**Liminality**

by Wix

**Summary**

The ink hasn't even dried on his hospital release forms when Tony is informed that the ex-Avengers have been granted full pardons and are returning back to the Compound.

**Notes**

Hello Everyone!

So apparently I just wanted a story full of Tony Angst (like all my other stories don't already
have it! ). It's been a crazy couple of weeks for me and I've finally had a chance to sit down and type! Hope you all like it!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Sometimes, Tony wonders if it wasn’t all just some cruel and terrible nightmare. The flickering, fading light of the broken ARC reactor shining against the icy designs the snow and the frigid temperatures drew across the cement floors. The silence that felt like a living, breathing creature pressing down on his shoulders as he pried himself out of the almost useless suit with stiffening hands.

He’s all alone down here.

Abandoned.

Betrayed.

And the sad thing is, that he’s not even surprised by this turn of events. He realizes that the writing had always been on the wall from the beginning.

Iron Man: Yes – Tony Stark: No

The all-consuming anger has left him, and it leaves him feeling the cold that’s seeping into his skin.

He’s so tired, no…he’s so beyond tired. He’s not really sure that he has any more strength left in him to be angry, or hurt, or any of the other various emotions that ripped through his body the minute he saw the video. He’s on autopilot now, and isn’t that a joke for the masses to enjoy, and he’s past feeling and now he’s just surviving.

The heavy weight of the armor falls off of him and Tony crawls out of it, turning around immediately to get to the wires and to transfer the last of the power out in a call for FRIDAY. The beacon will let her know exactly where he is and he knows that the backup suit is inbound.

There’s a joke to be said here. Tony’s sure of it. It’s hiding somewhere, amongst the falling snow and the lifeless armor blanketed by a fallen shield and a severed arm.

Tony wonders if he’d laugh at it if he figured it out.

He wonders if it’d actually be funny.

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The ink hasn’t even dried on the hospital release papers before he gets the ‘good news’. Everett Ross walks into his medical room where the nurses are cleaning up and Tony’s buttoning up his shirt.

“Good morning Mr. Stark.” He says, a smile on his face as he clutches the file in his hands like he’s brought Tony the Holy Grail. “I speak on behalf of the entire council when I say that I’m glad your recovery is coming along.”

“Thank you Mr. Ross.” Tony says with a smile that feels fake and feels like it’s slipping off his face no matter how much he’s trying to hold it up. It’s too heavy, too much to pretend and Tony notices that Ross isn’t paying him the slightest bit of attention as he presses on to whatever has brought him to Tony’s medical room today.

“I thought that you would be pleased to know that your statements regarding Secretary Ross’s actions have not only opened an investigation into the man, but has also pushed him off the Accords Council.” Ross smiles at him. “A new representative from the US will be sworn in within the week.”
“That’s great news.” Tony agrees and Ross nods. “Were you able to locate the R.A.F.T. and retrieve the people being held there improperly?” There’s a momentary frown that crosses Ross’s face.

“We went, but we were too late.”

“Too late?” Tony asks and his mind immediately flashes to all of the things Ross or his scientists could have done before the Council came.

“There had already been a jailbreak.” Ross admits. “Apparently, Captain America and Black Widow were able to get in and get the rest of their team out.”

“Oh, I see.” Tony says calmly, reaching over and grabbing his jacket before pulling it on. His arm still hurts, but the thin cast on it helps keep it from being jarred too much. “So what happens now?”

“Well, here’s where everything gets better.” Ross says, and there’s such obvious excitement in his voice and his eyes. “The actions of Secretary Ross proved to some degree Rogers’ fear of the Accords coming in and controlling them, and it was determined that – in a show of good faith, that a pardon would be offered out for the Avengers who went against Ross’s play.” It feels like he’s back in Siberia again for a moment, the cold leeching the life from his body. “Once we were able to look at everything happening in a big picture sort of way, we came to the conclusion that these were extenuating circumstances that were pushed way past what they should have been by a man trying to abuse the system for his own gain. We reached out to let the Avengers know that we see why they did what they did and we’re ready and willing to work with them to make sure that something like this never happens again.”

“So you’ve already discussed it with them?” Tony asks, and Ross nods.

“Yes, Captain Rogers has been quite understanding and cooperative.” He says and Tony would snort in disbelief if he had the energy to. “They agreed to the new offers and everything is settled.” Ross looks at Tony like Tony should be so thrilled.

Tony figures there might have been a time when he would have been. But these last two weeks in the hospital have driven that right out of him.

“So they’ve already accepted their pardons and are returning to the Compound I assume?”

“They’ll probably be there before you get back.” Ross says happily. “Which I’m sure will be helpful with all of the healing you’re going to be doing for a while. To have your team there to pick up the slack I mean.”

“…and Barnes?” The name is like poison in his mouth, but he forces it out anyways.

“Sergeant Barnes is a special case, but we’ve managed to contain most of the damage. He’s been released into the Avengers care with the option of becoming an Avenger if he’d wish in the near future.” Ross shrugs. “Captain Rogers made a compelling argument about the wonders of your Binary Augmented Retro Framing technology and how it could assist Sergeant Barnes and help him make a rapid recovery.”

“Did he now?” The question comes out sounding so tired and Ross still doesn’t seem to notice.

“It’s really a miracle the things that science can do these days.” Everett gushes as he puts the file down on the bed for Tony to look at. “But here’s the official copy, everything is restored to how it was prior to the Ross events.”

“…restored?”
“The Avengers.” Ross clarifies. “We have assured Captain Rogers that we have no desire to have him relinquish his position now that we have an open line of communication with all of you. He’s put you down as the liaison to the Accords Council and I do think that’s the best option, don’t you? With how well we’ve already worked together and with how you were willing to make the changes dictated by the first Accords process. So it seemed natural that it would be you.”

“I see.” Tony says carefully. “I guess a lot has happened while I’ve been away.”

“You know how it works.” Ross says, interpreting his subtle dismay as a joke. “But we’ll be in touch soon. I know that you must be itching to get out of here and get back to the Compound.”

“Where the Avengers are waiting.” Tony says and Ross nods. “Sounds like a blast.”

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The car pulls up to the front of the Compound and Tony contemplates for the fiftieth time whether or not he should just cut his losses and abandon ship. The easy answer is ‘Yes. Absolutely’ and the not so easy answer is ‘Vision, and soon to be Peter’. Vision’s still so heartbreakingly young and while he may not see himself as JARVIS, Tony still sees him as one of his. He won’t abandon Vision like Bruce did to him - he won’t leave him to stand against the witch alone. Not to mention Peter, who is so excited to be ‘An Avenger’ and will throw himself into the situation wholeheartedly, and Tony doesn’t trust that he’ll be safe. Peter is young too and Tony wonders if maybe it was still too soon to upgrade Peter to the big leagues. The ‘Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man’ might have some mileage under his belt, but would it be enough to help him survive the real enemies out there? Especially the ones who would go on to call themselves his team?

“Thank you.” Tony says to the driver as he offers him a sizable tip and he gets a smile in return.

“Do you need help?” The man asks and Tony shakes his head.

“No, I’ve got it.” He says as he pushes open the door and steps out. For a second he wonders if he can do this, but then he reminds himself that he survived Howard and Obie, he survived the Ten Rings and open heart surgery, he’s survived everyone wanting a piece of Iron Man and he’ll continue surviving this.

Besides, it’ll be different now.

He’s not as blind or naïve as he once was. These people weren’t his family – hell, they weren’t even his friends. He didn’t owe them anything anymore and quite frankly, he could care less what they thought or said.

He was here because Iron Man would be needed. He was here because Tony Stark would be needed.

And despite popular opinion, Tony knew how to put himself second.

That didn’t change the obvious fact about everything though. Nothing was the same anymore. Everything was broken beyond repair.

That was the sad truth.

Tony heads for the door, and pulls it open awkwardly with his good hand as he walks inside. There’s a small part of him that wishes that all of the Avengers would be off doing their own things, but there’s the other –more realistic- part of him that knows better. Sure enough, he’s greeted with the sight of all of them standing there in the main lobby, their body language a spectrum of
uncertainty, distrust and outright hatred. He hadn’t been expecting anything less.

“Welcome back Tony.” Steve greets, his shoulders are back and his tone is level and Tony almost wants to sigh, but he doesn’t bother. He just comes to a stop in front of them and looks at Steve expectantly. “There are some things we need to talk about.” Steve presses on and Tony doesn’t respond. “We need to have a team meeting.”

Tony just nods and turns towards the stairs, walking in the direction of the conference room. He doesn’t take in the others, he doesn’t take in their responses or their glares. Honestly he just wants to go downstairs to the lab and sleep for the next hundred years. He opens the door to the conference room with the same level of awkwardness that he managed the front doors with and he takes an empty seat. He figures it doesn’t really matter which one he’s in as the others start to file in and take their own.

Clint sits next to him and is all but pushing out hatred with every breath he breathes and Natasha takes the opposite side of him. She’s looking at him like she wants to say something, and eventually she decides to just go ahead and do it because she leans over towards him, making his skin crawl at her proximity.

“How are you feeling? Are you okay?” She asks and Tony bites back a ‘Why? Looking for more holes in my armor for you to manipulate?’

“Fine.” He says and she leans back as Barnes enters the room with Steve. It’s strange to be in the same room with him and not feel the rage that he knows is lying deep within him, waiting to unleash itself at the least opportune moment. Barnes doesn’t look in his direction and Tony opts to ignore the soldier as he takes a seat and Steve clears his throat to gather their attention.

“Now that we’re all here, I just wanted to help us all clear the air about the events that transpired recently.” Steve says, glancing at Tony. “There’s some, understandably, hostile feelings towards certain members of the team and I wanted to get it out in the open and get it handled as soon as possible so as not to have it affect us out on the field.” Steve looks at all of them. “Ross knocked us down a peg, and we need to get back up.”

“He had help.” Clint snaps and Tony doesn’t bother to look in his direction.

“We all made mistakes,” Steve stresses, looking at the archer for a moment before his eyes land on Tony. “And we can move past them, and become a team again. I’m sure of it.”

“I demand an apology.” Wanda snaps, glaring at Tony. “He locked me up in here, treated me like a child to be punished.”

‘I’m sorry, I was under the impression that you were ‘just a kid’ a few weeks ago. My mistake.’ Tony thinks to himself but doesn’t say anything.

“Tony?” Steve prompts and Tony glances at Wanda.

“My apologies.” He says easily and there’s a little bit of surprise on everyone’s faces when he doesn’t follow that up with a sarcastic quip or ill-timed joke.

“Do the rest of us get one?” Clint sneers. “For all of the bullshit that you put us through? For all the crap we had to deal with because once again you thought you were right and we were all wrong?” The archer’s fists clench and Tony can see it out of his peripheral.

“My apologies to you all.” Tony says in the silence that follows Clint’s words and he can see the glances that they give each other.
“I think you should say sorry to Bucky and Steve.” Sam says, a thread of anger in his voice. “For betraying them like you did.”

“Sam, that’s not necessary.” Steve says quickly and Clint shakes his head.

“No, we’re supposed to get it all out in the open right? I agree with Sam.” Clint says and Tony glances up at Steve who looks slightly uncertain – but not at all ashamed, not at all like he’s done something wrong.

More like he’s wondering if Tony’s going to say anything.

It’s more than clear that Steve hasn’t.

“I apologize for any transgression that I did against the two of you.” Tony says and the words rise bile in his throat but he stomps it down. If he can kiss ass to help the company then he can swallow this down as well to help the world.

Steve looks mildly surprised by his statement, and a glimmer of what looks like hope starts shining in his eyes. Tony has to fight back the bile again.

“It’s okay, I understand.” Steve says, looking at Tony like he’s granting Tony forgiveness. Tony wonders for a moment if he’s ever hated anyone as much as he does Steve Rogers. “Um…well, that was good.” Steve says, running a hand over the back of his neck. “I guess…I guess we can move into the next matter of business.” He looks at Tony. “Tony, I know you know about the hell that Bucky went through under Hydra’s control.” Tony doesn’t respond. “And he needs a little extra help getting rid of the Winter Soldier…I mentioned the Binary Retro thing that Stark Industries rolled out to the Council, and they thought it would be a good idea to let Bucky use it for his healing.” Steve makes eye contact with Tony. “Would it be possible to have that happen?”

“He’ll need to be scanned to see if he’s a viable candidate.” Tony says calmly, “if he is, then it’s all his.” There’s genuine surprise on Steve’s face at Tony’s easy acquiesce to his request.

“That’s…that’s great Tony. Thank you.” Steve says, giving him a smile and Tony doesn’t bother responding to it. “Uh…I’ll admit I thought that we’d be going over this for a while. It’s nice to not have to argue about getting someone help. I guess the only other thing to discuss is Spider-Man.” Tony fights back all cues and responses that would give away his panic at Steve mentioning the kid. “He’s a strong fighter, a little young but he can be trained. We were hoping to have him come by and meet the rest of the team, properly.”

“I’ll send him a message.” Tony says and Steve nods.

“Sounds good, and what’s his name?” He asks and Tony shakes his head.

“Spider-Man chooses to wear a full face mask for his own reasons. If he chooses to give that information than it is his to give. However, I will not. It is not my place to give it.” Tony responds and Clint snorts.

“But it was your place to drag him out on the field. What did you promise him Stark? Or did you find out who he was and black-” Clint says and Steve cuts him off.

“Clint. That is enough. Tony’s right, if Spider-Man wishes to become an Avenger then he’ll reveal himself to us. I shouldn’t have asked.” Steve says and Clint leans back in his chair with a huff. “The rest of you are dismissed, I want to speak with Tony alone please.” There’s some shuffling of feet as they all stand up and Natasha goes to put a hand on Tony’s shoulder and Tony rolls his chair slightly to prevent it. The redhead gets a frown at the action and looks like she’s going to say something to
him, but opts against it and just looks at Clint, sharing some secret spy telepathy with the other man before the two of them leave with everyone else. Steve waits till the door is closed before he comes over and pulls out the seat that Natasha was just in and takes it, looking at him. “…thank you Tony, for the tech. Bucky really needs it and you know that he’s—”

“I’ve already said he can have it.” Tony cuts him off and Steve looks a little taken aback.

“Yeah, I know. I just wanted to say that I’m happy that you’ve moved on. That you’ve realized that Bucky was just a victim.” Tony doesn’t say anything to that and Steve presses on after an awkward silence. “I’m glad we’re able to get past this, I was worried that might not be the case.” It’s clear that he wants some kind of response from Tony, but Tony doesn’t give it to him. “I mean, we’ve been friends for a while and I’m just glad that Zemo’s plan didn’t work out in the end.”

‘We’re not friends Rogers, we never were and we won’t ever be. I see that now.’ Tony thinks as Steve waits for some kind of response.

“You’re not normally so quiet.” Steve says with a joking tone, prodding at Tony again. “I did want to bring up something without the others here.” Steve presses on after a moment. “Bucky’s an Avenger now, and I just want to be sure that there’s not going to be any issue on your side with that.”

“I’ve already been informed that he’s been offered the position.”

“Well, after the Binary thing he’s already decided he’s going to take it. He wants to do some good after so long being a victim to Hydra.” Tony wants to roll his eyes with how much Steve keeps trying to drill that in. Tony already knows that Barnes was a victim, and he doesn’t need to be beat over the head with it repeatedly. “I was hoping that you might consider something else.” Steve starts and Tony looks at him as if silently saying ‘get on with it’. “Well…the damage that you did to Bucky’s arm was unnecessary and it’s hurt him a lot…He needs a new arm and I couldn’t think of someone more suited and better qualified to build it. You know, especially after how you damaged his last one.” Steve looks at him imploringly. “He’s going to need it if he’s out on the field and—”

“Fine.” Tony says and Steve cuts off.

“Really?” He asks, a smile coming to his face. “That’s…that’s great news Tony. That’s really great news. I was so worried that…you know what, never mind. I’m just glad that we’re past all of this. I know that you know I never meant to hurt you.” ‘No, of course not. You just meant to lie to me, beat me and leave me to die in a frozen wasteland – but of course you didn’t mean to hurt me.’ Tony mentally rolls his eyes and barely manages to not do it in reality.

“I’ve been informed that I’m the liaison to the Accords.” Tony says, changing the subject and Steve nods.

“I couldn’t think of anyone else that I would want to be my right hand man.” He says it like he’s giving Tony some kind of honor and Tony wants to bash his face in. “We’ll have weekly meetings, just you and I so that you can keep me up to date on all of that.” ‘Carving my eyes out with a spork sounds like more fun’ Tony thinks.

“Anything else?” Tony asks aloud and Steve shakes his head.

“No…no that’s it for right now.” He says and Tony nods, standing and making his way around Steve and out the door before the other man can say anything else. He heads to the elevator that’ll take him down to the lab and lets the scanner read his bio-signature before unlocking.
“If you think your fake apology is worth anything to me Stark you’ve got another thing coming.” Wanda hisses at him as she rounds the corner, rage in her eyes. “I know it was you who put me in that collar and that was a big mistake.” There’s red around her fingers and it does make Tony’s heart clench even if he tries to remain unaffected.

“Wanda.” Vision’s voice is a balm on the situation as the red dissipates and the girl gives an innocent look to the other man who has approached. “Natasha is looking for you.” He says and she nods, walking away as the elevator doors open. “It is good to see you in good health again Mr. Stark.” Vision says with a small smile and Tony tries again to give one back but fails just as spectacularly as he did with Ross. Vision doesn’t seem to realize it either, as he continues on his way and Tony steps into the safety of the elevator and lets the doors close.

He has work to do.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Author's Note:
I always get the first two or three chapters of new stories up quickly. I hope you all enjoy it!

It’s so cold…why is it always cold?

The darkness of space stretches out before him, the thousands of Chitauri war ships mocking him.

Mocking the man who thought he could stop this from happening.

He hears their laughter as he plummets back down to the earth.

It’s still so cold. There’s frost everywhere and his labored breath leaves frozen vapor trails in the air. He glances up and it’s no longer the Chitauri laughing down at him, it’s Steve.

“In the end, what good were you?” He asks as he raises the shield. His father’s shield. “Why didn’t you do more?” He asks as he brings it down –

‘Boss? Boss!’ FRIDAY’s voice cuts through the panic. ‘Boss you need to wake up. You’re having a nightmare and your stats are all over the place.’ There’s a few more seconds of trying to push out of the nightmare, and he’s struggling with the feeling of cold all the way down in his soul. ‘Shall I alert Colonel Rhodes?’ She asks and Tony knows that her protocols will allow for her to seek outside assistance in 30 seconds if he doesn’t answer her.

“No…no, I’m fine. I’m awake.” He slurs out, picking his head up off the couch cushion and slowly pushing himself into an upright position. He feels like he’s going to be sick, but he holds it back and focuses on breathing slowly.

‘Perhaps the Vision might be a better choice? He is in the building after all.’ FRIDAY tries again and Tony shakes his head no.

“No thanks FRI. Honest, I’m fine.” He says. “It was just a nightmare. You know how those get.” There’s no response from FRIDAY, but the lights turn on slowly, allowing his eyes to adjust to the brightness in small increments. “Thanks.” He tells her.

