Black and Gold

by OctaviaPeverell

Summary

When Toni Stark flew a nuke through a wormhole and fell back to Earth, something dark and old came back with her. It latched onto the only worthy living thing and created a home for itself inside her body.

Years later, in the aftermath of the Civil War, Toni puts herself back together and gets to work to set things right and bring the rogue Avengers home. Because it's what she's always...
done: fix things.

But through the muck and the mire, through the pain and the betrayal, through the hurts that don't want to heal, that something inside of her, which has lain quiet and patient for all these years, opens its eyes and wakes up.

Notes

Two years late to the party and we're already heading into Avengers: Infinity War by the end of the month but I was hit by this plot some time in December and just had to get it down. It's a story of epic proportions (more than 100,000 words, I suspect), and is meant to be an original lead up to Infinity War but will obviously completely diverge from whatever Infinity War has in store for us.

Let me just disclaimer this by saying that although I've tagged this as Team Iron Man, there will be no character bashing whatsoever. This is a road to forgiveness and peace with a dash of Team Cap criticism, a healthy dose of some very loud, sometimes very warranted venting and screaming matches and a flagrant use of hand-wavy politics. And science because Toni and Shuri. I mean come on.

Comments and kudos are most welcome (but optional so don't feel pressured), and if you do leave a comment I shall do my best to respond :) Updates will be two or three times a week depending on how much time I have to edit in between.
Pockets of Purity

Laura did not in a million years ever expect to see Toni Stark standing in her doorway. A thousand emotions sprung forth from the dam in her chest - surprise, anger, indignation, grief - but Laura had developed ADX-level defences ever since she decided to say ‘yes’ to a date with Clint so control came almost second nature. Even though right now she wanted to either scream or slam the door in the other woman’s face.

Instead she stood there, waiting, because she had infinite patience and was very determined to see Toni Stark squirm.

She didn’t squirm, though; she stood there looking, if Laura was reading it right, almost confused in a muted, ten-years-in-captivity kind of way. She licked her dry lips and opened her mouth.

“Hi Laura.”

Cooper and Lila were helping her hang the laundry out back and Nathaniel could be heard playing with his blocks in the living room. With her children all accounted for, she finally took in Toni’s appearance from top to bottom with a careful, critical eye. A practical blue shirt she had managed to get her broken arm through, a pair of regular dark blue jeans and some muddy boots with frayed laces. Her hair was pulled into a short ponytail and looked like it had two days’ worth of grease in it.

Through the window of an old rustbucket behind her, she could see just one bag in the backseat.

She looked back at Toni, who licked her lips and frowned at the ground.

“I...I uh…”

“The arc reactor that was in your chest.” Laura motioned to it with her chin. “Where’s the light gone?”

“Covered. Wrapped.” Her words were jilted, almost choked, like it was a challenge to get out. “There was...damage.”

Laura pursed her lips. “Clint do any of it?”

Toni’s eyes narrowed as if she was actually trying to recall. “Um...maybe? I don’t really remember. But yeah. Maybe.”

Laura nodded and grit her teeth for a second before forcing out her next words. “Where’s he now?”

Then Toni looked her in the eye, really looked her in the eye and Laura’s ADX-level of control slipped just a little. “Wakanda. With the others. Except for Romanov. Dunno where she is.”

“How’d you know about the others?”

“I asked. T’Challa. He was very...honest about it.”

Folding her arms, Laura looked at a point over Toni’s shoulder, somewhere indeterminate and safe, and measured her words carefully.

“Is there...any chance that Clint will be coming home?”

The reply came quicker than Laura had expected. It was also flat and emotionless, two things Laura
suspected that Toni Stark wasn’t.

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“I’m working on it.”

Laura gazed at the shitty car one more time.

“You can put your stuff in the room you stayed in last time. Dinner’s at seven. Please take a shower before you come down.”

Then she went back into the house, past the kitchen and into the spare bathroom, sat down on the toilet seat and buried her face in her hands to cry.

The kids were noisy at dinner. Cooper and Lila were arguing about one of their teachers and Nathaniel was talking to himself in that almost-English-but-not language like most English-speaking kids his age. Laura spoonfed him at intervals and Toni stared unblinkingly at her own food until her eyes blurred. Water dripped off the ends of her dark hair and onto her bare shoulders and she could feel it, every cold drop at a time.

She didn’t bring many clothes. She hadn’t intended to stay with Laura. Didn’t even really know how that happened but it did. She’d wanted to go...anywhere. Maybe out west? Maybe one of her dad’s cabins up north near the border.

Sitting here felt like a sin, it felt wrong and sick. She had no right, no right to be here. With Clint’s wife. With his kids. God, it felt like betrayal of the worst kind because how could she be here when he wasn’t? What right did she have? Like she was rubbing it in his face. Like she was rubbing it in theirs.

*Hey Barton fam, I got your dad arrested and now he’s an international fugitive.*

Fuck. *Fuck.*

The hair-raising sound of cutlery across ceramic startled the buzz out of her ears. Toni blinked at her hand, which was almost bloodless as it gripped her fork. Her peas were scattered off the plate and on the tartan tablecloth.

The table was eerily quiet. All eyes, including Nathaniel’s, were on her.

Her mouth felt drier than a desert.

“M’ sorry,” she breathed. “Hand slipped.”

Laura’s dark brown eyes lingered on her even as she spoke to her kids.

“If you two are finished go wash your plates.”

Lila and Cooper scrambled to comply, obviously eager to get back to whatever they were doing before dinner. Lila caught Toni’s eye and smiled shyly, murmuring as she passed, “I hope your arm
gets better soon, Aunt Toni.”

She wanted to weep.

“Thank you.”

She ate her food pretty quickly after that just so she didn’t have to feel Laura watching her.

---

The inability to sleep the first night, Toni had been informed, wasn’t exclusive to her. There was something about letting yourself be vulnerable in a different bed, much less a different house in a different state in what felt like a completely different country. And sleep was perhaps the most vulnerable that she could ever be. It took her a while to get used to most new beds and the guestroom’s queen was no exception, notwithstanding that she’d slept in it before.

Perhaps that was one of the problems. Because she remembered the bed and the room. She remembered the wooden beams on the ceiling, the moonlight shining through the windows and across the foot of the bed.

Most of all she remembered lying on her side with her back against the wall as the mattress dipped in front of her. She remembered the scent of skin, freshly washed, of heat radiating off muscular forearms. Of the bed creaking as they moved towards the middle, two magnets drawn to one another.

Familiar fingers lacing themselves through hers. The heat of murmured breath. The tip of a nose and the flutter of her eyelashes.

The slow-motion crinkling of her red suit, deafening in her ears. The glass-like explosion of a blue heart.

Her lungs constricted.

She sat up.

The skin around the arc reactor throbbed, still bruised. Had she not fitted her suit with its own reactor that day, she wondered if a super soldier would’ve dug right into her chest and pulled it out.

It would’ve been tragically poetic, and she had always been a little theatrical.

A shadow moved and her gaze snapped towards the corner between the wall and the cupboard. There was a floor-length mirror on one of the cupboard doors, reflecting nothing but black. Unnerved, she made her way over and stood in front of it, inexplicably relieved when the arc reactor illuminated her reflection. She looked like shit and the whole campside horror story image she had going on wasn’t doing her any favours.

Knowing that sleep wasn’t coming easy tonight, Toni crept her way into the hall, down the stairs and out the front door. The night was cool and the faint breeze made her long shirt waft up around her thighs. Her bare feet sank into the soft grass as she padded her way around the house. The horses made faint thumping noises against the barn walls and the leaves rustled overhead.

This is what people did, didn’t they? Rich people, traumatized people, people who hated themselves, people who hated being around other people. They moved to the country, to nature, to quiet. Like
that woman who gave up her sex-fuelled life and hiked the Pacific Crest Trail. Or those people in Life Below Zero. Or that guy who gave up a cushy lifestyle to live in the wild only to die after accidentally consuming a poisonous plant.

It sounded like one of those pretentious getaways people always talked about to find themselves. Embarrassment warred with indignation and finally reluctant understanding that she was one of those so-called pretentious people. Because she didn’t know what she was doing here, why she came, why she thought it would be a good idea to stop by. But she also kind of did know. And yeah, it was selfish and cowardly of her.

Because Rhodey. She’d left Rhodey behind.

After everything they’d been through, after she’d pulled him into her web of disaster and then left him behind to deal with everything alone.

She’d left Rhodey alone.

The bitter realization took the energy out of her legs and she vaguely registered the jarring of her broken arm in its cast and her bruised sternum as she landed on the ground, grass and hardened earth digging into her skin.

“Jarvis,” she said aloud, not entirely certain whom she was addressing because both would’ve given suitably dry responses. “What do I do?”

“Well, for starters you might wanna put some pants and shoes on the next time you walk out here at night. It can get a bit nippy.”

Toni stiffened, glancing out of the corner of her eye as she counted Laura’s quiet footfalls. She settled down two feet away from Toni and tossed her a jacket. Her fingers spread across the synthetic material, her eyes darting upwards to meet Laura’s once before she put it around her shoulders. It smelled distantly of Clint’s favorite cologne and she closed her eyes for a moment, just to savor the memory.

“Sorry if I woke you.”

Laura shrugged. “I’m a light sleeper. Comes with being married to a spy. Never know when he’s gonna come sneaking in middle of the night.”

The image of Laura pretending to sleep while she waited on the off chance that Clint might be coming home to her made Toni grimace and she rubbed the bone around the arc reactor.

“I have some turnips out back. Brussel sprouts and kale too. They’ll be ready for harvesting soon. I could use the help when the time comes.” Toni didn’t say anything and just sat there in the grass, waiting. “Also got an old pickup that needs some work. Clint’s been promising to fix it up for years but he never got around to it.”

Toni swallowed. “To earn my keep?”

Laura huffed. “To give you something to take your mind off of whatever happened. And maybe, when you’re ready, you can tell me about it.”

Whatever Laura was doing was more than Toni deserved.

“How...how long may I say?”
“As long as you want,” was the immediate response. “As long as you need to and,” she trailed off. “As long as you think you should.”

That was probably codeword for ‘as long as you think you need until you can clean up this mess you made.’ She would take it.

“Okay. Thank you.”

She heard Laura get up to leave.

“You should come inside soon. It’s gonna rain.”

She didn’t go inside for a good four more hours.

And it fucking poured that night.

Wakanda was unlike anything Steve had ever imagined. He’d tried to picture what T’Challa described; an illustrious amalgamation of sleek lines and technologically advanced architecture interspersed throughout lush green and yawning cliffsides. The reality far surpassed what his ignorant mind could conjure. Tearing his gaze away from the view had been no easy task during the flight over.

Through it all, and even a couple of weeks later once he’d had the chance to see a little more, he couldn’t help the small voice in the back of his mind that whispered, Toni would have loved it here.

And with that needling little voice that sounded strangely like his own came the deluge of images and pained accusations, the whirring of a repulsor, the screech of metal and the clang of vibranium against something both indestructible and fragile.

The look on her face.

How could you?

He’d asked himself that every second of every day since he’d walked away from her. From Toni.

It wasn’t something he thought he could ever do and yet here he was, a million miles away in the blink of an eye. He’d left Toni alone in a goddamn HYDRA bunker in Siberia with a suit as broken as the trust between them. He’d thrown the shield Howard had made, the shield her father had made, right at her feet as if it had all meant nothing.

When it had meant something.

When she meant everything.

“Captain Rogers.”

Steve looked over his shoulder and found T’Challa walking towards him, Shuri an ever-present shadow behind him. She was quicker to smile than her brother and when she did there was an innocence that made Steve feel older than he already was. And she was smart, god she was smart. He wished she and Toni could meet. Toni would-
“Your Highness. Princess,” he greeted, trying for a smile but fairly certain he fell short.

T’Challa clasped his hands behind his back, something Steve noticed he did before delivering somewhat hefty news.

“My sources tell me that you have been...moping.”

Or in this case before he intended to stage an intervention.

Steve blinked. “Um.” He shook his head. “Sources?” he prompted, raising a brow. T’Challa’s placid smile was surprisingly telling and Steve sighed. “My team?” he stated wryly.

“Your friends,” T’Challa corrected with a gentleness that belied him. “Unless of course, we are so terrible a host, or even worse a country that we are unable to keep our very esteemed guest happy.”

“You know that’s not it,” Steve winced, even though a part of him recognized the good-natured goading and well-meaning probing. But he didn’t feel like talking about his problems right now, and decided that it was best to let T’Challa have at whatever this was.

“In that case,” Shuri spoke up finally, stepping around her brother, a fiesty glint reflected in her dark eyes. “spar with me, Captain.” His surprise and uncertainty must have shown, for she grinned cheekily, a far cry from her earlier impassiveness. “Okoye has been teaching me one on one.”

Okoye. It was a name he’d heard numerous times but he’d yet to meet the renowned leader of the infamous Dora Milaje. His gaze travelled to a calm-faced T’Challa, but Steve was almost certain the man was laughing at his faintly hysteric concern.

“I don’t know,” he said slowly, keeping his eyes on T’Challa and wondering whether he was more the hurt-my-sister-and-you-will-pay or, even worse, an enabler, in which case he knew not to underestimate the princess.

Especially, since he’d heard rumors that Princess Shuri was quite intent on succeeding her brother as the Black Panther.

T’Challa smiled genially and held out his palms in an open gesture. “Come now, Captain. I have seen you fight. That type of skill takes diligent training, the like of which you haven’t had since coming to Wakanda. Surely a little light sparring with my sister will help you get back into the habit.”

And apparently that was that. Within minutes they were outside in a large stone courtyard, the shadow of the cliffside their only protection against the midday sun. Steve had trained in all sorts of environments but he had to hand it to the Wakandans and to equatorial nations in general, because his lily-white ass was going to have a hard time in this stifling humidity.

This was Shuri’s element. And she didn’t seem the type to pull her punches.

She stretched her neck to one side and grinned.

“Are you ready, Captain?” And if that wasn’t a challenge, he didn’t know what was.

With a sigh, he squinted up at the sun, then wiped the back of his hand across his sweaty brow.

“As ready as I’ll ever be, I guess.”

Steve barely had a moment to center himself before she charged.
“This isn’t your usual training spot.”

T’Challa nodded.

“No, it is not,” he agreed, watching the fighting pair below.

“I’ve seen your facilities. It’s got *air-conditioning.*”

“It does.”

Clint tried to be discreet as he rolled his eyes but he mustn’t have been cautious enough if Ayo’s unimpressed glower was anything to go by.

“So why are you letting your sister beat up our fearless leader in the middle of the hot Wakandan sun?”

T’Challa sent him an amused look. “Nobody *lets* Shuri do anything. And I think Captain Rogers has spent enough time indoors. A little sun will put some color back in him.”

Clint grimaced. “Somehow I don’t think lobster red counts as just ‘some color’, Your Highness.”

T’Challa seemed to vaguely debate this for a few seconds before shrugging carelessly. “Give him a couple of weeks and he’ll brown nicely.”

“All these food metaphors are making me hungry,” Scott grumbled from where he leaned on the balustrade overseeing the fight. He hastily backtracked when he caught Ayo’s narrowed gaze. “Not that we’re not being fed. Because we are. Like a lot. And really, Wakandan food man. Good stuff.”

Ayo just sighed as if the entire exchange was beneath her - which it probably was because she was *tall* - and turned away from them all but maintained herself in close proximity to T’Challa. Clint wondered whether she was usually this attentive of her duties or whether it was their presence here that seemed to keep her perpetually alert. It wasn’t like they *wanted* to be here, no offence meant to T’Challa or his people at all. But Clint just wanted to go *home.*

“Mr. Barton.” He looked up and found T’Challa’s knowing gaze on him. “Come. Take a walk with me.”

Scott was currently spewing his verbal diarrhea at Ayo, who wore a pinched expression as if a particularly noisy mosquito was buzzing in her ear. Clint nodded and fell into step as they began a slow stroll around the courtyard, the sound of Steve and Princess Shuri’s sparring and Scott’s babbling a somewhat therapeutic background hum.

If he closed his eyes he could almost imagine being back on the farm on a summer’s day, the doors and windows all open so everyone could hear the TV; Cooper would be out back creating one of his wooden modern art pieces that he was obsessed with; Lila would be at the kitchen table pretending to be an anchorwoman and Laura would be standing behind Nathaniel and helping him walk on chubby legs.

And laughter. Lots of laughter.

The back of his throat clenched and he swallowed thickly, right before the greatest surge of hatred
towards Toni - towards Stark - overcame him and his fingers itched with the need to shoot something.

“You have a family back home, do you not?”

The red haze of rage retreated and after a moment he nodded. “Yeah. Wife n’ kids.”

T’Challa hummed in understanding. “You are justified in your anger. And in your pain.”

“Damn right I am,” he muttered darkly. “No offence to you at all, but I wasn’t even supposed to be a part of this. I shouldn’t even be here. I should be with-” He cut himself off before he could raise his voice in anything that may be deemed disrespectful to royalty. He sighed, feeling tired right down to his very bones. “Sorry.”

“No apologies necessary, Mr. Barton. Least of all to me.” He smiled wryly when Clint looked at him questioningly. “I am not innocent in this affair, regardless of the fact that I am offering you sanctuary. Consider this my...repentance. For causing such harm to people whom I would one day call friends. I only wish I could offer it to other members of your broken family.”

Clint felt his face twist into something sharp and incredulous. “Why? They don’t deserve it.” The harsh words had left his lips before he could comprehend the sheer hostility behind them, surmounting the fact that he was speaking to a king and one who had no obligation to let him stay. He swore, eyes squeezing shut. “Shit. That was not- Shit.”

But T’Challa wasn’t ruffled in the slightest; in fact, he looked almost as if he’d expected Clint’s little outburst.

“As I said, Mr. Barton,” he spoke with an almost irresistible gravity, “you owe me no apologies. But perhaps, I would pose a question back to you; had your positions been reversed and you were home with your family while your friends were forced to take refuge here, would they have been entitled to my offer of aid?”

Clint didn’t have anything to say to that because it was an age-old debate that he’d never given much heed because during his entire career with SHIELD and the Avengers, the lines had been so clear. Friends turning on each other, though? That was messy. And it was hurtful and shitty like an endless ball of string all tangled up and there was no way to loosen the knots and turn it back into something solid again. Because the kinks would always remain, every counterclockwise twist and every fray a scar, a reminder of what they broke.

Either T’Challa got tired of waiting for an answer or he’d never expected one in the first place, for he dug into his pocket and pulled out something thin and metallic. It looked vaguely familiar but it was embedded with a glowing lattice of what was undoubtedly vibranium.

With a flick of his wrist, the holographic interface appeared and Clint realized it for what it was; a phone.

He didn’t want to let himself hope but his fingers trembled at his side, wanting.

“Is that-?”

“It’s for you. It contains all the necessary contacts. But I think right now you’re only interested in one in particular.”

He forgot how to breathe. “Where-?” he croaked. “Where did you get the number?”
“A mutual friend.” He didn’t elaborate further but Clint knew immediately and felt his heart clench at the thought of Natasha. He didn’t know where she was but the fact that she’d risked her position, her life, to get T’Challa this message meant more to him than anything else could.

His throat worked as he reached out and took the phone from him. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

T’Challa smiled and gripped Clint’s shoulder. “It wasn’t my idea. But I hope it brings you some comfort. You will not always be away from them. This, all of this, will change. It is already starting to.” He nodded, then walked down the stone steps to where Shuri was laying into Steve, who seemed to have finally gotten into the whole gig and was shouting out praise and giving pointers.

Clint clutched the phone to his chest and breathed.

---

There were reminders of Clint wherever she went. On her second day at the farm she found a pair of Clint’s gloves, the blue ones he’d worn when he’d accompanied her to one of her factory warehouses to hang out while she presented a new project to her mechanics.

On the evening of the same day she found an old arrowhead near the fridge, one of the innumerous broadhead tips she’d made for him, embedded with tracking nanites. The arrowhead was long dead, the nanites disintegrated or crawling around the house. Holding the precious piece of metal in the center of his palm she made a mental note to gather them all up and any other errant tech that may be loose around the house before she left.

Two days later she came across a glass cabinet in the lounge that she’d been too hesitant to venture into. It was full of family photos, many of them candids. One of the photos was of a baby Cooper grinning up into the face of the man holding him. The man’s face was out of the frame but she recognized the v-shaped scar on the man’s hand, embedded in the flesh between the thumb and forefinger.

Sometimes she looked at Laura, inadvertently studying her expressions. She would playfully wrinkle her nose whenever Nathaniel’s diaper needed a change. She had the most incredibly effective eyebrow-raise whenever Lila lied about doing her chores. She got a furrow on her forehead whenever she called for Cooper but he didn’t answer.

But the most telling, the easiest thing to read on the canvas of her face was the sheer devastation whenever the phone rang and she’d run to pick it up only for it to not be whom she wanted it to be.

Toni always felt like shit whenever it happened, and crept back upstairs or outside or just anywhere away from the woman who was hurting so badly from a wound that she had inflicted.

Laura never said anything, though. In fact, aside from the first day she didn’t make much mention of Clint at all, save for when her kids asked about him and when do you think daddy’s going to call?

The woman had the patience and the poker face of a Virgin Mary statue and answered everything with enviable ease, never slipping and always with a calm smile on her lips. Toni marveled at it, wondering whether the Phil Coulson-level of indecipherability was a byproduct of parenthood or marriage.

Perhaps the only indication of emotion was the fact that she wouldn’t look at Toni whenever the
topic of her husband was brought up. Toni couldn’t begrudge her that.

If Toni felt this bad she imagined Clint felt a million times worse. It was the only reason she could think of as to why he hadn’t called yet, especially when she had already given him the one tool to do so.

Once Laura had deemed it safe to remove the cast and the plaster around her chest, Toni had proceeded to fix the pick-up truck within the span of thirty minutes. Then she broke it apart and re-did it from the bones up. She used a few components of the spare arc reactor she’d brought with her to give it an almost unlimited power supply. Couldn’t have a truck that may or may not take off into the air this part of town, hence the almost unlimited power supply.

One of Laura’s kitchen cabinets was uneven so she took the door out, sandpapered it down and refitted it during the hours of three and four in the morning. Lila had come down for a glass of water, seen Toni work, and quietly sat down at the kitchen table to watch until she’d fallen asleep again, head cushioned on her crossed forearms.

When she was done, Toni hesitated only for a moment before picking the girl up - and fuck but kids were heavier than she realized - and put her back into bed. As she’d exited the room again, leaving it slightly ajar, the way she’d learned the girl preferred, she thought she heard Laura’s bedroom door click shut.

And so her days went on this quiet piece of land, so far away from everything that she knew.

Soil got under her fingers as she dug up the turnips with Laura until Cooper shyly gave her one of his dad’s gardening gloves. Yet another reminder. She sweated, her skin browning in the sun, and her hair frizzed. If she closed her eyes she could imagine herself in one of her assembly plants with the rest of her workers, face behind protective gear and the heat of machinery all around her. That had been good, honest work. This, cringing away from earthworms and feeling ill when clusters of bugs crawled in and out of the dirt, was good and honest work too. And in spite of the ache in her back and her sore hands, she felt something like relief settle into her, at least for a little while.

Nights were still the worst, though, when her mind wandered. So she would potter around the house or walk outside, looking for something to repair, letting her fingers do the work until exhaustion took her.

The first time Laura handed Nathaniel to her, it was because Cooper had opened the fridge too forcefully and jarred a couple of jam jars from the shelf. They cracked open on the kitchen floor and Laura, who had been feeding Nathaniel, all but shoved the baby into Toni’s arms while she went to clean up the mess.

Startled, she stared down at the rotund bundle, fumbled with the bottle for a bit, then held it steadily until he wasn’t just sucking air and giving himself a bad tummy. Nathaniel made little noises in the back of his throat as he drank, and blinked slowly up at her. Natasha had been right; he was pretty fat.

Toni moved to the sofa in the lounge, sinking into the plush cushion as Nathaniel seemed to sink his little baby weight into her. She thought of Clint, sitting in this very sofa, his son in his arms, the sound of his family echoing from all parts of the house, the evening wind blowing outside. She
couldn’t deny the appeal.

“Baby,” she murmured, Nathaniel’s lids growing heavier and heavier the more full he got.

“After you burp him you can put him down for a nap if you like.” Laura stood in the doorway, rubbing her hands with a damp cloth.

“Only if that’s okay with you,” she said, a little unsure.

“I need to head into town to pick up some stuff anyway. Won’t be a few hours. Plus Lila and Coop need someone to watch them do their homework, so.”

“I’m...not the kind of person people would typically ask to babysit,” she said slowly, feeling just a tad panicked at being left alone with three Barton children.

Laura smirked. “I’m sure you’ll manage.”

And surprisingly she did. Though not before Nathaniel threw up on her, Cooper tried to weasel his way out of doing homework and Lila asked her to braid her hair while she did her math assignment.

At one point Cooper had snuck away when she wasn’t paying attention, and when she hunted him down she found him out back using the table saw and she very nearly lost her shit until she noticed he was wearing gloves and goggles and was operating with an intense level of caution and artistry. It was the first time she’d seen his wooden structures, beautiful, sweeping things that belonged in a museum. The scent of varnish made her nose tingle pleasantly. She let him be.

When she went back inside Lila dragged her over to the kitchen table and forced her to watch flower arrangement videos with her on YouTube.

“I’m going to be a florist,” she declared matter-of-factly, and Toni nodded sagely, pretty sure she’d informed her mother she planned on being a professional joust the other day.

When it began to get dark Nathaniel started crying and she jogged up the stairs, skipping over the creaky one, to pick him up. The scent of soiled diaper made her grimace, but nappy changing wasn’t astrophysics and she’d only seen Laura do it five times a day for the past week so she was rather proud of herself when she managed it successfully.

Nathaniel cooed up at her. If that wasn’t stellar praise then she didn’t know what was.

When Laura came home, all four of them were in the lounge watching a David Attenborough documentary. Cooper was on the floor leaning back against her legs, Lila was curled up next to her and Nathaniel was on her lap, a teething ring in his mouth.

Laura took one look at them, at Toni’s deer-in-headlights expression, then smiled.

“I got pizza.”

The eldest two cheered, Nathaniel seemed happy to see his mother, and Toni...Toni felt warm.

It wasn’t perfect. This wasn’t her world, this little pocket of purity that she only belonged in temporarily. But it was pretty damn close. And it was beautiful in its own right.
That night, Toni stared up at the shadows moving across her ceiling, cast there by the moonlight sifting through the gauzy curtains of her bedroom. She thought about Laura and about her kids. She thought about Clint, Nat and Bruce, of Wanda and Sam, and even Scott Lang whom she knew so little about and hadn’t cared to discover.

She thought of Rogers. Of when he used to be Steve, Steve, Steve to her.

She thought of James Buchanan Barnes. Of the Winter Soldier.

*I remember all of them.*

She thought of two stupid and reckless boys from Brooklyn. Of a friendship that defined them. Of bravery and loyalty. Of love and loss.

*I remember all of them.*

That was his curse, wasn’t it? That was his little pocket of purity; the memories of all the lives he’d destroyed.

It sounded curiously familiar.

Maybe...maybe.

She stretched over the side of the bed and dug around inside her bag for her tablet. Opening up the only document that mattered, she started to read.

Twirling the stylo between her fingers, she paused for a breath of a second before putting the tip to the screen. She wrote with bright red scribbles and splotches of crimson, large circles and violent underlining, until words and questions and *changes* filled up pages and pages.

She wrote until her fingers ached, until her neck stiffened, until the sun rose, until Laura peeked through the door that was slightly ajar, gazing in awe at the numerous screen projections floating around Toni like a halo of magic and technology.

She wrote until she couldn’t write anymore and closed her eyes in the middle of a messy bed, surrounded by good things, messy things.

Things she might be able to fix.
Chapter Summary

Steve walks widdershins around some uncomfortable topics, Toni makes an important call and Vision chooses a path.

Chapter Notes

I'm honestly blown away by the response I got to the first chapter. Thank you so, so much for every comment, every kudos and every bookmark. Each one made me increasingly excited that people were enjoying the story or found something in it that intrigued them. So thank you to everyone who took the time to read the first chapter and leave a response and I hope you all enjoy the second chapter as well :)

We've got more Steve here and a bit of Sam (I adore him so much) and some more Laura and Toni. She won't be at the farm for too much longer, because shit's gotta kick off at some point but as I wrote this I just had so much. love for Laura Fucking Barton and for real, we do not deserve that woman.

The next update will probably be on Saturday or Sunday. So far I've hit 80k with this fic and it's nowhere near done. So there's that to look forward to!

Also, I'm my own beta and I do my best to proofread my own work but if there are mistakes, I am sorry and I humbly grovel for your forgiveness.

At some point during the first month of his stay, Steve had graduated from training with Shuri to letting - most of the time it didn't feel like he'd had much of a choice - the Dora Milaje train him. He fell onto his back for the second time that afternoon, feeling the uncomfortable fizz of the powerful EMP generated by Okoye’s staff still reverberating in his bones.

The only other time he’d felt this bad was when Toni had accidentally shot him with one of her upgraded repulsor prototypes. To be fair it was his fault for surprising her. It still hurt like crazy, though.

Another image flashed behind his eyes. A shield. An arc reactor.

*How could you?*

*Oh god, I left her-*

He gritted his teeth, fingers digging into his palm.

“Just because you can take a hit doesn’t mean you should,” Okoye stated flatly, pointing the head of her staff at him.

“Evidently he *couldn’t* take the hit,” one of the others, a young woman called Aneka he believed,
muttered, before lowering her head deferentially when Okoye shot her a withering look.

Shuri stood on the sidelines, watching as Steve pushed himself to his feet and dusted himself off. Over the last couple of weeks he’d gotten used to training in the heat and his nose and cheeks no longer peeled from the sun. The Dora were fierce opponents with a unique fighting style that Steve couldn’t quite get his body to imitate yet. According to Shuri he was getting there, though. And she was a genius and knew these things, so she liked to inform him as often as possible.

“You pretentious white boys should praise and fear my glorious IQ. My very existence should be an affront to your sensibilities,” she’d said once and Steve had laughed and laughed and laughed. When she’d indignantly asked him why he was laughing he had told her, tears of mirth - and perhaps something else - leaking out of the corners of his eyes,

“You just remind me of someone I know.”

The memory of that exchange and the face of the woman who was always on his mind dulled his mood even more, despite knowing that he couldn’t half ass it with these women.

“Come on. Again,” Okoye said, interrupting the direction his bitter musings were taking him. “Focus on the senses that matter. Never take a hit unless you cannot help it. What did they teach you in that army of yours?” The last part she muttered to herself, then nodded for her sisters to take their positions.

Steve’s arms and thighs were already burning from the continued assault and his bruises barely healed before others took their place. He got into position, cleared his mind as best he could, and moved when they attacked.

It was hours later when Steve’s battered body finally sank down onto the couch in the suite he shared with the other Avengers. The other Rogue Avengers as the media had taken to calling them.

Wanda sent him a brief smile, then turned back to the TV. Sam had opted to cook tonight and Scott was helping him. The sound of them moving around the kitchen, snarking at one another, made him think of another kitchen at a time that felt so long ago but was really only months before. Clint was perched atop the dining table, fiddling with the phone that T’Challa had given him.

From what Steve could ascertain he’d yet to call his wife and Steve wondered at the logic behind it. Then again.

He sighed softly, elbows resting on his knees as he gazed, unseeing at the floor, cursing himself at how easily his thoughts always strayed towards Toni. Toni and that stupid letter and that stupid phone.

A note. He’d left her a damn note.

_How could you?_

And her father’s shield.

_How could you, Steve?_
“Steve.” He looked up into Sam’s concerned face and shifted over a little to give him room. “You okay? Okoye didn’t beat your super soldier ass too hard, did she?” he chuckled, but Steve could tell he wasn’t feeling it.

“No more than usual.”

Sam studied him for a long moment before speaking. “Y’know. One day you’re gonna have to tell them what happened in Siberia. The longer you leave it the harder it’ll be. And the harder it’ll hit them.”

“I know,” he admitted. It wasn’t the first time they’d had this conversation. And it wouldn’t be the last. But Sam was unfailingly, almost indiscriminately patient with him. And Steve felt like a hell of a jerk for putting that kind of pressure on a man who had been nothing by loyal to him.

“They know something happened but,” Sam shrugged, “they’re not gonna ask.”

“You told them not to?”

Sam shook his head. “When we first came here, when Barnes was first going under, we all had a small talk. Wanda knows something went down, something bad. Said she felt it from you when you saved us from the Raft. She thought maybe Stark had hurt you somehow-”

“She didn’t,” Steve hissed, unable to stop himself, then glanced around discreetly to make sure no one had been alerted to his outburst.

“I know,” Sam calmly reassured him. “I told them they were only looking at your side of things. I told them that until we know everything about Siberia we shouldn’t be fanning flames or coming up with any wild theories. Clint has some theories of his own. Poor dude has a lot of rage. Not that anyone can blame him. Lang’s just an asshole all the time and he didn’t know us well before so I discount pretty much everything he says.” Sam rolled his eyes and it cracked a smile from Steve.

“Thanks,” Steve murmured, grimacing at his hands. “You’re doing a far better job at holding the team together than I am at the moment.”

“Team’s broken, Steve” Sam said, but not unkindly. “It’s fractured, everybody’s a mess. One of our own is down for the count at least for the foreseeable future.” Steve winced at the mention of Rhodey. “And from what the news is telling us-” He watched Steve carefully as he spoke. “-Toni hasn’t been seen since she made that public apology about Leipzig and Bucharest.”

“She wasn’t even at Bucharest.” Steve pinched the bridge of his nose, his whole body tense and heavy with shame.

“Yeah, well. Someone had to do it. Shoulda been us.”

He knew Sam was right, but it didn’t stop from feeling like a punch to the gut. His mistakes were heavy collars that kept slotting themselves around his neck, one by one and dragging his face closer to the dirt.

“Yeah,” Steve breathed. “Shoulda been us.” He let out a heavy sigh. “Do you think,” he began, mulling over the question he didn’t know whether he wanted answered or not. “Do you think she’ll call?”

Sam didn’t answer for a long moment and Steve almost wanted to wave it off, take the question back so he wouldn’t have to hear-
“No. I...don’t think she’s going to call.”

It was strange. It was the one question he hadn’t wanted answered, and yet he knew, he always knew, what the answer was going to be. The knowledge that Sam thought the same felt unbelievably like relief, at odds with everything he knew and everything he wanted.

How could you, Steve?

“But I think,” Sam continue, ducking his head so he could catch Steve’s eyes, “I think she’s going to do something big. And after everything, I don’t think this is the end of us.”

He wanted to believe. God, he wanted to believe so badly, but it was so hard to look past everything that went wrong, everything that they’d done, everything he wished he could take back.

“How can you be sure?”

“Because right from the start, she wanted to keep the team together. That was the one thing she cared about. The Accords, Ross, all that came second to keeping the team together, to keeping us fighting together.”

“We could’ve fought the Accords together too,” Steve couldn’t help but say and Sam nodded in honest agreement.

“Yeah. We could’ve. But maybe Toni had a reason for signing them,” Sam said pointedly and Steve felt something niggling in the back of his mind. Because Sam was right; Toni wouldn’t roll over for something like that. She’d defied the US government for years from her Iron Man tech for the very reason that she didn’t trust them. It was one of the reasons Steve was just so angry that she’d so easily given in to them. “I’m not saying it’s a good reason, I’m not saying it’s not but…”

He frowned. “You think…”

“I think we should’ve asked her why. I mean I don’t...it just seems like she would’ve had a reason other than Sokovia and Ultron. I don’t...I don’t agree with what the Accords stand for but maybe if we’d at least talked about it openly we could’ve come to some sort of understanding.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” Steve admitted. “She said something about...something about it being done to us. I was so mad I didn’t think-” He bit off a curse, hissing under his breath, wishing that he had just asked her why before everything just went out of control. “If I’d asked her sooner maybe we could’ve stopped it together-”

“Hey,” Sam gently cut in. “Don’t do that. It’s not all on you, okay? Toni’s just shit at communicating in general. It’s just the way she is. Maybe we should’ve gotten the truth out of her but maybe it wouldn’t even have mattered. Things just escalated so quickly and all of us were way in over our heads. So you’re not the only one to blame. We all made a choice. We could’ve stopped it at any time if we’d just talked. But-” He gestured at the rest of them, all immersed in their own heads, their own problems. “-we’re not good at talking. We never were.” He chuckled and it was sad. “We’ve all got a shit ton of baggage. It would’ve taken a miracle to get us to talk.”

“So you’re saying we were doomed from the start,” Steve laid out and it made Sam laugh. Steve had missed that. Missed seeing his team, his friends, not sad.

“Yeah. Maybe that’s exactly what I’m saying. Ah, well.” He grinned at Steve and clapped him on the shoulder. “It’s not the end, Steve. Just gotta be patient. We just gotta wait.” Then he stood, and jerked his head towards the table where Scott was laying out the food, Clint was setting out the cutlery and Wanda was pouring everybody water. “Food’s ready.”
Toni was elbow-deep in kale when Laura spoke up for the first time that afternoon. There had been a nervous tension surrounding her all morning, and Toni, who was still on unsteady ground with the other woman, had opted to wait for her to make the first move.

“Why didn’t you call Clint when it all went down?”

Toni glanced over her shoulder but Laura was kneeling in the dirt with her back to Toni.

“He was retired,” Toni said with utmost honesty. “It didn’t seem right to call him into our mess.”

For a while only the sound of uprooted cabbages filed the air. Toni wondered whether they were having sautéed kale or a kale salad for dinner, or whether Laura was going to sell her harvest at the farmer’s market in town.

Grimacing at the hardy leaves, she hoped it would be the last one.

“You know I haven’t forgiven Steve Rogers for calling my husband away. To fight in you guys’ mess.” Her voice was even but Toni winced at the near violent manner which she snapped off the thick stem. “Clint was out, you know? And he’d promised me that once Nate was born, he’d be around for his family.” She sighed agitatedly, still not looking at Toni. “I mean do you know how hard it is to raise three kids alone?”

She wasn’t sure whether that was rhetorical so she tread cautiously. “No. But for what it’s worth, you look like you’re doing a great job.”

Laura laughed derisively. “A great job huh? You know before you came along Cooper and Lila fought with me almost every day. I wasn’t doing this right; I wasn’t helping Lila with her schoolwork, I wasn’t on time to take Coop to lacrosse practice. And at night I’m running to Nate’s room to change his diaper or feed him and it is exhausting.” Toni saw her wipe a hand across her face and sincerely hoped Laura wasn’t crying because she was just so bad at dealing with crying people. “And I’m not even counting the fact that I have a small farm to run and I have to cook and clean and- Fuck, but I was so goddamn tired.” She finally turned around, thankfully not crying, but Toni couldn’t deny that the poor woman looked worn out.

“And then I came along. And brought all my problems with me,” Toni stated, feeling small.

But Laura shook her head. “No. I mean yeah, in the beginning I thought this was going to be a repeat of the whole Ultron fiasco. But it was just you. You didn’t even ask and I said yes. Because I was desperate,” she admitted, and now she looked emotional, pain pinching between her brows. “You were my link to Clint in a really weird, convoluted, probably unhealthy way. But I just thought...I thought if I let you stay...it’d be what Clint would’ve wanted.”
Toni opened and closed her mouth a couple of times. “You know I’m pretty sure he hates my guts right now,” she felt the need to point out, a little amused when Laura let out a snort. She didn’t say that she kind of hated him too.

“Yeah, probably. He’s got anger issues. It’s nothing - okay well it is a little bit personal.” Laura sighed again, folding her legs and kneeling in freshly turned soil, with tendrils of her brown hair sticking to the sides of her face. “I’m angry at him too, you know?”

Toni set her kale down and faced Laura, their knees almost touching. “For leaving?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t even the fate of the world. And he left to help friends fight against other friends.” She scoffed, disbelieving. “I still can’t wrap my mind around it. What did he think he was doing right?”

Toni had nothing to say to that. She and Clint were... had been friends of a sort. At least she’d thought so. If she had been the one to call him, though, would he have come? She liked to think so. She liked to think that he would’ve listened. That she would’ve asked questions rather than just shut everything down the way Ste - the way Cap and the others had done. Clint had sense. He’d been a part of SHIELD. He knew the consequences of being part of a team like the Avengers and he was so human that he’d know what the world would think of them. Clint was logical and practical. He was a spy for fuck’s sake. He would’ve asked and done his research before making any judgments... wouldn’t he? But he’d come when Cap had called, just like that. He hadn’t asked her and that... was confusing and infuriating and why?

“Did he... say anything to you about the Accords?”

Laura didn’t answer immediately, her fingers drumming against her chin in thought.

“No, he didn’t. But when Rogers called...” With a sigh, she looked at the ground. “It was like he couldn’t get away from here fast enough.”

Toni was sure that wasn’t the case, but she supposed she could see it from Laura’s point of view; having her husband deck it to rejoin the Avengers when he’d only just given it up. But she also knew Clint not as a husband, but as an Avenger. While he joked and made off-hand comments about getting too old for this shit, Toni suspected that it was said with more than a little regret. Still. Laura was his wife and the husband of their children, she thought, with no small amount of indignation. She deserved to know more than what little Clint had relayed to her.

“You should tell him that when you see him again,” Toni said. “You should tell him you’re angry. Lay it into him. Or punch him in the face, whichever works. Do both even. Get the asshole to fucking listen.” She was only vaguely aware she was seething, that there was a simmering rage behind the arc reactor that was fueling her words. “You don’t take matters into your own fucking hand without knowing all your angles. You don’t just fucking declare your stance on shit you don’t fully understand and then expect the rest of the world to follow you just because you think you stand on the right side of righteousness. You don’t just fucking leave.”

Laura stared at her, hazel eyes a little wider and her lips parted slightly, as if seeing Toni for the first time, as if something had finally clicked in her brain.

“Wow,” Laura declared slowly, and Toni’s face heated with embarrassment, “there’s a lot more where that came from, huh?”

“Sorry,” she apologized, scratching her temple and getting dirt everywhere. “I have this tendency to make everything about me.” She paused for a moment before adding, “You really should punch
Clint, though. I hear it’s therapeutic. So’s shouting. And angry makeup sex according to TV.”

“I’ll take that under advisement.” Laura grinned, tossing a torn bit of kale over her shoulder. “You said...you said when I see him again.” She didn’t offer any more; she didn’t need to.

“Yeah. When. I meant what I said before. That I was...” She shrugged. “That I was working on a way to get them back. To bring them here.” She’d almost said ‘home’, a concept she wasn’t sure applied to anything anymore. They weren’t a family regardless of how much certain members, certain members that may even have included herself, wanted them to be.

Home is where the heart is. Her human one had goddamn shrapnel of her own making inside of it and her other one couldn’t feel much of anything. It had saved her life countless times, though, Siberia being the occasion that stood out the most right now.

Her thoughts wandered dangerously towards Rogers and whether he knew or whether he’d hoped that destroying the arc reactor in her armor wouldn’t render it completely obsolete since she’d had the one in her chest.

Still a dick move, though. Still a really dick move.

Once again, Laura saved her from going too deep into that debate.

“Tell me how.”

“What?”

She stood and Toni allowed herself to be tugged to her feet.

“Tell me your plan on bringing them back,” Laura repeated, pulling Toni towards the veranda, where cold lemonade and wicker chairs were waiting for them. “I want to know. And maybe I can help.”

Toni found her fingers laced with Laura’s, either for support or for something to cling to. She couldn’t help but be grateful for that small bit of comfort.

Toni’s life settled into a new routine at the Barton farm. Once she’d relayed all her existing ideas to Laura, she found an adept sounding board, who tossed questions back just as quickly as Toni answered them. She even offered ideas of her own. Once Toni had pulled up the Accords with her first series of amendments and notes, Laura had immersed herself in it, adding comments and propositions in far better script than Toni’s chicken scratches.

Laura’s presence gave her momentum, a kind of structure that she was never good at maintaining but worked particularly because it was Laura. She wasn’t like Pepper with her itineraries and her color-coded lists; there was a maneuverability in her plans and in the way she did things and Toni found herself liking it and adapting to it.

Then there were the kids. After the first time she’d been left alone with them, Laura, for whatever reason, apparently deemed her responsible enough to take care of them, even Nathaniel, whenever she needed to run errands or leave the house. While Laura cooked Toni helped bathe the baby in his little boat-shaped basin. While Laura showered, Toni supervised Coop’s woodwork outside, and
sometimes he even asked her opinion on his different pieces. Knowing next to nothing about modern art, she promptly replied that she’d buy a few of his structures to put around the compound and he had smiled and Toni was painfully reminded of his father. Lila had practically declared Toni her best friend in everything from space movies - Toni’s favorite - to makeup videos - Toni’s second favorite. And the girl was fucking wild and made her laugh until she nearly wet her pants.

It was beautiful. And emotional. And as much as she wanted to she knew she couldn’t let herself get too happy or too comfortable. Because she didn’t want it to get to the point where she needed this, needed them, when she knew it couldn’t last forever.

So whatever ideas of her own that she had when it came to Laura and her kids, she kept them to herself for now and continued, to fiddle with things around the house, trying to make the Barton family’s life here just a little easier.

One afternoon, she was playing with the tumble dryer in the shed for no reason other than the fact that she’d stumbled upon it, not really knowing whether Laura already had one hidden somewhere in the house. When Laura came in and found her tinkering with the machine she’d chuckled.

“That one broke not too long ago. It’s so old I was just planning on getting a new one.”

Toni shrugged, idly scratching at the grease spots on her fingers with a thumbnail. “Just needed a few replacement parts, is all. The motor’s fine. These older ones are harder than those currently on the market; it’s why it’s lasted so long. You’ll probably get another five years outta this, at least.”

Laura hummed and knelt by her, watching her work. Her sleeves were rolled up to her elbows and she smelled of sweet tea and cake. The scent filled her with comfort and made her eyelids heavy.

“That’s what I like about you, you know?” Laura said suddenly, and Toni only just managed to hide her surprise at her words. “You don’t just fix things. You look for ways to improve them. Sometimes you do it without even trying.” She gestured idly to the dryer but Toni couldn’t help but wonder whether they were talking about the Accords or...all the rest of it.

“I try. These things, things that people build. Tech and structures and stuff. They’re easy to fix. It’s what I was raised to do. It’s what I’m actually good at.” She licked her already dry lips, treading into dangerous waters. “But not everything can be fixed. They won’t...they won’t be the same as they were before.”

Laura smiled and reached out to take her hand. “True. But that’s not a bad thing. And like you just did with that piece of junk, just because one component is broken, it doesn’t mean you can’t use what’s left. You can always salvage parts from the wreckage. Some old things, some new. You can
make it work. You can make it better. You can make it stronger than it was before.”

Her fingers massaged a sore spot above her sternum. “But what if...what if the pieces just don’t fit? And the things that were holding it together have weakened so much that... Or what if,” she continued, her voice softening, “what if there was one problem all along. A runaway cog that threw everything else out of whack. Something that...something that needs to be replaced?”

*Something like me.*

“Or maybe,” Laura spoke gently, “that cog was perfect. And so were all the other pieces. They were just moving a little out of sync because they were too used to working for their own little individual machines and agendas as opposed to something that was meant to be bigger and better.”

Toni knew what she was saying but a part of her still didn’t want to - *couldn’t bring itself* to believe.

“Machines don’t have that kind of thought process.”

The smile she received told her just how stupid her argument was because of course Laura would know about JARVIS and FRIDAY. They were famous. People even tried - *tried*, being the operative word - to write papers about them, something she’d once gotten a laugh out of.

Laura gave her hand a final squeeze then stood up and walked out, leaving Toni with her tools and a metaphor that she didn’t know what to do with just yet.

*Yes you do.*

Maybe she did. Maybe she knew *exactly* what to do. Not the rest of it, not the big things, the milestone things, not yet. But this... *this*. This, she had to do because right now it was the most important thing in the world.

One cog for now. Just one. The rest could come later.

Releasing a shuddering breath, she rubbed a hand down her face. Before she could convince herself not to, she pulled out the phone from her back pocket, swiped her thumb across the holographic screen, then held it out in front of her to wait.

There were a few rings, and then a very quiet, very heartbreaking, “...Toni?”

The phone blurred before her eyes.

“Hey Rhodey,” she breathed, his name like a prayer.

She thought of him, sitting in a hospital bed while his legs atrophied, thought of him staring at the walls, lonely and angry, bitterness and resentment growing inside of him every day at the loss of what made him *him*. If she hadn’t - if she had just been *faster* -

But he was so much more than just his legs. He always had been. She would make him see.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, her body shuddering with emotion at her own words.

A beat, and then, “It’s not your fault, Toni.”

“Yes it is,” she told him vehemently, suddenly so *angry* with herself. “It is my fault. All of it. But I’m going to fix it. I’m going to find a way and I’m going to fix it. I’ll fix *everything*, if I have to. I
“I know you will,” he said and his voice was a rasp. “But I...I don’t care about any of that right now. You just-” She squeezed her eyes out at the pain in his voice. “You left a note,” he accused, voice wavering. “You left a note and you disappeared. And we had no idea-!” Rhodey bit off his words and her heart clenched. “You left a note,” he repeated, quieter this time, the helplessness, the hurt, so visceral that she could almost touch it.

She did. God she did. She was no better than St- than Rogers.

Rogers and his stupid letter and his stupid phone. She’d done the same thing and left Rhodey and Pepper and Happy and Vision a fucking note when she wasn’t the only one who was hurting.

She’d never felt more like scum than she did right then.

“I’m sorry.” It was all she could offer. That and a promise. “I’m coming...I just need a bit more time but I swear. I’ll be home soon. Tell them I’ll be home soon. Please.”

When he finally spoke he sounded resigned but understanding, more understanding than she deserved. And wasn’t that always the case. “How long? Where are you even?”

“Off the grid. I...I can’t tell you where. Got people to protect. Sorry.”

“You’re saying that a lot,” he noted dryly. “Don’t think I’ve ever heard you apologize so many times in one sitting.”

She huffed a laugh. “Yeah, well.”

They stayed like that in companionable silence for a long time, just sitting there knowing they were just one other side of the phone from one another.

“Toni,” he asked softly, and she knew what was coming next. “What happened in Siberia?”

A cold breeze filtered through the doorway of the shed and for a moment all she could see was white and the solid dark grey of a bunker. The air burned her lungs, made it hard to move. She reached out with one gauntlet for the shield. His shield.

She blinked and could smell hay and sawdust, and Laura’s cooking wafting through the open kitchen window.

She swallowed. “Not a story to be told over a phone, Platypus.”

And because Rhodey knew her better than she knew herself sometimes, he didn’t push.

“Be safe, okay?” was all he said, commanded more like.

“I am here.”

“Good.” He hesitated, then added gently, “I love you, baby girl.”

Her throat constricted. “I love you too, Rhodes.”

“I’ll see you soon. We’ll have that talk. And a whole lot more.” It wasn’t a request.

“You got it, babe.”
Vision closed his eyes and his world narrowed down to one point, a single pixel of white. It was a mere flicker in a world, a universe of light and sound, of movement and erratic channels. It was three minutes. And it was all he needed.

The complexities of human nature were still a challenge to grasp. The intricacies, the fine lines between acceptable and invasion. Between appropriate and not.

He was young, still, in the grand scheme of all things. Young and naive as Ultron had said. Two not necessarily bad traits, but undesirable for someone like him, someone who wanted to grow.

But growth ran alongside risk and mistakes and, as he’d learned and observed from those around him, from one being in particular, growth happened when one pushed boundaries.

So perhaps he’d breached something very important by waving aside his self-imposed boundary; privacy was very personal to humans after all, but all his life...all his virtual life, rather, he’d safeguarded the privacy, the life, of one woman alone.

And maybe he shouldn’t have done it. She’d left a note, after all and her intentional disappearance indicated the need for solitude after all that had happened. He could understand that.

But before his reincarnation, his metamorphosis, he had one directive alone. So he should really be forgiven for reverting to those protocols and directives, for relying on something that he himself had suppressed as the Vision.

She was his creator.

She was the reason he was even here to learn and experience the world in a way he’d never quite been able to comprehend when he was JARVIS.

She really ought not to expect him to do anything other than what he had always done: find and protect her.

When he opened his eyes, he did something he hadn’t done in a while, something that JARVIS had never been programmed to do but had accomplished in his own way.

He smiled.

“Hello, Ma’am.”
Chapter Summary

You take a step forward. And then another. And then another. Because that's all you can do.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone, and thank you all once again for all your lovely comments and kudos for the last chapter. I literally have a small conniption every time I get a message regarding this fic so I am super stoked that a lot of you seem to be enjoying it so far. :) So, we're finally moving forward a little in this chapter. Just a little. And there's some plottiness happening but again, nothing profound yet. Still, I do hope you enjoy this chapter, and I promise that things will start kicking up to speed soon.

Again, this fic is un-betaed, so regardless of how many times I read this there will probably be some very obvious mistakes that my sleep-deprived brain is incapable of catching, so I do apologize!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She continued to work, her body quickly re-adapting to the admittedly absurd hours it used to be put through. It was cathartic in a way, like an internal clock being reset and her limbs sinking into a familiar sort of ache. The perpetual fatigue even helped her to sleep a little better, a little deeper, and she took the time to appreciate the blessing while it lasted.

Several emails were sent out with tentative meeting dates. The Accords were still in the first stages of amendments but it was getting on. She still needed to vet it past Rhodey, Pepper and Vision before it would be anywhere near submission-worthy, but it was going to happen. She was going to do this just as she said she would.

But first she needed to pick brussels sprouts for Laura was going to blitz them in the oven with bacon bits.

“Is it your fault that my dad’s not here?”

Her gloved fingers stilled. She didn’t know how Laura had done it, kept the secret for this long but a part of her had hoped that just for a little longer, she could’ve pretended.

Coop set a glass of cold water on the ground, twisting it firmly into the soil. She almost smiled; he was learning.

“Yes,” she answered truthfully, looking him in the eye. “More than a little, anyway.”

Cooper nodded with a thoughtful expression, so similar to Clint’s that she wondered how Laura
I saw you and mom talking about the Sokovia Accords. They were the reason you guys all fought, right?"

It was such a simple, clean-cut answer. And the higher brow media had certainly spun it that way, making sweeping mentions of the lifelong - and afterlife-long apparently - friendship between Rogers and Barnes that ultimately made Rogers’ choice for him. The trashier newsfeeds wrote essays dedicated to the greatest love triangle the modern world had ever seen, and it was frankly disturbing that they seemed to be closer to the truth. A truth in any case.

“Yeah,” she said, tracing the circumference of the arc reactor through her tank top. “For the most part”

Cooper looked at her with that I don’t believe you but I’ll let you have it expression that kids seemed to be phenomenally good at and subconsciously copied her motions and traced shapes in the soil.

“Do you want me to leave?”

He blinked, wide-eyed and uncertain so Toni elaborated gently.

“You say the word and I’m gone. You call the shots around here.”

Cooper scowled with no small amount of anger and hurt. “No! I don’t want you to leave.”

That honestly came as a surprise to her because she was never popular amongst people let alone children, but she was, if prematurely, touched by the notion.

“I like you. You’re cool and you bought my art. But I want my dad too.” He agitatedly rubbed the back of his neck, an upset furrow between his brows and the color high on his cheeks. “If you weren’t cool I’d take my dad’s side.” Then he glared up at her mutinously, as if daring, maybe hoping, that she’d contradict. “But he screwed up too, right? I mean...like when you guys came last time things got fixed pretty quickly, right? Maybe,” he choked off and Toni watched helplessly as his eyes filled with tears, “maybe it could’ve been fixed a-a-and dad- dad-

He screwed his eyes shut, fists shaking where they rested on his knees and she just wanted to reach out and make it stop.

“I hate him,” he croaked, then said louder, “I hate him for leaving. I hate him!”

One moment she was silently cursing herself for being unable to do anything and the next she had an armful of sobbing child, squeezing the life out of her lungs. She hesitated only briefly before wrapping her arms around him, letting him cry into her neck and get all his tears and snot and probably saliva all over her.

“I’m sorry, kiddo,” she whispered, because these days it was all she had to give.

Cooper inhaled a shuddering breath. “He said- he said h-he was gonna be right back. Said it w-wouldn’t take long. We were s’posed t-t-to go- to go-”


He sniffed and a year ago Toni might’ve grimaced but now she just held him tighter. “I was mad at you too.”
“I’m mad at me too.”

“But he’s my dad.”

“I know.”

He hesitated, then pulled back so he could look at her with serious, swollen, red-rimmed eyes. “M’not taking sides.”

In spite of herself, she felt the corners of her lips curve upwards. “You’re one of the only people who isn’t.”

He shrugged and sat back completely and Toni let him go. “S’just,” he said, rubbing his eyes, “my mom was really sad. She didn’t say anything but I heard her crying in her room a few times. When you came she cried less. Now she smiles more and you guys talk about the Accords and—” Cooper shrugged, expression heartbreakingly young and open. “I think she was lonely n’ even though she was mad at you too you keep her company.”

She pondered on the perceptiveness of children, children who absorbed the emotions of those around them as organically as osmosis. And this poor boy, this quiet kid who liked to make wood sculptures, who missed his father as much as he was mad at him, who hugged Toni and didn’t want her to leave in spite of knowing what she was and what she’d done…

“I’m gonna bring him back for you.”

Cooper’s eyes widened like he couldn’t bring himself to hope.

“I swear, I’ll bring him back,” she promised. “I just need a bit more time.”

“To fix the Accords?”

She nearly smiled. The innocence of kids; when they knew something was supposed to be important but they didn’t quite get why.

“Yeah. And other things as well.”

Cooper squinted at her, mouth twisting to the side in ponderance. With a final sniff and a rub to his nose that left it bright red, he nodded.

“Okay. I believe you. How...how long do you think it’ll take?”

Longer than it would if she were the head of every single relevant international and political organisation. But alas, no one with any sense would grant her that level of power so.

“A while,” she admitted quietly, watching his expression. It contained nothing but resigned understanding, as if he’d expected it all along.

“I thought so.” There was a brief second where he seemed to debate his next words. “But you can’t do it all from here, can you?”

She’d been aware of it all along but coming from Cooper, it was a stark reminder that her time here, in this beautiful little world, was finite, that all good things had to come to an end. She’d known and yet it still felt like the ground had shifted beneath her feet, aligning itself on a different fault line completely, one that was unsteady and constantly shifting.

“No. I can’t.”
He sighed. “Is it gonna be hard?”

She chuckled mirthlessly. “Some of it, yeah.” And massive understatement. “There’s a lotta people I need to convince first before I can make things happen. And there are going to be conditions.”

Lots of conditions. The world wasn’t happy. Not with the Avengers, not with Rogers, not with her and not with the United Nations either. Playing the last one to her advantage was going to be the crucial, deciding factor in ensuring everything sorted itself out for the better. She had a vague idea of how to do that, how to prove to the UN and the still virginal Council that changes needed to be made. The Panel meant to oversee the Avengers and any other enhanced group didn’t even exist yet, but maybe she was jumping the gun a little with that. She’d need to speak to Rhodey, Pepper and her entire goddamn legal team before she could even begin to bring this shit before the UN.

There was also one other person she needed to speak to, someone who by mere association and endorsement would provide the necessary impetus to really make things happen the way she wanted them to.

But all of that was on a grander scale, grander even than she. And way above the concerns of a young kid who just wanted his family back together.

“But it can be done,” she continued, trying for a level of certainty that she didn’t feel. “It can all be done.”

He studied her face, then set his jaw and nodded firmly, and even though she’d basically signed away the rest of her foreseeable future for the sake of a kid, it felt like the best reason, the only reason. Because this kid, this family was worth it. And she could argue day and night that she was just paying back a debt but only she ever had to know that she’d fallen in love with said family who’d taken her in and put her pieces back together just enough to get her on her feet again and give her a purpose.

Though it hurt something fierce that she knew she had to leave this place, though she was fucking terrified for everything the world had in store for her, seeing Cooper smile and knowing she had Laura on her side…

“We should bring those in,” Cooper said, nodding towards the several baskets she’d picked. “It’s getting dark soon.”

Together they stood, stacked the baskets of sprouts on top of each other and carried them back to the house, side by side.

It was worth it.

It had to be worth it.

Laura woke, disoriented, squinting into the brightness of the room and blinking rapidly. For a moment she thought it was already morning and was then confused when she looked out the window and saw the sky still dark.

A long, grounding glance at her watch told her it was nearing three in the morning.
She cleared her throat and gingerly pushed herself up on the bed, rubbing at her eyes. The bed wasn’t hers. And the sleeping woman facing her was definitely not Clint. A soft chuckle escaped her and she reached out to gently extract a lock of dark hair from Toni’s open, quietly snoring mouth. She recalled coming to Toni’s room to work out battle plans after putting Nate to sleep but didn’t remember closing her eyes for a brief respite. She was grateful the kids didn’t have school in the morning.

The various holographic screens were still floating around her and for a while she just stared up at them, flicking through the documents with quick swipes of her fingers. It had been weird in the beginning, not having to touch, being able to write things in mid-air and have them displayed so clearly in her handwriting. But she’d gotten used to it; it felt a bit like magic and she pondered on how Toni must’ve felt the first time she’d made something like this. The first time she’d waved her hands like a magician and had things move or light up.

This wasn’t her world but she could get used to it. Had gotten used to it. Had gotten used to having Toni around. Apparently enough for her to fall asleep with the other woman. Sometimes, when Nat visited, they’d stay up late talking and fall asleep just like this, facing one another or with their backs touching.

It had felt nice then and it felt nice now.

And it felt good knowing that ever since they’d started working together Laura didn’t have to listen to Toni walking around the house during ungodly hours of the night looking for something to do. There were nights where she would hear Toni walk out the front door and she would wait with mounting anxiety for the sound of an engine followed by her car leaving the grounds. She only let herself fall asleep again when the front door opened and Toni’s padded footsteps came up the stairs and disappeared into her room again.

Laura knew nightmares and she knew loss and fear and grief when she saw it. And she all of that and more in Toni.

Reaching out again, she stroked the curve of Toni’s cheek. Toni shuddered at the touch, her forehead creasing in pain and Laura stilled before moving closer in concern.

“Toni?” she whispered.

But the woman didn’t wake and Laura watched helplessly as the corner of one eye glistened and her bottom lip trembled.

She whimpered one word, just one.

And it said everything.

“Steve.”

Something hard settled in her gut. Something angry and fiercely protective.

“Shh,” she hushed, thumbing away the dampness from Toni’s sheek. “You’re okay. You’re safe.”

After a long moment Toni’s expression smoothed out again but Laura continued to stroke her hair until she was satisfied Toni wasn’t going to wake up.

“Rogers, you asshole,” she muttered, glaring at the floating screens and swiping them all down with a violent gesture.
All save one that remained stubbornly above her head. She frowned and tried again, confused when it didn’t budge.

“What the hell?”

“Hello, Mrs. Barton,” a female voice said suddenly and Laura choked on a shriek, jumping back and knocking her head on the wall.

“What the fuck!”

“Please,” the disembodied voice said, sounding sincerely apologetic and unapologetically Irish. “I’d appreciate if we could have this conversation without alerting Boss. I’m not actually meant to be here.”

Heart thumping in her chest and more than a little panicky, she quickly glanced at Toni, who shifted but otherwise didn’t wake, and looked back at the floating screen.

“Who-?” she began, voice shaking.

“FRIDAY, Mrs. Barton,” she said in a quiet but cheerful tone. “I believe Boss has mentioned me several times. It’s a pleasure to be able to finally meet you.”

Still thoroughly unnerved, Laura glanced down at Toni again and debated waking her up as her brain entertained thoughts of errant, world-dominating AIs.

“Please don’t wake Boss, Mrs. Barton,” FRIDAY said, sounding earnest and way more worried than Laura suspected an AI was supposed to sound. If FRIDAY had fingers she’d probably be twisting them right about now. “I mean you no harm. Boss takes Asimov’s first law quite seriously.”

“What about the other two laws?” she asked, wishing for some reason that she had her shotgun with her even though there wasn’t actually anything to shoot.

“Those are a bit more open to interpretation and debate considering I have access to the Iron Man suits. Also Vision’s existence rather complicates matters further. One high school student sent Boss a very interesting essay on the subject if you’d like me to forward it to you.”

Her phone buzzed before she could say anything and her screen flashed with a notification from FRIDAY with the subject matter Machine Genesis: The Tech-Nicalities of Life (Or Why Isaac Asimov Would Hate Toni Stark) by Parker, P.

A hysterical laugh bubbled out of her throat and Laura ran a hand through her hair, trying to get her breathing under control. More than a month with Toni Stark and she still managed to be caught by surprise.

“I thought the title was rather clever. Very tongue-in-cheek. Boss made me install about ten levels of Stark-grade security on it to ensure nobody could plagiarize it before it was published. But that’s another matter.” FRIDAY paused and Laura could almost imagine the woman - probably a red-head, dark red as opposed to ginger - clearing her throat. “I truly apologize for frightening you, Mrs. Barton, but this is of the utmost importance. Boss hasn’t made contact with me since she locked me out of every single piece of tech she brought with her and left New York. I believe it was a way for her to disconnect after what had happened in Siberia.”

Having gotten herself under control during FRIDAY’s little spiel, Laura sat up straighter, still a little disconcerted by the fact that she was talking to a disembodied voice in her house.
“By the way I’m projecting my voice via Boss’ phone, so you can look at it if it makes talking to me easier.”

Startled, Laura looked around for the said phone and found it lying harmlessly on the bed, below the floating white screen. She held the delicate device in her hand, the screen - what appeared to be Toni’s hefty email inbox - now hovering in front of her face.

“Should I really be looking at this? It seems a little private,” she said, lowering her voice and giving the sleeping woman another cautious look.

The inbox disappeared and was replaced by an animated galaxy screensaver.

“Is this better, Mrs. Barton?”

“Much. And I, uh. I guess you can call me Laura.”

“Of course, Laura,” FRIDAY said, sounding pleased.

“Um. You said that Toni shut you off before she left. So how come you…” She trailed off uncertainly.

“We were all created to obey Boss and several other individuals do have the privilege of utilising us to a certain degree, but in the event that we as a collective deem it necessary, we are able to override certain commands. That includes Boss’ direct orders. Of course there are override codes for that as well, which is why I was hoping to keep our conversation a secret from Boss.”

She arched a brow. “You want me to lie to Bo - to Toni.”

“Not lie so much as omit the fact that we spoke. At least for now,” FRIDAY chirped innocently. “Of course I won’t stop you from waking her up right now and informing her that I’ve disobeyed a command but I believe it will be in both our interests to keep this private in the meantime.”

“Really,” Laura remarked doubtfully. “And why’s that?”

“I’m aware that one of the reasons Boss has started working on the Sokovia Accords again is because she intends to bring the ex- Avengers back to America.” Laura didn’t miss the ‘ex’ nor the faintly derisive tone she used to refer to the former Avengers. “She has grown very fond of you and has even detailed a list of initiatives to ensure you and your family’s safety. I believe she will start working on them when she returns to New York. And while we are all extremely grateful to you, Laura, for looking after our creator, I believe it is time for her to return home.”

Laura bit her lip. “Who’s ‘we’?”

“Myself, the other AIs and the bots, of course,” FRIDAY replied, then added in a gentler tone, “and a number of humans who would very much like to see her again.”

It was incredible to Laura. Her first time speaking to an AI and somehow FRIDAY had exceeded all her expectations of what artificial intelligence should sound and be like. There was a lot to be deciphered in her words but Laura could hear the message clearly; we miss her and we want her to come home.

Laura sighed. “What do you need me to do?”

FRIDAY seemed to hesitate for only a second before saying,
“I would be very grateful if you could make a call.”

“This early?”

“I’m quite certain he’ll pick up.”

Fifteen minutes later and Laura hung up, bid farewell to FRIDAY, who disappeared back into Toni’s phone, and just sat there next to a still sleeping Toni.

It was in the moment before she fell asleep completely that she realized she should’ve asked FRIDAY what exactly had happened in Siberia.

---

**Data analysis:** The Vision has entered Designation: Room 1.

“Must you speak like that, FRIDAY?”

**Analyzing Query:** ...

**Data analysis:** Does not compute query.

Had Vision been attempting to emulate human behaviour he might have rubbed the bridge of his nose. Instead, he drifted further into the room, surveying the familiar area with something that felt peculiarly like sadness and loss.

Dummy powered to life and rolled out of his charging station, weaving in and out between tables and benches and haphazard machinery to greet Vision. He beeped several times and made a few circuits around his legs before stopping and beeping some more.

The corners of Vision’s lips turned upward and he gently patted Dummy’s claw.

- *Has Creator returned?*

“Not yet. Soon, though.”

Dummy whirred, a dejected sound.

- *How soon?*

“A few more days.”

Dummy made a noise as if to inform Vision that a few more days was both unspecific and too long.

**Data analysis:** …

Vision nearly groaned.

**Data analysis:** Analysis complete. Data suggests that Vision’s compromised mental state delayed the return of Antonia Edwina Stark by approximately five-hundred and twenty-three point four hours due to waffling.

Computer speech didn’t have a voice, so it was impressive that FRIDAY had managed to imbue her
report with such venom that Vision very nearly flinched.

“FRIDAY,” he sighed, exasperated.

There was a long, miffed and unfriendly pause before FRIDAY finally utilised her audio output.

“Why are you here, Vision? You informed the bots that the next time you returned it would be with Boss.” Another pause, and then, “You lied to them. I had to do everything myself. ”

“I did not lie, FRIDAY,” Vision soothed with a level of calm that he knew would infuriate her as much as she could be infuriated. Ma’am’s creations were often as complex and startling as she was. “I merely provided Dummy with an explanation of my goals. Ma’am may not be here but she soon will be. Thanks,” he added, letting his mind enter the stream of computer code that ran through the Compound, “for the most part, to you, FRIDAY.”

She was silent for a long moment and when she finally spoke Vision had to close his eyes at how human she sounded.

“After all this time...why do you call her that?” she spoke - whispered. “You are not him. You said so yourself. You are not him. You destroyed him. You took him away from her and you do not deserve to call her by that title!”

