Tangled Up in You

by SailorChibi

Summary

Sometimes when you meet your soulmate, it's just not the right time.

In the aftermath of everything, T'Challa sets about proving that he really does want Tony.

Notes

I've been branching out into some other pairings with Tony, just feeling my way around what else is out there. I wrote a little bit of a Tony/T'Challa fic and ended up being commissioned for way more of it than I thought would ever happen. Should be around 4-5 chapters long.
See the end of the work for more notes.
Like all kidnappers who decided that kidnapping Tony Stark would be a good life choice, they died in a glorious blaze of explosions.

Tony leaned back against the tree, head tipped up towards the sky, and listened to the distant booms until they gradually died off and the only thing he could hear was the sound of his own breathing. It was dark and quiet now; he wasn't sure where he was, only that he was probably (hopefully?) still on American soil, which didn't mean much at all. Roughly 3/4s of the country hated his guts for fighting against Captain America, and the other 1/4 only liked him for the products that he could offer them.

And money. Always the money.

He stayed where he was for a little while longer, just resting, before he slowly hoisted himself to his feet. His bad arm throbbed and so did his ribs - he'd fractured, if not outright broken, a couple - and the rest of his body was definitely bruised because his captors hadn't been gentle, but there was nothing serious enough to keep him from hiking through the woods to the nearest town.

At least this time, it wasn't winter and he wasn't having to walk through several inches of snow while dragging a heavy suit of armor behind him. Small miracles; after the past three days, which had been spent in a dank, smelly cell waiting for his opportunity to escape, he wasn't going to complain.

Something flashed, the moonlight reflecting off metal, and Tony froze as Black Panther emerged from between two trees, stealthy and silent. Tony was so shocked that he just stood there, staring.

Out of all the people that he had not been expecting to see, Black Panther was in the top five. As far as Tony knew, the king was supposed to be safe in his own country.

"What are you doing here?" he asked rudely. His throat tightened, the effect of smoke catching up on him, and he swallowed roughly against a coughing spell. It didn't work. His ribs burned as he started to cough, and he silently upgraded the fracture into a definite break.

"A ransom note was sent to us." Black Panther removed his helmet. "And I could sense that you were in danger."

"What are you doing here?" Tony asked rudely. His throat tightened, the effect of smoke catching up on him, and he swallowed roughly against a coughing spell. It didn't work. His ribs burned as he started to cough, and he silently upgraded the fracture into a definite break.

"A ransom note was sent to us." Black Panther removed his helmet. "And I could sense that you were in danger."

"Really," Tony said, just as flat, not believing him for a second. "And - you know we haven't actually bonded, right? Like just because we shook hands, that doesn't mean you're going to die when I die. I bet it wouldn't even hurt that much. Like a bee sting." He smiled, all teeth.

"That is not why I'm here."

"Then why are you here? I didn't demand anything of you. And I won't. I don't want anything." Tony drew back slightly, wrapping his good arm over his belly for support. T'Challa was probably the only person left in the world who could hurt him (or at least, that's what he wanted to believe). "I'm sorry you got stuck with me for a soul mate. But I haven't told anyone. I wouldn't do that to - well, to anyone, but especially not to you. We can just pretend it never happened. Like we have
For a good thirty seconds, T'Challa just stared at him. Tony got uncomfortable approximately three seconds in. He shifted out from under the tree and backed away another couple steps, then realized that was stupid: regardless of whether he turned his back on T'Challa, it wouldn't make a difference if T'Challa really wanted to kill him. Tony was just a human, and an injured one at that, whereas T'Challa was definitely... something more. So he turned around and started walking in the opposite direction, hoping that T'Challa hadn't brought anyone else with him.

"Anthony," T'Challa said behind him.

Tony winced. "Please don't call me that." The last time anyone had called him that was Jarvis, and Howard, and Maria... the old ache rose up inside of him, clawing at his chest.

"Tony. My plane is this way. I can give you a lift. Unless you prefer to walk over twenty miles to Mianus."

"Excuse me?" Tony said, spinning around.

"Mianus, Connecticut," T'Challa said with a completely straight face. "It's the closest town."

Tony stared at him again. "Are you shitting me? Because I haven't eaten or slept in over three days and I'm pretty sure I have broken ribs and probably a concussion and that would just be cruel."

Something that looked a little like concern flashed over T'Challa's face, gone too fast, and he said, "You could keep walking and find out, or you could follow me to my private plane."

Connecticut. Jesus, Tony's kidnappers went for the weirdest places sometimes. Going with T'Challa wasn't the best idea - even this proximity was making his heart rate speed up, though that could've also been the last of the adrenaline - but there was no way he'd make a twenty mile trek through the woods either. He really didn't feel like passing out and dying of exposure outside of some city named Mianus. He couldn't help the way his lips twitched. T'Challa must've caught it, because he smiled. It was a small smile but damn it was gorgeous, transforming T'Challa's whole face into something that made Tony's stomach flip. His body swayed towards T'Challa of its own accord, bringing him within arm's reach. T'Challa watched him steadily, eyes bright with something Tony couldn't identify.

Quietly, he said, "I did not acknowledge the bond when we first touched because I was in mourning, consumed with grief, and did not feel I had adequate time to greet you the way our traditions dictate. That was my mistake, and I apologize. It was not about you. It never was, but it should have been. You are... I would be honored if you told the world we were mates."

Tony's mouth went dry. "Clearly my concussion is worse than I thought, because I'm hearing things."

"You're not hearing things, but..." T'Challa frowned, and he closed the distance between them. His hand lifted. Tony very carefully did not flinch, staying perfectly still, not even breathing while T'Challa so very carefully touched the back of his head. His fingers were gentle, but Tony still hissed through his teeth at the white-hot burst of pain that rattled through his head. The pads of T'Challa's fingers came away wet with blood, overly dark under the shadow of the trees.

"You need medical attention," T'Challa said, a new timbre of concerned anger running through his voice.
"That's not new," Tony muttered, thrown off by this strange new attitude. It wasn't unpleasant, though it was odd to have someone besides Pepper or Rhodey openly worried about him. He couldn't help wondering what T'Challa wanted. Sex, maybe? Some people did say that sex with your mate was like the ultimate trip. No other experience in life could compare. He definitely wouldn't mind getting down with T'Challa, though with the current state of his ribs and head Tony would have to pretty much lie back and let T'Challa do the work.

T'Challa definitely looked like he wanted to say something at that, but he visibly swallowed whatever he'd been about to say. Instead, he said, "Will you come with me?"

"Okay, fine," Tony said. "It's not like I have any other options." He looked past T'Challa and hesitated. "Wait, you're not - you're alone, aren't you? There's no one else on the plane?" And by that, he meant that he'd rather take his chances with the twenty mile trek than have to spend even five minutes with the Avengers right now. He couldn't bear to sit in a small, enclosed space with Clint or Wanda, much less Steve.

"It's just me and a few of my personal guard," T'Challa replied. "I had several offers for company, but I declined."

Tony snorted. "I find that hard to believe," he muttered. "The only reason any of them would want to see me right now is so that they could tell me what a shitty job I'm doing at handling everything. After all, Ross might have been dealt with but the WSC still isn't happy." He eyed T'Challa, wondering if T'Challa would be the same as everyone else he'd talked to about this. Rhodey was the only person who felt that the rest of the team had been in the wrong. Pepper felt that Tony should be the one to apologize, as though getting down on his knees and begging for forgiveness would change anything at this point.

"Yes, I've been following your progress through the press. American media is notoriously unreliable, but you've been doing an admirable job."

That was... unexpected, and it was something about T'Challa that Tony couldn't decide if he liked or not. T'Challa constantly left him feeling wrong-footed; he was never sure what the right thing to say or do was. And admittedly Tony was used to that, but he couldn't bullshit his way through with T'Challa the way he could with everyone else. Because T'Challa was one of those exceptionally rare people who could see straight through Tony without even trying, and lying to him just didn't do any good.

"I wouldn't call it admirable," Tony said finally, dropping his gaze. More like hideous. Most days he was barely keeping his head above water. It seemed like not a day went by that he wasn't fielding off a new demand for the rest of the team, or trying to figure out best to handle the issue of the accords. Stark Industries had distanced themselves from him as much as possible, though of course the public demand for Tony's products would never die. They just didn't want to admit that everything came from his hands alone. That, on top of the fact that there was still a demand for super heroes and Tony was now trying to handle about 90% of those missions on his own. He was working himself to the bone, but this time there was no reward and he didn't think there ever would be.

"I would. But come," T'Challa said, when the silence dragged on. "You're shivering."

Was he? Tony hadn't even noticed. T'Challa turned and Tony followed automatically, keeping his eyes on T'Challa's back. Or, well, okay. Maybe a little lower than his back. He might be half-starved, exhausted and in pain, but Tony wasn't dead and T'Challa had an extremely fitted uniform that displayed his assets pretty nicely. Tony wasn't going to lie; he would be willing to follow such a gorgeous ass pretty far.
As it turned out, T'Challa hadn't been lying. His plane was only about a ten minute walk through the trees, and Tony was shocked he hadn't heard it land. Wakandan technology at its finest, no doubt. His fingers itched to get a good long look at the plane's mechanics, maybe even delve into the on-board computer, but he knew better than to push his luck and ask. Wakanda was extremely protective when it came to its technology, and for good reason. More than one person had tried to make off with Wakandan secrets and paid the price.

They were met by a handful of guards, a mixture of men and women that stared at Tony with unsmiling faces. T'Challa set a hand on Tony's shoulder and guided him up the ramp. His hand was warm, even through the uniform, and Tony was so shocked by the contact that he couldn't find it in himself to say a word. It had been months since anyone touched him. He'd almost forgotten what it felt like.

For some reason that, out of everything, was what made the tears well up in Tony's eyes.
Chapter 2

Tony did his best to blink the tears back before T’Challa or anyone else noticed. He didn’t have much left but his pride, and frankly after everything that had happened he didn’t think that wasn’t worth much, but he was determined to cling to it with all that he had. He’d just managed to rescue himself from being kidnapped; he would be damned before anyone saw him being weak now.

Especially T’Challa. The idea that they would ever get anywhere as soulmates was laughable, but Tony still wanted T’Challa to think positively of him. After the past three days, he didn’t have it in him to be his usual annoying, babbling self. This time, he settled for silence and hobbled over to an unclaimed seat in the corner. His ribs ached as he sat down, but his legs were grateful for the rest.

It wasn’t too hard to find a distraction: the plane was a thing of beauty. Tony couldn’t resist trailing a reverent hand over the wall. He couldn’t immediately identify what material it was made out of. A mixture of vibranium and something else, maybe. The metal was cool to the touch and rippled faintly when he applied even a little pressure. He closed his eyes and let himself wonder, for just a moment, what the armor might look like if he could add vibranium to it.

The next thing Tony knew, someone was picking him up. A tingle ran through his body, something he’d never felt before, dulling the pain of his injuries and leaving him flushed from head to toe. It was a pleasant sensation, if unexpected, and he couldn’t resist nuzzling into the touch. The arms hugged him tighter in response and a chest rumbled beneath his ear. The exact words were lost on Tony, but the rumbling was nice and made what was obviously a dream feel a little more real.

He slept deeply and well for the first time since Ultron, and didn’t wake up until the sun hit him in the face. Tony groaned a little in protest, rolling gingerly onto his side, but the annoying rays followed him even when he tried to bury his head in the pillow.

"FRIDAY, could you dim the lights?" he croaked.

"It’s not possible to dim the sun, Boss."

Tony sighed. It was times like this that he missed JARVIS. Well, okay, that was a lie. He always missed JARVIS. "Just pull the curtains down, please."

"Allow me."

He bolted upright at the very unexpected voice, staring wide eyed over the couch as T’Challa walked over to the large window and drew the curtain across, blocking out the sun. It left the living room comfortably dark, with the only light source a lamp over the chair T’Challa had obviously been sitting in. Tony stared dumbly at the half-empty cup of tea and book, both sitting on the end table, and couldn’t help the pang of sadness. The tea in the tower had belonged to Bruce, and that book looked like one of the trashy romances that Steve used to like so much. Both of which had been left behind after the avengers went their separate ways.

He wondered, sometimes, if Bruce had good tea where he was, or if Steve was finding new, even trashier romances in Wakanda.

"Is that better?" T’Challa asked when the silence dragged on a little too long, and Tony’s eyes jerked back to him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, brushing off the lingering memories of the Avengers. There was no point in thinking about them, but no matter how much he reminded himself of that fact, they
always seemed to pop up in his head at the most inconvenient times.

"Do you remember what happened?" T'Challa asked instead.

"Yes, I was kidnapped." It was hard to forget when just inhaling made his ribs ache - though noticeably less so than before. He looked down, realizing that he'd been undressed and his ribs had been bound while he was out. His arm was also bandaged and cradled snugly against his chest in a sling. The rest of his scrapes and bruises had also been treated.

"Good. Then you know you were injured. I did not feel right in leaving you alone," said T'Challa, returning to his chair. "Miss Potts was here when we returned. When she saw you, she was very distressed. She insisted that your private clinician look over you before she would agree to depart."

"Oh." Some part of Tony relaxed at knowing that T'Challa wasn't the one who'd treated him, yet at the same time he was a little disappointed. "Why am I sleeping out here on the couch?"

"You haven't granted me permission to enter your bedroom."

Tony looked at him. "Permission?"

"A bedroom is a sacred place," T'Challa said, picking up his cup. He drained the rest of his tea before finishing, "As sacred as a man's area of work. Both could be considered the eyes to his soul. I would not presume to enter unless you gave me permission."

It was... kind of weird. None of the team had ever hesitated to enter any room in the tower except for his workshop, and that was only because the first time Clint came down unannounced, he'd scared Dummy and ended up with a face-full of fire extinguishing foam for his trouble. During the brief time the team had lived together, Tony had gotten used to hiding pretty much everything he wanted to be kept secret. And even that was a challenge, because Natasha and Clint were natural spies who lived to ferret out secrets.

"Thanks," he said after a long pause, knowing that the word was pretty damn inadequate in terms of everything T'Challa had done. Even if he'd gotten away from the kidnappers, T'Challa had rescued his ass from dying out in the middle of nowhere and fended off a bout of tears from Pepper. The mental tally he was keeping between him and T'Challa was looking more and more uneven by the day.

"You are welcome. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine."

T'Challa raised an eyebrow, looking a little amused. "So you say, yet when you sat up at the sound of my voice, you winced and cupped your free arm protectively over your ribs. You've also been wincing and squinting for the duration of our conversation. The doctor said you have a concussion, so am I safe in assuming that you would like one of the painkillers she left?"

Tony made a face. He'd never liked painkillers. Before it was because you weren't supposed to take them with alcohol, but now it was because they made him sleepy and he didn't have the time for that. "I told you, I'm fine."

"What would it take to get you to take at least one?" T'Challa asked. Because he seemed genuinely curious, Tony gave him an honest answer.

"I don't know. Maybe the ability to actually sleep for eight to ten hours without being harassed or otherwise disturbed by the WSC, Ross, Pepper, Stark Industries or some dumbass super villain out to
"conquer the world?" Tony said, dragging a weary hand down his face. It wasn't fair. You were supposed to feel better after sleeping, but he felt even more exhausted than before. He was fighting to keep his eyes open, and unless he got some coffee it wasn't a battle he was going to win.

T'Challa studied him for a few seconds, then said, "I told Miss Potts I would call her when you woke up, but that can be put off for another few hours yet. The doctor did recommend that you rest. As for the WSC, Ross or S.I., FRIDAY can block their calls for the time you need to sleep." He stepped closer and bent to pick up one of the pill bottles on the table, extending it to Tony. "If someone attacks the world while you're sleeping, I will take care of it."

It felt a little - okay, a lot like Tony was slacking. Yet he wanted desperately to accept T'Challa's offer and get a few precious minutes of rest where he didn't have to worry about anything. Still, he resisted. He didn't deserve to rest. He shook his head.

"You don't have to -"

"I do not have to do anything," T'Challa said, with the kind of cool, calm pride of someone who knows that is 100% true. "This is an offer I make because I want to. Please, Tony."

Turned out it was supremely hard to say no to T'Challa when he was standing two feet away and looking at Tony with those dark, pleading eyes. Tony took the stupid bottle and popped it open, shaking two white pills out into the palm of his hand. He tossed them back and swallowed dry, never losing eye contact with T'Challa. The gorgeous smile T'Challa gave him once Tony stuck his tongue out to prove that the pills were really gone made him more than a little weak at the knees, and he wobbled. T'Challa immediately grasped his arm to stabilize him.

"Would you permit me to escort you to your bedroom?" he asked, voice rumbling right into Tony's ear.

Which, yeah, unfair. Tony found himself nodding dumbly without really knowing what he was even agreeing to, so it was fortunate T'Challa hadn't asked for the rights to Stark Industries or something like that, because Tony probably would've said yes to that too.

T'Challa steered him over to the elevator. FRIDAY opened the doors immediately and they stepped inside. The smooth ride made Tony nauseous, and he meant to lean against the wall. Instead, he found himself leaning against T'Challa. The king was warm and strong, taking Tony's weight with little effort, and it was so nice, for once, to be able to lean against someone without having them run away or worse, throw it back into his face.

"FRIDAY, the curtains," T'Challa said right before the doors opened, and so when they walked into Tony's room the curtains were already drawn and it was blissfully dark. Tony zeroed in on his bed, sitting down and then slumping over with a soft moan. He couldn't remember the last time he'd actually laid down in his bed, and the mattress felt amazing against his sore and abused muscles. That, plus the fact that the painkillers were already kicking his ass, meant he was fading fast.

He meant to tell T'Challa that he could go, but instead what came out was, "Stay?"