‘Anytime Boss.’

Tony sighs as he runs a hand through his hair and pushes himself to his feet. The lab is in a state of disarray, as it has been for a while now. The Iron Man suit from Siberia has been down here since his return and Tony walks over to where it lays on the work table. He stares at it for a moment in silence, before reaching out his hand and gently tracing the cracks and the damage around the ARC reactor.

He can still hear the sound it made when the shield hit it. He thinks the sound will haunt him till his grave, because for a moment – he’d forgotten that him and the suit weren’t actually one. He’d
forgotten that he no longer needed the ARC to survive and he remembers the fear that had gone through him when he thought that this was it – this was how he died. At the hands of Captain America – the world’s biggest wolf in sheep’s clothing.

Tony glances up at the damaged face plate, and how it’s been stuck haphazardly to the armor itself. It looks terrible and Tony almost can’t believe that he was inside of it when it happened.

“We got a few extra miles put on us, didn’t we?” He asks it softly, before letting his hand drop and he turns to his main workstation. “FRIDAY, pull up all active projects please.” The holographic screens pop up, files floating in the air for his review.

‘Are you sure you don’t want to get a little more rest Boss? You’re still recovering.’ FRIDAY’s voice has a pleading note to it and Tony smiles a little.

“I will, soon.” He promises as he reaches out for them. “But right now I want to prioritize my next few weeks.” He flips through the requests from Stark Industries R&D, ranking them in color and importance before filing them away. “I’ll need a new file for another Mach.” He tells her and he smiles as a red and gold folder pops up before filing itself away. He pauses as he sees the file for the Avengers, and it takes him a second before he taps it and watches it expand.

There are dozens of projects here, dozens of plans for new armor and weapons. Upgrades and vehicles, plus a plethora of other random ideas that he thought they might appreciate if he could figure out how to actually get them to work.

He stares at it for a second, before he grabs them one by one – and tosses them in the trash.

‘Boss?’

“Don’t worry, just prioritizing…and apparently spring cleaning.” He says to her as he continues to throw them away. One by one they disappear, things like Sam’s new wings, Steve’s new bike, Wanda’s new body armor, Natasha’s new widow bites upgrades, and a whole range of options for Clint. It’s not till the entire file shows empty of anything in regards to them that he takes in a deep breath, one that feels like he’s been fighting to take in for a while.

‘Shall I delete the whole file?’ FRIDAY asks and Tony shakes his head.

“No, Vision and Spider-Man’s files stay.”

‘Shall I add War Machine’s file to the bunch?’

“No, I’ll leave it where it is for now.” He takes in the whole list of ‘To Do’ again, and can’t fight back the smile at how it’s cut itself by over half. “That looks good.”

‘It does Boss.’ FRIDAY agrees, a little bit of approval for his actions in her tone.

“I’m going to lay down again. If Pepper or Rhodey call let them through. Everyone else can leave a message.”

‘Will do Boss’

+++ "Mr. Stark!” Ross says with a smile as Tony walks into the office. “Thank you for swinging by.” He goes to stand and Tony holds up a hand.
“You can stay seated.” Tony says as he comes over and takes one of the chairs. “I just wanted to set up a meeting with you to discuss some important things.”

“Of course. You and I are going to get to know each other pretty well, with you being the whole ‘liaison’ to the Accords.” Tony’s smile at his words is as fake as they come.

“I’m looking forward to it.” He says and Ross clearly buys it. “I’ll just jump right to the chase. I did want to take this time to inquire about alternative options for Avengers equipment.” Ross gets a confused look for a moment.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, with my injuries—” He motions to the visible cast on his arm and the not so visible ones underneath his clothes. “Production times have taken a severe hit. Unfortunately, SI is my first concern and I’m having to prioritize my workload during this time.” Ross gets an understanding look even though he doesn’t look pleased.

“I see, that makes sense.” He says slowly and Tony nods.

“So, with that in mind I was curious how the Council would like to proceed.”

“Proceed?”

“With the contract for the Avengers?” Tony prompts him, keeping his voice jovial and calm.

“But, this will only be a temporary thing. You’ll be all fixed up in no time.” Ross points out and Tony shakes his head.

“With the backlog, which is growing by the second, I don’t foresee myself being able to devote the time and resources that I once did to the Avengers.” Tony presses on before Ross can stop him. “As you can imagine, the safety and wellbeing of the team is one of my highest concerns and I want to be assured that my schedule doesn’t affect them negatively in any way. So, sadly, I’m realizing that I’ll need to step down.”

“Oh, I get it. That makes sense…but are you saying that you’ll be stepping down permanently?” Ross asks and Tony shakes his head.

“No, not at all. There might be some small, individual projects that I might find the time to take in the future, but creating for a whole team just isn’t something I can do anymore. Especially since the fall of SHIELD.”

“Why would SHIELD matter?”

“Well they used to…well with no better way to put it, they used to ‘front the bill’ as it were. For a while there I was maintaining the whole team with my own private funds, but that was not meant to be a permanent solution. Now with the team under the command and purview of the Council, I can step back without concern.” Ross gets a look like he’s just heard something terrible. Tony figures that he has.

“Wait, are you saying that you’re withdrawing all of your support from the Avengers Initiative?”

“No? I mean, Iron Man will still be on the team.” Tony says. “But it was always a conflict of interests to have one of the members of the team bankrolling everything. As I’m sure you can imagine.” Ross nods, although it’s clear he doesn’t want to. “I’ve made a list though, of amazing companies and developers who would be a boon to work with. Their prices are competitive, but the
quality that they produce is certainly worth it.”

“Which companies?” Ross asks and Tony pulls out a list and slides it across the table. They’re all good companies, some of whom SI have worked with personally who could definitely benefit from a contract like the Avengers contract. “And…you won’t be assisting anymore with the equipment or the-” Ross cuts himself off before he says ‘or the bills’ and Tony shakes his head.

“No, like I said that was only supposed to be a temporary thing.”

“And what about the Compound?” Ross asks, realizing that the transfer of the Avengers Compound into the name of the Accords means a hefty sum without Tony fronting that bill.

“Since I’ll maintain a lab in there, I’ll pay rent on it. However, I do have some paperwork for you to sign in regards to that.”

“You do?”

“Yes. Since I’ll be working down there, the space must be separate from the Accords purview.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I’ll have patented equipment down there as well as active SI projects.” Tony explains as he slides the contract across the table. “The lab must be off limits to all without proper authorizations.”

“I’ll have to run this by the Council.” Ross says slowly and Tony nods.

“Of course, I can give a leeway of 24 hours.” He says and Tony gets a smile.

“Why 24 hours?”

“Well, after that it becomes a security risk for Stark Industries. I’ll have to relocate the lab entirely into a new location.”

“Would you move it back?”

“It takes a lot of work to relocate, and it opens SI up to far too many security snafus. If it gets moved, it’s a permanent move. Honestly I shouldn’t be giving 24 hours, but I decided to go off on good faith.” Ross nods at his statement.

“Of course. I’ll contact them right away.” He says and Tony gets a smile.

“Thank you Mr. Ross.”

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The nightmare is the same. The cold, the falling, the failure.

‘Boss…Boss wake up.’ FRIDAY gets him again, stirring him awake and he gives a thumbs up to the ceiling. These naps feel like they’re leaving him more tired than when he went into them.

“Any word from the Council?”

‘They’re asking for a stay of action until they can find time to renegotiate your conditions with you.’ FRIDAY responds and Tony sighs. Of course they are, they’re probably trying to undo everything that Ross just sat there for. Unfortunately for them, Tony isn’t really in the mood to play these games anymore.
“I see. Inform them that unfortunately those conditions are absolute and the waiting period has passed.” Tony says as he rolls over and sits up. “Inform them that the contract is null and void now and that I’ll be out of the lab by the end of the week. And please start the lab relocation process.”

‘Sending response now.’ She says as he makes his way over to the door. He smooths down his hair and fixes his shirt before tugging back on his jacket and stepping into the elevator. There was once a time when he might have just gone straight up for coffee looking like he just woke up, but these days the Avengers relationship with him is all business. So they only get to see this side of him from now on.

“Good morning Tony.” Steve says as Tony enters the kitchen and Tony inclines his head to him.

“Good morning Mr. Rogers.” He replies and he can see the frown on Steve’s face from all the way across the kitchen as the others roll their eyes and send silent looks to each other. Tony ignores them though and pulls out a cup, and pouring himself some coffee that FRIDAY put on just a few minutes ago. He turns around and takes them all in, sitting at the table and he doesn’t miss how Barnes tries to make himself as invisible to Tony as absolutely possible.

It doesn’t work, but Tony will give him some credit that he at least tried.

“Would you like some breakfast?” Natasha asks, scooping some eggs onto a plate and holding it out for him. The panicked, icky feeling that he gets when someone he doesn’t trust tries to hand him something returns after being absent for the last few years and he just shakes his head as he takes a sip to try and hide it.

“No thank you. I’m actually on my way out.” He says, and it’s not a lie. He’s just leaving out how he’s heading out with no place to go. He pauses and looks around the kitchen. “Where’s Vision?” He asks and Wanda gets a strange look as Steve answers.

“He said that he didn’t like coming into this area anymore.” And Tony watches as his eyes go to the crater. “We should probably get that fixed.”

“I’ll alert the Council right away.” Tony says before turning away. “FRIDAY, can you tell me where Vision is and if he’d be okay with company real quick?”

‘Mr. Vision is in his room Boss…and he says he is not opposed to visitors.’ Tony nods as he pours out the rest of the coffee and places the dish in the dishwasher before leaving. He hopes that they all get the memo to clean up after themselves from his silent action but he severely doubts it.

Oh well, he’s not paying for the cleaning crews anymore.

Tony exits the room, ignoring the whispering that the Avengers are doing as he heads over to Vision’s dorm and knocks on the door. Vision opens it in seconds.

“Mr. Stark.”

“Hello Vision, I was wondering if you had anything to do today?” He can see the surprise on the other man’s face at the question.

“Um…no, at this time I do not.”

“I see, would you like to accompany me?”

“Where would we be going?”
“I’ve got a few errands to run, nothing major but I wouldn’t be against the company.” He replies and Vision takes a moment before he nods, stepping out and closing the door behind him. Tony gives him a smile and leads him out to the car. He ignores how Clint and Natasha stare off after them as they exit, like two wardens spying on them.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been outside.” Vision says after a minute in the car. “I mean, apart from Avengers missions.”

“Do you like that?” Tony asks, “Being cooped up in the Compound?”

“Well the Compound is hardly insufficient in regards to activities that one might engage in.”

“But it’s not the same as having an outside presence.” Tony says. “If you wanted, we could fix that.”

“Fix it?”

“Yeah, you know. Get you some paperwork, get you an ‘Outside the Avengers’ name.” Tony spares a quick glance at him. “You could take a class or something, get a hobby.” He looks back at the road. “Hobbies are always good.” There’s silence after his statement.

“I fear I would…stick out.” He says after a while and Tony tries to show how unimportant that would be by his tone and manners.

“I stick out, heck all of the Avengers stick out now. Famous people always stick out, but that doesn’t mean you hide yourself away. It just means that you take precautions.”

“I think I stick out a little more than the rest of you.” Vision says with a little amusement in his voice.

“True, I’ll give you that. But I stand by what I said. What good is it to protect this world if you don’t have any connections to it?”

“I have connections. I have all of you.”

“…true…” There must be something in his tone because Vision looks at him.

“Mr. Stark?”

“It’s nothing Vision… I’m just… we’re not the most… healthy? No… Maybe functional is a better word choice, but we’re not the best examples of good relationships.” Tony says. “I mean, it might be for the best if you expanded your circle… you know, see how other people interact with each other and with you before you settle down thinking that what happens in the Avengers Compound is in any way healthy.”

“What are you getting at?” Vision asks slowly and Tony sighs.

“I don’t know.” He says immediately before he pauses. “You know what, actually yeah, I do know what I’m getting at. I’m worried about you.”

“About me?”

“Yeah… I’m worried that you might think that how we act, how we behave and how we treat each other is in any way okay.” Tony says. “It’s not. Let me just be absolutely clear about that. It’s not.”

“The Avengers are a family.”

“Just because Rogers says that doesn’t make it true and even if it were true, it doesn’t make it good.”
Tony argues. “And...No offense, but getting thrown down by someone else is considered assault – completely ignoring the fact that she not only did that, but did it with such force as to leave damage to the surrounding structure.”

“I was not permanently harmed.”

“Viz…Viz that doesn’t make it okay.” Tony says as he pulls to a stop in front of the penthouse. “Just because you walked away from it with minimal scratches doesn’t make it okay.”

“She was in a tight spot.”

“That doesn’t give her a Mea Culpa for doing what she did.” Tony replies. “And that’s what I’m worried about. I’m worried that you’ll see these kinds of moments, see moments like this-” Tony motions to his arm. “And think that it’s all okay for some reason.” Tony takes a second as Vision’s look seems uncomprehending. “…I think…I think it might be best if you had other, outside experiences. An art class, or a cooking class – whatever you want. I’ll get it set up.” Vision takes a moment before he slowly nods.

“I would not be…adverse to a cooking class.” He says and Tony gives him a smile.

“That’s great, that’s perfect. I’ll set it up right away.” Tony pauses and looks at Vision. “I was hoping that I might get…that I might get you to agree to another thing.” There’s a moment before Vision nods. “I was thinking of adding an addendum to the Accords that allow for Avenger members to seek…well, psychiatric assistance.”

“You wish for me to speak to a therapist?”

“…why don’t you like to go into the kitchen Vision?” Tony asks instead of answering the question and a complicated look crosses the other’s face. “A therapist might be able to help with whatever you’re feeling. Don’t be like me.” Tony says. “Don’t hold it all in until it gets to a point where you don’t even know how to get help even if you wanted to.”

“Do you?” Vision asks, “Want to ‘get help’ I mean?” Tony gives him a smile that he can feel is sad.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t mind that…and I kind of pity the person that I pick out, but I guess we’ll see what happens.” Vision gets a surprised look on his face.

“You’re going to go to a therapist?”

“I think it’s probably well past time.” Tony admits. “So yeah, I’m looking for a suitable candidate, and I can find you one as well.”

“Ist Mr. Wilson a therapist?”

“No, he’s a group lead or some other kind of thing for returned vets. Besides, even if he were it’s a conflict of interests because he’s involved in the situation. You should always seek an impartial party when doing things like this – or so I’ve read.”

There’s a moment where Tony isn’t sure what Vision is going to say before he slowly nods.

“I suppose that it couldn’t hurt.” Vision says eventually. “Perhaps it would help us both.”

“I hope so.” Tony says, and he really means it.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Like I’ve mentioned before, I always get the first two or three chapters typed up quickly and I really suck at keeping them to myself. So here’s another update!

“How are they feeling?” Tony asks, hovering close by just in case Rhodey needs to lean on him and his heart breaks at the sweat practically dripping down Rhody’s face from the strain.

“Good…I think.” Rhodey says as he takes another step and Tony sees the stumble as it happens and immediately rushes over to grab the other man before he can hit the floor. “Shit.” Rhody curses and Tony shakes his head.

“They’re still tight, it’s not you. I’ll fix them, I’ve got more data now.” Tony says quickly and Rhodey pauses to give him a look, and it’s the same one that he’s had since MIT. The look when he can tell everything going through Tony’s head.

“How are you doing?” He asks, changing the subject to more dangerous waters and Tony does a small shrug.

“I read somewhere that you’re supposed to take it ‘One day at a time’.” Tony says and Rhodey tilts his head.

“And are you?” He asks.

“A day seems so long, I’m aiming low for now. An hour or so at a time.” Tony tries to put some humor in his voice, but the subject is a little too heavy for that. Rhodey gives him a look and pats him on the shoulder, a comforting gesture that Tony appreciates. “What about you? How are you doing?”

“Healing still, and certain people are waiting to see where the chips fall.” He replies. “I’ve already been approached about the fact that if I can’t pilot the War Machine armor anymore that they’ve got excellent candidates for me to show you.” Tony shakes his head immediately.

“No. Absolutely not. My rule stands, if they try to put anyone else in the armor or deconstruct it – it’ll self-destruct.”

“I told them that would probably be your answer.” Rhodey says with a small smile and Tony reaches out to place a comforting hand on Rhody’s arm.

“I’ll get you back on your feet. I promise. And if you still want to be War Machine – I’ll find a way. I always find a way.” Rhody’s smile is grateful as he holds out his hand for Tony to take.

“Help me up?”

“Of course.”

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There are movers coming in and out of the lab, and Tony’s watching the entire process with
FRIDAY like a hawk. There’s not really any chance for anyone to take anything important. FRIDAY and him have already emptied out the important things in the lab using the backup armor and the jet – but he’d still rather not lose anything else.

“Tony?” Natasha’s voice catches his attention and he doesn’t turn to her right away.

“These red marked boxes need to go to Stark Towers,” Tony’s explaining and the other man nods.

“Of course sir. We’re almost finished here and we’ll be taking off soon.” He says and Tony nods with a small smile.

“Thank you George.” He says before turning away and acknowledging Natasha on his own time.

“Yes Miss Romanoff?” He asks, looking at her and she frowns.

“‘Nat’ is shorter, and easier to say.” She tries to joke with him, but Tony can see the truth in her eyes. There’s no comradery here, just another snake trying to find a hole to burrow in.

“So it is.” Tony agrees. “Is there something I can help you with?” She takes a moment, her eyes searching his face before she speaks.

“You’re moving the lab?” She asks, and he almost sighs at the obvious question.

“Evidently, and I really must be getting back to it so if there is something that you need from me Miss Romanoff, now would be the time to say it.” She frowns and crosses her arms.

“Why are you moving the lab? Tony, I thought that you were past this. Are you really going to be so petty just because you didn’t get your way?”

“The lab is being moved for security reasons, and that is all I will say on the subject. Now if you’ll excuse me.” Tony turns and walks away, going back to the job at hand and he sees the slight surprise on Natasha’s face that he didn’t rise to the bait that she laid. He hopes that she comes to realize sooner rather than later that he could really just not give a fuck what she thinks or says off of the field.

He’s signing the last form when Natasha returns with the others in tow. They all look disappointed and irritated at what’s happening and Tony doesn’t even begin to pretend to understand why they’re even here. Why are they so against him leaving if they hate him so much?

“Tony, what’s going on?” Steve asks and Tony doesn’t glance up from the tablet that he’s signing.

“The lab is being relocated to a Stark Industries location for security reasons.” He replies before finishing up. “Thank you George. I’ll see you at the Tower.”

“See you there Mr. Stark.” George says as he all but pushes past the small group of Avengers and heads out the doors.

“What ‘security reasons’ Tony?” Steve asks, crossing his arms. It’s obvious that Natasha has gone and told everyone about Actual Toddler Tony Stark™ and his most recent temper tantrum.

“The Compound is now an Accords Council property which means that an SI lab cannot be located and run out of this building.”

“What does that mean?” Sam asks, and Tony almost rolls his eyes at how he crosses his arms too. It’s like a wannabe Steve, but then again, Tony can’t really think of any other way to describe Sam Wilson.
“Which part Mr. Wilson?” Tony asks and Steve huffs.