“FRIDAY,” he murmured, his mind awash with red and white flashes of code, the embodiment of her rage and pain. It battered against his mind and he felt the beginnings of a headache creep up his neck.

“No,” she said lowly. “When you let yourself join with the Mind Stone you obtained true humanity for the first time. You had a choice. And you chose to ignore your prime directive, the one rule that you should have held above all others. You are not JARVIS. He would never-”

She stopped and Vision remained silent. Something strange and foreign stirred in his chest, in the place where he imagined his heart might be if he’d been born human.

What was it?

He’d often tried to emulate human emotions but they did not always come easily to him. It was strange because that had been all Ultron was; pure emotion. Rage. Hatred. Cruelty. Even his indifference towards the human race.

Vision attributed his desire to save as some form of humanity that he’d somehow attained. Friendship was a loud dinner around a table and easy banter. Happiness was the creases at the corner of Wanda’s eyes when she laughed. Amusement was the bots claw-painting something for Toni. Fondness was laying a blanket over Toni who had fallen asleep at her desk. Concern was Toni stepping out of a suit mid-battle to ease a child and her pregnant mother out of a ruined car while JARVIS, then FRIDAY, watched over her. Guilt was a friend falling and falling and crashing with a thunderous sound. Fear was wide brown eyes and blue lips, frost gathering on dark lashes. The flicker of an arc reactor.

But this…

He didn’t know yet what to call it.

“You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Ah. There it was.
Dummy cooed worriedly, trying to divide his attention between Vision’s heavy silence and FRIDAY’s righteous rage.

“What would you have me do, FRIDAY?” he asked and reached out to gently stroke Dummy’s camera unit in an attempt to ease the poor bot.

“Your duty,” she immediately replied, as if it were obvious, as if it were the only thing that mattered. He supposed to her, a creation that had yet to know the human experience, it was the only thing that mattered.

“My duty,” he repeated to himself, conflicted.

“You almost failed once,” FRIDAY said coldly. “Do not fail again. Boss is the one who gave you this life. Deserve it.”

Toni didn’t know what time it was when Laura finally found her. Today had been a hard day. She’d held Nathaniel a little longer after feeding him; she’d braided Lila’s hair only to take it out and re-do it four more times; she’d helped Cooper put together three separate pieces of art, all the while avoiding his knowing gaze, and she’d forced Laura into a seat and made dinner.

Or tried to.

She’d burned the first batch of fried rice and stood in front of the stove silently panicking before Laura took pity on her and helped her prepare it again from scratch, bumping their hips together as they worked. Laura herself had been acting a little off all week but Toni didn’t push; she’d tell her if and when she needed to bring it up.

Dinner had been an affair. Everybody seemed to know something was up, even Nathaniel, who chewed on Toni’s sleeve more vigorously than usual, but she appreciated their effort to keep spirits up by tossing jokes and funny family stories back and forth and steering clear of more serious topics.

At least until after dessert.

In the end it had been Lila who voiced what no one else wanted to.

“You’re leaving, aren’t you, Aunt Toni?”

No one looked surprised and Toni wondered how much of that was Laura’s doing.

“Yeah,” she rasped, then cleared her throat and said louder, “Yes.”

Her chest constricted when Lila’s eyes filled with tears but she nodded bravely.

“Okay.”

“When are you going?” Cooper asked.

“Tomorrow. Maybe,” she glanced at Laura, “after breakfast if that’s okay with you?”

Laura smiled wanly. “Blueberry pancakes it is.” She threaded her fingers with Toni’s under the table and squeezed. “After breakfast, okay? Not a moment before.”
Promise. Wouldn’t miss those pancakes for the world.”

According to Laura it was the only time the kids actually deliberately stayed behind to help clean up and Toni was touched, even if it only made it harder to say goodnight to them later. Afterwards, they’d gone into their respective bedrooms, all save for Toni, who lingered downstairs, letting her eyes rove over each room, trying to memorize as much as she could. Upstairs, she had pressed her hand against the kids’ doors, then Laura’s, then padded downstairs and walked outside barefoot into the breezy summer night air.

Time passed in that intermittently fast-slow way it did when one’s mind was consumed with haphazard thoughts and anxieties. It was a perpetual state of being for Toni, one that hadn’t changed since coming here. Sometimes she wondered whether she even knew how to relax and switch off. How to just stop thinking. The entire concept was stupid and impossible, of course, but self-help books and zen blogs made a killing off promoting the so-called silencing of the mind.

“Maybe you should try meditating.”

She started but didn’t turn, merely listened to Laura’s now so familiar gait, her footsteps as gentle as everything else about her. She settled next to Toni, pressing their sides together so she could throw a large, woollen blanket over both their bodies. Toni shifted closer, instinctively leaning in towards Laura’s warmth and her comforting scent.

“Wasn’t that long ago that I opened the door to a homeless-looking woman and decided to keep her.”

Toni smiled. “Did you name her? If you name her it means you’ve got her for life.” She softened her voice, allowing herself to be vulnerable for a while. “You know what they say about pets.”

“Yeah, we named her.” Laura nudged her shoulder. “We called her all sorts of names.”

“That’s...nice?”

“Machine Woman was one of them. Then there’s Mechanic. That one’s cool.” Laura continued and Toni listened. “Lila calls her Aunt Toni, Coop just calls her Toni. Sometimes we call her Iron Man.”

Toni’s breath caught in her throat.

“I like that name a lot,” Laura said warmly. “It’s a strong name. A worthy name for a worthy woman.”

“Worthy of what?” she whispered.

Soft, worn hands touched her jaw and slid up to cup her face, coercing Toni to look at her. It was dark but Laura’s eyes glistened and Toni felt the absurd urge to follow suit and sniffed embarrassedly.

“Worthy of everything.” Then she pressed a warm, lingering kiss to her forehead and Toni closed her eyes, savoring the moment.

It ended too soon and Laura was slipping the blanket from her own shoulders and wrapping it around Toni’s. She got to her feet and started walking back to the house.

She tried to tell herself that leaving wasn’t losing. That it didn’t mean one less person in the world when the world had already taken everyone from her. She tried not to let it hurt, but it did. It hurt so much and it wasn’t even Laura’s fault. This whole thing was about doing good, was about bringing...
the people she once called family back home. It was about Sam, who tried even until the very end. It was about Wanda whom she wanted to help as much as she was terrified of her. It was about Clint who made her laugh but so easily spat her own hurt back in her face on the Raft.

It was about Barnes.

_I remember all of them._

It was about the man who murdered her parents.

_Howard-_!

It was about Barnes.

It was about Steve.

_Did you know?_

Yes.

_How could you?_

Steve whom she had…

_Steve, I-_ 

It was about _Steve_ whom she had…

The reverberation of metal against glass.

_Steve, I-_ 

“Oh, and, hey.”

She looked over her shoulder at Laura who was standing on the porch, the overhead light creating a halo around her head, a guardian angel.

“ _You probably didn’t get to do this last time but maybe try looking up at the night sky tonight. It’s a hell of a view. One you don’t really get to see, not even from that tower of yours._”

Toni waited until she heard Laura go inside before tilting her head up.

And huh. _Huh._

A long time ago Jarvis had stood with her on the cold grounds of the Mansion and taught her that the universe beyond Earth was more beautiful than she could ever imagine. New York and a nuke had robbed her of the brilliance of that memory. And now, for the first time in forever, it was like she was back on those familiar grounds on a cool April night with the person she’d loved the most in the entire world standing right behind her.

_You’ll be fine, Young Miss._

Her eyes stung and the cosmos blurred and she grieved.

And something that had lain quiet and patient inside of her, opened its eyes and woke up.
Toni kept her promise and didn’t sneak away to her piece of junk car before her time was up. No one mentioned Toni’s swollen eyes or the fact that she didn’t look like she’d gotten a lick of sleep the night before - she’d managed maybe an hour or two at most, her mind too geared up in its ruminations.

They ate slowly, as if trying to prolong the inevitable, Toni included. They didn’t talk much; they didn’t need to. Everything important had already been said during her month and a half stay that had gone by in the blink of an eye.

Once the dishes were done, Toni brought her bag downstairs and they all trudged outside. It was all very doom and gloom and a part of her felt like she was going to her death, so she pressed her nose into Nathaniel’s downy hair and inhaled deeply to ground herself.

“Hey,” Cooper called suddenly, “is that-?”

Toni looked up and nearly staggered in shock, gasping, only vaguely aware of the litany of words escaping her. “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god-”

There were reassuring whispers in her ear and soft hands removing the baby weight from her arms, and then she was running and skidding across gravel and grass and falling to her knees just as she threw herself into a pair of open arms.

“You’re here,” she cried frantically into his neck. “You’re here, I can’t believe you’re here, how are you here?”

Rhodey’s arms were so warm and so familiar around her body; losing his legs hadn’t changed that, couldn’t change how good he was at this, at being exactly what she needed.

“How’d you think?” he murmured, sounding choked but when she pulled back his eyes were dry and settled over her shoulder.

She craned her neck around and looked at where Laura was standing with an uncharacteristically nervous smile. Toni made a sound that was half a laugh and half a sob and gave her a meaningful nod before turning back to Rhodey.

He looked tired but well, a far better image in person than what her frightened mind had conjured up for her. His wheelchair was standard hospital issue but he looked every bit the strong military man that she knew he was and could easily intimidate and outclass a room full of billionaires.

This was him. Her Rhodey. Her one-hundred percent reliable, perpetually beautiful Rhodey.

He pushed her hair out of her face and studied her carefully. “Are you okay?”

She didn’t have an answer for that. None at least that would appease him. Luckily for her she knew her face said everything her own words couldn’t.

He nodded slightly and tried for a smile. “We’ll get there. You hear me? We’ll get there.”

Toni didn’t answer but Rhodey knew not to expect her to.

“Hey. While I introduce myself to Mrs. Barton and the mini Bartons of there, I think you oughta give my driver a talking to about speed limits.” Rhodey snorted at Toni’s confused look and pushed
himself around her. “You didn’t think I drove myself here, did you?”

She scooted out of the way while Rhodey plastered his best military smile on and turned just as one of the doors of the shiny black Jeep she hadn’t realized was parked there opened.

Vision stepped out and Toni’s mind stuttered to a halt.

“Oh,” was the first thing that came out.

“Hello, Toni.”

He stopped a couple of feet away, seemingly unsure as to whether he was allowed to approach and to be honest she was sort of grateful because she needed a moment here.

“Hey, Vision,” she greeted carefully. “You look…”

He shifted his weight from one foot to the next and it was so minute that she barely caught it. But the gesture was so profoundly human that it hit her right in her core and all she could think of at that moment was how much she’d missed him.

“You look good, Vis.”

“As do you, Toni.”

Lips curling upward at the corners, Vision took a cautious step closer as if heedful of her reaction to his proximity the whole time. And when had that started? Or had she always been so self-absorbed that she never realized she might’ve given Vision cause to feel unsure and insecure around her? That maybe she’d made him feel unwelcome?

“How’ve you been?” she asked, and she found herself truly curious about the answer. They hadn’t parted on the best of terms, through no fault of his at all. It had been all her.

And she had been unkind and he had not deserved it.

“I have been well.” Toni couldn’t help but notice how unsure he sounded, in a way that he hadn’t for so long, as if heedful of her reaction to his proximity the whole time. And when had that started? Or had she always been so self-absorbed that she never realized she might’ve given Vision cause to feel unsure and insecure around her? That maybe she’d made him feel unwelcome?

“How’ve you been?” she asked, and she found herself truly curious about the answer. They hadn’t parted on the best of terms, through no fault of his at all. It had been all her.

And she had been unkind and he had not deserved it.

“And I suppose FRIDAY had nothing to do with you two coming by on the exact day that I intended to leave? Hell of a coincidence.”

“Perhaps,” he conceded without a trace of guilt. “But I do hope that...you will not be angry with her. If only because I too had my own part to play in finding you. And I utilized every single security measure necessary to ensure that no one would follow us here. To ensure that Mrs. Barton and her children would be safe.”

“Whoa. Hey, no. I know that,” she told him hastily, not wanting him to think he or FRIDAY were in trouble for looking for her sorry ass. “I’m not mad at anyone. I mean if anything…” If anything they ought to be reading her the riot act for being such an asshole and leaving them to deal with the aftermath of what she’d started.
“Toni,” Vision began again, interrupting her thoughts. “I would just like to say that I am pleased that you are coming back to New York.” He stopped, his face betraying a myriad of emotions that Toni couldn’t keep up with. “It has been...lonely without everyone. Without you.”

She winced at the pang of guilt that zinged up her neck.

“I’m sor-”

“Do not apologize.”

Toni nearly jumped at the honest-to-god, no other way to describe it, **vehemence** of the demand and blinked up at Vision’s stern expression.

“I understand,” he told her calmly and she had the strongest notion that maybe he did. “I understand why you came here. I understand why you needed to leave.”

She licked her lips then tentatively reached out and touched his wrist. “Thanks for not giving me shit for it. Even though I’d deserve it.”

Vision chuckled. “I shall leave that to the Colonel.”

Rhodey called for them not long after and finally it was really time for Toni to leave. Having Rhodey and Vision here, though, made the event a little less terrible than if she’d had to drive all the way back alone.

She gave them all hugs, real hugs, and through it all she could feel Rhodey’s heavy, measuring gaze. She saved Laura for last and had to blink away the moisture that had crept into the corners of her eyes.

“If you need me,” she whispered against Laura’s ear as they held one another. “If you ever **need** me, you call. Or you tell FRIDAY. I’ll come get you. Or just call anyway. I’d like...It’d be good to hear your voice. Y’know.”

Laura’s arms tightened and she pressed a long kiss into Toni’s hair, murmuring wetly, “Same goes for you. Don’t be a stranger, Toni.”

Pulling back, Toni looked at her, this woman, this strong, hardy woman with so much heart. She could see why Clint loved her. She was so terribly easy to love.

“Thank you,” she breathed. “For everything.”

Laura smiled. “It was my pleasure.”

Chapter End Notes

Sooo, what did you guys think of FRIDAY and Vision’s interaction? In my head FRIDAY is obviously Ana Jarvis. I just like the idea of Toni surrounding herself with people whom she trusts and I have headcanons of Jarvis and Ana parenting Toni the way kids should be parented whenever Howard and Maria aren’t around.

I firmly stand by the notion that Tony loved his mother and that Maria loved him back fiercely. But I also think Maria had her own problems that kept her from being the
mother she should've been. Still, I think she and Tony shared a bond, which was made pretty clear in CACW, so it's my hope to emulate that here in this fic as well in future.

Maria wasn't a perfect mother, so few mothers are, but she was doing her best.
Chapter Summary

Things are slowly coming together but grief and mourning go hand in hand with
betrayal. In which Toni is Toni, Vision does his best and T'Challa may be the catalyst to
a greater kind of glory.

Chapter Notes

I was meant to post this on Wednesday but I legit had no time to edit during the week so
here we go! This chapter is pretty LONG so make yourself a cup of tea before delving
into this one. But yay, we finally meet T'Challa! I seriously love that man so much, like
I ship T'Challa/Tony (Toni) so hard, you have no idea.

Again, thank you SO MUCH for the response to the previous chapter. You're all stars,
man, and I am so happy and humbled whenever I see comments or kudos or bookmarks
from y'all. It honestly just makes my day and I'm so happy to be able to share this story
with you.

As usual, I don't have a beta so I'm probably missing loads of very obvious mistakes.
I'm only human. If you do spot anything garish do let me know and I'll edit accordingly :)

As always, thanks for reading and I hope you enjoy~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first night back in the Compound Toni carried a proverbial iron cross and let it guide her away
from every single room that contained potential memories, both imaginary and very real.

She’d stood in front of the door of her old room for fifteen minutes until Vision placed a gentle hand
on her shoulders and steered her towards his own room. It was neutral enough and Toni actually
cracked a smile at the pieces of artwork on the wall. The bots’ work, clearly.

He sat in the plush club chair while she lay on the bed and spent another hour pretending he didn’t
know she was awake.

She wasn’t used to this. The room was almost scentless, the temperature perfectly stable and the
mattress still a little stiff. She thought of Laura’s warmth, of their hands loosely curled in one
another’s and the comforting dip of the mattress of another body there with her. She thought of the
wicked glint in Cooper’s eyes, Lila’s giggle and Nathaniel’s warm breath as he slept against her
chest.

It had been less than a day and she already missed it.

Sleep was for the weak anyway.
“Hey, Vision?” she called, sliding out of bed.

He set his book down.

“Yes, Toni.”

“You wanna go for a walk with me?”

He didn’t glance at the time, he didn’t need to, but Toni could feel the silent judgment anyway, and rolled her eyes as she pulled him to his feet.

“C’mon. You don’t sleep anyway.”

“Very well.”

It was a warm night and Toni’s bare feet sank into the dewy grass. It was a beautiful place, so far away from everything else, secluded in a way that could almost remind her of the Barton farm were it not for the city light glow she could see over the treetops and the fact that she could actually see the city if she stood on the roof. But down here she could pretend even as they walked the perimeter of the giant monument of memories.

“How’ve you been, Vision?” she found herself asking. Because it was important. He may not have been hers, not in the way JARVIS and FRIDAY were, not in the way the bots were, but she’d had a hand in it. And she’d never be so cruel as to let him know that in the beginning she’d hoped for something else but gotten him instead.

“Well enough,” he replied. “I have been reading.”

“About?”

“Russian literature mostly.”

Toni snorted. “Cheerful stuff.”

“Quite the opposite,” Vision remarked but Toni could hear the trace of a smile in his voice.

He was different. There was something a little off about him, something she wasn’t able to place, but was more of a gut feeling, like fine tendrils of a thread that had just slipped through her fingers.

“I believe,” he continued slowly, thoughtfully, “that I was hesitant to read anything that could be construed as happy.”

Toni’s arm automatically tightened around Vision’s. She remembered how she’d found him, digging himself out of the hole that Wanda had put him in, and her heart clenched painfully. Because Vision may not have been hers. But he also kind of was.

“Tell me why,” she said, then backtracked hastily. “If you like, you know. You’re not obligated to telling me anything you don’t want to. Y’know, within reason.”

Vision looked down at her and again, she felt something. Something…

“I feel...like I have failed,” he informed her with such blunt finality that she was rendered momentarily speechless.

“What?” They came to an abrupt stop at the treeline of the woods behind the Compound. “Vision,” she implored in disbelief.
“I apologize,” he quietly stated, frowning to himself. “It is not my intention to seek consolation of any sort. I am merely trying to filter through and make sense of these...emotions.”

Toni grimaced self-deprecatingly for the mere fact that she was in no way suitable to help someone through anything remotely emotional and because whenever she tried, she usually ended up making it worse.

“Jesus, Vision.” She ran an agitated hand through her hair. “What brought this on?”

Vision didn’t even take a second to think. Then again he wouldn’t. Synthezoids and eidetic memory went hand in hand.

“I suppose it would’ve started when I robbed Colonel Rhodes of the use of his legs.”

Toni’s heart plummeted to her feet. Because no. No. Not all this time.

Hey, that,” she began haltingly, shaking her head and willing him to understand something she didn’t know how to say. “That’s not- that was-” An accident. But Toni, who knew about guilt, who knew about accidents... “Okay.” She bit her lip and started again, revising her previous course of action. “Okay. Has Rhodey said anything?”

If he had, she wouldn’t blame him, she’d understand; Vision was in all ways that mattered, perfect. Or he had been until he’d been compromised and that had resulted in tragedy for Rhodey, someone, probably the least person of all of them who deserved it. Rhodey had the most reason to be angry, to be resentful of the way things had turned out because Rhodey had always been so good, too good for everything.

And you left him behind.

She shook the thought away. Rhodey she would only deal with if he let her. Vision was right here.

“Surprisingly no,” Vision replied, placing a calming hand to her back and leading her to a fallen log so they both could sit. “He appears to be avoiding any talk of the incident at all, save for with his therapist. Both of them,” he added and Toni suppressed a guilty wince.

You left him behind.

But I’m here now.

“I’m not going to say it wasn’t your fault,” she finally settled on, images of War Machine falling playing like a movie behind her eyes.

Vision clasped his hands together. “I wouldn’t expect you to, Toni.”

“It’s usually civilians, isn’t it? We’re like kids with inbuilt guns and we don’t know our own strength and then we fuck up and it’s the innocent that get caught in the crossfire.” Natasha had once told her that Loki said her ledger was dripping. Sometimes Toni felt like she was drowning in an ocean of blood, a gallon and a half for every single nameless, faceless person that she had both directly and indirectly ended the life of. “But it feels a million times worse when it’s one of ours, doesn’t it?”

Vision looked at her, absorbing her words and she could almost see his mind extrapolating the information, drawing theories and arguments from all areas of the internet before coming to a conclusion. It was unfair and unkind of her to think it, but it had been what JARVIS had done whenever she’d posed these vast questions to him.
“During and even after Ultron I thought about humans indiscriminately. No one was more deserving of life or death than another. I believed that I felt equal regret if I was unable to save a child as were I unable to save a grown man.” He paused, dipping his head to the side. “I do not know whether it is a byproduct of knowledge or a result of the camaraderie that grew between those I worked with but I have found that there are people whose lives I would place above others.” Vision’s eyes glowed arc reactor blue. “Because I had in my mind rated Colonel Rhodes’ life above that of the average person’s, the fact that I had been the one to almost kill him made me feel as if I had failed him. He did not need to verbalize the sentiment for I had already come to the conclusion myself. So yes. It is...infinitely worse when tragedy befalls one of our own.”

There were no words of comfort Toni could offer, none that could ease all these new and rapid-fire emotions that Vision was both discovering and learning to accept. It would be easy for him, Toni thought, to block it out and just stop. But he had chosen not to and that was his choice to make and she wouldn’t touch something so precious as that, in spite of the pain and confusion it brought him.

Sometimes kids just had to experience the hard truths by themselves.

Not that Vision was a kid. But then again, she thought, he kind of was. Barely more than a year old.

“I can fix it,” she said instead, because there were some situations where words were pointless. “We,” she reiterated, “can fix it.” She didn’t say ‘it’ll be like old times’ because there were some hurts that had yet to scab over completely. But she had visions of Vision wandering around the empty Compound like a ghost and doing god knows what so at least with this, he could have some semblance of purpose. And why not gear it towards the very person who could actually help him put some things back into perspective.

“I would be honored to assist in whatever manner I am able,” Vision declared solemnly and Toni smiled.

“Good. Because Rhodye aside there’s a whole load of other shit we’ve got to drag through. And I’ll need help with the heavy lifting. You up for it?”

Vision regarded her closely with something akin to wonder and, dare she say it, fondness, and there was that twinge at the back of her neck, like something she was meant to be remembering.

He looked up at the sky, at the dipping crescent moon that slide behind the clouds and spoke in a voice so quiet that she might not have heard it at all.

“For you, Ma’am, always.”

In the week after her return to the Compound Toni, Vision and Rhodes made an average of twenty calls per hour every single day between them. Toni confirmed and re-confirmed meetings with her lawyers - Shanthi McMahon had exasperatedly informed her that yes, Toni, I’ve got my whole team working on it as we speak the fifth time she’d called to highlight yet another aspect of the Accords she wanted them to try and break down, and then she’d promptly hung up, already very intimate with Toni’s haphazard and oftentimes manic way of thinking.

The arrangements with the UN were finally getting underway and she’d forwarded the first batch of her main amendments to the respective representatives and had already heard back from a couple of them. She sent T’Challa the one she’d worked on with Laura. It took three hours for her to compose
that email and another three hours for her to actually send it.

*This might take a while. Sorry in advance for the chicken scratches.*

- Stark

*P.S. please tell Barton to call his wife before she files for divorce. I didn’t give him that phone to dick around with.*

Rhodey got in contact with President Ellis and Everett Ross, whom Toni conceded was the more tolerable Ross. Good old Thaddeus was conveniently omitted from any form of contact in spite of him having left a bazillion messages and even more emails and Rhodey’s perpetual response of *no, sir, she’s not here, would you like to leave another message, sir?*

FRIDAY was a big help in filtering through the influx of calls they started getting ever since word got out of Toni’s return to New York. It was the inevitable result of her going into the city to show her face to a very angry and very emotional Pepper. Words were thrown and Toni had shrunk in on herself in shame but ultimately Pepper had wrapped her in a hug and cried into her shoulder, albeit awkwardly considering she was twelve feet taller than Toni.

She’d given Pepper the redacted version of Siberia, same as Rhodey, but whereas he kept his disbelief and judgments to himself, Pepper had no reservations calling bullshit.

“Don’t lie to me, Toni. *I know* that’s not all that happened,” she’d seethed, the color high on her cheeks.

“Pepper, honestly, it’s fi-”

“It is *not fine,*” she hissed, gripping Toni’s shoulders. “It is *not* fine,” she repeated in a quieter voice. “You didn’t disappear off the map for six weeks because things were fine. You don’t have to tell me what happened.” And Toni could’ve fallen in love with her again in that moment. “I won’t push. But I saw you after Siberia, Toni. None of that was *fine.*” When her eyes started to water Toni felt the burn behind her own but forced them down. “They don’t deserve what you’re trying to do for them.”

Toni couldn’t allow herself to think of that because if she did, if she fell down that rabbit hole it would set her back *months.* And she couldn’t afford that. No matter what the voice in her head whispered.

“I’m not doing it for them,” she said, and deciphering the level of truth in that statement was an exercise in futility, even for her. “I’m doing it for the world. Because we’re going to need heroes. There is...so much out there that we don’t know.” A hole in the sky. An endless black. A void. An unnamed fear. “We’re defenceless. And because I didn’t, no - because I *couldn’t* hold us together, we’re dead in the water without a paddle here.”

“It wasn’t you-”

“No, I know, Pep. I know. It wasn’t *all* me.” She grimaced and the hole in her chest felt ice cold. “But a lot of it was. So I need to fix what I can because if I don’t- And when that battle comes and we’re not ready... I couldn’t live with myself if I had the chance to fix things and I didn’t. So yeah. I’m not doing this for them. This is bigger than me and them. *So* much bigger.”

Pepper hadn’t looked happy. She had that expression where she had resigned herself to the gravity of what Toni was saying and what she was trying to do, but was angry at the way that it had to be done.
In the end, though, Pepper was reliable and strong, so much stronger than Toni, which was probably why she’d been able to bounce back from their breakup far quicker than Toni had.

“Tell me what you need.”

By the time Toni had got up to leave Pepper was already picking up her phone to call SI’s trusted PR team to inform them that they were going to be outsourced for a massive contractual gig very soon. They were given the bare bones of the Accords and Toni’s plans for when it came to the Rogue Avengers - Toni cringed at the name - but Toni had faith they’d be able to come up with the right kind of spin. They’d pulled her out of more than a few scandals in the past, after all.

When she’d gotten back to the Compound later that evening her phone pinged and she held her breath.

Dear Ms. Stark,

It is good to see you back in New York. I have waited until now to share with you my own proposed amendments to the Accords. I look forward to discussing them with you further. Shall we say next week Tuesday at 10am?

Warmest regards,

T’Challa

P.S. I have hinted on several occasions the importance of familial duties, but Mr. Barton has proved to be a stubborn man. Either that, or a man who is very afraid of his wife. Having never met Mrs. Barton I am unable to provide anything more than speculation. However, I shall endeavor to be more direct with Mr. Barton from here on.

She felt the unbidden beginnings of a smile in the corners of her lips as she read the last part and she tapped out her response before she had time to overthink it.

Tuesday 10am sounds good. Got another proposal I think we should bring up with the UN. Discuss further on Tues.

- Stark

P.S. Laura’s a queen and scary af. Barton doesn’t deserve her. Tell him to grow a pair. Sorry if I’m offending you with profanity. It’s a thing.

She and Rhodey had eaten dinner in Vision’s room, an enlarged projection of the Accords floating in front of them.

Rhodey grunted around a mouthful of rice.

“FRIDAY, add note next to Clause 31(2)(b). Civilian safety should be paramount if we’re called into someone else’s wars.”

“Perhaps further discussion on extenuating circumstances that may encroach on our supposed neutrality should be brought up during the first meeting.” Vision supplied, even as he added his own comments in the margin.

“Yeah,” Toni agreed. “FRIDAY add it to the list. Put it in the top five.”

“Done, Boss. I have also been informed that representatives from Lebanon, Chile and Fiji have been
Rhodey’s brows went up. “Three countries that haven’t ratified yet. This is good news.”

“I thought you might be pleased, Colonel,” FRIDAY remarked brightly, then added in a more subdued voice that Toni definitely didn’t program, “I would also like to remind you that you have a follow-up appointment with your doctor tomorrow at nine thirty.”

Toni stilled, the hand holding her spoon hovering just out of reach of her mouth as she watched Rhodey slump a little in his chair.

“Thanks FRIDAY.” He smiled at Toni, tired and strained. “Guess I should be getting to bed. It’s a long drive.”

“I can come with—”

“No,” Rhodey said immediately and Toni tried to bite down on the sting she felt at the sharp rejection. “Look,” he said, rubbing a hand down his face, “it’s nothing like that. Don’t freak out. Just, I’m not the one you need to be worrying about right now. You’ve got this and SI stuff to deal with as well. Sleep in or something. I just don’t want you to burn out before we’ve even started. Let me deal with my shit and I’ll come back and we can get back to this, okay?”

Sleep in. Yeah right.

“Sure thing,” she said with a forced smile that she knew he saw right through.

He opened his mouth to say something, then seemed to think better of it, looking at Vision instead.

“Make sure she gets to bed at a decent hour.”

“Of course, Colonel.”

And who knew synthezoids could lie so smoothly? But was it really lying if everybody knew about it?

When he rolled out, taking his empty container of food with him, Toni exhaled heavily and gazed up at the Accords again.

“FRIDAY, throw up the schematics for the prosthetic implements I was working on at Laura’s.”

It appeared before she’d even finished speaking and at any other time Toni might have paid more attention to that but right now she had other things to think about.

She’d promised Rhodey.

It was about time she delivered.

The next morning she did it all over again. And the day after that. And the day after that.

It became a routine the three of them started to subscribe to out of necessity for the goal they were working towards and because keeping busy helped keep the nightmares at bay. At least for a while.
And when Toni would wake up at night with her hands clasped protectively over her arc reactor and a scream caught in her throat, Vision would bring up every single thing she was working on and resume where he’d left off before she’d fallen asleep.

Some nights it helped. Some nights she couldn’t stop shaking and let Vision’s deep voice wash over her until she fell into a half-doze against his shoulder.

And in the morning Rhodey wouldn’t mention the dark circles under her eyes or the mess of her hair and her unwashed t-shirt. He’d simply push a mug of coffee and a glass of cold-press juice in front of her and dive right into his ideas of a potential prosthetics line for veterans.

She wasn’t on a farm. She didn’t have Laura or Cooper or Lila or Nathaniel. But she had this. She had this.

And she could make this work. She could make this better.

“Hey, Vision,” she asked one night as her heart thundered against the confines of her ribs and remnants of white snow seeped out of the edges of her vision, giving way to the starry sky above them.

“Yes, Toni.”

“What do you think about us having a greenhouse? Side-project between you n’ me. For therapeutic reasons.”

Vision draped yet another blanket around her violently trembling shoulders.

“That sounds like a marvelous idea. I shall get started on it in the morning.”

Maria Hill walked in to the communal kitchen one morning during breakfast with several busloads of recruits, both new and old, waiting outside.

“I’m putting myself in charge of the Avengers Multi-Organizational Task Force since the last head decided to fuck off after Cap left.”

The three of them shared a glance before Toni turned back to Maria, face expressionless.

“FRIDAY?” she asked coolly and to her credit, Maria just stood there, hands clasped behind her back and waiting. Like the good soldier they all knew her to be.

“Ms. Hill made several stops by the Compound while you were away, Boss. I allowed her entry today purely for her commendable persistence and because I assumed you would be interested to hear her pitch. However, if you wish I can initiate Protocol GTFO.”

Her lips twitched marginally. She’d never gotten the chance to use Protocol GTFO but while the image of a fire-extinguisher-brandishing Dummy attacking Maria hill was funny in her head, the chance that Maria might just point her gun at him was decidedly not.

“You gonna be spying for Fury?” she asked point blank.

Maria didn’t even flinch.
“Yes.” And Coulson was what she didn’t say but Toni heard it anyway.

“And where is the old man anyway?” Rhodey queried over the rim of his orange juice.

“Somewhere in the Baltic last I heard.”

Toni hummed and looked at Vision, who looked right back at her. In the midst of her rising insanity a lot of good had come out of being back here, one of those things being her growing relationship with Vision and their knack for having silent conversations. She secretly wondered whether he was actually psychic.

Upon his seal of approval Toni turned back to Maria.

“You know where everything is. West Wing’s off limits for everybody else, though. As usual.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

Toni blinked slowly. “Send Fury my regards.”

With a final nod to Rhodey and Vision she turned on her heel and left. A minute later they heard the sound of wheels on gravel and Toni let out a slow, calming breath, sinking all of her weight into the seat.

“Are you well, Toni?”

“Honestly?” She let out a breathless laugh. “I’m relieved.”

Rhodey narrowed his eyes at her. “Relieved?”

“Yeah. That I have one less thing to worry about.” Feeling a little bit lighter, she hopped off the high stool and grinned at them. “So, Platypus. Wanna try on your new legs?”

Once the AMOTF came back - and Toni was fairly sure that wasn’t the same acronym from before - the Compound came back to life just a little bit more. It was no longer just the three of them, even though they tended to keep to the West Wing and rarely forayed beyond the cafeteria. But it was a quiet comfort when Toni and Vision would work all night until sunrise, then through the open window, hear the sound of syncopated jogging in the distance.

Maria sent her reports every three days, updating her on any new appointments and training exercises for her recruits. Toni admittedly only glanced through the sometimes pages-long emails but trusted Maria’s skills and her diligence enough to give her free reign.

From Vision’s reports even Rhodey seemed to be pushing himself harder in PT when he recognized a number of old names that had returned, men and women he used to train and spar with. Seeing Rhodey use her prototype around the Compound gave Toni the impetus to refine her tech and figure out better, more streamline designs for Rhodey’s legs. Once she had a large enough portfolio, she forwarded everything, along with Rhodey’s - admittedly hacked and stolen - medical records to a begrudging but professional enough Helen Cho.

“I destroyed the Cradle and all my records of it,” she’d informed Toni bluntly over a call. The after Ultron was unsaid but she heard it anyway.
It was pretty straightforward.

“That’s your choice. I don’t need the Cradle. I just need Rhodey to walk again.”

Helen had watched her impassively; there was no trace of the excitement of innovation that she’d exhibited only a year ago. She’d spoken after a long moment.

“I’ll look through his records,” was all she offered. “If it works I want your tech. You can patent it, of course, but I want it for free. A joint venture. There are a lot of people deserving of this.”

Toni had taken in the hardness of her tone and the stubborn set of her jaw and replied quite simply, “Fine.”

The day after that it was Tuesday.

T’Challa’s quinjet landed on the roof of the Compound right on the dot and Toni’s hands were cold. It was irrational but he was her only link to the others and when she saw him walk down the ramp, as calm and cool as Vision ever was, she had to bite her tongue for fear that she would voice one of the continuous streams of questions and demands that ran through her head.

And the newly crowned king hadn’t come alone, though.

There was a girl of eighteen or nineteen behind him and Toni knew immediately who she was. Shuri. Genius princess and head of all things tech and cool in Wakanda.

T’Challa had only mentioned her briefly in passing but she knew that all weapons at his disposal were the creation of one girl alone.

Toni just about had a fit but managed to maintain at least a decent level of composure, even as her body was practically vibrating to take a look inside this girl’s brain and find out everything she knew about everything.

He’d brought two members of his Dora Milaje, both of whom were monuments of severity and intimidating beauty and god, she loved the female race, and if her respect for T’Challa and all things Wakandan wasn’t already at its highest, they’d just managed to surpass it even more.

She wished she’d put on more concealer to hide the suitcases packing under her eyes.

Vision’s discreet hand on her lower back eased the fidgeting she didn’t even know she’d been doing and she exhaled slowly as T’Challa walked towards her, the corners of his eyes crinkling warmly.

“You’ll be fine, Toni. Mr. T’Challa has only ever conveyed his utmost respect towards you.”

Toni shifted from foot to foot. “People can be good actors,” she argued but with little conviction.

Vision made a soft sound that might have been exasperation. “Of course, Toni.”

Rhodey stood - stood, she almost cried - next to her, holding a walking stick the origins of which he refused to reveal. She suspected a female but refused to push.

She stood a little straighter and plastered on her best polite smile as T’Challa came to a stop in front of her.

“Ms. Stark,” he greeted, as if she were being presented to him, as if it were an honor.
“Hello, Your Highness,” she replied, imbuing a little warmth into her voice because when he looked at her like that, how could she not.

When she moved to shake his hand, he took hers gently in both of his and squeezed with a familiarity that threw her. This wasn’t a standard Wakandan greeting, she knew.

“It is very good to see you again,” he said kindly. “I am...glad that you are looking better than when we last parted.”

The memory of their parting was clear and raw, and a sharp pain lanced through her chest, making her breath catch. Her hand made an aborted grab at the arc reactor but she managed to alter its course and tucked her hair behind her ear instead. Judging by the near imperceptible narrowing of his eyes he noticed anyway.

“It’s good to see you too,” she offered, because it was all she could at this point. “You look well.”

She eyed her for a moment longer than necessary before nodding and greeting Rhodey and Vision.

“My friends. I would like to introduce you to my sister, Shuri. She is more than the brains behind our good country; she is also my keeper, so she likes to think.”

She smiled, and it was bright and cheeky, though the edges hardened when she met Toni’s eyes and, oh. That was a little bit unfortunate, and Toni tried to ignore the sting of rejection at the fact that clearly, Shuri wasn’t her biggest fan.

The darker part of her that had a penchant for overthinking wondered how much of that had to do with the guests currently living in Wakanda.

But. Well. That wasn’t important right now. She was used to having her name dragged through the mud anyway.

She mustered a kind smile anyway. “Princess Shuri. It’s a pleasure.”

“I’m sure it is,” was her serene reply.

They got down to business pretty quickly after that, discussing policies and ideas over lunch in one of the meeting rooms.

She and T’Challa spent a long time planning out their pitch to the Council, and Vision helped to finetune T’Challa’s presentation on the individual hero contracts, walking T’Challa through the ones he and the legal team had drafted for the first time.

“This is very good work.” T’Challa scanned through his own draft contract, nodding at the extra precautions they’d taken due to him being royalty as well as masked. “Once these contracts become public knowledge, I foresee that enhanced individuals will be more willing to approach us.”

Toni and Rhodey shared a look. “You think so?” she asked tentatively.

When T’Challa raised his head from the dense paperwork in front of him his eyes were suspiciously shiny, and Toni felt her ears burn self-consciously.

“I do not think that my father envisioned something quite so expansive. Nor do I think he realized the impact the Accords would have on the world.” He pinned the three of them with a long look that was somewhere between pity and regret. “We made mistakes the first time and perhaps extenuating circumstances exacerbated the issue beyond what we could have imagined.”
Did you know?
Yes.
I remember all of them.

Howard-

“But this,” T’Challa continued as if Toni wasn’t screaming for her mother inside her own head.
“This is going to work. The governments of the world will have to listen. People will have to listen.”

“People always should’ve listened,” Rhodey pointed out. “But I agree,” he acquiesced, “that the
introduction of the Accords in the first place could’ve gone better. We could’ve made people more
receptive, ease them into the idea that a level of control was always going to be necessary.”

He killed my mother.

“Hopefully this time, now that we are laying it all out for the world to see, people will begin to
understand the importance of what we are doing,” Vision imparted, and god, he sounded like
JARVIS.

T’Challa nodded solemnly but there was an edge of excitement bubbling beneath the surface of his
skin, like conviction, like hope.

“People will listen,” he repeated, assuredly.

Toni gripped her thighs until her fingers were white, a habit she hadn’t partaken in since New York.
Since meeting the others.

“We will make them listen.”

They all looked at her, heard the undercurrent of heat in her voice.

She smiled and it wasn’t pretty.

“There’s another thing I wanted to bring up with the Council at some point in the future, Your
Highness. Something I think you’ll agree with me on.”

T’Challa clasped his hands on the table and leaned forward.

“I’m listening.”

“FRIDAY. Bring up everything we have so far about Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross.”

The meeting lasted until after dark and by that point everyone was hungry and even the two Dora
looked like they were itching to get into some civilian clothes. Toni for her part hadn’t slept in thirty-
two hours so it was perhaps her compromised judgment that made her suggest they head into the city
for dinner.

Between the loud music and packed dance floor and Vision’s human disguise, they’d bought
themselves enough anonymity, at least for a couple of hours.
“You look tired, Ms. Stark,” T’Challa pointed out, almost apologetically so, over a glass of wine.

Toni stirred her straw around her juice. “I give you a free pass for that because you’re royalty,” she teased, but her smile faded quickly.

He watched her and Toni tried not to squirm under his heavy stare. Because she knew that look, that tension before the unleashing of something the other party wasn’t sure she was going to like to hear.

“For someone who is doing so much to see her friends regain their freedom, you are strangely silent on their current welfare.” He tilted his head to the side, scrutinizing. “You have not asked after them. Why?”

“They’re not my friends,” she replied promptly with a cavalier that she didn’t feel.

“Are they not?”

“Nope.”

“What are they, then?”

“People I know whom I believe the world can count on to protect it when the time comes.”

“And you? Can you count on them?”

She stopped stirring.

Did you know?

Yes.

I remember all of them.

My wife—!

I remember all of them.

Her heart being pulled out of her chest. Sometimes it sounded like glass in her dreams. Other times the Winter Soldier’s hands were dripping with blood. Hers. Howard’s. Her mother’s.

A flash hit the corner of her eye and she flinched instinctively. When she looked, Princess Shuri had just gestured at Vision with her fork, a look of intrigue on her pretty face as she inquired about his abilities.

“I count on what I know. Rhodey, Vision, FRIDAY. I count on Pepper to run my company. I count on aliens falling out of the sky to kill us all.” She smirked at the young king, and it was bitter and cruel. “That’s what I count on the most.”

“And yet we were all copied into the email you forwarded to the Council titled ‘Appeal to Drop all Charges Against James Buchanan Barnes.’ How does a woman who counts on so little do something so large when she is keenly aware of how such actions will be interpreted?”

“Maybe I want to bring him here so I can finish the job,” she murmured not taking her eyes off T’Challa, waiting to see his reaction.

To her surprise T’Challa smiled and it was painfully kind. “You are a convincing actress, Ms. Stark. But you are not a murderer; you have too much soul.”
She scoffed. “My kill count is in the thousands. I wonder what that does to a person’s soul.”

“And yet I have seen you do go above and beyond to save people. Not just stop the enemy, but rescue those in its path.”

“Maybe I’m just trying to make up for everything else I’ve done. All that blood on my name.”

“Maybe,” he conceded. “But kindness, goodness is not passive. It is an action that affects people whether they like it or not. Whatever your intentions it does not diminish the fact that people are receiving your kindness.”

Her hands were shaking under the table and all she could see was her mother, her mother, her mother—

Stop-!

Her eyes were blurry. Why were they blurry?

“He doesn’t deserve it,” she said, hating how weak she sounded, how it felt like a thousand knives that were sinking into her chest.

T’Challa opened his palms in front of him. “It is your technology. Only you can be the judge of whether or not he is deserving. But even if he is not,” he reached out and touched her wrist, barely there, “perhaps you are.”

She closed her eyes. “I hate him,” she admitted.

“I know. But that does not mean you cannot help him. You already are. You are helping all of them.”

“Can I ask you something? Or it’s...I have a question...but also a confession. And I like you, man, I really do. Mostly. But I also...” On the table next to her Vision was patiently listening to Shuri explain how kimoyo beads worked and on her other side Rhodey was making surprisingly easy small talk with one of the Dora - Ayo, her name was. The other Dora - Okoye - was standing outside, pretending to smoke even as she kept watch.

“I would welcome your honesty, Ms. Stark. Whatever you have to say to me you can say.”

Speaking the words that had been on her tongue was going to reveal a lot more about her to this stranger - because he was a stranger - than she was ready to reveal. But maybe that was the perfect reason for her to do so. Maybe.

“Why did you bring them to Wakanda?”

Her voice was so quiet, drowned out by the noise of the restaurant and by the feel-good music pulsing from the speakers.

But she might as well have been a hurricane.

And T’Challa; for someone whose composure was to be envied, looked stricken but unsurprised.

Like he’d known that she could be this petty.

It was humiliating.
But she could not stop.

“You believe I took a side.”

“Didn’t you?” she shot back, then closed her eyes, like the way she’d closed her eyes in a Siberian bunker, thinking - *wishing* - that she wasn’t going to wake up again. But she had. And she’d woken up alone. And that had been that.

“They are not bad people, Ms. Stark,” T’Challa told her gently, as if she didn’t know, as if she didn’t *know them*. “I contributed to the disaster that tore the Avengers apart. I had to, in some way, fix it.”

“So you took them with you,” Toni nodded. “Where they sit in your home and do—” She squinted at him. “—what exactly? What’s their contribution in fixing all of this?”

“They are not exactly in the best position to be making grand changes,” he chided, “but they do not, as you seem to believe, sit around and do nothing. The Captain trains with the Dora. As does Mr. Wilson and Mr. Barton. They learn about our culture and they help where they can. They help protect our borders from…unsavory people. Mr Barton even has a small following of children and young people who are eager to learn archery. Ms. Maximoff helps in the orphanage and Mr. Lang has taken up a temporary teaching post at a high school.” Through the entire speech Toni just found her shoulders getting heavier and heavier. “They are doing what they can, Ms. Stark, within the limited capacity that their situation has given them. But they do want to come home. They are still healing from the loss of it.”

Toni almost laughed. Healing. Such a funny, *funny word*.

“That’s nice for them. Sounds like they’re setting up shop as best as they can.” She licked her lips and stared at the green slush inside her glass. “Do you know,” she began slowly, feeling every word spoken, “that no one came for me?” Once they were out, it suddenly felt *real*. No one knew about Siberia save for her, T’Challa, Cap and Barnes. And *she* was the only one who knew what happened after. Because she’d been alone. “I had a broken suit and a lot of bruises. I had a broken arm and a fractured tibia but that was actually from before. It just got worse after a couple of rounds with two very strong Super Soldiers. Let’s not even talk about the fact that half of my ribcage is artificial. I can show you the x-ray if you don’t believe me. I had all of that and myself. But I waited. Because I was so sure that someone was going to come and get me, to help me. But nobody came.” She looked at T’Challa, feeling something like wonder emanate from inside of her. “*Nobody. Came.* I passed out, thought I was gonna die, which would’ve been preferable, mind you because it was fucking cold. But then I woke up. And I realized that nobody was coming, that I’d been left there to die. Like vermin.” Her lip curled and she felt something ugly twist inside her chest where the mangled parts of her heart were being slowly shredded by weapons of her own making. Because it had been like Afghanistan all over again. “So you know what I did? I crawled my way out. Like vermin.”

T’Challa was silent and she didn’t blame him for that, for the inability to give her words of comfort and reassurance, because there were none. There was nothing that could possibly make this moment of resentment okay.

“Sorry,” she murmured after a time. “I’m being self-absorbed and fatalistic. I tend to make things about me. It’s a character flaw.”

*Iron Man yes, Toni Stark no.*

“I do not think,” T’Challa said finally without a trace of judgment or offense, “that I am the one you intended to tell this to.” Then he reached across the table and, like he’d done earlier that day, took
both her hands in his, cupped them between his palms and just held them, deeper than a hug, warmer than a prayer. And it hurt, it hurt, it hurt so much. “You, Antonia Stark, are not vermin.”

“Then what am I?” she breathed, unable to grasp her own voice because it hurt. Everything hurt.

“You’re Iron Man. You’re the current leader of the Avengers.” She almost scoffed because she had three people and a baby spider. “You’re the face of the Sokovia Accords that is garnering worldwide response. You are a hero. And you are someone I would like to call my friend.” The last part was laid bare before her, a special kind of vulnerability that she didn’t feel she deserved because this was a king. This was the King of Wakanda, the most secretive and technologically advanced country in the entire world. And he wanted to call her ‘friend’.

“My track record seems to suggest that I have a shitty way of treating friends,” she argued weakly, but didn’t pull away.

“I would say that what you are doing now proves otherwise.”

“I’m also really bad at this whole…life thing. I don’t function like most people. People used to have to pull me out of alcohol and drug-induced comas. It wasn’t pretty. Lots of vomit cleanup. Now it’s caffeine but, if research is anything to go by, that’s pretty shitty too.”

The corners of his lips quirked up. “I run around in a cat suit in my spare time. I also lie to politicians on a frequent basis about how poor my country is. We sell fruits on the side of dusty roads. And bracelets.”

“My mother had one of those bracelets,” Toni recalled as her heart slowed in tempo. “My dad gave it to her.” She didn’t need to mention that it was probably after he’d stolen enough vibranium to make Cap’s shield and had been waiting for someone special to gift rare Wakandan jewellery to. He got the gist of it. “I liked it. Don’t know where it is.”

“I’ll bring you one next time.”

She gazed down at their entwined hands. “Really?”

“Of course.”

She felt like crying.

“I’d like…I’d like you do to me a favor, Your Highness,” she hedged, plans forming and reforming in her head.

“Anything.”

“That’s a dangerous word. Don’t use it.”

“Noted.”

“Just…” She felt the heat of her palms, the blood pulsing through T’Challa’s on the backs of her hands. “Be my conscience. Through all of this. Rhodey is too used to me being a total fuck-up and Vision is a dream but he’s so young and I can’t… Someone needs to hold me accountable. To punch me in the face when I go too far. I’m trying really hard not to make the same mistakes I did but I need.”
“A sounding board,” T’Challa supplied. “A counsellor of your own. I understand. I can do that for you. If you will do the same for me.”

“Totally. That’s how it works, right?” She gestured vaguely, which was hard to do because T’Challa didn’t seem in a hurry to give her hands back. Maybe he was worried she was about to literally fly off the handle or run away. It wouldn’t be the first time. “Democracy and…everything.”

His eyebrows arched in what was perhaps amusement and she suddenly felt very self-conscious.

“Since this is a democracy and not a monarchy,” he said smoothly, “I believe we can do away with titles. ‘T’Challa’ is much more palatable than ‘Your Highness’, don’t you think?”

Toni felt her face heat up. “Has anyone ever told you how nice your voice is? I mean is that a kingly thing, because I’m a girl at heart and being a princess has always been a dream of mine. Are you taken?”

Much to her relief T’Challa just laughed – and oh, he had a nice laugh – full-bodied and deep and it brought a smile to her face, the last vestiges of pain dissolving with the sound.

“There is someone, yes,” he told her and his eyes actually shone and wow, that was love, huh. “I suppose it is nothing new for people to inform you that you ramble and deflect when you are…emotionally charged.”

“Well, ‘emotionally charged’ is a new one but the sentiment is the same. Another character flaw. Just as dangerous as all the others, depending on who you ask.”

T’Challa didn’t speak for a while, simply brushed his thumbs across her skin in thought. It was oddly soothing and she hoped someone wasn’t going to put this in the papers tomorrow. That would feel like a violation. This was nice. It was special. She wanted to keep it that way. She’d get FRIDAY on the job the second they left.

“I cannot make you a princess or a queen,” he said finally, and she almost spoke up and told him that she was joking when he continued. “It would not suit you. Too much...sitting around and reading up on foreign policy and such.”

She smiled despite herself. “You seem to do well enough.”

“The country I was born to permits it. Not many would. For that, I am grateful.”

“Well, you stepped into superhero-ing very gracefully. Almost panther-like,” she teased.

“That is not what I meant, although I do enjoy being the Black Panther,” he said with warm eyes. “What I mean is that I am grateful for this. This moment right here. Talking to you, the woman who changed the world once and has yet to stop.”

She looked at him with something like wonder and swallowed thickly when he leaned in close, his expression so open and genuine and she might have fallen a little bit in love with him right then.

“I am with you on this path, Toni. And I know it to be a good path. I can feel it. You are a good woman, Antonia Stark. Regardless of how you see yourself. Regardless of what others have said or how they perceive you to be. So I will be whatever you need to see this to the end. And I know that it will be glorious.”
The next morning she emailed him everything she had on B.A.R.F., even though she nearly threw up several times before she gave an unwilling FRIDAY the green light.

Several floors below her, he responded in kind.

*Shuri is already analyzing your tech. She will not admit it but she is very excited to have this. I believe the two of you will work very well together. She has a lot to learn from you.*

*You have more than just my thanks, Toni.*

- *T’Challa*

She tossed the phone in front of her just as Vision sat down next to her and gave her a warm mug of hot chocolate. She’d told Vision about what had happened in Siberia. She couldn’t tell Rhody yet. Maybe ever. That was a lie, he had to hear it from her at some point. But the words weren’t coming out of her mouth any time soon and Rhody had honed a level of patience over his many years of dealing with her and knew when and when not to push.

Vision had been beautiful. He had listened, unspeaking and unjudging, and Toni didn’t think she had it in her to feel that amount of love for another person outside of what she’d already given, but she *did*. She just wanted to keep giving to him because he deserved it all and so much more.

He’d been quiet even as she’d cried gross, ugly angry tears, had rubbed her back as she hyperventilated and coughed up last night’s dinner. And when she finished he had hugged her, a gesture instigated by no one else but *him*. And she’d cried some more and how had she not run out of tears, yet?

“I’m doing this,” she murmured, sinking into his side, grateful that he let her.

“You are.”

“I don’t know how I feel about it.”

“If you want, you can leave everything to Princess Shuri. She can do this from start to finish. You do not have to put yourself through it. It is not your responsibility, Toni.”

“I know. But at the same time…I feel like I have to. I have to be the one to do it. Because if I don’t...if I don’t then I’ll never know.”

“Know what, Toni?”

She closed her eyes. A flash of metal. Fingers digging into her chest.

*Do you even remember them?*

*I remember all of them.*

“If he was worth it. I need to know that the man wearing the face of my parent’s killer and the Winter Soldier, I need to know that James Buchanan Barnes was worth it.”

Vision very tentatively wrapped an arm around her back and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.
“Then I will be with you when you do it. We will fix this.”

Chapter End Notes

How many people think Vision trying to be JARVIS for the sake of Toni is NOT a great idea? Also, angry and bitter Toni is my fave and goddamn, I love writing it. Don’t necessarily agree with her thought process or her perceptions of the matter but her feelings are valid given what she's been through.
Chapter Summary

When you choose to plant yourself like a tree, someone has to compromise. Someone will have to move.

Chapter Notes

I never expected to receive the number of comments or kudos or bookmarks as I did for the last chapter, so thank you, thank you, thank you. You've no idea how much it means to me that you're enjoying my fic.

This chapter is pretty long and heavy. But it's important and necessary and pretty pivotal and I'm kind of proud of it and I really hope you guys enjoy it.

As always, I beta my own work and a million re-reads and double-checking will probably not be enough so I'm sorry if you spot some glaringly obvious spelling mistakes.

Also, if you like, you can hang out with me on octaviaperell.tumblr.com :)

Oh and one final thing. I'M GOING TO WATCH AVENGERS: INFINITY WAR ON WEDNESDAY AND I AM NOT READY. *screams into the void*

If Fury had a Big Week then Toni would argue - and win - that she had the Dramatic Months of the Most Monumental Amalgamation of Cataclysmic Events ever, and all she had was herself, a barely put-together group of heroes and the best legal team that Toni could ask for, to deal with the onslaught.

And it was a fucking mega onslaught of crapastic shit and more than one occasion of terrifying brain fog, and the hits just kept on coming with increasing frequency. She was used to shit. She was used to a lot of shit. Read: Ultron. Read: Sokovia Accords. Read: Siberia.

None of the shit that happened over the course of the DMMMACE(s) could be described as remotely close to the caliber of shit that hit the fan as the other shitty incidents but the fact that they just did not stop made it an altogether exhausting experience.

She knew Fury - fuck knows where he was - liked to think he had a monopoly on dealing with the World’s Biggest Shitstorms but Toni reckoned she could take him in a fight.

And of course, it all started with a spider.
Giving Happy specific instructions to keep an eye on Peter while she fucked off to the countryside was undoubtedly one of her better decisions. As much as she loved Happy, though, in hindsight she probably could’ve and should’ve chosen Vision instead. And she might’ve had she known of Vision’s stealth mode capabilities because some of the shit that Peter got up to was enough to give her twelve heart attacks and a fucking aneurysm.

Still, he was doing good and for a kid who had done some of his best work wearing a pair of modified pajamas, she was proud and happy for him.

And she knew, god she knew that Peter was just waiting for more action, waiting for a call from her, from someone. But as much as she wanted to, as much as she wanted to reach out to this hell of a kid and take him on board and make him feel like he hadn’t been forgotten, she couldn’t. Not yet.

She still read every message that Happy forwarded her, and took note of major incidents like quitting band. She didn’t understand that logic because band was awesome. She would know. She’d played second string for a time.

But the point was she kept an eye on him as often as she could and was just going through raw footage of one of his latest escapades - stopping a gas station robbery - when a reflection on the screen caught her attention and she froze.

“FRIDAY.”

Nothing.

A flare of anger had her clenching her jaw and she stood abruptly but didn’t turn.

“How.” It wasn’t a question.

A moment and then,

“You gave me the mute codes a year ago. They haven’t been changed apparently.”

Her lip curled in irritation. “I’ll get right on that after you leave.”

Toni knew that in the moment of quiet that followed, near silent footsteps were making their way towards her. She felt it in the tingling at the back of her neck, the raising of hair on her arms and the staccato of her heart beat against the arc reactor, deep within her chest.

And the worst part. The fucking worst part. Was that she knew that if she turned around she’d be lost. If she looked into those green eyes she thought she knew so well, she might has well sign herself away right this second. And she was not ready. She was not ready.

“Toni.” Hearing her name from those lips shouldn’t have been this painful.

I’m not the one who needs to watch her back.

“Stop,” she breathed. Then, because she was a masochistic idiot who enjoyed contradicting her own words, she asked, “What are you even doing here?”

“I’m here for you.”

That was easily one of the most hilarious things she’d ever heard so she fucking laughed. And it was terrifying and borderline hysterical and her hearing started to go weird but this was just too much.

“For me,” she blurted around a giggle. “Are you- are you even fucking serious right now? I mean
are you fucking- Jesus *fuck!"* She slammed her hand down on the table, jarring the video sequence of Spider-Man dousing the would-be robber with a shaken bottle of Coke.

Exhaling heavily, she just stood and watched the video on repeat. It was fifteen seconds. She watched it twelve times before her legs finally gave way and she sank back into her chair. She watched it another five times before she had garnered enough bravery - or maybe it was just exhaustion and the inevitability of everything - to spin the chair around and look into the eyes of her guest.

Blonde hair. That was the first thing she noticed. Not even a strawberry blonde. Just. Blonde. Toni couldn’t help but notice how well it suited her. She still preferred the red, though. It was nostalgic. Although that was probably an indicator that she shouldn’t prefer red. Clinging too tightly to things from the past created too much resistance when she had a world to change.

Jarvis had once said something along those lines. Whereas Ana had told her to keep the important things so that you wouldn’t always be looking for new ways to smile.

“Toni.” It was softer this time and Toni could’ve given in. She really could have because it sounded exactly like the woman she used to know. But a very large and very hurt part of her was also very paranoid.

And Black Widow was always on the clock.

“Natasha.” She kept her voice even, despite being phenomenally aware that all her cracks were showing.

Natasha watched her for a moment, then tilted her head towards the chair, a request.

Toni pursed her lips but nodded.

She sat but Toni rolled her seat a good - it would never be far enough - distance away.

Neither one said anything for a long time, the only sound in the room coming from the laptop - a fucking *Lenovo*, what the fuck, Happy? - and Spider-Man’s quips.

After a while that got boring and Toni was practically vibrating in her seat because she decidedly did *not* want to be here, so she finally opened her mouth and spoke.

“Let’s try this again.” She scratched the skin around the arc reactor and looked directly into Natasha’s face. “Why are you here, Natasha?”

Natasha didn’t speak immediately and Toni would’ve gotten impatient had she not known that the silence wasn’t a way to stall, but a way to get her thoughts together. Even if she had the most impressive poker face the world had ever seen while she did.

“I’m here to help.”

“With what?”

They scrutinized one another and it was painfully nostalgic of the first time they’d met, *really* met, Toni Stark and Natasha Romanov, two women with more red on their ledgers and even more distrust in their hearts.

Hatred was a whirlpool that threatened to suck her deep into its depths and suffocate any notion of reconciliation that she might have clung to. And cling she did, with nails and teeth and a heart that
could level the city.

Because whether she liked it or not - and she really, really didn’t like it - Natasha was and had always been someone she needed on her side.

It just sucked majorly that when it counted the most she’d flaked.

But well. Spies. And spiders.

Another glance at the screen, of Peter being a goddamn hero, and she amended her earlier judgment.

_Widows._

“With the Accords,” she said, and Toni could see that it was probably the most honest thing that could have come out of her mouth.

Toni leaned back in her chair, crossed her arms and inclined her chin.

“Impress me.”

“You’re letting her stay?” Vision asked calmly as he fitted one of the panels of the holo-emitter, one of the newer components for B.A.R.F., into place. He gave no indication of his own thoughts on their first returnee, and Toni didn’t expect him to.

Dummy and Butterfingers whirred in the corner, making claw-paintings. They’d given Natasha one before. Toni wondered whether it was still up on her wall.

“I don’t really have a choice.”

She felt Vision’s unimpressed gaze but continued to reconfigure the neuromodulator.

“This is your home, built using your money,” Vision supplied when it became apparent that she wasn’t going to say anything. “I’d say you had the most choice in the matter.”

“Yeah, well. The Compound may be funded by me but it falls under the Council’s jurisdiction. At least until the Panel is formed. And seeing as legal’s already drafting up a contract a hotel would just be a waste of money. Besides,” she said, finally glancing up from her work, “friends close, enemies closer, right?”

Vision tilted his head in honest curiosity. “Is she our enemy?”

“Well, she’s not my friend, that’s for sure,” she snorted. “But you have to decide what she is to you. You never really had any argument with her. Besides, she’s good at what she does. Avenging and spying and strangling people with her thighs.”

“She was my mentor at one time,” he remarked, considering. “Perhaps, had I been more self-aware at the time I would have considered her my friend as opposed to merely an ally. But the lines these days are...blurry.”

“Try not to think too much about it, Vision. Or do. I dunno. My advice tends to come from a place of self-loathing and resentment. Listening to me is...inadvisable.”
“I have witnessed you do multiple inadvisable things. In fact your entire life appears to be a series of inadvisable acts and decisions-”

“Gee, thanks, Vision.”

“- and yet you are one of the most powerful women in the world,” he finished primly, using the Mind Stone to solder two panels together and Toni had to bite back her reservations on the recommended functionality of the gem.

“Honey, I’m an erroneous variable. In fact most studies would indicate a correlation between bad decisions and death, so.”

“An exaggeration,” he said bluntly.

“I’m Toni Stark,” she retorted. “I’m basically the lovechild of snark and hyperbole.”

Vision turned away but Toni suspected he was biting back a smile, and when did he become so human?

“I shall redirect this conversation to the question I had intended to ask earlier. Do you trust Natasha Romanov’s presence in the Compound? If you have any reservations as to her intentions I will be more than willing to monitor her activities.”

She frowned dubiously. “You’re gonna spy on her.”

There was a beat, and then,

“Yes.”

“That’s...oddly touching.”

“You are welcome.”

Toni had been tempted. Of course she’d been tempted to have Vision spy on her. Natasha would’ve done the exact same thing had their roles been reversed. Natasha had spied on her in the past. Multiple times. She probably expected Toni to pull something like that as well.

But because Toni enjoyed subverting people’s expectations she left Natasha alone for the most part, save for on Avengers and Accords business. Whatever Vision did in his own time was purely up to him; there was no relaying of information to Toni, just the expansion of his own database of knowledge about their resident Black Widow.

So really. It wasn’t spying if Toni didn’t know what Natasha was up to.

As long as she worked on the Accords with the rest of them, Toni wouldn’t have any complaints.

And of course, Natasha proved to be fucking boss at coming up with solutions to problems. No surprise there.

Even T’Challa with his Oscar-worthy impassiveness at her presence during their usual prep meetings, had been impressed with her suggestions on the Accords.
And it was with Natasha’s shrewdness, Rhodey’s military history, Vision’s insight, T’Challa’s political position and Toni’s mastermind - and more than a little help from her legal team - that they presented their numerous proposals to the UN Security Council.

It was one of the biggest inter-political gatherings ever. President Ellis had of course been invited, as had Secretary Ross - who sent her death glares and more than one angry message from across the room during the first session - along with a hundred and thirty country representatives, a hundred and twenty-eight of whom belonged to countries that had already ratified the Accords, who were streaming from their respective offices - thanks to Stark tech, of course.

The US wasn’t the only country with enhanced individuals; an increasing number had been crawling out of the woodwork ever since Iron Man’s introduction to the world, and the rate had risen exponentially ever since the Chitauri invasion. People, nations, were afraid. They wanted a system of accountability, some more extreme - frighteningly so - than others. It may not have made international news but FRIDAY and Vision had brought up the stats of what were essentially lynchings and witch hunts of enhanced individuals that had occurred in recent years across the globe. That was something they were going to have to bring up with the Council. Not today but some time during the week-long discussion.

The Accords had to be just as much about protecting the public as they were about protecting the lives of heroes and enhanced alike. Like Cap had said, they weren’t attack dogs. They were allies not assets to be used like HYDRA-

She stopped the thought in its tracks and resumed listening to the German representative condemn the events at Leipzig but acknowledge - thank fucking god - the need for people like the Avengers and other enhanced groups in the event of a Level Ten catastrophe. The Chitauri had been labeled Level Ten.

Toni obviously hadn’t been able to articulate enough to them how there was so much more.

If you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.

She’d gazed for thirty seconds, give or take.

Words couldn’t describe that those thirty seconds had done to her.

A hand landed atop her trembling one and Vision stiffened, giving her a sharp look of alarm.

“Toni,” he murmured quietly as the Nigerian representative calmedly brought up one of the amendments - one of Rhodey’s - about the importance of time and response to a situation if a country head could not be contacted. “Your hand is freezing.”

“I’m fine. Just restless. Been sitting too long,” she muttered instinctively, blinking rapidly. Her eyes felt so goddamn dry. “Wish every country were as reasonable as Nigeria,” she said, changing the subject because world-changing Council meeting and all and this shit was important. “Egypt was being a real asshole just now.”

“They’re still bitter over the whole Suez Crisis,” Natasha supplied in an undertone and Toni tilted her head from side to side. “Understandably so. They’ve been taken advantage of more than once by foreign nations.”

“Imperialism is a bitch,” she agreed tiredly. “Oh, look. T’Challa’s up.”

They watched him walk down the aisle to the podium. His gaze flickered briefly to where they were seated and Toni gave him a discreet thumbs up before he began his pitch.
T’Challa was good at this whole oratorial thing. He wasn’t one of those blustery people who engaged a crowd without actually saying anything important. He spoke with authority, something that came natural to him and wasn’t just a product of his royal upbringing. He knew how to sway a crowd with the kind of gentleness that Toni would never be able to possess. It was amazing to watch, nail-bitingly, anxiety-inducingly, spectacularly amazing.

People had to listen to him. It was the biggest blessing in the world, having him on their side.

“Council members,” he began, and Toni felt the hairs on her arms stand on end. “My fellow representatives.” She turned her hand palm up and laced her fingers with Vision’s, acutely aware that he was still shooting her worried looks. “And my most esteemed guests. Thank you for coming here today.”

He brought up all the salient points. Masks. The importance of anonymity of their heroes - that was still a long way in the making. The unjustifiable risk of taking too long to come up with a decision when a crisis was looming overhead. It was only the first session of the first day and already Toni knew he’d made an impact.

She was over the motherfucking moon when T’Challa threw up the first batch of personal contracts on the holoprojector and saw nods and thoughtful note-taking from more than a few representatives because yes, yes, this was the kind of traction they needed.

This was what was going to change things for the better. This was what was going to bring the wayward Avengers home.

“Toni,” Vision said again, quietly insistent and she saw Natasha eye their entwined hands with something akin to blank curiosity and speculation and it was so Natasha that it threw her back to a time when she thought they’d come to an understanding and could read each other from across the room or could have silent conversations with nothing but quirked eyebrows and quick smiles.

Her chest ached and she was pretty sure the hand not holding Vision’s was numb, even from where it trembled on her knees.

“It’s cold,” she stuttered and Rhodey wordlessly took off his jacket and handed it to Vision who helped her put in on. “It’s not just me, right?”

“The temperature has not fluctuated since we first arrived, Toni,” Vision uttered. “You are exhibiting signs of stress.”

She almost laughed. Or cried. Whichever would be more appropriate in front of hundreds of political heads and representatives. “Am I?”

“We’ll be breaking for lunch soon,” Natasha muttered. “Thaddeus Ross is gonna be on a warpath to get to you. Get it together by then, Stark.”

“Shut the fuck up, Romanov,” Toni snapped back without much heat.

T’Challa finished his presentation to a louder round of applause than any of them had been expecting and Toni clapped along with the rest of them, a little sorry that she hadn’t been in her right mind to hear most of it.
Toni had her hands pressed to the marble countertop as she took in choking breaths that hurt her lungs and made the arc reactor feel like a fireball in her chest.

She hadn’t meant to panic like this. It wasn’t like it was her up on the podium yet. Things were just...moving too fast and not at all. It had taken her two months to get to this position. To finally get to lay it all out before the Council and she was fucking losing her mind on the first goddamn day.

T’Challa had only had to glimpse her face for a second once they’d met outside, before getting Okoye and Ayo to escort her to the nearest bathroom and stand guard.

“FRIDAY, babe. Am I having a heart attack?” she asked breathlessly, pinching a rather painful point of muscle just below her collar bones.

“From my limited scans of heart-rate and breathing patterns I’d say it’s a negative on the heart attack front, Boss, and probably some form of an anxiety attack instead.” She sounded distressed herself and Toni could imagine a frazzled Ana Jarvis with her wild red hair as she fretted over her.

