Enough Rope

by Amber_and_Ash

Summary

Tony can't get himself back from Siberia, and it takes the night for him to be rescued. While waiting to see if he'll die of hypothermia, he realises something for the first time. It wasn't that he failed because he hadn't tried hard enough. He had failed because he had tried too hard. His so-called team-mates had formed the habit of blaming Tony for everything because he had let them. He had shouldered the blame, let them attack him without consequence, and cleaned up after their mess, all so they could continue to feel self-righteous in peace. But it wasn't just him they were attacking, and saving the world didn't give them a free pass to be the very bullies that Steve claimed to fight against.

Tony woke up in hospital, still sustained by the relief of his realisation. Things sucked, but they would get better. He was Tony Stark, and no challenge was too much for him. It was odd how much easier it was to plot when he actually did intend ways to manipulate the ex-Avengers into falling in line. And since that was what they seemed convinced he was doing all along, they didn't deserve a warning that it would now be true.

Notes
Reasonably plot-light, with a lot of unreliable narrator rehashing. Not only is Tony shading things to get the reactions he wants, he also genuinely doesn't know all the details the viewers do. Events that make perfect sense to us might legitimately seem irrational to him. Fair warning - while I have tried not to demonise any particular character, this is very much a pro-Tony fic that takes liberties with both characterisations and the source material. It does not set out to give fair consideration to the merits of both sides of the ‘civil war’, because that’s not the type of emotional catharsis I’m aiming for.* If you’re not on board for that, I recommend not reading this.

*Although I do find a lot of the Team-Cap merits to be a result of some very dubious world building that I intend to totally disregard to support a great deal of my plot. This I learnt about the MCU:
- Invading countries, destroying public property and assaulting law enforcement was perfectly legal before the Accords.
- Political actions that would have taken years of discussion in meetings legally obligated to be open to the public can nevertheless occur in complete secrecy from the Avengers.
- Over a hundred countries solve their concerns about American aggression and lack of oversight by appointing an American war hawk as supreme dictator with no oversight. I know there is a story to be told about the endemic dehumanisation and abuse of marginalised individuals by the criminal justice system. I just have a hard time buying that CA:CW is that story.

Updates should be weekly.
Tony woke up to the clatter of Rhodey’s wheelchair as he pushed his way into Tony’s room. The hospital catered to his wealth with large open spaces, heavy expensive curtains, guest sofas and a small electronic store’s worth of technical equipment, but practicality demanded the same easy to clean plastic floors of any other hospital room, for all that it pretended to be wood, and the sound of it was quite distinct.

“Rhodey,” he greeted, putting on a fair appearance of happiness.

“Colonel Rhodes,” greeted FRIDAY at the same time from Tony’s tablet. One of the things too many people had complained about was FRIDAY ‘spying’ on them, so he’d worked through the protocols with her. If they knew she was in the room, then they had no cause to object to her listening to them.

Rhodes ignored both greetings.

“This wasn’t your fault,” Rhodey said intensely.

“Okay?” asked Tony. They’d had this conversation about Rhodey’s injuries already. Not that Tony believed Rhodey, but still, they’d covered it. It wasn’t like Rhodey to try a second round so quickly. “What are you talking about?”

“The retrieval team passed us the footage from Siberia. None of it was your fault. Steve has a long history of lying to get what he wants. You aren’t the first, and you won’t be the last.”

Tony’s breath caught. He hadn’t intended Rhodey to find out about it so quickly. Not before he’d had time to prepare the ground for Campaign ‘Captain America is not always right’. “I’m pretty sure I’m supposed to point out he was mostly lied in order to save the world, or some shit like that.”

Rhodey made a dismissive gesture. “Remember that time when the Air Force they kept forcing me to serve as a prosecutor?”

That was a left turn, even for the type of conversations Tony tended to have with people. But any diversion was a good diversion. He put a teasing note into his voice. “Yep. Have to hand it to the military to just straight up acknowledge reality – defence gets real lawyers, while prosecution gets some random person out of the corridor.”

“All right,” said Rhodey, overriding him. “I went into it thinking motives would matter. Like we had one kid who was UA because he’d been drunk, and another because his girlfriend had threatened suicide. I thought that’s what would be important about whether they got another chance. But it turned out that motives meant jack. They didn’t even understand their own motives. The kid who got drunk for the first time learnt not to rely on friends to draw the line for him and never had a problem again. The kid with the girlfriend had a string of high drama relationships and never believed he had a responsibility to draw a line at all. What mattered to determine future behaviour was past behaviour. And time and time again, Captain America finds the need to lie, to disobey authority, break the law, and endanger innocents who are just trying to do the right thing. I don’t care how much of a man crush you have on him, you cannot let him jerk you around anymore.”

Huh. Tony should have known. Of course Rhodey would not only have followed his logic, but would have arrived there before him. He had always been better at this dealing with other people thing. “Okay.”
Rhodey narrowed his eyes.

Tony smiled as much as he could from beneath his bandages. “No, I’m serious. I had a lot of time to think before the hypothermia kicked in. You’re right. I mean, I screwed up too. I turned this all into some sort of test to see whether they still trusted me, like some idiot kid who doesn’t mention his birthday to see whether people remember anyway. But the people I failed were people like Charlie Spencer and the Spider kid. The people who die when superheroes charge in without thinking. The psychics who get painted with the same brush as Wanda Maximoff. I didn’t fail Steve Rogers. His choices are his own, and he made some really bad ones.”


“Sorry,” said Tony insincerely. “I didn’t mean to make you waste your whole intervention speech by being reasonable. I could pretend, if you like? If you put a lot of work into—”

“Ass,” said Rhodey, relaxing for the first time since he had entered the room.

“And such an awesome ass it is, too.”

“I’m afraid you’ve lost out. And it was good stuff. A whole bit about how I became friends with the Tony Stark who could convince anyone into doing anything. A really killer couple of lines about how the uptight angsty superhero fashion really doesn’t look good on you.”

“I will get FRIDAY to steal your written notes, and tease you forever.”

“Seriously, though, Tony. You seem… well?” said Rhodey, turning it into a question.

Tony knew Rhodey didn’t mean physically. No-one looked well when bundled up like a trainer for attack dogs. But he was okay. Tony had plenty of experience pretending not to give a fuck, but the current almost-euphoria was less familiar. It was like there was a window between him and the guilt and the fear. He could see the possible consequences lying before him, but the worst no longer had power over him. His most personal failure had already happened.

“Surprisingly so.” Tony agreed. “I must still be in shock or something. I’d never be this adult-like naturally.”

Rhodey awkwardly patted the blanket the last nurse had used to trap Tony into position, and the two of them almost had a moment.

“I quit the game,” continued Tony. Rhodey’s eyes widened, and Tony realised what it had sounded like. “No, no, I don’t mean I’m suicidal or anything. Jesus, platypus, what do you take me for? I’m not quitting the Tony Stark game; just the Tony 2.0 game. See, thing is, I realised I’ve been going about this all the wrong way. You know when Yinsen told me not to waste my life? I’ve been acting like he’s sitting in the afterlife assigning experience points like the most asshole GM in existence. Every time I got a negative score, I figured I had to work twice as hard to make up for it. But I was freezing there, pretty sure that this time I really was going to die, and I had a revelation. Do you know what the most lifesaving action I’ve ever been part of was?”

Rhodey said, tentatively, like it was a trick question. “Re-directing the nuke in Manhattan?”

“Nope. Inventing mosquito-repellent fibre. We sell the bedsheets and curtains and clothes and car interiors, but we give away the nets. Used to be, a million people each and every year would die from a mosquito borne illness. Now those diseases are almost eradicated. The people I helped to do that weren’t superpowers. They were normal volunteers who will never get a parade or even get excused a parking ticket for their sacrifices. They were health officials who have to choose who lives
and who dies every day because there just aren’t enough resources to save everyone. They were
government officials in places like Sri Lanka who decided that civil war wasn’t a good enough
reason to step back from malaria prevention.”

Rhodey wheeled himself back and forward a few times, considering that. “Not the arc reactor?”

Tony tilted the bundle that hid his hand back and forth. “We’ll only know how big an impact it had
on global warming in a hundred years. So potentially it will save every single future human – and
potentially it won’t save anyone.”

Then something that had been nagging on the corner of his mind came to full view. “Wait. You said
they showed ‘us’ the details? ‘Us’ who?”

“Hello, Tony,” said Pepper, coming to the other side of the bed.

“Jesus, Pep. Were you just waiting in the corridor until the best intro line? You’re not secretly Agent
Coulson, are you? I mean, I haven’t seen Agent since he got himself un-deaded. Rhodey,” he said in
a fake whisper, “are you sure that’s Pepper?”

“Tony,” she said in a familiar tone of exasperation. “There was outstanding paperwork, and James
wanted a word first. Now, how are you doing? Without the bullshit, if you don’t mind.”

Tony couldn’t see much past the bandages on his face, but he tapped the bundles that concealed his
hands lightly against the sheets. The IV moved something, and he had to wriggle his wrists a few
times to get the trapped hairs to stop pulling. “Did they tell you about the frostbite?

“The mummy impression is kind of a clue,” said Rhodey.

Tony gave him a look over his non-existent sunglasses.

“Not the details,” said Pepper. “Seeing as how you’re awake and able to manage your own
treatment. How bad is it?”

“They think my face and feet will recover. My hands aren’t so lucky. Turns out that the metal I used
to make my gloves more responsive conducted heat much better than just some air. So, that’s a thing.
In about six months, they’re going to amputate the tips of my fingers. They’re leaving it because
they don’t know how much they’ll need to take off, not because they have any hope that they won’t
have to take any. Peps, you’re going to have a SI stock dip to ride out. And Rhodey, I’m afraid
figuring out your whole leg situation is going to take a little longer than I’d hoped.”

“Jesus, Tony.” Rhodey paused, then breathed out rapidly. “I almost don’t want to ask, but… The
Cradle?”

“Or Extremis?” asked Pepper.

Tony let his head fall back to the pillow, trying to find a more comfortable position. “Rhodey,
remember that poli-sci course we crashed because it was run by that Heinlein fanboy? He said the
prime consideration for a law should never be whether it allows you to do good, but whether it will
allow your worst enemy to do evil when he acquires your position in the future.”

Tony swallowed dryly, and Pepper reached out to help him with the adult sippy cup that was
insultingly not in red and gold. “I think we all agree we’ve been pissing all over that. If I’m going to
do better, then accountability has to mean something. We can’t keep locking bad guys up for an
action and doing exactly the same thing behind closed doors. Not if we want to continue to call
ourselves good guys. So. Would either of you allow Thunderbolt Ross access to Extremis?”
Neither of them answered, which was answer enough. Tony’s heart broke a little at the pain in their expressions. He waited out the screech-clang of the cleaner working his way past Tony’s door, the room filling with a lemon smell that almost, but not quite, entirely failed to conceal the smell of bleach.

“Look, you know me. I’m not going to be defeated by gravity or a little bit of bad weather. But any treatment I take, and any treatment I give, will be ones that will be released to the general public. It has to be, for this whole thing to have been worth anything.” Tony was surprised at the bleakness in his own tone, but he didn’t try to cover it up. They both deserved more from him after all the shit they’d already put up with.

Rhodes nodded. “I get it. I mean, I wish I didn’t. Part of me really, really wishes you’d delayed having this revelation until after you’d performed whatever miracle you have in the back of your mind to get me walking again.”

Tony winced, shaken in his conviction. It was easy to say he was making a decision for himself, but did he have the right to make it when it also affected other people? Wasn’t that precisely what the rest of the team had been so upset about?

Rhodes continued, “But I get it. And I agree.”

“I’m proud of you,” said Pepper.

Tony stared at them, open mouthed. “Yeah. None of that now. Just because I’d too injured to run away doesn’t mean a man has to be ambushed with that kind of emotional thing.”

Pepper smiled in return. “I hate to enable you by breaking the moment, but we should probably get on to making Russia happy sooner rather than later.”

“Damn,” said Rhodey. “You broke the Accords chasing Captain America. Ross is going to—”

“—do absolutely nothing,” Interrupted Tony. “I only broke the Accords if Russia makes an appeal to the council to handle me as a threat beyond their ability to cope. Otherwise, I’m not Iron Man, the superhero. I’m just Tony Stark, the ordinary law-breaker. Russia hates Ross. I doubt they’d ask for help from him if an alien portal opened up in front of the Kremlin. But SI, on the other hand? We get along fine since I stopped selling weapons to their enemies and started selling them clean energy. I’ll plead whatever their equivalent of no contest is, and pay the fines for illegal entry, and, I don’t know, disturbance of the peace?”

Rhodey sounded horrified. “Wait, throw yourself on the mercy of the courts? They’re the ones behind the Red Room. They’re probably the ones who funded the entire Winter Soldier program with Hydra.”

“You’re falling into the same trap as Steve Rogers, there, Rhodey. Most people are not part of multi-generational secret organisations. Most people, even most people in government, are just people. And yeah, unfair as fuck, but I’m Tony Stark in case you’d forgotten. They aren’t going to piss me or Pepper off by demanding jail time or whisking me away to do illegal experiments.”

“I agree,” said Pepper. “I’ll set it in motion. They know you’re incapacitated at the moment so we have a bit of time, but it will prove good will to start as soon as possible. We have a lot to get through.”

We. Tony really should have brought Pepper on board as soon as the other Avengers had made clear that ‘we’ didn’t include Tony. “Capsicle and his ice friend can wait a bit – and I have something
Rhodey inspired that will confuse the whole issue quite nicely if I can pull it off -- but we should probably get a move on with handling the bunch in the raft.”

Tony’s phone beeped. “Ah, boss? I might have news about that.”

“Go ahead, Fri.”

“From my observations of Ms. Romanoff’s online actions, I believe she and probably Mr Rogers and Mr Barnes are going to attempt to break them out of jail shortly.”

Tony closed his eyes, and sighed deeply. “Of course they are. Damn it. I’m going to need to establish an alibi.”

“You’re literally restricted to bed, Tony. I think you’re covered,” said Rhodey.

Tony snorted. “Disadvantages of being known to be as skilled as I am. I probably could organise a jailbreak from my bed, and they know that too. I guess I’m going to have to actively and aggressively campaign to have them released on bail, then.”

“Why didn’t you do that before?” asked Pepper.

Tony almost bit back, but realised a second later that it had just been a question, not an accusation. It was a bit disturbing how unfamiliar it was to talk to someone who didn’t automatically blame him for everything.

“It totally wrecks the plans I had to counter Ross, and makes things worse for them in the long run. The more official paperwork there is, the less room we have for official bullshit later on. As long as there isn’t an arrest record for them, I could still negotiate a complete pardon. But if they are released on bail, then they’ll have to face a real trial. And frankly, that isn’t something they’re likely to win.”

Rhodes said, “you don’t owe them anything, Tony. They decided to support Captain Asshole of their own free will.”

“They did,” agreed Tony, still mentally inventing and discarding approaches. It was amazing how many options opened up to him now that ‘saving the team’ was no longer a goal. “But their problems spill over and become my problems, and I want to stop that getting out of hand. Fri, my darling, do any of the official German, Romanian or UN bodies have those nifty systems that escalate correspondence to a supervisor if it goes un-actioned after… call it two days? Some timeframe prior to me leaving for Siberia.”

A moment’s silence. “Yes, boss. I’ve found someone in the German UN team in Vienna whose away message was incorrectly set when she was hospitalised in the blast. If you can give me something in the next twenty minutes, I can insert it into a queue that will be noticed within an hour.”

“Good girl,” said Tony, feeling the warmth of Friday anticipating his plan. She really was growing up fast. “Put together something suitably official sounding asking for a writ of habeas corpus for a bail hearing for them all.”

“Would that be effective?” asked Rhodes.

“Legally speaking? Not at all. I have absolutely no standing, and Germany are hardly the only complainants. What it will do is remind them that being on international waters does not mean law ceases to exist, and that Ross does have the obligation to present the prisoners to the various countries as required for court dates. But the important thing is so that I can mention it in a press statement. The mere suggestion that Ross is trying to start up yet another Guantanamo Bay using UN
resources is going to make the international media light up. They adore the ‘America is indifferent to basic human rights’ story. Most of them think even the regular American jails are inhumane breeding grounds for future, angrier, criminals; the Raft is going to have them sputtering with outrage. No matter how high anti-super sentiment is, the German government will be tripping over themselves to distance themselves from imprisoning anyone there. Which will harden Ross’s stance against them and make their eventual treatment worse, but the bulk of audience isn’t going to care about that.”

Rhodey nodded. “And they won’t jump to the conclusion you broke the Avengers out of jail if you look like you still had reason to believe the legal way would work.”

“Exactly. Ironically, this is just the kind of moralistic high horse good-in-the-short-term but bad-in-the-long-term approach Cap… Rogers always wanted me to take. Well, bad in the long term for everyone except for the ant kid, I guess. This is his best shot of getting clear of it all, considering he has no prior involvement.”

“So. Press statement.”

“Actually,” said Tony, feeling the momentum build inside him. “Let’s go all out and make it an interview. Can you find me someone who will come here tomorrow? See if you can convince them that getting my raw medical files is the bribe to play nice and follow our script. But someone the public would expect to play softball anyway – it’s an interview from a hospital bed; we don’t want to oversell it.”

“You want your medical files released?” asked Pepper.

Tony understood exactly why she was so surprised, but he had been sincere that he was playing a different game now. According to this game’s rulebook, being seen to be vulnerable was a positive, not a negative. “If I’m provably physically incapable, it will stop a good twenty, maybe thirty percent of the public from demanding to know why I’m not out there doing something. It’ll give me the time I need to get everything else in order. The extent of my injuries is going to come out sooner or later, so let’s give it plenty of time to get boring before I actually have to deal with people, shall we?”

“Of course, Tony,” said Pepper, leaning forward to kiss him on the temple. It almost made his eyes water, but he pulled himself together and started the details of his planning. Rhodey and Pepper were kind enough to let him. It was one advantage of having so many things collapse at once, he thought. There was always something else to distract him.

Pepper pulled out a table that had been cleverly concealed to hold her own tablet, adjusted Tony’s bed, and then found the remote control that adjusted the lighting. Tension Tony hadn’t even realised he’d been carrying loosened as his eyes relaxed. He could do this. He had his mind, and his bots, and his friends. He could cope without his hands.
James Rhodes read quietly next to Tony's bed as Tony took a post supper nap. Jim knew he had a bed of his own a few floors down, but he found himself unwilling to leave Tony alone in the circumstances. Perhaps he was focused on taking care of Tony to avoid thinking about his own situation, but he was already doing all he could to maximise his prognosis. He was willing to take comfort in the familiar actions of taking care of Tony. He worried. Even with Tony operating at his best, things still had the potential to turn out very, very badly for him.

The TV was playing with the sound muted, and Jim looked up when his mind registered it was playing an excerpt from Tony’s afternoon interview. The screen capping did a fair job of translating his words, but Jim could have guessed which segment they were playing without the clues. Tony, looking brave and earnest around his bandages, saying ‘we should not treat prisoners well because we have faith in their humanity. We should treat them well in order to keep faith with our own.’ It was a good sound bite, and Jim was willing to bet it would be misattributed to five different sources before the broadcast even finished airing.

