Facing Reality

by aliaoftwoworlds

Summary

Three years after the media-coined Civil War, the US government has pushed through pardons for the Rogue Avengers. However, they're going to have to face the real world now, rather than living off the money and good grace of Tony Stark.

A series of somewhat-connected snapshots from the Rogues' return to the Compound on, and their realizations that life won't be as easy as it was before. Slight canon divergence in that there's not yet any threat of Thanos.

Notes

This is a post-CW bitterness fic by someone firmly on Team Iron Man. It will not be friendly toward Team Cap (it will, however, be neutral/somewhat friendly toward Bucky).

I may add characters as they appear in each chapter. I'm trying to keep the tags to only the characters that are prominently featured or at least have speaking roles.

Seriously, if you're a big fan of Team Cap, don't bother reading it. It will just make you unhappy.

Amilie is an OC that I have integrated into most of my MCU fics. She won't feature prominently in this fic, she's really only mentioned here as Tony's source of protection from
Please feel free to mention any formatting, spelling, or grammar errors. I have recently developed a very annoying tendency to accidentally switch into the present tense when I'm writing.
Chapter 1

Though it certainly wasn’t something he would wish on anyone else, Tony sometimes did appreciate growing up in the cutthroat business world and the media spotlight, for the skills it had taught him if nothing else. The ability to make “fuck you” sound like an apologetic statement, the nuances of questioning someone’s intelligence while complimenting them on the surface, and of course, the ability to resist rolling his eyes during serious discussions. He had intentionally forgone these rules and customs many times, but when the situation was particularly serious and he was feeling stressed and upset, he could always fall back on being unfailingly, stiffly polite and formal.

Sitting alone in a room with a bunch of lawyers and discussing the return of the Rogue Avengers certainly qualified as serious and stressful. However, after extensive talks with his team—his real team—and the therapy he’d been going to, he was more than prepared for this. Three years was a long time to be apart, and things had changed. Calmed down. Tony had a support system he knew he could actually count on, a team that really worked together and trusted each other, and he knew he was holding all the financial and legal cards in this game.

One of the most important lessons he had learned over the last few years was how to focus only on the things he could control. He couldn’t stop the US government from getting a bug up their ass about the “image” of American heroes and aggressively pursuing pardons for the Rogues. However, he could take the news gracefully and work to protect himself and his new team from the fallout. He couldn’t stop the Rogues from being rebranded “Avengers,” or a third of the public from lapping up their bullshit and thinking the Avengers were once again one big, happy family. But he could put his personal issues aside and, for the good of the public they were working to protect, treat the Rogues with polite formality.

He was also learning—slowly, with a lot of help from his team—how not to take responsibility for everything. He was slowly but surely learning to let go of his guilt over things he couldn’t change, or wasn’t responsible for in the first place. This had been the subject of quite a few of their discussions when the news came through that the Rogues would be coming back. After a lot of work, Tony could feel firm and justified in greeting the Rogues with professionalism and working with them to transition back into being responsible, regulated superheroes, but not offering anything more than that. He had no obligation to do more, and so he wouldn’t. That was one point Rhodey had been driving further into his head every day.

The others in the room were mostly the liaisons each of the Rogues now had for dealing with their real-world responsibilities as well as the new, revised Accords, which each of them had been required to sign in order to be granted a pardon and return to the United States. Part of the requirements from Germany and Romania for granting pardons to the criminals rather than demanding their arrest and trial in an international court was that they sign the Accords and repay their debts by working for the good of the world. It was a sickening sentiment, particularly to the families of those they’d killed, but a realistic one. Even as rich as he was, Tony had paid a heavy chunk of money to Germany for the destruction he’d caused at the airport, as well time spent personally assisting with the cleanup efforts. Rogers and his crew had caused far more property damage than Tony’s side, particularly those involved in the tunnel collapse in Bucharest, and none of them were billionaires. Even if they worked normal jobs and had their wages garnished for the rest of their lives, none of them could come close to paying for the damage they’d caused.

Naturally, one of the first issues to be addressed was Barnes, because of course Rogers was more concerned about his brainwashed ex-assassin buddy than anyone else. Hadn’t that been what the entire media-coined Civil War was about? A lot of bitter feelings came with the beginning of their
dealings with the pardons, but Tony had eventually stamped it all down to focus on working through it all. Barnes himself, after he was taken out of cryo in Wakanda, was surprisingly cooperative. Tony had actually felt for the man; he had been brutally tortured for decades, forced to do horrible things, and finally broke free of his brainwashing, only to be dragged by his old friend Rogers into a fight he didn’t need to be in, causing more damage and hurting more people along the way. It wasn’t long after Siberia that Tony was looking into ways to help Barnes overcome his unprecedented trauma and deal with the Winter Soldier triggers in his head.

After much argument with Rogers, who of course trusted only himself with his buddy despite his utter lack of experience in dealing with psychological trauma, the Accords council was finally able to get everyone to agree. Barnes would be taken under guard to a state-of-the-art psychiatric facility in Nevada. The place was practically a vacation home. Tony had generously flown out some of the top psychiatrists in the world, doctors who specialized in war trauma, cult brainwashing, and memory loss. He also had designs in his mind, though not yet on paper, for a new prosthetic. He’d wait on that until Barnes was declared stable—better to leave him one-armed while there was any chance of triggering the Winter Soldier programming and making him attack his doctors. Barnes would have guards present during any interactions with other people. Everyone who would have contact with him had been thoroughly vetted.

After the initial insanity with the announcement of the pardons and the Barnes situation, it was time for the gritty, stressful reality that the Rogues were coming back to work with them. It was nice enough to be able to send away the man who’d murdered his parents—in body if not in mind—and then helped to beat him half to death and leave him stuck in a broken suit in a freezing Siberian bunker, but he knew it was not going to be so easy with the others, particularly Rogers.

Which led to him here, stuck in a room full of lawyers who asked him for a meeting to discuss the Avengers Compound, now renamed the International Superheroes’ Training Center and Compound. Pepper had wanted his name attached to the building, partly for press and partly to remind people that he owned it, but at the time the Compound was being revamped and they started welcoming in some of Xavier’s graduates, Tony’s name was still too intertwined with the Avengers and their drama. He hadn’t wanted that tainting what he was trying to build.

He was exercising his ability to not roll his eyes to its maximum, listening to these people try to kiss his ass and “hesitantly” ask for what they assumed he would be giving them. Really, access to the Compound at all was a gift he didn’t have to give them, but he would. At least there, they could be watched and would have to conform to the rules.

He resisted sighing, though his tone flattened even more as he stated things they could easily have read in the ISTCC legal paperwork. “As I’ve said before, the training facilities are continually upgraded to match our users’ unique needs and qualities. If any new patron of the Compound has a need for additional facilities, they may request them through the Equipment and Training office. Because upgrades to the space are typically lengthy and require a large budget, the request will be discussed and voted on by the designers, who typically work multiple requests into one design to conserve space and money. Ultimately, design changes need to be approved by me, since I’ll be paying for them, but there is a budget set aside specifically for continual updates to the Compound and we have not yet had a request we couldn’t meet.”

The lawyer currently questioning him—he’d forgotten which one, they all looked nearly identical in their uncomfortable suits—pressed forward with his pointless questions. “And requested upgrades to living spaces are handled the same way?”

Ah, they were getting close to an important topic, finally. It was time to be very clear. “Living space arrangements made out of necessity, for accessibility or containment of mutant abilities, for example,
are handled through the E&T office, yes. Personal changes or updates to a living space must be cleared through the design board for safety reasons, but nearly any change is free to be made at the user’s expense. However, those are for individual living spaces, not common lounge areas for daily use by off-site members. Were your clients planning to request updates to common areas?”

There was a brief flash of confusion across multiple faces before they smoothed back out into calculating politeness. “No, I am talking about individual living spaces. It was assumed that our clients would maintain residence at the Compound, as they used to.” There it is, the slight accusation hidden in a question. That the fact that things changed while the Rogues were away for three years is somehow not their responsibility to deal with, but Tony’s.

Tony adopted an expression of mildly surprised understanding. “Oh, I see. Well, there is plenty of living space available and we aren’t planning many more move-ins in the next few years. We typically have notice long beforehand if someone is planning to move in, but we can have apartments furnished and ready for move-in in approximately ten days. The base cost for a Compound apartment is two thousand dollars per month, which I can assure you is quite reasonable considering the costs to run the building. There are additional fees involved with certain services, which are detailed in the rules and regulations for the Compound. I won’t waste your time reading them all aloud.”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence before Marie Jackson, the representative of the new SHIELD branch that would now oversee and take responsibility for the Rogues as a group, opened her mouth. “That is not really in the budget for the group.” She was addressing the liaisons rather than Tony, thankfully. Tony had met her a few times before today; she was a wonderful woman, smart and talented, and had infinitely more patience than Tony himself, which was how she had gotten stuck with the job of making the Rogues understand that they’re now living in the real world, where actions have consequences and things cost money.

Tony’s apologetic expression was genuine this time, though it was only for what Marie had to deal with. “Yes, unfortunately with the costs of maintaining a facility like this, there is simply no way to bring living costs down to what would be considered affordable to the average person. I understand that Dr. Xavier’s students receive some sort of a sponsorship to come and train there, which covers their living costs. Most of our on-site junior trainees are there through scholarships and funds for superhumans as well. If living at the Compound is not in your budget, however, I’m sure you can make arrangements elsewhere. Most of the current active Avengers live off-site, myself included, and I can assure you that daily access to the Compound for training, activities, and meetings is quite simple.”

That brought the lawyers up short. It was logical and there was really nothing they could argue with. Tony wasn’t lying or inflating the costs. The Compound was a bitch to maintain and if he wasn’t getting help from fundraising, superheroes’ charities, and investors, it would be eating him out of his very considerable bank account.

It was obvious to anyone who looked or did a minimal amount of research that Tony was sponsoring Spiderman as well as several of the others, and of course everyone knew that Tony paid for everything related to Rhodes’ Avenger work. But none of these lawyers were quite bold enough—yet—to come right out and ask whether Tony would be spending his personal money on the Rogues like he had in the bad old days. Half of him hoped they were smart enough never to try it, while the other half knew they were all thinking it and wanted one of them to ask so they could get it over with.

After a few moments of silence, another of the liaisons shuffled some papers and cleared his throat. “Well, I’m sure we can… work something out for residence. I wonder if you could further explain the rules on equipment inspection in the paperwork you sent over?”
Tony took a deep breath. Here was another potentially touchy subject. “It’s a safety precaution. Any new equipment, including replacement parts and items like ammunition, must pass a thorough inspection before being brought into the Compound. Even if any members choose to contract with one service for repeated deliveries of the same standard items, each shipment must be inspected before it can be allowed into the Compound. I know it creates a slight delay in delivery and can be a bit of a hassle, but the potential for harm to the Compound and its members is too large to forego these precautions. Equipment can be stored at the Compound once it has been cleared, and if it is taken outside the Compound and then returned after that, it only needs to pass through the basic security inspection done each time someone enters the Compound.”

“What about equipment designed or created at the Compound?” This was asked with slight hesitance. Tony knew where the man was eventually hoping to go with this, but if he didn’t want to get to the point, Tony had no obligation to help him along.

“There are labs at the Compound for these purposes, yes, and they undergo frequent safety inspections. Any raw materials or parts brought in must pass the same inspections as finished equipment, and the same rules about leaving and reentering the Compound apply.”

“So equipment designed within the Compound itself can be freely used within the Compound once it is completed?”

“Yes, but since I assume you’re asking for your clients’ sake, I must warn you that there are strict rules in place regarding the design and manufacture of equipment within the Compound. With few exceptions, all work of the type must be done within approved lab space. Most of the labs are currently being used by myself, other residents of the Compound, or the Stark Industries Youth Science Program. There is some space available for rent, but there are considerable safety regulations to be aware of if your clients are planning to set up a lab area, and anyone they wish to hire to work within the labs must go through very thorough background inspections, which can take up to a month.”

“No, none of our clients were planning to set up lab space of their own at this time.” He was clearly suppressing signs of frustration, and Tony himself was getting a headache. Legal and political maneuvering was exhausting.

“Well, then if you would like to help speed the process of equipment inspection along, you can give a list of the companies that your clients plan to contract with to the Safety and Inspections office at your earliest convenience. Inspection is required for each shipment, but there is also an initial vetting process for any new company and the sooner we can get that out of the way, the sooner your clients can have their gear at the Compound.”

It was clear that everyone in the room understood Tony’s point. Several slightly surprised looks were directed at him. “I was under the impression that you designed and created equipment for the Avengers, Mr. Stark.”

Tony could admire the man’s bold move, and at least they could finally get this out in the open, even if he had to hide it all behind formal, professional language. “I do design and manufacture equipment for myself and several of the other active Avengers, yes. All of them have worked out a contract deal or are compensating me in some way. My responsibilities have multiplied since the last time any of your clients were Avengers. At present, I have very little free time available beyond my already considerable duties that would be open for contracted design work. Also,” he nodded slightly to Marie, “if the living expenses at the Compound are beyond the budget for the team, I highly doubt you would be able to afford to contract with me for weapons or gear.”

Many of the lawyers deflated a bit in the face of this firm reminder that Tony had no obligations to
their clients. To cover his ass, the one who had asked the question said smoothly, “Of course, Mr. Stark, I’m sure your duties are considerable. Perhaps we can work something out in the future, but until then, we will have a list of our contracted companies sent to the Compound as soon as we can.” Which Tony knew to mean they would be scrambling to come up with someone as soon as possible, since up to now they had been assuming Tony would be pulling everything the Rogues needed out of his ass.

It had been nearly an hour of this type of back and forth and Tony was progressively losing his patience and his unaffected, professional manner. Thankfully, their time was almost up. Tony looked down at his watch and then surveyed the room, putting on his best important businessman voice. “I’m sorry gentlemen, ladies, but I have another meeting to be at in just a few minutes. I encourage you all to review the policies and procedures of the Compound again, I’m sure they will answer many of your clients’ questions.” In other words, the majority of this meeting had been a gigantic waste of his time. “Are there any more matters to address now?”

“Yes, actually.” This was one that Tony recognized: Kaito Matsui, Wanda Maximoff’s new superhero liaison. Tony had to stop himself from reaching up to grab at the pendant Amilie had given him. He blinked and forced himself to focus as Matsui continued, rather than disappear into sense memories of Wanda’s induced nightmares. “There is a section in the Compound regulations mentioning power suppression?”

Tony took a fortifying breath. He’d almost forgotten about that; it was such a normal thing now, one that all of the responsible people at the Compound accepted, that he’d nearly forgotten that there were some, namely returning Rogues, that would surely throw a hissy fit about it. “Yes?”

His slightly challenging tone made Matsui fidget. The man must have known that Wanda would be unhappy with him for this news, and Tony felt a stab of guilt at putting him in this position—but then reminded himself that this wasn’t his fault, it hadn’t even been his idea, and he wasn’t willing to compromise on this point, no matter what. It wasn’t even a matter of his own safety anymore, thanks to Amilie, but the safety of the rest of the Compound’s residents.

Matsui continued nervously, surely knowing he didn’t have a leg to stand on to argue against this. “Isn’t that a violation of the rights of the members of the Compound?”

Tony leveled a glare at him and let his voice go completely cold. He raised his voice just slightly to be sure the rest of the room was paying him the utmost attention. “The measure was suggested by several of Xavier’s graduates when the mutant training program began. As much as they are in control of their powers, there are always slips, and they all believed that mild power suppression in the common areas, with the exception of training rooms of course, was a helpful solution. The non-mutant magic users at the Compound also appreciate the measures. At the time it was proposed, every member of the Compound and its administrators unanimously agreed on it. Since then, there has been no complaint from the new members.”

Tony stood up, leaned forward and braced his hands on the table in front of him. Most of the lawyers leaned back, away from the ice in his eyes. “Let me make something very clear here. The ISTCC is not a necessity for your clients, and this is not a negotiation. If any of your clients find the rules or regulations of the Compound intolerable, then they are perfectly free to not live or work at the Compound.” He pushed back off of the table and strode to the door. “Please thoroughly review the legal paperwork you were sent with your clients before you schedule another meeting with me.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Marie Jackson meets with the Rogues to address some of their concerns, or rather to beat her head against a very stubborn wall.

Chapter Notes

Holy crap, I did not expect this kind of response so quickly, thank you all so much for reading, for the kudos, and for the wonderful comments.

There are already so many people subscribed to this, I feel I need to tell you all upfront that I probably won’t be able to stick to any sort of consistent upload schedule. I’m a medical student and I work part-time too, so I really don’t get much free time. I tend to go on creative sprees in the first few days after an exam, then do nothing for the week leading up to the next one. But I will do my very best to update at least once a week.

I also think I should mention that I’ve only ever watched the Marvel movies, never read any of the comics and I don’t have time to start, so my stories will be based entirely on the MCU. I’ve seen all the movies pertaining to the Avengers at least once except for Ant-Man, for some reason I just never got around to watching that one. Because of that, I don’t think I’ll be writing much that focuses on Scott; he’ll just appear in the background or be mentioned. I also haven’t seen Ragnarok yet, but I wasn’t planning to include Bruce or Thor in this story; in my mind, Bruce is still hiding out in India or something in this, but if you’ve seen Ragnarok and want to think of it that way you can imagine Bruce is off on another planet, possibly having adventures with Thor and Loki.

FYI, for this story’s purposes I picture Natasha as being essentially in the wind or maybe joining up with the Rogues in Wakanda for part of the last three years. She was declared a criminal when she broke the Accords and betrayed Tony, and then given a pardon along with the rest of them, so now she’s essentially just returning as one of them.

Also, I promise, not every chapter of this is going to be set in a meeting with lawyers, though there won’t be a lot of actual action. But since this story is supposed to be focused on the sort of reality of regulations and rules that should exist around anything involving power over people’s lives, there is going to have to be a lot of talking about rules and sitting down in meetings. I have ideas in mind for more action-packed stories later, but I don’t want to start working on them while I’m still only a couple chapters into this one.

Marie Jackson had been praised for her patience more times than she could remember. From a young age she’d been uncommonly good at sitting through anything someone could throw at her and calmly reasoning back. It had won her dozens of debate tournaments, countless arguments with exes,
and admission to Harvard Law.

However, despite the seemingly popular belief, she didn’t just have some magical inborn ability that made it all effortless. She had to work hard for it, even more so because it was now her reputation and was expected of her. And this group of reinstated Avengers was certainly making her work hard.

She took slow, deep breaths as she listened to Barton complain about their current government-sanctioned accommodations. She had a feeling that telling him “this was the best we could do on short notice” wouldn’t go over well, no matter how true it was. They’d been scrambling a bit to figure everything out in the wake of the pardons being announced. It was all well and good for the President and his people to push through opposition and bring the Rogues home, but it seemed, as usual for a government project, that once their part was done they just dumped everything else onto the next poor sucker down the chain of command.

Because of the “sensitive nature” of what was discussed and negotiated to bring the Rogues back, the decision wasn’t made public until the pardons were cemented. There had also been almost nothing done internally, which meant the new SHIELD, which would now be responsible for the returning Avengers, had almost no time to prepare. With her experience and track record, Marie was put in charge of the new division created for them, and told to facilitate their return and integration into SHIELD. Nice and vague, so that they could conceivably dump almost any problem with the Rogues on her and her division.

Each of the Rogues had been granted, at the government’s expense, the services of a personal superhero liaison to work with them, the Accords Council, and Marie. However, most of the few short weeks between the announcement of the pardons and their actual return to US soil was taken up with their incessant questions about the Accords themselves and the new operations of superhero teams under supervision. Marie knew each of their liaisons had attempted to broach the topics of living arrangements and other logistics, but had been brushed off multiple times with assurances of the availability of the Compound and the apparent belief that everything would be fine. It appeared the Rogues hadn’t bothered to keep up with the changes Stark had been making in the last few years; that, or they really thought that the man would make exceptions to everything for them. Perhaps past experience had taught them to expect everything to be taken care of. Eventually, their lawyers had stopped asking. After all, their job was really only to interface between their clients and other officials when necessary, not to personally see to their clients’ every need without prompting.

As expected, that last, disastrous meeting with Stark, just three days before the Rogues were set to arrive back in the US, led to much more work on Marie’s part. Thankfully, she’d been prepared. She couldn’t fault Stark for his attitude toward the Rogues, and she hadn’t been nearly stupid enough to believe that he would go back to paying their way. The Rogues’ liaisons had called the meeting when their clients had finally started to ask about housing arrangements (though she’d heard it was less “where will we be staying when we get back” and more “I hope nobody messed up our rooms in the Compound”) and though some seemed to have bought into their clients’ insistence that Stark would take care of everything for them, she could see in most of their faces that they’d been expecting to have to deliver bad news. It was a bit like watching a train wreck, seeing them attempt to bring up each of their issues as though they actually had a leg to stand on against rules and regulations of the Compound that had been in place for nearly three years.

Naturally, as soon as the Rogues realized that complaining to their liaisons was getting them nowhere, they came to Marie. Privately, Marie thought they should be grateful that she’d managed to wrangle housing for them out of her limited SHIELD budget, but telling them that wouldn’t do any good for her or them. However, keeping her patience with them and indulging their complaints was causing her to waste precious time sitting in meetings and rehashing the same points yet again; time she needed to be solving other, real issues for the group.
“I’m sorry, Mr. Barton, I know that the current situation is far from ideal.” No doubt, though she was certain her version of “ideal” and theirs was quite different. Barton snorted, forcing her to shove down a spike of annoyance at his attitude. “With the short notice period after your pardons, we simply haven’t had time to tweak the budget for the team to fit all of its needs. Right now, the majority of our funds are taken up by the cost of renting space in the ISTCC for equipment and training, as well as what we have set aside for equipment contracts, once we work those out.”

She saw the slight hardening of expressions at the mention of equipment contracts. Now there was something she truly couldn’t understand. Never mind living space in the Compound; it appeared the entire team had actually been convinced that Tony Stark would be taking the time out, for free, to design and create all of their equipment. Surely they knew that as a civilian and a signee of the Accords, it would be legally irresponsible for Stark to be the official sponsor of an Accords team in any manner. Of course, individuals within the team were free to contract with him personally, and he could choose to gift anything he would like to any team member, as long as it was done within Accords safety guidelines. But somehow she doubted, after past events and three years apart, that Stark would feel much like giving away his valuable time, money, or designs to any of the Rogues. Which, of course, was perfectly reasonable, but led to an enormous headache for Marie, in the form of six superheroes coming to her with demands for housing and equipment and no idea where to get them.

“What,” demanded Barton at this, “you can’t adjust the budget at all?”

Marie folded her hands in her lap. “I certainly can’t, Mr. Barton. And SHIELD can’t just reallocate resources at the whims of anyone, not like they used to. The new SHIELD is not a covert agency, it’s a known government program. It’s under much stricter regulations than before. In order to avoid any… incidents, like what happened to the former SHIELD, the agency now has to be much more transparent. We follow established chains of command and government regulations. We submit a plan and a budget, and alterations need to be clearly reasoned, discussed, and given time to be put into effect.”

Barton sat back, clearly disgruntled, and muttered slightly under his breath, but said nothing more out loud. There was a moment of silence before Rogers spoke up. “Do you have an estimate for when we’ll be able to increase the budget and find a closer space to the Compound? I know it’s the best you can do for now, but really, the travel time to and from the Compound each day is interfering with our training, particularly with the difficulties we’re already having.”

Marie wasn’t going to take the bait and ask about that last part. She already had an idea what it was about, anyway. Before the Civil War, her impression was that the Compound housed only the Avengers and the minimum necessary support staff. However, since its change to the ISTCC and the integration of science programs, research facilities, and training for other superhumans, the Compound was significantly more crowded than before. Though the facilities were impressive, the sheer number of users meant that time had to be allocated and shared among them. This had apparently come as a shock to the Rogues, who never had to share their space in the past. It might not have been an issue otherwise, but combined with being kicked out of their old space and losing their old backer, every small issue was becoming a serious one with them.

Instead of going down the rabbit hole of problems that had nothing to do with her, Marie focused on what she could address. Maybe this time she could get it through their heads, though she doubted it. “I know your current location isn’t ideal. I can’t give you a time estimate right now, but when we do adjust the budget, we will see what we can do about moving you closer. In the meantime, we can certainly discuss other ways to maximize your training time. Do you think you need more improvement in group or individual areas, or both?”
“Both, I would say, though they’re both difficult when we can’t have all of our members training together.” He looked to Maximoff, who was sitting with her arms crossed, refusing eye contact with Marie.

Marie turned to face her. “Miss Maximoff, have you still not gone to the Compound?” She knew the answer already, but asking left room for a freely given explanation.

Maximoff straightened, crossing her arms even more tightly and staring resolutely at the opposite wall. “I won’t go anywhere where they want to suppress my powers. They’re just trying to control me. —it’s too much like—like that awful collar.” She shivered slightly and moved a hand up to her neck.

Though Marie considered herself an empathetic person by nature, she was unmoved by this display. Maximoff’s powers were destructive and, as far as she had seen in footage, barely controlled. There was no reason she should be using them in the common areas at the Compound, and comparing that safety measure among allies to her treatment by the criminal Ross on the Raft was, frankly, ridiculous. However, Marie noted the soft, indulgent look that Rogers gave the girl upon this pronouncement, and knew that appearing unsympathetic to Maximoff’s concerns would not bode well for the Rogues’ cooperation.

Before Marie could respond, Rogers reached out to put a hand on Maximoff’s shoulder and addressed Marie. “She has a right to feel comfortable where she trains. I know Tony is being difficult about this, but surely there’s some way you can work something out with him?”

“No,” Marie was short and firm this time, “I can’t. Despite what you seem to think, the power suppression in common areas of the Compound was not Tony Stark’s idea, nor would it be his decision alone to change it. Furthermore, it’s a safety measure that has been approved and accepted by many other mutants and magic users, and one person’s disagreement will not be enough to persuade anyone to consider changing it. You are not the owners of the Compound, and you don’t have the legal or financial clout to demand any changes to the rules and regulations. I suggest you accept those rules and make the most of the very expensive space and time we’re renting for you. If this is a problem you can’t work past, we can easily find cheaper training facilities.”

Rogers’ expression had hardened almost immediately, then morphed into frustration as she spoke. “The Compound is the best available and you know it. I don’t understand why this has to be such a problem. All the other Avengers at the Compound, plus all those mutants and kids, they got space there with no trouble.”

It was like beating her head against a brick wall, trying to get Rogers to see anything but what he wanted. “All of the others at the Compound had to work hard to be there. Each of them is paying their way somehow, just as you are being asked to do. They had to make sacrifices. They understand that they have to work within the expectations of the Compound, and they’re willing to obey the rules and follow protocol to get what they want. Unless you’re willing to do the same, I can promise you won’t receive all the same privileges.”

Marie looked back at Maximoff, managing to catch her eye this time. “Miss Maximoff, if you are truly unwilling to accept the arranged training time at the Compound, then we will remove your name from our submitted plan and save the money we are currently spending on your individual access. However, should you choose to decline the group training, you will not be considered a part of the group SHIELD is funding, regardless of your status with the Accords, and we will no longer be able to give you housing or other support. I suggest you make this decision within the next two days, as we’re due to submit an updated plan to ISTCC scheduling on Thursday.”

Most of the Rogues looked pissed, probably thinking that Marie was being deliberately unhelpful. It
would make her dealings with them even more unpleasant for a while, but there was nothing she
could do about it. She couldn’t change what they were asking her to change. There was nothing she
could do about most of their grievances, and frankly, she was more willing to be on their bad side
than that of the Accords Council, the ISTCC boards, the Avengers leadership, or Stark.

