murdered and denied Tony's grief again...

He didn't really mean to aim at Rogers. He tried at the last instant to pull it. The beams from the Time and Mind Stone met the Space Stone. Rogers was engulfed in blazing light.

"NO!" Tony shouted.

The light died down, still flickering, not quite dark.

And Rogers was still there.

But not alone.

"WHAT is THAT?" Dr. Strange asked. "One of Thanos' generals? I thought we got them all with the first wave."

"That..." Tony stared as Rogers went berserk, beating hell out of his new opponent. "That's the Red Skull. I thought he was dead..." Around Rogers more people popped out of the light. Some of them were wearing Nazi uniforms, but most of them were dressed in the clothes of the allied forces of World War 2.

General Ross appeared, riding astride Abomination's shoulders. "FLASH!" he roared. "FLASH!"

The bewildered soldiers looked up at him. "FLASH, DAMN YOU SLACKERS! INVASION!"

A grizzled sergeant shouted back, "THUNDER! GET UP AND FIGHT!" They beat the few Nazis into submission, while Ross threw weapons to them from a huge backpack Abomination was wearing.
A purple black cloud filled with lightning appeared. Thanos, it could only be Thanos, strode out of the cloud and looked around, grinning. "My Children, Thanos greets you."

"Fucking finally," Tony said.

Chapter End Notes

If google is right, Yeka is Stop and Phantsi is Down (hopefully the direction, and not other meaning of the word.)
(Dora Milaje-type women protect rhinos)
http://www.blackmambas.org

The D-Day (Operation Overlord) used the password "Flash" and the countersign was "thunder." The troops were also issued brass crickets, a small toy that made a clicking sound when squeezed in order to recognize friendlies in the dark. One click was answered by two clicks.


Red Skull had used the Tesseract powered gun on some of Hitler's officers/generals? because they were going to shut down Hydra. And the Space stone stuck them all in the 'stored for later' dimension along with everyone else who got shot. They were retrieved because the combination of Mind and Time found Red Skull through Rogers' memory and then it followed Red Skull's memory, etc.

In all the ruckus, I forgot to mention that Nightcrawler and Mantis had also teamed up with Wolverine. Kurt *poofed* them close to the generals, Mantis put them to sleep, and Logan cut their heads off (he had to do more than that to kill some of them, but in general, POOF/LULLABY/SLASH.)
Tony turned with Vision and Strange. Thanos' smug satisfaction made it easy to take it personally so Tony was able to keep Space's stream joined with the other two. The big purple bastard had even got himself a crown with six settings for Stones, anticipating getting the last of them. He held his hands up to either side of the crown, clutching it tightly.

The triple blast of Mind, Time and Space shot out, and was intercepted by a beam from the three stones already set in the crown. Thanos didn't even flinch. Instead he smirked. "Go ahead. Try. In the end, you will all become Thanos' Children." His gaze passed over the corpses of his generals. "Fight well, and you may serve me in life. Or death. Either way, you will be mine."

Tony could feel the strain building as the Stones fought each other, kept fighting. He was the weak link, inexperienced, not really in control of the Space Stone. Thanos' eyes were on him, boring in, mocking. Tony set his teeth and held on. He couldn't even spare breath to insult Thanos' wrinkly ballsack face. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw people turning to them, trying to fight their way to them. Rogers was dragging Red Skull along with him, shouting something.

The Outriders kept fighting blindly, getting in the way.

It was a total mess, not improved when the Milano appeared and hovered for a few moments as if searching for a clear space to land before simply smacking down on a pile of Outrider corpses.

A silver-white ball of light formed next to Thanos. Tony braced himself internally for whatever fresh hellbox the purple pimple was opening. The light faded revealing two tall slender figures, dressed in shining white robes. The shorter of the two was at least twelve feet tall. And held an orange cat in her arms.

"Watchers," Thanos said with a sneer. "Have you come to record Thanos' ultimate victory? You haven't the courage to intervene."

"Watching you," the shorter one said, as she released the cat to leap down, freeing her hand to make Charley's favorite Prisoner gesture. The cat... Tripod... sat down to wash his fur back in place, his one vibranium leg shining in the sunlight.