The rest of the interview was Tony’s typical media presence, but it had gained back a bit of the steel that had been missing since Ultron – no, make that since Afghanistan. Tony, despite everything, seemed to be healing at last. He was still a little too afraid of his own judgement, but that would come. At least with the rest of the Avengers gone, there’d be no one left to drag him back into unhealthy thought patterns. Jim admired the Avengers for their dedication, for their sacrifices, and for their attempts to do the right thing. But that respect didn’t blind him to the way that they’d treated Tony. Like Tony was the one who needed to redeem himself from something. Like the label Merchant of Death was a literal truth, rather than the moral indignation of the same people who were willing to call any soldier a baby-killer. Like Tony deciding that the weapons industry was too unregulated was in any way on the same level as Natasha deciding to stop murdering people for a living.

Afghanistan and Stane had hardened Tony and stripped away his illusions, but they hadn’t made him into a hero. Tony had always been that. Tony was carelessly generous, painfully self-aware and so driven that he needed constant distractions to keep himself from imploding. He was also often disagreeable, never patient, and occasionally terrifyingly dismissive of social norms. At the core, though, he was a good man. Tony deserved to accept himself on his own terms.

The Avengers had refused to allow that. They acted as if Tony always needed a reality check, despite the fact that Tony was the most brutally self-aware person Jim knew. Sure, Tony abused his advantages shamelessly, but he was never in doubt about why he was given them. In Jim’s experience that was unique amongst powerful people. Jim’d had more than one superior officer who had believed that the respect they were offered was not simply a result of their rank, but proof that they were inherently superior people -- and would react very badly to anyone challenging that impression. Tony, instead of surrounding himself with the typical enablers of such delusions,
deliberately chose his companions for the opposite traits. With the Avengers, Jim thought Tony had gone too far. For a bunch of supposedly trained spies and mental health workers, they’d taken the ‘Tony Fucking Stark’ brand surprisingly literally.

The door opened, startling Jim and waking Tony. One of Tony's security staff came in, but he was accompanied by two unfamiliar men. FRIDAY started the motor on Tony’s bed. A team of Tony’s protégés and a donation had replaced the standard hospital equipment with a far more elaborate system hosting the AI, that did not require Tony to press anything. As he came upright, the bank of full spectrum LEDs (‘Serotonin and vitamin D are important, platypus’) adjusted to bathe him in light. Tony watched the men without speaking. Rhodes followed his lead. The two men briefly explored the bathroom and lounge area, then checked Tony and Rhodes against a tablet. They left again, taking Tony's man with them.

Then the real visitors entered. Friday introduced, "Mister President and General Ross."

Tony repeated the greeting, sounding completely unsurprised and not at all discomforted by the sudden invasion. Jim, internally, tensed. He didn’t hold Tony’s confidence that Tony could play off the Siberia affair. Yes, he agreed that Ross wanted to be in charge of the Avengers more than he wanted the Avengers gone, but he wasn’t the type to take blows to his pride lying down.

Unable to stand, Jim considered the logistics and the appearances of trying to salute indoors, in dressing gown, and from a wheelchair. He resigned himself to just offering the greeting of the day, but the lack of formality of the entire situation grated. He had no desire to be on dressing gown terms with either of these two men.

With fine political instincts, President Ellis didn’t try to shake either of their hands. “Doctor Stark, Colonel Rhodes. I’m glad to have caught you together. I was shown excerpts of your interview, Doctor Stark. Terrible stuff, just terrible. I just had to come down and wish you both well in person.”

"Thank you, Mister President. That's very kind of you."

Ellis made himself comfortable in the guest chair closest the bed, a white leather affair that Jim suspected Tony has specially ordered. Ross remained standing, despite the fact that height left him exposed to the glare of the artificial lights.

Ross asked abruptly, “Will either of you be fit for duty any time soon?”

“I’m afraid not, General,” said Tony without adding any details about their prognoses.

Ross sniffed. “Then we’ll have to see about getting other pilots for Iron Man and Iron Patriot. Unless you intend to make the case that your personal copyright is more important than the safety of the entire world, considering how undefended your little squabble has left us?”

Tony turned to President Ellis with an apologetic smile. “I’m afraid that simply isn’t a workable solution. A suit has to be designed specifically for an individual pilot, and they take hundreds of hours work for that initial adjustment.”

Jim flinched internally at the reminder. He and Tony had come to terms with the period when Tony had been dying, but the hurt and the guilt hadn’t entirely faded away. It had been a punch to the gut when he had first realised that the suit he thought he had stolen had been specifically tailored to him. If Tony and JARVIS hadn’t had such extensive scans of Jim already, there was no way Tony would have been able to do it at all.

Tony continued, “What I can offer is something better. We’ll bring forward the production of
vibranium laced body armour and provide that to all active personnel associated with the Accords. It’s more comfortable and easier to fit than the suit, has been shown to withstand blows in the range we observe from most superhumans, and has integrated electronics to provide a full range of services and analysis. All it really lacks is integrated weapons and the flight capability. With the improvements to drone technology, I’m sure General Ross would agree that the ability to fly is more of a gimmick than a genuine tactical advantage.”

Jim recognised the sentiment from one of Ross’s earliest rants against Iron Man, but didn’t let that show in his expression.

Ross grudgingly nodded, but couldn’t seem to resist the urge to get in a dig. “Perhaps if it had my men at that airport, it wouldn’t have been such a cluster fuck and they’d all be in jail where they belong.”

Tony looked earnest, and President Ellis might have been the only person in the room to believe him. "General Ross, I honestly don’t think even the RAFT will be able to keep Captain America if he doesn’t want to be kept. I continue to believe that our best chance of success is convincing him to come in by himself. I grant you that step one did not go particularly well, but step two, in my opinion, is reducing the number of people he feels obliged to protect. We need to prove to him that the system works and give the detainees fair and swift trials as soon as possible."

President Ellis spread his hands. "I don’t disagree, but as I’m sure you can appreciate the US has limited powers in that matter. We have already chosen not to prosecute them for any crimes on our own soil. The problems with the RAFT..." the president trailed off and shook his head. "I know that General Ross reported it would take a great deal of work to bring the institution into a proper framework would take, but I had rather underestimated the extent of the problem until your interview."

Tony nodded. "We certainly can’t just close it down. From what I understand, SHIELD was not always consistent in how it chose which superhumans it chose to incarcerate. It will take effort to separate out those who could threaten the safety of the entire world if you permitted them even the slightest freedom of movement, from those who would already have been home if they’d been allowed proper trials."

"It's a work in progress, sir," said Ross. The president’s words must have worried him, because for the first time his tone was conciliatory. "And I wish we had other options for the former Avengers myself, but we've all seen how they took advantage of us when we tried. We had them in custody once before, but we mistakenly believed they were acting in good faith and trusted their honour to keep them detained. Instead, they ripped apart the Berlin facility and destroyed large parts of their own Avengers facility. We cannot risk that happening again. I refuse to endanger yet more innocent law enforcement officers and prison officials."

Jim agreed more with Ross than he did with Tony about the necessity for the RAFT. As horrific as Tony's description of Wanda's treatment had been, they'd tried being nice first. She'd violently attacked Vision -- an individual she claimed to like -- when she hadn't been in any danger at all. More than that, she’d shown no qualms about collateral damage in the past. Jim was more inclined to admire the bravery of her guards than to condemn them for insisting on restraints. Sure, Clint, Sam and Scott weren't as uncontrollable as Wanda and the Winter Soldier, but there was a reason people were judged by the company that they kept.

On top of all of that, it was impossible to claim with a clear conscience that they could safely be held at a normal detention facility when they so strongly suspected that plans were already being made to break them out. He would stay silent about that possibility because Tony had convinced him Steve
wouldn't lose control again (Barnes wasn't involved, he thought uncharitably), but claiming they should be in a regular jail was a hypocrisy too far.

The president sighed. "Hopefully we can sort it out and put the rest of it behind us. I do appreciate you downplayed most of the details as part of an ongoing investigation. We can hardly stop that Wakandan guy from making that whole Zemo trial into a spectacle, I suppose, considering the circumstances with his father -- terrible tragedy, simply terrible, our thoughts and prayers are with all the families -- but it's really best to minimise the affair here at home."

'Good luck with that,' thought Jim cynically. It bled, it led, and Americans were Involved with a capital 'I'. The American public would shortly know more details about Zemo's personal history than they did about their spouses. Who he was, what he'd done, and why he'd picked Captain America as the easiest target to manipulate. Tony's statement had been that he believed Steve's heart had been in the right place, but obviously misjudgements had been made on all sides. That wasn't going to satisfy the ravening beasts of either side. The platitude that the matters had been resolved sufficiently that no-one need fear any further violence was also something people already believed or would never believe, despite what anyone said.

"I must admit," the president said, shaking his head, "I just don't understand what caused him to conceal all of that in the first place. I know Rogers isn't the character out of the propaganda comics, but he always struck me as being a sensible guy. Not the type to go for conspiracy theories about the corruption of the UN."

Tony said, "I think we have to allow for the fact that he just doesn't have the same experiences as us. We've grown up with a UN that, except for patches of desert in Africa and such, genuinely represents the whole world. Even if we couldn't find them on a map with a reference guide, they're part of the UN. Even if we haven't officially acknowledged their existence in decades, they're part of the UN. Even if we're currently at war with them, they're part of the UN. Steve grew up with a League of Nations that barely coloured in half the map, kicked out countries they didn't like, and told ex-colonies that they needed the tutelage of more 'advanced' nations before they'd be capable of representing themselves."

The president didn't look convinced, and Jim was unsurprised. He imagined this was exactly the reaction Tony had probably been aiming for. Political naivety might be excused in a private citizen, but Steve had declared himself something more. Before he had decided to publicly stand against the Accords, he'd had an obligation to educate himself fully. Ignorance, in this case, was a worse defence than the most paranoid disbelief.

Tony modulated his tone to sound more contemplative than informative. "When we hear about the UN, most of the time it's because some idealistic young actress has become a goodwill ambassador, or because the World Health Organisation is releasing research, or because UNICEF is making some sort of appeal. When Steve hears about the UN, it's because he believes the Security Council has done something he disagrees with. The authority figures that Steve has encountered have almost entirely been people in charge of covert militaristic organisations. Secretive, aggressive, and willing to make hard calls about the deaths of civilians. I doubt he ever realises that kind of personality is not representative of all politicians, let alone the kind of politician willing to put up with the slow pace of the UN. It's easy for him to imagine that the Accords were decided by an old boy's club making deals in a back room somewhere, rather than the multiple rounds of open consultations with legitimately appointed representatives it actually was."

"And you couldn't just tell him that?" asked the president.

Tony let the silence drag on a little longer than was comfortable, and then said dryly, "I tried."
The president had the grace to look embarrassed, but General Ross looked like he was two seconds from rolling his eyes.

After that pause, President Ellis finally brought up the elephant in the room. "I understand you went after Captain America without informing anyone."

He said it like a statement rather than a question, but Jim can feel the subtle threat behind it. This was the moment the gloves might well come off.

"Yes, Mister President," answers Tony, the respectful words letting Jim know that Tony needed Plan A to work – which implied a worrying lack of Plan B. "When it became clear that I would not be able to bring him into custody by force, I judged it best to at least keep the lines of communication open. Unfortunately, I discovered my best chance to talk to him would be in Siberia. I'm sure we can all imagine the political circus it would have been if General Ross had attempted to convince Russia to allow us entry. They never would have believed it was a genuine Accords sanctioned operation rather than an attempt by America to conduct covert operations against them or whatever other thing they chose to accuse us of in their media."

The president shuddered, and even General Ross looked like he was reconsidering a few conclusions.

"I felt my best play was to go in as a private citizen, which I hoped would simultaneously protected the United States and appease Steve Rogers," finished Tony.

“And did it protect the United States?” asked General Ross. He didn’t hide his scepticism, and the president looked at him a little sharply.

"Yes,” said Tony, all sunshine and light. “I will be heading to Russia for a hearing in exchange for immunity once I’m well enough to travel. The official position is that I am a private citizen in this matter. That might not stop the more paranoid of their news organisations from speculating, of course, but at least the major outlets will fall into line. If you feel that it would help with that distance to impose additional punishment on behalf of the United States for my actions, I would naturally accept that with grace."

Jim held his breath as Tony just put it out there on a platter. A little hysterically, Jim wanted to laugh at the thought of Tony accepting anything with grace. Tony would either complain about it to his dying breath, or embrace it with such enthusiasm as to make it seem a reward instead of a punishment. Jim could only hope it was something Tony could live without.

"Oh, no,” said President Ellis with a wave. “No, I don't think we need go that far. Perhaps an open letter of disapproval or some such, but we needn't word it too strongly."

Jim breathed again. He snuck a look up, but Ross gave away no reaction to the president throwing away a major weapon against Tony. The clock ticked over to 8pm, and the bank of lights turned into the reds and golds of its sunset protocol. Ross’s eyes relaxed of their previous squint.

Ross said instead, “When can we see that armour, Stark?”

“As soon as possible,” said Tony. “I’ll ask Pepper to give you a more accurate timeline, but I believe we’re looking at two to three months.”

Ross almost smiled, and Jim understood why. In the military, projects that typically took years to even come out of design. While Jim understood that it was the result of many valid accountability, feasibility and safety concerns, it was an occasional relief to experience the speed of a single
committed billionaire engineer. Better sub-par armour when you were under fire than perfect armour after you were already dead. It seemed the terms of the bribe had been understood and accepted.

“See to it, then, and contact me when you get out of this place.”

“Of course, General,” said Tony.

“Well,” said President Ellis pointedly. “I think we should let you get some rest.”

Tony smiled again. “Thank you, Mister President, and thank you for coming to visit. It means a lot to me.”

“Thank you, Mister President, General Ross,” echoed Jim, resigned to the fact that ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’ had been the full extent to which he had been expected to contribute. He didn’t enjoy being marginalised, but he had to admit that Tony was simply better at this kind of manipulation than he was.

And Tony had done very well with it. Very well indeed.
Chapter 3

Loki sat in one of his mother’s private gardens. The dawn chorus of birds nesting in the thicket had started, but the morning air here was still bitingly cold. As a child, he had never understood why his mother had deliberately designed something to be unpleasant, but he had a better appreciation for it now. With distance, and access to more honest histories, he could finally understand how precarious her position as a war trophy had been. She had understood his position in ways he had never credited, and the closest he could get to her was this painful nostalgia.

It also guaranteed he would not be interrupted. The court would never understand the (acting) King of Asgard wasting time on the chatter of two mortals. Loki knew better. These were the two men who posed the most threat to him, not the easily placated elders, nor his lumbering ox of a brother. If he needed to meddle, this was his best chance of discovering how.

The image cleared on time, for once. Banner was at his usual work bench, but Stark seemed to be in some sort of medical bed. Stark’s appearance was shocking, and Loki was glad Banner asked the question he himself wanted to know.

"Tony! What happened?"

Stark made a movement with his shoulders that Midgardians used to indicate confusion or indifference. "Turns out, spending the night in Siberia in a de-powered suit isn't good for your health. Who knew?"

“Tony,” repeated Banner, this time in seeming reprimand.

Stark threw up his hands in surrender. “Okay, I’ll tell you. But it’ll need a lot of back story for it to make any sense.”

Banner leaned back and crossed his arms, as impatient with Stark’s theatrics as Loki himself. “Go ahead, I’m on an infinite payment plan, here.”

Stark sighed. “Once upon a time, back in the days of yore—”

“Before or after the last time we spoke?” interrupted Banner.

“Um… after.”

“So, earlier this month, then.”

Stark lifted a bandaged hand to his chest. “—In the days of yore, earlier this month. The calendar moved on its unceasing tread, and hark! The deadline approached. Either the Avengers would have to start negotiating to work within the Sokovia Accords, or cease being international vigilantes entirely. Time passed, and time passed, until only three days remained, and still no Avenger had made themselves known. And thus it came to be that the new Avengers and I were summoned to account for ourselves."

“Without you and Agent Hill riding herd on them, they’d forgotten the deadline,” said Banner, sounding exasperated.

Stark huffed a laugh. “Brucie-bear, they had never even heard of the Accords.”

“What?” asked Banner. “I mean, seriously, what? Even Thor knows about the Accords, and his only
source is BBC articles Darcy has been sending him.”

“Admittedly,” said Stark, “it was never as big in the US – you know how we feel about anything to do with the UN – but still, it was about us. Apparently, the Avengers as a collective group never read past page one of their favourite news site. This is where they reacted with all the reasonableness and the sense of personal responsibility we’ve come to expect from them.”

“They blamed you.”

“They blamed me,” agreed Stark. “Since I’m the one person who did my duty to stay current with international affairs and knew about the Accords, it was my fault that the existed. I’d stabbed them in the back by failing to stop them.”

“Could you have done anything?” asked Banner. “And why would you have? The Accords would finally make their actions legal. No more America unilaterally sending in its forces and then telling the world how grateful they’re supposed to be about it. I would have thought Steve would be all over doing the right thing by the little guy.”

“Ah,” said Stark. “That’s where the fly landed in the ointment. You were right, Ross did win the pissing contest. He got put in charge of the American side and was right there to rub the Avengers noses in it.”

Banner smiled wryly. “Yeah, okay. That sucks. He was an asshole even when he was just my boss and my future father-in-law. But, I mean, it’s not like he’s HYDRA. His aims are pretty straightforward, and he can be reasoned with. He was prepared to put everything aside to work with me to save Harlem, and let me walk away afterwards, despite everything.”

Stark frowned. "You know his treatment of you was not reasonable, right? Harlem was all on him, not on you.’”

Banner placed his hands precisely in the centre of the hideously expensive wooden bench Thor had insisted on. Loki was looking forward to leveraging the inevitable damage against the shapeshifter. Banner regained his composure and said mildly, “Hulk helped.”

Stark, in contrast, was looking even more upset. “What happens when people fuck with the Hulk is not your fault. The people doing the fucking are the ones to blame.”

"They're partially to blame,” corrected Banner. "I'm also partially to blame for allowing myself to be in a position where they could 'fuck with the hulk' in the first place. But let’s not have this argument again. So they didn’t want to work with Ross for… reasons?”

Stark huffed, but didn’t pursue it further. “I think they felt it would be disloyal to you, considering your history.”

Banner ran his hands in either direction against the wood, and then said, “Bullshit.”

“Sorry?”

“Come on, Tony, you know I’m smarter than that. They were perfectly happy – thrilled, even – to work with Fury. Fury was more intelligent than Ross, but it’s not like he was less of an utter bastard. The person who was willing to use a young child to lure me into a trap wasn’t Ross, after all. Then the Maximoff twins… do I really need to say more? Wanda made me into a murderer, and Steve didn’t even ask my opinion before he welcomed her with open arms. The Avengers never gave a damn about the personal morals of their allies before. Tell me the real reason.”
Stark screwed up his nose, then relaxed his face. Loki was unsure what that had been intended to indicate. “You know how Fury acted like he was only one step away from being a Captain America fanboy? How he always sent in his most sympathetic and admiring staff? Ross… not so much. In he was in Steve’s face about his utter cock-up in Lagos, about his lack of control of his team – and not just Wanda and me, but you and Thor going missing.”

