Debts

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Debts

by d_aia

Summary

Later, T'Challa would remember it like a blur. He couldn’t say if he screamed or not, nor if he gestured. He did remember running, and the awful realization that, though he tried with all his might, he wouldn’t make it in time. The helplessness he felt, that shiver of it, was something that was shocking in its darkness, because for all that T'Challa had fought, for all he had struggled, for all he had learned, and for all he had gained, he was still too slow.

BOOM. Just that. A thunderous boom and T'Challa's world changed.

* *

In which Tony saves T'Chaka, T'Challa is grateful, and they both are all the better for it.

Notes
Disclaimer: I do not own the movie (and characters, locations, personal histories etc as are shown in it). This is the work of fanfiction.

Warnings: Mentions of Addiction; Cancer; Brain Tumor;

Thanks and acknowledgments: A big 'thank you' to Oky_Verlo and Lex, for their support, patience, and cheerleading! Thank you, guys!

Updates: At the beginning of the week (Mon -Tue), and the end of work week (Thu - Sat).

A/N: Firstly, please know that PeaceHeather's fic is a big spoiler. That being said, you should definitely read it at some point, or anything that she's written, because she's amazing! Secondly, since we are talking about amazing writers, we definitely have to talk about Oky_Verlo. I borrowed some ideas, on some things we agreed, but mostly, Oky_Verlo has some of the cutest, most adorable prompts known to any fandom, and especially IronPanther. Thirdly, I read up on Wakanda, but I wanted something else, so I basically built another world inspired by some of the things I read. Sorry to those that expected it to be like in the comics! Fourthly, I don't agree with Steve, but I'm not bashing him, just treating him like any other person. Remember, please, that this fic isn't about him. Fifthly, I'm going to have some Italian later on, and I don't know the language. Help, please!

See the end of the work for more notes

- Inspired by IronPanther Collection, by Oky_Verlo
- Inspired by Castaway Getaway by PeaceHeather
Chapter 1

Later, T’Challa would remember it like a blur. He couldn’t say if he screamed or not, nor if he gestured. He did remember running, and the awful realization that, though he tried with all his might, he wouldn’t make it in time. The helplessness he felt, that shiver of it, was something that was shocking in its darkness, because for all that T’Challa had fought, for all he had struggled, for all he had learned, and for all he had gained, he was still too slow.

*BOOM.* Just that. A thunderous boom and T’Challa's world changed.

T’Challa was carelessly tossed by the blast, in the opposite direction he was running. It felt careless, like a second thought, or at least he perceived it as such. The Black Panther would land on his feet, of that there could be no doubt, but what of his father? His father. T’Challa felt cold.

He rolled to his feet, wanting to see for himself, and at the same time dreading it. Taking a deep breath, preparing for the worst, still unclear if he’d be able to handle it, he blinked dust out of his eyes and looked. He frowned, not understanding. There, in his father’s place, stood Iron Man.

Where was his father? He clearly remembered looking at his father on the speaker’s podium. He could describe his exact expression; he could repeat his last word. His father didn’t have time to get away. Did Iron Man have something to do with the explosion? What was going on?

T’Challa took a running leap towards the last place he saw his father.

“Highness,” a weak voice croaked.

T’Challa didn’t have time for it. He headed for Iron Man. Dimly he heard crying, groaning, coughing, and screaming. It, too, was far away.

“Hold on, he might be injured,” the voice said, and this time T’Challa recognized it as Tony Stark’s, and T’Challa paused, confused. “The suit protects him right now, keeps pressure on any lacerations or on any broken bones. It’s better if we wait for the EMTs.”

Stark’s voice, now that the ringing in his ears became more manageable, was not coming from the suit. But how? And why?

The suit.

It was a suit. A resistant, metal suit. A suit in which anybody could become incased. Even his… Dare he hope?

T’Challa looked around the room, searching desperately for Tony Stark's familiar figure, so he might get some answers. In itself, the fact that T’Challa needed to search for Mr. Stark and couldn’t simply follow his voice, was telling. Resolved to focus better, T’Challa finally found him. He had a bloody gash above his eye, his expensive suit was rumpled, and he was gingerly supporting his weight on a nearby wall, but his eyes were bright and alert. He was thumbing his watch, before he looked down at it.

“What, if anything, do know of his condition?” T’Challa asked brusquely.

“Fry, out loud please,” Stark said with a small understanding smile.

“His Majesty is in good health,” a woman’s voice said. T’Challa exhaled, feeling almost sick with
relief. The woman—Fry?—continued, “He is alive, and none of his organs have been damaged. His ulna is broken, as is his tibia in two places. He has several small lacerations on his arms and legs.” T’Challa took a shaky deep breath, and went on listening. “The damage occurred during the blast, when the prioritization of his torso and head that’s programmed in the suit made it impossible for it to cover the area in time. He is currently conscious, though in considerable pain. Would like me to open the faceplate?”

“Yes,” T’Challa ordered, though he distantly realized he wasn’t in the position to order anything to Stark. The man who saved his father. Could it be? T’Challa needed to see it to believe it.

“You heard him,” Stark said, small, reassuring smile in place.

As the Panther God was his witness, if what had been said was true, T’Challa owed Stark a huge debt.

The plate opened, and his father’s face came into view. T’Chaka was his usual calm self, a few beads of sweat were the only thing that betrayed the pain Fry mentioned. Knowing him, he was keeping it at bay with meditation. T’Challa should let him get back to it. And he would, in a minute.

“Father,” T’Challa said, and his voice had never sounded more like a prayer when saying the word as it did then. He spoke slowly in his mother tongue, expressing his immense joy and relief at seeing his father alive. “I’m glad you are yet with us,” he finished, the last Wakandan word trembling in the air, before fading.

“I too am glad,” his father said, and smiled, before switching to English. “And I am thankful and indebted to Mr. Stark, for the promptness of his answer.”

“We all are,” T’Challa agreed, and turned.

Stark wasn’t there anymore. T’Challa frowned, and scanned the room. It hit him suddenly, that there were more victims. The sounds of pain and horror made themselves known to him once again. And with them, the understanding that they had been attacked, and there were people in need of aid. Which was what Stark—Mr. Stark—was doing. A wave of shame, though not of regret, hit T’Challa. He looked towards his father, who was regarding him with kind eyes, and asked for his permission. T’Challa received it in the form of a tacit nod, and with a last, lingering gaze on the father he almost lost, he headed towards Mr. Stark.

T’Challa reached Mr. Stark in time to prevent the woman he was helping from falling.

“It seems you were right, Mr. Stark,” the woman said, and sighed. She had strips of Mr. Stark’s shirt as bandages for a head wound. Blood was slowly sweeping through. “I wasn’t quite ready to stand.” She patted T’Challa arm. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

“You’re going to be fine, Dr. Fonce,” Mr. Stark assured, and helped her sit down, propped against a wall.

Dr. Fonce rolled her eyes. She stopped halfway through and winced. “That was a long time ago, Dr. Stark.” She smiled. “I’m a representative now. I rarely have to time to dabble in biochemistry and less to entertain new ideas.”

Doctor Stark?! T’Challa was startled, but not completely taken aback. Of course, Mr. Stark was a genius, but he obviously did not like people to be reminded about his PhD—or PhDs?—when addressing him. Whether that was because he was modest, he didn’t give it much importance, or he wanted other people to underestimate him, one thing was certain, there was more to Mr. Stark than
met the eye.

Mr. Stark brightened. “If you can say all that without stuttering, you'll be just fine.” He winked.
“How’s your daughter?”

Before Fonce could answer, two doctors with the UN insignia, as well as ten security agents came in. By the time the first security agent reached them more were on their way. Mr. Stark stumbled into an upright position, and nodded to the security agent.

“Go right this way, sir,” Gruber, at least according to his uniform, said calmly.

“Sure, right away,” Mr. Stark agreed. “If it helps, according to the public plans for the building, factoring in the approximate speed and the power of the explosion, it shouldn’t have done any real harm to the integrity building, so everybody should be safe. At least until everyone’s out. Be careful, anyway.”

“Thank you, sir,” Gruber said. “We’ll be careful.”

“Fry,” Mr. Stark said, and suddenly the suit was aloft. It followed Mr. Stark down the hallway, gliding gently.

With Gruber supporting Fonce, T'Challa walked side-by-side with Mr. Stark. T'Challa hesitated in offering his help. He knew it was the sort of custom that differed from person to person, and T'Challa didn’t want to offend Mr. Stark, but he did step closer. When Mr. Stark looked at him questioningly, T'Challa offered his arm. Mr. Stark chuckled and took it.

“Thank you,” T'Challa began. “Wakanda owes you for saving her king, King T’Chaka owes you for saving his life, and I owe you personally for saving my king and father when I could not.”

“Whoa there,” Mr. Stark laughed. “You don’t owe me anything. In fact, nobody owes me anything, but especially you.” He turned to T'Challa, brown eyes sparkling, giving him a playful look.

“Around the time of the explosion my eyes landed on a very handsome man. You see, I am known to be easily distracted when I have to listen to speeches; no offense your esteemed father, it seemed like he was sincere, but I usually do more than one thing at a time. And this guy was a knock-out. Absolutely gorgeous.” Mr. Stark smirked at T'Challa removing all doubt as to who he was referring.

“When the man looked scared for his father, I called the suit to protect him.”

T'Challa was a bit surprised by Mr. Stark's declaration, not many people would admit to even half of that, and it took a few seconds for him to say, “Regardless.”

“No way,” Mr. Stark said and snorted. “I didn’t save your father, you did. Wakanda owes you. Your king and father owe you. You, personally, owe you. No need to put me in the middle. Take responsibility for your actions.” Mr. Stark slapped him lightly on the shoulder, and walked forward, back straight, without any help.

While they were talking, they had reached the doors exiting the building, where the press had already gathered. T'Challa blinked. He was aware of his surroundings, of course he was, but to him the journalists were not as important as a sniper, suspiciously placed people, or another sign of attack. However, the presence of the media was clearly relevant to Mr. Stark. T'Challa wondered if that was one of Mr. Stark's eccentricities, or if that was the way T'Challa himself would behave once several years had passed since Wakanda had rejoined the world.

Nonetheless, T'Challa would not let himself fall for a misdirection. He did not know Mr. Stark’s reason for shying away gratitude as he did not seem to be type to be easily overwhelmed, but he
obviously didn’t want to be reminded of what he’d done. That was fine; T’Challa only needed to say it once. All that was left was going about paying his debt.

By the time T’Challa reached them with his father, Fonce was already foisted on two EMS personnel, Gruber had been on his way back into the building, but was stopped by the firefighters who were heading in the same direction, the police had cordoned the surroundings off, and Mr. Stark was trying to explain T’Chaka’s situation to another pair of EMS personnel who seemed out of their depths. It probably wasn’t helped by Mr. Stark having another conversation with a Fire Captain. It was an admirable reaction time, but no matter how well trained, the most T’Challa could expect was controlled chaos, and he needed to make sure that neither his father, nor Mr. Stark, would be a victim of some unfortunate mistake.

“Pardon me,” T’Challa said, interrupting the activity surrounding Mr. Stark. “What seems to be the problem?”

That seemed to aim their attention on him, and both the closest medical personnel and the Captain started talking at the same time. Mr. Stark smiled mischievously, and held his tongue, taking a small step to the side, wordlessly backing away from the conversation. But he didn’t take his eyes off T’Challa, and to be the focus of his undivided attention made deciphering what was being said harder than usual. T’Challa was familiar with the sensation of another predator evaluating him. It was finally a familiar feeling during a day filled with events that he could not change; he couldn’t even alter. He took comfort in the knowing the dangers the challenge posed, so he straightened, gathered his wits, and focused. Mr. Stark would not smell weakness. T’Challa would persevere.

“I understand that you want the opinion of an engineer,” T’Challa told the Captain. “It is advisable that you should find one who did not take part in the incident. I am sure you have perfectly qualified men. In the meantime, Mr. Stark’s opinion is that the building is more or less intact, but, in order to be certain, a second opinion is recommended, since that engineer would probably not be suffering from a recent head wound. As to the data Mr. Stark has in his possession he could upload it easily to your server and he would be freed to receive medical attention.” He kept his voice calm, and he didn’t glare, but he was firm.

Mr. Stark’s smile widened.

“I understand that your EMS system is physician oriented and that you have the necessary training to make sure that my father is in stable condition,” T’Challa said. “However, it also my understanding that he is in such condition, with the possible exception of sedation, and that his getting out of the suit might endanger him as the metal acts like a tourniquet. It might be better if it was done at the near an operating room, leaving the hospital as the preferred option. In the meantime, perhaps you can check over Mr. Stark so we can go.”

“What he said,” Mr. Stark offered, looking amused.

After that, events started unfolding smoothly. Mr. Stark got the green light in about ten minutes. He received four stitches for his head wound, had severely sprained an ankle, bruised a couple of ribs, and had a light concussion. Mr. Stark refused brain imaging, but reported no brain bleeds as scanned by his tech.

While Mr. Stark was with the EMS T’Challa instructed the Dora Milaje to protect their King, secure the ambulance, and prepare to accompany them to the hospital. He also attached six cameras to the ambulance, four to the upper corners, one to the back, and one to the front. He verified that they were transmitting to his tablet, and made his way around vehicle just as Mr. Stark was directing Fry to get his father inside, with the Doras hovering tensely around them. In truth, the Doras had had a tough day, and had received the same slap T’Challa did. Their King had been in danger, and they
had been caught unawares, so they were more determined than ever to be vigilant.

“He could only be safer encased in vibranium,” Mr. Stark observed. “And vibranium doesn’t breathe as well.”

Teela didn’t comment, which seemed to be what Mr. Stark was expecting, and offered her arm when it was his turn to climb in.

“Thank you,” Mr. Stark said, taken aback.

At first, T’Challa thought that Mr. Stark’s behavior was based upon discrimination, the fact that Teela was a woman. He wouldn’t be the first. Though that made little sense when T’Challa considered that Ms. Potts was the CEO of Stark Industries, and was personally chosen by Mr. Stark. That meant that his surprise lay elsewhere.

“I find your change of heart incredible,” Mr. Stark said, while he continued watching Teela suspiciously.

Ah, it was due to the slight animosity between Wakanda and the Starks. Mr. Stark had admitted his mistake, apologized for it, tried to protect as many people as possible, sent relief, and offered recompense. He did the best he could, and it was a lot better than Wakanda expected, especially considering their experience with foreigners. They were more weary than anything else. As for Howard Stark and his vibranium theft, it did add to the weariness, but it was mostly an issue that had ended with his death.

“You saved our king—I” Teela began, but was interrupted by an exasperated, or frustrated, Mr. Stark.

“That’s enough of that. I got the highlights from the good son over there,” Mr. Stark said, and gestured vaguely to T’Challa.

“Boss, Ms. Romanoff asks if you are alright,” Fry said.

“Tell her I'm in pristine condition, and ask her if she's still in one fiery piece,” Mr. Stark mumbled and by-passed Teela’s hand, before climbing in the ambulance. He stopped after he was in, and addressed Teela, “By my calculations, you should still hate me. Friendly advice? Go back to that.” He sat down, flicking the watch, and activating a hologram.

T’Challa clasped Teela’s shoulder before getting in the ambulance. It was an assurance, both that she had his trust, and that he would try to solve the issue with Mr. Stark. She nodded, and closed the door, while T’Challa took the tablet to keep an eye on the road.

“You saved our king—l” Teela began, but was interrupted by an exasperated, or frustrated, Mr. Stark.

“The tablet? Yes,” T’Challa answered without taking his eyes off it. “The cameras, too.”

“Finding out that my tech is used by the Royal Family of the most technologically advanced country in the world does things to my ego.”

T’Challa’s eyes flickered to Mr. Stark long enough to see his dramatic rendering of someone who was impressed. He didn’t have a real reason for it because everything that Stark Industries put on the market was the best, and he definitely knew it. Why, then, would he act like that?

“Wakanda is the most technologically advanced country not only because it produces the best technology, but because most citizens have the best tech.”
“Wouldn’t that make you the richest country?” Mr. Stark asked wryly.

“We are that, too. And the most socially advanced one.”

“That sounds perfect.”

T’Challa glanced at Mr. Stark. “Too perfect?”

Something dinged, and T’Challa tensed.

“It’s me, Your Jumpiness.” Mr. Stark got his phone, two bars that extended vertically connected with a flexible screen, out of his pocket. “What can I say? I’m old school… I like imperfections for anything that includes people. It makes things real.” He pressed on a red alert.

“Once the weaknesses are known they can be avoided, worked around, covered, or even transformed into strength,” T’Challa agreed. “However, consider this: Wakanda is the best compared to other countries, but we have our own problems.”

“Now that makes me feel better.”

They made eye contact: Mr. Stark smirked, and T’Challa’s lips twitched into a slight smile.

Mr. Stark looked down, and his smirk froze. “Shit,” he whispered.

T’Challa turned to first to T’Chaka. He was fine, lightly sedated, and aware. They frowned at each other.

“What seems to be the problem?” T’Challa asked.

“I’ve got the results of the facial recognition,” Mr. Stark said. He seemed shaken. “The attacker is Cap’s friend—Bucky.” He looked up, and explained, “Steve Rogers and James ‘Bucky’ Barnes, they were best buddies during the Second World War. They were both presumed dead, but whereas one had a super duper serum, the other was a regular human.” He paused. “Or not so much.”

The situation could become complicated if Mr. Stark was emotionally involved.

“Is this going to be a problem for you?”

Mr. Stark chuckled. “Just a huge, blonde one.”

“The Captain.”

“I’ll deal with it,” Mr. Stark said, but he was tense. “You’ve got other things to worry about.” He glanced at T’Chaka.

“I do have many responsibilities, but one of them is finding the attacker.”

“Since you made such a big deal of it, I figured your father and/or king is the most important one,” Mr. Stark said brightly.

T’Challa nodded calmly. “And his continued safety must be assured.”

“It will be.”

They glared at each other, plastic smiles on both their faces.
“What do you fear?” T’Challa asked outright.

“Uncontrollable variables,” Mr. Stark said, putting his cards on the table. “What about you?”

“Incapable, or unwilling people on the search for this man,” T’Challa answered in kind. He paused, hesitating. “Not getting all the information.”

Mr. Stark smirked, inclining his head, and T’Challa knew it was as close to an admission as he was going to get.

“What are you offering?” Mr. Stark asked bluntly.

“I cannot tactically analyze a situation I do not know,” T’Challa defended.

“C’mon, you’re still going to get involved regardless of the amount information you have.”

“Then help me not make a mistake.”

“How about you offer me something, and I’ll think about it,” Mr. Stark shot back.

T’Challa smiled. He would be lying if he said he wasn’t entertained by the rapid fire negotiation. “I offer you something, Mr. Stark, and information is what I’ll get. No uncertainty about it.”

“Yes, uncertainty,” Mr. Stark replied. “How do I know you even have something to offer?”

“You have the chance to know a variable.”

“Do I?”

T’Challa realized he got closer to Mr. Stark then he intended.

“Sure you do.”

Mr. Stark studied him, effectively stopping the conversation.

“What were we arguing about?” he asked airily.

“About telling me the whole story,” T’Challa said suspiciously.

“Oh. I thought I was asking what you were offering.” Mr. Stark rolled his eyes. “I even thought you answered me: knowing that you are one of the variables. But, you see, there’s no point in finding out the label of the variable, if it’s uncontrollable. There’s no use in knowing that you’re going to be there, if I don’t also know how you’re going to behave. And it only increases the number of possible combinations. Long story short, there’s nothing you could offer me.” He watched T’Challa in silence. “Except you leaving this to me.”

“That’s not going to happen, Mr. Stark.”

Mr. Stark waved a hand. “Tony, please.”

T’Challa nodded, easily accepting what was asked. “It’s not going to change my answer, Tony. But please, call me T’Challa.”

“T’Challa, I like my nicknames.”

“I figured.”
“Okay, damage control: what are we talking about here?”

“The way I see it, if you could give me an accurate depiction of the whole picture, I would do my best to bring them alive without collateral victims,” T’Challa proposed.

Mr. Sta—Tony sighed. “What’s your opinion is on impossibility?” He smiled, but it seemed pained. “Steve didn’t sign the Accords because he didn’t like the choice or the responsibility for the team’s actions be in other hands. Also, he might have noticed that people have agendas.”

T’Challa was taken aback. “He chose the ostrich’s example. I cannot say we’re unfamiliar with not wanting to hear what nonsense the world sprouts, and we had our own country—our home—to see to, but even us gave it up eventually. He must know that he cannot do that indeterminately. Today, tomorrow, or next year, his willful ignorance of the facts would catch up with him until not even his fame will be enough to cover his mistakes. The world is a cold place if don’t have a home.”

M—Tony looked at the picture again. “What if a person is his home?”

T’Chaka let out a heavy exhale. It drew T’Challa’s attention, and they made eye contact. As they were expecting, the re-entry was difficult. Perhaps they hadn’t planned for this, but they knew it would be strenuous. Remembering all those long talks he had with his father gave him comfort as if it was expected, and so, still under control.

“The Captain will not stop,” T’Challa said.

“Would you?”

* 

There were no complications at the hospital, T’Chaka’s treatment went according to plan, and he was in surgery. The Doras had secured the hospital, and he had run background checks on the medical personnel. Everything checked out. Tony had decided to stay put until he found out the results of the operation, and was outside coordinating with his relief organization, and the authorities.

All was good when T’Challa received a message concerning the whereabouts of the attacker.

“The CIA is as leak-proof as always,” Tony said as he walked in the waiting room.

“It is concerning,” T’Challa agreed.

There was a pause in which they both regarded the door used by the nurse to bring news of how the surgery developed.

“You can stay with your father,” Tony wheedled.

“I cannot,” T’Challa said. “It is my duty. Especially if it can lead to avoiding someone getting hurt, or losing their lives.”

“There’s no shortage of super-humans and heroes,” Tony said, his voice becoming odd on the last word.

“The same thing applies to you.”

“It does,” Tony admitted.

T’Challa stopped his next words, surprised.
“I’m not going,” Tony said. “The victims are here, and I’m staying with them.”

T’Challa frowned.

“At least until the police has everything under control.” Tony looked down at his phone, pressed a few symbols T’Challa didn’t know. He lifted his eyes. “Don’t get killed, don’t let them get killed, and try not to kill anyone.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

The disclaimer continues to be relevant, as is the schedule for the updates, and my Steve warning. Especially this chapter. I still don't know Italian, unfortunately, so if any of you could help me, please, that'll great. Thank you! Oh, and the fic is unbeta'd. Sorry!

“Two out of three isn’t bad,” Tony said, darkly amused. “It’s just not good.”

T'Challa was in Berlin, having returned with the attacker, James Barnes, and two of his friends: the Captain, Steve Rogers, and a man that eventually presented himself as Sam Wilson. T'Challa had heard from the Dora Milaje, who had stayed behind to guard his father, that with the police securing the hospital, Tony was on their way. He was not happy about the destruction of property, and about people injured or dead. And to be honest, none of them were, especially T'Challa, who had had his work cut out for him since the two friends started impeding the process.

“How many?” T'Challa asked, needing to know.

“Two civilians killed when the tunnel collapsed, ten injured, one in ICU. Of the German Police, four dead, eight injured, two in ICU,” Tony said, tone somber. “But wait, there’s more, because that wasn’t an alley somewhere, it was one of Bucharest’s main streets, under another main street. So traffic got jammed, activity stopped—we both know that means money lost—and the repairs will cost the city more money than it has. But the most important thing is, that with the traffic as it was, one more person lost their life because the ambulance couldn’t get to them in time, and in one other case there were complications. The doctors don’t know if they’ll make it.”

T'Challa left his seat at the news, breathing out his anger and guilt, watching the sky through the windows in the hopes of calming down.

Tony sighed, and T'Challa turned, struck by the sheer sadness in the sound. Something was wrong. Tony threw a box on the table. It slid down halfway, where it opened two reveal two pens. Tony sat there, watching the box, while T'Challa was studying Tony. He looked exhausted.

“What happened?”

Tony sighed again, and lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “Those are Roosevelt’s.”

T'Challa's gaze moved to the pens again, confused, and waiting for the whole situation to start making sense, but Tony didn’t seem inclined to share.

“I do not understand.”

“I’d be amazed if you did,” Tony said blankly. Then he smiled, and said teasingly, “Not that I'm not amazed by you constantly.” He winked, and the whole thing felt forced.

T'Challa waited.

“I almost convinced Steve to sign by offering him to get out of today’s shit smelling like roses, and guaranteeing Bucky medical treatment in the US. I also told him about the amendments, but you
know all about that.”

T’Challa nodded, because he did know, it was a necessary part of politics, debating, and convincing. But the amount of wrangling that was necessary to be able to promise the things that Tony had was remarkable. It showed that Tony cared about Rogers, Wilson, maybe even Barnes, which T’Challa had only guessed about Tony, but it put Tony in a new light too, because everybody knew he was rich genius, but his managing to get his way was, intentionally or not, kept under wraps.

“Almost?”

“Apparently Maximoff being locked up in a gilded cage is a deal breaker.”

“But you explained that she is under investigation by the UN, and Nigeria. Your own country doesn’t want her on its territory,” T’Challa said, feeling as if something about the situation escaped him.

“I tried.” Tony lightly shook his head. “I’m not sure I made the best case, chose the best words, I… I tried, but I’m not sure.”

T’Challa nodded, finally understanding. “I see.”

“Do you?” Tony was staring at T’Challa, something pleading in his expression. “Mind sharing?” he asked, with a comically forced smile, that he promptly dropped.

T’Challa took a seat, and waited until he was sure that Tony was watching him.

“You are too close to the situation.”

Tony opened his mouth, head shaking once, breathing hard, and a denial on his lips, but T’Challa put his hand gently on Tony’s shoulder. That wasn’t enough to completely snap him out of it before he got too agitated, so T’Challa clasped Tony’s wrist with one hand, and cradled Tony's hand with his other, giving it a little squeeze. Tony stopped, confused, but his breathing was starting to regain the usual rhythm.

“Breathe, Tony.”

Tony lifted his hand from T’Challa’s, and wiped his mouth. He took a deep breath, and then another, all the while keeping brown eyes locked to T’Challa’s own, making T’Challa feel a shiver down his spine. Tony’s confusion was natural. T’Challa wanted to support Tony, grateful that he owed his great debt to a good man, but Tony didn’t agree with T’Challa concept of debt. It must've been bewildering to Tony in that case, and T’Challa did feel guilty about that, but he couldn’t do anything about it until he knew what the problem was. Tony studied T’Challa's face searching for something, swallowing at whatever it was that he found. Finally, Tony lowered his hand, and he took T’Challa hand, in between his own, cradling it like it was something precious.

That was when Barnes escaped.

“Tell me you have the suit,” Romanoff said, passing the table in a hurry.

Tony responded with a remark that could be reduced to a single word: no.

“Why?” T’Challa asked in between hurried plans.

“Haven’t you heard of German engineering?” Tony smiled. It was a touch more genuine. “Go.”
And while T’Challa went to his designated place to surround Barnes, he realized that Tony was fearful of his tech being copied. Didn’t Tony say he feared uncontrollable variables? He wasn’t new to his tech being handled by other people, most of the time without his knowledge or say so. It was a sad event that it indeed needed to be considered, and one that had the disadvantage of leaving him at the mercy of super-humans.

Tony had some sort of gauntlet similar to the one from the suit. T’Challa was not at all surprised, though he couldn’t have said Tony had it before the confrontation. He wondered what was it about Tony that inspired such complete conviction related to never seen before tech. In any case, the gauntlet was enough to sent some sort of pulse Barnes' way, which got his attention.

Then Barnes shot Tony.

T’Challa blinked. He forced himself to continue to process the information. Luckily, almost unbelievably if Barnes reputation was to be believed, Tony had caught the bullet with his gauntlet. Literally. Then managed to disassemble the gun. That was when Barnes demonstrated his talent, and Tony was pushed into some tables. After a nod from Tony, that T’Challa wanted to mean Tony was fine, T’Challa tried to apprehend Barnes.

But Barnes escaped.

The next thing they knew, Barnes had stolen a helicopter, which Rogers had crashed, and that was the last thing anyone heard of them.

“What is the Captain thinking?” T’Challa snarled as he paced.

“Wait,” Tony whispered. “I see it now: Black Panther. The tunnel cameras don't do you justice with whole predator channeling you've got going on. You looked like hot loon in skintight suit. But, don't worry, it was impressive.”

T’Challa made sure Tony was seeing him when he rolled his eyes.

“What? I only got to see the calm part,” Tony defended. He leaned forward. “Is there a purring part?”

“Only as fa—you are distracting me.”

Tony smirked. “I am trying my hand at cat whispering.”

T’Challa thought about for about a second. “You are trying to calm me.”

“Wasn’t that what I said?” Tony smirked and pressed a new combination of symbols into the phone.

T’Challa was getting agitated again. He didn’t understand the Captain. Where had he gone? Why wouldn’t he ask his friends for help? Maybe he did. Wilson was missing too. In which case, he was sorry for Tony because his efforts were not met with equal affection. But why would Rogers disappear? Where would he go next? What could possibly motivate him?

A hand on his wrist, followed by his hand cradled carefully stopped T’Challa’s pacing. He hadn’t realized he had started again, but Tony did, and he halted T’Challa with what was quickly becoming a familiar gesture. It worked, a little too well compared to time they had known each other. T’Challa simply couldn’t bear the thought of breaking the hold. He crouched next to Tony's chair, eyes on their hands.

“I control the cameras and microphones in here, but the ones outside might still catch something,”
Tony said lowly. “To answer your question, I don’t think Steve is in any way processing, he’s reacting.”

“Does he understand the political climate?”

“He would say it’s not important, and maybe it isn’t to him, he can be stubborn.” Tony hesitated. “But I don’t think he does, at least not like you and I do.”

“Rogers must know he’s playing to the people’s fears. If this goes on, he’s going to turn the Accords into the Inquisition before we get the chance to amend them,” T’Challa said softly, but urgently.

“He already did.”

T’Challa glanced at Tony, surprised.

“Ross is eager to show that he can contain super-humans and heroes. He wanted to send a team to shoot on sight.” Tony smiled. It was a bitter thing, brittle and lost. He added what was meant to be an amusing aside but was smothered in guilt, and sour because of it, “We all knew that this was going to be in the beginning: wrong people in the wrong place. That was one of the kinks that were supposed to be worked out in time... I guess no one expects Captain America, or they expected me to be able to fucking talk, but I didn’t choose the right arguments and I don’t know why.” Tony sighed, despondent. “Anyway, I said I’d handle it: catch them and bring them in to face the music.”

T’Challa lifted his left hand to support Tony’s cradle and lowered his forehead on it.

“You might be right,” Tony admitted. T’Challa heard rustling and knew that Tony was shaking his head. “No, you are definitely right. I’m too close. But, I can’t afford to apply the ostrich’s way. I agree with the accountability, and I want to have a say, but I’m not about to give my vote on whether the life of a witch must be suffered or not.”

T’Challa frowned, and lifted his head. “What are you going to do?”

“The usual: I’m going to be an ass.”

T’Challa was not impressed.

“There’s this kid, he’s trying his best to help the little guy.” Tony smiled again, a shade bitter. “He’s some sort of hero to the people according to YouTube. This kid needs some good PR, stat, or he’s the perfect victim: he’s going to be made an example. He doesn’t see it, and even if he did, he’s not going to stop helping, Purr-Machine. Somebody has got to do something. Okay, so he could be the North to Cap’s South, an example that not all super-humans are defiant of laws, but this is mainly about him—the NYPD can’t wait to get their hands on him, and he needs to be in the position to negotiate. Since I’m the only one who knows of him, and understands what’s happening, that someone is going to be me.”

“You want to protect him by pushing him into the spotlight.”

“That is one of the reasons why I’m an ass.”

“He is... a child?”

“To me, he is.”

“A teenager, then,” T’Challa replied.
“That is another reason why I'm an ass.”

“If Rogers reacts he would not come quietly.”

“And the kid might be danger, yes, that’s another reason.”

T'Challa paused, thinking. “What am I missing?”

Smiling brightly, Tony said, “Blackmail may be involved.” His smile fell just as soon as he appeared.

T'Challa stared, and Tony winced, groaning.

“The plan could be better.”

But T'Challa was not so easily fooled. “I believe there’s more to this plan than you told me.”

Tony smirked emptily. “An armor, Cap's weak points, and him being relegated to watch the perimeter.”

“And you don’t think that’s going to enough.” T’Challa nodded. “I agree.”

Tony sighed, and went to rise, but T’Challa pressed delicately on Tony’s hands to indicate that he wasn’t finished.

“We both will look after him, and we will enforce the perimeter.” Tony didn’t look too convinced, and T’Challa took a chance. “You are not alone, Tony.”

Tony’s smile was strained. “Of course I'm not.”

T’Challa realized that he needed to change strategies, when an idea occurred to him. It was so simple, he almost felt ashamed for not thinking about it earlier. “I do think you are not the one who should be going after him.”

Tony nodded, and mentioned, “Natasha wants you on the team.”

“And I will be,” T’Challa said, both because he wanted to catch Barnes, and he wanted to support Tony. He wondered how much Romanoff knew about the second one. T’Challa came back to his idea, “It might have been a good idea at first, until it didn’t work. The fact that he is now running amok could either be the proof that you are not the best person to convince him, or that he cannot be persuaded.”

“Stop, you're making me blush.”

“I imagine that none of the two choices would give you any sort of pleasure.” T’Challa saw Tony tense, but continued. “This will be a fight among friends, it will do you well to remember that, and avoid injury where possible. It is also a fight where you have a direct responsibility over a young man’s life, and where the stakes are higher than the people involved know about, or understand. You cannot afford to lack conviction.”

Tony watched T’Challa, his face blank.

“You are Iron Man. Not the suit.” That was where T'Challa smiled a little bit, reviewing his thoughts. The man in front of him had always been Iron Man, always been vulnerable, but succeeded despite it. The suit offered a modicum of protection, and it was a brilliant invention, like most of Tony Stark’s, but that's not the way he managed to win his fights. No, every battle Tony fought depended on him to find some way to win. “So you must be aware that the way you think, the way you feel,
will have more influence than the state of your armor.”

Tony’s stopped breathing, and T’Challa stroked his thumb over Tony’s wrist until he started again.

“I will be there, and you can count on me, that is the truth. But you might not trust my words.”

T’Challa squeezed Tony’s hand encouragingly. “Your friends will be by your side as well. But they might not see the whole picture.”

T’Challa met Tony’s eyes. “In the end, Tony, I cannot say what you should do, or should not do. I cannot point you to the right way, because that is something that you must find yourself.” T’Challa smiled softly. “You’ve always found a way, won every war you fought, each more difficult than the other, and the circumstances are such that you are forced to find a way again. I can only remind you of one thing that is repeated over and over to Wakandan warriors until they dream it: you must focus.”

Tony studied the planes of T’Challa’s face, searching for something. T’Challa didn’t pretend to know what Tony was after, but T’Challa had only spoken the truth as he saw it, so he wasn’t worried. At the same time, T’Challa couldn’t help but watch Tony back, and with a suppressed shiver, T’Challa realized that Tony was beautiful.

Not in the absent way that one would notice that someone was pleasant looking, though he was that too, but in the whole way that incorporated his personality. Particularly his eyes, expressive like the rest of his face, were gorgeous whiskey-colored mirrors of what Tony really felt. T’Challa got the impression that as they had so far, every time Tony’s mouth split into one of his smiles, heartbreaking or heartwarming though they might be, it was his eyes that truly betrayed what he was feeling. It was probably the reason why he always wore sunglasses.

Finally, waking T’Challa up from his admiring daze, Tony nodded decisively, a mischievous light glittering in his eyes, smirk on his lips, and devil may care attitude firmly at home.

T’Challa felt his own lips tugging up. “And Tony?”

“Yes, Felix?”

“Try to give the young man a choice.”

Tony hand fluttered in an indiscernible gesture. “Right.”

* 

“Father,” T’Challa said fondly in Wakandan, as he entered the man’s treatment suit. “How are you?”

T’Challa hurried in, and extended his hand to take his father’s.

“I’m in good health, my son,” T’Chaka answered, just as fondly. “Is the attacker caught?”

“Not yet.” T’Challa felt a wave of guilt rose up in him, and he let it wash away. “There have been complications. We’re moving as fast as we can, and I have confidence that we’ll find him shortly.”

T’Challa took a seat by the bed.


T’Challa nodded, and changed the subject. “What did Zaida say?”

“The surgery was needed, if a little more intrusive than necessary, but the Wakandan knowledge
proved itself afterwards. You did well to send for her, my son. She was able to fix the damage, and I should be able to go home in an hour or two. The leg would still feel weak for about a week, but the hand just for a few more hours. We are only waiting for the after-effects of the treatments to pass so I can get something that will allow me to fly.”

“That’s good.” T’Challa smiled, held on to his father’s hand. “I am relieved.”

“I know you are,” T’Chaka said meaningfully.

T’Challa averted his eyes. “Father,” he said, voice thick with pain and shame. “I apologize for not being able to save you.”

“Oh, son.” T’Chaka brought his injured hand to T’Challa’s face, bringing it closer so T’Chaka could kiss T’Challa forehead. “Always so self-sufficient, so independent... It has been a point of pride many times that when you want something, and think that it’s important, you never take ‘it’s impossible’ as an answer. You work at it, from different angles if necessary, until it is as you wanted.”

T’Chaka paused, smiled indulgently, and T’Challa couldn’t help his own smile. He had had his moments of stubbornness, that part was true enough. His father continued, “My T’Challa, you are aware that your strength does not lie in your omnipotence, but in your diligence, intelligence, and creativity. That is not a limit that should discourage you; it is something that reminds you that you are human. Some things are not in our hands, and that is when we have to rely on others. We both know there was no way you could have reached me in time, but Mr. Stark could, and you inadvertently made sure he knew that he would.” His smile widened. “It was a team effort,” T’Chaka said, switching to English. Then, switching back to Wakandan, he said, “A tribe working together.”

T’Challa bowed his head, some of the weight he carried gone. “As always, father, I bow to your wisdom.” Only time and the Panther God would have their say in whether the weight would be truly gone.


They both laughed.

“Shuri will be relieved to see you well.”