If Tony could have spoken, he'd have shouted, what the fuck? Strange did it for him. "WHAT THE FUCK?" the sorcerer supreme yelled, totally losing his dignified cool.

Vision frowned. "I believe I know you, do I not?" he said mildly to the female.

She grinned at him and waved.

The taller alien said, "I am Edakeen." He folded his arms neatly into the sleeves of his robe. "We are Watchers, and bound not to interfere. I violated our rule once, and was punished." He looked mildly at the girl. "I did not know I wasn't human. When my punishment ended, I had to leave my wife and children."

"Dad," Charley said, complacently.

"I have returned for Charlotte, but we cannot interfere."
Charley nodded. "Stupid rules. Thanos stupid, too."

Thanos sneered at her, but kept hold of his crown. "What do you know?"


"Bah," Thanos said, "The planets I have halved become paradises! Everyone has enough!"

"Hmm," Charley said. "Mussolini made the trains run on time?"

"What?" Thanos said. His gaze flickered to her for a moment, and his fingers flexed, but he returned to holding onto his crown.

"He didn't," Charley said. "He made the train people lie. People lie when you scare them." Charley hummed. "If you kill half a tomato plant you don't get tomatoes. Even if your generals tell you so."

"The weak die, that is right. The strong will survive, to create better worlds," Thanos said.

"T-Rex was strong. He didn't create anything." She held up her fingers with them a few inches apart. "Mice. They lived when it was hard. People. When it is hard, people create. They see problems. They try to fix. Kill half the people, you kill half the fixers. The intellicrop makers. The thinkers. The inventors. The mothers. The children."

"It is fair," Thanos said, "they will have a chance. More than my own people did." He glared at her.

Charley blinked calm silver eyes at him. "I watch the past, too. You stole their lives, so you would live."

"I DID NOT!" Thanos roared and reached out with both hands for her.

An arrow flew through the air, knocking Thanos' crown off. The beam from the three stones ended. Thanos was hurled back by Time, Mind and Space. Charley reached out and caught the crown.

"Pretty," she said, and put it on her own head.

Chapter End Notes


Clint was watching his chance the whole time, with Barnes and Spidey keeping off any attackers. He used his mutant power of marksmanship/telekinesis at the perfect moment.
A hillock of grass moved, a photostatic veil crumpled to the ground and Drax jumped at Thanos, hacking with his knives. "I was SO STILL, I was invisible!" Drax shouted in triumph.

Tony and the others stopped using their Stones, and landed, watching in horrified fascination as Drax diced and sliced. Thanos was still tough, Drax didn't actually cut off his limbs, but he definitely tried.

"Where is GAMORA!" Quill ran up, yelling. Beside him, Rocket was blasting any Outriders who came close because Quill wasn't paying any attention to anything except Thanos. Groot followed, impaling bunches of Outriders and using their bodies to add force to his blows. Squirrels were clinging to his branches, and throwing nuts that Groot grew. The girl with the fluffy tail was casually stabbing Outriders by using claws that sprouted from her knuckles.

"Gamora is dead," Thanos said, trying to stand up, even though Drax had mangled both his legs. "I had to sacrifice the one I loved to obtain the Soul Stone."

Rogers arrived, dragging Red Skull by the arm. "No, you didn't," he said, throwing Schmidt down to the ground. "Tell them. Tell them, like you told me."

Schmidt looked up, his face twisting in a grimace, the closest he could get to a smile. "The Space Stone sent me to the Soul Stone. They hated me, the Stones hated me. I NEEDED the POWER! I TOOK IT!" Schmidt screamed.

Rogers shook him hard. "The rest of it! Say it."

Schmidt snarled at Rogers. "I couldn't touch it. I was not strong enough. Why should Thanos have my power? Why should he just reach out his hand and take it? I saw the woman, and I wanted to make him pay. So I told him he had to sacrifice what he loved." Schmidt drooled. "And HE DID! I TRICKED HIM! AND HE CRIED!"