“I’m missing?” asked Banner, sounding startled.

Stark nodded. “I don’t think either of them have any idea that you’re not on-planet anymore. Under the circumstances, I didn’t feel it was best to let them know.”

“Huh. Okay, so Steve is feeling all defensive and insecure, and he blames Ross and the Accords for making him feel bad. What happened next, Uncle Tony?”

"Aunt Peggy passed away," said Stark, his face going completely blank.

"I'm so sorry, Tony."

Stark waved a hand. "We all knew it was coming. But, see, Rogers decides this is the perfect time to drop all his responsibilities to attend the funeral of a women he barely knew. So I was stuck trying to patch things over with Ross, and we all know I'm the last person who should have been trusted with that kind of job."

Loki's hand tightened around the arms of his chair. Denying others the ability to attend the funerals of loved ones seemed to be a habit of the self-righteous. Apparently, not everyone’s pain mattered.

Stark sounded determinedly light-hearted. "And so the first of the ceremonial signing events for the Accords occurs. Oh, oh! Guess where?"

Banner smiled, willing to play along. "I'm taking from your question it wasn't the obvious candidates of New York or Geneva. Okay, then. Turin, because of the interregional crime research group."

"Nope," said Stark. "Vienna."

"The UN headquarters for nuclear energy, drug problems and outer space? Is that supposed to be some sort of comment about how they see us?" asked Banner.

Stark said, "my guess is that they threw darts at a board. I like to imagine they were a hand twitch away from hosting it in Madrid and calling us tourist attractions. Or Valetta, and calling us all old."

“So the signing goes wrong, somehow,” said Banner, anticipating the next step in the story.

“To put it mildly,” agreed Stark. “Bad-guy-of-the-week, some guy named Zemo, blows up the UN buildings, and leaves footage behind that it was Steve’s best bud, the Winter Soldier.”

“Ah.”

“Exactly. Ah,” said Stark. “Now it was completely fake, but later events proved that didn’t really matter. Bad Guy didn’t order Barnes to do it, but he could have if he’d wanted to. So, now there’s a huge manhunt for the super soldier. Good news, they know he’s a brainwashed hero prisoner of war. Bad news, they think he's a fully activated HYDRA assassin.”

Banner said, “Let me guess. Steve does something impetuous, and reveals he knew all along where Barnes was.”
“Yeah,” replied Stark. “I’m not entirely sure how, but he managed to do worse than that. Steve becomes absolutely convinced that the real, true plan is to murder Barnes without giving him a chance to defend himself. Look, I don’t want to go around accusing other people of paranoia. Not when I’m the one who almost killed their partner because of a nightmare. But Steve seemed to seriously lose any sense of perspective. So he set out to... I don't even know. Arrest Barnes himself? Smuggle him back to the states and handcuff him to the railing of Clint's farm? Transform him with the power of friendship? We never got a chance to find out, because Steve and company only succeed in putting down half a SWAT force and destroying a tunnel full of civilians before the rest of the police force, helped by Rhodey, take extreme objection to that.”

“As one would,” said Banner, his tone a mixture of horror and amusement.

Stark quirked a smile in agreement. “They surrender. Steve is proven 100% wrong when they bring Barnes in without harming a hair on his head and hand him over to the Joint Counter Terrorist group. I mean, it was unreal. These people were still in the midst of trying to clean up from a major terrorist attack. The entire city was in chaos. Hospitals were overwhelmed. The death toll was ticking up and up. A little bit of vindictiveness towards the perpetrators would have been perfectly understandable. But they don’t. And then the JCT bunch are even nicer. They give them comfortable chairs and coffee in pleasant rooms. For Barnes, they arrange a psychiatrist for him and agree to release him back to the United States for treatment. For the others, they’re willing to retcon their crimes away as actions of an official force if they sign the Accords. Except, before any of that can happen, Ross is proven 100% right about Barnes still being a clear and present danger. Bad Guy reactivates the Winter Soldier, and Barnes breaks out of the Berlin offices, taking Steve and Sam with him.”

Banner rubs his eyes, concealing his face with a low groan.

Stark gives him a few minutes and then says. "Now, I'm sure you can imagine Ross's reaction to all that."

"Nuke it from orbit?"

"It's the only way to be sure. But I think he’d been told to play nice with us, because he gave me thirty-six hours to bring them in myself before enacting that plan."

Loki shook his head, once again amazed at how willing Midgard was to resort to nuclear weapons. It defied comprehension how they had managed to keep themselves as intact as they had.

“It didn’t go well?” asked Banner.

“It really didn’t go well,” agreed Stark. “We all made some decisions we shouldn’t be proud of and collectively destroyed an airport. Steve and Barnes stole a plane and escaped. Natasha attacked a head of state and had to go on the run. Sam, Clint, Wanda and that Ant kid, remember him? They were arrested by Ross. I got some even younger kid who really shouldn’t have been there injured. Rhodes took a fall that’s damaged his back, possibly permanently.”

“Tony,” said Banner, leaning forward like he could reach out and touch Stark.

Oblivious, Stark continued. “And it got worse. Because Ross is not the supernaturally restrained European authorities. He promptly carted them all off to Fury’s old secret prison. I went and visited, but Ross wasn’t budging. But by this time I’ve found out that there was a third party involved in all this, so finding Steve had to take priority. The only way I could get any information out of them was to swear to go entirely alone without telling anyone. Now, if Steve had been right about what was ‘really happening’, that was a plan designed to win the Stupid Olympics, but whatever. I couldn't let Steve get himself killed when he was so unstable."
Stark paused to maneuver some sort of vessel to his mouth, and then resumed. "Since the Accords seemed to be his berserk button, when I arrived there I let him know that I was breaking the Accords to be on his side. It calmed him down enough to tell me what he thought was going on. Someone was apparently going to take over the whole world with five new super-soldiers from the HYDRA program."

"How?" asked Banner. "No matter how good they are at killing, five people couldn’t effectively hold a small village. There’d be too much to do."

Stark shrugged. "No clue, Bad Guy never explained his fake evil plan to me. I doubt he explained it to Steve either. I think Steve still hasn't adapted to just how destructive modern weaponry is, and he has no idea how necessary bureaucracy actually is. Again, I am aware of the supreme irony of me saying this -- but he's started to believe the propaganda. With enough people telling him that he won the Second World War single-handedly, he's started to think that individuals really are that powerful."

Banner leaned back again. "I guess, to be fair to him, we did save the world against the Chitauri and Ultron, and we were just five people."

Stark shook his head. "I agree that we saved cities, which, don't get me wrong, is pretty damn awesome. But we didn’t do more than that. The WSC plan would also have saved the world, just at the cost of a part of Manhattan. Ultron's plan might not actually have caused much more damage than our fight already caused. We did good things. I just have to wonder if we would have done better things if we'd been within the framework of an organisation with real resources behind it and the ability to deploy them publicly."

"Fair enough. But how about when Steve stopped project Insight?" asked Banner

"Actually..." Stark trailed off, and paused long enough for even Loki to want to urge him to get on with it. "I mean, I haven't told Steve for obvious reasons, but I could have grounded the Helicarriers with a command code. So could half a dozen other people, including Fury. Those hundreds of deaths were completely unnecessary. I think Fury deliberately set Steve up for something, but I haven’t figured out what yet."

“Ouch,” said Banner. “So Steve’s his innocent death count beats Loki.”

Stark nodded. "Many times over, but then so does mine. Loki has that crazy-low total of 87 or whatever. And that's only if you buy that he caused the explosion with the tesseract, rather than saved a major chunk of our planet's outer shell from SHIELD's incompetence. But Steve’s entire take on that is that you can’t save everyone, and it was all the other guy’s fault for fighting you in the first place. He’s killed honest law enforcement officers just trying to do their jobs, and he still doesn’t see that maybe that’s a problem."

The angle of the sun was now enough to shine into Loki’s eyes, and he shifted his position to avoid it. This wasn’t the first time they’d mentioned Loki. A favourite discussion was whether he was so insane he planned to fail in New York, or so insane he didn't realise it was a failure of a plan. Of course it was neither, but it was still irritating – and terrifying – that two mere mortals could see so much while his so-called family had been so blind.

Banner sighed, then asked, “So what happened with the bad guy?”

“Bad Guy’s real plot turns out to be to cause the Avengers pain. And not physical pain. Emotional pain. He had access to all the Hydra data, so he knew -- get this -- that Winter Soldier killed my parents.”
“Oh, Tony,” said Banner, his hand reaching towards the mirror again.

Stark lifted a hand to stop him. “Wait for it. He also knew that Steve had been informed about the Winter Soldier killing my family. And somehow, he figured out that I didn’t know -- maybe because of my BARF demo, maybe just because I hadn’t gone off the rails targeting HYDRA, I don’t know. So he implements one of his little plans. He broadcasts a video of my parent’s assassination, and I found out Steve knew all along. I’m afraid I don’t have your practice in controlling my temper. I mean, I had enough control -- or perhaps the lack of control, to be honest it’s all a little fuzzy -- not to engage any of the more lethal of my weaponry, but Steve eventually had to disable my suit to calm me down.”

“Friday allowed his override codes?” asked Banner.

“Ah, no,” said Stark, shifting on the bed. “Not exactly.”

“What, exactly?” asked Banner

“He destroyed my arc reactor with his shield.”

Banner opened and closed his mouth a few times. “You said you spent the night in Siberia. Because your suit was depowered and no one knew where you were. Steve just walked away and left you to die in the snow.”

Stark looked apologetic. "I was inside, actually. No heating, fair enough, but no snow either."

"Tony."

"I was the enemy, Bruce. What did you expect him to do?"

Banner drew himself to his full height. "If he was the soldier he always claims he is, I expected to obey the Geneva conventions. Article 15 - 'Parties to the conflict shall, without delay, take all possible measures to search for and collect the wounded and sick, to protect them against pillage and ill-treatment, to ensure their adequate care, and to search for the dead and prevent their being despoiled.'"

Stark smiled slightly. "First, I'm pretty sure that article 15 was only in post-WWII version. Second, neither of us were engaged in a real war -- it's not like he had a government he could hand me over to. Third, you have that memorised? Why do you have that memorised?"

"I read it. Don't be jealous if your memory is an overfull sponge that leaks facts everywhere," said Banner in a lighter tone.

“Look, it sucks,” agreed Stark. “It sucks all round. All my plans for dealing with Ross have been completely wrecked. I'm afraid it's going to take a little longer to get you home safely."

Banner glanced at something just out of sight. "Yeah, well, the shape-shifting charm is giving me a few problems. It'll take me a while still I'm confident enough to come home. It might be a good thing. If Ross was why Steve didn't sign the Accords, then Steve must be planning to do something about him."

Stark laughed. "Bruce, Brucie, Brucie-bear. You've met Steve. When has he ever had a long term plan for any of his actions? He's like a spoiled purse dog -- 'See threat! Attack threat!' -- and trying to bite you when you stop him from running into traffic. He thinks if he just hits things with his shield hard enough, everything will just work out. Hell, we're still cleaning up from the mess he made from his whole SHIELD-is-hydra temper-tantrum."
Banner glared. "Then I guess you and SHIELD have been enabling him. You put the work in to make it does all work out, so he has no reason to believe otherwise."

"That's... that's... depressingly likely," said Stark, his body pulling in towards itself. "Even more depressing is that we're going to have to clean this up for him too."

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” said Banner, echoing Loki’s own thoughts.

“I don’t have much of a choice,” said Stark. “Innocent people got caught up in this.”

Loki carefully released his hands from the chair. Surely Stark was not going to pursue a tactic of constant appeasement. Not like Frigga. Not like Loki’s first attempt. Not a man like Stark.

No, thought Loki, examining Stark’s body language more closely. No, Stark was concealing something. This was the third option between submit and rebel. Subvert. Like Loki had done with Odin’s appearance. Stark was a truly dangerous enemy – or perhaps a valuable ally. When the Mad Titan arrived, it would be the likes of Stark, Banner and himself who would save the nine realms. Not those considered so inherently trustworthy. It might be worth lending him a little helping hand so he was in a position to do even more.

It was a plot that had the advantage of being wonderfully poetic. It had grated when Odin had pretended Midgard had played any part in Odin’s hatred or punishment. Odin's contempt for that realm dwarfed even the contempt he felt for Jotunnheim. If someone threatened to kill Odin’s least favourite horse or the entire realm of Midgard, Odin would just be confused as to why they’d think that was a choice. So it would be delicious, marvellous revenge to act as if Odin had been completely sincere, and start building up official ties.

As the sun rose even higher, the dissonance of the dawn chorus died off. The sound of a hidden stream took dominance over the bird cry. Loki relaxed back in the growing warmth of the day, letting the rest of their conversation wash over him as he laid plans in his head.
Kolya -- General Nikolai Petrov -- seethed quietly at the press coverage over Stark’s visit. He was unimpressed at the leniency shown to that American billionaire by the government, and even more unimpressed at how it was being sold onwards to the general public. It was bad enough that he was expected to be nice to his own country’s landlords and exploiters, but now they were even catering to foreigners just because they had money and fame?

First they had allowed him to be taken out of the country for medical treatment instead of being thrown into jail, and then they calmly gave him plenty of time to construct a story while ‘recovering from his wounds’. And now they were allowing him to sight-see prior to the hearing! The man should be under lock and key, not flaunting his ill-gotten wealth in Russia’s capital. Even his newest assistant, Verenich – a spoiled rich kid who wanted the record of having military service without any risk of actual hardship or danger – seemed to be fooled by the man’s public image.

He glared at the boy. "Stark is not being respectful. He is making sure that his own English speaking media will pay little interest to the hearing."

"We can hardly ask him not to speak Russian, sir,” said Verenich. The boy sounded apologetic, and Kolya made a note to replace him with someone with more of a backbone. There were limits to even political favours. “That would send quite the wrong message to our own media. His offer was, after all, more generous than we originally hoped for."

Kolya waved dismissively. "A few hours recorded conversation in exchange for complete immunity. This, a fair offer for an American war-lord invading our country."

Verenich replied, "And leaving again without doing any harm, sir."

Kolya glanced up sharply. Perhaps he had dismissed Verenich too quickly. It wasn’t often that people were willing to disagree with him so overtly.

Verenich continued without a change in expression. “I do have further news, General. Intelligence has turned over a conversation they believe you might be interested in.”

So now Kolya was being managed. Perhaps the boy had realised that Kolya, at least, would have seen Stark’s stated intention of using Russian as bad news. The general held out a hand, and to Verenich’s credit, he had earphones ready with the conversation prepared. As Kolya has anticipated, it was a recording of Stark from the previous night.

Stark was obviously drunk. Of course he was, had anyone really expected otherwise? Drunk and arrogant about his own security, a typical American. Well, it wasn't like Kolya was going to educate him. It didn't matter how good the encryption on his phone was with the state of the art microphones they had in the hotel room itself.

“You should hang up on me, Rhodey.”

The reply was incomprehensible, but he didn’t have the time to wait for the analysts to finish with it. The raw impression was often more valuable, anyway.

“No seriously,” slurred Stark. “I’m a piece of shit friend for asking you to listen to me whine when you’re the one with real problems.”

The pause wasn’t long enough for this ‘roady’ – ‘Colonel James Rhodes?’ was the identifier on the
partial transcript that had been shoved in front of him – to reply before Stark continued. “Because you know what ridiculous thing is keeping me up? That Steve thinks I’m fucking incompetent. If I really was the supervillain he claims me to be, then I would have fucking won. If I’d actually been trying to kill his best-buddy-Bucky-Barnes, then Barnes would have been a smear of red on the floor. Rather than, you know, just literally disarmed and made a little less terrifyingly dangerous if he got triggered again. Seeing as how we were standing within earshot of someone who had both the ability and the motivation to trigger him and all. I’m Tony Fucking Stark, and if I want a super-soldier dead, I am more than capable of fucking killing them. That’s why he wanted me there in the first damn place.”

Again, the reply was swiftly cut off.

“But no, it’s like he thinks I got injected with stupid the second I disagreed with him. Oh, wait, that’s it, isn’t it? Because every fight he’s in is a battle of good versus evil, and everyone knows that evil never wins. He figured that when I forgot strategy and tactics, and didn’t bother to use my real weapons, that was just my bad-guy-handicap.”

A marginally longer reply.

“Then why did he leave me to die alone in the cold?”

Kolya pushed aside the discomfort of the following silence. If Stark was reduced to this level of rawness, it would only be to Russia’s benefit.

“Shit, sorry. I must have drunk more than I realised. I’d better get some sleep, huh? Sorry to disturb you.”

The recording played the three beeps of end of transmission, so Kolya assumed Stark had hung up. That was, as Verenich had promised, very useful. It was obvious that Stark wasn’t as committed to the rehabilitation of his colleagues as he himself probably liked to believe. Kolya could use this. He checked the time – it would be tight, but he thought they could pull it off. It would be worth it.

It wasn’t quite ready by the time General Petrov was called down to meet with the other members of the hearing, but his team was well aware of the consequences if they failed. Besides, Kolya would have to wait until those with better political connections could finish anyway. Once Stark was in place, the panel filed in as one to take their seats. In another example of the craven pandering to this billionaire, they’d allowed Stark to take a seat as well at a smaller table facing them. Their own table was large enough for them all, but entirely dwarfed by the size of the room. With the vast amount of space around it, it looked like it had been unintentionally abandoned there on the way to its real destination. Presumably, the room had been organised more for the benefit of the multiple cameras than anyone actually in it.

Kolya sneered even more at the overlarge gloves Stark had been permitted to wear. Medical devices, indeed. As if any number of deadly instruments couldn’t technically count as medical. And this was a man who had called one of the most efficient flamethrowers in existence ‘flight stabilisers’ when he had been challenged on the matter by his own government. But no-one had asked his opinion, so Kolya shut up and accepted the will of his superiors.

Stark’s initial recital of the recent events was bland and provided nothing new. The existence and location of the HYDRA base within Russia’s borders had been extorted from Stark’s team before they’d even been permitted him to be rescued. In this one instance, the waffling of politicians and Americans played in Kolya’s favour. The members took turns to picked holes in the account, and Kolya was content to let him lull Stark with questions he had undoubtedly prepared for. He wasn’t even upset that Stark was being so deliberately uninteresting. His own questioning would provide all
the interest he needed.

One of the lesser judges – Kolya had forgotten his name as soon as he had heard it – said, “You have recently asked for bail hearings for the former Avengers. This is not the first time you attempted to interfere with legal and criminal actions taken against them, is it?”

Stark did not attempt quite the level of casual body language he used when confronting his own government, but he also did not look contrite or intimidated. “Your honour, after the fall of SHIELD, it was briefly part of my function within the Avengers to take care of such matters. Providing mediation services in such matters was a normal and understood part of my job.”