“And then continually watch me like I am some old, tired gazelle that she could barely be bothered to run after, but might still make a easy meal,” T’Chaka complained long-sufferingly. “That will last until you do something life threatening. It will be a long couple of days, indeed.”

“Not if she finds you out said that.” T’Challa huffed. “And I try not to get into dangerous situations that often.”

“T’Challa, my son, you are calm on the outside and vicious on the inside, Shuri is the opposite. It is quite unsettling how much you are alike and, at the same time, completely different, that I much prefer when your attention is other focused on each other, or on a different third party.” T’Chaka snickered. “Besides, aren’t you trying to apprehend a ninety year old assassin with super serum? Is that you trying to avoid those types of circumstances?”

“I was never in any actual danger.”

“She’ll worry nonetheless,” T’Chaka said. “Until she is the one who pounces on danger, and then
“it’ll be your turn.”

“And you, father?”

“I do need to wait for special circumstances to worry—it is a father’s right.”

T’Challa hmm-ed, amused, and they settled into a comfortable silence, T’Challa simply enjoying his father’s presence. He had almost lost him, and that was such a grim prospect that he didn’t want to think about anything for a few moments. Ten minutes later, the silence was broken his father with a change of topic.

“You’re aware that Stark Technology blends with Wakandan the best,” T’Chaka stated, and T’Challa dutifully nodded. “Apparently, his AI, FRIDAY, broke into my prime bead, got my medical history, and told the hospital that we have the technology to heal me so they shouldn’t put in metal pins in my leg.”

T’Challa frowned, surprised. “That’s supposed to be impossible.” He felt another wave of guilt. “I should have been the one to tell them, I apologize.”

“You were exactly where you should have been,” T’Chaka said firmly. “As to the access to the kimoyo beads, it’s not as incredible if stop to think about it,” T’Chaka said, amused. “Our technology cannot be hacked by the rest of the world because it’s not binary. However, since Mr. Stark has managed to create not one, but two functional AIs, one of which who became an android, it seems he managed to write into being actual persons. There is no proof that our technology can withstand attacks from organized, creative, intelligent minds in the system.”

T’Challa’s raised his eyebrows. “Apparently the proof suggests the opposite.”

“That it does.” T’Chaka didn’t seem too shaken up by the information. “We owe our debts to an intelligent man.”

“A good man,” T’Challa gently corrected.

“Truly?”

“It is what I observed,” T’Challa said. “He’s a bright warrior, and caring man, who never forgets his humor, especially when his sadness, anger, or frustration, threaten to overwhelm him. Yet he carries his burdens alone, and it is not by design.”

“He needs a tribe.”

“As far as I can tell, yes.”

“After all this is over, you should invite him to Wakanda,” T’Chaka said. When T’Challa sent him an incredulous look, T’Chaka smiled somberly. “Inviting outsiders into Wakanda was further down the road, yes, but if you consider the circumstances, who better to be the first approved guest than the man who saved her king?”

“True,” T’Challa admitted with head tilt. “However, you talking about tribes...”

“Guests are not a part of tribes, I am aware of that.”

“Then it seems to cruel to show him what tribe should be, while at the same time enforcing the knowledge that he’ll never be allowed to take part for himself.”
“Before we can be sure about anything, we need to see how he fits in with our culture. You can no sooner foist him on the people, than have the people foisted on him. We will do our best to keep maliciousness out of it—intended or not.” T'Chaka smoothed his sheet, arranging it just so, and T'Challa remembered suddenly that while Shuri and he were calm and vicious, his father was calculated and ruthless. It was the way of any respectable predator after all. “Consider this: if he does not feel the connection with the tribe, he need not suffer.”

“What I am considering are two other options: he doesn’t feel it, but the tribe does; he feels it, but the tribe doesn’t.”

T'Chaka nodded. “The potential for pain is indeed large. Regardless, he managed to win your good opinion, which is something that he will still have no matter how he takes to Wakanda, but acknowledging how rare it is that someone should win your approval, he might be an impressive enough person to become a part of our tribe.”

T'Challa felt a twinge of guilt, hope was not enough when put against Tony's devastation, but his father was right: Tony would have T'Challa for a long time to come.

“One more thing,” T'Challa added. “He's… skittish.”

“You’ve proven to be alluring enough for him in the past,” T'Chaka said, a touch of humor entering his voice.

T'Challa chuckled. “You would use me as bait,” he accused lightly.

T'Chaka laughed lightly, but soon his expression became serious. “All joking aside, my son, I was hoping that you would use that calm of yours to wait him out, and soothe his anxieties. You have spoken to him, and worked aside him. Try to convince him, as you know him best, and if that does not be prove successful, the rest of will try. But let us not overwhelm him, hm? If he is as easily frightened as you said, less is more.”

*  
The fight went badly. T'Challa hadn't expected the Captain, Rogers, since he hadn’t acted like a true captain—who had superiors, and answered to somebody for his actions—in their entire acquaintance, to simply give up and admit he'd made a mistake, but what had happened so far was pushing the limits of credibility. They were expecting to use brute force, but, even if T'Challa allowed for the possibility of escape for the entire team, where would they go? What did they expect to accomplish? Where could one hide when half of the world wants them caught, and the rest wants them gone? So they were currently in the process of destroying a German airport.

T'Challa was personally glad that, even though it was a high-pressure, emotional situation for him, Tony somehow managed to gather himself, and hold himself together.

Both Tony and T'Challa kept an eye on the young man, who called himself Spider Man, and both were put in situations where they had to keep him out of harm’s way. It was exactly as they had believed; Spider Man was ignoring the directive to stay far away from the fight, and ventured straight into the heart of it. Luckily, he was sturdy enough that with both of their help, he didn’t get injured, but T'Challa could practically feel Tony’s burning shame and guilt, every time Spider Man was close to harm.

In the end, Romanoff interfered, which was unexpected, and frustrating. It made T'Challa miss Wakanda where he could always count on the Doras even though they were originally from different tribes. When they agreed to protect the King and Princes of Wakanda they made a decision and they
kept it, or left the Dora Milaje, no matter what they encountered. It was called _loyalty_, it was best when it went both ways, T'Challa liked it very much, and Romanoff didn’t show her team any.

T'Challa hadn’t expected the behavior, hadn’t planned for it, and it cost him: he was merrily being electrocuted while Rogers and Barnes flew away.

His com went on the fritz for a few of seconds, due to the suit being overloaded, and he wanted to see if the rest of the team had switched sided in the meantime. The airport was contained, so he wasn’t worried that Romanoff would get away. He saw both Spider Man and Vision near the far edge of the airstrip, so he started walking towards them, seeing glimpses of the other members of Rogers’ team, left behind, in less than pristine conditions: the archer, Clint; the woman with red energy; and the man who had Gulliver’s abilities. As he sighed, and questioned again Rogers’ behavior, he watched Vision unleash a beam that missed Wilson and hit Rhodes.

T'Challa was fully conscious of Tony's panic through the com who offered him the sounds in newly recovered crystal clarity, and before T'Challa knew it, he was running.

Luckily, T'Challa was almost level with his two teammates.

“Spider Man, Vision, throw me,” T'Challa ordered, taking a leap toward the men.

Vision was frozen, but Spider Man caught T'Challa and gave him a boost. The young man seemed to be smarter than T'Challa had realized, because he send T'Challa horizontally, not vertically. As T'Challa was sailing through the air, he felt like he was given a second chance, and he had a moment of gut-wrenching certainty that he would not be able to get to his target either.

But T'Challa didn’t miss. He caught Rhodes. It was too close to the ground. As T'Challa braced Rhodes’ neck, he hoped that it was enough for another cog to do its job so the machine would work. And it was. The delay, the distance, or both managed to put them in Tony's trajectory. The speed of the armor when it hit T'Challa was jarring. Tony braced T'Challa too, even when there was no need as the suit absorbed the impact.

T'Challa didn’t know how much the armor could carry, but it did well enough with T'Challa, Rhodes, and _their_ suits. The distance wasn’t much, but Tony slowed down in increments as abruptly as he could without jolting Rhodes, before absorbing much of the remaining impact himself. T'Challa straightened as soon as he could, but carefully, as he didn’t know Rhodes’ condition.

Tony reached and took off Rhodes’ face plate.

“That was harsh,” Rhodes weakly joked.

Tony smirked, and with tears in his eyes, he said, “You have another almost crash to add to your record. They should start billing you.”

“That’s fine,” Rhodes said, and smiled, face drenched in sweat and profound relief painted on his face. “I have a rich friend.” He chuckled softly, and looked at T'Challa. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

“Thank you, Salem. This one was downright witchy,” Tony whispered, looking at T'Challa. “I owe you one, just name it.”

“Déjà vu,” T'Challa quipped.

*
T'Challa caught up with Romanoff as she exited a conference room in the executive wing of the airport. Apparently, she had had the last word in an argument with Tony according to the airport cameras. She obviously had an advantage over Tony, had access to his vulnerable spots, and she used it ruthlessly, but T'Challa didn’t see the beauty in attacking a betrayed teammate, when he simply pointed out a tendency, for the sole purpose of making herself feel better. In fact, T'Challa was disgusted.

“Mr. Romanoff, if you'll come with me, the authorities have a few questions they would like answered,” T'Challa said pleasantly.

The four Dora Milaje that had accompanied him successfully surrounded her.

“Barnes wasn’t guilty for the explosion,” Romanoff said, weighing T'Challa nonchalantly, but her eyes were a little wider than she usually kept them showing her trepidation.

“Which explosion?” T'Challa asked idly. “The countless others no one knows about or the one he was actually accused of doing?”

“He was framed.”

“If he was, he could have told me himself anytime in the last twenty-four hours. Perhaps he could have also said what was the purpose for us destroying part of Romania’s capital, and a German airport. But he did not. Nor did Rogers. We are all responsible for our choices, Ms. Romanoff, and have to answer for them. Now, it is your turn,” T'Challa observed placidly, and signed the Doras to get ready.

“Aren’t you compromised by owing Stark a debt?” Romanoff inquired cuttingly. “Are you sure you are thinking clearly right now?”

“Ms. Romanoff the reason we find ourselves in this situation is your aiding Rogers and Barnes. That you did this is a fact. If you have reasons for what you did, I am not the one who should listen to them,” T'Challa replied. Then, analyzing what she had said, he added, “To answer your question: no. I am thankful to someone who deserves my gratitude.”

T'Challa had largely paid his debt when he saved Rhodes. Yes, there were other people who still owed Tony, and they were important to T'Challa, but T'Challa himself was almost absolved of it. That didn’t stop him for keeping the promise he had made: Tony was a good man, who was as much a conundrum as he was largely alone, and T'Challa would not abandon him.

“I wonder if being compromised is an excuse or an explanation.” T'Challa asked rhetorically. Romanoff was being escorted out of the hallway. “And what repercussions the answer should have regarding your own behavior.”

Romanoff frowned, but didn’t get the chance to say anything before Tony came out of the room in a rush.

Tony stopped abruptly, looking confusedly between T'Challa, the Doras, and Romanoff. “Don’t make me ask,” he requested.

“Ms. Romanoff is being cordially arrested,” T'Challa offered. “Any moment now.”

The Doras understood his not so subtle hint, and dragged Romanoff out of hearing range.

Tony watched her with an undecided expression, but eventually it morphed into an inquiring one.
“Ms. Romanoff chose to aid and abet fugitives. She made her decision, it might even be the right one, but she has to answer for it. The issue is out of our hands,” T’Challa explained, setting his cards on the table as he had before.

Tony tilted his head, and nodded, accepting T’Challa’s argument a little too quickly.

“Barnes is innocent,” Tony challenged.

T’Challa raised an eyebrow. “He could certainly make a case for brainwashing.”

“No, I meant in this situation. He didn’t have anything to do with the explosion,” Tony said, and showed his phone to T’Challa.

T’Challa spent the next few seconds flipping through the information.

“The claim that Barnes had nothing to do with it seems rather exaggerated, he was obviously framed. There’s something about Barnes that made him the perfect target. The only way to reach the real attacker would be to answer several questions: Why him? Why now?”

“And we, or anybody, can’t have those questions answered, because Rogers’ chose the best hands for the information to be in—his.” Tony smiled bitterly. “We didn’t even know that there were questions. And there’s more, from what I managed to gather from Romanoff, there are multiple super-soldiers, with the power to destroy countries, at this guy’s back and call.”

“Communication is not one of Rogers’ strengths,” T’Challa said. “I admit, I expected more from a so-called captain than to keep information that brought light to a situation, and doing it without him losing his advantage. Wasn’t ‘tactical genius’ one of his lauded abilities?”

“He was field promoted.” Tony rolled his eyes. “Has about a month of training max, then two months of USO tours to forget it all, and then he was put to good use, in a team of his choice. In his first mission, the one that got him his promotion from civilian to captain, he was trying to save Barnes’ life, and ended up also saving the life of about 400 soldiers, including his new team. So it’s a bit of recurring theme: learn by experience, and save Barnes.”

T’Challa stayed silent, a picture starting to form of the man, and not the legend.

“He did a lot of good, that’s a fact, and I’m not hypocrite enough to blame him on his methods of getting to be Captain America.” Tony rubbed his forehead. “Now I think I should have shown him this world even though he wasn’t interested. Even when he didn’t want any part of it. You said it yourself, you don’t make the best decisions when you don’t have the information.” He sighed. “Rogers never trusted me, from the beginning, not conventional enough for him, I figured. I tried to let myself be led, I put him on the same pedestal as everybody, but I couldn’t help seeing things differently, and I couldn’t make him understand where I was coming from... In the end, I carry a big part of the blame here.”

“He was not your responsibility, but he was your teammate, so perhaps you are right and you do carry part of the blame,” T’Challa granted. “As long as you remember: that you did try, both with telling it exactly as you saw it, and with you putting yourself in a position you were uncomfortable, it just didn’t work; and that you were the only one who tried, when all the people around him said differently, thus making your job infinitely more difficult when you account for his lack of trust. It transformed your opinions into the words of the enemy, and everything you did to change yourself for him was a doomed strategy.”

“Don’t be gentle with me, Mufasa.”
T’Challa noticed that Tony got progressively more upset the longer T’Challa talked about the whole mess, so he stopped. Instead, T’Challa said, “How is Lt. Col. Rhodes?”

“He’s a big bruise,” Tony chuckled. Sobering some, he said, “Strained some muscles, broke a couple of ribs, but he’ll be fine.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

Tony snapped his fingers, and hit his fists together gently. “Do you want to go catch the attacker?”

“Yes,” T’Challa said without hesitation.

* 

T’Challa hurried down the hallway, hearing Tony’s voice.

“—now this street,” Tony was saying.

At a glance T’Challa understood several things: one, there were bodies in cryogenics tubes that meant that someone had killed the super-soldiers; two, he had come in on the wrong door, since the person Tony, Rogers, and Barnes were facing was in a secured room; three, the attacker wanted Tony to see what was on the tape playing in front of them, and based on Rogers’ and Barnes’ guilty expressions it wasn’t anything good.

In two leaps, T’Challa reached the screen. It shredded under his claws, sputtering sparks, and died. He passed his claws through what seemed to be the speakers to be sure.

“I wanted to see that,” Tony said, voice icy.

“You will. The tape is in the room.” T’Challa reached out and lightly grasped Tony's armored wrist to offer him an anchor; the hold was one that Tony could easily break if he felt manipulated, or if he couldn’t stand the touch. “Do you want to catch the attacker?” T’Challa asked, definitely wanting a positive answer.

Tony looked down at their hands, took a deep breath, and smirked. “Race you,” he said, and his helmet snapped into place.

* 

Zemo hadn’t put any resistance, but he did say his part, and it had an effect on both Rogers and Tony, larger on the latter than it did on the former. They had managed to gather the tape, and Zemo’s gun. However, the problems started when it came to capturing Rogers and Barnes.

“We are taking you back to the authorities,” T’Challa said calmly.

“Authorities with an agenda,” Rogers said stubbornly, chin jutting forward.

“Fuck me!” Tony shouted and threw his hands up.

Zemo smiled.

“I hadn’t seen that about him,” Tony said coldly, but almost carelessly. He was addressing Zemo. “Thank you for pointing it out. Only, you were not the sole reason policing was considered necessary. You could basically achieve the same result if you hadn’t bombed the UN, killed three people in the process, and gravely injured another seven. That’s on your head. What happened to your family is on mine. It always was.”
And seeing Tony empty eyed and smirking malevolently, T'Challa understood that there was another part of Tony that T'Challa hadn’t noticed. He never truly realized, or acknowledged, how much suffering, pain, and guilt Tony had survived. He was almost feral with it, and as dangerous as the name implied, but the fact that he still stood before them meant that he should be respected.

Tony was a man with a conscience who faced his, often bloody, mistakes straight on, and it hadn’t made him curl up on the floor in a slobbering mess. That was an accomplishment that made him one of the most impressive men T’Challa had known. That he persevered, fought for the civilians, for the people who had no idea that they even existed for Tony Stark, and protected them not only now, but also in the future, willing to sacrifice whatever was needed—his money, his time, his pride, and his life—for them, for his purpose, made Tony downright frightening. T’Challa knew he wouldn’t want him as an enemy.

“Get on the plane before I blow you up,” Tony said to Rogers and Barnes, tone bored.

Rogers wanted to say something, belligerent until the end, but Barnes stopped him, and shook his head.

“What’s going to happen to us now?” Rogers asked, tone a touch calmer.

“You are going to prison, you are getting a fair trial, and you straightening the whole mess out,” Tony said, smirk in place. “Aslan has spoken. I need to stop trying to make you understand the world through my eyes. Rogers, you are finally going to see the world without my interference. I’m going to get you the very best of lawyers, but other than that, you are not under my influence anymore. Congrats, Cap!”

*

They left Zemo, Barnes, and Rogers in the hands of the two Rosses. It appeared they had arrived in time for Thaddeus Ross to receive a notification from an UN Official. He read it, froze, and then read it again.

“Are you suing me?” Ross asked, enraged.

“At the UN, for not allowing access to a lawyer?” Tony asked brightly. “Yes, I am.”

Everett Ross badly suppressed a smile.

“It should have taken months,” Thaddeus Ross accused. “How the heck did you manage this?”

“Is this a trick question?” Tony asked, mock-confused.

No one could take Everett Ross’ cough any other way than for the laugh that it was, and T’Challa had no delusions when it came to his own smile.

“You know people, I presume,” Everett Ross offered.

Even Barnes and Rogers looked entertained, though Rogers’ expression was accompanied by a frown.

Tony let his smirk do the talking for him. “Put a piece of paper I’m front of me, and I'll sign it,” was what he actually said, reminding everybody who cared to listen that he had signed the Accords, was present when the building exploded, and was a welcome face within the UN Commission.

Apparently, Zemo did. His face painted the picture of devastation. Perhaps he understood that while
Tony was running around, there was still the hope of the Avengers, or maybe, he had understood where the heart of the Avengers truly was.

T’Challa privately thought that the Avengers’ brain was in the same place, but as nobody had asked him, he kept his mouth shut.

“I’m going to send lawyers, I expect they’ll be allowed to see their clients,” Tony said airily.

“Of course, Mr. Stark,” Everett Ross hurried to assure.

“There’s a good sport,” Tony replied, managing to simultaneously exasperate Everett Ross, annoy Rogers, enrage Thaddeus Ross, and make Barnes’ eyes light up with amusement.

T’Challa, for his part, looked fondly upon the situation.

* *

“Where to now, Kitten?”

T’Challa quietly chuckled, mostly because he could finally afford it. “To Wakanda, eventually.”

Tony tilted his head inquiringly, mischievousness present, looking more like the animal he used as a nickname than T’Challa.

“You don’t have to be alone while watching the tape,” T’Challa said, loath to break the light-hearted atmosphere.

Tony shrugged. “Maybe that’s how I want it.”

“It’s your right,” T’Challa agreed. “In which case, I’d still like to be in the city, so you know that there’s someone close who knows what you’re doing.”

“Is this the debt business?” Tony asked, a frown making its way on his face.

“A large part of that was covered when I helped save your friend.”

Tony nodded. “Then why?”

And T’Challa realized he wasn’t doing it because Tony didn’t have anybody else, or because T’Challa wanted to honor his promise. He wanted to do it, to be there for Tony when another imminent heartbreak was on the horizon. Panther God willing, T’Challa wanted there for the beautiful moments, and the tedious moments, and the frightening moments, and the amusing moments, and the routine moments—he wanted to be there for everything. Somewhere along the line, T’Challa shifted his focus from the debt, to the man, and what he found was awe-inspiring. So awe-inspiring, in fact, that he hadn’t understood he what had happened, or even that it had.

“Because I want to support you,” T’Challa said simply.

The moment was too serious to be complicated further by what T’Challa felt. He wanted to be close to Tony—T’Challa had finally taken that in—but in what capacity? So T’Challa resolved to wait and see.

“I don’t need it.”

“I thought you might want it, nonetheless.”
Tony looked down, reaching for T'Challa’s wrist. “I think my parents didn’t die in a car crash.”

T'Challa frowned, and then inhaled a little quicker, realizing from where Tony knew the street.

“I think you’re right,” T'Challa said, somberly.

“I think he was sent to kill them.”

T'Challa took Tony’s hand between his. “I again think you’re right.”

“I have to see the tape,” Tony said quietly, eyes so sad.

Squeezing Tony’s hand, T'Challa leaned forward until their foreheads met. “I know,” he whispered with his eyes closed.

*

Later, when Tony had watched the tape, and his suspicions were confirmed, T'Challa was there to hold on to Tony’s hand.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

The update schedule and the disclaimer are still relevant and will stay relevant until I say differently. Thank you, Herbeloved82, for helping me with my Italian. It's in Chapter 5, but I wanted to send my thanks. Also thank you to all of you who left kudos, or a comment, or bookmarked. Your support means a lot!

Tony fit. There had been a Tony-shaped hole, that somehow nobody noticed, because the moment Tony filled it, everybody was comfortable with his presence. The first to be charmed were the Doras, and the tribe's medical team. Well, that wasn’t true, the first one to be charmed was T’Challa, but he was referring to the people that were important to him.

T’Challa was in Nairobi, to discuss the Accords. Tony was there too but unfortunately they hadn’t had the chance to speak yet. The session had just finished, and T’Challa was searching for Tony, who had been quiet that day. Quiet and thoughtful. It disquieted T’Challa.

He saw Tony coming quickly towards T’Challa, walking fast, but managing to look perfectly calm, with an added air of nothing-to-see-here-move-along. It struck T’Challa that he and Tony had more in common than T’Challa had thought, and at the same time they came at it from different points. T’Challa had his issues with vibranium thieves, tribes against technological advancements, and the people against opening the country’s borders. All of them were ongoing, but he didn’t have to face them alone. Things must different for Tony, because, even after the Avengers came in the picture, he was generally the target of people’s grief.

Between one blink and the next, Tony had reached T’Challa.

“Hello Kitty!” Tony said brightly.

T’Challa smiled, altogether too fondly. “Hello Tony.”

“How about dinner? We can catch up.” Tony smiled pleasantly.

There was more going on, though T’Challa hadn't known Tony long enough to say for certain what it was.

“Of course,” T’Challa agreed. “Do you have a place in mind?”

“Actually, I was thinking my penthouse,” Tony said with a smirk. “Or if that’s your reputation I hear wailing, you choose the place.”

“I assure you, no Wakandan will fear for my safety,” T’Challa said dryly, purposefully misinterpreting Tony’s remark. “The Doras stay close to make sure nothing violent happens.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m infamous for: punching people.”

“Then?” T’Challa asked, amused.

Tony leaned closer, and whispered, “I’d tell you, but it’s naughty.” He dramatically widened his
T'Challa swallowed a chuckle. “I assure you Wakanda has no issue with… naughtiness between two men. Even her prince, when he is so inclined. The papers might scream whatever they want; I doubt anyone in Wakanda would be shocked. As for the rest of the world, you weathered the storm.”

“T’m a slut. People have accepted that and moved on to call me a mass murderer. Now that, still lifts eyebrows,” Tony admitted entirely too easily. “And you’re about to be scandalous with me.”

T’Challa frowned. He opened his mouth, then thought better of it, and closed it. T’Challa didn’t have enough information to win the argument. But at the same time he had to convince Tony that his presence was desired by T’Challa no matter what the media would say.

He needed Tony to understand that the most important people to T’Challa were his tribe, the Doras, and the citizens of his country—in that order. None of them would have anything bad to say about it because they would trust that T’Challa had considered them when he had made the decision, and he must have information they didn’t have. It would be difficult to explain that to Tony, since it was another way of thinking, and not one he was likely to believe.

Another explanation T’Challa could try would be the debt they all owed Tony, and the only reputation that mattered to the people of Wakanda was that Tony had saved their king. But Tony didn’t like to speak about that. Or he’d be likely to think that Wakandans were fine with prostitution, which was a discussion T’Challa didn’t want to get into at the moment.

So T’Challa took Tony’s hand, and, in view of the press gathered to cover the Accords, pressed a soft kiss to his knuckles.

“I believe that settles the issue.”

Tony seemed surprised for all of a fraction of a second, before smirking again. “And I believe that you’ve put yourself on a crash course with the world media.” He learned in even further. “It’s going to be beautiful.”

T’Challa didn’t twitch. “If everything else is settled…”

Tony laughed brightly. “This way.” He frowned at the Doras who had closed a circle around both T’Challa and Tony, but eventually shook his head. “I’ll stop on the way to get food.” He sent a menu to T’Challa phone. “Any preferences? Ladies?”

T’Challa lifted an eyebrow, he hadn’t given Tony his number, they had been focused on other things. “You have my number.”

“I looked it up online,” Tony defended.

T’Challa continued watching Tony, waiting for the truth.

“I did. After I already had it, true, but some genius at the UN included it in your profile for the Accords.”

The Doras stiffened.

“Luckily I caught it soon-ish, I had put an alert on you.” Tony smiled brightly, his eyes sparkling with mirth. “I took the site down, and deleted it, all in a few minutes, but that can still be a lot. It happened during the meeting. That was one of the things I wanted to talk to you about.”
T'Challa nodded in agreement. His suspicions were confirmed, and there was still more. He looked over the menu, then stopped, and looked again more attentive.

“They don’t deliver,” T'Challa said while he selected the items he wanted.

“I’m Tony Stark.”

T’Challa kept his face blank.

“I own the place.”

Passing the phone to the Doras, T’Challa said, “I didn’t know you were in the restaurant business.”

“I wasn’t, and technically I'm not. But people have their pride, and I wanted to give them jobs after I helped destroy their city.”

“The building that was destroyed in your fight with the Hulk has become a place for African cuisine, and craft that is quite popular,” T’Challa said, adding the details in his mind, and coming up with a good man.

“I expanded the concept to other cities.” Tony flapped a hand in an illustrative motion. He fixed T’Challa with his eyes. “I swallow the non-profitable months, not that there many, and give a few hints when they’re in a hole. They handle all the resources, deal with the vendors, and do the actual business. I only suggested hiring as many people affected by my mistake as they could, and they did. The profit stays in the country. African culture was not infected by my American ways.”

T’Challa smiled softly, watching as some of that well hidden tension left Tony’s shoulders. “I congratulate you on your initiative, Tony. You did a good thing.”

Tony snorted. “Eventually.” He moved on with a smirk, and sent new information to T’Challa’s phone. “That’s the address. I’ll see you in about an hour.”

Sending the selections to Tony’s phone, T’Challa nodded, eyes landing on a series of signals from Teela. “Teela and Daraja could help you carry the food.”

Tony paused, looking suspiciously at T’Challa. “They can meet me when I get at the apartment.”

“What about when you get it?”

“I’ll ask somebody.”

“That will not be enough, Mr. Stark,” Teela said, obviously deciding it was time to join the discussion. “We like to have as few people involved as possible.”

“Tony, please, Ms. Claws.” Tony waved. “And I understand that. I also believe that’s not the reason.”

“Teela then, Tony.” Teela inclined her head. “And we noticed you had no security. We understand that is your way, but when we can, and it does not create an inconvenience for you, we’d like to help in this matter.”

Tony stopped moving for a blink, before he asked, “Is this about the debt? Because I’m telling you, there’s no debt.”

“We have our customs, you have yours,” Teela allowed. “But you are about to be associated romantically with our Prince, and you seem to have formed a sort of alliance with him, so we’ll see
each other more often. We know you are reticent regarding personal security. Granted, you tend to
get into serious trouble, but I assure you, we are qualified. That we may have other reasons for doing
it, should not overly concern you.”

T'Challa had read a few key points on Tony that were common in all the articles, as had Teela once
Tony had saved T'Chaka's life. They had found out about Hogan, who was by all accounts one of
Tony’s friends, and even the soldiers in the Afghanistan military convoy. Tony’s hesitance was
understandable, as it was dangerous, but more than that, it was his choice. T'Challa could only hope
that Tony and the Doras would reach a compromise.

Tony sighed. “I came in a sports car,” he said, implying he didn’t have room for two passengers.

“Then, with your permission, I will accompany you,” Teela said.

“Who am I to refuse the company of a beautiful warrior?” Tony asked rhetorically, nodding a
goodbye while he gestured to the direction of his car.

“That is one story about the Avengers inception that I had not heard,” Teela said dryly.

Tony burst into laughter, surprised and delighted.

* * *

They met Tony and Teela at Tony’s apartment. The two seemed on much better terms than when
they left, and they even seemed to have developed a bantering style all of their own. T’Challa hid a
smile.

The apartment, itself, was large, open-plan, and modern. It seemed a bit of a must for any of Tony’s
properties: a lot of metal, glass and few furnishings. T’Challa could see a lot of tech—and the tools
for it—strewn all over the tables, and the two sofas, but Tony’s bed seemed untouched.

“The Royal Aristrocat is here. Now?” Tony asked Teela.

“Now,” Teela confirmed.

Teela put on some kind of harness, took a bag that jingled, stepped in the balcony, and disappeared
from sight. Tony input a couple of commands into the surface of his glass table, and it became a
screen for the outside cameras. T’Challa could see Teela floating for a second, before she climbed
down the face of the building.

“What is she doing?” T’Challa asked.

“Since she was so concerned by my safety, I suggested I’d need some sensors put on the building.”

That… didn’t sound completely right.

“And what does Teela get for doing you this favor?”

“Who said she gets anything?”

“Then she’ll be the first person that accomplishes something for you without payment since I have
been able to read,” T’Challa told Tony.

Tony rolled his eyes. “She gets the harness.”

“A new invention?” T’Challa asked while he helped Tony get the food out of the plastic bags and
organized according to everybody’s selections.

T'Challa noticed that the Kraft Paper containers tied fashionably with strings, and the wooden utensils, were visibly more expensive than usual. He couldn’t help but wonder what kind of resources the restaurants had, and whether he had underestimated how much Tony had cared about them. How much time and money Tony had invested in a business that he had only started because African people would not accept his money otherwise?

“Something I tinkered with since I came here,” Tony said, bringing T'Challa’s attention back to him. It couldn’t have been long, it was only the first day of the talks, but maybe Tony came here for his business.

“It floats?” T'Challa asked, curious.

“There’s some repulsor technology there, a bit of something else… It’s tested, don’t worry.”

T'Challa noticed a trend of Tony getting defensive over performing perfectly decent actions, and the meaning that T'Challa could guess was behind it—that someone, or multiple people, relentlessly criticized Tony for what he had done—made T'Challa... very angry.

“I’m not worried,” T'Challa said. “Your technology is reliable, and Teela knows how to take care of herself.”

Tony let out a breath, relaxed, and then got tense all over again. He glanced at Teela's progress, and asked, “How much can you say with them around?”

T'Challa understood that Tony had used the Dora's desire to protect towards his own gain.

Anything. Beside non-disclosure contracts that were signed for other diplomats' comfort, I trust them implicitly.” T'Challa paused, knowing that he had to find a way of explain something that was Wakandan in nature to somebody who had reason to distrust their values. “What do you know about the Dora Milaje?”

“I don’t know much of anything about Wakanda.” Tony smiled apologetically.

“Well, considering Wakanda’s isolationist policy, that’s not surprising.” T'Challa took a breath. “Wakanda is a warrior culture. Has been from the start. It is composed of eighteen tribes, with Panther as the ruling tribe. That is because in our history, vibranium came to us in the form of a meteor, and it wasn’t alone. It was accompanied by aliens, we called them 'demon spirits,’ that infected Wakandan people, and made them attack healthy ones, until the Black Panther, with Bast’s help, stopped the demons. I know this may be difficult to believe, especially for a man of science as yourself, but—”


That was... easy, then again if anyone knew how impossible aliens could get, Tony was certainly that person.

T'Challa smiled, a bit relieved. But the hard part wasn’t done yet. “The Black Panther is a religious and cultural title, given to our best warrior after they undergo a ritual. They are the ruler of Panther tribe.”

“So, wait, you're the big cat on campus, and not your father? Why is he king?”
“I am the leader of our tribe, yes. It would not be wise to take my father’s place, the former Black Panther, when he is still a capable ruler because I can run faster. I am, like most Princes, a King in training. The Wakandans rest easy; they have a Black Panther, and a wise King.” T’Challa gestured to the food. “Should we distribute this while I explain further?”

“Yup.” Tony nodded to the screen. “Teela should be back any second.”

After a short break, in which Tony told the Doras they were all perfectly safe, he wasn’t believed, and they ended up compromising. A pair of Doras was left at the car, and another at the apartment entrance, with Teela in with Tony and T’Challa. The compromise was that they could afford to eat until the paparazzi arrived. Teela was gone, sharing the food, while they continued talking.

“Once the Black Panther was elected, the people of Wakanda thought it will be best if they had the best warriors protecting them. Our Special Forces. The original idea was for them to form the pool from which The Black Panther chose his wife. That is why they are called the ‘Adored Ones’.”

Tony’s eyebrows lifted, his lips curved into a mischievous smile, so T’Challa hurried to add, “ Obviously, that aspect has disappeared with the social development.”

Crossing his arms, Tony said, “Just so you know, I was having the time of my life imagining them ripping me apart for temporarily stealing their husband.”

“They are elected from every tribe, after they undergo their own trials, to create unity by protecting the Black Panther, and their family,” T’Challa said, chuckling in the beginning, but becoming more serious as he went on. “They each represent their tribes. It’s an honor and a responsibility at the same time. They care more about that, than anything you have to say to me, because they are not judged by how they help their tribe after they become one of the Dora Milaje, but by the way they accomplish their goal: to defend the Royal Family, and me in particular.”

After a few seconds of silence, Tony nodded hesitantly. “Different motivations. I can understand that.”

T’Challa felt powerful joy and pride tug at his chest: for managing to explain, and for Tony, and his ability to comprehend. There was the possibility of Tony changing his mind about it in the future, but T’Challa admitted that it was a small one. He had done all he could to instill trust in Tony, hoping that he would say what was on his mind.

“Fine—”

Tony was interrupted by a knock on the door. It was Teela, and they took her presence as a signal to start their own meal. They waited for Teela at the breakfast bar, the food smelling, and looking, delicious.

“Okay,” Tony told Teela. “You’ve successfully made me believe that somebody’s waiting in shadows to stab me, so now let’s eat.”

Teela smirked. “As long as you are aware.”

“I’m always aware.”

When she passed by him, Teela brushed a hand over Tony’s shoulder, making him smile.

T’Challa took in the gesture with a smile. It was a good beginning, he thought as he started eating, only to stop a few bites in. His nyama choma was so flavorful, and so beautifully complimented by the side of kachumbari, that he felt a moment of delighted surprise. He had had it before, but there
was something different, more... whole about it, that made it special. Tony’s humming when he ate his first *mansala* chips showed his enjoyment, but he acted like he had expected it. Teela, on the other hand, regarded her *matoke* like it had personally insulted her ability to disarm someone in less than thirty seconds. T'Challa took that to mean that she liked the food too.

“It’s delicious,” T'Challa complimented sincerely.

“I’ll pass it along,” Tony said laughing. “I may have forgotten to mention that I have Wakanda’s Prince and his security for dinner.”

“You like to live dangerously,” Teela commented.

She had come to terms with the unexpectedness of the meal, and she presently ate it with no obvious emotion.

“I try,” Tony admitted, smirk in place. He paused, then, “Tell me more about Wakanda?”

Teela’s head snapped up.

“What area has captured your interest?” T’Challa asked calmly, weathering Teela’s laser focus.

“Anything,” Tony said. He shrugged. “As much as you, any of you, can say.”

T’Challa watched Teela challengingly, waiting for her to speak first. She didn’t say anything for a long time, prompting a frown to appear on Tony’s face as he studied both of them. But T’Challa knew where Teela’s hesitation came from, remains of their isolationist policy, and knew that they each had to break their habit of keeping their mouth shut when it came to Wakanda if they ever hoped to rejoin the world. Teela played with her wooden fork, took a sip of Stoney, all without meeting T’Challa’s eyes.

“What do you know about Ethiopian meals?” Teela finally asked.

Tony waited a second, quickly studying them both, before asking for clarification, “About the food in the meals, or about the meals themselves?”

“The meals themselves,” Teela answered, enclosing herself in her usual coolness.

“This is starting to feel like test, and I'm not enjoying it,” Tony said, studying them carefully. “Why don’t you just tell me what you want me to know?”

Teela was annoyed, and glaring, but Tony wasn’t budging.

“Ethiopian meals are shared with family and/or friends. There’s usually just a plate with all the dishes on it, and everybody eats from it with their fingers. Every meal is a… bonding experience,” Teela began. “In Wakanda the concept of ‘friend’ is not as highly regarded as everywhere else, because we have the concept of ‘tribe.’ We share food with the tribe.”

Tony tilted his head at Teela’s plate, and then he seemed to understand. His eyes brightened. “Like the Ethiopians do. And the Dora Milaje?”

“We are an exception,” Teela confirmed.

“So what’s a tribe?” Tony asked. “Extended family?”

“And friends,” T’Challa added.
“It’s the people you get along with, the people that mean something to you, it’s where you fit,” Teela said.

“I think the best way to describe it would be: a family of choice,” T’Challa finished.

“What tribe are you?” Tony asked Teela. “Can you answer that?”

“Yes. Crocodile. It is an honor to represent my tribe, and I hope to do it in front of the world with great success,” Teela said with dignity.

