Nobody's heroes

by boleyn13

Summary

“This job... we try to save as many people as we can. Sometimes that doesn't mean everybody. But if we can't find a way to live with that, next time... maybe nobody gets saved.”

At the end of the day Steve did save everybody. He saved Bucky from Tony, his team from the government, the world from the Sokovia Accords. Some time would probably have to pass for things to blow over, and then everything would go back to normal. Couple of days. Tops. After all Team Cap saved everybody, showing the world how dangerous the accords were, how easily they could be abused. Even their supporters had to come to their senses now.

Yet five days after Siberia nobody feels safe. Things don’t calm down and suddenly it’s again Steve against the rest of the world. Only now it’s not some international organisation or government but the people. The ones he had saved. Slowly Captain America must realize that they don’t feel saved but angry, hurt and scared. The people demand justice for those who were really trying to save them and paid the price
Hey there,

This is my Civil War Fic which treats the consequences such an event would have. Consequences for the whole world, not just the Avengers. I am very excited about this work and I will try to give you a weekly update. Anyway, I'd like to adress something first:

- there will be no pardons. Main premise and driving force of this story is the idea of consequences. There are some great fics about how Team Cap gets pardoned and still have to deal with the aftermath, but that's not going to be the case here. They don't get pardoned. This will be a story about everybody dealing with what they did and see how it affected other people. The world, not just the Avengers.

- No Thanos as a way out to bring them back together.

- I will not blame Ross for everything that went down

These three parts are very important to me, so I thought I would let you know. What else? This story will be heavily influenced by my shot "Don't come crawling back to me", but you don't have to read it to understand what's going on.

Good, that's about it. Have fun reading and tell me what you think :D

P.S. - The author is Team Iron Man (because she thinks he was the hero in this film)

• Inspired by [Don't come crawling back to me](https://www.ficarchive.com/authors/boleyn13) by **boleyn13**
“…still no official statement about the whereabouts of the Avenger and billionaire Tony Stark. Iron Man was last seen…”

“Friday, please…” Pepper wasn’t surprised by how tired she sounded. Not surprised but no less displeased. She didn’t have the time to be tired. Or weak.

At least she didn’t have to worry about that news report anymore, Friday immediately changed the channel and Pepper’s office was filled with jazz music. It did nothing to lighten her mood, the knowledge that probably every other station was debating the same question.

Where was Tony Stark?

Pepper refused to let any of this get to her, she needed to concentrate. Today was way too important to get distracted or to commit a mistake, because of sentimentality. Everything had to go smoothly, for Tony.

As much as Pepper wished to get out of here, for this to work she needed to stay where she was and wait until the end of an average workday. Today was everything but.

Shifting in her chair Pepper folded her hands on the desk, staring at the blank numbers on the computer screen. They could be the key for eternal life and joy and at the moment Pepper would not care.

It had been five days. Five days and six hours that Friday had lost contact to Tony. Five hours and six hours ago the Iron Man suit had shut down and Friday had interrupted Pepper’s meeting at that time.

“Miss, I am no longer able to detect a signal from Iron Man. I lost boss.”

The meeting had instantly ended and everything had gone to hell. Avengers fighting other Avengers at a German airport, using brutal force and destroying most of the place while doing so. Most of them getting arrested while Captain America and Iron Man had disappeared.

And there was Rhodey…

Pepper could feel her hands starting to tremble and she tried to fight it. Straightening her back Pepper counted to five in her head and closed her eyes to make sure no tears were rising. Not today. She couldn’t afford to lose focus and it angered her that they had ended up in this place. When something so terrible had happened to a close friend and she couldn’t take the time she thought necessary to process this. To feel crushed and overwhelmed by sadness.

If there was one reason good enough for postponing all of this, just one reason – it would be Tony.

Rhodey understood, he felt the same way and yet Pepper could feel that numb and seething anger inside of her. Such a day shouldn’t exist, where she had to do this. But here she was, because somebody else had forced this upon them in an act of pure selfishness.

No. Not today. It was so much more important than whatever she felt at the moment. Also there would be a lot of time to deal with what had happened five days ago. Probably the rest of their lives.

Glancing at her watch Pepper only wanted to know how much longer until she could leave, but she
didn’t even register the time it indicated. The watch had been a gift. From Tony. That was all Tony was about. Making gifts and not thinking twice about it. Giving so much and not excepting anything in return and people thought that was okay, because why would need to pay back a billionaire?

Pushing the rising bitterness down Pepper blinked and it was 3:46.

Good, at least it would be over soon…

A knock at the door almost made her jump and Pepper told herself to get a grip. She was perfectly able to handle every kind of pretentious and brutal business man who wanted to treat her like a fragile, little girl and that was what she had been doing all her life. Today wasn’t the time to fall apart. After taking a second to regain her composure Pepper uttered a clear audible “Yes?”

Her assistant walked in, several files in her hand. “Miss Potts, the report for…”

“Thank you, Anna. That would be all.”

A nod and a smile and the door was closed again. Even Pepper’s own assistant was craving answers, it was written all over her face, but she knew better than to ask. Another thing Pepper couldn’t be bothered with at the moment.

Absently Pepper scanned through the report, a lot of numbers and charts would have told her so much any other day. There was no use in trying to understand any of it today, so Pepper put it away.

3:53

“Friday, I’d like to speak to Happy.”

“Gladly, Miss, but I must add that Mr. Hogan hasn’t arrived at the hospital yet.”

“I know… I just want to make sure that everything is working out. I am nervous…”

Friday wasn’t Jarvis and therefore Pepper didn’t feel quite as at ease with her, but she was still one of Tony’s creations. He had given her charm, a caring voice and Pepper still felt like she was talking to a friend. They were so hard to find these days.

A soft click and the music was replaced by Happy’s voice. “Pepper, hey. I’m not there yet.”

“I know… I just… I’m going crazy here. We need this to work out. Tony needs…”

She was stumbling over her words and Happy instantly spoke up to calm her down. “It’ll be okay. I just had another call from the administration and everything’s perfectly coordinated. You organised it, remember?”

Right, that was what Pepper did. Organising things and she hated it when things went wrong. Yet it had never been this important. The press were sharks and Tony Stark always made for great headlines.

“Yes, I remember… Just call me the second you think something is going wrong. If there’s only one camera…”

“There will be more than one camera, but as long as they don’t get a glimpse of Tony that won’t matter. Nobody will get to see him. I promise.” After so many lies these obviously honest words threatened to choke Pepper. “Thank you… I gotta make sure now that the airport car is on its way. Yes, I know… I might be too controlling, but I am not leaving anything to chance.”
“Right there with you, Pepper. I’ll let you know when we’re on our way back. It’s going to be fine.”

Pepper released a sigh. “I know…”

Happy instantly caught the slight tremor in his voice. “Is there something else?”

“I just think… I should be there. I haven’t seen him in… and now I won’t be there when he…”

“Don’t even start. You were right when you planned this. These fuckers are still waiting in front of the headquarters for you to get out. If you’re seen anywhere near a hospital we won’t get them off our backs anytime soon. It’s okay, Tony will understand.”

The very same thing that Pepper had been telling herself the whole time and she knew that it was true. At least the part about the press. Pepper wasn’t so sure about Tony. He had been let down way too many times.

“Thank you, Happy.” A phrase she had said so many times and suddenly it meant so much more. At a time when you had to find out that there was barely anybody you could rely on.

“See you tonight. It’s going to be fine.”

Pepper definitely hoped so. She needed today to be a success, otherwise they would have their hands full with new things to deal with when she was about to need all of her resources for something else entirely.

“Friday, the airport vehicle?”

“Already on its way, Miss Potts. Shall I put you through?”

“Please.”

Another click. “Miss Potts?”

“Yes, I wanted an update on the situation.”

A soft laugh was the response and Pepper gritted her teeth. She didn’t like it that somebody was taking this lightly. “Everything’s just fine. The second we left the tower we had them on our tail.”

Good, at least the press continued to stay predictable. “Take your time.”

After two other calls Pepper was relieved to learn that everything was working according to plan. 35 minutes ago a vehicle of Stark Industries with tinted windows had left the soon to be former Avengers Tower and was heading towards JFK airport. Another one would arrive at Newark Airport in about 20 minutes. The last call had confirmed that a car had left the Avengers compound when Pepper had called Happy.

So at the moment the reporters were chasing three cars around the city, hoping that Tony Stark was sitting inside of one of them. The second they realised that two of them were moving towards an airport even more press would move there.

This way nobody would even notice some average Jeep stopping at the backdoor of a hospital.

It was going to be alright. Not a single camera would get a picture of Tony, nobody would fire questions at him. Pepper was going to see him tonight, she just had to get through the rest of the day.

If she had any idea how to do that…
There was work enough for several lifetimes. Messages were flooding her mailbox, the phone hadn’t stopped ringing until Friday had taken care of it and Pepper hadn’t even glanced at the everyday business yet. Something she wouldn’t do.

Seconds were passing, turning into minutes and they all felt the same. A nightmare that had been lasting for almost a week. Not knowing, then knowing, but not able to see or make sure. Depending on what others were telling her. It wasn’t enough.

Pepper flinched when Friday spoke up, despite the AI’s careful tone. “Miss Potts, Mr. Hogan wants me to let you know that they are leaving the hospital now. There haven’t been any disturbances. Mr. Hogan also wants to emphasize that boss is doing fine.”

Again Pepper was shaking and her only wish was to tell Friday to make another call, so she could talk to Tony.

No, now was her turn. She would see him tonight. In person.

Standing up Pepper began gathering her files and reports, things that she hadn’t even looked at and carelessly put them into her bag. Brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear Pepper granted herself a moment to get ready. It wouldn’t be different from any other day of this week. Except… this time she knew that Tony was on his way home. So her main duty was to keep every emotion off her face, to not attract any attention. To give Tony the time to heal.

“Friday, please call my driver.”

“Of course, Miss Potts.” A short pause. “Everything is going to work out just fine.”

Pepper wasn’t a pious person, but now she was tempted to pray that Friday was right. Leaving her office Pepper told her assistant to go home. She did it with a smile, already practicing her pokerface. The ride in the elevator was way too short and Pepper tried to ready herself. It was ridiculous. For years she has been dealing with reporters and the scum of the earth, they always tried to gain reactions from her by provoking her, but that had never worked out. Pepper knew how to deal with them. Today wasn’t going to be any different. Except that Tony would have to pay the price if Pepper made a mistake.

Walking down the huge entrance hall Pepper took a look at her phone and at the incoming message.

Car’s at the door

Showtime. She could do this and tonight she would talk to Tony.

The security guard was waiting for her at the door and Pepper nodded at him. The door was opened for her and Pepper stepped outside.

“Miss Potts! Miss Potts!”

“Have you talked to Mr. Stark?”

“Is he in New York?”

“Have you seen him since Leipzig?”

Thanks to the blockades none of them could actually approach her, but that didn’t stop them from shouting their questions and flashing their cameras. Three days ago the security had closed off the area around the main entrance which of course didn’t keep the press away. At least there was now
enough distance between them so they couldn’t thrust their microphones into Pepper’s face. That didn’t stop them from firing their questions like projectiles. Pepper was counting in her head, having something to think about, to keep her busy, so she wouldn’t make out what they were yelling. The guard didn’t leave her side until she had reached the car and once again he opened the door for her.

“Is he on the run?”

“Has Mr. Stark also been arrested?”

Pepper’s face was a mask and she slipped into the car, closing the door behind her.

“Like discussed, Miss Potts?”

Pepper nodded and the driver started the engine. She didn’t allow herself to release the breath she was holding until they had left Stark Industries behind them. Almost done. Leaning back Pepper took her phone into her hand, just holding it, waiting for a message, a ringing, anything.

The city was passing by behind the windows and Pepper thought she was going to feel dizzy. No, her body wasn’t going to let her down now. She wasn’t the one in hospital, Pepper was fine and she needed to be fine to make all of this work. A bit of sneaking around, that was all, Pepper had no right to complain or to collapse under the pressure.

The display of her phone lit up and Pepper’s heart skipped a beat.

*Boss is on his way home*

Releasing a long breath Pepper let her eyes fall closed for a moment. So it had worked. With a bit of luck Tony would get to the compound without any reporters following him. Same for Pepper.

Her car’s destination was a smaller facility of Stark Industries. When Pepper got there, she used that time to do some work and to keep up appearances. She let the chief of administration show her around, took a look at the newest numbers and charts. In the back of her mind Pepper was feeling terror. Everybody would look right through her, she was merely going through the motions. At the moment she was in no way able to call anyone out on their mistakes or to even correct them. Luckily there wasn’t much to do, everything was perfectly fine and after an hour Pepper left again. This time in another car. To be completely sure two other vehicles were leaving at the same time, in different directions.

Pepper had her eyes closed, already thinking about being at the compound. 20 minutes ago she had received another message.

*Boss at home*

They had managed to get Tony home. Safely. Keeping him guarded from curious, penetrating eyes and Pepper, for the first time in days, felt gratitude and actual relief. She would be able to talk to Tony, to see him. Talk about what had happened and clean this mess up. Tony would be safe.

When the car finally stopped they were right next to the entrance of the compound and Pepper couldn’t get out. There was nothing that she wanted more and yet she was suddenly afraid what might be waiting for her. Of what she might not be unable to unsee.

“Miss Potts?”

The driver was looking at her and Pepper quickly unbuckled. “Thank you.” Being afraid was ridiculous. She wasn’t going through any trouble, she was safe. No reason and no right to be afraid.
Getting out of the car Pepper didn’t hesitate and walked with fast steps towards the doors. As soon as she stepped inside Pepper felt disappointed, because nobody was there. Had she imagined Tony standing there, only waiting for her?

Walking towards the stairs Pepper passed the wardrobe, covering with several of Wanda’s jackets. These would need to go.

Upstairs Pepper found Vision waiting for her, softly nodding his head. “Miss Potts, it is good to see you again.”

A small smile made its way on Pepper’s face. “Hello Vision. Is Happy still here?”

“Where would I go?”

Turning around Pepper faced the source of the voice and the deep lines of worry on Happy’s face caused a knot to form in her stomach. Still she was able to keep the smile and greeted Happy with a hug. “Everything went fine?”

“Yes, nobody noticed.”

Nodding Pepper let go of him, trying to keep her composure. “I’m going to look after Tony…”

Making a step towards the elevator Pepper got held back by Happy. “Where are you going?”

“To the lab. What…”

“Tony didn’t go to the lab. He wanted to… sleep.” The lines on Happy’s face got a bit deeper and the knot in Pepper’s stomach hardened, started to hurt. They didn’t need to exchange any more words. It was such a harsh hit from reality. No matter what had happened, no matter which mission… Obadiah, Vanko, Loki, Killian, Hydra, Ultron… Tony had always come home, sometimes from the hospital and he had gone straight to his lab. As therapy, to show that he was okay, to prove himself that he was okay, to make better suits, because he needed that.

Tony had gone to bed…

Taking a breath Pepper nodded softly and headed for the stairs instead. It was going to be fine. He wouldn’t be out of the hospital if he wasn’t okay. Her steps were slow and when Pepper was standing in front of the door to Tony’s bedroom and her hand on the doorknob, she couldn’t move.

Furious at herself for being weak when Tony needed her Pepper opened the door. The room lay in almost complete darkness, except for the light that entered with Pepper. It was easy to make out a silhouette lying on the bed. Careful not to make a sound Pepper moved closer, she just wanted to get a glimpse of Tony. To actually see him after so much time. Taking a step closer Pepper’s eyes slowly got used to the darkness and she could see Tony’s face.

A hand shot up to cover her mouth, to smother the shocked sound that wanted to escape her lips. This couldn’t be true. Tony had been in hospital, Pepper had known that he was hurt, but seeing was different than knowing. Tony was lying on his back which offered Pepper a perfect view of his face. A large bruise which had only started to fade away was covering his eye, a small patch was hiding his split lip and a cut across his eyebrow had been stitched up. As if that display of violence hadn’t been enough, the features of Tony’s face were contorted and tensed. Caught in a nightmare.

Pepper’s hand was shaking when she trusted herself enough to bring it down. A decision she had taken too fast, because only now she dared to look at the rest of Tony. He hadn’t bothered to slide beneath the blanket, so Pepper could take in his fully clothed body. One of his arms was in a sling
and when Pepper spotted his other hand she choked back a sob.

Tony’s fingers were clawing his t-shirt even in his sleep. His hand was placed in the middle of his chest, trying to clutch it. The exact spot where the arc-reactor had been. Tony’s heart.

Pepper bit her lip as hard as she could to keep her focus, that this wasn’t about her or her feelings. She was here to make sure that Tony was alright and she wasn’t going to break down only to wake him up from the rest he needed. But how was she supposed to keep quiet? When the strongest, most enduring and most relentless person she had ever met was lying on this bed, seemingly broken. Tony had never backed up, never giving up and no matter what had happened, nobody had managed to make that constant cheeky grin disappear.

Much to her distress Tony had proven again and again that nothing could keep him down, nothing could penetrate the armour he had built around himself. Now he was lying here and Pepper could tell by his features that he was in pain and the one causing it hadn’t been a terrorist or some monster. This was the work of one of Tony’s friends, the ones who were supposed to fight by his side, to protect him… like Tony had been protecting them.

That was what had got Tony here. He had been the one trying to protect people and how had they repaid him? With violence and betrayal.

With every second she was looking at the abused face Pepper felt her pain turning into anger. No, this wasn’t the time. It was about Tony. Now it was Pepper’s turn to take care of everything, to make sure that Tony would be alright, that nobody would dare to lay a hand on him again.

Making an effort to keep her breathing calm and steady Pepper slowly reached out, a whisper passing her lips. “It’s okay, Tony. You’ve done enough. Nobody will hurt you anymore…”

The mere tips of her fingers were brushing over Tony’s temple and Pepper instantly jerked her hand back as if she had burned herself. Or it had been her who had burned Tony.

With a disturbing whimper Tony turned his face away, his hand clutching to his chest and Pepper watched helplessly as Tony’s features contorted in panic.

Quickly Pepper took a step back before the shock could paralyse her limbs. Tony’s fingers tightened around the fabric of his shirt, knuckles turning white and Pepper felt herself thrown back a couple of years. She saw Tony trashing around in bed, gasping for air, working through a panic attack. Tony had proven once again how strong he was by overcoming it. They had thrust him right back in. The people who should have protected him. The ones Tony had sacrificed so much for.

So this was how they showed their gratitude. With violence and blood.

Forcing herself to stay calm Pepper stayed exactly where she was and watched how Tony’s features were easing up again, but not enough to give the impression that his dreams weren’t haunted.

Pepper felt the need to pull the blanket over him, to at least have the illusion to keep him safe and yet she didn’t dare to do anything that might wake him up. The only thing she could do was standing there and looking at him. After several minutes of watching Tony’s regular breathing Pepper felt strong enough to leave.

Slowly she left Tony’s bedroom and pulled the door shut behind her. Closing her eyes Pepper took a moment to gather herself. What had she expected? Friday had called her. Had told her that she had lost contact with Tony for about 5 hours before Vision had found him. She had told her that Tony was in a hospital and then Pepper had done everything to keep that a secret.
Lost contact for about 5 hours and then hospital. What had she been thinking?

*Steve…*

*It’s Steve…*

That had been the one thought in her head. The thought that had kept her upright and functioning. She almost felt as betrayed as Tony and Pepper instantly hated herself for the mere comparison. Straightening back up Pepper told herself to hold her head up high and headed towards the stairs. Her steps were slow and Pepper felt like walking through a dream, unable to cast the image of Tony’s face away.

“Pepper…”

Recognizing that voice Pepper looked up, surprised that she had already reached the end of the stairs. Rhodey was there. Right next to Vision and Happy and Pepper felt her skin crawling at the sight of the wheelchair.

*It’s Steve…*

There was no strength left to force a smile on her face, so Pepper merely walked up to him and bent down to hug him. It felt wrong, everything about it.

Pulling back Pepper couldn’t wait, she needed to know. So much time had already been lost and nobody had been there to protect Tony. While he had been protecting everyone else…

“What happened? What did they do to him?”

A shadow crept onto Rhodey’s face and his eyes told her that he didn’t want to tell her. “Pepper, let’s just…”

“No. I’ve spent five days making sure that nobody would get close to him and I was worried sick, but at the same time I thought that he would be safe, because… It was Steve! How could he end up being seriously hurt when it was Steve!”

“Pepper, please sit down and we will talk…”

“No. I want the medical reports, I want…” Stopping herself Pepper realised she had forgotten about the most essential part. “Friday, pull up the footage from Siberia, recorded by the Iron Man suit.”

This time it wasn’t Rhodey, but Vision. “Miss Potter, I do not think that seeing what happened in Siberia would help you. I will try to answer your questions by telling you…”

“Did you see it? I know somebody must have checked the footage, so did you see it?”

Slowly Vision lowered his eyes and nodded. “Yes, I saw it.”

All these years talking to Jarvis, sometimes simple exchanges, sometimes debating how to get Tony out of his lab, expressing their frustration and fondness of the same man. Vision wasn’t Jarvis and yet Pepper could only hear the AI now. So worried for its creator.

“I need to see it, because none of this makes sense. He went there, because of his friend. Because of Steve and now… I need to understand why Tony is… Friday, play the footage.”

This time there wasn’t protest, but a general sense of unease could be felt. Friday started the footage on the screen closest to them and Pepper balled her hands to fist. Whatever she was going to see, she
needed to know.

It was like seeing the events through Tony’s eyes, how he entered that dark, old facility and Pepper couldn’t fight off the feeling of dread. Seeing this she knew that Tony would end up hurt, she suspected someone lying in wait around every corner. That didn’t happen. Tony found Steve and Barnes, they talked, Tony apologized. What for? Tony had been right, Tony had been following the law, Tony had been trying to apprehend a fugitive and it hadn’t been Tony who had started a fight that had destroyed a German airport.

The video went on and Pepper got a glimpse of the man responsible for the Vienna bombing, but she had no time to give him much thought, not when the following event let her blood run cold.

Tony had been staring at the video showing the death… no, the murder of his parents. Pepper was seeing it with him and a wave of dizziness was washing over her. Barnes had killed them. The desperate need to look away filled Pepper when Barnes cracked the skull of Tony’s father and strangled his mother to death. But Tony hadn’t looked away, so Pepper didn’t either.

When Tony finally took his eyes off the video, he was staring at Steve.

Did you know?

Everything after that was a blur. Tony went after the man who had brutally murdered his parents. The man who had been standing right next to him while Tony had been forced to witness said murder. With Steve. Steve who had known all along and who was now fighting with the murderer of Tony’s parents against his friend.

Pepper’s fists were shaking when she heard Tony’s voice, the rage and the pain. So that’s what Steve had been doing? Telling the United Nations, the entire world to go fuck themselves, so he could protect a single man?

A sound of dread escaped Pepper’s throat when Tony’s gaze darted between those two, fighting both of them off at the same time. They were tossing the shield back and forth between them, using it to hit Tony with it. The shield Tony’s father had made…

Pepper was ready to scream when Steve had Tony against the wall and kept hitting him, how he wouldn’t stop until Tony freed himself and then…

Tony was lying on the floor, Steve on top of him, his hands on Tony’s helmet and… the screen went black. The footage had died which meant that Steve must have ripped the face-plate off.

“What happened then? What did he do, Friday?” Pepper didn’t recognize her own voice and Rhodey tried once more to protect her. “Perhaps you should sit…”

“No. Friday?”

“Captain Rogers rammed his shield into the arc-reactor powering Boss’ suit, disabling it completely. After that he left with Sergeant Barnes.”

She wasn’t able to breathe, her head was swimming and somebody was grabbing her arm, giving her the support she needed to keep standing. “His heart… It had been keeping Tony alive! Steve knew that! It was his heart!”

“Miss Potts, you are in distress…”

“He didn’t need it to survive anymore, but he still felt vulnerable about it! Steve knew that! Tony
was lying on the ground! He was defenceless, he had just seen his parents die and… that was his father’s shield! They beat him with it! They kept hitting him… when he was the one who…”

Choking up Pepper felt arms closing around her and for a moment she allowed the tears to fill her eyes.

All she could see was Tony’s bruised face and how his hand was still trying to hold on to the reactor…

His father’s shield…

He had to watch them die and Steve had known…

Tony had tried reached out to them, after Romania, at the airport, he had walked into this base as a friend and all Steve had done was ramming the knife into his back again and again.

Now Tony was lying up there in his room… while Steve was on the run with the murderer of his parents. The anger inside her began rising even faster when the next pieces fell into place. Steve had left him there. In Siberia, stuck in a disabled suit without anybody knowing where he was. Vision had only got there thanks to Friday, five hours later. Captain America had left him there to help Barnes escape and flee justice after Romania and Leipzig.

Freeing herself from Happy’s arms Pepper shook her head. “I thought Tony was going to be fine because… It was Steve! Steve! No… It’s enough. He broke the law, because he thought he knew better than everybody else! Because the government would abuse their power? And what does he do?! Violating countless laws, destroying public property, hurting and killing innocent people and beating up his friend who only tried to help him… He is not going to get away with that.”

Silence filled the room and Pepper’s mind was racing. Who she would have to call, who to give her support… The United Nations, the US government, she was already in talks with German government, because Stark Industries had offered to pay for the damages caused to the airport… She needed to get in contact with some Romanian delegates… so many people… so many who got hurt. Tony was just one of them and Pepper was going to make sure that he was the last one to get hurt by them. No more.

“They won’t. They won’t get away with it.” Rhodey’s words were calm and sure, Vision and Happy nodding in agreement.

Finally a single tear made its way down Pepper’s cheek and she was torn between burning desperation and gratefulness. No, she wasn’t alone. Tony wasn’t alone.

Steve was and he probably hadn’t even realised that yet. Wherever he was hiding.
Hey everybody,

Wow, thank you for all that positive feedback. I hope I can deliver :)

Today we're going to do something that nobody bothered to do in the movie - we're talking about the Accords. For a change somebody actually knows what they are talking about.

Ladies and gentlemen, meet a major player in this fic - Hope van Dyne. I hope you'll love her just as much as I do :)

Have fun and tell me what you think

“… have proven that the Sokovia Accords are a pressing matter and without a doubt necessary.”

“Could you go into more detail with this statement, Professor Andrews.”

With a groan Hope pulled her hand back, pain was pulsing beneath her skin. Red stains were appearing on the white bandages around her knuckles. Sighing in frustration and annoyance Hope stripped them off and took a look at the damage. The last punch against the bag had completely taken off the scabs and now the wound was bleeding again. Just a scratch.

Using her other hand to wipe the sweat off her forehead Hope focused her entire attention on her laptop which she had brought with her to gym. By now CNN was a constant tingle in her ears, but every fibre of her being refused to miss any new information. Most of the time the news were just guessing, throwing accusations or showing their faces over and over again.

As if anyone could forget what the world’s most wanted people looked like. Sure, there were people who had done way worse, but those criminals or terrorists usually had an established enemy and had some trouble moving around the world. They had natural limits to what they could do. Unlike her. Hope could understand way too good why this thought was more terrifying than the constant war against terrorism. At least at the moment.

The man being interviewed wasn’t a politician, but a Harvard professor of international law. During his introduction they had mentioned that he had been working as a lawyer for the United Nations several years ago, his main assignment had been trying to free political prisoners all over the world.

“The concrete actions of the so called Team Captain America makes this a very simple matter. At the time of the fight at the Leipzig airport Captain Rogers, Sam Wilson and the Winter Soldier were already wanted fugitives. The public nor the government didn’t have any knowledge that Miss Maximoff had joined their cause among two more people. Tony Stark had this information and it was him and the Avengers who found out that Team Captain America would be at the Leipzig airport. It was their chance to apprehend them and they took it. Thanks to the Sokovia Accords a very quick cooperation with the German government was possible. I wonder why nobody has commented yet on how quickly the airport got evacuated. Thanks to an instant information transfer
between the Avengers and the United Nations. It wasn’t possible to evacuate the airport hours earlier, Team Captain America would have noticed and chosen another spot to meet up and the chance to apprehend them would have been lost. This way four international criminals could be apprehended and not a single civilian was hurt in the process. Because there wasn’t one single civilian close to the area, thanks to a prompt evacuation through experienced German police officers who handled the situation perfectly without causing panic. Imagine – you are waiting for your flight at an international airport and suddenly the police tells you to instantly leave the building. In this time and age - not an easy task, but it was done. Thanks to the Sokovia Accords.”

The constant knot in her stomach started hurting again, like every single time somebody talked about Leipzig. Admittedly the pain was way less intense now and it had to be due to the fact that somebody had said something positive in relation to the airport disaster. Something that rather seemed impossible, especially when the video footage of the incident was all over the news. Damned airport security.

Nodding slowly the reporter took a look at his notes. “We’re all very thankful that the fight at the airport didn’t cost any more human lives, after the tragic event in Bucharest, but there is still the immense amount of property damage which was inflicted on the airport. State property. Wouldn’t it have been a more… safe procedure to try to relocate the fight?”

Hope rolled her eyes at that question. Was it so hard to get a competent interviewer? If the professor was annoyed, he didn’t let it show. “Whereto? The Avengers knew where the fugitives were going to be and they had the chance to keep that confrontation in one single space without any civilians close by. Given the fact that Captain Rogers had already proven that he doesn’t care about civilian casualties and considering that his team had grown in number… They were no longer dealing with two enhanced soldiers and a man who can fly, but with Miss Maximoff. Trying to apprehend them somewhere else would have only led to another fight in a public space and we would have more injured civilians, maybe even more would have ended up dead. Keeping the fight at the airport, cooperating with the German Government and keeping the people safe was the right decision. This is not a matter of opinion, the Sokovia Accords helped saving lives that day.”

“Unfortunately there is no way to deny the damage which could have been avoided if…”

“Sorry for interrupting you, but how? How could this have been avoided? The Avengers were reacting due to the experiences they had already made with Captain America. They were obviously trying to avoid a second Bucharest. There is no blaming the Avengers here who acted accordingly to the law, who worked together with United Nations and the German government. The footage recorded by the War Machine suit showed that clear attempts were made by Tony Stark to avoid an escalation. Captain Rogers reacted dismissively, attempts were made to flee and the situation escalated in a fight. This was a mission to apprehend criminal fugitives, an escalation was always a possibility.”

Escalation… that word weighted heavily on Hope’s mind. It had been a gigantic escalation, big enough to rip the wings of a plane and she couldn’t free herself of the guilt she was feeling. Hope was an enabler and until now she hadn’t done anything to make up for it. Where to start? If you don’t want to cover a gaping wound with a ridiculously small band-aid, but really try to improve the situation it was incredibly hard to figure out what to do.

It was so easy to tear a house down. All you needed was a sledgehammer and then you could start destroying it in any way you liked. Any wall, floor, ceiling in whatever order, it didn’t matter, it would all come down.

To rebuild it was something else. First you had to get rid of the rubble. Then you needed to come up
with a new construction plan, dig a new fundament, gather all the materials that were necessary to actually build a house and then the real process was only getting started. Destroying was easy, creating and rebuilding actually required care and thought. Traits that not all people possessed. Hope’s hand started shaking and she was tempted to smash it another time against the sandbag. Her knuckles wouldn’t thank her for that…

Grabbing a towel Hope wrapped it around her neck, ignoring the blood staining the white tissue. Her muscles were hurting, feeling strained and she was in obvious need of a shower. Ignoring all that Hope kept standing where she was, her eyes fixed on the laptop.

“You are emphasizing the importance of the Sokovia Accords for keeping the public safe from becoming involved in a fight of… supernatural entities so to speak. How would you respond to Captain Rogers’ statement justifying his disapproval of the accords? In summary his main concern seems to be the danger of the Avengers being turned into a government task force which could be easily misused for corrupt purposes or that they could be stopped from helping when they would be needed. How do you, as a barrister who has been very outspoken about his approval of the Sokovia Accords, respond to such claims?”

“That Captain Rogers either has never read the Sokovia Accords or that he doesn’t understand them.” Professor Andrews didn’t look like he wanted to add something and Hope would have smiled at his coolness if these words hadn’t hit straight home.

Never read the Accords… doesn’t understand them…

That was definitely reminding her of someone and it wasn’t Steve Rogers…

The reporter looked a little bit flustered, but quickly came to grips with it. “How do you come to this conclusion?”

The professor folded his hands on the table in front of him, his demeanour confident and professional. “I’ve read the statement that they released and if the consequences hadn’t been so severe, I would have been entertained by it. Look, there is a common need to make difficult matters simple and to explain them in a few words. Same has been done with the Sokovia Accords which is impossible. The Accords themselves are an 1876 pages long document which has been created over the course of two and a half years by a committee of 25 lawyers of work for the United Nations. The finished accords are by no means the first draft, they have been re-evaluated and re-defined several times like every other legal document before it gets passed. If you know anything about politics and laws you also know that after their enacting flaws and problems are going to surface which hadn’t been visible before. Even the constitution of a country has to be changed and re-defined time after time. Some things just don’t apply to the current society anymore or it wasn’t able to make out the flaws when you look at the document on paper. The practical application of a law always brings up difficulties that weren’t considered beforehand, because… it is not possible to think of every eventuality. The Sokovia Accords aren’t any different. Maybe Captain Rogers expected a perfect product, I don’t know that, but such a thing is not possible. That still remains the minor problem. Captain Rogers made the fatal mistake of not spending enough time to evaluate the accords, so he came to the assumption that the accords were about him and the Avengers. When you look at a document from such a misguided point of view… there is no way you can come up with an unbiased opinion on it. This may sound harsh, but I am convinced that Captain Rogers’ statements can be ignored, because they are the equivalent of a person of the Middle Ages talking about global warming. They don’t have a clue what they are saying.”

This time Hope couldn’t deny that her lips formed a small smile. It wasn’t happy, by all means, it was a time for bitter smiles. Do you hear that, Scott? Not a clue what he had been saying… Why
wasn’t any of this surprising Hope? When somebody jumped out of bed in the middle of the night, because of one phone call that didn’t last longer than 10 seconds and you didn’t ask a single question… then you obviously had no idea what you were doing.

Sitting down on the floor Hope crossed her legs Indian style and continued to watch the interview. It gave her some strange sense of comfort. Hearing a sophisticated man who had nothing to do with this talk about the whole situation in an emotionless, professional way. Not afraid to call them out on their stupidity and recklessness. Hope didn’t even dare to think of the arrogance, it made her so angry at herself. She was a successful woman in a field of men despite her father’s name, not because of it. Such things as arrogance and empty phrases were nothing new to her and she despised them. Just like the fact that a man she had let close had fallen for it.

“I am sorry, but I am not quite sure I understand… what do you mean when you say that the Sokovia Accords are not about the Avengers? Weren’t they specially created for them?”

The smile on the Professor’s lips proved Hope’s point. Polite but so tired of explaining things which should be so easy to understand. “No, not at all. The Sokovia Accords aren’t about the Avengers but about the people. Not about American citizens but about every person on this planet. It’s vital to understand that the idea of the accords wasn’t born with the Sokovian tragedy, but with Tony Stark’s Iron Man. The events of New York and Johannesburg forced the governments of the world to act. None of the Avengers was working for a national or international organisation anymore. It’s hard to see them like that since the entire world owes them their gratitude for the events of New York. But after the destruction of the organisation SHIELD which had been supervising parts of the Avengers to some degree… the Avengers have been a self-declared crime fighting squad. They weren’t any different from some guys in your neighbourhood who decided to arm themselves with guns and patrol the streets… It definitely looked different, because one of those men was a billionaire and the leading designer of technology of our time. Nonetheless they were an organisation who didn’t respond to anybody, who didn’t take orders from anybody, didn’t respect the borders they were crossing and most of the time didn’t even inform the government of what they were about to do. None of that would have been tolerated for this long if it hadn’t been for New York. The Avengers have proven themselves to be incredibly resourceful and some of them possess supernatural abilities. We have seen the devastation that can be caused by them and the tragedy of Lagos could have been easily avoided. If the Nigerian government had had any idea about the mission taking place in their capital, they could have helped. Evacuation, controls, surveillance… endless options and most importantly… they would have insisted that the Avengers wouldn’t have tried to capture Rumlow in such a public place. There was no cooperation, no control, no advice and the result was the death of innocent people. Tragically not for the first time.”

Hope remembered the news footage of crying people, rubble, dust and that Nigerian woman screaming in desperate anger into the camera. Where are they? Where is that girl?! She did that! She did that! Where did they go?!

The people of Lagos had been there to dig the Wakandan delegates out of the rubble. Them and other people who had shown up one day later. People who wore jackets with the name ‘Stark Industries’ on their backs. Biting her lip Hope tried to fight off the mental image of Scott ripping apart that airport and that plane. Nobody had come to clean this mess up. Hank and her had given Scott the suit and knowing about the suit’s abilities… They had handed Scott a gun and if you gave a gun to a child, you were responsible for what it was going with it.

“We’ve heard arguments that the Avengers were reluctant about sharing their knowledge, because the information could have leaked and the terrorists would have been warned.”

“Letting the government of a country know that a terroristic operation is about to take place on their
soil is not the same as posting that information on the internet. One of the Avengers is an experienced spy, another one a highly decorated soldier with years of experience. They know how to transfer information to the right person. The reason why the Avengers preferred to work without any kind of oversight is simple. It’s incredibly easy and comfortable. Unfortunately it also gave some of them the feeling that they were always right about what they were doing and that they had the right to do it. Which they don’t. Nobody does. They decided to make the entire world their playground and no matter how noble their intentions are… you can’t do that. Captain Rogers claimed that the accords weren’t an option, because he doesn’t trust the government. By making that statement he proves once more why the accords are necessary, why the United Nations are necessary. You can’t save the world alone, using your fists. The Second World War didn’t end because of Captain America. It wasn’t won because of a single man. It was won because several countries were able to put their differences aside, work together, help each other and defeat a common enemy. This is what the United Nations and the Sokovia Accords are about – working together, cooperation between countries and people. For the people.”

Taking in these words Hope absently nodded to herself. Working together. What was she doing here? Hanging around in the cellar, hitting the sandbag over and over again with the weak hope that she could get rid of her anger. Why? Because Hank had seemed hesitant when she had made her suggestion? Technically Hope didn’t need his permission. She should know better than to be mad at him. Hank had pretty much offered Scott a part of himself and Scott had abused it. Now Hank didn’t want to be reminded of another one of his mistakes.

Still, there was no time for self-loathing. It had been Hope’s mistake too and the need to make up for it kept her awake at night and she hit the punching bag until she bled. That didn’t change anything. Hope had never been good at waiting and it didn’t help her guilty conscience. If she wanted to help make things right or to at least help undoing some of the damage, she would have to work together with other people. Who were probably going through the same thing as her.

“What was your reaction to the major outbreak from the maximum security prison RAFT? Does that mean the accords have failed?”

Despite having finished her work-out about five minutes ago Hope suddenly felt cold, shivering.

“I don’t see how this has anything to do with the accords. This is another general misunderstanding. The four members of Captain America’s team weren’t imprisoned because they violated the accords. None of them ever signed the accords, they couldn’t violate them. What they did was breaking international law like other people do every day and we call those people criminals. Sam Wilson was involved in the Bucharest incident of which we still don’t know extent. Doctors are still fighting for the lives of people involved in it. Wanda Maximoff, Clint Barton and Scott Lang committed several crimes before and at Leipzig. Illegal entry, obstruction of punishment, attempted theft, property damage and the list goes on. I am not a prosecutor and I am most definitely not responsible for this case, but after seeing the imagery like everybody else… I am most certain we can also add attempted murder. 1st and 2nd degree.”

Closing her eyes Hope thought of Cassie and the first time she had met her. How she had looked at Scott like he was her great hero who could do no wrong.

“As for Captain Rogers and the Winter Soldier… I sincerely hope that we won’t learn soon about something even more… disturbing.”

“What are you thinking about, Professor Andrews?”

“I am merely speculating, but the entire world has been asking the same question for several days
now. Where is Tony Stark? The first Avenger to clearly speak out for the accords and willingly joined forces with the United Nations went after Captain Rogers and the Winter Soldier when they escaped from the airport. Nobody has heard of him since. Last night Captain America broke his team mates out of prison, using brute force. At this point... I think we have to consider the possibility that Tony Stark might be dead.”

Hope’s eyes snapped open and now she was indeed shivering. Stark dead? No, they were talking about Captain America after all. The second that thought crossed her mind Hope’s hand itched to punch herself. She knew better than this by now, everybody should know better than this. Bucharest was still all over the news and there was that little girl a young student had dug out of the rubble of the tunnel while most of the police and military had been busy escorting Rogers, Wilson and the King of Wakanda. Who could blame them, they were doing something that was absolutely necessary, but the result had been that there had been fewer people available to take care of the injured. Not to mention the German police squad.

Knowing all that it suddenly wasn’t impossible anymore to believe that Stark’s conviction to hunt down the Winter Soldier might cost his life.

How were they living in a world where the Avengers turned against each other and let people get hurt to protect an assassin? Who had at that time been the major suspect of bombing?

People were killed and hurt left and right, a trace of rubble and debris and there was Scott... as Giant Man... threatening to step on the King of Wakanda, kicking a bus at him, throwing a plane at Iron Man and...

Hope slammed the laptop shut so hard, she thought she could hear the display crack. Attempted murder. It needed a Professor of international law to point something out that everybody could see. Not her father’s life work. Not her heritage.

After five days of shock and disbelief Hope had finally gathered the courage to do what she knew she had to do. Running upstairs Hope grabbed her phone, calling her father. She only reached his mailbox and now it was too late to waste any more time. “Dad, this is Hope. I can’t reach you, so I have to tell you like this. I’m taking the Wasp suit and I’m going to take it to Tony Stark. I don’t care about the bad blood between you and his father. The Ant-Man suit is out there and we saw what Scott used it for. So we have to work together to undo this mess... if Stark is still... I’m going to lance cooperation between Stark Industries and Pym Technologies and I’ll put on the suit to help the Avengers and... I hope I have your support.”

That message had to be enough.

Next step was to call her PA to set up a formal letter to the German government. Deep felt apology, offering to pay for any damages, not just the ones Scott had caused. Of course, the letter wouldn’t be enough, Hope would definitely talk to somebody in person, but now something else was even more urgent. Her PA did a quick job at putting her through to the PA of the CEO of Stark Industries.

Hope’s heart was racing, she didn’t even hear the first words of the PA.

“... Potts’ office. How can I help you?”

“This is Hope van Dyne, CEO of Pym Technologies. I would like to speak with Miss Potts on behalf of an urgent matter.”

“I am very sorry, Miss van Dyne, but Miss Potts isn’t available. She is in an important meeting.”
Hope hadn’t expected anything else, Stark Industries and Pym Technologies didn’t talk with each other and at the moment Pepper Potts had definitely other worries than business meetings. “I see…” Why not just try and go for it? “Then I would like to talk to Tony Stark himself. I want to propose cooperation between our two companies and resources… I am offering him the technology of the Ant-Man suit.”

If that didn’t get him on the phone…

“I am very sorry, but only Miss Potts decides which messages are going end up on Mr. Stark’s desk.”

Some phrase that she had learned by heart and Hope swallowed softly. What if he was indeed dead? “Listen, tell Miss Potts that I believe Mr. Stark is right about the accords and that I condemn what happened in Bucharest and in Germany and I am… appalled by how the technology of my father has been used. I want to offer my help, so something like this won’t ever happen again and… I want to offer my apologies, because… I was one of the reasons Scott Lang had the suit in the first place. I want to make up for that.”

There was a pause at the other end of the line, then the PA cleared her throat. “I see, I… I will make sure Miss Potts will immediately be informed about your call.”

“Thank you…”

Hanging up Hope took a breath and tried to organize her thoughts. There was a lot of things she had to do now. She had no idea if this call was enough to really get into contact with Virginia Potts, Hank had left a lot burned earth behind. If something had indeed happened to Tony Stark…

They were out there now, criminals the whole world was looking for and Hope wouldn’t let Scott do any more damage. Not with the suit. Not with his bare hands.

Why hadn’t she decided sooner to do something? Why had it been so hard for her to see? Because it was horrible and hard to believe. To have been so wrong, to have seen something in a person that had never been there.

Hope had seen something in Scott.

Stark had seen something in Rogers.

She had to do a press conference, it was time to take a stand, to let everybody else know what she knew. What was really behind Captain America’s strong and noble fight against the accords.

Nothing. One of his soldiers didn’t know anything about the accords. The moment the public had learned about the fight at the airport Hope had downloaded a copy. Scott had never seen a single page.

Press conference. Damage control. Distancing her and the company of Scott’s actions, condolences and… A headache was creeping up on her, Hope started rubbing her temples. She needed to sit down and write a list. What to say, what to do, who to call… With her phone and her pad Hope sat down at the kitchen table, because it was the closest flat surface available and began to write. After noting the first obvious names and organisations so much more came to her mind, so many affected, so many people drawn into it who didn’t have anything to do with it, but couldn’t run away now. Including Hope.

Until she was done one hour had passed and Hope felt more exhausted than after her workout. Her clothes were sticking to her skin in the most disgusting way and the blood on her knuckles had dried
up. Maybe now was the time for a shower after all. Rubbing the back of her neck and Hope groaned, knowing that relaxation would be the last thing on her mind for a rather long period of time now.

Grabbing both her phone and her pad Hope walked upstairs, placing them on her bed. After stripping off her clothes she carelessly dropped her sweat-soaked sportswear to the floor and headed for the bathroom. When the hot water was finally pouring down on them and Hope let it work its magic on her hardened muscles. None of it was enjoyable though, it gave her time to think and the unrest settled back in. How late was it in German now? Could she even still call today? How ridiculous was this thought anyway? When it came down to matters like this, nobody cared about what time it was. Hope was the CEO of a multimillion company, she could call any government any time she wanted to. A fact that the general public despised, but it was still a fact and Hope would use it. There was a vital need to talk to Hank… By now Hope was very confident in her understanding of the Ant-Man suit, but Hank was its creator, nobody knew it better than him. They had to consider every possible changes Scott might have…

Wait…

With a hasty gesture Hope turned off the water and then she could definitely make out the ringing of her phone. There vast number of people who could be calling her, but the name ‘Stark’ was the reason why Hope immediately stepped out the shower and rushed into the bedroom, water dripping off her body.

The display of her phone showed the words ‘Unknown Caller’ which didn’t mean anything. Bringing the phone up to her ear Hope answered the call. “Hello?”

“Hey Hope… surprise, huh?”

A somewhat embarrassed, sheepish and yet light-hearted tone that instantly made her snap.

“How dare you, you moron!”

Scott sighed and Hope could tell that he was way too relaxed, way too calm and hundreds of thought were running through her head, questions, and accusations and how could he even sound remotely happy? She needed to find out where he was.

“Yeah, I know that could have gone better…”

Her hand was shaking and it was so hard to stop herself from screaming. “Where is the suit?”

“Don’t worry, we took it with us when we got out of this shithole and…”

“You stole it and you’ll bring it back. Now.”

“What?” Legit confusion and surprise, it was making her vivid. No, he really hadn’t thought about it for one single second.

“You will take the suit which doesn’t belong to you and then you will go to the next police station and turn yourself in.” Her voice was steady, it didn’t waver, perfect.

Hope could picture the look on Scott’s face. How stupid he looked when he didn’t understand a smart, hidden insult or an innuendo. A week ago she had thought that this was adorable, now it disgusted her. “Hope, what are you talking about? Is there somebody with you? Don’t worry, nobody can trace back this call and…”

Good, then she didn’t have to try to make it longer than necessary.
“Scott, if you care about me at all, if you care just a bit about Cassie or about anything at all, then you’ll end this madness this second and turn yourself in!”

“What are you… Turn myself in? I just got out of the prison they threw me in for no reason.”

No reason… The news images flashed before her eyes and Hope was losing it. “You threw a plane at Tony Stark! You kicked a bus at the King of Wakanda! You tried to step on a person while you were Giant Man! You were trying to kill people, Scott! For no reason! You left! You left in the middle of the night for a ten second call! All that talk about changing your life, being a good dad! You left me, fine, I can deal with that, but you left your daughter! Because of one phone call!”

“It was Captain America, Hope.”

Nothing else. That was his argument. The one reason. Nothing else was necessary. A call in the middle of the night from an American Icon… by that Bucharest had already happened.

“So what?! Captain America doesn’t change a thing. Did you even ask what the whole thing was about? What he needed you for? Did he tell you he needed you to trash an airport? To help a fugitive escape justice? To try to kill Tony Stark?”

“No, it was that accords bullshit…”

“Don’t you dare mentioning the accords! You’ve never read a single word of them! Why did you go? If your daughter asks me why her daddy went away to spend the rest of his life running away from the law… what am I supposed to tell her? I was right next to you and I have no idea! Besides that you are stupid and don’t think about anybody else.”

“Hope, listen, when Captain America calls you in the middle of the night and asks you to help him, you don’t ask questions. He’s a hero, you automatically know you do the right thing. He asked me to be an Avenger!” Ridiculous excitement. Like a kid… except that his own kid would spend the next weeks crying, having lost her dad again. Hope didn’t even want to imagine a regular day at school when your father was on Interpol’s most wanted list.

The desire to yell at him vanished instantly. Scott wouldn’t get it. He couldn’t see it. Not now at least. There hadn’t been any consequences for him yet. For everybody else, but not for him. “You are not an Avenger. You are a criminal, a fugitive. There are only three Avengers left. The Vision. Colonel Rhodes, who you help crippling and Tony Stark. Who I hope to god is still alive…”

“What the hell, Hope…”

“Give the suit back, you stole it and you misused it. As a weapon like Cross would have done. Show some respect and a little bit of decency and turn yourself in… and just in case, if you try to call me again, be sure that by then I’ll have set up everything necessary to trace back that call.”

Hanging up Hope tossed the phone against one of the pillows on the bed and angrily brushed the tears away that threatened to fall down. They were burning with rage and she was shaking. His ignorance only added to her guilt. Why had she let Hank talk her into this?

It should have been her wearing the suit. The call that night would have never come and the Giant Man would have never made an appearance. Perhaps the Avengers would have been able to apprehend them… perhaps Colonel Rhodes wouldn’t be bound to a wheelchair now.

It should have been Hope.

Slowing sinking to the bed Hope took a single breath, she didn’t grant herself more time. Picking the
phone back up she quickly scanned through two webpages until she had the phone number of the San Francisco FBI field office.

“Hello, my name is Hope van Dyne. I have information about one the criminals of Captain America’s team.”
Hey everybody,

What is everybody actually doing in Wakanda? Sitting around? Let's see...

Have fun :)

To claim that Wakanda was different would be an understatement. Sam had been in Africa before, multiple times, but those had been missions. There had been constant pressure, stress, Sam and his team had quickly moved from one place to the next.

Now Sam wasn’t moving at all. Nobody of them was moving. They were all in this one place. Which was admittedly beautiful.

If there was on place that was a wonderfully acceptable as a hiding spot, it had to be a breathtakingly beautiful palace in the middle of an African paradise. Given the fact that it wasn’t some random 5 star resort but the actual court of this country, they couldn’t just walk around and enter any room they would have liked to.

T’Challa had been very clear about which part of the palace was open to them. Nothing to complain about, they had several wings at their disposal and every one of them had a very spacious and luxury private room.

Sam was lying on his new bed, the most comfortable one he had ever had. A four poster bed with a ridiculous amount of cushions. Gorgeous patterns and symbols were craved into every single post and sometimes Sam wondered who had slept in this bed before him. Diplomates? Members of the royal family? Not that it mattered. The bed was just another part of this perfect room that by no means looked arrogant or pretentious. It was filled with culture and warmth, very different from the compound which had been mostly slick, bright, metallic surfaces. It was no exaggeration that Sam could spend hours trying to find and take in every detail. Theoretically. Actually trying to do that gave him a headache.

Yawning softly Sam got up from the bed and walked over to one of the several cushy chairs and slumped down onto it. The doors to the balcony were open, offering him the beautiful view over the garden. One of the gardens.

It would be downright perfect if there wasn’t this incredible heat, almost unbearable. No, there was nothing to complain about. Wakanda was beautiful in every sense of the word. It wouldn’t have to be that palace, Sam would have loved every place after his stay at the Raft. Five days had been more than enough. He felt a feeling of unease crawling up his spine and Sam concentrated instead on the sounds around him. Sometimes, when he concentrated enough he could hear the sounds of the jungle, the wildlife not too far away.

From some of the windows it was possible to see the edge of the jungle, a sea of different shades of green. Something that Sam would love to explore, but none of them had set a foot outside the palace until now. He couldn’t say that they had tried though, after what they had been through they were all
glad to just sit down and take a breath. Not running for their lives or fighting against people who had problems with their beliefs. It was quiet, almost peaceful. So sometimes Sam just closed his eyes and was grateful that they had this place.

It was early and Sam felt like taking a run and it was fantastic he could actually do that. He had checked out a little bit of the garden before and it was perfectly fine for his morning workout. Walking up to his wardrobe, which was just as beautiful as the bed, Sam wondered once again how T'Challa knew his size. The clothes hadn’t been there when they had got here, but 12 hours later Sam had returned to his room from dinner and the wardrobe had been filled with clothes his size and admittedly they were quite nice. There was also sportswear, so Sam could go straight ahead.

After getting changed Sam left his room and was once again facing the challenge of not getting lost in the palace. The hallways were long, wide and just was stunningly beautiful as everything else. Which was a problem, you started staring and then you got lost. This time Sam got to be proud of himself, because he found one of the entrances to the garden at the very first try. Now all he had to do was to not get lost here.

While starting to run Sam tried to remember their flight here, it had been night and they had been talking, he hadn't been paying too much attention to his surroundings. Something that he regretted now, because he couldn’t tell where the palace was located in this country. Were they even close to the capital? Or in the capital? Granted, a look out of the window should answer that question, but their wings only offered a view of the garden and the jungle. Perhaps that was something he should ask T'Challa the next time he got a glimpse of him. Sure, he had king’s business to do or he was hanging out with Steve.

Just the thought of him let Sam feel a little sting and he lost his rhythm for a second. Today was about time that he actually tried to talk to Steve. God, one could only imagine how he must feel at the moment. Going through so much trouble to save your best friend from people who wouldn’t listen and had clearly no idea what they were doing and then you had to watch how said best friend went back into the ice. Those fucking Hydra bastards knew how to fuck with brains…

Steve had had his friend back for a mere second and now he was gone again, which wasn’t fair. At the moment Steve spent most of his time in this lab, staring at Barnes in this tube. Sam still didn’t have an actual soft spot for the guy, but he knew well enough that Barnes had been fucked over. By Hydra, the United Nations and Stark. How could one guy have so much bad luck? Hopefully those Wakandan scientists could figure something out to help him, because that would also help Steve.

The guy really needed a break and wouldn’t grant himself one. That made him who he was, Captain America, a hero who never disappointed his friend, who broke them out of prison. Nevertheless Sam had seen how tired he looked and that sadness in his eyes. A feeling Sam could understand well enough, they all felt the same. Now they had a chance to get some well-deserved rest.

This was what Sam had to tell Steve. Lean back for a second. We’ve done it. We proved that the accords are a stupid idea. They corrupted half of the Avengers, made them Ross’ slaves and they made Captain America a fugitive.

One had to simply savour that thought, let it sink in to appreciate how laughable it was. Insanity. Captain America fleeing the law. Hearing that simply everybody had to realise what a fucking stupid law that had to be. Those idiots really weren’t making a good case for themselves.

Speeding up his steps Sam tried to not think of anything for a moment, he wanted to simply enjoy his surroundings. Too bad he didn’t know anything about plants, so there was no way to tell if any of them were local. This was Africa after all, was there supposed to be so much green? Anyway, everything about this garden was exotic and beautiful. Most of all Sam savoured the fact that he
could let his guard down, he wasn’t being watched or had to fear that somebody would jump out behind a bush. This was safety, something the accords had tried to take from them.

Damn, not again…

His longed for distraction waited for him behind three huge trees. The sight of Wanda lying in a deckchair, turning her face towards the sun and wearing a faint smile on her lips, was immensely comforting. Sam still grimaced at the mental image of that collar they had put around her neck. A straight jacket. As if she was some mental patient. Did they still use those things in mental asylums? Sam highly doubted it. This happened when you gave people control who had no idea what they were doing. Guys who sat in their chair and behind their desk all day, watching war and battles only on a screen and they still thought they had any right to tell a soldier how or when to fight.

Now Wanda was here. Safe.

Slowing down Sam stopped next to her and she clearly was aware of his presence, but didn’t bother to open her eyes.

“How can you wear black in this heat? You got to be melting…”

Cracking one eye open Wanda smiled at him. “I don’t care, just enjoying the sun. Haven’t seen it in a while.” The intonation of her words had that dark edge to them and Sam solemnly nodded. “I know… Don’t think about it too much. That’s a memory now. That’s all it’s ever going to be. A memory of a dark place.”

Now Wanda was looking at him in earnest and nodded slowly. “Not if other people get their way.”

“They won’t. Look at them and look at us. We’re all here, the son of one of the people who created the accords took us in. If that’s not proof enough that they are worthless… he realised that and everybody else will too. Then the people who did this are going to get punished.” Sam made sure to speak slowly, to give every word emphasis, because he could clearly see that Wanda needed this. Among all of them she had had it worst.

Except for Steve maybe, but his wounds were of a different kind…

“I know… Have you seen Clint? I tried knocking at his door an hour ago. He didn’t answer.” An abrupt change of topic, yet easy to understand.

“No idea… probably he just got lost in the palace… or here… Seriously, it’s giving me a headache.” Sam smirked and Wanda leaned back, shifting a bit around in her chair. “It’s beautiful. I’ve never seen anything like this… Actually I’d like to see more of it. Do you want to go outside later? It’d like to check out the surroundings of the palace… use my legs a little bit.”

“I thought about that too just five minutes ago. Cool, in one hour. Meet up before your room.”

With another smile Wanda nodded and Sam was confirmed in his conviction that the worst was behind them. Smiles were back. “I’ll try to use my legs a bit…”

Continuing his run Sam pondered. Perhaps they should ask T’Challa for a guide. Sam knew nothing at all about Wakanda and he doubted that Wanda had more knowledge than him. Sure, exploring on your own could be fun, but Sam didn’t want to be eaten by a panther or something. Who knows? Maybe those animals were considered holy and were roaming the streets and the jungle.

Important things first though, meet up with Steve and ask him if he wanted to join them. If one of them needed to get outside, it was definitely Steve. Sam shortened the rest of his run, returned to his
room and got clean in a shower that was even bigger than the ones at the compound had been.

Searching for Steve Sam decided to check out the salon first, it was closer to his own room and more or less the common area of their wing. A huge, gorgeous room, decorated with Wakandan art that mostly represented animals. Steve wasn’t there, but Scott. The second Sam said hello to him, he realised how little he knew about Scott. Nothing actually. He couldn’t tell if it was early for Scott to be awake or if he was morning person. They had never shared words really. Sure, Sam had called him, pretty much recruited him, but expect for that?

“Morning…” Scott was rubbing a hand over his face and Sam had to chuckle. Definitely not a morning person. “Didn’t you sleep well?”

“Didn’t sleep at all.”

“Why not? The beds in this place are amazing. I’m going to ask if I can keep it when we go back.”

Scott raised an eyebrow at that and Sam had the feeling that he wanted to comment, but for some reason didn’t. “It obviously wasn’t the bed. Something on your mind? The Raft?” It would only be understandable if the prison had also taken a toll on Scott.

Making a dismissive gesture Scott huffed. “Prison is old news for me.”

Right… Sam flinched the tiniest bit at that. He had forgotten about that. Another time he would have reconsidered working with an ex-con, but the accords had left them with no choice. They had had to take every help that they could get and Scott had turned out a decent guy, choosing the right side. “So what’s going on then? Look, you can tell me. We’re all friends here.”

Scott’s first reaction was to blink, then he eventually shrugged. “You have a girl?”

Okay, this wasn’t going where Sam had expected. Love sickness? “No, I don’t.”

“I do…” Suddenly he looked so beat down, completely different from the guy who Sam had encountered on the roof of the compound. Who had annoyed him with his stupid lines. That was a thing he knew about Scott, he had a big mouth… and evidently a girl. Which he had had to leave behind. Sam was beginning to feel like shit when he remembered Scott mentioning his daughter on their flight here… Wait, were they talking about his daughter or his girlfriend?

Sitting down on one of his wonderful chairs Sam smiled encouragingly at Scott. “You’ll be able to talk to her soon. T’Challa said…”

“I know what he said and I was a pain in the ass about it. Last night I got him to let me make a call… two calls actually. He said the line was perfectly fine, nobody would be able to trace the call and I believe him. Have you seen the laptops in our room? I played a little bit around with it… That stuff is on a level with Stark’s tech…”

Sam’s mouth twitched at the mention of this name, but Scott didn’t dwell on it, so he ignored it.

“Anyway I got to make the calls and… it didn’t go over well.”

Instantly Sam felt like back on the run with Steve. Had the government gone after Scott’s family? Would they really go that far? Hell, they had put them in this prison in the middle of the sea, they didn’t stop at anything. They had to talk to T’Challa instantly to make sure…

“I don’t know which was worse. Talking to Hope or not talking to Cassie at all.”
“I’ll need more information…”

“Hope is my girlfriend, Cassie is my daughter…” Scott didn’t make a big deal out of showing emotions when they weren’t light-hearted. His face clearly showed that he was troubled by these conversations, but it was still low-key.

“So how did it go? They must have been relieved to hear from you.”

A somewhat sad grin flickered over Scott’s face. “Yeah, I thought so too… Wasn’t the case. I didn’t get to talk to Cassie. I called my ex-wife and the second she heard my voice she hung up on me.”

Hearing that kind of family problems that weren’t any of his business made Sam uncomfortable, but it was obvious that Scott needed someone to talk to and since he didn’t really know any of them…

“Are you on bad terms?”

“Not anymore, we made up… Not made up made up, but we’re friends. I get to see Cassie, I make small talk with her new guy. It’s awkward, but that’s normal in that kind of situation, isn’t it? So… I called, so happy I would get to hear my little girl’s voice and she hung up on me.”

Yeah, that didn’t make sense. Scott’s ex-wife had to know what was going on, what kind of trouble Scott had ended up in for helping Captain America and the Avengers. Everybody would be worried in that kind of situation and they’d be glad to hear from him. Probably a government agent had been standing there, looking over her shoulder and she hadn’t wanted to lure Scott into a trap. How should he say that without scaring Scott out of his mind? He had a little kid. Not safe in an unknown house like Barton’s. “There could be… Have you considered the possibility that she… wasn’t able to talk to you?”

Frowning in confusion Scott finally seemed to actually look at him. “What do you mean?”

“I dunno… Maybe somebody else was there that she didn’t trust.”

“Huh, no idea. Paxton is a cop and he can be a jerk, but… at the end of the day he’s okay… he got me out of jail once. No…”

“How did she sound when she answered the phone? Worried? Tensed?”

“No, none of that. It was a perfectly normal hello. Sam, where are you going with this?”

“I don’t know… there is a reason why T’Challa made sure that the call can’t be traced back. Maybe they are not just listening to phone conversations, maybe there is also someone at the house in case you might show up?” Sam could have definitely said that better, the way Scott flinched made him feel guilty.

“No… Paxton is a cop… there’s no reason… I’ve pulled a lot of bullshit on Maggie in the past… now I got arrested again… doesn’t matter if it’s not my fault, I can see her getting pissed about that… perhaps it was just too soon. I should have given her time to calm down.”

Sam didn’t know that woman, he had no idea if that theory made sense. Anyway, he had trouble believing that anyone would be angry at a family member when they got in trouble for standing up for their beliefs. For being Captain America’s ally. Nevertheless the idea of her being a scorned, angry woman was definitely the more appeasing one. That she was keeping him from talking to his daughter was despicable though. “You’re probably right.”

“Yeah… doesn’t help me with Hope.”
“She hung up on you too?” If that was the case, they could be sure that their families were being watched and harassed. Threatened. Steve would go crazy…

Shaking his head Scott let out another exasperated sigh. “Quite the opposite… she gave me quite a talk. Which means I didn’t get to say anything and she kept screaming at me. She told me to give back the suit and to… turn myself in.”

It took Sam a moment to let the words sink in. What? Why would anyone say that if they weren’t working for the government or if they hadn’t been manipulated by Stark like he had been? Was that a possibility Stark reaching out to Scott’s girlfriend? That man was rotten enough to support the accords which would have made them a personal hit squad for the United Nations, he was pretty much capable of everything.

Or was it simpler? Didn’t she understand yet what was going on? Only hell knew what the media was telling the world about them, Sam hadn’t felt any inclination to check on it yet. Honestly, Scott’s girl couldn’t be very smart if she instantly believed that Scott had been doing something wrong. Or she just didn’t know the implications yet. It would get out there eventually. People would ask where Captain America had gone and outrage was going to follow.

Steve hadn’t supported the accords. A war hero who had dedicated his life to protecting his co-citizens. Who was Stark before Iron Man? Known for selling weapons, sleeping with way too many supermodels and getting drunk in public. Everybody knew that they would ask questions why a man like Steve was chased by the law. T’Challa knew the truth now, it would all get out there and then the accords would be history. Then they would go home and the real criminals put into jail.

“Did you tell her what the Raft was like? Or why they put us there? You had to leave so quickly, you couldn’t have had a lot of time to explain. She probably doesn’t understand…”

“Hope is… brilliant and she was furious. She called me a criminal… and more or less that I’ve let my daughter down… that I’m a disappointment to her.”

This was serious. Scott was away from his kid, at the moment unable to see or talk to her and his girlfriend had made him feel terrible. There had to be something Sam could do, make Scott realise how important it was what he had done and that soon everybody else was going to realise this too. That he was a hero and his daughter was most definitely proud of him.

“Hey… she has no idea what she is talking about. She wasn’t there. They left us no chance at the airport, Stark wouldn’t listen to what Steve had to say. He was too busy kissing the government’s ass and you see where that got us. What you did there gave Cap the possibility to get away and go after the other Winter Soldiers. You helped save his friend and prove that the accords don’t work, that they are only meant for binding us to their will and if we don’t agree with them we get thrown into prison. You fought with Captain America, you’re a hero. I don’t know about you, but that doesn’t sound like a disappointment to me.” Smiling at Scott Sam reached out and touched his shoulder. They were a team and after the most recent events it all too clear that they had to stick together. You couldn’t trust anybody to have your back…

When Scott returned his smile it didn’t quite reach his eyes. A start nonetheless. “I guess so…”

“Wait a bit and in a day or two ask T’Challa again. Call your ex-wife again, I’m sure she’ll come around and will let you talk to your kid. She needs her father.”

Not saying anything Scott nodded slowly and Sam decided to leave him alone, he didn’t really look like he wanted to talk a second longer.
Sam still wanted to talk to Steve. Unfortunately one minute of knocking at his door didn’t bring him any closer to that. There weren’t many places left where Steve could be. Most likely the lab, still staring at his best friend.

Sighing Sam checked his watch. One hour had passed and Wanda was painfully punctual, probably already waiting for him. He would talk to Steve when they got back, take their time.

He was anything but surprised to find Wanda ready to leave in front of the door to her room. She looked unbothered and happy, a nice contrast to Scott. “Ready to leave?”

“Definitely.”

They engaged in a casual conversation about the garden and the weather while making their way to the end of their wing. Because Sam was a gentleman he opened that huge double wing door for Wanda who couldn’t take advantage of that, since a young woman dressed in seemingly traditional Wakandan clothes stood in their way. “May I ask where you are going?” Her tone was polite and yet her face remained completely stern. This court etiquette had to be tiring after some time.

“We want to leave the palace, take a walk. Check out your beautiful country.” Wanda explained and Sam thought he didn’t hear right when the woman said they couldn’t do that. “I am afraid I cannot let you pass. You don’t have the permission to leave this wing.”

Immediately Wanda’s relaxed demeanour faded away. Her shoulders tensed and she visibly narrowed her eyes at the woman who didn’t bat an eyelid. “We’re guests of the King, we…”

“I know who you are and the King has not given you permission to enter other parts of the palace.”

“Are you saying I switched one prison for another?” Sam took a step back when he saw a hint of red in Wanda’s eyes. “Wanda, I’m sure this is a misunderstanding.”

“Actually no.”

The woman turned around and revealed T’Challa walking up behind her. When she took a slight bow Sam asked himself for the first time if they were supposed to do the same.

“Why aren’t we allowed to leave?” Wanda snarled and the woman instantly turned back around. “How dare you to address the King in this…”

“It’s alright. May you leave us alone, please?”

Again a little bow and she was gone instantly. Leaving the three of them behind standing in the doorway. T’Challa was looking at them with a soft expression and Sam instantly relaxed. There would be a logical explanation for this. Wanda wasn’t as confident. “Why won’t you allow us to leave?”

“I think you will agree with me that you leaving these rooms is a very bad idea. A mistake none of us can afford to make.”

“I’m sorry… your highness, but we merely want to take a walk. I don’t see how…”

T’Challa interrupted him in the most calm and collected way. He sounded all business, somewhat detached and nevertheless friendly. “One day ago you escaped from prison, your faces are all over the media, arrest warrants are out for every single one of you and now you want to leave the palace to explore the capital in broad daylight.”
That answered Sam’s question where the palace was situated. It also confused him. “But this is Wakanda, you granted us sanctuary.”

“I did, but I cannot hope for every other country of this world to respect that. The second you step out there, people will see you, recognize you, your pictures will be taken and the world will know where you are. Here in Wakanda. This will have consequences. Of political, economic and probably military nature. I am sure you understand that I am very eager to avoid this. If your presence becomes known I can’t guarantee your safety.”

“We’re very capable of looking out for ourselves.” Wanda replied sullenly.

T’Challa shrugged. “I don’t doubt that, Miss Maximoff, but it’s not your safety that is my main concern. It’s the safety of Wakanda. I will not risk the country’s peace or our economic stability, because you feel like going for a walk. The gardens you have access to are very big, these rooms contain all sorts of entertainment and comfort. I have to ask you to make most of it. You leaving the palace is not an option. People knowing that you are here is not an option.”

Wanda bit her lip and Sam sighed in defeat. He could see T’Challa’s point. Damn those stupid accords. The day that people would see them for what they are couldn’t come soon enough. “I see… I’m sorry, your highness. Looks like we’re going to have to take a walk in the garden, Wanda.”

The look on her face didn’t hide any of her displeasure or disappointment. It was Sam’s day to comfort people. Putting an arm around Wanda’s shoulders Sam smiled at her. “Don’t worry, it won’t be for long. Soon the accords will be exposed for what they are and they’ll call us to come back, because they know they need us.”
Victim / Hero

Chapter Notes

Hey everybody,

So, today we get the first glimpse of the actual consequences and who has to deal with them. Also, there is Peter ;)

Have fun and tell me what you think :

Barrier-free. Something that Rhodey had never wasted any thoughts on. Why should he have done that? Especially in relation with the Avengers Compound. Why would the headquarters of a bunch of superheroes need to be adequate for a wheelchair? The concept downright sounded ridiculous.

Tony had thought of nearly every feature to make life at the compound comfortable and almost luxury. Rhodey hadn’t actually lived at the compound, unlike most of the others, but he had always enjoyed his stays here. It had been a lively place, full of friends and with Tony’s fingerprints all over it. What was not to love about it?

Was it strange to only notice something when it wasn’t there anymore? Or when it had drastically changed? The structure of the compound hadn’t transformed at all. Not yet, Pepper was working on it. Everything else had been turned around. The people who had been living here were gone.

Rhodey definitely didn’t miss them, but the silence was something new. Normally he could have counted on Tony to fill the void with his smiles, his laughter and indecent comments. Tony didn’t even leave his room. Which probably was for the best, Tony deserved all the rest he could get and hiding from the world was something Rhodey could also understand.

Tony’s somewhat absence from the compound was the one thing that really pained Rhodey. The fact that the compound was not barrier-free was more practical issue. There were a lot of little obstacles all over the place, some of them were simply impossible to overcome with the wheelchair, so Rhodey avoided these areas altogether.

One thing was for sure – the wheelchair wasn’t going to go anywhere. A simple truth that Rhodey had accepted the second the doctor had come to talk to him. Rhodey was a soldier, so many of his friends had suffered a similar fate or even worse. Did he hate it? Yes, Rhodey loathed the wheelchair with every fibre of his body, but he knew that it was his friend. He couldn’t treat it as a foe. It was a tool to help him move around and Rhodey had to treat it as such, learn how to use it. That was what he did. No way Rhodey was going to avoid a single one of the obstacles. He needed to learn how to deal with them if he wanted to be as independent as possible with the wheelchair. What made that so hard was Rhodey’s wandering mind. No matter how hard he tried to concentrate on himself or on doing anything with this stupid chair… Rhodey was thinking about a hundred different things.

The little package which had been delivered to the compound today was one of them. What a surprise. Yesterday an online magazine had published some article that claimed that Tony was back at the compound. They had probably no idea that they were right, it had been nothing but clickbait. Of course the story had been all over the web. Tony’s name was all over the news at the moment, the whole world was searching for him although he wasn’t a fugitive.

After some lawyer had publicly stated that he thought Tony was dead, a lot of news channels had
jumped on that same train. What if he was dead? What if Team Cap had killed him? It was all disgusting speculation and yet Rhodey found that he didn’t care, because it had been so close.

They had almost killed him…

Rhodey had a bad feeling about the package although Friday had already stated that the content wasn’t dangerous. He wished he could check everything and anyone Tony would ever come in contact with. To keep at least some of the harm away from him.

So there was the package, which could be nothing, then there was Pepper, rushing through the compound on her heels, alterning between yelling and hissing into her phone. “Classified information! Are you kidding me?! Whoever stole the shield and brought it to him was helping a terrorist to escape! You are aware of the fact that the shield is a weapon? They armed a terrorist on the run and now everybody on the internet can watch what he did with it! Apart from…” Pepper stopped herself, pinching her brow and taking a deep breath.

One simply had to admire this woman’s strength. They both knew very well what that shield had been used for. Steve had rammed it into Tony’s heart. The one thing that made him Iron Man, his great creation. With the shield his father had created. Steve probably hadn’t wasted a single thought on this act, the macabre irony would be lost on him. Rhodey had seen what that knowledge had done to Pepper, the same thing what it had done to him. The shock and the betrayal. There had always been this underlying sentiment in every single instance – it was Steve, so Tony was going to be fine. Nothing bad could happen, because it was Steve.

Who was supposed to be better than all of them…

Maybe that was what happened when you put people on pedestal.

“Look, I am only acting in your very interest. Are you counting on keeping this information classified? The public is slowly catching up to what happened. Have you seen yet one of those thousands video blogs which are analysing every single detail of the airport fight? How long do you think it’s going to take until somebody asks why he had his shield? Which version do you prefer? That you gave it back to him. Doesn’t sound very good. That he stole it from you when he escaped? Makes you look even more incompetent. How about the truth? That one of your agents gave it to him and therefore helped him flee from the authorities. You know that it’s going to get messy. There was a clear chance to apprehend him and the Winter Soldier and Wilson. But no, they even got better equipment to do more damage. The newspapers are going to love this. No, I’m not threatening you. You know that it’s going to happen… Why I want to know who it was?”

Pepper let out a dry laugh that instantly died when she met Rhodey’s eyes. The change was anything but subtle. Until now she had been in business mode, trying to get a job done. That attitude quickly faded away and the veil couldn’t cover her eyes anymore. Not enough. There was this overwhelming sadness inside of them, even more than anger.

Rhodey wanted to stand up, to walk, just to show her that it was okay. Pepper didn’t have to fight for him too. There were a lot of ‘what if’s in this story. Until now Rhodey hadn’t thought about this one. Sure, for a second the idea had crossed his mind what would have happened if Wilson hadn’t come with Rogers. Would that have made any difference?

Pepper had a very concrete ‘what if’ on her mind and it was far too obvious. What if whoever had given them the shield and the wings had just stayed at home? Would there still be feeling in Rhodey’s legs? Would he be able to get up to walk around? Would there be one thing less for Tony to feel guilty about?
Of course they didn’t know and they never would. Still there was no doubt that the events would have gone down differently. It was impossible to ignore that Wilson wouldn’t have been able to participate in the fight, he would have been ridiculously outmatched. Rogers probably wouldn’t have allowed him to get anywhere near the airport.

On the other hand they had all been wrong about Steve…

“I want to file charges.” Pepper turned away from him, her voice getting stronger instantly, having lost none of her confidence. Nobody had an idea how relentless Pepper could be when something was important to her. Right now – nothing had ever been more important. “The shield has never been SHIELD’s property and therefore it has never been in the possession of the government. It was made by Howard Stark and given to Steve Rogers for his fight against Hydra. It has never been a gift though, there is no legal document whatsoever that would indicate such a thing. The shield is made of pure Vibranium, it has an estimated worth over two million dollars. We are talking about aggravated theft here. The shield is property of Stark Industries and we’re going to file charges. So if your information is still classified… It is. Wonderful. That means they got away and you have no idea where they are… Do you really want to wait for the public to get a hold of that? I am very willing to offer you Stark Industries resources for your search for them. I would need to know who you are searching though…” Pepper trailed off and Rhodey raised an eyebrow. To keep that information classified didn’t make any kind of sense, it was just a matter of days until the public would know about it. Not when John Oliver, Stephen Colbert and Bill Maher weren’t talking about anything else than the ‘Civil War’.

“Understood. I thank you for your cooperation…” Pepper ended the call, huffing softly, making it obvious she wasn’t actually surprised by what she had learned. Did they know the person who had handed Steve his shield? “Friday, please pull up Sharon Carter’s SHIELD file, I want to take a look at it later.”

“Certainly, Miss Potts.”

“Peggy Carter’s niece? Does she even know Steve?” While voicing the question Rhodey realised how stupid it was. Eventually they would have met at Peggy Carter’s funeral. He didn’t care if they had known each other before or why Sharon Carter had thought it was a good idea to help Rogers get away after the Bucharest tragedy.

“She definitely knew him well enough to give him weapons that the government had confiscated and didn’t give up his whereabouts. I don’t know that girl, so I don’t know if she’s as deluded las Wilson or… Silly girl…” Pepper sighed, shaking her head. “Aggravated theft is a given… The rest will depend on the prosecutor… if she’s the only one they can get their hands on, it’s going to get ugly. Accessory charges… perhaps even for attempted murder and…” There was a hitch in Pepper’s voice and Rhodey flinched.

Accessory to criminal assault…

Sharon had given Wilson the wings and by the end of the fight Rhodey was sitting in a wheelchair. Not able to move his legs. Most probably for the rest of his life.

“We haven’t heard yet what she has to say… There is no way of knowing what she thought she was doing… She’s on the run too? Maybe she’s with Steve.”

“I don’t care where she is, they’ll find her and then she’ll have to answer for what she did. Supplying a terrorist on the run with a stolen weapon… After Bucharest!” Biting her lip Pepper shook her head once more. “Unfortunately the Carter girl is the least one of my worries. I have to clean up behind a bunch of people who think they can use the entire world as their personal playground and I’m
supposed to run a company at the same time…”

Rhodey was just about to tell her that he might not be able to walk, but he could still do stuff. He could help, she only needed to tell him what he should do, which little weight to take off her shoulders. The opportunity didn’t present itself, because Vision floated through the wall right next to them. Pepper did her best to not visibly wince, but it happened anyway. Vision looked sheepish and instantly bowed his head. “I am sorry to have startled you, Miss Potts.”

“It’s okay… something happened?”

Slowly Vision nodded. “I have been watching the news and it has just been reported that the young man who helped evacuating people from the tunnel succumbed to his wounds.”

All remaining tension left Rhodey’s body, he felt numb, his body suddenly drained of strength and power. He hadn’t told anybody about it, but Rhodey had put so much hope into this. Talking himself into believing that things could get better, that everything wasn’t lost if that young man would live.

Marius Radu

That name had been all over the media during the last days and it still faded in comparison to the constant mentioning of four words ‘Steve Rogers’ and ‘Tony Stark’. Nevertheless everybody knew about the 22 year old Romanian student who hadn’t even been caught up in the tunnel. He had been on his way on to university when Rogers and Wilson had just made the whole structure collapse. Marius was one of the first people on the scene and immediately went to help people hit by the rubble. No good deed goes unpunished. While trying to calm down a little girl trapped in a car, whose parents were unconscious, more wreckage came down and Marius got hit by a large a brick of concrete.

Marius hadn’t had anything to do with Barnes and Rogers’ search for him. All he had tried to do was to help other people who had got involved against their will. That young man was a hero and now he was dead.

Closing his eyes Rhodey silently said a short prayer for the poor man who had clearly deserved better, a chance to grow up and live a life. At the same time Rhodey became angry at himself, a little bit disgusted by the fact that his next thought was about Tony. About how happy and grateful Rhodey was that Tony hadn’t shared Marius’ fate.

“How many…” Opening his eyes Rhodey saw that Pepper had sat down on the couch, her hands folded in her lap. She looked like a woman who was desperately trying to keep her composure. Something she had to do 24/7, Rhodey had to tell her that it was okay to be human with them. It was the world outside that needed to see her being strong and relentless, her friends already knew that she was all that. “How many died in total?”

“Five persons died in the tunnel. With Mr. Radu the toll has risen to six. Two women are still in critical condition. The German government still has not published any information, but according to the rumours two members of their task force died while trying to apprehend the Winter Soldier. I cannot give you any numbers on the people who got injured, that list would be extensively longer.”

Rhodey could only hear Jarvis although it had never been as clear that Vision wasn’t Jarvis. This kind of compassion was something Rhodey had never heard from Jarvis. Worry about Tony, yes, but while counting and telling numbers Jarvis had been a computer. Vision wasn’t, the tone in voice was gentle and respectful.

Six people…
And Vision was right – they still had no idea how many people got hurt during Rogers’ rampage.

“I need to contact the family… offer our condolences… not now, they have other things on their minds than… Six people died and she gave him the shield…” Pepper’s hands were shaking and when Rhodey wanted to speak up to her, she was already standing up and raising her phone.

“Friday, I need a contact to the Romanian / German association of the families of the victims… I fear I don’t know the name, the press is too busy showing Cap’s face all over the place… I should have reached out to them long ago…”

“Pepper, it’s okay to take a break… you’ve been on the phone half of the day. Have you actually eaten something?”

Rhodey’s attempt was instantly dismissed. “Not now. I’ve talked to government agencies all day, I’m not going to take a break before people who actually were affected by this… Friday?”

“The main contacts are already on your phone, Miss Potts. The Romanian spokesperson is also one of the co-founders, Silviu Stan. His daughter died on the scene.”

Swallowing softly Pepper nodded, but she didn’t move otherwise. Rhodey understood her hesitation, it was never easy to talk to the family members of people who had tragically died. Even more so when they had every right in the world to be angry and that there was no guarantee that they wouldn’t direct that anger at her. When Pepper had nothing to do with all of this, she was only trying to pick up the pieces and put them back together, knowing that they wouldn’t fit.

“You don’t have to call immediately.”

“Colonel Rhodes is right, Miss Potts. There is nothing wrong with waiting another 15 minutes to get prepared for this conversation.” Vision agreed with him and Rhodey shot him a thankful smile.

Which resulted in Vision lowering his eyes. The constant knot in his stomach made itself felt again. It hadn’t been Vision’s fault. Friendly fire was something terrible, but it happened. The only way to avoid it was not going to war.

“No, this can’t wait… There’re two other women who might still die…” Clearing her throat Pepper started typing on her phone, then lifted it to her ear. Rhodey thought about leaving her alone, she hadn’t said anything, but these kinds of conversations were probably easier to do when you were alone.

“Mr. Stan? Good afternoon, this is Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries…” Pepper instantly trailed off, which was a sign that the person on the other end of the line had already taken over the conversation. Rhodey hoped that it would work out, Pepper only wanted to help although she wasn’t obligated to do that.

Pepper frowned lightly, yet there was no visible tension on her face. “Yes, indeed, thank you for taking the time, I appreciate it. First of all, I am very sorry for your loss. None of this should have happened, least of all to innocent people who had nothing to do with these events.”

Another pause and Rhodey was biting his lip. Pepper listened for a little bit, nodding, curled and uncured the fingers of her free hand. She was calm and that could only be a good sign.

“I have heard about your association and that you are trying to raise awareness to the people who got hurt and lost their lives during the… that day. I’d like to offer my support. Please, don’t get me wrong, this offer isn’t bound to any conditions. Money to take care of the medical bills or… Yes?”

Pepper’s eyes landed on Rhodey. “Of course, take as much time as you need… it’s… Pardon?”
Whatever the other one had said, it threw Pepper off her guard. Her eyes widened a little bit before her mouth dropped open the slightest bit. What had just happened?

Rhodey felt instantly alarmed when he saw Pepper losing her cool. Tears were welling up in her eyes. Vision made a step forward, but Pepper raised a hand. Her voice was waverling. “Thank you, Mr. Stan… I appreciate it, thank you for your concern. It’s really… thank you. My PA will send you all necessary contacts. Feel free to use them at any time… Goodbye, thanks for taking the time and talk to me.”

The second Pepper hung up she released a long, shaky breath. Judging by the expression on her face she had just learned something very important or astounding. Rhodey was unable to tell, but then Pepper spoke up anyway. “He… was very grateful for my suggestion, but he said he needed to discuss this with the other founding members of the association… then he…” Pepper directly looked at him and there was some long lost glimmer in her eyes. A strange fondness. “He didn’t ask about Tony, but… he said that they were praying for him… because he tried to stop them from hurting even more people…”

Pepper sat back down, clearly overwhelmed and Vision tilted his head, slightly frowning, looking confused. “The sentiment is understandable. Thanks to the security footage of the airport the confrontation between Captain America and Mr. Stark has been seen by almost every single person on this planet. It is also public knowledge that Mr. Stark has disappeared on his quest to apprehend the Winter Soldier. It is understandable that people would be worried, given the fact that people have died during the events of Bucharest.”

Rhodey felt a little moved by his words, because they were true and at the same time naïve. “I guess… Cap and the rest of his team tried to put all the blame on Tony… I can still hear him saying that Tony tore the Avengers apart… damn hypocrite… I was afraid that… the people would believe the same… People like to believe what Cap tells them.”

“Mr. Stan doesn’t…” Silent tears were freely running down Pepper’s cheeks. “He said that… it is comforting to know that they are still people with power who care about something else than… just themselves. They are worried for him…”

Maybe it was about time to let the world know that Tony was okay. The media coverage wouldn’t go away and reporters would storm their doors, no matter what. Yet suddenly there was a little hope.

Marius Radu had just died… but Tony was still alive. Was it cruel to let the world believe that there was nobody left fighting for justice? Was there anybody left? Rhodey was useless in this wheelchair and Tony was broken. Who was left of them? Vision was standing right next to him, more powerful than all of them. They wouldn’t ask him to take on this fight, not alone.

A somewhat comfortable silence settled in. No matter how dark the situation was, Mr. Stan’s compassion had reminded Rhodey that the world might not be blind. They had seen what had happened in Bucharest and in Leipzig. It was too hard to imagine what would happen if they knew about Siberia…

“Miss Potts?”

The voice of one of the Stark Industries employees brought Rhodey back to the present. Vision quickly placed himself in front of Pepper so she had enough time to brush the tears away. Then she got up and looked impeccable again, somewhat cold. “Yes?”

“We’re done clearing out the first room and… what are we supposed to do with all these things?”

The young man gestured towards the box he had placed in front of him. It was full of clothes and the
dark colours made it obvious that they were Wanda’s.

Right, Rhodey had almost forgotten about that. Pepper had called some people in to clear out her and Cap’s room. Or Rhodey had tried to forget about it, the thought that they had lived beneath Tony’s roof, eaten his food, lived on his generosity, worn the clothes he had bought… it made him sick to his stomach.

Pepper’s face turned to stone and her eyes shortly darted to the box, judging by her reaction it could have been vermin. “The things she brought here herself, including the laptop, hand written notes go to the tower. I want it out of the house. Everything Tony bought her and can’t give us any hints where she might have gone or why… straight to the trash.”

Searching for a reaction Rhodey turned to Vision, but there was none. Not very surprising, considering what she had done to him. They still weren’t done fixing the holes in the floor. Hopefully Tony wouldn’t get to see them…

Nodding the young man continued sheepishly. “I see… How are we supposed to tell which stuff is her own and which has been purchased by Mr. Stark?”