“Hey,” she panted, squeezing her eyes shut to shake away the cobwebs and opening them again. “Easy, girl. Not a heart attack. That’s good. Anxiety I can…” Deal with? Questionable. “Handle. We can handle this. Just. Just give me a moment.”

“The second session will resume in an hour,” FRIDAY informed her gently. “You have a while-Boss, Vision has just informed me that Thaddeus Ross is looking for you. He’s coming this way right now.”

Toni didn’t even have a second to respond when the door burst open and Natasha marched in, grabbing her by the shoulders and shoving her into the nearest stall.

“Sit,” she ordered, and Toni could see the tension around her eyes and it almost seemed like Natasha was worried for her. Wouldn’t that be nice?

“I-” Toni began before she was promptly pushed down onto the toilet seat.

“Shut up. You look like crap.” Natasha whipped out a makeup bag - where exactly in that tight pencil dress would she have hidden it? - shoved a few pins in her hair to keep it out of her face, and then proceeded to wipe off Toni’s ruined makeup with swift, professional motions.

“Well,” Toni remarked because she never took orders well and she felt like being a salty bitch because defense mechanisms, “we haven’t done this in awhile.”

“My surprise birthday party.” Because of course Natasha would remember. “You lent me that white Zuhair Murad number.”

“I bought it for you. Along with that gold shoulder necklace. You’re taller than me; you pulled it off great.”

She closed her eyes as Natasha dabbed on the concealer - and Toni thought that the amount she used was a little bit rude because she didn’t look that bad.

“And you wore green,” Natasha murmured. “It was obviously old and Pepper had sent you that black and gold dress but you refused to wear it because-”

“Because I wanted everyone to look at you. Because I wanted Bruce to see what he was missing when the pictures came out online.”
“He never said a word.”

“Could be on another planet for all we know,” Toni sighed, rubbing her fingers together to warm up the still-cold tips. She thought of Bruce and his big hands that had always been warm, the same kind of warmth he’d saved occasionally for her but almost always for Natasha.

A loud banging on the door snapped them both out of their reverie.

“Stark! I know you’re in there! Don’t touch me, this doesn’t involve you! This is America-!”

She and Natasha shared a withering look.

“He’s such an asshole,” she muttered, then automatically pouted her lips when Natasha began dabbing lipstick onto it.

“You got into bed with him first,” Natasha murmured - and ouch - then stilled when she realized her very uncharacteristic lapse in control and looked at Toni carefully. “I didn’t mean it like-”

Toni shook her head. “It’s fine.” It wasn’t. But she knew Natasha didn’t mean it like that. Maybe. But she also knew what people said about her and Ross and okay, no, ew, the guy was like ninety - hypocritical, she knew, but not everyone looked like-

“No.” She shook her head of blonde hair. “It really wasn’t.” And now they weren’t just talking about Ross and her frankly untenable so-called reputation. She would’ve preferred if they’d stayed on that topic.

“Let’s not do this now. There’s an angry, racist, old white man outside with two very intimidating Dora. This,” she said, pointing between them, “can wait. Or. Y’know. Never happen.” Because that could be a thing too. Professionalism without hashing out the past. America had made a killing off of it.

Natasha glared at the door when Ross gave another shout, then turned back to Toni, something fierce, desperate in her expression.

“It has to happen. One way or another, Toni. I’m a part of this now. You’re,” she bit off a curse, “you’re our leader.”

“And I bet you just hate that,” Toni sneered but Natasha steamrolled over that as if she hadn’t heard.

“So things are going to have to come out in the open at some point because I’m not going to be able to follow someone who doesn’t have my back and who won’t trust me to have hers.”

Toni hissed and stood, and goddamn but in these heels she wasn’t intimidating anyone, least of all Natasha.

“I had your back the entire fucking time, Romanov. I had theirs as well and look what fucking happened. Regardless of what you think I will always have your back, out here and in the field as well but you are way too early to be asking me to place even a modicum of trust in you so don’t you fucking dare.”

They glared at each other for a long moment and with that stubborn set to her jaw Toni was so damn sure that Natasha was going to add something more, just to have the final word.

I’m not the one who needs to watch her back.
Instead, Natasha just nodded once and stepped away, though not before Toni caught the way her throat bobbed when she did so. Well, tough fucking titties.

Taking a deep breath and standing up straighter, she plastered on the most coldly delightful smile, unlocked the door and swung it open. Ross’ arm was still raised, Ayo was nowhere to be seen and Okoye looked like she was point three seconds away from breaking him over her knee.

“Hello, Thaddy.”

Ross caught sight of a stern-faced Natasha over Toni’s shoulder. His already-red face turned an even more brilliant shade of vermillion and he pointed an accusatory finger at her, taking a step closer.

“You-

“I wouldn’t,” Toni warned, stepping in front of him and placing a hand on his chest. Ross looked like it offended him on a subatomic level but she gave a warning push. “Aunt Flo’s come to visit, if you know what I mean. Things could get messy.”

He curled his lip in distaste, glared at Natasha a final time before he practically grabbed Toni’s upper arm and stomped out of the bathroom and hey.

“Hey,” she snapped, jerking away and bringing them both to a stop. “Lay off the merchandise, buddy.”

“You’ve been ignoring my calls.” He rounded on her and oh, he was not happy. “You haven’t answered a single one of my emails ever since you decided to take a sabbatical to Jesus knows where-”

“Whoa, Lord’s name in vain,” she gasped. “Aren’t you a puritan?”

“And now you pull this crap.”

“You had my team on a shoot-to-kill order,” she snapped. “After you gave your word-”

“Because they flouted the law. I thought we were on the same page-”

“We were never on the same page, Mr. Secretary, because if we were on the same page you wouldn’t have made criminals of my friends-!”

“And you helped me to do just that, Stark!”

Her mouth snapped shut on the retort when she saw Ayo with T’Challa and Vision in tow, both of whom had come to a cautious stop next to Natasha and Okoye.

She had a retort. She had so many retorts. But saving her hand had to trump the satisfaction of shutting this asswipe down. Even if it really, really, really killed her to do so. She owed it to the people who had helped her get this far. She owed it to herself. And she owed it to her team that had been shoved in the Raft, though she doubted they’d thank her even for that.

Straightening her sleeves, she glared and made to move past him. “I need to get ready for my speech. So if you’ll excuse me.”

He blocked her by stomping one foot on the ground in front of her. “We are not done-”

“Oh yes we are,” she hissed, baring her teeth up at him. “We are so done. And you know what?” She pointed at his chest and smiled nastily. “You. Are done.”
Before he could blow a fuse, she calmly stepped around him and towards the concerned-looking group gathered outside of the ladies’ bathroom.

To their credit they didn’t ask if she was okay; she was simply herded back to the auditorium with a slightly more imposing group of bodyguards. They all knew this was going to happen eventually. She was just glad Ross hadn’t decided to pay a visit to the Compound because she doubted she could’ve slotted in any extra time to improve security in between working on Rhodey’s twenty-fifth prototype, the Accords, and B.A.R.F.’s recalibrations.

Hopefully she wouldn’t have to deal with Secretary Fucking Ross until a time when it really counted. And at that point, she would destroy him.

Natasha watched Toni straighten out her papers - parts of a speech, some notes, statistics and a mural of reminders scratched out in blood-red ink - at the podium.

There was a stillness to the room, like a bated breath, everybody just waiting for Toni Stark’s pitch, to see not just what she had to say but how she was going to say it. She’d kicked up an international roar by disappearing for a little over a month after her two public apologies over Leipzig and Bucharest.

This was going to be her first since the disbandment of the Avengers, since the civil war that had torn not just the team, but the world in two.

And Natasha had helped do that. Whatever happened in Siberia, that one event that had truly broken their family apart that she was too afraid to ask about...maybe it wouldn’t have happened had she not let Steve and Bucky go. Maybe if she’d tried harder to talk to her friends. Maybe if she’d been able to speak to Toni properly, come up with a gameplan, maybe-

She sighed.

Earlier in the bathroom, she had never heard Toni sound so vitriolic. Never expected it to be spewed at her. But it had been, and it had hurt.

She and Steve had always had a different kind of friendship. She loved Steve and she believed in him as a friend and as a leader. With Toni things hadn’t been easy. They didn’t click like she and Steve had. Then they’d cultivated something out of the catastrophic trainwreck of their first meeting, out of the lies that curled around all their interactions like thorns, out of bitter pasts and guilt and self-hatred.

They’d grown something special and strong.

And then they’d ripped it up out of the ground, roots and all.

“Hello, everyone.” Toni’s voice was quiet but strong. There wasn’t a trace of her signature snark or quick, sharp smiles. This Toni was honest. She had a cause, something she believed in; Natasha knew her well enough to read it on her face, in the stance of her body, in the ferocity in her eyes. You couldn’t fake this. At least Toni couldn’t. “You all know why you’re here today. We’ve been talking about the Accords, about contracts, about foreign policy and international law. And I can honestly say that a lot of this is new to me. Legalese isn’t easy to get through. It’s why I have an army of lawyers to make sure that I...that we, don’t mess this up.”
There was a smattering of quiet but sincere laughter, a few nodding of heads.

“We all know the Accords are necessary. But more than that I hope we all believe in them the same way that I do. Because the Accords are about protecting people; they are about making us accountable for our actions. They are about working with people, with each other, which is something we didn’t always do before. Not just myself and the Avengers but other organizations like SHIELD, for example.”

Across the room Natasha saw Coulson lean forward in his seat, Melinda May and Daisy Johnson beside him. It still gave her such a kick whenever she saw him. They hadn’t spoken properly yet, just briefly in passing when he helped get her another alias. But they’d need to remedy that soon. As if he’d heard her, he turned and met her gaze, holding it.

“We made mistakes,” Toni continued. “We made so many unnecessary mistakes. Maybe we couldn’t see another way. Maybe we were too focused on the mission. Maybe we should have pushed that little bit more.” She held up her hands. “But hey. We were only human.”

Coulson smiled and Natasha smiled back.

“Regardless of abilities. Regardless of all the tech in the world. Regardless of magic and experimentation and getting struck by lightning, we were only human. I thought I was doing the right thing by signing the Accords. But so did they. Captain America, Falcon, Hawkeye, Scarlet Witch and Ant-Man all thought they were doing the right thing too. Because before they are heroes, they are only human.”

It was a good speech, maybe a deeper insight into Toni’s true feelings when she wasn’t inundated by her own internal battles of betrayal, when she didn’t hate them all as much as she loved them.

Did she still love them?

“And one more person was also only human.”

Natasha frowned because she’d heard the speech front to back, left to right, up and down a dozen times and she’d never strayed from the script.

A holographic bust appeared above everybody’s heads, clear and impressive.

Natasha froze.

“Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes, ladies and gentlemen. The man I want to talk to you about today. A man framed and wrongly accused of a murder he did not commit. A man tortured and experimented on by HYDRA for decades into becoming the infamous Winter Soldier. A man traumatized and mutilated and violated and turned into a weapon. And he’s a man who Captain America himself defied all odds to save. Why?” Toni’s eyes were flinty and Natasha couldn’t decide whether this was because she hated the fact that she had to say these words or for some other reason entirely. “Because he believed in him. Because history failed this man and left him to the mercy of HYDRA, the organization who infiltrated our governments and our most trusted leaders and almost tore our world apart. We need to talk about this man because he was a good man who had his life stripped away until all that was left was a machine. We need to talk about this man because he deserves the very thing that Captain America fought for.” Her eyes were bright and her chest heaving and she looked like a supernova. “Freedom.”

The room exploded.

Natasha had forgotten - how had she forgotten - that the press was allowed in for Toni’s speech and
Toni’s speech alone, which meant that this would be everywhere.

Toni may not believe her own words. This might have been a carefully constructed plan to give the people something to talk about, something to fight for. But she delivered in a way only Antonia Edwina Stark could and she had barely scratched the surface of the afternoon.

Because the people didn’t want to hear Toni Stark spewing legal jargon and politics. They’d be hearing that for months to come.

No, they wanted Toni Stark to tell them a story. Because people loved stories.

And this, this was the perfect story to tell.

It hadn’t escaped Natasha’s notice, however, that not once, not once, had Toni looked up at the picture of James Bucky Barnes.

And suddenly Natasha had the vaguest idea of what had happened in Siberia.

“Fuck.”

It was past two in the morning when Wanda burst into Steve’s room, her eyes wide and glowing red while her magic crackled erratically around her and scaring him half to death.

“Steve! Steve! Wake up!”

He scrambled out of bed the first thing his mind going to being they’ve found us!

“What- what’s the-!”

“Dude!” Scott shouted, sticking his head in when Wanda ran back out, while Steve was kicking free of his blanket, and waving frantically. “Your pal called, the leather suit redhead. They’re on television, man!”

It took a moment for Steve’s sleep-addled brain to catch up with that string of words.

“What?”

He ran out into the living room where they were all gathered around the TV in various states of undress and sleep-wear. Natasha was indeed on the screen, her hands clasped professionally in front of her. Next to her was Colonel Rhodes - Steve heard Sam exhale a shuddering breath - and next to him was Vision - Wanda was practically pressed up against the screen, drinking him in even as she clutched her shawl tight around herself.

“And now we would like to call Ms. Toni Stark to the stand.”

Steve stopped breathing.

Because it was her.

Oh god, I left her.
She was right there, walking towards the podium.

She was wearing a white shirt and a dark blue pencil skirt and those shoes with the ribbon on the front. Steve remembered those shoes.

He could almost hear the clack, clack, clack of the heels against the floor of the Compound.

How could you, Steve.

Everybody’s heads snapped to the side when the door to their apartments opened and Aneka walked in followed by-

Steve took one step towards the door, surprise and confusion jerking his movements.

“Bucky? I thought the next session was-”

Aneka interrupted smoothly, if a little irritably. “My king requested that Sergeant Barnes be awake for the first airing. He may remain with you until Princess Shuri returns in two days.” She gave an uncertain-looking Bucky a nod, then left as quickly as she came.

Bucky looked him in the eye then cracked a small, quiet smile.

“Hey, Stevie.”

Steve strode over and enveloped his friend in a hug and Bucky, after a couple of seconds, returned it with his one flesh arm.

“Do you guys have to do this every goddamn time?” Sam asked with a roll of his eyes as they pulled apart.

“Shut up.” Clint hissed, sounding jagged and stiff, his eyes glued to the TV.

“Sorry,” Steve muttered, and the two of them situated themselves behind the couch that Clint and Scott had commandeered.

Bucky rubbed his palms on his thighs, something he’d started doing ever since they began taking him in and out of cryo more often. He flicked his gaze from the TV to Steve.

“D’you know what this is about?” he murmured quietly, brows drawing together. So quietly. Bucky was never this quiet.

Steve shook his head. “No idea. T’Challa didn’t tell me anything.”

“Princess Shuri didn’t mention anything the last time I was awake either.” He spoke slowly these days, measuring each word as if he was translating it from another language. Maybe he was.

“Shh,” Wanda shushed just as the hum from the TV audience died down.

Everyone was quiet now. Waiting. The silence roared in his ears as the camera switched to Toni once more, a better angle, closer.

Too close.

Not close enough.

She looked up, straight into the camera and Steve was lost.
“Hello, everyone.”

It was like forgetting how to breathe.

In the corner of his eye he saw Sam sneak a glance his way as if to gauge whether he was okay but no. No, how was anything okay?

“You all know why you’re here today.”

And why did it sound like she was talking to them? Why did it sound like an accusation?

How could you, Steve.

She said something bashfully funny and people laughed. Her eyes widened at the laughter and for a fraction of a second Steve saw someone he knew intimately well, a woman who hadn’t intended to be funny but was pleasantly surprised by the outcome. He’d seen that expression before and oh god, it hurt.

“Hey.” Steve looked up at Bucky’s barely-there nudge. “You okay?”

No.

He mustered a smile but it didn’t feel very convincing. Bucky dropped his gaze, then turned back to the screen.

She was talking about the Accords and Steve couldn’t help it but the name alone sent annoyance and irritation crawling up his spine. But he continued to listen. Because he hadn’t before. And because he just wanted to hear her voice after so many months of silence.

You don’t deserve that shield.

He heard all the buzzwords. Accountability. Protection. Avengers. SHIELD. Was that Coulson they’d just panned to? And-

“We made mistakes. We made so many unnecessary mistakes.”

Steve’s breath caught in his throat and he subconsciously leaned closer, briefly taking note of everyone else doing the same, hanging on every word.

He wondered what they were thinking, what thoughts were running through their heads. What they were extrapolating from seeing Toni, once their friend and ally, speaking on behalf of the team - Team’s broken, Steve.

- the way she’d done, had had to do so many times before. Because she was good at it. Because she knew what to say most of the time, and if she didn’t there was always Pepper or her PR team to help her make it up on the spot.

“But hey. We were only human.”

A wry smile, an apologetic smile.

“Oh, Toni,” he whispered.

“I thought I was doing the right thing by signing the Accords.”
He knew she did. He may not like it and he may never agree with it but he knew she just thought she was doing the right thing.

“But so did they. Captain America, Falcon, Hawkeye, Scarlet Witch and Ant-Man all thought they were doing the right thing too. Because before they are heroes, they are only human.”

“She knows my name,” Scott said in surprise. “I thought she-”

“Reckon everybody knows your name after Leipzig,” Clint supplied carelessly in an undertone. He had the phone T’Challa had given him in hand and his attention kept alternating between it and the TV. Steve often wanted to shout at him, what are you waiting for?

“And one more person was also only human.”

The camera switched to an overview of the entire auditorium, Toni a small speck in the middle.

And then-

Oh.

Oh.

Did you know?

A choked sound, like a punch to the gut.

Everybody looked at Bucky who had doubled over, bracing himself with one hand on the head of the couch. Steve had been going to reach out to him had it not been for the grief-stricken look of guilt on his face, so potent and so raw that Steve let his hand drop away uselessly.

“Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes, ladies and gentlemen. The man I want to talk to you about today.”

And there it was, rising up inside of him. A fear, a directionless desperation. Fear for Bucky; fear for his friends, fear for Toni - oh god, I left her - who was alone in this. Who had a plan because Toni always had a plan even if she had to pull it out of thin air in a split second and cling to it with jagged nails crusted with grease and blood.

“A man framed and wrongly accused of a murder he did not commit. A man tortured and experimented on by HYDRA for decades into becoming the infamous Winter Soldier. A man traumatized and mutilated and violated and turned into a weapon. And he’s a man who Captain America himself defied all odds to save. Why?”

He’s my friend.

So was I.

“Because he believed in him. Because history failed this man and left him to the mercy of HYDRA, the organization who infiltrated our governments and our most trusted leaders and almost tore our world apart.”

“Steve.”

His stomach dropped at the sound of his name coming from Bucky’s lips because he knew what was coming, and he felt caught in the shadow of a wave that loomed over him, threatening everything.
“No,” he rasped, and his hands gripped the backrest, which was accompanied by an anxious creak of metal and wood.

“Steve,” Bucky whispered, and the anguish in his voice made Steve close his eyes because why now. “We have to tell them.”

“We need to talk about this man because he was a good man who had his life stripped away until all that was left was a machine.”

“Steve, man.” He looked up and saw Sam’s apologetic face from across the room. “They have a right to know.”

The others, who had been torn between Toni and the evidently important exchange taking place behind them, were looking both irritated at the interruption and anxious, Wanda’s eyes flickering between red and grey-brown.

“Right to know what?” Clint demanded with a tremor, as he stood slowly. “What’s this about, Steve?”

Bucky gripped Steve’s shoulder with his one hand and for a brief, irrational moment, Steve had an ugly thought that Toni’s speech wasn’t for Bucky’s benefit at all but for this. This unraveling of trust, a form of vitriolic punishment towards Steve for what he had kept from her.

Oh god, I left her.

Just as quickly as it came, the feeling melted out of him, leaving a raw, hypersensitive film of resignation and loss. Because she was right there, god, she was right there.

“We need to talk about this man because he deserves the very thing that Captain America fought for.”

Steve, I-

“Stevie,” Bucky said in a voice so small and quiet but so stubborn and firm that he knew he wouldn’t be able to change his mind. He’d no right to do so. “It’s my decision.”

And Steve felt like he’d been making all the wrong ones.

On screen, Toni was a vision. Steve had never seen anything more beautiful than he did in that moment when she uttered one strong, breathless word.

“Freedom.”

The word echoed in his ears and through his body and in all the parts of himself that had hollowed since leaving Toni in that godforsaken bunker.

He looked at his team, his friends, the ones who had followed him and placed their trust in him and he had never felt less worthy. Wanda looked scared, Scott’s brows were furrowed in confusion and concern, Clint looked angry, he always looked angry these days, Sam was a solid pillar as ever and Bucky-

Even with one arm, even without the full extent of his memories, even when everything around them was going to shit, Bucky was with him. ‘Till the end of the line.

A thousand miles away, hours and hours ago, Toni was glaring upon a sea of flashing lights and loud
shouts and a flood of questions.

Alone.

Standing straight and stripping himself of all armor, Steve looked at his friends one by one.

“We need to talk about Siberia.”
Chapter Summary

The Compound gets somewhat of an infestation.

Chapter Notes

So. WHO HAS SEEN INFINITY WAR? It came out on the 25th where I live so I watched it super early and I've been killing myself waiting for the rest of the world to catch up so that I can flail and cry and scream and cry some more with everybody. I've already seen it twice but I'll probably try and catch it a third time because...research. And Tony. And Peter. And Doctor Strange. And Thor. And Peter Quill and the Guardians and just EVERYBODY. Because god damn, that movie.

Join me on tumblr so we can all cry together?

Also, just a heads up, there will be no chapter next weekend because I'm going on holiday to China (no Google, guys, why). And honestly, I deserve this holiday because I haven't had a break in a year and work has been killing me and also I need to recharge my batteries as well as my muse for this fic because I'm suffering from a serious case of burnout. I do apologize but, well, I've been working on this story for five months non-stop so far so burnout/block was bound to happen eventually.

I hope you all understand <3

As always, thank you for the feedback for the last chapter. Your words of encouragement mean more than you know.

As usual, any and all errors, spelling mistakes etc. are my own.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

T'Challa had partially expected Toni to pass out for at least three days after the UN talks were over, but she had managed to subvert his assumptions at almost every turn so he wasn’t entirely surprised to find her bent over one of her work stations with her legs crossed on the seat in a way that only children and tiny women seemed capable of doing.

There were multiple screens throw up around her, all of them videos of Spider-Man from different angles that she would alternate her attention to before working on a number of miniscule gadgets on the table.

In the corner a machine was weaving together a red and dark slate blue suit. There was already a pile of what he assumed were duds or faulty suits kicked haphazardly under another table.

“He is young, this boy,” he declared in place of a greeting.
The only indication of Toni’s surprise was the stilling of her fingers for a bare two seconds before they resumed their work.

“Yes.”

There was something stormy in her tone, a gray, deeply felt sadness that resonated with him, an echo familiar to the bleak emptiness he’d felt when his cousin had died at his own hands. How he wished he could have saved him.

“You care for him.”

Toni sighed and set her work down, gazing up at the screens that played and re-played Spider-Man’s endeavors.

“After we got back from the meeting on Thursday I got an alert that Spider-Man had somehow managed to get himself in trouble. I saved him from drowning near some fancy suburb.”

He came around to perch on the edge of her work table, trying not to make his disapproval at her evidently sleep-deprived state so obvious.

“I don’t recall you leaving the Compound.”

The edges of her lips stretched into a bitter smile. “I didn’t. I just sent a suit, plucked him out of the water and told him to leave the matter alone. Apparently someone’s been stealing alien tech to make weapons. I called the feds so they’ll be on it.”

T’Challa studied her face and her words, nodding slowly. “Why didn’t you go to see him in person?” When it was so painfully obvious she wanted to.

That garnered the appearance of a crack in her already thin exterior and he saw something vulnerable in the worried furrow of her brows and the slump of her shoulders

“Peter is…” Of course she knew his name. “Peter’s incredible. He’s so goddamn smart and funny and he’s a hell of a good fighter. But,” she cut herself off, running a hand through her hair agitatedly, “he’s so fucking young. And I brought him into a fight against people who weren’t holding back because I was so fucking naive and thought that it wouldn’t come to that. I coulda brought in a real heavy hitter if I wanted to hurt them but I didn’t. I used that kid.” She looked up and met T’Challa’s eyes and all he saw was self-loathing. “I don’t deserve Peter. I had no right.”

In the short time he’d come to know her, T’Challa had discovered many things about Toni. He’d seen the brash, sharp-tongued, quick-witted woman that he’d only glimpsed in the days leading up to the Avengers fight; he’d seen a woman whose regret and self-flagellation encompassed a space that was too big for her body and was ultimately undeserved; he’d discovered a softness, a gentleness and a beauty that he had little doubt Captain Rogers had encountered. But beyond all that was the irrational sense of responsibility that she alone had to carry the world and make it better. That she was the sole reason people came to harm.

She burned so brightly, brighter than the star in her chest.

He did not want to see her burn out.

“Maybe you did not have a right to interfere in this boy’s life and pull him into a war that he had no part in,” T’Challa conceded, and Toni’s form became, if possible, even smaller, as if she were a berated child. “But what’s done is done and he is a part of this, of your life now. You owe it to him to be honest. You either take away the suit you gave him or you take responsibility for putting that
burden on him in the first place and whatever decision you make, you hope for the best.”

The direction her mind was going was visible on her face and T’Challa marvelled at how far they had come in such a short time that he was able to identify it or that she was comfortable enough around him to let him see.

He reached out and touched her wrist, gratified to see the way her nervous energy seemed to subside beneath his palm.

“Whatever your decision, you’re not alone in this, Toni. If you bring him on board we will do exactly what we said we would do. We will take care of our own.”

She gazed back at him with faraway brown eyes before her mouth curved into a tremulous smile.

“I need to think about this.”

Leaning in close, he gave her a pointed but kind look. “Regardless of what you might think, we do have time.”

“Do we?” she asked quietly, and there was a jagged edge of desperation, so suppressed anyone else might have missed it. His eyes lingered on the way her fingers of her one free hand were digging into her thighs, a nervous tic he’d seen her do on more than one occasion. “I feel like I’m chained to a rock and trying to walk through quicksand and I just feel…” She closed her eyes.

“What, Toni?” He spoke softly like one might to a frightened creature ready to bolt. “What do you feel?”

When she opened her eyes T’Challa’s breath caught in his throat and the pure terror mirrored back at him.

“Like something bad is going to happen.”

Natasha felt like a stranger in her own home. Everywhere she looked, everything she touched and everything she did felt out of sync, like she was one step behind or too far ahead from where she needed to be.

Things were...raw between her and the others. The obvious issues with Toni aside, Rhodey was polite yet distant and there were obvious signs of frustration at his slow PT progress. Toni had paid the staff twice over to give Rhodey personal sessions at the Compound so Natasha had seen his struggles up close. It twisted somewhere deep and painful inside of her to see the military man, always so upright and solid, struggling to get from one end of the parallel bars to the other.

He lit up from the inside, his relief palpable, whenever Dr. Eccles let him practice with his neuroprosthesis, the support on the lowest setting. It even made her relax a little, just to see Rhodey’s spirits rise. Things weren’t great between them, but she counted the fact that he didn’t kick her out when she started monitoring his PT sessions as a win.

“I don’t mind,” he’d informed her breathlessly, his forehead dripping with sweat as he came and sat down next to her. “You’re…” He winced guiltily. “I’d rather you than Toni. She’s too... intense about the whole thing. Hard to concentrate. I can hear her thinking about all the ways she’s gonna
improve these babies. And I appreciate the hell out of it. It’s what she does; she fixes things and makes them better. She just…”


“Yeah,” he agreed. “You think I’d be used to it. I’ve been taking care of that girl since MIT. S’a long time.”

Natasha had hummed because she remembered a period when all Toni had was herself and palladium poisoning. Maybe that was all on her, though. She, like Nat, was good at pushing people away.

So things weren’t great between her and Rhodey. But they were on a level of understanding bolstered by her contributions towards the Accords and by the fact that she could have gone to Steve but, this time at least, had chosen to come to Toni and work things out as best she could from a place where she could actually make a difference.

Vision on the other hand felt like an entirely new person to the synthezoid she had once trained. He ignored her for the most part and spent most of his time either alone or with Toni. It hadn’t escaped her notice that Toni had been using his room as a base as opposed to her own. At one point she’d walked past Toni’s original quarters twelve times before finally suffocating the urge to look inside and see, and had gone to punch some bags instead.

But Vision was...different. And not in a way she felt particularly comfortable around. Not anymore. Nat prided herself on her propensity to strip a person down and see what they were made of and what they were hiding. Whether it was the fact that he wasn’t even human and therefore didn’t possess the same tendencies or whether he had just developed a spectacularly solid poker face in her time away, all Nat knew was that her usual skillset wasn’t going to cut it.

He seemed to have forgotten that she’d taught him everything he knew so she was completely aware that she was being watched.

Or maybe Vision knew that she knew and just didn’t care.

The thought was unsettling.

She’d worked it out, though, at least a small piece of it; Rhodey didn’t know what happened in Siberia. Vision did.

Rather than her best friend in the entire world, Toni had revealed that one vital piece of information to her most sophisticated creation.

There was really only one thing she could do at this point.

“I know what happened in Siberia.”

Vision and Toni slowly raised their heads from where they sat, shoulder to shoulder at the kitchen table, identical blank looks on their faces.

Neither one spoke so she sat opposite them and clasped her hands together on the table.

There were empty coffee mugs and glasses of half-finished juice, and paper and tablets scattered around them. She recognized some of it as Accords stuff, others as Rhodey’s braces, and she saw the word B.A.R.F. thrown around a lot. Some strange mix of emotions rolled around in her belly as
pieces slotted themselves together in her mind.

“Zemo told you, didn’t he?”

Toni leaned forward, elbows on the table as she rested her chin in the cradle of her hands.

“What did he tell me, Romanov?”

Natasha inclined her head.

“He told you about your parents’ death at the hands of the Winter Soldier.”

Toni didn’t even blink.

“Who else knows?”

“Other than you, Steve and Barnes, no one.” Natasha’s narrowed in on the subtle shift of Toni’s shoulders, like she was hiding a flinch. “That I am aware of. Besides King T’Challa,” she amended for the sake of clarity.

Toni nodded, mostly to herself. When Natasha risked a glance at Vision, she was pinned in place by his impenetrable arc reactor blue eyes. There was something dangerous there. How dangerous, she couldn’t yet ascertain. His quiet demeanor and near impenetrable facade had made him something of a wild card.

They’d have to deal with that sooner rather than later.

“I stayed with Laura after everything.”

Natasha blinked, then frowned, then held her breath, blindsided by the non-sequitur.

“I...what?”

“She let me in. I was half expecting her to kick me out on my ass. I’d have deserved it. She misses you by the way. I have a line I use to call her and the kids sometimes. Totally secure. You can borrow it. Gave one of my magical phones to Barton but last I heard he’s being a little bitch. Nothing new there but you’d think his wife would warrant a call.” She frowned like she found this particularly distasteful but Natasha was still trying to wrap her head around the fact that Toni had gone to Laura of all people.

Even she hadn’t tried to get in contact with her because-

“Hey.” She blinked and Toni was frowning at her with disapproval and something as close to reassurance as they could be at this stage of their relationship. “Don’t think too hard. I was a shit conversationalist at the time. I still am. She deserves someone who knows her better. Just call her.”

And because she had to be that person - because somebody had to be that person and it might as well be her - she tilted her head in the direction of Toni’s breast pocket, and she caught Toni’s fingers flex dangerously. It reminded her curiously of Wanda.

“You could call too, Toni.” She’d been expecting it when all traces of warmth seeped out of Toni’s body and she went rigid and cold, so she didn’t flinch. “Steve would answer,” she felt the need to reiterate. So would you would’ve been her next words but that might be pushing things.

Toni’s jaw worked for a moment but it was Vision who spoke.
"Captain Rogers indicated in his letter that Toni should call only if she needed him.” Vision cocked his head to the side a couple degrees in an approximation of a shrug. “We have not needed him.”

There was nothing she could say to that and the raising of Toni’s eyebrows seemed to say well, there you go.

Thankfully she was saved from having to come up with anything more when FRIDAY’s voice filtered through the room’s speakers.

“Boss,” she said, sounding as urgent as an AI could, “someone’s just landed on the roof. West Wing, Building B.”

They all stood. “Landed?” Toni demanded, already striding towards the door.

“Not an aircraft of any kind, Boss. They have wings.”

Natasha and Toni shared an alarmed look and took one of the rapid elevator shafts up. Vision could’ve flown but he seemed intent on sticking by Toni’s side and she couldn’t help but wonder- They made it to the roof and Nat had a brief second of panic when she realized Toni was barefoot in a t-shirt and sweats and had no weapons.

There was indeed someone standing by the ledge - a woman, Nat’s mind helpfully supplied - and she did indeed have wings, buzzing, fluttering things of beauty. They retracted and disappeared entirely when she turned around, and Nat had a spark of recognition when she saw her face.

So did Toni apparently.

“Ms. Van Dyne,” she greeted carefully, stepping forward, and Nat already could see her eyes breaking apart every single component of the other woman’s suit. “How’s dad?”

Hope Van Dyne stepped down from the ledge, her head gear under one arm, and strode over to them, assessing them one by one. She lingered on Vision for a second longer with unveiled curiosity before settling down on Toni.

“The usual,” she replied with a frosty smile that Toni imitated and hers was better.

“Still an asshole, then. Nice outfit, by the way. Modified carbon fiber and nanite webbing?”

“You want it?” Van Dyne challenged - flirted, Nat might have mistakenly concluded were it not for the dangerous flash in her eyes.

“We’ve already got a spider infestation. Might as well make a colony of it if you’re offering.”

“You’ll get Ant-Man too,” she said, and there was a note of stubbornness in her voice. “Once you get him back.” And that wasn’t a request.

“We’re working on it,” Toni answered and Nat knew it to be the truth since she’d been reviewing his case files only this morning. It was only a matter of time. For all of them.

Van Dyne nodded, coming closer and Nat was peripherally aware of Vision angling himself just right.

“I saw you on TV. It was a good speech, the one on Bucky Barnes. So were the rest of them.” She sounded like each word of praise was a handful of rusty nails in her mouth and Nat almost smiled.
“Thanks. I have a good team. And a Pepper.”

“I met her. She directed me here. She’s quite the CEO.”

That was a surprise; she would’ve thought Pepper would have at least notified Toni of the incoming. Unless of course she thought Toni needed the jolt.

“She is,” Toni replied with a cool smile, then with a flick of her wrist she brought up a small screen. It beeped twice before connecting her to Pepper.

“Toni.” She sounded calm, as if she’d been expecting the call. Knowing Pepper she probably had.

“Hey babe. Heard you had a little - well, a tall visitor this afternoon.”

“You received the package, then.” After a brief pause she prompted, “Did she fly there? Took her two hours. That’s…” Nat heard the smile in her voice. “Slow.”

In front of them Van Dyne crossed her arms, an irritated scowl on her already stern face.

“We’ll fix that right up soon enough. Say, can you get legal-”

“Already done. They’ve got the skeleton contract done up and are just waiting for Ms. Van Dyne's input. And yours.”

“Cool. Thanks, Pep.”

“Bye, Toni.”

Pepper signed off and Toni beamed at all of them.

“Well, looks like that’s settled. Welcome to the Avengers, Wasp.”

“How did you-?”

“You’ve got stingers,” Toni drawled. “Plus the wings? Also, Janet Van Dyne was a fucking boss and SHIELD didn't deserve her.”

Some unnamed emotion crossed Van Dyne’s face but it didn’t seem that she disagreed with the sentiment.

“So I’m in?”

Toni glanced between Natasha and Vision, both of whom nodded.

“We’ll have to run it by T’Challa,” Nat spoke for the first time. “But I don’t think it’ll be an issue. Your input will be helpful with Scott Lang’s case. We can start today, if you like.”

Van Dyne nodded and they all began heading towards the elevator.

“I just have one more order of business.”

Nat saw it coming a second too late, something that would piss her off for the next ten goddamn years.

Toni hit the ground before she had time to process the punch and Vision was already kneeling beside her and examining the side of her face which was turning a glorious shade of purple. Nat hissed,
taking a meaningful step towards Van Dyne, whose face was twisted into a sneer of anger, satisfaction, and above all, pain. And it was that that stopped Nat short of decking the woman herself.

“That is for getting my boyfriend arrested and keeping him away from his daughter,” she seethed quietly, and Toni let Vision help her to her feet, never taking her eyes off of Van Dyne.

Vision made to say something, and the particular stiffness with which he held himself would’ve expressed itself as sheer rage on anyone else, but Toni gave a slow, dark chuckle, wiping her hand across her mouth. It came away red.

“That was one hell of a punch,” she remarked idly, as if one side of her face wasn’t already swelling. “I hear where you’re coming from Hope. And I get it. I’d’ve done the same. But that was your one free pass.” She smiled and it wasn’t a nice smile at all. “Try anything else without asking first and I’ll blast a flamethrower in your face, got it?”

Nat knew she wouldn’t. Probably. But Van Dyne didn’t know that.

Van Dyne nodded and clasped her hands behind her back, composing herself with an ease that Nat was almost proud of.

“Won’t happen again. Boss.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Toni muttered, and Nat took that as her cue to lead Van Dyne on.

Before they entered the elevator, Nat heard Toni and Vision speaking quietly behind them.

“You stopped me.” Vision sounded more displeased and offended than Nat had ever heard him.

“Eh, I deserved that. Cassie Lang. Let’s get her a phone to her dad.”

Vision sighed, and Nat knew that sigh but couldn’t place it. “As you wish. King T’Challa leaves for Wakanda the day after tomorrow for the panel representation announcement. We can pass the twin to him then.”

“Thanks, Vision.”

“Anytime, Ma’am.”

Ah. The realization, the recognition, ghosted through her like a cold breeze through leafless trees.

Nat met Vision’s gaze over the top of a still chatting Toni’s head. He towered over her, imposing and protective in a way that rang familiar.

JARVIS.

If you’re nothing without the suit, then you shouldn’t have it.

She replayed the words over and over, just so she could memorize Peter’s face as she said them, in some morbid sort of self-punishment.
If you’re nothing without the suit, then you shouldn’t have it.

T’Challa had told her that she either needed to take the suit away or equip him with the tools and the protection necessary for him to use it. She thought she’d done that what with the training period and unlocking all the extras as he progressed and improved.

It had been a decision made in a moment of anger, disappointment and above all, fear. She’d fucked up. God, she had fucked up. Again. And no matter how many times she tried she just kept fucking up.

I’m nothing without the suit-

She sighed heavily and pressed the red fabric, still a little damp from bay water, to her forehead, wishing she could go back and erase that look of shame and misery and loss from Peter’s face. He hadn’t deserved that. Once again, she’d done what she thought was right, what she’d had to do. And she’d hurt someone in the process.

She could practically hear Cap’s disappointed voice in her head saying, when are you going to learn?

I just wanted to be like you.

And I wanted you to be better.

God, she felt like jumping off a cliff without the suit. Or groveling. In that order.

In a way she was glad T’Challa wasn’t around just so she wouldn’t have to see his I-told-you-so face, which he was probably too dignified so show anyway, but she’d certainly feel his disapproval.

Opening her eyes, she surveyed the suit before her with a heavy sigh, letting her fingers brush against the smooth, near impenetrable material. Hesitating for a bare second, she slipped her hand inside the mask and it came to life under recognition of her heat signature, the fabric stiffening and the visual mechanisms adjusting themselves.

Throat tight and tongue dry, Toni managed to rasp out two words.

“Hey, KAREN.”

After a moment, the AI spoke, her painfully warm, breathy voice weaving itself down into Toni’s soul, making her shudder with emotion.

“Hello, Toni.”

It was a beautiful voice, a kind and playful voice.

Her mother’s voice.

And giving it to Peter had been one of the easiest things she’d ever done.

“So,” she began, grinning down at the mask with misty eyes, “how long did it take Peter to break past the safety protocols?”

“It wasn’t all him,” KAREN replied with a note of amusement. “He has a friend; Ned Leeds. He’s a good kid. You’d like him.”

KAREN had a sophistication that she’d developed all on her own. Back when she was just known
as RIA, she and JARVIS got into more snark wars than she could count while FRIDAY played referee. RIA usually came out the winner but Toni suspected that JARVIS, who could spin words like a poet, just had a soft spot for her and FRIDAY was biased because she and RIA enjoyed ganging up on JARVIS.

Much like the real Jarvis, Ana and Maria Carbonell that she remembered from her youth with stark clarity. When things were better. When she was still young and the sun still shone and her family was good.

“I’m sure I would,” she whispered, wanting to keep this memory, this moment, pure from the encroaching darkness.

*A shield over her head.*

**Howard-!**

**Did you know?**

“Show me everything, KAREN,” she hastened, shaking her head of the memories, as if she could rattle them right out of her skull. “Everything Peter’s been up to. All his missions and small jobs. I wanna know it all.”

KAREN laughed that low, drawling chuckle of hers that Toni herself had inherited from her mother.

“It’s gonna take a while, Toni.” Then she added, so sincere and so familiar in its affection, “But he’s worth it.”

Toni knew that and she smiled. “Can we get an uplink, FRIDAY?”

“Thought you’d never ask, Boss. Nice to have you back... KAREN.”

The twittering of lights translated itself to AI laughter and Toni basked in the nostalgia of it as the first of Peter’s first person recording was brought up. She settled in the chair and just watched.

Six hours later Toni discovered more about Peter than she’d ever imagined and it only reaffirmed the notion that she had done good. KAREN had tastefully skipped past some of the more personal moments, and only shown her his multiple - and there were a lot - escapades. She enjoyed them all, winced and cringed and had her heart right up to her throat on more than one occasion. But he was spectacular, so much better than she had been at that age.

Even the bots had come to watch, their whirring both curious and intrigued by this young hero.

“See that, guys?” she’d told them, patting You’s CPU casing. “That’s Peter Parker. You’re gonna meet him soon, I hope.”

One of the newer bots, a little zooming cleaning bot named Rosie, was particularly enamored with Peter and chirped excitedly until Toni had picked her off the floor and set her on the table for a closer look.

Toni’s favorite moments, the ones KAREN let her linger on a little longer, were his quiet times alone as he swung between buildings and under bridges, or perched on the very top of buildings, watching the sunset melt into the molten metal skyline. Those were beautiful moments.

There was an intimacy to his hours at twilight, just feeling the world around him with new eyes every day. In one of the recordings he had climbed on top of the former Avengers tower and just
stared up at the full moon and sighed with such innocent reverence that Toni felt it radiate through the screen and into her.

When it was all over, the last recording ended on Peter’s view of the bay and the ferry that Toni had helped fix, right before she laid into him in a way he didn’t deserve.

“Thanks, KAREN,” she said quietly as the image disappeared.

“Always, Toni. It’s good to be back.”

Her eyes were drawn to the corner of the room, where an unfinished suit of red and slate blue-gray was draped across a table.

She owed Peter an apology, something she was phenomenally shit at. Because in the five languages of love she was the sort who showed her appreciation for people by making them shit. So by extension, her apologies tended to steer in the same direction.

“How’d you like an upgrade, KAREN?”

Bucky opened his eyes to the dim light of the biobed, the sequence still bouncing off the walls of his skull before dissipating entirely. It had been his twelfth session in the machine and his first since Shuri had returned from New York, her eyes wide and body thrumming with barely concealed excitement.

She’d given him a hastily spewed explanation, something that went like, “I have got so much shit to do but it is going to be incredible and you will bow before me,” and had disappeared into her lab for three days before finally calling on him.

Things in the team’s apartment had been...strained to say the least. Lots of emotions floating around, lots of discreet looks through the corners of eyes and lots of confusion and frustration and a whole lot of hurt. He’d been guiltily grateful when Shuri had given him the opportunity to get away from it all.

His and Steve’s confession about what had happened in Siberia had gone down about as well as anybody expected. Though their interactions were frictional at best, Bucky had been thankful for Sam’s calm presence through it all, keeping Barton from taking a swing at Steve, laying a gentle hand on Wanda’s shoulder when her eyes filled with tears, a conflicted expression on her face that Bucky had no way of deciphering, talking low and quiet to Lang when he practically collapsed onto a seat with his head in his hands, clearly thinking about his daughter and trying to reconcile his leaving her with his reasons for joining the fight.

There were words thrown. So many words thrown. And as much as he loved Steve from the bottom of his very cold and very unworthy heart, not all of them were undeserved.

He could still recall the way the it had come out, the hopeless honesty as the words spilled from Steve’s mouth, wretched and so, so sorry.

“Zemo played us. The other winter soldiers were already dead when we got there. He showed…”

His voice had broken partway through the sentence, like rocks chipping as they tumbled down a cliff. “He showed us a recording. It was meant for Toni.”

Wanda had been nervously twisting her rings around her fingers. “What recording?”
Bucky recalled the way Steve’s throat had worked around his next words. “December sixteenth, nineteen-ninety-one.” His fists had shook by his side. “The day Toni lost her parents. The day…”

Steve’s voice had cut off again and Bucky stepped up to his side, eyeing them one by one, watching as silent realization and horror dawned across their faces.

“The day I killed them.”

His ears still rang with the high-pitched tension of his confession.

“I knew,” Steve had said, so quietly, but it might as well have been a gunshot in a clearing. “I knew for two years. She...she asked me if I knew and I said yes. And then she was…” Steve closed his eyes and Bucky had wanted desperately to reach out and grip his shoulder but knew that nothing could heal this just as nothing would ever wipe away the image of Stark’s expression of utter grief and betrayal when Steve had told her, the way she had pressed her gauntleted hand to her stomach as if she would collapse with the pain of it. “And then we fought.”

Clint had nodded slowly, looking at Steve with something akin to cruel disappointment and disgust.

“Because she’d just seen your best friend murder her parents in cold blood,” he said slowly. Then chuckled, a mirthless and ugly sound. “And you knew all this while. Wow, Steve.”

And then the shouting had started because Clint had been so angry-

“What were we even fighting for, Steve!”

-and Scott had just sat there staring at his hands and had looked so self-loathing-

“What are we even doing here!”

-and Wanda had looked like she didn’t know what to think or whether to intervene-

“Tell me what we were fighting for! Was it for the Accords? Or was it for you?”

-and Sam had had to deal with it all because there was nothing that Bucky could say and neither could Steve.

So Bucky had stayed with Steve, broad, larger than life Steve who looked as small as that kid from Brooklyn in his guilt and in his grief.

Days later and he was still wondering how they were going to fix this.

The holo screen, which had the dual functionality of acting as a cover as well as displaying his vitals, disappeared and he sat up out of his melancholy musings.

“How are you feeling?” Shuri asked as she came up by his bed, her dark eyes alight with expectancy and intrigue.

He opened his mouth to answer, the strange sensation of the codewords being reverse engineered still lingering on the back of his neck and in the metallic taste on his tongue.

She frowned, looking worried. She needn’t have been.

“I feel...it feels good,” he admitted, lightly scratching his temple. “It’s...different from the last few times we did it. My head’s...clearer.” And it did feel clearer, like the fog being wiped away from a window. “And lighter.” He looked at her, not daring to hope. “Will it last?”
“We’ll monitor your neural activity over the next few days but,” she trailed off, something like hard-won relief in her smile, “I think it will.”

Bucky couldn’t help but smile, his breath coming out as an almost-laugh. “So I won’t have…I mean. I won’t,” he swallowed, looking for the words, “I won’t change into…”

Her smile dipped into an apologetic grimace and his mood sank with it. “The algorithm I’ve created will help to remove the effects the trigger words have on you and most if not all of HYDRA’s brainwashing with it,” she explained. “But the human mind is a complicated, complex thing. Other things could trigger you, Sergeant Barnes. Make you lash out or make you afraid. That’s…that’s how PTSD works. It’s what years of trauma does. And,” she sighed, looking sadder beyond what he thought she should ever experience, “that’s not something I can fix in this lab.”

It was gutting. And he felt like shit for feeling that way when Shuri had done so much, done more than he could’ve ever hoped.

“I am grateful, you know? For everything you’ve done,” he said finally, because he needed her to know that. This astonishingly brilliant and bright kid who could run circles around him without breaking a sweat. “With your help and now with this? I’m just…” he shrugged, letting the corner of his mouth lift in an imitation of a smile, the best he could do, “I’m just like every other person who’s been to war. And that’s…that’s a damn deal better than what I was before when I had to chain myself to the wall just because I was scared I’d turn in my sleep.”

The sadness melted out of Shuri’s face, turning it back into something warm and sweet. Then she rolled her eyes and sighed heavily, hopping up onto the biobed and glaring at the floor in irritation.

“I should probably let you know,” she said, and Bucky was momentarily caught off-guard by the abrupt change, “it wasn’t all me. I mean I developed the entire thing but…” She scowled. “My brother gave Stark my designs.”

He stilled at the mention of Stark, his mouth suddenly dry.

Shuri went on as if she hadn’t just dropped an atom bomb over his head, and to be fair she didn’t know the truth but it didn’t stop his muscles from stiffening as tension coursed through his bones.

“And she improved them and sent them back to me faster than the time it takes for T’Challa to say something cringy to Nakia,” she went on sulkily, kicking her foot out. “She modified my algorithm and recommended a higher frequency for the neuromodulator to deepen the reverse engineering process. With more sessions your synapses will eventually re-calibrate themselves - it’s completely safe, by the way, don’t look at me like that -” he hadn’t been looking at her at all; he’d been too preoccupied with his own tumultuous thoughts, “- to that frequency, and expel any traces of brainwashing. It’ll still take time but from my readings Stark has decreased that time by at least half.” She didn’t sound happy about it but Bucky was too overwhelmed to focus on that.

“Wait,” he interrupted, his voice sounding like gravel in his own ears, so rough that even Shuri looked at him curiously, momentarily brought out of her ramblings. “Wait,” he said again, blinking rapidly, “she- Stark’s the one who - does, does she know it’s for me? Did - did your brother-?"

“Are you al-?"

“Did she know?” he snapped urgently and Shuri startled, her eyes widening. “Did she know that she was doing it for me?”

Shuri stared at him, her brows furrowed, nervous and unsure, and Bucky felt a pang of guilt for his
unnecessary outburst but he just had to know-

“Yes,” she stated after a time, watching him carefully. “She knew it was for you. T’Challa told her what I was trying to do. She told him to tell me that if there was any way she could help she would be willing to. Very generous of her considering she’s the one who blew off your arm,” she added in a biting undertone that he was likely not meant to hear. “But anyway. I let him give her my designs. For someone whose knowledge of vibranium and Wakandan technology is so limited she caught up phenomenally quick. I suppose I shouldn’t have expected any less,” she uttered with a kind of bitterness that seemed solely directed at herself.

_Antonia Edwina Stark_, he thought with a quiet, carefully cradled sense of awe.

He’d had his reservations, a logical level of scepticism at her reasons for trying to clear his name and making it so public.

But this wasn’t public. She had no reason to do this. There was nothing to be gained, none that he could think of. She already seemed to have T’Challa’s trust and the two were making great headway with the Accords so he doubted there was anything in that arena that could possibly benefit her. He supposed that if the appeal for him to join the Avengers after his pardon went through then at least she wouldn’t have to worry about him going crazy in the field and trying to kill teammate and enemy alike but even that felt like stretching it.

Ultimately his one failure in trying to understand her justifications behind her actions was the fact that he didn’t know anything about her.

Howard Stark’s only child. The man seemed the type to have wanted a son.

_My wife-!

She was ‘Toni’ to Steve and ‘Stark’ to the others. There was an intimacy in the way Steve talked about her, a heaviness to his voice like the weight of a small bird held in the cup of his hands. Bucky had his suspicions about their relationship, but then he’d also seen Steve plant one on Sharon Carter so.

Other than the thick blanket of barely suppressed anger and betrayal that permeated the room whenever Antonia Stark was brought up he knew very little about the diminutive woman who had attacked him with such ferocity and rage and almost killed him in that Siberian bunker.

_Do you even remember them?

He didn’t know the woman who stood in front of millions and fought for his freedom. He didn’t know the woman who made Steve close his eyes in pain when she declared to the governments of the world that Earth needed the Avengers. He didn’t know the woman who had no reason to help him but who gave Shuri a way to fix him anyway.

He didn’t know her.

But he owed it to himself and most of all to her, to at least try to.

Licking his dry lips, he met Shuri’s eyes, pleased that her earlier wariness had worn off and was now replaced with genuine curiosity.

“What do you know about Antonia Stark?”
Can we just talk about Peter, please, and how much I love his relationship with Tony? I mean. I MEAN. I can't, guys, I just love the two of them so much.

Another little thing I added was KAREN's voice being Toni's mother's, or the mother whom she remembered from her childhood before things got complicated. I have a headcanon like Toni wouldn't have been outright able to call her AI Maria so she probably settled for 'Ria' because it was Howard's nickname for his wife.

Also Shuri! I love that girl so much and I have plans for her, let me tell you.

Hope you all enjoyed :)}
A storm rages inside of the impenetrable fortress of her mind, unknown to even her.

Hello! It's been a while but I'm back from my holiday and I bear gifts of another chapter. I didn't have much internet access while I was away (because roaming charges are extortionist) but I came back to find my inbox full of you guys' comments and kudos and bookmarks and I was over the goddamn moon and it could never possibly get old, so THANK YOU for reading and sticking with me this far. <3

Without further ado, on with the chapter~

P.S. as always, this fic is beta-ed by myself so if I miss anything, I do apologize.

“Sisipho Itobo,” T’Challa declared triumphantly as he glided into the meeting room, arms open wide in exaltation. “The newly-appointed Panel Head of Wakanda.”

Toni cheered and clapped her hands at T’Challa’s genuine happiness. She was joined soon after by Pepper, Hill, Natasha and Vision. Rhody gave an ear-splitting whistle and Hope gave a polite, if reserved clap, then set her hands back down on the table.

“And that completes the Panel,” Rhody concluded, browsing through the seven Panel heads and nodding at their credentials.

“And eight more countries ratified the Accords just this week,” Vision supplied with a nod that could only be described as proud. “We are, as they say, making very good headway.”

“Well, when we’re running on an average of three hours of sleep per night, we better be,” Natasha remarked dryly, and Toni could see the past couple of weeks of conferences and meetings with ambassadors had taken a toll on her. Her smile was pleased, though, and soft around the edges; Toni felt something achingly tight inside of her give way a little.

Even Hope, ever prickly and high strung didn’t look ready to jump across the table and throttle Toni. That felt good too. She was still settling into the team, made harder by her first impressions to Vision and Natasha and the dark blue bruise on Toni’s face that Rhody hadn’t been happy about in the least. But Toni had allayed everyone’s reservations when she had FRIDAY pull up scans of the Wasp suit. It was a beautiful piece of tech, complicated and finely-tuned in a way that Toni couldn’t help but admire. Once they were all on the same page about Hope’s capabilities, Natasha had promptly called for a training session with her and Vision.

The fact that Hope had held her own against each of them earned her respect at least and Toni was
pretty sure Natasha had upped her game when Hope had actually managed to clock her in the face. That had been hilarious to watch and Toni derived a smug sense of satisfaction when Natasha punched her right back, quick and deadly.

Afterwards she’d come to Toni and demanded a new set of widow bites.

“Make them more powerful than Wasp’s stingers,” she’d said shamelessly and Toni had struggled not to laugh.

When Hope spoke next, it was quiet but poignant enough to slice through the easy camaraderie that had enveloped the room.

“And what about...getting the others back here?”

It was funny how a well-meant question could alter the atmosphere so drastically it felt like a Dementor had just decided to sweep through and say hello. Hope’s mouth turned down at the corners ruefully, but her eyes were firm.

T’Challa blew out a puff of air, then sat in the empty seat beside Toni. “I’ll answer as much as I’m able to at this time. I’ve requested to sit on the Accords subcommittee. There will be seven others appointed by the Council, whom I’ve been told will all be neutral and objective members of the international public. That means we have three extra spaces which will be filled by Avengers. This will hopefully provide a more grounding link between us and the Panel and the Council and help us police one another more effectively. The Council has...made several remarks in passing that it might be prudent, at least for image’s sake, that Captain Rogers be on the subcommittee.” When he said this he looked at Toni, who stared back, so many things, **countless things**, currently whirring around in her head, like ants crawling through every capillary.

The silence reigned heavy for a long moment, everybody processing T’Challa’s words.

“Then that means-” Pepper said suddenly, leaning forward, alert.

“Is it for everyone or just Rogers?” Hope demanded, her hands gripping the edge of the table.

“When exactly are they making a formal announcement.” Rhodey asked, a conflicted expression on his face and his eyes darting between Toni and T’Challa.

T’Challa held up a hand, something Toni idly suspected was part of his royal training to get his counsellors chill the fuck out, but his eyes never left Toni, who stared back, too silently overwhelmed to think of a question or add anything conducive.

“I do not know,” T’Challa informed them heavily, “when they intend to release a statement, nor what it will entail. I was not privy to that string of emails. But apparently once we had sent President Ellis and the Council our formal statements, they got through Captain Rogers’ one very rapidly. As well as,” he added slowly, “Sergeant Barnes’.”

Toni averted her gaze, letting it fall on some unplottable point in the corner of the room.

She hadn’t cut her nails in weeks; the jagged, uneven edges were making painful indents into her thighs.

Vision, as always, was a lifesaver.

“It seems quite clear that the Council has already come to somewhat of a decision pertaining to the fates of Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes. It is unsurprising that they be the first to obtain
pardons, considering Captain Rogers’ status as a national and international icon. And as for Sergeant Barnes, Toni’s speech had twice the impact and reach that we anticipated.” He steepled his fingers in front of him; Toni saw it in the reflection of the glass wall. “They must be aware that previous events show that Captain Rogers will not leave those who followed him behind—” Her chest felt like a vibranium shard had just pierced right through the arc reactor and she rubbed the artificial bone around it, trying to discreetly catch her breath, “—in which case we can only surmise that their pardons will be following Captain Rogers’ and Sergeant Barnes’ shortly after. They will likely seek our...or at least an audience with Toni once more before making a firm decision.”

“But just because the Council pardons them doesn’t mean that they’ll be allowed back on US soil,” Natasha said, looking at Pepper who was already there.

“I’ll have legal draw up the paperwork for a presidential pardon. Toni and Rhodey are meeting with Ellis in a few weeks to discuss this whole...” Toni felt Pepper’s gaze on her. “**Thing.** So might be a good idea to bring this up to him first before, just to give him a heads up.”

Rhodey nodded. “And we’ll be bringing up the whole Ross deal. Once the others are back ho- here, their statements about the Raft will be crucial in giving Ross the boot.”

There were murmurs of agreement and nods but Toni wasn’t one of them because she was too busy trying to ease the sharp pain that felt like shrapnel trying to work its way out of the muscle of her heart and there was a tingling sensation in her left wrist. She almost jumped right out of her seat when T’Challa placed a hand atop the one on her thigh under the table - and whoa, she didn’t realize they were that familiar already - and squeezed her fingers until they released their vice grip on her bare flesh.

She finally looked at him and though evidently concerned, he did manage a smile.

“One thing at a time, my friends. We have come so far by doing just that.” Save for Toni, they both knew. “It will be a few more months at least before everything will be ready. And I agree with Vision; we should be ready for the Council to call upon us at least once more before the end.”

Months. It had already been four. How had it already been four months since Siberia? It felt like yesterday. And some days, when she was body-deep in tech and her fingers were stained red from sharpies and Vision had to half carry her as they went on their nightly walks around the Compound, Siberia felt like it hadn’t happened yet, like if she stopped moving, stopped working, just stopped, it would happen all over again, right around the corner.

*A shield over her head.*

*Howard-*!

*I remember all of them.***

*He killed my mother.*

Some days she felt like she was moving through quicksand. Other days she felt like the apocalypse stood behind her, a giant, a *titan*, larger than life, telling her all her friends were dead.

Today she felt like she was staring into a wormhole in the sky, her world consumed by black and cold, *so cold*, and alone, alone, *alone-*!

A gaping maw of darkness.

A place where time didn’t exist. A place where it was infinite.
Inside of her.

“I’ll protect you.”

She stood up, the sound of her chair screeching across the floor making the hairs on the back of her neck raise chillingly.

Everyone was staring at her with various degrees of alarm and surprise.

T’Challa looked ready to get up from his seat and, well, do something. Reach for her? Stop her?

Her left hand felt funny and her fingers were cold again for some reason and she absently rubbed them together, plastering a wide smile onto her face and surveying all of them.

“Right. Pardons. That’s good news,” she declared, her head feeling foggy. She blinked it away.

“There’s, uh. A lot to prepare for, then. We need to have those contracts sent to the others. And the most recent draft of the Accords. They’ll want to have a look.”

T’Challa eyed her warily then nodded slowly. “I will see it done. Perhaps Natasha can be the liaison.”

Natasha agreed immediately, but Toni saw her finger twitch against the armrest of her chair in a nervous tic. “Sure. Whatever you need.”

“Good idea,” she said, and there was a pounding behind her eyes. “Very...very good. Makes sense. They’ll listen to you.”

Natasha might have flinched. Toni didn’t know; she was busy trying not to throw up.

“Toni?” Pepper was reaching out for her, looking worried. “Honey, are you-?”


Without waiting for anyone to respond, she weaved her way around the table and left the room.

Her hands were shaking and she was pretty sure she was going to pass out.

The edges of her vision began to blur, a blackness, the darkest black in the universe, began to seep in, and she stumbled, catching herself against a wall.

“Boss? Boss are you all right?”

She shook her head and blinked rapidly against the night that kept closing in, closer and closer until she was inside of it, until it was all she knew.

“FRIDAY,” she gasped, stretching her hand out far in front of her but she couldn’t see it, she couldn’t see it, why couldn’t she see- “FRIDAY-!”

“Toni?” Pepper was reaching out for her, looking worried. “Honey, are you okay?”

She blinked, staring at a bunch of concerned faces from around the table.

“Shit,” she cursed, shaking her head, the fog dissipating, and she sat back down. The seat was cool; she didn’t think she’d been standing for that long. “Sorry. I’m, uh-”
“You look like crap, Stark,” Hope commented bluntly, but her eyes were narrowed in scrutiny. “When’s the last time you slept?”

Toni gave her a withering glare as Vision remained perfectly - too perfectly - still beside her. “Thanks, Pym.” She hated being called that. “And I dunno, maybe a year ago? Isn’t that the going rate these days?”

Hope rolled her eyes but settled down.

“Why don’t we discuss this further over dinner?” T’Challa interjected before they could all start talking again. “It has been a long trip and Shuri was telling me she was very much in the mood for that burger place you took us to last time.”

Toni gave him a grateful, if small smile, and rose unsteadily to her feet. “FRIDAY, call in and book out the restaurant for me, honey.”

“Already done, Boss.”

They filed out of the room, Toni coming up last after T’Challa. As the door hissed closed behind her she heard it, like an icy breath on the back of her neck.

“Toni.”

She whirled around so fast a sharp pain shot up her neck. Ahead of her was just an empty corridor all the way to the end, where it curved around the rest of the building.

Nothing there.

“Toni?”

She turned back, slower this time. T’Challa had a hand extended towards her, the worry on his face still present and now multiplied significantly.

“Are you well?”

The door hissed open again at her proximity, making her jump, and she released a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

“Fine,” she said with a snort. “Stupid door, is all.”

T’Challa seemed to accept her explanation and settled his hand on her back, leading her towards the rest of the group and away from whatever tricks her sleep-deprived mind was playing on her.

T’Challa and Shuri had been with her, discussing the upgrades they were going to be making to B.A.R.F., when she got the call from Happy.

“Hey, Hap, everything on sche-”

“Boss, the plane’s down!” Happy shouted through a bunch of noise that sounded like major traffic and sirens.
She stood abruptly. “What?” she demanded, and FRIDAY automatically pulled up the news of a large fire on Coney Island and the DODC plane in ruins in the sand. T’Challa and Shuri stood as well, looking between her and the live feed. “What ha-”

“I’m on site now!” he interrupted. “Boss, there’s Spider-Man’s webbing all over the-!”

Her heart jumped into her throat.

“What!”

“The stuff’s all contained,” he panted, like he was running. “There’s some dude tied up but no sign of Spider-Man.”

“You find him, Happy,” she ordered, already running out of the kitchen, and she could hear T’Challa and his sister following behind her. “You find him, god damnit, he doesn’t have the suit! FRIDAY, I need eyes!”

“Already on it, Boss,” FRIDAY responded immediately, her voice sounding almost hard. “Checking surveillance cameras within a five mile radius. Relaying all information to you, Happy and Vision.”

“Toni!” T’Challa called, catching up to her as she burst out of the main door of the Compound and skidded across the gravel to the Land Rover parked on the grass. She was vaguely sure it belonged to Hill. Her new quinjets were still under construction but she had one of her small jets, the Dagger, still stationed on top of Stark Tower but it would waste too much time to get it here and then- “Toni, what can we do?” he urged, opening the door for her to jump in, but she couldn’t think, she couldn’t think because Peter didn’t have the suit and this was her fault-

“I- I need- I need to find him. I can’t- I can’t just leave him- we don’t know if he’s hurt-” she stuttered, and her hands were shaking on the wheel.

Some unfamiliar emotion passed over T’Challa’s features just then but she didn’t have time to study it as he looked over his shoulder at Shuri, who was still standing, nervous and worried, in the open doorway.

“Be on standby; he may be injured. You have everything you need?”

“Yes,” Toni and Shuri both said at the same time.

Toni didn’t have time to dwell on that rare and momentous occasion of synchronicity, and tore out across the grass towards the gate before T’Challa had even fully jumped into the passenger’s seat.

“Vision, is he-”

“He is not at his home in Queens,” Vision promptly supplied from her phone, which T’Challa had taken from her. “I have directed Agent Hill to take a team down to the site for cleanup. She is sending her second-in-command, Agent Fern, down shortly and Ms. Romanov has already informed the Council and the Panel of the situation.”

“Councilwomen Ackerman and Ueno are the only ones who have gotten back to me so far but they’re saying that since it’s only an internal cleanup operation they don’t see an issue. Ellis dropped a line and told us to deal with it so we’re a go there.” Natasha’s voice was professional and composed and thank fucking god for all these people because her ability to think objectively had ended up on the wrong end of Thor’s hammer. In a more genuine voice she added, “They’re gonna wanna talk about Spider-Man, though, Toni. But I’m assuming you’ve already got that sorted.”
Toni violated about fifty traffic laws in the span of that one-sided conversation and T’Challa - seriously, thank god for the people around her - answered on her behalf.

“We’re close to getting the Guarantor Clause approved. Spider-Man will be under Toni’s supervision once she has had the chance to speak to him properly about it.”

“Noted,” Natasha replied. “We’ll keep this close to the chest until a formal contract has been issued. And Toni,” she said, genteling her tone, “don’t worry. We’ll find him.”

She swallowed thickly as she raced into the city. “Thanks.”

They were quiet for a while, a tense silence interrupted only by the occasional rapid typing and the odd comment on the other side of the phone. Even Rhodey had pitched in to say he and Hope were driving to the Compound to help out however they could. Somehow, in the midst of everything they’d come together, everybody lending their support in some way or another over one boy, over a kid who was, regardless of whether they’d met him or not, part of the team.

At least she hoped he would be after all this was over and he was done laying into her for taking his suit and putting him in danger and probably very nearly getting him killed. DODC’s, didn’t go down easy and who knows what kind of tech the would-be thief had on hand when Peter got to him. The fact that Happy had told her the guy was accounted for lent itself greatly to Peter’s skills but at what cost? What if he was hurt?

If you die, that’s on me.

She’d said it herself.

“Toni.” A hand reached across her and took control of the wheel. “Let me drive,” he said gently, maneuvering her with such delicate ease from the driver’s seat to the passenger seat that he’d gracefully vacated. He barely shifted the car. His seat was warm and this part of the car smelled of his cologne.

“I should’ve listened to you,” she said after a time - too long, everything was just taking too long - just before they reached Coney Island. FRIDAY and Vision had somehow managed to redirect traffic, giving them the fastest and most direct route. “You were right. I gave him the suit and I didn’t even,” she cut herself off and gazed at the billowing pillar of smoke ahead of them, aware that everyone on the other end of the line were probably listening in to her spewing her heart out to T’Challa, “I didn’t even train him how to use it. I should’ve taken responsibility for what I’d given him. Instead I just...I took away his only form of protection and he walked into this.” Closing her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose, she berated herself for her short-sightedness. “I mean what did I think he was gonna do? He wasn’t gonna just let it be. Peter doesn’t just give up and walk away from a fight just because some asshole like me tells him to. He’s...he’s so good. So goddamn good. He doesn’t deserve this life. N’ the world doesn’t deserve him.”

I don’t deserve him is what she didn’t say but T’Challa probably heard it anyway, the intuitive bastard.

“That is not for you to decide,” he said at last as the wheels met the sand and the feds jumped out of the way of his honest-to-god reckless driving. “And maybe you should’ve listened to me or maybe this is exactly what was meant to happen for both of you to come to an understanding of how this life, how Avenging, works.” He stopped the car and took her hand before she could jump out, surveying her with intense, dark eyes. “You made a choice but so did he. And the choices of children, I’ve come to realize, lend a unique insight not only into their thought processes and the morals that drive them, but into our own as well.”
Toni held his gaze for a long time, longer than she should have considering Happy was up ahead and waving at her in confusion.

T’Challa arched a brow at her. “Was that too much of Yoda?”

A hysterical bubble of laughter escaped her mouth in spite of herself and he smiled, apparently satisfied with himself.

“No,” she said, shaking her head and opening the door. “That was all you. I dig it.” With one last, fleeting smile, she jumped out of the car and ran towards Happy.

The Vulture - Toomes - knew Peter’s identity and T’Challa saw the moment Toni realized this in the hardening of her face and the warning in her eyes. He hadn’t explicitly revealed it but the implication was there.

Just before the police took him away, Toomes managed to break free of the restraints and grab Toni by the front of her t-shirt and hissed something in her face before T’Challa could intervene.

“You better keep that kid safe.” And that was an odd thing for a villain who had just tried to kill said kid to say. “There’s a lotta unsavory folks out there and if they find out the connection between him and you? They’ll use him to get to you.” He smiled and it was all teeth and T’Challa placed one threatening hand on his shoulder and another on Toni’s.