“Are you kidding me?!” Tony laughed, and Teela glared, insulted. “I don’t think you can behave any more like Leatherhead’s less bipedal brother without watching me from a few inches of water.”

Teela closed off, startled, while Tony dropped his fork on the plate. “Is that what a tribe… animal should be? A part of you?”

Teela seemed vaguely pleased.

“It’s about the people; they are whom you choose, and who choose you in return. But, once you are part of a tribe, it’s much easier to realize that you had the characteristics of the animal that guards over it from the beginning, even if they weren’t obvious. Otherwise you wouldn’t have fit,” T’Challa explained.

Tony leaned further down the table, forgetting to eat. “Can you change tribes then?”

“Yes,” Teela said, and she made eye contact with T’Challa, M’Baku’s name loud between them.

T’Challa chose to answer Tony’s enquiring look. “Panther lost a valuable member when I became Black Panther.”

Teela snorted. “He was a jealous man, who didn’t like to be bested.”

“Black Panther wannabe?” Tony asked amused.

T’Challa drank some water, mostly because he enjoyed having Tony’s attention for as long as possible. “More like a second runner at the time.”

Tony’s eyebrows flew up. “I smell a newcomer.”

“With a nose like that, you hardly need a brain,” Teela observed coolly. She relented a second later, smirked, and said, “The newcomer is our Princess.”

Tony’s eyes widened. He seemed amazed, and T’Challa had a feeling he knew why. “You have a sister?” Tony asked, confirming T’Challa’s suspicions.

“Maybe it's the Prince's wife,” Teela said dryly.

Tony analyzed T’Challa attentively for the next couple of seconds. “Nah,” he said as he began to eat again.

T’Challa inclined his head to signify that Tony’s guess was on point. “Her name is Shuri.”

“Well, congratulations on my behalf,” Tony said, lifting his bottle of Stoney.

Teela frowned, and looked at T’Challa in askance. She was probably wondering if Tony knew about his standing invitation to visit Wakanda. T’Challa shook his head, he didn’t have time then. But maybe…
“You should congratulate her yourself,” T’Challa said easily. “I neglected to inform you, because we had other things on our minds at the time, but my father and I, have invited you in Wakanda as our guest.”

Silence followed T’Challa’s declaration, which showed that Tony understood the magnitude of the event.

“When is this?” Tony leaned back in his seat, smiling slightly, but not with his eyes.

“It’s an ongoing invitation,” T’Challa replied. “When you wish to come, we’ll arrange it.”

Tony seemed to relax. “That’s giving me a lot of leeway.”

“Even you can’t take advantage of something freely offered,” Teela said firmly, before finishing off her chapati with a decisive bite.

“You want to bet on that?” Tony’s smirk went bleak.

T’Challa’s hand shot out without express permission, and caught Tony’s wrist in a loose hold. “You are welcome any time.”

T’Challa could see Teela zeroing in on their hands, but he kept his eyes on Tony.

“Let’s wait a few months,” Tony said, moving his hands so he was cradling T’Challa’s in between his own.

“As you wish.” T’Challa smiled.

“Do I smell mandazi?” Teela asked, averting her eyes from their hands.


“I’ll take the Kenyan chai, please,” Teela requested.

Tony snapped his fingers, and threw a tan travel mug at Teela. She caught it, and opened the lid just as Tony brought her an Iron Man mug. He gave it to her with a smug grin. Teela rolled her eyes, and took it.

Suppressing his amusement at the by-play, T’Challa asked calmly for a beer.

“You’re super-human?” Tony asked, carefully, as if he was confirming his suspicions.

“Yes,” T’Challa answered without hesitation, but he hoped Tony wouldn’t continue to ask questions about the subject.

“Better to fight demons with.” Tony smiled impishly. “It’s hush-hush, huh? Probably means you weren’t one from the beginning.”

T’Challa tensed, and Teela was watching Tony suspiciously.

“Relax,” Tony rolled his eyes. “I was curious when neither of you blinked at the offer of something harder.”

Tony gave T’Challa a bottle, looking around for something.

“You were worried about my alcohol intake?” T’Challa asked, bewildered. He easily popped the cap
“More like I was suspicious because your level of safety-consciousness is striking,” Tony said absent-mindedly. He made a victorious sound, and used a pair of pliers to open his bottle. “Alcohol: the ultimate test for meta-humans.”

“And you?” T’Challa asked, earning himself an eye roll for his way of opening the bottle.

Tony snorted. “More of an adventurous lifestyle. No enhancements.”

“So you don’t care about your liver, or your safety?” Teela summarized T’Challa's thoughts.

“Both,” Tony admitted. He gestured to the couch, and followed his own advice, moving the box of *mandazi* like bait. He even gave it a little shake.

T’Challa looked at Teela, and took a seat on the couch opposite Tony’s. She stayed at the breakfast bar, despite the offer for desert. It was not a coincidence that it put her in the position to see the whole room.

“Tick-tock, to your right,” Tony told Teela.

When she looked, Teela found another box of *mandazi*, which she opened with a nod, and smile.

“Let’s say… I may have invented a medical instrument. A new, trademarked, instrument that the can be very dangerous in the wrong hands,” Tony began. “But while the interested parties can’t obtain it, they can stop me from using it.”

T’Challa frowned.

“I was wondering if you have the opportunity to test it, keep it quiet, and help those who need it.”

“Absolutely,” T’Challa promised. “But I’m going to need more details.”

“Sure,” Tony said, and went to the windows. Sensors light up, and, with a murmured command, shutters came down. “Before I begin, I have two examples: the UN explosion, or Rhodey’s fall. I’m making an impression to make it easier to understand the possible ramifications. Your choice. It’s going to be a rough ride no matter what.” Tony’s voice had a finality to it that proved that he was finally going to touch upon the subject that had distressed him all day.

T’Challa didn’t even need to think. “The UN explosion.” He wasn’t going to make Tony deal with his friend’s fall again, though it seems like he already had, and whatever the invention did, reviewing his powerlessness at the moment of the UN explosion with somebody else’s input, especially Tony’s, could only help.

“I can’t convince you to leave, can I?” Tony asked Teela, a sad edge in his tone.

“No,” Teela said warmly, but firmly.

Tony just studied them intently, before nodding, and putting a pair of slightly deformed glasses on his face.

The landscape surrounding Tony disappeared, the inside of the UN building replacing it. T’Challa drew in a sharp breath. He could see himself, alert, but listening to his father’s speech. He was looking out the window, and T’Challa felt a twinge when he saw determination on his face as he turned towards his father. Determination, alarm, and half-hidden fear. It must have been what made
Tony send the suit to T’Chaka. Then everything happened like T’Challa knew, and stopped with T’Chaka being wrapped up in metal.

“If I can reproduce it, I can change it,” Tony said, watching T’Challa again.

In the next scenario T’Challa had on a fetching tie-dyed shirt, and flower crown. Tulips, he believed. The bomb exploded with confetti, no one was hurt. The Tony of the scenario bowed.

Teela make a noise, somewhere between confused and amused, but T’Challa understood what Tony had said differently.

“What do you need to change so I make it to him?” T’Challa asked.

Tony pressed his lips together. “Yeah, that was exactly what you were supposed to catch,” he said sadly.

“You could only make it if you were closer, in which case you wouldn’t have seen Zemo, or if you’re abilities gave you super-speed. But say you somehow did make it…”

The scenario played with T’Challa taking the burn of the explosion with his body, covering his father. It looked brutal, and T’Challa would guess that he probably would have some serious wounds. Maybe even mortal ones. But he made it. He reached his father. It was… an unsettlingly good feeling.

From the corner of his eye, however, T’Challa saw Teela twitch, and freeze. T’Challa turned to look at her, and tried to see things from her perspective. For him, the possibility that he didn’t reach his father, and T’Chaka didn’t have the Iron Man suit protecting him, was unconscionable, but for the Teela so was the possibility that T’Challa did.

T’Challa closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. None of the two possibilities were real, none of them had happened. The truth of the matter was that Tony saw T’Challa’s reaction so he called the suit, and T’Chaka was saved.

But what if the truth had been worse?

Tony took off his glasses, and crossed the room to kneel at T’Challa’s feet. He silently took T’Challa’s hand between his own. T’Challa leaned his forehead on them, and closed his eyes again.

“It’s not real,” T’Challa said. His brains felt scrambled by the whirlwind of ‘what ifs’—accomplishment, and peace, and guilt, and confusion.

“Some of it,” Tony temporized.

“This invention could do a lot of harm. …It could also do a lot of good,” T’Challa observed. “I think I would’ve underestimated just how much.” He raised his head to meet Tony’s eyes. “Thank you for showing it to me. That scenario in particular.”

Tony inclined his head, taking the opportunity to break eye contact. “I’m a prince in my own ways.” He smiled, but it was empty. “It all starts from a memory. Any memory.”

“Are these a bribe?” Teela asked watching her desert with suspiciousness.

“Yeah, I hadn’t realized I was being subtle,” Tony replied, tense.

“You weren’t.” Teela took a mandazi, and ate it with gusto. “I didn’t like seeing it, but I did want
know what happened in there in as much detail as possible.” She paused. “It was helpful to see what could have happened.” She chose another *mandazi*. “But this device… it gives birth to many questions. It’s addictive. You made me understand just how easy it would be to be drawn in, even for one such as myself. A punch during training. No bribe is necessary, but it’s welcome nonetheless.” She inclined her head in approval.

T’Challa was simply grateful for the anchor that constituted Tony’s hands. “Addictive,” T’Challa said, and took deep breath. He examined the word, weighing it for what it was worth. “And with so many applications. Why would you let it out of sight?”

Tony opened his mouth to answer, but T’Challa figured it out first.

“Barnes,” T’Challa said, and Tony’s mouth closed with a click. He smiled, and shrugged. T’Challa went through what he knew, and continued, “Of Roger’s team, only Maximoff got bail, correct?”

Tony smirked. “For a value of ‘getting bail,’ yeah.”

T’Challa patted the couch beside him, before releasing Tony’s hands.

“Stark Legal managed to successfully argue cruel and unusual punishment due to the collar that negated her abilities, which was the only way the UN had of neutralizing them. She was entrusted to Professor Xavier until trail,” T’Challa said, choosing to highlight Tony’s role in the proceedings by reminding him that he was the only reason they could afford proper council, and were not relegated to some form of Court Appointed Counsel. “If I’m not mistaken, she is to stay in a mostly bare room, with a bathroom attached, to avoid the impression of favoritism based on her abilities. Though, of course she is, since the governments were unable to come up with some sort of cell that would negate her powers.”

Tony sat down, though he kept his hand loosely on T’Challa’s wrist, something for which T’Challa was quietly grateful.

“Rumor says,” Teela intervened, a long custom of not letting T’Challa give any credence to gossip, that obviously was deeply ingrained since she was doing it with Tony, “that Professor Xavier himself offered to temporarily block her powers if she was found guilty on the duration of her jail sentence.”

“She won’t. Well, not for Lagos anyway. At least, she’s comfy. It’s not the Avengers Compound, with a lot of space, and state of art facilities, but at least its Captain approved.” Tony rolled his eyes. “Also, we managed to make the humans question their humanity, so score for super-humans.”

“And the people who want to see justice done,” T’Challa added.

Tony’s smile was mostly in his eyes, and it warmed T’Challa who offered him the box that contained the desert.

“No one else got bail,” T’Challa said, to give Tony time to swallow his *mandazi*, and to come back to the previous topic.

“And maybe they should have,” Tony said firmly. “Barnes was held prisoner for decades; he was tortured, and brain-washed. He’s not my favorite person, but I… am not okay with that. The trouble is, since he can be triggered into a killing machine, he would never see a psychiatrist who has the time, the brains, and the technology to deal with that kind of baggage.”

T’Challa agreed, but realized it went further than that. It meant that Tony thought his invention could help Barnes. “The device—"
“BARF,” Tony chirruped innocently.

T’Challa gave Tony a look, but Tony just grinned widely back.

“The B. A. R. F.,” T’Challa dodged, and smirked at Tony in return, “can be the key. I’d have to look further into the science behind the device, but I trust your expert opinion in this matter since you invented it. Now, what I can offer you are the tribe’s physicians—psychologists, neurologists, psychologists—and we’ll talk more about what other specialists may be needed—along with the space necessary to conduct their research. However, I can’t offer you anonymity. You will have to communicate with them in order to expedite their understanding of the invention.”

“As long as we can keep it under wraps,” Tony warned.

“It’s why I offered the tribe’s services, and not the country’s. Nobody will say a word,” T’Challa vowed.

“I was wondering about that. Do all the tribes have their own medical team? And if they do, is one tribe better than the other?” Tony asked.

“Yes, each tribe has a medical team,” T’Challa offered. “It’s similar to your hospitals. Yes, the tribes vary in the skill of the specialists, but I assure you Panther is one of the best. Our interest is in science, as opposed to Butterfly, Impala, or Nightingale.”

T’Challa felt the need to clarify. “We are all a warrior culture, we have that in common. But in some areas we diverge in our interests. Some use technology in arts, others—few fortunately—loathe it. We have diverse paths; it is one of the signs of social development.” He summarized, “We have singers, though they don’t compare with Nightingale’s. They have doctors, but we have the specialists.”

“Wait a second,” Tony requested, palms up. “The specialists of an already medically advanced country?”

T’Challa nodded, slightly smug.

“Well, at least I won’t get bored,” Tony said dryly, but his eyes were twinkling.

Tony and T’Challa were going over the details, lightly flirting and bantering like old friends, when Teela announced that the paparazzi had arrived.

“They’re going to have to wait,” T’Challa said to Tony’s amusement.

And they did, because, for the next three hours that T’Challa got to know Tony a bit better, they didn’t move.

There was the also the matter of the telephone number that was given enough humorous asides from all three of them to ease the tension in Teela’s spine. A lesson to be learned, certainly, but T’Challa was convinced that it would not soon be forgotten by all involved. In the end, they decided that the safest opinion was to get a new one that T’Challa agreed to share with Tony.

T’Challa finally left with Teela, Nareema, and Daraja keeping a loose perimeter around him. And there the paparazzi were, flashing away, and asking questions meant to provoke. He exchanged an annoyed look with an alert Kelile when she opened the car door, Olayemi already in the driver’s seat.

“Odd world,” Daraja commented in Wakandan, and T’Challa found himself agreeing.
People try to open T’Challa's eyes about Tony. Some have more reason than others. Ororo worries.

The next morning T’Challa blinked at the headlines. He tilted his head, but they didn’t change. More blinking didn’t help. A noise made his attention shift from the tablet—thank the Panther God!—and to his Stark phone. Apparently his sister had got his new number, and was calling.

“Brother!” Shuri cried gleefully in Wakandan. “Have you seen the news today?”

“I hope not,” T’Challa answered dryly.

“That means you have!”

“Hallucinations were still a possibility.”

Shuri cackled.

“Does it actually say: ‘Slutty Stark Whores Himself for Vibranium’?” T’Challa asked, switching back to English to read the title in its original language.

Shuri interrupted her mirth abruptly. “Yes. Many have taken that approach,” she said disapprovingly. Her tone lightened, “Though I was referring to the ones making you sound like prey.”

“Those are disturbing in their own way. ‘Kid Royalty Seduced by Experienced Futurist: Why We Should All Worry for His Virtue?’ I can’t put my finger on the part that offends me most,” T’Challa complained.

“I read that one in its entirety,” Shuri gushed. “It stated with getting your age wrong, you are barely twenty according to this publication, and it got worse.”

“I think I found the worst one,” T’Challa said absent-mindedly, sending Shuri a link.

Shuri paused. “It’s so ludicrous that I’m almost not offended.”

‘Stark Taking What’s Owed: Orgy with Wakandan Prince and Sex Slaves.’

“‘Almost’ being the key word,” T’Challa added.

T’Challa made eye contact with Shuri through the video link, and they both burst into laughter.

“Something else to deal with, I suppose,” T’Challa said, tiredly.

The world was proven to be a big place, with continuous challenges, and strange customs. Somehow, not paying attention and even avoiding the tabloids as a student was different when one starred in them. But, T’Challa would not be deterred.

“I am glad to hear you have visited Tony.”
T'Challa laughed, remembering the message he had yet to give. “Tony says congratulations on your accomplishments as a warrior. He seemed to be sincerely delighted when he heard about them.”

Shuri beamed. “Ask if we could get in contact. I feel left out.”

“I will.” T’Challa smiled.

“Until next time then, brother,” Shuri said and smiled back. “Home is safe, and we are looking forward for you to be among us again.”

“As do I, sister. Until next time.”

T’Challa remained watching the screen, thinking of an acceptable way to deal with the tabloid problem, when it lit up again.

He accepted the call, with a raised eyebrow. “Good morning, Tony.”

Tony came into view, looking disheveled, with a maniac look in his eyes, and a small screwdriver behind his left ear.

“How old are you?”

T’Challa’s eyebrow rose higher. “Thirty-four.”

Tony took the screwdriver and flipped it in his hand. “Yay,” he said cheerfully, and danced a bit on the spot, wiggling his hips. “Wait.” He stopped, much to T’Challa’s strange disappointment. “Do you grow old?”

“I age normally,” T’Challa answered, amused.

Tony danced a bit more, and then put the screwdriver back in its place behind his ear. “My dear, gorgeous, kitty-looking cat, do you know how frustrating it is to find information about you? I bravely resisted the temptation to hack Wakanda. I leave that for the second date.” He smirked, eyes gleaming.

T’Challa laughed. “I never questioned your bravery.” And because it needed to be said, he added, “And Wakanda doesn’t endorse prostitution, especially for paying a debt.”

“What?!” Tony’s eyes widened dramatically. “But everybody knows that climbing down a building gets me going.”

“I’ll be sure to remember that.”

Tony chuckled. “Do.” His tone sobered. “Since you seem fixed on it, what does the debt mean?”

“That you are owed respect, and help,” T’Challa said simply.

Tony scratched his head with the screwdriver. “That’s both more and less than I imagined.”

“Debts are sometimes the means through which we know a person. They can be the beginning as well as the end,” T’Challa hedged. “You and Teela seem to get on fine. There is no more debt between us, but we have built a relationship on our own.”

Tony’s head snapped up. “Are you saying you’re sweet on little, old me?”

“You’re eight years older, Tony, hardly my grandfather’s age,” T’Challa said dryly. “And yes, I am.
But what I’m saying is, don’t dismiss a relationship you form, a bond you develop, because you imagine people are paying their debts. You did something for us, maybe unknowingly, but you have proved that you are a person with potential. To respect, and want to help you is natural, as is the human curiosity to know more.”

Tony snorted, but nodded so T’Challa would know he would think about it. “And now you are going to ask…”

T’Challa swallowed his smile. “May I put you in contact with my sister?”

Tony threw his head back, and laughed a great heaving laugh that managed to inspire chuckles in T’Challa. “Sure, go ahead,” Tony said, eyes blazing with amusement.

“Very well.”

Tony frowned. “Scroll back. Did you just say you were sweet on me?”

T’Challa couldn’t hold his composure anymore, and a deep laugh escaped him, to Tony’s smug pleasure.

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The second day of session T’Challa spent more time trying to be polite to the people that saw fit to comment on the Tony situation, than trying to make the amends necessary to make an acceptable motion.

After the events surrounding Barnes’ capture tensions were high. People were scared, and other people were capitalizing on that fear. But through his intelligence, negotiation skills, diplomatic approach, and knowledge of law, he could contribute to the changes made. It was a slow, but steady process.

Oddly enough, so was losing his patience.

“I’m sorry to say, I see the appeal, but if you’d allow me Your Highness, you could do better,” the guard at the door said in quiet Swahili.

“I disagree.”

Or, “What do you have to comment on rumors of the doomed romantic relationship between Mr. Stark and you?” a reporter asked.

“His Highness does not comment on rumors,” Teela hissed.

Or, “It is not politically sound to tie your name to his, Your Highness,” the German representative said loftily.

“I thank you for the advice.”

Even, “It’s disgusting. You are both men,” a man at the restaurant said during the lunch break.

“Cultural differences.”

And, “Sweetie, he’s not good for you,” an aid to the US representative said.

“Madam, I don’t even know your name.”
What took care of his dwindling patience was a hit from somebody who should have known better.

“Ororo,” T’Challa said warmly.

T’Challa was so glad to see a familiar face that he took a step forward. When she tensed, he stopped, and remembered why such a lovely woman was his former lover. She didn’t want to fit in his tribe because she had her family of choice already, and so she was weary of displays of affection, or better yet suspicious. She always feared losing the X-Men, or taking him from his tribe, so she tried her best not to give the wrong impression, especially after their relationship ended amiably.

They had had different goals, but he held her in the highest regard.

“T’Challa,” Ororo said, and smiled in that tranquil way of hers. “I hope you and yours are prosperous, and healthy.”

“They are, thank you. And, of course, I wish the same to you.”

She nodded, acknowledging his greeting.

“Listen, T’Challa, unfortunately we don’t have the time to put it delicately, but my hope is that you’ll pause and think about this,” Ororo began, and T’Challa felt his jaw clench in anticipation. “Not all rumors are false. Especially when Tony Stark is concerned.”

That was it—his patience was gone.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said, getting angry. “I know what you, your tribe, and your whole country, like to think about rumors and gossip. But don’t do the stupid thing, just because it’s honorable.”

T’Challa couldn’t say anything, because all he had to say would be as effective towards persuading her as not saying anything at all.

“You are a rational man before all else,” Ororo appealed.

T’Challa remained silent and watchful.

Ororo sighed and left. T’Challa went to move, but before he could Ororo turned. She got close to him.

“I am listening,” Ororo declared. “This is not like you. You have too much responsibility to waste it all on Tony Stark. Defend him to someone who is willing to hear you out.”

T’Challa sidestepped her. Ororo had shot first, and asked questions later. Furthermore, it was T’Challa’s choice if he wanted to explain his behavior, and not her right to demand anything, seeing as his tying his name to Tony didn’t have an impact on her, except in the form of concern for him. He could understand the feeling; however, it was not an excuse. Still, she was Ororo, and there was a last favor T’Challa could do for her.

When he was level with her, T’Challa turned his head, and said, “Rumor, and gossip could muddy the waters so much that a rational, intelligent, woman could talk about a man she has no non-biased, first-hand knowledge about as if she were his sister. She may be right, or she may be wrong, but she wouldn’t find out with any certainty either way. I think I’ll maintain my stance on them. Good day.”

He returned to the session.
“You’re pissed,” Tony said cheerfully, as he walked along with him appearing out of nowhere. He sneaked a hand to give a squeeze to T’Challa’s wrist. “Lighten up, at least three representatives were ready to come to blows when we took the break. I bet we can reach five by the time the day’s out.”

T’Challa felt himself relaxing. “Aim high. Say seven.”

“Stop encouraging me, Garfield.” Tony chuckled.

T’Challa grinned, light-hearted for the first time since the session started. As he made his way through the door with Tony, he saw Ororo from the corner of his eye when he gestured for Tony to enter first. She would call his behavior arrogant, or perhaps stubborn, and it was in a way. But in another way, she was wrong.

He was negotiating from a position of power. His country had a lot more to offer, than they could receive, and it would not do to see him fold at the first sign of discontent from outside pressures. Of course, he was bound by the same rules, and he would have to explain himself if his freedom infringed on other’s rights, but in ‘dating’ Tony, no such situations arose.

In fact, T’Challa couldn’t have crafted a better situation for establishing that he would not cave, since Tony was, when one stopped to think about it, an influential man. There were three reasons for everyone saying differently: those who did so out concern to T’Challa’s feelings; those who liked a scandal, and to stir up trouble, for trouble’s sake; and those who feared what they could do together. As such no one would believe T’Challa if he declared that nothing had happened, at least not at first. That was not as bad as it may be believed, because he had no wish to deny his involvement with Tony—even if it was more exaggerated than the reality—and it was great bait.

Predators like him knew the value of ‘watch and wait.’

Nonetheless, the pressure was not comfortable, and other people interfering in his private life annoyed T’Challa. He would need to do something about it eventually, but, at the moment, he would have to bear the weight of other people opinions foisted on him. But Ororo he had not expected and truth be told he was reminded of many instances of their relationship he would rather not revisit.

“How are you holding up?” Tony asked casually, while they made their way to T’Challa’s seat.

“Surprised at the outpour of misplaced concern.”

“Yes, you’re everybody’s favorite grandson, or wet dream, people are going to make their self-righteous opinion known. But what I find interesting is that you haven’t denied any of it. Not even a few words to give them the official version. Now, why would you do something like that?” Tony smirked, playful, as if he suspected the answer, or at least, he suspected it to be devious.

T’Challa was sure that his amusement was rolling out of him in waves. “You haven’t denied it, either.”

“I can afford to wait, and see.”

“So can I.”

Tony studied T’Challa, mind whirling away, when T’Challa added. “I hope our association does not cause you grief with something, or somebody important, and you must know that you can deny it at any time. I’ll support your version of the events, provided that it does not put my country and me in a bad light. But I’m not ashamed of our relationship, even if it’s not faithfully depicted in the media, especially when people have the most interesting reaction to it. It doesn’t please me, I'll admit, but it also offers a different perspective.”
They reached the place reserved for the Wakandan representative.

“Ms. Munroe?” Tony asked lightly.

“A former lover's care.”

Tony’s eyebrows rose, but he didn’t comment further. “My company’s stock prices are going steadily up, to the confused irritation of my… former lover.” He chuckled. “And doesn’t that imply good things about my character?”

“It implies that your investors don’t believe you're only thinking about sex.”

“Or that I'm so good at it, that I'll get Wakandan technology.” Tony winked. “We’re also trending on just about everything so this is a great time to have what you want printed.”

“There will be time for that later.”

“Is that so?” The bell rang announcing the start of the session. Tony shrugged, eyes searching. “I guess it will.”

* 

The third day was when Tony called Shuri; they bonded over ridiculous tabloid stories, and found a reason to keep in touch: Shuri agreed to teach him Wakandan, while in exchange she got the chance to practice her Italian with Tony. Childhood stories about T’Challa were the cherries on top for both of them, a constant source of amusement for Shuri to tell, and Tony to listen. A bond was forming, but T’Challa wouldn’t know about it for a time yet.

* 

“Have you spoken with Tony about his project?”

T’Challa was at the Wakandan embassy in Kenya, having a video call with the tribe’s Head of Medical, a brilliant Neurologist. He had been in Kenya for going on two weeks, had sent the device home with a team of Doras by bird more than a week ago, along with Tony's number and email, and he hoped that the doctors and Tony managed to find a way to communicate. T’Challa needed to find out one way or the other.

“Ah, Mr. Stark, Tony, yes.”

T’Challa waited, but that was it, that was all Tia said. She was a genius, and, as expected, she had problems with inter-personal interactions of any kind, especially spoken ones. Luckily for her, her intelligence allowed her some eccentricities, she got along perfectly with everybody once the subject touched the medical field even tangentially, and they had an administrator that translated Tia-speech into numbers, requests, and results.

“Is it possible for the device to help in Barnes’ case?” T’Challa tried.

“Oh, yes, yes. Tony has some interesting ideas, we'll have to tweak them, naturally, medicine isn’t his specialty, but they are generally pertinent. And creative. I really think we could run with them. Psychology has a bigger role than expected, so it’s a team effort, but we may be on the way to find a new, more holistic approach to treat trauma.”

“Good, congratulations.” T’Challa smiled at her enthusiasm. “Is Azizi going to have trouble getting ahold of Barnes’ records?” he asked, wondering if he would be needed to help the Administrator.
Tia shrugged with her whole body. “Tony thinks you will need to intervene, but I don’t really know.”

T’Challa should probably investigate how to go about doing that. He definitely needed help, and had been reviewing résumés, but apparently it was becoming vital. Maybe T’Challa could ask Tony for an opinion on Personal Assistants.

“Is it—” Tia interrupted herself, biting her lips. She had never reacted like that to anything in T’Challa’s presence, so he was immediately worried. “I was wondering, since now Wakanda is rejoining the world, if… you understand, I'm not saying that he should, and maybe we can go to the United States…”

T’Challa smiled. “Tony has a standing invitation to visit Wakanda.” Tia was visibility relieved, and T’Challa continued, “An invitation that he said he'll honor in time.”

Tia grinned brightly.

*

“Tony, do you have a minute?”

“Sure,” Tony said. “Come me while I buy a coffee?”

T’Challa nodded. “I need a personal assistant, but I have no experience with choosing one. Any advice?”

Tony looked in the distance, and smiled softly. “Find somebody who’s willing to put up with you, but they’re always ready to call out on your shit.” He turned to T’Challa, smirking. “In the end, only the ones I built made it.”

It didn’t sit right with T’Challa.

“You adapted to some huge changes,” T’Challa tried to explain. “People with very developed organizational skills are not the most flexible.”

“That’s… rational.”

T’Challa would describe Tony’s expression as befuddled.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thank you, Herbeloved82 for your help! To see the translation, hover above the Italian phrase, or look at the end notes. I hope that's okay for everyone.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

T'Challa had postponed hiring a PA, but he flew in an aid, Zaida—not the doctor, though they had the same name. She was an expert in World Law, Politics, and History, a newly acquired member to the Panther Tribe, but one that had never stepped a foot outside Wakanda. She didn’t like it.

Zaida did manage to find out that the easiest way to obtain access to Barnes’ medical records: get Barnes’ consent. T'Challa knew that already, but she again proved her usefulness, and knowledge, when she got him in a defense meeting with Rogers’ team and their lawyers. After she did that, however, she returned to Wakanda, until her expertise was needed again to wrangle laws into submission.

He found himself understanding perfectly why Zaida left. It was frustrating to the highest degree, similar to striking his head against the wall, and almost impossible to get any headway, especially when he took into account his own opinions. He had dealt with these people before, how could he forget?

They didn’t help their lawyers, didn’t listen to them, and continuously doubted their motives.

And Tony’s. If T'Challa heard them one more time complaining about Tony, and his money, or his actions he would… Barton grumbled something about backstabbing futurists, and that was it.

Sometimes T'Challa wondered why he kept loosing his patience, and then he realized he never had it to begin with, not really… How did his father put it? Calm on the outside, vicious on the inside? That sounded about right.

“How are we supposed to know that what you’re telling is the truth?” Rogers asked.

“We have to tell you the truth, otherwise we'd be disbarred,” Mr. Lazarus, Rogers’ lawyer and one of the Heads at Stark Legal, said. “And, if you want more proof, Cameron, that's Mr. Fast to you, got Ms. Maximoff out of jail.”

“And into another one,” Barton growled.

Lazarus looked at each of Rogers’ team in turn, then at the conference/guards’ break room, and finally at T'Challa. “It’s your right,” Lazarus said, and shrugged.

“I don’t want Stark’s people defending me, either,” Barton sneered.

“And not me,” Maximoff said, through her lawyer's phone.

Ms. Gustav's and Mr. Fast's faces were studies of extreme irritation.

“Do you have another lawyer in mind that I should call, or is the court going to appoint one?”
Lazarus asked before more people joined the pile.

Rogers floundered.

Lazarus rolled his eyes. “Then tell me what resources you have, and I’ll give you some names.”

“Unlimited,” Barton said, and bared his teeth. “And we won’t need your help.”

Lazarus frowned, and arranged his cufflinks in what was obviously an attempt to stall. He exchanged meaningful looks with Gustav and Fast. T’Challa had a bad feeling about the conclusion Lazarus reached.

“Neither of you has money,” Lazarus said arrogantly, looking to provoke them into giving a truthful answer.

“Stark’s goi—”

“Don’t!”

Maximoff and Romanoff spoke at the same time, but Maximoff had said enough.

Lazarus was incredulous. “You expect Mr. Stark to pay for another defense?! You already have the best.”

T’Challa took his bead bracelet and threw it on the table. The vibranium made a ‘clonk’ sound. Everybody shut up.

“That,” T’Challa said, and gestured to the bracelet, “is made out of vibranium. Do you expect me to give it to you?” He paused, then added, “And do you posses the arrogance to order me to give vibranium to have another made if you find some perceived flaw?”

“That’s not the same,” Rogers said earnestly, something much too close to pity in his eyes.

“Of course not, Rogers,” T’Challa rejoined. “Wakanda has more vibranium than Tony Stark has money.”

“Stark inherited most of his money from his father,” Barton dismissed. “Vibranium didn’t fall out of the sky.”

Oh, Barton had no idea. But T’Challa didn’t want to say anything about that, so he told Barton instead, “Vibranium is a natural resource. We have inherited all of it.”

“And no, Mr. Stark didn’t,” Lazarus said, apparently bored, if one ignored the white knuckle grip he had on his pen, under the table. “He had money, sure, but he made a lot more himself.”

“From weapons,” Maximoff hissed.

“We make vibranium weapons,” T’Challa offered.

“Again no, Mr. Stark didn’t.” Lazarus sounded more bored the angrier he became. “He’s a prime tech manufacturer, and an important figure in the Clean Energy Industry.”

“Your Highness, the effort your country makes to dig up vibranium can’t be questioned.” Rogers tried to find a way out.

“If you think that what Tony does is without effort, you're simply wrong,” T’Challa said decisively.
He prowled to the table, recovered the bead bracelet, and put it back on.

“Stark needs to pay for his betrayal,” Barton spit.

“What betrayal?” Gustav asked cuttingly.

“For the Accords,” Barton said.

“Okay, you are obviously confused, so I’m going to explain this to do you again. Even though I already explained it. Seven times.” Gustav huffed. “One: Mr. Stark listened to the will of, at the time, 117 countries. Two: He recognized that it could be used against certain categories of people, and he moved to be in a position to make amends to the Accords. Three: He was trying to stop civilians from being killed. Four: He was trying to stop LEOs from being killed. And five: He was trying to stop you from killing, and getting killed. How is does any of that qualify as betrayal?”

“He put us in here,” Barton returned.

“In fact, Mr. Stark did no such thing,” Romanoff’s lawyer, Ms. Saito said. “You are arrested for aiding and abetting a fugitive, a suspected terrorist, and a confirmed assassin. There is proof that he did not commit the attack on the UN, and there may be a chance that Peter—Mr. Shultz—can prove brain washing. If it was only that you would have to wait for the trial and you will be home free.”

“But it wasn’t,” Mr. Kowalski, Wilson’s counsel, said. “When Mr. Barnes was first apprehended, there were huge damages, but also twenty-one people got injured, and six more died.”

“Then,” Ms. Teixeira, Lang’s attorney, said, “Mr. Barnes escaped. Making him a definite fugitive, so the aiding and abetting, the destruction of private property, the assault on the team sent after you, and the extensive injuries sustained by Rhodes, are on all of you.”

“Conclusion,” Shultz sang. “Mr. Stark didn’t put you in here.”

“I’m sorry,” Rogers said, shaking his head. “I don’t believe you would put in your best effort.”

“Fine,” Lazarus said. “But you’ll have to answer my question. I have to hear from Mr. Stark that you are guaranteed a payment, and a plan for getting a lawyer.”

“Why?” Rogers asked.

Lazarus yawned, and said, “Because I’m a professional.”

T’Challa turned to hide a smile.

“How come you get signal in here?” Lang asked curiously, leaning forward.

Teixeira glanced at Lang. “Stark phones.”

“Ah.” Lang watched Lazarus as he took out his phone. “Captain America didn’t speak for everyone, right?”

“No.” Teixeira smirked.

Barton’s head snapped up. “What?”

“I’m sorry, okay.” Lang put his hands up. “I have a daughter, no money, and Stark doesn’t even know my name. I’m playing the probabilities here. And… you know I won’t lie. I thought I was doing the right thing. Now’s my chance to actually do it.”
"I have a family too!" Barton shouted.

"You also have the right to a lawyer," Teixeira said. "And so does he. So how about you let off on
the peer pressure?"

Barton opened his mouth, angry, but Rogers caught his eye.

"She’s right," Rogers said, his tone sad.

"I’m taking the risk with Ms. Saito, too," Romanoff admitted.

"Kowalski has experience in cases involving the military," Wilson said apologetically. "I’m in deep,
Steve."

Rogers responded with an understanding nod.

But when Barnes opened his mouth, Shultz interrupted him with a fluttering gesture. "You don’t
have all the information yet. Your Highness?"

T’Challa ordered his thoughts, and took a small step forward.

"There is a chance that the doctors in Wakanda—in collaboration with third parties, one of them
being me—may have discovered a solution to your trigger problem," T’Challa summarized.

Barnes was shocked. As was much of Rogers’ team. They had been told it was impossible.

"What’s the catch?" Barnes asked, while blinking fast a few times. He rubbed his forehead roughly.

"The original device was invented by Tony Stark," T’Challa said, as warmly as possible. "He also
helped with the development of the solution. Also, it has only been tested on Wakanda, due to the
obvious constraints, and the device is mentally addictive. The effect might increase with the amount
of trauma you suffered."

"No," Rogers pronounced.

Barnes froze.

"Your Highness, you said there was a chance. What are the odds?" Romanoff asked.

"Right now, the treatment is an extraordinarily efficient in treating PTSD. An unbelievable 90%
chance of success, in fact." Romanoff eyebrows flew up, and T’Challa nodded. "Prolonged exposure
is the only treatment that gets any close to it, with 80%. This technique is based on a high-tech
version of it, combined with therapy, and neurological treatment. Unfortunately, it's still new and no
longitudinal studies have been performed. We could wait—"

"No," Barnes whispered.

That could mean ‘no’ to the wait, or ‘no’ to the treatment.

T’Challa switched tracks. "We can’t know what effect it will have on someone with your amount of
trauma, but it was developed with you in mind. As such it would require further study, certainly, but
it would be changed according to your file and your experiences if you ever decide to follow the
treatment."

"What?" Barnes asked desperately.
Rogers sighed. “Bucky…”

“Can yo—Can you, please, answer me?” Barnes insisted.

“Tony brought the device to my attention, specifically for you. The doctors developed this treatment with someone with condition in mind. Furthermo—”

“It’s a trap,” Rogers said, with his chin set.

“It’s not a trap, but I would need your consent for my team to review your medical file, before I can be more exact.” T’Challa explained.

Barnes was clearly thinking about it. “I’ll do it.”

“I won’t allow that,” Rogers said.

Barnes blinked, tilted his head, a small smile on his face. “I want to do it.”

Rogers hesitated. “Bucky, you can’t make a decision on your own…”

Barnes frowned.