Pepper shrugged casually. “Everything that’s worth more than 10 dollars…”

“Understood. About the Captain’s room…”

“Trash. All of it. Except for everything hand written, the laptop and photographs.”

After another nod the man rushed away and Rhodey could see that Pepper was fighting to keep her composure. He felt the urge to say something, to somehow make it easier for her, although he knew very well that this wasn’t possible. Commenting on throwing their things away? Hell no, all of them would feel better if they weren’t going to see Wanda’s jackets and shoes lying around anymore.

“About the package that got delivered for Tony… should we take it to his room? Or wait till he is ready to get out?”

“I would advise to wait.” The quickness of Vision’s response caused Rhodey to raise an eyebrow. “We have no idea about its content. We know it isn’t dangerous, but after the severe physical and psychological trauma Mr. Stark has suffered, I do not think it would be wise to risk upsetting him even more.”

Pepper’s gasp confirmed that she was thinking the same as Rhodey. “You think it’s from him.”

“I do believe that it’s a possibility that Captain Rogers has sent this package. After his last encounter with Mr. Stark… I think he will want to explain himself.”

“We should open it. If Steve sent…”

“Pepper, no. We don’t have the right to do that. It’s Tony’s. We can try to keep the press and the entire world of his back, yes and help him as much as we can, but we don’t have the right to start making decisions for him. When he is ready to get out, we can tell him about the package and that it might come from Steve… then he can decide what to do with it.” Rhodey wouldn’t accept any objection and despite her first reaction Pepper nodded. “Yes… of course… I’m sorry… but the thought… what should Rogers still have to say? What would make him think that he even has the right to talk to Tony? If this package is from him… I hope the Stan family also receives one. The Radu family and the families of every single one of the German officers…”

What else could Rhodey do but agree? And desperately hope that it was an apology. Steve begging for forgiveness and finally trying to make things right. Acknowledging that he had hurt people would
be a first step.

Probably too much to ask. All this misery had only taken place, because Rogers had already proven that nobody mattered to him but James Barnes. The man who had killed Tony’s parents.

“I have to talk with Interpol… I offered them some of my contacts to…”

“Miss Potts, I am sorry to interrupt you.”

Everybody’s attention was immediately fixed on Friday’s voice. During the last week she had very rarely been the deliverer of good news. Quite the opposite to be honest. “Yes?”

“Somebody is calling the compound. Secure line. Identification – Avenger.”

Rhodey’s body stiffened and a shiver was running down his spine. Why now? Why would they even… This was the moment Rhodey realised that he didn’t believe in an apology. Rogers had been so stubbornly convinced that he was right. Accusing everybody of having an agenda while sacrificing the lives of six innocent people for his own private war. For saving one man that was a danger to everybody else.

The alarmed look on Pepper’s face told him that there was more to it. “How? The number has been changed. Like the entire protocol. The only ones who still got the identification as an Avenger are Tony, Rhodey and Vision.”

“Boss added another member, Miss Potts.”

Obviously confused Pepper turned to Rhodey and Vision for help and it took another second for Rhodey’s mind to catch up. “The kid!”

“Kid?” That only added to Pepper’s confusion.

“The young man who supported us against Captain Rogers’ team at the airport.” Vision clarified and some of the tension left Pepper’s features. “Can he be trusted?”

“Only Tony ever talked to him… but he obviously gave him the codes. Which means he trusted him.”

“Tony trusted the man who left him to die in Siberia.”

Another time that Rhodey couldn’t argue. “Why not listening to what he has to say? That’s what we should do. That’s what Cap didn’t do… listening to other people before deciding if they’re right or wrong.”

Sighing in defeat Pepper nodded, clearly against her will. “You are right. Again. Friday, put him through.”

There was audible click and Rhodey instantly remembered that excited, young voice. Hadn’t he called ‘The Empire Strikes Back’ a really old movie? Involuntarily Rhodey had to smile.

“Mr. Stark? Hello, you’re there?”

So obviously a teenager, young, hectic, straightforward and somehow innocent. Or perhaps Rhodey was just interpreting way too much into a few single words.

Pepper was back in business mode – she had to protect Tony and that was her only interest right now. “This is Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries. Who am I talking to?”
“Oh, hey. Hi. Uhm, I must have dialled the wrong number… Mr. Stark said I could reach him personally. Oh, sorry, you asked for my name. I’m Spider-Man. Not Spider-Boy… he may have told you that it’s Spider-Boy, but it’s Spider-Man… Can I talk to Mr. Stark now? Mam?”

His nervousness was impossible to deny and Rhodey couldn’t help but grin. “Pepper, it’s definitely the kid…”

“Who’s there? Hey, you know who I am, but I have no idea who you are. Not fair!”

“Actually we do not know who you are. Mr. Stark refused to share that information and you’ve only presented yourself by the name of Spider-Man.” Vision pointed out the obvious and the kid laughed embarrassedly. “Yeah, right… uhm… listen, it’s very nice to talk to all of you… but…” His tone changed within a single word. “I was really hoping to get a hold of Mr. Stark… I’m really worried with all this talk on CNN… I just… wanna know if he’s okay. Is he okay?”

Rhodey watched Pepper instantly and the slow change was evident. Once again her demeanour softened a little bit and Rhodey knew that she heard the same thing as him. Raw emotion by somebody who was still too young to know how to hide it. This kid was genuinely worried about Tony. Nevertheless Pepper wouldn’t let down her guard that quickly, not after the severe betrayal.

“What did you hear?”

“That… listen, Miss Potts… I am sure you watch television too, right? Mr. Stark was really nice to me and he sent me home after the airport. Which was good, because I was done… but now he has disappeared and… I don’t want any government or Avengers secrets. Just tell me he’s okay and I’ll back off. I… I was fighting Captain America and… I didn’t make it to hold him back long enough and… I just want to know if he’s okay.”

By the end Spider-Man’s voice was nothing but a hushed whisper and Rhodey felt his chest tighten. It didn’t matter which powers that kid had, he was still a teenager and he was obviously beating himself up about not doing a good enough job. Had he seen the news reports and now felt guilty about what might have happened to Tony? No, they shouldn’t even have to think about this.

“Tony is fine, kid. Don’t beat yourself up. You did great in that fight, none of what happened afterwards was your fault.”

There was a short pause and then another whisper. “Are you just saying this to make me feel better? Is he really okay? Can I talk to him? I want to apologize for…”

“How about you call another time tomorrow? There’ll be a better chance that Tony will be able to talk to you. He’s quite busy…”

It was a bad lie, but Rhodey hoped that the kid wanted to believe it badly enough to accept it.

“Alright… could you tell him that I called? That I am sorry?”

Why? Why was he feeling so guilty? Why was Pepper feeling guilty? People who hadn’t done anything wrong? “Sure thing, kid. Take care.”

“You too… whoever you are. Bye, Miss Potts.”

The conversation ended and Pepper actually smiled at Rhodey. “He sounds like a nice kid… don’t make me think about how Tony dragged a kid into this…”

“A young man whose abilities widely surpass those of most Avengers.” Vision stated softly, causing Pepper to raise an eyebrow. “But he is what? 16 years old?”
“And yet more fit to join such a battle than Agent Romanoff or Agent Barton ever will be. From the glimpses I caught I can tell that the young man’s power matches Captain America’s. Not to mention the other abilities he has. Questions can be asked if he is mentally stable enough to join such a cause and there is no way those can be dismissed. Physically… he is superior to most of us. The fact that Mr. Stark brought him to this fight… I am inclined to believe that Mr. Stark was still under the impression that we knew who we were up against. Captain Rogers. A friend. Nobody expected a fire truck or planes being thrown at us… or about 50 cars to be dropped on Mr. Stark…”

Rhodey was surprised by how bitter Vision sounded, but then again – he was right.

Pepper nodded. “I have to leave. If Tony should get up… don’t give him the package immediately. Make sure he eats something and… please don’t let him into the lab… or maybe he should go into the lab, that would mean he is okay… I don’t know. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Where are you going?”

“I have meeting with the CEO of Pym Technologies.”
There were only so many episodes of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Clint could watch before getting seriously pissed off. Frustration mingled together with an overwhelming desire to eat pizza. It was perfectly safe to rule out the possibility that there might be no pizza in Wakanda. Every single place in the world had pizza, it was a sign of civilization. Clint was sure if he asked one of those girls who strolled in every morning to tidy the place up, they would let the royal kitchen know that he wanted pizza, and there would be pizza. Anyway, all these thoughts about food were just another try to distract himself from the phone which was lying on the couch table in front of him.

Being such a pussy was ridiculous. Just because of Scott and his bitching ex-wife and girlfriend. Clint didn’t really know that guy, sure he was thankful that he had been there when they had needed him to kick Stark’s ass. Hell, one wouldn’t want to mess with somebody who could grow taller than a building. Then again, Clint really had enough of people who thought they knew how to fight or what it meant to be a soldier just because they put a suit on which had some freakish abilities. Without ever receiving any kind of training or education. Suddenly everybody thought that they were something special, just because they had some sweet gear.

He was digressing. Right, Scott… Clint knew shit about him. God knows what his relationship with his ex-wife had been like. Clint definitely had no idea. She had full custody of their child, so it was very likely that there was bad blood between them. Without knowing what had gone down between those two Clint couldn’t figure out if the last couple of days that anything to do with her reaction.

Yeah, she had hung up on him, dick move. The guy only wanted to talk to his kid and he had been through a lot of shit. Fucking Ross. Tony was playing in the same league though. First he thought he knew better than everybody and then he let the government lock them up. Stark knowing better than Cap, huh. Good one. Ultron anybody? Already forgot about that? What it all came down to – Scott had been fucked over like all of them and now he was on the run, because…

Clint had no fucking idea why. Why the hell would the government suddenly interfere with their work? Sure, SHIELD was history, but until Ultron nobody had bothered… and that had been over a year ago. Now they were acting up? Because Wanda had saved maybe hundreds of people in Lagos? Yeah, it was a tragedy that the Wakandan people ended up on the receiving end, but look where they were now.
Wakanda. Their king had taken them in. Obviously he realised that it hadn’t been Wanda’s fault. Seriously, what excuse did the rest of the world have?

Whatever, there was a very high probability that none of this had anything to do with that woman not wanting to talk to Scott. Who the hell knows? Perhaps he had cheated on her or the other way round and bad things had been said? Very well possible. About 1000 billion things could go wrong in a relationship and they were already separated.

No, Scott’s ex-wife could have whatever reason to hang up on him. That wasn’t worrying Clint in any kind of way.

The girlfriend? That was something different. Hell, probably Scott had crappy taste in women. That was perfectly possible. Clint hadn’t been there, he had only heard Scott’s very short, ‘I don’t really want to talk about it’ kind of version. His girlfriend was pissed and called him a criminal. Well, they were on the run and when you broke the law – yes, you technically were a criminal.

Only too bad if the law was fucking stupid and was designed to make you the criminal. Also, Scott’s girlfriend wasn’t Laura. She had probably had no idea what she had got herself into when she had got involved with Scott. Laura was the wife of a secret agent, of an Avenger, she knew how quickly things could go down and change.

After going through all these things over and over again in his head Clint couldn’t come up with another explanation – he was a coward. Yeah, there had been no way of knowing how fucked up things were going to turn out and it wasn’t Clint’s fault… which wouldn’t stop Laura from being mad. From one day to the next Laura was alone to manage the farm with three kids. Granted, not for the first time, but the situations had been different. Nothing had stopped him from coming home. Their stay in Wakanda wasn’t going to last forever, they all knew that. The world couldn’t do without Captain America or the Avengers. Sure, right now they acted as if they were criminals, but in a few weeks things would have smoothed over. After the next ISIS attack or some natural disaster, a train accident with over 200 deaths… everybody would call for them to come back to make them feel safe. That was how things worked.

Steve was right, they couldn’t save everybody, but if they didn’t even let them try, they wouldn’t end up saving anybody.

Time to stop being such a pussy. Clint reached for the phone, but as soon as he felt the weight in his hand there was some sort of doubt that wouldn’t stop nagging at him. For fuck’s sake, Scott and him weren’t the same people and their families definitely weren’t the same either. If his girlfriend was too dense to realise that it wasn’t Clint’s problem. Still, he would have to explain to Laura how and when things had gone wrong. Hell, he wanted to talk to his kids, let them know that he was alright. They must be dying with worry by now…

Putting the phone back down Clint took a look at his watch. Sometimes it was easier to do something if you had decided beforehand when you wanted to do it. In five minutes. He could make the call in exactly five minutes. Simple enough.

Those were five minutes that Clint needed to get through.

No more Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, that was for sure. Taking the remote control Clint switched the channel, quickly zapping through them. Just a mere second was enough to tell that he had no interest whatsoever in watching what was on. He was even rolling his eyes when he got a glimpse of his own face right next to Wanda’s. CNN? Probably. These guys were the worst.

Clint kept zapping, hoping for some music video or something remotely interesting that wouldn’t
make him think. Suddenly he saw flowers, lots of them. He was already watching something else when his brain caught up with what he had seen. His thumb brushed over the right button, but Clint only pressed it after some hesitation.

The flowers were still there and Clint’s first thought was the death of the princess of Wales. Laura had been in front of the TV 24/7 when that had happened. Clint remembered the streets of London being covered with flowers. An overwhelming display of compassion. That had always alienated him. For some reason no school shooting or plane crash had ended up in such a flood of flowers than the death of one princess.

So no, the flowers that were being laid down in front of that tunnel were in no way competing with what happened in 1997 and it looked overwhelming nonetheless. A sea of flowers in all colours, little burning candles, even drawings. The camera was moving too fast to clearly make out a motive, but to Clint it looked like something a kid of Lila’s age might have drawn.

There was a strange sting in Clint’s chest.

The camera zoomed out and there were hand-written notes all over the place. Illuminated by the candles.

*De ce?*

Clint had never learned a word of Romanian, but weren’t these notes always saying the same? Why? Unfortunately there was a very simple answer to that question. A German police squad had tried to kill an innocent man and had tried to take on something they weren’t qualified for. Sure, it was terrible that people had got hurt, but that could have been avoided so easily. Why was it so hard for people to stay out of things they knew nothing about? Politicians didn’t know shit about what kind of work the Avengers were doing and some elite squad just didn’t have the means to apprehend a super soldier. Ridiculous.

That was why.

One second later the camera lingered on the photograph of a young man. Dark hair, dark eyes, a slightly crooked nose and a small mouth. Right next to it was another sheet of paper. *Marius, ne e dor de tine.*

Marius… wasn’t that the name of that poor lad who had died when he tried to get someone out of the tunnel? Sure, another fucking tragedy, but what had he even been doing there? Saving people trapped in a tunnel was the firemen’s job. They knew how to do that, they had the equipment and the training to do that. Another case of people doing things that they knew nothing about. Clint felt sorry for him and his family, but his death could have easily been avoided too.

All of this could have been avoided

Marius’ name was all over the place. Hadn’t they announced his death just this morning? They had plastered his face all around the tunnel in just a couple of hours? As far as Clint knew Natasha didn’t speak Romanian either, but she knew enough Roman languages to perhaps piece some information together.

*Un erou*

*De ce?*

Sighing softly Clint raised his hand again to change the channel when something else caught his attention. Something entirely unexpected. Luckily the TV had the option to pause the current image,
so Clint had the opportunity to make sure that his eyes weren’t fooling him. No fucking way. Somebody was making fun of him. There was no other possibility. Somebody had some weird and honestly distasteful sense of humour. What was this supposed to be? This was more or less a memorial place, so who in their right mind would put a photograph of Tony Stark there? This was all sorts of disrespectful.

It caused Clint to think of that pretentious lawyer again. The Wakandan Times or whatever that newspaper was called had quoted him. Clint had seen the paper lying around in the common room, the interview nicely presented. Another guy who had a lot to say and no idea what he was talking about. Those guys were going to be the downfall of the entire fucking world. All that bullshit of him talking about Tony being dead. Clint snorted at the mere thought. He had his doubts if anything could kill Tony, that guy kept standing up no matter how hard you hit him.

That might be something Clint admired about him. Just like his ability to change his allies and throw his morals out of the window. Tony dead… What kind of moron would actually believe that? Stark had gone after Steve, his friend, not some fucking psychopath. Friends, huh. If they had been real friends Tony would have known when to back off and trust a soldier who had proved himself and his loyalty over and over again. Instead the government just had to lay down some papers in front of him and Tony was happy to throw them all under the bus. Why would he sign that load of bullshit anyway? Some guys in suits telling them what to do? Sitting comfortably behind some screen and deciding who got to live and who got to die without ever being part of a battle? Clint had thought Tony to be smarter than that.

Playboy, billionaire and genius? No way…

Feeling bad about the Ultron fiasco was no fucking excuse. Who had built that freaking thing? Him and Banner, but it was no question where Ultron had had the murderous personality from. Tony had caused the Sokovia disaster and everybody else should pay for it? Nah… they could go and fuck themselves. Perhaps they should sit down and write some accords for Tony, but not for the ones who were doing their job right, because they were fucking qualified for it.

Anyway, Stark wasn’t dead. There no reason to put his picture down here. Was this all that was needed? Some lawyer with a fancy degree saying on live television that Stark might be dead and everybody went fucking crazy?

That guy was probably perfectly healthy, sitting at a table with Ross and debated how to put them back into jail and Wanda into a straightjacket. Dirtbags. Clint hoped that Steve had at least cracked one of Stark’s billion dollars ribs.

A glance at his watch told him that six minutes had passed. No more stalling. Stark was perfectly fine despite some idiot telling something different. Clint had to let his family know that he was okay too.

Swallowing softly Clint grabbed the phone and started dialling the number before he had too much time to think about it. While listening to the dial tone Clint could hear his heart beating in his chest and finally the doubts were gone. He would let them know that he was okay and Clint would work something out with T’Challa to bring Laura and the kids here. So they could be together and give a fuck about what the rest of the world was doing.

“Hello?”

That was her voice and the single second Clint could give himself to the illusion that he was at home. “Laura…”

She instantly recognized him, she was his wife after all. “Go to hell.”
Clint didn’t get to hear anything else before she instantly hung up and he was back in Wakanda, sitting on that couch, thousands of miles away from his family. The TV was still showing people laying down flowers.

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It wasn’t like the dossier was telling Pepper anything new. All these years she wouldn’t have been doing her job if her knowledge about Pym Technologies wasn’t vast and detailed. They were one of Stark Industries fiercest competitors, not to mention the rivalry between Tony’s father and Hank Pym. The mere thought of Howard caused a shiver to run down Pepper’s spine and she quickly discarded it. She needed to stay focused. Due to the sour relationship between Stark Senior and Pym, the later one had never been in a room with Tony and there had never been any sort of cooperation between these two companies.

To say things were bad didn’t cover it. At all.

Hope van Dyne, Pym’s daughter, had never met Tony either. Until last year her relationship to her father had been very strained, they two of them hadn’t even been talking. There was no indication that their difficulties had been caused by business related to the company, so Pepper assumed that it had been family related. However, they seemed to have overcome those, since Hope was now CEO of Pym Technologies, working closely with her father.

That alone gave Pepper a very bad feeling when it came down to their meeting. Pym hated the mere Stark name, why should his daughter feel any different? Then again, Pepper’s PA had told her that Miss van Dyne had been very clear on this. Hank Pym hadn’t been mentioned in this conversation.

Offering a cooperation

Technology of the Ant-Man suit

Apology for Scott Lang’s actions

That would be all too easy, right? Everybody had an ulterior motive. Now? A Pym suggesting cooperation between them? Not only that, she was offering their greatest piece of technology. There had to be some strings attached to this. Yet Pepper was willing to listen to what Miss van Dyne had to say. There were some rumours about Pym Technologies being in talks with the German government. Offering to pay for the damages at Leipzig. Something Pepper had already done. That had to be Miss van Dyne’s decision. Pepper was inclined to believe that she felt bad about how Lang had used the suit her father had built, but they had given it to him, hadn’t they? Did that make her responsible or innocent? Pepper wouldn’t know until she had talked to her.

Looking at her cell phone Pepper realised that Miss van Dyne had been waiting 13 minutes now. That should be enough of a statement. Letting the CEO of such a big company wait was an impossible thing to do. 13 minutes? No way. If Miss van Dyne’s intentions weren’t genuine, she would be already gone.

Calling her PA Pepper told her to tell Miss van Dyne that she would see her now.

Obviously she hadn’t left, because a young woman in a black pantsuit was entering her office. Pepper let her walk up to her desk before even bothering to get up.

“Miss Potts, thank you so much for taking the time to see me. You must be very busy.”

“I am indeed busy, Miss van Dyne. Therefore I would be very grateful if you could come straight to the point.”
Hope nodded and they both sat down, Pepper looking expectantly at her. “I am in the possession of another suit which has the same abilities as the one Scott Lang has stolen from Pym Technologies. Only superior.”

Another suit. Potentially dangerous. Pepper would have Friday looking into this, immediately. First she would have to figure out who was sitting in front of her. Pepper knew she was only second choice, Hope had wanted to talk to Tony. They all wanted to get their hands on him. “Stolen? So you didn’t give it to him? Before the incident with Darren Cross?”

Hope’s features hardened up and Pepper knew that her words had already hit home. “Yes, my father gave him the suit, but it wasn’t a gift. Scott wasn’t supposed to do with it whatever he wanted. He definitely didn’t have the right to take it and… go to war with it. Using it against the Avengers, in a fight he knew nothing about… My father would have never allowed it. I had no idea what he was up to… I would have held him back. Believe me, I would have stopped him…”

Pepper watched her intently and she couldn’t spot any signs of dishonesty. Quite the opposite. Judging by the expression in Hope’s eyes Pepper was sure that she would have used her fists to stop Lang from doing what he had done. “So you don’t agree with your boyfriend’s opinion on the Sokovia Accords?”

A dry laugh escaped Hope’s lips and Pepper had rarely heard something as bitter. “Scott doesn’t know anything about the accords. He never even looked at them. For him it wasn’t about the accords. Captain America called him, that was enough…”

Suddenly Pepper felt like looking into a mirror. Hope was collected enough, a business woman with hard edges, but when she mentioned Rogers, she was clearly trying to hide her disgust and her anger. “I see… Rogers does have that effect on people… people who don’t like to think for themselves…”

When Hope didn’t disagree with her Pepper continued. “You mentioned you have another suit. What are you intending to do with it? Why are you here?”

No hesitation, just pure conviction. “I want Tony Stark to take a look at it. I am familiar with the technology and I am sure with his help we will be able to find a way how to disable the suit Scott has stolen. To stop him from doing any more harm…”

Until now Hope had done everything right and Pepper was willing to believe her, but now Tony had been mentioned and Pepper’s guard was up. It was her turn to protect him and she wouldn’t fail at that. “Aren’t you able to do that on your own? Your father is the creator of the suit.”

“Yes and I am not underestimating my father brilliance, but I am not willing to take any risks. Four eyes see more than two. Why fight alone when you can combine forces? Look, I know I am offering you something of incredible value, but I also need your help. Tony Stark’s help. The suit has been used to hurt people, to break the law… that’s not what my father created it for. I want to help the ones who got hurt and who tried to stop them. Miss Potts, I want to help and you could use my help.”

Pepper couldn’t be sure, but she thought that this woman was sincere. Nevertheless there was one thing Pepper couldn’t ignore. “I am sorry, Miss van Dyne. I find it hard to believe that your father would let his creation anywhere near Stark Industries.”

“My father is mostly interested in getting the Ant-Man suit back and stopping Scott from abusing his legacy. I can understand if you have trouble believing me, but… the suit I possess was an actual gift. I can do with it whatever I want, I do not need my father’s permission. I am the CEO of Pym Technologies, not him. My offer to cooperate is legit and I am a woman of my word.”
Taking her time to respond Pepper studied Hope’s face. What reason should she have to lie? Her father might have hated Howard Stark, but they were dealing with something else entirely here. A group of former super heroes wandering around, misusing their powers and bringing innocent lives in danger. On the run from the punishment they deserved.

Her lack of response seemed to unsettle Hope and her sovereign attitude was wavering. “Miss Potts, if you are not interested in my proposition… I am just asking for one thing, then I will no longer steal your time.”

“What would that be?”

It was something about her eyes, a hint of vulnerability while her voice was still firm and steady. “I want to know if Tony Stark is alive and well.”

Pepper’s pokerface was put to the test. “I fear Mr. Stark’s whereabouts and health are none of your concerns, Miss van Dyne.”

“I can understand that you don’t trust me, of course. You don’t know me and my family and the Starks have been at odds for years, but this isn’t about my name, curiosity or business. I should have been wearing the Ant-Man suit, my father wouldn’t allow it. He wanted Scott to do it, to keep me safe and along the way I stopped protesting. Scott wore the suit and he took it. Everybody has seen what he did with it in Leipzig. It’s a miracle that he didn’t kill anyone. The fact that nobody died doesn’t mean that there haven’t been consequences… Scott’s participation was vital to how this fight turned out. Without him the Avengers would have had the upper hand and… Colonel Rhodes wouldn’t have suffered his injury. I am so sorry for what happened to him and I can’t shake off my responsibility for what happened. Without Scott the Winter Soldier and Captain Rogers wouldn’t have got away and Tony Stark wouldn’t have had to follow them…”

Hope took a breath and lowered her eyes for a moment.

“None of that would have happened if I had been wearing the suit. Believe me, Miss Potts, I wouldn’t have been on the wrong side… if I had chosen a side at all. Mr. Stark has been missing for almost a week now and that wouldn’t be case if… I am partly responsible and I can’t bear the thought that a person died as a consequence. My prime concern is… I want to know if Mr. Stark is alright…”

Pepper wanted to tell her to be quiet and tell her that she was wrong. Hope wasn’t responsible for the actions of a person she had put her trust in. Then again, Pepper knew that whatever she said it wouldn’t matter. Hope had seen what Lang had done with a weapon that she would have used differently. She felt guilty for not fighting harder to keep it.

“You are not responsible for Lang’s actions.”

“I am a reason why he had the suit in the first place. We gave it to him, my father and me. Such a powerful tool can’t just be given away…” One of Hope’s hands was balled into a fist and slightly shaking.

It reminded Pepper so much of herself that she quickly made a decision. Maybe Hope had trusted the wrong person, Pepper wasn’t going to commit the same mistake. “Tony is fine and this information is not leaving this room.”

It was almost like Pepper could see the large weight that was falling off Hope’s shoulders. “He wasn’t hurt?”
“I did not say that. He was hurt, badly. But he is alright now and safe and I intent to keep it this way.”

Hope nodded. “May I talk to him? About the suit?”

“Eventually. If he agrees to your proposition. It’s not my decision to make… What is it that you want, Miss van Dyne? Perhaps I can find a way to help you.”

“I want to make up for my mistakes and make sure that something like Leipzig or Bucharest isn’t going to happen again… Wearing the suit is great responsibility, you cannot abuse its power. I am not going to do that, Miss Potts. I will use it to help Mr. Stark to make sure that they will have to answer for their actions. In a courtroom.”

A smile flickered across Pepper’s lips. “I see we are on the same page… now let’s talk about joining our resources.”

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“You know… this stuff… whatever it is… can almost be called edible.” Rhodey couldn’t come up with a better description. To his surprise Vision looked happy enough. “I guess it is a question of getting enough practice.”

Obviously, but Rhodey still wasn’t amazed by the prospect of having Vision cooking for him regularly. Even the colour of the soup didn’t seem right, the taste was bearable though. Way too little salt. Still better than some of the stuff he had been served during his time in the army.

“Do you enjoy it? Cooking? I’ve never thought it was much fun…”

Vision shrugged which was an odd sight and offered him a small smile. “I would like to think it relaxes me and from what I have heard good food is a way to bring people together. Or at least at one table.”

An honourable intention, sadly there was nobody here but them. Happy was out to get Pepper and Tony wasn’t leaving his room. Everybody else… there would be more necessary than good food to get them to sit down at one table. Rhodey wasn’t even sure if he wanted that.

“I hope you won’t take this personal… I said almost edible. We’re still far away from ‘good’.”

Vision smiled in response. “I am perfectly aware of that. I am always grateful for an honest opinion. It will help me to improve.”

For some reason Rhody doubted that. He was feeling generous, so he tasted another soup and suppressed a soft cough. “How about next time you try to fry some sausages? Maybe a soup was a little too ambitious.”

“Did I hear somebody say soup?”

Rhodey froze mid-motion at the sound of this familiar voice. A bit too tired and too worn out, that was wrong and yet there was no way to deny who it belonged to. The surprise on Vision’s face was probably matching Rhodey’s as they both took in Tony’s form, standing in the doorway.

He looked somewhat small in a too large black t-shirt and sweat pants. His hair was tousled and greasy, his face unshaved. But it was Tony. Standing there, kind of sheepishly, as if he was waiting for permission to enter his own kitchen.
After getting a hold of himself Rhodey quickly nodded. “Yeah… uhm… Vision made some soup.”

“If you want something to eat I would advise you to take the Chinese leftover from last night. I am sure they would be easier to… digest.” Vision looked slightly awkward and Rhodey could see the corners of Tony’s mouth twitch. It wasn’t an actual smile, but it came close enough to make Rhodey think that they maybe were going to be okay.

“Chinese leftovers sound great… I’ve been living on this stuff for years.”

Both Vision and him weren’t saying anything while Tony was slowly walking over to them. Rhodey could see him grimacing at every step and the anger was instantly rising again.

Steve had done that…

They could clearly hear Tony swallowing a groan when he sat down at the table after getting a box of Chinese food from the fridge. He didn’t bother to heat it. If their eyes on him made Tony feel uncomfortable, he didn’t let it show. Something that was completely out of character for him, Tony merely studied the content of the box, using a fork to poke around inside of it. Tony wasn’t supposed to be this quiet. Tony had never been quiet, no a single second of his life.

Now they were sitting here in silence and Rhodey was forced to watch Tony using his left hand to eat, his right arm still in a sling. The bruises on his face had barely started to fade and Tony was so obviously in pain just sitting here. Perhaps they should tell him to go back to bed and rest, but Rhodey couldn’t bring himself to do that. Not when he finally got a sign that Tony might get better. Hopefully…

The silence endured until Tony had eaten half of the box and eventually pushed it away. His eyes met Rhodey’s and slid down, focusing on the wheelchair.

No, not now. Should Rhodey even be here? Was he making everything worse? Tony should get some peace.

Looking back up Tony had a complete blank expression on his face, his left hand absently coming up to his chest. Ever so slightly he pointed at the wheelchair, mumbling under his breath “This thing will need to go…”

Chapter End Notes

De ce? - Why?

Marius, ne e dor de tine. - Marius, we miss you

Un erou - A hero
Hey there,

Just so you know - I don't think I'm going to be able to keep up the current posting pace. I know, my best qualities are that I'm prolific and fast, but the truth is soon I'm not going to have that much time at my disposal. Nevertheless I'm promising you'll never have to wait long, because writing is a hell lot of fun :)

Anyway - anybody interested in a chapter from Peter's POV? Here you go :)

Have fun and let me know whose POV you're also interested in
*cough*Steveisnext*cough*

Oh, that fucking letter...

“No way this is real.”

“Of course it’s fucking real.”

“Geez, you couldn’t tell fake if it bit you in the ass.”

It was a tiny little bit arrogant to assume that they were talking about something he had done, right? Peter felt that nervous tingle which was his daily companion. Three guys in the row in front of him were crouching over one table, surrounding that guy who was definitely failing his math class. Was he called Derrick? Could be Derrick… Anyway he would get a football scholarship, so who cared about a stupid math class.

“Just look at the fucking tires! That can’t be real!”

Tires? Could be… Why were always cars involved when Peter had to do some… work? They could not be looking at the Leipzig footage, everybody had already seen it 400 times and nobody debated that it was fake, because… everybody knew it was real. That didn’t stop people from wishing it would be fake. God, that would make life easier…

Peter remembered the invasion. Aunt May had had her arms wrapped around him while they had watched it on TV. There hadn’t been so much to see, the only footage had been recorded by news reporters in helicopters and even they hadn't dared to get too close. That had to be a first in the history of journalism. Just like aliens…

Like everybody else Peter had been scared, but he had been a little too young to understand what was going on. The look on Uncle Ben’s face had frightened him and how Aunt May’s arms had tightened around him. Until he hadn’t been able to tell if it was him shaking or her.

Then there had been Iron Man. Carrying a nuke through the hole in the sky and then all the monsters, to Peter they had been monster not aliens, had dropped dead. For him Iron Man had saved the world that day. Later on he had learned that it had been team work, the Avengers became a synonym for a group that protected the world and the people and yet… Peter had already chosen his
hero. Iron Man had carried a freaking nuke! Stopping it from blowing up Manhattan. Guess who had put an Iron Man poster over his bed the very next day? Peter still had it, now in a box under his bed. Even now he was still thanking his lucky star that Mr. Stark hadn’t seen it when he had suddenly showed up at their place.

Dream come true… not going to ruin it because of fanboying…

Anyhow, after the invasion things had been easy. It wasn’t like everybody expected the Avengers to show up all the time when something bad happened, but there was no denying that it was a reassuring thought to know that they were out there. People who could do what nobody else could do and who were doing good things with this power.

Peter had never expected to one day end up in a position where he could make that choice for himself. The choice to do something good with his powers. That choice had led Tony Stark, freaking Iron Man, to his door and at the same time the Avengers had stopped existing. People who were supposed to stand up for everybody else were now fighting each other and Peter had been in the middle of it.

Sure, Iron Man had always been his favourite, but that didn’t mean he didn’t know who Captain America was. That he didn’t mean anything to him. Going to Germany and fight Captain America? The hero and symbol of their nation? Then Mr. Stark had started explaining and Peter had heard about the accords before. A good thing in his opinion. If you had such immense abilities, you had to be responsible in the way you used them. Oversight was a common concept in military, politics and the justice system. It was a democratic principle and Peter agreed with it. Also he had seen the reports about Bucharest…

Peter was only 16, yeah and he often had no clue what he was doing, but… hell, even he had been able to tell that whatever Captain America had been trying to do there, he had gone about it a pretty reckless way. Bringing down an entire tunnel while chasing after one single man?

“There, check out that shadow. No way that’s real.”

Okay, enough of day dreaming, Peter had to know if this was about him. Completely casually, at least he hoped so, Peter got up and slowly walked past them. While trying to glance over their shoulders to see whatever YouTube video they were watching.

“Hey Parker, watch where you’re going!”

“Sorry…” Peter mumbled half-heartedly and felt like an idiot. They were watching a car doing the most incredible drifts in a parking garage. No Spider-Man to be seen. Of course. Not everything was about him. The last thing he needed was attention. More than he had already received when he had come to school with a black eye.

“Hey Parker, did you stare too intently at someone else’s girl?”

Yeah, only if…

Maybe a tiny little part of him wanted the recognition. It was stupid and childish, but hey, he was 16, he was allowed to have some dreams. Stupid dreams. It wasn’t like Peter had saved the world, no, but he had fought next to Iron Man. Peter had slept beneath that Iron Man poster – was it pretentious to consider the possibility that one day maybe some kid would do the same… just with a Spider-Man poster.

Was it physically possible to kick your own ass really hard? That was what Peter should do right
now. This wasn’t about his vanity. There was reason for him to show off. Mr. Stark had been pretty clear on what Peter had been supposed to do. Web them up and keep your distance.

The last part… well… Did having a fistfight with the Winter Soldier count as keeping your distance? Yeah, he had got a close look on the metal arm, which was still completely and utterly awesome… but they had got away. Him and Captain America… Back at the airport Peter hadn’t seen or understood what that actually meant.

Then Mr. Stark had disappeared…

Biting his lower lip Peter rushed past his school mates, out of the classroom and down the hall. Pushing the door of the restroom open Peter slipped inside and breathed out in relief when nobody was in here. Leaning over the sink Peter splashed his face with water and it didn’t help at all.

Peter had had fun during the fight. Not the entire time, having that container dropped on top of him, no, that had been anything but funny. Chasing Falcon and the Winter Soldier down that hall, bringing a freaking giant down to the floor… yeah, pretty amazing. Watching Iron Man and War Machine doing their thing and being right next to them – dream come true. During parts of the fight Peter had been pretty much exotic about it happening. Obviously too much, because he hadn’t got his job done. The two main persons they had been supposed to stop had got away and Mr. Stark had to take the rap for that.

Miss Potts and that man, who Peter suspected to be war machine, had told him that Mr. Stark was fine. Every part of Peter wanted that to be true, because that would mean it wasn’t Peter’s fault that he had got into trouble. Or would that only be luck? Peter could have done a better job, especially with that most amazing suit. Mr. Stark had given it to him, wanting nothing in return…

Right, that fight in Germany, but Peter had managed to fuck that up anyway.

They had said that he could call today. Then he could apologize. What if Mr. Stark was angry at him for doing such a lousy job? Peter wouldn’t be able to hold it against him… To be honest, Peter was kind of afraid to talk to him. It was highly likely that he would be told that he had fucked up and that he should stay the hell away. Nevertheless Peter needed an opportunity to tell Mr. Stark that he was sorry… for disappointing him and getting him into trouble.

Talking about trouble, Peter should head back to the classroom. He had never wanted school to be over quicker.

Time was crawling by, but the good thing about it was that it never stopped moving. Eventually Peter could grab his backpack and leave school as quickly as he could. During his ride home Peter watched other people in their seats, staring at their phones. Not an unusual sight, but Peter couldn’t help but wonder if they were watching something related to the ‘Civil War’. A middle aged man had such a deep frown on his face Peter couldn’t imagine him looking at anything else. It was a bit like the world had stopped talking about anything else. Peter was too young to be sure, but he believed it had been the same way after the invasion.

That had been a more hopeful time though. A bit weird, right? Sudden confirmation that there was extra-terrestrial life and that they had hostile intentions… and yet people had felt safer than now, because the Avengers had kicked a lot of ass together. Now they were only kicking each other’s asses and there was an underlying sentiment in the general public that Iron Man might be dead.

Sure, Peter had overheard conversations in the underground during which people had been saying that this assumption was ridiculous and that Captain America sure had a damn good reason for doing what he did. As long as those things don’t happen on American soil – who cares?
Those conversations were happening, but it wasn’t hard to spot somebody standing nearby who was rolling their eyes.

Aunt May was still at work when Peter got home and he was quite happy for that. A bit of time before he would have to answer the usual questions. How was school? Which was a code for ‘Did somebody try to beat you up?’ Peter shouldn’t be frustrated by that, because he knew that she was worried. Naturally so when Peter was walking around with a black eye that she thought he got in school which was so not true. Well, this time… it wouldn’t be the first time that some jock decided he needed to do something about Peter’s face.

Sometimes this was so incredibly frustrating. One little punch back and nobody would ever dare to annoy him again… but Peter couldn’t just punch somebody. Not without seriously hurting them.

Slumping down on the couch Peter looked at his backpack and grimaced at the thought of the homework that was waiting for him inside of it. Sure, it needed to be done, but Peter couldn’t do it right now. All he longed for was one single phone call.

Hello Mr. Stark, are you okay? I’m so sorry…

Checking the clock on his phone Peter decided to wait another hour or so before calling Mr. Stark. A little bit of time couldn’t hurt to gather up enough courage and to find the right words. In the meantime he could do what every normal person his age usually did – checking out stupid stuff online.

YouTube had very concrete suggestions for him. It was ‘Civil War’ all over again. Who had come up with that name anyway? It was stupid…

Peter had enough of the news footage, he had been there, what did he need to see it from another person’s perspective? For the sake of his sanity Peter tried to stay away from everything concerning Bucharest. Instead he clicked on a video of the LastWeekTonight Show, he could really need something that would make him laugh.

He definitely should have read the title of the video.

As if John Oliver wasn’t going to comment on the latest scandal that had left the world in shock. “Now let’s talk about everyone’s favourite topic – America. You know despite its obvious faults like the complete lack of health insurance or a functioning justice system… it’s a pretty awesome country. Don’t you agree with me? Pretty awesome country.”

The crowd applauded and Peter had no idea where this was going.

“America, I, an Englishman, will gladly repeat myself, you are awesome. But you’ll have to forgive me for being very glad to have a British passport. Because no matter how awesome you are, the rest of the world is going to get pretty pissed off at you when a single guy runs around protecting a wanted serial killer, blowing up tunnels and airports while waving a shield with your flag on it.”

Oh…

“Yes, I know, Steve Rogers is a single man and he isn’t working for any American organisation anymore. No, he is a wanted fugitive, but it’s still not the best publicity that we’re still calling a man ‘Captain America’ who walks into other countries without their permission, offers to solve problems that they never had and when he fucked everything up, he leaves again, so other people can clean up his mess that would have never been there if the jerk would have stayed at home, because nobody wanted his help in the first place. I don’t see what’s American about that.”
The audience laughed as a map of Vietnam, Iraq and then of the entire Middle East popped up next to the host.

“I can understand why the rest of the world gets pissed off at us when we’re calling an international fugitive who seems to be fond of trashing foreign places ‘Captain America’. Maybe it’s about time to change that. How about something less… demeaning for the rest of the population of this entire country who doesn’t support the destruction of German airports and Romanian freeway tunnels or helping a nazi-terrorist flee from a police squad, because the two of you happened to be buddies 70 years ago? I’ve come up with a few ideas, tell me what you think… How about Captain ‘My actions do explicitly not reflect the views and ideals of the United States of America… or those of Puerto Rico’”

Peter had no interest in hearing the other suggestions, but he got the idea. This was a very valid point, but maybe they were being too hard on him. After all Captain America hadn’t had any opportunity yet to comment on what had happened. Mr. Stark had said that he thought he was right and after meeting him Peter could say that this was definitely true… Peter had no idea what to think. Everybody had an opinion and Peter thought that there were so many things and details that he didn’t know about… it was making his head hurt.

Why he was clicking on the next video was beyond him. He had never watched Bill Maher’s show before. There seemed to be a discussion going on, about the battle at the airport. Four people sitting at a table, debating the political consequences. Peter had no idea who any of them were. In the back of his mind he was afraid that they would mention him and his finger was already hovering the screen to end the video. The next comment of the man on the left made him stop.

“… no statement about the events. Not before or after. Where is the outrage about that? Now Stark Industries offers to pay for all the damages inflicted to the airport? I’m sorry, but to me it looks like a rich businessman is trying to cover his ass. We have no idea what happened between the two parties before the Leipzig incident. About what pushed Steve Rogers, an American hero, to act completely on his own. That Stark Industries now wants to pay for the damages is very telling, it’s pretty much a confession of being just as guilty of the fight that insured as Team Captain America.”

What? Was something wrong with that guy’s eyes? Peter had been there! Mr. Stark had tried to start this thing with a conversation, but Captain America had pushed him away and then… things had escalated. Why was the offer to pay for the damages a way to say ‘I caused this mess’? Not just that, this guy was also implying that Mr. Stark was doing this to keep people from looking further into this. What? Peter didn’t understand what this was supposed to mean.

“Sorry for my French, Aaron, but this is lot of bullshit.”

At least Peter assumed that Bill Maher was saying bullshit, because of the beep he couldn’t be sure.

“Do your research. Stark Industries has been paying for damages caused by the Avengers for years. You know why he is paying for the airport? Because unlike other people he has some human decency. Steve Rogers doesn’t bother addressing anything that he has done. No letter to the newspapers or an uploaded video. Nothing. Stark Industries has come out and expressed their sympathy. Sure, we have to attribute that to Pepper Potts, the CEO of the company, but it’s also common knowledge that she and Tony Stark agree on most matters. You know who also expressed their sympathy. Pym Technologies, the creators of the Ant-Man suit. I hear they’ll have a press conference tomorrow, I’m looking forward to hear that. The United States Armed Forces who created the Falcon Wings. They apologized for what their invention was used for after Wilson had stolen them. All of them have come forward to apologize and that doesn’t mean that they are guilty of anything. Don’t start pointing fingers at people who have a conscience! Especially when you still
don’t know if one of them is dead or not.”

He had to pause since the applause of the crowd had become too loud.

“We should still talk about Captain America and things that for some reason nobody knows. Steve Rogers isn’t even a Captain.”

Huh? Of course he was. Captain America, everybody knew that…

“His alter ego, the propaganda figure was a Captain. Steve Rogers never rose higher than to the rank of a private. After infiltrating the first Hydra base, the military just acted like he had been a Captain all along. Perhaps because it sounds better. So how does he get to be the leader of the Avengers? For sure not because of his military rank, they had a highly decorated Colonel with way more experience than Rogers at their hands and…”

Peter shut off his cell phone, his head was swimming. He didn’t want to hear about this or think about it too much. Maybe that was childish and unreasonable, especially since he had been involved in all of this, but was it too much to ask for to hear some good news.

Good news… to hear that Mr. Stark was okay and that he wasn’t angry with him, that would be good news and the only ones Peter was really interested in. Time to stop being a coward and call him, Colonel Rhodes had said it was okay…

Colonel Rhodes… Peter felt a lump forming in his throat. As far as he had heard the paralysis was permanent. Could be rumours, but… Damn…

Taking a soft breath Peter dialled the number Mr. Stark had given him and tried to ignore his heart which was beating way too fast. This time there was no long waiting period or that strange but completely awesome computer voice. Definitely one of Mr. Stark’s AIs. Peter wanted to ask him about them. That guy could teach him so much… Peter would kill for a closer look at the Iron Man armour…

“Hey there, Spider-Man.”

Great, he was almost falling off the couch. What a start. “Hello… uhm… Colonel Rhodes? Am I right?”

“Absolutely. You still want to talk to Tony?”

Could his stupid heart slow down a bit? Tony Stark had been in his room, he had been sitting on Peter’s bed and he had survived that without making a complete fool out of himself. He was going to get through this too. “Yeah, yeah… that would be great. Only if he wants to, of course. I don’t want to annoy him or steal his time. It’s not like I can’t…”

“Kid, calm down, okay? It’s cool. Tony is here and awake, I’ll put you through.”

Another deep breath was necessary to calm his nerves down. “Thank you. That’s great. Great.”

Then there was silence on the other end of the line and Peter started biting his lip. What was he doing here? He should have written down what he was about to say. Peter definitely needed some help, so he wouldn’t start babbling or saying something stupid. God, he was going to say something stupid… In his head Peter was going through the words which he should avoid and then he felt like crying, because he was going to mess this up anyway…

He had to thank him again for the suit, that was important, he hadn’t done that enough. Saying that
he was sorry for not stopping Captain America, for not being good enough and for not following his
directions. Sorry for getting slightly hurt, so he hadn’t been able to help him pursuing the Captain
and the Winter Soldier. For…

“Kid? You’re still there?”

That was still Colonel Rhodes’ voice. “Yeah, sure.”

“I’m sorry, but… Tony still feeling tired and he can’t talk to him right now. Sorry.”

Mr. Stark was angry with him. Of course, he had every right to. Peter hadn’t been good enough and
Mr. Stark had got hurt…

“I see… Could you tell him I’m sorry? Please?”

There was a short hesitation. “Listen, we’re going to do something else. Tomorrow is Saturday, so
no school. How about I make sure that Tony calls you first thing in the morning? Promise, okay?”

There was no point, Peter had had his chance and he had blown it. “Sure… that would be great.
Thank you.” He could hear himself how crestfallen he sounded… and War Machine was hearing all
of it. Just wonderful.

“It has nothing to do with you, kid. He’s just tried. He’s had a couple of rough days.”

“I see… thank you, Colonel Rhodes.”

“Take care, kid.”

How stupid of him to expect anything else. Iron Man had asked for his help and Peter had let him
down. Why should he ever want to talk to him again? Peter needed some fresh air, he needed to get
out and clear his head. Letting his phone lie on the couch Peter walked over to the window and
opened it. He just needed to be done with swinging around before Aunt May was back. Hopefully
by then Peter wouldn’t feel like crap any more.

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After hanging up Rhodey stared at the phone in his hand, not really sure why he was starting to feel
so terribly guilty. Sure, it wasn’t pleasant to tell the kid that Tony wasn’t going to talk to him, when it
was so horribly obvious that the kid had only one single wish – talking to Tony.

“Friday, did Tony give any reason why he didn’t want to talk to him?”

“No, Boss said that he couldn’t.”

“Is he in pain?”

“Not physically, no.”

Rhodes considered himself smart enough to understand that slight nudge. Wheeling towards the
elevator Rhodey swore himself that he wasn’t going to push Tony. If he didn’t feel like talking to the
kid, for whatever reason, that was okay… but the kid clearly needed to hear that Tony was fine. Or
at least alive. It was cruel to leave him hanging like this.

After the short elevator ride Rhodey stopped in front of the door to Tony’s bedroom and knocked
softly.
“Come in.”

He was never going to get used to Tony’s voice sounding so fragile. God, Rhodey hoped he wouldn’t have to get used to it. Anything but that. Opening the door Rhodey rolled inside and spotted Tony lying on his bed, a sketch block in his hands.

First thing Rhodey noticed was that his skin tone looked slightly better and that shave had done miracles. Still, this wasn’t quite Tony. The fact that they were in his bedroom didn’t make any sense. Years ago Tony had said himself that he didn’t use a bedroom to sleep or to rest but to fuck…

“What’s up, Rhodes?” Tony tried to show his trademark grin, but the look Rhodey gave him made it disappear quite quickly. There should be no pretending between them.

“You’re alright?”

Tony shifted softly and Rhodey noticed how he turned the sketch block away, so he wouldn’t see it. “I feel like I got beat up by two enhanced human beings… no, it’s getting better. I’m just… tired.”

That was what he sounded and looked like and it was so wrong.

“I see… I’ll leave you alone in just a second… I just wanted to ask you… The Spider-Man would be really glad if you took a minute and talked to him. I told you that he called, he’s really worried about you.”

It was impossible to miss how Tony winced and Rhodey frowned. “Tony?”

“Yeah… I can’t talk to him right now.”

“Doesn’t have to be now. Just call him tomorrow morning. That will be fine.”

“That won’t work out either.”

Slowing rolling closer to the bed Rhodey resisted the urge to reach out to touch Tony. They had known each other for such a long time, Rhodey could see when he was suffering. “Something wrong? Why don’t you want to talk to the kid?”

Tony opened his mouth and when no words were coming out Rhodey felt like he was falling down from the sky for a second time. Words were Tony’s tools, just like the equipment in his workshop, he knew how to use them and he loved using them. Tony also never wanted to admit or show any weakness. Rhodey had been so sure to hear him start babbling about everything and nothing, giving him a long list of reasons why he couldn’t talk with Spider-Man and by the end Rhodey would be to confused to ask further questions.

That didn’t happen.

Tony’s shoulders slumped beneath an invisible weight, he became even smaller and the look of guilty and self-loathing on his face was almost too much to take.

“Tones?”

“What am I supposed to tell him? I nearly got the kid killed. I make a big speech, give everybody shit about Charlie Spencer and how we dropped a building on him in Sokovia and then I bring a kid to the fight… and Cap drops a container on him. I should have told him to get out of there the second Wanda decided to bury me beneath a fuck ton of cars. They weren’t fighting with their gloves on and I didn’t tell him to get the fuck out of there. I got another kid hurt. What the hell was I thinking?”
No, this wasn’t going to happen. Tony wasn’t going to take the blame for this one too. Vision was right, Tony had expected a confrontation with friends. Not with enemies. He couldn’t have known… None of them could have known…

“You are not going to do this to yourself, do you hear me? The kid is fine, understood? He got a few bruises, but he is fine, he told me that. He is worried about you. The media is talking about the possibility of you being dead. The kid is dying of a bad conscience, because he thinks he hasn’t done enough to help you. He called, because he thought you might be dead. I thought he was about to start sobbing until we told him that you are okay. He’s feeling just as guilty as you.”

If necessary Rhodey would repeat these words so often until Tony had understood them, he wouldn’t allow Team Cap to drop this on Tony.

“He’s what? That’s stupid. He brought down Lang. We would have been toast without him…” Tony mumbled, sounding confused and Rhodey instantly nodded. “Exactly. If you’re feeling horrible about bringing him… talk with him about that. He isn’t holding it against you, I’m sure. He’s upset that he wasn’t able to do more for you. Please, call him. The kid needs to know that you are alright… so he can be alright.”

Although he didn’t look quite convinced Tony nodded slowly. “Okay… will do.”

“Good… by the way, I completely forgot about that over lunch. A package got delivered for you…” Pausing shortly Rhodey wondered if it was the wrong moment. Then again, there would never be a good moment. “We think Steve might have sent it.”

Tony showed no physical reaction. “Oh?”

“Yeah, damn… I left it downstairs.”

“I can…”

Shaking his head Rhodey closed his eyes. “No, I gotta… I need practice anyway. I’ll be back in a minute.”

It took him five minutes to get down to the lower floor, get the package and return to Tony who was now sitting on the edge of the bed. Not moving a muscle when Rhodey placed the package in his lap. “Why would he send me anything?”

“I have no idea.”

Sighing barely audible Tony started opening the package and Rhodey felt like an intruder. “I can leave if you…”

“Nah…” Continuing to open the package Tony pulled out a letter and a flip phone. Which looked about 100 years old. A letter. Maybe Steve was finally reaching out. With a bit of luck they could finally open a dialog, a conversation… and put something broken back together. A phone. That said ‘get in contact with me’. Steve was willing to talk. Perhaps not everything was lost.

While Rhodey was willingly giving into the little spark of hope Tony had already opened the envelope, his eyes running over the letter.

Tony’s eyes.

Rhodey didn’t need more to understand that he had been wrong. That letter wasn’t a spark of hope. Blanc, no light in them, not the glimmer that had always made Tony stand out. Tony was still
reading, his right hand holding the letter in hand while his left was sliding up his chest. Suddenly his fingers twisted in his shirt, right on the spot where the reactor had been. It looked like a subconscious gesture, Tony’s lips were trembling and the spark of hope turned into a feeling of dread.

“Tony?”

Dropping the letter to the floor Tony got up to his feet, storming out of his own room, leaving Rhodey behind. Alone with the overwhelming desire to be able to run after him. And with the letter.

Picking up a piece of paper from the floor shouldn’t have been that difficult. When Rhodey finally had it between his fingers, he felt exhausted and slightly bad for somewhat invading Tony’s privacy, but he had enough of people hurting him and not knowing how to protect him.

The letter was short. Agonizingly short, considering all the things that had been done and had not been said. Rhodey began to read and he tried to imagine Steve’s voice, saying the lines he had written down. It was a mockish, cruel tone. Sounding similar to Loki when he had talked to these people in Germany. With every word Rhodey could feel it inside him. That suppressed anger that he had decided to keep locked in, for Tony’s sake. Every word fuelled the flame, letting it burn higher and hotter.

It was unbearable arrogance, written down by a man who was so delusional to think that this was vindication. Considering and known what Steve had done, what his Team had done… this was disgusting. Not a slap in the face, he was pushing the blade deeper into Tony’s back and telling him that Steve would be noble enough to forgive him. As soon as Tony had realised how wrong he had been.

_We all need family._

They had never been a family. Family didn’t treat each other like that. They didn’t throw cars after you, they didn’t keep secrets from you… they didn’t beat you, beat you, beat you to help the murderer of your parents.

_My faith is in people, I guess. Individuals._

So 117 countries, billions of people weren’t trustworthy, because he didn’t know them personally? Their opinions didn’t matter?

_I know I hurt you Tony_

Rhodey saw Tony’s hand clutching his chest, reaching for the reactor and images flashed before his eyes of Steve on top of him. Slamming the shield into the reactor. His father’s shield. Right into Tony’s heart. When he had already been lying on the floor. Helpless…

“No, you don’t. You don’t know anything.”


With trembling fingers Rhodey scrunched up the sheet of paper which was worth so much more than the condescending words that been written down on it. Enough. Why couldn’t he just stop? Why did he have to keep hurting Tony? When was it finally enough?
Hey everybody,

So, today we're looking at Steve. Actually I believe that Steve is a good man, but unfortunately has no idea how the world works and accuses other people of things he does himself. And those things are huge...

Anyway, parts of this chapter are quotes from "Don't come crawling back to me", but I adjusted them to make sense in this story. Hope is talking to the journalists ;)

Have fun

P.S - To whoever feels the need to trash the real UN in the comments - fuck you. The UN was founded to help creating world peace. That must be the greatest thing in the world, a noble thought. Of course, it's almost impossible to realise, but just knowing that there are people dedicating their life to this cause is reassuring and gives a lot of people hope.

The UN stands for equality, peace and for human rights. It supposed to open a dialog between the nations of this world. Sometimes it succeeds and sometimes it doesn't. Is it perfect? No. Absolutely not. It's an ambitious project, getting the entire world at one table and to TALK about our problems. Not everybody always plays withing the rules.

What does the UN stand for? Trying to end the hunger in the world, trying to make it possible that every child can get an education, trying to create equality between the genders, trying to stop AIDS from devouring Africa, trying to ensure world peace...

So don't dare to spit on that, because the UN was against your hero in a fucking movie! You don't get to insult an organisation that stands for those things. That was created after WW1 when people were desperate after the horror they had witnessed. No, the UN probably can't save the world, because the are a peace organisation and violence is a more easy way to obtain your goals.

I can't believe it have to right this... once again - I will not tolerate anyone talking shit about the real UN, because they wanted Captain America to be accountable in a MOVIE!!!

The UN is a sign that there are still people out there who want to work with each other, not against each other. If you want to get rid of that, fine. I hope there are not many like you out there.

No matter how hard Steve tried, he couldn’t pretend that Bucky was only sleeping. It didn’t get any easier. Steve’s mind didn’t possess any real memories of his time in the ice. Perhaps his brain was just trying to protect him from it or there was nothing to actually remember. Another thing that Steve would never know. Somewhere in the back of his mind he could feel something.
Cold…

There was no way to tell if he had made that up, because Steve thought that he had to remember something of these 70 years. He had spent most time of his life in a block of ice and it was hard to believe that had been without consequences. Steve didn’t have issues with drinking ice-water or taking cold showers that left him shivering or freezing. None of that triggered something. Apart from the physical effects there was no discomfort. Steve didn’t have any problems with ice. Hadn’t had.

Bucky was right in front of him and not here at all. He could still be falling from that train, slipping through Steve’s hands. He could be dead. He could be Winter Soldier or he could still be missing. His best friend was gone again and there was nothing Steve could do about it.

Like this Hydra had indeed rendered him helpless. Steve could seek out bases all over the world and tear them down, he could bring down the HellCarriers and oppose everybody who tried to do him wrong, but in this case – there was nothing Steve could do about it.

Helplessness was something that Steve had no idea how to deal with. It was an entirely new experience that he didn’t want to go through. Even back then, when he had still been that small, weak kid from Brooklyn, Steve had never felt like this. Other guys had been bigger and absolutely stronger than him, but Steve had never been afraid of them. His fists hadn’t been enough to make a difference, but Steve had had his words, his wit and his determinedness. The results hadn’t always been to his liking, of course not. Nevertheless Steve had been able to do something. It didn’t actually matter if his attempts to stand his ground against a bully hadn’t been successful, Steve had had the possibility to actually try to do something.

Now there was nothing Steve could do. Except for sitting here and watching Bucky being in the same place Steve had been for 70 years. It wasn’t fair, but Steve did no longer want to inwardly curse Hydra for what they did to Bucky. That wouldn’t help them in any way and Steve was getting tired of being angry. He was way more interested in solutions.

This was why he was feeling so useless and lost. There was nothing Steve could do to make this situation any easier for Bucky or to find a cure for the brain washing. In this domain Steve was a blind man moving through a field of mines. Steve knew how incredibly lucky they were to be here in Wakanda where they actually had the means and the ability to help them. Unfortunately this was not a problem that could be solved within a single day. Or a week.

Bucky could be locked up in this tube for years to come and Steve didn’t know if he could take it, although it was the best possible solution. T’Challa had insured him that his scientists were searching for a way to erase the manipulation Hydra had planted in Bucky’s head. Only god knew if there were other words out there. Other than those Zemo had used. Something that Steve hadn’t thought of.

Bucky had done that. All of this had been his idea, the responsible thing to do. A necessary evil. Although Steve was sure that he would be able to protect Bucky if somebody with sinister intentions would show up. Something that Steve would never understand, how people could use somebody for their own purposes no matter if they were willing participants or not. Was that something the world had come to? Or had it always been like that. Probably the latter.

Sighing tiredly Steve stood up, knowing very well that he couldn't sit here all day, watching Bucky to make himself feel horrible. That didn’t help anybody. With a last glance at Bucky Steve walked towards the door, his steps way too heavy.

As always a young woman was waiting for him at the other side. It was strange that they had never been officially introduced, but Steve had heard T’Challa calling her Okoye. Steve wasn’t really sure
about her profession or her duties. What he knew for sure was that she was here every time Steve wanted to see Bucky. Okoye escorted him to the lab and back. He was grateful for the effort, but it wasn’t actually necessary.

“I appreciate that you are here to escort me, but you don’t have to waste your time waiting around for me. I am sure you have better things to do.” Steve shot her a small smile, so shortly after seeing Bucky he wasn’t capable of offering more.

Okoye, if that was her name, kept that stoic expression on her face. “Your access to the palace is restricted. The king made a concession by letting you come here and see your friend. There are conditions. I lead you here and back to your quarters. It’s a matter of safety. Unnegotiable.”

Steve was a guest here and he owed T’Challa for giving Bucky a safe place, therefore Steve would respect his rules. Nodding softly Steve followed Okoye down the hall, his thoughts going in all different directions. A matter of safety. That phrase didn’t sit right with Steve. Did that mean that T’Challa wasn’t sure that Bucky was safe? Even here? Or was T’Challa just very careful? Steve couldn’t tell, because he didn’t know T’Challa. This was definitely something they had to talk about, if there was no guarantee for Bucky’s safety…

No, nobody knew that he was here and T’Challa had said that he intended to keep it this way. Which was a smart idea, Steve totally agreed with that. Nonetheless they should have a conversation about this topic, to reassure Steve. All of them were just settling down, it would be terrible to have to start running again. Also Bucky had put his trust in Steve, to watch over him and Steve needed T’Challa to do that. It was important to know about all these things.

“Is there a chance I might talk to T’Challa later?”

Okoye didn’t bother to stop or to turn around. “The king…” She put suspicious emphasis on this title. “… has to deal with the daily concerns of our nation. Just this week the Federation of Wakandan Industry has entered talks with the Federation of Wakandan Unions to negotiate new wages and new collective contracts. Three new environmental laws are going to be passed this week. Also a major food manufacturer of the Capital is going to celebrate their 100 years of existence. The king is invited to the festivities and he is going to honour the grandson of the founder of the company for his accomplishments and services for our nation. As you see, the king is quite busy.”

That was indeed a long schedule and it made Steve feel uneasy that it might get difficult to get a hand at T’Challa when needed. Sure, T’Challa had also other things on his mind, but the importance of their situation was undeniable. It was important for Bucky’s safety and for Wakanda. It was unfortunate that Steve didn’t know T’Challa enough to know what to expect for him. Was he going to seek him out? Or was Steve supposed to go to him? Which wasn’t easy to do without… disrespecting T’Challa’s own rules.

“I see, I know that T’Challa is very busy, but you can be assured that I’m not deliberately wasting his time. It’s important. Could you… inform him about that?”

“The king…” Now there was a sharp edge about that word. “… is always informed about everything that happens in his palace and his country.”

Steve had no idea if her distanced way of speaking was required because of some courtesy rules which might be in place here. Or if she just wasn’t too glad about her duty to escort him to the lab and back. Granted, it wasn’t the most exciting task and she had to wait outside until Steve was done with staring at Bucky, wishing one of the scientists might burst in and tell him that they had found a way to clear Bucky’s head.
By now they had arrived at the swing doors to their private wing, once again without meeting a single soul. Glancing at Okoye Steve smiled slightly. “Thank you for dropping me off.”

There was no response, she just looked at him expectantly and Steve sighed softly. While walking through the door and closing it behind him Steve realised once again how little he knew about the country he was staying in. Habits, traditions, culture, etc. He was unable to tell if Okoye was annoyed by walking him around or if she was supposed to act distanced around him. That was another thing Steve should probably look into.

It wasn’t just him, he was sure of that. Having missed 70 years of world history made it hard to catch up to all cultural and political changes and back in the 40s Steve hadn’t even heard of Wakanda. From what he knew now Wakanda had isolated itself from the rest of the world for a very long time, so he wasn’t the only person who lacked proper knowledge about Wakandan culture or traditions. To be honest, Steve didn’t even know where the country was exactly located. Somewhere in East Africa and that’s about it. How many miles away from the United States? From New York City?

Leaning back against the wall Steve started wondering. Had Tony received his letter yet? How fast could it even be delivered from Wakanda’s capital to New York? If it had arrived at the compound, had Tony already read it? There was no guarantee that Tony was indeed at the compound and Steve regretted that he hadn’t sent another copy to the Avengers Tower. Or to Stark Industries.

Steve had sent it only yesterday, so it was unlikely that Tony was already holding it in his hands. Sliding his hand into the pocket of his jeans Steve wrapped his fingers around the cell phone, hoping that it would start ringing this very moment. There was still a chance to work out everything that had gone wrong between the two of them. Steve knew that Tony wanted only the best for the Avengers in his very own way, so not everything was lost. Now that Steve had reached out for Tony they could hopefully talk about this and work out a solution.

After all Tony had realised that they had done nothing wrong. Steve was fully aware that Ross must have contacted him when he had heard about the security breach at the Raft. Who else to bring them back but Tony? He was the only person who got the equipment and the ability, also he was a supporter of the accords. Ross must have called him. Tony hadn’t shown up, he had turned a blind eye to them and Steve wasn’t sure if this was Tony’s way of admitting that he had been wrong or if he was just helping them because they were friends.

They had always been friends. Yes, Steve had made an unforgiveable mistake. By not telling Tony about his parents Steve had made things excessively worse than they could have been. There would have been time for them to talk about it, they would have been in a safe place. Tony would have learned it from a friend, some place where he would have been at ease, at home or at the compound. Bucky would not have been around and Tony wouldn’t have had to witness his parents’ death.

Then Steve would have been able to explain it and things would have been different. Maybe Tony would have understood. Steve had tried to protect him and he had failed miserably, endangering Bucky at the same time. It had been wrong of Tony to attack him, somebody as intelligent as Tony should have known that it hadn’t actually been Bucky…

Nonetheless Zemo’s scheme would have never come to fruition if Steve had told Tony two years ago… or would the results have been the same? Would have Tony reacted the same way? Unlikely, but now it was impossible to ever find out…

They were going to work this out. Steve had sent Tony the letter and had let him know that Steve wasn’t holding a grudge because of the Accords or the Raft. It had been hard enough for Steve to let go of that. After he had seen in what kind of conditions they had kept Wanda. Like a crazy person… or rather like an animal. Tied up with that collar around her neck…
Shaking his head Steve tried to discard of that thought. Yes, he knew that Tony hadn’t put them there personally, but there was no denying that he had signed the very Accords who had made that possible. His friends being imprisoned when they had been trying to save an innocent man and to eliminate the threat of more Winter Soldiers. The mere thought of the unfairness made Steve grit his teeth. It wasn’t like he hadn’t seen it coming the second Ross had placed the Accords in front of them. Yet knowing something and feeling it happen were two different things.

Another thing that they would have to fix and they could do that together. If Steve only knew if Tony had received his letter yet…

There was no point in thinking about it all the time, Tony would call him and then Steve would know for sure and they could leave this mess behind them.

Pushing himself off the wall Steve didn’t feel like returning to his own room, there he’d be alone and thoughts of Bucky would haunt him. Instead Steve walked towards the room they used together as a common space to hang out. He would have liked all of them to be there, so Steve could get some distraction, but there was only Scott. To see him was making Steve somewhat uncomfortable. Sam had told him about what was going with Scott’s ex-wife and his girlfriend. It was a shame that Scott was rewarded like this for his loyalty and bravery. Sure, it looked bad when the media was only mentioning your name while telling the rest of the world how you escaped from prison.

Should have Steve let them in there? Good people who had done the right thing didn’t deserve to be treated like this. Steve hadn’t been able to stand by while they had been torturing Wanda with that collar and the straight-jacket. Nevertheless he was sorry for what had happened to Scott in the aftermath. Everything had to happen so fast, there had been barely any time. There had been no possibility for him to warn his family or to personally explain the situation to them. Things would have worked out differently…

They hadn’t had the time because of the Accords and Tony’s relentlessness…

It wasn’t Steve’s fault, yet he felt like he could have done more. “Hey Scott…”

“Hello Captain.”

There was this strange goofiness to Scott that Steve found amusing. That bright, somewhat foolish smile that betrayed the vast intelligence of the man in front of him. Steve didn’t think that he and Scott could hang out 24/7 together, because then Steve could definitely get annoyed or overwhelmed by that energy and urge to talk non-stop. Somewhat familiar to Tony…

“What are you doing? How’s the Wakandan programme?” Steve nodded towards the television and Scott shook his head. “No, I’m watching CNN. They’re broadcasting Hope’s press conference.”

Hope… that was his girlfriend if Steve remembered right. “Uhm, why would she give a press conference?”

For some reason Steve’s question caused Scott to frown. “Hope is the CEO of Pym Technologies. Hank Pym built the Ant-Man suit. They’ll want to talk about that. After what Hope said to me… I’m pretty sure that she’s going to make clear that they had nothing to do with… you know… me trashing the airport…” Scott’s tone was unfamiliarly sheepish and it caused Steve to raise an eyebrow. “But Hank Pym gave you the suit.”

“Kind of… it’s complicated. Hope is anything but thrilled about how I handled things. She… She’s probably going to tell the whole world anyway in about five minutes… If you want to hang around?”
Why not? Steve had been ignoring the media for some days now and maybe it would be for the best to start looking into it. This woman was Scott’s girlfriend, it couldn’t be as bad as… other media outlets. At least Steve was hoping that.

“Okay…”

Settling down on the couch Steve turned to the television and his timing seemed to be marvellous, since the conference was just about to start. Nothing special so far. A white room full of journalists. A speaker’s desk right in front of them. A woman in her early thirties was walking up to it, wearing a black pantsuit and her elegant steps reminded Steve of Pepper.

“That’s Hope…” Scott mumbled next to him and Steve could hear in his voice that he was dreading this. It couldn’t be that bad after all. This woman cared for him…

Taking her stand behind the desk she got right to it, not even clearing her throat. “Thank you very much for coming here on such a short notice. I appreciate it. First of all I want to make perfectly clear that I am speaking on behalf of Pym Technologies. Also be assured that every word I am going to say reflects my personal opinion and beliefs.”

Judging by the look on her face Steve thought that she probably wasn’t smiling a lot, which was strange if she was in a relationship with such a funny guy.

“As the public knows Scott Lang, also known as the Ant-Man, has joined forces with Captain America and supported him in the clash between the Avengers in Leipzig, Germany. The German Government released surveillance footage of the Leipzig airport that showed fractions of the Avengers fighting each other, led by Tony Stark’s Iron Man and Captain America. The footage also revealed some of the powers and abilities of the Ant-Man suit, created by my father Hank Pym. Scott Lang used the shrinking and enlarging powers to cause massive damage to some of the buildings belonging to the airport and to several planes of the Lufthansa airline. I hereby declare that Pym Technology does in no way support or approve the actions Scott Lang has used our technology for. Further I want to ensure the German government that we are going to bear the damage that has been done to their public property. I offer my sincerest apologies for what cause our technology was used on German soil and I can only hope that the German people will come to accept it.”

Right, the airport… it wasn’t like Steve wasn’t sorry for the damage they had caused, but Tony’s team had left them no choice. Also, nobody had been hurt. Things could be repaired and re-build, human lives couldn’t. It had been Bucky’s life on the line…

“The suit Scott Lang was using while fighting the part of the Avenger, who were acting according to international law, do in no way belong to Scott Lang, but is the property of my father. It was handed over Scott Lang, because my father trusted him to do something good with it, to help people. My father and me got to know Scott Lang as an intelligent man with a good heart who could be trusted with such a task. I am deeply saddened by the fact both, my father and I, have been wrong.”

Steve glanced at Scott and he could see the instant effect of these words. They were hurting him which they shouldn’t. Hope had been right with her first impression of Scott, he was a good man with a good heart. He had been instantly there to help Steve and his friends, no hesitation and he had been willing to take the risk. That had been more than enough to gain Steve’s trust. It had been selfless and it saddened Steve that Hope wasn’t able to see that.

“Steve Rogers, also known as Captain America, called Scott Lang and asked for his support. Without asking why or against whom Steve Rogers needed his support Scott Lang decided to join forces with him and took the suit with him. The result was the fight at the Leipzig airport. I know for a fact that Scott Lang didn’t ask any questions about Steve Rogers’ intentions, because he told me so.
Two days ago I received a call from Scott Lang. Please, don’t interrupt me, I will give you all the information about how this happened right now. Scott Lang called me to let me know that he is alright. He wouldn’t tell me where he is, because the first thing I said to him was that I wanted him to turn himself in. He couldn’t understand why I would want that and when he couldn’t tell me a single reason why he left behind his family and went with Captain America to break the law, I ended the call. I will gladly repeat myself, I don’t know where Scott Lang is and if I knew I would instantly report his whereabouts to the law enforcement. I have already given the police every bit of information I have on this.”

This was indeed heart-breaking. It had been enough for Scott to go through that conversation one single time, he hadn’t even wanted to tell them about it. Now Hope was sharing it with the entire world and unfortunately she didn’t get it right. Scott had come with Steve to save the world from an immense threat, the Winter Soldiers. The law had tried to stop them from doing that and there had been no time to work something out. Not with Tony and the others there. Scott had been a vital part for them to get away, to have a chance to stop Zemo from what he had wanted to do.

What they had thought he wanted to do…

“The Ant-Man suit is still in Scott Lang’s hands, he took it with him when he and Captain America’s team fled from the prison he had been transferred to. I can’t make it clear enough that my father, creator of the Ant-Man suit, would have never handed it over to Scott Lang if he had known what cause he would use it for. Unfortunately we had no idea what he was about to do, because Scott Lang left the second Captain America called him. Without asking questions or telling anybody where he was going. If we had known we would have done everything in our power to stop him from doing so. The Ant-Man suit is the property of my father and Scott Lang has forfeited his right to use it. The suit and all other devices of Pym Technology Scott Lang has taken with him are stolen goods and it pains me to see my father’s work being used for the destruction of public and state property and to hurt people who were trying to carry out the law. Therefore I offer my apologies to the people whose lives were put in danger, because Scott Lang thought he could use technology that wasn’t his against them.”

That caused Steve to raise an eyebrow. The airport had been evacuated, nobody had been there. Nobody had been… When the thought finally came to his mind Steve felt like somebody had rammed an icy blade into his stomach.

Rhodes…

Steve hadn’t known until he had got them out of the Raft. Sam had told him, ridden by guilt and self-loathing. They had sat down and talked about it, eventually Steve had told him that it hadn’t been Sam’s fault. First of all it hadn’t been him who had actually hit Rhodes. Not that it was Vision’s fault either… It had been a battle and sometimes… things went wrong. A horrible thought, it definitely shouldn’t be that way and Rhodes deserved so much better. To say that ‘Things like this happen’ wasn’t enough, Steve knew that. The battle could have been avoided altogether, this was the real problem. Without the accords and without Tony standing up for them… nobody would have been at the airport.

Steve was sorry for what happened to Rhodes and he should be ashamed for almost forgetting about it, but his injury had been the consequence of unfortunate circumstances and… the accords.

Yet Hope was talking about people who had been injured… whose life had been put in danger… who was she talking about?

She answered Steve’s silent question a second later. “Tony Stark. The Vision. T’Challa, King of Wakanda. The unidentified man known as Spider-Man. Most of all Lieutenant Colonel James
Rhodes. I feel deeply sorry for what happened to you in this fight and I am praying for your recovery. I am terribly ashamed that Pym technology was involved in this fight and led up to your injury…”

None of them had been hurt, they hadn’t been in danger. It had been them, Steve wouldn’t have allowed them to be hurt. Swallowing softly Steve realised that there was no mentioning of Natasha. She had turned her back on Tony during that fight and now the accords would be after her too. He could only hope that she was alright.

“As somebody in the inner circle of one of the criminals on the run, I see it as my duty to inform the public of what I know. It is not much, but since Captain America’s team has claimed to be acting in the name of the people, it’s my opinion that the people should know how these acts look like. Scott Lang stole technology that isn’t his own and used it against a group of people who were trying to apprehend a dangerous fugitive. Like everybody else I have heard Captain America’s statement that Mr. Barnes is not to blame for the Vienna bombings, but at this point nobody knew that. Also it doesn’t change the fact that Mr. Barnes, with the help of Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson, fled from the police in Bucharest, using brutal force. Six innocent civilians died in the tunnel that collapsed, because Captain Rogers and Sam Wilson supported the Winter Soldier’s attempt to flee by using their special abilities without any consideration of the people around them… Magdalena Stan. Luminita Matei. Andrei Ciobanu. Vitalie Popa. Gabriel Dumitru. Marius Radu. Countless others were hurt, some still fighting for their life.”

She paused and Steve lowered his eyes. Another thing he hadn’t wanted to happen. Again – they hadn’t had any time. Steve would have done thing differently, but they had arrived two minutes after him, ready to kill Bucky. What had he been supposed to do? They had chased them out of the building and then… there had been T’Challa… they wouldn’t have been in the tunnel if not…

“I know that there is still a great sentiment of sympathy for Captain America who has been idolized for decades. Hereby I want to encourage everybody who has any kind of information on his whereabouts to share them with the police. Scott Lang is a father of a lovely daughter. After being released from prison he desperately fought to be able to see her and promised her and her mother to become a better person, to be a responsible father. The very second Steve Rogers called for him Scott Lang dropped everything and left. He had never met Steve Rogers before, they had never shared words. Steve Rogers needed a soldier and Scott Lang was willing to follow him without knowing why, what for, against whom and what he would have to do.”

That wasn’t true. Steve had told Clint to brief Scott, he had known that their mission that been more important than the Accords. A stupid law that would be abolished eventually, because it didn’t work. Because it was made to oppress, not to help.

“Captain Rogers wanted to lead his own team without any kind of oversight, so he could decide for himself what to do and where to go. They decided to go to Germany and destroy an airport and hundreds of cars that belonged to civilians. What for? To help a wanted fugitive to avoid his capture. Against whom? The Avengers, operating under the law. You have seen the video footage, clear attempts to negotiate were made by Tony Stark and instantly dismissed by Steve Rogers. What did Scott Lang have to do? Destroy public property of the German people and endanger the lives of people how were trying to apprehend criminals. Steve Rogers… is dangerous. He didn’t need to give any reason, any explanation. His word and name were enough for Scott Lang to follow him. Yes, it’s also Scott Lang’s fault for… but I fear how much more people could decide that Steve Rogers’ word means more than international law – established by the elected governments of democratic nations. Which aren’t considered trustworthy by Steve Rogers.”

Why was there no talk of the accords and how they were supposed to decide where they could or
could not go regardless of who was in need or how fast they would had to act? No, Steve didn’t trust big, faceless organisations, because he had made that mistake before. SHIELD had been Hydra all along and if SHIELD could be infiltrated, everybody could. Especially something so big and impersonal like the United Nations. Who could vouch for whatever another person in there was doing? A broad number of politicians would rather bomb or blow up a country than negotiate? How long until they would have sent them to conquer another nation? Or to do crimes? Like Ross…

“The last thing I want to address is a more personal matter. Pym Technology still possesses the technology of the Ant-Man suit and we are going to use it in every way we can to stop Scott Lang from doing any more damage with the suit he has stolen. Pym Technology has already reached out to Stark Industries to collaborate on this matter.”

What? Wasn’t the government enough? Tony wouldn’t… Tony had let them get out, he wouldn’t go after them.

“I am already in talks with the CEO Pepper Potts who accepted my proposal to cooperate. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. The conference is over.”

No, this wasn’t going to work. Tony probably hadn’t received his letter yet, but he would… and then he’d know that the door was still open. That Steve wanted to talk, that Steve missed him.

It happened very fast, Hope turned around to leave, but one of the journalists shouted a question which got picked up by the microphones. “Have you any idea where your boyfriend is hiding?”

Out of the corner of an eye Steve could see Scott wince.

Hope instantly turned around, the look in her eyes was cold. “Scott Lang is not my boyfriend. He ended our romantic relationship when he left his family and loved ones without a second glance for the sole purpose of becoming a fugitive. He hadn’t even considered this, so when he called me I let him know that that our relationship is over. I can’t be with a person who puts the word of somebody he doesn’t know above the people and responsibilities in his life.”

Another thing that should have never been said in public and Steve immediately reached out to touch Scott’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, but she doesn’t know what hap—“

“Could you just…” Shrugging him off Scott stood up. “I just… need a second and… I’d like to be alone.”

Nodding Steve muttered a soft “Of course” and watched Scott leaving the room. He hoped that he would be okay. It didn’t look like they were going to catch a break soon.

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“Thanks Friday, that’s enough. Put on some 80s movie… I need some background noise…”

Pulling the blanket up to his chin Tony shifted as slowly as he could, but he instantly felt the strain and gritted his teeth.

“Boss?” The picture of Hope van Dyne walking off was replaced by the starting credits of Demolition Man. Yeah, that could work, loud enough for Tony to fall asleep. “I’m alright… just a few bruises…”

“Miss van Dyne kept word, she delivered the blue prints of the Wasp suit to Miss Potts who has already uploaded them to your private server. Would you like to take a look them?”
“No.”

“But Boss, they are…”

“I said no. I’m tired.” It was more than just a feeling of fatigue. Tony felt crushed and he just wanted to sleep. To stare at the movie screen long enough until his eyes would fall closed. With a shitload of luck he would be instantly asleep and there would be no time for his thoughts to catch up with him. Just one night of sleep. Without images to haunt him, the sound of pleading in his ears and then…

Tony’s hand came up, rubbing the skin over his heart.

One night of sleep, then he’d feel better. One night without waking up and desperately reaching for the arc-reactor.
Hey there,

Today we're going to deal with something that I consider a plothole in the movie, something that never made sense to me. Oddly enough it's also a point that most of Team Cap supporters use to call the Accords bad and abusive (Yeah, it has to do with Thunderbolt Ross)

Also we're going to look at Natasha... ;)

Attention - the character called "Ross" in this chapter Everett Ross (Martin Freeman), not Thunderbolt. Just to avoid confusion ;)

Now let's go to Wakanda :D

Have fun and tell me what you think

P.S - Wakandan geography is a bitch, I took some liberties

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Back in the days Natasha had got a glimpse of a mission report. It had had nothing to do with her, but she remembered the essential idea. Getting a spy into Wakanda. A country so cut off from the rest of the world and yet everybody in the government knew that this little state possessed technology that was far superior than what they themselves had to offer. The mission had been to obtain information and to steal whatever could help them to catch up to Wakanda’s level.

A complete failure. Of course.

Not a single agent even made it across the border. Nothing happened to them, they just went home and had to tell SHIELD that they hadn’t even set a foot into the country they had been supposed to spy on.

Natasha had never bothered to learn details about it, she had had other things on her plate. Now a deeper look into those files would have been very helpful. Then again – information on Wakanda was so limited, the reports probably wouldn’t have been able to tell her something useful.

This was another time that Natasha would rely on the one thing that also got her out of difficult situations. Her instinct. Not the first time she was doing something like this and it wasn’t going to be the last time either. She had been on missions in North Korea, more than once. So the concept of what she was going to do wasn’t new to her. It was undeniable though that she had had the help of SHIELD back then. Natasha hadn’t been in a car, alone, observing the border post for two days now. After various changes of her position and lurking in the shadows Natasha hadn’t seen a single vehicle passing the border. Not surprising and not helpful.

Time was working against Natasha and she felt the pressure rising every day. Two of her bank accounts had been barred which meant she couldn’t use the money, nor the names she had used to create the accounts. If somebody (Tony) had found them, they were perfectly able to find the others.
There were other ways to get by and Natasha knew how to create a new persona, but this took time and without money at her immediate disposal, it would take even longer. Being in Sudan didn’t make this an easier task.

Her next steps were quite simple.

- Crossing the border without being seen and without attracting any attention
- Making her way to the Capital and to the royal palace

Simple, not easy. To disappear in the masses was one of Natasha’s fields of expertise. Unfortunately it didn’t play in her favour that she was supposed to blend into the population of a country that she knew nothing about. Apart from the obvious fact that she had the wrong skin colour.

Glancing at the satellite images in her hands Natasha once again went through her options. Birnin Zana was about 150 miles away from the border, a distance she couldn’t cover by foot in an unknown country. Getting over the border with the car? Downright impossible. One phone call would be enough to settle the whole affair. She would let Steve know where she was and she would have the possibility to talk to T’Challa.

Her chances were good that something similar would happen if she tried to cross the border. Unfortunately Natasha didn’t have any guarantee that it would go down this way. The last thing she could afford was any kind of attention. If she was seen close to Wakandan borders people would put two and two together and it would become common knowledge that her friends were hiding here. Natasha wasn’t going to risk that.

What she needed was a closer look at one of the guards. Routines, behaviour… a vehicle that she could steal. Maybe it was time to look at a page from Steve’s book.

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With darkness as her ally Natasha checked the softly illuminated display of her watch. 2:32. The border was highly secured and barely visited. No matter how important your duty was, if it was dull – you weren’t able to keep your attention at a permanent high level. From the different points she had been watching the border post Natasha had been able to make out enough to choose a time and a place. It bugged her that she didn’t have more information to go on, to cross the North Korean border they had had over two months of preparation. Natasha has had four days now.

By now staying was just as dangerous as just trying to cross the border. Natasha had checked her gear three times, she knew where she would go. Looking through her binoculars Natasha could see that everything was calm and once again she lamented the fact that she couldn’t enter Wakanda somewhere far away from the post. There would be no back-up for her on the other side and thanks to the satellite images Natasha knew that she would have to cover a large distance before reaching the next city. She needed a vehicle and this was the only place where she could get one. A few days ago she had played the thought of hiding in a car, but nobody seemed to be moving here. Relief was probably still days away.

2:35

Nobody was to be seen and that was the sign to start. Moving with the shadows Natasha pulled the little chip from her suit and threw it with impeccable aim. The electric impulse wouldn’t give her more time than 30 seconds, but she would make most of it. They would definitely do everything they could to find out why their cameras were acting up and that element of surprise was all Natasha needed. If she was acting too slowly they would be warned and looking out for her…
While using her grapple gun Natasha proved once again perfect aim and now there was no turning back. The wall was about 8 feet high and with the help of the rope Natasha needed about three seconds to climb to the top. From there she risked a glance to the post, but there was no movement behind the windows. It couldn’t be that easy, Natasha was prepared for upcoming inconveniences.

Jumping to the ground Natasha moved along the wall, using the darkness to her advantage. Around the house, straight for one of the cars. Stopping next to one of the windows Natasha took a second, evened out her heartbeat and risked a glance. No control room, just a hallway. Natasha slipped around the corner and faced the parking lot. Three cars. She would have to disable the other two before disappearing with the last one.

Unfortunately she would have to take care of whoever was trying to sneak up on her first. It was always hard to give up a plan, but Natasha was good at adapting to any kind of situation. Nevertheless she would have loved to be a few miles away before attracting that kind of attention.

Sliding on hand down to the holster of her gun Natasha turned around and while doing that she could fell the soft puff of air. So this wasn’t going to be a gunfight. Thanks to her reflexes Natasha managed to block the first punch and within the same second her attacker delivered the next one.

Female. Early twenties. Highly trained.

Natasha didn’t get a chance to make use of her gun, it had been a long time that somebody had been able to keep up with her fighting style. Usually it was Natasha who was calling the shots, but at the moment she was merely reactivity. Dodging kicks and punches, only every now and then getting the possibility to attack herself.

Unidentifiable martial arts background. Similarities to Pakistani training. Notable coordination and strength. No use of weapons. Wakandan special forces?

Natasha heard the third person move behind her, but she couldn’t do anything about it, because the woman she was fighting with didn’t miss a second and used a deliberate kick against Natasha’s ankle to make her stumble. Instantly an arm slid around her throat from behind, but Natasha rammed her elbow into the stomach of the woman behind her.

Two against one.

She’s had worse…

Second female. Early thirties. Stronger than the other one. Not quite as fast. Incredibly well trained.