Thanos lunged for Schmidt. Quill shot him. Thanos fell, and glared up at Quill, only inconvenienced. "He made me kill my daughter!"

"She was NEVER your daughter!" Quill said, tears thickening his voice. "She was BETTER than you!"

Nebula came up beside Quill and stared down at Thanos. "You have no children. You have nothing. You ARE nothing."

"All this death," Dr. Strange said. "For nothing."

"You could have done great things," Vision said, "Been a mentor to younger races, but you chose the path of destruction."

A Wakandan woman came up beside them. "You have far more red in your ledger than I ever dreamed possible."
Tony's head snapped up, recognizing the voice. "Romanoff?"

The 'Wakandan' pulled off a photostatic veil, revealing Natasha Romanoff's features. "I got curious. I didn't want to miss all the fun."

"Yeah, ok, you helped out, I'll have Jarvis put a bonus in your bank account," Tony said.

"Tony," Rogers said, in a disappointed-in-you voice.

"I don't care what you think of me, Captain Wakanda," Tony snapped. "I just want to get this over with and go home."

"I just want Gamora back," Quill said.

"Her body lies on Vormir, and her soul is trapped within the Soul Stone." Thanos said. "You are too weak to deserve her. She is better off dead than with you."

"You can borrow my knife. Cut off a piece," Drax said, offering one to Quill. "It's not as good as killing him, but it's good."

"No, thanks," Quill said, wincing back from the bloody knife. He repeated, "I just want Gamora."

Tony stared at Thanos, wondering what the hell they were going to do with him. Around him the battle was dying down, the sheer numbers of the Outriders not enough to compensate for their total lack of strategy. Soon it would be over and they'd have to decide what to do with him. They couldn't leave him with Drax to be whittled down to component parts, but was there a prison strong enough to keep him? The Raft hadn't even been able to withstand Rogers.

Chapter End Notes

Note: Drax learned to be invisible in school. If he stayed perfectly still and didn't raise his hand, he was NEVER CALLED ON.
Charley tapped the orange Stone set in her crown. "Soul will trade." Charley blinked. "But not Red Face. Soul says he's...itchy."

"We don't trade lives," Rogers said, sternly.

T'Challa came limping up, half supporting, half supported by, N'Jadaka. N'Jadaka snorted, and said, "What the hell do you think war is, man? People died here, trading their lives for others."

General Ross followed, on foot. In the distance Hulk and Abomination were duking it out, while a ring of Asgardians watched, occasionally pausing to kill a confused looking Outrider that stumbled into the way. "Bleeding heart liberals," Ross grumbled. "Airy fairy bullshit."

Rogers and Ross glared at each other.

"What happens if someone offers to trade?" Romanoff asked. "I'm curious. What is it like in the Soul Stone?"

Charley touched the Soul Stone again. "Soul doesn't care. You like cake, you get cake."

Romanoff lowered her brows in thought. "So it's not punishment for your sins?"

Charley shook her head. "Soul isn't hell." Charley tilted her head, with an air of listening. "Soul is peace. Soul is rest."

Romanoff took a deep breath. "It washes away all the red?"

Charley smiled. "Yes."

"NO!" Rogers said. "It's wrong. Don't do it, Natasha. You've paid for your past, you don't need to do that."

"Why don't you let Romanoff make her own decision?" Tony said. "No one's pushing her." He glanced at Romanoff. "You can go. Disappear. Jarvis will keep you on the payroll. We won't ask you to do anything horrible."

"I'd still be someone else's puppet," Romanoff said. "I'm tired of it. I'd like to make my own world."

"But it wouldn't be real!" Rogers protested.

Romanoff gestured at the battlefield. "I've had enough reality. More than enough."

"I won't let you." Rogers let go of Red Skull and strode forward. "It's not right."

Spiderman descended on a thick web line, with Barnes and Barton hanging onto him.

"It's her right," Barnes said, stepping away from Spiderman once they reached the ground. "Allow Romanoff the dignity of her choice."

Rogers swallowed. "Bucky."
"Steve," Barnes said. "We're not the same two kids who grew up in Brooklyn. Let the past go," he said softly. "You don't have to fight any more. You're not the little guy, and the world's not full of bullies."