“If that’s all for now, everyone, I believe you’re all due to head to the Compound in about half an
hour, and I’m sure you need time to get ready. If you have any further adjustments to make to the
proposed schedule revisions, remember to let me know by Wednesday afternoon. I’ll be seeing you
all tomorrow.” With that, Marie stood up, gathered her paperwork, and headed back to her office to
deal with more of the endless problems that this job had brought to her.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

It’s Rhodey’s turn to lay down some truths, specifically on Rogers.

Chapter Notes

I know Tony being awesome and taking no shit is a major draw to the story, but I can’t have him dealing with all the Rogues’ “problems,” that would be a waste of his valuable time and go against the whole point of him distancing himself from responsibility for them. So unfortunately, it’ll be another few chapters before Tony is heavily featured again, as we see what’s up with most of the Rogues. After that, though, the next four chapters will all feature Tony himself. I have a total of 11 chapters planned for this, but as we get farther into the story, feel free to comment with suggestions or things you’d like to see, and if I like them and can fit them into the story well, I might work them into a chapter, or even dedicate a new chapter to them.

This chapter has a lot of thinking about what’s been happening over the last few years. I hadn’t planned to include so much, but once I got writing, it just kept coming out.

If you haven’t figured out by now, this story is particularly Steve and Wanda unfriendly. Most of my post-CW fics likely will be, as they’re the two I have the most problem with.

I guess another slight alteration to canon here is that Spiderman is officially an Avenger. I suppose most of Homecoming could still have happened, but in this, I imagine Tony during that time as being in the middle of transitioning the Compound to the ISTCC and bringing in more programs for youth and superhumans, so even if Peter didn’t want to become an actual Avenger right then (and couldn’t be a full member anyway, since he was a minor), he still would have been around the Compound and involved in a lot of the new programs and stuff. He would be working with Tony and the other Avengers at the Compound, at least, and maybe in the field a little bit, as he finished high school. I definitely picture him in college right now, he’s way too smart not to be, but he also signed the Accords the day he turned 18 and now he works as an Avenger sort of part time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

James Rhodes had been having a good day. He was overseeing group exercises with some of the most promising junior trainees at the Compound; the ones who were slated to become Avengers, should they so choose, once they turned 18 and could sign the full Accords, not just the provisional ones for minors. Spiderman, who’d turned 18 and been able to officially, fully join the Avengers four months ago, was joining in on this one, as well as two mutants. The adults were exercising their leadership skills and practicing at the same time. The kids were learning from different styles and working together with people who could very well be their team leaders in the near future.
It was going amazingly well. Parker meshed naturally with different groups, fitting in just about anywhere. He was friendly with everyone and kept everyone’s moods up even when exercises weren’t going so well. All of Xavier’s graduates already had excellent teamwork and leadership skills, and knew how to take full advantage of each person’s talents in a group. Most of the Compound’s residents were assigned to several different general groupings, and rotated within those groups during training to keep them on their toes. The mutants chosen today, Magoro and Kline, were relatively new to the Compound, but worked with the group as though they’d been together for months.

Rhodes was always proud to see the progress they’d made in the last few years, and the benefits it was bringing to so many people. With such a large variety of abilities between them, everyone at the Compound had the opportunity to hone different skills and work in innumerable different conditions. There was a general atmosphere of camaraderie among the patrons of the Compound, especially the young superhumans. They were fostering healthy, functional mentoring relationships between older, more experienced people, like the Avengers, and the young who flocked to the ISTCC for the opportunity to discover more about themselves in an atmosphere that encouraged and helped them.

Rhodes had been worried, at first, when Tony began throwing himself into the changes to the Compound and the Accords. He was barely out of the bed he’d been confined to for a week after Siberia, and was already trying to overhaul just about everything related to his former “team.” Rhodes had seen that manic need to take action in his best friend before: when his parents died, when Stane betrayed him, after the Chitauri invasion. It was Tony’s way of dealing with—or avoiding—his anxiety, by throwing himself into project after project, keeping so busy that he wouldn’t have time to think about anything else.

But Tony had been determined, not just to keep busy, but to work for something better. He’d told Rhodes that he wouldn’t let another team go down in flames like theirs had. Once he’d gotten Rhodes walking again and dropped some of his misplaced guilt about the situation (and wasn’t that a fun few months), he’d asked for Rhodes’ help in creating something new, something better.

So they’d gotten to work. They’d built a real, functional system from the ground up. Starting with the Accords, they tweaked and argued and fixed and eventually laid the groundwork for safe, responsible teams of people built on trust and understanding, not betrayals and secrets. Tony spent a lot of time working with the UN on the formation of the Accords Council, a rotating group of representatives from different countries who would form a sort of governing body for Accords signees. There were thousands of pages of rules and provisions in place just around the Council now, covering every contingency and situation that anyone could think of in the last few years, and room to add more as they occurred or were imagined.

Though they had been from the beginning (although not according to the Rogues, apparently, who’d barely bothered to ask beyond the basics before spitting on them), the newer Accords were a highly fluid document. There was a regulated process involved with changing the rules or adding new ones, but it was generally recognized that when dealing with worldwide threats, superhuman powers, and aliens, you could never prepare for every situation. There were plans for the improvisation required in major situations. But more importantly, there were regulations for dealing with the aftermath of those situations. There would never again be a “well, it’s done, we’d might as well forget about it and move on” attitude around events that signees were involved in.

That was something Rhodes, Tony, and Vision—all the remaining Avengers—had put a lot of time into the revision efforts for. There needed to be accountability for actions, yes, but there also needed to be a way to learn from what happened and improve. People who got hurt when superheroes did their jobs deserved more than an apology or reparation money. They deserved to see that those superheroes understood what went wrong and would work to never let it happen again. Even when
the damage that had been done was unavoidable, it still shouldn’t be written off.

It was a sad testament to the attitude of Tony’s former teammates—not that they didn’t want to do the right thing, but rather the automatic suspicion and derision they had for anything that Tony suggested or approved of—that Tony seemed surprised when so many people agreed with him. His work on the Accords revisions was well received and implemented with very little argument or further revision. Then, inspired by the positive progress and confident in the thorough regulations and protections of the Accords, superheroes began jumping to sign.

That wasn’t to say it hadn’t been a lot of work, or wouldn’t continue to be. Tony and Rhodes were called in on a regular basis to consult on further changes. And the Accords were certainly changed now from the rough outline they’d been back when the whole “Civil War” happened. Rhodes himself had had his issues with the Accords at the time, and though he hadn’t wanted to show it in front of the others for fear of encouraging their dissent or involving Ross’s wrath before he was prepared to deal with it, he knew Tony had had problems with them too. However, unlike the others, Tony had spent his life dealing with the legal complexities of business. He understood bureaucratic change and regulatory documents. He knew that it was far easier to revise a living document, no matter how many problems it had, than to scrap it and start over.

Rhodes understood the hesitation when Ross was involved. He understood the problems with the original Accords, and the concerns of the now-Rogue Avengers. But he also understood that in the end, their extreme actions spawned from one point: their distrust of Tony. They’d automatically distrusted the Accords when Tony was the one trying to explain them, and they hadn’t trusted that Tony really would help them resolve their problems from within once they’d signed. Rogers may have acted like he was going to sign before he got a hard-on for his old buddy and ran off to aid a suspected terrorist, but Rhodes knew he would have been a problem as long as Tony was involved. Though he would have given a hell of a lot for his best friend not to have to go through what he did in Siberia, in a way, the dissenters on the team going Rogue was a blessing. They were out of the way in Wakanda for three long years, and their crimes had gone a long way toward squashing legitimate concern for their issues. If they’d stayed behind and agreed to work with the Accords, they could have continually caused problems, making a hell of a scene over their issues and having the support of the public behind them. Though Romanoff might have had the foresight to let Tony work and Barton and Wilson weren’t quite the “rally the public” type, Rogers knew about as much about subtlety as a bull in a china shop. Combine that with his general ignorance of political maneuvering and legal processes, and he would have been a disaster for the carefully crafted revisions to the Accords that Tony and Rhodes had implemented over the last few years. Rather than understanding that changes needed to happen gradually and that sometimes issues needed to be ignored for a while in order to be addressed later, Rogers would have planted his feet on every single questionable issue, refusing to budge until things were changed exactly to his liking, and ultimately would have drawn out negotiations far longer than needed.

Now, thanks to their extended Wakandan vacation, the Rogues had not only given Rhodes and Tony time to work on the Accords like real businessmen, but they’d also greatly weakened their position. Not many people looked very kindly on criminals who ran away to become fugitives while someone else stayed behind to do all the work, then returned to reap the benefits. Tony had fought—harder than necessary, in Rhody’s opinion—to make sure that the pardoned Rogues would be treated fairly and given the same expectations as any new signee of the Accords. Nonetheless, their political clout had vanished after what had happened. They were being treated fairly, but not preferentially—which they seemed to be taking great exception to. They no longer had the perfect reputation behind them to work as leverage in their demands. Some of the public may have happily rechristened them “Avengers” once their pardons were announced, but the politicians and other superheroes knew that they’d given up the privileges that came with being Avengers three years ago, and those wouldn’t be
They were still a pain in the ass to deal with, though.

Hence Rhodes’s current mood-darkener: the sight of Rogers approaching as he oversaw training. He sighed, but resigned himself to the inevitable. So far, for the week the Rogues had been back and training at the Compound, they’d managed to keep them from having any direct contact with Tony. Rhodey and Friday hadn’t even had to run much interference to make that happen; Tony was, in fact, an incredibly busy man, and he didn’t have time to be dealing with the return of the douchebags. But Rhodey had known that sooner or later, if he failed to corner Tony, Rogers would come to him. Rogers no doubt still thought of him as Tony’s loyal sidekick and the best way to get to Tony, despite Rhodes technically being the first field leader of the Avengers—Tony had become far too busy with his many new projects, and Rhodey had the field experience and was already proven to be a willing and capable leader. But Rogers, who’d never seemed to fully appreciate Rhodey’s military experience (nor the fact that, even ignoring that Rhodes actually earned his military title unlike Rogers, Rhodes outranked him), was always focused on Tony as both the source of and the only potential solution to his problems, and would always see Rhodey as either a way to get to Tony or an obstacle that prevented his access to Tony.

Rhodey kept a straight face and tracked Kline’s jumpy progress across the room, watching her skillfully dodge creative attacks from the juniors. From the corner of his eye, he saw Rogers approach, hesitate slightly as he waited for Rhodey to turn and acknowledge him, then eventually turn to stand next to him when he realized he wouldn’t be addressed.

They watched the trainees for a few moments before Rogers spoke. “They seem to be working well together. Teamwork’s important.” Rhodey spent half a second pondering whether Rogers was really trying to open their conversation with some veiled reference to his own complaints, but gave it up. He wasn’t worth the effort. “Seems like quite a big operation going on here,” Rogers tried, and again Rhodey ignored him.

Rhodey could see Rogers’s posture stiffen slowly, as he received no answer to his attempted small talk. Rhodey, both because of his position and for Tony’s sake, would treat the Rogues with professionalism, but he had no obligation or desire to be friendly and pleasant. They weren’t friends, and after what they’d done to both him and Tony, they likely never would be. Rhodey was acutely aware that he wouldn’t be standing here having this conversation if it weren’t for Tony’s incredible mind and dedication. There were also millions of amputees and paralyzed patients out there now benefitting from the designs Tony standardized for Stark Industries to release publicly.

Even after Rhodey’s implants were perfected and his movement was nearly indistinguishable from before his injury, Tony continued to work with clinicians and the VA to develop new assistive devices. Tony said he didn’t want to waste the vast anatomical and medical knowledge he’d had to acquire to work on Rhodey’s implants. With the cost and personalization of Rhodey’s implants, they weren’t feasible for mass production, but the braces he’d had before the implants had also worked wonders, and those, Tony could create and sell barely above cost, making enough to pay his employees but keeping costs for the users as low as possible.

Tony’d also then expanded a bit into prosthetics, since it was a similar enough field that he wouldn’t have to do weeks’ worth of additional research just to conceptualize a product. His advanced technical knowledge made for some incredible designs, though he had to keep what he gave to SI fairly simple in order to keep them affordable. Naturally, he set up charitable foundations to get free products to people who couldn’t afford them through the VA and several other medical centers. People still had to show up and go through a process to get them, but it was a hell of an improvement over what they’d had before, and a lot of people were a lot better off now.
Rhodey wasn’t an idiot; he knew Tony had plans for an advanced prosthetic for Barnes. As protective as he was of Tony, if he wanted to do this, Rhodey wouldn’t try to dissuade him. He could certainly find more sympathy for Barnes than any of the Rogue Avengers, and it wasn’t the brainwashed ex-assassin’s fault that his old buddy Rogers had turned out to be such an ass.

Speaking of Rogers, after a few more moments of stiff silence, he finally decided to address Rhodey directly. “Rhodes—”

“—Colonel.” Rhodey interrupted, short and to the point. He finally turned to face Rogers, seeing a momentary flash of confusion, possibly even hurt. “It’s Colonel Rhodes, Rogers. I expect you to address me by my title. I am busy right now, so please, skip the small talk and get to the point.”

Rogers looked briefly taken aback. Perhaps despite the frosty welcome from most of those at the Compound that they’d interacted with so far, Rogers had convinced himself that the problem was only between himself and Tony. Well, Rhodey could at least stand in solidarity with Tony. He knew Rogers could understand the real meaning of his demand for formality. We’re not friends.

The surprise was quickly replaced by a poorly disguised look of disappointment. Christ, was that infuriating. Had Rogers really expected a friendly welcome from any of them, much less Rhodey, who had been paralyzed in large part due to Rogers’ actions? Whose best friend was abandoned to die in Siberia by his so-called friend Rogers, a “friend” who’d then dumped all of his responsibility onto Tony and left? Rhodey, with confidence born of his military rank and a healthy upbringing that resulted in a firm understanding of his own actions and moral stance, was unaffected by the “disappointed Captain America” look, beyond irritation. But he could see how that would have worn Tony down, Tony who was already insecure about nearly everything he did, particularly in the face of Rogers, the man he’d grown up being compared to.

Rogers seemed to compose himself, and stood straighter, turning completely to face Rhodey in a relaxed military stance. At least he was capable of showing respect when it was asked of him. Sometimes. “Of course, Colonel, I’m sure you’re very busy, I’m sorry to interrupt you. I was wondering if you happen to know when Tony might be available for a meeting here. I’ve tried a few times to catch him now, but he never seems to be around. I just need a few minutes of his time.”

Need, Rhodey’s ass. Rogers wanted to bitch to Tony about he and the dick squad not being treated like special little princesses anymore, living off Tony’s money and influence, putting Tony down constantly while depending on him utterly to keep them out of legal and financial trouble. Well fuck that.

“He’s a very busy man, I’m sure you know, even busier than me. But I should ask, what do you need to talk to him about? If you have a query related to Stark Industries, you can call them to make an appointment, but I doubt you’d be meeting with the owner of the company directly. If you’ve got an issue with the Accords or the Compound, I’d suggest you have your liaison contact the Council or the ISTCC offices, respectively. And questions about the Avengers should be relayed to me, since I’m the official team lead.”

Rogers blinked. Rhodey could see him thinking, trying to figure out how best to phrase what he wanted in order to encounter the least resistance. There was a small shockwave, and Rhodey looked back into the training grounds to see Magoro with a palm on the floor, four fallen students around him. He smiled to himself; the kids needed to remember to adjust their strategies for the specific powers of the mutants they were working with. He was distracted when Rogers spoke again. “Well, there’s several things. Some of them are… personal, things I’d rather discuss only with Tony.” He tried giving a friendly smile, but it faltered as Rhodey’s cold gaze turned back to him.

“As I’ve already said, Mr. Stark is a very busy man. You are not entitled to his time, particularly not
for simple personal matters. If there’s something you need to tell him, send him a letter. I’m sure he’ll contact you if there’s something he wants to say in return.” Rhodey knew Rogers could hear what he wasn’t saying. *Tony already read your shitty “apology” letter and had nothing to say to you. Why would he want to talk to you now?*

Rogers switched tactics immediately. “I also have things to discuss regarding the Compound. It covers a lot of areas, and Tony’s the owner, so I thought it would be easier to talk to him than to bother all of the different offices.”

Because of course, causing the least difficulty was always Rogers’s main priority. Rhodey held himself back from snorting. “Mr. Stark owns the building, yes, but he’s not the head of the ISTCC Board, nor does he control any of the offices. He doesn’t have any more individual say in how things work here than I or any of the others do, unless he chooses to kick everyone out and redesign the space as he wants, which I highly doubt he’d do, considering all the work he’s put into creating the ISTCC.”

He could see Rogers becoming frustrated and trying to conceal it. “Look, Rho—Colonel,” he corrected, and Rhodey raised an eyebrow. “Can we just talk for a few minutes, leader to leader?” No doubt he meant he wanted to try to lecture Rhodey about how being a leader meant doing whatever Captain America wanted. But Rhodey was not about to deal with that.

“I think you’re confused here, Rogers.” He turned fully to face him while Rogers’s eyebrows contracted. “You’re not a leader, not anymore. Technically, myself and Mr. Stark are the only official field leaders of the Avengers. On a mission without either of us, an appropriate leader will be selected by the Council, but as it stands now, every current member of the Avengers ranks above you, Wilson, Romanoff, Barton, Lang, and Maximoff on that front. Now, if you all take a mission among only yourselves, you’re free to lead that group if the Council approves. But if you go out with any of the others and try to give them orders in the field, or disregard orders given to you by the designated leader, you *will* be disciplined accordingly.”

Rogers’s jaw was tight, his fists clenched. He started to open his mouth, but Rhodey interrupted again. “You gave up your position as a leader of the Avengers three years ago, Rogers, and you’re not just going to be given it back immediately.”

Rogers practically sneered at him. “It’s Captain,” he said, in lieu of any real argument, trying to goad Rhodey with his earlier words turned back at him.

Rhodey leveled an unimpressed look at him. “No, Rogers, it’s really not. That title was given to you, not earned as a real military rank. You haven’t been a member of the US Army since before you went in the ice. And if you had been three years ago, you’d have been court martialed and given a dishonorable discharge for desertion with intent to remain away permanently, when you abandoned your duty to run away to Wakanda.”

Rogers looked absolutely furious. Part of Rhody was honestly curious about whether Rogers would be stupid enough to hit him, physically unprovoked, in the middle of the Compound. It would certainly give Rhody a chance to punch Rogers, which he’d been wanting to do for years, and it would give him an easy way to get rid of him. But Rhodey was smarter than that, could be calmer than that, and he wouldn’t want himself or Tony to have to deal with the aftermath of a confrontation in the Compound. “I think this conversation is over. If you have issues with the Compound, contact the individual Compound offices that would deal with them. Please give me space to observe this training session.”

He turned back to watch the trainees. After a few moments of tense silence, he heard Rogers turn on his heel and stride away.
I know I switch between “Rhodes” and “Rhodey” for his thoughts and stuff, sorry, I just can’t quite decide what I want to call him. I don’t think I have the hang of writing from his point of view, so I apologize if this chapter wasn’t so smooth.

I know “Captain America” is more a superhero title than a military one, but a lot of people in the MCU and the fandom act like it actually carries military weight, so I did some research. If Steve was still considered an active duty soldier once he woke up, which I find highly unlikely, then he’d be subject to military regulations, even if he was sanctioned by the Army to be working with the Avengers. Being AWOL, which he technically was before he even went to Siberia, automatically becomes desertion after 30 days away. “Desertion with intent to remain away permanently” would be the heading his would be under, since as a fugitive, he couldn’t have legally intended to return to the US (This is ignoring the actual criminal charges he incurred, because of the pardon thing). The charge of desertion has to be handled by general court martial, and typically carries a penalty of dishonorable discharge and forfeiture of all pay, possibly with imprisonment for up to five years (though the pardons would probably make that difficult). If you desert your post in a time of war, you can receive the death penalty. Desertion is a serious charge. Of course, he probably wouldn’t actually be considered an active duty soldier anymore, so that wouldn’t really apply, but I can definitely picture him insisting on being called “Captain,” which would irritate the living shit out of me.

I also realize it would be unrealistic for every Avenger, even Spiderman, to be ranked above all of the Rogues permanently, but for now, the Rogues are just back and are essentially new to the team, at least the newly regulated, Accords-sanctioned team. There’s also a thing going on that is preventing any of the Rogues from having any authority in the Avengers, which there’ll be a chapter on later. Suffice it to say for now that they shouldn’t just come back and assume their roles are cemented automatically.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Steve finally gets to voice some complaints, only to find that no one much appreciates it.

Chapter Notes

Guess who passed their hematology exam *party noises* thank you all for waiting. I wanted to have this posted early this morning, but when I turned on the laptop I use for writing, it immediately started installing updates that literally took four hours to finish. I guess that’s what I get for writing on my old, crappy laptop. I just like the keyboard better than my good one for school.

For anyone also reading Electric Veins, I’ll try to alternate posting chapters for both. Sometimes I just have the urge to work on one and not the other, which is why I posted that one in the first place; the idea wouldn’t leave me alone long enough to write more of this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Captain Rogers!”

Steve turned at the shout of his name and saw Sam do the same. They were just outside a small restaurant on the outskirts of New York City, a quiet place they were escaping to for lunch and some private conversation. He knew Tony’s AI was always watching them at the Compound, and he couldn’t be sure Tony didn’t have SHIELD spying on them as well. If he wanted to be sure what he said to Sam was in confidence, they needed to go somewhere completely unrelated to the Accords, the government, or superheroes in general.

It would also be nice to escape the environment of SHIELD and the Compound. As much as he was determined not to let the “new management” ruin their home or their work, it was hard to deny that the attitudes they were continually putting up with were bringing down morale and undermining the confidence of the team.

Hence this little escape for lunch and conversation with his second-in-command. Sam had been fairly quiet since returning home. He’d been uncharacteristically acquiescent to some of the ridiculous demands and rules pushed on them, and when Steve had brought up the problems in conversation lately, Sam had quickly changed the subject. Steve had eventually realized that maybe Sam wasn’t comfortable discussing his issues where they might be heard by someone who could make their lives difficult, and so he’d invited Sam out to lunch at a secluded little place, just to “get some fresh air” on paper, but really to talk freely.

But it seemed they weren’t really free anywhere they went. Steve had to force himself not to show his irritation as he turned to face the reporter that had shouted his name. He’d always hated having to talk to the press. It reminded him of his days as a “performing monkey,” and Stark and SHIELD’s constant lessons and reprimands on what to say and not to say, how to stand and smile and gesture
and walk correctly, bored and annoyed him. He’d hated trying to piece together some fake version of
himself just to please a reporter or two, and never being able to say what he really wanted to. He
knew most of the team hated it as well, so eventually they’d left Stark to handle their press. The man
thrived in the spotlight, loved preening and showing off in front of crowds, and though Steve hadn’t
wanted to encourage his ego, it was worth avoiding the headache of dealing with it himself.

Now, he hitched a smile onto his face as he faced the reporter, a young woman whose lethally high
heels still didn’t put her even at Steve’s shoulder. Trailing behind her was a man fiddling with a
camera setup he carried. Evidently they’d just happened to catch Steve and Sam as they were passing
by. Steve internally groaned—another minute or so and they’d have missed each other completely.
Just his luck as of late.

She smiled a dazzlingly white smile and held a hand out to Steve, who gave it a firm, polite shake.
“Captain Rogers, I’m Mindy Shah with WPIX 11, thank you for stopping. Would you mind taking
just a few minutes to do a short interview? I’m sure viewers would love to hear what you have to say
about your return to the US and the new Avengers team.”

Sam fidgeted in the background, clearly uncomfortable with this further scrutiny, but Steve didn’t
want to just blow her off. Besides, this could be a chance to let people know that he and his team
were still here, still fighting to protect them, despite the red tape they were being wrapped up in right
now. “Sure,” he said, flashing his own bright smile.

“Excellent!” Mindy looked back to the cameraman, who handed her a microphone. They positioned
themselves so that Mindy was half facing the camera and half facing Steve. Sam moved around them
to stand out of the way behind the camera. The cameraman gave her a three second countdown and
then a thumbs up, and she raised the microphone. “This is Mindy Shah, PIX 11. I’m here with Steve
Rogers, better known of course as Captain America. Captain, we haven’t heard from you and your
team since all the excitement when your pardons were announced. How does it feel to be back on
American soil?”

She held the microphone out to Steve, who gave her a smile. “It feels great, Ms. Shah. We’re all very
grateful to the President for helping to get us back home where we belong.” Before he could say
more, she took the microphone back and spoke again.

“Why haven’t we heard from you until now?”

“Well, we’ve been very busy in the last few weeks.” Steve couldn’t stop himself from frowning
slightly as the microphone was again taken away before he could expand on that thought.

“What has your team been up to since your return? Training hard, I presume?”

“Of course, as much as we can right now.”

She raised her eyebrows. “What do you mean by that?”

Steve glanced to Sam behind the cameraman. He was grimacing slightly, though it was hard to tell
whether it was because he wanted Steve to be careful what he said or because he just wanted this to
be over so they could eat. Well, either way, Steve was in the middle of it now. And this could be the
chance to get the public to recognize some of the problems that had been hidden from them until
now. “Well, we’ve been experiencing some… pushbacks since we arrived back. We’d like to get out
there as soon as possible, to do the work we’ve always done, to protect the people. But some of the
changes to the way the team operates are slowing us down.”

Mindy looked surprised. “Are you saying you’re being held up by the Accords?”
Steve wanted a moment more to consider his words, but the microphone was back in his face and Mindy looked expectant. “A bit, yes, among other things. Some of these problems are why we fought against the Accords in the first place. But not to worry,” he added, giving her a reassuring smile. “I’m sure we’ll work through it and be back to work in no time.”

“Well, we certainly hope so. Thank you for your time, Captain. This has been Mindy Shah with Captain America, PIX 11.” She shook his hand once more, then gestured to the cameraman to stop filming. Her smile was strained and she exchanged a few words with the cameraman before turning back to Steve. She seemed almost surprised that he was still there. “Thanks again, Captain. I’ve got to go; I’ll let you get inside.” She nodded to the restaurant. “If you’d ever like to talk more, let me know, we can set something up.” The cameraman fished inside his bag for a moment and produced a business card, which he handed to her, and she handed to Steve. “Same goes for you, Mr. Wilson,” she said to Sam, then turned her back in a clear dismissal and began talking to the cameraman as he packed away the equipment.

Steve tucked the card inside his jacket as he and Sam finally proceeded into the restaurant. Sam was chewing his lip, looking troubled. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m just… not sure that was the best idea, announcing to a reporter that you think the Accords are holding you back.”

Steve gave his name to the hostess before turning back to Sam, glancing around first to be sure that no one was nearby and clearly eavesdropping. “I know you’re worried about them making things even harder for us, but this was a chance to speak to the public, not the government. We need to let them know we’re still fighting for them.”

Sam’s brows drew together even further. He opened his mouth to speak, but their server arrived to take them to their table, and he dropped the subject.

It wasn’t until the next afternoon that Steve heard anything more about the interview. He’d nearly forgotten about Mindy Shah after his uncomfortable lunch with Sam, who, even when he knew they wouldn’t be watched or overheard, seemed reluctant to discuss strategies for getting the Avengers back to the team they used to be and getting rid of the new red tape.

He was still thinking back to Sam’s attitude during yesterday’s lunch when one of the SHIELD interns who delivered messages to them arrived in their common space and announced an immediate, urgent meeting with Marie Jackson and some of her people.

“Why? Did something happen?” Clint asked, jumping up. Steve knew Clint had been itching for some real action; they still hadn’t been sent out on any kind of mission.

The intern gave a nervous glance to Clint’s hand, which was reaching behind him for some of his combat gear. “No, nothing like that. Just… please come with me immediately.”

Steve met Natasha’s eyes. She gave him a half shrug and turned to get Wanda, who was the only one not in the common area, and they all followed the intern out of their “wing” (their barracks, really, and maybe that’s what this meeting was about: maybe Marie had finally found them some real accommodations instead of this hastily spruced up government hostel) and to a conference room in the next building over.

