Things That Are Never Meant

by katling

Summary

When Tony Stark disappears from Siberia, the aftershocks shatter some people and rebuild others. And when Tony returns, nothing will ever be the same again.

Written for the IronManBigBang on tumblr. With absolutely amazing art by feignedsobriquet

Notes

Ugh, this fic fought me every step of the way so if there are some inconsistencies, I apologise. I had to ultimately beat this fic into submission with my keyboard. I hope you enjoy it and feignedsobriquet's glorious art!
It took a query from the Russian authorities forty-eight hours after he’d last been seen on the Raft before anyone realised that Tony Stark had never returned from Siberia. When asked, the Russians told the UN that Iron Man had requested permission to enter in order to pursue Captain America and James Barnes, which had been granted due to his standing with the UN Accords Committee, but they’d heard nothing more. When queries to Stark Industries and what was left of the Avengers were greeted with the same worried and nonplussed silence, the Russians were asked to investigate urgently.

Their report sent a shudder through the United Nations. There were signs of a fight, a fight that Iron Man had clearly lost, even though the familiar shield and a metal arm were found on scene. There was also found the presumed reason for the fight – a video that showed the Winter Soldier killing Howard and Maria Stark. What wasn’t found was Tony Stark. The suit was there, battered and broken, with a huge gash in the chest that matched the discarded shield, but there was no sign of its pilot and creator. Nor was there any sign of where he might have gone. It was as though he’d disappeared off the face of the planet.

The first reaction was shock and fear. The assumption was that, on seeing the video with the Winter Soldier standing nearby, Stark had broken and attacked them. But it was also clear that whatever had happened next, it hadn’t involved Rogers trying to stop the fight. It seemed that, if anything, Rogers had chosen to side with the Winter Soldier against Stark. The entire world stewed on this and argued about it. With no concrete facts, they could do little else.

The fear ratcheted up when the Raft was broken into and the remainder of the rogue Avengers were freed by Rogers. The defining comment came from a small corner of the internet but soon ricocheted around the world – “Does this mean you’re only worth something to Rogers if you support him?”

With no sign of Tony Stark and with the world afraid of what Rogers might do next, the UN chose to act.

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Colonel James Rhodes looked at himself in the mirror and straightened his tie before turning his wheelchair around. He was getting better at steering the damn thing and his doctors were actually rather hopeful that he might not be stuck in it forever, which was news Rhodes had never expected to hear. Apparently, there was just enough reinforcement of the spine of the War Machine suit that his spinal column hadn’t snapped. There was spinal damage but they wouldn’t know how bad it was until the vertebrae fully healed and all the swelling went down. For now, Rhodes was in a back brace and a wheelchair but there was some hope for the future of something better.

He’d been surprised when the UN Accords Committee had approached him about picking up the mantle of the Avengers. He wasn’t sure if he was ever going to walk again, let alone get in the suit, but they seemed unconcerned about that. He expected that might be addressed in the meeting he was about to attend. It was clear the Committee had some kind of purpose in what it was doing and he could only hope they weren’t thinking of scrapping the Accords... or worse, turning them into some sort of stick to beat enhanced people with. He and Pepper had discussed that possibility and would fight any steps in that direction vociferously.

He’d been trying not to think about Tony through all of this, though it was hard and he rarely succeeded. There were no signs of what had happened to him. The Russians had scoured the entire base three times over and when Rhodes had spoken to their commander, his frustration had been obvious. He seemed to feel like he had failed by not being able to deliver Tony back to them and that delivering back the suit, the shield and the arm was a poor and inadequate second. It had been nice to
have someone outside of Tony’s little inner circle be so concerned about him. The commander had signed off by saying he would be sending search parties out into the surrounding country and that he would do whatever it took to find Tony. Rhodes had passed the commander’s name on to Pepper so she could find a way to do nice things for him.

“Jim?”

Rhodes was pulled out of his thoughts by a familiar but completely unexpected voice. He turned and stared for a moment before finally regaining his voice. “Carol?”

Standing before him was Carol Danvers, whom he’d known during training and their early years in service. Before she’d gone missing, whereabouts unknown. Apparently. Rhodes had been suspicious about that because the Air Force had never changed her status from that. Not to AWOL, not to MIA, not even to KIA. Just missing, whereabouts unknown. He’d always assumed someone had known where she was.

Now she was standing there, wearing a strange uniform with a yellow star on her chest. She also looked impossibly young and there was an air about her that reminded Rhodes a little bit of Rogers. Which wasn’t what he really wanted to think about right now.

“That’s me,” she said with a grin. “And when did you get old?”

Rhodes snorted. “I’m not old. When did you get frozen.”

“Not frozen,” Carol said with a grimace. “It’s a long story but the short version is… I’ve been off the planet.” She grinned. “But literally, not in the other way.”

“You know, before the invasion, I might have thought you were crazy but not anymore,” Rhodes said with a sigh. “So, I’m guessing you’re back?”

Carol nodded. “Yeah, for good. More or less. Looks I came back at a good time. What the hell was Rogers thinking?”

Rhodes couldn’t help his sigh of relief and from the look Carol gave him, it hadn’t gone unnoticed. “That Bucky Barnes was apparently more important than everyone and everything else in the world.”

Carol rolled her eyes then came closer. “And is it true?” she asked quietly. “Is Stark missing?”

Rhodes nodded. “Yeah.” His voice shook for a moment. This was worse than Afghanistan. At least there, they’d known what had happened, even if they didn’t know specifics. Now, they had no idea at all. “The Russians haven’t been able to find anything and they’ve gone above and beyond. I think they don’t want to be blamed.”

“Well, people have to be thinking it,” Carol said wryly. “Russia gets their hands on the world’s foremost weapons manufacturer. That’s not good.”

“He stopped doing that,” Rhodes said sharply.

“I know,” Carol replied. “I’m still catching up on the details but I haven’t been entirely out of the loop. But still.”

Rhodes sighed. “Yeah, I know.”

A nearby door opened and a young man came out and approached them. “Colonel Rhodes? Captain
Danvers? They’re ready for you now.”

Rhodes looked over at Carol and she shrugged. “Guess we better go see what they want.”

Rhodes laughed and they made their way inside.

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“...today a spokesperson for the United Nations announced the formation of the United Nations Enhanced Taskforce, established to carry out the requirements of the Sokovia Accords. The Taskforce is to be jointly led by Colonel James Rhodes, known as War Machine, and Captain Carol Danvers, known as Captain Marvel. The new UNET Headquarters will be based at the old Avengers Compound and they have already announced plans to establish Taskforce teams in as many countries as possible.

In related news, it’s been four months since the disappearance of Dr Tony Stark and questions are being asked about precisely what role Steven Rogers and James Barnes played in the incident. While there has been a public statement released by Steven Rogers, claiming that Dr Stark was alive when he and Barnes left the bunker in Siberia, those claims are still unsubstantiated, despite the best efforts of the Russians to locate either Dr Stark or any evidence of where he has gone. Pressure is increasing on the ICC and Interpol to issue warrants for the arrest of Steven Rogers and James Barnes on the charge of murder, however both organisations have refused to comment.”

The news anchor paused and appeared to be listening to something. Her eyes widened slightly before she continued speaking.

“In breaking news, a new video has been sent into this station, along with many other news agencies and various sites on the internet. We warn you, the video is graphic and may offend some viewers.”

Vision of the news anchor faded away to be replaced by a clear image of concrete walls and floors and what was clearly the interior of some sort of bunker. A moment later Steve Rogers, James Barnes and Tony Stark came into view and it was obvious what this video was. As the viewers watched, the scene played out. The three men watched the video everyone had already seen, of the murder of the Starks, then it was revealed that Rogers had known of this and lied and kept it from his teammates, from Tony. Then the fight broke out, was fought and lost and Rogers and Barnes walked away. Unfortunately for everyone watching, the video cut out before it revealed what had happened to Tony Stark.

The news anchor returned, looking shaken but still professional. “As you can see from the video, not only were Steven Rogers and James Barnes responsible for the injuries inflicted on Dr Stark, it appears that Rogers had known all along, perhaps since the fall of SHIELD, that Barnes had murdered Dr Stark’s parents and had lied to him for years. Reporters from this station will be seeking responses from Stark Industries and all other parties involved.”

The anchorwoman straightened and turned to another camera. “And now, we go to Philip Jones in Geneva.”

The TV was abruptly muted and silence reigned in the room. Steve looked over at Natasha, who had been holding the remote, and flinched at the perfectly blank expression she was directing at him. That expression never boded well.

“You said you told him,” she said flatly. “And that was why he was pulling back from the Avengers.”
“I…” he began.

Before he could say anything more, the door to the room opened and T’Challa walked in, flanked by half a dozen of the Dora Milaje.

“Mr Rogers,” T’Challa said sternly. “Was Dr Stark alive when you left the bunker?”

“Yes,” Steve burst out. “He was, T’Cha…” He didn’t get any more of the king’s name out before the Dora Milaje all but growled at him “Your… Your Majesty,” he hastily said. He looked imploringly at the king. “He was alive and talking. You have to trust me.”

T’Challa snorted. “I have to trust you? When you are revealed as a known liar? I think not. How badly was he injured?”

“I… don’t know,” Steve admitted. He wanted to protest being called a liar but he couldn’t find the words.

T’Challa’s expression hardened. “You will all remain in these rooms. You will be under guard at all times until we decide what we are going to do with you.”

Steve half-stood. “Bucky…” He recoiled at the contemptuous look T’Challa gave him.

“If I were you, Mr Rogers, I would worry more about yourself. That video has been seen around the world and the requests for you to be arrested for murder have turned into demands.” He paused at the door and met Steve’s eyes. “And my duty is to my country, not you.”

The door closed behind the king and his entourage with a decisive bang and in the silence they all heard the sound of the lock clicking. It seemed especially loud.

“They can’t do this!” Wanda shouted, standing up, magic swirling around her hands. “They can’t keep us locked up as prisoners.”

“Wanda,” Steve began.

“No,” she said, the red mist increasingly in size and intensity. “I will not be treated like a prisoner again.”

She stepped forward and raised her hands towards the door. Red mist burst out and slammed into the door, where it immediate ricocheted back and engulfed them all. Just before his vision was lost in the red mist, Steve hoped that Bucky would be okay.

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“So, they’ve been arrested?” Pepper asked with great satisfaction.

“Well, for various given values of arrested,” Rhodes replied.

He stretched his legs out in front of himself and sighed with relief. The doctors had been right. His spinal cord hadn’t been severed but there had been some irreversible damage. He could walk again but it would never be unaided. Sometimes it seemed like his physical therapy was without end but he was walking with crutches now so he was willing to accept it. And FRIDAY had given him full access to the War Machine schematics and he was working on adjustments, much to the surprise of most people. It was like they forgot that he’d earned his way into MIT and yes, he really was an actual rocket scientist. He might not be in Tony’s stratosphere but he was damn good in his own right.
“Lang’s been sent back to San Francisco,” Rhodes continued. “Since he’s such a non-entity and he faces going back to prison because he broke parole, Germany have decided to be nice and drop the illegal entry charges. So he’s not facing any further criminal charges. The airport and the airline whose plane he destroyed are still contemplating civil suits.”

“Does he actually have any money?” Pepper said archly.

“I think they’re more looking to go after Pym Technologies,” Rhodes said. “Since he used the suit and they reclaimed it after Lang was arrested.”

“That could bankrupt Pym Tech,” Pepper said, her eyes narrowing with interest.

“Empire building, are we?” Rhodes said with a grin.

Pepper looked a little sheepish then she straightened. “It can be a gift for Tony when he gets back.”

Rhodes nodded and they both looked a little distant. They’d been maintaining both publicly and privately that Tony was alive and would come back. They had to. They couldn’t bring themselves to believe anything else.

“Germany are also dropping the illegal entry charges against Barton,” Rhodes continued. “Mostly because they’re far too gleeful over the fact that SI and Vision are pressing charges against him.”

Pepper sniffed dismissively. Barton had been making a lot of noise since he’d been returned to the US, whinging about the charges and claiming that Tony was just hiding and generally being obnoxious. The media had lapped it up until an enterprising hacker had unearthed the video of Barton and Maximoff’s attack on Vision from the District Attorney’s office and spread it all over the internet. Both Pepper and Rhodes suspected the hacker’s name was FRIDAY but they weren’t feeling inclined to ask questions.

“Romania are not inclined to go easy on Wilson,” Rhodes continued. “They’re definitely pressing criminal charges and while they can’t pin any specific murder or manslaughter charges on him, they can get him with accessory charges. So they’re going to. Germany’s dropped their charges because of that.”

“Are the Air Force going to press theft charges?”

“They’re thinking about it,” Rhodes replied. “But they’re waiting to see what happens. They’ve got the wings back and might leave it at that.”

“A General Hunter rang me today,” Pepper said. “He said they’d like to return the wings to SI to ensure their safety.”

Rhodes chuckled. “I heard some rumours about that. They’ll want to do it publicly is my guess. Just rub it in Wilson’s face that he’s never getting them back even if he manages to get out of prison before he’s old and grey.”

“That was the impression I got.” Pepper smiled. “I said it sounded like a wonderful idea. What about the others?”

“Well, Maximoff is a smear on the ground,” Rhodes said with a shrug. “T’Challa has apologised profusely and a little bit insincerely. Something about not realising how her magic might react to the protections on the palace.”

“Do they have some form of magic or was it vibranium?” Pepper asked.
“He’s being cagey about that. I don’t think he wants to admit either way.”

Pepper made a displeased noise. “We’ll see about that.”

Rhodes grinned. It wasn’t a pleasant grin. It was pretty obvious that T’Challa had been there in Siberia and had failed to check on Tony. Whether he hadn’t cared or had just believed Rogers’ word, they didn’t care. Pepper, in particular, didn’t care. She intended to make T’Challa suffer until she’d felt he’d grovelled enough. Rhodes thought that was fair enough. Maybe if T’Challa had checked on Tony, he wouldn’t be missing right now.

“Rogers is apparently still screaming,” Rhodes said. “They’ve had to use vibranium restraints on him to safeguard the nurses and doctors.”

“Do they know what he’s seeing?”

“No idea but he’s screaming about Bucky so something to do with him presumably.”

Pepper rolled her eyes and looked unconcerned, though Rhodes knew she wasn’t entirely unsympathetic to Barnes. She didn’t like Barnes because she knew as well as Rhodes did how much the deaths of his parents had affected Tony but brainwashing was a hideous crime and she wasn’t going to diminish that.

“And Romanov?”

“She’s conscious and coherent but completely paranoid,” Rhodes said. “Refuses to go anywhere without at least three knives and has tried to stab at least a dozen people thus far. The Wakandans have her in a restricted compound near their border that seems to make her as relaxed as they think she’s ever going to get.”

Pepper looked slightly mollified but still a little put out. Rhodes knew how she felt. Despite the fact that Rogers and Romanov had been, as far as the Wakandans could tell, permanently affected by the rebound of Wanda’s magic, it still felt like they were getting away scot-free. The only ones actually paying some sort of penalty were the ones who were least involved, including Barnes, whom T’Challa had reported had gone back into cryostasis until he could be sure he was safe. That had actually gone a long way to calming Pepper down. It was certainly more responsibility and accountability than any of the others had shown.

“How’s Vision,” she said after a short silence.

“Confused and he was starting to veer over into angry,” Rhodes replied. “I got a bit worried about that so I assigned him to shadow Parker and that seems to be working well. It’s hard to remain angry for long around that kid.”

It was FRIDAY who had finally revealed Peter Parker to them after she’d fielded a large number of increasingly frantic calls from him. The kid had been distraught and blaming himself for whatever had happened to Tony, saying that he’d gotten carried away at the airport and hadn’t done what he’d been told and if he had, Rogers and Barnes might not have gotten away. Rhodes wasn’t so sure about that. He was pretty sure Rogers would have gone through anyone and anything and Tony would never have forgiven himself if one of those things had been the kid.

Pepper had had some things to say when she’d learned that Peter was fifteen and she’d all but frogmarched the kid to his home when she’d found out his aunt didn’t know. May had been angry at first but when she’d seen the suit Tony had given Peter and been told about all its safety features by FRIDAY, she’d calmed down a bit. She still wasn’t happy about it but after a long talk with Pepper,
Peter now had an actual schedule and regularly trained with Vision under Rhodes’ supervision. Trying to stop the kid would have been futile so making sure he was as well trained as they possibly could was the compromise.

“Vision hasn’t found any traces of Tony?” Pepper asked.

Rhodes shook his head. “He’s been all over that bunker at least a dozen times and can’t find any traces of anything. The Russians have been very accommodating.”