Normally Natasha would think three steps ahead, even during combat. Now it was hardly possible. These two women had probably trained and worked longer together than everybody Natasha had ever met. She and Clint were a perfect and deadly duo, knowing each other’s styles and moves perfectly. These two were acting in perfect unison without the need to look at each other. No little signs to let the other know what would happen next. They couldn’t just be reacting to each other.

For every hit that Natasha actually landed she received three in return. She could take them down, she knew that, but she didn’t have the time and no guarantee that there weren’t more of them. Flight was the option, but she would need to do enough damage to have an opportunity to get away. Attention was already on her, no point in disabling the cars anymore. If she…

“Ladies, you’ve had enough fun. Stop playing around.”

A third woman. To her left, behind her. Natasha had to…
The force of the punch was so abrupt and uncontained, Natasha’s head was brutally thrown back. A sudden and sharp pain spread just beneath her skin, her right ear was ringing. A kick into her stomach quickly distracted her from the initial pain and her vision became blurry when the back of her head connected with the hard floor.

“You are trespassing, Miss Romanoff.”

Blinking Natasha stared up at the two stern faces looking down at her. The realisation came quick and bitter. They had been playing around with her. Fighting at a level superior to almost every agent she had ever encountered and they had been holding back.

Swallowing a bit of blood, she must have bit her own tongue, Natasha changed her strategy. Punching her way out of this wasn’t going to work. Women with such combat training, they had to be linked the King. This wasn’t how Natasha had wanted to meet him, not without Steve’s support. After all, their last encounter hadn’t gone over well. She had used her bites on him. Sure, by now T’Challa had learned the truth about Barnes’ innocence, so there was a good chance she could talk her way out of this. Eventually they had both chosen the same side.

Natasha was grabbed by her arms and roughly pulled to her feet. This time she didn’t put up a fight, because there was no way this scenario wouldn’t end up with her and the King in one room.

They dragged her into the building and Natasha was tossed onto a chair.

Two doors. One leading directly outside. One window. Faint smell of cigarettes in the room. No ashtray. Two desks. Five screens. All of them black.

Casually Natasha straightened up and wiped the blood off her lip with the back of her hand.

“Wakandan hospitality, I guess.”

One of them made half a step forward, a snarl dominating her face. “You entered this nation without permission. A federal crime.”

Three, but definitely not equals. The one in the middle was calling the shots, the body language of the two other ones made that clear enough.

While Natasha was still watching them they were repositioning, one of them in front of each door, the leader was looking at her with obvious contempt. Nothing that Natasha hadn’t dealt with before and she wasn’t the one she had to convince.

“If I broke the law, I am more than willing to face the highest justice.”

The lines on her forehead got deeper, only ever so slightly showing how that Natasha had hit a nerve. Loyal to the king. Personal service?

“No don’t make the mistake to think yourself important enough of the King’s time. If he should only glance into the direction of somebody who tries to violate our borders, then because he is well aware of his duties. Not because of the individual who disrespects our laws.”

A bluff, Natasha could hear it in her inflections, calm enough but still angry that her king actually would take the time to talk to her. They both knew that.

“So what’s going to happen then? We’re going to sit here and talk about what I did wrong?”

The left hand of the woman to Natasha’s left was twitching, the one to the right subconsciously raised her chin, trying to make herself look taller. Threatening. This was personal.
“It is not surprising that you do not see the implications of what you have done. As nobody who has never experienced something worse than a slap on the wrist as consequence to her actions…”

Natasha knew better than letting his get to her. It wasn’t like she had never heard people judging her although they didn’t know a single thing about her. She wouldn’t want it any other way, information was vital.

“You will be silent now and you will wait.”

Not the most creative strategy, to let her wait to try to weaken her resolve.

She wasn’t quite sure if they expected her to make an attempt to get away. If that was the case, they were going to be disappointed. Natasha crossed her legs and her arms, meeting the glare of the leader without any hesitation. Staying silent seemed to be an easy task for all four of them.

The actual waiting time couldn’t be more than 40 minutes.

39…

When T’Challa entered the room the three women didn’t miss a second to bow their heads in acknowledgement, but their eyes didn’t leave Natasha. They had their priorities. So did Natasha.

Standing up slowly Natasha offered a polite smile. “Your highness.”

T’Challa’s stern face didn’t change the slightest and Natasha knew that her bites had left an impression. “Miss Romanoff.”

“I am sorry we have to meet again under such… unpleasant circumstances.”

“I am sure you are.” T’Challa replied drily and Natasha knew that he was going to make her work for it. “Let’s not endure in these unpleasant circumstances any longer than necessary. You will be escorted to the nearest airport and you will get on a plane and it will bring you to a destination of your choice.”

That was startling. There was nothing Natasha appreciated less than surprises and this was one of them. No, she hadn’t expected open arms, but she had been sure that there would be a conversation.

“Your highness, I’ve already reached my destination of choice. I came here to have the possibility to talk to you.”

“You wished to talk to me. So you’ve entered my country without permission and in secrecy, although I would have been informed of your presence immediately if you had simply used the legal way…” T’Challa trailed off, his eyes not leaving her face and Natasha was well aware of the fact that every single movement she made was observed by his guards.

Fine, he wasn’t going to back off, Natasha knew just want to say. “The fact that you’re keeping the presence of Team Captain America in your nation a secret made me believe that it might be better to not attract any kind of attention. I figured this was the safest way without being seen by the Sudanese border guards.”

One of the guards huffed, but T’Challa ignored it. “I see. You’ve acted in the interest of Wakanda.”

“I did what I thought was the best for every party involved, I apologize if I disrespected the laws of your country. Due to the current… state of my persona I figured it might be best to not be seen at all.”
“Interesting. Do you wish to hear my assumption why you tried to enter my country without anybody knowing?”

Natasha remained silent and T’Challa continued. “You were very aware of the fact that you wouldn’t be allowed to enter the country if you showed your face. So you decided to pass the border illegally and to head towards Birnin Zana. There you would have probably made your presence known. You were counting on Steve Rogers’ support. I understand, the Captain would object strongly to me sending you away. You thought your chances to stay would be better if you had him on your side, since I’ve already granted him sanctuary.”

“Steve has nothing to do with…”

“Miss Romanoff, I have to listen to so many lies every single day. I’m not interested in hearing some more. Even from such a talented liar as yourself. Your actions had nothing to do with you looking out for my or Wakanda’s interests. You were looking out for yourself. Your past has shown that this is the thing you do best.”

Natasha had known that she was burning all her bridges when she had used her bites on T’Challa, letting Barnes and Steve get away. T’Challa was a smart man, he knew now about Barnes’ innocence and he knew that Natasha had stopped him from hurting or killing an innocent man for a crime that he had never committed. Now was the time to remind him of that, it would help to be more forgiving for the pain Natasha had caused him. “Your highness… I should have immediately apologized for attacking you at the airport. I am sorry for hurting you.”

One of the guards was sliding her hand behind her back and Natasha ready to pull her own gun at any time. “But I had to make a quick decision and we both know I made the right one. To stop the fighting and to save an innocent man’s life. I trusted Steve’s word and I am content to see that I made the right choice. We are on the same side.”

It wasn’t enough. Natasha knew it the second the last word had passed her lips. She wondered what kind of education T’Challa had gone through as a child. As a future king. His face was hard to read and only now his eyes were giving something away. Their expression wasn’t that different from the ones of his guards.

T’Challa hated her.

Nonetheless his response was slowly, calm, dignified. Talking like a diplomat. “I do not know whose side you are on, Miss Romanoff. I do know that you are changing them way too frequently. You change them when it suits your purpose and…”

“Your highness, I…”

“Do not interrupt the King.” A voice that had turned into a sizzling sound and the leader looked ready to cut Natasha’s throat.

T’Challa took no notice of it. “Maybe you think that I am displeased by your presence, because you used your gadgets on me. People are residing at my court who have used more excessive violence against me. They showed their loyalty in doing that. I may or may not like their reasoning, but I could see their dedication to support their friends, the side they had chosen. I have wondered… why did you bring me to this fight? You claimed that you needed help to apprehend the Captain and his friend. Yet you let them go. Did you spontaneously decide to switch sides? Because if so… you willingly jeopardized my life and the life of the young man fighting along Tony Stark. We would not have been their without you. Why? Did you still have the intention to apprehend them? Or were already planning on letting them go? If so, did you involve us for your own amusement? Is a fight
more fun if it gets more dangerous? If it puts more people at risk?"

None of them were moving and nevertheless Natasha could feel them closing in on her. All three of them were ready to jump, to defend their king for something that had already happened.

Natasha shivered, but they wouldn’t see it.

Information was vital and she had barely anything to go on. She had considered the possibility of being thrown in prison or being chased away. It had never crossed her mind that someone in Wakanda would be out for her blood. Steve and the others were here, T’Challa had forgiven them, trying to make up for his mistake.

The atmosphere didn’t leave room for much doubt, they wouldn’t bat an eyelid. All it needed was a single gesture from T’Challa and they would kill her. Having let her keep her weapons didn’t mean anything. It was a sign of confidence.

T’Challa was a reasonable man, so she had to appeal to him with logic. “Nobody was going to get hurt. We were not fighting terrorists, Hydra or an evil robot. We were going to have a talk with Steve Rogers. Captain America, a war hero and a friend. It wasn’t possible to predict that the situation would escalate.”

“So you brought us for a talk and lied to me beforehand.”

“No, my decision to let Cap go was made during the fight. His determination and refusal made me realise that I made a mistake. I trust him and I came to the conclusion that they wouldn’t stop fighting. I let them go, I chose Steve, because I trust him and it turned out that he was right about Barnes and the threat in Siberia.”

No visible reaction, he merely kept looking at her. “You chose a side, that’s right… after having already chosen one. You signed the accords, you sat down with Tony Stark and made plans with him, went to a fight with him and then you betrayed him. Don’t pretend otherwise. You are here, because you know it was betrayal, you fled the consequences. You are right, I took in the Captain and his friends. Because I owe a man a debt. I owe you nothing. I am King of Wakanda, it’s my duty to protect my country. You proved yourself untrustworthy and disloyal. Did you really believe I would tolerate a person at my court who just betrayed her closest ally? I will not endanger Wakanda by granting a person sanctuary who probably wouldn’t hesitate to repay my kindness with treason. No, Miss Romanoff. You will name a city, a country and a plane will bring you there. Believe me, I would gladly hand you over to the authorities, but I can’t without drawing attention to you and therefore to Wakanda. You will go somewhere else and if you ever come close to these borders again – the Midnight Angels will be waiting for you.”

Natasha’s eyes darted from T’Challa to the three women and all of them were smiling. Almost teasing her to come back, so they could act on their contempt for her.

“Your highness, that’s…”

“Goodbye, Miss Romanoff.”

No time to compromise or put up another act, he had made up his mind before even entering this room and now he was turning around walked out. Leaving Natasha without a plan B. She would come up with one, eventually, but now, for the first time in years, she did not quite know what to do.

With the king gone all three of them stepped forward. “Move or you will be moved.”

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The pile of files on his desk just wouldn’t get smaller. Three assistants and still that much shit ended up on his desk. How was that even possible? Reports over reports, indices over indices which would all lead nowhere, but somebody had to look into them right? The high bosses were going crazy over this. When the president used expressions like “How the fuck could this happen?! You are supposed to be an anti-terrorism unit! You are not supposed to supply them with fucking weapons!” then you knew you were in trouble.

Pepper Potts had been right, it hadn’t taken long for the news stations to figure out that Wilson and Rogers shouldn’t have had their gear. Fox News out of all people had been first to point out that the shield and the EXO-7 Falcon should have been in the hands of the authorities after they had been captured in Bucharest. How did they get their hands on it during their escape?

Of course, everybody had come to Everett to give him shit about this. First he let them escape and then he let somebody steal their gear? The president, Secretary Ross… everybody had called and yelled. To be honest, Everett was astonished that he still had a job. Well, they could throw him out tomorrow, who knows. Right now he was still trying to clean this mess up. Which was pretty much impossible, because it was all over the place, all over the world.

Five minutes ago he had had the German secretary of the interior on the phone who had also been trying to rip him a new one. Actually, this one Everett could get behind. First German agents are getting ripped apart by Rogers and Barnes… the minister had been kindly enough to give him the numbers that nobody else knew about. Three men dead. Shattered skull. Pneumothorax, punctured lung. Broken neck. One in a coma. Two who are probably going to suffer the same fate as Colonel Rhodes. The others were luckier and still in bad shape. Anyway, the secretary told him their agents had been torn apart and then the fucking Americans let the terrorists loose on German soil… which resulted in their airport being torn apart. By a man waving a shield with pretty much the American flag on it. Four American citizens and one Sokovian woman who was living in the United States thanks to a special visa.

It would take one hell of a lot of ass kissing to smooth down the relationship between Germany and the US. Sadly it didn’t help that Stark Industries and Pym Technologies were paying for the damages. Sure, the German government had already thanked them, but now it was even more obvious that the US government hadn’t done anything and now they were getting even more bad press. Technically, none of what had happened was their fault, Rogers had broken pretty much every law imaginable, but the rest of the world was starting to point fingers that the US government had enabled the Avengers way too long to do as they pleased. For most of the time they had been an entirely American team anyway… it had this ring to it. Americans doing as the pleased all around the world and the rest of the world clearly didn’t like that.

All of that meant more work for Everett. Finding the terrorists on the run and locking them up. This time without them breaking out five days later. Finding Sharon Carter and locking her up. Saving a little bit of their reputation and proving that the justice system was still intact.

Too bad that Team Cap had vanished from the surface of the earth. They got hints and sightings every day, but none of it seemed legit. It was an annoying mystery. You needed a plane to get to the Raft, a plane needed to start and to land somewhere and yet the entire secret intelligence of the US wasn’t able to figure out where.

“Sir?” Agent Moore was standing in the door, looking terribly rushed and out of breath. Which meant he had been running here, which meant that he had bad news or really good news. Judging by their track record Everett wouldn’t bet one his suits that it was good news.

“Moore, what do you got?”
“We’ve got a confirmed sighting of Sharon Carter!”

Good news. Rogers would be better, but this was finally a piece of information that Everett wouldn’t get yelled at for. “I’m waiting, Moore. Where? When?”

Approaching his desk Moore dropped various screenshots of some security camera. “Train station in Madrid. One hour ago.”

While taking a look at the pictures Everett was already giving orders. Sending way more people than necessary to Spain although they had a big unit already positioned in Madrid. Too many things had happened to take any more risks. If Sharon Carter slipped through their fingers… Well, heads would roll and Everett’s was going to be first. What a shame, he was quite fond of his head.

“We’re still not going to release an arrest warrant for her, sir? The Madrilenian might…”

“No. What Carter did will become public knowledge when we have her in custody and waiting for her trial. Rogers has broken out his friends, chances are good that he’ll try to do the same for her, but this time we’ll be prepared.”

Agent Moore nodded in understanding and Everett got on the phone, the president needed to be informed of the most recent development. This was the only good thing about this chaos, now Everett was reported directly to the president. No more Ross to ruin his day.

After that rather short call Everett hung up and sighed deeply. “A shame… the second CNN is going to talk about her letting Rogers go and supplying him with weapons… it’ll set feminism back about 100 years.”

Moore, still in the room, was raising an eyebrow. “I am afraid I can’t follow.”

Wasn’t that kid watching the news? They were in an election year, for Christ’s sake. “A woman let Rogers go while he was on the run and didn’t report him to the authorities. Even more, she gave him the weapons we had confiscated. Another woman let him go during the fight at the airport. What do you think the right-wing conservatives are going to make of that? Women clearly aren’t fit to do this kind of work, they get infatuated with criminals or are too emotional… They are going to say shit like this and people will listen, because… you can’t argue the fact that two women let him go.”

As if this whole mess hadn’t done already enough damage to the political landscape.

“One the other hand… the White House is going to announce the deposition of Secretary Ross today, so there should be no shortage of news…”

Everett couldn’t deny a little feeling of smug gratification. After Rogers’ rampage across Europe and his stubbornness to stay completely independent in… doing whatever he wanted, he had only proved that the Sokovia Accords were absolutely necessary and overdue. Everett was working for the government for a reason. He believed that a functioning, equal society needed rules to work and to guarantee safety and justice. Everybody was obliged to work within this set of rules. The Sokovia Accords had been set up to make sure that the Avengers weren’t operating outside these rules anymore. They had been set up to make sure that the Avengers were doing what they claimed to be doing all along – working for the people. Evidently only the UN was adapt to be in charge of that.

Too bad that Ross had decided that he could make the Avengers his personal task force…

Everett felt like he was going to develop ulcer thinking about it. Shortly after Leipzig Everett had collapsed on his desk chair, lost in disbelief how this could have happened. His career was over and he was sort of responsible for a mass murderer walking free around Europe… and for a Super human
destroying everything that stood in his way. A glance at his laptop had showed that somebody had sent him a message. A video. Their own security footage from the conference room. Ross having a conversation with Stark and Romanoff.

To cut a long story short – Ross had given Stark 36 hours to apprehend Rogers. He had had no authority to do that. None whatsoever. Stark and Romanoff had signed the Sokovia Accords. The US government didn’t have the means to tell them anything. Only the committee of the UN had this power, composed of several nations, so this exact shit couldn’t happen.

A US secretary pretending to be in charge and using a crew of enhanced humans to his liking. It didn’t matter that the UN would have also sent the Avengers to apprehend Rogers. Actually, they had done that, but that message must have got lost in the mail, because the committee hadn’t set a stupid time limit and hadn’t threatened to kill anyone.

Everett had no idea what Ross had been thinking. He was fucked and there was no way his actions would have gone by unnoticed. They were dealing with the UN, for Christ’s sake. Of course they would realise that an American politician was trying to use the Avengers, pretending that he was somehow related to the Accords. Ross had nothing to do with accords. Another thing what Everett didn’t understand was Romanoff and Stark’s reaction. Judging by the video they had believed him. Why? The US secretary of State didn’t speak for the UN – that should be common knowledge, right?

Ross couldn’t send the Avengers anywhere. What he could do was sending US military and maybe that had been the underlying threat. Which would have been blackmail and the Sokovia Accords protected the Avengers from exactly that. Also it was against US law. Why hadn’t Stark or Romanoff reached out to the UN directly? They would have got help in this matter…

Anyway Everett had sent a copy of the video to the UN Security Council and to the White House. Nobody of them had been thrilled. Ross trying to execute order of the Avenger pretty much violated all the security measures put up by the UN and he was also overstepping his power as Secretary of State. It didn’t have to be mentioned the UN was so incredibly pissed at the US right now… Sure, those had been the actions of one man, but the list of corrupted people in US organisations grew longer and longer and the rest of the world was sick of paying the price for it.

Ross was done and Everett could only hope that they would get their hands on Team Cap soon enough or they would lose all political prestige they had left. The EU had them by the balls anyway…

The ringing of his phone pulled Everett out of his thoughts. “Ross speaking.”

“Sir, you should put on the news. CNN is beating us again.”

Fuck, couldn’t he get a break.

“… until today we’ve barely had any information on the former Avenger Clint Barton, alias Hawkeye. Thanks to today’s issue of the Des Moines Register it is now public knowledge that the man, who supported Captain America in helping the Winter Soldier to flee from his arrest, is actually married and a father of three.”

Everett’s mouth dropped open. How on earth could they know something like that when the entire secret intelligence had no idea? So much about Romanoff releasing all of SHIELD’s files to the world. A family would have been important witnesses and… what was that? Using the remote control Everett froze the screen. They were presenting the summon section of said newspaper. Now that was interesting…
SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF IOWA

COUNTY OF WAYNE COUNTY

Index No. 9467363

Date Summons filed: 5/25/2016

Plaintiff designates Wayne County as the place of trial.

SUMMONS WITH NOTICE

Plaintiff Laura Barton – against - Defendant Clint Barton

ACTION FOR A DIVORCE

To the above named Defendant:

You are hereby summoned to answer the complaint in this action and to serve a copy of your answer, or, if the complaint is not served with this summons, to serve a notice of appearance, on the Plaintiff's attorney within 20 days after the service of this summons, exclusive of the day of service (or within 30 days after the service is complete if this summons is not personally delivered to you within the State of Iowa); and in case of your failure to appear or answer, judgment will be taken against you by default for the relief demanded in the complaint.

NOTICE: The nature of this action is to dissolve the marriage between the parties, on the grounds...

No, Everett couldn’t fault this woman for wanting to get out of this marriage… One had to image that, staying hidden away from the world, because your man was a secret agent and then you had to give that up, because you wanted to file for divorce and that idiot was on the run – no way to deliver the papers. You had to publish in the newspaper then. Everett had to make a few calls, instantly. It was going to be long day.

Chapter End Notes

To avoid confusion - what Laura is doing here is what she was to do legally to get a divorce. If you can't deliver the divorce papers to your partner, because you have no address, don't know where they are or if they are on the run - you have to publish such a statement in the local newspaper (several times actually) only then you can continue with the divorce process.  
I looked up the laws for California and New York and used the text of original documents you need to file for divorce in New York.  
Laura doesn't have another choice if she wants a divorce, since there is no way to deliver the papers to Clint
Hey there,

Big changes in RL going on for me right now. Which probably means slower updates, but you know me... the wait is never going to be long ;)

Today - OC time. Most badass character in this story. Sophie Müller.... and there's also Tony

Have fun :D

Laura Barton was doing the legal thing, a thing she had every right to do. After reading a few articles on the subject Hope could easily understand why she would want to get a divorce, although half of the information was probably made up. This was the legal way, she had to do it and it rubbed Hope the wrong way. At the moment the media was all over this, because, admittedly, it was a good story that got them views and clicks.

It distracted from the real issue though.

From the people who deserved the attention. The news liked to give serial killers catchy names and debated weeks, months, years what made them commit their crimes. Was it this coverage that created even more serial killers? Shouldn’t they be locked away and never be talked about again? Didn’t they deserve to be forgotten?

They never were, books were written about them. Years later people remembered their names. Nobody knew the name of a victim although they were so many more.

No, it wasn’t quite the same, Hope knew that, but she could see strange parallels in those two situations. Turn on the TV, open a newspaper and you hear about how Captain America shouldn’t be a real Captain, the question how Wanda Maximoff had actually gained her powers and how on earth could Sam Wilson have brought the Falcon wings to the airport fight?

All matters that needed to be addressed, but not at the expense of the people who were suffering because of them. They should be the focus and they would be. Pepper Potts and Hope were going to make sure of that.

“Miss van Dyne, I am Alexander Mayrhofer. Pleasure to meet you.”

Hope knew that the man in front of her was closer to 50 than to 40, but his face and athletic figure wouldn’t give it away. “Sehr erfreut Sie kennenzulernen, Herr Mayrhofer.”

The few words already brought a smile to his face. “Sie sprechen Deutsch?”

“Unfortunately not, that was already everything I’m capable of.”
“Your pronunciation was impeccable. I hope you had a pleasant flight?”

“It was a very long flight, but that gave me time to look into your conditions and suggestions.”

“Is there something you’d like to address? We still have time to go through it before the meeting.”

“It’s not me who has to agree with all of this. I’m just here to make sure that these people get the help they deserve and nobody tries to make money through them.”

“We are on the same page, Miss van Dyne.”

Hope was aware of that, otherwise Miss Potts her wouldn’t have chosen him to help them. They weren’t going to make any mistakes that would cause more misery for those already suffering.

During the next five minutes Hope tried to keep her calm. She hadn’t been this nervous before meeting Pepper Potts or before talking to the press about Scott. To some extent that had all been business. Today was something different. She was going to talk to real people who had no interest in numbers, names or who she was working for or what her relationship with Scott was all about. They had been through so much, what should they care about her? For them it was about the ones who got hurt. Who were overshadowed by a woman filing for divorce and a man who used a title that wasn’t rightfully his.

Eventually the door was being opened and Hope instantly got up from her chair, taking a soft breath. The first one to enter the room was the interpreter, Hope had had the chance to talk to him beforehand, a polite young Romanian man. He was followed by two women and a man in their thirties, a man with white hair who had to be about 60 years old and a couple that Hope knew that to be around 50 years old to have a son in his early twenties. They were Marius Radu’s parents.

The interpreter introduced them although it wasn’t necessary, Hope knew exactly who all of them were. Katharina Neubauer was a petite brunette and Hope felt her throat constricting while she was shaking her hand. The German woman’s face was tensed and Hope thought that the slightly swollen skin around her eyes was an indicator that she had only recently stopped crying. Something she shared with Marius Radu’s mother.

All of their expressions were similar. A sadness in their eyes which was almost overwhelming and Hope wouldn’t be able to imagine it if she wasn’t seeing it right now. What was it like to lose a child? To have it brutally ripped from your life, although you swore to yourself to protect it from any harm. Was there any way to come to grips with it? Through religion or time? Hope had no idea and she didn’t dare to make any assumptions. The appearance of the people in front of her made clear that for them life had changed forever. It had darkened and although Hope could believe that it might get better, someday, she felt that at the moment the concept of a silver lining was lost to them.

Just like the idea of heroism. It was so easy to say that the end justifies the means. Kill two persons to save two hundred. Strangely enough the ones proposing such measures were never volunteering for self-sacrifice.

Hope wished that Scott could see their faces. That he could have seen them before going to Leipzig. No, Hope hadn’t met them before and yet she could tell that their movements had become heavy and slow. Dragged to the ground by some burden that couldn’t be lifted off their shoulders.

Trying to free herself from these thoughts Hope sat down when everyone else had done the same. She hadn’t lost anything, she couldn’t afford to get choked-up. Hope was here to help and she was going to do that.
“Thank you all so much for coming here. Especially under these circumstances, I know you have other places to be and other things on your minds that need your attention…”

The look in the blonde woman’s eyes made Hope pause. Sophie Müller was different from the others. Her face was hard and her eyes clear, bright. Where in Katharina’s features Hope had seen sadness and pain, in Sophie’s she could only find determination. Not cold, anything but and with a shocking intensity. For a second it threw Hope off, but then she continued. “Before we talk about the press conference I would like to introduce you to Alexander Mayrhofer. He is a lawyer specialised in supranational law and agreed to offer the help of his law firm to your organisation.”

Another pause to let the interpreter catch up with her and Hope could immediately see how Ioan Ciobanu’s face darkened at the word ‘lawyer’ and Anton Stan raised an eyebrow.

Hope tried not to think about the fact that his daughter had only been ten years old.

It was him who spoke up and the interpreter instantly translated. “What would we need a lawyer for?”

Alexander gave Hope a short look which was probably supposed to mean that he was going to explain that himself. “Mr. Stan, I know in your situation legal steps are not your first concern, but unfortunately we have to act quickly to ensure we can claim your rights and the rights of your loved ones and…”

“Herr Mayrhofer, Sie werden mir hoffentlich verzeihen, aber ich habe nicht die beste Erfahrung mit Anwälten.” Hope’s eyes settled on Sophie Müller who was talking with a soft but firm voice that perfectly matched her face. She was extraordinarily beautiful in a very natural way, not wearing any make-up. “Ich spreche hier nicht nur für meinen Mann, sondern für alle seine Kollegen und deren Familien. Wenn Sie mit uns das große Geld machen wollen, dann können Sie das vergessen. Wir sind nicht hier um Profit aus der schlimmsten Sache zu schlagen, die uns jemals passieren wird.“

The interpreter repeated it both in Romanian and English. Everyone nodded in agreement and Hope quickly stepped in. “Mrs. Müller, I ensure you it is not our intention to make money with your misery. Miss Potts and I only invited Mr. Mayrhofer to this meeting, because we are convinced that his intentions are to help, we’ve talked to several lawyers in advance and…”

“So if you don’t intent to get money out of the fact that my husband is in a coma, that Katherina’s husband is dead, that Anton’s daughter and Ioan’s son died in the tunnel… that Marius died trying to save a little girl whose parents barely survived… what is Mr. Mayrhofer here for? I am from Munich, I know his law firm. They aren’t interested in small fish.”

It was the wrong moment to think about this, but Hope knew that they had to put her behind a microphone. Her charisma was impressive and it was so easy to tell that she was real. She had herself under perfect control, because she was strong and fierce, but her features and her eyes were a testament to her pain. Everybody who saw her and listened to her would be able to tell.

“Mrs. Müller, we have a common goal here. We want justice for what happened to your family members. You want Steve Rogers in front of a jury and I promise you, me and Miss Potts, Pym Technologies and Stark Industries will do everything in our power to make that happen. To hold the man responsible accountable for his actions. After looking into this and getting in contact with Joint Counter Terrorist Centre, the organisations your husbands work for… we learned some important information that made us come to the conclusion that we will need counselling.”

Sophie Müller placed one hand on the table top and with the other she made a gesture that indicated the lawyer to start talking again.
Opening his folder Alexander handed out several sheets of paper, a copy for every one of them. “The woman in this photograph is Agent Sharon Carter. Former SHIELD agent, now working for the CIA and after the Vienna Bombings was under the commando of Deputy Task Force Commander Everett Ross who is responsible for the Joint Counter Terrorist Centre. By now Ross was able to retrace her steps before the Bucharest incident…”

“Don’t call it that. My son died that day, crushed in his car by tons of concrete because one man thought that he had the right to destroy a tunnel full of people to help a terrorist escape. It was not an incident.” Ioan Ciobanu hissed and Alexander sheepishly nodded. “I am sorry… that was thoughtless. I apologize. What I meant to say… Ross is now able to prove that Carter gave Rogers and Wilson the information where the Winter Soldier was and when and how the task force was going to take him down.”

Hope’s eyes were fixed on Sophie Müller who didn’t show any reaction. Except for her right hand which she balled into a fist. Marius Radu’s mother lowered her eyes and his father’s mouth became thin, white line. “So Captain Rogers knew where to go because of her? He wouldn’t have been there if that woman hadn’t given him that information?”

Slowly Alexander nodded. “He may have got his hands on the information later on, on his own, but then he wouldn’t have got to Bucharest in time… so yes, she enabled him.”

“Where is this woman?” It was the first thing Katharina Neubauer said out loud and Hope could hear the tears, which she was about to shed, in her voice.

“She is still on the run from the authorities, but as far as we know her apprehension is only a question of days. She is not with Captain Rodgers, we know that. She will have to face charges of treason, because she shared information she had access to as a CIA agent with a civilian. Since Captain Rogers didn’t sign the accords, he had lost his status as an Avenger and was no longer tied to any anti-terrorist organisation.” Alexander made a short pause for the interpreter. “Also… Agent Carter’s actions directly led to Captain Rodgers’ fight with the task force which led to… the death of three of its members, including Mrs. Neubauer’s husband and to the severe injuries of Mrs. Müller’s husband. Furthermore her sharing this information with Rogers indirectly led to the death of your children, the death of Luminita Matei and Gabriel Dumitru, the collapse of the tunnel and the injuries of 87 people… Your association, you personally… you can press charges against her. Due to the evidence and circumstances we are talking about negligent homicide and assault. I know it is too much to ask for an immediate decision. You will have to talk about this and I created these dossiers with all the infor-“

“Er hätte es ohne sie nicht tun können! Sie wusste was er tun würde! Dass er sie umbringen würde! Um sie davon abzuhalten Barnes aufzuhalten, der über 100 Leute in den letzten 70 Jahren umgebracht hat! Wieso ist sein Leben mehr wert als das von Jürgen? Wir haben zwei Kinder… wie soll ich… Sie ist schuld!”

Unintelligible words that turned into sobs and every single sound got under Hope’s skin. They seemed to suck all warmth from her body and although she couldn’t understand, she knew what was being said. Jürgen Neubauer had died on the scene. Barnes or Rogers, one of them had broken his neck.

This woman had already been a widow when Scott had jumped out of bed to go and fight for Captain America…

The tears were now streaming down her cheeks, her body rocked by uncontrollable sobs and Hope remembered that all-consuming grief and despair. Sophie Müller reached out and pulled the shaking woman into her arms, whispering soothing words into her ear. Katharina accepted her without any
hesitation. They were equals. One husband dead, one in a coma from which he would probably never wake up again. Hope could see the same pain in Sophie’s eyes and she didn’t want to be in that chair anymore.

Putting on the suit, that was what Hope wanted. Find Scott wherever he was and make him look at these two women. Who were you fighting for? Who did you do this for?

While Sophie was trying to calm her friend down the interpreter quietly repeated Katharina’s words in Romanian and Alexander leaned in to Hope, translating for her. His tone was soft, hesitant at times and yet Hope was moved. Painfully so. “He wouldn’t have known without her. She knew what he was going to do. That he would kill them. To stop them for taking down Barnes who has killed over 100 people during the last 70 years. Why is his life worth more than Jürgen’s? We have two kids. It’s her fault.”

A heavy silence settled in the room, only partly interrupted by Katharina’s sobs and Hope swallowed softly, not knowing how to continue this discussion. “Mrs. Neubauer, if you want a pause, we could…”

“No, I want to know…”

Alexander nodded, then continued. “Like I said… you don’t have to come to a decision immediately. Sharon Carter is not the only factor though… You may have heard that this morning the American Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross had to resign for trying to use the Avengers for his own and therefore American purposes. This was a violation of the Sokovia Accords which ensure that the Avengers can only be called to action by a committee of the United Nations. The Sokovia Accords also include a paragraph that demands the Avengers’ presence if there should be incident involving an enhanced individual. The Winter Soldier obviously is such an individual and therefore the Avengers should have been the first to deal with him. Secretary Ross was very aware of that and nevertheless ordered that a task force of the Joint Counter Terrorist Centre would be immediately going after him while the UN committee was still debating which measures should be taken to ensure the safety of the population of Bucharest if the Avengers were to go after the Winter Soldier. This would be their first mission under the accords and there shouldn’t be a second Lagos. Knowing all that Secretary Ross ignored an international agreement and he will have to face international charges. Mrs. Müller, Mrs. Neubauer, you and every family of a task force member also have the possibility to press charges. If you should decide to do so – I will gladly support you.”

“Pym Technologies will compensate all the fees.” Hope pointed out and she could see that all of them were overwhelmed by all this new information and possibilities.

The implications…

The task force shouldn’t have been there in the first place. After Hope’s talk with Pepper Potts, she was fairly sure that Ross sent them there, because he didn’t believe that the Avengers would immediately kill the Winter Soldier. A single man going against the United Nations. He wasn’t that much different from Rogers. Both of them would hate to hear that.

Rogers wouldn’t have been able to get there on time and some of these men probably wouldn’t have died. The tunnel definitely wouldn’t have collapsed.

“We will have to talk to the other ones… this is not our decision to make. We’re not the only ones who have been affected by… these events.” Ioan Ciobanu mumbled lowly and everybody else nodded.

“Would you like to stop for a moment?”
Again, everyone agreed and Hope shouldn’t have felt so relieved. To be right in front of them, to look at so much misery and pain… “Miss van Dyne?”

Looking up Hope realised that Sophie Müller had walked up to her and Hope instantly tried to not stare at her belly. She had to be about five months along. “Yes?”

Sitting down next to her Sophie cleared her throat. “I heard what you said on television. About Scott Lang and his involvement in the fight at the Leipzig airport.”

Instantly Hope’s heart was hammering against her chest.

“I just wanted to tell you that I admire your courage and I want to thank you for taking a stand although you aren’t obligated to do that. All of this… that you are giving us a platform to talk about what happened. Every one of us has lost someone and nobody is quite themselves at the moment, but we are all grateful.”

Hope was staring at her and suddenly felt so foolish. For considering herself a strong, independent woman for so many years. This was strength. Pregnant, having her husband ripped away from her and the one who did that was still claiming that he was acting on behalf of the people, standing up against a corrupted government.

“I’m merely trying to make up for a mistake… the suit should have never been in Scott’s hands, but I am happy if I can… help you in any kind of way.”

“You are helping, Miss van Dyne. Don’t doubt that.”

“Mrs. Müller, I have thought about the press conference and I have a suggestion… I have no idea if you have already agreed on who is going to talk to the journalists. I think it might be a good idea if it was you who did that.”

“Why do you think that I am the right person to do that?”

“I listened to you talk. I think you are able to say things in a way that will make people listen. That will make them understand what this is about.”

Sophie was thinking, a little frown on her forehead told Hope as much. “I guess I don’t have to ask you if you read the statement the New York Times published this morning.”

No, that was unnecessary. Hope had read it on the flight to Bucharest. It had taken over a week, but finally Steve Rogers had decided to talk to the world. About Hope. His words didn’t mean anything to her, they didn’t upset her.

An entire paragraph about how Hope was doing Scott wrong. Hank Pym had given him the suit, because he was a good man, to do good things with it. Scott had indeed known what he had been getting into. Saving an innocent man from a government that had created the accords to make the Avengers their personal killing squad.

Hope’s father had used a nice phrase to describe most of his business partners. If stupidity was painful, they would be screaming all day. Hope could hear Rogers screaming loudly.

Ross had lost his position as Secretary of State, because he had been doing just that, trying to use the Avengers for his own purposes. He had been ignoring the accords or tried to make people believe that he had some authority over them. Rogers didn’t have a clue about politics and how the modern world worked. Did he really believe that the United Nations would create accords that would allow a single man, a single person, a single nation control over the accords, over the Avengers? That was
exactly what they wanted to avoid. The accords had been created to ensure accountability and to make sure that the entire world could feel safe. Would it make Russia feel safe if the United States were in control of the Avengers? No and that wasn’t case, but Rogers didn’t realise that.

He would have had to read the accords.

An entire paragraph about Scott and about how wrong Hope was. It had been written in a respectful way and Hope didn’t care. What she did care about was the second paragraph. Rogers said that he regretted it deeply that people had been harmed during his attempt to save Bucky Barnes, an innocent man, from a squad sent to kill him. None of that would have happened if the accords hadn’t been in place, then the Avengers would have been the one to take care of this…

No, this man had no idea what he was talking about. Even worse, he was acting without knowing what he was doing.

Not enough, he didn’t mention any names or said that he should have acted differently. Rogers didn’t even acknowledge that it was his fault. The task force would have never caused the tunnel to collapse…

“Yes, I’ve read it.”

Sophie leaned back in her chair, placing one hand on her belly. Now Hope was unable to stop herself from staring. Would Rogers still be of the same opinion in ten years? Would he say the same things he had written, looking into the eyes of a ten year-old child? A child that would probably never meet his father…

“I’ve read it so many times. I became so angry, I couldn’t go to the hospital and visit Michael… I know there is a chance that he will wake up. The doctors say I shouldn’t get my hopes up and I don’t, but they are obligated to read me the statistics. There is a slim chance, so I should consider myself lucky. Katharina’s husband is dead. Three men that worked closely with my husband, who were his friends are dead. Marius’ parents lost their child, my child is still safe in my stomach. I still have my child and my husband is still breathing. I should be grateful, but I am raging. I’ve read it so many times, I know the part by heart that makes my blood boil.”

She took a breath, her eyes burning, but her hand was still calmly lying on her stomach, protecting her child. “…and therefore the Avengers are going to continue to stand up against the accords set up by corrupt governments to prevent us from protecting and helping the ones in need…” A dry laugh escaped her lips. “I know who he is talking about. About his friend. A man he knew personally and therefore he didn’t care about what he did or what he might have done. He claims he was protecting an innocent man and an innocent life cannot be taken… so did three men have to die who were following orders? They were killed, not disabled. They are dead, Bucky Barnes is alive and still in hiding. If Rogers is right and he was innocent… now he isn’t anymore. Three men were killed before they reached the tunnel. Is it still self-defence when a single punch of your metal arm can break a spine? Are you still protecting the innocent if you throw a shield that can break a man’s ribcage?”

***

Seconds. Steve was looking at him.

Numbers. Tony was good with numbers. Calculus, programming, algebra… everything related to numbers.

Three seconds.
After ripping off his face-place Steve had taken three seconds to look at him before bringing the shield down.

Three seconds were enough to change your mind. To say no. To see Tony’s face and realise that he had been a friend. That he was Howard’s son.

They had been friend. Steve and Tony. Howard and Steve.

Steve brought the shield down, ramming it into the reactor and Tony felt Obediah pulling it out of his chest. Leaving him to die in the cold. Sending him into cardiac arrest. Ripping Tony’s heart out. Not metaphorically.

Gasping for air Tony jerked up, his ribs immediately screaming in pain, but he couldn’t care less. Both of his hand reached for the reactor, only touching cold skin. It was gone, Steve couldn’t destroy it. Steve hadn’t killed him. Steve hadn’t killed him. Tony was alive.

Thanks to Friday

Thanks to Vision

Pulling the blanket around himself Tony tried to not think about the cold. Cold metal, cold winds, a cold, abandoned building. A cold hand that wrapped itself around his mother’s throat.

Squeezing his eyes shut Tony wiped away the tears that weren’t going to fall and curled himself into a ball.

“Boss? Do you need help?”

“No, I just want to sleep.”

“Boss, you haven’t left the room in over…”

“Mute.”

Closing his eyes Tony tried to…

The shield was coming down and Tony reopened his eyes, digging his fingers into the blanket. It wouldn’t leave him alone. Around him all the time. The shield. The hand that crushed his father’s skull and choked his mother to death.

A buzzing sound filled the room and Tony sat back up. “Friday, I said…”

“Miss van Dyne, how was the meeting?”

What? This was Pepper. Why was…

“Draining. A lot of tears. These people are suffering and the media is only talking about how Barton’s wife doesn’t want to put up with him anymore. I know… it’s not easy for that woman either, but… I just want Rogers to spend five minutes in a room with the family members. God…I am sorry, you want to hear some actual information.”

“It’s okay. I wouldn’t have felt any different. What did they say about Sharon Carter’s implication and the possibility to sue Ross?”

Tony’s head was swimming and he wanted to tell Friday to stop this. Another weak attempt to get him to leave his room, by letting him listen to a conversation behind Pepper and Hope van Dyne.
Tony didn’t have the energy for this…

“They were angry. Shocked, but they wouldn’t say anything without talking to everybody else first. You want my personal impression?”

“Of course.”

“They will file charges. Definitely. We talked about the press conference tomorrow. Sophie Müller is going to talk on behalf of the association.”

“Sophie Müller… right, her husband is in a coma if I remember right?”

“Yes. She’s pregnant.”

“My god…”

Steve, what have you been doing there? They were only men with guns. You can throw your shield at somebody in a metal suit. Not at men with normal bones. They were going to break…

“Any news on Rogers’ statement? Can we track him down?”

What? Steve had released a statement?

“Negative. The New York Times received an email with the statement, but the secret intelligence isn’t able to track it back to him. I had Friday looking into it and she isn’t able to do it either. Tony made Friday, she can do pretty much everything. So her not being able to trace it back tells us a lot. Cap can type in some letters and press the send button. He is not able to encrypt a message or to not leave any traces.”

“He has help.”

“Exactly. Someone with enough technical skills to fool the secret intelligence of the US and Friday.”

“And somebody with a plane to get to the Raft and away. That should narrow the list down.”

“Absolutely.”

Tony blinked, the pieces were falling into place and their voices were ringing in his ears.

“Can’t Mr. Stark look into it? He might be able to figure it out.”

“Tony still isn’t feeling good and I will not bother him with Rogers. He has done enough damage. I will keep Tony out of this as long as I can…”

Running both hands through his hair Tony shook his head. “Friday, mute”

This time Friday complied and Tony felt cold. Someone capable to sending a message via the internet that Friday couldn’t trace back? It sounded like something that should excite Tony. It didn’t. Two minutes ago he hadn’t cared where Steve might be.

Now Tony knew and he still didn’t care.

Friday had forced him to listen to this conversation and now Tony knew where Steve was. How could he act like all of this didn’t concern him when he knew… Tony hadn’t wanted to know this! All he wanted to do was to sleep. One night of sleep without his parents dying. Without Steve or Obediah killing him…
Steve was in Wakanda… Tony didn’t want to know, Tony didn’t want to know anything about him or them.

Tony wanted to work on his cars. To talk to Jarvis. To go out drinking. To play video games. To talk with Rhodey about…

Rhodey…

A taste of bile filled Tony’s mouth and he saw him falling from the sky. Crashing to the ground. Steve dropping that container on Peter. The kid lying motionlessly on the floor. Charlie Spencer’s mother. Ultron lifting part of Sokovia into the sky…

Tony had made him. He had stopped creating weapons, because he didn’t want to destroy things anymore, to stop taking and destroying lives. Only to end up creating Ultron.

Tony had tried to do the right thing with the accords and his best friend had ended up crippled… The sight of him in a wheelchair was too much to take.

That thing will need to go. That’s what he had said…

Pushing off the blanket Tony put his feet on the floor, slowly standing up. Yes, Tony had created something that destructive that had caused a lot of pain. But there was also Vision…

Tony could create something good and that’s what he was going to do.

Chapter End Notes

"Sehr erfreut Sie kennenzulernen, Herr Mayrhofer.” - "Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Mayrhofer."

“Sie sprechen Deutsch?” - "You speak German?"

“Ich spreche hier nicht nur für meinen Mann, sondern für alle seine Kollegen und deren Familien. Wenn Sie mit uns das große Geld machen wollen, dann können Sie das vergessen. Wir sind nicht hier um Profit aus der schlimmsten Sache zu schlagen, die uns jemals passieren wird.” - "I don't only speak on behalf of my husband, but all of his colleagues and their families. If you want to make quick money with us, then you can forgot about that. We're not here to make profit from the worst thing that will ever happen to us."
The water was crashing down on Wanda’s shoulders, bringing relief to her tensed muscles. Her new bed was perfectly comfortable, Wanda couldn’t complain and yet every morning she woke up with a hurting back. It wasn’t a lingering pain and yet persistent. Rubbing the back of her neck Wanda winced. She felt her skin beneath her fingers, knowing that the collar was gone. Sometimes she could still feel it though.

The tight, cold metal around her throat which wouldn’t budge, wouldn’t give her freedom to move. It didn’t happen so often, but yesterday there had been another moment. When Wanda wasn’t able to breathe, her throat seemed to be too tight and she felt the pain that had been there. The shocks running through her body when she tried accessing her magic.

Like an animal…

Releasing a deep breath Wanda shook her head. The collar was gone now, just like the cell. Her friends had recused her.

Just like Pietro would have done…

The feeling of sharp, cutting sadness settled in her stomach and slowly spread across Wanda’s body. It was something she simply couldn’t get used to. Grief and loss had been part of her life from a very early age. When they had lost their parents. The scars were still there, but they didn’t compare to the new ones. Losing Pietro had been so much worse than everything he had ever lived through.

Wanda wasn’t afraid of dying anymore, because she had already felt it. Not because of her magic. Pietro and her had been twins, they had spent almost every minute of their life together. When they had volunteered for the Hydra experiments Wanda had had those silly, somewhat romantic thoughts. They had entered this world together and they would leave it together.

Stupid…

Despite their parents’ death Wanda had never been alone. Pietro had always been there, to share her pain, to protect her, to make her laugh or being someone that Wanda could protect. Someone that was important, a motivation to go on.

Wanda had felt him dying and several parts of her had died with him.
Ultron had killed her brother. The mere thought turned the sadness into something else. Something that Wanda couldn’t quite name. Anger as a word didn’t cover it. Rage that filled her with the urge to destroy and take things apart. Not like the anger she had felt which had driven her into Hydra’s arms. Way more intense, eating her up until there was nothing left of her. That robot killed her flesh and blood. The last member of her family. The robot Stark had created.

Yeah, which has been his idea entirely. It’s not like somebody gave him hallucinations to put that thought in his head…

Wanda winced, propping herself up against the shower wall. Another kind of pain, just as familiar. Not in her stomach but in her chest. Not as intense but it threatened to make her nauseous. It had a taste to it. Bitter and metallic. Almost like blood. Always accompanied by Pietro’s fault.

She couldn’t understand. Her brother was still there this way. Whenever Wanda thought of Ultron and became angry, Pietro’s voice resounded in the back of her head and the anger turned into… shame. His little remarks were the words which Pietro would use, but he would never talk to Wanda in such a condescending tone. While still being alive he had never done that, not once. Pietro’s snark had been something he had used all the time, with everybody who annoyed him or who was getting under his skin.

Never with Wanda though…

She wasn’t crazy though. Wanda knew that these were her own thoughts and for some reason she wanted Pietro to say them. She didn’t want to think about why or why not. Pietro was dead and if she could still hear him sometimes… Wanda would treasure these instances.

Turning off the shower Wanda reached for a towel and wrapped it around her slim body. In front of the mirror she almost subconsciously checked her neck, but there were no marks. Nothing. Gone. And it was never going to happen again. Steve had promised that and Wanda knew that she could trust his word. After all he had come for them, he had taken the collar off.

Like Pietro would have done if he had been still alive. He had died a hero.

I dunno. Is it heroic dying when you throw yourself in front of a man when it was you who sent the guy who tried to shoot him in the first place?

Grabbing a second towel Wanda started drying off her hair and walked back into her bedroom. Startled she stopped in her tracks when she spotted a young woman pulling the sheets off her bed. The maid looked just as surprised as Wanda. Probably she had been under the assumption that Wanda wasn’t here. Which usually was the case at this hour.

“Hello.” Wanda smiled at her softly. “Thank you, but you really don’t have to do this. I can…”

“I will come back later.” The young woman abruptly turned around and rushed out of the room so fast that Wanda was left standing there, not really sure what had just happened. She had more or less ran away from Wanda. Somewhat bizarre…

She is Wakandan. Are you really that surprised?

Shaking off that thought Wanda walked over to the door and locked it. Just in case. Disposing of the towel Wanda opened her wardrobe and chose a new outfit. In her mind she was already trying to come up with things she might tell Clint.

Wanda had been there when he had learned. They had walked into the common room and had found a newspaper lying on the table. Which had been strange, because it hadn’t been Wakandan. The Des
Clint’s face when he had read about his wife filing for divorce was hard to describe. A second before he had been smiling at Wanda and then it had been falling apart. Something behind his eyes had broken and Wanda had only been able to stand there and watch. Wanda didn’t know Clint’s wife, but that didn’t stop her from being enraged by her actions. First refusing to talk to him and then she was filing for divorce? Who would do that to someone you claimed to love? According to Clint everything had been perfectly fine between them before Steve had called him. Clint had been trying to help a friend and save the world from an immediate threat. He deserved better than that. Unfortunately that didn’t matter, he had been hit just as hard.

Since learning the news Clint hadn’t left his room and Wanda was going to change that. His wife may have abandoned him, but his second family wouldn’t do that.

After pulling her hair back in a ponytail Wanda slipped into her shoes and unlocked the door to her room. Clint’s was the closest to hers, so just a few seconds later Wanda was standing in front of his door, knocking softly. “Clint?”

There was no response and Wanda started shifting from one foot to the other. “Clint?”

Suddenly the door was ripped open and Wanda winced since she hadn’t heard any footsteps. Clint was glaring at her, features hard almost contorted. “What do you want?”

“I thought you’d maybe want to get out of that room for a while. You’ve been…”

“Wanda, I get what you’re trying to do here, but I don’t want to leave that room. Not now and not in ten minutes or an hour. I just want to be left alone.”

“But I don’t think…”

“It doesn’t matter what you think about this. I’m fucking dealing with my divorce how I want to and I don’t any attempt to cheer me up and tell me that it’s not as bad as it looks. Go and hang out with Steve. Try to get him out of the damned lab, he needs that more than me.”

Whatever Wanda would have liked to reply Clint didn’t get to hear it, because he shut the door in her face. It wasn’t like she had any right to feel hurt, he was in a terrible situation and she should be understanding. Perhaps it was best to give him some time, Wanda knew that there situations when you didn’t want to talk to anybody. When the sheer presence of another person was driving you mad.

Yes, she would have to give it some time…

Thanks to T’Challa and Steve they actually had time and didn’t need to start running again. Steve. This was a good idea. Wanda would ask him to talk to Clint, Steve knew how to talk to people.

Wanda’s knock at the door stayed unanswered and therefore she decided to check out the common room before heading to the lab. It was closer anyway. The slight sting of disappointment was instant when the common room was empty but for Scott. Wanda shouldn’t be surprised, this was the place one could usually find him. Not saying anything Scott merely nodded to acknowledge her presence, then immediately turned back to the TV.

“You’ve seen Steve?”

“He’s in the lab. Watching the soldier on ice.”
His tone was a bit too disinterested for Wanda’s taste. “And what are you watching?”

Again not saying anything Scott pointed at the TV and Wanda started to feel annoyed by his attitude. She crossed the room to get a look at the TV and felt like she was taking another cold shower. “Why are you watching this? People dragging us through the dirt?”

“The conference hasn’t started yet, so there is no way of knowing who’s going to get dragged through the dirt.” Scott’s response was dry and Wanda was completely taken aback.

“They’re calling us terrorists. Steve. When he was the only one going after a global threat. We were trying to save the world and they throw us in prison, calling us terrorists…”

“Well, by definition…”

“I don’t get you. Why would watch people talking on the news judging us when they have nothing to do with it and have no idea what was going on? How they tried to force us to do what they want or…”

Scott made a harsh gesture which was probably supposed to shut her up and it worked. Nobody had tried to show her boundaries in quite a while. Not in that way. Stark had tried by making her a prisoner…

_Right locking you up at the compound, the only place you’ve called home in years. With Vision, someone you care about and who promised to protect you. This and the Raft. Totally the same thing…_

Wanda winced at the sound of Pietro’s voice and Scott raised an eyebrow before crossing his arms in front of his chest. “What a coincidence, but this is a conference of people who have a lot to do with what happened and I want to hear what they are saying. So you either shut up and stay or you get out.”

She was one second away from telling him to shut up himself. Scott had been charming and sweet when they had met. Not cold and distanced like right now. Wanda shouldn’t forget what kind of situation he was in though. Similar to Clint’s. His girlfriend had dropped him the second things had got complicated, without even knowing what had happened or what that monster Ross had tried to do them. Locking them away for trying to save everybody…

“So what is this?”

“Family members of the German task force that…”

“Tried to kill Steve’s friend who was innocent of the crimes he was accused of?”

Scott glanced at her. “… and family members of the people who died in the tunnel that collapsed when Cap was… saving his friend. Now be silent, I want to listen to this.”

Sitting down next to Scott Wanda decided to give it a shot. That wouldn’t be pleasant, but she should know what they were going to tell the rest of the world about them.

On the screen a pretty woman in her early thirties was sitting down behind a white table with a microphone on it. A mere second but it was enough for Wanda to get a glimpse of her figure and her obvious pregnancy. Right on the nose. Picking a beautiful blonde woman who was also pregnant to be your spokesperson? Quite an effective way to manipulate the audience. Next to her was sitting a man with a stern, closed-off face. His hair was grey, he could have been Wanda’s father.
The spokeswoman placed her hands on the table, looking calmly around the room and then she started to talk. Without notes or clearing her throat.

“Good morning. My name is Sophie Müller, I am 32 years old and I am the wife of Michael Müller. A hard working member of a German anti-terrorist unit who dedicated his life to make sure our streets were safe, to watch out for civilians, to help and protect by putting his own life in danger. My husband fulfilled his duty as member of the special forces every day and 10 days ago he was assigned to go to Bucharest to apprehend a terrorist on the run who was under the suspicion of being responsible for the bombing of the Vienna UN building in our neighbouring country Austria. I have not spoken to my husband since. He is in a coma after being thrown down a staircase and gravely injuring his head. Due to the statements of my husband’s colleagues I know that the man who threw my husband down the staircase while trying to help a terrorist to flee law enforcement was Steve Rogers.”

“Flee from the… they were sent to kill him!”

“Wanda, shut your mouth!” Scott hissed at her and Wanda was startled. He knew that this was true and it should be obvious why that woman wasn’t saying it out loud. Everybody knew that Helmut Zemo was responsible for the bombing and that Bucky Barnes was innocent. They had come to kill an innocent man and Steve had put himself in front of his friend to protect him. It was a case of self-defence.

After a short pause Sophie Müller continued, her voice still smooth and on point. “Today I am here to speak before you on the behalf of a group of family members of the German task force that was sent to apprehend the Winter Soldier. I also carry the responsibility to speak to you on behalf of the families of the five persons who lost their lives in the tunnel that was destroyed by Steve Rogers and the Winter Soldier while fleeing from the task force.”

For a moment she glanced to the man next to her and her serious expression faltered for a second. The man’s sad eyes caused Wanda’s throat to tighten up while his lips formed a faint smile. Probably meant to encourage her.

“But I also speak on behalf of every single family member of a person who got hurt during this catastrophe and the family of the construction worker who got injured while doing his job and trying to clean up the damage done to the Leipzig Airport, inflicted by the so called Team Captain America.”

A soft gasp escaped Wanda’s lips and since there was nobody else here she turned to Scott who looked annoyed when he turned to her, but then raised an eyebrow. “What? You haven’t heard? They were trying to get rid of the mountain of wrecked cars when the whole thing collapsed. Guy suffered several broken rips.”

“But…”

What? Did you think they would just let them lie there? Or wear iron suits like Stark while cleaning up the place?

“Today we are a group of 113 persons, tomorrow we will be more. My story isn’t unique. It’s anything but. Every single member of the task force got injured by the hands of the Winter Soldier or Steve Rogers. Three other men who chose as a career to server their country are dead. Two died in the building the Winter Soldier was hiding in. One succumbed to his wounds on the way to the hospital. Jürgen Neubauer left behind a wife and three children. Markus Oberbeilsteiner was happily married and father of twins. Florian Hofer left behind a three year old daughter and his fiancé. He may still be alive if the fastest way to the hospital hadn’t been destroyed by Steve Rogers and the
Winter Soldier.”

Another glance to the man next to her. “Like most of the people who lost their lives that day.”

Wanda shifted. This wasn’t what she had expected. No tears, no yelling, not even real accusations. Sophie Müller sounded like she stating facts and Wanda had never heard these names before. It didn’t change the fact that they had been sent to kill Bucky, but it was somehow different now that they had names.

“There are men who will not be able to continue in their line of work, because their motor skills have been permanently damaged. A dear friend of my husband, Simon Gaarberg will never be able to walk again. These men were doing their job, they were out to make the world a safer place and Steve Rogers used brutal force to stop them from doing so…”

“A safer place… Bucky wasn’t going to…”

“Shut up! People died, don’t you get that into your thick head!??” Finally somebody was yelling. Wanda wouldn’t have thought that it’d be Scott.

Sophie Müller continued after catching her breath. “After… disabling the task force Steve Rogers and the Winter Soldier fled from the scene tried to escape police and military forces. Over a hundred Romanian civilians were hurt in the process, 27 of them children under the age of 14. Five persons died. Magdalena Stan, a nine year old girl. Luminita Matei, 45 years old, mother of two girls. Andrei Ciobanu, 31 years old died on the way to his girlfriend. Vitalie Popa, 29 years old left behind his partner and their 11 months old son. Gabriel Dumitru, 38 years old, father of two. Marius Radu, 22 years old died a few days later after trying to help a family to escape the wreckage of their car…”

Sophie Müller paused and Wanda felt Scott’s eyes on her. She didn’t dare to look at him.

“Steve Rogers showed disregard for other people’s lives and property. Hijacking a car and willingly destroying a tunnel filled with cars. Cars in which civilians were driving home from work… We are the families of these people who died and got injured because a single man decided he could do whatever he wanted. That he knew better than the elected governments of a great number of states… We are the unseen faces of the crimes Steve Rogers committed. I am not here today to talk about who is going to pay for the billions of damage the city of Bucharest has to face. I am not here to talk about who is going to pay for the hospital bills for everybody who got injured that day. Or who is doing to support the wives and children who got left behind. No, I am here to talk about this.”

What followed caused a frown to appear on Wanda’s face. Despite her calm and collected appearance Sophie Müller wasn’t capable to stop her fingers from shaking when she picked up a piece of paper that was lying in front of her.

“This is a statement from Steve Rogers and his team, released by the New York Times. It was published yesterday and I am sure everybody in this room and everybody watching on the TV screens has already read it. You will forgive me if I read one part of it out loud one more time, but I have to hear it to be able to believe that such arrogance and… bigotry can exist. I will spare you the attacks on Hope van Dyne, they don’t deserve any more attention than they are already receiving.”

Arrogant? Steve had wanted Wanda to read it before he had sent the statement. There was nothing arrogant about it. It was the truth.

“… and therefore the Avengers are going to continue to stand up against the accords set up by corrupt governments to prevent us from protecting and helping the ones in need…”
Yes. What had the accords done? What else than putting them behind bars for trying to save the world from five highly trained killers? First they wouldn’t listen to them and they wanted to use them to hunt down innocent people?

Sophie Müller raised her head again and Wanda’s heartbeat sped up. When she had first seen her Wanda had been sure they had chosen Sophie Müller, because she was beautiful. Suddenly she wasn’t beautiful anymore. Her eyes were burning with rage and her features seemed contorted by what she was feeling. She looked scary.

“My husband and his colleagues were the ones protecting the innocent. They didn’t walk into a highly populated place and started using their guns without any regard for the people around them. If Steve Rogers were here today, I would ask him to tell me who was there to clean up the mess he had left behind. Who was there to make sure that all the injured people were transported to a hospital as soon as possible? Which was a sheer impossible task after the destruction of the tunnel. Who was there to dig out the people buried under the rubble and trapped in the tunnel? Not the Avengers but Romanian and international military forces. People, heroes like Marius Radu. People acting under the law that Steve Rogers despises so much, because it stops him from helping people in need… but Steve Rogers is not here. He isn’t here, because he is a fugitive, a criminal and a coward.”

What? No, Steve had saved her. Steve had tried to save everybody…

“I agree with Hope van Dyne, Steve Rogers and the people behind him are dangerous. The reason I am here today is a call for justice. We want justice for our loved ones who were only doing their duty or who happened to be on their way home, to work, to their friends, to the cinema… We want the person responsible for this facing the consequences of their actions. We want Steve Rogers to leave the hole he is hiding in and to turn himself in. To face the law he was so willing to break. To defend an innocent man… by using his enhanced powers to kill and injure. No attempts to talk or to negotiate where made. Steve Rogers didn’t reach out to the Avengers or to the government. He claims that the UN and the American government were out for the blood of his friend and he reacted to this by using deathly violence without even attempting to search for another way out. Mr. Rogers, if you are listening to this, prove to the world that not every word of yours about freedom and justice has been a lie. Come out of hiding and stand up for your deeds… and stop insulting us with these statements that only consist of condemnations of the United Nations. Not a single apology, the victims of his actions have never been addressed, never acknowledged. We are today to remind the world that we exist… although Steve Rogers obviously doesn’t think we do. I want to end this conference by telling you something on behalf of Ioan Ciobanu who didn’t think he was in the right condition to talk in front of you today. Yesterday Ioan said to me ‘I want Captain America to look into my eyes and tell me why the Winter soldier’s life is more worth than my son’s’. Thank you for the opportunity to speak in front of you today.”

Wanda was left without words. What was she supposed to say to this? She felt for this woman whose husband was in hospital. That was horrible, but she couldn’t just leave out essential parts while talking to the press.

Bucky was innocent.

Steve had acted on his own, because the accords had tried to bind their hands and stop them from helping where they were needed. That’s what Steve had been talking about. They had known about a huge threat, the Winter Soldiers in Siberia and what had the UN done? Sent Stark and their friends to stop them, to imprison them.

They hadn’t left Steve any other choice and now they were complaining about what had happened? When Steve had only been reacting to them and their actions?
“I can’t believe this…” Scott turned off the TV and rubbed a hand down his face.

“I know… it’s hard to believe that they’re trying to put all the blame on Steve…”

Out of the corner of her eye Wanda could see Scott jump. “What?! That’s what you took away from that? People died! A little girl died! I have a little girl!”

Wanda shifted, feeling uncomfortable. There was no way to deny what Scott was saying. A little girl had died and other people had too. Wanda was feeling bad for them, she knew what loss actually meant. Probably better than Scott. “I know… I am feeling sorry for them, believe me, but they can’t blame it on Steve. Not when he was left no other choice than to go there to save his friend. They were going to kill him and it was them who hunted them down into that tunnel in the first place.”

Scott stared at her with wide eyes. “So you are saying that it’s all their fault? Bringing down that tunnel had nothing to do with Cap’s or Barnes’ superior strength? Or Cap hijacking that car?”

“I am saying that they forced this situation on him and… sometimes we can’t save everybody. If we don’t accept that… next time nobody gets saved.”

In response Scott only blinked at her, then let out a breath, huffed and eventually laughed. “Seriously? Who got saved that fucking day?”

“Steve saved his friend.”

“He did? You know that they got apprehended, Wanda, right? They got taken in custody and nobody killed Barnes. Maybe the information Cap had was wrong? Maybe the orders got changed? Who the hell knows. They had him and they didn’t shoot him and I don’t think that happened because Cap was standing right next to him, because after that stupid tunnel coming down… they had more reason to shoot than they had before. People fucking died and you talk about not being able to save everybody. Nobody but that Radu kid tried to save anybody that day… Save it, I’m not listening to this BS anymore.”

Tossing the remote control to the side Scott got up to his feet and stormed past Wanda, out of the room. Leaving her sitting there with Pietro’s voice ringing in her ears.

*Hey, you saved Steve and a lot of people in Lagos, right? That’s good enough. No need to think about how you might have been able to… I dunno… avoid innocent people getting killed altogether.*

Pietro had always loved sarcasm…

***

Scott’s blood was boiling and the same time he was feeling like throwing up. His stomach was turning and Scott could feel the taste of bile surging into his mouth.

Cassie’s school bus was crossing a bridge every day. Bridges were built by people, they could be brought down too. That little girl could have been Cassie. Scott had spent years in prison and he had never wanted so badly to hold his child like he wanted to now. Just to feel her little arms wrapped around his neck and making sure that she was okay.

Being a parent was terrible. Until you had a child you didn’t know what fear is. You went through life more or less blind. There were newspaper articles about natural disasters, accidents, sickness or paedophiles. Horrible, nasty things that shouldn’t even exist, but you turned the page and you continued to live.
As soon as he had taken that little bundle into his arms – everything had changed. Sure, Scott had still been a reckless idiot, with his own stupid ideas and dreams. But from that day on he had been afraid and aware of what kind of world they were living in. Bad things happened to good people. Children could be involved in accidents and there were disgusting creatures out there who were dangerous and didn’t hesitate to hurt kids.

Being a parent meant to be afraid and Scott didn’t want to ever experience what those little girl’s parents were going through right now.

He just wanted to hold Cassie…

Hope had told him that he had screwed up and Scott still didn’t want to believe that. Who could you trust to have your best interest at hear if not Captain America? The man was a war hero, he had fought aliens and brought down a secret Nazi organisation that had tried to kill thousands of innocent people. Wasn’t that enough to earn a hell lot of trust in advance? Scott had had the opportunity to talk to Steve. He was an amazing guy, caring and incredibly attentive and he acted like Scott wasn’t making a fool out of him around him.

That man was a hero and Scott trusted him to have their best interests at heart.

But that little girl had died and… War Machine was in a wheelchair. Scott had googled him. That man was a hero too. Had fought in the war for the US and risked his life more than once… without having super powers and without the suit. Yes, Scott would have also trusted that man… and this man had stood up for something that Steve called vile and bad.

Like Stark… Yeah, Hank hated him… but Hope had told him that Hank had never met Tony Stark. Okay, it was perfectly possible to hate somebody you had never met, Scott knew that.

But Stark didn’t have to be Iron Man. After that shit in Afghanistan he could have sold his technology to the highest bidder, which he hadn’t done. He had kept it to make sure that it was used for something good. He had carried a nuke through a hole in the sky… and he had also built a killer robot.

No, Scott didn’t know about a Stark… and yet Hope had turned to him without batting an eyelid. Working with him to make sure that Scott didn’t do any more stupid stuff… like growing tall without knowing if…

Damn, he could have died… then Cassie wouldn’t have a father anymore. Did she had a father now? Without him the fight would have been different. Everybody had said so. Would Rhodes still be able to walk? What would Scott have done if Rhodes had been knocking on his door? Well, he would have googled him, because his name was not as famous as Cap’s, but then… Yeah, Scott probably would have trusted him.

Was that right?

Hope had called him an idiot. Hope wouldn’t have trusted anybody with this. She would have looked into the facts herself and then she would have known what to do. Because she was tough, strong and smart. And Scott had left her without hesitating.

Fuck…

The urge to vomit was almost overwhelming, so Scott stopped in his tracks and took a few deep breaths through his nose. No, Scott was sick of sitting on the couch and watching on TV what the rest of the world was thinking what was right and what was wrong. Now he had heard what Steve
thought, what Wanda thought… what Hope thought. Time to have an opinion himself.

Walking towards the wing doors Scott took another breath. The woman he knew who was on the other side of that door was giving him goose bumps. Her calm demeanour and calculating eyes were giving him the creeps, but he would have to talk to her. Raising his hand Scott knocked on the door and waited.

He was nagging on his lower lip when it was opened and there she was. Hot for sure, but she had that vibe about her… as if she could beat the crap out of him without breaking a sweat.

“What do you want?”

And she sounded as if she was going to enjoy it.

“Hey… uhm… sorry to bother you, I know we’re not supposed to do that, but I thought…”

“What do you want?”

“Not wasting any time, huh? Good, I can deal with that. No pressure at all. I… wanted to ask if there was a possibility to talk to his Highness? The king?”

She didn’t move, just pierced him with her eyes and Scott cleared his throat. “I know he is the king and has things to do which are definitely way more important and I really don’t want to be responsible for him missing out on… king stuff, but… I don’t want to talk about our situation here or make any requests, nothing of that sort. I just feel like I’ve only heard one part of a story and I believe he is the only one who can me the other part. Am I somewhat comprehensible?”

She tilted her head and Scott could be imaging it, but he thought that her features were softening the slightest bit. “No, you are not. What information do you wish to gain and why is it so important that only the King can give it to you?”

“I would like to look into the Sokovia Accords.”

“The Accords are a public document. You can read it online like every other person on this planet.”

“I know, but… his father… the former king helped creating them, right? I am sure the King has more insight in what they stand for and… listen Lady, I have no idea what kind of mess I got myself into. I’m trying to figure this out right now and I feel stupid that I have to ask the King of country to help me do that, because he definitely has better things to do, but… he’s the only one I’ve got. The people I’m here with… I don’t know them very well, but I think they are my friends and therefore I… went with what they say and now I want to know if… things might be a little different from I thought… and the King is the only one here who might… tell me how things really are. So that’s why I’d like to see him… if he is available and not busy… running a country, building new streets and passing laws. King’s stuff.” Scott tried to put on his sweetest smile, it had always worked on Maggie.

Never on Hope though…

The guard looked at him for several seconds then, to his bewilderment, nodded. “I will let the King know about your request.”

“What? Seriously? Awesome!”

She narrowed her eyes at him and Scott instantly lowered his eyes. “I meant… that would be really nice of you… thank you.”
God, she was scary…
Hello everybody,

A new chapter. About time, I know. Responses to your reviews will come later, as soon as I find the time :)

Have fun :)

“All I am saying is – Secretary Ross got discharged for using the Accords to use the Avengers as a private military force. For his own purposes. That’s incredibly dangerous and I think Steve Rogers is a hero for standing up to that.”

“Melissa, what’s your response to that?”

“Simple, Kerry is misquoting the facts. Secretary Ross didn’t use the Accords, he tried to work around them. The Sokovia Accords don’t give the Secretary of State the power to dispose over the Avengers.”

“That’s not…”

“No, that’s true. That’s a fact. Read up on the Accords, it’s a public document. They do not give a member of the US government the power to tell the Avengers what to do. They simply don’t. What Secretary Ross did was threatening Tony Stark and Natasha Romanoff to use military force if they didn’t bend to his will, all while pretending that he had authority given to him by the UN. Which wasn’t the case. This incident only showed us that there has to be a better, more direct line of communication between the Avengers and the UN. Trying to paint Steve Rogers’ crimes as an act of heroism, because of another man’s crimes that had nothing to do with Steve Rogers’ motivations… I am sorry, but that’s downright offensive and insulting to the people who have died and got injured.”

“Kerry, your response?”

“Steve Rogers’ motivations were exactly that – stopping the Avengers from becoming a force in the hands of corrupt governments that can…”

“The UN is not a government.”

“Melissa, please, don’t interrupt me. I didn’t interrupt you. I am saying the media is dismissing far too quickly the concerns of Captain America, because they are only focusing on Bucky Barnes. What do the Sokovia Accords mean? They give a committee composed of several nations control over them. Nations that the US is not on good terms with, nations that don’t respect human rights. Do you feel at ease with Russia having a say in what the Iron Man technology is being used for? Are you feeling safe thinking about a committee with Pakistan and Afghanistan on it can say Wanda Maximoff what to use her powers for?”

“There is no feeling safe when Wanda Maximoff is involved and she proved that she doesn’t want anyone telling her what to use her powers for. It’s very telling that you immediately think of abuse and war when we’re talking about accountability. The Sokovia Accords were designed to make the
Avengers a counter force, a unit to save and protect. Not an aggressive instrument of war.”

“Oh, now you’re just…”

Pinching the bridge of her nose Pepper fought the beginning of a headache. That gesture was enough for Friday to turn off the TV, which caused a little smile to appear on her lips. Those debates were tiring, but in the end it was a good thing that people were talking about it. Sure, some right-wings were now crawling out of their holes, trying to justify Rogers’ actions and dismiss of the Accords, so they could make the Avengers an American task force. It was so blatantly obvious. Too bad that the US had been involved in setting up the Accords and they protected what was left of the Avengers.

Pepper felt her chest tightening and she took a deep breath, filling her lungs with air to liberate her from that sensation. People were getting scared, because they didn’t know if Iron Man was still alive. Rhodey was paralysed and Vision was still an unknown force to most of them.

The rest… well…

It had been over a week, they soon had to make Tony’s state public. Pepper had already prepared a statement, but right now it would only distract from the Bucharest victims and that wasn’t going to happen. They had a right to be heard.

Turning her attention back to the latest reports of the research department Pepper couldn’t deny a bit of relief. Everything concerning Stark Industries was working just fine. Thank god for that, Pepper had already enough on her plate.

They had to set up new contracts with the government and Pepper would make sure that there would be some strings attached. There was no way Pepper was going to let that persecution come to naught, because uncomfortable questions would be asked. Oh, no, Pepper would make sure that they would get to the bottom of this. So many people had used Tony in the past and Ross wouldn’t be the one to get away with it. Rogers wouldn’t either.

“Miss Potts, Miss van Dyne has arrived at the Compound.”

“Thank you, Friday.” After pushing the sent button Pepper put her pad away and walked towards the entrance. Hope was just walking in, looking around since she was here for the first time. Pepper greeted her with a smile. “Hope, nice to see you. Did you get without interruptions?”

“Pepper, hello. The press seemed to have cleared the way. Getting here was much more relaxing than the 12 hour flight.”

She indeed did look tired, collected and professional, but a little bit worn out. “Sure… Is your luggage still in the car?”

“Yes, why?”

“We are not in a hurry. There are several empty and clean guestrooms upstairs. You can take a shower and change if you like.”

Pepper almost laughed when she saw the little glimmer in Hope’s eyes. Common trait among businessmen, Pepper had enough experience to know when they wanted something, but didn’t want to let it show.

“That would be splendid… If that’s okay. You took the time to…”

“It’s perfectly okay. You are the one running around world, I can wait another half hour. I’ll make
s sure we have something to eat. Food on a plane is always atrocious.”

“You can say that. Upstairs you said?”

So while Hope was upstairs, getting comfortable after her flight Pepper called Tony’s favourite Italian place. She had already ordered a few hours ago and now let them know that they could send the delivery service on their way. Sitting down at the table in the dining room Pepper pulled her tablet back up, but then only stared at it.

“Friday?”

“Yes, Miss Potts?”

“Any chance I might talk to Tony?”

There was a pause and with Friday that was never good news. “I’m sorry, Miss Potts, but Boss is still in Blackout Mode. He refuses to switch it off.”

How could something be equally worrying and reassuring? Tony’s stubbornness was well known, sometimes Pepper loathed him for it, but it was one of Tony’s most prominent character trait. To see that coming into place again meant that Tony was feeling better. Pepper had almost felt like crying when Friday had told her that Tony had left the bedroom and was now in the lab. Sadly that was all the information that Pepper had. Tony was in the lab.

He didn’t answer her, Rhodey’s or Vision’s attempts to talk to him and nobody was allowed to enter the lab. Truth to be told, that was nothing new. Pepper had lived through all of that before. Now it was different. Tony had gone through such a trauma, witnessing his parents’ death with the man who had murdered them standing right next to him. Then getting beat up by a man he trusted who was supposed to be his friend. Who had known all along what had happened to Tony’s parents, but had kept it a secret… and had dared to verbally crucify Tony for making mistakes. Mistakes that he owned up for. Rogers had never done anything like that…

Of course not. Captain America doesn’t make mistakes…

“Miss Potts, would you like some tea?”

Startled Pepper looked up and saw Vision smiling at her. It was kind and yet a bit awkward. No, he wasn’t Jarvis and it was clear that Vision was still struggling with everyday situations. Which behaviour was appropriate and which wasn’t. Vision was perceptive, that much was obvious. He had seen or sensed the distress Pepper was in. “Thank you, Vision, but I’m going to have lunch in a moment. With Hope van Dyne. Tea doesn’t go well with Italian food.”

“I see. Would you mind me joining you?”

“No, not at all, you’re very welcome to join in.”

“I appreciate it.” Sitting down opposite of her Vision placed his hands on the table and mirrored Pepper’s position. “Are you alright? You seem troubled.”

Pepper brushed it off. “The usual… everybody is talking about how awful it is what Rogers did or if he should have done something differently… they get so wound up in this talk that nobody’s talking about how to apprehend them…”

“Well, I am not on expert on media coverage, but I do think it is more important that the authorities are doing their duty than just having the media talking about it.”
That was obviously true and Pepper nodded softly. “Right… I just… I know I shouldn’t get mad at the media, I have way more important stuff to do, but sometimes I can’t help myself…”

In response Vision just nodded and Pepper was grateful that he didn’t say anything else. She would just have to let it go at the moment. The media still played a part in all of this, but Pepper wasn’t too eager on playing that card early. Or at all.

If they were going to force her hand though, Pepper wouldn’t hesitate.

“Miss Potts, I… Oh, hello.” Hope had entered the room, clearly taken aback by Vision’s presence. A frown was the dominating expression on Hope’s face, but not too big to be in any sort of way offensive. Vision was going easy on her, standing up he offered his hand to Hope. “We have not yet had the pleasure of meeting each other. It is an honour, Miss van Dyne. People have called me the Vision. Now they simply refer to me as Vision, you may do the same.”

The frown was replaced by a timid smile and Hope shook Vision’s hand. “Nice to meet you, but you can call me Hope. Same goes for you, Miss Potts.”

“It’s Pepper. Sit down the both of you. Dinner will arrive in a few minutes.”

Hope nodded and sat down, glancing at wishing. “Uhm… excuse me if that question is offensive to you, but… do you eat?”

Vision and Pepper both smiled at that. “No, Miss… Hope, I do not eat. Which is a rather lamentable fact.”

“He likes to cook though.” Pepper winked at him and Vision looked somewhat proud. “I do believe I am making progress in this particular field.”

It was good. Some chit-chat, nothing to serious, small talk to get the conversation going. Like in a business meeting. Pepper was fed up with that. She liked to think that she was sitting here with friends. Yes, she had met Hope only a week ago, but she had turned out to be more trustworthy and more reliable than most of the Avengers had ever been. After all what had happened Pepper shouldn’t feel like she needed a circle of people around her that she could rely on. That need had Tony almost cost his life and Pepper wasn’t going to commit the same mistake, because in the end it would again be on Tony’s expense.

“Any chance that Mr. Stark is going to join us for lunch?”

A hope that Pepper instantly had to dash. “Very unlikely. Nobody has seen him for two days…”

Closely watching the woman opposite of her Pepper could see the concern. Something she rarely got to see. Concern for Tony. It disgusted her that she could find it so easily on the face of woman who had never met him, but the ones who had called themselves his friends hadn’t shown any of it.

Quite the opposite…

“He is alright though? You told me…”

“Mr. Stark’s physical wounds are healing.” Vision lowered his eyes and his voice. “Unfortunately his soul has been bruised more thoroughly than his body and I don’t think these wounds are going to heal anytime soon. At the moment he prefers his privacy. Something that we have to accept as hard it might be…”

Hope was quick to respond, almost a bit embarrassed. “Of course. I didn’t intent to… overstep any
boundaries.”

“Nobody thinks you did.”

Lunch got delivered a moment later and it was a nice opportunity to take a breath. Sadly it was impossible to stall forever and it was Hope who finally brought it up. “I had a conversation with the UN delegate during the flight home. I’m going to sign the accords, since the UN agreed to my terms.”

“You know that you don’t have to do this. You have no obligation whatsoever to start doing this…” Pepper trailed off when she saw a grin making its way onto Hope’s face. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No, absolutely not. It’s just… I told you that it should have been me wearing the suit. Not just because I would have used it better, but… I wanted to. I wanted to wear the suit. As simple as that.”

Pepper had heard that before. From Tony…

“There is no need to worry for me, I appreciate it, but it’s not necessary, believe me. I am perfectly aware of the consequences, perhaps more so than anybody else. My father wore this suit, I know what it is like. What it means and the effect it has on other people. Even if I didn’t want it – my hands are tied. Scott forced me to do this, so did Rogers. I can’t be in possession of the suit and let it lie around while they are still out there and after what happened, I’m definitely not going to give the suit to anybody else.”

In understanding Pepper nodded. “I see… that’s your condition, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely. The suit is private property and it’s going to stay that way. If I decide that I’m out, for whatever reason, the suit is also out. Unless I give it to somebody else which is not going to happen. Same goes for the Ant-Man suit as soon as we get it back… it’s going to straight back into my hands. The UN agreed, so I am signing.” A completely honest statement and Pepper couldn’t respond in any other way than nodding softly.

It was Vision who spoke up. “It would most-certainly be an honour if Hope joined the Avengers… Yet would you allow me to make a remark?”

“Naturally. I wanted to ask you about your opinion anyway.”

“I believe that you have the best intention and the capabilities to be an Avenger… unfortunately I am not sure if the Avengers do still exist. There are not many left and I am not sure if they are willing to continue to bear that title.” Another person who showed obvious concern and… Pepper stopped her own thought, because she had been refereeing to Vision as a person. Why not? He had shown more emotional intelligence and empathy than the actual human beings…

There was something in Hope’s eyes. Amazement. That’s how Pepper would describe it. “I know about Colonel Rhodes situation which is horrible and I know that he must have other priorities right now…”

“I wish.” Pepper interrupted her with a sigh. “That man is already neglecting physical therapy because he feels like he has to be here 24/7 just in case Tony might finally leave the lab. That he has to be there for him, almost as if he has to make up for something…”

“That seems to be a common sentiment around this house.” Vision smiled knowingly at her and Pepper shook her head. It wasn’t the same. Rhody had always been there for Tony, during the accords and Rogers’ betrayal. She was the one who had abandoned him before all of this and she
hadn’t been there when Tony would have needed all the support in the world.

“As I’ve said… Colonel Rhodes needs to look out for himself right now, but the people who are responsible for his injury are still at large and I want to help apprehending them. I am willing to go into the field alone if…”

Hope was interrupted for a second time and Pepper couldn’t deny her surprise, because it was anything but normal for Vision to do something rude. “That will not be necessary. If there should be another battle, you will not have to fight it alone. I cannot speak for Mr. Stark, only for myself, but I will support you to stop Captain Rogers from doing any more harm.”

“Thank you…”

“We don’t know about Tony though. I have no idea what he is going to do… He could come out of there any second and put on his suit… or he’ll never even look at it again. At the moment I think both of these outcomes are possible. I don’t even know which one I’d prefer.”

Nobody said anything when Pepper had finished and the silence was heavy, uncomfortable. One of the many times she wished that Tony would just come out of the lab, so she’d know which one it would be. Pepper just wanted him to be safe, but she knew that he was needed if they wanted to get their hands on this little group of fugitives. They were all doing their best and Pepper wouldn’t stop that was for sure, but there was no way to deny that they would be moving much faster with Tony’s help.

But he shouldn’t even have to look at them anymore…

“You want to take a look at the statements of the families?”

Oh thank god, a change of topic.

“They are going to press charges, aren’t they?”

Hope was quick to confirm. “It was almost a bit… unsettling. It’s not like I don’t understand them, I really do… At the second meeting I got the impression that they wanted her head. Mostly the wives of the task force members who died, which is perfectly understandable. I just can’t fight the feeling that they’re pouncing on Sharon Carter, because the one they really want is out of their reach.”

That made an awful lot of sense, but Pepper couldn’t feel an ounce of pity for that woman. She had read the files that Romanoff had released and the ones that Everett Ross had sent her.

Peggy Carter’s niece sent out to spy on Captain America and being his girl next door. A little distasteful in Pepper’s opinion. Sharon Carter’s reports had been released like the rest of it. She had nothing to say about him but songs of praise.

What was wrong with Fury to choose a woman to spy on him when she most definitely had had an upbringing that inclined her to adore and look up to this man? Or had he chosen her in hope that Rogers would see something in her that he had also seen in her aunt?

More disgusting than distasteful…

Clearly she had seen the same in him than her aunt had so many years ago. Why else give him that information? Why give him the weapons after five people had died in Bucharest? First she had handed the information about Barnes to Steve when she could have easily given it to the Avengers… Natasha had been there and Tony was always just a phone call away.
Sharon Carter deserved to be put in front of a jury. Like the rest of them. Unfortunately she was going to be the first one and the first blow was always the hardest.

“What about our beloved former Secretary of State?”

“Same. But they are more eager for her. It seems like it’s easier to forgive a power hungry politician who abused his power than a woman who gave up information because of a crush…” Hope sighed and Pepper tried to figure out what that hard expression in her eyes met. Anger? For some strange reason Pepper didn’t think that the anger was directed at Sharon Carter… nor at the families of the dead.

It would take a bit more to figure this out. “Crush? Something I don’t know about?”

Putting her fork away Hope made it obvious that she didn’t feel like eating anymore. “Magdalena Stan’s father is a history teacher. He wrote his thesis about secret organisation in the Second World War. Captain America was obviously part of that. He was aware of Peggy Carter’s funeral just two weeks ago. It was not hard to figure out that Sharon Carter is her niece… They came to the obvious and right conclusion. To be honest… some of them seemed… even disgusted by the idea. That love story, which maybe never happened, got romanticised by the media and now Peggy Carter is dead and perhaps her niece took her place.”

Yes, Pepper could understand that this would outrage a lot of people. Even more so because she was sure that it was the truth. If not, it didn’t change what Sharon Carter had done and it was inexcusable.

“I see. You went over the details with Mr. Mayrhofer?”

“I did. He is perfectly capable and the fact that it’s a German law firm makes things a lot easier. I don’t think there will be a lot of interference necessary. He makes the impression of being a good guy… despite being a blood sucking lawyer. I’ll stay in close contact anyway… to make sure the families won’t feel any pressure on them whatsoever. They have suffered enough…” Hope trailed off, his voice was wavering a bit at the end and Pepper just nodded, giving her a bit of time to collect her thoughts. “About the construction worker who was injured at the airport…”

Noticing that Hope felt a little bit lost Pepper moved in. “We will of course contact the family and offer to pay for…”

Shaking her head Hope cut her off. “No, I would like to do that. I know about our cooperation and you’re paying for half of the damage of the airport, but I want to do this alone. I hope you are okay with that…”

Pepper didn’t get to say anything, Vision did that for her. All this time he had been listening carefully, in complete silence. Between the two women who were both burning beneath the surface, he looked more out of place than ever. Calm, seemingly at ease, but not cold. Anything but.

Tony had never created anything cold… not even Ultron

“To help this man seems very important to you. I could see your drive and willingness to help all of them, but this is more personal. May I ask why?”

Little lines around Hope’s eyes were very telling. She clearly was still amazed by Vision’s mere presence. “You are right… all of them are important, but… they were in Bucharest. Scott was at the airport…”

It was too much. Pepper closed her eyes, breathing in, fighting down the raging anger that was trying to get control over her every single day. Hope was drowning in guilt and rationally that didn’t make
any sense. Her father hadn’t given her the suit, he had given it to Lang. If it had been her, she would have been on Tony’s side at the airport, there was no doubt about that.

But that hadn’t been her choice. She was innocent and still feeling guilty. Pepper felt lost, she didn’t know what to do about that. After all she had to bear her own guilty every day. Unlike Hope Pepper deserved it. She had left Tony alone.