"But...Gamora died," Rogers said. "How can killing Natasha change that?"

Charley said, "Soul doesn't want body." She touched the red Stone next to the orange one. "Reality will help." She pointed at Quill. "You think Gamora."

Quill lifted his head and swallowed, visibly. He nodded.

Romanoff straightened. "What do I do?"

Charley touched the orange stone. "Think of best place. Best time. Be happy."

Romanoff closed her eyes and tilted her head back. She smiled, a sweet, uncomplicated smile. She whispered, "Papa ya khochu domoy." She let out a soft breath and opened her eyes. They glowed orange, and then turned red. The red spread over her face, and to all parts of her body, like a rising sunset.

It grew brighter. She stood straighter. Taller. Greener. Then she blinked and tossed her long, blood red hair. "Peter?" she said. "Peter?" Gamora said.

"Oh, god, yes. Gamora." Peter ran to take her in his arms.

Chapter End Notes

Not going to put it in the story, but I woke up from my nap seeing a dark figure bouncing through the mess on the battlefield like a pinball, saying 'STOP TRYING TO SHOOT ME! I AM THE GOD DAMN BATMAN!'

According to google translate; 'Papa ya khochu domoy' means 'Daddy I want to come home'
Trying to find Gamora's eye color I found the story of the actress' makeup regime. NO WONDER MCU thinks nothing of audience sitting in their seats for three hours. She had FIVE hours of makeup for each filming day. (Then again, audiences are paying to see the movie, and actress is paid to act.) I finally gave up on finding the eye color, is it supposed to be black (no humans have black irises) or very dark brown? Whatever.

https://www.allure.com/story/guardians-of-the-galaxy-make-up-details
The sky clouded over, and a breeze blew, fluttering loose clothing- except for Dr. Strange's cloak, which pressed closer to him. Ororo landed lightly.

T'Challa straightened and pushed at N'Jadaka, trying to stand without support. "Ororo. I am glad to see you are well."

Ororo smiled at him. "As I am glad to see you, T'Challa."

Tony looked away from all the heart eyes going on between Quill and Gamora, and now T'Challa and Ororo. He wanted to be with Pepper. He turned to check on Rescue and saw Tripod crouched next to Thanos, delicately lapping from a pool of blood. "Tripod, don't do that, it's disgusting." He spoke louder than he intended, and drew attention.

Rocket looked away from Gamora and saw Tripod. "What the fuck? Hey, Quill, why didn't you tell me your stupid planet had flerkens?"

"That's a cat," Quill said, glancing away from Gamora. "What do you know? You won't even admit you're a raccoon."

"I ain't no raccoon! Whatever the fuck that is. BUT THAT, that is a flerken. It's going to lay eggs and you'll be sorry then when you've got hundreds of those monsters all over the place!"

Tony laughed. "Tripod's not even female. He's not ...."

And then Tripod opened his mouth.

Wide.

Really wide.

Pink tentacles and mouths like deep sea fish emerged.

Really really wide.

Thanos had time for one scream before the tentacles grabbed him and stuffed him down Tripod's throat. Tripod purred and licked his paw.

No one said anything for a long moment.

"Told you so," Rocket said smugly.

Tripod made hacking noises and spit up Thanos's armor.

"Good kitty," Charley said.
Tripod wandered into this fic on his own, LONG before I ever heard of flerkens. Totally not planned, just Tony had a tuna sandwich in IM3 at Harley’s home, and when he went to Rose Hill it seemed reasonable for him to have another, and I know in MY neighborhood if I was to eat a tuna sandwich outdoors stray cats would come up and beg. So... it happened.

Serendipity, I accept it.

Earth is full of flerkens- the badass cats in this video take on dogs, foxes, bobcats, black bears, alligators and snakes... including COBRAS.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9B1DKszsMRk
Tony stared at the patch of ground where Thanos had lain. "Yeah. That happened." He decided to stock up on gourmet cat food, just in case. Tripod came over to Tony and rubbed against the legs of the Iron Man suit. What the hell. Think of Tripod as a small, furry Hulk. He's got it under control. He's cool.