“He can’t just have disappeared,” Pepper said, her frustration bleeding over. “If he was dead, there’d be a body. If he was captured by HYDRA, there’d be some kind of trace of them being there. He certainly didn’t walk out of there on his own.”

“I know,” Rhodes said heavily. “UNET command has been contacted by someone calling themselves the Sorcerer Supreme. Carol and I have a meeting with them tomorrow. Maybe they can help.”

Pepper deflated again. “I hope so.”

Rhodey reached over and patted her hand and they turned back to the work they needed to do to keep SI and the Avengers running in Tony’s absence.

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“You know I’m going to need to go back soon?”

Tony slouched back on the chaise he was lying on as he watched his companion. Loki was still wearing Odin’s robes though he’d dropped the illusion and the contrast was a bit jarring. Not that much of what had happened since Rogers and Barnes had left wasn’t a bit jarring.

After they’d left, Tony hadn’t been able to get out of the suit and without the arc reactor powering the suit’s systems, such as the heating and life support, the cold had made itself known very quickly. He’d actually been on the verge of panicking when Loki had suddenly appeared in front of him, which to be honest hadn’t really helped with the panic at first. But, after a lengthy back and forth that had started with Tony assuming that Loki was some sort of hallucination then progressed to some very salty commentary on Loki’s little attempt to take over the world before finally settling on some general snarking, Loki had freed him from the armour, conjured a magical fire that had had Tony spluttering about the physics (or lack thereof) of it all and had made him an offer. Tony had been on the verge of telling Loki where to stick his offer when Loki had talked so soberly about the Chitauri and the being behind them, a Titan named Thanos – personifying the fear Tony had held since his trip through the portal – that Tony had been silenced and had then accepted before he had really thought about it.

Not that he regretted it. Loki had brought him to this place, a strange estate that apparently both was and wasn’t in Asgard, in order to heal and to allow them to set some plans in motion. Loki’s favourite form of entertainment these days was explaining how that was possible and watching Tony’s head explode from the sheer illogic of it but prior to that things had been… interesting. Tony had been hurt far more than either of them had been aware. Loki had the ability to heal some of the damage but some of it – some old, some new – had been too great. Tony had been philosophical about it all but Loki had simply glared at him then disappeared for a couple of days. He’d returned with a golden apple, which Tony had simply gaped at initially. He knew what it was of course. He’d read through all of the Norse legends he could get his hands on after meeting Thor, mostly out of interest but aware that while he couldn’t take anything they said as gospel, there may well be some truth in them, even if it was only a little.
But Idunn’s golden apples were exactly how they’d been described and though Tony had wanted to ask a thousand questions and maybe even test the damn thing, he’d finally contented himself with one question. The answer had been enough to make him accept. The apple wouldn’t make him immortal, though it would give him a longer life than normal. Loki wasn’t entirely sure how long that would be. He knew what it was for an Aesir and a Jotun (and hadn’t that been an interesting discussion full of minefields) but for a Midgardian? That he couldn’t say. But more importantly, the apple would heal him and give him some advantages similar to the serum – enhanced healing and enhanced strength, agility and reflexes. Tony had tested it out and he was confident that, while he wasn’t stronger or faster than Rogers and even Barnes, he was strong enough and fast enough that he didn’t need to fear facing either of them without the suit. He would be able to hold his own until a suit could get to him. Not that it was exactly necessary these days but it was the principle of the matter.

Of course, Loki had asked things of him in return for all of this but given that everything he’d asked for had been aimed at preparing for Thanos, Tony had not had any hesitation in agreeing. He’d been suspicious at first, wondering where the catch was, but when his suspicion had started to get in the way, Loki had finally admitted some things that Tony was sure he’d rather he hadn’t had to – his own imprisonment and torture at the hands of Thanos and his minions, his fear of what would happen when Thanos came for them all, his determination to not let it happen and his resignation that it probably would.

“I am aware of that,” Loki said, drawing Tony out of his thoughts. “I would not have kept you this long had you not been so badly injured.”

Tony nodded. “Before I go back though… are you ever going to answer my question?”

Loki twitched and looked away. This was something that had been hanging between them from the beginning and Tony had never been able to get a straight answer out of Loki – why him? Why was Loki so convinced that Tony was the one that needed to lead this whole thing? Trying to get that answer out of Loki had given him a really good insight as to why Loki was called the God of Lies and Mischief. Loki had used every trick he possessed to distract Tony from that question and while he’d often been temporarily successful, Tony had never quite let it go.

Loki finally sighed and sat up. He seemed to realise he was still wearing Odin’s robes and he quickly transformed them into his signature green, though not his armour. He rarely wore that around Tony these days, usually choosing a green tunic and trousers, both of varying designs, with black boots. He began pacing and Tony knew he was going to get some sort of answer out of him.

“I don’t truly have an answer for you,” Loki finally admitted.

Tony raised an eyebrow. “You must have something or you wouldn’t have gone to all this trouble.”

Loki grimaced. “He’s afraid of you but I don’t know why. I wasn’t exactly in a position where he was going to confide in me and I was never able to discover it by any other means. All I was able to determine was that he is afraid of you.”

Tony frowned. “Wait a minute. This is from before the… the whole thing in New York, right?”

Loki nodded. “Yes.”

“How did he know about me?”

“I do not know.” Loki gave a frustrated sigh. “I suspected some sort of precognition or foresight after Barton told me all he knew about you and the Avengers Initiative. But I know little about the Titans…"
and what they were like and I cannot find anything, anywhere that indicates whether they possessed that sort of power. He may have consulted one of the races that do have foresight. Perhaps it is something I don’t know. All I do know is that he feared you. One of my tasks was to feed him whatever information I could find about you.”

“And did you?” Tony asked.

Loki hesitated. “Yes… and no. The art of lying to people is to also tell them the truth.”

“Two parts truth to one part lie,” Tony said with a slow nod. “Get the mix right and they’ll swallow the lot without recognising the lie.”

“Something along those lines,” Loki said, eying Tony curiously. “You know this?”

Tony snorted. “You should try doing business, especially in the world of weapons manufacturing. The art of succeeding in business is being able to lie through your teeth and make it sound like the god’s honest truth.” He grimaced. “I can do it and do it well but I never liked it.”

Loki was still looking at him curiously but then he nodded and his pacing calmed down into just a slow stroll back and forth. “The information I gave him is… probably things you would rather he not know but fundamentally harmless. The information Barton gave me that he definitely would want to know, I… altered.”

Tony swore under his breath. “Exactly what did Barton actually know? I gave SHIELD the run around when it came to what happened to me in Afghanistan but I know they speculated and after I started deleting their speculation, I’m pretty sure they started keeping my file on paper only.”

“It was indeed mostly speculation,” Loki said. “From my observations, some of it… was reasonably accurate but some of it…” He snorted. “Was laughable.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Let me guess… you altered the reasonably accurate stuff and pass on the laughable stuff without changing it.”

Loki smirked and nodded. “Of course.”

“Did it make it better or worse?” Tony asked. “In regards to his opinion of me.”

“It’s difficult to say,” Loki replied. “He certainly seemed baffled on occasion but at other times, he seemed either unmoved or he seemed to accept it as correlating with what he’d either thought or known about you.”

“Can you work out what corresponds to what information?” Tony asked. “How did he react to the laughable stuff as opposed to the altered reasonably accurate stuff?”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Off the top of my head, no, but give me some time and I should be able to remember most of it.”

“Good,” Tony said. “That’d be worth knowing.” He tapped his fingers against his chest where the arc reactor used to be. “So… he’s afraid of me but you don’t know why.” He looked over at Loki and cocked an eyebrow at him. “Could you find out?”

Loki was silent as he contemplated that question. “Possibly,” he finally said. “But I wouldn’t give it very high odds. I burned a large number of bridges among those loyal to Thanos by my actions on Midgard.”
“How loyal are they?” Tony asked, looking curious.

Loki knew what he was asking with that question and he shook his head. “Don’t even bother. Those who survive in Thanos’ service are insanely loyal to him.” He suddenly paused and tapped his bottom lip with one long, slender finger. “Although… I have heard some rumours about a couple of his daughters that might be worth investigating.”

“Daughters?” Tony said dubiously.

Loki snorted. “He calls his followers his children, though in the case of these two, it’s probably more accurate than with many of the others. He took them from their homes when they were children, right before he wiped out the entire population of their planets. He raised them as his but…” He snorted. “Odin could be cruel but he has nothing on Thanos.”

“Ouch,” Tony said with a grimace then he frowned. “So what does Thanos actually want other than the Infinity Stones?”

Loki was silent for a moment then he snorted. “He would tell you that he wants to destroy half of all the people in the universe.”

“But?” Tony said. “There’s obviously a catch and… why the hell would he want to do that?”

“His world, Titan, died due to the usual problems associated with overpopulation and an insane obsession about not doing anything about it unless they came up with the perfect solution,” Loki replied. “They would not accept any half measures or temporary solutions until a better one could be found. It was all or nothing.”

“And nothing occurred,” Tony murmured.

Loki nodded. “Thanos is all that remains of his race so now he claims to be acting magnanimously on behalf of all other peoples to ensure they do not go through what his people did.”

“So that’s his claim, what does he actually do?”

“You must remember that up until now, he hasn’t had any of the Infinity Stones,” Loki said. “He has had to use more mundane methods.”

“Right,” Tony said dryly. “Let me guess… he invades and if they fight back, he wipes them out?”

“More or less,” Loki replied. “He does give them an opportunity to surrender and allow only half their population to be killed. You can imagine how that goes.”

“Let me guess,” Tony said cynically. “One half of the population gets to watch as the other half is killed, giving them a false sense of hope to go along with their horror… then they’re killed as well.”

Loki nodded. “Precisely.”

“So… the infinity stones will make this easier?” Tony said.

Loki looked thoughtful as he settled down onto the chaise opposite Tony’s. “It would, yes, but my suspicion is that he wants them for another purpose.”

“Which is?” Tony asked with a raised eyebrow.

“That I can’t tell you,” Loki replied. “It was something I observed as he spoke to others. It is not a boast to say that I am skilled at reading others and everything about him said that while he wasn’t
precisely lying, he also wasn’t telling the whole truth.”

“So he’s likely got some kind of hidden agenda.” Tony sighed. “Him and everyone else, I guess.”

Loki looked amused. “That is true.” He arched an eyebrow at Tony. “So what will you do when you return? I’ve told you of the fate of your… team.”

Tony snorted, even as he shuddered. Loki had told him of what had happened in Wakanda and while he’d admit he wanted his revenge against them, that wasn’t what he’d had in mind. Then again, they had been the ones so eager to bring Wanda on board. The words ‘schadenfreude’ and ‘hoist on their own petard’ kept coming to mind.

“I think recent events have proven that they were never my team,” he said sourly. “But if your timeline is correct, then I don’t know how much time I have to put a new team together.”

“And what of your Iron Legion?” Loki asked.

Tony shot him a look but didn’t bother asking how Loki knew about that. Loki was a sneak at heart and had ways of finding out all sorts of information. Also he’d had access to Barton and at least one other SHIELD agent that Tony could determine.

“I destroyed them,” Tony said. “I was using them as a crutch instead of getting actual help.”

“And now?”

Tony snorted. “That apple had more than just a physical effect.”

Loki smirked. “I know.” He sobered. “It didn’t alter your mind, you know. It’s simply that with your physical issues dealt with and your endurance increased, your mind is not so easily clouded by fatigue and stress.” He raised an eyebrow and looked at Tony appreciatively. “Which makes you all the more remarkable. All that you have achieved will be nothing to what you can do now.”

Tony blinked. Loki had been regularly throwing these compliments and other semi-flirtatious remarks into their conversations for weeks now and he honestly didn’t know what to make of it. It could just be Loki having a little bit of fun with him, given his past playboy reputation, but there was just something about them that made Tony think that wasn’t the case. That Loki was flirting with him. He just didn’t know why. Whether it was just to keep him on side or whether Loki was truly interested. If it was the latter, Tony couldn’t deny that he wasn’t flattered… and a little interested himself. Loki was gorgeous, clever, witty and sarcastic. Just Tony’s type. Sue him.

He cleared his throat. “So, you think I should create the Iron Legion again?”

“I think you need a team you can rely on,” Loki replied.

Tony frowned. “You think I can’t rely on Rhodey and Vision?”

Loki’s hesitation was more pronounced this time. “I think Rhodes is very human and Vision… possesses one of the things Thanos wants.”

Never let it be said that Tony couldn’t read between the lines. “So Rhodey could be killed…” He ignored the thump of his newly-repaired heart at that thought. “…and Vision could be… captured and killed.”

“A robotic suit of armour is very resilient,” was all Loki would say so Tony took it as confirmation. “And less distressing should it be destroyed.”
“Right,” Tony said slowly. “I kind of feel like there’s something you’re not telling me.”

Loki sighed. “There are many things I haven’t told you but most of them are pure speculation on my part, based solely on my observations. I have no concrete evidence that I am right or wrong and it has been a few years since I was a prisoner of Thanos. Things may have changed. I will admit that.”

He grimaced. “So when I make an observation or suggestion…”

“You think it’s a good idea but can’t really say why,” Tony said as he nodded slowly. “Okay, I can go with that. I’m all for contingencies and planning for as many possibilities as is feasible.”

Loki didn’t disguise his obvious relief. “Good.”

Tony gave him a small nod. He knew what it was like to be desperately trying to convince people of something and not be believed because of your past. Playing Cassandra wasn’t fun and Tony wasn’t going to be a hypocrite now.

“Right,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Let’s plan how I’m going to go back and how much you want me to tell everyone about you and what we’re doing.”

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“Are you sure you do not want me to accompany you?”

Tony looked over at Loki then smiled wryly. “No, it’s okay. Let me explain things to everyone first before we throw you into the mix. It’s been a little over four months now and Pepper and Rhodey are likely to be a bit… tense. If they see you, they might decide to shoot first and ask questions later, so to speak. I’d rather ease them into the idea that you’re not our enemy.”

Loki pouted. “Am I not a friend then?”

Tony reviewed what he’d just said and he chuckled softly. “You know what… I guess you are. You did save my life and all that. But you also invaded Earth and caused a shitload of trouble in New York. So… you know.”

Loki sighed melodramatically but Tony could tell he was pleased by the first part of what he’d said.

“Fine. I’ll wait.”

“It won’t be too long. I’ll need to present this to the Accords Committee or this… Taskforce you told me about so they’ll want to ask questions,” Tony said then he scrunched up his nose. “You couldn’t have gotten some more details?”

Loki snorted. “And have people wonder why the All-Father was suddenly so interested in Midgard?”

“Good point. I thought Asgard liked your changes?”

“They do,” Loki said. “But I still have to tread carefully. Banishing Heimdall was not a popular move, necessary though it was, so I have to be mindful of not pushing too far, too fast.”

“Wouldn’t Heimdall have helped?” Tony asked. “Or is he biased?”

Loki shrugged and paced a little. “I… rarely know what Heimdall is thinking but from past experience, he favours Thor too much for me to be comfortable having him around.”

“Maybe it’s worth contacting again now?” Tony suggested. “Now that he’s had time to see what
“No, but he could tell if he looked at Odin closely enough.” Loki sighed. “I have considered it but I cannot take the risk that he will give everything away. I need everything established to protect Asgard and as many of the other realms as possible. I cannot risk it all falling apart because Heimdall decides to side with Thor yet again.”

“Yeah, okay,” Tony said with an understanding nod. “I see your point. I’m just saying… keep the guy in the back of your mind. He could be useful.”

“I know,” Loki replied. “And I do. Now, are you ready?”

Tony nodded. “Yep. Send me back so I can face the music.”

Loki nodded and a moment later, Tony was surrounded by an ocean of rainbow colours. He winced against the brightness of it all and tried to keep his eyes open, to see the Einstein-Rosen bridge in action and remember all that he could. Then as abruptly as it started, the light show finished and he found himself standing on the roof of Stark Tower, a familiar pattern burned into the ground around him.

“That’s going to be fun to explain,” he muttered as he headed for the door. He placed his hand on the reader there and the door opened smoothly. He didn’t try and hide his presence and he knew that opening the door would have alerted FRIDAY and Pepper to his entrance. He was proven correct when the light in the stairwell flicked on and he heard the faint buzz of the nearest speaker activating.

“Boss?”

FRIDAY sounded shocked and pleased and so very relieved and Tony’s shoulders twitched. He knew his disappearance would have affected people but he’d tried not to think too much about it because there wasn’t much he could do. Now, though, he couldn’t avoid it.

“Hey, FRI-girl.”

“Boss, you’re back! You’re alive!”