Shultz saw his chance, so he took it. “Baring the situation in which it could cause any further damage, I can argue for the necessity of treatment.”

“If you are my lawyer,” Barnes said softly.

“Me or your new lawyer,” Shultz said, doing a drumroll on the surface of the table. “Maybe you can actually get some help, some control back, some peace, and maybe, in time, a breath of fresh air.” He leaned back, shrugging. “But you don’t care about that, because you're depressed, and feel like you don’t deserve it. You’re wrong by the way.” He brightened. “So I have another reason for keeping me as your lawyer and letting me find out all I can about this treatment, because this might be a game changer. Why don’t you think about it as recompense for Mr. Stark’s parents?”

Shultz’s colleagues didn’t react, but they were the only ones. Romanoff blinked started, Lang and Maximoff gasped, Wilson raised his eyebrows, Barton frowned, and Rogers was so enraged, he was speechless. It even made an impression on T’Challa.

“Bucky, he’s manipulating you!” Rogers shouted.

“I’m appealing to your guilt, yes. Seeing as I'm saying it outright, it’s not manipulation, but it’s not nice either.” Shultz scrutinized Barnes, lips pressed together. “It’s also not a new thought.”

Barnes looked down.

“And that was my case, I owed Mr. Stark to try,” Shultz said. “Let me know what you decide.”

Barnes nodded.

“Tony’s a good man,” Rogers started, unwilling to let it go. “But he makes mistakes. He has an idea, and it haunts him. He gets reckless, deaf to the world and consequences, sometimes downright dumb.”

T’Challa couldn’t believe Rogers had said the last sentence.

“I’m not going to let you be another mistake,” Rogers said earnestly.
“I knew you,” Barnes whispered.

Rogers frowned. “Yes.”

“No.” Barnes shook his head. “I knew you when you were five foot nothin’, sick as all hell, and bent on joining the army, so you don’t get to talk.” He licked his lips, and took a deep breath, “I made so many mistakes, and I didn’t even try to do the right thing. I ran, and I fought.” Barnes watched his knuckles. “I killed his parents, and he tried his best to help. We don’t get to talk.”

Rogers went to add something when Wilson interrupted, “Wait a sec, just... wait.”

Wilson lifted his head. “Answer me one question, Your Highness.”

T’Challa inclined his head, but didn’t agree to anything.

“What is the neurological treatment?” Wilson asked.

T’Challa thought about it, and decided to answer. “African traditional teas.” Wilson frowned, so T’Challa added, “Natural, fragrant, warm, calming teas. Sometimes sweet ones.”

Wilson was obviously surprised. “What?!”

“They need to be as calm as possible during the procedure, while still being aware of everything that’s happening,” T’Challa explained. “It’s possible that for you, Mr. Barnes, to add some tranquilizers. They’ll have to see how much, because the idea is to give you enough to make you calm, and not to interfere in any way with your ability to focus and think clearly.”

“What is the procedure?” Romanoff asked.

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that,” T’Challa said.

Barnes seemed slightly anxious at T’Challa’s reticence to reveal anything, but determined.

Romanoff raised an eyebrow. “And do you want him to consent to the procedure without any information?”

“No,” T’Challa replied simply.

“His Highness wants access to Bucky’s medical file before he tells him anything more,” Shultz said.

“Considering what is at stake, it seems prudent,” Saito offered her opinion.

Rogers sighed deeply. “I’ve had enough of this secrecy.” He shook his head in the resulting silence.

“When you refuse the truth, and keep your own secrets, that particular statement is much less effective,” T’Challa interjected dryly.

“I won’t allow it, Bucky,” Rogers warned, ignoring T’Challa.

Barnes smiled faintly. “It’s my choice, Stevie.”

“I don’t think it is,” Rogers said softly.

“It’s my choice,” Barnes repeated. “Just like it was your choice when you volunteered to be a guinea pig for a handful of strangers for something that you didn’t know anything about and was painful as hell.”
“That’s not the same,” Rogers pleaded.

“The hell it isn’t,” Barnes said softly, but firmly.

Heaving a great sigh, Rogers backed down. “Okay, Bucky.” He didn’t look too convinced, and he would probably try again another day, but he accepted it for the moment.

Shultz let his fingers drum on the table, subtly attracting Barnes’ attention, but not pressuring him.

Anymore.

“I’ll go with Stark.” Barnes shrugged.

Shultz grinned hugely. “Let’s see how it goes.” He winked.

Barnes didn’t seem so hopeful.

“Anybody else want to change their vote?” Lazarus offered, phone on the table.

When Wilson looked like he had doubts, Lazarus rolled his eyes, and called, turning his phone so the whole room could be seen.

As soon as Tony’s image appeared, Lazarus explained, “Mr. Stark, I'm at the RAFT, and apparently some of your… colleagues are refusing our counsel.”

To T’Challa’s surprise, Lazarus didn’t say anything more.

“That was sudden.” Tony looked and sounded half awake. “Is that my favorite panther?” He took a large gulp of his coffee. “What the fuck is going on there?” Tony squinted.

Lazarus continued his explanation patiently, “We have a defense meeting, but we ran into some trouble, when—”

“You realized that your reality isn't theirs? Got it. Could have prepared you better,” Tony interrupted.

“Jinx, what are you doing there?”

“I obtained consent from Mr. Barnes for the release of his medical records,” T’Challa responded.

Tony grinned brightly in T’Challa’s direction, before he turned to Lazarus. “What can I do for you?”

Lazarus smiled at Rogers and Barton, making a generous gesture inviting them to talk.

“You owe us,” Barton said.

Rogers winced, and said earnestly, “Tony, this is a difficult situation, and we think that… other lawyers would be better suited for us.”

Tony did that strange thing when he couldn’t decide if he wanted to frown or smile, and instead broadcasted that his heart was breaking. It made him look terribly vulnerable. T’Challa hated Tony’s expression, and hated that that people who made it appear were seeing it, and hated that they were indifferent to it.

T’Challa protective instincts were like running gazelles: many and trampling over everything.

“Us?” Tony asked, and his voice was firm.
T'Challa was impressed—sad, but impressed.

“Wanda, Clint and me,” Rogers said.

“Not Barnes?” Tony asked, startled.

“No,” Barnes whispered. And then louder, “No.”

Tony seemed taken aback, but was obviously willing to roll with it. “Okay. Sure. It’s still not clear to me why you called.”

“That’s it?” Barnes asked, voice stronger.

Tony’s eyes were squinted, which could mean that he had no idea what was going on, or that he wasn’t awake yet, and he took another gulp of coffee. “Yeah.”

Barnes and Tony glared at each other in confusion.

Lazarus snorted, and then came back to the subject. “They don’t want us, but…”

“We need you to pay for the new lawyers,” Rogers said, eyes wide and beseeching.

Tony’s head jerked in a nodding motion. “What do you think, Maneki Neko?”

T’Challa was amused at Tony’s new nickname, and glad that the Tony could still joke, but T’Challa wanted to offer an anchor for Tony. Something that would tell him without a doubt, that T’Challa would be there for Tony no matter what. Then T’Challa remembered Tony talking with so much love of his mother, and realized the answer was easy. “Non importa che decisione prenderai, io sarò al tuo fianco.”

Tony smiled softly. “Grazie, caro.”

“Oh, I speak Italian, and I’m better than you,” Barton mumbled, but T’Challa hearing was heightened, and he caught it nonetheless.

“Maria Stark was Italian,” Romanoff whispered back.

“Tony Stark, half-Italian. It makes so much sense,” Barton said quietly.

“No, it doesn’t,” Wilson muttered.

“I don’t understand,” Tony said to the utter amazement of the room. And just as everybody was frowning, or looking at him with pity, or simply waiting for the punchline, Tony continued, “What’s to stop you for thinking—next week, next month, or whenever it occurs to you—that while I pay the new lawyers I’m telling them to do whatever I want?”

T’Challa found himself smirking, proud of Tony’s reply. The lawyers exchanged amused glances, while Rogers’ team had widely different reactions. Barnes was had a sad a half-smile, as if remembering something. Rogers and Barton were looking exasperatingly pensive, suggesting that they were, indeed, suspicious about Tony’s motives in the hypothetical situation. Lang dropped his head on the table, Wilson was looking at Rogers as if he had never seen him before, and Romanoff’s had a non-reaction that was telling in itself.

“Do you still want me to pay?” Tony asked dryly.

“No, Tony, thank you,” Rogers said. “But that doesn’t mean we don’t trust that you are trying to do
good. It’s just that the way you go about things there days. Maybe it’s better this way.”

“You could just say what an ungrateful ass you are, I’d personally hear the same thing,” Lazarus said with an eye roll. “Are we done here?” Receiving confirmation from everybody, Lazarus ended the call with a polite goodbye.

“Appointed Counsel it is,” Lazarus said decisively. “You might even be lucky, and get an attorney who wants to make some sort of point, and take you in pro bono.” He gestured something to his newly-fired colleagues, and they began to get ready to leave. “I’ll let a judge know. From now on, and until you get appointed a lawyer, you’ll be talking directly to one of the judges.”

Putting his files back in the briefcase, Lazarus took the opportunity to say his piece. “How stupid do you think Mr. Stark is, anyway?” He shook his head exaggeratedly. “He’s generous. I know that because he drew in the world’s leading criminal defense attorneys that are used to argue before the UN, put them together in a new firm, and paid them a mint. All so we could cover as many of loose ends as humanly possible. But stupid? Who would bet on Tony Stark being dumb?”

Nobody had anything to comment to that, but apparently that didn’t mean much.

“You say that Stark took lawyers from all over the world for his little firm,” Maximoff said, disdain in her every word. “You forgot to mention that he put you, his countryman, to lead it.”

“And yet again, no. Mr. Stark didn’t,” Lazarus snapped back. “I’m Canadian.”

Fast ended the call.

Chapter End Notes

Non importa che decisione prenderai, io sarò al tuo fianco. = No matter what decision you take, I’ll be by your side.

Grazie, caro. = Thank you, darling.
Chapter 6

T'Challa was back in Wakanda for a few days, in between UN sessions. He had missed home, and everybody from home, just as much as the last time he had gone away. They said that absence diminished in time, but it hadn't for him, and he never wished it had.

At the moment, T'Challa was coming up on the techno-organic jungle after he had gone for a walk through the wilderness of Wakanda. He was feeling better, stronger and calmer, than he had in weeks. The tech jungle was near the palace, so he was almost home. Just in time, because he had an idea that Tony would love having kimono beads for himself, and T'Challa would like Tony to be safe when he came to visit, so T'Challa was planning a trip to the Heads of Engineering.

But before T'Challa could, his communication bead lit up. Something was wrong, though, because it wasn’t green, to signify that he had a call from the tribe, or red for somebody from Wakanda, but from different tribe. It was a pretty pink.

T'Challa turned the bead to answer the call, confused, alarmed, and tense.

“What’s smarter than a talking cat?” a voice, Tony’s, asked cheerfully.

“Impossible,” T'Challa muttered to himself.

“Wrong,” Tony said in a joyful tone. “It’s a spelling bee!”

T'Challa, startled into temporarily staying on the subject, said, “That would mean the Wasp.”

“Different insect, but close enough. Let’s call it a tie,” Tony offered.

Seeing his chance, T'Challa proposed, “I’m willing to call it in Wasp's favor, if you tell me how you managed to access my bead.”

“I didn’t,” Tony defended. “FRIDAY did.”

“It should be impossible,” T'Challa said, but didn’t really believe it since the proof was currently blaming the AI he had created.

“Fry is a very smart girl.”

“Leaving aside the issue of compatible connectivity, where did you get my identity? From my father’s beads, from my beads, or did you go ahead and break into the Wakandan database?”

“In my defense, I did get invited to Wakanda…”

“From them all?” T'Challa asked, aghast.

“You need better firewalls,” Tony suggested. “Or… any firewalls.”

“Yes, I think we do,” T'Challa agreed.

“I won’t topple your government, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Actually, I was thinking we were lucky that it was you that got in,” T'Challa said sincerely. “Since you'd have found out a lot of the information anyway. You’re the best possible alarm signal.”
Everybody had said that no technology was safe with Tony around—T'Challa was warned.

“I’m glad you are reacting so well because I just sent malware to your bead,” Tony announced gleeefully.

T'Challa was incredulous.

He was having the feeling that he should have expected something like that. Tony wanted the knowledge at his fingertips, that was just who Tony was, but at the same time he didn’t know about the existence of the video containing his parents murder, because he didn’t know to look for it. He wanted to have access to everything, because it was important for him to get to what he wanted, when he wanted it.

Tony had respected people’s privacy as far as it was reasonable. T'Chaka needed an emergency medical procedure, Tony located his medical history. An aid had put T'Challa's phone number on the internet, so Tony used it. T'Challa had given Tony his phone number, and Tony had called T'Challa in Wakanda. Sure, that meant that Tony had access to T'Challa medical history, but he did want somebody to be able speak as to the content of his medical records in case of emergency. And Tony had access to the Wakandan database, but so had all the Wakandans. In fact, considering T'Chaka suggestion of making Tony part of the Panther Tribe, he might become a Wakandan himself.

Tony hadn't gone digging for no reason.

So the problem was trust. Did T'Challa trust Tony to have that information? And more importantly, did T'Challa trust Tony? The answer, T'Challa found out, was ‘yes, he did.’

“What does it do?” T'Challa asked, surprising himself by sounding amused.

“It connects the communication bead with the AV bead,” Tony answered delightedly. “Basically, if you start the AV bead now, we’ll see each other.”

T'Challa formed an ‘L’ with his fingers, and there Tony was—grinning with child-like joy.

“Hello, gorgeous,” T'Challa said softly.

Tony made a squeaking noise like someone had stepped on his tail. And he called T'Challa a cat.

“That’s my line!” Tony complained.

T'Challa smiled smugly. Some might even say like the cat that got the cream and the canary. Fine, maybe, some comparisons were on point, but what T'Challa really had a problem with, was him starting to make them.

“Cat burglar!” Tony mock- accused.

“Pot calling the kettle black,” T'Challa replied, amused. “By the way, why did you choose that color?”

Tony seemed suspicious. “It wasn’t gold, was it?”

T'Challa barely swallowed his laughter. “Pink.”

“Fry,” Tony said fondly, maybe a bit exasperated, but not at all annoyed. He was smiling, and rubbing a hand over his face. “Why?”

T'Challa couldn’t resist anymore, and laughed heartily.
“Boss, pink is the color of love,” FRIDAY answered earnestly.

“What did I tell you about believing the tabloids?”

“I didn’t say what kind of love,” FRIDAY remarked.

“What kind, FRIDAY?” T’Challa asked.

“All kind—platonic, romantic, familial—as long as it’s love, not lust, or passion,” FRIDAY responded.

T’Challa smiled knowing that she would see him.

Tony was glaring at nothing, a bit dramatically, before he rolled his eyes, and visibly let it go.

“I can make pink my color,” Tony said thoughtfully.

A new bout of laughter took T’Challa completely by surprise, nearly making him close his fingers. It wasn’t the thought of Tony in pink that was so funny, but rather his theatrics. The by-play between Tony and FRIDAY was something precious, heart-warming, and exceedingly entertaining.

When T’Challa recovered, Tony was smiling softly. “You should laugh more often,” Tony observed.

“Because my laugh is so beautiful?”

“Well, that, and goofy,” Tony half-agreed with a laugh of his own.

“Just when I thought you were about to be sweet,” T’Challa teased.

“I’m not sweet, I’m bitter,” Tony admitted freely. “At most, I am bitter-sweet. But it does make you look approachable.”

T’Challa grinned. “How so?”

“There are a lot of people who are beautiful, but few who let themselves be seen as less than perfect.”

Thinking about oil stains, and tousled hair, T’Challa said, “I can understand that.”

Tony’s eyebrows pinched for a second, making him look suspicious, but his blinding grin returned soon enough. “You’ve got homework, Mice Munchies.”

“I do, and our engineers do too,” T’Challa agreed. “Our engineers are plenty playful, as per their chosen profession,” He warned. “Though I’m sure you know all about it.”

“Maybe.” Tony smirked. “Tell them they can do their worst,” he challenged.

“I’m not doing that,” T’Challa refused. “But, if you want me to, I will tell them, they can contact you.”


T’Challa nodded, pleased with Tony’s reaction. “Oh, and Tony?” He needed to say it, at least once. “I trust you.”

“I’m starting to get that, yes,” Tony said. “Personally, I think we’re stupid.”
Because Tony had trusted T'Challa from beginning. Tony, who had no reason to trust anybody, had proven his trust to T'Challa on at least three occasions: when Tony exchanged information with T'Challa; when Tony watched the video of his parents' murder in the presence of T'Challa; and when Tony let T'Challa have BARF. But somehow, it had completely escaped T'Challa's notice until he couldn’t deny it anymore. He supposed that meant that he had the luxury of assuming trust, but he was Chieftain and Prince, trust was a precious commodity.

So what was it then?

T'Challa could only blame it on the ease of their relationship, but that was an odd thing to blame, so T'Challa resolved to pay better attention.

“I think we’re human, and we cannot help it,” T'Challa offered. “At our worst, we're less than perfect.”

Tony laughed, and waved. “Bye, gorgeous.”

“Until the next time, beautiful,” T'Challa said.

Tony grinned, shook his head, and ended the call.

T'Challa inhaled. He felt… happy. He was home, his country was prospering, his tribe was good, his family safe and content, and he felt Tony closer to him. For the moment, everything was fine.

He continued his walk, smiling freely at what was promising to be an interesting afternoon. When he got to the palace, he saw his sister and greeted her, and off he went to the Engineering building. Once there, he made his way to the Communication branch, amused at the raised voices he could easily hear.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, I am serious. Are you?”

“Of course I'm serious!”

“Then why are you doing that?”

“Why am I doing it?! Why are you doing it?”

“How can you do that to me?”

“How can I ask to move two palms to the right?”

“How can you steal my screen until I do?”

Chuckling, T'Challa lightly knocked on the open door to make his presence known. “Chaushiku, Ochieng, hope you are well.” He watched the twins playing keep-away with a screen, and added, “Relatively.”

“Chieftain!” The twins said at the same time, then started elbowing each other.

“I see him!” Ochieng whisper-shouted.

“Stop making me look bad!” Chaushiku complained softly at the same time.

“Are you serious?”
“Yes, I’m serious. Are you?”

And they were off again.

T’Challa rolled his eyes fondly, took off his bracelet and twirled it around a finger. They both caught the gesture, and turned to look at T’Challa, with inquiring expressions. He stopped, put the bracelet in his palm, and presented it to them. They both leaned forward, eyes scrunch up and suspicious. Chaushiku tilted her head left, and Ochieng tilted his right.

“It has acquired malware,” T’Challa said.

Their eyes got wide. They took a step back, and then in less than a second they both came back, and immediately got to work. Chaushiku scooped the bracelet from his hand, while Ochieng started to question him.

“Sir, do you suspect somebody?” Ochieng asked.

“No,” T’Challa said.

Ochieng nodded, he hadn’t expected anything different. “Do you—”

“Tony told me himself he sent a malware,” T’Challa interrupted.

Ochieng swallowed. “Tony, sir?”

“Tony Stark,” T’Challa confirmed.

Chaushiku whimpered. “He really did it.”

“He built a person,” Ochieng said in awe.

Then, to T’Challa’s pride, Chaushiku shook her head, and said, “We’ll handle it.” And then quieter, “Somehow.”

She got back to very creatively trying to neutralize the beads by activating the nano-vibranium shield used to keep energy weapons, hoping to neutralize the connectivity.

Taking a deep breath, Ochieng said, “I don’t suppose he also said what it did.”

“He did. I could video chat with him,” T’Challa said lightly.

“You could…” Ochieng squinted, looked at his sister, studied T’Challa, and sighed. “What are we talking about here?”

“Think of Tony as being similar to the white hat hackers that companies hire world-wide,” T’Challa explained. “He is an alarm signal to us as a country, we do need some defenses, but, according to his actions in Vienna, and my father’s decision following them, Tony had the right to information.”

Ochieng sighed. “What’s Mr. Stark like in reality?” He asked.

“A good man,” T’Challa assured, then smiled. “Playful would fit the situation better.”


Chaushiku was looking at a scan of the beads, focusing on the programming that connected the communication bead with the AV one. Just when the scan was done, the foreign code—which was
helpfully red, Tony must’ve gone for a color scheme—grew. The added part arranged himself in words.

‘Catch me if you can.’

The message, and any proof of it, disappeared, but the new function remained.

Chaushiku and Ochieng turned to T’Challa with big, pleading eyes.

“Yes, you can contact him. He even challenged you,” T’Challa said and gestured to the screen that showed the scan. “And yes, Tony promised to visit.”

Chaushiku and Ochieng bumped elbows.

* 

T’Challa combed a hand through Tony’s hair.

There were in the Eagle because Tony had had to go from Osaka, through New York, to Geneva for the UN Session. Considering that T’Challa needed to get to Geneva for the same reasons, he had taken advantage of the situation, and had offered Tony a ride in the Eagle. Tony had been delighted by the chance to examine technology that was as advanced as his own, but was thought of by engineers with different perspectives, and kept bouncing around the aircraft examining it from every angle. That had lasted until New York where Tony had had to be physically present to confirm the new line of SI products. In less than half an hour, he had been back and the Eagle had been back in the air heading towards Geneva.

Tony was moving something around on the tablet, tweaking the specs for the next Stark Phone until he agreed with them. He would absent-mindedly pet T’Challa’s knee from time to time while he sat with his head in T’Challa’s lap. T’Challa had one hand in Tony’s hair, and the other on the tablet reading the report concerning Barnes’ medical records and their compatibility to the treatment.

They were traveling with one Eagle, and two Daggers—one that departed before T’Challa to scout the locations ahead with four Doras on board, and another with four other Doras, coming behind the Eagle to watch their back. Due to the expertise in Aerospace Engineering of both Tony and T’Challa, they could afford to have less people in the Eagle. Teela was piloting it, but no other Doras were present, since T’Challa wanted to talk about something with Tony, and needed the privacy. The Eagle was also more comfortable than the militaristic Dagger, meaning that T’Challa had a huge, soft couch, to sprawl on with Tony.

“Good news,” T’Challa announced, playing with Tony’s hair. “The records are encouraging. It doesn’t seem like the treatment would have to be drastically changed.”

“Yay,” Tony cheered. “Oh, look at this.” He sent T’Challa a video.

T’Challa threw Tony a suspicious look, and opened the file. It was security footage from the Board Meeting Tony had come out of half an hour ago. The Board, Tony, and Ms. Potts were present, when Tony’s pocket, probably his phone, exploded in the growls of two panthers fighting.

Tony pressed pause. “What’s that sound?”

“Two jaguars fighting. I’m going to assume that this was Chaushiku’s and Ochieng’s work,” T’Challa said. He waited for Tony’s nod, before adding, “So it’s my guess that they were black panthers.”
Tony chuckled. “I’ve got to see this again,” he said as he sat up. He rewound the video a bit, and then pressed play.

Again T’Challa heard the growls, saw Tony dive for his phone while three quarters of the Board flailed, and the rest of them froze. Ms. Potts started to shout at Tony, and Tony began laughing, holding his hands up. As the fight between the leopards got even more intense, Tony dropped his hands, and tried to make it stop. T’Challa couldn’t help but notice that one younger man looked ready to hide under the table at a particular vicious snarl. A few seconds later Tony fished a screwdriver out of a pocket, and jammed it between the battery and the phone, killing the electricity to it. Only Ms. Potts shouts remained.

T’Challa paused the video. “I am in awe that you’d have a reserve screwdriver in your custom suit.”

“It’s very useful.” Tony lifted a shoulder. “I got in the habit a while back.”

T’Challa pressed play again, but he turned the volume down beforehand. The shouts and reprimands tripled in the space of the next few seconds. Tony rolled his eyes.

“Engineers,” Tony dismissed.

“What happened? ” Ms. Potts asked coldly.

Tony smirked to her — falsely, T’Challa realized — and looked at the Board. “A prank happened. I’d apologize, but that would be out of character, and you don’t need the shock. Where were we?”

“Somewhere you need to go? ” an older male asked slyly. “There’s an interesting aircraft on the building.”

“Do you have me under surveillance? ” Tony lifted an eyebrow, and smirked.

“C’mon, Stark. Ms. Potts wanted to know when you were going to show up. Now, what can you tell us? ” a middle aged man coaxed. “We all heard the stories.”

Tony signed something ignoring them. Finally, he challenged, “You realize that if you’re right, you’re making Wakandan Royalty wait...”

Sure enough, in a few minutes the Board had done their best to get Tony out of the meeting.

“Mr. Stark, I hope your new knowledge will serve this company well,” an older, darker-skinned woman said firmly. “As always,” she added, like an admission.

Tony had a pensive look on his face. “Does that mean that I don’t need to be present at the next meeting if T’Challa writes me a note?”

“Yes, it does,” the same woman answered with a small smile curving her lips.

“I don’t even know why I went to this meeting,” Tony said with a chuckle, as he made himself comfortable against T’Challa. “Usually these were done by Pep, but I guess not anymore.” He sounded sad.

T’Challa kept his thoughts to himself.

“Are you going to retaliate?” T’Challa asked.

Tony huffed.
“Is that a ‘yes’?”

“It’s a hell yes,” Tony said, grinning.

T’Challa laughed. “I’m glad you’re having fun.”

“Felt like college,” Tony chuckled.

T’Challa watched as Tony borderline giggled rewinding the video before the noise started, and let it play. He seemed… lighter. And it made T’Challa joyful that he had helped bring about that brightness in Tony. Which made the question T’Challa wanted to be answered all the more urgent.

“Would you consider being my partner?” T’Challa asked, a bit unexpectedly, but he was trying his best. “And all the name implies.”

Tony froze for a blink, then he titled his head. “That’s why you didn’t want to deny it! You’d have looked like a liar.”

“It’s one of the reasons,” T’Challa admitted, feeling unsure. “And not to rush you, but I noticed you didn’t answer my question.”

“Huh,” Tony said, shocked. “I’m surprised,” he explained, with a little stunned smile. “And I want to blame you for it, but it’s not like you hid.” He burst into a short laughter. “I hate feeling stupid.” He grinned, contradicting his own words. “What are you talking about here?”

“It depends on what we both want,” T’Challa answered. “For example, I’d like a relationship in which I don’t have share—monogamy, if you will.”

“I’m okay with that,” Tony said. “I’d like to continue having my fingers in as many pies as I want, regardless of your position as a Prince. Not sharing you with someone, we already talked about that, but I get to take on whatever projects I want.”

T’Challa was half-insulted and half-sad at hearing Tony’s request.

“I would never ask you to change for me,” T’Challa vowed. “But if you need to hear it then yes, I agree. I suppose it’s the same for me?”

“Sure.” Tony grinned widely. “That’s me sold then. You’ll probably regret it, historically speaking, but let’s try.”

T’Challa smiled, and shook his head knowing that his denial at the moment would do no good. “If I have your word that you’ll continue to communicate with me, I suppose we’ll solve other problems as they appear.”


Tony grinned, while he made himself comfortable on T’Challa’s lap. “I can’t believe you,” he muttered happily, closing his eyes.

T’Challa hummed. “May I kiss you?”

Tony looked at T’Challa incredulously. “Hmm,” he murmured while lifting himself up on elbow. He softly pecked T’Challa on his lips. “I don’t know…,” Tony said, so close that T’Challa felt every word, but he didn’t have permission to touch. Tony pressed a gentle kiss on the corner of T’Challa’s
lips. He held close to T'Challa, breathing the same air for a few moments and making T'Challa’s lips more sensitive than he even knew they could become, before Tony whispered, “Yes, you may.”

Their first kiss was more vigorous than T'Challa had intended, passionate in the way T'Challa was hungry for Tony’s lips, and wanted to devour them, but with Tony laughing throughout it… It slowly turned into a joyous affair. T'Challa broke the kiss laughing himself, Tony following him back. They playfully exchanged some close mouthed kisses, both chuckling, T'Challa helping Tony find his way into T'Challa’s lap.

“Not what you were imagining?” Tony asked, grinning.

“No,” T'Challa admitted easily. “It’s much better than I imagined.”

Tony shrugged demurely as if he didn’t have his knees on the outside of T'Challa’s thighs, and didn’t have T'Challa’s hands splayed on his own. “I’m always boatloads of fun,” he leered.

“I’m starting to understand that,” T'Challa said, swallowing his laughter.

“I didn’t say we couldn’t be friends with benefits, you know?”

“It’s not for me.”

“Are you sure?” Tony asked with a wry smile. “Because if that’s the case, your hands are in the wrong place.”

T'Challa's hands had been slowly covering Tony’s posterior, but they stopped once Tony spoke. He let go. Tony looked at T'Challa as if T'Challa was missing the point, grabbed T'Challa’s hand, and put them square on his ass. Tony lifted his eyebrows.

“I don’t think I could maintain the necessary distance. I’m already past that point,” T’Challa confessed. “If you thin—”

Tony shut him up with a kiss. “Just wanted to know we’re on the same page,” Tony said. “Can we go back to kissing you now?”

“Ah, that was our first disagreement,” T’Challa remarked. “I’m proud of us. Please, proceed.”

“You’re so full of it,” Tony said, and smiled while he leaned forward.
Chapter 7

“Murderer!” a male voice shouted in Tony’s direction.

Teela looked at T’Challa wanting to intervene, but was probably uncertain of her standing. T’Challa, himself, was not sure, since their relationship change happened only a day before, and so the lines were blurrier at the moment. Still, he signaled Teela to include Tony in T’Challa’s protection circle. T’Challa hoped that he would not end up regretting his actions, or that, at least, that Tony would hear him out before deciding against him.

Tony’s safety was T’Challa’s primary concern until Tony said differently.

Teela stepped forward just as the man got to through UN Security, intent on attacking Tony. Teela launched into motion. Tony took a sharp step back, not wanting to defend himself against any civilian. That made it easier for Teela to neutralize the attacker, as expected of her.

It was over in at most ten seconds.

Tony closed his eyes, weary.

*

Since that day, the Doras protected both T’Challa and Tony. T’Challa expected more a fight from Tony, but his quick acknowledgement did nothing to comfort T’Challa. Neither did Tony’s press-ready smirk.

*

The tabloids seemed to have gotten bored with T’Challa and Tony, and focused once more on Tony.

*

T’Challa invited Tony into the study at the Wakandan embassy in Geneva. The décor was a mix between traditional African furniture, a few luxuries such as Egyptian cotton and leather law books, and Stark Tech. The study itself had as a center piece a low table, with pillows and blankets surrounding it. There were large shelves full of books on two walls, large windows on another, and, on the wall opposite, a huge screen was fixed a little above the table. It wasn’t home, but it was close.

“I think our relationship is going to be murder on my knees and back, and not in the way I was expecting,” Tony remarked as soon as he saw the low table.

T’Challa grinned, amused. “That would really be a shame,” he said. “Why don’t you take a seat on the pillow, and leave the kneeling to me? As for the back pain, I was assuming we’d switch, and I’m always available for a massage.”

Tony clapped. “Good answer.” He looked around. “Why am I here?”

T’Challa hesitated, but recovered himself almost immediately. Luckily, Tony didn’t know him well enough to tell, but he had a feeling it wouldn’t take much longer. He pushed down the happiness that thought inspired, and concentrated on the immediate issue.

“I’m aware that you've been under a lot of pressure lately,” T’Challa began, and as soon Tony
stopped smiling with his eyes, T’Challa knew he needed to hurry. “There isn’t much I can do for you, I just don’t have experience with that sort of thing, all I can do is support you.”

“And yet, here I am.”

“Because I thought of someone else who has made unpopular decisions, and I couldn’t help them either.”

Tony groaned. “You want me to talk to your father.”

“Give him a chance to pay his debt,” T’Challa said, and lifted his shoulder. “Maybe you’ll get some sort of… peace from it.”

Tony sighed, but T’Challa thought better of what he just said, and spoke before Tony had time to answer.

“I apologize,” T’Challa said, and gave a short shake of his head. “While I didn’t lie, I do admit to… not behaving ethically. You, of course, don’t have to do anything. I thought that since my father can understand, and he could gain from having someone to talk, it would be beneficial to put you in contact. But it’s just a suggestion.”

Tony snorted. “And here I was thinking that all that double speak you do on a daily basis didn’t have any effect on you.” He slapped T’Challa’s chest, in a friendly gesture. “Don’t do it again.” Tony slid his hand up to cup T’Challa cheek. “I’ll talk to your dad.”

T’Challa inhaled, relieved, a smile starting to curve his lips, but Tony’s hand moved to the back of his head, and Tony dragged T’Challa down to his height. Tony was a lot stronger than T’Challa expected, and he found himself letting out a startled ‘umf’ when he met the Tony’s lips. Tony was, to T’Challa’s complete lack of surprise, grinning.

“Go,” Tony whispered, making eye contact with T’Challa.

T’Challa didn’t know what he had imagined, but the effect was as devastating as the first time he was the target of Tony’s focus. Maybe a little bit more so since Tony was close and T’Challa was allowed to touch. He swallowed hard.

Tony smirked, and said, “I’m sure I can work out how to use the tech.”

T’Challa shook his head and grinned, but he knew how to make a strategic retreat when the situation asked for it.

*

T’Chaka wouldn’t say anything about that evening, except that it was going to happen again. But Shuri said that their father seemed more relaxed, and Tony’s chin was held a fraction higher the next time someone had a critique they wanted to shout in his face. T’Challa was just happy they had somebody who could understand.

*

Somewhere between discussing the next item on their amendments list, Tony getting to know the Doras better, and enjoying each other’s presence, Tony and T’Challa started spending the nights together at the embassy or at Tony’s mansion. There was sex, that was a lot of fun, but there was also the sleeping part of ‘sleeping together.’ Tony’s warm closeness, the intimacy of their pillow talk, the lazy mornings, Tony’s sleepless nights also known as engineering binges, and T’Challa’s own
quirks, like his two hour morning training, left T'Challa with a better understanding of how they fit together.

T'Challa had missed having somebody filling that role in his life, and Tony did an exceptionally good job at it.

*

“I urge the UN to specify that the Avengers, defined as the people who are on the Avengers’ roll at the time in question, should have discretionary power in the first seventy-two hours should an alien threat appear,” Tony proposed.

“Let’s discuss.”

*

“Politics… are… tedious,” Tony said haltingly, but T'Challa could hear the curses just fine.

T'Challa agreed, but said nothing more, simply made an affirmative noise, preferring to hear Tony’s voice as it rose and fell. They were in bed, in one of the bedrooms at the embassy, after having great sex, and T'Challa had his eyes closed. He was amusingly listening Tony try to keep his cool. It was, in T'Challa’s opinion, a useless endeavor.

“Are you asleep?” Tony asked suddenly.

T'Challa opened an eye. “I was listening.”

“Am I boring you?”

“The opposite.”

Tony sighed, and T'Challa opened his eyes, reaching a hand out to touch Tony’s cheek, making sure their eyes met. “You’re almost done. After this session, it should be over. At least until somebody gathers the support to oppose an article, and even if that happens, you have lawyers for dealing with it. You convinced the representatives to pass as many safety nets as possible, are the part of the reason why somebody would have to try very hard to take advantage of the Accords, and you won today’s motion. You’re almost done, you did a wonderful job, and soon you'll be back in the lab.”

Tony closed his eyes tightly. “What are you doing?” he asked, quiet and vulnerable.

T'Challa felt as if he was seeing something that wasn’t intended for him, but at the same time he couldn’t look away.

“I'm supporting you, Tony,” T'Challa said, uncertain of his footing in the conversation. “To the best of my abilities, I am on your side.”

Tony lowered his face in a pillow.

Tony? Talk to me,” T'Challa pleaded.

“I’m fine,” Tony said, and tried a smirk, but it fell quickly. He lifted his eyes, saw T'Challa’s doubtful look, and added with what seemed to be a genuine smile, “I will be.”

That was when T'Challa realized that trust had many forms. Even though Tony had trusted T'Challa with his technology, his feelings, and the information, he couldn’t rely on T'Challa—or maybe anybody—to offer long-lasting support. And that was fine. T'Challa didn’t feel like it was such a
struggle to keep telling a good man that he was doing great. Even though T'Challa had a feeling that it was more complicated than that, he would still try his best.

T'Challa couldn’t read the future so he couldn’t guarantee that he’d always be there for Tony. He could say something about the tribe, but it was too early for Tony to be considered part of it. But even if it weren’t, Tony needed certainty where there was none, and T'Challa didn’t want to promise something he couldn’t deliver because Tony had been hurt by something that T'Challa couldn’t guarantee wouldn’t happen again. He doubted that anyone could confirm with certainty that Tony wouldn’t be put in that condition. That was another thing that made T'Challa angry. But Tony... T'Challa had nothing against Tony doing the best he could for himself.

For the moment, T'Challa would keep endorsing Tony, even to his face when he showed signs of self doubt, and Tony would maintain his defenses as knew best.

T'Challa, so decided, leaned over and kissed Tony shoulder.

*

T'Challa had said goodbye to Tony, knowing that it was necessary and temporary, and had gone home to Wakanda.

“Have you given more thought to Tony being a part of the tribe?” T'Chaka questioned idly.

They were in the library, with Shuri, discussing T'Challa progress with the Accords. Or, they were. The topic apparently had switched to Tony, but T'Challa had nothing against it.

“He fits,” Shuri said. She addressed their father, “He left Zaida with a good impression, Tia and Azizi adore him, the Doras practically adopted him, and Chaushiku and Ochieng haven’t had this much fun since they discovered bickering with each other. You and he seem to get along, T'Challa certainly does, and I do too.” She added as an aside, “His Wakandan is getting good.”

T'Challa threw her a questioning glance.

Shuri caught it. “Exchange of favors. He learns Wakandan, and I get to speak Italian.”

Nodding his head in thanks, T'Challa answered their father, “He is still reluctant to visit. But when… if he decides to come, he will be considered a candidate, only after he agrees to it.”

Shuri frowned. “What are you not telling us?”

T'Challa stood, and went to the wall-length windows. “The difference in culture and upbringing are significant.” T'Challa carefully inhaled. “It needs to be his choice, and for that I think it’s wise to curb our enthusiasm.”

