Old Souls

by the_writer1988

Summary

Tony Stark dies October 17th 2023.

And wakes up on the 30th April 2016, three days before Lagos.

Three days before the breaking of the Avengers begins.

But now he has a chance.
A chance to do it all over again.

And not die trying.

Notes

My new story! Had a burst of inspiration for this and had to write it. Buckle up folks, its gonna be a long one!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Prologue

PROLOGUE

17th October 2023

“We’re gonna be okay.”

Pepper’s voice was fading in his ears. Her face was diminishing in his vision as blackness crawled at the edges of his eyes. He felt so weak, so in pain… His whole body was feeling numb. His heart was slowing and he found it difficult to keep on taking the small breaths he could. He’d made sure everyone was safe…

He’d won.

His breathing was slowing.

All he could see now was Pepper’s smile as he turned his head to the side weakly, allowing gravity to take his body.

“You can rest now.” He barely heard her voice.

His vision vanished and he ceased seeing Pepper’s face in his mind’s eye as he felt himself fade into blackness.

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Tony rolled over and yawned as consciousness slowly began to drag him out of the realm of sleep. As he opened his eyes, he found himself in familiar surroundings. He was in a room, his bedroom, lying in his bed in the Compound that had just recently been destroyed by Thanos…

That name resonated with him.

Thanos.

He’d been fighting him, hadn’t he?

Or had he dreamed it?

It all felt so real.

Memories flashed in his mind’s eye as Tony sat up in bed, pushing the covers off and looking down at his right arm. His arm was fine. There was no evidence of injury. He’d felt his arm burning, the bones crumbling to dust in his arm as he held the power of the Infinity Stones as they coursed through his body. No dream could make him feel that type of sensation…

Pepper’s face flashed in his mind.

“We’re gonna be okay. You can rest now.”

Those words had felt so real, so final…

Her face fading from his mind… He’d died. He was sure of it.
Then where was he?

Was he in heaven?

Surely Tony Stark wouldn’t be sent to heaven?

Tony slowly got out of bed and walked across to the en-suite bathroom, glanced in the mirror and stumbled back in shock.

Forcing himself to look again, he reached up and touched the right side of his face, turning his head this way and that, looking for the signs of aging and for the scars he felt for sure should be there, yet he looked exactly how he had in 2016. He had small tufts of grey hair at the sides.

He remembered Pepper kneeling in front of him, struggling to keep smiling as she uttered the last words he’d ever hear. That couldn’t have been a dream.

“Where am I?” he whispered, touching his face once again, afraid the illusion would break.

Moving out of the bathroom, Tony walked across to the other side of the room, opening the curtains and looked out. The Compound was bustling with activity as employees of both Stark Industries and the Avengers went about their working day. It was a sunny day with the sun beating down upon the land.

Stumbling back, Tony felt the beginnings of a panic attack. He could feel his heart pumping faster in his chest. If he could feel his heart beating he had to be alive, right? Surely?

*Stay cool, Stark. Clearly, something happened when you used the stones.*

He knew it had happened. The memories felt too real. He could recall Morgan, his daughter, giving him a long hug before he had departed for the Compound. He remembered holding her as a baby. If it had been a dream, everything he remembered wouldn’t feel so real and he’d have had to sleep for years to be able to fit it all in…

“Oh god, Morgan! Is she-?”

He needed to find out where he was. Did Morgan even exist?

How could he find out?

Tony pressed his hand to his chest, just to make sure his heart was beating.

It was.

“Are you alright, boss? I detect your heartbeat rising suggesting you are succumbing to a panic attack.”

Tony jumped, stumbling back against the wall, sliding down it. His A.I was here. He knew he should be dead. He’d died. He’d felt it. But he was here… It felt real. Was it real? It had to be…

“I shouldn’t be here…” he muttered, casting his gaze around him. He swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. He needed to know where he was. Judging by his appearance he had to be in the past…

“Friday?” he managed.

“Yes, boss,” the A.I responded.
“What is today’s date?”

“The thirtieth of April 2016.”

To be continued...
Chapter One: The Purpose

Chapter Summary

Tony acclimatises to his new situation and gets stuck in, in changing things.

Chapter Notes

Oh, wow, thank you for the positive feedback for the first chapter! I honestly was not expecting it! I hope I do not disappoint any of you with what I have planned!

Please, do enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER ONE: The Purpose

30th April 2016

Tony didn’t react straight away to the date. He swallowed, his mouth feeling dry. “Friday, can you repeat the date?” He’d heard correctly, right?

“The thirtieth of April 2016. Are you feeling alright, boss?”

Tony numbly got to his feet, casting his gaze around. “I’m fine,” he answered, not wanting to raise suspicions. He’d clearly died. He remembered it. It was too visual in his head for it to have been just a dream. So that meant… somehow… and he didn’t know how, he’d ended up in the past, specifically just before…

Something gnawed at him. What was so specific about this date that he’d woken up here? What had he been doing in April 2016? Rubbing his eyes, Tony groaned. “This is a mess.”

He couldn’t tell anyone about this; they’d believe him crazy. But why had he been sent here? Was this a form of hell where he had to relive everything?

“But then…” he muttered quietly, “if I was being forced to live through everything again, why would I have control of my own body?” If this was some sort of punishment for his sins Tony doubted he’d have any control of his body. The fact that he did, suggested that his theory he was in some special sort of hell was clearly wrong, which he was rather glad about.

Glancing around the room, Tony noticed a few leaflets on the dresser and moved to study them, finding them all leaflets on MIT. And then he remembered. A few days from now he would be attending MIT, where he would use newly developed technology from his Research and Development team at Stark Industries, to trial run a potential new device which could aid the recovery of hundreds of people during therapy.

It was an event Tony and Pepper were due at… Wait.
“Shit.” Tony swore, already realising right now he and Pepper were on a break. He couldn’t simply return to Pepper. Currently, their relationship was dead in the water.

Morgan…

His daughter’s face swam into his mind’s eye. Morgan was the one thing he loved more than Pepper. And right now her very existence was under threat. She might not ever be born, or if she was, she wouldn’t be his Morgan. The Morgan he knew was gone forever.

September sixteenth, 2018. 11:20pm.

Tony started.

“What?”

September sixteenth 2018. 11:20pm.

It wasn’t even a whisper. The words just appeared in his head, ingraining themselves into his mind.

It worked out. Morgan had been born in June 2019. Why had the date, and presumably the time of Morgan’s conception, suddenly appeared in his head as if he had always known it? He remembered they’d married shortly before that date.

I’d built the cabin before we married. It was my wedding gift to Pepper.

They’d decided to live their lives in the new world they had found themselves in following the Snap. They couldn’t put their lives on hold anymore. Pepper had reduced her duties at Stark Industries so she could enjoy married life with Tony as much as possible. They’d started trying for a child soon after their wedding… Morgan had come along quite quickly, surprising them both as they had expected problems due to their respective ages.

But Pepper had fallen for Morgan quite quickly.

Now Tony was in a time where he and Pepper were on a break.

I want my little girl.

September sixteenth, 2018. 11:20pm.

The words reverberated throughout his brain again. He tried to ignore them.

But why had he been sent back here? What was he supposed to do? What was his purpose in being here?

Fix things.

The words appeared in his brain, not knowing where they had come from.

“Oh,” he said aloud, “can whoever is putting stuff in my head, please stop doing that?”

All was silent. It was unnerving.

This day was getting odder and odder.

First, he’d died, then the next he was waking up in 2016, seven years before he died.
Tony took in deep breaths.

*Think, Stark, think!*

“The day I was at MIT was the day of what?” Tony wracked his memory. There was something significant about being sent back to this specific point. Something he could change, if it was the way to fix things.

“Friday, has there been any intelligence reports delivered recently which the Avengers are acting upon?” The quicker way to find an answer was to ask his A.I. Friday was installed within the Compound. She’d be able to determine if they were preparing for a mission or not.

“Intel has been received regarding a possible attack to steal a weapon in Lagos, Nigeria. The suspects include a one, Brock Rumlow, an international terrorist currently wanted across the world for several known attacks,” explained Friday. “Would you like me to send you the full intel, boss?”

Tony shook his head. “No.” He now knew what he could stop, or rather change.

It was the disaster in Lagos which had accelerated the Accords. Tony could potentially prevent the disaster from unfolding, allowing innocent lives that were originally lost to live.

“I’m not even supposed to be here…” he muttered quietly. He was trying to remember where he should have been. “Friday, when did I get here?”

“Last night, boss. You arrived after everyone had gone to bed. However, you have agreed to hold a speech at M.I.T on the third of May.”

“Right…” Tony chewed his bottom lip, thinking. “Do we have a date when Rogers will act on the intel on Rumlow?”

“The intelligence suggests the date of attack will be the same day as your M.I.T speech, boss.”

He’d have to postpone the M.I.T speech. He had to be in Lagos, otherwise what was the point in sending him back to this point in time if he wasn’t going to be there to prevent a wider catastrophe?

“Friday, send my apologies to the Director of M.I.T that due to unfortunate circumstances I will have to delay my appearance for a few weeks but notify them I will be contributing a large donation to the faculty and the students.”

“Yes, boss.”

That was one thing dealt with.

The next was to get himself involved with the Lagos mission.

*And, technically, I’m not even part of the Avenger’s rota anymore. And I need to fix things with Pepper.*

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Tony showered first, taking the time to inspect his body, noticing the scars he’d received during his fight on Titan did not mar this body. *It’s because that hasn’t happened yet, idiot!* Tony kept glancing at his right arm. This arm had held all six Infinity Stones, had wielded them to ensure Thanos’ ultimate destruction, and yet it looked fine.

A part of him was still trying to comprehend the situation he had fallen into, how he could go
about altering things so they did not follow the same path. Was he in an alternate timeline or was he in the timeline he’d died in? Tony didn’t know, yet he had the feeling the rules of time travel did not apply in this case. Why be sent back if he was just going to create an alternate reality with his actions?

“But I also know where all the Infinity Stones now are,” he muttered. “I could collect them before Thanos does…” It was a thought he’d have to wait to consider. First, his biggest priority was ensuring the team didn’t split. The Avengers needed to be whole if they were going to counter Thanos.

Tony dressed in a suit and went for a walk around the Compound. It was business as usual as Stark Industries also had a few floors to themselves for research and development. In fact, once Tony and Pepper had got back together, Pepper had moved the majority of her work to this base so she could spend more time with Tony as he negotiated the Accords and worked in tandem with the one hundred and seventeen countries that had supported them. But right now, Pepper was on the other side of America, working out of Malibu.

It was part of a way for them to maintain their distance from one another as they took a break.

Tony swallowed, remembering how hard he had taken their break-up the first time. He wanted to fix things with her now but Pepper needed the space. She needed to see he was trying to reign in his compulsiveness to be Iron Man. The Accords had helped with that… and what Steve had done to Tony in Siberia had brought her back…

Steve.

The Winter Soldier. Zemo.

“Shit.” It wasn’t just the Accords Tony had to consider this time around. It was the wider problem that had split the Avengers further.

The framing of the Winter Soldier.

The death of Wakanda’s King.

He stopped in his walk around the Compound, moved to the window and pulled out his phone. “Friday,” he instructed quietly, “can you begin a world-wide search for Bucky Barnes?” He already knew where he was but he needed the evidence if he was going to exonerate Bucky from suspicion if, in the event, Tony was unable to prevent Zemo from attacking the signing of the Accords. “Tag him, and record his every movement. And begin a secondary search for a man of Sokovian birth called Helmut Zemo. Tag him too and let me know if he drops off your radar.”

“Yes, boss,” she replied.

“And,” as if it was an afterthought, “find and locate Stephen Strange. Again, keep tabs on him.”

He needed to know where Strange was. He didn’t want to be surprised like last time.

He knew I was going to die. That’s why he spared me. That realisation had struck Tony on the battlefield when he had seen the wizard raise his finger towards him. Just one way to win, and it had all hinged upon Tony’s willingness to sacrifice his own life.

But did he see this? Did he know I’d be sent back?

It didn’t matter if Strange had known, only that Tony had acted when no one else could.
God, he wanted to see her again, but right now, she didn’t exist. It was impossible to see her. All he had was the memories he’d made of her in the last four years of his life.

He made his way towards the conference room where he hoped to find the Avengers in a planning session for their mission to Lagos. Tony smiled and acknowledged everyone he passed, noting that they seemed pleased to see him.

Feeling a bit of nerves bundled in his stomach, Tony pressed open the door of the conference room and walked inside.

Steve, Natasha, Sam, and Wanda sat around a table filled with maps and diagrams and photos, discussing how best to stop Rumlow’s attack. They all looked up as he entered. Surprise flickered across Steve’s face and Natasha’s eyes widened. Wanda looked indifferent and Sam raised his eyebrows.

“What? Didn’t know I was in town?”

“It’s good to see you, Tony, but as you can see we –” began Steve.

Tony cut him off. “I’m here to help.”

“You have an M.I.T speech scheduled,” said Natasha quietly.

Tony turned his attention towards her, noting the suspicions in her eyes. “I didn’t know you had a personal interest in my schedule. Do you keep tabs on me, Agent Romanoff?”

Her lips twitched but she didn’t reply, just kept watching him which he found a little unnerving.

“Do you want to join the Avengers again?” asked Steve, casting his gaze around the table.

“I never really was an Avenger… Just a consultant. Friday clued me in on the intelligence you received and I thought you might want an extra hand?” He wasn’t going to push his way into the mission. If Steve didn’t want him there then he wouldn’t be part of the mission but it wouldn’t stop him from going to Lagos and preventing the catastrophe that was sure to come if he wasn’t there.

“To be honest…” Steve hesitated, “… it would be great to have you with us, but I think the Iron Man armour would stand out.”

Tony had expected this. He could easily develop the nano-technology. He knew how to do it. “I have some new tech which only needs to be deployed into a suit when it is needed. I can be undercover as much as the rest of you.”

Steve nodded. “If that’s the case then… great, take a seat. We’re still going over the bare basics of the mission.”

Pulling out a chair next to Sam, Tony sat.

He didn’t fail to notice Nat’s continuing glances at him or the suspicious frown she wore whenever they made eye contact. Tony shook off the feeling and got to work.

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“Have we accounted for Rumlow wearing a suicide vest and attempting to take out as many of us as possible?” asked Tony. They’d planned most of the mission. Wanda and Nat would be
undercover in the main square, watching for any suspicious activity. Sam would be on a roof whilst Tony and Steve would be in opposite buildings and watching the street from above.

“He’s not gonna be wearing one, Tony,” answered Steve. “Rumlow wants to cause as much destruction as possible. Killing himself is against his character.”

“If he was to detonate in the middle of a crowd…” Tony pointed out. “Mass casualties. Can we take the risk?”

“Stark has a point,” pointed out Sam. “We cannot blindly assume he won’t wear a suicide vest. What if he does and innocent people are killed in the blast? We need to plan for this eventuality. We cannot sweep it to the side.”

Steve frowned, leaning forward. “If he does wear one, he will look to cause maximum damage to the market. We’ll need to prevent him from making it that far.”

Tony folded his arms across his chest. “Then we need to keep this to inside the building he is targeting and neutralise him before he can escape. I think it is better off I am stationed inside the building they are targeting.”

“What if he’s not going to hit the Institute for Infectious Diseases?” asked Natasha. Tony had already raised the point of Rumlow’s possible target was the Institute rather than the local police station located close by. “There are several targets he could be after. This could all be a ploy to lure us there.”

“It isn’t. The intel is solid, you said it yourself,” noted Tony.

“The intel only states he’s after a weapon,” said Wanda. “There is no solid proof of what building he is going for.”

“I know it’s going to be the Institute for Infectious Diseases.” Tony knew he was bold in saying this. “He’s after a weapon. The worst weapon Rumlow could go after is a biological one which would cause maximum damage if unleashed upon the general public. His only logical target is the Institute.”

Steve still looked unconvinced. “In other countries, he’s been in, he’s attacked the local police stations and there is one close to the Institute. He could easily steal weapons from there.”

“I think Tony is right,” said Natasha suddenly. “Logic dictates he’ll be after the biological weapon. He already has enough weapons, why add more of the same when you can obtain something different and far more destructive? If Tony is wrong, there is no harm in him being inside the Institute, is there? He can still join whatever skirmish we get into if Rumlow’s target isn’t the Institute.”

Steve acknowledged Natasha’s point. “Ok, Tony, change your starting position to inside the Institute but stay on comms. If we need you, we’ll call you.”

“Sure,” shrugged Tony. His main priority was to ensure Rumlow didn’t leave the building with the biological weapon. If he succeeded he’d save countless of lives. And he’d spare Wanda the indignation of being put on house arrest for her unintentional mistake. If it did come to it and Wanda still did make a mistake which injured and killed people, Tony would talk to her directly, instead of sending Vision as a messenger.

Steve poured over the maps. “Can anyone think of anything else?”
“We need to notify the Nigerian government about this intelligence,” advised Tony. “Otherwise we will be entering a country illegally.”

“That hasn’t mattered before,” declared Steve. “We’re the Avengers. We are helping people. The more people who know of this intelligence the easier it is for someone to betray us. We cannot trust any government to let us do our jobs properly.”

Tony sighed. Of course, Steve would see it that way. “Things change. The Sokovia incident has caused ramifications throughout the political world. People are demanding for something to be done to keep us in check.”

“What are you saying?” enquired Wanda hesitantly.

Tony sighed. It was better to have this conversation now rather than later. He should have warned them before about the Accords but he’d assumed Steve would have kept up to date with all the developments of the world. He hadn’t expected Steve, or any other member of the team to know nothing about the Accords when Tony had brought Ross to them to discuss the implementation of them.

“I’m saying we cannot simply go to another country without permission and act within their borders without notifying the correct people. There is legislation being drawn up which will affect how we work as a team. We will have to answer to a panel of people if things go wrong, submit reports of our missions, work with the panel if places do not wish for our help. The Accords are good and bad. They’ll be coming in regardless of what you think, Steve. It’s better to work with them than to become a fugitive and being unable to help people without becoming a hunted man yourself.”

“Tony has a point, Steve,” agreed Natasha, leaning across the desk. “It’s worth notifying the Nigerian Government. If something doesn’t go to plan –” she glanced at Tony, “we’ve covered ourselves, right?”

Tony nodded emphatically. “Any fallout will not be so bad because we will have had permission to be there.”

“What if they say no? I’m not going to let some official dictate how I go about saving the world.”

“Wow, Steve, wow.” Tony had forgotten how Steve could be stubborn. “Look, I know you find it hard to trust the government after Hydra infiltrated SHIELD but do not make yourself a criminal. How can you help people if you are constantly on the run? We need to stay a team and if that means taking the bad with the good, then we should. The Accords will become law, whether you like it or not.”

“Tony, you’re respected. Can you make the call?” Natasha eyed him directly.

“Sure.” Tony figured he would be the best one to do so. Steve didn’t have the diplomacy skills Tony had learned over the years.

Wanda frowned. “But why would they listen to Stark? He’s not respected… He’s hated.”

Tony wanted to laugh. “I’m not hated. I may have been for a while after Ultron, especially after the first few months, but I’ve shown I am willing to atone for my mistakes. 75% of the relief aid for Sokovia comes from my own pocket. It’s because of Sokovia and what happened there is why I am willing to work with the governments on the Accords. They should have the right to refuse our help, especially when it isn’t world-ending scenarios.” He narrowed his eyes, scrutinising Wanda.
“Don’t forget I’ve kept your part in Ultron quiet.” He placed his hands together and cast his eyes around the room. “Look, the Accords are something we can discuss after Lagos, but I do believe it would be in our best interest to inform the Nigerian government of the threat. And, they may give us extra help to capture Rumlow.”

“More people the better, Steve,” intoned Nat as Steve reluctantly nodded.

Tony smiled at her.

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For the next two days and nights, Tony worked hard to replicate his nano-technology. He hadn’t invented it until the beginning of 2018, just before Thanos arrived, but there was no reason why he couldn’t establish the suit now. He’d already started the bare basics of it.

He needed a portable device to carry around with, one that could be easily hidden and activated at a moment’s notice.

With the new Arc Reactor ready, Tony attached it to his chest, with little nanonites clinging to his skin to hold it in place. They didn’t hurt, he barely felt it.

Smiling steadily, he slipped out of his lab. He needed to prepare for the mission.

They’d be leaving in a few hours.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

Tony’s main motivations at the moment are keeping the Avengers together and getting back with Pepper as at the start of Civil War they were on a break. He's decided to go with the flow and get stuck in. Of course, Tony seems to know certain things when he shouldn't... such as he has to fix things and when he and Pepper conceived Morgan because even if they have a child, there is no guarantee it is going to be the same Morgan, right? because the circumstances have to be at the right time.

Next up: Lagos Mission...

Until next time,

the-writer1988
Chapter Summary

The team travels to Lagos to prevent Rumlow's attack.

Chapter Notes

Hello all,

Here is the next chapter... which covers Lagos. I was expecting it to be a bit longer but it didn't work out that way. The next chapter will be longer! Thank you for all the comments so far!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER TWO: Lagos

3rd May 2016

Lagos, Nigeria

It was an overnight flight to Nigeria. The team had gained permission from the Nigerian government to carry out their mission in Lagos, providing they liaised with the military which Tony was very happy to oblige by, despite Steve’s continued concerns. As Steve was in charge of the mission, it was his duty to co-ordinate with the Nigerian military team which was being sent to join them.

As the Quin-Jet began its descent into Nigerian airspace, Tony couldn’t help but glance at Natasha, who sat in the pilot’s seat. He hadn’t had a chance to really study her since everything was happening so fast. Tony had needed to integrate himself into the Lagos mission and he hadn’t had much time to do it. He’d thrown himself into his new situation.

Now he had a bit of relative quiet he couldn’t help but keep glancing towards Natasha. The last words he’d ever heard from Nat were: “See you in a minute”. Those had turned out to be the last words she would ever say to the team before her death. Before her act of self-sacrifice to ensure they gained the soul stone.

But if gaining the soul stone requires losing someone you love, how can I obtain it without doing so?

He shook his head. The dilemma of Vormir would have to be solved some other time. But he would make sure Nat’s fate would be changed.

Sadness welled up, tightening his chest. He hadn’t been shocked to see Nat when he’d gone to their planning session because he’d already known she was still alive in this time. It had been hard to see her, knowing of the fate which awaited her. A few years ago no one would have thought Natasha
would sacrifice her life, but then, Tony mused, no one would have believed it possible for him either. Steve had once made it clear to him; Tony would never do something so heroic. Hours later he had proved Steve wrong.

Truthfully, Tony had been lying down on the wire for years now. So many times he had stared death in the face and had survived. Only this time death had caught up with him and somehow he’d miraculously been sent back to 2016 with vague instructions to ‘fix it’, whatever that meant!

*I’ll change it. I’ll change it so Nat does not have to die.* It was a vow he intended to keep.

Right now, he needed to focus on ensuring the damage to Lagos did not occur again. As long as he played his part Wanda shouldn’t have any need to contain a suicide bomb.

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They landed at a military base and were then driven into Lagos where they discussed their plan with the military chiefs before they moved to their predetermined positions. Tony was escorted into the Institute where he then helped to remove the biological weapon, preventing Rumlow from getting his hands on it in the first place. Any other materials that could be used to create a biological weapon were also removed to reduce the risk of any being stolen.

Tony crouched low on the third floor, hidden behind the wall of the next room, eyes ready to track anyone who entered the room. He wasn’t wearing his suit yet, he didn’t need to.

“Any movement?” Tony asked into his earpiece. He wasn’t sure on the timings of the attack. They just knew he would strike at some point today.

“Nothing I can see,” replied Steve. “Everywhere looks quiet. Nat, Wanda and Sam are all in position.”

“Good.” Momentarily he switched off his comm-channel, twisting his watch, which was made of nano-tech, to Friday’s frequency. She was monitoring the Lagos situation herself in a remote-controlled Iron Man suit, patrolling from the air, hidden by the clouds moving above the city.

“What do you see, Friday?”

“Nothing suspicious, boss. Everyone is in place.”

“I’ll have to keep you on silent but as soon as you detect something abnormal, alert me. I’ll see the red light on my watch.”

“Yes, boss,” Friday acknowledged.

Tuning back to the team’s frequency he overheard Wanda say: “You guys know I can move things with my mind, right?”

“Looking over your shoulder needs to become second nature,” Nat replied.

“Anybody ever tell you, you’re a little paranoid?” Sam interjected.

“Not to my face, why? Did you hear something?” Nat was quick on the response.

“Eyes on target, folks. Best lead we’ve had on Rumlow in six months and I don’t wanna lose him.”

Sam snorted. “If he sees us coming, that won’t be a problem. He kinda hates us.”

From Tony’s research, he knew Rumlow had a personal vendetta against Steve and the others. He
was also intent on causing as much damage as possible in his previous attacks, probably in the hope of drawing the Avengers out into a confrontation.

The comms went silent until Steve’s voice came over again.

“Sam, see that garbage truck? Tag it.”

“It’s a battering ram,” said Tony. He’d read the reports, he knew what Sam would report back. “Loaded to the max.”

“We don’t know –” Steve began but was cut off.

“Stark’s right, Steve. Max capacity,” confirmed Sam.

“Go now! He’s not hitting the police! It’s the Institute!”

Tony wanted to make a smarmy remark that he had been right, but now wouldn’t be the right time. “I’ll suit up. If Rumlow makes it this far…” Tony trailed off as he heard a loud crash followed by gunshots as the assault on the Institute began.

“We need him alive, Stark!” Rogers ordered over the comms.

“You do not need to remind me!” hissed Tony as he activated his suit, pressing his fingers on the Arc Reactor magnetised to his chest. Nanonites ran down his entire body, forming red and gold armour, swirling and clicking into place, locking the suit together. The helmet shut down over Tony’s face and the display appeared in front of him. He could have created the Mark 85 but had settled for the Mark 50 instead. He wouldn’t need the advanced armour for a few years yet. And he’d rather not raise too many suspicions.

Windows smashed in the room next door to his and gas started to flow out from canisters that had been fired through. Tony was thankful they had evacuated the building, less injuries that way.

“Tony! Rumlow’s inside!” Steve’s voice came over the comm.

“Got it.” Tony moved quickly out of the room, knowing Rumlow would be coming this way. They were not on his floor yet but he could detect people heading towards his level. He headed back towards the lab where Rumlow would head to. Ducking into the room and locking the door again behind him, Tony pivoted and hid beside a cupboard, hidden from view from anyone entering the lab.

He didn’t have to wait long before someone punched the door down and walked into the lab wearing heavy black armour with a gas mask on and they marched towards the case where the bioweapon should be.

Tony stepped out from his hiding place, blocking Rumlow’s exit as the man turned to face him as soon as he saw the case was empty.

“You shouldn’t be here!”

Tony smirked from within the helmet. “Sometimes things do not go to how you plan them, do they? You’re lucky I knew exactly what your target would be and could make the necessary arrangements to prevent you from stealing the biological weapon.” Raising his right arm he pointed his Gauntlet at Rumlow. “Surrender.”

Rumlow didn’t respond verbally. He simply attacked.
Tony reacted swiftly, firing his repulsor at Rumlow who ducked, running straight towards him. Tony stepped to the side, reached out and grabbed Rumlow, commanding the nanonites to clasp onto the man’s wrist, twisting his arm back behind him.

Rumlow attempted to turn back, nearly snapping his arm in the process, using his other arm, covered with another specialised gauntlet, to punch Tony in the chest.

Tony stood his ground. The Mark 50 was highly durable, not as strong as the Mark 85, but enough to deal with insignificant threats like the terrorist before him.

Rumlow tried again, struggling to free himself from the iron grip.

“I gave you an option. I suggest you take it,” reiterated Tony. He knew Rumlow wore a suicide vest. If he was going to detonate it, inside this building would be better. All the explosive materials were gone. The only people injured would be the attackers. If Rumlow managed to escape…

“Never!” From Rumlow’s free arm, a large knife slid out of their holdings and he swiped along Tony’s mask, barely grazing the faceplate. And then he pulled, hard, snapping his own wrist as he pulled free from Tony’s grip on his other arm. Rumlow stepped back, breathing hard. “He should have been here instead of you!”

*He means Steve...* Tony realised.

“If I can’t escape then I can cause as much damage as possible!”

Tony spied the detonator button as Rumlow turned and ran, out of the lab and towards the nearest window.

“Shit!” Tony fired his thrusters and flew forward. “Steve! Incoming!”

Tony spread his arms and grabbed Rumlow around the waist as the man reached the window and leapt out of it, depressing the detonator at the same time. Instead of falling, Tony flew out into the open air as his whole body was encased in hot heat as something tore apart in front of him. He felt intense burning through the suit and then the nanonites were blasted away, exposing his flesh to the air, as heat swept over and through him. He was thrown back by the force of the blast, windows shattering behind him and he fell through the air until he hit the ground with a sickening thud.

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Natasha twisted her body, her legs wrapped around one of her attacker’s neck, punching them on the head as she swung them down, flipping back away from them and sliding one leg underneath and tripping another attacker up.

Her earpiece crackled and Tony’s voice came over the line: “*Steve! Incoming!*” That could mean only one thing. Rumlow was on his way…

There was an almighty crash overhead as Rumlow leaped out of the third-floor window but then Tony was there, grabbing hold of Rumlow as his body exploded spectacularly. Tony was thrown away from the force of the blast and she could see his suit melt in the devastating heat of the explosion, exposing the front of his body to the debris and flesh and blood of Rumlow’s body and parts of the Institute as the windows around it shattered from the heat. The building shook and a part of the wall crumbled forward, landing in the foyer in front of her.

Tony was thrown back, his body falling before he hit the floor with a thud.
“Tony!” Natasha scrambled for her feet and rushed over to him. He was lying completely still, half of his suit torn away from the force of the blast and his face was slightly burned and bleeding. “Come on, Stark, don’t do this to me! I still need you!” She felt for his pulse and was relieved to find a strong heartbeat at the base of his throat. Relief swept through her. Not all was lost. Though how Tony had got here…

No, she’d dwell on it later.

She hadn’t expected him to turn up.

She’d been expecting someone else.

“Why do you… still need… me…? Agent… Romanoff?” coughed Tony as he opened his eyes slowly.

“No reason,” she said. Now was not the time.

“Stark!” Steve was running over, as was Wanda and Sam. “Is he alright?”

Natasha nodded. “He is. He just got caught in Rumlow’s suicide bomb, just a few burns, nothing that cannot be fixed quickly,” she smiled, relieved. “But he stopped it from becoming something worse. If Tony hadn’t been inside the building when he attacked…”

“Rumlow could have escaped and caused a lot of damage in the marketplace,” relented Steve. “You were right, Tony, about where he intended to hit.”

Tony winced as he tried to sit up. “Yeah, well, maybe you’ll listen to me more, now.”

Natasha couldn’t help but chuckle. “Come on, you’ve averted a wider catastrophe. You need medical.”

Thankfully Tony had only suffered minor burns, his suit having taken the majority of the explosion as it was ripped from him in the blast. On the ride back to the Avengers Facility, Tony had spent the flight with a cold compress over parts of his face, arms, and chest where the explosion had most affected, after running cold water over the areas first. He took some antibiotics to reduce infection and instructed Friday to order in a soothing cream which would help the skin heal faster. The damage was not too severe once he was cleaned up.

Once they arrived back at the facility, Tony asked Steve to write a report for him as he could use it with his negotiations regarding the Accords. He promised Steve they would sit down and discuss the positives and negatives of such a panel operating the Avengers, but first, he needed to rest and heal from his injuries.

Making his way slowly to his room, Tony sat on the edge of his bed, glancing around. He’d prevented a wider tragedy from occurring. The Wakandan Aid Relief workers hadn’t died. He’d stopped Rumlow from ever reaching the marketplace and becoming a danger, and therefore ensured Wanda did not use her powers to throw Rumlow away. Though the original incident had been unfortunate, Tony had wanted to avoid that specific situation again, because it was partly the reason why the Accords had been pushed quicker through the processes to become law. Now, the Accords wouldn’t be implemented as quickly, meaning T’Challa’s father wouldn’t die at the signing of the Accords.

Just one simple change had a butterfly effect.
One thing did nag at him, however: the enigma that was Natasha Romanoff.

He’d already suspected something off about her. She had seemed quite relieved he was still alive after the blast and some of the words she’d said to him, as he stirred from consciousness, resonated with him, and his suspicions had been raised further.

*If I died and came back here, why not Nat too?*

He heard movement from behind him as his door to his quarters opened and soft footsteps entered.

“Hello Tony,” Natasha said.

Tony turned slowly to face her, taking in her soft red hair around her shoulders and her green eyes shining brightly, a gentle smile on her face.

He leaned back, a teasing smile at the corner of his lips. “Tell me, Agent Romanoff, how was Vormir?”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

How many people guessed the Natasha twist? :D But how long has she been back for, that is the question...

Next week, Tony and Natasha talk...

Until next time,

the-writer1988
Chapter Three: Revelations

Chapter Summary

Tony and Natasha discuss their unique circumstances...

Chapter Notes

Hello all!

Wow, the response to the cliffhanger of the last chapter was astounding. Yes, Nat is back as well. Tony isn't alone in his mission! I hope this chapter isn't a disappointment!

CHAPTER THREE: Revelations

4th May 2016

“Tell me, Agent Romanoff, how was Vormir?”

“I didn’t particularly enjoy the skydive I did without a parachute… It could have ended better.”

He wanted to shout for joy. There was no way this was not his Natasha. “It is you,” he whispered. “Clint said you fell…”

“We fought. Someone had to do it and Clint had a family to go home to. And, I had red in my ledger…”

“Nat… you made up for that years ago…”

“I never believed I did. But sacrificing myself so we could bring everyone back? I cleared the red in my ledger, Tony.” She moved to sit beside him on the bed.

He surprised himself by wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her in for a hug. “God, when you didn’t appear back on the platform… Nat, don’t ever do anything like that again, okay?”

She embraced his hug, wrapping her arms around him too. “If there is no other way…”

“No, there is. There has to be,” Tony answered. “We’re both here for a reason. We didn’t die and be sent back if we were not going to change our deaths.”

Natasha pulled back, looking up at him with her intense green eyes. “You… died?”

“Surely you must have guessed…”

“I hoped you hadn’t…” She squeezed his arm. “Pepper… Morgan.”
“I know.” He bowed his head, tears threatening to fall as he thought of them.

“Who else died?” she asked quietly.

“No one. Just us.”

She paused but her answer was barely a whisper. “We won?”

He nodded. “We did.”

“But… if it worked… and we won…” She moved from the bed and began pacing. “Why have we been sent back?”

Tony shrugged. “To fix things.” At least that was what the mysterious voice in his head had informed him.

“Wait,” she turned to face him, “if we won, how come you died?”

“Turns out messing with time means it can mess back with you,” he explained. “We brought everyone back. Bruce did it. He was the only one strong enough to wield the stones without dying. But… moments later the Compound was blown to pieces. Thanos was there with his army.”

Natasha raised a hand. “Hold on, Thanos? I was there when Thor killed him.”


The words floated into his head as if he had always known those details.

“My guess is this Thanos was from a branch reality which was created when Rhodey and Nebula retrieved the Power Stone. We knew from Nebula that the time we were aiming for was around the days when Thanos was actively looking for the Power Stone. I think he must have found out… Wait…” His mind was whirring and he gasped. “Nebula disappeared when we had all the stones… She wasn’t there for the Snap…” He jumped from the bed, running his hands through his hair. “She did it! She brought Thanos from the past! But… she hates him… why would she?” He was talking more to himself now.

“Nebula once told me she was connected to a network. A network Thanos has access to,” remembered Natasha.

“Of course! That’s it!” Tony was jubilant. “The Nebula that came back with Rhodey wasn’t our Nebula! It was her past self! That’s why Thanos arrived.” Tony sat back on the edge of the bed. “We had to fight Thanos and his army. We were out of practice, Nat. Even Thor struggled. It was bleak… then the cavalry arrived. All of the Avengers assembled together and we faced Thanos’ army. Pepper was there…” His face shined as he remembered Pepper fighting in the Rescue armour, how she had proven to be at ease within it. “Thanos knew we had the stones. He kept trying to take them from us. The time machine was destroyed when his ship came through and our only option to get rid of them was to get back into the Quantum Realm. Scott’s van was on the battlefield. But Thanos, he got hold of the stones… Nat, he was going to wipe out the entire universe and rebuild it in his image. Carol arrived and destroyed his ship but she got blasted by the Power Stone and thrown away… It was the only way, Nat. The stones were in a gauntlet I had made. It resonated with my own suit… I attacked Thanos, one last effort to stop him from killing all life in the universe…”

Tony looked at his right arm, shuddering suddenly.
“The nanonites in my suit stole the stones from the Gauntlet. Thanos didn’t notice. When he tried to snap his fingers, that’s when he knew I had the stones.”

“Oh, Tony…” Natasha swallowed. He could see in her expression she already knew what he’d done and the heavy price he had paid for his act of self-sacrifice.

“I killed him,” choked out Tony. “Killed him and his whole army.” He was still standing in front of Natasha but the reality of what he had done was crashing down around him. Of what he had given. Of what he had lost. “Pepper… She was there…” He could feel tears welling in his eyes. He never cried. Tony Stark never cried. “I remember dying… my vision going… the next thing I know I’m waking up here.”

Natasha got to her feet and gently pulled Tony into a hug. “It’s alright. You’ve been through a lot. You threw yourself right into this new time without really coming to terms with what had happened to you.”

Pulling away from her embrace, Tony fumbled for a handkerchief and dried his wet eyes. “Pepper was the last thing I saw. She said I could rest now… Obviously, I can’t if I’m here.”

Natasha winced. “I think you’re here because of my choices, Tony.”

He looked at her sharply. “What do you mean?” He frowned, his eyes still shimmering with tears. “When I was regaining consciousness in Lagos, you said you still needed me. Why?”

Nat shifted away from Tony so she was facing him. “How long do you think I’ve been here, Tony?”

“Slightly longer than me. A few weeks?” he answered.

She shook her head, her hair falling about her shoulders. “Two years.”

Tony’s eyes widened. “What? Two years?”

“Maybe I should start at the beginning?” she suggested.

Tony nodded for her to continue.

“When I died, I retained consciousness. I didn’t know where I was. I remember seeing orange skies… orange water… I was just there… in the water. I’m not sure how long I was there for… Then I heard a voice calling my name. It told me I had a choice to make. I could accept my fate and move on or live again and save everybody. I chose the second option because I assumed it meant my sacrifice hadn’t meant anything, that all of you had failed…”

Tony shook his head. “No, we won. I beat him. I was nearly out of it but I remember seeing his army begin to turn to dust. I never really saw Thanos go but I made sure to target him… And we’d bought everyone back too. We won, Nat.”

She frowned, looking a little confused. “But then why give me the option to choose?”

“Because maybe we are meant to stop Thanos from using the stones in the first place,” Tony reasoned. “The universe was destabilised in the wake of the Decimation. Imagine what it could be like in the aftermath of everyone being brought back? People moved on with their lives. Some, not all but those that did… If their loved ones returned… how chaotic would it be?”

“We’ll never know as we are not there.”
“Why do you believe I am here because of your choices?” he asked. It had been curious wording from her. Nat had been given a choice, he hadn’t unless he couldn’t consciously remember being given one.

“After I made my choice the voice told me I’d be sent back but I could only waken in the year I died in, which was 2014. It told me it wasn’t time for me to change anything just yet and if I’d tried, outside forces would prevent me from doing so. And, believe me, I tried to expose Hydra, prevent Ultron, everything but each time I attempted it, I was stopped. The voice kept telling me, these last two years, I had to wait for someone else, that I needed them. They wouldn’t tell me who. Only that I’d know when events started to change.”

“Ah, so you knew as soon as I stepped into the planning room,” deduced Tony.

“Yes. You were never involved with Lagos. Admittedly, I assumed it would be Steve. I wasn’t sure if the voice meant someone else would die but I always thought it would be Steve who’d go down fighting… and he’d be the one to arrive. I spent so much time around Steve the last few years, so to me, it made sense to be him.”

Tony wasn’t sure whether to feel offended or not. “You know I’ve made more sacrifice plays than Cap has, right?”

Natasha winced. “I know.”

“Still,” assured Tony, “if our original timeline isn’t the one we are altering –”

_It is._ The voice echoed around his head.

“Mysterious voice says it is!” Tony rolled his eyes.

Natasha cracked a smile. “You’ll get used to the voice. I hadn’t heard it in a while… then you arrived,”

“At least we’re in this together. I’m glad I’m not alone.”

“It’s nice I can finally do something instead of living the same thing again.”

Tony chuckled. “So…” He leaned back, hands resting behind him, supporting himself on the bed. “Got any ideas on where to start other than what I’ve already started on?”

“A fair few,” she admitted, “mainly involving how to obtain the Infinity Stones earlier.”

“Hmm. We need to keep the team together, Nat,” said Tony quietly. “We cannot let ourselves split over the Accords.”

“Agreed. We need to prevent what’s occurring now.” She inclined her head. “What have you started on?”

“We both know Barnes is hiding in Bucharest but I’ve ordered Friday to start a worldwide search for him so I can convince Rogers I did my research.”

“Good idea. I don’t believe telling Steve about… our conditions… would be a good idea.”

Tony nodded his head. “Definitely not. The fewer people who know about us, the better. I’ve got her also searching for Helmut Zemo. He’s either putting his plans in motion or he has yet to act… I want to find him before he begins to act. We have a few weeks before we really need to worry.
22nd June is the day he plants the bomb and frames Barnes. Ideally, I’d like to capture him then if we are unable to locate him prior.”

“Good. We need the intel to back up our assertions if we are going to exonerate Barnes from any wrongdoing,” valued Nat.

“I’m also tracking Stephen Strange. I think we need his involvement in this but we have to wait until he becomes the Supreme Sorcerer or whatever he will become,” finished Tony. “But that isn’t all. We need to call in Carol and make links with the Guardians.”

“Calling in Carol will be difficult. Fury keeps the pager with him at all times…”

Tony frowned and sat forward. “We need to convince Fury somehow… Telling him is not an option. The only person I want to tell is Pepper.”

Natasha grimaced. “What if telling Pepper backfires?”

“It won’t,” he smiled. “I’ve got a feeling telling her everything is the right move.”

*It is.*

“Oh.” Natasha jumped.

“You heard?” he grinned.

“Yeah. Whoever the voices are they are trying to pinpoint us in the right direction. We need an ally, Nat. Pep is the best one. And… I cannot keep secrets from her.” Tony’s lips twitched. “She’s already had to suffer enough… watching me die.”

“She won’t this time,” assured Nat.

Tony didn’t comment, just pulled a face. “God… I just think of how strong she was in my final moments. She didn’t cry… She kept on smiling, knowing it would be the last thing I’d see. She was so strong… I didn’t want to go, Nat…” He turned his head away, the tears threatening to fall again.

“Most of us don’t,” she answered quietly, moving closer to Tony, resting her head on his shoulder. “We both made the choice to die, knowing what it would cost us. We were at our endgame.”

“We thought we were,” noted Tony sighing. “We were wrong. We’re still needed.”

“Seems the universe cannot cope without us, Stark,” quipped Natasha, laughing quietly. Then her face grew more serious. “So, long term goals: stop Thanos. Short term goals: keep the team together.”

“Yeah. A middle goal for us is making contact with Carol and/or the Guardians. We’re lucky the Accords are not being pushed forward as quickly so Zemo may not be able to break us apart as he hopes. I do know several countries are calling for them to be ratified. I think we should operate on the assumption they will be happening. Instead of the government coming to us about them, we should be going to the United Nations ourselves to work with them. It may mitigate the impact they’d have on our activities if we show a willingness to co-operate with the international community.”

“But how do we sell the idea to Steve?”
Tony leaned back, frowning. Steve was the problem. His moral compass wouldn’t allow him to compromise. Steve wanted to do things his way because he believed it to be the right way. “Leave that to me. I think you should discuss it with the others… and… reach out to Clint. And Scott too. I know we haven’t officially met him yet either but we need to be on good terms with him and…” Tony paused. “No. Leave the Pym’s to me. Hank Pym hates me simply because of my father. I need to be the one to reach out.”

“Right. We have a plan then.”

“We do. We also need our own secret communication channel. I’ll build a wrist device which will allow us to communicate discreetly. And that’s another thing, I’m going to avoid involving Ross in the Accords business. His involvement last time didn’t help matters,” explained Tony. “We may not have any choice in dealing with him at some points but it is doable. It is important we go to the United Nations as a united front to work with them or we’ll find ourselves split…”

Nat’s expression was stern. “We have to prevent it from happening.”

“We’re gonna have a rough couple of months with this, Nat…” Tony looked at her. He felt old, wanting to be back at home in his cabin with Morgan and telling her stories of what he used to do. But he couldn’t because she didn’t exist just yet nor did the cabin as he’d built it from scratch.

“I know. You’re lucky, Tony,” she smiled wearily. “You didn’t have to wait for two years, living through the same thing, knowing you could do nothing to change it. Waiting for you has been… hard.”

“I’m here now, Nat,” he replied quietly. “We’ve been given a blessing and a curse.”

“Two years to not mess this up,” she pointed out.

“Two years before Thanos,” swallowed Tony. He was not looking forward to facing him again. He knew he would. And that was when he remembered, the secrets he had carried with him since Titan, the words Thanos had said to him… “There’s something about Thanos and me which I never told any of you about when I got back from Titan. And… God.. Nat, it terrifies me.”

Natasha caught his gaze, studying him. “Tony, what is it?” She reached forward and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “You don’t have to say.”

He swallowed, knowing it was the right thing to do to tell Natasha. If they were going to be working together she had to know. His trip to another planet had continued to haunt him on a regular basis even after Morgan had been born. Waking up from nightmares had become a regular occurrence. “I was the last one standing. Nat. He threw a moon at me… But when I flew back down to face him, to defend Strange, to stop Thanos from taking the stone… Nat… He said my name. He said ‘Stark’.”

Natasha’s eyebrows rose up in surprise. “He said your name?”

Tony nodded slowly. “Yeah. When I queried it, he said I wasn’t the only one cursed with knowledge… I don’t know what he meant. Or really understand how he knew my name. It’s like… He knows me.”

*Thanos was behind the attack on New York in 2012.*

The voice echoed through their heads. They both glanced at one another.

“We knew he was behind it… Bruce told us,” observed Natasha. “But… why you?”
Tony didn’t need a voice to tell him why. He already knew. “The missile… I destroyed his army, didn’t I? He might not have cared about the rest of you because you just fought his army…” Tony began to reason.

Natasha gasped. “But he would want to know who repelled his invasion, successfully ended it.”

Tony shuddered, a shiver running down his spine. “It’s scary thinking he may have done his research on me. He was eager to fight me one-on-one. When I launched my first attack I heard him say ‘come on’ as if he was preparing himself to face me, as if he had been anticipating fighting me for a long time.” He was surprised how much he still remembered of the fight, even years after it had happened. “It was short. But I lasted the longest. I managed to draw blood after using a variety of attacks. He just came at me, Nat. Punching, hitting me… tearing my suit from me. Picking me up and hitting me at point-blank range with the Power Stone. I tried everything to fend off his attacks… even tried to stab him.” The others had never known of his stab wound as Nebula had already healed it before his return to Earth. “That backfired spectacularly on me. Turned my own weapon against me and stabbed it through my right side.”

“HE DID WHAT?” Natasha shrieked. “Why did you not say anything before?”

Tony winced. “Blue meanie helped me before Carol rescued us. Only two who ended up knowing were Pepper and Rhodey. I didn’t want to admit what he did to me. Or what he said. There’s more… I couldn’t fight after he stabbed me. Pushed me back until he could force me to sit on some rocks… He put the Gauntlet on my head, forced me to look at him. He said to me I had his respect, that half of humanity would still be alive, which was true…He shoved me back, stood back up… He told me he hoped people would remember me… He was gonna kill me with the stones. He pointed the Gauntlet at me, all four stones lighted up… And then Strange bargained for my life. Willingly gave up the Time Stone to spare me. I guess we know why he did. He knew what the outcome would be when he looked into the future and saw one way to win. He knew I had to be alive…” He’d never revealed Strange had looked into the future and when he saw Natasha’s questioning glance, he decided to elaborate. “Before Thanos arrived on Titan, Strange looked into the future with the Time Stone. He searched for many different ways to win… We lost in all but one of those futures. He was right… but the cost of that future was…”

“Our lives,” finished Natasha quietly.

Tony sighed. “Yeah, our lives, but we’ve been given another chance. Why we don’t know. We just have to work with what we’ve got and hopefully we can beat the timeframe set down upon us.”

“We will.” Natasha caught his gaze. “I do not intend to die failing. We will succeed, Tony, but we need to work together. And… with what you’ve revealed about Thanos and you… it may be something we can use against him.”

Tony wasn’t sure whether he liked it or not. “Maybe…”

She placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “You won’t be alone next time you face him. I’ll be there too. We’ll face this together.”

A slight smile tugged at his lips. “Thanks, Nat. Thank you.”

“We’re a team, Stark.” She stood from the bed and placed one hand on her hip and held out her right one to him. “Come on. We’ve got work to do.”

To be continued...
Chapter 3 illustration of Nat arriving at Tony's room, draw by the wonderful and talented JediPanda22! Please check out the rest of their artwork on their Instagram page: JediPanda22!

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

So, Nat has been around since 2014, unable to change anything until Tony turned up. You might wonder why Nat couldn't have travelled forward in time to 2016, but that is the rules she was told and she was actively prevented from altering anything until Tony arrived. The big question is, why was Tony sent back? Who/what/when is behind it?

I think, based on Endgame, Nat and Nebula got quite close as they must have talked over the five years Nat ran the Avengers and Tony already had his friendship with her too so I don't think its unreasonable to assume they would come to the conclusion that it was an evil duplicate of Nebula which returned in their Nebula's place, resulting in Tony having to wield the Gauntlet.

Nat and Tony have begun planning what to do... The first is to ensure the team stays together during the Accords process. Can they succeed? There is so much to come in this fic. I also wanted to establish the Tony and Thanos rivalry. I was always disappointed it wasn't really paid off in Endgame with 2014 Thanos recognising Tony... So, the whole Tony and Thanos rivalry will be a big part of this fic!

Next chapter: Steve and the Accords... The Civil War storyline will roughly last ten chapters I think.
Will be posted probably early Sunday next week or late Sunday evening UK time as I am working that day.

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Four: The Accords

Chapter Summary

Tony and Natasha present the Accords to the assembled Avengers...

Chapter Notes

Again, wow, thank you for all the comments for the last chapter!

Updating slightly earlier than normal today because I am working this afternoon and I wanted to get this out before I left. It's quite a long chapter, over 6000 words! Hopefully, it is not too long and boring, but I feel this is an essential chapter that is needed to push the plot forward. Once we get past the Civil War storyline, things will begin to move quickly.

I have had several questions/requests regarding whether this will be Natasha/Steve fic. I'm not a big fan of Steve however I can promise there will be lots of interaction between him and Natasha so if you want to take this is a precursor towards a relationship please do, but there won't be any romance between the two in this story.

Secondly, yes, Peter Parker will be joining this story. He will play a role in Tony's life.

And thirdly, I made a bit of an error in the previous chapter by stating the Accords signing in Civil War happened on May 22nd. It didn't. Lagos happened beginning of May but the Accords signing in Vienna occurred in June so I've gone back and altered it to bring it up-to-date.

Please, enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER FOUR: The Accords

Friday 6th May 2016

Missouri

Natasha stood at the edge of Clint’s property; her eyes focused on the quaint farmhouse the Barton family had made their home. She remembered the last time she had visited the farm. It was just after half the population had been wiped out. Clint had been unresponsive and Nat had feared the worst. Travelling alone to his secluded farmhouse, Natasha had found the property deserted. The only thing she had found to indicate Clint had survived was a scrawled note in his living room stating the words: *Leave me alone.*

Respecting his wishes, Natasha had left Clint alone, having guessed his whole family had been taken in the Decimation. It was the only explanation as to why Clint had disappeared and didn’t
want to be found. Of course, a few months later the first reports of Clint murdering people who, in his mind, should have been taken, sprung into her radar. She’d spent years trying to track him down but failing each time, until just before Tony had returned to the Avengers with the solution for time travel.

But now, Clint was at home with his family, not even aware of what the future held. Natasha needed to bring Clint into the fold, and Tony wanted everyone there to discuss the Accords and for a group decision to be made. It was her job to convince Clint to accompany her back to the Compound. She was sure she could.

Making her way across the grass and onto Barton’s porch, Natasha knocked on his front door.

“Nat…” Laura Barton answered the door, her face breaking out into a smile.

“Hi… Is Clint home?”

“He’s in the barn with Cooper. Do you want to come in?” Laura offered.

Natasha shook her head. “Not today. I need to talk to Clint about something quite important. I may need to borrow him for a while…”

Laura sighed. “Another world-ending threat?”

Natasha winced. “Not exactly… He won’t be gone for long. A few days at most. Nothing bad will happen.” I hope, she added internally.

“No dangerous mission then?” Laura asked hopefully.

“No, definitely not,” Natasha smiled and glanced over towards the barn. “Will it be alright if I interrupt them?”

“It’s fine. It’s nearly time for lunch. Can you ask Cooper to come back for his sandwiches?”

“Sure.” Natasha stepped away. “I’ll make sure to come by before we leave to see Nate and Lila.”

“Please do, I’m sure Lila would love to see her favourite aunt,” laughed Laura, watching Natasha walk across the grass and onto the path which led towards the barn.

The cool breeze air picked up Natasha’s shoulder-length hair. She felt calm. She always felt safe on the farm. It was a piece of seclusion she could not receive anywhere else. Many times she had visited the farm just to get away from everything.

The door to the barn was slightly ajar and Natasha stepped inside. Clint and his son were sitting at a worktable, tools scattered around them as they worked. “Hey, boys.” She stepped into the light shining through the rafters above.

Clint glanced up and his face split into a large grin. “Nat! What are you doing here?”

“I’m afraid this isn’t a social visit.” Natasha approached the table. “Hey, Cooper, what’s he teaching you?”

“Lila likes archery so we’re making her a bow for her birthday. Dad is showing me the tricks of the trade!” grinned Cooper, pushing his chair out behind him to give her a hug.

“My, you are growing big! You’ve sprouted a lot in a year!”
“You should see Lila,” laughed Clint. “She’s unrecognisable. She’s gone from being tiny to having a growth spurt in a short space of time.”

“I promised Laura I’d see both Lila and Nate before I left today.” Nat hugged Clint, turning to look back to Cooper. “Do you mind? I need to talk to your dad. Your mum told me your lunch is ready.”

Cooper started to jog away, turned back and waved to Natasha. “Thanks, Aunt Nat!”

She waved back, her heart pulling for those words. She hadn’t been called ‘Aunt Nat’ in a long time.

Once Cooper was gone, Natasha turned back to face Clint, who was leaning against the defunct tractor sitting in the middle of the barn. “What brings you here? This isn’t a social call, I take it?”

Shaking her head, Natasha sighed. “No, it isn’t. I need you to come back to the Compound with me. There are things we need to discuss as a team. There is new legislation coming in called The Sokovia Accords which will affect how we operate as a team.”

Clint frowned. “The Sokovia Accords? Isn’t Sokovia where Wanda is from?”