The judge raised an eyebrow. “You are speaking of the time before they kicked you out after Sokovia. But you continued to make similar attempts after that, even though it was no longer your role, is that not true?”

“In a way,” agreed Stark easily. “As a concerned party, I did attempt to mediate between them and the JTC after the capture of James Buchanan, but Zemo reactivated the Winter Soldier before any conclusion could be reached.”

The judge was starting to get visibly impatient – a tactical error in a court where he did not have the power to simply jail the person he was questioning for his attitude. “What about your on-going efforts to stand in the way of the court-ordered deportation of Wanda Maximoff?”

Stark managed a puzzled smile. “The situation with Ms Maximoff was obviously complex, but the state agreed to allow her to remain under house arrest at the compound while the legal matters were being resolved.”

“Despite the rioting mobs outside your front door,” said the judge, practically biting out the words. Stark bowed his head in acknowledgement. “Well, yes. I believed that when the full truth of the matter come to light, public opposition against her presence would ease.”

The judge made a disbelieving sound. “In other words, you have a long and ongoing history of shielding the Avengers from the proper consequences of their actions. How are we supposed to take your claims of supporting the Sokovia Accords seriously?”

Stark was once again pure innocent earnestness. “There is no conflict between supporting the Sokovia Accords and supporting the Avengers. The Accords are about the mutual protection of everyone on Earth. The Avengers aim is also the protection of everyone on Earth. While some of the actions of the former Avengers were obviously misguided, I have faith that their intent was for the best for everyone. I’m sure that my opinion will be shown to be justified over the course of their trials.”

A different judge picked up the train of questions. “The trials of Wanda Maximoff, Clint Barton, Sam Wilson and Scott Lang, you mean.”

“Yes, your honour,” replied Stark.

“Because you chose not to arrest Steve Rogers or James Barnes.”

“It was not a choice, your honour,” repeated Stark for what was probably the fifth or sixth time. “We were unable to contain them safely. Our best option was to deescalate the situation and concentrate on the real architect of the incident, Helmut Zemo.”

“Zemo may have been behind the Vienna bombing, but Rogers and Barnes had multiple
independent crimes they still have to answer for. Zemo conveniently could be arrested – by King T’Challa, whose presence is noticeably absent from your testimony. Why did King T’Challa not likewise bring in Steve Rogers and James Barnes?"

“I was unaware of King T’Challa’s presence at the HYDRA base until after I woke up in hospital, your honour. I cannot speak to his motivations. I have not spoken to T’Challa on any matter since I found out about Steve choosing to pursue Zemo.”

The other members were looking increasingly frustrated at Stark’s slick responses. Kolya was just starting to worry that the chairman might close things up when Verenich approached soundlessly and slipped a file in front of him. Kolya rifled through the contents. Excellent. Once again, his team had managed the improbable with sufficient efficiency – although he would have words for them about cutting it this fine. After he congratulated them, of course. Good morale relied on the balance between wanting his approval and fearing his disapproval.

As the judge ran out of things to say, Kolya examined Stark. He had begrudging respect for his composure. It wasn’t easy not to have people took turns accusing you of being a liar while you were forced to pretend they weren’t. Even if – perhaps especially if – you really were lying. But even Stark had to be getting tired now, and tired people made mistakes.

Kolya pulled his microphone towards him. “You said you did not speak to King T’challa about the base in Siberia, but you had extensive contact with him prior to that. Do you have any theories about why King T’Challa chose to arrest Zemo, but allow Rogers and Barnes to escape…” he paused just long enough for Stark to open his mouth before continuing “and to abandon you without assistance, gravely injured and semi-conscious?”

Stark closed his eyes. Kolya couldn’t see Stark’s hands, but he could imagine Stark was putting extreme stress on his doctor’s handiwork.

“I cannot speak to his motivations,” Stark repeated from earlier, buying himself time. “But I imagine he was as unaware of my presence there as I had been of his. It is also quite possible that he likewise did not encounter Steven Rogers or James Barnes.”

Kolya did not pursue it. His superiors would not thank him for making political waves with Wakanda without explicit orders to that effect. He had perhaps already walked too close to the line, but he’d wanted to rattle Stark, and he’d done that. Instead he said, "Before confronting the terrorists at the airport, you say you took a day and a half to recruit specialists in non-lethal capture."

Stark’s face twitched, but he had already contested the ‘terrorist’ description once and lost. "Yes, General Petrov."

Kolya let Stark’s confusion about the sudden change of topic build as he sorted through his documents, letting the soft sliding noises fill the gap. "Did you take those specialists with you when you went to Siberia?"

"No, General," said Stark. “I went alone. It was not a sanctioned Avengers operation, so it would not have been appropriate to bring anyone with me."

It was Kolya’s turn to let a previously debated topic slide. Instead, he stared at Stark with a half-smile. “So, tell me, Doctor Stark. What was your plan to capture the super-soldiers in Siberia non-lethally?"

Stark looked confused. “I wasn’t, at that time, anticipating a fight with Steven Rogers or James Barnes.”
Kolya dropped his smile to level a glare. “Not the American super-soldiers, Doctor Stark. The Russian ones.”

“I…” Stark trailed off, and took a sip of water in a poor attempt to conceal his racing mind. "I expected to assist Steven Rogers in his plan, and Steven Rogers is himself a specialist in non-lethal force."

Not a bad answer for something off the cuff, thought Kolya, but not one that would hold water for long.

He asked, "How many super-soldiers do you believe Steven Rogers and James Barnes could have safely contained without lethal or life threatening measures?"

Stark opened his mouth, and Kolya cut in again before he could speak. “And Doctor Stark, I remind you that you are under oath.”

Stark’s shoulders fell. "Perhaps one each."

There was a soft murmur through the room as everyone started to realise the significance of his line of questioning. Kolya waited it out. "Perhaps two total, then. Thank you. We have your statement earlier that you could not arrest Rogers and Barnes because you yourself were unable to safely contain two super-soldiers. Not the same super-soldiers, I grant you, but similar in strength."

"Yes, General," said Stark, still sounding defeated.

“If my fellow members of the board would indulge me, I have a short presentation on the equipment Doctor Stark has admitted to bringing within our borders prepared?”

Kolya could see the chairman hesitate, unsure if Kolya’s request was a subtle power grab. Fortunately, it seemed the board itself was curious about where Kolya was going, and murmured softly in agreement. The chairman waved his hand graciously. “Go ahead, General.”

At a nod, Verenich pulled down the screen on the closest wall, lowered the lights and started the presentation. Kolya noted with approval that Verenich had all the settings correct and the video cued to begin with as little fuss as possible. No shameful pressing of buttons while staring at the ceiling and having rubberneackers yell unhelpful suggestions in his staff. When none of the cameras repositioned themselves, he realised Verenich must have provided the producer with an independent stream. Very organised.

Kolya consulted the notes that had been prepared for him. “We start with the iconic weaponry of the Iron Man suit, the ‘repulsors’. As we can see, each repulsor can, if necessary, independently maintain enough force to keep almost a quarter ton in the air.”

The board did a fair job of containing their snickers as they viewed various instances of Stark’s flight mechanism failing and forcing Stark to balance over an outstretched foot or hand like a five-year-old trying ballet for the first time.

“They could obviously equally well propel something else with the same force. At the strengths displayed here, being targeted with both hands would be the equivalent of being hit by a car travelling at 70 kilometres an hour.” A very small car, to be entirely accurate, but he didn’t need to mention that.

“We’ll move past the flash-bangs, guns, lasers, EMP projectiles, flares and other such minor distraction tools stored within the suit, and consider the missiles. The suit contains six so-called ‘mini-missiles’ launchers,” said Kolya, as the screen showed the missiles destroying thick stone walls at the
rate of an automatic machine gun. He waited until the footage showed actual buildings exploding before continuing with, “As well two more conventional missile launchers, able to fire various anti-tank and anti-bunker striker missiles.”

This caused another uneasy shifting of weight. They’d been informed about the Iron Man suit, but it had been easy to consider it as little more than a jetpack, instead of the heavily equipped flying tank it really was.

“Finally, the ‘Unibeam’.” Kolya didn’t provide any commentary to the footage. He didn’t have to. The footage showed the beam going right through a man, and then through the steel wall behind him without dissipating in power in the least. The board watched in grim silence.

When the screen went blank, Kolya spoke into the semi-darkness, “In another battle, the beam is reported as having continued for more than kilometre before it was eventually stopped by a mountain. It bored a hole almost two meters into solid rock.”

Kolya hoped for the sake of everyone he fought with that Stark had been very well drilled in the homily of ‘always know who is behind who you’re shooting at, because you might be shooting at them as well’.

Kolya gestured to Verenich to bring the lights back up. "Given what we have just seen, Doctor Stark. How many super-soldiers do you think you could remove from the field if you were willing to kill them?"

Stark shifted and then said, "It's hard to say exactly. It depends factors like their equipment, their training, their teamwork, the terrain, and so on."

"Under the circumstances you anticipated, Doctor Stark. If forced to, would you say it was likely that you could have killed them all? Yes or no."

"Yes," admitted Stark. "If forced to."

"So tell us, Doctor Stark, why multiple attempts are made to apprehend a brain-washed American soldier without hurting him, when your only plan for brain-washed Russian soldiers was to kill them all?"

A shocked gasp, not just from the members, but from the camera operators as well. It wasn’t that any of them hadn’t seen the destination, but they knew their parts as performers in this little play.

Stark took a few deep breaths of his own. “I had no intention or expectation of killing them. As I have previously stated that I had no plan, and I was simply present to assist Steven Rogers.”

“Who,” said Kolya, relentlessly, “by your own testimony could not possibly have had any plan to safely capture them either.”

"I didn’t say that,” said Stark. “I just said he couldn’t have subdued more than one soldier in a direct fight. It might well be that Steve anticipated reaching them before they were woken from cryo-sleep.”

Kolya allowed another dramatic pause before asking very quietly, "and then what?"

"Excuse me?" asked Stark.

Kolya continued, "if he had no intention of killing them, as you are trying to claim, then what did Rogers plan to do with them next? Stand guard over them forever, like your grave of the unknown
soldier?"

It was Stark’s turn to show visible frustration. "I'm afraid I didn't ask, general, as the situation did not arise."

“How convenient for you.”

Stark’s lips tightened, but he didn’t answer.

“To summarise,” said Kolya, not even pretending to speak to Stark any longer. “Rogers was so indignant about attempts to capture a fellow American that he was willing to commit multiple acts of terrorism, but so indifferent to the lives of Russians that he did not even attempt a plan that might save them. And this, Doctor Stark, is the team that you wish us to believe represents the whole world. This is the leader you are trying to tell us is more than a murderer pursuing his own personal interests and the interests of America. This is the person who you say we should trust to protect our citizens. And who, Doctor Stark, is going to protect us from him?”

The chairman called Kolya to order, but it was obviously more to prevent Stark from saying anything to undermine Kolya’s speech than a true reprimand. He obediently switched off the mike and pushed it away. He could have focused his efforts more on the image of the so-called ‘Iron Man’, even with all the positive publicity, but ‘Captain America’ was a much better target. Every wide-eyed idealist who had been so convinced that America’s warped culture was so much better than Russia’s would now know better. If even America’s most iconic hero – their very representation of truth, justice and the American way – was such a self-serving monster, then what did it say about the rest of them?

When the hearing was finally over, with Stark left looking like he needed hospitalising once again, Kolya returned to his offices with Verenich a polite half-step behind him.

“You did a good job today, Verenich.”

“Thank you, sir,” Verenich replied.

“But if I catch you managing me like that again, I will slice off your dick and choke your mother to death with it, do you understand me?” asked Kolya with a smile.

Verenich looked appropriately contrite. “Yes, general. It won’t happen again.”

“Good.”

Kolya hummed under his breath in satisfaction. This had been a good day to be Russian, and a bad day to be Captain America.
Chapter 5

Outro/Chapter Notes

This chapter has been broken into two parts for length, but I've tried to avoid a cliff-hanger.

I have deliberately chosen fictional newspapers and channels throughout so that readers aren't distracted by agreeing or disagreeing with my opinions regarding the various biases. If something I mentioned exists, please let me know so that I can change it.

Pepper kicked off her shoes, and dumped them at the entrance to her room. She was getting used to living in the same building as Tony again. After Russia, Tony had moved into the compound with Rhodey, as it was the most disabled-friendly of all Tony’s properties. Or perhaps more accurately, the one easiest to remodel, since it needed substantial remodelling anyway. And, typically, Tony had used a free hand in remodelling. The existing rooms had been carefully evaluated, and the personal elements transported. Everything else had been replaced. The permanently closed door that led to the relocated rooms of the ex-Avengers was just past her own, and she’d visited once. The rooms were indistinguishable. Everything had been placed exactly how the owner had abandoned them, including discarded jackets. In Steve’s case, the room still looked exactly how it’d been when he had first moved in. Pepper would have thrown all their stuff out, or boxed it all up and given it to Ross, but Tony had plans.

Even with the altered look, she wasn’t entirely convinced, that the decision to move in was one of practicality rather than Tony’s intermittent self-destructiveness. She didn’t like the idea of the three betrayed men – because she did count Vision in that number -- alone in this place with just failed symbolism for company. Pepper had made the executive decision to move in with them, and none of them were silly enough to protest.

But it did mean she had reassumed some of her previous cat-herder responsibilities. Pepper walked into Tony’s workshop with a considering eye. Tony was surprisingly diligent about keeping the floors free from clutter so Rhodey was never denied entry, but he still occasionally moved things beyond the point that he and the bots could tidy them themselves. There was less mess than when Tony was fully engaged in a project, but there didn't seem to have been a repeat of his frustration earlier that week. He’d wrecked a tool because he lacked the fine control to use it properly, and that had started a cascade of chaos as the frustration of one thing had led to the destruction of the next. But today didn’t require an intervention.

Tony turned with a smile. "Pep! I thought I still had fifteen minutes. What have I forgotten?"

"Too many things to list,” said Pepper, “but you’re right, I’m still early for the super-secret broadcast you’ve been teasing us with. Another piece has come into play. JAR— FRIDAY, can you bring up the Midnight Observer?"

One of Tony’s blue hologram screens transformed into a web browser with the lead story – *The Silencing of Wanda Maximoff: Why we’re still talking about women and not with women.*

"You were right,” said Pepper. “It's the most anti-Captain America piece they've ever run."
Tony smirked and Pepper let him have his moment. Pepper had resisted this aspect of the plan. Not because she’d had any moral qualms. The ‘overheard conversation’ was a standard gambit in the world of journalism, and everyone knew the unwritten rules. She hadn’t worried about sounding convincing, either, or having to defend her position at a later time. It had been like one of those trick drawings, actually -- once Tony had pointed out the alternate interpretation, it had been hard to see anything else. She just hadn’t believed it would work. But she’d done it, because refusing Tony anything was difficult even at the best of times.

FRIDAY had let them know who had taken the bait of a distracted bouncer, and Pepper had started the script. “It’s not too late to tell them the real reason you wanted to keep Wanda away from Steve.”

Tony spoke with a grimness that wasn’t entirely acted. “I couldn’t even convince my team. I have no chance of convincing the world. Everyone is too focused on Pietro’s heroism to even be willing to consider that he was abusive. They sure aren’t going to believe that Steve was making it worse.”

“To be fair to the team,” and there, Pepper was speaking only from the script, she had no interest in being fair to the team at all, “they had no way of knowing whether Wanda bought the little girl dresses and the children’s toys of her own accord.”

“Sure,” said Tony, “But none of them could miss his little trick of psychically moving her around without her consent. Half the time he didn’t even warn her. Nor could they miss how overdeveloped her startle reflex is.”

Pepper sighed. “None of them have the background to realise how worrying those signs are.”

“Neither does the press,” said Tony.

“But you don’t have to go into any of that,” said Pepper. “Despite how liberal Captain America is, he’s still a product of his time. You can just point out how he probably didn’t see anything wrong with a woman who was not independent.”

“Not independent!” objected Tony. “That’s a little bit of an understatement. Wanda had no therapy, no training—”

Pepper chimed in, “—no education, no income, no outside friends—“

“—and nowhere else to go,” finished Tony. “I’m sorry, I know I’m dwelling on it too much. It was just really frustrating that she wouldn’t trust me help her because of the whole Merchant of Death thing.”

“So say that to the press,” said Pepper. “The public will understand that the ‘house arrest’ was as much about separating her from Steve as it was keeping her safe.”

“Except that I failed,” said Tony. “And now Steve has two ducklings utterly dependent on him. That’s something I don’t want to draw attention to. No, I’ll stick to the more obvious reasons about her legal problems and the mood of the protesters. It’s not like that isn’t true as well, and it’s far more neutral to Steve.”

Pepper had stood up, deliberately making noise about it. “Ready to face the vultures, then?”

“Lead the way,” said Tony.

The reporter had been out of site by the time they opened the door, and Pepper had counted down the hours until the opinion piece was likely to be published.
Pepper cleared a space for herself to sit, letting Tony finish the test he seemed to be in the middle of. "So you can add Midnight Observer to the tally of newspapers demanding the former Avengers have their day in court."

Tony just hummed in acknowledgement.

Pepper wrinkled her nose, and then gave in to her curiosity. "But even if you knew they'd go after Steve, how did you know they wouldn't just run the abuse story straight and make her out to be a victim?"

Tony reset the hologram and began again, using exaggerated facial movements to navigate instead of gestures. "Because that would have reduced Wanda to a product of male abuse and denied her agency of her actions. Their reader base can be very touchy about things like that. Also, Jennifer is one of the more purist writers from MO when it comes to gender inequality. She wrote an article two years back completely indignant that single fathers were more likely to given a jail term when single mothers would be offered diversion programs, and that they served longer sentences for the same crimes as mothers. ‘The endemic and unfounded belief that a child better off separated from a criminal father’. Well written article, considering the topic. She wasn't the type of person to deny Wanda the capability to be a villain of her own desires."

Pepper smoothed down her skirt unnecessarily. "It’s just… I mean, they seriously said that the Romanian SWAT team had it coming when Steve attacked them, but they're now indignant that Steve didn't encourage Wanda to get a proper education."

It wasn’t quite a question, but Tony answered her anyway. "Their readers are never going to be paralysed by a vigilante when they try to arrest someone in good faith. But they might be trapped in a nightmarish domestic situation because they have no other option available to them. It isn’t that they lack compassion. They lack imagination.”

Pepper wondered briefly if lack of imagination explained Tony’s opinion about Wanda. Even though he had been the one to point out that Wanda’s circumstances and actions made her appear more like an abuse victim than an independent woman, he didn’t see her that way. It was a spot where Tony didn’t have enough ego. He didn’t see anything unusual in his own ability to accept change and keep on going. He had gone through worse than Wanda, more frequently, and fought tooth and nail not to let that turn him into a victim. He could intellectually appreciate that other people had more trouble or made different choices, but he never seemed to apply that knowledge to anyone he knew. Since Wanda could have claimed her independence and didn’t, his conclusion was that it had been a mature decision on a conscious level.