“I know that nothing I say can change the way you feel about this… but will you allow me to point something out anyway?”

Nodding Hope indicated Vision to continue. “I was also there. At the airport and it was…
catastrophic. Mr. Lang certainly didn’t pull his punches, but he wasn’t the only one. Mr. Lang though was not the one who destroyed all the cars that led up to the unfortunate man’s injury. Someone else has to bear that responsibility.”

Yes. Pepper had seen the footage. The one the public had seen and the one the Iron Man suit had recorded. Pepper had seen it from Tony’s perspective. All those cars that little bitch had dropped on him. As if he wasn’t a man made of flesh and blood inside of his suit. One that he had built, that he had created with his own brilliant mind. To help people. To make up for his own and for his father’s mistake.

Not like her. Nothing was special about her. She had her powers from a piece of alien technology a violent, psychotic mass murderer had brought to their world and she had received these powers to destroy. She had used them to destroy and had shown no remorse.

If that girl was smart, she was going to run to the edge of the world and then she would just keep running. She would be wishing for the Raft when Pepper was done with her…

“I see what you are trying to do here and it’s really nice. It does not matter that he did not do… that exact thing. Scott was there, he was involved and he shouldn’t been. It should have been me and everything would have been… yes, it would have been different. I would have helped you to protect people, not them hurting them. Mr. Stark would not have been hurt.” Hope’s confidence and business demeanour was back, expect for the little smile that she offered Vision. It was sincere and came from the heart. Pepper felt a little better seeing it.

“It is undeniable that every action has its consequences… unfortunately some people refuse to see them…” Vision lowered his eyes and Pepper quickly decided to change the subject or she would head straight back into her anger. “While you were gone I talked to Interpol and…”

“Miss Potts, an intruder has landed on top of the roof.”

Sharing a glance with Hope, Pepper could see the same worry she was feeling and jumped up to her feet. “Immediate lock-up of first floor, activation of all the defence measures around the lab. We need Mark XXXIII and…”

“Allow me, Miss Potts.” Vision stood up himself. “I will look into this myself.”

For that he instantly received a nod from Pepper. How could have anyone entered the area? They wouldn’t hurt Tony anymore, she wasn’t going to…

“Oh my god…” Hope gasped when she saw Vision gliding through the ceiling and Pepper restrained herself from pointing out how often he did such a thing. The next seconds passed at a crawling pace and Pepper’s heart was racing. Not here, not ever. They would have to kill her before laying one finger on him.
“All-clear, Miss Potts. The intruder turned out to be an ally.”

“What? Are you sure?”

“Positive, Miss Potts. The Vision is leading him downstairs.”

Pepper raised an eyebrow, indicating Hope that she had no idea what was happening. A minute later she understood, not sure though how she was supposed to feel about this.

“It’s the Spider.” Hope pointed out, half laughing, half confused.

The teenager raised his head and Pepper immediately felt uneasy due to the fact that he was wearing a mask. “It’s actually Spider-Man, Mam…”

“You are trespassing, young man. This is private property. Are you aware of that?”

Vision put a hand on Spider-Man’s shoulder, smiling a softly. “Our young friend was assured that Mr. Stark was going to contact him. Which hasn’t happened and therefore he decided to… drop by.”

“Swing by seems more appropriate to me.” Now even Hope was smiling and Pepper still felt uncomfortable by the fact that it was apparently so easy to enter the compound. She would have to set up a new security protocol during the next hour. Clearing her throat Pepper demanded everyone’s attention. “I appreciate your concern for Mr. Stark’s well-being, but due to the current circumstances I’m not fond of people showing up uninvited. You should have called.”

“But I did! Two times and Colonel Rhodes told me that Mr. Stark would call me back, but he didn’t… and…” The words just blurted out of his mouth and then he instantly didn’t have any of them left. Right, he was a teenager. “I know this must look weird and I normally don’t run around like that, but I can’t just ring on the doorbell and Mr. Stark knows who I am anyway and… I’m rabbling, right? I want to apologize and since I can’t get Mr. Stark on the phone I decided to show up in person, because then he would have to talk to me… Seems like I was wrong?”

No, it wasn’t quite possible to be angry at him, after all Pepper had heard his first call and thanks to the footage she knew that this young man had risked a lot to help Tony. Security measures had to be improved anyway. “Okay, the next time you want to… drop by… give us a call anyway. About Tony…” Yes, Pepper remembered how Rhodey had mentioned this. Tony had been supposed to talk to the young man. “I am very sorry that he didn’t call you, but… it’s definitely not because he doesn’t want to, but at the moment he doesn’t… Excuse me.”

Her phone was vibrating against her leg, so Pepper pulled it out and took a quick glance at the display.

_Everett Ross_

“Yes?”

“Good afternoon, Miss Potts. We got her. Train station in Sevilla. We might want to talk about how and when to make this public. We’ll probably need whatever is left of the Avengers if Rogers is going to crawl out of his little hiding spot to come and get her.”

They would be ready, Pepper would make sure of that.
Hello everybody,

Finally - The King of Wakanda has the floor... (and he brought his amazing sister)

Have fun :D

The delegates bowed their heads and then slowly walked out of the room. T’Challa released a long sigh that released some of the tension of his body. Royal duties were nothing new to him, he had been born a prince, an heir to the throne of a great country. He had watched his father fulfilling his duties and he had always known that one day it would be him doing this.

Never had he expected it to happen so soon.

It wasn’t hard to admit that he had also underestimated the toll it would take on him. At the moment he just wanted to lie down on the couch and take a long nap. A little pause from having to stand with a straight back, conveying virtue and honour. The audiences were over. To T’Challa it had felt like a really long day, so long that he was surprised it was actually over.

Taking a second T’Challa rubbed his temples, trying to stop his starting headache to take over. Tomorrow wasn’t going to be any easier, he couldn’t afford to be distracted or not on top of his game. If there were only a few less things on his mind…

Being alone wasn’t good for him. During these moments he began so easily to question his own decisions. What if he was not going to realise his projects? What if he didn’t have the ability to do that? T’Challa’s father would have been able to do it…

A foolish thought

If his father was still here, everything would be different. Things would have never escalated to this point. His father wouldn’t have been driven by this low, personal urges for revenge. Nothing had been more important to his father than Wakanda, he would have always thought of Wakanda first.

Even before his children.

Another reason to admire his father even more. He had known about the importance of his position, he had always been aware of his duty to serve. That a king was a servant to his people.

T’Challa knew that too, but sometimes it was still hard to act accordingly. The shoes he had to fill were big T’Challa was afraid to his very core that he would not be able to do that. A personal failure was something he could live with, but now T’Challa was king and a king couldn’t have personal failures.

A king would always fail his country.

Stopping his process of thought T’Challa nodded towards the Dora standing in front of the main door. After taking a little bow they left the room and T’Challa turned around, exiting through another
door. Walking down the small corridor T’Challa loosened his tie and thought about the cold ice-tea he was going to enjoy in two minutes. The phone in his left pocket started to vibrate and some of the tension instantly returned.

Those long dead emperors just had to be envied. Whatever happened in their realms… people had to write information down and some poor lad had to put that letter in a bag, get on a horse and start riding to get the message to the king. This could take weeks. T’Challa learned about new information within seconds and it was expected of him to come to decisions just as quickly.

Checking the e-mail T’Challa sighed in relief. Re-scheduling of an audience tomorrow. That wouldn’t cause him to lose any sleep. Finally T’Challa entered his private rooms, discarding of his tie, dropping it onto an empty chair. Bringing one hand up to his right shoulder T’Challa massaged it softly, but it didn’t help to make the pain go away. Slowly walking over to the bar T’Challa slipped out of his jacket and reached for a glass.

An attentive pair of eyes followed his every move and T’Challa felt slightly annoyed that she wouldn’t speak up. As children they had done this all the time. Trying to sneak up on each other, to move in the shadows, as quietly as possible. Like a panther.

Now it was the same. Shuri was sitting on the couch, not moving, not saying anything and T’Challa knew that this wasn’t going to end well for him. Despite his many failures and faults, he was still able to tell what kind of situation he was in. Especially when his sister was involved. All it needed were little glances, the slight curling of a lip and her black eyes. Somebody else might not have been able to tell, but T’Challa knew her.

And she knew him.

“That tie costs more than some of our countrymen make in a month. You shouldn’t toss it around like that.”

Definitely not what T’Challa had expected her to say. Slightly better, but it was obviously just the introduction. Turning around T’Challa took a sip from his ice-tea and savoured the taste of peaches. Lovely. “It cuts of my windpipe.”

“No, it doesn’t and you are not obligated to wear it anyway.” Shuri had picked it up by now and looked at it. She was probably right. T’Challa had long forgotten about the label, but it did cost a fortune. No doubt about that. Perhaps he should have a talk with the royal tailor. He hated ties anyway. “How was the charity event?”

“Profitable. I hope. The kids were sweet, the parents brave. Should have invited more press though, those business scumbags always open up their wallets way wider if a camera is present. Your meetings?”

T’Challa nodded softly. “Good… they’re still trying to test me. How far they are able to go…”

“Of course. A weak king would favour their positions. It’s important to show strength… and reconnaissance. Ask Machiavelli.”

“I don’t think I want to be a Machiavellian ruler.”

“A good ruler. That would be enough.”

It was no accusation, not a hint of malice in her voice and yet T’Challa felt like he had to defend himself. Shuri had been raised the same way as him. Wakanda first, then everybody else. Wakanda came always first.
T’Challa had decided differently when he had gone after Barnes. It had been his decision to put himself before Wakanda. Shuri would have never done this. It was shameful to admit that and T’Challa was not going to say that out loud. Things would have been different and they both knew it. An underlying sentiment between them, unable to deny. What would have happened if it had been her in Vienna instead of T’Challa? Shuri would have put Wakanda first, they both knew that and T’Challa feared that resentment might grow from this.

A king wasn’t allowed to fail

When T’Challa didn’t reply although the ball was in his field Shuri continued without batting an eyelid. “I received a request from one of the maids.”

Frowning softly T’Challa walked over, not quite able to follow what she was saying. “You? How so?”

Looking after the staff was not something the royal family was responsible for. It was downright impossible for them to be addressed personally with issues related to their work.

“She informed her superior of a problem and he thought it was serious enough to come to me with it. Yes, I offered him beforehand that he could come to me if there should be problems…”

Oh no. “And?”

Shuri cocked her head, her eyes not leaving T’Challa’s face, trying to capture every single one of his reactions. “She doesn’t want to go to the east wing anymore.”

Instantly T’Challa tried to take in the same position he had had in front of the delegates. A bit distanced, seemingly above everything, knowing it all and merely granted them a moment of his precious time. Right now it was an instinct and it was foolish. Shuri could read him like a book and vice-versa. “Why that?”

“She had a run-in with the witch. Don’t give me that stare, it’s what she called her. The witch. Nothing happened, but she doesn’t want to go there anymore.”

Usually that would be unacceptable, but T’Challa didn’t want any more complications and none of them could afford to draw more attention to the east wing as necessary. “I see… Fine, I’ll tell her superior to change her shifts. She doesn’t have to go to east wing anymore and another girl will…”

“Nobody will fill in for her.” His sister interrupted him and T’Challa was startled by his own reaction. He was the king and people didn’t interrupt him. Shuri would always do that and this was the way it was supposed to be. “Why not? Just get to the point you are trying to get across. I’ve had enough of beating around the bush today while talking to the delegates.”

“Alright. None of the maids wants to go there anymore. They are actually very glad that she did say something, now they feel enabled to do the same. They are scared. Of her and of the others. Mostly of her, they don’t want to go there anymore and I told their superior that it was okay.” Shuri raised her chin slightly, just waiting for him to reply, to scold her for going around his back. The east wing was 100 percent T’Challa’s business and responsibility. “You said nothing happened. The maid merely ran into her.”

“That’s obviously enough. They are scared of her, they don’t want to be in the same room as her and I am of the opinion that they shouldn’t have to.”

“Running away from what we’re scared won’t change our fear.”
This was the one step too far. Shuri’s lips formed a thin line and T’Challa swallowed. It was rare that she showed her disapproval. His sister had been trained just like him. One heir, one potential protector of the realm wasn’t enough. Wakanda didn’t take the risk of leaving the spot of the Black Panther empty. The woman right in front of him was just as capable as him, perhaps even more. She had herself under perfect control, every single moment and now she showed him what she thought about his statement. Words followed swiftly. “Does my brother think it’s cowardice to flee from somebody who is clearly superior to you in any way? Is it cowardice to run from a hurricane?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“It’s what you said. They are afraid. They saw what happened at the airport and it has barely been two weeks since our countrymen died in Nigeria. Are you really expecting them to not be afraid?”

Even though T’Challa had taken off the tie, he still felt like choking. There was a reason why they were in the east wing, sealed off from the rest of the palace. T’Challa was well aware of the risk he was taking and he didn’t want to confront the rest of the country with their presence. It would be painful, a slap in the face. Still, they were his people, T’Challa knew that he would be able to explain, to reason. But the rest of the world?

Wakanda had been isolated for decades, centuries. It hadn’t been bad for them, anything but. Their technology was far advanced from everything the rest of the world had to offer, their economy flourished and they had managed to keep all of their enemies out. Vibranium offered them so much and at the same time it was their greatest weakness. Everybody desired it and sometimes people would stop at nothing to get their hands on it. Isolation hadn’t been hard on their country, but it had changed their society. They had become arrogant, distrustful, almost cynic. Their father had realised that and decided to change their ways, open their borders and their arms to the rest of the world. Not a task that could be accomplished in one day, nevertheless T’Challa believed in it and he was determined to go through realise his father’s last project.

If the world found out that he had given them sanctuary, Wakanda’s borders would have to stay closed forever. Worse. They would be under attack. The ice T’Challa was walking on was very thin, cracks started showing, but he couldn’t turn around anymore. It was long too late for that.

T’Challa would always be able to trust Wakanda, not the rest of the world. To try to avoid any kind of attention would be the best choice. The smart thing to do. Something his father would have done. Or Shuri.

No, Shuri would have never had any debts to pay. Things wouldn’t have gone this far. Now T’Challa had to pick up the pieces and put them back together. Clearing his throat T’Challa nodded. “You are right. I am sorry. I understand their concerns, but what am I supposed to do if all of them refuse to…”

“Do they need their beds to be made? Or the hallways cleaned? I am sure they are fully capable of doing that themselves. The king has staff because he has many duties and responsibilities of great importance. You are not going to lose time by doing the chores. They have a lot of time on their hands. They are going to take care of the east wing themselves and the maids are not going to be bothered by this anymore. Does this sound acceptable to you?”

“I’m being asked? It sounds like you’ve already come to a decision without me.”

“You have enough on your mind already and I had to act quickly. The second they start thinking or feeling that we… you are looking out more for your guests than for your own people we will be fighting for a lost cause. We can’t afford any more unease.” Shuri exhaled loudly, her eyes finally leaving T’Challa for a second. The importance of the thoughts running through her head could be
seen on her face. Worry was drawing lines on her forehead and around her lips. “I know the burden lies heavily on your shoulders and I cannot remember a king in the history of our country who had to face more complications while staring his rule. You have and always will have my support and therefore I have to tell you truths that are unpleasant and discouraging. I don’t have to have to carry the weight of the crown. I don’t have to have my eyes everywhere, I have the luxury to be able to focus. I can choose what to look at. So I am looking at the Dora Milaje… When you sent away the Russian spy, they saw in you their king. A display of strength, determination and loyalty to Wakanda. They were proud of their king and proud to serve him. Don’t let that success fool you. You managed to appease them.”

Slightly confused T’Challa raised an eyebrow. Most of Shuri’s concerns he could understand perfectly. That didn’t mean that he agreed with her. Now he had trouble seeing her point. If there was one thing that the king could have unlimited trust in – it was his squad of personal guards. The Dora Milaje. Her names were synonyms for loyalty and allegiance. “Shuri?”

“Father once told us to never forget this. The Dora Milaje serve the King as long as he serves Wakanda. Father isn’t here anymore, so I will have to make sure that you won’t forget.”

Now she was implying something that T’Challa had never thought about and it reminded him of how much he needed his sister by his side. Especially now. “Thank you, Shuri…”

Eventually a smile flickered across Shuri’s face and despite the undeniable darkness of her words, T’Challa felt something like relief. He would have loved to talk about something else, just for a moment. A second.

There was a knock on the door, a well-known rhythm that was only known to a few. Speaking of the Dora Milaje… “Okoye, feel free to enter.”

His personal guard didn’t miss a second and obediently bowed her head in the presence of her king and his sister. “My King.”

“What brings you here? I hope good news, I’ve had my share of bad messages for one day…”

“I don’t see myself fit to judge the situation, but one of the residents of the east wing has a request that I need to bring up.”

The siblings shared a look, both equally surprised, Shuri immediately distrustful but silent. Due to her comments about the Dora Milaje T’Challa took a moment to look Okoye up and down. To understand what she thought about the message that she was about to deliver. Okoye had most contact with them, especially with the Captain. T’Challa had chosen her for a reason. She was the most skilled fighter and incredibly attentive. There were numerous things that he could want. Probably related to Barnes or contact to people outside of the borders of Wakanda. Again. T’Challa had probably made a mistake by allowing him to send that message. It wasn’t Steve who he owned the debt to, but since there was no way for anyone to talk to Barnes…

“Please, go ahead. I want to hear it.”

“Lang has voiced the wish to talk to you, my King. He wants to talk about the accords and stated that he doesn’t think he can talk to one of your other… guests.”

Not good news, no. The best he could have hoped for. A glimmer of hope that his plan might work out. They needed time, time to think, to listen. Running away wouldn’t allow them to take a breath, to understand. It was so easy to continue to hate somebody if you felt hunted. If there was a safe place, you could take your time and see them for what they are. Or at least listen to them.
“Lang?” Shuri’s smile became more present. “It makes sense. He was the last one to join them. There was not enough time to influence him like the others. He is most open to other voices and opinions. Did he seem sincere? Or is it a ploy to find out more about my brother’s positions?”

Okoye turned to Shuri, the same respect in her demeanour as if she was talking to her king. “I know too little about this man to judge, but he seemed genuine. Considering his attempt to kill the king, I am definitely not inclined to trust him.”

“He didn’t try to kill me, he…” T’Challa couldn’t come up with something to defend Scott, because he could have easily killed him. Crushed him like an ant beneath his boot. Nevertheless Scott didn’t make the impression of a bloodthirsty killer, quite the opposite. Like a child playing with a gun that he had found. “He had no idea what he was doing and that’s not the point anyway. He wants to talk about the accords which is wonderful. One has to start for the rest to follow… you will tell him that I consider his request, but tell him that I am very busy and that my time is precious. We will let him wait, a day or two. If his interest is sincere, he will ask another time… Thank you, Okoye.”

The member of the Dora Milaje nodded, bowed another time before leaving them alone again.

“What do you think?” Shuri wanted to know and T’Challa could only shrug. “I am not sure. It’s what I hoped for, but I will not act too fast again. That’s a mistake I won’t commit again. I saw Hope van Dyne on television. If he did too… he probably means it.”

“I saw her too and saw Stark Industries standing up for the families of the dead. Which brought up some questions that I put aside although I shouldn’t have done that… When are you going to talk to the Romanian government? Barnes is not the only one you owe a debt.”

No, she would never stop to criticize him and T’Challa shouldn’t expect any different. It was vital, although it led him to the darkest places. “The jet will leave tomorrow morning. I can consider myself happy if somebody’ll talk to me. I’m as much to blame as Rogers and Barnes and yet nobody seems to talk about that.”

“Because it’s not true. Not entirely. You were doing the wrong thing, but at least you were trying to stop somebody from doing even more harm.”

“It’s still not fair.”

“No, it is not… That was only my first question.”

“Go on…”

“Tony Stark. Is he dead?”

The glimmer of hope faded away and T’Challa stared at his sister. Not wanting to believe that she had just asked this. Not wanting to admit that she had more than enough reason to and that she probably shouldn’t have waited so long to begin with. “No, of course not.”

“Where is he then? A man who never shied away from the spotlight has suddenly dropped from the edge of the world. You were in Siberia and I know what you told me. You also know that my tolerance only goes this far. I waited. It’s been over a week. Still no sign of Tony Stark. So I will ask you again. Is he dead?” Shuri said the last sentence so slowly and with way too much emphasis. Was she really thinking this?

“I left to get Zemo. Perhaps it was the wrong decision, I don’t know. It was what I decided in that moment. To get the one responsible for all of this. Then the Captain and the Soldier left the base, both in bad shape. Rogers said that there had been a fight and that they had to leave before back-up
was going to arrive to get Barnes. I assumed that Stark had called additional forces. I had done him wrong, so I took him with me, to make up for it and I didn’t have much time. Should I have checked? Yes, but it’s Tony Stark we are talking about. The last person one should worry about considering his abilities. Rogers would have never killed him.”

“Not even while trying to protect his friend? He has proven that this isn’t a problem.”

Another thing that T’Challa couldn’t deny. Another dark spot on his soul. Another thing that wouldn’t have happened if Shuri would have been in Vienna with their father. “I asked about Stark. He said that he was okay and they didn’t have much time. I trusted that statement. It’s possible that I may have committed a mistake. Believe me, I am waiting for news that he is okay. Every day.”

***

After having her sit in that small, bleak room for over an hour Everett decided that she had waited long enough. By now the walls had to be moving in on her. A 12 hour trip to get here without an opportunity to sleep or to have a shower. She looked tired and yet keep that stone-faced expression on her face. Well trained, of course. It was in her genes and SHIELD had known a thing or two to teach their agents.

In the end it didn’t seem to matter when Steve Rogers alias Captain America smiled at you. Then all that training went out of the window. It made Everett sick to his stomach that Sharon Carter was obviously preparing herself for an interrogation. Training she should have used against terrorists. Not to help them.

Pushing the door unceremoniously open Everett stalked inside and her eyes were immediately on him. Analysing, trying to adapt to the new situation. “Sir, I…”

Ignoring her Everett dropped the first file on the table right in front of her. It was open, showing a photograph of Jürgen Neubauer’s corpse lying on a dissecting table. “Jürgen Neubauer. Broken neck. Died instantly at the scene.”

Startled Sharon’s gaze dropped to the file, then instantly back up to Everett. “Sir, I want…”

Cutting her off Everett shoved the next file across the table. “Markus Oberbeilsteiner. Shattered skull. Died on the spot.”

“I…”

The next one. “Florian Hofer. Punch into the stomach broke his ribs, punctured his lungs. Would have had a chance to survive if the road to the hospital hadn’t been blocked because of a collapsed tunnel.”

Again she raised her head, trying to get a word out, but Everett wasn’t going to have any of it. “Marius Radu. Crushed by a block of concrete. Hung in for three days before his body shut down.”

“Magdalena Stan. The car she was in was, was pretty much cut into two parts. Her father went away with nothing but some scratches. The wreckage pierced her chest.”

“Luminita Matei. Bleed out on the way to the hospital.”

“Vitalie Popa. Car got buried under so much wreckage, his family isn’t able to give him an open coffin at his funeral. Don’t you dare to look away.”

“Andrei Ciobanu. Broken neck.”
“Gabriel Dumitru. Or what’s left of him, what the firefighters were able to get out of what was left of his car.”

Her fingers were curled around the edge of the table, shaking and Everett placed a sheet of paper on the last file. “The list of people who got injured with a detailed description of their wounds. Read it. Look at it and then think again about whatever you planned on telling me.”

Turning around on his heels Everett left, slamming the door behind him. He didn’t stop until he was back in his office, dropping on his chair. Exhaustion was claiming his body when he glanced at the surveillance footage on his computer. It showed the only person Everett had seen smiling during the entire last week.

Zemo

He wouldn’t stop smiling.
There was coldness around him. Hardness. Tony was feeling comfortable and confused. Something hard was pressing against his chest. Blinking softly Tony straightened up, realising that he had been half lying on a table, resting on the edge which now made his chest hurt. A pain that was almost sweet.

The room was bright and hurting his eyes. What had he been doing? Where…

“Jarvis?”

“No, boss, it’s just me. Sorry.”

Right, Jarvis wasn’t here anymore. He hasn’t been around in quite some time. Tony missed him. In the ice cold winds of Siberia Tony had wished for him. Jarvis had been part of his suit, looking out for Tony every second and every step of the way. Tony definitely hadn’t made it easy for him. Friday was doing a job which was just as good, but it was still different.

Friday hadn’t been there and Tony hadn’t wasted one thought on her. He had wanted Jarvis. Not just to save him, to send a signal, but to talk to him. To make him believe that Tony wouldn’t die alone on this frozen spot.

One second, just after waking up, Tony had thought that Jarvis might still be here.

Rubbing both of his eyes Tony rolled his shoulders, trying to work some of the tension out of his body. He couldn’t have slept long. It hadn’t been relaxing and Tony hadn’t woken up by a nightmare of being killed by his friend. So no, couldn’t have been more than 10 minutes. It would be easy to just ask Friday, but in the end Tony didn’t give a damn. What was the point in finding out how much time he had actually lost? Better starting to make up for it.

Blinking the last remains of his slumber away Tony tried to focus on the prosthetics in front of him. He had advanced quicker than he had expected and yet Tony was anywhere but done. It was his wish to finish them without anyone seeing them beforehand. Like that he would be able to hand them over to Rhodey and he would be able to walk from one second to another. It wasn’t going to work that way, Tony knew that. They would have to be adjusted to Rhodey’s body and as much as Tony would like to believe… he was not able to fulfil miracles. There would still be pain and hard training. All of this should be unnecessary.

But somebody had to do this and Tony was the only one who could.

Some coffee would be a good idea. Tony couldn’t stay awake and he couldn’t sleep either, so coffee would definitely help. But then he would have to leave the lab and that wasn’t an option. Tony
would try to get as far as he could on his own, making them as perfect as he could.

His best friend didn’t deserve any less.

Friend…

Tony pushed that word away. Just semantics. Words were without any value. Friend was just another word. Like enemy. Like trust. Like betrayal. They were all neutral, just a bunch of letters put into a specific order. People gave them meaning.

Sighing softly Tony grabbed his screwdriver. Still working on the hardware. Maybe he was imagining it, but he had the feeling that his fingers weren’t as skilled and as fast as usual. Lack of sleep. Lack of good, relaxing sleep. Another time. This was more important and Tony couldn’t afford making mistakes. If something had to be perfect than it was this.

Working was good. It helped to clear his head. Wires and electronics. Ones and zeros. Something to concentrate on without getting distracted by the pain in his chest which had nothing to do with falling asleep on the table.

“Sir, there is a video message for you.”

“Not interested…” Tony mumbled under his breath, wondering why Friday wouldn’t let him alone. He had been very clear about his request to be sealed off from everybody else.

“It’s from the so called Spiderling, boss.”

Putting down the screwdriver Tony closed his eyes. Of course. He had hoped for this to just go away if he ignored it long enough. For the kid to go home and forget about all of this, then he wouldn’t get dragged into this mess. At least one person should get some peace and the chance to live a life without getting killed or seriously hurt for trying to help people. Tony had promised that he would talk to him, hadn’t he? Rhodey had been angry with him and Tony felt that lump forming in his throat again.

He saw Peter lying on the ground, not moving. Like Charlie Spencer.

Tony had brought him there. Why? A kid. If he had been so sure that there wouldn’t be a fight – why bring a super powered being? Even worse… bringing a kid to this fight. After Steve and… his friend had brought down that tunnel. With a little help from the King of Wakanda.

Wakanda…

A hot burning pain spread across Tony’s skull and he gritted his teeth. No. He didn’t want to have anything to do with this. The prosthetics, they were important. Nothing else. They should have his entire attention. Not them…

Forming a fist Tony softly patted it against his forehead, as if it might help him to think. “Okay… let me see.”

That didn’t mean Tony had to watch it through to the end…

The video popped up on the screen next to him and Tony released a long breath of air. This wasn’t going to be nice.

Peter was looking into the camera, the awkward way like he wasn’t sure if it was already recording. “Uhm, hi Mr. Stark. Miss Potts was nice enough to let me use this room to record a message since
you are… occupied. I know… I’m starting to be a bit stalkerish… third time is a charm, isn’t it? I got it, you don’t want to talk to me. I gotta accept that and this is the last time I’m going to bother you. I promise. I just… need… I really want to apologize for what happened at the airport. You brought me there to help you and you were very clear on what was I supposed to do and… Geez, I got distracted because… I was having fun. That’s so stupid, I know. I was part of a fight between superheroes and I thought it was cool. I got carried away and… Damn, I don’t even know. What you told me was pretty clear and I screwed it up. If I had managed to do what you said… without getting myself knocked over the head… you would have had more time and things would have worked out differently. I’m sorry you got hurt. I should have helped you out more and… dealing with the giant. Colonel Rhodes’ injury could have been avoided if I…”

“Hold on…”

Friday immediately froze the image.

“Is he serious? He can’t be… I mean… We probably would have been toast without him and… he can’t be serious.” Tony shook his head, staring with blurry eyes at Peter’s face on the screen. Teenagers were already bad liars and actors, not that Peter had even been trying. His expression was so open and his eyes were hurting.

“He seems to be serious, boss. The young man was very disappointed when he couldn’t talk to you personally.”

Another pain in his chest. Tony rubbed his sternum, biting his lip. What was wrong with Peter? The kid should be furious at him for bringing him to this fight in the first place and instead he was apologizing. Tony should be the one apologizing.

He had been lying there. Motionless. For a second Tony had thought him dead…

Then Rhodey had fallen from the sky and Steve hadn’t even asked about him.

“Continue.”

“… had done what you told me. If I hadn’t been playing around. I wasn’t even capable of keeping the Winter Soldier from reaching the plane. I had him and the Falcon, but I fucked that up and… I just wanted to let you know that I’m sorry, but I totally understand that you don’t want to talk to me. I just…” Peter stopped, shifting around and he remained silent for several seconds. Tony’s fingers twitched and he was tempted to tell Friday to turn it off.

It was his fault. Not Peter’s.

“This is totally selfish and out of line and you’re going to think that I’m crazy, but… on the news they are talking about Spiderman and about how he should also be subjected to the accords, but nobody knows who he is and… I kinda have no idea what to do. Should I ignore this or… I can’t just stop or maybe I should, cause I clearly have no idea what I’m doing… There is nobody I can talk with. Aunt May has doesn’t know and there is no way I’m telling her and… Mr. Stark, you are the only one who knows and the only one I could ask for advice and I know I have no right to bother you with this. I’m sorry for bringing it up. I just wanted to tell you that I am sorry for… disappointing you. You put so much trust in me and I did nothing to live up to that. I hope you’re fine and that you’ll get better. I guess that’s it. You can stop recording now.”

Tony stared while the screen went black and blinked in disbelief. What was the kid even thinking? Rhodey was right, Tony should talk to him, but at the moment he couldn’t even imagine talking to Pepper. Or anybody.
It still wasn’t fair to leave the kid hanging like this. He didn’t have anybody… perhaps that was still
can be better than being stuck with Tony. If there was one thing Tony really excelled at, it was fucking
things up. Peter maybe didn’t see it this way, but that didn’t mean that it wasn’t the case.

For some bizarre reason Peter thought that he had let Tony down and he couldn’t let him sit on that,
not when the kid was beating himself up.

Closing his eyes Tony took himself a moment and tried to figure out which way to go. Just sitting
here wasn’t an option. Especially since he had refused to talk to him two times already.

“Friday, text message to Spider-Man.”

“I am listening and ready to go.”

***

“You’re late for dinner.” Aunt May wasn’t reproaching him, just stating a fact and Peter lowered his
eyes. “Right, I’m sorry. I lost track of time.”

“Okay. Set the table, please.”

Nodding Peter rushed to get the plates, relieved that he was already off the hook. He really had to be
more attentive. The Spider-Man business was taking up a lot of his time and Peter needed to think of
better excuses, so aunt May wasn’t going to figure out that something was wrong.

Placing the plates on the table Peter felt his phone vibrating in his pocket. The second he reached for
it aunt May turned around. “Peter, we’re about to eat.”

“Sorry, I’ll make it quick.”

Glancing at the display Peter had to suppress a gasp

Tony Stark

There was nothing that could stop him from reading this message instantly. Dinner time or hell. No
chance.

You’re a hero. You saved my ass. Don’t dare thinking anything else

Second message

Give the accords some time. I’ll talk to you. We’ll figure it out. In the meantime – do your freaking
homework

Aunt May asked him why he wouldn’t stop smiling

***

Rolling over Hope cursed whoever was calling her at…

3:21

“Are you kidding me?” Rubbing her eyes with one hand Hope reached for her phone with the other
one. It had taken her over an hour to finally fall asleep, the jetlag driving her insane and now she was
pulled from her sleep. God, she hoped that was important. A lawyer or a family member. No excuse
for anybody else.
Sitting up Hope looked at the illuminated display and frowned. Unknown number. She probably shouldn’t even answer that. Normally she wouldn’t have, but since her life had also changed during the last week… It could be someone important and Hope wouldn’t risk letting somebody wait.

“Hope van Dyne speaking.”

There was a soft click and Hope could hear somebody breathing. Normal, not the creepy way. Although… at 3:21 everything was creepy.

“Van Dyne… right. You don’t use your father’s name because he is a jerk?”

What? Although their relationship had majorly improved Hope didn’t feel the need to defend Hank. During his life he had probably done enough to warrant such a statement. “People with manners start a conversation by saying hello and introducing themselves.”

“Too bad, my father didn’t teach me any manners. He was a jerk too… Still my father. Jerk or not. Right?”

Hope’s mouth dropped slightly open when that certain thought crossed her mind. On the phone it was always difficult to make out a voice. Even more so when you had never talked to this person face to face. She didn’t know for sure, but Hope definitely wanted to be right.

“Mr. Stark?”

“What gave me away?”

“The daddy issues.” Damn, now she was biting her tongue and it was already too late.

Fortunately Stark didn’t seem upset. “Yeah, that one is a classic.”

Shifting around Hope leaned against the headboard, turning on the light. “It’s past three in the morning, Mr. Stark and we’ve never actually met. Why do you call me?”

There was a pause and for some reason Hope felt like Stark didn’t know what to answer.

“To be honest… I had no idea what time it is. I’ve working for a while now and I’m so overtired that it doesn’t matter how many times I blink… I still have double vision. Working like that won’t bring good results and I need good results. So, I thought it’d be better to sleep a little bit. Can’t sleep. Well, I fall asleep and minutes later I’m awake and feel worse than before. Maybe talking to somebody will help me fall asleep… Don’t try to understand, it’s weird. I don’t understand myself…”

“Okay… so why are you calling me? Like I said… we’ve never met each other.”

Stark sighed at the other end of the line. “Right… Sorry for waking you up… I was curious and I didn’t want to talk with anybody I know. They would say the same phrases that I don’t want to hear.”

It was odd, but Hope thought that this was making sense and she had been waiting for a while now to be able to talk to him. “Alright. I hope I can bore you to sleep…”

“I saw you on television… the press conference.”

“You did?”

“Yeah… I didn’t expect that I would hear something like that one day. Pym Technologies and Stark Industries in the same sentence. Without talking about lawsuits.”
Hope thought it was odd, but she had to smile. “Well… I don’t share my father’s opinions and I wanted to do something good. Take on responsibility…”

“What is it with you people?”

“You?”

“You… the ones who have nothing to do with this bullshit. The Spiderling, Pepper… now even you. You’re not responsible for anything and yet you feel like shit… Stop that, it’s giving me a headache. Your boyfriend is a tool and obviously a dumbass. I saw you on television… trading you for Cap? Bad decision…”

Hope wasn’t quite sure how to take this. It sounded a lot more like the Tony Stark the world was familiar with. Maybe he was putting on a show, perhaps he was already feeling better. Who knew…

“Scott wanted to be a hero… I made a mistake and made him think he could be one. I know that I’m not to blame for what he did, but that doesn’t mean I don’t feel like I could do something.”

“Huh… funny. You don’t sound like your dad.”

“You’ve met him?”

“Once… he was a jerk. Me too… we didn’t get along.”

“Yeah, he does that…” Hope sighed softly and reminded herself to not let her be influenced by any of that. “He brings out the worst in people if he wants to.”

“ Heard that before…”

When he wasn’t saying anything else Hope decided to just go for it. “You mind if… Have you received the blueprints?”

“Yes…”

“Have you taken a look at them yet?”

Another pause. “No. I am working on something else right now. Something more important.”

That was something what Hope didn’t want to hear. In her mind there was nothing more important than making sure that the Ant-Man suit couldn’t do anymore damage. Nobody could be more helpful at that than Tony Stark. Then again, Hope knew that he had a few things more on his plate. “Is that something I can help you with?”

“No, that’s something I have to do alone… thanks anyway… I’ll be honest, Miss van Dyne. You don’t seem like a person that is willing to put up with any kind of bullshit…” Another pause. “I am not entirely sure if I want to take a look at the blueprints. I am not sure if I want to have anything to do with that.”

This was it. A reasoning that was deprived of all logic. “I don’t understand… You got screwed over. I talked with Miss Potts and I can see that she wants to burn down entire countries if necessary. If somebody had done… I would want them to pay for it. Not just because of their wrongdoings, but because they did it to me.”

“I bet you broke some noses on the playground.”

“Only if they were mean to me.” Hope waited for a laugh, but it didn’t come. “I don’t get it. Could
you explain?"

By now he sounded weary, like he needed to sleep for an entire day. “I am so tired of this… picking up the pieces while other people keep on breaking glass. Wow, that sucked as a metaphor… I don’t want to have anything to do with them. I want them out of my life. Out of my conscience. I am done…”

***

“Where is Scott?” Steve couldn’t help but notice that Scott was missing at dinner again. In response Sam shrugged softly. “He said he wanted to read and that he wasn’t hungry.”

Most likely Steve was exaggerating, but it concerned him a little that Scott seemed to avoid their presence. It was the second dinner that he missed. Perhaps he was still trying to cope with the end of his relationship and had decided that he wanted to be alone. Clint had done the same, although he was sitting here right now.

“Must be one hell of an interesting book…” The archer muttered under his breath and continued to poke the meat on his plate with his fork.

The atmosphere was anything but comfortable. It was hard to make conversation when everybody seemed to be lost in thought and the one who always liked to crack jokes was absent.

“We should try to talk to T’Challa. About going out and getting a breath of fresh air. The palace is great and all, but I’m starting to feel a bit like Julian Assange…” Sam pointed out and Steve frowned in response. “Who?”

“The Wiki Leaks guy… with blonde hair and the crazy eyes.” Wanda explained and Steve still had no clue what they were talking about. Probably another thing that he would have to put on his list.

“Anyway, my point is that it’s getting strenuous sitting around all day. I don’t see the harm in us taking a walk around the city.”

Steve could understand Sam’s frustration, but he didn’t share it. The lab was here, Bucky was here, so Steve felt no inclination to leave. Not everybody was like him though, so Steve would have to take that into account. “I know it’s difficult, but he’s not in an easy situation either. He took us in, but Ross’ goons are still after us and if they find out that we’re here… Wakanda is going to end up in deep trouble. We have a responsibility and he does too. We have to respect that.”

“Ross is history. Should be worth more than a side-note in the newspapers. Too bad that they are busy bitching about us.” Clint was snarling and Steve sighed. “Yes, but he’s just one single part in all of this. The accords are still in place, so whoever is going to take his place is going to continue his work. I’d like to go out too, but that would have consequences for other people…”

“We’ve been on stealth missions, Steve. All of us. I think we are perfectly capable of moving around a bit without being noticed.” Wanda had a point there and Sam nodded to show that he agreed. Sighing softly Steve wished there was an easy way to end this conversation. He wanted them to feel comfortable and he wanted them to be safe. It was necessary to keep a low profile, but it shouldn’t be. Wanda should be able to go out if she wanted to. Sam should be at home, working with veterans and Clint shouldn’t have to learn about his divorce in the newspapers. There should be no divorce at all. “Okay, I get it. I’ll talk to him. I’ll try…”

Unfortunately it was rather difficult to even get a hand on him. T’Challa was running a country, good excuse for being quite busy…
“Thank, Steve.” Wanda shot him a genuine smile and that made everything better. It had been quite a while since he had seen her smile like this. For a while he had feared that the Raft had taken that away from her. It was a relief to see that this wasn’t the case.

“This is really good… I don’t know a thing about food, but my stomach really digs this. It’s great.” It was kind of obvious that Sam was trying to change the topic and he appreciated it. Steve shared his non-knowledge about Wakandan cuisine which didn’t mean that he didn’t like it. It was very tasty. Alone in a kitchen Steve would be completely lost, he could maybe throw an egg into a pan, but that’s about it.

When dinner was done Clint was the first one to get up and Wanda quickly said something before he had the opportunity to leave. “How about we watch a movie? All of us. That’s definitely going to be more fun than dinner and we definitely should spend more time together. It’s not like we have other people around.”

A good idea, Steve was grateful for it and it didn’t take that much to convince Clint. They settled down in the common room and while Steve was still thinking about getting Scott Sam was already turning on the TV.

“… as the whole world audibly releases a sigh of relief there are still no images to confirm the statement of Stark Industries. There are also no medical reports about what kind of injuries Tony Stark suffered in Siberia. His long absence from the public eye and the very late confirmation about his survival keep fuelling rumours and speculation…”

Before Steve even had a chance to take in the words Clint was already reacting to them. “I don’t get this. Were they trying to make them believe that you killed him? Bullshit… sooner or later Stark would have ended up in front of a camera anyway. So what is this about? Why is he hiding?”

Sam shrugged. “Perhaps the UN is telling him to keep a low profile? Busy working on a way how to track us down. No time to go out.”

Shaking his head Steve ignored his last comment, he was trying to understand something. “Wait a second… did people really believe that he might be dead? Because he didn’t have a public appearance in over a week?”

“Just ignore it. Things are about to calm down, the press needs something new to talk about, so they’re trying to go with Stark…” Wanda made a dismissive gesture and then turned to Sam. “Change the…”

“We have to interrupt the current story. We just received news of a hostage situation in Tel Aviv. Apparently a terrorist group entered the office building of an insurance company and now keeps every person in the building hostage. Unfortunately we still have very little information on the situation, therefore the identities of the kidnappers are still unknown. There is strong suspicion that their motivation might be Islamic terrorism…”

“My god…” Wanda covered her mouth with her hand and for a second Steve asked himself if this would never end. If there were always going to be people who didn’t have other intentions than bringing pain and misery.

“According to our sources there are over 60 persons in the building… People on the streets heard shots being fired. Police and military forces are…”

“Steve?”
Eyes were looking at him. Waiting, expecting and it was reassuring that they were thinking the same thing as him. “We should get going.”

At the same time everybody got up to their feet, determined and ready. They didn’t get further than one step. T’Challa was casually standing in the doorway, hands buried in the pockets of his suit. “May I ask where you are going?”

“There’s a kidnapping in Tel Aviv. Probably a terrorist attack.” Clint sounded nonchalantly, seemingly annoyed by having to point out the obvious.

“So I’ve heard. You want to go to Tel Aviv. If that’s what you want to do, there is no stopping you. I am merely curious how you are going to get to Israel?” Tilting his head T’Challa’s eyes went from one person to another.

“With the Quinjet. The one we got here with…” Sam quickly explained, urging Steve with his gaze and he was right, they were losing precious time. Human lives were at stake. “We really have to leave, it’s…”

Raising his hand T’Challa cut off Steve’s words. “Like I said… you may leave if you like, but what makes you think that the Quinjet is at your disposal? It belongs to the crown.”

“But you… the Raft…”

“An entirely different situation. Perhaps you are used to… having a personal airplane. This is not the case here. It is mine and I will not give it to you to go to Israel while you are still wanted fugitives. Only to cause another diplomatic incident.” T’Challa clear and strong tone made clear that he meant every bit of it and Steve felt like he was being pushed in front of a train.

“Your highness, perhaps you don’t understand… It’s a critical situation. The Avengers are needed and…”

“Israeli military and police is already present. I am sure they are able to handle the situation.”

“With all due respect, we have other possibilities than the police and the military. We could make sure that nobody gets hurt.” Wanda’s gaze was challenging, but T’Challa was clearly having none of it. “Such a guarantee does not exist. Why do you think you are more adapt to handle a hostage situation than people who have been trained in these negotiation processes for years? Tell me, Miss Maximoff, have you ever had to deal with a hostage situation? Do you know about the motivations of a kidnapper and how to deal with them? Because violence alone will not be enough.”

“It’s a terrorist attack.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know if it’s a terrorist attack. Now listen to me very carefully. You will not go to Israel. I will not have you capture the attention of the entire world and lead it to Wakanda and more importantly I will not let you go there and enter a situation that you know nothing about. This could very likely be another result of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and you, a group of Americans, decide to go in there and handle it, because you are the most qualified? You are not. This is happening on Israeli territory, it’s Israeli business and if they ask the Avengers for help, I am sure that the Avengers will respond. In case you have forgotten – you are not the Avengers. Not anymore. I wish you a pleasant night.”

So T’Challa left them alone and Steve looked at his friends, seeing the same confusion that he was feeling.
Hello everybody,

You guys want the videos leaked? Well, we're going to leak... something :P

First MAJOR change from my oneshot and I'm pretty sure you're going to like it.

Anyway, here's Scott and does what any human being should do - looking at a problem from every angle possible

Have fun and tell me what you think :D

Responses to the reviews will come a little later

“Let’s face the facts. We are not talking about anybody, we are talking about Tony Stark. Probably the most well-known person on this planet who has never shied away from any camera. After trying to hunt Steve Rogers down Tony Stark disappeared, making the world assume he was dead and now we learn that he has been hospitalized and not ready to make a public appearance. It’s safe to assume that another fight occurred between him and Steve Rogers…”

“We don’t know that.”

“Seriously? What other possibilities are there? There already was a fight at the airport, Steve Rogers and James Barnes escaped and Tony Stark went after him. What else should have happened? Given the fact that the public hasn’t seen Tony Stark since and Stark Industries waited until now to release a statement. I think it’s time to consider the possibility that Tony Stark was injured so badly that his life was in danger. Maybe the injuries are so severe that he is no longer able to face the public…”

“I have to stop you right there. There is no evidence for that. We have no idea where Tony Stark went or if he even saw Steve Rogers after the fight at the Leipzig airport. Are you trying to tell us that Steve Rogers, a decorated war hero who saved the entire planet…”

“Technically it was Tony Stark who saved the planet.”

“… that he would have seriously hurt Tony Stark in a fight? His friend? Get out of here, that assumption is ridiculous.”

“Is it? Steve Rogers is responsible for the death of six civilians…”

“Unfortunate circumstances.”

“The members of the swat team that he killed? With his own hands? Or don’t they matter because they weren’t his friends? Colonel Rhodes, a member of the Avengers, a decorated war hero, since you like to put emphasis on such things… he won’t ever walk again. Steve Rogers showed no…”

“Steve Rogers was not directly involved in Colonel Rhodes’ injury.”
“Another unfortunate incident? How many lives does Steve Rogers have to take, how many laws
does he have to break until you right-wingers finally admit that…”

“Oh geez, shut up!” It was kind of stupid to yell at the live stream on his laptop, but Scott was fed up
with the debate. His own fault, he had decided to watch it. So incredible exhausting. Scott had
wanted to know what was going on with Tony Stark and he had learned nothing new. Okay, Tony
Stark wasn’t dead, technically that was news. Not really though, because Scott hadn’t thought for
even a second that something could have happened to Stark. Sure, there had been a fight in Siberia,
Steve had said as much and that’s about it. Fighting had also taken place at the airport and it hadn’t
been their intention to really hurt anybody…

Right… now a person was sitting in a wheelchair. Granted, Steve hadn’t been directly involved in
that. Scott had been more likely to hurt someone than Steve. So the thought of Steve killing Tony
Stark in a fight was ridiculous. Out of the question.

Stretching his muscles Scott let his thoughts wander, because the flood of information was slowly
going overwhelming and yet he still didn’t know anything. Stark hadn’t been seen since the airport
fight. Not in public. It had been confirmed that he had been in hospital. By Stark Industries and the
hospital itself. No report on his injuries though. Could be a relatively simple thing like a broken arm.
Why was he hiding now? And why had they kept silent about his state for so long? Letting the
people believe that he might dead? Hank would probably call that an ego thing, but Scott failed to
see it. At the moment the media was bashing Cap with everything they had… well, most of it. Stark
not taking advantage of that possibility seemed kind of weird. A missed opportunity.

No, Scott had no idea what was going on. Something he had a lot of was time, enough time to do his
own research. Closing the livestream completely Scott opened Google and typed in Tony Stark.

350 000 000 results…

Scott replaced Tony Stark with Iron Man

540 000 000 results

Scott had to start somewhere, right?

Tony Stark + Sokovia Accords

Scanning through the page Scott quickly found something that captured his attention. Stark had
given The Guardian an interview about the Sokovia Accords. Exclusive. Just one day before signing
them. A British newspaper? Weird…

Opening the site Scott began to read.

... there need to be boundaries. We can’t go out and do whatever we want, that would make us no
better than the bad guys...

... I know we’ve committed mistakes. I committed severe mistakes and I am not saying that
everything would have been avoidable, but it would have definitely helped to have another opinion.
To bring in another point of view...

... the Avengers are only people. We are not perfect. When the next threat is going to happen, I can’t
promise that we’ll do everything right, but we have at least try to and if something goes wrong,
because we made mistakes, we have to stand up for them. The police does that, the military has to
do that. They are public organisations and the Avengers should be the same. We cannot be a private
organisation that hops from country to country creates chaos and then disappears again. At the
moment the whole world calls for more cooperation between the nations in the war against terrorism. The Avengers can’t just stand aside and say that’s none of our business. Sokovia was a tragedy and a lot more people could have been saved if the Sokovian government would have been informed and able to help. The Avengers didn’t do that because they became arrogant, sure they were the most adapt and the most capable people to handle this situation…

If we don’t trust the rest of the world, why should they trust us? Why should they let us in? I was arrogant too. Being Iron Man, having that power… It makes you believe that you can do everything you want, wherever you want. That’s not true. There are rules and the Avengers have to accept them like everybody else…

… the Avengers have become an armed, private force. I am part of it and that made it very easy to accept this new state, because… you know… it’s us. We’re the good guys. No reason to worry. It doesn’t work like that. We don’t have any authority whatsoever. Sooner or later we’re going to catch some criminals and their lawyers are going to get them free, because the Avengers are not the police. We can’t arrest anybody. Maybe it was even us committing the crime…

Okay, now that was bullshit. They were the Avengers. Everybody knew who they were and that they were fighting for justice. Battles that the police and the military are not… Scott flinched. He had been about to make the exact same argument. But it was the truth. The military and the police hadn’t been able to deal with the Chitauri invasion. Ultron had been entirely defeated by the Avengers. What would they have been able to do against the five Winter Soldiers?

That wasn’t the point that Stark was trying to make. He was taking about… legal issues? The right to do the right thing? If you knew that a bad thing was happen, wasn’t it your duty to stand up to that? Where did your civil duty end and where did vigilantism start?

Would anyone really have complained if it wasn’t for Lagos? Sure, a terrible accident. That’s what it had been. An accident. While trying to stop a terrorist from stealing a biological weapon. That was something you had to fight against. No discussion about that…

A knock on the door made Scott jump and he looked at his watch. It was way too early for someone to want something from him. Getting up Scott walked over and opened the door. He was facing a guy that he had never seen before. Clean shaven, nice haircut, a suit that was probably worth more than the Ant-Man suit. There was something wrong about him. Something painfully obvious. He was white. As far as Scott knew they were the only Caucasian people in Wakanda. A foreigner? What the hell… Nobody but the maids had entered their wing and Scott’s instincts were kicking in way too late. That guy could only mean trouble. Too bad for him that he showed up alone, Scott was so going to kick his ass if he should…

“Mr. Lang, sorry for disturb you at such an early hour. I hope I didn’t wake you up?”

Uhm… at least he was a polite government agent that was here to kill him? “No. By the way – who are you? What are you doing here?”

The man smiled at him, almost looking sheepish and not like an asshole that was here to drag Scott back into prison. “I’m sorry, I forgot to introduce myself.” Scott almost frowned when the man held out his hand. “My name is Ilya Kalinouski. His Highness, King T’Challa, let me know that you might want to talk to me.”

“Sorry, Mr… Kalinsiki or whatever… I don’t even know who you are.”

“I am a lawyer, Mr. Lang. Specialised in constitutional law. I was told that you might wanted to take a look at the accords and that you would need some assistance.”
Scott ran out of words. Was this for real? First he didn’t get a real response to his request and now T’Challa sent him a lawyer even before breakfast? Was that amazing or awkward? Oh, what the hell, this was definitely amazing and Scott needed to ask for his name again and now try to understand it. “Oh, wow… cool. Uhm, come in. Sorry for the mess… the maid hasn’t been here… whatever. Come in.”

“Thank you, Mr. Lang.” That guy even moved like a lawyer, slow and somewhat graceful. Like he was used to go to fancy dinner parties where you had to be careful to not throw some antique vase off the table.

“Just call me Scott and… what was your name again? I got distracted by the all the… letters.”

To his relief the lawyer didn’t react like a snob, his smile seemed very genuine. “It’s Kalinouski, but Ilya is less formal. May I take a seat?” He pointed at the table and Scott rushed over to close the laptop. “Oh, please do.”

Ilya placed a ridiculously large briefcase on the table and sat down. By now Scott’s heart was beating a little bit too fast, he was excited that somebody was here to bring some light into the darkness. To be honest, he hadn’t quite believed that T’Challa would go as far as send him a lawyer to explain this whole mess to him. Even better, Ilya had to be an outsider. He was white, he couldn’t be Wakandan, so maybe he could tell Scott what was going on outside of the palace.

“I don’t want to be… impolite, but I expected… Okay, I didn’t really expect anything when I asked T’Challa… the King for some advice, but I guess I pictured somebody else… somebody more Wakandan? Shit, that sounded racist now, didn’t it?”

“No, you sounded confused and I think that is very understandable. You are right, I am not Wakandan.”

“Thought so… Kalinouski… Russian?”

“Sokovian.”

Scott’s eyebrows shot up, although he didn’t know why he was surprised. Where was the difference between a Russian, Sokovian or even French lawyer? As long as he knew his shit. It was a little on the nose to have a Sokovian explaining the Sokovia Accords to him, but whatever was necessary.

“Would you mind telling me about your difficulties? Then it will be easier for me to figure out how to help you.”

“Right, uhm… I started looking through the accords online, but it’s pretty overwhelming and I hardly understand a word… it’s all legal language and pretty confusing. It sounds a bit weird, but I need somebody to sit down with me and to explain it to me. Not just the overall… sense, but pretty much everything. I… have the feeling that the media and a lot of other people are only scratching on the surface.”

Ilya’s grey and calm eyes were watching him attentively and he eventually nodded. “That is a very smart statement, Scott. You want to get started instantly? If so, we will need coffee. Lots of it.”

“Cool, I’ll check out the kitchen. Be back in a second.”

Five minutes later Scott put two steaming cups on the table and looked at two copies of the accords already lying there. Fuck, those were really huge. Hopefully the fond wasn’t as tiny as Scott expected it to be.
“Thank you. Let’s get started? First things first. You cannot read such a document on your screen. It will give you a headache and you need a marker, something to write down notes. One reading isn’t enough. You have a degree, right? It’s not that different from studying university papers.”

God, Scott had hoped that those times were far behind him. Didn’t look that way. “Okay, I got my marker. Let’s do this.”

The headache kicked in one and half hours later. Which was pretty good in Scott’s opinion.

“You deserve a break. It’s a pretty hard read and a lot of information.”

Rubbing his forehead Scott felt the desire slam his head against the table top, but that would look stupid in front of the lawyer. “Yeah, that’s an understatement. Fuck… all that paragraphs and clauses… I liked it more when it was simple.”

Ilya raised an eyebrow at that. “How can a document that treats the rights and duties of a super powered task force and their role in our society be simple?”

Scott had no answer to that which made him feel stupid. “You know… I’ve talked to some people who said… who thought that it was a very one-sided affair. That made it sound… simple.”

“Well, the accords are a lot of things. They are not everything that I wanted them to be and we will work on them for years to come, but they are definitely not simple.”

“Wait a second… does that mean that you’re a co-creator of the accords?”

“I’m Sokovian… what happened to our country was different than the events of New York or Washington. There was no alien invasion or a corrupt government organisation trying to launch the Third World War. The destruction was brought to us by the Avengers themselves. Not intentionally but their somewhat reckless actions had consequences which resulted in the worst tragedy my country has ever seen and our nation has been violated by several wars for years. At that time only Johannesburg could be compared to the disaster of Sokovia. Then Lagos happened… something we dreaded, but it was inevitable.”

Frowning softly Scott shook his head. “How so? That was an accident. Wanda tried saving everyone at that market… which resulted in a tragedy… How was that inevitable?”

“When people take on a task that they aren’t equipped for and that they know nothing about… what other result can you expect than disaster?”

Okay, now this was getting ridiculous. “Hold on. I don’t really get this. What are you talking about? It’s the Avengers. They were hunting down a wanted terrorist. Who is better suited to do that than them?” The idea was absurd, there were no better fighters than them, nobody with the same skills. Surely, Ilya had to refer to something else and it was a strange misunderstanding.

Casually Ilya crossed his legs and his fingers curled around his empty cup of coffee. “Who? A counter-terrorist unit. Intensively trained individuals who have experiences with that kind of situations. Who have a lot more resources at their disposal to guarantee that they can do all that is possible to save civilian lives.”

“I don’t get it. Do you realise how weird it sounds when you are talking about skills and you say that the Avengers don’t have them? We’re talking about Captain America here. The Black Widow, Hawkeye…”

“A soldier who received his training 70 years ago. Two assassins and spies who definitely weren’t
trained to do what they were doing… Look, I am not going to argue that their incredible abilities couldn’t be useful… They could, but they are used in the wrong way. Lagos is a prime example. They went there, having no idea what they were doing and people died. That’s why you have this document lying in front of you.”

Scott was already on the verge of protesting, but then he decided that he wanted to hear this. If he still wanted to, there would enough time to contradict. “Okay… What do you mean by that – no idea what they were doing?”

“Given the reports that Stark Industries released they were looking for Rumlow and had strong indices that he was in Nigeria. Their idea that he was about to rob a bank was absolutely wrong. When they realised that it was already long too late. The Nigerian government had no idea of the Avengers’ presence. The Avengers didn’t give up any information that Rumlow, a wanted terrorist, was in Nigeria. That is just reckless and allow me… stupid. The Avengers don’t have access to every piece of information in the world, they might think that, but it’s not the case. Obviously they had no idea that biological weapons could be found in Lago. The Nigerian government knew that and they would have instantly doubled security and they would have supported the Avengers if they had known. There would have more policemen in the streets, there would have been plans to evacuate public places. None of that could happen, because the Avengers refused to share information, because they thought they could handle it. Having the Falcon do some air surveillance and have the Black Widow and Miss Maximoff on the street. It’s laughable. It’s not enough. It’s reckless. They don’t have the resources and the possibilities the government has. I don’t know how familiar you are with counter-terrorism, but it’s usually a quiet affair. Agents try to avoid public places for these kinds of things. I’ve heard the argument before – Miss Maximoff saved more people than she killed that day. Nonsense.”

Scott opened his mouth, but Ilya shot him a warning glance. “The fact that you fought of an alien army is incredible and something… we can hardly grasp and such an amazing thing can easily make you lose touch with reality. Four people, although two of them super powered, are not enough to take on a terrorist unit with four times as many members. Especially not in a public place. The Avengers were not able to hold them back, they escaped and of course they would choose a public space to get it away. The consequence was chaos and disaster. People who knew what they were doing would have tried to never let such a fight happen in the first place, they would contacted the Nigerian authorities to make sure they would find out as much information as possible. To predict the next steps, to get them outside of the city. None of that happened. Instead people died.”

That… was something Scott had never thought about. There had been terrorists, it seemed only natural that the Avengers would be there. Scott had never considered that they shouldn’t. They were the Avengers, led by Captain America and Captain America protected the innocent, fought Nazis. The modern equivalent of Nazis were terrorists, so that seemed fairly easy.

Technically… yeah, it was somebody else’s job to do that kind of stuff. Trying to get the fight out of public zone made sense. Isn’t that what happened in New York? Why not in Lagos? What had happened in Sokovia? Had they contacted the authorities to tell them what was about to happen? What that robot was about to do?

“If Lagos had gone down differently… would the accords still have happened?”

Ilya smiled sadly at him and pointed at the accords on the table. “Scott, a document like this isn’t written within a week. A lot of people have been working on the accords for over two years… what happened in Lagos only accelerated things. The accords would have happened anyway. I was involved in creating them, I believe that they are a good thing. A very good thing. They give a voice to the people of the world. I guess you have never been to Sokovia… in my homeland the Avengers
have the same reputation like the terrorists they are trying to hunt down. It wasn’t Hydra that
destroyed my country. I’m not saying that they shouldn’t have been stopped, but it’s also a question
of ‘how’.”

Scott remembered the images of an entire city floating in the air. It was true, Hydra hadn’t done that.
Swallowing softly Scott remembered Hank’s words and looked at Ilya with shy eyes. “Do you hate
him? Tony Stark, I mean. He was the one who created Ultron…”

“I did.” The response was quick and even, obviously honest. “For a short time. Then he stepped in
front of a camera and took the entire blame. Stark Industries has been putting a lot of money in
Sokovia since. Rebuilding. Taking care of the families who lost their homes. Stark also got other
companies, entire nations to invest. Sokovia survived, but Zemo’s sentiment is by no way unknown
among the population. They got an apology from Tony Stark, they saw that he is trying to make
things right. It’s probably not enough to gain forgiveness, but it’s something. The other Avengers…
everybody saw them there that day. Even before when they invaded the Hydra base… the people
aren’t stupid, they know that the other Avengers were also involved to some degree. There never
was an apology or a visit. These people never chose to be saved by the Avengers… they didn’t get a
say in that. Nor did the people of Lagos or Johannesburg. The look at Sokovia and they see a
wracked country and the ones responsible never even got a slap on the wrist. The Accords are long
overdue.”

Not knowing what to say Scott’s eyes focused the document on the table. More than 1800 pages. A
bit much to simply write down ‘Avengers must do as government’ says. Ilya and him had only got
through 30 pages and there had already been so many exceptions. Scott’s head was swimming and
he was feeling a bit sick. The preamble had been horrible. No, actually it had been anything but…
five pages dedicated to freedom, peace, justice and the people of this earth. Who all had equal rights
and deserved to live in safety. This document should ensure that a force as powerful as the Avengers
with great and positive potential should be used like that – in a positive way. To be honest, it hadn’t
sounded that bad. Pretty good actually.

“Can we get back to the accords? I get us another round of coffee?”

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A strange sound pulled Scott from his sleep and he sat up straight. What? Huh? What the hell was
going on?

Another knock at the door. Oh, so somebody was knocking. Right. He had fallen asleep on the
accords. And he had drooled on them. Great. Absolutely disgusting. Running both hands through his
hair Scott had to realise that his headache had only been getting worse.

The knocking wasn’t helping. “Yeah, I’m coming. Give me a break…”

Standing up Scott took a second to stretch. His arms and legs were hurting from falling asleep on a
hard chair. Ilya had left during the early hours of the afternoon and now it was… check his watch…
time for dinner. Scott just wanted to sleep, his head and his eyes were aching and he was in such a
terrible mood he didn’t want to talk to anybody. Especially not to the only people around him.

Moving towards the door Scott took all the time in the world. Opening it he saw Sam standing in
front of him, a grin on his face. “Hey there, little man. Wow, did I wake you up?”

He sounded disbelieving and Scott was already annoyed. “Yes. What’s up?”

The grin dissolved and Sam turned more serious. “Listen, you’ve been keeping a bit to yourself and
That’s totally cool, but it would be a good idea for you to join us for dinner tonight.”

“Uuh… why?”

That question seemed to throw Sam for a loop. “Uhm… We gotta talk about some stuff.”

“Such as?”

“Right, you weren’t there last night, but… we’ve run into some problems with T’Challa and we wanted to talk about what we’re going to do about it.”

Scott raised both eyebrows and stared at Sam for several seconds before closing the door, saying “I have no problems with T’Challa.”

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Turning the page Pepper took in even more lines of that ridiculous, silly handwriting. From just looking at these diaries one could get the impression a little girl had written them. The words were something different though.

Dark, twisted and so distorted. Maybe Pepper was wrong, a child could have easily written this. The perspective on the world was devoid of any experience. This wasn’t the opinion of an adult. Adults weren’t putting the whole world into two categories. Good and bad. Things weren’t as simple as that.

It was long after midnight and Pepper was tired, longing for some sleep and yet she wouldn’t put that diary away. Maximoff hadn’t been writing regularly. There were big time jumps and sometimes she had written several pages a day.

Ideas, dreams, events… nothing of interest until Hydra. From there Pepper just wanted to seek her out and get her hands on her. She had no idea what she would do, but Maximoff’s past was evoking the lust to do violence in her. Working for his arch-enemy, letting them experiment on her and yet Rogers had trusted her more than Tony?

Shaking her head Pepper forced herself to continue reading, she wanted to be done with it as soon as possible, because this was making her physically uncomfortable. Everything about this girl… she wanted it far away from her. As far as possible. Nonetheless Pepper would go every single detail. There was no way she was going to risk missing something that could help her to find them.

Blinking Pepper eventually stopped. In the middle of the page after finishing a phrase in the middle of a paragraph. The words she had just read were causing her to have a physical reaction. A sour taste in the back of her mouth, accompanied by the feeling that she was about to retch. Her stomach was turning and the only way to fight of a wave of nausea was to close her eyes and hold absolutely still. Bright spots were dancing in the darkness and Pepper pushed it away.

Reading that paragraph again she took in every single word, to make sure that she wasn’t wrong. That she perfectly understood that scurrilous, misbegotten event Maximoff described. Again and again. Pepper needed about eight times to let it sink in. For her to realise that such blatant cowardice and audacity could even exist. That a person could carry these traits without crumbling beneath them.

Not even Obediah had gone that far. Even he had been man enough to tell Tony what he was doing. He had looked into Tony’s eyes and told him that he was destroying him. Scum like that man hadn’t gone as far as this woman…

She had been living in Tony’s house, had worn the clothes he had bought her, eaten his food…
Pepper’s hands were shaking. All her life she had shied away from violence. She had despised people for using it, had seen it as a sign of weakness to settle your conflicts like this. Now Pepper was longing to do some damage with her hands.

Nobody knew. It had been her. All along and she had let Tony take the fall for it. Even before Rogers.

They were a waste of human skin, all of them. Calling themselves heroes and all they did was dragging a man down who was constantly trying to make up for his mistakes, feeling like the world was on his shoulders.

Tony had spent two nights without sleep, Pepper knew. At that time she had still been lying next to him. Choking on guilt, trying to find ways to make it better. To make up for it. That’s why he had been so willing to sign the accords. Now it turns out that it hadn’t even been his mistake…

It had been her and she was on the other side. With Rogers… Burying Tony under a load of cars, ripping his heart out and leaving him to freeze in Siberia. While he was innocent and she had said nothing…

Enough.

Pepper didn’t need red magic to bring down the entire world around her. She would do it anyway and right now was the time to start.

“Ross.”

“Sorry to bother you at such a late hour, but I have new information about the witch. Mind boggling information.”

“I’m listening.”

“I’ll send it to your office in just a minute. You’ll need to do me a favour though?”

“What kind of favour?”

“Make sure one of your employees takes it to WikiLeaks.”
Hello everybody,

The bad news first. I don't have a lot of time on my hands and the time I do have I want to spend writing. That's why I'm probably not going to reply to all of your comments or I'm going to do it... way later. The reason is simple, the response to the last chapter was overwhelming and I'm really grateful for that :D You guys are awesome :)

Just a few things that got discussed in the comments

1) Wanda is a wanted criminal, the police and authorities would have looked into her diary anyway, her privacy is gone. Pepper was only the first to get her hands on it

2) WikiLeaks is part of Pepper's private revenge and it's somewhat... necessary. Wanda is highly dangerous. When a highly dangerous and armed individual gets to roam around freely, people get warned. Also Pepper wants people to realise Tony's role in the Ultron disaster and she believes that people are more willing to listen when the information comes from WikiLeaks and not the government. Since the later is not as trustworthy...

There you go, I hope you have fun with the next chapter :D

For those who don't know, Cenk Uygur is a political commentator and founder of the Young Turks program. He wears his heart on his sleeve and I've decided to let him comment on the WikiLeaks business ;)

“To everyone who thought that the whole scandal about Steve Rogers couldn’t get worse… Well, turns out you are wrong. I’m going to be honest, we live in a world of political corruption where nothing should be able to shock us anymore. I’m presenting you these kinds of news very single days, about asshole politicians who sold their souls to cooperates only to screw the voters over. We’ve covered so much of that shit, the times when I get really angry at something are not that numerous. Guess what, today is one of these times.”

Cenk Uygur shook his head in disbelief, looking down on the notes in front of him. “This is crazy, man. I’m getting sick to my stomach when I think about the fact that we’ve called this guy ‘Captain America’. If what this man stands for is indeed America… we should be fucking ashamed… Anyhow, let’s get to the disgusting story that dropped today. It’s horrendous. You remember the Sokovian tragedy? The one the Sokovia Accords are named after? Ultron, the program that Tony Stark created and which caused the destruction of an entire city? Turns out he didn’t create it. Not really.”

After rubbing one hand over his forehead the presenter looked back at the camera. “Wanda Maximoff did it. All the people who raised their voices when the Avengers brought an ex-member of Hydra on their team... Yes, they were right. It’s so despicable. Sorry, I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s start from the beginning. Thanks to a leak somewhere in the CIA WikiLeaks got their hands on some pages of Wanda Maximoff’s diary. A diary from two years ago. The one she was writing in
around the time of the Sokovian tragedy. Well, we find out that the Avengers weren’t quite honest with us. Wanda Maximoff wasn’t joining them to fight Ultron. No, she was working with him! She only changed sides when she realised that he was going to kill her too! Don’t you think that would have been something the public would have liked to know? That you made somebody an Avenger who has been in an alliance with Ultron! Yes, it’s great that she changes sides, but her whole backstory has never been discussed! She just walked away! Oh and it doesn’t stop there. It gets even better.”

Another pause and a hoarse, joyless laugh. “You remember the last two years? All the shit that every single person in the media gave Tony Stark? For fucking up that program… Yeah, everybody knew that it was an accident and he didn’t want it, but why was he working on such stuff in the first place. Turns out that we have to apologize. I have to apologize. What Wanda Maximoff writes in her diary is outrageous and it shows the true extent of her powers that we weren’t aware of. All that telekinesis shit… peanuts. We have it in her own words. She manipulated Tony Stark’s mind, she gave him illusions of despair and death, so he would create something that would help her to take down the Avengers. And he did just that. How can anyone listen to this without getting sick!”

He was yelling, not taking a second to keep his calm. “It was her! Two years part of the Avengers and she didn’t say a thing! It’s in the diaries! Tony Stark doesn’t even know! She never said a thing! Do you know where she lived during these two years? In Tony Stark’s house! How is it even possible to have so little human decency…”

Taking a breath he shook his head. “No, no, no. Conversation is over. No more debates if Rogers was acting in America’s interest. No more Republicans who tell us that the Avengers should be an American task force and that Steve Rogers is a patriot. Nobody would be calling him a patriot if he had destroyed a tunnel in New York! You see the people he surrounds himself with. Natasha Romanov let him escape and we’ve all read the files, we all know what kind of person she is! Everybody was just too afraid to speak up, because she is an Avenger! Because the Avengers are untouchable and not accountable! The whole country is mad as hell about young black men being shot by white policemen who don’t even get a slap on the wrist, but the Avengers can do whatever the fuck they want?!! People like Natasha Romanov who killed for hire or Wanda Maximoff who let a man believe that created a program that killed hundreds of people when she was the one who raped his mind?!! Steve Rogers wants those people to act freely and outside of the law?! Yeah, we saw where that led! To a destroyed tunnel in Bucharest and a destroyed airport in Germany! Try doing that here! Try to destroy LAX or any other airport! Everybody would go ballistic! No, we’re done! Of course Steve Rogers doesn’t want accountability, he is breaking the law! He has terrorists on his team who have no scruple whatsoever! I am sick of it!”

Closing his eyes he audibly sucked in a deep breath. “There is little chance that Tony Stark is watching the Young Turks. Hell, given the people he has been fighting, he is maybe not even able to watch the news… Anyway, I hereby want to apologize to Tony Stark for everything I’ve said during our coverage of the Sokovian Tragedy two years ago. As it turns out he was the very first victim of Wanda Maximoff, the person actually responsible… unbelievable. I’m really curious if Steve Rogers is going to respond to this… if he’s going to hold on to her now… he’s an even bigger moron than I’ve thought. First thing I’ll do when I get out of here tonight… I’m going to get a Team Iron Man shirt… This is how fucked up this situation is, I’m feeling sorry for a billionaire… Can you imagine how much money Tony Stark spent trying to rebuild Sokovia? Paying for medical bills, rebuilding an entire fucking city and now it turns out – it wasn’t even his fault! I hope Tony Stark sues the hell out of that girl. I know, she doesn’t own a penny. I know she’s a fugitive and a terrorist, doesn’t matter. This is about the law, about justice and equality.”

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“We have to interrupt our current story, because I just got told that we have received new information concerning Wanda Maximoff’s role during the Civil War. After the shocking news about her being behind the Ultron disaster new material has surfaced. A video of the surveillance footage of the Avengers Compound has been uploaded to YouTube. It shows Miss Maximoff using brutal violence against The Vision to be able to leave the compound to join Steve Rogers in the fight at the Leipzig airport. We have to warn you, what you are about to see might disturb you…”

***

Slowly Shuri lowered the New York Times and neatly folded it before putting it away. She took her last sip from her coffee cup before standing up from her chair. How fortunate that she was wearing a pantsuit instead of a skirt. Like this she would be able to handle herself way better if it should come to a fight. It was quite likely.

Just in case Shuri took off her earrings and the bracelet she was wearing. Casually Shuri opened the door and made her way through the palace. Okoye saw her coming down the hall and bowed her head. “Can I somehow help you, my princess?”

“Yes, you can. Step aside. I have a few things to take care of in the east wing.”

Okoye’s expression was easy to read. An order she would definitely like to obey, but they interfered with the King’s words. “My King has ordered me to not let anyone enter these rooms without his explicit permission. I am sorry.”

Of course and Shuri couldn’t challenge her to ignore her orders. Questioning the loyalty of the Dora was a door that should never be opened and Shuri wouldn’t be the one to do it. “I see, then we have to inform the King of my request.” While reaching for her phone Shuri got interrupted and pleasantly surprised at the same time.

“That won’t be necessary.”

All it took was to turn slightly around and Shuri faced her brother. He did look like a king right now and that made her proud and confident. The way he moved showed grace and self-confidence, he was going to make a decision and everybody would have to accept the King’s will, the way it should be. “What things do you have to take care of?”

Cocking her head Shuri felt tempted to make it hard for him. For even asking that question. “Does the King read the newspaper? Does he watch the news? Then he should have a good idea of what I’m going to do.”

T’Challa stopped in front of her, glancing at Okoye who bowed her head. “Shuri, this is not an option. We need to keep a cool head.”

“Wakanda is not offering sanctuary to someone who kills innocent people and let others take the blame for it. That’s something we don’t do. I am not going the presence of a person which such criminal energy in the royal palace. That was the Wakandan diplomat talking. As Shuri, your sister, I’m telling you to get that witch out of my house.” There wasn’t going to be any kind or form of playing around. Shuri needed him to understand instantly how serious she was about this. If that meant to forget about all courtesy and pretend that they weren’t guest in these halls themselves, Shuri was willing to do it. Sometimes there was a clear line between right and wrong. It couldn’t be any clearer now and it had been crossed. Something that Shuri wasn’t going to accept.

If T’Challa was startled, he didn’t let it see. Good, in front of the Dora the King couldn’t risk to look weak or fragile. Having an argument with his sister shouldn’t even cause him to blink an eye.
“This decision is not yours to make and you should know better than to act imprudently.”

Him standing up to her was good, something he had to do and yet it made Shuri’s anger only burn hotter. “It was imprudent to bring them here, brother.”

An open challenge in front of a Dora was a step that she couldn’t take back, but sometimes special actions were necessary. Ever so slightly T’Challa narrowed his eyes and then sighed. “We probably can’t argue about that. Nevertheless you are jumping to conclusions. We cannot immediately believe a story because it’s run by the mainstream media. The US government hasn’t confirmed yet if the documents on WikiLeaks are even real. We need to check before we react.”

Shuri was tempted to grit her teeth, his words were hitting right home. T’Challa was right and Shuri didn’t want him to be right. This was the problem, something very hard to admit. Shuri wanted it to be true, because she felt nothing but disdain for the girl who had killed several of their countrymen. No, Shuri didn’t know for a fact that the revelation about Ultron was true.

Yet she was completely sure. It was hard to explain. Kind of like everybody knew that O.J. Simpson had killed his ex-wife. No proof and yet everybody… just knew. Shuri knew that the witch had manipulated Tony Stark’s mind. Leading him to believe he had been creating death and destruction.

It was hard to understand, a concept almost impossible to grasp. How did that man have to feel about himself? Being able to create another sentient being… which only longed to bring misery and to set the world on fire. Had Tony Stark thought that this lust for chaos and pain and come from him? That it was his fault?

“Very well…” Shuri made it to not bite her lip before continuing. “You are right, my king. We are going to look into this, but might I ask… if these accusations turn out to be true… what is the king planning on doing?”

Now she had him. T’Challa straightened up, like he always did when he thought he had to be the King now, strong and showing his confidence. It also showed Shuri that he had no idea what he was going to do. “I will talk to her to hear her side of the story. It’s not possible to just… send her away, Shuri.”

“Why not? It was possible to just… take them in. Even though you owe them nothing, T’Challa. Not even the soldier. I know you think you do, but it’s not true. You didn’t harm him in any kind of way.”

Her brother didn’t agree with her on this, but refused to comment. Instead he acted like a king and used arguments based on logic. “What is your plan, sister? Tell her that she is no longer welcome? Do you want to send her away? And expose to the world that she had been here in Wakanda all along?”

It took some effort to not laugh at that and not to get even angrier. “Are you trying to tell me that we can’t get them to leave anymore, because you let them in? That we are stuck in this situation?” A bitter part of her got loose, saying something that she had no right to say. “Are you telling me that the king is not the Lord of his own house anymore?”

A button had been pushed and T’Challa stepped closer, using the little height advantage he had on her. Foolish. He knew better than that. To show real strength you didn’t have to rely on your body. “Sister, remember that I’m your king. I greatly value your advice and ideas, they are precious to me, but only one of us is king.”

“You are right. You are king of Wakanda and of all Wakandans. You serve them. You are not
bound to obey anyone else.” Shuri raised her chin, putting emphasis on each word, so T’Challa would understand.

“You are right. I serve Wakanda and I keep my country safe by keeping them here. It’s too late to ask how we got here. We have to play with the cards in our hands…”

For a moment Shuri pondered what to say. She knew that T’Challa had the best intentions and destiny had put him in a spot way worse than he deserved. His potential to be a fair and virtuous king was great and he couldn’t start acting on it. They were holding him back. Her phone vibrated in Shuri’s pocket and she reached for it. A news update. Glancing at the phone Shuri almost wanted to laugh, but instead she merely handed it to her brother. “The CIA confirmed it. The diary is real. We cannot pretend that nothing happened. We already knew that you’re sheltering criminals, my king. Their crimes just got a new dimension.”

“You know why I am doing this. There is some success. Just look at Lang.”

That argument wasn’t going to work for him. “Right… Lang. Have you talked to Mr. Kalinouski yet? He is a very educated man. Do you think that he doesn’t read the newspapers?”

Judging by his expression Shuri could tell that he had already thought about that. Which didn’t mean that he had answer. T’Challa dreaded the conversation that he was going to have with the lawyer. A friend of the country, a friend of their family. A Sokovian who had decided to dedicate his life to the reconstruction of his country. No, he wasn’t going to take this well. Nobody would.

“I am also going to talk to him. Please, Shuri. I know you have the best intentions and I see that you are right, but I chose my path. I still believe that it can work out for everyone. You have to trust me though and let me try. I will do it without you, but it would be easier with the help of my best advisor.”

Turning away Shuri looked at Okoye and the door she was standing in front of. She was behind it and that knowledge alone was almost enough to make Shuri go against the King’s word. This was Wakanda, they believed in justice. They believed in the Sokovia Accords.

Sokovia…

All her doing. For a being so powerful she was an enormous coward. Letting Tony Stark the blame because she wasn’t strong enough to take it? Or was it just cruelty? Did she want to see him suffer? What for? Was this still Hydra? Something else? Or just the stupid thoughts of a girl who had no idea how the world worked? “You will never lose my support, brother… You will choose how to handle this. But there have to be consequences…”

The rest was left unsaid. It wasn’t necessary. T’Challa had understood just fine. If he didn’t do anything, then Shuri would.

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Steve already knew that things could change so terribly quickly. One second was enough to turn your whole life around or the lives of everyone you cared about. He had seen it happen with the Sokovia Accords. One moment they were the master of their own destinies and just the blink of an eye later somebody took that away from them. Everything changed within a single moment. Something that Steve definitely didn’t want to relive.

But it was happening right now.

“Jesus, just calm down for a second, so we can talk about it!” Sam seemed more annoyed than
angry, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Scott was the opposite. To be honest, Steve didn’t know him well enough to judge all his reactions. His distress was obvious though. As far as Steve was aware, Scott seemed to be a pretty straightforward guy. Why should he hide his anger?

“Talk? That’s what I want to do! I want to fucking talk, but you guys are too busy telling me to calm down!” Scott’s face was hard as stone, his lower lip was quivering slightly.

“Come on, man. This is ridiculous. Now that they know that Stark is fine and Steve didn’t do anything to him, they need to find another way to smear us. This time they went all the way…” Sam was dismissively rolling his eyes and Steve could perfectly understand his frustration, but he still felt that this wasn’t the right way to react. Like this Scott would feel like they were patronizing him, not taking him serious. Steve wouldn’t have this kind of dynamic in their team. Especially now that they had to stick together.

“Ridiculous? You think it’s ridiculous? I’m not so sure. Especially since she’s been looking at the floor the entire time during this conversation!” At least Scott wasn’t yelling anymore, but that didn’t mean that his voice had lost any of its sharpness.

Steve glanced at Wanda and he saw the impact of Scott’s words, she winced, standing behind Clint like she didn’t know where to place herself in the room or what to do with her body. She did seem intimidated and Steve wouldn’t have that. It reminded him of what she had to go through at the Raft. Just because people didn’t understand that she was different, but at the same time they wanted to use her for their own purposes. “Okay, Sam is right. Everybody needs to calm down, so we can sit down and discuss this. There is no point in…”

“Maybe she isn’t looking at you, because you stormed in and started quoting bullshit.” There was something about Clint’s inflections. Perhaps Steve was imagining it, but it seemed to lack some of Clint’s usual bite and conviction.

Putting his hands on his hips Scott let his head fall back for a moment then he turned his attention back to the main person, Wanda. “Fine. We’re all calm. We’re all relaxed and in a perfectly good mood. I’d still like an answer, because this is a fucking big deal. You might not see it that way, but I see it that way and all of Sokovia thinks it’s a big deal.”

Sam snorted. “And how many Sokovians do you know to be an expert on what they think?”

“Seriously? You did just say that? Say it again and I’ll kick your ass. I was in prison, I don’t need the suit for it.”

Instantly stepping forward Steve put a hand on Scott’s arm. “Hold on, nobody is going to start a fight here. You’re upset, I see that, but we have to…”

“You are right, I am upset! Because I’m trying to get a reply from Wanda, but only the three guys are talking! I’ve heard Wanda speak before, I know she is capable of it and I know she can perfectly look out for herself, so give me a break and stop talking over her. After all, she is the one who can instantly bring some light into the darkness. Wanda, are those pages on WikiLeaks really from your diary? It’s a simple yes or no question.”

Eventually Wanda raised her head to meet Scott’s eyes and her expression was stoic, failing to give anything she was feeling away. “Yes…”

Steve felt the cold creeping up on him, crawling up his legs over his back, swallowing him whole.
Why? It had made perfect sense. Tony had created other things like Jarvis or Friday. A program as advanced and powerful as Ultron was totally in the range of his abilities. It wasn’t like he had denied creating him. Right? Except for the talk about being not close to an interface… it was over two years ago, Steve had trouble remembering. Mainly because the case had been perfectly clear, Ultron had said so himself. Now Wanda should have… How? She had come to them to fight Ultron, so it couldn’t have been her intention to create him in the first place.

“Wanda, I guess you owe us an explanation.” Steve heard Scott huffing next to him, but he ignored him, concentrating on Wanda instead. She didn’t know Scott as well as she knew him. It was important that she realised she was still among friends and Steve wanted to give her that feeling.

“The day you came to Sokovia to get the sceptre… It was Stark who got his hands on it. Just before he reached it… I gave him a vision. Like I did with all of you. I let him see something before he touched the sceptre…”

A memory washed over Steve, definitely not casting the cold away. Peggy had been there, all of his friends and comrades, people who had become his family. Then Steve had realised that they were all gone. Everybody he knew, everyone he cared about. Steve had never seen the end of the war. Instead he had woken up to be completely alone, cut off from all of his roots. Feeling lost. Like in the moment Fury had told him that it was 70 years later and Steve had realised that Peggy was gone. Like everybody else. But Steve had snapped out of it, he hadn’t been controlled by that feeling.

So what had Tony felt? What was he afraid of?

“What did you show him?”

Wanda shook her head and even before she opened her mouth, Steve knew that she was telling the truth. “I don’t know. I don’t get to choose. I just showed him what he was most afraid of…”

“What do you think he saw? You must have gotten some vibes. You were standing right next to him.” Scott wasn’t going to let it go and Wanda looked at him. Suddenly a lot surer about herself. “It was dark and cold. Like there wasn’t any form of… life. He was afraid…”

“He didn’t look too afraid on the flight back.” Clint pointed out and Scott was about to lose it again. “Oh, really? The flight you were completely passed out on? What? I read the newspapers. It’s fucking common knowledge! She made Stark create Ultron! Is that not worth having a conversation about?”

“Slow down a bit, will you?” Sam raised a hand, trying to get a word out. “She said she let Stark see something that he was afraid of… how is that the same as telling him to create the Ultron program?”

Steve nodded, that was a good point Scott had to see, but he didn’t. Scott laughed. Like a person who was going crazy… or who thought that everyone around them was losing their minds. “Oh, wait… you are serious?”

“Lang, I don’t know what you’re getting at, but Wanda gave every member of the Avengers an illusion, except for me. None of us did anything extreme. They were afraid, paralysed and then they got over it.” Clint seemed to have made up his mind, he was spiteful and Scott blinked. Stunned. Struck by disbelief. “How are you even… That was during a fight, right? Wanda tried to disable you. That’s what she did. Stark was a whole other thing. She wanted him to create something to destroy the Avengers. It was her intention.”

Another assumption, but this one was dangerous. Was one news article really enough to tear them apart? “Scott, you can’t say that without…”
“Without what? She just confirmed that it was true that she gave him these visions! The intent was to get him to use the sceptre to create something that could destroy the Avengers. Why are you looking at me like that? Oh… you didn’t read them. Well, I read them. The pages of Wanda’s diaries are on WikiLeaks! The whole world has read them! It’s right there, explained in fucking detail.”

Now it was Steve who winced and Sam opened his mouth, needing another two seconds before voicing his thoughts. “How did the CIA even get their hands on the diary?”

Clint snorted. “Wanda’s stuff is still at the compound. Stark must have handed it over to the authorities.”

Shaking his head Steve was still searching for an explanation. “That doesn’t… Why would Tony do that?”

“What the hell are you talking about?! Are you even…” Scott groaned, running one hand through his hair, his whole appearance oozing with vexation. “We are fugitives! Wanted criminals! Of course the CIA, FBI and god knows who would go through our stuff! That has nothing to do with Stark… Why are we talking about this?! Wanda messed with his mind, so Stark would create Ultron and Stark doesn’t even know that. Nobody knows that!”