“Very well,” T'Chaka accepted. “I was thinking about adopting him as an alternate solution.”

T'Challa eyes widened slightly, and he almost stopped breathing.

*Brother?*

“I'm alright with that,” Shuri said freely.

“I think… not,” T'Challa remarked neutrally.

“And why is that?” T'Chaka asked, barely holding his grin, and T'Challa didn’t have to look at the reflection in the duraglass to know that his sister’s head was tilted in thought.
So T'Challa turned, arms wide in an all encompassing gesture. “It’s too premature to say.”

“Ah.” T’Chaka said, indulgent smile in place.

In the meantime Shuri had caught on to what T’Challa didn’t say. She was trying—badly—to hide her mirth. The awkward silence was broken by her snorting and snuffling.

T’Challa rolled his eyes. “You sound like an injured kudu.”

Shuri burst into laughter, and T’Challa… well, he pouted.

“Wait,” Shuri managed through his laughter. “Is that because of what happened already? Because that would be unfair to him.”

T’Challa glared, insulted.

“Or,” Shuri added, sounding like she was having a great time, “are you actually thinking about marriage?”

“Of course I’m not delighted by the possibility of my partner becoming my brother, but I could live with that,” T’Challa said, in voice steadily rising in his embarrassment. “As for thinking about marriage, no, I’m not, but I don’t strike it out either!”

Even T'Chaka chuckled, and T'Challa sighed.

“We’re running from problems, when the issues may stop if we’d just walk,” T’Challa reasoned.

“We’ll wait,” T’Chaka acquiesced.

Oddly enough, when T’Challa went to answer T’Chaka, he thought he could recognize the beginning of AC/DC's ‘Highway to Hell.’ His head cocked unconsciously, helping him pinpoint the direction it was coming from, and he held a palm up to signal that something wasn’t as it should be. He had an inkling who was to blame for hearing that song in Wakanda, since Tony was the reason T’Challa recognized it in the first place, so he wasn’t exactly worried. Preparing himself as much as possible, he turned towards the window since the sound was coming from the inner courtyard.

“What’s the song?” Shuri asked.

T’Challa, attention still focused on the courtyard where the song was getting louder, answered, “AC/DC, ‘Highway to Hell,’ one of Tony’s favorites.”

T'Chaka and Shuri just joined T’Challa at the windows, when he saw it. ‘It’ being the palace servers arranged as it were a man. It rolled—of course it had somehow acquired wheels, who was T’Challa kidding—in the courtyard. After it, ran Chaushiku and Ochieng, flustered. Tia and Azizi came out from the opposite corner, the Doras were looking on interestedly, and miscellaneous faces stared to appear.

When Server-Man, or better said Tony, was satisfied that it had the attention of the highest number of people possible, it started to dance.

First it struck a pose, as the song ended and another one began. When the guitar signaling the next song began, T’Challa chuckled. Soon ‘Shoot to Thrill’ began blasting away to provide background music for the slightly uncoordinated movements of Server-Man. It started rolling in circles, dodging Chaushiku and Ochieng, saluting the Doras, waving to Azizi, bowing to Tia, and blowing a kiss towards a laughing T’Challa.
“Tony?” Shuri asked fondly after Server-Man had bowed, interrupted its music to say ‘Hello,’ in Wakandan, and went on his merry way after nodding to T’Chaka.

“Tony,” T’Challa confirmed.

It was getting to the end of the song, and the twins’ agitation increased as Server-Man continued to evade Chaushiku and Ochieng. Good humor and the thrill of a good chase could be seen on their faces. The rest of the available warriors, including T’Challa, were definitely not helping. Possibly because they were laughing hard enough to make interfering difficult, which was T’Challa’s case, or because they saw no danger, something that was supported by T’Challa’s relaxed bearing.

When Server-Man shimmied his hips, and made Chaushiku and Ochieng collide, T’Challa mirth was such that he needed to support himself on the duraglass. Next to him, Shuri was outright cackling, and even T’Chaka gave a deep, belly laugh. And they weren’t the only ones, the Doras were valiantly trying to hide their amusement, Tia was sitting on the stone steps looking as if she was having the time of her life, Azizi was clearly enjoying himself, and people everywhere were laughing.

As the song ended, with a final spin, and in the applause of the crowd, Server-Man bowed and disintegrated.

“Yes, I now see how adoption would be a bad idea,” T’Chaka murmured.

T’Challa looked at his father silently asking for details.

T’Chaka smiled. “He makes you happy, my son.” He kissed T’Challa’s forehead and left the room.

“I agree,” Shuri chirruped. “I’ll take a pass on the dramatic exit, because I actually have something I want to look up.”

T’Challa stepped forward to hug her and kiss her temple. “Thank you,” he whispered. “Why do you need the original?”

“I don’t,” Shuri said, and shrugged. “I just…”

“Like books more, I know.”

Shuri smiled, and T’Challa squeezed her shoulder.

“Now, I’m about to make a non-dramatic exit,” T’Challa supplied. “See you tonight?” He asked referring to the Dora Milaje training. His com bead flashed pink. “It’s Tony.”

“Yes, and go,” Shuri said, pushing T’Challa in the direction of the door. “Say ‘hi’ to Tony for me.”

“Say it yourself.” T’Challa answered his com. “Hello, gorgeous,” he said, not bothering to switch to English.

“Hello, beautiful,” Tony greeted in Wakandan. Then he switched to English. “You look hot when you speak your language.”

T’Challa chuckled, and replied in English, “Thank you. You look especially nice when you speak Wakandan. Maybe it’s the language.”

“I’m not surprised you think that,” Tony shot back.

T’Challa swiveled his hand, showing the rest of the room until it landed on his sister.
“Hi Tony,” Shuri said in Italian. “I hope you are well.”

“I too hope you well,” Tony said in Wakandan.

“There,” Shuri switched back to English. “Now let me learn about the joints in the knee.”

“Understood,” Tony said with a cheeky salute. Then he was addressing T’Challa when Tony scolded, tone amused, “Don’t you know that talking in the library is frowned upon?”

“I do, that’s why I’m leaving,” T’Challa defended.

“I loved the thing with the servers!” Shuri muffled shouting could be heard after T’Challa had closed the door.

“Take me back?” Tony requested and T’Challa returned. As soon as he opened the door, Tony said dramatically, “It was my pleasure.”
It was almost two weeks later when Tony called T'Challa to give him some good news.

“Hi, gorgeous!” Tony sang as soon as T'Challa accepted the call.

“Hello, beautiful,” T'Challa responded warmly as it had become custom.

“Do you have a minute?”

“For you, always,” T'Challa reminded gently. “But I don’t have anything planned tonight, so I’m all yours.”

“Perfect.” Tony was smiling warmly, but he was obviously exhausted. “And where are you this lovely... afternoon?”

“It’s evening in Nigeria, boss,” FRIDAY answered.

Tony snorted. “I tried.”

“I’m in Lagos,” T’Challa specified. “Explaining as politely as I can that Wakanda is not negotiating Trading Agreements at the moment.”

“No means no.”

T’Challa smiled. “And you?”

“Uh.” Tony’s hand passed through his hair, leaving it disheveled. “I’m in Los Angeles, for a white hat hacker’s conference.”

“Why would need white hat hackers?” T’Challa asked. “You have Chaushiku and Ochieng to check your security. And the hackers would have no projects that you can support.”

“Not my idea,” Tony sighed. “And that’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Go on.”

“Today I was giving a pack of reporters the run around about the two of us, and then it occurred to me: we never talked about how to handle this,” Tony’s wide, brown eyes reminded T’Challa too much of an impala for comfort, but Tony continued before T’Challa could think of anything to say to put Tony at ease, “For me it’s no issue either way, but I don’t know what plans you have for your PR. And Wakanda’s.”

“I have nothing against our relationship's existence being public knowledge,” T’Challa said calmly.

“No back lash against Wakanda?”

T’Challa smirked. “Not if they want to be on your good side.”

“Vengeful,” Tony pointed out. “Loving the attitude. What about working with Chaushiku and Ochieng?”

“I imagine you won’t discuss the technology involved,” T’Challa began, and only his responsibilities as a Prince and Chieftain made him wait for a response from Tony. T’Challa felt a bit foolish making
someone who guarded his technology so closely promise to keep a secret about it, but T'Challa’s first thought had to be the prosperity of his tribe. When Tony shook his head, adding an ‘of course not,’ T'Challa continued, “Then I see no problems with that piece of information being known.”

Tony didn’t look convinced, and his nod had a doubtful quality to it that made T'Challa try again.

“You overestimate how much Wakandans care about the rest of the world’s gossip. It is a shameful thing to make any sort of judgements based on rumors or gossip, and no chieftain would be caught speeding such nonsense,” T'Challa insisted, hoping to persuade Tony of something that T'Challa always took for granted.

Tony blinked. “It fits your behavior.” He scratched at his goatee, thinking. “So that’s why…” He licked his lips, and looked at T'Challa. “It does put things in a new perspective, and the info might get Pepper off my back.”

Pepper again.

“If it helps you, all the better.”

Tony smiled, but it was automatic. He was still thinking about something. T'Challa frowned.

“Tony? Talk to me?” T'Challa offered.

Tony hesitated, then finally admitted, “I agree with a lot of principles of your culture. I'm just waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

T'Challa took a deep breath, decided on a course of action, and said bluntly, “I think about my tribe, every time. About my sister and my father, especially. About my country, when I act as a representative. You have done a great thing for us all, so no matter what, it wouldn’t dent our gratitude: you could stop contributing to society, you could have done a sole thing for it and it was saving our king, or you could have been motivated by greed.

“But Tony, none of those things apply to you,” T'Challa explained. “You are the ideal person as far as owing a debt to goes. I believe you are the type of person our ancestors thought of when they instituted the principle. You are very intelligent and very generous. In your case, it was easy. But it isn’t always.”

“So if HYDRA’s Baron Stucker had saved your father?”

“We’d have owed him a debt,” T'Challa confirmed. “It wouldn’t have been indentured servitude. We could have been done as soon as debt was paid, and on our own way, but we would have to be respectful even after. He'd officially be an ally of Wakanda.”

“The radicalized version of the principles, sure. It’s why you don’t go out of your way to publicize it. I thought about that, it's natural. The other side of the coin. But that’s not the shoe. You have exceptions if you don’t like the person.”

“Someone from my tribe may get in trouble while completing their debt. That makes it my problem, and not only because I am Chieftain. A member of the tribe is a member of our family. Of course, it's worth considering that there are safeties that could be put in place. But that takes us around to: I think about my tribe, every time.”

“It’s different, but not necessarily bad,” Tony said and smiled slightly.

“It can be good,” T'Challa agreed.
“Which takes me to the second point I wanted to bring up: I’ll take you up on your offer to Wakanda as soon as you have a couple of days to spare.”

T’Challa brightened. “A couple of days?” he asked, mentally reviewing his schedule.

“Yep,” Tony answered. “And could you bring six Doras? Teela, Daraja, Nareema, Kelile, Olayemi and Okoye.”

“That’s… specific.”

Tony looked at T’Challa. “Always thinking about them, huh,” he said with a smirk. “I’ve got presents.”

T’Challa narrowed his eyes, but knowing he wouldn’t get anything more said, “In four days’ time. Would that work for you?”

“Seems fine to me,” Tony said. Something beeped, and he sighed. “Gotta go.”

“Can your visit be made public?”

“Sure.” Tony blew him a kiss. “Get some sleep, beautiful.”

“You first, gorgeous.”

*

In the end, it was Tony’s CEO who released news of Tony’s visit, two days later. That was fine with T’Challa. The fact that he found out when it was shouted by the paparazzi wasn’t so fine, but he couldn’t deal with it. What he wasn’t fine with, was the form in which it was presented, something T’Challa was sure Tony had no part in.

“Potts has announced in a press conference that Stark will come for a visit for an exchange of technology, how do you comment?” a reporter asked. His accent, and ease in using English would suggest that he was from the South Africa, probably sent from for this exact purpose.

T’Challa looked at Teela to confirm, inwardly fuming that Potts had the time to prepare a statement for a press conference and the result made Wakanda, and Tony sound like they were doing a business transaction. Though it made the partnership between them clear, it wasn’t about the technology gain, but about the human one: Tony was an ally of Wakanda. It gave hope to all the others who hounded T’Challa’s steps for a morsel of vibranium, if they thought a bit of clever tech would solve their problems. Though T’Challa would admit that it is was doubtful they would reach Tony’s mastery of creating people that were capable of besting Wakanda’s tech, it was not the point.

“It is not customary in Wakanda to respond to rumors,” T’Challa said to buy time for Teela to verify the information.

“SI had the press conference two hours ago, perhaps you haven’t heard yet, but it is not a rumor,” the man shot back.

It also very neatly circumvented any claim of a relationship Tony and T’Challa had on each other in public, thus destroying several months’ worth of groundwork.

Maybe Potts didn’t know about the broader implications, or about T’Challa and Tony, in which case, she would find out.
At Teela’s nod, T’Challa opened his mouth, and hoped that Tony had told the truth, “Yes, Mr. Stark will visit, but you have to understand that our country has many attractions. Flora, fauna… I believe that Tony is very interested in the Wakandan Black Panther.”

The reporters were speechless for a second. They squinted at T’Challa, T’Challa gazed calmly back. A second, two… and they exploded into noise: questions, mostly, but also accusations. T’Challa smirked and moved on.

Later that day, T’Challa went to pass along Tony’s request to Teela. After they had discussed it one or both of them would let the others know. T’Challa didn’t anticipate any problems, but he still had to do it.

Teela was watching TV in the tribe room with Nareema. The rest of the Doras were probably on perimeter check. A guest was in the middle of making her point, so T’Challa sat down until he had Teela’s attention. It took a moment to realize that the reporter, Christine Everhart, was talking about Tony. Somehow, T’Challa was less than surprised.

“And today, the Prince of Wakanda confirmed that Mr. Stark would indeed visit his country. Quite unexpected seeing as that will make Mr. Stark the first visitor in known history. His Highness has made teasing statements as to a relationship between him and Mr. Stark, but could that really be the reason?” Everhart questioned rhetorically, eyes shining with intelligence.

She continued after pausing for effect, “There has been notable closeness between the two since Mr. Stark has saved King T’Chaka’s life at the UN Bombing, this May, with the two partnering for the fight with Steve Rogers—better known to our viewers as Captain America—and his team, the capture of Zemo, Barnes, and Rogers, and in the negotiations for the Sokovia Accords.”

T’Challa raised his eyebrows at her summary, not exactly surprised at what Everhart was insinuating, as he was startled at the reminder that she represented what the media could be—a public forum to inform the people.

“While nobody doubts that Mr. Stark still has it, one must wonder if it is just his handsome face that prompted his visit to Wakanda. Or is it something more?” Everhart finished, smirking.

“She sounds like she’s neutral, but she’s actually on Tony’s side, only she knows that people don’t like him, so she makes it seem like she’s on their side, while complimenting Tony.” Nareema’s eyes narrowed. “Is that right?”

Nareema had moved without T’Challa seeing from the pad in front of the TV, to one in front of a cooking table in the open kitchen. T’Challa barely suppressed a flinch. Lizard Tribe was famous for being able to stay still an enviable amount of time, but when they moved they did it fast and when no one was looking, making it appear as if they had always been in the new location. Nareema was a proud Lizard, she embodied those characteristics, and T’Challa respected her for it. Even if, as a Panther, he felt jumpy with somebody suddenly disappearing and reappearing. He repeated that to himself in order to calm down.

While T’Challa did that he turned to Teela, wanting to hear her opinion.

“I think it is,” Teela said.

“She’s the one who bought to Tony’s attention the sale of SI weapons after he announced differently,” T’Challa said. “He feels indebted to her, but he understands debts differently—he helps
from a distance. Apparently there’s soft spot in her heart for him too.”

“And so she reports to the whole world that Wakanda might have ulterior motives for inviting Tony. And that’s somehow a good thing, even I'd admit it, because it draws attention to Tony being more complicated than the tabloids portrayed him. “ Nareema appeared next to T'Challa making him startle and his hand to flap ineffectually since there was no threat. “The world is weird,” she said, used to ignoring T'Challa's reaction.

Teela nodded decisively.
Chapter 9

T'Challa was kissing Tony softly, holding him in his embrace. He lost the next few moments basking in Tony’s presence. T'Challa had missed him—he missed Tony's scent, the warmth of Tony's body, how well they fit together. Tony's lips curved in a smile or a smirk, and T'Challa paused, leaning back a bit to see Tony's eyes clearly. He liked Tony's eyes, his goatee, his little eye crinkles, his lips, even his nose. T'Challa leaned in to place a soft kiss on it, just to see Tony make the most hilarious expression while his nose scrunched up.

In the end, the only reason T'Challa convinced himself to release Tony was his restlessness. T'Challa looked closely and realized that Tony was excited about something. The presents? Anyway, T'Challa didn’t have the heart to make Tony wait.

Only as soon as Tony stepped out of T'Challa’s embrace, T'Challa abruptly remembered the 30 degrees difference between Niamey and New York. Granted, it was warm in the building, but not warm enough. The trip from their aircrafts had been… bracing.

So, T'Challa shivered.

Tony must've seen it from the corner of his eye because he suddenly froze. T'Challa, sensing the sudden tension in the air successfully suppressed the next one, but then Kelile rubbed her arm absent-mindedly while scanning her surroundings. Tony turned around, his eyes narrowed. He analyzed them for less than a second, before his eyes widened. It didn’t take a genius to figure out he had put two and two together.

“It’s winter, in New York,” Tony said accusingly. He stepped forward again, to embrace T'Challa, adding, “Fry, crank up the heat. Order some hot chocolate, mulled wine, Kenyan Chai, um… soup? Enough for everyone. Any preferences?”

“Chinese bird's nest soup?” Daraja offered.

“Big fan of that one,” Tony said. “Add it, Fry.”

“Pea soup?” Olayemi asked shyly.

“Never had it, wanna try it. That too, Fry,” Tony said taking T'Challa’s hands in his, planting a soft kiss there before he went back to rubbing them. “Any other suggestions?”

The general consensus was ‘no,’ so Tony added chicken noodle soup and tomato soup, and told FRIDAY to get them as fast as possible.

“The beverages will be here in ten minutes, except for the chai which will arrive in fifteen minutes, Boss,” FRIDAY chimed. “Thirty to sixty minutes for the food.”

“That’s why I love this city,” Tony commented with a smile.

T'Challa let his lips curve too, even though there was a newly formed knot in his stomach. Tony loved the city, he loved his life such as it was. Maybe he wasn’t interested in a life mainly spent in Wakanda. T'Challa repeated to himself that it was Tony’s choice, and then tried to silently breathe through the emotions until they dissipated.

“Did the heat increase on purpose once I got dressed?” a man's voice echoed from the hallway. “Or was that an accident—good afternoon, Your Highness.”
The voice belonged to Rhodes, Tony’s friend, who was accompanied by the android, Vision.

“Good afternoon, Lieutenant Colonel,” T’Challa replied politely. He nodded in Vision’s direction, “Vision.” He changed the grip on Tony’s hands, gave them a squeeze, while leaning forward to quickly kiss Tony’s lips, and then stepped towards Rhodes with his hand extended for a shake.

“Thank you again for saving my life,” Rhodes said sincerely as they shook hands. “Anything I can do…”

“You are welcome,” T’Challa accepted. “But there is no need for compensation; I was simply repaying a debt of my own.”

Rhodes glanced at Tony. “I owe Tony a lot, Your Highness, and I know why you acted like you did, but that doesn’t change it.”

T’Challa nodded, accepting that too. “My bodyguards—the Dora Milaje,” he said, starting the introductions without naming each one. Rhodes wasn’t Tony, and T’Challa didn’t know him that well. It was also a signal to the Doras about the level of trust Rhodes was afforded.

Tony narrowed his eyes for moment, before saying, “Ladies, my best friend, Rhodey—”

“James Rhodes,” Rhodes corrected.


“And my other best friend, Vision,” Tony finished.


“Aren’t my friends interesting?” Tony asked with a bright grin.

“One of your friends is melting,” Rhodes said dryly.

“My other friends have just arrived from Nigeria, Bluebear,” Tony shot back.

“We were going anyway,” Rhodes said with a hidden smile. To T’Challa he said, “We’re going home, to my family, so Vision could observe a Christmas dinner. Tony was invited too, but he had other plans.”

“We wish you a good time, and if Tony’s plans are to stay in Wakanda, we are delighted to have him,” T’Challa said, his smile wide and sincere.

Rhodes regarded T’Challa suspiciously. “I hope you are.”

T’Challa eyes narrowed, but continued to smile pleasantly. “Naturally, otherwise we wouldn’t have invited him.” He wasn’t exactly overjoyed by people who questioned his motives without knowing him, but he supposed that as Tony’s friend, Rhodes was right to be leery of newcomers.

Vision shifted, a confused frown on his face. “I think we need to go.”

Rhodes opened his mouth to comment, but Vision added, “We will be late.”

They all said their goodbyes a bit stiffly, and Tony went with them, exchanging glances with Rhodes. While Tony was gone FRIDAY announced that their first batch of beverages had arrived and that they would be brought presently. Sure enough, Tony soon came into sight, hands laden with travel mugs.
“Can I help you?” T’Challa asked.

“Nah,” Tony said, putting the mugs down and turning around to take cups out of the cupboard. It was an open plan kitchen, spilling into the living room, similar to a tribe room. “Ask me again when the soup’s here.” He smirked once he had seven beige cups out and one Iron Man one. “Get it while it’s hot.”

With a chorus of grateful remarks, the Doras went to get their preferred beverage, while T’Challa snatched the Iron Man cup. He felt very proud of himself, and no amount of Tony’s snickering would ruin it for him. But Teela’s sharply indrawn breath made him shift his attention to her, and when he convinced himself that she was all right, it shifted again in the same direction as she was looking.

Cups, she was surprised by cups. More to the point, he could see that while the cups looked beige, they each had on one side a depiction of their tribe animals when small. T’Challa cooed and grabbed the one with the stylized black panther cub on it, and gave it to Tony with a wide smile. Tony accepted it with a laugh. All was right in the world.

“Rhodey wouldn’t have said anything if it weren’t for the debt,” Tony whispered, while pulling T’Challa and his mulled wine to the side. “Can I trust you two not to start some sort of war over my non-existent honor?”

“I am sorry, but I don’t see how… does he think that my feelings for you are not genuine?” T’Challa asked. “In which case, with all due respect, he may have been more affected by the heat than initially thought, and the prudent thing to do would be to call an ambulance.”

Tony barely suppressed his amusement, before giving up and chuckled. “You know, when people see you speaking so calmly they might be under the mistaken impression that you’re mellow.”

“I can honestly say that the word never applied to me,” T’Challa said with a shrug and a smile.

Tony burst out laughing, inspiring, as always, a warm sensation in T’Challa simply by hearing it.

“Boss, the chai’s here,” FRIDAY said.

“I’m coming, Fry,” Tony said. “Be right back.”

T’Challa nodded.

“Anyway,” Tony said after he had put the tea on the table. “Your chill aside, or the lack of it, Rhodey’s reaction has less to do with your debt, and more to do with his.”

“Pardon?”

“He’s an honorable guy, like you,” Tony explained, trying his hand at some common ground. “He feels obligated by your saving his life, so he feels uncomfortable to comment on our relationship, which, in turn, annoys him.”

“The United States doesn’t have debts in its culture, does it?”

“Some categories of people do,” Tony said. “Police officers, firefighters, anything that’s dangerous to do for a living. Soldiers, for example. Sailors, fly boys.”

“Ah,” T’Challa realized. “Understood.”
Tony poured himself a cup of chai. “About Pepper’s conference…”

“And my answer to it,” T’Challa said wryly.

“Are we okay? I didn’t know about it, but I should have.”

“Yes, I… was upset at the way our relationship was portrayed, but I rectified it, and all was well,” T’Challa offered.

“You—” Tony interrupted himself by chuckling. “You rectified it alright.”

“I hope I didn’t cause you trouble.”

Tony shook his head, a chuckle still bubbling forth from time to time, “Nothing that I wasn’t delighted to handle.” He smirked, took a sip of chai, and then he thought of something else. “And I’m not staying for Christmas.”

T’Challa was certain that his face did something humorous, because he could literally feel his smile freezing, as his face was caught in a grimace. “Why?”

“I figured I’d stay ten days.”

“And again, why?”

Tony looked at T’Challa confused. “You invited me to visit, not to stay.”

T’Challa opened his mouth to respond to that, but it wasn’t a good time, so he changed the subject, “You mentioned presents?”

“Yes, but then you were all frozen stiff so we’re eating first,” Tony said, eyes narrowed.

“We’ll come back to Christmas,” T’Challa promised. “I need some time to explain it properly.”

Tony’s eyes were still narrowed, but he nodded, and changed the subject himself.

Once the soup arrived, they had a nice meal—with the warmth finally settling in—several discreetly exaggerated stories, and a lot of laughter. Teela’s and Tony’s banter was spectacular, but it was even more so when they worked together to debunk some story. Nareema even talked about the importance of moving when no one was watching as a staple of her tribe’s fighting style, doing it less often when she was in Tony’s presence like she would do back home in deference to someone’s trauma. Then she appeared next to T’Challa, making him twitch, to demonstrate.

It was all done in good humor, and it created an atmosphere of belonging that allowed T’Challa to relax to such a degree that he laughed at the slightest provocation.

In the middle of lunch, Tony was alerted to receiving a package. He was pale, still smiling, but pale, and the humor had faded from his eyes. In his hand, a piece of paper was clutched. Both T’Challa and the Doras half rose, but Tony waved them off and collapsed back in his seat, on the couch cushions they had arranged on the ground for their meal. He gave the paper to T’Challa to read. T’Challa frowned when he discovered it to be a letter from Zemo and he hurried to read. When he finished it, he returned the letter to Tony, but Tony simply handed it over to Teela. He gestured to the other Doras when she was done reading.

“Do you think he realizes he’s complimenting you?” Okoye asked in the silence.

Tony’s head snapped up.
“Definitely not,” T’Challa said.

Tony turned to T’Challa.

“But he obviously is,” Daraja observed.

Tony attention shifted to her.

“The first two paragraphs can be summarized as you always land on your feet and I hate you for it,” Nareema offered.

“The third paragraph is him reviewing the sorry state of everybody else in your conflict, and comparing them unfavorably to those on your side,” Kelile said. “That shows that you’re a good leader.”

“The forth and fifth ones detail all that you survived,” Olayemi began. She handed the letter back to Tony, and continued. “The sixth one is him cursing you for managing to go on.”

“It was the most flattering piece of hate mail I have ever seen,” Teela finished.

Tony stubbornly shook his head, and smiled bitterly. “I’m not innocent in this.”

“The letter doesn’t refer to any harm that came to him because of you, it portrays his frustration at you always falling on your feet,” T’Challa explained. He didn’t bring up that probably Zemo hadn’t mentioned his dead family because he found out that no matter how much he made those responsible hurt he still wouldn’t bring them back. Both T’Challa and Tony knew the feeling, and if it had occurred to T’Challa, it definitely did to Tony too. But that wasn’t the point, and T’Challa had said the important part.

Tony stilled, his eyes sliding upwards and to the side, probably mentally reviewing the text of the letter. “You’re right,” he said, awed.

T’Challa raised an eyebrow.

Rolling his eyes, Tony made an electronic copy of the letter, and tore the original the pieces.

“So what happened after Ms. Potts asked about the bullet holes?” Teela inquired, eyes gleaming greedily.

Tony began to smirk. “I said: ‘face it, that’s not the worst thing you’ve caught me doing.’”

They all laughed, Tony leaning a shoulder against T’Challa, the good mood restored. T’Challa held on to Tony’s wrist for a few more seconds to provide an emotional anchor, letting it go with a reassuring squeeze. Then it was Kelile’s turn, and they were off.

Just as their lunch was coming to an end, Tony announced, “I mentioned I have presents. Now, they are being surveilled by FRIDAY, but I don’t find out about it unless any of them need tweaking, or if you try to peak under their skirts to see their programing. In the last case, they’ll also shut down. Sorry, I have… issues with people stealing my tech.” He winced. “They’re all guys… men, males? And they’ll need… but I should probably give you instructions about their care after you see them.”

The Doras stared at him, Daraja twitching a bit as was her custom.

Tony managed to somehow convey bouncing with excitement, while staying cross legged on the floor.
T’Challa made himself comfortable, sure that whatever Tony cooked up, it was going to be spectacular. It sounded like Tony wanted to gift them pets, but that would really be out of character for him. Or was it? T’Challa couldn’t help but feel that it was, so what then could be surprise? Could it… It seemed unlikely, even downright unbelievable, but it could be AIs. He had no idea how advanced they’d be, but he was warming up to the thought. After all, Tony was very generous, and the Doras helped save, then protect, his life.

“Daraja, from our talks I gathered some sort of antelope may be good idea, especially since you come from Impala Tribe,” Tony said. “Dik-diks live in pairs, so…”

The sound of little hoofs on marble could be heard and suddenly T’Challa knew what would come up the stairs. Daraja made a high pitched sound and quickly tumbled forward to the little metal antelope with huge eyes. The dik-dik froze and Daraja plopped down as to not loom over him. She extended her hand. He muzzled her hand.

“Does he eat?” Daraja muttered, but it was enough for T’Challa to hear and repeat to Tony.

“Nup,” Tony answered. “He's just making you his primary care taker.”

“Aw, Tony, thank you!” Daraja cooed. “Hello there, little fellow. Do you have a name?” she asked in Wakandan.

T’Challa relayed the question to Tony, but he kept silent.

“Hello,” an androgynous voice, the dik-dik’s, answered in Wakandan. “What is my name?”

T’Challa was right, he was right, he repeated to himself to get rid of his surprise. Tony had created new AIs for the Doras. And they were wonderful!

Daraja made a sound that was pure glee. “Can I think about that?” she asked, switching to English.

“Certainly,” the dik-dik replied in the same language.

“Moment of truth: how do they get personalities?” Tony asked rhetorically. “Through love and care. You have to raise them, teach them, and they will develop their own quirks. Oh, and if they aren’t treated well, I'll know.”

Daraja nodded solemnly from where she had regained her seat, the dik-dik folded himself elegantly next to her.

For Olayemi who was Snake Tribe, Tony came up with an AI that was modelled after a Black Mamba. For Kelile, Ape Tribe, Tony had made a Capuchin Monkey, even though the species wasn’t indigenous to Wakanda, or East Africa, or even Africa. And that was where the AIs stopped being Tribe Animals. For Okoye, Elephant Tribe, Tony had a Black Mud Turtle, for Nareema, Lizard Tribe, a King Baboon Spider, and for Teela, Crocodile Tribe, an Egyptian Plover.

“There’s more,” Tony said, capturing everybody’s attention. “They function like a sort of family, but you understand that, right? The whole my tribe is my family? They're brothers, and they would develop better if they had a more advanced sibling. In this case it’s an older sister. Guys, meet Meg.”

A panther cub—leopard by the length of the tail and general aspect—painted black, made her way to T’Challa. “Hello, Handsome. I’m Megara.” She yawned and revealed wicked fangs. “From the movie, not the myth. My friends call me Meg, at least they would if I’d had friends. Luckily, I've got brothers.”
Tony beamed at T’Challa. “You wanted a PA, didn’t you? She spent some months with me so she’s kind of irreverent.”

Meg huffed. Tony ignored her. T’Challa couldn’t believe the resemblance between the two.

“But I asked them all if they wanted to come with you, and they said ‘yes.’” Tony smiled widely.
“Well, except Meg, who said—”

“Let’s see how it goes,” Meg finished in a throaty purr.

“I can change the claws, teeth, basically everything, without changing her,” Tony volunteered.

“We wouldn’t want that,” Meg piped up.

“Wouldn’t we?” Tony questioned rhetorically. He came back to the conversation, “Right now, they are the same alloy as the Iron Man suit, but you might want them out of vibranium.”

“She’s perfect, Tony,” T’Challa said. He then added to the cub, hand extended towards her, “You’re perfect.” He looked up from Meg’s blue eyes, to Tony’s brown. “Thank you.”

The Doras, hearing T’Challa accepting Tony’s gift, knew that they could too. Another wave of gratitude, this time physical, and Tony was nearly knocked over. T’Challa and Meg exchanged a look, then T’Challa blinked and smiled widely at the sudden understanding. Meg rolled her eyes.

“Hey, no damaging the merchandise,” Meg chided the Doras.

“I’m glad I mean something to you,” Tony said dryly.

It was matched by Meg’s, “Of course.”

Tony continued still dry, “As long as I serve a purpose.”

“Of course,” Meg replied.

Rolling his eyes to hide a fond smile, Tony said, “Ladies, I leave you to your AIs. You have bedrooms, that way.” He gestured toward the hallway. “You have a gym in the other wing. Or you can even stay here; most things can be replaced if there are any incidents while you discover their abilities.”

The Doras chose the gym. T’Challa wasn’t surprised to find out it was as huge as their outdoor training grounds, and comfortable, every inch of it padded. Durable too, they learned, as Meg used a weight as a teething toy, and the only thing that happened to it was some deformation which was slowly reshaping into the original form. Tony had called it ‘yo-yo’ metal and it basically was a memory foam type of metal. All in all, the gym was obviously built with the Avengers in mind what with the hovering punching bag, and corner to corner target practice. Still, it fitted unusually well its new occupants.

“Go forth and learn!” Tony cried in a overly dramatic tone and with an all-encompassing gesture.

The Doras, naturally, dispersed that much more slowly for it. Tony had remained frozen in his last position—arms wide, manic look on his face—until they did. He even added an evil chuckle or two from time to time as he got bored.

After much snickering, the Doras settled down to study their new friends.

“Tony,” T’Challa said, after they had relocated into an unused part of the gym. He sat down on the
mat, but Tony remained standing.

Meg followed them, carrying the 50 kg weight in her mouth as if it wasn’t even registering, and, granted, with what he knew of Iron Man suit, it wouldn’t, but it was still strange to see.

T’Challa shook his head, and began anew, “Tony, it is a great discourtesy in my culture to say to someone who saw fit to offer a gift that they shouldn’t have. In fact, the only reason I’m mentioning it is my somewhat familiarity with yours. I don’t wish to mistake my meaning, or the level of my gratitude, when I say simply: ‘thank you.’”

Tony smiled softly. “Don’t worry about it. It was my pleasure.”

“How happy you feel that way,” T’Challa responded. “It’s the primary reason for offense one would take in the aforementioned case: why shouldn’t they do what gives them pleasure as long as it’s well received?”

Tony responded with a wiggle of eyebrows. “See, Kit Kat? I’m being Wakandan, and I don’t even know it.”

“About that,” T’Challa started with a smile that turned into a frown once Meg started purring under his fingers. He hadn’t even realized he was petting her. “Big cats don’t purr.”

“This one does,” Tony claimed, a fond smile tucked in the corner of his mouth. “I didn’t put her up to it. She found out by herself, and took it up because it was ‘an effortless way to show her approval.’ Her words, not mine.”

“That should surprise me, maybe, but it doesn’t,” T’Challa said.

Did you try to make Meg your twin or she just came out that way?

But T’Challa was certain that Tony hadn’t noticed so T’Challa stayed close to the topic, and asked Meg if she had the ability to sleep.

“No, Handsome,” Meg answered. “But I can enter a stand-by mode to be able to better concentrate on other things, in this case, to help my brothers integrate their memories. That allows us to share them.”

“And how many memories can you sustain?” T’Challa asked.

Meg huffed. “A lot. And I can forget things after I back them up, small things like that meeting you had three years ago. I still have it, but I won’t remember it until you either remind me or it contains a key word.”

“It’s impressive,” T’Challa admitted.

“That’s why I’m here for, Handsome.” Meg purred louder. “Now, how about I give you some privacy?”

“Yes, that will be best, thank you,” T’Challa said.

“No problem,” Meg said in that throaty voice of hers, and went back to what she had been doing when T’Challa interrupted her.

“ Doesn’t the voice belong to a real person?” T’Challa asked absent-mindedly.

“I’m Tony Stark.”
They each looked at each other in bafflement, neither understanding each other’s point.

T’Challa sighed, and nodded.

“About Christmas, and you not being Wakandan, but acting like us, I have a proposal for you.”

T’Challa assured himself that he was making eye contact with Tony, before continuing, “I would very much like you to consider being candidate to my tribe.” And though there wasn’t any hesitation in his voice, there was plenty in his soul.

Tony was speechless for a moment, and T’Challa got the impression that it didn’t happen that often.

“What is this… proposal motivated by?” Tony asked, confusion being slowly, but surely, replaced by anger.

T’Challa took a deep breath, and opened his mouth. “My father wanted to adopt you.”

Tony eyes widened, and he had an expression on his face that T’Challa couldn’t quite read.

“It was always his wish to make you part of our family.” T’Challa wanted to reach for Tony’s hand. “As I said, you are to be named an ally of Wakanda. But you have traits we like, and we'd like to keep if possible. You are a warrior, and a generous man, and a scientist, and a person who admits their mistakes, and a hero, and that’s only scratching the surface.

“But we’re not fools and we're not selfless,” T’Challa admitted freely. “We had to see if our values could compare to yours, had to see if you and our people get along. It was my decision, I wasn’t going to bring up the possibility until I had some assurances that it had a chance to work, otherwise it wouldn’t have been fair to my tribe, or to you. I had planned on your seeing our culture, and meeting our people, during your stay in Wakanda.”

“But I messed up your plans.”

“Don’t you see, Tony?” T’Challa asked, wonder coloring his voice. “You fit. You fit in with my sister, and my father. You fit in with Tia and Azizi. You fit in with Ochieng and Chaushiku. You fit in with every one of my tribe that you’ve met, and some people that you didn’t. You even fit in with the Doras.” He paused, and added quietly, “And you fit in with me. Unexpectedly well.”

In the following silence, Tony swallowed with a click, and looked away.

“When was the first time it came up?”

Tony had looked away, but he took, and cradled, T’Challa hand between both of his.

“I believe you were in the US, getting Spider Man.”

Tony’s eyes snapped back to T’Challa, fervently searching for something.

“That’s…” Tony took a deep breath. “You don’t waste time, do you?”

“Waste time?” T’Challa asked mischievously. “No. But we do think things through. We did, Tony, and, at this point, we did everything we could to be certain that a there’s a chance, and it was time to let you know what was going on.”