Marie and one of her subordinates were waiting in the room with grim expressions, along with two people Steve hadn’t met. Before he could ask what was going on, she gestured for them to sit down.
and said curtly, “Rogers. What the hell were you thinking?”

Steve was taken aback for a moment. Marie hadn’t been entirely helpful to them so far, but she was generally polite and at least apologetic about their continued issues with the SHIELD division now overseeing them. “I’m sorry, Ma’am, but what is this about?” He asked.

“You really don’t know?” She gestured vaguely around, clearly frustrated. “Your little ‘interview’ yesterday?”

Sam sat up straighter next to him while the rest looked to Steve with confusion. “What about it?”

Marie glared around at them. “Do none of you watch the news? That video went viral.”

One of the new people spoke up. “PIX published it yesterday afternoon and by this morning, it had been reposted on a dozen other news networks and social media platforms. It gained over ten million views on Youtube in less than eight hours. The discussions on Twitter are still gaining momentum.”

“Wait, hold on—” Scott interrupted, looking at Steve. “You did an interview? When?”

“Yesterday, when I went to lunch with Sam, a reporter stopped us and asked me for a few words… it was very short.”

Marie was pinching the bridge of her nose. “Did it never occur to you, Rogers, that making your first public statement since returning without any kind of preparation or planning—or, at the very least, informing us about it afterwards—was not the best idea?”

Steve bristled at her tone. “I was asked for a quick statement and I gave it. I answered her questions and I told the truth. I don’t see what the problem is.”

The second of the new people answered, a suited man with neatly trimmed hair and glasses. “The problem, Mr. Rogers, is that what you consider ‘the truth’ is, in fact, subjective. And when you, as someone under intense public scrutiny, make a public statement, people will dissect every word of that statement and come to their own conclusions.”

The first newcomer continued. “In the era of the internet, one person’s opinion can be seen and shared by thousands in just a few seconds. People build off of each other’s ideas, and ‘groupthink’ often escalates emotionally or politically charged discussions. When you make a public statement these days, understanding how your words could be interpreted is just as important as making sure what you say is honest and truthful.”

Clint looked impatient. “So Steve said something to a reporter without clearing it with you first. Big deal.”

Marie turned her impressive glare on him. “It is a big deal, Mr. Barton, because the public, on the whole, did not appreciate what Steve had to say.”

Steve looked quickly between Marie and the two new men. “What do you mean?”

“The media, both official and social media, is tearing you apart right now,” Marie said. “You have your supporters, yes, but even the sane, rational ones are being drowned out by the millions who are decidedly not on your side. You’re being called ungrateful, selfish, antagonistic, rude, untrustworthy, uncooperative, and those are the nicer terms. And since you seem to have taken it upon yourself to speak for ‘your team,’ the opinions about this are being directed towards all of you as well,” she added, looking around the table.
Steve gaped at her, thoroughly confused. “I don’t understand. I barely said anything!”

Marie clenched her jaw. “As Mr. Burlen said,” she gestured to the second man behind her, “the public interprets every word you say. And you said plenty. You basically told the world that the Accords are slowing you down and you’d rather not have to deal with them, and then you actually assured them that your team would get ‘back to work,’ implying you would somehow be circumventing the Accords. You also told them you were glad to be home ‘where you belong,’ hence why I now have to deal with all of this.”

“What do you mean, why you have to deal with this? What does us being home have to do with it?” Sam asked.

“Because wording matters, Mr. Wilson. He said you were home where you ‘belong,’ which can be interpreted not only as an insult to Wakanda—whose citizens, by the way, are not happy with their King’s decision to host you for three years when he should have been focusing on Wakanda’s reentry onto the international political stage—but is also a giant ‘fuck you’ to Germany and Romania, who were the main barrier to your coming back home, since they wanted you all extradited and tried in their own courts. Since you mentioned the President directly in your little underhanded ‘thank you,’ Germany and Romania are pissed at him. So he got pissed at his people, who dumped the responsibility for this onto me.”

Steve was aghast. “That’s not what I meant at all!”

“Maybe not, but it’s how it was perceived. This is the kind of thing that can be avoided when you have someone experienced in the matter go over what you plan to say, or at least be out there clarifying your intentions before social media makes up their own minds about them.”

“I just wanted to let the people know that we’re still fighting for them,” Steve said, irritated. “If I let someone write some speech for me, I’d never get to say what I really wanted.”

“Good,” Marie said. That brought Steve up short. “Because frankly, Rogers, no one gives a damn what you want to say. Thanks to your little speech, you’re now being tried in the court of public opinion, which means people are expecting you to be above normal human flaws. Every mistake you make will be amplified and picked apart and used to nurture resentment for you. You said you wanted to let people know you’re fighting for them—how? By going against the Accords, which, I may remind you, you willingly signed?”

“We didn’t exactly have much choice,” Wanda said sullenly. “It was the only way to come back home.”

Marie raised an eyebrow at her, expression cold. “Are you saying you signed a legally binding document with no intention of actually honoring that contract?”

“No,” Steve hurried to assure her, before she could try to get Wanda into some sort of legal trouble. “But the Accords are constantly being changed, and we just want to be a part of some of those changes. There are parts of them that aren’t working well for us, and we just want to fix those so that we can get to work.”

Marie turned that cold glare back to him. “See, Rogers, here’s the thing. You’re the only ones the Accords ‘aren’t working well’ for. The current organizational structure and most of the smaller details have been in effect for over a year now, and there have been very few complaints, none of them substantial. There are dozens of heroes, not just in America, now peacefully and effectively working with the Accords. If they have problems, they take them to review boards or other proper channels. And the public has seen that.”
“So what, we’re not allowed to have a different opinion than the others?” Natasha said, crossing her arms. “Seems a bit one-sided.”

“Of course you can, but you’re already on thin ice, Ms. Romanoff. All of you. People don’t see you as heroes making a glorious return home. You’re criminals who were pardoned and are trying to be heroes again. While you were away in Wakanda for three years, the people who stayed behind worked very hard to remake the Accords, and they were very transparent about that process. The public appreciated that. Now after the newly revised Accords have been implemented, successfully, for more than a year, you come back and immediately start complaining about the structure that you didn’t put any work into yourselves.”

“That’s not fair, Steve said, “we left because we’d fought against the Accords, because we were the first ones who wanted to change them!”

Marie shook her head. “Extreme action requires extremely sound reasoning to be admissible. Maybe at the time, you really thought that the Accords were irredeemable, but it doesn’t matter now, because you were wrong. The fact that they continued to exist, to be revised and implemented and are now working well, proves that you were wrong to dismiss them entirely. Becoming criminals in the process didn’t help you.”

Wanda was glaring at Marie, looking murderous, and Steve decided he needed to steer the conversation away from the topic of their exile and return. “So, you’re saying people are angry that I mentioned problems with the Accords to them when we haven’t been back that long yet? I’m sorry,” he said, trying to placate Marie, “I guess I should have waited a while longer before voicing any complaints. I just thought maybe I should bring people’s attention to problems that might have been kept from them.”

Marie sighed and looked up to the ceiling for a moment. “Nothing has been kept from the public, Mr. Rogers. The Accords are a publicly available document. You can look the entire thing up on the UN website, and there are dozens of sites out there translating the legal jargon into layman’s terms and discussing what everything means. Any proposed revisions, amendments, additions, or issues are also made public on the site. You weren’t bringing attention to anything but your own personal, unofficial complaints, which is why people are looking so unfavorably on it. It doesn’t help that this was the first time anyone’s heard from you publicly since your return.”

“I don’t get it,” Clint said suddenly. “We’ve made statements before that were nastier than that. We’ve complained about things before without the public jumping down our throats. Hell, Stark went up there and made a fool of himself every other week when he was an Avenger.”

“Mr. Stark is still an Avenger, Mr. Barton,” Marie said pointedly. “And he has the reputation and rapport to do some of those things. He’s very skilled in dealing with the media. I’m sure much of what you considered ‘making a fool of himself’ was done with a purpose. He also has a very extensive legal team, which if I’m correct, he used for the Avengers as well, back when he was supporting the team financially.”

“Yeah, and?”

“And, those kinds of things are now the responsibility of individual groups or those managing them, not the Accords Council. SHIELD didn’t give my department the budget or time to assemble a PR team of any kind, which means not only are we underequipped to deal with this disaster, but this is all the worse for what we haven’t been doing. You’ve been basically hiding away from the public since your return, which hasn’t endeared people to you. We had bigger concerns to deal with before this happened, but now it looks like PR is going to have to be our first priority for a while.” Marie sighed again and rubbed at her temple.
“It’s not like we made statements every day back on the original team,” Natasha said impatiently. “A few weeks without some kind of PR event isn’t enough to be considered ‘hiding away.’”

Marie looked at her like she’d grown a second head. “Of course you did.” She glanced around the table, and when she received nothing but blank looks, she turned to exchange a look of incredulity with Mr. Burlen and the other new man.

The other man stepped toward the table. “Did you really think the old Avengers’ PR team did nothing but wait around for major events to happen so they could write your speeches? They were working for you every day. They released statements on your behalf after every mission that wasn’t strictly classified, and after every sighting of you abroad or on duty as Avengers. They monitored your media coverage and worked behind the scenes to be sure that negative press, wild rumors, and conspiracy theories didn’t gain too much traction in the mainstream media.”

“And nothing like that has been done since we arrived back home?” Steve asked.

“Like I said, we didn’t have the time or money to create a PR team for you. Mr. Burlen and Mr. Kalo, here,” Marie finally named the other man, “are media specialists from other departments who were kind enough to let me steal them away for a while in order to help deal with this.”

Mr. Kalo gave Marie a small smile before continuing. “It also doesn’t help that over the past few years, the new Avengers team and many of the other Accords signees have been making even more effort to reach out—not just to be transparent in their workings, but also to connect personally with the public. Many of the individuals or groups have blogs and Twitter accounts that they post on themselves in addition to letting PR people write posts. They have regularly scheduled days where members of the public can meet with them for a meal or event. They take time after press conferences to go and talk to people individually.”

Clint snorted. “So you’re telling me people don’t like us anymore because we’re not on Twitter? Seriously?”

“I would think people would appreciate superheroes conducting themselves professionally,” Steve added with a frown. It sounded like the new heroes were turning the entire thing into a giant production.

“Being detached from the public doesn’t make you ‘professional,’ Mr. Rogers, it makes you unreachable.” Mr. Burlen said. “And no one appreciates that any more. After many of the major mistakes made by heroes, there’s been a movement to recognize that even superheroes are still regular people. It’s a good thing for both the public opinion and the heroes themselves, to not have everything riding on being infallible. Yes, heroes are still held to a higher standard, but not an impossible one; at least, that’s the goal. And with your past, you should be grateful for that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Wanda snapped.

Burlen spoke with an air of explaining something to an impatient child. “It means, Miss Maximoff, that if the public expected superheroes to never make a single mistake, none of you ever would have been able to return to hero work after being criminals, regardless of the pardons. You never would have been accepted back after the ‘Civil War.’ But because of the work done to make heroes more relatable and approachable, the public is willing to give you a chance again. If you want to take advantage of that, you also need to do your best to be relatable and approachable.”

Steve had a bitter taste in the back of his throat. “So you want us to go perform for the public, spend our time dancing around for them instead of doing real hero work.”
Marie looked like she was refraining from rolling her eyes with great difficulty, and it only increased Steve’s irritation. “It really doesn’t take that long to do what other heroes are doing. We’re not asking you to do nothing but kiss babies and write blog posts all day. We’re just asking you to **inform** the public of what you’re doing, regularly. You want them to know that you’re working for them? This is how. You need to show them that you’re working **with** the Accords, that you appreciate your current position and are doing your best to make the most of your second chance. Instead of complaining about what’s not working, you need to keep up a positive attitude and express that to the public. Once you’ve established a presence with them, you can afford to talk about some of the hardships, but first, you need to make them see that you’re a normal person, a person who cares about them and is working hard for them.”

It still seemed like they were asking him to fake everything being perfect, to put on a smile and dance for the people instead of working for them. But it also appeared that arguing against it would get them nowhere, and if it was true that people had misinterpreted what he’d said yesterday so badly, then he needed Marie and her people to help him fix it. He couldn’t afford to antagonize them. So he swallowed down the bitter feelings and just nodded, hoping that would placate her.

Marie stared him down for a moment before turning back to Burlen and Kalo. “So. Let’s get started.”

Chapter End Notes

I know next to nothing about NYC or its news channels, I just googled “New York City news” and found WPIX 11, so forgive me if any of you are familiar with it and it’s totally unrealistic/wrong. Also, I know, that was the shortest interview ever.

I realize this chapter may seem oddly friendly to Sam. I think he’s a smart, rational guy with way too much ridiculous loyalty to Steve, apparently enough that he’ll do incredibly stupid things just to help Steve out. But in the face of being a wanted criminal for three years, having to be pardoned by the President just to come back to the US, and the “you fucked up” attitude they’ve all been receiving from pretty much everyone, I think he would maybe be beginning to realize that he did, in fact, fuck up, and that rainbows and sunshine don’t shoot out of Steve’s ass. Steve might have been gung-ho about trying to return to the old ways of the team, but Sam is more informed and more realistic than him. I think he would understand what an extensive system the Accords have put in place, and that there’s really nothing he can do about it. He’s still a dumbass (and criminal) who probably doesn’t agree with the Accords entirely, but he at least realizes they’re not going anywhere, and that Steve’s theatrics about it will bring them all nothing but trouble.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Sam faces some of the frustrations of an unforgiving world.

Chapter Notes

This is a short chapter, just showcasing that the consequences of a major fuck up aren’t always poetic and well deserved. Real life is messy and contradictory and unfair, and you just have to deal with it.

Next chapter is also going to be short, featuring Clint, so I’ll be posting it quickly too. After that we’ll be back to Tony’s point of view!

“Mr. Wilson, good to see you again.” Sam’s liaison, Matt Brown, shook his hand and gestured for Sam to sit down. As he did so, Brown pulled another chair up to sit across from him. Sam appreciated that he didn’t feel the need to put a desk between them.

“So, have you heard anything back?” Sam asked, clasping his hands together.

Brown took a fortifying breath. “I have, and unfortunately I have no good news for you. There are no positions open either within SHIELD or the ISTCC offices that you would be able to fill. I’m sorry.” He grimaced, and his apology did seem genuine.

Sam liked the man, and Brown certainly seemed to like Sam more than many of the others’ liaisons liked them. Perhaps it had to do with Sam’s general acceptance of the new regulations they were under with the Accords. While he didn’t love a lot of them, realistically, there was nothing he could do about it. The others (namely Steve, and sometimes Wanda along with him) constantly demanding that their liaisons try to change things that were impossible to change was nothing but an exercise in frustration.

Sam hoped that Brown was making it known that he was cooperative, at least. It would be idiotic not to think that their liaisons talked among themselves and others, and since they were the main line of communication between the team and the people in charge of everything they dealt with, it seemed prudent not to aggravate the lawyers. Not that the others paid much attention to that—aside from Natasha, who did seem smart enough not to make waves, and Scott, who just generally stayed out of a lot of the drama.

Apparently even having his liaison on his side wasn’t enough to get him a job in SHIELD or the ISTCC, though.

With most of their SHIELD department’s limited budget spent on the necessities of their accommodation, gear, and training, there wasn’t much left over for luxuries or general expenses. Steve had been browbeating poor Marie Jackson into getting them money for what they needed (“needed” being loosely defined—some of the things he’d seen Wanda buy since they’d returned
didn’t exactly qualify as necessities) for the last month and a half, but it was clear from Jackson’s increasingly irritated warnings that that wouldn’t last forever. Steve and the others seemed to have their heads buried in the sand in that regard, but Sam understood that they would eventually be turned away when they asked for more money, and he didn’t want to be stuck with nothing when that happened. Though his seized accounts had been returned to him after the pardons, he didn’t exactly have a wealth of personal savings, and the stipends they received from SHIELD for their work under the Accords weren’t enough to really live off of—particularly since some of that was dependent on their hero work, and so far, they hadn’t been sent out once.

Which brought him, last week, to request a meeting with Brown and ask about employment. Brown recommended seeking something within SHIELD or at the ISTCC, so he could not only be close to where he was living and training, but could also stay within the same organizations for ease and safety. Brown had promised to ask around and get back to him, but apparently he hadn’t found anything.

Sam sighed and hung his head for a moment. “Well, thank you for looking. I’m sorry to have wasted your time,” he said with a grimace.

“It wasn’t a waste of time,” Brown assured him. “It’s good that you’re seeking employment and other ways to earn money. I know we’ve spoken about your SHIELD stipend and budgeting, and it’s clear you’ll need an alternate source of income.”

“So, should I go out and look in the city? I’m sure there’s plenty of jobs available nearby, I can work close to where we’re staying. Even if it’s just minimum wage, secretarial or retail or something, I’ll take it. I don’t need a ton of money to supplement the stipend, just something. And a part-time job would let me work around our training schedule.”

Brown hesitated for a moment. “I’m—not sure that’s the wisest idea, to be honest with you.”

Sam frowned. “Why not? You said it was a good idea to get a job, and there’s nothing available with SHIELD or the Compound. Isn’t a job in the civilian sector the only other choice?”

“Well, I really was hoping that I could find you something in SHIELD. The ISTCC was a long shot, but a decent potential backup. I really did push for something, tried to put in a good word for you, but nothing took.”

“I’m sure you did, and thank you for trying,” Sam said cautiously, not sure where this was going, “but why is it not a good idea to look elsewhere?”

“Well, because anything in the civilian sector would be very public. I can guarantee the media would quickly find out where you’re working and would be hanging around. People would go there just to try to see you, and a lot of them wouldn’t be polite. They’d make a game out of trying to antagonize you at work. Even people who weren’t trying to mess with you would be a distraction and inconvenience. A lot of places wouldn’t hire you because they know you’d bring trouble.”

That made sense, even if it sucked. Sam thought it over for a moment. “Well, there’s places where I wouldn’t be so publicly available. Stock, warehouses, closed offices, things like that.”

“Even there, people would find out, and the media would follow. Particularly after the… incident the other week.”

Sam sighed. That whole thing was really biting them in the ass. He’d wanted to stop Steve from saying anything to that reporter, but it all happened fast, and Steve likely wouldn’t have listened to him anyway. Steve seemed determined to believe that if they could get the public on “their side,” all
of their issues with the Accords would somehow disappear. Unfortunately, the rest of the team and
the public still saw Steve as their “leader,” so his attitude and his choices reflected back onto Sam
and the others as well.

“We’ve been dealing with that. I thought we were doing a lot better.” They were; Jackson had
worked some kind of miracle with her people and those media guys, Burlen and Kalo. There were
no more public speeches or appearances yet—Jackson had said that coming out with an apology for
what Steve had said would just appear insincere, and worse, would confirm in many people’s minds
that Steve had meant what they’d interpreted from his words. Instead, several statements clarifying
Steve’s intentions were released (paraphrasing and cleaning up Steve’s own words, of course), and
each of the others had helped to craft their own.

They had decided to wait until this blew over to try starting public outreach of any kind.
Unfortunately, that was taking longer than expected. The social media discussions had gained in
strength for days after their meeting with Jackson and the others. While some people had calmed
down on their own, and others had been receptive to the released statements, a lot of people had
remained angry, and they only encouraged each other. As much as he’d first dismissed the claims
that not having an established social presence had contributed to the scale of the reaction to Steve’s
interview, it was true. They had almost no rapport with the public anymore—any previous goodwill
they’d earned as Avengers had been destroyed by their condemnation as criminals and the passage of
time. As a result, few people were willing to defend them on principle alone.

“That’s true, things are calming down again. But if news got out that you got a civilian job, it would
ignite all new discussions, and with what happened with Rogers, a lot of people would automatically
be against you. Things would turn nasty fairly quickly.”

Sam frowned. “Be against me, how? How could anyone be angry about me getting a job?”

Brown gave him a sympathetic look. “No one should be, but with your history now, people will
search for any excuse to condemn you. Getting a civilian job would raise questions about what
you’re doing, why you were pardoned and brought back if you’re just going to be spending time in
the city stocking warehouses instead of working to protect people.”

Sam considered this for a moment. “But I know some of the others at the Compound have other jobs,
and not just the juniors, but the adults. Stark owns a company, Rhodes still works with the Air
Force.” Sam had to fight down a stab of jealousy at the thought of Rhodes and his military career—
pardoned or not, if Sam wanted to ever go back to the Air Force, they wouldn’t want him back. It
had been enough of a fight for the President to get them not to take back the Falcon gear
permanently, since it was still technically their design and property.

Brown let out a sigh. “I know. And people appreciate them for it. They consider it highly
responsible. But those others haven’t made any major missteps. They’re looked at as doing the right
thing and working elsewhere on top of it. You, on the other hand, are seen as trying to make up for a
criminal past. People are going to apply different standards. They expect you to be working hard full-
time as a hero to make up for what happened before and to be worthy of Presidential pardons.”

“But they’d call me lazy and irresponsible if I just lived off SHIELD’s money forever, or tried to get
more out of the government, or something. How am I supposed to support myself?”

“I know, it isn’t fair. But public opinion rarely is. To be honest, no one cares about your money
troubles—not in the general public at least.” He amended. “They don’t want to hear that you have
more issues, not after what happened with Rogers. They want you to quietly work your way back
into their good graces, without any issues. They don’t want you to be an inconvenience.”
Sam put his head in his hands. “That’s impossible.”

Brown’s voice was sympathetic above him. “I know. I’m sorry I can’t tell you anything better, but that’s the truth. The public isn’t on your side, and they’re unlikely to be until you’ve done something to earn their admiration again. But you won’t be able to do that without establishing yourself with the Accords, which takes time and resources. And the public doesn’t want you using those resources until you’re back in their favor. It’s an impossible cycle.”

Sam looked up helplessly as Brown continued. “I’ll do what I can for you. I can search more discreetly than you for civilian sector jobs. I’ll look for something as close as possible to where you’re staying and that involves contact with as few people as possible. It will eventually get out no matter what you do, but if you’re out of the way for the most part and there’s no one constantly taking your picture or media hanging around your workplace, it won’t cause as much of a stir.”

Sam sighed again. “Okay. Thank you, I’m sorry to cause you so much trouble.”

Brown smiled at him and reached out to shake his hand. “It’s part of my job, Mr. Wilson, but your thanks is appreciated.” He stood and pulled open the door for Sam to leave. “Good luck, Mr. Wilson.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Clint is really only concerned with one thing, but the sentiment is not returned.

Chapter Notes

I actually liked Clint a lot until Civil War. I thought he was an interesting and amusing character. I know a lot of people didn’t like it, but I thought his family in AoU was sweet and added to his interesting characterization. But then they just flushed his character down the toilet in CW. He abandoned his family to run off at Rogers’ word, he suddenly basically despises Tony (I have some theories about Wanda that might be explored in other fics, but for this one I’m assuming that his thoughts and feelings were entirely his own), and becomes a criminal for no good reason (not that anyone on team cap had a *good* reason, but Clint was possibly the worst besides Scott, seeing as he wasn’t even involved in the first place). But since CW is official canon material, however much I hate it, I’m going with that as Clint’s new personality. And now, with how he acted in Civil War, I think that he genuinely does love his family, but he’s a selfish asshole who can’t even see what a hypocrite he is. So let him burn (muahaha).

Next chapter will be returning to Tony’s point of view and will be longer again, so no more daily updates.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Clint stormed out of Marie Jackson’s office and stomped out of the SHIELD building, to find that his taxi had left despite his instructions to wait for him. He swore loudly and threw himself down on the nearest bench for a minute.

Jackson had been against him before she’d even heard what he wanted, and he knew she was just trying to be spiteful because she was annoyed with them. They had to go to her regularly to get the money they needed to make up for what their pitiful SHIELD pay didn’t cover, and she’d been telling them over and over that they couldn’t keep expecting that money. Clint rolled his eyes every time. If she really meant it, she wouldn’t keep letting them leave with what they wanted.

Sam, evidently spineless, had taken her at her word and been looking for an online job of some kind. He hadn’t been having any luck, apparently. Sam had tried to tell Clint to do the same and Clint had brushed him off. They’d be getting more money coming in once they started going out on actual missions—once Stark got over himself and let the Council or whatever actually send them out—and in the meantime, he’d just get the difference from Jackson.

He wasn’t about to go grovel for some minimum wage job, or work on the internet like a 30-year-old loser who never left their mother’s house. He was a damn good SHIELD agent for years before he was an Avenger, and if they really wanted him to do more beyond the Avengers, he could go back to taking missions for SHIELD.
Of course Jackson tried to steer him away from that idea, another of her ridiculous power plays (or maybe she was just Stark’s puppet, he’d probably bought out the new, neutered SHIELD anyway). The first thing he’d brought up in his “meeting” with her was taking SHIELD missions, and she’d told him that he was no longer considered an agent, and that SHIELD wouldn’t send an unapproved contractor out on a mission. He’d snorted and told her exactly what he thought of their organization —such a pathetic shadow of the former SHIELD that it barely deserved to keep the same name—and she’d curtly reminded him that the secretive, unregulated nature of the old SHIELD was what had allowed HYDRA to infiltrate it so thoroughly.

Clint used to have much better control over his temper, but his patience had been thinning over the last few years. He still had the patience necessary for long missions as Hawkeye, but he just didn’t see the point in putting up with continuous bullshit from people he didn’t even like. He did still have some self-control, though. He’d managed to sit back down and wipe the anger from his face when Jackson had threatened to have security throw him out of her office. He still hadn’t gotten to the most important reason for his visit, and he needed her cooperation.

Laura.

He’d heard from his wife exactly once since the Civil War. Two weeks into his stay in Wakanda, T’Challa had passed on a message to him. It was short, just a single sentence saying that she and the kids were safe. He wouldn’t have believed it, but she’d signed it with a code phrase that only the two of them knew. It was absolutely genuine. He’d breathed a sigh of relief and allowed himself to finally relax.

At least until he started obsessing over it. There was no question it was from Laura, so why hadn’t she said more? They had a variety of code phrases, including ones for when they were being threatened or watched, and she hadn’t used any of them. She’d used the one that meant everything was completely well and good. Which meant she could have said more in the message, and just… didn’t. Nothing about how the kids were doing, where they were staying, what they were thinking. She didn’t ask for a return communication of any kind or give an address that he could send a discreet letter to. She must have known that he couldn’t risk calling her, not when he was a fugitive. She hadn’t signed it with “I love you.” Just the code phrase.

He’d eventually concluded that she was just giving him the silent treatment, angry about him leaving again after promising that he was retired and out for good. He’d felt bad about leaving, but at the time, he’d had every intention of coming back. He’d left her a note, explaining why he was leaving. She couldn’t expect him to leave a teammate locked up, to not answer Steve’s call when he clearly needed Clint. Steve knew he was retired, he wouldn’t have called him back if it wasn’t vital. And he’d been right. Stark must have really gone power-mad if he had locked Wanda up and teamed up with that son of a bitch Ross. Stark had always had it out for Wanda, probably pissed that she wouldn’t let him forget that he was a war profiteer whose weapons had killed more innocent people than half the villains they fought.

Laura had always understood his work, his need to be out there, in the middle of the action. They’d made it work. But when she was about to have a third baby, and it was getting to be too much to handle… well, he’d agreed to retire and to be there for the kids full time, because when he was there, he was happier than anywhere else. She’d told him that she could deal with the time apart, but she always dreaded getting the call that he’d been killed. She couldn’t handle three kids entirely on her own. So he’d had to make a choice between his job and his family, and the choice was simple. At least for a few weeks.

He was itching within a month. Being stuck at the farm made him antsy, no matter how much he loved to be with Laura and the kids. Turned out that giving up the adrenaline-filled life of a hero
wasn’t as easy as just putting in his papers and going home. He’d fixed up two dozen furniture pieces, taken apart the tractor Stark had fixed during the Ultron incident (then spent two weeks being teased by his family when he couldn’t put it back together and had to go buy a new one), and repainted the entire house twice, all within a month. He was bored, and as much as he loved his wife and children, he was beginning to regret retiring completely.