"Of course," T'Challa said, a sad smile on his face as he sat on the edge of the bed. He looked at Tony for a moment before he began to sing. The song was low and sweet, though the words were unfamiliar - Xhosa was one of the few languages that Tony didn't speak and which he'd been meaning to learn, only there just never seemed to be any extra time to actually do it.

Against his will, his eyes slipped shut. He drifted off listening to the sound of T'Challa's song.
Chapter 3

Every time Tony woke up over the next god knows how long, T’Challa was there. He helped Tony to the bathroom at least three times, then brought him back to bed and encouraged him to take a painkiller and sip at both water and chicken broth. Tony was dizzy with fatigue and not hungry in the slightest, but it was hard to say no when T’Challa’s arm around his shoulders was making his skin fizzle pleasantly. He begrudgingly sipped a little of both before falling back asleep.

The fourth time he woke, T’Challa was gone and Tony was alone. In spite of the warmth of the blankets, Tony went cold from head to toe. In that (too) short span of time, he’d somehow grown used to having T’Challa around. To having a gentle voice and gentler hands taking care of him, the way no one else did.

And now T’Challa was gone, probably having returned to his country. He wasn’t sure why that knowledge hurt so much, but it did.

"FRIDAY, time and date?" he asked, rubbing at his chest.

"Monday the 5th, 10:16am," FRIDAY replied.

Huh. Last date Tony remembered was the 30th. He wasn’t sure how long he’d been with the kidnappers, probably at least two or three days, which meant that T’Challa had been caring for him for anywhere from three to four days. Pepper and Rhodey were probably going out of their minds by now. It was a wonder he hadn’t woken to find the both of them hovering by his bedside.

"Call Pepper," Tony said, deciding to put himself through the worst call first.

It wasn't pleasant.

In between calling him an idiot who didn’t know when to slow down, Pepper cried a lot. It turned out that Rhodny was in the office with her, which meant that he was yelling at Tony the whole time while Pepper was crying. Tony was seriously contemplating pulling the covers back up over his head until they both shouted themselves out when the door opened and T’Challa walked in.

Tony stared. T’Challa raised his eyebrows.

"Help," Tony mouthed at him.

"Miss Potts?" T’Challa said, looking like he was trying not to smile. "Mr. Rhodes?"

"Who’s that?" Pepper demanded. "Tony, who is that? Who’s there with you?"

"King T’Challa," said Tony, because hey - she’d asked.

Pepper made a choked sound that sounded like she was dying; Tony was pretty sure she’d punch him for that later on.

"Your highness," Rhodney said, instantly suspicious. He alone knew where the rest of the team was, and exactly who was offering them sanctuary.

"Good morning," T’Challa said, slipping something - a cell phone, Tony realized - into the pocket of his pants. "You should know that physically, Tony is healing well. He’s had a mild fever for the past four days, but your physician returned, Miss Potts, and said that it was more from lack of sleep and
food than from anything serious. Essentially, Tony has been pushing himself too hard." He sounded faintly disapproving.

"Well, I could've told you that," said Rhodey. "Tones, I thought you said you were going to start sleeping more."

"I did," Tony protested. Or at least, he'd had every intention of doing so. But every time he thought about taking a break to catch some sleep, something else that was vital popped up in his inbox. He couldn't in good conscience sleep when there were important things to be done - sometimes things that could make the difference between the rest of the team being put into jail or remaining free in Wakanda.

Rhodey sighed, as though he'd plainly heard what Tony wasn't saying. "You really are an idiot. Pepper and I are coming over."

"Okay," Tony said, somewhat meekly. There was no point in arguing.

The call ended then, which meant Tony had about twenty minutes before the two of them showed up on his doorstep. He looked up at T'Challa. Apparently the man hadn't left after all, which was something Tony didn't really understand. T'Challa had a whole country to run. Why the hell was he wasting time here in New York, taking care of Tony?

"I thought you left."

T'Challa shook his head. "I was speaking with my sister when FRIDAY alerted me to the fact that you were awake. I meant to be here, but Shuri needed my help."

"Then you should go to her," said Tony. It was hard to quantify the emotions spinning through him right now, but the equal parts fear and hope were easy to pick out. Hope that maybe T'Challa had stayed because he wanted to, because Tony was important, and fear that maybe it was the opposite. That T'Challa was just making sure he didn't die out of some unnecessary obligation, or as a way to pay any perceived debt.

"Actually, she and I were discussing the fact that I will be staying here in New York with you over the next three weeks. If you would have me, of course."

Tony stared. "You want to - what, why?"

"I would like to court you."

Out of everything that Tony had expected to hear, that was probably close to last on the list. "... What?"

T'Challa prowled closer to him. He glanced at the bed and then at Tony and Tony, after a moment of blankness, nodded his head. Only then did T'Challa sit, perching on the edge of the bed and looking directly into Tony's eyes.

"I told you before that I reacted badly when I found out about our bond," he said. "It was poor timing. I was in mourning for my father, and wholly unprepared to find my soulmate. Instead of explaining things to you, I foolishly told myself that you would automatically feel the same way and postponed our discussion. I'm sorry. I should have spoken to you then, instead of letting you think that I didn't want you all this time when, in fact, it's the very opposite."

Tony's mouth was dry. This was sounding like something straight out of the romantic movies Clint liked to watch. "T'Challa?"
"You are my soulmate. I would like you to be my partner. If you would give me permission to court you, I want to prove that I care for you. You, not your fame or your money or anything else you have to offer."

"I..." For one of the first times in Tony's life, he was truly speechless.

"That's why I came to find you," T'Challa went on. "I kept putting off contacting you even after things had settled somewhat. We were both preoccupied, but nothing is as important as this. It was only after I received word that you had been kidnapped that I realized how silly and irrational my actions were. The whole way here, I was consumed with how it would feel to arrive at that compound only to find you dead." His face twisted into the beginnings of true grief. "Dead, when I could have changed that if I had only spoken up sooner."

"But I'm not dead," Tony couldn't help pointing out, and T'Challa finally smiled.

"Yes, and I have thanked Bast every minute since then that you are still alive. I won't make the same mistake twice, Tony. You can think about it if you need to. I understand that I've sprung this on you, and that you're still ill.-"

"No!" Tony blurted out. "I mean - I mean, yes you can - but you know I'm not, you know -" He waved a hand between them. "You're a King. Don't you want someone who is more - you know?"

"You grew up in the limelight. Who could understand the pressure of that better than you?" T'Challa wanted to know.

"Exactly. You must know about my reputation. What I did. Who I did," Tony added bitterly, because even though it had been well over five years since his last party, the media still loved to act as though he hadn't changed at all. Either they were writing stories about what he'd done wrong as Iron Man, the things he'd done as the Merchant or Death, or about the playboy he wasn't anymore. Sometimes it felt like the amount of people who actually knew Tony could be counted on one hand.

"I know. But I don't care," T'Challa replied. "And neither will my people. If I judged every man by his past, I would be a fool indeed. I believe a man can change, Tony. You have proven that yourself. You are wise, generous, loving and kind. I could point to dozens of incidences in the past year alone that would prove that. Wakanda and I would be lucky to have you."

"You're crazy," Tony mumbled, but it was a weak protest and they both knew it. He touched the band around his left wrist. It covered the mark that had been there since he was born, and which only a select few people had ever seen. The last thing he needed was his mark leaking to the media; people would start showing up in droves claiming to be his soulmate just for a chunk of his money.

Very slowly, he tugged the band off. It left behind a perfect circle of pale flesh that hadn’t been touched by the sun in years. He turned his hand over, revealing the mark. He’d never understood it as a child. It was the outline of a cat that had something on its collar in place of a tag. Later, after he’d received the arc reactor, he realized that’s what it was: the arc reactor, hanging around the cat’s neck. Seeing it now when the mark was filled in, the black cat with the fiercely blue arc reactor, made him grimace.

"I’m a collar to you," Tony said hollowly, staring down at the mark. It was the only way he could think of to interpret it. “Something that’s holding you back. You shouldn’t be here.”

“I disagree.” T’Challa removed his own band from his right arm and held his hand out beside Tony’s. The two marks were a perfect match, of course, the only kind to exist in the world. “To me, this says that you are my home. An anchor that grounds me, as my mother was for my father. What’s
more, you are my most precious treasure, that I should both keep close and glorify.”

Tony’s cheeks heated up. No one had ever said something like that with so much sincerity.

“T’Challa…”

“If you don’t want me –”

“I do,” Tony cut him off. “I so do. It’s just – I don’t want you to make a mistake. You’re saying all these good things about me and I’m none of that, especially when it comes to a relationship.”

“I believe otherwise,” T’Challa said simply. “And as for the relationship, each one is unique. We can learn together what makes us work.”

“Okay.” The word was out before Tony could stop it, but how could he say no? This was his soulmate, and what’s more it was T’Challa. Tony didn’t know him that well yet, but he definitely wanted to.
Chapter 4

It would probably be embarrassing to admit that they just sat there for a few minutes, smiling at each other, before T’Challa finally said, “Did you want to get dressed before your friends come?”

“Uh, it’s fine.” Tony pulled the sheets up a little more. Pepper and Rhodey had seen him in worse than just boxers.

He thought things might be a little awkward when Rhodey and Pepper arrived, but it wasn’t. Pepper warmed up to T’Challa immediately – it helped that T’Challa was being his normal, charming self. Rhodey was a little more standoffish, but that wasn’t surprising. Neither of them stayed long, because Tony was still visibly exhausted and having difficulty staying awake as the conversation continued.

Tony eventually did fall asleep, much as he was trying to fight it, and woke up several hours later feeling slightly more human. He stumbled into the shower and fumbled around until he’d gotten the bandages off; he spent several long minutes turning around under the hot water, letting it wash away some of the tension in his muscles. It would only come back one he saw the inevitable state of his email, but for the time being it felt nice.

His ribs and arm ached as he got dressed, but it was nothing he wasn’t used to. He disregarded the painkillers still on the nightstand and followed his nose out into the kitchen, because there was something delicious-smelling happening in there and he wanted to be a part of it.

“Are you feeling better?” T’Challa asked, spooning two bowls full of what he’d made.

“Marginally.” Tony winced as he gingerly sat down, making sure to keep his back straight. T’Challa set a bowl in front of him; it was rice mixed with chicken, corn, some kind of mushroom, and spinach, but the rice was orange. He looked at T’Challa.

“It’s a dish that one of the chefs showed me how to make,” T’Challa told him. “Cooking is an important part of the Wakandan courtship process.”

Tony’s fork froze just as he was scooping up some of the rice. “Wait. There’s a process? Like, a whole written down, carved in stone for thousands of years kind of process?”

“Yes,” T’Challa said, looking amused as he took a seat across from Tony. “My ancestors took soulmates very seriously. Just because you have a soulmate does not mean everyone deserves it. They believed there should be effort on both sides to prove that you are worthy.” He took a bite of his food, while Tony tried not to reveal that his heart had just sunk straight through the kitchen floor.

He would never be able to prove that he was worthy of T’Challa. Ever.

“And what, uh,” his voice cracked when he spoke, “what does this process usually entail? From a foreigner’s side of it, I mean.”

“You have already proven yourself, Tony. You went out of your way to help me to track down my father’s murderer; even if it wasn’t who we initially thought, your actions were integral in helping me to discover the truth and bring his murderer to justice. Those are not the actions of someone who is unworthy.”

“But I wasn’t –”
T’Challa lifted a hand to forestall the objection. “You are worthy,” he said, very gently. “It doesn’t matter if you had your own reasons for what you were doing. Beyond that, you were willing to help Steve and Bucky – and even now, after you know the truth, much of what you do is in defence of them and the rest of the team.” He paused momentarily. “Vision sends a greeting, by the way.”

Tony perked up, momentarily distracted. “He’s okay? He’s happy?”

“Yes. He and Wanda have resolved their differences and are quite pleased to be together.”

“Good,” Tony muttered, casting his eyes down to the table. He missed Vision desperately, but he couldn’t watch Vision walk around the tower like a lost puppy anymore. That was why a month ago, after a long and thorough conversation with T’Challa, he’d discretely left a one-way ticket to Wakanda via Tony’s private jet on Vision’s pillow. That he’d surfaced three days later to find Vision gone was still a blow, but he couldn’t keep Vision here just for him when Vision clearly didn’t want to be here.

“You are also doing everything you physically can to protect the world, often over-extending yourself,” T’Challa added. “You’re a good man, Tony. Maybe there are others who don’t realize that, but I know I am fortunate that you are my soulmate. That is why I want to prove myself worthy of you.”

The urge to snort derisively was too strong, but even Tony was aware enough to know that would be cruel in light of T’Challa’s passionate words; he stuffed a heaping forkful of rice into his mouth instead. And then promptly moaned in amazement as several flavors burst across his tongue: spices and pumpkin, tempered by the sweetness of the corn and earthiness of the mushrooms.

“Oh my god, marry me,” he gasped when he could talk.

T’Challa laughed. “You like it?”

“Like it? It’s fantastic, holy shit.” Tony wrapped a protective arm around his bowl and took another bite. When he looked up from having closed his eyes in bliss, T’Challa was watching him with a fond smile.

“I’m glad you enjoy. It’s Shuri’s favorite dish as well.”

“I see why,” Tony said in between bites. “So… what else is there to this courting business?”

“Traditionally, that’s a secret.”

“So you’re not going to tell me?” Tony pouted.

“No,” T’Challa said, eyes sparkling with amusement. “You’ll have to wait and find out.”

Tony made a face at him, but it was hard to argue when so far he’d been given an awesome dish. “I guess I should go back to work, then.”

“Miss Potts is handling everything as far as S.I. goes,” T’Challa told him. “I have been running interference with SHIELD. As for Ross and the WSC, they have had enough of your attention, Tony. Let them wait.”

“But –”

“You know as well as I do they are unlikely to do anything, especially considering the rise in supervillain attacks with no one to fight them off but you,” said T’Challa, entirely too reasonably. “I
will help you if something happens, but let the public turn the fire back on them for once. You’ve faced enough of it in the past several years; it’s time for someone else to feel the burn.”

It made sense, kind of. Tony just didn’t know what Ross would do. He was the unknown, crazy variable in this situation. “What if Ross hurts someone?” he asked, his stomach twisting.

“You can’t control everything. It was one of the first lessons that my father ever taught me. Even as a king, you can only do what you can and hope that it’s enough, and - if it isn’t - then deal with the fall-out as best you can. Don’t ask more of yourself than what a man can do.”

Easy to say, harder to believe, but Tony had the feeling that T’Challa already knew that. He lowered his eyes to his bowl and kept eating, even though some of his enjoyment had drained away. He wanted so badly to atone for everything that he’d done, but his own limitations prevented him from doing so. Somewhere, he had the feeling that Howard was spitting contemptuously at him.

When they were finished with their meal, Tony hobbled into the living room and sat down on the couch with a wince. T’Challa followed him a moment later and wordlessly offered a painkiller. Reluctantly, Tony took it. He was a little surprised when T’Challa sat down beside him and turned on the television. Somehow, he’d never really thought that T’Challa was the kind of guy who would enjoy the new Ghostbusters movie.

But then, he supposed there were people out there who were convinced that Tony spent all his time in the workshop thinking up increasingly crazed ways to destroy the world. It was just… a little odd. Humbling, even, to have the king of Wakanda sitting beside him on the couch, casual as anyone, watching a movie. Odder still to realize that Tony had been leaning into him and T’Challa didn’t seem to mind, even encouraged it by lifting his arm and setting it very gently around Tony’s shoulders.

They were cuddling.

“Are you alright?” T’Challa asked, turning to him with a frown when Tony tensed. “Are you in pain? Okoye is outside, should I ask her or FRIDAY to contact the doctor?”

“No, I…” Tony paused. “Wait, what? You have a guard outside?”

“Yes. Does that bother you?”

Tony shook his head. T’Challa was a king, and it made sense that not even the security Tony had around the tower would be enough. He felt a little foolish for not having realized that before.

“No, it’s just… she doesn’t have to wait outside. Wouldn’t she be more comfortable in here?”

T’Challa smiled at him, so warm and affectionate that Tony froze. “I’m sure she is fine. Miss Potts instructed FRIDAY to get her anything she needs.”

“Oh, okay,” Tony said dumbly, unable to look away. He wasn’t quite brave enough to make the first movie, but… if this were a movie, this definitely would’ve been the moment that they kissed. Much to his disappointment, T’Challa turned back to the movie. After a few seconds, Tony did the same.

They watched the rest of the movie, but Tony wasn’t really paying attention. It had occurred to him that so far, T’Challa had been the one to do everything for the courtship. That wasn’t very fair. It might have been a Wakandan tradition, but no matter what T’Challa said, Tony wanted to do his part too. He wanted to do something to prove he was worthy of such an amazing man.

He just wasn’t sure what that thing would or should be.
When the movie was over, T’Challa excused himself to take care of some business. Tony watched him go and then leaned back against the couch. As soon as he knew for certain that T’Challa was out of hearing range, he said, “FRIDAY, please call Pepper.”

The line barely had time to ring once before Pepper was picking up. “Tony? Is that you?”

“It’s me,” Tony confirmed. He honestly did not recall much of her and Rhodey’s visit. He must have been more tired than he realized.

“Thank god,” Pepper said. “I was starting to get worried. You never sleep this long.” She was trying for levity and falling flat, her voice breaking a little like she was on the verge of tears again.

“Aw, c’mon Pep. Don’t cry again. I’ve been kidnapped before. It’s not that big a deal.”

“We got a ransom for you, Tony, and a threat to kill you if it wasn’t paid. It’s always a big deal,” she said sharply. “Especially because you don’t usually come back with a king behind you. What exactly happened? I gave you a pass before because you were so exhausted you could barely think straight, but I want to know.”