“It is…” Natasha hesitated. “The incident with Ultron has caused ramifications. New legislation is coming in to govern the Avengers. Tony has been working with the United Nations with the legislation, however, he is concerned the team will fall apart if we do not work together to ensure the correct legislation is put in place which pleases everybody on the team. We need you for a few days to discuss this. You may not be on active duty for now but you are still one of us.”

“And what happens if we cannot agree?” Clint walked around the barn. “I’ve got a young family, Nat. I can’t be on active duty anymore. Does this really concern me?”

Natasha wanted to say Clint would come out of retirement on the words of Steve Rogers alone, just because the man asked, but that hadn’t happened yet. This whole meeting Tony wanted to hold was to stop the team from splitting onto different sides. The words she wanted to say would only be relevant if Clint did choose a side.

“It concerns everyone who was and is an Avenger,” replied Natasha quietly. “Clint, we value your input. You’ll be back before you know it.”

Clint laughed. “You’ve said that before. Then everything has gone to shit.”

A wry smile crossed her face. “It won’t this time. You coming?”

“Anything for you, Nat.”

“Wouldn’t be the same without you, Clint,” she grinned. “Before we go I need to see Lila and Nate. I’m sure Lila wouldn’t forgive me if I didn’t say hello to her since I’m here…” joked Natasha, leading the way back to the farmhouse.

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Saturday 7th May 2016

Avengers Facility

Everyone was seated around the conference table. Sat in the middle was a draft copy of the new legislation, the Sokovia Accords. Tony sat next to Natasha, the two having decided to present a
united front rather than risk being on two different sides of the table. Tony held his tablet in front of him, waiting for everyone to settle before starting.

He was facing Steve with Wanda and Sam either side. Clint sat at the bottom of the table with Rhodey at the head. Vision seated himself close to Wanda.

“Thank you all for coming at short notice,” began Tony. “You may or not be aware of new legislation coming in that will affect how we operate as a team.” He pointed to the Sokovia Accords in the centre of the table. “This is legislation which has been in the works for a while now, since Ultron. There were whisperings of this after Steve exposed Hydra within SHIELD. But it didn’t really reach international attention until after Ultron. The US government wishes for us to comply with the Accords. The timeframe to ratify them is by the end of June. I want to keep this team together, so does Nat. We both propose working together to ensure we sign a version of the Accords which suits us all. No legislation can be perfect for us. There will be things within it we disagree with. That is the way things work in the real world.” He focused his eyes briefly on Steve. He would be the one who would object most to this legislation. Tony was expecting it.

Clint folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in his chair. “I got the general gist of what the Accords are about. It’s about taking responsibility for our actions. You said this only came to a head because of Ultron. The rest of us do not need this legislation to govern us, Stark. It’s only you who needs it. Ultron was your fault.”

Clint had always been blunt, Tony knew that.

Tony traded a quick glance with Natasha, seeing her roll her eyes at Clint’s words. Tony could have let the accusation go, something he would have done if the circumstances were different. He’d never told the Avengers why he had created Ultron in the first place. This was the perfect time to do so, to clear some air.

“Creating Ultron wasn’t as simple as you believe, Clint,” said Tony quietly. “I wasn’t the only one who Wanda got her hands on.” He swept his gaze to the young woman who cringed. “I’ve kept this quiet out of respect for Wanda wanting to make up for her involvement in Ultron. Wanda did use her powers on me when we captured Baron Von Strucker. It was just before I took the sceptre. I saw all of you dead or dying around me, the army from New York heading through another portal to invade Earth.” He turned to face Wanda. “That nightmare or vision you gave me was directly responsible for why I reactivated the Ultron Project. Ultron was an abandoned project, deemed too dangerous to proceed with… but that vision? Whatever you did to me, influenced me to take the risk, and in doing so I nearly doomed the entire planet. Sokovia does lie squarely at my feet because I let your mind tricks get the better of me but if you hadn’t have done it, I wouldn’t have been so insistent on creating an A.I to protect the world. I’ve created plenty of A.I’s and none of them have become a threat to the planet until you messed with my head.”

Wanda bowed her head, her cheeks flushing red. “You killed my parents. I wanted revenge.”

Tony sighed. This wasn’t the time and place to have this conversation yet the others needed to understand. “And you wanted me dead too. Wanda, I had nothing to do with your parent’s deaths.”

“It was your name on the bomb!” she retorted angrily.

“Wait.” Rhodey raised his hands. “You hate Tony because his name was on the bomb which killed your parents? Do you realise how stupid that sounds? You’re blaming the man who designed the weapons rather than the people who launched the bomb in the first place! That’s…” Rhodey shook his head. “Messes up.”
“And those bombs were fake anyway,” said Tony. He’d researched it. “None of the bombs I designed were duds. I had a 100% track record. Every single one was manufactured to the highest standards. I learned later, Wanda, that to keep a tidy profit for himself, the man who I thought cared about me, had been betraying me for years. He sold my weapons on the black market, had a side business where he manufactured fake Stark Industries weapons at a cheaper price but still marketed them as the genuine article. It was those weapons which were sold to Hydra in Sokovia. They didn’t have a high safety record. When I found out the extent of Stane’s betrayal, I shut it down, destroyed all the weapons which were sold illegally. I’ve been taking accountability for my mistakes for years.” He shot Clint a glare. “How many of you have contributed to helping Sokovia since Ultron? How much money did you pay, Steve, to help clear up the damage caused by the Helicarriers? Did you stay and help? Did you contribute at all? I wasn’t even involved in it and yet my company, on my direction, actively involved itself in clearing up the messes that have been made by other people! Do not tell me I do not take accountability for my actions. I do it for all of you as well even when I’m not involved!”

Everyone was silent around the table.

Natasha looked at each and every one of them before she finally spoke. “A lot of us have misjudged Tony over the years. This needs to stop. How many of us have offered to help clear up after we’ve fought somewhere? How many of us have reached out to the public and apologised for our actions? We may be saving the world but a high cost is still paid by others. Tony understands this. He does take accountability for his actions. Becoming Iron Man was his first step at taking accountability. We have to stick together on this otherwise the outcome if we do not could be… catastrophic, especially if we are ever faced with another world-ending threat.”

She was referring to the threat Thanos posed to them, not that the other Avengers knew it yet of course.

“What if we disagree with the whole concept of the Accords?” queried Steve.

“Then you are off the team,” stated Natasha before Tony could reply. “Whether you like the idea of them or not doesn’t matter. They will still become law. A law we will have to obey and if you continue working with the Avengers illegally you would be arrested.”

“If I do not sign them, the Accords would not apply to me,” said Steve. “I wouldn’t have agreed to them.”

Tony almost put his head in his hands. “That isn’t how the world works, Steve. If its law, regardless of whether you signed them or not, you’d still be breaking them. You’d still be punished for the illegality of your actions.” He locked eyes with Steve. “The best thing about these Accords is that there is legislation written into them that those which sign them can request and debate changes to them. The changes may not be passed but our hands are not completely tied. But before we make any decisions we need to discuss them in detail.” He held up his tablet, pointed it at a screen to the left of himself and projected his notes on the Accords so his teammates could read them. “I’ve been consulted on the Accords for the last few months. I am in favour of them though there are parts of it I do disagree with… Overall I believe it is in our best interests to abide with them because if we do not they will be forced on us and we will not have any political leeway at all. Agreeing to work with them gives us an advantage.”

Natasha took up the information. “Since Sokovia, one hundred and seventeen countries have been under discussion with the United Nations about whether the Avengers should remain a private organisation or operate under the supervision of a United Nations panel. This could mean we can only operate when we have permission to do so. Tony has been the one who has worked most on
this. He bought me into this just recently as he wanted a second opinion before proceeding further.”

It was a lie but a convincing one. Sticking together was a priority.

“The Accords do not stop us from operating in our own country. We do not have to ask for permission to act in America. It is when we enter other countries when they haven’t asked us for help is the problem. We are entering countries illegally, without going through the proper channels,” explained Tony. “This is why I was so insistent on us gaining permission to enter Nigeria. What if something had gone drastically wrong and people had died? What if one of us had made a mistake? It could all come back to haunt us. Having permission to operate in another country helps reduce the risk of us being blamed for any casualties. That onus would then fall on the government who failed to protect their own people. The Accords not only safeguards other countries but it also safeguards us.”

Steve cleared his throat. “Why should we have to ask permission to go somewhere where we are needed?”

“It’s the way the world works, Steve,” answered Rhodey quietly. “This isn’t World War II. Society has moved on. If we are to be respected by the international community, we need to be seen respecting their rules and regulations. What if they do not want our help? Are you going to force your help on them because you believe it is the right thing to do?”

Steve bit his lower lip. It was clear what the super-soldier believed.

Tony leaned across the table. “Steve, just because it is something you want to do, doesn’t give you the right to force it on others who may not want help.”

“Mr. Stark is correct. Everyone should have the right to refuse help.” Vision had been observing the proceedings carefully.

Steve sighed, glancing at the others who had yet to voice an opinion.

“Hear me out, please,” beseeched Tony. “One of the key things we would need to do is to a sign a register and provide biometric data such as fingerprints and DNA sample. This isn’t unreasonable as our fingerprints are already on record. We would have to reveal our legal names and true identities to the United Nations. Most of us are publicly known. We shouldn’t have a problem with revealing them. Would this be acceptable to everyone here?” He cast his eyes around the table, watching for the small nods of acknowledgment. “Good. At least we can agree on something.”

“I’m sensing there is more in this document we won’t be so happy about though,” noted Sam.

Tony minutely nodded. “There are some points I disagree with but as I have explained if we sign them as they are, we will have the ability to discuss with the committee other parts of the legislation we disagree with and potentially argue for them to be altered.”

“Just because they might agree to talk with us, doesn’t mean they will take our concerns seriously,” said Steve, glancing at the next screen Tony had projected onto the wall. “I do not like the idea of those with powers, like Wanda, should have to wear tracking bracelets at all times.”

“I know. I don’t like it either. It’s one of the clauses Natasha and I are fighting to get removed from the Accords.” It was one they intended to start on as soon as this meeting was over but Tony and Natasha needed the others to know that it was already being worked on, even if it was a bit of a lie. It soon wouldn’t be. “We may be able to alter it so tracking bracelets are only utilised in the event of the individual is under probation or being investigated. I’m hoping we can remove it all together
but we may need to reach a compromise with the Accords committee on this.”

Steve frowned.

“Steve,” said Nat quietly. “We cannot have it all our own way. We need to compromise too.”

“I’m the only one here who would be affected by that particular legislation,” said Wanda quietly. “I have supernatural powers.” Her hands flickered with red energy. “I’ve done so many things wrong in my life that if I need to be tracked if I’ve done something wrong then I will do it, as long as it doesn’t suppress my powers.”

Tony felt quite surprised by Wanda’s reasoning. This wasn’t something they’d covered during their original Accords meeting when Ross had presented them to the team. This time it was different because Tony was taking the initiative himself. Perhaps they would be more open to agreeing to the Accords now they would not feel so threatened by Ross?

Still, Steve was still being quite stubborn. He could tell Rogers was not happy about the legislation at all. He would take some convincing.

“Wanda, are you sure?” asked Steve quietly.

The Sokovian girl inclined her head. “If it helps the people feel safe, Steve, why shouldn’t I?”

“You could be betrayed by the government. People could get their hands on you and experiment on you and your powers. All sorts of things could go wrong, Wanda!” reasoned Steve.

Tony sighed. He’d barely gone over the legislation and Steve… He was a brick wall, refusing to budge.

Wanda’s lips twitched. “It is a risk I will have to take. I’m done being the bad guy.”

“Thank you, Wanda,” addressed Tony. He wanted to give her praise. She was being quite reasonable about this. But then she nearly signed before. “We will all be classed as enhanced individuals. This includes Nat, Clint, Sam, Rhodey and I.”

“What?” Clint objected. “I have no powers!”

“You have enhanced tech which enables you to pull off feats no ordinary human could. Having the skill you do with your bow and arrow puts you in the enhanced category. Even being a member of the Avengers places you as an enhanced individual,” pointed out Tony. “My brain is my power. The amount of advanced tech I have created? My suits enhance me to the point where I can survive circumstances no other human could. Strictly speaking, I am an enhanced individual. All of us are in some ways, regardless of whether we have powers or not.”

“Whether we have powers or not doesn’t matter. We are all members of the Avengers and the Accords will affect us as a team and therefore we have to abide by them,” reported Natasha, leaning forward. “If we break the law or become a threat to the safety of the general public, we can be detained indefinitely without trial.”

There was an uproar from Steve, Sam and Wanda’s side.

Tony groaned.

“We are working on changing that!” shouted Natasha over the vocal objections from the other three. “That part of the Accords came from Secretary Ross himself. It is a suggestion which is
Tony could have attested to that if he wanted to. That piece of legislation had been altered. This time, however, Tony wanted to ensure that specific piece of legislation did not make the final Accords. It would make placing the Avengers in the Raft extraordinarily difficult for Ross.

Steve looked doubtful.

“Steve,” Tony leaned forward, “please trust me on this. Nat and I are doing everything we can to keep the team together.”

“We’d be better off opposing the Accords together,” replied Steve. “How can you support something like this when it prevents us from doing our jobs?”

“Because it will be done to us. Supporting is the best option for all of us,” said Tony quietly. “We’ll at least have power.”

“Another important piece of legislation within the Accords which all the countries agree upon are that we would be prohibited from taking action in any country other than our own,” continued Natasha, seeking to move the conversation onward. “There are two ways to gain permission to operate outside the US. The first is by being given clearance by that country’s government. If that fails we would submit an urgent application to the United Nations subcommittee requesting permission. The subcommittee can overrule the wishes of the government. All the countries have signed in agreement with this legislation. Alternatively, governments can request our aid and we can decide whether to attend or not, or they request the UN committee to dispatch us to them. It works both ways. No government has the power to deploy us outside of their national borders without having the specific permission from the aforementioned pathways. This help protects us, Steve, from operating illegally and keeping not just us safe, but others too.”

“If any of us choose to not sign, we will not be allowed to take part in any police, military or espionage activities, even within our own country, or any active missions of any kind,” added Tony. “The Avengers would not be a privately owned organisation, which is run by my money now since SHIELD fell. We would be funded by all the one hundred and seventeen nations which are signed up to the Accords.”

“What about the countries which are not signed up for the Accords?” asked Sam. “The world consists of one hundred and ninety-five, not one hundred and seventeen.”

Tony frowned, exchanged a glance with Natasha. “That… is up in the air. Still under discussion with the nations who are not interested in the Accords. As far as I am aware until the nations agree to implement the Accords, if we did attend any of the countries which are not operating under the Accords, we would be able to act freely.”

“Though it would still be best to gain permission before entering any of those countries,” added Natasha. “It would show we respect their rules and regulations instead of assuming we are needed or they would be grateful for our help. Not signing the Accords do not mean they disagree with them.”

“There are other additions to the Accords which have been made recently which we will not seek to amend,” continued Tony, changing the projection on the wall to show a list of other points in the
Accords which he felt the others needed to be aware of. “The creation of self-aware artificial intelligence is completely prohibited. This affects me. I’ve always created multiple A.I’s. Only one turned into a super-murder bot and that was due to outside influences. I lost the best A.I I had.” His eyes moved to Vision. “But he became something more, something better. None of my other A.I’s is a patch on what JARVIS was. But they are all capable of learning. I will maintain FRIDAY and the Accords committee are aware of her role with the Iron Man suit and have authorised her use, as well as approving her for use within the Avenger’s Facility and my own homes. This legislation ensures other people cannot create anymore A.I’s, and neither can I. If I do, I would have to submit myself to the committee for a review and potential imprisonment.”

“The last important piece of legislation is the use of technology to bestow individuals with innate superhuman capabilities is strictly regulated.” Natasha glanced at Wanda. “What Hydra did to you and your brother cannot happen to anyone else unless the United Nations approves it. Same with creating more super soldiers.” She glanced at Steve. “Using and distributing highly advanced technology is a crime in itself too. Anyone caught doing so without having a legal reason to do so shall be submitted to the Accords Committee and punished to the full extent of the law.”

Tony leaned back in his chair, switching off the projection. “Those are the main points we wished to take you through. I’ve sent you a copy of the draft Accords to your email accounts. Please read them and get back to me on your thoughts and opinions on anything we can fight to change.”

“When do they wish to ratify them, Tony?” asked Rhodey. “Do they have a specific date?”

“I’m hearing the end of June. I thought it was the end of this month but we’ve got just under two months to get the ball rolling on this and set changes in motion.”

“Not bad,” agreed Rhodey.

Tony cast his gaze around everyone in the room. “Please read them. I want to keep the team together… If we split over this… it could cause ramifications we cannot recover from.”

Steve reached forward and picked up the printed edition of the Accords. “I cannot promise you anything, Tony, but I’ll read them. We’ll let you know.”

Tony stood from his chair and folded his hands behind his back. “Thank you.”

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Everyone filed out of the conference room leaving Natasha alone with Steve. He was looking through the Accords, his frown deepening as he read them. “You disagree, don’t you?”

Steve sighed and placed the Accords back on the table. “I disagree. It takes away my freedom to go where I need to be.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Even if they do not want your help?” She could see he struggled with the idea people would not want his help.

“I don’t – This whole thing is hard. I know what Tony is trying to do. But these Accords will rip us apart.”

“Then why oppose them?” she asked. “If you believe they’ll rip us apart, the best thing to do, as a team, is to face them together. We need to stand and trust one another to have all of our backs, regardless. Do you trust all of us?”

“I do.”
Natasha braced herself. “Then why won’t you trust Tony with the truth about how his parents really died? I was there in the old SHIELD base with you when Zola revealed that nugget piece of information. The Winter Soldier murdered Tony’s parents. He deserves to know. You told me you would.” It was one of the things Tony wanted to happen. He wanted Steve to come to him with the truth. He felt doing so would help their friendship. Even though Tony already knew because he’d already lived it once, he needed Steve to come clean with him.

Steve had the dignity to look ashamed. “He might go after Bucky, Nat…”

“He won’t. Tony is a reasonable person. Talk to him, Steve. You want there to be trust within the Avengers?”

He nodded.

“Then keeping secrets isn’t going to help us maintain our team. What if Tony found out in the worst possible way?” She was thinking of Siberia and Tony being forced to watch the video of his parent’s deaths. Though she knew Tony wouldn’t react that way now if the same information was imparted, Steve didn’t know it. “He deserves to know. He’s always blamed his father for their deaths, for drinking and driving at the wheel when he shouldn’t have been. Tony deserves to know the truth, Steve, and the only way he will, is if you sum up the courage to tell him. It’s better coming from you than me.”

Steve swallowed. “I know. I just do not want Bucky to be hurt.”

“He won’t be,” reassured Natasha. Tony wouldn’t attack him this time. He already knew what had happened. The point was Steve didn’t trust him to tell him the truth. “Trust Tony,” she advised. “Trust him to always have your back. And we’ll make it through this whole mess with the Accords as a team.”

“You really believe Tony will not immediately start hunting Bucky down if I told him?” Steve fidgeted in his seat.

Natasha leaned forward. “I think Tony has too much on his mind now to go off on a revenge mission. If you do not trust him, Steve, with the truth, if this team breaks apart because of your secrets, it will be on you. I’m advising you because you are my friend and it is the right thing to do.”

She could only hope Steve would make the correct choice. Until Steve lifted the weight from his shoulders over the secret he kept from Tony, he wouldn’t be able to relax. Getting to her feet and walking towards the door, she glanced over her shoulder, her red hair falling in tresses over her shoulders. “Believe me when I say you can trust Tony, Steve.”

Steve only inclined his head, his eyes focused upon the document sitting in front of him. He needed to be alone and Natasha would leave him to it.

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On Monday morning Tony took his personal jet back to Malibu where Pepper was working out of Stark Industries. She didn’t know he was coming. Yet he needed to see her. He could still remember her face as he died; the mask she had worn so he wouldn’t see her upset. He’d known she was, known she would break down as soon as he had gone.

But he wanted to see her. He had to fix their relationship before it was too late.

Right now they were on a break. He remembered what had prompted Pepper to come back to him
It had been the incident in Siberia. FRIDAY had alerted Pepper as soon as his suit had gone offline. She’d organised a rescue operation. He’d arrived back at the Facility to find Pepper waiting for him, wanting to talk. They’d managed to clear the air between them and moved back in together.

Now things were different.

Siberia shouldn’t happen.

He arrived at Stark Industries, marched through the foyer and towards Pepper’s office. It was nearly the end of the working day. Politely he knocked on her office door.

“It’s open!”

Tony opened the door and walked inside.

Pepper’s eyes widened when she saw him. “Tony… I thought… Why?”

Tony stopped in front of her desk. “I’m here to take you out to dinner.”

“Tony… we’re not…”

Tony sat down, bracing himself. “I love you. Always will. I never say it enough. But I want to say it more.”

She was watching him carefully from behind her desk. “Tony… Why are you really here?”

Pepper could always read him. She knew him so well. There wasn’t much he could hide from her.

“Pep…” he sighed. “I can’t do this without you. You ground me, you keep me focused. I know I’ve made mistakes, I know I’ve messed up when I’ve put the suits before you. There are things I need to do but I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

She sat back straight. “Are you proposing to me?”

He realised the context of his words. “What? No -!”

“So, you’re not proposing to me?”

“Ah… damn it… ah, being around you can be so frustrating sometimes!”

A slight smile tugged at her beautiful face. Her hair was tied back in a pony-tail. “Now you know how I’ve felt all the years I worked for you.”

This wasn’t working out the way he had hoped it would. How could he tell Pepper about his unique circumstances if they couldn’t fix this? Siberia had been the reason they’d got back together. He rubbed his eyes with the palm of his hands. “God, Pepper, I want to do you right. I can’t give up the suits, not yet, not when the world still needs me, but I can’t lose you. You keep me sane. You made me who I am today. Without you…” He bowed his head. “Without you… I’m nothing.”

She moved from her chair then, around her desk until she was kneeling in front of him. “Tony Stark, you are not nothing! You are a hero! And I love you too but I can’t do this. When you leave on missions I worry you’ll die!”
The trouble was her fears were real. Tony had died. He hadn’t returned home. He’d left her with their daughter to raise alone. Everything Pepper had feared had come true. “Yet you were so strong…” he whispered quietly.

“Tony?” Pepper’s voice was quiet, her expression worried. “What do you mean?”

He bit his lower lip. She shouldn’t have heard that. He raised his head, grabbing her hands as they rested on his knees. “Pep… I need to talk to you. Just…” He searched for the right words. “When are you free to come to the Compound?”

“Tony…” She sounded wary. “What is this about? Why are you really here?”

Tony sighed. “Pep… There are things I need to tell you… maybe even show you. Here isn’t the right time but I know we haven’t been… really… communicating since we decided to take a break… I came because I wanted to see you. And I still want to take you to dinner.” If there was one thing he did want to do, it was that. “No strings attached. Just friends, out for dinner.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Tony…”

He clutched her hands. “I’m trying, Pep, I really am to be the person who is worthy of you.”

“Tony…” She pulled him into a hug, wrapping her arms around his upper body. “We’re gonna be okay, Tony…”

A flash of Pepper’s face in his mind as he lay there dying… Those words triggering the last few moments before he’d died and been brought back. Those words… She’d said them to him then. Now he was hearing them again, only with a different context.

Resting his head on her shoulder, he whispered: “I know. I know, Pep.”

They hugged for a while before Pepper finally drew away.

“Something is bothering you,” she realised.

Tony couldn’t deny it. It was that obvious.

“I’m free at the weekend. I’ll fly over this Friday evening. Whatever is going on with you, we can talk about it then,” she said.

Smiling up at her, he hugged her again, only briefly this time. “Can I still take you out for dinner this evening?”

“Only if you are paying, Mr. Stark,” she replied, a hint of cheek in her voice.

Tony grinned back. “Of course, Miss Potts.”

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When Tony returned to the Compound a day later, Natasha was waiting for him. She looked worried as he descended from the plane.

“You were gone longer than I expected you would be.”

Tony shrugged. “Pepper and I went for dinner. Then I slept on the couch. And then I had breakfast with her before leaving. She’s visiting on Friday for the weekend.” He lowered his voice so the workers in the hanger of the Compound wouldn’t overhear. “We need to figure out the best way to
tell her about us. The voices…”

“I know they want us to tell her, to trust Pepper…” Nat seemed doubtful. “Wouldn’t it be better if she didn’t know you’d died and been sent back?” She pressed.

“Not planning on telling her I died, just that we were sent back to stop something worse from happening.” He watched for her reaction, hunching his shoulders a bit. “I’m guessing you’re not meeting me here for an update on Pepper…”

“No, I’m not,” she answered. She held up a data-pad. “FRIDAY sent this to me twenty-five minutes ago.” On the screen was the face of the man who had framed James Barnes for the Vienna bombings originally. Now they had a chance to stop the bomb from happening altogether. “Luck is on our side, we have a location on Zemo.”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

Phew, that was a long chapter! The Accords, Natasha urging Steve to come clean to Tony about his parents, Pepper and finally a bit of progress in hunting down Zemo!

The next chapter should be posted next Sunday :)

the-writer1988
Chapter Five: Willing To Compromise

Chapter Summary

Steve comes to Tony with a decision and Tony and Nat face the Accords committee...

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the comments so far!

I hope all this talk of the Accords isn't too boring. It needs to be sorted out before this fic can progress further. I'm aiming by Chapter 10 to have the Civil War story wrapped up, then we will be moving into the Infinity War storyline and that is when the real action and fun will start. I have a lot of plans for it so please stick with me! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER FIVE

Willing to Compromise

Tuesday 10th May 2016

“Luck is on our side, we have a location on Zemo.”

Tony’s face split into a wide grin. “Where is he?”

“Cleveland.”

Tony did a double-take. “Cleveland? What’s he doing there?”

Natasha frowned. “I don’t know. Friday reports it looks like he is trying to track someone down but she cannot identify who. He’s lurking in murkier areas… as if he is watching for somebody.”

Tony placed a hand under his chin. “Are things happening faster than they should be? The bombing shouldn’t happen until the twenty-second of June. We’re still in May.”

“We don’t know how long Zemo was planning his attack,” reasoned Natasha. “He certainly had something to control Bucky with… When he was posing as the government official to assess Bucky, the lights went out and we lost everything, sound, video… The next thing we know Bucky isn’t Bucky… He’s the Winter Soldier…”

“The red book…” murmured Tony. “When Zemo was interrogated after he was captured, he spoke about the book which triggered the Winter Soldier. He doesn’t have it right now but he soon will. That’s what he is looking for.”

“The thing is, Tony, Zemo hasn’t technically done anything wrong yet. We can’t apprehend him just because we know what he does. Our knowledge only comes from our unique circumstances. It
will not hold up in a court of law. We have to provide evidence.”

Tony swallowed. He took the data-pad from Natasha. “There has to be a Hydra agent in Cleveland. Only former Hydra officials would have access to the red book.”

“So… Do you think Zemo and this Hydra agent were working together?”

Shaking his head, Tony flipped the page on the datapad to peruse further details on their target’s movements in Cleveland. “He’s certainly keeping a close eye on several neighbourhoods.” He glanced at Natasha. “I don’t think they were working together. Zemo acted alone. He must find whoever he is looking for soon and murders them to get that book.”

“Murder…” Natasha smiled. “That’s what we can get him on. He murders someone or even tries to we have a reason to apprehend him, a reason to put him behind bars.”

Tony nodded, beginning to pace. “But how soon will it be before he discovers the location of who he is looking for?”

Natasha shrugged. “FRIDAY is keeping a trace on him. I’ve asked her to alert us.”

“We might not get there in time…” Tony warned. “Well… I could with the suit but I’d have to leave you behind and we need to do this together.”

“There is another option.”

“What?”

“You said Pepper was there when you died.”

“Yeah…” Tony wasn’t sure where she was going with this.

“She had a suit?”

It clicked. “She did.” He scrutinised her. “You want one?”

She shrugged. “Not particularly. I’m thinking more of one just to fly to places so we can stay together. A QuinJet isn’t as fast as your suits.”

“Hmm. That is something I can do. No weaponry? Nothing like that at all?”

Natasha shook her head. “No.” She paused and then amended: “Maybe something small to defend myself with if we get attacked in the air but nothing like yours. At least I’ll be able to keep up with you. I wouldn’t use it in front of the team unless absolutely necessary.”

“Yeah,” agreed Tony, “I’m not sure they would take it well if they knew the extent of how much we are working together.”

“They’d probably want suits of their own…” Natasha quipped.

“Or try to question you why you are spending so much time with me,” noted Tony quietly.

“Using the Accords is a good excuse. I’d rather be in on them than on the outside of them. Steve is stubborn but I think he will come around.”

Tony’s lips twitched. “He nearly signed before. I offered him a chance to sign… after Bucky was brought in. Steve was offered one last chance to work with the Accords. He refused…” He bit his
lips. “It was because of Wanda… And her being locked in the Compound for her own safety. The words ‘weapon of mass destruction’ may have entered the equation.”

Natasha’s eyes widened. “You didn’t!”

Wincing, Tony stepped away. “I did!”

“Tony!” She was shocked, surprised even. Would have hit him if he hadn’t stepped away.

“I know! It was a stupid thing to say but at the time he didn’t seem to grasp why Wanda had to be kept in the Compound. He kept saying she was just a kid but she’s not. She’s in her twenties. And people were vying for her blood! And, to top it all off, she’s an illegal immigrant who doesn’t have a valid visa to be in this country. The only reason Wanda is in this country is that I am personally vouching for her.”

“She doesn’t know, does she?” Natasha murmured.

He shook his head. “No. If I do not vouch for her, there is nothing Steve can do to keep her here legally. He can fight the system all he wants. He’ll just end up getting himself arrested for obstruction of justice.”

“We need to get them to sign the Accords.”

“First, we have to make the guarantees that will make it easier for Steve to sign,” explained Tony. “His concerns are valid. Best way to beat the system is to work on the inside. Which reminds me, I have a meeting with the UN panel in a few days, I would like you to be there. Two voices from the Avengers are better than one.”

“Sure.” Natasha glanced at the datapad in Tony’s hands. “Hopefully Zemo will not make his move for a while yet.”

“I don’t think he will. We’ve got time to convince the others to sign the Accords before Zemo strikes.”

Natasha eyed him wearily. “I hope you’re right about that, Stark.”

He caught her eyes. “Me too, Nat.”

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**Thursday 12th May 2016**

Tony had sent a message to the other Avengers he was going to see the Accords committee with Natasha the next day and welcomed their feedback on them. Surprisingly Steve came to Tony’s office to talk to him about it.

“I read them. We all did. We sat down and went through the whole document,” admitted Steve. In his hands, he was holding a blue folder.

That surprised Tony. He hadn’t expected Steve to do so especially since Steve had not read the full document previously. The small changes he was currently trying to make were helping.

Tony swivelled in his chair. “And? Please take a seat.” He indicated the seat in front of his desk.

Steve sat, placing the folder in front of him and opening it.
Tony could see sheets of pages from the Accords document, photocopied with pieces of it underlined.

“Before any of us sign, we want our concerns addressed. We deserve a chance to have our own say. This folder has everything you need. If things can be sorted or safeguards put in place which addresses our concerns…” Steve hesitated. “It is something we could sign but not as they are now.”

Tony nodded, pulling the folder towards him, flicking through the folder, running his eyes over the highlighted sections and the annotations to the side. “The tracking bracelets I will bring up as well as being indefinitely detained without trial. I will seek clarification on what happens with those countries who have not signed up to the Accords.”

“If this legislation does become law there is one other thing which isn’t mentioned within the Accords which needs to be debated,” said Steve. “I feel very passionate about it.”

“Right,” answered Tony. “What is it?”

“What if we have to be somewhere where there is a life-threatening threat and we are needed there immediately? What if it is a world-ending situation? We cannot be sitting around waiting for permission.”

Tony reached for his data-pad, flipping to his copy of the Accords. “Did you miss page four hundred and sixty-five?” Holding it up, he turned it over to Steve. “It’s addressed right there.”

Steve took the data-pad, eyes running over the screen. “It’s not completely clear, Tony.”

“How is it not clear? If there is a world-ending threat we can act on it as long as we head out there we put in the relevant requests to act in that country.”

“But what if they refuse?” said Steve. “If there is a world-ending threat and we are not allowed to enter the country, what then? And it causes untold destruction because we could not act? Are we supposed to let it happen? Will we then be detained indefinitely because of our actions saving the world?”

Tony frowned and re-read the passage himself. “Ok, Cap, you have a point. It isn’t clear and we do need to clarify.” He wondered if that had been Steve’s objections to the Accords in the first place. “How do you feel about obeying the Accords when it isn’t urgent missions which need acting on straight away?”

Steve frowned, his shoulders tightening.

Tony noticed his physical reaction. “You still do not like it, do you?”

“No…” Steve shook his head. “I just…”

“Want to go where you are needed.” Tony could see what Steve was having trouble with. “Steve, we cannot do what we want in this world all the time. I do not want you to become a criminal. We have to stay together. If we defy the laws at every turn we are no better than the bad guys. Wasn’t it helpful we informed the authorities of Rumlow’s attack in Lagos? They could discreetly evacuate people and remove highly dangerous materials from being stolen. Just think what could have happened if we hadn’t informed them or gained permission? People would have died.”

“I know,” admitted Steve. “But…”
Tony watched carefully, knowing Steve was considering all the facts.

“If we are allowed to act without permission in world-ending or imminent life-threatening threats then I will sign the Accords.”

Tony’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “You will?” he stammered.

A small inclination of the head gave Tony his answer.

“Are you sure?” He felt he needed to clarify it again. Steve’s response was a surprise but a welcome one.

“We discussed it. Friday showed us polls and opinions on the Avengers presently. The people we save want us to not be entirely independent, to be answerable to someone. But these safeguards have to be put in place before I will agree to sign anything.”

“Wow.”

Steve cricked his head. “You seem surprised?”

He was. He really was. The Steve of his time had been completely adamant against the Accords, not willing to compromise at all. This Steve… *They’re the same, Steve!* He reminded himself. “I’m just happy you are willing to compromise. We need the Avengers together, Cap…”

“You keep saying that,” mentioned Steve, leaning forward across the desk, hands clasped in front of him. “Why?”

Tony hesitated. Could he say something without giving anything away?

Yes.

He had permission.

“Something is coming, Cap. I don’t know when but something is… And we need to be together to face it. It’ll be bigger than anything we’ve faced before but it will be a lot harder to defend the Earth from this threat if we are not working with the government.”

Lowering his gaze, the other man contemplated the new information. “How long have you known?”

Tony shrugged. “Since New York. Steve, we are not prepared for what is out there. We were lucky last time but next time, we might not be so lucky. If we do not stay together we will lose. You said it yourself, last year that we would lose together too. But I’d rather be in the position to defend the Earth from now until then, rather than be operating illegally.”

“Would they really stop us if there was a world-ending threat if we didn’t sign?”

“Probably not but they’d want us to answer to it afterward.”

“Even if we saved the world?” pointed out Steve.

Tony grimaced. He knew Steve and the others had been given leave to return after Thanos. The Accords had been disbanded but it didn’t matter now as the Accords were still in play. “The Accords are the only way we stay together, Cap. I can try to change them so it is easier for us but you have to play your part too.”
“Why won’t you not sign them?” Steve locked his gaze. “You could break the law with us.”

Tony’s eyebrows rose at Steve’s suggestion. “And jeopardize my entire livelihood? They could take away all my money, my business, everything I own. I have a lot of things at stake if I do not sign. By signing, I am able to keep everything, including my suits. I can’t let them get access to them, Steve.”

“So you’ve been pushed into signing.”

Shaking his head, Tony leaned back in his chair. “No. I made the choice which works best for me and that is to sign. I can’t be any help to you if I’m in jail. The Accords are the middle ground the world needs right now. Whether they last or not is another point entirely. Until then we have to stick together. Help me help the world, Steve. We cannot afford to lose.” Again, he silently added. He held out his hand across the table hoping Steve would take it.

Focusing his eyes on Tony’s extended hand, Steve slowly reached out and took it. “We have a deal.” He pulled his hand. “Make those changes, get clarification on the points we’ve raised, and we will all sign.”

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Friday 13th May 2016

“He agreed to sign?” Natasha leaned back against the wall as they waited for admittance into the chamber where they would discuss the Accords with the committee.

“I know. I’m surprised too.” Tony walked slowly up and down the corridor. He was feeling antsy, wanting to get this meeting underway. “But it does depend on whether we can get the changes made to the Accords. It’s the only way we’re going to keep the team together. I can’t go on the run. I told Steve why I couldn’t. I cannot afford to not obey them.”

“I think you did the right thing,” observed Natasha quietly. “We’ve both learned from our mistakes. I shouldn’t have helped Steve at the airport and allowed them to escape. I knew Steve would keep trying no matter what. Zemo wouldn’t have been able to split us further apart if I hadn’t helped Steve. But the answer is not splitting. It feels right to be working under the Accords.”

“It will be easier to prepare the world this way,” said Tony. “Minimise the damage Thanos may make.” He glanced up as the doors to the chamber opened and they were beckoned inside.

The room was circular and a long table was set up in the middle of it. Six seats were positioned on one side with the other two seats on the other side for Tony and Natasha. The six seats were filled, three men and three with women representing the six continents across the world. Each person represented the wishes and desires of the nations within those continents.

Thaddeus Ross was the representative for North America and he sat at the table, his eyes piercing bright as he watched Tony and Natasha take a seat each. He didn’t look happy, his cheeks slightly red as if he had already been arguing with his respective counterparts.

“Secretary Ross,” Tony inclined his head. He turned his attention to the other representatives in the room, introducing each one to Natasha. “Laura Templar, representing Europe; Sergio Ballard representing South America; Marcel Kech sits for Australia; Georgianna Melhar represents Asia and Afolabi Adebayo stands for Africa.”

“It’s good to meet you all,” said Natasha. “I hope you do not mind me accompanying Tony to this
meeting. He has—” She was cut off by Thaddeus Ross’s very loud voice as he attempted to discredit him.

“In fact, we do mind. This is supposed to be a classified meeting between us and Mr. Stark. I respectfully ask you to leave.” His counterparts all gave him a look but Ross ignored them.

Natasha folded her arms across her chest. “No. I’m staying here.”

“If she’s not allowed in the meeting then I refuse to attend.” Tony got to his feet.

“It is compulsory for you to attend, Stark,” warned Ross. “You are already in enough trouble for talking to the Avengers about the Accords. Do not make me have you arrested.”

Twisting to glare at the man, Tony had the overwhelming urge to punch him. He’d forgotten what an arrogant prick the man was. He was looking forward to taking him down, something he had not dared to do before because of how much power had been bestowed upon Ross once the Accords had been signed.

They were not law yet.

“Have the Accords been made law yet, Secretary Ross?” Tony asked sweetly. “I would not be breaking the law by leaving. Talking to the Avengers? I wasn’t prohibited from doing so. How do you expect us to consider the Accords if the majority of the team are not involved in the ratifying of it? Or were you hoping the less time they had to read them, the more chance you had of bringing them into line under yourself?” Because that was Secretary Ross’s play. He wanted the Avengers under his control. Tony wasn’t going to allow him to succeed this time. “How do you expect the rest of the Avengers to accept the Accords as they are when they are hardly given any time to consider them and request changes?”

“The wording of the legislation does not concern them. They will follow the law or be arrested or retire,” stated Ross harshly.

“Thaddeus, stop making a fool of yourself and sit down!” Laura Templar spoke up, her eyes peering over her round glasses. “We all agreed the Avengers should be given access to the Accords before the signing date. If Mr. Stark had followed your plan of introducing them three days before the selected signing date, problems could have been created. This way we can still debate them and discuss any concerns the Avengers may have.”

Tony inclined his head. “Thank you, Miss Templar.”

Ross glowered at them.

Tony knew he wasn’t going to like what happened next. Ross would fight him every step of the way. But this time he had Natasha with him to back him up. “Much as you may not like it, Ross, I do not work for you.”

“Yet.”

“Clearly you are not the right man for the job,” stated Natasha. There was anger glittering in her eyes.

“I have been appointed by the President himself!” roared Thaddeus, his face becoming redder.

“You have it in for us based on some of the legislation you proposed, Secretary,” swallowed Tony, shifting the papers out of the folder he had brought with him. He cast his gaze around the room.
“Rhodey has already agreed to sign the Accords as has Vision and Wanda Maximoff has made a provisional guarantee to sign. However, the other members of the team are more apprehensive about some of the legislation proposed within the Accords themselves. Natasha and I would like to discuss with you today about potential changes to the Accords which would then enable Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson agree to sign and work with the governments of the world.”

Ross’s lips were twitching and it was clear he wanted to say no however the other five representatives seemed happy to listen.

Tony passed his notes over to Natasha who took up the discussion.

“The tracking bracelets are a no from the Avengers,” she began. “It violates our rights of freedom and none of us will consent to be tracked twenty-four seven. Perhaps if we are considered dangerous because of something we may have contributed to in our efforts to save the world, it may be up for discussion, however, it is not legal for us, as heroes, to be tracked at all times.”

“And those with powers like Miss Maximoff?” enquired Georgianna.

“She has abilities which need to be tracked,” added Sergio Ballard.

Ross looked smug.

Tony smiled. He had a plan. “Easy. She’s human. All of us are. She doesn’t need to be tracked. She needs to be given the chance to learn to use them in a safe and controlled environment. Wanda has agreed if she needs to be tracked she will consent to it, but only in the event, she is under investigation or it has been proven she is dangerous, neither of which occur currently.”

“She may have done questionable things in the past,” interrupted Natasha, “but so have I. Should I not be tracked too?”

“You do not have super-powers, Ms. Romanoff,” pointed out Marcel Kech. “The two cases are entirely different.”

“If we start tracking people with powers they may feel less inclined to help us in our hour of need.” Tony cast a glance at Natasha before turning his attention back to the committee. “Put it this way, how would you feel if you were in Wanda’s position and were told you had to be tracked at all times just because you have powers?”

“It’s for the greater good.” Ross folded his arms over his chest, stubborn as always.

However, the response from the other five members was more positive.

“It wouldn’t be fair to be feared for our powers,” confirmed Sergio.

“I think we can agree most of us, that the permanent tracking bracelets can be altered to only be used when an Avenger or an enhanced individual is under investigation and it is legally required for them to be monitored,” suggested Laura. “Do we have a consensus? If we do we can take this suggestion back to our respective continents and gain feedback on whether this change would be acceptable to the governments around the world.”

The rest of her companions muttered agreement, even Ross did, though he didn’t look happy.

“There are two other areas of the Accords which require some changes,” continued Natasha. “The second part is about detaining us indefinitely without trial. That is illegal and breaks our human rights. None of us can sanction the Accords fully with that in place. I understand that a particular
piece of legislation is unpopular among many of the countries involved with the Accords. Is that correct?"

“It is,” Afolabi Adebayo confirmed. He glanced at his companions. “We all disagreed with the motion Thaddeus put forth. He was insistent on including it.”

“Of course he did,” muttered Tony. “He’s intent on controlling us. I think we can agree to remove that piece of legislation.”

“Or alter it so you are only detained pending trial if the situation warrants being put in jail, otherwise house arrest should do,” suggested Laura wisely. “If that is the case, monitoring would be required at all times to ensure house arrest is not broken. Do you agree?”

“We would have to discuss it with the other Avengers,” explained Tony, “but I feel certain it may be something they will agree to. They do know they will have to compromise if any changes are to be made to the Accords.”

“Excellent. Do you have any other queries relating to the Accords, Mr. Stark?” Sergio asked.

This meeting was going better than expected though Secretary Ross’s face was still not looking happy. He was losing control of the Avengers by the minute.

“There is one other thing we require clarification upon,” started Tony quietly. “We all agree we need to seek permission to cross into other countries, but what if there is a world-ending threat and we do not have time to ask for permission? By not attacking when we have the intelligence could lead to more deaths. How do we go about it?”

“I would believe it to be obvious, Stark,” said Ross. “You ask for permission regardless of what the outcome would be.”

“And if people died because we had to wait?” Natasha asked, her eyes burning steadily at Ross. “Collateral damage.”

“Wow,” whistled Tony. “You’d rather people died than be saved? Isn’t the whole point of the Accords to prevent people from dying?”

“Mr. Stark has a point, Thaddeus…” Marcel indicated. “This is a discussion I have already been having with officials. If there is such a threat, which is a high risk to life, then they would be happy for the Avengers to intervene, before permission is granted, providing of course they have been notified in advance of what this threat is so they can provide assistance if needed. All the Avengers would need to do is communicate on-route. If they decide the Avengers are not required they would request the Avengers to leave.” Marcel’s bright green eyes turned towards Tony and Natasha and she shook her head slightly to move a bit of hair out of her face. “Would the Avengers retreat if asked? If the government wanted to handle the situation on their own?”

Tony bit his lower lip. “I would. I cannot say for the others.”

“Like Captain America,” intoned Thaddeus Ross. “He finds it difficult to follow orders, doesn’t he? Prefers to give them rather than obey.”

Tony wasn’t going to rise to the bait. “I think it would depend on the situation at hand. If it was a threat only we could deal with and we were being pulled out, I would find it difficult to leave knowing it would be better for me to be out there fighting. I think the main point here is that if we do have to enter a country without permission to prevent a world-ending threat, we wouldn’t have
repercussions for our actions in doing so. We would be just trying to do the right thing.”

“Agreed. In world-ending threats the Avengers should not face any punishment for attempting to help,” backed Afolabi. “It is the smaller missions which are not world-ending threats that we would prefer to have some element of control over.”

“That we can agree on,” smiled Natasha. “But we do need to have a firm answer on whether we can still act legally in world-ending situations. Hopefully, they would be few and far in between but we cannot deny that we have had our fair share of them.”

Laura cleared her throat. “As far as I am aware, the general consensus among Europe is if it is a world-ending threat they are happy for the Avengers to intervene without notification, providing of course at the end they stay and help with the clear-up and provide statements both to the governments and the Accords committee. We would then determine if permission should have been granted prior to your intervention. But this would just be a formality. We would prefer to trust the Avengers to act when they need to without permission.” She cast her gaze around, avoiding Secretary Ross’s burning eyes. “I think we can all agree world-ending threats would be allowed to be acted upon without due authorisation?”

There was muttering from around them, all of them agreeing to the clarification Tony sought.

Tony smiled. “If these changes can be implemented into the final version of the Accords, you will have a deal with the Avengers to work under the Accords and with the United Nations.” He and Natasha rose from their chairs. “Thank you for your time to listen to our requests and consider them all.”

All apart from Ross said farewell as they left the chamber.

Once outside, Tony smirked. “Ross is not happy, is he?”

“No,” grinned Natasha. “He’s losing his power.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me if the others requested a new appointment to his position. He is rather… unstable. I hope the changes we asked for will be implemented. On the day of the signing, before we sign the official document, we will need to check to make sure Ross hasn’t tampered with it.”

“Would he dare?”

“He would. He wants the Avengers under his control. What we’ve done is strip power away from him. He’ll be gunning for us both, Nat.”

“Let him try,” she replied darkly. “He won’t win.”

Tony grimaced. “We’ll see. Steve should at least accept the Accords now. We’ve requested the changes and hopefully part one of our plans has worked. We’ll keep the team together for Thanos.”

Natasha sighed. “Once they are signed we have to start preparing for him.”

“We do… we do.” Good thing he was already thinking about it.

On the way back to the Compound, Tony received two messages. “Pepper is at the Compound. And I’ve just been sent this.” He passed his phone over to Natasha.
On the screen was a video of a masked individual swinging through New York, stopping a bus from rolling over and bringing it to a stop.

“Peter?”

“Yes,” Tony confirmed. “I’m keeping an eye on him.”

“Are you bringing him into the Avengers?”

“Soon.” Tony took his phone back. “I want to be involved in his life, Nat. He meant a lot to me. But… I’m not sure whether to get close or not.”

She laid a hand on his arm. “Do it. But do things differently this time. His Aunt found out about his secret identity, right?”

Tony nodded. “She did.”

“Recruit him to the Avengers but tell her. Spider-Man may only be a teenager but we need as many heroes as possible if we are to counter-act Thanos.”

“The kid is going nowhere near Thanos again,” stated Tony darkly.

Natasha cocked her head to the side. “If you want that, you cannot get involved with him.”

Tony groaned. “Damn it, Nat.” He put his phone back in his pocket. “I’ll talk to his Aunt. I cannot not have him in my life.”

---

Pepper was waiting in the common room when Tony and Natasha returned. Her long hair fell about her shoulders and she wore a shirt and skirt, having dressed down for the occasion. She was surprised to see them both there.

“Hi Pep,” smiled Tony. “Good day?”

“The usual when you are running a world-successful business,” she answered. “What do you want to talk to me about Tony?”

Tony exchanged a glance with Natasha. They had already discussed how best to start this out. There was no point leading up to the reveal that they were both from the future. It was better to just come out and say it. He’d already ensured all recording equipment was switched off and none of the other Avengers were currently in the Compound so they were unlikely to be disturbed or overheard.

Tony scratched the back of his head. “I’m not sure how to go about and say this, Pep, so I’m just going to come out and say it. Nat and I… we’re from the future.”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!
So, Steve is willing to compromise on the Accords. Zemo is looking for the red book to control the Winter Soldier with and Tony and Nat cannot interfere until Zemo has committed a crime. All they can do is have him followed. Ross wants to control the Avengers but is being stopped by Tony and Natasha.

It's never really revealed what the committee of the Accords would be so I decided to make it up a bit, have a person represent each of the six different continents who then liaise with the respective governments on the Avengers behalf. Antarctica is the seventh continent but no one lives there so doesn't require representation at the moment. Ross is representing North America which is why he is on the panel.

Peter has sort of made his debut in this story. Tony is currently watching out for him via Friday monitoring him from public cameras.

Up next: Tony and Natasha talk with Pepper. Will be posted next Sunday!

the-writer1988
Chapter Six: Reconciliation

Chapter Summary

Tony and Pepper have a much-needed chat.

Chapter Notes

Shorter chapter today because I wanted a chapter dedicated to Tony and Pepper's talk. The next chapter will be longer. I'm still estimating another few more chapters to go before we are done with the Civil War storyline. Thank you everyone for the feedback so far!

And, special thanks goes to JediPanda22 for the fantastic art they have done for this chapter which is posted at the bottom. Please check out the rest of their art for various fandoms on their instagram account found here: https://www.instagram.com/jedipanda22/

Please enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER SIX

Reconciliation

Friday 13th May 2016

Tony scratched the back of his head. “I’m not sure how to go about and say this, Pep, so I’m just going to come out and say it. Nat and I… we’re from the future.”

“Have you been drinking?” Pepper leaned forward and then back, her eyes opening suspiciously, watching the both of them with her sharp gaze. “Because you generally only say stupid things when you are drunk.”

“To be fair he says stupid things when he isn’t drunk too,” interjected Natasha.

Tony threw her a look. “Not helping,” he whispered. Returning his attention to Pepper, he continued: “I’m not drunk. I’m completely sane.”

Pepper raised an eyebrow.

“Ok, maybe not completely sane… We both know I’m a bit crazy…” he admitted. “The point is… I’m not lying to you. I am from the future. As is Nat.”

“You asked me here for this?” Pepper shook her head in despair. “Tony… if you think pretending you are from the future is going to repair what’s happened between us, you’ve got –”
“I can prove it.” This wasn’t going the way he expected. He couldn’t lose Pepper in his second chance. Maybe it was too soon to try to get her back. Maybe he should have waited to talk to her. But knowing what their endgame was made him want to spend as much time with her as possible.

*It won’t be your endgame if you do things right…*

The voice reverberated inside his head, attempting to comfort him, to waylay his fears of what the future could still hold for him and Pepper.

“You’re scared,” she whispered. “You’re trembling. Why?” Her voice was soft and soothing, comforting him, despite the worry he felt at potentially losing her.

“I am,” admitted Tony, something he rarely did. “I’m scared you won’t believe me.”

“Time travel… really?” she asked dubiously, tipping her head forward and raising an eyebrow in question.

Tony shrugged. “I was going to invent it one day.”

Pepper stepped back, her eyes moving from Tony to Natasha and then back to Tony. “I’m not sure…”

“It’s the truth, Pepper,” reassured Natasha. “Tony isn’t lying. We are both from the future. Maybe he should have built up to the reveal instead of dropping a bit of a bombshell on yourself? This isn’t something we would lie to you about.”

Pepper patted the seat beside her. She still looked unsure. “Tony, sit with me, please.”

Tony moved across the room to sit beside her, his body trembling. “Pep…”

She raised a finger and pressed it on his lips. “I need to ask you something.” She shuffled slightly in her seat but kept her eyes upon Tony’s. “Are we married in the future?”

Tony nodded, staying quiet. He wondered what Pepper was up to.

“Then if we are married then you will know something about me that I vowed to tell only to one person and that was to the man I would marry. I would tell them the night before our wedding. If you truly are from the future you will know what I am talking about as I would have told you.”

“But you told me a secret you’ve kept for
years and that you would only reveal a day before our wedding day. It is a secret that you wanted to keep and by telling me then you were searching for trust. To know that I still wanted to marry you even though you’d kept this secret from me for years.” He remembered it well: Pepper informing him she had something to tell him, a secret she had kept from him and one where, she said, if he decided not to marry her after knowing then she would understand. Tony had still married her, understanding her desire to keep it secret, keep it quiet.

Pepper swallowed.

“You told me when you were fourteen you were orphaned. You’ve never allowed yourself to get close to people since the fire,” began Tony quietly.

She breathed out.

“It happened by accident but the consequences were severe for you. You survived but no one else did. You were the one to raise the alarm. You woke up in the middle of the night and smelt smoke. You told me how you ran to your parent’s room and roused them from their sleep. The smoke was already thick, suffocating you all. Your dad smashed the window of their bedroom, told you to jump and they would follow once they got your younger sister. You jumped out, landed and broke your wrist and ankle in the process. You couldn’t move. You were crying and in pain… Your whole house was in flames. Your parents were at the window with your younger sister.” There were tears forming in Pepper’s eyes. He wanted to stop, to not harm her anymore. But she hadn’t asked him too. “But then there was an explosion. The whole upper floor of your home collapsed, taking your sister and your parents with it. They died then. You were the only survivor and you hated it, hated surviving because you could have got your sister before going to your parents. You could have all lived and you blamed yourself for their deaths. But there was nothing you could have done. Since then you’ve been on your own, determined to work hard, to prove to the world that you survived for a reason. But you always refused to allow anyone to get close to you. You had boyfriends but you were afraid of letting them get too close to you in case you lost them. And then you met me. You were so difficult to read, to get close to. You worked hard, determined to succeed. You never let me get close to you. I always used to have my way with my Personal Assistants but, Pep, you were not a push-over. I took you seriously, and I got to know you, respect you and learned to love you legitimately. And… I think it took you years to trust me, to get close to me, to have feelings for me because of what you had survived. You fell in love with me over many years but you were still afraid to lose me like you lost your parents and your sister.”

And then I died anyway, he thought, realising all of Pepper’s fears had come true. He had left her. But he couldn’t tell her that.

“Tony…” A slight smile tugged at her lips. One tear slipped down her cheek. “There is only one way you could have known about the fire…”

“Do you believe me now?” he asked quietly.