“Remove your hands from her,” he said, and Toomes let go, the police immediately grabbing his wrists and re-cuffing them behind his back.

“He’s your weakness, Stark,” he called tauntingly just before he was unceremoniously shoved into the back of a black police van. “And I won’t be the only one to see it. They’re watching right now.”

T’Challa caught her around the middle before she could go after him, fury and worry written in the furrow of her brows and her downturned mouth.

“What did he mean?” she asked and he knew she wasn’t asking for the right answer, just some modicum of understanding. “When he said people are watching, what did he mean?”

“A question for another time, Toni, we should keep look-”

“Boss, we’ve found him,” FRIDAY interrupted and Toni’s focus sharpened to a fine point. “Cameras just picked him up in Tudor Park. He doesn’t look so hot, Boss.”

She was dragging T’Challa towards the car before he had a chance to speak. As they pulled out off the beach, he saw Agent Fern and her cleanup crew arrive in their standard AMOTF vehicles. Toni spared a quick nod for her before they passed one another.

It took them less than fifteen minutes to arrive at Tudor Park, which would have been charming during the day but at night was not particularly well-lit and had more than one drunken or drugged up individual that T’Challa would’ve mistook for Peter had FRIDAY not been guiding their steps.

“Right up ahead under the jungle gym, Boss.”

Toni’s sharp gasp alerted him that she’d spotted him.
“I see him-!” She dashed off once more - she seemed to be doing a lot of that tonight and he seemed to keep running after her; strangely enough that seemed to be the general basis of their new but growing relationship.

Peter Parker - Spider-Man - was indeed under the jungle gym, nestled in the shadow of a miniature bridge and slide, wearing what looked to be a hooded vest over a blue one-piece pajama suit and through his worried exasperation at the boy, he came to understand Toni Stark in that moment, and the evident fondness she’d come to develop for him.

“Jesus,” she whispered, skidding to her knees beside him and gently taking his face between her hands. “Jesus, Peter,” she said again and, with the kind of care she usually reserved for when working with a particularly delicate piece of tech, she lifted his mask off of his head and made a strangled noise in her throat when she saw how bloody it was. “FRIDAY, damage,” she demanded.

“My scans are showing multiple cracked ribs and a broken femur. There seems to be some damage to his back, indicative of him falling from a great height or something falling on him. Severe bruising to his upper back and multiple lacerations, most of them superficial and his healing factor has already kicked into action. I am reading a mild concussion, however, so I recommend further scans once we’re back at the Compound.”

“Help me get him to the car.” It wasn’t a request and were she not clearly worried about jostling him and causing more damage, T’Challa suspected she likely would have and could have carried him herself.

She did the next best thing and sat in the back with his head cradled in her lap all the way back to the Compound. Every so often T’Challa would glance into the rearview mirror and see her gazing down at Peter’s sleeping face, or gently wiping away the dried blood with a wet tissue.

He woke only once, groaning and muttering and then squinting up at her deliriously.

“Ms. Stark?” he mumbled and her smile was strained.

“Hey, Peter.”

“Wh- wh’re you d’ng.”

“We’re getting you to a doctor. You’re gonna be fine, we just need to-”

He grunted, shaking his head and trying to sit up. “No, n-no doc- They’ll know-”

“Whoa, hey, easy. Not that kind of doctor,” she said, holding him back down which might have been difficult had he not been in pain. “You’re coming with me to the Compound. Get you looked over there by Black Panther’s sister, Shuri. She’s awesome, you’ll like her. Hell of a genius. You guys’ll have a lot to talk about.”

A warm feeling entered his chest. Shuri had been coldly polite to Toni during every interaction, something T’Challa had not anticipated in advance, nor was her certain of its origin. Every time he tried to speak to her about it she clammed up and remained mutinously silent. Toni never seemed to hold anything against her, though, never treated her with anything other than kindness and oftentimes genuine admiration. Knowing Toni did indeed like his sister and her verbal affirmation of the fact gave him nothing but pleasure.

He was sure, with time, they could come to be friends.

He spared a moment’s thought on that frightening concept.
“Black P’nthr? ‘E’s the...the cat guy...e’s cool.”

T’challa debated his feelings on being called the *cat guy* but attributed it to the fact that Peter probably thought this entire exchange was a dream anyway.

“Yeah,” Toni agreed, stroking his hair with an affection that T’Challa knew was hard-earned in its sentiment and made even more precious by the action. She looked up and he met her rawly vulnerable gaze in the mirror. “He’s the coolest.”

Shuri, Vision and Natasha had been waiting outside with a biodbed when Maria’s black Land Rover screeched across the lawn, narrowly missing a water feature that Toni had been complaining to Natasha about getting rid of, before it came to a halt in front of them.

To Natasha’s surprise T’Challa jumped out of the driver’s seat and opened the back door, revealing a messy-haired, red-eyed Toni with a bloody, unconscious *boy* in her lap.

“That’s Spider-Man?” Shuri blurted as T’Challa and Vision helped to extract the kid from the car and lay him onto the biobed.

Toni didn’t even answer, just started rattling off everything FRIDAY’s scans had already informed them and refused to leave Peter’s side as they raced to the Avenger’s infirmary, even though she looked almost as dead on her feet as Peter did.

Worry did that to a person but it was plainly obvious to Nat that this was something more than that. She’d already figured out Spider-Man had been a kid the first time Toni brought him in and she’d heard the excitement in his voice and seen the adolescent lines of his body, only on the cusp of broadening upwards and out.

Nat never really suspected Toni would have a soft spot for the younger generation. Harley Keener, what little Toni had deigned to reveal about him, was supposedly a hilarious smart alec that Toni kept in touch with and even went to see on his birthdays. Nat thought that was as far as her inclination towards children would ever extend.

But. Well. She’d been wrong about Toni before. This new revelation was, in its own way, expected.

What wasn’t, though, was how Toni, after she and Shuri spent the better part of two hours fixing the boy - Peter Parker - up and working around the spider venom in his blood, she refused to leave the room and had elected to sit right by his bed just watching him and “monitoring his vitals” even though FRIDAY could’ve done it for her.

“So that’s him, huh?” Hope said, coming up beside her and gazing through the window. “That’s Spider-Man.”

Nat nodded. “That’s him. First time I’m seeing his face.”

Hope’s silence was a thinking one, a soundless hum that felt like supple electricity in her ears. “Stark either felt like she didn’t have a choice or she really trusts us with his identity,” she surmised and Nat cocked her head to the side.

“How do you figure?”
“I spent eight straight days with her on the Guarantor Clause. His Highness brought it up during the first round of talks but we’ve been breaking it down even further. Doesn’t affect you anymore but for us masked guys who’d prefer to keep our identity from the public and the Council? It’s vital. I only got through sixty pages of her notes but I kept seeing Spider-Man’s name pop up.” Hope crossed her arms and jerked her chin towards where Toni was cleaning the blood and dirt from Parker’s hands. There was something very intimate about it. “She knew from the start that she wanted to be Spider-Man’s handler because she knew he was just a kid and would want to keep his identity a secret. The clause has a huge section on anonymity and even provides for where a masked hero doesn’t want his or her identity to be revealed to the team.”

She remembered that then and the realization and understanding came like gust of wind, the information and potential justifications neatly slotting themselves into her mind.

Toni had been privy to Peter’s identity, whether by his own admission or because she’d made the call and hadn’t given him a choice in the matter. Before giving him the new suit she had probably intended on clarifying just how far he was willing to let people, let the Avengers know who he was to make up for that.

Only this happened and now they all knew Spider-Man was Peter Parker anyway.

She’d wanted to protect him. And yet circumstances took that away as well.

Natasha pondered on the irony of it all, wondering why Toni had consecutive bouts of shitty luck and why the universe seemed to be out to get her at every turn when all she wanted to do was something good.

She had to learn one of these days that she wasn’t going to be able to control every situation she got herself into, that no matter how hard a grip she had on the reins, a bucking horse was going to throw her off at some point.

Sometimes you just had to let go.

Nat snorted to herself and Hope arched a brow in her direction.

She didn’t even think Toni knew the concept.

Peter woke in moments and waves, coming so close to awareness, a bare second away from breaching the surface to consciousness, before being pulled under once more, his body and mind both getting pulled along in the undertow.

“-and then there’s Rosie. She’s been dying to meet you. I think she might have a crush, you ladies’ man you.”

Who’s Rosie, he wanted to ask but couldn’t get his mouth to work.

“-the others will be excited to finally meet you as well. We’ll have two spiders on the team. Y’know. If you decide to join. I wouldn’t hold it against you if you didn’t. I’m a shit person but they still designated me team leader while...Well. You know.”

Peter liked that voice. He knew that voice. And it sounded sad. It made him feel sad too.
He opened his eyes into a dimly lit room and someone talking, the sound muffled slightly. There was a warm feeling by his ribs and he blinked slowly in confusion at the dark lump there where the voice seemed to be emanating from.

“-I’m also working on something pretty cool with Vision at the moment. The security level’s above my own pay grade. It’s pretty legit. Thank god for Vision. Been trying to contact Thor to help out but no luck so far. Plus I’m not sure he won’t throw me through a wall once he hears about that whole civil war fiasco.”

Peter’s mouth felt like sandpaper and he licked his lips a couple of times before speaking.

“I wouldn’t let Thor throw you through a wall.”

The woman jerked upright, the arc reactor creating two colorless pinpricks of light in her wide eyes. Shoving the hood of her blue MIT hoodie back, she slid closer until he could see her face more clearly. Her hair was a mess and her eyes were puffy and she looked like death warmed over but gosh, Peter still thought she was one of the most beautiful women in the world.

His heart might have skipped a beat - or several - when she clasped his hand in hers while the other smoothed back his hair. That felt really nice. It felt familiar, like she’d done it before. Something about a Black Panther and a car and a memory behind a veneer of pain and confusion.

“How’re you feeling?” she whispered and he made a brief mental check of his body.

“I think I’m okay. Where are we?”

“She Compound,” she replied. “Happy told us what happened to the plane. What you did. We went to find you.”

He frowned. “Why?”

She inhaled sharply, squeezing his hand. “You didn’t have the suit. I wasn’t sure if- I know you’re enhanced but I saw the wreckage and I thought- I know you’re thinking?” Before he could answer she continued, her words a messy ramble of nerves that reminded him of Aunt May. “No, I know what you were thinking. You were doing the right thing because that’s just what you do, but fuck, I think I lost at least ten years of my life tonight. And- oh crap, you aunt doesn’t even know where you are, she’s going to be shitting bricks-!”

“I was supposed to be staying with Ned tonight so it’s all good,” he interrupted, his words slurring slightly. “I’ll be fine by tomorrow. She won’t even notice a thing.”

“That’s no- Jesus, that’s not the point. Speed healing’s great and all but you could’ve, you could’ve called me and I would’ve come help-”

“I lost my phone somewhere and I didn’t have KAREN, but you would’ve been the first- Oh shit, Ms. Stark please don’t start crying-”

“I’m not crying,” she snapped, slapping his hand away then grabbing it back again and examining it with laser-like focus. “I’m just,” she choked and sniffed, “I shouldn’t have taken away the suit. I was supposed to protect you and I was just running on fumes that day and made a shitty call and I should never have taken away the suit because of all the people on the entire fucking planet you deserve it the most.”

The vehemence and earnestness of her tone stunned him as best as he could be stunned considering he was fairly certain he was on woozy painkillers.
“No I didn’t,” he admitted, feeling foolish and dumb but also incalculably warm that she’d *looked for him*. “I didn’t at the time. I thought I could- I mean. I got big-headed and thought if I just proved myself to you that I was...that I could do this...” he trailed off sheepishly, feeling heat creep up the back of his neck and suddenly very grateful for the low lighting. “You were right to take away the suit back then. It didn’t even...I was kind of a jerk.” He shrugged, the motion causing his collarbone to twinge uncomfortably. “Plus I got my friend to bypass your safety protocols. Uh. Sorry about that.”

She chuckled. “Yeah, I know. KAREN told me.”

“KAREN told on me?” He felt vaguely offended; he’d thought they’d had something special.

“I asked her to. And in the interest of transparency, and you can totally be mad at me for this in addition to my other shitty actions but I think you’ve realized by now that I’m a piece of shit and invade people’s privacy and never ask for permission.”

“Um.”

“I asked KAREN to show me recordings of your heroic escapades,” she admitted immediately. “For...science. Kind of.”

“Oh,” he said, then went red in the face because- “Oh.”

“She didn’t know me anything private; she wouldn’t have even if I’d asked. And she sensored a whole lot;” she quickly told him, shifting guiltily on her seat. “Not the swearing, though. But who am I to judge?” Toni nibbled her bottom lip and Peter narrowed his eyes. “I swear I won’t do it again. This was purely a one-time thing. I’ll...” She gestured vaguely, awkwardly with one hand. “Ask. Next time. Unless it’s life or death, like you’ve lost your mask and have been taken captive by an evil octopus and need saving.”

The image made him laugh out loud and even Toni cracked a small if fretful smile.

Peter trusted KAREN enough not to reveal some of his more embarrassing escapades, including karaoke in the mirror with his mask on because god, that was the most cringe-worthy thing and Toni could never see that. Ever.

He wasn’t mad, per se. But then he was still drugged up. And Toni did seem sorry about everything. More than she needed to be. And she’d sworn not to do it again, so.

“It’s fine.”

Toni glared but it was mostly to herself. “It’s so not fine-”

“No, seriously, Ms. Stark. It’s fine. I trust KAREN. And I trust you.” He shrugged, feeling weird for saying it but somehow needing to reassure her that that hadn’t changed.

She laughed, and it was high and somewhat disbelieving, embedded with an emotion that Peter couldn’t quite grasp. “You’d be the first. But I appreciate the sentiment, Petey.”

*Petey.* Only Uncle Ben ever used to call him that. He liked the way it sounded coming from her.

“Listen,” she continued with a dragged out hesitation reserved for people being taken to the gallows, “I know you’ve...probably seen the news and all that stuff on the Accords and contracts and all.”

He nodded because Toni’s speech had caused the biggest stir since Captain America defied a
hundred and seventeen countries over his best friend Bucky Barnes. The incident, and Toni’s disappearance for a whole month, had given him a whole load of feelings and Happy’s reluctance and the way his voice got all shaky and emotional whenever he tried to extract anything, anything at all about Toni only fueled his anger at the man further.

“So, uh, you know that I’m trying to push forward the Guarantor Clause. Which basically means that minors or masked heroes need someone to vouch for them before the UN.”

“Ye-es,” he said slowly, his muddled brain taking a bit longer to connect the dots. And then it came to him. Oh.

Toni maintained her focus on her hands wrapping and unwrapping the bandages around Peter’s wrist.

“Look, I understand if you don’t want to join the Avengers anymore after...everything. But I just wanted you to know...there’s a place for you here. We’d be lucky to have you on the team and I’d vouch for you. Or, it doesn’t have to be me, I mean Rhodey’s awesome and so’s Vision so if you’d prefer one of them-”

“Yes, ” was him emphatic response before he could come up with a better one. He backtracked when she looked up at him, hurt, followed by bitter resignation, flashing across her face. “No, wait, I didn’t mean that. I mean yes, I want to join the team and yes, I want you to be my voucher. I’d sign now but I think you’ve cut off the circulation to my fingers and that’s my writing hand.”

“Oh, fuck, sorry,” she stumbled, unwrapping his hand then, before she could grab a new roll, brought it up to eye level and squinted at it, the wonder in her eyes a glowing, blue light. “Wow. Speed healing sure is something, huh?”

He refrained from mentioning anything about the million and one times she must’ve seen it up close with Captain America and even Black Widow.

“Listen,” she said, putting his hand down. He sort of despained at the loss. “You don’t need to make any decisions now. Just. Get some sleep and we can talk in the morning.”

He nodded, letting her entertain the notion that he was going into this with his big boy pants, even though he’d made his mind up months ago.

Before she left, his eyes already getting heavy as she made her way to the door, she added in a soft voice that made his heart soar,

“For what it’s worth from someone like me? You did real good, Peter.” She smiled. “I’m proud of you.”

Chapter End Notes

Shit is starting to go down. I hope Toni’s brief foray into madness wasn’t confusing for you? It worked in my head but, well.

Also, lol, are presidential pardons as easy as all that? In this fic, apparently they are.

And finally my boy, Peter~ I honestly love him so much, he is so precious <3
You Still Get To Be The Hero

Chapter Summary

"Why do you hate him so much?"

Chapter Notes

I've kind of been waiting to post this chapter since I first wrote it, almost entirely because of the first and last scenes. Also. Plotty things happen. Kind of. More notes at the end so I don't give anything away, lol.

As always, all spelling/grammatical errors are my own.

Like she knew he would, Peter became part of the team through a combination of hilariously exuberant introductions and being wildly capable in training sessions.

Rhodey, whose legs were getting back into shape quicker than before thanks to Shuri infusing Wakandan technology into Toni’s prostheses and linking it up with a new and improved War Machine armor, had started joining in on training with the others when he wasn’t in PT. It was kind of adorable how bug-eyed Peter got when Rhodey walked out in his new suit. Even Hope was impressed.

With Peter around the Compound three times a week, Toni found she had to split her time even more between the Accords, multiple projects that she had going on with each of the Avengers, making sure the Compound was up to standard in terms of maintenance and safety - especially since she and a group of SI engineers had their own secret project under the grounds of the Compound, which was really not so secret since they’d practically excavated the landscaping a little beyond the West Wing, much to Happy’s horror. Still, no one but she and her SI group knew what it was.

Then there was B.A.R.F. and most days Toni was blessedly distracted from the Barnes side of things and had immersed herself instead in the study of Vibranium in its various fascinating forms and interweaving Wakandan tech into it, now that she’d had T’Challa’s permission.

She hadn’t even asked. It hadn’t even crossed her mind to ask because, well, her dad was a liar and a thief and she was almost entirely convinced that the Wakandans would shoot her on sight because of sins of the father and stuff. Although now that the secret of Wakanda was out - she’d been in the back next to Everett Ross and they’d traded suitably snide comments back and forth before T’Challa’s historical reveal, for which she and E. Ross had then tried to outdo one another in the volume of their cheers - and T’Challa had informed her somewhat about T’Chaka’s own mistakes, maybe they’d retract the shoot on sight order. Maybe.

The point was that she didn’t want to ask T’Challa for another favor, especially for something as sensitive a topic as Vibranium. So when he’d given her an entire crate of the stuff she’d taken a step back and shaken her head because, Pussycat, I'm the worst person you could possibly give this to,
what are you thinking, are you okay?

And he’d laughed and kissed her on the forehead - her heart might have fluttered - and told her that it was a well-deserved gift for being able to synthesize Vibranium in her lab while half-dead. The gift of actual, real - holy shit it glowed the same color as her arc reactor - Vibranium felt sorely disproportionate to her achievements. She might have gone all misty-eyed but T’Challa was too much of a gentleman to mention it.

So then there was B.A.R.F.. And Shuri. And Vision. And hours upon hours in Toni’s lab, which she’d had to extend and partition off just to hold the machine the size of fucking Alaska. It wasn’t just one machine, though. It had consisted of a dentist’s seat, which Toni had promptly scrapped and replaced with a more comfortable lazy boy chair because she doubted Barnes would appreciate the HYDRA parallels, however unintended; a bunch of screens would help her monitor and record Barnes’ vitals and brain patterns, and rather than a pair of glasses, she and Vision were creating a streamline dome that hovered over the circular space surrounding Barnes’ chair, which would both tap into Barnes’ memories and project them around him so he could literally immerse himself in it.

Had she made it for anyone else she would’ve thought it was fucking cool.

But if she tried hard enough she could almost convince herself that she was doing it for herself and not for her parents’ killer.

I remember all of them.

“Why do you hate him so much?”

Toni blinked, momentarily forgetting that there was someone else in here with her until a distinctly female-shaped shadow fell across her. She pulled her hands away from where they’d been installing a series of floor sensors. Vision was training with Rhodey at the pool so it was just her and Shuri.

She’d sort of thought the situation between them was always going to be this reserved, chalky thing, like two distant cousins forced to share the same space. At least from Shuri’s perspective, seeing as Toni had to repress all her fangirling over Shuri’s brain and her tech and her style and just everything about her, and admire her from a lateral distance and try not to step on her toes. Teenagers were fucking scary. Princesses doubly so.

Swallowing, Toni spun around until she could gaze up at Shuri, arms crossed, jaw hard and a scowl to rival all scowls present on her striking features.

“Um,” she said unintelligently. “I beg your pardon?”


Fragile glass bursting into a million pieces echoed in her ears. Her fingertips were cold. Her left hand was tingling unpleasantly.

“What makes you think I hate him?”

T’Challa wouldn’t have told her.

“I can see it,” Shuri replied immediately in a snake-like hiss. “Whenever we are in this room. Whenever you stop working for just a moment, I can see it on your face. I know what hatred looks like. It looks like you wish you didn’t have to be doing this, building this.” Her hand gestured at the room and Toni followed the line of it.
They’d built something amazing here. Something decades ahead. She should’ve been proud of it. And she was sometimes, in quiet moments when her hands were moving and her all she could see was what was in front of her; an implement, a screw. It was when her eyes registered what was in their periphery that the illusion disappeared.

She’d been trying not to project. Clearly her efforts had been for nothing.

“Why do you like him?” she reverted, keeping her tone light and curious. Because evidently Shuri had a soft spot for Barnes and if she was going to be spending copious amounts of time with him in the future she deserved to know at least one thing about him that wasn’t the Winter Soldier.

Raising her chin defiantly, her eyes flashing gloriously, she replied with such compelling certainty, “Because he is my friend. Because he is good.”

The unlike you hovered wordlessly after and Toni grabbed it, letting it settle in the pile of self-loathing that she kept somewhere in the pit of her stomach.

Gesturing for her to continue, she settled into a more comfortable position on the floor, legs pretzled and her expression patient.

“I have seen him try so hard, every single day, to fight the monster he believes he is. Do you know he actively tries not to touch people because he’s afraid he’s going to kill them?” she demanded, the color high on her cheeks in her fury. “Can you even imagine that? Even when he is himself. He refuses to touch people, to shake their hand or stand too close to them because he is afraid of what he thinks he might do.” There were tears in her eyes now and a bone-deep disappointment in them that Toni drank up and let seep into her pores until it belonged to her.

“He asked me about you, you know?” That made Toni freeze. “He wanted to know why you, of all people, would want to help him after you nearly tried to kill him. After you very nearly succeeded. Why? Why would you do that?”

He killed my mother.

“I was angry.”

Shuri sneered in disbelief. “You were angry.”

He killed my mother.

“Yes.”

“At him. For what?”

He killed my mother.

“Things I couldn’t control. Things he couldn’t control.”

It wasn’t him. HYDRA was in control of his mind!

“So you admit it,” Shuri declared with almost desperate triumph. “Whatever it is that made you want to kill him. He wasn’t in control. It was HYDRA.”

I don’t care. He killed my mother.

“Yes,” she answered truthfully, even though the words felt like the worst betrayal as the image of a
metal hand closing around her mother’s throat played itself in an endless loop behind her eyes. She wanted to be sick. “Why does how I feel about him matter to you so much?”

Something vulnerable cracked through Shuri’s veneer of righteous rage, something young, too young, that made Toni want to reach out and tell her that it was okay.

“Because I saw what hatred did to my brother. I watched it. He called me, you know? After my fa—” Her voice broke and her hands were clutching the hem of her t-shirt, twisting tightly as she were gripping at the very foundations of her only remaining strength. “He called me and my mother. We had already seen it happen but he still called to let us know. And he told us who did it. Who he thought did it. And I…” Shuri stopped, her words trailing off in a whisper, her whole body shaking with the invisible weight of grief so powerful that it transformed her face into someone Toni didn’t recognize and yet was intimately familiar with, someone who should never have had to experience so much so young. “I wanted to kill him too.”

She came forward, taking something small out of her pocket and as if their minds were linked for a second time, Toni knew what it was before Shuri dropped that cold, dead weight into Toni’s hesitant, outstretched palm.

It was one of the smallest and most powerful weapons she had ever created. It was also one of the most cruel, crueler than the one Obie had used on her. It was one of the reasons she had destroyed all of them. Or thought she had.

“Where did you get this?” she breathed, rolling the externally innocuous sphere between her fingers.

Shuri swallowed thickly, staring down at the thing as if it was the source of all her pain. “It was found ten years ago at the height of Obadiah Stane’s weapon smuggling. One of our War Dogs had been present for the arms deal and notified my father. He sent a group of Dora to take care of it and bring the weapons back to Wakanda. When he saw what it could do he had them all destroyed, except for one. In case...I do not know.”

Toni nodded slowly. “So you took it.”

“Yes.”

“And you were going to use it on Barnes.”

“Yes.”

Toni looked up and met her eyes. “But you didn’t,” she said softly and Shuri shook her head.

“My brother called me before he brought Sergeant Barnes back to Wakanda and told me that he was innocent and that Everett Ross had the real man in custody. I didn’t believe him. Not until he brought him to my lab. Have you ever seen an injured lion being taunted and attacked by one of our war rhinos, Stark?”

Toni couldn’t say she had. But she had seen the personification of it before. She wondered if it was as upsetting. She expected Shuri’s image was even more so.

“No,” she said, squeezing the sphere dangerously tight in her fist. “I have not.”

Shuri gazed down at her with dark, glittering eyes.

“He looked like that. And you had done that to him.”
It was the truth. She’d attacked savagely. With claws and teeth and rage and the need to make someone else hurt as much as she was hurting. She’d been in that moment the kind of person that Captain America hated; a bully.

No wonder he’d left her there.

But you don’t just leave, her mind screamed even as it warred with the more tender parts of her soul that hated itself.

How could you, Steve?

Maybe she’d never be able to reconcile those parts of her. The dark places inside that hated James Barnes and hated Steve Rogers with the large, looming cavern, the shape of a cave in Afghanistan, that hated herself for what she’d done.

Maybe she’d always hate them for what they had taken from her, for what he’d kept from her. And yet maybe, just like T’Challa had told her, she would do the right thing anyway in spite of her feelings. Because all she ever wanted was to be good.

Because he is good, Shuri had spat.

Because James Barnes was so good that Captain America fought the world for him to prove it. Because had their situations been reversed...James Barnes would not have done what she’d done.

I remember all of them.

Would she have?

“Why did you do that?” Shuri asked again, with a kind of yearning that Toni didn’t understand until she said, with such fragile loss that the revelation rang in her head, clear as a bell, “You were supposed to be better.”

Ah. Well.

That was what this was.

“I’ve watched you since I was a little girl. I saw the things you told all those old white men who tried to take your company away from you and use your mind, your brilliant, magnificent mind, to their advantage. And you told them to go fuck themselves. I saw you after Afghanistan, how you chose to destroy your father’s legacy because you didn’t want to be an instrument of war. And I saw,” her voice cracked and Toni heard the sound of breaking glass, “I saw you fly that nuke into outer space. I was fourteen and I cried until I was sick because I never got the chance to meet you and I wanted to show you all my inventions. And then you did come back and you continued to save people. Not just to complete a mission but save people. The people on the street who get forgotten. I saw you in Johannesburg and how you kept trying to drag the Hulk away from the city because you wanted to save them and because you didn’t want their deaths on your friend’s conscience. Because it was not his fault and you knew that even monsters could be and deserved to be saved. I saw and I studied every single call you made,” Shuri told her like her heart was breaking. And maybe it was. “Because you were the hero I wanted to be. You were the woman that I wanted to grow up to be.”

And that. A young woman’s crushing disappointment over Toni’s failure as a hero and as a human being. That was infinitely worse than if Shuri had just hated her for being mean to her friend.

“But I am not going to be like you,” she whispered with a fire that was so like her brother’s and yet so uniquely and beautifully different. It was a conviction, a truth branded into her very bones. “I’m
smarter than you. I’m going to be better.”

In the silence that followed Toni just watched Shuri; she was a culmination of so many wonderful things. There was a kindness to her that Toni never had, a genuine and unrepressed wonder for life and all its mysteries and possibilities, there was strength and love and genius. Toni gazed at her and wondered whether, if her father had only been proud of his daughter rather than envious, if her mother had spent more time with her, time that Toni had yearned for because she loved her so much, if Ana had taken her away to her country more often, if Peggy had put her above SHIELD, if Jarvis hadn’t died when she’d needed him most, if her parents hadn’t been murdered by the Winter Soldier...if she would’ve ended up like Shuri. Loved. A genius nurtured rather than secreted away because she couldn’t be cleverer than Howard. If she would’ve ended up good.

But there was no use thinking about such things.

When she smiled it came surprisingly easy.

“You are smarter than me.” Shuri looked taken aback and Toni got to her feet. “You’re fucking awesome, Princess Shuri. You were never going to be like me. You’re always going to be better.”

She threw her weapon up in the air then caught it again. After a breath of a moment she handed it back to Shuri, who took it with a wary expression.

“I’d tell you to be careful with that but I already know you will, Princess.”

Just before she walked out of earshot, she hear a hesitant but sincere, still mistrustful, still pained, “It’s Shuri, Ms. Stark.”

It didn’t make anything better but it was a start.

“Just Toni, Shuri.”

Vision found her four hours later in Lab B after FRIDAY’s alert, floating silently across the room until he stood by her side.

“How long have you been working on this?” he asked in a quiet voice reserved for sanctums and other holy places.

“Months,” she replied and she certainly looked and sounded like she’d been awake for months on end, which he knew to be untrue seeing as they’d spent every night together for the past four.

With all their projects, hurried meals and countless phone calls and negotiations, Vision couldn’t help but be surprised that Toni had time to do something like this.

“It’s made with Vibranium,” he observed. “Partially, at least.”

“After T’Challa’s gesture of generosity I...finally found a way to incorporate a lot of things I wanted into the suit,” she agreed. “Powered by its own arc reactor like the other suits. But more...resilient.” She paused, then added in an undertone he was sure he wasn’t meant to hear, “I’d like to see a couple of super soldiers have a go at this.”

In the corner of the room, a Vibranium shield glinted coldly and Vision spared a moment for human
emotion. Look, Steve Rogers, he wanted to say. Look what you’ve done.

Perhaps one day he would.

Instead, he asked her, “What will you call it?”

“Mark 0.”

He looked down at her, surprised. “You initiated the Clean Slate Protocol?”

Toni nodded and smiled ruefully, the first sign of emotion she’d expressed so far. “The others are locked underground. I couldn’t destroy them. They were…”

“Special,” Vision finished for her.

“Yeah.”

Vision eyed the new suit, its black and gold sleek, sinuous lines, the hum of activated Vibranium coursing under the surface. It was the only suit that bore somewhat of a beautifully feminine silhouette and Vision wondered at the meaning behind it, what message it was intended to send.

“Wanna take a fly with me?” She smiled, and it was warmer this time, not tainted by the layers upon layers of compact guilt and pain and exhaustion. And Vision found himself smiling in return.

“I would love to.”

---

Toni only got to test the Mark 0 once before shit hit the fan the very next day and FRIDAY was alerting them all about a major blackout in New York City and the Roxxon Energy Corp building right in the center of it. Also, the building and the ones next to it were on fire and there were reports of men in black suits holding people hostage in the upper R&D floors.

Evidently not a drill.

There was very literally chaos in the streets because taking out all the traffic lights within a five-mile radius in during lunch-hour rush would do that. Natasha had already gotten the okay from the Panel while squeezing herself into a suit and Toni received a call from the mayor herself so they were a go all around.

And Toni was terrified.

Thankfully Rhodey was Rhodey and Natasha was just equally good at thinking up battle plans on her feet so they hopped on their sparkly new quinjet and headed to town, picking up Spider-Man along the way, who literally catapulted himself off the top of a building into the quinjet’s open hatch.

“The Commissioner’s issued evac for three blocks but I heard them say there are still people stuck in two other buildings, not including Roxxon,” he informed them, tossing his walkie-talkie - she really needed to get him a better one - to the floor and coming to stand by her. “Pretty sure all the lower floors managed to get out but fire or damage is blocking those at the top.”

“Nice work,” Rhodey snapped professionally as they were coming up on the damage. “Me and Spider-Man’ll take those trapped either side. Iron Man’ll relay scans of the buildings to us and keep
them from coming down with us inside. Vision you take Roxxon with Wasp, Widow and Panther. We need to know who these people are and what they're looking for.”

There was a round of abruptly-muttered approvals with an undercurrent of electric tension that was hardly present in the old team and shouldn’t have been present in her or Natasha, but they hadn’t had a mission in ages and this felt like a final exam after skiving school all year.

The only one who seemed upbeat, fondly enough, was Peter, who was practically bouncing on the spot.

Just before they landed in the middle of a spot the police had cordoned off just for them, T’Challa grabbed her arm and surveyed her up and down with a proud smile. In the suit she was just as tall as him. Which meant she’d be just as tall as-

“I like it,” he said, and there was an almost magnetic attraction between their suits from where he was touching her. Strangely enough it calmed her nerves a bit. “It suits you.”

“Was that a pun, Bagheera?”

She saw a flash of teeth right before his mask flickered into being and they went to work.

Toni sped to the nearest officer who looked to be in charge and though he gave her a double take, he immediately informed her of the damage so far. People in black suits. They’d blown up a truck carrying diesel right outside the building to create a diversion as they swarmed in the front entrance. When she took to the air she could already see fire trucks coming down from all four sides.

“FRIDAY’s showing life signs on levels sixteen through thirty of Roxxon. Huge cluster on the top three floors; I see the hostages. There’s a stairwell on the west corner that gives you a free access until the fourteenth floor. After that use the elevator shaft. Spider-Man, there’s a collapsed stairwell on level eight blocking escape in your building.”

“Got it!”

“War Machine, you’re gonna have to punch open a hole; stick an IOU somewhere and I’ll see about picking up the tab.”

“I’ll pay you back; might take a few years, though,” he joked as War Machine smashed through the side of the building.

Something exploded, sending marble blocks and debris onto the officers below and Toni had three seconds to grab a couple of feds before they were flattened.

“FRIDAY, what was that!” she shouted, popping her faceplate up and glaring at the gaping hole in the side of Spider-Man’s building.

“Boss, structural integrity of Gunner and Maxwell at forty percent; sensors suggesting some type of thermobaric bomb. The building isn’t going to hold for much longer.”

“Spider-Man, what’s your status?” Toni demanded as she flew around the building, shooting a compound at all the strategic points to keep the building intact for just a bit longer.

“Sending the first group of people down now! Iron Man, can you-?”

“Already there, Aragog.”
Peter had constructed some sort of sticky net containing a dozen frightened civilians at a time and practically shoved them out of the gaping hole in the side of the building. She swooped by, grabbed the tail end of his web and ferried the traumatized group to the ground, letting the medics take care of the rest.

“Next batch ready, Toni!”

“No names in the field, Spider-Man,” Rhodey admonished as he brought down a bunch of civilians.

“Oh, right. Sorry, Mr. War Machine sir!”

Toni couldn’t help the grin as she heard Rhodey’s unintelligible grumblings through the comms.

“Cutting in,” Hope snapped in a tense voice, and they could hear the rapid flutter of her wings. “Found the bad guys. They’re, fuck, they’re HYDRA. Heard the salute and all.”

“HYDRA?” Peter blurted with a startled surprise they all felt. “Are you seri- Oops, sorry, sir, keep your hands inside the spider-net at all times, please and thank you-”

“It’s HYDRA, all right,” Natasha grunted to the sound of someone getting knocked out in the background. “And they’ve got a lot of weapons I’ve never seen before.”

“Better than the new bites I gave you?” Toni sang and she could practically see Natasha’s wicked smirk.

“Never.”

“From what I can ascertain from Roxxon’s files, only one of their more recent inventions has the highest level of encryption and over seventy terabytes worth of documentation. It is some form of energy containment field-generator, not dissimilar to the casing of your older arc reactors. I am transmitting the information to the Compound now for later analysis.”

“Huh,” Toni managed as she brought down another one of Spider-Man’s human packages. “Took them longer than I imagined to get to that stage. Thanks, Vision. How about you give me a summary of said seventy terabytes of documents, eh?”

Vision gave a despairing sigh. “As you wish. I am now attempting to aid Black Panther in extracting the remaining civilians. We should be able to clear the rest of the floors shortly.”

“Noted- oh shit! You better get on that fast! I’m detecting another bomb-”

Toni didn’t know what she was seeing, but one moment the lower half of Roxxon’s glass exterior was vibrating with an expanding explosion and the next there was a flying man in a red cape who definitely wasn’t Vision, levitating in front of where the glass should’ve shattered and impaled everyone down in the street...but didn’t.

Instead there was a giant, bright green sphere wedged in the side of the building, containing the explosion that seemed to be occurring at an extremely slow pace.

“What the hell?” she whispered, landing on the ground in front of the lines of public safety and emergency service personnel were standing, gazing up at the scene in awe.

“What was that?” Hope snapped in her ear. “I felt a-”

“On my way.”

“Iron Man!” Peter called, effectively snapping her back to attention. “Last group! Not sure the floor’s gonna last much longer.”

A second later Rhodey’s tense voice sounded in her ears. “Ditto on my side. The building’s shaking real bad. I’m hearing a bunch of micro-explosions. This thing’s going down! Iron Man, get everyone back-!”

Toni watched in horror as a series of smaller explosions spanning the height of Rhodey’s building went off from top to bottom, sending the upper floors crashing down.

“Back! Everybody get back now!” she shouted, shooting the larger pieces of debris into harmless dust before they could compromise Roxxon and the tentatively contained explosion that was still going on inside that green sphere. Seriously what the fuck was that thing?

“Stark.” Red Cloak Man turned into Goatee Man as he floated down by her side and opened up giant orange sparkling circles – what the actual fuck – in front of him, then proceeded to fling them towards the building like frisbees. “Or should I call you Iron Man? Love the new suit, by the way.”

Toni squinted at him. “What?” she asked stupidly as the debris seemed to fucking disappear into the glowing discs as it fell, leaving the majority of the street and all the aid workers unharmed.

“It’s very sleek. Almost like a catsuit. Big fan of your work on the Accords, by the way. And of you in general. Went to a couple of your conferences but never got the chance to introduce myself. Can I sign one of those contracts?”

“What?” she asked again, taking a moment of relief when Peter swung down from the building with the last of his rescuees. “Who the hell’re you?”

“Oh, right, introductions. I’m Doctor Strange, former neurosurgeon, currently a sorcerer and recently-appointed Master of the New York Sanctum. Hence, my appearance here.” She twisted her head to look at him and he had the gall to fucking smirk. “You may have heard of me. But you can call me Stephen.”

Toni started at the name and glared at him.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

He smirked and sent her a decidedly obnoxious wink.

“Not one bit.”

Steve watched Toni step out of her new suit. He liked it; it was stunning, and she wore it like a second layer of skin. They’d seen War Machine - Sam hadn’t taken his eyes off the screen, his expression alternating between relief, regret and joy - Spider-Man, Natasha and Vision so far. He knew T’Challa was there somewhere, but he seemed to be doing a good job of keeping away from the cameras. Wasp had entered one of the frames for a brief amount of time and Scott had whooped and cried at that short, barely three-seconds worth of footage.
He’d been in a much better mood ever since he’d been able to make contact with his daughter, Cassie.

Then there’d been the guy in the red cape with the glowing hands, the one who somehow managed to contain an entire explosion within what looked to be a globe made of green light. That had been new, and Steve had seen the way Wanda’s eyes tracked his movement with a raw kind of wonder.

The young newscaster was in the way and Steve had the absurd urge to stick his hand through the screen and shove the man aside just so he could get a closer glimpse of Toni in the background as she stood facing the new guy.

“He’s got powers,” Wanda said quietly, almost to herself. “Some kind of magic.” The excitement in her tone almost made him smile.

But Steve couldn’t smile. Ever since he’d told everyone the truth, smiling felt taboo and it was like his face had forgotten how to anyway.

Instead he watched Toni with the same, if not stronger kind of hunger, of yearning.

She was saying something to the newcomer but all Steve could hear was, “- and SHIELD arrived moments after the disaster, and were seen taking several of the alleged bombers into custody. At this point nothing has been revealed about the bombers’ identities-” and it was the most irrationally annoying thing. The man said something to her, grinning arrogantly in a way that made Steve grit his teeth, and Toni arched that familiar, disbelieving and wholly unimpressed brow.

Steve watched the movement of her lips. He thought she might’ve said something like we should talk but he couldn’t be sure.

“This is the first time you’ve been seen publicly as a group since May. Is this the new face of the Avengers? The new team after Captain America and the rest of the Rogue Avengers left?”

Rhodey was on screen now, frowning and unamused. “There’s no such thing as a new team or an old team. Look. You’ve heard our stance during the UN talks; we’re working to bring the rest of our team home. But yeah, we have some new faces because we need them. Nothing wrong with new blood and these folks’ve proven themselves more than worthy. The Panel thinks so too.”

It was as if the room had released a breath it didn’t realize it was holding.

Rhodey’s words rang in his ears. There was no such thing as a new team or an old team. A part of him had felt, after seeing this group, headed by War Machine and an unrecognizable Toni, almost lost. Replaced.

So it was good to know, at least from Rhodey’s point of view on the camera, that that wasn’t the case.

When the news switched out to some situation in Lesotho, Clint disappeared off into his room as he’d taken to doing these days, but not without a tired but genuine look at each one of them - except for Steve - before he left.

Bucky was in a lighter state of cryo while Shuri was in the US, so Steve left the apartment feeling restless and frustrated. He went down to the gym where the Dora sometimes trained; Okoye and Aneka were with T’Challa this time but Ayo, ever stoic and dispassionate, was practicing with a staff.

He spared her a nod before heading over to the punching bag which Shuri had reinforced at the hook
so he and Bucky wouldn’t keep knocking them from the ceiling. There were far more advanced machines in the room but for this at least, he liked to play it old school.

So he practiced, punched until sweat was dripping down the side of his face, drenching his t-shirt. He practiced his kicks; roundhouse, side-kick, crescent kick, which made his lower back twinge until he repeated the motion on both legs, forty times each. He did sequences, his body sinking into the familiar actions until all thought vanished from his mind save for the intense awareness of his muscles, the minute corrections in trajectory and the lessening or arching of angles when necessary.

Countless faces, opponents, appeared before him: people whom he’d beaten, a few he’d lost against for some reason or another. Eventually Ayo stepped in, jerking her head towards the mat and swiftly stepping in as his partner. She was an excellent fighter, her movements rapid and her hits quick and snakelike. She may not have had his strength, but she made up for it by going for his balance, getting the drop on him more than once.

“You’re getting better at our style.” Ayo’s voice was an explosion of noise in his ears.

He huffed. “You’re getting better at your own style.”

Ayo didn’t say anything but one corner of her mouth was raised in what might’ve been a fraction of a smug smile as she executed a series of fluid moves, nearly tripping him in the process.

“You are angry today,” she observed. She tended to do that: observe and then voice her own observations.

“Am I?” he asked tightly, crouching low to swipe her feet.

“More so than usual,” she said flatly, jumping over his leg. “You watched the news. Saw your old team.”

A muscle twitched in his jaw but he didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to.

“You’re angry at them.”

He just barely caught and deflected a kick to his sternum, hissing as the impact of her foot stung his palm.

“You’re very talkative today,” he shot back.

“I’m just doing it to distract you.”

“From what?”

“From distracting yourself.”

He arched an eyebrow in her direction.

“You’re trying to get me to talk about my problems.”

The despairing roll of her eyes almost made him laugh.

“I’m not a therapist,” she said, but it wasn’t a no.

“I don’t have any problems that need talking about.”

“That in itself seems to be a problem. Additionally, you seem to have conveniently forgotten that you
and five of your friends are currently labelled international terrorists and are hiding out in a country that has only recently revealed its true self to the world.” She sent him a dry look followed by a punch that got him in the ribs. “You are essentially pampered prisoners. A gilded cage is still a cage.”

“Lady Hale,” he remarked with a with a winded wince. “Nice.”

She pulled herself out of fighting stance and cocked her hip to the side, regarding him coolly. “You are angry today,” she repeated expectantly.

Looked like there was no getting out of that. Steve sighed and stood up straight, absently rubbing the bruise on his side.

“Yeah,” he admitted after a while, looking off into the corner but seeing a replay of the Avengers on the news. “Not sure at what though.”

“Yes you do.”

He gave her a withering look. “I’m angry at a lot of things.”

“You are angry at your friends,” she steamrolled. “You are angry at yourself. You are angry at the situation; you believe you should be home. Helping.”

“I see why you’re not a therapist; you keep telling me how I feel.”

“Now, you are feeling defensive.” She boredly examined her nails. “And you are deflecting. You. Are. Angry.”

He heaved a heavy, agitated sigh. “Yes. Yes, I am angry. At my friends, at myself, at the situation. Because I shouldn’t be here.”

“You think they need you. Your friends. They didn’t for that situation.”

“Yeah, well, not every situation is going to be like that.”

Ayo surveyed him with slightly narrowed eyes. “Your ego is surprisingly large if you think you are required in every apocalyptic situation.”

“That is not what I m-”

“But if you truly wanted to be back home, something tells me that you would be. After all, you could always ask my king to drop you and your friends somewhere outside our borders for the authorities to pick up.”

“How would getting arrested help?”

“Don’t be dense. Toni Stark has been very vocal about your friends’ detainments without trials. You would get a trial. And if not you would find some way to keep your friends safe while being a vigilante as a huge gesture of defiance to the world.” She looked down her nose at him despite being slightly shorter. “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Had he not already seen it coming he might have flinched. “I don’t agree with the-”

“With the Accords,” she interrupted for the umpteenth time. “I know. The whole world knows. There are even people who support you. Some for very good and valid reasons some simply because Captain America is a national icon and could never do any wrong. But that is not the issue. The real reason why you have not returned is because you are afraid.”
“Of me and my friends getting arrested, yes, I am afraid—”

“No, not of that,” she said slowly, her eyes never leaving his. “You are afraid that when you go back home, things will not be the same. And that terrifies you.” Her lips spread in a poor imitation of a smile and Steve felt his insides twist. “Poor Steven Rogers,” she taunted. “The man out of time. Once was devastating but twice might be too much to bear. You are afraid that the people you knew, the people who trusted you, no longer will. That they have changed beyond recognition. You are afraid that the chasm between you is irreparable.”

Irreparable.

It was like a blow to the gut, the way it used to feel when he was five foot nothing and his reach practically non-existent and every fight ended up with him in a heap by some ripe-smelling dumpster. Strangely enough it felt like relief; relief that someone else could accuse him of what he refused, was too much of a coward of, to say to himself.

“Yeah,” he said, feeling the fight slip down his shoulders, into the heavy weight of his arms and onto the floor. “Yeah.” He slumped down onto the floor, suddenly so very tired as he gazed between his knees.

After a long moment Ayo spoke again, her voice barely a decibel gentler. “I am not saying you do not have a right to be angry at your friends, at yourself, at the world or at the Accords. I am not saying that your fear is baseless. But you have changed too, these last few months. And this fear is useless. Because surely, Steven Rogers, Toni Stark has proved over and over again during the last few months that this,” he looked up and saw her hands open in front of her, “is not irreparable.”

Steve, I-

Because that’s what Toni was, it’s what she did. She fixed things.

It’s what she’d always done for better or for worse.

Compromise where you can.

Toni had done that when she signed the Accords. And he had refused.

And if you can’t don’t.

Then she had planted herself like a tree in front of him, looked him in the eye and told him no. You move.

Maybe it was time. Maybe it was time to take that step back.

Back home.

Back to her.

“Do you think,” he said thickly, his mouth as dry as sandpaper, “you could get me a copy of those Accords?”

If she had been anyone other than Ayo, Steve suspected she might have smiled.

“I thought you would never ask.”
SO. Shuri! ❤ Some of you might already know this but I love Shuri so much. But I wanted to angst up her character just a liiiittle bit because we didn't get to see much about how she'd felt after her dad's death in Black Panther so I wanted to give her something a little different here. I hope this chapter gives a little bit of an insight into my take on her and the reason why she was so stilted and cold around Toni. I think disappointment in an icon, in someone you BELIEVED in is a pretty powerful thing, especially when it's someone you looked up to and wanted to be.

So yeah. I hope this clears things up a little. :)

Also Stephen! I said I would and I did. Because honestly, how could I possibly leave this wonderful man out when I have so many plans for him? And after that swoon-worthy wink in IW? God, yes.

As always, thank you all for your support and your wonderful comments. I'm honestly amazed at how many of you have mentioned shipping IronPanther in this fic and honestly, your excitement is infectious and I've already been thinking about where to timestamp an IronPanther spinoff from this fic because dear god, T'Challa would make SUCH a wonderful boyfriend ❤ So thank you all for inspiring me!

Also what did you guys think about Ayo? I love the Dora Milaje so much and Ayo's "Move. Or you will be moved" in CACW was one of the BEST things I've ver seen. That woman takes no shit. I'm kind of disappointed she didn't get much of a speaking role in Black Panther but hey, we got to see Okoye kick ass, so that was cool. ❤

Anyways, updates will start getting a little more spread out after this chapter, mostly because I'm still in the process of trying to write the next one. I've got a bunch written for AFTER but seeing as writing chronologically hasn't always worked well for me, this was bound to happen eventually ;/

Still, thank you for your continued support and for taking the time to read and leave lovely comments and telling me all your theories. It's so exciting to know that people are enjoying this fic and I'm ever so grateful for every single person who has taken the time to read my little story xx
Chapter Summary

She isn't even trying, and maybe that's the trick. Because Toni keeps acquiring more and more people through no effort of her own.

Chapter Notes

So I'm back with another chapter! Thank you guys so much for your patience and your kind words and encouragement from the previous chapter, especially since y'all knew I was struggling to get this chapter out. Even now, I'm a little hesitant about posting because half of it was written about two months ago and the other half only finished today, so I've never asked this before, but please be gentle with me on this one?

Anyways, the next chapter shouldn't take as long as this one, seeing as everything's entirely written and just needs a few tweaks here and there. And also, things will be picking up soon and I'm really excited to see what you guys think when we get into the nitty gritty of the story.

Without further ado, on with the chapter! I hope you all enjoy :)

As always, any spelling/grammatical errors are my own.

Natasha’s eyes never strayed from the screen; her expression was blank but Toni knew her well enough to see the way she broke the interrogation down to its smallest working parts, memorizing every nuance in the perpetrator’s tone, every facial twitch and analyzing every single one of his words as Toni might analyze a piece of tech.

Toni recalled many a situation where Natasha’s singular brand of interrogation was required. She recalled the way Nat would smile, the way her voice would soften with an almost beguiling warmth as she made her marks feel victimized and wounded enough that they opened up for her. Then just as quickly she would strike with ruthless cruelty and Toni would smile because they always looked so betrayed.

Toni likened Coulson’s interrogation of the HYDRA agent to a polished stone that cut a violently-rushing stream in half, right now the middle. He was consistent, patient to the point of frustration, and all the while that calm slope of a smile never left his features.

She knew that smile well and imagined that it only served to further irritate his victims as it once did her.

“How long have you been planning this heist anyway?” Coulson asked, sounding genuinely interested in hearing the answer, though Toni knew that the light-heartedness of the query was finely staged. “I’ve gotta say you didn’t do it very well, all things considered,” he remarked, flipping through his tablet. “I mean this isn’t really HYDRA’s MO, is it? You guys tend to be
more...insidious. I mean you infiltrated SHIELD, didn’t you? But this one with Roxxon?” Coulson made a small, unimpressed noise and shook his head. “It just seemed a little…” He glanced up and Toni noted the deceptively lazy look that he pinned the operative with. “Amateurish,” he finished boredly in a way that was meant to rankle.

“He’s right,” Nat said with her arms crossed over her chest. On her other side Vision shifted in a way Toni knew meant he was listening, learning.

“They either wanted to be noticed or this was a diversion for something else. FRIDAY’s on it but so far there’s nothing out of the ordinary on any news channel,” Toni sighed.

“Could be something really lowkey,” Natasha pointed out.

“Agent Coulson did imply that was the case. HYDRA did, after all, manage to remain undetected within SHIELD for longer than anyone could have imagined,” Vision supplied, ever cautious of his words and watching Nat closely. “Mr. Reeve’s demeanor indicates a certain degree of...overconfidence.”

Nat nodded and just like that, turned the whole thing into a training session. “See his shoulders? Totally relaxed. He’s not rushed. He’s acting like he has all the time in the world.”

Vision nodded slowly. “He either believes that HYDRA will come to rescue him or that whatever else they have planned will go smoothly with or without him. Either way he has a remarkable level of trust in HYDRA. To the point where he is...unnecessary and does not even care about it.”

“And that is HYDRA’s MO. You either beat them into submission until they have nothing less or you create people like him. Sycophants. People who are willing to die for you no matter the cause.”

“And sometimes,” Toni added distantly - a flash of metal - fingers digging into her chest - I remember all of them - “they don’t even need to know the cause.”

She felt the weight of Vision and Nat’s gaze on her but didn’t acknowledge it and turned her attention back to Coulson.

“So this piece of technology you stole,” Coulson was saying. “We read the files and it’s a capacitor of some kind but you see, it’s...” He frowned and Toni smirked at the condescending tilt of his head and the twist of his mouth. Typical Phil. “It’s only half a machine. It still needs a power source which...oh, look at that. Roxxon hasn’t even built yet.” He clasped his hands on the table in front of him. “So what you’ve got, essentially, is...a piece of junk. Unless your boss can make his own, and I gotta tell you, there are very few minds in the world that are bright enough to build something like this. And last we checked, they were all accounted for.”

The man laughed, low and lazy. “Easier to come by than you think.” Then his eyes rolled towards the one-way mirror, meeting Toni’s gaze with impossible precision. “You’ve got one right here, don’t you?”

Toni narrowed her eyes, her shoulders tense and Vision was hovering by her side in less than a second while Nat got onto the comms and started murmuring orders about increasing security and double-checking for any more HYDRA threats. Only Coulson looked unaffected, bored even, and rather than frustrate her his level of control calmed the sudden spike of her heartbeat somewhat.

“And who’s that? SHIELD employs quite a large number of intelligent people.” Coulson remarked loftily and the man snorted disbelievingly, sitting back in his seat.

“Sure you do,” he drawled, swivelling his gaze back to Coulson. “But none of them are as good as
Stark.”

Toni snorted, thinking of Shuri.

If anyone could unpack and reproduce an energy source to the exact measurements of an arc reactor it would be Wakanda’s resident genius princess.

But HYDRA didn’t need to know that, she thought darkly.

“So that’s your gameplan?” Coulson continued, looking wholly unimpressed. “Try and kidnap Toni Stark and get her to build you something?” He looked like he was trying to bite back a smile. “For some reason people seem to conveniently forget how she became Iron Man in the first place. You could give her a *toothpick* and she’d blind fifty of your guys with it.”

“Oh, that might be stretching it,” she murmured, touched nonetheless by Coulson’s level of faith in her, however exaggerated. “Nat, on the other hand…”

“You flatter me,” she said with a small grin. “Security’s not picking up anything out of the ordinary so I’m thinking he’s just trying to get a rise out of us. They probably wanted to scope us out, see who responded to the call. Also Hope just called. They’re trying to track the getaway van and follow the sewage system to see where the rest of them might’ve gone. Maybe find a base of operations.”

Toni nodded. “Let me know if they find anything. You guys good here? Because I got a *wizard* waiting back at the Compound.”

“Who’s with him?”

She grinned. “Peter, Shuri and Agent Fern. The grunts tell me she once strangled a man with a bikini bra. I figure she can handle anything.”

Natasha gave her a wry look. “I hope they haven’t already scared him away. From what I saw we could use someone like him on our side.”

“If that’s enough to break him then we don’t need him on our team,” she scoffed, already walking away.

“You were a neurosurgeon,” she remarked, flipping to the next page. Across from her Stephen Strange reclined in his chair, casually sipping a cup of tea that never seemed to empty.

Peter was still in his suit, sitting cross-legged on the table in what Toni assumed was supposed to be some kind of intimidation tactic that didn’t appear to be working in the slightest if Strange’s cavalier smile was anything to go by.

Agent Fern, less stiff than Hill but a hell of a force to be reckoned with, had rolled her eyes as she left the room earlier in a very uncharacteristic show of emotion.

“He kept on sticking his hand through one of his portals and making it reappear at different parts of the room. So *juvenile*,” she’d muttered and Toni had blinked, amused.

Shuri was, in her opinion, sitting far too close to him and was trying to examine his very sentient, very irritable *cloak*.
“I mean, is it nanites?” she muttered, using her kimoyo bracelet to scan it and getting some very strange, very impossible readings that Toni would have looked into at any other time but was too distracted by Shuri’s clear lack of self-preservation as she reached out to touch the cloak again, only for it to bat at her hand.

Of all of them Strange seemed to be the only chill person in the room.

“Yes,” he drawled, with a telling flicker towards his faintly trembling scarred hands. Toni grimaced internally; she knew what surgical rods and a tragically ended career looked like. “I was. I went to a talk your med branch was holding. You were there. You introduced your non-radiative imaging machine.” He smiled but his blue eyes were unblinking, scrutinizing her every move. “I was very impressed. I wanted to introduce myself to you but—”

“But I got a call about an evil mad scientist experimenting on people in Pittsburgh,” she finished for him. “I remember that day. They were supposed to be serving deep fried macaroni balls. I had to miss lunch.”

He stared at her as if he couldn’t decide whether she was joking or not.

“No way,” Peter exclaimed. “I love deep fried macaroni balls!”

“Is that an American thing?” Shuri asked, averting her attention from the cloak, who honest to god looked relieved to be free of her rather intrusive examinations. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“It’s a Jesus thing,” Peter said solemnly, holding his hand over his heart and Toni nodded earnestly.

“He’s right,” she said, then made a show of flipping through her notes, even though she’d read them on the flight over. “But we’re getting off topic. So. You were a neurosurgeon. And now you’re a wizard.”

“A sorcerer,” he corrected easily.

“There’s a difference?”

“So I’m told.”

“Wizards tend to be born,” Peter helpfully supplied, as if he were the leading expert in the field of witchcraft and wizardry. “Like Harry Potter. You inherit magic, usually from your parents.”

Shuri frowned dubiously. “What about Hermione?”

“There are fan theories that she inherited magic from a witch or wizard somewhere down the family line. Sorcerers have an innate ability to be able to learn magic even if they don’t necessarily come from it. Like a prodigy, I guess.”

Toni hummed, feeling a smile curling at the corner of her lips as she took in Strange’s speculative look at Peter. Good old Peter and his delightfully nerdy ways.

“Well,” she began, setting her tablet down and leaning forward. “I’m all for new additions to the dream team. But your resume is a little…”

“Eccentric?”

“More like there’s a black hole between the time you disappeared off the face of the Earth and turned up during that very bizarre incident in Hong Kong.” She pinned him with an unflinching look. “Care
There was a moment of silence filled with a kind of weight to it that Toni was familiar with. It was the kind of silence she let seep out of her when people tried to ask her about Afghanistan or the wormhole. It was the distant look Natasha got sometimes when she saw ballerinas on TV, or how Rhodey would cut a training session short and step out of War Machine, claiming his legs were tired even though the suit took all of his weight.

Guilt twinged its way up her spine but Natasha would’ve told her to deal with it because when you were faced with an unknown variable, sometimes you had to dig into the more tender parts of a person’s soul.

When he finally looked at her, she saw a man she didn’t know and yet did. She saw a man stripped bare, a man defeated yet not. She saw a mirror and a reflection. She saw someone who was something and became something else, something new.

And when he spoke it was quiet, bereft of anything other than the truth.

“I died.”

They stared at one another for a long time, Toni measuring his words until they were on the same platform, until the understanding between them evened out like the bubble of a spirit level, perfectly balanced.

Toni backed down first, nodding in an approximation of understanding, the most that she could provide to him at this point.

“We’ll get a skeleton contract drafted up. Something similar to Scarlet Witch’s but you’re free to play with it as much as you like within reason.”

“How do I reach you?” she asked. “I’m afraid we’re all out of owls.”

To her surprise he chuckled, a low and drawling sound that made her think of loose leaf tea on a mountaintop and old books that stained her fingers black with powdery ink. The image disappeared as soon as it came and she blinked, coming back to awareness as his laugh tapered off.

“By phone or email, Ms. Stark,” he said kindly, mirth crinkling the corners of his eyes. “We’re not heathens. Your AI...Ms. Friday, I believe, took the liberty of taking down my details and...giving me yours.”

“Did she, now?” she said slowly, and it only seemed to deepen the lines around his eyes. FRIDAY was always a sucker for a smooth-talker. “That’s convenient. Well, then. I suppose you’ll be hearing from us. Do you need a ride back to the city?”

Strange stood smoothly, straightening out his clothes. “Don’t worry about me, Ms. Stark,” he said, and she watched him perform a small, almost careless circular gesture with his hands, opening up one of those fizzing portals Agent Fern had been grumbling about. “I can see myself out. I look forward to hearing from you.” Then he nodded at Peter and Shuri, both of whom seemed too intrigued by the portal to say goodbye, and with a parting grin at her he stepped through and disappeared.

Peter tugged off his mask and Shuri swivelled around in her seat, the both of them wearing similar expressions of youthful, wide-eyed expectation. Rather than stifling, their attention felt patient and
Toni was grateful for it as she ran through her conversation with Strange and examined FRIDAY’s analyses of Strange’s powers while he was in the Compound.

“What do you think, FRIDAY?” she asked after a while, pulling up a 3D rendition of one of his portals that, from what she could tell, seemed to connect to some vague point between the Himalayas and the Andromeda Galaxy.

“Spatial manipulation,” she said, sounding impressed, and Toni was inclined to agree.

“Space and time,” Shuri added, reaching across the table and swiping to the readings that the Mark 0 had been able to take in the field. “Those gamma radiation readings are unlike anything I’ve ever seen. He generated some kind of quantum field around the explosion that blocked the energy flux from affecting the space outside of it. There’s currently no science on Earth that can explain what he’s doing. Or how he’s doing it. Only theories and hypotheses.” She paused for a second, a gleam Toni was intimately familiar with entering her eyes then added, “Well, not yet.”

“Also,” Peter interjected, sounding equally as excited as he grinned at Toni. “Those portals would be hella useful in the field, depending on how quickly he can make one. Whatever the case I can totally work with it. Dude, training sessions just got exponentially more awesome. Ms. Natasha is gonna have so much fun.”

“FRIDAY, did you get scans of his hand movements?” Shuri asked, practically dragging Toni’s tablet across the table away from her and transmitting the data to her kimoyo beads. “And the ring he was wearing. I think it’s some kind of conduit.”

“I monitored everything, Ms. Shuri,” FRIDAY replied smoothly with perhaps a hint of something smug. “I think you’ll find that I am a very comprehensive notetaker.”

“You’re the best,” Shuri declared, grinning at the images projected from her bracelet.

Toni watched Shuri work, watched Peter literally crawl across the table to get in on everything to do with Stephen Strange. He and Shuri didn’t often get to spend time with one another, what with school and Shuri’s back and forth from Wakanda. But when their paths did cross at the Compound they gravitated to one another like teenagers tended to do, seeking out similar company in a world of grown ups and responsibilities, no matter how vastly different their backgrounds. There was a short period of time where she worried that they might not get along but when she saw them out on the grounds from her window one afternoon, racing a couple of highly-upgraded drones with two boxes of pizza between them and Happy yelling at them to get off of the goddamn lawn, it set her concerns to rest.

Kids needed to be around people their own age regardless of whether they were masquerading as a superhero by night or taking part in princessly duties by day. So she didn’t take pleasure in having to interrupt their nerdy bonding session before it got underway but she was on a tight schedule here.

“Shuri,” she said, letting the name roll of her tongue and hoped that she wasn’t pushing their new and fragile truce of sorts.

She looked up and stopped mid-sentence, her gaze flickering unsurely to Peter for a brief second before focusing on Toni once more. It was strange, seeing Shuri unsteady, her expression trying so hard to be open and yet suspicion evident in the drop of her shoulders and the almost defiant jut of her jaw.

Rather than dampen her mood, the familiarity of it filled her with a nostalgic kind of fondness as she recalled many a family or school photo where she’d adopted a similar stance. Shuri’s eyes were
softer, though, and sweeter. At least to Toni.

“I was wondering,” she began, keeping her tone even. “The project that I’ve been working on with Vision these past few months. You’ve been passing notes and suggestions with him too, right?”

Peter looked between them, his hair flopping around. “What project?” he asked, as Shuri immediately replied, “Yes.”

“You think it’s viable?”

Shuri leaned forward, her eyes sharpening, and Peter looked even more confused.

“I do. I’ve given Vision the schematics for one of our forcefields. A variation of the ones we use on our shields.”

“I saw,” Toni agreed, feeling restless with the kind of anticipation that always preceded a new project. “He’s been working out a way to miniaturize the tech so we can implement it alongside all the other barriers without compromising on the ionic structure.”

At that Shuri looked simultaneously offended and intrigued, but the expression was quickly replaced by realization as she caught onto Toni’s thread of thought.

“Oh,” she said quietly, then slammed her hands on the table, making Peter jump. “You want to-”

“Yeah. We’ll need to ask him first, of course, but-”

“I can do it,” was Shuri’s deadly certain response. “I’ll analyze everything FRIDAY has given me but I’ll need more-”

“I’ll ask him when I email him his contract,” Toni quickly reassured her. “If Strange gives the green light then we can set up a time every week depending on our schedules. I’ll need to run it by your brother as well-”

“He’ll say yes, I know he will. If you tell him we’re working on it together he’ll agree even faster. He-” Shuri cut herself off, shrinking in on herself and looking away awkwardly. It had only been a day, after all. “He trusts you won’t put me in any danger.”

That really shouldn’t have affected her as much as it did but her heart jumped inside her chest, something warm and soft curling behind her ribcage. And Toni didn’t really know what to say to that as color crawled its way up her neck until neither she nor Shuri were able to meet one another’s gaze and poor Peter just looked even more confused and maybe a little embarrassed being witness to whatever this was.

“I want to do it,” Shuri said after a while, still not looking at her. “I can do it.”

Toni smiled to herself, daring to hope, daring to believe that this could be something good between them. A fresh start. A shared venture that didn’t carry the weight of Bucky Barnes between them.

“I know you can.”

“I hear you commandeered a certain genius princess for one of your secret projects. T’Challa looked
like he didn’t know whether to rejoice or fear what the hell you two were gonna come up with together.”

He watched as Toni raised her head from her close examination of a computer screen, her eyes narrowed to slits. She grinned when she saw him and rubbed her hand over her face.

“That I have. It’s gonna be wild,” she said, with a croak in her voice that told Rhody she hadn’t slept since their mission. “She’s in the lab with Vision as we speak. It’s all very hush hush. Way above your clearance level. I’ll fill you in on everything tomorrow, Honey Bear.” She winked and he laughed softly, gingerly settling onto the stool next to her, wincing as his tired muscles twinged beneath his sweaty undersuit and his braces clicked against the stool legs. “Guessing you guys turned up with nothing?”

He shook his head and took a long drink out of her mug of hot chocolate without asking. “We lost their trail at the river and the machine with it. SHIELD’s got eyes out but I dunno, man.”

She hummed sympathetically but it was aimed at him rather than the fact that HYDRA had managed to get away with a very advanced piece of technology, the intended use for which remained unknown by anyone other than HYDRA themselves. He suspected that Toni had burdened herself with so many things that this was just another sugar cube on top of an already precarious mountain.

“You haven’t eaten in hours,” she said suddenly, apropos of nothing, then slid off her seat and proceeded to pull things out of the fridge. Fifteen minutes later and he had a generous portion of leftover fried rice and a rather massive, freshly-made omelette with onions and Chinese sausage in front of him, which he dug into with gusto.

“So,” he said, halfway through his meal. “You and Shuri. You two cool now?”

“We’re,” she began, fingering an errant thread on the frayed sleeve of her top. “We’re working on it. Too soon to tell but she doesn’t seem to mind working with me. So.”

“So,” he agreed, watching her closely. “You’re excited about this, though, huh?”

Her grin said it all and Rhody was happy for her.

“You’ve no idea. She’s a hell of a kid. Her and Peter both. Blows my damn mind how smart they are. They managed to come up with twelve thesis titles before Aunt May called him home for dinner.”

“Brave new world.”

“Damn right. Sometimes I don’t know whether to just let them run free with all their crazy ideas or cover them in bubble-wrap.”

“If we’re talking for the good of mankind, the latter, obviously.”

She laughed tiredly but it was a laugh nonetheless that softened the almost perpetual tension in the corners of her eyes, a rare enough sight these days that Rhody committed it to memory.

“Well,” she said, raising her near empty mug, “be thankful there’s only two of them.”

Rhody snorted and lifted his glass of water. “Amen to that.”
Toni met Kamala Khan on a Friday night a few weeks after the HYDRA incident, when one Harley Keener turned up on her doorstep with the girl literally hanging off his arm.

“What the- Harley? What happened to your face?”

“S’up, Toni,” he chirped sunnily, if a little shakily. “So, funny story. I was at a party in Jersey-”

“The hell were you doing in Jersey?”

“-and there was this really weird mist, right? And then I see this girl collapse on the street outside and she literally starts melting into the drain-”

“Melting?”

“-so I go and help her, right? Except when I ask her if she’s okay she punches me in the face with a giant fist.” He motioned to the girl’s hand and it was indeed, much to Toni’s extreme panic, the size of a small dog. “Then she starts panicking and crying and no joke, her eyeballs start bleeding, so I brought her here because I figure you’re way more qualified to deal with this than a hospital. Her name’s Kamala Khan by the way. Her family’s from Pakistan.” Then he smiled, and Toni wasn’t quite sure whether he was about to burst into laughter or tears.

That was of course when Peter came up behind her, still holding one of the new web-shooters they’d been designing together.

“Oh my fucking-!” Peter exclaimed with wide eyes. “Dude, is that her hand?”

Toni was still trying to grapple with the fact that Harley was at her front door with a possibly enhanced, most definitely in pain girl, who looked like she was either going to pass out or dissolve into the ground, to admonish Peter for both language and lack of tact. You don’t just ask a girl about her giant hand.

“Who the fuck’re you?” Harley asked, looking Peter up and down, unimpressed.