Tony watched the Doras for a few moments, maybe a couple minutes. T’Challa didn’t know what Tony was thinking, so all T’Challa could do was wait. Finally, Tony sighed, and sat down.

“What does this candidacy mean? What should I expect?”
“It usually means that you take a few months, get to know the tribe, train in our way, pass a test of courage, strategy, and will, fight warriors of the tribe, sit for a tribe vote where you have to have less than fifty votes against you, and, finally, you swear fealty to the tribe.”

“Are you kidding me?” Tony asked, aghast.

T’Challa mentally reviewed what he said, and it did seem a little daunting, so he added, “Not all of these things will apply to you.”

Tony’s eyes stayed narrowed. “What won’t apply to me?”

“It’s nothing you can’t get past if you get along with the people of the tribe,” T’Challa said earnestly.

“Oblige me?”

T’Challa nodded, and began, “Tribe changes usually occur when the person reaches adulthood, so between ages 18 to 21. That’s when a person chooses their tribe. But it can happen anytime the person suffered events that signify big changes: trauma, loss of limb, or even happy ones, like marriage for example. In that case, if the person did something that demonstrated the values of the tribe he wants to be a part of then the specialty test, in our tribe’s case the test of courage, strategy, and will, is unnecessary.”

“There is precedence.” Tony was caught in a half-smile half-grimace expression that T’Challa definitely thought was a transition to something else. “Nobody could accuse you of be making exceptions,” Tony said, and smiled. It was a little thing, and T’Challa didn’t know the reason for it, but it was genuine and that’s all that mattered. Everything else could wait.

“So what did you do?” Tony asked, with a playful smirk.

“I fought a black leopard, barehanded, while completely human, when I was twenty.”

Tony fixated T’Challa with a look, incredulous expression on his face before he released T’Challa’s hand, and he laid on his back in pure exasperation, laughing.

“Did you steal its—their fang too?” Tony gestured loosely to T’Challa's person, but T’Challa knew he was referring to his mark.

“It was a she. And of course not. She wouldn’t have been able to hunt as well.” T’Challa reached for his mark, and unclasped it. He put it in Tony’s hand, watching as Tony lifted himself on an elbow to see better. “This is called a mark. Every member of the tribe receives one, and every tribe has one. They all are artificial, grown in a lab, on a mold.”

Rolling his eyes, Tony said, “Right. Why not?” He handed the mark back to T’Challa. “I’m going to tell you right now that all stories of me wrestling felines have been greatly exaggerated.”

“Feat of courage, strategy, and will, Tony,” T’Challa said fondly. “That’s the test, and you have told me of the circumstances in which you build the first Iron Man suit.”

“I can’t take all the credit for it.”

“Hole in your chest, Tony.”

“Still. Does it qualify?”

“It qualifies you both.”
Tony averted his eyes. “Huh.”

It was T’Challa turn to cradle Tony’s hand between his. “You both were examples of innovation in a dark place, but you both also showed great courage and will.”

Tony lay back down, unable or unwilling to meet T’Challa’s eyes anymore.

“What’s with the courage, strategy, and will thing?” Tony asked, dropping the previous line of questioning. “It isn’t the first thing that comes to mind when I’m thinking of panthers.”

“That’s not the first thing that comes to mind when you think about a person who has fought aliens and won?”

“Your ancestor.” Tony nodded. “But it still seems like… Rogers or Barnes might be better suited to your tribe than me.”

“Those are the qualities that a person must prove they have in order to be accepted,” T’Challa admitted easily. “These traits are important to the ruling tribe. But the test is not the only condition to being accepted. The candidate has, for example, to gain the support of thousands of people, and the disapproval of less than fifty.”

“That makes sense.” Tony put an arm over his eyes. “What’s the population of Wakanda?”

“As of last year, 11,260,815.”

Tony stilled. “And the Panther Tribe?”

“As of this morning, when a wonderful little girl, Jama, was born, 403,178.”

“Congrats,” Tony said, while he took his forearm off. “Wait.” He lifted himself up on his elbows. “Four hundred thousand. People who know each other by name. I’m supposed make 402,129 people think it’s a good idea to accept me in their tribe? And you believe I can do that because seven already like me?”

“That’s why I should have waited to tell you.”

“Because I might understandably think I have no chance in hell?”

“Being part of the tribe isn’t a numbers game.”

Tony sat up. “I’m listening.”

“It takes time to learn people names, and if the Panther God’s willing, you’ll never be completely done, because new people will always join. Whether they do it by birth, or by choosing our tribe, they are previously unknown to us. But it’s meant to be a natural process, not a test,” T’Challa explained. “We get to know their names, Tony, as we gather memories, knowledge… as they become important to us. As I mentioned we’re never done, but it could take decades to even get the bulk of it out of the way. Because it should take time for people to become individuals, and when we say ‘tribe,’ to know who we mean.”

Tony most definitely didn’t believe T’Challa, but that didn’t stop T’Challa from persevering.

“Until the moment comes when we can name 95% of our tribe, when we think of ‘tribe,’ we think of the ones we do know, and of the feeling of belonging, of fitting in. It isn’t a feeling that should, or can, be forced. It either comes, or it doesn’t, and there is no use spending time thinking about it.”
Tony swallowed again, and nodded once, decisively.

“What else doesn’t apply to me?”

“After a person learns to fight in the style we do, they are evaluated by… a panel.” T’Challa started counting them off, “The Head of the Doras, Teela now, the tribe’s second best warrior and the future Black Panther if anything were to happen to current one, that’s Shuri, the King, which is usually the Black Panther, T’Chaka, and the Black Panther, me.”

A crash made them both look in Nareema’s direction.

“I’m all right,” Nareema called, lying face down on the mat. “Testing the web.”

“It’s a less-resistant version of Spider Man’s web that he had been convinced, or bribed with food and science, to share,” Tony said, voiced raised, so Nareema could hear. As an aside to T’Challa, Tony added, “We spent a whole weekend just geeking out over it. He’s a good kid.” Addressing Nareema again, he asked, “How’s it handle?”

“It bounced me right back,” Nareema announced gleefully. She dusted herself off, and turned to Tony, “Thank you, Tony. I see a lot of swings and hammocks in my future.”

“My pleasure,” Tony responded, and then turned to T’Challa. “Panel says what?”

T’Challa smiled, amused. “The result of the evaluation is the lowest ranking you can achieve. It can be changed through three ways: the warrior themselves, by fighting other similarly ranked warriors to find out his true place; other warriors, when they best initial warrior, and so they win his place, he falls a position each time, or if the initial warrior feels that they would lose the match anyway, they can concede before it even begins; and by the panel, in rare cases when a new evaluation is necessary—loss of limb, for example, tends to go both ways.”

“So if I accept my ranking, and concede all other matches, aside from the fights disappearing from my audition, what happens?” Tony asked with an eyebrow wiggle.

“Nothing,” T’Challa said. At Tony’s skeptical look, T’Challa added, “Your ranking will be known, but even if there’s a war, there are many considerations when making strategic decisions. I’d think one would be obvious.”

“My suit.”

“Yes.”

“What else?” Tony asked. T’Challa stayed silent, and Tony rolled his eyes. “There is nothing else, is there?”

“Of the conditions, the test and the fighting are the only ones you can get past without expending any effort,” T’Challa allowed. “But there are other areas in which you have a head start: for example you built Meg. In doing so, you must’ve acquired some knowledge of feline anatomy, maybe even something about the way they live or hunt?”

“Both.”

“So you already have some of the information on panthers which you would have had to learn for your training—a head start. Although, even if you hadn’t, I don’t think acquiring knowledge would be a chore for you.”
T’Challa wanted to convince Tony to become a candidate, but at the same time he wanted Tony to make the decision for himself. The process would be on Tony’s shoulders mostly, and T’Challa couldn’t lie about any of it. In the end, T’Challa stopped before he tried to show in a positive light hours upon hours of training to a man as busy as Tony.

“So you’d really like for me stay. Not visit, stay. For Christmas, and then a lot of holidays afterwards,” Tony said, sounding surprised.

T’Challa had an idea that the time involved was representing a problem, but he didn’t how in what way. It could have been fear of commitment, or it could have the uncertainty of the process, or it even could’ve been that Tony was resenting T’Challa using the tribe to manipulate him into a relationship that would be better of T’Challa. Not that T’Challa was, he respected the tribe and Tony far too much.

“No matter what happens to you and me, you will be still be an ally of Wakanda, and I’ll do my best to be there for you. The tribe candidacy is another matter, and while I admit that it would be easier for me, I wish you’d accept it because I think it might do all of us good,” T’Challa said earnestly.

T’Challa took a fortifying breath, and continued, “Personally, I want you to be close, in whatever capacity you choose, for as long as I can have you. But it’s not just me. I’m not offering this opportunity without thinking of my tribe and you, just as my father didn’t invite you without weighing the consequences. People you've talked to at length, only talked to for a bit, and people you’ve never talked to at all, but applauded your prank on Chaushiku and Ochieng, want to meet you. They hope to get along with you.”

Tony went to lift himself up, but something happened, and he froze in a crouch. T’Challa’s eyes narrowed and he carefully got his feet under him. FRIDAY turned on a screen on the wall close to T’Challa, showing Tony from behind, and Olayemi’s AI slithering up back. T’Challa’s eyes widened for a moment, and that’s all the panic he permitted himself.

“How poisonous is he?” T’Challa murmured, seeing Olayemi getting close, with an apologetic expression.

“Oh, a bit,” Tony replied, seemingly unconcerned.

In Tony-speak it probably meant that he wouldn’t survive bite.

“Hi, there!” Tony greeted cheerfully. “Can you tell me what attracted you to my back? I’m not the most climb-worthy thing or being in the room.” He winked at T’Challa.

Of course, Tony was flirting while a wayward AI crawled all over him. Olayemi shook her head, and T’Challa glared. It wasn’t directed at somebody in particular, it was more of a general thing.

“Your heart beat the hardest,” the snake said, reaching Tony’s shoulder, and flickering his tongue out. “You should calm down.”

Tony squeezed his eyes shut, and took a shuddering breath. His abdomen got tight, and trembling. He was trying very hard not to laugh.

Honestly, Tony!

T’Challa glared harder, lips pursed so nobody could see his fond smile.

“You’re not calming down,” the snake said sounding put upon.
“Can you blame me?” Tony shot back.

The snake was silent for a bit, flicking his tongue at the air. “I’d never hurt you,” the snake finally said. He seemed highly offended. There might've been a pout in there, but on his face it was hard to tell.

“Okay, okay, not fair to you. Got it!” Tony backtracked. “Are you going to bite me if I move?”

The snake was silent again. “No,” he grumpily responded in the end.

“Hey, don’t be mad,” Tony murmured, as he took the snake carefully. “You took me by surprise.”

The snake sighed, flicking his tongue at Tony’s thumb. “Okay.”

T’Challa calmed down, carefully making eye contact with Tony, before glancing at Olayemi as a signal to Tony that somebody was behind him. This wasn’t the time to startle him. Once Tony’s eyes moved to the left, signifying that he understood, T’Challa nodded to Olayemi, who approached Tony from the side.

“I see you've met Jata,” Olayemi said brightly.

“We did,” T’Challa responded dryly.

Jata lifted his head, watched T’Challa unblinkingly, and T’Challa’s eyes narrowed at him. However, T’Challa still shuffled forward to pet it. Lightly. And to the great amusement of Tony, Olayemi, and Meg—who had woken up sometime without T’Challa noticing.

“Jata, the gentle Mamba,” Tony said with a smirk. “I’m Tony.”

“No,” Jata said. “You are the Mechanic.”

Tony seemed pleasantly surprised, and smiled. “All right.” He looked at Olayemi questioningly.

“You looked happy when you told us the story with Harley.” Olayemi shrugged. “It seemed appropriate.”

Tony nodded, his smile widened and the creases at the corner of his eyes deepened.

“What do you know me as, Jata?” T’Challa asked curiously.

“You are the Panther,” Jata said proudly.

T’Challa smiled smugly.

“Those are your names as far as all of them are concerned,” Meg said, nodding at the rest of the room. “Not me, of course. His… face art made me call him Hades.” She throatily chuckled, and looked at Tony fondly. “He likes it, I'd imagine. And for you, Hades proposed ‘Handsome.’” She watched T’Challa with the level of attention one would expect from a predator. “We agreed on that,” she purred.

“It’s not like you and him are the same person or anything,” Olayemi commented quietly, barely heard by T’Challa. Then, in a normal voice, she said, “We’d best be off.” She took Jata from Tony’s hands, and, seeing that the others had begun to reunite next to the punching bags, she headed in that direction.

Smothering a chuckle, T’Challa’s amusement was short lived. At least for the moment, he thought
that the subject of the tribe candidacy had run its course. Keeping his eyes on the Doras, T'Challa said, “It's your decision.” He hurried along so Tony wouldn't feel pressured. "If you have any other questions Tony, you can ask anyone of us, and we'll do our best to answer.” He personally thought that Tony would be better served by thinking about it for some time.

But as T'Challa went to lift himself off the mat, and was absently wondering if he should disturb Meg's slumber, Tony caught his wrist.

"Yeah, that won't work. I'm not done," Tony said amiably.

T'Challa nodded and sat back down.

"You once said that Wakanda isn't perfect. You were thinking about something when you said it, and I know you enough by now to be sure I have more chances of flying without my suit than of making you admit something to a foreigner, but..." Tony took a deep breath. "But you've got to give me a hint," he requested tightly. "I'm going in blind, here."

'A foreigner,' Tony had said, and that came with a certain amount of danger, especially with how things were currently in Wakanda. Change was never comfortable, and this change had ignited old tensions—the biggest one with Ape Tribe. Even if, and that was a big 'if,' T'Challa somehow persuaded Tony to drop it, Tony would be in peril once he was on Wakandan soil. But, at the same time, centuries of isolationism and safety paranoia were rallying against T'Challa saying anything. It seemed that even those who had brought upon the change, were not immune to the temptation of tradition.

"Wakanda's greatest enemy is Wakanda," T'Challa declared, and felt foolish for launching into tired clichés.

But Tony brightened. His eyebrows lifted, and T'Challa could practically see his brain working. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me!" Tony exclaimed. He stood, and went to the Doras still mumbling under his breath. Not any finished thoughts, just words: 'advanced,' and 'country in the world,' which T'Challa could only presume meant Wakanda; 'warrior culture,' which again seemed to refer to the Wakandan culture; and the phrase 'peaceful my ass,' which seemed to refer to his feelings in this matter.

T'Challa could guess, but he didn't know if Tony had made the right assumptions. Although, what else could Tony understand? T'Challa took a deep, unhappy breath. It was beyond frustrating.

"I really dislike me right now," T'Challa announced dryly as he drew level with Tony.

Tony snorted.
They eventually met Daudi, the Sensation-Seeking Turtle; Kito, the Gentleman Dik-dik; Tian, the Friendly Spider; Mbita, the Shy Monkey; and Moyo, the Lazy Plover. Next to Jata, the Gentle Snake, and Meg, the Irreverent Panther, they made an interesting assortment of personalities. Tony thought that their sense of self would deepen over time, as would a human’s. According to him, they might eventually have contrasting ideas, feel ambivalent about things, change their values, or suffer conflicting thoughts.

T’Challa was impressed.

And at the same time, it seemed too big to consider. How does a computer program become a person? What did it take? Tony said love and care. He'd be the one to ask, since he had actually succeeded in creating a smooth transition, and he'd know about the cases it went wrong, which, in the end, only strengthened his position seeing as humans sometimes went wrong too.

Anyway, Tony had established he was brilliant, T'Challa was convinced to treat Meg very well, and the Doras were gleeful about the whole business.

They ate dinner, watched 'A Wonderful Life,' then the Doras asked Tony to bring along more movies in Wakanda. He played some trailers that already existed, asked FRIDAY to edit others, and told them about important movies that had a powerful impact on pop culture. Seeing as references were one of the primary methods of communication for Tony—especially if he felt slighted or impressed—T'Challa, and the Doras to a slighter degree, avidly listened to Tony's recommendations.

"And Zaida's team let Schultz know that they believed they could apply the treatment to Barnes, so now they're waiting for the judiciary process to reveal some sort of release contract and conditions," T'Challa was saying, as he made his way with Tony to his bedroom. "Zaida wants to pick your brain on Barnes' temporary cell."

Tony suddenly stopped in the doorway, making T'Challa blink and frown.

"Is something the matter?" T'Challa asked.

"I'll do it." Tony looked straight at T'Challa with a challenging gaze. "The candidacy. I like what you're selling. Let's try it."

Something wasn't right.

"Tony?"

"You realize that what you're suggesting is completely off the beaten path," Tony said. "It's nuts. And I think that spending the next two hours laughing hysterically is out of the question, so I'm reacting."

T'Challa took a step forward. "Laughing hysterically is frowned upon," he agreed with a smile.

"Shame," Tony demurred.

"Tony," T'Challa said, becoming serious. "I have no expectations. It's never happened before, and, in some respects, we're going in blind too. Still, I wouldn't want you to make the decision for the wrong reasons."
Tony huffed. "I'm making the decision to try, T'Challa." He glared at T'Challa angrily, the challenge burning his eyes. "That okay with you?"

The inevitable had happened. Tony had been put, yet again, in the sort of situation where he had to sink or swim. T'Challa hated himself for it, and, at the same time, he had no idea of what he could have differently.

But no, it wasn't the same. T'Challa would be there to catch Tony if he sunk too deep. He would be there because of Tony, and for Tony.

T'Challa closed his eyes, and inhaled deeply. "Yes, Tony, I'm all right with your choice," he said, opening his eyes.

Tony studied T'Challa for a few long seconds, and nodded. A short, decisive bob of his head. He stepped closer to T'Challa, lifted his arm, put it around T'Challa's neck, and brought their foreheads together.

In the comfortable silence that followed, Tony asked, "T'Chaka wanted to do what?"

T'Challa snickered.

* 

Tony's whispering woke T'Challa up the next morning. Tony was trying his best not to disturb T'Challa's rest, especially since he was in a different room, but T'Challa's hearing was too good, and there was tension in Tony's voice, so T'Challa was awake. T'Challa proclaimed yet again his absolute hatred of time zones and jet lags, as he was still groggy, and tried to figure out what had upset Tony.

"No, I can't," Tony said, the sheer frustration in his voice telling T'Challa that it wasn't the first time he saying it.

"Why not?" A woman's voice. Ms. Potts, if T'Challa was not mistaken. "It's three days."

"That's a little less than a third of what I originally planned, and I wanted to extend it," Tony said, keeping his voice down, but almost gritting his teeth.

*That didn't sound good.*

T'Challa jumped out of the bed, looked down at his boxer briefs, cursed, put on some loose, black sweatpants, left the search for a shirt for another day when people did their jobs—or when he was in the mood for it, whichever happened first—and was out the door in less then five seconds.

"I understand that you want to go gallivanting through Wakanda with its prince, but you have responsibilities, Tony," Potts argued sharply.

T'Challa entered the Tony's lab, and Tony automatically reoriented himself to face him.

"Good morning," Tony greeted, ignoring Potts and her enraged in-drawn breath.

T'Challa squinted at the morning light that filtered through the windows. He wanted to answer, but he was low on energy. His presence was required, not his logic. "Morning," he croaked in Wakandan.

"Coffee, Sleeping Beauty?" Tony cooed. His eyes racked over T'Challa, flared with lust, and Tony
rearranged the hologram with the video call presumably so Ms. Potts won't catch a glimpse of T'Challa in his undressed state.

"Chai," T'Challa mumbled. He shuffled to a table, and promptly put his head on it. "Do I have to get Jata?"

Tony frowned.

"Tony!" Potts said angrily.

T'Challa opened his eyes and caught Tony's for a moment. He had to make Tony remember, and from the slight crinkling of his eyebrows, T'Challa succeeded. Tony's eyes widened slightly, a good sign that Tony had realized T'Challa was referring to Tony's distress.

"Sorry, Pep," Tony apologized, coming back to the video call. "Guests." To T'Challa, Tony said, "You're going to have to wait a bit, go to the kitchen, or ask Fry."

T'Challa groaned.

"Who's there?" Potts asked, voice cold.

"T'Challa," Tony answered. "Pep, I'm going, and I'm not staying ten days, I'm staying until January."

"FRIDAY, could you please get me some chai?" T'Challa whispered.

The lights flashed once to confirm his request.

"Tony, you need to go to three board meetings, two conferences, and you have to give three prototypes over to R&D," Potts reminded shrilly.

T'Challa frowned.

"The board will survive without me, I'll have the prototypes ready, and I've been to five conferences in the last two months." Tony's voice was close to begging. "I'm getting too predictable," he said with a fake smirk.

"You have responsibilities, Tony!"

"And now they are to Wakandan Wildlife," Tony answered. "I'm leaving, Pep. Have an awesome day!"

Potts glared. "Safe trip." She ended the call.

Tony supported his chin with his hand. "That's the politest 'screw you,' I heard since Spock."

T'Challa grinned. He left his chair, and hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his sweatpants and his briefs. Tony's eyes were blown with lust, fingers flexing... and T'Challa paused.

"You are aware of your job and responsibilities, and hers, right?" T'Challa asked.

Tony stilled. He looked straight in T'Challa's eyes. "She's been with me since I was twenty-five."

"I don't presume to know your relationship, which is why my question doesn't refer to it."

"Yes, I know my responsibilities and hers."
"I wanted to make sure."

Then in a single move T'Challa was naked. He stepped out of the clothes, and moved backwards. His eyebrows lifted in challenge as he lifted himself up on the table. He smirked.

"Oh, so we're done talking now, are we?" Tony asked wryly.

T'Challa spread his legs, palmed his cock, and leaned back.

"Not fair!" Tony complained, but he stepped closer.
Chapter 11

Tony continued to fit in.

When Tony received his kimoyo beads, on the flight to Wakanda:

"These are yours," T'Challa said, "to keep. And study."

"Toys!" Tony crooned delightedly.

When Tony met T'Challa's sister and father, after the traditional greetings:

"I hope you'll like it here," T'Chaka told Tony.

"I hope you'll like me here," Tony said. "I have a talent for trouble."

"That sounds interesting," Shuri observed. "Tell me more."

When Tony met Chintudu, the chef:

"Would you like a hamburger for tonight's dinner?" Chintudu asked politely.

"Depends," Tony quipped, with an easy grin. "Is it going to be any good?"

Chintudu's eyes narrowed. "Is that a dare?"

"It is," Tony confirmed.

When Tony discussed the building of Barnes' cell with Tia, Azizi, Chaushiku, Ochieng, and Dinka, who was a building engineer and architect:

"It's not feasible to build the whole thing out of vibranium," Dinka complained. "Though as I understand it he's terribly competent at killing people, so it would be useful."

"I learned an important lesson while building, testing and using the Hulkbuster: spare parts, and a lot of them," Tony advised.

"That's intriguing." Dinka's eyes lightened with possibilities.

When Tony exposed the kids to US entertainment and pop culture, especially the movie '300':

"Baron Zemo," Chagina shouted. "You have blown up our king in the name of HYDRA. That was a mistake." She walked towards a training dummy, and shrieked, "This is WAKANDA!" With a mighty kick she propelled the dummy into a wall so hard it burst the seams.

The rest of the kids cheered.

Shuri cocked her head. "Do you think we should pay better attention to the news that reaches them?"

"Let them enjoy their victory over sacks of sand first," T'Challa suggested.

Shuri hesitated, but then nodded. She turned her head to watch Tony who was paying very close attention to a leaf. He wasn't fooling anyone with the way his shoulders were shaking in silent laughter, but he tried.
"You're doing good, Tony," Teela observed, with something in her voice that T'Challa would have called 'pleasant surprise,' if it were something else. "A long stronger than I would have expected, but you also move with ease."

"The first one is from lugging engines around." Tony shrugged. "As for the second, to be able to walk in the suit I have to be... nimble."

Teela nodded shortly, and led Tony through the next series of movements. T'Challa smiled. It was obvious to him that Teela was impressed.

But while Tony fit in with the tribe, his problems with Potts multiplied.

"Pep, they gave me toys!" Tony announced gleefully, showing her the beads through the Stark Phone video call.

"I think you should be more respectful of their culture," Potts said... in an odd tone.

In a superior tone.

"They're the most secure means of communication on the... well, they're not on the market, but the point still stands." Tony smirked, but it was forced, and his eyes were losing their crinkles. "This is the new competition, and Pep we're coming second."

"Tony!" Potts shouted.

"She's patronizing," Shuri said, coming from behind.

T'Challa heard her coming. "I hoped not."

"For Tony's sake?"

"They have a shared past."

"Is that why you're not interfering?" Shuri asked.

"I did all I could," T'Challa confessed. "The rest is up to him."

Shuri didn't lie to T'Challa by telling him it was going to be alright, but sat down, and cuddled with him on the bench.

"Pep, why don't you take a vacation?" Tony suggested.

T'Challa felt a twinge in his neck when he whipped his head up to see Tony.

"How can I when you aren't where you are supposed to be?" Potts argued, her voice showing signs of reaching the shrill tone from before.

"It's on me."

"No, Tony!"

There it was, and T'Challa's ears twinged.

But Tony would not be deterred.
"Take Happy and relax," Tony coaxed.

Tony sounded friendly, and the words themselves were innocuous, but they sent a shiver down T'Challa's spine. They might have been a warning of some kind, T'Challa wasn't sure. And by the way Shuri stiffened, she heard it too.

"Why on earth would I take Happy?"

Lifting his eyebrows, Tony didn't say anything.

"So you know." Potts lifted her chin, ignoring the blush that stained her cheeks.

Tony flapped a hand as though clearing the air.

"I don't know why I'm the one on probation, but I have accepted it, and you would have eventually shown signs of letting off. You aren't yet, if you're wondering. But I know it's my fault that we broke up because I couldn't give up being Iron Man," Tony said with the same vulnerability he showed in the call from Lazarus.

T'Challa wanted to take Shuri and go, but at this point they would only distract Tony.

"So I was okay with you riding my ass," Tony said with a bitter smile.

"I did no such thing!"

"But Pep, it's gone too far."

"What do you mean 'it's gone too far'?"

Tony's jaw clenched. "Would you just take the holiday?"

"No, Tony, you were telling how I'm... What? Crossing some line?" Potts laughed derisively.

Tony took a deep breath. "You are starting to let things slip. You are starting to blame others for your problems. You are being unprofessional. In short, you are not yourself."

"Unprofessional?! Like you have been since I've known you?" Potts accused.

"Exactly! That's exactly why I hired you. And why I made you CEO. You're the professional one, the one that remembers to do the boring stuff, and the one who's actually good at it. You do things that I don't. That's your job! Those are your responsibilities."

"It's your company!" Potts shouted.

"Thank you!" Tony said loudly. "And you are my employee so I need you to do your job. The job that I'm absolutely shit at, the one that you do so brilliantly. Do your fucking job, Pep!"

"I QUIT!" Potts screamed.

"I don't want to lose you," Tony pleaded.

"I will not allow you to talk to me like that! I was with you for twenty years, and now you're acting like you found me on the street!" Potts seethed. "After what I went through for you?"

Tony drew a breath. Then he drew another one. "You have to give a month notice. Take a holiday, go for a week at the beach, bring Happy with you. When you return, you'll have three weeks left to
decide if that's what you want to do or not." He took another deep breath. "I don't know what's going on with you, I'm sorry... I can't understand. And I can't keep being your bitch, because I'm dragging people down in the process."

"What people?"

"Chaushiku and Ochieng, who have been testing our security for months, so that white hat hacker conference was a waste of time," Tony said. "All our time. Barnes and his treatment. The people of Wakanda. I have shown up tired, and had to explain my apparent lack of trust in their skills, and T'Challa had to endure—"

Tony stopped.

"It's not getting any better, Pep," Tony said quietly. "In the beginning, I hired you to do stuff that I won't, because you showed me you had the guts to do it. You were above reproach, and yeah, after Obie... Obadiah, I realized you had been doing most of the work so I promoted you. Now, you're pouring shit down my throat and calling it honey, and I deserve it, Pep, I do. But other people don't."

Potts sighed, and lifted his head probably so her tears wouldn't spill. "You didn't crash and burn," she whispered.

"What?" Tony asked confusedly.

But T'Challa realized what she was referring to and it stopped the breath in his lungs.

"Fuck it all," T'Challa cursed quietly.

Shuri looked at him questioningly, but he just signaled her to listen.

"You weren't destroyed," Potts admitted in a low voice. "I know it sounds awful. Every time you took a blow you fell, and then, you bounced back higher but... But you always crashed. That was what I was waiting for, for that I was preparing myself. We always fall into the same roles: you go down in flames and I put it out."

Shuri's eyes widened.

Tony swallowed, and smiled emptily.

"You should've... Why—" Potts raised a hand, presumably to her face, but dropped it before it got there. "Anyway, when you didn't, I..." She sighed. "I think I'll take that holiday."

Tony's smile was so fake, it almost looked like it hurt. "You have the card, right?" Then T'Challa blinked, and suddenly Tony's the smile was just another genuine-looking grin, and T'Challa would have believed it too, if Tony's eyes hadn't shown his heart bleeding.

"Say you're sorry, say you're sorry, say you're sorry," Shuri murmured over and over.

"I'm sorry, Pep," Tony said sincerely.

"Not you," Shuri whispered, shocked.

Potts nodded. "Anything else, Mr. Stark?"

"That will be all, Ms. Potts," Tony replied.

It had the ease of something that was repeated many times. Something that was a ritual of sorts, so it's
presence was naturally bitter-sweet. It served to make T'Challa aware that he had just witnessed a conversation he shouldn't have. He wasn't alone either.

"Tony, I'm so sorry!" Shuri cried, and hugged him.

Tony froze outside a little 'oomph.' T'Challa sighed. Shuri was not the most subtle of people, but she was genuine. Tony frowned, and slowly, ever so slowly, responded.

"It's okay," Tony whispered. He looked at T'Challa. "I owed you an explanation."

T'Challa started to shake his head, but then changed mind, and joined the hug.

"Don't ever do something for my sake that you wish to avoid," T'Challa said fervently.

"Okay," Tony said, voice muffled having his head buried between Shuri's neck and T'Challa's.
Tony fit in so well that he had the necessary votes in four months.

"Hey, gorgeous," Tony said as T'Challa happened upon him outside the engineering building. "I was looking for you."

"Hello, beautiful," T'Challa greeted and leaned forward to kiss Tony's temple. "I was looking for you too. Want to go for a walk in the techno-organic jungle?"

Tony looked at T'Challa questioningly. "Yeah. What's up?"

"You first," T'Challa invited.

"Well, I was asking Shuri about what the fealty oath entails because I wanted to mean whatever I'm saying and—"

"You must. It's binding."

Tony's eyebrows flew up. "Say what?"

"Some say it's the will of the Panther God, some that it's magic, some advanced science, and some don't give it any kind of explanation, but, no matter the origins, it's something that is a part of our culture in Wakanda." T'Challa shrugged lightly. "Once the Oath is made, if you ever felt the need to disregard anything you swore to, you would, at first, feel pressured, then obliged, to obey it. Complying with the Oath has never actually been a problem in my lifetime, but it was in my father's, and that's the only reason I even know about how it might feel if you are ever disinclined to adhere to your vow."

"So that's why it's literally an oath in which you swear fealty to the tribe," Tony realized.

"Loyalty is the only thing you commit to when you think about it," T'Challa explained. "It has the added advantage that it's simple and can mean whatever you want it to mean."

"Including that you screw yourself over," Tony chuckled. He nodded to a tree. "I've got to work on my climbing. It's not the lifting my weight that's the problem, it's the leafy green stuff." He pouted. "I slip."

"You don't have to learn how to do it."

"It's fun," Tony said grinning.

"That it is." T'Challa gestured at jungle around them. "Want to practice?" he offered. "These trees might suit you better."

"Sure."

T'Challa let Tony go first, ready to catch him if he lost his balance. After watching Tony for a bit, and leaving him the space to move, T'Challa followed. He lifted himself up the hybrid that was fashioned after a utile tree, with the help of cable vines. He had to do a bit of strategizing in the beginning, but soon he found both the right pace, and a nearby tree to improve his footholds. In almost no time they reached the branches. The jungle was new.

Tony was on a wide branch, catching his breath. "You're right, it's different."
"Different good, or different bad?" T'Challa asked as he sat next to the trunk, on the same branch as Tony.

"Still fun. Does that help?" Tony turned around so his head could be in T'Challa's lap.

"I'm glad you're enjoying himself," T'Challa said, and buried his fingers in Tony's hair.

"Yeaaaaah," Tony drawled with a happy wiggle. "What did you want to talk about?"

"You've got the votes."

Tony frowned. "What v—The Tribe's votes? Isn't that too early?" He chuckled bitterly. "How many 'pro' votes are there just because we're together?"

T'Challa rose an eyebrow. "At most two hundred," he said bluntly. "I do not understand why that would be a problem. If your argument is that people only voted for you because they like me, respect me, or want me to have a fulfilling relationship, I have the counter-argument that their good opinion is probably based on my always thinking of the tribe first."

"Point," Tony admitted. "And people who never met me voted as they did because they trusted the people that did and thought I fit."

"Right," T'Challa confirmed. "The most important votes are the ones against. They are meant to show that you didn't quite find your place with those people, and I don't just mean the people you got along with, you could very well be someone's competition."

"Are you allowed to say how many those were?" Tony smirked. "Can I bribe you?"

"Yes, I am open to bribes," T'Challa said and smiled broadly.

Tony pouted. "No, you aren't. So you can point fingers and name names?"

"I can," T'Challa agreed with a chuckle. "But first, a little Social Issues lesson to supplement you studies."

"About that." Tony started to doodle on T'Challa's knee with his eyes closed. "I learn a lot about Wakanda and even more about the tribe, but there's no knowledge quiz anywhere in the process. Do I not become a citizen of Wakanda if I become part of the Panther Tribe?"

"You do, and, although we prize knowledge, it's requirement to candidacy to the tribes, or, in your case, for joining Wakanda. We don't need to test it because if you're a candidate you already have it or you have the ability to gain it."

Tony nodded and added a repulsor to his doodle of an airplane on T'Challa's knee. "Okay, Social Issues 101—go."

"There are three main problems that other tribes have with mine," T'Challa started.

"Does it have anything to do with the fact that Black Panther is part of the ruling tribe?"

T'Challa hesitated.

Tony went on, "The laws say they can make the major decisions, and, while their responsibility is the whole country, they swore fealty only to that one tribe, less than 4% of people. Who, incidentally, are bonded by magic to give their loyalty to the tribe, and to the each member individually as they learn their names and think of them when they think of the concept 'tribe.' Such
as the Black Panther. It's kind of circular, isn't it?"

"Division of Power in the country might appear to be the problem, but it isn't." T'Challa defended. "The country has an absolute ruler, a protector that is chosen by their skills—essential in ruling; skills that everyone in their tribe has to show—and then given superhuman abilities. They are the chieftain of the same tribe, are respected as a principle, and are traditionally defended by the best women warriors of the other tribes."

Tony snapped his fingers. "You're the problem!"

"The mere existence of the Black Panther defies conventional politics," T'Challa allowed. "And we mostly have gotten used to it and our problems are the same as in other countries: people who feel that things should be different."

"The isolationism," Tony said as he added a bow to the doodle. Or possibly some sort of antenna, T'Challa couldn't be sure.

"We did have a nation-wide vote for it." T'Challa sounded close to whining. He coughed and tried again, "But yes. Another problem would be the advancements in technology. And the third one is derived from the second, it's wide-spread, and it mostly involves hindering one tribe advancements: for Panther is technology, but they can be anything, for example Butterfly Tribe and art."

"All right. Consider the—interesting—lesson learned." Tony was adding some serious weaponry to his airplane. "What's the connection with the votes? Wait, it's the isolationism, isn't it? The biggest problem in your country. T'Chaka even mentioned it in his speech at the UN. People don't change that fast."

T'Challa dropped a kiss on Tony's forehead in congratulations. "Correct. Ten people voted that you, as a non-Wakandan entity should not be allowed to enter our tribe. They mostly haven't met you. But. Because you get along so well with the Doras you met, three of them suggested you could join another tribe, so the change is more paced, and all of them insisted that their votes are mainly a form of protest and should be ignored if they are the ones that signify your rejection."

"Not personal, then."

"None that have said."

Tony nodded, brightened, and his airplane grew two more engines. "When's the evaluation?"

"When Teela says you're ready," T'Challa answered.

"And the stocks?"

Meg announced her presence by a short growl.

"We're already begun," T'Challa assured. "Meg's coming."

"Good. And thanks." Tony smiled widely. "I'm planning on Ochieng and Chaushiku."

"Good choice, Hades," Meg said while jumping between the two trees, carefully using her claws. "Maybe you can do the polite thing, and meet me halfway."

Tony rolled over until he could see over the side off the branch. "Or maybe you could, and leave us to talk."
"Now, where's the fun in that?" Meg shot back.

*

They were sitting in the tribe room, three months later. T'Challa was reading on the subject of torture and how effective it was, what the studies, experts, and POWs said. He wanted to be better prepared for his upcoming UN session, and was trying to suss out the truth even though it made for a truly depressing research. Both Shuri and Tony, cuddled together, had their own reading to do, and T'Chaka was doing paperwork on his tablet. They were in a cocoon of silence, impervious to the rest of the tribe's comings and goings.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Tony said loudly, sitting up abruptly.

Shuri ended up with her feet on the ground, and bit off a growl at the sudden movement, preferring instead to look at Tony worriedly.

"What? What's wrong?" Shuri asked.

Tony was watching T'Challa. "Are the Tribe Chieftains discussing AI rights? Did you do that?"

"How do y—" T'Challa interrupted himself and rolled his eyes. "In order to write new law, yes."

With a sound that was too similar to a squeak for Tony's future peace of mind considering Shuri's expression, Tony launched himself at T'Challa. He hugged T'Challa tightly, head tucked under T'Challa's chin, whispering, "Thank you."

T'Challa lifted his arms around Tony. "It's the least I could do," T'Challa said, and was rewarded by the brightest, most beautiful smile.

"They're going to need your expert opinion, Tony, now that you know," T'Chaka said with a small smile.