Now Clint and Sam remained silent, maybe they had run out of things to say, but this time Wanda chose to defend herself. “I didn’t know what was about to happen! I had no idea what he would come up with!”

“So it’s his fault?! I’m sorry, but this is fucking repulsive! That man created a weapon of mass destruction, because you messed with his mind and then you lived in his house, letting everyone believe that it was his doing. That’s despicable… Nothing? You guys are still not saying anything? Okay, then I’m saying it. Fuck you. I’m not sitting at the same table as her anymore. I know I’m not as close with her as you guys are, but… how can you not be outraged about this?”

Scott’s eyes darted around, from one person to another and Steve didn’t know what he was searching for. He didn’t find it, because out of a sudden Scott turned around and stormed out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him.

Taking a breath Steve looked at Wanda and she saw how shaken she was. Hydra had put her into a terrible situation and the Raft had done the same. After seeing what Ultron really was, she had chosen the right side. Had admitted that she had been wrong. “You didn’t know what was about to happen?”

Wanda was quick to shake her head, her eyes glistening strangely as if there were tears inside of them. “No. What I did to Stark was the same thing that I did to the rest of you. I had no idea where that would lead him…”

There was no falsehood in her expression but regret and Steve wasn’t going to send somebody away who was standing up for their mistakes.

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The cold tiles felt like heaven against his forehead and yet the taste of bile was still burning on his tongue. Tony’s vision was so blurry that he had closed his eyes. Unfortunately it wasn’t helping. Even lying on the floor didn’t stop the world from spinning. All power and strength had been drained from his body.

It wasn’t like Tony didn’t have a lot of experience of throwing up and passing out on the bathroom...
floor. Normally that process had involved lots of drinking and sometimes even drugs. Tony hadn’t known that it was possible to get physically sick because of new piece of information.

Here he was. Barely able to move and his stomach was clenching painfully. His throat was hurting and passing out seemed like such a tempting idea. Tony wasn’t so lucky though, the acid taste suddenly became overwhelming again and Tony barely made it back up on his knees. After already throwing up two times there was nothing left in Tony’s stomach and he ended up vomiting bile.

When he was done Tony wished to get the disgusting taste out of his mouth, but feeling too tired to move, he rested his head on the toilet seat. Just a bit of sleep. Without the shield crashing down or his heart being ripped out. Why couldn’t he just go to sleep?

“Mr. Stark?”

Jarvis… Tony missed him. Jarvis had been something good. His best creation…

A hand was placed on his shoulder and when Tony opened his eyes, his vision was still blurry. Colours were mingling together and he wasn’t capable to make out any shapes. There was a lot of red… and maybe gold. Tony had always liked that combination.

“Mr. Stark, you need to drink something.”

No, Tony was just going to throw up again.

Bright spots were dancing in front of his eyes and something was pressed against his lips. Cold and wet. It was water. Tony’s throat complained, but he swallowed it anyway. At least the disgusting taste was washing away. Blinking softly Tony thought the red colour was slowly taking on a form.

“Hey, Vis…”

Vision looked worried as far as Tony could tell. Why was he even here? The whole area was in lock-down mode. Friday… she must have let him in… maybe afraid that Tony was going to pass out on the floor and chock on his own vomit.

“Do you need help to get up on your feet, Mr. Stark?”

Ignoring the question Tony looked at Vision’s blurry face. Yes, definitely worry. He was capable of empathy. He cared. Vision was able to care for somebody…

“I thought you were the exception. A glitch in the matrix…”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Stark. I don’t understand.”

Letting his eyes slide shut Tony attempted to shake his head, but quickly stopped that. “Most things I create end up hurting people… you were the exception. I thought… maybe you didn’t have a lot of me in you… turns out not everything I built turns out evil… perhaps there is… a little bit of me in you… and maybe that’s not so bad…”
Hey everybody,

My god, did you have a lot to say about the last chapter. I'm loving it :D
I hope you have fun with next chapter and of course we're still dealing with Wanda's deeds...

P.S. I don’t think Wanda is really lying when she says she didn't know what would happen. We know that she wanted Tony to create something (something bad, destructive, deadly) but she didn't know WHAT he would come up with, influenced by her and the sceptre.

“Due to the newest developments in the Civil War we have to interrupt our current segment. We’ve just received the information that the Sokovian Government is in process to revoke Wanda Maximoff’s citizenship. A not entirely unexpected action, but this isn’t the only announcement the government made today. An arrest warrant has been issued for treason against the nation of Sokovia. Our correspondent Emilia Hampton has been part of the press conference. Emilia, can you tell us what was said during the conference and what are people’s reactions?”

“Jon, I’ve never witnessed anything similar to this during my time as a news correspondent. The prime minister of Sokovia declared that Wanda Maximoff is now wanted for treason against her native country. According to the constitution of Sokovia a person can be convicted for committing treason if they should aspire to abolish the democratic, constitutional principles on which Sokovia is built. The prime minister stated that Wanda Maximoff’s involvement in the creation of Ultron posed a threat to the mere existence of Sokovia and all its principals, therefore treason charges are completely justified. The moment the prime minister announced this all the Sokovian journalists in the room stood up and applauded. It was a very moving moment, you could feel the atmosphere was very special and that people felt personally involved in this story.”

“Now we all know that Wanda Maximoff is responsible for the creation of the Ultron program, did the prime minister address Tony Stark in any kind of way?”

“Yes, he did. Another very emotional part of this conference. After a question from a reporter the prime minister explained that they never pressed any kind of charges against Tony Stark, because several investigations proved that the creation of the Ultron program was never his intention but rather an accident. The mind control he was under gives us a new perspective on these events. Furthermore the prime minister apologized for all the harsh criticism that Tony Stark received two years ago. As we all remember some members of the Sokovian government even called for his arrest two years ago. Now the prime minister went as far as calling Tony Stark the first victim of Wanda Maximoff who is actually to blame for the thousands of people who died during the Ultron tragedy.”

“How was the reaction to this statement?”

“You could sense a general agreement and the people I got to interview also expressed regret for crucifying Tony Stark in the media, especially now that every hour knew information about Wanda Maximoff’s relation to Hydra surfaces. Apparently Steve Rogers was perfectly aware that Wanda
Maximoff had a hand in the murder of Wolfgang von Strucker while that man had already been in police custody. That obviously didn’t stop him from making Wanda Maximoff, an ex-member of a terror organisation, a member of the Avengers.”

“Speaking of Steve Rogers – given the events of the Civil Wars and his knowledge about the murder of Wolfgang von Strucker, did the prime minister address the rumors that Steve Rogers might have also known about Wanda Maximoff mind controlling Tony Stark?”

“No, at this moment this is just pure speculation, but the people of Sokovia are perfectly convinced that Steve Rogers was aware of Wanda Maximoff’s implication and that he just… didn’t care.”

“Thank you, Emilia. After Sokovia’s actions against Wanda Maximoff the EU is quick to follow. The conversation about an entry ban to the European Union…”

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“Damn it…” Rhodey cursed when one of the papers slipped from the pile and sailed right to the floor.

“Wait, I’ll get it.” Pepper instantly bent down and picked it up before Rhodey could even protest. The look of frustration on his face wasn’t missed though. “Something wrong?”

“No, I just… need to learn to do these things myself.”

That statement did anything but please Pepper. “It’s okay to accept a little bit of help. Everybody needs to do that.”

“Now you’re talking about Tony, not about me.”

A small, sad smile flickered across Pepper’s face. “True… but you are doing very good. Letting me pick up a sheet of paper is not giving up any your independence.”

Sighing in defeat Rhodey shrugged. “May be… but you shouldn’t be here in the first place. Is Stark Industries running own its own.”

“Oh, I wish, but…”

“It’s fine, Pepper. I’m here. Vision said that he is okay. He got sick, that’s all.” Rhodey wished that it had been indeed all. All of them had been in shock when Vision had told them. Friday calling him in the middle of the night, because Tony was in major distress. Luckily Vision had cleared everything up. Tony had been throwing up in the bathroom, not because he had eaten a rotten sandwich or because he had been drinking.

No, Tony had watched the news. He had learned the truth. Rhodey couldn’t imagine what it must have felt like. Feeling responsible for the death of thousands of people. They had talked about it. A conversation they’ve had before. After Obediah. Tony had never been able to shake off the thought that it was somehow his fault. His weapons being sold to murder innocent people. It didn’t matter that he had never allowed it, had never signed any piece of paper or had never said ‘yes’ to any of this. There was always the sentiment of ‘I could have done something’ or ‘I should have known’.

Tony knew that it wasn’t his fault, but that wouldn’t stop him from feeling guilty about it.

Same situation with Ultron. They had sat down, talked about it. Rhodey and him. At the time Rhodey had wondered why it had only been the two of them. He had flattered himself and had
decided it was because Tony trusted him most. Now he knew the truth. The others hadn’t cared. Ultron had been destroyed, done. No reason to dwell on it. Except for when they wanted to bring it up to make Tony look bad or when they wanted something from him.

Tony had given him details on what had happened. He had described a feeling of imminent dread and fear. Like he could feel somebody’s breath in the back of his neck and if he had stopped running, he would have died. Or everybody else. At the time Rhodey had perfectly understood. A severe case of PTSD. Nobody could fault Tony for that. Thanks to his vivid descriptions Rhodey knew what Tony had seen when he had carried the nuke through the portal.

More of them. An infinite number, ready to destroy every single life on this planet.

Nobody else had seen that, just Tony and it was naïve… No, it was stupid to believe that this image would ever leave him alone. The panic attacks were gone, but that didn’t mean Tony was fine or that he had overcome his fear. Why should he ever overcome the fear of such a real threat? Nothing had changed.

So, there had been Tony’s understandable anxiety. He had been working with an alien artefact which was known for messing with people’s minds. Loki had used it to turn people into his mindless slaves. Tony had told him that it had influenced Bruce on the HellCarrier, something they hadn’t quite understood at the time. Bruce and Tony hadn’t been anywhere near to an interface, that’s what they had said. Ultron had happened on its own, because that sceptre had had a mind on its own. Even Vision said that he doesn’t quite understand the power of the stone in his forehead and that he sometimes fears it. Rhodey didn’t want to think about all the implications, although it even explained to some degree why Loki had been such a crazy asshole.

There had been proof enough that it hadn’t been Tony’s fault. Nonetheless Tony couldn’t fight off the feeling of guilt. He should have never touched the sceptre in the first place. They should have handed it over to Thor, get it off the planet. As it turned out – Tony had never had a chance. That girl had looked into his mind and intensified his greatest fears, pushed him into a dark place.

It was hard enough for Rhodey to think about this without throwing every object he could get his hands on against the wall. There was nothing else he could do in rage, being tied to this wheelchair.

Tony had been living with this guilt for over two years. There had been people everywhere accusing him of playing god, playing with people’s life, but that hadn’t really mattered to him. His own conscience was enough to deal with on its own. Wanda had known and she had done nothing about it. She had let him take the fall for what she had done. The deaths of innocent people.

In his naivety Rhodey had thought that this knowledge should be a relief. To learn that Tony wasn’t responsible for that, to be finally able to end this horrifying chapter of his life. It hadn’t been a relief. Tony’s body hadn’t been able to take the news. Rhodey couldn’t imagine what the news had done to his soul.

“You know that’s not all. I was about to lose my mind when I read it. I didn’t know what to do with myself… I’ve never… experienced that kind of anger before. Not even with Killian… I have no idea how it must be like for him.”

Rhodey had always known to never mess with Pepper. She was a perfectly kind and good-natured woman, but you shouldn’t dare to cross her or anyone she loved. The Maximoff kid had done way more than that.

“Vision was there for him and as soon as Tony gets out of his lab, we all will be there for him… It was good to leak it to the public. Tony deserves it to be exonerated and it puts pressure on all the
nations that have refused to comment on the whole… Civil War debacle yet. With this kind of attention and outrage, it will be easier to find them.”

“Better yesterday than tomorrow… Look, you are right. I have a ton of work on my desk and…”

“It’s okay, I’m here. If he needs help or anything… I’m here.”

It was good to see a smile on Pepper’s face and it was even better that it was Rhodey who made her smile. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

So Pepper left and since Vision was meditating, it was awfully quiet at the compound. Maybe it was time to leave, when Tony felt better. The Avengers didn’t exist anymore, not in the same form they had existed before. Why stay at a place that was full of memories? Memories that were now tainted. Rhodey would just have to roll through that door and he would be able to look at the spot where Wilson had been standing, telling them that 117 nations had no fucking right to tell him what to do. A statement that Rhodey was barely capable of grasping due to its sheer arrogance.

The tower wasn’t an option either. It would be the same. Tony had let them into very part of his life…

Sighing softly Rhodey decided that these thoughts could wait. Until Tony would be better and he would be better.

The next couple of hours Rhodey spent in the gym, working on his arms. Now that his legs were useless Rhodey had to do everything with his hands, like pushing the wheelchair around. It wasn’t the first time that Rhodey worked out in the wheelchair, but he still wasn’t used to how tiring it was. When he was done Rhodey felt like crawling into his bed and sleep for 12 hours straight. It wasn’t even eight o’clock though, so no way he was going to bed already. Instead Rhodey took a shower and then settled down in the living room, watching the news.

Wanda’s face was everywhere…

Rhodey had to change the channel six times and then all he got was a rerun of Two and a half men. That show definitely wasn’t Rhodey’s cup of tea, so he switched to Netflix. He ended up watching an 80ies action movie, he had seen it about a hundred times before, but it was harmless and somewhat of a distraction.

It was during a ridiculous explosion that Rhodey’s ears caught another sound. Not coming from the TV. Steps. Somebody was here and it definitely wasn’t Vision. Nobody ever heard Vision walk. Turning around Rhodey checked out the door, not having the time to react in any other way or to even think about who could move around the compound like that.

Tony looked bad. He wasn’t actually wearing these clothes, they were hanging off his shoulders and his hips. It was shockingly visible that he had lost some weight. Had he even been eating in the lab? Whatever he had been doing it had definitely kept him from shaving and showering. There were dark stains on his sweater and little cuts. Yet nothing stood out like the black rings beneath Tony’s eyes. They made his bloodshot eyes look even smaller. Rhodey was looking at a man who was about to fall over. “Tones, what…”

Rhodey wheeled towards him and Tony didn’t move. The closer Rhodey got, the smaller Tony looked. “Tony, are you okay?”

The expression on Tony’s face was unreadable, but his lower lip was quivering. Was Tony avoiding his eyes? “I… made you new legs.”
How many times in his life had Tony rendered him speechless? Countless. This was just one more
time. Rhodey blinked in confusion, he had perfectly understood the words, but they didn’t make any
sense. Until he finally realised that Tony was holding something in his hands. Metal, wires, screws.
Prosthesis? That’s what Tony had been doing the entire time? Why he hadn’t slept or eaten? To
make up for another mistake? A mistake Tony had never committed?

There was nothing Rhodey could say to this. Not a word in the English language to explain how he
felt.

So Rhodey just stared at his best friend who instantly lowered his eyes. “I am sorry. So sorry…” A
broken whisper that should have never been utter.

Rhodey did have a word for that, he did have a response, but he couldn’t say it, because no matter
how Rhodey thought about it, Tony was completely at his mercy. In a state of vulnerability that
Rhodey hadn’t known before. Something that shouldn’t even exist. In this moment Rhodey could
destroy every single little piece that was left of Tony.

He would have to thank god that it was the two of them here. That it was him who got to see Tony
like this.

There was nothing to say, Rhodey only reached out, fisted his hand in Tony’s nasty sweater and
pulled him down, wrapping both arms around him. Tony’s initial reaction was a wince as if the last
thing he had expected was Rhodey hugging him. So Rhodey pulled him closer, completely
unbothered by the hard metal pressing against his ribs. He wasn’t going to let go, not until Tony
understood.

The tension was slipping slowly and Tony started shaking in his arms. Sobs were rocking his body
and Rhodey couldn’t feel angry now, not with Tony, but it would come later. Now he was just
happy that Tony was still here. That both of them were still here.

Tony didn’t put up a fight. Which was relieving and disturbing at the same time. Rhodey had to ask
him one single time and Tony lay down on the couch, closing his eyes to sleep. It took Rhodey a
moment to actually pull a blanket over him, but Tony was already asleep by then. Rhodey watched
him, then the prosthesis on the couch table, hardly believing what had just happened now.

He was going to walk again.

One minute earlier Rhodey had known how the rest of his life was going to be like. He had known
that the wheelchair was going to be a constant companion. Now that wasn’t the case anymore.
Rhodey knew Tony better than anybody else, he was proud to say that and he knew what Tony
could do. Most certainly he knew that Tony would have never said something like that if he didn’t
mean it.

Rhodey would walk again and it didn’t matter at all. Not right now. He kept watching Tony lying
there, breathing softly and almost expecting him to wake up any second, tormented by nightmares. It
didn’t happen, but Rhodey could see the tensed lines on Tony’s face and he just knew that it wasn’t
the kind of sleep that brought you real relaxation. That would come, for now Rhodey was content to
see Tony close his eyes, not working himself to death.

He could have left, they were at the compound, Tony was perfectly safe and yet Rhodey kept sitting
here, watching Tony. Rhodey only looked up when he heard the clicking sound of high heels on the
floor. Was Pepper already back? How much time had passed since she had left?

“Hello Col… Oh my god…”
Hope stopped dead in her tracks and stared at Tony. Rhodey would have almost laughed at her expression if it wasn’t somehow heart-breaking. For now he only raised a finger to his lips to indicate her to be silent.

Nodding Hope slowly came closer, eventually whispering “Is he okay? He doesn’t look okay.”

“No, he isn’t, but he will be.”

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“That little bitch was part of a terror organisation! She killed half of the population of the city she grew up in and blamed Tony Stark for it! The man who carried a nuke through a portal in the sky! A fucking hero! She’s a monster and not being able to control other people’s fears?! Are you fucking kidding me?!”

“She lived of his money while he was spending millions to rebuild her home! Such a disgusting human being!”

“Kudos to Sokovia. I hope that bitch rots in prison!”

“She should have gone to jail immediately killing those people in Lagos!”

“Captain America broke her out of prison! How I am supposed to make my kids feel safe if she could be anywhere?”

Releasing a frustrated groan T’Challa turned off the TV and ran both hands through his hair. The card house he had built started collapsing around him and he was running out of options. People protesting in front of the Captain America museum in Washington, because they were so angry and needed some way to show it. Something to do.

It wasn’t like T’Challa couldn’t understand. Everybody’s reaction to such information was different. For T’Challa it had been shock, he had felt numb. Which was strange, judging by how he had felt about his father’s death.

There were a lot of things you could negotiate about. Mistakes that could be erased if you talked about them. Opinions that could be changed if you brought up valid arguments. T’Challa had learned a few things about politics. It was a disgusting fact, but he knew that you could even talk away the fact that people lost their lives.

One or two…

Not a thousand. Something else that you couldn’t talk away… making a man believe that he was a mass murderer… making the entire world believe that he was a mass murderer. Not when man had almost singlehandedly save a major city from destruction and was considered a hero for standing up to a man who was willing to ignore the will of the entire world…

Almost the entire world, the United States still torn on the entire Captain America vs Iron Man business. The rest had already chosen a side. The right one in T’Challa’s opinion.

How were they supposed to come back from this? There were some messes that you just couldn’t clean up. What if Rogers had indeed known? Then T’Challa saw no chance for him to ever realise that he had been wrong about the accords. T’Challa didn’t ask for much, at least he thought so. Way too much had happened during one week. It was so easy to get overwhelmed, but people normally didn’t give their heroes that right. They had to be perfect all the time. T’Challa could understand that Rogers had lost total control of the situation. Or did he only hope that?
If things had gone down too fast, if it had really been all about Bucky Barnes, then there was a chance for Rogers to realise that the accords were never meant to tie him down. They were a form of communication, a band between the rest of the world and the Avengers, because he simply had to know that they had been cut off from everybody else. Sergeant Barnes was safe, all of them were. There was no hectic, no rush. At this time they simply had to start pondering, questioning their own motives and everybody else’s.

But if he knew…

A knock on the door made him wince and T’Challa growled in response. “What?”

“Your highness, Doctor Kalinouski wishes to speak to you?”

T’Challa’s blood was running cold and he felt ridiculous because of it. He was king and he would have to justify his own actions for years to come. The right to be afraid of that didn’t exist. “Give me 30 seconds.”

Quickly getting up from behind his desk T’Challa took a deep breath, realising that his mouth was dry. Grabbing a glass of water from the table T’Challa instantly downed it, only to find out that it didn’t help to calm his nerves. Shuri had been right, of course.

30 seconds passed way too quickly

When Ilya entered the room T’Challa instantly straightened up and tried to convey some form of grace and sovereignty. “Doctor Kalinouski.”

The first look at Ilya told him that this was going to be hard. Usually the man was wearing a kind smile on his lips, now his expression was completely blank when he bowed his head. “Your highness.”

“What can I do for you?”

“Nothing” was the soft response. “I am merely here to give you a piece of advice. If your highness would find that appropriate.”

“Of course…”

“I know that your word is worth something and that you value it. You are a man who keeps his promises. A most wonderful character trait for a king and yet I have to ask you to break this promise.”

T’Challa blinked in surprise, this was something he hadn’t seen coming. “I’m sorry, but I fear I don’t quite understand.”

The lawyer slowly continued, sounding completely serious, but there was still a certain warmth in his voice. “You gave that promise as a man, not as a King, but now this promise threatens to affect your position as King and your entire nation. I’ve been in politics long enough and I know it’s difficult, even unfair. The weight of the crown is heavy, but it has to come before everything else. You are King first. A man, a brother, a friend only second. You will have to break this promise to be a King to this nation.”

The truth in this statement was undeniable and yet it put T’Challa on the edge. Taking advice was important, but this was more than advice. Somebody was telling him what to do and it didn’t matter that it was a man he admired a lot. “Ilya, I know the newest developments must have personally shocked you and…”
“Oh, your highness…” Ilya shook his head, sighing softly and T’Challa felt like a child. “This is not about me. Yes, I was mad when I learned about this. I am still incredibly angry, angrier than I’ll ever be for the rest of my life… and it’s still not about me. Or the members of my family who died in the rubble left behind by Ultron. It’s about this country that I’ve come to love. I came here to work with your father and I fell in love with Wakanda. I offered you my help because I believed in your idea. That people can change their minds when confronted with new ideas, new information. I obviously didn’t know who I was dealing with at that time and neither did you. This woman can’t stay here. You will not be able to keep this secret and as soon as the rest of the world learns this… they are going to turn against you. Wanda Maximoff is not an American, so the United States will not do anything to protect her. Giving the actual political landscape and the tensed relations with Europe, especially with Russia, they will be eager to make sure that she ends up in a prison cell. Not to mention the blow to their image for letting her escape in the first place.”

“What does Russia…”

“Sokovia’s closest political ally has always been Russia, especially after the Cold War. They have various trade agreements with Romania. The leaked SHIELD files have come back up. Various mission on Russian territories that the Russians were never aware of, assassinations carried out by SHIELD members, one of them Natasha Romanoff. No, the US will not do anything to strain their relations any more. If that… girl is discovered, your highness… you will have war at your doors. We are not talking about Julian Assange or Edward Snowden, this is bigger. You promised to protect a man, because you’ve made a mistake. That honours you, but you made this promise as T’Challa. Not as the Black Panther. You have to break it to protect your people.”
Hey everybody,

A rather short chapter, but stuff happens, so I think you will be content. Just remember - T'Challa is in a very difficult situation ;)

Have fun ;)

“WikiLeaks, huh? I knew why I always tried to be nice and sweet with Pepper. When she tries to fuck you up… she means business.” Tony was rubbing on hand over his face, his hair was completely dishevelled. The typical look of a man who had just woken up.

“I’m pretty sure she would have given away even more things if she could…” Rhodey trailed off and Hope wondered what exactly he was talking about. Judging by the look on Tony’s face – he knew. “That’s not an option…”

“I know… Look, I’ll get you a cup of coffee. No offense, Tones, but you look like you need it.”

“And a shower, I would recommend a shower.”

It was the first thing Hope said during this entire situation and both men turned to her, looking more or less surprise. It was odd having Tony Stark looking at her. Hank hadn’t spent much of her childhood talking about the Starks, but when he had… Well, Hope was pretty sure she had learned her first four-letter words listening to him talking about Howard Stark. The last two weeks of Hope’s life had in some way been all about Tony Stark. Now he was right in front of her and Hope wasn’t sure what she had expected or if she had expected anything at all.

A tired, worn out man who was in desperate need of a shave and maybe a month of sleep. Nothing you could fault him for.

“Wow, you really are quite the charmer, van Dyne.”

Rhodey sighed and shook his head. “And she is completely right. You stink and these clothes are becoming a part of you… Definitely in need of a shower.”

Tony opened his mouth, but instead of saying he grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled it up to his nose. “Okay, you might have a point there. I’ll take a shower. A small one.”

“Oh, please.”

“Yeah, yeah…” Ever so slowly Tony stood up and Hope thought that he moved like a man with a heavy burden on his shoulders. Then again, she had nothing to compare it to. When Stark was gone Hope couldn’t hide her curiosity anymore. “What does he have on them?”

“Excuse me?”

“You said that Pepper would have liked to release more information, but that’s not an option,
because Mr. Stark doesn’t want that. I was wondering what you were referring to.” What was there still left? What could still be shocking after finding out what Wanda Maximoff had done to her own people? And Tony Stark.

The expression on Rhodey’s face told her that she had judged too quickly. Yes, there was something else. Whatever it might be. “The video footage of what happened in Siberia. How Captain America and the Winter Soldier beat him into a pulp and how… That’s something I don’t have the right to say. Not if Tony doesn’t want it. It’s about Cap… and how all of us were completely wrong about him. It’s bad… very bad.”

Hope responded with a mere nod, she didn’t even want to rack her brains about this. At this moment it was naïve to think she could ever figure out what this was about, especially since the latest events had proven that nothing was impossible. The world could be turned around within seconds. “I see… Is he going to disappear again?”

“I don’t think so… He did what he wanted to do, why he needed to be alone.”

This time Hope didn’t need to ask, she had seen the prosthetics. Why should it be surprising? It was Tony Stark. When you were able to build the Iron Man suit, then you were also capable of creating prosthetics that would make a paralysed man walk again. “These are amazing. I hope they are going to work.”

“They’re Tony’s. They will work.” It wasn’t even stated with a lot of determination. Just another fact. The sun will rise tomorrow. Bananas are yellow. Whatever Tony Stark builds fulfils its purpose. Facts.

It was a reassuring thought.

“We’re going to have dinner soon. Another fifteen minutes or so. You want to join? But I have to warn you, Vision is cooking, so there is no way to be sure about the end result.”

“I’d like that. Thank you.”

“Great, I’m going to check on him to make sure there’ll be something to eat. Tony isn’t the fastest person in the bathroom, I guess he’ll join us for dinner, but if shows up earlier…”

“Yes, I’ll be there.”

So Rhodey left her alone and Hope took advantage of that to check her e-mails other messages that were waiting on her phone. A message from Mr. Mayrhofer to keep her up to date with the development of the proceedings to get Ross and Carter in front of a jury. Right now it wasn’t the time to make her capture public, it would get lost in the Ultron scandal. More time for the lawyers to get prepared. The state would accuse her of treason anyway, but that wouldn’t mean much to the members of the ones who had died that day. With a soft frown on her forehead Pepper read the next message. Sophie Müller wanted to talk to Sharon Carter…

They would have to talk to Everett Ross about this. A civilian in a room with a woman that would be put on trial for treason. That wouldn’t be easy to organize, if they even got permission…

“You don’t look much like your dad…”

Startled Hope raised her head and she was facing Tony Stark for the second time this day. His appearance had vastly improved. Sure, too little time had passed for the dark rings beneath his eyes to disappear, but the shower had clearly helped to fresh him up a bit. With his hair combed and a trimmed beard he made an almost nice figure in the casual clothes.
“He tells me I look a lot like my mother. That’s for the better I guess.”

Tony nodded, looking around and Hope felt like she had to explain. “Colonel Rhodes went to help Vision with dinner.”

“Rhodey helping someone to cook? That’s going to be interesting…” His voice was quiet and his speech slow. It didn’t really fit him.

Hope felt a desire creeping up on her and although she knew that it wouldn’t mean anything, that it wouldn’t help in any way, she couldn’t help it. “I am very sorry about… what was done to you.”

Tony blinked, slightly tilting his head at her. “Is it sad that I have to ask you to be more specific?”

No, it wasn’t sad but horrifying. A second later Hope felt foolish. She had done her homework, she had read up on him and he was definitely right – she had to be more specific. “About Ultron. I can’t imagine what it must be like to live with that for two years.”

His eyes wandered off, not focusing on her anymore. “Yeah… I did build him though. Nothing’s going to change that.”

“It makes a difference. A huge difference. You were forced to. Nobody really knows what she can do to a human mind, so there is no way to find out how much of this creation was really you and what was her. But we know that she wanted you to build something. That’s what happened.”

“I know, that’s why I’ve been throwing up the entire night and it would be really nice not to talk about this.”

Hope quickly nodded, she totally got that. “I’m sorry. You want to check on the food?”

“Sure…”

Vision greeted Hope with a friendly smile before turning to Tony. “It is good to see you outside of the laboratory again, Mr. Stark.”

“Thanks, Vis. What’s on the menu?”

It was pasta and it wasn’t bad. Nonetheless dinner was a very quiet affair. Tony obviously didn’t want to talk a lot and everybody was happy to have him sitting here at the table. Because of that Hope more or less flinched when Tony was speaking up without looking up from his plate. “Rhodey told me you joined the avenging business. Why?”

“My father’s technology was stolen and is now used to do harm and further injustice. It’s my duty to do something about this. To try to get the suit back and stop its misuse.”

Still not looking up Tony poked the noodles on his plate with his fork. “I see… You’ve sent me the blueprints…perhaps I’ll find the time to take a look at them…”

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Wanda was missing her guitar. She had always liked to play when a lot of things were on her mind. It had helped her relaxing, clearing her thoughts. That or talking with Vision. Wanda missed him and it pained her to know that he was alone too. When they could have been all together.

Things were tough at the moment. Scott was furious, because… Because of what? Nothing of what he had said was untrue. It wasn’t the whole picture though. He didn’t know what it was like to walk
in her shoes. He hadn’t grown up in a country scarred by war, seeing nothing but death and
destruction all around you.

“Hey, can we talk?”

Clint was sitting down next to her, his face as stern as ever. Wanda thought that he should smile
more, but at the moment life wasn’t giving him much reason to be happy. “Sure.”

“Look…” Releasing a sigh Clint leaned back and ran both hands through his hair. “A lot of shit went
down today and you’re probably scared…”

“I’m not scared.”

“Well, it would be pretty understandable to be scared. Normal even. I won’t lie… that kind of shit
and attention we’re dealing with now is a first one. I have no experience with that bullshit either.
There’s one thing I’ve learned though. I’m not instantly buying everything that I read in the
newspapers or that I see on television. Especially when I know the person they’re talking about. I
would have immediately called bullshit on this whole story, but my problem is now that… you said
that it was true. You gotta help me with this, Wanda. Cause right now it is not making a whole lot of
sense.” He raised an eyebrow at her, clearly expecting something, but Wanda had no idea what.

Looking on her black fingernails Wanda tried to come up with the right words to say, but nothing
came to her mind. Fortunately Clint was helping her along. “I didn’t have to deal with this crap in the
first place, so you’ll have to give me some information. I know what Nat told me. Memories of her
time in the Red Room. Bad ones, really bad. Steve mentioned memories of the war, of being alone
while everybody else was dead. That’s what you showed Stark? Memories?”

Nibbling on her lower lip Wanda looked up and found Clint still waiting. “I am not creating images.
I’m not deciding what people are going to see. They see what they… fear. Sometimes that’s
something what they’ve already experienced. Sometimes it’s just an idea. Sometimes it’s both of it.
Steve is afraid of being alone. If Natasha saw this room… then she fears something that happened
there.”

Clint nodded, to show her that he understood. “Alright… and that’s what happened to Stark too?”

“Yes, but like I said… I don’t know what he saw. It was empty and cold and he was afraid. I could
taste his fear. It was… immense and I knew it would lead him to self-destruction.”

“Hmm…” Clint made a pensive noise. “You didn’t know what he would come up with? How could
you even know that he would build anything?”

It hadn’t been just him. “The sceptre… how was he going to resist it? Given his background… I had
no idea though what he would come up with. I just… let him see something. Like the rest of you.”

“That’s what I don’t get.” Clint crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Yeah, that stuff was nasty and
Natasha was completely out of it for a moment, but everybody was eventually able to shake it off.
Everybody went back to normal and didn’t… there were no lasting effects. The duration of a plane
ride was enough to get everybody back to normal, but Stark gets to work on the sceptre for three
days?”

How Wanda supposed to explain something that she didn’t understand quite herself? Sometimes her
powers felt like part of her, sometimes they didn’t. She couldn’t always tell what they were going to
do or how. Making somebody else understand this was downright impossible. “It wasn’t the same.
Not quite. What I did to Thor, Steve, Natasha and… Doctor Banner… was meant to immobilise
them. With Stark it was… different.”

“All I want to know is… did you put the thought in his head to build a murdering robot?”

The answer to that was simple. “No, I can’t directly… manipulate somebody’s mind. I can merely push them into a certain direction.”

Whatever Clint had wanted to hear, this seemed to satisfy him. “Okay… I know that you know that what you did was wrong. You realised that and chose the right side before it was too late. This whole thing should have stayed between us. It’s Avenger’s business. It’s not fair that it’s now out there, being discussed by people who have no idea what has been going on.”

A weight was being lifted off Wanda’s shoulders. After Scott’s outburst she had started worrying that the others were also going to hold her past against her. It was something she had left behind and now it was trying to catch up with her.

Pietro had died that day. Wanda had lost everything just like everybody else. The rest of the world didn’t know that. Clint did and that gave Wanda hope it was going to work out.

“People have no idea what has been going on, because Miss Maximoff decided to remain silent about vital information that only she possessed.”

Flinching light Wanda spun around to spot the king standing in the doorframe. How was he able to sneak up on them? It was the second time that he did it and it was putting Wanda off. Reminding her that she couldn’t let down her guard. Normally she was able to sense people around her, but it was difficult with him.

Next to her Clint straightened up but remained seated. “Your highness, no disrespect, but we’re having a private conversation here.”

“Not really, you’re discussing an event that affected the lives of thousands of people and is known as one of the greatest tragedies of this century. Given Miss Maximoff’s implication… no, there are no private conversations about this.”

There was no need to listen to her powers to read him. The king was angry, but perfectly collected. No, she couldn’t afford to have any illusions about this. T’Challa didn’t like her and that wasn’t going to improve her situation.

“That kind of stuff shouldn’t be discussed in public in the first place.”

“Well, it is being discussed and I am going to talk about it with Miss Maximoff now, so I would appreciate it if you left right now.” T’Challa gestured towards the door and Clint didn’t move a muscle. “Sorry, but I think I should stay here.”

“Why?”

“Make sure that Wanda’s okay.”

It was impossible to miss how the corners of T’Challa’s mouth twitched. “Interesting. Does that mean you don’t trust me around Miss Maximoff or are you the same opinion like Captain Rogers? That she is just a kid and you cannot leave her alone?”

Kid? Wanda didn’t like the sound of that and she looked at Clint to see his reaction. There was none which pretty much confirmed T’Challa’s second statement.
“Tell me, Miss Maximoff, have you ever voted?”

“Yes. Why is that of any importance?”

“Have you ever had sex?”

Wanda’s eyes went wide and Clint huffed. “Hey, now you’re clearly out of line.”

Clearly unimpressed T’Challa shrugged. “I’m trying to make a point. Miss Maximoff is old enough to participate in political elections. I will take a guess and assume she has been in love and maybe even in a relationship before. I assume she was sexually active with a partner. I know that she decided to go to war. I know that she has the licence to drive a car. I know that she has made several life changing decisions in the last two years. I know that Miss Maximoff has taken more than one life, regardless of the reasons. Therefore I consider her an adult and perfectly capable of having a conversation with me without having another man looking over my shoulder.”

Clint was about to open his mouth when Wanda put a hand on his wrist. “It is okay. You wanted an explanation. It’s only normal that his highness would also like to have a bit more information.”

Instead of leaving instantly Clint scowled and shot her another glance, to make sure that she was really okay with this. “Fine…”

The second Clint was gone T’Challa spoke up again, remaining where he was, not coming closer. “I heard what the both of you discussed and maybe you won’t be surprised that I don’t share Mr. Barton’s opinion on this matter. I do think it matters if you push somebody… in a certain direction. What I think matters even more… if you are aware of what you did wrong, why didn’t you speak up about what happened? Your friends didn’t know and I hardly doubt that Mr. Stark knew either.”

Wanda didn’t miss that he didn’t include Stark when he was talking about her friends. Not that she could fault him for that. “I made the wrong choice when I let Stark take the sceptre. I shouldn’t have and I paid for it…”

She still felt it… Pietro dying…

“… I wanted to leave it behind me. To end it. Ultron got defeated and I helped doing that. The city is being rebuilt. I saw no point in…”

“You are talking about a fairy tale.”

“What?”

“Fairy tales. The monster gets defeated and everybody leaves happily ever after. Life doesn’t work like that. The monster leaves behind rubble and dead people. Families who have lost somebody. Like Zemo. I don’t support acts of terrorism, but I can understand the man’s pain. Having his family ripped away from him, because somebody comes into his country, playing god and destroys it. He reacted to it in the most violent way and he didn’t even know half of the truth. Because you stayed silent. Letting everybody believe that Tony Stark caused this tragedy.”

Wanda felt cornered and rushed to defend herself. “He did create Ultron. I didn’t force him to do that.”

There was no answer, instead T’Challa merely looked at her, frowning softly. “You just said that it was your intention to make him create something that would destroy the Avengers.”

“Yes, I knew he would act on his fears, but I didn’t know what would result…”
Shaking his head T’Challa sighed. “I was going to give you a chance. Try to understand what was going on or why you kept silent… now it turns out to be quite simple. You don’t think that you did anything wrong.”

“No!” Wanda quickly got up, shaking her head. “I didn’t know… My parents died because of Stark’s weapons, I was angry and foolish and I thought Ultron was going to offer a solution. That wasn’t the case and I realised that I was wrong. I helped fighting him.”

“You did… but you never acknowledged helping creating him. Tony Stark did. You lived with him for two years, you must have noticed that creating Ultron had severe consequences for him. You were just too much of a coward to carry them with him… or alone.”

“I…”

Raising his hand T’Challa cut her off. “Let me be honest, Miss Maximoff. I am disgusted by what you did. Your actions cost thousands of people their lives and you willingly watched how an innocent man took the blame for it. Talking to you right now I think you still don’t realise what this information means. Your home country will put you in jail for the rest of your life if you ever set foot there again. Almost every other country in the world has already agreed to hand you over to Sokovian authorities if they should get their hands on you. There are also the terrorism charges and…”

“I am not a terrorist, I was helping Captain America to fight off a global threat.”

“Right… another thing you told nobody about. Not the man who would have been actually able to help you with that… Now please listen to me now very careful, Miss Maximoff. I am King of this country, but I am definitely not an absolute monarch. I cannot do as I please. I took in the Captain and Sergeant Barnes because I owe him a debt. I don’t owe you anything and if I had known about your role in the Sokovian tragedy… I would have never allowed you to enter my country. You are here now and I cannot send you away without knocking heads with Captain Rogers. My hands are bound. If I send you away and it becomes public knowledge that you have been here… Wakanda will have to face the consequences. I am not going to risk a war. You will stay here. In these rooms, no contact to anyone outside of the palace. You are free to leave if you decide to return to Sokovia to go on trial for your actions. In other case… you’re going to stay right where you are.”

Wanda felt like she was being paralysed. Like somebody was putting that collar back around her neck, pulling it tighter around her throat than before. This couldn’t be true, he had no right. Wakanda was supposed to be a sanctuary and until now there had been no talk about not having the right to leave the country if they wanted to. “You can’t do that! I’m not going to be a prisoner!”

Unimpressed T’Challa sent her a cold glare. “It is not my intention to make you a prisoner, Miss Maximoff. I am protecting my people and I don’t trust you. To be honest… I don’t know what to do. Keeping you here puts my entire nation at risk and one day I will have to take the blame for that, but as long as you are here…. As long as you are in these rooms, in this palace, I can at least be sure that you are not out there hurting anybody. This way I know people are safe from you. I can keep you here and I am too afraid of what you might do if I might let you leave. If somebody should come and ask for your… the people you’ve hurt… I will not let Wakanda take the fall for you.”

Wanda was still protesting, but T’Challa didn’t even bother to turn around to look at her, he just let her stand there.
Hello everybody,

New chapter, today we're going to talk about therapy and who should get it. Also there is Zemo...
Cameo time! :D

Have fun :D

“Okay, now let’s see where this is going.” Everett sat down, placing his hand casually on the table, watching on several screens as the newest psychologist entered the room. As if he hadn’t better things to do. They could try to analyse Zemo for days and years to come and that wouldn't make any difference. What information did those guys hope to gain? Zemo had already admitted all of his crimes and he had explained the reason. In his mind the Avengers had destroyed his life and therefore he destroyed them. A revenge tale. Easy. Everett didn’t need a shrink to understand that.

He didn’t feel good about this session. Three different psychologists had already talked to Zemo… or pretty much tried to, he wasn’t actually talkative. Everett didn’t care as long as they didn’t come up with a stupid idea like declaring him certifiably insane. That was the last thing anyone wanted.

Here he was, another one of those clowns who were only wasting tax money. Everett couldn’t wait for him to be gone. Another report for another department and in the end it wouldn’t change anything.

Zemo was obviously bored from the second the psychologist entered the room and Everett watched them on the screen with only half an eye. His disinterest was destined to fade away pretty quickly.

“What one of them do you hate most?”

What? Everett’s head snapped up. No introduction? No ‘I’m only here to talk’ bullshit? Zemo looked just as surprised as him and the psychologist was sitting there, pretending like he hadn’t just asked a completely crazy question.

“I beg your pardon?”

“The Avengers. Shouldn’t that be obvious? I asked which one of them you hate the most. Tell I thought we skip the unnecessary details and get straight to the point. I would tell you that I don’t want to waste your time, but let’s be real, time is all you have, but mine is rather precious.”

Now that was an approach that Everett hadn’t seen before. Usually the psychologist were all about coddling a person, making them feel good, so they would spill. That didn’t seem to be the case here. What department was that guy from again?

Zemo didn’t move and his face wasn’t one that carried a lot of expression, yet Everett could tell that he was just as taken aback by this different demeanour as him. “Unnecessary details like introducing yourself? Like you said, I have a lot of time and it was you who came here. I would prefer a proper
The psychologist shrugged. “As you wish. My name is Gunnar Golmen, I work for the government and I’m not here to help you deal with the traumata you went through. I am here to find out how you could achieve what you achieved. That’s it. I am not particularly interested in anything else.”

“Didn’t they warn you that I’m not easy to talk to?”

“Maybe my colleagues didn’t find the right words. Let’s get back to my first question. Which one of them do you hate most?”

“Does that make a difference? Does that matter?”

Golmen leaned forward, tapping his pen against the notepad on the table. “To me it does. Because if I know which one you hate most, I can see if you made sure that they got the worst treatment. If not… your plan isn’t as smart as you might have thought which means that you aren’t as smart as everybody thought and therefore not worth my time. Which one?”

A smile spread on Zemo’s lips and Everett felt that tingle in his fingers. How gladly he would punch that man in the face and knock his teeth out…

“Or you’ve come here with false assumptions.”

Golmen continued to look quite relaxed and crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Are you a believer in equality? That they should be seen as a unit? So you had to hit the Avengers as one.”

Zemo didn’t answer and Everett thought it was a silent agreement.

“Fine by me. I suppose you don’t get any information about what’s happening outside of your cell.”

No, he didn’t and Golmen, although he had been sent by the highest government department, didn’t have a right to tell him. Of course that was the bit that really caught Zemo’s attention. “I don’t need the information. I know, believe me.”

“Well that answers the question if you’re smart or not. I thought you were… clearly I was wrong.”

How was this supposed to work? Was he trying to get to Zemo through his pride? Everett had tried something similar. Humiliating him just because he could and because that guy deserved to be taken down a notch. It hadn’t worked. For a very simple reason. That man was at peace with himself. He had succeeded, he had reached his goal and nothing else had mattered to him. What to do about that?

Against Everett’s expectations Zemo didn’t offer his small, unsettling smile. Nonetheless he seemed perfectly calm. “May I ask what brings you to this conclusion?”

“A plan with this many variables, that depends on people’s reactions… a smart person would know that it’s impossible to be sure how it will turn out. If you aren’t aware of that… do I need to continue?”

“I may not know exactly what is going on at the moment, but I have seen the beginning of the avalanche and you can’t stop an avalanche. I know that it came crashing down.”

That knowledge seemed to be enough to make solitary confinement quite tolerable.

Golmen nodded slightly. “So if I told you that the mirror has been fixed and we’re still seeing the cracks… you wouldn’t believe me.”
“No, I would not.”

“Granted… the public is taking sides. These matters should be complicated, but in this case… it suddenly seems very easy. People have decided who is the good and who is the bad guy. The good guy is going to walk away from it. Completely. How do you feel about that?”

“Only one person needs to see the true colours of another one to make a difference. The right person knows. It has already made a difference.”

Zemo loved being vague, didn’t he?

Golmen remained silent, his green eyes watching Zemo carefully for almost a minute. None of them said anything, so Everett was tempting to clear his throat over the speakers.

Eventually the psychologist continued in his calm manner. “I can understand wanting to bring down the Avengers. You aren’t the first one who tries to do so. Aliens, Ultron… powers that we seemingly can’t compete with and yet… here we are. The Avengers undone by a mere man. My employers want to know how. Without enhanced powers. Without an army.”

Everett tilted his head as if that would get him a different perspective. It seemed a little bit all too easy. Steve Rogers. An American hero. Suddenly a wanted terrorist. Everett was working for a secret government agency, he was well aware of manipulation tactics and brain washing. A process that was taking months or years if you didn’t want the victim to be aware of it. Zemo had never even met Rogers personally. So how he had been able to break the Avengers completely apart? Or was it just the accords? No, Everett knew better, his conversation with Pepper Potts had taught him better.

*Mr. Stark came to Siberia as a friend… he left as another one of Rogers’ victims*

This man in this cell had done something and Everett just couldn’t grasp it…

“The downfall of the Avengers was my doing?” Zemo’s mouth formed a little, unsettling smile. “That’s not what I’m here for, is it? I’m in prison for bombing the UN building in Vienna. An event that killed several people, the leader of a country. Did I forget something?”

Golmen didn’t even bat an eyelid. “The murder of the psychologist who was assigned to analyse the Winter Soldier.”

The smile got a little bigger. “Right… Does that worry you?”

“No. Murder doesn’t shock me. It’s painfully simple. The rest of what you did isn’t. Tearing them down, piece by piece. Shall I put my cards on the table? You scare the crap out of some really powerful men. Steve Rogers’ name has been celebrated as a synonym for loyalty and integrity. Then he becomes a fugitive and terrorist within two single days. They are scared what people like you could do to other people who aren’t as strong-willed ad the Captain.” Golmen impatiently tapped his pen against the notepad and looked expectantly at the other one.

“I didn’t do anything to Steve Rogers. That man chose his path a long time ago. He kept his cards close to the chest and I forced him to show them. That is the one thing I did.”

It didn’t sound like much and Everett didn’t quite understand. Was it about Bucharest and his desperate attempts to protect the Winter Soldier?

“Did you force him to show his cards to Tony Stark?”

“Yes, because the cards weren’t his to begin with. They were Stark’s.”
Everett didn’t get any of that, but Golmen suddenly returned Zemo’s smile. “An empire toppled by its enemies can rise again. But one which crumbles from within…”

It happened suddenly and Everett was unprepared. Until now Zemo had already talked way more than to any other psychologist. His patronizing and his amusement had been impossible to miss, but now it was all gone. The content expression was replaced by surprise which was followed by disbelief. “What did you just say?”

“It’s impressive. Why try to fight someone when you can make them fight among themselves? Thank you, Mr. Zemo. My time was actually well-spent.” Ever so casually Golmen stood up, grabbing his notepad while Zemo silently frowned at him.

That was all. Zemo didn’t speak up again and Golmen left, leaving Everett confused. This had been quite different from the conversations with the other psychologists. Had they learned anything new from this? Everett clearly hadn’t and he was definitely going to have words with Golmen about this. It wasn’t like he cared about his high security level in any way, Everett wanted an explanation.

When he found the psychiatrist Golmen was putting on his green coat. Judging by the quality that guy was definitely making more money than Everett. “How did it go?”

“You watched, didn’t you?”

“Exactly, but I thought your conversation was rather short…”

“I found out everything I needed.”

“May I know what you found out?”

Golmen buttoned up and smiled contently. “You have a perfectly sane man in this cell.”

“Sane? You call bombing the UN building sane?”

“He was fully aware of what he was doing and he chose to do it. A high level of planning was necessary, intelligence. That man felt betrayed and since nobody could offer him justice, he went out to get it himself. Perfectly sane… and he isn’t done.”

“What?”

“He is not done.”

“He is sitting in a cell. With no contact to the outside world. There is nothing he can do.”

Golmen shook his head, smiling at Everett in the most patronizing way. “He is not done and I’m curious to see what he still has in store.”

***

“What is this?”

Pepper had asked herself the same question just a minute ago. “Rogers’ stuff, I’m going through it. Looking for some clue where he might hide. It’s stupid, I know, because Rogers isn’t capable of planning that far ahead or of making smart decisions in general. I can’t find anything worth looking into…”

Hope picked up one of the sheets and let her eyes glide over it. “That’s a whole lot of nothing…”
“I know. Immensely frustrating. Maximoff’s face is all over the media and I’m pretty sure about everyone on this planet is now willing to hand her over and we don’t have a single hint where to find them.” Pepper pushed some other pages away, looking up because she needed something good now. Something positive.

The mere thought of Rogers or that witch was leading her to a dark place that was almost impossible to get out of. Looking up helped. Right there across the room were two of her best friends and they were getting back up on their feet. Both of them.

Walking was still far from anybody’s mind, but Rhodey was practicing to stand with the prosthetics. Standing. Another thing that people had said was impossible. It turns out that Tony could make these things possible.

Hope noticed that Pepper wasn’t paying attention to the files anymore and she followed her gaze. “Is that what he does? Revolutionising medicine within a week?”

Smiling softly Pepper nodded. “Pretty much so… That’s the thing about Tony. He has way too many ideas and sometimes it’s hard for him to focus, but when something is important to him… he can get things done that nobody thought possible. His best friend can’t walk anymore. So he builds him legs. That’s what he does…”

There was something in Hope’s eyes when she watched the two of them and it made Pepper feel lighter. She got it, Hope was feeling admiration, impressed by what Tony could so and she saw that it was good. Amazing. Miracles.

Letters and e-mails had been flooding Pepper’s office. Apologies. Condolences. Fuck them all, everybody had been so fast to condemn Tony. Not that anyone of them had cancelled their contracts with Stark Industry. Hell no, they were all too interested in making money, but they still liked to look down on Tony.

If Pepper could she would have everybody walk into her office and spit in their face. Unfortunately she had to find the real villain in this story. Back to the notes. Rogers’ room had barely contained anything handwritten and pretty much all of it wasn’t of any use.

“Do you need help with that?”

“Please, go ahead. The less I need to see of this, the better. Tomorrow I’ll hand it over to Ross anyway. Perhaps he’ll have more luck with that.”

Sitting down next to her Hope grabbed one of the sheets and looked over it. They continued like this for a couple of minutes until Hope slid a sheet over to her. “Does this make any sense to you?”

Pepper quickly scanned the words.

*I love Lucy (television)*

*Moon landing*

*Berlin Wall (up + down)*

*Steve Jobs*

*Disco*

*Thai Food*
“I have no idea…”

“It’s Steve’s to do list.”

Both of them looked up, seeing Tony standing right in front of them. Pepper didn’t feel good about him having to look at any of this, but that was her fault. She should have done this somewhere else… Then she wouldn’t have been able to see Tony’s little miracle.

“To do list?”

Shrugging softly Tony glanced at the list, taking a step back. “He showed it to me a while ago… things he needed to learn about the 21th century… cause he missed the last 70 years. People told him what stuff he needed to check out?”

Okay, so another useless…

“I hope you are joking.”

Hope was staring at Tony, as if she couldn’t believe what he had just said. In response Tony slowly shook his head. “No, I kind of ran out of jokes. Why? Did I sound funny?”

Still looking shocked Hope grabbed the list, holding it up. “That man spent 70 years in a block of ice. He missed every single event between 1944 and 2012 and people told him these are the things he needs to check out? Thai food? I love Lucy? Who told him that? Good lord…”

Pepper gave her a second, because for some reason Hope seemed about to lose it. “Was he in therapy or something? He missed… everything and people told him to check out music groups and TV shows? He was fighting in the Second World War. Did somebody tell him that Germany is one of our closest allies? Or about the Cold War and the difficult relationship to Russia? Or the Middle East? The sexual liberation? Martin Luther King? Equal rights for woman and for blacks?”

“I’m pretty sure he noticed most of these things by… living among us for four years.”

Sighing softly Hope pinched the bridge of her nose. “That is not the same… Look, try to take a person out of North Korea. They suddenly experience the internet, freedom of speech, they see that their leader isn’t almighty. They realise that slowly and even when they know… it’s hard to deal with that. Or a lesser extreme… a person that comes from a society that treats women like shit and who is used to that… they will have trouble adapting to a society where that isn’t the case, no matter what their opinion this issue is. That man was taken out of a different time and the fact that… nobody suggested to send him to a therapist baffles me… We grew up with all of this naturally and sometimes it’s even hard for us to keep up with the globalization and how quickly things change. Berlin Wall… up and down… Really? That’s it? Oh, of course, the Moon Landing, right. That’s all you need to know to manage in 2016. The UN gave this man a document to sign when he probably doesn’t even know what the UN is! How should he know when people tell him to watch I love Lucy? Is there any chance that he knows that the German special forces he killed weren’t Nazis?”

The last part was probably an exaggeration, but the words still stung. Pepper had to admit that she
had never thought about this. Which was shocking. There was no precedent. Rogers was the only one and she had never given it much thought. About the experiences that…

“How are they doing?”

A quiet whisper and yet it sounded like a scream. Tony’s features were hard as stone, because he wanted it that way. He couldn’t let them see how bad it was. How terrible he felt. “The guys who… survived Bucharest. Is there something I can do to help? Like… with the prosthetics?”

The seething anger was brushed off Hope’s face and she was quick to nod. “Yes. Yes, there are two men who… they got the prognosis that they’ll never walk again. If you’re willing to share that technology…”

“I’ll do some fine tuning then… Rhodes, you okay with being my lab rat?”

“Anytime, but I’m done for today…”

Nodding Tony glanced another time at the list, then at Hope. “If you could get me the medical files, I’ll sit down and work on it.”

“Sure, I can do that.”

“Not today though. You have working for several hours. Get some sleep, you still look exhausted.”

Tony didn’t protest and it hurt Pepper. These little things. They were everywhere. Yes, Tony could still create miracles, but there was no joy in it. The snark completely gone and Pepper would make them pay. The little witch would never see the light of day again. They needed to lock her up and throw the key away. Rogers… he needed to be put in front of jury, for people to see. A lot of people had been hurt and they needed closure. All of them…

“He is not going to do it.”

Stopping in mid-thought Pepper looked around, realising that Hope and her were alone now. It had never happened to her before to get this distracted. Hope’s gaze though was enough to capture her complete attention. The seriousness, the conviction. When had been the last time that Pepper had looked at an equal? “I’m sorry?”

“Tony.” Hope said his name like it deserved to be said. Softly and with care. “He is not going to fight them and I get why. He doesn’t want to. He is tired of it and he shouldn’t have to. He doesn’t have to.”

“Somebody has to…”

“I know and that’s going to be you. You’re already fighting them and I’m going to help you. You’ll continue to do this. Cutting off support and sympathy. Looking for them, making the world smaller and smaller for them until you find them. You will and then I’m going to fight them. Vision will be there to help me and military forces, probably of several nations.”

It had been a while that Pepper had felt like this. Understood. Supported. A glimmer of hope in these cold days. “What about getting the Ant-man suit back? Wasn’t this what you wanted?”

“It still is, but I realised that this is bigger. Like most people. Getting the suit back isn’t enough. I can take a weapon out of their hands, but that doesn’t make their hands any less dangerous or less likely to do violence. We’ll get the suit, the wings, the bow and the bites. The six of them are going to prison and I’ll be among the ones who put them there. I promise.”
“T’Challa, I need to… Oh, I’m sorry, I’m looking for the King.” Steve hadn’t expected to see anyone else but T’Challa in this room. Okoye had led him to the King’s office, that’s what she had said, after Steve’s immense protesting of being ignored.

Now T’Challa wasn’t here and he probably shouldn’t feel angry at the woman in front of him, but he was. It was so frustrating to run against walls when you were trying to have a conversation with someone. He knew T’Challa was busy, but he had found the time to turn Wanda in a complete mess and now he was going to disappear again? Steve had never like arrogance or people who came and left like they pleased. Nobody had the right to treat other people like that, not even a king. They might be his guests, but not his prisoners.

The woman sitting at the desk looked past him and slowly nodded. Turning around Steve saw Okoye leaving the room and closing the door. So she was taking orders from the other woman. Tall, lean, a beautiful face and a very composed body language. Steve couldn’t make out much more until she stood up and came towards him.

“I know that you wanted to speak the King.” The same pronunciation that Steve had heard before. “Unfortunately he has to deal with way more pressing matters, so you have to take your chances with me. My brother will not be available for a couple of days.”

Brother? Steve hadn’t known that T’Challa had a sister. Then again, he knew pretty much nothing about the king at all. Especially after his latest actions.

“I am sorry, but this can’t wait. I have to…”

“Oh, please stop.” She made a dismissive gesture, then crossed her arms in front of her chest, not avoiding his eyes for a second. “You don’t have to do anything and you don’t get to make any requests. My brother is leading a nation. I know you have no idea what that means, because you have never really taken care of anything. He is responsible for the lives of millions of people. For their health insurance. Their taxes. Their education. Their museums. Their vaccination. The state of their roads and bridges. Their human rights… These things cannot wait. You, Mr. Rogers, you can wait. You have a lot of time on your hands and you owe that time to my brother. So, please, don’t walk into this room and tell me that you cannot do something, because I will not hesitate to show you what I cannot tolerate.”

Like a bullet between his eyes. It hit him completely unprepared. Steve had been ready to make his case, to argue, to reason. He had not been prepared to be… What? What was she even doing here? T’Challa’s sister knew who he was, but was she familiar with all the details? What did Steve know about her? What did she know about him? Perhaps there was some kind of misunderstanding. “I’m sorry, I don’t even know who…”

“My name is Shuri, princess and as long as my brother is without a son, heir to the throne of Wakanda. I know what you came here to do and believe me, I am just as unhappy as you are with my brother’s decisions to keep Miss Maximoff here.”

“So you agree that…”

“If it were me sitting on the throne, she would be already on a plane back to Sokovia where she would have to face the consequences of her doing.”

The second bullet hit even harder. This was Wakanda. The sanctuary. T’Challa had taken them in, because he understood. Or that’s what Steve had thought and now he had to protect Wanda again?
After all what people had already done to her. Because they were scared, because she was different. Like him. Or Bucky.

“She did nothing on purpose…”

“Do you suffer from dyslexia? You can read what she did. She wrote it herself.”

“I know, but… she had no idea what she was doing. She is still young and inexperienced, then Hydra gave her these powers that are almost too much to handle… What she did was wrong, but she couldn’t have known what it would lead to and she changed sides. She fought as an Avenger. For the good side. She saved my life.”

“And killed thousands of others. I will not discuss this with you. It’s a waste of my breath and my words. What are you here to complain about? My brother promised you sanctuary and now he told you that the witch isn’t allowed to leave anymore? She should be grateful. The second she sets a foot outside and somebody see her, they will call for her blood and she brought this upon herself. My brother is keeping her here, because he thinks that this is the best way to protect Wakanda. I don’t share his views, but I trust my king. If you aren’t comfortable with his rules… feel free to leave. You, the two former agents and Mr. Lang are free to leave whenever you want to. If you think there is anywhere you can go. Anyone who would still have you… I hope you have no illusions about your stay here. You are here, because my brother suffers from a guilty conscience when he actually owes you nothing. Your presence is a disgrace to the throne and you are starting to wear out our patience. So turn around, go back to your rooms and be grateful that I am not ruler of this country.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Gunnar Golmen is exactly who you think it is and no, he won't appear again and he won't have any other impact on the story. I just felt this was something he would do and I had fun writing it :)}
Hello everybody,

Merry Christmas! :D Here's my little present. A little dose of reality for Sharon.

Have fun :)

A feeling of relief came over Sharon when the door was being closed behind her. She wasn’t scared. Not of the situation she was in, nor of the dark glare of the agent who had led her to this room. Yet it felt good to not have judging eyes on her. Yes, she got it, to an outsider all of this had to look horrible, but until now nobody had given her the chance to explain herself. There had been no interrogation either. Sharon had been ready for it, she was well prepared, it was part of her training.

They were stalling, trying to wear her out. Not really surprising, standard procedure. Nothing she couldn’t deal with, but by now Sharon just wanted them to get on with it. So she could state her case, things would look quite different then. An interrogation room meant that things were finally moving forward, she was finally allowed to do something about her situation.

Rubbing her wrist Sharon was glad to be rid of the handcuffs. Sitting down on one of the two chairs next to the table Sharon decided to wait. There was nothing else she could do. It wouldn’t surprise her if they would let her wait a couple of hours more.

Sharon turned out to be wrong.

The door was being opened and a man walked in. Instantly Sharon did a quick analysis. Between 40 and 50 years old. Confident posture, used to be around other people. Dark blue three piece suit. Perfectly white shirt and a spotted tie. It wasn’t Sharon’s field of expertise, but she could still tell the difference between an expensive brand and the rummage table. That suit must have cost a little fortune. Nothing an average agent could afford. The shoes were shined to perfection. Italian? They could have put anyone in that suit. Maybe… No, from the way the man moved Sharon was sure that he was feeling comfortable in his clothes. He was used to them.

Black hair, a trimmed beard, a very dapper appearance. Suitcase. A lawyer? Really? Sharon had some trouble believing it. She hadn’t had the opportunity to make any phone calls. The idea of her being allowed to talk to a lawyer seemed laughable.

“Miss Carter, my name Seth Clarke, your assigned lawyer. I propose we start discussing your defence strategy right away.”

Interesting… but hard to believe. “Are you? My lawyer? I didn’t ask for one. I didn’t get to.”

“I was hired by your family. We’ve got about two hours, cameras are turned off, don’t worry. We have a lot of stuff to get through, let’s not waste any time.”

Her gut told Sharon to be weary. This could be a trick. Ross knew everything about her training, well aware that she had been coached and prepared to withstand different forms of interrogation. Sending in a fake agent seemed to be right up his alley.
“How do I know if you are actually a lawyer?”

One of Clarke’s eyebrows went up and if he wasn’t acting, he was a man with a really limited patience. “Miss Carter, I’m going to be frank. You are in a world of trouble. I’m not going to get you out of this. Our main goal here is to get you a prison sentence that will allow you to get out again before you are 60. Please, spare me the paranoia and stop wasting time.” Opening his suitcase Clarke pulled out a few documents and slid them across the table.

Still sceptical Sharon grabbed them and took a good look at them. Seth Clarke was indeed a lawyer, partner of an acclaimed New York law firm. Sharon recognized her mother’s signature. The confirmation that this was real was taking Sharon aback and for a moment she felt completely lost. Things were finally moving now. For a couple of days life had just stopped. From the second they had put her in handcuffs at the airport in Seville nothing had happened. Sharon had been sitting in a cell with nobody talking to her and she had started thinking about the possibility that it might stay that way. That they had decided to lock her away and forget about her.

Not the case.

“I am sorry, Mr. Clarke, I just… didn’t expect to see a lawyer.”

No patience whatsoever, just a very deep frown. “Unfortunately we don’t have time to discuss your expectations. This is a huge case, we have a lot of ground to cover. We should start with…”

“Can you tell me what’s been happening since I’ve been arrested?”

Clarke sighed in response. “The former Avengers and Steve Rogers are still on the run. It has been revealed that Wanda Maximoff is responsible for the Ultron disaster. Tony Stark is alive, but still hasn’t made a public appearance. Anything else you want to know? Who’s leading the Billboard Charts? If a new Star Wars Trailer has dropped? Or can we start talking about how we’re going to save your life?”

His harsh tone was another thing that Sharon hadn’t expected. Normally she wouldn’t have someone talk to her like that, but she knew that she was lucky to have him here and it was better not to risk alienating her only support right now. “Saving my life? How is my life on line?”

That question seemed to be far more to Clarke’s liking. “Right now we can’t say anything for sure. It all depends on a lot of factors which haven’t been decided yet. It will certainly take months for the prosecutor to finish the plaint… but until then we need to be prepared for all the eventualities. You will definitely have to face charges of espionage and most likely for complicity in murder. It’s hard to tell if the government has a solid basis for treason, but a good attorney is probably able to get it done and believe me, they’re going to get the best one available.”

Espionage, treason, murder…

Words that Sharon had heard before, a lot of times. These were the things she was supposed to fight. That’s why she had joined SHIELD and then the CIA, to fight the just fight, do the right thing and fill in the huge shoes that Aunt Peggy had left behind. All her life Sharon had known that she would never be able to live up to that standard, but that wasn’t necessary. Peggy Carter had been a hero, proving her worth countless of times and even being mentioned in the same breath as her name was an honour.

Espionage, treason, murder…

These words had nothing to do with her, nor with Steve. She had trusted him to do the right thing.
Not just trusted him, she had known that Steve would find the right way to deal with what they were going through. Millions of other people knew that too. Captain America had never failed anyone, a known fact. Yet it was different with Sharon. Her aunt had told her the stories, Peggy had actually been there. She had been at Steve’s side when he had proved his bravery, when he had proved his superiors wrong. Steve who would never leave anyone behind and who was the first one to throw himself into battle.

Aunt Peggy had told her and then Sharon had lived through it herself. Without Steve Hydra would have killed thousands of innocent people. Steve had been the only one who had noticed, who had stood up against it and he had proven once again that he deserved all the trust that people put in him. Sharon had trusted him more than Ross, she had never seen Steve fail or do something wrong.

Espionage, treason and murder had nothing to do with this…

“Treason? How does this make sense?”

Clarke’s features were easing up which meant that he was finally content with Sharon’s questions. “Do you know the constitution, Miss Carter? Treason against the United States, shall consist only in levying War against them, or in adhering to their Enemies, giving them Aid and Comfort. You offered aid and comfort, there is no discussion about this. If they accuse you of treason or not depends entirely on Steve Rogers’ state as a terrorist. A person of his fame and with his history… you don’t declare them a terrorist easily. Especially since none of Rogers’ crimes have taken place on American soil. If the US government isn’t going to bend to international pressure and Russia and Germany are applying a lot of pressure, then we won’t have to worry about treason. After the immigration crisis the German chancellor is walking on thin ice, if he wants to be re-elected he has to take a stand and show the people that he is listening to them. The anti-American sentiment is at its peak after the Leipzig incident and a very big trade agreement between the US and Germany is on the line. It’s a strong possibility that the government will soon officially declare Rogers a terrorist. Which would be devastating for us. Our best case scenario is that they will accuse you of handing over secret information to a civilian. Consequence of your actions was the successful escape of a wanted terrorist and the death of three German officers and six Romanian civilians. We’re facing another problem here. Until now Rogers hasn’t been accused of murder or manslaughter. So we don’t know what charges you’ll have to face. Concerning the victims in the tunnel it could go either way. About the three officers… the chances that he’ll be charged with anything else but murder are minimal. Which is bad for you.”

Everything that Clarke stated sounded like a fact. He said everything like a lawyer would. Stoic and emotionless. That didn’t help Sharon to understand what he was saying. Slowly the pictures were surging again, claiming her mind despite her attempts to push them away. One had stuck with her especially. For some reason not the little girl, but one of the officers. Everybody else had had some kind of wound or injury on their faces. Little cuts or bruises on a cheek, a broken nose, a split lip. The man had been young, probably in her early thirties. About the same age as Sharon herself. His face had been untouched. Sharon remembered his brown curls, falling into his forehead. A small, nicely shaped nose and full lips. Prominent cheekbones. Not a single freckle. Nothing had messed with his handsome appearance. Looking at the photograph Sharon hadn’t been able to stop wondering about what colour his eyes had. Something she would never know. He had looked beautiful and at first glance one could think that it was the photograph of a sleeping man.

Until you saw the huge, rough and repulsive scar across his chest. They had cut him open for the autopsy…

They were all dead. Nine people. Nine people had lost their lives and no amount of trust in Steve’s
abilities was going to make that go away or bring them back. But Steve hadn’t been the only person involved in this…

“Miss Carter, I need your attention.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I need your version of the story. Everything that happened. Every little detail. I need your version to be excessively detailed. The other side is going to dig deep and we can’t afford any surprises.” Clarke looked at her expectantly and Sharon still felt weird that somebody asked her about this. Nobody had done that until this very moment. “I… where should I start?”

“Why did you give Rogers the information where to find the Winter Soldier? Why were you even with him at that moment?”

Memories of Aunt Peggy’s funeral came back up and a knot formed in Sharon’s throat. “He was at my aunt’s funeral. Before that he didn’t even know that I was related to Peggy Carter. He brought me back to my hotel and we talked. There we learned about the bombing in Vienna. We went there together and then things… happened at such a fast pace. The order was out to kill Barnes on sight. I got the information where he was and… Steve knew him. He’s the only person still alive to personally know him and I thought that this was something worth to take in consideration. So I told him where to find Barnes.”

“Miss Carter, you make it very hard for me to help you if you’re only telling me half the truth.”

“But this is…”

“No. Surveillance cameras of the Viennese café showed that you also handed him over an entire file. It’s those kind of details that will make the difference between 10 or 30 years in prison. We’ll have to explain your motivation. Why did you give him this information?”

At least that was a question that Sharon could easily answer. “Steve wanted to save his friend and find out what really happened in Vienna. As it turns out he was right about Barnes not being responsible for the bombings. I trusted his judgement and his abilities. Logically he was the one who should go after the Winter Soldier, they are equally matched. It was a bad choice to send regular people after him, Steve should have been involved or the other Avengers. I trusted him to do the right thing.”

“And what would that be?”

“Save his friend and give him the opportunity to prove his innocence. Killing him on sight wouldn’t have giving him that chance.”

Clarke blinked, then grimaced. “Didn’t you just say that it wasn’t the right choice to send not enhanced people after him? Because they wouldn’t stand a chance? How would they have been able to kill him then?”

“I didn’t say that. Nobody is immune to bullets.”

“So what was Rogers supposed to do about that? Did he say anything?”

Sharon shook her head. “No, he immediately left for Bucharest and I trusted his abilities to get his friend to safety without anybody getting hurt.”

All the frustration and impatience was suddenly back and for a second Clarke merely stared at her.
“Okay, this statement just moved to number one spot of things you are not going to say in court. I don’t even want you to think about this.”

“Why? It’s the truth…”

“It’s a wrapped gift for the prosecutor. He would rip you into tiny little pieces.”

The idea of going to court still seemed so far away and Sharon had trouble following his train of thought. Where was the fault in her logic? She told him how she had felt and it hadn’t been a difficult decision for her. Nobody could be more trusted than Steve. “He was the only one capable of…”

“What did you expect him to do? In all seriousness. The prosecutor is going to ask you that question. When you gave him the information and he took off to go to Bucharest – what did you think would happen? Don’t use words like safety. Don’t talk about nobody getting hurt. Steve Rogers isn’t known for peaceful solutions. He is famous for throwing very hard punches and for shooting Nazis. Name me one single conflict that Steve Rogers settled without using violence.”

Sharon opened her mouth and every single word she wanted to say died on her lips. In all honesty, she hadn’t thought that this was going to work out without any kind of violence. “I hoped that… Steve would get there fast enough and there wouldn’t be any confrontation.”

“Well, obviously he wasn’t fast enough. What did you think would happen? Did you consider the possibility that someone of the task force could get injured or end up dead?”

Without hesitation Sharon shook her head. “No.”

For a few seconds Clarke let her answer sink in, then met her eyes. “Why? Rogers went there to save his friend from being killed by a German task force. How was he going to do that without using violence?”

“I don’t know, but it was Steve. I figured he would find a way.”

“He didn’t and the legal system is going to make you partly responsible for the death of these three men and the injuries of several others. We will have to come up with a much better explanation, because if you stay with this story… Every prosecutor with half a brain will call Sophie Müller to the stand to talk about her husband’s injuries and then you are done for. The jury will be back after five minutes.”

“Steve didn’t have the intention to kill anybody. I know that.”

“Did you ask him? No. We will have to work out an exact wording, because your current story is going to get you…”

“It’s not a story, it’s the truth.”

“Even worse and we’re not even done with everything you will be accused of. Stealing the shield and the Falcon gear… you are on video footage doing that. Rogers and Wilson had it at the airport, so there is not much we can do about that. Then there’s Mayrhofer…”

Having trouble to keep up with him Sharon made a gesture that indicated him to stop. “Who is Mayrhofer?”

“The partner of one of the biggest law firms in Germany. He is the lawyer of families of the Bucharest victims. The task force and the people who got killed and injured in the tunnel. They are suing you and ex-Secretary Ross. They are still preparing the law suit, nothing is official yet, but I
am familiar with Mayrhofer’s work. His rate of success is very impressive. All the fees go directly to Stark Industries and Pym Technologies which means they have unlimited resources. Miss Carter, do you understand this? They are going to dig up everything. Everything that ever happened in your life and they will use it to present you in the worst possible way. Every personal or professional incident. Relationship, friends, family, they’ll even check your taxes. They will find something and since Stark Industries is financing the law firm… you can be sure that they will be cooperating with the prosecutor, they will hand over everything they find. We are up against a giant and unfortunately you did exactly what you are accused of. 30 years of prison is the best we can hope for and that’s being very optimistic.”

It was a hard blow to take, but Sharon managed to not wince. She had known that her work for the CIA was over and she would get punished in some way, but spending most of her life in prison? Steve was supposed to come back and make things right, because that’s what he did. What he always had done. In the end he had always been right and his opponents came to realise that. Sharon had trusted him and to be honest, she had felt a little bit smarter than the rest of them. How couldn’t they know? History had proven Steve to be right. To be the one you should listen to. Where would they be without him? In a world ruled by Hydra?

30 years of prison? For doing what she believed in. What seemed to be the right thing.

“What…” She quickly cleared her throat when she realised how weak her voice sounded. “What can we do?”

Clarke didn’t lose any time and came straight to the point. “We have to make a deal and hopefully we have something to offer that they are more interesting in than you.”

“Are you saying…”

“We have to give them Rogers.”

There was something Sharon could respond to that. Did he really believe that she would betray him? Things had gone horribly wrong, Sharon was aware of that and she felt for every person who had lost someone in Bucharest, but things had clearly gotten out of Steve’s control. He was going to find a way to make it right, he always did. That was what he was doing now, wherever he was, Sharon just knew it.

“No, I am not going to say anything bad about him. Steve was trying to save a friend who turned out to be an innocent man who would be dead without him. It was never his attention to kill anyone, but every circumstance was working against him. He couldn’t just sit back and watch. He can’t do that… If he knows that someone is in danger, he’ll come for you… regardless of what he must do.”

Sharon knew it was foolish to hope that he would understand, but she wished that everyone could see that Steve wasn’t a killer. The way how things had turned out was not the way he wanted them to turn out. From all the reactions she had expected, an almost pained groan wasn’t one of them.

“That’s the second thing you definitely can’t say in court. Did you ever get intimate with Rogers?”

The prospect of 30 years in prison hadn’t made her flinch, but this question did. “I am sorry?”

“Are you in any way romantically involved with Rogers?”

“That is none of your business.”

“Which means yes. Does anybody know about this? Anybody seen you? Is there proof?”
“Why is this of any…”

“Your aunt is war hero. A celebrated icon of feminism and patriotism. Today people still remember her name and her recent passing has shown that she is still incredibly beloved by the people. Probably most of her history with Captain America is made up, but that doesn’t matter. Her niece involved with Rogers… that is going to leave a bitter taste in their mouth. The media would love this story and I don’t have to explain the effect it would have on a jury, do I? Miss Carter, I promised your mother to do everything I can to keep you from spending the rest of your life in prison, but I don’t have a lot to work with. Rogers is the one they want. They can’t get him, so they’ll come after you with all they got. The only way to save you is to give them Rogers. If you know where he is, if you have any idea where he could have gone, if he said anything, you need to tell. It’s the only thing that can save you.”

***

Balancing the DVD player in one hand Peter unlocked the door and slipped inside the apartment.

“Now that’s a piece of crap.”

Peter almost jumped out of his skin and dropped the DVD player which was incredibly embarrassing. Fortunately his reflexes weren’t gone entirely and he managed to quickly create a web that stopped the player from crashing to the floor.

“You shouldn’t do that in public. It might freak people out.”

“You freaked me out!” Peter released a shaky breath and put the DVD player down and then mentally kicked himself for once again making a fool out of himself in front of Tony Stark.

Tony Stark. In his apartment. Again. “Uhm… aunt May?”

“At work. I let myself in… Look, getting here was extremely uncomfortable and I don’t intent to stay long. So put that thing down and come over. I got to tell you something.”

“Sure, right…” Dropping his backpack to the floor Peter hurried over and sat down next to Mr. Stark, not really looking at him.

“Jesus Christ, kid… You still think I’m mad at you? I’m not going to bite you.”

Feeling that his cheeks were already flaming red Peter looked up and Mr. Stark was smiling at him. It looked kind of weird. Not like last time. They hadn’t spent that much time with each other, but Peter had seen hundreds of pictures of Mr. Stark and that was enough to say that… he had looked better.

“Sorry… I’m just… nervous. I didn’t think I’d see you again… so soon.”

“Yeah, I had some stuff… to take care of.”

Peter didn’t say anything, that would have been out of line. Colonel Rhodes and Miss Potts had told him a thing or two. Then there was the media. Mr. Stark had been in hospital. Trying his best to be discrete Peter looked him up and down. A few cuts on his face and a black eye, but besides that…

“Are you okay? I… was worried.”

“Yeah, I heard that. I’ve been better, but I’m okay. Look, kid, I need to apologize to you…”

“What? No, no, no, no. You did nothing wrong. I fucked up and…”
Peter’s eyes almost popped out of his skull when Mr. Stark simply put his hand over his mouth to shut him up. “No talking. Just listening. I’m sorry for ignoring your attempts to talk to me, but… I was in a bad place and I don’t think that it would have done any good to talk to you in that state. It’s better now… not good, but better. Like I said, I can’t stay long and Pepper is already freaking out about me leaving the compound so… let’s talk about the accords.”

“Okay, great, I wanted to…”

“Shut up and listen. I don’t want you to do superhero stuff. You’ll get hurt sooner or later, that’s inevitable… Although you’re pretty much a god and… way more adapt to do this thing than I ever will be, but… I’m not an idiot. You’re 15 and being a hero is awesome, you’ll do it anyway, regardless of what I say and since I’m not your dad I can’t tell you what you can’t or cannot do. I’m not encouraging you to kick some bad guy’s ass, but… I’ll make sure that you’ll do it in the safest way possible. It’s like telling you to not have sex. Of course, you’ll have sex, so it’s better to give you a condom instead of… Damn, that wasn’t the road I wanted to go down… You’ll get a new suit. A better one. It’ll take some time and lots and lots of Vibranium, but that’s not going to be a problem. Could you just do me a favour and keep away from the bad guys until I made you bulletproof? Again – this is me not encouraging you to kick ass.”

Peter stared at him with his mouth open and Mr. Stark smirked softly. “Great, I consider that a yes. Now, the accords. First, we’re definitely not going to tell anyone who you are and since you are a minor you aren’t going to sign anything. Which means that you can’t do any superheroing, which you shouldn’t do anyway, outside of New York. Right here, well… we might be able to come to an agreement with the police for a slight amount of cooperation… after you’ve done your homework and eaten your dinner. Also, no ass kicking during school. Education is very important.”

“You’re sure you don’t want to be my dad?”

“Oh, shut up and listen.”
“I don’t see the problem. So you can’t leave. Where would you have gone anyway? It’s not like we’re here, because we have a lot of options where to go to.” Scott casually shrugged and Clint was already opening his mouth when Steve glanced at him. No more yelling or not so well hidden insults. They were going to talk about this in a civil way to make sure that everybody’s voice was being heard. Like this they were going to figure out what was going on and what they were going to do about this. Together. Like a team.

“He took us in as guests. Now he says he won’t let me leave anymore. We switched one prison for another.” Wanda’s voice was hard to define. There was rage and shock, both of it and Steve was unable to tell if one emotion was more intense than the other. Her eyes lingered on Scott, clearly confused by his previous statement. Steve had to admit that he was feeling something very familiar.

“It’s not about our lack of options. I agree with Wanda, he cannot decide that she is not allowed to leave anymore.” Steve stated his opinion and was taken aback when he heard Scott clearing his throat. “Actually, he can.”

“What?” Sam was raising both eyebrows and Scott shrugged in response. “He is the King of this country and the head of their government. Interpol put a red notice on Wanda’s head. According to CNN 135 countries have already agreed to instantly to extradite her. T’Challa can change his mind and since he is the head of state, he can throw you in prison as soon as he wants to. A room in the palace is pretty generous when you consider the circumstances.”

“Oh great, now you’re justifying this?”

“Newsflash, Hawkeye.” Scott casually crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Wanda is responsible for the death of a few hundred people. Probably thousands. Those kinds of things normally get you arrested, but since you are totally cool with this…”

Wanda winced at Scott’s words and Steve thought of the raft and the collar. How small she had looked. They had used a torture device on her and Steve couldn’t get rid of that image. “You okay?”

“Are you kidding me? Really? She’s doing perfectly fine. Can we have a conversation about this now? The Ultron disaster and how it’s totally her fault? No? We’d rather discuss how the guy who took us in without asking for anything in return is pissed to find out that she was responsible for…”

“On whose side are you anyway?” Clint snarled at Scott who was perfectly calm, speaking without his usual jokes or quips. “Oh, now there are sides? Which sides? You against the people who died in
the Ultron disaster?"

“Stop it.” Wanda whispered weakly, her eyes looking at the table top while she was nervously tugging on the sleeve of her shirt. Her behaviour started to worry Steve and he felt the need to step in. “We’ve already talked…”

“You talked about shit. I wanted to talk and you kept talking about how Stark built Ultron because you don’t care. Looks like T’Challa cares. Sokovia cares. Interpol cares. Nobody is going to swipe this under the rug anytime soon. You want to talk about it? Otherwise I’m going to go back into my room, because I’m not wasting my time watching you complain about the only thing that keeps us from getting thrown into prison again. A real one.”

Nobody said a thing for a couple of seconds until Sam, who had remained mostly silent until now, cleared his throat. “Okay, I wanna talk about it.”

Steve raised an eyebrow, a bit surprised by his reaction, but why not. Scott was right in one point, Ultron hadn’t been a small thing. It had been an unparalleled tragedy and it needed to be discussed. Especially since some people were only interested in one side of the story. How could the whole world know exactly what Wanda had done when nobody had asked her about it? The diary wasn’t enough to pass judgement. “Fine. Go ahead, Scott. What do you want to talk about?”

“Why are you all so cool with this? Hundreds of people are dead, because of her!”

“She did not plan for that to happen.” Clint pointed out and Steve was grateful, because that meant he didn’t have to do that.

“For god’s sake, stop talking over her. Wanda knows how to talk. Granted, the diary didn’t talk about wiping Sokovia off the map, but what did you think that would happen? Combing the most brilliant technical mind on this planet with alien technology that has a mind of its own and proved to be incredibly hostile and powerful? Something nice and fluffy?”

“Scott, there’s no need to talk to her that way.” Steve sent him a warning glance, but Scott only reacted with a mere huff. That wasn’t good. This kind of energy would only poison the team.

“Most brilliant technical mind on the planet? Really?”

“Try studying at MIT. They have whole semesters dedicated to his inventions. There’s a saying – If it doesn’t obey the laws of physics, a Stark built it. So yeah, most brilliant technical mind on the planet. Done with being a smartass about something that you don’t know anything about? Great. Wanda, what did you think was going to happen?”

Fortunately Wanda didn’t seem to let herself get intimidated and raised her head. “I didn’t know what Stark would create. What I did was… giving him some motivation. I can’t just look into someone’s head and see their fears and secret. I would probably go crazy if I did. Sometimes I get glimpses and I can feel some of it. I don’t know what Steve saw or Thor. I didn’t concentrate on it either. Stark… he… his fears are connected to the sceptre, so it was incredibly intense. His mind was cold and full of darkness. It seemed… empty. I don’t know what he saw, but the intensity was… overwhelming. I knew that he was going to use the sceptre and that the result would be… disastrous for him and the Avengers.”

Scott looked hat, blinked and then turned to Steve. “How the fuck is she even on your team?”

“Listen, Scott… you weren’t there during the last two years. Things naturally look differently from the outside. Wanda was in a difficult place, not everybody can relate to that if they haven’t gone
through something familiar. What she did was wrong, she admitted that, but it happened at a time when Hydra’s influence was still strong. She regrets what she did and she has been trying us to destroy Ultron. Ever since then not a day has passed that Wanda didn’t prove her worth as a member of the team. I’m proud to have her with me.” Steve offered Wanda a soft smile, hoping that it would make her feel better and when she hesitantly smiled back, he felt relieved.

It had to be so hard on her. Growing up an orphan, losing her brother and now the entire world was after her when they hadn’t seen what Steve had witnessed. Wanda had saved Steve’s life. All of their lives. He knew that she was a good girl who had made some severely bad decisions. Like a lot of them. Steve had read Natasha’s old file. Did anyone doubt her to be a good person? God, he hoped that she was alright…

Wanda had deserved a chance to prove herself, to change. Everybody should get that chance, because change was possible. Steve believed firmly in that. What was there left to believe if he should lose that? He considered Scott a friend, but when it came down to this – he didn’t know much more than the average person on the street. Wanda had been with Hydra, in a desperate attempt to help her country and people who had been suffering for years. War was the worst thing that could happen to anyone, Steve knew that. No, she probably should have never done that, but Steve could understand that need to do something. To help and when you were small and unimportant, you turn to somebody who might give you enough power to bring about change. The world had forgotten about Sokovia. Nobody had been there except for Hydra. Wanda and Pietro had been desperate for an opportunity and Hydra had offered it.

From that moment on… who could tell what tactics Hydra had used to manipulate both of them? The Avengers had been the biggest threat to Hydra, so it was easy to believe that they had nurtured Wanda’s fears and her rage about her parents’ unfortunate death. Yes, Steve was aware that they had joined Hydra voluntarily. Yet it was important to look at the entire picture. Circumstances were important.

Hydra and their manipulations were the enemy. Not the people who ended up their being their victims.

“I agree with Cap.” Clint nodded to confirm what he had just said. “You’re happy now, Lang?”

The question seemed to confuse Scott, he reacted with a frown. “No, because we haven’t even got to the main point yet. Okay, I get it. You’re Captain America and more forgiving than other people why not. Okay, you forgive Wanda that she wanted to create something to explicitly kill you – whatever. But what about Stark?” Scott paused for a moment, let Tony’s name linger on their minds and Steve felt his chest becoming uncomfortably tight. He was worried that it might get hard to breathe any second, so Steve sucked in some air, covering his mouth with his hand. This way hopefully nobody would notice.

“Maybe you are sorry and decided to redeem yourself by becoming an Avenger. That doesn’t change the fact that the entire world population, every fucking person on this planet thought that Tony Stark created Ultron. Alone and on his own terms. That’s horrible. Even worse – he believed that himself. I don’t really have to tell you how cruel this is. Making him believe he is responsible for the death of…”

“The entire fucking thing was a mess, right.” Clint interrupted Scott, his expression and tone clearly showing his annoyance. “But Wanda didn’t put a gun to his head and told him to create a murder-bot. You weren’t there. You didn’t talk to that fucking robot. It had Tony’s personality all over it. You can’t just say he had nothing to do with it.”