Tony smiled as he continued down the stairs, FRIDAY’s voice following him. “Yeah, baby girl. It’s a long story but I’m… good. Are Pepper and Rhodey here?”

“Yes, boss,” FRIDAY replied, her voice brimming with happiness. “I’ve just told them and they’re coming up to the penthouse now.”

Tony nodded as he emerged from the stairwell into the penthouse. It looked exactly the same as the last time he’d seen it and there was a small amount of mental whiplash. Not that he’d really thought anyone would change things since they hadn’t last time he’d disappeared but it still felt strange.

He turned around when the elevator doors opened and there was a blur of red hair and Pepper thumped against him. He wrapped her up in a hug and pressed his face against her hair, his eyes closing as he took in her familiar scent. He was pretty sure they were both deciding to ignore the hitch in her breathing and the suspicious dampness on the shoulder of his shirt.

“Pep,” he said helplessly. “It’s okay.”

She pulled back just a little and thumped him on the shoulder. “Where have you been?”

She then seemed to actually see him properly and her eyes widened. Tony was eternally grateful that
though she pulled back, it wasn’t that far and she didn’t seemed horrified, just shocked and worried.


“Yeah, I echo the what the hell, Tony, in all meanings of that phrase,” Rhodey said.

Tony turned to look at his oldest friend and winced when he saw that Rhodey was still in a wheelchair. “That’s… that’s gotta go,” he said, guilt colouring his voice.

He was surprised when Rhodey stared at him blankly then looked down at the wheelchair before his expression cleared and he actually laughed.

“No, no… Tones, it’s fine.” Rhodey slowly levered himself up from the chair and Pepper immediately came back to offer him her shoulder. With that support, he walked carefully forward. “My spine wasn’t broken. Damaged, yes, but not broken. Once everything healed… well, I’m never going to walk without some sort of support but I’m not paralysed. I just use the chair when I’m tired but soon I won’t need it at all.”

Tony felt a wave of relief wash over him and he lurched forward and into Rhodey’s waiting arms. “Thank fuck, sugarplum, because that was my fault.”
They stayed that way for a long, long time then finally Rhodey pushed him back just far enough that he could rest his hands on Tony’s shoulders. “No, I’m not having that. It was a bad beat, Tony. I won’t deny that but it wasn’t your fault. Could have happened any time in my career. It was just sheer bad luck it happened then. And I did not spend the last four months talking Vision through his guilt just to have to start again with you. So stop it.”

Tony swallowed the lump in his throat and nodded silently. He still felt guilty but he had also heard what Rhodey had said.

Rhodey’s hand squeezed tighter for a moment. “Now where the fuck have you been and why do you look like you’ve just stepped out of the disaster that was the 2001 SI Christmas party?”

The laugh caught Tony by surprise and he pretended to scowl at Rhodey. “You promised me that we would never speak of that again.”

“Yes, yeah,” Rhodey said as he leaned on Tony’s shoulder and started nudging him over to the couch. “Spill. What happened? Do you have any idea how worried we’ve been?”

Tony waited until they were all sitting down. “Yeah, I know. I’m sorry but in my defence, I didn’t have a lot of options. I was… kind of… well, maybe not precisely dying but it wasn’t good.”

“What happened?” Pepper asked. She was sitting beside him and had one of his hands tightly clasped in hers. On his other side, Rhodey was pressed up against him. It didn’t feel confining in any way, more like they wanted the contact to make sure he didn’t disappear again.

“How much do you know?” Tony asked. “I was getting some information where I was but not anything comprehensive.”

Rhodey grimaced. “Tones… there were videos. From the bunker in Siberia. Two of them.”

Tony sighed and slumped down a little. “Right. So you know… that.” He licked his lips. “After… after Rogers and Barnes left, I was… stuck. There was no power in the suit and I couldn’t get to most of the manual releases. Those I could get to were jammed. I was pretty sure FRIDAY would have sent out an alert when she lost contact with the suit, I just… the alerts were meant to go to the Avengers and you, Rhodey bear, which… well…”

“Yeah,” Rhodey said heavily.

“So, I’m lying there, wondering what hell I should do, when…” Tony paused and licked his lips again. “Loki appeared.”

“Loki?” Pepper asked incredulously.

Tony nodded. “In all his snarky glory. We kind of argued back and forth for a bit and then Loki actually got around to telling me why he was there.” He gave them a very sombre look. “The Chitauri invasion wasn’t a one off. The person behind it is coming back. It’s not a matter of if but a matter of when.”

There was a moment of silence before Rhodey said, “How did you know he wasn’t lying?”

Tony’s smile lacked anything remotely resembling mirth. “We’d gotten past that point and I’d pushed his buttons enough to be able to read him a bit. Also…” He made a soft huffing sound. “You know that moment when you just know someone isn’t lying? Yeah, that.”

“How does he know about this?” Pepper asked.
“That was the other reason I knew he wasn’t lying,” Tony said. “He told me something I think he would have much preferred to keep a secret. He was captured, tortured and controlled by this person. The invasion… wasn’t exactly his idea and he botched it deliberately.”

Rhodey grinned. “I get to collect money now. I don’t think there’s anyone in the military who hasn’t dissected that invasion a hundred times and while there was always some disagreement, the general consensus was it was a bungled job. We just didn’t know if it was deliberate or he was just a crap general.”

“He was hoping to draw his brother to Earth,” Tony said. “And once Barton told him about the Avengers Initiative and who was in it, he wanted me in the fight as well.”

“Why you?” Rhodey asked, a worried frown appearing on his face.

“Because he saw me as the biggest hitter, after Thor, and that meant he could feasibly surrender to us without it being overly suspicious.”

“He wanted to be taken back to Asgard?” Rhodey asked.

Tony snorted. “Yeah but that didn’t go the way he thought, hence the whole faking his death thing.”

“So what’s he doing now?”

Tony snickered. “Pretending to be Odin and ruling Asgard.”


“Magic,” Tony said wryly. “Which he refuses to explain properly to me because he knows it gets me all worked up and that amuses him.”

Both Rhodey and Pepper laughed then Pepper fixed him with a gimlet look. “Tony,” she said firmly. “Explain to me why you look more like you did when I first started working for you.”

Tony grimaced. He’d hoped to avoid that question for a little bit longer. “Okay, so… I wasn’t in good shape. A vibranium shield to the chest doesn’t do anyone any good, even if they’re wearing a metal suit.”

“We got that and there will be more words about that later,” Rhodey said.

Tony grinned briefly. He knew that tone of voice. The words wouldn’t be bad words, more worried and concerned. “Loki did what he could but healing isn’t is his forte. He got me mostly back together but we both recognised that as I was, I would never be able to put the suit back on again.” He grimaced. “Actually we both recognised that even with what he’d done, my life span was… pretty limited.”

“Tony,” Pepper whispered, one had over her mouth.

“So, Loki had a bit of a sulk about that then disappeared for a couple of days,” Tony continued. “He came back with a golden apple.”

“They’re real?” Rhodey said.

Tony nodded. “Very real. I mean, don’t misunderstand. I’m not a god or anything. The apple healed me. It’s given me some advantages and probably a longer life span, though Loki can’t say how
“Why not?” Rhodey asked.

“Because he only knows how they affect the Aesir,” Tony said, leaving out the revelation about Loki’s true origins. That was something Loki had told him very reluctantly and he didn’t know whether the trickster wanted other people knowing. He knew more from what Loki hadn’t said that his true origins weren’t widely known among the Aesir. “Contrary to anything that might be in the Nordic myths, Midgardians have never actually been given an apple before.”

“So it’s…” Rhodey gestured towards him. “Made you younger?”

“In a sense,” Tony said. “Physically anyway. It’s taken me back to… what do you reckon? Early thirties?”

Rhodey chuckled and nodded. “Yeah, about that, I’d say.” He sobered. “So… why? Why did Loki do all of this? No offense to the guy but I can’t imagine it was out of the goodness of his heart.”

“Thanos,” Tony said bluntly.

“Who?”

“The guy who was really behind the Chitauri invasion,” Tony said. “He’s coming back.”

Rhodey looked grim. “How soon?”

“Unknown but Loki’s trying to find out. He says to plan for sooner rather than later though.”

“Wasn’t Loki working for him?” Rhodey said dubiously. “Why the change of heart?”

Tony hesitated. “He was working for him but not voluntarily. I’ve only got the edges of the story because…” He licked his lips. “Let’s put it this way. Whatever happened to Loki was his Afghanistan, only it didn’t work out so well for him.”

Rhodey and Pepper both nodded in understanding.

“Loki carries a bit of a grudge but…” Tony looked out towards the city through the windows. “He’s also scared. This Thanos… he’s not a chump and he wants the Infinity Stones.”

“Vision,” Rhodey said grimly.

“And there’s another one on Earth as well, according to Loki,” Tony said. “He doesn’t know where it is but he’s felt it here.”

“Does he know where the others are?”

“The Tesseract is on Asgard and it holds the Space Stone,” Tony replied. “Thor gave the Aether or the Reality Stone to a guy called the Collector. He’s pretty powerful so he may be able to protect it but there’s no guarantee.”

“That’s four,” Rhodey said with a thoughtful frown. “How may are there?”

“Six,” Tony replied. “Loki has a lead on the fifth, the Power Stone. It’s the last one that’s a problem. The Soul Stone. No one knows where it is.”

“So Thanos might have it?”
Tony shrugged. “It’s possible but Loki didn’t think so.”

“How’s he been doing all of this?” Rhodey asked. “Didn’t you say he was ruling Asgard as Odin? And where the hell is Odin anyway?”

“Odin apparently does this thing called the Odinsleep,” Tony explained. “If I understood Loki’s explanation, it’s a kind of restorative sleep of some description. It’s magic.” He snorted and ignored Rhodey and Pepper’s grins. “Anyway, no one knows about this except for Loki so he took his opportunity to start making preparations.”

“Isn’t Odin his father?” Pepper said “Couldn’t he have just told him about Thanos?”

“It’s complicated but the short answer is no. Odin wasn’t going to listen to him and neither was Thor. The only person who might have was Frigga and she died during that incident that ended up trashing part of London.”

“So what does he want from us?”

“To be prepared,” Tony replied. “There’s some other stuff but that’s the important part.”

“The Accords Council and the Taskforce are going to need to know,” Rhodey replied. “And we’ll need to talk to Carol.”

Tony frowned. “Carol?” He blinked. “Wait… Carol as in Carol Danvers? The woman you’ve had a crush on since the Academy?”

“I have not!” Rhodey yelped and Tony’s grin widened.

“Yes, you have. You mooned after her every time I saw you. You were too chicken to ask her out.”

“I wasn’t a chicken.”

Tony started making clucking sounds and Rhodey immediately scowled and grabbed him in a headlock. Pepper laughed at both of them and removed herself from the couch with an adroitness that spoke of long experience with their shenanigans. Tony was happy to lose himself in the fun for now. There would be a lot of talking in his future and he was happy to leave it there for now.

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Tony sat on the couch in his penthouse apartment with a glass in his hand and stared at the view out the window. The last three days had been meetings and interviews almost from dawn to dusk. From the Accords Council to handling his return in the media, he’d done more talking in the last few days than he had in a long time. The upside was that his press conference had led to SI regaining almost all the losses they’d incurred in the last four months. Also that Pepper and Rhodey had apparently been busy and Thaddeus Ross was now languishing in prison, awaiting a trial on more charges than Tony had thought possible.

The downside had been the very awkward conversation he and Pepper had had the morning after his return. On reflection, it had been a long time coming. He couldn’t stop being Iron Man and Pepper, try though she might, couldn’t truly accept that part of him. He didn’t blame her or think badly of her. Sometimes no matter how hard you tried or how much you wanted it to work, it just… didn’t. He’d known it was coming for a while, he just hadn’t wanted to face it. But as Loki had said, without his physical issues plaguing him anymore and with the clarity the apple brought, he could see that the writing had been on the wall for a while now. Pepper deserved someone who could put her first and he… well, he deserved someone who was willing to accept all of him, especially now.
He’d also had a chance to catch up with all the details about what had happened with his former teammates. Just the thought of them made him shudder. He’d never liked Wanda but he wasn’t sure she deserved to be smears across a Wakandan room in tiny little pieces. In fact, the Wakandans hadn’t been able to find a trace of her, so thoroughly had she annihilated herself. Steve was still screaming, completely trapped in whatever nightmare vision Wanda had conjured for him. Natasha was too dangerous to let go. She was, at least, coherent but she trusted no one and would start stabbing people at the slightest provocation. The Dora Milaje had tried taking her weapons away but that just made things worse. They’d finally conceded and allowed Natasha a few knives which left her in a state that was manageable. Wilson, Barton and Lang had been the least affected by Wanda but had received the harshest consequences. All of them were facing prison if they were found guilty in their trials, which seemed likely given the weight of evidence against them.

There was a time when Tony would have fallen over himself to help them and make those pesky consequences go away but he’d spent a lot of time talking to Loki. There were some interesting parallels between his situation with the Avengers and Loki’s with Odin, Thor and Thor’s friends. Loki, like Tony, had often manipulated things to keep Thor from facing the consequences of his actions and the end result had been… the Chitauri invasion. Sure, Loki had done things that sucked but so had Tony so who was he to throw stones? But Loki wasn’t the only one who’d fucked up and Thor and Odin seemed to like wandering around, acting like their shit didn’t stink. Tony might have been inclined to be more sceptical except that he’d seen what Thor was like.

But Tony had taken the underlying lesson on board. The consequences of constantly indulging the Avengers had ended up smashing down on Tony, the city of Bucharest and the Leipzig/Halle airport and Tony was of the opinion that they’d all paid too high a price. Pepper had already ensured that the Maria Stark Foundation was busy with relief efforts in Bucharest and apparently in the wake of the release of the videos, Germany had decided that the onus for the damages for the airport lay with Rogers and his merry morons for starting that fight and not with Tony’s group for trying to avoid it. Except for T’Challa, that is. Both the German and Romanian governments had primly presented him with a significant bill after Wanda’s temper tantrum had resulted in the revelation of the Rogues’ presence in Wakanda.

“Are you brooding?”

Tony gave a start and twisted on the couch to find Loki standing in the entrance to the living room. “No,” he said, a little defensively.

“It looked like you were brooding,” Loki replied, looking amused.

“I was thinking in a manly fashion.”

Loki snorted and sauntered over. He dropped down elegantly on the couch and arranged himself artfully. Tony, having seen this act before, just looked amused.

“So,” he said. “I talked to Pepper and Rhodey.”

“Oh?” Loki said, pretending he didn’t care.

“Rhodey’s in charge of the Avengers now, along with Carol Danvers,” Tony said. “They’re very interested in what you have to say.”

Loki gave him a narrow-eyed look. “Just like that?”

“Well, there might be some questions about what was really going on during the invasion here,” Tony replied. “But… Rhodey knows me. He knows I wasn’t lying about the invasion not being the
end of it.”

“But nothing was done,” Loki observed.

“Remind me one day to tell you about the legend of Cassandra,” Tony said sourly. “Not that it really matters. They’re listening now.”

“And what of your former team?” Loki said.

“Well, you were right that they’re pretty much a non-issue now,” Tony replied. “And Pepper managed to keep the Accords from getting out of hand because of all that mess so things are in better shape than I expected.”

“And that means?”

“That means we’re not starting behind the eight ball,” Tony said. “We’ve got a bit of a head start that I wasn’t expecting. It means that Carol and Rhodey are willing to listen to what you have to say and the Accords Council and this United Nations Enhanced Taskforce will listen as well. I can’t guarantee there won’t be some sort of repercussion from the invasion but if you tell them at least some of what you told me then it shouldn’t be too bad.”

Loki grimaced. “If I must.”

Tony cocked his head. “You know it won’t be seen as weakness, right? We’re not the kind of dicks that Asgard are.”

“So you keep saying,” Loki said with a falsely idle shrug.

Tony decided to let it go for now. He’d learned it was often easier to let Loki ruminate on things in his own time than push right away. “I also spoke to Rhodey about the Iron Legion. He thinks it’s a good idea.”

“I believe I also told you that,” Loki said smugly.

Tony laughed. “Yeah, yeah. Don’t get smug. I also told Rhodey and Pepper about the apple.”

“I can still procure one for your injured friend,” Loki said almost dismissively, as though he didn’t want to be seen as concerned.

“He may not need it,” Tony replied. “He wasn’t hurt as badly as I thought. His spine wasn’t broken but he’ll always need some support.”

“Then my healing abilities may be enough.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “If you’re willing…”

Loki inclined his head. “It is far more advantageous for him to be fully functional than not.”