He could admit, when the call came in from Cap, he’d jumped at the opportunity. He knew Cap wouldn’t call for anything other than an emergency, yeah, but the truth was he’d have left for almost anything. But he’d always intended to come back. Stark’s refusal to see reason on the Accords made that impossible, and Clint had spent three years in Wakanda nurturing hatred for the man who took his family away from him.

After the one message from Laura, he’d given her time to calm down, to understand why he’d left and remind herself and the kids that he loved them and would always come back to them. He knew seeing his face on the news, a wanted criminal, couldn’t have been easy for her. But she knew him, she knew that he had a good reason. He’d waited patiently in Wakanda for her to simmer down and contact him again. And waited, and waited.

He’d grown increasingly impatient, then somewhat despondent, over the three years they spent away. While they were wanted, there was almost nothing he could do to try to contact his family, or to make sure they were still okay. What if something had happened to them? What if Laura was trying to contact him, but T’Challa wasn’t allowing any more messages in? He’d wanted to leave multiple times, to sneak back to the US or at least to the American continent, to try to find out more. But T’Challa had made it clear that if they chose to leave the sanctuary of the Wakandan palace, they would not be welcome back. Steve—and Natasha, once she showed up—had always talked him out of leaving, but it had been harder each time.

The moment their pardons were announced and they’d agreed to sign the damn Accords, the first thing he did was call Laura. His hands shook just dialing her number, knowing he could finally talk to her without the fear of being tracked down and arrested. He’d never been so keyed up, not on any mission for SHIELD or the Avengers, not even in moments when he’d been sure he was going to die. He was rewarded with a computerized voice saying the number had been disconnected.

He’d thrown the phone at the wall in anger and shattered it. It had taken more than half an hour for him to calm down enough to even sit and think about it. But eventually, he’d realized that Laura had probably changed her number for safety reasons. Maybe that was part of how she’d ensured they were safe.

So he’d borrowed Nat’s phone and gone through four other numbers that he knew for her, including lines that had been designated for missions or emergencies only. Each one was disconnected. He’d finally tried their ultimate emergency line, the one that would remain open no matter what, so they could always contact each other in times of crisis—disconnected.

They were given the services of their “superhero liaisons” and while the others immediately jumped to questions about their departure, their Avenger status, and the Accords, Clint’s first demand had been to talk to Laura. His liaison had stammered about being unable to do that, that Laura didn’t have a listed number and if Clint wasn’t able to contact her, she wouldn’t be able to either. Clint had ignored her for three days before finally accepting that she couldn’t do anything about his family and going back to her to talk about the Accords. Once he came home, he could do something about it himself.

Clint had not been in a good mood on the flight back home. The others had mostly avoided him, except for Nat, who had seen him at his worst, and Steve, who came by a couple of times to try to
assure him that everything would work out once they were home. Clint’s wordless snarls had eventually sent him away and he hadn’t returned.

He’d gone through a dozen old and rarely used numbers for Laura in the first two weeks back home. Finally, after more than ten days, he reached one that wasn’t disconnected: an old cell phone that Laura had always kept in service in case any of the kids needed to leave the house for more than a day. He got nothing but a five year old voicemail message, but he was too relieved to have finally reached a working number to be upset about it. Laura kept the phone in a box in the closet most of the time, it would probably be a while before she’d either hear it ringing or take it out and see his messages.

He called it about ten times a day for three weeks. The voicemail box was full within a few days, but he could still call. Each time it wasn’t answered, his hopes fell a little further. After three and a half weeks, the phone had been turned off, and no longer rang. It just went straight to the message telling him the voicemail box was full. Which meant Laura had seen it, and turned it off. That or she’d forgotten about it and let it run out of power, which was unlikely.

He’d started trying to ask around SHIELD—in the old days he could have them track a person or a number no questions asked, and he figured even with all their new rules and shit, he’d just have to fill out some paperwork. It was his wife he was trying to contact, after all, not some stranger. But he’d been given the run-around every time he’d tried.

Which had led to his shitty meeting with Jackson just now. After their little sniping contest over the crappy new SHIELD, he’d gotten to the point and asked her to track down Laura for him. She’d frowned and told him in no uncertain terms that they couldn’t just impinge on a citizen’s rights and track them down for no reason. Clint, already riled up, had yelled that Laura was his wife and he had a right to talk to her. Jackson, calm and collected as ever (which only infuriated Clint even more), had said that if Laura didn’t want to talk to him, she didn’t have to, and SHIELD would not be involved in the issue. When Clint jumped to his feet, knocking his chair back, she’d calmly hovered her hand over a button to call security. Disgusted, Clint had stormed from the office before they could come and throw him out, muttering insults all the way out of the building.

Now, sitting on the bench outside and waiting for another taxi to drive by, Clint began to feel a little hopeless. SHIELD was of no help to him, Laura wasn’t answering the one number he had, and he had no idea where they were. Without SHIELD’s resources, even Nat’s hacking skills were of no use to them. SHIELD had always taken care of everything he needed—that or Stark, once he was an Avenger. But now Stark was throwing a hissy fit and refusing to support them.

Nat had been the one to suggest that they use some of the computers at the Compound when they were there for training. But the first and only time they’d tried, Stark’s fucking AI had immediately shut down the console they were at and told them that if they tried to use the Compound computers for anything other than their designated purposes, they would be banned from the Compound. Despite it being utterly useless to swear at an AI, Clint did it anyway.

He cursed Stark for kicking them out of the Compound. He knew the people who lived there had far more access to the AI and the Compound resources. Back in the old days, Stark’s tech could have tracked Laura down in under a minute. But now, every time he tried to ask, the stupid thing told him that it “can’t assist in that area without further authorization.” So Clint would have to find some other way to get access to what he needed.

He was not going to go begging that bastard Stark to help him contact his family.
Just in case anyone thinks I’m drawing on “truth” for any of Clint’s rants, I want to make it clear that just about everything he thinks about Tony is complete bullshit. Tony is NOT a war profiteer; Stark Industries’ work literally does not fit the definition of war profiteering. He also never sold his weapons to terrorists (or anyone but the US military), that was Stane, someone who’d been running the company since Tony was a kid and who Tony trusted (with no reason not to), dealing under the table. Tony inherited the company from his father in the first place, it’s not like he chose to make weapons on his own. Yet, when he realized that something was going wrong and the weapons were ending up in the wrong hands, he immediately stopped production and did his best to fix the problem. Yeah, he was perhaps naïve in the years before IM1, but naivete is not the same as malicious intent and isn’t enough to condemn Tony. I won’t even start on the complete idiocy of Wanda blaming Tony for her parents’ deaths. Okay, rant over.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Tony finally has a conversation with Rogers.

Chapter Notes

Let’s give poor Marie a break from dealing with the Rogues, and instead make poor Tony deal with them some more.

Sorry for the long wait, this chapter kicked my butt a bit, we’ve got the renal exam next week at school, and we recently had a death in the family. But I got the chapter done, yay. Writing relaxes me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Tony!”

Tony was just coming up from the labs when he heard the shout, and he couldn’t stop himself from stiffening at the voice. So far, though he’d seen them all in passing and exchanged short remarks (in other words, snarked back at insults hurled at him) with some of his former teammates, he’d avoided having to actually be face to face with Rogers. Until now.

He knew some of his team were making it clear that the Rogues were not welcome to approach him. He’d told himself and his new team when the pardons were announced that he didn’t want to be petty—though Rhodes had thoroughly disagreed—but he’d admit, it had been nice to wash his hands of them almost entirely.

He’d heard through the grapevine that they were bringing most of their troubles to poor Marie Jackson now, and finding that she didn’t have the resources or the will to bend over backwards for them like Tony had back in the day. Tony hadn’t had any direct contact with her since an ISTCC meeting almost a month ago; there was no official reason for him to, since he wasn’t a contractor with SHIELD any longer, wasn’t the head of the ISTCC, wasn’t on the Accords Council, and wasn’t legally or financially responsible for the Rogues. But there was no doubt the morons considered him personally responsible for most of their troubles, and were hounding Marie with constant demands to meet with Tony, for her to somehow make him do what they wanted, or just to override him to force what they wished into place. The woman must have the patience of a saint, and a constant headache.

He pulled himself together the way he’d been taught all his life, trying to convince himself this was nothing more than a business meeting with a particularly unpleasant client. He pulled his shoulders back, shifted his stance into something casual but authoritative to try to indicate his control of the situation, and forced his most neutral expression onto his face as he turned.

A lifetime of acting in business and for the media allowed him to keep still as Rogers approached, but it was a near thing. He’d almost forgotten how much taller the man was. Training in power
stances and how to take control of a discussion could only go so far when he had a super solider who was capable of crushing his skull—or his ribcage, as he’d already proven—looming over him. Having him so close shoved unpleasant memories and thoughts of the Civil War into the front of his mind.

Rogers’s team hadn’t been holding back the way Tony’s was at the airport in Germany, which had been an insult and irritation more than anything, until Rhodey ended up hurt. At the time, it had still just been a matter of ideological differences, a fight over actions and trust. A splintering of friendships, which had hurt, but Tony was used to it, and besides, the Avengers had plenty of problems before the fight. They’d never really trusted Tony, and though he’d given them nearly everything, what little they’d returned was always given grudgingly. From day one he’d been bracing himself for everything to fall apart. Natasha betraying him had stung—even though he should have known better, she was good at getting to his soft spots and he’d truly believed she’d agreed with him—but she was a backstabbing spy who’d been playing him from the moment she’d met him, after all. Like the rest, her abandonment was expected, in some part of him deeply buried in the name of friendship and camaraderie.

But Siberia… that was something else. For all their problems and arguments, all their differences of opinion, and the way Ste—Rogers had looked down on him continuously, Tony had really thought that Rogers respected him in some way. Evidently, he’d been wrong. He’d barely been able to think once he’d understood what was happening in that damn video, and then realizing that Rogers had known, known for years and kept it from him, he’d just seen red. He had planned, as much as it was possible to plan when his mind was so consumed by grief and anger, to smack Rogers out of the way, take out some of his frustrations on Barnes, then arrest them both.

But Rogers had shot that plan to hell. Tony supposed he should have expected him to do just about anything to defend his buddy—he’d already murdered innocent people and caused staggering amounts of property damage for that reason—but Tony was someone he knew. Someone he’d supposedly called a friend. Obviously they hadn’t been friends at all—in fact, once he’d gotten over the guilt and been convinced by friends and therapy that his reaction was, in fact, not unreasonable for the situation, he’d started to think that Rogers hadn’t ever even thought of Tony as a person. America’s Golden Boy, the paragon of goodness, master of righteousness, considered Tony beneath all of the consideration he applied to other people. Steve “sometimes my teammates don’t tell me things” Rogers had kept a secret that wasn’t his to keep for years, using Tony’s resources to search for his parents’ killer, and all the while continuing to berate and mistrust Tony for the Ultron incident. Yet he’d allowed Wanda onto the team, against Tony’s protestations, without a second thought. Despite her history, she apparently deserved the “fresh start” and “second chance” that Tony was never given.

And Rogers, with all of his grand speeches (usually directed at Tony, because of course he was always the source of all of their problems) about teamwork and trusting each other and cohesiveness, had been ready to kill Tony. Tony’s life had been in danger more times than anyone could count, but he’d only really, genuinely feared for it a few times. Siberia couldn’t beat Afghanistan for physical pain, and as much as it had hurt emotionally, Rogers’ betrayal and lies weren’t quite on the same level as Obie, whom he’d trusted fully and without reservation, who’d been there when his parents died and when he returned from the desert.

But that didn’t mean it wasn’t added to the long list of things to give him nightmares. Having the man he’d grown up being compared to, his idol and then his source of resentment since childhood, and eventually—so he’d thought—his friend, hovering above him and ready to sever his neck with the edge of his father’s shield to protect his parents’ murderer, face twisted with hatred, was terrifying. Tony didn’t think he himself was capable of actually killing Rogers or Barnes—even in his blind rage, he’d only gone for non-lethal measures, ignored the numerous weapons in the suit that
could have killed both of them in a single shot—but apparently, Rogers didn’t hold the same reservations about him. Rogers, who would never hurt a teammate, who was the absolute exemplar of good will and morality, didn’t think Tony was worth it.

Or maybe Rogers was just a gigantic hypocrite. A deeply flawed person thrown out of his time and into a chaotic future which had, in his absence, turned him into an untouchable idol. Alone, that would have just been an inconvenience for Rogers himself, but the problem was that he’d bought into his own legend. He truly believed he was morally in the right in every single situation, that those who disagreed with him were bullies who needed to be stopped with violence, and he stubbornly refused to even consider other viewpoints.

Rogers, who claimed to “fight for the people,” the man who’d always looked at Tony sideways when anyone mentioned the days before Afghanistan because Tony had—indirectly, though that never seemed to matter to the people who held it against him no matter what he’d done to redeem himself since then—been responsible for innocent people’s deaths, had killed innocents himself and told the world to go to hell, because he couldn’t handle letting anyone else deal with Barnes. Rogers, who’d told Tony to “get over himself” and stop “judging people by their past” when he’d protested against Wanda’s appointment to the team, had judged Tony before he’d even met him and deemed him a worthless, selfish egotist who used his money to get what he wanted instead of earning it.

Even Tony had been drawn in by the legend of the great Captain America, but in his case it came out as resentment rather than hero worship. He knew it hadn’t helped things when he was standoffish from the beginning, but it was difficult enough to get over a lifetime of insinuation that he couldn’t live up to Steve Rogers, much less to meet him and have the man immediately dislike him. Add on top of that all his issues with the Avengers and Fury’s manipulative “not recommended” bullshit… well, Tony was aware he had a validation problem. He’d allowed Fury and SHIELD to use it against him, played right into their hands because he was so desperate to prove he was worthy to be an Avenger.

Now, though, they’d exhausted the last of his good will. Nothing like almost being brutally murdered by a teammate to make one see the light. He’d spent the last three years away from them and building a new team, a team of actual friends who treated him well and respected each other. Only now, from the other side and after extensive therapy and time, could he see exactly how bad it had been before. And now that he recognized it, now that he’d learned how good it could be, he would never go back.

So he faced Rogers with a neutral expression, forced himself not to clench his fists or rub at his suddenly aching chest, and refused to show fear. He’d survived their last encounter, and since then he’d only risen up while Rogers had sunk lower. He’d proven to the world, and himself, that he was the better man, and now, nothing Rogers or any of the others said would be enough to make him think otherwise.

He could see Rogers smooth out his irritated expression into a falsely polite smile, and his already dark mood dropped further. That was something Rogers had always done to him, and it took him a long time to realize what a self-righteous, manipulative tactic it was. When Rogers was annoyed with Tony and they both knew it, he would pretend to be polite and light when he started a conversation, to try to make himself look like the good guy. But when Tony acted unconcerned in return, Rogers would accuse him of “never taking things seriously” and berate him for it. Clearly he was hoping to start this conversation the same way.

Rogers stopped too close to Tony; the distance between them was for friends, not barely tolerant acquaintances. Tony resisted the urge to step back, but when Rogers started to make a movement like he was going to reach out and take Tony’s shoulder, Tony managed a seemingly casual shift of
footing that angled his body away from the reaching hand. That was something he’d had to learn to do as a very young, objectively handsome, ambitious CEO bringing up his father’s company from a US-based model to an international powerhouse. There were a lot of older businessmen out there who assumed he would be willing to “negotiate” behind closed doors and would be grateful for the leg up, and even more who thought they were entitled to him in some way after they’d made a deal. He’d learned quickly that so much as letting someone casually put a hand on his shoulder in a meeting could be taken as carte blanche on him, and a later rejection could lead to public retaliation in the form of ruthless attempts to crush his company financially, lawsuits that popped up out of nowhere, or false rumors suddenly circulating about Stark Industries that could drop their stock significantly by the time he was done proving them untrue. For his company’s sake, he could never speak in public about what kind of a cesspool the high-ranking business world was, and so there were few ways to let them know he wasn’t up for that. Much of the foundation of his playboy reputation came from the fact that if he was seen bringing two or three beautiful women up to his room at night when he was at a conference or public event, that greatly lessened the chance of any late-night visitors hoping to “talk business.”

Rogers seemed to steel himself for a moment, looking Tony up and down. Tony felt no urge to squirm under the scrutiny, which was pleasing. He’d really succeeded in letting go of any desire to please or live up to Steve Rogers and his expectations. Rogers’s smile briefly widened into something almost hopeful, and he started with, “Tony. It’s been a long time. It’s good to—”

“I’m busy,” Tony interrupted immediately. He was still determined to be professional about this, not to let it devolve into anything personal, but he did not have to be friendly. Not counting that piece of shit letter, Rogers’s last interaction with him had been abandoning him, injured, in a 400 pound metal coffin, in a frozen Siberian HYDRA bunker that, for all they knew, could still be visited by HYDRA agents any time. Tony had done absolutely nothing since then to indicate that he wanted to have any contact with any of them. So if he had to stand there and listen to that asshole actually try to make small talk, he would punch him in the face. He settled for cutting him off. “I’m on my way to another engagement, Rogers. What do you want?”

Rogers’s smile fell instantly and was replaced by his typical disappointed look, but maybe he realized Tony was not going to wait around for him, because he at least got to the point. “I need to talk to you about some things.”

“I doubt that, but since you’re here, talk. What do you want?” Tony repeated. He really was very busy, that wasn’t a lie, and he was expected upstairs in ten minutes. But even if he’d just retired for good and had nothing important to do for the rest of his life, he wouldn’t want to waste a single minute talking to Rogers. But maybe, by sucking it up and talking to him for just a few minutes now, he could avoid some future problems. Or just make them worse. Whatever. He wasn’t the one who’d insisted on starting a conversation where one clearly wasn’t welcomed.

Rogers’s frown deepened. “Why haven’t we been sent out on any missions yet? You know we’re ready, Tony.”

Hearing his name in that admonishing tone sparked even more irritation, and his voice was clipped as he responded. “Well, congratulations, but that’s really not my area or concern.”

“You’re a team leader. Maybe you want to punish us, Tony, but we need to do the work we came back for.”

Tony let his expression and voice flatten even more. “My personal feelings towards you have nothing to do with your work with the Accords, or mine. I’m a team leader, yes, but I don’t decide who gets sent out on a mission. You would know this if you bothered to familiarize yourself with the
Accords and team policies regarding sanctioned missions. I can submit requests regarding specific team members once I have worked with them already, but I don’t decide who is best for a mission, the Council does, based on their assessment of the situation and each potential team member’s submitted skills and evaluation results. I suggest you take it up with them if you have a problem.”

Rogers’s frown turned confused. “Evaluation results? We didn’t go through an evaluation.”

“Well, then, that would be why you haven’t been sent out on any missions yet.” Tony said impatiently. He was honestly astonished that they were discussing this; surely Rogers wasn’t actually unaware of this basic rule?

“We were Avengers before, why would we need to be evaluated?” Apparently he was. Jesus Christ. Tony actually looked up to the ceiling for a moment, unable to face that amount of monumental idiocy directly. “You signed the Accords. You have a liaison to help you work out the details, and you’ve been back for two months now, working within the Accords. Please tell me this time you actually read them.” When he looked back down, Rogers was giving him a look that was part confusion and part irritated reproach. He sighed. “Every Accords signee who wishes to be sent out on officially sanctioned missions, individually or with a group, must undergo an official evaluation. The results will be used to help determine the best people to send out on any assignment.”

Rogers scowled. “We were already Avengers. They know our skills.”

“Not Lang,” Tony pointed out, “and it doesn’t matter that you were Avengers before. Evaluations are used as a record of skills and abilities to be used for constructing the most effective teams for missions. It’s not a test of your abilities, it’s a record of your skill level in whatever abilities you choose to show. It’s an opportunity not only for the Council to be able to construct well-balanced teams, but for individual heroes to choose which skills they’re comfortable using on missions. There are plenty of mutants who have signed the Accords that have multiple abilities, but don’t want to use some of them in battle. They can choose not to include those abilities in their evaluations, and they will never be asked to use them on a mission, unless they change their minds and choose to present them in a future evaluation.”

Rogers crossed his arms. “And what happens if someone fails their evaluation?”

“No one ‘fails’ an evaluation. As I already said, it’s not a formal test, it’s an assessment of the extent of your skills and how best to use them. If the skill or skills someone chooses to show are underdeveloped or unstable, I suppose they wouldn’t be asked out on many missions, but they can always request a more thorough assessment, or a sponsorship for more training.”

Rogers seemed to have nothing else to say. He thought for a moment before finally asking, “Why weren’t we told about this?”

Tony gave him an incredulous look. “That has nothing to do with me, so I have no idea why you’re asking me. But if I had to guess, I would assume no one thought they had to. You were supposed to be going over the Accords and the requirements and expectations placed on you with your liaisons. If you had questions about the rules you read over, you should have spoken to them about it. I’d recommend speaking to them about Accords related matters.”

Rogers scowled. “SHIELD hasn’t said anything about it.”

“SHIELD probably didn’t think they had to,” Tony said, exasperated. “They probably assumed that you all wanted to train more thoroughly before undergoing your evaluations. You’re all adults, they must have expected that you’d actually read the documents you signed, and that you were capable of
taking care of what you needed to without having to be spoon fed every single step. Apparently they were wrong.”

Rogers’s scowl deepened, but before he could do more than open his mouth, Tony cut him off again. “Whatever the reason, none of this is my business. If you have nothing to talk about that actually concerns me, I’ll be leaving.”

He was rewarded with a scrunched up expression that told him Rogers was supremely frustrated about being forced to change the subject. “Yeah, I do,” Rogers finally said. “I—Clint wanted to ask for your help with something, something personal.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “And he can’t ask me himself?” He knew why, of course, but he wanted to see what excuse Rogers would come up with.

He could see the hesitation. “Clint’s… not in a good place right now. He’s been trying to contact his family.” He paused, then continued when he realized Tony wasn’t going to say anything. “He went to the courts last week, and they gave him a divorce order. He hasn’t spoken to Laura or the kids in years. He—we were hoping you could help. If anyone can find Laura and make sure she’s safe, it’s you.”

The attempt to butter him up, to appeal to his ‘ego,’ made him want to shake his head, but he refrained. “Laura and the kids are perfectly safe. And if Clint received a divorce order with full custody given to Laura, or a termination of parental rights, then he has no legal right to contact them. Besides, I would think the message of divorce is clear. She doesn’t want to talk to him.”

Rogers gave him a stern look. “It’s his family. And he can’t be sure they’re safe just because of some signed papers. Those can be faked.”

Tony managed not to roll his eyes with great difficulty. Rogers’s automatic distrust of government, legal proceedings, and bureaucracy was always at full intensity when he didn’t like what they were doing, then conveniently disappeared when he was getting what he wanted. He could come back to the US thanks to government pardons and live off of government money, but when their rules made life more difficult for him he’d sit there and condemn them all for being “corrupt” in a heartbeat. More of his hypocrisy.

“I’m fairly sure that the court systems don’t allow someone to just submit divorce papers without proof of identity. And if Laura has full custody and is no longer married, then no, they’re really not his family.” Tony paused for a moment, unsure whether or not to say what he’d been planning to. After a second, he decided why the hell not, they all hated him already anyway. If Rogers passed this on and Barton decided to try to take it out on Tony, he’d be kicked off the team and lose his contract with the Accords, and then Tony wouldn’t have to deal with him anymore. “And I’m not just assuming based on documents. I happen to know that Laura and her children are safe.”

Rogers’s eyes widened. “How?”

“Because I’m the one who helped them stay out of Ross’s reach. When you all decided to run off to become fugitives without a thought to who you’d left behind, Ross wanted information, badly, and I wasn’t cooperating. We didn’t have enough yet to prove that Ross was dirty and get him locked up, so after I got out of the hospital, I got a message from Laura asking for help staying away from him. I helped her get a new identity, move somewhere else, hide herself and the kids pretty thoroughly. Then once we’d gotten Ross thrown in prison, and I told her it was safe to come home, she said she didn’t want to. She didn’t want to go back to her empty home and the reminders of her criminal husband. I can’t imagine why.” He kept his expression neutral, but his tone was scathing.
Rogers was red-faced. “So you encouraged her to leave Clint, what, because you were mad at him?”

Tony kept his unaffected air. “Not everything is about me, Rogers, aren’t you always saying that? I haven’t encouraged her to do anything. She’s a grown woman who can make her own choices, the best for herself and her children. I helped her to settle into a new life, and since then I’ve had minimal contact with her. She made the decision to file for divorce and full custody on her own, likely so she could cut ties completely and not have to worry about her husband returning and trying to force his way into her life again. She was granted divorce and custody by default because her husband wasn’t there to defend it, seeing as he was an international fugitive.”

“You can’t do that. He has a right to see his children.”

“I didn’t do anything, Rogers. Amazing as it might sound to you, I do not control the American court system. If a judge signed a legal order for termination of parental rights, which is perfectly reasonable considering his abandonment and criminal history, then he has no right to see, talk to, or know the whereabouts of Laura’s children.”

“Clint was pardoned,” Rogers said through gritted teeth.

“Barton and the rest of you received government pardons in order to return to the US and work under the Accords. Those pardons mean you won’t be tried or imprisoned for your numerous crimes in the US and internationally. They do not absolve you of blame or responsibility for those crimes, or keep you from facing the personal consequences of your actions. Your guilt is unquestionable, and pardons do not change that, or the fact that Barton abandoned his family and became a fugitive for three years. They moved on, and a signature on a document isn’t going to change that.”

“This is petty, even for you, Stark. You know where they are, you could get Clint in contact with them.”

Tony raised an eyebrow again. “Your friends are not the only people in the world deserving of your consideration or respect. I’m honoring not only the law, but Laura’s wishes. Now, if you’ll excuse me, it’s clear you have nothing to say that concerns me, and I’m expected upstairs.”

He moved to step to the side and walk past, and Rogers reached out to grab Tony’s arm, to stop him from leaving or pull him close—whatever the reason, it didn’t matter. Tony jerked his arm out of the way, stepped back, and turned to face him again. He lowered his voice to a growl. “Grab me while I’m clearly walking away from you, Rogers, and I will push assault charges. That will end your career with the Accords, and then you’ll be entirely the government’s problem. Since signing the Accords was a part of the agreement for your pardons, I’m not sure what they’d do with you then.”

Rogers pulled back, but he puffed up his chest and drew himself up to stand even taller over Tony. “Was that a threat?”

Tony managed to appear unconcerned despite his racing heart and the unwelcome fear Rogers’s movements had brought to the surface. “Hardly. I’m simply stating facts. I assume the conditions surrounding your return were discussed with you, and I’m just reminding you to think about the consequences should you choose to commit a crime against my person, particularly here, in a monitored public area.” He gestured around them, to the hidden security cameras. “Now move. This conversation is over.” He stepped around, turned his back, and walked away with his hands in his pockets, leaving Rogers fuming in the hallway.

Chapter End Notes
That got away from me a bit with all the thinking about the past. But hey, that must be a bit what it’s like to be in Tony’s mind, like eight paragraphs worth of thoughts for every three seconds of real time.

I have no idea if there’s any canon information on how much the suit weighs, but according to Google the average volume of a human is about 0.0664 cubic meters, and if the total size of the suit is about 2/3 the volume of a person (since it’s hollow, but thick and obviously larger than Tony himself in order to fit him inside it), that volume of titanium would weigh about 440 lbs. So there’s my rough estimate.

I had to do some research into divorce and custody laws for this, but from what I found, there are a variety of things that are grounds for termination of parental rights, including being unable to contact the parent in question, and also certain felonies. I would think the scope of Clint’s international crimes would certainly count for that. All of that is up to the individual judge, of course, so I’m sure there are grounds for arguing that it shouldn’t have been allowed, but in the case of a woman whose husband abandoned them completely and became an internationally wanted criminal, they would pretty easily give the order for termination of rights. And from what I read, for the most part re-initiating parental rights after termination isn’t even considered.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Vision has some news.