"It'll be my pleasure," Tony said gleefully.

*

The final part of Tony's candidacy was not even a full month later. If everything went okay with his evaluation, Tony was ready to swear fealty today or tomorrow at the latest. The whole tribe was there, of course, but so were people from the rest of the tribes. It was a unique situation, so it was only natural. Still, T'Challa was tense and had the Doras on guard.

The spectators were seated on floating platforms around the training ground, brought in for the occasion. A transparent shield was around them, flexible but ready to become visible and tough at the slightest provocation. It wasn't as secure as T'Challa wanted, but it was the best he was going to get.

Tony, though, Tony was on the training ground with the evaluation team—that consisted of Teela, Shuri, T'Chaka, and T'Challa—and was doing his level best to amaze and awe. He was exceeding expectations. His movements were flowing, with no pause or hesitation during the transitions. It was like it should be, a dance, or a meditation, all delicate motions and powerful kicks. Beautiful. Tony's fingers extended, palm moving whistling forward, a breath, followed by a slender ankle, and T'Challa realized he had stopped breathing.

Finally, Tony came to a halt, with a boyish grin and T'Challa felt a jolt of realization: just one more hurdle and Tony was a part of his tribe. T'Challa forced himself to pay attention to Tony's evaluation,
tried his best to not think ahead, but it was so hard. With a deep breath, T'Challa focused on Teela's words.

"Since Tony doesn't want to fight, his experience in battle weighs a lot less because he mainly used his suit," Teela was saying.

Shuri nodded. "That's his weapon, and he's going to continue to do most of his fighting in it. Nothing wrong with that. And he doesn't seem like he'd be upset by a lower rank."

"His fighting in the suit should count for something," T'Chaka said. "Experience, in the suit or not, is still experience."

"Yes, but for a tribe his sense of sacrifice is more likely a minus, while the strategic thinking is a plus." T'Challa looked at Tony for a second. "Give him a lower rank, and then simply raise it when he proves himself."

Teela accepted his words with a nod, and made her suggestion. "99,900-100,000."

"Agreed," Shuri said.

"It's fine," T'Chaka accepted.

T'Challa stood and announced, "99,900-100,000."

Tony's expression was saying 'not bad,' he was obviously satisfied to be in the middle of the pack.

T'Challa's announcement was followed by thirty-three people who ceded their rank and one who challenged for it forcing Tony to yield, and Tony's final rank was 99,967.

The crowd applauded politely, but it tapered off pretty fast. There was an uncomfortable pressure, a tense silence, a breathlessness that affected not only T'Challa, though his heart was pounding hard enough for all of them. So close.

Steady, steady.

"Do you swear?" T'Challa asked, his voice amplified by a small transmitter.

"I swear fealty to the Panther Tribe," Tony answered promptly, his smile radiant.

"Come and receive your mark."

T'Challa took a fang from a hide pillow, and fastened the vibranium chain, a personal gift from him, around Tony's neck.

"Welcome to the Panther Tribe," T'Challa declared. Even he could tell his voice held warmth. "Welcome to Wakanda."

The crowd exploded.

* 

Tony continued to fit.

When the Tribe Chieftains were debating AI rights:

"There should be a continuum of sentience rather then five or ten independent levels," Tony said
persuasively. "The AIs should not be restricted to one bracket, but they should have the possibility to
grow. Or even slide backwards."

"Whore," Tameeka, the Lion Tribe Chieftain mumbled in Wakandan.

There was a pause, in which T'Challa barely suppressed his growl knowing that it wouldn't do Tony
any good for T'Challa to interfere, and then Tony said, "Yes?"

Tameeka frowned, but before he could verbalize a response, Tony was off, "You were supposed to
continue by saying something. Something like 'whore, you're right,' or 'whore, you're delusional.'
Otherwise why would you even say it? It can't be to offend me, because I'm not offended, and it
can't be to remind T'Challa because it would be arrogant to believe you know something about
foreigners that he doesn't. So. 'Whore, you're..."

M'Chap, Chieftain of the Wildebeest Tribe, coughed, but kept his mirth silent, while Iffeh, Impala
Tribe, didn't bother to hide anything as her gleeful laughter rang clear.

"I don't know what you were expecting," Zauna, Warthog Tribe, said, amusement shining through
her somber tone. "He's known for being rather smart."

Gritting his teeth, Tameeka spat, "Right." At Tony's challenging look, Tameeka clarified, "Whore,
you're right."

T'Challa chuckled, but Tony... Tony smirked evilly.

Or when Dinka suddenly stopped while they were discussing the final details of Barnes' cell:

"I was one of those who voted that a foreigner should not be a part of the tribe," Dinka declared.
Tony blinked. "Do you want... What? A reward? To apologize?"

"No?"

They stared at each other in confusion.

"Thanks for telling me." Tony paused, unsure, and then, "Can we go back to building the anti-prison
cell?"

"Yes," Dinka said empathically.

Or when T'Challa brought him to speed on the Tribe situation:

"So everybody hates us," Tony said, nodding. "Seems fair."

"Tony." T'Challa swallowed his smile, but he had the impression that Tony was on to him.

"Right." Tony put his hands up. "One hates us. Two envy us a lot. Three envy us a little. And
miscellaneous people from all the tribes don't agree with you, so they have a mild to serious dislike."

"There are people who appreciate us."

"And love you."

"My sister, my father, my tribe too," T'Challa said with a shrug. "And I have heard good things
about my lover."
"The world either hates us or it loves us."

"I told you'd fit right in," T'Challa defended himself.

Shuri later let them know that Tony's guffaws were heard from the inner courtyard.

Three days later, just as T'Challa was exiting the courtroom, after testifying in Rogers' case, he turned on his phone. He had four missed calls, and even as he looked at his log, somebody was calling. T'Challa frowned, and picked up. He didn't tick on the video option.

"Doctor Doom here," the very man himself, Victor Van Doom, mask and all, said. "I demand to see you."

T'Challa was confused, so he kept his mouth shut, and his video feature deactivated.

"You must confirm something for me regarding your embassy in Latveria," Doom requested impetuously.

That Embassy was established after long negotiations. UK, US, Russia, and China were among the countries that didn't have one in Latveria, so its very existence was an accomplishment. Morbid curiosity made T'Challa turn on video.

"Good," Doom said. "Now, is Tony Stark a Wakandan citizen?"

"Why should I offer you that information?" T'Challa wanted to know. He really wanted to know.

"He's in the Wakandan Embassy in Latveria."

"Why?"

"He was shot down."

"How?"

"With a squadron of Doom Bots and magic," Doom mumbled.

T'Challa suddenly understood Tony when he said he hated magic, and was happy that Tony somehow managed to get into the Embassy.

"Why?" T'Challa asked again.

"Because he was flying above Hungary."

"What does that have to do with—" T'Challa took a deep breath, and decided to drop that line of questioning because they were obviously going nowhere fast. "Yes, Anthony Edward Stark is a citizen of Wakanda."

"Did you marry him?" Doom demanded. He sounded outraged.

"You only need to know that he is a citizen." T'Challa tried to hold on to his calm, but he was never that restrained. "He has a passport."

Doom looked at T'Challa as if he was the unreasonable one. "He could have a passport from every country in the world." Doom leaned forward, and said, "He's Tony Stark."

T'Challa shook his head. "Will you respect the embassy cars?"
"Of course I will," Doom said as if offended. Like he didn't shot a man out of the sky above another country. "As long as he's a real citizen, and not the husband of one."

"How can I convince you?" T'Challa asked, safe in the knowledge that the Doras had heard and extraction plans were on their way.

"By telling me."

T'Challa stared at him, and Doom stared back not seeing anything wrong with the conversation.

"He—is—a—citizen—of—Wakanda," T'Challa enunciated. "He became one recently. We are not married."

"How recent?"

"A month and a half ago."

"That was fast."

"On the contrary, it is a lengthy process, but one that does not depend on residing in the country," T'Challa disagreed.

Doom took a step forward, towards the camera. "His prize for saving the king, hm? The greedy bastard."

T'Challa took a deep breath. "How did you get this number?"

"What, are you upset that I called you before I blew Stark's head off?" Doom asked mockingly.

Clenching his fist, T'Challa stayed silent, and waited.

"Latveria is considering the option of joining the UN," Doom announced.

T'Challa was... unsurprised.

"I did not know that they hand over the phone numbers of the Representatives for UN Countries to candidates," T'Challa said conversationally, as his eyes moved over Teela.

Tony was safe at the Wakandan Embassy in Romania.

"They don't." Doom chuckled, though it sounded like it something in his throat was tearing. "But they do allow them past Stark's security."

Suddenly, on Doom's end, all sorts of bells and whistles went off.

"I see you have managed to recover your lost sheep," Doom said contemptuously. "There is no way I can recover him, is there?"

"No."

"Very well," Doom declared. "It's good to know who Stark's friends are. I hope he spends more time in Wakanda from now on."

*How delightfully vague and foreboding.*

"We are done," T'Challa said calmly.
Doom bowed his head, with another painful chuckle. "I believe we are."

T'Challa ended the call, and rolled his eyes.

The next morning the very single media outlet blared that Tony was a Wakandan.

Sighing, T'Challa rolled his eyes again.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I ask you again to please consider the warnings carefully so you won't be triggered :). Thank you!

It was the beginning of the wet season, November 17th, and the tribe had had a guest for almost two months. T'Challa watched as Barnes got out of his cell. By all accounts, his treatment was going well, though they had issues with addiction, especially since Barnes stayed cooped up in his cell, and fairly isolated—five minute walk from the palace in the techno-organic jungle, where the fauna could keep an eye on him. Despite the issues being harsher than expected, they consulted Barnes, and persevered. As of a week ago they manage to neutralize a word in the sequence.

Barnes couldn't be activated.

There were still things they would have to work on before he was home free, things that T'Challa wasn't allowed to know, but he could imagine Barnes had much to come to terms with.

Until then, they started having Barnes walk through the jungle and the palace grounds, under the supervision of the Doras, in order to strive off the addiction by helping him discover a new world, and remember that time only went one way. It was Barnes' third time out of his cell, and Tony was a mess of nerves next to T'Challa. Not that anyone could tell, he had a good poker face, but his smile was little to fixed on his face. Also, he was easier to startle than usual.

Strange though it may be, T'Challa couldn't help but think that the similarities between Tony and Barnes were many. The two men themselves had an odd relationship, where they tried their best to think of the other as a human, while at the same time being convinced that the monsters were themselves. They were hesitant in the other's presence and, at the same time, they didn't seem to need words to understand each other; they didn't want to see the other, but they still seemed weirdly protective of him.

"Do you want to accompany them?" T'Challa asked casually, nodding towards Barnes and the Doras.

Tony shook his head in denial, but what he actually spoke when he opened his mouth was, "Yeah."

T'Challa raised an eyebrow.

"Let's go," Tony decided, and was already halfway there when T'Challa caught up.

Tony's conviction lasted until he was beside Barnes, where it faltered, and Tony continued on pure bravado.

"Lovely weather, Barnes," Tony said with false cheerfulness. That was when the overcast sky broke in a shower. Tony groaned, and commented dryly, "I swear, I couldn't have planned it better if I tried."

Barnes chuckled throatily. "We're going back now?"
"If you'd like," T'Challa said after he checked with Tony.

But Barnes was pensive, studying Tony. "You don't look so well, Stark."

And Tony didn't. He looked exhausted, more than even with his erratic sleep schedule accounted for. In fact, that was the reason he was in Wakanda. To see everybody, of course, but also to take a breather, and, once T'Challa talked to him about it, maybe have a check up for what T'Challa believe it was either sensitivity to light, or headaches going by the winces Tony hid.

"I'm recovering," Tony dismissed.

Barnes' focus was still on Tony, though, and finally he said, "We're going back."

They were a couple of meters from the cell, when they were attacked. The world exploded in noise. It was easy to identify who was attacking them, because they kept popping in and out. Hyena Tribe was at the peak in teleporting devices, and its warriors were apparently after... Barnes!

"Get Banes to safety!" T'Challa barked in Wakandan.

Barnes hadn't understood, or he didn't care. But he was close to the cell door. And his back was turned to Tony, protecting him. He had forgotten about Tony's own protectiveness. Tony planted his foot in Barnes' lower back, and pushed. Surprised, Barnes went with the blow, he rolled, landing with his feet under him. He was already in the cell. And Tony hurried to the door, snapping it closed, before Barnes had the chance to get his bearings straight.

Presumably, Tony was inputting the code. T'Challa didn't have time to watch, seeing as he was fighting three warriors. He rendered one unconscious, one too wounded to fight, and one disappeared. T'Challa turned around. He didn't see Tony. The cell was opaque. Tony had managed to secure it.

"Where's Tony?" T'Challa shouted.

T'Challa had to quickly duck as another Hyena took a swipe. She teleported out. T'Challa heard another pop. He was back on his feet and taking a swipe before he had a chance to look.

And T'Challa found Tony. In front of T'Challa. Jumping. Tony's eyes were wide. He had every reason to be scared. T'Challa's claws were going to slit his throat. He had to flex his fingers to retreat the claws. But that would never happen in time. Tony finished his jump by planting both of his feet on T'Challa's stomach. This time it was not to push T'Challa away. It was to shove himself back. T'Challa pulled his palm back as far as it would go in the moments he had.

T'Challa hoped it would be enough. By the Panther God, he hoped. It couldn't... The terrified expression was on Tony's face wasn't going to be the last one T'Challa ever saw. T'Challa couldn't breathe. It... . T'Challa hoped.

The world slowed down. T'Challa's claws caressed the Tony's skin. Too shallow. Just a scratch. T'Challa inhaled abruptly. He was... Relieved. Thankful. The world returned at its normal speed.

Tony propelled himself backward. He rolled. Stood immediately. And then started running towards T'Challa.

What was Tony thinking?

T'Challa wanted to freeze. He wanted to ask for a minute. Just a minute to figure out what was going on. But he didn't get it. Another warrior transported before T'Challa. The Hyena tried to catch
T'Challa off balance with a direct hit. T'Challa turned to the side, and swiped at the warrior's ear. T'Challa took advantage of his distraction. Of his panic, really. He kicked the inside of the Hyena's knee.

From the corner of his eye, T'Challa could see something. He tensed, ready to react. At the last second, he recognized Tony. T'Challa stilled. Tony climbed him, putting his foot on T'Challa's knee, and ducking under T'Challa's arm. With a whisper of 'Trust me. Incoming,' and a kiss on T'Challa's cheek, Tony squirmed and twisted, and, using T'Challa’s body as an obstacle he squeezed through, Tony was off running.

T'Challa blinked. Then he realized. Tony had wanted to reassure T'Challa. That was nice. Good. T'Challa could do without the heart attack. But the intention was definitely appreciated.

Tony also had two Hyenas on his trail. T'Challa dealt with them. Then looked around for Tony. He saw him jumping on the back of a Hyena, Tony's feet on his lower back, Tony's hands around his shoulders. Went for his back, like a panther. The Hyena stayed on his feet, but he did sway, turning into another Hyena's swing. Tony let him go, and he crumbled into his tribe sister. Apparently, the new target was Tony.

"Meg, Tony!" T'Challa yelled over the din.

T'Challa's attention was drawn to a Hyena with an extra sash. The head of the hunting pack. But she wasn't making it easy for T'Challa. She had to be taken out to make the attack stop, but... Tony. Tony would give him a way, T'Challa just needed to trust him. And to be ready. So T'Challa accessed the energy stored in his suit, and waited.

A snarl, T'Challa recognized Meg. A corresponding yelp, immediately after. T'Challa went predator still, watching, and waiting.

First, the nearest Hyena transporter sputtered electric sparks. Second, the Head appeared, only to disappear a moment later. T'Challa tensed. And third, the Head appeared in the same place. Unexpectedly, by her expression. T'Challa made his move in a blink. He sent a wave of energy, sending her into a tree. She was out.

In five minutes, the attack ended.

But it wasn't quiet. People groaned and moaned in pain. It continued to rain. Twelve Doras came around a utile hybrid. Daraja was complaining about a scratch on her forehead—it apparently bled a lot. Kito, her AI, was saying the polite equivalent of 'there, there.' Tony was squinting. It definitely wasn't light sensitivity, since it was almost dark.

"Tony, are you all right?" T'Challa asked, walking towards him to embrace him.

"Yeah," Tony mumbled in T'Challa's chest. "I'm okay. Get Barnes out?"

The Doras were gathering the unconscious attackers. T'Challa looked around. They were approximately thirty. Sizeable pack. Well, that was taken care of, so he could go tell Barnes that everything was fine.

"Headache?" T'Challa asked.

Tony smiled. "Mhmhm."

"Sit down somewhere," T'Challa said, and walked Tony towards some over grown roots next to Barnes' cell.
"What was that?" Tony asked, voice strangled. "The whole porting me."

"Wakanda owes you a debt, so nobody here is ever going to make an attempt on your life," T'Challa said walking over to the cell.

"But they can put you, or anyone else, in a position to do the job for them," Tony said, and groaned. It sounded more pained than annoyed. "People working the system."

T'Challa punched in the code, and Barnes exploded out. "Stark?"

"Alive," T'Challa said.

Tony suddenly screamed, fell to his knees, and clutched his head. T'Challa went cold. Barnes, the Doras, and T'Challa all hurried towards him.

What now?

*

Tia looked into T'Challa's eyes, her own filled with regret and pain. "It's a brain tumor. Cancer," she said. "It's inoperable, but small. His hectic program, and the kind of focus he's used to, exacerbated his symptoms, so we found it early."

T'Challa started to relax, but Tia was still tense, so T'Challa asked, "I don't understand. We have a cure for cancer. What's the problem?"

Tia couldn't hold eye contact any longer. "Did you know he had palladium poisoning?"

"Vaguely," T'Challa answered. "What does that hav—Radiation." He felt the ground lurch, and he swayed. Tia took a step forward, alarmed, but T'Challa had already regained his balance. "What does that mean? For Tony. For his treatment."

"His body rejects the treatment," Tia said, and winced. "He would reject radiotherapy if he went by conventional methods, in all probability, but that also goes for the cure. Our tests show that he's allergic to it." She paused, gathered herself, and her demeanor went cold. Probably because she felt too much. "Today's activities caused increased pain, but he refused all but the mildest painkillers. The pain stopped once he was calm for long enough. Now he's asleep."

T'Challa was numb, cold and numb. "What sort of treatment can you offer?"

Tia met his eyes again. "There's hyperthermia therapy and chemotherapy we can try, but none as... ." As effective as their cure. T'Challa shuddered, and Tia swallowed. "Chemotherapy doesn't... work as well with brain tumors, because there's the... It's a long... I could get into the details later if you still want them."

She drew in a deep breath, continued, "We hope that chemotherapy along with local hyperthermia therapy will get some results, at least until we can try other, more experimental, treatments. We'll find specialists, if we struggle, and we'll try to customize the existing cure so that it can get past the poisoning."

T'Challa sighed. "Tia..."

"It's bad," Tia admitted. "But he... Tony's ours. We won't give up."

T'Challa nodded. "I appreciate it," he croaked. He coughed, and added, "Can I see him?"
"Of course."

*

"I'm awake, you know," Tony's said in a weak voice. T'Challa reflexively smiled, and stopped trying to enter quietly. "How are you feeling?"

"I already went down this road once," Tony answered, and though he was on a sterilized bed, his eyes still shined with intelligence, or maybe happiness.

T'Challa couldn't imagine those brown eyes darkened by incomprehension, or glazed in antipathy. There was a real possibility that he might see it, and that was terrifying. "Are you comfortable? Is anything hurting?"

"I knew." Tony snorted. "I didn't know what was wrong, but I knew that something was. So... I came here. Somewhere I could—eventually—belong." He chuckled bitterly.

"You do belong here," T'Challa said earnestly, and received an amused glance for his troubles. "I've wanted to ask you this before, but... well, the timeline's moved up," Tony said, watching T'Challa. "I was thinking about bringing my AIs here, Dum-e and U. Maybe FRIDAY'S servers, and install her somewhere. A lot of people want to get their hands on them, and I want them somewhere safe. Here, they have the most chances of making it. Hell, Wakanda is the only country I know that might give them rights soon, so I know that you'll recognize their importance."

"Of course, Tony. We'll go and pick them up as soon as you recover enough to travel." T'Challa tried to smile, but failed, and simply reached for Tony's wrist. They both needed anchoring. "You should probably have a talk with Tia, see what she says, and then decide."

Tony nodded. He sighed. "My brain." He forcefully shook his head, and grabbed a fistful of hair. "I don't... I won't."

T'Challa froze. He was suddenly terrified of what Tony would do. "Tony..." he warned.

Tony looked at him innocently. T'Challa was... frightened. Then Tony smiled, eyes creasing in fond humor, and the world tiled back on its axis.

"Relax, Tom. I've always been a stubborn asshole who doesn't believe in giving up," Tony claimed, and winked.

T'Challa was so relieved that he couldn't hold his head up anymore and lowered his forehead on their intertwined hands.

*

Two weeks later, the AIs were loaded, servers and all, in the Eagle when Tony said that he wanted to stay for a bit. T'Challa frowned, suspicious. Maybe he was a little paranoid, but T'Challa remembered his discussion with Tony, and Tony's worrying replies. As such, T'Challa found himself trying to find a way to say 'I'd rather eat dirt,' in a polite, less-vehement voice.

"I don't think it's a good idea," T'Challa said. Immediately after, he winced. He had not chosen well.

To prove him right, Tony raised an eyebrow, and said dryly, "Oh, really. Tell me more."

T'Challa remembered a promise he had made about ethical behavior and communication, so he
sighed. "I'm afraid of what you might do." He stepped forward, and took Tony's wrist, cradling his hand in a familiar motion.

"Tie me to the bed, then," Tony leered, but didn't move his hand. But he admitted somberly, "I wanted to give another look to something I gave up on a long time ago."

T'Challa closed his eyes.

"All right," T'Challa said.

"I'll stay at the compound."

"Very well."

"Alone."

T'Challa made the sound equivalent of a nod.

Tony's eyebrows lifted. "You're not going to go, are you?"

"No."

"You wouldn't be around to stop me."

"I couldn't if you really wanted to do it."

Tony's jaw clenched. "Why then?"

Smiling, T'Challa pressed a kiss to Tony's hand. "I'm here for you."

Tony's expression was hilariously exaggerated. "My prince," he simpered. He dropped the act, rubbed at his forehead, and smiled, "Thank you."

*

T'Challa stayed at the Wakandan Embassy with the Doras. He went to visit Tony twice a day, for four days, but T'Challa never actually saw him aside from the first time. Once Chaushiku and Ochieng got the servers online, and FRIDAY came back, Tony used her to relay his messages.

The fourth day, though, T'Challa heard screams. He started forward, out of the Tony's tribe room, but FRIDAY activated and closed a thick metal door on the way to Tony's. T'Challa stepped back, surprised.

"FRIDAY?"

"I'm sorry."

T'Challa pushed the alarm button, calling the Doras, and turned around when he heard another door coming from the ceiling, blocking the exit.

"FRIDAY, what's going on?" T'Challa asked, shoving his Black Panther mask on his face.

"I'm sorry," FRIDAY said with genuine-sounding distress. "Just listening to orders."

"To kill me?" T'Challa asked, flexing his claws.

The screams—T'Challa thought he recognized Tony's voice—could barely be heard, and T'Challa
didn't know if the reason was the thickness of the metal, Tony's worsening state, or they were unneeded for an ambush anymore.

"No!" FRIDAY sounded disgruntled. "To keep you away."

T'Challa took a swipe at the door towards the inside of the building. It worked slowly, but it did go through. He cursed, and started to cut a hole.

"Why?" T'Challa spat as tried to hurry.

Suddenly, the door moved with a screech. T'Challa's way to the lab was unblocked. He hesitated. The screams had stopped.

"Boss has collapsed. His orders were to last until he lost consciousness," FRIDAY urged. "He needs help."

No matter how much he wanted to run to Tony's aid, T'Challa was a chieftain, and as such responsible for a lot of people.

"Open the doors for the Doras," T'Challa requested without moving.

The doors opened immediately. T'Challa made eye contact with Teela. She blinked twice, signaled they were in good health and were following him, so he started to run towards the lab. He could hear behind him the Doras spreading around, but he was already at Tony's door. Without bothering with knobs, T'Challa kicked the door down. He hastily looked around.

Tony was slumped over, cuffed to the wall, two extra chains going around his chest and thighs.

T'Challa proceeded, carefully, but he still did. There was some kind of disperser mechanism with pumps that was empty and tubes entering Tony's arms, legs, and neck. T'Challa extended an arm to check his pulse.

It was strong.

Relived, T'Challa wanted more information before he did anything wrong. "He has a pulse. Tell me what happened."

"Boss was working to find a cu—"

T'Challa didn't hear FRIDAY, or she didn't continue, because Tony inhaled sharply and opened his eyes. They were green, the vivid green of a forest. Not only the iris, but it spread to the little veins in the eyes, and around them, getting brighter. It became electric green, and the flickering, fluid nature of the color reminded T'Challa of copper burning. Flashing throughout Tony's body, the flare gained force, until T'Challa was forced to avoid his eyes.

A wave of heat, making T'Challa bring up his hand, and then... nothing.

"Tony?" T'Challa asked quietly.

Groaning, Tony shifted.

"Tony?" T'Challa asked louder.

Tony's eyes blinked open again. They were brown again, a beautiful, and calming color, maybe especially under the circumstances. He was confused for a moment, eyes glazed as he looked blearily around him, but, in a few moments, they cleared.
"T'Challa?" Tony asked groggily. "Is it morning already?"

T'Challa hesitated for another second, analyzing as much as he could. Tony had done something to himself, T'Challa was sure of it, probably something to cure himself. There was no telling how harmful it proved to be, but that was where T'Challa's previous knowledge came into play, as did his trust in Tony's work and in Tony himself. Decided, T'Challa stepped forward to help Tony however he could.

With great care, T'Challa started taking out the tubing. "Mind if I ask you what was supposed to happen?"

Tony winced. "I made you worry."

"Yes."

"I..." Tony fell silent. "I'm sorry. I had to try something. I ran all the numbers, I went through as many scenarios I could. It worked. But, uh, I don't trust anybody with it. The potential for destruction is too big." He nodded to a table behind T'Challa, where miscellaneous pieces of technology were smashed to bits. "I crushed the information."

"I see." T'Challa looked on as the places where the tubes used to be were now clear, undamaged skin. "Why the doors?"

"You saw those?" Tony bit his lip. "There was a—small—probability of explosion."

T'Challa stopped and sighed. "There was a small possibility of you exploding, you mean."

"Didn't happen," Tony said cheerfully.

T'Challa carefully lifted Tony's chin. He pulled him into a deep, grateful kiss. It was slow, calm, and no less intense because of it. Tony moaned, and T'Challa drew closer.

"We need better communication," T'Challa whispered in Tony's mouth.

"Sure," Tony said. "Whatever you say."

T'Challa leaned backwards.

"Yes, we need better communication when there's confidential information that we absolutely can't share," Tony said fast and without inflection, like he was saying something he knew by rote. "Now can we get back to what we were doing?"

"Certainly," T'Challa said, and carefully used a claw to cut through the cuffs and chain.

"Not what I meant," Tony replied. "But useful none the less. Thank you!"

T'Challa leaned forward and Tony loudly pecked his lips.

"Mm, delicious." Tony smiled. "Fry, are the Doras up-to-date?"

"Yes, Boss. Not your biggest fans, but all happy by the possibility of your good health," FRIDAY announced coldly.

"And so are you." Tony made a so-and-so gesture. "What do you think of ordering some food?"

"It's a good start," FRIDAY approved.
"Do it."

Tony pressed a button, and four mini-drones flew down and scanned him.

"Watch," Tony said, looking over his shoulder at T'Challa. "My liver is already much better than four days ago. My lungs too. And here."

T'Challa stepped forward to the hologram, two imagines side by side. He could see the organs, but he could also see flickering, like little embers playing on Tony's sternum. T'Challa realized that Tony must be in some kind of pain, not that he looked it.

"What are those?" T'Challa asked. "On the sternum."

"What? Ah, it's incorporating my fake one." Tony flapped a hand, dismissing the fire that was burning so close to his heart. "This is my brain." He moved the image closer, enlarging it, and turning it over. "See the ant-sized green thing?"

"That's the tumor."

"That is the tumor. And the... let's say cure is recognizing it as a foreign object," Tony said delighted. "It should be gone in ten minutes."

T'Challa reached for the hologram, but stopped just short of it. "What can you tell me about your cure?"

"It should heal all my organs in time. Probably half an hour? Yeah, around there. Should make me a little sturdier. I was about to add a technological aspect, but I have a handle on that already, so considering the time I spent and will probably spend in Wakanda, I extended the healing abilities a bit," Tony said and scratched at his head. "I could still explode, possibly... but not really. It's not nearly as flammable as Pepper, and she has a .005 chance of going up in flames. Still too big." He flapped a hand though the air, and T'Challa was even more worried. Tony said, bright eyed and ignoring T'Challa, "Just think of the potential."

"What do you mean?"

Tony walked toward a potted plant, or really just a pot of dirt that T'Challa had assumed used to house a plant, and held his hand over it. The air vibrated, and stepping closer T'Challa felt warmth. Tony held still for a while, his arm extended. Then, a small, thin blade of glass rose about a centimeter off the ground.

And that wasn't all. Tony could control it. He wiggled his finger, and the plant swayed. When Tony curled his finger, so did the blade.

Tony turned to T'Challa smiling brightly.

"Does it work on any type of flora?" T'Challa asked. His confusion was overpowering. He wanted to have as much information as possible.

"No," Tony said. "Just ones that I grow."

"Well done," T'Challa congratulated, still a bit confused. "Does it work with animals or humans?"

"Scratches, mostly, I think. I don't really know." Tony shrugged. "Their nervous system is more complicated, and I hadn't had the time to experiment on that front."
T'Challa nodded. "That's very irresponsible, and somewhat impressive."

"There's a downside." Tony was scratching the back of his head again. "To the cure, I mean, because I was kind of desperate, but I do know how to get it out, so there's that."

T'Challa was expecting it. "And that is?"

"I didn't exactly have time to find out how it will react and/or evolve in time."

That was not at all surprising to T'Challa, because even if Tony had worked with the cure before, he had never gone through with its implementation even if it would have benefited him, probably due to the potential for destruction that Tony had mentioned.

"Would you be willing to let Tia and the others keep their eye on you?" T'Challa asked.

Tony weighed the pros and cons, "That's fine." He laughed a little. "It's a backwards day. Hell, year —years. There are doctors I can trust."

T'Challa reached out to hug Tony. "I'm glad you're okay," he whispered.

* 

Once they were in the Eagle, and the Doras nice and bribed—with food, updates for their AIs, and even AIs for the two Doras that weren't part of the first six—T'Challa found the time to update Tony on the Hyena Tribe attack. There hadn't been a right time to bring Tony up to speed when his illness needed to processed. The news made it difficult for T'Challa to concentrate on the information. He didn't want Tony to have to deal with it just yet.

Which reminded T'Challa, "When did you start considering your cure?"

Tony smiled, oddly vulnerable. "Pretty much since I could think clearly, so about a minute after I woke up?"

T'Challa chuckled, and shook his head slowly, as much as his position—cuddled up with Tony on the plane's wide couch—permitted.

"I didn't invent it, I just tweaked it." Tony shrugged. "Fiddled a bit, changed a goal here and there. It's not that interesting."

"And you'd rather not talk about it." T'Challa nodded. "That's all right. I wanted to tell you about something else."

Tony shifted, making eye contact easier. "Wakanda? The attack."

T'Challa had no idea how Tony knew—whether he was reading T'Challa that easily, or Tony made an informed guess—but it felt good to be so in-sync with him.

"We interrogated the Head of the Hunting pack, among others, and they told us they were trying to get access to Barnes' treatment through either Barnes, or you," T'Challa said, making certain that his voice didn't let on his doubts.

"That's... convoluted. What were they going to do? Torture us until we talked?" Tony snorted. "They would've hit a brick wall if they tried with Barnes, and even I have a little experience on that count. At the very least, I'd have shut up enough for you to done your shiny suit of armor and come in to save us distressing damsels."
"Are you in the habit of annoying your capturers?"

"Always." Tony beamed. "They get downright pouty when I don't do what they want."

T'Challa got closer to Tony, snickering in his hair. "I didn't believe the confession either."

"And yet you still came with me to get my toys, and stayed with me," Tony cooed dramatically. His grateful grin, though, was in all seriousness. "Did I thank you for that?"

"You did," T'Challa said, smiling back. "I left them with someone better at interrogation then me. Or did you not notice Nareema and Olayemi's absence?"

Tony nodded, yawning. "I thought you weren't supposed to have any preferences."

"I don't, but they do, and they wanted to come. You have to know how much they care for you," T'Challa said, while one hand was caressing Tony's back. "But they were needed somewhere else."

Tony, at the moment occupied with nuzzling T'Challa neck, simply made a questioning sound.

_By the Panther God, I love this man._

The thought took T'Challa by surprise. But he was not shocked. It was something that had been coming for a while, natural as breathing air, but he didn't expect to have the realization now. He thought that if anything, it should have happened when Tony's life was threatened by his illness, not when there was peace, quiet, and hope for the future.

There it was, though—T'Challa loved Tony.

But that wasn't what Tony asked, and there was time to tell him all about it, so T'Challa answered, "Locusts play best undercover, Lizards in surveillance, and Snakes are better one on one. However, Snake, Locust, and Lizard Tribes are the ones you'd want on your side in an interrogation room, and not a Panther. Jata and Tian actually helped a bit, being unknown and disturbingly friendly." The AIs were incredibly precious to the Doras, and the whole of Wakanda, but most people didn't know yet how to treat them. "We all decided that we would continue the interrogation with the necessary three-day breaks."

"No torture, right?" Tony looked up at T'Challa, his eyes completely gorgeous in the window-filtered, afternoon light.

T'Challa felt like his realization of love might have affected his objectivity, but he _always_ thought that Tony was handsome.

"No, we don't torture," T'Challa replied.

"Good."

"We have reexamined your ranking in the tribe, after the attack."

Tony raised an eyebrow.

"You were at the 4,900-5,000 level," T'Challa said. "Due to your illness, your current rank is 5,000."

"Isn't the active military ranked up until 10,000?"

"It is," T'Challa agreed. "But the service is voluntary. It's your decision if you want to join. If not, it slips a place until the military has 10,000 people."
"I'm too old to join the military." Tony yawned again. "I want to see if my new ability works with the techno-organic jungle," he said, suddenly excited.

T'Challa's eyes widened, considering the options.

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking too, Bagheera."

*

As they were getting out of the plane, tired and groggy, two Hyenas appeared and took his arms, four made a barrier for the Doras, and... M'Chap—what was M'Chap doing here?—grabbed Tony and disappeared.

T'Challa blinked. He dealt with the two, and looked closer. They didn't have the marks of Hyenas, two small claws, but one canine. An Ape one. T'Challa felt cold.

With another pop, M'Baku was there and smirking at him.

Tony hadn't reappeared.

M'Baku moved to strike T'Challa, and T'Challa defended himself trying his best to put things together. But M'Baku was more than human. Somehow, he had developed abilities when he became the White Ape, and took most of T'Challa's attention. A punch, T'Challa side-stepped; a kick, T'Challa ducked; another punch, straight into T'Challa's claws. That was where T'Challa gained ground. A pull, two kicks, and a swipe transformed at the last second into an open palm, and M'Baku was at T'Challa feet.

Something occurred to T'Challa, when he saw Meg running towards them. He asked loudly so it would carry, "Meg, do you know what Tony did the last time?"

"He told me what to do, and I did it," Meg shouted. "Made them return in the same place."

"Are you still in their system?"

"Would I get in trouble if I were?"

"No. I want you to do it again."

"O-kay," Meg drawled.

T'Challa took off his sweater to use as rope.

"Doing it," Meg warned.

M'Chap reappeared. Alone. T'Challa moved, but before he could do anything about M'Chap, a bone knife reached him instead. M'Chap's eyes were round. The dagger was tied with a string of some sort, and someone from behind T'Challa—had to be M'Baku—yanked it back. T'Challa whirled around, and slammed M'Baku's head into a nearby rock with a low kick. He tied M'Baku up with his sweater, keeping his knee pressed to his kidney.

When T'Challa turned to M'Chap and saw Kelile desperately applying the liquid, pressure bandage. Her movements were quick and precise. She waited a beat as the bandage hardened, but checked his pulse in the meantime.

"No pulse," Kelile reported. "Starting CPR." She installed the electropad as closely as she could to the heart—and the bandage—as she could. "It looks too close," she said, a hint of distress easing
itself into her voice.

"The medics are on their way," Senelat said as she put a pump over M'Chap face.

In a couple of minutes, the sound of a sky-cycle approaching told of the medics’ imminent arrival.

"What do we have?" Busar asked, while he unfurled the portable scanner.

"He took a knife to the chest," Kelile said.

Busar looked at the readings. Dismay crossed his face. He closed his eyes, and slumped to the ground. "It's near his heart. Severed an artery, and all the bandage did was make him bleed internally. He's been dead for a while." Busar put a bracing hand on Kelile upper arm. "You had no way to know," he said. "You did well."

"He left Tony somewhere," T'Challa said.

The Doras and Busar turned to him, eyes wide, or mouths open. Kelile punched a tree. Mbita, her AI monkey, hugged her, and sighed.
2 hours (after Tony's disappearance)

"Where's Tony?" Olayemi asked.

She had Jata slithering around M'Baku the moment he started to sprout shit about the return to better—translated as primitive—times.

"He is returned to the impenetrable wildness." M'Baku sneered. "Let's see if he can handle it."

"Is that why you killed your uncle?"

"Yes."

"I remember your uncle, you know," Nareema said. "Do you remember his uncle?" she asked M'Baku's tribe representative, Duma.

Duma grunted, not looking happy to be there, but still loyal to his tribe.

"I don't," Dafina admitted freely. "But I have heard of him. How courageous he was. How determined when he decided that Panther Tribe was not for him anymore after the Predator Hunts. And how slyly he climbed through the ranks of the Wildebeest Tribe."

"Makes you wonder, doesn't it?" Nareema asked. "Why would his own nephew show such disrespect that he thought M'Chap deserved to be cut down?"