“T’Challa is my soulmate,” Tony admitted. Just saying it out loud made him shiver.

Pepper gasped. “What?”

“The kidnappers sent a ransom to Cap, too. When T’Challa saw it, he decided he would be the one to respond. I’d already escaped, but he offered me a ride back home,” Tony finished. Thank god for that. The last thing he needed right now was another run-in with the team, and there was no way Steve would’ve let something like that go. He’d have come to save Tony, even if just for the chance to rub it in his face later.

“Oh my god. I can’t believe you found your soulmate,” Pepper said wonderingly. “Wait… did you know?”

Tony was silent.

“Tony?”

“I… might have had an inkling,” Tony mumbled. “I thought he didn’t want me.”

“Tony.” Pepper’s voice went all soft and warm; if she’d been there, she would’ve undoubtedly pulled him into the kind of hug Tony desperately needed right now.

“He didn’t acknowledge it, Pep. At all. He said he was too upset about his father’s death, and I get that. I mean, I’m Tony Stark. He hardly needs a reason to refuse to acknowledge that we’re soulmates. But now he’s here, and he says he wants to court me, and I don’t – I don’t know what to do about it.”

Pepper was silent for a few seconds. Then she said, “Rhodey shared some concerns with me. He seemed to think that T’Challa might be siding with Steve and the others.”

“He’s offering them a safe place, but beyond that…” Tony trailed off.

“Is that a conversation you need to have with him?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Honestly, Tony was sick and tired of the fighting. And the last thing he wanted was to see the team in jail, even if they all hated him. So what did it matter, in the end?
“Rhodey and I will come see you again tonight,” Pepper said, clearly making an executive decision. “Can I bring anything?”

“Coffee?”

Her laugh was low and sweet. “Just this once, Mr Stark.”

Tony smiled, swallowing the lump in his throat, so damn glad that he hadn’t irreparably fucked this up too. “Thank you, Miss Potts.”
Tony spent the rest of the afternoon researching Wakandan courtship rituals. Prior experience had taught him that surprises were rarely a good thing, even coming from someone like T’Challa. Frustratingly, much of what he found didn’t really tell him much. It seemed that courtship rituals were often unique to each family, so what was considered a step forward for one family might not mean anything at all to another. There were, however, a few key moments that were universally considered a Big Deal.

Number one, showing each other your marks. Tony blushed a little when he realized that technically, he’d been the one to initiate that step. He hadn’t done it with the intention of courtship, of course. He didn’t even like the stupid mark, no matter what T’Challa tried to suggest about it’s meaning. However, it turned out that touching the marks together frequently tied into that, which they hadn’t done.

Number two, food. It was very common for one or both partners to cook a meal (or multiple meals) for their mate to prove that they could provide. Remembering T’Challa’s awesome food this morning, Tony winced. That was an issue. He couldn’t cook to save his life. He could bake, though. A little. Mostly because Jarvis’s wife, Ana, and Aunt Angie had been determined to make him learn something. It had been years since he’d touched a pan, though. Maybe he could bake T’Challa a cake? Did that count?

Too bad he couldn’t just order pizza and call it a day. Tony was fabulous at that.

Number three was sleeping together in a platonic way. Tony had no clue how that was going to go over, but he suspected not well. Since Afghanistan, he’d been prone to nightmares more often than not. Most recently, his dreams of the team dying (thanks Wanda) had been over-ridden by Captain America destroying the arc reactor. Except in most of Tony’s dreams, the arc reactor was still keeping him alive too.

If T’Challa enjoyed having his sleep destroyed by someone screaming and having a panic attack, this would work out fantastically. Otherwise, Tony couldn’t see how it was going to work. He rubbed a hand over his face, tired, and shifted around as best he could. With broken ribs, it was nearly impossible to get comfortable. But he was reluctant to give in and go to bed. This was important.

Number four, then. A personal gift. That was… really not helpful. Most of the sites just said the gift had to be something that came from the heart. He lost a good hour trying to figure out what he could possibly give to T’Challa, a literal king who had way more money at his disposal than Tony ever would. Most people were easy to buy for, but then again most people couldn’t afford to drop a couple thousand dollars without blinking.

Then again… judging by some of the talks he’d had with Pepper before all of this happened, Tony couldn’t either. Stark Industries had taken a massive hit after Sokovia, and Tony’s own personal finances were trying to fill in the gaps. He refused to fire anyone employed by his company just because of his own failings, but the fact remained that someone had to pay for the damage wrought by the Avengers. Especially recently. The destruction at the airport alone had cost Tony millions. He wasn’t broke, but he couldn’t toss around money the way he could before either.

Needless to say, a gift was going to be a big problem.
Number five was meeting the families. Tony’s family basically consisted of Pepper and Rhodey. He knew T’Challa had a sister, though Tony had never met her. That meeting would probably not go well. No one liked Tony when they first met him. Hell, all of Wakanda was T’Challa’s family. It was an extraordinarily daunting thought.

Number six, and the last that FRIDAY could find, was a kiss.

Tony re-read that a couple of times to make sure it was right. A freaking kiss? That was a big step? In this day and age, it seemed a little silly. Most people kissed on the first date, if not more. Then again, it had taken him and Pepper like ten years to kiss for the first time. And he couldn’t help remembering how T’Challa had turned away on the couch. Maybe he didn’t want to kiss Tony?

It would be good, though. He closed his eyes to better imagine it. He’d had more than his fair share of make-out sessions over the years, but not many of them had meant something. T’Challa would mean it. He’d probably be ridiculously chivalrous about it too, asking for permission and making sure that Tony was really okay, cupping Tony’s face and just looking at him for a little while before he moved in…

“Tony. Tony, wake up.” A hand brushed across his forehead.

“Mmm, T’Challa?” Tony mumbled, wondering when he’d fallen asleep.

“Not quite,” Rhodey replied, sounding amused.

It was a struggle to open his eyes, and Pepper and Rhodey came into focus slowly. They were smiling at him, Pepper sitting beside him and Rhodey standing in front of him. Tony smiled back sleepily, leaning into the comforting touch of Pepper’s hand.

“How are you feeling?” Pepper asked, running her fingers through his hair just the way Tony liked it.

“I’m fine,” he said.

Rhodey snorted. “Yeah, sure you are.”

“Just a couple of broken ribs, honey bear. Nothing that’s gonna keep me down for long.”

They exchanged exasperated, if fond, looks before Pepper shook her head. “You’re an idiot,” she said, not unkindly. “When was the last time you took your pain medication?”

“What time is it?”

“Almost 9pm.”

Shit. He’d been sleeping for a lot longer than he’d thought. He rubbed at his eyes and blinked blearily at his friends. Rhodey shook his head and reached down, sliding his hands under Tony’s arms and helping him to stand. The bite of pain in his ribs was sharper than Tony was expecting. He winced, leaning heavily against Rhodey to stay on his feet.

“Yeah, medication time,” Pepper said, rising to her feet. “Where’s T’Challa?”

“He was working,” Tony said. “FRIDAY?”

“King T’Challa is sleeping, Boss,” FRIDAY replied.

“Could you wake him, FRIDAY, please?” Pepper said.
“Pep, no,” Tony protested.

“Yes, Tony. Regardless of whether or not this man is your soulmate, I want to make sure he’s not going to hurt you,” Pepper said determinedly. She had a look on her face that Tony recognized; it usually meant a slow death for what executive she was about to meet.

“But you said – you said you thought I should apologize,” Tony said, confused. He definitely remembered having that conversation, if only because it had stung so much.

Pepper’s eyes softened. “I did say that. I didn’t understand the situation. Rhodey filled me in on a few things. I was wrong, and I’m sorry. I think everyone could have handled things better, but Steve definitely owes you an apology.” She reached out, slender fingers finding the bruise that had bloomed high on his neck. “And he’s not the only one. I’d like to know why T’Challa is protecting them.”

“You and me both,” Rhodey muttered, tucking Tony in close to his side. Their progress towards the kitchen was slow, and Tony was glad to sink down into one of the chairs. Pepper bustled around, fetching him a cup of water and two pills. Tony took them reluctantly.

“I don’t suppose I could talk you into giving me coffee,” he said.

“Absolutely not,” Pepper said.

“Mean,” Tony mumbled into his water, drinking it down in one long gulp. She gave him a look, but came over to refill his glass and run her fingers through his hair again.

T’Challa appeared at the door a couple of minutes later, wearing a fresh pair of dark jeans and a blue shirt. Except for the faint puffiness around his eyes, you never would have known he’d just been sleeping. “Miss Potts, Colonel Rhodes, good evening. I apologize for not being here when you arrived. I fell aslep listening to Shuri complain about the ants that follow Scott around the castle.”

Far from lightening the mood, as T’Challa had probably intended, his words had the opposite effect. Part of him felt like he should be yelling at T’Challa to run right now, but Rhodey’s hand on his shoulder stopped him.

“That’s actually what we wanted to talk to you about,” Pepper said pleasantly enough, sinking down into a chair beside Tony. She crossed one leg over the other, sitting up straight like a queen regarding her subjects.

“Oh?” T’Challa cocked an eyebrow curiously, taking a seat across from them.

“Yes. We’d like to know why you took the Avengers in, when they were the ones fighting against the very Accords your father gave his life for.”

“Pepper!” Tony said, shocked.

“It’s a fair question,” Pepper said, looking at Pepper. “It’s a fair question.”

“Pepper!” Tony said, shocked.

“It’s fine, Tony,” said T’Challa, looking at Pepper. “It’s a fair question.”

“One that we would all like to know the answer to,” Pepper said. She was smiling, but it was that smile that could change to pure evil in a matter of seconds – usually accompanied by the verbal, if not financial, evisceration of whoever was unfortunate enough to have pissed her off.

“I’m not sure that I have an answer you will find acceptable. Part of it was guilt. I incorrectly tried to kill Barnes several times over. I felt that I owed him something for my actions, and the only thing I had the ability to offer was a place to go.”
“You know he killed a hell of a lot of people, even if he didn’t kill your father,” Rhodey said.

“I am aware.” T’Challa’s eyes flicked to Tony. Clearly, he’d heard about Howard and Maria. Tony dropped his gaze, his stomach churning from the water he’d been sipping. Just thinking about Barnes was enough to make him feel alternately hot and cold.

“Then why? Surely you could’ve just given him some money and sent them on their way.”

“I could have, but then no one would know where they were,” T’Challa said. “At the time, it seemed like a better choice to know exactly where they were, especially Barnes and Rogers. I can tell you with reliability all of their plans, which amount to nothing thus far.” He frowned. “In retrospect, it may not have been the wise choice that I thought. But it is the one I made.”

“And yet you’re still protecting them,” Rhodey said.

“I am a man of my word, Colonel Rhodes. I offered them a place to stay and I will not go back on that. Had I known certain things at the time, I might have decided otherwise.”

“Do you still believe in the Accords?” Tony asked. He hadn’t known that he was going to speak until the words were out, and his hands shook a little.

T’Challa’s answer was immediate. “Yes. Having gotten a taste of what you all do on a regular basis, I am even more convinced that there needs to be some sort of accountability. I’ve read the Accords. I don’t agree with everything that they contain; there will always be super villains and threats to our world, regardless of whether superheroes exist or not. But I do believe that they are a positive place to begin. In time, they can be altered to better suit the needs of the Avengers or any other superheroes who decide to fight evil.”

“And Rogers…” Rhodey let the question trail off meaningfully.

“He still believes that he did the right thing. Your Captain America is surprisingly stubborn.”

Tony choked on a laugh. “That’s one way to put it,” he croaked. All three of them stared at him in concern. He shivered and leaned into Rhodey’s warmth; Rhodey immediately slipped a protective arm around his shoulders.

“I know I can’t give you the kind of concrete answer you wanted, Miss Potts,” T’Challa said. “Truthfully, it was a decision made in the heat of the moment that I felt committed to follow through on. I still do, even now.”

Pepper was frowning, but she had relaxed a little bit too. “And Tony? Why now?”

“I realized what I could have lost,” T’Challa answered honestly. “When he was kidnapped, I could feel the danger he was in. I’m sure I must have felt it before when we were fighting, but adrenaline or grief kept me from acknowledging it… or perhaps I wasn’t ready to admit it. Tony, I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to keep apologizing,” Tony said. “I understand.”

T’Challa’s dark eyes lingered on him. “I fear you don’t. I told you before that I would gladly tell anyone who asked that you are my soulmate, and I meant it. I’m not ashamed of you or our connection. I have told you my reasons, but that does not excuse me and I know that. I will do whatever I can to make it up to you.”

“Even if it meant kicking the Avengers out?” Rhodey asked.
T'Challa frowned, but it was Tony who said, “I don’t want that.”

“Tones –”

“No, Rhodey,” Tony said, a little more forcefully. “They’re still –” His throat locked up and he couldn’t get the words out, but he still meant it. Even after everything, he still cared.

Rhodey didn’t look very happy, but he nodded. “Okay, Tones. It’s okay.” He squeezed Tony’s shoulders, comfortably running a hand up and down his arm.

Chapter End Notes

I'll be honest. T'Challa's reasons aren't that great because I'm having a really hard time imagining why he would take in Steve and the others, and I don't anticipate Marvel will ever give us a half-decent reason, much less a good one. This was the best I could come up with.
The next two days were quiet and peaceful in a way that Tony hadn’t experienced in months - years, if he was being honest. Pepper visited him twice with documents that absolutely required his signature, but her first visit was brief and the second lasted several hours only because Tony sweet-talked her into sitting down and having a glass of wine while he worked. One glass led to two, which led to three, and before Tony knew it he was watching a visibly amused Happy carry one drunk Pepper into the elevator to see her home.

For the first time, Tony had the chance to sit down and make some upgrades to the legs he’d built for Rhodey. They were still at the cutting edge of technology, of course, but the ones Rhodey had now were still prototypes and that simply wasn’t good enough for Tony’s best friend. Normally he would’ve just cooped himself up inside the workshop on a binge until they were finished, but roughly six hours after Tony got to work, T’Challa was there knocking politely on the door.

“Let him in,” Tony said finally, glancing at the band on the table. Sometimes he took it off while he was working, particularly if he needed to get both hands into delicate places. It was one of several reasons he didn’t usually allow people into the workshop. But T’Challa had already seen the mark – had the same mark, for god’s sake – and was already stepping inside.

“I thought you might need a break,” T’Challa said by way of greeting.

“I’m good. I’m never bored down here.”

T’Challa smiled. “I said you might need a break, not want a break. It’s a small but profound difference that Shuri likes to shove in my face whenever she feels I’m spending too much time on my duties. You’re still healing, Tony.”

“I’m fine,” Tony disagreed, which was a total lie. His ribs hurt to the point where he couldn’t breathe if he tried to bend over too far, and it seemed like every day brought a new wave of aches on top of the old ones. As a result he was sitting up stiffly on his stool instead of bent over the way he normally would, and T’Challa’s look was entirely too knowing.

“I made dinner,” T’Challa offered, strolling closer to the bench. “I thought you might like to join me on the balcony. It’s a pasta dish that Pepper told me you enjoy.”

It had been ages since Tony’d had good pasta, and he was positive that T’Challa’s pasta would be sinful. He licked his lips. “I could maybe be persuaded to take a quick break, though I’m not sure I like the thought of you and Pepper conspiring against me.”

“Not conspiring. She just told me a little bit about your favorite foods. Let me know that you were allergic to rabbit and mint.”

Tony nodded. “Found about that last one when Ana brought me a mint-chocolate cookie one day,” he said, twisting to follow T’Challa’s progress. “I took one bite and my throat swelled up. Almost gave her a heart attack. She had to rush me to the hospital. It’s ingestion only, though. I can be around it, I just can’t eat it.”

“I know. But that kind of information is important to have if I’m cooking for you,” T’Challa said, only slightly admonishing. “I would hate to send you to the emergency room.” He said it lightly, but Tony could tell he meant it.
“Sorry. I’m not very good at remembering stuff like that,” Tony said. T’Challa was looking at the blueprints now, studying the modifications that Tony was making, and it made the hair on the back of his neck prickle. He wasn’t used to this, to having someone in his space. He’d shared a lab with Bruce briefly after the Battle of New York, but that had been over almost before it begun.

“Are you adding repulsors to these?” T’Challa asked suddenly, and Tony stared at him in surprise.

“Um, maybe? I was thinking about it. Actually, I was kind of hoping to add some anti-gravity fields instead, but they’re surprisingly hard and finicky to work with.” Tony gestured to the rejected hologram blueprints, which had been crumbled up and tossed aside. FRIDAY wasn’t as fast with the recycle bin as JARVIS had been. The comparison, natural though it was, still made Tony wince.

“I know a little something about it. Perhaps I could help. Would you mind?”

“Not at all,” Tony said, swiftly moving from surprise to curiosity. The last person to have any kind of interest in his work was Bruce. People were always happy to receive the work Tony could do, but very few people actually wanted to talk about it. He had a very clear memory of giving Clint some new arrows and starting to talk about the difficulty he’d had in creating them, only for Clint to cut him off mid-word. Apparently, science talk was boring.

It did make sense. T’Challa had attended several of the same science conventions, talks and forums as Tony, though the two of them had never actually spoken much. And T’Challa had at least one PhD, if not two. He was a well educated, worldly man, as benefitting a future king. But there was a huge difference between knowing all of that background and actually seeing the way that T’Challa grabbed one of the holograms, so natural, flicking his fingers to make the hologram obey as though it was something he’d done a thousand times before.

Tony ducked his head to hide a smile, feeling strangely shy. He didn’t really mind T’Challa’s presence, but it was a little odd when he wasn’t used to it. He had gotten used to the few seconds of praise he usually received for his finished projects, but letting someone actually see a work in progress – the trial and error, especially the numerous errors – was like looking into Tony’s soul. It was a part of himself that he usually tried to hide.