A point that Steve would like to ignore, but that hardly seemed possible. Not when he perfectly
remembered how Tony had pretty much called Ultron his child.

“Huh…” Scott made a pensive face. “Isn’t that funny… we have a somewhat telepathic person on this table of who we know that she is able to manipulate somebody’s mind to let them get overwhelmed by their darkest fears to get them to do irrational and dangerous things and you tell me that we still should blame the guy whose mind she manipulated? Then why aren’t you in prison after all the… what was his name? Loki business? Sam told me how…”

Steve saw it coming before it happened. Clint was a guy who would regularly grit his teeth and liked to snarl, but it was actually hard to make him snap. Except if you knew about this one thing. There was no time for Scott to finish his sentence, Clint was already on his feet, leaning across the table to probably intimidate him. “Don’t you fucking talk about that! You weren’t there! You have no idea what that was like to have somebody in your head!”

Despite Clint’s daunting demeanour Scott didn’t flinch, nor bat an eyelid. To be honest Steve was impressed by how calm he seemed. “Yeah, exactly. I wasn’t there, I don’t know what it’s like to have somebody mess with my head, but you do! Judging by your passionate reaction you didn’t like it very much. So why is it okay when Wanda does it to Stark, but when some Asgardian god does it to…”

“It was something different! I couldn’t control anything I was doing, I was more or less a zombie! Stark was piloting back the plane, he talked to us, he was making jokes, he was throwing a fucking party. He didn’t act any differently.”

“Aha, I get it, because it wasn’t exactly the same, it means that Stark wasn’t affected at all. Got it. Do you listen to yourself? Or are you just feeling entitled to the mind control thing?”

Steve reached out to grab Clint’s arm, afraid that he was going to lose it over this. Not without reason, what Loki had done to him had to leave a person damaged for life. Losing all trust in the safety of your own mind. Just mentioning Loki’s name got Clint all worked up and everybody had to understand that. Nonetheless this wasn’t the place to lose it, they were all friends and they needed to stick together. Nobody else would. “Clint? You okay?”

Shaking his head Clint growled, then bit his lips as if he was trying to swallow the words he wanted to say. Eventually he released a long breath and focused on Scott, looking calmer, his eyes hard nonetheless. “What is this even about, Lang? We should be talking about if he can still trust T’Challa to have our back and now you’re playing Stark’s lawyer. The man who sold us out. He didn’t move a finger when they put us on the Raft.”

“Well, I guess that happens when you destroy an international airport, you go to prison and the last time I checked Tony Stark wasn’t the government or a member of the police… but what do I know?”

“Where do you want to go with this, Scott?” Steve asked carefully. “We can talk about anything, but I’d like to know what’s really bothering you.”

Now Scott was looking at him and Steve froze. The first time they had met was still so present. Steve had felt a bit uncomfortable confronted with Scott’s uncontainable admiration. It had been the first time they had ever talked to each other and this very moment it was hard to imagine that the same person who had done that was sitting opposite of him. “What’s bothering me? I’m fucking scared how this whole thing is going to work out for me? Yeah, I’m fucking, I know that. I’m on probation and I’m on the run for having destroyed a German airport and stealing Pym technology. I’m stuck here with you guys, because otherwise I’m going to end up in prison for the next 20 years or so. Strangely enough that’s not what I’m worried about the most. You are right, we don’t know each other so well,
but you know Stark. You are the Avengers, you defeated the aliens together. I was at your museum, you were friends with his father. Wanda was making him believe he was a mass murderer, the whole world believed that. Yeah, nobody got after him, because he is still a billionaire and he did a lot of stuff to make up for it, but now everybody knows that it wasn’t his fault, but hers! And you guys don’t seem to care about that! She let him take the fall and you don’t care. Is it so hard to believe that I’m scared that I’m going to end up taking the fall for something too?”

Steve was rendered speechless. None of this had ever been his intention and for two years it had been perfectly clear that Tony had created Ultron. Retrospectively Steve felt bad for criticising him for it, knowing that it hadn’t been him alone. How would it help to crucify Wanda for it? She hadn’t planned for Ultron to happen either. “I’m very sorry for what happened to Tony, believe me, but what do you expect us to do? All of this… has already happened. We can’t change it anymore. I would like to go back and react differently, but it’s too late for that.”

“Oh, right… so when somebody gets murdered you just shrug it off, because you can’t go back in time and can’t prevent it from happening. The murderer just gets to walk away?”

“I’m not a murderer!”

“Honey, I watch the news. We can argue that you didn’t want to kill half of the Sokovian capital or the people in Lagos, but you murdered Strucker.”

The mere name caused Steve to flinch. “He was Hydra…”

“Still a human being. Just because fucking Hydra was involved it doesn’t mean that she isn’t to blame at all! I’m…” Sighing Scott buried his head in his hands. “I can’t do this. It’s like talking to a wall. You already know what you want to believe and you’re sticking with it. Hydra is bad, evil and entirely to blame for everything. Stark… collateral damage? You’re sitting here pretending that she isn’t responsible for the death of thousands of people and get upset, because T’Challa is worried for the safety of his people? We owe that guy everything. That guy is the only chance your best friend has to ever live a normal life. Newsflash, we are at his mercy. He is the government of this country, he has to look after its interests and he has the authority to arrest us. Red notice from Interpol, don’t forget that. You can sit here and debate about how outrageous it is that he doesn’t want her to leave, afraid that she might hurt somebody. Everybody else on this planet would react the same way. You guys are the exception and that’s not a good thing. I gotta go, I have a lot of reading to do. The chapter of the accords about adding new members to team is fucking endless…”

Pushing back his chair Scott got up to his feet and Steve could feel how his words were weighing heavily on everybody’s shoulders. It wasn’t quite like that. Wanda’s implication in the Ultron disaster had been about the Avengers. Lagos had been an accident. It wasn’t quite like that. Wanda’s implication in the Ultron disaster had been about the Avengers. Lagos had been an accident. It had never been her intention to hurt anybody else. T’Challa didn’t know that, but Steve would explain it to him, clear up this entire mess. She wasn’t a monster, Steve knew that. Nonetheless he didn’t come up with anything to say while Scott was making his way towards the door.

It was Sam who spoke up. “You’re reading the accords?”

“Yeah, it’s a lot to get through. Especially the part where they talk about saving people’s lives instead of… you know… killing them.”

That stung. Steve couldn’t explain why, but he felt distraught when Scott finally left them alone and nobody dared to actually look at each other.

“He thinks I should still be in the Raft… wearing that collar.” Wanda whispered and Steve instinctively shook his head. “No, he’s… angry. He had to leave everything behind. His daughter,
his girlfriend… he doesn’t know where to put his anger.” Should he be saying this? Steve didn’t actually belong in this time anyway. What had he left behind? Bucky was here…

“He should be angry at the fucking accords and the guys in business suits and ties that got us here.” Clint grumbled, slumping back down on his chair and Sam’s constant silence was suddenly too much for Steve to bear. “Sam, what do you think?”

“I think…” Steve knew Sam well enough to know that he was struggling. Not feeling at ease with what he was about to do. “I think that he’s got a point. Yeah, Clint is right about the accords, but… Wanda, you didn’t say anything. We’re your friends. Look at us right now, nobody hurt you or anything. I don’t like Stark and he did screw us over, especially Steve, but he’s not to blame for Ultron and it wasn’t okay to… No, it was a despicable thing to let him believe he caused that. Nobody wanted all those people to die. You didn’t. He didn’t. You should have said something and somebody among us should tell you that you… did something horrible. I got to know you, another side of you, but Scott doesn’t. I get that he is scared and pissed off. I’m angry too. We need to be back sooner or later, the world is going to need the Avengers and then we also need you. People have to be able to trust you. Do you get that? Stark financed your entire life for two years and regardless of what happened two weeks ago… you screwed him over… in the worst possible way and I’m with Scott on this… I don’t know if you’re actually sorry about that.”

Lowering her eyes Wanda nodded shortly. “I am… I know it was wrong, but… I was a coward. The Avengers offered me a place… a purpose when I had nothing and… I was scared that it would all go away again if I told you…”

Steve closed his eyes, thinking about how many things had gone wrong and how helpless he was to do anything about it. He was right about Wanda though. She was a good girl. Troubled, yes. Easy to take advantage of. Like Bucky… That would never happen again.

“So… what about the house arrest?”

Exhaling loudly Steve made a decision. “Scott has a point… at the moment we can’t really go anywhere, so we shouldn’t do anything right now. Show T’Challa some good will, then it will be easier to talk to him.”

They definitely needed him as an ally. His sister and her cold, hateful stare hadn’t vanished from Steve’s mind. Wakanda was Bucky’s only option, he didn’t have the right to put it on the line. “And we need to talk to Scott… tomorrow. Let’s give us all some time to calm down. We’re his friends and we’re not going to let him down. It’s our fault if he doesn’t know that.”

***

“I have an army.”

It was the look on his face. Smug and so much confidence. Tony had used it himself so many times before. That’s why Tony hadn’t understood. That one moment with Loki and Tony hadn’t learned a single thing about him. For him it had been all show. That expression in Loki’s eyes.

The knowledge that he couldn’t lose. Not a hint of doubt. No fear, no uncertainty. Nothing. Tony had thought that it was a good pokerface. Even when the Chitauri had been all over New York, killing people right and left… Tony had still thought that Loki was an actor. Full of shit.

“I have an army.”

Sure, they had a Hulk and to Tony that had been the biggest force imaginable. Loki hadn’t known
what he had coming…

Fuck, had Tony ever been so wrong?

Later on, after nearly dying and saving New York and the entire world from destruction Tony had seen him again. Lying on the floor of his penthouse, slowly sitting up, looking at them. Staring at his defeat and looking barely interested. Asking for a drink.

By then Tony had known better. Loki hadn’t been an actor and his confidence had been there for a reason. Tony had seen them. At the other end of the portal.

Not thousands of them but millions. All of them there. Waiting…

Loki had known and therefore his defeat hadn’t mattered to him. Borrowed time… all of it.

Tony hadn’t been able to sleep for over a year. The memories, the knowledge had cost him his relationship with Pepper and almost his sanity. Nights had been endless and painful, so Tony had been hiding in his lab, like he always did. Until sleep had come back to him like a long lost friend.

Then Steve had taken it away again. By killing Tony every night. Sometimes he killed Howard too. Sometimes Tony and Howard were the same person. It didn’t matter, they were all expandable. Steve didn’t even look at Tony’s mother. The shield would ram into the reactor and Obediah would leave Tony to die.

That was waiting for him and therefore Tony wouldn’t return to his bedroom. There was nothing Vision could do about that. “Don’t look at me like that, it isn’t going to work?”

Cocking his head Vision was calm to respond. “How am I looking at you?”

“Like a parent who’s going to send their kid to bed. I’m not going to bed.”

“You’ve been working for 18 hours straight. Your body will need some rest if you want to stay effective.”

Damn, that was a good way to put it. “I’m Tony Stark. I could close my eyes, put my hands behind my back and I would still be fucking effective.”

Vision smiled gently and Tony quickly turned his attention back to web-shooter Peter had given him to take a look at. It was hard to believe how talented that kid was. The last time Tony had seen something this clever… Screw it, he had never seen anything this clever that he hadn’t created himself. He was so going to get Peter a scholarship…

“Your work isn’t going to run away, Mr. Stark.”

No, the web-shooter was still going to be here tomorrow, but that kid was fucking 15 years old. Tomorrow he might get some stupid idea like wanting to impress a girl by stopping some bank robbery and Tony would be damned if he didn’t do everything he could to keep him somewhat safe. Kinda ironic… Tony would be dead if a car hit him with full force… Peter would probably walk away without a stretch.

That was another risk that Tony wasn’t going to take…

“I’m sure Miss van Dyne won’t mind if you show her your ideas a little later than promised.”

“No, she’ll get them tomorrow. Like I said…..”
Tony wasn’t going to let her be called to some kind of mission without the perfect version of this suit. Pym was a fucking genius, Tony would give him that, but there was no technical device that Tony couldn’t improve in some kind of way. Hope couldn’t stay the size of a wasp all the time… and Tony would make sure that she was bullet proof.

“Looks like I’m going to need more Vibranium…”

Vibranium… Wakanda…

A shiver was running down Tony’s spine and he squeezed his eyes shut for a moment before staring intensely at the web-shooter. That had nothing to do with him anymore. All his life Tony had walked right into things that were bad for him… he wouldn’t do that this time. Also, there was a lot to do, Tony had to… Why was his vision getting blurry?

Somebody was touching his shoulder and Tony flinched although the touch was gentle, almost reassuring. “Mr. Stark… Miss van Dyne is not going to be alone if something should happen. Or the young man. I will be at their side. You don’t have to finish everything tonight.”

Tony was running out of options. Except for the truth… “I can’t go to bed, Vis… it feels like dying… every time.”

“I do not possess the ability to relieve you of your nightmares, but I can assure you that they are only dreams and not going to hurt you. You are trying to protect your friends and so am I. When you wake up, you will be surrounded by friends. You will be safe. Even while you’re asleep.”

Chapter End Notes

Good lord in heaven - I just got a tumblr account. I'm still figuring out how it works, but if you want to ask me anything or if you want to give me writing prompt, feel free to drop by ;)

https://boleyn13ao3.tumblr.com/
Hi everybody,

There you go, new chapter, more Scott and something weird is happening. Somebody is reading the accords. Like actual reading and talking about it is happening. Who would have thought?

Just to affirm something that I've stumbled over in the comments:

- Thanos will play NO part in this story. He will not even be mentioned. I will not do a cop out. This story is about how Team Cap's actions would affect the world they're living in, no aliens to bail them out

- Wanda's parents got killed by a Stark weapon. Deal with it. Stark Industries produced weapons. They got sold to the military. The military uses weapons to bomb things. It wasn't sold by anyone else, it wasn't built by another company. There is no reason to make excuses for it

Anyway, let's get on with the story. If anyone has any questions or wants to see a little preview for the next chapter (I'll post the preview in about a day or two) - visit me on tumblr :)

https://boleyn13ao3.tumblr.com/

Now have fun :)

“...re professionals who undergo a rigorous national selection process. must abide by codes of conduct and technical standards established by their military and civilian law enforcement institutions. It is incumbent upon them to read and embrace all appropriate Rules of Engagement, regulations, Mission-specific standard operating procedures and Status of Forces Agreements for application throughout the Mission area of operations. The Avengers have the same responsibility as other Mission members to advance human rights through their functions, and to prevent and report violations of international human rights and humanitarian law...”

That sounded reasonable, didn’t it? It should be all about human rights and although Scott knew that he was a loose cannon, he could clearly see why it was important to know the rules of engagement. Shouldn’t that go without saying? Then again, while going through the accords Scott had found out that every single detail had to be written down, no matter how obvious it was.

All in all that paragraph was perfectly reasonable and therefore it went straight to Scott’s ‘makes sense’ list.

Okay, next one.

“... carry out their duties in accordance with international law enforcement standards and procedures set out in applicable directives, regulations and orders. At all times, the Avengers conduct themselves in a manner that upholds the reputation of their profession, their country of
origin and the United Nations. Any act of misconduct is subject to formal review and investigation, potentially resulting in repatriation and further disciplinary action if deemed appropriate…“

This was the whole point of it. Consequences…

Sometimes it was still hard to wrap his head around this concept. It had been so easy, so clear. The Avengers fight bad guys that the police can’t take care of. Why can’t the police take care of them? No idea and Scott had never asked that question. It had never occurred to him that they didn’t have any authority whatsoever.

That what they were doing was technically illegal… after the fall of Shield.

Everybody trusted Captain America, so why question what they were doing? Scott felt a knot forming in his stomach. God knows how everybody would react if some average Joe assembled a bunch of friends, they got some weapons and declared that they would from now on protect the planet against all possible threads…

The thought alone caused a shiver to run down his spine. Yes, that sounded like a crazy and potentially dangerous bunch of people.

God, Hope was right, he was so stupid…

Another point on the ‘makes sense’ list. By now it made the ‘bullshit’ list look pretty bad. Okay, next one…

“… are accountable for their actions and subject to audit, investigation and, if necessary, administrative or disciplinary action. Avengers plans should include clear, detailed descriptions of their roles and responsibilities…”

Fuck, this wasn’t going to get any better, right? What was bad about clear, detailed descriptions of their roles and responsibilities? Wasn’t that one of the things the Sokovian government hat complained about? The Avengers had wrecked the city defeating Ultron and then they had left. Since they didn’t work for anybody and weren’t reporting to anybody… who was responsible to finance the rebuilding? Or who would decide how much of the destruction had been unavoidable and what had been reckless? The military and the police had to ask themselves those questions too…

Scott was sounding like such a wimp, but when you actually started thinking about this things like a tax paying adult… some things became blatantly obvious. Tax-paying, right… where had he read all that stuff about money?

Closing the accords Scott looked at all the page markers. Illya had given him the advice to choose different colours for different categories. Green was economics. Green equals money. Yes, Scott was a freaking genius.

Or the world’s greatest idiot if you asked Maggie or Hope…

God, he missed Cassie so much. It should be a feeling that he was already familiar with. In prison Scott hadn’t done anything else than missing his little girl. Back then he had thought that nothing worse could ever happen to him. Now he was missing her again and it was way worse. There was no comparison.

In prison Scott had had a perfect perception of time. Everyday had brought him closer to home. Closer to Cassie. He had known that he would see her again. Of course, he had been aware that Maggie would make it hard on him, she still had every right to. But Scott had known that he would get out and that one way or another – he would see his little girl again.
Now Scott had no idea if there was the slightest chance of ever giving her another birthday present.

Their stay in Wakanda wasn’t like his prison sentence. It may never end. Leaving Wakanda behind meant going back to prison. For way longer this time. Staying in Wakanda meant being away from Cassie. Scott didn’t know how long he was going to be able to take this.

Clint also had kids. How was he dealing with that? Not all probably and it wasn’t like Scott gave a fuck. He didn’t like that guy and he couldn’t stand his face. Also, Clint was in this business way longer than Scott, he should have told him what he was getting himself into…

Yeah, that wasn’t fair and Scott could hear Hope scolding him, calling him an idiot and that he was searching excuses for himself. True, Scott could have asked some questions and read a fucking page of the accords…

Right, the accords…

Exhaling loudly Scott flipped to the page that he had been looking for. Finances…

Scott was half way through the first paragraph when there was a knock at the door. Why was it so hard for everybody to leave him alone for an hour or two? It wasn’t like he felt like talking to any of them, not after their last conversation. Scott just wanted to get through the last of his questions to finish his list. Pushing his chair back Scott got up and slowly walked towards the door, ready to send anyone away who was trying to bother him.

To his surprise Scott eventually saw Steve standing in front of him. He had expected Sam. Captain America was standing in front of him and Scott wanted him to go away, so he could read the accords. Perhaps he’d still find a reason in there. A reason for all of this madness. A reason for not knowing if he was ever going to see Cassie again. Something to make it worth it.

“Yeah?”

“Hey, Scott.” Steve offered him a little smile and it looked so nice. Scott knew that he offered it anyone. He had to, Wanda had got the same smile and it was giving Scott the creeps. “I thought maybe it’d be a good idea if we talked alone about the things that… you wanted to discuss yesterday.”

“We’ve talked about it yesterday and I think I’m well aware of your opinion by now…” Scott pointed out softly and Steve shifted his weight from one foot to another. “Yes, but you didn’t hear the end of the conversation.”

“Right, because what I heard what was enough.”

“Will you just give me a chance to talk with you about it? I know that this is important to you and it’s also important to me.” Steve offered him a tentative smile and it wasn’t necessary to search the sincerity in it. For a second Scott started wondering if Steve had ever told a single lie in his entire life. It was hard to imagine. First, there was this whole Captain America and absolute integrity business. Second, Scott wasn’t the most gifted liar himself and it was more than obvious that Steve was even worse than him.

“Okay, fine. Come in.”

Stepping aside Scott let Steve in who did a look around. Right, this was the first time he was in here. Naturally Steve instantly spotted the desk and everything Scott had been working on. The accords, several sheets of paper, a dictionary that explained legal terms and so many damned notes. Good lord, from here his desk looked like absolute chaos.
“So uhm… you’re actually reading the accords?”

Why did Steve sound surprised? Scott had told them that he was reading the accords, that was nothing new. “Yes, I’m trying to work through it. It’s been over a week and I’m still not even halfway through it. The wording is a bitch, I need to read the same line five times to get the meaning. Especially when Illya isn’t around to spell it all out for me.”

“Illya?”

Oh right, they had never met. “He’s a lawyer who helps me to understand the complicated stuff. T’Challa sent him to me when I asked for some support.”

Steve didn’t respond, he merely nodded and was probably trying to decide what to make out of this new information.

After finally sitting down, Steve’s eyes settled on Scott. “I don’t quite understand T’Challa’s position on the accords.”

“Really? Wakandan people died in Lagos, his father was one of the main forces behind the accords and T’Challa was in Vienna when the accords were about to be ratified. I’m pretty sure T’Challa is as much pro-accords as you can get.” This conversation had just started and it was already really weird. They were in Wakanda. Freaking Wakanda. How could there even be a debate about T’Challa’s opinions on the accords?

In response Steve slightly moved his head as if to incline that he wasn’t so sure about that. “No, T’Challa can’t be that supportive of them. He was there when all went wrong and he took us in after the accords got all of you locked up.”

“Uhm… I haven’t got an actual look at my arrest warrant, but I’m pretty sure it had to do with wrecking the airport and not so much with the accords…” Scott heard Hope yelling at him. For endangering people’s lives. For acting recklessly without any reason. For being so incredibly stupid.

Hope had always been right. About everything. Hank had been crazy for giving the suit to Scott.

“The people who got you arrested where the same ones that wrote the accords.” Objectively it was very easy to listen to Steve’s voice. The way he said that was calm, soft, like he was a patient teacher, just beginning to explain something to a pupil. It rubbed Scott the wrong way anyway. “Again, I’m pretty sure that the Joint Counter Terrorist Centre didn’t write the Sokovia Accords…”

“Not the agents themselves. The men who are in charge of making the decisions. Like Ross.”

Okay, maybe there was something that Scott didn’t get. Some detail… “Ross is waiting for his trial for trying to abuse the accords… so I don’t really see your reasoning.”

Steve obviously didn’t mind, he seemed to be just fine with explaining everything to Scott. So there was still hope that they could have a normal conversation about all of this. “That’s the whole point, Scott. The accords were set up by people like him. In powerful positions and who are only interested in gaining more power. They’d use the accords to make the Avengers their personal task force. Either to use us to do what they want or to immobilise us when we could end up getting in their way. Both of these possibilities have already happened.”

What was going on here? Was it Scott’s fault that he couldn’t see it? Or was it Steve who didn’t get it? Fine, they were here to talk about all of this and Steve was finally willing to give Scott some insight, so they would discuss this until Scott could wrap his head around it. Pulling up a second chair Scott sat down. Now it was his turn to get into lecture mode. “Sorry, I know I can be kind of
slow, but I don’t see your point. Ross got thrown out of office, because he tried to misuse the accords and use the Avengers as a private task force without the consent of the UN. Therefore the accords definitely aren’t meant to use the Avengers that way, otherwise nobody would be talking about abuse. He went behind the UN’s back and he made you guys believe that he was in charge when he clearly wasn’t. I don’t see how the accords are to blame for one guy being a complete shithead.”

Steve had pretty eyes. It was weird to think something like that about another man and Scott regretted using the word ‘pretty’ even in his mind. Anyway, his eyes were bright and clear, easy to look at. They hardened up at the mere mention of the former Secretary of State. Scott understood why, that man had caused all of them a lot of trouble, but the more Scott thought about it he got the impression that Ross was just a little pawn in a game of chess.

“Before the accords were on the table nothing like that would have been possible. Nobody else had been involved. Outsiders who didn’t really know what we were doing, because they weren’t part of it. With that attempt to control us the misuse became possible. Shield didn’t work out, because they were Hydra. We should have learned from that. Without the accords no outsider had been able to take advantage of us.”

Did that mean that Wanda didn’t count? Or had Steve included her when he had been mentioning Hydra? That seemed highly unlikely. Steve couldn’t have forgotten about this. They had been arguing about the fact that Wanda had used the Avengers for her own purposes. There was no debate about that. Wanda had admitted herself what she had done to Stark. Saying that the Avengers had never been taken advantage of before the accords… that just wasn’t true.

“Okay, you are worried that you’re going to lose control over your own actions. I get that, I think it’s a legit fear, but… that’s how things work.”

Steve determinedly shook his head. “The Avengers were founded to protect the people. It’s a very simple thing, it doesn’t need to have politics involved to make matters complicated or bureaucracy to slow things down until we’re not able to move anymore. After the fall of Shield we managed ourselves and it worked out fine. Yes, we’ve made some mistakes, but they will always happen. Accords or not. We were independent and we could make sure that the people who needed help actually received it.”

Finally, something that they could agree on. Scott glanced at the accords lying on his desk. That ridiculously huge pile of paper. Reading them took a hell lot of time, acting them out would be even more complicated. Bureaucracy was a bitch and fearing that it would slow action down so much until you weren’t effective anymore was something that Scott could get behind. The rest of it…

“Yeah, you guys were working independently, because what you were doing was illegal.”

Until now Steve had been so perfectly calm, relaxed even. They were having a reasonable and civil conversation. Now Steve was blinking, the expression on his face was changing entirely when confusion was taking over. “What are you talking about?”

“Illegal stuff. Believe me, I know one or two things about that. Not as well as I should, that’s why I went to prison… Damn, I got distracted… What I wanted to say, you mentioned Shield yourself. You worked for a government agency and then you didn’t work for anybody which means you didn’t have any authorisation going around and taking out terrorists. And other things like crossing borders without reporting to the authorities. Don’t get me wrong, everybody’s grateful if there is one terrorist less, but…

Technically you are just a couple of highly armed guys who’ve decided that they are doing police work and people got pissed off by that. If you don’t have any authority or legal framework… well,
it’s very easy for people to start pointing fingers as soon as mistakes happen. So yeah, on a technical level you guys were breaking the law. Same with me when Pym hired me to use the Ant-Man suit and break into the headquarters… definitely illegal, but at least I was aware of that.”

Scott had made a good point, hadn’t he? Again, Steve didn’t answer immediately, but was taking in Scott’s words. When he spoke up, his voice was firm and clear. “It’s not quite the same thing, Scott. We’ve been protecting the earth for two years when Shield fell. We had already proven ourselves and nobody said anything until the accords were suddenly put on the table.”

Yeah, that was indeed a bit weird. “Agreed… I have no clue why you didn’t get told about the accords sooner. After all they had been in the works since Johannesburg… Honestly I don’t even get why Secretary Ross introduced you to them. He’s not a spokesperson of the UN and he didn’t have any authority at all when it came down to the Avengers…” Scott couldn’t pretend like he knew what was going on or how these affaires normally happened. What he knew was that Ross was full of shit…

“That’s just the point, Scott.” Steve had a smile on his face and it looked strangely sad. A bit beat even. “The mere existence of the accords allowed a power-hungry politician to tear the Avengers apart and to send them after an innocent man. That’s just the beginning and even with Ross gone the situation hasn’t changed. With the accords still in place the next guy can abuse them just as easily. Next time the Avengers could be used for something way worse…”

Huh… the Avengers. That was Stark, Rhodey and the Vision. Until now they hadn’t done anything. Nothing good, nothing bad. Rhodey wasn’t able to and nobody knew which state Stark was actually in… That wasn’t the point anyway. Scott was having a more or less political conversation with Captain America. He shouldn’t be able to get one single word out, too busy staring at these arms and going crazy about the great hero in front of him. Two weeks ago that had been the case. Now Scott was looking at him and thought… Hell, Scott wasn’t the brightest lightbulb in the chandelier. He had done some incredibly stupid things. Things so reckless and dumb that he had lost his family and all the people he cared about for a second time. Wasn’t that the definition of idiocy?

Nonetheless Scott had a degree. Which didn’t mean anything. You could spend 10 years at a university and still be a complete idiot. So no, Scott didn’t have any illusions about his own intelligence, but he thought that the got the problem.

Steve didn’t get it.

Ross was gone because he tried to make something out of the accords that they definitely aren’t. He was going to prison for that. Wasn’t that a sign that the accords weren’t going to be misused again? Or at least that the UN wouldn’t just let anyone misuse them? Was this a glass half full / half empty thing? Did Steve see something different than Scott? Or didn’t he see the accords at all?

Sending the Avengers after an innocent man he had said.

After Bucharest?

Next time the Avengers could be used for something way worse…

Like what?

... to maintain international peace and security… removal of threats to the peace… to bring about by peaceful means… principles of justice and international law… based on respect for the principle of equal rights… to achieve international cooperation in international problems…
... unite our strength to maintain international peace and security... that armed forces shall not be used, save in common interest...

Scott glanced at his notes, lying right there on the table. Next to Captain America.

An Avenger shall perform all duties impartially, without favour of affection or ill will and without regard to status, sex, race, religion, political belief or aspiration. All citizens will be treated equally with courtesy, consideration and dignity... They will conduct themselves in appearance and department in such a manner as to inspire confidence and respect for the position of public trust they hold...

... will never employ unnecessary force or violence and will use only such forces in discharge of duty as is reasonable in all circumstances...

... will cooperate with all legally authorized agencies and their representatives in the pursuit of justice....

Avengers will be responsible for their own standard of professional performance and will take every reasonable opportunity to enhance and improve their level of knowledge and competence...

The use of force should be used only after discussion, negotiation and persuasion have been found to be inappropriate or ineffective....

Respect from the public cannot be bought; it can only be earned and cultivated...

Damn, who was Scott trying to fool here anyway?

Looking back up he met Steve’s eyes, he could still see the confusion and it hit him so hard. Scott wasn’t even halfway through the accords, but he had read enough to know that they couldn’t be discarded as the chains a politician wanted to put on the Avengers. So Scott simply had to ask.

“Please, tell me that you did it for your best friend. All of this. It’s still a selfish thing to do, but I would get it. Fighting this...” Scott gestured towards the accords. “…is just stupid and doesn’t make any god damned sense.”

“I know that it looks like an opponent that we can’t overpower, but if we don’t stand up to this now, it will...”

“No, no.” Shaking his head Scott was about to start rambling, but then quickly stopped himself and stayed on point. “That’s not what I meant. I didn’t say you shouldn’t fight them, because you aren’t going to win. You shouldn’t fight them, because they are... pretty much okay. Granted, a few things need some fine polishing, like their ideas how much time you can actually go off duty and the quota of...”

“What are you even talking about?”

“The accords. I’ve read them. Most of them. They are okay. They don’t intent to completely control you. Hell, the first 30 pages are only about respecting human rights and the integrity of sovereign countries. They are about saving lives and keeping peace. Yes, the Avengers would work for the UN and the committee would assign their missions, but...”

Steve wouldn’t let him finish. “But that’s where it all goes wrong. That’s how Ross did it. If we let somebody else decide what we do, it’s only a question of time until we get forced to do something that we don’t want or that’s wrong.”

Seriously, was he for real now? “Uhm, Steve? Did you ever have a real job? Everybody has a
fucking boss who decides what you do and sometimes you don’t like that.”

“Being an Avenger is not a job. It’s more important than that.”

“Exactly, that’s why a couple of very intelligent people, definitely more intelligent than me and you, sat down and wrote those 1800 pages. Because it’s important. There is always a chain of command. Somebody has to make the decisions or things don’t get done. It wouldn’t be a single guy, but several delegates of independent nations. About over 100 people to be exact and they have to vote on it. Yeah, I know, I also thought that would take fucking ages, but they don’t have to assemble for that. There are emergency clauses. Lots of them. Also if an Avenger doesn’t want to be part of a mission because of their moral principles, they can refuse. Later on, there will be hearings, but they can’t force you to do anything. You’re not a slave…”

Scott trailed off when he didn’t see the slightest of change in Steve’s expression. For him the idea of somebody else having influence on the Avengers seemed unbearable. It wasn’t like Scott couldn’t understand him a little bit. Shield had turned out to be a giant pile of shit. That could give a man trust issues. But was that a good reason to tell the rest of the world to fuck off?

“I know what happens when you give people that kind of power. In the wrong hands the Avengers are an incredible dangerous weapon… People with agendas made the accords and they are going to be the ones on the council. A council once tried to kill the population of an entire city. It’s not safe to let…”

“So what are you going to do? Sure, you’ll always run into a corrupt politician. You’ll always have to work with an asshole. It’s human nature. But if there are asshole, there also have to be good people. You can’t seriously believe that everyone who works for a government or for an international, political organisation is bound to be corrupt. That would be… crazy. If everybody said that they don’t trust the government and they won’t accept its system… Well, then you have complete anarchy. You have to find some middle ground. I’m not saying that you should be okay with anything that’s in the accords, but if you read it… you pretty soon understand that it’s about making the world a safer place. It’s not just about restraints. Hell, they are offering quite a lot. An immense budget for machinery, gadgets… and the possibility to recruit more people. The UN is willing to put a shit ton of money into the Avengers…”

In response Steve smiled in a way that made Scott think that he had said something silly. “Money has never been an issue.”

“Sure, you’ve been working for Shield – the government and then you had a billionaire in your club. Who’s going to pay for your stuff now?”

Steve didn’t respond and Scott realised that he probably hadn’t thought about that. Maybe he hadn’t thought about a lot of things and the desire to see Cassie became overwhelming. So he had lost his daughter a second time, probably for good. And what for?

Picking up one sheet of his notes Scott looked at the last paragraph.

*Any person can file a complaint against a member of the Avengers without fear of retribution. Even a member of the Avengers conducting or supervising an investigation is permitted to file a complaint against another member of the Avengers*
Hey everybody,

Here we go, let's go back to Tony, okay? :D

A lot of you were asking about the accords and to be honest - those are all real quotes. "United Nations Police in Peacekeeping Operations" and some paragraphs of the code of conduct of American police forces

If anyone has any questions or wants to see a little preview for the next chapter (I'll post the preview in about a day or two) - visit me on tumblr ;)

https://boleyn13ao3.tumblr.com/

Now have fun :)

“Okay, this is kind of creeping me out. I’m afraid of accidentally squashing you. Aren’t you afraid that somebody might step on you?”

“Actually no. I can fly, so big, dramatic gestures with your hands are way more threatening.”

There have always been lots of things that Tony wanted to try. He was a man of science, it was necessary to be naturally curious. Shrinking to the size of an insect wasn’t something that he was eager to experience. Hell no. That was just horrifying. “You’re not scared I might get a fly flap?”

“Not until you suggested it.” The earpiece carried Hope’s voice and she actually sounded like she was enjoying herself for some reason. Some people had such a strange idea of fun. Tony would be perfectly fine lying on the couch and drinking an ice-cold beer. Admittedly, this was more important.

“Okay, any problems yet? How does the flying work out? Wings equally balanced? The weight?”

“No, everything works perfectly fine. Actually it feels lighter than before. I can’t complain.”

“Fine, then stop flying around. It’s making me nauseous.”

“You don’t even look in my direction.”

“Because I’m so incredibly nauseous.”

Sighing in relief Tony watched as Hope pretty much popped up out of nowhere at the other end of the room. One had to hand it to Pym, that technology was fucking genius, but it freaked Tony out nonetheless. Something about it didn’t sit right with him. Something that Tony couldn’t explain and he didn’t like that.

What he did like was the fact that his little adjustments seemed to work perfectly. Good news. “That colour is atrocious though… You’re sure you don’t want that changed?”
Opening the visor of her helmet Hope shook her head. “Wasp. The yellow is obligatory.”

Tony shuddered and grimaced. “It’s ugly as fu-“

Hope’s raised eyebrow made sure that Tony didn’t finish that sentence. “It’s very… flashy.”

“Have you seen the Iron Man suit recently? I thought flashy was your thing.”

“Don’t compare my beautiful gold / red design to this… colour. Anyway, if we ignore all the fashionable details… you’re content with your test ride? I got plenty of time for the fine tuning. Like painting it in another colour. How about gold? That’s so much better than yellow. Yellow is… urgh.” Tony wanted to make a retching sound, but throwing up in his bathroom after watching the news was a way to vivid memory. Therefore he was content with seeing Hope smiling amusedly. “It’s perfectly fine. I had no problems handling the suit before, but I have to see that you made it easier.”

Her smile became softer, the way you’d smile at a friend. More than mere curtesy and it made Tony feel uncomfortable. He wanted to make a joke, to change the atmosphere, make it go away.

“Thank you. I know you have a lot on your plate and you didn’t have to do any of this. So, I’m really grateful.”

With a nonchalant gesture Tony turned around, clearing his throat. “Well, I could have done better if you had allowed me to do something about the colour. Anyway, I’m expecting a guest and we’ll need the gym, so if you were so nice to…”

Someone rather timidly cleared their throat and the resulting sound made Tony stop in his tracks and look up at the ceiling.

Of course, somebody always had to fuck with him…

Peter was clinging to the ceiling and it looked pretty much effortlessly. Like he had been in this position for quite a while. Little brat…

“Seriously, Friday? Not even a word? You just let him… hang out here? I don’t even get a notice about the security breach?”

“Boss, Spiderman has unlimited access to the compound. Granted by you.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. I just like to know about people coming in and leaving again. And you? What are you doing up there? Not saying a word. Get down here, you’re way too soon anyway.”

The leisure pose instantly vanished and Peter hastily nodded. “Sure, Mr. Stark. I’m sorry, I didn’t want to interrupt and… coming down, right.”

The kid jumped down, landing on the floor right next to Hope who was reacting way too calmly to this whole situation. “Hope, that very impolite young man is the Spiderling and he clearly has no idea how to use doors.”

“We’ve already met and I think he wanted to be called Spider-Man…”

“Right, thanks, Miss van Dyne.”

When did that happen? Probably during Tony’s… during the time he didn’t want to talk to anybody. Rhodey and Pepper had told him how badly Peter had wanted to talk to him and the kid had been
here. It made sense that he would have run into Hope. Another thing that made Tony feel uneasy. He was walking such a thin line with Peter anyway.

“What you did was really cool by the way… the shrinking. Totally awesome. Kind of seen it before, but… that kind of thing is still mind-blowing the second time.”

Hope smiled at him in response. “Thank you… you are here to test another suit?”

Yes and Tony wanted to get it done quickly, he would much rather like to go back and work on Rhodey’s legs. Or work on Peter’s gadgets. That was so much easier than actually testing them with him. Or with Hope.

Tony must have been crazy to schedule both of these tests the same afternoon. At least he would be done with all of this in an hour. Then he could go back to his lab.

“Okay, enough of the small talk, underroos, We need to get you into your suit to start working on the details. A lady is present, so you’re definitely not going to change in here. The suit is in the room next door. Go, get it. Time is money.”

Despite the mask Tony could tell that Peter was blinking and most probably gaping. “Yeah, sure. I’ll… be back in a second.”

Peter rushed towards the door and out of the corner of his eye Tony could tell that Hope was now looking at him. When she spoke up she did it in the form of a soft whisper. “So what’s the deal with him?”

“I have no clue… I don’t think he knows either. Something happened to him and now he is able to do all the things you saw on video… and a hell of a lot more… He’s a kid and maybe the most powerful person running around… he’s going to use those powers one way or another and somebody’s gotta prepare him for that…”

“Did I say something wrong?”

Her question confused Tony, which finally made him to look at her. The smile was gone, now she seemed concerned. For whatever reason. Tony couldn’t stand people looking at him like this. It wasn’t quite as bad as pity, but he was sick of it anyway. “No. Why would you think that?”

“No. No, you didn’t. I remember being his age… not a lot, thanks to a lot of alcohol and drugs, but I remember well enough to be sure that there is no way to stop him from playing the hero and using his powers. I can’t stop him, I have no right to stop him. But I can try and make sure he doesn’t get hurt again. I owe him that much. It’s rather simple.”

Against his expectations Hope didn’t reply anything, she merely nodded, almost as if she understood. Well, considering her relationship with Lang and how she felt about the Ant-Man suit… perhaps she actually did understand what Tony was trying to explain. Unlikely though, Tony had quite a history of failing in trying to explain himself to other people.

At least Peter spared him of having to continue this conversation. The kid more or less stumbled back
into the room. Geez, God must have had a really fun day when he had decided to give that kid super powers. Clumsy, into technology, not into sports, incredibly smart and just the slightest bit awkward. Logical choice…

“I’m ready. This is amazing. It feels like a second skin and…”

“Good lord, stop sucking up to me, kid. This is just the prototype. I’m not wasting Vibranium on the test subject…”

Again, Tony felt like he could see beneath the mask and make out how Peter’s face fell. That he was feeling stupid now and that he was mentally kicking himself. It was pathetic and at the same time endearing. Kind of…

“Oh, okay… uhm… what do you want me to do?”

Go home and do your homework?

Hope was smirking, the amusement was back and Tony wanted to get out of here. Clearing his throat Tony shrugged. “Do your thing. Swing around. Jump up and down and… what do I know? You need to be able to tell me if you can’t move properly or if the weight is dragging you down. So go ahead… do your thing.” Tony made a vague gesture with his hand and then felt like adding something. Because he had made Peter feel stupid. “And remember that a lady is present. Go ahead, impress her.”

Quite an unusual challenge, but something a teenage boy was very susceptible to. Peter’s body language changed instantly and he straightened up. “Right… uhm… so I’ll do my thing.”

And he did just that. Hope was too badass herself to gasp when Peter climbed up a flat wall as if it was nothing. Nevertheless her eyes got a little bit bigger. Tony was glad he had seen enough video footage of Peter doing that kind of stuff, otherwise he would have a similar reaction. “How are we doing until now?”

“Pretty good… except that I think the fabric is going to cut off the circulation in my thighs…”

“Well, that probably only means that you gained some weight…”

“Hey!”

“I’m not a professional tailor, okay. I’ll add it to the list. You’ll finally do something impressive?” Tony crossed his arms in front of his chest, looking expectantly at Peter who had reached the ceiling by now. The impressive stuff came one second later. Everything that Tony had asked for. Swinging across the room, a few jumps that were clearly defying gravity and another proof that Peter could stick to every surface. Eventually he was hanging upside down on a seemingly very thin web string. “So… was that okay?”

“I don’t know.” Tony shrugged before addressing the same question to Hope. “How did he do?”

“I’m definitely impressed, but I don’t think that this was the point.”

“The suit… right… it’s really cool, Mr. Stark and it has…”

“Kid…” Tony sighed and was tempted to pinch his nose. “You don’t need do that. No speeches today. Just tell me what I need to fix, so I can fix it.”

Tony desperately hoped that Peter wouldn’t start rambling again, it was cute, but not what he needed
right now. A list of flaws that Tony could go through, that was all he wanted.

Clearing his throat Peter started talking again and Tony sighed in relief. “It’s a little too tight. I can move around just fine, but it’s not very comfortable. The weight is perfectly okay… I didn’t notice any difference. There’s the neck part… I don’t know what you did with it, but it’s kind of difficult to turn my head.”

That was bad, Tony had expected it, it was bad nevertheless. Peter needed to be able to move his head freely to be aware of his surroundings all the time. Then again, Tony had been in some battles. Ugly ones. He knew that the bad guys liked to go for your neck or your throat. Easy target, one stab and you were done for. The consequence was that Tony had to find a way to bend the Vibranium to his damned will. Hardest material on earth and he was supposed to make elastic fabric out of it. Totally possible, Tony had seen it and he knew that he could do the same. Probably even better. He needed it to be better. He needed it to be perfect.

“Great… I mean not great. I’ll get it fixed. Anything else? We’re not going to change the colours, because they look awesome.”

Next to him Hope let out a little chuckle and Peter quickly shook his head. “That’s about it. I can’t complain. It’s awesome. Thank you again for doing… Right, you told me to stop thanking you. I will do that. No more thanking…”

Thank god for that…

“Perfect, now that we got that done. You probably have CEO stuff to do like firing interns and meetings with bad guys in suits. And you… you should go and try to get into a movie that you aren’t old enough for.”

“Nobody does that anymore, we can watch anything on the internet.”

“Okay, now you’re getting an ugly ass yellow suit for making me feel old…”

Now both of them were laughing and Tony needed to get out of here. “Was nice having the two of you over. I’ll call you when I am done with the updates. See you.” He was so obviously fleeing from the room, but Tony didn’t care. As soon as he was out of the gym, he felt like he could finally breathe properly. Being alone was good. Tony could deal with people only in a very small dose. This had been too much, he felt tired, worn out like after a fight.

Absently he rubbed over his chest, then quickly stopped himself from doing so. The images always came to haunt him when he did that. Time to go to the lab, he had to find a solution for the Spider-Man suit. He would be already done if the Vibranium weren’t such a bitch. Almost impossible to get it into the shape you wanted it to. Creating bullets or knives… easy. Piece of cake. Garment? A fucking piece of clothing? That was something else entirely.

Possible though, Tony had seen it and he would figure it out. Tony had always been able to trust the abilities of his own mind. Perhaps the only thing that he could trust in. Heat. He would need a lot of heat and he would have to be insanely fast…

First Tony would go over the design a few more times. Perfection. Everything else was unacceptable.

Time passed. Or at least Tony thought so. He was never quite sure when he was working. One song melted into the next one. Tony’s pencil was scraping over the paper and Pepper was calling his name. Yeah, some hours had probably passed.
“You missed dinner.”

“Not hungry.”

She was walking on eggshells around him. Pepper probably didn’t realise herself, but Tony did. All these years Pepper had done nothing else but trying to make sure that he was okay. Happy, healthy and sober. This moment was like so many before, she was trying to make sure that he was fine. Then again, it was the first time that she had no idea how to do that. Tony could sense that she was afraid. Afraid of saying something wrong, of making a wrong move, of…

… triggering him…

A knot was forming in his guts when he thought about that. It made him angry that things could be changed this easily, that even Pepper was affected by this. Was it even anger? Tony couldn’t tell. Too tired. Too tired to feel angry?

Pepper shouldn’t have to mind her words around him. She had never done that. “Hope and the young man both went home. They didn’t say anything, but I got the impression they thought that you wanted to get rid of them.”

No reproach, pure softness. The gloves were on and they were made out of velvet and yet Pepper was still scared that Tony would shatter into pieces at the slightest touch. Granted, that was a possibility… but only after he was done. Not putting down the pencil Tony answered her, most of his thoughts still focusing on how he could allow Peter to turn his neck as far as he wanted to. “That’s partly true…”

“Okay, why do you ask them over if you don’t want to see them?”

“Because they need to be testing the suits or I won’t know if I did a good job… they came here, we did some tests, now I have to work on it again to erase the mistakes…”

He could hear her moving behind him and pictured her face as she was about to sigh. “Look, Tony… I know you and how you get when you are working. When you are starting a new project… Hope can figure it out, she is thick-skinned, she doesn’t get upset over these kinds of things. The Spiderling…”

Tony felt the corners of his lips twitching. Peter didn’t like being called that. It was ridiculously easy to tease him with that. Obviously that wasn’t Pepper’s intention, she just didn’t know his name and she had to call him something. “… he’ll think again that he did something to upset you.”

“He’s a teenager, Pepper. He’ll get over it.”

“Tony, you can’t do something like this to the kid. He blamed himself for your injuries and he’ll end up thinking that you do the same. You’re right, he is a teenager. Of course he is going to believe that it’s something personal.”

Almost. Pepper was almost scolding him, but not really. She couldn’t bring herself to do it, because Tony was made out of glass. No, he was a glass. Somebody had dropped him, broken him into tiny little pieces. Somebody else had put the pieces back together, with glue… Touching him bore a high risk of breaking him again. Pepper wasn’t going to be the one to do that.

Peter wouldn’t die if Tony wasn’t particularly nice to him. Words didn’t break bones. Fists did…

“I don’t blame him for anything.”
“I know and he probably knows too, but… he doesn’t feel that way. Just keep that in mind.”

Doing her the favour of looking up Tony nodded. “Okay, I’ll do that. Could you give me a moment? I’m trying to wrap this kid up in Vibranium…”

Instead of leaving Pepper came closer and a part of Tony was screaming with the joy. The other half was itching to push her away.

“Why? I know he just… 15 years old, but I’ve seen the videos. He’s probably the most powerful of all of you…”

Peter was lying motionlessly on the ground…

Pepper was falling…

His father was saying a name, then there was blood…

A hand wrapping around his mother’s throat…

The shield came crushing down…

Tony squeezed his eyes shut, his fingers clutching the pencil with all his force, but Peter wouldn’t get up. He kept lying on the ground…

“Scratch the word ‘probably’. He’s one of a kind, he’s definitely stronger than… Being strong isn’t enough. He’s playing by the rules, because he is a good kid. Other people aren’t that kind. They… they’d drop containers on him that weigh several tons to… He thinks he has some kind of responsibility, can you believe that? He is 15 years old, he is pretty much a god and he thinks about how these powers obligate him to help other people… He is going to do that, there is no stopping him and when he does… I’ll make sure he’ll be as safe as he can be… What I can do is that nobody and nothing will be able to pierce his suit. Nobody will be able to rip off one of Hope’s wings… This is what I gotta do, Pepper.”

A hand was put on his shoulder. How was she touching him? Was Tony already breaking?

“Dinner will be ready whenever you are. Just don’t forget to sleep. I’ll have Vision check on you.”

Vision… yeah, that was a good idea… Tony could use some help to melt down the Vibranium.

***

“It’s an unusually cold day for Wakanda. An odd time to go outside.”

Startled Scott looked up from the accords and was confronted with a very pleasant surprise. In front of him was a person he had never seen before. During the last couple of days he had gotten worried that he would have to spend the rest of his life with the same four people. The woman who had walked up to him was gorgeous, but she didn’t look like one of the servants. That jumpsuit was no servant attire. “We’ll… it’s still warmer than San Francisco at this time of the year. I’m Scott and you are?”

“My name is Shuri. The King’s sister.”

Holy shit… and Scott hadn’t shaved in three days.

“Uhm…” Putting the accords to the side Scott quickly got up from the bench only to find out that he still had no idea what to do. “This is rather embarrassing, but it turns out I have no idea how to
greet… royalty… Would you help me out… your highness?”

Smiling warmly Shuri held out her hand. “A simple hello would suffice.”

Shaking her hand Scott let out a sigh of relief. “Hello… okay, that was easy. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Let’s take a seat.”

Following her example Scott sat back down on the bench strangely excited for whatever she had to say. Shuri was a change of scenery that he desperately longed for. He would even welcome her yelling at him for some reason.

That didn’t happen. Instead she handed him a photograph.

Scott felt his entire body going numb. He knew that Cassie hadn’t grown during his absence, but she was looking taller anyway. Maggie was holding her hand, picking her up from school. “Who did take that picture of my daughter?”

“A journalist. It was published in an online article about you. Your daughter’s face was blurred, but other copies ended up online anyway.”

Jesus fucking Christ….

“Is there the slightest chance that not every other kid in her class knows about… me?”

Shuri had big eyes, but not easy to read. Scott had never been a great judge of character. “I don’t think so, Mr. Lang, but they knew before this picture was published. Most of the attention is focused on Mr. Rogers, so I doubt that many people got to see it. If it is any kind of solace.”

No, it wasn’t.

Hope had been right. Cassie was still in San Francisco, still living her life and her father was now a wanted terrorist. The whole world had seen him when… Oh…

“I’m sorry, your highness.”

“What for?”

Was she making him say it, because there was no way she didn’t know. There was no way she didn’t hate him. “I… didn’t intent nor wanted to hurt or kill your brother, but I put his life in severe danger. The fact that nothing happened to him had nothing to do with me being attentive or smart… it was dumb luck.”

Shuri nodded ever so slowly. “Yes, it was luck and believe me if your actions had ended up hurting my brother, we wouldn’t have this conversation. My brother is fine though and you are here. Alone in the gardens of this palace. A copy of the accords in your lap. A lot of unexpected things happened.”

Her reaction wasn’t something that Scott had expected either, so he preferred to stay silent and wait for whatever else she had to say. Or he was just going to look at the picture. Thinking about how far away she was and how desperately he had tried to get her back and then Scott had given her up in a millisecond. What for?

When Shuri didn’t say anything else Scott couldn’t stand the silence. “You hand pictures to
everyone?”

From the way Shuri’s face changed Scott could tell that she thought his question was funny. For some reason. “No. What images would I show them?”

Now this question wasn’t funny, but perfectly legit. It was easy to answer when it came down to Clint. He had kids too, but that guy had been a secret agent for most of his life. There was no way he hadn’t known what he left behind.

Wanda? Scott wouldn’t pretend that he knew a lot about her other than her murdering half the population of the city she had grown up in and letting Tony Stark take the fall for it. No, Scott couldn’t imagine her caring about someone. No photographs for her.

From their conversations Scott knew that Sam was single and that he didn’t have any close family. Sure, there had to be friends, maybe someone he had been dating. He seemed like the relationship kind of guy.

Captain America…

“Do you know where Steve is?”

The princess nodded again, such a small movement and it was filled with elegance. “Where he spends most of his time.”

Scott snorted before he realised it and Shuri tilted her head, intrigued. “What is it?”

Obviously Scott shouldn’t tell her, he didn’t know her, but she was someone else. Not the four people he was stuck with who were defending a mass murderer and who were happy to ignore a document that had been written to make sure to protect the rights of every person on this planet. Like Scott had done, but he had been ignorant. Hope had been right about him being an idiot.

“I just noticed that not everybody left something behind. Cap didn’t. Everything he cares about is in that laboratory. On ice. He didn’t have to give something up and I… am not going to see my daughter grow up. I’m not going to see her again…”

Saying it out loud made it more real and Scott tried to fight down the despair. He had failed his little girl. A father was supposed to be around, to protect her, to love her. Scott had robbed both of them.

“It cannot be denied that your situation is bitter, but it doesn’t have to be hopeless.”

“Yeah? How so?”

“There is always the possibility of going back.” She made it sound like something he could actually do and Scott sighed. “Right. That would be a much longer prison sentence than the one I already did. I would miss her growing up anyway… and my life would be over too. Not that it isn’t over now… and let’s face it… I deserve to go to prison, but… I wouldn’t get to see Cassie, I know that and hell, I just think it’s unfair…”

Scott winced when she put a hand on his shoulder. She wasn’t smiling, but there was a strange softness in her eyes. “It is. All of this is unfair, but you know that the situation is not going to change. My brother is not going to send you away and if you choose to stay here… you choose to be away from your daughter. You may not have known that when you got into this mess, but you know now. You’re running away just by sitting here.”

“I know, okay! What’s the alternative? 20 years of prison? I know that I fucking need to be
punished, but…it means missing my daughter’s life anyway.”

His own words were sinking in and Scott wanted to scream. He didn’t though. It would have kept him from listening to Shuri. “It doesn’t have to be that way.”

“Huh?”

“Turning yourself in and proving your honest regret is going to help to moderate your punishment.”

“Yeah, from 20 to 15 years?”

Shuri shook her head. “I am talking about you going home. To your daughter.”

“How on earth would that happen?”

“You aren’t the one who caused all of this. You are not the one they want the most. Things like this happen all the time. Little members of the mob going free, because they give the police information where and how to find the patriarch of the family…”

“Are you saying…”

“I’m saying that you could make a deal. Turn yourself in, give the other ones up and you can go home to your daughter. Just like that.”
Hello everybody,

First, another thing that I noticed in the comments and I feel like I should address:

- I love Captain America: Civil War as a movie. I saw it 3 times in cinema and I own it to watch it any time I like. I think it is a great piece of work. The ending makes me angry in all the good ways. A lot characters act in a way that makes me want to kill them and that's perfectly fine, because it makes good drama and tension.

Cap is the villain in this movie. I see it that way. Tony is the hero and it is complex, hurtful, intense and simply great. People do incredibly stupid things in this movie, people are incredibly ignorant, but not all of them. There are incredibly ignorant and stupid people in real life, so there should be such people in movies. On the other hand we have perfectly sane people like Tony or Rhody. At the end of the movie Rhody gets to talk about why he is still supporting the accords and the movie doesn't tell us that it's bad.

Sure, they try to make it a bit clean by telling us that nobody died, but the story itself makes sense. Zemo is a great villain, Cap is an even greater villain, because he thinks he is the hero and doesn't even realise what he is doing wrong. Natasha has always been backstabbing, so it fits her character to be a complete asshole at the end. Wanda is nuts - still nuts.

Scott acts like a person who has no idea what is going on, but takes part in the events anyway - 100000 of people do that every day.

The action was great, the story was good and the acting was outstanding (looking at you RDJ) I loved it and I love it even more, because it provokes so many emotional reactions. In a good way.

Yes, I am a bit worried that they might try to make Tony the villain later on, but then - it's RDJ, they know that he is their cash cow, they won't throw him under the bus easily.

Anyway - I love Civil War, it's probably my favourite Marvel movie although my favourite character isn't even in it.

Enough now - let's get back to the story. IT'S FINALLY HAPPENING! YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN

Sam wondered if Steve talked to him. It was hard to imagine that Steve would spend hours just sitting here, staring at his best friend. Barnes wasn’t able to respond, so talking to him wouldn’t have any kind of effect. People were talking to patients who were in a coma. Was there any difference? Sam wasn’t sure and couldn’t exactly know if Steve was doing nothing but looking at Barnes. Nonetheless, Steve was spending most of his time here.
Saying something would be weird, but that way Sam was merely standing around in a room with a man who had decided to go back under the ice so he wouldn’t put any more lives in danger. To be honest, Sam didn’t really know what he was doing here. Checking that everything was okay? How? There was nothing he could do. Barnes could be dead and he wouldn’t be able to tell.

He was looking okay though. Nothing about him would give away all the stuff he had been through. Well, except for the missing arm. Steve hadn’t been talking about this, but they knew that Stark had done that anyway. Sam didn’t want to give it too much thought, they would have to deal with all of this soon enough. Personally.

Despite all that had happened Sam still couldn’t say that he was particularly fond of Barnes. He didn’t seem like the kind of guy he would want to hang out with. Steve and him went way back, that was something Sam wasn’t able to comprehend. Nobody could understand what it was like to walk in those shoes. It was easy to understand though why Steve was so eager to keep his best friend safe. Steven being a good guy was just part of the answer and it was way too simple.

This was the only part left of Steve’s old life. A human being. It was only natural to cling to it. To Barnes. That was a connection that nobody on this earth had ever experienced. Because it was unique. Nobody had ever been pulled out of their life, out of their time. It would never happen again and it was obvious that the circumstances made it impossible for Steve to give up on that. Sam would never ask him to, the world was a very lonely place, it was natural and understandable that Steve was looking for somebody to share his thoughts with. Somebody who didn’t look at him like he was out of place.

They had been looking for Barnes for two years and then it had only taken… how long? One day for everyone else to find him? Sam still couldn’t quite wrap his head around it. There had been no time for the both of them to be happy to be reunited. Barnes because of his programming. Steve because everything had gone to shit once again and the weight of the world had been resting on his shoulders. So how must it feel like to have your best friend ripped away from you again? Permanently maybe? Because of the people you had been fighting all along?

No, nobody knew what it was like to be walking in Steve’s shoes and for his part, Steve wasn’t eager to ever experience that.

Barnes was right in front of them and out of everybody’s reach. Only god knew what those Hydra bastards had done to his brain. Steve was a hopeful guy, he had to be, he was Captain America. Sam considered himself a realistic person and judging from the evidence that he had seen – he wasn’t so sure if there was any chance if the programming could be broken. But what did he know? Wakanda was full of surprises and things that he hadn’t thought possible. Maybe they could come up with something that nobody had considered before. Their technology was amazing, but Barnes’ problem wasn’t merely… technical. Somebody had messed with his mind and it needed more than some machine to take care of that.

“I hope things will work out for you… somehow.”

Now he was talking to him anyway, feeling foolish and Sam pinched the bridge of his nose. He couldn’t understand how Steve did this. Spending that amount of time here. It was depressing, made him think of a funeral.

Shaking his head Sam turned around, the room was getting too small for him and he had only come here on his way to the lab anyway. Turning around Sam picked the gear back up and left the room. The absence of security personal had startled him, but this was Wakanda. Sam wasn’t so naïve to believe that nobody was watching him right now. Also, the woman who had brought him here had definitely informed somebody of his whereabouts.
Another door to the left and the terrible silence came finally to an end. People were buzzing around, working and nobody was paying attention to Sam. A strange sensation. It had been a while since he had seen other people than the team or T’Challa. It was nice or would be nice if Sam didn’t feel like an intruder. It also reminded him of the fact that he didn’t have anything to do.

“Can I help you, Mr. Wilson?”

That had been fast. A man about the same age as Sam had walked to him and gave him that expecting look. Friendly enough but ready to show him the door if Sam didn’t have a good reason to be here.

“Hello, uhm… I’m sorry, I didn’t quite know where to go and I don’t have a clue if I’m right here….”

“This is laboratory is under royal supervision. Civilians don’t have access to this area.” Stern but very clear. Sam got it and it was obvious that this guy knew who he was. How not? They were supervising Barnes, they had to be aware of what was going on here. Sam even understood that they wouldn’t want him wandering around here. “Right, sorry. It’s just I’m in need of some help with my gear.”

The scientist ever so slightly raised an eyebrow and his gaze dropped to Sam’s hands. It wasn’t easy to carry the EXO-7 wings and he would love to put the jetpack down. “Something wrong with it?”

“Yes, a malfunction of the left wing. It won’t unfold as quickly as…”

“I’ve heard about this design. I’d be curious to take a look at it.”

Delighted Sam nodded and agreed. The gear was put down on one of the tables while nobody else was paying attention to them. Hopefully Sam would only need one guy anyway. Said man was carefully examining the gear and Sam almost exhaled in relief when he noticed the care with which he was treating the gear. It was something special and Sam liked it when people were acknowledging that.

“Interesting…”

“What?”

Not looking up from the wings the scientist mumbled absently an explanation. “It’s a very innovative design, but you can clearly see two different influences…”

“How so?”

Sam was beginning to feel a slight uneasiness when the scientist unceremoniously screwed part of the cover loose, then grabbed a tiny flashlight to check out the inside of the jetpack. “Two different sources were working on this. Somebody who had a clear vision and… a little bit conservative. It’s very American so to speak. Later on somebody else worked on it and improved it. Excessively so. It’s unorthodox and incredibly creative. Very impressive…”

This guy obviously knew what he was doing and that was all Sam could ask for. It was out of the question that somebody who wasn’t extremely skilled would touch the gear. Too important, too special. Not everybody had enough knowledge to understand how it was designed.

“Right… can you see what is wrong with it?”

“It’s in plain sight. A sensor got damaged… probably by brute force. I assume it happened during
your fight at the airport.”

Yes, that was rather obvious. “I fear so too. Do you know how to fix it?”

Straightening back up the scientist nodded. “Of course.”

“Fantastic!”

“It would probably be about two days of work. I will have time to do it in about three months. I’m not sure if we have all the necessary material here, this is a completely unique design. With the material and the working time the costs will add up to 15000 dollars.”

Sam felt like the scientist had ripped off one of the wings and had hit him around the head with it. What? That much money wasn’t something that Sam could even imagine. Like always Sam reacted with a smile. “Right, you are…”

The unimpressed expression on the Wakandan’s face told him it was better to leave the rest of that sentence unsaid. “I’m sorry, Mr. Wilson. Did you expect me to do it for free?”

“No, I’m…”

“I’m relieved, because that would be… excuse my choice of words, it would be ridiculous. This gear is an example of extremely advanced technology. There are not many people around who are able to repair its defect. The material is hard to come by and expensive… not to mention how much time the work will take. Who would do that for free?”

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“There is still enough time for you to say no. Just get out of there and nobody could fault you for that. You don’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I have to do this, dad.” Hope didn’t say that he made her have to do this. She hoped that he knew anyway, but she couldn’t be sure. Not after all that had happened with him putting Scott in the place where she should have been. Hope had been supposed to wear the suit. There was silence at the other end of the line and Hope remembered how good that had made her feel. To render him speechless. That hadn’t happened so often before and now it didn’t mean anything. Hope felt foolish. Her little feud with her dad was so pointless, she knew that and nevertheless she couldn’t stop herself from partly blaming him for some of the things that had gone down.

If Scott hadn’t had the armour…

Now it was too late to moan Hank’s decision. It should have been Hope anyway.

“Are you sure what you are getting yourself into, Hope? I won’t stop you. I can’t. I don’t have the right and I know… I’ve stopped you before from doing things that… You are throwing yourself into danger and as your father I cannot support that…”

That had made her so angry before. This set of mind. “Why not? This is without a doubt the biggest thing I’ll ever do. It’s also the most honourable. Why would you proud of me getting a degree, getting married or getting a well-paid job but you won’t support my decision to help the world become a better place? To help people who have been harmed? To use the suit for what it had been designed?”
“I lost your mother like this…”

“I lost her too, don’t forget that.” Hope took a breath, trying to not let her memories get the better of her. “You should think that what I’m about to do is wonderful. A lot of people were hurt and wronged and the ones who did that are probably going to do it again. They have no reason to stop, unless somebody stands up to them. I’m willing to do that. I have to do it, because I have the abilities to do it. Should I just sit around and do nothing because you are afraid that I could get hurt. That you could lose me? That would be wrong. Every soldier in a war has a mother. Should they all stay at home? The consequence would be that nobody would be left to fight the invading army and the entire country would be lost. Due to selfishness. I don’t have the right to stand by and do nothing when I have the ability to help the ones in need.”

Despite her best efforts Hope couldn’t hear her father making a sound. It was impossible to picture his expression. She wanted him to have a bad conscience, she wanted him to be aware of his role in all of this. Just like she was of hers. Hope shouldn’t have backed down. Scott had charmed her and she had given up her place. Thinking about it made her tremble with rage.

“Are you reproaching me of caring to much about you to not let you perform a dangerous task that could have led to you losing your life?”

“Yes, that’s what I’m doing. Because I was the most capable person to perform said task! There was too much on the line to risk it. You had no right to risk Cross selling that technology or weaponing it. Not because of me… and I didn’t have the right to step back. I’m not going to do that again. I do not need your approval, but I would like your support.”

“Alright… I don’t have to like it though. I know you’re not blindly walking into this. Be careful anyway… especially around Stark. I don’t trust him.”

Hope held back the exasperated sigh that she desperately wanted to let out, but instead she remained calm and stated how things were. “I do. They’re waiting for me, I have to go inside. I will see you tonight, dad?”

“Of course.”

For now that was more than enough. After hanging up Hope put her phone into her pocket and pulled out a little mirror, checking her face. No doubt was visible and she was content. When she entered the room the UN delegates and the lawyers were all smiling, reminding her how long it had been since she had seen those expressions. She had heard the spiderling laughing, but she hadn’t seen his face.

“Miss van Dyne, a pleasure to see you. We are most glad to have you here with us today.”

“Gentlemen. I’m sorry for letting you wait, but I will not waste any more of our time. My lawyer and I have no objections to the current version of the accords. The modified paragraphs relating to the Wasp suit are definitely corresponding to my wishes.”

The whole procedure didn’t take longer than 20 minutes. Hope signing the accords. Taking pictures. The witnesses signing too. Shaking hands. By the time it was over Hope didn’t feel much different but definitely relieved. Now she could do more than just making phone calls, more than sending money to some address.

Hope would make sure that Scott wouldn’t do more damage with the suit than he had already done. Finally make up for that mistake…
Her phone was buzzing and Hope quickly pulled it out of her purse, expecting a message from Pepper or even from Tony. Asking how everything had gone down.

It was a message from her father.

_Tell Stark that I’m sorry_

What? Hope started to frown, not really understanding what Hank was referring to.

After checking the news she knew.

***

“I’m not a snitch.”

Illya grimaced as if he had just witnessed something extremely unpleasant. Like a child picking its nose and then shaking the hand of a stranger. “I’ve always disliked that word. It’s used way too often in my opinion and most people clearly don’t know what it means. You for example.”

Scott folded his arms in front of his chest, leaning back in his chair. It was good to have somebody to talk about this. The princess seemed like a nice enough person, but Scott didn’t know her and she obviously had her own agenda. While her eyes were fierce and passionate, Illya’s were kind and forgiving. That was what Scott needed right now. “Hey, I did some jail time. I know exactly what a snitch is.”

In response Illya smiled tiredly and shook his head, looking like he was tempted to laugh. “You obviously don’t. Snitches… do not exist. Well, they do… but you only find them on a school yard and they are maybe 10 years old.”

“Giving my friends up to the police to save my own skin… how would you call that?”

“Doing the right and sensible thing, your civic duty.”

Scott huffed, not really knowing what to say. Shuri’s suggestion had taken him aback. No, that didn’t cut it. It had knocked all air out of his lungs and his immediate reaction would have been to start protesting. If he had been able to say something. Now Scott was still feeling like somebody had given him some kind of drug that was slowing down his movements and thoughts. Giving them up to the authorities to save his own skin? Like traitor? When he had gone willingly with them? When nobody had actually done something to him?

No…

“What is sensible about betraying your friends? Yeah, I know we don’t know each other that long and I had no idea what I got myself into, but… They could have let me at the raft. They didn’t do that. I could give myself up without saying anything…”

“That would be stupid… and wrong.”

“You just say that because you kind of like me and you despise Wanda and that Cap is protecting her. I get that. I really do. But it’s not something personal…”

“Exactly.” Illya nodded. “So do not make it something personal. You joined Steve Rogers’ cause and later on you had a change of heart. You realised that what you were doing was wrong and you want to make up for that. You also know that the other people didn’t have said change of heart. Who still believe that they are right. Reporting a crime that a loved one committed is not snitching. If you
knew that your best friend was cheating on his girlfriend… would you feel a moral obligation to tell her? What if she wanted to marry him? Would that be considered snitching? We’re not talking about a child stealing cake from the kitchen and eating it. Do you know what Wanda Maximoff has done, Scott?”

Yes, Scott knew and that knowledge engulfed him like cold fog. So easy to get lost inside of it and panic was quick to follow. “Yeah, I know…”

Illya wouldn’t stop looking at him and Scott shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He definitely didn’t want to talk about Wanda’s deeds or Steve’s complete lack of understanding of modern day politics or… democracy.

“What would that be?”

“Do you want me to summarize?”

“Sometimes saying things out loud helps. It definitely does in court.”

Scott groaned but he had learned already that Illya had a reason for most things he said or did. “She made Stark create Ultron and made him believe that he was responsible for this creation. Then she and her brother killed Strucker… Hydra agent. Ultron ended up killing a few hundred people in Sokovia. Maybe thousands… the numbers vary, but you know that. That’s what she did… everybody knows what she did.”

“Yes and you know where she is hiding from the authorities. Is it snitching to report somebody to make sure that they won’t hurt anybody else?”

“Why haven’t you reported us yourself then? You’ve had ever chance to and… I wouldn’t reproach you. I wouldn’t reproach the king’s sister… or the king himself.”

The soft smile on Illya’s face made Scott feel guilty. “I am not perfect and you are right about the princess, she has her own agenda and so I have. Hers is to protect Wakanda.”

“And what is yours?”

“Shuri wasn’t lying to you. These kinds of deals exist and they happen all the time. Members of the mob walk free after 20 years of crime because they give up somebody who is even worse than them. Or the entire family. It’s not a perfect system. But what is more important - one soldier or an entire army? If a prosecutor has the chance to cut off the head of the beast, he won’t settle for one limb. I’ve always been honest to you, Scott. You don’t have many options. It’s either this palace as a prison or a real one… Or the third option. You have honest regrets, vital information and the support of the princess of his country. There is a chance you can go home to your daughter and it would not be snitching… or betrayal. Reporting somebody who committed a crime is never wrong, Scott.”

It made sense but Scott couldn’t. This wasn’t like him. No matter how badly he wanted to see Cassie, to take her in his arms… how could he destroy several lives just to save his own? Like this he wouldn’t be any better than…

“Have you watched the news today, Scott?”

“No, should I?”

“I believe it might help you with your decision.”

***
“An open dialogue seems like the best solution. I may heavily disagree with their opinion, but I cannot leave their voices unheard. The Desturi have gathered more support among the population than I thought they would… There is obviously concern among our people and I will not ignore that.”

The ministers nodded and out of the corner of his eyes T’Challa could see Shuri smiling. Knowing that she was proud of him made T’Challa hold his head up higher and he immediately turned to her when the conference had ended the ministers had left. “Do these affairs make you happy, sister?”

“I am not happy about the Desturi, but I am very glad that we’re finally back concentrating on Wakandan issues.” Shuri was still smiling and T’Challa did the same. “Wakanda always comes first, you know that.”

“I know…” Shuri nodded, turning more serious. “You’re sending the right message. If the people see that you’re willing to listen to the Desturi, they will know that you are also listening to their worries and fears. Wakanda has been in isolation for so long, it is only natural that our people fear what the rest of the world might bring to us…”

T’Challa knew that she wanted to say something else and he was immensely grateful that she didn’t. Everybody had expected that their father’s decision to let Wakanda join the global community after thousands of years of isolation wouldn’t appeal to every person in Wakanda. The Desturi and their conservative agenda was the result of that. T’Challa wouldn’t make the mistake of ignoring them or demonizing them. They were also a part of Wakanda, they had the right to have their voices heard. T’Challa wouldn’t make them stronger by pretending he didn’t hear them. His father’s work wouldn’t be jeopardized.

“Does the king have some time left to dine with his little sister tonight?”

“This was the last conference and for once I’ve done my paperwork. So yes, nothing speaks against having dinner. Do you want to…”

T’Challa was cut short by his phone. Shuri’s went off a second later and they both shared a glance before checking the messages they had received. As always Shuri was faster than him to understand the new situation they were in. T’Challa thought that he didn’t understand at all.

None of this should be possible…. He couldn’t be this wrong. Not with the responsibility he had. Not when Wakanda was paying the price.

“Maybe an open dialogue with the Desturi isn’t such a good idea after all, brother. They may have just found the perfect argument why we shouldn’t allow outside influences in Wakanda. Bad people might come here… and as we both know, they are already here.”

***

“Peter, there’s a package for you. It’s from Stark Industries.”

Aunt May had barely finished that sentence when Peter was already right next to her and grabbed the package. Had he moved too fast? Faster than a normal human being was capable of? Damn, he really had to be more careful when he got excited. Right now it didn’t look like Aunt May had noticed. Maybe Peter had moved normally after all…

“Thanks. I’ll take a look at it.”

“Is it about the internship you talked about? I wasn’t sure if that was still going to happen after what happened to Mr. Stark… whatever happened to him…”
She didn’t know that Peter had talked to him or that Mr. Stark had been here and that was for the best. “I dunno, I guess I’ll see when I take a look at it…”

It took some great skills and talk about homework to convince Aunt May to not immediately look at the package. Peter inwardly died a few times until an hour later when he was in the safety of his room, lying on his bed, ripping the package open.

Several pages of paper, one hand written. That was definitely the first one he was going to read.

Hi kid,

First of all – I hope you’ve done your homework and played some video games. Do kids still play video games? I feel so out of touch…

Here’s a first draft of your arrangement with the NYPD. Read it. No skipping paragraphs, no scanning the pages. READ IT. When you’re done, write everything down that you don’t understand or what you don’t agree with, I’ll have my lawyer work something out. Then you’ll get the second version and as soon as you’re content and my lawyer says it’s okay – you can sign it. You’ll need to meet the police chief though, with mask and everything, don’t worry. Gotta make it official.

I’m almost done with your suit. We need another test run. This time without Hope van Dyne though. I can’t have you around impressing women that are far too old for you. (Piece of advice – never use the world old when talking about a woman. In no context whatsoever)

Read the damned paper.

And in case I made you feel like I wanted to get rid of you last time – I did, but that had nothing to do with you. Your little show was really cool, I’m a big fan.

See you,

Tony

P.S. – Why aren’t you reading the freaking paper yet? (Do you see how badly I’m trying not to swear while writing this?)

Putting the letter down Peter couldn’t keep the smile off his face. Oh, right, he was so going to read it and impressive Mr. Stark with all the points he was going to come up with. Even if Peter was okay with all of it, he would find something just to prove that he had read it.

Two hours well spent with a lot of notes and Peter’s head was spinning but it was worth it. Mr. Stark was going to be content, perhaps even proud. Peter could do as he was being told. Waiting for the suit, sitting still, not doing anything stupid. Yes, Peter was perfectly able of doing that.

Until he turned on his phone and found out that the whole internet had been reduced to one single piece of information. Two videos.

The Winter Soldier killing Mr. Stark’s parents

The same Winter Soldier that Peter had let get away, because he had been having fun, he had been playing around.

Mr. Stark seeing the same video that Peter just had seen. Captain America standing right next to him
and... the murderer of Mr. Stark’s parents. Captain America admitting that he had known all along... and the both of them teaming up against Mr. Stark, beating. Over and over and over...

Peter had let them get away. Both of them and this was where they had ended up. He had complimented that guy on his metal arm. He had killed Mr. Stark’s parents... and Captain America was standing in front of him? Protecting him? Beating up the man who had saved the entire world to protect a killer?

The image of Aunt May crying flashed in front of Peter’s eyes. Her putting Uncle Ben’s clothing in a box. Then there was Mr. Stark telling him he was going to make him bulletproof, that he had done nothing wrong...

Captain America was slamming his shield into Mr. Stark’s chest was the last thing Peter saw. The display of his phone cracked and then the entire thing burst into little pieces, flying across the room. Peter’s fist was trembling, his ears were ringing and he didn’t know what to do with himself. Anger so overwhelming that he couldn’t move and made him want to scream because he had nowhere to put it.

Peter had promised Mr. Stark that he wouldn’t do anything. A promise he would have to break.
Hello everybody,

So the big news first:

- I finally wrote down the plan for the final chapters. It's definititely going to be under 40 and shit's going to start going down very soon. I just finished chapter 26 and chapter 27 is going to be... a lot of story lines coming together? You'll see it when it's done, don't worry.

Second:

- Sorry, this is probably the shortest chapter in the whole story and I know you are so excited for the reactions to the videos, but we need 2 chapters to cover that. (Actually 2 and a half, but Team Cap isn't my priority and will never be)

Third:

- Hank Pym is sorry, because he is a human being and just watched a man he knew being slaughtered by a brutal killer. Of course he feels sorry for his kid

Forth:

- Stop telling Peter to not do something stupid. He's not going to stay under his blanket in his little safe space. He is fucking Spider-Man and he's going to address some issues that made me so MAD at the movie, so look forward to that... and he's going to kick some ass, he is Spider-Man!!!!

Last:

- Have fun with this chapter, Shuri is being awesome (she is going to be so much more awesome in the next chapter)

As always I'll post the preview for the next chapter on my tumblr in a day or two - https://boleyn13ao3.tumblr.com/

"Tones, I’m still not leaving. Not going anywhere. You don’t have to let me inside. I just wanna know that you…"

The words died on Rhodey’s lips, he wasn’t able to voice them. Wanting to know if Tony was okay. Everybody knew that he wasn’t okay. How could he?

The second he had got back up to his feet somebody had to hit him with full force, brutally knocking
him back down. Now it had been Zemo… but most of Steve. Still Steve…

No, Tony wasn’t okay, but what was Rhodey supposed to say? I want some kind of sign that you are still alive and didn’t do something stupid inside there. Endless ideas had flooded Rhodey’s mind when Pepper had called him, when he had seen the video on YouTube. Sleeping pills. Knives and lots of other things that didn’t have anything to do with Tony… Yet Rhodey couldn’t help but feel afraid, knowing that Tony was inside there, alone and refused to come out…

That was still the best case scenario. Tony just refusing to come out…

“Fuck, Tony. Just say something and I’ll be fine.”

Silence and the worst thing was that Rhodey wasn’t even sure if Tony had heard him. Black out mode. Why was he doing that? Rhodey could perfectly understand his desire to lock himself away, to drop from the edge of the world. But they were still here and they were worried about him. Rhodey was scared that this was now going to throw Tony back into a dark hole that he just managed to crawl out of.

“Friday, please. I need an update. Any kind. What state is he in?”

Everything Tony created turned out to be perfect one way or another. And immensely loyal. If Tony had told her not to say anything, Friday wasn’t going to say anything.

“Boss is doing alright, Colonel Rhodes. He does not want you to linger in front of the lab. There is no need to stare at the door.”

Of course not. This was Tony. He wasn’t going to accept help from anybody. Part of him should know better. His friends wanted to be there for him also for their own sake. To know that Tony was as… okay… as he could be. Rhodey hated that word so much.

“What is he doing?”

“What working.”

Friday didn’t say anything else and Rhodey knew that she wasn’t going to interrupt Tony, no matter how much he might beg. Perhaps Tony needed this, some time to feel ready to face everyone else, knowing that they… knew. The only person in their little circle who hadn’t been aware of what had happened in Siberia was Hope.

Unfortunately it didn’t stop there.

The murder of Howard and Maria Stark was now public knowledge. Everybody could watch it on YouTube and everybody did. 100 000 000 views within the first hour. The news was all over it and this wasn’t going to go away.

Tony knew that better than anybody else and Rhodey had no idea what to say to him if he should actually open the door. He was quite torn on this. With the entire world knowing about what happened to his parents, Tony wasn’t going to be able to catch a break. On the other hand… Rhodey felt a slight tingle of satisfaction that people were now seeing what Steve had done. Realising to what extent Tony had ended up being the victim in this story.

Sadly that knowledge wasn’t going to help Tony. For him it came down to the whole world pointing fingers and watching him going through the worst, darkest moment of his life. It shouldn’t have to be like that.
But this was now the world they were living in. Captain America choosing to beat up his team mate after he had just witnessed the murder of his parents – standing right next to said murderer. No person in their right mind could fault Tony for attacking Barnes. Not after going through something like that. Having his whole life rewritten within a second. No matter how deeply the anger and the frustration with his father sat inside of Tony – Rhoddy knew that he had always longed for one conversation. A talk that could give him the opportunity to ask some questions. Why had his childhood been a series of times of not feeling good enough and being pushed aside so his father could chase after a ghost? An opportunity to make peace perhaps. Rhoddy was sure that Tony’s and Howard’s relationship would have always been strained, but Tony had never had the possibility to say a few things that he would have liked to say. Too young, too bitter, too proud. Then his parents had suddenly died and Tony had been left with the feeling of being abandoned one more time and a lifetime of feeling guilty for being angry at them the moment they had died.

Murdered…

“Colonel Rhoddy, Miss van Dyne just entered the compound.”

Sighing softly Rhoddy nodded. There was no point in two of them lingering in front of the door to the lab, wanting for a glimpse of Tony. Reluctantly Rhoddy turned around and wheeled down the hallway. Of course Hope had seen it by now. Everybody had seen it. That’s why she was here. They met in the living room and Rhoddy could tell that she had waited some time before coming here. To prepare herself, to be calm and collected. As much as possible.

“How is he doing?”

It was the right question to ask. Tony should come first now, but unfortunately Rhoddy knew that this wasn’t going to happen. “I have no idea. He is in his lab. We’re back to square one… The videos dropped during the night and nobody was around when he found out…”

Hope slowly nodded, putting down her purse. “This is… I won’t call it a good thing, because it isn’t… but this is going to reach more people than everything that happened so far. There is a good chance that it’s going to help us find them… I’m going to look at this from this angle. Otherwise it’s just cruel.”

Another thing that she was right about and Rhoddy desperately wished that there had been a way to do this without torturing Tony. “I’ve been trying to get him out of the lab for hours… so I didn’t keep up with the… developments… how did he get the videos out? The man is in prison and nobody even knew that there are videos…”

“Lots of rumors… we know nothing for sure. The videos were sent to the New York Times and the Washington Post. Anonymously of course and to be completely sure they were uploaded on YouTube. It’s all over the place…. Did you know that there was a video? Not of the murder itself but… them watching it.”

“No… the Iron Man suit recorded everything that Tony saw, so we knew what had happened, but we had no idea that there were cameras… Perhaps Zemo set them up or they have been there all along. It was a Hydra base, they must have had some surveillance.” Rhoddy loathed himself for not thinking about that possibility sooner. It should have been obvious, they had had to worry about so many other things. “He’s still in prison and I doubt that they were giving him a laptop.”

“Actually that’s not very hard to do. A simple countdown and then the videos will be automatically sent or uploaded… It needs some planning and foresight, but that’s all there’s to it… Considering that he couldn’t even know beforehand what he would get to record…” Hope trailed off when she
noticed the look on Rhodey’s face.

God, he wished that there had been no way for Zemo to know, but after all that had happened Rhodey found that extremely unlikely. It had been so easy to tear the whole façade of the happy family into little pieces. Since there had been no happy family in the first place…

“Oh, I think he had a very good idea of what was going to happen. Bucharest and Berlin didn’t leave a lot of room for interpretation… Rogers proved how far he was willing to go to…” What was the right word? Rhodey couldn’t seem to find it. “… protect Barnes. He kept on doing just that.”

A dark shadow seemed to spread across Hope’s face and for a short moment Rhodey couldn’t help but notice that the disgust and the anger seemed to rob all of her beauty. “What happened in Bucharest and in Germany is beyond compare, he put the lives of innocent people on the line… Tony was his friend and he beat him to the ground after… How can you keep something like that from your friend?”

“Like I said… Cap is all about protecting Barnes.”

Rhodey could hear Hope gritting her teeth. “You are not protecting anybody by ramming your shield into the chest of somebody who is already lying on the ground.”

***

“No, Mr. Stark is not available for an interview. No comment. No. Miss Potts is not going to comment either… I’ll tell you the same thing that I told CNN – you publish a single word about this, you’ll hear from our lawyers.”

It was strange to hear her PA doing this kind of stuff. This had always been Pepper’s field of action. Telling reporters to go and suck someone else’s blood. Now her assistant was dealing with them, because the press wanted to talk to her. A role that didn’t quite feel right.

Shaking her head Pepper pulled herself out of her own thoughts. There was no time to sit here and ponder. Again all she had to do was keeping the press off Tony’s back.

They wanted him to comment on it? What was he supposed to say? He found out that his parents had been brutally murdered and the murderer had been standing right next to him. Yeah, he would definitely want to talk about that…

Questions and demands for interviews were flooding Pepper’s office and it was impossible for her PA to handle all of it alone. Especially since the phone wouldn’t stop ringing. It was disgusting. Now that everybody knew they should stay back and allow Tony to breathe, to handle his trauma. To do that would be basic human decency and yet that turned out to be too difficult.

What did they even want to ask him? How it felt to see somebody smashing your father’s skull and squeezing the life out of your mother? How it felt that even one of your supposedly closest friends didn’t feel like your pain wasn’t worth being addressed? That his actions proved that he didn’t feel like Tony had the right to be in pain?

It wasn’t him… it wasn’t his fault…

Pepper could hear his voice and she was unable to continue typing on her computer. Rogers couldn’t possibly have thought that things were that simple. He could repeat it over a thousand times that Barnes hadn’t killed Howard and Maria Stark – it would still be a lie.

Barnes had killed them. His hands had ended their lives and there was no way Rogers’ words could
change that fact. Obviously, because Rogers had stopped using his words very soon. Violence was language had he understood so much better. It could have gone down so very differently. The whole “Civil War” could have been avoided. Yes, the accords would have happened anyway, but Rogers didn’t give a damn about them, that should be clear by now.

Everything that happened had been about Barnes. Marius Radu, Gabriel Dumitru, Vitalie Popa, Luminita Matei, Andrei Ciobanu and Magdalena Stan had lost their lives because of Rogers’ quest to save a single man. That man was supposed to be a soldier? Shouldn’t war have taught you that it was better to save hundreds of lives than a single one? That obviously wasn’t that important to Rogers.

Nobody would have died if that damned coward would have opened his mouth. Two years ago, when Rogers had found out about it. When his word had still mattered. It would have been hurtful, traumatic even, but it would have been the right thing to do. If he hadn’t been too worried about one man, forgetting about everything else in the world. Especially the one person who was most affected by all of this…

Tony

Rogers should have taken him aside and tell him the truth. Wasn’t that the reason you had friends? To have people around you who were honest and sincere with you. He would have been able to choose a setting, a safe place. He could have told Tony about the death of his parents and he would have time to deal with it.

What was better? You friend breaking some awful news to you, who could make you feel safe afterwards. Or having to look at the two most important people in your life getting slaughtered – with the person who committed that atrocity right next to you.