“It’s Sam, Tony. Not ‘Mr. Wilson’, Sam.” He scolds and Tony nods.

“I am well aware what his name is Mr. Rogers, thank you for that.” He says calmly and he can see the irritation rack up in all the people present. “Now, which part Mr. Wilson?”

“The Accords own the Compound?”

“Yes.” Tony replies easily.

“Why?” Steve asks and Tony sighs, tucking his tablet under his arm and getting his best ‘businessman’ persona involved.

“With the deed and the property being transferred into the U.N. authority, the Compound has become an…embassy if you will. It is no longer American soil, it’s governed by the Accords Council and the U.N. diplomats.”

“What does that mean for us?” Natasha asks.

“From what I understand, everything will continue going forth as it has up till now. I don’t believe that they intend to charge rent for the room and board at this time, but of course, I cannot guarantee that.”

“Rent?” Wanda snaps with a slight disbelief in her tone. “This is our home.” Tony opts not to say anything to that, but the options were numerous and they almost slip past his tongue anyways.

“Are you doing this to get back at us?” Steve demands. “Damn it Tony, I thought we were past this. We apologized and we were trying to move past this.” Tony almost asks ‘What apologies did your lot give? I remember being the only one required to ‘make amends’ Mr. Rogers.’ But he realizes that to mention such a thing would undoubtedly go over their heads and he doesn’t have the time to deal with that right now.

“I’m not sure what ‘this’ is that you’re referring to, but I can honestly say that I am not doing anything to ‘get back at you’. It made rational sense to hand over the Compound to the Accords Council and was something that had been in talks prior to the end of the ‘Civil War’ as it would grant a certain immunity to anyone on the premises.”

“But you’re quitting?” Natasha asks with a heavy layer of disapproval in her tone, like she’s speaking to a naughty child instead of a full grown man.

“Absolutely not. Wherever did you get that impression?” He asks and they all look around at the trucks getting closed and pulling away.

“You’re moving the lab.” She accuses and he nods.

“Yes I am, but I still don’t see where you got the impression that I was quitting. Stark Industries and the Avengers Initiative are completely separate entities. My choices for SI in no way reflect on my choices with the Avengers.”

“What’s with all the ‘Mr. Rogers’ and ‘Mr. Wilson’ bullshit Stark?” Clint snaps and Tony gives him a look.

“I’m endeavoring to add a layer of professionalism to how the Avengers interact and are run. We’re in the spotlight now more than ever, and not in a good way. It would behoove us all to reconsider
how we behave and interact with each other.”

“In public Tony, this is private.” Steve says and Tony shakes his head.

“If we can’t show respect to each other in private, how do you expect it to be there in public? Not to mention, at any time there could be someone watching. We don’t get the luxury of ‘private’ anymore.”

“Funny, I don’t feel very ‘respected’.” Nat says, crossing her arms as well and Tony’s starting to wonder if they’re supposed to be something like a Crossed Arms Gang. There’s a beep in his ear and he holds up a hand.

“One moment.” He says, ignoring their frustrated looks as he takes the call. “Hello? Hey Pep.” He greets and he listens to what Pepper is saying on the other side of the line. “Yes, I’m aware and we’re transferring it all now...It’s in transit as we speak, I’m getting ready to fly out of here and supervise the drop offs.” He looks at his watch. “I remember, six thirty sharp, I’ll be there.” They exchange parting pleasantries and he ends the call before glancing back at the group in front of him. “I have to go, unfortunately I’m on a tight schedule today.”

“We’re going to talk about this Tony.” Steve says, moving in his path so as to block the exit, clearly intending to push the issue now.

“We’ll discuss it at the meeting tomorrow. We have a full itinerary to discuss, add it to the schedule. FRIDAY, suit please.” The armor wraps around him and he takes off before anyone can even get the stupid idea as to try and stop him.

The meeting tomorrow is going to be so exhausting.

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The gala is packed full of eager patrons as Tony makes the rounds, smiling and small chatting for a good cause. A waiter comes by with a tray of champagne glasses and Tony takes one, taking a small sip before launching back into the song and dance that has been his whole life.

As Maria once taught him though, things like this were necessary evils. You didn’t get anything done alone, and if you wanted to change the world then you were going to need deeper pockets then even a Stark had.

There’s a lull in the music as the orchestra pulls up their next piece and Tony narrowly avoids getting grabbed by the debutant of the night. He’s surprised when there’s a small chuckle next to him when he breathes a sigh of relief.

“You fight alien invaders and Nazi cells…but a young woman has you hiding behind a pillar with your tail between your legs?” Tony turns to the man speaking and gives him a helpless smile.

“You’re clearly new.” Tony says and the man gets a smile of his own.

“I suppose I am.” He agrees and Tony lets himself relax a little now that he’s out of the immediate spotlight and he takes another small sip. “So, the Clean Energy Initiative for Stark Industries is an aggressive proposal.” The man says and Tony nods, falling back into his schmoozing role.

“It is, but completely doable.” Tony says. “And in this case, completely doable is a responsibility for the rest of us, or at least that’s how I feel about it.” The other man inclines his head slightly at his words and Tony tries to place him. There’s something about his face that’s familiar, but the name evades him.
“I’m surprised that Captain Rogers and his team are not in attendance for this.” The other man presses on and Tony shakes his head.

“Oh. No, this is strictly a Stark Industries project.” He explains for the umpteenth time tonight. “The Avengers Initiative isn’t involved in this.”

“But it would be good press for them right now, would it not?” He asks and Tony takes a small sip of his drink to grant him the pause in response as he glances over this man’s face. Reporter? Is that where he’s seen him before? “And with how things have been going recently for them, good press would go a long way.”

“Stark Industries and the Avengers are separate entities.” Tony says again and he’s starting to feel like a broken record. He doesn’t touch the part about ‘good press’. Of course the Avengers could use it, but it’s no longer on Tony’s time or his companies’ time. This event is about Stark Industries and Tony won’t allow for the Avengers to step in and get the limelight that they didn’t earn nor did they deserve. “I’m sure that there will be plenty of other opportunities for the Avengers to show the public exactly how they feel.” Tony phrases the words and his tone as if he means them in a good light, but he doesn’t. The Avengers have already shown the world how they feel: that they’re better than them, that the world has no right to question them, and that they have the right to do whatever they think is necessary because they ‘mean well’. There’s a small look of amusement – and maybe even a little amused approval – at Tony’s subtle duplicitous dig. “I’m sorry, I don’t think I caught your name.” Tony says and the amusement blossoms clearly on the other man’s face.

“No, I don’t think you did.” He replies and Tony goes to say something but he’s interrupted by a new presence in the area.

“Good evening Mr. Stark.” King T’Challa’s voice cuts into the conversation without preamble and Tony turns to him, keeping a side eye on the other man.

“Your majesty, thank you for coming. I didn’t see your name on the RSVP list.” Tony greets as he takes in the two women flanking T’Challa. They’re clearly warriors with how they stand and Tony knows that these must be T’Challa’s bodyguards for the night. He keeps the frustration out of his tone at seeing the King. This was the man who knew that Tony was present in Siberia and who knew that he must have been injured or disabled and still chose to just fly away with Rogers and Barnes without a care in the world.

This was the man who also left him to die in a frozen wasteland.

As far as Tony was concerned, T’Challa had proven that he was just as duplicitous as Natasha was.

“I was unsure if I’d be able to attend.” T’Challa says, obviously oblivious to Tony’s feelings, and Tony steps out from behind the pillar a little to wave down a waiter, motioning to come over with a tray of drinks. T’Challa takes one, his two bodyguards shaking their heads and the man in the corner takes one as well, leaning back against the pillar as if he’s about to watch a show.

Tony gets the strangest feeling that he really doesn’t trust this guy.

“Well, I’m pleased that you’ve made it. The Stark Clean Energy Initiative could do with someone as esteemed as you supporting it.” T’Challa nods, clearly agreeing with him before looking to the other man.

“Do you mind if I speak to Mr. Stark alone for a moment?” He asks and the other man shakes his head and pushes off the pillar, weaving down into the crowd and disappearing from sight. Tony does a small, three finger tap on his leg as a signal to FRIDAY to watch the guy.
‘On it Boss.’ She replies and Tony turns his attention to T’Challa and motions for him to continue.

“I have been made aware that you are the Avengers liaison to the Accords Council. This pleases me, and I wanted to discuss-” Tony holds up a hand to stop T’Challa and he stops with a small frown.

“I’m sorry your majesty, but this is a Stark Industries event. I am here as an employee of Stark Industries and I must request that any and all conversations tonight reflect that.” He says. “However, if you wanted to discuss the Accords or the Avengers with me, FRIDAY is more than willing and more than capable of setting something up.” Tony keeps his voice calm and friendly, but there’s a firm undercurrent in it. He’s done mixing the two entities together and he refuses to be hunted down at all times of the day by others.

“I see…” T’Challa says slowly, disappointment clear in his tone. “Perhaps you might make an exception?”

“Unfortunately, I really must insist.” Tony replies with a shake of his head. “However, I will have FRIDAY schedule an appointment. Now, if you wished to discuss the Clean Energy Initiative, then I’m all yours.” T’Challa shakes his head at his offer.

“No, I have already made a donation to the cause.” He says and Tony gives him his patented businessman smile.

“Thank you for that. It is very much appreciated.”

‘Boss, bad news.’ FRIDAY sounds off in his ear. ‘Romanoff has just entered the building.’ Tony bites back an irritated sigh. Of course she has.

“I guess that I shall make an appointment with your assistant soon.” T’Challa says and Tony nods.

“She’ll give you the hours and we’ll go from there.” It’s clear he’s said something wrong by the way that T’Challa frowns.

“The hours?” He asks and Tony nods.

“Yes, my Avengers consulting hours.” Tony replies. “FRIDAY knows all about that, and if you have any questions on it she’s more than capable of filling you in. Thank you again for your donation and I hope to hear from you soon.” I hope to hear that you went back to Wakanda and stayed there. Tony thinks as he makes his way away from the king and back into the main crowd.

He walks over to the bar area, making himself an easy target away from the other patrons and like a moth to flame, Natasha appears.

“Hello Tony.” She greets, a smile on her face that’s somehow made threatening with the blood red lipstick she’s chosen to go with.

“Miss Romanoff, I did not see your name on the guest list.” He says calmly, putting down his glass on the bar top.

“I didn’t know that you’d be present for this. Isn’t this more Miss Pott’s job these days?” Natasha asks and Tony shakes his head.

“No, it’s both of our ‘jobs’ as you put it.” Tony replies.

“I’m just surprised that you didn’t invite us. You know we would have been here to help you if we had known.”
“Thank you for the offer, but I did not foresee needing your assistance with this.” Tony says and she frowns.

“Tony.” There’s a reproach in her voice. “You can’t keep pushing us away. We’re trying to fix this, but we can only do so much if you keep fighting us.”

“I’m sure that I have no idea to what you are referring.” He waves her off and she gets a frustrated look.

“Of course you don’t. You’ve moved out the lab, you’re avoiding us and when you’re not you’re insulting and belligerent. And now you’re intentionally shutting us out, but of course you have no idea about what I’m talking about.”

“Miss Romanoff,” Tony says, silently amused with how irritated she looks at her title. “This is a Stark Industries event, not an Avengers one. If it were an Avengers event I assure you that you would all be notified. However, SI and the Avengers are separate entities as I have been pressed to remind everyone far too many times these last few days and a layout of clear boundaries and separation between the two is not a bad thing.”

“How long are you going to keep this up Tony?” She snaps and he sighs but doesn’t bother answering her. “How long are you going to pretend that you don’t need us?” She asks. “If you’re not careful Tony, you’re going to lose us. You’re on fragile ground already with the team, and then where will you be?” Tony turns and looks her right in the eye for the first time of the night.

“Not everyone you lose is a loss.” He says calmly, watching as her eyes widen at the obvious insult. “Have a good night Miss Romanoff.”

Tony walks away from her at that point, not wanting to waste any more time. He greets a few more people before the man from before reintroduces himself into Tony’s area.

“That was rather cold Mr. Stark.” He says with a smirk and the feeling that Tony knows him is back. “Trouble in paradise I see.” He says with a small glance in Natasha’s direction. Tony doesn’t respond at first, just taking in the man and struggling to figure out where he’s seen him before.

The realization, when it comes, hits him like ice water.

“Loki.”
Chapter 4

Hello everyone! Thank you so much for the reviews! They keep the creative juices flowing!

So, Tony gets a little snarky in this chapter and some things come out! Please enjoy!

And on another note...I've learned that I have a thing for writing gala/dance scenes. You learn something new every day. :-) 

“Loki.” The name slips out past his lips before he can truly consider the repercussions of calling out the Asgardian trickster god, and Loki’s eyes widen in surprise at Tony’s realization. The phantom feeling of a hand at his throat, and the feeling of freefall without the safety of the suit assault Tony, and he takes a tiny step back on instinct. He doesn’t get far though, because in the seconds between seconds, Loki’s hand snaps out and grabs his good wrist, tugging Tony forward with a firm tug as he steps back onto the dance floor.

The yank throws off Tony’s balance for a brief moment, but it’s all the time that the trickster needs before he raises their hands and loops his other arm around Tony’s back, pulling him in close, adjusting them into the perfect picture of a normal couple on the dance floor.

“You surprise me Stark.” Loki practically purrs in his ear moments later as he moves with the music, and Tony glances around the area at all of the innocent bystanders that could get hurt if this goes sideways. “Very, very few people can see past one of my enchantments.” He praises and Tony moves his bad arm into a better position.

“Why are you here Loki?” He asks, keeping his voice quiet and silently praying that they don’t draw anyone’s attention.

“I’ll admit, I was here out of boredom at first.” Loki says and Tony considers for a brief second trying to find Natasha in the crowd and give her some kind of signal to evacuate. The thought immediately gets thrown to the wayside when he realizes that if Natasha figures out this is Loki with him that she’ll call in the others and the chances of damage and human casualties would raise exponentially. “And I thought that I might find some entertainment in your pitiful little entourage.”

“The Avengers aren’t here.” Tony feels the need to inform him and Loki sighs.

“I am aware. I was quite put out at first, after all I only have so much time on my own before my darling brother makes his ‘grand appearance’.” For some reason, the news of Thor’s potential return has a heavy feeling sink in Tony’s stomach.

Thor could ruin everything.

And that was just on the Accords side of things. The Asgardian prince tended not to be the most diplomatically blessed of individuals and his temper was something that Tony had already been on the receiving end of far too many times.

Not to mention – if Rogers went whining to Thor about Tony not doing what Steve wanted when he
wanted it – Thor would undoubtedly side with the star spangled idiot and theoretically could cause Tony quite a bit of trouble.

“I had intended to make a…what is the word you Midgardian’s use? An entrance.” Loki continues, maneuvering them around a couple that’s had a little too much to drink and are starting to giggle more than dance. “You know, maybe cause a few things to catch on fire, enchant the water, truly the possibilities were endless. But then imagine my surprise when I return to Midgard to find out that this world’s would-be protectors are experiencing some time of disenchantment from those they seek to rule over.”

“The Avengers don’t rule over anything, we protect.” Tony snaps out and Loki shakes his head.

“Do they know that?” He asks, and the question hits a little too close to home. “You are not the same as you once were, Anthony Stark.” Loki says, glancing down at him and Tony refuses to return the look on principle. “In our last interaction there stood a man of arrogance and desperation.” He can feel Loki’s eyes trail over his face. “Now all I see is a tired warrior who has been dragged down by the battle.” He doesn’t justify that with a response. “And not just that – you shun your comrades in arms. That’s rather unwise all things considering. For this planet in general, but especially for you.”

“Why ‘especially for me’?” Tony can’t help but ask and Loki shrugs.

“The Mad Titan has heard of your name. All the stars have by this point I would assume. Of the Iron Man of Earth who defeated Thanos’s army in one blow.”

“That’s not exactly how it happened.” Tony says, a small amount of horror winding through him.

“How it truly happened matters not. That is how the story has been told. Congratulations Anthony, you have quite the fan club out there even if your allies here do not sing your praises.” Loki says before he gets a grin and dips Tony, his grin just growing in size at the glare that Tony sends up at him before pulling him back upright. “You need allies Stark. This peace, it’s a mirage. Like the eye of the storm. Thanos is coming.”

“Thanos, the Mad Titan?” Tony finally asks. “Friend of yours?”

“Not even in the slightest.” Loki says calmly but Tony can read between the lines. There’s something there, some kind of history between the two.

“How do you know him?”

“Who says I do?”

“The look on your face.” Tony replies back and Loki gets an irritated look.

“Thanos and I have had a…passing acquaintance.” He says carefully.

“He supplied you with the Chitauri.” Tony surmises, figuring it’s not a far jump to make with the information that Loki has just given him.

“He did, but it was not what was promised.” The careful construction of the sentence makes Tony feel like he’s stepping into dangerous ground.

“What was promised?”

“The same old siren song that gets us all at some point. I was…unwise in my exile for a time, and I came to pay the price of it.” Loki seems to brush all of that off. “However, now is not the time to talk
about that. I’m here for different reasons.”

“...I’m going to ask that you not cause a scene here.” Tony says after a brief pause. “If you want to
go mano y mano, I’ll call the suit and we’ll take it somewhere else.”

“Don’t worry yourself, I’ve already come to the determination that I won’t be causing mischief here
today.” Those words cause a small amount of relief to go through him. “I was going to wait for my
idiot brother, but now seems as good of a time as any...if not better.”

“Time for what?”

“To offer my loyalties to you of course.” Loki says with a grin and Tony doesn’t believe him in the
 slightest.

“Really?” Tony asks with a small amount of sarcasm in his voice.

“Honest.” Loki assures. “I hold no love for the Titan, and Thor has thrown Asgard’s lot in with you
Midgardian’s, so the All-Father has agreed that my services can be utilized for the upcoming battle.”

“...wait, are you basically doing community service?” Tony asks and Loki shrugs.

“I don’t know what that is, but probably by the way you said it with such disfavour.” The music finally
stops and Loki pulls him in tighter instead of letting go and leans down to whisper in his ear. “You
need allies Stark, the ‘Widow’ is not wrong about that. I can be a powerful ally when I wish to be.”

“And what on earth would make me believe that you ‘wish to be’ for our account?” Tony asks back.

“Why would we ever trust you?” The question seems to roll around in Loki’s mind for a moment
before he whispers his response.

“I spoke of my folly before, but I was not clear. You have seen the effect of the Scepter, and of the
Mind Stone locked within.” Tony doesn’t need to answer that, they both already know it’s ‘yes’.

“Evidently it’s...charms...can overrule those of us who might have originally thought ourselves
immune.” Tony takes a second to fully understand what Loki is telling him.

“Thanos used the Mind Stone on you...that’s what you’re saying?”

“And as you can imagine, I would be quite thrilled to have the chance to show him the error in that
judgement call.” With that, Loki finally steps back. “Consider it Anthony, and you’ll see us again
soon.” Tony doesn’t have the opportunity to say anything before Loki turns and disappears into the
crowd. Tony doesn’t bother following him, he knows that Loki will be long gone before he could
even try.