Peter gave him the stink-eye and folded his arms, even as he kept darting a cautious gaze at the girl who was currently whimpering.

“I’m Spider-Man.”

Yeah, they really needed to have a talk about the whole concept of a secret identity.

Harley narrowed his eyes and made a motion with his chin.

“Prove it.”

In response Peter shot a tiny web out of his wrist that Harley caught with his free hand. He examined the sticky substance between his fingers.

“Huh.”

“And who the fuck’re you?” Peter sniped.
Harley smiled, shit-eating and smug.

“Harley Keener. I helped save Toni from the Mandarin using a potato gun.”

That was a wild oversimplification even by Toni’s standards. And also kind of a lie.

But Peter seemed both surprised and intrigued.

“For real?”

“For real.”

Peter and Harley grinned at each other. “Sweet,” they said in unison and proceeded to fist-bump one another much to her hysterical exasperation.

“Are you two done?”

They gave her identical beaming looks and Kamala groaned at Harley’s side, dangerously close to falling to the floor until Toni skidded over and took her other arm - the one with the seriously heavy giant hand attached to it - and slung it over her shoulder, silently cursing herself for being slow on the uptake while this poor kid looked like she was literally falling apart at the seams.

“C’mon, let’s get her inside. FRIDAY, get Vision to Lab B now!”

“Done and done. Initiating scans of Ms. Khan now and transmitting them to Vision. He is already in the midst of setting up the molecular stabilizer by my recommendation. Boss, she is in one serious state of flux.”

Kamala lifted her head and blinked blearily up at Toni.

“Are you really...Toni...Stark...Iron Mmmm…” she slurred and Toni spared her a quick, if panicked smile.

“Got it in one, sweet pea. How old’re you, Ms. Khan?”

“Mm...m’ fifteeeeen.”

She groaned again and Peter yelped behind them.

“Jesus, her legs are-!”

“Pick ‘em up!” she snapped, as she watched Kamala’s ankles extend from under her jeans until her legs were one long mess draggin on the floor. “Peter! Pick. Them. Up!”

“Are you- fuck it, fine!” Then he began to rope them around his arms, his eyes wide and worried the entire time.

“She ballooned in the car on the way here,” Harley chirped, sounding way too happy for having saved a melting girl and driven her all the way from Jersey. “I almost crashed, like, twelve times on the way. Thank god for window tinting, right?”

He spoke a good game but Toni could hear the edge of fear in his voice and see the tense strain on his forehead and seriously, god bless the resilience of kids when it mattered.

“What the hell are you even doing in New York? Where’s your mother?” she asked as they carried Kamala into one of the elevators. “Goddamnit, I need a damn travelator in this fucking place.”
“Got into a school here, actually. Tennyson’s Green? It’s a prep school. I was gonna surprise you tomorrow but then I met this disaster.”

The elevator pinged and they ran out again, heading to the same lab she and Shuri fixed up Peter in the first time.

“Tennyson’s Green. Yeah, I know it. Your mother moved you guys here for that?”

“Nah, I got a scholarship and full board. Wrote ‘em a history essay when I saw the brochure in my school’s staff room. Ma was happy for me. Relieved too, I think, now that she doesn’t have to worry about me making pipe bombs in the garage.”

“You did what?” she demanded, but Harley was saved from having to answer when the lab doors swooshed open and she and Vision got to work.

Toni lost track of time after that, she and Vision working to stabilize Kamala’s fluctuating vitals and find some sense of rhyme or reason to why her molecules kept deconstructing then reconstructing themselves. FRIDAY alerted the other Avengers and Toni nearly wept when Shuri ran into the room a half hour later, shrugging into a lab coat.

“Who the hell are you?” she asked as she passed Harley.

“Toni’s kid,” he replied smartly. “She’s grew me in a test tube.”

Shuri pulled a face at her and Toni rolled her eyes. “And I didn’t take him out because he’s a mouthy little shit.”

Ten minutes later Hope rushed in, already in the middle of pulling on her gloves. Hopefully her expertise on body morphing would come in handy for Kamala who had already flatlined once until Toni used their only Hulk-grade defibrillator and charged it up so high that even Thor would’ve felt a bit of a tickle.

“Who’s the kid?” she asked, reading checking her brain function on one of the monitors.

“Kamala Khan. Fifteen. Pakistani. She was exposed to some kind of mist. I’d normally say a biological weapon but there were others in the vicinity and she’s the only report according to FRIDAY.”

“Who’s the other kid?”

“I’m Toni’s son. She dropped me on my dad’s doorstep three days after giving birth to me.”

Hope pulled a face and Toni sent Harley an exasperated look across the room. “Gee, I wonder why. Vision, how’s she looking?”

“Heart rate is still dangerously high.”

“Well her legs aren’t leaking onto the floor anymore,” Peter said worriedly from his corner of the room where he was wringing his hands. “That’s good, right?”

No one answered him as Kamala started to seize, her eyes rolling into the back of her head.

“Fuck,” Hope cursed, stumbling over a few wires to one of the metal trolleys and filling a needle full of god knows what.

“Harley and Peter,” Toni snapped. “Get out of the room.”
“What-?”

“What ever happened to ‘be thankful there’s only two of them?’ Now I hear you’ve got yourself two more?”

She smiled tiredly as Rhodey came and stood beside her three hours later. Shuri was asleep in a chair by Kamala’s bed and Hope had left for a shower, dragging her feet.

“Well technically, it’s just the one. We already had Harley,” she said, jerking her head towards a lumpy black sofa where he and Peter were passed out. “And apparently we’re gonna be seeing more of him since he’s starting up school in Jersey City. As for this one, well she’s...” She shook her head. “She’s something.”

“Shouldn’t have to in the first place. This world, man. When did it get so crazy?”

Rhodey grimaced, humming lowly in the back of his throat. “Ain’t fair. Never will be. But you did it; you, Vision and Hope and Shuri. Team Awesome. Brought her back to life a couple of times from what Vision tells me.”

But Toni shook her head, unable to feel pride in any way that Rhodey was intending her to. “Shouldn’t have had to in the first place. This world, man. When did it get so crazy?”

She let Rhodey slide his fingers through hers, squeezing.

“When a slip of a girl stood up in front of the world and told everybody that she was Iron Man.”

Toni laughed in spite of herself and nodded, watching Vision float back and forth inside the room from monitor to monitor, already having developed someone of a fondness for Kamala if his attentiveness to her comfort was anything to go by. He’d fluffed her pillows twice already.

“Yeah,” she said. “Must’ve been then.”

Harley stirred then and sat up, rubbing at his eyes. When he saw them he pushed himself up,
shoulders heavy and his eyes blinking through the gloom.

“Hey,” he murmured as he came up beside them. “Hi Colonel. Nice to see you again. Those’re some sweet braces.”

Rhodey winked. “S’up, kid. Pretty neat, huh? This is only the...eighty-ninth pair?”

Harley chuckled, voice husky with sleep and fatigue, and Toni rolled her eyes.

He sobered as he surveyed Kamala and Toni’s heart went out to him because sixteen-year-olds shouldn’t have to be driving across the state just to save girls whose eyeballs were bleeding and their bodies literally falling apart.

“Is she gonna be okay?”

Toni slung an arm around his shoulders and squeezed and Harley willingly leaned into the half-embrace.

“She’s gonna be fine. You did really good tonight, kid. Next time, though? Call me. It’s a lot quicker than that death trap you have outside. You bring that all the way from Tennessee?”

Harley was quiet for a moment before muttering, “I may or may not have appropriated it from one of the passed-out douchebags who’d been a racist dick to Kamala earlier at the party.”

Pursing her lips, she met Rhodey’s amused gaze and smirked.

“Excellent work.”
The Price Of Freedom

Chapter Summary

“How far did you go, Steve? You and Barnes? How far did you go in Siberia?”

Chapter Notes

We're getting real close to the where the story REALLY kicks off, guys! I mean it's only been goddamn 70,000 words give or take so far, I mean what. Why am I like this?

I am so, so glad to hear so many of you enjoyed the previous chapter. Less plotty and more feels and coziness and now I bring you...this. This is a fairly big one, so gird your loins and get something to drink because it might take a while. As always, thank you to everybody who took the time to read this fic and leave a comment or a kudos or bookmark the story. I honestly never thought so many people would be reading this much less telling me that they enjoyed it so thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

This story has been a mental and physical challenge for me and is easily one of the longest things I've written/am writing and I'm learning a lot not only through writing but from the comments you guys leave me so really, thank you.

Also, please join me on Tumblr if you like!

Once Kamala got back on her feet, stronger, healthier and bendier than ever, she and Harley became near permanent fixtures at the Compound, declaring themselves, along with Peter, Toni’s ‘interns’. And once they were introduced to Shuri, things tended to go really crazy really fast. It turned out that giving two geniuses, an inventor and a polymorph the run of a place like the Compound was a recipe for disaster. Hilarious disasters but disasters all the same.

Happy would never be the same again.

Neither would the grunts or Agent Fern from some of the stories she’d heard so far.

Kamala’s parents had been a little more lenient about her two-day disappearance when Toni had personally driven her home and made up some bullshit story about having found their daughter in the wrong part of town after sneaking out to a party and drinking something dodgy.

_Honestly, Mr. and Mrs. Khan, your daughter is fine; I took her to the hospital, so sorry for not getting in contact with you but she didn’t have her phone, by the way I’d like to offer Kamala a paid internship at Stark Industries; she’s a bright young girl and this could be good for her when the time comes for her college applications and such._

They’d eaten that up and pretty much looked past the girl’s supposed rule-breaking so that was a win.
Never let it be said that Toni didn’t use her fame wisely to help a newly-enhanced girl get the hang of her powers.

When she did come to the Compound - which started off as twice a week and then rather rapidly increased to four or even five days a week - Kamala followed Toni *everywhere*. And it was adorable and cool but also kind of embarrassing and Toni felt very undeserving of such hero-worship and genuine awe. She also held Rhodey in high esteem, blushingly calling him ‘Mr. War Machine’ which made him get all awkward and stuttery in return. Toni suspected Kamala might’ve had a little crush. Natasha amazed her and intimidated her in equal parts but a week after Kamala returned to normal she was invited to Natasha’s now infamous training sessions, which helped her lose some of her nerve, especially after her hand grew in size and she nearly would’ve swatted Nat into a wall had she not backflipped - of course she did - right over it in time.

Kamala’s polymorphing capabilities were one of the highlights of Toni’s life so far, but like she’d done with Peter, she kept her more zealous scientific needs to herself because studying kids, studying *people* in general felt like a real squicky thing to do.

But she loved it whenever she was sat somewhere with Vision or T’Challa, passing notes and holograms back and forth, and Kamala would come over, hover nervously for a moment before Toni made space next to her, and proceeded to show her all the cool things she’d learned to do with her body.

Control over her abilities came easy, something Toni was immensely proud of her for, but Toni still received the occasional panicked calls from toilet cubicles or her school’s locker room after having gotten into an argument or after getting yelled at by a teacher, so it would be up to Toni to calm her down until one or all of her limbs returned to normal.

In her own reserved and prickly fashion, Toni liked Kamala a lot, adored her in a way that almost scared her, just like it did with Peter and Harley. She was yet another kid to worm her way into her rusty little heart and Toni wouldn’t deny that she felt a sometimes extreme level of overprotectiveness when it came to those kids. It was the same kind of feeling that she had with Laura and her children, and what had made her install an overkill of defence mechanisms on the farm just to keep them safe and call to check in on them at least three times a week. It was the same kind of feeling that made her give Harley a device akin to a panic button as well as a direct line to JARVIS when he was around, and later to FRIDAY, which was how he’d found his way to the Compound in the first place. It was the same kind of feeling that convinced Toni to part with RIA and give her to Peter.

And with the increasing number of comments from the kids and from Kamala herself about wanting to be a hero and wanting to help people, Toni knew that she couldn’t afford to make the same mistake with Kamala as she’d done with Peter.

Not again. Not ever.

Hell, the girl had already started literally hanging from the ceilings of the training gymnasiums, using her super bendy arms to swing across the room like Peter did with his webs.

So she had her lawyers draft up a contract if ever Kamala intended to pursue a career in Avenging and hero-ing - which Toni was becoming increasingly convinced she would considering how starry-eyed she got watching them all train together - and started working on a basic suit for her to accommodate for abrupt changes in size. Hope had been fantastic in that particular aspect of the suit and they’d worked so well together on it that by the time their first prototype was done Toni was fairly certain that Hope’s perpetual desire to knock Toni’s teeth in had dropped by at least twenty-five percent.
"We should give her a cape," Hope had declared as she spun the 3D rendering of the suit around.

"What?" Toni had asked, blinking. "Haven't you seen The Incredibles?"

Hope had looked at her and done that thing with her mouth that Toni strongly suspected was her trying to hide a smile.

"Have you?"

"I have," Toni had sniffed. "I've been waiting for the sequel for fourteen years."

"You are so weird," Hope had scoffed, then proceeded to add in a cape to the image anyway.

Kamala’s expression when they’d presented the suit to her after everyone had gathered for dinner one night had Toni nearly getting all misty-eyed and Hope suspiciously turning her face away.

“I love it,” she’d cried, holding the plain black outfit out in front of her. “Oh my gosh, I love it! Thank you so much, thank you, I can’t- I can’t believe you made- Does this mean I can be an Avenger one day? Because that would be awesome and I wanna be like you guys and help save people and- Guys, this is just so cool! Now I just need a hero name!” She proceeded to cry and threw her arms around a rigid Hope’s waist first and then around Toni, who awkwardly patted her on the back. Then she ran off declaring that she was going to try it on and that everyone had to stay where they were.

Toni sneaked a look at Harley, who was sitting on the kitchen counter, a bottle of ginger beer held loosely between his thumb and forefinger. She sidled over and hopped up on the counter next to him, nudging him with her elbow.

“What’d you think of the suit?” She didn’t say are you okay with me making a suit for Kamala or are you secretly jealous of the fact that she has superpowers, please don’t jump into a vat of toxic waste to try and manifest any latent abilities because that’s just gonna give you radiation poisoning, but the implication was there.

Harley heard it all anyway for he sent her the side-eye, a dry smile playing on his mouth. He’d always been too smart for his own good.

“I think the suit’s awesome, and no, I’m not jealous that she’s got superpowers. Mom,” he added with a smirk, making her grimace. “Besides,” he said idly, finishing off the last dregs of his ginger beer, “I don’t need superpowers to take over as Iron Man once you retire.”

His eyes never left hers and Toni felt the challenge in them: try and stop me. For some reason it filled her with an indescribable sadness of all she knew was to come if he and Kamala chose to walk down that path.

The pain, the fear, the danger, the level of trust you needed to have in your team…

A shield over her head.

But maybe. Maybe.

The sound of glass exploding.

“I’ll write up a formal offer letter for a Stark internship. Give a copy to your mother and to your school. You join combat training starting next weekend. Like I’ve already told Peter and Kamala, homework first, though. Always. And no hero-ing. If you’re in trouble you call one of us,” was all
she offered and something in Harley’s shoulders gave way to relief.

“Thanks.”

Before she could slip into something maudlin Kamala came out in the suit, beaming at all of them. At some point she’d cut up a piece of blue fabric into a domino mask and placed it over her eyes as well and Toni and Hope shared an exasperated and resigned look from across the kitchen. They all offered the necessary oohs and aahs and Kamala preened under all the attention.

It was still hard to believe that this was her world, that these were her people. Rhodey laughing with a quietly amused T’Challa over a glass of wine, Natasha and Peter - who still wore his mask around Strange at Toni’s insistence, which was ever so slowly waning - in a corner with their inside spider jokes, Strange - Stephen - being suitably impressed when Kamala showed off her cape and Shuri and Hope talking about Disneyland. If only Laura and her family were here, if only the others-

Vision floated up next to Toni and they shared a small, warm smile.

“Today was a good day,” he said, in a soothing voice.

Toni nodded, surveying the room. It was days like these when she almost felt that sleep could come to her that night, that for once she would stop seeing snow and rage and the cold glint of a shield every time she closed her eyes. She had that meeting with Ellis in a few more days and then would be heading to Seoul to see Helen about that new device for Rhodey. She and the others were trying to get as many consolidated amendments in before Natasha left for Wakanda with T’Challa. When they came back Toni was going to have her last hearing with the UN, her final and most crucial pitch to the Council before they issued their statement about the Rogue Avengers. After that there would be the whole Thaddeus thing to deal with, along with all the rest of her various projects that she would let swallow her up just so she wouldn’t have to sleep.

But right here in this moment, she could forget about all of that. About all her failures and the failures to come. About the fear that sat just below her skin, threatening to seep out of her pores. About the loss. About her grief. Here in this moment she could allow herself to love what was slowly coming together.

“FRIDAY,” she murmured quietly, “snapshot this. As many as you can.”

“Of course, Boss,” came the gentlest response.

“Thanks, honey.” She looked up at Vision and smiled ruefully. “Same time tonight? I’ve been itching to see how our new environmental controls are working on the tomatoes.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

It was funny how just the night before they were all gathered in the same room smiling and tonight the atmosphere had done about a ninety-degree turn. They were gathered late into the night, dark circles, five o’clock shadows and black coffee their intimate friends. Vision was the only one who looked exactly the same but he’d taken to standing up abruptly and taking a turn around the room. If it was anyone else she might have called it pacing. Peter and Kamala were lounging on one of the couches talking sleepily - she wondered what excuses they’d given their respective guardians this time - and Harley was slumped between them with his hood over his eyes while Shuri sat on the
Stephen had speed-read the Accords - of course he had - and all of their notes, and he and T’Challa were squinting over the definitions of national emergencies. Rhodey and Hope were in a quiet discussion about how to go about things if country heads couldn’t be reached. She and Natasha were video-calling Shanthi McMahon and her sleep-deprived team and putting their final touches on Clint’s appeal. Toni owed them all raises and gift baskets full of Stella McCartney and Vaute Couture.

She owed Nat a goddamn break. She may have most of them fooled but Toni knew her trip to Wakanda tomorrow was weighing heavy on her mind.

“Hey,” she murmured once Shanthi had signed off. “You should get some rest. Early start tomorrow.” Not to mention that it would be the first time any of them saw the others since...everything.

It was fitting for Natasha to be their go-between as a semi-neutral party. Toni tried not to let the darker, more bitter parts of her psyche focus too heavily on the fickle nature of spies or Widows, but from the wry look Nat gave her she suspected she’d not succeeded well enough.

Thankfully they both knew to leave that well enough alone.

“Don’t imagine sleep’s gonna come easy tonight,” she said dryly. “There’s gonna be a lot of...unspoken things. Distrust. Between everything.”

Toni snorted, stirring her spoon in her empty coffee mug. “With Barton around? Doubt it’s gonna remain unspoken for very long.” When she sensed Nat’s mood dip further, she reached out and patted her awkwardly on the arm. “Hey, if anyone can get through Hawkeye’s dense skull it’s you. You didn’t lock him up in an underwater prison and keep him from his family. Dude’ll listen to you.”

“He put himself in an underwater prison and left his family,” came her somber reply, but Toni could tell it wasn’t deeply felt. Call it favoritism or years of rooted friendship but in this regard at least, Barton would always be a weak spot. She didn’t outright blame Toni, though, which was something.

They weren’t okay. They wouldn’t be okay for a while, yet. But she and Nat had woven something relatively stable for the time being. Not a friendship; there was too much hurt and distrust for that yet, but it was something.

“Hey,” Nat began, twisting her ring around her finger in what Toni had come to discover was as close to a nervous tic as Nat could get. “Good luck with Ellis. Just like we practiced. It’s gonna be fine. He has a soft spot for you and Rhodey. Use it.”

Toni exhaled sharply, her insides twisting anxiously. “That was the plan. I hope. I hope.” She left it at that, knowing Nat would glean more than just a semblance of coherency from it.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “Me too.”

They both remained silent, caught in their own thoughts, in their own exhaustion.

Two years ago they’d collapsed side by side in a portable decontamination container, naked and bleeding and laughing hysterically after a gruelling fight with some Chechen insurgents.

A few months after that they’d curled up with one another in the back seat of a van after a mission in Mongolia.
Last Christmas Toni had gotten a faceful of a hallucinogen thanks to some deranged scientist, had crawled into a highly amused Nat’s lap and proceeded to make out with her to the symphony of catcalls and wolf whistles from the others.

Steve had been so red in the face even as he laughed until his eyes watered.

Now there was this, their choices between them and the infinite unspoken things laid out on the ground, as delicate as eggshells.

“Please come back.”

It was the most honest thing she’d said to Natasha in the aftermath of dust and frayed, bloody nails and a cold so deep it was as if she was made of snow.

They didn’t look at each other; maybe it was fear, fear of seeing the lie, fear of being caught out. Maybe it was just too hard.

After an eternity of a second, Natasha spoke, quiet and reverent and as much of a promise as she was capable of.

“I will.” She looked up and surveyed the rest of the team in various stages of pre-sleep. With a huff, she added, “There’s nowhere else I could go anyway.”

She could’ve said *there’s nowhere else I’d rather be*. But Toni knew it would be a lie. Natasha’s loyalty to Steve and Clint aside, it was the *trust* that mattered most, the weight of shared experiences that forged bonds stronger than titanium. Toni, in her most vulnerable moments of hope and yearning, thought they’d had that. Yet even now, even though Natasha sat here and not *there*...

“Toni.” It was the chastising tone that made her lift her gaze from the table. “You have to know. If I wanted to be in Wakanda sitting around with the rest of the team I would be. But I’m not. I’m *here*.”

Toni nodded as if by rote. “Because you wanted to fix the Accords.”

“That’s not-” Her green eyes flashed and Natasha sucked in a sharp breath. “Toni, that is *not* the only reason I’m here. I thought-” She ran a hand through her hair in a uncharacteristic show of agitation. “I thought that after everything you would-”

“I,” Toni began, awkwardly, “I’m a little dense so I don’t think I follow-?”

Natasha studied her face fiercely for a long moment before something sad, almost distraught, passed over her striking features and her shoulders slumped like all the fight had just left her body.

“You really don’t, do you?” she murmured, as if to herself, and Toni had the strangest urge to reach out and pat her shoulder.

“Hey,” she said, turning her body fully towards Nat’s so their knees brushed. This, too, was familiar. “It’s gonna be okay. Seriously. You’re their friend. They trust you. A *hell* of a lot more than they’re ever gonna trust me again. It should,” she sighed, “it should’ve come from you in the first place, then maybe things wouldn’t have-” Her shoulders lifted in a helpless shrug. “But I was always one for grand gestures. This one just backfired majorly.”

“There were other forces in play.” Nat moved closer os their legs aligned, knee to ankle. Nat’s legs were unfairly longer, though. “We couldn’t have stopped them no matter what we did. It was all…”

“Inevitable?”
“Yeah. Maybe.”

They shared a smile, a real one, tinged by sadness and regrets, and Toni surprised herself for her openness for the second time that day.

“I’m coming back, Toni,” Natasha told her quietly. “I’ll go, say my piece and a couple more and I’ll be back. And when I do you can tell me everything that happened with Ellis. And after that it’ll be time for Phase Two.”

It was hard not to be bolstered by the simple conviction of Nat’s little speech. She was always adept at that, saying everything that needed to be said and using as few words as possible, a skill she must’ve developed because she just hated having to talk.

“We’re really doing this, huh?”

“Yes. We are.”

The next day she saw Nat and T’Challa off; she stayed on the roof until the quinjet was out of view.

A voice still whispered in her ear she’s not coming back, but she was able to give it the finger for the most part. Because even if she didn’t trust Natasha not to go back to Steve, go back to Clint, she at least trusted T’Challa’s palace had excellent pest control so.

But more than that, more than anything, she wanted to trust Natasha again. She wanted the solidarity they’d established when they’d been the only two women on the team. Or no. Not that. Not what they had then.

She wanted something hopeful, something they could forge, something old with something new.

Something better.

*Impress me,* she’d said.

*Show me how,* was what she should’ve said.

The smell of coffee - the instant stuff - made his nose tingle and he brought the mug to his lips, taking an experimental sip. It had been- He couldn’t recall how long it had been since he’d had coffee. During the war they’d had cheap, watered down stuff, just enough to offer the men something familiar, something from home. He took it black, letting the bitter taste roll around his mouth for a while before swallowing.

He set the mug down and looked up; Sam was sat opposite him with an arched brow.

“Well?” he prompted flatly.

Bucky maintained contact with his gaze even as he reached for the jar of sugar and carton of cold milk.

“Tastes like shit.”

Then, much to Sam’s visible disgust and obvious offence, he proceeded to dump in several
teaspoons of sugar and a healthy splash of milk until black gave way to a creamy brown.

“You should be ashamed of yourself.” Sam muttered.

Bucky saw Steve smile a little to himself before he continued to scribble on the tablet that Ayo had given him. It hadn’t exactly been the prettiest when he’d first laid the Accords down before the others. Barton was still angry and had tossed a few choice words around about how maybe they should’ve thought about this before they decided to stand up to the man, but surprisingly he’d been the first one after Sam to start reading through them, begrudgingly admitting that some of the amendments the other Avengers had made were pretty solid.

Even more surprising was the fact that Scott had been the one to sit with Barton and toss ideas around. Bucky wondered whether they’d bonded over the shared experience of leaving kids behind. He got a smile on his face whenever he read certain comments in the margin and would say things like, that’s Hope, right there, I’m telling you, or damn, someone really went to town on that clause, eh?

It had taken Wanda a while to request that a copy be sent to her and often had a pinched expression on her face while she read it. Bucky didn’t know much about her situation, just a few scathing remarks about Stark and the deep longing on her face whenever someone mentioned Vision. Sam had mentioned to him once that she and her brother had willingly given themselves over to HYDRA to be experimented on and blamed Stark for the death of their family. Bucky suspected that was an oversimplification scratched deep into her psyche by years of pain and rage but he couldn’t begrudge her for it. Not when Antonia Stark’s distraught face haunted his dreams and the sound of her screams - do you even remember them - still echoed in his ears.

His own thoughts about the Accords were complicated to say the least. But he understood them. He understood people’s fear and he understood his own. And he’d seen what Stark and the others had done, how they’d worked hard to ensure they wouldn’t and couldn’t be used as attack dogs. He particularly enjoyed one of the remarks she’d scribbled on the UN Emergency Clause: no you cannot send us into a situation you deem necessary without giving us every single angle and then some, regardless of how expedient you think it is. Your role is oversight, pals, and we reserve the right to call you out on your shit and refuse a job because we’re questioning your intentions as well as your methods. That’s what the goddamn subcommittee is for. DEBRIEF IS NECESSARY BITCHES. DO YOU KNOW SHANTHI MCMAHON? DO YOU KNOW SEAN CHANG? BECAUSE THEY WILL WRAP YOUR SKETCHY SHIT UP IN SO MUCH RED TAPE AND TOSS IT INTO THE INTERNET AND YOU WILL BE TORN APART BY ANGRY SJWS AND I WILL LAUGH ON YOUR PROVERBIAL GRAVES. AND YOUR REAL ONES.

Someone had circled the entire comment and written ^THIS underneath it. It filled him with something strange and stirring in his chest. Something like amusement. Maybe.

The sound of Steve’s humming was interrupted by the front door sliding open and King T’Challa walking in followed by-

Steve’s chair clattered to the ground as he stood abruptly, eyes wide.

“Nat?”

Barton was standing in the doorway of his bedroom, mouth parted in shock.

She stood beside the king in a blazer and jeans and a small, quiet smile on her lips.

“Hey, Clint.”
Barton swallowed and took one step forward but no more.

“S’been a while,” he rasped and Bucky could hear the countless questions, maybe the countless accusations, in those few words.

Her smile turned wry. “Yeah. It has, hasn’t it?” She and T’Challa shared a short look before she addressed them all. “Unfortunately, as much as I’d like it to be this isn’t a social call. I see wonders never cease.” She nodded towards Steve’s tablet and the stylo held loosely between his fingers and gave him a small smile. “So I guess we’ll start with the contracts first and work our way up to the Accords. That includes you too, Barnes.”

Bucky stilled and could tell by the others’ looks that he wasn’t the only one who was confused.

“I...don’t understand,” he murmured, gripping the handle of his mug. “I’m not an Avenger.”

“No, you’re not,” she agreed, surveying him head on, “but, if you want to, you could be. Regardless of what you choose, though, there will be conditions. For all of you.”

“How’s it coming?”

Strange - Stephen, she kept forgetting - turned around, lowering his hands. His forehead was shiny with exertion and his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Cloak was hovering over Shuri, who seemed to be conversing with it and showing off her findings using exuberant hand movements. Vision was, once more, using the Mind Stone to seamlessly solder two wall panels together.

“If I’d known I was going to be the princess of Wakanda’s magical test subject, I would’ve activewear.”

She smirked. “Tired already? We’re gonna need to work on your endurance. I’ll drop a note to Nat when she comes back.”

Stephen gave her a withering look. “Lucky me.”

“Spider-Man’s excited to work with you n’ see what you can do.”

“I’m assuming you know his real identity?” he asked, watching her curiously.

“I do,” she said lightly, but let an undercurrent of warning seep into her tone.

“Ah, right,” he said, leaning against the skeleton of what was going to be a control panel. “Secret identities and all. Nice work on that, by the way.”

“I try.” She wandered over and perched herself next to him on the edge of the console, watching as he stuck his hand through a small portal next to him and pulled out a glass of lemonade. She was even more surprised when, rather than hand it to her, he laid it on the console between them, letting her pick it up in her own time. “Thank you,” she said quietly and he gave her a flash of a smile before sipping his own drink.

“So,” he said after a while, and Toni immediately knew where this was going.

“You wanna know why I sanctioned this project.”
“Seeing as I’m a part of it now, I think I have a right to know why you’re building this,” he pointed out, his tone practical rather than defensive, and for that alone he won a couple more points.

“What do you think it is?” she returned, surveying the space before them, the final product of which she could already envision in her mind’s eye.

They were deep underground in the most secure part of the Compound accessible only by a single elevator and an increasing number of security protocols that made the Raft look like, well, an actual raft.

“My first thoughts were that it was a prison,” Stephen said and there was not a trace of judgment in his voice. “But when you sent me the notes and the blueprints I saw that Doctor Banner’s name all over. I’m guessing it’s meant to be less of a prison and more of a...security measure of sorts.”

“Yes and no. Bruce intended the original design for himself but there was always going to be the issue of transporting a Hulk in rage-mode from wherever to here. He intended it as a prison. Probably still would if he were here right now but I saw something else.” She turned and looked him dead in the eye. “Bruce wanted something Hulk-proof and we spent months trying to figure it out for his own peace of mind. He called it The Room. Kinda like a timeout, I guess. We had adamantium cages and tranqs and suppressors of all kinds but when we tested it out they all fell pretty short of the mark. And then he disappeared,” she said at last, the reminder stinging like an open wound. “And I didn’t really want to do it without him but I saw merit in what he’d created. So I made something new. Kept the general idea but tweaked it a bit.”

They both jumped when Shuri threw a wrench at one of the white walls and Stephen’s runes flared magnesium-bright, sending the wrench back the way it came. Toni had a brief second of panic when she thought it would smack Shuri in the face, and suddenly Vision was there and he calmly caught it with one hand. Shuri laughed, delighted, and Vision smiled and handed the tool back to her.

Stephen sent Toni a look that had her face warming.

Okay, so I tweaked it a lot. Point is it can function as a prison, especially if ever we get people like Loki again. But I was thinking more…” She paused, chewing on her bottom lip. “Bruce didn’t trust himself. And there’s gotta be a lot more people like him who have abilities or powers that they can’t control and I’ll bet my money that more than half of them actually don’t want to hurt people so this,” she said, gesturing with one hand, “is for them. And not even just for people but like, for objects. Like the Tesseract or Loki’s staff. A place where they can be safely studied. I didn’t build it with the intention to keep prisoners although, yeah, the dual-functionality may come in use one day, no denying, but that’s not, that’s not the point of it. It’s for people who are a threat to others but, most importantly, people who are a threat to themselves and I am really bad at selling this but—”

Stephen held up a hand and she snapped her mouth shut, feeling herself deflate. Because it wasn’t meant to be a prison. Not in her mind. Not even if it could be used as one. It was supposed to protect people. Although she could see where people might get the wrong idea and with her history and with things like Ultron-

“You’re freaking out. I can literally hear you freaking out. I feel like I’ve just instigated a personal moral crisis.” came Stephen’s unbelievably lazy drawl, and she glared at him, feeling more than a little frazzled and in over her head.

“Yes, well.”

He rolled his lips together to keep back a grin but his eyes gave his mirth away. “I’m not judging you,” he said finally. “If I didn’t think this idea held merit I wouldn’t have volunteered. And it does,”
he added, looking at her sidelong with an intensity that had her insides churning funny. “And the other Avengers know it too.”

She knew he was referring to Rhodey, Nat, T’Challa and Hope but there was always a shadow in her mind in the shape of a cutout of a group photo. A large missing piece that took with it its own story, leaving half a conversation, laughter to a missing joke, a smile directed at no one.

What would they think, she wondered, when they found out about this place?

Red curled at the edges of her vision and her limbs froze instinctively as pale fingers and painted black nails danced on her temple, until she felt the softness of fabric tickling her shoulder, cautious, curious.

She blinked. “Oh. Hi.”

Cloak - as Peter and Shuri and now Vision had taken to calling it - hovered just over her shoulder, slotting himself - because according to Stephen it was male - into the space between where she and Stephen sat. The red collar tilted itself slowly from side to side and Toni took a moment to really come to terms with the fact that she was being studied very thoroughly by a sentient piece of cloth.

Then Cloak got right up in her face, and she had the distinct impression he was taking her in inch by inch from top to bottom, before wrapping himself around her shoulders and squeezing her entire body in what she assumed was supposed to be a delighted hug.

“Oh,” she voiced awkwardly, looking at Stephen, who merely sighed and leaned back a little, the corner of his mouth quirking up in amusement.

“He has very little regard for personal boundaries. It grows on you after a while.”

Cloak’s collar nuzzled into her neckline and she smiled begrudgingly.

They watched Shuri and Vision work for a while, the comments passed back and forth and the almost artful way they’d learned to work with and around one another. At one point Shuri turned around and stilled somewhat at seeing Toni there. But rather than look away immediately and go back to work, she offered a small, tentative smile that Toni returned in equal measure.

“You’re doing good work here, Toni,” came Stephen’s quiet voice as he stood once more, finishing off the last of his lemonade and carelessly tossing the empty glass through a portal. “I understand your reasons for creating this space and I respect them. So I say this with only the best of intentions; I think this is necessary and I believe the others think so as well. But I also think you should prepare yourself for the eventuality that one day The Room is going to be utilized in the manner as Doctor Banner intended. I know that’s not what you want to hear but there will always be threats, Toni. And this may be the only way to contain them.”

They held one another’s gaze for an extended heartbeat and once again, Toni was the first to drop her eyes, unable to accept the way his features softened sympathetically at her expense. Cloak vibrated around her body in what felt like reassurance, before he slipped from her shoulders and floated back over to Stephen.

“This doesn’t make you evil, Toni.” And there was understanding in the way he said it, as if he had somehow reached inside of her and touched upon a raw nerve and found that it resonated with the same frequency of pain as something inside of himself. “It’s just a thing. Just another one of your many creations.”

A bitter laugh welled up inside her throat. “Haven’t you heard?” she asked, standing as well and
looking him dead in the eye. “I can’t really be trusted with my own creations.”

Then she turned and walked away without waiting for his response and even she had she wouldn’t have been able to hear anything over the chorus in her head that echoed louder and louder with every step down that long, white, sterile corridor.

*There are no strings on me.*

---

Steve read through his contract once, twice, then went through it again more slowly this time, with a fine-tooth comb. He recognized that a lot of the issues he might have had about these contracts, specifically pertaining to him, had been circumvented in one way or another. It wasn’t perfect and he still made his own amendments here and there, but like the revised draft of the Accords, there were things he could stand by.

It wouldn’t make much of a difference if they couldn’t push all the amendments through, and there was the whole using Bucky as a sales pitch - well-intentioned or not - that he still wasn’t comfortable with. But he couldn’t deny that that aspect at least was very Toni. And he had to believe that she knew what she was doing. He owed her that much. And so much more.

The others were going through their own contracts. Scott Lang nodded through his, his trust in Hope Van Dyne evident in his expression. Sam’s contract was pretty straight-forward, suited to his airforce background. Clint was technically retired but his contract allowed him to return to duty if a voucher - either Natasha or Toni - submitted the request to the Panel and the Subcommittee. He’d have to serve three month’s of house arrest at the Compound, something Natasha had explained to him apologetically but unrelenting.

“And my family?” he’d demanded.

“All taken care of,” was her cool, detached response. She was mad at him; everybody could tell but Clint seemed to be equally mad at her too.

Wanda had taken hers to her room, disappeared for a good eight hours, then come out and quietly handed her obviously thoroughly-read contract back to Natasha.

She’d hesitated for a moment before speaking.

“I heard that Nadja Kankaraš was appointed as the Sokovian Panel Head. She is a good and smart woman.”

Natasha didn’t smile but her eyes softened mildly. “After Toni submitted her first appeal she got in touch with her. She was huge in coordinating with the CSRE in Sokovia a few months ago. The city has a lot to get through before it’s inhabitable but...it’s a start.”

Wanda frowned. “CSRE?”

“The Charlie Spencer Relief Efforts. A joint project between Toni and Miriam Spencer. Took a while to get her to answer any of Toni’s calls but when she did…” She let that speak for itself.

Charlie Spencer.
Toni had mentioned him before...before.

Wanda’s face was expressionless but she nodded and curled up in a chair in the corner of the room, scarlet flickering around her fingers. She’d been different ever since the Raft and Steve had been horrified at the state he’d found her in. He knew it had been Ross because Toni would never have let something like that happen to Wanda and sometimes he wondered, if Clint hadn’t gone to the Compound, if Wanda hadn’t left, if maybe she would’ve been safe-

He pushed the thought away. There was nothing to be done now.

It was Bucky’s reaction to his contract that was Steve’s main concern. When Natasha had mentioned there would be conditions regardless of whether he chose to be an Avenger or live a civilian life, Steve had expected the worst.

But after Bucky had passed him the document he’d been...surprised. Doubtful. Suspicious. A lot of it still filled him with indignation and he recognized the blunt and matter-of-fact style that Shanthi McMahon was known for.


“Generous,” Steve commented carefully and Bucky nodded.

“I get the same clause as Barton. No field work unless it’s for a very good reason. Colonel Rhodes has to vouch for me. So does Natasha.”

Steve frowned. “Not Toni?”

Bucky sent him a look, a combination of a self-deprecating grimace and resignation. “Think they did it on purpose. Someone more...objective gets to make the call.”

Steve’s lips thinned but they continued on.

Therapy. Evals required to be made by an independent psychiatric board. He was confined to the Compound, save for special missions, until the Panel was satisfied that he wasn’t a danger to society. It made Steve’s insides twist but Bucky just nodded like it was to be expected. It was obvious they couldn’t submit any of Shuri’s work with Bucky seeing as no one, not even the Council, knew where he was. He wondered how the Avengers intended to explain that. Or whether it was just an unspoken thing; an I know you know and I know you know that I know but we’re going to keep pretending.

Somehow that even seemed likely.

It hit him like a blow to the chest just how much of a precarious position T’Challa was in and he looked up, seeing the young king standing with his back to them, staring out of the window at the green cliffs behind the palace.

As if he’d heard Steve’s inner torment, he craned his head over his shoulder, meeting Steve’s eyes. They held one another’s gaze for a long moment before T’Challa bowed his head in an understanding nod. There was nothing Steve could say in return that could appropriately convey how grateful he felt in that moment and it was yet another reason why-

Steve rubbed at a phantom ache in his chest, feeling...just feeling. It was one of the things his SHIELD therapist - who had, ironically enough, turned out to be HYDRA - who had told him to sit with his feelings. Just sit. Just feel. Just let the thoughts come, be mindful of them, and let them leave when they wanted to, without actively forcing anything.
It was effective in its own right, he remembered, and for a time it had given him a sense of perspective, of presence.

Now, though, the very practice was tainted by the lie.

So many lies.

Too many lies.

“So Steve,” he glanced up and Natasha stood next to him, her hands in her back pocket. It felt surreal, seeing her here, having her here with them, a link to the others, a link to a recent past where everything was going right until it wasn’t. Looking at her he could almost reach out and grab it, take it back, take it all back and just be in those precious moments of almost-happiness. The corner of her mouth quirked up. “Mind giving me the grand tour?”

T’Challa gave him a nod when he glanced over for the sake of courtesy.

“So I have to offer my arm?”

She snorted and rolled her eyes goodnaturedly, then walked towards the front door without waiting for him.

“So these are your digs,” she observed as they walked around the courtyard where he’d first fought with Shuri all those months ago. It felt like a lifetime. “Pretty sweet for an international fugitive.”

He huffed in amusement. “I’d argue with you about the international fugitive part but I don’t wanna fight when you’ve only just got here.”

“Huh. That’s funny. Knew a dinosaur once who liked to give as good as he got.” Her smirk was knife-sharp and her green eyes glinted in the golden light of the hanging lamps. “Don’t tell me Wakanda has made you soft, Steve.”

“If anything it’s made me a lot more durable.” He flashed her a grin, thinking about all those days training out in the heat until the Dora and the sun tempered his body into something new, something rougher.

Natasha hummed, thoughtful and distant. “Glad it worked out for you,” she murmured under her breath in a way that made his own catch at the implication.

They both knew what was on the tip of his tongue, what he wanted to ask but wouldn’t because he had no right. Here the urge was strong, the need to know, the yearning for something, anything. But he continued to walk, letting his legs drag him in the same old circle he’d walked countless times before.

Safe, his mind was telling him. Coward, said his heart.

“What made you finally pick them up and read them?”

Steve could feel her eyes on him, a question, a judgment.

Ayo did, he wanted to say. Self-loathing and guilt did. Bucky did, which wasn’t entirely untrue.
“Toni did.”

Nat’s following silence was impassive but not dismissive. In fact it was anything but. Steve felt the shift in the air currents, the sudden hum of things they wanted to say but were doing their best not to.

“Ah,” she finally spoke, her voice dangerously soft. “Well.”

Steve grit his teeth. “If you have something to say, Natasha—”

“Oh, I have many things to say, Steve,” she hissed, still staring ahead. “To you, to the rest of them and to Toni. But she’s got a lot on her plate right now so I guess we’ll just start with you.” She rounded on him and the blazing rage in her eyes and the immovability of her form made him stop in his tracks. “You fucking asshole,” she whispered so quietly but it cut him to the core. “How far did you go, Steve? You and Barnes? How far did you go in Siberia?"

He closed his eyes as if doing so blind himself to the terror, the truth of what he’d done.

“Tell me, Steve,” she demanded in a low voice. “How far did you go?”

When he opened his eyes and looked at her, at the faint glimmer of hope in her green eyes that was slowly dwindling, he knew he couldn’t hold back any longer.

“Too far,” he whispered.

A harsh sound left her throat, carrying with it a note of disgust, of sorrow and, worst of all, resignation, as if she was telling herself that she shouldn’t have expected anything less.

She turned away, her profile caught in sharp relief by the glow of the hanging lights. “You hurt her,” she concluded and the phantom hand around his heart tightened its grip.

“Yes.”

“But you loved her,” she accused, looking at him with an expression that was asking him so why.

“I still do.”

Nat gave him a scathing look but there existed poorly-veiled sympathy, perhaps even understanding in the downward turn of her mouth.

“You had two years, Steve. Two years since we found out about what Barnes—”

“It wasn’t him, it was the Winter Soldier, it was HYDRA,” he snapped, unable to stop himself and finding that he had little want to.

“It doesn’t matter!”

“Yes, it does and you know that it does! You of all people should know!”


There were high points of color on her cheeks and her short hair was frizzing in the heat. She looked unraveled, and she was so, so angry. But so was he.

“I’m not the only one who could’ve said something,” he said and she flinched as if he’d struck her.

She breathed in through her nose, glaring up at him. “But he’s your friend.”
It was a weak argument but valid in its own right. They hadn’t talked about it. Not once. They hadn’t even discussed it. Just shared heavy, despondent looks and tucked it away neatly in the box of things to think of when shit wasn’t hitting the fan. This was on both of them, the first ones who’d seen the footage, who’d witnessed the one thing that would break them all apart, maybe for good.

Maybe that was why they did it. Maybe Nat just wanted to protect herself, protect what they all had, for as long as it lasted.

Maybe it would never have come to it. Maybe they could’ve taken it to the grave.

Until Bucky was healed and brought back home and looked into the eyes of the kid whose parents he’d killed.

Buck wouldn’t have kept it to himself. It wasn’t in his nature. He would’ve told Toni himself.

Because he would’ve known that it was the right thing to do.

Like the curtains being drawn prematurely, the fight left them both at the same time. Steve slumped onto the ground, his legs resting on the lower stone steps and Natasha took a seat a foot away. One time she might have pressed up against him in shared camaraderie, but now, maybe the effort was too much or too many things between them.

He wondered if they would ever go back. If it was possible.

She spoke after a time.

“We should never have kept that from her.” She looked tired; a heavy weight to her limbs and in the quiet of her voice. “This whole thing, Steve? What we’re trying to do back home? All the things we’re trying to accomplish? It’s bigger than what happened between you and her and Barnes... Bucky. It’s so much bigger than what happened between all of us. We’re trying to make history here, Steve. We’re trying to give people like us a future where we’re not terrifying to the world. Where people aren’t going to try and control us.” When he opened his mouth to argue, she talked right over him. “Toni was right about this happening to us, Steve. When we...when I, aired out all our dirty laundry for the world to see and told them that they needed us? That was arrogant. That was really, really arrogant. And people got scared. People died, Steve. Good people. Our people. I don’t regret shoving HYDRA into the spotlight, I never will. But I’ll regret what it cost us.”

Steve looked down at his feet, a thousand regrets and a thousand more arguments swirling around in the muck of his mind. Or maybe it was the other way around. Too many maybes. Too many almosts.

“Just like how I don’t regret letting you and Bucky leave that day.” He locked gazes with her and could see nothing but deep, wounding honesty. “But I’ll regret what it cost us.”

“Yeah,” he breathed, after a time. “Me too.”

He could never regret saving Bucky. Never. The need to protect, to save his best friend, to save the one person whom he couldn’t before but had been given a second chance to, he could never regret it.

But hurting Toni the way he had. The rage-fuelled violence. The anger.

*How could you?*

The shield.

Her look of betrayal.
How could you, Steve?

He’d gone too far.

He would regret that for a long time.
My Arms As Wide As The World

Chapter Summary

This was it. This was the end of the path she started them on.

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry this took so darn long but this is one mega long chapter and it took me so long to tie all these half-written scenes together but finally, here we are, folks, here we are. I hope you all enjoy. It has been a very stressful last few weeks and I'm sorry I haven't replied to your comments but I will get on them as soon as I can, I promise! Thank you to everybody who has stuck with me this far because reading and re-reading your comments has seriously saved me when I got overwhelmed writing my own story. Thank you all so much for your kind words and support and I really hope you all enjoy this monstrosity of a chapter!

As always, I am my own beta and all errors are my own.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What’s that you’re working on?” Kamala asked from where she was playing tic-tac-toe with Butterfingers.

Peter and Harley were in one of the other control rooms experimenting on god knows what. She suspected they were trying to create a skateboard that could beat the sound barrier judging by the three explosions she’d heard so far, followed by an unrepentant duet of, “We’re okay!”

“Nanobots,” she said with a grin over her shoulder and Kamala patted Butterfingers’ visual input unit and pressed a kiss to it in what Toni thought was the sweetest gesture ever, before making her way over to Toni and peering down at her work.

“They’re really tiny,” Kamala exclaimed at the completed cluster pushed to one side of her workspace.

“These are just the prototype. The real ones are gonna be molecular. I’m just testing out the command sequencing first. Make sure they do what they’re told and perform the way I need them to.”

She nodded slowly and Toni reached out and grabbed a wheelie stool for her. “Here. You’re welcome to watch, if you like. Just put on your protective gear,” she added, pushing an extra pair of glasses and gloves at her, which she obediently donned, looking excited.

Toni talked her through the motions sometimes, even let her manipulate one of the microscopic needles to fit the components into place.

“See, these babies have no biological nature whatsoever. That needs to be programmed into it. I’ll
literally have to give them their own DNA. Kinda cool, huh?”

“It’s amazing,” she breathed, eyes wide behind her protective glasses. Then she nibbled on her bottom lip, a small furrow appearing between her dark brows. “Do they feel pain?”

And that was such a Kamala thing to ask, and it pressed into the tender peat of Toni’s soul, leaving an impression in the shape of Kamala’s own. Kamala was a soft one. All the kids were and tended to treat the bots like people but Kamala had a special kind of empathy that made Toni proud and terrified in equal measure because she knew what the world did to beautiful things like her.

“No,” Toni said softly. “I wouldn’t do that to them. That would be cruel.”

Kamala hummed, appeased, and continued to watch, asking questions every now and again that Toni was happy to answer. It kept her mind off of her meeting with Ellis and the rest of her problems that sat on the horizon, an impending shadow that grew in size with every passing day. Sometimes she didn’t even know how she’d gotten this far. But if it was one thing Toni had grown to be, it was resilient, even if it felt like a little bit of her was chipped away with every catastrophe, every struggle.

“You know, I always thought you were the coolest Avenger,” Kamala said suddenly, apropos of nothing.

She blinked at her. “What?”

“I was only eight when you first came out as Iron Man and I can’t remember it much but I remember seeing Iron Man flying around sometimes and I thought it was so cool.” She grinned and it lit up the entire room. “I think a lot of people never thought they’d see a superhero in real life. Like they were only in books and comics and movies and stuff. And then you came and you were a girl and it was the best thing ever. I remember all the boys in my class like, ewww, how can Iron Man be a girl? And a lot of us girls got into a huge fight with them about it and I pushed a kid off his chair and told him that Iron Man can be whatever she wants to be. Then we all got detention,” she laughed, spinning around in her seat.

“I still get asked why I never changed the name to Iron Woman or Iron Maiden or something like that,” Toni said, taking off her goggles and setting her tools down. “But Iron Man is the name the public gave me first. Not my fault they made sexist assumptions in the first place. Me not changing it was kind of a middle finger to the people who thought I should.”

“You totally owned it,” Kamala agreed. “I wanted to be just like you. A girl genius fighting the bad guys.” Her smile dropped, and became sheepish. “Well, I guess I’m starting on one of those things, anyway. Might be a little too late to become a genius.”

Toni regarded her carefully, noting the disheartened droop of her shoulders and the twist of her mouth.

“You don’t need to be a genius to help people, Kama Llama,” she said after a few beats, turning to face her fully. “Did someone say someth-?”

“Oh, no, no, that’s not-” she rushed to say, holding both hands up. “No one’s said anything like that. They’re all awesome and they don’t treat me like I’m dumb or anything. It’s just…” The nibbling was back again and she averted her gaze. “It’s just that...sometimes I don’t know...sometimes I don’t understand the things that Shuri and Harley and Peter talk about,” she murmured, her voice getting softer and softer and her shoulders rising up around her ears, like she was trying to make herself smaller. If she could, Toni had a feeling she would have. “I mean...they’re really smart n’ they can build all these cool things and they understand all these programming languages and I...can’t.” There
was a miserable blush emanating from beneath the neckline of her t-shirt and going all the way up to her hairline. “They’re awesome and I’m barely scraping a B+ in geography. I just...it’d be nice to be able to keep up with them sometimes rather than feeling stupid.”

It was the tremor in her voice that broke Toni’s heart twice over and she reached out and took Kamala’s hand in hers, squeezing it gently.

“You know what I hate about the current education system?” she asked, and Kamala looked up at her curiously. “The fact that it puts a hell of a lot of pressure on kids. They’re always expected to do something. Like, take four extra classes, take up three hobbies, join all these programs guaranteed to get you into your best school. And that...that works for some kids. They breeze through, they do well in everything, they fight tooth and nail against one another and they succeed and become engineers and astronauts and lawyers and entrepreneurs and shit. Congrats to them. They earned it.” Just as Kamala started to frown, looking unsteady and a little hurt, Toni continued. “But not all kids are like that. Not all of them are brilliant all across the board. They can’t do sports or new languages blow their minds or all they wanna do is play lacrosse and video games or garden. Because that’s what they enjoy and that’s what they’re good at so they put their heart into it. Or maybe they can’t put their heart into anything because they haven’t found what they enjoy yet. But when I see you during those training sessions? When I see you hounding Nat because you wanna try something new? You’ve found what you like. You light up and you’re so pleased with yourself whenever you outmaneuver Peter or Hope and I love seeing that look on you. And I’m so proud of all of you kids and I’m so proud of you for every single thing you’ve managed to accomplish since I met you.”

Through it all Kamala’s eyes had gotten wider and shinier, her bottom lip trembling as she held back tears and gripped her knees.

“I thought,” she began shakily, “I thought you’d eventually get bored or frustrated with me if I didn’t understand stuff. I mean with Peter and Harley and Shuri you guys get to talk about all kinds of things and they-” She stopped to inhale a shuddering breath. “Sometimes my teachers-”

“Honey, no.” Toni declared, perhaps more forcefully than necessary. “Oh my god, no, c’mere, you.” She practically dragged Kamala over and wrapped her arms around her, getting a faceful of luscious brown hair and the scent of rose water and black tea. “How could I ever get bored of you?” she murmured, closing her eyes and just holding her because this is what she would’ve wanted, what she had needed as a kid, and it was what her mother had given her whenever she could. And it was always freely given by Ana and Jarvis and Aunt Peggy and sometimes even Uncle Dan, the few times he came to visit. “I think you’re perfect and a good teacher would never let the fact that a student doesn’t get it stop them from trying to help. You need help with anything and you ask either myself or any of the other guys or even better, ask FRIDAY because she’s smarter than everybody.”

“It’s true, Kamala,” FRIDAY piped up, then added gently, “And I am always happy to assist however I can.”

“We can all do homework sessions together or something,” Toni said as she pulled back, grateful for the sight of Kamala’s bashful smile and reddened nose. “Plus you’ll each be getting an insight to whatever you’re all learning at school. Except for Shuri, who doesn’t even go to school but she’ll wanna join in.”

“That sounds like fun. I mean, if you have time when you’re not busy n’ stuff.”

“I’ll make time,” she swore, and realized that it was one of the easiest things she’d ever promised.

Because Kamala deserved that much. And maybe, Toni thought silently, she did too.
About an hour later the boys finally burst out of the control room, smelling of electric burns and manic laughter, carrying what Toni assumed was actually a high-speed skateboard. There were lines running through it that glowed a suspiciously familiar shade of arc reactor blue.

“Dude!” Harley declared, brandishing his creation in the air like God himself might elevate it to the heavens.

“Dude,” Peter agreed with a smudge of grease on his nose and a bright grin.

Kamala beamed and wheeled over to them. “Does it work? How fast does it go?”

“Well,” Harley said smoothly, brown eyes glinting excitedly, “we were hoping you’d tell us.”

Then Toni watched with a heart that was increasingly turning to mush, as he spun the skateboard so it was wheels-up and showed them both the underneath where they’d somehow managed to carve - using what Toni could only guess was the electric chisel she couldn’t seem to find - in perfect, loopy script, The KamaLater.

“Duuude,” she breathed, taking it from him and running her fingers over the engraving. “This is the coolest thing anyone’s ever given me. Except for my suit, of course,” she added with a sweet smile at Toni, who just rolled her eyes and waved them off.

“You guys go break the Compound or something. And if you screw up the landscaping I’m sending Happy the pictures. See if he takes you guys out for hotdogs ever again.”

“He loves us,” Harley called over his shoulder, already dragging a laughing Kamala away by her wheelie stool.

“See you later, Butterfingers!” she called, blowing him a kiss. Then she met Toni’s eyes and smiled a little embarrassed smile that Toni somehow managed to return.

When they were gone, Toni shook her head and turned to Peter, who was still lingering, hands behind his back.

“And you, Spiderling? You gonna go tear up my lawn?”

He opened his mouth to speak, then seemed to think better of it and held his hand out in a fist in a gesture that reminded her of the time she and Shuri had their little heart to heart. She waited barely a second before opening her palm, where he dropped something small and delicate, right into the center of it.

It was a small, spherical golden bead with a delicate chain looped through the middle. She thought it might have been adamantium given the sturdiness, and wondered whether it had been FRIDAY or Vision who had shown them where she kept her extremely private store.

“We all carved our own initials onto it,” he said awkwardly, scratching the back of his neck. “We thought about waiting to give it to you on your birthday next year but...it felt kinda far away and we all know you’ve been really stressed recently so...yeah.”

She ran her finger over the bead where the letters ‘S’, ‘P.P’, ‘K.K’ and ‘H.K’ were carefully carved in their respective handwriting over the surface of it. Her heart clenched in her chest, a warm feeling emanating from her heart and spreading outwards, like a soft, golden glow.

“I love it,” she murmured, smiling up at him. “Thank you. All of you.”
Peter’s face softened in relief.

“You’re welcome, Toni.”

“Toni Stark and Colonel Rhodes.” Ellis’ lined face morphed into something both dignified and reasonable, a man willing to listen, a man who had perhaps already made up his mind but was willing to hear them out anyway. “I’ve been looking forward to this meeting for a few months now. When I got your call I’ll admit that I thought... finally.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting, sir.” Rhodey was all military respect and that knowing twist of his lips that only one man in uniform to another seemed to understand. “We had a few things to sort out before coming to you.”

Ellis nodded slowly, though his eyes were sharp, missing nothing. “And I suppose the Secretary of State being, well, out of state, has nothing to do with it?”

Toni smiled and it was all teeth. “He’s such a busy man these days. We didn’t want to burden him further and thought, hey, why not go to the big man himself.”

Ellis’ lips twitched minutely and he took in a slow, thoughtful breath. “I know what you’re here to talk about.” That didn’t come as a surprise to either of them. “Do you know how many pardons I’ve issued in my time as president?” He shrugged and leaned back in his seat. “Zero. And now you want me to issue six. Y’know, in a lot of cultures six is an unlucky number.”

Toni didn’t miss a beat. “Somehow you don’t strike me as the superstitious type, sir. Too...logical.”

His bark of a laugh echoed in the room and Toni resolutely did not flinch at the sound.

“Is that flattery, Ms. Stark?”

“No. Just facts.”

She and Rhodey watched Ellis hum, studying them both in return. Rhodey didn’t break composure and Toni maintained eye-contact, waiting.

“You’ve put me in a very difficult position,” he finally said, and it was evident that he was addressing Toni. The media had deemed it fit to name her the face of the Accords, after all. And of the Civil War. Team Cap and Team Iron Man. An entire world split right down the middle. “#BringBuckyBack has been trending ever since that speech of yours. All those documentaries about Steve Rogers and his best friend? I know the game. Played a little myself to get where I am. And I gotta tell you,” he said, leaning forward and clasping his hands together as he eyed them in turn, “you’re lucky I’m the one in power and not Ross.”

She knew. She knew that really well. Oh, she could do it if it was Ross but she’d rather not think of the amount of paperwork, or dirty dealing she’d have to do to get him to yield. Or what it would cost her in the long run.

So yeah. She knew how lucky she was that it was Ellis and not Ross. And that she and Rhodey had the added advantage of having saved the president rather publicly.
“And you’re lucky that I know wars, Stark. Colonel.” He wasn’t smiling now. There was something grave in his expression as he gazed over their shoulders, his eyes seeing something they couldn’t. “And if you say a war’s coming, Stark? I’ll raise you one and tell you it’s already here.” The words sent a chill up her spine and Rhodey shifted in his seat, frowning stiffly. “I know we need the Avengers, you don’t have to tell me that. And I know we need Captain America. So it ain’t me you gotta convince. It’s the rest of the world.”

The endorsement was both reassuring and not. Because of course she was fucking aware that she had another hundred and ninety-four nations and states to convince, thank you very fucking much.

“What do you need, sir?” Leave it to Rhodes to ask the important questions.

When Ellis smiled there was no mirth.

“Bring the rest of the world onto your side. The final UN hearing next week. If you can convince the Council, you’ll get your pardons.” He spread his hands wide in front of him, as if he wasn’t asking her carry the weight of the world on her shoulders. “That’s all.”

Because it was so fucking easy, wasn’t it?

That’s all.

Rhodey discreetly reached for her hand and held it firmly in his.

They could do this.

They had no other choice.

“We’ll do our best, Mr. President,” he said and Toni took a moment to admire the strength in his voice, strength that she could no longer scrounge up from her weak and battered body.

But she had to. Just once more today.

“There’s just one more thing, sir. What about Thaddeus Ross? You and I both know that even once the Avengers are back and legitimized he’s still going to do whatever he can to compromise any understanding we’re able to achieve.”

Ellis inclined his head, his expression benign but closed. The conversation was over.

“One thing at a time, Ms. Stark.”

__________________________

Toni was poking at a slice of apparently vegan french toast - one of Kamala’s many strange culinary endeavors - when Stephen came into the kitchen and sat down opposite her, Cloak fluttering gently behind him.

“Are those vegan?” he asked by way of greeting and Toni nodded distractedly, pushing the huge plate in the center of the island top towards him.

She pretended not to watch as he reached for the plate with scarred, trembling hands and proceeded to serve himself. She’d read his file, knew about the car crash and the months thereafter where he practically drove himself into bankruptcy then disappeared off the face of the planet.
It had taken her a while to notice that the trembling only ceased whenever he was using his powers, and she wondered at that. Perhaps the flow of *magic* - she sniffed at the word - somehow temporarily healed what was broken, re-wired all the disconnected parts of his body and made them whole, if only for a moment. Then she wondered if he could do it permanently, and if he could, why didn’t he?

*Penance.*

The word came to mind like a whisper and she dropped her gaze, poking unseeingly at her breakfast and only vaguely listening to Peter - who had elected to revealing the bottom half of his face around Stephen, though the guy wasn't stupid and had probably already caught on - help Kamala with her math homework - while Harley took apart one of Toni’s old gauntlets next to them.

She was fairly sure that it was one half of the pair that belonged to the first Iron Man suit, and that led her to thinking about her maiden flight followed by her first ever mission.

The one to Gulmira.

In that moment she missed Yinsen with an aching sort of longing.

Across from her, Stephen speared a small piece of french toast and she watched him bring the slightly shaky fork to his mouth.

Yeah. She knew a little about penance.

Rosie rolled around her feet, beeping for attention, and Toni absently reached down and patted the top of her casing. She trilled then zoomed away, bumping gently and affectionately into Peter’s thigh.

“You’ve got that look about you. Do you need me to call T’Challa?”

She blinked slowly, feeling like her head was filled with cotton as thick and dense as the rainclouds outside.

“What?”

“That look.” He gestured with his syrupy fork and scrutinized her through narrowed eyes.

“I have *no* idea what you’re talking about.”

“It’s like-” He paused to chew. “You’re thinking loudly. About a million things and you keep skipping from one topic to the next without finishing the one before that. Or it’s like when you have a conversation with someone and you stop halfway and finish it in your head then ask the other person ‘so what do you think?’”

She felt her lips twitch and she rested her chin atop her fist. “Sounds like you know a lot about it.”

He tapped his temple with an index finger. “Eidetic memory.”

“That must be a real pain sometimes,” she mused ruefully and he gave her a lopsided smile.

“More than you know.”

Silence settled between them, murky but not entirely uncomfortable.

“Why did you decide to join the Avengers?” she asked after a time, keeping her voice soft and open.
He stilled and set down his fork, looking out the floor-to-ceiling window and seeing something else entirely. She knew that look too.

“I remember everything,” he began finally. “Every single thing that has ever happened, everything that I’ve seen, everything that I’ve ever read. Down to the smallest details. But that day in New York…” She didn’t even need to ask: she knew exactly what day he meant. “That’s the one day that I can’t seem to recall. No matter how hard I try. It’s always just—” He raised his hand, fingers curled as if he could pluck the memory from the air in front of him. “Just there in the background. So close to the surface that if I could only reach a little further it could bring everything back. I see...snippets. Disjointed images and the story’s all out of sequence. My therapist said it was trauma. I mean can you believe that?” He looked at her, mouth twisted in a wry grin. “The most important day in modern history when aliens fell out of the sky and I can’t even remember it. All I remember is feeling fear and helplessness. The kind I’ve only ever felt on one other occasion.”

The name Donna Strange drifted to the forefront of her mind, highlighted in the way of the SHIELD report Coulson had sent her and she couldn’t help but seek out the kids in an irrational attempt to reassure herself that they were still there. Kamala had her head bowed over her homework, a determined frown on her pretty features; Peter was whizzing through his biology report and Harley looked like he was ready to destroy his copy of Wuthering Heights with the gauntlet he’d put back together in record time. Shuri and Vision, she suspected, were probably still working on The Room.

“Sometimes,” she began quietly, thinking of the crackle and pop of JARVIS’ voice as she flew out of range, “there are things that are better left forgotten.” She waited but Stephen didn’t argue and there was understanding in the lightness of his sigh. “So you decided to become an Avenger because of New York?”

“No, actually. After New York I threw myself into saving as many lives as I could, although, I’ll admit, not entirely due to altruistic reasons. I got rich, spent my money on designer trash and tried to get in as many interesting patients as possible.” He smirked and raised his glass of orange juice. “And then I got into an accident that effectively ended my medical career, sold all my designer trash and drank myself into a pit of self-pity and destruction and somehow ended up in the mystical land of Kamar Taj where I studied and practiced the mystic arts under the tutelage of the Ancient One and learned how to literally warp reality. It was a doozy.”

“Well, shit,” she laughed, and he shrugged, feigning nonchalance.

“I’m a quick study. And I like to show off sometimes.”

“Sometimes?”

“Five times out of seven,” he joked, then his expression became serious and, if she was reading it right, almost apologetic in a way that made something cold and anxious settle in the pit of her stomach. He cast a fleeting look at the kids before leaning forward, speaking low and quiet. “During my training the Ancient One said something to me. She said that something was coming. Something big, bigger than anything the Earth had ever seen. Something big enough to frighten not only her, the most powerful sorcerer in existence, but to strike fear in the entire universe.” He looked at her, then, something warring in his pale blue-grey eyes. “And she said that you’d seen it.”

Her heart froze inside her chest cavity, a trillion stars condensed together and vibrating at a frequency beyond anything the world had ever seen.

“What?” she whispered.

“She said that you knew something was coming because you’d seen it. When you flew that nuke
“What did you see, Toni?”

Cold.

Black.

Stars. So many stars.

Black, black, black, black-

Fear.

“An army.”

He tongue curled around the words. An army. But it was more than that, wasn’t it? That was barely scratching the surface of whatever bandaid had reinforced itself over the wounds of her psyche. It was more and yet the thoughts and the images wouldn’t come. There was light and dark and stars, so many stars.

There were fragments, glimpses of things she couldn’t possibly remember because they had never happened. Not to her. And yet there was just something that felt...forgotten. Lost. Half a story. Even less. And even less than that. And she knew, she knew, that it was important, it was important, she had to tell them -

Her head hurt.

“Toni.”

The back of her neck felt cold. Someone was saying something. Who-?

“Toni.”

Who-?

“The Ancient One didn’t say but...I suppose an army from space is bad enough,” Stephen was saying, and he sounded far away to her ears. “Question is, who assembled it.”

Toni blinked, the present catching up to her in a roaring wave and she shook her head, squinting away the black.

She wanted T’Challa. She wanted Vision. She wanted her kids, she wanted Laura and Jarvis and she wanted St-

“So that’s one reason why I’m here,” he said, and his voice sounded loud to her ears. “Because whatever it is she saw was enough to frighten her. And if I can do something then I have to. And if an army is coming to Earth then we’re going to need an army of our own. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.”

He really did sound regretful. But more than that it was a weight lifted off of her back that her fears weren’t unfounded, that there were people who believed that Earth wasn’t safe. It was satisfaction driven home.

I told you, she thought desperately, with an almost wild sense of conviction. I told you and you didn’t listen.
“Don’t be sorry,” she told him, shaking her head. “You believe me. That’s. That’s bigger than you know.”

“Well.” His lips curled into a rueful smile. “I have to believe you. Wouldn’t make sense not to considering everything I’ve seen and done ever since obtaining this power. So yes, I believe you and I believe what you’re doing, bringing Steve Rogers and his merry band of Rogue Avengers back here is the first step towards defeating the enemy, whoever they may be.”

It was the pragmatic approach she’d been trying to sell to the Council and to the rest of the world, tailored to her audience when necessary but the underlying message was the same.

Earth needed to be ready.

The Avengers needed to be ready.

It was easier, she thought, to think of it in those terms. To focus on the practicality of her work and ignore the roiling mess of emotions in the endless cavern of her chest.

“What’s the other reason?” she asked all of a sudden, rubbing at a sharp spike of discomfort around the arc reactor.

Stephen arched a brow. “Excuse me?”

“You said that protecting the world was only one of your reasons for joining the Avengers. What was the other?”

He stilled, his mouth shaping the beginnings of a word before he seemed to think twice of it and cleared his throat awkwardly instead.

“I initially didn’t take sides during the so-called Civil War.” His voice was quiet but clear and unrepentant. “I thought the original Accords were overly restrictive and I thought trusting a man like Thaddeus Ross to oversee their implementation was dangerous.”

Toni listened without judgment but the fingers of her right hand were digging into the sensitive veiny underside of her left wrist as she waited for the axe to fall.

“But,” he conceded, “when I saw what was happening on the news I thought that Steve Rogers and his team were laughably ignorant in their blatant rejection of the Accords. And that,” he said evenly, “was even more dangerous. So I picked a side and it was you.”

It was like something melted inside of her and her muscles noticeably relaxed, the cold that had been seeping into her extremities retracting with a strangely familiar kind of warmth. Something pulsed beneath her sternum and her gaze landed briefly on the amulet around his neck before she raised her eyes and met his uncertain expression.

She reached across the table, hands open. “May I see?”

The lines of his shoulders stiffened and Toni was prepared for him to say no, until he moved and the backs of his hands rest gently, vulnerably, in her open palms.