Tony stared at him for a long moment then nodded with a faint smile. “Sure.”

They both fell silent for a moment then Tony got to his feet and clapped his hands together, startling Loki.

“Pretty sure I owe you a drink, Reindeer Games.”

Loki blinked then a smirk grew on his face. “I believe you do.”
Tony ambled over to the bar and after a slight pause, Loki joined him. As Tony poured the drinks, they started talking about what they needed to do.

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Wanda sat hunched up on the couch and glared at the TV. She’d found the house three days ago after far too many days of walking and hiding and scrounging food and water wherever she could. She had no idea where she was or how she’d ended up here. The last thing she remembered was trying to escape the palace in Wakanda. Something had happened with her magic and there’d been an explosion. She’d blacked out and woken up in what looked like a jungle.

This house had been the first one she’d found that looked safe. The owners had disagreed with her but they were now lying unmoving on the floor behind the couch, the dried blood that had flooded from their eyes, ears and nose giving an indication of how they’d died. She had realised that morning that she would have to move them soon. They were starting to smell and she didn’t want them messing up her house.

The TV caught her attention when the news anchor announced a special report. She cocked her head slightly then snarled when a picture of Tony Stark appeared behind the anchorman. She leaned forward and listened with growing anger as the man on the TV talked about how Tony Stark was alive and had returned.

“No,” she growled. “He’s dead. He will die by my hand.”

She lurched to her feet and hurried through the house, snatching up what money and other valuables she could find. She threw them into a backpack she found, along with a few of the woman’s clothes. They were about the same size so they should fit her well enough. She needed to go back to Wakanda and get Steve. She knew he was still there, affected by her magic. She could feel it. She could fix him easily enough and then she would make sure he fought for her. Maybe she would even have him finish the job he started in Siberia. She’d seen that when she used her magic to try and escape, just a glimpse before everything had gone black. She’d seen the way Steve had slammed his shield into Stark’s chest. Maybe she would convince him to do it again, only better this time.

She smiled then, a thin, mad rictus that would have terrified anyone who saw it, and stormed out of the house.

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Tony hadn’t stepped into the Compound since the civil war. Understandable since he hadn’t exactly been on the planet but he’d also avoided it since he got back. He was pleasantly surprised, however, to walk in now and not feel like he was being overwhelmed with memories. Part of that was undoubtedly because he had never lived long enough to form much in the way of memories but most of the ones he did have of the place were… not that great.

“Tony?”

He was drawn out of his thoughts by the heart-breaking familiar yet not so familiar voice and he turned and smiled at the man who had apparently just phased through the nearby wall.

“Vision. Hey. How are you?”

“Vision. Hey. How are you?”

“I am… well,” Vision replied. “Though I feel that is a question I should be asking of you.”

Tony chuckled and walked over to the synthezoid. “I’m fine. Better than fine. Rhodey gave you a briefing?”
Vision nodded. “I find myself both relieved and… oddly annoyed. Relieved that you were safe and given an opportunity to heal in a way that would not have happened here but annoyed because…”

“You were looking for me,” Tony said with a nod. “I’m sorry about that. We couldn’t figure out a way to send a message that wouldn’t have risked getting back to Asgard in some way.”

Vision inclined his head. “I also find it odd that Loki would assist you.”

“Yeah, I thought that too,” Tony said. “But sometimes greater threats make for strange bedfellows, so to speak.”

“Indeed.”

Tony cocked his head. “Hey, are you okay? I know you… cared about Wanda and…”

“I am…” Vision frowned slightly. “I have been speaking to a therapist on Colonel Rhodes’ recommendation. It has been very valuable. I have been able to see where my… inexperience caused me to…” He pondered the thought for a moment. “To misread people.”

“Wanda,” Tony said as neutrally as he could manage.

“Yes,” Vision replied. He cocked his head and looked at Tony thoughtfully. “You did not like her or trust her and yet you made no move to stop the relationship that was growing between she and I.”

Tony sighed. “Look… she hated me. It was irrational and juvenile and bordering on delusional but whatever. I just figured maybe you were seeing a different side of her than she was ever going to show to me and…” He smiled ruefully. “You are your own person, not JARVIS. So, I didn’t think I had any right to tell you what to do.”

“And that alone makes you a better person than her,” Vision replied. He paused momentarily. “And Mr Rogers. They both felt more than entitled to tell me how I should think, feel and act in my personal life. I did not realise how… wrong that was.”

Tony scowled. “I didn’t know they were doing that. Shit.”

Vision raised a calming hand. “Do not feel guilty, Tony. It has caused no lasting harm and I am able to view it as… let us say, a learning experience now.”

Tony grumbled under his breath. “You shouldn’t have to.”

Vision looked amused. “Perhaps not but we cannot change the past.” He cocked his head. “I would agree that I am not JARVIS, however I am still… related. I believe you have every right to speak to me should you feel I am in danger.”

Tony’s breath caught. “I, uh… didn’t want to presume. JARVIS’ code may have made up a part of you but you are your own person. You’re different from him and back then… I kind of worried I…”

“Might not be able to separate the two of us?” Vision’s amusement deepened. “Perhaps at first but I do not think that would have lasted long. I feel no particular urge to call you sir and I believe that was his… thing with you.”

Tony smiled, amused at Vision’s somewhat awkward usage of slang. “Yeah, it was. He was modelled after Edwin Jarvis, who was our butler and, well, more of a father to me than Dad was in many ways. Jarvis the human always called me ‘young sir’ but JARVIS felt that a simple Sir was more appropriate.”
Vision smiled. “But back to what we were talking about. While I regret my… blindness in regards to Ms Maximoff, I cannot regret the experience.” His expression became rather wry. “One cannot always learn by positive experiences, sometimes the negative ones are necessary.”

“But you’re alright, yeah?” Tony pressed. “She didn’t mess with your mind or anything?”

Vision shook his head. “She could not.” He tapped the Mind Stone in his forehead. “Her magic came from this and thus it protected me.” He frowned. “She… intimated that she had influenced your mind more than once but became evasive when I pressed on the matter and then angry. Have you experienced any effects from that?”

Tony wasn’t surprised to find that Wanda’s meddling hadn’t been a one off thing. He’d noticed the frequency and severity of his nightmares had increased after every visit to the Compound and while he’d never articulated his suspicions as to why, he hadn’t ignored them, either. It was why he’d started finding more and more excuses to stay away. Which in retrospect had probably been considered a godsend by Rogers. It was much harder to lie to someone’s face than it was behind their back.

“Not that I know of,” he said. “But I honestly didn’t realise she’d tried more than one. I mean, I’m not surprised to hear it but I don’t know if any of her influence is still there.”

“The apple would have removed any of the witch’s influences from your mind.”

Tony yelped and whirled around to glare at Loki, who was leaning against the wall further down the corridor. “I’m going to get you a bell!”

Loki looked amused. “Perhaps I should announce myself in the future? A choir singing my praises or a suitable fanfare?”

“How about just not appearing out of nowhere?” Tony grumbled. “And I thought you had Asgard things you couldn’t avoid.”

Loki grimaced. “That is what I have come to speak to you about. I may have to abandon Asgard sooner than I’d hoped.”

“The All-Daddy showing signs of waking up?” Tony asked shrewdly.

Loki nodded. “He is.”

“Will that put us in danger?”

Loki shook his head. “No. He is unlikely to make much in the way of changes to what I have done. He will not able to in the short term without raising serious questions and in the long term…” He shrugged. “I have left detailed notes as to the reasons why I have done all that I have done. Odin is very good at avoiding things he doesn’t want to deal with but he has an Infinity Stone in his vault. He will not be able to ignore this and even the most rudimentary investigation will confirm what I have left for him.”

“Right,” Tony said dryly then his gaze sharpened. “You said something about the apple removing Wanda’s magic from my mind?”

Loki nodded. “It was there. I noticed it when I first got you to Asgard. I had intended to tell you and offer to remove it myself but then your injuries proved to be more than I could personally handle. Once I ascertained that the apple would be needed, I confess it slipped my mind. I knew the apple would take care of it and we had more important things to deal with.”
Tony stared at him for a moment. “Just a hint… next time, *tell me* that sort of thing, no matter what.”

Loki inclined his head. “I will and I apologise.” He raised an eyebrow. “Not that she could touch your mind now. There are those who could but not her.”

“If I may ask,” Vision said. His tone was polite but he looked very disturbed. “What had she done to Tony?”

“I didn’t look closely enough to be sure once I decided on the apple but it was malicious,” Loki replied. His gaze was curious as it looked upon the synthezoid though the discomfort was obvious, if fleeting, when he reached the Mind Stone gleaming in Vision’s forehead. “The Mind Stone isn’t malicious in and of itself but it has not been treated well over the years… even by myself. That it has created a being like you instead of one of malice…” He inclined his head towards Tony. “You may consider that your influence and that of your AI and Banner.”

Tony was taken aback and for one of the few times in his life, speechless. The idea that Vision was good was because of him, and of something he’d created was… not something he’d ever considered. He’d always taken the blame for Ultron. He’d never considered that he might also take the credit for Vision. As he processed all of that, Loki turned to Vision.

“And you are?”

“Vision,” the synthezoid said with a small bow. “As you seem aware, I was created from a combination of the Mind Stone, JARVIS and Thor’s… blessing, for lack of a better word. My body had been created by Ultron for his own purposes.”

Loki nodded. “And Ultron?”

“An AI from the Mind Stone for all intents and purposes.”

“A… sentience might be a better word for what existed in the Mind Stone,” Loki said. “And it was not truly a part of the Mind Stone, which I suspect you have been puzzling about. How Ultron could be evil and yet you are not?”

“It has been on my mind,” Vision replied. “What was this sentience?”

“I don’t know,” Loki admitted. “I was aware of its presence when I possess the sceptre but the sceptre was designed to contain the sentience and allow me to use the power of the Mind Stone. Was the sceptre damaged?”

“No,” Tony said, coming into the conversation. His expression said he’d heard all of it, even while concentrating on his own problems. “But Bruce and I had connected it up so we could examine it.”

“So the sentience had a path out,” Loki said with a nod, satisfied by the explanation. “What happened to it?”

“Ultron was destroyed,” Vision replied. “I can only presume the sentience was indeed destroyed as we have seen no sign of it.” He cocked his head curiously. “Could this sentience have influenced those the Mind Stone was used upon? You say it was malicious.”

Loki considered that question. “I can’t say for sure but it is possible.”

Vision looked over at Tony. “That may explain Wanda. The malice of the sentience could have worked on her own obsessions and delusions. From what I have been able to ascertain, it was her, not Pietro, who held the deep-seated belief that you were to blame for their parents’ deaths.” He
cocked his head thoughtfully. “Or rather, he believed because she believed.”

“He was the follower then?” Tony asked. “And she was the leader?”

Vision nodded. “Yes, that is my belief.”

Loki looked intrigued. “It is possible that she possessed part of that sentience. It may have tried to escape via her when the Mind Stone was used to enhance her.” He huffed. “But it is also something of a moot point given the woman is dead.”

“True,” Tony said. “So, was there a reason for your visit other than to tell me that we might have to move to Plan B a little sooner than we expected?”

Both Tony and Vision were surprised when a faint tinge of pink shaded Loki’s pale cheeks before fading again. “You did promise to explain the allure behind... pizza,” Loki said, saying the last word with something that could really only be called confused disdain.

Tony grinned. “Yeah, I did, didn’t I? Well, come on then.” He looked over at Vision. “Want to join us, Viz? I know food isn’t really your thing but I can explain why the toppings are the way they are.”

Vision looked amused then his gaze flickered over to Loki momentarily. “Thank you for the offer, Tony, but I will decline. I have much to think on.”

Tony nodded then ushered Loki towards the common room, one hand resting on the small of his back. “FRI! Order us up a range of pizzas, okay? A bit of everything so Loki-doki can see the magnificence of pizza.”

“I’m on it, boss,” FRIDAY said cheerfully in reply.

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Tony closed the door to the meeting room with a sigh of relief. Besides him, Loki looked exhausted and drained and Tony gave him a small nudge. “Wanna blow this popsicle stand?”

Loki blinked and stared blankly at him. “If that was a suggestion we leave, then my answer is yes.”

Tony chuckled and gestured down the corridor. “Yeah, it was. Come on.”

They made their way out of the building and down into the carpark in silence. Happy was waiting for them and when they were both in the car, he drove them out into the street.

“Where to, boss?”


“Got it.”

Happy wound the window up between the front and back to give them some privacy and they both slumped down in the seat.

“Does your Council always ask the same question five times?” Loki grumbled.

“Probably,” Tony replied. “Besides it usually wasn’t the same question, just a variation to see if they could prompt your memory with any more detail.”

Loki groused and muttered under his breath and leaned against Tony. “I suppose I should not
complain too much. At least they asked questions. That is far more than Odin ever did.”

“Odin is a real dick,” Tony said. He could feel the heat in his cheeks from having Loki so close, partly because Loki was so stand-offish that he felt rather honoured that he was trusted enough for that kind of close contact but mostly because it was Loki and as much Tony had tried to deny it, he did find the man attractive. “I think you win the sucky father award.”

“I wasn’t aware it was a competition,” Loki said dryly.

“It probably shouldn’t be and yet…” Tony said with a wry smile.

“Boss?” FRIDAY said of the car’s speakers before Loki could say anything.

“Yeah, FRI?”

“There are reports of some sort of commotion in Wakanda.”

Tony frowned. “Reports? The press still don’t have access.” He sighed. “FRIDAY? Are you spying on Wakanda?”

“Not… really?” FRIDAY replied, sounding a little sheepish. “I mean, I was but then I got caught by Princess Shuri and we started talking and she’s… a little arrogant but she’s really nice and smart underneath that. I like talking to her.”

“Oookay,” Tony said. “We’ll discuss that later. What are these reports?”

“I can’t really tell,” FRIDAY replied. “Shuri’s lab has been put on lockdown by the Dora Milaje and she’s busy with whatever’s going on and can’t talk to me.”

“Internal trouble or external trouble?” Tony said, aware Loki was listening, though he was still leaning against him.

“I can’t tell,” FRIDAY replied. She hesitated for a moment. “But I have heard Rogers’ name mentioned.”

Tony gave a deep, weary sigh. “Of course it has. The man’s not even compos mentis and he’s still causing trouble.”

“I’m not sure he is,” FRIDAY said slowly then she paused for a moment. “Oh, Princess Shuri would like to talk to you, boss.”


“Dr Stark?” came a young female voice.

Tony immediately straightened a little because Shuri sounded scared and whatever sins Wakanda and her brother had committed, Tony hated hearing a kid sound scared. “Yes, I’m here. What’s happening, Your Highness?”

“Just Shuri, please,” she said, her voice shaking a little. “I can’t get much in the way of details but the Dora Milaje are saying that it’s the Scarlet Witch and she’s come for Rogers.”

Tony straightened up completely and Loki pulled away. He mourned the loss for a moment but he couldn’t dwell on it. “The witch? Maximoff? Are you sure?”

“We thought she was dead too,” Shuri replied. They heard a muffled voice from the background
then Shuri spoke again. “My brother went to sort things out but… they’re saying he’s attacking anyone who gets in his way. He seems to be escorting them towards the hangar bay.”

Tony grimaced then squared his shoulders. “Tell your people to let them pass. Maximoff’s controlling your brother and she won’t hesitate to use him to go through anyone who gets in her way. With any luck, she’ll discard him once she gets to a jet. I’m assuming you have trackers in your jets?”

“We do,” Shuri replied after she given some orders to whoever was with her. “And in the Black Panther suit.” She paused. “Do you really think she’ll let him go?”

“I hope so,” Tony replied. “But we’ll have to plan for her taking him with her. What’s Rogers’ condition?”

“Unknown,” Shuri replied. “But she came for him so I’m presuming his mental state is her doing. Physically he’s lost some condition but not much. The serum kept him healthy even when he was screaming.”

“Right.” Tony scrubbed his face and a screen burst into life in front of him with a message that his suit was inbound and would meet the car in a couple of minutes and that Rhodey and Carol had been alerted. “Your Highness, do I and the other members of the Taskforce have permission to enter Wakanda to offer assistance?” He glanced over at Loki and raised an eyebrow. At his nod, Tony continued, “We’ll be bringing an expert in magic as well, if that’s okay?”

There was some muffled discussion and then Shuri was back. “Yes, Dr Stark. We’re sending you coordinates now.”

“Thank you,” Tony replied. “I’ll get back to you with an ETA as soon as I have one.”

The line went dead and that was when Tony noticed that Happy had turned and was heading towards the airport.