"So." T'Challa looked around at the smoking hulks of Thanos's ships, and the piled corpses of Outriders. "It is time to care for the wounded, and count the dead."

"Yes, my king," one of the nearby warriors said. People were already going over the field sorting out the wounded for treatment, without waiting for orders. Aircraft lowered wherever there was space, and let down ramps to accept them. The dome over the palace went down, and doctors and nurses who'd been pressed against the barrier ran out with hovering gurneys, dodging around alien corpses to retrieve the wounded people.

T'Challa wrinkled his nose. "And perhaps burn the..."

"Outriders," Nebula said. She gazed at the battlefield and frowned. "Usually I just move on after a battle. Burning sounds like a great deal of work. Isn't there some way of recycling them?"

T'Challa coughed. "If they were edible, the black panthers might take a few... but so many."

"I could help," Charley said. "Make them...flowers. Or trees."

"Charlotte," Edakeen said gently, "We should only watch."

Charley pushed out her bottom lip. "But... flowers."

"We are watchers," he said.

Charley suddenly grinned and pointed at herself. "Half!"

"Yes, and so long as you do not use too much power, the Council will not take notice of you," Edakeen said. "You've done enough for one day. It is time for you to go home to Rose Hill. I will visit when I can."

Charley sighed. "Yes, dad." She shimmered and shrank back into the girl Tony remembered, a tall, normal looking girl with blue eyes and light blonde hair, dressed for a day of gardening in her tomato patch with well worn trousers and a red striped t-shirt. The only thing that stood out was the crown on her head. She touched it and the crown shimmered too, and became a sky blue ball cap covered in brightly colored rhinestones, with three very large ones in the center, red, purple and orange.

"Good?"

"Very good," Edakeen said.

"Erm," Quill said, "is it safe? I mean, leaving the three of them with one person?"

Edakeen said, "Charlotte will Watch over them."

Tony said, "Odin told me it was too dangerous to keep even two of them on Asgard."
"For Asgard, it would have been too dangerous as two would have worked together to draw others. The six Stones have an affinity for each other. They will be content here on Earth." He smiled slightly. "If you wish, you may separate these three and set them in the rings you have prepared. So long as they remain on the same planet, there should be no problems."

Charley shrugged and took off the ball cap. "Who wants?"

Rocket reached out, and then he shook his head. "Nah. But hey, you know, if I'm giving up one of those rocks, how about we get paid? We got expenses! You think it's cheap flying across the galaxy every time someone needs the Guardians?" He pointed at Bucky. "I'd take that arm as a down payment."

"Rocket, no," Quill said.

Charley reached into the pocket of her trousers, and pulled out a squashed plastic bag. "Want this?" She handed it to Rocket.

"What is this?" Rocket ripped open the bag and stuck his nose in. He sniffed. "Oh, yeah." He pulled out a marshmallow and ate it. "Ok, gimme an arms' worth of them, and we're good."

Barnes said, "Um...I don't know what it's worth. Stark custom built it."

"Ottobock North America makes a nice arm for $60,000," Tony said. "Of course, it's not a custom job." Tony looked at Rocket. "Tell you what, let me have a look at your tech and I'll get you a lifetime supply of Stay-Puft."

"That was a good movie," Quill said. "The one with the giant marshmallow man. Hey, did they ever make a sequel?"

"Yeah. Two of them," Tony replied. "The second one they switched it up by putting women in the main roles."

"Huh," Quill said. He had his arm around Gamora. "Cool. I love strong women."

Gamora rolled her eyes. "Of course you do. Doesn't everyone?"

Chapter End Notes

I got really distracted when I googled 'what do raccoons like to eat best' and wound up on a wildlife trapping/relocating service page where the trapper takes lots of photos, and for most of the critters, tries to live trap and relocate - exception rodents. So most of the photos are of live critters and I kept looking.
http://www.aaanimalcontrol.com/blog/raccoonbait.jpg


https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghostbusters

And I think that is the end. Hope it satisfies. :^)
Works inspired by this one

The Prettiest Shell by AnonEhouse

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!