Pepper wouldn’t pretend that she knew exactly how Tony would have reacted, he had always been unpredictable in his brilliance and his recklessness. Yet there was one thing that Pepper knew perfectly well. Tony wasn’t a cold-blooded killer. It would be unfair to ask him to forgive Barnes. That simply expanded what most people were capable of. Hydra manipulation or not, the hands of this man destroyed Tony’s family, killed his parents. Who could even dare to ask him to forgive and forget about that? Tony should never have had to be in the same room as Barnes. Rogers couldn’t ask him to perfectly understand every circumstance and consider how much manipulation and control had been at play when he witnessed his parents’ murder one second ago.

It had to be so easy for Rogers. When you didn’t care about anyone but one person. He didn’t understand either.

Tony would have had time, he would have had people around him, he would have had the opportunity to do his research. It was Tony Stark, he would have dug deeply and he would have drawn his own conclusions.

The stupidity was overwhelming. Tony could have found Barnes easily. Rogers should have known that, there was nothing that Tony couldn’t do.

Zemo’s whole plan had been relying on Steve being a coward and a moron. It shouldn’t have been that easy.

He had forced Tony into a situation where he had had to stand witnessing his parents being killed and he had had robbed Barnes of the possibility of ever gaining forgiveness. Even more than that. The abuse didn’t stop there. Now the whole world had been invited to watch Tony’s suffering. The internet and every news organisation were going to try to gain profit from it. It was a good story. Who was going to care that all of it really happened to a real person who was once again in the
spotlight. Not for being brilliant, but for his misery. When they should all just leave him alone…

The phone was ringing again and Pepper snarled. Finally enough of it. There was no way of stopping the videos. They were out there. The news weren’t talking about anything else, but Pepper could at least keep them away from Tony. There had been enough gloating.

Picking up the phone Pepper’s tone was for sure harsher than her PA deserved. “I said no interviews, no comment and…”

“I’m sorry, Miss Potts, but outside the building…”

“I don’t care if they surround the building with cameras, we’re not going to say a…”

“Miss Potts, I think you should see this.”

Pepper’s office was located in one of the top floors, there was no way for her to see the main entrance from one of her windows. It took her about five minutes to get in front of window that offered her a good sight without being visible herself. Ever since the videos had dropped Pepper had been feeling a strange tightness in her chest. It didn’t make it actually hard to breathe, but a bit uneasy. Looking down to the street Pepper was overwhelmed by the sensation of some of the tightness just fading away. Not all of it. Enough to feel better.

It was a young couple, not even in their thirties yet. The man’s arm was wrapped around her waist, she was holding a small bouquet of lilies in her hands. When she lay them down in front of the main door Pepper could see that these weren’t the first flowers. A single rose. Dianthus and tulips.

The couple turned back around and there was another woman, carrying a sunflower. She wasn’t the last one.

***

“You opened our sacred doors to murderers and cowards who gladly walk over those they’ve hurt. They are sitting at our tables, taking our mercy for granted and now that we’ve seen the despicable atrocities they are capable of – you will still not send them away?!”

“You know it’s not that easy. Sergeant Barnes cannot be entirely blamed for…”

“I am not talking about the Winter Soldier!” Shuri knew she wasn’t acting like she was supposed to. From early childhood Shuri had learned to behave like royalty. Always respectful, graceful. Even when you’re angry you couldn’t lose your temper, you didn’t have that luxury. Shouting at her brother was a luxury she desperately needed.

Pushing that kind of anger down wasn’t possible. She’d like to take where it belonged, but before that she had to do this. “I am talking about this piece of human filth that this walking our halls after killing people, disrespecting the will of 117 nations and clearly has no signs of empathy. This is the heart of Wakanda, our home and you soiled it by letting them inside.”

Shuri could see one of the Dora making a step forward. Hesitantly. They were interpreting her behaviour as a threat to the king and at the same time they were agreeing with her. A dangerous path to walk down, but Shuri was too angry to care. How could she sleep at night, knowing they were harbouring a man who was all too willing to destroy lives to serve his own selfish purposes? Not to forget about that girl. A fierce killer and a coward. What a pathetic combination.

“Do you think that I’m not disgusted by what I just saw? Do you think that I don’t care?” T’Challa wasn’t angry, but disappointed, perhaps even shocked and Shuri couldn’t bring herself to give a
damn. The latest turn of events was so much more important than her brother’s feelings.

“I think that you went away while all of this was happening. While they were beating down a man who was willing to work with the people and who didn’t kill innocents.”

“I was going after Zemo, the murderer of our father.”

Part of Shuri could understand, but her pain wasn’t important. Shuri was a princess first, a daughter and a sister second. “I know, but our father was already dead. Tony Stark was still alive.”

“He still is.”

“Not thanks to you! You saw what he did with the shield! Listen, brother, I will no longer accept their presence here! This has lasted long enough!” No more backing off, it was about time.

Now he was acting like a king and Shuri couldn’t stand it. “It’s not that easy. I know I made a mistake and we’ve already discussed that it is too late to simply send them away. Not without putting Wakanda at risk. I do know that it’s my fault. I have no illusions about that. Nonetheless it’s too late. If I send them away, if I send Miss Maximoff away… Why can’t you see that having them here means that they cannot do any more harm?”

“Because they are living in quarters of the palace. Not a prison cell where they should be. You coddle them. It disgusts me…” Shuri shook her head.

“So what do you propose?”

“Throw them in prison where they belong. Then we can make it public and Wakanda’s reputation will not be harmed. Not as much. We are able of detaining them.”

T’Challa looked at her with a stern expression, shaking his head. “I am not sure if we are. Should we take that risk?”

“Everything is better than sitting around doing nothing. Our situation is not going to change. Should we let them stay here forever just because we’re afraid that Wakanda will pay a price for it? We’re going to have to pay it anyway, but if it’s us who hands them over, if it’s us who puts them into prison, then it will be us who dictates the price we’re going to pay.”

His sigh made her blood boil and for the first time ever Shuri felt an intense desire for the throne. “Shuri, I’ve let anger blind me before. I cannot do it a second time. I promise you that this solution will not be permanent, but at the moment I don’t see what other choice we have.”

“What are you waiting for? All you do is wait. How is anything going to change when you don’t do anything?”

When her brother opened his mouth to respond the door was being ripped open and Shuri wanted to take apart whoever was interrupting them. “Not now!”

“I’m sorry, your highness, but this cannot wait.”

Why not? Waiting was all they were doing…

“What is going on?”

“The residents of the east wing started attacking each other.”
Hello everybody,

Okay, first things first. We're not done with all the reactions. I know this is mostly Scott's reactions and you guys want something else, but we'll get there, I promise.

Anyways, you'll love this chapter trust me. You'll love Shuri, you'll love Scott.

Have fun :)

It shouldn’t be a surprise. It wasn’t. Nevertheless T’Challa felt completely taken aback, out of his comfort zone. The words hadn’t even turned into air yet and the look on Shuri’s face told him that she was so far ahead of him. While he was still having trouble understanding what was going on, she was already planning on what to do next.

Break up the fight – of course.

Then what?

How was this ever going to work out?

“I’m going to handle this myself.” Shuri’s tone was determined, not leaving any room for doubt. She always meant what she said. T’Challa knew better than trying to convince her to stay behind. It wouldn’t be fair anyway. Something that he would have liked to avoid. Him and Shuri and the Dora heading for the east wing.

Heading for disaster.

Loud noise greeted them even before the main door had been opened. Shuri walked in front of him, a pace so fast that T’Challa almost couldn’t keep up with her. Another door and then there was chaos.

Rogers’ nose was bleeding, the other three were looking around, confused, startled and clearly looking for something. Or someone.

“Step back! All of you!” Shuri growled at them, but before anyone could react Rogers was knocked back by a sheer invisible force. “Lang, stop it right now!”

T’Challa could see Shuri’s eyes darting around, Wilson was just uselessly standing there, while Barton turned to the Maximoff girl. “Can you make him out?”

“No, he is moving way too fast. If he…”

“Scott! I will not allow the use of weapons in these halls! This is our home, I demand you to respect that!” Instantly Shuri had all eyes on her and T’Challa realised that this was the first time she actually met them. His sister had always known how to make an impression.
Everybody flinched when Lang popped up next to Shuri, wearing that infamous suit. Barton was the first one to react. “Are you out of your mind?!” He was moving already, trying to lunge at Lang, but Shuri stepped between them. “You will back off, Mr. Barton.”

Shuri didn’t need to lecture him about what might happen if he didn’t follow her orders. Her entire demeanour made it obvious that she was calling the shots, that she was in a superior position. His sister was their father’s daughter. Unlimited charisma and determination. Nobody was able to simply ignore that.

Especially Barton who looked quite startled that somebody told him what to do. “He attacked Cap and…”

“Yeah, because somebody needed to finally punch him in the face!” Scott snapped and Barton moved again, only to have Shuri putting a hand against his chest, pushing him back. “Another step forward and I will end you.”

T’Challa’s eyes darted to Okoye’s face and her expression took him aback. Admiration combined with loathing. This could get out of hand quickly.

“And who are you that…”

Okoye’s hand was moving to her belt and T’Challa wasn’t going to let this go one step further. “You will treat my sister, the princess of this country, with respect.”

“Yes, right, I’ll properly introduce myself later. The guy you’re standing in front of went crazy and started attacking Cap without rea-“

“Fuck you, Barton! You saw the video!”

“Quiet! All of you! This is not your house! You are guests here and you will stop screaming and using violence against each other! Mr. Lang, I don’t appreciate you using the Ant-Man suit to hurt anybody although I share your desire to hit Mr. Rogers. It seems reasonable to separate the five of you. Mr. Lang, you’ll come with us.”

“Miss, I don’t know what you…”

This time Okoye was too fast for T’Challa to do anything about it. The head of the Dora rushed forward, her hand on her blade. “You will address the princess as ‘your highness’ and you will not talk to her unless she asks you a question. Now step back.”

After that clear statement silence finally spread inside the room. Barton blinked, almost in shock and Okoye’s gaze dared him to make another mistake. She wouldn’t hesitate, neither would her five colleagues who had already taken position. The Dora had made perfect use of their ability to move without a sound, forming a circle around the fugitives and the royal family. Miss Maximoff was the first to notice that they were being surrounded, glancing around and T’Challa felt his guts turning into ice.

“Now will you please tell us what happened?” T’Challa kept his voice calm, somebody had to keep a clear head when several people in this room were itching to become violent. Shuri being one of them. “I want to hear both sides. Mr. Lang, would you please give me an explanation why you felt the need to attack Mr. Rogers?”

Shuri’s huff was clearly audible and T’Challa knew that it was necessary to ignore it.

“I’m sorry, your highness, but you gotta be kidding me! You have to have seen the video! You
know what he did! Everybody knows what he did! Bucharest, Berlin, the fucking airport and now this! And he still has the nerve to say that the accords would stop anybody from protecting people?! You were beating an innocent person to death! Your friend!"

T’Challa couldn’t pretend that he knew any of them. They weren’t his friends, nor his allies. He had never really spent time with them. Nonetheless he was sure that this wasn’t how Lang behaved normally. That it was hard to enrage him in such a way.

“Stark is fine, you know that…” Wilson’s whisper was so timid and low that it was hard to make out, but Lang wasn’t holding back when he answered. Screaming.

“No, I don’t know that! Nobody knows that! Steve was trying to kill him!”

That was finally enough to provoke a reaction from Rogers. He didn’t look very heroic now. Somewhat pathetic with his bleeding nose and disbelieving eyes. “I wasn’t trying to kill Tony!”

Judging by his voice he was stunned that somebody might even consider that possibility.

Taking off his helmet Scott granted them to look at his face. T’Challa would have described his features as soft and kind. They weren’t anymore. Torn apart by outrage and frustration. Like somebody who had been repeatedly pushed too far and who wasn’t able to take it anymore. “You were slamming a shield made of Vibranium into his chest piece! What did you think would happen?!! It’s fucking Vibranium! I know you don’t like to learn new things, but shouldn’t you know a few things about the weapon that you are using?! The hardest metal on earth that doesn’t give in, combined with your superhuman strength, close distance, full force… the Iron Man suit isn’t made of Vibranium! It’s probably titanium, I don’t know, but what I know is that a person is beneath that suit! When you ram a piece of Vibranium through that chest piece, it’s going to burst! The shards would enter his chest, probably piercing his lungs or heart! Not to mention his ribs breaking and the pressure that’s going to damage his lungs even further! You did all that when he was already lying on the ground!”

Nobody dared to say anything, because what was there to say? How were you going to defend such an action?

Rogers was standing there, like a deer in the headlights. T’Challa felt a feeling of disgust rising. Disgusted by himself. Was this the first time Rogers was actually thinking about it? That metal could be crushed and that the skin underneath it was soft and vulnerable. It would have been so easy to turn around. To check. T’Challa hadn’t done that and he couldn’t remember why not.

Because of Zemo? To make sure that he ended up in prison as fast as possible? Or because there had been no reason to believe that somebody was in danger? Not when Captain America and Iron Man were involved.

“I didn’t… Tony was fine when we left.”

“Yeah, because the extent of every injury ever is always immediately visible!” Lang spat out that part out. “You didn’t check! He was still wearing the suit when you left! He could have been bleeding underneath! His lungs could have collapsed minutes after you left! Maybe they did! We don’t fucking know that! He’s been in hospital after this shit and nobody has seen him since!”

“They released him after a week…”

“Nobody has seen him since! You can’t know what kind of state he is in! Stark was your friend! He came there to help you! People like this asshole over there gave him shit for that!” Lang pointed at Barton, then focused back on Rogers. “And you did your very best to kill him!”
That outburst obviously left Lang drained and out of breath which gave Rogers finally the opportunity to make a case for himself. A rather hopeless task. Everybody had seen what had happened and T’Challa desperately wished for it to be different. That way he would be able to justify how he had… left.

“I didn’t want that to happen and I tried to talk to him…” There was some honest regret in his voice, but it was that kind of excuse that simply wasn’t enough. T’Challa knew that ‘I didn’t want this to happen’ didn’t serve anyone. It wasn’t something an adult should say. You couldn’t paint yourself as someone unable to stop something from happening, when you had a very active role in the disaster. “You saw it… Tony attacked Bucky. He wouldn’t listen to me when I told him that it wasn’t really Bucky. He knew that, was supposed to know that. It was Hydra manipulating his mind. Tony lost it, he attacked him, he wouldn’t stop…”

“Oh, now mind control is suddenly a thing again! When somebody else but her does it, it excuses everything! Do you even see your fucking hypocrisy, you asshole!? Watching your parents being brutally murdered isn’t a small deal! So when your best friend is in danger, you are totally allowed to lose your shit and it’s perfectly okay to destroy a tunnel, killing civilians and agents and to blow up an airport… but when you see your parents being murdered, you are fucking supposed to calmly analyse the situation?!”

The conversation should end right here. T’Challa saw no way how Rogers could come back from that. There was no rational argument left. At some point everybody had to take a look at themselves and realise that they had a mistake. Or several…

“Listen…” Rogers was trying to buy himself some time, still shaking his head like he had no idea how he had ended up in this situation. “They were trying to kill him. There were no plans for bringing him in. He wasn’t responsible for the Vienna bombing and he can’t be blamed for his actions as the Winter Soldier. They were trying to kill an innocent man and I couldn’t…”
“Then why didn’t they do it?!” Lang had stopped a long time ago to hide his repulsion. He could have easily been spitting venom right into Rogers’ face.

Their former leader was once again startled, a slight jerk went through his body and he was once again confronted with a fact that he had never thought about. “What?”

“They did not kill him! Who the hell did tell you that? How did you know that this was their intention? Maybe their orders had been changed! The people who took you in were the same people who had been coming for him before you collapsed the tunnel! They didn’t shoot him on sight! Although both of you killed several of their colleagues! Did any of you even get hurt? The Winter Soldier wasn’t killed, wasn’t hurt although they had every opportunity to! If I had wanted to kill him, you know what I would have done? I would have put a bullet into the back of his head on the way to the prison and then I would have told the press that he tried to flee. Easy! That didn’t happen! Six people died in the tunnel, three men of that task force died and Stark ended up in hospital, we don’t know how he is doing. The only one who walked away perfectly safe is your best friend and don’t dare to moan about his fucking arm! That thing was a weapon designed to kill people and it did just that!”

“He didn’t mean…”

“I can’t do it!” Lang didn’t bother to listen to one more word, he turned his head… looking at Shuri. “Please, I need to get out of here. I’ll sleep with the dogs or in your moat, I don’t care. I can’t stay in the same rooms as these people a second longer.”

“I’m rather surprised that you lasted this long, Mr. Lang. Come with me, we will find you new quarters.” She was putting a hand on his arm and eventually Miss Maximoff opened her mouth, clearly distraught. “He is allowed to leave, while I am forced to…”

Shuri spun around and she instantly was in Miss Maximoff’s face. Speaking slowly and clearly, to make sure that every word would be perfectly understood. “You aren’t forced to do anything. Go ahead, leave these rooms and our country, nobody will stop you. Mr. Lang is going to leave you, because he has something called a conscience and therefore doesn’t stand to be in the presence of such despicable human beings. Also I fear for his safety if he stays with you only a moment longer. So we’re going to leave now, with him and if I see your eyes flashing red only for a second, I will consider you a threat to the King and every other person in this room, my countrymen. Don’t expect a gentle treatment.”

Not even waiting for a reaction Shuri turned back around. “Mr. Lang.” A short nod and she was heading towards the door, Lang following her. T’Challa was confused. Arriving here he had been sure that Shuri wouldn’t back off until all five of them were in prison cells. Now she was just leaving. Before him?

T’Challa wasn’t interested in anything else they might have to say and looking at Rogers only made him think of his own mistakes, so T’Challa was glad Shuri gave him a reason to leave too.

A feeling of relief came over T’Challa when the Dora closed the doors behind them. It didn’t last long though. “I’m going to do it. Just tell me who to talk to and I’ll do it. This has gone too far…”

A smile ghosted over Shuri’s face, making T’Challa feeling a bit odd. “A very smart and righteous decision, Mr. Lang. We will need to make a few phone calls.”

“What are you talking about?”

Eventually some of the rage disappeared and was replaced by confusion. “Uhm… he doesn’t
know?”

“I do not know what?”

Shuri met his eyes, completely serious. “Mr. Lang is going to contact the UN to inform them about the current residence of the fugitives and to turn himself in.”

She had to be joking. This simply couldn’t be true. It didn’t make any kind of sense. “What? You cannot be serious. It was you who insisted that their presence cannot become public knowledge.”

“We should discuss that in private, my king.”

Again, she was right, but T’Challa wanted to talk about it now. About the obvious fact that Lang and his sister had talked before. That they had discussed Lang making a deal and selling the others out? And Wakanda? They couldn’t discuss that in front of the Dora. They shouldn’t see them fight or discord between them. Shuri asked Okoye to bring Lang to his new rooms, promising they would meet up later and then they remained silent on the way back to T’Challa’s office.

The door fell shut and T’Challa wanted his answers. “What are you doing? You’ve repeated it over and over that we’re taking an immense risk by having them here and now you want to leak that information to the entire world?!”

Calm and collected Shuri looked back at him. “T’Challa, please… you are King, you cannot afford to be this naïve.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We are running out of time. There is no way we can keep their presence a secret much longer. A fight like this one is going to draw attention to them or somebody else is going to inform the rest of the world. You have to be aware of that. The whispers in the halls, the looks. The way the Dora look at them.”

A shiver was running down T’Challa’s spine. “The Dora are Wakanda’s most loyal servants.”

“Exactly. They serve Wakanda. They lost their countrymen in Lagos. The maids are afraid, they talk. The Dora are disgusted. The kitchen stuff isn’t stupid either, they know who they are cooking for. The scientists in the laboratory. One of them is going to give them away. It’s going to happen and then we won’t be able to do anything. If Scott is going to give them up, we can at least protect him and we can cooperate. Put them into cells, tell the world that we put them in a room to make sure that they wouldn’t hurt anybody else. That we were working together with the one feeling remorse. It will be us and him who tells the world where they are and it will be us who puts them into prison. That way Wakanda will walk away unharmed. That is the only way to get us out of this mess before it’s too late.”

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“My father wants me to tell you that he is sorry. I know… it sounds strange to me too. How often have you met? Two times… he doesn’t know you, you don’t know him. Does his compassion mean anything? To you? I don’t know if it mattered to me… but I felt like I had to tell you. Because he asked me to and you have the right to know… I also think you should know what is happening outside. Not the media, fuck them. People you’ve never met, people you’ve never talked to… they feel compassion too. I went to talk to Pepper today, I had to use the backdoor since it’s impossible to even drive up to Stark Industries. There are flowers everywhere. Pepper had them removed two times, now she has given up, the driveway is blocked. I know that nobody had the right to see what
happened in Siberia or what happened to your parents… people saw it anyway and it left an impression. Shock, horror… and pain. They see it as it is. Two murderers against the man who had stood up to them. I need you to know that. There is no discourse about it. No discussion or interpretation. They know. Everybody is seeing the same thing. Nobody is going to blame you for anything… not like he did. You have every right to stay inside there, as long as you want to. I wouldn’t know how to take it if I had to share my darkest moment with the entire world… I am sorry that happened and I shouldn’t have seen what I saw, but it cannot be changed anymore and we have to go on. Somehow…”

Hope let her head fall back against the door, feeling tired and drained. She had no idea if Tony was even listening to her. Why should he? He had to be so sick of everybody treating him like… fuck…

“Okay, screw this. You know what? Get the hell out of this lab. You have the right to mourn your parents, but you’re not helping yourself if you decide to lock yourself up. It’s not going to go away. Everybody knows and nobody is going to forget. You can go crazy if you want to. Trash the place. Set it on fire. Scream… You can do all that, but you cannot hide inside this room, locking everybody out and have us worried sick. It’s cruel. Your best friend is going up the walls, Pepper is burying herself in work, so she can find a little distraction, Vision doesn’t talk and I’m… I’m not going to take this shit. Get out of there or at least talk to me or I will use the suit and get inside to make sure you’re not lying on the floor with your wrists slit… because that’s one of the things we’re imaging right now…”

Taking a breath Hope was ready to continue her speech when she flinched, hearing a familiar voice. “You totally took all the lunch money from your class mates, didn’t you?”

Fighting back a breathless laugh that had nothing to do with happiness or amusement Hope ran a hand through her hair. “No, but I actually once did break somebody’s nose on the playground… they totally deserved it.”

“I’m sure of that.”

They remained silent for a moment, Hope looking up, searching for the microphone that transported Tony’s voice, but then she felt stupid, because such a thing would never be visible in Tony’s house. “You scared the shit out of us by disappearing again.”

“Somebody decided that they wanted to share a moment of my life with the entire world. I decided that I didn’t want that…”

“It’s not going to go away though.”

“Right, but it was so… easy to pretend that it didn’t happen.”

Frowning softly Hope tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

“Pepper knew. Vision knew. Rhodey knew. Nobody addressed it. I could tell that they were all biting their tongues, but I didn’t mind. We all knew and we didn’t say anything. Could have continued like that forever…”

“What? Pretending that your supposed friend didn’t know that your parents had been murdered and refused to tell you and… I guess I don’t need to spell it out. We don’t have to pretend… and if you are worried… I promise that this new piece of information isn’t going to define what I think about you. That’s not what’s going to happen. People will not define you over this… event.”

Tony took his time to respond. “But they are going to define Steve over it, am I right?”
Yes, there was no denying this. Thinking about Tony different things came to mind. The genius that created the Iron Man suit. The bomb he carried through a portal in the sky to save an entire city and the world. The man who had respected the will of 117 centuries and didn’t put himself above them.

Rogers…

He was the man who slammed his shield into the chest of man lying on the ground after said man had been forced to witness the murder of his parents. That was it. Hope couldn’t think of anything else.

“Yes, they will and he deserves no better.”

Silence again. For several minutes actually.

Until…

“I guess you are right.”
Responsibility

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

Well, what am I supposed to say? Shit is going down

Have fun ;)

Now they were left standing there. Scott gone from second to another. Steve was still feeling the sting of his punch. Not that it hurt as badly as his words. It was insane to even suggest for a single second that Steve had ever had the intention to hurt Tony. Nothing had been further from his mind.

A shield made of Vibranium connecting with armour that was made of… something else. Steve didn’t think about these kinds of things. He never had. In that moment Steve hadn’t thought about anything, he had had to stop Tony. There hadn’t been any alternatives. The idea of having put Tony in a hospital bed was torturous. It had never been Steve’s intention to cause him any harm. What had he…

“He hates you.”

Wanda’s quiet whisper ripped the silence apart and Steve’s head flung around. She was standing there, not moving, her face blank. Yet it was clearly her who had said these words. “What?”

Finally she turned to Steve and repeated that phrase, lacking any kind of emotion. “He hates you. Scott. I could feel it. I wasn’t even trying. It was all over him, unable to miss. He hates you.”

Another punch. Just as painful as the last one. Worse.

“He’s losing his mind. Three weeks in isolation and he snaps…” Clint mumbled and Steve didn’t feel like he had time to catch up with his words, Sam turned out to be way faster than him. “It’s not just that and you know that, Barton. You heard him.” His eyes slowly focused on Steve and they made Steve feel even more uncomfortable. He wasn’t used to Sam looking at him like this. It was so strange, Steve couldn’t even name it. “Cap and Barnes put Stark in hospital. There is no way around that. Everybody could see that.”

“I didn’t plan on that, Sam. I’ve never wanted to hurt him.” Steve instantly felt like he should explain, defend himself and Sam made a little gesture that showed he understood. “Nobody thinks that, Steve… but you beat him to the ground… your friend who had just watched his parents die.”

The softness in his tone was reassuring and accusing at the same time.

“I don’t see what Cap could have done. You saw how this shit went down. Tony would have killed Barnes.” Clint pointed out a very painful truth and Steve desperately wished that it would have been different.

Sam’s attention easily shifted from Steve to Clint. “Geez, you can’t just leave out the fact that he saw his parents being murdered literally a second ago. By Barnes…”
“Yeah, but Barnes was being mind-controlled and Stark knew that. He knew that when he showed up. Okay, he should have never seen that. That must have been… horrible… but Tony is smart. He knew about the mind-control and it’s been over 20 years. He should have been able to take a second and wait. Barnes cannot be blamed for what happened and since Tony wouldn’t stop… I don’t see what Steve could have done different.”

“How about telling Stark the truth, so he wouldn’t have had to learn about his parents murder in such a fucked up and traumatising way? In that kind of situation you can’t expect anybody to react… reasonably… You shouldn’t have… done that.”

“He was going to kill him, Sam.”

“It was the two of you against one and Scott didn’t lie, we all saw it. You didn’t stop when he was lying on the ground…” This time it was obviously an accusation and Steve didn’t know how to take it. To not agree with Sam was strange. They had always been of the same opinion, at some point Steve had started to consider that a given.

“I couldn’t… I couldn’t risk him hurting Bucky. He had blown off his arm, he would have gone further.”

“Steve, I’m not saying that you deliberately hurt him, okay. It’s just…” Sighing softly Sam shrugged, looking a little lost. “There is a line between defending yourself and… where you stop just defending yourself… and it’s really blurred here.”

It wasn’t like Steve couldn’t understand what he was saying, he couldn’t say that Sam’s reasoning didn’t make sense, but Sam hadn’t been there. He hadn’t seen the expression in Tony’s eyes… it wasn’t the same on video.

“I understand that you might want to discuss this, but that can’t be our priority now.”

Once again Wanda had all eyes on her and Steve was equally thankful and confused.

“Scott just turned on us. Only god knows what he is going to tell them. You heard the princess, she wants us gone. So I say we leave before they turn against us completely.”

Her suggestion caught Steve off guard. It didn’t seem like a possibility. It wasn’t. “You want to leave?”

Wanda nodded without hesitation. “T’Challa already stated that he doesn’t trust us. Now Scott is gone and the princess openly threatened us. If we stay here, we’re at their mercy. I say we can’t take that risk.”

“And where would you go?” Sam voiced the same disbelief that Steve was feeling.

In response Wanda shrugged. “Anywhere is fine by me. As long as we stay away from people who want to turn us in anyway.”

“Anywhere, right.” Sam was shaking his head. “In case you haven’t noticed – our resources are very limited. So if you don’t have a clear plan, going anywhere isn’t going to cut it.”

“I dunno, she has a point.” Clint crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Scott went crazy and attacked Cap. They seemed pretty much in favour of that. All that reading the accords bullshit? No question where he got that from. I agree, we definitely aren’t safe here.”

Steve was about to respond, to explain to them why they couldn’t leave, but it was Sam who picked
up the conversation. A different one. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I’m sorry?”

Sam met his gaze, straight and direct. “Why didn’t you tell us what happened in Siberia? It’s anything but unimportant. Now everybody knows. Would you have told us? Did the whole world have to know about it, so you’d end up telling us?”

“How should I have told you without telling what happened to Tony’s parents? I didn’t have the right to do that and neither did whoever released the videos… It’s Tony’s family and… after what happened… I was afraid that you’d look at Bucky the same way Tony did.”

“Don’t make this about Stark, Steve…” Sam slowly shook his head. “You didn’t tell Stark that Barnes had killed his parents. You also didn’t have the right to do that? Who does this concern but him? You didn’t tell him and then you didn’t tell us what happened. Why? If you’re so sure that Barnes cannot be blamed, why didn’t you tell anybody?”

“Bucky cannot be…”

“I know, Steve. I know.” Sam let out an exasperated sigh. “You heard Clint, he knows too. Everybody will know that once you explained the mind-control to them, but none of us has to know that. The one person who should have known that… is Stark. Then he would have been able to deal with it. He would have had some time and he wouldn’t have ended up fighting the both of you.”

There was a flaw in this reasoning and it wasn’t even Steve who immediately came to point it out. Clint didn’t look at ease while talking about this which made Steve even more grateful that he did. “But Stark did know about the mind control when he walked in there. He decided to run berserk anyway.”

“Jesus…” Sam reacted with a dry laugh and brought one hand up as if he wanted to run it through his hair, but then dropped it mid-way. “I’ll gladly repeat what Scott said and what I said a few seconds ago… he saw his parents die. They were murdered, there is no other way to call it. He walked into that having no idea what was about to happen. He thought his parents had died in a car crash, right? Then he sees them being murdered and the guy who did it, willingly or not, is standing right next to him. That is highly traumatic… you can’t just gloss over that.”

Steve couldn’t shake off the memory of Tony’s eyes. The look of agonizing pain and betrayal. The wish to help him with that, to make it go away… both being overshadowed by his need to protect Bucky. “I know it shouldn’t have gone down like that. I should have told Tony beforehand, I know that now. I made a mistake that led up to something… unfortunate, but at that moment it was too late to anything about it. I couldn’t let him… hurt Bucky.”

“Yeah, that all went all horribly wrong. Can we talk about this later and figure out what we’re going to do about the Wakandans throwing us out any second now?” Clint suddenly seemed to be very impatient and Steve had to point out the obvious. “I cannot leave. Wakanda is Bucky’s only hope to ever be cured from Hydra’s control. I’m not going to leave him alone…”

“They’ve already made me a prisoner. You know that they’re not going to stop there.” Wanda whispered softly and Steve couldn’t shake off the feeling that she was right.

“Again – where do you want to go? Without money? Without a plane? Without a place to go? Did I miss something out? If you guys have a plan, don’t hesitate to share it with me.”

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“Miranda Kean, who is at the moment at the Captain America Museum in DC, is going to join the conversation now. Miranda, can you tell us if the situation has calmed down yet?”

“Good evening, Mark. Yes, the situation has indeed calmed down as the police finally succeeded to clear the building. It’s hard to tell since there hasn’t been any statement yet and the area got closed off, but several young people have been escorted out by police forces and it can be assumed that there have been several arrests.”

“Has there been any confirmation that these acts of vandalism have anything to do with the incident that occurred a couple of hours ago? Are there any indices that the same people might have been involved?”

“Like I said nothing has been confirmed yet, but considering the crowd which has gathered around the museum and large number of people who entered the building… it seems possible but unlikely.”

“Pictures of the damages done in the museum can already be found on the internet. Do you have any new information about what happened inside the museum?”

“At the moment all we know is that during opening hours a group of students entered the museum and managed to smuggle in spray cans which they used to spray the words ‘Terrorist’ over one of the exhibits. The staff of the museum reacted by removing all the visitors and closing the doors early. As it turns out most people didn’t return to their homes and about an hour after the museum was closed an unknown individual threw a stone through one of the museum’s windows. We don’t know yet how many people actually entered the building through the broken window, but we can be sure that the damage done to the exhibits must be severe.”

“How so? Any examples?”

“Not everybody stayed in the museum until the arrival of the police. Our cameras caught footage of people burning items from the museum’s gift shop in front of the building. Mostly t-shirts and replicas of the famous shield.”

“Has there been any statement of one of the vandals on why they are doing this?”

“It wasn’t possible to do any interviews, but the timing of this riot suggests that this is a reaction to the videos released yesterday, showing Steve Rogers fighting Iron Man. There are rumors that some of the vandals were wearing Iron Man masks.”

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“I just thought you should see… it should be private, but unfortunately it isn’t anymore and a lot of people care. After Bucharest, Berlin and Leipzig… people feel affected… and they feel sympathy. It’s something you’ll have to deal with eventually.”

Hope held out her phone, Tony could see it out of the corner of his eye and he really didn’t want to reach for it. Then again, he knew that she wouldn’t back off. Something that Tony was grateful for. Somebody to take off the gloves. To treat him like a person made of flesh and blood.

Not glass

Reaching out Tony took the phone and glanced at it, unable to deny a sting of fear. It vanished away a second later and instead he suddenly had no idea how to feel and what to think. Being overwhelmed. That was something for normal minds. It had never happened to Tony. Not before Siberia…. Well, that was a lie. The portal and what he had seen at the other end, that had overwhelmed Tony. An unknown sensation. Usually Tony looked at problems and started thinking
about solutions. That was how he worked. Desperation and whining was just a waste of time. Problems were there to be solved. Everything could be explained and analysed.

Almost everything…

Years ago Tony had analysed that his father had been a jerk and that having a child had never been a priority for him. Tony had analysed that if Howard hadn’t cared, there was no reason why Tony should care. Howard’s life had been perfectly fine with him not caring and Tony would only end up feeling miserable if he continued to sulk about the lack of attention and affection during his childhood. So Tony had stopped caring and his life had been good.

Until it had turned out that it was impossible to stop caring. At least for Tony. Having a father who was absent a lot and didn’t hug still meant having a father. A father Tony had obviously loved. Despite him not being the person Tony had wished for.

Obviously he hadn’t been the person Howard had wished for, so that was only fair.

Both of them had loved Tony’s mother.

To find out how Tony had lost both of them had been overwhelming.

This was also overwhelming. Tony had never sent flowers to a funeral. No reason why actually. In his mind flowers were meant for women. To make them smile. People didn’t smile at funerals and after attending the one of his parents, Tony didn’t want another funeral ever again.

Now his parents had a second one and maybe people were also burying him.

It was hard to make out a single colour. There were so many of them. Flowers covering the ground, even blocking the doors to SI headquarters. Real people had put them there. Not some shady, sleazy business guys in suits who sent a fancy bouquet and couldn’t give a rat’s ass. Whoever had put the flowers there had cared enough to do that. The nature of their death had moved other people to do that. Tony wasn’t crazy for…

He didn’t want to think about it.

Howard being murdered and ripped from his life didn’t make an actual difference. If he had had real car accident that day he would have been gone either way. So would have his mother and all their baggage, every fight would have happened either way. It wouldn’t have changed Tony’s childhood or stopped Howard from ignoring him, from asking too much of him and giving too little. Howard had still been a jerk.

And as it had turned out… Tony still cared.

Those regular blokes cared… everyone except for Steve…

“I don’t know what to say. This one of these things… you see them on television, but you don’t think they could ever have something to do with you. I… none of those people probably ever met my parents. They only knew my dad as the guy who produced a lot of weapons…” Without looking at her Tony handed the phone back and he was sure that Hope nodded.

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean it’s any less real. They know you or they think that they know you. Even if they had no idea… what happened to your parents and how Rogers dealt with it… it evokes a reaction from everyone who saw it. That makes us human.”

Even that definition could be stretched, but Tony didn’t feel the need to tell her this. It was one of
these rare moments when Tony didn’t feel like his chest was too tight. Like he had trouble breathing. As if a part of him was missing and at the same time too much weight had been put on him. Now it seemed okay.

Hope didn’t seem to mind the low lights as much. Nor sitting on the cold floor with him. It was still his lab. A place where he felt at ease. Every inch of it was Tony Stark. Steve had never set a foot in here. Not that Tony would have let him. Technology was freaking him out. Tony didn’t need his friends to like the same things he liked. Not everybody could be Rhodey. But people shouldn’t think his main interest, his calling in life was… weird.

Bruce had never been freaked out although he perfectly knew what machinery could do in hands that weren’t skilled enough to use it the right way.

Hope didn’t seem freaked out either. Sure, Hank Pym’s daughter. Genetics were a crazy thing, you just couldn’t escape them.

“Can we take a day off from this? I’d like to lie down on the beach. Get a tan. Sip on a colourful cocktail. Leave my brain here and leave.”

“No, nobody gets to do that. You’ll deal with it and you’ll mourn. You need closure and you’ll get it. Sooner or later.”

There was this little itch in her voice. Not enough to make Tony feel uncomfortable, but more than enough to notice it. “You are not suggesting therapy, aren’t you? Because I’m terrible with psychologists…”

“No, I am a simple woman who likes simple solutions. A crime was committed. Unfortunately there is no way anymore to help the victim, so the first priority has to be to punish the guy who committed the crime.”

That didn’t work out so well the first time, didn’t it? “The guy who committed the crime… not going to be that easy. The Winter Soldier is slippery. Hard to get your hands on. Especially without the whole mind-control thing…”

“You are not seriously considering letting him get away with it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to think about any of this. You saw the video too, full length. No need to answer, I know you did. That wasn’t a human being, but it wasn’t a machine either. I know a thing or two about them. I wish it’d be that easy… I am aware of the fact that he can’t be… actually blamed for… the things he did as the Winter Soldier… I know that…”

The images came back and Tony fought the instinct to squeeze his eyes shut, knowing that it would only get worse then. A broken neck. A shattered skull.

Somebody’s heart being ripped out of their chest… again and again…

“But then… no matter how hard I try… I can’t get the thought out of my head… that the last thing my mother felt before she was dying… was the grip of cold metal around her neck…”

Tony balled his fingers to a fist and it was still shaking. He had killed them. With his bare hands and Steve hadn’t even looked surprised. A childhood full of glorious stories about Captain America. Loyalty, friendship and patriotism and Steve didn’t even blink. Everybody was expandable except for one…

Howard had built the shield…
Hope had seen it when Tony had let her into the room. She hadn’t said anything, but it was still there, lying on the desk behind them. In the drawer was Steve’s phone. Waiting to be crushed with a hammer. As soon as Tony felt strong enough to lift it.

What would Howard have said? If he had been there. If he had seen Steve slamming the shield into Tony’s chest. The arc-reactor. Tony liked to believe that he would have been horrified. To see his own creation threaten the life of his child…

But who knew…

Then again, Tony hadn’t realised that he still cared until he had seen… so maybe Howard would have lost his mind over it. Tony liked to believe that…

“Do you remember the last thing your mother said to you?”

Tony knew where she wanted to go with this and it was a noble attempt, but it wouldn’t help. “Yes, very well so. I relived it quite a few times. It wasn’t a nice conversation. I was a jerk…”

“And that doesn’t matter. None of it matters. Maybe you weren’t a good son in that moment. Maybe she wasn’t a good mother that day or a couple of other times. An entire life is more than a couple of moments. Were you close to your mother? Did you share time together that made you feel good? Protected? Cared about? As we grow older we began to see your parents as people… not just as our parents. We see their flaws and I for my part… I started to resent my father for being human. For making mistakes. You are an adult, you know your parents weren’t perfect, but when you look back… do you remember them loving you and trying their best to make sure you were going to be alright? To make you succeed?”

His chest hurt and Tony tasted blood on his tongue. Bitter

Eventually he closed his eyes and there was the Winter Soldier. Killing his parents. Howard and Maria. Who had made him shriek with joy for picking him up from school one day instead of sending Jarvis to get him. A rare occasion, but it had happened. The look in Howard’s eyes when Tony had built his first motorcycle from scratch. Pride. He had actually sat down with to see if it worked. Maria caressing his hair after he had scraped his knees, falling down while running after a cat. They had been his parents.

“My mom, yes… my dad… I am not so sure. I like to think that… he was one of these guys who thought that they had a calling. A mission in life. He was in World War 2, so it makes sense that he could see the big picture… dedicating his life to the whole world. A family only gets in the way. Lots of people will call such a guy a hero and I get that… just sucks when you are the family that gets in the way… but… I wanted more of my old man’s attention for a reason. I’ve never wanted less of him in life… I wanted more… so I guess, yeah. I remember them loving me.”

It was the first time since she had entered the room that Tony actually looked at her. To be honest, he hadn’t even looked at her when she had been trying out the Wasp-suit. Tony had made jokes about her rough edges, the iron-like exterior. It was all still there, an essential part of her, but there was something about her eyes. Something soft, but it didn’t evoke the same disgusted feeling that pity did.

“Then remember that. A whole life matters more than a few moments.”

She was right. A reassuring thought. Tony knew it wouldn’t be enough to simply say this to make the images disappear, but Hope was right. The cold metal around his mother’s throat was single moment. Just like her death. She had spent his entire life being his mother and Tony would value that
by remembering her for that.

“Thank you.”

Tony didn’t get a response and he didn’t want one. For a moment he was glad to put his head in his hands and to not think about anything.

An hour could have passed until Hope spoke back up. “It’s going to come to an end soon. Releasing the videos was a despicable act, but it made the world an even smaller place. They have nowhere to go. We’ll find them and then a lot of other people maybe will be able to find closure. The family members of Bucharest and Berlin… every who lives in one of the 117 nations who signed the accords and who feel afraid, because they know that they are still out there.”

How was she doing that? Without even knowing it. Every single word hit like a punch and it suddenly hurt so much more, because she was the one who said it. After making him realise that maybe he didn’t have to see his mother dying every time he thought about her.

“I don’t think that they will risk showing their face. Or do anything…”

“That doesn’t matter. Everybody knows that they are out there and everybody has seen what they are capable of… how easily they hurt friends and the innocent. I can understand that they are afraid…”

This time she was turning away from him. “I don’t spend an hour without wondering what Scott might be doing today. What he might use the suit for. Who he might hurt with it… because I didn’t speak up loud enough when my father gave it to him. Although I could feel that it was the wrong decision…”

A moment ago she had been lifting the weights off his chest. Now she was adding new ones. The shield was right behind them and Tony couldn’t…

He didn’t want to. Not once. Looking at Steve’s face to relive being killed by his father’s creation. His friend. Looking at her and thinking he was responsible for a city falling from the sky… Tony was done.

Making Rhodey walk again. Having Pepper stop worrying about him. Giving Vision a life of his own. Keeping them safe, that was all he had an interest in. Peter and Hope.

She didn’t have any interest in feeling safe. Hope wanted redemption and Tony was keeping her from it. He was keeping that German woman from finally having the man who crippled her husband behind bars. He was keeping Sokovia from… healing?

“Tony? Is everything okay?”

Her hand was on his arm, not hesitant or weak. She didn’t believe that he was made of glass. Hope knew that he wouldn’t break. Steve had been selfish. Tony couldn’t do the same thing. “I… know where they are.”

Another first time. Hope was staring at him, the softness gone to make way for confusion. “You… what?”

A smile made its way on Tony’s face. It was good to know that he could still be inappropriate. “Figured it out… by accident. I didn’t want to. I definitely didn’t want to. I don’t… I want them to be gone from my life… in every kind of way.”

“You need to tell me. Right now.”
“I… prefer it this way. Them gone. So I don’t have to deal with it.”

No, Hope didn’t think he was made of glass and she didn’t shy away from showing him her anger. “But this isn’t solely about you. You’ve suffered, you still do and what that little bitch and that hypocrite did to you lacks a proper term, but… you are not the only one. You are not the only one. There is a woman called Sophie Müller whose husband is in a coma. A man named Anton Stan who lost his 10 year-old girl. A woman named Katharina Neubauer who lost her husband, the father of her children. You know the names, I know you do. There is an entire nation of Sokovia that deserves to put a woman on trial who killed thousands of their countrymen. There are the family members of the guards who worked at the Raft. There is Bruce Banner. Your friends. Me… and there’s you. But it’s not only you, so you don’t have the right to keep this from us. I know you don’t want to protect them, but yourself. I promise you will not have to deal with them, but you have to tell me. You still have a responsibility.”

This time she wasn’t going to look away and Tony wasn’t going to break. Nothing had broken him so far. She knew that and Tony was starting to understand it too. You could tell somebody the truth and protect them at the same time.

“Wakanda. They’re in Wakanda.”

Hope didn’t get up and ran off. She slowly nodded and offered him her hand. “Thank you.”

Sighing in defeat and relief Tony grabbed her hand and let her pull him to his feet. He did not object when they left the lab.

***

Peter still couldn’t explain how it worked. His senses had become so much more reliable after the incident. Sense of hearing, sight, smell… everything had drastically improved. There was also something like… intuition.

Everything was in complete darkness when he slowly came down the ceiling. Mr. Stark’s AI had said that he had unlimited access, so the room stayed dark. Nobody came to throw him out which was good, because Peter had no idea what he was looking for.

Until he saw the shield right there. Lying on the table.

A perfect starting point. Peter found a flip-phone in the first drawer of the same desk.

***

“Gentlemen, somebody is here with me who has something to tell you. Please, go ahead.” Shuri handed him the phone and nodded encouragingly.

Scott had to swallow hard anyway, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to do it. There was a little girl who deserved a father who was willing to do anything to earn her forgiveness. “Hello, my name is Scott Lang and I want to turn myself in.”

***

The photograph showed all four of them in the hallway. The royal insignia clearly visible on the wall behind them.

After typing the words ‘cannot remain silent about this any longer’ she clicked the ‘post’ button.
What comes next?

Chapter Notes

Hey there,

So this chapter has a soundtrack :) 

Hamilton's "What comes next?" just fits this chapter perfectly - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gq_-Ei-_hK8

Anyways, things are going to speed up :)

Have fun

“I see, sir. We’re about to get on the plane. It’s a five hours flight to Wakanda, enough time for the negotiations to proceed. I hope the Wakandan government turns out to be cooperative. We’ll be in touch.”

Hope hung up and continued to walk up to the quinjet.

“The King hasn’t given us permission yet to enter his country?” Vision wasn’t really asking, he already knew the answer.

“The UN has been made aware of the photograph about 20 minutes ago. They immediately approved the Avenger mission, but apparently it wasn’t possible to contact the Wakandan court yet… which probably means that somebody isn’t picking up the phone. Anyway, we don’t have the permission to cross the Wakandan borders, but we could get it any second, so we should get as close as possible. Especially since it’s a five hours flight.”

Vision responded with a calm nod and Hope was doing her best to keep her heartbeat down. More than five hours and there was no guarantee that the Wakandans were going to let them in. International pressure was going to be immense, so Hope doubted that they would keep them protected behind their walls forever. Not with the entire nation of Sokovia calling for the witch’s blood. Sokovia alone wouldn’t be that much trouble, a small, rather poor nation. Yet everybody with some political knowledge was well aware of the fact that Russia was holding a very protective hand over Sokovia.

No, it wasn’t going to be pretty. Hope still had five hours during which she could ponder why on earth the King of Wakanda would take them in. Wakanda – a driving force behind the Accords. Wakandan civilians had died because of the little witch. It didn’t make any sense to Hope.

Her phone was ringing again and Hope brought it up to her ear. “Yes?”

“This is Pepper. You’re already up in the air?”

“No, in about 40 seconds. The UN council already approved.”

“Let’s hope that the photo doesn’t turn out to be fake.”
“Unlikely. It has been confirmed that the woman who posted it works at the Wakandan court. They’re there.”

“Yeah… I talked to Tony or I tried to. He didn’t really say what he thinks about all of this, but he decided to send Friday along with you.”

Slightly confused Hope raised an eyebrow. “Meaning?”

Pepper didn’t have to answer, the meaning became very obvious a second later. A slight buzzing sound and then Vision and her were surrounded by ten Iron Man suits, in different sizes and colours.

“The Iron Legion. At your command. Friday’s main order is to protect the both of you. Good luck and be careful. You know that they are dangerous.” Pepper was clearly concerned and Hope appreciated it, but there was honestly no time for it. “We’ll be. When we come back, they’ll be in prison. Bye… and take care of Tony, please.”

“Of course, take care.”

Hanging up Hope smiled slightly at Vision. “Seems like they’re outnumbered now.”

“Indeed. We still cannot be sure if there even will be a confrontation. If so… I advise you to concentrate on the members of Mr. Rogers’ team who use technology to enhance their skills. You are very familiar with the Ant-Man suit. Please focus on him and Agent Barton, Romanoff and Mr. Wilson. I will take care of Mr. Rogers and Miss Maximoff.”

Vision didn’t seem to be able to actually sound angry and Hope knew this was as far as he would go. He was concerned for her and wanted to keep her safe from the witch’s powers and Rogers’ brutality. Strategically, it made perfect sense. Vision should handle the two most powerful people, since his abilities clearly outmatched Hope’s. They had to look out for each other and they would do just that. Like Tony, who had sent them his personal little army.

Yes, this was going to end today. The diplomats had to do their jobs to open the doors and then Hope was going to make up for her mistake. Time to go.

***

The world was turning upside down. A phrase used way too often. It had lost all its meaning so long ago. Not for T’Challa. He was only starting to get it now.

This sudden rush. When you felt like every second was precious and just slipping through your fingers when you were heading for disaster.

It’s so good to be King, right?

No, it wasn’t. Not when you saw the danger that was threatening your people and you were almost paralysed by your fear of making it even worse. Not to mention the guilt that was weighing T’Challa down. He had more or less asked for this, but he wasn’t the only one who was concerned.

“Brother.” Shuri’s eyes weren’t leaving him, not even for one of these seconds which were already slipping through his fingers. Whatever had to happen, it had to happen fast. The word was out there. Just like Shuri had predicted. Now it wasn’t about T’Challa’s debts anymore. It was about every single Wakandan person.

T’Challa didn’t fear war. Germany, Sokovia or Romania weren’t going to start a war over a five people. No matter what they had done. There were other things though. The entire world. His
father’s legacy, his dream of opening Wakanda’s borders would die. T’Challa would rob his entire nation of the possibility of experiencing something else. He didn’t have the right to make that decision. To force them back into isolation.

Or make them the target of potential terrorism…


With his head swimming T’Challa looked at his sister, her gaze hard and accusing. “It’s only been out for maybe half an hour.”

“Social media isn’t helping.”

Just having this conversation was wasting time. T’Challa had to act and he felt like he couldn’t move. Too many things at once. The Team Captain America had to be taken care of. A statement had to be made for the rest of the world to hear. All of that should have happened seconds ago and T’Challa didn’t know how. His father would have known.

“Your highness, the Secretary-General of the United Nations is on the phone. He demands to talk to you.”

Of course. Probably T’Challa should be thankful that it was only the United Nations. What was he supposed to say to the president of Sokovia? Or Romania…

“Your highness, a crowd is forming in front of the palace.”

“The Desturi?”

“There seem to be members of the Desturi among them, but it’s mostly ordinary civilians. They are very upset.”

“And they should be.” Shuri took a step forward, obviously fed up with waiting and doing nothing. “Take that phone call. Now. You know what to do. We have to act quickly or Lang is going down with them. Or Wakanda will have to take the fall.” She wasn’t going to back down and she was right.

Stalling was not an option. It would only make matters worse. So why was he still feeling like somebody had cut off his arms and legs? Rendering him completely useless. “The Secretary-General wants our permission for UN forces to enter our country. He wants me to agree to let the Avengers into Wakanda. To arrest the fugitives. He wants me to allow a fight in Wakanda that will possibly endanger our citizens.”

Shuri didn’t bat an eyelid and why should she? All this time she had known, she hadn’t been talking about anything else. “You know what to do, my King.”

The rest was being left unsaid, but T’Challa heard it anyway. If you are not going to do it, I will.

She was right. She was their father’s daughter and Wakanda came first. It was about time to stop making mistakes. T’Challa’s duty was to protect his people. Wakanda should come always first. They were in this situation because of his selfishness. His own private revenge. Wakanda was first…

T’Challa closed his eyes and decided to rid himself of his doubts, like taking off a jacket. Dismissing of them. He didn’t have the right to wait any longer.

“Hand me the phone. I want the army at the Royal Palace to secure every single exit. Okoye,
assemble all the Dora. Detain the fugitives.”

Having made a decision T’Challa felt like he could finally stand a little taller and the atmosphere in
the room instantly changed. Shuri didn’t smile, but her eyes started sparkling again. Nodding she
turned around, clearly intending to follow Okoye. “Sister, what are you doing?”

“I was trained with the Dora. I’m going to help them.”

“No, I will…”

“You, my brother, are King. Talk to the UN.”

Again, she was right and T’Challa knew he had to make this quick. Picking up the phone he started
to tell the Secretary-General that their borders were open for blue helmets and the Avengers.

***

“We have to leave. Right now.”

Sam heard Wanda’s voice right behind him, but the words didn’t really sink in. How was he going to
focus on everything else than what was going on television? The location of their rooms didn’t offer
them a view of the streets leading up to the palace, but the television did.

A stream of people was approaching the palace. They were screaming. The commentator was talking
in Wakandan, so Sam didn’t get a single word. It wasn’t necessary anyway. Some of the people had
brought signs, written in English. They were obviously aware of the media attention. Or the signs
were actually meant for Sam to read them.

Wakanda does not hide MURDERERS

Wakanda = Sokovia Accords

Justice for Lagos!

The Black Panther is NOT the protector of Wakanda’s enemies!

That one probably was directed at somebody else. The camera didn’t linger on a single face for too
long, but it was enough. Sam could see them screaming, shouting, raising their fists.

Sam had been to war, he had seen atrocious things. He had talked to veterans who had suffered
greatly and for some reason that had made Sam arrogant. It had made him feel like nothing could
shock him anymore. Like he had seen or heard everything and now it was impossible to shake him.
Sam had fought Hydra alongside Captain America. What is there left to amaze or startle him, right?

Hubris…

Being an Avenger was all kinds of awesome. There was no other way to describe it. Looking back it
was obvious how much Sam’s life style had improved as soon as he had joined that club. Kicking
terrorists’ ass, having people looking up at you and part-time living in a luxurious mansion wasn’t
half bad. All kinds of amazing.

Sam had been sure that things were going to turn around again. It had been proven over and over
again that the world needed the Avengers. That they needed Cap. How often could one single
person save the world? Sam had never been fond of politics and neither had Steve. It was a lot of
dirty negotiation and making deals. What happened to ‘We don’t negotiate with terrorists?’. Sam was
an ordinary guy, unlike Tony Stark for example. What did a billionaire know about the average
man’s needs and beliefs? Barton for example was an agent. Not the most normal occupation, but still
closer to the everyman than Stark, a guy who had inherited his fortune.

The people didn’t like faceless organisations or politicians who had sold their souls years ago. They
trusted the Avengers, they trusted Cap, because he was one of them. Therefore Sam had been
convinced that the whole accords thing was going to blow over. A bunch of people in suits were
writing down contracts to restrain them. Right, the people would totally accept them. Not going to
happen…

Then Sam had seen the video and there was no way he could approve of how Steve had… reacted.
Sam had talked to veterans who had seen their friends being killed right next to them and he listened
to their description of their feelings. They varied, but intense rage wasn’t uncommon. The
overwhelming and sudden urge to kill whoever had done that. Steve had made Stark going through a
similar experience and he had… ignored it. The sheer blatant pain which had been visible in Stark’s
expression. The fact that Barnes had been standing right next to him.

Steve had never told him, so Sam had assumed that Stark had betrayed them. A billionaire who was
playing Iron Man only for fun who had nothing to gain and nothing to lose. Who wasn’t in contact
with the everyman. Obviously normal people didn’t care about him either. He was a celebrity, sure
and that somehow made him less of a hero in comparison to Cap or people like Romanoff and
Barton who had dedicated their life to a certain mission. They didn’t happen to invent a cool suit…

As it turned out the rest of the world didn’t think like Sam did. After seeing the video Sam had
started to look at the comments. Then he had quickly reassured himself with another fact – the
YouTube comment section was full of trolls. Unfortunately the comments on every newspaper article
were the same. Journalists writing pieces about it were singing the same tune. People in the streets of
Bucharest being interviewed were confirming these statements. The world seemed to be agreeing on
something.

Tony Stark was a hero.

Sam remembered Steve bringing up a story that Stark liked to remind everybody that he had carried a
nuke through a portal in the sky? Hubris?

Maybe, but that didn’t change the fact that he had done that. People had seen that. They had seen
him carrying that nuke, saving the world. The world had seen Tony Stark defeating Loki in
Germany. Online they could see his signature beneath the accords. They could see him trying to talk
to Steve in Leipzig.

The people thought that Stark was right. They actually wanted the accords and now they had seen
Steve beating this man into the ground.

Even more Wakandans were gathering, shouting, waving signs and Sam thought that maybe he
should have listened to Rhodey. He had dismissed him as Stark’s friend, but that guy was a
decorated war hero… who would never walk again because of Sam… and Steve’s refusal to talk to
Stark…

Why hadn’t they done that? They could have told him about the Winter Soldiers without
immediately giving up their location… It was Tony fucking Stark, Sam had seen what Friday could
do. Easiest thing in the world for Stark to provide a way for communication that Ross wouldn’t be
able to listen to.

No sanctuary!
Disgrace!

Burn the witch!

“She’s right. This is getting out of hand. T’Challa is going to hand us over to get out of this mess. Steve, we gotta go.” Barton’s voice caused Sam to turn around and he saw that there was nothing left of Captain America’s glory.

He was standing there with his usual look of determination and still looking completely lost at the same time. “I cannot leave. Bucky is here and this place is his only chance. If I leave nobody is here to protect him.”

That wasn’t true. “T’Challa promised that he is safe… he promised him sanctuary and there is no reason for us not to believe him. He never promised to protect us… and I don’t think he can.”

Wanda nodded in agreement. “We have to act quickly. Somebody is going to come for us any second, we gotta go.”

Glancing at the television Sam sighed.

Murderers!

“Where do you want to go? There are people in front of the palace. The jungle is on the other side and we have no idea about Wakandan geography. We don’t have the means to get out of here.”

“We can leave the same way we got here.” Barton pointed out and Sam wanted to laugh. “What? You want to steal the King’s quinjet? Yeah, that’s going to work out.”

“Why not? We came here this way. We know where it is and right now we still have the element of surprise on our side. But we gotta get out now. Cap, I know you don’t want to leave Barnes behind, but he said it himself, didn’t he? He didn’t want to be a danger to anybody… and honestly if we get out of here now – we’re less likely to draw attention to him.”

Steve’s eyes showed that Barton was reaching him and Sam didn’t know if he wanted this. Running away again. Where to? On the other hand, he saw the people on TV and it became more and more obvious that staying here was not only putting their liberty but also their lives in danger.

Whatever they were going to do – it had to happen right now.

***

There was no need to open the doors to the East Wing. They were already open. Shuri’s fingers tightened around the spear. Finally. It was about time to end this humiliating and shameful chapter of the history they were going to write.

Shuri was going to make her ancestors proud. Her family had always defended justice and protected Wakanda by all means necessary. This tradition wasn’t going to stop now.

“Mr. Rogers, Mr. Wilson, Mr. Barton, Miss Maximoff. You are under arrest. Put down your weapons and keep your hands by your sides.”

Everybody knew that this wasn’t going to happen and Shuri’s eyes darted from one person to the next one. Their faces seemed so empty. No passion, nothing.

“Not going to happen, lady. I’m really sorry.” The archer still hadn’t learned to address her properly
and Shuri didn’t care. It was going to be easy to take him out. They only had to worry about Maximoff and the Captain.

“Then I fear we will have to force you to.”

The Dora started to move and Barton fired an arrow. Before it could hit anything it simply exploded in mid-air, releasing some kind of black smoke. It spread incredibly quickly and filled the corridor, making it impossible to make out the fugitives. Instinctively Shuri covered her mouth with her hand, but she was already sure that the gas wasn’t some kind of toxin. It was merely supposed to mess with their sight.

“Form a line. Nobody is getting past us!”

Shuri could feel a brush of air and her instincts were taking over once again. Bringing her spear up Shuri smashed it against something that felt like solid stone or bricks. Rogers. Fighting blind wasn’t her field of expertise, but she knew how to knock somebody off their feet. Crouching down Shuri took a swing with her spear and contently heard the sound a rather big person falling to the ground. Before she could do anything about it Shuri felt a strange force pressing against her. Not a human touch, because it was all over her and brutally threw her back. Crashing to the floor Shuri couldn’t hold back a painful moan, seeing red spark flying in the air despite the smoke.

She was going to end that witch.

“Hold the line!”

Not being able to see anything Shuri could hear another muffled moan. Dora didn’t scream in pain. Shuri just wanted to lash out, but she had no idea where she was. Like this she might hit a Dora. Reaching out Shuri tried to find a wall, but there was nothing she could touch.

Listening. She had to listen. Steps. Somebody was running. Behind her. Too heavy to be one of the Dora. Shuri wouldn’t risk throwing the spear, but there was more than one way to use it.

Another swing and Shuri put her entire body weight behind it. Again the metal was colliding with a human body and Shuri felt it going down. Having no idea who she had just brought down Shuri pounced, getting on top of the body that was already trying to get back up. Her hand pushed against a broad chest, moving upward Shuri pressed her Vibranium spear against an exposed throat. “You stay down or I will crush your throat!”

One was down, but Shuri didn’t hear any more steps. She didn’t hear anything.

***

T’Challa ran down the hallway, the members of the palace guard right behind him. This was what he should have been doing a while ago. Running. Now he was just trying to catch up.

“Your Highness, they have just managed to get to the rooftop.” One of the guards kept talking into his radio and T’Challa cursed himself. It should have been obvious. He had brought them here with the quinjet, of course they would go there.

“Send all the forces there! Inform the air surveillance!” If they should manage to get off the roof, T’Challa didn’t want to lose track of them.

His feet carried him into another room and despite himself T’Challa stopped. Frozen. Guards were lying on the ground. Wakandan citizens. The people he was responsible of. The ones he needed to protect.
The thought that they might be dead crossed his mind and that their blood was on his hands. People had died in Bucharest. Why had he thought it impossible that these events could repeat themselves in Wakanda? They just had.

“Your Highness?”

T’Challa could hear the blood rushing to his head. He felt like he was about to get dizzy, maybe he was even going to fall over. Without a fight. Without a battle. Kneeling down T’Challa reached out and touched the guard’s shoulder, slowly turning him onto his back. A relief that couldn’t be expressed with words when he saw the guards’ eyes darting around. He wasn’t dead.

“Are you alright?”

There was no response. His eyes were focusing on T’Challa. They weren’t settling on anything. “Can you hear me?” T’Challa snapped his fingers in front of the guards’ face, but there was no responsive.

“This is the witch’s doing.”

T’Challa couldn’t argue with this statement. “Call the medics to this area! We have to get to the rooftop!”

On his way there T’Challa encountered several more of his countrymen. All on the ground, staring into nowhere. After actually getting to the rooftop T’Challa could only see a black spot in the sky. Disappearing quickly and the world came crashing down.

***

Swallowing softly Scott fought the urge to get away from the window. Nobody could see him, but Scott still felt like hiding. All these signs.

Murderers, they said.

That was the truth, wasn’t it? People had died in Bucharest. Civilians and agents. Why? Because Rogers had wanted to protect his buddy… then he had the audacity to criticize Stark for losing his mind over seeing his parents being murdered.

Scott wasn’t one of them. Not really. But he could have been… Turning into giant man had been the most reckless thing he had ever done in life. How easily he could have ended up killing somebody.

Did they know that? Had they been also thinking of him when they had been writing that sign? Were they also calling for him?

His heart was starting to race and Scott was feeling afraid. For the first time since getting on that plane. He had realised it. He wasn’t like them. He would have never done this to Stark. He would have never done that to anyone. He wouldn’t have…

Then why had he turned into giant man?

Scott was starting to feel sick when he remembered turning into Ant-Man, crawling into the Iron Man suit. He had been ripping out wires left and right. Again, he could have killed Stark…

What for? Why? Because his childhood hero had told him that he needed him? When that had turned out to be a load of bullshit… It hadn’t been about the accords. It hadn’t been about the security or the will of the people. It hadn’t been about the Winter Soldiers.
No, it had been about Barnes. Because he was more important than anybody else. Why? Barnes was probably about 90 years old. He should already be dead. Sure, what Hydra had done to him was atrocious, but at what point did that stop being an excuse? How many people had died because of him? How many people would die, because Rogers just couldn’t bring himself to…

No, nobody was worth that. If a mentally deranged person started shooting around, killing people, if they didn’t stop… the police would be forced to kill them. It wasn’t the person’s fault that they were sick, it wasn’t their fault that their brain didn’t work properly, but at some point…

Scott saw another Iron Man mask in the crowd and he felt the urge to retch. A hand was put on his shoulder. “I hoped that we would have been able to avoid this.”

Ilya hadn’t left his side since the word had got out. Maybe he knew that it was too late for him and that fucking deal. Now everybody knew and Scott would end up in prison like everybody else. “I should have seen this coming. I can’t even be mad at whoever put that photo online… It’s my fault that I am here and now I have to face the consequences. They’ll think I’m only trying to save my skin…”

“Your deal isn’t off the table yet, Scott. You talked to the delegates before it became public that you are here. Trust the princess, Scott. She made a promise, she is going to keep it.”

His voice had a reassuring tone, but it did nothing to help Scott. Closing his eyes to gather himself Scott noticed something he hadn’t realised before. The chanting. In perfect unison and so loud that he could hear it through the closed window. Unfortunately Scott couldn’t make out any words. Quickly Scott opened his eyes again, taking in the sight of the crowd. They were raising their fists, chanting, over and over. Unable to understand them Scott turned to Ilya, witnessing something that he hadn’t thought possible.

Ilya was shocked. His eyes were wide open, his lips slightly parted and Scott felt a shiver running down his spine to see this calm and collected man in such a state.

“What? What are they saying?”

“They…” Ilya shook his head, seemingly still not quite believing his ears. “They are calling for the Black Panther. Their protector. Their leader. Their queen.”
Hello everybody,

Sorry that this took a while, but I was either at work or binge-watching Westworld. Now I'm done and here is the new update.

Slight warning - this is more violent than what you are used to with the rest of this story

Have fun :)

“I have to admit I am not very familiar with the workings of Wakandan politics. Would you mind to explain to us what is going on here?” Hope was glad that Vision was asking this question, because she still felt too confused to voice it. The disappointment stung, it enraged her to an extent she barely felt able to move. They had still been in the air when the UN had informed them that the fugitives had got away.

Hope’s reaction had been an incredible need to destroy someone. For a very limited amount of time she had thought that today this whole ordeal was going to end. That they were going to put them into jail and bring justice to those who have been wronged. Maybe Tony would feel comfortable enough to leave the house.

Now they were stuck in the very same situation and Hope was furious. The moment the UN had called them to tell them that they were gone, Hope and Vision had still been miles and miles away. Too far away to be able to detect them.

A quinjet, equipped with Wakandan technology. Nobody was able to find this thing when it was using stealth mode. Hope simply couldn’t stop wondering. She was ready to start throwing accusations around, but how had they ended up in Wakanda without assistance anyway? Somebody had helped them. Two times. They hadn’t received a lot of information yet, things seemed terribly convoluted. Nonetheless the Wakandan government had granted them to enter their borders and even more confusion had ensued.

They had landed the jet within the walls of the palace of the royal family. It had been impossible to miss the huge crowd of people which had gathered in front of the palace. Hope thought it to be naïve to assume that it had nothing to do with the fact that it had now become public knowledge that the fugitives had been harboured in the royal palace. Somebody would have a lot of explaining to do. Why shouldn’t these people be outraged? Their friends and family members had died in Lagos and now their king had assumingly granted their murderers sanctuary.

Sanctuary…

That was the wrong word. What were they running from? The law. No inhuman or autocratic law.

By now she was so sick of wondering, Hope wanted answers and then they would need to find them again. Track them down. Whatever Wakanda was dealing with now, Hope couldn’t really be bothered. She wanted the former members of the Avengers. The idea of picking up the phone and
telling Tony that they had slipped through their fingers was making her nauseous.

They hadn’t even been close…

“What you are witnessing is unprecedented… It’s difficult to explain, but closely related to the reason why you are here.” The man who had greeted them looked agitated, nervous even. “It is old Wakandan law that every single citizen has the right to challenge the Black Panther. To take his place. The last time a king got challenged was over 100 years ago. Not once was a challenger successful, but this country firmly believes that the position as their leader has to be earned. If the Black Panther proves himself unworthy… he loses the right to stay in his position… The people are referring to this law. They are calling for the King’s sister to take her place as the queen of this country.”

Hope and Vision shared a look. “Does this have something to do with the King harbouring criminals?”

“I cannot speak on the behalf of the Wakandan population, but the timing of this protest seems rather… obvious.”

Another door was being pushed open and Hope saw the female guards looking at them. Completely neutral. The security of this place was enormous. It was getting hard for Hope to believe that they had escaped without help. If she was going to find out that the Wakandans had supported them while getting away… this wouldn’t end nicely.

“The King is awaiting you. Due to the urgency of the situation, we will pass on the usual etiquette.”

Their guide gave one of the guards a little sign and the wing-doors in front of them were being opened.

Hope had seen the Wakandan King before, only on television, but she was familiar with his face. The woman talking to him was completely unknown to her, but judging by the nature of this situation and her elegant clothing, she most probably was his sister. The one the people wanted to put on the throne. Another thing that Hope couldn’t care about right now.

“Your Highness, the Avengers.”

The royal family turned to them and unlike their guards, they weren’t neutral. In their eyes Hope could see the pressure they were under, but she couldn’t bring herself to feel bad for them. “Miss van Dyne, The Vision… I’m sorry that you came here without finding what you’re looking for.”

“We are very curious to find out how this came about, your Highness. How did Team Cap end up at your court?” There was no need to beat around the bush and Hope was so sick of losing time.

“I granted them sanctuary so they would be under surveillance. To keep the general population safe. Unfortunately they decided to flee after their whereabouts became public knowledge and we were not able to hold them back.”

The speech of a politician and Hope didn’t care too much, she instead watched the King’s sister whose lips formed a thin line. She was angry, that much was obvious, but for some reason she preferred to stay silent.

“So they just walked out of here and stole your jet?”

Hope was content when both of them had cleared noticed her patronizing tone. How long had they been here? Two or three weeks? They had lived in a palace while Tony was trying to gather up the broken pieces of his life. They had had every comfort imaginable while Sophie Müller was sitting
next to her husband’s hospital bed. The Radu parents had had to bury their son last week…

“I assure you, Miss van Dyne, they didn’t just walk out. They overpowered several of our guards and put them through severe distress.”

Next to Hope Vision took a step forward. “Are you referring to Miss Maximoff’s powers? If so, I might be able to help the ones who were exposed to it.”

The siblings shared a look and eventually nodded. “We would be immensely grateful. Okoye, please lead the vision to the hospital wing.”

The female guard nodded and made a gesture that should indicate Vision to follow her. Hope didn’t mind to be alone with them, it might even be easier. In front of Vision and his calm nature she felt strange while expressing her anger. “The UN delegates will be here in about an hour. You will have a lot of explaining to do.”

“It was never our intention to help them to escape justice. They were to be transferred to prison when they got away.”

“Why were they here in the first place? They escaped from a high security prison and the King witnessed some of their crimes first-hand. I have trouble understanding why they would be tolerated here without you contacting Interpol or the Avengers. With Vision’s support you would have been able to put her in a cell. Now they are gone… when we could have had them locked up. They should be in front of jury…”

Again, they were looking at each other and Hope just knew that there was a lot more going on than she was aware of. “You are right, Miss van Dyne. There were mistakes made on our side… I owed somebody a debt, but things got out of hand. What you are approaching us of is not unfunded… but you are wrong nonetheless. My sister orchestrated some form of cooperation with a member of the team who wanted to get out and turn themselves in.”

For the first time now Hope was willing to let go of her rage for a second. A piece of information that changed the status quo. Who of them would want to get away? After all they had done, who would be able to develop a conscience? Raising her chin Hope met the King’s eyes. “Are you saying that one of them might contact us to tell us where they are now?”

“No, he didn’t leave with them. Only three of them got away. We made a prisoner.” The princess pointed out and Hope was getting frustrated. “With all due respect, you were hiding international fugitives, murderers and now you’re feeding me one little piece of information after another. I want the whole story now. You are aware that I will write a report for the UN and all of this is going to have consequences! I spent time with the people who got hurt and who lost their families, because of these people who don’t care about anything but their own skin. You were hiding them when one of them killed so many of your own people. Give an explanation.”

To Hope’s surprise the King turned to his sister. “You should be the one explaining it. You will have to do it a lot of times.”

“T’Challa…”

“Shuri, go ahead. Don’t start pulling your punches now.”

The princess sighed in response and then looked at Hope. “My brother made a mistake by letting his guilty conscience get the better of him. As it turned out that the Winter Soldier wasn’t responsible for our father’s death and after trying to take revenge on him my brother felt like obligated to offer him
his help. Sanctuary and our best attempts to find a cure for his programming. Unfortunately the Captain interpreted this as an invitation to bring his despicable friends here. My brother and I disagreed on what to do with them, but ultimately the decision was made to keep them here. It was a hopeful attempt that if they were given some liberties, some time without having to run or to make plans, that they would reflect on their actions. That they would start to see the pain and misery their actions had caused. Although I disagreed with my brother’s approach, I have to admit that it worked. Lang used the time he was given and honestly started to regret his actions. He agreed to turn himself in and share his information with the United Nations. Only an hour after we contacted the United Nations, a member of the royal staff published the photograph which you have already seen…”

Her head was swimming, so Hope raised her hand so the princess would stop, giving her a second to understand all the new information she had just been given. Scott had turned against them. A realisation hit her with full force and it was even more unexpected than Scott giving up on his precious Captain America.

Hope didn’t feel good about him trying to make up for his mistake. Not after what had happened. On a personal level she had stopped caring about him. It was good that one of them had changed sides, it was hopefully going to give them some kind of advance. One set of hands less that could do damage. She could take the suit back. It wasn’t going to hurt anybody else.

“He is still here? With the suit?”

“Yes.”

“Good… the delegates will talk to him when they arrive. Interpol will decide what to do with him. You were mentioning another prisoner?”

“The falcon, yes. He is in one our cells.”

The two biggest threats were still out and about, but the situation wasn’t as terrible as Hope had initially thought it would be. A few hours ago she hadn’t had any idea where any of them could be. Now three were still on the run, but Scott had changed sides and Wilson was in prison. It was a start.

Straightening her back Hope made her demands clear. “I want to talk to Wilson. Now.”

There was surprise, but no objections. The prison cells of the palace weren’t comfortable, sleek, white walls and massive bars, obviously made of Vibranium. Hope had never met Wilson before and seeing him sitting there, she had no desire whatsoever to even glance at him again after this conversation.

By the way he was looking at her Wilson had obviously been expecting someone. “Who are you?” No hostility or wariness. Wilson didn’t know her, he wanted to find out who he was talking to.

“My name is Hope van Dyne, I’m a member of the Avengers. I was sent here to apprehend five fugitives. Three are still on the run. You are still here. I want to know where they went.”

His response was quick and even. “I don’t know.”

Hope wanted this to be over quick. No part of her was interested in staying in his presence for too long. Rhodes was in a wheelchair because of him. It didn’t matter that Tony had built him new legs. Even if she ignored how badly Rhodes had gotten hurt, Wilson had decided to stay by Rogers’ side even after Bucharest, Berlin and Leipzig. He was now where he belonged – in a cell. “Mr. Wilson, you are in a lot of trouble. You are grown man you should know a thing or so about the legal system. There is not much you can do to improve your situation, but cooperating would definitely help you.
Where did they go?"

Sighing softly Wilson turned away. “I don’t know, Miss van Dyne. There was no plan. No
discussion. Just get on the plane and get away. I have no idea where they are going and I doubt that
they know…”

Rogers had proven over and over again that he didn’t have the ability to think ahead and a horrible
track record of bad decisions. Hope was willing to believe that story. As soon as Wakanda wouldn’t
guarantee for their safety anymore, they had got up and left.

Scott hadn’t done that. Scott was still here. Maybe Hope and Hank hadn’t been entirely wrong about
him. It was definitely too late to fix everything that had been broken, but maybe Hope was able to
trust her gut after all. This time it had nothing to do with Scott though.

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“Here. Enjoy.” The bartender handed Natasha the glass and she nodded, thankful that he instantly
turned back around again. Not leaving an impression was something you had to learn very early on.
Hair colour, make-up and clothing. Everything had to be adjusted. Normally that wasn’t so hard to
do, but during the last couple of days Natasha had to realise something the hard way.

She had no idea what it was like to be a lone survivor.

Sure, she had done missions completely on her own and she could face at least 10 guys twice her
size and take them down. Getting thrown out of Wakanda had been unpleasant, but Natasha had
known that she would get by. She had the skill set to do so.

Until it became clear that this was the first time that she was completely on her own. Without an
organisation to provide her tools and money to get the job done. Without the Avengers to do the very
same thing.

Natasha still had some of her fake IDs and everything she had taken with her when she had left the
compound, but she was used to plan ahead. It was only a question of time until she would run out of
resources. That kind of situation was new. Also her face was still on television. A wanted fugitive.

And somebody had already found her.

Bringing up the glass to her mouth Natasha looked at the espresso machine behind the counter and
tried to make out the reflection on its shiny surface. It was hard, but she could make out the man
sitting on a table behind her. He had been following her for over an hour now. Not in a very subtle
way. If he was some kind of government agent, then he was really doing a horrible job. Maybe he
was some hired goon. Who knows? He may not be subtle, but hard to get rid of. Natasha would
have liked to not draw any more attention to her.

Placing some coins on the counter Natasha got up, grabbed her coat and left the café. As she walked
down the street she could see him in the reflection of the windows of parked cars. No, he wasn’t
even trying.

A quiet place with no people around, that was what she needed. Natasha was always prepared for
these kinds of situations, she knew how to check out a new place. Around two corners and then she
slipped through a half open gate that led to the backyard of an old apartment building. No windows
on this side. Natasha quickly pressed herself against the fence, hiding in the darkness. She would
have to do a little interrogation, to make sure there weren’t more of them.

While waiting Natasha tried to slow down her breathing, avoiding making a sound. She would have
to act quickly. It took another 30 seconds until her persecutor stepped through the gate and before he
could take a look around Natasha rammed her elbow into his stomach. The moment when he was
struggling for breath Natasha struck him a second time, this time between the shoulder blades, with
enough force to knock him to the ground. By pressing her knees against his lower back Natasha kept
him where he was. “Who sent you?”

When there was no immediate answer Natasha intensified the pressure, evoking a painful groan.
“Who sent you? Interpol? FBI? Or are…”

The words died on her lips when a searing pain around her neck cut off her breath. Jerkily Natasha
brought her hands up to her neck, trying to tear on the rope that was wrapped around her throat. It
was too tight to slip her fingers beneath it and Natasha instinctively tried to breathe which only
resulted in panic rising up inside of her. No, somebody was tightening that rope and she had to attack
them, not…

Before Natasha could do anything about it, somebody delivered a hard kick that hit her right into the
chest. There had been no holding back and Natasha was brutally knocked to the cold ground, but at
least the rope around her throat was gone, allowing her to get some much needed air into her lungs.

Pain was spreading across her scalp when somebody grabbed her hair and jerked her head up. Her
hand went for the knife on her belt, but an unforgiving slap across the face made her spit out blood
and somebody grabbed her arms.

This wasn’t happening. Natasha tried to deliver a kick, but the person in front of her easily dodged
her attack and he was hit in the face again. “So predictable…”

Whoever was behind her used something cold and metallic to tie her wrists together while the rope
was being wrapped around her neck once more.

Natasha was sure that they were going to choke her to death, right here, the place she had led them
to. Fear mingled together with humiliation. How could it have been so easy? She hadn’t even put up
a real fight…

In terror Natasha waited for the rope to cut off her breath once more, but one second melted into
another and she realised that it wasn’t going to happen. Which could only mean that they were going
to play with her.

The hand in her hair pulled her head back once more and she got a first glimpse of one of the people
who had attacked her. An Asian woman, probably Korean and Natasha felt her blood freezing in her
body. Seeing people’s contempt for her wasn’t something she had never experienced. Over the years
she had learned to not let herself be bothered by it. Half of her conversations with Stark had been
filled with this sentiment. The expression on this woman’s face was different though. In her eyes
Natasha was a vermin. Something so disgusting you didn’t even want to step on it, because it would
soil the sole of your shoes. Nevertheless you needed to get rid of it. Exterminate it.

“Not even a month. That’s how long the great Black Widow lasts without her support system. What
did you say to the government? That will not do anything about you, because they need you?
Amazing how far you’ve gotten without their help.”

Mercenaries? No, this was personal and she wasn’t afraid to show her face. The man who had
followed her around came up right next to the Asian woman and he clearly shared her disdain for
Natasha. His lips even curled in disgust. Neither of them tried to hide their faces.

“Who are you?” Talking hurt and the taste of blood was bitter and was threatening to make her retch.
“Thought you were so quick to catch on. Here’s a clue.”

Another kick and the pulsing, burning pain spread beneath Natasha’s skin and her face connected with the floor. A few seconds there was nothing else she could concentrate on than ache in her chest and cheek. He hadn’t been lying, it was a clue. Natasha had seen that technique before. Many times.

“Shield…” While rasping that word she could feel the blood trickling down her chin. They were standing around her, all three of them. Two men and that Asian woman and Natasha understood that they weren’t on some kind of mission. Too much focus, too much contempt.

“Right, Shield. That’s what we were before you decided put every piece of information Shield ever had on the internet.”

“Hydra…” That single word earned her a violent kick in the stomach and Natasha felt her muscles convulse. The woman’s reaction was to grab her around the throat and pull her onto her knees. “Does this hurt? I’ve read your file, Romanoff. You have no idea what pain is.”

Her face was distorted by anger and dark spots were dancing in front of Natasha’s eyes. She didn’t feel like she could follow what that woman was saying. “How incredibly brave of you to release all that information when you had Tony Stark as a fucking sugar daddy to take care of you. A fancy new home, money and every gadget imaginable to play hero and taking down Hydra…”

No screaming, no yelling. An even voice filled with so much hatred, it made Natasha’s blood crawl. Nevertheless she was surprised when the woman spit in her face. “We didn’t have that luxury when you published the date of our current missions and our covers!”

What?

“I was in North Korea, under cover for three years when you put it all out there. With Shield gone everybody suddenly forgot about my existence. No way to contact home, no support, completely on my own and thanks to you the North Koreans knew about my cover and the cover of my partner. Do you know what they do to enemy agents? No, how would you? They let me watch. They slowly broke all of his limbs and I had to listen to it. They played around a couple of days before they shot him in the head and turned to me.”

Slowly things were starting to make sense and Natasha felt the knowledge sinking in that she wasn’t going to get out of this.

“My best friend came back from an assignment when you published the files. Telling the whole world that he had stolen plans to a nuclear base. A week later he was dead.”

The third one also told her how she had somehow ruined his life. It involved torture, a year of imprisonment and…

“It was the only way to expose Hydra.” Natasha spat out and one of them stepped on her hand, making her scream. “Yet Hydra perfectly continued to live on. You exposed us. Hundreds of us and you didn’t care, because you were perfectly safe at your Avenger’s compound. You killed so many of us and you can’t even get by a month on your own. Pathetic.”

One of the men grabbed her by her arm, forcefully pulling her to her feet. “Enough. Let’s get going.”

“Why not just kill me here?”

The woman laughed joylessly. “That’s what you would do, right? No. You’ve finally pissed off enough people that the officials want to get their hands on you. They’ll lock you up in a cell and
throw the key away. We get to choose which hole and it won’t be a nice one.”
Scott had never felt so small. Kind of an ironic thing to say for him, but it was true. There were only two of them. Had he expected an entire army? A guy and a woman. He was too skinny for his suit and she wore glasses that didn’t quite fit her face. They were normal people, not evil looking in any kind of way. Nevertheless they made him feel uncomfortable. Not their fault, Scott had fucked up and now he had to own up to it. Shifting around on his chair Scott waited for the next question.

“What have you any idea where they could have gone?”

Expecting eyes and Scott really wished that he could give a satisfying answer. He wasn’t an idiot, he knew very well that his chances to get out of this would be way better if he could give them the others. That had been the plan, right? Until they had taken off. Now Scott was all they got. Would they lock him up anyway to tell the world they had at least captured one of them? “No, unfortunately not. I didn’t even know they were going to leave?”

The skinny guy tapped his pen against the notepad on the table. It didn’t seem like an impatient gesture, rather a habit that was hard to get rid of. “No remarks? A plan B? Could have been mentioned in an entirely different context. Somebody else who supported Mr. Rogers’ opinions?”

“No… Steve did never mention anything like that and honestly… I don’t think that there was a plan B. This didn’t even feel like a plan A. I don’t believe that anybody has thought this through… But I didn’t really talk to any of them during the last couple of days. I avoided them… maybe they came up with a plan to get away and didn’t tell me. That’s possible, but I doubt it.”

Judging by their faces Scott couldn’t tell if they believed him or not. Suddenly he wished for the princess to be here. Or Ilya. Just one person who would be on his side, who didn’t believe that he was like them. There was nobody else left. Scott had made sure of that.

“Why do you doubt that, Mr. Lang?”

“Because… I realised that there wasn’t a plan. This was the place where they could go and then… Steve wasn’t interested in anything else than making sure that Barnes was alright. Honestly I’m kind of shocked that he left him behind. So I’m really no expert on what Steve Rogers would or wouldn’t do… Sorry…”

“Alright. Perhaps they didn’t plan ahead. Nevertheless you’ve spent some time with them. Try to put yourself in their shoes. Where would they go? What would they do? Any ideas?”

God, he was really bad at this. There was something he had to give them. Something he could offer. “I don’t know. Really… these people… when I got involved I thought this was about something… I
was stupid, then I looked at the accords and the stuff that happened in Bucharest or what we did in Leipzig… There is no reason to it. No plan. Rogers thinks he is right and Wilson… Damn, he is sure that things are going to calm down, that the world is going to need the Avengers again and that everybody is simply going to fall over and do as they say. Don’t get me started on Wanda… that girl is insane and needs to be put in a straight-jacket.”

“You think they are an immediate danger?”

Another question that Scott didn’t himself capable of answering. The world had been so much easier when it had been black and white. “I don’t think that they are out to hurt anybody… that’s not how they think… Well, it’s not how Steve thinks, but if he feels like he has to protect his friends… and Wanda feels threatened pretty easily… I don’t know. If I had to guess… Rogers can’t leave the Winter Soldier behind. Either he’ll come back to get him or he’ll try to come up with a way to… pardon him? This whole disaster is about the Winter Soldier. Rogers doesn’t give a damn about the accords, he hasn’t read them. Wilson and Barton just blindly agree with him and Wanda… I have no idea what’s the deal with her…”

Both of them were sharing a look and Scott asked himself if he had done anything to actually help himself. To get back home to Cassie.

“Thank you, Mr. Lang. Somebody will be here to get you in a second.”

Nodding softly Scott watched them leave and as soon as they were gone he buried his face in his hands. So, in an hour or so he’d be on a plane to Germany. Nobody could tell him how this was going to work out. Sure, the princess was going to do her best to help him, but it was naïve to believe there wasn’t going to be prison… Which was okay, after what Scott had done, he didn’t deserve any better.

But Scott wasn’t dangerous… Not anymore. He wasn’t going to hurt anybody. Everybody else seemed to doubt that and they had good reasons to do that. Scott couldn’t fault them. Being scared was horrific. Scott had to know, he was scared out of his mind right now. When the door was opened, he was expecting guys in uniforms and with handcuffs. He was not expecting Hope.