“Got a message to meet the quinjet there,” he said to Tony’s unspoken question. “The suit’s been diverted to meet us there.”

“Good.” Tony turned to Loki. “What do you think you can do against Maximoff’s magic?”

“I don’t know,” Loki replied. “But from what you and Thor have said and what I felt of her magic in your mind, I am confident of my abilities against her. Assuming she will still be there, which I doubt.”

“Yeah, my guess is she’ll be long gone by the time we get there,” Tony said with a grimace. “But you’ll have victims to help and examine.”

Loki nodded. “Good.” He paused and rolled his eyes. “Well, not good but you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do,” Tony said with a snort.

They arrived at the airport in short order and found the quinjet waiting for them. As Tony stepped out of the car, the armour swooped down and wrapped itself around him, with only the helmet not making an appearance. He followed Loki onto the jet and within a few minutes, they were taking off. Tony sent their ETA through to Shuri then looked around at who had been able to respond to the quick call. Carol and Rhodey were there, along with Vision and Loki, but he was surprised to see the other passenger on the jet.
“Hope,” he said, giving her a nod. “I thought you were in San Francisco this week.”

“I was,” she said wry humour. “I’d come back over to discuss a couple of things with Carol regarding Scott and the call came in. Since I was here…” She shrugged and the wasp wings of her suit gleamed as they moved behind her.

Tony had been surprised to find that Hope had joined the Taskforce but after meeting her, he’d soon discovered that Hank’s distaste for all things Stark had not been picked up by his daughter. In fact, Hope had been more apologetic than anything else, clearly frustrated and angry at Scott’s behaviour. For his part, Tony had been philosophical about it all, though he did have some plans for a nanotech suit to ensure that the Ant-Man thing couldn’t happen again.

“Glad to have you,” he said as he shifted position as the jet banked sharply. “Is the Council up to speed?”

“They know what we know,” Rhodey replied. “We have approval to do whatever is necessary in regards to Maximoff and Rogers but they want a full debrief from you as well as Carol and myself when we get back.”

Tony nodded. “That’s going to be fun. The only reason I knew so quickly is because FRIDAY’s been making friends in interesting places.”

Rhodey paused. “They know about FRIDAY so I don’t think they’ll be concerned about her. They just want the details. This did come out of left field for everyone.”

“I notice no one’s asked the burning question,” Tony said dryly. “How the hell did Maximoff survive?”

“Would it be possible to see footage of the original incident?” Loki asked from where he was somehow managing to lounge indolently in one of the seats.

“FRI?” Tony said.

One of the screens in the jet burst to life and displayed the incident in question. Loki watched intently then asked for FRIDAY to replay it and slow it down.

“Pause it,” he said sharply then tapped the screen. “Look there.”

They all crowded in and stared at the screen. “Not sure what you’re seeing, Lokes,” Tony said.

“FRIDAY, please move it forward just a fraction,” Loki said.

The picture on the screen shifted slightly and they saw the faint image of something that looked like a fuzzy red line.

“What is that?” Hope asked, frowning.

“A portal of some description,” Loki replied. “A messy one so I doubt she did it consciously.”

“Dammit,” Rhodey muttered. “I thought Stephen looked at this. How did he miss it?”

“Because he wasn’t looking for it,” Loki replied smugly then he let the smug attitude drop and shrugged. “Why would he have? She appeared to be dead. This…” He gestured towards the screen. “I only saw it because I was expecting it to be there and looking for it. It lasts the barest fraction of a second, just long enough to engulf her, before it disappears.”
“So while we thought she was reduced to molecules, it was actually a case of her magic letting her escape,” Rhodey said sourly.

“If it is any consolation, I doubt it was something she did consciously,” Loki replied. He waved a hand at the screen again. “My modes of transport are different but the elves of Vanaheim use portals such as this. This…” He scowled. “I honestly cannot tell if the woman is well trained or poorly trained.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Really? Why?”

“Use of portals should have been a basic lesson purely because the misuse of them can be…” Loki shuddered. “Disastrous. She clearly has no experience or training in establishing or using them. However, from what I have seen, she shows immense skill and control in other aspects of her powers.”

“Could it be because they are not something that is natural to her?” Carol asked.

Loki considered that for a moment. “It’s possible. Are there any records of what was done?”

“Maybe,” Tony replied. “I’ll have FRIDAY start digging in the SHIELD data dump as well as everything that was extracted from the HYDRA base in Sokovia.”

“I’ll get my best shovel out,” FRIDAY said. “Princess Shuri reports that one of the Wakandan jets has taken off with Maximoff, Rogers and King T’Challa on board.”

“Crap,” Tony said with a grimace. “I was afraid of that. She needed someone to fly the damn thing

Carol nodded. “I expected it as well. It’s… a problem but we’ll deal with things as they come. I take it Princess Shuri is stepping in.”

FRIDAY paused for a moment then opened a communications channel. “Dr Stark?”

There was still an edge of fear in Shuri’s voice but she sounded steadier and calmer than she had before. Tony nodded in silent approval and he could see some of the others doing so as well.

“I’m here,” he said. “I have Captain Marvel, War Machine, Vision, Wasp and Loki on board as well.”

Another voice came over the line from Wakanda. “I am Queen Ramonda, the Queen Mother. I have General Okoye and Ayo from the Dora Milaje with me. May we open a video channel?”

“Of course,” Tony replied. A moment later a screen burst into life and they saw four weary and worried women standing in a high tech laboratory. “What’s the situation there? We know Maximoff has taken the King with her and Rogers.”

“We have many injured,” Okoye said stiffly. “The Black Panther was ruthless in his attacks but he did not seem inclined to… finish his kills.”

“Probably Maximoff’s influence,” Tony said. “She probably wanted to get out as quickly as possible, not get bogged down.” He glanced over at Loki. “Any idea how much effort it would be to control two minds?”

Loki frowned. “Unknown. It depends on how much of what she does is control and how much is influence. Taking control of another’s mind is… tiring, especially if they are fighting you. Using an artefact like the sceptre I was given by Thanos makes things easier. On the other hand, influencing
another’s mind is easier but they are more likely to break free if they are strong-willed or being asked to do something that is utterly against their normal principles.”

“I think we can say that King T’Challa is being controlled then,” Okoye replied, eying Loki curiously. His involvement now wasn’t widely known but it would be soon so Tony wasn’t concerned. “He would never attack his own people in the manner he did.” She paused. “And he would certainly have never attacked the people that he did.”

“Was it only the King whom she controlled or did she attack anyone else?” Carol asked.

“She attacked the guards and staff who were on duty where Rogers was being kept,” Ramonda said, her serenity still intact but a little frayed at the edges. “Many of them are… still affected.”

“I will examine them when we arrive,” Loki said. “I would like to see the effects of Maximoff’s magic and I will do my best to remove it.”

“Thank you, Prince Loki,” Ramonda said, inclining her head regally.

Tony saw the way Loki twitched at that form of address but he didn’t say anything, just bowed to the Queen Mother in return.

“If you’re able to track the jet, we might be better off dropping Loki off and following them right now,” Rhodey said. “I don’t think we want to allow Maximoff to get dug in somewhere and have both a super soldier and the Black Panther at her beck and call.”

“I can pass on the tracking information to you,” Shuri said.

“And Ayo and I will come with you,” Okoye added with the air of a woman who was in no mood to be crossed.

Carol and Rhodey exchanged glances. “I’ll go clear it with the Council,” Rhodey said before clumping off towards another part of the jet.

“I don’t think the Council will object,” Carol said smoothly. “However, we want Maximoff alive.”

Okoye went very still then she seemed to drag a semblance of calmness about her like a cloak. “Of course,” she said. “However, Wakanda will likely seek to extradite Maximoff to answer for her crimes here.”

“You’ll be joining a number of nations in that wish,” Tony said dryly. “I’m fairly sure Sokovia gets first dibs though.”

Okoye arched an eyebrow. “They do have a greater grievance.”

“I think there will be plenty of litigation and criminal charges for everyone,” Carol said. “Let’s catch them first.”

Okoye gave a curt nod. “What is your plan?”

Carol’s eyes narrowed. “Vision? Can you contain Maximoff?”

Vision nodded. “I can,” he said calmly. “You may rest assured that I feel no conflict in taking this action. She must be stopped.”

They’re not in their right minds and whatever crimes Rogers may be guilty of are to be dealt with in a court of law.”

There were nods and other indications of agreement from everyone then Rhodey rejoined them.

“The Council have given approval for General Okoye and Ayo to join us,” he said. “Though they want a full briefing as to what happened in Wakanda from the first indication that something was wrong.”

“I will do that,” Okoye said with another of those curt nods.

Tony had gone over to one of the storage lockers on the jet while that conversation had been going on and he pulled a few items out. The first one – a collar – he handed to Vision.

“New and improved version,” he said in reply to Vision’s unspoken question. “Courtesy of some discussions with Loki.”

“Ah, yes,” Loki said, peering over Tony’s shoulder at the mention of his name, his face very close to Tony’s, which he was pleased to see made Tony shiver and blush just a little. He then nodded to Vision. “It will supress her magic without harming her, even if she should try to use it. It is related to the muzzle and chains Thor used on me after my little coerced invasion.”

Vision nodded and tucked the collar away. “That is acceptable.”

Tony did his best to ignore the presence of the god at his back as he held up a set of handcuffs to Okoye. “Not vibranium but Starkanium. They’ll hold Rogers so they should hold T’Challa. Unless you have something better, which, frankly, you probably do.”

Okoye’s lips thinned. “We do and we would prefer to use them.”

“No problems.” Tony nodded and tucked the handcuffs into a compartment in his armour. He tossed the other pair to Rhodey.

“Boss? We’re five minutes out from the Wakandan border,” FRIDAY reported.

“We have already given you approval to enter and land at the capital,” Shuri said. “You should be able to pick up the transponder once you pass the border.”

The rest of the trip to the Birnin Zana was spent discussing tactics and plans for dealing with Maximoff, Rogers and T’Challa. As they started to land, Hope suddenly gave a low whistle of admiration. Tony turned and his eyes widened.

“Beautiful,” he murmured.

“Thank you, Dr Stark,” Shuri said with a wan smile. “Perhaps one day soon, you might be able to return under better circumstances. I would very much enjoy sciencing with you.”

Tony turned towards the video screen and gave her a small smile. “I’d love that.” He chuckled. “I need to introduce you to someone I know. You and he and others like you are going to do amazing things in the future.”

He saw the surprised and curious looks from the Queen Mother, Okoye and Ayo but there was no time to deal with whatever that was about. They landed smoothly and the hatch descended. Loki quickly made his way off the jet to be replaced by Okoye and Ayo.
“Princess Shuri will ensure Prince Loki can work unimpeded,” Ayo said with a small nod.

Tony sighed softly. “Thank you.” He straightened. “FRI? Has Shuri sent you the tracking information?”

“Yes, boss,” FRIDAY replied as they smoothly lifted off. “They’re heading north-north-east and are approximately two hours ahead of us.”

“Any indication of a destination?” Okoye asked. There was a faint frown creasing her forehead when she looked around and saw no one sitting in the pilot’s seat.

“No, General,” FRIDAY replied. “But their heading will take them towards Eastern Europe. It’s possible they’re heading to Sokovia.”

Carol shook her head. “I’ll tell the Council and get clearance.”

“If it is Sokovia, they are not going to be happy,” Rhodey said quietly. “Hopefully they’ll be willing to let us take the lead.”

“Why wouldn’t they?” Ayo asked, a little suspicious.

“Because they don’t have a great track record with Avengers,” Rhodey replied. “But they grudgingly respect Tony. And Vision and I are the only other ones who were involved in that mess so that should help.”

“And the fact that it’s Maximoff,” Tony said dryly. “She’s not exactly their favourite person. They’ve never bought into Rogers’ ‘little girl’ rhetoric.”

Ayo raised an eyebrow. “His what?”

“He calls her a kid,” Tony replied. “Which she very much isn’t. I never figured out whether that was him projecting or whether she was screwing with his mind for some reason.”

“That explains a great deal,” Ayo said with distaste.

Carol returned. “Sokovia are definitely not happy but they’ve given us permission to take whatever action is needed if that’s where Maximoff is heading. They just ask for some forewarning so they can evacuate people.”

Tony nodded. “More than fair.”

“The Council have asked us to keep in contact in case she’s not going to Sokovia,” Carol continued. “They’re going to contact all countries in the vicinity to warn them and obtain permission for our entry.”

Tony nodded then snorted. “Well, if nothing else, this will be an excellent test of the Accords’ emergency provisions.”

There were nods and various indications of agreement then they turned their attention to the map showing Maximoff’s location and their various plans. None of the original Avengers were surprised when the dot that indicated the jet containing Maximoff, Rogers and T’Challa came to a halt at the coordinates of the Sokovian HYDRA base. Carol immediately sent the information to the Council.

“Why there?” Tony mused.

“How much was left?” Carol asked.
Tony shrugged. “The building is fairly intact but the Sokovian government ordered it to be stripped of everything inside. I was only peripherally involved in that since they were still very unhappy about Ultron even with the results of the official investigation so I don’t know what they actually took out and what they left behind.”

“Could just be a familiar place,” Rhodey suggested. “She’s going to ground in a place she knows and feels she can defend.”

“FRI? Get the plans for the base up on the screen.”

The plans appeared a second later and they examined them closely, pointing out various areas that might appeal as a safe haven. As they got closer, Tony moved away to send out a couple of scouting drones ahead of them towards the base and as they returned their information, they added it to the plans. Finally one of the drones got close enough to send back heat readings and Tony grimaced.

“That’s the room where I found the sceptre,” he said. He was silent for a moment before continuing, “and where Maximoff first fucked with my mind.”

“Tones,” Rhodey began.

Tony smiled slightly. “Don’t worry. She can’t do that anymore. The apple did more than just make me look awesome and reconstruct my insides.” He grimaced. “Well, she possibly could get back in but not without making a supreme effort and I’d notice her. And put her down.”

“I will make containing Ms Maximoff a priority,” Vision said firmly. “While you and I and most likely Colonel Danvers possess some resistance to her, the others do not.” He cocked his head slightly, looking thoughtful. “It is also possible that containing her will break at least King T’Challa free of her control.”

“You don’t think Rogers will break free?” Carol asked curiously.

“It should have that effect,” Vision replied. “But he had shown marked favouritism towards her even prior to the events in Wakanda. In his case, he may not need her control to fight against us.”

“Yeah, I always thought that was a bit weird but who the hell was I going to tell about it who could actually do something,” Tony grumbled. “Captain America sheltering the HYDRA witch never sat right.”

“Was he trying to smooth the way for Barnes?” Rhodey said, one eyebrow raised. “Get the HYDRA volunteer accepted and it’ll be easier to get the HYDRA victim accepted?”

Tony shrugged. “Possibly. There was a time I would have said that was a bit too Machiavellian for him but then he proved he could lie better than pretty much anyone I’ve ever met so…” He shrugged again.

“Does it matter?”

They looked over at Okoye and saw that her expression wasn’t censorious as the question might suggest but more fatalistic than anything else.

“I suppose not,” Tony said. “He did it and that’s all that really matters in the long run. The why doesn’t change what we’re dealing with now.”

Okoye gave him a small nod of approval. “When he is back in his right mind, King T’Challa will trust us…” She gestured to herself and Ayo. “One of us will remain at his side to protect him while
the other will join with Colonel Danvers to assist you with Captain America, if it is needed.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Carol said with a pleased nod of her own. “Did Rogers take any weapons with him?”

Okoye shook her head. “No, he was unarmed but… surprisingly strong given his inactivity these past months.”

Hope leaned forward a little. “I know he can, as my aunt always used to say, take a licking and keep on ticking but he still feels pain normally, doesn’t he?”

“Yes,” Tony replied. “He’s just able to ignore it because he knows he’ll heal.”

Hope gave a tiny smirk. “Well, that all depends on where the pain is.”

“What are you thinking?”

“You and James distract him and I’ll go in small and give him something to really think about,” Hope replied. “Do you have any idea how sensitive the ear drum is and how much it would really hurt if I shot my wasp stings at them?”

Tony snickered. “No, but I’m guessing Rogers is going to find out.”

“He’ll probably lash out,” Hope warned. “But at least he won’t be targeting anything specifically.”

There were amused looks all round before FRIDAY gave them the signal that they were arriving at the abandoned HYDRA base. They quickly got ready and when the jet landed, they hurried off. FRIDAY immediately got the jet off the ground and set its course to a nearby military base where they’d earlier obtained clearance to park it. Both Tony and Rhodey had a habit of learning from their mistakes and leaving a jet on the ground to be stolen was not something they were going to do again.