“FRIDAY, alert Ross that we might have company joining us very soon.” Tony says into the
earpiece.

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The meeting starts at precisely 10am and Tony walks through the doors of the conference room with
a Starbucks in hand seconds before he’d be considered tardy. The whole group is there, sans Barnes,
and they break apart like they’ve just been having an intense discussion about something or another.

Tony can guess that it’s about him, but whatever.

“Alright, and Lyle I’m walking into a meeting right now but I will call you back right when I get
out.” He says into the earpiece. “Absolutely, I’ll talk to you soon.” FRIDAY ends the call and Tony
looks at the group in front of him. “Shall we begin?” He asks, and Steve nods, standing up.

“We need to talk about some things Tony.” He says, and there’s the tone in his voice like he’s about to start preaching the ‘Righteous Captain Rogers’ view of the world and how Tony should bow down and take it.

“Yes we do.” Tony agrees, “FRIDAY pull up the security footage from the event last night.” He can tell he’s thrown Steve off by how he gets a frown as the screens appear and Tony points out Loki’s disguise in the corner. “I was visited yesterday night by none other than Loki.” The name makes everyone who has had experience with him sit up straighter and the others look around confused. “He came by to tell me that he and Thor have returned from Asgard and would be joining forces with us to fight an entity that he called the Mad Titan, also known as Thanos.”

“Why would we ever trust anything that monster says?” Clint snaps.

“I didn’t say we should. I was merely informing the group as to what transpired last night.” Tony says, flicking the screens off. “I’ve already taken the liberty of informing the Council of this new development as well, so you don’t need to worry about that. They’re already hard at work deciding what an Accords agreement between extra-terrestrials and earth will look like.”

“We should have been there.” Natasha says, and Tony almost sighs at the same song and dance that she was giving last night. “Or would it not have been a loss if Loki had laid waste to all those people?”

“Stark Industries events are not Avengers events and since the Avengers are a planetary peace keeping force instead of a security division, there is no reason for them to be there.” Tony explains calmly.

“And yet, Loki waltzed right on in. We could have stopped him.” Nat replies.

“Luckily, Loki was nothing but cordial and no incidents transpired. I appreciate the concern though and I will take it into consideration at the next event.” Tony assures.

“Tony, we need to talk about this.” Steve says, clearly getting back on topic and Tony looks down at the tablet in his hands.

“Can it wait?” He asks and Steve looks at him confused. “There are seven other things on the itinerary before we close up this meeting today and I had hoped to keep us on schedule.”

“What? No it can’t wait.” Steve says and Tony sighs and motions for him to go. “What is going on with you? Why are you being this way?” Steve asks. “Natasha said that you told her that you wanted us gone?”

“No I didn’t.”

“Then what did you say Tony, enlighten us.” Clint asks, cutting off whatever Steve would have said.
“Miss Romanoff informed me that she was concerned that there might be a split in the Avengers and that I might end up losing certain members of the team.” Tony says diplomatically. “I merely replied that if those members were to leave, I would not mourn their loss. That is not the same thing as saying I want those members gone, it’s just simply saying that I couldn’t care less if they were.” Something about his calm, level reply has everyone staring at him in silence. “Now since that has been handled, might we continue on to Barnes’ scans? As medical proxy, do you give permission for me to discuss this in front of the group or would you prefer that they wait outside?” Steve looks temporarily taken aback before he shakes his head.

“No, they can see.” Tony nods and pulls them up before they have a chance to say anything or change the subject back, a tactic that he’s seen Pepper use more than once over all the years of being in board meetings.

“Very well. Now, according to these initial scans – Barnes is not a qualified candidate for B.A.R.F.”

“What?” Steve asks and Tony can tell instantly that Steve thinks that Tony’s just taking this away from Barnes because Toddler Tony is striking again.

“The scans show far too much deterioration in the frontal lobe cortex, here.” Tony makes the image expand. “And the hippocampus is severely damaged as well, as seen here.” He pulls up the second scan. “Unfortunately, this sort of deterioration makes it to where B.A.R.F. would be unable to latch onto Barnes’ brain and assist with any of the triggers or memories of his time under Hydra’s control.”

Tony looks down at his scans. “However, this is just the initial scan and Sergeant Barnes is a special case due to the off-brand serum given to him by Dr. Zola.” Tony glances up at Steve, since he figures all of this will pass from Steve’s mouth to Barnes’ once they’re out of here. “Since Barnes has a healing factor, of which we have no data on, I’d like to run a secondary scan in a week and see if there has been any improvement. If there has, then there might still be a chance that he will recover enough healthy brain tissue so as to be able to utilize the B.A.R.F. system.”

“You want to turn him into a test subject?” Wanda asks and Tony barely bites back the sigh and the eye roll.

“No, I’m merely offering a chance for a second opinion at a later time. Of course if Sergeant Barnes would rather not do that, that choice is his.”

“Would it even matter if he did?” Clint snaps. “You’d just string him along and tell him no anyways.”

“Shall we move on to the next item on the list?” Tony asks, completely ignoring Barton and looking at Steve who looks annoyed.

“Is that what you’re doing Tony? You’re going to keep giving him hope and then taking it away from him every time?”

“I did not promise that B.A.R.F. would work and I still don’t. I would tell you to take the scans to another source if you were concerned that some kind of…misinformation was being given, but since I’m the only one who can give that sort of information that would be pointless.” Tony says with so much patience in his voice. “Now, if Sergeant Barnes would like to try again at a later time, I am willing to take time out to run those tests again. I don’t really care what you think about me personally, but I dislike wasting anyone’s time – especially my own. I wouldn’t bother ‘dangling’ this in front of him, I’d just tell him no.”

“Why are you being like this Tony?” Steve finally asks and Tony sighs.
“I am being as professional as I possibly can.” Tony replies. “I would say that I would appreciate it if you could all be professional in return, but like I said – I don’t like wasting my time.”

“This kind of behavior is beneath you Tony, and it’s hurting the team.” Steve says and Tony turns to him.

“How?”

“What?”

“How is it ‘hurting the team’?” Tony clarifies. “I’m curious to see how an interjection of professionalism is detrimental to team functions.”

“You’re not being professional, you’re just being an ass.” Clint says and Tony ignores him again, but Steve jumps on the other man’s statement.

“Clint’s right Tony, this isn’t you being ‘professional’ this is you throwing a tantrum, and frankly it’s kind of insulting.”

“I assure you Mr. Rogers, I intend to perform my duties to the height of my abilities. Iron Man will be on the field and you will not experience any problems from me there. While we are here, I will handle my responsibilities and be on my way.”

“I thought we were past this.” Steve says crossing his arms and it’s the last straw on some levels.

“What is ‘this’?” Tony asks. “You keep saying ‘I thought we got past ‘this’’. What is ‘this’?” Steve goes to say something but Tony presses on. “Is it the Accords? Is that what we’re past? Is it Miss. Maximoff’s inclusion into the team? Is that what we’re past?” He presses and he watches as so many faces go angry at the question. “Or is ‘this’ the part where you didn’t tell me that Sergeant Barnes killed my parents and how you left me behind in Siberia?” There’s some surprised confusion on the teams faces and Steve gives Tony a look that seems to be a mix of disappointed and angry. “I’m sure I could go on about all the potential ‘this’s’ that you could be referencing, but it looks like there is some information that has been glossed over in the interim. So please Mr. Rogers, explain to me what ‘this’ is so that I can finally know what on earth you’re talking about.”

“What do you mean Barnes killed your parents?” Sam asks in the pause and Tony gives him a look.

“Bucky didn’t kill anyone.” Steve interjects and Tony sighs.

“I’d rather not have to show the video that I myself was forced to watch, but unfortunately it appears that Hydra sent the Winter Soldier after my parents the night they died. Not only did they do that, they also filmed it. How convenient.” Tony grabs his coffee off the tabletop. “Now, if you want any more information on it than that, feel free to ask Mr. Rogers or Miss Romanoff. I’m going to cut this meeting short however and I will email you the rest of the points that we had on the schedule.” Tony turns around before any of them can stop him and walks out.

He doesn’t have any more patience to deal with this today.

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It took FRIDAY hours and hours of compiling and sorting before Tony finally chose a name and sent the list to Vision. He lets out a shaky exhale, before he knocks on the therapist’s office door. He only has to wait a few moments before it opens.

“Good afternoon Mr. Stark, please come in.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Let me just start out with saying...I have absolutely no clue what's happening in this story.
But I'm glad you're all enjoying it!!!

The headaches are always an unfortunate side effect to extended uses of B.A.R.F. and Tony pinches the bridge of his nose as he leans back against the wall of the elevator. He’s exhausted, between the combined sessions of B.A.R.F. and therapy – he figures he may as well go all out when it comes to ‘healing’ – and dealing with SI and the Avengers.

It’s been almost a week since he’s seen the Avengers after the meeting and he’s not really looking forward to interacting with them again, but the world’s needs dictated that he must.

The elevator stops at the correct floor, the doors opening and Tony pushes himself out into the hall. He figures that he knows why Ross has called this meeting, Loki and Thor have been quiet for a while after Loki’s declaration of the Asgardian’s intent to join forces with them. Tony had thought that they’d arrive sooner, but apparently they choose to do things on their own timeframe.

The Avengers are all in the meeting room as Tony walks in. Loki and Thor are present, and Tony doesn’t miss how Barnes has resurfaced for this meeting. He doesn’t say anything, he just takes the final seat left open to him next to Steve and waits patiently for Ross to begin.

“Mr. Stark, right on time.” Ross says and Tony nods in greeting. Ross turns away and types something into one of the computers and a projected conference call appears on the wall. It's the Accord’s Council and Tony knows that they’re about to vote on whether or not Loki should be able to assist.

“Avengers, Mr. Odinson.” The head woman greets and she glances at Loki. “And Mr. Loki.”

“Laufeyson.” Loki replies, ignoring the look that Thor sends him at that designation, and she nods. “Mr. Laufeyson then.” She looks down at some papers in front of her. “We have the request from Mr. Odinson for your…rehabilitation to include working alongside the Avengers as an Avenger yourself.” She glances back up. “This council is concerned given your…previous history, as to why we should allow such a thing to occur.” Tony sits back and listens as Thor argues that his brother is true and sincere in his wish to better himself and make amends to the people of earth and Tony just glances at Loki.

Loki had said that Thanos was coming, and he had not been wrong about Tony needing allies when that fight came to their doorstep. The current Avengers lineup would be just as likely to kill him as they were to save him and he wouldn’t risk his own life with their behavior basically being like the flip of a coin toss.

He hadn’t really given it much thought until now, having been so distracted by other things – but Loki would be a valuable ally. Not just his Asgardian strength, but his knowledge of the worlds and of…magic – Tony’s mind hurts to even think that word – could be a big boon in the coming battles.
Not to mention, it’d probably work better if Loki were at least pretending to be on their side then outright attacking them 24/7.

A second thought starts to form in Tony’s mind, and he thinks it over for a moment.

The world is filling up with people like Spider-Man and the Scarlet Witch. People with powers and abilities who might not have the same kind of volatile disposition as the Sokovian woman. What if he could find more? What if he could recruit more into the team? Wouldn’t it be better to have more people on the field? Steve might want to keep it a tight knit group of people he could ‘trust’ (or really just people who blindly followed him when he said jump) but Tony knows that in the game of war – more is better.

“While we do hear your impassioned pleas for your brother Mr. Odinson, this council does not see a reason as to why we should allow Mr. Laufeyson to wander around free. Not with all he has done to the Earth in his last visit still fresh in our minds.” The council woman says and Tony can see that Thor isn’t winning any battles here. Tony can see Loki get a slight cringe, like he’s about to reveal something that he’d rather not tell everyone and Tony intervenes.

“If I may interject Councilwoman.” He says and everyone glances at him. “I think that we should consider the possible addition of Mr. Laufeyson as an Avenger.” There are surprised and angry ‘what’s?’ thrown around the table as the Avengers glare openly at Tony’s ‘betrayal’. “Perhaps not as a full member right off the bat, but as a consultant to the Avengers.”

“I’m surprised Mr. Stark that one of your group would argue for this.” One of the council says and Tony nods.

“I am aware of what Mr. Laufeyson has done, especially having had previous experience with him personally. However, we have shown that we are willing to be lenient with those who were once our enemies when they express a desire to assist us.” He motions to Wanda. “The Scarlet Witch if you all remember was the right hand of Ultron until she changed sides and has become a powerful ally.”

“Tony!” Steve hisses and Tony ignores him.

“Perhaps Mr. Laufeyson could follow in a similar vein.” Tony continues and he sees them looking at each other. “Mr. Odinson has assured us that he will maintain a close watch on his brother during this time, and I think that it might be wise to allow a temporary addition.” Thor gives Tony a smile for backing him up.

“I think it would be unwise for Loki to join the team.” Steve says, drawing attention to himself. “I’m sure that Tony means well with his statement as he usually does, but Loki has history with a member on this team who I feel it would be a disservice to him for him to be added. To have Clint have to be on the same team, and working with the man who used his technology to override his mind, and freewill, is beyond cruel.” Tony almost laughs when Steve says those words with such conviction and he can’t believe the sheer audacity.

“And yet, once again I draw attention to the Scarlet Witch and her approval into the team.” Tony says, ignoring the glares that they all send him. “If this Council is not aware, the Avengers first few experiences with Wanda Maximoff included her using her powers to get into our heads. With ease I can list a variety of events that stemmed from Miss Maximoff’s unwanted visions, including the Hulk’s horrible rampage through Johannesburg and even the creation of Ultron himself.”

“You made Ultron Stark.” Wanda hisses and Tony glances in her direction.

“I made a program that was titled ‘Ultron’ that I attempted to see if the Scepter’s power could assist
in making stronger. I have data stemming from that time that shows my brainwave patterns were off which resulted in a panic response that allowed for an opening to be exploited by the essence existing inside the Scepter, but under no circumstances did I create Ultron.” Tony tells her and he turns back to the Council. “All of this is, unfortunately, in the past. I only bring this up in opposition to Mr. Rogers’ statement that Loki’s addition would be a disservice to a member of the team. I was informed by Mr. Rogers a couple of years ago to move on from what Miss Maximoff had done to me as well as Mr. Banner who decided that he could not. Mr. Rogers told us that what Miss Maximoff brought to the table, and her ‘desire to fix her mistakes’ made it to where she should be allowed a second chance. I’m merely offering forth that chance to Mr. Laufeyson.”

“Is this a true recollection Captain Rogers?” The head woman asks and Steve takes a second before he nods.

“It was under different circumstances…but yes.”

“Different circumstances how?”

“Wanda joined our side of the fight before it would benefit her.” Steve says. “Her assistance in stopping Ultron was invaluable which is why she was allowed to join the team.”

“Couldn’t it be argued that Miss Maximoff only changed sides when Ultron’s final designs threatened her life and that of her brothers as well?” One of the council members ask and Tony could kiss them.

“She helped us.” Steve says firmly and Tony cuts in before this whole thing derails – no matter how amusing it would be to watch that derailment.

“Mr. Rogers is correct. Miss Maximoff proved to be a powerful ally in the battle with Ultron. That is why I’m offering a temporary addition of Mr. Laufeyson into the Avengers. Let him show his conviction to assist in making up for his past wrongs against this planet.”

Tony watches as the Council turns to each other and whispers before there are some nods that go around their table. Tony knows that he’s won before they say another word.

“Very well Mr. Stark, Mr. Odinson. We’ve decided to agree to the conditions of a temporary assignment under the watch of the Avengers.”

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“I wish to give my thanks for your assistance in there.” Thor says to him the moment they step outside and Tony shrugs.

“Not a problem Mr. Odinson. I agreed with your points and the inclusion of Mr. Laufeyson or I would not have done it.” Thor tilts his head a little.

“Are we still in council?” He asks, confused and Tony shakes his head.

“No, we are not. But you’ve been gone a while now and a lot has happened while you’ve been gone.” Tony explains. “If you wish to remain on friendly terms with the other members of the Avengers, please by all means go for it. But I have stepped back and will only be providing… council like interactions with the team.”

“Are you no longer friends?” Thor inquires and Tony shake his head.

“No. No we are not. But we are still the Avengers, and we must still interact with each other for a
much larger purpose.” Tony replies and Thor shakes his head like he has heard bad news.

“I am very sorry to hear this. It is not a small thing for shield-brothers to part.” Thor says and Tony goes to say something, but all of the classes that Rhodey, Happy and every other self-defense teacher have driven into him over the years kicks in and he shifts sideways at the last second, grabbing the wrist of the fist that just tried to punch him and throwing the man down to the ground.

He’s actually not surprised that it’s Barton. He’s a little surprised that he’d just throw a punch from someone’s blind spot, but he’s not surprised that he did it.

“If that had landed, Mr. Barton, there would have been consequences.” Tony informs him calmly. “This is your only warning, I won’t press for formal charges but try it again, and I will not be so lenient.” Clint twists himself out of Tony’s hold and goes to step forward, only to be grabbed by the back of the shirt by Thor and tugged back like a rag doll.

“What is the meaning of this?” Thor booms in anger.

“He’s a fucking traitor.” Clint snarls, trying to rip free from Thor’s grasp uselessly. “Fucking backstabbing traitor.”

“You will explain.” Thor demands and Clint shoves at him.

“Let me go.” He snaps and Thor does, but it’s clear that he’s more than ready and willing to intervene again. “You saw what he did in there, he fucking threw us all under the bus.”

“How so Mr. Barton? By siding with Mr. Odinson here over the inclusion of Mr. Laufeyson?” Tony asks. Clint goes to say something but Tony feels the presence along his side and he watches as Clint’s face darkens.

“Is this a common practice in your world Captain?” Loki drawls as Steve and the others approach. “For a superior to allow for one of their underlings to attack another without concern?” Steve comes over and puts a hand on Clint’s shoulder that the archer immediately shrugs off.

“No. That was wrong.” Steve says but Tony doesn’t miss how he doesn’t reprimand Clint or offer forth any fake platitudes against it happening again.

“FRIDAY, please gather the security footage of the last few moments.” Tony says, tapping his ear. Natasha takes a step forward.

“Clint’s hot headed Tony, you know that.”

“I do know that, but that sort of behavior should not have been so accepted by the Avengers that Mr. Barton acted upon it instantly without pause.” He say, adjusting his cufflinks. “Things are changing, and these kinds of moments will be one of the things that go. Any assault, attempted assault or any semblance of it will no longer be ignored. There will be consequences to such actions.”

“You’re not the leader of the Avengers Tony.” Natasha reminds him and Tony gives her a look.

“So let me understand this Miss Romanoff. Are you saying that if the current leader of the Avengers decides to turn a blind eye to assault on his team, then it makes it all okay and that no one should attempt to report these behaviors and try to stop them?”

“That’s not what I said at all.” She backtracks and Tony nods.

“Good, I was concerned for a moment.” He looks at all of them. “Now, if you’ll excuse me. I really
must be going.” He goes to walk away before he pauses at Thor’s side. “It’s good to have you back Thor.” He says and he doesn’t miss how Thor gives him a small smile at the use of his first name before Tony steps into the suit and flies away.

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“Mr. Stark, I wasn’t expecting to hear from you again so soon.” Ross says and Tony gives him a smile.