But he’d been right that Wanda never wanted Tony’s help. It might have been better for all of them, in retrospect, if he’d had a bit more respect for that, rather than for her self-image. He should never have continued to help her behind her back. If she’d been fighting her own battles against wrathful politicians since she’d suddenly decided not to be a terrorist anymore, maybe she would have had a better appreciation for her position. Or, more likely, have been sitting safely in an ex-SHIELD jail cell and not attacking people Pepper cared about. Pepper could feel sympathy for Wanda’s situation without losing any of her outrage at Wanda’s actions.

“Oh,” said Tony, his casual tone raising Pepper’s suspicions. “A parcel came through that I think best I not leave to a secretary to scan in and handle. Do you mind having a look for me?”

Pepper would usually have made a smartass response about the difference between a personal assistant and a CEO, just to let Tony know she wasn’t going to treat him any differently just because of his hands. His tone, however, sparked suspicions of her own. Her own hands were shaking as she
pulled out a flip-top phone and a letter. She skipped to the bottom of the letter to verify the signature.

How dare he? How dare he contact Tony after all he had done? She looked up at Tony, still pretending not to pay any attention to her. An impulse to protect him from it came and went. It would not be fair or just to conceal this from him. She read the full letter aloud. By the end, it wasn’t just her hands that were shaking. Her voice was also trembling with rage.


Pepper’s jaw dropped. “How can you find this funny? This… this parody of an apology. ‘Oh gee, Tony, I’m really sorry you’re wrong, but don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll agree with me soon.’ It’s an insult.”

Tony regained his breath. "It isn’t an insult to me. It isn’t an anything to me, because it wasn’t written to me. It was written to his conscience. He's worried -- just a little, mind you -- that he might not have been entirely the good guy in this little story. This letter creates a reality in which our actions were equivalent, and he was just wiser than me. The important thing is the phone. Because the one thing he is afraid of is that nobody needs him after all. He hasn’t allowed himself an identity that isn’t ‘fighter of HYDRA’, so if we take that away, we haven’t left him anything.”

Pepper tried to reread the letter with that mindset. Interpreting it as ‘please tell me I’m right, because I can’t afford to be wrong’ did help temper the smug self-righteousness. Not a lot, but it did help. Tony had always been faster than her to move on from emotional reaction to practical application. “What do you want to do with them?”

“Plug the phone in, will you?” said Tony, indicating which connector with a head nod. “You can dump the letter in the bottom roll-out. I might need it again later, depending how I end up playing it.”

The roll-out was a new set of surfaces built in to the wall that Friday could extract and bring up table height on request. When they started moving, the sides came up to keep everything contained, but they didn’t require the same dexterity as normal drawers to get things in and out. They were effectively six work tables that that could be hidden away and retrieved at any time, and so far, Tony seemed to be managing them with his stripped-down gloves. Pepper was considering setting one up for her own office. FRIDAY dutifully pulled up the bottom one, and Pepper left the letter unfolded on a clear spot. As she pulled her hand away, she noticed a selection of different types of prosthetic fingertips. She stepped away, but Tony had already noticed her attention.

Tony said, “Wanna hear something ironic? The best ones are made of the same alloy that are going to make me lose my real ones. More responsive, you see.”

“Why are they here?” asked Pepper, knowing any sympathy would be unwelcome.

Tony waved dismissively, “I dunno, something about me becoming comfortable with them before the operation. It was part of the negotiation to get them to agree to not to assign me a prosthetist – don’t look at me like that, Peps. You know that FRI and I are going to end up doing all the fitting and adjusting no matter what.”

Pepper debated whether this was something she should object to. There were reasons doctors and lawyers didn’t take themselves as clients, but perhaps Tony needed the control.

Tony continued casually, “And I started sessions with their PTSD specialist.”

Pepper stopped in the middle of turning back in shock. Tony had had reasons – good, valid reasons – for why he could not trust either a civilian therapist or a SHIELD therapist with potentially damaging
information, so why… unless he was just going to play them, but then why agree to it in the first place?

FRIDAY said, “Time, boss.”

“Thanks FRIDAY. Power down everything, we’ll start again tomorrow.”

“Sure, boss.”

Rhodes yelled for them from the newly re-designed entertainment area, and she had to walk double time to keep up with Tony. This wasn’t the time to get into it. If this was part of a plan, then Tony didn’t like to show his cards in the middle of a round. If it was an emotional change, then Tony didn’t like to show his cards at all.

“Good evening, Vision, Rhodey” she said instead, settling herself into ‘her’ couch, one just slightly tweaked so it did not look out of place compared to the adjustments made to the ones for Rhodes and Tony. It was a comfortably familiar room, despite being entirely new. There was none of the sunken seating and the deep carpeting of Tony’s usual lounges, but the smooth flows and gleaming surfaces was still identifiably Tony’s aesthetic. “Anything interesting?”

“They are once again discussing the bail hearing,” said Vision.

Rhodes nodded. “‘Sources say’ they’re likely to be released on their own recognisance, and the various hosts are bitching about special treatment for the rich and the famous.”

“From what I understand,” said Vision, “They believe that other members of the public in the same situation would not be catered with this degree of consideration, nor would they have seen such rapid action. They have some illogical belief that… Tony has purchased this privilege.”

Pepper noticed that the brief pause before Vision used Tony’s name hadn’t yet gone away, but they were slowly becoming less awkward around each other. They were finding their way to a relationship on new footings as Vision became more secure in his own identity. Tony might have avoided speaking about the situation forever, but Vision had confessed that Wanda had made him doubt his own selfhood. She had spent so much time assuring him that she regarded him as a real friend, only to go through him as if he were an inanimate object the first time he’d disagreed with her. Tony was one of the only people Vision could trust to see more in him, because Tony was the only person Vision could be sure believed in self-autonomy even of intelligences without human forms. In face of that, Tony had set aside his own discomfort, and set about bringing Vision fully into their circle.

“Seriously,” said Tony. “I didn’t pay for anything, of course, but I can see why they think something strange is going on. Legal and political affairs usually take months separately, and longer when they intersect, and this is the one time they decide to play with rocket fuel? I thought I was racing against the clock to even establish this as a possibility in the media before Steve broke them out. And now is when they choose to move faster than Captain Self-Righteousness himself.”

Tony paused, and then said in a whine, “I hadn’t planned for them yet.”

Pepper couldn’t help but smile at the familiar tone. “Can you cope with them?”

“How can I not?” he answered. “I’m Tony Stark. I can cope with anything.”

“Of course you can, Tony,” repeated Rhodes, halfway between sarcastic and sincere. “So what’s this clever plan I inspired? And I warn you, if you’re going to be blaming me for it, then it better be awesome.”
Tony sniffed. “All my plans are awesome, Platypus, you should know that by now. I should make
you wait for it, just for that.”

Rhodey poked him with a cushion. “Cough up, or I might just decide to change over to the
Kardashians.”

Tony looked at him with a heartbroken expression. “Never did I think any friend of mine could stoop
so low.”

Rhodey just poked at him again.

“All right, alright,” said Tony, laughing. “Remember the ‘the Avengers are not a military team
because military teams don’t suck that badly’ monologue you delivered one fine middle of the
night?”

Rhodes blinked. “Are you trying to claim you were actually listening to me at the time?”

“I might have been in the middle of something,” said Tony indignantly, “but I can multi-task!
Besides, I got Fri to give me the cliff notes when I woke up the next day. I do care about you and
your drunken rambling.”

“Thanks, Tones,” said Rhodey, “you’re all heart.”

Tony sniffed. “One of your complaints, in case you
don’t remember, was that the relationship
between Steve and Same never settled into proper commanding officer and senior NCO roles.
Something about Steve not letting Sam handle the care and day to day discipline of the team.”

Rhodes looked ready to go for a bottle to put him back in his previous drunken state. “True, but now
the problem is even worse the other way around. It’s the NCOs responsibility to keep an eye on their
young commanding officers. If Sam was doing his job, he should have been taking Steve aside
behind closed doors and given him advice on how to stay out of trouble. He should not be
convincing him to go crazy and threaten major governments.”

Tony tilted his head. “Okay, I grant you that even as a buddy he should have done that. But in made
me realise you’d forgotten something important, and if you’d forgotten, so has everyone else. Steve
Rogers has had almost no experience of the normal roles and responsibilities, because the Howling
Commandos weren’t a military unit either.”

Rhodes looked at Tony as if he’d lost the plot, and Pepper wasn’t far behind. “What do you mean
not… they fought in World War II!”

Tony disregarded her to bring his gloved hands to his chest, and posed with a wide-eyed expression.
“You see, good people of the world, it isn’t that Captain America thinks that you’re the nasty
untrustworthy bad guys, it’s just him fighting the demons of his past. That mean, evil SHIELD
organisation manipulated him over and over again, so now he has problems trusting anyone.”

“I… what?” asked Pepper.

Tony waved that off. “Sure, but they were SSR’s little public facing shock troop. It was a mixture of
nationalities and races, remember – even a resistance member. Their presence may not have been
entirely legal, but what’s a few civilians running around killing people when you’re a super-powerful
intelligence organisation?”

“Pepper blinked. The public would be willing to blame pretty much anything on SHIELD, and the
pro-Captain bunch would seize on pretty much anything that would reconcile their position with their
unease, but—“didn’t you say there were plans in place to re-legitimise SHIELD? With this and the bit about the RAFT, it might be rough to work with them in future.”

Tony grinned ferally, and a shiver worked its way down Pepper’s spine. "I’m not doing anything. I just suggested to some other people I would protect them if they chose to speak out about our shared beliefs. Don’t forget I spent a large part of my childhood being forced into company of the ex-Howling Commandos, and therefore correspondingly their descendants. The Howling Commandos loved Steve, but the Captain America propaganda bullshit? Not so much.”

“Tony…” said Rhodes in astonishment.

Tony continued, “Besides, I’m still a little pissed off at SHIELD being so morally grey that the actions of the Hydra agents just fit right in. Hydra was so integrated that no-one batted an eye when they murdered my parents. They could stand to lose a little more of the moral high ground they pretend to have to prevent that kind of thing from happening again.”

"Do you think SHIELD knew about your parents?” asked Pepper, calculating further plans. HYDRA had always been a target, of course, but perhaps it was time to look into making a few retirements a little less comfortable than they had previously been.

"Oh yes,” said Tony. “Two things. First, they were the only people to officially know where my father was and what he was carrying. Second, my mother was strangled to death. That's not exactly an injury typical of a car accident. They knew, and covered it up. Anyway, shush, all of you. It’s starting.”

Pepper was startled to realise they’d missed some of the introductory discussion, but FRIDAY turned up the volume. “Earlier, Sebastian was fortunate to have a few words with Joshua Sawyer, the grandson to the famous Howling Commando, ‘Happy Sam’ Sawyer. Let’s take a look.”

Pepper had always known that Tony had allies he’d never mentioned to her. Tony was like that. People could dismiss his charisma when they only saw the surface, but it was difficult not to want things to well for him when you really knew him. Tony, you just knew, was going to go out there and do things that mattered. To help him do those things – to share a little piece of that purpose with him – was seductive. Tony didn’t just have genius. He didn’t just have resources. He didn’t just have determination. He had the ability to write his own vision of reality, and inspire others to see it too.

So it shouldn’t have come as a surprise that Tony could drop a word in the ear of a descendent of one the Howling Commandos -- the group the world had regarded as little more than an extension of Steve’s ego -- and get them to come out against Steve. It shouldn’t have surprised her, but it did. The shiver that had trailed down her spine wasn’t quite excitement, and wasn’t quite fear. She felt that way every time she was reminded exactly why making an enemy of Tony was a very, very stupid idea.
Pepper pulled up her feet to nestle deeper into the couch, the material soft and warm against her skin. As always, it adjusted to her movements like it had been programmed to do so, and Pepper wouldn’t put it past either Tony or FRIDAY for that to be literally true. Pepper put that aside to concentrate on the Sawyer grandson. The set up was interview rather than talk show – the two speakers were face to face in chairs, rather than at an angle in couches. The ‘casual at home’ look the network had probably been trying for had so grossly missed the mark as to draw attention to its very unnaturalness. The view started with the interviewer, and Pepper vaguely recognised him as Sebastian, a middleweight journalist more known for his background pieces than hard-hitting headline news. All those things together suggested that the news network had not expected the content to be interesting enough to make prime time – but Tony clearly had. By the looks of things, the interview had been running a little while, so they must have cut out the introductory pleasantries.

Sebastian said, “Of course, it’s the current situation with Captain America is the one on everyone’s lips.”

The man who had to be Joshua Sawyer looked determined but not overly nervous. “Exactly,” he said. “I came forward because I think there are aspects about the past that would really explain a lot of what was going on here.”

Sebastian smiled in a practiced way that did nothing to conceal his condescension. “It sounds like you think you have hidden information.”

Joshua grinned back. “In a way. None of what I’m about to say is any great secret to anyone associated with the Howling Commandos, but yes, it’s information SHIELD tended to de-emphasis in official histories for propaganda purposes. We didn’t say anything back then because we really believed that SHIELD was in the business of keeping the world safe, and we trusted they knew what they were doing.”

Tony interrupted, darkly, “And because people who disagreed with SHIELD tended to conveniently be found to be threats to the safety of the world.” Pepper wondered, not for the first time, exactly how much Tony had known about SHIELD before that first official introduction.

With his witticism taken seriously, Sebastian looked a little less sure of himself and the direction of the conversation. “You don’t think that anymore?”

“No,” said Joshua. “I don’t think we can. Especially now, when SHIELD’s previous faults explain so much of what’s going on. It’s time that the public knew the truth.”

“Well,” said Sebastian tentatively, “please do go ahead.”

Joshua leaned forward. “People keep saying Steve Rogers was unreasonable for claiming the UN wanted to turn the Avengers into a hit squad. They keep saying he’s fear mongering, or paranoid, or whatever. But what they don’t realise is, that’s exactly what the government did do with the Howling Commandos. Steve isn’t just pulling this out of thin air. He has damn good reason to think it’ll happen again, because it happened before.”

Sebastian blinked. Pepper almost felt sorry for how out of his depth he was starting to look. “You
would describe the Howling Commandos as a hit squad?”

“Think of it this way, Sebastian,” Joshua said, his arms open and relaxed, “If you wanted to start a legitimate special operations group for a top priority task, how would you go about it? I mean, putting aside the legal and administrative challenges. You’d look for volunteers from the best veterans available, right?”

Sebastian asked, “Are you saying that’s not what happened with your grandfather?”

Joshua’s chin tilted up. “Not. At. All. Remember that my grandfather and a large proportion of the other Howling Commandos were captured by the Germans, tortured and experimented on. Then, instead of being discharged and provided with medical and psychiatric treatment – and even as far back as WWII, the army knew enough to do that – the SSR stuck a gun in their hands and pointed them at the enemy.”

“The SSR were sort of the spiritual predecessors of SHIELD, correct?” interrupted Sebastian.

“That’s right,” said Joshua. “SHIELD was formed out of the SSR and a few other minor groups, but the continuity of leadership and philosophy came entirely from the SSR.”

Sebastian said, “so you are saying that the recruitment of recent POWs was exploitative.”

Joshua nodded. “Exactly. That’s a good word for it. They took a bunch of traumatised, vulnerable soldiers who don’t have the support of their usual chain of command, and sent them on suicide missions under the charge of a civilian consultant who didn’t know any better.”

Sebastian held up a hand. “Let me stop you right there. Civilian consultant? Surely you’re not talking about Captain America, are you?”

“Sure I am,” said Joshua, as if he hadn’t said anything surprising at all. “You must know the backstory, right? Steve Rogers tried to enlist fraudulently five times before being recruited by the SSR for the super-soldier experiments? The SSR might have worked with the military, but it wasn’t military itself.”

“And the rank of Captain?” asked Sebastian.

Joshua shrugged. “As honorary as a Kentucky Colonel. It was a rank issued by the SSR for publicity purposes. Direct commissions – that is, battlefield promotions – did happen in the real army, but that was only to Second Lieutenant and the person was expected to complete proper leadership training. No military service would jump someone without even basic training to Captain. That would just be asking for catastrophe. Even if he’d taken any oaths, he could hardly be expected to understand what he was agreeing to honour.”

Sebastian said a bit faintly, “I suppose I did know that backstory, but that’s certainly not how it’s been portrayed through the years.”

“Yeah,” agreed Joshua. “We always found it irritating that Steve was the one who got all the credit for everything, you know? I mean we loved Steve, of course we did, but the stuff put out there for public consumption was just so extreme. The Howling Commandos contained people like Lord Falsworth, who was a very highly decorated maroon beret. It contained my grandfather, Captain Sawyers, who was an army ranger with years of specialised training. If you think about it that way, both outranked even the honorary title Steve was given. The Howling Commandos contained a bunch of trained, experienced and knowledgeable soldiers and civilian freedom fighters, but they were always dismissed as little more than sidekicks. We played along because we were told it was
necessary, but there were always rumblings about how insulting their PR people were being. It was like they were saying my grandfather’s job was so easy, that anyone off the street—or off the stage—could have done it.”

Rhodey snorted. “Steve always did say the success was a result of the team. Perhaps we should have taken him more literally.”

“Do you think—“ started Pepper, and the screen froze to allow her to finish without missing the interview, “Do you think the team could have been doing all the actual work and just let Steve think he was the one in charge?”

“Yes, I do.” said Rhodey. “I’ve seen teams successfully work around a problem commander before, and that’s with all the rules and conventions in place that try to prevent that type of thing. People simply looked to someone else for orders without troubling the official leader with the situation. If the leader was naïve enough – or lazy enough – he wouldn’t realise those orders were being given at all. It actually explains a lot about why Steve tended to act like his job ended the second he stepped off the battlefield.”

“Huh,” said Tony. “So Steve is the military version of the ‘ideas guy’.”

Pepper shared his expression of distaste. Outside the profession, people might cast Tony as the quintessential model of the ideas guy. Ideas seemed like the glamorous and unique part of a new product. Insiders, however, used the phrase as an insult, because they knew that ideas were a dime a dozen. Anyone could come up with the idea of a self-driving car or a clean water filter. The difficult part was turning those ideas into practical implementations that could turn a profit at the affordable prices for their market. At one stage, Tony had kept a running total of people who had accosted him in restaurants and elevators and public toilets with the line ‘I have this amazing idea. You develop it, and we can share the profits!’”. The number had reached absurd levels before he’d become bored with keeping track. The idea that Steve was on the wrong side of the Dunning-Kruger effect – so unskilled that he lacked the knowledge to even be aware that he was unskilled – was currently quite comforting.

FRIDAY gave them a moment, but when they didn’t continue, resumed the show.

“That’s an interesting point of view,” said Sebastian. “But let’s go back to your description of it as a ‘hit squad’. Even if how they were constructed was wrong, they were sent to attack HYDRA bases. Surely you’re not arguing that was wrong.”