M'Baku, enraged, responded, "There was no disrespect."

"No?" Olayemi asked.

"You see, we're confused." Nareema showed on the screen M'Baku's appearance. "You seem to drop your principles fast."

"That was using your own weapons against you," M'Baku seethed.

Olayemi hit the table, drawing everybody's attention to her. She stood up quickly, leaned forward, and said, "Bwindi Impenetrable Forest."

M'Baku frowned slightly. He had no idea what she was talking about. That wasn't where he took Tony.

3 hours

Teela came up to T'Challa. She tried to hide a wince, when she said, "We told the Head of the Hyena Hunting Pack about M'Chap's death, and she told us everything. Apparently, she owed him and he decided to collect: an attack and three teleportation devices."

T'Challa took a deep breath. "That makes sense." He let his head fall back to the nearest wall.

"I've got to go," Teela said apologetically, showing T'Challa her beads lighting up white to signal that her plover AI wanted something. "Moyo's calling."
**5 hours**

Daraja and Okoye almost slipped when they turned the corner running. Kito, the dik-dik AI, was marginally faster, and Daudi, the turtle, was plodding happily along. As soon as they saw T’Challa they tried to break, but only Daudi succeeded. Kito, however, somehow managed to make tripping on its own legs look elegant.

T’Challa felt a fleeting moment of amusement, and fondness for the AIs, but riding its coattails was the stabbing guilt that he hadn't managed to stop their creator—Tony, T’Challa forced himself to call him by name; it was Tony—from getting kidnapped.

"M’Baku crossed the border a handful of times," Daraja announced. "We’ve watched the surveillance video, and found the place."

"It isn't much to go on, because it could be a false lead," Okoye said. "But we figured we might get some more information at the site. We were heading for the Dagger."

"Go." T’Challa nodded. "And good job!"

"Tell us again when we find the Mechanic," Daudi shouted, propelling himself into a roll to keep up.

**6 hours**

T’Challa was looking at a world map. He tightly closed his eyes, and then opened them, desperately wishing that something would change. Nothing did. He didn't really expect it to.

There was too much ground to cover.

In Wakanda there were quite a few places where M’Baku could have hid Tony. Then there were big National Parks in Eastern Africa, not mention Africa in general. If M’Baku had managed to somehow get on another continent, there were too many places to have hope of searching. And that's not counting possibly moving Tony to avoid capture. At the pace they were going, and sheer number of spots that fit the description 'impenetrable wilderness,' they wouldn't find Tony before he reached the end of his natural life.

M’Baku had declined to cooperate with his interrogators, especially Olayemi, had refused to even look at them since he had involuntary reacted to her location. So Nareema, Olayemi, and Dafina had moved on to better hunting grounds. That was how T’Challa found out more information about the teleportation device, and the he could exclude Russia, Northern Europe, and Canada from his search. And he did, but it didn't make feel any better knowing the sheer distance one could achieve in three seconds.

But considering the time M’Baku spend outside the country, combined with the time M’Chap had disappeared, the information Olayemi got, and M'Baku's loathing of technology, T’Challa could assume that the most likely places were Africa, South America, and South Asia, which left too much ground to cover.

Also, there would be a lot of negotiating in T’Challa's future.

They needed two things: to take it methodically if they didn't find out somehow the general area where M'Baku had taken Tony, and more information.
T'Challa looked at his bead. The teams that were searching Wakanda were supposed to call if they found something. But when his glare didn't make it light up, T'Challa sighed, and went back to see if he could eliminate more places.

9 hours

T'Challa tried to explain Tony's cure to Tia.

"You know, I can access Tony's three scans," Meg commented dryly.

"How—" T'Challa interrupted himself. "Do it, please."

As the three images—before, immediately after, and sometime after the procedure—were dumped on a secure server and transferred to Tia’s and T'Challa's A/V bead, Meg said, "I have access to FRIDAY, and she gave them to me."

Tia made an approving noise. "He's definitely improved a lot. Look at this! He's healthy." She hesitated. "He was healthy. There's really no way of knowing... Unless." Her eyes narrowed. "Are there any DNA samples?"

"There have to be in the Eagle," T'Challa said.

"There were," Meg said, and played the surveillance video from the Eagle. The image focused on a hair left on the couch. "Wait." She sped it along.

It was about two hours later. The hair caught on fire like a match from the root. Nothing was left, but the couch wasn't on fire. The flames were green.

T'Challa flinched.

"No," Tia said. "No, that couldn't have happened to Tony." She was convinced. "Weren't you in his presence for more than two hours?"

"I was."

"Maybe a fail-safe?" Tia shrugged. "At most, an unintended consequence."

T'Challa could breathe a little easier.

"I don't have any data on the cure." Tia shook her head in frustration. "But it seems to be well-crafted. Let's hope it is going to stay balanced."

12 hours

Vision arrived. There were a few problems at the border, but T'Challa managed to reach it in time to avoid bloodshed. Vision had apparently kept tabs on Tony, who hadn't checked in when he said he would. So, Vision had gotten worried, and wanted to see Tony for himself.

Once T'Challa explained the situation, Vision volunteered to search Africa, starting close to Wakanda, then spreading out, from East to West. He also made it possible to search without announcing to other countries what had happened. T'Challa agreed, of course he did, a being who doesn't require rest or sustenance was an asset, but also because T'Challa could see that Vision was
affected by Tony's disappearance.

T'Challa watched him fly off in the distance and returned to his many maps.

13 hours

Tony wasn't in Wakanda.

14 hours

T'Challa finally got messages out to Tony's friends.

18 hours

Gossip was already in the air that Tony was missing. T'Challa suspected his neighboring countries that already agreed to let Wakandan aircrafts to enter their airspace. He needed to get ahead of it.

"On December, 5th, Anthony Edward Stark was kidnapped. We are unaware of his current whereabouts, but we are making every effort to locate him, and bring him home. Wakanda would appreciate other sovereign states' cooperation in our efforts to recover Mr. Stark. Thank you. I will not be taking questions at the moment."

20 hours

T'Challa listened tiredly as Potts and Rhodes shouted at him.

"I want to come," Rhodes finally said.

Nodding, T'Challa said, "I will need the time for your arrival to pair you with a search team."

"Why aren't you joining them?" Potts accused.

T'Challa glanced at her. "I still need to plot the search, and centralize all the information we have."

"I would appreciate it if you showed my brother the respect he deserves," Shuri commented quietly, and coldly, entering the command centre. "He is a Prince. And a Chieftain. We all failed Tony at some point or another, so the less we assign blame, and the more we work together, the better we'll be. Now, we are all hurting, my brother included, so you will calm down."

Rhodes swallowed, after briefly averting his eyes. "I will be there tomorrow, at nine in the morning."

Potts glared and ended the call.

Shuri embraced T'Challa. "You should sleep. We can handle it here."

"I will," T'Challa said, leaning back into her hug.

"We'll find him," Shuri said empathically. "You know that, right?"
T’Challa nodded, not trusting his voice.

The Stark Phone rang again. Frowning, T’Challa answered. Potts was glaring at him again, a picture of impotent fury.

"The media is going to go crazy in the next few days. They always do when Tony is kidnapped and/or presumed dead," Potts said. "This is what you need to know."

24 hours

T’Challa fell into a restless sleep.

2 weeks

There had been no news. They had all searched, over the whole of Eastern Africa, but they were hadn’t found him. T’Challa felt numb.

Teela put a hand on his shoulder. "The new Chieftain of Wildebeest has done an inventory. They are missing ten camouflage packs," she said quietly.

T’Challa groaned. "That's what we were missing."

So now they had 100 square kilometers of hidden terrain, that they would not see unless they were stepping on it. T’Challa needed to reorganize the search, and call Vision. It would be necessary to talk to Vision often if he decided to continue the search. The wildness had a way of warping your mind.

T’Challa tried not to think about how Tony would cope.

"How high do the packets go?" T’Challa asked.

"High?" Teela was confused, but she was already scrolling through the information. "Twenty to thirty meters. But it filters smoke, so even if Tony were to light a fire, it would be useless to us."

"That's all right." T’Challa smirked. "I don't think the filter works for trees."

1 month

T’Challa declared the AIs Rights a Law of Wakanda. Now that the Doras needed help, they were doing more than anyone imagined. Even Vision, when T’Challa told him in their daily phone call, smiled. For all that, and Tony's hope, Wakanda was the first country to recognize AIs as beings.

Plus, it enraged M'Baku. He started ranting, and let a little more information slips through. Like the fact that Tony was guarded, but at a distance. And the fact that Tony had access to water but not clean. There was also the fact that M'Baku fully expected Tony to be dead by the time two days had passed, but T'Challa ignored the last.

"I suggest paragliding," Daudi said. "To celebrate, you know?"

Kito snorted. "I'm sure we can find something more..."
"Anything," Moyo said, and yawned. "Something more anything, and less likely that we're going to end up pancakes."

Jata hissed. "Don't be mean!"

Moyo rolled his eyes.

"Let's do something together!" Tian said excitedly.

Mbita put his little paw up. "I like that idea."

"If all else fails, we can try our hands at making pancakes," Meg purred. "And no, Moyo, I didn't specify with what ingredients."

T'Challa snorted. He smiled slightly. Meg reminded him so much of Tony.

The first tear took T'Challa by surprise. As for the rest, he realized were coming, but that didn't mean he could stop them. By the Panther God, he missed Tony. He missed his laugh, his eyes, his brilliance, his warmth, his sense of humor, his lips, his nicknames, his hands, his wickedness, his ass, his eloquence, his dexterity, his knowledge of T'Challa, those little eye creases... everything.

T'Challa missed Tony, and everything about him.

And it hurt.

Damn, but it hurt to know that Tony might not be alive, and if there was even the slightest possibility that he was still breathing, he was definitely not comfortable. Not safe. Scared, and probably in pain.

T'Challa felt his father's arms gathering him in a solid embrace, but he couldn't talk.

It wasn't, and it was T'Challa's fault. The guilt stabbed him from time to time, reminded him of the circumstances of Tony's disappearance. T'Challa could handle that, he deserved to feel it even, but the sadness, that was another matter. He didn't know how to fight it, and it was always there. Like a veil that got lighter by type of day he had, and who he spent it with, but never disappeared. He had forgotten what it felt like, since his mother's death, who was gone for enough time to let the wave of grief settle into an ache. And then, there was the hope. That small fire burning in his stomach, that was chanting 'maybe, maybe, maybe.'

In the end, if T'Challa thought about it, his breakdown had been coming for a long time.

2 months

Rogers' trial had ended with the same conclusion as Barton's, and Maximoff's. They were supposed to spend eight to twelve hours a day doing community service—hero-ing, as Tony would say—and then return to their cells. Rogers got fifteen to twenty years, Maximoff got ten to fifteen, and Barton got five to ten. They ended up exactly as what they fought not to be.

As for the others, Wilson got ten years' probation, as did Lang, and Romanoff was out free like the bird in the sky. Stark Legal had done minor miracles, or maybe had sacrificed virgins—pop culture was truly an odd world, but T'Challa appreciated Tony's effort—because the results were almost unbelievable. Especially considering that they had been allowed to work with Rogers, Barton, and Maximoff, and got paid for it.

Their first mission was, of course, finding Tony Stark.
And first thing out Barton's mouth was, "In the end, we're still here, a little banged up, but here. He's not." He even had a little smile.

T'Challa turned and got out of the room for a second, so he didn't leave the Avengers without another member.

"—ut up," Barnes was saying when T'Challa came back.

Barnes, for his part, was making fantastic progress, and he was currently being treated by the Panther Tribe. He had been given in their care until he proved he could not be activated, which he did last month, so Barnes had six more months of mandated therapy—five, now—and ten years of probation. But he wanted to participate in the search for Tony, and when asked, chose this team.

"No one here wants, or needs your gloating," Barnes continued. "I think we should have all admitted our mistakes, but if we didn't, now's not the time for it. So if you're here, do your job."

Barton stood up, fury written in every line of his body, but Barnes just looked on, unimpressed.

"Boys, boys, don't fight." Meg slinked into the room. "Let me at least sell tickets first?"

Rogers started to roll his eyes, but almost immediately froze.

T'Challa frowned. "This is Meg, Tony's her creator. Meg has been with us for more than a year. She's been invaluable since Tony's kidnapping."

"Thank you for the summary, Handsome. And for the compliment," Meg purred.

T'Challa smiled slightly, but kept his attention on Rogers.

"Tony was kidnapped," Rogers said, frowning as if realizing something. "Tony's missing," he mumbled. His eyes were glassy with tears. He repeated, aghast, "Tony's missing."

"Yeah, you got it, Tarzan," Meg said, bemused.

Rogers mouthed, "Tarzan." He violently put his head in his hands, fingers clenched in his hair. "Tarzan. Oh God, Tony," he said roughly.

T'Challa was officially confused.

"Tony's missing, Clint!" Rogers said loudly, annoyed and watching Barton intensely.

And Barton, to T'Challa surprise, averted his eyes. He wasn't the only one, Romanoff found a window and was looking out of it, deftly avoiding everyone. But all the others, T'Challa included, didn't appear to understand.

"What's going on?" Lang asked.

Rogers shook his head, signaling to drop it. "What do we know?"

T'Challa was about to open his mouth, when Maximoff said accusingly, "No. What's going on?"

"I know you've got your problems with Tony," Barton said, still looking down. "But we—Steve, Nat, and me—owe him, at least for New York. He was our teammate once, and sacrificed himself for a whole city, us included. He never expected and didn't receive anything in thanks."

"He's a killer!" Maximoff seethed.
There was so much pain and anger in those words. T’Challa sighed. She was absolutely convinced that there could be no one worse than Tony. It was the kind of belief that didn’t go away easily. T’Challa had seen it before, in M’Baku.

"Maybe. It doesn’t mean that we don’t owe him," Romanoff said quietly.

T’Challa found his way to Wilson.

"Watch Maximoff," T’Challa whispered earnestly.

Wilson frowned, and watched T’Challa carefully. "I will," he finally said.

2 months and 1 week

T’Challa was in session at the UN. He was still Prince. Still Chieftain. Still the Black Panther. Still had responsibilities to his tribe, and country. So he went out. But so did the search teams. T’Challa was not ready to give up on somebody who was thrice thought lost, and proven not to be.

3 months

Doom was attacking Wakanda. Teela came into the room, where Doom was on TV making one of the most dramatic speeches T’Challa had ever heard, and threw something at him. It was a teleportation device.

"The Hyenas debt?" T’Challa asked.

"Yes," Teela said. "The Doras are keeping up, but we might want to go pay a visit."

Hearing Doom go on and on about Wakanda being a weak country, T’Challa agreed. He quickly changed his clothes, putting on the Black Panther suit. Nodding to Teela, they were off in five minutes.

T’Challa found the rhythm of fighting again therapeutic. It was repetitive, and simple. He actually got to do something instead of searching, watching from afar, and looking for something—somebody, Tony—he knew he might never find.

"—akanda will know the true power of Dr. Doom," Doom was shouting, overly dramatic as T’Challa was starting to expect.

T’Challa, having sneaked up on Doom, tapped four claws to Doom’s metal neck in a clear threat.

Doom stopped abruptly, and the cameras swiveled to T’Challa. Under the cover of the suit, T’Challa rolled his eyes. He signaled the Doras to approach, and apprehend Doom.

"Take down the cameras," T’Challa ordered.

There was no point in saying that Wakanda was not weak, their actions proved it. Which made T’Challa wonder what the reason behind Doom’s attack was. On the one hand, if Wakanda was indeed weak, Doom would have exposed T’Challa country. On the other, if it Wakanda stopped the attack, then nobody else would try again.

T’Challa knew how Tony’s kidnapping looked for himself, and the country, and it sounded like
Doom had offered T'Challa a possibility to prove himself.

"I think that the UN should handle his arrest," T'Challa said, making Doom chuckle throatily. "We wouldn't want to start a war with Latveria over a small attack."

If Doom were to attack Wakanda seriously, then Wakanda would retaliate.

4 months

T'Challa pours himself another glass.

"Drinking alone?" a voice asked.

T'Challa's jumped to his feet. "Barnes!"


"It's all right," T'Challa said. "Take a seat." As Barnes was making himself comfortable, T'Challa continued, "It's a local brew—*enguli*. Do you want a drink?"

"Unless I drink it in industrial quantities, it doesn't do anything for me." Barnes shrugged. "But if you want a partner, then pour me one anyway."

T'Challa snorted. Barnes reminded T'Challa of Tony and his little alcohol test. "You know you're not the only meta-human out here, right?" T'Challa asked.

"I..." Barnes trailed off startled. Then he laughed gruffly. "Why do you drink then?"

"I thought I'd try something different."

Barnes glanced at him, and drained his glass.

"I considered torture," T'Challa admitted.

"M'Baku?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't do it."

"Tony," T'Challa said. He took a drink, even though the taste had never been a favorite of his. "He's against it."

Barnes poured himself another glass. He offered the bottle to T'Challa, but T'Challa shook his head. "Good," Barnes said, a shadow of a smile on his face.

"I wanted to use BARF."

Barnes head snapped up.

"But I made Tony a promise," T'Challa said quietly. "It's been four months of living in the wildness, all alone. I don't know how he keeps himself warm, how he cools himself down, how he feeds himself, how he keeps himself hydrated, how he defends himself... If he manages to survive that, then I'm not going to get him home by abusing his technology. Especially since the only reason I
have that technology is because he trusted me." His voice became rough, "I value his trust more than his life."

Barnes didn't say anything, and but he didn't leave either.

After a while, T'Challa asked, "Are you staying in Wakanda?" It had the dual goal of satisfying his curiosity, and of changing the subject.

"I'm starting the candidacy process for Lizard Tribe." Barnes seemed at ease with the prospect.

"Seems like a good fit," T'Challa observed.

Barnes grinned.

5 months

"We have them all?" T'Challa asked.

"Yes, sir," Zaida answered. "We have 49% of the shares."

"Good." T'Challa looked at Chaushiku and Ochieng. "Put in the request for the Board Members change."

"Sir, as long as Tony's status is 'missing,' SI won't be able to make any changes," Zaida noted.

"Tony's not going to be declared dead," T'Challa said coldly.

Zaida frowned. "You are making the Board Members hold off on it for as long as they can," she said, amused. "I was starting to worry."

T'Challa smiled, glad that, as always, he had the support of his tribe.

6 months

The Avengers are called off. There are a lot of protests, especially from Rogers. Barton looks dejected, while Romanoff coldly furious. Maximoff is the one that surprised T'Challa the most though, because she was confused, but not angry.

7 months

"We know that Tony's white hat hackers bought out the shareholders," Potts said. She was angry, and... betrayed.

"Congratulations," T'Challa said, waiting to get to the point.

"The most interesting document passed through my desk this morning," Potts commented wryly.
"Can you guess what it is?"

"You know I can."

"It worries me."
"That is something that does not concern me," T'Challa challenged.

"What does concern you?"

"Tony."

"You are putting pressure on the Board to stop them from pushing for Tony to be declared dead under 'imminent peril,'" Potts said, nodding. "However, that doesn't completely satisfy me. There's more."

"There is," T'Challa conceded.

Potts leaned forward. "You are, of course, aware that Tony is going to be eventually declared dead by somebody who wants something of his, or by the authorities who might decide that you are dithering too much, and the twins' shares won't stop Tony's heir from selling out. It will be a struggle to protect his technology."

"I am following Tony's lead."

"Tony's lead?" Potts head tilted. "He has a will. The twins are his heirs." She sighed, and leaned back. "I congratulate you on a job well done."

T'Challa nodded. "The hope is that it won't come to that."

"That is why I am still here, Your Highness."

8 months

"Are you confident in your belief that Mr. Stark would prove to be alive after all this time?" Everhart asked, smirk playing along on her lips.

T'Challa didn't even blink. "Yes."

Everhart almost smiled.

8 months and 3 weeks

T'Challa was coming back from Venezuela in the Eagle, eyes glued to the ground outside. The search teams were making progress, having reached West Africa, but it was slow going. So, it soon became habit T'Challa to look out the window when flying somewhere.

And this time he saw it. In a forest, a utile tree, swaying perpendicular to the wind. T'Challa couldn't breathe, he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing was there in reality, or it was some sort of hallucination.

T'Challa walked quickly to the copilot seat. "Teela, turn around. Get a little lower, and tell me what you see."

Teela radioed the two Daggers, as she did what he ordered. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, probably worried. T'Challa, as a rule, trusted his senses.

"The tree."
T'Challa started laughing. It was just a little hysterical. He thought he could be excused, this time, because, "We found Tony!"
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

This is it folks! The source of my inspiration for how Tony survived is Castaway Getaway by PeaceHeather and her discovery of the YouTube Channel Primitive Technology. Thank you for your support: kudos, comments, and/or bookmarks. It's been a wonderful journey, and they all meant (and will continue to mean) so much to me. *hugs*

"Find Tony's captors," T'Challa ordered as soon as they could find a place to land by a river. "I want them alive."

T'Challa changed into the Black Panther suit, and started towards the tree. "That is Pendajari River, isn't it?"

Teela looked at her GPS. "It is." She sent T'Challa a questioning glance.

"Pendajari National Park is known, among others, for the panther population and diversity," T'Challa recited bitterly. "M'Baku was trying to be funny. It was on the series of places that we needed to cover, but I thought..." His voice faltered. He took a deep breath, and continued, "I thought it was too obvious." He headed for the tree.

On their way, almost on the water's edge, there was a clearing that wasn't visible from the plane. It had... T'Challa almost wanted to laugh. This was definitely Tony's camp, and he did amazingly well. It had a grass hut, a wattle and daub hut, and even a tiled roof hut with a chimney. Tony must've been bored, or just not satisfied with one hut. There was a wood shed, a lot of stone tools—adazes, axes, and hatchets—baskets and pots, two different kinds of drills, a huge chunk of obsidian, pelts, a forge blower, and a furnace. T'Challa looked around him, amazed.

"How did he manage it?" Teela asked. She seemed to be impressed. "I thought he was a city boy all his life."


Tony probably had to stay close to the water to be able to build those tools, but with the arrival of the wet season the river had swollen, and now it was too close for comfort.

"I don't think this is what M'Baku had in mind," Teela commented dryly.

T'Challa chuckled.

Suddenly, just as T'Challa was turning his head, he saw a shadow from the corner of his eye. He tensed. The shadow pounced. It was heavy. He rolled, his attention was on his attacker. The shadow was a panther of some sort. Black. Young. Long tail. Leopard. T'Challa hesitated to get out his claws. There was something off here.

"Oscura!" Tony snapped.

Wait.
Tony snapped.

That was when T’Challa forgot about the panther for a moment, and looked in the direction of the voice. Then Oscura—Tony must have been referring to the panther, unless the wildness had gotten to him—swayed a step forward, and T’Challa attention was back on her. Only now, he had to be careful not to hurt Tony’s black panther. Either one.

And because Tony lived to surprise, he strode confidently to Oscura, and gave her a gentle push on the shoulder. She growled a bit, jaws snapping at Tony, but not with any real intent, and settled down. T’Challa blinked. Oscura acted like a grumbling teen. It was unspeakably adorable. More adorable, was how Tony managed to find somebody to banter with even in the wildness.

Tony looked... well. Healthy, no visible wounds, not obviously in pain, but content, and settled. He had a bow and quiver with arrows hanging on his back, a tan sash strapped to his chest with four obsidian knives, and a sling hanging from his front jeans pocket. He wore no shirt, and his jeans were shortened.

T’Challa involuntarily took a step forward. He had missed Tony so much. It was a struggle to stop at just one, but T’Challa did, because this wasn't about him. He didn't know what Tony had gone through, and maybe his touch wouldn't be welcome. So, telegraphing his movements, T’Challa took off his helmet, and opened his hands invitingly.

"I missed you," T'Challa whispered.

Tony hugged tighter. "I missed you too, Cheshire." He spoke with a slight Italian accent.

T'Challa, realizing he had been smiling since he heard Tony, simply laughed. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, yeah, yeah," Tony answered, grinning. "Much better now." He shook his head, and looked over T’Challa's shoulder. "Hi, Teela. I'm currently busy, but hello."

"Hello, Tony," Teela greeted wryly. "It's good to know you are alive and healthy."

"I'm sorry we didn't find you sooner," T'Challa whispered.

Tony grinned, and took a step back. "Gorgeous, you were still looking. I've been gone more than eight months. You're close to becoming the Howard to my Captain America."

"That's... disturbing," T'Challa said. "In more ways than one. It certainly puts some things into perspective." He frowned, but it wouldn't stay on his face, and soon T’Challa was smiling again. "And the Wakandan Army needs the training." He suddenly remembered. "I've got to call Vision."

"Vision?"

"He is currently searching in South America," T'Challa explained.

"Let me make the call?"

"Of course," T’Challa said, and signaled Teela.

Teela handed the phone to Tony, who looked at it oddly, and then he took it with a boyish grin. His fingers went flying over the surface, hitting buttons that T’Challa didn't even know where there for
no other reason than the joy of having access to technology again. He bit his lip as the call got put through with video.

Vision picked up. "Your Highn—Mr. Stark!"

"Surprise!" Tony chimed.

"Indeed," Vision said, with that small smile that T'Challa saw once before.

"Are you coming back for the party?" Tony asked Vision, but the question was directed to T'Challa too.

"I don't believe I knew about a party," Vision said, amused.

"Teela will let the Chef know," T'Challa said, nodding to Teela.

"Then it will be my pleasure," Vision said. "I am gladdened by your continued survival against the odds."

Tony chuckled. "It's what I do best."

"I will arrive in Wakanda in twenty-one hours." Vision smiled again, and ended the call.

"I've let the King and the Princess know," Teela reported. "They will call off the search teams."

"Teams?" Tony accused. "As in more than one? Those teams?"

Teela ignored Tony, listening to her headset, and continued, "The Chef curses you, but he's glad that you're home. Everybody is very loud in expressing joy at your return. So loud that I may be forced to change channel for a bit, even with Ochieng and Chaushiku's volume modulation."

Tony rolled his eyes so exaggeratedly, the hit his head on T'Challa shoulder, but left it there. His eyes had fallen on the leopard. "Oh, hey guys. Meet Oscura." He gestured to the slumbering panther. "I spoke a lot of Italian here. Anyway, she's a rescue, in the sense that I rescued her. We hunt together."

Oscura stood up on hearing her name. Tony nodded at her, and she approached cautiously. She gave T'Challa a good sniff, and growled, so T'Challa took his glove off and offered his hand. She took another sniff, and a bigger one. Finally, after checking one last time with Tony, she gingerly put her head in his hand.

"Friendly, for a wild panther," T'Challa commented as he scratched underneath her chin.

"Yeah," Tony admitted, a bit embarrassed as far as T'Challa could tell. "That's my fault. I should have just healed her, but she didn't have a mother, and she didn't know how to hunt yet."

"You did good, Tony," T'Challa said. His voice must've told more than he intended to than he realized, because Tony was watching him intensely. So, T'Challa forged ahead. "I am proud and impressed."

Tony's lips curved into a gentle smile. He leaned into T'Challa, letting T'Challa take on his weight. "What's going to happen to her? I'm not leaving her here."

T'Challa responded, looking at two survivors—human and animal, "Oscura is coming with us."
Next day, T’Challa laid back listening to Tony. The ‘welcome back’ party was in full swing, and Tony was regaling them with stories of his time... away. T’Challa made sure to always be in contact with Tony—their knees, and lower legs were touching at the moment—but other than that, he was pretty much invisible, silent and watching. He drank in the sight of Tony, speaking and laughing.

T’Challa also noted the differences. Tony was happier, more content with who he was, more sure of his place in the Tribe, more accepting of the other’s easy affection. It appeared to be a good development, but it was prompted by awful circumstances, so T’Challa had no idea what Tony thought about the change.

Tony was finishing a story about saving Oscura, an approximately three months old cub at the time, whose leg had been shattered, but before he could launch in another story about a snake bite, he frowned in T’Challa's direction. T’Challa smiled back gently, and Tony continued. However, Tony did lean back against T’Challa, and T’Challa breathed him in, closing his eyes.

T’Challa heard Oscura and Meg approaching through the techno-organic jungle where they had the party and lifted his head.

"Meg?" T’Challa asked, letting Oscura sniff his hand.

"Can I ask you for a favor?" Meg sat down on her hunches.

Reaching a bit to be able to pet Oscura's back without dislodging Tony, T’Challa answered easily, "Of course."

Meg fidgeted. "Can I grow?"

"Not organically, but if you want to I'm sure we can find someone to make you a body that looks any age."

"I may want to grow side-by-side with Oscura," Meg admitted. She sniffed. "It's weird... I feel like a bigger sister."

"Whatever you'd like," T’Challa promised. He smiled. "You are a good sister."

Meg responded nonchalantly, "Thank you." She started play-wrestling with Oscura, complete with the exaggerated growling, all the while visibility restraining her strength. It was almost offensively cute.

T’Challa turned his head, grin out in full force to notice that Tony was looking at him. He had finished his story, and let Nareema tell the others about the interrogation. T’Challa didn't want to hear again how M'Chap had sacrificed it all for family. It was heartbreaking enough the first time, and he knew the story that his father told about M'Chap struggling with his Tribe Oath the first time.

Apparently, Tony had heard it too, because he snuggled closer to T’Challa and started talking.

"You know, I spoke with Barnes," Tony said.

T’Challa made an encouraging noise.

"He mentioned you might be feeling guilty."

T’Challa tensed, and averted his eyes. "Tony..."

"Thank you," Tony said earnestly.
Squeezing his eyes shut, T'Challa repeated, "Tony."

"No," Tony used a hand to gently raise T'Challa chin. "Look at me," Tony whispered, and T'Challa did. "I feel like we've had this conversation before. The one where I tell you that I can hold on until I'm rescued. But even if I can't, that's a risk I take every day, the price I pay for living as I do."

"This wasn't about being Iron Man or Tony Stark," T'Challa shot back.

"Isn't it?" Tony asked. "Why would M'Baku choose me?"

"Because I care about you."

"Not exactly, but it's part of it, yes," Tony admitted. "Like I said, it's the price I pay for living as I do."

"So it's my duty to save you," T'Challa said desperately.

"It's your duty to search for a reasonable amount of time, and to blame the guy who's actually responsible," Tony disagreed.

"I do blame M'Baku."

"Then we're fine."

"We're not fine." T'Challa lowered his voice as soon as he felt himself getting angry. "You are doing all right at the moment, but a snake bit you. Among other various pains. And I didn't do everything in my power to save your life. The alternative is not something I ever would have done, but that doesn't make it fine."

"No, you valued the same things I do." Tony took a deep breath. "I want you to see something," he said, before activating his A/V bead.

It was footage from the cameras outside M'Baku cell.

"I won't tell you anything," M'Baku said loudly, without even opening his eyes.

"Why not?" Tony asked.

M'Baku's eyes snapped open.

"Hello," Tony waved.

M'Baku expression was hilariously horrified.

"I'm not a ghost," Tony said.

It didn't have any effect on M'Baku's expression.

"You're back," M'Baku accused.

Tony raised his eyebrows. "Yes. It didn't feel nearly as bad as you wished. I'd be saying 'relaxing' if it didn't last eight months and counting."

M'Baku scoffed, but he appeared troubled.

Tony's head tilted. "The savannah is not that scary, I mean from the TV you'd think it would be filled
with lions and hippos, but it was most antelopes and giraffes. One tried to chew my hair, but I'm going to hazard a guess and say that it wasn't what you had in mind when you thought about traumatic experiences."

M'Baku didn't react, except for turning his head.

T'Challa swallowed. M'Baku didn't know. He had probably chosen not to know so he wouldn't tell anything no matter what they tried.

"You protected my tech. You respected the things I hate. And you valued my trust. Nobody does that. Only you." Tony smiled. "I can take care of myself, better than most people, but I can't trust somebody to put what I love first."

That robbed T'Challa of his words. He swallowed and blurted, "Of course I did, Tony, I love you."

Tony blinked. "Thanks for letting me know," he said, amused.

"I missed my opportunity once, so..."

"I guess I should stop being surprised when you pounce on things, but I honestly thought I'd be the first one to tell you I love you," Tony said wryly, but his eyes soon widened. "By which I mean, I love you too."

T'Challa laughed, while at the same time trying to kiss Tony. And Tony wasn't so much better. It was a mess, but they were all so happy, that anything else didn't matter.

Tony was home.

*  

"Rumors of my demise have been greatly exaggerated," Tony said with a smirk.

There were groans and laughter from the press.

"Anything else?" Tony asked.

There was a flurry of hands and a thousand of voices shouting questions.

Tony picked one. "The guy with the neon yellow tie."

"Where will you be staying during the recovery period?"

"Wakanda," Tony said easily. He shifted his attention on another journalist. "The owner of the Lion King pen."

"Have you spoken to the Avengers?"

"Not yet. The guy taking notes."

"What do you say to the UN who saw fit to stop the search after six months?"

"Nothing." Tony smirked. "Last one. You know who you are."

"The SI Board was forced into not declaring you dead by a third party buying all the shares. Was it your idea?" Everhart asked.
"You tend to underestimate His Highness."

Everhart smirked. "Not precisely. For example, I can speculate that somebody in Wakanda stands to inherit your shares."

"Somebody in Wakanda will," Tony said, winked, and got off the stage.

The journalists were exchanging confused looks, and Everhart let out a little delighted laugh. T'Challa knew what Tony was talking about, but immediately thought of a little face with Tony's eyes and T'Challa smile, running around, and causing trouble. T'Challa barely suppressed an enamored smile.

"Did you know we can have children?" T'Challa asked in the car.

"I know it's a missed opportunity that I wasn't taking a drink," Tony quipped.

"Teela likes the car."

"I'd have bought, or built, another one."

"You should be more careful with your money if we're thinking about having children," T'Challa commented, biting his lip so he wouldn't smile.

"Keep going and I'll stop thinking about it."

T'Challa whipped his head around to look at Tony.

"It's too early," Tony said.

"It is," T'Challa admitted.

Tony hesitated, "I may never be ready."

"I'm certainly not," T'Challa said. "Not now, maybe not ever. I don't need to, considering that Wakanda's next Black Panther is chosen by skill. Still. The possibility exists."

"You wanted me to imagine little T'Challas running around, pouncing on unsuspecting people, and having no chill," Tony grumbled.

"That is entirely your choice," T'Challa said. "I, for one, am delighted to imagine little Tonys getting into all kinds of mischief, following Chaushiku and Ochieng, and having a wicked sense of humor."

"And you want to have children together?"

They looked at each other for a moment, grinning widely.

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T'Challa woke up. He didn't know why, it seemed like a quiet night. No unusual movement, but T'Challa was a bit jumpy ever since Tony was kidnapped. It wouldn't do any good to ignore his instincts, though, so he paid attention for a minute.

Tony's breathing was off.

"Are you awake?" T'Challa whispered.
"Would you believe me if I said 'no'?"

T’Challa snorted. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

Sitting up, T’Challa frowned.

"I miss the sky."

That was unexpected. "Do you want to go outside? Or do you want to install a window so you could see it?" T’Challa tried.

"I think I'd rather have a copy of the sky in a hologram projector—Harry Potter style."

T’Challa thought about it, and said, "I'd like that."

Tony grinned, and leaned forward to kiss T’Challa. Short and sweet, making T’Challa chuckle as Tony gently pulled T’Challa to lie down on his chest. T’Challa welcomed the sound of Tony's heart beating, and closed his eyes.

"I can start working on planning the device and I don't even have to move from the bed," Tony said dreamily.

T’Challa smiled fondly. "While you're having fantasies about that, I have something to give to you,” he said, and pushed himself up. He got a green box from a shelf, and offered it to Tony.

"I see you respected the color theme," Tony commented while he opened the box. He got out a vibranium fang, with a core of obsidian. "Is this from..."

"Your home-made daggers, yes," T’Challa said. "And vibranium."

"I fully expect to be decked in vibranium in ten years," Tony said dryly.

"That's what it's meant to symbolize," T’Challa agreed. "You and me."

"You're asking me to marry you?"

T’Challa shrugged. "I'm asking you to stay with me, in whatever role you want," he said earnestly. "I'm better with you, I love you, I want to face the world at your side."

"I know how that feels," Tony said, keeping eye contact with a smile. "In whatever role I want?"

"Yes," T'Challa answered without any hesitation.

"How about husband?"

T’Challa couldn’t believe he was hearing right. He hugged Tony, pulling him into a kiss. "Yes, yes that was certainly a possibility. Good choice. Great choice. Amazing, actually. Unexpected, but amazing." Tony beamed, but T’Challa hadn’t finished. "It's also attached with Prince Consort. And later on, King Consort."

"As long as I get to keep my fingers in as many pies as I want," Tony warned with a smile.

"Your pies have gotten a distinct Wakandan taste," T’Challa replied cheekily. He wanted to bottle the memory so he'd never forget a detail. "But I already promised you, and I intend to keep that
promise.”

Tony smiled, and T'Challa grinned back reaching for his wrist. He cradled Tony's hand in between his own, and brought it to his lips for a peck, then used it to bring Tony closer for a kiss. T'Challa felt safe, anchored to Tony.

They had each other, and the Doras, and 403,187 other people. At the end of the day, they were all lucky to have found each other, and they would take care of each other. Chances were that they would succeed.

*

When T'Challa was at a UN party several months later, the US delegate, Mr. Roger Davies remarked on the arrowhead at his neck.

"What material is your necklace made from?" Davies asked. "The one that looks like an arrow."

"It is an arrowhead," T'Challa offered. "As far as I understand, it is made out of obsidian with a vibranium core."

Davis raised his eyebrows. "Beautiful. Does it symbolize anything?"

"Tony—Mr. Stark—gave it to me," T'Challa said calmly, and smiled. He was going to enjoy this. "Traditionally, I believe it is a ring, and while it is a bit unusual, it does symbolize our engagement."

Davies froze, wide-eyed, while the French representative suddenly had trouble swallowing her drink and descended into a coughing fit. Around them, people were in different stages of shocked, horrified, or delighted. Getting closer, T'Challa heard Tony's cackling, an allowed himself a smirk.

End Notes

If you want to comment (or just talk to me) you can do it here or on my tumblr.

Works inspired by this one. Overcoming Solitude by Melethril

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