“Boss,” FRIDAY said an undetermined amount of time later. Tony jumped. Sometimes her voice was still so jarringly different from what he was expecting.

“What?” Tony said, wincing as his whole body protested the movement.

“There appears to be a small fire in the kitchen. Should I –”

“Shit,” T’Challa said, leaping to his feet. “Dinner – I forgot –” He sprinted for the door. Tony stared after him and then laughed. He’d never heard T’Challa swear before, or even seen him that frazzled. It was kind of refreshing.

“Save everything, FRI,” he said, sliding off the stool slowly. He followed T’Challa, using the wall for support, and got to the kitchen just in time to see the new scorch marks on the wall behind the stove. T’Challa was dumping a smoking pot in the sink; he looked up at Tony guiltily.

“I am sorry. I’ll pay for the damage. I had put the pasta on to cook while I came downstairs to get you, but I got caught up in –”

“You think that’s the first time there’s been a fire in the house?” Tony said, cutting him off with a wave of his hand. He stepped closer, rubbing a thumb over the scorch marks. Some soot came off on his hand. “Seriously, it’s no big deal. You should’ve seen the flames the time that Rhodey and I got
drunk and decided to bake cookies. JARVIS called the fire department and Pepper.” He smiled at the memory, though it stung. Any mention of JARVIS always did. Maybe it always would.

T’Challa was watching closely when Tony glanced back at him, but all he said was, “I’ll make up some new pasta, then. Since we’re both here now.”

“I have to be honest. Pepper used to make threats about lighting a fire and smoking me out of the workshop, but you’re the first person to ever follow through,” Tony said, grinning. T’Challa just rolled his eyes.

The pasta was as delicious as Tony had expected, but it sat heavily in his belly later that night. He kept going back to his research about Wakandan rituals, and how important food seemed to be. He hadn’t been lying to T’Challa; he and Rhody really had set the kitchen on fire that day. What he’d neglected to add was that that hadn’t been the only time that something Tony tried to cook or bake turned into a disaster. There was just something about Tony and recipes that didn’t mix.

He grabbed his phone and sent a quick text, then got up, stiffly making his way into the living room. About twenty minutes later, there was a quiet knock on the door. Tony opened it to find his cousin standing on the other side. Hair up in a messy bun, wearing a tank top, boxer shorts and flip flops, gun in one hand and cell phone in the other, Sharon still managed to look beautiful even when pissed off.

“Are you dying? You better be dying, considering you didn’t even have the decency to shoot me off a text when you got back. I had to hear that you were okay from Pepper, Tony. From Pepper! And now it’s 4am and you’re sending me text messages about baked goods. Wait. Are you drunk?”

“Sadly, no,” Tony said, stepping aside to let her in. Thirteen months sober and still holding, though only because, in those initial weeks after the confrontation with Bucky and Steve, the thoughts of Howard had been too fresh to indulge in the vice they had once both shared. Shame, really, because alcohol would’ve made everything a hell of a lot easier to get through.

Sharon swung around to face him. “Then...?”

“T’Challa’s my soulmate, and I need to cook or bake him something because of - well, just because.”

To her credit, Sharon took the soulmate news in stride and went straight to the heart of the matter. “You can’t cook. Or bake. You couldn’t even build a robot who could cook or bake.”

Tony shot her a wounded look. “You swore you’d never bring that up again.”

She put her hands on her hips and stared at him.

"Okay, look, I'm sorry. I should've texted you. I forgot."

"You didn't forget," Sharon said. Her voice cracked.

"Oh, no, hey - hey, kiddo, I told you that you're forgiven. It wasn't your fault," Tony said quickly, hoping to avoid another bout of tears. Sharon was not the kind of person who cried often or easily. It had scared the shit out of him when she showed up three days after the fight with Steve and Bucky, drunk, crying and apologizing for giving Steve the shield in the first place.

"You forgive too easily, Tony. I always said that." But she was smiling now, if somewhat shakily, running a thumb under her eyes to wipe away the tears. "What did you want to bake for him?"

"Food?"
"Food," Sharon repeated. "Are you... are you kidding me?"

He shrugged helplessly. "Cookies? Everyone likes cookies."

"Do you even have the ingredients for cookies?"

Tony shrugged again.

Sharon sighed. "Okay, let's do an inventory of your kitchen first. Or rather," she added, eyeing him critically, "I'll do the inventory, and you can sit down and watch."

"I could help."

"Nope." She steered him into the kitchen and pushed him down onto one of the chairs, then walked over to the fridge, hitching up her boxer shorts. Tony squinted at them.

"Are those mine?"

"No."

"Were they mine?"

Her expression was pure innocence when she glanced over her shoulder. "They were mixed in with my laundry last time I did it. Since I had no way of finding out who they belonged to, finders keepers."

"You used to say the same thing when Aunt Peggy brought us back gifts and you were the first to find them," Tony muttered sulkily. Peggy had always intervened, of course, and made Sharon share, but that didn't mean Tony had forgotten.

"And that, out of everything, is what you can't forgive," Sharon said, laughing a little, but her eyes looked suspiciously damp when she turned around. "Let's call in a grocery order. For starters, I'm teaching you how to make the most amazing cinnamon buns in New York."
Chapter 7

Calling them the most amazing cinnamon buns in New York was something of a stretch, at least when Tony was involved. He sat back and wiped his forehead, feeling more fatigued after three hours than he ever did after three days in the workshop. He was pretty filthy from head to toe, covered in flour, sugar, cinnamon, and white glaze, but he had three pans of not too shabby cinnamon buns sitting in front of him. He looked up at Sharon and grinned.

She smiled back, even though she was just as dirty as he was. Tony might have tripped with his arms full of the flour container and dropped it, causing a white cloud to blow up in their faces. Thank god for the fact that there was always some kind of a store open in New York, even at 5am. One emergency trip for what Sharon claimed was an outrageously expensive package of flour later, and they had this to show for it.

“Go ahead,” Sharon said, pushing one pan of buns a little closer. “Try them.”

“I want T’Challa to try them first.”

Sharon bit her lip, then blinked. She swiped her tongue over her lips, probably tasting cinnamon and sugar just like Tony, and said, “I appreciate the thought behind it, but are you sure? He might be your soulmate, and I know that you’re made of iron, but he can probably still succumb to poison.”

Tony glared at her, though part of him didn’t mind the teasing remark. It meant that Sharon was warming up a little, maybe even starting to forget. “I’ll have you know that I tasted everything we were making, and at no part during the process did I feel ill. They’re not even burnt!” He couldn’t stop looking at the nicely browned buns. The glaze was actually a decoration as opposed to an attempt at hiding something.

“Your funeral,” Sharon said with a shrug. “Can I borrow your shower? I have cinnamon in places that it really should not be.”

“Go ahead.”

She stood, slipping out the door as quietly as Natasha would have, the only sign she’d been there the dusty white footprints that remained behind. Tony watched her go, then turned his attention to the cinnamon buns. Now that Sharon was out of the room, he felt safe in letting the proud smile creep across his face. This was the first time since Ana died that he’d actually baked something edible, and it was the same feeling of accomplishment as he remembered – a different feeling than what he got from creating new gear or improving FRIDAY, because those things came easily to him and this didn’t.

The sun was just touching the horizon, which meant that T’Challa would probably be up soon. Tony yawned and propped his chin on his hands, figuring that he’d just wait here so that he could see the look on T’Challa’s face when he walked in the room and saw that breakfast was ready. It hadn’t taken him long to figure out that T’Challa was a disgustingly early riser, which made sense considering all of the meetings he probably had to attend, but still. If Tony never saw 7am from what he considered to be the wrong side again, he would be just fine with that.

He didn’t meant to fall asleep, but the next thing he knew someone was saying his name and there was a blanket being draped over his shoulders, even though he was still gross and sticky. It had a nice smell, spices and metal, and Tony hummed happily, pressing his nose into the fabric. His brain had already identified that smell and slotted it into the tiny part of his head reserved for people who
were safe.

“This isn’t a very comfortable place to sleep,” T’Challa said, right next to his ear.

Tony’s eyes popped open. For a split second he was disoriented at seeing T’Challa’s dark eyes so close to him, but that faded away as soon as he realized that he’d missed it. “Damn it!”

“Something wrong?”

“I fell asleep.” Tony straightened up, realizing that his ribs weren’t pleased at his position.

“I’m not surprised. Did you sleep at all last night?”

“No, I… cinnamon buns!”

“Cinnamon buns?” T’Challa repeated, following Tony’s gaze to the table.

“I, um…” Okay, Tony hadn’t rehearsed this part of it and he was quickly coming to regret that.

“FRIDAY and I researched Wakandan courting rituals. It seemed like food was pretty important, but I can’t bake. Or cook. Believe me,” he added. “So I texted my cousin and asked for her help. She came over last night and helped me make you cinnamon buns.”

T’Challa was quiet for a moment. “I take it that’s the young woman asleep in your bed?”

“Yeah, that would be her. She’s not my real cousin. Aunt Peggy – that is, Peggy Carter, she was my godmother, and Sharon is her great-niece. So technically we’re not related, and if we were I’d be old enough to be her uncle, but I called her my cousin because –” Tony stopped mid-sentence, stunned, when T’Challa pulled him into a gentle hug.

“Thank you, Tony.”

Tony’s mouth hung open. It was at least a couple seconds before he regained his composure, and he brought his hands up to hug T’Challa back. He tried to remember the last time someone beside Pepper or Rhodey had given him a hug and couldn’t. There had never been a whole lot of hugs in Tony’s life, but it seemed like there had been a particular deficit lately.

“You’re welcome,” he said once he’d gathered his scattered wits. “The food you make is so good. I know these won’t be anything even close to what you can do, but I thought… I wanted you to know that I want this too.”

T’Challa sighed against his neck. He was being very careful to not put pressure on Tony’s ribs, but he still tightened his grip a little. “I appreciate that, even though I already told you that you didn’t need to do anything to prove yourself to me.” His voice was kind, but chiding.

A little embarrassed that T’Challa had seen through him so easily, Tony shrugged. “Well, I don’t know how the cinnamon buns turned out yet. They might be terrible, in which case that’s probably a good thing.”

“I’m sure they’re delicious. I’ve never had them before. May I try one?”

“Of course! They’re for you.” Tony hated to pull out of the hug, but he was eager for T’Challa to try the food. He turned back to the table as T’Challa sat down beside him, close enough that their shoulders were brushing together. His body gave off warmth even through the fabric of the blanket, and Tony smiled to himself. He felt a little like a giddy teenager.
The cinnamon buns had cooled, but they were still sticky and plump. T'Challa tore one off easily and took a huge bite. Tony didn't even try to be subtle and openly watched, trying to prepare himself for the moment when T'Challa spat it back out. Instead, T'Challa chewed a couple of times and swallowed. He looked back at Tony and smiled, his whole face lighting up.

"They are even better than I thought they'd be, Kitten. Thank you."

Kitten. Holy shit. Tony's face went hot, and he knew he was blushing, but he couldn’t stop it. He used nicknames freely, of course, but it had been a long time since he was in a relationship with someone who used them back. Pepper wasn’t that kind of person, and Tony was okay with that. It actually hadn’t occurred to him; before this moment, he wouldn’t have said he had a preference one way or the other.

But that word, spoken in such a sincere, affectionate tone, made Tony’s heart squeeze. "Y-you’re welcome," he stuttered. "They’re good?"

"You haven’t tried them?" T'Challa ripped a small piece off without waiting for an answer, holding it up to Tony’s lips. Tony parted his lips, hardly believing this was happening, and allowed T'Challa to feed him. He chewed the pastry, barely tasting it.

"It's good," he whispered, though for all he knew it could've tasted disgusting and he wouldn't have noticed. Funny how inconsequential things like that seemed when he was looking into T'Challa's eyes. It was like the whole world dropped away.

"You did a wonderful job," T'Challa agreed, leaning in a little closer. Not close enough to kiss, though, and Tony was momentarily confused until T'Challa took his hand. He gently twisted Tony's arm and pushed the band up, uncovering Tony's soul mark. Tony caught his breath and held it as T'Challa removed his own band, not daring to breathe as T'Challa - with plenty of hesitation, giving Tony every opportunity to pull away - pressed their marks together.

It wasn't the rush that Tony had expected. It was more like a tingling sensation that radiated out from where their marks touched, and it left him feeling like everything was just a little bit sharper. Suddenly he was more aware of his exhaustion, of how good the kitchen smelled, the way T'Challa's eyelashes fluttered against his cheek when he blinked. Tony shivered, exhaling when his lungs started to ache, and lowered his gaze. Their arms weren't shining or glowing or anything stupid like that, but it sure felt like they should be.

"This was one of the steps in the courting traditions," he said dumbly.

T'Challa nodded. "Yes. The other day, I thought that maybe it was moving too quickly to do this." He sounded a little breathy, clearly not as unaffected by the sensations as he might look. "But you took the time to research and bake for me."

"Of course I did. This is important to you. I want to do it right," Tony said. "And since you wouldn't tell me..."

"And I still won't," T'Challa said, chuckling. "I meant it when I said I wanted it to be a surprise, and that you had nothing to worry about. Especially now. When we're married, you can bake me cinnamon buns all you want." He was smiling again.

Tony's stomach flipped at that sentence. When we're married. As though it was a foregone conclusion that T'Challa wanted to marry him. "I guess I'll have to practice lots, then," he croaked. "Because Sharon stopped me from dumping in salt instead of sugar at least four times."
"I'm honored to be your guinea pig." T'Challa bent at the waist and brushed a kiss over the back of Tony's hand. It was both sweet and kinda of dorky, and Tony might officially be in love.

They just sat there for a while, smiling at each other, until T'Challa's stomach grumbled. Tony startled at the sound and then laughed at the put-out look on T'Challa's face, like T'Challa couldn't believe his stomach had ruined the moment. Reluctantly, he pulled his arm away. It took a few extra seconds for the tingling to slowly fade away, and he missed it desperately once it was gone. He found he didn't want to put his arm-band back on, either, and left it sitting on the table while he stood and went to the coffee maker.

"You can have as much of them as you want for breakfast. I should go shower, I guess."

"Tony."

"Yeah?" Tony turned around.

"I've been thinking about what Miss Potts and Colonel Rhodes said, about the other Avengers."

The happy, swimmy feeling in Tony's chest immediately drained away. "I don't want you to kick them out. Please don't."

T'Challa shook his head. "I won't. But I know that you've had to foot the bill and the public scrutiny for a lot of what's happened. I will help however I can, and I apologize for not making the offer sooner. And I know that the U.N. will eventually repay you, but who knows how long it will take for that to happen? In the meantime, you've become the scapegoat. I never thought that was fair, but the more I come to know and understand you..." He stood up with a grace that Tony envied. "I want to make it a condition of the team's amnesty that they have to have a press conference. I want them to take some of the blame. They deserve it."

"That's not necessary."

"No, Tony," T'Challa said gently. "It is necessary. I know you don't think it is, but you should not have to take the blame for everyone's mistakes. You were not the only person who made bad decisions that day." He stepped closer, cupping Tony's face in his hands. "It's the least they can do."

Tony closed his eyes. He wanted to argue more, but he was just so tired. Not just physically, but mentally and emotionally. *He was so tired.* He leaned into T'Challa, almost unable to believe the way that T'Challa's arms came up around him immediately, so confident and sure. He could lean against T'Challa, and it was okay.
Chapter 8

Want to have dinner with us tonight?

That depends who's cooking?

Tony frowned as FRIDAY read off Sharon's response to his text. Somehow, the line seemed even more insulting when read out in FRIDAY’s chirpy voice. He grumbled a little and removed his hands from inside the car's engine, grabbing a spare rag to wipe away the worst of the grease. Then he grabbed his phone from his pocket just as another text came in from Pepper, confirming that she, Rhodey and Happy would be there by six. Pepper, at least, had the decency not to question who would be cooking - probably because she figured Tony would be ordering out.

*Not me. T'Challa.* He finally typed back to Sharon.

Sure! Sounds great. Be there at five. Spending the afternoon beating up SHIELD newbies. :)

He snorted at the smiley face and shook his head, though he couldn't stop the fond smile. Sharon was way too much like Peggy in that regard; both of them absolutely loved training the new recruits, which was a task that most SHIELD agents tried to avoid. Tony could remember at least a dozen separate occasions of sitting at the back of the training room, holding a squirming Sharon in his lap, both of them watching with rapt attention as Peggy put the recruits through their paces. The best moment was, of course, the inevitable recruit who thought that they were better than an experienced agent. Peggy had never hesitated to punch someone in the face to teach them a lesson, and Sharon was the same way.

"FRIDAY, let T'Challa know that everyone is confirmed, please," Tony said, bending down to peer into the engine again. After a moment of consideration, he decided to give it a rest and go work on the armor for a while. One of the gauntlets was still giving him a little bit of trouble after a mission a couple of weeks ago; he'd been thrown into a building, and the gauntlet had been a little jerky ever since.

"Done, Boss," FRIDAY said obediently.

"Thanks." He stood up, arching his back until it popped satisfyingly, and strolled over to his workbench. It looked depressingly bare no matter how many projects he spread across it. There were no arrows for Clint, no Widow's Bites for Natasha, no upgraded armor for Steve, no tech worthy of surviving Thor's lightning, no trackers for Bruce.

It still hurt in a way, and when the team had first left and the tower was painfully empty, Tony'd had to stop himself several times from working on upgrades for them anyway. It was basically second nature for him now to outfit the Avengers to the best of his ability, and it was hard to wrap his mind around the fact that they were no longer his responsibility.