From there they separated and headed for their planned entrances. Tony and Rhodey headed for the main entrance, a tiny Wasp circling over their heads. The doors to the base were closed and Tony exchanged a glance with his friend before they both blasted it open with their repulsors. They clumped their way into the base, making no effort to be subtle, as FRIDAY whispered intel into their ears from where she was monitoring heat signatures and trackers using the drones.

It didn’t take long before she gave them their warning of Rogers and T’Challa’s approach. Tony didn’t bother looking around for Carol, Okoye and Ayo. They knew what they were doing and FRIDAY would be feeding them information as well.

The attack, when it came, was without any warning other than FRIDAY’s. One moment they were making their way through what looked like an abandoned cafeteria and the next, Rogers had come charging silently through the doors they’d been heading for. A black flash to their side indicated T’Challa’s arrival.

Tony didn’t hesitate and immediately blasted Rogers with a repulsor, sending him flying back across the room. FRIDAY flashed an alert about T’Challa across his HUD but before he could even turn, Okoye and Ayo had leapt out and grabbed their king’s arm, allowing Carol to unleash her strength against him. With that battle in hand, Tony turned his attention fully on Rogers and he and Rhodey split up, forcing Rogers to concentrate entirely on both of them. Unlike his last fight with the super soldier, this one was in his favour. He wasn’t planning on holding back any more than he had to and he had Rhodey with him.

Suddenly, Rogers lurched backwards and screamed in agony, his hand clapping over his right ear.
He lurched to the left, an unconscious – and ultimately futile – move to try and get away from the pain, before he started beating at the side of his head with one fist.

“Wasp, are you out?” Tony snapped.

“I’m clear,” Hope replied. “Yikes, I think he was extra sensitive to the stings… or it was the noise of them. Or both.”

“Tones, let’s corral him in the corner and get him restrained,” Rhodey said, his order crisp and clear.

They had just taken a step towards Rogers when there was a pulse of red that seemed to run through the whole building. Tony heard Rhodey grunt and the War Machine armour went down on one knee. Alerts on the HUD told him that Okoye, Ayo and Hope were suffering from whatever had hit Rhodey while Carol was still shaking it off. Rogers was still huddled against the wall, clutching at the side of his head. Tony was surprised to find that he felt fine. There was a feeling of intrusion at the edge of his mind but it faded quickly.

Which was just as well because a moment later he was sent stumbling forward as T’Challa leapt onto the back of his armour, his claws screeching along the gold-titanium. Tony swore, knowing the metal of the suit wouldn’t stand up to those vibranium claws for long. He fired his repulsors and rocketed towards the ceiling, slamming into it back first… or rather, T’Challa first. The impact was heavy and rocked Tony even in his suit. He dropped and T’Challa slid off his back and dropped unceremoniously to the ground, though Tony could see that he was stunned rather than actually unconscious.

He glanced over at Rogers and saw he was starting to overcome whatever Hope had done to him and he made a split decision. He was confident he could take Rogers or T’Challa on their own, though they’d all end up a bit more damaged than originally intended, but they needed to deal with the real problem – Maximoff.

“FRI, where’s Vision?” he snapped.

A small map immediately appeared in the HUD. “Maximoff didn’t bother with any niceties, boss,” FRIDAY added. “She attacked him immediately. I estimate he’s going to win but it’s taking time.”

“Right.”

Tony didn’t bother with any niceties of his own and simply smashed his way through the walls to the room where Vision and Maximoff were fighting. The moment she caught sight of him, Maximoff screamed and sent a wave of red in his direction. He and the suit were sent crashing back into the wall he’d just smashed through and Tony immediately felt pressure against his mind as she tried to force her way in.

“What have you done?” she screeched. “LET! ME! IN!”

Tony didn’t have to answer her. Vision had taken advantage of the distraction Tony had provided and now he clapped his hands on either side of her head. She screamed twice, first in rage then in fear, then she slumped down in his grip. Vision eyed her warily for a moment then in a swift move, he removed the collar from wherever he’d hidden it and fitted it around her neck. Only then did he let her go entirely and she slumped to the ground.

Tony shoved himself to his feet. “Take her to the jet,” he said before turning back to the battle he’d abandoned.

When he got back to the cafeteria, he found that T’Challa was slumped against one wall, looking
dazed and confused, Ayo crouched beside him protectively. On the other side of the room, Rogers was being held down by Carol and Rhodey while Hope and Okoye secured him with restraints and the gag that had been decided on after Tony had warned them.

“Maximoff?” Carol barked even as she finished what she was doing.

“Contained,” Tony replied. “Vision’s taking her up to the jet.”

“What happened?” Rhodey asked.

“She wasn’t inclined to care about any past friendship they might have had,” Tony said dryly. “She was giving Vision a run for his money. FRIDAY believed he’d win eventually. It was the eventually part that I wasn’t prepared to wait for.”

Once Rogers was restrained Carol stood up and grimaced. “I understand why you were so wary of her now. She packs a hell of a mental punch.”

“Dr Stark?”

Tony turned at the weak request and let the suit unfold from around him. He walked over and crouched down in front of T’Challa. Ayo was still almost vibrating with anger so he was careful to telegraph his moves so as not to agitate her any further.

“Your Majesty,” he said, checking T’Challa’s eyes for any residual redness. “How are you feeling?”

“Unpleasantly like I have been thrown into a ceiling and been given a beating by the Dora Milaje,” he said with wan humour.

“Well, I suppose that’s okay then,” Tony said with an amused snort. “How’s the head?”

“Confused,” T’Challa admitted. “I…”

Tony waved a hand. “Don’t apologise, Your Majesty. We’ll probably need Loki or a Wakandan expert, if you have one, to confirm it for the record but Maximoff had you under pretty tight control.”

“Yes, she did,” T’Challa said, his voice sounding stronger as anger started to filter through. “She was supposed to be dead.” He shook his head. “Forgive me, Dr Stark. We should have made sure.”

Tony waved that away as well. “No one knew so I’m not sure why you should be any different. She ended up being capable of a few things we didn’t know about.” He snorted. “If anything, it’s something else to lay at Rogers’ feet. He’s the one who refused to let her be independently assessed.”

“That was on the table?” Ayo asked, her voice low and intent.

Tony nodded. “After the mess in Sokovia, yes. But Rogers stood up and puffed out his chest and insisted she was fine. I objected but the investigation into Ultron hadn’t been completed at that point so I didn’t have much leverage.” He snorted. “Let’s face it. I never had much leverage with Rogers at any time. My fault. I should have taken their money and toys away much earlier and maybe half of this crap wouldn’t have occurred.”

“I believe you have a saying about hindsight,” T’Challa said as he slowly levered himself to his feet.

Tony nodded as he got up as well. “We do and I take your point. Now, let’s get you back to Wakanda. Your mother and sister are pretty damn worried.”

“You spoke to them?” T’Challa said as Carol picked up Rogers and tossed him over her shoulder,
ignoring his muffled protests.

Tony was impressed but he quickly had to control the giggles that were threatening at Rhodey’s look of somewhat lovestruck awe. A quick glance at Hope, Okoye and Ayo showed him that they’d seen that expression as well. Hope looked like she was also trying not to giggle while Okoye and Ayo both looked like they approved. Tony could understand that. Who didn’t like a man who openly adored a strong woman?

“Yes,” he said, hoping he’d managed a decent poker face. From the rampant amusement when the others looked at him, he hadn’t succeeded very well. “FRIDAY… my AI, FRIDAY… has been talking to your sister for a while now apparently.”

T’Challa nodded and sighed as he allowed himself to lean on his General’s shoulder. “I was aware of that. Shuri was most put out that she managed to hack our systems but she seems to like FRIDAY very much now.” He eyed Tony curiously. “They seem much of an age, which I was not aware AIs could be like.”

“My AIs are learning AIs,” Tony said as they trooped through the corridors of the base. He felt it was an odd conversation to be having right now, especially with a man he really didn’t know, but from the pinched look on T’Challa’s face, the king was trying to avoid thinking about a few things and from the way he was leaning on Okoye’s shoulder, he was also trying to ignore something that hurt a fair bit. Tony knew that feeling so he was willing to play along. “FRIDAY is very young so the analogy is pretty much correct. My previous AI was more sophisticated but he had also been around for almost thirty years.”

“Is he… no longer with you?” T’Challa said, the pause caused by him swallowing some sort of sound of discomfort.

Tony grimaced. “He was killed by Ultron,” he said flatly.

Conversation halted as they emerged into the sunlight, much to Tony’s relief, and they made their way over to the jet. T’Challa was helped into a seat and Okoye and Ayo immediately liberated one of the first aid kits to take care of his injuries as best as they could. Carol unceremoniously dumped Rogers into one of the seats in the rear of the plane and secured him there. Hope then moved to stand guard over him. Vision had already secured an unconscious Wanda into a seat and Carol checked with him briefly before joining Rhodey to report in to the Council. Tony sat down in the pilot’s seat and prepared to fly them back to Wakanda. He didn’t have to but he enjoyed the exercise and it was a helpful distraction from everything that had happened.

Their return to Wakanda was heralded with much in the way of relief and they were able to conduct their initial debrief from there. Once that was done, they were escorted to rooms in the palace to rest. They would have returned immediately but the Wakandans seemed determined to show them hospitality and Tony, Rhodey and Carol had agreed that it would probably be best to remain for the moment.

Tony was a more than a little surprised to walk into the rooms he’d been assigned to find Loki already there, slouched on a large wicker chair on the balcony. “Uh,” he looked back at the closed door. “Did I get the wrong directions?”

Loki glanced over his shoulder then very studiously turned back to stare out over the jungle beyond the palace. “These people seem to be under the impression that we are together.”

“Oh,” Tony said, a little nonplussed. He wasn’t sure how they’d gotten that impression unless… unless Okoye and Ayo had misread Loki’s actions on the jet before they’d dropped him off here. He
frowned a little. That was a lot to read into a relatively small action unless small actions had big meanings here. Not that he didn’t wish it was true but he couldn’t quite read Loki as well as other people so he’d never been entirely certain whether Loki’s small actions and flirtations meant more than just some momentary amusement. And he hadn’t been willing to take a chance either. Not so much because he had been, in a way, at Loki’s mercy in that little house on the edges of Asgard but because he and Loki had actually developed a friendship and he hadn’t wanted to do anything to ruin that.

“I can make my way back to the Compound,” Loki said, his voice devoid of emotion.

“No!” Tony said hurriedly before coughing slightly and licking his lips. “You… don’t have to do that.”

Loki twisted around to stare at him intently, his eyes narrow. Whatever he saw in Tony’s expression had him rising to his feet and prowling over in a way that made Tony’s breath catch slightly. “So,” he said as he closed the gap between them. “Are we finally going to address this… thing we have both been very firmly ignoring and refusing to think about, let alone speak of?”

Tony resisted the urge to take a step back and stood his ground as Loki came to a halt in front of him, close but still a gap, a gap that Loki clearly had no intention of crossing. Tony had to crane his neck a little to look Loki in the eye but when he did, it was worth every potential crick in his neck. For once, Loki’s eyes were unguarded and everything Tony hadn’t been able to decipher before was there to see, plain as day. The sheer want and desire left him a little breathless but it was the rest of what was there that made up his mind. The fondness and amusement, the friendship and care, the mischief and chaos that could easily, as it had in the past, be turned to destruction but was so better used for fun and entertainment… and deeper than that, the pain and weariness and betrayal and bitterness that Tony understood so, so well. That echoed with everything that he held inside himself.

He’d always known that he and Loki were well-matched. Look at how easily they’d become friends. He’d known that despite their differences, they were so very similar… and sadly for many of the same reasons. He’d always suspected that their friendship could always spark more. It was just a matter of which way that more went – down a mutual path of destruction and self-destruction that Loki had walked before and Tony had been perilously close to choosing or whether they battled their demons and let their better angels take the lead and choose something that would undoubtedly be full of mischief and chaos but something that was also good for both of them. And Tony wanted that and he believed they could have it. He knew Loki (and even he himself) would have his doubts but something were worth working for, worth fighting for.

So Tony took that deliberate step forward, closing the gap and not quite pressing himself against Loki.

“Yeah,” he breathed as he tilted his chin up in obvious invitation. “Let’s do that.”

Loki’s smile was small and wondrous before morphing into the smirk that always made Tony laugh. He did so now but was quickly silenced when Loki kissed him and then he didn’t much care about anything else for a while.

*****

When Tony and Loki emerged and joined the others the next morning, Rhodey took one look at him and burst out laughing. Tony pouted at him and then poked his tongue out. The Wakandans and most of his team were watching them with confused amusement while Loki just sighed and steered them both over to the large table they were all sitting at, which held a wealth of breakfast foods.
“You’re mean, platypus,” Tony said with a pout that disappeared the moment the cup of coffee appeared under his nose. “Ooh, coffee.”

“And you’re ridiculous,” Rhodey replied. He then nodded towards Ramonda and Shuri who were sitting opposite them. The Queen Mother was watching them with the sort of patient amusement that mothers all over the world master, while Shuri had a look on her face that said louder than words that she thought they were idiots but she liked them anyway.

Tony quickly took another swallow of his coffee and nodded to both of them. “Good morning. How’s T’Challa?”

“He’s… well,” Ramonda said after some consideration. “I was hoping that Prince Loki would be kind enough to examine him this morning to ensure the witch’s influence is gone.” She paused and grimaced. “Our Council is… reluctant to allow him to make decisions on things until they are assured his mind is clear.”

Loki inclined his head. “Of course, Your Highness. I can go now, if you like.”

Ramonda held up one hand. “Not just yet, Your Highness. We also wished to discuss the witch herself. She is currently being held in our prison and there are many here who wish to see her face our justice but I am also aware that her crimes are many and not solely against our people.”

Tony looked over at Rhodey and Carol. “Has the Accords Council made any decisions?”

Carol shook her head. “No. Maximoff is turning out to be a hot potato. Sokovia is the loudest voice, though Nigeria also has their hand up.”

“Wouldn’t Nigeria be less on her and more on Rogers?” Rhodey said. “He was in command and he gave her orders. The fact that she screwed up is bad, yes, but he should never have taken her there if he knew she wasn’t up for it.”

Tony snorted. “I think the idea that Maximoff is untrained is a nice fiction that she and Rogers wanted to sell us, sugarplum.”

“Indeed,” Loki said dryly. “I have reviewed what she has done and she is anything but untrained. She has control over what she does, never doubt that.” He arched an eyebrow. “Do you really think that someone who exerted the kind of skill and control she showed in Sokovia is untrained?”

“And that just makes sense,” Tony added, sparing a small private smile with Loki. “I mean… do you really think HYDRA would have let her loose if she wasn’t in control?”

There was a moment of silence. “Huh,” Rhodey finally said. “Why didn’t we all think of that?”

“Because she was very good at the doe-eyed ingénue act,” Tony said dryly. “And she had Rogers wrapped around her little finger and he wouldn’t hear a word against her. I should know.”

“Apart from all of that, the defence that Rogers was in command holds a lot less water than you think,” Carol added. “That wasn’t a sanctioned Avengers mission. That’s on record. That was just four super-powered people playing cops and robbers in the street. If they wanted the protections of an official mission, they should have made it one, instead of sneaking into the country and going vigilante.”

Tony groaned and drained his coffee. “Yeah, that was more or less what Ross was ranting at me about at the time.” He winced. “I couldn’t actually blame him all that much. He’d been woken up at five o’clock in the morning to take a call from a very angry President of Nigeria about a mission that
he had not been notified about. No one likes being caught with their pants down like that and Ross is no different. Hell, I know Hill didn’t like it when she subsequently got a call from Ross, wanting to know what the hell the Avengers were doing in Lagos and I know I didn’t like it when I got a similar call from Hill.”

“Is that why he took over the briefing?” Rhodey asked. “I know it was supposed to be someone from the UN originally.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah. Ross was sixteen different kinds of pissed off. The fact it was enhanced people running amok didn’t help either. It was exactly the sort of thing he’s been ranting about for years and…” He sighed. “You know, he actually wasn’t really triumphant or smug or anything when I spoke to him. He was pissed off. People had been killed and injured and he was the one fielding the angry phone calls from Nigeria and he couldn’t actually tell them anything. Normally, he, at the very least, got a heads up that a mission was on, along with where and the estimated time frame, even if he didn’t get the details. Whether he paid attention or not, he got the heads up. Now, here’s this unsanctioned mission that apparently no one knew anything about and people have died. In his mind, he’d warned people about this. So he was angry and feeling justified in everything he’s ever thought and said.”

“And then Rogers just played into his game by going even further out of line,” Rhodey said with a snort.