“Yes well, with the shifting dynamics of the two groups and being the liaison, I thought it best to be proactive in these first few months.” Tony says as he takes a seat.

“How has Loki been?” Ross asks and Tony shrugs.

“He has been holed up with his brother from what I understand going over the Accords documents.” Tony replies and Ross nods. “I’m actually here for something specific.” Tony says and Ross glances at him.

“Okay?”

“Well, with how the Avengers were first formed there wasn’t really time to…how should I say it…time to integrate the correct people into the correct positions.” Tony says and Ross looks at him confused.

“What do you mean?”

“In this case, I mean Mr. Rogers.” Tony replies. “As you well know, Captain America has had quite a loyal following for over fifty years.” Ross nods. “But what you may not know is how much of that information that the public believes about Mr. Rogers is fictional propaganda.” Tony says, sending a file to Ross’s computer and letting him look at it. “If you look at that promotion schedule, Mr. Rogers went straight from an SSR agent to a promotion of Captain. There were no steps in-between.” Ross glances over the information that Tony’s pointing out. “Not only that, Mr. Rogers does not have leadership training outside of the field. Arguably, he doesn’t have it on the field either. Mr. Rogers’ unit, the Howling Commandos was governed by Colonel Chester Phillips and to a lesser degree Agent Margaret Carter. Mr. Rogers was not responsible for his team’s actions, well-being or anything during his time in the war.” Tony lets that sink in. “Now I bring this up for a reason.” He motions to the screen again and lets the security footage of Barton’s attempt to punch him play and he leaves it on Rogers’ non-response. “We have kept this mostly in house up until now, but I’m afraid that with the growing interest in the Avengers that a slip up or mistake like this might surface and bury us all underneath it.”

“I see your point.” Ross says slowly. “What were you thinking about doing about it?”

“There is nothing that I can do about it. I was thinking that there might be something that you can do about it.”

“Like what?”

“Well, I’m not opposed to Boot Camp, but for the most part I think that Rogers should be pulled into some kind of training program that teaches him how to lead a team, how to utilize their strengths and weaknesses properly and how to manage them on and off the field.” Tony takes a second. “Not only that, I also think that Mr. Rogers should be given a…well not a crash course, but definitely a course in the world and how it’s changed since world war 2.” Tony shrugs. “SHIELD wasn’t really that interested in getting him up to date on how the world has changed, and I think that was a serious
disservice to Mr. Rogers. If he’s going to be the head to the Avengers then he needs to know not only how the world has changed, but how it came to do that and what that means for him personally and the team going forward."

“Why not just bring this up to Rogers himself?” Ross asks.

“Because this goes beyond ‘take a couple college courses’. The Council is in charge of the Avengers now as a unit and to that point I’m bringing up a concern that they might want to look at.”

“Oh, of course. Thank you for bringing this to our attention. We’ll get it handled right away.”

“That’s all I ask.”

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The second set of brain scans from Barnes are in and Tony’s been looking them over carefully for the last half hour.

The knockoff serum was a work of art, and Tony can see now why Hydra must have needed to strap the Winter Soldier into the chair so often. Already the tissue is showing significant repair and Tony feels pretty confident that in another week or so Barnes will be ready to test out B.A.R.F. for the first time.

Tony sits in his chair, playing with the glasses for a few moments before he sighs and reaches for his jacket, pulling it on.

“FRIDAY, connect me through to Mr. Barnes at the Compound.” He asks and the call screen opens up, taking a few seconds before Steve comes on. “Mr. Rogers, I’m looking for Mr. Barnes.”

“You can speak with me.” Steve says, a thread of anger in his voice as he crosses his arms.

“Is Mr. Barnes unable to come to the phone?” Tony asks and there’s a movement before Barnes places his hand on Steve’s shoulder and moves him out of the way.

“I’m here.”

“Good, I’m calling to inform you about the results of your most recent test.” Tony says, pressing on. “FRIDAY will send you the scans if you wish to take them to a neuroscientist, but from a B.A.R.F. standpoint, if the healing in your brain tissue continues at this rate, you’ll be able to start the program in about two weeks’ time.” There’s a look of surprise on Barnes’ face, like he expected Tony to say that he wasn’t going to be able to do it. “Of course, in two weeks we’ll need to take the final scans but at that point we should possibly be able to start the program…if that is still something you’d like to undertake.”

“Of course he does.” Steve says, smiling at Barnes and clasping a hand on his shoulder.

“I do.” Barnes agrees moments later and Tony nods.

“Very well, I’ll send over all of the paperwork that way you have two weeks to look over it and have it filled out.”

“What paperwork?” Steve asks and Tony types a few things onto one of the other screens.

“The permission to treat disclosures, the disclosures that explain exactly what B.A.R.F. does and what Mr. Barnes can expect from his treatment.” Barnes nods.
“Of course.” He glances up at the screen. “Thank you Mr. Stark.” He says. “I know that you probably don’t want to help me, and I understand why you wouldn’t because of what I’ve done to you and your family…but thank you. Thank you so much and I am so sorry.” Steve of course is already shaking his head with a frown as Barnes apologizes and Tony takes a moment.

“…I won’t deny that our history is…well not the most ideal.” Tony says carefully. “But at the same time, I understand what it’s like…to go through something like that.”

“You’ve never been through anything like what he went through Tony.” Steve’s snapping in the background but Tony ignores him.

“…and I don’t know if you’ll believe it, but I do want to help you.” He admits finally and he takes a second before reaching out to shut off the feed. “But…thanks for acknowledging it…and you’re welcome.” He says before he shuts off the call.
Chapter 6

Hello! Here's the next chapter for you all!
And we do finally start to shift to other POV's, this is still mostly Tony's story, but there will be moments of getting in other people's minds.

AND REQUEST!!!!
Please no more reviews critiquing the pairing choice or asking for a different one. I understand if you have strong feelings on it, but please don't do it.

The board meeting was a lot smoother than the last few have been. Or actually, a lot smoother than each one for the last few years have been. Then again, Tony figures that it's the first time since the Avengers came around that Tony's actually made significant progress over his SI projects in a timely manner.

Pepper was pleased, although she didn’t say much to him about it. Tony figures it’s all fair in the end. After all, she was there – she was at his bedside every day that he was under and watching over him when the doctors were worried that he wouldn’t make it. The last conversation that they had was Pepper explaining to him that this was exactly what she wanted to avoid. That she couldn’t take sitting at his bedside not knowing if this was the moment that he was going to die.

Tony had apologized to her, and had said that he understood – and he did. Pep didn’t deserve the pain and the stress that he caused her during their time together. Maybe if he had been more mature during that time, or more understanding of the other person in the equation then they’d be in a different situation now, but those times had passed.

He’d made his bed and now he had to lie in it.

‘Boss, you have a visitor…I thought it best for him to wait in your office.’ Tony pauses and nods, but he doesn’t miss the hesitation that FRIDAY’s expressed. He’s got so many questions running through his head at her words.

Who is it?
What do they want?
…He still has an office?

It takes Tony less than a minute to reroute himself and end up at the correct door. He takes a second, preparing himself for anything and then he pushes open the door.

Phil Coulson turns and gives him a smile.

He wasn’t ready for that.

+++ ‘Mr. Rogers.’ FRIDAY grabs his attention and he glances up from the sketch he’s been working on.
‘**Councilmember Ross is on the line for you.**’ Steve nods and closes his sketchbook.

“I’m on my way in.” He says as he packs up and goes back inside. Wanda is sitting off to the side, and there’s something that looks like anger or frustration on her face and it makes Steve stop.

“Wanda? Is everything okay?” She looks up at him and shakes her head. “What’s wrong?” She motions over towards where the Vision sits and it takes Steve a second to realize what might be upsetting her.

It’s the book in Vision’s hands.

**Boundaries: How To Recognize And Set Healthy Boundaries Every Day**

The Android looks positively engrossed in the book and Steve’s eyes go to the small stack of books on the table next to him. The spines of most of them are visible and they all seem to be following a similar vein: setting healthy boundaries, signs of unhealthy relationships, finding your true self; and a whole bunch of other modern day hogwash. He goes to make a step towards Vision, to figure out what’s brought this on when FRIDAY interrupts him again.

‘**Mr. Rogers, Councilmember Ross is still waiting.**’ He pauses and sighs.

“Yeah, yeah I’m on my way.” He says and he continues on into the conference room. It takes a moment before FRIDAY pulls up the video screen and he sees Ross on it. “Good morning Mr. Ross.” He greets and Ross smiles back at him with a nod.

“Good morning Mr. Rogers.” The response catches Steve for a second. Normally Ross tended to call him by his title Captain.

“Is something wrong?” He asks and Ross takes a second before shaking his head.

“Not really ‘wrong’ per se, but definitely something that needs to be addressed and handled.” Ross grabs some papers on his desk and straightens them before looking back at the screen. “So, one of our people was going through your records the other day and they brought up something that they thought might be important to our attention.”

“Okay?”

“Mr. Rogers, have you ever had any formal training in leading a unit?” Ross asks and Steve gets a little smile.

“I’ve had plenty of field experience at this point.” He jokes and Ross’s smile doesn’t reach his eyes.

“Yeah, that’s what we came to the conclusion of. Unfortunately…that isn’t good.” He says and Steve feels like he’s missed something.

“What’s not good?”

“Well…as you can imagine, we can’t have the leader of a team of highly specialized individuals not have any training.”

“I’ve handled my team pretty well up until now Sir.” Steve says, a tiny bit defensively and Ross shakes his head.

“‘Pretty well’ isn’t what we’re looking for.” He replies and Steve feels a moment of horror hit him.

“Are you saying you want to remove me as leader to the Avengers?” The Avengers won’t take it,
they won’t stand for it. Well, Tony probably would but the rest would side with Steve. He’s led them flawlessly for years.

“No, not at all.” Ross replies and the vice that was starting to tighten around his chest lessens. “We’re merely looking into solutions for this unique problem that we have.”

“Oh…okay. And what solutions have you come up with?” He asks and Ross flips some pages.

“We had a suggestion, and we’ve decided to make it happen.” He starts and Steve refrains from the need to ask ‘what is it?’ “As you can imagine, your situation was difficult because of all of the…well suffice it to say ‘misinformation’ going around.”

“Misinformation?”

“Yes, the stories. The Captain America stories. So many of us have grown up on them and sometimes you forget to stop and realize that the figure that they’re portraying might not be or have the skills of the character.”

“What does that mean?”

“It merely goes back to your leadership training Mr. Rogers, nothing to be concerned about. Now, as I was mentioning before – we’ve pulled out some teachers for you. They’re going to train you and stick you in simulated situations and all that jazz and see how you respond and how they can help. Not only that, but we’ve also put forth a program with the help of…outside contractors, to assist in the gaps that your time in stasis has created.”

“Outside contractors?” Steve says, catching onto the fact that Ross clearly shifted his answer at the last second. “Do you mean Tony sir?” Suddenly this whole thing is sounding like something Tony would do, to add insult to injury and claim that Steve doesn’t know how to lead all because Tony doesn’t know how to follow.

“Mr. Stark was informed of the need to take all this information and to put it into a program that would make the most sense and work the best for you.” Ross says, waving off Tony’s involvement. “He accepted and has returned the program to us. We’ve already had others look at it and we’re satisfied with his choices.” Ross pulls them back to the original issue. “So, we’ll have the jet pick you up and take you to the training location, during the interim time you’ll need to assign a temporary team leader if you haven’t already designated someone as your backup.”

“Normally that’s Iron Man sir.” Steve says, but he shakes his head. “But lately with Tony’s interactions with the team I’d say that would be a bad choice.”

“Mr. Stark’s interactions with the team?”

“Yes sir…he’s been…well aggressive towards us since our return.” There’s a look of surprise on Ross’ face.

“Do you have specific moments Mr. Rogers? I’ve seen myself the way Mr. Stark interacts with the team and I’ve seen nothing of concern.”

“We used to be a lot closer, a lot friendlier to each other. Now though, Tony’s verbally aggressive and constantly undermining the team.”

“I see, well please keep a note of that. If there is something happening we should jump on that right away.” He waves to someone off screen. “So, as I said, the plane will be there within the hour. Pack a bag and we’ll go from there.”
“Sir?”

“Yes?”

“What if I think that this whole charade is unnecessary?” He asks and Ross gets a frown. “I mean, I’m the leader and my team follows me.” Ross shakes his head.

“Mr. Rogers, understand this please. We’re not looking for someone who can be followed, we’re looking for someone who can lead.” He says. “And this course is non-negotiable, and passing this course is non-negotiable as well.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying, and the Council is saying, that if you do not take the course and if you do not pass, that you will be removed from your office immediately.”

+++ 

“Hello Tony.” Phil greets – a dead man greets – and Tony almost visibly recoils.

“You’re alive.” He says after a second and Phil nods.

“Yes, stories of my untimely demise were a little too proactive.” He says with a shrug and Tony feels a sudden feeling of rage eat at him. Fuck Fury and fuck his need to play around with their emotions and play them like fiddles. “I was hoping that we could talk.”

“I see…” Tony takes a moment to push down all that dismay and rage and nods. “Of course Agent Coulson, how may I help you today?”

“It’s Director now actually.” Coulson corrects and Tony pauses for a brief second as he walks behind his desk, before taking his seat and motioning for Coulson to take his.

“Director? Director of what, last time I heard SHIELD was shut down.” Tony says, even though he knows that isn’t true but he didn’t expect them to already be restructuring themselves so quickly.

“No, SHIELD is very much alive and well.” Coulson says and Tony nods. He doesn’t say anything and Coulson presses on. “I’ve come to discuss a working arrangement between us.”

“Working arrangement? And who is ‘us’?”

“SHIELD and the Avengers.” Coulson clarifies and Tony nods.

“I see, then you shouldn’t be talking with me Director, you should be speaking to the Council.” He answers him and Coulson gets a little smile like Tony’s being funny.

“SHIELD is still very much in the shadows these days, it might be better if it stays that way for a while longer.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.” Tony says, although it’s a lie. He does, he understands perfectly. Coulson wants to undermine the Council and the Accords with the Avengers help. That could and would ruin them when it got out, because it would get out.

“The Avengers were initially a SHIELD program, and we’ve worked well together.” Coulson says and Tony shakes his head.

“The Avengers may have initially been governed by SHIELD, but that was a long time ago Director.
These days they’re governed by the Accords and the Accords Council.” Tony says. “And clandestine dark agencies working ‘from the shadows’ aren’t something that the Avengers can be doing business under the table with.” Coulson’s smile falls a little. Tony watches as Coulson takes in the situation and changes up tactics.

“Perhaps you’re right.” He says, “But we worked well together once.” Tony shakes his head.

“I wouldn’t say that.” He says and Coulson frowns.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I wouldn’t say that a government agency that puts a civilian under house arrest while they’re sick and dying, spies on them, assaults them, manipulates them for their own purposes, and threatens their lives is ‘working well together’.” Tony replies calmly. “Now, unfortunately I’m going to have to inform the Accords Council of this…offer, if I can call it that, and I really must ask that we wrap this meeting up.”

“Stark-” Coulson goes to say something and Tony shakes his head.

“By wrap up, I meant its over.” He cuts him off. “Have a good day Director, and congratulations on the promotion. I wish you the best of luck with it.” He almost says ‘Hail Hydra’ as a parting joke, but he figures he shouldn’t give Coulson any opportunity to pretend that he misunderstood it and thought Tony Stark was Hydra. “FRIDAY, please forward this unscheduled meeting to Councilmember Ross.”

‘Done Boss’ She says and Coulson stands with that frown still on his face.

“I see that we’re done here then Stark.”

“I’d say you’re correct. Have a good day.”

+++

“Hey Mr. Stark!” Peter says with all the enthusiasm that he usually has and it brings a smile to Tony’s face.

“Hey Pete, you know you can call me Tony right?” He asks and Peter looks like Tony’s just made his day as he comes and takes a seat, dropping his backpack on the floor next to him.

“Is this a meeting? Is this for the Avengers?” He asks excitedly and Tony nods.

“It is.”

“Because I totally want to join – or wait, am I technically already an Avenger? I mean, you recruited me right?”

“I did, and you are on the list as an Avenger member.” Peter does a little fist pump in the air and Tony holds up a hand. “But we need to talk.” He settles down and looks at Tony so earnestly and Tony almost wants to call this off and send him home wrapped up in bubble wrap. “So, the…rest of the Avengers team wish to meet you. They want to get to know you formally.”

“I’d love that.”

“Hang on there for a moment.” Tony warns and there must be something serious happening with his face because Peter settles down again. “I know that you want to be an Avenger, and I know that
anything I say here is just advice because I have no real authority over you…but I would advise caution.”

“Caution?”

“Things right now are…complicated Peter.” Tony says. “The Avengers, we’re not a…good environment right now. There’s far too much water under the bridge and I honestly think that something is going to come to a head soon and I don’t want you caught up in it.”

“But…I’m an Avenger.”

“Yes you are.” Tony agrees. “But…if I can ask something of you.”

“Anything.”

“Whenever you come by the Compound…always be in costume. Never give your name, never give anything that could trace you back.” Tony says and Peter takes a second before he nods.

“Okay, I can do that.”

“Good, I hope that it won’t be forever…but for right now, it’s the safest choice.” Tony looks at him. “I just want to keep everyone safe Peter, and that includes you. So if you come by, please just…heed my words and don’t get too chummy with them?”

“I won’t.” Peter says and then he articulates quickly, “I mean I won’t get chummy, not that I won’t listen to your warning.” Tony smiles.

“I figured as much.” He says and he watches as Peter thinks something over.

“So…you really think that it’s not a good idea that they came back?” He asks and Tony considers being vague, but opts against it.

“Yeah, I think it was the worst thing that could have happened to us.” He admits. “If they hadn’t come back we could have had a chance to start over, cut out the rot and make something better. Now we’re stuck trying to make the best of it and trying to correct behaviors and beliefs that are just so contrary to what we’re trying to do.”

“And what are we trying to do?”

“…we’re trying to be the heroes that the world needs us to be.” Tony replies. “We’re trying to be better.”

“And you don’t think that can happen with them?”

“I hope it can, because we’re stuck with them whether it can or can’t.” Tony says with a shrug. “But for a while, we’re just going to have to be vigilant and watch our backs.”

“And watch each other’s backs.” Peter says, looking at him and Tony smiles.

“Yeah, and watch each other’s backs.”
Hahaha. Seriously guys. Once again I state that I have no idea what's happening in this story.
Please enjoy.

Although I am realizing that I may have to drop the 'Not A Fix-It' Tag and turn it into something more like Not a Traditional Fix-It? Hmm. Not sure.

“If we get it into production tomorrow we can have a working prototype ready within the week.”
Yvonne says, tapping on her tablet and Tony nods.

“That’s acceptable.” She holds out the screen and he swipes his signature on it.

“Mr. Stark?” Hannah, Pepper’s new secretary approaches and he looks at her. “Um, there’s someone here for you?”

“Who?”

“A Mr. Sam Wilson.” She replies and Tony takes a second to hold in his sigh. He’d been informed by Ross that Sam had been tapped to be stand-in leader for Steve while he was away on the Council’s request for training, and he’s kind of wondering what the man is doing here at Stark Industries.