He had plenty of projects to fill up the space, of course. Hill and Fury still reached out to him on a regular basis for SHIELD upgrades. Tony made it a point to outfit Sharon personally, and he was working on the Iron Man and War Machine armors, not to mention Rhodey's prosthetics. Stark Industries was taking up a lot of his time, too. But it just wasn't the same. Everything was different now.

Tony sat down on his bench and sighed, calling up the projects that he'd been working on before the Ultron disaster. He hadn't touched a single one of them, even though he should have been: some of
them were pretty high priority and weren't for the team at all. But every last one had JARVIS's metaphorical handprints on them in some way, and that hurt most of all.

Holograms filled the air, turning the space around Tony an eerie shade of blue that was not unlike the color of the arc reactor. He pressed a hand to his chest automatically, drumming his fingers, as he peered around. Yep, there were the improved exploding arrows he'd been working on for Clint, as well as gloves that had better grip and strength. The new gun for Natasha that used specialized bullets which were coated in poison. The wristband for Steve that would've allowed him to call the SHIELD back from within a hundred feet. And oh, there was the rudimentary alarms he'd started sketching out for the Barton farm after he'd discovered Clint's family.

Something pinged behind him. He startled, twisting quickly enough that something twinged in his back. T'Challa was standing about five feet away, looking around the room in wonder. He'd knocked a small screw off of the desk. Tony glanced down at the screw, putting two and two together quickly: it hadn't taken him long to realize that T'Challa really was as graceful as a cat, and even when Tony was paying attention it was absurdly easy for T'Challa to sneak up on him. That meant that T'Challa had knocked the screw to the floor on purpose to alert Tony to his presence. That was such a small thing, but it filled Tony with warmth and eased some of the bitter hurt welling up inside of him.

Silently, a little shyly, he reached out an arm to T'Challa. Part of him was expecting T'Challa to ignore the silent request, but T'Challa closed the distance between them immediately, pulling Tony into a warm hug. Tony tucked his head under T'Challa's chin and inhaled the familiar scent of leather, pumpkin and orange. T'Challa must've been in the kitchen already, even though supper wasn't for another three hours. He chuckled to himself.

"Something wrong, Kitten?" T'Challa murmured.

That nickname still made a flush rise on Tony's cheeks. "I was just thinking to myself that I hope you set a timer this time."

"For your information, FRIDAY said she would tell me when forty minutes have passed," T'Challa said loftily, but there was no disguising the unmistakable fondness in his voice. "Cakes take a while to bake, so I thought I would come see what you were up to."

"Nothing, really. I was just looking around..." Tony trailed off, reminded of what he'd been doing. Wallowing was what Rhodey would've called it, and he was probably right. Nothing would ever be done with these blueprints, or at least, not for a very long time. Maybe someday Tony would repurpose them into something new - Peter, for example, would probably appreciate the gloves, considering that his armor was laughably weak - but not right now.

T'Challa was quiet for a few seconds. Then he said, "You are very clever. Much of this is far beyond what my best engineers would be capable of."

"I can't take all the credit. JARVIS helped." Just saying the name out loud opened up a hollow pit in his stomach. He missed JARVIS so much it was a physical ache.

"JARVIS?" T'Challa repeated, confused. And in a rush, Tony realized that T'Challa had no idea who JARVIS even was. It was the first time that had ever come up; everyone else that Tony was close to had met JARVIS. He swallowed hard.

"He was my first A.I. Well, not my first. That was Dummy. But the first one I ever put so much effort into. He was FRIDAY's predecessor, but a hundred times more advanced. Just picture
someone who is basically human, but is pure coding. That was JARVIS. He was my best friend."
"What happened to him?" T'Challa asked.

"Me. I happened," Tony said quietly, pushing his face into T'Challa's chest. "I created Ultron, and JARVIS tried to stop him. He was successful, too. That's how the Vision was born."

"I see," T'Challa said, sounding as though he really did. His arms tightened around Tony, and Tony shuddered. Out of everything, JARVIS was the one thing he missed the most.

"I lost him," Tony whispered. "I mean, I have FRIDAY now. And she tries. It's not the same."

"I'm sorry, Tony." And amazingly, T'Challa sounded completely sincere even though he'd lost his father not that long ago and here Tony was, whining about something that was completely his fault. He let himself indulge in the comforting hug for only a few minutes before squirming free, even though he very much just wanted T'Challa to hug him forever.

"It's fine. Did FRIDAY tell you that Sharon confirmed? She'll be here at five."

T'Challa clearly saw the change in subject for what it was, but allowed it without comment. "Yes, she did. That's why I came down. I thought you might want to help me in the kitchen until everyone arrives."

Tony looked around at all of the holograms and made a decision. There was no point in sitting down here staring at all of that data. A quick sweep of his fingers sent everything back to where it had been stored on his personal servers. "Sure, that sounds great."

True to her word, Sharon arrived at five on the dot. She was punctual like that, probably because she never knew when she was going to get called away on a mission. She'd clearly gone home to change first, because she was dressed in a pair of jeans and a fuzzy green sweater. She also came bearing flowers, which she thrust into Tony's hands, and a bottle of non-alcoholic wine, which she handed over to T'Challa, who accepted the gift with a gracious nod. Tony, meanwhile, stared down at the flowers and raised an eyebrow.

"Don't judge. I know you like flowers," Sharon said.

"I do not."

"Liar."

"You're the liar," Tony said grumpily, but he couldn't help lifting the flowers a little so that he could inhale their sweet scent. Normally he wasn't an outdoorsy person, but it was kind of nice to see the brightly colored flowers. It was a reminder that there was a whole world outside of the tower.

Sharon rolled her eyes at him for the lame comeback and turned to T'Challa. "I'm Sharon Carter, Tony's cousin."

"T'Challa, Tony's soulmate." T'Challa said the words simply, as though he'd said them a thousand times before, and Tony's heart skipped a beat. Part of him hadn't really believed until this moment that T'Challa would advertise that so freely. How the hell had T'Challa gotten that comfortable saying it so fast?

She grinned. "I like you. You'll do." She stuck out a hand to shake. T'Challa, grinning, shook it.
Somehow, Tony was left with the strong impression that someday he would regret letting this meeting happen.

Rhodey, Pepper and Happy arrived at about quarter after six. T'Challa had supper ready pretty much immediately: roasted chicken, mashed potatoes, pumpkin-spiced squash, and fresh rolls. Dessert was an orange and chocolate cake, which was so good that Tony had seconds. He was licking his fork after eating the last bite when he caught T'Challa watching him. There was a hungry look in T'Challa's eyes that made Tony flush in spite of himself. He was used to people wanting him like that, but it had been a very long time. Knowing that T'Challa felt that way was kind of an ego boost.

He liked this, he realized, looking around the room. Happy had an arm around Pepper's shoulders. He was shaking his head and sipping from a glass of wine. Pepper and Sharon had their heads together and were laughing at something. Rhodey, beside Sharon, was rolling his eyes and trying hard to hide a grin. T'Challa was still looking at Tony, but now his expression had changed to something more softer and secretive. This was Tony's family now. He had no idea how he'd gotten this lucky.

When dinner was over, and everyone had gone home and the dishes had been taken care of, Tony set the vase of flowers on the empty table. He was surprised when arms came around him from behind, pulling him back against a firm chest. T'Challa just hugged him for a moment, not speaking, so Tony carried on, fussing with the flowers until their arrangement was to his liking. Sharon, brat that she was, had purchased red tulips and yellow sunflowers.

"The colors look good together," T'Challa said finally.

"I have excellent taste." Tony pushed a sunflower into position and nodded decisively.

T'Challa chuckled. "Would you like to sleep with me tonight?"

Tony froze.

"Just sleep," T'Challa amended. "I would like to share a bed with you."

It was the next step in the courting ritual, Tony remembered. His heart pounded in a strange mix of excitement and fear. "I don't know if that's such a good idea. I rarely sleep the whole night through. I have nightmares," he explained, embarrassed. "Bad ones. I once called the armor while sleeping and nearly gave Pepper a heart attack."

"You are not the only one with nightmares," T'Challa pointed out. "You don't have to. But I would like to."

"You won't get a good night's sleep, T'Challa. I meant that. Are you sure?" Tony had to ask.

"Very sure."

Like it was just that easy. Tony closed his eyes briefly, taking a deep breath. He still thought it was a mistake and that it would more than likely end in disaster, but... he'd missed sleeping beside someone, and he couldn't think of a better person than T'Challa. He wanted to know what it was like to fall asleep in these arms. He turned his head, looking into T'Challa's eyes, and said, "Then yes."
Tony was so deep into working that he didn’t notice when the door opened behind him, but it was pretty hard to miss the sudden silence as FRIDAY shut his music off. He frowned and set down the soldering iron, pushing his goggles up to squint at the door. Rhodey was standing there, arms crossed, patiently waiting for Tony’s attention, and Tony couldn’t help eyeing the braces on Rhodey’s legs critically. That was something else high up on his list –

“Oh no you don’t,” Rhodey said, rolling his eyes. “Stop thinking whatever you’re thinking. You’re not going back to work until you’ve had food and at least eight hours of sleep. FRIDAY, please save and close everything.”

“FRIDAY, scratch that. I’m busy,” Tony said. He definitely didn’t whine. “I have to get this done before T’Challa comes back.”

“What is it? It can’t be more important than your health. Don’t make me get Pepper and Sharon down here, because I’ll do it.”

“That’s cruel,” Tony muttered, gingerly running his fingers across a seam. The body felt pretty solid – well, of course it would, it was made of vibranium. He just desperately hoped that T’Challa liked it. Otherwise, the nerve-wracking phone call to Shuri, in which she’d held a judgmental silence for a terrifying thirteen minutes while Tony babbled about why he needed the metal and why she couldn’t tell T’Challa about it until she finally broke through the torrent of words with a crisp ‘Okay’ and then hung up, would be for nothing.

“I’m a cruel person,” Rhodey agreed easily, pushing off the wall and coming closer. His shadow fell over Tony’s creation and there was a long pause. Then, once Tony’s anxiety had officially spiked its way through the roof, Rhodey crouched down so that he was on eye-level with the table. His expression was carefully blank, but Tony thought he might have depicted a spark of amusement somewhere in that military-grade calm.

“It’s for T’Challa. It’s part of the courting ritual. I mean, he hasn’t told me exactly what the courting ritual is, but FRIDAY and I looked it up and a personal gift is usually part of it and now he’s gone back to Wakanda for three days, and I know he said it’s for some unavoidable meeting and he wasn’t happy about it but I don’t want him to come back with a gift if I don’t have anything for him and –”

“Tones, whoa. Too many ‘ands’,” Rhodey said gently, rocking back on his heels. There was a slight stutter from the braces, not the fluidity they should’ve had. Tony frowned at them, but a hand on his chin drew his head up and forced him to meet Rhodey’s eyes.

“I just want to be good enough,” Tony muttered.

“You are good enough. You always have been, man.”

Tony snorted, turning back to the table. He eyed his creation critically. “What do you think?”
Rhodey was quiet for a moment, glancing at Tony to ask for permission before he reached out to pick it – her, it was definitely a her – up. She was about a foot and a half long with another ten inches of tail. Tony had done his best to make her look as lifelike as possible, largely relying on FRIDAY for that since he had never actually seen a black panther in person. Made out of solid vibranium, a slightly repurposed arc reactor shone from her chest. The blue light was comforting to see, not that Tony would ever admit it.

“It’ll be a full A.I.,” Tony added as Rhodey examined her. “I’ve been working on the coding ever since T’Challa left. She’s designed to make people think that she’s just a pet, but an intelligent one. Capable of protection, yes, even though T’Challa doesn’t really need it, but acting as a functional assistant at the same time, including scheduling, translation, and a database of relevant political info that can be consistently updated as long as she’s connected to the internet. Which she will be because, hi, me.”

“If T’Challa has any sense, he’ll love it,” Rhodey said.

Just a little bit of the pressure that had been building in Tony’s chest eased, though it wouldn’t fully dispel until T’Challa returned and gave his opinion one way or the other. A therapist would’ve said it was a learned reaction, left over from when Howard had thrown his inventions back in his face with nothing but anger and scorn. Tony preferred not to think about it.

“You think so?” he asked, maybe a little too eagerly judging from the concerned look Rhodey gave him.

“Yeah, I do. How long have you been working on this?”

Tony hesitated. Not because he didn’t want to answer, but because he wasn’t sure. “What day is it? FRIDAY?”

“Boss has been in the workshop for approximately fifty hours,” FRIDAY said.

“Tony!”

“What? T’Challa said he’d only be gone two or three days. I didn’t have long to work,” Tony protested. Though, yeah, now that he had stopped, his body was definitely complaining. His head, ribs, ankle, and both arms were aching with pain. He put a hand to his temples at a particularly sharp throb, wincing.

“You have got to stop doing this to yourself,” Rhodey said, though he sounded resigned. He straightened up, setting the mini-panther back on the table with the kind of care that made Tony love him so much. “Come on. Shower, food, sleep, in that order. You stink.”

“I do not,” Tony mumbled.

“As the person who has to smell you, yeah, you do.”

“Not my fault your nose is too sensitive,” Tony said. He squinted at the holographic screen. The coding was pretty much finished, far as he could tell; he wouldn’t know what needed to be tweaked until it was uploaded. He’d based it off of FRIDAY’s data and built from there, adjusting as he went to fit T’Challa’s needs. It wasn’t nearly as sophisticated as FRIDAY – Tony just didn’t have the time – but he was hoping that there might be a chance for upgrades in the future.

“My nose had to put up with you in university, and you’re about two hours away from reaching that point. Get moving.” Rhodey poked him in the shoulder, albeit gently.
“Okay, okay. FRIDAY, start upload and integration process. Update everything, but don’t switch it on until I come back down.” Tony ordered. He wanted to be there, just in case something went wrong. You just never knew sometimes.

“Starting upload, Boss.”

The upload bar appeared on a screen as Rhodey physically pulled him from the workshop. He marched Tony upstairs and made him shower while Rhodey put together a couple of sandwiches. By the time that Tony stumbled out of the shower, he was so exhausted that the most he could manage to choke down was half a sandwich and a glass of water. He didn’t even remember Rhodey half-carrying him to bed.

Coffee woke him up later; the sweet, enticing smell drifted through the air, and when Tony opened his eyes there was a mug right in front of his face. He pushed himself up, biting back a yelp of pain when his ribs vehemently protested the move, and reached for it. It was well worth the pain when he took that first glorious sip, eyes drifting shut as he sighed.

“Better?” Rhodey asked, and Tony jumped. Rhodey rolled his eyes. “Jesus, you didn’t even see me standing here – how did you think that mug got here, magic?”

“Hate magic,” Tony grunted, huddling into his mug as best he could. From the feel of it, he was going to be paying for all the hours he’d spent in the workshop.

“I know you do. I kinda do too,” Rhodey admitted, sitting down on the edge of the bed. He was holding his own mug of coffee, which he drank completely black. Tony had copied him back when they first met, Tony only sixteen to Rhodey’s twenty-two, drinking his coffee like that for a whole two years before Rhodey successfully convinced him that there was no ‘cool’ way to drink coffee and that sugar was perfectly fine. Of course, then he started bitching because Tony liked four teaspoons of sugar in his coffee, but that was just Rhodey for you.

Tony grunted again rather than speak and drained the rest of his mug. “How long have I been sleeping?”

“Eight hours.”

“Hate you,” Tony mumbled, mourning all those hours lost. “I needed four, five tops.”

“Clearly your body disagreed. I would’ve left you here to keep sleeping, but T’Challa called. He’s on his way back.”

Tony’s heart turned over at the news. He’d only gotten the chance to sleep beside T’Challa once, and they hadn’t even woken up together: a phone call from Shuri had drawn T’Challa out of bed long before Tony was awake. He’d actually been woken up to the news that T’Challa had to return to Wakanda for a couple of days. So technically, it probably wasn’t really sleeping together if it had only lasted about three hours and one partner had to leave prematurely.

But, having fallen asleep beside T’Challa once, Tony knew what he was missing. And that wasn’t even factoring in T’Challa’s quiet but commanding presence around the tower. There was no delicious food, no beautiful smiles that took Tony’s breath away, no one to force pain medication on him, no one to watch movies with, no one to join him in the workshop. Just Tony and a big empty, endless tower, with only FRIDAY and the ‘bots for company.

Rhodey was smiling. “I figured you’d react that way. So I’m giving you time to get your new A.I. online.”
“Appreciated.” Tony threw the covers back and stood up. The room spun and he tipped over, saved only by Rhodey’s hand on his arm.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine. Just a momentary lapse.”

“Uh-huh, and does this ‘momentary lapse’ require medical intervention?”

“Nope.”

“Right,” Rhodey said, not looking convinced, and watched Tony very closely as he pulled on a t-shirt and jeans and headed for the elevator.

The workshop was dark and quiet when they entered, though Dummy whirred over to greet them. Tony patted him on the head absently and kept walking over to the desk. He pulled up a screen, scanning quickly through FRIDAY’s information. It looked like everything had gone smoothly, but as expected there were a few tweaks to be made. He got to work.

He always lost time when he worked, and this time was no exception. One moment he was adding a little bit of coding and the next, FRIDAY was announcing T’Challa’s presence in the tower. Tony looked up, blinking, and realized that he’d been at work for three hours. Rhodey, according to FRIDAY, had received a call and left two and a half hours ago, which explained how Tony had been left alone for so long.

He tossed a cover over the mini-panther and stood up, wobbling a little, in time to see T’Challa coming through the workshop doors. T’Challa was smiling already, and Tony couldn’t help the smile that crossed his face in response. But in the span of those few seconds, he realized he had no idea what to say. This was the first time he was greeting T’Challa as a soulmate instead of as an acquaintance or teammate. He had nothing reliable to fall back on here and no idea what to do – should they shake hands? Hug? Kiss?