“Pretty much.” Tony shrugged and shook his head. “But back to the actual point of this conversation. Maximoff is well trained and don’t for a moment think otherwise.”

Ramonda nodded and gestured for one of the Dora Milaje standing by the door to come over. She issued a few sharp orders in Xhosa and the Dora snapped a salute and hurried out of the room.

“We’ll reinforce the cell,” she said. “Will the collar hold?”

“Yes,” Tony replied. “It’s an upgrade on the old one and it has some of Loki’s wards on it as well.”

Loki, who had been sipping at a cup of tea, suddenly straightened and put his cup down. He spat out a litany of savage words that none of them understood and Tony placed a hand on his arm.

“What’s up, Reindeer Games?”

In reply, Loki turned to Ramonda. “The guard. Her name?”

Ramonda frowned. “Which one?”

“Teela,” Shuri said, clearly knowing who he was talking about.

“Was she confined?”

Shuri froze. “No. Well, yes and no. She was sent back to her rooms to rest and told to stay there. Okoye ordered Xoliswa and Nareema to stand guard but they weren’t ordered to lock her in. Why?”

Loki was on his feet in a moment, many of the others in the room following suit, confused but willing to follow his lead. He gestured to the remaining Dora Milaje guard. “Take me to her.”

Ramonda’s quick nod had the Dora opening the door. Tony and Carol followed Loki with Carol giving the others orders to stay with Ramonda and Shuri until they got the all clear.

“Something wrong with this woman?” Carol said, easily keeping up with Loki and the Dora.
“There was something lingering in her mind that I couldn’t quite identify but didn’t seem harmful in the immediate,” Loki said, short and terse. “There were others who needed my help more urgently than her so I suggested she be confined until I could get back to her this morning.”

When they got to Teela’s room, they found the door open and the one of the guards unconscious while the other was clutching at her head. Loki knelt in front of her and touched her forehead, green magic flowing briefly over her skull. She gasped then raised her head.

“Which way did Teela go?” Loki demanded.

“Towards the cells,” the woman growled. “Her eyes were red.”

Loki spat out another incomprehensible curse, though it was clear this one was directed at himself more than anything else.

“Let’s go,” he said tersely.

The Dora who had guided him there leapt in front to lead the way and as such, when they reached the cells she bore the brunt of the witch’s initial attack. Green magic caught her before she could impact the wall but she was still unconscious and twitching as Loki lowered her to the ground.

Tony watched him manoeuvre the woman and turned, activating his gauntlet watch, just in time to see a wave of red in front of him. He gave an incoherent yell and tried to throw himself out of the way but then the world went red and all he could do was scream.

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Loki spun around at Tony’s scream and rage flowed through him. He had just readied his magic to take care of the witch when Carol shoved him to the side. She was glowing and furious and the beam of energy she aimed at the witch sent the woman slamming into a wall. Loki had never seen Captain Marvel in full flight before now and he had to admit it was a glorious sight. He sent his magic flowing after her and it wrapped itself around the witch’s neck and wrists in glowing green bands. The witch was no longer conscious to protest the treatment but her tame Dora was.

Teela charged at Carol in silent fury but was easily matched so Loki turned his attention back to Tony. His screams had stopped and it would be easy to mistake him for being unconscious. He wasn’t. He was, instead, trapped and even his binding of the witch had not freed him. Loki held a hand over Tony’s head and swore quietly but vociferously. He looked up again to find that Teela was down and unconscious and Carol was checking the other cells.

“How is he?” she asked once she was done.

Loki looked up at her, his expression grim. “Not good.”

“Jim told me the golden apple would protect him from her magic,” Carol said and Loki bridled until he realised that there was no accusation in her tone, just worry and concern.

“It has,” Loki growled. “Her magic hasn’t been able to penetrate his mind. Since it could not achieve its purpose, it has, for lack of a better word, wrapped itself around his brain. Nothing in, nothing out.”

“Like sensory deprivation?” Carol said.

Loki nodded. “That would be an adequate translation.”
“Knocking her out didn’t stop it?” Carol asked with a gesture towards the unconscious and bound witch.

“No,” Loki said tersely. His lips thinned and his expression became sulphurous. “She has… let the magic go. It is surviving without her constant input.”

“How?” Carol asked and when he snarled at her, she raised an eyebrow. “Is that because you don’t know or because she’s done something completely irresponsible?”

“The latter,” Loki snapped. “She must have seen you and I and realised that her chances of getting out of this were slim and decided to throw all caution to the wind.”

“But she attacked Tony.”

Loki snorted. “She despises Tony. Of course her final roll of the dice would be aimed at him. I should have made him stay with the others.”

Now it was Carol who snorted. “I don’t know him well except for what Jim’s told me but even I know that ‘sit, stay’ doesn’t work with him.”

“I could have tied him to the chair,” Loki snarled even as he reached out and let his magic flow over Tony’s head again.

Carol wisely left that comment alone and instead went and met the arriving Dora Milaje. She directed them to contain the witch as well as Teela then came back to Loki.

“What do we need to do for Tony?”

“I need a shielded room… or at least a room I can use for that purpose,” Loki replied. “And Vision.”

Carol nodded and went back to the Dora to pass on the message. In short order, two Dora appeared with a stretcher and helped Loki load Tony onto it. Vision was waiting out in the corridor and he looked down at Tony with open worry and concern until Loki drew his attention away.

“Can you strip the witch of her magic?”

Vision’s eyes widened momentarily then he nodded. “I can. It came from here…” he tapped the Mind Stone embedded in his forehead. “It can return as well.”

“Do it,” Loki snapped.

Vision hesitated. “Do we need approval from the Council?”

Loki’s eyes darkened and Carol stepped in immediately. “I’m authorising it as one of the leaders of the United Nations Enhanced Taskforce. I’ll deal with any repercussions from the Council.”

Vision inclined his head. “Very well. I will see it done.”

“T’Yana, escort him,” Okoye barked from where she was overseeing matters on her end.

Vision and T’Yana slid past Loki into the cell block and Loki didn’t spare them any further thought as he followed the stretcher. They were taken to an unused room and the Dora placed the stretcher on the floor then bowed to him and exited. A moment later, Carol and Okoye came in.

“Need any help?” Carol asked. “Carol help or Captain Marvel help. Either or both.”
Loki paused. “Both actually. Keep an eye on him for now and then I may need you to… restrain him and possibly me when I try to remove the witch’s magic.”

“We can’t wait it out?” Carol asked. “If it’s got the potential to be that dangerous.”

Loki shook his head even as he began to weave his magic around the room. “No. You called it sensory deprivation and that is what it is at a far more fundamental level than you might think. No stimulation in and none out. Tony is trapped within his mind, unable to even twitch a muscle. While his mind is remarkable, the lack of sensory information will adversely affect even someone like him.” He shuddered. “Thanos used something similar when he captured me. It is…” He was silent for a moment. “Agonising.”

Carol was silent for a moment. “Right. Okay.”

“Prince Loki,” Okoye said and there was a respect in her voice that Loki suspected few outsiders ever received. “Should we evacuate this part of the palace?”

Loki grimaced. “Normally I would say no but the witch’s magic is… unpredictable and strong. My magic should contain it nevertheless but it might be wise to be cautious.”

Okoye nodded and left the room. Loki continued his work and when he was finally done, the walls, floor and ceiling of the room glowed with intricate green runes. The room itself felt suddenly muffled and heavy, as though not even air was able to escape.

Loki turned to the stretcher that held Tony and knelt down beside it. He then looked up at Carol. “I am going to remove her magic. I don’t know what will happen but you must do your best to contain it and us to this room. With force, if necessary.”

Carol didn’t question him, she just nodded and her eyes seemed to glow. “Got it.”

Loki put her out of his mind and stretch out his hands so they hovered over Tony’s head. Green magic dripped from his fingers and crawled over Tony’s skin. As it spread over the man’s head, red lanced up and swirled sickeningly with it. Loki snarled and the green intensified. As it did, the air in the room shimmered and shuddered and as the green magic intensified yet again, red and green light flickered out from Tony like lightning. Carol stood firm amongst it all, her stance tense but ready for anything.

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Tony had never had any difficulty in inhabiting his own mind. Sometimes it got overwhelming and kept him from sleeping, the thoughts and ideas rushing around chaotically and not settling enough to allow him to do anything with them but fight off the desire to beat his head against something until it all stopped. That didn’t happen often though and most of the time, his mind was a source of ideas and plans and interesting things.

But this… this was different. Always before there was data coming in. Sight, sound, smell, everything. Even with his eyes closed, his other senses, his very skin, gave him endless – and often useless – data. Now, though, there was nothing. No sight – it was all black. No sound, no feeling of anything against his skin, no scent. Nothing. Other than what was already in his mind, there was nothing in and no matter how much he tried, nothing out. He couldn’t open his eyes or tell if they were actually closed in the first place, he couldn’t tell if his attempts to move his fingers, his hands, his feet, were having any results and he couldn’t make a sound that he could determine.

Panic rose sharply within him and he battled with it for an interminable amount of time before he
managed to stop his mind cycling downward endlessly. Once he had gained some control, he tried to push outward again, to see, to hear, to do anything. This time, instead of nothing, he came up against a wall of swirling red.

_Fucking Wanda_, he thought savagely. _I'm not letting that bitch get away with it this time._

He wasn’t sure how much of the words were fact and how many were bravado. This wasn’t like last time. He’d been lost in the vision she’d given him but not for long. His time sense was good and if he could trust it now, he’d been trapped in his mind for longer than the last time. What’s more he had no idea how to break out, how to stop this. But this time it was different in another, better, way. The apple. The golden apple of Idunn that Loki had given him. Loki had told him the apple would protect his mind and it had… sort of. She wasn’t in here. She was outside his mind, hemming him in, keeping him trapped. When her magic hadn’t been able to get in, it must have fallen into that secondary task.

He pushed out again but once again hit the wall of red. This time it sparked back at him, sliding through his new mental defences, and he was thrown back into Siberia. For a moment, he tried to grapple his way out of it but the events of Siberia were too new, still too sharp even now, and he lost the battle.

Everything faded and he was back in his suit on the cold concrete, Rogers looming over him with his shield in his hand. He looked up and was caught by the memory, lost in it as it twisted and warped itself with flashes of red. Rogers’ face twisted into something dark and ugly and his eyes showed no mercy.

“Kill him.”

It was Barnes, standing next to Rogers, staring down at them with his arm glinting coldly, cruelly silver, blood dripping from his hands.

“Kill him, Stevie,” Barnes said. “We’ll never be free while he’s alive.”

Rogers’ face twisted again until Tony could no longer recognise the man he’d thought was a friend. The man looming over him, shield in his hands, was ugly and twisted, his face red and warped.

As the shield began its inexorable descent, Tony’s mind tweaked on something – Barnes’ arm. Barnes’ _silver_ arm. His metal arm. An arm which Tony had already blown off by this point.

With an anguished cry, Tony forced himself from the memory and with a great lurch, he found himself drifting back into the unending, empty blackness of his mind. He let himself drift among the myriad of random thoughts that came and went as he shuddered away from the memory that had been warped. It could so easily have gone that way… well, perhaps not _exactly_ that way but he’d been sure at the time that Rogers intended to bring the shield down onto his face or neck.

As he drifted, he debated attempting to breach the wall the witch had put around his mind. Part of him shuddered back from the very idea, not wanting to relive more of the grab bag of horrors in his memories. But the other, larger, part didn’t want to give in to her and her machinations. So he pushed forward again but this time he noticed that the wall of red was different. This time there was green laced through it, ebbing and waning as the two forms of magic fought. Tony gave a silent cry of triumph and pushed forward, reaching out for the wall. He was startled when he got close enough to touch the wall as blue lightning – as blue as the arc reactor that had once sat in his chest – lanced out from him and joined the green and red. The entire lot roiled and lashed around and Tony was sure he cried out as pain rushed through his mind. He refused to stop however and he pushed that blue lightning forward again to join the green in fighting the red.
Carol watched the arcane battle going on within and around Tony with narrowed eyes and thin lips. She’d already been contacted by Jim on the comms once and she’d managed to fob him off with an excuse that had sounded pretty flimsy to her. She knew Jim though and there was one person in world he would protect above and beyond all others and that was Tony Stark.

She hadn’t understood it back when she’d first known Jim. To her, Tony Stark was a spoiled, rich brat born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Then she’d met him, just a short time before Howard and Maria Stark’s deaths. While he had moments when he could be a spoiled, rich brat, they weren’t serious. It hadn’t taken long for her to realise they were a mask he put on to protect himself from the vultures that circled him night and day, all wanting a piece of the Stark heir. Instead, she got to know Jim’s ‘Tones’. Not well but well enough. A small, scrawny, too intelligent for his own good, kind-hearted dork of a kid. She’d also been there a few times after his parents’ deaths when he’d been utterly drowning in grief and guilt and a whole heap of other things that had made her heart go out to him.

That was why she couldn’t tell Jim about this right now. He was going to yell at her and she’d wear that. But he didn’t have the protections that Loki and she did, each in their respective ways, and Tony was going to need him after this was over. So she was willing to take the tirade he was going to give her and do so with ease if it meant that he wasn’t put at risk and was there, ready and able, to deal with the aftermath.

But the air in the room was now thick with energy, almost dense enough to see and certainly enough to have her Kree-born powers reacting to protect her. Anyone without some form of protection would be in danger. She could see the red of the witch and the green of Loki crawling over Tony’s form but then she drew in a small breath when she saw blue join them. She’d seen that same blue on Tony’s armour, from the arc reactor. It had to be him fighting back, though she didn’t know how. From what Jim had told her the apple Tony had been given had healed him and given him some enhancements but this? This hadn’t been mentioned at all. Then again, according to Jim, Tony had said that even Loki didn’t know how the apple was going to affect a Midgardian.

The energy levels in the room increased and she exerted some of her own powers to contain it and drain it off, taking it into herself and let it burn off safely. She could now clearly see the battle going on, Loki’s green and Tony’s blue slowly starting to overpower the witch’s red until the red was finally hurled away from Tony’s body. It hung in the air, an almost tangible mist twisting and turning malevolently until Carol shot a beam of pure energy at it. The red mist exploded and dissipated into nothing and with it went half the energy build up in the room.

She looked back towards Tony just in time to see Loki fall back into a slumped sitting position and his green magic withdraw from Tony’s body.

“Is he okay?” she said, still maintaining her defensive position. “Are you?”

Loki nodded and glanced over at her. He looked tired but satisfied. “I am fine. Tony… will wake soon.”

She noticed he didn’t say Tony would be fine but she wasn’t surprised. There was no way of knowing what had been going on in Tony’s head while he was trapped. Certainly he’d been fighting from the inside but how much of that had been him and how much had been pure instinct and panic was unknown. All they could do was wait… and in her case, finally let Jim know what was going on.
Loki was, by and large, not a particularly patient person. He had learned patience since it was required when using magic and he liked to think that while it was not a natural skill, it was one he had mastered well. He had to put all that training to the test as he waited for Tony to wake.

Part of him wanted to curse himself for getting so attached and perhaps even to break away and run but that would not only be cowardly, it would also be foolish. He also had enough of a grasp on Tony’s personality to know that if he ran, he might not be welcomed back. Or rather he would be welcomed back but he would never be allowed close again. And that was something he did not want to happen.

He knew he could have stopped this right at the beginning. Rescuing Tony was a tactical move. Thanos knew who he was and was wary of this Terran whose name echoed among the stars. That made allying himself with Tony a tactically smart move. It hadn’t remained that calculating for very long and if he was honest with himself, it probably hadn’t been that tactical at the beginning either. Little though he wanted to admit it, even to himself, but Tony Stark was precisely his type – intelligent, sarcastic, quick of thought and action, endlessly inventive and clever, able to look outside the box for better solutions. Even when he’d been under duress during the invasion, it had been Tony who had been his focus. The others… they’d been mere annoyances. It had been Tony who had been the biggest threat to what he’d needed to do… and what he’d wanted to do. They had been two different things.

He’d sometimes wondered if Tony had figured out that his role in the invasion was not his choice. He hadn’t said anything at the time but when he’d revealed the truth to Tony after he’d rescued the man from Siberia, he hadn’t looked surprised. In fact, he’d given a small nod as though the revelation had confirmed something he’d already suspected. He hadn’t pursued it or tried to force answers out of him though, had instead allowed Loki to tell the story in his own time, something he appreciated greatly. It was never easy to talk of trauma and Tony had understood that.