Pepper nodded. “I swore to only tell you once… And I know I’ve never said anything about it to you. The only way for you to know is if we were going to get married… And, I’m sure I’d remember marrying you.”

“So…” Tony urged, waiting for confirmation.

“I believe you.” She glanced at Natasha. “But I have no way of testing Natasha to determine if she is really from the future. All I can do is trust you, Tony, and I do.”

A weight lifted from his shoulders. Pepper believed him.
But she pulled back, her eyes searching his, looking for something he was sure wasn’t there. “Why have you come back? And… wait… does this mean there are two of you?”

“No,” Tony said instantly. “We didn’t do the traditional time-travel of hopping into a machine and coming out in history. There are not two versions of us running around. I… went to sleep in my future… and woke up back here.” It was a semblance of truth. Dying had felt like falling asleep… only losing awareness completely and being unable to breathe. He had known he was dying, had felt the life slowly leaving his body. “The best way to describe it is….”

_Souls. Your souls moved backward in time._

Tony paused, eyes widening at the voice in his head.

A quick glance at Natasha told him she had heard the same thing.

“Tony?” Pepper prodded, noticing their simultaneous reactions.

_Tell her about the voice you hear._

Natasha swallowed, moved slowly and sat down on the table in front of the sofa Tony and Pepper were sitting on.

“Souls. The best way to describe it is our souls moved backward in time and inhabited our old bodies. We merged with our past selves, bringing all our knowledge of the future to the here and now,” explained Natasha. “We do not know why we were chosen to come back, only that we have to stop things from playing out as they did before. Something… bad occurred which Tony and I wish to prevent. We need to keep the team together and working on the Accords is the best step forward.”

“I think I understand,” said Pepper. “You’re still the same person only with memories from a life you’ve already lived. Sort of like Vision? He remembers being JARVIS but now he is sentient, alive. But… how did your souls get back? What about your bodies in the future? Did you die?”

“Honestly? We don’t know. We both woke up here,” admitted Tony, knowing he couldn’t tell Pepper the full truth. He didn’t want to worry her. Maybe one day he would but right now wasn’t the right time to tell her that he and Natasha had died in their future. “But we both hear a voice. Whatever is responsible for sending us back is with us. It guides us, hints to us as to what decisions to make. You saw me look at Nat. That was the voice talking to us.”

“It just spoke into our minds about our souls moving backward in time,” confirmed Natasha.

Pepper swallowed. “I guess this means you won’t be giving up being Iron Man?”

Tony lowered his chin against his chest and took a deep breath. “I can’t. Not just yet. Not while I still have to make sure the future I come from doesn’t happen.” He looked up. “But once this is done, I will retire. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“What if you die before you can retire?” Pepper asked sadly.

It was always a possibility he would still die. Tony knew that. “I can’t promise to come home.” After last time, he couldn’t. When he’d left to go on the Time Heist, Tony had had a feeling he wouldn’t see his home again, just a niggles of doubt, as if he knew his time was up. He’d been proven right. He’d never promised Pepper he’d come home safe. She had known the risks, let him go, and knowing she could lose him forever. And Morgan… God, Morgan…

He hoped the voice would tell him otherwise but he was met with silence.
“Then if I am to die then I want to spend whatever time I have left with you. If you let me…” She deserved to have the choice to walk away. “I’ll be alright if you choose not to be with me.”

“Tony…” Pepper’s shoulders slumped. She looked weary and tired. “This last month since we decided to take a break has been difficult for me. I’ve missed you. Thought about you every single day and I’ve been tempted to pick up the phone just to hear your voice. I demand a lot from you. I expect a lot from you and I know I can be very overbearing sometimes but I love you. I know giving up the Iron Man suit is a lot to ask…”

Tony twirled his fingers together with hers. “I will always be Iron Man, Pepper. Nothing can take that identity away from me. I’ve been given a second chance. Both Nat and I have, I can’t sit back and let things happen again, not when it is in our power to do so.”

“We have a mission to accomplish before either of us can rest,” added Natasha. “We didn’t come back together. I’ve been here a tiny bit longer than Tony has. He only arrived recently. We found one another quickly enough.”

Pepper nodded thoughtfully. “Have you changed anything, apart from telling me, of course?” she added as an afterthought.

“Yes. Lagos. I wasn’t supposed to be there.”

Pepper gasped. “MIT speech. You cancelled on them. I received the notification you had done so.”

“I had to be in Lagos to prevent something worse from happening. It worked. Lagos was the start of it, where everything started to go wrong originally. It started a chain reaction which resulted in a catastrophic event. The Avengers were not together. We broke apart…”

Natasha continued. “Being apart was one of the reasons we lost.”

“The Accords were the driving force which split us,” revealed Tony. “Now it will be the legislation which will keep us together. For us to function as a team we have to follow the Accords, especially if we want to be ready for what’s coming. Facing it together with the world is better than trying to fight it apart where failure is more certain.”

Leaning back in the sofa, Pepper sighed.

“What is it?” asked Tony, his eyes studying her beautiful face.

She squeezed his hand. “I’ll help you,” whispered Pepper.

Tony was taken back. “What?” He was surprised but the feeling of happiness burst through him at her words.

“I know you are not telling me everything. Guess there are rules you have to follow. “

“There are,” Tony confirmed. Rules stymied him but he recognised the importance of them in this situation. He simply couldn’t tell Pepper he’d died, though he suspected she might already have that inkling of doubt.

“You’ve been truthful, not kept me in the dark. Coming clean when you didn’t have to? It shows me you care and you want to make this work. I’m willing to try again.”

Tony’s face split into a broad smile. “Pep…” He moved quickly, joy running through his body, as he pulled her close, hugging her and burying his head in her shoulder. He wanted to cry because he
had one part of his life back.

Moving her face, Pepper kissed him on the lips, pulling him down.

Natasha stood hastily from her perch on the table. “I think I should leave.”

Tony broke out into laughter as Pepper drew away from him. “We’re not going to do anything…”

“Yet,” Pepper’s eyes sparkled.

“Oh.” Tony’s eyes widened.

“Later, Mr. Stark,” teased Pepper. Leaning back, Pepper moved her gaze over to Natasha. “I’m assuming the others do not know of… this?”

“No.” Natasha shook her head. “We do not plan on telling them. I don’t think the voice would let us.”

“It told us to trust you though,” admitted Tony quietly. “I guess it knew doing so would reconcile us.”

“Tony…” Pepper smiled sadly. “I didn’t want to go on a break. But I needed time to revaluate and I realised I can’t be living my life without you.”

A lop-sided smile pulled at Tony’s lips. “Guess we’re stuck with one another, aye Potts?”

Pepper squeezed his hands. “Fortunately for us, we are.” She leaned in and kissed him on the lips. “What happens now?”

“Tony and I will continue with what we’re doing, ensuring the safe passage of the Accords and keeping the Avengers together,” explained Natasha.

“We’re also tracing a man named Helmut Zemo who is responsible for a terrorist attack which is due to happen soon,” continued Tony. “Unfortunately, we cannot act until he’s committed a crime and so far he hasn’t but FRIDAY is keeping tabs on him. We’ll be ready to act as soon as we receive notification.” He hesitated then, unsure whether to take the risk.

Pepper noticed. “What is it?”

“There’s this kid, where I came from, who became a big part of my life. It’s around this time I met him… He changed me for the better. I’m debating whether to go ahead and put myself in his life when the situation which forced me to go to him in the first place shouldn’t happen now…” Tony had been considering whether to leave Peter out of everything. Keep him safe by not getting to know him.

“How much did he mean to you?” Pepper queried quietly.

“He died in my arms and it broke me, Pep. He’s got powers, and he has the potential to be one of the greatest superheroes of the world… I took him under my wing but one mistake I made was not telling his Aunt about his after-school activities. She did find out though and she accepted my role in his life. He’s fifteen.”

Pepper swallowed. “I think if he means so much to you, you need to be involved. Maybe mentoring him previously made him a better superhero. Don’t cut him out of your life.”

“Tony, we’ll need him. We’ll need as many people to fight as possible. At least with us he’ll have
the right training and will not come blundering in unprepared,” suggested Natasha.

Tony sighed. “I want to keep him safe. Everyone I love safe. But I know it is not possible.”

“We’ll do the best we can.” Natasha glanced at Pepper. “But what I believe is most important to
the future we are trying to build is you two. The voice wouldn’t have told us to trust Pepper if she
didn’t play a pivotal role in what was to come next.”

It was perhaps an interesting statement and one development Tony hadn’t considered. *I should
have seen it. Pepper has always been pivotal to everything I do. Why would it be different this time?

“Trust,” Pepper murmured, “that’s what is important. Trust one another and we can’t fail.”

The only issue now towards trust was the difference in the Accords and whether the rest of the
team would support them. Tony worried their efforts would be for nothing. “Then let us believe the
others will trust us and help us keep the Avengers together.”

Natasha smiled gently. “I don’t know why but I believe they will.”

To be continued...
Please let me know what you think!

Pepper is going to be important throughout this story. It is never fully revealed where Pepper's family are. The only indication we have is in Iron Man 1 she tells Tony he is the only thing she has which suggests to me she has no family. I had two options to go with for how to convince Pepper of the truth. My original idea was using BARF and Tony shows her some memories but those memories can be manipulated as demonstrated in Civil War when Tony showed MIT students the last time he saw his
parents alive and then altered the memory. I then decided to explore Pepper's background and decided to go with a tragic event which caused Pepper to lose her family at a young age and not want to talk about it because she blames herself. Hence her decision to only tell someone before they got married, as a test to see if they still wanted to marry her since she kept it from them for so long.

I hope the idea works and I felt it made more sense for Tony to know something about Pepper he wouldn't necessarily know in canon at this point.

The next chapter will move the story forward a bit more as we bring Peter Parker into the story...

Until next Sunday!

the-writer1988
Chapter Seven: Trust

Chapter Summary

Tony and Peter meet!

Chapter Notes

Afternoon everyone! Here is your weekly update. Peter Parker arrives in the story! I know you have all been waiting for his appearance... This chapter will move the story forward a bit more. The next few chapters are going to be quite fast-paced as we near the end of the Civil War Arc.

Thank you for all the comments so far. Please, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER SEVEN

Trust

Friday 20th May 2016

Queens

A week later, Tony asked Happy to drive him to Queens where he intended to bring Peter Parker into the fold. He’d thought long and hard about how to approach the subject. There was no need for him to take the kid to Germany now. If things worked out the way they were supposed to, the airport fight wouldn’t be happening. But the kid still had superpowers and was quickly becoming more and more noticeable in the media, especially with the multiple YouTube videos that were popping up online.

It was time for Tony to step in.

Only this time, Aunt May would be informed of Peter’s identity. She had supported her nephew when she had found out the true nature of Peter’s internship with Stark Industries, though she hadn’t been too happy about Tony Stark keeping the secret from her. She had slightly relented when Peter had told her he had asked Mr. Stark to keep the secret.

Now everything was different.

Tony’s first priority was to safeguard Peter. He could simply just walk away and leave the kid to it, but no matter what, the kid would still get involved. For instance, the Vulture was operating in the vicinity, another man Tony was keeping an eye on, waiting for the right time to take him down. He could just as easily shut down the Vulture’s operations now but he had a good reason not to. His priority at the moment was sorting the Accords. After that, Tony had a few years to prepare for Thanos, in which he could turn his attention elsewhere.
Right now, it was Peter.

The car pulled to a stop outside an apartment building. He knew the Peter and May would be moving soon as their lease was due to run out and wouldn’t be renewed. He’d had to remember which apartment to go to.

“We’re here, boss,” said Happy.

“Thanks,” said Tony, getting out of the car. “Wait here. I won’t be too long.”

Taking a side entrance, not wanting to be seen, Tony took the emergency exit stairs, disabling the alarms with FRIDAY and ran up the stairs to reach the sixth floor. The hallway was deserted.

Perfect.

Knocking on apartment twenty-three, Tony waited, feeling a bit nervous. He heard footsteps from beyond the door and May opened it, eyes widening as she saw who was at her doorstep.

“Hi, Ms Parker, Tony Stark, may I come in?” He tried his best to appear genuine, flashing a smile at her as he held out his hand for her to shake.

“To…Tony Stark? The Tony Stark?” She extended her own hand and shook his. “I think… you’ve got the wrong apartment.”

“No, definitely the right one. Peter Parker lives here, right?”

“Yes…” She stepped aside, allowing him to enter the apartment, shutting the door behind him.

“Is he here?” he asked.

“What do you want with him?” she asked carefully, her shock at seeing Tony Stark on her doorstep was wearing off and the colour was returning to her cheeks.

“Just a talk. He’s very smart for his age and I have an internship I’d like to offer him, if he’s interested and you are agreeable to it, of course?” Best way to play this. Keep the internship intact. Peter needed it to so he could reach his full potential.

“How… how did you know about him? He’s just a normal kid.”

Oh, if Aunt May knew he wasn’t just a normal kid.

Well, she’d find out today anyway as Tony intended on revealing to her Peter’s abilities, even if the kid did not want it. A part of him worried doing so would prevent Peter coming to trust him and getting close to him. Peter didn’t know it would work out. Tony had the foresight to know Aunt May would be very supportive of her nephew.

“As part of Stark Industries recruitment drive, we contact all the schools in the area to determine which students may benefit from an internship. It is a programme which has been going on for a while. I do not personally get involved very often, however Peter’s potential was flagged up to me as one to watch, and I figured it would be beneficial to meet with him, to discuss his future career options.”

“Oh…” May seem surprised. “He always has been a smart kid. I’ll go get him, shall I?”

“Please,” replied Tony.
“Take a seat, Mr. Stark.” She pointed to the couch. “I’ll be right back.”

He watched her leave, feeling a bit nervous at the prospect of seeing Peter again and the kid not knowing or fully understanding how much he meant to Tony.

May returned quite quickly with a teenaged boy behind her, his round face surprised at the presence of Tony Stark in his living room.

“Mr. Stark, this is Peter. Peter, Tony Stark.”

Tony stretched forward, holding his hand out to Peter. The boy took it, shaking Tony’s hand.

“My aunt tells me you’d like to offer me an internship?” asked Peter, his voice shaking a bit.

“I do,” confirmed Tony. “You have unique skills Stark Industries and the Avengers would be interested in.” He emphasised the word Avengers, hoping the kid would understand the meaning.

He did because his eyes widened, but he tried to maintain his cool.

“I think… think you’ve got the wrong person, Mr. Stark. I’m not sure I can help you… And I do not have any skills which would benefit the Avengers either…”

Tony smiled. “Nonsense. You can. I know you can. I have proof.” He held up his phone.

Peter squeaked which caused Aunt May to look at him in surprise.

“What’s going on, Peter?” she asked.

“Can I talk to you… alone? Mr. Stark?”

“If your Aunt is fine with it…” Tony gave the ball over to May.

“Sure… that’s fine.” Though she did look a bit worried.

Tony followed Peter to his room.

As soon as the door was closed, Peter sat on the edge of the bed, fiddling with his fingers, determining what the best question would be.

“You’re probably wondering why I am here,” said Tony quietly, already guessing what the kid’s question would be.

“Yeah.”

Tony pulled out his phone, flipped it and projected a video of a kid swinging through New York. “That’s you. Isn’t it?”

“No!” Peter replied too quickly. “It’s just a home-made video.”

Glancing up at the ceiling, Tony pointed up with his finger. “If I opened the small loft space you’ve got up there, I wouldn’t find a suit then?” He knew it was where Peter kept it hidden.

Peter’s face paled. “Erm…”

“Kid, I’m here to help you.” Tony continued gently. “I know who you are and what you can do. I’ll open the loft if I have to.”
“Please don’t! Just… don’t tell Aunt May. She’ll freak out!”

Tony winced. He’d agreed with that condition before but he couldn’t this time. “Sorry, your Aunt needs to know.” May had been angry at first, then scared for her nephew but then had accepted Peter’s new role as the friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man. He didn’t see any reason why she wouldn’t be supportive this time.

“She’ll ground me!” Peter protested.

“She won’t.”

“You don’t know that!”

Tony wanted to laugh but Peter was becoming more and more agitated, so he sat down on the edge of Peter’s bed. “I’m trying to help you. You underestimate your Aunt. Look, I need your help and I cannot have it on my conscience if something happened to you and your Aunt could never know the truth. Sometimes it is best to let go of our pride. The people who love us will understand.” Because Pepper did despite the continual fears she had he’d kill himself. Tony hoped to avoid that outcome.

“What do you need me for?” asked Peter quietly. “Mr. Stark?”

“Call me, Tony,” he smiled gently. He could just recall Peter saying ‘Tony’ in a broken voice. The kid had been devastated at seeing Tony’s wounds. If Tony could have spared Peter from seeing it, he would have done. It felt good to be talking to Peter again, even though the relationship they’d once had was no longer there. It would take time to build up again but Tony hoped Peter could come to trust him again. “You have superpowers, unique abilities we could use. We need people like you on the Avengers.”

“You want me to join the Avengers?” Peter gasped, his eyes widening in surprise and his mouth hanging open. He struggled to close it in his shock.

“No, not just yet. You need training,” reaffirmed Tony. The kid’s face deflated a bit. “You wouldn’t be allowed on the team without sufficient training and knowledge of certain protocols. You’d be on the reserve team, to be called up if we desperately needed you. But that isn’t all. I’m serious about an internship: a genuine offer to you to come and work for me. But, the catch is, your Aunt May has to know the full truth.”

Peter swallowed. “If I said no would you still tell her?”

“I feel as the adult in this room it would be my moral duty to inform her,” replied Tony carefully. Peter’s shoulders dropped. “Either way, she’s going to find out.”

“She’ll find out eventually. Isn’t it better for her to know the truth?” Tony studied Peter. He could see him considering the options Tony had given him, already knowing Tony would not be leaving Aunt May out of it.

“I guess…”

Tony leaned forward. “It doesn’t have to be today. I’m not going to push for an answer just yet.” He still had time. “Think about it.” He pulled a card out of his pocket, passing it to Peter. “My number. Call me.”
Avengers Compound

Steve was waiting for him when Tony returned to the Compound, making his way towards his office. Surprised to see him there, Tony made himself comfortable on the chair, whilst Steve leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, looking across at him.

“This isn’t about the Accords,” started Steve. “It’s something else. Something I should have told you years ago…”

Ah, my parents.

Tony was surprised. At least he was assuming it was about Bucky.

“But I need to know something first…” Steve was hesitant.

Tony could guess. “They want to bring the Winter Soldier in, Steve. If they ever need to go after him, they will only kill if they have to but it will not be their first option.”

“It shouldn’t be an option at all,” stated Steve.

“And if he kills people because he’s been activated? There is a way out there to control him but we do not have it in our hands,” replied Tony carefully. I hope we get the Red Book soon before Zemo gets his hands on it.

“Bucky shouldn’t be punished for the actions of other people into forcing him to do things he doesn’t want to do,” argued Steve, pointing out the obvious.

“I know that, Steve, but what if he was on the brink of destroying a whole city with a push of the button and the only way out was to shoot him dead? What would you do? Sacrifice a whole city on the off-chance you could save your friend? How would Bucky Barnes take it if he found out you chose his life over thousands of others?” Tony leaned forward. Steve couldn’t be this close-minded. “I know he is your friend but sometimes we have to make difficult choices, no matter how much it hurts us, just to save the world.”

“I’d choose the city…” Steve admitted quietly.

Tony wasn’t sure Steve was sincere in his answer. His experiences before coloured his view of Steve. Steve had prioritised Bucky over the safety of the general public. He’d been misled into believing there was a kill order for Bucky. Sharon Carter had been misled by Thaddeus Ross. The soldiers in Bucharest had not gone in with kill orders. They’d been told to bring the Winter Soldier in for questioning, but if necessary were to kill if he resisted arrest.

Sharon’s bad advice to Steve had caused the whole mess in the first place.

But that deception hadn’t happened yet and hopefully wouldn’t.

“Tony…” Steve asked quietly. “How did you know I was going to ask about the Winter Soldier?”

“I read the Hydra files, Steve. There is a lot of information on the Winter Soldier out there. It is all in the public domain. However, there are still some things from the Hydra files that have yet to be decrypted. I’m sure all their secrets will come out eventually. I know what Bucky Barnes means to you and I promise you I will do everything in my power to protect him.” Tony meant that. Despite what Barnes had done to his parents, he hadn’t carried out the task willingly. He’d had no choice and Tony had accepted it. It didn’t mean he should condemn the man who had carried it out.
Steve bowed his head, almost in shame. “I’m not sure you will still want to protect him after I tell you what I need to.”

Tony swallowed. So this was about his parents.

“I’m telling you this because we need to trust one another and stay together. The Accords are trying to split us because we have different views about them but if we are to stay together I have to be truthful and not keep secrets. I’ve kept this from you for longer than I should have done and I’m sorry for it. I was afraid of your reaction.”

“Steve?” Tony proceeded cautiously. “You can trust me.”

“I know.” Steve raised his head, took a deep breath and said: “The Winter Soldier murdered your parents.”

Steve had said it. He’d come out and said what Tony had wanted to hear. Steve was trying to build bridges, build the trust between them that should have always been there.

“Ok,” replied Tony.

“Okay?” Steve looked at him suspiciously. “You already knew?”

Tony shrugged. “As I said, the Hydra files leaked onto the internet. It was within them. I did a search for ‘Stark’ and it gave me all the information Hydra had on me and my parents. I didn’t know you knew though. How long have you known?” Originally, Tony had never made that specific search into the Hydra files, deciding he didn’t want to know what was there. But this had been one of the algorithms he had been searching for since coming back in time. He wanted to know what Hydra had on him.

Steve winced. “When I was at the old training base during the brief time I was on the run, I found out there. Armin Zola told me. He showed me newspaper cuttings of Howard’s death and how it had been made to look like an accident. He implied the Winter Soldier was responsible. I figured Bucky was the one to kill them but I don’t know for sure if he was responsible. I’m telling you this now because I do not want it to become an issue that can be exploited against us later. If you can find out your parents were murdered, others could too.”

They could. It was a risk which Tony could not eliminate unless he had Friday do a deep search of all released Hydra files to find the information and delete it. But there was a lot of information to traverse through. Ultimately the information would become public knowledge. Tony could keep it hidden but he just didn’t want to.

“You’ve known for a while though,” noted Tony. “Took you a while to come and tell me.”

“I know,” replied Steve quietly, his face burning. “I should have told you years ago. Even if I didn’t know who their killer likely was, I still should have told you they had been murdered rather than killed in an accident.”

“It matters you admitted it,” reassured Tony. “Thank you for taking the time to tell me. You can trust me not to go after Barnes. I know he wasn’t of his right mind if he did kill them. It would be bad form if I attempted to kill him for something he didn’t have a choice over.” After the fight in Siberia, Tony had realised he had reacted badly to watching the video of his parents murder and his subsequent attempts to hurt Barnes as much as possible. He wished he could apologise for it, now he never could since the Siberia events would not be happening.

Steve visibly relaxed, as if he had finally released tension which had been holding him back.
Thursday 2\textsuperscript{nd} June 2016

Tony had a meeting with the President, a request he had put in himself to discuss the Accords and the Avengers concerns over Ross’s appointment to the role. Movement on the changes of the Accords had begun to shift before Ross had clamped down on them and no new progress to legislation changes had been made.

Ross was proving to be problematic for Tony, still attempting to block any changes he and Nat wanted to put through, though the other representatives from the continents were more than happy with the changes. Ross was still able to block them because the panel had to be united in order for changes to be made to the draft document.

This had frustrated Tony’s attempts to get the changes into law before the signing date. He was running out of time to keep the team together.

He pulled a few strings at the White House to get a meeting with the President. He did owe Tony for helping to save his life a few years ago.

“Mr. President.” Tony held out his hand and the President shook it, indicating for him to sit down in front of his desk.

“Mr. Stark,” President Ellis greeted. “It is good to see you again and to hear good reports from the negotiations with the Accords citing your agreement with them.”

“In part,” Tony clarified. “The Accords are what I need to discuss with you.”

President Ellis placed his hands in front of him. “Oh.”

“Specifically it is about the representative for the United States of America,” began Tony cautiously. “I remember your speech when you announced Thaddeus Ross to be our representative on the panel. You wish for the Avengers to collaborate with governments worldwide and yet Thaddeus Ross is the sticking stone to bringing in all the Avengers on the Sokovia Accords. He may have experience with the Hulk but the fact his own involvement in that disaster has been covered up is inherently wrong. Are you aware, Mr. President, that Ross believes Bruce is the property of the Armed Forces? The only reason he is leaving him alone is because the Hulk saved his life, yet he would do anything to be able to control the Hulk. You’re confident he would be able to work with allies abroad and the Avengers, however he is doing everything in his power to block changes the other representatives wish to make. Those changes were brought before the committee by myself and Natasha Romanoff and they were agreed. The rest of the countries took these amendments back to their governments and there is support for them. Has Ross spoken to you about the changes we requested?”

“No… he has not,” the President frowned. “Ross told me the Accords were accepted as they are.”

\textit{That bastard!}

Anger coursed through him. “He’s trying to sabotage the Accords because he doesn’t agree with the changes put forth.”

“What were the changes you requested?” Ellis grabbed pen and paper. “If they are reasonable I will accept them.”
Tony sighed. He hadn’t expected Ross to not take the changes back to the President. No wonder there was a delay in inputting the changes. The President had never been informed. He ran over them in short detail. “The tracking bracelets should only be implemented if there is a requirement for it, not to be tracked constantly from day one of the signing. Secondly, detaining us without trial? That is illegal. We all have a right to a trial if we arrested. Not surprisingly, that was Ross’ specific piece of legislation. A lot of other countries are not happy with it. It was agreed that we could be held if awaiting trial, either in a secure prison or house arrest, depending on the severity of their crimes. And, finally, in the face of world-ending threats, the Avengers should be allowed to intervene without permission, providing we notify the country in advance as we travel there of our intentions.” Tony folded his arms across his chest. “I do not see these as unreasonable changes and these are the three aspects of the Accords which are preventing Steve Rogers from signing.”

“I’m surprised Ross has not brought these to me,” murmured President Ellis. “I agree they do not seem unreasonable. Between you and me, Stark, I have had a few requests from the other representatives to remove Thaddeus from his position. It is finding someone else to fill his shoes.”

“There has to be someone else you trust enough to work with the Avengers and the Accords on a non-bias basis,” suggested Tony.

The President’s eyes clocked on Tony. “How about you, Mr. Stark?”

“Me?” Surprise flickered across his face.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You are an Avenger, Mr. Stark, and a part of the team that has saved the world on numerous occasions. You are a hero to many, respected for the work you do. Perhaps the best way for the Avengers to work with the governments of the world, is to have one on the Accords Committee. And I trust you to make those difficult decisions on whether the Avengers intervention is needed.”

Tony swallowed. He hadn’t been expecting that. “Can I at least think about it?”

“Of course. If you choose to decline, I’m sure I will find someone else. Nevertheless, I shall call Thaddeus today and inform him he will be removed from office, effective immediately.”

It was the most Tony could have hoped for.

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“Are you going to take him up on the offer?” Natasha asked over the phone.

Tony was on his way back to the Compound and had Natasha on speakerphone. “Me as a politician? Technically one, anyway.”

“I think it would work, Tony. We’d have someone on the inside, fighting for us, an advantage we didn’t have before.” Natasha pointed out the obvious. “It would work best for us.”

“This is going to make me a big target of Ross.”

“We’ll deal with him if he tries anything,” vowed Natasha, her voice hard.

“If there is one thing I didn’t expect when I went for this meeting was to become a part of the Accords committee,” moaned Tony.
Natasha laughed. “Only if you accept.”

“Any replacement of Ross’ could be worse, even if they say they are neutral. They could still try to hinder us, something we cannot allow to happen, not with Thanos on his way.” Tony leaned back in his seat.

“No,” replied Natasha quietly. “This might be a good change. You’re not going to become Secretary of State if you take Ross’ spot on the Accords committee are you?”

Tony’s eyes widened. “God, I hope not!”

“You’re accepting then?”

“I don’t think I have much of a choice. It is the safest option. And it demonstrates how we do want to work with the governments of the world and respect their sovereignty. I’ll call the President when I get back and accept the proposal.”

---

The very next day it was announced to the world of Tony’s appointment to the Accords Committee. In protest about being removed from the Accords Committee, Ross had resigned as Secretary of State though he refused to answer questions from the press about why Tony had usurped his position. The President still had yet to decide on a new Secretary of State.

It didn’t take long for a new draft document of the Accords to be created, making the changes Tony and Natasha had requested.

Now, all that needed to be done, was to ratify the Accords.

And Tony’s job to keep the team together would be completed; one step closer to defeating Thanos for good.

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**Monday 6th June 2016**

Monday morning came and found Tony in his office at the Compound, reading through his emails forwarded to him regarding the developments of the Accords when Natasha arrived, a grim look on her face, holding an envelope in her hands.

“I found it among the post. Just one word written on the front. ‘Stark’. I do not recognise the handwriting. Appears to be an attempt to hide who it is from, though I can take a guess as to who is responsible.”

Tony frowned. “It’s from someone who has been in this building recently otherwise it wouldn’t have reached here.”

“All the scans have come back negative. It is safe to open.”

Tony slit his finger underneath the envelope. “I think it is from Ross. He’s not too happy about losing his position. He’s been made to look like a monster. I figured he might come after me, especially since I have ruined his career of making legislations against superheroes. He probably got the letter through security here by planting it on someone to put in the post.”

“I’m surprised he would be so open about it,” replied Natasha calmly, though there was a hint of
“He’s lost everything,” replied Tony. “He has nothing else to lose since his whole reputation has been tarnished. Taking Ross out of play means the Accords are more likely to be amended. We’ve got to consider every variable towards the endgame, Nat. We cannot leave any piece left unturned.”

“So agreed.” Natasha watched as Tony pulled out a piece of paper, opened it up and then promptly showed it to her.

Written in pen which was supposed to be a bad attempt at child’s writing were the words:

Mark my words, Stark. I’ll get you for this.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

So, Ross is threatening Tony? What will he do? *evil laugh*

The scene in Civil War where Steve sees Bucky for the first time, which I briefly mention early on in this chapter, I don’t think they were given kill orders to kill Bucky. The way the scene is set up makes me think they were intending on bringing Bucky in but only kill as a last resort. The fact that they capture Bucky when they had him surrounded after the chase instead of killing him says a lot to me that Steve was misled about the orders concerning Bucky. They could have easily shot Bucky instead of taking the effort to bring him in. But those are my thoughts.

Next chapter: Zemo finally makes his move!

To be posted next Sunday.

Until then,

the-writer1988
CHAPTER EIGHT

Confronting Zemo

Wednesday 8th June 2016

The text came through quite late at night when Tony was already in bed with Pepper lying next to him. They hadn’t fallen asleep yet when his phone vibrated.

“Who’d be texting you at this time?” murmured Pepper sleepily. They’d resumed their relationship a few days before, sleeping for the first time since they had gone on a break, taking a few weeks to return to the point where they could move forward again.

Tony reached for his phone and sat upright as soon as he saw the text. “Shit. I’ve got to go.” Pepper, now wide-awake, sat up, resting her hand on the palm of her hand as she leaned on her elbow. “What is it?”

“It’s Peter. He has told his Aunt about being Spider-Man. Apparently she’s freaking out. I need to get there!” He’d hoped the kid wouldn’t tell his Aunt on his own but apparently he had. At least she hadn’t walked in on Peter in his costume which had been the sole reason she’d discovered Peter’s true identity previously.

Tony remembered getting the call from May in the middle of a meeting. He’d had to dash away and soothe over a potential breakdown which had taken him hours to sort out. “I might be gone a while.”

“Do you want me to come?” asked Pepper.

Tony shook his head, already pulling on a pair of trousers and a shirt before grabbing his phone and the detachable Arc Reactor, placing it on the front his shirt. “I’ll take the suit. Be there quicker!”

“Be careful!” Pepper called out as he ran out of the room.

Tony made for the nearest emergency exit as his suit began to cover his body, ordering FRIDAY to
open it before he engaged his thrusters and shot out into the darkness, increasing his thrust capacity so he could get to Queens faster.

He was there in ten minutes, landing on the building’s rooftop and deactivating the suit before going through the emergency exit and to the sixth floor. Knocking on the Parker’s apartment door, it opened quickly and Peter urged him in. He looked fearful, frightened.

“I told her and she just…” Peter pointed to his Aunt who was sitting on the sofa, stock still.

Tony moved in front of her, sitting down on the chair off to the side. “Ms. Parker?”

“How could you?” she whispered.

Tony swallowed. This was familiar territory. It was the exact same words May had said to him when he’d arrived after she’d inadvertently walked into Peter’s room and seen him in his costume. However, his response could be given differently this time. He’d apologised before. “I’m not sure what you mean, Ms. Parker.”

“You knew… About Peter’s abilities. What he could do.”

“I did… And I was going to tell you. Peter asked me not to so I told him I would give him a chance to talk to you first. Its better it comes from him. He only came forward because I urged him to. Otherwise, you would still be in the dark now.” Tony glanced at Peter and mouthed: Why didn’t you call me?

“Is this what this internship is about? Not to help him find a career but so he can join your team?”

“The internship is real,” insisted Tony. “Access to Stark Industries labs and projects with the Research and Development department… There is a lot Peter can learn from us… but, I will not lie to you, the skills he has as Spider-Man would come in handy for the Avengers. And he would only be called in if it was absolutely necessary, as a last resort. I wouldn’t willingly put him in danger if I could help it.”

May’s piercing eyes studied Tony’s face. “I’m not sure I can trust you.”

“How long have you known?”

“A few weeks. I’d heard about the vigilante Spider-Man when his videos were flagged up on my system. They seemed way too real to be fake. I decided to try to locate him and it led me to this apartment. I haven’t been on this since the beginning if that is what you were thinking,” explained Tony, hoping May would accept his answer.

May tipped her head in her nephew’s direction. “Do you want the internship?”

Peter nodded. “I do. It would present unique learning opportunities for me.”

May tilted her head back towards Tony, her gaze piercing his own. “Can you promise me he will be safe?”

The truth was the safest option. “No.” He couldn’t deceive her. She needed to know, no matter what they faced in the future, Peter wouldn’t be safe going into the line of work he was. “But his skills give him higher durability, capable of surviving things normal humans would not. He’d be
going into dangerous situations but is less likely to be harmed.” The image of Peter fading in his arms pushed into his mind. He didn’t need the reminder right now! “The world is a dangerous place, are any of us ever truly safe?” he reasoned.

“No,” May answered quietly. “Not even you.”

“Right.”

“I do not mind the internship itself… It’s the heroics I’m not sure on…”

Tony glanced at Peter before replying. “I don’t think you could really stop him if you wanted to. He was given those abilities for a reason. There is always a reason for something happening, whether it is good or bad. We want our children to reach their full potential. Peter can give so much more than he already can do with the right training and the right equipment to keep him safe.”

Because Peter was definitely getting a new suit. The home-made one was not fit for purpose… At all.

“Would you still carry on if I asked you not to?” May asked.

Peter lowered his gaze. “I can’t ignore people needing help. Not when I have these abilities where I could make a difference. I caught a bus, Aunt May, saved the people with just my strength alone.”

Tony watched the exchange carefully.

May fell silent, her shoulders shaking as she held back the tears.

“You have my word that Peter’s internship is real. He will not be called forward by the Avengers unless we really need him to be there,” added Tony, reiterating his previous point. It was important for Peter’s Aunt to understand this. Previously she had taken a while to accept Tony’s role in her nephew’s life but she had seen the good Peter could do under Tony’s tutelage.

“You’ll be sixteen soon. In a few months even…” May reasoned. “You’ll be able to drive… Nearly an adult… If your uncle was here, he’d encourage you, not hinder you from using your abilities. He’d be so proud of what you’ve become.”

It was awkward listening to her words, feeling like he was intruding upon a deeply personal conversation.

“But you’ve been saving people, helping others in need. We’ve always taught you to help others, to be the best you can be… And, I suppose, if doing this, helping the Avengers is the way to go forward, I cannot be the one to stop you… No matter how much I may worry about you.”

Peter gaped, surprise crossing his features. “You’re letting me continue being Spider-Man?”

“I am.”

“Really?”

“Yes. But there will be conditions,” added May. “Your schoolwork is important too. Having an internship at Stark Industries does not mean you can slack off. I expect good grades from you. You have to manage your time appropriately if this is going to work. Can you promise me that?”

Peter nodded. “I can. Definitely!”

“Good.” May shifted position so she could look at Tony. “How often would he be at the
internship?"

“Every Friday night, if that is acceptable to you?” suggested Tony. “My driver, Happy, will pick
him up from school and drive him to the Avengers Facility upstate. He’ll stay the night and we’ll
bring him back Saturday morning. How does that sound?”

“He won’t be at the New York building?” asked May.

Tony shook his head. “No. I’m selling the tower. All Stark Industries business is transferring
upstate in a few months. Peter will be able to have full access to my lab and state of the art
technology which is not yet in place within Stark Industries. If you would rather he didn’t…”

“No, no that’s fine,” said May.

Tony smiled. “Good.”

“So, this Friday?” she wanted to clarify.

“Unfortunately not. There are a few things I need to get sorted first before Peter begins his
internship.” Mainly Zemo and the Accords. “Is the first Friday in August acceptable for you?” He
directed the question at both Peter and May.

“It is,” responded Peter.

“I’ll put it in the diary.” May leaned forward. “I just want you to promise me one thing, Mr. Stark.”

He knew what was coming.

“If something bad happens and it’s a disaster all around, promise me you will do whatever it takes
to bring him home.”

No hesitation was required. “I promise. If it cannot be me it will be someone from the small circle
of people that I trust: Pepper, Happy and Rhodey.”

“That is all I can ask for, Mr. Stark.”

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**Sunday 19th June 2016**

“I’m worried,” Natasha spoke quietly, approaching Tony from behind.

Putting the StarkPad down on the table in front of him, Tony glanced up at his friend. “How so?
We’re doing everything right so far.”

“We believe we are.” Natasha slid onto the seat beside him. “It’s Ross. FRIDAY cannot locate him
anywhere.”

“He’s gone off-grid?”

She nodded, silently watching for his reaction.

“This wasn’t in the plans.”

“Nor were you joining the Accords committee,” she pointed out.
Tony rubbed the back of his head. “I’m honestly surprised the appointment has been well-received. I’ve caused a lot of trouble over the years. For them to value my opinion...?” He shook his head. “Feels weird.”

“You’ve matured.” The statement was not wrong. Arms crossed over her chest, she scrutinised Tony. “So, what do we do about Ross?”

Shifting on the chair, Tony leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “There isn’t much we can do. Ross has the connections to disappear if he really wants to. He sent me the threat, remember? That he’ll get me?”

“That’s what worries me. If we lose him…”

“It might work to our advantage. He needs to be detained. He’s going to attack me at some point. We may as well take him down at the same time. Not kill though.” Tony smiled, holding up his wrist. “I have trackers in my wrist. They’re a leftover from when I called the suits to me. I never had them removed. But FRIDAY can track them.”

“Will he be that obvious?” Natasha seemed dubious.

“He’s lost everything. What else has he got left to lose?” asked Tony. “Ross has been after the Hulk for years. If he had the chance to take down Bruce, he would. He’s issued a direct threat to me. The question is when he will act.”

Natasha was about to respond when FRIDAY’s voice echoed from the ceiling. “Boss, Zemo is on the move.”

Their heads snapped up, eyes wide open in surprise.

“Makes sense,” mumbled Tony. “It is only a few days before the Accords are due to be signed... He’s still aiming at framing Barnes. Not knowing his plan has already failed to tear us apart further.”

Natasha had known Steve had told Tony the truth. “Good.” She shifted her gaze to his Arc Reactor, placed on his chest. “You do not always carry that around.”

“I knew we’d be getting an alert soon,” he replied. “Figured it would be useful to have it on.” Reaching into his pocket, Tony pulled out a smaller Arc Reactor. “Here is yours. Place it on your chest and it should attach to any clothing you wear. Press it to activate the suit. I have a full suit, yours is just for flight capacity. You do have a few repulsor shots available to you if you need it.”

Natasha took the Reactor. “Does it matter where I put it on my chest?”

“No.” Tony tapped his fingers over his Reactor and the nanonites spread over his body, engulfing him in his suit. The helmet formed yet the face-place didn’t close up. He watched as Natasha placed her smaller Reactor in the middle of her body, just slightly below the clavicles.

She pressed her fingers to it and nanonites spread out, forming a thin, black armoured suit around her body. “Feels weird the nanonites running over me.”

“It takes a while getting used to.” Tony glanced up at the ceiling. “FRIDAY are all the exits clear? I don’t want anyone to see us.”

“Yes, boss. The exit down the corridor from this office is clear.”
The nanonites sealed around Natasha’s body.

“I know you haven’t had any practice in the suit yet. I only finished it recently. FRIDAY can control the suit so we can be on our way.”

“Can’t be that hard.”

“You’d be surprised,” retorted Tony. He walked to the door to the common area he’d been sitting in, opened it and saw the fire exit door already open. He fired up his repulsors, his feet hovering in mid-air. “FRIDAY?”

Natasha’s thrusters fired up. Their helmets sealed over their faces and Tony leaned forward and shot ahead, flying out of the fire exit and up and high into the sky. Natasha followed suit, FRIDAY controlling her suit.

“FRIDAY, course plotted for Cleveland?”

“Yes, boss.”

“Good. Have you given Nat instructions on how to use the suit?”

“She has. I think I’ll be fine to control it…” responded Nat. “I know if I lose control she’ll be there to help. If this is going to become a regular thing, flying off with you Stark, then I need to learn as we go along.” Leaning forward she flew past Tony, stretching her hands out behind her to increase her boost.

Tony moved in front of her. “Eh… Cleveland is that way.” He pointed off to the right.

“Show off,” grumbled Natasha.

Tony laughed.

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Cleveland

“Sensors indicate one heat signature in the house. Looks like Zemo mounted a curb and hit the occupant’s car,” observed Natasha from her outpost just above the house they knew Zemo was still in. “How are we going to do this?”

“I say we just go in. I go in the back and you the front. He won’t be able to easily escape if so.”

“Unless he smashes a window.”

“There is that,” admitted Tony, “but we are armoured up. He isn’t. And if he leaves the house and it becomes another chase… I’d rather keep this as quiet as possible. The Accords signing is just a few days away. I’d rather not jeopardise our position on it by making a mess in our own country in trying to apprehend a criminal.”

“Good points,” mused Natasha. “But we cannot arrest him if he has committed no crime.”

“I’m certain he’s murdered the occupant of the house. FRIDAY initially reported two heat signatures.” Slowing beginning to maneuver down, Tony headed for the back garden. “Let’s go.”

---
Natasha landed awkwardly on her feet in front of the main entrance. Tony had installed minimal sensors in her helmet so it was easier for her to work with the suit. She didn’t need the full interface he had in his own suit.

There was still one heat signature detected in the house.

Stepping silently forward, she reached the front door.

“I’m in position,” said Tony.

“Oh three. One. Two…. THREE!” Her shoulder hit the front door and she crashed through it, swinging her arm around and raising her palm at the startled man in the room before he dropped almost everything and made a run for it, only to hear a crashing sound in the distance as Tony made his own entrance.

The man – Zemo – stumbled back into Natasha’s line of fire. Palm raised she pointed her repulsor at him. “Stop running and we won’t hurt you.”

He snarled. “You shouldn’t be here!”

“Too bad, we are,” said Tony appearing behind the man. “Looks like you’ve been busy.”

Natasha noticed the man off to the side, tied by his ankles, his head in water, not moving. He was clearly dead. “You gonna tell us why you killed him?”

“He was Hydra,” explained Zemo, his voice filled with bitter.

“Didn’t give you what you wanted?” guessed Natasha. “That’s why you wanted the Red Book in your hand?” It hadn’t escaped her notice what Zemo had been holding. “Think you can control the Winter Soldier do you?”

Zemo’s eyes turned to slits. “How did you know?”

“You’re not the only one to unencrypt the data.” Natasha stepped forward. “We’ve been doing it too. We know all about the Red Book and December 16th, 1991.”

Zemo’s face paled. “How?”

“Are you asking how we knew what you were looking for or how we know about those two specific things?”

“Both,” he hissed in return.

Tony’s faceplate lifted. “Steve Rogers told me everything. You wanted to split us apart but you’ve underestimated how strong a team we really are. You’ve lost before you’ve even begun to tear us apart.”

Zemo’s eyes were widening but also calculating as he considered the information Tony had just dropped on him.

“You attempted to gamble,” added Natasha, “hoping you’d win. But you’ve just earned yourself a prison sentence.”

“NO!” Zemo hand’s moved quickly and he pulled a gun from the waistband of his trousers and –

“NO!” Tony leaped forward, reaching for the gun as Zemo pulled the trigger. The bullet bounced
off his faceplate and he twisted Zemo’s arm, forcing the gun arm down. “Drop the gun!”

He refused.

Natasha kicked Zemo’s hand with her suited foot, forcing his fingers to open and drop the gun and she kicked it aside. Wincing in pain, Zemo dropped to his knees, clutching his injured and now bruised hand.

Natasha deactivated her suit and from her waist-belt, she pulled out a set of cuffs. With Tony standing with his palm pointed at Zemo, she rounded the man and pulled his arms behind his back, cuffing them together. “You just confessed to wanting to use the Winter Soldier and,” she plucked the Red Book from the floor which Zemo had dropped when Tony had prevented him from shooting himself, “and you killed a man. It doesn’t matter he was Hydra, you intentionally murdered him. There is more than enough reason in this room alone to have you convicted and sent down for years.”

Zemo grunted but refused to speak.

“I’ll make the call to the relevant authorities. We’ll need to take Zemo into custody.” Tony began to walk away, the rest of his suit retracting back into the arc reactor as he moved into the kitchen.

Natasha stood guard, arms folded across her chest, watching the man carefully.

At least apprehending Zemo meant the Accords would go off without a hitch.

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Tony made a report to the Accords committee regarding their capture of Zemo as soon as they returned to the Compound. Though he was a representative he was still required by law to write up a written report. Zemo was taken into custody by the police and taken to a local police station. Since Zemo wasn’t enhanced the Accords committee had no jurisdiction over him.

He was out of their hands for now and would be tried on the crimes he had committed in Cleveland.

The one thing Tony did keep was the Red Book for the Winter Soldier. He felt it better to keep so they at least knew where it was. He considered destroying it but reason overcame his desire to destroy it. What if someone else knew the code words and could control Barnes? They’d be able to use the Red Book against Barnes to gain control back.

Tony placed it in his office, hidden away in a secured draw underneath his desk, making sure only Natasha knew its location.

He was sure it was safe.

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Monday 20th June 2016

It was two days to go before the Accords were due to be signed in Vienna. Tony was sitting at his desk writing out a speech he intended to make. He probably wouldn’t follow it but he did need to make some notes on what he had to cover.

His eyes were struggling to stay open which was unusual for him. He couldn’t understand it. The coffee should be keeping him awake. He reached across his desk for his cup and took a sip from
his coffee, drinking the rest of it whole.

He wrote a few more lines, read it back and frowned. It didn’t make any sense! His vision blurred. The struggle to keep his eyes open was becoming almost impossible.

“FRIDAY?” His voice slurred. “Wha…”

And then he slumped forward on his desk, his whole body going limp as his body succumbed to the darkness that had been threatening to consume him ever since he had started to drink his coffee.

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Natasha’s eyes opened slowly to find Steve shaking her. “Ste… Steve?” Pushing herself up, Natasha looked around and found herself on the floor. “Steve? Why am I… on the floor?”

“You were drugged,” stated Steve. He held up her coffee mug. “The whole pot is contaminated with a sleeping agent. We both were. My enhanced metabolism fought it off quicker.”

She struggled to clear her head. “Why coffee? And why wasn’t it detected?”

“New batch delivered this morning. Tony opened…” Steve trailed off, eyes widening.

Natasha caught on quick. “Tony!”

Stumbling to her feet, still feeling dizzy, they both ran for Tony’s office, Steve helping her along. She had a horrible feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Down the corridor and up the stairs, nearly tripping over her feet, Natasha forced herself to move, trying to shake off the effects of the sleeping agent hidden within the coffee granules. Steve reached the office first, the door slightly ajar.

She was almost afraid to enter it.

He nudged the door open.

“Tony!” Natasha stumbled forward.

He was slumped on the floor, just unconscious, and his office was a mess.

Draws were tugged out, and papers were strewn all over the floor.

Natasha knelt down next to him. “Tony…” She shook him gently.

He started to groan as he was tugged back to the waking world.

His fingers grasped her own. “Wha…?”

“Hey… don’t fight it… Sleeping agent…” she advised.

“I… was… was… at… my… desk…” he managed. “I fell… asleep… at… my… desk.” He winced in pain, starting to blink rapidly to clear his own vision.

Natasha swallowed, gently sitting him up. “Someone put a sleeping agent in the coffee granules.”

Tony rubbed his head as he sat up, awareness coming back to him. “But… why… wasn’t… it
noticed?”

“It wouldn’t be if it came from the usual supplier,” reasoned Steve. “Tony, is there anything in this office someone would want to take?”

Tony’s eyes widened. He grasped Natasha’s wrists. “Nat… check the secured draw underneath the desk.”

Realisation hit at his words. Tony did have something someone would want but how had they known to find it there?

She crawled over and peered underneath the desk, using her fingers to probe for the secured draw. It was slightly jarred out of place. Already knowing what she would find, Natasha pulled the draw out and showed the contents to Tony and Steve.

“Shit,” murmured Tony, still slightly drugged.

“What is it?” asked Steve, his eyes flicking worriedly between the two. “What was in there?”

Steve wouldn’t know what was there. They’d decided not to tell him when they had apprehended Zemo.

Tony groaned, his mind trying to catch up with the events that were moving far too quickly. “Nat… the Red Book… it’s gone.”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

Uh, oh... who has the red book? Will the Accords signing go off without a hitch? Plus, Nat has her own Iron Man suit now...

Coffee granules... always check the coffee granules...

Next chapter: The Accords signing in Vienna...

To be posted next Sunday.

Until next time,

the-writer1988
Chapter Nine: The Winter Soldier

Chapter Summary

The Accords signing doesn't go well for our heroes...

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the comments! All your questions about how someone got into the Compound, how the Red Book was stolen will be answered over the following few chapters... Please bear with me as the answers come out!

Please, enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER NINE

The Winter Soldier

Monday 20th June 2016


Tony cursed. He hadn’t wanted Rogers to have known just yet, not until they’d succeeded in bringing Barnes into the Avengers. His long-term plan was to unite the two friends again but not until after the Accords situation had been sorted. The Red Book being taken complicated matters and could just throw the Accords off.

Shaking his head again as the drowsiness wore off from the sleeping agent, Tony gingerly got to his feet, steadying himself by his desk. Whoever had stolen the Red Book had, had no qualms in throwing Tony from his chair to the floor so they could access the secret compartment. No one apart from Natasha had known where it was or what it was for.

Unless... His mind was ticking over, working furiously, to figure out who was behind this. He could make a guess but he doubted Ross would have done the job himself. “FRIDAY?”

There was no answer.

“She was disabled,” answered Steve. “When I woke up she was the first thing I tried. Whoever did this disabled her without any of us knowing.”

Tony groaned. “I’ll have to reboot her.” She might still be able to give them some answers but it depended on whether she had been hacked into by someone on-site or an outsider. His vision blurred slightly again. “Yesterday Nat and I apprehended a man in Cleveland. He killed a former Hydra agent and had a Red Book with him which he recovered at the scene. The Red Book contains instructions on how to activate the Winter Soldier.”
Steve’s eyebrows rose.

“Only Nat knew I had it in here. We were keeping it safe so no one could use it against Barnes. I thought it was safe here.” Tony dropped his chin down to his chest.

“Are you saying someone could control Bucky?” asked Steve, his voice tight. “I’ve been searching for him for two years. I’ve had no luck.”

Tony winced. “It’s possible. If they know where he is.”

“Tony… Do you know where he is?” Steve leaned forward, hands pressed down on Tony’s desk.

Exchanging a glance with Natasha who nodded slightly, Tony sighed. “Bucharest. Romania. He’s been there a few months, living a quiet life.”

“And you didn’t tell me?” Steve’s fists clenched. “I thought we were supposed to trust one another!”

“Steve,” Natasha raised her hands, “we both decided not to tell you.”

“Why? You know I’ve been searching for him! I can’t believe you would keep this from me!”

“You can talk, keeping my parent’s deaths from me for years,” interjected Tony. “We only found the Red Book yesterday. At what point did we have a chance to tell you about it? We knew it existed, yes, but had no idea where it was until we got our hands on it.”

“We’ve been searching for it for months. We figured telling you about the Red Book would be a mistake, lead the wrong people to his location until we had it ourselves,” explained Natasha easily. “We were going to bring you in once the Accords were signed so we could bring Barnes back into the fold if he wanted to. Without the Accords to protect us we could have potentially led anyone to Barnes, any potential Hydra operative who could then use him. Better to leave him where he is whilst we worked to ensure the Red Book was found.”

“We were thinking of his safety and ours,” added Tony. “If someone else had found this Red Book and used it to control Barnes? Chaos.”

“But that is exactly what is going to happen,” said Steve. “What if they know where he is? What if they track him down?”

“FRIDAY is monitoring him,” reassured Natasha. “He’s been under surveillance with us for a while now.” Which was true but not as long as they were leading Steve to believe.

“FRIDAY is currently down.”

“Here, only,” noted Tony. “Her servers are only down here. She should be fine in the other places she is installed. The only way they can take her down across her entire network is to attack her central computer system which only I have access to on the mainframe. She should have full footage of Barnes’ hideout from the moment we began monitoring until whenever we stop. I’ll make a check as soon as I’ve rebooted her here.” He was already getting his phone out, logging onto his network.

Steve clenched his fists. “I can’t be dealing with this right now.”

“Steve…?” Natasha asked.
“Oh no…” Tony realised. He remembered what had happened at this point originally. Steve had hurriedly left to fly to London. “Peggy.”

“How do you know?”

“I knew her, Steve,” Tony had been too busy with the Accords last time to attend Peggy’s funeral even though he had wanted to. The time hadn’t been there for him. Same as it was now. “She was a constant figure in my life growing up. I knew her better then you did.”

“Her funeral is on the 22nd June, the same day as the Accords signing,” said Steve. “I have to be there for her.”

“We need you at the signing, Cap,” answered Tony. “I want to go to Peggy’s funeral too but it is our duty to show unity on the Accords.”

Steve shook his head. “No. I can’t. I’ll sign it when I get back.”

“Steve…” Natasha stepped forward. “There are bigger things in play here. Ross has threatened Tony.”

Tony’s sharp gaze towards her proved he hadn’t been expecting her to reveal that little nugget of information.

“Ross? The guy Tony replaced on the Accords Committee?” Steve moved back, surprise running across his features.

“Yes.” Natasha folded her arms across her chest.

“You think he did this?” Steve gestured around the room at the mess in Tony’s office.


Tony leaned back on his desk. “Ross has the contacts in place where he could learn the location of the Winter Soldier. If he gets his hands on the Red Book…” He had a feeling he knew what was going to happen.

“You believe he will use Bucky?” whispered Steve.

“On me, yes. He’s threatened me. The Red Book is now missing. It fits.” Tony hoped he was wrong. “He’ll want to get revenge and he’ll try to make it public, to try to split us apart by using Barnes.” His fingers ran over his phone screen. “FRIDAY?”