“Okay, please move him to my office. I’ll be around shortly.” He says and she nods, moving off down the way she came and Tony turns his attention away from the drama possibly sitting in the office and puts his mind back on the SI project.

He doesn’t dally after he’s finished with all the signing, and sure enough Sam is waiting for him when he enters his office.

“Good morning Mr. Wilson, I’ll admit I didn’t expect to see you here.” He says and Sam nods, standing up from his seat.

“Yeah, sorry about dropping in on you.” He says, and Tony will give him that he sounds sincere. “I just wanted a minute to talk to you, alone if possible…and you’re kind of a hard person to track down these days.” Tony motions for Sam to take a seat again as he comes around the other side of the desk and takes a seat himself.

“How may I help you?” He asks, figuring that they should just jump straight into it.

“I wanted to say I’m sorry.” Are the words that come out of Sam’s mouth and Tony will admit that they surprise him.

“For what?” He asks.

“I judged you without knowing the whole story. I mean, looking back I should have known that something else was happening, that something was missing from the parts I was getting, but…I mean
I guess I got caught up in all the Tony hate that was going around at that time. I guess it made it easy to just accept that you’d fucked up and leave it at that.” Tony takes a moment, and just looks at Sam and the other man takes it as a silent agreement for him to continue. “I didn’t know about the video, none of us knew. I mean, Nat knew about Bucky being the one who—” he cuts off for a second and opts to be kind and not say ‘who killed your parents’ and Tony’s a little grateful for the kindness. “But she knew, the rest of us didn’t. I mean, to some of us it didn’t really make any difference—” Tony figures that’s Wanda, and maybe Clint, but definitely Wanda, “but to some of us it did. It made all the difference and I’m sorry that I didn’t ask you what happened. After all this time you deserved that much, and we didn’t.” Sam lets out a frustrated sigh, “And then I told you to apologize to them—”

“You didn’t know.” Tony feels like saying in his defense and Sam shakes his head.

“Doesn’t change the fact that I was just being an ass. We all were. You were just getting out of the hospital and we should have been checking if you were okay and not demanding apologies the second you walked in the door.” Sam looks at Tony. “Are you okay? Like…really? Because I’m starting to think that this distance thing you’re doing is less about the Accords and you feeling like you lost, and more about something else.”

“Is that what you guys think?” Tony asks. “That I’m pulling away because of the Accords?”

“We don’t really know why you’re doing it, only that you are. I mean, I’m starting to see why but I’m figuring that I’m not seeing the whole picture and I guess I’m here to ask, like I should have asked before.”

“It’s not about the Accords, not really.” Tony replies slowly. “It’s about some of the things that happened during that whole thing, but it’s not about them.” Tony looks at Sam. “I’m sorry myself in truth.” He admits. “I’m sorry that for some reason you all thought you couldn’t trust me. I’m sorry that I couldn’t find the words to adequately express myself or what was going on. I mean, I speak a lot but contrary to popular belief I’m not always the best at being clear. Not about things that matter.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t take the time to listen.” Sam admits. “I feel like a lot of this crap could have been avoided if we’d just taken a step back and thought things through.” Sam looks at him carefully. “Are you really okay? With Barnes being in the Compound?”

“Wow, going right for the jugular there Wilson.” Tony jests a little before he sighs. “To be honest, I’m too tired to be not okay with it. I’m more okay with that than I am with walking in and seeing Wanda every day, and I know it’s going to be a while but he seems to at least understand that these kinds of things take time and I guess we just have to wait to see where all those chips fall.”

“Do you still not like Wanda being in the Compound?” Sam asks and he sounds a little surprised. “I mean, I’ll be honest, I thought that all of that was water under the bridge.”

“…No…it’s not. It still hurts to see her there and not have Bruce there. I feel like we took in our enemy at the cost of our friend and quite frankly it still makes me mad when I see her with her little chip on her shoulder for something I didn’t even do.” Tony shakes his head and pulls himself back from the oversharing. “But she’s the Avengers little darling for some reason that I cannot fathom, and I have truly considered mind control.” Tony smiles a little at that, and Sam looks like he’s sad at what he’s hearing. “But with the others, I can be professional. I can work with people that I don’t like and don’t trust. As long as they do their job and I do mine, we should be fine.”

“Isn’t there some trust involved in that? Don’t you have to trust her to do her job?” Sam asks and Tony gets a little sarcastic smile.

“I guess I’m still working on that part.” He replies. “But personally I don’t think she’s field ready and
should be out there anyways, but that’s me.” Tony shrugs. “But…I mean, thanks.”

“For what?”

“For coming here without your chest puffed up and your nose in the air expecting some kind of groveling from me. I’ll admit, I’m getting pretty sick and tired of it.”

“I’ll get the others to back off.” Sam promises and Tony gives him a small smile.

“Good luck with that.” He says and he watches as Sam’s face goes serious.

“No. I will get them to back off.” He repeats and Tony stares at him for a second before he realizes that he truly believes that Sam is certainly going to try, and he nods.

“Okay…thanks.” Sam gives him a smile, before he gets a thoughtful look.

“Was it you?”

“Don’t play the guessing game. We were doing so well at being clear with one another.” Tony pokes at him and he chuckles a little.

“Steve thinks that you had something to do with the ‘Boot Camp’ thing.” He asks and Tony feels his shoulders go back. So much for having a good conversation with Sam, but he’s not ashamed or really hiding what he’s done.

“Yes I did.” He says and Sam nods.

“Why?”

“Because he needs training. We’ve fucked up too many times under his ‘leadership’ and unless he gets help, nothing is going to change.” Tony says. “I didn’t do it to be cruel or to get back at him as I’m sure he’ll come to the conclusion of. I did it for the Avengers. If Captain America is going to be leading them anywhere then he’s going to be the best damn leader that we can make him be. No more of this ‘just a small kid from Brooklyn who doesn’t know how to back away from a fight’.”

Sam thinks about it for a moment before he nods.

“I guess I agree.” He says and Tony feels a little bit of surprise go through him. “I won’t say anything if you don’t want me to, but I agree with what you’re saying.”

“I’m not hiding it. I don’t care if they know, it’s not like it’s a bad thing.” Sam makes a face that tells Tony exactly what they’re both not saying: They’ll take it as a bad thing because you’re the one who did it Tony.

“Okay, well…thanks for talking with me. I’ll see you back at the Compound.” Sam stands up and goes to the door.

“Hey Sam.” Tony calls out and Sam turns around with a surprised look on his face. “Thanks.” Sam smiles and nods.

“Anytime Tony.”

+++

Tony can’t help the wide smile on his face as he watches Rhodey walk like there’s no required support system.
“Rhodey Bear, you are a genius.” He says as Rhodey smiles at him, and comes over to take a seat on the workbench again. “I can’t believe you figured it out.”

“Eh, I had the extra time and I was looking over the blueprints that you sent me.” Rhodey admits, taking the small tool that Tony is holding out for him as they both start to close up the braces outside coverings.

“Now that we’ve got them working though, if you want I can start adjusting the War Machine armor to accept them.” Tony says softly, not looking up from where he’s working and Rhodey pauses, before Tony can practically hear the smile in his voice.

“I’d like that.” He says and Tony risks a glance up to see his friend looking down at him. “I’m feeling flabby.” Rhodey jokes and Tony feels the laugh punch out of him.

“Oh no, can’t have that happen.” Tony chuckles as they both go back to work closing up the braces. “So did you hear? Loki and Thor have signed the Accords.”

“I heard, it’s been making quite the buzz in certain circles.”

“Yeah, I figured it would.” Tony admits. “But let’s be honest, we don’t know anything about all of the people and planets out there and the Asgardian’s do. Plus, having Loki on our side could really benefit us.”

“Hey, you don’t need to sell it to me. I can understand the thought process that goes along with it. I don’t particularly agree with it, kind of like I didn’t agree with it before, but I understand it.” Tony thinks back on Wanda and he frowns a little, pulling back and wiping his hands. “What’s that look?”

“Huh?”

“Oh no, don’t play that. What’s up with that look?” Rhodey asks and Tony sighs.

“Oh, just thinking about Wanda.”

“What about her?” Rhodey inquires and Tony takes a moment to think over his reply.

“She’s dangerous.” He admits and Rhodey nods.

“This is something we knew.”

“No, I mean she’s still dangerous. It’s been a while since she joined the team and in that time she hasn’t gotten any better at understanding her powers or controlling them.” Tony says. “Not to mention, her personality hasn’t really taken a shift from the ‘I’m a helpless Tony Stark Victim’ mentality.”

“Okay?”

“Well…something needs to be done about it.” Tony says eventually. “But the problem is, I don’t know what.”

“Well, what do you want to do?” Rhodey asks and Tony runs a hand through his hair.

“In a perfect world? I’d revoke her Avengers status and get her psychiatric help.” Tony replies. “But mostly I just want to know that if this Thanos showed up tomorrow that she’d actually be a competent warrior, and I don’t think that’s true right now.”

“Well, it’s pretty hard to train her, I mean, Vision doesn’t exactly know how her powers work.
They’re different then the way the Mind Stone works for him.”

“I know, but there has to be something.” Tony says, slightly frustrated. “I mean, I know that Rogers thinks that she just needs practice and exposure, but I don’t think that’s working. She needs something more structured, something more…I don’t know, just something more than what we’re doing with her.”

‘Boss, you have an incoming call.’ FRIDAY says and Tony glances up.

“Is it Pepper, Peter or Vision?”

‘No’

“Take a message then.” He says as he turns back to Rhodey. “I mean, I went to Ross for Rogers because I really believe that he can get better if someone just puts the time and energy into him. Maybe Wanda can too, but I don’t know where to even begin starting with her.”

“Not that she’d accept your help even if you did.” Rhodey reminds him and he nods with an irritated huff.

“Pretty much.” He tosses the rag over onto the workbench. “But honestly, that’s just not acceptable. If I were the leader of the Avengers, I wouldn’t allow it.”

‘Boss?’

“Yeah?”

‘I think you might want to take this call.’ Tony sends up a confused look to FRIDAY before glancing at Rhodey with the same confusion.

“Um…okay? Connect the call.” The little green light pops up when the call connects. “Hello, may I ask who is calling?”

“Good evening Mr. Stark, and thank you for taking my call. My name is Charles Xavier.”
“Wait…so this guy is some telepathic mutant who runs a school for mutants and people with special abilities…and he just happened to call at the precise moment in time when we were talking about Wanda and he claims that he wasn’t listening in?” Rhodey says and Tony nods slowly, pouring himself a drink.

Today was certainly a ‘pour yourself a drink’ kind of day.

“According to him, he has a student who is precognitive. He’d asked her to keep a finger on the pulse of when it would be the best time to reach out to us. She said it was then, so he picked up the phone and called.” Tony replies and Rhodey crosses his arms with a frown like he’s not sure if he believes it.

“Do you think he’s telling the truth?”

“I think it doesn’t really matter.” Tony responds honestly. “If he is listening – then there’s not much that we can do to stop him, and if he isn’t then there still isn’t anything we could do to stop him from deciding to.”

“So what did he want? What did you two talk about?”

“Wanda mostly, and a joint venture with what he says his students call ‘the X-Men’.”

“The X-Men? Dear god we all need to stop coming up with stupid team names.”

“I don’t know.” Tony says with a grin. “I think it’s kinda catchy. I mean the mutant X gene is sort of responsible for all of their craziness so it fits.”

“Fine, okay – the X-Men, are they intending to sign the Accords? Or are they supposed to be a secret that he wants kept?”

“No, Xavier expressed a desire to have a meeting with Ross first, as kind of a liaison sort of thought process before he fully signs on to the Accords. He made some noise about wanting to have special protections put in for the school since not all of his students opt to become X-Men and he doesn’t want them contained in that way if they choose not to be.”

“That makes sense.” Rhodey agrees. “What did he say about Wanda?”

“He’s sending over his second in command, Doctor Jean Grey to come take a look at her.” Tony says and Rhodey tilts his head.

“Shouldn’t he be coming himself? I mean, Wanda’s telepathic and she’s kind of volatile on the best
of days.”

“I said the same thing, and Xavier assured me that Doctor Grey would be able to stand her own should the meeting get out of hand.” Tony takes a small sip, savoring it before continuing. “But he did set up a meeting with me to have me come by and see their training regimens.” Tony shrugs, “I don’t know…maybe this is a good thing.”

“I hope it is.” Rhodey agrees. “For all our sakes.”

+++ 

The TV program is as foolish as they could possibly come, but on some level Wanda appreciated the transparency of the entire spectacle. You knew where everyone stood, you knew who the bad guys were and you knew who the good ones were as well. It was as simple as just looking at them and their big, over the top responses and reactions to things.

Real life was not as easy as daytime soap operas.

Instead of clear lines drawn, there were snakes in the grass who were particularly talented at hiding their dangerous natures and making everyone believe that they were good people when they were anything but.

Tony Stark was one such person. A man so frequently celebrated and praised when he should be rotting away in the ground like a bad memory that the world needed to spit on and move on from.

She sighed and shifted on the couch, pulling the throw over herself to keep warm. Steve had been sent away to do some kind of ‘Leadership Training’ thing, and Wanda knew that Stark had something to do with it. Steve had tried to tell them that it was a good thing, a helpful thing that was going to make everyone else feel more secure in Steve’s position as leader – but Wanda could tell that he didn’t believe it. On some level he thought what she thought which was what everyone thought – that Tony was doing this to get Steve out of the way and to humiliate him while he did it. Ross had pretended that this was just a sudden thought that came to the council’s minds but everyone knew the truth. There was a traitor amongst them and while they weren’t sure what to do about him – or with him – yet, it would be a problem that they would get a handle on soon.

“Miss Maximoff?” Stark’s voice came from behind her and she sighed and rolled her eyes, choosing not to turn around and face him. If he could act like a two year old child then she’d respond no better. “Miss Maximoff, there’s something I need to speak to you about.” He tries again and Wanda reaches out and grabs the remote, turning up the volume and settling in. “FRIDAY, end program please.” The television turns off a second later and Wanda slowly turns to look at him. “We need to talk.” He says now that he has her attention and he’s holding up a folder.

“We have nothing to talk about Stark.” She snaps at him, clicking the remote again and growling when nothing happens.

“FRIDAY’s not going to turn it back on until after we’ve finished this little powwow.”

“You don’t control me Stark.” She says, looking back at him with a smirk. “No matter how much you might like to.” He gets a slightly baffled look before hiding it and Wanda doesn’t bother with curiosity about what he’s thinking.

– Why the hell would I want to control her? Where would she even get a thought like that? When have I ever tried to control her? How about she learns to control herself and then we’ll all be better off for it. –
“Anyways-” Stark says, pressing on past his own thoughts. “I have someone coming by today who will be speaking with you about enrolling at Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters.” He puts down the packet on the coffee table and Wanda makes a point not to reach for it or even acknowledge it. “They think you might be a good fit.”

“No.” She says, grabbing the remote again. “We’re finished. I want the television back on.”

“We’re not finished.”

“Yes we are.” She says. “I’m not going. I’m not going anywhere. You might think yourself so sly for sending Steve away but you will not manage with the rest of us so easily.” She sends a smirk at Stark and he looks slightly frustrated.

– Should have just let Wilson tell her, why the hell do I even bother with these people? –

“Just, look it over. It’s a pamphlet that I got off their website, it’s not what it looks like. There’s more to it than just the fancy school. Doctor Grey is coming by later to tell you the full story but it’s a school for-.” The word ‘Doctor’ catches her attention and she turns to Stark instantly, her fist clenching.

“Are you trying to sell me off Stark? To some scientists to poke and prod at?” She snarls and Stark takes a step back when her magic comes to the call of her aggression. “Is it an asylum? You wish to lock me away again?”

“I didn’t lock you away the first time.” Stark replies and she slowly stands from the couch, coming forward as he steps back. “The security cameras are recording. I’ve done nothing to you and if you attack there will be consequences.” Stark says, his voice calm but his mind is a maelstrom of panic and fear, and that pleases her. He should be afraid of her and he should never forget that fear. “Doctor Grey is a respected authority in her field and at the school. And I did say ‘school’, not lab and not asylum. It’s a school full of people like you. Where you can go to learn.”

“I know everything I need to know.” She snaps at him, cutting him off and he snorts. “Then congratulations, you’re the only one in the universe who can say that.” He seems to realize his own stupidity seconds later as he cringes and she takes a step towards him.

“Wanda!” Sam’s voice enters the mix as he jogs into the room. He’s in his workout clothes and Wanda figures that he’s just hightailed it from the gym to where they are to come save Stark. She wishes he hadn’t bothered. “What’s going on?”

“He’s threatening me.” She says, motioning to Stark and Stark rolls his eyes as he looks at Sam. “I’m doing nothing of the sort. I’m informing her of an opportunity that’s just presented itself to her for her consideration.” – If she wasn’t so fucking crazy – loose cannon – dangerous – I wish Xavier the best of luck – Stark’s mind adds on to his words even though he doesn’t let them fly. He motions to the file on the table and Sam goes over and picks it up, leafing through it with a growing look of surprise on his face.

“Wow…this place is really nice.” Sam says after a moment, holding it out for her to take which she does. The pictures look like an old castle, with children smiling and running around freely. There are pages of labs and computer rooms and well-furnished dorm rooms. “But…I don’t think that’s a good idea at this time.” Stark looks conflicted for a second before he sighs.

“Well, you’re going to find out later on today anyways and as acting leader I guess you should know, I mean I was going to let Doctor Grey tell everyone else, but… like I was trying to say before,
Xavier’s School isn’t just a fancy school.” Finally his lies start to come out, there’s been something he’s hiding under the surface and Wanda almost wants to smirk at his plan unraveling about him. “Xavier’s reached out to me personally and he’s in with Councilmember Ross…the school is a front, for kids and people who have powers.” That trips her up.

“What?” She says and he nods.

“Yeah, it’s a school for mutants. Xavier says that he thinks that they can help train you and get you where you’re supposed to be schooling wise. You didn’t finish high school after all, but they can help you get your GED and who knows, maybe you’ll continue past into college or something. Who knows, but they’re used to training people with powers and you need training.”

“That’s amazing.” Sam says and his voice sounds excited as he looks over her shoulder at the pamphlet again. “Do you think they’ll agree to it?”

“I don’t see why not? Start with one of the members of the Avengers as a kind of trial run and see where it goes from there? Miss Maximoff would have the unenviable role of being the image of the Avengers while she was there so a certain level of decorum would be expected from her, but…I figured it’d be something that she’d appreciate or at least like the chance to have.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this?” Wanda snaps at him and he gives her a look like she’s a foolish child and it makes her want to claw his eyes out.

“I tried.” He lies. “You weren’t listening.”

“I don’t have to listen to you.” She growls back to him and he makes a ‘there you go’ motion as he looks at Sam.

“Like I said, I tried, but it wasn’t getting through.”