Joshua grimaced. “They fought against people they believed to be the enemy of the whole human race, and I’m the last person who would want to diminish either their personal bravery or their accomplishments. But the SSR were the people who determined who exactly that ‘enemy’ was. It’s only a difference in wording to call something an attack on a suspected HYDRA base – or an illegal raid a civilian research facility to steal their technology. Knowing what we do now about the prevalence of HYDRA influence on the SHIELD, you have to wonder whether it was all just an exercise in transferring vital information and equipment from their old facilities to their new ones when they realised that the war was not going to end in Germany’s favour.”

“That will sting for Steve,” said Rhody, sounding like he could feel the blow himself. “All those sacrifices, and it could have been for the enemy? I can’t imagine worse.”

“A chilling thought,” said Sebastian at the same time, but rather more inanely.

The image cut back to the original hosts. There were three of them around a glass table, perched on fashionable bar stools – the type that proved they were fashionable by being so uncomfortable that
no one sane would by them for any other reason. One host shifted, and the microphones were not quite good enough to conceal the squeak of plastic against plastic.

The host in the middle, a tanned blond woman Pepper thought was named Anna, looked appropriately grave. “A chilling thought, indeed. What do you make of that, Jim?”

Jim’s teeth were less precisely perfect than his fellow hosts, indicating he was more likely their designated expert than a usual member of the team. His hands were rigidly held in place, folded in front of him. “I think Joshua raises a very strong point about Steve Rogers lack of military expertise, Anna. We all grew up with the comic books, but those of us in the service also grew up to see just how flawed they were. Rogers simply wasn’t proper military material. This was a man who should have been serving jail time, not one who should have been trusted with the lives of others.”

“Isn’t that a bit of a strong reaction?” asked Anna. “Speaking as a civilian here, but I would have thought someone wanting to enlist despite their limitations would be admirable.”

Jim’s hands twitched, like he was stopping himself from making a gesture. “What you’re forgetting is that it isn’t just their own lives they’re risking. It is one thing if it’s a limitation the army knows about and knows to compensate for, like bad eyesight. It’s quite another when they’re lying through their teeth and might suddenly be unfit for combat without warning. The army has guidelines for a reason, Anna, but I can assure you every teenager who gets rejected thinks they know better than the trained professionals. That kid who tells himself his occasional asthma doesn’t count, and then gets triggered by the stress and the dust and the smoke? He’s just as responsible as the enemy for any damage his unit takes when they are forced to rescue his stupid ass instead of being able to rely on him to rescue theirs. And every single one of those liars getting people killed wanted to be just like Captain America.”

“Okay,” said Anna, not particularly sincerely. “I can grant you that. But that isn’t quite the case here, is it? By the time Steve Rogers entered combat, he had been cured of his medical condition. Why couldn’t he have been enlisted than?”

“I obviously wasn’t in the army at the time,” said Jim with a fake laugh, “but if I had been, I would have raised concerns. Curing his physical condition didn’t change his personality. He was still the person who was willing to lie, cheat, and put others in danger. It might not his health anymore, but there’s plenty of other ways to screw over your buddies.”

“That’s bullshit, you know,” said Tony suddenly, and FRIDAY paused the interview again.

“Which bit?” asked Pepper. The extent of Jim’s dislike had taken even her aback. No one was universally liked by everyone, of course, but she’d always had the impression that the military worshipped Captain America just one rung below their own god.

“That the lying to enlist proves he lacks character,” answered Tony. “Everybody lies. People who pride themselves on being honest to others are usually just better at lying to themselves about how what they do doesn’t count. The most actually honest people, statistically, are those with the lowest risk-tolerance thresholds. They’re not more moral people; they’re just more afraid of getting caught. The military should reconsider being so keen on having that as a trait.”

Rhodey scoffed. “No matter what the movies might tell you, risk-taking isn’t usually a desirable trait in the military.”

“Come on, honey bear,” said Tony. “Who am I supposed to believe? An expert who tells me something once, or fiction creators who tell me something all the time?”
Pepper decided to risk addressing the underlying concern. “You know you can understand why Steve lied to you without having to agree with him, Tony.”

Tony waved his gloved hand at her. “What are you talking about? We were talking about fraudulent enlistment. Now hush. FRIDAY, resume.”

It had been too soon to get into it, after all. Pepper grimaced to herself, but let it go.

Anna unfroze to ask, “What about his rescue of all those POWs? Didn’t that prove anything?”

“Only that he got lucky, Anna,” said Jim, in a tone of someone who was finally being vindicated in a long held belief. “Another part of the backstory we prefer to gloss over was that his extraction plan was a pick up by Howard Stark. Stark flew a plane that seated no more than six, including the pilot. Rogers was as surprised as the Germans when his actions resulted in the freedom of all the POWs. He could equally well have gotten them all killed. And we were all fortunate that it did turn out to be a HYDRA installation, because otherwise his actions could have endangered every other POW held in any Axis POW camp. He was a loose cannon that just happened to be pointed in the right direction that once. Frankly, the success of the Howling Commandos makes a lot more sense if Rogers was just the colourful distraction while the experts did the real work.”

Anna’s expression was by that time a little fixed. “Well, that’s certainly a very strong position. Any thoughts, Vance?”

The shark grin on Vance’s face didn’t suggest he’d be providing her with any rescue either. “Something that Joshua Sawyer was careful not to mention, but stands out like a pimple at the tip of the nose to anyone who is looking for it. He spoke of Rogers being put in command, despite his lack of rank. Do you happen to know who took over the unit after Rogers was lost?”

“Um… Dum Dum Dugan, wasn’t it?” said Anna.

“Yes,” agreed Vance. “Not any of the people Mister Sawyer mentioned as having obviously more command experience than Rogers, but Sergeant Dugan, the next ranking white American male.”

“That does seem like an unfortunate move, but we have to bear in mind that it was the forties—“

Vance spoke over her. “—and when the Avengers was re-formed after the actions of Sokovia, the leadership was changed to Steven Rogers and Natasha Romanoff. Not either of the people with actual military experience - the two tour veteran Master Sergeant Wilson, or the active duty Colonel Rhodes. Romanoff was an ex-member of not one but two terrorist organisations, with no command experience whatsoever. But hey, she’s the whitest person after Rogers, so she must be a good pick.”

“Now that’s unfair,” said Tony, the display freezing again. “I mean yes, they totally screwed you over, Rhody, but SHIELD and the SSR were never racist. Or at least, substantially less so than their cohorts. They just very strongly preferred an incompetent insider to a competent outsider. The most you could probably say was that they have a history of being dismissive of military experience.”

Rhodey snorted. “I think you mean the least you can say. Joshua was right about an actual serving military person having too much training on actual accepted practices, and too much of a framework to complain. The number of times I had to bite my tongue and remind myself that Steve was the one in charge, and if he chose to let things slide like that, then it was none of my business… I feel like a complete idiot now for having missed all the signs. I was convinced I wasn’t treating him like some sort of wide-eyed fan, but I sure as hell wasn’t treating him just like another team member, either.”

Tony awkwardly patted his arm with the back of his hand. “Steve is good at tactics in
straightforward situations, and very good at motivating others. In a way, I left the team without all the support it needed for Steve to be able to operate successfully.”

Rhodey said, “You mean you did all the hard work to make him look good. A good leader deserves that kind of support, but a good person repays the favour. Steve’s the kind of person who thinks that loyalty is something he should be shown, not something he should show others. I completely ignored his history of contempt for the people who helped him. I shouldn’t have. In future I—“

Rhodey looked down at his legs and grimaced. Between his natural recovery and Tony’s assistance, no one knew yet whether he’d be able to return as a full member of the Avengers, even if there was an Avengers to return to.

“Boss?” said FRIDAY tentatively.

“Yes, FRI?

“Secretary Ross is calling. Apparently, it’s urgent.”

Tony’s face turned from uncertain to sour in a second.

“Well, you can tell him—“

“You need to take it, Tony,” Pepper interrupted. “We need him on our side as much as possible.”

Tony grimaced, but moved into the alcove to take the call. The automatic glass doors shut behind him, but they weren’t much of a barrier to sound, and none at all to sight. The whole area reflected the light from the television. Every part of it was glass, the walls, the counters, the table-tops. If a person wanted to sit, they would have to bring their own chair, and Tony hadn’t. The blue-tinted glow made Tony look like an apparition as he stood there, holding nothing and touching nothing.

They didn’t continue the show, but Pepper only started to listen in as Tony's voice became more agitated. "No, of course I didn't – I still don't. They were getting released by the end of the week."

Ross’s voice was too distorted to make out the words.

“What precisely do you expect me to do?” asked Tony. “I can’t even open doors, half the time.”

Pepper winced. Tony might be putting it on to make a point, but that didn’t make it less true. She wasn’t going to push Tony to go outside the building much with the current public scrutiny, but she could only hope he wasn’t starting to feel trapped, or worse, unwilling to leave the house.

“I don’t know if you noticed, Ross,” said Tony with heavy handed sarcasm, “but we're not exactly on each other's Christmas card lists anymore.”

Actually, thought Pepper, since FRIDAY had taken over that responsibility, they just might be. It would be just the AI’s sense of humour to do exactly that.

"I'll see what I can do,” said Tony. “But I wouldn't hold your breath.”

Tony gestured for FRIDAY to hang up, and came back into the main room, the wash of gold lights bringing him back to life.

"What did he want?” asked Pepper.

Tony looked frustrated. "The jail-break went ahead after all."
Rhodey said with weight, “Was anyone hurt?”

“Not permanently, they don’t think. Wanda…” Tony trailed off. By the look on Rhodey’s face, there was subtext there that Pepper couldn’t follow. Tony walked closer to Rhodey to meet his eyes. “But that’s on me, Platypus. Not you.”

“It’s on Wanda and Steve,” said Rhodey, but he sounded more like he was agreeing than disagreeing.

“But why break out now?” asked Pepper, returning to the more obvious problem.

"I guess,” said Tony slowly. “I guess Steve didn't believe it was actually going to happen. Probably convinced that Ross would find some way to 'disappear' them before the trial.”

“That,” said Rhodey, “Or he still hasn't learnt his lesson about keeping up to date with the news.”

Pepper laughed, although it wasn’t a laughing matter. Rhodey had taken it very hard that absolutely no one had stepped into the communications void that Tony had unintentionally created by leaving, including Rhodey himself. His training had betrayed him there, and he still worried that he could have somehow salvaged the situation if he’d been a little more aware. Pepper didn’t agree with him, but she respected his right to feel badly about it.

Still, it was funny because it just might well be true. Going by past performance, Pepper did not put it past Steve to simply have no idea that his ‘team-mates’ were about to be released perfectly legally. But Tony was probably right – it was even more in character for Steve to assume some malicious conspiracy against him rather than trust a foreign government to do the right thing.

Tony sat back into his couch with a sigh. "Good thing I’m a genius and prepared for all possibilities after all. FRIDAY, initiate project Welcome Home.”

Pepper grinned to both Tony and herself. Of course Tony had a plan for a jail break as well. And of course this little exercise playing out on the screens in front of them would not be going to waste just because the court trials would not be going ahead as they had so recently envisioned. Pepper had no doubt this commentary would be front page news no matter which shore the Avengers washed up on. At least one person in the Avengers would shortly be finding out that he or she might have put their faith in Steve based almost entirely on fairy tales. Knowing Tony, there’d even be footage of it if she wanted to see their expressions. They could afford to wait to see how it all came out.

Chapter End Notes

Re: Falsworth being a superior officer: This is speculation based on his character in other media. I could not figure out his rank at all, or even whether he was enlisted or an officer, in the MCU. Nor could I figure out why he’s wearing what looks like a hybrid Coldstream/Scots Guards cap badge rather than either the wreath-and-eagle of the army air corps or the wings-and-parachute of the parachute regiment. If anyone has better information, please let me know!
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

We, as consumers, can accept that Clint’s characterisation in CA:CW was simply lazy story-telling. As a writer, however, I need to force it to make sense anyway. I’m not trying to bash him, but fans of his might find my interpretation a little uncomfortable.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Playing on TV was some English-speaking comedy show, but Clint suspected it would shortly be turned off. The comedian had just mentioned the Avengers.

“‘Dude,’” said the comedian in a fake voice, although Clint wasn’t sure who he was impersonating. “I think bail jumping is supposed to wait until after we’ve left the prison.” He turned to face the other direction and deepened his voice, “What? And have no collateral damage? That’s not the super hero way!”

Clint cringed and left the room before he was forced to comfort or reassure someone again. He did believe the rescue had been the right thing to do. Ross would not have tamely turned them over and let them go home. By rescuing them, Steve had prevented them from being ‘disappeared’ into some even deeper, darker hole. He was just sick of having to say it. Even worse, he might be asked to join the group hug. Steve had apparently recently come to the renewed realisation that SHIELD was HYDRA, and he and Barnes were all upset about it. He imagined his instinctive reactions of ‘No shit, Sherlock’ and ‘Suck it up, buttercup’ would not be taken well, and Sam was not currently high on his list of people he wanted to be talked at by.

Instead, he took advantage of this temporary privacy to sneak off a balcony with the phone he had just lifted. It was his phone, after all, and Sam Wilson had no damn right to keep it from him. The group had had serious arguments about the care package that had been waiting for them when they got back from the Raft, but Clint was firm in his opinion. Stark had faults – many, many faults – but organised malice wasn’t one of them. He didn’t have the attention span for it, for a start. If he claimed this was a safe way for Clint to contact his wife, then that was exactly what it was. Stark was showing off by proving that he could predict exactly where they’d land up after the jail break, but he wasn’t making any kind of threat. A threat would have been a repulsor blast to the head when they landed.

Clint opened the door, and the hot Wakandan air hit him like he’d walked into a blanket soaked in boiling water. The heavy pungent-sweet scent of the nearby blossoming vines made his nose tickle, but long practice allowed him to suppress his sneeze before it could draw attention to him. He slipped out quickly, trying not to let the heat or smell enter their suite and give away his location.

He initiated the face-to-face call with a trembling hand. It was answered on the first ring, and Laura’s face crystallised into view on the screen. “Clint! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he said with a smile. “A little banged up, but I’ll be okay.”

Laura wasn’t smiling back. “I’m glad you’re not hurt, but damn it, Clint. What on earth were you thinking?”
"Steve needed my help. It was the right thing to do," said Clint, expecting his wife to soften the way she usually did when he mentioned his world-saving activities. But this time, she didn’t. Realising too late that it wasn’t the wisest thing to do, he said what he was thinking. “You look angry."

Laura took a deep breath. "I'm trying very hard to remind myself that you and Steve are very probably under the influence of mind control again, and are not responsible for your actions."

Clint stared at her for a moment. Mind control? What on earth— "I’m not under mind control. Why would you possibly think that?"

“You don’t realise it, of course,” said Laura, speaking more to herself than to him. “You wouldn’t. I’m not sure that pointing out my reasons is going to help you any – you’re probably too deep under.”

“No, seriously,” Clint said. “I’m not under any sort of mind control, and I would know.”

“How do you know that for sure?” she said in a tone she more typically used when speaking to the children. “It’s not like we have any reason to believe there’s only one type of control in the world.”

She didn’t mention Loki, but Clint’s gut tightened in anger anyway. He pushed down that impulse. An argument here would be counter-productive. She was just worried.

Clint took a few deep breaths. “Okay, let’s say any of this was true. Would telling me your reasons for thinking that way hurt any? It might even help jolt me out of it.”

Laura looked out of the screen, and then shrugged. “I guess that’s true. At least until the next time you’re affected. Can you think about it as if it were someone else? Think about it as if it were a totally separate matter you’ve never heard of, and give me your honest opinion about that?"

Clint tried another smile. “If that would make you feel better.”

Again, Laura failed to return it. “Okay. Consider the whole Ultron affair. Tony, a man with a history of producing the politest, nicest, most human friendly AIs imaginable, meets Wanda and suddenly produces Ultron. Steve, a man with a history of hating and fearing HYDRA agents, meets Wanda and suddenly tries to kill a team-mate based on a HYDRA agent’s say so.”

Clint presented the obvious counter arguments. “Stark has a history of being reckless, and failing to consider the long-term consequences of his actions. Steve has a history of being compassionate. He knows that a lot of HYDRA agents didn’t join voluntarily. Some of them have family members being kept hostage, or they’ve been brain-washed. He didn’t want to hurt one unnecessarily.”

Laura cut him a look of sheer disbelief. “Sure Steve did. That’s why when he heard about the other five winter soldiers, he knew that each and every one of them was somebody else’s Bucky. He therefore made sure to inform the proper Russian authorities about it, so that they could all be kept safe even if they tried to fight back. Instead of, you know, just heading out there with his best bud with no other option other than to slaughter them all or die trying. Because Steve knows how they might not have been there voluntarily, and he knows how wrong and evil it is to attempt to arrest a victim of brainwashing, let alone try to fight against them.”

“We don’t know what happened out there,” said Clint.

“You might not know,” said Laura sharply, “because you were stuck in jail, but the rest of us heard every detail when Tony gave his evidence at the Russian Hearing. You know, the one Avenger present who actually gives a damn about being answerable for his actions?”
Clint couldn’t believe it. She was quoting Stark? “You can’t trust Stark. He tore apart the Avengers.”

Laura snorted. “Tony is the only reason I’m safe right now! Did you think all your enemies would just disappear when Fury wasn’t around to protect us anymore? Did you think all your former friends would just ignore how your besties Steve and Natasha deliberately stabbed them in the back and walked away? Tony was the only Avenger to care enough to try and help them afterwards, and everyone knows that. Respect for him was the only thing keeping them from planning a little justice of their own all this time.”

"Look, I’m glad Stark is looking out for you,” and Clint found to his surprise that he was. Well, perhaps not glad, but a little relieved. Even Stark wasn’t enough of a schmuck to hurt innocent women and children, and he sure as hell had the resources to do it properly. Not that Clint thought any of his colleagues would be looking to take revenge, surely?

Clint shook his head and continued, “but he sure as hell wasn’t looking out for Wanda, me and the rest of us. You have to look at what he actually did, not just what he claims he wanted to— ”

Laura interrupted, "Tony isn't the one with a proven history of being able and willing to artificially influence others, Clint. And, as a matter of fact, Stark was distraught about the treatment of Wanda on the Raft. Unnaturally so, one might even say. Think, Clint. If you don't find any of the Ultron business a little strange, think about what happened after that. Wanda wants to stay, so Steve ‘decides’ to invite her to join the Avengers. Bruce is still angry with her because of what she forced him to do in Johannesburg, and he ‘decides’ to run off. Tony is still suspicious of a woman that tried to murder him because of some absurd claim he killed her parents, and he ‘decides’ to retire. You are still uncomfortable around her, and you ‘decide’ to retire."

"That's not how it happened,” protested Clint. Sure, he’d wondered a time or two after returning to the farm about whether he’d made the right choice, but that was perfectly natural. And he’d worked damn hard to make sure Laura didn’t have any reason to think he didn’t like being home. It wasn’t fair of her to accuse him of needing to be mind-controlled before he was willing to spend time with his family.