Chapter Notes

I never understood the weird Vision/Wanda thing. I definitely have no interest in whatever is going on between them in the IW trailers. I do think Vision does (or at least should) see Tony as somewhat of a father figure, certainly a friend, and he would be protective of him in a way. Also, though he has his own emotions, he’s more capable than a human of detaching himself from them to analyze a situation, particularly after the fact.

There isn’t a lot happening in this chapter, I just wanted to address this relationship, and work in some fluff with Tony and Rhodey. Don’t worry, there will be more on Wanda later.

Tony was with Rhodey in one of the Tower’s kitchens when Vision came floating up through the floor. He looked troubled, which filled Tony with a sense of foreboding, and his quiet “am I interrupting?” where usually he just walked up and greeted them did not help.

Tony exchanged a quick look with Rhodey and turned to lean against the counter, seeing Rhodey do the same beside him. “You’re not interrupting, buddy, you know you’re always welcome here. You’ve got a home here too.” Tony wasn’t sure if he wanted to ask or not, but he’d have to eventually. “Is something wrong?”

Vision looked at Tony keenly for a moment before answering. “Nothing of great importance,” he said, and Tony felt relief rush through him. Vision wasn’t the type to lie or downplay something; if he said it wasn’t very important, that meant there was no world-ending crisis he had to deal with.

However, Vision was inexperienced and still awkward in personal matters, and Tony had a feeling that’s what this was about. He tried to give Vision an assessing look, but it might have come out apprehensive. He wasn’t exactly known for his expert handling of his own personal problems, much less someone else’s.

“I came by to inform you that I plan to significantly reduce the time I spend in the Compound. From now on I will only be there for training and meetings. However, if you wish me to be present at the Compound for any other reason, please do not hesitate to call me, and I will come over immediately.”

Rhodey frowned next to him and pushed away from the counter. “Of course you’re perfectly free to do so, Viz, but can I ask why? Is there a problem you’re having?”

Vision hesitated for a moment, and Tony had a feeling he knew what was coming. “Is it Maximoff?”
He asked.

Vision nodded. “Yes. I find myself… uncomfortable in her presence. I thought I had had enough
time to process and accept what she did to me, and to you,” he nodded to Tony and Rhodey, “those
years ago, but her renewed presence has revealed to me that perhaps I did not fully come to terms
with what happened.”

He looked frustrated, in that way of his that meant he was having difficulty clearing some emotional
obstacle. Tony certainly had experience with that. “Being away from someone who hurt you makes
it seem easier to process what happened. You might feel like you’re completely over it, but when
they come back again, everything is worse than you thought. It’s a human thing, Viz, it’s pretty
unavoidable.”

Rhodey gave him an approving look before continuing. “If you need more time to process now that
she’s back, that’s fine. You should take it, and don’t feel bad for needing it.”

“Also,” Tony added, feeling it was necessary to make this point, “don’t feel like you need to forgive
and forget. You’re allowed to be upset over what happened for as long as you’d like. An apology
doesn’t mean you have to accept it and pretend that nothing happened.”

Vision looked contemplatively between them. “I believe that is part of the problem, though not all of
it. Miss Maximoff has not apologized to me, yet she seems to expect that I have moved on and am
willing to ‘forgive and forget.’ I have tried to tell her that I would like her to give me more space, but
she has not done so.”

Tony blinked. “She hasn’t even apologized to you?” He’d thought that was just him. Rogers and the
others had always been so sure that she was “making amends” and had seen the error of her ways,
Tony had just assumed that it was only her persistent personal grudge against him that made her
continue to treat him like an enemy and refuse to acknowledge what she’d done to him. But if she
wouldn’t even apologize to Vision, whom she’d been friends—possibly something more, Tony was
never sure and sure as hell didn’t want to be involved in their personal life with… well, it didn’t
make Tony feel any better, but it did make his opinion of Rogers sink even lower, which he hadn’t
thought possible. Had she ever really shown remorse, or had Rogers just assumed it when she batted
her eyes, and happily let an unrepentant Nazi onto the team?

Vision looked solemn. “She has spoken the words ‘I’m sorry’ several times, but I have not yet felt
that any of those attempts constituted a real apology. I did not feel sincerity in some of them, and
every one was followed by an excuse of some kind. I remember our sessions well, and our
discussions regarding apologies. I did not feel any of her attempts qualified.” He nodded again to
Tony, who gave him a small smile. Vision had been part of many of the group sessions—with and
without Tony’s therapist—discussing what happened during and after the Civil War. They had all
been working through heavy emotions, and he’d thought it was prudent to help Vision deal with
betrayal and broken friendships as well. Vision had taken quickly to philosophical discussions about
intention and meaning, the basis of trust and apologies. Despite working through his own troubles,
he’d been a comfort to Tony in his own way. His logical analysis of situations still brought him to
censure the Rogues’ actions and support Tony when reviewing most of the falling out, and
sometimes that helped Tony more than anything else. The support of his friends and his therapist was
expected. But when a logical, unemotional analysis by an android still put Tony in the right, that
made him feel less like he was justifying his own actions in the aftermath and more like he’d been
right all along. Maybe Vision wasn’t the most unbiased third party, but he’d take it.

Rhodey was nodding in approval again. “That’s good. I mean, it sucks to hear she won’t even
apologize sincerely, but it’s good that you recognize that. You don’t have any obligation to listen to
Vision frowned. “Her ‘justifications’ worry me. I admit that I was perhaps blind to her volatile state of mind back when I considered her a friend. But now I am not, and I am disturbed by what she seems to consider valid reasons for her actions. When I bring up her choices and where they led her, she either provides no justification whatsoever beyond ‘I had to,’ or she finds a way to shift the blame to Tony. She refuses to accept responsibility for any action of her own doing, or any consequence her own choices have brought her.”

Tony rolled his eyes, but Rhodey looked serious. “That doesn’t surprise me,” Tony said, “she always hated me, she tried to blame anything she could on me, and when there was no possible way to blame me, she’d just bring up that I killed her parents again. Rogers just enabled it, telling her to ignore when people were afraid of her, when they died because of her. And god forbid if I tried to suggest that she do anything proactive or consider taking responsibility, because then she was ‘just a kid,’ being bullied by the big bad weapons designer who murdered her parents and ruined her childhood.”

“Which you didn’t,” Rhodey said. They’d been over that about a thousand and one times, so Tony just smiled in return. The sentiment was appreciated, but unnecessary.

“That pattern seems to have continued, and only worsened,” Vision said. “Our few attempts at conversation have always ended with her blaming you somehow. I have not even had the chance to discuss my feelings regarding her actions, because she will not allow me. She appears interested only in using you as an excuse for her actions and expecting forgiveness from me.”

“I’m sorry,” Tony said immediately. He didn’t want to be the cause of Vision’s problems, or be the thing holding him back from discussing his feelings. Whatever his own problems with the witch, if Vision wanted to rekindle their friendship, Tony wouldn’t stand in the way, at least not intentionally. Apparently he was in the way, whether he wanted to be or not.

“You should not be,” Vision said, “it is not your choice or your fault that she is so fixated on you. Perhaps she really is incapable of looking beyond her personal grudge, or it is possible she is deliberately changing the subject in order to avoid having to take responsibility for what she did to me. But her obsession with and hatred of you worries me. I do not wish to see her harm you.”

“She couldn’t,” Rhodey said, gesturing to Tony’s chest, “thank god. But she could still try.”

Tony pulled out the amulet he got from Amilie. “She could, and I’d be protected, from her powers at least. Beyond that, she really can’t harm me. Without her powers she’s just a normal human, she doesn’t have super strength or anything, and I’ve always got at least a gauntlet watch on me. Not to mention I’ve got FRIDAY watching my back in the Compound, isn’t that right, my girl?”

FRIDAY sniffed. “She’d be down before she could even touch you, Boss, I guarantee it.”

Tony smiled at her protectiveness. “And if she did come after me, it would just give us reason to kick her out of the Accords and have her arrested. Their pardons and signing the Accords don’t protect them if they commit more crimes. And her pardon was the most contested. Germany wanted her locked up for life, but even though Germany and Romania were the major players in the battle for pardons, they weren’t the only ones. Sokovia wanted her extradited, there are people there calling for her to be executed. She willingly worked with Ultron, and she volunteered for HYDRA. Whatever bullshit people believe here where they haven’t been so directly affected by HYDRA and Ultron, in Sokovia they’re not so willing to forgive.”

His smile faded into a grimace. “But there’s issues with that. First, the amulet only protects me, and
it’s not like Amilie can just churn out five dozen more for everyone living at the Compound, or even civilians, if Wanda chose to attack me out on the street or on a mission. I’d be worried about the fallout. She has control of her powers when it’s convenient, but if I was involved, especially once she realized she couldn’t touch me, I don’t think she’d exactly be calm and collected about it. Second, even if her only crime was attacking me and they decided to cut her off and extradite her, it might not be safe. She’s volatile, and we don’t really have a tried and tested way to contain her powers. Rogers and the rest of them might think I personally threw them in the Raft, but that was Ross’s creation, and just about everything about it was illegal. That collar they had on her wasn’t tested or approved. If it came down to it and she was endangering civilians, I can’t say I wouldn’t put it on her again, but only as a temporary measure.”

Rhodey crossed his arms, a crease appearing between his brows. “How do we even get a surefire method of restraining her? It’s not like she’d agree to test something out.”

“I know I am capable of restraining her powers for a short period of time,” Vision said. “In the past, I was… conflicted about fighting her. But having seen the damage she can do, and what she is willing to do without reason or remorse, if she presented a clear danger to innocents, I do not believe I would have a problem again. However, my ability to contain her is not indefinite, nor would it be a permanent solution should one be required. I need to be physically present, and exert a considerable amount of energy.”

Tony tapped his fingers on the counter behind him. “We obviously don’t have anything absolute, but there are some things working in our favor. I’ve spoken to both Strange and Xavier about magical and mutant powers, obviously, in designing the Compound and working with the teams and the Accords. We mentioned Maximoff in passing a few times. Both of them think there might be a way to contain her powers permanently. I’m not sure how exactly Xavier would do it, it has something to do with his telepathic abilities and locking away the part of her mind that was influenced by the Mind Stone and gave her the powers in the first place. But that could be further complicated, because it seems like she had some inherent magical ability and the stone just unlocked that. That’s why she survived the experimentation in the first place.”

“So Xavier isn’t sure, is basically what you’re saying,” Rhodey said.

“Maybe not, but he’s much more powerful than he wants most people to think. I wouldn’t put it past him to be able to deal with her no matter what surprises she has. Besides, there’s other options. Strange is more experienced with magic itself, and he helped design the power suppression at the Compound. Since that affects her, Strange says that means her magic is of a kind that he’s capable of influencing. He’s fairly confident that he could bind her powers if necessary. He says he could do it so that there’s no way for her to access them in this plane, or something—” Tony made a face at the unclear laws of magic—“And it could even be done so it’s reversible, but not by just anyone.”

“That seems like an acceptable solution, should something happen.” Vision looked back to Tony again. “I still hope to avoid any incidents, but if one should happen, it is good to be prepared. In the meantime, I believe it would be best for me to avoid Miss Maximoff altogether. Despite my clear reluctance, she continues to follow me and attempt to start a conversation when I am at the Compound, and our conversation attempts only end with her finding a way to be angry with Tony and myself feeling frustrated. I think it is best that I simply keep away from her. I will spend my free time here at the Tower and go to the Compound only when necessary.”

Rhodey’s frown deepened. “You shouldn’t have to do that. If you’ve explicitly told her that you want her to leave you alone and she won’t, you can file a harassment complaint with the ISTCC board. It can be handled in house, the Council doesn’t need to know, so it doesn’t have to risk going public.”
Vision shook his head. “I believe that that would simply create even more problems. I know you have spoken about the need to ‘pick your battles,’ and in this case, I do not believe this is a battle I am willing to fight. It is not difficult for me to simply spend most of my time here, instead of at the Compound. I will maintain contact with my friends there, but there are few activities I do there that I am not perfectly capable of doing here instead. And I will see both of you at the end of each day, as well as in training and during missions.” He smiled at Tony and Rhodey.

Rhodey leaned back against the counter once more. “If that’s what you want to do, it sounds good to me. Just let us know if there’s anything else we can do.”

“Thank you. The thought is appreciated.”

“Tell you what,” Tony said, “Harley is on break next week and he’s spending it here, for science.”

“Ostensibly for science,” Rhodey interrupted with an eye roll. “Really for destruction, to annoy the living shit out of me, and to give Tony an excuse to try out about a hundred bad ideas.”

Tony grinned. “Like I said, science. Anyway, he’ll be over for a week, and Pepper should be around, too, no business trips in her schedule. I’ll invite Peter over, and we can all take a day off, watch movies and make food and stuff like that. Just get a vacation from dealing with the Accords and the Avengers and all that crap. How’s that sound?”

Vision smiled. “That sounds pleasant. I would be glad to join you.”

“Great,” Tony smiled even wider. “I’ll see if Pepper can get a day, or at least half a day, she’s the hardest to schedule. I can rearrange training schedules so we’re all off at the same time. Give some of the others a chance to watch the younglings train for a day.”

Rhodey chuckled. “I thought they were Padawans?”

“Oh, Platypus, you have so much to learn. The newest of our Avengers and the graduated mutant leaders are Padawans. The kids and the mutant newbies are younglings. You, our fearless leader, are Yoda. Actually, scratch that, you’re Mace Windu. More badass, less sit-around-and-philosophize; champion of the Jedi Order, no patience for the rebels.” Tony winked.

Rhodey raised an eyebrow. “Does that make Peter Anakin? Because I’m not sure I like what that means for you, Obi-Wan.”

Tony gave a dramatic mock gasp and clutched his chest. “How dare you suggest that our sweet, pure, innocent Spider boy would ever turn to the Dark Side.”

“Is the ‘Dark Side’ in this analogy Mr. Rogers and his team’s willful ignorance and insistence on being contrary in every situation simply because it involves you?” Vision asked.

Tony cackled and bent double. Rhodey rolled his eyes and shoved him to the floor with a snort, but he smiled. “Thanks for that, Vision, now he’s never going to let the Star Wars references go.”

Tony picked himself up off the floor, still chuckling. “Maybe that’s what we’ll do on our day off next week. Star Wars marathon. Anyway, Vision, I’m sorry you feel like you have to avoid the Compound, but I won’t complain about having you around the Tower more.”

“The offer still stands to do something more official about it, if it keeps happening or it gets worse. Please come to us if more problems come up.” Rhodey said.

Vision inclined his head to each of them in turn. “Thank you, gentlemen, I will keep your offer in
I will leave you to what you were doing. Good day.”

“See you at the Compound later,” Tony called as Vision disappeared through the opposite wall. He turned back to Rhodey, who was giving him a serious look again.

“Maximoff is going to be pissed.”

Tony nodded. “She’s going to be pissed no matter what. Vision thinks it’s best to stay away rather than try to call her out, and I don’t disagree, but now she’s just going to think I’m stealing him away to be petty. She’ll find a way to be angry either way. I didn’t know she was pursuing him so much. It doesn’t surprise me, I just… hadn’t thought much about it, I guess. I don’t know what exactly they had before. I didn’t really want to know. I didn’t get it, but I thought maybe she was better with him, like everyone else. I was the only one she really hated. But she won’t even apologize to him, because of me.”

Rhodey gripped his arm. “Because of her obsession with you, not because of you,” he corrected, meeting Tony’s eyes with an intense look.

Tony gave him a half-smile and shrugged. “Yeah, I know. I just hate being the cause of something bad, of keeping them apart. Just because I didn’t get it doesn’t mean it wasn’t good for them. If it made Vision happy, he deserves it.”

“You heard him. He said she was always volatile, and he doesn’t want to even see her now that he’s realized it. She’s bad for him, man, and he knows that. He doesn’t blame you, no one does.”

Tony smiled a little. “Maximoff does, and probably the rest of them too.”

Rhodey scowled predictably. “That alone should prove that you’re not to blame.” He stared Tony down for a moment. “Look, I know that last one was a joke, but tell me the truth, Tony, are you really going to blame yourself for this? Because we can work on it. I’ll help you with it. But I need to know.”

Tony felt a familiar lump coming up in his throat at being faced with how loyal and loving his best friend was. He was decent about accepting help now, but he still struggled sometimes with believing that he deserved everything Rhodey gave him. He swallowed past it, but knew Rhodey could see his slightly damp eyes. “I’m not, for now. I know it’s not my fault. But I’ll let you know if that changes.”

Rhodey nodded and patted him on the shoulder, then let go and turned back to the counter to finish cleaning up the remnants of their lunch. “Good. Now, I believe you just signed yourself up for Pepper-wrangling duty, and we’ve got a meeting to be at in an hour, so you’d better get to it.”

Tony shook his head. “No one wraps Pepper, Rhodey. I will bring an offering to the Queen, kneel before her throne, and state my request with the appropriate humility and subservience.”

“So long as your ‘offering’ isn’t strawberries again,” Rhodey said, and though his back was turned, Tony could hear the smirk.

He gave the back of Rhodey’s calf a light kick. “Next time you’re slowly being poisoned by the giant hunk of metal and radioactivity you’ve got instead of a sternum and trying to figure out how to save yourself plus get around a bunch of spy bullshit at the same time, I’m going to quiz you on all of my favorite things and your supposed French skills, and see how you do.” He was joking, but the moment he finished the sentence he started to worry. He knew Rhodey carried his own guilt about some of the things he’d said and done back when Tony was dying, and Rhodey could be even more
stubborn than Tony himself about holding onto guilt.

Thankfully, Rhodey just turned and flicked dishwater at him. “I could beat your ass at friend trivia any day, Stank.”

Tony rolled his eyes for show and moved to dry the plate Rhodey handed him. As he stood there, side by side with his best friend, he reflected on his life now compared to years ago, to what he’d been so desperate to try to achieve with the Avengers. While he’d tried his best—in some good ways, some bad, but still tried—to make it work with them, his real gifts, his real friends, had been by his side the entire time. Rhodey, Happy, Pepper. He’d gained new ones along the way, and the loss of the ex-Avengers did nothing but let him focus on people who really made him happy. In the Civil War, they had lost him; maybe not his friendship, because they’d neither wanted nor appreciated it in the first place, but his money, his support, his tech, his resources. Whereas he’d lost their accusations, their barbs about his ego, their dismissal and distrust.

Now he was the one with the legal standing, the finances, and the support of the public, and they were the ones in jeopardy, constantly under intense scrutiny, held to impossible standards. He felt for them in a way—after all, he certainly knew what that was like—but they’d brought that on themselves by becoming criminals, by throwing their opportunities and privileges down the drain.

They wouldn’t stand for it for long, he knew. So far, it seemed Jackson and the others had been keeping them somewhat in line. At the very least, perhaps they accepted that if they caused too much of a stir, there would be severe consequences. But it wouldn’t last. The insults against them were piling up, and sooner or later everything would boil over. Hopefully, when that happened, the fallout could be controlled and they could be dealt with quickly and relatively quietly. Their interference and problems had no place in Tony’s plan for the future, and he was going to waste as little time and energy as possible on them.

No matter what problems they caused him now that they were back, he had come out of their war the stronger person, and he knew he would again. He was proud of Vision for standing up for what he wanted, and of himself for not trying to take responsibility for it like he would have in the past. He could stand firm in his convictions and watch them crumble, knowing he was in the right. They had no power over him.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Everything has a cost, and Tony’s friendship is a discount the Rogues are no longer privy to.

Chapter Notes

This is a short chapter, but the concept is actually what inspired this whole story, even though I’m not 100% happy with the chapter and my writing of Natasha.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Natasha cornered him when he was alone after a meeting had gotten out early. Smart on her part, and well calculated, he knew. She would be able to guarantee at least as much of his time as there had been left in the meeting. At least, assuming that he didn’t lie and make up a reason to leave. But, well, this was a challenge he didn’t need to back down from. She didn’t have any leverage on him and he had all the leverage on her. Maybe it was better to see what she wanted, get a better sense of where they all were.

He’d stayed behind for a few minutes after everyone else filed out of the conference room, still organizing files and making some notes on his tablet. When he was done, he looked up, preparing to leave, and she was leaning casually against the doorway, watching him. He sighed. He was going to start wearing a proximity detector connected to FRIDAY so he could get the hell out whenever any of his former teammates were nearby. At least he didn’t jump or twitch, thanks to living around an android who liked to phase through walls and a hyperactive superpowered teenager who could crawl silently across ceilings and drop down in front of him without warning. Maybe he could have concealed a scare from Rogers, but Romanoff was better trained than that, and she would jump on any weakness she could get him to show.

He raised an eyebrow, waiting for her to start talking, and when she didn’t, he just looked back down at his work. He was done with what he’d been wrapping up after the meeting, but there were dozens of projects he could pull up and make some notes on if he needed to. It was a subtle power play and he hated the necessity of treating this interaction like a battle, but he wasn’t going to give any ground to Natasha.

Finally, Natasha evidently realized that Tony was going to ignore her as long as necessary and decided to pick her battles. “Mr. Stark,” she said, and her voice was sweet and unthreatening and completely fake. “Do you have a moment?”

She walked over and perched on the table next to him. He closed down the project he’d opened and locked the tablet; no need for her to see anything he was working on, classified or not. When he sat back in his chair, she looked down at him with a familiar friendly, indulgent smile. She’d worn that smile in their years as teammates, every time she wanted to act like Tony’s friend so that he would open up to her, giving her a mine of information and personal weaknesses that she could then use.
against him later. She was an expert at playing every side of a confrontation and despite knowing that, Tony had bought into it every time, common sense overridden by his desire to be accepted and understood, coupled with the leftover need to prove himself to the woman who’d made the original report on him, telling him he wasn’t worthy of being an Avenger. He’d craved every friendly interaction with her, every time she’d been willing to listen to him, to understand him.

It was all fake, every move she’d made was a manipulation. Well, perhaps not every move—she was a human being, after all, and to be fair to her, some of her opinions and actions had to be genuine, at some point. But enough of them were false, and Tony could accept that he couldn’t tell the difference. So, to protect himself, his only option was to treat everything she did like a ploy.

He stood, both to avoid sitting below her level and to convey that he was the one choosing to give her this time and he could leave at any moment. “Well, you caught me at a good time, my meeting just ended a little early,” he said, inclining his head. They both knew that he knew very well this was no coincidence; his statement just told her that he wasn’t going to make this easy. If she wanted to act like his friend, he’d make her work for everything.

“Excellent, I just need to settle something with you quickly. I won’t take much of your time, I know you’re very busy.” He wasn’t sure if he was imagining the hint of sarcasm and reproach, but he thought he was. She seemed to be taking the ‘friendly’ route, however false it was, and she was too good to let that slip if she was committed to it.

Then again, maybe it wasn’t such an easy act to keep up this time around. He was frankly surprised she’d taken that approach to begin with. He knew she was close to Clint, and valued her freedom above all else. After what had happened with Laura and the kids—though it wasn’t at all his fault, none of them would see it that way, that was for sure—and Tony’s dedication to his side, which ended up being a part of what kept Natasha a fugitive limited to the Wakandan palace for more than two years, she couldn’t be happy with him.

She was one of the smarter, or at least more perceptive, among the Rogues. Though the Accords hadn’t been his idea, they both knew his influence couldn’t be underestimated. If he’d really fought against the Accords, particularly if he’d stood united against them with the other Avengers, it would have set them back significantly, if not scrapped them altogether for something different. But he didn’t do that, because they were right, and the Rogues who’d fought against them were wrong. Since Natasha had chosen to switch to the wrong side, she surely saw Tony as a partial cause of her troubles. He couldn’t find any sympathy for her. She’d picked her side using personal feelings instead of reason, abandoned Tony because she liked Rogers better than him, and it ended up biting her in the ass.

He turned to face her fully and raised an eyebrow again, not bothering to worry about his body language. She’d be able to see through anything he tried to fake, and he had nothing to hide from her anyway. Let her see that he was impatient and bored, that she wasn’t worth his time.

She certainly saw it, because she slid off the table smoothly and stood facing him, dropping the saccharine smile for a neutral expression. He idly wondered what tactic she’d be trying next and sighed internally. The next few minutes would be a lot easier if they could just talk frankly, but that would never happen. “You’re certainly right about that,” he said, continuing their polite charade. “I appreciate your effort to save me time.” He gave her a smile fake enough for even Rogers to see it. “What do you need to talk about?”

In the old days, it would have just been “what do you need?” without a qualifier, because of course, anything they needed, he’d take care of without question. He knew that she noticed the difference, but at least she didn’t seem surprised by it. Back when they’d first returned to the States, he’d had a
hard time believing that they actually expected him to continue supporting them, after everything that
had happened. He really had spoiled and indulged them to the point that they thought it was a given.
But after more than two months back and several realities slapping them in the face, hopefully they’d
finally realized that they’d get nothing out of him.

Natasha leaned a hip against the table and pursed her lips. “Amilie, the Elemental girl.”

“Yes? What about her?” Tony didn’t roll his eyes, but he knew Natasha saw the desire there. What
was that about not wasting his time, again?

“I was with her yesterday, on that hospital security detail.” Ah, yes, missions. After Rogers’s
revelation that he was too clueless to schedule evaluations for himself or his team, they’d quickly
jumped on it. Truth be told, Tony had wondered how in the hell Romanoff hadn’t known about the
requirements of the Accords—she was at least smart enough to read them and know the relevant
details—and had eventually concluded that she’d known and just not said anything. There were a
dozen potential reasons for her silence that Tony could think of off the top of his head: she’d never
been much to worry about her public image, so maybe she just didn’t care how quickly they got out
there; she was reluctant to take on some of the kinds of work the Council now sent them out on; she
recognized that Rogers and Maximoff, at the very least, were destructive as all hell and would only
cause them more problems once they got out in the field; any number of other things.

Whatever the reason, they all knew now, for better or worse (most likely worse). Rogers had been
the first one evaluated, choosing to stick entirely to the physical training rooms. His recorded skill set
was, as of now, pretty much entirely punching things. Barton still hadn’t been evaluated, likely still
sulking in his room about Laura deciding she was better off without him. Maximoff had thrown
some things around, blocked some attacks. He wasn’t sure if she’d submitted a statement about her
ability to mentally influence; either way, the use of that type of power was considered a human rights
violation by the Council, so she could never be officially asked to use those powers, and would in
fact face an inquiry and punishment if she did use them on a mission.

Wilson, Lang, and Romanoff, at least, had been smart about theirs, recognizing that there were more
important skills than the physical. Romanoff had shown herself a half-decent negotiator and hacker,
plus presented her skills in tracking, undercover work, interrogation, and several other areas. Wilson
wasn’t a bad negotiator himself, had mass-casualty and rescue operation training from his military
years, and could handle himself well with trauma victims. Lang, as it turned out, knew his way
around large-scale and intricate planning work for a variety of operations.

Thanks to their more diverse resumés, they were actually being considered for missions already,
particularly the small-scale operations that didn’t require any sort of physical confrontation. Rogers
might have thought being an Avenger was all about fighting aliens and HYDRA, but the Council
found many more ways for them to be useful. Wilson was slated to go out with Rhodey, Spiderman,
and one of the younger mutants in the next recon mission, and Romanoff had already gone with
Amilie and one of Xavier’s senior students on a mission yesterday. They were working Lang into
teams as well. Rogers was probably foaming at the mouth about him and Maximoff still not being
sent out, but the Council just didn’t have much need for Captain Face-Punch and his unstable witch
sidekick. He could go whining to the Council about it, but they wouldn’t take his shit any more than
Tony would.

Tony gestured for Natasha to continue, impatient. He was well aware that she’d been out already,
and wasn’t looking forward to whatever complaint she was going to bring him that inevitably wasn’t
his problem, or his job to deal with.