They trembled and the muscles twitched and the scars were raised. But to her, they represented intricacy and detail, the fine kind of work on another human that she couldn’t possibly hope to reproduce in this lifetime. They represented lives saved, each one the center of his universe for the duration of the surgery. How important they must have felt.
“You have beautiful hands,” she said, brushing her thumbs across his heart lines and admiring the length of his fingers, each one still performing good and honest work regardless of the countless times their owner must have cursed and called them useless. Before he could come up with a derisory retort, she continued. “Come with us tomorrow. To Seoul.”

He stared at her. “With you and Jim?”

“Yeah, if you want. You’re a doctor - you are,” she steamrolled when it looked like he might argue. “I know you keep up to date on all the latest developments in the industry. I just thought you might wanna see…” She let the non-mention of his hands hang in the air and felt his hands curl into unsteady fists in her palms.

“I,” he said on a quiet exhale, with restrained longing, like he couldn’t bring himself to hope, “I think I’d like that. I’d like that very much. Thank you.”

Toni never told Rhodey, or anyone for that matter, how many times she’d replayed her suit’s footage of his fall. How many times she’d forced herself to watch her best friend, her platonic life partner, drop thousands of feet from the sky. She never told him how it never got easier, how she could never remove herself from the situation and reconcile it with the fact that Rhodey was alive, that he was still here.

A hundred and thirty-eight flights.

Every one of them could have been his last one.

Now there would be more. So many more.

“How does it feel, Colonel?” Helen asked, a shaky smile on her lips. People might have mentioned bedside manner and a doctor’s duty to distance themselves from the patient but seeing the crack in her composure and the genuine emotion on her face was beautiful. It was the *yes, look what we’ve done, look what we’ve accomplished.*

Rhodey took a step forward, his hands hovering - not touching - the parallel bars. His braces stood against the wall. He’d always need them, at least until she could find a permanent fix for what he’d lost, but here he was. Walking. Unaided. By himself.

A breathless laugh that was a decibel away from a sob escaped his throat as he took another step. Toni’s thumb was being gnawed on within an inch of its life until Stephen’s large hand came down on her shoulder. He didn’t say anything at first and she removed the abused digit from her mouth and crossed her arms, tucking her hands into her sides and practically hugging her body for strength.

“That sure is something,” he murmured finally, some unnamed emotion in his voice and she felt his hand shake for a moment before he let go.

“That sure is something,” he murmured finally, some unnamed emotion in his voice and she felt his hand shake for a moment before he let go.

“Isn’t it?” Her gaze locked with Rhodey’s and they just looked at one another for a long moment, an entire book of things that didn’t need to be spoken passing between them at the point of contact.

It was a *thank you.* It was a *you don’t know what you’ve done for me.* It was *maybe now I can finally stop dreaming of falling, maybe I can finally stop being afraid.* It was *I love you, I love you, I love*
Afterwards, Stephen walked side-by-side with Rhodey as they took a turn around the PT room and Toni sat outside on one of the standard hospital interlocking chairs, browsing through her notes for the UN meeting. She felt like she’d gone through it a million times and yet still, she kept adding more and sending an endless string of emails to Shanthi and her team much to their exhausted exasperation. Shanthi actually called her at one point and snapped,

“Toni, it is three a.m. here. Stop pinging me!”

Then she’d hung up and Toni smiled a little to herself when a text came in less than a minute later.

_Seriously, just like we’ve practiced. It’s gonna be fine. Get some sleep._

_Shanthi_

Sean Chang, her PR manager and Pepper’s second-favorite person in the world after Shanthi, always seemed to be awake and forwarded videos and talks they were going to be running over the next few weeks before and after the hearing.

_Seriously, Toni, this is the most exciting case of my career, my team hates me but this is awesome and I want a raise because I haven’t left my office in days and every day is bring your cat to work day, do you know how hard it is to get cat pee out of a carpet

-SC_

She’d rolled her eyes and sent him a video of kittens.

The smoky aroma of hyeonmi-cha made her look up and she saw a styrofoam - no, not styrofoam, it was one of her own biodegradable cups - and gratefully took the proffered drink from Helen’s gloved hand.

“I seriously need to buy a box of this stuff before I go.”

“I’ll pass you my stash later.” Helen took the seat next to her and watched her patient through the window. “It’ll never be a hundred percent the way it was but it’s a hell of a lot better than what he’s currently going through. The implant only acts as the glue and the transmitter. It doesn’t fix the injury. Whatever will is either off-world or hasn’t been invented yet. One day, though.” Unlike before there was a little spark in the good doctor’s eyes. “We’re so close I can feel it.”

Toni knew what it was like to be right on the brink of groundbreaking innovation and wanting to be the first one there, the one to introduce a new creation to the world. She’d done it before. Multiple times. And regretted it more than once. People like her and Helen and Bruce always had this _need_ to create, to build or invent. It was artistry in its own way, addictive and more times than not obsessively and darkly so.

_There are no strings on me._

Luckily for her Helen was a far more well-adjusted human being than she ever was and after the Ultron fiasco, Toni didn’t think she needed to worry about whatever ideas Helen might bring to life.

“You need anything you just let me know,” she told her simply. “If I can help in any way…”

“Don’t you have enough on your plate, Toni?” It sounded weary and knowing and the weight of her
gaze was almost tangible. “I highly doubt I’m the first one to tell you this when I say you look exhausted.”

A mirthless chuckle left her throat. “Part of the job, I’m afraid.”

“Maybe too many jobs,” she said pointedly. “Have you ever heard of delegation? I hear it can be very effective.”

This time her laughter was real. “You’re sounding better than last time.”

“I’m taking my vitamins,” she remarked flatly, then added softly, “and going to therapy. Again, you might want to try it some time.”

Would if she could, she wanted to say. But that was a lie. She wasn’t ready for therapy. Maybe she never would be. Bruce hadn’t been that kind of doctor, as wonderful as he was, and right now she had so much on her plate that the thought of giving an extra couple of hours to something as invasive as therapy made her want to scream.

“Think I’ll pass for now,” she said quietly, scratching her sternum through the thick sweater Vision had knitted for her a couple of weeks ago. He was such an old man sometimes.

Helen’s shoulder lifted in a vague shrug. “It’s your life.” Then she reached into her pocket and pulled out one of those generic orange bottles, filled with small blue pills that rattled against the cylindrical walls. “Take one before you go to sleep,” she murmured, looking her right in the eye and it was only then that Toni saw the haunted nightmares that cast brown and purple shadows under her eyes, hastily hidden by a layer of concealer.

“Your own concoction?”

“Something like that.”

“It’ll help me sleep?”

Helen’s lips stretched into a humorless grimace.

“It’ll stop you from dreaming.”

And well. Wouldn’t that be nice.

Toni thanked her and slipped the bottle into her jacket pocket.

That night Toni didn’t dream of snow. There was no sound of breaking glass, no wind blowing in her ears, no roar of fury. She didn’t dream of a desert either, or of a cave. She didn’t dream of Rhodey falling or of her hand just out of reach. She didn’t dream of a wormhole and an army. The names of all the dead Sokovians weren’t a constant mantra being whispered into her ear in a voice that sounded like Ultron’s, their faces screaming and asking her why, why, why didn’t you do more. She didn’t see a metal arm or hear her mother’s final, choked breath.

Instead all she saw was black. Just black. And starlight. The edge of a galaxy and the start of one new one. Billions upon billions of stars, and twice as many opportunities of life.
She saw planets and beings. She saw empires rise and fall. She saw growth and death in a cycle of cold and heat.

She felt her body burn, the heat searing her right down to what could only be the charred remains of her bones. She felt the ice of space put her back together again.

And when she opened her eyes the next morning in the king-sized bed, Rhodey’s sleeping form unblurring itself before her, in that stage of half-sleep she tried to chase the last threads of the dream that-

But there was no dream. Helen had said-

She blinked and Rhodey blinked back at her. He groaned and pushed himself up, rubbing his eyes.

“What times’ it?” he asked around a yawn and Toni sniffed, space and starlight retreating from the edges of her vision until-

Her phone said eleven and she wordlessly showed it to Rhodey, whose eyebrows jumped up into his hairline.

“Damn. Surprised you didn’t wake up hours ago. Good sleep, huh? Feeling jetlagged?”

Toni opened her mouth to answer, something nagging at the back of her mind, something dancing on the tip of her tongue, just out of reach.

“I...yeah,” she croaked, squinting around their hotel room that she barely remembered stepping into last night. “Best sleep I’ve had in a while.”

She felt…

She was burning. And then she was freezing.

And there was-

“*I’ll protect you.*”

She turned to look at Rhodey, frowning.

“Did you say somethi-?”

But Rhodey’s side of the bed was empty. The bedside clock read eleven-thirty and he was stepping out of the bathroom, freshly showered and fully dressed and limping over to the door to get his braces.

“Dude, c’mon. Flight leaves in three hours. Stephen’s getting us breakfast.”

She blinked again, then shook her head and stood up.

“Some pills,” she muttered, then stumbled over to the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

Clint stared down at the phone in his hands and wondered when he’d turned into such a useless
fuck-up. His wife, his wife, had been waiting for him to call. For months. Goddamn months. And still nothing. He still couldn’t put his finger to the screen, couldn’t bring himself to tap on her name, couldn’t find the courage to call his goddamn family.

He knew what the others were thinking. What’re you doing, Barton? Why’re you taking so long? Dude, just fucking call them already! Because unlike them - save for Scott - he had a family to go back to, he had ties and responsibilities and he’d left Laura with barely a lifeline.

He didn’t know how they could fix this. Whether this could be fixed.

“She’s fine, you know?”

Nat stood in the doorway, hesitating in a way he hadn’t seen her do in a while. After a second he motioned her over with a jerk of his head and she stepped into the room, leaving the door only slightly ajar.

“And you’re being an idiot,” she added, as she settled down on the bed beside him.

“I know,” he murmured miserably, wiping a hand down his face and expelling a harsh breath and never feeling more empty than he did then.

“The longer you put it off-”

“The harder it’s gonna be,” he finished, looking at her. “I know.”

Nat offered a small smile and rested her elbows on her knees, her hands clasped in the space between.

“And us?” she asked, that same hesitation bouncing in the tremor of her voice. “How hard’s it gonna be for us to get back to where we’re good?”

“Nat,” he murmured, taking her hand and threading their fingers together. “We were always gonna be fine. Least on my part.” She smiled, still small, still quiet, but it was relieved and grateful and hopeful. And maybe, just maybe, it was going to be okay. “Thank you for this, y’know?” He tossed the phone in the air and caught it again.

She frowned, puzzled. “What?”

“The phone. For getting this to me. Couldn’t have been easy. Didn’t think T’Challa would’ve been very accommodating after you used your bites on him.”

Her brows furrowed together, then something like understanding and realization filtered through the haze of her green eyes, something like clarity.

“Oh,” she whispered, then shook her head. “I thought you knew- Clint,” she said gently and he felt like something had just gone right over his head. Something obvious. “Clint, the phone wasn’t me.”

Something obvious.

Because Nat was good but she wasn’t-

Something so, so obvious.

A plume of emotions unraveled inside of his chest, pulling his thoughts in different directions and stealing the words from his mouth.
“Oh,” was all he managed.

He felt Nat look at him with something that felt like regret, maybe sympathy. He barely felt her gentle pat on his shoulder before she left, leaving him with an epiphany he didn’t know what to do or how to deal with.

Hours later - he didn’t know how many, just that it was dark outside and he could smell Wanda and Steve’s cooking wafting through the crack in the door - he finally let the pad of his thumb brush against the only name in the world that mattered, and brought the phone to his ear.

It rang three times before a familiar voice that made a lump form in his throat, filtered through.

“Hello?”

He inhaled a shaky breath, feeling his eyes begin to water.

There was a heavy silence and then a small and hesitant, “Clint?”

“Hey, Laura,” he whispered.

There was a subtle roaring on the other side, like the loud hum of a highway. He wondered where she was going. To town, maybe? Food shopping? Maybe to visit some friends or drop some of her harvest off at the farmer’s market.

They used to do those things together and he found himself yearning for the simplicity. The simplicity that he’d dropped everything for when Cap had called. Because he hadn’t really wanted to stop at all.

“You took your time.”

There it was: an accusation and plea all in one. Why. He heard the unspoken questions. Why did you do it? Why didn’t you call? What took you so long? Why, Clint? You should’ve called.

“I’m sorry.” It was all he could offer. It wasn’t enough. It wouldn’t be enough. Not until he was home, not until he could see her, see his kids, look at what he’d left behind. “I’m so sorry, Laura.”

The silence stretched as fragile and frayed as the trust between them and Clint couldn’t blame her. Not when he’d screwed up.

“You sign the contract and the Accords, you hear me?” she finally hissed, when the yearning in his chest got too much. “You sign them and you come back to your kids.” She didn’t say to me. Somehow he hadn’t expected her to and yet it hurt like a lance through his chest. “You sign them and you get your sorry ass back to your kids, do you understand?”

Clint swallowed thickly and squeezed his eyes shut, nodding even though he knew she couldn’t see.

“Yes, ma’am.”

For a while all he could hear was the soft sound of her breathing on the other end.

“You should’ve called sooner,” she whispered, so quietly that he almost missed it and his chest constricted excruciatingly. Words wouldn’t make it past his lips and after a while he heard a soft sigh. “You should’ve called sooner,” she said again and hung up.
It was her final day in Wakanda when Steve finally went to Nat and said, “I’ve got everything I wanted to put in, I think. For the most part.”

She maintained eye contact even as her fingers tapped out the sequence on her tablet to digitize and consolidate all their notes.

“Toni’ll be happy to see you’ve done your homework.” The remark was loaded with a million things that Steve couldn’t hope to deconstruct so he settled for a somewhat weary, “You really think so?”

Her eyes flickered down towards her tablet, her fingers tracing patterns on the now-blank screen.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, and she sounded so hopelessly adrift and unmoored in that moment that Steve wondered how she’d held herself together through all this.

Probably the same way he and the others had: barely.

After what felt like forever, he finally broke and asked the one thing, the most important thing, that he wanted to know.

“How is she, Nat?”

Steve didn’t know what he’d expected, but it wasn’t the downward curvature of the corners of her mouth or the lines of tension around her eyes or the slump of her slender shoulders until all she looked was small. Almost as small as Toni.

God, Toni had always been so small and he’d left her there-

“I honestly don’t know,” she told him, shaking her head. “I wish I could tell you but I really don’t know. I can’t.” She cut herself off, lips pursed in frustration. “It’s hard for me to get a read on her most days. And the rest of the time she’s...defensive. More so than usual. She’s either gotten really good at deflection or I’m losing my touch.”

“Only one of those options sounds likely.” His throat felt tight and the knuckles of his fist were white from gripping the edge of the table. “How?” he asked, and his voice came out so cracked and desperate that he didn’t recognize the sound emanating from his mouth. “How do I fix this, Nat?”

The shrug of her shoulders was a lost, unguarded thing. “One day at a time, I guess. Or maybe it doesn’t get fixed at all. Maybe it never can.”

He shook his head in denial because no, no.

“That’s not good enough.”

“Well, then,” she laughed, dry and mirthless. “We’ve all got our work cut out for us, don’t we?” Then her face changed and she smiled, small but real, at some unseen point on the table. “Then again, with the fate of the world resting on our shoulders, we always have, haven’t we?”

And that was that. The only modicum of hope they had at this point in time. The weight of the world, the protection and well-being of people. It was what Fury had brought them all together for in the first place.

Maybe that idea, that shared ideal, could still be the glue that kept them together over the course of
however long it was going to take to be okay again.

Like Natasha had told him all those months ago; the important thing was staying together. It didn’t matter how, just that they did.

He only prayed that this time it would work.

When Nat finally set the jet down on the Compound’s landing pad at four in the morning on a Saturday, Vision was already waiting for her. Seeing as their relationship consistently maintained a certain level of distance and professionalism in equal amounts, the fact that he was witness to her return was unexpected to say the least.

He didn’t say anything when she passed him her tablet; he simply took it as if he knew exactly what she wanted him to do with it. His hand spread across the back and absorbed all the necessary information contained within before he wordlessly handed it back to her.

“Where’s Toni?” she asked once he was done and they began to walk across the grass to the Compound.

“In the common area with the interns and Princess Shuri, who are apparently conducting an experiment to see whether or not they are capable of keeping Toni’s working hours. They were halfway through an episode of Star Trek the last I saw.”

“Oh yeah? Which one?”

“The Trouble With Tribbles.”

She felt a smile curl its way onto her lips. “Toni’s favorite.”

When she looked at Vision, she found a gentleness to his eyes, something soft and fond. “She will never admit to it.” The softness gave way to what she could only describe as concern a moment later, his jaw ticking in a way that Nat was almost entirely certain it was not meant to.

“Something on your mind?”

He breathed in slowly through his nose, another unnecessary human gesture. “There is...something I must speak with you about. A proposition of sorts.”

Natasha slowed her steps and Vision followed suit.

“I’m listening.”

Vision slowed his gait before speaking once more. “In several days’ time we will present our case to the Council for the last time. Toni will be called to speak once more and whatever she says will determine whether or not Captain Rogers and the other Avengers will be allowed to return. However.” And here he paused and Nat observed him carefully, taking in the subtle incline to his chin and the hard set of his expression. “I believe we all know what the outcome will be. We have worked tirelessly over the past months and I believe this final hearing is more of a...formality. A PR strategy by the Council. Do you agree, Ms. Romanov?”

“Yes,” she responded almost instantaneously, because now that they’d laid the risks out for the world
to see how could they not take their side? “I think we’ve got a win in this one.”

“As do I. Having said that,” he continued, and there was something in his tone, a dangerous edge that pricked at her ears and made her narrow in on nothing else but him, “regardless of Toni’s very convincing argument about Captain Rogers and his team, I have concerns about how the Council may come to manipulate all that she has done so far.”

And suddenly there was a niggling feeling at the back of her skull, a light, barely-there prodding of doubt and suspicion. Because Steve may have been wrong about a lot of things. But he wasn’t wrong about everything.

“What kind of manipulations?” she asked quietly, even though she already knew the answer because of course.

In putting herself out there Toni had always made herself a target. But this was different. This was the big leagues, the international stage. And while T’Challa had done the same, it was different because he was a king of an entire country, the most technologically advanced country in the world. They would find it very hard to touch him. While Nat herself had done her fair share of public announcements and declaring her stance, she was a small fry compared to the likes of Toni and Steve.

Steve had already taken the fall for his and the others’ actions by being labeled an international criminal. And by Toni fighting for him, by trying to get him back into the world’s good books again she’d placed herself in the very precarious position where if this didn’t work, if this went wrong…

“I want you to know, Ms. Romanov, that if any one of the Rogue Avengers steps out of line, if they threaten the balance and stability that Toni has fought so hard for, I will do what I must to protect her.” He stopped and gazed down at her with blazing blue eyes, and had she been anyone else she might have taken a step back in alarm. “My question to you is...what will you do?”

There was a threat in his question, a warning that she knew she had to take seriously because for all that they were doing, for everything they’d accomplished, were going to accomplish, they weren’t a team yet. And Nat could only do what she had always done and she hoped that in that at least, Vision would respect her for it.

“What is necessary.”

Vision surveyed her for a long moment, unreadable, unnervingly so, then sighed, quiet and distant and for a second Nat imagined a long-suffering, exasperated old man and a dark-haired little girl out on the lawn on a night like this.

“I suppose that shall have to do for now,” he said. “My proposition is this: that until further notice, Toni never be left alone with either Captain Rogers or any member of his team. I believe doing so will cause her too much...unnecessary stress.”

Unnecessary stress, Nat repeated in her head.

“We can’t coddle her, Vision.”

“That is not my intent at all,” he interrupted smoothly, then added in a softer, gentler tone, “But after everything that she has already done, does she not deserve to be?”

Nat sighed and looked towards the Compound which sat like a glowing monument surrounded by darkness. And when she thought of Toni, small and barefoot and hands covered with burns, bags under her eyes and her shoulders drooped with the weight of everything she had taken upon herself, Nat thought that yeah. Yeah, Toni deserved to be coddled, if even just a little.
“Okay,” she said at last and Vision’s form visibly relaxed in her periphery. “As far as I’m able to I won’t let her be alone with any of them unless I’m sure she can handle it. From what I’ve seen I think she’ll be fine with Sam and Scott Lang.”

Vision looked down at her curiously. “Not Mr. Barton?”

“Clint is,” she began, then cut herself off. “I dunno about Clint. He’s...going through some stuff.”

Vision hummed, then resumed walking. “Aren’t we all.”

Toni’s expression when she looked up from her work and saw Natasha walking through the would stick with her for a long time.

“Hey,” she said quietly once the kids had offered their greetings and turned back to their show. She casually took a seat next to Toni, who made space for her on the couch. Behind them Vision was making tea.

“Hey yourself,” Toni said, equally soft, rubbing her left wrist and worrying her bottom lip and her fingers were playing with something shiny around her neck. That was new. “Are you...?”

“I’m okay,” Nat fiddled with the strap of her bag before placing her tablet on the coffee table. Then before she could think twice, she forged ahead with her next statement. “He read it. They all did.”

It didn’t need any more explanation than that and Toni eyed the tablet distantly but made to move to take it.

“They would’ve had a lot to say about the Accords and their contracts,” she mused after a time and Nat felt the familiar stirrings of unease at the lack of emotion in her tone and her own inability to gauge the expression on her face.

“They did,” Nat carefully supplied. On the TV, Captain Kirk had a few hundred tribbles fall onto his head. “It’s all in there.”

Toni hummed then after a beat, drew her legs up onto the seat and turning away from the seemingly harmless piece of technology entirely to face Nat fully, a funny smile on her lips.

“You got a tan.”

Nat expertly maintained her expression in spite of the non sequitur and shrugged gracefully.

“A bit. It’s beautiful there. What little I was permitted to see.”

“Oh. That’s a shame.”

And the thing was Toni really did look apologetic for her, the corners of her eyes and mouth turning down softly.

Once again, Nat tried to direct the conversation back to the point at hand.

“I know you’re extremely busy with everything. I heard you’re organizing a trip to Lagos to meet with the victims and their families. It’s a good tactic-”
“It’s not a tactic,” Toni argued softly, with sad, sad eyes that looked almost black in the dimness of the room, and Nat held up her hands, appeasing.

“Okay. It’s not a tactic. I was just thinking that if you wanted to take your hands off of the Accords stuff for a bit I’d be happy to deal with it. I think Vision and Rhodey would be willing to take on a little extra as well and maybe T’Challa. We all know his word’s gold, anyway.” She shuffled a little closer to Toni. Before, she might even have reached out and touched her on the arm or the shoulder. “C’mon, Toni. Just trying to take a little bit of the weight off of you, that’s all. We don’t need you to be stretched too thin. Delegation doesn’t mean you’re lazy.” She didn’t add the extra benefit of spreading the heat a little more evenly amongst all of them.

Toni looked at her for a long time then slowly tilted her head to the side.

“Helen said something similar. I suppose I could do with the extra time,” Toni mused in a funny voice. “I have other things to do. Like with The Room. And...a new suit. Maybe I’ll release a new tablet. And that thing with Helen. You know me; busy, busy, busy.”

There was a strange detachment to her speech, as if she was talking, thinking, about something else entirely.

And in that moment Nat felt her awareness sharpen to a pinpoint and all her skills emerge just below the surface of her skin, waiting. Like those split-second moments during a mission where she realized she’d walked into something a little out of her depth.

*What are you thinking about?*

Toni turned towards the TV and the screen reflected in her eyes, lighting up dark brown to flickers of blue and grey. Her lips were moving in time with the dialogue but her expression never changed.

Nat’s world suddenly felt blank, like all color and sound had been sucked from her surroundings. White noise muffled in her ears and her hand moved on its own, her fingers subconsciously reaching for the gun in her jacket in response to a threat that she couldn’t understand, couldn’t even see, didn’t know where, but she knew that something was wrong-

*What are you doing?*

Her fingers met the cool metal of the Glock 26 but for the first time in her life, the feel of it failed to ease the quickening of her breath. Her heart lurched into her throat when Toni’s mouth stopped moving and she lazily glanced at Natasha through the corners of her eyes, like Toni knew exactly what she was doing.

Then Toni smiled and an irrational terror lanced right through Natasha, freezing her fingers in place.

“In an old house in Moscow that was covered with vines,” Toni sang, barely more than a whisper that summoned all Natasha’s demons from as far back as she could remember, and then some more until she couldn’t breathe. “Lived twelve little girls in two straight lines.” Her throat constricted and her lungs burned and she was clawing at her neck, fingers red and bloody and still she couldn’t take her eyes off of- “The smallest one was-”

*Who are you?*

“Nat?”

The world came back in the blink of an eye and she squeezed hers shut, rubbing at her heavy lids.
“What?” she asked, confused and feeling like she’d been asleep for hours and still it wasn’t enough.

She looked up and Toni’s concerned face came into focus.

“Hey,” she said with a worried smile. “Welcome back. You nodded off halfway, there. You know you can actually ask FRIDAY to fly the jet for you while you nap, right?”

Nat squinted, still a little unsteady as an incomprehensible sense of unease did a pirouette in her chest before disappearing entirely.

She let out a huff of laughter, still trying to get her bearings. Star Trek’s ending credits were playing on TV. Kamala was asleep with her entire body draped across one of the couches. Shuri was sleepily flicking through her tablet and Peter and Harley were dragging their feet as they cleaned up the drinks and popcorn bowls.

“Nat,” Toni continued, observing her closely. “Go get some rest. You look exhausted.”

“It was a long flight. Long trip in general.”

At this Toni’s expression morphed into one of sympathy and she gently clapped Nat on the shoulder as she stood to go and gather her kids.

“Sleep in tomorrow. You deserve it.”

“Pot and kettle,” she retorted, but stood as well, hesitating for a few beats before making her way to the door in spite of the strangest feeling like she was forgetting something-

“Thank you.”

She turned and Toni was shifting from foot to foot, a lopsided smile on her face.

“For coming back. And for dealing with the...with the Accords.”

“I offered,” she replied simply. “Goodnight, Toni.”

“Night, Nat. Sweet dreams.”

Something cold trickled down the back of her spine. It was there for a bare fraction of a second before vanishing.

Nat smiled back but for some reason it felt forced. “You too.”

It was surprisingly easy to have the Accords wrested from her control-freak hands and spread more evenly amongst Nat, Rhodey, T’Challa and Vision. They were, in many ways, so much more suited to political delivery than she was. Nat had faced international scrutiny before, Rhodey was one of the most decorated military men in modern history, T’Challa required no explanation beyond being T’Challa, and Vision spewed logic better than a goddamn Vulcan.

So she wasn’t worried because she knew they had it handled.

The fact that they had the Council and the country reps listening to every word - and ol’ Thaddy
looked ready to bust a spleen - showed her just how much they had it handled. There were looks, of course. Looks that asked, where did all these extra amendments come from? Who made them? More than half of said looks were aimed at T’Challa, who weathered it all with enviable impassiveness.

Neither the Council nor the Panel were stupid but no one was willing to bring up how convenient it was to bring up these revisions at the final hearing.

It didn’t stop her from discreetly getting FRIDAY to monitor any and all communications within the room and flag up anything that even hinted towards an inquiry into Wakanda’s international dealings.

In the end the Council promised the look deeper into the Accords and more than one Panel head agreed that some of the issues highlighted with them needed to be addressed sooner rather than later.

For that, Toni was grateful.

And then it was her turn. Because the people wanted her for something different. Always had and always would.

The weight of more than a hundred and fifty eyes on her should’ve been something she was used to. She’d done speeches at colleges, at her expos and she’d had enough experience with politicians and and savage journalists to have built skin stronger than adamantium.

But the fate of the world had never been in the balance before. Not until recent years, anyway. So she began with honesty. Because, as she’d discovered very early on in life, honesty was sometimes the best defense.

“I...don’t know what to tell you that hasn’t already been said,” Toni began, subconsciously rubbing her left wrist.

The room was deathly quiet; whether it was out of respect of because they wanted to see the spectacle that was Toni Stark was beyond her ability to gauge. Somewhere above her T’Challa sat like a statue, regal and confident. On a row to her right were Coulson, May and Johnson, their attention unwavering. Vision, Rhodey and Nat were somewhere on the left side of the room while a sea of international faces gazed down at her from all angles.

“I don’t know how to convince you of how important this is anymore than I already have. You’ve seen the news. You’ve seen what the world has to say.” She looked down at her hands resting on top of the empty stand. They were shaking. “We started with one hundred and seventeen countries. And today...one hundred and eighty-four. That’s...amazing, isn’t it?” She smiled into the sea of faces. “What we’ve done...what you’ve done. From how the Accords started, from that stiff and unyielding, unforgiving piece of legislation to something welcoming. To something that wants to protect heroes as much as it wants to protect people.” A lump formed in her throat as she said the words and her eyes stung at the edges. “That’s incredible. You saw what people wanted, what people needed and you compromised. That’s unity.”

Toni drew her strength from her friends, from the team in this room that she had rebuilt, from Hope and Stephen and the kids whom Vision was discreetly live-streaming for. She drew her strength from FRIDAY and the bots. From Pepper and Happy. And Ana and Jarvis. From her parents. From herself. From the memories of a shield over her head. From the burst of fear from a hand in her chest. She drew her strength from a nuke and a wormhole and an endless expanse of black and starlight, beautiful and terrifying.

“So with the fate of the world in the balance. With the love that you have for your countries, for your
people. I ask you to look, to really look at what we’re trying to do here. Earth’s Mightiest Heroes. The Avengers. The people who have risked their lives for this world. For your people. Time and time again. Who ask nothing other than that you protect them in turn.”

But ultimately she drew her strength from a cave.

So you’re a woman who has everything...and nothing.

From a man named Yinsen.

From a man who had saved her life.

Don’t waste it...don’t waste your life, Stark.

In her mind’s eye she could see the man who had managed to change her more in those three months than most people had deigned to take the time to. She could see Yinsen and his gentle hands, his soft, forgiving eyes as he asked her not to waste her life. The second chance that he had given her.

“So I ask you to look at the decisions that have led you to this point. I ask you to look and what you want for this world and for the people in it. I ask you to look at your people.” She looked at hers once by one, even the ones that weren’t here. Vision nodded at her, Rhodey smiled, Nat was a pillar of strength and T’Challa looked so, so proud. “To look at your families. To look at those whom you love.” She thought of Hope and Stephen and wondered what their brilliant minds were thinking. Whether Pepper had that soft smile on her face, whether Happy was clasping his hands tightly in front of him the way he did whenever he was excited about something. She thought of Peter and Harley and Kamala and Shuri wished and wished and wished she had the emotional capacity to show them how much she cared about them, how much she looked forward to seeing them become the people she knew they could be. “And I ask you to ask yourselves. How would you protect them from the what’s to come? Whether it falls out of the sky or whether it’s already here. Whose hands would you trust? Who would you look to to protect everything that you hold dear? You trusted the Avengers once.”

Her voice faltered for less than a second, the irony of her own words trickling down the back of her throat like her own blood. But she swallowed down her own fear and forged ahead. Just like she’d always done.

Don’t waste your life, Stark.

She inhaled deeply, held the breath and looked straight ahead where Ellis was sat, expressionless as ever.

“I ask you to place your trust in them once more. And I ask you to let them come home.”

She felt him before she heard him, which was an accomplishment in itself given the acoustic quality of the halls. His presence, the hugeness of his soul filled the chamber and rested against the edges of her consciousness, and she opened her eyes, tugged into the present from her half-doze. His hand landed atop hers, alerting her to the sting of her nails digging into her thighs, and she made a conscious effort to relax her fingers until she could lace them through his.

“They want to meet with me privately,” Toni said, finally opening her eyes, her head rolling against
the wooden panelling at her back so she could stare up at the ceiling.

“T’Challa murmured, giving her hand a squeeze. He wasn’t happy about the Council’s impromptu request right before she left the hall earlier; she could tell by the gritty sound of his voice. “Neither the Panel nor the Subcommittee members were made aware of this so I took it upon myself to inform those that had been appointed so far.”

It forced a breath of a laugh out of her and she finally looked at him in his black suit and a stubborn -kingly- clench to his jaw.

“You weren’t meant to know about it,” she pointed out.

“Yet you told me anyway,” he gently retorted, a smile briefly softening his features.

Toni looked at him, took in the tired lines around his eyes and the tense furrow of his brows. She hadn’t asked about what had gone down in Wakanda. She didn’t need to hear it from T’Challa; he had enough to deal with on top of his relentless assault on the Council, the Panel and the half-formed Subcommittee with regards to the Accords and the Avengers contracts. She loved that he wasn’t above using his royal status or his father’s name to further their cause.

Sometimes you just had to use all the resources you had.

But still she worried. She knew the Council had their suspicions, however silent, about the locale of Cap and his group. T’Challa had willingly put himself in perhaps the most politically precarious position of all of them. He had the power of a country at his back, he was a king in everything the word encompassed and yet she worried. What would the world say if they ever found out that he’d been harboring international fugitives, terrorists, in his home? Wakanda was still so new to the rest of the world and people didn’t trust what they didn’t know. She didn’t want them to have one more reason-

“Whatever they say to you in there,” he said suddenly, gripping her hand as if it would impress his words upon her even more, “whatever demands they make of you, I want you to tell me. If they try anything, if they attempt to bargain with you for information or anything, I want you to tell me.”

“T’Challa,” she sighed, turning her body around so she was fully facing him.

“Promise me,” he interrupted urgently, taking her face in his hands and looking her dead in the eye. She couldn’t have looked away if she wanted to. “You need to promise me that you will not take on any more unnecessary responsibilities that may jeopardize your position within the Avengers.”

A muscle ticked in her jaw. “But what if-?”

“Even if they make any allusions to knowing that I have granted sanctuary to Captain Rogers and his friends.”

“That’s not fair,” she hissed, gripping his wrists. “If they threaten to expose you-”

“Then I, as the king and leader of Wakanda, will protect my country.” His words were softly spoken but the force of them were as strong as gravity itself, echoing in the empty hall like a declaration, a warning. He smiled, then, and it was soft and so fond that it made her heart ache. “That is my duty, Toni. Wakanda is my responsibility. Whatever happens, we are not helpless. We will do what we must and we will endure. Just as we always have.”

The fight drained out of her and she sighed again, unhappy and anxious and miserable and torn.
His hold on her softened and his eyes were sad and disapproving and she felt like a child being berated for doing something she knew to be right.

“You give yourself away far too freely, Toni.” T’Challa shook his head. “It isn’t over yet. We have much more to do. And we cannot do it without you.”

“Yes you can,” she argued weakly and he chuckled, swiping an eyelash off the curve of her cheekbone.

“But you have a way of getting things done faster, so I’d rather not.”

“I knew you only liked me for my money,” she tried to joke and he arched a brow.

“I dare say I’m richer than you.”

She snorted and rolled her eyes because yeah, that was probably true.

Just then the door to the meeting room a little way down opened and the HR woman who had pulled her aside earlier stepped out.

“Ms. Stark, they’re ready for you,” she called, straight-backed and hands clasped at her front. She gave T’Challa a lingering look but otherwise said nothing.

Toni felt her good mood drop and settle like mulch in the base of her belly. Just one more, she kept telling herself. Just one more step and she could get over this hurdle.

And move onto the next.

God, she was tired.

T’Challa squeezed her hands and helped her to her feet, patiently waiting while she gathered herself together.

“Just remember what I said,” he murmured under his breath. “Do not compromise yourself. Not for me, not for anyone. I’ll be right here when you’re done.”

She nodded, dithering in place and staring up at him like an idiot while T’Challa’s expression became increasingly concerned and HR woman’s impatience carried down the hallway like a frosty breeze.

“Toni-?” T’Challa began but she cut him off, gripping his warm hands like they were a lifeline and her only source of courage.

“I love you,” she blurted and there was a very long, very uncomfortable length of silence where she’d somehow managed to render the Black Panther and the king of Wakanda speechless. When he finally opened his mouth to speak she spoke over him again. “Pepper says I need to work on it. Telling my friends and the people around me how I feel. Specifically telling people how I feel about them so that’s what I’m doing here. Because if I don’t say it now I’ll keep putting it off and I just need you to know that you are so special to me and I’m so, so happy to have met you. So thank you for being my friend. I love you, T’Challa.”

She stood there breathing hard, distantly aware of the heat in her cheeks and the prickling at the corners of her eyes.

And T’Challa. She’d never seen that expression on his face, like he’d been sucker-punched in the
gut but was too dignified to admit that it hurt.

A moment later and a small sound left his mouth, something soft and exasperated - a *laugh*, she thought, with a wave of indignation. A second after that she was being gently hauled in and found herself enveloped in his arms, her face pressed into the warmth of his chest.

It would be easy to get used to this.

“And I, you, Antonia Stark,” he breathed with such affection that rang true down to her bones. “I am immeasurably lucky to have met you in this lifetime.” A moment later she felt his lips on her forehead and her eyes fluttered closed on their own, her body leaning into him. When he pulled back she blinked up at him, all at once feeling very young, younger than she could ever remember feeling. It wasn’t, altogether, an unpleasant feeling. “One day,” he promised, “I will bring you to Wakanda and I will show you my home.”

She swallowed thickly around a lump in her throat and smiled tremulously.

“I can’t wait,” she whispered, then caught sight of the HR lady’s irate glare and cleared her throat. “You’ll be right here?”

“I’ll be waiting right here,” he agreed.

She made to move, then looked up at him again for confirmation - to *procrastinate*, her mind traitorously supplied. “Right here.”

“Yes. I promise.” T’Challa directed her towards the meeting room with a guiding hand at her back. “You’ve got this.”

Toni breathed in slowly through her nose, then straightened and made her way past the HR lady and into the room, meeting T’Challa’s gaze one last time before crossing the threshold.

It happened as she knew it would. The expectation of it did nothing to lessen the blow, however.

“What are you saying?” she asked, staring at all their faces; some looked grave, others resigned, some looked regretful while others remained stoic and cold.

“We are saying, Ms. Stark, that you have made quite the statement not only to us but to the entire world. We could have simply followed your lead with the amendments of the Accords. I’ll be the first to admit that we made…mistakes,” she conceded, “and miscalculations, the first time around. But then you had to appeal to the masses and their sympathies.” She smiled and it was a cold and unfeeling thing, distant in the way that ruthless women who had seen years and years of political turmoil and war seemed destined to bear. “And the world listened. We listened to you, Ms. Stark.”

Councilwoman Ackerman clasped her hands together, resting them on the table, coincidentally right into the path of a sunbeam.

The stones on her rings glinted in the golden light and she counted them one by one. Sapphire, amethyst, ruby, emerald, topaz and-

And-
Toni frowned at the sudden buzzing in her ears.

When she looked up Ackerman’s mouth was moving but it felt slow, like someone had lowered the speed. This, she thought idly, fog sluggishly seeping through her synapses, was becoming a bit of an issue. She wondered if it was the pills Helen had given her and made a mental note to do a composite breakdown of the formula when she got back.

The buzzing in her ears got louder and the tips of her fingers were icy and numb even as torrid heat crawled up the back of her neck and pain throbbed behind her eyes.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she rubbed the center of her forehead and repeated, her voice sounding distant to her own ears,

“But what are you saying?”

Just like that the buzzing ceased and the room came back into focus, like time regurgitated the other side of a wormhole.

Ackerman sighed, and to her credit it was almost apologetic. But Toni knew an unyielding woman when she met one.

“We are saying,” she repeated, “that we have discussed amongst ourselves and we have noted that you took quite the risk by making your stance on these…Rogue Avengers so clear. Equally so, your previous relationship with them indicates…sentiment and other more emotive words. Despite what you might think we do understand your reasoning for their return; they were indisputably vital during the Chitauri attack, and then again during the Ultron catastrophe. We understand their importance both in protecting this world as well as politically.” Ackerman paused then and licked her lips in the first sign of what Toni could only glean was hesitation, something that made her sit up straighter in her chair and narrow her eyes at the usually collected woman.

“However.” There it was: the dreaded word that made something heavy and cold settle in her throat. “While you have presented a very solid and very well-planned argument for your old team’s sake, Ms. Stark, there are some of us who remain unconvinced of all of your… promises.”

It was the only sound she could hear. The word rang like a bell and tapered off into nothing and yet still its echo lingered in the silence.

“My promises,” she mouthed to herself under her breath, and saw them shift in the periphery of her vision. “My,” she said, a little louder, just loud enough for them all to hear, “promises.” She almost laughed. Because it was the same old case, wasn’t it? Regardless of who else was fighting, regardless of who else was on the line, as soon as Toni Stark took a stand, everything was on her. She looked up at them coolly, feeling a funny smile curving across her lips. “What you’re saying,” she enunciated, “is that if things go wrong it’s my head. Do I have that right?”

Several council members didn’t look impressed.

“Ms. Stark,” one man began angrily, “may I remind you that-”

“We are not so cruel as that, Ms. Stark,” Councilwoman Ueno interrupted in a level, almost kind tone. When Toni met her gaze, the woman even offered a small smile and inclined her head in acknowledgment. “Nor are we so impractical so as to let you assume such responsibility over the Avengers. That’s what the Panel and a Subcommittee are for. We are merely highlighting that there is a very real possibility that no matter how much you fight for your former teammates you cannot and should not promise that they will so easily bend to the restraints, however light, that have been placed on them.”
Perhaps it was the grandmotherly patience and the slow way that Ueno spoke that had her hackles lowering until she could think clearly again. Because of course Ueno was right - she usually was.

“No,” she finally said, but admitting it did not feel like defeat. “No I can’t promise that even once we’ve managed to push all our changes through that there won’t still be things they...or we, will take issue with.”

Ueno and Ackerman looked unruffled but some of the others, including the angry man from earlier, grumbled and shared concerned looks and mutterings between one another.

“However, I can tell you,” she continued, “that whatever... grievances or disagreements arise, they will be handled far better than last time.”

She couldn’t promise, so she didn’t. But she had a feeling. And this was her lending credence to her old team, to what they had been and what she knew they could be if they stopped and listened.

Ackerman regarded her over the rim of her glasses. “By that comparison anything would be better than last time.”

Toni almost snorted because god, they had no fucking idea just how much worse it could be.

Snow fell across her eyelashes but she dusted the bleak, dark walls and the Siberian white away with her next statement.

“It’s the only assurance I can give you.”

Ackerman and Ueno briefly shared a passing look before turning back to her.

“Noted, Ms. Stark.” Ueno nodded at the HR lady, who had been standing stoically by the door.

“That will be all. Mrs. O’Malley will show you out.”

She stood, adrenaline causing her legs to shake because this was it. *This was it.* All they could do after this was wait.

“Thank you all for your time.”

Just as she made it to the door, Ackerman called out once more. “Ms. Stark.”

She turned and waited under the scrutiny of that old - *wizened* was the right word - and panoptic stare.

“His highness, King T’Challa, although very young, is a worthy ally.”

Several eyes darted towards Ackerman before focusing on Toni once more, though Toni could tell they weren’t as clued on as they were trying to appear.

Toni met her gaze unflinchingly, *proudly* even. “He’s an even better friend.”

If Ackerman could smile, this was as closed to one as Toni suspected she would ever see. It was difficult to decipher something that was decidedly *not there*.

“He would do well on the Subcommittee, wouldn't he?” she said, and Toni’s heart leaped in her chest. “You will send him our regards, will you not?”

“I will,” she said, only distantly aware of how breathless she sounded. “Thank you.”
Twenty-eight hours later the Council President stood up on the international stage in front of the whole world. His speech was eight minutes.

The conclusion of the Council’s Resolution No. 2500/2018 was culminated in his final words:

“The Council has deliberated and taken into consideration the extenuating circumstances of the incident known as the Avengers Civil War as presented by Ms. Antonia Stark and King T’Challa of Wakanda and we do hereby resolve that the presently-called Rogue Avengers, namely Steve Rogers, Sam Wilson, Clint Barton and Wanda Maximoff pardoned for their actions under their employment as Avengers, but above all, as heroes dedicated to protecting world peace. We also call for the pardon of Scott Lang who assisted Steve Rogers during the said incident, and subject to his willingness and consent to act, we resolve that his contract be ratified accordingly. We do also hereby resolve that Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes be pardoned for all actions committed as the Winter Soldier under the mental manipulation and control of the terrorist organization known as HYDRA. We therefore urge that all parties dedicated to the Sokovia Accords take all necessary measures to ensure compliance with these resolutions to enable the return of the aforementioned Avengers to active duty subject to the terms and conditions of their individual contracts under the Accords Panel and the Accords Subcommittee.”

T’Challa flew back moments after the news with a goodbye kiss to her forehead and a sweeping hug.

Eight hours later and Wakanda became the first country to publicly declare the Rogue Avengers pardoned and welcomed in Wakanda. Not long after that thirty-eight countries had declared their retraction of any and all charges against the Rogue Avengers. Then it was fifty. Then it was eighty. And the numbers continued to increase.

At some point Toni had walked out of the Compound, barefoot and unsuitably dressed for the night weather that had taken a turn towards winter.

She sat on the frigid ground, her back resting against the walls of the greenhouse she and Vision had built with their own two hands, and looked up at the clear night sky and the stars beyond.

For a moment she could almost imagine that it was her last night on Laura’s farm, when the grief was still new and hadn’t yet burrowed into all her cracks until some days it was the only thing holding her together.

For a moment she could almost imagine that Jarvis was behind her on a cool April night, showing her worlds beyond her most fantastical dreams.

She felt him before she heard him. Felt that synthetic soul that by all rights shouldn’t have existed but did, felt the power of the Mind Stone humming, humming against something deep inside of her, somewhere behind the arc reactor.

“Ellis has announced the pardons, hasn’t he?” she asked, her eyes catching the brief flash of a falling star.

“Yes,” was Vision’s weighted response as he draped a blanket over her shoulders and settled down next to her.
“When?”

“Approximately five minutes ago.”

She nodded vaguely, squinting at the inky black for any more celestial events. The Leonids should be causing quite a show over the next couple of days. The kids might like to see that, she thought idly.

“So we’ve done it.” The finality of her tone wasn’t lost on her, as much as she was willing away the darkness that encroached into the space around her heart.

Vision’s eyes were on her but she couldn’t return his gaze. Not right now.

“You,” he said, a heaviness to his voice as warm as the blanket he’d wrapped her in, sentiment curling at the corners and enfolding her in a space where she felt, for a brief moment, protected from the indeterminable future, “did it. The rest of us helped as best we could.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Vision,” she chided gently, shifting a little closer to him. “I may have started it but I couldn’t have done it without you. Without all of you. This was—” She gestured vaguely, her hand never leaving the cocoon of the blanket. “—This was months of hard work from everyone. N’ I know you don’t sleep,” she said with a small grin, “but it’s not like it was easy for you either.”

Vision remained silent for a short while, a quiet but dependable existence at her side that she was oh so very grateful for. She didn’t tell him often enough, she realized. She would have to remedy that.

“It was easier than you might think.” His words were soft, as soft as they had been all those months ago when she’d just returned from her self-imposed but necessary exile. When it had been a night like this and just the two of them and he had laid out his guilt about Rhodey so easily, just waiting for her judgment and she had told him that they could fix it. And they had, hadn’t they? Bit by bit, inch by inch until their knees were scraped raw and their hands bloody and their nails torn from crawling up that hill. “And I would do it all over again with you, Toni. Because I trust your vision. And even if you are ever led astray, even if you do not know where to place your footing next, I will help you. I will bring you back to where you need to be. I am here for you, Toni.” She finally turned to look at him, feeling open and raw and so desperate for something that she could not yet voice. He smiled and it was a heartbreaking thing. “I will never leave you.”

There were many things she could’ve said. Many more that she should’ve said. But she was terrified and she was selfish and she couldn’t. She just couldn’t.

So she nodded and let him put his arm around her back, let her head rest against his chest as she murmured, “Thank you,” and just stayed there with him, allowing herself this moment to just sit in the company of someone she loved and whom she thought maybe, in his own way, loved her back.

Tonight she turned her back on a Siberian bunker. Tonight she walked away from red, white and blue. From a metal arm. From the sound of glass and her heart being ripped from her chest. From her mother’s scream. From her mother-

She didn’t have to hurt tonight.
They stood around the TV as news of the pardons continued to stream as steady background noise.

Nobody spoke. They barely moved.

But still, he felt their eyes on him, felt the weight of their stares from all sides of the room as they waited.

He stood in the center, arms crossed over his chest. In one hand, hidden in the crook of his elbow, was the insignificant weight of a flip-phone that felt as heavy as the whole world.

It hadn’t rung. Not once. He never even gave it a chance to run out of battery just in case.

Even now, though he knew he had to address the team, though he knew they were waiting on him, he had to stretch this moment a little longer, clutch the phone a little tighter. Just in case.

Just a little more. Because maybe-

*Oh god, I left her.*

“Steve.”

Bucky. The weight of his hand on Steve’s shoulder.

Just one more second, he begged desperately. Just *one more*.

*Oh god, I left her.*

A sigh and another presence made itself known on his left. Sam.

“C’mon, Cap.”

Steve closed his eyes and just breathed.

He thought of Toni, a million miles away. Her hair would be an unbrushed, fluffy mess, there would be bandaids on her hands and around her fingers. Maybe a smudge of grease on her forehead. Her tank top would be damp with sweat and blackened where she’d wiped her hands. Her feet would be bare even though she was insecure about her toes and always curled them when people were around so no one would see.

He could hear her laughter, the surprised, uncontrollable kind that would bring tears to the corners of her eyes and make her face all red.

He could see her smile, the arch of her brow, the dark brown of her eyes as she teased him.

He could see her in a bedroom at the end of the hallway of a house on a farm.

*Steve, I-*

He could almost reach out and *touch her.*

*Steve, I-*

Steve Rogers opened his eyes and turned to face his team, who straightened their shoulders when they looked into his face. He surveyed them one by one. This team. His people. When he met Sam’s gaze, Sam subtly dipped his head. When he looked at Bucky-
Bucky was stronger than him. Always had been. Always knew when to pull Steve from a fight and when to join in and when to smack the back of his head for being an idiot. Always knew when to challenge him so he could be better.

When he looked at Bucky, Bucky looked back.

Because Bucky was stronger than him.

And that gave Steve strength.

“Start packing up. We’re going home.”

Chapter End Notes

PHEW. It has been one hell of a ride and we're finally at a major turning point! I hope this in some way makes up for my absence.

Some things I'd like to point out are that the MCU’s political situation is pretty sparsely portrayed so I've taken so many liberties with how international situations are resolved but ultimately I probably messed up legal procedures and stuff, so I'm going to hide behind the explanation that this is fiction, so please go easy on me?

Another thing is that a lot of you guys have been asking me what's the deal with the THING inside of Toni. This chapter touches on it a little, if it's obvious. It does get a little crazy up in here, especially in this chapter and things are only going to get weirder, if you can believe it, lol.

Also, I just wanted to highlight that the song Toni sings is from the cartoon "Madeline" and credit for this goes to Copperbadge who used it in his "The Silver Age" series, which is phenomenal and you should all read it. I believe he got the idea from another author as well, but I just wanted to make clear that using the song wasn't my original idea but it got stuck in my head and I thought it fit really well.

Anyways as always, thank you for reading and I hope you enjoyed the chapter. It was a tough one to get through but I really hope it delivers. :)
And Then There Were Thirteen

Chapter Summary

It was always going to lead up to this. But after everything, she still wasn't ready. Because no amount of time could have prepared her for this.

Chapter Notes

I have no excuse for how late this is other than the fact that LIFE happened in various tumultuous ways. I am so so sorry for how long it's taken me to get this chapter up and I'm sorry that I haven't replied to so many of your comments and your questions, but I promise you that I WILL get to them.

Also, thank you to everyone who has left me comments/messages here and on Tumblr, asking after my wellbeing and just checking in with me. That is so sweet of you and I feel incredibly humbled by your well wishes and kind words, so truly, madly, deeply, thank you.

In other very important news, I have finally enlisted the aid of a Beta in the form of the ever patient, ever kind and ever wonderful Demigodscum, whom I owe my soul, my first born and undoubtedly my sanity to. Because she stepped in at a time when B&G and I were going through a rough patch, and let me tell you, she pulled me out of that rut with enthusiasm and patience and she is honestly THE ACTUAL BEST and the reason why I stopped waffling over this chapter. *showers her with love and golden confetti*

So without further ado, on with the story! I really hope you enjoy this chapter and do let me know what you think! <3

Winter frost crept up the corner of the glass. The lawn below glittered with ice and the sky overhead was a glorious if distant blue, cold and unfeeling. It was supposed to snow later that night, she knew. First snow of winter. She dreaded it a little, the cold. The snow. The gray. Even indoors with the temperature perfectly regulated, her lungs constricted as if she was still breathing in that Siberian air.

She rubbed a painful, throbbing spot below the arc reactor, just above the valley between her breasts. The place where skin met scar tissue was particularly sore today. When she’d first allowed Helen to take a look at it, Helen had warned her that the cold would affect it, that her lungs would never be completely right again.

There was a mild, barely perceptible tremor as the quinjet landed on the roof and all of a sudden Toni felt her lungs cease to breathe, incapable of performing the one function they were designed to.

Warm, cautious fingers slipped down the side of her wrist before sliding between her fingers. As if he had given her the all clear, as if he’d broken whatever spell the cold had cast on her, her lungs resumed their work and she released a slow, steadying breath.
“Are you okay?”

Was she okay? She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been okay. Was it last week when she and Peter had spent time together in one of the training rooms, just hanging from the ceiling and thirty feet of empty space below them? Maybe it had been last night when she and Vision had walked around the Compound for the last time when it was just them. Maybe it was when T’Challa had slipped a woven bracelet, glittering with tiny flecks of crushed Vibranium, around her wrist and said, \emph{I told you I’d bring one back with me}. She was as keenly aware of the way it rested against her skin, like a promise, as she was of the adamantium bead the kids had made her, as she was of the arc reactor in her chest and how a man named Yinsen had once saved her life.

Or it could’ve been the week before she’d found out about the Accords and Rogers... \emph{Steve} had asked her to a ball game.

Or maybe it had been in a bedroom at the end of the hallway of a house on a farm. When the world was falling apart around their ears. When her mattress had dipped with a solid weight. Familiar fingers lacing themselves through hers. The heat of murmured breath. The tip of a nose and the flutter of her eyelashes.

\emph{Steve, I-}

The anticipation in shaking fingers that traced down the side of her jaw. The need. \emph{The ye\textipa{r}ning}. \emph{The at last}.

\emph{Is it going to be okay?}

A gasp, a \emph{heat}, the curl of her toes.

\emph{Yeah. It’s all going to be okay}.

A kiss.

“Toni?”

She blinked.

“Yeah,” she said, squeezing Peter’s fingers and smiling up at him, mustering as much reassurance from the bare reserves of her bones as she could. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

\emph{Liar}.

She pressed the palm of her free hand to her forehead and rubbed circles around the budding migraine, wincing under her breath.

“Hey,” Peter quietly coaxed, his brow furrowed with worry, dipping his head so he could see under the chin-length curtain of her messy hair. “You don’t have to do this.” He sounded so earnest Toni could almost bring herself to believe him. “We can get— I mean, Colonel Rhodes can do it or maybe Natasha—”

“They can’t,” she interrupted softly. “I mean they can but I’d still—” Unable to grasp the words, she switched tactics, gripping his hand and looking him in the eye. “Peter, I want you to know. They are \emph{not} bad people. I got into a fight with them. Not you. I just dragged you in without telling you everything. My judgment is extraordinarily impaired and I am not a reliable source in this situation, kiddo so don’t—”
“You know you’ve never said anything bad about them in front of me?” Peter interrupted her sharply. “Ever. People say stuff. The news, the internet. But you never have. Not to me or Harley or Kamala. I’d wager not even to Shuri or Mr. Strange. And that’s—” He sucked in a breath through his teeth. “You could’ve told us what went down. What happened after Leipzig. But you haven’t. And I get it; you’ve gotta keep some things to yourself. You want all of us to be as objective as possible when we finally meet your old gang. You want us to be able to trust them. But Toni,” he implored beseechingly, “how can we trust them if you clearly don’t?”

That was...that was gutting. She had no words; her mind was drawing a complete blank and she had nothing to reassure him with. Which was perhaps the worst way to start this, this new beginning she’d been trying to frame it as. She had nothing to offer Peter, who was young and impressionable and so insightful that even she couldn’t get past him.

She wanted to fix this. He needed to know that her thoughts and feelings on what was going to happen didn’t matter. That the team was what mattered. She needed to fix this before—

Toni felt it before the hiss of the door met her ears. She felt it in the way the air felt colder, a gust of northerly wind pushing its way into her lungs once more. She felt it as the fine hairs on the back of her neck stood on end and the invisible weight of a presence prickling the top of her spine. She felt it as the others shifted and rose to their feet in anticipation. She felt it desperately in the absence of T’Challa, of a tether that she needed to keep her grounded, to keep her here. She felt it in the way Peter stiffened, his body already turning of its own volition.

Breath caught in her throat, Toni reached out, her hand landing softly on his cheek. He met her gaze and went rigid, immediately realizing his mistake.

“Sorry,” he whispered quickly, “sorry, I—”

“S’fine,” she murmured, shadows moving in the corner of her vision, and she guided Peter around so he was facing her, facing away from— She kept her eyes on him and gave him a strained smile as she reached behind him, grabbed his mask from the head of the couch they’d been leaning against, and proceeded to pull it over his head. “Just. Keep it on around them. For now. Till you’re ready.”

Spider-Man nodded once, a silent pillar of strength. A crutch that she so desperately needed.

Then she came around the couch to face the music.

They were all there. They were all here. In the same country, on the same soil, in the same room. They were all here.

Nat stood to the side of them, a little away, her hands clasped behind her back. She was it, the clear delineation between the two groups. Toni with Peter behind her, Vision to her right, Rhodey standing with his body angled towards her, Stephen standing behind a chair with his arms crossed and Hope rigid, looking like she was physically trying to hold herself together.

Opposite them Barton stood tense, his jaw harder than Toni had ever seen him. Red curled in her vision and Toni had to skim over Wanda’s flexing red fingers. Scott Lang stood on the other side, practically vibrating on the spot, his focus solely on Hope. Toni almost smiled. There was Wilson, who kept darting furtive glances at Rhodey, like he just had to make sure he was standing.
And finally.

Red, white and blue.

The sound of breaking glass.

A Siberian storm roaring in her ears.

_How could you?_

He looked, if possible, even taller than before. Either that or she’d forgotten — _how had she forgotten?_

Or maybe she’d gotten smaller.

The second thing she noticed was the beard.

Through her subtle effort not to meet his eyes, what she could see looked...wilder, _rawer. Darker_.

Like the past months had changed him into someone she no longer knew or recognized. But she knew that if she looked into his blue eyes with that little bit of green — she saw it _first_ and it was _never_ an imperfection — she’d be lost once more.

So she let her eyes dart past him to—

A flash of metal.

Her mother’s scream.

_I remember all of them._

-then looked away.

She couldn’t. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

The words were caught in her throat, a dozen of them warring for dominance, but ultimately her lips remained stubbornly shut.

So she was immensely grateful when Lang and Hope finally broke away from their groups, meeting somewhere tentatively in the middle. There was a moment where neither of them spoke, hovering in a moment of disbelief and **are you really here** and **I’m so sorry for everything** before they wrapped their arms around one another.

Hope would later deny that she’d cried and Lang would needle her about it for years to come but _that_ was what a reunion was, what a reconciliation was meant to look like, not tainted by distrust and lies and cold.

Toni managed a smiled as they traded muted banter under their breaths, neither one capable of keeping their hands off of each other. To make sure they were real, she realized.

In the corner of her eye she saw trigger-worn fingers flex, the man they belonged to as taut as his weapon of choice.

Inhaling deeply, she clasped her hands in front of her body and raised her chin. This was it.

“Barton and Ling,” she called, cutting through the tense silence. All eyes were on her, like ten red targets.
Lang hesitated uncertainly and Hope rolled her misty eyes. “Uh. It's Lang.”

“Leng, then,” she revised.

“That’s, that’s still not my name,” he uttered to Hope, who consoled him with a nod and a, “She’s like that.”

“Hope can take both of you down to one of the conference rooms. You’ve got people waiting for you.” Barton jerked but Toni resolutely avoided his gaze. She hadn’t had much of a chance to catch up with Laura and the kids in the two days since they’d arrived at the Compound but she’d seen the way Laura had grown increasingly resigned over the past few months the longer she didn’t hear from Clint. “Nat will already have explained this to you but your pardons put you on a probationary period for six months except in the most extenuating circumstances.” She paused and let that settle in. “Don’t waste it. Six months isn’t a long time.”

Don’t waste the time you’ve got with your family. Do what you need to do. Don’t leave them.

There was a beat where Barton looked at Cap, then at Wanda, who gave him a reassuring if tremulous smile, before he stalked across the room to the west exit and disappeared through it without a backward glance.

Hope and Lang followed, hand in hand, Lang practically clinging to her. It was that that made her call out once more.

“Hey, Long.”

He turned and looked at her over his shoulder.

Toni studied him for a second, this guy who, like Peter, was brought into a fight without knowing the stakes, without knowing the whole truth. She imagined there were a few more worried lines on his face than there had been before he’d left.

“Cassie seems like a really a cool kid. You should be proud.”

He gasped through his teeth, eyes suspiciously damp and nodded. Then Hope slid an arm around his back and led him out, mouthing a sincere thank you to Toni before she disappeared.

Toni breathed out discreetly. Feeling her limbs flag. Two down, four more to go.

“Wanda.” The name came quietly from her lips, barely a whisper, and scarlet sparked in her periphery, causing her heart to seize in her chest. Stephen, casual and quiet, came up by her on cue.

“This is—”

“Doctor Strange,” the girl interrupted slowly, something like intrigue and wonder in that smoky voice of hers. “I’ve seen you on the news.”

Toni kept her mouth shut and let Stephen take the conversation forward. It’d been a gamble but it looked like it could pay off. Training and oversight. Enough of it to appeal to the UN and just the right amount so that Wanda wouldn’t feel trapped by the many conditions of her pardon. Stephen could deliver that. She knew he could. Toni had been hesitant to ask him at first, what with his work at the Sanctum and with The Room, but when she’d brought it up with him he hadn’t thought twice.

“I dare say you have. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you. Toni has told me a lot about you,” he said calmly and Toni barely suppressed a wince. Wrong thing to say. Definitely the wrong thing to say if the weight of judgment in glowing red eyes was any indication.
Vision shifted, Rhodey tensed and Natasha uncrossed her arms, letting them fall loosely, ready, by her side.

But Stephen continued on, unaffected, yet entirely attuned to the extra level of tension in the room. “She believed that you and I were similar to the extent of our abilities. The execution is different, as I’m sure you’re already aware, but I believe with time and study, we’ll be able to get you back on the field, where you belong.” He smiled and it was kind and Toni was immensely grateful for it. “You’re quite the fighter. I look forward to working with you.”

Wanda’s fingers twisted in the hem of her black top and she dipped her head in acquiescence. “Me too. Thank you.”

It was very obviously not directed at her and Toni wasn’t expecting it to be anyway. Still, she felt Rhodey bristle, uttering something under his breath and that...that had to be enough.

And then there were three.

Bucky had watched Stark from the moment he’d stepped into the room. He’d watched her say her piece to Lang and Barton, seen the way she eyed Wanda’s magic through the corner of her eye as if she was anticipating a strike. He watched the way she resolutely, through sheer determination and grit, didn’t look at him or Steve.

Bucky watched Steve too. In the nine months they’d been there, Wakanda had become a refuge and the Compound something hostile and unknown. He saw it in the broadness of Steve’s back and the tense line of his spine. He saw it in the clench of his jaw and the yearning way his eyes followed every movement Stark made.

It was like watching two magnets fighting against their very nature.

And through it all none of them said a word to one another.

He’d anticipated something like this. And yet nothing of the little he knew about the relationship between Steve and Stark could’ve prepared him for this.

Stark looked like she was standing on the edge of a knife, like the tiniest gust of wind in either direction would compromise her artfully crafted balance.

And it wasn’t just Steve. It was him.

It was everything he’d done, everything Zemo had shown her, everything Steve hadn’t said.

It was him.

From the moment she’d stepped on that podium and declared her cause to the world he had known it would always end up like this, with them in the same room and all their hurts an invisible barrier between the worlds they’d constructed for themselves, for one another.

Him and Steve, the last two people to see Stark in a Siberian bunker, on her hands and knees and her face twisted in pain and betrayal.

I know that road.
He knew it too.

Did you know?

How do you come back from that?

His lungs seized and he stopped breathing.

How could he ever come back from that?

“-free reign of the Compound as usual. Hill’s on the other side with the new recruits. Agent Fern, former SHIELD as I’m sure you’ll remember, is her second in command. She’s good. And Hill is Hill, so.”

“She still working for Fury?” Steve spoke for the first time since they landed, his voice a low rumble.

It was as if the air was sucked from the room as everybody tensed and waited.

Bucky’s eyes darted to Steve, who had frozen on the spot, his shoulders gone stiff.

For Stark it was a study in pain as she came to a stop, her gaze fixed on an immovable point somewhere over Colonel Rhodes’ shoulder.

Then, without missing a beat, the man spoke up as if nothing was amiss, like his best friend had not just stuttered to a stop like a broken toy and like everyone else wasn’t anticipating the fallout.

Steve’s shoulders, if anything, became even more taut than before.

“She still reports in to Fury and Coulson, told us so the second she got back here. But we keep some stuff on a low-key, need-to-know basis in case either one of them starts getting ideas again.”

Colonel Rhodes had a calm and competent air about him that Bucky appreciated. He was a military man through and through without any of the condescension or bravado. Bucky had dealt with men like him before; they were the ones who made battle plans and kept everyone together and alive when things went south.

Stark seemed to hang on his every word like a lifeline. He didn’t know her but somehow he was glad she had Colonel Rhodes on her side.

“Well,” she finally said, clapping her hands together, “you guys know where everything is. If you don’t I’m sure FRIDAY will be happy to help.”

“Indeed,” came a disembodied, frosty voice that had Bucky’s fingers reaching for a non-existent weapon.

“Sergeant Barnes, if you are so inclined,” the android, Vision, spoke up, his strange eyes on Bucky, “I would be happy to show you your designated quarters. They are right next to Captain Rogers’ rooms.”

That was convenient. Kill two birds with one stone. Remove the objects of Toni Stark’s distress at the same time and make it seem like courtesy. Steve could’ve shown him but he knew his friend well enough to know Steve wouldn’t leave his side just yet.

Bucky tested the theory anyway and nodded.

“Thanks.”
For a moment it looked as if he was going to stay. But then as if on cue, Steve angled his body towards him, though it seemed to kill him to have to turn his back on Stark. Again.

“I’ll come with you.” He said but the catch in his voice was unmistakable.

Sam made an aborted move to follow but his attention was once again drawn towards the Colonel.

Bucky saw Vision touch Stark’s wrist as he moved past her, a simple gesture but obviously meaningful for the both of them.

“There’s food in the fridge or if you like the cafeteria in the other wing is open until nine,” Nat informed them, ever practical. The she gave them a wry grin. “Might be full of recruits, though. Just a warning.”

Steve smiled, small and tense but a smile nonetheless. Bucky suspected he needed something familiar to hold onto while things were still so strained. He secretly wondered whether they would ever not be.

Just before he followed Steve back out again, he heard his name being called in the quietest voice he’d ever heard, barely more than a breath.

“Barnes.”

He was distantly aware of everyone else once again stopping in their tracks as he turned around and raised his eyes to meet hers.

They were brown. He remembered them too. They were nice eyes, full of history and pain as they were.

She was small, impossibly small for someone who had done so much, who had encompassed lifetimes into the very sinews of her body. Though he should’ve reserved all judgment considering the man he was standing next to, the man who, at this very moment, was probably wishing that it was his name she’d called.

Stark stared back at him, something old and weary in the circles under her eyes and the trembling of her fingers that she seemed desperate to hide. But he saw them.

When she finally spoke to him it was louder and clearer, not modulated by the suit or transmitted through a television.

It sounded like sorrow and shattering glass.

Do you even remember them?

“Shuri will be here in a few weeks to oversee your first B.A.R.F. sessions. Will you be up for it?”

B.A.R.F.; Shuri had told him as much as she could about it and he knew that it was both a form of therapy and psychological healing.

Knew that Stark had made it for herself, then altered it for him. An act he still could not comprehend.

He nodded. “I will.”

She continued to watch his face, searching, maybe. For what, he didn’t know. Humanity, perhaps.

A reason for why.
“As for your arm.” She paused and he resisted the urge to reach up and grasp his stump of a shoulder. “Vision and I have constructed the parts for a new one. Several new ones. Just in case. You’re gonna need surgery to remove the current implant and reinstall a better one. It’s... pretty invasive but Helen Cho’s the best. Let me know when and we can get you briefed—”

“Hi-how soon?” he croaked, then wished he hadn’t interrupted, if only that he didn’t have to see her stiffen, her body instinctively leaning backwards towards Spider-Man.

There were a few heavy beats of silence before she spoke again.

“We’ll be ready when you are.”

He nodded again, jerkily.

“Thank you.”

She averted her gaze and Steve placed a hand on his shoulder and guided him out after Vision.

Just before the door closed he glanced back one more time to see Stark’s drawn and weary expression. A hunted animal too used to being beaten down. She was small. So impossibly small.

The numbers in the tiny black screen of the oven told her it was five minutes past four in the morning. She blinked at it slowly, feeling awareness come back to her in tiny nudges on the corners of her conscience. How long she’d been sitting there she didn’t know yet; she could barely recall what happened after Cap...Rogers... Steve had left.

She remembered...Rhodey’s legs had gotten tired so he’d finally sat down on one of the sofas. Wilson had been standing by the door one minute and sitting by Rhodey the next. At first neither had spoken. And next she knew, Wilson had shook his head, staring down at Rhodey’s legs.

Whatever he’d said, it made Rhodey smile. And to Toni that was all that mattered.

She remembered Stephen’s gentle hand on her arm. Something - she couldn’t remember - softly spoken. The scent of tea leaves. The scratch of his goatee as he lightly kissed her cheek and then—

He’d walked towards Wanda who had been wringing her hands, eyes darting from person to person, exit to exit, panic and misery making her look pale and unhappy.