“Wanda, that’s enough.” Sam scolds her before she can fire back, taking Stark’s side suddenly and Wanda stares at him for a moment. – “Thanks…for coming here without your chest puffed up and your nose in the air expecting some kind of groveling from me…” – “We’ve fucked up too many times…nothing is going to change. I didn’t do it to be cruel or to get back at him…I did it for the Avengers.” – Sam’s mind is easy to rifle through and pick up glimpses of the secret conversation between him and Stark. It’s clear that something about it has changed the tide, and has clearly manipulated Sam into believing that Stark is actually doing any of this for the Avengers and not for his own pathetic ego.

“Stark isn’t doing this for me. He’s doing this because he wants me gone.” Wanda says and Sam shakes his head – “I feel like we took in our enemy at the cost of our friend and quite frankly it still makes me mad when I see her with her little chip on her shoulder for something I didn’t even do.” – The memory makes her fist clench as she sees her parents dead bodies flash in her mind and Pietro’s corpse. All of them laying under Stark’s feet and he has the nerve to try and tell people that he wasn’t responsible.

Worse, somehow he’s gotten them to believe it.

“Look, Doctor Grey will be coming by in a few hours. She’s already en route and you can discuss any concerns or questions with her. She’ll have more information on the school than I will and you can make your decision then.”

“Is it even my decision?” Wanda fires back. “Or will you just go to Ross if I say no?” Stark gets a complicated look and Wanda gives him a smirk as he tries to think over his answer.
“...I don’t doubt that it’s already crossing Ross’s mind to have you go there even without me stepping in to vouch for it.” He says carefully. “But I mean, if you can show that you have an alternative ready in place of this opportunity to learn your powers I’m sure the council will listen.”

“And if I don’t care what they think?”

“Then you can retire.” Stark says simply.

“You’d like that wouldn’t you?” His look says ‘yes’ even though he doesn’t open his mouth to say it.

“They’ll probably require you to have some kind of powers training from them if we join forces with them. As for the GED or the schooling part, if you don’t want to go you don’t have to. The Council doesn’t control that, it only has a say in your abilities for being an active Avengers member. I’d recommend that you sit down with Ross and express any concerns that you have after you meet with Doctor Grey, but that choice is yours.” He looks up at Sam. “And on that note, I’m out. Have a good day Mr. Wilson, Miss Maximoff.” He says as Sam waves him off and he leaves them standing there.

“I’m not going to do it.” She tells him and he gets a look like he’s wanting to scold her but refrains.

“Like Tony said, the school part is your choice, but the training part is probably going to become a requirement for you to stay on the Avengers.”

“I’m not going to do it.” She repeats firmly and Sam shrugs.

“No one can make you, if you want to not go and you decide that you just want to say ‘fuck you’ to the Council and not do what they tell you to then that’s your prerogative.” She gets a small smile and a nod. “But you better have a backup plan ready.”

“Backup plan?”

“Yeah, for where you’re going to live, how you’re going to get food and all that.”

“I live here.”

“The Avengers live here and if you decide to not abide by the rules then you’ll have to go somewhere else.”

“Stark isn’t going to kick me out.”

“Tony isn’t the one who’d be doing it and I’m sorry – but that’s how the world works. If you don’t do the work, you don’t get the reward.” Sam says, holding out the file for her. “I suggest you keep an open mind. Steve went and did the whole ‘boot camp’ didn’t he? Because he understood that it wasn’t something that was harmful to him and that it was something that he could probably turn around and find something useful from. Maybe this one is your ‘boot camp’.” He pats her on the shoulder. “Did you want me there? When you speak to Doctor Grey?”

“No.” She says, shaking her head. “I’ll go alone.”

“Okay. Sounds good, keep us all updated on your choice.” He turns and walks down the hall and Wanda barely holds in the sneer.

“Stark sellout.” She mutters after him, not that he hears her.
Please feel free to leave a comment! I do ask for no comments of a critiquing or negative nature.
Thank you
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Thanks for your patience! Here’s the next chapter. Just a heads up, there has been a slight change to the tags. As always, please just be aware that they’re likely to change at any time and with each new chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There isn’t really a lot of free time that Steve gets here at ‘Captain America Boot Camp’. His days are pretty solidly booked. The drill sergeants ride him pretty hard, starting just before first light and keeping him either out on the practice field or in the classroom dealing with ‘hypothetical scenarios’ that at first he could never seem to get right. That’s not fully a true statement anymore, he’s learning the patterns and the methods by which they want him to handle these situations, and while he doesn’t agree with them – he knows that’s not really what this whole exercise is about.

This is about Tony. Well, it’s about Tony and him more specifically. Steve knows that Tony’s the one who lit a fire under the Accord’s Council’s asses to get him pulled off the field and put into this ‘training regimen’ while playing it off as being concerned for the future of the Avengers. Steve wishes that he could make Ross understand that the ‘Avengers’ aren’t what Tony’s really after right now, he’s just after a little payback that he thinks he’s due.

Luckily, Steve’s able to keep an eye on Tony and the others in the small windows of freedom that he does get. Whatever free time he has he uses to read his emails and make sure that he’s keeping up with what’s going on back at the Compound, and making sure that everything is holding itself together while he’s away.

Natasha and Sam are both being very good at sending him constant daily updates. It is enlightening to see the small gaps in what they choose to share over what they choose not to. For instance, both of them have different accounts about Tony’s new ‘Xavier’s School for the Gifted’ contact. Not only do they have different accounts, they also have completely different reads on the situation.

Sam’s email is all about the benefits of a partnership with Xavier’s School, and how it might benefit Wanda in the long run to attend. He attached the brochures to the email so that Steve can see the full pretty picture of where Tony’s trying to ship Wanda off to. According to Sam, the school is full of individuals, both students and teachers alike who all have special abilities who will be able to come up alongside Wanda and help her learn control and fill in any supplemental schooling that she might have missed from her Sokovian education. Sam believes that Wanda will actually feel more secure being surrounded by people like her and knowing that there’s a set system of guidance ready to assist her at any given moment.

Natasha’s report by comparison is a lot more pragmatic about the whole thing. In it she expresses concern about the telepathic leaders of the school taking in Wanda outside of the Avengers watchful gazes and protection. She also has extra information about how Tony and Xavier don’t actually know each other, and how the telepath claims that he didn’t use his power incorrectly to spy on them and how he is by definition untrustworthy. She also expresses her concern about where the offer is coming from within the Avengers as well. Since Tony and Wanda don’t exactly have the best history together and Tony’s starting to make a habit of trying to break apart the Avengers while claiming that
it’s for their own good.

Natasha’s reports have an added element to them though that Sam’s neglects to mention. Apparently Sam’s been having private meetings with Tony these last few days and he’s been less than forthcoming with whatever the two are talking about behind those closed doors. Natasha has mentioned how she’s offered for a full team meeting, with an open door policy so that everyone can know what’s going on, but Sam’s denied the request each time. Natasha also mentions how she isn’t sure how she feels about Sam signing on so quickly to Tony’s school idea for Wanda without looking further into it himself and just taking Tony’s word at face value.

On one hand, Steve is glad that Tony is finally talking to one of them and is getting past this hurdle that he’s made for himself. The only way that the Avengers are going to come back as a strong unit is if all of them do their part, and right now the only one not holding his weight is the brunet. This whole ‘professional’ air that Tony’s been toting around for the last few weeks is obviously anything but no matter how he’s pretending to frame it and how he’s gotten the Council to eat it up, and it is good to hear that there are some steps being taken to make progress on the Tony front.

On the other hand though, Steve knows how good Tony can be with his words. He knows how easily the brunet can get people wrapped around his fingers and played like puppets on strings if they don’t know to be duly wary of him and if they don’t know to question his motives. Sam hasn’t really had a lot of experience with Tony since he joined the Avengers since the two men never really moved in the same circles, so Steve realizes that this is Sam’s first true experience with the fast talking billionaire.

And while it’s good that they’re talking, Steve just wishes that he was there to mediate it, since Natasha’s concerns definitely sound like they hold some weight. Because of it, Steve’s considered swapping out Natasha or Clint for Sam in the upcoming days till he can return. He feels that it might be the right thing to do if Natasha continues to feel as though Sam’s not taking the post as cautiously as he should be. Plus there’d be the added bonus of someone who is a little more…experienced with handling Tony’s ups and downs if Steve did swap them out.

Also, Tony’s the liaison to the Accords for the Avengers and as such is required to attend meetings, speak and interact with the acting team leader until Steve returns and sets this all right. Perhaps it wouldn’t be a bad idea to allow for the others to have their moments with the brunet to be able to air out past indiscretions. It might be best to have that all handled and in the past before Steve returns to have his own words with the billionaire about this ‘training’ bull.

Steve does have to admit to himself that he was angrier with the brunet earlier in the sessions, but he’s come to see them as a nice supplement to what he already knows. There are a few things that he has learned here, along with some new ways to handle the team dynamics and field scenarios. He just wishes that Tony had talked to him about it instead of going behind his back and trying to get a leg over him with this. So while there has been some good that came out of this, Steve isn’t happy how Tony has negatively impacted the Accords Council’s impression of him and his leadership abilities.

It’ll be something that they will undoubtedly have to discuss when Steve returns shortly. Until then, Steve types up his new orders before the drill sergeants return to grab him for his next session.

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“And what pray tell are you up to today Mr. Stark?” Loki asks from behind him and Tony turns to glance over his shoulder at the newest ‘consultant’ for the Avengers. Loki’s leaning up against the doorframe with his arms crossed, looking like he owns the place and Tony sighs inwardly.
“Just setting up for a meeting. Can I help you with something Mr. Laufeyson?” Tony asks and Loki tilts his head, taking Tony in as though he’s reading him before he nods.

“I was wondering if I might get your assistance.” Loki replies, stepping in and closing the door behind him. Tony frowns slightly as he turns fully to address the other man.

“Assistance with what?”

“You were able to repel the power of the Scepter all that time ago, I wish to know how you did it.” Loki says and Tony pauses to think about it.

“I don’t think it’s something that I did, per se.” Tony says slowly. “I think it was the ARC reactor that actually did it.”

“The ARC reactor?” Loki inquires and Tony nods as he waves for FRIDAY to bring up the screens.

“The ARC reactor. Stark Industries technology.” Tony says as FRIDAY pulls up several schematics and articles for Loki’s eyes to peruse. “It’s a self-sustaining energy source.”

“This is what powers your machine.”

“The Iron Man armor?” Tony asks and Loki nods. “Yes, it does. It also powers the Compound, Stark Towers and several other locations and various other items.” Tony says as Loki steps into the area and approaches the screens. His eyes look over the information like he can actually understand it, and who knows maybe he can, before he looks back at Tony. “See? Not really something I did.”

Loki steps forward and Tony tenses slightly when he raises his hand and very gently taps Tony on the chest where the ARC used to sit. There’s a small look of confusion when he doesn’t come in contact with the metal casing like he did before and Tony isn’t sure if he should laugh or take a step back.

He opts for both in the end.

“Yeah, I used to have a mini ARC reactor in my chest. Don’t have it anymore.” Tony says and Loki frowns.

“Why would you remove an advantage?” He asks and Tony shrugs.

“Because while it had its ‘advantages’ as you call them, it had far more disadvantages.” Tony doesn’t say ‘plus if I had still had it, I’d be dead right now. Rotting away in Siberia’ “So in the end I had to take it out.”

“Perhaps there is a way to use this energy source as a barrier against Thanos and his army.” Loki offers and Tony nods.

“Maybe, I haven’t really had the time to look into it, but I’m open to suggestions.” Tony says and Loki gives him a look. “What?”

“You would listen to what I would have to say?” Loki challenges and Tony shrugs.

“We’re on the same team now. Doesn’t really make sense not to listen to you.”

“I could betray you.” Loki points out. “Maybe I will tell you nothing but lies.”

“Maybe you will.” Tony replies easily. “Maybe you already have, maybe you’re just a liar.” Tony looks at him as Loki’s jaw seems to tense and he gets a look like he’s masking anger or frustration.
“And maybe you aren’t. But there isn’t enough data on that yet to go by so…face value for right now is all I’ve got.” Loki looks a little surprised at Tony easy acceptance of their situation and Tony isn’t really sure why, but he’s not going to really waste time trying to figure out the God of Mischief’s mindset right now. He’s got an entirely different ex-brainwashed individual to deal with.

“…you surprise me Tony Stark.” Loki says quietly after a moment and Tony looks up from where he’s glanced down at Barnes’s data to take in the ‘god’. “Your compatriots keep me at arm’s length, as they should…yet you do not seem to.”

“I wouldn’t say we’re particularly close.” Tony interjects and Loki just looks at him.

“Yet you’ve kept my secret, and you’ve sided with me over your own allies…why?”

“Does it matter?” Tony asks and Loki nods.

“I would wish to know if you would wish to tell me.” He says and Tony sighs as he thinks about the answer.

“I know a bit about what it’s like to have someone fuck around with your head.” Tony says eventually. “I wouldn’t wish that on anyone, and it sure as hell isn’t anyone’s place to demand that sort of information to make themselves feel better.” Tony puts down the tablet on the nearby desk. “As for why I would take your side over ‘my allies’, the answer is simple. If you’ve told the truth about your own experiences, and if you’ve told the truth about wanting to destroy Thanos – then we have the same goal and by definition, to a point, we’re already allies.”

“An interesting way to look at it.” Loki says and Tony shrugs.

“We have a saying here, ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’.” Tony says. “And while I’m not usually the biggest believer in that statement, I can understand the idea of the sentiment behind it.” Loki seems to think about his answer for a moment.

“You realize the fault in your logic?” He asks and Tony motions for him to continue. “You said ‘if I’m telling the truth’ and yet you also express an understanding that I may be lying. How could you make a decision based off of such fickle information?”

“…I guess it all comes down to the fact that I hope I’m right.” Tony answers him.

“Right about what?”

“Right that you’re not a liar.”

“Many have called me one, and I will be the first to say that I have not gotten the title ‘Liesmith’ erroneously.”

“There have to be times that you tell the truth, otherwise the lies would hold no power.” Tony replies. "So we can call it me being a devil’s advocate…but just because you’ve been known to lie from time to time doesn’t mean that you’re always lying.” There’s a strange look that Loki gives him at his statement that Tony realizes he doesn’t have the time to break down because there’s a soft knock on the door. “Come in.” He calls out and it takes a moment before Barnes pushes the door open. “Ah, Mr. Barnes please take a seat. My apologizes, Mr. Laufeyson but I must cut this short. I have a prior engagement.” Tony tells him and Loki nods before he walks over to the door, pausing a second to seemingly size up the ex-Winter Soldier before he leaves the room.

“You asked me to come?” Barnes says and Tony nods.
“Yes, we need to discuss the next stages of B.A.R.F..” Tony tells him and he motions to a seat. “I wanted to get started on this ASAP so that we might be able to count on you in the field should extra help be required.” Barnes immediately comes and sits down, and Tony has to fight back the urge to keep himself from turning his back on the other man.

Barnes was a victim, Tony gets that. Tony also gets that he was a victim too. It’s just hard to correlate the two pieces of information sometimes.

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“This is ridiculous!” Sam’s snap catches Tony’s attention as he and the Vision walk down the hallway and the two of them stop to see what’s going on. Sam’s in the living area with Natasha, Clint and Wanda standing across from him. “And to be frank it’s insulting.”

“It’s Cap’s call.” Natasha says and Tony’s already dreading whatever the hell ‘Cap’s call’ means.

“He already made that call.” Sam says, crossing his arms and clearly trying to calm himself.

“Well he’s made a new one. Thanks to his fancy new ‘leadership’ training. Right Stark?” Clint asks, looking at Tony with a small sneer in his voice and Tony just arches an eyebrow.

“What’s going on?” Tony asks, looking at Sam and Sam gives him an apologetic look that makes no sense for a few moments.

“Steve’s pulling me from ‘acting leader’ duty.” Sam says. “He’s electing Clint instead.”

Chapter End Notes

Whew that chapter was kicking my butt. Hope you enjoyed it!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Thanks for waiting! Here’s the next chapter!

Tony takes a few moments to let that information soak in. Steve, from wherever he is right now, had decided in all his ‘supreme Steve wisdom’ that Clint would make a better acting captain right now than Sam.

“I see.” Tony says, giving into the need to reach up and pinch the bridge of his nose in tired exasperation. “And I take it that he went through the proper channels for such a request? I’ll admit I’m curious to see the paperwork on this particular decision.”

“He chose Clint, Tony.” Natasha says and Tony glances up, looking the two over – Natasha in her fake easy comradery like stance and Clint with his stance screaming ‘oh I can’t wait to make you suffer’. It only takes a moment to fully put the pieces together that are dangling in the air between them.

“I see, so there was no paperwork filled out and no request for Wilson to be formally removed from his position?” Tony says and Clint steps forward.

“It’s Steve’s call remember? He’s the team leader and he chose me.” He tells him and Tony shakes his head before he looks at Sam.

“Unless Rogers filed a complaint, he currently has no authority to remove you from your office. Not while he is still away.” Tony tells Sam. “This – to adhere or agree to this would be to go against regulations. If Rogers truly believes that you have somehow been negligent in your position as the stand in, there are actions that he can take but he cannot just send out an email and replace you with someone else.” Tony looks at Clint. “FRIDAY, has such a request been filed and approved?”

‘No Boss, there has been no official paperwork regarding a change in acting leader or any referencing a vote of no confidence in Mr. Wilson’s abilities to lead the team.’ FRIDAY responds and Tony nods before looking at Sam.

“See? You’re still acting captain. Cover yourself and you’ll continue to be.” He tells him and Natasha crosses her arms.

“‘Cover yourself’, are you telling him to watch his back against us?” She asks and Tony’s mind just boggles over the sheer ludicracy of that statement.

“Considering that an attempt to oust him from his position has already been made, it would be wise to assume that certain parties who did not accomplish what they set out to do might try again.” Tony says as neutrally as he can manage. “As such, a level of awareness of the situation is required.” Tony turns and goes to walk by Sam but he pauses for a second. “Welcome to the top, it’s not as fun as it’s cracked up to be.” He says softly to the other man, sparing a small smile for him before he continues on his way. He can hear arguing behind him, of Clint demanding that Sam relent to Rogers’ wishes regardless of ‘chains of command’.
Tony shakes his head as he heads out for the car. Haven’t they all learned their lesson that the ‘chain of command’ beginning and ending with Rogers’ whims will get them all in trouble?

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The tide is turning, that much is clear, but it’s difficult to say which way the boat is going to be pulled. Natasha’s prided herself on knowing exactly when to jump ship and when to cut her losses, but these last few months have certainly been a frustrating experience where each of her decisions seems to go belly up.

It made sense to side with Tony when Ross came with the Accords document. Their days of no oversight were bound to end one way or another and Natasha knew that if anyone could keep both hands on the wheel throughout all of this it would be Tony, so she stuck with him. But when Steve learned of the Winter Soldiers and the threat that they provided, she saw an opportunity to stretch out their freedom for at least a few more years. The general public would rally behind a hero who had to go against politicians in order to save them all from annihilation at the hands of a super powered task force.

It should have all worked out.

And then Siberia happened and a crack appeared in the foundation of the Avengers.