She surprised him, however. “Her combat outfit is incredible. I overheard her explaining its
properties to one of the officers, and when I asked her about it, she told me you developed the ballistic material.”

Tony hoped this wasn’t going where he thought it was going. Natasha wasn’t stupid enough to think he’d just be handing her anything, but she could and would try to weasel it out of him somehow, and he just didn’t want to deal with it. “Yes, that was a particularly tricky one, something as flexible and thin as that that will absorb the impact of projectiles. Amilie’s has magical properties as well, but she developed that aspect mostly with Dr. Strange, I didn’t have much input. The regular stuff is available to certain task forces and crime units, but there aren’t a lot of people using it.”

He could see Natasha assessing him, trying to parse out his words and figure out how best to get what she wanted. “She told me that you control who can get their hands on any of it.”

Tony nodded. “That’s true, I hold the patent but I gave the production rights to Evolution Textiles, they make all of the material at request but they need to clear it through me. That isn’t the kind of stuff we want ending up in the wrong hands.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow, and this time he was more certain of the slight reproach. For someone with her past, she’d always looked condescendingly down at his attempts to make up for the lives that had been lost because of his naivete. She seemed disdainful any time he mentioned keeping tight control over who ended up with specialized equipment, as though not knowing what Stane had been doing years ago meant that he could never try to avoid that problem in the future without being a hypocrite of some sort. More likely she considered it an insult for her to be one of the people under scrutiny, rather than automatically being given what she wanted without question.

The reproach was replaced by the barely-there demanding, judgmental look he was familiar with on her face. “But in the right hands, it’s a great help. Priceless protection for people who are out there saving lives, so they can continue to do so.” So that’s how she was planning to play this: casting herself as the hero who needed protection in order to do her job and relying on his guilt complex to make him feel like the bad guy if he didn’t give her that. In the past, it would have worked in a heartbeat. Not now.

He adopted a falsely understanding expression that he knew would be transparent and irritating to her. “Oh, of course. Any of the Accords signees are welcome to use it as long as they’re in good standing with the Council. If you want to get your hands on some of it for yourself, I’ll put your name through no problem. I believe it costs them about twenty thousand per square yard to produce. They usually raise the price just a bit when they sell it, of course, to make a profit, but for an Avenger they’ll probably be willing to get it to you at cost.” He dropped the fake act altogether and gave her a condescending smile.

Her expression turned frosty. “Right, because everyone can afford that. You’re the one who designed it, you’re going to try to tell me you can’t get it for free from them?”

Tony leaned back against the wall casually, radiating his lack of concern. “And put them out of business? I designed it, yes, but they’re the ones who actually have to put in the work and time to make it. It’s difficult and time-consuming, and the materials are expensive. If I want any of it, I pay for it. You’ll have to do the same.”

Natasha scoffed. “Why don’t you just admit it, Stark, you could easily pay for everyone on the team to be protected with that stuff, but you’d rather hold it over their heads and make them suck up to you and your ego before you’ll give it to them.”

Tony actually laughed. “Right, my ego. Wondered when it would come to that. It might be pointless to tell you the truth, Romanoff, but I haven’t given away any of it for free. But I suppose you and
your merry band of criminals are used to getting everything for nothing, huh? Well, I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but everything costs money, and this stuff is particularly expensive. If you can’t afford it, I guess you just won’t be getting it.”

There was a sneer on Natasha’s face now. “Because I’m sure Amilie paid twenty thousand a yard for hers.”

“Amilie,” Tony interrupted before she could say any more, “received the material for her combat outfit in exchange for something she gave me that was of… immeasurable personal value to me. I repaid her in part by purchasing the material for her gear. And before you bother asking,” he added when she opened her mouth again, “no, I’m not talking about ‘friendship’ or ‘trust’ or something like that. I mean a physical object which was easily worth the cost of her material.”

He pushed off the wall and moved to head for the door. “If you’ve got something of similar value to offer me, I’d be glad to procure something you’d like in return.” He turned back at the door to look her up and down, making his disdain clear. “But somehow I doubt you have anything I want.”

Chapter End Notes

As it turns out, nearly every name is already a thing. Evolution Textiles wasn’t meant to be a real company, it was just something I made up.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Money, money, money. (Apparently the Rogues think it grows on trees)

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait for this one, I built up some steam writing Electric Veins and didn’t want to let it go to waste. Now I’ve got the GI exam coming up at the end of this week, and after that it’s spring break! Hopefully I’ll be writing a lot then.

I’ve gotten some excellent prompts/ideas from comments (and huge thanks to everyone who comments, even if it’s just a few words, it really motivates me!). I’ve worked a couple into this chapter, and then I have two more chapters after this planned, and I think that’ll be it for this story. But I’ve started planning out a series of other post-CW bitter stories where Team Cap gets what they deserve, and I want to work some of them in there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Marie sighed heavily as she sat down in the SHIELD conference room. The last few weeks had been even more of a nightmare than usual for her in this job. She was beginning to spend more and more of her time questioning why she even did it. The only real reason, at this point, was that SHIELD would never be able to find someone else both competent and willing to take the job, and someone had to do it, or a lot more people than just her would suffer. But her altruism could only go so far, and they certainly didn’t pay her enough to deal with this.

That’s what it all came down to in the end: money. Money made the world go ‘round, and unfortunately, most of her current issues stemmed from the fact that she was in charge of six overgrown toddlers who apparently couldn’t understand the concept. She was essentially a parent to temperamental superheroes, and now she was paying for her leniency in the past. There were actual consequences emerging now, and she was going to be faced with some tantrums when she delivered the news.

The source of her problems came filing into the room right on time, and she could swear her head started aching harder at just the sight of them. Rogers was actually smiling at her, which she knew shouldn’t annoy her more, but it did. The man was a walking disaster and Marie hadn’t sounded happy when she’d called them for this meeting, surely he must know that this wasn’t going to be a pleasant conversation. Maximoff and Barton were wearing their usual scowls, and Romanoff was attempting to look unaffected. Wilson and Lang, at least, looked apprehensive; naturally, the two causing her the least grief were the ones most likely to listen to her and actually absorb what she said.

“Let’s get right to it,” she said as they finished sitting down. “We’ve got a few things to talk about and not a lot of time to do it, and I have a lot to do. I’d like to get out of here as quickly as possible.”

“Of course,” Rogers said before she could continue, apparently under the impression he was being
polite by wasting even more of her time. “What can we do for you?”

“What you can do is stop causing problems for me, but there’s a pipe dream,” she said bluntly.

Rogers’s face started to morph into that self-righteous frown that said he was going to try to reprimand her, so she plowed on before he could open his mouth. “First thing’s first. You can stop coming to me for additional money beyond what you get from your official stipend, because that’s over. The budget we were pulling that from is closed off and it’s not coming back.”

There were noises of surprised outrage and mixed protests from around the table. Marie leveled an extremely unimpressed look around at them. “I’ve been warning you for months now that this would happen, it can’t possibly come as a shock.”

“Where the hell are we supposed to get money from, then? You don’t pay us for shit,” Barton said.

“You’re being paid the stipends this department can afford to give you, Mr. Barton. Perhaps they don’t cover all of your expenses, but there’s nothing we can do about that. You’ve all had ample time and warning to prepare your own budgets and understand your monetary needs and constraints. Mr. Wilson and Mr. Lang have taken on additional jobs, as I hear it,” she said, gesturing to them, “I see no reason why you can’t do the same.”

That earned an ugly sneer. “We’re Avengers. We shouldn’t have to take additional jobs just to afford basic living expenses, especially not some damn entry-level, minimum wage job.”

Marie raised an eyebrow. “You can overestimate your importance and your worth in the working market if you’d like, Mr. Barton, but it won’t change your situation or SHIELD’s budget.”

Barton snarled, but Rogers spoke up before he could say anything else. “But ma’am, you told us a few weeks ago that SHIELD was willing to cover basic expenses. I thought that was the point of the whole charade with tracking all our purchases with receipts.” He made a face at the last part, as though the idea of keeping receipts and tracking expenses was beneath him.

“Responsible spending practices and consideration for a budget is hardly a ‘charade,’ Mr. Rogers. But if that’s what you think, it certainly explains the summary my department brought to me when they delivered the news.”

Rogers looked like he wasn’t sure whether to be irritated or confused. “What do you mean?”

Marie opened the folder she’d brought and pulled out one of the budget summaries. She scanned it again, scowling as she was reminded of the facts—their confusion was particularly irritating in the face of their utter disregard for her budget and warnings. “This is the summary I was given of your submitted spending in the last three weeks.” She lays it on the table and glares around at all of them. “Do you have any idea how utterly ridiculous this is?”

Some of them opened their mouths, but she silenced them with a deadly look and went on. “Miss Maximoff, you came to me less than a week ago claiming that you needed additional money for food, yet this says you spent nearly four hundred dollars last week at a clothing boutique. An upscale boutique, I might add. This type of spending is why SHIELD has chosen to withdraw that money. It’s clear you’re not using it responsibly, and we can’t justify that to our superiors, who ultimately control our budget.”

Marie noticed that Romanoff was giving Maximoff a mildly disappointed look. She wasn’t entirely surprised; while Romanoff hadn’t fully heeded Marie’s warnings and gotten a job, she, at least, had a reasonable spending profile on Marie’s summary. She bought only what was necessary and spent as little on it as possible. Though she shouldn’t have been depending on SHIELD for extra money at
all, what they’d gotten would have lasted longer if those like Maximoff hadn’t been irresponsible with it.

Maximoff, on the other hand, crossed her arms over her chest and glared like a child. “I was under the impression clothes are considered a necessity.”

“Not when you already have a full and functional wardrobe—or were the clothes you’d been wearing for the previous several weeks suddenly destroyed?” Marie snapped back, starting to lose her patience. “And certainly not from high-end stores. You are living off a tight budget. Miss Maximoff, you do not need designer-brand clothes. Were you actually considerate of that fact, you could walk into an appropriate store with absolutely nothing and come out with an entire wardrobe for less than you managed to spend in a week.”

“Right, a few comfortable luxury items are completely off the table, because we’d might as well be prisoners who get no say in what we have,” Barton sneered.

Marie pivoted to face him, and felt a small amount of satisfaction when he actually shrank back slightly from her icy glare. “That comparison is childish, and I won’t waste my time on it. And you should not be one to talk, Barton, considering your own additions to your budget problems. I see you submitted an order for a new desk and chair in your quarters, again—do I want to know what happened to the ones you had?”

Barton’s jaw clenched, but it was Rogers who answered, putting his hands up in an attempt at a placating gesture. “Clint was having very personal issues, Ms. Jackson, surely you can understand. He was under a lot of stress. It was an accident.”

“No, Rogers, I can’t ‘understand.’ That is not an acceptable excuse, no matter how grave these personal issues were.” She knew exactly what they were, of course, after Barton had come to her repeatedly about it. She knew that he’d been cut off from his former wife and children and wasn’t taking it well, but that was neither her problem nor an acceptable reason to add to her budget problems. Violently lashing out weeks after the fact because he was facing the consequences of his own decisions was behavior unbecoming of any rational adult, much less an Avenger, and Rogers was making himself look worse by thinking it could be excused. “In fact, you all are putting me under ‘a lot of stress’ right now, and you don’t see me taking it out on the furniture, because that sort of violence is irresponsible and pointless, and the things in this room don’t belong to me.”

Rogers closed his mouth, looking slightly embarrassed—good. She turned back to Barton. “If you cause any more destruction of SHIELD property outside of reasonable training accidents or missions, Mr. Barton, you will be held personally responsible for its replacement. At this point, your behavior is not only causing budgetary problems, it is also creating concern over your psychological state. Your status in this department is rocky, Mr. Barton, and I would not push it farther and risk it getting back to the Council. If you are declared unfit for your current duties under the Accords, SHIELD will be forced to drop responsibility for you, and the US government will have no choice but to extradite you and allow the various foreign governments who still wish to try you for your crimes to do so. I might remind you that your pardon is only valid in the United States, and was issued only on the condition that you are an active signee of the Accords. Volatile behavior can and will get you kicked out of the Accords, are we clear?”

Barton gave a terse nod, refusing to make eye contact. The rest of them seemed moderately cowed as well, which was good. The same rules applied to all of them, and they’d been getting more and more troublesome in the past few weeks. Perhaps a firm reminder of the fragility of their freedom was what they needed, and a less entitled attitude was exactly what she needed from them going into the next point of discussion.
She sighed and flipped through her folder for several more papers. “Our other point of discussion is related. You’ve all been out on several missions now, some of which have involved physical fights, and resulting destruction. The government is having to pay more than they want for the damage you’re causing, and that makes them unhappy, which makes me unhappy.”

Wilson frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Don’t understand what, Mr. Wilson? It isn’t a difficult concept. You all are causing damages that are adding up alarmingly fast, and the government that’s having to pay for them is not overjoyed about it.”

“But,” Rogers interrupted, “aren’t the Accords supposed to protect individuals from having to pay for damages caused during missions? I thought that was the point of them, so that we aren’t punished for necessary collateral damage when we’re saving people.”

“That is—a somewhat inaccurate rephrasing of—one of their purposes, yes. Since Accords signees are acting in the best interest of the populace and helping with serious threats, damages incurred in the line of duty by specific signees are not the responsibility of those individuals to compensate. The nations that have signed the Accords have their own agreements in the matter.”

“So what’s the problem?” Lang asked.

“There are two problems. First, much of the damage you’re causing is not considered ‘necessary’ by the Council, and second, you all are a special case because of your pardons relative to the US only and your status in many of the nations participating in the Accords.”

She waited a moment for them to process this, and as expected, every face around the table morphed into some combination of confusion and anger. She resisted the urge to sigh again; if they’d paid any attention at the initial briefings, they at least would have known about the second half of their problem. And of course, if they actually did what they were told, they would have avoided the first half.

Rogers, predictably, looked the most stern, as though he was the one doing the reprimanding. “What do you mean, it’s not considered necessary? That’s ridiculous. We can’t completely prevent property damage in a firefight.”

“Of course not, which is why the Council goes over mission plans and reports to assess damage and how to better prevent it in the future, and of course, take the responsibility as a group for mission-related damages. You, however, keep going off-mission. You, Mr. Rogers, and also Miss Maximoff, have officially deviated unnecessarily from the mission plan in both of your battles so far.”

“We did what we had to!” Maximoff burst out.

“According to the Council and your group leaders, you did not. Their analysis post-battle indicates that your deviation from plan was neither necessary nor helpful. Worse, you failed to inform your mission commanders of your intent to do so.”

“The circumstances dictated—” Rogers began, but Marie cut him off.

“Battle logistics are not my area, Mr. Rogers. If you wish to argue the point, you should speak to your mission commander during or immediately after, or preferably before, the mission. But part of signing the Accords and working with a group is the acceptance that there is a chain of command—a chain which you are no longer at the top of, in case you’ve forgotten—and analysis of situations to provide the best possible plan. I would think you’d understand that. You need to follow the plan
you’re given. If you don’t, the damages you cause when you’re off-mission will not be covered by the protection of the Accords.” Rogers looked like he was chewing glass, but Wilson spoke up before he could say anything.

“But it sounds like they won’t be anyway,” Wilson said with a frown. “Did you say the government is having to pay for all of our damages?”

Marie nodded solemnly. “This was discussed during the briefings immediately following your arrival, but perhaps you need a reminder of the terms of your return. The majority of the world was strongly against allowing any of you back. They were highly unwilling to contribute any of their own funds to paying for damages you cause. The US government was determined to bring you back, and so they negotiated an agreement wherein aside from a very small allowance, they will be responsible for paying for all damages caused by you. They did that under the impression that you would be following carefully constructed and analyzed Accords plans and therefore causing the minimal possible amount of destruction, but you are very quickly becoming more trouble than you’re worth, literally.”

Wilson and Lang averted their eyes at her statement, but the rest of them scowled or sneered in her direction, clearly offended by her choice of words. Well, too bad. They were the ones causing their own problems, and as long as their problems were causing trouble for Marie, she would continue to let them know exactly what she thought of them.

“So we’re clear,” she continued, leaning forward to brace her palms on the table, “the President and those in the government who campaigned and negotiated to have you brought back were not in a majority, themselves. They could do it because they are the official government of the country, but they can’t force others in the country to take responsibility for you. As you may or may not know, there are quite a few funds and superhero charities that help donate to Accords accounts to pay for their work, including damage control, but they are also not responsible for covering any damages incurred by you. SHIELD and our superiors have that entirely on our shoulders, and our budgets. Now, the cost of keeping you here and having you out in the field is climbing higher than imagined, faster than imagined. You’ve already overwhelmed SHIELD’s budget in just a few missions, which means we’ve had no choice but to pass that debt up onto higher levels of government, and they’re not happy.”

She stood tall again to look down at each of them. “Even some of those who supported your return are starting to question it, now that they’re being forced to pay for it. You don’t have that much support in the government; Congressmen were happy to argue that you’re ‘American heroes’ and should be brought back when it was a booster to their own image and campaigns, but voters don’t respond well to loss of budget from departments that normally serve the public because they need to shunt it on to you. No one else in the government now wants to touch you with a ten-foot pole, because you’re a curse on a department’s budget. Now, frankly, the President is too proud to go back on his decision and admit that he made a mistake in bringing you back, but if you keep costing this kind of money, he will be forced to do something about it.”

Rogers crossed his arms and sat up straighter in his chair, puffing out his chest a bit. “What, he’s going to threaten us? Scrap our pardons and throw us out of the country? That won’t happen.”

“No it won’t. But if costs continue to add up like this, SHIELD could be told to drop our budget for your housing, your stipends, and any liaison work we do between you and the Accords, the Compound, etc. You’ll be responsible for your own personal expenses entirely, housing, food, clothing, as well as paying for your time and space at the Compound, your equipment, and almost everything else. According to the deal the US made in order to bring you back and have you sign the Accords, the only thing the government is absolutely responsible for is paying for your official
Accords expenses, including damages, and any evaluations or training that are officially ordered or sanctioned by the Council. If SHIELD drops you and you have to do everything else on your own, I imagine it will interfere with your ability to work effectively as Accords members, and if they choose to kick you off, then the terms of your pardons will be broken and you will be extradited.”

“So you’re essentially blackmailing us,” Rogers said, voice hard. Marie had to resist the urge to roll her eyes at his analysis.

“I am informing you of the consequences should you continue to fail to do your job. You were brought back with the expectation that you would follow certain rules and regulations, and those include the rules of the Accords and your field leaders. Thanks to you, not only is the government concerned with the costs you’re incurring, but the Council and your leaders are not happy with you. If you continue to go off-mission, it will be considered insubordination by the Council, and they can and will kick you out of the Accords for it.”

Rogers’s jaw worked for a moment. “We should have input into mission plans, be able to make tactical decisions.”

“You do, Mr. Rogers, just as every signee does. You may submit your opinions and recommendations to the Council before or after missions, and they will be taken into account when the mission is analyzed. That doesn’t mean they are obligated to follow your advice or do what you want if they don’t believe it is the most effective strategy, but you may submit whatever opinions you’d like. During missions, you are expected to follow given plans and the instructions of your field leaders. That’s how effective teamwork goes. If you or Miss Maximoff feel you need more training, either in general field strategies or in your specific areas of expertise in order to cause less damage when you fight, SHIELD can arrange them for you.”

Maximoff scoffed. “We don’t need more training.”

“If you are causing damage of this magnitude, Miss Maximoff, perhaps you do.”

“I thought battles weren’t your area of expertise,” she sneered.

Marie gave her a withering stare. “Perhaps not, but awareness of your actions and their consequences is. I might remind you that yours was easily the most contested pardon, both internationally and here in the US. You haven’t been out of the country on any missions yet, but even here, people are wary and frightened of you and your powers. Carelessly causing damages that aren’t mission-approved is not the way to get people to trust you. Accords missions are public record, I should remind you, and anyone can go and see that you are going off-mission and causing unsanctioned damage. You’re only causing yourself more problems with the public.”

Maximoff crossed her arms tighter and looked to Rogers as though expecting him to take over for her. “I can’t control other people’s fear of me. It’s not my fault they don’t like me. They don’t understand my powers. I haven’t hurt anyone.” Perhaps she meant to sound firm to justify herself, but Marie only heard childish petulance.

“Perhaps some of their fear is rooted in ignorance, but you are not doing yourself any favors with them. Since returning, you’ve done nothing to attempt to connect with the public, and now that you’re going out in the field again, you’re causing unnecessary damages. Maybe no one has been hurt yet, but eventually, someone will be, and that will be a blow you can’t come back from. Even if no one gets hurt, public opinion of you matters on missions. In crowded areas, we depend on the public’s willingness to listen to and cooperate with Accords teams. If there is a chance that you will cause a panic and do more harm than good to bystanders, the Council will consider that a legitimate reason to bench you. If they do that, you’ll have very little opportunity to try to earn back the
goodwill of the public, and the Council could consider kicking you out permanently for it.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Rogers said. “They can’t bench her just because some people are afraid of her, and others are jumping on the bandwagon. She’s helping them.”

“They can and will, Rogers, because civilian reactions are important and potentially dangerous. The same applies to you, you know. You don’t garner as much fear as she does because of the nature of her abilities, but you are not doing well in the mind of the public, and you could conceivably run into the same problem. Barreling through missions and trying to do your own thing, causing destruction in the process, is about the worst way possible to establish yourself. If it continues, the Council will kick you out for the safety of the public and the reputation of the other Accords members, and complaining about it won’t do you any good.”

Marie could see that arguing with them was becoming pointless, and she had more important things to do. Hopefully she’d made enough of a point. She scooped her papers back into her folder and gathered it up, preparing to leave, but paused to impart a last warning, seeing Rogers’s argumentative expression. “You’re on thin ice here, Mr. Rogers. If I were you, I wouldn’t stomp my feet.”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve read a lot of fics where Steve is very money-conscious because of how he grew up, and I think he probably was for at least a little while after he first woke up. But the Avengers movies never showed him having any particular consideration for money because Tony was spoiling them all rotten and they got used to having whatever they wanted. Really, if anything, he’s wasteful in the movies (throwing motorcycles at people, really? Those things are expensive and there’s definitely better ways to accomplish a goal. Yeah, I know, they’re action movies and it was a director’s choice because it looks “extra cool” or whatever, but I don’t care). And honestly, after using Tony’s money and resources without a problem to search for Barnes while actively choosing not to tell Tony about his parents (which I will never be over), my mind just cast Steve as basically a big spoiled brat who thinks that he’s owed whatever he wants because he’s a “hero.”
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Steve’s tendency to take Wanda’s word as gospel comes back to bite them in the ass.

Chapter Notes

Kicked ass (no pun intended) on the GI exam, and now we’re in Florida on break!
These notes are becoming a chronicle of my life, lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Much as he hadn’t wanted to admit it, Jackson was right, and it scared all of them. Steve couldn’t even think of a good pep talk to give the team after that disaster of a meeting, not with the firm reminder that they could pretty much be kicked out of the country any minute if they didn’t play along with whatever Tony and the Council wanted. It frustrated him to no end, to be pardoned and brought back only to have that dangled over their heads constantly in order to force their cooperation.

Clint practically ran from the meeting with his head down, angry at himself and the world, but quiet. Steve felt for him, but didn’t know what to say to make it better. Jackson had made it pretty clear that they had no power here, and he didn’t want to jeopardize Clint’s status by encouraging him to complain or fight back. After all, a psychological evaluation was subjective, and if the evaluator had a bias against Clint, they could pretty much say anything, and apparently that was grounds for being kicked off the team nowadays. Even though Clint’s anger at the situation with Laura was perfectly reasonable considering how he’d been blocked at every turn, they would pretend it meant he was “psychologically unfit for duty” or “unstable” and use it as an excuse to kick him out and hand him over to Germany. It was ridiculous, particularly coming from Tony, after the way he’d reacted in Siberia. Evidently he could attack Bucky and blow his arm off with no consequences, but if Clint hurt some inanimate furniture his fitness for duty would be called into question. It made Steve blaze with righteous fury, but Clint didn’t seem interested in Steve’s attempts to commiserate, instead keeping his head down and barely responding, then disappearing into his own quarters.

Sam, Scott, and surprisingly, Nat, had left the meeting contemplative and chastised. Sam and Scott he wasn’t too surprised about—though he was certainly a bit disappointed—after all, both of them had been pulling away from the others lately, going off on their own to get quiet part-time jobs and rarely interacting with Steve or the rest of them. Steve hadn’t been on a mission with either of them, just one with Wanda and one on his own; each with several of the new people as well, of course, as though they needed babysitters on the kinds of simple assignments they’d been given. But while Steve had faced obstacles at every turn and was constantly questioned and ordered around unnecessarily curtly in the field, he hadn’t heard anything about Scott or Sam having trouble. They’d both been involved in more missions than Steve as well. He felt like he was losing a connection with them and wasn’t sure what to do to get it back, and that bothered him.

Natasha had been the surprise after that meeting. She was normally one to fight back against being pushed into something or ordered around. She hated being taken advantage of or threatened, and that
was exactly what was happening. But instead of any sort of frustration at their situation, Nat’s anger had been directed toward Wanda when they left. She’d been annoyed that Wanda was so careless with their budget and that she kept provoking the Council and Jackson. Natasha told her she was just making things harder for them, and when Steve tried to tell her that she was being unfair, to remind her that Wanda was still young and that these people in SHIELD and the Council were obviously biased against them and particularly Wanda, Nat just turned that same impatient, annoyed look on Steve, like he was being particularly dense.

He’d wanted to respond to that look, but was distracted with calming Wanda down. Wanda was already on edge after she’d been facing so much hostility lately at the Compound and even from SHIELD, and that meeting had only made things worse. Jackson reprimanding her specifically, just for buying clothes with the money they were given for their own expenses, was just rude, and not at all helpful. Yes, maybe Wanda should have found a cheaper store to shop at, but that issue could easily be solved with a private conversation, instead of calling a meeting to chastise them all and calling her out in front of everyone.

Then, to not only tell her that people were still afraid of her and that she could be benched for no reason, but to imply that it was actually her fault, was cruel and completely unnecessary. Wanda had left the meeting furious, and Natasha’s disapproval only made it worse. Steve knew he should be trying to keep a level head no matter what they threw at them, but it was hard. After Jackson’s parting comment about “stomping his feet,” as though his problems with the way they were being blackmailed—it was blackmail, whatever Jackson said to the contrary—and poorly treated were nothing more than a childish tantrum, he was silently fuming as well.

But whatever issues he was facing, he still recognized that Jackson and the Council did, in fact, have all the power here. He couldn’t let his own anger goad the others, not if it meant risking that they would be kicked out of the Avengers and extradited. So after spending a short time with Wanda, trying to make sure that she wasn’t going to go storming into Jackson’s office any moment and make a scene over her mistreatment, he went back to his own room to sit and calm down for a while.

His boiling anger had cooled down days later, but was still quietly simmering. He wanted to push forward and do his work regardless, but being at the Compound was a nightmare lately, mostly for him and for poor Wanda. Everywhere he went he was faced with judging looks and ridiculous rules he couldn’t get past—he couldn’t even go and blow off some steam by training in the gym without having to sign up for a slot. Even if there were only a few students currently training and he could see that the equipment he wanted was free, he couldn’t just walk in and use it. He wasn’t allowed in half the rooms, even when he saw others freely entering and leaving them, and his use of the computers and training simulators was more restricted than some of the others’ as well.

Wanda was facing two different fronts. On one hand, she had people hurrying away from her, leaving rooms when she entered and averting their eyes. It set her on edge and he couldn’t blame her. Steve was often thoroughly ignored by everyone in a room, as they carried on their conversations like he wasn’t even there. But they would fall silent if Wanda came in, no matter what inconsequential thing they’d been talking about, as though they didn’t want her to hear anything they said. She would give Steve angry, helpless looks, but he didn’t know what to do about it. He’d tried to pointedly strike up a conversation with her or some of the others a few times, but abandoned the attempts. The others wouldn’t respond to either of them and Wanda’s half of any conversation he started was always jerky and angry because she was too distracted by their surroundings.