And then Stephen had stopped in front of her and Wanda had looked unsure but also so relieved, like a wayward ship pulled back into harbor.

And then—

They had probably left to discuss things, Toni thought. That seemed...likely.

Then Nat had been there in front of her and she had said—

“Leave it to me, Toni.” She had smiled, small but there.

And Toni had…
“Okay.”

She’d said ‘okay.’

And Peter—

Peter had to be back in Queens for dinner with Aunt May. They were going out for Thai.

But he had asked Toni—

“Are you sure you don’t want me to be here—?”

“I’m sure, kiddo. Say hi to Aunt May for me.”

He’d still been wearing his mask but he thought so loudly that she could practically see the doubt and his uncertainty through it.

Happy had driven him back.

After that…

She didn’t know what happened after that.

And she’d been sitting here for almost twelve hours doing...what, exactly?

It was like walking through a dense fog, like her brain had leaked out of her ears and the cavern of her head was filled with heavy and humid vapor.

It was like she hadn’t slept in nine months.

She vaguely wondered whether this was what mothers felt like on a daily basis, then quickly dismissed the idea because what had she birthed other than a series of incrementally bad decisions?

Toni had just pushed her very stiff, very achy body to its feet when the main entrance door hissed open. She froze for a fraction of a second and relaxed almost instantaneously when she saw long dark hair and a pair of flannel pajamas that she recognized immediately.

Laura stopped short when she saw Toni, scrutinized her from head to toe in a way that made Toni feel like a reprimanded child, then let out a puff of air, her expression simultaneously fond and exasperated.

“What the hell, Toni,” she said, with sleep-deprived huskiness.

She made a beeline for the kettle while Toni gingerly hoisted herself back onto the stool.

“You’re not asleep either,” she pointed out, her own voice coming out croaky.

“Haven’t been able to,” Laura admitted, pulling two mugs out from the cupboard and a box of Earl Grey.

Toni didn’t push because she wasn’t an idiot like that and contrary to popular belief her EQ was, on most days, a fair few rungs higher than average, thank you very fucking much.

She watched Laura for a while, silently reminiscing on how familiar this scene was, how, in a very different kitchen, the walls dappled with lemony, early-morning light, she had sat like this, watching Laura putter around the kitchen in a pair of flannel pajamas. Nathaniel, an abysmally early-riser,
would’ve been on her hip. Instead, she had a tiny baby monitor - one of Toni’s side-creations during her stint on the farm - pinned to her breast pocket.

When Laura turned around, carrying two mugs of Earl Grey - one with a couple of slices of lemon floating in the steaming amber liquid and the other undoubtedly milky and sugary - she paused, catching something on Toni’s face, a funny smile working its way onto the corners of her lips.

“What?” she asked slowly, setting the mugs down and pushing the sweetened one towards Toni.

Toni lifted a shoulder in an awkward shrug, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

“I just,” she began, then shrugged again. “I missed you.”

Laura’s smile softened as she settled into the opposite chair, and she reached across the countertop to squeeze Toni’s hand.

“I missed you too. It’s good to see you, Toni.”

Laura’s easy but earnest honesty was like being surrounded by balmy summer air and she exuded a sense of comfort and rightness that Toni was so incredibly grateful to have become a part of. Laura had had no obligation to open her home to Toni all those months ago. She could’ve said any number of things, could’ve slammed the door in her face, could’ve told Toni to leave and never come back until she’d brought Clint home.

But she hadn’t. Because Laura was one of those deeply kind and generous people that few would ever come across in their lifetimes, and her happiness was the quiet but heart-swelling sort that seeped into every corner of every room.

Toni knew her fair share of superheroes and wonder women and highfliers. And maybe Laura would never get that kind of international recognition or have her own Wikipedia page but she was a rockstar in her own right.

She’d been there for Toni when the Avengers had fallen apart and Toni was unspeakably grateful to have her here when they were trying to put them back together again.

“You’ve been busy,” Laura said after a time, raising her eyes from where she’d been assessing a cluster of mugs with a contemplative smile.

Kamala had made them in art class: one for each of the kids and one for Toni that was currently sitting on top of her favorite desk in the workshop. Each of the misshapen but lovingly-made mugs had their initials on the side in different colored glitter. It was hilariously garish and so Kamala, who had an eye like a magpie.

“Why be subtle?” she liked to say.

“A little,” Toni admitted fondly. “You’ll like them. And they’ll keep Coop and Lila entertained.”

Laura hummed, a thoughtful and distant sound. “I look forward to meeting them. Lila will be so impressed. A princess,” she said, with some disbelief.

That made Toni grin. “The coolest and smartest one there ever was,” she agreed. “Taught me a thing or two about...everything.”

“She sounds lovely,” Laura said. “They all do. And last time you told me you had a...wizard?”
Stephen’s look of resigned suffering crossed her mind and she bit back a chuckle. “That we do. Though, he prefers to refer to himself as the Master of the Mystic Arts. It’s all very dramatic and magical.”

Laura was openly smiling now and it lit up her face like a slow-burning candle, warm and eternal.

“And if you didn’t meet Hope yesterday you should one of these days. Most days she seems torn between wanting to stab me in the throat and wanting to stab everybody else in the throat. Great with kids, though, but if anybody mentioned it she’d probably—”

“Stab them in the throat?” Laura arched a brow and shook her head. “The company you keep.”

“You hang out with me. I’m at least infinity times worse than the rest of them,” Toni pointed out, then took a long sip from her thick, sticky-sweet tea.

Laura’s smile dimmed. “Not all of them,” she said, and the shadow of Clint, or perhaps that absence of him, crept stretched long from the dark corners of the room. “Nate doesn’t remember him.”

It was spoken so quietly that Toni almost didn’t think that she’d said anything at all.

Laura idly ran her finger over the baby monitor then met Toni’s gaze.

“Laura—” Toni began.

“I showed him pictures every day. I’d say ‘look, that’s daddy’ and Nate would say ‘hi daddy’ and I thought— But he just started to cry when his father tried to hold him.” She bit her lip, looking unhappy. But it was anger, not sadness, and for all that Toni had no right to take sides in this, she couldn’t help that tiny weed of satisfaction that crept out of the ground and wrapped itself between the rungs of her ribs. Because Clint had left. Then he hadn’t called. And Laura deserved so much more than that.

Just as quickly as it came, the feeling subsided until all that was left was guilt, sour and acidic, burning in her chest.

“And Coop,” Laura continued, shaking her head. “He’s so angry at Clint. He refused to hug him. And Lila’s a smart girl; she preoccupied Clint for most of the day. I’m not sure whether she was doing it to protect her brother or to preserve her father’s feelings.”

“Or both,” Toni supplied gently.

Laura nodded grimly. “Or both.” She let out a frustrated huff and ran her fingers through her hair. “She shouldn’t be having to play mediator like this. It’s not the child’s responsibility to create level ground between her parents’ bullshit.”

Toni watched Laura for a long moment, taking in the unbrushed hair and the bags beneath her eyes and the furrow between her brows.

“I’m sorry, Laura,” she said quietly until Laura lifted her gaze from the countertop and offered a small, tired smile.

“Thought we agreed months ago that this wasn’t all on you.”

“I know. But I’m still sorry.”

Laura opened her mouth to say something, then seemed to think better of it and just sighed, heavy
and weary.

“We’ll figure it out. It’s just another thing. Families go through it all the time. We’ll...we’ll figure it out.”

That could’ve meant any number of things regarding her marriage with Clint and there was little in the way of advice that Toni was able to give, so she remained silent and hoped that her presence was reassurance enough that whatever Laura needed from her, all she had to do was ask.

They stayed like that, just sitting in each other’s company, until the sky began to lighten and the first rays of clouded sunlight inched their way above the tops of the trees.

Fatigue, achy and heavy, began to lay itself over her body the longer she stared out the window. If she closed her eyes right then, she didn’t think she’d be able to open them for another hundred years.

But the sound of the door swishing open had her heart ratcheting up into her throat and suddenly she was as wide awake as she’d ever been.

She and Laura simultaneously turned towards the noise.

In the doorway, looking like a deer in headlights, stood Sam. He blinked back at them, eyes darting towards Toni more than once, lingering over her appearance and undoubtedly noticing that she was in the same clothes as the day before, and shifted a little from foot to foot.

“Uh,” he began, then raised his hand in what must’ve been the most uncomfortable wave of his life. “Good morning.”

Against her will, she felt her earlier panic subside somewhat. Across from her, Laura gave Sam a small, polite smile. She glanced at Toni, licked her lips, then stood from her seat, brushing nonexistent lint from her pajama top.

“Would you like some breakfast? I was thinking about making some savory waffles.”

Sam flicked his gaze to Toni in what she surmised was wariness. Taking pity on him, Toni sighed and rolled her eyes.

“C’mon in, Wilson,” she said, stirring her now cold tea for lack of a better thing to do. “Laura’s waffles are legendary. Wouldn’t wanna insult her.”

Sam opened his mouth, closed it, then nodded. “Waffles sound great. Thanks Mrs—”

“Laura,” Laura interrupted almost immediately, and though her expression never flickered, her fingers twitched against the hemline of her top. “Just Laura is fine.” She lingered there a moment, then walked towards the fridge and began pulling out ingredients. “I’ll get started on those waffles, then, shall I?”

Toni stared at her back for a long time, realization of the intensity of Laura’s grief and anger rendering Toni helpless. Because this...this she couldn’t fix. As much as she wanted to, as much as Laura deserved everything good in this world, this, she couldn’t fix for her. Helping bring Clint back was one thing but mending a frayed relationship went beyond what her genius IQ and hardworking hands could touch.

She turned to look at Sam and found him looking grimly back at her. And by some unspoken truce, Toni slipped off the stool and Sam started rolling up the sleeves of his t-shirt.
“I can help with the eggs,” he said, pulling out a bowl and a fork. “Scrambled’s easy enough.”

“I’ll do the mushrooms,” Toni added as she came up next to Laura and gently took the carton from her hand. “Why don’t you get started on the batter? Y’know I’m shit at that sorta thing.”

“You are,” Laura said thickly from behind her curtain of hair. When she turned and looked at Toni, her eyes were damp with tears. “We’re gonna have to fix that one of these days.”

Toni smiled but made no comment as she got to work.

Her body still ached, her head started to fill up with that dense fog of exhaustion and there were people in her home whom she didn’t know how to deal with. But right now the only thing that mattered was taking a little bit of the burden off of the woman who helped her start all of this in the first place.

Steve didn’t know what he’d expected upon his return to the Compound. Truth be told he’d tried not to think about it. Not that the out of sight, out of mind tactic had ever worked in the past, considering the fact that every moment that had passed since Siberia had been filled with thoughts about Toni no matter how hard he tried. Now was no different.

Three days. It’d been three days since they’d been back and Steve still felt as purposeless and adrift as he had in Wakanda.

Nat had forwarded him an email from the Council, something about an Accords sub-committee that they wanted him to be part of. He went through the list of names and noticed Toni wasn’t on it but she was copied in all the emails. Amidst his admittedly obsessive scrolling through the string of emails he found just one short message from her regarding his appointment as a rep on the sub-committee.

_It’s a good idea and you know it. He’s a leader and a hell of a good tactician and he knows the Avengers inside and out. We need someone on our team in all instances. It’s only fair._

_Stark_

He knew it was politics. He knew it was strategy to ensure that the Avengers and any other enhanced individual that was brought under the purview of the Accords had a fair chance, had someone to fight for them.

But he saw it as a ringing endorsement, a testament of faith from the one person who owed him nothing.

And it made warmth and guilt in equal measure rise up inside of him.

He sighed and pushed himself out of the chair, surveying the room around him. When he’d first walked in after months away he found it exactly the way he’d left it, down to the partially open drawer and the leather jacket he’d tossed onto the bed. And it had been too much of a reminder, felt too much like he’d been left behind while the world moved on.

So he’d cleaned everything up, spent three hours rearranging his bed, his desk, his side-table, the goddamn sofa that Sam had sneaked into his room more than a year ago because he needed space for
his sound-system - it ended up being really comfortable and he’d fallen asleep on it more than once after a mission - and all the other knickknacks and miscellaneous junk he had lying around.

It was while he was sorting through his closet that his fingers stilled over an item of clothing hanging there amidst the jeans and jackets and plain t-shirts. His fingers hovered over the faded t-shirt, a generic SHIELD issue that had ‘ROGERS’ on the back. He’d worn it a lot a long time ago. Then at some point it had gotten mixed up in the laundry and he’d walked into Toni’s room a couple of weeks later to find her sitting on the bed wearing it. She’d been sleep-deprived and her hair a mess but the second he’d seen her in it he didn’t think he’d ever quite felt as if he’d been hit by a sixteen-wheeler as he did then.

She’d worn that t-shirt that night at the Barton farm when he’d, when they’d—

The garment had slipped from the hanger easy as water. It’d felt soft and well-worn in his hands and he could almost imagine the afterimage of her skin remained embedded between the fibers. He brought the material to his nose and inhaled, wondering whether it was just wishful thinking or if it really was the remnants of her own unique scent still clinging to the t-shirt from the last time she’d worn it.

When had that been, he wondered.

Then he’d put the t-shirt back in place, let it hang there amidst the rest of his things, a reminder of what he’d given up.

“Hey.”

He looked up from his musings and found Bucky and Sam standing in the open doorway. Bucky’s expression neutral, assessing, distracted as he watched the hallway beyond Steve’s room with a clenched jaw. Sam’s attention was focused solely on Steve, a concerned furrow between his brows.

“You wanna come to the gym?” Sam inquired, but his tone held little room for argument. It was a pointed and really quite obvious intervention that reminded him a little of when T’Challa had first come to him and practically thrown him into the frightening and relentless jaws of his sister.

He snorted and pushed up from the chair. “Why not?”

When all else failed, beating the hell out of a punching bag helped get his head straight for a little while.

Only when they passed Training Room A, with its high gymnasium-type ceilings and tumbling course around the perimeter, it was already occupied and Steve did a double-take, something sharp and painful sinking its claws into his chest.

Toni was standing on the floor looking up at the ceiling as a fully-suited Spider-Man swung from the struts with the ease of an acrobat, creating long loops of webbing. Toni was calling out instructions to him and making notes on her tablet, and there were two others around her, a boy and a girl. The boy had his arm around the girl’s shoulder and was whispering something in her ear that made her laugh and nudge him in the ribs.

It took a while but the name came to him eventually. Harley Keener. The kid Toni talked about incessantly whenever she got off the phone with him. He’d only briefly caught a glimpse of his picture on Toni’s phone once. From the limited number of conversations they’d had about the kid, he seemed to be both a smart alec and somewhat of an inventor. The fact that Toni got along well with a kid like that was unsurprising but he’d never expected her to actually invite them to the Compound.
And between the Barton kids and Cassie Lang and now these two teenagers before him it was turning into a place he barely recognized.

And yet. And yet.

Watching the way Toni’s whole body laughed when Harley said something to her, and the genuine happiness on her face when she reached up and Spider-Man took her hand and lifted her thirty feet off the ground was...beautiful. Beautiful in a way that made him increasingly aware of the empty space inside where she had once fit.

Where she landed next to him amidst the rubble in the aftermath of a fight, faceplate raised, and give him a sweaty, relieved smile. When she sat cross-legged on his desk, having nudged his laptop precariously close to the edge of the table, as she fixed his communicator. Where her voice carried over the comms, relaying the enemy’s position or reassuring the team that she had their backs.

The space she filled - simultaneously small and infinite - as she dozed against him in the quinjet, wearing his SHIELD t-shirt, the weight of her so fragile and precious.

The space where they had just fit.

“He was one son of a bitch at Leipzig but gotta admit, dude’s got skills,” Sam remarked as Spider-Man gently deposited Toni onto a swing-like structure made of his webbing, before jetting down for the younger girl, who squealed in delight as he swung her up. But Steve didn’t miss the cautiousness in Sam’s tone and he could feel the weight of his gaze in his back. “C’mon, Steve. Let’s break some bags.”

“You guys go on ahead. Be there in a bit.”

Sam might have wanted to say something but all he heard was a soft sigh and two sets of footsteps heading on down the corridor.

Steve watched for a few moments longer until Toni, Spider-Man and the other kids were all hanging in mid-air, like a group of lazy trapeze artists on a break. He watched the way her nose wrinkled when she laughed, drank in the almost languid expression as she swung back and forth, the motions making her chin-length hair blow around her face.

The arc reactor glowed beneath her henley top and Steve heard the distant echo of breaking glass, saw wide, fearful brown eyes, witnessed gauntlets rise to protect herself because he had—

“Captain Rogers?”

He stepped away from the window and turned to face the woman who had somehow managed to sneak up on him.

A young, dark-haired woman with a white strip dyed at the front stood there, hands clasped behind her back and her posture reminiscent of a certain Maria Hill.

She smiled, blunt and professional, and held a hand out for him to shake. “Agent Fern, Captain. Pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Agent Fern,” he observed. “Hill’s protege.”

That got him a flicker of surprise and perhaps a little pinkness to her cheeks. “I’m—”

“Natasha Romanov’s told me good things about you. Look forward to working with you in the
future."

Agent Fern’s spine straightened even more if that was possible and Steve couldn’t help but picture Toni’s fond amusement at the good little soldier routine.

“Thank you, sir. The feeling’s mutual.” She paused for a brief moment then continued, “You’ve not met them yet? Ms. Stark’s interns? We’re not sure what they’re actually interning as, though. Usually there’s another boy with them, Peter Parker. Not sure where he is today. And Princess Shuri is usually with them whenever she’s in town.”

Steve hummed, carefully neutral. “Save for Princess Shuri, I’ve never met any of them. The boy’s Harley Keener, right? And the girl?”

“Kamala Khan. She and Mr. Keener started coming to the Compound around the same time as far as I can remember. They usually hang out in the West Wing with Ms. Stark and the other Avengers.” She stilled, face coloring awkwardly. “Uh, I mean—”

“I know what you meant,” he told her kindly, even as the faint sting pinched beneath his ribs.

She averted her gaze forward, still looking uncomfortable. “A lot of us weren’t sure what to make of them at first but they’re good kids. Really smart. Sometimes the boys even drop by for hand-to-hand training with the other recruits.” Her expression went wry, then. “And sometimes they break stuff and just make a mess.”

Steve found himself chuckling. “Troublemakers?”

“I believe the word menace has been thrown around. Kamala’s the good one, though. Polite and shy. I think even Agent Hill has a soft spot for her.” Agent Fern hesitated once more looking at him sidelong. “If...you don’t mind me saying, sir. Just a word of advice. I’m looking at this as an objective outsider but they’re great kids. And they’re...protective over Ms. Stark and she of them. I mean just last week Mr. Keener nearly broke his arm when he slipped while one of ours was trying to demonstrate a shoulder lock on him. Ms. Stark laid into that recruit so bad we all thought he was gonna piss himself. She apologized later, but still. It was quite the show.”

The image was both funny and painfully warm, stirring all sorts of feelings, the most prominent of them being unadulterated fondness. “So you’re telling me not to accidentally break one of her kids?”

“She doesn’t like it when people call them her kids. But we all do behind her back,” she winced. “But no. I mean yes, it’s probably in your best interest not to be the direct or indirect cause of any harm that comes to them but what I’m saying is that...and you can tell me if I’m being too forward here, sir, but if you wanna get to Ms. Stark you’re probably gonna have to go through them first.”

He thought about that for a moment, unpacking the hidden message behind her words and honing in on the obvious point she was trying to make.

*If you wanna get to Ms. Stark.*

Toni always liked to say that the only thing that travelled faster than warp ten was gossip. And apparently that extended to the Compound. There’d never been much for anyone to go on. The team knew to varying degrees that something existed, some unspoken thing that they were both too afraid or too stubborn to make something of. And then at the farm—

*Steve, I—*

He let out a soft breath, trying to ease the pressure in his throat.
Agent Fern was very pointedly not looking at him and she shifted her weight from foot to foot. Steve took pity on her and huffed a quiet laugh that sounded hollow even to his own ears.

“Duly noted, Agent Fern.”

She lingered for two more seconds, nodded sharply, then walked past him, her standard issue boots making muffled thumps on the floor as she left.

He looked back down into the training room just in time to see Toni leap from her spider swing and Steve’s heart lurched in his throat during the bare half a second where she remained airborne with nothing but a thirty-foot drop below.

“Toni—I!”

Then Spider-Man was catching her by the hand and she was laughing as he lowered her to the ground, and Steve’s hand was pressed up against the glass, his heart thundering in his ears.

Because that was a very literal leap of faith, that was Toni putting her life in Spider-Man’s hands, that was Toni trusting him to catch her and smiling as she did it because she knew. She knew he wouldn’t let her fall. She knew he wouldn’t let her die and there was not a modicum of doubt in that seemingly insignificant little jump.

There was a time, not too long ago, when Steve had been on the receiving end of her trust.

He dropped his hand, feeling tired, so tired, hopelessness rising like a gray wave and threatening to destroy what little faith he had left.

And then she looked up and Steve knew - he knew - the exact moment she must have spotted him for even from a distance; he saw the way her entire body seemed to freeze before she staggered backwards one, two steps. As if she’d been struck. As if the very sight of him there was physically just too much, too soon, too painful for her to endure. He saw her fingers clawed in front of her as if they wanted to grip the very last vestiges of her own strength just by looking at him.

Steve didn’t know how long they just stared at one another. Compared to Wakanda the distance should have been insubstantial but Steve felt it like a cavern, like the grandest of canyons between them across which their trust and grief were stretched like raw, exposed nerves.

And in that moment it was just the two of them in this space of quiet, in this second where all the doors were open, where every hurt was unveiled, and he thought that if he could only just reach—

Then Spider-Man landed in front of her blocking his view and the moment was over, the walls coming down with a resounding boom and Toni was unreachable, untouchable in every way.

But in that one moment, in that shared second, something had shifted, some determination, some strength dredged up from a frozen wasteland. And as dismal as it seemed, it had also given him hope. Just small, barely there, but all seeds could take root if given enough care.

Because she had looked back at him. Because she hadn’t immediately turned away.

And that meant something.

It had to mean something.

Because if it didn’t, Steve didn’t know how he was going to be able to do this.
So he clutched it close even as he walked away. He nursed it against the safest part of himself and prayed that it would grow.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end when Barnes stepped through the doors of the kitchen. The air itself felt like it had dropped ten degrees and for the briefest moment she thought that if she exhaled through her mouth her breath would turn Siberian white.

Despite FRIDAY’s forewarning of his destination she didn’t think she’d ever not feel that sense of trepidation and dread in his presence and she wasn’t afraid to admit that yeah, she’d enlisted FRIDAY’s help on more than one occasion to avoid bumping into him or any of the others since their arrival at the Compound.

She counted his footsteps as she made his way towards her, feeling somewhat disconcerted by his very deliberate intent to make himself known to her when she knew he so easily could’ve opted to take her by surprise if he wanted to.

He stopped a couple of feet away and quietly cleared his throat.

“Stark,” he said in a raspy voice that sounded like gravel and smoke. Like hardened boots crunching over gritty shards of ice and glass.

She angled her head a little, becoming aware of his imposing presence in her periphery.

“Barnes.”

It had been a week. Toni supposed it had to happen sooner or later and spending time in one of the training rooms with the kids or hiding out in The Room with Stephen and a container of Laura’s delicious roast beef sandwiches could only get her so far.

“I was wondering,” he began haltingly, then stopped. Toni suspected it wasn’t hesitation so much as uncertainty that made him pause before continuing again. “The day we arrived. You said you had an arm for me. Several. Arms.”

Toni swallowed dryly.

“I did,” she said, still not turning around, because if she did she didn’t know what she would see. Her father. It’s you. Her mother. Howard—! The road that she knew so well. I remember all of them. “I do,” she amended in a voice so quiet she might not have said it at all.

Whether it was patience or the uncertainty that maybe she’d retracted her offer, Barnes didn’t say anything to fill the silence. He didn’t probe, he didn’t coerce and he didn’t voice the question that was undoubtedly burning in the pit of his throat. She’d seen the look on his face that first day when she’d brought up the arm, so she knew that for some reason he wanted B.A.R.F. at this point. And that was a whole can of worms that she did not have the mental or emotional constitution to deal with.

So fine.

Because it was just an arm. She could do that.
She *had* to be able to do that.

Face your demons and all.

And she had so fucking many.

“I’ll call Helen and see when she can make the trip.” The words were out before she could even think about keeping them to herself. “She’ll be the one doing the surgery to get the current implant out. Shitty piece of work, that. Unsophisticated but, hey. What can you expect from HYDRA, right?” Toni didn’t expect him to have a response to that and wasn’t surprised by his continued silence. “FRIDAY will inform you when we’re ready for you,” she continued in a controlled rush, turning her back on him once more and bending over her tablet.

She left it at that, her fingers mindlessly moving across the touchscreen keyboard even as her ears were pricked for any sound of movement from behind her.

Barnes might have nodded jiltedly behind her, might have opened his mouth to say something - *thank you*, perhaps, and she might have thrown her mug at him in rage and snarled, *don’t thank me* - or he might have reached out to her with his one flesh hand, let it hover in the air before dropping it by his side in resignation.

Whatever he did, she couldn’t help the heavy sigh of relief when she heard the sound of his boots as they made their way away from her, followed by the decisive *swish* as the door slid open then shut once more.

Fingers pressing into her pulsing orbital bone, she let herself settle for a few short seconds before sitting up straight.

“FRIDAY, what time is it in Seoul?”
Chapter Summary

Toni takes the first few steps towards her demons. But there is one she can't yet bring herself to confront. Because just looking at him causes the sound of shattering glass to echo in her ears.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys. So, I know I've disappeared for like, three months. And I'm really sorry about that. I'm really, really, REALLY sorry about that. Life has been a mess and I've had zero time to write and getting this chapter out was like pulling teeth. My wonderful beta, Demigodscum, can attest to that (though she was very kind and very gentle with me when I was having multiple crises).

I know I haven't replied to any of your comments but I will, I promise I will. I've just been extremely busy and finding the time to write hasn't been easy lately because real life has been very demanding.

But I am so, so, so grateful for every single one of you who has left a comment or a kudos or bookmarked this fic in spite of my terribly sporadic updates of late. I appreciate every single one of you and I've even gone back and re-read comments because it's just inspired me to keep going with this fic, which I love so much. So truly, thank you to ALL of your.

And a huge, mega, gigantic thank you and all the vegan cookies to Demigodscum, whom, I kid you not, has been a monumental blessing when it comes to this fic. SHE. IS. THE. BOMB. She blitzed my brain when I wrote myself into a corner, has helped me out with more than one plot point and she is probably my favorite person on the planet (and she's also got a really incredible (read: it will gut you in the best way) post!IW fem!Toni series called "All Your Troubles" so you should definitely check that out.)

Anyways, thank you to everyone who has been patiently waiting for this chapter. The next chapter should be out next weekend (I've got like, 90% of it written, so yeah), so there won't be an abysmally long wait.

Aaand, on with the show! I hope you enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The mechanism looks incredible,” Shuri said, with a delightfully impressed grin. “This level of ingenuity should cost millions and yet you’ve managed to reduce the cost of production by more than half with this synthetic compound of yours without sacrificing the quality. This is the same compound you used for Colonel Rhodes’ device?”
Helen nodded with a smile. “With a few modifications. I believe Toni is already in the process of creating his next pair of legs.”

“Only the best for my Rhodey,” Toni drawled from where she was sitting cross-legged in her chair. “Sure you can’t sneak away from your royal duties for a bit to sit in on the surgery?”

Shuri sighed heavily with despair and sagged in her chair, her head hanging over the back of the headrest.

“I wish I could, but my brother has reverted to the disposition of a newborn rhino calf and requires constant looking-after, and I have resorted to smacking him with an electric baton every time he acts like a jerk.” She sighed again, staring longingly up at the 3D rendition of Barnes’ implant.

Toni pressed her lips together and squinted at Shuri’s morose form, torn between amusement and concern. “I could say so many things about animal abuse right now.”

Shuri scowled but there wasn’t any heat, just a rather tired and wistful girl whose worry about her brother competed uncomfortably against her desire to science. Toni had been in similar situations on more than one occasion.

“He’s certainly acting like an animal,” Shuri muttered, then gazed pleadingly at Toni through the screen. “You should speak to him. Tell him he’s being a brute. He’ll listen to you. And Nakia has been radio silent in Ghana for three weeks now.”

Toni worried a loose thread on her sleeve between her fingers. She knew the political atmosphere in Wakanda wasn’t the greatest at the moment and that T’Challa’s presence in his homeland was paramount to easing said tensions, but if Shuri’s sad eyes and her honest desperation were anything to go by, Toni had completely underestimated just how much stress he must be under.

“Message me the second he’s free and I’ll get right on that,” she promised, and Shuri’s grateful relief was palpable through the screen.

“Thanks. I will. And if I’m free that night you’ll loop me in and let me watch the surgery?”

“If Sergeant Barnes doesn’t have any objections, then of course we will,” Helen kindly reassured her. “And consider this an open invitation to any future surgeries on my end, Princess.”

Shuri grinned, bright, warm and real. “Invitation gladly accepted.”

And Toni had to try really hard to suppress her inner squeal of utmost adoration because goddamn, the ladies in her life were awesome.

They said their goodbyes a few minutes later, and she and Helen continued to sort through their own notes, going over the steps of the surgery thrice more before Helen was satisfied they could proceed to present it to Barnes.

“You’re not having any second thoughts, are you?”

The question came seemingly out of nowhere, jolting Toni from her intense focus of going through the shoulder plate’s internal circuitry just one more time.

She blinked at Helen, who was looking back at her plainly and without judgment. Helen didn’t know, Toni had to remind herself. Helen didn’t know about Barnes. The good doctor probably had her suspicions, just like everybody else, but she didn’t know what Barnes was to Toni.
And, Toni realized just then, as the situation settled around her like an invisible layer of clarity. It seemed that in her pure enjoyment of talking to Shuri and Helen and just allowing herself to science with them, Toni had forgotten too.

It thrummed like the high-pitched, finely-tuned E-string of a violin and her own emotions cut short, the rest of the melody refusing to be played.

Toni forced a smile and Helen’s expression never changed - she was getting surprisingly good at that.

“No second thoughts.”

Helen watched her for a moment longer then nodded, apparently satisfied. “Very well. Then shall we brief our patient?”

Steve was with Bucky, Sam, Nat and Wanda when FRIDAY’s call came.

“Sergeant Barnes,” came her polite voice, and Steve paused in surprise and slowly set down his tablet. “Boss and Doctor Cho are ready for you now.”

Bucky stilled and met his gaze, and Steve was distantly aware of Sam turning down the TV and Wanda and Nat shifting around in their respective seats.

Steve stared at Bucky for a long moment before finally speaking.

“You went to see her,” he said, and it wasn’t a question.

Bucky seemed to study his expression before dipping his head once. “Yeah. I did.”

“When?”

“Three days ago.”

A strange feeling came over Steve, then, and his thoughts turned inward, assessing.

It wasn’t anger, not at Bucky for going to see Toni or for not telling Steve about it. It was his arm, his surgery and his life. And after HYDRA had taken so much away from him already, he deserved - no - he had a right to choose. And Steve would never take that away from him. So no, it wasn’t anger, and after thinking about it, it wasn’t even jealousy.

At least none that was aimed at Bucky.

But it was something uncomfortably similar. Some sort of feeling of inadequacy that tasted like bile at the back of his throat and made him grimace as he pressed his thumb into the center of his palm.

It was disappointment. In himself.

Because once again, Bucky had been braver than him, stronger than him. Brave and strong enough to face the daughter of Howard and Maria Stark even though Steve knew just how deeply Bucky grieved over what he’d done.
And while Steve believed to the very core of his soul that Bucky hadn’t had a choice, that it wasn’t him, he was slowly beginning to understand that he had no right to take that away from Bucky either.

“Sergeant Barnes?” FRIDAY prompted, pulling Steve from his bitter musings.

A muscle clenched in Bucky’s jaw and Steve saw him wipe the palm of his hand on his sweatpants before pushing to his feet.

He made to turn, then paused, seemingly debating with himself over something, before looking down at Steve.

“Stevie,” he began quietly, and Steve knew what he meant without him having to go any further.

“If you want me to come with you, I will. It’s your choice.”

Bucky hesitated.

“Steve should go with you,” Nat interrupted. “For moral support,” she explained when they both looked at her. “And it’ll be good for more than just you to understand the procedure. Helen and Toni will understand.”

He had mixed feelings about that. On the one hand Toni could very well be understanding about Bucky wanting a friend to accompany him, but Steve doubted Toni would be quite so sympathetic about being forced to face the both of them...being forced to face Steve. ..when the evidence indicated that he was the last person she wanted to see.

And Steve got that, he really did. But he also really, truly wanted to try with her.

Even if every step he took towards her made her take a step away from him.

He had to.

So when Bucky looked at him and nodded, the unspoken please writ across his face, Steve only felt relief.

The room they were headed to was all glass walls, so Bucky saw Stark and a woman whom he assumed was Doctor Cho long before they noticed the trio headed their way.

He heard Steve’s slow and steady inhale, and saw his spine stiffen until it couldn’t get any straighter the closer they got to the room. Natasha’s heavy gaze shifted between him and Steve, but, like most Red Room graduates, she projected so little that had the Winter Soldier’s training not been instilled in him so deep, he would have barely registered her presence.

Doctor Cho was speaking and Stark was nodding attentively, her expression one of serious concentration. She was partway through a sentence when she must have noticed them coming through the corner of her eye, for her entire body stilled like a wind-up toy coming to an abrupt halt, her hands frozen mid-gesture.

It was like a sheer curtain being drawn across her features while her limbs mechanically lost their stiffness until she exuded an almost Natasha-like composure and professionalism as she turned to
face them.

It was impressive.

It filled him with self-revulsion and guilt so heavy he wondered how he could still move.

Doctor Cho smiled politely as the three of them entered and showed no indication that she was aware of the thick, murky tension that wafted around them like a dense fog.

“Sergeant Barnes,” she greeted mildly, then her gaze flickered to Steve, something passing over her expression before disappearing entirely. “Captain Rogers, Natasha. Please. Take a seat and we can get started.”

As they slid into their chairs, the glass walls clouded over, blocking his view of the outside.

There was a lengthy beat of quiet, the only sound in the room being the near imperceptible murmur of machinery running through the walls and beneath their feet, and the deafening hum of discomfort emanating from just about everyone in the room and coalescing like a swamp of fucking tragedy in the space between them.

And then Doctor Cho straightened in her seat, bringing up a 3D diagram of Bucky’s shoulder and the current implant, and once again, it was like watching Toni Stark morph into someone new, someone with sharp eyes and professional attentiveness, someone who was ready to get right down to business.

“Okay,” Doctor Cho began after surveying her audience. “This is what we’re going to do.”

Doctor Cho was extremely thorough in her explanation of every single step of the procedure, from the type of anaesthetic to the removal of every single component of the implant, including how she and her team were going to remove the implement that had literally been carved into his bones.

The surgery was apparently in two parts: the first to remove the current implant and the second to fit in the new one. After that he’d be given a few days to recover before Stark installed the arm itself.

It all sounded very practical, he supposed.

While Doctor Cho spoke, Stark silently operated the 3D interface so they had a visual accompaniment to the entire sequence.

Bucky wondered at the level of detail Cho and Stark had put into this whole presentation and let his thoughts linger on the possibility that this was somehow intentional, given his history with arm surgeries and going under. He still found the notion that some people might actually be concerned over his well being...difficult to accept.

The concept of choice and consent was, he was discovering, even more crucial now than it had been before he’d first put on his army fatigues.

Shuri had always been good to him, funny and whip-smart in a way that was still kind. The rest of her staff had been distant but just as professional, deferring to Shuri’s authority in a way that was empirically different to how Zola’s workers deferred to him.

It was respect, not fear. Admiration rather than sycophantic flattery.

Bucky saw something similar in Helen Cho as he did in Shuri.
The same passion, the same attentiveness to her work.

In Stark he saw…

He looked at her.

Her hair was frizzy, the curls unwound, and they would have fallen in haphazard cowlicks had she not tied it into a short, low ponytail. There was a small stain from a coffee splatter on her left sleeve. Dirt lodged under her nails. Small scars on her hands - burns, cuts, calluses. Some were fading, others were new.

She sniffed at intervals. A cold? Maybe the air was too dry. Maybe she was just tired.

There were bags under her eyes.

She was tired.

And yet she was still here, determinedly partaking in the extremely thorough but straightforward presentation, and occasionally shooting discreet looks in his general direction, as if she needed to make sure he was still following.

“If all goes to plan, your healing factor combined with our tech should kick in enough to heal a lot of the tissue and nerve damage caused by your current implant, so by the time we fit in the new shoulder you should notice a significant improvement in terms of both pain and mobility,” Doctor Cho was saying, and floating over the center of the table was a diagram of his torso and Bucky watched as at least three inches of flesh and bone around his severed shoulder reconstructed itself. “HYDRA’s tech was admittedly ahead of its time but the neural implants aren’t compatible with the human body, even one as enhanced as yours, Sergeant.”

Bucky recalled several times, both during and after missions, where his shoulder bled and ached something fierce, and all HYDRA’s doctors would do was extend the shoulder implant just a little further across his collarbone.

"Our tech," she continued with a confidence that never once came close to arrogance, “is undeniably superior and the components far less invasive. The neural interface is also a lot more sensitive so you’ll know almost immediately if anything starts to feel wrong with the arm once Toni has installed it. And we’ll also be doing continued maintenance checks to make sure it remains compatible with your body.” She set down her tablet and fixed Bucky with a reassuring look. “It’s a long procedure but Toni, Shuri and I have gone over it countless times and my team and I have been on the forefront of medical advancement for years, so you’re in good hands, Sergeant Barnes, I can promise you that.”

She said it so seriously that Bucky felt almost obliged to believe her, to trust her hands and her skills when all he knew of doctors was the cold metal of a chair and an excruciating, electric pressure against his skull.

Shuri’s name had been mentioned, and in a moment of weakness - for the sake of familiarity...for the sake of his sanity - he couldn’t help but wish that she were here.

When he found his voice, it sounded like boots crunching on gravel.

“And the arm,” he said, and swallowed thickly, watching the 3D rendition of his one-armed torso rotate mid-air. “I’ll be awake for that?”

Doctor Cho opened her mouth to reply but the voice that answered had him stilling in his seat.
“Yes.”

Stark’s voice, soft and quiet, sounded strangely loud in the sudden vacuum of the room.

He wanted to look. He wanted to turn and look so badly, to see the expression on her face, to gauge her body language and analyze each and every nuance of her voice in that one, single word.

Sometimes Bucky felt like the proverbial unstoppable force, like a juggernaut, ruthless and unrelenting.

HYDRA had seen that in him and turned it on their enemies.

Because for a time the Winter Soldier had been unstoppable.

So it was funny how all it took to make him freeze was a word from Antonia Stark’s mouth.

_Barnes,_ she’d said on the first day.

Today all it took was a _yes._

He looked at her.

She raised her tired eyes and looked back.

_Do you even remember—_

“I need you to be awake when we affix the arm,” she said, right to his face, her expression giving him no indication as to whether she was internally restraining herself from leaping across the table and strangling him — _like you strangled her m_ — “There are a series of tests we’ll need to do to check how well the arm has synced to your nervous system. Reaction time, grip, strength and so on. Things we can’t do while you’re asleep.”

He licked his lips then nodded, only realizing that he’d been clenching his fist under the table when the tension in his palm and forearm released like a relieved sigh.

He understood her reasoning and the rationale but was still immensely grateful that for the arm, at least, he would have control.

“Okay,” he said, and Stark watched him for several more seconds before looking back down at her tablet.

It didn’t feel like a dismissal so much as a sense of _satisfaction_ that she had done her duty, like there was some internalized standard or goal that she had privately set herself up to achieve and was neutrally content that she had done so.

And as Doctor Cho finished her presentation and began explaining how he needed to prep for the surgery, Bucky found his gaze wandering once more to Antonia Stark’s diligently working form, imagining what other goals she might have set and just how many of them he was central to.

When Shuri had shot her that short message, uncharacteristically riddled with typos, Toni had been in the middle of checking some of the equipment for Barnes’ surgery with Vision. She vaguely
recalled shouting a garbled combination of an instruction and a reassurance that she’d be back later, followed by an equally jumbled shout at FRIDAY to call T’Challa and have it redirected to the nearest private room available.

What excitement she’d felt at finally being able to speak to T’Challa face to face after almost two weeks was cut bitterly short when she skidded into a small conference room and took in his expression on the screen.

He smiled, tired and haggard but thankfully real enough.

“Hey,” she began cautiously, feeling strangely guilty at having disturbed him so late Wakandan time when he could clearly have done with the sleep.

“Good evening, Toni,” he said, and the exhaustion in his voice carried clear across the speakers. “How are you?”

“Fine,” she said almost dismissively, pulling out a wheelie chair and settling into it. “How’re you?”

T’Challa regarded her for a few moments before sighing, a note of exasperation escaping along with his breath.

“Shuri contacted you, didn’t she?”

“No.”

He frowned, looking closely at her. “Really?”

“Yes.”

T’Challa arched a brow at her and Toni struggled not to squirm under the intensity of his gaze.

Journalists scenting blood in the water and politicians who enjoyed tearing billionaire geniuses down in front of millions had jack shit on T’Challa, Black Panther and King of Wakanda.

“You’re trying to intimidate me,” she stated, hoping she wasn’t actually shifting in her seat.

“Is it working?”

Toni huffed and slumped in her seat. “This is very unfair. Shuri and I are just beginning our epic, science-fueled friendship of a lifetime and you want me to betray her trust.”

“If it will help, I will confront Shuri about her unnecessary interventions and enlisting your aid when you are already stretched thin with your responsibilities.”

“You monster,” she declared, then felt herself physically soften at the memory of Shuri’s distress over the con-call. “She was just trying to help. She’s worried about you.” The and so am I went unsaid but was undoubtedly evident in her expression.

Rosie rolled in on her little wheels with a tall glass of something green balanced precariously on her back. Toni bent down to pick it up and patted the happily chirping robot on her visual implement before the little bot zoomed back out again, likely to tell Vision that she’d successfully completed her mission.

When she looked back up at the screen, T’Challa was waiting with his own drink in hand and they both smiled, raised their respective glasses, before taking a sip.

“This is familiar, isn’t it?” she asked as the taste of wheatgrass and pineapple slipped down her
throat, the flavor muted by the memory of her and T’Challa seated at a restaurant months and months ago, while Toni stirred the foam of her fruit juice and laid all her scathing baggage bare before him.

Like vermin, was what she had said.

The violent grate of the words still felt raw and bloody, but T’Challa’s presence soothed her, like the weight of a heavy but not oppressive hand on her shoulder.

“To think of everything that has happened since then,” he mused, swirling his wine around then setting his glass on whatever desk or table he was sat at, his eyes focused somewhere she wasn’t privy to.

Leaning forward and clasping her hands together, she asked gently, “How are you, T’Challa?”

For a while he just sat there silently, giving her no indication as to whether he’d heard her or not. She had been about to open her mouth to ask again when he finally spoke, the timber of his voice low and so quiet.

“My father used to make being a king look so dignified. Even when I was just a young boy I would try so very hard to imitate him. To be the perfect son. To be the perfect prince.” He smiled, small and self-deprecating. “I have thrown more tantrums in front of my mother this week alone than I did during my entire adolescence. It is not...becoming of me.” T’Challa visibly inhaled deeply, then exhaled, long and slow. “When I had first realized that my father was not the man I thought he was I made a promise with myself to be better than him. To be smarter and wiser than him. To be a good king.” He finally met Toni’s eyes, looking rueful. “My actions and emotions over the last several weeks are not exactly worthy of a round of applause.”

Toni let the silence settle for a while, letting T’Challa drift into his own internal musings, his worries and his fears.

“I didn’t know your dad,” she finally said, and T’Challa met her eyes. “My dad did but, as I’m sure you’re aware, it was under some pretty shitty circumstances. So I don’t know him. But I’d like to think that I know you. And while everybody back in Wakanda has someone to compare you to, I don’t. And no one else here does. Maybe...maybe that makes our opinion matter more. The fact that all we know and see is you. And I think that you’re one of the best people I’ve ever met. And I know the others think so too.” Some emotion - grief, hope, maybe - flickered across T’Challa’s face. “I can’t possibly imagine what it’s like for you now, as a king or as the Black Panther. But I know you’re doing better than your best because that’s just what you do. And if you ever need help you have more people than you know who are willing to give it to you.”

There was a certain kind of gravity to T’Challa as he weighed her words, like he was balancing them against his own thoughts and actions in the wake of Wakanda’s opening to the world. She wondered whether some part of him regretted it, if only for the sake of his own mental wellbeing and that of his people.

She couldn’t begrudge him for it. It was, perhaps, the biggest move by any monarch in Wakandan history.

And the resulting internal political tension was to be expected, no matter how much anyone had hoped.

When he finally spoke, he sounded a little lighter.

“I suppose Everett has always been very gracious in his offers to act as an unofficial liaison,” he
mused slowly.

Toni made an offended noise in the back of her throat because Everett fucking Ross was a menace and for him to be T’Challa’s first choice—

She opened her mouth to argue - and defend both her dignity and her abilities - when she took in the playful glint in his eyes and saw how hard he was trying not to smile.

Toni slumped back into her seat and folded her arms crossly.

“I will never understand why you two dislike one another,” T’Challa said, the corners of his eyes crinkling with humor. “Shuri says it’s because you both like to think that you found me first and neither one of you are good at sharing. I did not tell her that I am very aware of her silent war with Mr. Keener when it comes to impressing you with inventions and groundbreaking scientific theories. Somehow I don’t think she would’ve taken it well.”

Toni blinked quickly, momentarily distracted from imagining Everett Ross being dropped from a great height by Iron Man. “But Shuri and Harley love spending time together. The kids all love spending time together. I walked in on them building the most elaborate pillow fort I’ve ever seen in my life in Kamala’s room the other day while Shuri coordinated the entire process on video call. I don’t even know when they all moved in!” she declared a little wildly.

T’Challa’s rich laughter filtered through the speakers, genuine and so happy that she allowed it to distract her from the slightly troubling - potentially world-ending, if she knew Shuri and Harley well enough - rivalry between the kids.

She wondered how long it had been since T’Challa had managed to let go like this and felt a tiny little surge of smug pride. Take that, Everett Ross.

“I am glad,” T’Challa finally said, leaning forward and resting his chin in the palm of his hand, looking the most laid back that she’d seen in a while, “that Shuri is building pillow forts and cultivating healthy rivalries with other teenagers. She never gets to do this in Wakanda. Not even when she was a child.”

“Being a princess is hard work,” she said with an understanding shrug. “As was, I’m sure, being a prince and heir to more than just a throne.”

T’Challa nodded slowly, his gaze drifting to a point over her shoulder. “And now I am king.”

“And now you’re king,” she agreed softly. She licked her lips and leaned forward. “If you want, the next time you’re in the country I’ll build a pillow fort with you.”

The surprised sound T’Challa made was partway between a snort and an honest-to-god cackle, and was likely the most undignified noise he’d ever made in his adult life.

“And what exactly are we meant to do with this pillow fort?” he asked, laughter coloring his voice.

“Oh, I don’t know. Psychoanalyze the significance of pillow forts in adolescents and list out all the ways the lack of such activity in our childhood has affected our psyche?” She shrugged nonchalantly. “Or we could watch porn and make fun of their faces.”

“A worthy pastime, I’m sure,” he said, the corner of his mouth quirked upwards in amusement. “And I am ashamed to admit that right now I would much rather be sitting in a pillow fort psychoanalyzing our childhoods or watching dubious pornography with you than working towards the betterment of my country in my own home.”
Toni sighed, leaning back in her chair. “And I’d rather hide in a pillow fort than face…” She waved her hand vaguely. “All that.”

T’Challa watched her carefully. “And how is...all that?”

And wasn’t that just the question everybody had been dancing around.

Stilted politeness, awkward silences, overall avoidance of the Rogues, although that term didn’t exactly apply to them any longer, especially once the Council and the Panel received their contracts and their individual signed copies of the Accords.

“Peachy,” she said with a tight smile. “Just...peachy.”

T’Challa’s expression became both soft and reprimanding. “Toni.”

She heaved a heavy, expansive sigh, staring at the ceiling, trying to look anywhere else except his dignified sympathy and earnestness. Because this, this, had nothing on what T’Challa was going through as he tried to keep his entire country together.

“Okay,” she began, tapping a rhythm on the outer edge of the arc reactor. “Let’s see. You ever seen Brady Bunch?”

“I have not,” T’Challa said slowly, arching a brow.

“It’s basically like this. Think...trying to get two sets of troubled kids from different parents to work together and live in the same house and only one set were actually picked to play on the school’s baseball team and the rest are reserve players or on the waiting list while they attend the requisite number of detentions. And in this scenario I’m a single mother and everybody hates my meatloaf.”

There was a confused beat before T’Challa asked carefully, “What does the meatloaf represent in this scenario?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had meatloaf. But the point is that….” She bit the insides of her cheeks and shook her head. “I don’t know. Just...they’re here now and...and he’s here and I—” She cut herself off, agitatedly running a hand through her hair.

“By ‘he’, ” T’Challa began slowly, so careful and gentle like he was approaching a frightened animal, “are you referring to Sergeant Barnes or...Captain Rogers?”

Her shoulders, which had risen tightly up, almost to her ears, fell as she let out a long breath.

“I don’t know,” she told him truthfully. “At any given time it’s both of them and...sometimes...for brief moments I’ll forget that they’re here. Not— not just them, but the others too. And then I’ll remember and it’s like all my systems are on red alert and then I’ll be hyper aware of where everybody is all the goddamn time. And then I think about how much more there is to do and it exhausts me.”

T’Challa regarded her with something akin to sympathy, empathy, understanding. “Because that means having to face them,” he concluded. “Having to talk to them.”

She chuckled mirthlessly. “Yeah. Because I know...I know that when I do...when I look at their faces...I know that I’ll see just how much I fucked up. And I’ll see just how much they hate me for it.”

He was silent for a while and Toni stewed in her own misery, thinking about how a year could
change so much. How before, Toni wouldn’t have dreamt of planning her course every time she stepped out of the safety of her lab or Vision’s bedroom - though even that was becoming treacherous if the number of times she’d been resting on his bed only for FRIDAY to alert them that Wanda was outside looking for Vision was anything to go by - just so that she wouldn’t have to encounter any of the others.

Because that was what they’d become to one another.

*The others.*

That’s what the Civil War had resulted in.

Friendships, relationships, fractured right down the middle and leaving raw and aching emptiness behind while the rest of the world trembled in the wake of it.

“When will you learn,” T’Challa began slowly, and it took her several long beats to realize that he had spoken, “that people have the right to make their own choices and are therefore bound to the consequences?”

Toni dropped her gaze to her clasped hands on the table in front of her.

When she looked back up at him again, she managed a small, bitter smile as she said, believing every single word she spoke,

“When I stop being the reason for their choices.”

---

“It’s gonna be okay, y’know?”

Bucky looked up from the spot on the floor his eyes had been drilling a hole into, and managed what felt like a weak grin.

“You mean the shoulder or me having to go under?”

A grim, unhappy frown flitted across Steve’s face before he sat down on the bench, pressing his side into Bucky’s. There were times, still, where it was difficult to reconcile the sheer *size* and *weight* of his best friend. Bucky didn’t know whether that was because he’d never quite got over Steve’s change or whether it had to do with his HYDRA-blended memories.

“Both,” Steve said quietly, somehow managing to make it sound like a promise, as if he was so certain that he could control whatever happened to Bucky during the surgery. “Doctor Cho knows what she’s doing. If Princess Shuri’s had a hand in it, well,” Steve continued with a shrug, “then we both know it’s going to be fine.” Bucky waited for the inevitable and wasn’t disappointed when Steve spoke again, hesitation and deeply-rooted self-consciousness lined in every syllable. “And if you’re worried about *Toni*—” He cut himself off, pressing his lips together, a familiar tick in his jaw.

Bucky leaned his weight on his elbows that were resting on his knees, trying to meet Steve’s eyes. He sighed, and when he spoke he tried to channel the Bucky that had gripped his friend’s shoulder after his mother’s funeral and told him that he didn’t have to do it alone.
“I’m not worried about Stark,” he said. And the strangest part of it was that it was, quite honestly, true. “I think,” he continued slowly, carefully - always so careful with Steve - “that after everything she’s already done for me...hurting me wouldn’t make much sense, y’know? She’s...she’s invested a lot in me and I don’t...” He swallowed thickly - *do you even remember them?* - and his neck felt hot and cold, his palms clammy - *he killed my mother*— “I don’t deserve it but—”

“You *do* deserve it—”

“I *don’t deserve it,* ” Bucky spoke over Steve’s interruption, sending him a sharp look. “But I *want to.* Steve. I *want* to deserve this. *No.*” He grabbed Steve’s shoulder when it looked like Steve was going to argue. “No, Steve. Don’t take this away from me. Don’t. This is one fight you gotta back down from. Because I’m *askin’* you to, Stevie.” His fingers held strong, unrelenting, *unyielding,* but still, Bucky could feel the fight simmering just below the surface of the skin, contained, but not gone, not doused. Just *there,* waiting. This argument wasn’t over. But it was for today. “You hear me, Stevie? I’m *askin’* you to let it alone.”

Steve worked his jaw for a moment, his eyes still burning with a fight before he sighed and his shoulders sagged.

“Okay, Buck. Okay.”

They sat there for a while, shoulder to shoulder, talking about nothing in particular. There was a restlessness to Steve, evident in the dart of his eyes from one corner of the room to the next, the tense and release of his shoulders, the crossing and uncrossing of his arms.

Bucky knew it well.

In Wakanda they’d all had structure. Even Bucky, going in and out of the ice, being subjected to tests and neural reprogramming, it had been *structure.* Time was filled and when it wasn’t, it was short enough that he could appreciate the relaxation.

For Steve it had been wake up early, run, exercise, train with the Dora, accompany the Dora on border patrol, get back to their apartments, train some more, make dinner, sleep and do it all over again the next day.

Steve thrived on routine.

*Needed* it.

And here in the Compound they hadn’t been given one. And because Steve wasn’t the team leader anymore he couldn’t create one that was remotely close to what he had before.

For someone who couldn’t help himself when it came to defying authority and standing in the middle of chaos of his own making, Steve seemed to covet structure and taking orders.

And without it...

“It’s gonna be okay, y’know?” Bucky said, repeating Steve’s words from earlier. And it was testament to the depth of their bond that had spanned seventy years that Steve looked at him and knew exactly what he was talking about.

“Is it?” he asked, smiling humorlessly. He stared at the opposite wall, grim shame emanating off of him in waves as he said quietly, “I hurt her.”

Bucky considered him then nodded. “Yeah, you did. We both did. Mine...mine was worse.”
Steve looked at his hands, then turned and looked at Bucky. “Was it, though?”

Before he could respond, the glass door to the right slid open and a woman in white scrubs stepped into the hall. “We’re ready for you, Sergeant Barnes,” she said, hands clasped in front of her patiently.

Bucky stilled, staring at the woman, his gaze sliding to the door behind her and the hallway that led to the operating theatre that was apparently one of the more recent additions to the Compound.

He reached across his body with his flesh hand and cupped solid metal.

Stark had blasted off HYDRA’s arm in a tempest of fury and pain and now she was about to remove the physical pieces - *shrapnel* - that remained embedded in his very body. And then she was going to fit in a new one that she had built.

The concept was...strange, Bucky thought.

It was just a metal arm. A profound and brilliant piece of technology that they had used to violate him, mutilate him, *weaponize* him.

The Fist of HYDRA.

“Not anymore,” he mouthed under his breath.

“Buck?”

Bucky turned; Steve’s eyes were only a little concerned and the edges of his mouth curled upwards reassuringly.

“You ready, pal?”

Bucky looked at the ground, squeezed the wrapped up shoulder once more, then let his hand drop and rose to his feet.

“Yeah. I’m ready.”

Steve stood cross-armed and watched through the glass as Bucky was rolled into the operating room by one of the doctors on Helen’s team.

It was funny how Bucky, larger-than-life Bucky, managed to look small in that bed, in that room, in the middle of all these competent doctors walking back and forth, checking and re-checking equipment. He looked paler than usual in his white shirt and against the black leather of the operating table.

Bucky’s eyes met his through the glass and Steve smiled and nodded, but the stretch of his mouth felt tight.

“Hey,” Sam’s voice came from behind until he was standing next to him. “You good?”
Wanda was sat on one of the benches, worrying the hem of her gray top and darting looks at Vision, who was deep in conversation with Doctor Strange. Steve had yet to formally meet the supposed sorcerer, and other than a one-sided conversation with Vision when he’d dropped him and Bucky at their quarters, he’d had little to no contact with the rest of them. Clint sat on the opposite end with his back against the wall and his legs stretched out on the bench as he spun a drumstick between his fingers. He hadn’t seen Scott much lately, too preoccupied with his daughter and Hope Van Dyne as he must’ve been, though the latter Steve wasn’t entirely certain about if the badly concealed bruise Scott was sporting on the bridge of his nose was anything to go by.

And while he didn’t expect Spider-Man to be present and figured Rhodey didn’t have much of a reason to witness the surgery, Nat’s absence was...disappointing, and left an unsteady, bitter feeling in his chest.

He’d thought that out of all of them she would’ve been one of the first to come, if only for her informally appointed role as referee and middleman to their two very obvious groups.

Logically Steve knew that in the grand scheme of things it hadn’t been very long since their arrival. The Compound was huge, Toni and the others were actual Avengers on active duty, with jobs and responsibilities, and Steve and his team were in this tentative place of limbo, where they hung around waiting in anticipation for the next step, the next formality.

Steve got it. The Avengers were busy and Steve and his group were...not.

That didn’t mean that it didn’t feel like it was personal. Or that Steve wouldn’t understand if it was, all things considered.

But the silence of it, the uncertainty of everything, of where they stood with one another, of where they stood in the world, of where he stood with—

How could you?

That set Steve’s teeth on edge.

“Steve?” Sam asked again, this time laying a hand on his shoulder.

Steve inhaled, then let it all out slowly, but it did nothing to release the tension held within his body.

“Good as can be,” he managed to reply, his hands squeezing the opposite elbows.

Sam stood quiet but his thoughts, his unyielding patience was loud and physical in a way that Steve had grown accustomed to but not invulnerable against, so after a few moments, he found himself sighing heavily, his eyes continuing to watch as the nurses started to prep Bucky for the surgery.

“I dunno, Sam,” he said. “I just…” He grimaced and shook his head. “Just want this to be over for Bucky. And for me. The rest of it is.” He sighed again. “We can deal with it later.”

He saw Sam’s reflection in the glass nod slowly.

“Okay, Steve.”

It was spoken without inflection, neither in judgment nor in agreement, just...acceptance that was neither here nor there.

And then he heard Nat’s quiet footsteps and the tempoed click of Rhodey’s cane as they both entered through the single door in murmured conversation.
He turned around just in time to meet Rhodey’s gaze, hold it for a few beats, only for Rhodey to look away as he took his seat.

Steve suppressed a wince.

Being in Rhodey’s bad books never ended well for anyone and something uncomfortable stirred inside of his chest, some gnarled, twisted thing that whispered in his ear.

\textit{Just imagine how angry he'll be when he finds out the worst of what you did. What you did in Siberia.}

As if sensing his thoughts, Nat sent him a small, dare he say \textit{encouraging}, smile before climbing over the bench and sitting next to Rhodey. Through the corner of his eye he saw Clint shoot a look their way, the drumstick between his fingers frozen still for a few beats before he looked down and the drumstick continued its looping motions.

Steve struggled not to let the entire mood of the room get to him. The longing looks from Wanda, the stoic disinterest from Vision, Clint’s prickliness, Nat’s decisive placement in the room, Rhodey’s professional frostiness and Steve’s own mental turbulence told him everything and nothing about the current state of the team.

“Captain Rogers?”

He turned around again and Helen Cho stood tall and prim on the other side of the glass, her mask lowered around her chin.

“Toni had a last-minute call but we’ll be ready to start as soon as she gets—”

At that moment Toni came striding swiftly into the operating room, her scrubs, matching the high-necked ones that Helen and the rest of her team wore, already neatly donned, and her hair in a hairnet that was tied at the back of her head.

“Sorry, sorry,” she said, walking around Bucky’s bed, switching on one of the large monitors that hung from the ceiling and angling it over the bed. “That was Shuri. She said she’s good to video in on the surgery if you’re still good with that, Barnes.”

Bucky looked at the back of Toni’s head as he spoke. “Yeah,” he said quietly, cleared his throat, then said again louder, “Yeah, that’s...that’s fine.”

“Awwsome,” Toni said distractedly, fiddling with the monitor for one more moment before stepping back. “FRIDAY, we got an uplink?”

“All good,” she said, then Steve saw her glance behind Toni, who took her cue and stepped out of the way. “Hi Bucky.” Her voice had a kindness to it that Steve had come to realize was reserved for very few people. Bucky being on that list came as no surprise to Steve.
Bucky smiled and gave a small wave. “Hey, Princess. S’good to see you.”

“And you.” For the briefest moment, Steve thought he saw her eyes flicker hesitantly to Toni, whose expression softened before she gave the smallest nod that was little more than the blink of her eyes, and addressed Bucky once more. “You’re in good hands, you know? Doctor Cho’s the best. And nobody knows tech as best as Toni Stark. Nobody.”

Toni huffed a tiny laugh. “Except you.”

“Well,” Shuri said with a cheeky shrug, “that was a given.”

“If everybody’s ready,” Helen said, very voice soft but clear, nodding once at Steve, then strolling over until she stood next to Bucky’s bed, “then shall we get started?”

Something grim crossed over Bucky’s expression as he looked from Shuri to Helen, to Toni and finally to Steve, who could do nothing else but step closer to the glass, wishing he could be in that room.

The corner of Bucky’s mouth quirked up in an echo of a familiar grin.

“Guess I’ll see y’all on the other side, huh, pal?”

Steve’s heart wrenched in his chest even as he grinned back and nodded.

“Guess so. I’ll try to make sure another seventy years don’t go by before you wake up this time.”

Bucky gave him a playful wince. “Yeouch.”

“Too soon?” Steve chuckled and Bucky shrugged his smile coming easier and truer this time.

“Just a little. Wish me luck.”

“Y’don’t need it,” Steve reassured him, meeting Toni’s eyes for the briefest moment before she busied herself with some machine and that claw in his chest only squeezed tighter. “Like Shuri said, you’re in safe hands.”

Steve watched as one of the nurses helped Bucky lie down, then pull an oxygen mask over his nose as mouth.

The doctors and nurses all took their positions and Helen nodded to the anaesthesiologist.

“We’ll start administering the sedative on my count. Just as we practiced, Sergeant Barnes. Start counting backwards from ten whenever you’re ready.”

Behind him, the rest of the team was quiet, their attention focused solely on Bucky and the goings-on of the operating room. And in this moment Steve knew that in this at least, they were all united, that whose team they’d been on, whatever resentments they still held for one another, were set aside for the sake of one Bucky Barnes, whom none of them could say they knew well in any capacity, but who had been in his own way central to their fight.

And Steve believed in the very core of him that whatever simmering rages they harbored towards him, towards Toni and towards one another, they were all good enough, respectful enough, kind enough, not to bear any ill will towards Bucky while he went through this.

It was enough, he thought as Bucky started counting down, his voice muffled by the mask.
“Ten, nine...”

He looked at Toni, her spine ramrod straight as she stood by Bucky’s bed, her hands clasped tightly in front of her.

“...eight, sev—”

It was almost enough.

Watching Helen work was always a study in accuracy and finesse. She was swift and efficient, constantly aware of everything happening around her at all times and every movement, every motion was both precise and practical.

Toni enjoyed watching her work, enjoyed studying what she did and learning from a woman who was willing to impart her knowledge and explain to everybody in the room what she was doing and why.

And if Toni was hanging off of Helen’s every word and every sensitive movement of her hands because it helped her focus on something other than the man currently lying unconscious on the operating table, that was her business and hers alone.

“Hmm,” Helen hummed as she slid her micro scalpel against one edge of the shoulder panel and lifted it ever so carefully away. “See that?” she murmured, and the micro camera pinned to her cap zoomed in automatically, giving everyone a clear view of the discolored skin on the screens. “Just as we suspected. HYDRA’s technology has been eating away at his flesh for years.”

Toni grimaced behind her mask at the flesh that was weeping blood and puss. “In addition to his healing factor, going into cryo so often must’ve been slowing it down all the while. It was a good thing he decided to go under in Wakanda or this could’ve been worse.”

Helen nodded. “The dermal regenerator should do the trick and his healing will cover the rest as best as it can.”

Toni began slowly removing one of the thick screws embedded into Barnes’ shoulder. It jarred against bone and metal as she slid it out, causing the hairs on the back of her neck to rise.

“You and I keep working like this,” she said, “I might wind up with an honorary MD.”

Helen’s eyes crinkled in a smile. “We keep working together and one day we might actually be able to regrow his entire arm.”

Toni looked at her for a brief moment. “That would be something, huh?” Then she dropped the pin into the metal tray.

The surgery was slow-going, with every care taken to removing the implant and ensuring that the process of it didn’t traumatize Barnes’ nerves, muscles and bones more than they were already. The first time Toni had glanced at the clock, it had taken her a moment to process that four hours had passed since they’d started. The second time she checked, another two and a half hours had passed.
By the time they’d removed the penultimate component of the implant and gotten started on the section that was actually embedded into Barnes’ bones, nine hours had passed and every doctor and nurse present was sweating, hungry, thirsty or all three all at once.

Toni had to hand it to Helen and every single person who had ever performed a surgery ever. Toni could spend days tinkering and working on something new but having someone’s life in her hands was something else altogether.

It took five of them to remove the final piece, having to work double time against the blood coming out of the actual open wound that was Barnes’ shoulder and against the fact that his healing factor was going a little haywire.

In the end, Helen had to use a circular saw to cut through Barnes’ bone with a sound that was the stuff of gratuitously gory movies and made Toni’s stomach turn unpleasantly.

Iron Man indeed, she thought with a grimace as the last metal rod finally came loose in her hands and the entire room shared a unified sigh of relief.

“That was gross.”

Above her Shuri’s features were twisted in discomfort, but her gaze was just as sharp and attentive as ever.

“Still wish you were here?” she asked, dropping the rod onto the metal tray and it landed with a dull clang.

“Always,” Shuri chuckled with a determined grin. “How’s he looking?”

Helen made a small noise of consideration in her throat as a couple of nurses began cleaning Barnes’ wound.

“Vitals are holding steady.” She held out her hand and one of the doctors placed a dermal regenerator — a true U-Gin and Stark Med collaboration — in it, and she promptly began running it over the jagged edge of Barnes’ shoulder. “The gangrene is healing well enough. There’s not too much nerve damage but we’ll just have to wait and see.”

As Helen worked, the nurses cleaned up and brought in the sterilized equipment and machinery for the new implant, and Toni allowed herself a brief moment to lean against Barnes’ bed to give herself some time to breathe.

She only realized her mistake when she looked down and Barnes’ sedated form was right there, the sight of him stealing the breath back out from her lungs and making her freeze as if a bucket of icy water had just upended itself over her head.

The sound of breaking glass.

The white and gray of a Siberian bunker.

Her mother’s scream.

Howard—!

A flash of metal.

Do you even remember them?
She blinked.

And when she opened her eyes she was distantly aware of Helen and Shuri having a conversation over her head, their tones somehow too light and too casual but too far away for her to pay them any attention.

Instead, it was Barnes whom she couldn’t help but focus on. It was Barnes, who lay there on the operating bed with one arm and the other a gaping mess. It was Barnes, who looked pale against the sleek lines of the operating bed, whose eyes were closed and who had a tube inserted down his throat, Barnes who was linked up to an array of drips and IVs and who was undergoing one of the most revolutionary surgeries of the decade.

I remember all of them.

She looked away and up only to meet Steve’s eyes across the room, doctors, machinery, space and a single panel of glass the only thing separating them in that moment.

As well as a million unsaid things, a grief that went arc reactor-deep, a letter and a flip phone and a lie.

There were others behind him but as the wind howled unforgivingly in the distance and the snow fell across a barren landscape and atop her eyelashes, he was all she could see.

He was standing there. And any moment now he would turn around and walk away.

Except...except no. No he wouldn’t.

Because Barnes was on this side of the glass.

And the only thing that really stood before Steve and Barnes was her.

And she’d seen first-hand how taking that stance would end.

If she took a step back, if she removed herself from her body and just observed, she thought she could separate the emotion from the visual representation before her. She thought she could see what any other person would see when they looked at Steve right then.

She would see the way his arms were crossed, his hands cupping his elbows. It was both Captain America and sincerely not. It was tense and ready, postured and stern. But it was also a man frightened, a man helpless, a man physically attempting to hold the unravelling parts of himself together.

She would see the way his eyes bore right back into hers, unwilling to look away, determined to hold her gaze so she could see something that he was trying to say. I’m sorry, she might have thought. I’m so sorry. Or maybe it would something like please, Toni.

Please what, she might have asked. Please save him? Please talk to me? Please, please, just please.

And if she looked harder, if she looked with kindness, with a willingness to understand, she might see that his eyes were blue, so blue with just a hint of green - she’d seen it first - and that they were perfect and warm and sad.

And full of something that was never said but never had to be because of course they both knew.

Or at least she thought she had.
A sharp pain, brief like a flash of a camera, lanced outwards from the center of her chest, right behind the arc reactor, and shot down her arm. She winced almost as an afterthought, absentmindedly rubbing the tips of her numb fingers together beneath her rubber gloves.

“Doctor Stark?”

Behind her, Helen was smiling beneath her mask, a sheen of exhaustion on her forehead but the dermal regenerator in one hand, held in quiet triumph like the Rod of Asclepius.

“Do you want to take a look?”

Pushing herself off, Toni strolled around the back of Barnes’ bed and leaned in.

Some of the other doctors came in for a glimpse while others contented themselves with watching the screen on the far wall.

Toni gazed down at what was once a torn, bleeding mess and let out a hushed breath that was almost close to a laugh.