“Is everything alright, boss?” her voice echoed through the room. “Something… a virus…”

“I know.” Tony growled. “We’re fine. Can you check on Barnes? His location?” He hoped they still had time. If Ross got his hands on the Winter Soldier… It didn’t bear thinking about. “If I’m right about this, Ross will not get his own hands dirty publicly. He’ll do it privately, behind the scenes.”

“Tony… are you sure?” Natasha had caught on. She was remembering the previous events too.

“I am.”

“What is it?” Steve wasn’t partial to what they knew about the future.

Their own knowledge was enabling them to jump to new conclusions of what could happen.
“Ross doesn’t like the Accords as they are. He’s also facing an investigation for keeping information from the President. He’s looking at a prison sentence for treason though he has been given bail.” Tony had been keeping that little nugget of information to himself. “He’s got nothing left to lose. He’ll try to disrupt the Accords signing with the Winter Soldier and attempt to get me in the process.”

Steve’s fists banged on the table hard. “Damn it!”

Surprised by the outburst, Tony stepped away from Steve. “We need you here, Cap.”

“I should be there for Peggy! I can’t miss her funeral! But this…”

“Barnes needs you,” said Natasha quietly. “Peggy is gone but you still have Barnes and if Tony is right and Ross does send the Winter Soldier after him then we need you there with us. You’re the only one Barnes will listen to.”

Steve sagged onto Tony’s chair.

“Steve, the choice is yours,” said Tony. “I’m not going to force you to do anything you do not want to do. But if Barnes shows up…”

“You need another super-soldier…” muttered Steve. “I’ll stay.”

“FRIDAY? Have you got a report on Barnes’s location?” asked Tony.

“Negative, boss,” the A.I confirmed. “Barnes is gone. I’ve scanned the apartment, it’s a mess. All the CCTV from the area has been deleted. I cannot trace him.”

Steve slammed his fist down on the table again. He was angry this was happening at the inappropriate time.

“Damn.” Tony had been afraid of this. “I think… we can only assume Ross has Barnes and the Red Book.”

Natasha paced the office. “He must know we would realise he’d be behind this. He hasn’t exactly been subtle.”

“He’s got nothing left to lose, Nat. We can play him at his own game.”

“You’ve got a plan?” asked Steve.

“Sure have,” smirked Tony. “The Accords signing is the perfect place to attack since no weapons are allowed. Ross has made this personal. I do not believe he will get the Winter Soldier to assassinate me. He’ll make him capture me. Ross has nothing left to lose save his own life. He’s at the point where he doesn’t care. He knows we will make the connection between him and the Winter Soldier. My best guess is he’ll have Barnes bring me to him where he will then kill me himself. And then have the Winter Soldier kill him, effectively blaming the Winter Soldier for our deaths.”

“What if you’re wrong and you’re shot dead?” Steve grimaced.

“I won’t be.” If there was one thing he was certain of, it was the idea he wouldn’t be shot dead. Tony attributed it to the mysterious voices giving him that particular feeling without actually confirming it inside his head. “If I’m right and I am taken, you can track me. I have a tracker in my arm. FRIDAY can access it and tell you my exact location. Unless Ross pre-empts that you should
be able to follow easily. I suspect he’d be waiting nearby."

“You’d allow yourself to be taken?” Natasha asked.

“If it was evident that was what the Winter Soldier was aiming for, yes. Best way to catch Ross. He’ll hate me even more though if we stop him but he’s only got himself to blame. I think it’s the best option we have,” said Tony. “This way we end the threat Ross poses for good.”

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**Wednesday 22nd June**

The day of the Accords signing dawned bright and early. They’d travelled overnight to Vienna. Tony had purposefully left his Arc Reactor behind. The whole point of the Accords was to show co-operation with the other economies of the world. Walking into the signing with his Arc Reactor would be stating he didn’t really support them. He could have hidden it underneath his clothes but for his plan to work to expose Ross he needed to be defenceless.

Though Tony was never really defenceless.

Not these days anyway. The watch of his wrist was a testament to that.

Both Steve and Nat were combat fighters, able to fight without weaponry though Nat had hidden a few small Widow Bites in her sleeves which were undetectable to the scanners as they walked into the building holding the Accords. Steve had been forced to leave his shield behind, something he hadn’t been happy about but had ultimately accepted anyway.

Tony was dressed in a suit with a lanyard around his neck holding his badge stating both his position on the Accords Committee and his role as Iron Man.

Not all the Avengers were joining them. Clint had elected to stay at home with his family though had signed in advance, as had Wanda, Vision, and Sam. Rhodey had decided to attend the ceremony in Vienna and Tony had informed him of Ross’ threat to him and his feeling he would be attacked here. Rhodey hadn’t been too happy about his best friend putting himself in danger but Tony had insisted.

Tony walked around the conference hall, talking to various representatives, keeping an eye out for any danger. He even had FRIDAY monitoring the place. He’d given her instructions to notify him through his watch if she visualised Barnes on her sensors. He was sure something was going to happen.

“Mr. Stark!”

Tony turned to find a young man walking towards him. “T’Challa.” Tony held out his hand to the prince of Wakanda. “And King T’Chaka, welcome.”

“It is good to see you here, Mr. Stark,” the King replied. “Your quick thinking in Lagos saved lives. A wider atrocity could have been committed and Wakanda would have suffered the effects of the bomb had it gone off in the market place.”

He shook the King’s hand. “Thank you. I try my best to save as many lives as possible. Regrettably, it doesn’t always happen.”

“It is good to see you representing your country on the Committee. It was a brave choice, especially if you are out in combat,” T’Chaka observed. “I can think of no one better placed to be
impartial on the Accords. I hope our two great countries can work together in the future.”

*Interesting choice of words…* Tony mused. As of now, Wakanda was known to be one of the poorest countries in the world with a lack of available technology to advance. But he knew Wakanda hid true wealth and advancement. He hoped to bring them out of the shadows and out into the world. They needed Wakanda against Thanos. “It would be wonderful to see your great country. I feel your country would benefit greatly if the borders were opened though I understand the hesitation to do so. You prosper well enough on your own to not need the rest of the world’s aid.” He saw both the King and Prince’s eyes shift slightly as if they had noticed Tony’s words were hinting at a deeper knowledge of their country.

T’Chaka straightened. “Perhaps we shall sit down in the future and discuss collaborating with you, Mr. Stark. I’m sure we could come to an agreement.”

“My pleasure,” smiled Tony as the two walked away. Seeing T’Challa again reminded him he needed to bring the Black Panther into the fold. *One step closer…*

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The Accords signing went smoothly, ratifying the Accords into international law with all the countries that had signed up to it implementing it into their own laws. Tony mingled with the delegates, trusting in FRIDAY to alert him to any trouble, though he did remain aware of his surroundings.

Natasha moved past his shoulder. “Everything running smoothly so far.”

“I know,” he replied. Maybe he had got it wrong? Maybe Ross didn’t intend to attack him here. Still, at least T’Challa still had his father. He wouldn’t lose him just yet. “I just have this feeling…”

“Me too,” she murmured.

It was reassuring Natasha had the same feeling he had. He wasn’t going insane then. She moved off into the crowd, smiling and laughing at other delegate’s jokes, engaging in conversation with them.

A man approached him, just like many had throughout the day. The man was wearing glasses and was nearly bald with tufts of ginger at the side of his head. The faint sensation of recognition tingled in his brain and he couldn’t help but think he should know who this man was.

“Mr. Stark, it is an honour to meet you!” He held out his hand for Tony to shake.

But Tony felt suspicious and stepped back, making sure to have one hand on his watch in case he needed to activate it at a moment’s notice.

The bald man came to a stop in front of him.

And then it hit Tony. He knew who this man was. He recognised him. He knew how much this man had hated being compared to him by Stane. This man was…

Before he could complete the thought he was shot in the back of the shoulder and a flash echoed across his eyes and everything went instantly black.
The explosion sent Natasha flying. She rolled, coughing and spluttering as smoke filled the air. She held her hand to her mouth trying to prevent the intake of the thick smoke. She couldn’t see a thing as dizziness overcame her. Lying on her belly, she crawled along the floor, trying to stay beneath the smoke.

She could hear voices off to the side and the movement of shapes within the thick smoke.

“Steve?” she called out.

“I’m here.” Steve scrambled up next to her, a hand over his mouth and nose. “Tony was right.”

“We need to find him.”

“He got shot, Nat.”

Natasha cricked her neck trying to look at Steve through the smoke. “What?”

“He went down.” Steve coughed. “Bucky is here. I’m sure of it.”

They began to crawl through the smoke, coming across bodies on the floor, none injured just knocked out. Tony had been on the other side of the room, close to the exit when the explosion had happened. The attackers could have easily taken him out in the mere seconds it had taken them to regroup.

“Where’s Rhodey?” Natasha realised they were missing one person.

“Out-cold. As the explosion went off I saw someone hit him in the head. Everything happened too fast for me to shout out a warning. We can’t do anything for him now.” Steve pushed himself to his feet. “This is going too slow. We’ll have to run.” He was coughing more as he breathed in the noxious fumes of the smoke. Holding out his hand to Natasha, he yanked her to her feet. “Come on!”

Natasha stumbled as Steve pounded his way towards the exit, the smoke descending all around them. She could hear coughing and stumbling and screaming all around her as the various delegates of the Accords struggled to comprehend what had happened.

“Tony!” Steve shouted out.

Struggling to see, Natasha pushed herself forward, tumbling out of the front doors of the building and out into the large open space between the road and the building where she could see a limp figure being pushed into a waiting black van.

Bullets splattered around their legs and Steve pulled her behind cover. Looking up she could see the Winter Soldier pouring continuous bullets in their path, preventing them from racing out of cover to stop Tony from being taken. Her head still felt dizzy and she felt sick to her stomach as the fumes from the smoke wreaked havoc on her body. Natasha watched as Steve tried to make a run for the van but was stopped as the Winter Soldier landed in front of him, mask in place over his face, his eyes dull as his gun turned to focus upon Steve’s chest.

Steve threw himself to the side and the bullet missed him, giving the Winter Soldier enough time to turn and run back to the waiting black van, leaping in behind where Tony had been thrown with the doors slamming behind him. The van accelerated and roared off the premise and into the road as the five men who had collected Tony’s limp body raced towards Steve and Natasha, their fists
Behind them, smoke continued to pour out of the building and in the distance sirens could be heard.

Steve stood straight and tall, Natasha weak on her feet from the smoke inhalation.

“Stop right where you are!” demanded Steve, his voice ringing high and clear. “You can’t win!”

“Doesn’t matter,” one man replied as he stalked forward. “It doesn’t matter if we are caught. We’ve been rewarded handsomely for our assistance in acquiring Tony Stark. He’ll be dead before you find him.”

Natasha limped forward. “There are more ways to track a man than you imagine.”

“It’s already been prepared,” another replied.

“What’s been prepared?” Steve asked.

But none of the five men answered, instead breaking into a run and headed straight for them.

Natasha ducked, swinging her legs out tripping one man up, before punching another underneath the jaw. A third tugged her hair and she found herself pulled back, only to whirl and knock him in the chin with her elbow, almost choking him.

She reached for her wrists, yanking up the sleeve to reveal a thinner bracelet, equipped with a few of her Widow’s bites. Tony had given it to her that morning, a weapon which had bypassed the sensors to get into the Accords. Twisting her wrist she threw two of them at one of her attackers, electrifying him in the process. He fell and did not rise. Next, she twisted, kicking out with her left foot, connecting the sole with one of her attacker’s head, pushing him away, giving her enough time to get to her feet and fire off another Widow’s bite to hit him.

Now she was down to one or was as Steve barrelled into the man, punching him in the head as he did so. The man collapsed to the ground, boneless and out cold.

Natasha breathed out easily.

“They got away.”

“Don’t worry.” Nat pulled out her phone. “We can track Tony with his implants. He gave me access. I can get his location – ” Her face fell. “Shit.”

Steve frowned. “Not transmitting?” he asked.

Natasha shook her head. “No. They’re offline. We can’t trace him.” Reaching to her earpiece which connected her to FRIDAY, Natasha spoke quietly. “FRIDAY, can you trace the black van that just left?”

It was a few moments before she got a response. “No. The van entered a tunnel not far from here. It hasn’t left.”

Natasha cursed under her breath. “They swapped vehicles out of sight of any cameras. We can’t trace him.”

“And they have Bucky too,” said Steve.

“I know.” Natasha turned back to the building behind them as emergency vehicles pulled up.
“Steve, we have to come at this from a different angle. Maybe we can still track Tony before Ross fulfills his plan?”

“Are we still assuming its Ross?”

Natasha’s eyes zeroed in on a man stumbling from the building as the emergency services barrelled past. “Him. I saw him with Tony just before the flash went off. I turned away just as he got shot. I didn’t see it, but are you sure he was shot?”

“Positive.”

Natasha winced. She hoped there hadn’t been any casualties. “Then let us get ourselves a man to interrogate.”

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The darkness started to recede and dull pain in his shoulder began to throb as consciousness slowly started to bring him out of the slumber he was in.

Tony shifted uncomfortably, his eyes opening slowly. His shoulder burned. His vision focused. He was flat out on the floor of a large van, arms unbound and ankles free. That was a big mistake. Moving his head he saw his captor.

The Winter Soldier stood on guard, holding a gun pointed right at Tony.

“I don’t suppose I can offer you freedom in return for letting me go?” asked Tony.

The Soldier did not reply.

Agony burst through his shoulder and he gingerly felt behind his back, feeling for the entry wound. It had been patched up. He’d been out longer than he thought. He got to his feet, the gun following his every movement.

“I guess you have orders to wound not kill?” Tony tried again. He could hear the sound of an engine. The van he was in was taking him somewhere.

Still no response.

He still had his watch. But he was injured.

He knew he’d lose.

It was worth a shot.

He tapped the front of his watch, pulling on the gauntlet before the Soldier could react, twisting his palm and firing at the Winter Soldier. The Soldier moved, twisted and lashed out, aiming for Tony’s head with the butt of his gun.

Tony ducked, thrusting out his arm with the gauntlet, firing off a shot but the Soldier had been ready for the attack. He was already leaping to the side, using the sides of the van to catapult himself off of it, leaping towards Tony, who tried to shift his aim only for the Soldier to tackle him before he had a chance to retaliate.

Tony fell back, his head and shoulder banging against the floor. Fiery pain erupted and he yelled out.
The Winter Soldier was on him in an instant, straddling his chest and one hand curled around
Tony’s throat, tightening his grasp as he restricted airflow.

Choking, Tony brought up his Gauntlet-covered hand and tried to fire again yet the Soldier noticed
and slammed his foot onto the arm, trapping Tony’s arm against the floor.

His other arm was still free. A single punch to the Winter Soldier’s jaw did nothing.

The grip on his throat tightened.

Blackness was starting to fall around the sides of his vision.

“Don’t!” Tony choked out, now abandoning all attempts to fight.

But the Winter Soldier had his orders.

Being choked into unconsciousness wasn’t a pleasant experience. Desperate to get air into his
lungs, despite the pain in his shoulder and his throbbing head, Tony forced his hands onto the wrist
of the Winter Soldier, trying to pry the cold fingers away from his throat. Slowly but surely he
could feel the fingers slipping from his throat. Determination spread through him. He could do
this!

The Winter Soldier’s eyes widened only briefly before he raised his metal arm above his head,
forming it into a fist.

Eyes widening, Tony tried to move but couldn’t as the Winter Soldier brought his fist down hard
on Tony’s cheek, cutting his lip and bruising his cheek.

Dazed, Tony’s attempts to stop being strangled loosened and the fingers only tightened around his
throat again. “No…”

He tried again, rather feebly, but it was enough to anger the Winter Soldier further who curled his
metal hand into a wrist again and punched Tony not once but twice in the side of the head.

The first hit was enough to make him lose consciousness for a few seconds, the second punch
made him fall into blackness, his whole body going limp as he lost sight of everything.

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“William Ginter Riva.” Natasha, arms crossed over her chest, observed the man in front of him.
“Former engineer at *Stark Industries*, fired by Obadiah Stane just a few hours prior to his death,
and now a criminal in the eyes of the law. Tell us what you know and maybe the law will go easy
on you.”

The man did not reply, just stared stonily ahead.

“Who hired you?” Natasha tried again, her eyes sharp as she observed the man in the police
interrogation room.

Still, there was no response.

“You’re only making things worse for yourself by not answering. I saw you by Stark before the
smoke bomb went off. You’re not going to get out of this.”

“I was merely asked to keep Stark distracted. I did not know what was going to happen,” the man
admitted.
“I find that hard to believe. Most of the people involved in this attack are former disgruntled Stark Industries employees who have been fired for various reasons. Obadiah Stane fired you, not Tony Stark, yet you seem to dislike him. Why?”

“Because of who he is, because of what he can do even with limited materials. I was unable to replicate the Arc Reactor. Stark is at fault for simply being better than me. I was fired from a job I loved because I could not complete the work assignment Stane had given me. I was one of the top scientists. Once Stane was gone I appealed to return, to have my position reinstated. Stark refused.”

“But that isn’t Tony’s fault you got fired. But you were complicit in aiding Stane and it is understandable he wouldn’t want to rehire someone who was helping him. Didn’t you find it odd when he tasked you with replicating the Arc Reactor technology?” Natasha asked, trying to sense how this man could hold a vendetta against Tony.

William sighed. “It doesn’t matter. Stark’s own actions caused me to lose my job. There are many of his ex-employees who hold grudges against him. This was our chance to make him suffer for once.”

Natasha chose to ignore his words. He’d be questioned further. “Tell me who hired you.”

“I don’t know. I was contacted anonymously to distract him at the Accords signing. I didn’t know what was going to happen. The other people involved in this? I don’t know them.”

“They’re all ex-Stark Industries employees. That is the connection. Fine, if you don’t know who is behind this, then do you know where Tony is?”

“No. As I said, I knew what I had to know.”

Natasha sighed. This wasn’t getting her anywhere. “Fine. You’ll be held here until charges are filed against you. I’m not the first person who will be interrogating you today.” Natasha rose from her chair and walked out, leaning against the wall. They’d lost Tony and had no way to track him.

They had to find him.

And fast.

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When the blackness receded Tony found himself in a cold and small room, lying on the floor with his shoulder on fire. It hurt like hell. His wrists were bound behind him.

“Ah, it is good to see you are finally awake, Stark.”

The man’s voice didn’t surprise Tony.

“Get him up. I want him facing me.”

A cold metal hand grabbed him by his hair and hoisted him up into a kneeling position. The movement jarred his shoulder and he hissed in pain. He focused his gaze on the man in front of him, clearly showing his contempt and his defiance in the face of what could possibly be his death, unless he found a way to escape.

“Thaddeus Ross,” stated Tony.

“Stark. You’ve ruined me.”
“Shouldn’t have given me a reason to ruin you,” retorted Tony, defiant.

“You could have been an asset to me if only you hadn’t gone behind my back with the Accords.”

Tony snarled. “They deserved to know. You lost your power because you refused to comply with the rules yourself. If you do not follow the rules, how do you expect others to do so in your name?”

It was a valid point.

Ross stalked forward, a gun glinting in the dim light of the room they were in.

“You’ve ruined everything for me, Stark. People have tried to silence you before. Unlike them, I will not fail.”

The Winter Soldier tipped Tony’s head back, holding him securely in place.

“They’ll come for me.”

“No, they won’t.” Ross reached into his pocket and pulled out several bullets, inserting them into the gun. “They have no idea where you are. You’re dead, Stark.”

He raised the gun at Tony and fired.

To be continued...
Many thanks to JediPanda22 for another illustration of this story with one of the cliff-hanger to this chapter! Please check out their other artwork on Instagram at JediPanda22.

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

If anyone has seen Spider-Man: Far From Home, you will recognise William Ginter Riva as the man helping Quentin Beck and he doesn't like Tony very much because he couldn't succeed at making the Arc Reactor smaller in Iron Man. I think it was a stroke of genius to bring him back and I figured it would probably be around now Quentin Beck would be getting fired from Stark Industries and forming his little 'I hate Tony Stark' group. It made sense for me for the group to potentially already be operating so they've been used in this fic though Beck himself isn't a part of it.

Ross has nothing left to lose and wants to kill Tony. He knows he has committed treason by lying to the President and is aware he will spend the rest of his days in prison.
The next chapter may be posted on Saturday as Sunday we have a big family lunch so I may post a day early... If not it will be late on Sunday.

Until next time,
the-writer1988
Chapter Ten: The Connection

Chapter Summary

Natasha, Rhodey and Steve rush to save Tony.

Chapter Notes

My apologies for not updating yesterday. We had a big family event going on and it was just impossible to update yesterday. But it is here now! I hope it is worth waiting the extra day for!

Just a warning for this chapter: Ross may have gone slightly insane... But he has lost everything.

CHAPTER TEN

The Connection

Wednesday 22nd June 2016

The bullet tore into his thigh, tearing through ligaments and muscles and striking the bone, burying deep into his leg.

Tony screamed, trying to jerk away but the steel grip of the Winter Soldier on his hair prevented him from twisting away. Breathing heavily, he forced himself to look up at Ross. "You missed."

"I shot you where I wanted to, Stark." Ross walked slowly towards him until the butt of the gun was pressing against Tony’s head. "Blowing your brains out will be the last thing I do." He shifted his aim and fired again, only this time into Tony's already injured shoulder.

"Your downfall… is… your… own…” Tony panted, trying to ignore the pain shooting through his whole body. Fresh blood leaked from the two wounds in his leg and his shoulder. "You know… before… you kill me… How did you manage it?"

Ross scrutinised him. "To get you? You have many enemies, Stark, some just waiting for a chance to be given a shot at you. You've been under my surveillance for a long time. After you unleashed Ultron, I visited you at your new Compound, remember?"

Tony froze. He remembered. For him, it was such a long time ago but for Ross, it was only a year ago. "The world was already turning against the Avengers. Surveillance was needed. The people you hired to build the new Compound were also under our pay salary with strict instructions to lay the groundwork for undetectable surveillance to be built into it. Only certain areas are covered. Your office for one. Just a tiny camera, small enough to be undetectable, always recording every moment of the day. Your little hidden draw was not so hidden to me. I saw you install it. I know
how it works. I know it needs finger-print recognition. Easy to add another finger-print to a system once you have a way in, isn’t it? William is quite skilled with computers.”

Tony gritted his teeth. Ross had always been one step ahead of them. “Espionage, that’s how you did it. You always had a backdoor.” If the cameras had been installed before Tony had added FRIDAY, no wonder she wouldn’t have detected the other system. It was a basic system, a small camera that probably had no links to the mainframe.

“Naturally. It was easy for William to hack into your secure files and find everything we needed to know. Once you have a backdoor, it can be used as many times as we liked.”

“And coffee? You drugged us…”

Ross laughed. “Very easy. One of the domestics was on my payroll as well as yours. She refilled the sugar pot the night before with a sleeping agent. The coffee would have been too predictable. And I know you have plenty of sugar in your coffee, Stark. You never suspected a thing.”

Tony glared at his captor. “And who came into my office to steal the Red Book?”

“The domestic did. Once you were out she went in, took what she needed, and left but made sure to leave a mess behind. Make it look authentic at least. She is now far away from here. I paid her quite handsomely to carry this off. She is now far away from here. I paid her quite handsomely to carry this off. No one will be able to identify her. You’ll be dead and this information will not make its way back to anyone. We won’t be leaving this room alive, Stark.”

So he’d been right to predict Ross’s plan. Tony smirked. “So you’ll frame an innocent man for your crimes?”

Ross laughed. “Barnes is hardly innocent. He’s killed many people in his time. We will be his last victims. I kill you, he kills me and then he has orders to wait until we are found and then he will be charged with our murder. His numerous crimes will be leaked and his fate will be sealed.”

The Winter Soldier did not move from behind Tony. He was fully aware of what his orders were and could not countermand them himself. He was in Ross’s complete control, holding Tony steady.

“I have four bullets left, Stark. Where shall I shoot you next?”

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Natasha leaned back in the chair frustrated by the lack of progress. Her left shoulder burned with pain and her thigh was throbbing. She didn’t know why. She assumed she’d overstretched herself fighting but it didn’t make sense.

She was trawling through security footage of the tunnel where they knew vehicles had been swopped. It was tiresome work. Tracking every single vehicle and finding where it went to see if it would lead to any clues as to which one now held Tony. Or where it had taken him. They’d already sent Rhodey to investigate for any secret pathways from the tunnel. He’d found nothing.

“Ouch!” A burning pain shot up her wrist and she rubbed it. It hurt like hell. Where was this pain coming from? It felt like the burn from gunshot wounds…

Natasha paused.

Tony had been shot in the shoulder and she had an ache exactly where he’d been injured…
What if he is getting shot in different places? Somehow I’m feeling it…

She closed her eyes and tried to calm her racing heart. Focusing her mind upon the area of her wrist, which still burned, Natasha sought her way through the pain and she found herself looking out of Tony’s eyes. In front of him was Ross, holding a gun at him. She couldn’t hear what was being said but she knew he was in trouble and he’d been shot multiple times, judging by the burning pain she could feel through his whole body. He remained defiant. Not scared, determined to meet his fate with dignity if he was to die here today.

Tony? She tried, hoping he might answer her.

He didn’t.

Ross aimed the gun, swerving it around in the air, talking to Tony as he undoubtedly tried to decide where he was going to wound Tony next. Clearly there was only one way this would end: Tony would be shot dead.

Natasha pulled herself away, trying to bring herself back to her body. It felt like she had seen into Tony’s soul. Her very body tingled as if they were now linked. She knew where he was. She could feel him, not far from where she was. His soul was burning in her brain, leading her to him.

Even when she opened her eyes she still felt the tug of his soul on hers. The burning of his soul urged her forward in her steps.

“Steve…” she said, reaching where Steve was going through his own data from the tunnel. “I know where Tony is.”

“You do? Where is he?”

“Not far from here. He’s been taken to a hotel near the airport. In the basement.” She could feel him close to the airport. It was only a twenty-minute drive… twenty minutes Tony did not have.

“Did you track one of the vehicles there?” asked Steve.

She nodded. She couldn’t tell him she seemed to have a connection to Tony which told her where he was. She’d only just learned of it. She didn’t understand it. She wondered if Tony had noticed her presence. “Ross was smart. He was always going to be close by. They’ve gone in the complete opposite direction to which they originally went. They thought they could outsmart us. They didn’t. But I don’t think we have long. Rhodey and I will travel ahead. You follow our beacons.”

“Why can’t –” Steve started but Natasha interrupted.

“We do not have time to discuss this, Steve.” She turned and ran out the room, already pulling out the smaller Arc Reactor Tony had given her and attaching it to her chest.

---

Tony panted. His wrist hurt. Ross had ordered the Winter Soldier to release one of his arms and hold it up for Ross to shoot. The bullet had torn through his wrist but was lodged halfway through. Blood was leaking down his wrist. Tony was sure the bullet had nicked a major artery yet it seemed to be stemming the blood flow.

“You know… if you had been receptive to changes in the Accords, this wouldn’t… have… happened,” gasped Tony.
“The Accords were perfect as they were before you meddled with them. We need to control the Avengers. To send you where you are needed to be only and not waste time dealing with terrorists like Brock Rumlow.”

Tony winced. “You do realise nothing bad happened in Lagos, right? There were no reported injuries, no deaths… We even notified the government to ensure we had permission to act, and the relevant authorities were involved. We’re supposed to safeguard human life… The Accords work. But you cannot force people to go somewhere where they shouldn’t be. Nor is it legal for us to be detained without trial. All those -”

“Shut up!” Ross walked forward and pressed the gun to Tony’s head.

“Shoot me, you know you want to.”

Ross snarled. “Not yet.” He walked away. “I’m not done with you.”

“The more you shoot me, the more this looks like you did it.” Tony attempted to shrug but roaring pain ran through his shoulders. “Sending me that note was not a smart move. I knew you’d try something.”

“And yet you still made yourself vulnerable,” smirked Ross, his eyes glinting.

“Everyone is going to know you killed me. Not the Winter Soldier. Even if he shoots you dead, you’ll still be vilified as a villain in the public’s eyes,” snarled Tony. “It doesn’t matter if I played right into your trap. I know help is coming.”

“You’re a fool.” Ross waved the gun around in the air.

Tony smirked. “I wouldn’t underestimate Natasha Romanoff.” Because he could feel her in his head, probing around could almost feel they were joined together in soul. He didn’t know how she was doing it but she was there, with him.

Tony?

Her voice reverberated inside his head.

He didn’t answer. Couldn’t allow himself to be distracted.

“Three bullets to go. The last one is going in your head, Stark.” He walked forward. “I’d quite like to shoot you in the heart but doing so would be a waste… You’d be dead before I can blow your brains out.” He pressed forward until the butt of the gun was pressed against Tony’s stomach.

“Will I shoot you in the head from the top or up through the chin? But first…”

Tony flinched, jerked as the bullet went into his stomach.

“Let him go,” Ross ordered.

The Winter Soldier released Tony and he fell, slumping to the floor, gasping in pain.

“If I know my anatomy correctly that bullet should have gone into your stomach. Your stomach acid will leak and you’ll suffer serious internal damage. Before it can kill you…”

“You’ll shoot me in the head… I know!” He almost wanted this to be over. Intense pain was ripping through his entire body. He couldn’t even lift himself up from the floor. His blood covered the floor. He couldn’t even feel the hand Ross had shot.
“One more place to shoot before your brains… Where shall it go, Stark? Maybe I’ll let you choose?”

Tony scoffed. “Yeah, right, as if I’m going to give you ideas…” he wheezed.

“Soldier, turn him onto his front.”

Grabbed by the Winter Soldier, Tony was forced onto his front, head pressed down onto the floor.

“Remove his shirt.”

Sticky with blood soaking through it from the stomach wound, the Winter Soldier cut the clothes off, leaving Tony on the floor shivering from the cold room and the lack of blood running through his body. His heart was beating faster than it should as it tried to compensate for the loss of blood.

Ross knelt down beside Tony’s body, running the butt of the gun down his spine before moving the gun to the level where the kidneys were usually found.

“You don’t need two kidney’s –”

And that was when the door flew open.

Because of the nature of the attack, the remaining Accords committee had already sanctioned a rescue mission, meaning Rhodey and Natasha didn’t need to seek permission to rescue Tony. She knew they were running out of time. Thankfully the two Iron Man suits quickly made it to the hotel where Natasha could feel Tony.

“We haven’t got time to waste, Rhodey,” breathed Natasha, one hand over her abdomen, feeling pain running through her body. Ignoring the check-in clerk at the hotel counter, they pushed past and into the corridor. She could feel Tony beneath them.

Finding a lift they took it down to the bottommost level – the service level, located beneath the ground floor of the hotel and where guests never go.

“He’s close…” Natasha still had her suit on, as did Rhodey. Smaller and lithe, she was able to run down the corridor before stopping at a metal door labelled ‘No Entry’. She pointed at it. “Blow this door in. He’s in there.” She could sense his pain through there.

Rhodey urged her to step back, raised his arm and fired a repulsor shot right at the door, blowing it open on its hinges.

Stepping through the smoke, Natasha and Rhodey walked into the room. The Winter Soldier came at them. Natasha ducked underneath his attack leaving Rhodey in his War Machine armour to tackle the threat he posed. Her main concern was Tony.

She collided with a body, heard a gun-shot and a cry of pain before she was twisting her legs around the body and pulled them down with her. The smoke was beginning to dissipate, clearing her vision and she saw Ross on the floor, glaring at her before he scrambled towards the gun he had dropped in her attack of him. Launching herself forward she reached out, aiming a punch at his head and punched him hard in the side of his head.

Ross went down like a light, her gauntlet hand leaving blood-red marks on the side of his head. She picked up the gun and saw Tony lying on the floor, his body covered in blood.
“Tony!”

Running forward and then kneeling beside him, she carefully turned him over. The last bullet had hit his right elbow. Looking down she saw the trail of blood in his left wrist. It was a mess. He was unconscious but breathing.

“Stay with me, Stark. I cannot do this without you.” Gently laying him on the floor, she moved across to Ross, flipped him over and pulled out a set of handcuffs from her utility belt, chaining both his wrists and ankles together. Then she took a risk to look outside the room, in the corridor where Rhodey had the Winter Soldier pinned against the wall. He didn’t need her help. Turning back, kneeling down beside Tony’s body, she retraced her suit and pulled out a medical kit and started to wrap the various wounds that littered Tony’s body.

He needed treatment and fast.

“What the hell did Ross do to him?” Rhodey stepped into the room.

“Shot him a few times,” answered Nat, placing a bandage on Tony’s wrist and circling around it to stop the blood from continually leaking. “There is one in his stomach. We need to get him to a hospital.” She hesitated then, glancing up at Rhodey. “Is Bucky Barnes okay?”

“He is. I managed to knock him out quite quickly. He found it difficult to get through my armour. Yours he might be able to sustain damage to.” Rhodey moved forward, his bulky suit having trouble fitting through the door. “I’ll take Tony. I’ll be careful with him. Nearest hospital?”

Natasha nodded. They had no other choice. They were in Vienna. Away from the Avengers facility and they couldn’t afford to waste in getting Tony treatment. “Call in Helen Cho. As soon as Tony is stabilised we’ll get him back to the Avenger’s facility but for now we need to trust in the local doctors to help him before we lose him.”

Finishing bandaging the various wounds, Natasha stepped away as Rhodey knelt down, slid his arms underneath his friend’s and body and hefted him into the arms.

“Go.” Natasha urged. “I’ll deal with Ross.”

“Authorities are already on their way,” added Rhodey as he turned and walked away.

“I’ll follow when I can.” As much as Natasha wanted to stay with Tony, she had to ensure Ross was captured and tried for his crimes. Bucky could now be reunited with Steve and begin treatment for his own personality differences.

Apart from the little hiccup with Tony’s injuries, everything was running smoothly.

- - - - -

By the time she made it to the hospital, Tony was already in surgery.

“Pepper is on her way over,” explained Rhodey.

“Naturally. Did they say anything about the prognosis?”

“They did a CT. Multiple bullet wounds: two in the right shoulder, one through the back and one in the front, his thigh as well as wrist and elbow and his stomach. They’re operating on him now to remove them. The worst injury is his stomach…”
She could see Rhodey was worried. “He’ll be alright.”

“We cannot say it for certain yet…”

“No, but I believe he will be,” answered Natasha. *We were both sent back for a reason. What was the point of sending Tony back if he dies before Thanos has even arrived?* It didn’t make sense. Rhodey didn’t know the Tony he knew had memories from a life he had already lived.

“He was shot in the stomach, Nat. He’s having major surgery to repair the damage. His wrist… God knows what his wrist will be like when they fix it if they can! He could lose it because of where the bullet has hit.”

_He’ll be fine._

The mysterious voice echoed in her mind. She hadn’t heard it in a while but now it was offering her reassurance.

“Rhodey… trust me. Tony will be fine.”

---

Pepper sat next to Tony’s bed. He was still sleeping off the anaesthetic. He’d come round a few times since returning to his room after his surgery but he hadn’t been truly awake. He’d been unaware of where he was before falling back into the blessed slumber of dreams. His wounds were serious and he’d need a few weeks in hospital before he was given the all-clear to fly home. Tony didn’t know that yet. He wouldn’t be happy when he found out.

Rhodey and Nat were also sat around Tony’s bed.

“What’s going to happen to happen to Ross?” asked Pepper quietly.

“Incarcerated immediately,” stated Natasha. “I made sure he was turned over to the relevant authorities. Once Steve arrived at the location, he swiftly took control of the situation. He’s overseeing Bucky Barnes and what happens to him now. Barnes has been controlled for years. He’s had no say in what he does through no fault of his own… It’s time he was given the chance to live a normal life with help and therapy from people who are in a position to help him. I’m sure Steve will be a huge factor in this.”

“Good. I will be pressing charges against Ross,” confirmed Pepper. Her eyes were hard and she looked determined.

“You and a few other people will be,” noted Rhodey. “He’s the reason why the attack happened. Ross will not be seeing the outside world for years. If he lives that long… He’s looking at decades for this.”

“I’ll make sure he never becomes a threat again.” Pepper’s voice was hard. She was determined and focused on this matter.

Nothing would be able to stand in her way of ensuring Tony’s safety.

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**Friday 24th June 2016**

Consciousness slowly returned to him. He knew he’d been wavering in and out of it for hours now.
He felt like he’d been run over and his whole body ached with pain.

“Tony? Honey… shh… It’s alright. You’re safe.”

He was groaning. He knew. His eyes slowly opened and his vision focused upon Pepper’s face looking over him. “Hey, Pep.” He smiled lightly. “I… hurt…”

“You’ve had surgery, Tony. Your body is still recovering. You need to rest.”

“I think… I’ve… rested… enough…”

Her hand was running through his hair, soothing him. “They’ve kept you sedated for a bit longer, just to give your body that little bit extra time to heal. They were going to bring you out of the anaesthetic after the surgery but they wanted to keep you under just a little bit longer.”

Tony blinked, still feeling drowsy, turning his head to the other side. The sleepiness was slowly fading leaving him far more aware.

“Hey, Nat,” he whispered.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Could be better…” he sighed, shifting in the bed. “I… wanna… know… one… thing…” He struggled to say the words, exhaustion from talking overwhelming him.

“What?” Natasha leaned forward.

“Why… did… I… feel… you… in… my… head?”

With those last words, Tony’s eyes fell shut.

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Pepper glanced up at Natasha sitting quietly to Tony’s other side. “What did he mean? Feeling you in his head?” Thankfully Rhodey had stepped out to bring them lunch otherwise Tony’s words would have been very awkward to explain, especially since Rhodey had no idea about Tony and Natasha’s true history.

Natasha winced. “I think… Tony and I are connected.”

“Connected?”

“I could feel it each time he was shot,” admitted Nat. “I didn’t know for sure until I arrived there and saw where his injuries were. But we have a link… I tracked him because of it. I somehow… saw through his eyes,” explained Natasha. “I cannot explain it… or why, or how this link now exists. We didn’t have it before we both came back. But something is linking us together.”

“The voice is,” reasoned Pepper. “You said you both hear it… That’s the link. If you can both hear it then you already had this link but if you’ve only been sent back in time why do you have the voice now? Tony said you both woke up here and it was with you. Why has it now suddenly appeared unless…” Pepper stopped and then gasped, realisation dawning over her. “Natasha, did you and Tony die?”

To be continued...
Please let me know what you think!

Well, Pepper figured out Nat and Tony died and were not just sent back during their sleep overnight as they had originally implied to her. I thought this was a good place to stop otherwise this chapter could go on forever...

Tony and Nat's connection will be explained later on in the story but they have a unique link. Can anyone guess as to why they have it?

Ross played a bit of a long game. He already had all the spy cameras set up during construction of the Avengers Facility so was able to spy on the Avengers if he wished to. He didn't always use it.

Tony's draw where he hid the red book was actually quite secure since it had a digital lock on it so it was quite a secure place to hide something if he wanted. Unfortunately, Ross had already pre-empted that and he'd already seen where it was located through his spy-camera. Hopefully, this answers anyone's questions on how Ross knew where the Red Book was and how it was stolen. It was, technically, an inside job.

The next chapter should be posted on time for next Sunday. I have a lot of time this week to write and I am determined to keep my weekly schedule.

Until next time,

the-writer1988
Chapter Eleven: Next Steps

Chapter Summary

Tony recovers and plans ahead with Natasha.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay in updating. I fell sick over holiday and couldn't really write. I'm still ill but recovering. I may not update this weekend but we'll see as I am trying to keep up with regular weekly Sunday postings. But I am behind as I only just finished this chapter today so update this Sunday may not be possible.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Next Steps

Friday 24th June 2016

“Natasha, did you and Tony die?”

Natasha hesitated. “It’s complicated…” she answered. It was the best way to describe their situation.

“How is it complicated? It is a simple question,” responded Pepper. “Did you die?”

Natasha’s shoulders slumped. She couldn’t avoid answering. Pepper had made an educated guess on the little information she had been given. The fact they could now hear a voice and did not really know what the voice was, was a big clue as to how Tony and Nat had truly returned to the past. “We did die.”

“How?”

“We both sacrificed our lives,” she admitted. It was the truth after all. Natasha had willingly jumped to her death giving Clint the opportunity to take the Soul Stone and see his family again and Tony… Tony had wielded the powers of the universe and saved them all, at the cost of his own life. “We had to. We had to make the difficult choice to do so. When I died I remember it going completely black. And then I woke up back here in 2014, just before Hydra was exposed. All I had was a voice in my head telling me what I had to do. I freaked out at first, tried to tell someone but I couldn’t. I was physically stopped from doing so. All I knew was someone would be joining me but I had to wait for their arrival. I was here for two years before Tony arrived. And the only reason I guessed it was him was that he got himself involved in an event he’d not been around for previously. Everything else played out as it was supposed to. I couldn’t change a thing… couldn’t halt Ultron or stop Bruce from disappearing…”
“I’m sorry you’ve had to live through that again…” Pepper looked down at her hands. “How did Tony die?”

“I do not really know… Not for certain anyway. I had already died… I think you need to talk to Tony. Neither of us wanted to tell you that we’d died… We didn’t want to worry you. Tony wanted to protect you from the full truth… Don’t hate him for it… He doesn’t want to lose you.”

“But I lost him…” murmured Pepper quietly. “Where you are from, I lost him.”

“We have a chance to stop it, Pepper,” explained Natasha quietly. “What happened to take our lives can be stopped but we have to work as a team. Tony and I hope we’ve been sent back so after we’ve completed our tasks we can live our lives. The lives we should have kept in the first place. But there is always the possibility we are still meant to die.”

Pepper fell silent, her eyes falling from Natasha’s face. There was conflict in her features.

“Don’t leave him, Pepper. He needs you,” whispered Natasha, aware she shouldn’t be interfering in their relationship. She knew how Tony would feel if Pepper left him.

“I need him too. Tony has been a part of my life for so long…” whispered Pepper, “but the thought of him having died… Was I even there? Was he comforted? I know from where he came from we were married because he knew about my past… Did we have children? Was I left to raise them alone?”

“Pepper…” Natasha reached out and gently took Pepper’s hands in her own. She glanced at Tony in the bed, still out-cold. “Please talk to Tony. He needs you more than you know. I know it may be hard for you to want to stay knowing it was death which brought us back.”

Pepper’s lips twitched. “I don’t think I could walk away from him forever. Going on a break was difficult enough…”

“You took the risk before…” added Natasha. If Pepper walked away from Tony she wasn’t sure what she would do. Tony needed Pepper just as much as she needed him. Their lives were so intertwined that it seemed impossible they could be apart. But could Pepper take the risk knowing Tony had already died?

There was a moan from the bed and both women turned their heads to look at Tony who was gradually waking up again. He was having moments of consciousness before falling back asleep but each period was getting longer and longer.

“Hey, Pep…” His voice was soft as he sought out Pepper.

“Hey…” whispered Pepper, leaning forward and taking his hand. “I’m here. I’m not leaving you.”

The words she chose were curious at best and Natasha wondered if that was a hint to her she had already made up her mind whether to stay with Tony or not.

“Thirsty…” Tony whispered.

Pepper reached out for a glass with a top on and a straw inserted into the top. “Be careful.” She tipped the glass towards Tony’s mouth and he took the straw and sucked, drinking in the cold, soothing water to hydrate his parched throat.

“Thanks…” Tony weakly smiled. It would take a few days for him to recover. He’d lost a lot of blood and his wounds were still healing. His eyes began to close again until he drifted off.
“I’m not going to abandon him…” Pepper continued quietly. “I love him. And I will do everything in my power to make sure he lives. Whatever happened in your future needs to be prevented. I will support him as best as I am able. And I will talk to him.”

Natasha allowed a small smile to cross her face. “Thank you, Pepper.”

The doctors were quite surprised by how quickly Tony’s injuries healed after surgery. He was ready to fly home a few days later though he was under strict instructions to not do any heroics. Tony didn’t mind. He was quite happy to spend a few days with Pepper. What he hadn’t expected was Pepper’s simple question when she laid a bowl of chicken soup in front of him and perched next to him on the sofa.

“You died, didn’t you?”

Tony nearly dropped the spoon. “What? I’m not sure what you mean?”

Pepper dipped her head. “I think you know. I figured it out. You died and you woke up here, didn’t you?”

Tony swallowed. “If I did, does it change things between us?” He watched her, his eyes focusing upon her beautiful face.

“No, Tony, it doesn’t. Dying is a risk I have always taken with you… I know you have to be Iron Man. I’d rather you didn’t but you were sent back for a reason. I hope it is so you can live after your work is done here…” She trailed off.

“But there is still a possibility death is still my fate,” finished Tony. He knew that. “I didn’t want to tell you because of scaring you away. I didn’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t,” said Pepper, leaning in and kissing him on the lips. “I said to you I would help you. I want to help you. I’ve like to have my own suit. I want to fight beside you.” She hesitated then but after a moment she slowly began to talk again. “If you die in battle, I want to be there with you because I think you would want me to be the last thing you saw.”

Tears gathered at the corner of Tony’s eyes. “You were the last thing I saw.” It was difficult to admit but Pepper being there, giving her permission that he could rest easily and not worry about those he loved, had helped in his final moments. He had drifted off thinking of her, seeing her face one last time… And then he’d woken up back in the past. “I don’t want you to have to go through that again. See me die…”

“Tony… My greatest fear is losing you. But I know you wouldn’t be able to rest if there were people out there you could help.”

“Those were your last words to me…” he replied quietly, his eyes moving down to the bowl of chicken soup, which he had now lost the appetite for. “You can rest now’. You gave me peace when I needed it.” The tears trailed down his cheeks. “I left you… I left you to rais-” He stopped midsentence.

“Raise?” Pepper guessed. “We had a child?”

Tony minutely nodded not wanting to verbally confirm. He missed Morgan so much. He wanted to hold her in his arms and never let her go again.
You don’t want to tell me,” reasoned Pepper.

“I worry if I do… they will not ever exist and… god…” Tony trailed off. He didn’t want to endanger Morgan’s existence by telling Pepper about her. The pressure would be on her. He knew the date and time of conception and that was something Tony would never tell Pepper. If the Morgan he knew was to exist he had to keep that specific information away from her, at least until after Morgan was born. That’s if he survived long enough for Morgan to be conceived. There was always a chance she wasn’t supposed to.

“You’ll see them again,” promised Pepper. “I know you will.”

Tony hoped he would. Slowly he picked up the spoon and dipped it into the soup. He attempted to change the subject. “So… a suit? I know the perfect design for you.”

“Do you now?” she teased.

“Of course…” he grinned. “As soon as I’m better I shall get started.”

---

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Steve asked as he approached the room Bucky was being held in. They’d all flown back to the US on the same flight Tony and Pepper had been on. And Bucky had been transferred to a secure facility upstate.

Natasha glanced over her shoulder. “Steve, he’ll be fine. They’re not going to kill him. What he’s done was carried out under duress. This has been proven. But… he does need treatment and a secure hospital away from the public would be the best option for him. At least until we can figure out a way to remove the trigger words from his head.” She wasn’t keen on the idea herself of Bucky being secreted away in a facility however it would be the safest place for him apart from Wakanda, but as of yet, Wakanda wasn’t yet known to be technologically advanced. So they were not an option.

Thankfully Tony had already passed on respective notes and materials to the Accords committee regarding the Winter Soldier and how he had been a prisoner for seventy years, forced to carry out commands at a whim. They had sympathised with Bucky’s plight and had vowed to help him, providing, of course, the Winter Soldier could be brought in safely.

“I worry they’ll use Bucky…”

“The Red Book is safe,” said Natasha.

“Someone still stole it,” pointed out Steve.

“That was a mistake on our part…” admitted Natasha. “Avengers Facility was supposed to be safe.”

“Where is it now?”

Natasha reached into her pocket and pulled out the Red Book. “I have it. On me at all times. I have a meeting with the Accords panel to determine what the best use of it would be.”

“It should be destroyed,” stated Steve. “Incinerated, that way no one else can ever use it against Bucky again.”

“Maybe. But it could have its uses. And what if there are other Winter Soldiers out there?” She
knew there were but had no evidence to back it up. She hoped Bucky would be able to confirm it. “How can we assume Bucky is the only one? Would Hydra really limit their Winter Soldiers to just one person?”

Steve sighed. “You could be right. But that book already fell into the wrong hands once, it can’t happen again.”

Natasha could understand Steve’s fears. “The only option at the moment is keeping this book with us. Avengers Facility has been compromised and Tony hasn’t been in the best shape to investigate yet. Once the security breaches have been fixed, I will not have to carry this book around with me. Bucky will be transferred back to our care once he has made significant progress. He’s going to a good place, Steve. I’ve seen it. You’ve seen it.”

With the help of Pepper and the influence of Stark Industries, arrangements had been made to place Bucky at a secure facility where he would begin treatment for the mental and physical abuse he had suffered within the hands of Hydra. Their primary aim was ensuring he could be reintroduced to society. Once Bucky reached a certain point in his treatment, Tony had informed Natasha he hoped he could continue it at the Avengers Facility.

“Do you trust Tony, Steve?” asked Natasha. “He helped set this up long before Ross became a problem. He’s been putting in place the pieces he needs to help Bucky. Everyone here has gone through a verified check, double and triple checked.”

“I do trust him,” admitted Steve.

Natasha laid a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Then let us go and see your friend.”

---

Bucky’s room was bigger than Steve had expected. It was comfy. He had a television. A double bed. An en-suite bathroom. It looked more like a small flat than a hospital. “You seem surprised…” said Bucky. His metal arm had been removed, something Bucky had consented to. Engineers had been called in to help design a new one, an arm that wouldn’t be considered lethal or could be used against others.

“I thought you’d be in a prison…”

“Tony isn’t like that, Steve,” warned Natasha. “You told me you trusted him.”

“I do.”

“Then you shouldn’t be surprised this isn’t a prison, Steve,” replied Bucky. “It’s nice. People want to talk to me. See how I am, what do I need? They are taking good care of me. I’m quite happy to stay here. I will have meetings with government officials, to discuss with them the crimes I committed under Hydra but everything needs to be assessed and looked at. I can have visitors whenever. There are no set times for you to follow. I’m not being treated like a criminal.”

“You shouldn’t have to be questioned by the government. It isn’t fair on you,” said Steve quietly.

“How do you expect people to learn who were victims of Hydra if Bucky doesn’t help them?” asked Natasha. “The people who lost loved ones to Hydra’s scheming deserve to know the truth. The government will not be pressing charges. Others may but they are likely to be turned down from the court because Bucky had no choice in the missions he was given. He was trained to be a merciless killer with no emotion, no individual thought, just with the mind-set to carry out his tasks and to flee if required. Bucky cannot be convicted of any crime whilst in the state of the Winter
Soldier. If he committed crimes as Bucky, he would be able to be held accountable. We all are.” And that is what Steve didn’t understand before. Bucky had still committed crimes as himself, ones he had to be held accountable for. If Steve had listened to others and considered other options, we wouldn’t have had to become fugitives. I wouldn’t have had to betray Tony. I knew Steve wouldn’t stop. I had to help him.

She did regret helping Steve at the airport but it was the only way to avoid casualties as Steve was determined to do things his way and no one else’s way. Someone could have died.

True Ross had had it out for Bucky but that was only because he had been deemed dangerous. Once it had become clear Steve was fighting to protect Bucky, it had been Tony’s quick thinking and reasoning to convince Ross to bring in the Winter Soldier. If Steve had appealed himself, the chase through the tunnel, resulting in several casualties, could have been avoided entirely.

Steve needed to learn to communicate and trust others to make the right decision. She knew he was finding it hard to work under the Accords and he was trying. She had to give him credit for that.

And I know after trusting SHIELD only to learn they were infiltrated by Hydra that he cannot easily put his faith in governments. That’s why he can only trust himself… Steve had been tarnishing everyone with the same brush even after all of the Hydra agents had been exposed. And she could understand it. But he was trying to adapt.

At least they had a chance now to face each problem as a team. They could all stand together and face Thanos as one unit without splitting apart. They already had an advantage they didn’t have before.

“You’re alright, Buck?” Steve asked. “They’re not forc-”

“No, they’re not.” Bucky interrupted before Steve could finish his sentence. “If it means getting Hydra out of my head I’m happy to receive help.”

“I’ll come by every day,” said Steve.

Bucky shook his head. “No, every other day.”

Steve pursed his lips. “Fine.”

Bucky turned his attention to Natasha. “How’s your friend? Stark?”

“Recovering. He doesn’t blame you.”

“Recovering. He doesn’t blame you.”

“I know… He should do.” Bucky winced. “I was in Romania, just in my apartment, when someone knocked on the door. I’d got to know my neighbours quite well despite my best efforts to keep a low profile… I answered… That man was there. Ross? Is that his name?”

“It is,” stated Steve angrily. “He used you.”

“He had the Red Book and used it on me. I tried to fight it. I tried to stop him. Tried to attack him… But he had soldiers there who stopped me. They came through the door…” he shivered.

“It wasn’t your fault,” said Natasha. “Ross wanted to hurt Tony anyway. If it wasn’t you, it would have been someone else.”

“I just stood there, in that room, whilst your friend was shot repeatedly… I had orders to watch and wait until Stark was dead, and then shoot Ross in the head. Make it look like it was me who did
it… Tell me he is going to prison for what he did?” Bucky asked, leaning forward.

“Oh, he is, for good. There is no way he can walk out of this one. He was already facing the courts for treason. He’s just made it a lot worse for himself.” Natasha couldn’t help but smile vindictively. “Ross has lost for good. And you, Bucky, have a chance to live a normal life.”

A slight smile tugged at Bucky’s lips. “I do not deserve it.”

“You do. Everyone deserves a second chance. I was given one and look how I turned my life around.” Natasha pointed out. Her own past was a good place to start. “I was an assassin, got on SHIELD’s radar in a bad way… Instead of killing me, they gave me a chance. I turned over a new leaf. You can too. This is your chance.”

“I’m grateful.”

Natasha stepped away. “Steve, you alright if I leave? See you back at the compound later?”

“You’re taking the car?” Steve asked.

Natasha shook her head. “No. I have my own suit. I’ll fly back. You can take the car.” She tossed him the keys which he caught.

“I really want to know when you started using your own suit…” said Steve.

Laughing over her shoulder, Natasha waved a hand. “Maybe I’ll tell you later!”

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Monday 4th July 2016

FORMER SECRETARY ROSS CHARGED WITH KIDNAPPING AND ATTEMPTED MURDER

The former Secretary-General, Thaddeus Ross, was today charged with multiple offences, including the kidnap and attempted murder of billionaire entrepreneur and superhero, Tony Stark. A trial date has yet to be set. Ross has been remanded in custody and will have no chance of bail. A spokesperson for Mr. Stark said: “We are pleased to confirm Mr. Stark has made a full recovery and will follow the trial closely in addition to his duties as a member of the Avengers and of the Accords Committee.”.

The Winter Soldier, known as Bucky Barnes, was under the control of the former Secretary-General. His orders were to acquire Tony Stark and bring him to a safe location where Ross was waiting. Ross intended to kill Stark and in turn be murdered by the Winter Soldier, framing both their deaths on the Winter Soldier.