On the other hand, she’d faced the exact opposite of fear from some of the mutants. Steve’s team, of course, had all heard about Professor Xavier, apparently a telepath, and the mutants he trained. Steve had wondered whether any of the students currently at the Compound had any powers similar to Wanda’s, and back when she was still talking to him, Natasha had helped him try to find out more
about the Compound’s residents on the UN site. They hadn’t found much; though signees of the Accords were listed and records of their countries of residence or formed hero groups were public on the UN site—with provisions for heroes who wanted to remain masked—their specific residences weren’t listed, and as the Compound was technically a privately owned building in association with the Accords rather than a UN-owned one, their employment and residence records were not available to the public. Natasha figured, seeing as he owned it, Tony would have his own protections in place, and she hadn’t wanted to try to hack in; it wasn’t worth the risk that they’d be discovered and punished for it, not for some simple information about the Compound residents. Additionally, because about half of the mutants at the Compound were minors, they were covered under additional Accords protections and possibly wouldn’t be on official records anywhere.

Steve initially gave up on learning about the other residents, but eventually found out from Wanda anyway. Turns out there were two different mutants currently at the Compound who had some ability to influence minds: one of the older leaders and a girl even younger than Wanda herself. Wanda had come storming into Steve’s room one day about a month after their arrival, fuming and near tears, and Steve was able to calm her down enough for her to tell him that she’d met the others with similar powers and they’d been absolutely awful to her. From what he gathered, she’d mostly talked to the younger girl, who’d called Wanda an irresponsible monster and claimed that she herself would rather die than willingly influence someone else’s mind for her own gain, much less on HYDRA’s orders.

It had taken Steve a while to find the right words to put Wanda at ease. Reminding her that the girl was a child who didn’t have the maturity or tact of an adult didn’t seem to help. He was trying to convince her that the girl didn’t know her, couldn’t have understood her situation and therefore couldn’t make judgments on it, when she burst out that the girl was wrong and would happily use her own powers on someone else if she ever actually encountered any real hardship. That hadn’t been Steve’s point, really, but it got Wanda to stop looking so despondent and she didn’t seem like she was going to run off and try to fight the girl any moment, so Steve let it go.

But it seemed now that those incidents, combined with Jackson’s latest grievances and Natasha’s cold dismissal, had pushed Wanda into a near-permanent state of anger and defensiveness. Though Steve could hardly blame her considering everything, he couldn’t really do anything to make it better, and it was making her less pleasant to be around. Between that and having to deal with his own problems, he’d been spending a little less time around her since Jackson’s meeting. It made him feel a bit guilty and he hoped she wasn’t taking it as some sort of rejection from him as well, but he really did have his own worries to focus on.

They’d all begun cutting back significantly on their spending now that they were depending only on their SHIELD stipends and the pay from any missions they were sent on. For the same reason, Steve decided he needed to grit his teeth and play nice with anything and everything his “leaders” told him to do in the field. He needed to be seen as cooperative so they would send him out as often as possible, because he got paid for each mission and he needed the money. Sam and Scott both had some sort of jobs now—Steve wasn’t entirely sure what they were doing, Scott left sometimes and Sam was doing something on the internet—and they were being sent out the most often as well, so they had a decent amount of money coming in, but the rest of them were just getting by.

Sam and Scott had both been drifting away from Steve since coming back to the US, but they weren’t fighting or anything. Steve still considered them friends, and so he went to Sam’s room one day to ask about how his field missions were going and if he thought Steve could do something more to be sent out more often. Sam had looked relieved at the question and invited him in happily. He was doing some sort of data organization and analysis for a company, it turned out, and the work could be done at his own pace and entirely from his computer, so long as he made certain deadlines. Steve hadn’t known Sam was so good with math and computers; the work required fairly complex
math skills and some basic programming abilities. Things Steve himself couldn’t do.

That was one area where he was hitting a wall. Sam had been encouraging him for over a month to find an additional job, and though Steve had been resistant to the idea at first, now he was being forced to admit that it would be helpful, maybe even necessary. But that just brought up the problem of what kind of job he could get. He was still an Avenger and needed to be physically present at the Compound for training daily, and Sam had shared his liaison’s warnings about being seen in public doing other jobs. But the kinds of jobs available on the internet, like what Sam was doing, required skills Steve just didn’t have. Back before the war, he hadn’t exactly had the time, means, or opportunity to develop many skills that would be considered useful in the modern world. And once he’d been woken up, SHIELD had really only focused on his physical abilities. He still felt a bit of guilt badmouthing them, but he had to admit, they’d been severely lacking in his education on the modern world. As much as it galled him to admit it, the vast majority of what he’d learned about the present day had come sporadically from Tony.

So he accepted that he likely wouldn’t find any acceptable job, and focused instead on being sent out into the field more to augment his income. Sam cautioned him about budgeting (and tried, unnecessarily, to teach him about credit and money in the modern world—he wasn’t completely ignorant, he did at least know how that worked, even if he had to admit that he hadn’t been using it as wisely as he should have lately) and then questioned him about his evaluation for the Council. When Steve gave an overview of his evaluation, Sam grimaced and recommended that if he wanted to be sent out more often, he should schedule an additional evaluation and show more than physical skills. Sam had been out on five missions and consulted on one already, and he’d only used the Falcon wings on three of them.

It still irked Steve—his skills were widely known from his time leading the Avengers, he really shouldn’t be forced to schedule an evaluation and make an official record just for them to know that he could do more than hit things—but arguing that to Sam would be pointless, and he felt he was reconnecting with Sam and didn’t want to ruin it by hitting one of the new sore spots Sam seemed to have about their lives and work.

So he scheduled an additional evaluation for the following week, and in the meantime, cut down more of his budget. He could get by on a little less for a while without a problem; he’d certainly done worse growing up. He continued training at the Compound—signing up for his slots and obeying every rule, no matter how ridiculous—and was left alone for the most part. He received fewer suspicious or angry looks from others there when he was quiet and cooperative, and it did make life a little easier.

Wanda was still angry about everything going on, but she’d settled down in the last few days. She and Steve spent some of their free time together at the Compound, and she could at least carry on conversations with him normally even if others were in the room now—that is, unless those others were Vision or Tony. Vision had practically stopped coming to the Compound weeks ago and ignored Wanda when he was there, which in Steve’s opinion was just petty, and no doubt encouraged by Tony. Tony himself usually didn’t stay in one place for long and left both of them alone, but any time he was in the vicinity, Wanda would end up abandoning whatever she was doing in order to glare in his direction until he left or Steve managed to get her out.

It was one of those times now; they’d been sitting in one of the common areas after training, not talking but sitting together, just sharing their space quietly, when Tony came into the adjacent room with a group of mostly mutant kids.

It always hurt just a little to see Tony around the Compound. He was almost constantly surrounded by either some combination of the other Avengers, who were protective of him and often threw not-
so-subtle scathing looks in Steve’s direction, or by a gaggle of awed kids who seemed to follow him everywhere he went, hanging on his every word and laughing like a big family. Steve supposed Tony liked having his ego stroked, even if it was just by a bunch of kids who admired him, but still… he couldn’t deny that the kids really did flock to him.

And he was always smiling, laughing, clapping his companions on the back and leaning back casually against tables and walls when he spoke to them. It sent some unidentified emotion through Steve to see it. He couldn’t remember the last time Tony had actually smiled at him, and he’d never looked so relaxed around the original Avengers. Maybe at the very beginning, after New York, but certainly not after Ultron. Even when Steve had tried to show that he’d forgiven Tony for Ultron, that he was willing to work past the problems they’d had, Tony had remained stiff and defensive around all of them, never smiling and flinching away from physical contact, always looking like he couldn’t wait for an excuse to leave the room.

But it seemed he didn’t have any of the same reservations about his new team, or the others at the Compound. Even now, surrounded by the kids, he was smiling despite his mock-stern tone. Steve found himself watching their interactions through the open archway between the rooms, not really listening in to what they were saying, but just watching them. The kids watched Tony’s every move like a hawk, smiling and sometimes shoving each other playfully through whatever he was saying, but clearly paying attention. When one of them spoke, Tony always gave them his full attention. He looked at all of them with a fondness Steve had only ever seen in him around Pepper or Rhodes.

Tony leaned down to place his palms flat on the table in front of him, addressing the kids seriously for a moment, and Steve noticed a necklace of some sort swing forward from between the folds of his jacket. Tony straightened a moment later and tucked the necklace back into his shirt almost absentmindedly, and Steve didn’t spare it another thought beyond thinking that Tony had never been much of a jewelry guy before—just another way he’d apparently changed.

Steve went back to his book, not wanting to be caught staring at Tony and the group and be on the receiving end of eight or so angry, protective glares. He’d noticed that Tony’s presence was one of the things guaranteed to ramp up the others’ negative attitudes toward Steve. He’d have blamed Tony for it, but Tony never seemed to notice. They threw Steve angry glares behind Tony’s back, came up with excuses to get him out of the room that seemed just genuine enough that Tony never questioned them.

Before he put his head back down, though, Steve saw Wanda staring into the other room, not with curiosity like Steve had, but with undisguised loathing. Wanda had always had a bit of a grudge against Tony—though he wanted the team to be cohesive above all else, Steve had always given her a little leeway on that, he couldn’t imagine how awful it must be to know that Tony’s weapons had killed her parents, and though she knew now that he was a good guy at heart, it wouldn’t bring her family back—and that grudge had only deepened with all of the problems they’d been facing since their return, not to mention their three-year exile in Wakanda, all because Tony was determined to be stubborn and petty. As long as she didn’t do anything violent, Steve was inclined not to try to tell her that her anger was unfounded—after all, it really wasn’t—but he knew it wasn’t helping put her in the others’ good books. It wasn’t just the other mutants with mind powers that apparently hated her, it seemed to be all of them, and since they all seemed to be so protective of Tony, spending her time glaring at him only made them dislike her more.

But Tony was gesturing into another room and the group moved away before any of them noticed Steve or Wanda, so Steve put it out of his mind for the moment. Wanda went back to doing whatever she was doing on her phone, and Steve focused in on his book again. They only had another half hour before it would be time for some group training, and he wanted to at least finish that chapter.
By the time they were done at the Compound for the day and back in their SHIELD housing, he’d nearly forgotten that they’d seen Tony that day. So when Wanda suddenly growled out “can you believe him?” once she and Steve were alone in the common area, Steve was momentarily confused.

“Who?”

“Stark,” she spit the name like a curse. “Parading around wearing that... thing, like he can do whatever he wants. Just because his stupid Accords are tying our hands and he knows we can’t complain.”

Steve was confused for another moment, before he reviewed what they’d seen of Tony earlier that day. He recalled the necklace he’d seen for a second. “You mean that necklace thing he was wearing?”

Wanda crossed her arms. “He’s always wearing it. Just hides it, usually. Probably doesn’t want to risk someone seeing it and questioning where he got it.”

Steve felt an unsettled feeling beginning to rise in his stomach. “What do you mean? Do you recognize it?”

“No, but I can feel it, all the time. It interferes with my powers.”

Steve blinked. “We only ever see Tony at the Compound. Are you sure that’s not just that power suppression you’re feeling?” He didn’t want to question Wanda, but he didn’t want to believe that Tony would be going around intentionally wearing something that would mess with her, either.

She glared at him for a moment. “I’m sure. The power suppression in the Compound is minor, it just sort of blunts everything. But that thing Stark wears, it messes everything up completely, like some sort of a block.”

Steve’s heart dropped. So it was definitely Tony. “How does it do it? What is that thing?”

“I don’t know. I doubt Stark knows either,” she snorted. “It’s probably alien, or something, strong enough to mess with my powers. I’m sure he doesn’t know everything about it. He’s messing with things he doesn’t understand, like always.”

*Like Ultron* went unspoken, but Steve knew they were both thinking it. God, if Tony was really messing with something alien... that was dangerous, especially if he was hiding it from the others. Steve put a hand on Wanda’s shoulder. “If he’s messing with something dangerous, then it needs to be stopped. You shouldn’t have to be around something that interferes with your powers, and it could affect someone else too. I’ll talk to him.”

Wanda turned her head away. “He won’t listen to you. He’ll probably just tell you to keep quiet about it or he’ll have you thrown out of the country.”

“He won’t do that. They can’t kick us out with no legitimate reason, and he’s all about following the Accords rules.” He had to believe that, that Tony would at least be that decent. He wouldn’t really have them thrown out over this. “If he refuses, I’ll go to the Council. They should know someone is dealing with something dangerous, I’m sure it’s against the rules. They’ll make him stop.”

Wanda looked unconvinced, but now Steve was determined. He went to bed that night planning all sorts of ways that he could get a moment with Tony, and different ways the conversation could play out. So far, Tony had seemed unwilling to lift a finger for them, but this was a matter of safety for everyone. If need be, Steve would threaten to tell the Council. He didn’t want to actually do it and get Tony into serious trouble, but maybe telling Tony that he would do it would be enough to
convince him to take off the thing without too much fuss.

It was impossible to plan for every possible scenario, and with how much Tony seemed to have changed in their time apart, it made it even harder to try to predict how he would react. It was times like this that Steve missed Bucky the most. He could have used his friend’s advice in this situation. He’d fought hard against having Bucky sent away, but that was the only way they’d agreed to let him, or any of them, back in the States. And Steve had looked the place up on the internet; it was legitimate, expensive, nice, and apparently very successful. Bucky was certainly being well cared for. Steve wished he could at least write him a letter, but part of the condition of his return and move into the facility was that he not have contact with Steve or any of the other Avengers. It had angered Steve, who thought, despite their insistences that it was an important part of letting him heal without confusing and distracting messages from people from his past, that it was just another form of punishment for Steve, taking Bucky away completely. But when his treatment was done, he could go into training and eventually become an Avenger too, fighting right alongside Steve like in the old days. Steve fell asleep that night thinking about how it would be someday when Bucky returned.

Getting Tony alone didn’t turn out to be too hard. The next day, before training, he happened upon Tony alone in a corridor, evidently going to or from his lab. Tony glanced at him and away, looking bored as he always did when they happened to cross paths, and kept walking, but Steve stepped into his path. “Tony,” he said firmly, “we need to talk.”

Tony sighed and stopped, rolling his eyes and then looking up at Steve impatiently. “What do you want, Rogers? I’m on my way to an important meeting and I really don’t have time to waste with you.”

Steve forced himself to ignore the barb and got right to the point. “It’s about that necklace you wear.”

He could see Tony’s eyes widen just the smallest amount and his hand twitch, as though he wanted to reach for it but stopped himself. It just confirmed Steve’s fear that Tony knew the thing was dangerous and was hiding it from everyone. He couldn’t believe Tony was doing this again. Hadn’t he learned anything from Ultron?

“What about it?” Tony said, his voice tight.

“What is it, exactly? Where did you get it?” Steve was hoping he could ease Tony into confessing, maybe even wishing that Tony would ask him for help with it. But his hopes were dashed when he saw the cold look in Tony’s eyes.

“That’s none of your damn business, Rogers.”

He started to step to the side again, but Steve once again moved to block him. “Wanda says it’s interfering with her powers,” he said, hoping that if he could make Tony realize that it was affecting other people, he might be more agreeable.

Tony flinched almost imperceptibly at that, and his hands clenched into fists for a moment before releasing again. Steve could see that they were shaking just slightly. He found himself hoping that
Tony was feeling guilty, realizing that his deception was hurting someone else. “Does she,” was all he said, sounding strained.

“Tony, if it’s something you don’t understand, you need to turn it over to experts. If you don’t know where it came from—”

“I happen to know exactly where it came from,” Tony snapped, cutting him off. “And what it is, which is why I know it’s not stopping Maximoff from doing her job here. It’s just none of your business, so why don’t you drop it and get out of my way.” His tone was challenging, but Steve wouldn’t back down.

“It’s messing with Wanda’s powers,” he insisted. “You need to take it off.”

Tony gave him an incredulous look. “Yeah, that’s not happening. It’s not coming off, and I don’t give a shit what you or Maximoff think about it.”

Steve fought the urge to roll his eyes at Tony’s childishness. Tony had never tried to approach his and Wanda’s issues like an adult in the past, and apparently that hadn’t changed. Though Steve hadn’t want to resort to threatening him, clearly Tony wouldn’t respond to reason. “If you won’t take it off, I’ll take this to the Council, Tony. They should know about something interfering with someone else’s work.”

Tony snorted out a dry, humorless laugh. “Go right ahead. Now get out of my damn way, Rogers.”

Steve was surprised enough that Tony sidestepped him and continued down the corridor before he could stop him again. Perhaps Tony didn’t think he’d actually go through with the threat. He certainly hoped it wasn’t that Tony was planning to bribe the Council or something. But according to Jackson and everyone else he’d heard so far, there were multiple layers of legislation in place to be sure that kind of corruption couldn’t happen. He had to trust that.

So he found himself that afternoon going to his liaison, Gina Normani, for the first time in weeks and asking her to set up a meeting for him with the Council. He hadn’t utilized her services much since returning—he preferred to do things himself, and there was too much chance for messages to be lost in translation or intentionally altered when they were going through a third party. But he wasn’t sure exactly how to schedule a meeting with the Council, and after all, this was their liaisons’ job. She tried to question him about what the purpose of the meeting was, but he just told her that it was personal business. He didn’t want rumors spreading around about him or Tony before he could actually talk to the Council, or to deal with Normani trying to talk him out of it for some reason.

She scheduled a meeting for him the following morning, which was faster than Steve had expected, but pleasing. He arrived at the conference room slightly nervous, but determined. He was grateful that the Council was in New York at the moment; the members of the Council rotated regularly, but the body itself also moved around the world as well, so that they could spend some time physically present in various countries participating in the Accords. If they’d been abroad or even across the States when Steve had scheduled the meeting, he’d have had to talk to them over a video conference, and he just didn’t think it had the same effect as being there in person.

The room was lacking the usual round conference table, and instead the councilmembers were seated side by side behind a long table at one end of the room. There was a smaller table with several chairs facing them, for anyone meeting with them to use. They were at least all at the same level, the Council wasn’t looking down on anyone coming to speak with them, but walking up and sitting down still made him feel like he was approaching a panel of judges in a courtroom.

“Good morning, Mr. Rogers,” the one sitting in the center said. Steve recognized him after a
moment; John Russo, the Italian that was the current head of the Council. Steve appreciated the greeting, and the fact that none of them looked at him like he was something unpleasant. At least here was a hopefully impartial party.

“Good morning,” he said as he took a seat at the table facing them, keeping his back straight and his hands folded in front of him.

“What brings you to us today, Mr. Rogers?” Russo asked pleasantly.

Steve took a deep breath. He’d considered how to phrase this all night. “I’m here about an issue that was brought to my attention by Wanda Maximoff, something that is affecting her work at the Compound and therefore her ability to act as an Avenger.”

Russo frowned just a bit. “You realize that the ISTCC, while in partnership with the Council and the UN, is not under our direct control, correct? If this is a problem with their rules and regulations, there’s nothing we can do for you.”

Steve nodded. “Of course, sir, this isn’t a problem with the Compound itself, that just happens to be where Wanda is encountering the issue.”

One of the other councilmembers frowned. “Is Ms. Maximoff indisposed?”

The question threw Steve off guard slightly. “What?”

The man raised his eyebrows. “If this issue is affecting Ms. Maximoff primarily, why is she not bringing it to our attention herself? If she has a problem that requires addressing, she should be present here.”

Steve frowned. “Well, she brought the issue to my attention, and I promised that I would deal with it. I have more experience in these matters, and she’s young. I consider myself responsible for her.”

Russo raised an eyebrow as well. “That is a kind sentiment, Mr. Rogers, but Mr. Kramer is correct. You may consider yourself personally responsible for Ms. Maximoff, but you are neither her legal guardian nor her official leader. She is an adult, and in the future, if she has any issue, she should bring it to the attention of the Council personally.” He held up a hand before Steve could respond. “However, as we are already here today, let’s hear it. What is the problem she’s having?”

“Well, Councilmembers, it concerns Tony Stark.” He saw several of them straighten at the name and continued before he could distract himself wondering what they were thinking. “He’s been wearing a sort of necklace, and Wanda—Ms. Maximoff—told me that it’s interfering with her powers. I tried to tell him this and ask him to remove it, but he refused. W—Ms. Maximoff and I are concerned that it could be dangerous to others, if it’s capable of interfering with her abilities.”

Russo’s expression had become more and more surprised as he went on. He appeared to take a moment to compose himself before responding. “Let us clarify a few things, Mr. Rogers. You’re worried that this item is dangerous?”

“Yes,” Steve said firmly.

“On what grounds? What has given you reason to believe it may be dangerous?” asked another councilmember, a severe-looking, dark-skinned woman with black hair pulled into a tight bun and a strong accent.

Steve frowned. “Wanda told me that she can feel it whenever he’s around, and that it’s blocking her powers, messing with them. Anything capable of that has to be powerful, and potentially
dangerous.” He didn’t want to bring up Ultron and Tony’s past messing with powerful items, but he hoped they were thinking of it anyway and reaching the same conclusions he had.

The woman sat back slightly in her chair. “So you have come to this conclusion entirely on the word of Ms. Maximoff, and you spoke to Mr. Stark and asked him to remove it on that word as well. Did you ask Mr. Stark about it?”

“I did. He refused to give me any details and just insisted that he wouldn’t remove it.”

“Which is his right, considering it is his personal property, which he may choose to wear within the privately-owned Compound. If Ms. Maximoff has a problem with being in the Compound at the same time as Mr. Stark, then she can choose not to frequent the Compound.”

Steve’s frown deepened. The Council was acting like Wanda was complaining about nothing, and they didn’t seem concerned at all about the potential danger. “I simply thought,” he said politely, hoping to get them away from Wanda and bring the focus to Tony, “that perhaps I should bring something like this to the Council’s attention, considering the potential for problems for others at the Compound or in the field.”

The woman leaned forward, but it was Russo who spoke again. “Mr. Rogers, I assume that the item in question is the amulet that Mr. Stark wears at all times now. It is a green stone on a chain, about the size of a quarter, and as far as I am aware, usually the only piece of ‘jewelry’ on his person.”

Steve was taken aback; apparently the Council knew about the necklace, amulet, whatever they wanted to call it. Maybe Tony had brought it to them last night, anticipating Steve’s visit. Something in him was sending up warning flags about this conversation, but it was too late to back out now. “Yes, that’s it.”

Russo folded his arms on the desk in front of him. “The amulet in question was created by Ms. Amilie Pierce and given to Mr. Stark nearly eight months ago, after being presented to this Council and registered as a personal magical object. It was examined by Dr. Stephen Strange, an experienced magic user and our foremost expert on magical items, as well as Mr. Vision and Dr. Charles Xavier, to confirm Ms. Pierce’s explanation of its abilities. The amulet was recorded and registered as a device for personal protection for the wearer, in this case Mr. Stark, against any sort of mental attack, magical, telepathic, or otherwise.”

Steve just stared blankly for a moment, too busy thinking about Tony to respond. If it really was harmless, and something registered with the Council, why did Tony refuse to talk to him about it? Why did he have to be so contrary, so frustrating? They could have avoided this entire thing if Tony had just said a few words to him. This must have been why Tony was unconcerned when he mentioned bringing it to the Council’s attention. Maybe Tony, in yet another petty display, had just wanted Steve to go and embarrass himself in front of the Council.

Russo cleared his throat lightly, and Steve jerked his head up, realizing that he’d been gazing at the table in front of him, thinking angrily about Tony. The other councilmembers were leaning back in their chairs, clearly having just finished a discussion of some sort, which Steve had completely missed.

“This brings up a disturbing question,” Russo said, and foreboding crawled up Steve’s spine. “Since the amulet you have come to report as ‘interfering’ with Ms. Maximoff’s powers is in fact designed only to protect Mr. Stark from attacks on his own mind, this Council is very concerned about how Ms. Maximoff came to the conclusion that it was a powerful object capable of ‘blocking’ her powers. If she was attempting any sort of magical attack on Mr. Stark, intentionally or otherwise, then that is a serious problem that must be addressed. Had she come before this Council herself, we could have
questioned her about this now, but since you elected to represent her in this matter, we are forced to take you at only your word and try to come to conclusions based only on that. Good day, Mr. Rogers,” he said, and the dismissal was clear. The councilmembers began standing and gathering their things, and though Steve wanted to say something else, try to defend his stance or Wanda’s powers, he couldn’t think of anything.

He left the meeting room feeling off-kilter. He was still angry at Tony for refusing to just tell him that that amulet was harmless and that he’d registered it with the Council, but he was also worried about Wanda. She’d been angry at Tony lately, yes, but he couldn’t believe she would have tried to get into his mind because of it. It must have been accidental, just a byproduct of her own emotions, but he had a nasty feeling that the Council would never understand that.

He was hoping that Russo’s parting remark was just a warning to get this under control himself, and not a promise that there would be retribution for having called the meeting and brought this to their attention. He’d done it to try to help Wanda, and if she was punished because of it, he would feel like he’d failed her. He wouldn’t be able to forgive himself.

He tried to keep his head held high as he walked away, but he had a sinking feeling that he’d just caused a lot more trouble than he’d meant to.

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter in this one, which will be the conclusion to what just happened here, and then this story will be done! But for those who want more bitterness, I’ll be starting a new extra-bitter, more active consequences-focused (rather than legal/financial) series after this, already got 10 stories planned for it. More on that at the end of next chapter.

Just want to clarify something, because it might look like Natasha is joining the group of sensible Rogues. In this story Sam and Scott are obviously getting a clue and cooperating for the most part, because Sam seems like a reasonable guy who’d do the right thing if he just got his head out of Steve’s ass, and I don’t know much about Scott because I haven’t seen Ant Man, but he was the least involved in CW, so I hold out hope that he might have some sense and intelligence buried in there. Natasha, however, while she’s obviously trying to cooperate, isn’t lumped in with them. In my opinion, MCU Natasha is a selfish snake with absolutely no loyalty who will do whatever is necessary to best help herself. She fucked up and chose the wrong side in CW because she liked Steve better than Tony and assumed his method of “punch until your problems go away,” combined with Tony’s need to fix everything even when it isn’t his fault and Natasha’s assumption that she could manipulate her way back into Tony’s good graces, would mean that choosing Steve’s side would work out well for her. And now that she’s stuck with the Rogues and realizing that Tony won’t fall for her shit anymore, she’s just trying to do whatever she needs to in order to make her life easier. So she’s pissed at Wanda (and Steve too) for acting like spoiled children and making everything an ordeal, but it’s not out of any sense of morality or realization that she fucked up and should do better, like Sam or Scott, it’s just because things would be easier for her if Steve and Wanda would shut up and stop causing trouble.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Steve reaps what he’s sown.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It all happened so much faster than Steve could have imagined.

It was only hours after Steve’s meeting with the Council, when he was in one of the Compound’s common areas after his morning individual training. He saw Clint and Natasha approaching him looking grim, with Sam trailing behind them. After the disastrous way the meeting had ended, Steve had worried about Wanda all through his own workouts, and seeing the others approaching him now sent a spike of dread through him.

It sounded like the Council had interpreted her worries about Tony’s amulet as an attack on him. Despite all the claims of how impartial and fair they were, Steve worried. Tony was the one who’d pushed for the creation of it, who’d been so involved in the Accords. Surely they must be biased towards him. What if they used this as an excuse to kick Wanda out, all because Tony couldn’t be mature enough to just talk to Steve when he’d asked?