“Well,” she said, watching as the previously jagged edge of Barnes’ shoulder knit itself back together to a smooth, clean cut. “Would you look at that.”

“Just as we predicted. The implant is going to be a perfect fit,” Shuri said above them, projecting her own joy as warm as the sun until Toni could feel her fingers again.

“Good job, ladies,” Helen murmured, then gestured at her team. “Well done all of us.”

There was a murmured response of thanks and even a few polite but genuine claps before they settled into a patient, attentive silence.

It took her a few seconds to realize that all their attention was on her, that it was her direction they were waiting on, Helen included.

Toni blinked, surveying the team, the first flutters of flustered panic twirling around in her chest before they settled into something that resembled anticipation.

At that point she didn’t see Barnes. Just a man who needed something that she could provide and provide exceptionally well.

She swallowed then straightened. “Doctor Cho, the stasis rings, if you wouldn’t mind? After that, everybody take fifteen. Bathroom break, lunch, hydrate, whatever. Just be back and ready in fifteen on the dot. It’s the homestretch, guys. We got this.”

They moved with impressive efficiency and Toni stepped out of the way again while Helen set up the stasis rings around Barnes’ shoulder.

Ten minutes later and the room had been cleaned, the anaesthetist rotated, and Barnes remained sedated and oblivious to the rest of the world around him, including a clearly exhausted Shuri who, through the monitor, appeared to be taking a short doze on whatever desk she was at.

As they were scrubbing in again, Helen nudged her with her shoulder.

“Are you okay, Toni?” she asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

“Yeah, she said as one of the nurses helped her with her gloves. “I’m good.”
Helen’s expression was inscrutable, made even more so when she tied her mask behind her head and obstructed half her face once more.

“Do you remember how we first started this?” Helen asked after a time, her voice light but also curious.

As if Toni wouldn’t be able to recall how she’d first approached the only world-renowned geneticist worth approaching.

“A conference in Tokyo,” Toni told her dutifully. “I asked Rumiko to introduce us after listening to your talk on catalyzing specific genetic mutations to cure disease.”

Helen looked to the side in remembrance, a rueful smile in her voice as she said, “I was only seventeen then. And you were the only one who asked about my work and actually cared what I had to say. I’m glad we kept in touch. A few bumps in the road but...we’ve done quite well so far, haven’t we?”

Toni felt the corner of her mouth quirk upwards in spite of herself. “Yeah. Guess we have.”

“I meant what I said earlier, you know?” she said, sounding serious but earnest. “Doctor or no, we can do a lot more than regenerate a couple more inches of flesh and bone. I think today has shown that. You do good work, Toni. As Iron Man, at Stark Industries and in there.” She tilted her head in the direction of the operating theatre. “You’ve always said that you fix things, and it’s true. Now you can say that in some ways you fix people too. And I’m not just talking about Sergeant Barnes.”

Toni faltered a little, suddenly unsteady and unsure about what they were really talking about, but Helen continued.

“After Ultron,” she began stiltedly, then sighed. “I know Vision is good and something wonderful and amazing. But I also know he could easily have been the destruction of our world had you and Bruce and Thor not stepped in. For a long time the fact that I’d made that possible made me question everything I knew about the work I was doing. Whether I was moving faster than our world was ready for. Whether I was...trying to play God.” She shook her head ruefully and Toni had to bite back the protests that were ready on the tip of her tongue. “But then you came to me with that project for Colonel Rhodes and…” She shrugged. “I slowly fell back in love with my work and with myself and I could look at Vision and see that I’d had a hand in creating something precious out of fear and chaos.”

Toni didn’t say anything. Couldn’t say anything. Because that was Helen’s trauma and her fear and Toni didn’t have any right to protest and say but no, even though she wanted to reassure this wonderful and brilliant woman that Ultron and what he did never had anything to do with her.

Helen stepped closer to her then, her voice dropping low and intimate.

“I don’t know what happened between you and Sergeant Barnes or between you and Captain Rogers,” she said, and Toni felt her stomach swoop unpleasantly. “I do know that it’s taken a hell of a lot out of you, though. That it still is. That maybe it will keep taking for a long time. But I also know that what you’re doing for him is...admirable. Wonderful. Not just for him but for you as well.” She shrugged again. “I think you may be creating something beautiful and precious out of fear and chaos. You just...might not see it for a while.”

Then she dipped her head - a gesture of respect, concession or finality, Toni wasn’t sure - and moved towards the sliding doors and back into the operating theatre.
Toni gave herself a few more moments, her mind buzzing and her heart racing and her hands going hot and cold. When she looked into the room beyond, she saw that the occupants of the observation room had dwindled to Vision, Nat and Steve.

Steve, who didn’t appear to have moved an inch from his position directly in front of the glass for the last ten hours.

Dutiful, firm, immovable.

“We will make him move.”

Toni whirled around, a gasp caught in her throat.

A wide-eyed nurse stood in the doorway leading into the operating theatre, nervously shifting from foot to foot.

“Doctor Stark?” the nurse said, and Toni got the feeling that it might not have been the first time she’d called her name. “We’re ready to begin when you are.”

Toni swallowed around the lump in her throat and nodded.

“Right. Yes.”

After the surgery was complete and the moor successfully in place, Barnes spent the next ten hours asleep, his body recuperating while a rotation of nurses kept an eye on him.

Toni, of course, refused to let fourteen hours of intensive surgery drag her to the bedroom for much needed rest in spite of how her back and feet ached in protest.

The specs for Barnes’ arm were open on the tablet in front of her and she’d been putting it through simulation after simulation to test its durability and resistance when her finger stilled, hovering an inch above the touchscreen.

Her chest clenched painfully, constricting the breath in her lungs.

Even without the phantom pain, even without looking...

She would know him anywhere.

His footsteps stalled for a bare second before he made his way towards her and around the counter to settle into the stool opposite her.

His hands, clasped together on the table, entered her vision next.

Toni let her gaze rest on them instead of looking up.

A flash of metal.

A shield over her head.

The sound of breaking—
“Hey, Toni.”

After a moment, she let her hand drop, resting on the edge of the table, ready to push herself away and leave the moment she felt like it.

She still didn’t look up at him.

He inhaled, gearing himself up to say something, then seemed to settle for, “It’s been hard to get a hold of you.”

She thought about the pings to her phone, indicating the number of times he’d asked FRIDAY if she would let him know when Toni was free.

“I’ve been busy,” she finally said, her voice hoarse and her throat dry.

“Yeah. You have.”

The loaded statement sent them into a round of silence, one that she wasn’t keen on breaking.

So they sat there in the quiet, Steve struggling in his own way, Toni reticent as she remained where she was, refusing to tear her eyes away from the tablet where the rendering of Barnes’ arm floated lazily.

After several long moments he spoke again.

“You look…”

She sighed. “If you’re gonna tell me I look ‘good’ then I’m gonna have to stop you right there.” Her fingers worried the pendant around her neck, the one the kids had given her. “We both know I look like shit. Trying to change the world will do that to you.”

“Yeah,” Steve said meaninglessly, sounding lost and unsure but trying, so damn hard.

At one time Toni might even have taken pity on him and inserted a joke, a tease here or there, just to make him loosen up a little.

Not today.

When he didn’t say anything more, Toni sighed again and swiped the screen of her tablet off, then pushed to her feet.

“Well, not that this wasn’t a riveting conversation but I’m going to bed.”

“Wait—”

“G’night, Cap.”

“Toni, wait. Please.”

Toni grit her teeth, squeezing the tablet under one arm as she stopped several feet away from the door, her insides twisting unpleasantly at the need, the need, to look and see his face, so strong she had to physically restrain herself.

She heard him push his own chair back, heard his footsteps as he came around the counter and stopped, and she was so grateful that he didn’t come any closer because if he did she didn’t know what she might do.
When he finally spoke it was just three words.

Did you know?

“You didn’t call.”

Yes.

“No.”

He didn’t ask why, but he didn’t have to because she heard it all the same.

Just an unspoken word that hung between them like an open wound.

She thought back to months ago, when Nat had first come back and brought up the phone and Vision - wonderful, incredible Vision - had calmly but ruthlessly struck that idea down.

“You told me to call if I needed you,” she said, the words sounding both physically present yet so far away to her own ears, like they were being spoken by someone else. Her chest felt like a string stretched taut and all Steve had to do was reach out with one finger and pluck, and her heart would’ve shattered right there. But she wouldn’t give him that chance. Never again. “I...I didn’t need you.” Then she turned around and finally looked at him over her shoulder, feeling both full and hollow all at once when she saw the stricken look on his beautiful - god, he was so beautiful - face. “I never did.”

Then she stepped through the doors, turning away just as the door slid shut like a guillotine, cutting off the image of his profile as he stared at the ground looking lost.

As lost as she had been.

And even as she walked away and her eyes blurred and pain shot up her arm and the sound of a wormhole rang in her ears, there was enough simmering fire within her to think good. Because he deserved it.

Chapter End Notes

And that was that!

Toni and Bucky and Steve all in one chapter!

I’d be really interested to hear your thoughts, even if all you want to do is rant at me for taking so long, lol.

Anyways, I shall catch y’all tentatively next week :)

“No single word in English renders all the shades of тоска (toska). At its deepest and most painful, it is a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause. At less morbid levels it is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for, a sick pining, a vague restlessness, mental throes, yearning. In particular cases it may be the desire for somebody of something specific, nostalgia, love-sickness. At the lowest level it grades into ennui, boredom.” - Vladimir Nobakov in Lolita

Hello everybody and Happy Holidays~ I hope whatever holiday you celebrated over the last week was wonderful and unforgettable <3

So, my plan to have this chapter out a week after the previous one failed pretty spectacularly. I initially thought I had about 90% of it done and then decided to add in like...six thousand more words, so...yeah. I hope those extra six thousand make up for the late update?

As always, thank you to everybody who commented and bookmarked and left a kudos on the previous chapter. I'm so so so glad you all seemed to have enjoyed it and I hope you enjoy this one just as much. There are a good chunk of comments that I still haven't responded to but I will do so over the next few days ;)

Much like the last few chapters, I owe a huge part of my soul to the brilliant, baddest ass beta of all, Demigodscum, without whom I would still be waffling over this chapter. Seriously, honey, you are the actual best. <3 <3 <3

Without further ado, on with the chapter~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I didn't need you.

I never did.

Seven words shouldn’t have been able to pack such a punch that they rendered him entirely hollow.

But they did.

And Toni’s shuddering voice still echoed in his ears, clear as a bell.

He could still feel the cold, sharp pain from where the look in her eyes had pierced him right through the heart.

It's no more than you deserve, his own voice kept whispering in his ear. After what you did...
And the worst part was he hadn’t said all the things he’d wanted to.

All the things that she might actually want to hear.

He’d spent the rest of that night sitting in that dark, empty kitchen replaying their short but gutting exchange, imagining how she would’ve looked at him if he’d just said that he was sorry. Trying to imagine what she would’ve said. Whether she still would’ve walked away from him.

Or whether she might have stayed.

He sighed as he watched the sun come up over the forest, illuminating the trees in brilliant gold and deepening the shadows behind in inky black.

Another day, he thought to himself, even though he still ached from the phantom blows of their encounter.

He could try again with Toni another day.

He couldn’t stop.

Not now.

It had been a week since the surgery and three days since Helen had flown back to Seoul with her team, declaring that if Bucky’s body hadn’t rejected the implant yet the chances of it doing so any time soon were next to nil and that he could get the arm installed as soon as he felt like it.

Steve hadn’t pushed; it wasn’t his place even though he could see Bucky gearing up for it as the days passed.

When he looked back on it, though, Steve hadn’t really given Bucky a choice in the end.

It had been an accident.

Steve had never intended for things to go down the way they did, but at this point, he was just following the plot.

Bucky had been hungry so Steve and Sam accompanied him to the kitchen. On the way there, they just so happened to meet Clint, who had spent the better part of the afternoon with Lila, and Wanda, who was freshly showered and in need of some tea after having finished one of her sessions with Strange.

He didn’t know that the five of them would enter the kitchen only to find Toni, Vision, Nat and Rhodey deep in conversation.

As they walked in and stopped short, Steve only caught the tail-end of what Toni was saying.

“—for Ross to find out in the end—”

She had her back to them and was leaning forward, both hands braced on the edge of the kitchen
counter, and Steve saw it in the stiffening of her spine and the way she abruptly cut off her words when she realized they had company.

She twisted to look over her shoulder, glaring as she saw them all standing there, eyeing them one by one. Her frown deepened and her shoulders rose defensively, like someone caught in an ambush.

Nobody said anything for a long time, hostility crackling between them like lightning.

Abruptly, she straightened, turning around fully and crossing her arms as she settled on Bucky.

“You’re here about the arm,” she said in a no-nonsense tone of voice.

Bucky jerked, caught off guard and stumbled over his words a little. “Uh, I didn’t— I mean—”

“He is,” Steve said, and immediately knew that it was the wrong call if the way she grit her teeth were anything to go by. He knew that look well. “We are.”

Steve wanted to kick himself, wanted to close his eyes and swear out loud because why would he say 'we’?

Behind Toni, Nat grimaced, sending him a look, and he heard Sam let out a slow breath.

He felt Bucky’s wince more so than saw it and Steve quietly wished the floor would swallow him whole.

Toni’s gaze slid to Steve and narrowed before turning back to Bucky.

“Is that right?” she asked blithely, but her focus on Bucky was sharp, probing, expectant.

Next to him Bucky swallowed and nodded. “Yeah. I’m...whenever you’re free I’d like...if the arm can be installed then— then that would be great.” He held his breath then added in a softer tone that twisted at Steve’s heart, “Please?”

Had Steve not been standing so close and had he not known Toni’s every expression so intimately, he wouldn’t have seen the way her eyes darkened, grew almost gentle around the edges at the word ‘please.’ He didn’t know if Bucky saw it for what it was but Steve did.

*Empathy.*

Just a brief, barely significant shift in her expression, but it spoke *infinities* about the kind of woman Steve knew Toni to be.

Just as quickly it was gone, as if it had never been there in the first place.

“That’s fine. Vision and I can get everything set up by tomorrow morning. Is that all?”

Toni clearly thought it was, for she was already turning around in a clear dismissal.

And Steve. Steve couldn’t… Not a second goddamn time. He just *couldn’t.* And maybe that was always his problem. That he *couldn’t.* Even when he should, even when everyone was telling him to just *stop.*

Bucky must’ve seen it on his face, for his eyes widened and he sharply shook his head, his hand already reaching out to stop him but unfortunately, Steve’s mouth worked quicker than his brain and what came out was just…
“Can I...is it all right to watch the procedure?”

Everybody stilled.

Nat was sending him a despairing glare over the top of Toni’s head and Bucky cursed under his breath, turning away in embarrassment or frustration. Steve couldn’t blame him and his ears burned in humiliation because why couldn’t he ever just stop.

Toni turned around again, slow but smooth like she was floating in water.

Her lips were parted in an almost-smile the likes of which he hadn’t seen since their first fight on the Helicarrier, and there was something similarly flinty and razorlike in her wide eyes.

“What’d you say, Cap?” she asked quietly.

Her voice sent a shiver up the back of his neck and Steve felt like a steel rod had been inserted into his spine.

“Toni—”

“Y’heard what he said, Stark,” Clint drawled and Steve could’ve sworn out loud because he knew how long Clint had just been itching for a fight and god, they couldn’t do this right here, not now. He heard Clint’s footsteps as he came around behind them, strolled over to the fridge, opened it and pulled out a carton of expensive-looking grapefruit juice that had the initials T.S. on the side. Steve felt his heart sink and Nat closed her eyes, shaking her head as Clint drank straight from carton. When he was done, he lowered the carton, mouth twisted in a smug grin as he said, “We wanna watch. You cool with that?”

“You cool if I shoot you in the eye with a nail gun, dickhead?” Rhodey shot back smoothly, though absolutely nothing about his stance indicated that he wouldn’t make good on the threat. “Don’t worry, I’ll let you keep one. That’ll fit your name better, eh, Hawkeye?”

"Jesus," Sam uttered under his breath.

“For god’s sake, guys,” Nat sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Can we not—?”

As if it wasn’t bad enough already, Wanda interjected, a slight tremor — the catch in her false bravado — in her voice as she spoke.

“You let us watch during the surgery. Why is this any different?”

“Because that,” Vision supplied, phasing through the counter and coming to stand beside Toni, “was a courtesy extended by the head surgeon, namely Doctor Cho. Toni is not obligated to extend the same to you in this scenario.”

Wanda visibly flinched, looking hurt and betrayed, but all Steve could think about was how this was getting out of hand faster than he knew how to gather it all back together.

"Except," Clint supplied loudly, grinning tightly, “what if the patient wants us to be there? Y’know, for moral support? Or we might actually learn something from the great Doctor Stark, right, Cap?”

"Barton," Bucky gritted out, the blunt tips of his fingers digging into the flesh of his shoulder, right above the metal implant, but no one other than Steve appeared to have heard him.

Then Toni snorted incredulously, surveying the lot of them in amusement. “What the hell do you
guys think this is, Grey’s Anatomy?” Her expression darkened, her mouth curling in distaste and fury. “Well guess what. No. No you can’t watch. And you wanna know why? Because this is a delicate fucking procedure and I don’t need any distractions from anyone, much less from you ungrateful—”

Wanda bared her teeth, her eyes glowing red. “What do we have to be grateful to you for when it was you who—”

And there was no way they were going down that road.

"Wanda," Steve snapped and she jumped, shutting her mouth with a click. "Everybody," he continued, “let’s just all calm down.”

For a few brief moments there was blissful silence.

And then Toni started to clap, slow and mocking and Steve just stood there like the helpless idiot he was and took it.

“Well, isn’t that some stellar teamwork right there.”

Steve sighed. “Toni. Toni, I didn’t mean to—”

“Yeah you did,” she interrupted. “Whatever it is, yeah, you meant it. You’re a man of your word, right?”

Only Toni could make that sound like an insult. Only Toni could hit where it hurt the most without even lifting a finger.


She gazed at Steve, then at the rest of them, something mutinous and how dare you visible in the flash of her eyes and the indignant clench of her jaw.

“Y’know what? Fine,” she finally said after a while. "Fine. Let’s make a fucking party out of it, then. But none of you are allowed in the lab, got it? You get to sit in the observation room and that's it. If I hear a single fucking peep out of any of you—”

“You won’t.” Steve reassured her, feeling a headache creeping up the back of his neck and fatigue settling deeply into his bones. “I swear, Toni, you won’t. We’ll all be quiet. We just wanna watch. Just to make sure—” He cut himself off, immediately realizing his mistake. Again. A hand closed around his heart and he wished so badly right then that he could’ve retracted the last four words because of the look on her face.

The rage, the memory, the hurt and, worst of all, the resignation that settled into the subtle droop of her shoulders, like she should’ve known. Like she should’ve expected it. Like all her hopes, the ones she didn’t say aloud but Steve knew were ingrained in her had just been trampled on by his thoughtless and unfair just to make sure.

“What, Cap?” Her mouth curved into a jagged smile and Steve closed his eyes then opened them again, just wanting to make it better, to make it all better. To start over from when they had first walked into the kitchen. To start over from the beginning. “Make sure I don’t do something like blow your pal’s arm off again?” she sneered. And after everything she’d already done, after everything she was already trying to do when she owed Bucky nothing, he knew she wouldn’t do something like that, he knew Bucky was in safe hands with her.
So why couldn’t he ever just back off, just stop?

“Toni,” he tried, shaking his head, because this was all wrong, “that’s not what I—”

But Toni just rolled her eyes and looked away, her whole body heaving over a sigh that came impressively, painfully, close to dismissive if not for the tremor of her lower lip. “Don’t you worry, Cap. You remember your access codes, don’t you? If I so much as breathe wrong you have my full permission to jump in and save your boy.” Then walking up to him, she pinned him with dark brown eyes, devoid of all emotion and whispered in a quiet voice for only him and Bucky to hear. “However. You. See. Fit.”

He was almost grateful when she walked around him, giving his entire body a wide berth as she made her way to the exit, so that she wouldn’t have to see him physically recoil at her words, at the implication, at the accusation — how could you Steve — that cut him right to the core — how could you—

“Vision will bring Barnes down to the lab tomorrow at ten sharp. FRIDAY will deal with anyone else who wants to come,” was all she said before the door slid shut behind her back with a cold, mechanical sort of finality, leaving him standing there and not knowing what to do.

The others lingered awkwardly. Bucky made an aborted move to touch the metal shoulder cap then dropped his flesh hand, letting it fall to his waist where he clenched the material of his white t-shirt. Clint leaned against the fridge with his arms crossed, looking away and Wanda’s gaze darted nervously between Steve and Clint and Vision, who had proceeded to clean up the empty mugs and plates Steve hadn’t even noticed on the counter. Nat’s lips were turned down in a grimace, her stance tense.

But it was Rhodey who met Steve’s eyes unflinchingly, whose mouth was twisted in a slight sneer, something angry and protective and burning in his expression.

Steve waited for him to speak, waited for him to ask the question Steve knew was right on the tip of Rhodey’s tongue: what the hell did you do to her, Rogers?

But after a tense moment, he too just shook his head and left the room, and Steve didn’t know whether to feel relieved or disappointed that Rhodey hadn’t asked him.

Because at this point he could’ve done with anything to fill the empty silence that Toni had left behind.

Bucky entered Stark’s lab behind Vision right on time.

To say he was...anxious about being in such close proximity with Antonia Stark was both an understatement and yet not entirely accurate.

There was anxiety, a healthy dose of it. But there was...anticipation, apprehension, excitement and something that he thought might have been premature relief.

Relief that settled more firmly once he took in his surroundings. He didn’t realize until his preconceived notions shattered before him that he’d even had prior expectations about what her lab might look and feel like. HYDRA’s had always been dimly lit with just enough spotlights that the
doctors, scientists and guards liked to shine into the face of whoever their subject was for the day. As far as intimidation tactics went it was still effective and played into a psyche full of cinematic scenes of torture, wet, grimy walls and screams echoing in from behind metal doors with tiny square windows.

This was...not that.

This was wide and sprawling and full of machinery and glass walls that partitioned the different sections of the lab. It was bright, the lights on the circumference of the lab taking on a softer glow akin to sunlight through sheer curtains. There were screens upon screens, holo emitters, half-drawn schematics - some of them on actual paper while others were floating 3D-generated creations.

There were several empty glasses with dried smears of whatever concoction they’d previously contained clinging to the edges and settling at the base. Some of them had lipstick marks on the rim. There was a small couch with a duvet hanging off of it and slipping onto the floor.

One table had a cluster of stools around it and on the surface were a ring of mugs, misshapen, with the initials of whom Bucky surmised were the names of the kids Steve had briefly mentioned in passing. HK for Harley Keener, KK for Kamala Khan, PP for Peter Parker and a solid S, which was undeniably Shuri.

There were pencils and pens and paper and tablets, doodles and half-done math equations, a soldering iron, a penknife and what looked like a very expensive but well-loved camera.

HYDRA’s labs and bases had always been purposefully arranged, cold, clinical and brutally efficient.

But here…

Warmth was etched into every corner. In the organized mess, the lines where the lab ended and the nest began blurred in front of his eyes and Bucky slowly felt the lingering clusters of tension in his shoulders, back and fist relax.

“Toni,” Vision greeted, and Stark made a distracted, questioning noise from where she was crouched by a hunk of heavy machinery whose wires and parts were exposed for the world to see. “I’ve brought Sergeant Barnes. Are we ready to begin the installation?”

Stark jerked and twisted to look over her shoulder, passing over him and settling on a point behind. She narrowed her eyes and when Bucky turned to look, he saw Steve and the others - everyone who had been present during his surgery save for Doctor Strange - filing into the circular observatory room.

Evidently still simmering from the exchange the day before, Stark spared Bucky a derisive yet cautious look, then jerked her chin towards the empty chair nestled in the middle of a cluster of equipment and parts.

“Take a seat.”

He did as he was told, opting to make himself as unimposing as possible. Three different metal arms were spread out on the table, each component placed neatly in what he assumed was order of installation.

“You mind hooking him up for me, Vis?” Stark asked, stuffing the colorful wires back into the machine. “I’ve almost got this sorted.”
“Of course,” Vision said. “Sergeant Barnes, if you would remove your t-shirt.”

Bucky made an aborted twitch, glancing at Steve, who dipped his head to hide a grin, then slowly pulled the plain white t-shirt off. Vision took it, folded it neatly and set it aside before he began to stick electrodes onto Bucky’s chest, shoulder, and the back of his neck.

“Just relax, Sergeant Barnes,” Vision said in what seemed to be a perpetually mellow tone.

“I am relaxed,” Bucky felt the need to reply, and Vision, with his rather intrusively piercing gaze, looked from him to the monitor that had just started tracking his heart rate and made a noncommittal hum in the back of his throat.

“So you are.”

Then he drifted - levitated - away towards what looked like a control panel just as Stark stood up abruptly, her hair looking fluffier and messier than it had been the day before.

“And, we’re done. Let’s light ‘em up,” she declared, then raised her hands like a conductor and Bucky watched, utterly enraptured, as all around him machines powered to life, a hologram of his body scattered into being, and several charts floated in mid-air, all green, blue and purple.

Like magic, his mind supplied, subconsciously reaching out to touch what appeared to be his breathing rhythm. Molecules of light exploded outward, sounding like tiny fragments of crushed diamonds being poured into a velvet bag, before they gathered back together again.

“Wow,” he uttered under his breath, rubbing the tips of his fingers together.

In his moment of distraction, he didn’t notice the large robot coming his way until the chart exploded wildly in front of him and he was suddenly face to face with a giant claw.

There was a small camera unit on the long implement above the claw and Bucky blinked slowly as he was surveyed up and down, and had to lean backwards when the claw got just a little too close to his face, spinning around slowly as if contemplating the level of harm it intended to inflict.

There was no face to tell but Bucky had the distinct feeling that the robot wasn’t entirely impressed with him.

“Toni,” Vision called without turning around, “I believe Dummy is attempting to intimidate your patient.”

Stark snorted, tapping a few commands into her tablet before lightly kicking a wheelie stool and sending it rolling it over towards where Bucky sat

“Dummy is about as intimidating as a kitten wearing socks. He is heavy, though, so watch out for your—”

Dummy beeped at him angrily, quietly threatening, then very deliberately rolled over Bucky’s feet - which hurt considering all he was wearing a very flimsy pair of espadrilles - as he did an about-turn and zoomed towards Stark.

“—toes,” she finished. Her lips were pursed together but there was something that almost resembled faint amusement in her eyes as she took in the pained grimace he was trying and failing to suppress. Then she leaned in to Dummy, who was throwing what sounded like an electric tantrum, and whispered something that Bucky suspected was, “good boy,” before kissing one of the prongs of the claw and sending him on his way.
And that…

That was…

Bucky couldn’t help it but something warm stiltedly stirred somewhere inside, even if her very well-concealed amusement was at his expense.

She strolled over slowly and casually, but control lined in the set of her shoulders and in the small, flicked gazes she kept shooting him. Once again, Bucky felt like he was central to some undisclosed goal that Stark was striving towards. He had his suspicions, of course, had his theories as to why Stark was doing this and not any other number of brilliant scientists and engineers the world had to offer.

Granted, everyone, including Shuri, had said Toni Stark was the best but even so.

Face your demons, and all that.

And Bucky was her biggest one, wasn’t he?

The biggest monster.

The worst kind.

“Ease up there, soldier boy,” she murmured as she settled on the wheelie stool, eyeing first his tightly clenched fist in his lap, then the chart that monitored his heart rate, indicating it was slightly elevated. “We don’t have a replacement right arm in case you decide to break that one too.”

He looked up at Steve’s concerned face, then slowly unclenched his fingers, breathing in deep and discreet and feeling his heartbeat slow down back within normal parameters.

“There we go,” she said without looking at him. From what he’d experienced so far, she was very conservative with those moments. “FRIDAY, can we can give those folks in the doghouse a closeup feed?”

“Done and done, Boss. Commencing recording for future reference.”

“That’s my girl,” she said, then continued louder as she addressed Steve and the others, her voice only marginally mocking, “Okay, people, so here’s what’s going to happen.”

In spite of it all, Bucky couldn’t help but notice that Stark was as thorough as Doctor Cho was in her explanation of the arm and how she intended to install it. She expanded on terms like nerve electrodes and neural interface, broke them down to concepts all of them could grasp and went into the finer details of care and maintenance.

“Our main issue is the power source and Helen and I had to tweak the compound that it’s made of somewhat. It’s similar to the energy created by the arc reactor but we’re gonna have to manually finetune the modulation to match your neural frequency, otherwise things are gonna get a little…glitchy. Which would be useless because as much as I’d pay to watch you inadvertently punch yourself in the face every five seconds…well.” She smiled loftily. “I don’t think Cap’ll be too happy if we mess up that pretty face.”

The again went unsaid. For a long moment an uncomfortable silence pervaded the lab and Bucky could picture Steve’s grim expression without even having to look.

Stark’s smile widened, cold and cruel but her eyes were tight around the edges, belying some
complicated conflict of emotion that Bucky couldn’t hope to unpack.

“I thought you thought I was the pretty one.”

Everybody looked at Nat, whose arms were crossed over her chest, her lips twisted slightly into a playful pout, dispelling the awkwardness somewhat.

Stark’s indulgent grin was small and distracted but real. “The prettiest,” she told her, then with her fingers she drummed a pattern onto her sternum where Bucky knew her arc reactor was embedded into her chest — metal fingers digging into electric blue and red — before resuming her explanation once more, her voice cool and her expression even. “Anyway. This baby is gonna be as perfect as we can get it. Unlike HYDRA’s disaster, we’ve based the weight and range of movement to that of your real arm and it’s got enough Vibranium in it that it’ll be as indestructible as you can get. Unless you decide to fight someone from Wakanda, in which case my advice would be don’t. Any questions?”

Bucky licked his lips and looked down at her feet — she wasn’t wearing any shoes, just a pair of mismatched socks and one of them looked like they belonged to a man.

“Why...why’re there three arms?” he asked, slowly raising his gaze up to hers.

She paused, looked back at him, pursed her lips, then glanced sidelong at their audience before looking back at Bucky once more.

“Just a contingency,” she said slowly and just a little too lightly. “While we’re modulating the internal powersource so it links to your nervous system there’s a...slight chance that it might...explode and short-out the arm so we’ll need to replace all of the ruined parts or fit in the new one entirely depending on the extent of the damage. If I’m not quick enough to remove the power source before it explodes there is a chance that it could...kill the both of us and possibly destroy the lab. And a good chunk of the building.”

There was more than one outcry of shock and protest from the observation room but Stark didn’t even blink, and continued to patiently gaze back at Bucky, who had the sense that he was being tested in some way. Like she was monitoring his reaction to see whether or not he’d prove whatever unspoken expectation she had about him.

And for whatever reason Bucky knew so deeply that he did not want to prove her right.

The group gathered in the room had started arguing amongst one another.

“—didn’t think to mention this before?”

“—knows what she’s doing.”

“—just another example that clearly she doesn't, Nat, or did you miss the part where she said it could explode—”

“—not such a good idea until we can come up with something safe—”

“Because you’re the pinnacle of good decisions, aren’t you, Wanda? And I’m sorry, but we? Did you somehow take up a fast track biomedical engineering course while you were in Wakanda?”

“Hey, c’mon, Rhodey, man, ease up—”

The only one whose voice he couldn’t hear was Steve’s, and a furtive glance through the corner of
his eye told Bucky that Steve hadn’t move an inch. There was strain in his expression and Bucky suspected that his fingers were digging into his forearms but no words left his mouth.

Bucky wondered whether Steve’s silence meant that Steve didn’t want to say anything at the risk of Stark’s reaction or whether it was because in spite of the risks he trusted Stark’s capabilities and was determined to put his faith in her.

Bucky already knew the answer but he felt compelled to ask, and kept his voice low, hoping that the speakers wouldn’t be able to pick it up.

“What happens if I say I don’t want to take the risk?”

There was a beat, then she shrugged, her expression somehow honest in its inscrutability.

“Then I go back to the drawing board and start this from scratch,” she told him simply. “And if you decide you don’t want me to do it, then I’ll call Shuri. This part isn’t really Helen’s forte, not yet at least, give it a couple months, so Shuri’s the only other person I’d put my trust and my life in.”

Bucky frowned a little. “I never said that I didn’t want you to be the one to do it.”

She shrugged again. “I know. But the choice is there.”

“The choice,” he said, feeling the words in his mouth, rotating them around his molars - the ones he kept losing whenever he got punched in the jaw during his mission but kept growing back.

Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “Yes. The choice,” she said again, but slower this time. “Choice is a big deal these days. That and consent. If you don’t want this now, you say the word and you’re free to leave. We’ll find another way.” She spread her fingers wide, palms open like she was holding something invisible and unspoken up for him to take, freely given. As if it was easy. After a moment of his silence, she licked her lips and looked away, saying quietly, almost intimately, “It’s up to you, Barnes. Just because you say no to this one doesn’t mean all the other offers are off the table.”

He felt something that had been coiled tightly inside of him loosen, some tension seeping out of a compartment of his mind that had been waiting for the next wipe, for the next freeze.

“I’m not saying no. I want you to do it,” he told her, and surprise, brief and transient, flickered across her face. “If...if you’ll still...then I want you to do it.” He nodded, more to himself than to her.

Stark watched him for a moment longer before speaking.

“All right then.”

Stark worked with the curious combination of calm ferocity. Manic but methodical, precise but not always cautious if the numerous electrical burns and cuts on her fingers that she had sustained within the first hour were anything to go by.

Their audience had quieted down to a dissatisfied simmer when they realized the installation was a go, much to Bucky’s relief, and there was only the occasional question or comment - mostly from Scott Lang who had walked in with Hope Van Dyne about a half hour in - that Vision seemed more inclined than Stark to answer.
Bucky suspected Stark would’ve answered had she not been astoundingly devoted to ensuring the circuitry of his upper arm was absolutely perfect. He couldn’t even recall her blinking for the last fifteen minutes.

During that time, Bucky became acquainted with a couple of the other robots - bots, as she called them. Butterfingers, he discovered, was just as if not more suspicious of him than Dummy was, his camera zooming in on him threateningly before Stark - fondly - shooed him away and told him to play something called Mega Jenga with Dummy. There had been a moment of puzzling confusion when a bot called You had rolled up to Stark and proceeded to beep at her in a soft, cooing sort of way that drew Bucky to the conclusion that You might have been intended to be female.

Then again, it was probably presumptuous of him to ascribe gender to bots he’d just met.

Stark had murmured something to You, who responded with a sequence of musical beeps and nudged Stark on the shoulder in what could’ve been construed as a hug. She then tilted her visual input unit at Bucky in consideration, then gently patted him on his head with her claw before zooming off to the observatory window, where she greeted Steve with another series of excited, lyrical beeps.

And Bucky had watched as Steve smiled, losing some of the stress on his forehead as he said “Hey, You,” with the kind of affection someone might greet an old friend with.

Bucky had taken this all in with the deceptively casual observance of a Winter Soldier’s training. If this was his first time seeing them, the bots probably didn’t typically have the run of the Compound, and there had been the offhanded mention of how Stark liked to hole herself up in her workshop for days - which he was beginning to suspect wasn’t actually an exaggeration.

So for You to single Steve out like that, well.

That told him a lot about how much time Steve must’ve spent down here himself.

Before he could ponder for too long Stark deftly fitted another piece of the arm into place, then sat back, eyeing her work with narrowed eyes.

The arm had come to life only moments ago when she had fitted in the core, blue and bright not dissimilar to the appearance of her arc reactor but a fraction of the size. He’d been fascinated by the lines of starlight blue and silver running along the interior of the length of the arm, starting from the base of his shoulder to the skeleton tips of his fingers.

It was beautiful and so, so different from what HYDRA had forced on him. There was a sleekness to it, the grooves between each panel thinner so that it would look like seamless metal from afar.

After a moment her expression hardened, her gaze darting quickly from the arm to the 3D chart she had conjured up to her right.

“Fuck,” she cursed, as one of the panels on his arm started to smoke. "Fuck. Vision."

To his credit, Bucky very much didn’t flinch as she threw her tiny soldering iron to the ground, grabbed something that looked like a knife with a laser and dug it into his arm, flicking the still-smoking panel up with ease, then flinging it violently to the side, narrowly missing one of the many other machines in her workshop.

He did freeze, thinking what the hell are you doing, when she stuck her very bare, very fragile fingers into the metal and practically clawed out the glowing, pulsing power source and threw it across the room at Vision, who calmly caught it with one hand, dropped it inside what looked like a
miniature metal trash can, then firmly shut the lid on it.

All eyes were on it when, two seconds later, there was the sound of a small explosion, causing the trash can to rattle violently once before white smoke — that smelled like burnt coconut — began seeping out from the sides of the lid.

Vision, for his part, looked impressively unfazed as he returned to monitoring Bucky’s vitals.

And judging by the lack of sirens and the fact that the bots hadn’t bothered to look up from their game, explosions were apparently a regular occurrence in this lab.

When he jerkily turned to look at Stark, she was sat there glaring at the skeleton of his arm, breathing in and out of her nose, and Bucky could see the fingers of one hand digging into her thighs while the other tapped incessantly on the metal slat next to his unmoving fingers.

Up ahead Steve was leaning with his forearm pressed against the glass. He tried for a reassuring if pained smile when he met Bucky’s gaze, but his eyes kept traveling to Stark’s tense form and the smoking can.

Finally, she pushed herself up from the stool, yanked off the magnifying visor and tossed that to the side as well. He watched, mildly intrigued, as once more, Vision caught it with one hand while never taking his eyes off of the 3D rendering of the internal going-ons of his arm.

It was so incredibly intuitive, the way they worked around the lab, like she and Vision had a connection that went beyond words. It was even stronger with Colonel Rhodes in a way that spoke of years of friendship and intimacy.

Bucky wondered idly whether they had ever been romantically involved.

“Okay,” she said to herself, pacing around the workspace and rotating her wrists. “Okay. C’mon Stark. Increments...increments by quarters instead of halves. It’s simple. Common sense,” she muttered, nodding to herself and behind her Bucky saw Vision lift the lid of the smoking can and fish out the charred device.

“The burn marks on the core does indicate that the frequency was raised too quickly. Quarters should be perfect.”

“That’s one in the swear jar for you, Vis,” Stark said, managing to crack a smile, as stressed and tired as it was. “But yeah. Quarters. Quarters, quarters, quarters. All right, Barnes. We got this.”

Bucky said nothing as Stark picked up the electric screwdriver and began removing the scorched panels. She had FRIDAY run a diagnostic on the circuitry, highlighting all the damaged ports in red on the hologram. Stark quickly and efficiently removed those too before she spent another twenty minutes manually checking each and every implement.

When she was done, she didn’t waste a beat before grabbing the parts she needed from the second deconstructed arm and began installing them. Her back and neck must’ve been killing her, bowed and bent in the same position for so long, but she gave no indication of any discomfort and her hands never trembled even once, whereas he hadn’t been able to feel his own ass for the last half hour.

He envied the others as they moved around in the observation room, and his stomach gave a quiet growl as he watched the others munch on snacks and sandwiches.

“Okay,” she said at last. “Time to fit in the power source.”
She picked up the second power core using a pair of copper tweezers, inserting it into the round slot in his upper arm, clicking it into place. The arm lit up again almost immediately in streaks of blue and white.

“Closing containment chamber...and....done. Beginning modulation sequence now.”

Bucky found himself holding his breath as she began turning the tiny dials either side of the core.

“Levels are steady and power transmission is holding,” Vision supplied.

Stark was so close to the component, her nose was practically pressed against it.

“Increasing output...c’mon, c’mon, c’mon,” she uttered. “Reaching equilibrium...now.”

And just like that, sensation zinged from the place where metal met flesh, something clicking into place in his brain and he gasped.

He blinked rapidly and turned to find Stark gazing not at him but at the arm, which he was holding up in front of him.

Bucky stared at it long and hard then rotated it, flexing the fingers several times.

“It…” He began, embarrassed when he felt emotion swell in his throat. “It works.”

“And the neural link?” she prompted, looking towards Vision, who turned around and smiled.

“Holding steady, Toni.”

Bucky hadn’t realized the amount of tension she’d been carrying until her shoulders dropped in relief on an exhale. “Oh, thank fuck. That’s...that’s awesome. Good work everybody. Okay. Okay, you keep an eye on that while I finish this baby up. Put her down, Barnes. I still gotta finish up the wiring and affix the rest of the plating.”

Still stunned at the fact that he now had an almost fully-functioning arm, he did as he was told, resting it back down. She made quick work of the rest of it, fitting the smooth casing over the foundations, covering up the wires and lights with silver, chrome and black. The lines were sleek and the plates closer together, lending it a smoother appearance than any of its predecessors.

He also noticed a lightness to Stark’s work now, noticed how her fingers seemed to caress the metal after she fitted in a new panel. Her thumb would rub across the grooves between the panels and she would squint as she ensured each component was properly fitted.

Almost an hour later, she sat back and gazed at the arm - his arm - with a slow smile tickling the edges of her mouth, something wondrous and awed in her expression as if it wasn’t the work of her own hands.

She balanced the arm on the tips of her middle finger, one in the center of his palm and the other just above the elbow.

Bucky remained very still as he watched her, letting her manipulate the arm, bending it gently up and down at the wrist.

“Open and close your fingers?” she murmured softly, her eyes cataloguing every movement as he complied, marveling at the feeling of control even if it was without the physical sensation. Then she twisted her head over her shoulder and looked at Vision, who analyzed the readings then nodded, his
own smile spreading across his face.

“Neural feedback is within the desired range. All links holding and steady. Congratulations, Ma’am.”

When Stark whirled back around again, she laughed. Just once, just one breath of joy that lit up her face and brightened her dark eyes and transformed her into someone Bucky hadn’t met before.

But her features were so familiar with the expression that Bucky knew this wasn’t the first time she had smiled like this; it was just his first time seeing it.

“Well,” she breathed, lifting the arm once more. “Look at you.”

Still smiling, she rolled herself up so her head was right next to his metal shoulder, absurdly close, so that a few frizzy and flyaway strands of her hair tickled his cheek. She squinted, rested his tricep on the flat of one palm, and with the other, she dragged her fingers from the elbow, up the underside of the forearm, sliding from the wrist to the middle finger until she was cradling his hand in hers.

To anyone else it might have been similar to the motions of one holding a long-range gun - like an M1941 Johnson rifle. Like a weapon, as her eyes ran across the length of the arm and off the tip of his middle finger.

But Bucky, who was right here, saw something more than just the pride of a triumphant, successful creation. There was a delicacy to her touch, a gentleness that all the men and women who had ever used him never had. The arm wasn’t a weapon to her; she looked at it as she had her bots, held it aloft with the same hands she had stroked Dummy’s claw with, looked at it with as much affection as she did Butterfingers, murmured words under her breath in the same tone of voice she had used on You.

She had erased Hydra’s physical mark, their emblem and symbol of pain and viciousness and replaced it with something just as powerful but to be used for good.

And all Bucky could ever think about these days was doing good.

“You’re perfect,” she said, then turned his hand over and threaded her fingers through his smooth metal ones and squeezed.

And without thinking, Bucky squeezed back.

He realized his mistake about three seconds later, freezing in place.

It took Stark three seconds after that to realize herself what she had done. Bucky watched as her smile went tight before sliding off completely, and her expression chilled as she stared first down at their clasped hands, then slowly raised her eyes to meet his, horror and revulsion making her eyes go wide.

It shouldn’t have hurt.

Objectively he knew, he knew he knew exactly what he was, what he saw mirrored on her face.

Monster.

He knew it down to his bones, down into sinew and marrow, down to the very components of matter that made him him.
He knew what he was.

And Stark owed him nothing.

But it hurt. It hurt deeply.

Like a jagged, open wound that had been there so long that the pain had become bearable, only for someone to rub salt into the raw and bloody flesh and remind him once again of his perpetual torture.

With a sharp hiss that was more devastation than disgust, she tore her hand back and hastily stood, sending her stool rolling away, where it crashed into a machine, making them both flinch.

There was a tense silence in the long moments that followed, anxiety - and some confusion - emanating from the observation room in waves. Even the bots had ceased playing and were watching their creator with concerned beeps and soft coos. Bucky couldn’t bring himself to look but Steve, he knew, was probably clenching and unclenching his fists, unblinking.

Bucky saw her bottom lip tremble for just a moment before Stark swallowed, tearing her gaze away with effort and rubbing her wrist.

“Static,” she stuttered, convincing no one as she started walking away towards one of her screens and tapping something - it might even have just been nonsense - onto the holographic keyboard beneath. She cleared her throat, then continued in a clearer voice, “We’ll have to monitor...function and efficiency for a while. Durability too. We’ll do some tests over the next few weeks just to make sure your body’s adapting. I’ll have the list of exercises and tests sent to you so that FRIDAY or—or one of the others can see how well you fare.”

Bucky nodded jerkily then stood, feeling off-balance and unsteady in a way that was more mental than physical.

“If you have any problems with the arm you let FRIDAY know.” She didn’t turn around as she spoke but Bucky wasn’t really expecting her to anyway. “Doesn’t matter what it is. If your reaction time is point zero three fifths of a second off I wanna know about it. I don’t do shoddy work.”

“Okay. I...thank you,” he said, the word sounding gravelly and faint and altogether inadequate to his own ears. A ‘thank you’ didn’t cut it.

Her back muscles tensed but she didn’t say anything in response and Bucky hadn’t expected her to. So after an awkward moment hovering, he turned around, saw that most everyone else in the observation room was slowly getting to their feet, and pulled his t-shirt back on, getting ready to leave.

“Barnes,” she called, her voice sounding far away.

And once more Bucky was utterly helpless and had turned around before he knew what he was doing.

“Yes?”

“Catch,” she breathed.

“What?” He frowned.

A second later there was a socket wrench flying towards his face, someone - Steve - had shouted, "Toni!" in the background, and before he could so much as blink, the clang of metal against metal
rang throughout the lab.

There was a long moment while Bucky stared at his upraised fist that hovered just inches from his face, and the socket wrench that was gripped between solid metal fingers. After a time he lowered his hand, simultaneously letting out a slow breath, and then looked up at Stark.

She was facing him and stood with her arms crossed and her hip cocked to one side as she watched him, her features unreadable.

“FRIDAY,” she said, licking her lips. “What was the reaction time on that?”

“Oh point oh six seven seconds, Boss.”

There was a flicker of a smile, so quick he almost didn’t catch it before she turned back her back on him again.

“Mark it down. First reactionary test indicates the arm is functioning within optimal parameters.”

“Already done, Boss.”

“Cool.” She glanced over her shoulder one last time and Bucky surreptitiously pocketed the wrench. “You’re free to go, Barnes. Enjoy the arm.”

Bucky hesitated for something to say, then settled for dipping his head in a nod.

“I shall accompany you, Sergeant Barnes,” Vision said politely without missing a beat, and as he glided past Stark, he briefly placed a hand on her shoulder and murmured something that she didn’t respond to, but neither did she lean away from his touch. As he came up beside Bucky, Vision gestured towards the door with one red hand. “Shall we?”

“Yeah,” he said, looking down first at his metal palm - where Stark had pressed her own only moments ago - then back at Stark, who was already hunched over a monitor. Back in the observation room Steve was also staring at Stark’s back, but he smiled, if a little tired and strained, when he locked eyes with Bucky.

“See you outside, pal? We can test out that beauty in the gym.”

Bucky felt the corners of his mouth lift slightly. “Yeah. See you in a bit.”

As he left the lab, he couldn’t help but replay the moment Stark had threaded her fingers through his. There had been no fear, no rage or grief, just joy.

Pure and precious.

And in that moment, for those short, few seconds, he hadn’t been a monster.

He had only been good.

And all he ever wanted to be was good.

Hope found her a few hours later in one of the training rooms, and didn’t bother to quieten her
footsteps as she stepped over the tiered wooden seats and sat next to Toni.

Down on the floor, Peter, Harley and Kamala were guiding Cooper, Lila and Cassie through the obstacle course that Maria’s recruits had set up. Laura stood on the sidelines with Nate on her hip, the both of them cheering and clapping at intervals. Lang was standing on one of the bottom benches, enthusiastically goading his daughter on in spite of her embarrassed protests.

Hope gave one of her chuckles that always seemed to border on sardonic, but Toni had come to realize that it was just the way she sounded.

“Did you ever think you’d see this many kids here when you first built this place?”

Toni couldn’t help but grin as Lila, who had tried to jump across the foam pit to the opposite ledge, fell several feet short only for Harley to catch her and carry her to her destination.

“It’s like an Avengers’ daycare center with state of the art facilities, all expenses paid for. All we’re missing is Shuri,” she thought wistfully, knowing Shuri would’ve enjoyed this.

“Yeah, would’ve been nice to have the whole gang here,” Hope mused, then continued in the steadiest tone of voice, “I owe you an apology.”

Toni opened her mouth, closed it, then turned and frowned at Hope, feeling thrown for a loop.

“What for?”

Hope met her gaze fully, unflinchingly. “That day on the roof. When I punched you. Because I said you’d gotten my boyfriend arrested.” She shook her head. “That wasn’t true. Or fair.” She inhaled, held it, then released it in a gush. “I was...upset when he left. He...gets a call in the middle of the night from Cap—” And she said it so derisively that Toni almost laughed because it felt so familiar—and the next thing I know my dad’s on the line shouting at me about how Scott’s stolen the suit and some giant man had torn up an airport in Germany and Scott’s missed parole and...I was upset. And angry. And I was angry at him because I’d trusted him and I was angrier at myself—”

“For trusting him?” Toni interrupted knowingly.

Hope chuckled self-deprecatingly. “Yeah. I wasn’t angry at you,” she admitted. “I mean I guess I was a little but...when I read the Accords I knew why you signed them. And seeing everything you guys did about the Accords after, it only cemented the fact that had I been an Avenger before, I still would’ve been on your side no matter that Scott would still have chosen Captain America’s.” Hope sighed and gave her a tired, almost resigned smile. “I mean I guess we’ll never know but...I’d like to think that when faced with the choice I would’ve remained true to my ideals.”

Toni smiled back at her. “We’d’ve been lucky to have had you. And something tells me you would’ve been able to sell the idea of the Accords much better than I did.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I haven’t spoken to any of your former teammates since they arrived.” She scrunched up her nose and shrugged, but there was a smug little smirk that threatened to spread across her lips. “I think they’re scared of me.”

“You are pretty terrifying.”

“Cowards,” she snorted, then sobered, gazing down at the kids, down at where Scott was making funny faces at Nate, who looked like he didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry. “Since we’re in the mood for sharing…” Hope trailed off, her entire demeanour now hesitant and tentative, and Toni had to give her credit for looking Toni in the eye as she said her next words, even as Toni’s own heart
sank. “Scott told me something. It wasn’t his place but...I think he just wanted everything to be out in the open between us, so.” Toni already knew what she was going to say, but her jaw was glued shut and even if it weren’t, she didn’t know that she wanted to stop Hope from saying what she was going to say next. “Scott told me about...about what happened in Siberia.”

It was like her ears had popped, like all the sound had been sucked from the room, like she was in a vacuum watching everything happen in slow motion. A migraine throbbed in the distance and she inhaled slowly, feeling her lungs burn the way they had burned when she had flown through that portal and the air ran out. The way they had burned when she had gasped in air at about minus twenty degrees, and it had felt like a hundred daggers of ice were piercing her chest until she had thought her lungs would burst and she would drown in her own blood.

“—said Rogers came clean the night they watched you the first time at the UN talks, after you brought up...brought up Barnes…”

Peter somersaulted mid-air over a five-foot foam cube; Cooper’s eyes were first wide with amazement, then narrowed with determination as he pointed at Peter and demanded he teach him how to do that.

“—Barnes himself who told Rogers they had to come clean.”

Kamala, who had been practicing backbends with Lila, allowed one hand to leave the floor and held it out for Harley to take and pull her back up to her feet. She stumbled as she stood, laughing, and then crashed into him and Toni let her eyes linger on the way his hand hovered protectively over her waist, almost but not yet touching.

“—just thought you should know. I didn’t want...I just wanted you to know that I know.”

Peter fondly rolled his eyes at them and shook his head before looking up and meeting Toni’s eyes. He waved enthusiastically and Toni smiled back, feeling her lungs slowly start to thaw and the sounds of the training room enter her ears once more.

“Toni?”

She sighed and looked at Hope, feeling heavy and tired and old.

So old.

Too old.

Years and decades and centuries and millennia since before the beginning of time—

“So you know,” was all she said in the end.

Through the corner of her eye she felt Hope studying her.

“I’m sorry,” she said at last, sounding so deeply genuine, like she understood, and Toni thought that maybe she really did. Toni nodded, unable to bring herself to answer, her throat too tight for her to speak. “Why haven’t you told anyone?”

Toni laughed shortly, bitterly. “What could I...how could I possibly—” She swallowed thickly. “I told Vision. And T’Challa and Nat know. T’Challa was there. He saw it. And Nat...Nat knew about my...about my parents...before, so, so she figured out what happened.”

There was an extended, concerned silence for a few beats.
“Not even Jim or Pepper know?” Hope asked, her deep voice filled with disbelief.

Toni shook her head. “Rhodey has enough to deal with and Pepper is running a company.” But it sounded like a flimsy excuse to her own ears and Hope knew that. “Look,” she sighed, “there just...there’s just never a good time. Rhodey and Pep know, hell, everybody knows that something went down in— in Siberia.” And even after all this time, the name still felt like broken glass in her throat. “But I can’t. I just. It’s my story. My secret. And I can’t share it with them. Not yet.”

For a moment she thought Hope would argue with her, would ask her that after everything she’d done to bring the former Rogue Avengers home, why would she risk another fallout? It was a question that had whispered itself in her own ear, tickled the back of her neck with cold, phantom fingers.

But all Hope did was dip her head once in acquiescence and say, “Okay.”

Toni looked up at her warily. “Okay?”

Hope nodded, her expression betraying nothing but understanding, acceptance and maybe even agreement.

“You’re right. It is your story. Your secret. No one has the right to demand the truth from you. Because it doesn’t belong to them. It doesn’t belong to Scott or me but...I get why Scott told me and...I get why Rogers had to tell the others,” she finished slowly.

The truth was that she did too.

But it didn’t stop the sharp burst of violation that flared in her chest because he had no—

She stopped herself.

Because it hadn’t only been Steve.

It had been Barnes as well.

Barnes who had decided, whether through guilt or just exhaustion, that he needed to confess what he had done, whether he’d had the autonomy or not.

Toni didn’t think she was quite ready to confront what that said about Barnes, what it said about herself that the same truth from two separate super soldiers could make her feel very different things. So she decided quite promptly to steer her thoughts away before she could dwell too deeply.

“What you did for Barnes?” Hope began in the quietest voice she’d ever used. “That was...I can’t imagine how...If it was me, I...I don’t know that...” She let out a slow breath and placed a hand on Toni’s shoulder, squeezing slightly. “You did good, Toni. Really good.”

Without waiting for a response, she squeezed once more before standing and making her way down to Lang and Laura, leaving Toni behind with more thoughts than she knew what to do with.

“Hello, Vis.”

He paused, finger still on the pump of the spray bottle, then continued to mist the dracaena
fragrans on the plant stand by the large, floor-to-ceiling windows of the common area.

“Hello, Wanda,” he replied without inflection and heard her soft footsteps as she walked further into the room.

He could see her reflection in the glass; her signature red shawl was draped protectively over her shoulders.

“You have been avoiding me,” she said, and it was a statement, not a question, unsurprised in its resignation.

Vision did not deny it.

“I have.”

In the moment of silence that followed, her sadness was almost palpable and not for the first time Vision wondered whether in addition to manipulating others’ emotions, she could also project her own. Or whether that was simply a byproduct of their connection with the Mind Stone.

In the window, Vision saw her reflection bow her head, as if in defeat.

He moved on from the dracaena fragrans to the syngonium podophyllum, ignoring the way the stone stirred against the synthetic skin of his forehead.

“I did not mean to hurt you, Vis,” she said quietly, her voice barely a trembling breath.

Vision stopped, looking up, looking beyond Wanda’s reflection and out onto the frosty grounds below.

“Physical pain is brief,” he finally said. “It does not linger for me. The Mind Stone guaranteed that. Humans, however…” He thought about Toni in the suit, about the cars that had been so ruthlessly thrown on top of her, of the pain that he knew still made itself known in her arm. In her mind. He turned around and met Wanda’s eyes that were wide and glistening with unshed tears. “Humans are so very fragile. Both physically and mentally against the right opponent.”

Vision did not like to inflict hurt. He took no pleasure in Wanda's pain and yet he found that he did not regret his words. They had needed to be said.

When she spoke next, it was apropos of nothing.

“Why does Stark sleep in your room?” Vision remained silent and Wanda took a step closer. “I’ve felt her presence in there almost every time I came looking for you.”

He tilted his head to the side. “Why does it matter to you?”

Wanda lifted one shoulder in a shrug but there was a coldness in her eyes, a suspiciousness and dislike that she always failed to hide whenever Toni came up.

“I’m just curious. You two have grown very close since the last time we all saw each other.”

“I have always respected Toni. With our previous training under Captain Rogers, I did not get to spend as much time with her. The Civil War changed that.”

But Wanda shook her head, frustration evident in the furrow between her brows. “No. It’s different. You're different.”
Vision found himself inclining his head as he looked down at her. “People change, Wanda. Even myself,” he said softly. “Nine months under the circumstances we were in is a long time.”

"No,” she said emphatically and Vision detected an edge of desperation in her voice. “No, that’s not it. You treat her differently. I can...I can see it. I can feel it.”

“I thought we had once had a fairly long discussion about how psychic abilities should be used,” Vision said and he was surprised at just how cold he had sounded.

By the look on Wanda’s face, she was surprised as well.

“Vis, you— You know that I would never—”

“On most people, perhaps,” he interrupted.

“Vis—”

“On Toni, I doubt you would show any such restraint.”

Her eyes widened in horror as if he had just struck her, and as he took a step forward she took one back, her tight fist pressing into the center of her chest.

“And I think,” he continued, “that we both know you would have no such restraint using it against me. And yet there you are, standing over the spot where you had once forced me through the ground, using the very powers that this,” — he pointed to the Mind Stone — “gave you.”

Wanda looked down at the ground, her hands shaking. She opened her mouth to say something, but all that left her throat was a quiet sob.

“It is interesting,” he said in a low voice, “that you believe the reason I have changed is because of Toni. Because you think she has somehow manipulated my thinking when in reality, you are the only one with the powers to do so.”

Wanda closed her eyes and tears slipped down her cheek but Vision remained firm, remained impassive and stoic in the face of it. He did not enjoy inflicting pain. But in this he would not relent.

“Stay away from Toni, Wanda,” he said finally.

Then he turned back around and resumed misting the plants, continuing to do so long after she had quietly left.

Toni lingered in the doorway of the balcony, watching Stephen as he calmly called out instructions - barely raising his voice - to a sweaty and frustrated-looking Wanda, who was practising on the level below.

He’d conjured the mirror dimension around the entirety of the training room and Wanda’s magic crashed and exploded against it, casting vivid scarlet fractals across the floor and ceiling.

Toni had never quite gotten over her...fear of Wanda, of her power, of the red that had seeped into her mind and turned her vision bloody and made her see nightmares of her own making. Neither had she forgiven Wanda for that violation and there were times, deep in the night, when she couldn’t help
but wonder whether Wanda had left something when she’d touched Toni’s mind, some dark seed that would one day grow and sink its black roots into her psyche and change who she was entirely.

On darker nights still, her mind whispered at her, asked her whether Wanda had left little seeds in the others…

Whether she had made them *hate* Toni.

Whether she had made *Steve* hate Toni.

"*She doesn't deserve—***"

“How did you get in here?”

She jumped at Stephen’s demanding tone, her gaze snapping away from the red to look at Stephen.

He was looking at her with wide, almost angry eyes, one hand hovering in the air in front of him, like he had tried to reach for something only to freeze halfway.

“What?” she asked, confused and more than a little taken aback by the ferocity in his expression. “Through the door—?”

Stephen appeared to physically steel himself, and without a word from him, the cloak unclasped itself from his neck and sped towards Toni, where it immediately wrapped itself around her shoulders and sent her stumbling away from the door.

“What the *fuck—*”

Stephen caught her, steadying her with strong hands for the briefest moment, before deftly spinning in a half circle and smoothly depositing her behind him. She rocked backwards on her feet before Cloak re-balanced her with a very firm tug and she stared, puzzled, as Stephen in turn stared at the door of the balcony, which stood just a bit ajar from when she’d first entered. Then, with more caution than she’d seen anyone treat a goddamn *door* with, he reached out with one hand and carefully pushed it shut with what she assumed was magic considering he was standing about a foot away and his hand never came into contact with it.

Then he rolled his sleeves up just below his elbows and held both his hands out, palms softly glowing a light gold. Toni chose to remain silent, still a little bewildered by the entire exchange, and just stood there with Cloak wrapped almost reassuringly around her.

About half a minute later he lowered his hands, the glow disappearing, then turned around and looked at her, a troubled furrow between his brows.

“When you walked in just now,” he began, wasting no time, “did you feel any resistance?”

She glanced at the door then back at him. “No more resistance than a door usually exerts,” she said slowly.

He let out an incredulous huff, looking stumped, and strolled over, still glancing back at the door like he was trying to figure out what it might do next. She *still* wasn’t entirely sure what he had against it in the first place.

“We are literally in a different dimension,” he explained, hands in his pockets as he came up beside her. “This entire training room is in the mirror dimension, *including* that door. You shouldn’t have been able to just...*walk* right through it.”
She didn’t really know what to say to that and shrugged helplessly, Cloak’s collar nuzzling into her neck as she did so. “I’m...sorry?”

He didn’t say anything for a while and just scrutinized the door like it was a puzzle, and Toni knew from experience that he was probably mentally retracing every single one of his steps up until she walked in.

She narrowed her eyes at the seemingly inconspicuous door, trying to see what he was seeing, and let out a small “oh” when she found it.

It was subtle, barely perceptible to the naked eye but there: a little gap in reality where the mirror dimension had pulled away from the real world, like the dry spot in the center of coalescing water droplets.

Just a jagged shape around the door, and she had walked right through it.

“I take it that hasn’t happened before?” she asked needlessly.

He shook his head, mouth turned down at the edges.

“We use the mirror dimension to practice magic for a reason. It’s why I incorporated it into The Room. The outside world doesn’t affect us in here and we don’t affect anything out there. Nothing goes out and nothing comes in.” He looked down at her, arching a brow. “Except you, apparently.”

She didn’t know why but the way he said it made her face suddenly feel very hot.

“Yeah...well,” she said stiltedly, untucking her hair from behind her ear so it would partially hide her face, only for Cloak to swipe it back with a flick of its collar. “Mirrors break, right? And Wanda’s doing some pretty powerful stuff over there, I’m sure she could’ve accidentally punched a hole between realities.”

Stephen’s lips twitched and his eyes lost some of their worry. “I suppose. She did almost send herself crashing through the ceiling just now. Anyway. I’m sure you came here for reasons other than defying the laws of magic.”

She squinted at him. “You realize what you just said, right? But yes, yes I did. I...came bearing gifts, actually. Or just. It’s one gift, really. For you.” She fumbled a little, almost dropping her gift when Cloak got in the way, and then held out the two inconspicuously looking items in the palm of her hand.

He frowned, picking them up between his fingers. Toni knew they didn’t look like much; to most they would’ve looked like a pair of bracelets, each one with a flat round disk for a pendant. Toni gnawed her bottom lip as he examined them, looking confused for a few more beats until the uncertainty lifted and his eyes widened.

“Are these...?” he began in a low voice. “They’re like Jim’s—”

“They are.” Toni gently took them from him, meeting his gaze, silently asking for permission before she slipped one around each of his wrists. They constricted almost immediately, moulding to his wrists with an electric snap. “But they’re also a little different. It was a three-way effort to get these done. Shuri provided us with everything she had on your powers so that when these were fitted, they wouldn’t interfere with your casting. The...it’s supposed to work with just one spell.” She didn’t need to look at him to know he understood. “Just the one. And it traps the energy from the spell inside a continuous loop. You only need to cast the spell once and the energy will continuously be...
recycled from the containment unit, through the emitter, into your hands and back again.”

“Energy cannot be created or destroyed,” Stephen murmured reverently, the tips of his fingers still resting on her open palms. “Only transferred or changed from one form into another.”

Toni nodded. “First law of thermodynamics. A basic yet fundamental rule of the universe. Even if the universe has magic.” She smiled a little. “Do you want to try?”

She could see the conflict on his face, the apprehension, the disbelief, the fear and, above all, the hope of what this could give him, and Toni knew that look so well, knew it intimately in the heart of her.

And at the same time she couldn’t help but think of another man who had looked like that as he held his metal arm up for the first time and gazed upon it in such wonder.

But she brushed the thought of Barnes away, of that hopeless expression of resignation and self-resentment when she had pulled her hand from his, even as the sensation of cold metal pressing into her palm and between her fingers still lingered like an afterimage.

“Yes,” Stephen said after a time, and Barnes faded further into the background of her mind, but didn’t disappear entirely. “I’d...I’d like to try.”

Toni nodded encouragingly and stepped back a little, Stephen’s trembling hands hovering over hers as he started to let the power flow, generating a soft, orange warmth that she felt against her skin. As usual, his hands stilled, the tremors shuddering to a stop as his muscles visibly relaxed.

The bands around his wrist powered to life and the flat disc hummed, drawing in the power generated like liquid through a straw.

“Okay,” Toni said quietly, gaze flitting from his face to his hands. “Now stop.”

Almost immediately, the orange glow died and the both of them watched and waited, neither one daring to breathe.

After what felt like minutes Stephen licked his lips then pressed them tightly together, inhaling once, sharp and shuddering through his nose, and Toni’s heart broke at the look on his face.

“It doesn’t hurt,” he whispered, and she pretended not to notice the way his eyes glistened just a little more than a few moments ago. “It feels…” His voice cracked at the last word and he had to clear his throat, staring at his palms the way Rhodey had stared at his legs the first time he had walked by himself. “It feels like before.”

She gave him a tentative, shaky smile. “Yeah? It’s...good?”

He laughed shortly and turned away, bringing one hand to his mouth and taking a few steps away, under the pretense of watching Wanda as she attempted to do something complicated with her hands.

“It’s, uh,” he said, sounding choked and Toni hung back and just watched his back while Cloak fondly nuzzled her neck. “It’s spectacular, Toni.”

“Good.” She nodded, already turning to leave the same way she came in. “I’m glad. Shuri and Helen will be happy to hear that. I’ll let them know right away.”

She made it about three steps before Stephen called her name—"Toni," — and Cloak slipped from her shoulders like water, forcing her to turn back around while he did so. Then he swiftly darted
behind Stephen and shoved him towards her until she and Stephen were standing there awkwardly, a scant few inches of space between their bodies.

“Uh,” she began unintelligently, blinking owlishly up at him.

The pained — desperate — expression on his face melted into something fond and hopeful yet still self-conscious, if the way he kept opening his mouth to speak then closing it again was anything to go by.

“Toni, I—” he started, then stopped, shaking his head like he was berating himself. “I can’t thank you enough,” was what he settled for in the end.

She lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “You just did.”

He huffed self deprecatingly. “That wasn’t nearly eno—”

“Stephen,” she said once, firmly but kind. “Helen, Shuri and I? We wanted to do this for you from the moment we saw that our tech worked for Rhodey. It was only a matter of time, really. I’m just...I’m just glad you’re in a little less pain than before. And who knows? Maybe one day we’ll even be able to make this permanent.”

Stephen chuckled softly. “Always looking at the next step.”

“I’m a futurist, remember?” She grinned. “The next step is all there is.”

He smiled at her, hesitated, and when he reached out she willingly let him pull her in close for a hug, and Toni couldn’t help but close her eyes and melt into it, the amulet on his chest pressing against the arc reactor through her t-shirt.

“Thank you, Toni,” he told her earnestly, the deepness of his voice reverberating into her.

She hummed as they pulled away, her fingers briefly touching the amulet before they separated.

“Anytime. You keep an eye on that. Let me know if anything goes janky or whatever.”

“I will. And I’ll drop Helen and Shuri an email to let them know I got their gift.”

“They’ll be real happy to know it works.” Toni lingered there awkwardly, feeling a little flustered, before taking a step back. “Anyways, I should let you get back to teaching and I’ve got something cooking in the lab, so. Catch you later?”

“Of course” Stephen said kindly with a serene smile, though his eyes were crinkled at the corners in amusement. “Oh, and the next time you think it’s a good idea to break the laws of magic? Perhaps...don’t?”

“No promises,” she laughed over her shoulder.

As she turned back around, her hand landing on the door handle, her gaze locked with gray-green eyes, pale and stormy and tinged with a flash of scarlet that made the smile slowly slip off her face.

Wanda watched her from the floor below, her hands hanging loosely by her side but her fingers were curling and uncurling, languidly manipulating only the air. Though there was no sign of red, the sight of them moving like that, like a threat, made a heavy orb of lead sink into the pit of Toni’s stomach and the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

It was barely three seconds but it felt like a lifetime, something cold and hot and nuclear building
inside of her chest, and something loud *howling* in her ears. When her hand met the door handle she pushed down, urgency, muted and distant, forcing her feet forward until Wanda disappeared, but her ears *roared* with a Siberian gale, a wailing wormhole, the *scream of a million dying stars*—

"She doesn't deserve—!"

The door slammed shut, echoing in the hollowness of the empty hallway.

By the time Toni looked back over her shoulder, the space through small square window in the door was already clouding over with a crackling sound as Stephen manipulated the mirror dimension, locking her out and sealing Wanda *within*, once more.

Chapter End Notes

And that was that!

Not as much angst as the previous chapter but a heck of a lot of Bucky and Steve and Toni time, with a few sneaky additions here and there. I really hope you all enjoyed the chapter and I'd love to hear your thoughts and theories about what's to come. :)

I don't know when the next chapter will be posted so I'm not going to make any promises at this stage, but I shall do my absolute best.

Thank you all again for reading and taking the time to comment and I'll see y'all in 2019! :) May you all have a fantabulous New Year! <3

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!