Stark suffered multiple wounds prior to his rescue and extraction by Natasha Romanoff and Colonel James Rhodes. Ross and the Winter Soldier were apprehended at the scene. The Winter Soldier is currently held in a secure environment where he will begin treatment for his seventy years’ worth of brainwashing at the hands of HYDRA in an effort to restore him to full health and reintroduce him into society. In return, it is expected Barnes will co-operate with authorities to determine who he was forced to kill for HYDRA. An inside source has confirmed HYDRA was responsible for the deaths of many high-profile talents.
Tuesday 5th July 2016

Tony tapped his fingers on the table. “So… next steps? The Accords are sorted. Ross is out of the way. The Avengers are still together. Barnes is receiving treatment. Peter has me as a Mentor. I have Pepper back… What’s next?”

Natasha folded her arms across her chest. “We need to prepare for Thanos. But before we move onto the subject, I wanted to ask why you haven’t spoken to me about how I managed to find you when Ross had you? We have a link, Tony…”

“Because it is weird. You saw through my eyes. I knew you were there…”

“But why do we have this link?” pressed Natasha. “Surely this is something worth talking about?”

“I think the reason is obvious,” stated Tony. “I’ve been trying to track you, to connect with you. I can’t. But you can with me. What did it feel like when you reached out to me?”

“Oh…” Natasha breathed. “It felt like I was tracking your soul… Oh!” Realisation struck her. “The Soul Stone. I died because of the Soul Stone. I sacrificed my life for it…”

Tony nodded slowly. “What if you have been imbued with its powers? The ability to reach into other people’s souls and see through their eyes and have the unique ability to track them too?”

Natasha looked down at her hands. “I think it is only you, Tony, I am able to see into. I’ve tried with others… I get vague feelings from them but not deep ones like I received with you. Not enough information.”

“But you still have a connection. Those powers are handy if I ever get in trouble.”

“Which is all the time,” she interjected.

Tony mock glared at her. “Point taken.”

“But if I have these powers… powers I never had before… Shouldn’t you have something too? We both died by way of the Infinity Stones.”

Tony tilted his head. “You never used them. You gave your life so Clint could acquire the Soul Stone. I used all six. It burned me through completely. I was barely alive after using them. I doubt I’ve been imbued with powers of the stones. If I have they haven’t shown themselves to me and the best time would have been when Ross was shooting me.”

“Maybe it wasn’t the right time yet,” she suggested. “And you have healed rather quickly, something the doctors pointed out to you. You were shot multiple times and your recovery was quicker than anticipated.”

Tony frowned. She did have a point. “At this juncture, I’m going to say no. I think if I had powers they would have manifested themselves in some way. I wouldn’t have needed you to come and rescue me.”

Natasha eyed him carefully. “If that is what you feel…”
“Believe me, Nat, if I had powers we’d have known about it by now.” He glanced down at his datapad. “So, next steps. If everything runs to course, we have just less than two years before Thanos arrives here. We can plan a lot in that time. I’m going to focus on Wakanda and Spider-Man. I’ve got a meeting with Wakanda in a few weeks, an invitation from the King. I alluded to him I knew how technologically advanced they were. We’ve got to bring them in, start designing something which protects the whole world which isn’t on the scare of Ultron. There are some things I will not interfere with though. Adrian Toomes, the guy who Peter faced… that needs to happen. It was his learning curve but I’ll keep an eye on the situation. Those are my plans for the future. You?”

Natasha sighed. “We need to bring in Carol Danvers. I’m going to get Fury to get us to call her in.”

“He’ll be hard to convince.”

“I know but I’ve got to try. Once Carol is here, we’ve got to start thinking about retrieving the Stones before Thanos can get a hold of them. The key to winning this is stopping him from assembling them in the first place.”

“And then Thanos will come here for them all. We need to scatter them, Nat, so he never gets his hands on any of them.”

“Or destroy them.”

“Might be difficult.”

“Wanda can do it,” said Nat confidently. “She destroyed Vision.”

“And then Thanos used the time stone to turn back time…” noted Tony. He hadn’t been there for that event but had heard about it. “Which wouldn’t have happened if Strange hadn’t traded it for my life… though now I know why… I had to live.”

“That was unfortunate but we can save Vision. Shuri, T’Challa’s sister, was working on removing the Stone safely from Vision’s head before the army attacked. If we can bring them on-board we could safely remove the Mind Stone without harming Vision. And then Wanda could destroy the stones. If we could get the stones before Thanos we can eliminate their threat entirely. He won’t ever be able to collect them,” continued Natasha. “It’s the only way to win this. Eliminate the stones before they become a problem. And for that we need Danvers, we need the Guardians… We need to start making connections. But, Tony, we have to do this ourselves. We have to be involved at every stage. We were sent back for a reason and I think this is it.”

Tony nodded. “I feel you’re right. How about we set ourselves a timetable? Wakanda needs sorting first. Let’s get Vision’s stone out before we move elsewhere. His life is too important to leave until last.”

“And the Time Stone? Any ideas for it?”

Tony frowned. “Not right now. That’ll come in part two when we’re thinking of the other stones.”

“At least it’s a start,” noted Nat. She rose from her seat. “Ok, you and Wakanda, Danvers and I are the next steps for now.”

To be continued...
Please let me know what you think!

The power Natasha has potentially does come from the Soul Stone so a few of you were right about that. But Tony hasn't shown any sign of powers himself yet unless you count quicker healing. Will he?

Yes, Pepper is going to be Rescue. She'll be working directly alongside Tony and Natasha.

Bucky is receiving proper treatment for his years as a prisoner for Hydra. And he will be getting a normal prosthetic arm at his request as a Winter Soldier arm would remind him too much of his tortured history.

This chapter marks the end of the Civil War storyline. The Accords are sorted, Bucky is getting good treatment, Ross is in prison and the Avengers are still together. Up next will be Wakanda, Spider-Man, Captain Marvel and the Guardians of the Galaxy before the Infinity Stone hunt gets underway.

I hope you all stick with me as we move into the next exciting storyline of 'Old Souls'!

Until next time (which may be this Sunday or the one after),

the-writer1988
Chapter Twelve: Wakanda

Chapter Summary

Tony and Pepper visit Wakanda...

Chapter Notes

Somehow I managed to get this chapter finished on time. I am recovered from my illness now and I am returning to work tomorrow... This chapter deals with Wakanda and Natasha sits in with the agents questioning Bucky on his activities as the Winter Soldier...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER TWELVE

Wakanda

Monday 25th July 2016

“It’s a shame we couldn’t use the Stark Industries jet to come here,” said Pepper, approaching Tony in the cockpit of the QuinJet. “It would feel a lot more diplomatic…”

Tony shrugged. “The world pays more attention to SI jets than they do to Avenger jets. Wakanda has always been secretive. We’ve been invited here by King T’Chaka. At his request, they asked us not to use a commercial plane. I don’t mind. It gives me a chance to pilot for once.” Tony leaned back in the chair, his hands on the controls.

“I just wondered since these jets are quite uncomfortable…”

“They’re not really meant to be used for travelling. Mainly for missions,” admitted Tony. “I haven’t been pushing her as hard as I could because you are on board.”

Pepper placed her arms on Tony’s shoulders. “You know… we could have used our suits…” she whispered into his ear. “But someone hasn’t finished it yet…”

“It will be ready for when it is needed,” replied Tony. “Besides, I’m sure they will appreciate it more if we are in an Avengers Jet. More technologically advanced than this and the tech in here is already ahead of its time.”

Pepper shook her head in wonder. “I can’t believe Wakanda is rich and is hiding advanced technology. From everything you’ve told me about what you know of it… it’s just surprising…”

“You’ll believe it when you see it. The only reason they’ve invited me here is that they suspect I know of their little secret. They’ve remained secluded from the outside world for so long, their suspicions are immediately raised as soon as someone may hint of letting their little secret out,
which I haven’t done, by the way. I just hinted I was aware of something. But we need Wakanda in this fight ahead. Their technology will make a big difference.” Tony sighed. “The problem is, is that the person who did bring Wakanda out into the world in my time isn’t currently King yet…”


“He was King by this point. His father was killed during the signing of the Accords in Vienna… Events were carried out differently this time… mainly because I pissed off Ross enough he went a little crazy,” explained Tony. “T’Chaka is still alive… He may not be so eager to open the borders as his son was. T’Challa never revealed why he chose to bring Wakanda out into the world but I think something must have happened between his father dying and T’Challa taking up the throne. I believe it may be more difficult to open up the borders…” Tony turned his attention back to the viewscreen. “We’re coming up on Wakanda’s borders. You might want to see this.”

Pepper settled into the seat behind Tony’s chair and leaned forward, her eyes scanning the skies as the QuinJet began to descend. “Where about in Africa is Wakanda located?”

“It is a very small area around Lake Turkana. Turkana runs straight through the centre of the country. Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan and Ethiopia all border it. Interestingly, Wakanda has a lot of vegetation for its location. It is a rather green country whereas the countries bordering it are mostly desert and life is harsher. I’m not sure why there is such a difference.”

“But you have a theory?”

Tony grinned. “I do. But I’d like to wait and see if they reveal it to me first before I even tell you my theory.” He pointed the nose down towards the co-ordinates he had been given. “We’re going to be landing just inside the border. They’ll pick us up from there and escort us into their city.”

It was at that moment, as they crossed the border, a voice came over the communications channel, requesting they descend towards a field two miles away, where they would be met by the Prince’s delegation.

“I guess T’Challa will be escorting us in,” noted Tony. A wise move on their part. He’d never visited Wakanda before. He’d had no need to. He had always wanted to visit though and now this was his chance.

“There’s a lot of vegetation,” whispered Pepper. “Unusual for its location…”

“As I said, I have a theory…” smiled Tony. He kept the jet flying low over the grass, slowing the speed until he came to the designated field. Using the controls he hovered the QuinJet in the air, bringing it down onto its landing struts in the centre of the field. There was another jet standing by which looked far more advanced in technology than Tony had ever seen. Having not had the chance to visit Wakanda before, he hadn’t seen their tech up close. Now was his chance to learn something new and add to his knowledge. Unclipping his seat belt, Tony emerged from the pilot’s chair, grabbed his and Pepper’s bag and took her hand.

Together they walked down the ramp and out onto the field, fresh air hitting them in the face, cooling them instantly as they walked across the field towards the waiting Wakanda delegation.

T’Challa stood at the forefront, wearing ceremonial robes, marking his status as the heir to the throne.

“Prince T’Challa,” Tony bowed slightly, aware of the protocol that should be respected. Pepper curtseyed.
“Please…. no bowing, Mr. Stark.” T’Challa walked forward and shook Tony’s and Pepper’s hands. “Welcome to Wakanda. It is wonderful you could visit. We have had… problems the last few weeks which resulted in a delay to your invitation to visit.”

“Oh.” Tony didn’t seem too surprised. “I hope all issues have been resolved now.”

“They have… I’m sure my father will explain more.” T’Challa turned his attention towards Pepper. “Miss Potts, it is good to meet you. I understand if Wakanda chooses to work with Mr. Stark, you will be our point of contact?”

Pepper nodded. “Yes, unless other arrangements can be given. At the moment Tony is busy with the Accords and other duties which means he may be unable to fully work with you on this endeavour he hopes to propose to you and your father and your country.”

“We will see… First, I shall take you on a tour of our lands before we travel to the capital city.” T’Challa indicated the ship behind them. “Please, follow me.”

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Pepper breathed out in wonder at the magnificent views they were taken to, showing the true beauty of Wakanda and the potential it held. She stood beside Tony, holding his hand as they both glanced out towards a giant waterfall that ran through the centre of Wakanda. It was breathtakingly beautiful. “Wow…” She turned to face T’Challa. “There are a lot more secrets to Wakanda than the world knows. I’ve seen enough to know you are a country which is very well off. You do not struggle as your neighbours do. The question I have is how? This technology here is ahead of Tony’s. You could revolutionise the whole world.”

“There are those who would take advantage of our technology, Miss Potts. However Wakanda has had an incident recently in which we are re-evaluating our position in the world,” explained T’Challa smoothly.

“Then let me be the first to offer our aid if you do choose to open the borders,” replied Pepper, smiling warmly. “Stark Industries is one of the most technologically advanced companies in the world. I am sure our company and your own science division could work together to create something truly wonderful which would not just benefit Wakanda but the world in general.”

“It is something we are considering…” motioned T’Challa.

“I think your country could probably benefit from a lot of tourists… if that was an option for your country,” suggested Pepper, “though, with technological advancement, I suspect it isn’t something you would be particularly keen on to do.”

T’Challa shook his head. “Not at the moment. But we do have an interest in investing elsewhere. Isolation has protected us… however, we have much to give the world. Too much at once could stun it. We need to be careful with what we roll out.”

“I agree,” Tony interrupted, squeezing Pepper’s hand tightly. “The world isn’t ready for some of my advancements… What I’ve seen of yours, this airship? It’s too far advanced for the rest of the world. If Wakanda is committed to joining the international community it needs to operate a phase-in programme and then slowly reveal how far it is advanced over a period of several decades until the world is ready to catch up. If Wakanda reveals itself, you will become a target. A big target. I know that the scenario is not what you wish for your people.”

T’Challa sighed. “It is not.”
“I think if we work together we’ll be able to help each other out,” said Tony.

“I look forward to any future collaboration between our two countries, Mr. Stark.”

The Golden City was the capital of Wakanda. As the airship was piloted down towards the vast hanger of the Royal Palace, Tony cast his gaze out into the city. Throughout the tour T’Challa had given them, they’d seen various tribes working across the land of Wakanda, keeping it as fresh as possible and healthy to ensure the growth of crops. But the city was something else entirely.

It was a mixture of Wakanda and current advancements in technology. It was a bustling city with many tall structures and running through the city was a train, looking far advanced from any train Tony had seen before. The houses were quite modest, built strongly and able to withstand any weather.

The palace itself was truly spectacular, high spires into the sky, with wide windows. It looked out upon the city and backed out onto the forest and the plains.

The airship docked on the platform and T’Challa led Tony and Pepper out and into the Citadel itself, taking them through tall, bright corridors towards the throne room.

Sitting in the centre, in the throne itself, King T’Chaka awaited them. The throne room looked out onto the vast city beneath them and it was circular with glass flooring, allowing them to look down at the waiting room beneath. Queen Ramonda sat beside her husband in a green dress; her hands clasped together, her eyes scrutinizing the visitors.

“Father,” T’Challa bowed. “I would like to present Tony Stark and Pepper Potts.”

Tony and Pepper showed proper respect before standing straight and smiled warmly at the King and his wife. T’Challa moved to sit in the empty chair to T’Chaka’s right.

“Welcome to Wakanda, Mr. Stark.”

“Thank you, your majesty. Your country is truly remarkable. More than I expected for a country positioned where it is in Africa. You prosper well. There is no struggle for food or water. People can live a normal life. It is wonderful to see how far you have come,” replied Tony carefully. He knew they were already suspicious of the knowledge he had of their country.

“Yes… Mr. Stark, considering how quiet Wakanda is on the world stage, I’d like to know how you became aware that ‘we prosper well enough on our own?’” queried T’Chaka. “At the Accords signing, you hinted as much. Consequently, I am pleased to see you have made a full recovery from your ordeal.”

“Thank you,” smiled Tony. “I’m glad you both made it safely away.” He shifted on his feet a little bit. “As for knowing more then I should about your country? It was done unintentionally, no harm intended, and I would never sell the secret of your country to anyone, but I make A.I’s, or did, now the Accords have effectively ruled them out. They regularly scan the globe for any anomaly, technology or otherwise.” He was taking a guess here now as he needed to provide an adequate reason for how he knew of their advancement. “Sometimes I deploy drones to gather intelligence. One of them strayed into Wakandan land and caught a brief glance of technology that I had never seen before. I pulled the drone out as soon as I realised where it was.”

“Usually our borders would detect technology crossing it which shouldn’t be there,” intoned T’Chaka.
Tony wanted to curse.

“However, it has been known to happen. You are forgiven, Mr. Stark, and thank you for keeping
our secret. We are grateful for your support in this matter.”

“It won’t happen again,” promised Tony. Though it hadn’t happened at all, T’Chaka didn’t know
that. “I hope we can discuss the business of potentially working together?”

“We can, Mr. Stark. I am interested in bringing Wakanda out into the wider community however I
feel we need to go about this carefully. Our technology is far more advanced than the world has
seen before. What can you do for us?”

Pepper stepped forward. “I think I can answer that question, if I may, King T’Chaka?”

He motioned for her to do so.

“*Stark Industries* is a pioneer of a lot of new technology. The Iron Man armour itself is out of its
time, far ahead of any type of armour currently on offer. Only Tony has the ability to create it,
though I am certain your own technology makes Tony’s efforts look like child’s play. I propose we
work together: the two science divisions to bring new technology forward, slowly showing the
world what Wakanda is capable of.” Pepper swallowed. “We have an excellent reputation and seek
to improve the world for all. I believe our goals can be met if we joined together to create a path to
the future. Is this something you may be interested in?”

T’Chaka exchanged glances with his wife and son. “I believe it could be a potential avenue of
interest for us to explore. I’m sure Mr. Stark would like to explore our scientist division?”

“Only if I am allowed to,” said Tony. “I would rather be invited to visit them than presume I
already have the right to look in.”

“I’m sure Shuri will enjoy showing off, father,” chuckled T’Challa. “How about tomorrow, Mr.
Stark?”

“Perfect.”

“I will think about your proposal, Miss Potts,” continued T’Chaka. “Discuss with my advisors. For
now, I wish for you both to join us for dinner later. My son shall show you to your quarters. You
will be here for five days?”

“We will,” answered Pepper. “If that is acceptable?”

“It is.” T’Chaka smiled. “Please, rest and we’ll catch up later.”

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Their room overlooked the plains. The stars shone out high above them, sparkling in the sky. The
dinner had been a nice cuisine of African dishes, served in three courses with the King and Queen.
They had now returned to their rooms for the night.

Pepper stood on the balcony, wearing her nightdress, peering out into the skies beyond. Her hair
fell past her shoulders, curling slightly at the tips. “This place is wonderful.”

Tony approached her slowly, dressed in a t-shirt and night shorts, holding her by the shoulders and
gently rubbing the exposed skin there. “Hey.” He pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck. “I never
saw Wakanda before but I knew of the technological advancements. I’m glad I had the chance to
see it.”

“Hopefully this isn’t the only time you’ll see it,” replied Pepper, leaning back into Tony’s embrace.

“I know it is nice to be looking out here but… come to bed…” Tony gently kissed up her neck, his lips soft and tender.

Pepper moaned. “Tony…”

“I love you…” His fingers moved down to her waist, his face in her hair.

Pepper turned around in his embrace, placing her hands on his shoulders. “I love you too.” She leaned forward and kissed him tenderly on the lips as he pressed their bodies closer together. Gently she pushed him back until the back of his legs hit the bed and he fell onto it, pulling Pepper with him.

His hands trailed across her cheeks as he looked tenderly at her. Leaning up he caught her in a kiss.

“Love you so much.”

“I know.”

Nestling together, they didn’t sleep until much later.

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Tuesday 26th July 2016

State of New York

“It’ll be alright, Steve.” Natasha patted Steve reassuringly on the arm. “Nothing is going to happen to him.”

Steve didn’t look convinced.

Today was Bucky’s first meeting with government officials regarding his actions as the Winter Soldier, meetings Bucky had agreed to. Natasha was to sit in on the meetings. It should have been Tony but he had asked the Accords Committee to consider Natasha for the role instead. After a consultation, Natasha had been selected. Steve had wanted to sit in himself but had been denied due to how close he was to Bucky. He had been allowed to sit and wait outside if he was that concerned.

“Trust me, alright?” urged Natasha. “It’s going to be fine.”

Steve sat down on the bench outside the office they had chosen to hold their meetings in.

Natasha opened the door and walked into the brightly lit room. Bookcases were stacked against the wall, filled with numerous books, the desk had been pushed to the side and three sets of chairs had been set up around a table where glasses of water had been provided. Natasha sat on a stool outside of the circle: her role was to observe and only intervene if it was necessary.

Bucky sat on the sofa, his shoulder slightly tensed as he considered the two government officials in front of him.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Barnes. My name is Simon. I am a CIA agent as is my colleague, Miss Charlotte DuBank. We will be meeting with you every month for the next twelve months to
discuss your history with Hydra and any intelligence you may be able to give us, whether it is relevant now or no longer something we can act on.”

Charlotte leaned forward. “Miss Romanoff will be sitting in on these meetings to ensure you remain comfortable and we are not pushing you past the limits. These meetings can be long, can be short… It all depends on you. We are here to gather intelligence, not to interrogate you or to make you feel uncomfortable.”

Bucky nodded. “I already feel uncomfortable.”

Natasha watched their reaction.

“If you do not wish to proceed today we can always rearrange?” Simon suggested kindly.

Bucky shook his head. “I think I will always feel uncomfortable. No, I cannot avoid this… Let’s start… Even if I give you only one thing, it will be a start.”

Natasha nodded. This would be difficult for Bucky but she admired him for pressing ahead. The two agents were being very kind and helpful. All these meetings were supposed to be on Bucky’s terms and no one else. They were supposed to help him heal and accept what had happened to him had been out of his control, though she suspected Bucky knew that.

“We will start lightly. Please let us know if you wish us to stop,” said Simon. “Charlotte?”

“How much do you remember since you were captured by Hydra?”

Bucky remained silent for a short while. “I remember a lot more than I want to. They used to brainwash me so I would forget but it wasn’t making me forget, they just suppressed the memories. If I look deep enough I can recall certain murders. I don’t want to remember them… to know that these hands were responsible for multiple deaths and I wasn’t in control…”

“It must be terrible living the knowledge,” Simon said carefully.

“I killed people I knew, I worked with… Some even recognised me and I didn’t care. I killed them with my bare hands.” Bucky admitted.

“Are there any you want to talk to us about today?” enquired Charlotte.

Bucky inclined his head. “There is one… Steve told me he already knows… He, I mean Tony…”

Natasha’s eyes widened slightly. She hadn’t expected Bucky to admit to Howard and Maria Stark’s death this soon but it was good he was doing so. She didn’t feel she needed to intervene: this was Bucky’s choice to do so, to correct a misconception in history where it had been revealed to the public Howard had been drunk.

“Hydra wanted the new Super Soldier Serum Howard Stark had created. I was sent to retrieve it and leave no witnesses. I caused the car crash that night… I killed Howard and Maria Stark on Hydra’s orders. Howard recognised me but I paid no notice. I knew him… I had fought beside him with Steve… And I killed him.”

Simon and Charlotte exchanged glances at the reveal of information.

Charlotte clasped her hands together. “I see. Were you aware you were killing them at the time?”

Bucky shook his head. “No. Once the Winter Soldier takes over I’m not in control. I followed
orders. I remember the event after it but do not recall carrying out the orders.”

“The Winter Soldier is a separate personality to you then? One who takes over when the codewords are given?” Simon continued.

Natasha had briefed them on how Bucky had been activated. It was information they had needed to know prior to beginning their sessions.

“Yes. It’s not me. He has never been me. Those words are just a way to control me. Make me do things I would not do. I have no recollection of physically being there but I remember my victims, some more than others. The Starks are some of the more notable victims… I think Hydra wanted me to remember them, know what I did to people I worked with… Remembering some of them was another way for them to control me. I was never in a position to fight back.” Bucky turned his head away. “I wish I could have fought back. I’d have ended it before they could force me to do more.”

It was an admission Natasha had expected. Bucky’s life had been one of pain and horror. Hydra had never given him the freedom, only when they were in control of him and even then it was limited to the missions he was given.

“Would you say, now that you have been freed from Hydra’s control for two years, that you still feel that way?” Charlotte pressed carefully.

Bucky took a while to answer. “No…” he finally said. “Ever since I started to remember, I’ve wanted to try to reclaim who I was. Try to live my life quietly and not be dragged away again. In Romania, I was doing just that… blending in when I could and living day by day… Then Ross came…” He shuddered. “I could have been responsible for all the Stark’s deaths…”

Natasha winced at the revelation. It had nearly been a possibility.

“I remember… Quite a few years ago, back before Stark became a hero… Hydra wanted him. To use him. If he’d been there when I was sent to kill his parents… I wouldn’t have hesitated to bring him in. They never took many actions against Stark… Choosing to wait to see how much of a threat he could become or a potential ally.” Bucky swallowed, his fists clenching. “It wasn’t just Stark, there were others too.”

“How many people were you ordered to kill over the years?” Charlotte bowed her head forward, her eyes focussed upon Bucky.

“Hundreds. Sometimes I was sent out on a monthly basis… others weekly… The number of times I was woken over the years lessened…” admitted Bucky quietly.

“Why was that?” Simon enquired.

Bucky raised his gaze and focused on the two people in front of him. “I’m not the only Winter Soldier.”

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Wakanda

Shuri was simply amazing. Tony had to admit she was every bit as intelligent as T’Challa had said. Pepper was staying within the Citadel with Queen Ramonda and King T’Chaka where they would discuss the further advantages to beginning a partnership with Stark Industries. But Shuri? She put the entire Research and Development department at S.I to shame.
Princess Shuri was the leader of the Wakandan Design Group. The main laboratory was set up within Mount Bashenga and directly above the Great Mound. Within the mound was the world’s only source of Vibranium: the material which helped Wakanda advance beyond its years.

She showed him many different designs she had going, advanced communication devices, sound-absorbent boots, gauntlets, and spears. She was very energetic and quite pleased to be showing someone around with intellect which equalled hers.

“So… how long have you been part of the Design Group, Shuri?” Tony asked as he examined one of the Vibranium gauntlets.

“Quite a few years. Father used to bring me down here when I was little. It became known quite well the interest I had in engineering and the designs I created. I was given time here after educational days to study and learn my craft.” She moved to take the Gauntlet from Tony’s hands.

“On and off, I’d say I’ve been here since I was quite young but officially as part of the Design Group? Since I was sixteen. Two years nearly.”


“But you started young too.” She was quite astute but everyone knew who Tony Stark was.

“At least your father appreciates what you do,” replied Tony. Though he’d come to some sort of understanding about his father after his trip to the past, the wounds were still there. “Mine wasn’t that supportive…”

“All families are different. Some try to help you teach your potential, others stymie you, and some try to take what is yours for their own.” Shuri placed the gauntlets back in their respective places.

Over dinner the previous night, King T’Chaka had revealed they’d had some trouble from an outsider a few weeks ago: a man who went by the name of Erik Killmonger. He had challenged T’Chaka for the throne as he had a legitimate claim to it through his father. T’Challa had fought in his father’s place and had narrowly won. Killmonger, despite conceding defeat, had tried to kill T’Challa forcing the Prince to kill him. Shuri’s comments were in relation to recent events.

“They are…” murmured Tony. “Shuri, I have a prospective project I’d like your assistance on, if you’d be willing to work collaboratively with me?” He was impressed with what he had seen so far and he remembered Rhodey telling him that Shuri had been trying to remove the Mind Stone from Vision before Thanos had arrived. She had nearly succeeded. All she’d need was more time, which Tony could give her.

“It depends on what it is, Mr. Stark if it is worth my time and effort…” she slyly said.

Oh, Tony liked her. She was witty. And she liked challenges.

Tony grinned. “Have you ever heard of the Vision?”

- - - - -

State of New York

The meeting with the agents was soon over. Bucky had agreed to provide more information on the other Winter Soldiers providing it would be the end of the session afterward, which the two agents agreed with.

Steve was now with Bucky in his room whilst Natasha spoke to Charlotte and Simon.
“I think we have more than enough information to getting on with for now,” said Charlotte. “The existence of other Winter Soldiers is terrifying. If anyone knows where they are they could be unleashed upon the world.”

Natasha pursed her lips. “They won’t be. We’ll retrieve them before anyone else can use them. He gave us the location. We could have a team assembled in a few hours and bring them all in, help them as you are with Bucky.”

Simon shook his head. “It’s not that simple. We have to report to our superiors first. Then we’ll make a recommendation to bring the Avengers in.”

She didn’t mind the delay. Zemo had already been caught. There wasn’t any danger in the Winter Soldiers being released and Tony had prepared for everything. He’d already set a watch upon the Siberia base. They’d know if someone was heading in that direction and they’d be able to intercept them before the Soldiers could be released. Plus they had to check with Siberia if they were happy for the Avengers to work on their soil to retrieve potentially dangerous Super Soldiers.

“Fair point,” she admitted. “Let me know what the decision is. I can call Tony back from Wakanda if need be.”

“I think any action will not be taken for a few days,” explained Charlotte. “But we will be in touch.” She held out her hand for Natasha to shake. “Thank you for sitting in today. We look forward to seeing you next time.”

“My pleasure.”

“I have heard of the Vision. An android of sorts?” Shuri enquired.

“He’s an android,” clarified Tony, “who has a synthetic body made of Vibranium. He has an object in his forehead which is an off-world artefact. It is a potentially dangerous artefact which could have terrible repercussions if used by the wrong person. Thor deemed it safe with Vision but I’d rather not take the risk.”

“And you’d like me to try to extract it without harming Vision?” Shuri guessed.

Tony nodded. “It could be tricky, a challenge even. Will you help?” He needed her on his side. She was the only one capable of extracting the stone safely and keeping Vision as he essentially was.

A bright smile crossed the young Princess’s face. “Of course. It would be a pleasure to work with you on this, Mr. Stark.”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

I wanted Tony and Pepper to have time together and I think taking them both to Wakanda was a sensible move as both have potential business relationships in the offering there.
Regarding Wakanda's location in Africa. I used the MCU wiki to see if there was any information and it suggested it borders Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan and Ethiopia, even though the natural beauty of the country with the vegetation doesn't seem to fit with the other countries surrounding it, but let's just say there are other reasons for Wakanda's natural beauty (I'm thinking of the plant that gives T'Challa his powers is the reason why Wakanda is so lush. The Black Panther has yet to be revealed but Tony does know T'Challa holds that mantle. He has yet to encounter a reason to be deployed as the Black Panther.

The film Black Panther did still happen in this fic, only slightly differently because T'Chaka wasn't killed, so I chose to have it happen offscreen in this fic. It isn't something that should involve Tony and Nat anyway and it makes sense that Killmonger was gearing up to try to take the throne anyway, whoever sat on it. I figured due to T'Chaka's age, T'Challa would be the one who would fight in his place.

So, Killmonger came to challenge T'Chaka, he and T'Challa fought and ultimately, Killmonger's own actions caused T'Challa to kill him. The big difference is T'Challa is still a prince and not yet King.

Shuri and Tony should have met in the MCU. We were robbed of their interaction in the MCU and I had a lot of fun writing the scene between the two of them. You'll see more of the two together as they work on removing the Mind Stone from Vision.

And, yes, Bucky has revealed he isn't the only Winter Soldier. The other Soldiers will be dealt with in the next chapter as the Avengers team up.

Coming next: The Avengers travel to Siberia to encounter the other Winter Soldiers and Natasha takes a detour to Nick Fury to convince him to summon Carol Danvers back to Earth...

To be posted next Sunday...

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Thirteen: Siberia

Chapter Summary

The Avengers seek out the other Winter Soldier in Siberia...

Chapter Notes

First, thank you for the comments so far!

Secondly, this chapter doesn't cover what I had hoped it would. A few things have been pushed back to Chapter 14, 15 and 16. Apologies to everyone who had been anticipating Carol Danvers arrival. That will not be happening until at least Chapter 16 at the earliest.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Siberia

Wakanda Air Space

Friday 29th July 2016

“I’d say this was quite a successful trip,” Pepper leaned back in the passenger seat situated to the side of Tony’s pilot chair in the QuinJet as he lifted them off from Wakanda. Their weeklong trip was over and they both felt satisfied with how it went and what the results were.

Tony leaned back, switching the controls to autopilot. “It was. I think we’ve both achieved our goals in coming here.”

“I wasn’t expecting them to offer a trade deal with Stark Industries though,” mused Pepper. “But I think they are intrigued by combining their technology with yours. It is the most sensible way for them to come out into the world by integrating themselves with us and slowly marketing their products. Our research and development division could learn a lot from them.”

“What better way to step out into the world by partnering with us?” grinned Tony. “No… King T’Chaka has made a wise choice. I could have told him about the threat from up there.” He pointed to the sky, meaning Thanos. “But I felt worrying them now would be folly. We need to build trust before I even tell them anything about what is coming.”

Pepper frowned. “You never told me what is coming. What you fought before… what killed you.”

Tony paused, his shoulders slumping. He’d been afraid of Pepper asking this, of wanting to know more about the threat he and Natasha were seeking to stop. He wrestled with the idea of telling her, of giving her more to worry about, but if Pepper was going to fight beside them, she needed to
know, even if Thanos wasn’t going to appear on their radar for another two years.

“I know you want to protect me, Tony, but I’m here to help. Whatever is coming, I need to know so I can be prepared to face it when it arrives,” reasoned Pepper quietly, mirroring Tony’s own thoughts.

“I know…” murmured Tony. He lifted his chin and looked straight at her. “His name is Thanos. He sent the army to New York… The one I threw a nuke at… In his own eyes, he wants to save the universe… but in doing so, he wants to end half of all life.”

Pepper’s eyes rose, her hair falling about her shoulders.

“He’s a madman. There are these six stones scattered across the universe which he needs to complete his plan. Two of them are on Earth.”

“That’s coincidence…” mentioned Pepper, “for two of the six to be here.”

“I know. The yellow stone in Vision’s head? That is one of them. Thanos killed him to get it. Shuri has agreed to help me with a project to remove it safely so Vision doesn’t have to die. Wanda gained her powers from experiments on the Mind Stone. She has the power to destroy it. The other stone is with a man called Stephen Strange. Gaining access to him will be difficult. Nat and I have decided to focus on the others first. Hopefully, by the time Thanos arrives, we will have obtained most if not all of the stones and destroyed them, thereby preventing Thanos from completing his plan. But therein lays the problem.”

Pepper could guess. “If he finds out the stones have been destroyed he’ll attack Earth in revenge.”

Tony nodded. “He will. Either way, Nat and I will still have to face him.”

Pepper laid a hand gently on Tony’s shoulder. “You won’t be alone. I’ll be there too.”

Tony smiled sadly. He didn’t want Pepper anywhere near Thanos but she’d faced him before and held her own. She could do it again, only this time with a lot more preparation.

“When do you plan to remove the stone from Vision?”

“As soon as possible. I need to talk to Vision and Wanda. They deserve to know and make a choice if they want to do it. Shuri is brilliant but there are always risks to every experiment. The quicker we destroy one of the stones, the happier I’ll feel knowing we are one step closer to stopping him for good.”

“But if you destroy one of them, haven’t you won already?”

“I’d rather not take the risk,” explained Tony quietly. “Those stones are too powerful to be left out in the universe. If they’re gone no one will be able to find them and use them against others again, will they? It’s better to remove the threat then leave a small semblance of it behind.” They had considered destroying just one stone but wasn’t it better to take them all out of the equation completely? “The next few years are going to be tough. We’ve got to find the rest before Thanos realises what we’re doing. We had allies from the stars before. Nat is going to try to bring one of them in soon. She’s very powerful. I think you’ll like her. We’ll need them if we’re going to retrieve the other stones.”

There was one stone Tony was concerned about acquiring. And that was the Tesseract, the one which contained the space stone. It was currently held on Asgard but they had no way of contacting Thor or reaching the place itself. There was a very high chance if Thanos was going to
retrieve at least one stone, it would be that one unless they could do something to gain Thor’s attention.

Currently, he didn’t have any ideas.

For now, the space stone could wait.

Pepper whispered quietly breaking the silence that had fallen between them. “That’s what killed you, wasn’t it? You used the stones, didn’t you?”

Tony swallowed the lump in his throat before he answered. “I did.”

Pepper stood from her chair and walked over to Tony, kneeling down and taking his hands in hers. “Promise me you won’t use them.”

Tony’s lips twitched. He sighed. “I can’t promise that. If it comes to it and there is no other option… I’ll have to, Pep, and I do not want to leave you again but it is a risk we both will have to take. I’m sorry I can’t promise you this… I didn’t intend to do it last time. It was either do something incredibly stupid and heroic and sacrifice myself or let everyone in the entire universe die.”

Pepper squeezed his hands gently. “I shouldn’t have asked. I’m sorry.”

“You do not need to apologise, Pep,” swallowed Tony quietly, his right hand gently stroking her cheek. “I want to promise you I’ll come home, but I can’t. I’m grateful you want to be a part of this, no matter how dangerous it will be.”

Pepper leaned into his warm embrace as she pulled herself up beside him, comforting him. “I know you cannot promise me anything but I know you’ll make it back. I believe you will.”

But Tony couldn’t be so sure himself.

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Monday 1st August 2016

Siberia

It had taken a few days to receive authorisation from the Accords committee and Siberia for the Avengers to act on the information regarding the other Winter Soldiers. The team was assembled, all of them being called in for the assignment, even Clint who had semi-retired from the Avengers so he could spend more time with his family.

Natasha had spoken to the Accords committee about bringing Bucky with them on the mission as he had known the other Winter Soldiers. He had already explained to them that they were not forced into this new life as Bucky had been; rather they had volunteered to subject themselves to it. It was necessary to have Bucky’s expertise on this mission as he was the only one who would be able to accurately advise them on what to do if the other Soldiers were active at the base. He didn’t think they would be, yet it wasn’t a risk they were prepared to take.

Tony had also decided to bring Peter Parker with him. After having an intense discussion with May Parker, she had agreed on Peter accompanying Tony on the mission. It wasn’t supposed to be a dangerous one, more a routine mission that had the benefit of multiple planning, designed to keep everyone safe. Peter needed experience and Tony wanted to give his protégée a chance to
demonstrate what he could do.

They arrived in Siberia in the late hours of the day, landing just outside the HYDRA Siberian Facility.

Bucky went first, followed by Tony in his Iron Man suit and Natasha just behind him with the other Avengers bringing up the rear.

The entrance to the base was hidden behind a rock mound, cleverly hidden from view and not easily noticed.

Pausing at the door, Bucky turned back to the others. “It could be dangerous.”

“I think there is enough of us here,” said Steve quietly. “Do you fear they could be loose? Already out within the base?”

Bucky shook his head. “No. But they were unhinged. They were used sparingly I think. I don’t know if they did use them as I was always kept frozen until I was required. But I was… always their first port of call for most missions but when they really needed to utilise their skills they used them I believe. They were insane… They turned on their handlers and were frozen, to be kept under at all times unless they really needed to be called upon. When HYDRA abandoned the base they left them here, frozen in their cryo chambers. If I didn’t know about them they could be frozen for years, centuries even.”

“That wouldn’t be good,” said Sam.

“We’ve got a strategy,” interjected Tony. “I reckon they’ll still be frozen. If they are, we unfreeze them one at a time and try to talk them down. Perhaps freedom and away from HYDRA will help them?” He glanced to Bucky for confirmation. That was the plan. Try to bring the other soldiers in. If not, they’d either have to kill or keep the others frozen until a decision was made by the Accords Committee. Which was why they would only unfreeze one at a time, in the hope all of them could be talked down.

Bucky frowned. “They were all willing volunteers, from an elite HYDRA death squad. None of them were forced into it like I was. The serum they used from your father was supposed to be used in conjunction with Vita Radiation, the process Steve went under. But they injected them with it. The process and the following days and months of training turned them insane. They may not be reasonable. They turned on HYDRA.”

“Which could be a good thing,” advised Natasha carefully. “HYDRA promised them great things with their abilities they gifted them. And they were betrayed.”

Bucky didn’t look so sure. “It’s possible…”

“Seems like my father didn’t get the serum right after all…” mused Tony.

“I think it would have worked if they’d have access to Vita Radiation. It seemed the process they went through… having it injected intravenously was a mistake… They were awake for the whole procedure. In a lot of pain…” Bucky explained. They all knew this. “But if there is a way to save them…”

“Either way we have to know what they’re capable of,” added Wanda.

Tony nodded. They’d all agreed on trying to bring the soldiers in was the best solution but whether it was possible or not was another matter entirely. “Let’s go in… See where this leads us.”
Natasha eased into the dark corridor following Bucky. She kept her gun ready. She wasn’t wearing the suit Tony had crafted for her, instead choosing to use her usual suit, full of all her gadgets. She didn’t really need his suit since every Avenger was here. She glanced back. Tony was following behind her, his suit on but his helmet had yet to form around his face. It could be there in an instant if he needed it to be. “It’s very eerie… Dark and damp too.” She shivered slightly in the cold.

They proceeded down the corridor mostly in pairs. Tony had Peter walking beside him. Everyone had been introduced to Peter, they knew his identity and had agreed to keep it quiet. If Peter worked well with the team then he would be offered a place when he was older.

Bucky brought them to a large chamber, interspersed with equipment and off to the sides of the room wee cryo tubes, with five people sitting, cryogenically frozen inside.

Nat let out a breath. “At least they’re still asleep.” She’d worried about them changing events that someone may have freed them. Thankfully they were still out of the world.

“Who gets unfrozen first?” asked Sam, his gaze moving around the room, glancing at each Winter Soldier.

Bucky pointed to the closest chamber. “This one. Josef. He’s their leader. Unfreeze him first. He’ll be the most dangerous but if we can convince him to stand down, the others will too.”

“We should get into our positions,” advised Steve. “We all know what to do.”

Each Avenger made their way to different levels of the chamber, sitting atop various pieces of machinery.

Peter was with Sam, located up higher in the ceiling on top of an electronic cupboard linking all the cryo chambers together. Opposite them floated Vision and Wanda crouched on another piece of equipment, her hands poised to use her powers if need be. Clint was further down, with his bow and arrows out.

Stationed on the floor below, remaining in front of the chambers were Nat, Tony, Steve, and Rhodey, with Bucky standing off to the side.

Tony moved across the room to the central control panel, running his eyes over it.

“Tony, you’re right?” asked Natasha.

Tony nodded. “Yeah. It’s just figuring out the right sequence of keys to only bring Josef out. I’d rather not have to deal with all five at once.” He glanced over at Bucky. “I don’t suppose you…?”

Bucky shook his head. “No. I was always on the receiving end of it. If I was awake when the others were I was never shown how to bring them out of cryostasis. I suspect they thought I might rebel if I knew.”

Tony frowned. “Might be tricky then… Give me a few moments and I might have worked out the correct sequence.”

Natasha approached Bucky. “How volatile could this Josef be?” She eyed the man in the cryostasis chamber.

“Quite volatile,” the other admitted quietly. “He was the best after me… I mean, he did overpower
me once in training... He could be better than me. More of a struggle to apprehend."

It wasn’t encouraging. They didn’t need any more trouble. She hoped this would be a simple mission, one that proved the whole team could work well together. They needed to work well together if she and Tony were going to succeed in stopping the inevitable that was to come.

“But if we are able to talk him down...” Bucky implied.

“He’ll be a valuable asset,” finished Steve. He glanced over at Tony by the console. “Any progress?”

Tony grinned. “I think I have the right sequence.” He scratched the back of his head. “The only problem is I will only if I give it a shot and there is a chance I could have miscalculated.”

“I don’t believe that, Stark,” quipped Natasha. She knew Tony well enough he rarely made mistakes in his calculations. “Go for it. We have enough people here to subdue all of them if they all do break free,” She hoped. It wasn’t a given but it was possible.

Tony input the sequence, flipped a few switches and turned two large buttons before stepping back with the others and watched Josef’s pod. Noises erupted from the pod, steam issued, heat passing into the chamber to defrost him. The frost across his skin started to melt and warmth began to show on the skin as the process sped up.

“The door unlocks with a separate command,” explained Bucky.

“You couldn’t have said that before?” asked Tony, raising an eyebrow.

The man in the chair began to stir, his fingers moving slightly and his head twisting from side to side slightly as consciousness began to come back to him. Minutes passed and he opened his eyes, seeing the Avengers in front of him. His hands formed into fists.

Natasha’s stomach dropped.

The man’s eyes found Bucky as he moved into his vision.

“At ease, Josef,” said Bucky quietly. “HYDRA is gone. We’re not here to hurt you.”

“You...” the man said.

“We want to help you,” continued Bucky. “We can free you, help you. You have no need to serve HYDRA again.”

“I can do what I want...” said Josef. And he moved, leaping from his chair to bash his fists against the glass. The glass didn’t crack.

“Hey, there are a lot of us here! If you think you can take us all...” began Tony, but he leaped back slightly as cracks appeared in the glass as Josef punched again.

“Don’t you want to live a normal life?” asked Steve, stepping forward. “Away from HYDRA’s rules?”

Josef laughed. “HYDRA gave me what I wanted! Strength and power to do what I want!” His fist caused more cracks. “I could kill you all easily.”

Natasha swallowed, stepping back a bit towards Tony. “He’s insane... We won’t be able to reason with him.”
“No,” agreed Tony. “I might be able to freeze him again before he gets –”

The glass smashed and Josef leaped out, landing on his feet, his eyes shining and his smile wide in insanity.

“Shit!” Tony’s helmet formed around his face and he raised his arm, ready for a repulsor blast.

Natasha ducked around behind him, tucking her gun back into its holster and removing her batons. If this was going to be a fight, she’d rather be more of an adversary with the batons than with her gun.

Bucky raised his hands, stepping in front of Josef. “Listen! What HYDRA did to you went wrong. We can fix that!”

“I don’t need to be fixed!” roared Josef before he lunged at Bucky, hitting out and attempting to punch his adversary. “I’ve beaten you before and I can beat you again!”

The two struggled, brawling one another as Bucky tried to twist Josef’s arms but he flipped himself over, bringing Bucky with him.

Natasha winced. She edged forward but Tony held her back. “Why?” she demanded.

“He’s interested in Bucky. We can subdue him if we do not interfere,” whispered Tony quietly.

Natasha threw him a surprised look. “How?”

“Wanda.” Tony glanced up at where she was positioned high above him. “You weren’t there… but in the battle where I died… She nearly destroyed Thanos…”

Natasha’s eyes widened. “But she hasn’t used her powers for anything like that before…”

“No,” admitted Tony, “but she’s always been capable of it. Her anger over Vision fuelled it. But if she’s capable of that much power when angry, just think of how much potential she has when she is in full control of her powers.”

Bucky scrambled to his feet, with Josef following, trying to wrench him back down. He’d already signalled to Steve to back down, to not aid him. They had to try it this way first. If Bucky couldn’t take him down then the others would move in.

Natasha patched into her communicator. “Wanda, can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear.”

Glancing up, she saw Wanda looking down at her.

“Tony has an idea. Are you up for it?”

“What’s his idea?” asked Wanda through the earpiece.

Natasha focused upon Bucky’s fight with Josef. “Can you use your powers to hold Josef still, long enough for us to sedate him? It might be the safest way to bring them all in.”

Wanda fell silent. “I don’t think I can…”

She hadn’t discovered her full potential yet. She didn’t believe she was capable.
Tony activated his own ear-piece. “Wanda, I know you can do this. It’s a matter of trying.”

“I’ll try…” she answered.

As Bucky ducked again, trying to avoid Josef’s ruthless attacks, red lines appeared around his attacker, lifting him up in the air, holding him, though he still struggled.

“LET ME GO!”

Bucky moved back, rubbing the blood from his nose.

“Quickly, sedate him!” shouted Steve, even as he moved beneath the Super-Soldier as Wanda kept him lifted high in the air.

“NO! I WILL NOT-“ Josef was struggling in Wanda’s grip, attempting to pull himself free. He wouldn’t be able to but he could struggle. Sedating him would be difficult.

“Stark! Wanda’s looking a little green!” Clint’s voice came over the comm. “I don’t think she’ll be able to hold it!”

Tony shot up towards Wanda’s location, landing precariously next to her. She was straining, her body shaking as she sought to control the power coming from her. Sweat beaded down her forehead, dripping onto her cheeks. Vision was looking concerned for her wellbeing. “Hey, Wanda, concentrate, breathe slowly… Don’t strain yourself.”

Wanda’s shoulders shook. “I… can’t!” Her breathing was becoming quicker, the strain becoming too much for her.

“Someone get him sedated now!” yelled Tony. He held Wanda’s shoulders, trying to keep her calm, attempting to help her maintain control.

“I’ll do it, Mr. Stark!” Peter webbed a bit to the ceiling and then jumped down, landing next to Steve, who passed him the sedation injector. Then he shot another web to the left, circling himself round to the struggling Josef, still in Wanda’s grip.

He had more control now, was able to move his legs and kicked out as Peter approached, narrowly missing him.

Tony winced, wishing it had been someone else to try but this mission was all about determining how useful they could all be to the team, and how they could work together. This was just one small part.

Peter managed to land on the man’s shoulders who immediately tipped his head back in a desperate attempt to dislodge the teenager from his shoulders. But Peter hung on, holding onto the injector.

Steve ran up and jumped, grabbing onto Josef’s kicking legs, managing to get them in an arm lock, stopping his frantic movements.

“Hurry, kid!” shouted Steve.

Peter pressed the injector into the base of the man’s neck, depressed the trigger, watching as the solution flowed into the vein.

The man’s struggles ceased and he fell limp in their grip, the serum affecting him immediately.

The body fell to the floor as Wanda lost her grip and Steve and Peter hit the floor hard as Josef’s
limp body crashed down beside them.

“Are you alright?” Natasha ran up, helping Peter sit up.

“Yeah… Sorry…”

“You did fine,” she smiled. “You got him out. That was the main thing.” She glanced up at Tony. “Is Wanda okay?”


Steve frowned, moving over to Bucky and checking if he was hurt. “You pushed her too hard, Tony.”

“She needs to practice because she has potential that would benefit the Avengers to a large degree, if she knows how to use her powers safely without harming herself,” added Tony. “I’ll get her out of here. Back to the QuinJet.”

“Please do, Tony,” confirmed Natasha. She focused on Steve. They watched as Tony carried Wanda’s unconscious form out of the chamber. “One down, four to go.”

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The other four Winter Soldiers were easier to handle now they had taken Josef out of the equation. In case he woke up they kept him heavily bound to ensure he could be transported easily. The other four soldiers were not as volatile as Josef when they woke from their slumber, however, once they realised they were surrounded they did attempt to fight.

However, with each one the Avengers used different strategies, working together to ensure they achieved their goal. Vision was able to easily overpower one on his own, whilst Clint shot arrows at one of the soldiers, working with Natasha so she could easily inject them on the sly. Sam ran a distraction for Steve taking down a third and Bucky and Rhodey teamed together to sedate the last Soldier.

Once they had caught all of the Soldiers, they transported them back to the QuinJet, ensuring they would still be sedated for the journey back. Due to the amount of Avengers they’d brought on the mission, they’d used three QuinJets, enabling one Jet to be used to transport the prisoners back. Steve had volunteered to pilot that one with Bucky and Sam and Vision assisting him if they caused any trouble.

Tony was sitting with Wanda when Natasha found them in the QuinJet.

“Is she okay?” She glanced at the sleeping form of the young woman.

Tony nodded. “Yeah. She is. Just has a very severe headache.” He fiddled with his fingers. “I feel bad about it. I didn’t believe she would have a reaction like that…”

“I guess if you’ve never really tapped into your full powers before…” Natasha began. “She needs to train more. She struggles to control them.”

“Unchecked they could be dangerous,” noted Tony quietly, checking the IV line he’d inserted into Wanda to keep her hydrated. “Kinda odd how you can control yours easily though.”

Natasha shrugged. “I think there is more to both of us than we know, Tony.”
Tony shook his head, laughing quietly. “I don’t have powers. There is no reason for me to have them. I’m fine with the armour.”

“An armour that couldn’t protect you in the end,” she pointed out.

“Point,” he admitted. He didn’t want powers. He didn’t need them. “I think if I had an ounce of powers they would have surfaced by now. We’ve been in enough dangerous situations to warrant them and only you have shown an affinity for them.”

Natasha sat down next to Tony. “Whatever happens, will happen. We got all the Soldiers. Steve, Bucky, Sam, and Vision are escorting them back. Clint, Rhodey and your kid-” she grinned.

“-is not my kid.” Tony pushed back.

“-are in the other QuinJet. Clint will drop Peter off and go home and Rhodey will bring the Jet back. You okay if I fly us back?”

Tony nodded. “Sure. I think I need to be here when Wanda wakes up. I did, technically, do this to her after all.”

“She’ll be fine, Tony.” Natasha rubbed his shoulders. “We are one step closer now we’ve sorted the other Soldiers out. They’re out of our jurisdiction now. Bit by bit, we’re getting there.”

**To be continued...**

**Chapter End Notes**

Please let me know what you think!

Josef is the name of one of the Winter Soldiers - the others do not have any official names.

Wanda and her powers. Her power-levels throughout the MCU seems to change frequently. The powers she had in Endgame were just, quite insane, compared to how she used her powers in Age of Ultron and Civil War, so I think potentially, during the two years Team Cap were on the run, Wanda was setting out and improving her powers. I thought it might be interesting to explore the possibility of her overstretching herself because she hasn’t unleashed her full potential before. Her holding Josef could potentially tire her out, especially if he continually struggles.

I wanted to show the Avengers working together and get Peter in on the action too. I think this was a good chapter to demonstrate them relying upon and helping one another out. And I hope it worked.


Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Fourteen: A Growing Friendship

Chapter Summary

Tony and Wanda and Nat and Fury....

Chapter Notes

Hello all,

This chapter was quite difficult to write. Struggled with it a bit. The Tony/Pepper scene has been moved to the next chapter as the cliff-hanger sort-of type ending just seemed appropriate.

I have had a few comments suggesting Tony is out-of-character. I can understand that, as he may not be his usual self, he does seem more serious. He's been through a lot and he's trying to stop Thanos before he can snap his fingers again and he is really focused on that mission. I have taken this feedback on board and I hope future chapters will showcase a less serious Tony.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A Growing Friendship

Tuesday 2nd August 2016

New Avengers Facility

Wanda slept, her chest rising up and down in tandem with her breathing. The colour was seeping back into her cheeks. There was an IV line inserted into one of her veins in her hand, keeping her hydrated. She was exhausted. She’d hardly stirred in the flight back to the Compound.

Tony sat at her side, his guilt warring inside him for what he had asked her to do. Even though she had shown extraordinary powers during the Battle of Earth, this younger Wanda wasn’t at the point yet where she could tap into her full potential. She’d learned a lot about them during the two years she had been on the run and her secret liaisons with Vision.

He glanced down at the data-pad in his hand. He couldn’t just sit here and do nothing. He had to be doing something. So he’d decided to start work on designing further improvements to his Iron Man suit. They were coming closer towards the inevitability of facing Thanos and Tony needed to be ready. He didn’t want to be caught short-handed. He’d also work on gear for the rest of the team.

He was so absorbed by his designing that he failed to realise Wanda was slowly waking up and jumped slightly when she spoke quietly.
“Stark?” mumbled Wanda.

Tony peered over his glasses. “Oh, I didn’t see you were awake there.”

“Only a few minutes…” Wanda scrunched her face up in pain. “What… happened?”

Tony leaned forward. “Still got a headache?”

Wanda nodded in reply. “Not as bad as it was…” She trailed off. “Why… are you here?”

Tony swallowed. He knew why she was asking. They rarely spent time together. He’d always tried to avoid her as much as he could. He’d always been afraid she would use her powers on him again, force him to do things he had never wanted to do. They hadn’t talked about how she had blamed him for her parent’s death. He wondered if the Wanda he had known had only tolerated him so she could remain an Avenger? He would never know the answer to that question. The time he had come from was gone. The others hadn’t lived the same experiences he’d had. Only one person could truly relate to him and that was Natasha. He’d be lost without her though he suspected he would have figured everything out on his own anyway.