He couldn’t get over that. He’d spent the morning alternating between growing anger at Tony and worry about Wanda, and that he’d made everything worse. Tony must have known in the first place that the thing would interfere with Wanda’s powers. Wanda was powerful and didn’t always have perfect control; no one her age could be expected to. But of course, Tony had to be difficult when Steve asked, and goaded him into taking it to the Council, who thought a tiny slip of power that allowed her to feel the presence of the amulet meant she’d attacked Tony.

So when he saw the others approaching with frowns, he jumped up from his seat, ready for bad news. “What is it?”

They looked slightly taken aback at his quick response. “Have you seen Wanda?” Clint asked.

Fear dropped into Steve’s stomach. “No, not since yesterday. What happened to her?” Oh God, they’d come and taken her away, probably snuck her out some back door of the Compound so they could snap that awful collar back on her like an animal and throw her to Germany’s mercy, powerless and helpless.

Natasha quirked an eyebrow at his response. “We saw her this morning during individual training, across the hall in one of the simulation rooms. Jackson and a couple others came to the door and called her out. She left with them and never came back.”

“Oh no,” Steve said, already skirting around them, preparing to try and go after her, but Sam held out an arm to stop him.

“Woah, Steve, calm down, man. Maybe they’re just in a meeting. We just came to see if you knew anything about it. No need to go rushing after them.”
Dread twisted Steve’s insides. They didn’t understand the urgency of the situation. Natasha must have seen something in his expression, because she crossed her arms and let her face go carefully blank. “What did you do, Steve?” she said, ice in her voice.

“I had a meeting with the Council this morning;” he started, and immediately saw the apprehensive looks on the others’ faces. It hurt, to see that they saw him as a failure of a leader, that they thought his meeting with the people in charge couldn’t bring anything but trouble.

Clint frowned. “About what? Why didn’t you tell us?”

“It wasn’t about all of us. Just Wanda. And… and Tony.” As soon as he mentioned Tony, Sam put his face in his hands with a groan, and even Clint shook his head.

“Oh man… what happened?”

Steve stood up a little straighter, crossing his arms defensively. He hadn’t done anything wrong, he’d been acting in everyone’s best interests, and Tony was the one making everything difficult. “Tony’s been wearing this… amulet around, that Wanda told me is interfering with her powers. I tried to talk to him about it, but he wouldn’t tell me anything. We were worried it might be dangerous, something he was messing with that he shouldn’t be. So I went to the Council about it.”

Clint frowned. “So what’s the problem with Wanda? That sounds reasonable to me.”

“Let me guess, it wasn’t something dangerous at all,” Sam said shrewdly.

Steve bristled. “Not that I would have known that, with the way Tony acted. Going to the Council was the only option left.”

Sam shook his head. “You’re not the leader of the Avengers, Steve. It’s not your responsibility. And honestly, ‘the way Tony acted?’ How exactly did you expect him to act? The guy’s given every sign since we came back that he wants nothing to do with us, especially you. He’s not obligated to give you his time, or any explanations. If you cornered him at the Compound to demand answers, which I assume is what you did because we never see him any other time, I honestly can’t blame him for telling you to go to hell.”

Steve opened his mouth to argue back, but Clint interrupted again. “Wait, I still don’t see what this has to do with Wanda.”

Steve shifted anxiously. “The Council said Tony claims the amulet is just for personal protection. They think if Wanda was saying it interfered with her powers, that must mean she was misusing them.”

“‘Tony claims?’” Sam asked. “You mean he didn’t register it?”

Steve blinked. He hadn’t expected Sam to know that. “No, they said it was registered. How do you know that?”

Sam huffed. “Because I asked my liaison, Steve. I asked him about a lot of stuff to do with the Accords and the Compound rules. You should try it sometime. We’re allowed to have magical or other powered personal items with us that aren’t considered weapons, as long as they’re registered with the Council. They need to be evaluated by more than one expert, like magic users, and declared safe to have around other people. Which means if Tony’s amulet is registered, it’s definitely been deemed safe to use. Don’t act like it’s just some claim that Stark or the Council pulled out of their asses, Steve. These regulations are in place for a reason, and they work well.”
“That doesn’t give them the right to take Wanda way because of it,” Steve said stubbornly.

Sam frowned for a second, then jerked back like Steve had slapped him. “You said she told you it was interfering with her powers? But if it’s something for personal use, that means the only way Wanda could have noticed it is if she was trying to use them on Stark.”

“You don’t know that,” Steve argued, “she said she could feel it all the time. She’s powerful, maybe it affects her differently than the other people in the Compound.”

Sam scowled. “Don’t sugarcoat it, Steve. She attacked him. She hates him and you know it. She sits around all day refusing to accept that she causes her own issues and blames Stark for all her problems. She’s a spoiled brat and you just encourage it. I thought being exiled for three years would have given her time to realize what she’d done wrong—I sure as hell took a good look at my own mistakes—but all she did was sit in her room and whine about how Stark had ruined everything, and you let her. Now we all come back by the skin of our teeth, and she still just complains about everything. She spends too much money and won’t get a job, she doesn’t obey orders on her missions, and now she’s attacking people in the hallways? Oh wait, sorry, not all people. Just the ones she doesn’t like. God, Steve, it’s like you don’t even see how much you’ve changed. I thought you wanted to do the right thing, man, but you just want to do what you want. This here?” He gestured around the room. “This is the right thing. This is years of work put into a system that really works. There’s been a drop in property damage during missions by half since the Accords were implemented, and nearly 80% drop in civilian injuries and deaths. If you were half the hero I used to think you were, you’d be grateful for the Accords. You’d accept your pardon and the consequences that come with screwing up, and you’d do your best to work with them. But you just keep fighting the system at every turn, acting like you should still be in charge. And I’m tired of it. I’m tired of being lumped in with you just because I made the mistake of following you once. I’m trying to do better here, and you’re dragging me down. I’m fucking sick of it, man.”

He stood, breathing hard at the end of his speech. Steve just stood there, too stunned to do anything. Clint looked shocked as well, and Natasha’s eyebrows were raised. After another moment of silence, Sam made a disgusted noise and turned on his heel to stride out of the room. If the doors weren’t automatic, Steve had the feeling he’d have slammed it behind him.

Steve swallowed hard past the lump in his throat. He’d felt so close to Sam, once, and he knew Sam was a good guy. They’d been drifting apart since coming back—since being exiled, really—and he’d felt like he didn’t quite see eye to eye with Sam anymore, but he had no idea Sam was harboring that much resentment towards him. He’d just been trying to keep the team together, to have things go back to how they used to be. They’d been good then.

Maybe a part of it was stubbornness. He’d wanted to stick to his ideals, to the reason they’d fought the Accords and been exiled in the first place. He couldn’t call them perfect, or admit that they’d worked better than Steve’s team ever had, because that would mean he’d fought them for nothing, spent three years in Wakanda for nothing, kept Clint and Scott away from their families for no good reason. Now he just felt lost.

Natasha was turned away from him, staring at the door through which Sam had stormed out, and Clint was looking at the floor. He looked up briefly to make eye contact with Steve, but just grimaced and shook his head. It wasn’t a gesture of solidarity because he thought Sam was being unreasonable. It was a look that said he thought Sam had some good points, he just didn’t want to kick Steve while he was down and agree with them out loud. It still hurt.

While Steve stood there, still stunned from Sam’s explosion and trying to work through his own feelings about everything that had been said, Clint and Natasha left the room as well without a word.
Steve spent the rest of his break sitting in silence, thinking about Sam and Wanda. They had group training that afternoon, all of them plus a couple of the mutants. It was sure to be a tense affair, but Steve would work through it.

By the time it was time to head over to the group training rooms, Steve had decided that whatever Sam’s problems with him, they should still be supporting Wanda. Whether the amulet really did affect her or she’d had a slip of power that reached out at it, she didn’t deserve to be kicked out for it. They couldn’t prove that she’d done anything intentionally, and a brief slip of power shouldn’t be enough to condemn someone.

He arrived at the training room standing tall, chin up and ready to defend Wanda to Sam, but didn’t get the chance. They’d just gathered and were ready to enter with the mutants working with them today when Marie Jackson came marching down the hallway towards them, looking serious.

“Afternoon training’s been canceled today,” she told them all without preamble. “We need to talk, now.”

“Is this about Wanda?” Steve asked before anyone else could.

“Yes it is, Mr. Rogers. Now please, let’s move somewhere private. I’ve reserved a conference room upstairs. Sorry to interrupt, ladies,” she nodded to the two mutants they were planning to train with, then gestured for Steve and his group to follow her.

As soon as they’d all filed into the conference room, before they could even sit down, Steve turned to Marie. “Where’s Wanda?”

Marie’s face gave nothing away, calm and professional as ever. “She has been given a room at a U.N. facility for the next day.”

“You had no right to arrest her,” Steve snapped.

Marie actually looked confused. “She hasn’t been arrested, Mr. Rogers.”

“Then why is she at a U.N. facility?” Natasha asked.

“Due to the concerns brought to the attention of the Council this morning, they scheduled an immediate full psychological and magical evaluation of Ms. Maximoff, to be completed today. They pulled her out of her training this morning for that purpose. She is undergoing the evaluations as we speak. By rule, these cannot be done at a third-party facility like SHIELD or the Compound.”

Steve crossed his arms. “Evaluations? By who? Someone who’s already biased against her?”

Marie sighed. “By professionals, Mr. Rogers. She is undergoing psychological evaluation by two different fully qualified doctors, neither of whom have any personal or professional connection to the Accords, the U.N., or Ms. Maximoff herself. The magical evaluations are more difficult just because there aren’t that many qualified magic users in the world, but Dr. Strange and Dr. Xavier are certainly experts in their respective areas, and they routinely perform evaluations of some of the potential Compound residents to determine what sorts of additional support or precautions they may need for their own and others’ safety.”

“So, what, they’re going to put something extra in the Compound for Wanda?”

“I wouldn’t know, Mr. Rogers. That would depend on the results of her evaluations. I was simply informed by the Council this morning that they had ordered the evaluations, and instructed to remove her from training immediately so they could be done. I haven’t been updated since then, but I will let
“You know when I know anything more.”

“This isn’t fair to Wanda,” Steve said, frustrated.

Marie raised an eyebrow. “How exactly is it unfair? Every person working under the Accords should be at full physical and mental fitness at all times, and should never be a danger to others, either civilians or their fellow heroes. The Council and team leaders have the right and the responsibility to address any potential problems. They can order a fair evaluation for anyone who raises a concern. You brought a potential problem to the attention of the Council, so they are evaluating the extent of the problem and will use that information to ensure maximal safety for everyone and efficacy of the teams.”

“So leaders who don’t like someone can schedule all kinds of ‘evaluations’ any time they feel like it.”

Marie closed her eyes briefly like she was praying for patience, which just irritated Steve. They were talking about Wanda’s future here. “They need to submit a reason for an evaluation to the Council. If too many were requested, there would be an inquiry about it. In addition, if a signee feels they are being treated unfairly, they may submit a request for review of any evaluation or action by their leaders or the Council. An independent U.N. body will review it. If Ms. Maximoff is truly concerned that the results of her evaluations, whatever they turn out to be, are biased, she may submit them for review.”

Steve straightened and Marie held up a hand before he could even open his mouth. “Since I can practically see you thinking it already, no, you cannot demand a review on her behalf. Since she is an adult and you are not her team leader, you have no authority to do so. If she wishes to do so once the results of her evaluations are presented, she can. I suggest you let her make that decision.”

Steve stepped back, grinding his teeth. Whatever she said about independent evaluations and reviews, it sounded to Steve like the people in charge could just do whatever they wanted to Wanda if they didn’t like her. While he was busy considering it, Marie announced that she was needed elsewhere and left the room, telling them to go back to their quarters and warning them to behave themselves. The warning just increased Steve’s feeling that something was wrong with this, that this wasn’t right.

But there was nothing he could do about it, for now. They all left the Compound, going back to their SHIELD rooms early. Natasha and Clint murmured a few empty promises that things would be okay to him before departing, Scott glanced his way but then left without a word, and Sam just left for his room, still refusing to even look at him.

He barely slept that night, too worried about Wanda, afraid that she was now being punished because of his actions. When he did sleep, it was interrupted by vague nightmares where Wanda attacked him, forcing him back to Siberia, only in these dreams, he didn’t move at the last second, and the edge of his shield severed Tony’s neck. He woke early in the morning and didn’t try to go back to sleep, feeling sick from the vivid dreams of blood and pain, and a vague sense of guilt that he just couldn’t shake.

He was in their common area hours before anyone else, tapping his foot and sitting next to an untouched mug of tea, waiting for the hour when Marie’s office would open so he could go and find out what happened. The others came in eventually, going about their morning routines. Clint made a large breakfast and Natasha got Steve to eat some of it and drink his tea, despite the sick feeling he had in his stomach. Sam and Scott ignored him.

He didn’t need to wait for Marie’s office hours. She came walking into the common room early,
looking around and nodded, seeing that all of them were present. Steve sat up straighter as soon as she entered and opened his mouth before she could even say good morning.

“So? Where’s Wanda?”

“She won’t be returning here.”

“What? Why not?” Steve said, back ramrod straight and tensed to leap out of his chair any moment.

“Because of the results of her evaluations yesterday. Both the medical doctors performing her psychological evaluations and the magical experts evaluating her control over her abilities determined her to be a danger to others and recommended that she be removed from active duty with the Accords immediately.”

There was a cracking sound as the mug Steve was clutching—thankfully empty of tea, now—broke in his hands. “That’s ridiculous,” he snarled.

Marie gave a disapproving glance to the mug and looked back up at him. “No, it is the official recommendation given by four different independent professionals, none of whom had contact with each other during the evaluation process.”

“Wanda’s not a danger to others,” Steve ground out, fighting not to jump up from the chair.

“According to the experts that evaluated her, Mr. Rogers, she is. During her psychological evaluations, she displayed immature attitudes and a lack of self-control that alone would be enough to remove her from active duty. But she also expressed disdain for the Accords and their rules despite having signed a legally binding contract with them. She refused to acknowledge that she had disobeyed her leaders in the field and indicated that she would continue to do so in the future. When asked about the incident which led to her evaluation, she revealed a deep-seated and disturbing hatred for Mr. Stark and explicitly stated her desire to harm him physically.”

Steve was struck speechless by this information. Wanda had come to him about Tony because his amulet was interfering with her powers, and she was worried that it might hurt other people. She hadn’t ever said she’d wanted to hurt him. He couldn’t believe that she’d told the doctors she wanted to harm Tony. Unless… unless this wasn’t true. But before he could expand on that thought, Marie was continuing.

“During the evaluations of her powers, she demonstrated reasonable control over her abilities in physically demanding situations. However, when any sort of mental stress was present, both her evaluators found that she was severely lacking in control over herself and her powers. They both reported her to be quick-tempered and unpredictable when challenged, and stated concern for civilian casualties. In addition, when prompted during several theoretical scenarios, she stated that in some non-life threatening situations, she would use her mind-altering abilities on others, despite knowing that the U.N. considers this a human rights violation and has forbidden the use of such abilities except in the most extreme circumstances.”

Steve was at a loss. This all sounded bad, but he was still inclined to think it wasn’t fair to Wanda. She’d been dragged away from training without warning and suddenly put through tough evaluations, alone and probably frightened that they could send her away any time. Of course she hadn’t been one hundred percent in control of her powers. Pushed hard enough, anyone could lose control, and she was still young. And a situation didn’t have to be “life-threatening” to warrant the use of all of her abilities. It sounded like these scenarios were setting her up for failure.

He glanced at the others briefly, wondering what they were thinking about this. They were all
wearing mixed looks of shock and anger—except Nat, who just had one eyebrow raised and a slight frown on her face—but it was hard to tell whether they were shocked over Wanda’s treatment or if they believed what Marie was saying.

“A ton of problems came forth in her evaluations, and any one of them could have been grounds to remove her from active duty, at least temporarily. In the face of all of them, the Council has decided to revoke her active status under the Accords for the time being.” Marie concluded.

Steve’s chest felt tight, keeping him from forming words, so it was Clint who asked the question. “So she’s on her way to prison now? You said that’s what happens if we’re kicked out of the Accords, right?”

“No, Mr. Barton. In this case, the problem is with her qualifications for duty under the Accords, rather than disciplinary action for a violation of Accords terms. Though she indicated that she would violate Accords rules and expressed desire to harm another signee, she has not actually done either of those things, at least not sufficiently to consider her in serious violation. There is no proof that she has attempted harm to Mr. Stark already, despite the concern that initially prompted these evaluations, and her disobedience of her field leaders had not yet caused them to render any official disciplinary action.”

Clint shook his head at all the jargon. “So she’s not being kicked out?”

“Her active duty status has been revoked, but her contract with the Accords has not been fully terminated. Yes, active duty was one of the terms of your pardons, and yes, if any of the rest of you were to find yourselves in similar circumstances, we would have no choice but to extradite you. But Maximoff is a special case. The results of her evaluations prompted concern from other countries over whether, even if she were extradited, she could be effectively—and humanely—contained. They were worried, with her volatile state, that attempting to extradite her could cause her to lash out and harm civilians or police.”

Steve huffed at that. That was absolutely ridiculous and completely unfair to Wanda. But if it was keeping her out of prison… “so what’s happening to her, then?”

“As of right now, she is being taken to Xavier’s School for Gifted Younsters, where Dr. Xavier and several of his fellows train young and sometimes dangerous mutants. They have an excellent reputation and Professor Xavier has agreed to take Miss Maximoff on for the time being. Though she’s not a mutant, he is capable of containing her abilities should she have trouble with them. She will live there from now on, training with Xavier in his program.”

Sam spoke up for the first time all day, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall. “For how long?” His voice didn’t give away any of his feelings. Steve couldn’t tell if he was asking because he wanted Wanda back or wanted her gone, and it bothered him.

Marie turned to him. “For now, the arrangement will persist for the foreseeable future. The Council and SHIELD had to report this development, and we’re already getting a hell of a pushback from Germany and Sokovia. But they’ve agreed to some concessions immediately. She will be given repeat psychological and magical evaluations every four months. If she is determined on two successive evaluations to be fully fit, psychologically stable, and in complete control of her abilities, she will be reinstated to active Accords duty on a trial basis. Otherwise, she will remain with Xavier. If at any point she commits an actual crime, violates Professor Xavier’s rules to the point that he will no longer host her, or is determined by any evaluators to be too unstable to ever consider for active duty—which will require multiple levels of confirmation—then her powers will be permanently bound by Dr. Xavier and Dr. Strange, and she will be transported back to her home country of Sokovia.”
Steve barely noticed when Marie left, after telling them all that they were expected at the Compound that morning as usual for training. He felt sick. All this because Wanda was powerful, because she noticed Tony’s stupid amulet and because people were unreasonably afraid of her. Everyone kept telling them that their pardons were a “second chance,” but Wanda had never really been given a second chance. She’d encountered hostility and suspicion from the beginning. The deck had been stacked against her, and now she was being punished for not being perfect.

There were no murmured words of comfort this time. The others all finished their breakfasts in silence or retreated into their rooms until it was time to depart for the Compound. Steve just continued to sit at the table, staring at the far wall and thinking about Wanda and Tony and unfair expectations. Finally, when it was nearly time to leave for the Compound, he got up to get ready and clean up the shards of the mug he’d crushed. He dumped them in the trash, feeling a sudden stab of irrational hatred for the broken pieces of ceramic. All he could think about when he saw them was that SHIELD would probably chastise him for breaking something, even something stupid and cheap like the mug.

He knew that he was angry and probably not being rational, that he should settle himself far away from other people and give himself time to calm down and think about everything. But after brutally destroying some practice targets in his morning session and still feeling heavy with anger and righteous frustration, he found himself wandering the Compound during his break, looking for Tony.

In all likelihood, this would have happened anyway, eventually. He knew they were all out to get Wanda from the beginning. But he still couldn’t help but connect this back to Tony. If Tony hadn’t had to be so difficult, if he hadn’t worn that stupid amulet around the Compound just trying to get Wanda’s attention, if he’d just told Steve what it was instead of being cryptic and irritating and sending Steve to the Council…

He found him in one of the kitchens with Rhodes and the spider kid. They were leaning against the counters, easy smiles on their faces, chatting with each other. It sent a spark of equal hurt and irritation through him when their smiles all dropped the second he stepped into the room.

Rhodes and the kid were glaring at him intensely. Tony just looked indifferent. He swallowed past the lump in his throat and addressed Tony. “We need to talk.”

Rhodes was the one who spoke up before Tony could. “You know, Rogers, usually when you want a moment of someone’s time, you ask politely. You know, a question, with a ‘please’ at the end.”

The kid had shifted his feet just slightly apart, like he was preparing for a battle. Rhodes had his arms crossed, but Steve could see the tension in him. Tony, however, waved a hand back at them both. “He doesn’t know how to talk to me politely. It’s fine, Sugarplum. I can have a conversation with him. No need for hostility,” Tony said lightly, glancing back at the kid, who moved to lean stiffly back against the counter, still obviously coiled tight and ready to leap forward. Tony turned back to face Steve, expression neutral. “Let me guess, this is about Maximoff.”

“Yes,” Steve ground out. He stopped himself for a moment, taking a deep breath and trying to force himself to relax. They were obviously going to have this conversation here, in front of Rhodes and the kid, and they wouldn’t tolerate any kind of aggressive move on his part. Tony wouldn’t respond to that, either. Tony had all the power here and he knew it, and it made Steve ache to have to play along. After trying to shift his stance into something less hostile, Steve tried again. “The Council ordered an evaluation for her yesterday, and this morning they took her off active duty. They sent her to that school of Xavier’s.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I know. I was informed this morning. What about it?”
“You must know this is a mistake, Tony.” Steve fought to keep the accusation out of his voice. “They misinterpreted our concerns about that amulet you wear. They used it as an excuse to punish her.”

Rhodes snarled, but Tony put a hand on his arm briefly, telling him to back off, then turned back to Steve again. “I fail to see how that’s a mistake, or ‘punishment.’ They can schedule evaluations if they’d like, and it sounds like their concern was genuine.” He pulled the amulet out from his shirt, holding it up in front of his chest. “I got this for protection from her, you know. Looks like it’s a good thing I did. Obviously it works.”

Steve clenched his jaw. “She wasn’t attacking you.”

Tony let out an incredulous laugh. “Really? Because I was told that in her evaluations, she told them outright that she wanted to hurt me. They’re legally required to inform me if someone tells them they want to attack me, you know. Seems like being in the Compound with me would have been the perfect opportunity, don’t you think? How else would she have known about this?” He indicated the amulet again.

“She was pushed into that. Those evaluations were setting her up for failure, pushing her. She was already upset because that thing interferes with her powers, and then she was dragged out of training in the morning to go be questioned by a bunch of doctors. She was scared.”

“Have you talked to her since then?”

Steve frowned at the change in subject. “No, they haven’t let any of us contact her.”

“Then how exactly do you know how she was feeling, Rogers? Or is this just you projecting? Oh wait, no, it’s just the only thing you can use to try to justify what she did, isn’t it? You’ll say anything you have to to make her out to be innocent, and somehow I’m always the bad guy.” Tony shook his head with a grim smile. “Some things never change, I see.”

Steve bristled at the comment, but quickly deflated. He didn’t know what to do to help Wanda. He knew Tony could do something about it, but it seemed like Tony was determined to hate him no matter what. “Please, Tony, she’s just a kid. She doesn’t deserve this.” His voice was pleading.

Tony’s expression turned frosty. “She is very decidedly _not_ a kid, Rogers, please get that through your thick head. She’s an adult, older than Peter, older than Amilie even, and they’re both adults who’ve signed the Accords. She’s responsible for making her own decisions and for facing the consequences of her own actions. In fact, she’s lucky Xavier was willing to take her, considering he usually only takes in mutant _kids_. You know, actual ones, not adults who just act like children.”

“She’s young,” Steve countered, frustrated. Maybe she wasn’t a teenager, but she was still young, younger than Tony and Steve.

“If she’s still so young that she needs to be protected from the big bad world, then what were you doing bringing her onto the battlefield, Rogers? Huh?”

Steve closed his eyes in desperation. “Please, Tony,” he said, quieter than before. “You could help her, bring her back. She doesn’t deserve this.”

Tony gazed impassively at him. “And why on Earth would I do that, Rogers? For her? She hates me. She’d probably refuse to come back just because I was the one offering it. So why would I? For you?”

“Tony, we’re your teammates. Your friends. We—”
Tony cut him off with a laugh, backing up a step to be level with his companions. The kid pushed away from the counter and stepped close to Tony in solidarity, and Rhodes linked his arm with Tony’s. Tony was smiling at Steve, but his eyes held nothing but contempt. “You know, I believed that once. You really had me going. But three years is a long time, Rogers. If you wanted to keep the wool pulled over my eyes, you shouldn’t have left me alone for so long. Because I learned a hell of a lot in the last few years. I learned just how bad it was with you, how wrong the way you treated me was. I learned who my real allies are.” He lifted his hands slightly to indicate the two flanking him. “But the most important thing I learned, Rogers? Was that we were never friends.”

Steve just stood there, heavy loss a crushing feeling in his chest, as the three facing him turned to leave the room. He had no allies here. Sam wanted nothing to do with him, and even the others were pulling away. Wanda, the only one who’d stuck by him, was gone, and not coming back any time soon—maybe not ever. He was trapped by rules and regulations he couldn’t get around, and a public that wouldn’t forgive anything he did. Tony had moved on, cut him out completely, gotten a new team and new friends and a new life. And Steve could do nothing but stand there, alone, and watch Tony walk away.

Chapter End Notes

That’s all for this one! I know I didn’t come to any sort of satisfying conclusion with Steve and the others, but that’s open to interpretation. If you want to picture that Steve grudgingly settles into working under the Accords and obeying all the rules in order to save his own ass, you can. But if you want to picture that within the month he has some sort of a big blowout and gets kicked out and handed over to Germany and Romania to go to prison for the rest of his life, go right ahead :) Since his whole act in CW was focused on the personal, that was the important part of my ending for him: that he’s finally realized that Tony has completely cut him out and doesn’t need him, and he’s losing all his friends because of his shitty attitude. As for the others, Clint will either basically devolve into an emotionless Avenger-zombie and continue to keep his head down because he’s been properly chastised, or he’ll have some sort of episode and be declared unstable, extradited and sent to German prison. Natasha will likely bury all her resentment deep down because she doesn’t want to go to prison. From the fact that they were wising up in this story, I’d say Sam and Scott are the only ones that will make amends with the public and themselves for what they’ve done wrong, and will settle happily into working with the Accords. Maybe Tony (and Rhodey) won’t ever quite trust them fully like they trust Peter or Vision, but eventually there won’t be any bad blood at all, everything will be in the past. I only addressed Bucky the once, but I don’t think, once he’s cured of the triggers and has his head on straight, that he’d be interested in being an Avenger. He’d just want to be left alone to live his life, not become a publicly scrutinized superhero. Also, he’s going to have to face the consequences of what he did in Germany and Romania too, since he wasn’t under HYDRA’s control at the airport or the tunnel. It’s possible he could successfully argue that despite not being directly mind controlled, he was still way too confused to be making complex decisions on his own, and was just following Steve, but I doubt he’ll get off scot-free.

For those who want to see some extra-bitter, angry stuff, I just posted the first work in my new series, Bitter Retribution. This will be a series, not one big story like this one. Mostly one shots but a few multi-chapter stories too, and they’ll be less connected, more just a collection of different scenarios. The one thing they will have in common will be
Team Cap (mostly Steve and Wanda, but also the others) getting the shit kicked out of them, struggling while they find out Tony’s doing fine without them, turning on each other, etc. Pretty much a bunch of action-focused bitter post-CW scenarios that center around Team Cap being plainly and simply punished, rather than this story’s logical, methodical approach to realistic legal and financial consequences. So go check it out if your bitter heart needs as much fuel as mine.

Huge thanks to everyone who read this entire story, left kudos, or commented! I love to write no matter what but it’s satisfying and motivating to know that people are enjoying it too! Thanks for sticking with me to the end.

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