Flustered because he hadn’t thought this far ahead, he ended up blurting out, “You know, the number of pathogens passed during a handshake is staggering. It’s actually safer to kiss.”

T’Challa slowed to a stop, blinking in astonishment. Then he grinned. “Is it now?”

Tony was dying. No, he was dead and this was hell where he couldn’t stop embarrassing himself in front of his soulmate. Damn his big mouth. “That’s what I hear.”

“I’d hate to make you sick,” T’Challa said. Tony froze, hardly daring to breathe as T’Challa sidled up to him and leaned in close. His mouth was just inches away, then centimeters, then –

He kissed Tony on the cheek.

“I missed you, Kitten,” T’Challa murmured, lips brushing against Tony’s cheek with each word.

The sound Tony made was probably only audible to dogs. “I – you too,” he squeaked, highly aware that his face was burning hot again. “Missed you, I mean. I did.”

“Glad to hear it,” T’Challa said. “I have a surprise for you.”

All of Tony’s confidence rushed back. He’d been right! “And I have something for you too.”
Chapter 10

Tony wanted to show T'Challa what he'd made right away. But T'Challa was just too damn smart: he took one close look at Tony, wrapped an arm around his shoulders and forcibly steered Tony out of the workshop and into the elevator in spite of Tony's half-hearted protests. And when the elevator doors re-opened to the smell of pizza, Tony's mouth promptly snapped shut. He might have actually drooled a little. T'Challa smirked at him and walked out of the elevator, heading to the source of the delicious smell. He pulled up the top of the box and picked up a hot, cheesy slice.

"I'm sure I can eat this by myself if you want to go back downstairs," he said innocently, curling a finger around the string of cheese. "I mean, it's a lot of pizza because I ordered three boxes. If I can't, and you're sure that you're not interested, I'm sure that Sharon would come over and help."

"Fine, you win," Tony said, throwing his arms up. Which, ow - that was not one of his smartest ideas. He concealed his grimace of pain, but not well enough: T'Challa gestured pointedly to the medication bottles sitting on the coffee table with a stern look. Tony pouted to cover up the smile that wanted to break out. Part of him disliked being coddled, but another part of him liked that T'Challa was so determined to make sure that he was okay. It wasn't something that Tony had experienced a lot, and it was kind of nice.

He swallowed a couple of the painkillers and then made grabby hands at the pizza box, which T'Challa obligingly handed over. It was pepperoni, bacon, green pepper and onion, which was Tony's favorite. He took a huge bite and couldn't help moaning in pleasure. "Fuck, that's good."

The tips of T'Challa's ears went a little pink when Tony moaned, but he answered readily enough. "Happy told me what your favorite pizza place was, so I placed an order as soon as I got into town."

"Now you're all conspiring against me?" Tony said through a mouthful of pizza, not nearly as upset as he probably should have been. If being conspired against meant that he got a whole pizza to himself - and he honestly couldn't remember the last time that had happened, considering that until a little while ago he'd been living with Thor and Steve, both of whom could easily eat two large pizzas by themselves and still be hungry afterwards - then he was okay with that. He took another huge bite, eyes rolling up in his head. It had been way too long. He'd almost forgotten that pizza could taste this good.

"I asked and he told me. I'm not sure you can consider that conspiring, since all I wanted to do was entice you into eating and it worked," T'Challa said dryly, sitting down next to him with his own box of pizza. "What did you do while I was gone?"

"Oh, a little of this and that," Tony said, not meaning to be evasive, but it wasn't like he could come right out and say. Not yet, anyway. "I worked a little bit on Rhody's new legs. I think I'm almost at the point where I can build a prototype and get him to try them out. I just have a little more experimenting to do first. What about you? Did you get everything taken care of?"

T'Challa nodded. "Yes. Shuri didn't actually need my help as much as she thought she did. She's just not used to having to make those kinds of decisions on her own. She was handling everything just fine, though." He shrugged one shoulder. "That was alright. It gave me the opportunity to check in with everyone, not just her."

Tony could guess who 'everyone was'. He wasn't sure he really wanted to know, but found himself asking anyway. "And how is 'everyone'?"
"I take it you mean the Avengers."

Unable to speak, Tony crammed the rest of his pizza slice into his mouth and nodded.

"As far as I can tell, they seem to be well. Barton's and Lang's dispositions have improved considerably since their families arrived. I suspect it has been something of an adjustment. There was tension between Barton and his wife, as well between Lang and his family, but that's not surprising all things considered."

"That's good," Tony mumbled, chewing slowly.

"I can't tell you much about Maximoff or Romanov. To be honest, I don't see them very much," T'Challa said. "Wilson has been spending a good deal of time with Shuri." He sounded amused at that, and Tony looked up at him with a raised eyebrow. T'Challa chuckled.

"My sister is more than capable of handling herself and any potential suitors. Vision sends his regards to you, but I'm guessing that the person you're really wondering about is Rogers."

"Maybe," Tony said after a pause. He really wasn't sure. He wanted to know as much as he didn't. It was like a toothache he couldn't stop poking at.

"He spends a lot of time with Barnes, according to Shuri."

"I thought Barnes was frozen."

"He is."

Tony thought about that for a few seconds. "That's... sort of pathetic."

"I agree. I don't know Rogers or Barnes very well, but from what I've heard it's probably a good thing that Barnes decided to freeze himself again or there might have been a lot of friction between him and Rogers."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not the same person I was five years ago," T'Challa pointed out. "I can't imagine that Barnes would be the same person he was seventy years ago, especially in light of everything that's happened to him since then. And I'm guessing that Rogers isn't going to be very open to understanding that right away." He finished off his slice, concluding with, "Things are tense amongst the Avengers in general, but it's going to get worse before it gets better."

Tony absorbed this while he started in on his second piece. Nothing T'Challa had said was surprising, though it still stung to hear. In a way, he was relieved that he was away from the team right now. It was hard enough sometimes to get up in the morning without having to face that much unresolved anger and frustration. Not to mention, he was right there with T'Challa in agreeing that he didn't want to be there when Barnes was defrosted and he and Steve actually got the chance to talk for the first time. It would probably end with a lot of destroyed punching bags.

He looked back at T'Challa. "Remind me to give your engineers a tip about how to create punching bags to withstand Captain America."

T'Challa raised an eyebrow. "Very well. I did have something I was supposed to tell you, now that our conversation has made me think of it. Shuri wants to meet you. I'm supposed to invite you to come to Wakanda with me."
Tony choked. "What?"

"I know it's sudden, and it's probably the last place you want to be in light of the team's presence." T'Challa grimaced. "But she is very anxious to meet my soulmate after all the things I've told her about you. And it's not a good idea for both of us to be away from the country at the same time. I suppose that for one or two days -" 

"T'Challa." Tony held up a hand, surprised to hear T'Challa rambling. That was very unusual and spoke volumes about just how much T'Challa probably wanted this. "It's fine."

"Are you sure, Kitten? I don't want you to do anything you're not comfortable with."

"I can't avoid them forever," Tony said. No matter how much he might want to. "And I want to see your kingdom. I mean, I've been there before, but that was just for a bunch of boring meetings. I didn't get to meet your sister or really see anything. And I want to, because it's something that's so important to you. If that means I have to see the Avengers again -" his stomach twisted at the thought - "then so be it."

Besides, it hadn't escaped Tony's notice that the second to last step that he and FRIDAY had found on Wakandan courting rituals was meeting the family. T'Challa had already met Tony's family: Pepper and Rhodey and Sharon were the only living people Tony considered family now. In return, Tony wanted to meet Shuri and anyone else in T'Challa's family. He'd already spoken to Shuri on the phone, but it wasn't the same.

"You are a wonderful man, Tony Stark," T'Challa said. The sincerity in his voice made Tony blush again, mostly because he didn't think he deserved it. It was selfishness on his part to want to meet Shuri and see if she would consider him a bad influence on T'Challa before things got much more serious, but T'Challa didn't seem to have put two and two together and Tony didn't really want him to. He settled for ducking his head and picking up another slice of pizza rather than respond to the comment, and T'Challa seemed to be willing to let it go.

They chatted lightly as they finished their meals; T'Challa described the meetings he'd been stuck attending, and Tony told him a little bit about the newest S.I. product that would be hitting the shelves soon. He realized all over again how nice it was to be able to describe things to T'Challa and have T'Challa understand without needing the explanation to be dumbed down too much, if at all. But what made the situation even better was T'Challa's obvious thirst to know more. When he asked questions, it wasn't just for the sake of politeness - it was because he actually wanted to hear the answer.

After way more pizza than was probably healthy, Tony set his box aside and leaned back with a groan. "I think I ate too much."

"Does that mean you didn't save room for dessert?"

"Dessert?" Tony looked up hopefully, but his stomach chose that moment to rumble threateningly. "How about presents first, dessert after?" he suggested, wondering if T'Challa would notice if he surreptitiously undid the button and zipper of his jeans.

"That sounds fair," T'Challa said with a grin that was entirely too knowing. "It will take me a few minutes to finish your gift." He paused, looking uncertain. "Is it okay if I go down to the workshop alone first?"

That was - wow. The only person that was allowed into the workshop without Tony was Rhodey, and - except for when Tony was missing in Afghanistan and Rhodey went down to keep Dummy,
You and Butterfingers company on occasion - he didn't think Rhodey had ever actually done that. His knee-jerk reaction was to refuse, but he stopped himself at the last second. This was T'Challa. There was nothing he could do down there that FRIDAY wouldn't know about, but more than that, Tony didn't think there would be anything for FRIDAY to report. It was almost a shock to realize that Tony trusted him.

When had that happened?

"Kitten?" T'Challa said, sounding faintly worried. "Are you -"

"Go ahead," Tony said. It came out a little strangled, but he thought he was doing pretty well considering. After all the betrayals he'd suffered, how had he come to trust someone this much without even knowing?

T'Challa cast him another concerned look, but stood and went to the elevator. As soon as the doors were shut, Tony thumbed the button on his jeans open and unzipped them. He groaned in relief and collapsed back against the couch, staring up at the ceiling.

"How the hell did that happen?" he asked out loud, not really expecting an answer. Just when he thought he'd learned his lesson about trust, his heart went and proved him wrong all over again.

He must've fallen asleep, because the next thing he knew FRIDAY was waking him up by telling him that his presence was being requested in the workshop. Sleepily, Tony stumbled from the couch to the elevator and rubbed at his eyes the whole down, trying to look more awake than he really was. He wandered into the workshop and spotted T'Challa sitting on the couch, playing with Dummy. The table with the mini-panther was still covered, which was an unexpected relief - it hadn't even occurred to Tony to tell T'Challa not to snoop around, but it seemed T'Challa hadn't.

"Did I wake you? I'm sorry," T'Challa said.

"Not a problem," Tony said, belatedly realizing he'd forgotten to do his jeans back up. Good thing his shirt was long enough to cover his waistband. "Can I go first?"

"Of course."

Tony nodded, sleepiness disappearing as his heart started to pound from nerves. "I wasn't sure what to get for you - I mean, you're the King of Wakanda and the only person I've ever dated who actually has more money than I do, so buying you anything was pretty much out. And then I thought to myself that maybe what you needed the most was a personal assistant who could literally go anywhere with you - and I take it seriously when I say anywhere. Especially when I started thinking about Sam and Redwing, and how many times Redwing has saved his ass during a fight. So..." He whipped the cover off the table.

The mini-panther blinked and stood up, joints working smoothly and seamlessly. She stretched, back arching in one long curve, and then hopped down from the table, strutting over to T'Challa. Tony said, "It's the only one in the world like it. She has a pretty sophisticated artificial intelligence system and she's run entirely off of arc reactor technology." His mouth was dry, but he forced himself to add, "The first arc reactor, actually. Proof that I have a heart, or so Pepper told me once."

T'Challa looked at him sharply but knelt, offering a hand to the mini-panther. She sniffed his hand and then licked his fingers, a flash of pink tongue, and T'Challa visibly startled when he felt the dampness of her tongue. He was permitted to touch her then, running deft hands over her body. He blinked in surprise and said, "This is vibranium?"
"Yeah. Your sister is a scary person, by the way."

"That she is," T'Challa agreed absently. He tilted the mini-panther's chin up and rubbed at the metal curiously, smiling when a purr rumbled out of her. "Can she speak?"

"Yes, but I recommend telling her to be mute around other people. That's the command she's under right now, and she'll remain that way until you give her a name and I code you into her data. When she's muted, she can make cat noises but no other sounds. The more people that think she's just a fancy toy, the better," Tony said, unconsciously touching his wrist. The watch that could, with the right movement, be turned into a gauntlet had saved his life on more than one occasion. "FRIDAY can give you the full list of everything she's capable of later tonight, but I tried to cover all the bases. And she can be upgraded, of course, if I missed something."

"She's amazing, Tony. Thank you." There was both warmth and awe in T'Challa's expression when he stood up to pull Tony into a hug.

"You're welcome," Tony mumbled, trying not to sag in relief. Even right up until the moment he came into the workshop, he'd been second-guessing his decision. Knowing that T'Challa seemed to like the gift was a huge weight off his shoulders.

"No one has ever given me a gift like that before. You put so much thought into it," T'Challa whispered. "I'm... I can't even think of a way to describe how touched I am right now. My gift pales in comparison."

"I doubt that," Tony said, suddenly a little excited at the reminder. "What is it? Where is it?" He scanned the room, not sure what he expected to see. Nothing looked different, though.

"It's not something you can see," T'Challa said. Surprisingly, he looked a little nervous. "Go ahead."

"What?" Tony said, confused.

At the same time, JARVIS's voice said, "Hello, Sir."
Instantly, Tony was back in that moment of watching the dull orange coding, wrecked and ravaged, swirl lifelessly, knowing what it meant and being unable to voice it to anyone because it hurt too much. Back in the moment of watching the Vision straighten up and hearing that familiar voice, but knowing that the brain behind it was a completely different creature. Back in the moment of returning to the Tower after Ultron’s defeat and realizing that he didn’t have enough to re-build.

Tony had joked about his brain doing a blue screen of death before (mostly because he loved to point out the inferiority of Microsoft products), but this was the first time that it was actually true. He froze, not even breathing, staring straight ahead as the room went quiet around him. Not even Dummy was beeping, and the purr from the mini-panther had already died away. There was just silence.

“Kitten?” T’Challa said, concerned. “Tony, look at me.” He cupped Tony’s cheeks, guiding his face up until they were looking at each other. “Tony, my beloved, you have to breathe.”

“Sir,” JARVIS said. “I highly recommend you listen to King T’Challa. Your oxygen level is dropping rapidly.”

Fuck. Tony gasped at the sound of that voice and inhaled too hard, launching him into a coughing fit. His legs went weak; he leaned into T’Challa, who gently lowered him to the floor. It was cold under Tony’s butt – his pants might have slipped down more than they should have, exposing his boxers, and the stray thought slid into his head that it was a damn good thing he hadn’t chosen today to go commando, or T’Challa would’ve gotten an eyeful. That was enough to make him start laughing.


Tony shook his head, the laughter giving away to sobs. “JARVIS.”

“I am here, Sir. I’m currently running a calibration between my servers and FRIDAY’s to bring myself up to speed on everything I’ve missed. Calibration is nearly at 48%, and may I say that your work on the last armor was subpar. Your diagnostics were off by 2%.”

Yup, that was him, sassiness and all. Tony closed his eyes as tears ran down his face, turning his head blindly to hide in T’Challa’s shoulder. He was shaking and couldn’t seem to stop, breathing too hard and too fast, even as T’Challa’s arms wrapped around him. Overhead, JARVIS continued to ramble about little bits and pieces of the calibration process. That was never a habit he’d picked up from Tony, so this was purely for Tony’s benefit.

It usually worked, too. Nothing drew Tony out of a panic attack better or more easily than JARVIS’s soothing voice. And usually, JARVIS somehow knew exactly what to say in the moment: sometimes it was complicated equations that Tony had to focus on to understand, but sometimes it was just a meaningless repetition of the date, time, location and weather that he didn’t need to understand.

Today, though. All Tony could do was cling to T’Challa and listen, trying to accept that JARVIS was really here, but it did nothing to curb the emotions bubbling in his chest. It was just too much; he couldn’t handle it. His breathing picked up a little more and he wheezed, his throat tightening.

“Your highness,” JARVIS said then, and Tony felt more than heard the rumble of T’Challa’s voice as he answered. Tony whimpered when T’Challa tried to move, grabbing onto him even harder, renewed panic surging through him at the thought of anyone leaving.
“Shh, Kitten. I’m not leaving you,” T’Challa murmured, running a hand through Tony’s hair. A few
moments later, Dummy beeped. T’Challa shifted, moving around Tony, then pressed something
small and hard to Tony’s lips. Tony opened his mouth automatically, vaguely recognizing the pill as
one of the Xanax he’d stashed in one of the workshop’s drawers, and allowed it to be slipped under
his tongue.

T’Challa continued to stroke his hair and back, breathing slowly and steadily. Tony’s thoughts were
a confused, terrified muddle, but gradually he could feel the artificial calm kicking in. His breathing
started to settle into a more comfortable rhythm, and he realized that the mini-panther was curled up
beside him, purring quietly, and Dummy’s claw was patting clumsily at his shoulder. Huffing out a
dry laugh, Tony reached up a trembling hand and grasped Dummy’s claw.

“S’okay, bud,” he mumbled, feeling wrung out. It had been a while since he’d had a panic attack that
bad. Well, it had been about a month. That counted as a while, didn’t it?

“Sir, I recommend allowing King T’Challa to help you to bed,” JARVIS said.

Tony shuddered, but fortunately the medication kept working. “How?” he asked through gritted
teeth. “I don’t – I tried everything.”