Wanda’s face grew confused as Tony failed to answer her simple question.

“I’m here because what happened to you was my fault.” It was the simplest answer possible. “I asked too much of you. And you exhausted yourself because of it. And I’m sorry about that.” He needed to apologise to her. There was no way to escape the reality of him not having caused her undue harm.

Gently Wanda eased herself up in the bed, pushing herself up with her hands.

“Are you sure?” Tony asked, aware of how horrible Wanda must still be feeling.

“I’m fine, Stark,” she grated out. “Sleeping more will not do me any good.”

“Do you want some water?” he offered her a cup and she took it, sipping it slowly, her eyes focused on his face.

“There’s something… different about you.” Wanda scrutinized him carefully. “But I cannot put my finger on it.”

“How do you know there is something different about me?” asked Tony quietly, leaning back in his chair.

Wanda cocked her head to the side. “I don’t know. You just… feel… different.”

“Feel different?” He was curious by her choice of words. “Are you reading my mind?”

“No! I would never do that! It’s…” Wanda bit her lower lip. “It’s not just you. I have noticed someone else who is different…”

Shit…

Tony tried not to react but he knew his eyebrows had raised. “I’m not sure what you mean.” He tried to deflect but Wanda could be very perceptive when she wanted to be.

“You quit the Avengers. But now you are back. You just appeared during a planning session for Lagos which you shouldn’t have known about. And then the Accords happened. You helped us understand them, allowed us to make our own decisions. And then there are you and Natasha. You
were never really close and now you spend a lot of time together.” Wanda looked down at her hands. “I don’t think the others have noticed… But there is something else about you that I can sense, about both of you.”

Tony’s mouth had suddenly gone dry. “I’m sure it is nothing,” he deflected.

“I don’t believe I’m wrong,” Wanda leaned forward. “There is something within you both. I can feel it when I get close to you. Natasha has it but it is less pronounced than you. It feels like…” She searched for the correct words. “Untapped potential. I feel my powers resonating with you and Nat and they have never done so before. Not until recently. Something is going on between you two. I can sense it.”

“I’m not sure what to say,” replied Tony. Others were not supposed to find out. But Wanda had received powers from an Infinity Stone… He grimaced. “I was kinda wondering when someone would realise Nat and I have been spending an unusual amount of time together.”

“I’m guessing you cannot tell me why?” enquired Wanda.

Tony shook his head.

“And that I am capable of so much more with my powers?” Wanda raised the question. “I’ve barely begun to use them. And yet you ask me to do something I’ve never really achieved before. Holding that man still for so long strained me, Stark. I was losing control. He was slipping out of my grasp.”

Tony grimaced. He had asked too much of her. She’d lost control before, though he had prevented it from happening now by tagging along on the Lagos mission. Wanda had not had the need to contain a bomb. That had caused her a large amount of strain, enough that she had been unable to fully control the trajectory of the bomb which had caused the deaths of hundreds of people. But she was capable of it, capable of controlling her power and using it in large quantities without tiring herself out. She was just learning to control them now so it was natural for her to exhaust herself.

“How could you know I was capable of something like that?” she asked, keeping her gaze directed at Tony.

He sighed. “Wanda… There are things happening I cannot tell you about. Not yet. I’m trying to keep us together. Something is… coming. I don’t know when but it is on its way. Whatever you sense in me… whatever it is…”

“It’s power,” she repeated. “But it’s trapped inside you… Like… you are unable to access it…”

Tony wanted to leave, to walk out. He didn’t want to believe her, believe he had any ounce of powers but if Wanda could sense them there… He shook his head. Even Natasha was convinced he had something.

“You’re powerful, Stark.”

“Wanda…” he started. He searched for the right words. “I think you’re reading me wrong. I am nothing special at all. I am an arrogant, sarcastic, former playboy, philanthropist, billionaire who only works for himself. Someone like me would never have powers.”

Her face twitched. “You do not work for yourself, Stark.”

Tony folded his arms across his chest. “I used to. All I cared about was myself and doing what I wanted.”
“I once thought that too,” she replied quietly. “I misjudged you. But I wonder who you really are, Stark. Are you still the same person I manipulated into creating something which would seek to destroy you? I forced you to relieve your fears because I wanted to see you self-destruct… But, I think you already have. You’re holding it together by… strands… I can’t explain it. You and Natasha are the same. You’re different from the rest of us. You know more than you should. I just can’t place you.”

Tony sighed. He didn’t know what to do. Wanda clearly knew something was different about them. “I can’t say. If you say I’m powerful, Wanda, so are you. You have powers, working powers, something I do not have. You’ve taught yourself to control them. Your abilities have the potential to be endless!” He stood from his chair, not wanting to stay sitting if this conversation was going to continue.

“But you cannot tell me why!” replied Wanda. “I’m still getting to know what I can do!”

“Look, I pushed you too hard, alright? I shouldn’t have asked too much of you. I’m sorry, I really am, but I don’t know what you mean when you claim I am different!”

Wanda’s lips twitched. “You’re much too focused.”

That caught Tony and he stepped back. “Too focused?”

“On stopping whatever is coming. You and Natasha. Both of you are different. Maybe I’m sensing power in you two because of that…” She shook her head. “No… Whatever it is, it is not because you are too focused.” Wanda sighed. “I should stop pushing you. You’re not going to tell me anything, are you?”

“No. I’m not.”

“I could tell Steve,” she pointed out.

“Is that a threat, Miss Maximoff?” asked Tony. Steve could not know.

“No. I wouldn’t do it. Maybe last year I would have done but not now. I think you’re just as confused as I am about this. I won’t say anything to anyone about how different you two feel to me, or the sparks of power I sense.”

“Why would you protect me when I am trying to keep something from the team? You have no reason to do so. You hate me.”

“Whatever it is, it’s important, otherwise you and Nat wouldn’t be working so closely together.” She flinched at Tony’s words. “I don’t hate you.”

“I killed your parents,” stated Tony. “You blame me for their deaths. And rightly too.”

“I don’t blame you for their deaths anymore,” explained Wanda, shifting her legs over the side of the bed. “Your weapons were dealt under the table. It was those that killed my parents. You didn’t know what was happening.”

“Because I was irresponsible and didn’t care about others,” interjected Tony harshly. Afghanistan had opened his eyes, had shown a harsh reality he had never once considered. “Only about how much money I had and how quickly I could spend it. All I cared about was the next woman.” He didn’t like to dwell on his past. He was different now, a much better person because of it.

“Natasha explained to me how you were not at fault.”
That made Tony pause. “Nat did?”

“A while back. Just after the Lagos mission. She talked to me about it. Told me to investigate further. I did. You were cleared of being complicit in dealing under the table. You generally didn’t know.”

“I should have paid more attention though,” said Tony quietly. He still felt guilty that he had allowed such a misuse of his weapons. He never wanted his products misused again which was why he had stopped all weapons production, stepped away from the trade and moved into areas where he knew people could be protected. The only weapons he built now were ones he intended to use for himself or his teammates. “I should have realised something was up when I was profiting more than I should. I still reaped the benefits of what Stane did.”

“But you became Iron Man and have fought for the people. You still do. I was young and naive. I allowed Hydra to manipulate me, allowed them to experiment on me just so I could destroy you. Pietro and I were the only ones who survived Strucker’s experiments. I think we survived because we were meant to use our powers to help others, not help ourselves. Doing what I did to you, causing you to create Ultron, it opened my eyes. The one good thing to come out of it was Vision. I was wrong but I’m trying to be better. That’s why I want to be an Avenger, so I can show the world what I’m capable of. These powers are just an extension of who I am.” Wanda stood up, stretching her legs and arms, her gaze watching Tony carefully.

Tony moved around the room, not wanting to stay still and continue the awkward conversation but he simply couldn’t walk away. He kept moving equipment around the room, a nervous tick he had developed over the years.

“Tony?”

Surprise flittered through him.

Wanda had never used his first name in any of their interactions before. He couldn’t help twisting his head to look at her. She was standing behind him, arms loosely at her sides in the medical gown she was wearing, her hair trailing down her shoulders. What surprised him most was her right hand held out in front of her, stretching towards him, as if she was expecting a handshake.

Curious he turned fully to face her. “I’m not sure if I shook your hand if it would be a shake or a squeeze,” he commented wryly.

The right side of Wanda’s lips moved upwards in amusement. “Just a handshake.”

“Why?” However, he did reach out and take her hand.

“Because,” she explained, “I want to start over. I want to put our pasts behind us. Move on. Begin a friendship, one that can grow and prosper.” She shook his hand. “If something is coming and I am capable of so much more with my powers? You’ll need me. Better for us to be friends, and learn to work together to face this, right?”

“Sure.” Tony smiled. He hadn’t expected this. It felt like it was the beginning of an unexpected friendship.

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Thursday 4th August 2016

“What brings you to my neck of the woods, Miss Romanoff?”
Nick Fury leaned back in his chair in the secluded cubicle of a diner, with one arm draped across the back of it, a slight grin decorating his features.

Natasha sat opposite him, leaning on the table, hands clasped together. “You have something I need.”

“Very formal to your old boss,” commented Fury.

Natasha shrugged. “I have my reasons. This isn’t a social call. I know you are off the grid and you’ve set this meeting up at my request… Nice deserted diner by the way.” It had always been one of his favourite places to set up secluded meetings within the general vicinity of the public eye. They’d done it with Stark back when he’d been suffering from Palladium poisoning.

“It’s a nice payoff for them. Morning off work.” He sipped from his coffee cup. “Let’s get to the point.”

Natasha had considered different ways to approach Fury on the subject of Carol Danvers. He had kept her secret for years. Her details didn’t even exist inside SHIELD’s database. She was still listed as dead in official records, having been killed in an Air Force mission, which had gone wrong. Natasha knew, from her discussions with Carol over the years after the Decimation, how she had obtained her powers and what had happened to her since her accident. She marvelled at the woman’s dedication to help the universe. But Fury had kept her existence off the records, leaving only him with the opportunity to contact her if he felt she was needed.

“I need to contact someone,” she began, keeping her game face on. “Someone only you have the capacity to do so.”

Fury sat up straighter, his posture moving from relaxed to on guard.

Her words had put him on edge.

“I think you know who I mean. Carol Danvers.” Natasha didn’t flinch when Fury pulled out his gun and pointed it at her. She had expected this.

“No one should know who she is or that she exists. Reveal yourself.” Fury said firmly.

“I’m from the future,” said Natasha quietly. She’d thought about this long and hard. The only way to convince him was to tell him the truth. Surprisingly the inner voice had agreed with her assessment of the limited options she had. They needed Carol Danvers and the only way she could possibly gain Fury’s help was if he was aware of the truth. “I’m still Natasha. But fighting to stop what happened. And we need Carol.”

Fury’s eyes didn’t shake or move from the glare he was giving her. The gun did not waver either, nor did he lower it. “Prove it.”

“I can’t. You weren’t part of the future I came from. You were already gone. We found the communicator device she gave you. You’d already called her. We kept triangulating the signal out into space. She came and she helped us. But the cost was high for me and for Tony. Both of us are fighting to stop what happened. And we need Carol.” She said this sincerely, hoping it might be enough to convince Fury to at least lower the gun.

He did and he slowly sat back down but he remained watchful of her.

She didn’t blame him.
“How can I believe you when you can offer no concrete proof?” Fury pointed out. He still had the gun in hand, resting on the table. He could easily shoot her if he wanted to.

“Would I really be telling you this if I was lying?” she pondered back, wanting him to think about why she could trust him with such sensitive information. “Only one other person knows, aside from Tony, is aware of where we truly come from. Tony could only convince them because he became partial to information later on in his life which he could use to prove he was from the future. Unfortunately, I do not have any such luxury. I am Natasha. I have been a SHIELD agent for years. Barton convinced you to give me a chance. I was once a target, destined to be hunted by your organisation, instead, you offered me a chance to change and I took it. I’ve never looked back since. Never regretted it, always been loyal to you.”

He was still scrutinising her. “If I believe you… what do you need her for?”

“We need to get in contact with a specific group of people. They are space’s equivalent of the Avengers. Sort of.” That was the best way to describe the Guardians of the Galaxy. “We lack the technology and the tech to reach out to them though I’m sure it is not out of Tony’s ability to do so. But we do not have time to wait for him to invent something to reach out to. Carol is our only chance of getting things moving. Something bad is coming: the same person who was behind the attack on New York.”

“Loki?” Fury queried.

Natasha shook her head. “No. It’s worse. His name is Thanos and he wants to destroy half the universe. Where we came from he succeeded. You were one of his victims. We want to stop it from happening. To beat him and revive everyone who lost their lives across the entire universe, both Tony and I died. We both gave our lives and we were sent back here to fix things.”

“You have been working together for a while. I may be out of the field but I am still within the loop. I did find it curious.” He raised the gun again. “But I still require more proof.”

“I can’t give you anything else.” She pressed forward. She had to get through to him. What could she say to convince him?

“You’ve said nothing that could prove to me you are from the future. You could be lying. You could be pretending to be Agent Romanoff, taken her form and her memories. Killing you would revert you to your true form.”

_He thinks you are a Skrull._

The voice was back. She didn’t even know what a Skrull was. She chose to ignore it.

“Killing you would prove you are one.”

Natasha swallowed, her fingers gripping the edge of the table.

_Tell him how he lost his eye._

Of course, why hadn’t she thought of it? Carol had once told her how Fury had really lost his eye. It had been on one of the few visits Carol had made to Earth following the Decimation. They’d been reminiscing over the people they had lost. She’d asked Carol how she and Nick Fury had met. Carol had told her.

“A Flerken scratched your eye. That’s how you really lost it. Not in an epic battle as you have claimed, but to a creature who looks like a cat.” Natasha crossed her arms over her chest and stared
at Fury. “That help at all? Carol told me. And she hasn’t been to Earth since she left.”

Fury lowered the gun again. “You’re making this difficult, Agent Romanoff.”

“Do you believe me?”

“Only one other person on the planet knows the truth and you’ve never had any contact with them,” sighed Fury. “You’re either a Skrull or you really are Natasha Romanoff from the future who has met Carol Danvers.”

“How are you going to prove it is me without shooting me?”

“One simple way.” Fury smirked. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the communicator device that enabled him to call Carol Danvers. “Let’s see what she thinks of you, shall we?”

And he pressed the button.

To be continued....

Many thanks to JediPanda22 for their amazing front cover for this story, depicting Tony and Natasha! Please check out their other work on Instagram!
Please let me know what you think!

Tony and Wanda - definitely a friendship I never considered I would be writing about, but they've had a lot of issues in the MCU and Tony now has a chance to fix them. Wanda, having received her powers from an Infinity Stone, can sense there is a difference to Tony and Nat. Her words to Tony are important, especially when it comes to later developments in the story.

Nat and Fury - this was very difficult to write. They need to get Carol to Earth but their only option is through Fury. But what would make Fury believe Natasha is from the future? Though Carol wasn't there when Goose scratched his eye I think it is safe to say she would have known about how he really lost it. Fury calling Carol Danvers at the end is his way of checking to see if Nat is a Skrull or not.

Next chapter: Carol arrives, Tony and Peter bond, and Tony and Pepper have another moment.

To be posted next Sunday!

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Fifteen: Carol

Chapter Summary

Carol arrives!

Chapter Notes

Finally, we reach Carol arriving in this story! Natasha experiments with her powers and Tony and Peter spend some time together...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Carol

Friday 5th August 2016

Carol Danvers didn’t arrive straight away. It had taken her a few days to reach Earth when the Avengers had found Fury’s communicator calling out to her. They’d kept sending out the signal, wanting to know who Fury had called before he had become a victim of the Snap. Much like this time when Fury called her, she didn’t arrive until a few days later.

Natasha had agreed to remain with Fury until he could be truly certain of her identity and that she wasn’t a Skrull. The fact she had known how he had lost his eye was a big point in her favour however Fury wanted to be sure she wasn’t a Skrull and Carol would be able to be certain. She’d been allowed to inform Tony who hadn’t been happy with leaving her with Fury; however, she had asked him to stay out of this as it meant they would be able to get Carol on their side if they agreed to Fury’s wishes. Suspicious in nature, Fury wanted to be sure before he could fully put his trust in Natasha. She’d been surprised he’d allowed her to contact Tony but it was a welcome one.

Natasha had remained in a small room, quite happy to wait to ally Fury’s fears. He’d find out the truth soon. At least they had given her access to a datapad which suggested Fury believed her but he wanted Danvers to have the final say. She’d have gotten bored rather quickly. Though Fury was technically retired he was still running what remained of SHIELD in the background, away from the public’s eye.

Sitting on her bunk with her legs crossed over, Natasha closed her eyes. Now was a good time as any to practice using her powers.

Show me Tony.

She knew she could sense him, that she could trace him through their connection. She wished she could understand more of it. She saw him in her mind’s eye. He was in his lab at the Avenger’s Facility with Peter Parker. They seemed to be designing something. She was seeing out of Tony’s eyes as she had before when he’d been imprisoned by Ross. This was an ability that could be
useful. It was a shame Tony was unable to reach out for her though he would know she was there as he had recognised her before.

Tony, do you mind? I’m bored sitting in this room waiting for Danvers… Just wanted to explore what I can do…

Still seeing out of Tony’s eyes, she felt him jerk a bit. He hadn’t noticed her there, so absorbed in his work he had been. She watched as he wrote ‘I don’t mind’ on a scrap of paper to his right.

Thank you. She hadn’t wanted to intrude upon his soul without permission. Of course, there would be times when she may need to do so but in this instance she wanted him to have the choice to allow her access to his soul.

She decided to delve deeper into his soul. She could feel him all around her, his emotions, his worry for the future, his intense desire to do things right. Images flickered up in front of her, of his life and she felt mortified she was partial to specific moments of his life. There was no order to them, random snippets jumping out of her.

And then she saw it: Tony engaging Thanos, tugging on the Infinity Gauntlet, desperately trying to wrestle the stones from him. She saw Thanos throw him away, proclaim proudly that he was inevitable only to snap his fingers and nothing was there. She saw his realisation that the stones had been stolen, turned his attention back to Tony who revealed them on his right hand, settling into place on a nano-built Gauntlet, set into his suit. She saw Tony say ‘I am Iron Man’ and snap his fingers before pain wrecked through his entire body and the energies of the Infinity Stones burned his body, destroying cells and causing organ failure.

She felt his body failing as he lay in the dirt…

No!

Natasha pulled back out of the memory, panting heavily, still connected to Tony’s soul. What she had witnessed had not affected him in real life. She’d travelled too deep into his soul. Glancing back at the cascade of memories she noticed a small glow from behind them.

What is that?

Natasha pushed onwards and felt an intense power rush over her as she flowed past the memories, and found herself in a darkened room, faced with a glowing ball of rippling energy which seemed to be set at the very centre of Tony’s soul. Entranced by it, she stepped forward, feeling drawn to it. She could feel her own body responding to it, vibrating to the energies that sat within Tony.

What is this?

It was power.

This was proof Tony had powers.

But what was odd about it was the ball of energy seemed bound, tied together, as if there was an invisible barrier there, preventing the energy from being unleashed.

Spiritually she reached out towards it…

Her fingers brushed against it and static electricity coursed up her arm in a variety of different colours. It was too quick for her to catch all of them but she’d at least recognised red and purple. She almost felt drawn to them. Her curiosity grew.
But why can't he use them? She stared at the ball of energy, marvelling in its beauty.

That was the most baffling part of this discovery. The knowledge he had the capacity for powers the same as her, yet she could use hers with no trouble but Tony… He couldn’t. He refused to believe…

Oh… Is that the reason? Because he refuses to believe he has them?

She phrased the question in her mind, hoping the inner voice would answer but it didn’t, slightly disappointing her. She wanted to push on further, exploring past the ball of energy but as she tried to move around it she struck a hard, invisible barrier.

Ow! Natasha wasn’t one to give up and she pushed herself forward again.

This time the invisible barrier glowed brightly as she tried to push against it.

And then she went flying backward as intense pain spread through her, pushing her further away. Yanked backward by an invisible force, Natasha felt herself being pulled back to the edge of Tony’s soul, being yanked out completely and back into her own body.

Her eyes opened and she was back in the small quarters she had been given. Shaking her head and allowing her red hair to fall down her shoulders, Natasha leaned back against the wall, her mind whirring with the information she had obtained during her search of Tony’s soul.

She had a lot to think about.

A few hours later she was collected from her room by Fury who walked her towards the conference room. When they entered the room, she saw Carol Danvers standing there in ordinary clothes, her blonde hair loose around her shoulders but her eyes were hard and steely as she considered the woman in front of her.

“Hi.” Natasha stood in front of the other, watching as she was assessed by the steely gaze.

“I’ve never seen you before,” Carol stated.

Natasha shrugged. She knew Fury would have filled her in on what she’d said. “I’ve met you.”

“In this future, you come from?”

Natasha nodded. “I did. We were friends. You told me a lot about yourself as you grew to trust me over the years. I think we could do the same.”

Carol frowned. “You know about Fury’s eye. He vowed me to secrecy. And I know my best friend has had no contact with you either.” She strode forward until she was directly in front of Natasha. “So how do you know?”

“As I said,” repeated Natasha, “I got to know you. Fury was lost. You were an ally of ours.”

“It’s hard to tell if you are telling the truth.” Carol mused.

Fury walked around Natasha, hands in his pockets, relaxed. “I want to believe her. She wanted me to summon you. Would you have told her?”

Carol glanced at Fury. “It’s not a question one can answer. She’s a dilemma. I could have become
close to her… especially if we shared experiences with you.”

“‘She’ is right here!” Natasha frowned. “Tony and I have been trying to avoid telling people what happened to us. But we need to get out there.” She pointed upwards. “And Earth doesn’t have the technology to do it yet. Tony could probably create something but…”

“That would be too suspicious,” assumed Carol wisely. “Assuming you really are from the future, how can we know for sure you have Earth’s best interests at heart? How do we know you simply do not want to destroy the Earth?”

“I’m not a villain. I want to save it.” Natasha gritted her teeth. She’d always known convincing Fury would be hard but she hadn’t expected it to be this challenging. It was reassuring that Fury wanted to believe her. “Look, if you’re not going to believe me, just shoot me and get it over with. At least then you’ll be satisfied it really was me.”

“I’d have taken her blood,” noted Fury, “but Skrulls are capable of changing DNA and would be able to mimic the samples.” He stopped and turned to face Natasha. “The problem we have is how to rule out one hundred percent that you are not a Skrull without shooting you dead? I’d rather not kill one of my best agents. I called you in, Danvers, to see if you could help us with this.”

“Most Skrulls I know are not hostile,” replied Carol easily. “There are some fractions of the species that continue to remain hostile…”

Natasha was beginning to get fed up with this constant back and forth. “Can someone tell me what a Skrull really is?”

“Shapeshifters. They can take the form of anyone and mimic them in DNA. They also have the ability to maintain recent memories,” explained Carol.

“How far back in memories?” enquired Fury.

“Not too far. A few days, potentially weeks at most.”

Natasha folded her arms across her chest. “Happy now? Would I know how I became an agent of SHIELD if Skrulls only have recent memories?”

“No,” confirmed Fury. “That was years ago. But you could have obtained that information from Stark. That’s why I’m suspicious still because you were never close to Stark before and now you are. You’ve been working with him since May. You would have plenty of months of memories to be able to draw upon. We could bring Stark in, question him, and see if he is the real Stark too. But if he wasn’t real he wouldn’t have the knowledge to tell you about Agent Romanoff which makes his identity assured.”

“He wasn’t too pleased about leaving me here whilst you sought to confirm who I am,” stated Natasha.

“There is an easier way to clear this up,” interrupted Carol. She reached into her jean’s pocket and pulled out a small device, almost a wristwatch. “This is a scanner. It has the ability to determine if you are a Skrull or not. It can detect the chemical changes required for you to mimic others. It was developed a few years back. One simple scan is enough.”

“And you couldn’t have bought this up before?” argued Natasha. “It would have saved us this whole conversation if you’d shown it in the first place!”

Carol shrugged. “Fury’s decision, not mine.” She opened up the scanner and a hologram flashed up
above the screen. Pointing it at Natasha, she moved it up and down from head to toe and then from side to side. It beeps and then the hologram above the device turned green. Carol turned to Fury. “She’s human. Fully human.”

“Finally.” Natasha rolled her eyes, glad the whole thing was over.

Fury leaned back against the wall. “I suppose we do have a time-traveller on our hands then.”

“Two of us. Tony and I. No one else knows.”

“Apart from Pepper Potts,” mused Fury.

“How did you guess?” Natasha had hoped to keep Pepper’s identity as the other person who had known the secret.

“Stark only trusts three people,” stated Fury carefully. “Potts would be at number one and if he is going to tell anyone he is from the future, it would be her. It hadn’t escaped my notice they had been taking a break and now they are back together.” He leaned forward. “Stark may think he can spy on our activities but we also spy on him.”

“Oh, he knows,” replied Natasha. She turned her gaze to Carol. “We need your help which is why I asked for Fury to send for you.”

Carol pressed her lips together. “What for?”

Natasha bit her lower lip. “A mission. One that can help Tony and I stop the inevitable from happening. We need to stop Thanos from achieving his goal. And only you can help us do so.”

As promised back in June to Aunt May, Peter’s internship with Stark Industries began on the first Friday in August. School had already broken for Peter and for his first overnight stay at the Avenger’s Facility, Tony had made sure he had been the one to pick Peter up from his Aunt’s place in Queens, once again reassuring her that he had no plans to include Peter on further Avenger missions at the present time.

They were in Tony’s lab together looking over the designs for Peter’s Spider-Man suit. Tony was showing him all the nifty adjustments he had made and was taking him through the ‘training wheels’ protocol he intended to deactivate for Peter once the kid was aware of all the nifty things his suit could do. Tony had given it to him for the Winter Soldiers mission.

Peter scratched the side of his head. “Why did you install a parachute again? I don’t need one!”

“In case you fall from a great height and there is nothing for you to use your webs to reach?” Tony quipped back. “Just don’t get tangled in it.”

“But that wouldn’t happen!” grinned Peter.

Tony wasn’t amused. “In my experience, kid, it’s better to be prepared for anything.”

Which was why when he had designed and built his final Iron Man suit he had put in the safety feature of being able to contain and use the Infinity Stones. It had been a feature Tony had added knowing full well if he had to use them, he’d die. At the end that had been the future Strange had seen. Tony’s fate had always been inexplicably linked to the Infinity Stones.
“I don’t want anything to happen to you. With a parachute, you’re ready for anything. And it can be deployed if your new A.I inside the suit senses you are incapacitated and unable to activate it. Parachute is a must. It’s staying.” Tony wasn’t going to take no for answer.

“What else is in my suit?” Peter leaned over the holographic table studying the other contents of the suit.

Tony frowned, his fingers twirling the Spider-Man suit around in the holographic display. “Plenty of things, kid. Depends, I could create a whole new suit for you.” He was thinking of the Iron Spider suit. “It would be a lot more advanced than the one I have already given you.”

“Mr. Stark, you don’t-”

Tony raised his hand. “Please, it is Tony.” He had a feeling he would be reminding Peter to call him Tony for a while yet. He’d been dying when he’d faintly heard Peter call his name… He hadn’t been able to answer, he’d been saving what remained of his strength for Pepper. “Besides, I have a habit of upgrading everything. Nothing is ever good enough. You always need something… more.” He’d kept on designing and improving Iron Man suits because he felt the current model wasn’t the answer to the universal threat that was Thanos. He’d later learned none of his suits was a match to him, though the nano-suit had been his best at the time. He’d still failed.

Peter winced. “Am I going to get more suits from you?”

“Probably. Better get used to it, kid, I’m going to be a big part of your life!” Tony grinned. “Now… what else shall I show you?”

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Once Tony had finished taking Peter through the suit, he’d told Peter he would lift the restrictions on the suit a bit at a time so Peter could get used to all its various functions. The A.I installed in the suit would be one of the last things which would be activated as Tony wanted Peter to learn without it. Peter agreed with Tony’s assessment and was looking forward to using the Avengers training area to test out his new suit in a variety of trials in varying environments.

They had now moved onto other projects, including new designs for Stark Industries, which Tony hoped Peter would leave his mark on. He wanted the kid to be involved with the company in the future, even if it was in an unofficial capacity.

Tony was flickering through different designs, using paper to write down a few calculations and numbers, whilst Peter worked beside him, looking at prototypes and giving him his honest opinion. Tony hoped they could use the feedback to create a new improved product.

It was then he felt a familiar tingle in his mind but he couldn’t place what it was. Therefore he was surprised when Natasha’s voice echoed in his mind and he jerked a bit. He didn’t know what she was doing there but he hoped she wasn’t bringing him the bad news.

Tony, do you mind? I’m bored sitting in this room waiting for Danvers… Just wanted to explore what I can do…

A slight smile tugged at his lips. He was surprised Natasha had waited this long to try exploring further. He didn’t mind. She had unparalleled access to his soul for a reason. Besides, Natasha exploring further may enable them both to come to an understanding of their link.

He wrote ‘I don’t mind’ on a piece of scrap paper.
Tony went back to work.

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“I think it is time you went to bed,” said Tony, his eyes seeking out Peter. The kid was clearly tired. They’d been at work in the lab for over six hours and it was way past midnight. He was sure Pepper would yell at him for letting Peter stay up this late. Time went by quickly when one was having fun and Peter had the natural flair for designing that Tony had.

“But it’s not even that late!” Peter didn’t look up from the design, his tongue poking out the edge of his mouth as he concentrated on tracing over lines on the hologram.

“It’s after midnight. Just because I work through the night doesn’t mean you have the option to do so.” Tony stayed firm. “And I promised your Aunt you wouldn’t have too many late nights.”

Peter finally glanced up from his design. “But she won’t know.”

Tony frowned. “Only if I do not tell her. Who says I wouldn’t? I was going to tell her about you being Spider-Man after all…” He trailed off, ensuring Peter was aware that Tony intended to abide by the rules his Aunt had set down for Peter’s visits to the Compound.

Peter sighed, saved his work and walked towards the lab’s door. “I can come back tomorrow before I leave, right?”

“Sure. Remember I’m taking you home at 4pm.” Tony watched him leave before contemplating his own work and decided to close it before heading up to bed.

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Saturday 6th August 2016

Pepper called Tony from the lab around 11:15 am the following day, leaving Peter on his own. He instructed FRIDAY to inform him if Peter made a move to leave. The kid was curious enough to want to know why Tony had been called away.

He found Pepper sitting in their private common area of the Compound with Natasha and Carol Danvers.

“Finally got free,” said Natasha. “Before we start, Fury knows about us being from the future, as does Carol. It was the only way to convince them.”

Taken back by the admission, Tony stepped back. “I thought we weren’t telling anyone.”

“We aren’t. Fury and Carol have agreed to maintain our secrecy. It hadn’t escaped Fury’s notice that we had been working together more often. It raised his suspicions. But he won’t tell anyone else. He understands why we need to keep our conditions a secret,” explained Natasha carefully.

Tony joined Pepper on the couch. Carol was watching him. “I remember you.”

“I don’t remember you,” stated Carol.

“You won’t. But you won’t forget me,” grinned Tony.

Pepper slapped him on the arm. “You won’t. It’s impossible to forget him.”
“We’ll see.” Carol leaned forward. “You have a request to make? A mission?”

Tony nodded, squeezing Pepper’s hand. “We do.”

“Tony, do you want to do the honours?” asked Natasha.

“Err… sure?” He’d been expecting Natasha to be the one to talk to Carol and ask her but he could understand Natasha’s reasoning for wanting him there as well.

Carol focused her steely gaze upon him.

It made him slightly uncomfortable.

“We need to get in contact with a group who call themselves the ‘Guardians of the Galaxy’. Have you heard of them?” enquired Tony.

“I have. I’ve never encountered them before but I’ve heard rumours about them. Why do you need them?” she responded.

“First, they have a ship which would be useful to move around the universe in. Secondly, they know a bit more about the Infinity Stones and where some of them currently are. We need to retrieve them before Thanos does.”

“I could just kill Thanos for you.” Carol’s hands glowed in her lap.

“No.” Natasha shook her head. “Killing Thanos right now is not the solution. He may be a tyrant or whatever he is out in the universe, but he has an army.”

“I can take out ships with my hands alone.” Carol was adamant and Tony couldn’t blame her.

He’d watched her take out Thanos’ command ship during the battle. She was fully capable of carrying out her threat.

“We were sent back for a reason,” continued Natasha quietly. “I think if the answer was as simple as you going off to kill him, we wouldn’t be here. We’ve been given this chance to do things again…Tony and I have to be the ones to face him.”

“But if she could, Nat, why not?” asked Tony. If it was as simple as sending Carol off to kill Thanos…

Natasha caught his eye. “I do not believe it is that simple,” she repeated.

Sadly, Tony didn’t either. “You had trouble killing him before.”

“I fought him?” Carol’s head twitched slightly to the side. “And lost?”

“You did,” admitted Tony. Natasha hadn’t been there. “It was a close call though. He’s after the Infinity Stones. We need to stop him from gathering them by finding them ourselves and destroying them. But we also need a ship to go out into space. Since the Guardians helped us before, we wanted to bring them in on this. We lack the technology to send a message out there or build something quickly to reach out to them. That’s why we’d like you to find them for us and ask them to come to Earth.”

Carol inclined her head. “I could do that.”

“And you won’t go after Thanos?” asked Natasha.
Carol sighed, her shoulder slumping slightly. “I won’t. But only because it feels… right?… to leave him to you.”

Later that evening, after Carol had departed Earth to seek out the Guardians and Tony had driven Peter back home to Queens, Tony and Pepper lay in bed together. Pepper’s head rested on Tony’s shoulder and his right arm was wrapped around her body, holding her close to him.

“It’s going to start now, isn’t it?” she asked quietly. “Now you’ve got Carol going out there…”

“It is, Pep. But we both knew that.”

“You’ve got to go out there, haven’t you? Into the stars. If you want those stones…”

Tony’s lips twitched. “I have no choice. I don’t want to… but Nat and I can only rely on each other to get these stones destroyed. And we can’t get into space on our own. I may be a genius and I have knowledge of the future, but we do not have the materials to ensure safe spaceflight from one end of the galaxy to the other. I could design something but it wouldn’t be a simple or quick build.” Tony pressed a kiss to her head. “I’d rather not go into space again. I have no choice though, I have to.”

“New York?” she guessed.

Tony nodded. “And… Titan.” He’d not informed Pepper of his other trip to space. “I didn’t want to tell you but I went to space again. I was chasing after one of the Infinity Stones, trying to prevent Thanos from getting it. It went straight to him. He would have gotten it anyway, regardless of any decision I’d have made. That was the place where Peter died in my arms. It was where I faced Thanos for the first time. I nearly died there, Pep. I was stabbed there. He wanted to kill me…”

“But he didn’t,” she said gently. “Tony? Wherever you need to go, I’m going to be there, whether it is in space or not.”

“Pep… you can’t,” he pleaded.

“Tony, I promised you I would be there for you. I mean it. Every step of the way.” She leaned up now, resting on her elbow.

“I don’t want to see you die…” he whispered.

“You won’t,” Pepper reassured him. Leaning down to kiss him on the lips, Pepper ran a hand down his face. “If you are going to die, Tony, I’m spending as much time with you as possible, whether it is on Earth or off it. I’m not leaving you.”

Tony turned his head away. “I don’t deserve you.”

Taking his chin, she turned his head back towards her. “You deserve me, Tony.”

He shook his head. “No, I don’t.” He didn’t want to believe it. How could he be so lucky?

“No matter what happens we’ll face it together, the way we have faced everything for the last twenty years. It won’t ever change. You were sent back here for a reason. You were told to trust me with the truth for a reason. Destiny bought us together, destiny will keep us together.”

Tony pulled her closer. “You’re right like you always are. I died but destiny sent me back.
Whatever forces are at work they wanted me to trust you. And I will.” He smiled, and pulled her closer, kissing her on the head.

It didn’t take long for them to fall asleep snuggled in each other’s arms.

To be continued...

Tony and Pepper illustration from Chapter Twelve: Wakanda when they are on the balcony looking out. Illustrated by the talented JediPanda22. Please check out their other work on Instagram!

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

It's pretty obvious from all the hints I've been dropping that Tony does have powers... He just can't use them yet but I can promise they will come!

Fury was mostly convinced it was Natasha at the end of the last chapter but he still wanted Carol to confirm she wasn't a Skrull. Even though at the moment, the MCU has shown the Skrulls to be victims and the good guys, I'm sure there would be bad fractions of them still out there, so I can still see Fury being suspicious of anyone being a Skrull.

Carol will be in the story but not much. She won't appear again for a while.

Up next: The Mind Stone... Vision, Wanda, Tony and Shuri...

To be posted next Sunday!
Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Sixteen: The Mind Stone

Chapter Summary

Tony and Natasha focus their attention upon destroying the Mind Stone...

Chapter Notes

Erm... Hi, everyone! *waves*

Apologies for not updating last week, had things happen at work which triggered my anxiety on Friday 22nd November and I was unable to write. By Sunday I had only written 1000 words so I couldn't post. However, to make up for that, this chapter is 7000 words. If my chapters start to exceed 4000 words on a regular basis I may not be able to update weekly, even with a good week at work. I will try to update weekly but I may not be able to, especially as we move further into the story.

I hope this chapter makes up for the lack of a chapter last week!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Mind Stone

Wednesday 24th August 2016

Avengers Compound

The training area had been in use every day by Wanda as she sought to improve control of her powers and learn to test her limits. Vision was a regular visitor, instructing Wanda on the best techniques to use and how to maintain her control without draining herself.

Tony hadn’t kept an eye on Wanda’s progress, mainly because he didn’t see he needed to. He knew what she was capable of; it was just reaching that potential when it was needed most. She’d get there, he knew.

He watched from above as Wanda levitated pieces of disused machinery and threw them across the room with as much force as she could muster. Sweat was beading down her forehead and her fingertips glowed red, exuding energy in all directions.

Vision pointed to another set of machinery, this time instructing Wanda to step further away. Tony observed as she once again levitated the objects and sent them flying in all directions. One piece went through Vision.

“Vision! I’m so sorry!”
“It doesn’t matter, Wanda. Sometimes in situations, you will just have to act without planning ahead.”

“But I can’t lose control. The effects could be disastrous…” muttered Wanda. “I could hurt a team-mate! I could accidentally kill them! No,” she shook her head vigorously, “I need to learn to use these powers wisely and with control and with meaning.”

Tony started to walk down into the training area. “If it’s a choice of saving the world, Wanda, or saving a team-mate, what would you do?”

The young Sokovian bit her lower lip, head bowed. “I know what the right thing to do would be… but do I have the strength to do it?”

Tony stopped in front of her, a slight smile on his face. “You do.” Because he knew she had. She had killed Vision when there had been no other choice. She was strong enough. “Sometimes we have to make difficult choices, whether it is sacrificing our own lives for the greater good or sacrificing others to ensure the survivability of the universe at large.” Doctor Strange had sacrificed Tony for the greater good and Tony had given up the life he loved to ensure everyone he loved could live.

Wanda was fully capable of making those sacrifices too.

I hope she never has to make them this time.

“Why do you have so much faith in me?” asked Wanda curiously.

“Because I believe you are a true asset to this team, Wanda,” explained Tony. “You could become the most powerful of us all. I think you underestimate yourself. It’s only been a few weeks and I can already see improvement with how you control and use your powers. Vision is right though, if there is ever a time when you need to just act without thinking, it will be because you are faced with a choice between life and death. I have faith in you to make the right choices.”

“I’m afraid I don’t believe you…” she muttered quietly.

Tony chuckled. “I know. I think you’ll surprise yourself one day.” He shifted his gaze to Vision before settling back on Wanda. “I’m here for another reason too. I need to talk to you both about an urgent matter that only you two can help us with.”

“Us?” caught Wanda. “Only you are here.”

“Nat and I,” he clarified. “She’s busy elsewhere but she knows what I’m here for.” He ended in a serious voice.

“What is it?” Even Wanda sounded a little worried.

Tony’s eyes focused upon the Mind Stone in Vision’s head. “Can we go somewhere private?”

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Wanda’s quarters were the closest, a place Tony had only been in once when he had been designing the Compound for the new Avengers team before he had departed after the Ultron incident. He’d never thought he’d be welcome in her room. Times had changed.

Wanda sat on the bed, leaning back against the wall, whilst Vision stood next to her as Tony paced the room. He wasn’t sure how to begin with this conversation. He knew it would be a difficult one.
Finally, he stopped pacing and stood in front of Wanda, hands behind his back, almost like he was about to give a speech. “The Stone in your head, Vision, it needs to come out.” It wasn’t the best start.

“But he’ll die!” Wanda rejected.

Tony shook his head, rubbing the back of his head over the awkwardness of his beginning. “No. It’s complicated. I don’t know how to propose this to you two…” Could he tell them he was from the future? After all, Carol and Fury now knew. He’d hoped no one else would find out but it seemed events would spiral out of control which would mean they’d have to be told at some point. Was there any reason to keep on hiding their secret from the rest of their teammates?

“Thor told Steve and I about the Infinity Stones before he left Earth after Ultron. Since then Nat and I have learned more information about them. One of the stones is in Vision’s head. Though Thor deemed you worthy to keep it, I fear there is a danger in its continued existence here.”

“How so?” asked Vision, his fingers moving up to his head to gently touch the glowing yellow stone.

“I’ve had a recurring nightmare… Nat has it too, of a future where all of these stones are collected together and used against the universe.” It was the best way to explain their future without revealing everything. “I don’t know if what I see is real but it is concerning both Natasha and I see the same thing. That is why we’ve been working together a lot because we fear these visions, these nightmares could come true.” He bowed his head. “When I went through the portal in New York, stopping the advancing alien force, I saw how large that army truly was, what else is out there. There is no doubt in my mind that something worse is coming. And we have to be prepared for it.”

Wanda looked worriedly at Vision, then back at Tony. “But how do we save Vision’s life? Taking it out would kill him.”

“I have a solution. Wakanda.”

“But that’s one of the poorest countries in the world!” retorted Wanda. “How can they help?”

“Oh, you’d be surprised. Wakanda isn’t what it seems to be.” Tony didn’t smile. “They can help remove the Stone without killing Vision.”

Vision touched the Stone in his forehead. “This is an entity we know nothing about. What do you intend to do with it once it is removed?”

“Destroy it.” There was no other way. They couldn’t leave the Stones intact for Thanos to find.

“How?” asked Wanda.

Tony nodded towards her. “You. Your powers come from the Mind Stone. I think you’d be quite capable of destroying it.”

“Me?” Wanda’s eyes widened. “I don’t think I can…”

“You underestimate yourself, Wanda,” said Tony quietly. “Your powers came from experiments on the stone. It stands to reason the same composition would be effective in destroying it.”

“Mr. Stark, these things are ancient. Should we be messing with the very fabric of reality by destroying something so unique to the universe at large?” Vision asked, the concern evident in his
voice. “What if in doing so it causes ramifications we cannot foresee?”

Vision did have a point.

Tony sighed. “All good points but I know for a fact destroying these stones will not cause lasting ramifications for the universe at large.”

“You cannot know that,” replied Vision.

“I can,” stated Tony, determined to stay firm on this point. Thanos had destroyed them in 2018 after wiping out half the universe. Nothing bad had happened then but Wanda and Vision didn’t know that.

“How?” Wanda tilted her head to the side, curiously.

Should I tell them? he asked thoughtfully. More people were coming to know their secret regardless. He wondered how many more people would learn his and Natasha’s secret.

Let her read your mind… the voice suggested.

Tony winced at the thought of Wanda poking around his mind. He wasn’t sure he wanted her to do that. What would she be able to see? If she reads my mind she’ll realise I’m from the future.

Exactly, the voice seemed to be endorsing it.

Tony sighed. “Look into my mind and I’ll prove it to you.”

Wanda shook her head. “No. I can’t. I’ve already imposed on your mind once. I cannot do it again.”

He caught her gaze. “This time you have permission.”

Wanda bit her lower lip. “Are you sure? What if I see something you don’t want me to see?”

“Everything is there for you to see,” he stated calmly. “Wanda, neither of you will believe what I say unless I offer you proof. The only way I can is for you to read my mind. Telling you may not be enough.”

“Vision?” Wanda turned to Vision. “Should I?”

Vision locked gazes with Tony as he replied to Wanda. “I think if Mr. Stark is insistent upon having his mind read it would be discourteous to deny his request. We seek confirmation of his words, of his sincerity of this threat which faces us… If he can provide proof without resorting to his mind being read, I suggest it is our only viable option to comply with his request.”

Tony wasn’t sure if Vision was on his side or not but it helped he was trying to convince Wanda the only way was to use her powers on Tony’s mind.

“Ok,” said Wanda quietly, “I’ll do it… but I don’t want to.”

Tony nodded and moved to sit at the edge of the bed as Wanda moved towards him, kneeling on the fabric of the bed, holding her hands to the side of his head. Gently her fingers brushed the sides of his face before pressing thin fingers to his temple.
He felt prodding in his mind as Wanda’s thoughts invaded his own. It was different from when Natasha was in his mind. It felt right, connected as they were. With Wanda, it was an intrusion. It didn’t feel right. He winced as he felt her probe further.

He threw up images he wanted her to see. He showed her Thanos, he showed her the Infinity Stones. He showed her the time he fought Thanos and lost. He showed Wanda her own fight against Thanos during the battle where Tony had died. He showed her what she was truly capable of. What she could do with her powers. And then he showed her his death before waking up in 2016.

She pulled back abruptly, falling back on the bed, panting heavily, her eyes wide.

“Wanda?” Vision leaned down concern written across his features. “What happened? What did you see?”

Wanda levered herself up onto her elbows, her eyes still focused upon Tony. “You… You…” she whispered, her voice soft.

“Now you know how I know.”

“Wanda? What did you see?” Vision tried again.

She took deep breaths in. “We have to destroy it.” She turned to face Vision, raising her fingers to hover before the Stone embedded in his head. “It’s the only way to prevent what is to come.”

Tony watched carefully. She wasn’t telling Vision what she’d seen or what she now knew.

“Wanda, you can-”

She raised a hand to stop him. “No. The fewer people that know the safer Tony will be.”

“Know what, Wanda?” Vision flicked his gaze between Wanda and Tony.

“He speaks the truth,” continued Wanda. “It is not in his interests for people to know, Vision. I’m sorry.” Her lips twitched. “Can you trust me? Can you trust me to trust him?”

Vision floated away. “I’ve known Mr. Stark for years. I can trust both of you. But keeping secrets when we are a team is… We should be open and honest with one another.”

Tony watched carefully. He didn’t want to interfere. This was a discussion between Wanda and Vision.

“And if in telling you puts Tony in danger?” asked Wanda quietly.

“Why would telling me put Mr. Stark in danger?” Vision couldn’t comprehend the logic.

“Because…” Wanda lowered her gaze, “the very same threat that is after your Stone will be after Tony too. If he gets you… and finds out what Tony really is… We’ll lose the last hope we have.”

Tony’s eyebrows rose. Wanda was speaking prophetically as if he had some big destiny. He supposed he did have considering he had been sent back in time to fix things but to label him as the last hope was folly. He decided to step in. “I’m not the last hope. There are the rest of you. All of us are the last line of defence.”

Wanda shifted on the bed, twisting her body once more to face him. “No. What I see inside you is far more powerful than you can imagine. No. You are our last line of defence. You and Natasha…
You’ll be the last ones standing…” Then she glanced back at Vision. “The only way to save Tony is to keep his secret safe. Otherwise… we’ll lose…”

Vision floated backward. “There is much of the world I have yet to learn. Whatever you saw in his mind… It scares you.”

“It did,” admitted Wanda. “But I know what I saw was the truth. And if we are to survive this, we have to put our faith in Tony. We have to destroy the Stone. I know it without a doubt.” She moved from the bed, towards Vision, resting her hands on his chest, looking up at his face. “Believe in me, please.”

This time Vision didn’t argue, only nodded his assent.

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Tony lingered in Wanda’s room after Vision left, leaning against the wall, arms folded over his chest. “Now you know…”

Wanda looked at him. “You’re from the future.”

“Where I died,” he noted. “Are you not afraid of what I know?”

“No,” she answered.

“Does it matter I’m from the future? Do you still want us to be friends? I’ve already lied to you.”

Wanda shook her head. “It doesn’t matter to me. I’m not the first to know, am I?”

“No. A few others do not know such as Steve, Clint, or Rhodey…Nor do Thor and Bruce.”

“You know where they are though,” she pointed out. “Thor and Banner.”

“I do. But I can’t reach them.”

Wanda frowned. “This… alien… I saw in your mind… the one you defeated… He’s coming, isn’t he?”

“He will be,” admitted Tony, his lips twitching. He moved from the wall and slowly paced around the room. “There are six Infinity Stones scattered across the universe. Two are on Earth. I want to destroy them before he can get here to claim them. Saving Vision’s life is a priority for me. And I know the method I want to use will work because Wakanda was involved last time.”

“Were they successful in removing the Stone?”

Tony sighed. “They… never got as far as being able to remove it before Thanos arrived.” He left it at that knowing Wanda would be able to deduce the truth from his words. “We have time now to ensure the Stone is completely destroyed before Thanos even gets close to Earth. And you have the power to destroy it, Wanda. You just have to believe in yourself.”

Her lips twitched. “So do you, Stark.”

He wasn’t going to argue the point. “What you said about Nat and I being the last line of defence… How do you know?”

“I don’t know. It’s a feeling… When you let me into your mind, I felt like my powers were resonating with you, giving me a glimpse of what is to come, but only in thoughts not in images.
You were sent back for a reason, Tony. You and Natasha. I just feel deep down that you two are the most important pieces we have. I can’t explain it, but I believe it,” she explained quietly. “Vision can’t know about you. Too many people know already. This… Thanos… if he’s hunting for these Stones, he’ll be after you.”

“I’m surprised you managed to convince Vision. I didn’t mind him knowing.”

“The further he is away from this, the safer he will be. The Mind Stone is powerful. What if this Thanos gets it and deduces who you are from it? What you are? And all become one more person knows?”

“Thanos already knows who I am,” replied Tony. “He told me so when I first met him.”

“But that was then, not now,” continued Wanda. “You’re still Tony Stark but you are also something more… and that something more, whatever it is cannot be revealed to Thanos before the time is right. I just know we have to keep you safe for as long as possible.”

Tony hummed. He didn’t like these vague hints he was someone special or this destiny he supposedly had with Natasha at his side. He recognised what his role was, no matter how much he wanted to escape from it. “Wanda… When he comes to Earth, I’ll have to face him. I can’t be protected forever.”

Wanda sought his eyes, reaching for his hands. “I fear, now that I know what we face and who you are, that he’ll come for you when you least expect it. And you’ll have no way to defend yourself.”

“I’m always prepared,” said Tony. He held her by the shoulders, moving his hands from hers to grip her by the arms. “Wanda, this is why it is important we find and destroy these Stones. Vision’s is just one of six that need to be destroyed.”

She lowered her gaze, moving away from Tony. “We will. And now that I know what I can do, what I could be too… I know I have to be with you on your hunt for the Stones.” She raised her eyes towards the ceiling. “Even if it means going out there to do it.”

Tony raised his eyebrows, surprised by Wanda’s insistence. “Wanda…”

“You need me,” she replied. She held her right hand up, flickers of red energy dancing between her fingers, fixing him with an intense stare. “Maybe I can destroy more than one stone?”

“Maybe you can,” he admitted. He hoped she could. It would make their mission a lot simpler if Wanda’s powers affected every Infinity Stone. Tony almost doubted it but they wouldn’t know unless they tried.

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Thursday 25th August 2016

En-route to Wakanda

“Wanda knows,” said Tony, slipping into the seat beside Natasha as she piloted the QuinJet towards Wakanda.

“Does she now? The total number of people knowing about us seems to keep on rising. Why not go all out and reveal it to every member of the Avengers?” Natasha noted.

Tony chuckled. “I think if we are supposed to tell everyone we would have been guided to do so. It
feels there are certain people who are important to the endgame that needs to know. Others not so much… Wanda was supposed to know… Vision wasn’t. But he knows something is different about us because of the conversation Wanda and I had in his presence.”

Natasha frowned, flipping a few switches on the console to put the QuinJet into autopilot. “Maybe he doesn’t need to know the full truth because once the Stone is removed he will be insignificant?” she suggested. “He won’t have the powers of the Stone anymore, will he?”

“No… he won’t.” Tony bit his lower lip. “Wanda wants to protect him. But she also implied something else, Nat.” He shifted in his seat a bit so he was fully facing Natasha.

She turned in her own chair, noticing the apprehension in the air. “It’s got you spooked.”

He shrugged. “Yeah. A bit. We’re the last line of defence. The two of us. I don’t want to be. But I know whatever bought us back is lining us up to be just that. Wanda also implied I’m in danger. That Thanos will come for the Stones… and for me.”

Natasha swallowed. “But not me?”

“Apparently not.”

“I’m not the one who threw a missile at his army and destroyed it, am I?” she quipped, grinning slightly despite the seriousness of the conversation.

“Kinda wish I hadn’t done it now.” Tony winced and sighed.

“Can’t change the past, can we?”

Tony threw her a glare. “Not funny. Especially considering that is what we are doing.”

“One could argue this is now our present…”

Tony groaned, leaning back in his chair. “How did I get stuck with you?”

“Believe me, I wish I knew.” Natasha continued to tease.

Running a hand through his hair, Tony slumped forward. “Wanda also believes I am incredibly powerful…”

“You are. When I was in your mind, I saw it.”

“I don’t want powers!” he grated out.

Natasha leaned forward, resting a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “We cannot help what we are, Tony, only do what we can with the gifts we have been given. I’ve accepted I have these powers. I think you need to decide whether to embrace it or not. But these powers we’ve come back with? They wouldn’t have come back with us if we didn’t need them. I saw the potential in you, but it is in chains. Whether it is because you don’t want them or it is not time yet… You need to embrace them.”

“I know. But at the moment I can’t. Nat… I just can’t.” He leaned back in his chair.

“Believe me, Tony, this is the last thing I wanted for any of us.” Natasha rubbed his shoulder. “I’m embracing mine because I know I have to.”

Tony remained silent.
“You might need them one day,” she pointed out.

“Maybe,” admitted Tony. He stood from his chair. “I’m going to go back to Pepper. I’ll come by when we’re coming into land.”

Natasha smiled, watching as he began to walk away. “Tony?”

“Yeah?” He glanced over his shoulder.

“If Wanda is right and Thanos does come for you… I’m going to be there. I’m not going to let him take you. Or hurt you.”

Tony smirked. “Romanoff, it's appreciated but there are people here who need you. If Thanos is going to come after me, I don’t want you getting in the way.”

“Tough, Stark. I’m ignoring everything you say. I’m there whether you like it or not because there are people who need you too. Not just Pepper, but Morgan too.”

Tony chuckled, shaking his head. “I knew you were gonna say that.”

“Don’t underestimate me, Stark.”

Tony laughed again and walked away leaving Natasha to bring them to Wakanda, where he hoped they could destroy the Mind Stone.

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**Wakanda**

**Friday 26th August 2016**

“Are you sure you want to do this?” asked Shuri.