"Close enough,” dismissed Laura with a wave. “And if you ignore all of that, how do you explain your recent breakout? You were barely being charged with anything. You probably could have received a plea deal for community service. But for Wanda, it was a different matter entirely. You know that the agreements for what happened in Lagos fell through because of her and your stunt in the Compound, right? Wanda never signed the Accords, so she doesn’t have any protection under them. Nigeria was demanding she stand trial, and now America has absolutely no interest in standing in their way. Thanks to you and Steve. And she would have lost, she has to know that. Nigeria is not the type of legal system that accepts ‘it was an accident’ as an excuse. They once found a driver guilty of involuntary manslaughter when he lost his brakes and killed a child. They believed the driver had a responsibility to maintain his car, you see. I’m damn certain they would have found that she had a responsibility to have proper control of her powers before using them in a way that killed twenty-six people.”

Laura’s interest in criminal trials usually made for interesting stories and friendly debates. This wasn’t one of those times. If the phone hadn’t been his one and only precious connection with home, Clint would have thrown it off the balcony to see it smash against the over-perfect cobblestones below. He’d phoned Laura hoping to get away from the damn rehashes about the Raft break out, not go through it again with an even less sympathetic audience.

“"We weren’t ever going to see the inside of a court-room, Laura. Come on, you can’t be that naïve. They were going to use the Accords that Stark signed to keep us locked away until we agreed to do
whatever they told us to. That’s if they didn’t just jump straight to experimenting on us.”

Laura stared at him with a face carved from stone. Very quietly, she said, "Remember Norway, and that far-right nut-job that decided to murder seventy-seven people, including a political youth camp?"

“Laura, what—” started Clint.

“Do you remember?” Laura repeated.

“Sure, yes,” he said, vaguely remembering the incident.

Laura leant forward. “Remember how he only got a 21 year sentence? Remember how his 'cell' is a three room suite including gym equipment, kitchen appliances, an Xbox? Remember how his guards spend an hour a day with him playing chess or ball games or whatever? Remember how there are still ongoing protests about such 'inhumane and degrading' treatment of him?"

"What about it?" asked Clint.

Laura sat back again. "That country signed the Accords. A country that thinks that partial isolation of an unrepentant multi-murderer of children – rich children with very powerful parents – is going too far. What you claim you were facing is against the laws of practically every country in the world. Including us, in case you forgot that. But more importantly, including Germany. The European Human Rights Convention even specifically forbids deportation or extradition to any state that doesn't have equally high standards. How on earth did you think anything even approaching an agreement to hold people without due process, let alone anything more sinister, would have any chance of being ratified by any of the signing countries?"

Clint sighed. Civilians. "People like Ross don’t obey the rules they disagree with, Laura. His minions weren’t shy about letting us know that he’d be keeping us there forever unless we began co-operating with him."

Laura’s look of irritation was a familiar one from previous failures to understand each other. “Ross is not the emperor of the whole world, Clint. Ross isn’t even part of SHIELD, where they got away with all they did because no-one ever found out about it. Your arrest has reached saturation coverage in the world media. If you didn't get a trial, there'd be starving children in Ethiopia asking 'hey, what happened to those Avenger dudes?'"

“They could make something up, Laura,” said Clint patiently. “I would have thought you understood how corrupt these people can be.”

Laura snapped back, “And I would have thought you’d understand how little these people can get away with when they’re being mutually monitored by other groups of people who hate their guts. Like the way, say, two thirds of the world’s governments feel about each other.”

Clint swiped at his forehead, and then ran a hand down the back of his shirt, trying to relieve the itchiness of the sweat. “Look. It doesn’t matter who is right. We’re out of there anyway. But can’t you at least agree that I didn’t need to be mind-controlled in order to think breaking out was the only option we had? I just… we were trying to save the world, Laura. Why won’t you believe that I wouldn’t be perfectly willing to do that anyway?”

Laura crossed her arms. “How about because you weren’t trying to save the world. I might not be an Avenger, but I’m not a complete idiot, either. If any of you genuinely thought those supersoldiers might pose a real threat to the safety of the world, none of you would have committed to that imbecilic plan instead of, I don’t know, making a simple fucking phone call.”
Clint clenched his fists in reaction to both the swear word and the underlying anger it revealed. “Stark and Ross—"

Laura didn’t let him finish. “And Maria Hill? Melinda May? General Talbot? President Ellis? Fucking 9/11? Was every member of the whole damn planet part of this Ross conspiracy against you, that you couldn’t drop a note to any of them? Bullshit. It was never a plan to save the world. It was a plan to keep people from having to face the consequences of their own actions. Have you even asked Steve about the last conversation he had with Tony before he decided to attack him? Steve went from agreeing to sign the Accords to accusing Tony of being a Nazi as soon as he mentioned Wanda might have to face some sort of a review. Frankly, I’m being nice to Steve by assuming Wanda put him under mind control, because I don’t want to believe the alternative.”

Clint drew himself up to his full height, answering passion for passion. “That Steve’s willing to sacrifice everything, even me, in order to do the right thing?”

Laura didn’t budge an inch. “That Steve is taking advantage of a mentally ill woman to use as a weapon for his personal gain.”

"What the—“ said Clint. “Wanda isn't mentally ill, and Steve isn’t taking advantage of her. Don’t start being cruel to other people just because you’re upset with me.”

But the anger seemed to have drained from Laura. "Clint. If she attempted to torture Stark to death because she thinks he killed her parents, then she is criminally insane and she needs treatment. Delusions like that don't just get better. Did you imagine she just woke up one morning and said, ‘I guess deliberately causing those hundreds of deaths was a little bit of an overreaction. Silly me!’? What if the next person she decides deserves to be murdered is whoever failed to secure the missile? Or the pilot? Or the Sokovian leader? Or our own leader? How would you stop her? She’s already proven quite willing to go right through anyone who gets in her way.”

“She was brainwashed by HYDRA,” said Clint. “It wasn’t her fault, and she’s better now.”

Clint was uncomfortably reminded of more recent rhetoric, but that was just the normal hyperbole anyone used when they were upset. Stark had become rich by screwing other people over, whatever he may or may not have been responsible for in Wanda’s parent’s deaths. It wasn’t at all unreasonable for her to continue to dislike him even after the conditioning had been broken. And Sam was that super-awesome mental health guy, wasn’t he? If there was anything really wrong, he would have picked up on it.

Laura said, “Then that’s even more reason why she needs professional help. I mean, I didn’t want to believe that stuff about Steve deliberately isolating her, you know with the stopping her from getting an education and a job and the means for an independent existence and such, but that’s what you’re saying. That Steve knew she needed the time and the professional skills to recover from the brainwashing and to deal with the guilt of what she did while under the influence and didn’t give it to her.”

Clint opened his mouth, but Laura silenced him with a glare. “If you’re going to tell me that you didn’t gain any benefit from the treatment SHIELD provided after Loki, I can tell you right now that you’re lying. You were an experienced agent trained in keeping your mental integrity when captured or coerced. Wanda hasn’t had your training. Wanda is no Natasha Romanoff either, and even Natasha was given time and structure to deal with her transition. Steve is just throwing Wanda from one battle to the next with no attempt to help her at all.”

Clint didn’t say anything. He still wasn’t convinced that so-called ‘professional help’ ever helped, but he really couldn’t deny that she should probably have been given more time. Not with how the team
was saying she’d reacted to Lagos.

Laura gave him a minute, then said, “If she’s the innocent one in all this, then she was willing to obey Steve’s orders to attack a close friend without provocation or explanation. That’s a bad sign, Clint. That isn’t someone doing something because they believe it’s the right thing to do. It’s doing something because their leader said so. If Steve was a good man, he never would have allowed a relationship like that to develop in the first place.”

“You don’t understand how things work in combat units.” A statement which was simultaneously true, unkind, and weak. Laura was wrong, but he wasn’t in a position to explain to her why she was wrong. A headache was building above his eyes, and the sweat was getting in his eyes again. "Look, I don’t have any more time right now. But none of this would have happened if Stark had just trusted Steve."

Laura looked unmoved. "And none of it would have happened if Steve had just trusted Tony. Tony wasn't the one attacking friendly powers and giving every sign of having been compromised."

“My love to the kids,” he said, hanging up before she had time to protest. He put the phone away with shaking hands.

Clint then turned and then punched the wall. Not hard enough to break any knuckles or anything. Just enough to relieve some of his aggression before he took it out on the wrong target. He breathed shallowly through his nose, knowing his lack of breath had more to do with the heat than that mild physical exertion. Laura was wrong, but it wasn’t her fault. She’d been lied to, by Stark, and by the media. He just had to find a way to convince her of that.

Clint massaged his hand, deliberately pressing deeper to make the pain flair. Yes. He’d go through all that media himself, one by one, and show her where it was wrong. Clint had no doubt that Stark’s ‘Russian Hearing’ had been self-serving lies only possible because there was no one to call him out on it. And that stuff about Watchdog Vision had been using to try to scare Wanda into submission – if it even existed in the first place. Their next conversation would go very differently when he was the one who had all his arguments in place. Then she’d realise they were the good guys after all.

Chapter End Notes

What is going wrong with my edits disappearing? :( 
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

A few things this time:

1. I’m presenting a great deal of speculative material (especially in the second half), since we don’t know if any of this type of thing was included in the Accords. We also don’t know if it wasn’t. For a movie about a war _over_ the Accords, we are given shockingly few details _about_ the Accords.
2. This is going to go increasingly AU from MCU, as I will not be making any attempt to integrate any new movie – or trailer – into it.
3. I’ve tried to balance the realities of amputation with the vastly more advanced state of prosthetics and medical technology within the MCU. If I stray too far and ended up being offensive or insensitive, please let me know so we can correct that.
4. And for random interest, the government of real ants maps closer to that of a pure democracy than a monarchy (individual workers lay down pheromones to indicate their own preference of nest location, path, food sources, etc. until the consensus of the colony becomes clear). I’d love to see an Ant-man story where he must individually convince ants that they want to do something rather than just give orders.

This chapter is going to be another two-parter.

Scott took the furthest chair from the rest of the group, a bit surprised to see them. When Barton had told them about a Q&A show to discuss the Accords, with Tony Stark as their guest, each of them had claimed not to care. They hadn’t joined him and Barton for the Russian Hearing replay, or any of the other major media events either. The people he had hero-worshipped no longer struck him as holding a guiding light in a hurricane. These days, they seemed to be doing something a lot more like hiding under the covers. But Barton must have stepped up his persuasion tactics, because they’d all reluctantly dragged themselves in front of the television.

“Maybe this will help Tony see things our way,” said Steve, with his best hopeful puppy expression on.

“At least we’ll be able to see him squirm when they ask him questions he doesn’t want anyone to know the answers to,” said Wanda.

“They won’t,” said Scott. When the rest turned to look at him, he continued, “Ask questions he’s not expecting, I mean. The content of these shows is negotiated with the guest before they even agree to participate. Yeah, sure, sometimes a host will cheat a little and toss in a few surprises, but they won’t risk pulling that on Stark. I mean, not with the way he’s walked out on rule-breakers before.”

“He has?” asked Steve.

Scott paused. This was hardly the first time the team had surprised him with their lack of knowledge about how the rest of the world saw Stark, but come on. Clips of Stark walking out were recycled regularly. “Yeah, he has.”

The host – Danny White – finished his elaborate introduction, and Stark walked onto the stage to
thunderous applause. They made a joke about Stark’s inability to shake hands, and Scott flinched. It was ridiculous – he wasn’t the one who’d beaten Stark so badly he’d been unable to walk. But the damage they’d done to Rhodes and Stark was a painful reminder to him about how close he’d come to being a killer again. No, there was no point white-washing it. He would have become a murderer. The possibility of doing serious damage hadn’t bothered him during the planning or the rush of the battle, but it did now. He felt a renewed flush of shame of that part of himself that kept riding righteous indignation straight into criminal stupidity. His witticisms while committing actions that could well have resulted in some-one’s death seemed in retrospect, somewhat less… witty.

“What happened to Tony’s hands?” asked Steve.

This time, Scott wasn’t the only person to stare at him in disbelief. Barton said, “I cannot believe you just asked that. Seriously. What the actual fuck?”


“No,” said Barton. “That’s something you’re going to have to find out for yourself. I want to listen to Stark, now.”

Scott bit his own tongue. These people were the only support he had. Saying a few pithy comments would only hurt without helping, and he was trying to be a wiser person. Better late than never on that. His leg hairs tugged in a now-familiar way, and he looked down to see an ant determinedly climbing up in search of food. With a quiet sigh, he forced himself to relax and gently redirected the ant to a more promising route. Then he mimicked Barton and turned back to the screen. He leaned slightly to one side to avoid the glare reflected from a standing lamp someone persisted on moving to the centre of the room. The back drop to the show was what looked like a prison wall someone had splashed a few buckets of paint against, and Scott distracted himself by trying to figure out if it was a piece of painted canvas, or a CGI display.

The host and Stark were fussing over a small monkey-like robot. Danny asked, “Is this a new invention from Stark Industries?”

Stark flashed his megawatt grin. “Mirabelle is indeed a Stark product – I’m very brand loyal – but she’s from an existing range. She specialises in helping people with grip and fine manipulation problems, which is one of the areas where robots have shown to be more effective than service animals.”

Danny returned the robot to Stark’s waiting arms. “But this is just a short-term solution for you, right?”

The robot climbed Stark and perched half on his shoulder and half on the top of the couch. Stark patted it clumsily. ‘I’ll just need her help for another half year, I hope. The doctors are looking to perform the actual surgery in about three months’ time. Then it will be a few months to allow the wounds to fully heal – maybe longer, but we’ve made great strides in nano-healing, so we’re hopeful it will be quite problem free. After that, I’ll be fitted with Stark prosthetics and return to maximum awesomeness.”

Danny said, “There have been rumours that Doctor Cho have been consulting with your doctors. Given her speciality, are you saying the amputations will still go ahead?”

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Danny said, “There have been rumours that Doctor Cho have been consulting with your doctors. Given her speciality, are you saying the amputations will still go ahead?”

“Doctor Helen Cho is doing some really exciting work in creating new body parts that will be accepted by the body,” replied Stark. “But best estimates put that treatment as being available only two to three years from now. Doctor Cho has, however, as you guessed, been advising us on how best to allow for the possibility of future work using her treatments.”
“I noticed you avoided the word ‘clone’,” said Danny, with a wink towards the audience. There was a mix of cheers and boos, which Scott assumed reflected the public perception of Doctor Cho’s work, rather than any feeling for the word clone. It gave him a better feel for the demographics of the crowd, as well – not entirely the bunch of ultra-progressive New Yorkers he’d been expecting.

Stark just shook it off. “I had the honour of watching one of the earlier experiments. As an engineer, I can tell you that the process constructs new material. It doesn’t grow it. Calling it a cloned part might be technically correct, but it brings up completely the wrong mental impression of what happens. It would be like calling a spare part for your car a clone of the original door or side-mirror, just because the result is indistinguishable.”

Danny nodded. “This is just you putting your name on the waiting list, then.”

Stark waved his gloved hand in a so-so gesture. “Did you know, when Stark Industries first decided to go all in on artificial limb replacement a few years back, I wanted to call them cybernetic, rather than prosthetic? We had some surprisingly in-depth market research done into it, and we decided we could only call them cybernetic if they were so awesome that people would be willing to replace a perfectly healthy limb with one. This is me saying, that in about three years’ time, the world will find out if I’m one of the first people to have new body parts grafted – or one of the first person with cybernetic fingertips.”

This time the audience’s cheers were more comprehensive.

Wanda snorted. “Of course Stark wouldn’t have to face any real consequences for his actions. Not with his wealth.”

Sam said, “I’m surprised he’s waiting for FDA approval for anything. Seems out of character for Stark.”

Steve spoke up, but the doubt in his voice was clear. “He did say that he was going to behave with more restraint.”

Wanda said, “Probably just drawing out his injuries to gain sympathy.”

Danny’s resumption drew their attention back to the screen. “As our viewers know, we’ve been collecting questions on-line for the last two weeks, and we’ve got quite a stack.” The host picked up a pile of index cards almost too high for him to clamp between fingers and thumbs. “I apologise in advance that we couldn’t possibly get to everyone’s questions, but let’s see how far we can get.”

“With the uncomfortable questions co-incidentally at the bottom,” said Sam with a nod in Scott’s direction.

Scott half-shrugged and then had to lean the other way to avoid the glare from the screen. He had actually meant that they’d exclude questions about things like about Stark’s relationship with Pepper, or about his wild partying days, or (under the circumstances) anything about the death of his parents. But they could have agreed to that as well, he guessed. Stark certainly had the drawing power to demand any kind of terms he liked.

Danny lowered the stack and lifted the first card from it, moving from sitting under the blue splosh to slightly under the red. Was that a shadow, or just an illusion of a shadow? Danny said, “To plunge us into the deep end, let’s start with a question that triggered a great deal of discussion in our forums. Our moderators have all been putting in overtime, I can tell you. Mark Hendrickson from New York asks, ‘Since you now agree with the Accords, does that mean you admit that you were funding an illegal terrorist group before’?”
Scott breathed in quickly, and there was enough noise to suggest most of the others had done likewise. They weren’t terrorists before, and none of them were terrorists now. They just weren’t. People said the nastiest things on internet, everyone knew that.

Stark, in contrast, seemed more amused than anything else. “You weren’t kidding about a big question. Wow. Okay, let me see if I can tackle that by analogy. Let’s say you have an interest in blood play – not that I’m saying you do, of course.”

“People do things like that?” asked Danny with mock innocence.

Stark waited out the laugh. “So you ask someone to cut your throat. Unfortunately, something goes wrong and you die. Now, even though you asked for it, the courts would probably decide that a crime had still been committed. Consent only goes so far, after all.”

“Right,” agreed Danny. “Like that German cannibal guy.”

“Exactly,” said Stark. “But now let’s consider completely different circumstances - say someone was choking and had completely stopped breathing. You try to give them a tracheotomy, but unfortunately they die of that, rather than the lack of oxygen. Same actions, some outcome, but different motivations. There would probably still be an investigation, but if you acted in good faith then no one would think you had committed any sort of crime.”


Stark nodded at him. “Because we, as a society, quite like the idea of people trying to save lives, even if it means sometimes they fail.”

“I’d definitely want to encourage people to save my life,” said Danny. “I’m very fond of it.”

Stark grinned. “What a coincidence - I’m very fond of mine, too.”

Scott wasn’t sure why that called for a round of applause, but studio audiences were always weird like that.

Stark continued, “So to finally answer the question, when I first started funding the Avengers, that’s the space I imagined we’d operate in. We’d step in to save people’s lives when they were in immediate and obvious peril.”

“But it didn’t work out that way?” prompted Danny.

Stark looked rueful in a frustrated sort of way. If Scott hadn’t known better, he would have been tempted to sympathise with him. “Well, it did and it didn’t. The problem became one of scale. Before the invasion of New York, we’d gone my entire life – and you’ll have to look up on google just how long that is, I’m not telling you – without needing the firepower the Avengers could bring to the table. I was imagining the Avengers as being a last resort insurance policy. I didn’t anticipate just how regularly active a group they’d turn out to be.”

“And why does that make a difference?” asked Danny.