“That’s one of the reasons I went back to Wakanda. You’d told me about JARVIS, and I thought
that would be a good gift for you.” T’Challa’s voice was low and soothing, but bewildered. He
clearly had no idea what had set off Tony’s panic attack.

And why would he? Tony had been deliberately vague while telling him about JARVIS. He’d told
T’Challa that JARVIS was one of his first A.I.’s and that he was the most advanced, and even that
he’d been Tony’s best friend. But he couldn’t put into words exactly what JARVIS meant or how
much his loss hurt or how much Tony hated himself for letting it happen.

“He’s my baby,” Tony choked out, and it was so stupid. Humiliating, really, because he’d never
referred to JARVIs or the ‘bots as his children in front of anyone but Pepper and Rhodey, and now
he could feel the tears welling up in his eyes again.

“I love you too, Sir,” JARVIS said, without missing a beat, like it was just so natural, like he knew
exactly what that meant and meant it anyway, and it hurt in the very best way. The tears spilled over.

“Beloved, please don’t cry.” T’Challa sounded distressed.

That was definitely a new nickname. In spite of everything else, Tony still blushed. He stopped
holding onto Dummy’s claw so that he could wipe his face. “I’m not – it’s good. Really good. The
best gift I could’ve asked for. I just don’t understand how –”

“It was actually the work of the Vision. I’m afraid I can’t take much credit. When I asked him about
JARVIS, he readily provided me with a copy of all the coding he possessed that belonged to
JARVIS and explained to me how to integrate it with what you had here. Apparently he had been
working on it for some time with FRIDAY’s help.”

“Why didn’t he tell me?”

“I suspect he didn’t want to get your hopes up.” T’Challa rubbed his thumb across Tony’s cheek,
wiping away a stray tear. “But I don’t know for certain. I didn’t think to ask. I didn’t realize how
much it meant to you.” There was no condemnation in the way he said that, like he thought Tony
should’ve told him, just simple fact.

“It’s not something I usually talk about,” Tony muttered. The loss of JARVIS had cut deep, probably
deeper than any of the team would've guessed. Tony had always tried to downplay just how much JARVIS meant to him, not wanting anyone (and god knew there was a long list of potential assholes who might've done just that) to get the wrong idea about trying to steal him.

“I understand. Come on, up we go.” T’Challa stood up, pulling Tony up with him. Dummy beeped worriedly. Tony shot him a wan smile.

“I’m fine, buddy,” he said, giving Dummy a reassuring pat on the claw. “Thanks for getting my medication. You got just the right one.”

Dummy beeped again. At their feet, the mini-panther wound around T’Challa’s ankles and chirped at Tony. Tony would’ve leaned down to pet her too, but he was pretty sure he was going to end up face planting if he did that. He felt wobbly on his feet, like his legs might come out from under him at any time. It wasn’t an uncommon symptom after he had one of his attacks; they usually left him wrung out and exhausted.

What was unusual was having someone else there to help him. When the team was around, he’d always made it a point to have an attack in the workshop or his bedroom or anywhere, really, that was private, even if it meant scrambling out of the room while someone else was speaking mid-sentence. It had earned him a bit of a reputation amongst the team, but that was better than the alternative.

Now that he lived alone, it was a little easier in terms of privacy. Only Rhodey, Pepper, Happy and Sharon had ever seen him in the grips of a bad attack, and that was because they’d known him for so long. He did suspect that Natasha had walked in on him once. She’d never said anything, but Tony just knew from the way she looked at him later that night. That glance had made his skin crawl.

He had always loathed feeling weak, and that’s how he would’ve felt if Steve or Clint had come across him in that state. The last thing he wanted was their pity just because he was a human having a very normal human reaction to trauma (or so Pepper said, Tony still had his doubts).

He couldn’t say he was thrilled that T’Challa was either, either. Or that Tony had clung to him and cried the way he had. But T’Challa looked unfazed, if still concerned, as he wrapped an arm around Tony's waist and helped him into the elevator.

"I should have given you more warning," he said.

"You didn't know. It's not your fault. I'm the one who freaked out," Tony said. He looked away. "Sorry about - all that."

"You don't need to apologize, Kitten."

Shit. Just the sound of that nickname brought every wall that Tony was trying to build crashing down. Judging by the small smile on T’Challa's face, he knew it too. Tony mock-scowled at him as the elevator doors open and they stepped out together. T’Challa just smiled wider.

"I think you should lay down."

"But I'm not tired," Tony said, which was a blatant lie. The sleep he'd gotten before T’Challa had arrived seemed like a distant memory now. Between the excitement over T’Challa's arrival and giving him the gift, and the unexpected panic attack he'd just suffered, he was shaky with exhaustion.

"But I am. And I would feel better if you were in bed with me. I've missed you too much to lay down alone," T’Challa said with a perfectly straight face.
"I know you're lying," Tony grumbled, but allowed himself to be spilled into bed anyway. T'Challa immediately climbed in beside him and pulled Tony into his arms. The mini-panther jumped up onto the bottom of the bed, turned around in a couple of circles, and plunked herself down. Her eyes glowed as JARVIS turned the lights down.

"Good night, Beloved," T'Challa whispered.

In the dark, Tony blushed again. "What will you call her?" he asked, just to divert attention.

T'Challa was quiet for a moment, thinking. "Khanyiswa," he said finally.

Tony repeated the name, fumbling only a little. "What does it mean?"

"It means one who lights up. Illumination." They both looked down the bed. The arc reactor shone as Khanyiswa shifted, a flash of familiar soft blue that instinctively made Tony relax. And in the blue glow, T'Challa's affectionate smile was everything he'd ever wanted.
Chapter 12

Tony gave himself three days to revel in having JARVIS back before he approached the idea of a trip to Wakanda with Pepper. She was completely agreeable to the idea, which made him suspect that T’Challa had probably mentioned it to her already. She swung by the night before they left with some paperwork, since Tony could be gone for up to a week, and then cried when she found out about JARVIS. It might have made Tony tear up a little. Just out of sympathy, of course.

On Tuesday morning, early enough that it was still cool outside, Tony, T’Challa and Khanyiswa boarded a private jet for Wakanda. It was a long flight, about twelve hours, and Tony slept for most of it. He woke up to find that T’Challa had tucked a blanket around him before falling asleep.

Khanyiswa was curled up in his lap; she lifted her head and blinked at Tony.

He dredged up a smile and patted her on the head, then stood up and ventured into the bathroom. It was cramped, private jet or not, but serviceable. He splashed some water on his face and looked into the mirror. Admittedly, he looked a hell of a lot better now than he had before T’Challa came into the picture. For a while there, Tony barely remembered that eating and sleeping were things you were supposed to do every day.

And now, just when he’d gotten to the point where he wasn’t having a panic attack every day or literally working himself to the bone, he was going to face the team again. Tony had no idea how he was supposed to deal with that. On the one hand, he wanted to see them in person. It had been so long… he wanted to make sure that everyone was still okay.

But on the other hand, this was going to be an unbearably tense situation. Frankly speaking, he’d be lucky if tense was all it was. He hadn’t forgotten Clint’s little comment while they were on the Raft, and Wanda had never liked him, and he didn’t know Sam or Scott that well but Scott, at least, didn’t like him. Throw in Steve’s overall attitude and Tony was thinking maybe he should’ve turned down T’Challa’s offer to visit Wakanda.

That wasn’t really fair either, though. T’Challa was his soulmate. Tony had the right to meet his soulmate’s family. More than that, this was clearly important to T’Challa and he didn’t want to mess that up. He wanted to make a better second impression on Shuri, since their first impression had revolved around Tony asking her for a favor. Hopefully she would find Khanyiswa at least somewhat impressive?

His phone rang. He jumped, swearing under his breath as his elbow hit the door, and fumbled his phone out of his pocket. It was Rhodey. Tony winced and slowly brought the phone to his ear.

“Hey, sugar bear.”

“Don’t you nickname me, Tony Stark. What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Yeah, Rhodey was definitely mad. “Don’t be mad,” Tony begged. “I want this to go well. I’m meeting T’Challa’s sister in person for the first time. I can’t do that if you’re hovering over my shoulder growling every time the team so much as breathes in my direction.”

“They would deserve that and more! Christ, Tony, what are you going to do if one of them tries something?”

“That won’t happen,” Tony said, though he didn’t sound nearly as confident as he wanted to. In all honesty, he had his doubts.
“Right,” Rhodey said. “I’m coming to Wakanda.”

“Rhodey, no. It’ll be fine. T’Challa’s with me. And besides, I can take care of myself. Even without the armor, you know I could probably throw Clint Barton out the window without even trying.”

“I do. I also know that you won’t do that.”

Tony stayed quiet, trying not to squirm. Rhodey wasn’t wrong. “Please?” he asked, deliberately making his voice all soft and plaintive. “Stay there?”

Rhodey sighed explosively. “Fine. Fine! I’ll stay here. But you’re not allowed to use that voice for the next six months.”

“Deal,” Tony said, trying not to smile.

“But I’m warning you now. If any of them lifts so much as a finger—”

“You’ll be there in less than eight hours, I know,” Tony said. It chafed a little at knowing how much faster a flight it would’ve been if he could’ve taken the armor, but that meant traveling without luggage and – worse – arriving before T’Challa did. Tony was known for throwing himself into reckless situations, but not even he was that stupid.

“Damn right I will,” Rhodey grumbled. “You did bring the suit with you?”

“Of course I did. What do you take me for, an idiot? I carried it on the plane myself and it’s sitting right underneath my seat.”

“Good.” Rhodey paused, and then said, “Pepper told me about JARVIS. I’m really happy for you, Tones.”

A lump instantly formed in Tony’s throat. He swallowed hard. “Thanks.”

Rhodey, wonderful person that he was, sensed the change in tone. “Just make sure you’re careful.”

“I will. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Tony hung up, feeling a little lighter. He felt bad about going without even telling Rhodey, but it was the best plan he’d been able to come up with. Much as he would’ve appreciated the support, that was a guaranteed way to stir up the pot. Tony was used to schmoozing with people who didn’t like him, even people who didn’t bother to hide it. Rhodey wasn’t.

He slipped his phone back into his pocket, splashed his face a second time and then opened the bathroom. The very last thing he was expecting to see was the red-skinned man floating outside. Tony yelped and jerked back, slamming his elbow into the sink. He swore again and grabbed at the bruised skin, muttering under his breath about airplane bathrooms.

Vision blinked at him. “I was not aware you could do that with a bathroom.”

“You can’t. Damn it, Vision, I’ve told you before that you shouldn’t do that,” Tony scolded. His heart was still pounding away in his chest from fright.

“You also said it wasn’t kind to knock when someone was in the bathroom.”

“That was because you knocked twenty times for a phone call from a investor I didn’t even want to
talk to,” Tony muttered, but gave up. Scolding Vision about human culture and nuances was kind of like scolding a puppy: in the end, they just didn’t understand and you were left feeling terrible for having scolded them in the first place.

He straightened up and looked at Vision curiously. “What are you doing here?”

“Princess Shuri informed me that you were coming. I saw fit to greet you,” Vision replied. “Did you like the gift?”

“Yes, very much. Thank you.”

Vision inclined his head. “It required little effort on my part, and soothed the part of me that is always displeased when you are unhappy.”

“You… okay then,” Tony said, unsure how to take that and deciding that it was best to gloss right over it. “You didn’t have to come greet us. We’ll be there in less than half an hour.”

“His highness said you missed me.” Vision spoke the words like he wasn’t really sure what they meant, but they were mortifying all the same.

“It was just weird having the tower be so empty, that’s all,” Tony said hastily. “It was fine, really. I know you wanted to see Wanda –”

“I wanted to explain to her that her impression of you is wrong.”

Tony blinked. “What?”

Vision’s expression was completely serious. “I know what your mark is. I might not know everything that JARVIS did, but I did know that. And when his highness became the King, his mark became public knowledge, as per Wakandan law. I was aware of the fact that your marks would match.”

“And you didn’t tell me?” Tony asked, more curious than anything, though he would’ve been angry if he hadn’t known already.

“My understanding of human culture indicates that it was not my place,” Vision said. “However, I knew it would only be a matter of time before you found out, and at that time you would have to come to Wakanda. I wanted to take steps to improve the opinion of you, if not with the rest of the team, than at least with Wanda.”

“That’s why you left,” Tony said, dumbfounded. “Why didn’t you at least tell me that?”

“I was not aware you needed to know.”

“And we need to have a discussion about what constitutes a need to know basis,” Tony muttered, putting a hand over his face. He needed a few seconds. All this time, he’d been thinking that Vision had left him like everyone else, and now he was finding out that theory was completely wrong.

“Very well. When would you like to have this discussion?”

Tony smiled in spite of himself and waved a hand. “Not now. So did you make any progress? Does Wanda still hate my guts?”

Vision’s smile was slightly puzzled, but he answered readily enough. “She still dislikes you, but she is slowly coming to accept that you are not the terrible person she initially believed you were. I
explained to her about Obadiah Stane and his dealings with terrorists behind your back. Though Wanda believes you should have been paying more attention, she was willing to concede that you had no hand in the actual dealing.”

“I can’t fault her for that. I blame myself for the same thing,” Tony said. He’d never forgive himself for all those years spent partying and drinking when he should have been paying more attention to the company – or at least, scouting out people who were actually trustworthy, as opposed to people who would stab him in the back the first chance they got.

“It was not your fault,” Vision said, and he sounded so much like JARVIS that it still hurt, for a single dizzying moment, before Tony remembered that he didn’t have to mourn JARVIS anymore.

“We’ll have to agree to disagree on that.”

Vision tipped his head in acknowledgement. “We have also spent much time discussing her actions,” he offered, “and it is my opinion that she will be cordial to you.”

“I guess that’s all I can ask for,” Tony said, still reeling a little. He was tempted to ask exactly what Vision meant when he said discussing Wanda’s actions, but he had the feeling that Vision wouldn’t tell him. He hoped that meant Vision had explained to her that actions had consequences, and that public image could sometimes mean the difference between life and death.

“Unfortunately, I’m not sure my presence has done anything for the rest of the team.”

Tony snorted and finally took a step forward. Vision backed up obligingly, half-fading into the wall to allow Tony the room to slip by him (which would never stop being a little creepy). “That is probably the least surprising news you could’ve told me. The team hates my guts.”

“That’s not true. Agent Romanov –”

“Please, don’t,” Tony said, half-begging, not sure he could stand here and listen to Vision cite what the team actually thought about him. He was relieved to see that T’Challa was awake and standing; it was outlandishly weak, but Tony couldn’t help heading straight into T’Challa’s arms to take advantage of the hug T’Challa was offering.

“I heard you yelp,” T’Challa said, hugging him tightly. “Hello, Vision.”

“Your highness,” Vision said politely. “Greetings, and welcome back.”

“How is everyone?” T’Challa asked, rubbing a comforting hand down Tony’s back. “Come, sit with us and tell me how they are doing.”

It was a pretty blatant change of subject, designed to get them off the team, but Vision took it. And Tony even relaxed a little as he listened to Vision discuss his time in Wakanda; apparently, every single child he’d met was absolutely fascinated by him. But in too short a time, the plane was coming in for a landing and Tony tensed up again. Ready or not (and at this point, he was pretty firmly leaning towards not) he was about to see his ex-team.
Chapter 13

There was a handful of women waiting for them on the landing pad when the jet's door opened. All but one were dressed in the uniform of the Dora Milaje. The lone stand-out was wearing jeans and a pink vest over a white sweater, and she grinned broadly as T'Challa came down the steps of the plane, Tony on his heels. Vision didn't even bother with the stairs; he just phased straight through the bottom of the jet and landed on the ground. With a polite nod, he flew into the castle.

Tony envied him. He recognized Shuri immediately, of course. He'd seen pictures of her before, and, after realizing that T'Challa was his soulmate, he'd taken it upon himself to commit her face to memory. But he wasn't prepared for how beautiful she was in person, or how nervous he would feel as she and T'Challa embraced. He hung back, all of his usual confidence having deserted him. This was one of those make it or break it moments, but it had been a long time since he'd felt this anxious about meeting someone.

What if she hated him?

His heart was pounding by the time that Shuri and T'Challa separated. T'Challa said something to her and she rolled her eyes, punching him lightly in the shoulder. She said something back – and Tony seriously needed to put learning Xhosa at the top of his list as soon as possible – before turning to look at Tony. For a split second, her expression was grave as she openly looked him over, starting at the bottom and working her way to the top, and he froze.

Then she smiled. “You must be Tony Stark,” she said warmly, holding out a hand. “It’s so nice to finally meet you. You can call me Shuri.”

“How –” Tony repeated obediently, taking her hand. Her handshake was firm, but not deliberately tight; at least, not until she yanked him forward into a hug. Tony actually stumbled, caught off guard, and squeaked when her arms came up around him. He froze again, not sure where he was supposed to put his hands, and looked at T'Challa for help. T'Challa, the bastard, just laughed.

“You can hug me,” Shuri said, sounding amused. “I won’t bite. You’re my brother now.”

Tony had no idea how to respond to that. Rhodey and Sharon were like siblings to him, but he’d known them for years. No one had ever been so openly affectionate the minute Tony met them. “We’re, um, not married yet,” he pointed out.

“You can hug me,” Shuri said, sounding amused. “I won’t bite. You’re my brother now.”

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“I know. But you will be. Hug me, little brother.”

“I’m not little. I’m older than you,” Tony said indignantly, slowly hugging her back regardless. He put one hand on her shoulder and the other on her lower back, realizing that the two of them were the same height. And she was wearing flats. That didn’t bode well, though he supposed he should’ve been used to it. He wasn’t short, but his life seemed destined to have tall people in it.