Vision lay on the table in Shuri’s lab. “I am.”

Tony stood to the side, arms across his chest, watching intently with Natasha standing next to Wanda. He understood what Shuri was trying to do to save Vision’s life. It was something he could potentially have done himself but he knew Shuri’s technology was better equipped with dealing with removing such a powerful object without harming what made Vision, Vision.

She was in the process of duplicating Vision’s cell activity and data. Shuri had noted the structure was polymorphic. Tony had explained they’d had to attach each neuron non-sequentially, but to save Vision’s life Shuri had to reprogram the synapses to work collectively. There were more than two trillion neurons in Vision and even a small misalignment could cause circuit failures, a situation they needed to avoid.

Thankfully, Shuri had time to work on ensuring the correct alignment, a luxury she hadn’t had before.

Thanos wasn’t breathing down their necks this time either, allowing the work to proceed at a more leisurely pace.

Shuri had estimated the work separating Vision from the stone could take at least a few hours, potentially more. She was barely ten percent through the work.

Tony wasn’t sure he should be observing but he wanted to be here to witness the Stone’s
destruction. Wanda had been practising using her powers and he believed she had the capability to destroy it. She just needed the focus to do so and the will to carry it out, two things Wanda was capable of having.

If they could destroy this Stone today they would be one small step closer to stopping Thanos for good. Even destroying one would prevent him from winning but they couldn’t take any chances. They needed to destroy all of them to ensure complete victory. If Tony could work out time travel, it wasn’t beyond the realms of possibility that Thanos could as well.

Especially since Thanos had.

Tony shuddered. Bringing everyone back and the Compound getting blown apart in a series of missiles strikes had been horrific. The Avengers had been lucky to survive to fight back and marshal the last defence of Earth. That Thanos had time travelled. Still, he had still been an overwhelming threat that needed to be fought back against.

Noticing movement to the right, Tony saw Pepper nodding gently towards him from the doorway. Catching Natasha’s eyes, Tony motioned with his head that he’d be back shortly.

Walking across the room, Tony smiled and then embraced Pepper in a warm hug. “Hey. How are the contracts going?”

“We’re done,” answered Pepper quietly. “All the contracts are signed and Stark Industries and Wakanda are now partners. I’m glad I came on this trip. They’ve even agreed to allow our top researchers and scientists a chance to come here and spend a month learning about Vibranium and how technology can advance with it, providing, of course, they sign contracts preventing them from spilling the true nature of Wakanda’s advancement. I think that’s something we can agree upon. How are things going here?” She indicated Vision on the table behind Tony.

“Slowly, but she’ll get there,” answered Tony. “If all goes according to plan, Shuri should remove the Stone later today. We’ll be able to take a flight home tomorrow.”

“Good news,” Pepper pulled slightly away from Tony. “Do you mind if I take a look around the market? There isn’t much more I can do here…”

“Wanting to spend more of my money, Potts?” teased Tony, gently brushing his lips against hers.

“Always, Mr. Stark,” responded Pepper, wrapping her arms around his neck and deepening the kiss, their bodies pressing close together.

Tony grinned, nipping her bottom lip before pulling back. “Tonight?” Now was not the time to engage in any other sort of activity, no matter how much Tony wanted to take her back to their room and ravish her.

Pepper's cheeks went pink. “I look forward to it, Mr. Stark.” She leaned in and kissed him again before pulling out of his reach and turning to walk away.

Tony couldn’t stop looking until she was out of his eyesight.

“Done!” Shuri announced. A tired smile flickered across her face as she finally pulled back from the holographic screen she had been working from as the machines hovering over Vision’s head retracted back into their holders. She stepped back and turned to look down at Vision.
“I think we can remove the Stone. It shouldn’t be attached to any of his neurons or connective pathways.”

Tony walked forwards. “Maybe it is best to remove it without using our hands? These Stones are incredibly powerful. Handling them can be dangerous though some are less lethal.”

Shuri reached for a small pair of metallic tweezers. “Would these do?”

“Should be,” confirmed Tony. He stepped back beside Natasha. “Here we go.”

Carefully Shuri placed the tweezers around the Mind Stone. “Ready?” she asked, her gaze focusing on Wanda.

“I am,” the other replied. Little cusps of energy danced out of Wanda’s fingertips.

“Are you sure everything is now working collectively?” asked Natasha, a hint of worry in her voice.

“Affirmative,” reassured Shuri. “Removing this shouldn’t harm Vision at all. Since he is artificial in nature, and born into a synthetic body made from Vibranium, and is in some sense classed as an android, if removing the Stone puts him offline, I have the means to bring him back. I’ve stored his cell activity and data, backed it up to this point. But I do not believe I will need to rely on this data. Your consciousness shouldn’t be connected to the Stone anymore and you are still here, alive and well, suggesting the entirety of your consciousness wasn’t completely linked to the Stone. Your consciousness may have been separating since you were born, as you evolved and came to understand the world around you.”

“It seems a viable theory,” replied Vision.

“Ready for the Stone to be removed?” asked Shuri. He’d already said yes but now was the last possible instant where they could back out of this.

Do it,” confirmed Vision.

“Wanda, be ready,” added Tony. He didn’t need to tell her, she already was.

Gently, using the tweezers, Shuri placed the two sides around the Stone and gently pulled.

The Stone came loose from where it had sat in Vision’s forehead.

“Vision, are you still good?” Natasha asked as Shuri walked past her to place the shining yellow Stone upon a smooth workbench situated beside Wanda.

“Feel slightly different… Not as strong as I was before.” Vision sat up, gently tracing his fingers over the outline of where the Mind Stone had once sat. “Maybe I have become more human? Less advanced than I originally was?”

“Well, we did theorise this might be what would happen to you,” replied Natasha quietly. “Your abilities come from the Stone. With it now removed and no longer linked to you, you may have lost your abilities.”

“Reasonable.” Vision swung his legs over the table, his eyes focused upon Wanda as she approached the workbench on the other side of the room.

Tony followed Wanda, rounding the bench, placing his palms upon it and looked up at Wanda.
“I can do this,” she muttered underneath her breath.

“You can,” replied Tony. “Focus. Don’t strain yourself. Take your time and increase the energy bit by bit.”

Wanda nodded and raised her right hand. Whispers of red energy danced across her fingertips, flowing outwards towards the Stone.

Tony stepped back, raising his hand to cover his eyes, shielding them from the bright light of Wanda’s powers as they steadily increased in intensity as she increased the power slowly. Her face was beginning to redden, straining to increase her powers to a safe degree.

Wanda shifted her feet, balancing herself more securely as she added her other hand to the power flowing from her fingertips. The Mind Stone began to glow as the heat intensified, small tiny cracks beginning to appear across its surface.

Tony indicated for everyone to step back, all the occupants of the lab pressing their backs against the wall. Most of Shuri’s work was securely held in place, hopefully preventing any destruction to the work she had been working on.

“Urgh!” Wanda strained, her hair flowing out behind her as she increased the energy. “Nearly… there!” Her whole body was shaking in an effort to maintain the flow from her fingertips.

The cracks along the Stone lengthened and deepened and then broke.

The pieces of the Stone flew in different directions and a cosmic wave rocked out, throwing Wanda back, sliding her across the lab, rolling over and landing face down. The rest rocked the wave as it hit them all, pressing them back against the wall for a moment as it rushed over them.

The small shards of the stone cluttered to the floor and Tony rushed forwards, kneeling down beside Wanda. Reaching out, he gently turned her over.

“Did I… do it?” she asked.

Tony nodded. “You did.” He helped her up, pointing to the shattered remains of the Stone on the floor. “It’s gone. One down.”

Wanda got to her feet. “Vision?”

“I’m fine, Wanda.” Vision stepped towards her as Tony supported her.

Wanda smiled. “And you’re… normal?”

“I am. All the powers I had with the Stone are gone. No phasing but I’m still me.”

A little laugh erupted from Wanda’s throat. “I’m glad you’re safe.” She faced Shuri. “Thank you.”

The Wakandan Princess smiled. “I did all I could.”

“And it worked,” added Tony. “It’s gone. Exactly what we needed to happen.”

Natasha approached him holding a clear plastic bag. “I’ve picked up the shards of the Stone.”

“If you excuse us, Princess, Wanda, Vision… Nat and I need to have a quick talk.” Tony led Natasha away, out of the lab and down the corridor. “One down, Nat.”
“I know. I can’t believe it has been this easy,” she replied. “I keep waiting for something to go wrong.” She held the packet up containing the shards of the Mind Stone.

Tony took it from her, opened it and poured the shards onto his palm. “Such small things but with the power of the universe… We could stop now… We’ve destroyed one. Thanos cannot collect them all now.”

“Maybe not but I’d still feel better if we got them all. We eliminate their threat for good.” Natasha looked at the shards sitting in Tony’s hands and then her eyes widened. “Tony? The fragments!”

His hand was hot, a slight tingle running up his fingers and as he directed his focus upon the shards of the Mind Stone, they seemed to melt into his hand. “What!” he yelped, shaking his hand but the few shards which had yet to sink into his palm did not fall off. “What the hell?”

His hand glowed yellow as the final pieces of shard melded into his skin and disappeared. No mark was left only a strange sensation running through his body and into his chest. “What?”

“If that isn’t a sign, Tony…”

“Don’t say it!” warned Tony. Inspecting the skin he found no sign anything out of the ordinary had happened. His arm was still slightly tingling but the sensations were slowly fading.

“There is more at work here, Tony, then we realise,” swallowed Natasha. She reached for his hand, running her fingers over the stretch of his skin which the shards had sunk in to.

“Let’s just not say anything more about this,” swallowed Tony. He shook his hand. “The sooner we finish the rest of the Stones, the happier we’ll both be.”

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“Tony?” Pepper lay down beside him on the bed. “What is it? You’ve been quiet since you told me one of the Stones has been destroyed.”

Tony lay on his back looking up at the ceiling. “Just thinking about… stuff.”

“Isn’t it a bit dangerous you thinking about things?” noted Pepper, smiling gently, slightly teasing him. “You know you can tell me anything.”

Tony turned to face her, their noses barely apart. “I can’t keep on denying it, Pep.”

“Denying what?” Pepper sat up, looking down at him. “Tony, did something happen today?”

He nodded. “People keep telling me they think I’m powerful. The link Nat and I share? It’s complicated… The Infinity Stones, we both died… But when we came back, I think we brought them or aspects of them back with us. Nat has powers… She thinks I have them too… And what happened today, no matter how much I’ve denied it to her, I must have powers.”

Pepper leaned forward. “Having powers doesn’t change who you are, Tony.”

“But that’s the thing, Pep, I can’t use them and I don’t know why. I don’t want powers but if I have them why can’t I use them?” Tony sat up. “The shards of Stone melded with my skin, Pep, and it didn’t hurt. These powers what do they make me? Am I still human? Still me?”

Pepper reached out and stroked his cheek. “You are still Tony Stark. Still, the man I love. Still, the man I want to spend the rest of my life with.”
Tony’s eyes widened. “You… you want to?”

A smile tugged at Pepper’s lips. “Yes.” She leaned forward and pressed her lips against his. “I’m with you to the end of the line.”

“You… You’re amazing.” Tony’s face was a picture. He couldn’t believe the dedication he had from Pepper.

“You’re all I have, Tony,” she whispered. “I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

He kissed her. “Does this mean we’re engaged?” he asked, surprised by the development.

“If you want us to be,” she smiled.

“None of my proposals are conventional, are they?” he laughed, pulling her in for another kiss.

“What did you do the first time?” she asked. “I mean, I’ve just proposed to you in a roundabout sort of way!”

Tony chuckled. “I don’t think you want to know how I proposed to you before. Let’s just say we weren’t alone… And there were a lot of other people there…” He remembered the Press Conference he’d organised to introduce Spider-Man as the next official member of the Avengers. Instead, the kid had decided to not take him up on the offer and Tony had improvised by proposing to Pepper in front of a sea of reporters. Granted, he had expected the kid to turn him down.

“Oh god, please don’t tell me it was a press conference!”

“Maybe?” admitted Tony, cringing slightly. “You did say yes though.”

Pepper shook her head in despair. “I must have been mad to say yes to that proposal.”

“You loved me!” he grinned. More sombrely, he added: “Thank you, Pepper, for staying.”

“I couldn’t ever leave you, Tony,” she repeated. “And yes, I will marry you.” She slid down onto her back as Tony peered down at her from above. “Now, where is my engagement ring?”

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**Saturday 27th August 2016**

**En-route back to Avengers Facility**

“Did Tony talk to you?” Natasha sat down beside Pepper as she looked over the contracts which had been signed by the Wakandan King and the Prince.

“He did,” said Pepper quietly. “He told me this morning you might come talking to me.”

Natasha winced. She didn’t want to go behind Tony’s back.

“He won’t be mad,” Pepper pointed out. “He knows you care.”

“He told you what happened after the Stone was destroyed?” Natasha whispered quietly.

Pepper nodded. “He’s uneasy about it. He’s scared.” She placed the contracts down on the empty chair beside her. “I know he doesn’t want to admit it to me but I know him too well not to know when he is scared.”
Natasha bowed her head. “He’s told you everything?”

“About you two, yes,” admitted Pepper. “You have powers, so does Tony. The fragments of the Stone sinking into his hand through his skin has him worried he isn’t human anymore. But I don’t care. He’s still Tony to me. And I will always love him.”

Natasha smiled, relieved. “He’s lucky to have you.”

“I know.” Pepper sighed. “These powers he has… He doesn’t want them, but he needs them, doesn’t he?”

Natasha nodded. “I think so. I know he has them. I can sense them. I’ve seen them in his soul. Our bond, the link we share, it is important. When they come out, and I know his powers will be unleashed one day, whether it’s soon or a few years from now, he’ll need us, the both of us to help him through it.” She paused, reflecting for a moment on what to say next.

Pepper bit her lower lip. “Do you have a theory where these powers come from? Tony implied they’re the Infinity Stones themselves.”

“I believe mine originate from the Soul Stone. It’s how I died. Tony used all six… If I have the powers of the Soul Stone, then Tony has the powers of the other five. And I’m not sure what they mean for him, but I know from having seen inside his soul, that the powers he has will be…” She paused trying to find the right word. “Magnificent. I think he’ll be the strongest of us all. Whatever brought us back must have done this to us for a reason. I get the feeling we were not just sent back to stop Thanos but for something more…” Natasha trailed off.

Pepper breathed slowly, accumulating the information. “Have you told Tony this?”

Natasha shook her head. “No.”

“Why tell me?”

“Out of anyone else here in this time, you know the true extent of what happened to us. Tony’s lucky he has someone he can talk to. I don’t. Not really. And I’ve been here a lot longer than he has. Two years longer. I’ve had a lot of time to think. I know Tony is terrified of losing you, of not being able to have the life he wants so badly. He’s already lost it once…” Natasha sighed and sat back. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to make you feel worse…”

“You haven’t,” Pepper reassured her, reaching towards Natasha’s hand and holding it in her own. “No matter what happens I’m with you and Tony every step of the way, to the end of the line. Regardless of what happens in the future, if you are here for another reason beyond Thanos, I’ll find a way to stay not just by Tony’s side but with yours too. I can promise you, Nat.”

A slight smile tugged at Natasha’s lips. “Thank you, Pepper. It means a lot we have your support. I don’t know what Tony would do without you.”

Pepper laughed gently. “Be more of a walking disaster than he is now, I think.”

Natasha grinned. “You’re probably right about that.”

Pepper smiled knowingly, picked up the contracts beside her and continued to review them, whilst Natasha leaned back in her seat to rest for the remainder of the journey back home.

To be continued...
Illustration of Tony and Wanda shaking hands from Chapter 14: A Growing Friendship, illustrated by the talented JediPanda22!

Please check out their other illustrations on their Instagram page: https://www.instagram.com/jedipanda22/

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

A lot going on in this chapter... One Infinity Stone destroyed, five more to go. Wanda now knows about Tony and Natasha. Her role in this story has now expanded, so expect to see a lot more of Wanda! Vision is now normal with no powers of his own. Without the Infinity Stone, he's just an android but he maintains who he is.

And, you may have picked up on the hints in this chapter, but there is a lot more going on with Tony and Nat than what they even realise themselves.

Up next: Peter deals with the Vulture whilst Tony is called as a witness to the trial of
Thaddeus Ross!

I hope to post next week but depending on how long this gets, I may not be able to!

Until next time,

the-writer1988
Chapter Seventeen: The Trial of Thaddeus Ross

Chapter Summary

Tony goes to court.

Chapter Notes

I'm going to be brutally honest... I do not like this chapter. I found it very difficult to write. As I am in the UK, I do not know much about the US justice system so if it doesn't feel right in terms of how the trial is presented, please tell me and I'll see if I can edit it. I wanted to get this out.

Some of you may be disappointed because I wanted to include Peter and the Vulture in this chapter but that event doesn't work in this story, so it happens during the trial but off-screen, if that makes sense. I tried to think of ways to include it but with Tony tied up at Court it proved difficult and I chose to elect the easier option of only mentioning it briefly in this chapter. My apologies for that but Peter will show up in future chapters though it may not be for a while now!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Trial of Thaddeus Ross

Thursday 29th September 2016

New Avengers Facility

“Tony? Can I talk to you?” Natasha slid into the seat opposite Tony and continued when he slightly nodded in acceptance of her question. “It’s been just over a month since the Mind Stone was destroyed. I know you’ve been busy…” Her eyes focused upon the piles of paperwork on Tony’s desk.

Tony glanced up, placing his pen down on the paper. “I want to continue our Infinity Stone hunt but a date has been set for Thaddeus Ross’s trial. Starts next Monday. I have to be there for it. He is intent on dragging this through the courts despite the fact he’s already ruined his reputation. He refuses to accept a plea bargain or plead guilty.” Tony leaned back in his chair frustrated. “Ross is claiming diminished responsibility through reason of insanity.”

“Seriously?” Natasha was shocked by Ross’ audacity to claim such a defence. “He has to know that defence will not work. He knew what he was doing when he tried to manipulate the Accords and murder you!”

Tony nodded slowly. “I know. But apparently he has obtained proof which shows he was out of his mind. But since we are contesting that claim it has to go to a trial.”
“When will his case be heard?” asked Natasha.

“Over the next few weeks,” replied Tony. “As much as I want to get the Time Stone sorted I need to deal with this first. But the good thing about this is if Thanos sticks to the time frame he did before – and there is nothing to suggest he won’t – then we do have time to rest. Time is the last one we can do on our own without outside help. The others are not on this planet and we need the Guardians for them.”

Natasha frowned. “I’m surprised Carol hasn’t returned yet with them.”

“I’m not,” replied Tony. “We didn’t exactly give her a timeframe, did we? She could have contacted Rocket and the others and they may have refused to come. She would have still held up her side of the bargain.”

Natasha sighed. “All true.” She leaned back in the chair. “You are happy to leave the Time Stone until after Ross’ trial is over?”

“I’d rather not but preparation for the trial is hard work. I’ll be on the stand giving evidence. Effectively I am the accuser. The fact it has gone to trial is ludicrous but because Ross refuses to admit his guilt, we have no choice. Pepper is livid.” Tony shuffled through the papers on his desk. “We’re using your written statements as evidence so you have no need to take a stand and testify. Same for anyone who was present on that day. Only Barnes is testifying against Ross in person.”

“Bet Steve will love that…”

“He didn’t,” shrugged Tony, “but he has been helping Barnes prepare. Plus, William Ginter Riva has agreed to testify against Ross. He’s taken a plea bargain on the condition his sentence is reduced if his evidence contributes to a successful conviction against Ross.”

“Wait,” frowned Natasha, “when I interrogated Riva myself before rescuing you, he said he didn’t know who was behind it, or anyone else who was involved.”

Tony smirked. “He lied. He knew. Because he was an accomplice to Ross’ crimes and he admitted his guilt, Riva is already serving his sentence.” Tony leaned back in his chair, clasping his fingers together. “But the sentence can be reduced and that is the only reason why he has agreed to testify against Ross.”

“How long was he given?”

Tony shrugged. “Twelve years. It will be reduced to six years if Ross is convicted. For Ross, Pepper is gunning for life with no hope of release.”

“Good. He deserves it,” Nat replied darkly. She caught his gaze. “Are you concerned the insanity excuse will hold up and he’ll be sentenced to a more lenient one?”

“There is always the chance of it happening,” admitted Tony, “however, loathe as I am to use it, I could utilise BARF to project the jury my memories and show them how perfectly sane Ross was when he was shooting me through with bullets.”

“Then why not use it in the first place?” she queried.

“Because BARF is not perfect. The memories can be manipulated to show what you had wished had happened. If I bring it into this court case, Ross could use it himself to demonstrate I’m lying too. What I have is a prototype. Using BARF could backfire against us.”
Natasha frowned. “Shame that. Could have been a useful way to demonstrate his guilt.”

Tony nodded, falling silent.

Natasha paused, scrutinising Tony. “Something else is bothering you, I can tell.”

“It’s… Peter.”

“Parker?”

“Yeah…” Tony trailed off, unsure of how to proceed.

“Is he alright?” probed Natasha, her eyes never leaving Tony’s, observing the minute movements in his facial expressions.

Tony cleared his throat. “He’s fine.”

“Then why are you worried?”

“Adrian Toomes.”

“Who?” Natasha hadn’t heard of him before.

“You were on the run last time this happened. I doubt this was something you or Steve knew about.”

“We did keep up with the news,” Natasha pointed out. “But… admittedly… it was world news mainly.”

“I thought so. Toomes wasn’t a large scale threat. I didn’t really deal with the situation that well. I tried to tell the kid to leave it alone. I’d already fed information to the FBI about Toomes’ movements. The kid got in the way; disrupting the legal process I was trying to use to apprehend Toomes. It did work out for the best in the end though. The kid bought him in. I’m torn on whether to stop him or let the kid deal with him. The difference this time is that I will be a better mentor for Peter… But it is around now the whole incident kicked off and I’ve got the trial to think about…”

“Do you want me to look out for him?” Natasha intervened. “I can do that.”

Tony shifted in his seat. “I can’t ask you to do that. He’s my responsibility.”

“Yet you have other responsibilities you need to see to first,” she pointed out. “Peter is a good kid. He dealt with it before; I think he can do so again. All he needs is your guidance and you are still in the position to fulfill that role.”

“Trouble is I could be wrapped up in the court for at least a month. The trial is a complicated one. It doesn’t just involve what Ross tried to do to me; it also involves the prosecution the US Government is bringing against him for his role in trying to take control of the Accords. I need to be there for all of it as I was heavily involved.” Tony sighed and sat back. “No, I think I need to step back. Peter has a suit. Some of its functions have been released to him, he knows how it works. No, I think I know what I can do for Peter. He hasn’t stumbled across the Vulture yet. He soon will. I’m going to record him a message. Keep a watch on him. There may be a time he will nearly drown. You need to send in FRIDAY with the suit to extract him with the message uploaded. That should give him enough information that may help him. Whatever I say will not stop him from continuing investigating but it may aid him from making pivotal mistakes.”
“I can do that. Monitor him for you. Changed your mind, Stark,” she grinned.

“Only because I needed to,” he admitted. He muddled the papers on his desk together, not caring if they were out of order. “The one good thing about this changed timeline is that I already accelerated the removal of everything from Stark Tower. Toomes targeted the plane there as it left, intercepted it and tried to steal everything on board. Peter stopped him. That incident cannot happen now. I’ve already made sure everything has been transferred here.”

“Potentially you’ve already given him an easy ride then?” she noted.

Tony shrugged. “Hopefully.” He rubbed a hand down his face. “Just… keep me informed.”

“I will,” she promised.

“And once Ross is sorted for good we can focus our attention on the Time Stone.”

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Saturday 1st October 2016

“How are the other Winter Soldiers coming along?” Natasha leaned back against the wall as she observed Bucky and Steve in the training area.

Bucky paused, wiping the sweat from his forehead. He’d been given leave to stay at the Avengers Facility in-between his sessions with the government officials. Simon and Charlotte had made the recommendation to their superiors only a few days before and Bucky had moved back to the Avengers Facility. Before the Siberia mission to retrieve the other Winter Soldiers, Bucky’s arm had been replaced by Tony though it was easy to remove, a requirement currently put in place as a condition for Bucky moving back to the Avengers Facility. He was only allowed to have it installed when he needed it, such as when he was training.

Bucky flexed his fingers on his arm. “They’re… recovering. Not taking it well. Unlike me, they were allowed to keep their minds and memories. I think if you’re looking to them to join the Avengers, it is unlikely. They are loyal to Hydra and remain so.”

“But if they are recovering…?” she asked, trailing off.

Steve shook his head. “They’re complicated. They were HYDRA before they accepted the modified serum. Their loyalties haven’t changed. They’ll have to go through an extensive rehabilitation programme before they’d be cleared for release.”

Natasha wilted.

“And they all hated me,” muttered Bucky quietly. “I was… superior to them… I knew no different. I didn’t realise I had another life. They knew I had no choice in becoming what I was. But they did. They loathed they received an inferior serum which made them insane. Killing them would have been mercy.”

“That isn’t something we would ever do, Buck,” replied Steve.

Bucky grimaced. “You have your work cut out for you. They were elite HYDRA operatives, loyal to the cause. I think rehabilitation in their case could be difficult to achieve.”

Natasha sighed. “So you’d say it was unlikely they’d be of use to the Avengers in the near future?”
Bucky inclined his head. “I wouldn’t get your hopes up.”

“Right.” Natasha had hoped but at the moment the other Winter Soldiers were not fit for duty. “Thanks. I just wanted to check since you’re more involved with them that I am. I’d better get going.”

Steve stepped forward. “Are you heading to Ross’ trial with Tony?”

She shook her head, her hair falling about her shoulders. “No. I’ve given my statement. Plus, if required, I have agreed to be interviewed by video link. But there is enough evidence presented which should convict Ross.”

“I’ll be heading there on Wednesday,“ added Bucky quietly. “That is when I’ve been told the prosecution intends to call me forward to provide evidence. I’m not sure what help I can give.” He shrugged.

“I think you’ll give us more help than you believe you will,” smiled Natasha. “After his trial, Ross will not be able to hurt or use you again.”

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Monday 3rd October 2016

The court was in session.

Opening statements had been made and Tony was about to take the stand to present his own evidence. Aside from Pepper, he was the only member of the Avengers there. They had their written statements, all of which had been accepted by the court, and Natasha was on standby to submit video evidence if required. They were not expecting the defence to call many people forward due to the nature of the plea.

Ross was sitting under armguard, explicitly not looking at his accusers. In an attempt to fit the plea he was putting forward, Ross was dressed casually and his hair and beard were unkempt and he looked tired and weary.

Tony’s lawyer, James Hynes, stood in front of him. “For the record, please state your full name.”

“Anthony Edward Stark.” He could have made a quip but this wasn’t the situation to do it in, not for such a serious matter.

“Can you please explain to the court, in your own words, what happened on Wednesday 22nd June 2016?”

Tony nodded. “It was the day of the signing of the Accords in Vienna. I had already received a threat from the accused and I believed there was a possibility I would be attacked at the signing. I was prepared in advance for this and the Avengers were on alert for it. I was approached by a man named William Ginta Riva. I was shot in the back of the shoulder and there was an explosion at the same time which rendered me unconscious. I woke in a van being held by the Winter Soldier. I attempted to escape and failed and knocked unconscious again. I next awoke in a cold, small room where my arms were bound behind my back where the defendant ordered the Winter Soldier to force me to face him. The defendant told me ‘I had ruined him’ because I’d gone behind his back on the Accords, involving the President and raising my concerns on the defendant’s actions. The defendant proceeded to shoot me in several places, intending on shooting me in the head before ordering the Winter Soldier to kill him and ensure both murders were committed by the Soldier.
himself. Before he could shoot me in the kidney, Natasha Romanoff and Colonel James Rhodes arrived.”

“Can you say for definite Thaddeus Ross acted on his own accord and did not show any signs of psychiatric symptoms?” the lawyer continued.

“I can, yes. The defendant knew what he was doing and had elaborately planned this in advance, going so far as to send me a threatening note a few days before the Accords signing was to take place. It is my absolute certainty that the defendant was well and truly aware of his actions on the day of Wednesday 22nd June 2016,” confirmed Tony, standing straight and keeping his story simple and straight and his voice neutral. He avoided eye contact with Ross.

“Would you say that, if it had not been for the swift actions of Natasha Romanoff and Colonel James Rhodes, you would not be here today to present evidence?”

“I would not be.” Ross had intended to kill him. That much was clear. To try to wiggle out of it angered Tony, enough so that he was happy to spend weeks here to prove Ross’ guilt and sanity.

“Was the Winter Soldier under the defendant’s control?”

“Yes.” Now they were onto Barnes which Tony had expected.

“He was not aware of his actions?”

Tony hesitated. “I cannot safely state for the record if Barnes was aware of what he was doing; only that he regrets injuring me whilst under the defendant’s control.” That was the truth. Barnes had told him he remembered but that wasn’t the same as being aware. The only one they could obtain that correct answer from was Barnes himself and he was due to testify in a few days once Tony had been cross-examined by the defence.

“At any point did you feel the defendant was acting out of character?”

Tony shook his head. “No. He was clear and concise and knew what he was doing.”

“You confirmed earlier the defendant sent you a note, what were the contents of this message?”

“Mark my words, Stark. I’ll get you for this,” Tony recited.

“Thank you, Mr. Stark. I have no further questions.” His lawyer said and sat down.

The judge called forth the lawyer for Ross who intended to cross-examine Tony. He was a bald man, an elderly fellow with a white beard and a sharp gaze from his ice-blue eyes. He clearly had a lot of experience and would probably know how to trip Tony up.

“Mr. Stark, what evidence do you have that proves my client was responsible for sending the note you received?”

“It is not a coincidence I was attacked a few weeks later during the Accords signing,” answered Tony.

“A few weeks? Earlier you said it was a few days. Which is it, Mr. Stark? A few weeks or a few days?”

Tony nearly swore. He should have been more careful with his words. “It was a few weeks. I received it on Monday 6th June 2016.”
“Are you sure about that, Mr. Stark?”

“Absolutely.” Tony’s gaze hardened.

“The writing of the note is not my client’s handwriting. It could have been written by anyone. My client simply cannot be responsible for it. The note was not delivered by him. Anyone could have decided to threaten you.”

“I get threats on a regular basis but there is a difference between sending a threat and then acting upon it. This threat was carried out within weeks of it being sent. It was targeted at me. Ross admitted it to me when he was peppering me with bullets. He had nothing else left to lose. He knew his career was overdue to his conduct over the Accords and wanted to take me down with him. I will stand by that.” Tony had perhaps gone too far in his assertions here. But Ross couldn’t be allowed to simply get away with it. The note had come from him. “Whether he wrote the note or not is immaterial. It was still sent by him to me.”

“I believe it is in the firm interests of my client that the note is disregarded as evidence. There is no real proof which suggests he was involved, considering Mr. Stark has admitted he receives threats on a regular basis,” the defence attorney suggested to the Judge.

The Judge contemplated the motion for a few minutes and Tony waited, already knowing what the result would be. The note couldn’t be used for evidence without it specifically being proven it had been sent by Ross. They’d been unable to match the DNA to Ross specifically.

“Evidence A, the note sent to Mr. Stark cannot be used as evidence to support the prosecution,” the Judge ruled.

Thaddeus Ross smirked from his seat in the docks.

Tony wanted to swear but it would be futile to do so.

The defence attorney approached Tony again. “Are you aware my client has suffered depression in the past, Mr. Stark? And has been treated for mental health issues prior to joining the government? He suffered Post-traumatic-Stress following the Vietnam War.”

“No.” Tony hadn’t. Certain aspects of Ross’s past wouldn’t have been accessible to the public.

“Then you agree it is likely my client was not acting rationally during the time you were kidnapped?”

“I do not agree,” stated Tony. He was not going to allow them to take him down this road.

“Yet the established history is there. Why can you not believe my client was not acting rationally? You were responsible for his loss of a position he loved and had worked hard for. Is it no wonder his mental health issues resurfaced?” the lawyer pressed.

“I know first-hand what it is like to suffer from mental illness. I know how debilitating it can be. Thaddeus Ross did not exhibit any symptoms when I was his prisoner.”

The lawyer stepped forward, closer to Tony. “You’ve suffered from mental illness, Mr. Stark? Where is the evidence of this? Did you ever receive an official diagnosis?”

“No.” Tony grated out, already guessing where this line of questioning was going.

“If you do suffer from mental illness, how can we not rule out the possibility that you manipulated
my client into kidnapping you and shooting you?” asked the lawyer.

“Objection! This line of question goes against what we are here for. We are not here to question Mr. Stark’s mental health, rather question whether the defendant acted rationally or not!” James Hynes stood from his chair, raising the objection to the line of questioning that was not relevant to the trial.

“Agreed,” the Judge declared. “Please move on from this line of questioning.”

Tony breathed a sigh of relief. He’d never allowed his mental health to become public before but now he knew it would. He’d had no choice in the matter though.

“How can you be certain the Winter Soldier had not forced Ross to co-operate?”

What a stupid question. Tony wanted to roll his eyes but knew the fallacy in that one specific action. “The Winter Soldier exuded no emotion and carried out his orders with no objections. He was under Ross’ control.”

“And how does one control the Winter Soldier?” Ross’ lawyer pressed further.

Tony swallowed. Now they were in dangerous territory. He couldn’t deny the existence of the Red Book. “There is a book which allows one to bring forth the Winter Soldier, for him to take control of Barnes’s body and work to any command given to him.”

“And, if I am right in my assertions, you are in possession of this book?”

“I am.” Tony couldn’t lie, not while under oath.

“And there you go members of the jury. We have conclusive proof that Tony Stark had access to controlling the Winter Soldier. He admits he could control him. This calls into question the charges levelled against my client by Tony Stark. I would like the jury to consider the possibility that Tony Stark set up his own kidnapping with Barnes fully aware of what he was doing, in order to frame my client and force him to shoot Stark, in order to further discredit him.”

Tony seethed. This was Ross’ plan all along. How could the jury believe this?

“I have no more questions.” Ross’ lawyer joined his own table whilst Tony made his way back to his own.

“That was a disaster,” muttered Tony to James Hynes.

“No, it wasn’t,” replied Hynes, shuffling through the notes he had been making throughout the questioning. “They do not realise we have several credible witnesses. I suggest we call Barnes into court now, as well as Ginta Riva. I hadn’t wanted to use them until later on in the week but I believe we can repair the damage done today by bringing them forward today.”

“Barnes isn’t here though,” whispered Tony. “He’s still back at the Compound. He wasn’t expected to be called until Wednesday.”

“I know but as soon as I realised where the questioning was going, I put the call out to have him brought in.”

A hand landed on Tony’s shoulder. “It’ll be alright, Tony,” said Pepper. Her face was white but her eyes seethed with anger. “They will fail in taking you down. They cannot possibly know the other witnesses we can bring forward.”
Tony wasn’t so sure but he had to believe.

It had to be said William Ginter Riva’s appearance in the court and testifying against Ross did throw the defence team. William had been briefed well and he stuck to the points, insistent on Ross being his point of contact and ordering him to distract Tony so the Winter Soldier could shoot him as the bombs went off. The defence did bring him up on how he had lied before when interrogated originally and not knowing who he had worked for but Riva had provided evidence of the contact he’d had with Ross, thereby giving the prosecution another piece of item to introduce.

And then it was Barnes’s turn, escorted into court by armed guards. Steve sat at the back of the court watching the proceedings.

Barnes explained in his own words what had happened to him, how Ross had found him in Romania and had taken control of him with the Red Book, how he only remembered after waking up from the Soldier’s control what Ross had ordered him to do, how he had nearly ended the Stark line for good. And he expressed his regret and his hatred for the Red Book which controlled him.

Ultimately Barnes’ testimony was enough to convince the Jury that Ross had been acting sanely and with the purpose to get revenge on Tony Stark for stepping in and ensuring a fairer version of the Accords was drafted in, and for highlighting the concerns the Avengers had made regarding Ross’ involvement in the Accords.

Tuesday 11th October 2016

Following the first day of evidence, on the second day, it was Thaddeus Ross’ turn to take the stand and to be questioned by his own lawyer and then the prosecution. Ross stood up well in court and Tony couldn’t decide whether Ross had been successful in maintaining the illusion his decision making had been impaired when he’d kidnapped and attempted to murder him.

Over the following days, the rest of the Avenger’s statements were read out in court, submitted as evidence and then the prosecution presented the injuries Tony had received as further evidence. They had been calculated bullet wounds, chosen to cause maximum damage. Tony hadn’t wanted his injuries to be revealed but because of the nature of the case, the Jury had the right to examine the images put forth.

Thankfully it was a closed court, though reporters waited outside every day, wanting to report on the trial every evening. Neither Tony nor Pepper made any statements, though Ross’s lawyer did, in the hope of turning public favour his way.

It was late one night into the second week of the trial, once Tony and Pepper had returned to the hotel that Tony received a phone call from Natasha.

“How are things going?” he asked, answering the call.

“Good. I hear the trial is… interesting?”

“You could say that,” he answered. “But you didn’t call to discuss with me the trial, did you?”

“No,” she replied. “I wanted to let you know that Peter Parker apprehended Adrian Toomes earlier this evening.”
Tony’s eyes widened. “He did?”

“He did. Surprised me when he called to tell me. Apparently Toomes had been trying to get into the old Avengers Tower.”

Tony laughed. “Oh, he fell for the misinformation then. Good.”

“That was you?” Natasha asked. “Toomes said he had received intelligence valuable equipment had been left behind in Avengers Tower.”

“Yeah… I set this up before the trial. I didn’t want to really say in case Toomes didn’t fall for it but he did. I sent Peter a coded message for him to work out where Toomes was likely to strike next,” admitted Tony. “I was trying to assist him without making it too easy. He wasn’t injured?”

“Just a few bruises. Nothing he can’t handle. Toomes did attempt to blow a few floors up in an attempt to escape but it backfired on him, resulting in Peter being able to apprehend him.”

“Good.” Tony was relieved. He’d been worried about Peter handling the Vulture without him around to give aid but the kid had handled it well judging by Natasha’s report. “Guess that’ll be another court case I’ll be overseeing then with Toomes; stealing my property and attempted murder of a minor.”

“You’re making a habit of this, Stark,” joked Natasha. “Why don’t we just bite the bullet and issue a court summons to Thanos whilst we’re at?”

Tony laughed out loud. “Imagine that? Serving court papers to Thanos for crimes he has yet to commit!”

“I don’t think it would go well,” she reasoned in return, chuckling down the line.

“I think he’d raze the Earth in response. Let’s try to avoid that this time.”

“We will, Tony. How long do you think the trial will last for?” she asked.

Tony sighed. He knew it would be a long one. “The rest of this week is still to do with his attempted murder of me… but starting next week it is his obstruction of the Accords. I think I’ll be here until November. And then they’ll have to go away and deliberate the result. We won’t be getting anything done until the New Year at the earliest now. Unless Ross suddenly declares he is guilty and we can skip the rest of the process but he won’t.”

“You want to leave the Time Stone until next year?” Natasha was surprised by the admission.

“I don’t think we have a choice, Nat. I’ll be tied up here until at least mid-November and then we need to do research on Strange to see if he is around where we think he might be. We need to be sure. We cannot just walk in and demand the Stone. We need to plan this one carefully and thoroughly before attempting anything. If we have to wait until after Christmas then we have no choice,” admitted Tony. He didn’t like the idea of leaving the Time Stone until next year but he had a lot on that needed to be sorted before he could even begin thinking about sorting the Time Stone. “Thanos doesn’t arrive until April 2018. We still have sixteen months to get the rest of them. I think delaying is our only option at the moment.”

“Ok.” It was clear Natasha wasn’t fond of the idea but she could understand why. “I’ll see you when I see you. In the meantime, I’m going to try to get some intelligence on our friend, Strange, just to see if we can accelerate this along faster if we can.”
“Fine by me. If we can get the Time Stone sorted before Christmas…” Tony trailed off.

“We’d only have four to go after next year,” finished Natasha.

Tony wetted his lips. The advantages were there. It was just a question of whether they’d be able to achieve it. “Good plan.”

“Tony?” Her voice lowered over the phone.

“Yeah?”

“Take care of yourself.” Natasha cared, she really did.

“I will.”

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**Friday 18^{th} November 2016**

All the evidence for the charges levelled against Thaddeus Ross had been presented by Friday 4^{th} November but the Jury took two weeks before they were able to issue a verdict.

“Can the accused, Thaddeus Ross, please stand for the verdict?” the Judge decreed.

Tony watched anxiously as Thaddeus stood from his chair.

“Does the Jury find Thaddeus Ross guilty or not guilty in relation to the charges of kidnap and attempted murder of Anthony Edward Stark?” the Judge asked.

A woman with thick blonde hair and bright green eyes stood from the Jury holding a piece of paper in her thin hands. “The Jury finds the defendant guilty.”

Relief swept through Tony. He had hoped Ross’ defence of insanity wouldn’t hold up.

“Does the Jury find Thaddeus Ross guilty or not guilty to the charges of contempt of the Accords and the US government?”

“The Jury finds the defendant guilty.”

“Does the Jury accept the defendant’s plea of mental instability for his actions?” the Judge asked.

“The Jury does not,” the woman said.

Tony breathed out a sigh of relief. The Jury had not believed Ross.

“The prisoner will be taken to a secure facility where he will be kept in isolation for the foreseeable future. The full length of his sentence will be determined at a later date. However, it is the court’s recommendation that he be detained indefinitely. The defendant has no right to appeal.”

Tony wanted to laugh but didn’t. He knew it wouldn’t look good if he did so.

Now the trial was over he could focus his attention upon his other task: obtaining and destroying the Time Stone.

**To be continued...**
Please let me know what you think!

Well, the last part of the Thaddeus Ross arc has been posted. He's done, finite, finished. Thankfully! I was originally going to show more of his trial in detail but it was getting so long I realised I'd just keep on repeating myself so I elected to show as little as possible but still keep it interesting.

From now on, we'll be concentrating on the main storyline which is, of course, the Infinity Stones!

And to whet your appetite for future chapters... Thanos shall arrive personally in the fic in 7 chapters time! From now on, Tony and Nat will be on the Infinity Stone hunt. If I keep my weekly update schedule, the next three chapters will cover The Time Stone, The arrival of the Guardians of the Galaxy and just before the year is up, the Reality Stone!

The next chapter will be posted next Sunday. I am working the late shift next Sunday so I may post early UK Sunday time or late Sunday night UK time.

Until then,

the-writer1988
Chapter Eighteen: The Time Stone

Chapter Summary

Tony, Natasha and Wanda meet Doctor Strange...

Chapter Notes

Hello all!

A shorter chapter this week, especially after last week's mammoth chapter! The next few chapters may be shorter but as we move closer to the next part of the story, the chapters will begin to lengthen again.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Time Stone

Saturday 4th February 2017

177A Bleecker Street

New York Sanctum

They had not expected to wait so long before they made a move for the Time Stone. From staking out the New York Sanctum, Natasha had learned Stephen Strange had not yet appeared as the Sorcerer Supreme. In the last week intelligence had filtered through from Natasha that Strange had now appeared there.

Their plans to obtain the Time Stone before Christmas had not gone ahead. Neither of them had wanted to face the other bearer of the Time Stone. Tony had informed Natasha that when Bruce had gone to New York to obtain it for them originally, he had not encountered Strange, rather a woman. Considering they were going to be overlapping with Strange, both Tony and Natasha had agreed to wait for him to appear and then try to recruit him to the Avengers at the same time as retrieving the Time Stone.

Since Thaddeus Ross’s trial and the lack of movement on pursuing Infinity Stones, Tony and Pepper had spent the majority of December and January planning their wedding. They wanted to keep it small and had set a date for February 2018. Despite it not being the original date they’d married before, Tony didn’t care. He just wanted to marry her, have her as his wife, even if it was for a short time before Thanos was due to arrive and reign down hell upon them all.

They stood on the corner of Bleecker Street.

“Are you sure approaching them is wise?” Natasha whispered quietly.
“We have no choice,” said Tony. “We need that Time Stone.” He glanced over his shoulder at Wanda. He’d brought her along with them because if they were able to retrieve the Stone, he’d rather destroy it here rather than elsewhere. “I don’t want to risk leaving this one until last. We’re still waiting on Danvers to return before we can even consider the ones on other worlds.”

“I hope she returns soon,” noted Natasha quietly, her eyes focused upon the building situated just down the road from where they were standing.

“Me too,” replied Tony. He was getting anxious at the lack of contact from Carol Danvers. He was considering getting Nick Fury to send the signal to her again, in the hope it might entice her to return. It was possible she was having trouble locating the Guardians of the Galaxy but they couldn’t rule out the possibility she had made contact and they simply just hadn’t arrived at Earth yet. They hadn’t expressively informed Danvers to let them know the outcome.

Eyes focused upon the front door of the Sanctum, Tony began to walk up the path, keeping his head down. He was wearing inconspicuous clothing, a tracksuit with a hat and sunglasses. It was a disguise which had worked well over the years and continued to do so. His arc reactor was hidden underneath his jacket.

Natasha wore jeans and a hoody, and she too wore sunglasses. Her red hair was tied back. Wanda had adopted a similar style though her hair was splayed around her shoulders instead.

Reaching the door to 177A Bleecker Street, Tony raised his fist to prepare to knock when the door opened of its own accord.

Slightly weary, he glanced back at Natasha. “Someone knows we’re here…”

Pushing it open, Tony stepped inside into a wide entrance hall. The stairs sat in the centre of the wide room, curving round up to the first floor. The walls were decorated with old paintings and ornaments were scattered around the room. It was musky and old.

“Hello?” Tony called out, not really expecting an answer.

Wanda closed the door behind her and lifted the hood off her head. “This place…” she whispered. “There’s… magic here. I can sense it.”

Tony could feel it too. His skin was tingling. It was a sensation he had never picked up before when he had visited the place originally. He didn’t want to consider the implications of that thought. Tony stepped further, casting his eyes around, looking for any sign of movement.

He looked in one corner and then turned his head to look elsewhere, only to whip his head back when Wanda gasped. Doctor Strange was now standing where he had last looked. Strange was standing in the corner, his arms folded over his chest, scrutinising them as they stood in the entrance hall.

“I was not expecting guests,” the wizard commented.

Tony swallowed. “We need to talk to you.” He roamed his eyes downward and saw the necklace that Strange had worn before was not there. Where was the Time Stone?

“About what?” Strange drifted forward.

Natasha answered with her voice low but filled with emotion: “Something is coming. We’re trying to stop it but we need your help. We need the Time Stone.”
Strange led them to a study where there was a sofa aligning the wall. He stood in front of them, keeping his composure as he considered them all. Natasha’s proclamation had made him weary but he had agreed to talk to them. He disappeared for a while, presumably to collect the Time Stone as he arrived in the room a short while later with it hanging around his neck.

“How do you know about this?”

“Circumstances,” answered Natasha cryptically. “We have reasons for seeking it out.” They’d agreed to inform Strange as much as they possibly could without giving away what would happen if Thanos collected all the Stones. “We know there are six of them, something you are aware of yourself. We know they are all exceptionally powerfully, which have been in the universe since the very beginning, perhaps from the very point of creation itself, maybe even from before that.” She paused to collect her words together. “There is a threat coming who wants to collect all the Stones. He will do everything in his power to make sure he retrieves them all, and if he succeeds… its game over for all of us. We need to stop him and the only way of doing so is to destroy them before he gets here.”

“The Stones are required to keep the universe balanced,” Strange stated. “To destroy them is to destabilise the universe. You risk ripping the universe apart.”

“Charming,” commented Tony. “If it helps, I do not think destroying them is really ridding the universe of the Stones themselves.”

Natasha threw him a suspicious glance. What was he implying?

“A power that ancient surely cannot be easily destroyed?” Tony theorised, hands behind his back, swinging back and forth. “If they are the building blocks of the universe surely aspects of them must continue to exist even if their shells are destroyed? Destroyed and scattered makes it harder for someone to use their power unwisely, surely?”

Natasha wasn’t sure what he was implying but she could guess. The Mind Stone remnants had sunk into Tony’s hand. What if they didn’t need to destroy them? But if Tony suspected it, why was Wanda here? There was no guarantee that she was needed for the other Stones. She may have only had the power to destroy the Mind Stone.

“That may be so, Stark, however it is not something I am willing to risk on a theory,” stated Strange. “I cannot risk the universe.”

“You won’t be,” replied Tony.

“Tony…” Natasha felt wary of what Tony was saying. Wanda was watching him carefully.

“I was told to watch out for you,” explained Strange. “‘Watch out for Tony Stark’, she said. ‘He would come for it’. She never told me what she meant. Now I see it was for the Time Stone.”

“Who is ‘she’?” asked Tony, glancing at Natasha.

“The Ancient One. She passed away not that long ago. I am the Sorcerer Supreme now. She had the ability to see the future, past her own death, a very rare gift among the Sorcerers.”

“Did she tell you anything else?” Tony’s mouth was dry.

“No.” Strange held up the Time Stone. “Only to watch out for you. Curious wording. Am I meant
to stop you from what you are doing or to help you? Which is it, Stark?”

Tony swallowed.

Natasha could see he was unnerved by the conversation but he was attempting to keep his cool, to show he was not a threat.

“I’m here to help, not to single-handedly destroy the universe,” replied Tony carefully.

“Yet you want to destroy it,” stated Strange, “by taking the Stones. Perhaps they were Stones for a reason. Perhaps it is the only way their powers can be contained.”

Natasha paused, her mind whirling at Strange’s words. *No. They are still contained. The Mind Stone isn’t gone. It’s just in Tony…* What if their mission wasn’t to destroy the Stones but to become the Stones?

“I do not think there is anything I can say which would convince you otherwise,” continued Tony. “But I know something which might.”

“What?” Strange looked vaguely curious.

“Use it.” Tony pointed out. “Use the Time Stone to see the outcomes of the coming conflict. Something is coming. We still have time to prevent the outcome we know is at the end of the road but we need your co-operation. The only way to do that…” He trailed off, his eyes focused on the Wizard in front of him.

“He let me into his mind,” spoke up Wanda, having stayed silent all this time. “I saw things I wouldn’t believe but I know to be true. They need this Stone. It will help save us all.”

Strange cast his gaze between them. “Wait here.”

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Strange returned fifteen minutes later with another man in tow. A man Tony knew to be Wong, Strange’s friend and who had protected the Sanctum during Strange’s absence during the five years of hell following the Decimation.

“After discussion with my good associate, Wong, I will use the Time Stone to view the future. However, Wong is here to protect me if either of you decide to harm me or take the Stone.” Strange’s voice was hard and his face resolved over what he needed to do.

“We won’t harm you,” said Tony. “None of us are like that.”

Strange turned and sat on the floor, his legs crossed over. The Time Stone floated in front of him, glowing slightly green as tendrils appeared around Strange’s body. The Wizard’s eyes closed and they watched as Strange started to seep deep into the mysteries of the future.

“Will this work?” whispered Natasha in Tony’s ear.

“I hope so. When he did this before we were already set on the path to only one way of winning… I’m hoping this time there, with it being so far in advance, we may have a chance of more,” replied Tony, thrusting his hands into his pockets.

Wong kept a watch on them whilst keeping an eye out on his friend.

After a while Strange’s body began to shake and rose from the floor, hovering just a metre above
the floor, and his head began to move faster as he looked in different directions, potentially indicating that he was looking into lots of different futures.

“Is he alright?” whispered Wanda, holding her hand up to her mouth in horror as they observed Strange’s actions becoming faster and faster.

And then Strange came out of his trance, his voice rising as his eyes opened and a small scream erupted from his throat.

Tony flinched, not wanting to know the outcome of what he had seen and why it had caused Strange such a distress. He paced forward as Wong did the same, reaching Strange at the same time. Kneeling down, he placed a hand on the Wizard’s shoulder.

“Hey, you alright?” Tony asked quietly.

Strange looked stress, his normally perfect hair was now messier then usual and he was panting heavily as he fought to regain his composure. “I’m… fine.”

Tony wasn’t too sure on Strange’s assertion but decided not to question him further. He wouldn’t get answers if he pushed for them: he’d learnt that before.

“You saw the future?” Natasha asked quietly.

“I saw many outcomes of the coming conflict… All of them ended in failure save for one.”

Tony didn’t know how to react. There was still only one way to win? Surely they’d have more?

“You’re already on the path of one way, Stark,” said Strange quietly. “And, now I know what I must do.” He pushed himself to his feet, wiping dirt from his clothes as he got to his feet. He levitated the Time Stone towards Tony. “Take it.”

Surprise flashed across Tony’s face. He was surprised Strange was just giving it to them with no question asked but he had seen the future. Tony didn’t want to take it, not with his bare hands anyway. He glanced at Nat. “Do you have a cloth I can use?”

Understanding his hesitation in not wanting to take it in front of an audience, Natasha stepped forwards with a stray bit of tissue from her pockets and Strange levitated the Stone into her hand. Wrapping it up tightly, she passed the Stone to Tony who took it safely in his hands and tucked it into his inner pocket of his jacket.

“I’m surprised you just gave it to me,” stated Tony.

Strange still looked a bit shaken. Whatever it was, he was not going to elaborate. “You only have one shot of this, Stark.”

“Right…” Tony swallowed. He wasn’t sure what to think. “Erm… well… thanks.”

He wasn’t sure if they should leave or not but they’d retrieved what they came for and the three of them quietly left the Sanctum.

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Avengers Facility

“You didn’t really need me,” mused Wanda. “Why did you ask me to come?”
Tony unwrapped the Time Stone and set it upon the table in his lab. “I was going to ask you to destroy it there but… I think we need to do it here. The less people who know what we are up to the better.” He was careful not to touch the glowing green gem. He stepped back. “FRIDAY?”

“Yes boss?”

“Please secure all doors into the lab,” ordered Tony.

“Done.”

Locks clicked and sliding doors slid across and the few windows into Tony’s lab were shadowed over.

Tony stepped back, nodding to Wanda.

“You believe I can do it?” she asked.

“Honestly, I’m not sure, but it doesn’t matter if you can’t. You’re still incredibly powerful if you cannot.” He wanted to believe but a part of him did wonder if they really needed to destroy the casings but he had a theory he wanted to try out.

Tony grabbed Natasha’s hand and pulled her back.

“You don’t think she’ll destroy it, do you?” she asked quietly.

Tony didn’t answer. He didn’t want to face the reality he was supposed to absorb them. The nagging feeling in his chest only pumped harder. He was denying it.

Wanda positioned herself in front of the table, arms raised and she focused her power upon the Time Stone. Red strands of power echoed from her fingers and as she poured more energy into them, the strands increased in size until they were close to the Time Stone. But as they reached out to brush it aside, there was a white flash, a scream and silence.

Tony had covered his eyes at the flash and as he lowered his arms, he saw Wanda lying sprawled on the floor. She was groaning in pain. “Wanda!” He ran forward, ignoring the fact that the Time Stone was still intact on the table. He slid to his knees and gently turned her head to face his.

“Wanda?”

She blinked several times before she focused upon Tony. “That… hurt.”

“Do you want to sit up?” asked Tony.

Natasha was at her other side and at Wanda’s nod, Tony helped lift Wanda into a sitting position. She rubbed the back of her head.

“I don’t… think… I can… destroy it.”