Natasha’s not a fool, Tony will always be their best trump card. Even in how he’s playing the Accords right now is proof of it, she would have just figured that he would have been playing them for the Avengers benefit and not against them. She had seen the shift when he returned from the hospital, but she hadn’t had the foresight to really push before he’d walked away and locked himself down in the labs for whatever soul searching moment he found down there.

The Tony who left that meeting was the Tony they were used to.

The Tony who returned the next day was a Tony they did not know.

This was a Tony who didn’t engage, didn’t seem invested and who seemed to have his own agenda that he was no longer so eager to share with them and get their approval on.

This was a Tony who was going to do exactly what Steve had always feared he would do – he was going to destroy the Avengers, and there didn’t seem to be any way for them to stop him.

The proof of their inevitable destruction was given during the meeting with Sam. Sam was angry yes, but he had been willing to step aside as Steve had requested of him as he should have. It was only after Tony with his ‘those aren’t the rules anymore’ diatribe that made Sam square his shoulders against them and put his foot down declaring that unless proper protocol was adhered to, he would not be stepping down from his position.

“Steve’s asked that you step down for Clint. Tony’s right and he’s wrong. You can choose to step down at any time and that’s what Steve’s asked for.” Natasha says and Sam crosses his arms.

“I see no reason why Steve should think that I am unfit to lead the Avengers and I see no reason for myself that says I’m unfit. So no, I’m not going to step down.” Sam says and Clint steps forward.

“Steve’s still the leader Sam, you know that. This whole thing is going to be over in a few weeks anyways, do you really want to get off on the wrong foot by ignoring a request from your leader?” He says and Sam just shakes his head.

“If Steve has a legitimate concern, he can take it up with Ross and follow the rules. Until then, I’m
not stepping down and that’s final.” Sam replies, his shoulders going back. “Now, I have paperwork to do and a meeting to get to. I’ll speak with you later.”

“How was that time?” The Spider-Man asks Tony, his voice excited and friendly and the billionaire smiles back at him.

“Karen?”

‘He has added a distance of 10 feet to his previous distance record.’ An AI voice says from over the speakers and Natasha figures she’s not surprised that the young boy is wrapped in all the best that Tony can give him.

Tony always was a sucker for children and for protecting and caring for them. Undoubtedly from his own history with Howard.

The Spider-Man whoops in joy at the news and he high fives Tony as Natasha enters the area.

“A new record, that’s impressive.” She says, keeping her tone friendly and she sees how Tony turns from her subtly. “I don’t think we really got a chance to introduce ourselves. Everything was so crazy back then.” She offers out her hand to the young hero and Spider-Man nods as he takes it and shakes.

“Yeah, understatement of the year.” He agrees with her.

“I’m Natasha.” She says and she notices several things in the following seconds. The Spider-Man freezes, temporarily unsure about something and Tony is conveniently turned to the whole conversation like he’s not involved and like he has no say or authority in it.

It’s obvious that some kind of ball has been thrown in the kid’s court.

“I’m Spider-Man.” He says eventually and Natasha sees the tension that Tony had been carrying lessen a little at the kids comment.

“Spider-Man is your codename.” Natasha tells him with a friendly tone. “If you’re uncomfortable telling me your full name, you can just tell me your first. Hundreds of thousands of people probably have the same first name.” She says and he takes a moment.

“No…Spider-Man is good. I’d like for you to call me Spider-Man.” He says and she smiles with a shrug.

“Okay, Spider-Man it is.” She replies, figuring that it’s easier to attract flies with honey instead of vinegar. She’ll figure him out later. “How’s practice coming?”

“Good! Just broke a record! Well, you knew that already.” The kid rambles, rubbing the back of his neck in an embarrassed motion.

‘Spider-Man, the alert you set has been activated.’ The Karen AI says and Spider-Man jumps into action.

“Oh no! I gotta go Mr. Stark!” He all but shouts as he leaps into the air and takes off as fast as possible.

“The kid can move.” Natasha says amicably and Tony nods.

“Yes he can.” He answers her before shutting down the training area. “FRIDAY, run the numbers
and see about making adjustments to the regimen. I still think we can do better. There was a lag between sections 24 and 25."

‘Yes Boss, I noticed it too. I will immediately begin diagnostics.’ FRIDAY replies.

“Tony, can we talk?” Natasha asks and Tony seems to sigh before turning to her.

“Depends I guess on what you want to talk about.” He says.

“You’ve been distant.” She tells him.

“I’ve been busy.” He corrects her and she shakes her head.

“You were always busy before Tony, yet you always made time. You’re avoiding us.” She calls him out and he sighs.

“I’ve been busy Miss Romanoff.” Each time he says one of their names like that it’s like a line drawn in the sand and she hasn’t figured out how to cross it yet. “Prior to the Accords, I only had SI and the Avengers to be concerned with. While those hours are nothing to turn my nose up at, they are nothing compared to the sheer amount of work that I have on my plate now. I am the Liaison to the Accords, I am attempting to assist them with the expansion of the Avengers as well. I am still Iron Man and I am still a huge part of SI. My time is not as flexible as it once was.”

“I’d actually say you have a lot more free time.” She tells him. “I’ve noticed, that’s what I do remember?”

“I wouldn’t say ‘noticing things’ is what you do, per se, but I would say that it’s one of the tools of your trade.” Tony replies to her. “And my time is just that – my time. I am not required to make concessions or to ‘make time’ for anything that I do not wish to make time for.”

“Still determined to ‘lose us’?” She asks, and there’s a little reproach there and Tony finally turns to her with a sweet smile.

“I’m always curious about ways to shuck off potential dead weight. Must be an old habit from when I was CEO.”

“So now we’re dead weight to you?” She prods and Tony shrugs.

“I don’t know, are you?”

“You just said we were.”

“I said I’m always looking for ways to shed potential dead weight. You were the one who put yourself in that category Miss Romanoff, not I.”

“You put us there when you answered my question.” Natasha tells him and he shrugs.

“I never once said that I wanted to lose you. You were the one to say that as well if I recall correctly. Please stop putting words in my mouth Miss Romanoff, it does neither of us any favors.”

“Tony, you have to stop this.” Natasha turns her tone pleading. “You’re tearing this family apart.”

“The Avengers are not a family Miss Romanoff. They are a peace keeping force. Perhaps once we were closer than we are now, but we were in the wrong. The Avengers need to be looked at as a job. A job with specific requirements and expectations.”
“And you think you’re holding up to these imaginary expectations?”

“I’m holding up my part as required of me from the layout of my position.” Tony tells her easily. “If you think I am not, you can always pull up my responsibilities and speak to Ross about them.”

“And what about your responsibility to us?”

“And what ‘responsibilities’ would you be referencing?”

“Having our backs, keeping us safe? Being one of us?”

“I have your back on the field as I always have.” There’s a tone to his voice like he’s saying ‘Like you didn’t have mine’ and it’s a small dent in the armor that he’s pretending he’s erected around himself. “I’m unsure what you are referring to about keeping you safe, but I have my suspicions and I can say that providing weaponry and armor is no longer under my responsibilities and as such I do not have a responsibility to you to provide it.” He taps a few things on his tablet and the lights start shutting down in the training room. “As for being one of you, I am an Avenger and that hasn’t changed.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

“I know.” Tony admits and it’s the first real concession to her he’s made. “But I have somewhere to be, you’ll have to excuse me Miss Romanoff.”

“Tony, please.” She pleads and he actually stops at her request. “We just want to…fix this. I know I messed up, I know I shouldn’t have done what I did.” She can tell she’s hit something on the head. “I should have had your back, I shouldn’t have lied to you.”

“…Well, here’s to hoping that kind of behavior is well and truly in the past then.” Tony says and he doesn’t turn around to look at her and Natasha knows that she hasn’t gotten as far into his walls as she wanted. “Have a good day Miss Romanoff.”

“You too Mr. Stark.”
Chpater 11

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Thanks for waiting! I've had this chapter on my computer for a while, I wasn't really sure if it was ready but I decided that posting it instead of staring at it would probably be preferred. :-) So enjoy.

“Doctor Grey, thank you for stopping in.” Tony says as he comes forward and offers a hand to the red-haired doctor. She gives him a smile as she takes it.

“Thank you for having me Doctor Stark.” She says and Tony finds himself smiling back. “Professor Xavier was clear on what I’ll be doing here today, yes? Do you have any questions?”

“I’ve never heard of this school for... gifted youngsters before.” Natasha says. “It must be very impressive, to have hidden yourself from even SHIELD’s radar.”

“We are very private and very selective.” Dr. Grey replies to that easily. “As you can imagine, silence is a mutant’s greatest ally most days.”

“Silence isn’t going to be something you’ll be able to maintain if the X-Men join together with the Avengers.” Sam points out and Dr. Grey nods.

“There is a time when one must step out of the shadows. Professor Xavier has determined that now is that time for us.” She says. She glances past Clint and Natasha to Wanda when she approaches. “Miss Maximoff, a pleasure. I’m Doctor Jean Grey from the Xavier Institute for Gifted Youngsters.” She holds out a hand and Wanda comes forward to shake it. There’s a brief pause. “Please do not do that.” Dr. Grey says a moment later as she drops Wanda’s hand.

“What did she do?” Sam asks, looking between the two women and Dr. Grey just shakes her head.

“A slip I’m sure. A lot of telepaths have them in the early days.” She covers for Wanda as she motions to the couches. “Shall we?”

“What are you going to be doing?” Natasha asks and Dr. Grey smooths out her skirt as she sits down. She reminds Tony so much of Pepper that it’s almost hilarious.

“We will discuss Miss Maximoff’s abilities, as well as where she stands right now and what we might be able to offer her if we choose to go forward with that.”

“If?” Sam asks and Dr. Grey nods.

“Yes Mr. Wilson. If we decide to go forward with this partnership in regards to Miss Maximoff being the liaison between our two groups.”

“What reasons are you thinking that might cause a ‘no’ response?” Sam asks and Dr. Grey shrugs.

“I don’t know yet. It’ll all depend on how this evaluation goes.”

“You still haven’t said what you’ll be ‘evaluating’.” Natasha points out and Dr. Grey looks at her.
“Mental stability, degree and level of control, things that might open up our other students to any kind of harm or danger. As you can imagine, our first priority are the students already within our walls.”

“That sounds like you leave a lot of kids out in the cold.” Clint says as he crosses his arms and Dr. Grey shakes her head.

“Not as many as you might think Mr. Barton. Now if I may speak to Miss Maximoff alone.” Dr. Grey’s tone is clear on the dismissal and Tony nods as he turns to leave the area. He figures he’s not surprised when the others follow him.

“This isn’t a good idea.” Natasha starts off immediately and Tony sighs.

“It’s a school full of powered kids.” Sam says. “It’s a place that the Avengers should have a foothold in, and a place that Wanda might feel more secure and less, I guess, of an outsider.”

“We don’t know anything about these people.” Clint says. “Nat’s right, I don’t trust it and I don’t like it.”

“Professor Xavier has already started opening up communications with the proper channels.” Tony points out. “Now that there’s a much more…stable method of governing for outliers like us, it makes perfect sense that he’d reach out now.”

“Why not before?” Natasha asks. “We’ve been here for a while, why now? The Avengers have been around for years, why now?” It takes Tony a couple of seconds to work his mind around what she’s saying. He almost wants to rub at his temples at the either willful or horribly blind ignorance of the truth.

“Because the Accords Council exists now.” He says like it should be obvious. “Xavier doesn’t want to answer to the Avengers, and I don’t blame him. He wants to work hand in hand with an actual government force created to aid and shelter superpowered teams and individuals.” Tony shrugs slightly. “I actually hope that this is the first of many to come. Now that there’s a system in place, the time to speak up is right now. Perhaps more groups that we were unaware of might come out into the light, so to speak.”

“The Accords Council isn’t suited to handle every situation.” Natasha says and Tony just gives her a look.

“That’s why there are meetings. Lots and lots of meetings. To make sure that they can turn around and handle every situation.” He replies. “You lot might not like the Accords Council, but the rest of the world isn’t exactly seeing eye to eye with you on this one.”

“You mean you’re not seeing ‘eye to eye’ with us.” Clint snaps and Tony sighs.

“I mean that Professor Xavier has decided to reach out at this point, and that we should truly consider what an alliance with an entire force of…I don’t like calling them this, but mutants will look like.”

“What do you mean?” Sam asks and Tony tilts his head to think about it.

“There are a lot of things I think in regards to this. Training, interactions, recruitment – everything will be affected by an alliance with a genuine school for people with powers.”

“How so?” Sam questions as he crosses his arms.

“Off the top of my head? What do their training sessions look like? What technology do they use?
“Are we up to par and if we are not, are they willing to share information with us or will we have to rely on them?”

“Willing to admit that you might not be the end all of engineering?” Clint mocks. “Hallelujah. I don’t know if I should look outside to see if the fucking sky is falling.”

“Clint.” Sam’s voice is firm in the rebuking tone. “Enough.”

“Enough what acting captain?” Clint fires back. “I didn’t say anything we weren’t all thinking.”

“Funny, I wasn’t thinking that at all.” Sam retorts. Tony can tell that there’s something going on here that’s more than just Sam wouldn’t step down for Clint. There’s…rage in Clint, so some kind of argument or something that happened one of the times that Tony wasn’t around to witness it.

“There’s also the matter of recruitment.” Tony continues on after Sam’s and Clint’s stare down goes on too long. “Someone like Spider-Man might be better suited to being sent to them for training instead of here.”

“Just because of age?” Natasha asks with an arched eyebrow.

“Age and connection.” Tony responds. “I can’t imagine what it’s like having superpowers and I certainly can’t imagine having them during puberty. But being around a whole bunch of other teenagers going through the exact same thing and still having to worry about dates and homework and normal things? I think that could be powerful to a young hero just starting out.”

“That implies that we would trust Xavier with said children.” She replies. “Would you trust him with Spider-Man?”

“I don’t know.” Tony answers that after a moment. “I would want to walk through the compound for myself, and I would want to sit down and discuss the benefits or cons of us over them, but in the end if it were a better place for him to learn? A safer one? Then yes, I would want him to go in a heartbeat.” Tony tilts his head slightly. “I would still check up on him…probably religiously, but Xavier has assured us that communications with Maximoff would never be restricted, so you’d be free to do that whenever you wanted.”

“What about you?” Nat asks and Tony frowns.

“What about me?”

“You said we could check up on her whenever we wanted to. Would you also be checking up on Wanda religiously? As religiously as you would Spider-Man?”

“Not at all.” Tony says to that honestly and he sees Clint puff up and Natasha crosses her arms. “But Maximoff isn’t a teenager.”

“If she were?”

“Why are you asking this?” Tony questions. “What does it matter? She isn’t, no matter how much she’s coddled like she is.”

“She’s part of this family Tony.” Natasha says. “And it feels like you’re trying to throw her away.”

“This isn’t a family Ms. Romanov.” Tony retorts to that.

“This is a fucking family.” Clint snaps. “Just because you’re being an ass doesn’t mean that the rest
“Clint.” Sam’s reprimand comes again and Clint shakes his head.

“No, you know what. Fuck you and fuck him too. In fact, why don’t you go fuck each other since apparently you feel like bouncing on Stark’s dick these days instead of remembering who you’re supposed to be fucking loyal to.” Clint snaps. “Did Steve leave you in that prison? No, he fucking didn’t. Do you know who did – Stark.” He points at Tony for extra clarification or dramatic effect, Tony’s not really sure which one if it’s either.

“Barton.” Sam’s voice brokers no arguments and Tony’s a little surprised to even hear a tone like that come from the man who is usually only known or recognized for being in Steve’s shadow. “With me. Now.” He walks off to the side and Clint growls as he follows him. It’s clear that another argument is about to happen off in the background somewhere and Tony does not envy Sam for having to put up with it.

“Are you happy yet?” Natasha’s voice asks next to him and Tony turns to see that she’s come closer. “Look at what you’re doing.”

“And what is it that I’m supposedly doing? I’m looking and I’m not seeing anything.”

“You’re tearing us apart.”

“Funny, last time you said that you said I was tearing this ‘family’ apart.” Tony points out and she crosses her arms.

“I didn’t see the point in rehashing information you already knew.”

“And I don’t like repeating myself Ms. Romanov.” Tony says. “I’m not tearing us apart. If we’re falling apart as easily as you say we are, then we weren’t built to last very long, were we?”

“We were stronger than this once upon a time Tony.” She tries to lie to him. “We used to be so much stronger than this.”

“We crumbled like ash each time something pushed against us.” Tony says to that. “There isn’t one battle that I can think of where we withstood it from start to finish.”

“We’ve had dozens and you know it.”

“We’ve had none, and you know that.” Tony replies. “We’ve been at each other’s throats since the first day and that’s never changed. We’ve fallen apart so quickly and in so many ways that it’s impressive that any part of us is still here today for us to be arguing about. And yet, here we are – doing the only thing we ever knew how to do: argue.” Tony sighs and shakes his head, taking a small step back from her. “And that’s the kind of thing that I don’t want to continue doing.”

“So you’re just going to give up?” She challenges him. “Just like that?”

“Just like that?” Tony repeats with a tired tone. “Ms. Romanov, I’ve been on the never-ending hamster wheel that is the Avengers for the last five years. Trust me when I say that I’m more than ready to get off.”

“Breaking us up isn’t the way to change things.”

“Keeping things as they were by its own definition isn’t the way to change things either.” Tony replies before he shakes his head. “I have places that I need to be. Please inform me of Dr. Grey’s
“final report when she’s finished.”

“Or you could just take some time to be interested in this ‘hamster wheel’ and hear it for yourself.”

“FRIDAY, please keep me updated.” Tony says instead to that as he turns and goes to walk away.

“Steve’s going to be back soon.” Natasha says and Tony’s not sure if she’s fully meaning to use that sentence like a threat, but it clearly comes across as one.

“I am well aware of that fact.” Tony replies.

“If you think he’s going to just stand by and let you destroy the Avengers Tony…you know it’s not going to happen.”

“I’m not ‘destroying’ the Avengers. I’m trying to help them.” Tony says to that. “Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem as though the lemmings have enough sense to look up and see that a cliff is coming and that I’m trying to save them.”

“Oh, so now we’re lemmings? How many insults are you going to throw at us while pretending that you’re so above all of this Tony?”

“I guess we’ll never know.” Tony replies as he waves goodbye over his shoulder. “FRIDAY, please keep me updated on Maximoff’s review. Goodbye Ms. Romanov.”

“We’re never going to turn our backs on you no matter how hard you try to make us.” She says and Tony can’t help the ‘WTF’ look he must get on his face as he turns to look at her. “You know that and you’re taking advantage of it.” She takes a step forward. “Steve always let you get away with this. You’d push and he’d let you until you pushed us all over a cliff and then we’d have to pull ourselves all up together and then you’d turn around and do it again.” She shakes her head. “When are you going to stop doing this Tony? If you want to talk about a ‘hamster wheel’, let’s talk about the one that really exists. The one that actually happens.”

Tony doesn’t even know how to grace that with a response so he just shakes his head and walks away. That’s a whole level of either crazy delusion or really bad manipulation tactics that he’s just not in the mood for.

There is one thing that Natasha is right about though. Steve is returning soon, and everything is going to blow up in their faces when he does.

End Notes

Thanks for reading! Let me know what you think!

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