Shuri just chuckled, bumping their cheeks together before breaking the hug. She took both of Tony’s hands in hers. “Welcome to Wakanda. I hope that you’ll enjoy your time here. I want you to consider this your second home. As the royal consort, the kingdom is at your command.”

“Royal… what now?” Tony echoed, panic breaking through the temporary sense of calm all over again. “That’s not – I’m not –” He couldn’t even finish the sentence. Royal consort? Tony was not a royal anything. He’d fucked up Stark Industries so badly that he’d ended up handing the reins over to Pepper, and that was just one company. Not a whole country. He was not prepared for this.
“Shuri, stop overwhelming him,” T’Challa said, stepping close enough to wrap a comforting arm around Tony’s shoulders. “Be calm, Kitten,” he murmured for Tony’s ears alone. “We will discuss it later, okay?”

“Don’t tell me to calm down. Is she serious?” Tony demanded. Khanyiswa wound around his legs, sensing his discomfort, and trying to calm him. The scent of lavender and chamomile wafted into the air; he had a vague memory of including an essential oil dispenser in her design.

T’Challa sighed. “Yes. Now that I am King, that makes you my consort.”

“I… god, I knew you were a King, but I didn’t think…” Had they not been in public, Tony would’ve curled up into a ball and had a panic attack. Why hadn’t he thought about this sooner? T’Challa was a king. That meant his country had to come first in everything. And Tony was not the kind of person who should be ruling anything. Not in the slightest. He’d already known that he wasn’t good enough for T’Challa. He definitely wasn’t good enough for a whole country.

“Tony, listen to me, okay? You are generous and kind-hearted, even though you try to hide it. I already knew what kind of a man you were, but the past couple of weeks have only cemented that. I can think of no one else that I would want at my side,” T’Challa told him, completely serious.

“Clearly you don’t know me well enough yet,” Tony said, aim for lighthearted and missing it by a mile.

“On the contrary, I think it’s you who doesn’t know yourself.” T’Challa pulled him into a hug. “It will be fine. You will be fine. We are fine. No one is going to throw any decisions on your plate. I’ve been ruling Wakanda with Shuri’s help for almost a year now, and I’m prepared to do so for the rest of my life.”

But T’Challa deserved more than that. Tony couldn’t say it, but he was definitely thinking it. Why couldn’t his soulmate be someone who had been groomed for this? Some prince or princess from a neighboring land who knew everything about Wakanda, who didn’t have other responsibilities, who was fully prepared for that kind of responsibility? Why had life screwed T’Challa over that badly?

“That’s not very fair, though,” he muttered at last.

“Life isn’t fair. I learned that a long time ago,” T’Challa replied wryly. “And before you ask, I was intending to explain that to you after you saw the team. I thought you had enough things on your plate without worrying about this too. And I knew you’d worry, because that’s just the way you are.”

“Are you saying I’m a worry-wart?” Tony said, trying to sound offended.

“I’m saying you’re a conscientious person when you want to be. That’s not a bad thing. Now, can we agree to put this aside for now and talk about it later?”

Tony sighed. “I guess. But next time, a heads up would be nice before someone tells me I’m a royal anything.”

T’Challa’s mouth twitched with amusement. “Noted. Come on.” He squeezed Tony one last time and then let go, turning to find his sister. Shuri, Tony realized, had moved off to the side to give them some privacy. She had her phone out – a Starkphone, Tony was pleased to note – and was busy with it. But she looked up as soon as T’Challa said her name.

“I’m sorry about that, Tony. I didn’t realize you didn’t know,” she said, looking guilty. “That’s a terrible thing to throw on someone’s shoulders as soon as they walk off an airplane.”
“I’m glad you mentioned it. Better you than someone else,” Tony said, and he meant it, though this wasn’t exactly the first in person impression he wanted to make on his (possible?) future sister-in-law. At the very least, Shuri was the only one he’d made a fool of himself in front of. Maybe it was a good thing that Vision had taken off for the castle.

Shuri didn’t look like she agreed, but her gaze had fallen on Khanyiswa. “And who is this beautiful little thing?”

“Khanyiswa. Tony made her for me,” T’Challa said, pride evident in his voice.

“Is this what you need the vibranium for?” Shuri asked, already crouching down and extending a hand to Khanyiswa. Tony made a mental note that he would need to ask T’Challa if he wanted to key Shuri into Khanyiswa’s data – that way, Shuri would be able to issue orders for Khanyiswa to obey. At the moment Khanyiswa was maintaining a polite distance, keeping closer to T’Challa.


Khanyiswa’s eyes briefly glowed green in acknowledgement and she shifted closer, letting Shuri pet her. But she didn’t speak, and Tony understood why all too quickly. The door of the castle had opened and someone very familiar had stepped out onto the steps. Tony stiffened, realizing that Vision must have found Wanda and she, in turn, had alerted the rest of the Avengers.

The time in Wakanda had clearly done Steve Rogers well. His pale skin had actually picked up a hint of a tan, and he looked well-rested and healthy. Clearly he hadn’t been staying up late worrying about twenty different things. He wasn’t carrying the shield or wearing his suit, but just the sight of him was enough to make Tony instantly remember that terrifying moment when the armor was dead and Steve was holding the shield above his head. He couldn’t suppress a shudder.

“How is Rhodes?” Steve asked, sounding genuinely concerned.
Tony folded his arms across his chest. “He’s okay. The leg braces that I made for him mean that he’s able to walk, so that’s something.”

Steve visibly winced. “Right. That’s – that’s good. And Pepper?”

“Still Pepper. How’s… everyone?”

“Good. All good. I mean, Clint and Scott miss their families. Natasha is getting a little restless.”
Steve paused. “Wanda has been much happier since you sent Vision. Thank you for that. I know it must have been hard on you, since he’s your last link to –” He stopped, looking uncomfortable.

JARVIS. Steve didn’t know. Tony realized. Good. “It wasn’t for her,” he said honestly. “I’m not Vision’s keeper. I don’t get to control where he goes. He wanted to come here and I had the means to provide for it, so I did.”

Steve just nodded. “Still, thank you. It was a nice surprise. I’d been wondering how you were doing; T’Challa wouldn’t tell us.”

Tony’s affection for T’Challa increased a whole lot. “I guess he felt it wasn’t his place.”

“You never called,” Steve said suddenly. “I thought you would, but you didn’t.”

Tony stiffened. No, he hadn’t. In fact, for the first two months he’d carried that phone everywhere with him, hoping against hope that Steve might be the one to call him. And when that never happened, the day that Rhodey took his first steps, Tony had dropped that stupid old phone into a drawer, locked it and told FRIDAY not to let him in unless it was an emergency.

“But you came to see us,” Steve went on, “so that’s –”

“I’m not here to see you,” Tony said, cutting him off. “I’m here with T’Challa. He wanted me to meet Shuri and get to know Wakanda a little better. It just so happens that you guys are still here, too.”

“Oh,” Steve said, looking confused. “I thought –”

Tony cut him off again. The words just tumbled out. “It has nothing to do with you. T’Challa’s my soulmate.”
This was the first time since they'd met that Tony had ever seen Steve look so dumbstruck. The open-mouthed expression was comical, in a way, and Tony made sure to commit the look to memory (if only because he was certain that Rhodey and Pepper would want to hear all about it) before he walked past Steve and into the castle. He'd gotten all the way down the hall and rounded a corner - one of the maids actually bowed to him before pointing to a door about ten feet ahead, which was weird for reasons Tony was not wholly prepared to think about yet - before he heard footsteps behind him, and he allowed himself a small smile before schooling his expression. It was gratifying to see Steve be so knocked off-kilter for once.

"Wait, Tony. What did you say?" Steve demanded, catching up with him easily. "T'Challa's your soulmate?"

Because it was Steve, he was making exactly zero effort to keep his voice down. So that was how Tony saw all of the other Avengers again after weeks of no contact: standing in a doorway with everyone staring while Steve had a little fit beside him. Tony looked around the room, taking them all in, deliberately dragging out his response. Scott and Sam were sharing the couch and a bowl of popcorn. Clint was sitting on the windowsill. Natasha was, interestingly enough, sitting on the other couch beside Wanda. Vision was standing behind them; he alone smiled at Tony.

"Who's your what now?" Clint said, looking perplexed.

"Not that it's any of your business," Tony said, shoving his hands in his pockets. It was one of the few lessons that Stane had pounded into him that he actually appreciated: crossing your arms looked defensive, but your hands in your pockets made you look like you didn't care. There was no other image that Tony wanted to give off more than that right now.

"Tony," Natasha said. She was giving him a very familiar look - one that said she was only a few seconds away from making him talk. At one time, that look had been simultaneously terrifying and endearing, strange a combination as that was. But right now, it only served to make Tony angry. And that was.... unexpected. Refreshing. Part of the reason he'd been so apprehensive about coming here was because he was worried about what would happen when he saw the team again. Not just their reaction - though he was prepared for outright hostility at best and another attempt on his life at worst - but whether or not he would be able to stand up to them. Because he still loved them, all of them, Clint and Steve and Natasha, the teammates he'd fought beside and lived with for over two years, and he'd missed them in spite of everything. He couldn't just turn those emotions off no matter how hard he tried.

Right now, though, Tony was getting angry and, better yet, he was clear-headed in his anger. He didn't like the way that Steve and Natasha seemed to think they could pretend nothing had happened, or that they could still talk to him and treat him like he'd been away on a business trip. Like Tony owed them both something, when as far as he was concerned, it was definitely the other way around. Even putting aside the tangle of the accords and Siberia, Tony was the one who'd been dealing with the press, Ross, 117 very pissed off countries, and the nervous Stark Industries investors. He was the one who'd been under fire every damn day, not sitting out in the sun drinking cocktails and getting a tan.
"T'Challa is my soulmate," Tony announced to the room at large. Since the maid had bowed to him, it was probably old news to the rest of Wakanda by now. Frankly, it was a miracle that the team didn't know. It had to have been deliberately kept from them. He wondered who had engineered that, and looked up in time to see Vision wink at him.

"You?" Clint said, somehow managing to convey shock, disbelief and pity all in that one word.

"Yes, me," Tony said, trying not to sound as insulted as he felt. "That's why I'm here, so that I can see Wakanda and get to know what it's like." He clenched his hands in his pockets.

Clint snorted and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like "Poor T'Challa".

"That's great, Tony," Steve said, shooting Clint a glare. "Not what I was expecting, but he'll be good for you."

Tony bristled. "I'm just fine by myself. I don't need someone to be good for me, Steve," he snapped. "There's nothing wrong with me." The words tasted unfamiliar on his lips, because god knew Tony had thought and said the exact opposite dozens of times. But the implications of Steve's statement stung. He didn't need T'Challa to keep him on the road to the straight and narrow, or whatever garbage was going through Steve's head right now.

"That's not what I meant," Steve said with a sigh. "I just meant that -"

"Hang on, does this mean you're like the queen of Wakanda?" Scott asked suddenly.

He'd come to that conclusion much faster than Tony had. Tony eyed him, begrudgingly respectful, and nodded. "I guess so, though queen isn't the word I would use, since last time I checked I had a dick."

Clint looked a little like he was having an aneurism. Even Natasha and Steve appeared gob-smacked. Clearly, the two of them hadn't put two and two together yet either. That made Tony feel a little better. He swept his gaze over Wanda and Sam, since both of them had been silent so far. Sam was sitting back on the couch, arms folded. He met Tony's gaze without saying a word. Wanda wouldn't even look at him, and truth be told Tony wasn't the word I would use, since last time I checked I had a dick."

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"Lucky Wakanda," Clint said finally, though the quip didn't have nearly the sarcastic impact it should have, because immediately following it came T'Challa's smooth voice.

"I wholeheartedly agree, Barton. Wakanda is extraordinarily lucky."

Tony turned his head just in time to see T'Challa coming to a stop beside him. He pressed a hand to the small of Tony's back, a movement which was hidden from anyone else by the way their bodies were angled. That one touch made the last of Tony's nerves drain away, and he shot T'Challa a small smile of gratitude. By contract, T'Challa's answering smile was enormous. He beamed proudly at Tony for several seconds before looking away, his smile fading to something more stern as he looked Steve, Natasha, Clint, Scott, Sam and Wanda in the face in turn.

"I am very proud to have Tony as my soulmate. I can't think of anyone who would do better at my side than he will, and I would appreciate it if you would refrain from insulting Wakanda's Royal Consort under our roof."

Clint just sat there and stared, mouthing the words 'Wakanda's Royal Consort' to himself repeatedly.
Natasha said, darting a quick look at Clint, "He apologizes."

"I'm sure," Tony muttered, subtly leaning into T'Challa's warmth. He could've done this on his own. It would've been hard, and he might've walked away shaking at the end of it, but he'd done harder things in his lifetime. But he was starting to realize that the whole point of having a soulmate was that he didn't have to. T'Challa was there to support him because he wanted to be there, simple as that, and that made all the difference in the world.

"Tony, please don't make this difficult," Steve said, and he had the gall to give Tony the infamous disappointed face. Tony couldn't take that quietly.

"You're telling *me* not to make this difficult?" he snapped. "Are you kidding me right now?"

"Tony -"

"No. Just stop right there, Steve. I don't really want to hear it."

"What, you think you're too good for us now that you're a 'Royal Consort'?" Clint said, and Tony could practically hear the quotation marks around those two words. T'Challa bristled.

"You would do well to watch how you speak to my soulmate," he said very coldly. "You are here because of my invitation, but there are several people who have already told me that they're not pleased about your presence. I've allayed their concerns thus far, but I strongly suggest that you keep in mind that I can rescind that invitation at any point in time and you would be immediately escorted beyond our borders. And frankly speaking, I've been meaning to talk to you all about this for some time now."

"About what?" Sam asked, speaking for the first time since Tony had walked into the room.

"I am setting conditions on your amnesty," T'Challa announced. "In order for you to remain in Wakanda, you need to step up into the public arena so that Tony isn't taking the full brunt of the legal consequences and political backlash."

"You can't order us to do that," Steve said.

"No, I can't. But like I said, I can make it a condition that you have to follow through on in order for you to remain here. So far, Tony has been the one under the spotlight, deflecting every blow that comes towards the Avengers. I do not believe that is fair. You all had a part in this, and it's time you all shared in the consequences."

"But it was all his fault!" Clint exclaimed, outraged. "He should be taking the brunt of it!"

Steve held up a hand, forestalling any other objections. "It's fine," he said suddenly. "You're right, your highness. I'd be happy to do my fair share of explaining what happened. People should know that Bucky was innocent, and that the accords were the government's way of trying to unnecessarily control us." He glanced at Tony. "They should know that I haven't let them down."

"You mean like I did," Tony said, fury and grief burning bright in his chest. That was almost word for word from that stupid letter.

"I didn't say that."

"It's what you meant. Fuck you, Rogers."

"Tony!"
"Enough," T'Challa growled. "You are speaking to the co-ruler of the country that is currently offering you shelter, Captain. I suggest you learn some manners, and quickly." His eyes were dark with anger. "Shuri will work out the details with you. She has been in close contact with Ms. Potts and Ms. Carter, and they are preparing things in the U.S."

"Sharon?" Steve said, deflating so fast it wasn't funny, his eyes wide.

"Yes. She was most anxious to help, given that she and Tony have been as close as siblings for years," T'Challa said, his expression going soft when he looked at Tony. "You should think carefully about what you plan to say. I will not take lightly to anything that further tarnishes my soulmate's reputation, particularly when those things are a matter of opinion and are not necessarily the truth. I would hate to go back on my word and turn all of you out, but for Tony's sake I will not hesitate to do so." His glance back at Steve was pure ice. "And I do mean all of you."

Steve took a step back, turning white, and T'Challa took the opportunity to usher a speechless Tony away. Tony let him do it, mostly because he was torn between shock at what had just transpired and absorbing the look on Steve's face. They continued down several hallways in silence, and T'Challa made sure that they were several rooms away from the rest of the team and any prying ears that might overhear their conversation before he let Tony stop. Immediately, Tony swung around to face him.

"Why would you say that?" he demanded. "You didn't have to do that, T'Challa. It's fine. I'm fine."

"You are not fine, Kitten. You're exhausted. You're overwhelmed." T'Challa cupped his face, looking deeply into Tony's eyes. "And I said it because I love you."

Tony froze. "What?"

"I love you. I love you, and I hate the way they treat you, because you deserve so much better. I can only wish that someday, I'll be able to make you believe that too."

This time, it was Tony's mouth that hung open. He stared at T'Challa, hardly able to believe what he'd just heard. Sure, he'd thought to himself several times now that he might love T'Challa. But it had never once occurred to him that T'Challa could be feeling the same way, much less that T'Challa would come right out with it so soon. They'd only been together for just over a month, and, in Tony's (admittedly limited) experience, that usually didn't happen. But there was no denying the sincerity in T'Challa's eyes right now.

"T'Challa, I..." His throat closed up. It was too much.

"You don't have to say anything. I didn't say it so that you would say it back," T'Challa said gently. "I just wanted you to know that I would stand beside you before anyone else."

Tony swallowed hard and put a hand to T'Challa's chest, feeling the beat of that heart. "T'Challa... I... me too." He leaned in, because this moment felt right, and it never even occurred to him to think that T'Challa might pull away or stop him.

And T'Challa didn't. One of his hands slid around to the back of Tony's head and pulled him in, letting their lips meet in the middle.

The final step in their courtship.

Or not, Tony realized, pulling back and matching the smile on T'Challa's face with one of his own. Just the beginning.
Yes, that is the end - it's already 20,000 words longer than it was supposed to be. No, I'm not planning a sequel (at the moment, anyway).

I couldn't figure out how to work this in; numerous people asked about FRIDAY now that JARVIS is back. Someday in the near future, Tony installs FRIDAY in the Avengers Compound. She is basically the one who controls that building for the team.

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