She was still gorgeous, but Scott could clearly see that her edges had become even rougher. A month ago he would have thought that she was here for him. That obviously wasn’t the case. Although it wasn’t easy for him Scott didn’t look away, he was ashamed, but he owed Hope as much. To at least look her in the eyes. “Hi…”

“I imagined punching you in the face and taking you to prison myself. I didn’t picture it like this.”

“Me neither… but it turned out for the better, I guess.”

Hope crossed her arms in response “I’ll be honest – I don’t have much to say to you. I just wanted to take advantage of this opportunity and tell you that I’m glad that you did the right thing. Way too late and it doesn’t make up for what you did in the first place… at least the suit won’t do any more damage now.”

Her words stung and this was just the first taste. Scott would hear a lot more of that. He deserved it. “I know. I fucked up and I should have listened to you. You were right… there is nothing else I can say. I had no idea what the accords were about and I didn’t know that Rogers was only in for it because of the Winter Soldier… Yes, I didn’t know that, because I didn’t ask any questions. That’s… I should have known better. I was in prison and swore to never to something this stupid again and then… I am sorry.”
Scott could go on like that forever, but what would be the difference? It didn’t change what he had done and it didn’t make it better.

“Every night before going to bed I thought about what you might do with the suit. That somebody might get hurt. That I’d be reading about it in the newspapers the next morning. You walked out on me. That I can deal with. I am grown woman, you thought something else was more important than me. I have to deal with that… even if you think that committing crime is more important than me, your decision. I cannot accept that you walked out on your daughter and what for… You didn’t ask questions, right. You still threw a truck at people and you almost tore yourself apart for… what?” Hope kept shaking her head and Scott question got answered.

He could feel even worse.

Scott had disappointed her which meant Hope had been willing to put her trust in him. A strong, smart woman had seen something in him and Scott had thrown it away without even realising what he had been doing. Because when Captain America told you to do something, it had to be the right thing. Every single one of the stories said so. A world saviour…

But Tony Stark had saved the world too.

The thought of him made Scott feel nauseous. “You are an Avenger now… that’s why you’re here, right?”

Hope nodded slowly, not saying anything. Scott was glad, because he had just finished gathering up his courage. “Stark… is he alright?”

The second Scott mentioned his name, he could see the changes that Hope went through. She was slightly raising her chin as if she was readying herself to take a blow and to deliver that punch she had been talking about. “He will be… not thanks to you.”

The bitterness felt like a knife being rammed into his stomach and Hope didn’t feel bad for twisting it around. This wound wasn’t going to close any time soon. Until now Hope definitely hadn’t tried to hide her frustration and her anger. At this point of the conversation her eyes were burning and accusing him.

How could you? You are an engineer, you are smart. How could you rip out wires and cables like they are nothing? You endangered his life. You had never met him before. He had saved everybody’s life on this planet. Including yours.

A strange sickness was threatening to overwhelm him and now he was no longer capable of looking into her eyes. “When you see Stark… please tell him I’m sorry. I just want to him know that… I realised that he was right and I was… stupid. Maybe one day I can apologize in person…”

Hope slowly nodded. “Alright… I will tell him. Scott, I… I’m really glad that you came around and… I hope the princess will be able to help you. You’re not like them… and you don’t deserve to get the same punishment as them, but… it doesn’t change what you’ve done.”

Of course it didn’t and it shouldn’t.

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Everett had told himself to stay calm. He had done these things hundreds of times. It was always different though when it was one of them. Thankfully that didn’t happen so often. Usually he was surrounded by people he trusted. Which was incredibly important in their line of work. Lives were depending on it.
A terrorist wanting to kill you? Nothing they couldn’t deal with. One of their own running over to the terrorists? It was hard to not lash out when somebody was so willing to turn on everything they had previously stood for...

The way Carter looked at him made his skin crawl. As if she was expecting him to strangle her any second. Somebody who might attack her for no reason.

“I am not going to talk to you without the presence of my lawyer.”

Right, he hadn’t expected anything else. Luckily Everett didn’t care. “Don’t worry, I don’t want you to say anything. I want you to listen. Your lawyer is going to be here in half an hour. He’s going to tell you a lot of the same things. I’m going to save you a lot of time.”

She remained quiet. Good.

This wasn’t going to be pleasant and Everett was doing this for completely selfish reasons. He personally felt betrayed by her actions. Carter had been in his service and he needed to trust his people, he always had their backs.

“I don’t know what strategy your lawyer has come up with, but I am pretty sure that he told you to sell out Rogers. It’s the only thing that makes some kind of sense. The only thing that might get you off the hook. Either you refused to give up information on Rogers or you’re waiting for the right moment. That moment is gone. You’re pretty much done for.”

Carter quirked an eyebrow, seemingly unimpressed. Most probably she thought that he was testing some new kind of interrogation strategy on her. That he had made up all these things long before entering this room. Unfortunately for her that wasn’t the case.

“Rogers and his little gang were in Wakanda. The King took them in for some reason and now he’s probably losing his throne, because the population didn’t like it that he granted sanctuary to terrorists. One of them killed their countrymen in Lagos.”

He paused, merely for having enough time to analyse her reaction.

At first she still thought that his little story was made up, until it sunk in that them hiding in Wakanda made sense. A country so isolated that nobody could go in looking for them. A King who had accused the wrong person of killing his father, who was probably feeling guilty. No, Everett didn’t come up with this story.

“In case you’re wondering how I know that – a person working at the court took a photograph of them and put it online. Fed up with them comfortably hanging out in the palace while Bucharest is still trying to recover from the disaster Rogers bestowed on them. Unfortunately they got away before the Avengers or the UN arrived in Wakanda. Well, most of them got away. The Winter Soldier was left behind, apparently they put him back on ice. Wilson was captured by the Wakandan princess. They’re hailing her like a goddess. It’s not just Wilson and Barnes though. According to the UN Lang contacted them even before their location got public. Giving himself up and offering to tell them everything they want. You know what that means, right?”

She did and at the same time she didn’t. It crossed Everett’s mind that she maybe only got into her position because of her family name. He couldn’t be sure, but it seemed like a decent explanation for her reckless and irrational actions. Why giving Rogers all that dangerous information when he clearly was the one person who wasn’t supposed to know? Why not cooperating with the law when she was going to be put on trial for treason?
Everybody knew that she didn’t have much to offer. Everett didn’t think that she knew where Rogers had been hiding. Or that he had told her anything useful. Whatever information she might have had, it didn’t matter anymore. Lang had beaten her to it and he had actually spent time with all of them, he had voluntarily offered his assistance when he hadn’t had to.

Persecutors liked that kind of thing. More importantly – the public liked that. Lang had a good chance of not getting destroyed by the press. He was the one who had turned around and renounced being a terrorist on the run. Before the Avengers had come knocking at their door.

If Carter should defy all expectations and open her damned mouth, it would be too late. There was nothing to be gained from that anymore. There was nothing she could offer and Everett was here to see her realising that. After all putting all that blind trust in Rogers Carter was left with nothing, because somebody else who had committed the same mistake had woken up before her. Unfortunately Everett wasn’t sure if she was ever going to wake up.

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“We have to go back!”

“Steve…”

“No, it was wrong to leave in the first place. Sam is still there and Bucky, he’s…”

“Steve, listen to me, god damn it!”

Thanks to the autopilot Clint was able to get up from his chair and if necessary smack some sense into Steve. They had barely gotten away and all Steve wanted to do was to return into the lion’s den.

To Clint’s actual surprise Steve did close his mouth, but his lips curled, showing his obvious disapproval of the situation. Glancing at Wanda Clint was searching for some kind of support, but she was merely standing there, her crossed in front of her chest, looking into nowhere. Great, really. How Clint was supposed to do this alone? After she had urged them to instantly leave? Rightly so…

“Yes, this went horribly wrong and we had to leave somebody behind! This sucks! We shouldn’t have had to do this! But we were forced to! There was not time to go back to get your friend! We would have all ended up in deep trouble. There was only so much we could do.”

Turning away Steve shook his head, making Clint’s blood boil. “It’s us, Clint. We’ve dealt with other situations.”

“Not quite.” At least now Wanda was speaking up. “We’ve never been hunted. It was always the Avengers who went after somebody else.”

“That doesn’t make a difference…”

“Yes, it does, Steve!” Clint moaned in frustration, trying to explain the obvious. “It was always the other one who had to run, who had to hide. Now that’s us! Okay, we could have fought our way through the palace and get Bucky. Do you know how to wake him up? I seriously doubt that you could do it in a minute. We don’t know what kind of condition he’d be in. Okay, let’s say we got him. Then what? By then they would have cut off all the exits. Let’s say we get out? Then what? We don’t know Wakanda. We don’t know where to go and soldiers would be fucking everywhere. This plane was our only way of getting out. Thanks to the stealth mode we don’t have other jets tailing us. This was our only option and we were incredibly lucky. So if you want to turn around now, we’re all going to end up in prison cells. A collar would be put back around Wanda’s neck. Now we’re still able to do something. We cannot go back right now.”
Steve pressed his lips together and Clint could see how torn he was. He didn’t like what he was hearing and at the same time he knew that it was true. They were stuck. Couldn’t go back and had no idea where to go forward. They’d figure it out, they always did, but at the moment Steve had to accept that there was no way for him to get to Bucky without putting them all in severe danger.

“I can’t leave him behind. Everybody who’s been after us is going to go there. They’re going to kill him. They’ve tried it before.” Steve’s voice was trembling and Clint couldn’t tell if it was anger or fear. Probably both and it would be perfectly understandable.

“No, they won’t.”

Both of them turned to Wanda who still hadn’t moved. She was quiet, stating a fact and Steve obviously needed her to explain herself instantly. “What do you mean?”

“They know how important he is to you. There is a video of you online defending him. They’re going to use him as bait. So you’ll come to them and they can get their hands on you. It makes sense.” Wanda shrugged, seemingly indifferent, but Clint could see that she was barely holding it together.

For a short time they had thought that they could come to rest in Wakanda until things would calm down. Now they were on the run again and there was this very real threat of going back to the Raft. Of course she was distraught.

Slowly nodding Steve ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah… I guess they would do that… but I cannot turn my back on them. Sam and Bucky. I’m not going to let them down. I have to take that risk. I’m not asking you to go with me, I know it’s dangerous…”

God, this couldn’t be true. “Cap, we’re not going to split up, okay? That is out of the question. We gotta stick together, because together we’re the strongest and we don’t have anybody else we can rely on. There’s just us. We’ll go back for them, alright, but we have to wait. To figure out what to do. To come up with a plan. We can’t afford to make a mistake.”

Please, Steve had to see that Wanda and him were right. They depended on each other. Clint had no interest in turning around right now. All they could do was to try to get away as far and possible, find a new safe place and figure out what to do. They weren’t restricted by the court anymore. Maybe they could find a way to tell their own version of the story. Set the record straight. Clint had no idea yet what they actually could do, but at least they weren’t forced anymore to sit around. Their hands weren’t tied up anymore.

Sitting down on one of the empty seats Steve sighed. He was clearly still pondering, trying to come up with a decision.

“We’re still a team, Steve and I won’t let my friends down, but we… turning around now wouldn’t help anybody. They will not hurt Bucky. They need him to get to you.”

“But this was never about me. It was about him and… two days ago they didn’t know about him… about the Winter Soldier killing Tony’s parents…”

Wanda put a hand on his shoulder. “They put us away in that… prison.” She hissed the last word and it gave Clint the creeps. The memories were still way too present. “And they will put you there too. All of us. Clint is right, we have to be careful. Come up with a plan.”

Steve shifted, like he was about to get up again, but then he slumped back against the seat and nodded lightly. His face made clear that every single part of him didn’t want this. His conscience was
telling him to go back and get his friends and Clint respected that, but they had to be realistic.

A depressing silence settled in between them and Clint didn’t want to bring up the obvious question. Where were they going? Instead they remained silent for several minutes and Clint watched Steve’s fingers slowly forming a fist. Until a loud beeping sound tore the silence apart.

“What’s that?”

Steve’s eyes grew wide, looking a little brighter than they had a second ago and he was reaching into his pocket. Pulling out phone Steve ended up staring at the display and who could be possibly be sending him a message? Had they already found them? Were they already using Barnes or Wilson to blackmail them into coming back?

“It’s Tony.”

What? That didn’t make any kind of sense. “How?”

“I sent him a letter and a phone to call me.” Steve said matter-of-factly, as if it was the most normal thing in the world and not complete madness.

Wanda blinked in confusion while Clint wasn’t able to say a thing. “And? What is he writing?”

“That…” Steve hesitated and there was a hint of a smile on his lips which was quite unsettling since Stark was involved. “… things have gone too far. He wants to set them right. He wants to meet.”

Both, Wanda and him, pointed out the obvious at the same time. “This is a trap.”

“No, it’s Tony. He wouldn’t do that.”

“Steve, he attacked you and Barnes! Do you seriously think you are still friends!?”

“Tony had this phone the entire time and he didn’t use it to cause us trouble. It wasn’t him who put this picture online. He wasn’t involved in any of this and… despite what happened I’d still come for him when he needs me and I like to think that he would do that too. What happened is between him and me… it’s only us who can resolve this… I did reach out to him and now that he is ready to respond, I’m not going to turn around now. He’s our friend.”
Hello everybody,

I'm not going to lie - this is the chapter why this fic exists. The things Peter says are the things I wrote down before starting this work.

1. I know many people like the Carter quote - Well, I hate it. When it was mentioned in the movie I thought it was one of the most dangerous and arrogant things I have ever heard. So Peter is going to say the things that I would like to say

2. To all the people who are outraged that Tony brought a teenager to a fight - Fuck you, Peter outmatches most of them by far and worst of all - Tony still thought that they were going to talk to Steve, their fucking friend.

3. Peter is 15 years old, but he possesses common sense, which Cap clearly does not (and a lot of Team Cap doesn't either when I look at the YT comments) Anyways, this is Peter kicking ass.

Enjoy ;)

They were still making new episodes of America’s Next Top model. Who knew? That meant the world order was still in place right? The post still got delivered, Starbucks was still serving coffee, parents were still taking their kids to school and most action films were still boring. Life goes on. Thai food was still delicious and that was what Tony cared about at the moment.

About every two minutes Rhodey was glancing at him, but Tony pretended that he didn’t notice. It was going to stop, sooner or later. Rhodey would realise that Tony wasn’t going to disappear or to break down from one second to the next. Yes, Tony had seen the news. Yes, he knew that they were somewhere out there, but it didn’t give him a headache. There had been no confrontation which meant that Vision and Hope were fine. At the moment Tony couldn’t ask for more.

Perhaps this was going to be how it played out. They would stay on top of the wanted list and nobody would hear from them again. Not going to happen, Tony knew that, but a man could dream, right? As if Rogers were able to live another day without Barnes…

Tony shifted on the couch, the mere thought was making him uncomfortable. Vision had used the nicest and yet most neutral words to describe the situation. Most neutral? That expression didn’t exist…

The murderer of his parents was more or less caught up in a block of ice and that was… strangely okay. That way Tony didn’t have to think about it too much. Sure, he’d prefer a prison, but this wasn’t the worst option.

Chewing on his shrimp Tony tried to push these thoughts away. He had just figured out that life goes on, so why not focusing on that? How long has it been since he had built his last car? Way too long.

“Fancy or elegant?”
Rhodey was taken aback by Tony talking to him. That was new. “What?”

“Fancy or elegant? I need a new car. Something sophisticated, I’m going to build it myself. Fancy or elegant?”

“You don’t even know how to do elegant, Tony.”

“Well, then that’s my answer. Screw you by the way, I know all about elegance. I basically invented elegance.”

It was a pleasure to see Rhodey rolling his eyes. “Great. Just tell me when you’re finished patting yourself on the shoulder…”

“That could take a while.”

“I’m perfectly aware of that.”

They fell silent again and Tony had just been able to actually concentrate on the movie on screen when Rhodey spoke up again. Softly which made Tony immediately understand that it was important. “I missed this. Just so you know.”

“Yeah, me too… but let’s not get over emotional over this. Friday’s watching and she’s going to tell Vision and Hope and Pepper and I definitely can’t have that.”

“You are a hopeless case. I hope you know that.” Rhodey smirked and Tony felt a little lither. Perhaps there was a chance that things would go back to normal. Normal for them.

They both turned back to the television, but Tony couldn’t stop his thoughts from wandering. After today there would always be the possibility that they would walk back into his life one way or another. He couldn’t waste his time thinking about that or dreading a moment that might never come. All he needed to was to look around and there was enough stuff that he could do.

Rhodey’s legs. They were still far from perfect and other people needed them too. The shield was still lying in his lab, but Tony needed Vision’s help to do anything about that. The Avengers were seriously understaffed, they couldn’t go on like this forever. Finding new people shouldn’t be a thing that Tony needed to do, that was the UN’s business now. Not that it stopped Tony from worrying that the second attempt might fail like the first one. Well, the circumstances were different now, they had to agree with the accords beforehand… that should protect all of them from another disaster.

“Ouch!” Rubbing his arm where Rhodey had hit him Tony glared at him.

“Stop thinking whatever you’re thinking. You need some rest and time off like everybody else. Here, there’s a stupid movie, concentrate on that. This is time off.”

“Yes, mom. Sorry.”

Things were going to be okay, right now Tony could believe that. One way or another things were going to work out.

***

It was strange to be back at home. Wanda had called both of them crazy, but Clint had agreed with Steve. Coming back to the US was a move they definitely wouldn’t expect. That didn’t make it less dangerous, but nothing would have been able to keep Steve away. Tony was reaching out to them and it was that silver lining Steve had been hoping for.
In the back of mind Steve had always known that things were eventually going to work out. What Tony and him had been through, what all of them had been through. The fights, the wars, it was something real and connected them so much more than anybody else could understand. Tony and him had different opinions, but they could get over them, Steve was convinced of that.

Other things had happened to… Steve winced at the mere thought of Siberia. Every possible thing had gone wrong and Steve desperately wished that he could turn back time and change the order of events. To tell Tony beforehand. To not be a coward. It would have made things easier. Bucky should have never been there. Even if Tony had had the same furious and overwhelming reaction, Steve would have been able to do something about it. Now that was in the past and Tony seemed willing to work on their mistakes. Together they could do this.

After the release of the videos Steve desperately needed Tony’s help. There weren’t a lot of ways left how to help Bucky. Tony’s parents had been killed by the Winter Soldier and if Tony told the world that it hadn’t been Bucky, that he was innocent, then his words would have the necessary weight to actually help. To make them understand that there was no way Bucky could be held accountable for his actions. Only then the government wouldn’t be able to get its hands on him. People had to know and after the videos, merely Tony could tell them.

This was so incredibly important. They needed each other and the world needed the Avengers. Conflict and danger were present all the time, the accords had most definitely proven that and now they were running out of time. Sam needed their help. Sharon was in prison, Steve had only found out about that minutes ago. Bucky was helpless, alone and Steve couldn’t let another minute pass. People were counting on him and Steve wasn’t going to start now to let them down.

“We’re right on show.” Wanda murmured into the coms, still not hiding her disapproval, nor her discomfort.

“There is nobody here to see us.” Clint responded and Steve glanced at the treetops. From here he couldn’t even see Clint, but it was a reassuring feeling that he was up there. It shouldn’t be. They were meeting Tony, a friend, an ally. Yet after all that had happened, the disappointment and betrayal…

“He’ll come and he’ll come alone. He said so.”

Steve continued looking around, but at the moment Clint was right – there was nobody there to see them. Just trees that were surrounding them. An odd place for a meeting, but far enough away from the city and secluded enough to hide the quinjet. With a bit of luck no more hiding would be necessary in a few minutes. Tony hadn’t always been the most reasonable person, but he had without doubt seen what had happened during the last weeks. What was going to happen if they let other people divide them…

For now all Steve could do was waiting while Clint and Wanda were watching their surroundings, making sure that there wasn’t going to be an ambush. Steve wasn’t concerned. Tony had contacted him, knowing that all of this had gone too far. Together they could fix it.

A standard, very dull ringtone abruptly ended the silence and Steve took a long look at the phone in his hand. This was the first time Tony called. Until now he had only sent messages. Steve didn’t question that, maybe he hadn’t felt like it was safe.

“Tony.” Steve more or less whispered into the phone.

“Hi. Uhm… yeah, sorry about that. This is not Mr. Stark speaking.”
Too much happened in this second for Steve’s blood to run cold. Of course, he instantly knew that this wasn’t Tony. Steve also knew that he had heard this voice before, but he couldn’t place it. Had Clint been right? Was this a trap after all? Had he jeopardized his friends’ safety? Had Tony betrayed them?

“Who is this?”

The voice was so young. It couldn’t be a trap. Didn’t make a lot of sense.

“Spider-Man. You know… from Leipzig. We’ve met. You dropped a container on me.”

The kid?

“Where is Tony?”

“Mr. Stark doesn’t know about this. I wanted to talk to you. Can your friend come down that tree? So we can all sit down and have a conversation. This way it’s just awkward…”

Tony wasn’t here, but Steve needed him. Without him the hunt for Bucky would never stop. “What do you want to talk about?”

“The news won’t shut up about you and I only know Mr. Stark’s version of the entire story. I would like to hear yours. Come on, I’m alone and I’m not trying to fuck you over. The cops would be already here if I wanted them to.”

Steve didn’t like any of this, he had been sure he would meet Tony and that they would be able to sort everything out. Here and now. Instead the kid from the airport had called him. Still a good thing though. It proved that people knew that the stories told on television weren’t true. They weren’t a danger to anyone. The kid didn’t buy it and now was trying to find out what was really going on. That was smart and deserved Steve’s respect. If the kid was somehow so close to Tony that he could get his hands on the phone, it couldn’t hurt to talk to him, to make him understand what was really going on here. What was at stake.

“Okay, let’s talk. You want to do that face to face. Why don’t you come out?”

As soon as Steve had finished the question he got his response. A complete surprise like last time. Steve wasn’t entirely sure what the kid was doing or what his powers were, but it seemed like his suit allowed him to produce some kind of string. Like a spider. Strong, hard-wearing and almost disgustingly sticky. Now the kid was using these strings to swing from one tree to another and then landed right in front of Steve. Still wearing that mask, Steve didn’t really trust it. He didn’t like it when people thought that they had to completely cover their faces.

“Clint, it’s okay. Come down, he is here to talk.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Where is Stark?”

“Tony is not going to show up. We’ve been contacted by him. Spider-Man wants to talk, know what’s going. I said that we would talk.”

It was impossible to deny the slight worry that Clint wasn’t going to accept that and insist on leaving. This wasn’t what Steve wanted either, but it was a start. A way to get to Tony.

One minute later Clint and Wanda had both left their positions, joining Steve and the Spiderman. Another step in the right direction, but Wanda’s face was as hard as stone and Clint was scowling, his bow and arrow still in hand. “What the hell is this supposed to be? Tony’s sending a negotiator
that none of us knows?”

The Spider-Man was crossing his arms in front of his chest and Steve desperately wished to see his face to understand his motivation. To get a grasp of his character, to know who he was even talking to. “Mr. Stark didn’t send me. He has no idea I found the telephone Captain America sent him.”

This was the first time Clint ever heard him speak and the reaction was fierce. “What the… Jesus, how old are you?! Your voice didn’t even break yet. Tony brought a fucking kid to a fight!”

“I am 15.”

“Holy shit…” Groaning Clint ran a hand through his hair and Steve had to swallow himself. Too young. Way too young. He should be at home, playing video games, doing anything but that. Now the accords were even pulling children into this horrific situation. “I’m sorry, kid, but you clearly shouldn’t be here. You’re too…”

“Oh, cut it out.” Steve was taken aback by the suddenly harsh tone. That was different. He could clearly remember their encounter at the airport, the awe with which the kid had addressed him. The awkwardness which had somehow been endearing. It had been respectful. All of that was gone now. “You didn’t ask about my age before and you didn’t care about it when you dropped that container on me, so can we please ignore that?”

During the last couple of days a lot of words had made Steve feel like he was being slapped or punched. This didn’t sting as hard as the reproach of having tried to kill his friend, but there was pain nonetheless.

What had he said? 15 years old? Another thing that Steve hadn’t known. Nobody had told him and how should he have asked in that situation? A situation they had forced him in by cutting off all his support. Dividing the Avengers. Still Steve had known that he was young… but here he was. Alright. Nothing bad had happened to him.

“What do you want?” It was Wanda who was now taking over the conversation, seemingly not affected by the newest turn of events.

The posture of the kid loosened a little bit and when he continued talking the harshness in his voice was gone. Quite the opposite. He almost seemed to be joyful. “Oh right, back to the point. Mr. Stark doesn’t talk about any of you and I don’t know anybody else who knows you personally. The media is calling you a bunch of terrorists who love to break the law and have no respect for human life.”

“If you weren’t so young, you’d know that most of what the press writes and says is bullshit.” Clint snarled and suddenly the Spider-Man was crossing his arms again. “I know that, thank you very much. I have a great history teacher, she tells us to question everything. To look at a story or an event from different angles. To analyse before we form an opinion. I’m going to do just that and I have a lot of questions. So many that I wrote them down, because I don’t want to mess up or forget something.”

Steve blinked in his disbelief when the Spider-Man reached behind him and seemingly pulled a folded sheet of paper out of… a pocket from his suit? Was he serious?

“Okay, after a little research I got the impression that you may be a little dumb, but hey, I’m just 15 years old, maybe I got it wrong. We’ll start at the beginning. Please explain to me the Hydra disaster. I read up on it. Hydra was about to launch an attack on thousands of innocent people. They didn’t send thousands of goons to stab or shoot them, they wanted to use the HeliCarriers which are machines. Computers. They need programming and they were programmed to kill people… You
went in there with the Falcon, the Black Widow and your shield? Again, I’m only 15, but why didn’t you call the world’s best hacker, technology expert who happens to be a member of your team and who was also on Hydra’s kill list and would be excessively motivated to stop them. Not calling him seems kind of dumb, reckless and incredibly arrogant, so please… why?”

The mask kept Steve from seeing the kid’s eyes, but he still could feel them on his skin. Scott had thrown so many questions at him, yelling accusations, talking about the accords, but all these things had been fairly recent. Nobody had been talking about the fall of Shield for so much time now. It seemed so long ago, it was strange even thinking about it since everything had changed.

Steve had found Bucky again.

Even after Shield had disappeared, Hydra had continued existing.

They had saved so many lives that day.

Overwhelming, naturally. It had almost been enough for Steve to take, how was somebody this young supposed to understand? He hadn’t been there. “At that moment it was impossible to talk to anyone. Shield had been infiltrated and we didn’t know who…”

“Tony Stark was never part of Shield. Come on, give me something better. Like you had no time to pick up the phone or whatever.” Now he indeed sounded like a teenager, angry and pert.

“We didn’t have time and we couldn’t risk having too many people know about…”

“Fine, a trust issue… unreasonable and stupid, but what do I know. Fine, question number 2…”

“Come on, where are you going with this?” Clint snarled, but the Spider-Man pointed at the sheet in his hand. “Hey, I get to go first. When I’m done with my questions, you can start asking yours. Okay, question number 2. At the airport… or better before the airport why didn’t you call Mr. Stark to help you with the Winter Soldiers? That fight lasted over 15 minutes, a lot of lost time. None of our team knew about the threat and you didn’t explain it to anybody. Why didn’t you just pick up a phone and call Mr. Stark? Yeah, you disagreed about the accords, but the Winter Soldiers were a global threat, weren’t they? Wouldn’t you have needed every single person in this fight? Instead you chose to fight the Avengers and you only left with Barnes. That didn’t help your odds against the Winter Soldiers, right? Two against five instead of… twelve against five. One phone call to explain the situation and you didn’t do that. Why? It’s so stupid.”

That was just one part of the story and it wasn’t fair. “Tony was working under the accords. With Ross. His hands were bound.”

“Oh please… He came to Siberia, didn’t he?”

“There was no way to contact him without getting Ross involved.”

“It’s Tony Stark!” The kid was shouting. “You think the government is able to hack his phone when he was the one who built everything the military uses?! Type in his phone number and tell him that the world is in danger, you can sort out the accords business later on.”

“Ross would have…”

“Five Winter Soldiers! Nobody wants them to run around freely! Nobody! So even if Mr. Stark wouldn’t have been able to keep this from Ross… do you really think that he would have said ‘No’ or that the Avengers would have accepted that? That the UN would have accepted that? I don’t get it! I don’t get it, help me out here.”
What was Steve supposed to say? Tony wouldn’t have been able to help them. Not with the accords and Ross in the picture. They had led them to where they are now. People had tried to kill Bucky, Steve hadn’t been willing to jeopardize his life… not with these people who didn’t care about anything.

“Listen, kid, this is all really cute, you trying to play with big boys, but why don’t you shut up about stuff that you don’t know anything about?”

Steve glanced at Clint and the kid sighed. “Fine, let’s get to the biggie since his patience has clearly run out. Already. The accords… I’ll keep it short and simple. Who on earth do you think you are to disagree with 117 countries and still think you are right?”

This was such a common mistake. Not 117 countries had made an agreement on something. 117 governments. People with agendas. The same people who had let Hydra take over Shield. The people who were Hydra. Who had tried to kill Bucky. At least this was the part that Steve could explain. He could explain it fairly easily, because it was obvious and the kid seemed smart. He would understand if somebody explained it to him. As it had been explained to Steve.

“Listen… unfortunately it’s not that easy. The Avengers are a powerful force, too powerful to become the weapon of a government who could do with it as it pleases. I know a lot of people think differently, but… A good and very wise friend of mine once said - Compromise where you can. And where you can’t, don’t. Even if everyone is telling you that something wrong is something right, even if the whole world is telling you to move. It is your duty to plant yourself like a tree, look them in the eye and say, no. You move.”

There was no immediate response and Steve let the words linger. He knew about their power and he was sure that they had already left a big impression on the kid. How could they not when…

“Wow. Aunt May tells me not to swear, but this really earns the bullshit rating. Whoever told you that shit must have been a moron!”

Steve should have immediately defended Peggy, but he was too stunned to speak, to move. Something that had moved him so deeply, that had inspired him to stay true to his principles and… the kid showed complete and utter dismissal? How was that even possible?

“Even if the whole world… Damn, you really don’t hear how that sounds?” His voice sounded even younger when he was yelling. “If the whole world is against you, then maybe it’s because you’re wrong and they are right! Not moving when… Do you know who thinks they are right although the rest of the world tells them that they are wrong and tells them to stop what they are doing? ISIS for example.”

Steve gaped, feeling like his windpipe was blocked.

“Oh right, I forgot… you’re not up-to-date with modern politics… I’ll help you out, something you should be familiar with. Somebody who did what they thought was right and completely justified although the rest of the world got together and told them they are wrong… Hitler. Hitler did that. Weren’t you supposed to fight that guy? I think you would have gotten along perfectly…”

“That’s enough now! I’ve listened to enough of this bullshit.” Taking a step forward Clint seemed ready to scold the kid or to engage in a fight, Steve wasn’t sure. Steve couldn’t think. “I know you think you’re pretty smart, because Stark let you play with the big boys, but you shouldn’t be here. Go home and play with your Xbox. Leave this to the adults.”

The Spider-Man slowly turned his head, his invisible eyes shifting from Steve to Clint. “You’re right.
I’ve had enough too.”

Things were set into motion so fast that Steve could only react when it was already over.

The kid moved his left hand and these white strings seemed to be shooting from it. They attached themselves to Clint’s bow and the kid jerkily pulled it from Clint’s grasp. With his second hand the kid created even more strings, they wrapped themselves around Clint’s wrist and ankles, more or less tying him up and causing him to fall over.

“Clint!”

The shock on Wanda’s face lasted even shorter than Steve’s surprise and he could tell from her posture that she was switching into combat mode. Her magic was pooling around her hands, she lunged herself forward and threw it at the kid. He turned out to be too fast, new strings wrapping around the branch of a tree, pulling himself up and easily escaping Wanda’s attack.

Dropping to his knees Steve set to work to free Clint from his bounds. “Just a sec.”

“Hurry up, Cap!”

It was harder than it looked. So many of them, sticking tightly together, creating a web that Steve wasn’t able to simply rip apart. Just when Steve was about to use his full strength something crashed against him with unlimited force and Steve was thrown back several feet, uncomfortably landing on his back.

“Sorry, that present is not for you to open.”

Steve didn’t want this, a fight was the last thing on his mind, but once again somebody forced him to. He should have his shield. “This is not how we should…”

Wanda launched another attack and it was this moment that Steve had to realise how outrageously fast this kid was. Effortlessly he was jumping around, higher and faster than humanly possible. Faster than Steve. Not to mention that he could be out of their reach within the blink of an eye when he was using his webs. The increasing frustration on Wanda’s face was clearly visible as she constantly failed to hit the Spider-Man with her magic while he was swinging around, jumping from tree to tree.

“You know that thing you do… not a fan.”

Hanging from a branch the kid held out his hands and Steve moved to push Wanda out of the way, but once more both of them were too slow. The attempt to disarm Wanda was quite the success. A tight web was formed around her hands, keeping them together and her struggle to get the strings off turned out to be in vain, making her hiss in frustration.

“Good… should we negotiate now? Or should I web you up too and call the cops?”

“Look, we don’t know each other. I have no idea why you are doing this and…”

“Are you kidding? I make an ISIS comparison and you don’t get it?! Mr. Stark is right. You think you are right and it makes you dangerous. Somebody has to stop you from hurting more people and I have to do that… because I can.”

Steve wasn’t going to, but then the kid took a swing at him and he had to block it with both arms. His whole body was vibrating with the power of that punch. What had they done to him to make him that strong? When it became obvious that the kid wouldn’t let up Steve was fighting back, finding out that it was completely different from the last time. The hits seemed to be harder and the kid’s
fighting style was nothing Steve was used to. The constant change of direction and whenever Steve was trying to attack, webs on his wrists or elbows were pulling him back. It went so far that Steve was actually taken aback when one of his punches actually found its target. The counter came very quickly and Steve could feel his lip splitting.

“Step back, Steve.”

Both of them stopped what they were doing, looking at Wanda and Steve felt his blood run cold. The sight was terrifying. Even the air around her seemed to be cracking and sizzling. Wanda’s eyes were glowing red, her veins were standing out, Steve could see her magic pulsing beneath her skin. Whatever she was doing was already showing effects, the ground around her was cracking open, parts of it were levitating and red energy was burning the webs off her hands.

“Wanda…”

The earth was shaking, the cracks were getting bigger and Steve needed to do something, because whatever this was, it couldn’t end well.

“Yeah… no. I’m not doing that…” The Spider-Man grabbed Clint by his shirt and swung away.
“You’re in a lot of trouble, young man.” Hope was tempted to put her hands on her hips and shake her head, but that would actually make her look like a mother scolding her child. No, that wasn’t going to happen.

To be honest she didn’t feel like scolding the Spiderling at all. Sure, this was going to cause some trouble, because he had gone off on his own, but one person more to scratch off the list. Also the sight alone was worth it.

The Spiderling had wrapped Barton up in strings and now he was dangling from a big branch. Like a piñata. Hope hadn’t felt like smiling for quite some time, but this was admittedly funny.

“Oh, come on, I was perfectly safe and I called for back-up, didn’t I?” The Spiderling jumped down from the branch he had been sitting on and Hope looked from him back to Barton. “There is no being safe with these people.”

“Right and we shouldn’t lose much more time. They can’t be that far. I disabled the quinjet. You guys parked it just around the corner, really? Anyways, I relieved it of the rest of its fuel. I tried to place a tracker on Captain America, but I think it fell off during the fight. The witch went crazy, so I thought it might be a better idea to get away. It’s only been 15 minutes and they can’t be very far.”

Hope nodded. “The Iron Legion is all over the forest. I must admit you’re pretty organized… don’t tell Tony I said this, but… good job. Would you please let the guy down, so they can take him?” She gestured at Barton, then at the government agents behind her.

“Right, sure…”

With an almost elegant jump the Spiderling raised high enough to pretty much pick Barton from the tree like a fruit. Hope would have laughed if the situation wasn’t so serious. Two of them were still out there. The most dangerous ones.

“Get your hands of me, you…”

“Oh, shut up. Nobody’s interested in what you’ve got to say. If I were you I wouldn’t say a thing until my lawyer shows up. You’ll need him.” Hope snarled and didn’t even bother to look at him when the officials grabbed him and dragged him away. One thing less to worry about.

“We should instantly come up with a strategy how to proceed. The nearest town is only three miles
away and we should consider warning the population. I must admit that I do not know what is the right approach.” Vision looked at Hope and she knew that this wasn’t only her decision to make and she was grateful for it. Making a mistake right now could turn out to be fatal.

“I am not sure… Telling them that the Scarlett Witch and Steve Rogers are in this region might cause panic. On the other hand… we can’t just remain silent about this. This is a dangerous situation and we have to make sure that nobody gets hurt. I don’t think that they have the intention to hurt anybody… Unfortunately we had to already find out that they are willing to do just that if they feel… threatened.” Hope glanced at the leader of the task force who clearly had more experience with these kinds of situation. “Sir, what would be the smartest approach? The safest solution for the general public.”

“The safest option would be to find them as quickly as possible. Therefore we need as many eyes as possible, the public could help. We know that they have to be in a five miles radius, we’re already blocking the roads. Given their track record I would advise to inform the public about the current situation. To not approach them if they are seen, to call the police.”

Hope and Vision shared a glance before nodding. “Good, we will do that. We need to find them… fast. And you should go home.”

The Spiderling put his hands on his hips, his body language showing that he felt offended. “Hey! I can help!”

“You’ve helped enough. Tony didn’t want to drag you into this.”

“I’m sorry, Miss van Dyne, but I’m pretty amazing at tying people up from a distance. I can help! I’m fast and very strong. I can hold up a building if it comes down. You should keep me around.”

Hope was tempted to laugh at his stubbornness and she had to admit that he had a very good point. That young man was perhaps even more qualified to be here than her. With the witch out there and Rogers’ almost unlimited strength, they needed to throw everything at them that they had. “You stay with me, got it? When I tell you to get away, you get away. No discussion.”

An instant nod. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good, we gotta move. We gotta find…”

“Uhm, when we met up the Captain still had the phone. He must have thrown it away, but maybe we can still locate it and find out in which direction they went.”

This was a start. Hope didn’t expect much from this, but she was ready to do anything that was necessary. They were so close from putting this all to an end and Hope wouldn’t risk anymore people getting hurt.

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“You gotta breathe easy. Calm down, okay? It’ll be alright.” Steve had both of his hands on Wanda’s shoulder, trying to talk soothingly to her, but he already knew that it wasn’t going to be enough.

“He took Clint and you just let it happen!”

“I know, but we’re going to get him back. We’re going to get everyone back. We’re going to make this right again. Okay? But I need you for that. I need your support.” Looking pleadingly at her, Steve wished for her to get a grip. It was cruel, he knew that. At this moment Wanda had every right
to break down or to be upset. Unfortunately they didn’t have the time. Whatever they were going to do now, it had to happen quickly. Because of this latest trap people had to know where they were. Now it was only a question of time until they were found and Steve had to decide what to do then.

“How? How are we going to do that?” Tears were glistening in Wanda’s eyes and Steve felt like he was being stabbed in his chest. She was losing everyone who was important to her all over again.

Looking over his shoulder Steve glanced at the door, but it remained closed. It was a Sunday afternoon, this was a small office building. For now they were safe here. Nonetheless that didn’t mean they could stay for much longer.

“I think… I went about this all wrong… Perhaps we should… if we keep running, there is nothing we can do. They are in a position of power and we have to change that.”

“How? I asked you how, because I don’t see how we are going to do anything right now! At all…” Wanda’s voice was somewhere between a sob and a hiss. Steve knew that his idea was dangerous and maybe it would only help to get them into more trouble. But what other options did they still have?

Steve thought back to when he had found Bucky again. When he had become aware that Hydra was still around. Moments filled with dread and having no idea where to go. Him and Natasha against the world. Against everybody they knew…

… why didn’t you just call Tony…

… Tony could have dismantled their entire arsenal within the blink of an eye…

… Tony could do things that nobody else would never be capable of…

The mask had come off and Steve had recognized his best friend. Everything was a blur and then it had been them surrounded by Hydra… and civilians. He remembered Crossbones saying that they couldn’t kill him on the street. They should have. It would have been the smart thing to do. Nevertheless they hadn’t done it. Hydra hadn’t been able to kill him with people watching, because it would have showed them for what they were. It was awfully simple.

People watching had saved Steve, because they knew him, knew he was always on their side. Now all they could see was terror and fighting on TV. Taken out of context, with only one side telling their story, providing evidence. There was another story to be told. Steve’s.

Bucky’s…

“Wanda…” Steve crouched down in front of the chair she was sitting on, taking her hands into his own. “If we keep running… continuing like this is not going to help us. Or Clint or Sam or Bucky… We can try again to break them out of whatever prison they are keeping them in, but then we’d still be on the run and things would only end up repeating themselves… We can’t go on like this.”

Her eyes were burning into his and she seemed to try to pull herself together. “What do you suggest?”

“I am not sure yet how to go about this, but we need to make our voices heard. Tell the people what’s going on and… negotiate with the…”

“You want to negotiate after all they’ve done to us!? After they put us into that hole? That’s where they taking Clint! And Sam!”
“Listen, Wanda. We’re not going to back down or betray what we’ve been fighting for, but continuing like this… we’re going nowhere. We did the wrong thing. We hid away in Wakanda, because they decided to make us fugitives… and we acted like fugitives, proved them right, made it look like we have a reason to run, have something to hide. We need to stop running, we need to talk to the people and tell them what’s going on.”

“If we stop running they are going to arrest us too. They are going to throw us into cells like the last time. They didn’t listen to us the last time.”

She had a point there and Steve couldn’t deny that he was afraid of that too. They couldn’t forget about their strength. It wasn’t easy to get rid of the both of them and they could make demands in order for them to… surrender. At this point they had to find a way how to get into contact with…

“Do you hear that?” Wanda’s head came suddenly up and Steve’s thoughts instantly came to a halt. Yes, he could hear it too. Steps. Coming closer. Were they already here? Had they found them? So quickly?

More than one person… two…

One lither than the other one…

Wanda got up from her chair and Steve also stood up. This was a simple office room, no way to actually hide if they weren’t going to hide under that single desk.

Chuckling. Whispering.

No, those weren’t agents to get them. Civilians? People who were working here? Didn’t matter eventually, as long as they were going to walk past the door…

Steve’s breath got caught when of course the door was being pushed open and there were no agents. Just a man and a blonde woman. Still chuckling and whispering, holding hands until they became aware of Steve’s and Wanda’s presence.

Over the years Steve had grown accustomed to extreme reactions. The shield and the title Captain America seemed to bring them along quite naturally. Scott was a very good example. The admiration, a slight awkwardness. People had been blushing, chuckling, stuttering, and shifting their weight from one foot to another. Steve had always thought that this behaviour was ridiculous, but he had become used to it.

The reaction he got now was different. So different that he didn’t understand it.

There was recognition. There had to be. There always was.

The woman didn’t actually scream. No real sound passed her lips, but the change was so blatantly obvious. The flirting expression vanished completely, was being deformed into something else. Utter dread. Wide eyes, trembling lips. The man seemed more composed, but Steve could see the little details.

How he instantly repositioned himself as if he was trying to shield the woman with his body. A subconscious reflex, wanting to protect her from potential harm. Like pulling your child to the side when a car was approaching.

From one second to another the man’s entire perception had changed. He thought he was in danger and he needed to protect the weaker one. “Jen, get back…”
Steve raised his hands to show that he was unarmed. "Listen…"

The door was being slammed shut and this time they were running. Fleeing.

"We gotta go, Steve. They are going to call the police and they will all come for us." Wanda grabbed his arm and Steve knew that she was right, but he needed a moment to think, to understand what had happened a moment ago. This couple had seen them, recognized them and they had run away in fear.

Steve had never thought it possible that somebody could be afraid of him.

"We have to leave!"

Nodding softly Steve followed Wanda to the door. When they had entered this building to find a place to hide Steve hadn’t really paid attention to where they had been going. Open one door, close the next one. Down one hall, around another corner.

It took them longer than it should to get back to the small entrance hall and when they did Steve wished that they had never entered this building in the first place. When they finally arrived in the main hall, they had yet to stop again and Steve swallowed lightly. Another situation that should have been avoided. How did they get here? Staring at the barrel of a gun.

"Okay, this is how this is going down." The cop had a very calm voice but it didn’t miss intensity. Somebody who was used to give commands and to make himself very clear. "You are going to stay here and not move a muscle until the Avengers show up. I know a gun might not look that impressive to you, but I will not hesitate to use it."

For a second Steve wanted to close his eyes, to try to understand how things had come to this. Him and Wanda having to hide, sneak around and a policeman was pointing his gun at them.

"Sir, we’re not here to cause trouble…"

"I don’t care why you are here or what you are doing, but you are not going to leave." Still calm, but there was a little hitch in his voice, barely noticeable. Next to Steve Wanda made a step forward, but he raised his hand to indicate her to stay where she was.

"Sir, I know we have entered this building without permission, but we have no…"

"Mr. Rogers, I would appreciate it if you remained silent and don’t move until the arrival of the authorities."

Sighing softly Steve decided what to do without losing even more time. "I am sorry, but you do not have the means to hold us back. We’ll leave quietly and nobody will know that we’ve been here. Please, you are obviously a man who takes his duties very seriously. You don’t want to actually shoot us."

"Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure. I’d like to think that I am a good cop, above those kinds of things, but you killed several of my colleagues. To be honest, I might not be very upset if you got hurt. Don’t test me. Just stay where you are."

While Steve was swallowing down the bitter taste in his mouth Wanda took another step forward. "We are not going to wait here. We are going to leave right now and you are not going to hold us back."

Steve felt the desire to explain something, to stop this average man from hating him, but he knew that
they didn’t have time. Wanda was right. That couple had seen them and here was an officer already waiting for them. This town was downright tiny, everybody probably knew everybody. They must have called him directly. A man Steve had never met, but who hated him…

“You don’t have the means to hold us back.” Wanda repeated herself and Steve gasped when she began to act. A simple gesture of her hand and there was her red magic that even Steve didn’t quite understand. Sometimes it looked like it had a life of its own, wrapping itself around the barrel of the gun and pulling it from the cop’s grip before even one single shot could be fired. It was thrown across the room, out of everybody’s reach. “We are leaving. Stay aside.”

She didn’t even glance at Steve, just walked straight ahead for the door and Steve followed her, his eyes lingered on the cop. He stepped aside and it was a good thing to do so. Necessary. There was no way he could stop them and like this it was easier for everybody involved.

Another person to stare at him and suddenly his face mingled with Tony’s. They had had the same look in their eyes.

Quickly shaking his head Steve followed Wanda as she pushed open the door and sunlight flooded into the hall. The small, empty parking lot was right in front of them and before they headed towards the main road Steve remembered what Natasha had taught him when Hydra had tried to hunt them down. Pulling his cap deeper into his face Steve reached for Wanda’s arm. “Slow down, it will be less suspicious.”

Looking at him Wanda quickly nodded and they left the parking lot walking next to each other. “We need a car.”

“First we need to get off the main street. He’s still right behind us and he was talking about the Aveng-“

Something, somebody was bumping into him and Steve’s reflexes where about to kick in when he realised that it was a little kid. A boy, about 10 years old. He and another boy had probably been running down the street, talking, chuckling, not really watching where they were going.

“Sorry, Sir…” The boy raised his head, looking up at Steve who was about to respond with a smile when something changed. Eyes that grew wider with recognition. Something that Steve had seen so many times before, but it was different. Steve couldn’t remember the last time he had seen a scared child.

Steve had never seen a child who was scared of him.

It didn’t make any sense, but there was only him. The boy was looking at Steve. An expression struck with horror. One step back, he was stumbling and Steve would have reached for him, but he was paralysed. Something seemed to be crawling beneath his skin, a feeling of unknown dread spreading inside of him. This wasn’t something Steve had ever thought he would experience. A mere child being afraid of him.

How?

“Mom!” A high-pitched voice and the boy was suddenly pulled back from behind. His mother had the same black curls as him. “I’m sorry, he’s always so…”

As soon as she saw Steve’s face the words died on her lips.

A slap across the face, a stab knife being stabbed into his guts and twisted around. The couple had reacted to them in a very similar way and yet completely differently. With her it was worse. Perhaps
because she was a mother.

“Michael, get away!” Terror. This time not only visible but audible. She hastily grabbed her son’s arm, the other boy’s hand and started running. From him.

A mother and two children suddenly running down the street. Eyes were on them, Wanda urgently whispered his name and Steve couldn’t find it in him to move. Somebody was running from him. Terrified by his mere sight. That he would hurt them? Steve would never hurt a child… or anyone…

There had been faces on the television. A little girl’s…

If Steve had seen it, everybody else had. But he hadn’t meant that. He had never touched one of the civilians with his bare hands. The tunnel collapsing had never been Steve’s intention, he had been trying to save Bucky…

Somebody was shouting and Steve turned his head. People were staring at him. Nothing was left of awe and wonder. Fear and dread had swiped them away. How? They were normal people, Steve had always been on their side. Against the accords, so he would always be able to protect them. Now they were running from him. As fast as they could…

“Steve!” Wanda was pulling at his arm, like the woman had done with her son. His feet started moving and he had no idea in which direction.

A searing pain was suddenly spreading inside his skull and Steve’s hand shot up to touch the back of his head. There was blood on his fingers and on the stone on the ground. Confused Steve let his eyes dart around and they finally settled on a young man. If there had ever been admiration, his hadn’t been wiped away by fear. But by anger.

“Piss off, you son of a bitch!”

What?

Next to him Wanda was snarling and before Steve could react, before the pain could even start to subside, she was making a quick gesture with her arm. Red sparks were flying through the air and the man who had thrown the stone was brutally pushed to the ground.

More screaming. A man and a woman were running towards the man Wanda had brought down, others were staring at Steve, unable to conceal their hatred and their repulsion.

“Steve, we have to…”

A girl, only a teenager, was picking up a small child, maybe three years old. Cradling the boy against her chest she started running. Before that she glanced at Steve. Yes, Steve remembered that gaze. It was the one he wanted to protect people from. Now he was causing it.

“What did you…”

“Get off the streets. Go back into your homes and lock the doors. This is the Avengers Initiative. We are here to help.”

For a second Steve thought that it was Tony. An Iron Man suit landing right in front of the people who were crouching on the ground. Another one. They were everywhere, ready to attack, threatening and yet people hurried to get behind them.

“Mr. Rogers, Miss Maximoff.”
Steve’s head was spinning, but he had seen this woman before. Hope van Dyne was wearing a suit that didn’t look so much different from Scott’s.

“I want you to raise your hands and to get down on your knees. This is a public space, we don’t want to endanger any more innocent people.”

“Please, Mr. Rogers. Enough people have been hurt. Enough people have been killed.” Vision looked sad. Steve hadn’t seen him since Leipzig. He heard a child crying and that wasn’t what he had been trying to do. They shouldn’t be afraid. There shouldn’t be blood on that stone…

“You will not put us back into prison!”

Steve slowly shook his head, his voice wasn’t quite there yet when he whispered Wanda’s name.

“You are responsible for the deaths of Wakandan diplomates in Lagos. You are responsible for the Ultron disaster in your home country. You are responsible for putting over 20 Wakandan officers into hospital. Prison is where you belong, Miss Maximoff.”

Steve could feel Wanda’s reaction to van Dyne’s words. Her anger was surging, being unleashed. The air around them seemed to be buzzing, sizzling and crackling with electricity. Wanda’s hair was softly moving with an upcoming breeze and Steve could still feel the boy’s eyes on him.

Horrified. Mother feeling the need to protect her child at his mere sight.

Two men had given Steve the strength to protect people like her. One of them Steve had promised that he would stay a good man. The other one had been killed and Steve hadn’t thought it necessary to tell his friend. Howard’s child…

Wanda was raising her hands and Steve couldn’t. Instinctively Steve pushed her down, but it was too late. Her magic was already moving, directed at Hope van Dyne who… vanished before she could be hit.

Red eyes were glaring at him and the pain in his skull intensified, becoming overwhelming, piercing like nails. It brought Steve to his knees, the pain hot, searing and unforgiving. Until it suddenly stopped.

Looking up Steve saw the strings that were holding Wanda’s wrists together. No time for her to be surprised when an invisible force kicked her to the ground. Steve tried to get up, but he felt dizzy and somebody with sheer unlimited strength pressed him down. “Don’t move.”

Vision was standing in front of Wanda, but Steve could only see the outlines of their bodies, his vision too blurry. “Hope is right, Wanda. It is enough.”

“They will lock me in a cage, Vis. Because they cannot understand or accept that I am different.”

“No, Wanda. It’s you who does not understand. You have no right to demand their acceptance. You were not born different. You chose to be this way. You chose to hurt your friends and you chose to make people fear you. I did not want them to fear you, but you left them no choice… and now it’s me who does not have any choice.”

Vision knelt down, put a hand on Wanda’s forehead and a flash of white light swallowed everything that Steve could see. Then there was silence.

***
“Boss?”

Not straightening up Tony continued to tinker on the ignition, wiping the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand. “Yes?”

“One civilian hurt. The last two fugitives are disabled and detained. It is over.”

Tony’s hands froze for a second, then they just went back to do what they were doing. “Thank you, Friday.”
Hello everybody,

It's in the middle of the night here, but I've just finished this piece of work, so you guys deserve to see it.

Thank you for all the feedback to this story, I'm really overwhelmed. I'm glad that so many people enjoyed my take on the events.

So again - thank you every much and I hope you have fun with the last chapter :)

“Our organization does not criticise Miss Maximoff’s imprisonment. We are all very relieved and applaud the Avengers for doing such a formidable job, but the conditions in which she is held are not acceptable. Electroshocks are a method of physical torture and should never be used in an American prison.”

“Mr. Anderson, what are your thoughts on such accusations?”

“That they are ridiculous. It’s easy to throw around these words. Electroshocks. Torture. Yesterday I read an article that the government wasn’t respecting the Geneva Convention.”

“You are not. You are torturing her.”

“Miss Aldridge, I respect your work, but you and your organisation have to realise and accept that normal rules do not apply to Miss Maximoff.”

“So you have the right to abuse her? I do not argue that she is a criminal and needs to be convicted. My heart and compassion goes out to all the people she harmed and to their families. Nevertheless we cannot turn into criminals ourselves. The justice system needs to be above the cruel thirst for revenge.”

“Do you hear that rhetoric? Thirst for revenge… Have you ever thought about why the authorities thought it necessary to put that collar around Miss Maximoff’s neck? Its purpose is not to torture her, but to keep her in check.”

“To keep her in check? And you are complaining about my rhetoric?”

“An honest question, Miss Aldridge. Why do we literally put people behind iron bars when they go into prison?”

“To keep them from leaving.”

“Exactly. To keep them where they are. Iron bars are not able to hold Miss Maximoff back. She does not have the physical strength to move them, her mind can do that for her and she has shown her willingness to use her powers on multiple occasions. She can throw several cars with a little gesture of her hand and she used that ability to hurt people. Since the beginning of the justice system nobody has had to deal with a prisoner who has actual telekinesis. We don’t have the means to detain her.
Iron and steel are not going to help. They have proven to bend and to break and Wanda Maximoff has shown no remorse for using her power to physically and mentally torture other people. Is the collar the best solution? No, but what other possibilities are there? Solitary confinement? This woman is capable of breaking down any door just by looking at it and twirling her fingers. What are the authorities supposed to do? Yes, the collar does deliver electroshocks, but it’s only being set off when Miss Maximoff uses her magic."

“Which is an inhuman…”

“I’ll gladly repeat myself – what are we supposed to do? We are not dealing with a normal human being here. She could be drugged out of her mind or be put into a coma to stop her from potentially hurting people, but this would be actual inhuman treatment. Nobody is glad about this collar, but it is not a torture device. It’s life insurance for every prison guard that has to deal with Miss Maximoff. She has broken out of prison before and people got hurt. I am moved by your compassion, Miss Aldridge, but we should not be distracted by Miss Maximoff’s age or looks. She is responsible for the death of hundreds of people and the government is not willing to add a single more to the list. At this moment the collar is the only possibility to make sure nobody is going to get harmed. That’s all I have to say about this issue.”

***

The second Everett stepped out of the plane he knew that Wakanda wasn’t going to be a vacation spot for him. Instantly the heat was almost overwhelming and Everett just wanted to get out of his suit. Not possible though, one had to look impeccable when you were about to meet the monarch of an entire country.

A car was parked next to the runway to pick him up and a young woman in Wakandan attire was already waiting for him. “Mr. Everett.” She bowed her head a little and Everett returned the gesture. "My name is Okoye, I was sent to escort you to the Royal Palace.”

“Pleasure to meet you.”

The ride was quick which was a shame, because Everett enjoyed checking out his surroundings through the window. Wakandan architecture seemed very particular to him and Everett would have to talk a stroll through the city to take it all in. Everett had already seen pictures of the Royal Palace, so that surely impressive building wasn’t that much of a surprise. Also, Everett was more interested in the overall picture, not just one building that had probably been built hundreds of years ago.

Their meeting didn’t take place in a fancy room. Instead Everett was led into the garden. She was sitting in a chair, a cup of tea on the table in front of her, next to several folders that without a doubt contained official documents.

“My Queen, Agent Everett Ross.” Okoye introduced him and the queen looked up, smiling softly. Before Everett could say anything she got up to her feet and held out her hand. “Agent Ross, it’s an honour to welcome you to the court.”

“It’s me who is honoured by your invitation, your Highness.” He wasn’t sure if it was Wakandan costume to kiss somebody’s hand and it seemed too old-fashioned, so Everett took a little bow before shaking the queen’s hand.

“Sit down, have a cup of tea with me. I hope you had a pleasant flight.”

“Strangely enough, yes. It was quite pleasant. I slept most of the time, you Highness.”
“Please, call me Shuri. It seems like we have something in common. It has become way easier for me to fall asleep for a couple of weeks. Sleep is way more recreative.”

Not that much of a surprise, both of their lives had become incredibly easier after the manhunt had finally ended. Time to lean back and take a deep breath. Finally a moment without being scared that one second later there would be news about new victims. More pain, more disaster. It wasn’t completely over, but Everett’s part was done. It was the general attorney’s turn now.

Sitting down Everett poured himself a cup of tea and it was indeed delicious. The atmosphere was surprisingly relaxed and easy, so Everett thought he could ask this question immediately instead of waiting for the right moment. “I hope your brother is doing fine.”

Shuri nodded instantly. “Yes, he is still in Brussels. Our negotiations about the trade agreement with the EU are advancing nicely, I will join the talks tomorrow morning.”

Everett wouldn’t pretend that he completely understood what T’Challa’s new role at the court contained, but everybody knew that a former king wouldn’t simply be kicked out when his sister was taking over the government. Something between ambassador and advisor. They were probably going to give him some position that provided him with diplomatic immunity. Something that was desperately needed since there were now talks about also persecuting T’Challa for his role in Bucharest. Hard to do when that person had still been king.

“I know you are very busy, so thank you again for taking your time to meet me.”

“Of course, I want full cooperation between our two nations on this issue. He is a US citizen after all.”

“The president and congress agree that it’s for the best if he stays with you. Until we have found a way to break the programming.”

Everett got to finish his tea before Shuri offered him to do why he was here in the first place. He was surprised that none of the guards accompanied them, but Shuri personally led him back into the palace. “We are very grateful for the team of scientists you sent. I am convinced that our united efforts will soon come to fruition.”

His previous thoughts about security turned out to be a little bit ridiculous, since the laboratory turned out to be a highly guarded area. Five doors with finger prints, retinal scans and two armed guards just in case. Reassuring and what their nations had agreed on. Also Interpol had been very adamant about security measures. After the disaster that had happened at the Raft nobody wanted history to repeat itself. Nobody was going to take any chances, least of all the Queen of Wakanda.

Everett had wondered what he might feel at the sight of the Winter Soldier. Shock, anger, anything? Now standing in front of him Everett merely thought that it was surreal. A man turned into a weapon who looked like he was sleeping, locked away in a strange tube that made Everett think of Snow White’s coffin made of glass. Only that they weren’t looking at an innocent, young girl, but a grown man whose innocence hadn’t been proved yet.

“Any progress?”

“I’m being updated every day, but no. There were some budget cuts. Staff members were returned to the projects they had been previously working on, because I am not willing to spend all of Wakanda’s research budget on the Winter Soldier.”

Everett glanced at the queen who was standing there with her arms crossed and an uninvolved look
on her face. “Some people would call that heartless.”

An almost amused smile was Shuri’s answer to that. “I would call it reasonable. We’re not trying to find a cure for cancer here. If Barnes’ programming does get broken, he’ll still have to stand trial for what he did in Bucharest, Berlin and Leipzig… nobody has any idea if the fight against Tony Stark is going to end up in front of a jury, because you can argue that he was acting in self-defence… I don’t know. There is no excuse for Bucharest, Berlin and Leipzig, because Rogers keeps on repeating that he was himself at that moment and no danger to anyone. Who needs enemies when you have that guy as a friend?”

Huffing in response Everett turned back to the Winter Soldier. “I guess…”

“Finding a cure to the programming is important, I’ll admit that. If it should ever happen to somebody else again, we need an instant… cure. But at the moment only one person is affected and that person is very likely going to prison as soon as we wake him up. So yes, I am perfectly willing to invest the money into other research that is going to help more than one person and it’s going to do that a lot time sooner.”

A tough decision that the person in charge had to make and Everett wasn’t going to fault her for that. He wasn’t here to make sure that the Winter Soldier was being cured and put on trial. He was here to make sure that he was locked up and Berlin was never going to repeat itself. After taking in the fugitives Wakanda had been obligated to give them complete insight into their security protocols and their doors had to always stay open for inspections and even surprise visits. They got away very easy considering how stupid the King had acted. Well, it had cost him his throne and since Shuri had proven to be a fierce critic of his actions, nobody objected when she entered the political stage.

“Your offer to keep him here is nevertheless very gracious.”

“We have the means and a responsibility.” Shuri mumbled softly. “Let’s continue. You want to see the protocols?”

“Absolutely.”

***

Scott kept staring at the wall. By now he should be able to change the colour with the power of his thoughts. His eyes were starting to hurt. Green? Yes, green would definitely look good. Would the furniture have to be white? Or some lithe wood? There was no denying, Scott was definitely bad at this. It was official, he had no idea how furnish a room. One talent less.

A ring at the doorbell made Scott almost jump out of his skin. That was weird. Nobody knew his new address. Well, except for Interpol… and the FBI… and the CIA… and pretty every government agent who had ever lived. Well, they had told him that they were registering his phone calls, so why not knock on the door. Routine check-up? You’re still here, great. There was no point in letting people wait who could fuck up your entire life. Again.

Scott should be fucking grateful, so he opened the door smiling.

“Oh… wow… Now that’s a surprise.”

Hank looked unimpressed, not batting an eyelid. “Won’t you invite me in?”

“Yeah, sure.” Still completely taken aback Scott stepped aside and watched as Hank entered the apartment, instantly checking out his surroundings. It made Scott feel a little sheepish. Most of his place was still unfurnished and there were empty Thai boxes on his kitchen table… and the couch.
“Nice place you’ve got for yourself, Scott.”

Now that was just cruel. “Yes, the CIA is quite an estate agent.”

“Can we sit down somewhere?”

“Kitchen.”

Sitting down wasn’t making this situation any less uncomfortable. “What do I owe the pleasure to? Always glad to see you, Hank, but… I didn’t think I’d see you again… or that you’d be eager to visit me.”

“Let’s say I was curious. After all you’ve managed to impress me.”

That definitely didn’t make any kind of sense. “Uhm… how so?”

Leaning back Hank crossed his arms in front of his chest, like he had every single thing in the world under control. “Well, the way your six friends ended up is very different from yours, isn’t it? One has literally been put on ice. Another one is going to rot in a Russian prison, because there is no way in hell that the government is going to ask for her rendition. Four in a high security prison waiting for their trials. You are here. Being handed an apartment and a job. Somehow you always end up on your feet.”

Scott felt like he should make his case, defend his case, but Hank already knew everything. What was the point? “I realised that I made a mistake.”

“So you think it’s fair that you don’t go to prison at all? After flattening an entire airport?” Hank was raising an eyebrow and Scott ironically felt so small and useless. After Wakanda he swore to himself that he would never do anything without thinking about it first and that he would be and stay honest. “Fair? No, I don’t think it’s fair, but a very good thing happened to me and I’m not going to complain about it, because I sure as hell don’t want to go to prison again. Of course it’s not fair, I fucked up badly, but you gotta give me that I was the only one who realised how stupid that entire thing was… I came back around…”

“After stealing my suit.”

Oh… yeah, right. About that…

“You are here because you want an apology…”

Hank didn’t respond, he just kept looking at him and Scott sighed. “You’re right. I owe you an apology… and I kind of forgot about it after apologizing to Hope… which is awful… I am sorry. I had no right to run away with the suit. You didn’t give it to me to do with it whatever I wanted. I am sorry. I had no right to do what I did.”

That was the most important part, maybe it wasn’t enough for Hank and that would be alright, Scott was prepared and willing to keep asking for forgiveness for the next couple of years.

“It’s not like I don’t believe you, Scott, but you have to admit that it’s rather easy to apologize when you’re not being punished. You even got a nice apartment.” Hank kept looking around and Scott told himself to not get angry, he deserved some spite. Lots of spite. “I’ve fucked up my whole life for the second time, Hank. I’m very aware of that. Yes, I’m very glad that I’m not in prison, but that doesn’t mean that I walked away from the whole thing.”

Hank smiled and it definitely didn’t look very friendly. “You don’t go to prison. You get to work for
the government, they get you an apartment. It doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Granted, it’s kind of ironic that I’ve been trying to get a job after getting out of prison and nobody wanted me.” Scott was again working as an engineer which was what he had always wanted to do. There was no creativity, he did as he was told, mostly trying to improve security systems. It was the government’s way to try to make sure that he didn’t use his talents for bad intentions. About the apartment… yeah, they got him an apartment, but Scott was still paying rent. Like this they knew his address, where to find him at any time and they guaranteed that there would be ‘unannounced visits’. They were monitoring his phone calls and Scott’s passport had been confiscated. If he didn’t show up at work without a good excuse or if Scott dared to walk across the street, ignoring a red light, he would go directly to prison.

Everybody had been incredibly gracious. Thanks to Shuri’s intervention and support everything had happened extremely fast. They had come to an agreement and Scott had simply nodded, ready to accept any kind of punishment.

Eight years on probation and living right under Big Brother’s nose weren’t too bad. Scott knew that he was getting away easily.

Since Hank didn’t make any effort to say anything else Scott decided that he could ask some questions. “How’s Hope?”

When Hank pulled a face Scott raised his hands in a defensive gesture. “Don’t worry, I know better than to try to go down that road again… I know that I hit the jackpot when a woman like Hope would give me a chance. She’s way out of my league and I completely fucked that up. I’m not going to bother her, don’t worry. I just want to know that she’s doing alright.”

“Why don’t you ask her yourself?”

“Like I said… I don’t want to bother her. I’m pretty sure that she’s better off without me in the picture.”

That was it. Hank had wanted to hear just that, because his features suddenly softened. Just like that. “Hope is fine. She is working hard for Pym Technologies and every minute she doesn’t spend in her office, she spends at the Avengers’ compound. I guess she found her calling. She is doing fine.”

Scott nodded, not ready for the blow. “What about your daughter? Are you able to see her?”

Hadn’t this been the reason for everything? To be able to spend time with Cassie? To see her grow up. To be the father she deserved. A father she could be proud of. “Maggie doesn’t… at the moment she doesn’t want me to see Cassie. She yelled at me when I called her… I’ve never… I didn’t know somebody could be so angry. First I let Cassie believe that I would never let her down again and then… I walked out on them. Maggie made clear that she would never forgive me… There was silence for a couple of weeks and then… just a few days ago she called me and… she said that maybe we would be able to figure something out. She’ll call again when she feels ready…”

Scott really needed to buy furniture. He could leave like this for ages, but if there was a chance of seeing Cassie again, of spending time with her, maybe even here…

“I hope you’re going to work this out. You are an idiot, Scott, but you aren’t a bad person.”

Taken aback Scott gaped, not knowing what to say. Eventually he managed to stammer a few words. “Thanks, Hank… that really means a lot to me.”

Nodding softly Hank got back up. “I’ll leave you alone now.”
“Uhm… Hank… just one thing. I’ve tried to call Stark Industries, but I won’t get past the first secretary. I understand, I’m probably on some black list… Since Hope is an Avenger now and Stark Industries and Pym Technologies are working closely together… I thought that maybe Hope could get me an appointment with Stark… Just five minutes or a phone call. So I can apologize. For almost killing him, you know.”

Hank’s reaction would have been hilarious if Scott hadn’t been so nervous. For some reason Hank felt embarrassed or uncomfortable, shifting his weight from one foot to the other one and awkwardly crossing his arms in front of his chest.

“I guess I can do that…”

“Thank you. That would be great.”

When Hank left Scott felt a little lighter and looked around his still mostly empty apartment. Not good enough for Cassie yet, but it would be. This wasn’t Scott’s second chance, but his third and damn, this time everything was going to be different. Not an empty promise. People believed in him, Shuri had only made all of this possible, because she thought that he was worth it. Scott wasn’t going to disappoint her, he was going to make this count.

For Cassie.

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“Pizza Hut, he said no to Pizza Hut.”

“I can’t say I blame him. Pizza at Pizza Hut is atrocious.”

“That’s the point, Pepper. He said that’s what’s fun about it. Also it’s a small place, not a lot of people. He still refused. It’s been months, Pepper. It’s time he left the house.”

It wasn’t like Pepper didn’t agree with him, but she couldn’t find it in her to pressure Tony to leave the safety of the compound. Sure, Rhody’s concerns were totally justified. Refusing to leave the house over the course of several weeks was never a reassuring sign. Until now Pepper hadn’t even asked Tony why he didn’t want to step outside the door. She doubted heavily that he was afraid. There was nothing to be afraid of. All of them were behind bars and even before that… Tony had never been afraid of them.

Media attention was slowly declining, but Pepper could understand that Tony wanted to stay away. She would prefer him to go out and have fun, act like the reckless yet charming billionaire he had always been. It was ridiculous to believe that the events of Bucharest, Berlin, Leipzig and Siberia hadn’t changed him.

Tony was doing fine. He was designing and building new vehicles, working on ways on how to improve the prosthesis that he had created for Rhody and for other people in a similar situation.

“Of course you’re worried, but Tony is alright. I have Friday giving me updates on him and yesterday he was shooting some hoops with Dummy. He’s fine, he just doesn’t want to go out yet.” Pepper was surprised herself how convinced she was, but she had had a watchful eye on Tony during the last couple of weeks. She had seen him getting better, she had seen him smile. Sometimes it was quite simple.

There was a soft sigh at the other end of the line. “If you say so… I know you’re right…”

Pepper smiled and continued to type on her keyboard, waiting for Rhody to change the subject. She
didn’t expect the direction in which he would go.

“Wilson wrote me a letter.”

“He’s apologizing?”

“Yeah.”

“Great, then I hope that Tony got one too… and everybody else.” Pepper was tempted to roll her eyes, because she knew that there would be no letters or apologies.

“No, he wrote that he was sorry for my injury and that this fight should have never happened. He’s at least right about that.”

Frowning Pepper pulled her hands away from the keyboard and looked at the speaker that transported Rhodey’s voice. “You don’t sound… like you’re appreciating his apology.”

“Because I don’t. He can shove it where the sun don’t shine.”

Pepper had to admit that she was taken aback. What had happened to Rhodey was atrocious, but until now he had never actually blamed Wilson. Or at least he hadn’t said it out loud. “You don’t have to accept it if you…”

“It’s not about my legs, Pepper.” Rhodey sighed once again Pepper waited for the explanation that was quick to come. “That whole fight was a disaster and it could have happened to anyone. Strangely enough that’s the thing he apologizes for… not acting like a complete and dangerous idiot. He may be the worst of all of them…”

“Are you kidding? He’s Rogers’ little sidekick.”

“Pepper, you weren’t there when the accords were brought up for the first time. Rogers hadn’t even said a word yet when Wilson was already talking shit. Like the UN couldn’t boss him around… I should have called him out on that more. The guy was a soldier, he should know a thing or two about the chain of command and how important it is to have accountability. None of that, he was talking about how nobody could tell the Avengers what to do… without Rogers’ input. That is some fucking arrogance that I’m not willing to deal with. Rogers… you can at least make the case that he has no idea how the world works, because he’s been out for 70 years. Maximoff is just insane… what’s Wilson’s excuse? Nothing and I don’t think he has realised that the world isn’t just about the Avengers. Sorry, that… we should be done with this, but the letter really rubbed me the wrong way. I’m just glad that don’t have to worry about these things anymore and I’ll try to do just that.”

That would be better for everyone, but Pepper could understand that it was still hard to leave it behind them. Perhaps Tony was even doing better than all of them. “Some people are just… hopeless.”

“Right… listen, I gotta get going. Physical therapy. Sorry that I started ranting on the phone… and you’re sure I shouldn’t drag Tony out of the house?”

Laughing softly Pepper shook her head. “No, give it another month. Then we can talk about it again.”

“Okay, you have a deal. See you tomorrow?”

“Sure. Take care, Rhodey.”
Hanging up Pepper checked her watch, realising that she still had half an hour left till her next appointment. 15 minutes later Pepper’s PA called her, telling her that “Mr. Parker has arrived”.

A little bit early, but it wasn’t like Pepper hadn’t expected him to nervous and eager. “Alright, send him in, please.”

“Miss Potts, hey. Sorry for being too early, I can still wait a couple of minutes outside if you’re still busy. I don’t…”

“It’s perfectly fine, Mr. Parker. Better too soon than too late. Welcome to Stark Industries. Ready to start your internship?”

His eyes seemed to be too big for his face and they were sparkling. It made Pepper feel content to make a young man so happy just by giving him the opportunity to work in a field that he loved. Well, technically Tony had arranged everything, but Pepper had agreed to take the kid under her wing. Tony hadn’t given away any details and Pepper hadn’t asked, both of them pretending that she didn’t know why Peter was special. This way it was easier and safer for everybody. Especially for Peter.

“Yes, I can’t wait! But you really don’t have to guide me around personally. You’re the CEO, I’m sure you have better and more important things to do. Just tell me where I…”

“Rule number one – talk slower. Make pauses between the sentences. That will help people to understand you.” Smiling at him Pepper got up from behind her desk. “Rule number two – listen carefully and take notes. I don’t like repeating myself and there is a lot for you to learn. I hope you brought something to write.”

Instantly Peter showed the little notepad in his hand and Pepper smiled contently. “Then let’s get going.”

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“You just move one finger and you will be subdued.”

The message had been clear and very simple. Steve wasn’t going to make a fuss. He hadn’t caused any trouble since the day they had arrested him. Not that it seemed to impress anybody. The guards had a certain way of looking at him. Steve had seen it before. In the faces of the kids and the people in that little town.

Hatred wasn’t something new. Hydra agents had always hated him and they had gladly showed it to him. Because he had been in their way, somebody they had to crush or he would crush them.

Those had been ordinary citizens. These were prison guards. They weren’t working for some grand, evil organisation. At the end of the day they were only doing their job, they weren’t giving a damn about him personally. Or they didn’t have to.

Yet they hated him. Too many of them.

Steve shifted on the hard metal chair that was bolted to the ground. His cuffs had been fixed to the also metallic table. Most probably vibranium. Until now Steve hadn’t made an attempt to get free and he wouldn’t.

What had running away made better? Nothing. At the moment Steve didn’t even know what had happened to his friends. In prison. Sure, his lawyer had told him as much. But were they fine? Was
Bucky still in Wakanda…

The guard moved and Steve received another one of these looks. Move and we will hurt you. Again Steve had no idea what to expect. Definitely not a heavily pregnant woman entering the interrogation room. Her eyes instantly met Steve’s and there was something about them. Something stoic that Steve didn’t have a word for.

After slowly sitting down she kept looking at Steve, completely ignoring the two guards standing behind her. “Do you know who I am Mr. Rogers?”

“Yes, I saw you on TV a couple of weeks ago… I’m sorry I don’t remember your name.”

She slowly nodded. “My name is Sophie Müller and I guess it’s alright that you don’t remember my name. My life didn’t have any influence on yours… but you’ve influenced my life quite a bit. You put me in two different roles that I’ve never thought I’d find myself in. A widow and a single-mother.”

The cuffs could have vanished that exact moment, Steve wouldn’t have been able to move. Her eyes were perfectly clear, Sophie was a beautiful woman and Steve was searching for the same look he had seen in the eyes of the mother of this little boy. It wasn’t there and Steve didn’t know how to react.

No actual hostility, but pain and Sophie made no attempt to hide or to conceal it. The last time there had been a fight and Steve hadn’t had to look at it. Now there was no way to flee from this confrontation. “… I am sorry that you’ve lost your husband… I’ve never had the intention to hurt or to kill anyone.”

“And yet people were hurt and killed.” Sophie stated softly. One of her hands was resting on her belly and Steve couldn’t stop staring at it. “My husband was only one of them. I don’t know what you are thinking right now, Mr. Rogers, but I’m not here to yell or to scream. Not even to cry. Last weeks I told the doctors to switch off the machines that kept my husband alive. I have no more tears to shed. I don’t even want you to explain anything to me. I’m not seeking to understand. I’m here because I am hoping that I can help you to understand.”

Understand? Steve was already running against walls.

“Mrs. Müller, I’m sorry that you lost your husband… and that I had a hand in…”

“Either you or Sergeant Barnes killed him. I am German, Mr. Rogers. We do not like nice metaphors.”

Steve was tempted to close his eyes, to escape this moment for just a second. To gather his thoughts, to figure out what to say. What was there to say? This woman was right. Steve didn’t know if it had been him or Bucky, but one of them had killed her husband. The father of her unborn child.

Sophie Müller was probably going to be a good mother. By her posture and her speech Steve could tell that she was strong and tough, she was going to protect her child and make sure that it would always be cared for. Happy.

Nevertheless the child would never meet his father. Steve and Bucky had robbed him or her of that. They had ruined a life before it had even started. Ruined… It could still be a happy life… a loving mother, lots of friends, going to college, getting married, finding a good job, having kids…

All of that was still possible. But there would never be a father…
Bucky had killed Tony’s father…

“I know that this is probably going to mean very little to you… if anything at all, but it wasn’t… I was trying to protect Sergeant Barnes after the task force has been sent out to kill him.”

“The Winter Soldier.”

“His name is James Barnes.”

“That’s the name you know him under. The rest of the world knows him as the Winter Soldier. A killer that has been running free for over fifty years. Killing how many people? Over a hundred? Are these false information, Mr. Rogers? Correct me if I’m wrong.”

Steve bit it lip. It was so hard that they were all just seeing that one thing. “No, it’s true, but he was brainwashed. None of that was his own free will.”

“I am well aware… Now. After the entire story has become public. When the UN building in Vienna went up into flames, nobody knew about that. Because you decided to keep quiet. An enhanced terrorist with so much blood on his hands… people weren’t going to take any more risks. A task force was sent out, so no more innocent people were going to die.”

“He wasn’t responsible for the bombing and he was forced to kill…”

“I am sorry to hear about his fate, but he killed nonetheless and nobody… Not the government, not the UN, not Interpol and as far as I know… not even the Avengers knew that the mind control had been broken. A man with unlimited strength, highly skilled with all kinds of weapons, seemingly immortal and known for mercilessly killing his victims. Do you really not see why a task force would be sent out to kill him? Which they didn’t… even when they had the chance.”

Balling his hands into fists Steve wished he didn’t have to listen to this. “He is more than that. He is my best friend and I knew that he wasn’t involved in the bombing… Mrs. Müller, you may think that I’m selfish and… you’re probably right. To me, James Barnes is family… the only family I have left and I needed to help him. I couldn’t… I couldn’t stand by.”

Maybe he was pleading her. Steve felt like he was pleading. What for? Forgiveness? Understanding?

Sophie Müller kept looking at him, she wouldn’t do him the favour to lower her eyes and Steve was getting desperate. “Wouldn’t you do everything to protect your child?”

“You mean if I were willing to kill somebody? If that somebody was threatening my child’s life and in that exact moment I didn’t have any other way to stop them… yes.” She was speaking very slowly, taking her time. “What would I do if it was my child holding a gun to somebody’s head? Or somebody telling me that the only way of saving my child’s life would be to kill 10 random people in the streets? Would you find it morally acceptable if I killed them because I am a mother? Because I am supposed to love unconditionally. Is the life of my child supposed to outweigh the importance, the worth of any other life?”

What was Steve supposed to say? Bucky and him… they had always looked out for each other. Until Steve had let him fall. Bucky had saved him after the Helicarrier had crashed. Steve couldn’t let him down again.

“I couldn’t let him die…”

“You are right, Mr. Rogers. I do think that you are selfish… at other people’s expanse. Including Sergeant Barnes.”
“You wanted to protect the last member of your family... the last person who you knew before you went in the ice... Both of you, you are over 90 years old. If Hydra and military hadn’t played with the laws of nature both of you would already be dead. You were given a new life, but you can’t let go of the old one and put Barnes’ life before everybody else’s. A man who officially died during the Second World War. Who died a hero’s death. After hearing what Hydra has done to him, I think it’s fair to assume that the man you knew really did die that day. He has no family left. Everybody who knew him, friends, colleagues, girlfriends, all long dead. Nobody to come home to... there is only you... and even after you saved him... he voluntarily chose to go to sleep, because he is still a danger to everybody around him. I don’t deny that his life has been robbed from him. That it was tragic and painful... but the men and women who died in Bucharest had families, friends, children. They had lives and every single one of them was a person that had somebody who would be willing to kill for them...” She made a short pause before continuing. “As I’ve said before... the task force didn’t kill your friend. A phone call would have probably sufficed. You could have helped in some way. Come there with the agents, with the Avengers, bring in the UN. You weren’t just anybody, you had a name, you could have helped... One of your friends back then is one of the most powerful people on the globe... No agent would have died. The tunnel wouldn’t have collapsed and at the end of the day Sergeant Barnes would still be in the same position as he is now. Because he is still dangerous and you did nothing to help him.”

Sophie’s unforgiving gaze wouldn’t leave him and Steve felt the tears making their way down his cheeks.

***

“I’m too hot.”

*Hot damn*

Tony was supposed to tighten the screws, but they were getting to the real good part of the song. Not possible to stand still. Twirling the screwdriver between his fingers Tony took a step back from the open hood.

*Called a police and a fireman*

“I’m too hot”

*Hot damn*

*Make a dragon wanna retire man*

“I’m too hot”

*Hot damn*

*Say my name you know who I am*

“I’m too hot... Come on, Dummy, join in on the fun.” Pointing the screwdriver at Dummy only got him a blink as a reaction, so Tony shrugged and turned back around, almost doing a little pirouette.

*Hot damn*

*Am I bad 'bout that money, break it down*
That was an even better part of the song, the screwdriver wasn’t enough. So Tony grabbed a pincer, softly drumming them against the hood. Screw the scratches, he’d even them out later.

„Girls hit your hallelujah“

_Girls hit your hallelujah_

_Girls hit your hallelujah_

“Come on, Dummy! You can’t let me do this alone!”

The rhythm was taking off and Tony’s moves were putting professional dancers to shame.

’Cause uptown funk gon’ give it to you

’Cause uptown funk gon’ give it to you

’Cause uptown funk gon’ give it to you

_Saturday night and we in the spot_

Now it was time for the big solo and Tony gladly used the screwdriver as his microphone. “Don’t believe me, just watch!”

His moves ended abruptly when Tony did another little spin and had to find out that he was already being watched and judging by Hope’s expression, she really didn’t believe what she was seeing.

Ahh, whatever…

“Do I hear a little sarcasm? My voice is amazing.” Tony waved about with both the pincer and the screwdriver to emphasise what he had been saying. Hope chuckled in response. “Friday, turn down the music a little bit, please?”

“Boss?”

“You heard the lady.” Putting down his tools Tony made himself comfortable on the only chair in the garage / workshop. “What gives me the honour of your visit?”

Hope was so obviously in a good mood, her features were relaxed and soft. Tony’s performance could do miracles. “You didn’t blow up anything in over a week. I was worried that something might be wrong.”

“Yeah, I got bored and went back to working on cars. Hey, you want a new one? Fancy or elegant? What colour… don’t say anything… blue with silver highlights.”

That was going to look amazing, so there was no reason for Hope’s eyebrows to shoot up that high. “Blue? I thought you’d immediately go for black and yellow stripes.”

“Do you want an awesome ride or a crime against mankind? The entire wasp theme is ridiculous. Friday can give your suit a new paintjob anytime.”
“Stop criticising the suit… it’s flawless. Okay, you’re not blowing anything up which is good. Have you had lunch yet?”

It was already midday? Tony checked his watch and was surprised to find out that it was already past 2 o’clock. Huh. “Nope… I think it’s a good day for Chinese. You want some?”

“Sure.”

“Great, just tell Friday what you want and we’ll…”

“No, not a chance.” Hope was cutting him off, shaking her head. “Enough delivery service. We’re going out. I know a great place not too far away from here.”

That was surprising. Had Rhodey asked her to drag him out of the house? Perhaps. Hope didn’t put on velvet gloves when she was dealing with Tony. “Eating at home is so much more comfortable.”

“Tony…” Now she was crossing her arms in front of her chest, giving him that strict stare which meant that he was going to lose anyway. Or at least she thought that. “Rhodey, Pepper, Vision and the Spiderling are too nice to point that so, but I’ll gladly do it. You haven’t seen the sun in weeks, you’re starting to look like a vampire. Not like the charming, attractive ones from back when vampires were still amazing. More like a sparkling one that jumped out of a bad movie made for teenagers.”

“Wow…” Tony brought one hand up to his chest, covering his heart to show how badly she had just hurt him. “That was mean, van Dyne. Really mean. Everybody is always saying that the sun makes you age so much faster. I’m just looking out for myself.”

“Believe it or not, I’m doing the very same thing.” Slowly Hope walked over, then leaned against the side of the car Tony had been working on. Before the dance routine. “We’re going out and you don’t get a say in that.”

Putting on his old smirk Tony winked at her. “Van Dyne, if you’re that eager to go on a date with me, that can be arranged. No need to drag me out of the house for that.”

A cheeky, somewhat flirty remark had always been enough to throw most women off their game. It had even worked on Pepper. Not so much with Hope. Her expression remained soft, but turned a bit more serious. “I am old-fashioned. I’d like to be picked up at my place, but I’m already here and it’s not evening yet… guess you’ll have to take me out to lunch.”

Tony blinked, opened his mouth to respond with another witty remark, only to find out that he had run out of them. “That might not be a good idea…”

“Now that was very mean, Mr. Stark.”

“No, I didn’t mean…” Sighing Tony looked up at the ceiling, knowing that Hope’s eyes hadn’t left him. She wasn’t going to let him off the hook, she never did and maybe Tony didn’t want her to. “It’s not going outside… or the sun, I’m not vampire and not that much into biting. It’s other people. I can deal with the ones who come in here… Pepper, Happy, Vision, Rhodey, the Spiderling…” Tony lowered his eyes again, meeting Hope’s. “… you. But outside there are other people who watch the news and read the newspaper. I can’t believe that I’m saying this, but… I’m not very keen on being stared at… It’s okay when people do that because I’m so awesome or because I’m in the company of a beautiful woman… I don’t want to be stared at because people know what happened in Siberia.”

“Tony… you can’t stay inside the house forever and…” Another smile ghosted over her lips and
Tony thought that it was beautiful. “… hate to break it to you, but people are always going to stare. Yes, because of what happened in Siberia and because you are Tony Stark. It’s probably going to be… ugly the first couple of times, but it’s not going to stay like that forever. You’ve realised that your life doesn’t only revolve about what happened during the Civil War and everybody else is going to realise that too. You gotta start sometime…”

God, Tony hated it when other people were right.

“Okay… yeah, makes sense… but I’d still like to not start with a highly frequented Chinese restaurant.”

Hope shrugged, but the smile on her lips was anything but nonchalant. Right now she didn’t look like she would break Tony’s nose. “I see… how about a walk in the park?”

Yes, that sounded about right.

Fin

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