Tony’s lips twitched. “The Mind Stone must have been the exception.” It had been a theory he had already assumed but he’d hoped Wanda would have been able to destroy them regardless. He sighed. “Don’t worry about it.” He looked down at his hands. “Guess there is only one thing to do.”

Wanda looked at him with wide eyes. “What do you intend to do if you can’t destroy it?”

“I don’t think we really needed to destroy the Mind Stone,” said Tony quietly. “I picked up the fragments of it after it was destroyed and I absorbed them…” Other than Natasha and Pepper,
Wanda was the first to know this new development.

“Your power…” whispered Wanda in awe. “You think I could only destroy the Mind Stone because my power originated from it?”

“I do,” confirmed Tony. “In the end, considering I absorbed the fragments, I don’t think we needed to destroy them.” He walked towards the table, his shoulders slumped, not sure if he was ready to face the reality which awaited him if he succeeded in absorbing the Time Stone.

“Tony… I know it scares you,” said Natasha quietly, “but we’re on this path for a reason. We cannot ignore what we’ve been given or these powers we have.”

“I know,” he answered quietly. “I guess I have to face it sometime, right?” He had to accept it.

Natasha drew Wanda back as Tony reached out and gently picked up the Time Stone. He placed it on his palm.

And then the Stone began to sink into his palm, and his hand glowed green as it melted through his skin and leaving no mark behind, save for the slight tingling sensation he had experienced when the fragments of the Mind Stone had been absorbed. He felt warmth in his chest. For a brief second he heard the ticking of time in his ears before it fell silent and his whole body glowed briefly green.

He let his hand hang loose at his side. “It’s done.”

Wanda moved forward reaching for Tony’s hand, her fingers running over the skin where the Stone had sunk in. She reached up to place a hand on his chest but then paused. “Can I?”

He nodded.

She placed a hand upon his chest and closed her eyes. “Power. I feel it. The chains are loosening.”

Tony paled. “What do you mean?” He could guess but he’d rather here it verbally.

“Your powers are tied together,” said Wanda.

“She’s right,” confirmed Natasha. “I sensed it myself too.”

“But what ties them together is loosening,” finished Wanda, removing her hand from Tony’s chest and stepping back.

It was obvious what Tony now needed to do, where this was going. “That means for me to use my powers I have to absorb every Infinity Stone.”

“At least it makes things simpler,” smiled Natasha. “You just need to touch it. No need for us to destroy them, is there?”

Tony could only agree. “No, there isn’t.”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes
Please let me know what you think!

I looked at the Marvel Cinematic Universe wiki and it does have a preliminary dating system for when events in the MCU take place. Apparently the finale of Doctor Strange took place in January 2017 which is why this story has jumped ahead a few months. I didn't want Tony and Nat to meet the Ancient One, only Strange and Wong, so the small time jump had to be done.

So, a few developments in this chapter. Strange looked into the future but what did he see? What awaits Tony and Natasha? Why can Tony absorb the Stones? What will happen when he has all six? That's if he gets all six before Thanos arrives... *evil laugh*

I hope to post the next chapter next Sunday though it could be a day early or a day later as we may visit family on Sunday. It isn't confirmed yet though. Next week we will see the arrival of the Guardians of the Galaxy!

Until next time,
the-writer1988
Chapter Nineteen: The Guardians of the Galaxy

Chapter Summary

The Guardians of the Galaxy finally arrive!

Chapter Notes

Another shorter chapter this week but again we are building up to the next big arc in this story...

Thank you for all the comments so far!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Guardians of the Galaxy

Wednesday 5th April 2017

The alert of an unauthorised space ship entering the upper atmosphere sent the Accords Committee into a state of panic. Tony had been in a video conference call meeting with the committee when the alert had been sounded which enabled him to act quickly as he had suspicions on what the spaceship was and who it belonged to.

It had taken them long enough to arrive here.

With permission from the Committee to act, Tony instructed FRIDAY to open a broadcast signal which would allow him to send a message to the new arrivals. He intended to bring them down to Avenger’s Facility at the best possible moment. However, coming down in broad daylight might cause panic and concern and he’d rather avoid the implications of that scenario.

Tony was clad in his Iron Man armour, hovering just below the oxygen layer of the planet. His suit was designed to allow him to breathe further out in space. He could deploy weapons in space if the spaceship proved to be hostile but he doubted it would be. He recognised the ship.

He spoke into his receiver, communicating with Natasha and Steve at the Avengers Compound. “They’ll be in range shortly.” He intended to send a message to them once they were in range. He had to do this properly. With the Accords in place he had to follow the legislation, especially since he was part of the Committee.

“What will you do if they are hostile?” asked Steve over the communications unit.

“Threaten them,” stated Tony in reply. “But they won’t be hostile.”

“You can’t know that,” said Steve.
“If they are who I think they are, they’re allies,” grimaced Tony, knowing it was likely now his and Natasha’s secret was unlikely to stay hidden much longer.

Natasha’s voice echoed over his earpiece. “Trust him, Steve. There is a lot you are unaware of.”

“I’ve noticed you two have been working together a lot. Are you finally going to come clean?”

Tony swallowed. They hadn’t been as secret as they thought but more people were finding out. Perhaps they were destined to do so. He sighed. “Now isn’t the time, Steve. We do have a spaceship heading towards us.”

“Allies, according to you.” There was a hint of sarcasm in Steve’s voice.

“They will be,” grated Tony.

“Steve now isn’t the time,” Natasha butted in, sounding agitated. “We’ll discuss it later.”

Tony rolled his eyes. Steve could be so frustrating sometimes. “They’re in range now. Transmitting communication message. This is Tony Stark representing Planet Earth, calling unidentified ship. Please respond.”

There was a pause after he finished his message before he got a response. A female voice answered one he hadn’t heard before when he’d met the Guardians before but he could guess who it belonged to.

“You wanted to speak to us, Tony Stark?”

“I did,” he answered. He knew the female speaking was Gamora. He didn’t recognise her voice but she had to be Gamora. She was the woman whose death had enraged Quill, ruining their plan to obtain the Gauntlet from Thanos.

“Why?”

“This isn’t the place to discuss it,” explained Tony. “I need you to land on Earth… I’ll vouch for you. It’s imperative we work together.”

“We’ve come because we want to know how you have knowledge of us, considering your planet is not advanced enough to travel into space yet.”

Tony grinned. “Earth has had its fair share of alien attacks over the years. If they have knowledge of us, it only seems fitting we would have knowledge of other things, doesn’t it?”

“Possibly, Mr. Stark,” returned the female voice. “Where do you want us to land?”

“I’ll transmit the coordinates for you but wait until darkness. It’ll be easier to disguise your arrival if you wait.” He tapped his fingers over the keyboard, sending the codes across.

“Received and acknowledged,” a male voice confirmed.

Tony was tempted to say the man’s name but he was sure that would freak him out. He didn’t want them to become hostile if they knew how much he knew. His knowledge was dangerous. “See you soon then.” He switched the frequency back to the Avengers Compound. “I’m coming back. Don’t say it, Steve. I know you heard the conversation. I’ll explain when I get back.”

Steve didn’t respond though he suspected it was because Natasha was glaring at him.
“Let’s go home,” muttered Tony quietly, disengaging his thrusters and descended back towards the Facility.

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When Tony arrived in his lab, Steve was waiting for him. Natasha stood off to the side, looking a bit wary. Raising his hands, Tony pre-empted anything Steve was about to say. “We all have secrets, Steve, and there are some things that do not concern you.”

“I think it concerns me when you already know who these people are and they know you!” retorted Steve.

“It’s… complicated.” Because it was. He just didn’t have the time now to fully explain it. “Look, Nat and I have been working together for a reason. A reason I’m sure you’ll find hard to believe.”

“I slept for seventy years and woke up with everyone I knew already gone. I’ve seen other life exist out there. How can anything you say surprise me, Stark?”

“Oh, we’re back to surnames now are we?” accused Tony. Steve could be so stubborn sometimes.

“I’m not going to call you anything else am I, Stark, when I don’t even know who the real – ” Steve argued back, his hands balling into fists.

But Natasha stepped forward between them, hands raised. “We’re from the future, Steve.”

That shut Steve up straight away.

Tony glanced at Natasha. It was always going to happen, one way or another that Steve would find out the truth. He hadn’t wanted it to be so soon though. He’d rather have kept their secret for longer but with so many people being in positions to know, soon the whole group would be aware of Tony and Natasha’s secret. He wondered if it was worth it just telling them all. But could he trust them all? Heck, neither Rhodey or Happy had been informed. Only Pepper…

Steve shook his head. “Excuse me? The future? Come on, you really expect me to believe that?”

Tony shrugged. “It’s the truth. Pepper, Fury, and Wanda all know. We’ve been trying to keep it quiet, attempting to prevent something bad from happening.”

“Did you lose before?” Steve asked.

“You’re taking this rather well,” noted Natasha, her voice wary. “Tony and I survived what we’re trying to stop but it took so many other lives. Including some of our team members. We’re bringing in people who could be vital to our success this time. But you’ve been suspicious of us for a while, haven’t you?”

Steve moved away. “I have. You seemed to know everything that could possibly go wrong. Lagos… That was my first clue but I let it slide… But you two kept sneaking off for meetings, spending more time with one another. The Accords. You worked together on the Accords. Presented them to us as a team… And Ross. You found Tony pretty quickly after he was taken.”

He fixed his eyes upon Natasha. “If you’re really from the future…”

“Time travel is possible,” replied Tony quietly. “We came back. And we’ve been changing things so all those people who lost their lives do not lose them this time. When we came back… things changed between Nat and I. Somehow we can find each other… We’re not entirely sure why. But Nat found me because of that connection. We’re not going to hide it anymore.”
Steve sunk down into a chair. “It’s hard to believe.”

Tony shrugged. “It is the truth, the simplest one. Bringing the Guardians in is just one of the first steps we have been taking to ensure we are successful.”

Natasha reached out for Steve’s hand. He let her take it her smaller palm. “Steve, you have to trust us. What we’re doing, what we’ve been doing is to save everyone, not just on the Earth, but in the universe. If we are to succeed, you have to trust us.”

Steve pointed to the ceiling. “What is coming?”

Steve didn’t mean the Guardians. He meant the threat Natasha and Tony were trying to stop.

“He’s called Thanos,” answered Tony. “He was behind the invasion of New York. Loki was just a tool to carry out his wishes. Remember what Thor told us before he left Earth about the Infinity Stones?”

Steve remembered. “They’ve been showing up.”

“Haven’t you noticed Vision’s stone is gone?” asked Natasha.

“I had…” Steve frowned. “Vision said he found a way to have it safely removed and he was storing it elsewhere.”

“And you believed it?” Tony felt surprised Steve hadn’t questioned about the missing stone.

“I knew something was up. He told me you and Nat had it all under control.”

“Great…” Tony sighed. “Thanos is after the Infinity Stones. Nat and I are attempting to destroy them before Thanos gets them. With all of them together he can destroy the whole universe with a click of his fingers. We’ve destroyed two. The rest are located on other planets which is why we are bringing the Guardians in to assist us. We need to leave Earth if we’re going to get them all before Thanos does.”

Steve’s face hardened. “Count me in.”

“What?” Tony stepped back in surprise. “You want to come with us?”

“You’ll need me. And if I am to trust you, I need to follow your lead, right?” Folding his arms over his chest, Steve watched the two with interest.

“He’s right, we do need him, Tony,” interjected Natasha. “It can’t be just us going. Even if we do go with the Guardians, we might need others with us. They need to be prepared and the best way to do it is to follow us.”

“We cannot leave Earth undefended,” pointed out Tony. “If Steve comes with us…”

“There are others,” reminded Steve. “Tony, it isn’t just you defending the Earth. There are others too. And if this is a threat that won before, you need as much help as you can get.”

“Okay, fine,” agreed Tony. “You can come.”

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In the middle of the night, a select group of the Avengers sat around the Conference table in a room safely secured underground with the Guardians of the Galaxy on one side of the table and a few
members of the Avengers on the other. The Accords Committee had been informed of Tony’s decision for them to land. He’d explained his reasoning and that they had come with information relevant to a wider threat affecting the entire universe, though that was a falsehood on Tony’s part. He didn’t want the Committee finding out he had sent someone to ask for them to come.

Tony had asked, in addition to Natasha and Steve, for Wanda, Pepper and Fury to be there. None of the other Avengers were aware of the truth and didn’t necessarily have to be in the room for this discussion. He did resolve to speak to Rhodey and Happy at some point and bring them into the fold.

Tony sat in the centre with Natasha to the right and Pepper to his left. Steve sat beside Natasha and Wanda next to Steve, with Fury on Pepper’s left.

On the opposite side of the table sat the motley crew of the Benatar. Peter Quill faced Tony; his watchful eyes alight with suspicion, arms folded across his chest, straining the brown jacket he wore. To his right sat a green-skinned woman who had been introduced to them as Gamora. Then there was Mantis and a talking tree called Groot. Tony hadn’t met Groot before as he’d been killed by Thanos’ snap originally. In fact, Groot and Gamora were the only Guardian’s Tony had not met before. Rocket positioned himself on Quill’s left followed by Drax.

“Welcome to Earth,” began Tony. “I requested an ally of ours to find you and ask you to come here. We have much to discuss.”

“Interesting how an Earth-man could have knowledge of us,” stated Quill. “You’re out of range of anything going on in the wider galaxy.”

“It doesn’t mean we do not have our resources,” replied Tony carefully. “We did successfully defeat an alien army a few years back.”

“It doesn’t explain how you know about us though, does it?” Gamora pointed out. “The woman who sought us out, she’s from here, got mixed up in something and got given powers. We know of her and her exploits. She’s feared across the universe for what she’s been doing and yet…” She tilted her head to the side slightly, “And yet my father chooses to fear you, Tony Stark.”

Tony grimaced. “Your father being Thanos?” He sought clarification, already knowing the answer.

“He raised me,” she answered quietly. “But he wasn’t much of a father. Your friend mentioned you were trying to stop him from getting the Infinity Stones.”

It seemed Carol had given the Guardians more information than they had thought she might. Still, it at least made things a lot simpler.

“We are,” confirmed Tony, already guessing what the next question would be.

“How do you know of him?” asked Gamora.

Natasha answered: “Loki. After he lost in New York he did tell us a few things.” That last part was a lie however Tony was determined to not inform the Guardians of his and Nat’s unique circumstances and knowledge of the future. “We know he was sent by Thanos to obtain the Infinity Stone which was here. He failed.”

Gamora didn’t probe further but she leaned back in her chair.

“Why did you call us here?” asked Quill. “You’re not going to tell us how you know about us…”
“I pick up communications,” revealed Tony. It was another little stretch of a lie. But he did have satellites up in orbit, set on different frequencies to catch any transmissions. “I have satellites programmed to search for wavelengths and frequencies. It occasionally picks up transmissions. One mentioned your group, having stopped Thanos’ minions at a planet called Xandar.” Thankfully Rocket had been extremely helpful in telling them all about his own history with the Guardians during the five years after the Snap. It helped they were able to collate this information. “And Carol, Fury here is able to summon her back to Earth. We asked her back and enquired if she could reach you for us. It was the only way of getting our message to you.”

He’d already discussed with the others what he had been planning to say to their guests. It seemed only right to stay on the same page so none of them would be surprised when a little fib came out.

“You can build communication devices to pick up signals from lightyears away, yet you are incapable of creating a spaceship?” Rocket laughed.

Tony had forgotten what a dick the Racoon had been but he let it pass. “Technology is advancing. It won’t be long before we take our first steps out into the stars.”

“I am Groot!” the tree spoke up.

“What did he say?” Fury queried.

“He asked why you wanted to speak to us,” translated Quill.

“As I said, the Infinity Stones. We’ve found and destroyed two of them already.” Tony nodded towards Wanda. “Wanda was a great aid in that regard.”

“You destroyed them?” Gamora seemed surprised. “How?”

Wanda flicked her fingers, red traces floating up towards the ceiling. “My powers originate from the Mind Stone. I am capable of destroying them.”

“We know there are another four,” continued Natasha. “Our friend, Thor, intimated as much. We can’t reach him at the moment.”

“What we’d like,” added Tony, “is for you to take me and a small team to the various locations of where the Infinity Stones are hidden and enable us to destroy them, therefore preventing Thanos from gaining even one of them.”

Gamora and Quill exchanged glances before she spoke up. They’d clearly discussed this in advance, anticipating already what Tony had wanted to speak to them about based on Carol’s discussion with them when she’d tracked them down.

“We can only take you to one of them,” said Gamora. “We only know the location of one.”

They’d discussed the probability of Gamora hiding the fact she had known where the Soul Stone was located. They’d have to think of a way to ensure she divulged it to them without gaining her suspicions. They couldn’t exactly ask to take them to Vormir – that could prove disastrous for them if they named the place without being able to explain how they knew of its existence.

“What one can you lead us to?” asked Steve.

Once again the Guardians exchanged looks. Tony was surprised how quiet Drax was being.

“There is one on Xandar,” admitted Gamora. “The Nova Corps will not give it up easily. We may
have to steal it. Convincing them to release it back to us might be problematic.”

Pity they couldn’t use time travel to go back in time and take it from another point but every part of Tony’s being was telling them they had to take them from their locations where they were situated right now.

“I’m sure we can work on a plan which will work for all of us,” said Steve.

The Guardians didn’t know where the Reality Stone was currently held. Tony considered whether it would be a good idea to reveal it; however, he did know Thor knew where it was.

“We know where another is because Thor’s people placed it there,” said Tony.

“Where?” asked Gamora.

“A place called… Knowhere, with a man called The Collector?” Tony phrased it as a question.

“That man is an idiot!” Quill nearly launched into a tirade but a calming hand from Gamora soothed him.

“Thor may not have known that…” pointed out Natasha. “Can you take us there?”

“We could,” replied Gamora.

“But what’s in it for us?” interrupted Rocket. “Money?”

“I thought helping save the universe would be enough,” said Steve, his voice slightly tinged with frustration.

“Then we’re not interested!” stated Rocket, already starting to slide off his seat but noticed Quill and Gamora were not following his lead. “What? You two aren’t seriously thinking of doing this for free, are you?”

“Rocket… if Thanos gets any of the Infinity Stones he’ll be invincible… We have to stop him and if we have to do this for free, then I am volunteering my services whether you like it or not.” Gamora explained. “We can’t let him get any of the Stones.” She raised her gaze to look at Quill. “Peter?”

Quill glanced towards Tony and then back at Gamora. It was clear a decision had already been made. “We’ll help, but you’ll do what we say when on our ship, alright?”

Tony smiled and nodded. “Agreed.”

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“I wondered if Gamora may have come back as well…” said Natasha quietly as they stood in the kitchen of the Compound. “But I don’t think she has.”

“What makes you say she hasn’t?” asked Tony, lowering his voice so the others couldn’t hear.

“Because when you came back the voice told me ‘he has arrived’. I knew who I’d been waiting for, for two years was finally here. Nothing of the sort now with Gamora. And I think if she was back, she wouldn’t be hiding Vormir from us. We need to convince her to tell us otherwise we won’t be able to get to Vormir.”

“I know,” Tony bit his lower lip. “I think I have an idea but let’s wait until we’ve got the other
two.”

Natasha nodded. “A good plan.” She poured hot water into the teapot. “Who is coming with us to space?”

“Steve and Wanda… Pepper wants to come too.” He fidgeted, not liking the idea of Pepper putting her life on the line. “I’m not sure I want her to.”

“She’s been in on this from the beginning,” noted Natasha quietly. “I think we need her. And I know she’s been training in the suit you designed for her. I know you want to protect her.”

“I can’t lose her, Nat… Morgan’s life is on the line. I want my little girl. If Pepper comes with us and something happens to her…” Tony shook his head, trying to ignore the sensation of wetness in his eyes. Tony Stark never cried. He’d become a lot more emotional since becoming a father. God, he missed her.

“You’ll have her. I promise you, Morgan will be born and she’ll be the same little girl you love and adore. You’ll see her grow up, Tony. I know you will.” Natasha smiled.

Tony sighed. He wanted to believe but a part of him felt that there was a great loss still to come. He couldn’t be this lucky, could he? “Alright, Pepper can come.”

He hoped he was making the right decision.

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Friday 7th April 2017

Two days after the Guardians of the Galaxy had arrived, Tony, Natasha, Wanda, Steve, and Pepper were ready to leave Earth on the Benatar. Steve had handed the Avengers leadership over to Rhodey who was staying behind. Most of the other members of the team were unaware of why they needed to leave Earth, only it involved preventing a wider threat from reaching them. Pepper had handed the reins of Stark Industries over to her deputy who was keeping the company running in her place. All S.I knew was that Pepper was taking an extended vacation and wouldn’t be available for a few months.

Tony and Natasha promised upon their return they would tell them everything.

They boarded the Benatar with a suitcase each, not knowing for how long they would be gone for. They hoped it would only be a few months though the trip could be longer.

As Quill engaged the engines, the Benatar lifted off under cover of darkness. Tilting the nose up, he engaged the thrusters and the spaceship shot up into the sky with speed.

Tony glanced out at the disappearing landscape of the Earth below him, a slight tingle of fear erupting in his chest of being back out in space again, but he knew he had to do this.

They were on their way.

First on their destination was Knowhere, followed by Xandar and finally Vormir, if they could convince Gamora to reveal its exact location.

Tony closed his eyes, leaning back against his seat. We can do this. We can beat Thanos.

They were well on their way to achieving that goal after all.
To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

I decided a while back that Gamora would not be sent back to the past like Tony and Natasha. I debated about it for a while but ultimately decided against it. So this Gamora is just Gamora. And she is reluctant to reveal where the Soul Stone is. For now.

Steve now knows Tony and Nat are from the future but do not know the full extent of their history. He has a big role to play in this fic and I needed to bring him in from the sidelines.

Next up: The Reality Stone! To be posted next Sunday 29th December!

Merry Christmas everyone!

Until next time,

the-writer1988
Chapter Twenty: The Reality Stone

Chapter Summary

The Avengers and the Guardians travel to Knowhere...

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! I hope you all had a fantastic Christmas! I got sick again so I'm battling with a cold (yet again!!!) but I am off work until 8th January (on holiday leave, not sick leave) so I hope I get a lot of writing done... In this chapter, Tony learns something unexpected which worries him as to what his fate will be...

I would also like to thank AstralEgotist_20 for their idea they gave me for a conversation between Tony and Quill which starts off this chapter. Without it, this chapter would definitely be shorter but I think the first scene is quite a good one and it allows Tony to start forming friendships with the Guardians. So, thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Reality Stone

Saturday 8th April 2017

Enroute to Knowhere

It was going to take them a few days to reach Knowhere from Earth since the place was so far away from galactic civilisation. This meant it gave time for the Guardians to talk to and get to know their travelling companions from Earth.

It had been nearly a year since Tony had been sent back from the moment of his death and in that time not only had he been focusing on ensuring they could stop Thanos, but he had also spent a small amount of time tracing the family of Peter Quill. He didn’t know why he did it, more that he was curious over the circumstances as to how Quill had ended up leaving Earth.

What he had found had been tragic. Quill had gone missing the same day his mother had died of brain cancer. He’d been eight years old. His mother had died in front of him, her last words asking her son to take her hand. He hadn’t. Tony had learned those details from Quill’s grandfather, who’d he had tracked down and spoken to, informing him he was following a potential lead which could bring them to Quill’s location. He’d given the man a tiny bit of hope. He’d been broken by the loss of his daughter and grandson on the same day.

A part of him wondered why Quill had never returned to Earth. He recalled the first time he had met him: after they’d crashed landed on Titan and been attacked, Quill had not recognised the name ‘Earth’. Was it possible he no longer recognised the name of the planet he was native too? If
Quill had been out in space for such a long time, combined with the trauma of his mother’s death and being abducted could have resulted in Quill wanting to forget all about his past and where he had originated from. His last memory of Earth had been the death of his beloved mother, no wonder Quill wanted to forget as much as he could about the place.

Quill’s mother had been his whole world. They’d spent most of their time together, hardly spending it apart. And he’d lost her in the most brutal way possible.

He wondered if this was a good idea to talk to Quill about this sensitive matter but he wanted to understand how Quill could turn his back on everything. He had the means and the opportunity to return to Earth and help them. Why hadn’t he?

Decision made, Tony made his way through the *Benatar* towards the cockpit where Quill was sitting, watching as the stars went past, his eyes focused on their next jump point. Gamora sat just behind him, passing him the distance he still had to travel to reach it.

“What is it, Stark?” Quill asked.

“I wondered if you and I could have a chat?”

“Alone?” Quill clarified.

“If possible.”

“Sorry, I don’t swing that way,” Quill responded and then laughed.

Tony rolled his eyes. He wasn’t going to dignify that with an answer. Instead, he folded his arms across his chest and leaned back against the bulkhead, ignoring the streaks of light out the viewport in front of him as they streaked through space.

Gamora moved from her chair. “Here. If you can just tell him how far we’ve got till each jump point whenever he asks, you can have my spot and talk to him. Peter can be a bit of a jerk sometimes.”

“I’ve noticed,” quipped Tony, sitting down in Gamora’s seat and looking at the familiar controls he knew from the twenty-two days he had spent in space before. He hated being back in space yet his options were limited in this case.

The ship suddenly jumped as the *Benatar* sailed through a jump point. Tony glanced at his instruments and saw the next jump point wouldn’t be for a while yet. Gamora had left and Quill was piloting alone. At least he could have this awkward conversation in peace without any of the others overhearing.

“What do you want to know?” Quill lazed back in his chair, holding the controls loosely with his fingers.

“Why did you never come back to Earth?”

“Why are you asking me that?” Quill questioned a slight tinge of anger in his voice.

*Oh boy, I’ve already hit a nerve.* “I just wanted to know why you never did… You have your own ship, the means to do so…”

“My family was here,” stated Quill. “There is no one back there for me.”
Tony bit his lip. He wondered whether he should tell Quill about the grandfather he had left behind. He decided to risk it. “I know you went missing in Missouri in 1988. No trace of you was ever found. It was a huge news story all across the world for many months, years even. They never gave up hope of you coming home.”

Quill remained silent, the atmosphere tense.

Tony glanced at his screen. They still had a while to go before the next jump point. He shouldn’t have bought the subject up. It was clearly a sore subject for Quill.

“You spoke to my grandfather, didn’t you?” Quill asked quietly.

Tony winced. “I did. I shouldn’t have done…”

“No… it’s fine,” answered Quill. There was a long silence before he responded again. “How is he?”

Tony shrugged. “Missing. Looked for you for years. He lost his daughter and grandson in the same day, within minutes of one another. Every year on the day you went missing they remember you and your mother. He never gave up hope of you coming home one day.”

Quill twisted in his seat to look at Tony. “When did you do this? You couldn’t have tracked him down in the last two days.”

Tony hesitated. That was the only problem of asking these questions – it had roused Quill’s suspicions of how Tony had known who he was.

“Did the communications you receive via your satellites tell you our identities?” probed Quill. “I’m known as Star-Lord.”

Now he was in dangerous territory. He hated fibbing but in this case, he’d had no choice. He was trying to sustain the lie.

“That’s a lie. You were Quill on the transmissions from Xandar!”

Tony whirled and saw Drax standing behind them, having somehow crept up on them without either of them noticing.

Drax puffed out his chest. “And I was Drax, the saviour!” The grey-skinned humanoid stared proudly at Tony and Quill before noticing their lack of response and grumpily walked off. “No one appreciates the saviour.”

Tony blinked, struggling not to laugh at the ridiculous pronouncement. He could take a guess now. “It was Quill from Terra. Thor had told us the different names Earth went by, Terra was one of them. I decided to do a bit of investigating and found out about you.”

Quill frowned. “I guess that makes sense. As to why I never came back to Terra… I didn’t want to return to the place where my mother died…”

“You could have helped your planet.” Tony pointed out.

“How?” Quill shook his head. “Terra isn’t ready for space.”

“Despite the fact, we’ve had aliens attack us?” retorted Tony. Earth may not have discovered the resources for space-travel just yet but they were well on their way to doing so. “Who gets to decide
when we’re ready? You?”

“Do you speak for your planet?” accused Quill. “I doubt it.”

Tony’s voice darkened. “Technically I do with the position I’m in.” Being part of the Accords Committee helped with the amount of influence he had on Earth. Quill wasn’t partial to that, however. “Sooner than you think, we’ll be out there. Wouldn’t it be more beneficial if you could help your homeworld with defence?”

“If you were me,” Quill began, “would you?”

Tony hesitated. “I like to believe I would.” If he’d had the same upbringing as Quill had than he assumed he may have cultivated the same type of attitude. He may not have cared enough to return.

Quill laughed. “You think you would but in reality, you wouldn’t. I was taken at eight, Stark. I was forced into situations where I had to learn how to survive. I had to adapt quickly or, as Yondu would say, he’d feed me to his men. Little human runt I was… only useful to get into small spaces. Help them steal. Didn’t occur to me he didn’t mean it, only used it as a way to control me.”

“Sorry…” Tony admitted. “I can’t imagine what it must have been like for you.” The conversation wasn’t going the way he had intended it to go. “But you made it out and made a name for yourself.”

“It wasn’t that easy,” mentioned Quill quietly. “I’m not sure what I can do to help Terra. Even if I wanted to – which I don’t – seeing the people I left behind and being reminded of my mother? I can’t do it. She’s gone and she’s not coming back.”

Tony fell silent, glanced at the radar screens in front of him and saw it wasn’t much further until the next jump point. “Next jump ahead.”

“Thanks.” Quill sat in his pilot seat, directing the Benatar towards the next location. “You can tell them if you want.”

Tony was certain he knew who Quill meant. “Who?” He had to check though.

“My grandfather… and the rest of the family I left behind. Tell him I’m still alive and I’m living the best life possible. Maybe I’ll see him one day. Maybe I won’t.” Quill shrugged. “If I’m ever on Terra for a longer period maybe I will pop by. I can make no promises though.”

Tony pursed his lips. “Ok.” He wasn’t too sure on what else to say. The conversation was clearly over. Quill had made it known he wasn’t interested in returning to Earth and seeing the family he had left behind or try to assist the planet that had birthed him. Tony couldn’t blame him. Despite believing he would return to Earth, Tony had no way of knowing how he’d react in the situation Quill had found himself in when he’d been abducted.

All he could do whilst waiting patiently for Gamora to return before he could leave his station was focus on how far away the next jump point was. Settling back more comfortably in the chair, he hoped it wouldn’t be too long before he was relieved.

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They were sitting at the back of the Benatar, away from the other crew members. Natasha leaned back against the wall, her knees up to her chest as she glanced at Steve who sat beside her on the floor, legs stretched out and his hands in his lap.
“Was the future that bad?” Steve asked quietly.

Surprised by the question, Natasha looked at Steve, studying his expression carefully. There was curiosity there, a sense of wonderment of how bad the future could be. She wasn’t sure how much she should tell him. “It could have been better,” she stated.

“How many died?”

Natasha paused, unsure of whether to confirm anything. She felt a tiny prod in her mind, the voice coming to life once again. The voice that rarely said anything now, choosing to let her and Tony make their own decisions without any outside interference.

_Tell him everything._

The indication that Steve needed to know everything was startling at best. Why was it necessary for him to know?

_Because he has a role to play._ The voice didn’t reveal much but the hint was enough for Natasha to realise Steve was important to the endgame.

“Nat?” Steve asked quietly, noticing how reluctant she was to answer.

“Steve… What I’m about to tell you cannot get back to anyone. Not even Tony.” She had the feeling Tony wasn’t supposed to know the extent of Steve’s knowledge of what their future had been like. At least not yet anyway. “Promise me you will not speak a word to anyone about what I’m about to tell you.”

“I promise,” replied Steve sincerely.

Natasha breathed in and out slowly. “Thank you.” Shuffling on her knees, she turned to face Steve. “Half the universe died, Steve.”

He jerked back in shock. “What? How?”

“The stones, Steve,” she explained. “They are integral to Thanos’ plan. If he gets them he can simply snap his fingers and erase half of all life which is exactly what he did in our future. To reverse it the cost was high, so very high.”

Steve swallowed. “What was the cost?”

She lowered her gaze. Something was telling her that Steve knowing that she and Tony had died wouldn’t be a bad thing. He needed to know. “Our lives.”

Steve blinked several times. “Yours and Tony’s?”

Natasha nodded, confirming his guess. “Yes. Thanos destroyed the Stones after he used them against us… Five years passed before we could do anything to bring everyone back…” She turned away, leaning her head back against the bulkhead. “Tony invented time-travel. We picked out years where we could access all the Stones, retrieve them and bring them back to our time.”

“What year was it?” asked Steve.

“2023,” she answered. “The world had moved on as best it could. The Avengers was pretty much disbanded. I still lead them… You ran a support group for people who had lost loved ones and were trying to move on…” Natasha bowed her head, sadness welling up inside her as she
remembered those dreary years. “Half of the Avengers were taken when Thanos snapped his fingers… Our numbers were greatly reduced… Clint lost his whole family and he disappeared for years… Thor lost over half of his people… Huh… if you knew what he had become in those five years, you wouldn’t believe it.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask,” winced Steve.

“Don’t then. It shouldn’t happen this time.” Though Natasha wasn’t sure they’d be able to prevent the loss of Asgard. They were not sure if they could reach Asgard easily. They were saving the Space Stone until last in the hope that they’d still have a chance at preventing Asgard’s destruction and the loss of Thor’s people from Thanos’ rage when he’d attacked them afterward. “Bruce returned too… He changed in those five years… I won’t say how… Spoilers…”

“And Tony?” probed Steve quietly.

“He retired.” A slight smile tugged at her face. Though Tony had cut himself off from the Avengers, he had kept up a bit of contact with Natasha over the years. Pepper had also sent her the occasional photo of Morgan as she grew up. “Morgan…” she whispered. Now there was a little girl who adored her father.

“Morgan?” Steve asked. “Nat, who is Morgan?”

Natasha bit her lower lip. “I shouldn’t…” She’d made a small error in thinking of Tony’s daughter and saying her name in Steve’s perceptive hearing. “He needs to know… The voice in her head urged her to continue.

She wondered why he did need to know but the voice remained silent, unwilling to give any further clues.

But Steve already knew. He could guess on the limited clues Natasha had already given. “Morgan is Tony’s child…”

Natasha nodded, affirming the information. “Yeah. His daughter. She was only four when he died. He and Pepper married and had Morgan. They chose to try to move on with their lives… And we dragged Tony back in. He didn’t want to but… equally, he couldn’t stay away. I gave my life to get one of the Stones, and Tony… He sacrificed his life to save the whole universe. It was the only way.”

Steve reached for Natasha’s hand. “I’m sorry for what happened.”

Natasha squeezed his hand. “It’s alright. We got given a chance to stop it from happening. I don’t know why we were chosen or how it happened but somehow after I died… I can’t really explain it… I still had consciousness. I was given a choice to come back and I arrived back in 2014… I couldn’t change anything… Not until Tony arrived two years later.”

“You were here for two years?”

She nodded. “I was. I died in 2014. I died in the past collecting the Stones. I guess I had to remain in the year I died. Tony ended the war in 2023 but came back to 2016. I don’t know why it was different for him but I guess 2016 was the year when things started to really go wrong for the Avengers.”

“The Accords,” whispered Steve. “That’s why you two fought so hard to get the changes made.”
“It was. I shouldn’t tell you this but nothing is telling me not to.” Natasha shifted position so she was facing him. “The Avengers broke apart and that was why we failed last time. The Accords split us and that was where everything started to go wrong. We had to stay together and the only way to do that was to keep us together… There were more advantages to us working with the Accords than not at all. We had the advantage of knowing what had happened before…” She could see the curiosity across Steve’s face. “No, I’m not telling you what happened.”

“I wasn’t going to ask,” replied Steve.

“Good,” she smiled.

“If you’ve already got two Stones and destroyed them, do we really need to go after the others? You’ve already stopped him from collecting them all,” observed Steve.

Natasha shrugged. She couldn’t exactly reveal that Tony was absorbing them. “Better to be safer than sorry.” Tony had been given powers for a reason and he was clearly meant to access them. As far they could tell all he had to do was simply touch one and it would absorb into his skin. No, it didn’t matter they had taken two out of Thanos’ reach, what mattered was that Tony needed to get his hands on them all.

“I won’t ask,” said Steve quietly.

She smiled up at him. “Thank you. When we’re ready to tell you more, we will. All we need now is your support and aid in getting what we need. Just… Promise me something, Steve.”

“Anything,” he agreed.

“Promise me you’ll support Tony. I know you two haven’t had the best of starts with a friendship. But he needs you to follow him. Tony and I… we’re both important to what is coming. I’ll be standing beside Tony when Thanos comes. I need you to be on his side too. Not just on mine.” Natasha squeezed his hand.

Steve nodded. “I will. Tony can trust me to do the right thing.”

She smiled sadly. “More than anything he wants Morgan back. He’s fighting for the future he lost. She deserves a life with her father and her mother. Please, be there for him when he needs it.”

Steve leaned back, his gaze turning to curiosity. “Why are you making it sound like you are going to die, Nat?”

“Because I might. I might not be there at the end. We could face Thanos before the end battle comes. It doesn’t mean I will be here for all of it. Tony has to be. He’s the most important piece and he needs to be protected. Make sure he survives. Please!” Natasha squeezed his hands again.

“I promise. But if you think –”

She cut him off. “Hush. Say no more.” The look she gave Steve was enough to keep him silent. She leaned into his shoulder.

It had been on her mind for a while.

The Soul Stone and how they were supposed to retrieve it without a sacrifice.

It couldn’t be Pepper. Tony would never be able to do it.
She’d never let him try anyway.

*It has to be me. I have to die for Tony to get the Soul Stone. It’s the only way.*

It was not a comforting thought.

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**Tuesday 11th April 2017**

**Knowhere**

When they arrived at Knowhere, Natasha was surprised to learn it was a mining colony within the decapitated head of an ancient Celestial. The mining colony’s primary goal was to harvest the valuable and rare materials from the bone, brain tissue and spinal fluid, most of which remained to this day. The colony had become a safe place for outlaws since it had been established centuries ago.

They docked the *Benatar* as close to the location of where the Reality Stone was stored. The Guardians informed them that it would be held within the Collector’s Museum and they needed to contact him. It might take them a while for him to agree to see them but Natasha hoped they wouldn’t have to wait too long.

They received a notification to visit the Collector’s Museum a few hours later and were led there by his messenger, a humanoid with grey skin and no hair. They didn’t all go to the Collector’s Museum, there was no need to. Steve and Pepper stayed on the *Benatar* with Groot, Drax, and Rocket whilst Wanda, Gamora and Quill accompanied Tony and Natasha to the Museum.

When they arrived they were escorted into a large room filled with glass cages that held different specimens and objects. Some were alive, others inanimate and in some cases dead. The Collector approached them, his hands held up in front of his chest.

The Collector appeared very eccentric, his white hair brushed up, and his bottom lip and onto his chin had a black ink mark down it. He wore thick gloves and a fur coat trailed from his shoulders. A plaid jacket could be seen underneath and black trousers completed his look. His intense eyes studied them all in turn and yet Natasha couldn’t help but notice his lingering look upon Tony as he swept his gaze across his visitors.

“Welcome!” he bowed, making a point of taking Natasha’s hand and kissing it on the top.

She didn’t want to tug it away for fear of causing a diplomatic incident. They needed this man on their side.

He bowed to Gamora too before inclining his head to the others.

“What can I do to assist you?” he asked, putting his hands together in front of him.

They had all agreed for Natasha to take the lead on this one, despite the Guardian’s previous history with the Collector.

“You have something that we require,” began Natasha cautiously. “One of the six Infinity Stones. It was delivered to you by the Asgardians who gave it into your keeping for safe care. We ask for it now for the sake of the universe.”

“The universe…?” The Collector strolled away, his back to them, running a hand down one of the
glass cages which held a living creature.

“Yes,” she reaffirmed. “The Stones need to be destroyed before they can be used by the wrong people.” She didn’t want to be explicit to say Thanos’ name. The little information they had on the Collector seemed to indicate he had been around for millions of years and was one of the older beings of the universe. Gamora had filled that portion of his history in for them on their way to Knowhere.

“They don’t need to be destroyed…” the Collector said, his robes sweeping around him as he turned back to face them. “You know this surely.” He said it as a statement of fact, not hiding the fact he was staring at Tony intently before sweeping his gaze around the room once again.

Natasha didn’t like his interest in Tony but if the Collector was an ancient being, who was as old as the universe, he could probably sense the power residing within Tony and knew it had to be absorbed rather than destroyed. “The containers themselves need to be destroyed,” she continued, “so that the Stones cannot be collected and used by anyone. They may still exist but it means they become harder to collect if they are just atoms spread across the universe. That is our goal.”

The Collector stepped forward again towards her, his gaze was intense. “What do you know of the Infinity Stones?”

Natasha swallowed. “Probably not as much as you might do…”

“You told us before when we came here with one of the other Stones,” began Gamora, moving forward to stand beside Natasha, “that before creation itself, there were six singularities and that when the universe exploded into existence, the remnants of these systems were forged into Infinity Stones. Only beings of extraordinary strength could wield them and survive.” She glanced at Quill before returning her attention to the Collector.

“There is more to the Infinity Stones than I have revealed…” the Collector said. “I will reveal more… but at a price.” His eyes flickered to Tony.

Even he noticed it but Tony didn’t flinch.

“Depends on the price,” Natasha bargained. If he was going to ask for Tony…

“Something unique has been happening in the universe. The Stones are not simply disintegrating into atoms. They are merging with a new carrier, finding a new container to be protected by. My price is simple. I wish to talk to the carrier of the Infinity Stones and find out what makes them worthy to protect them than older beings.”

He could sense the power within Tony, could potentially even see it. It worried Natasha that Tony’s powers and what his potential role was could already be known by older beings.

“We can do that,” said Tony, stepping forward and standing next to Natasha, “if we ever find such a person.”

“But we do need the stone, Tivan,” added Gamora quietly, using the Collector’s first name to address him. “Finding such a person who could be merging to become a new carrier could take years.”

“It won’t,” the Collector replied, his eyes focused solely upon Tony. “They’re right here after all, in this very room. I’m looking at him right now.”

Quill shook his head, surprise running across his features. “Wait. What? Him?” He pointed to
Tony. “Really? The Universe has to be having a laugh!”

Wanda moved in front of Tony who had stepped back slightly, her hands glowing red as she stared at the Collector. “You will not touch him!”

“I do not wish to collect him, dear girl, I simply wish to determine why he is worthy. Why was he chosen out of everyone else in the entire universe? Why was he chosen?” The Collector didn’t edge forward but kept his gaze completely on Tony.

Natasha could see the weary and surprised gazes of Quill and Gamora and she knew the game was up. They wouldn’t be able to hide the fact that they were not destroying the Stones.

“The other two were not destroyed were they?” Gamora asked quietly.

Natasha swallowed and reluctantly nodded. “They weren’t. There is more about us than you know but we are all on the same side here. I promise to tell you when we get back to the ship.”

The Collector spread his arms out. “I mean him no harm. I just wish to talk to him privately.”

“Tony?” Natasha asked. She couldn’t make this decision for him.

“I’ll talk if Nat is there too,” stated Tony, folding his arms across his chest. “But you have to show us the Reality Stone first.”

The Collector paused, considering the offer Tony had made.

Natasha held her breath waiting patiently for his response.

The Collector moved quickly, reaching out his hand towards Tony. “Shake and we have a deal.”

Trading a quick glance with her, Tony took the Collector’s hand and made the deal.

“Follow me…” The Collector bowed, indicating for Tony and Natasha to follow him.

Glancing over her shoulder, Natasha looked at Wanda, Quill, and Gamora. “You will get your answers. We just need to sort this out before we can.”

“Gamora tells me I have to wait,” replied Quill, absentmindedly kicking the floor, “but don’t be too long!”

“We won’t,” she smiled and hurried after Tony’s retreating back.

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The Collector leaned back in a chair in the office he’d led them to, just a short walk from his collection. His eyes remained focused upon Tony. “You are an interesting specimen…”

Tony didn’t sit down in the offered chair. “I would prefer not to be called ‘specimen’ when addressed, thank you very much.”

“Then what shall I call you?”

“I think you already know who I am,” replied Tony curtly. “You look middle-aged but I doubt you are.”

The Collector smirked. “Correct, Tony Stark. I am an elder of the universe. I have been around for
“Which is how come you know a lot about the Stones,” noted Natasha. “Now, show us the Reality Stone as you promised you would or we will walk out of here right now.”

“Walking out of here wouldn’t be so easy,” said the Collector, amused his eyes once again on Tony.

Tony had a feeling something was going to happen. He didn’t feel safe and there was warmth in his chest which hadn’t been there before.

The Collector turned to the wall, pressed a few buttons on a control pad, imprinted his hand upon a scanner and had his eyes looked at before the wall slid partially open revealing a small, lantern-shaped container. In the centre it was glowing slightly red and a buzzing sound could be heard. “Your proof.”

“We want to see it properly,” emphasised Nat. “Open it.”

Tony moved closer to Natasha. “I don’t think that is wise.”

“Why not?”

“No sure… But let’s wait. I know it is in there,” he whispered. “My chest feels warm again like it was for the other two.”

The Collector was watching them beadily. “If you want this, you promised to talk. Tell me why you are worthy, Tony Stark?”

Tony shrugged. “I would consider myself not worthy and yet here I am. I can’t answer your questions because I do not have the answers myself.”

“You are something… new…” the Collector murmured. “Something… dangerous. And yet this Stone is responding to you. It wants to get out.”

The noise from the container was increasing and they could hear it bashing itself against the sides of the container, trying everything to break free from its prison.

“What would happen if I let it out?” The Collector moved his hand to the latch at the top of the container and pulled it up.

“Don’t!” Natasha reached forward. “Don’t let it out.”

“Why not? I want to know what makes him so special? What did you do to be given the ability to protect them all? What makes you a god, Tony Stark?” The Collector’s eyes were dark and dangerous and suddenly his hand was moving. He pressed something on his desk and Tony and Natasha went flying back against the wall, their backs impacting hard against it, and they were unable to move as if an invisible force was holding them back.

“I’m not a god,” hissed out Tony, struggling against the invisible force.

“You can’t escape,” said the Collector. “Tell me what you are and I’ll let you go.”

“He’s human!” shouted Natasha. “That’s all he is!” She struggled but couldn’t get loose. “Let us go!”

“If he was human, he would not be able to contain the Infinity Stones.” The Collector raised the
container again. “If you will not talk then I shall act.”

Tony’s eyes widened. The last thing he wanted was for this to happen. Deep down he knew he had to be something more than human for him to be able to absorb the Infinity Stones. The question was: what was he? He was afraid and his chest was feeling hot. Not like this… not like this!

And then the Collector opened the container and a red sludge stormed out, magnifying in size. The red sludge’s appearance caused the Collector to stumble and then fall back, his own eyes widening at the sight of what the Reality Stone could become.

Tony could see the sludge glowing red, his own body beginning to shine red and the sludge drifted towards him, solidifying itself into a smaller shape until it was a Stone. Floating in mid-air the Stone hovered right in front of his chest.

Intense warmth spread across his whole body and he felt so hot… So unnaturally hot…

His vision went dark briefly and the next thing he knew he was on the floor of the Collector’s office and the Reality Stone was on the floor next to him. Shaking his head, he saw Gamora in front of the Collector, blaster aimed at his face, with Quill and Wanda standing guard. Twisted beads of magic drifted from the tips of Wanda’s fingers.

He felt thin fingers hold him by the shoulders as he took in deep breaths.

“Tony,” Natasha whispered. “Take it. You know you have to.”

Tony nodded, reached out for the Reality Stone with his right arm but as soon as his fingers touched the smooth surface of the Stone, it turned into sludge again, attaching itself to his fingers. He jerked back but was unable to release himself from the grip of the sludge. Turning his hand over, the sludge covered his whole hand before it began to melt into his hand.

“What the –”

Tony drowned out Quill’s voice as his chest warmed and his right arm glowed the same shade of red as the Stone, and then the last tendrils of the sludge vanished into his palm and the warmth feeling disappeared as the glow around his arm dissipated.

Three down, three to go.

He glanced up at Natasha who offered him her hand and got to his feet. The Collector was still surrounded by the others but Wanda was lowering her hands now, the tendrils of power from her fingers vanishing into thin air and Gamora was lowering her own blaster before stepping back.

The Collector brushed down his clothes and resumed looking at Tony. “You are definitely something new, Tony Stark, perhaps even more powerful than the ancients themselves.”

“You’ll let us go?” asked Tony, trying to mask the croakiness in his throat.

The Collector bowed rather emphatically, brushing his arms out behind him in a wide arc. “Of course. I… always keep… to my… word.” He almost seemed afraid.

Tony ran out of the room.

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“Ok, can someone explain what the hell is going on?” Quill shouted as they walked back to the
Benatar, with Tony a little way in front of him.

Natasha couldn’t blame Tony for wanting to keep his distance. Two people had witnessed what their true purpose was in finding the Stones. Quill and Gamora were never supposed to find out, but then everyone they had tried to keep it from had discovered it one way or another.

Perhaps they were not meant to hide Tony’s unique abilities.

“You won’t believe us even if we tried to explain it to you,” said Natasha.

“Try us,” stated Gamora, one hand on the hilt of the sword she carried with her.

They had to go for the simplest explanation possible. “We cannot explain why Tony can do what he can. All we know is that we had an Infinity Stone in our possession and Tony absorbed it. We found a second on Earth and the same thing happened. We realised that was what we had to do. We need to find them and get Tony to touch them. I can’t explain why he is capable of absorbing them. He just is. We need your help to get the rest.” She locked eyes with Gamora. “If you know of anyone who could possibly know where the Soul Stone rests, the exact galactic coordinates, we need to know. Otherwise, there is still a chance Thanos would win. If Tony can absorb them, then they could, potentially, be forcibly removed from him. We need your help to stop him together.”

“No one knows where the Soul Stone resides,” said Gamora quietly.

“Tony needs it,” said Natasha quietly. “Otherwise…” She trailed off. They knew the Soul Stone was on Vormir but the exact galactic co-ordinates she didn’t know. Nebula had pre-programmed the co-ordinates into the Benatar back when they’d arrived in 2014 on Morag. She needed Gamora to tell them the co-ordinates.

Gamora stayed silent but her eyes were watchful.

“Please don’t tell the others what happened there,” said Natasha quietly. “We’ll talk to them when the time is right.” Though she knew the time was rapidly coming when everything would have to be revealed to everyone who was a part of the Avengers.

“I’m not so keen on keeping secrets from my crew,” stated Quill, lifting his chin and folding his arms across his chest, creasing the jacket he wore.

“You keep secrets from them all the time.” Gamora swatted him on the arm. “We’ll keep it quiet on the condition you say something soon.”

Natasha nodded. “Thank you. We will.” She glanced ahead and saw Tony at the bottom of the Benatar’s ramp being embraced by Pepper. Picking up the pace she jogged over to them, gently tapping Tony on the shoulder.

He turned to face her, one arm still wrapped around Pepper.

“We need to talk,” she said quietly.

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They locked themselves in one of the smaller quarters of the Benatar.

Tony sat beside Pepper, head bowed whilst Natasha leaned back against the wall. The dim light cast shadows around the room.

“The Collector,” grated out Nat. “He knew more about Tony than we considered possible. He held us against our will and released the Reality Stone, wanting to know why Tony is capable of absorbing them. As a result Quill and Gamora now know that we not just simply destroying the Stones.”

“It’s not that…” whispered Tony. “I don’t know how I got on the floor.”

“What do you mean?” Natasha seemed startled.

“Between the Reality Stone hovering in front of my chest to it and me being on the floor!” he retorted. “What happened?”

Natasha gasped. “You don’t know what happened? What you did?”

Tony shook his head. “No!”

“Nat, what happened?” pressed Pepper.

Natasha paced up and down the room before turning and getting to her knees so she was in front of Tony and he was forced to look at her. “Tony, nothing bad happened. We were held against the wall. The Stone was in front of you. Then your whole body sort of glowed yellow and green… And then you spoke. It was with your voice.”

“What did I say?” breathed Tony.

“’You will let us go,’” she repeated. “It was quite forceful but I thought it was you speaking…”

He shook his head, beads of sweat appearing on his forehead. “It wasn’t. I don’t remember doing it. I blacked out.”

Natasha swallowed, processing the new information. “Oh. The Collector let us go and we both fell to the floor. I did land on my feet but you completely crumpled. Then Gamora, Quill, and Wanda appeared. They said they had heard strange noises and decided they had to investigate and then I rushed over to you…”

“And you told me to take it,” said Tony. “Whatever spoke with my voice wasn’t me.” He pulled Pepper into a hug. “Nat, what if at the end of this, when I’ve absorbed all the Stones, what if I’m no longer me?” He tapped his chest. “There is something in here that can take control of my body and I don’t remember it. What if my fate is to die, to be a vessel but lose myself along the way?”

Natasha shook her head vigorously. “No, I refuse to believe that is what will happen to you, Tony.” She reached for one of his hands. “Listen to me, I know you may find it hard to believe this, but I am sure you will not lose yourself. Maybe because you cannot use your powers yet, they are still separate entities within you and when they feel threatened they take over? If you are supposed to protect them, once you are all fully merged together, you will remember.”

Tony nervously laughed. “It’s nice you are so optimistic, Romanoff, but I don’t share it.”

Pepper pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Tony… Everything is going to be fine.” There was worry in her eyes, Natasha could see, keeping strong for Tony. “As long as you have me, you’ll be fine. I won’t let you lose yourself.”

Tony swallowed. “We might not have a choice, Pep.”
“There is always a choice,” she returned.

Natasha nodded emphatically. “Tony, trust me when I say this; those that love and care for you will be with you every step of the way. We will not let you lose yourself.”

To be continued...

Thank you to JediPanda22 for this illustration of Wanda destroying the Mind Stone from Chapter 16!

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

Just a few notes:

1) Steve has an important role to play. Natasha did give him too much information but he was always meant to know more than the others. The only thing he doesn't know yet is that instead of destroying the Stones, Tony is absorbing them.

2) The Collector is an ancient being. According to the MCU wiki, he came into being just after the creation of the universe so he would definitely have a lot of knowledge regarding the Infinity Stones. I also think, because of Tony's uniqueness, he'd be curious and intrigued by Tony himself.

3) Nat's revelation about potentially having to sacrifice herself for the Soul Stone again... Tony needs to absorb it. Someone has to make that sacrifice for him to get it. It may not play out that way... The Soul Stone chapter is coming soon so answers will be given on that specific conundrum soon...
4) What held Tony and Nat in place was a forcefield pressing them against the wall. I didn't explicitly say what was holding them against the wall so just wanted to clarify in my notes.

5) The relationship between the Stones and Tony and how it involves Natasha as well will become clearer. We're getting quite a bit of information now but not everything... There is still a lot to be revealed! :D

Happy new year everyone! This will be the last update of 2019... with the next one coming on Sunday 5th January 2020!

And, as a little tease, here are the chapter titles for the four chapters I'd like to post in January on the 5th, 12th, 19th, 26th...

Chapter Twenty-One: The Power Stone
Chapter Twenty-Two: The Soul Stone
Chapter Twenty-Three: The Wedding
Chapter Twenty-Four: Bruce Returns

See you all in 2020!

the-writer1988

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End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

Future chapters will be longer. I hope to update weekly!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!