Loki huffed as he sat and allowed himself to recover from his battle with the witch’s magic. He knew he was pondering the past in order to not think too much about the way Tony had joined the fight. He’d told the Midgardian that he had no idea what effect the apple would have on him beyond the healing and other physical benefits it would provide. There were tales of a mortal or two being given the apple but nothing that Loki had ever been able substantiate. So other than knowing it wouldn’t harm Tony, he’d had no answers. That it could or would give Tony some form of magic was unexpected and he knew Tony had largely only had negative experiences with magic.

Not that it was magic as Loki knew it. Though it had taken on a form similar to his and the witch’s magic, it had felt different. Perhaps there had been a greater difference between Tony’s magic and the witch’s magic than Tony’s magic and his but still, different. Not unexpected though. Loki’s magic came from his Jotun heritage and Aesir training, though the apple may well be the cause for the similarities. The witch’s magic was a perversion of the Mind Stone’s power, a horrifying thing given how perverted the Mind Stone already was. No wonder the witch was the way she was.

“Urgh.”

Loki looked down and found Tony struggling to open his eyes and sit up. Carol immediately joined them and between the two of them they got Tony sitting up and leaning back against the nearest wall. Carol then crouched down beside them.
“How are you feeling, Tony?” she asked.

“Like the witch just tried to romp through my mind,” he grumbled in reply. He then pried one eye open and peered at Loki. “So… magic.”

Loki nodded. He could see Carol’s curious look out of the corner of his eye but he concentrated on Tony. “It seems so.”

“That’s unexpected.”

“I did warn you.”

Tony sighed and opened both eyes, wincing a little then he seemed to settle. “Yeah, you did.”

“What’s this then?” Carol said. “Because you two know I’m going to have to explain this to Jim before he gets to you.”

Tony wrinkled his nose then smiled beatifically. “My Rhodey bear will be fine.”

“Your Rhodey bear will go on a rampage if you’ve been hurt,” Carol said dryly. “Remember that party in Boston when that shithead slipped you those pills?”

Tony raised a finger and opened his mouth then shut it again just as quickly and pulled his hand down. “Yeah, okay… I’ll give you that one.”

Carol looked amused. “So… magic?”

“It seems the apple has had an… interesting side effect,” Loki said drolly. “Unexpected and
“You can do magic?” Carol asked.

Tony frowned. “Um. Maybe?”

“Hold out your hand and concentrate on fire,” Loki said.

Tony did that but nothing happened. Loki cocked his head curiously then smirked and pulled out the Stark phone Tony had given him. He turned it off and then placed it in Tony’s still outstretched hand.

“Command it to turn on.”

Tony blinked. “The voice commands only work when the phone is on.”

“I know,” Loki replied. “Command it to turn on.”

Tony gave him a dubious look then turned to the phone. “Turn on.”

Nothing happened and Loki sighed. “Say it like you mean it.”

He got an irritated look in reply but then Tony said firmly, “Turn on.” The phone suddenly pinged and lit up as the normal start process began. Tony’s eyes widened as he stared at the phone. “Uh… I can feel it working.”

Loki nodded in satisfaction, though he felt immensely fascinated. “I believe it would be accurate to call you a technomage. Your magic will undoubtedly protect your mind and body in a way not dissimilar to mine, if what I saw was accurate. But in terms of using it beyond yourself, it seems it has honed in on that which is your metier and chief joy – technology.”

“Did this wake up, so to speak, in response to Maximoff’s attack?” Carol asked, amusement glimmering in her eyes.

“It did,” Loki replied. He reached out and placed a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “I know magic is not…”

Tony’s eyes widened a bit more and then he grinned. “Whoa… cool. I can reprogram it just by thinking at it.”

Carol patted Loki on the shoulder. “I think he’s okay with it, past bad experiences notwithstanding.”

“So it seems,” Loki said dryly before chuckling. “I am relieved.”

“Me too,” Tony said, looking up at them and proving he had been paying attention. “Because I thought I was going to freak out but this…” His eyes went distant and then he grinned. “Do you think I could power the armour with this?”

Carol sighed. “Listen, squirt…”

“Hey!” Tony protested.

Carol grinned at him and Tony stuck his tongue out at her in revenge.

“Before you go running off to test and train your new toy,” Carol said patiently. “Can you let Loki and the doctors here check you out to make sure Maximoff hasn’t left any more time bombs? And
then maybe talk to Jim to make sure he doesn’t level Wakanda or something.”

Tony huffed. “Fine. Be that way.”

“Good,” Carol said blandly. “Now I’m going to go and deal with Maximoff and this Dora.” She looked over at Loki. “We’ll need your help with her at some point.”

Loki nodded. “Of course. I’d like to ensure Tony is fine and able to control his new ability first.”

Carol nodded and headed for the door. There seemed to be a small crowd waiting outside but Loki ignored them when Carol closed the door firmly behind her.

“Tony…” Loki paused as his phone blooped and beeped from whatever Tony was doing with it.

Tony looked up and unaccountably blushed, something Loki found truly adorable. “Oops. Sorry, Lokes.”

“Let me make sure the witch’s influence is truly gone.”

Tony nodded and with only a moment’s hesitation, allowed Loki to cast his magic. The spell detected no sign of the witch’s malevolence but it certainly showed that Tony’s new power was strong and remarkably steady for something so newly born.

“It’s gone,” he said and wasn’t surprised when both of them sighed with relief.

Tony handed the phone back to him. “Good. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised she attacked me in the end. She’s always thought I was the devil incarnate.”

“She shall not be able to do that again,” Loki said grimly. “And not just because you can protect your own mind now.”

“Yeah, not that I want that to happen again,” Tony said with a shudder. “Sensory deprivation like that isn’t fun.”

Loki leaned forward with concern. “You were fully aware?”

“Yeah,” Tony replied with a grimace. He then gave Loki a look of pure mischief. “You could kiss me and make it better?”

Loki smirked and chuckled. “I believe I would find that tolerable.”

“Tolerable,” Tony said, pretending to be offended.

Loki cut off the rest of what he intended to say by leaning in and kissing him. When he pulled back, he licked his lips. “More than tolerable.”

Tony actually growled at that and pulled him over so he was straddling the man’s lap. He was then pulled into a far more passionate kiss and when they finally broke away, he managed to plaster a smirk on his face again.

“Very well. Exceedingly pleasant.”

Tony grinned and then nudged him. “Come on. I suppose I better let the doctors look at me for about five seconds then go and make sure my platypus isn’t trying to take over the country.”

Loki rose elegantly to his feet then held out a hand to help Tony up. “That would certainly cap off
“Don’t give my sugarplum any ideas,” Tony said then he leaned into him as though he needed the support. He didn’t but Loki would admit he enjoyed being able to wrap an arm around the man’s shoulders as he guided him out of the room and back to all the things they needed to deal with.

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Tony gave a sigh as he hung up the phone and massaged his temples. The call hadn’t gone badly, it was just… complicated. Everything that had happened in Sokovia and Wakanda had its aftermath, after all, and though the Task Force had come out of it with its colours flying high, bureaucracy was always tiring and painful even at its best.

“FRI?” he said as he pushed his chair back and stood up.

“Yes, boss,” came the prompt reply.

“I am officially off the clock unless it’s an emergency.”

“Got it, boss,” FRIDAY said, sounding amused. “I’ll take a message if anyone else calls.”

Tony chuckled as he wandered down the hallway and into the common room. Rhodey and Pepper were there and having some kind of semi-serious discussion with Happy and Peter. Loki and Carol were, from their expressions, talking shop, while Vision listened curiously. Hope was over to one side, on the phone to either her father or Lang based on the set of her shoulders. The Defenders – and a few of their friends - the latest members of the Task Force, newly signed on in the wake of recent events, were lounging around, chatting quietly among themselves and occasionally with one of the others.

The only one missing was Dr Strange but he’d called earlier to apologise for his absence. There was something interdimensional he apparently needed to deal with. Tony had heard Wong mention something about tentacles in the background and had decided he didn’t want to know. Well, he did want to know but he’d had things going on himself that he couldn’t avoid that meant his curiosity about interdimensional tentacles was going to have to wait until Stephen got back.

Loki turned the moment he came into the room and a small, almost private smile flickered across his face. “Anthony,” he said, shifting to make room on the couch.

Tony wrinkled his nose as he sat down. “One of these days I’m going to get you to call me Tony.”

Loki smirked. “Perhaps.”

“How did it go?” Rhodey asked.

“We’re going to be in and out of meetings for months,” Tony said with a roll of his eyes. “But at least they’re all on our side. And they listened to me about the Chitauri and what Loki’s told them about Thanos. So they’re all on board there. We’re just going to have to explain things again and again and again because that’s how these things go.”

Rhodey sighed but looked resigned. “Yeah, that it does. Rogers?”

“Still doesn’t know which way is up,” Tony said with a sigh. “One moment he thinks it’s 1943, the next he’s in New York fighting the Chitauri, the next he’s in Siberia. The doctor in charge of his case spoke to me briefly about BARF this morning but admits he doesn’t think Rogers will be ready for it for months, maybe longer. Whatever Wanda did to his head seems to be permanent.”
“He’ll be staying in Wakanda then?” Carol asked.

Tony nodded. “He lashes out too easily now and vibranium is about the only thing that will hold against him.” He glanced at Loki and Vision. “Just a head’s up for you two. They’ll be extending a formal request for assistance sometime in the next week or two. Since it was Wanda’s magic that fucked up his mind, they’re hoping one or both of you might be able to unfuck it or at least tell them how to reduce the violent episodes.”

Loki inclined his head, though he didn’t look very enthused at the idea. Vision also indicated his agreement, though his expression was more sad than anything else. Tony knew why and he wasn’t surprised when the subject was part of the next question.

“And Maximoff?” Carol said.

“Now that Loki’s stripped her of her powers, everyone’s coming out of the woodwork to either lay more accusations at her feet or place a claim on her regarding charges and jurisdiction,” Tony said with a shake of his head.

“Any of those accusations false?” Pepper asked. “And who’s laid claim to her?”

Tony grimaced. “We haven’t hit a false accusation yet. Some have been exaggerated a bit but they’re still true in the fundamentals. As for jurisdiction… Wakanda want a piece of her, obviously. Then there’s Sokovia, Nigeria and South Africa, all for obvious reasons. Germany has put their hand up as well but also conceded that their charges are minor in comparison to things like murder, terrorism and crimes against humanity so they’re willing to cede jurisdiction to one of the more affected countries.”

“Could she actually get a fair trial in Sokovia?” Matt asked, Foggy nodding in agreement beside him.

“Probably not,” Tony replied. “The ICC has stepped up and entered the negotiations and I suspect that’s where she may end up. She has a lawyer now, at least. Some Swedish lawyer who specialises in taking on difficult cases like this. Not because he agrees with the people he represents but because he’s a stickler for the idea that everyone deserves proper representation under the law.”

“I like him,” Matt said approvingly.

“Same here,” Foggy added.

Tony gave them both an amused look. Both he and Pepper had given some business to Nelson & Murdock and the early results were looking excellent. Rhodey and Carol also had some plans to extend a contract to them to act more permanently as a lawyer for the enhanced, should they need it. If they accepted, which Tony expected would happen, they would, in a few years, be one of the preeminent law firms in New York. It was why he and Pepper were getting in ahead of the curve.

“Thought you might,” he said. “Anyway, we’ve all been explicitly told to stay out of it until we’re required to testify.” Jessica muttered something uncomplimentary under her breath and Tony grinned at her. “That goes double for you and Frank.”

“Who, me?” Frank said with one of the most unconvincing innocent looks Tony had ever seen.

“Yes, you, Mr Punisher,” Tony said dryly. “And that’s a superhero name that’s ripe for jokes, you know.”

Frank actually smiled at that. “Yeah, I know. Jessica’s made a lot of them. I’m expecting the rest from you.”
“They know you so well, Tones,” Rhodey said lightly, though not without an undercurrent to his voice. “And in such little time too.”

“Ooh, that was a loaded statement,” Jessica said. She then smirked. “Nice to know we’re already better teammates than Captain Dickhead and his posse of idiots.”

Tony snorted. “You couldn’t possibly be worse.”

“It’s always easy to jump over the bar when it’s been set so low,” Danny said with an easy grin. Tony and Danny had already had some discussions about some joint projects both between themselves personally and between SI and Rand Enterprises. He’d also realised that while there were things about Danny that he envied, he also often cringed a little at the younger man’s naïvety. He didn’t think he’d ever been that naïve but then he’d essentially been ‘on stage’ since he was four. Thankfully, Danny wasn’t someone he really had to manage. The other Defenders seem to have him very much in hand, though some of their methods did make him wince. He was lucky he’d had Rhodey in his corner since he was fourteen. Rhodey had never sugarcoated anything but he’d also had a knack for smacking him down when he was being particularly idiotic without making him feel like a complete heel.

“How did they react to your magic?” Danny asked.

“With a lot of questions,” Tony said with a grimace as he snuggled closer to Loki. He still didn’t feel entirely comfortable with the idea of magic in general – other than Loki’s, of course – but since his had a distinct technological bent, it was much more tolerable. “And some very polite but adamant requests that I ensure that I’m fully trained.”

“They do have a point there,” Pepper said, struggling to hold back a smile and a laugh. “The R&D lab may never be the same again.”

Tony groaned and hid his face in his hands as he tried not to laugh himself. “That was a disaster.”

“I wouldn’t call it that precisely,” Pepper replied. “But they *are* still struggling to explain things to the centrifuge.”

“Wow, Mr Stark, your life is so weird,” Peter said, grinning broadly.

“You gave the centrifuge an AI?” Hope said, having finished her phone call. The tight look around her eyes discouraged anyone from asking any questions.

Tony looked up. “It was an accident!” he said plaintively.

Loki chuckled. “This is why you need training.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony grumbled without any real heat. “It’s not a bad centrifuge. It just gets dizzy occasionally.”

Everyone started laughing at that. “You made an AI for a centrifuge that gets dizzy?” Peter said before falling over laughing.

Tony pouted then started laughing ruefully himself. It seemed he had a knack for making quirky and wilful AIs and not even this weird form of magic was going to change that. And for all his grumbling about magic, he wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Thanos was going to take everything they had. It was why he was actually bothering to care about Rogers and the rest of those idiots. Rogers’ skillset wasn’t anything special, especially in comparison to Luke and Danny’s abilities, but,
if they could ever fix his mind, he was another enhanced person who could spare ordinary, far squishier humans from having to take to the battlefield.

The possibility of some sort of wrist and/or ankle bands that would keep him under control when he wasn’t fighting had already been broached with Tony and he had to admit the idea was intriguing. It would allow them to offer some sort of temporary amnesty to any number of people in the Raft and other such places. Maybe a few of them would actually earn a second chance. Tony liked that idea, especially since he’d had time to go over the records of some of the denizens in the Raft.

(That had been his particular job for Nelson and Murdock, Attorneys At Law. Some of those in the Raft and other places that Ross had once had control over shouldn’t be there and Matt and Foggy were gearing up for some very fierce battles to get some of them out of there. That being said, some residents very much deserved to be in the Raft but maybe some of them were salvageable if they were given the opportunity.)

“He pays too much attention to his work,” Tony finally said, which only prompted more laughter. “He just needs to learn to relax and trust that he knows what he’s doing.”

“Your scientists find him charming,” Pepper said with a grin. “They’d have stopped using him but then he gets upset because he feels he should be working.”

“I’ll go and talk to him,” Tony promised.

Once everyone calmed down and stopped laughing, Carol raised an eyebrow at him. “And their conclusions regarding Thanos?”

“They want you, me, Loki and Rhodey to front the Security Council,” Tony said. “They’re not sure when but sometime within the next two or three weeks.”

Carol nodded. “Okay, we’ll have to sit down and sort out what we’re going to say. And hopefully by then, I’ll have heard back from some old… friends. If we’re lucky they might be willing to help. Thanos is a threat to us all.”

“I have sent a message to some of my contacts in an effort to find Thor,” Loki added. He sighed and rolled his eyes. “He may be useful.”

“May?” Tony teased.

“If he can get his head out of his backside,” Loki said with a sniff.

Tony chuckled and turned back to Carol. “Well, with any luck the contingency plans and possible allies will stop the inevitable chaos when we tell them who’s coming.”

“You wish,” Carol said wryly and Tony could only laugh.

Still, for all of his laughter and his knowledge of how difficult the road ahead was going to be, he was surprised to find that he felt happy and relaxed. He had his family, his team and his… Loki. He had power greater than anything he’d ever expected to have – or wanted to have, truth be told, but one thing he’d learned a long time ago was that he rarely got what he wanted – and hopefully all of that would be enough for them to defeat Thanos.

As for his old team… he didn’t miss them at all.
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