Stark said, “To extend the earlier analogy, by the time you’re driving around in a specialised vehicle looking for people who need medical assistance, you’re not a Good Samaritan anymore. You’re an unlicensed paramedic. I agree with the Accords because there are reasons we licence professions like that. I never thought we were - what was the phrase from the question? An illegal terrorist group? – we were never that. We were doing good. We just could have been doing better.”
The audience applauded, and Danny let them tire themselves out before continuing. “Alright, let’s move on to a related question. koolkittenkutie asks ‘do you think you had the right to stop Wanda Maximoff from standing trial for her actions in Lagos?’”

Scott distracted himself by examining the spelling of the name in the banner below Danny and Stark. He was not, under any circumstances, making eye contact with Wanda. He’d found himself staying away from her emotional demands so far, and he’d prefer if that trend continued.

Stark still didn’t look uncomfortable in any way, and Scott discovered he rather resented that assurance. “As you say, it’s in many ways an extension to the earlier question. My answer to it is much the same. I firmly believe that Ms Maximoff was trying to save lives. I also strongly suspect that when the full details are analysed, it’ll show that even more people would have died if she hadn’t acted. But would fewer people have died if the Avengers had been better trained, or had better communication with the Nigerian authorities, or had simply been a bigger group of people? I don’t know, but neither does anyone else. Those are the questions the Accords says we should be finding out answers to. They are not questions we should be burying under the sand because the thought makes us uncomfortable. So, no, I don’t think that Ms Maximoff in particular should stand trial for Lagos, and yes, I was willing to fight to prevent that. That doesn’t mean that I don’t think the entire incident shouldn’t be subject to a full review. I just want to make sure we are looking to figure out how to stop the same thing from happening again, not simply to find a scape-goat for what has already happened.”

“He makes it sound like he actually did anything to keep me out of jail in the first place,” said Wanda.

“He did,” said Scott and Barton on the same time.

Barton continued, “His motives might be in debate, but his actions are a matter of public record. If his legal team hadn’t fought the extradition, you’d already be in a Nigerian jail. Or already have broken out of a Nigerian jail, whichever. He can’t claim to want a trial for you now without seeming like more of a hypocrite than he usually does.”

Wanda started to reply, but someone bumped up the volume in an unsubtle hint. Danny had found a new card and had shifted back to the blue-blotch side of his chair. “Now for our most popular question on the other side of the fence. HoneyBadgerDon’t asks, ‘what will you do if the Accords prevent you from helping people? Just stand aside and let them die?’”

Stark hid any genuine reaction he might have had with an overdramatic gesture of taking a blow to the heart. “Ouch. Your viewers don’t pull their punches, do they?”

Danny smiled. “And that’s why we love them.”

Stark waited for enough silence to say in a soft tone, “The answer is that I see this as being similar to our medical informed consent rules. We may know an operation might save someone’s life, but if they refuse based on religious or ethical grounds then we have to let them. However hard it might be on the doctor, it’s the patient’s choice to make, not theirs. So if something happens and a country tells us they don’t want us there, then yes, we have to respect that. Sometimes that will mean people will die. And sometimes that will be an injustice to the people getting killed.”


Stark gave a painful looking shrug, and Scott wondered if that was a result of his health or the subject matter. “The will of government is not always going to be the will of the people. Let’s take a hypothetical country where most of the pro-government population is in the south, and anti-
government population is in the north. Now say a hypothetical meteorite is heading right for the heart of the north. If they refuse any superhero assistance, is it because they genuinely fear the superheroes will make things worse, or because they consider us ungodly, or whatever other reason they state? Or are they just hoping to improve how many seats they win at the next election?"

Danny said, a little uneasily, “I have to say this, Tony, but you’re one cynical man.”

“I think unfortunately that history agrees with me,” said Stark. “People will always be tempted into using the power in their hands for their own personal best interests, while telling themselves they’re doing it for the good of everyone. And despite everyone’s best efforts, there are many cultural and geographical groups that have no representation in the UN at all. We’ve seen that in the past when we haven’t been able to call what is quite plainly genocide ‘genocide’, because the only people with the authority to complain about it are the people doing the killing.”

“I must say,” said Danny, “It’s starting to sound like you disagree with the Accords.”

Stark laughed. “And you brought me on to the show so that I could defend them. Don’t worry, you were right the first time. I very strongly agree with them. But not even the Accords has managed to solve every problem, because some of these issues simply don’t have a right answer. There was always a debate about whether the Avengers had either the duty or the right to intervene in any situation. The Accords are just bringing more people to the table and letting that conversation happen in the daylight. It’s a fact of life that honest people can and do disagree with each other. I mean,” said Stark, swapping to a humorous tone, “if they’re disagreeing with me then they’re clearly wrong, but they have the right to be wrong. Part of being an adult is realising you can’t always make everyone happy. Unless we appoint someone absolute dictator of everything, we’re always going to have to compromise. Inevitably, we’ll come to regret some of those opinions and some of those compromises. That’s life. Even a superhuman is still human. Not being able to find some mythical perfect solution doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try at all.”

The audience responded to his cue obediently with applause and cheers.

Steve said, “I’m surprised they’re discussing the downsides at all, if this was supposed to be a pro-Accords show.”

“It’s a strawman argument,” replied Sam.

“Strawman?”

Sam turned to face Steve. “You know, they create a weakened and flawed version of their opponent’s argument, and defeat that with ease – like taking a sword to a strawman. Then they pretend they defeated the real thing.”

“That didn’t sound very flawed to me,” said Steve. “That sounded exactly what I am afraid will happen.”

Sam reached over to pat his hand. “Maybe it would be better to call it inoculation, then. They present a little bit of the truth, but not enough to overwhelm their own side. Then, when their viewers hear the real truth, they ‘remember’ having considered and dismissed it before. They’ll be thinking ‘Of course there are going to be bad decisions, but decisions have to be made,’ and not even consider the alternatives.”

“That’s awful. Still, I think I get what Tony is trying to say,” said Steve. “We shouldn’t have left it up to SHIELD to make those kinds of decisions. It should be up to the people that need saving. But we it’s not like we can send in a messenger door to door in the area to see what each inhabitant
thinks we ought to do, and hope the bad guy is polite enough to wait around until they’ve made up their minds.”

“Yeah,” said Scott, the sarcasm dripping from his voice heavier than even his teenager days. “If only there was some mechanism whereby the people could vote for representatives, that could later argue their interests in some sort of international body.”

“Scott!”

Barton angrily hushed them, and Scott turned back to the TV, feeling the blood rushing to his face.

Danny was leaning forward invitingly, moving him all the way into the green section. “Not one of our viewers’ questions, but I think they’ll forgive me for jumping the queue with this one. Should we look out for ‘absolute dictator’ as a future career move for you?”

Wanda snorted. “They say that like it isn’t a description of his current career.”

The audience laughed along with Stark.

“Hell no,” Stark said, “There’s a reason the paperwork thing is such a cliché. I’m coming out in hives just thinking about how much work that would be. And believe me, if I tried to palm off even more responsibilities to Pepper, she would eviscerate me. And thanks to previous apologies on my side, she has plenty of shoes that are perfectly up to the job.”

Stark waited out that round of laughter as well. “Seriously, though. Western civilisation has a terrible history of forcing people to do things while telling them it’s for their own good. The last thing we want is for that to become our present as well. Even if it means we make some mistakes along the way.”

“That seems like a good point to take a break. We’ll be right back after these commercials.” The lights on the back screen – or was it the back screen itself? – went dark, and a jingle began at triple a comfortable volume.

Scott jumped to his feet. “Anyone want anything to drink? I think I’m getting myself something to drink.”

He paused only long enough to for people to shout their requests, without giving them time to continue the previous discussion. He took only the moment necessary to switch off the floor lamp and solve the glare problem entirely. He was confident he could drag it out long enough to spend the entire break on the drink orders, and hopefully by then they’d have moved on too far to remember his minor rebellion. He could keep his smart tongue between his teeth and not piss off the powerful people. He really could.
Scott timed it perfectly and slid into the room just as the splotchy-wall lit back up again. He handed out the drinks in the flickering light, and managed to avoid noticing Steve’s non-verbal invitation to sit closer to the others. He sat carefully. Someone had turned on the floor light again, so Scott was forced to move his entire chair, despite the way it was now trapped up against a wall.

Danny smiled at the camera. “Welcome back, everyone. We’re here with Tony Stark, answering questions from viewers about the Sokovia Accords, a recent UN treaty to normalise superhero activities.”

That earned another round of applause, despite there being no earthly reason for the studio audience to need that information. Once it died down, Danny said, “Before the break we were discussing a country’s right not to ask for superhero assistance if they did not wish it. Moving on from that to what happens if they do make a request, here’s a question from BillyKnowsBest. He asks ‘Why do the Accords allow requests for help to be vetoed by other countries? Doesn’t everyone deserve help?’”

Stark nodded. “There is a voting process before superheroes are called in, but let me assure everyone that there is no country or power has an actual veto over requests under the Accords. But I’m afraid when it comes to the more technical details of the process we’re moving outside of my expertise. All I can give you my layman’s understanding of how it’s supposed to work.”

Danny waved a hand. “Please do. We understand you’re not a lawyer, nor do you play one on TV.”

There was dutiful laugh from the audience. Stark looked grave. “I assume the questioner is talking about the requirement that requests are first subject to what amounts to a peer-review system based on geographical region. Before the break, we discussed a hypothetical where superheroes were excluded when they should have been invited. This particular process is designed to prevent the opposite – a country trying to bend the intent of the Accords to use superheroes as a military or even a police force.”

“Sure,” said Barton. “It’s all about the humanitarian reasons if they have a financial stake in the matter, but until then, it’s all ‘we shouldn’t interfere with the internal affairs of other countries’. Never mind if the dictator is slaughtering his opposition and disappearing journalists. As long as the dictator isn’t also threatening our business interests, then it’s up to the country to solve its own problems. Like how Afghanistan gets fifteen years of war, but Zimbabwe gets a few stern letters of disapproval.”

Scott wondered where Sokovia fit into all of that, but decided it would be less than tactful to ask. The details were fuzzy, but he’d heard that Wanda had initially become a terrorist (sorry, freedom fighter) to drive ‘foreign invaders’ out of her country. He had been personally curious as to how she’d ended up disagreeing with the Accords when they so strongly in line with the very cause she’d sacrificed her very humanity in aid of. But not curious enough to upset her. It might be co-incidence how bad
things kept happening to people who upset her, but he wasn’t going to risk it.

On screen, Stark spread his hands apart, doing a bad job of looking humble. “People a lot more experienced in political administration than I am designed this process as the best way to balance preventing abusive requests with the urgency most of the them will have. They worked very hard to reduce the opportunity for brinkmanship, which includes not allowing a veto. Although I grant you that the vote might result in the same effect in some cases. Again, there is no perfect solution, and again, decades of experience have shown that Western countries throwing their weight into situations they don’t fully understand often just makes the problem worse. A country’s neighbours are much better informed – and much better motivated – when it comes to decisions like that than a handful of people in Washington or New York.”

More applause, but then Stark’s words had been shaded so as to offer both liberal and conservative sensibilities enough of what they already agreed with that they’d fill in the missing bits with their own prejudices. Scott took a sip of his drink and grimaced. T’Challa’s staff had specially brought it in for them, but while it might say Coke on the can, it always tasted wrong. Like it had somehow managed to go flat without the bubbles escaping. He determinedly took another sip, half hoping and half afraid he’d get used to it.

Danny flipped to another card, a piece of unnecessary theatricality now that Scott thought about it, given that he was really reading it off a teleprompter. “Perhaps this is another restatement of the previous two questions, but I think it has enough of a different focus to be worth answering separately. FeeFiFoeFum asks ‘Why are there so many rules about what superheroes can and can’t do? Since they’re the ones putting their lives on the line to save the world, shouldn’t they be allowed to follow their own morals?’”

Stark leaned forward. “I’d like FeeFiFoeFum, and anyone else asking themselves that question, to imagine this. Think of someone whose political opinions you disagree with. Your father-in-law, or that one co-worker who overshares. Not anybody corrupt or criminal, just someone on the other side of the aisle. Now, I’m sure you can come up with a whole list of things you believe are fundamentally necessary but that they think will destroy the country, and vice versa. Emigration, climate change, regulating business practices, personal privacy, abortion, compulsory vaccinations, and so on. Now imagine that person gains superpowers. Good for them, they decide to step up to the plate and become a superhero. But when they look around to fulfil their God- or science- given duty, are you willing to let them save the planet starting with one of those issues? What kind of restrictions would you like to have in place to limit what type of world-saving that person is allowed to do?”

Danny shook his head ruefully. “And suddenly, the Accords don’t seem restrictive enough.”

Stark spread his hands in a ‘so you see’ action.

Scott squirmed inside. The comment about pursuing personal campaigns seemed so pointed that he would have thought it was aimed at him if Stark had actually known who he was. Scott still thought he’d had the right goals, but he’d finally come to accept that his methods had been considerably more suspect.

Danny let Stark have his moment before his smile sharpened a little. “Here’s one that’s a little closer to home. MandatoryMonkeyMayhem asks ‘How can you claim to support the Accords and proper registration, when you’re still actively protecting Spider-man and other vigilante’s identities from the proper authorities?’”

They’d forced the entire question into the banner at the bottom, even though that crammed the words into all the available space. Scott noticed the room silenced as they all waited to hear how Stark tried to explain that. Or worse, betray those superheroes as well.
“Another hard-hitting question,” said Stark with a grin, looking frustratingly unconcerned. “Your viewers are determined to draw blood tonight.”

“Have they succeeded?” asked Danny, coyly.

“We’ll have to see,” said Stark. “I’ll get back to the specific example of Spider-man in a moment, but in general that’s actually a bit of a trick question. I suspect the person asking might not have realised that, though. When we talk about superhero registration, most people are thinking about something that isn’t in the Accords at all. They’re thinking of a variety of laws currently being proposed within some countries by the same people who pushed for the Sokovia Accords. Those registration laws typically propose requiring anyone with unusual abilities or technology, anything that they might possibly use in one of those Good Samaritan situations we mentioned earlier, to register with their government. Asking them to register for what they can do, if you will, rather than what they are actually doing. That’s obviously a very complex moral, legal and practical proposal.”

“I can see the moral and legal, but the practical?” asked Danny.

Stark said, “If you’re going to ask every person to register themselves who has the know-how to build Falcon’s wings, or to pilot the War Machine or the Ant suit, or to aim arrows, or any other skill that could potentially be used in combat, then we’re talking a very significant percentage of the population. And a fair number of them are still children. Is there an age at which they’re supposed to register? Is there some sort of time limit for how soon they have to register if they only realise they meet the criteria later in life? Do they register at a local police office, or at a hospital, or do they just send a letter to a federal office? Considering the immense volume of people that would be, which department will be providing the resources to handle that? And if there’s any sort of judgement call, or training, or monitoring involved in that, then even more staff will need to be hired and trained and equipped. So even if they solve the ethical dilemmas to their own satisfaction, any country considering this kind of general registration option will have to take into consideration just what a massive burden it would be to their taxpayers.”

“Yeah,” said Sam. “Forget telling people about how morally corrupt that kind of legislation is. Tell them it will hurt their pocket book.”

Sam sounded disgusted, but Scott couldn’t see the problem. The people who would be convinced on moral grounds probably already had been convinced. If you were trying to convert the rest, why not try a method that might actually work?

“But you’re saying that’s not what the Accords mean by registration,” said Danny.

“No,” agreed Stark, “It couldn’t, even if it wanted to. So long as human rights are not being violated, the UN just doesn’t have the power to dictate what a country does to its own citizens within its own borders. What the Accords say is, if someone wants to operate as a superhero on an international scale, then they and their powers have to be on record. The superhero has to provide certain minimum details and agree to a code of conduct when they sign up as specified under the Accords -- the equivalent of a job application, in other words. Even then, they can chose to restrict knowledge of their everyday legal identities. That will not be released to the public or even the wider law enforcement community. The idea is that a country appealing for help will be given just enough information that they can make an informed opinion about whether they want to risk that particular superhero within their borders.”

Danny nodded. “That seems perfectly reasonable, and I’ll skip ahead a little and predict you’re about to tell me that agreeing with the Accords has nothing to do with unmasking superheroes who stay home.”
“Exactly,” said Stark.

Danny said, “So what about Spider-man? He was there with you in Leipzig, after all. Sounds pretty international to me.”

“I can’t deny that,” said Stark, “but Spider-man’s presence was explicitly deputised by me, not him deciding to do something on a whim of his own. That kind of ad-hoc assistance is provided for within the Accords when it is necessary for the success of the mission. Your local viewers will be aware that Spider-man exclusively engages in non-lethal means of fighting?”

Stark made it a question in the tone of his voice, and the crowd roared their agreement.

Stark smiled at them, then continued, “Spider-man agreed to assist me because he saw the importance of avoiding casualties in this particular case. He would otherwise strongly prefer to remain within his own neighbourhood. Now I would strongly prefer he had better support, better medical care and better integration with local law enforcement, and I hope to work with him to obtain that. But that’s an entirely personal desire. Outside of that one authorised action, he falls well outside the scope of the Accords. I have no legal or moral authority regarding him or any of the other local crime fighters.”

“We’ll look forward to developments on that with great interest,” said Danny without trying to push for anything more incriminating. He skipped over two cards -- Scott wondered if they were already answered, or whether the host was just worried about the tone of the conversation -- then said, “Here’s one I find myself wondering all too often. MaryAnne2010 asks ‘if all it says is for superheroes to play nice, why is it so long?’ At two hundred and seventy-four pages you must surely agree that she might have a point.”

Stark smiled in reply, fully relaxed in his seat. “To be entirely accurate, over a third of it deals with appropriate responses to super-threats and not directly about superheroes at all. The community planning side of it, if you will. What kind of permissions and consent are needed from their neighbours before a country can install force-fields or automated defence systems. How to propose, approve, and fund global initiatives. What kind of subsidies exist for preventative measures and disaster recovery. A lot more along those lines. I think in the long run these will prove to be the most important parts of the Accords. We now know that we aren’t alone in the universe, and that’s amazing. We also know that some of that life is hostile to us, which is a lot less amazing. The future of our very civilisation might very well depend on how we, as a species, rise up to meet that challenge. What will ultimately matter isn’t what some of us do. It’s what all of us do.”

The audience applause was even more enthusiastic and more sustained than it had been at any point prior. Scott got that. When the aliens came back, he didn’t want his life and everything in it to be entirely reliant on a handful of flaky superheroes either. But when the actual plans were in the hands of people like Secretary Ross, he wasn’t sure it made any difference how sound the principal was.

Danny said, “That’s a good point, and important to remember. I’m sure we all are striving for the best in that. But for now, what is the other two thirds of the Accords about?”

“Details,” said Stark, which earned him more laughter. “Seriously. Details. Take section 15. Boiled down, it just says that superheroes should not reveal any secrets they accidentally come across during the course of an Accords sanctioned intervention. Sounds straightforward enough, but what happens if a fight takes me into a new iPhone factory? Are they required to just take my word for it when I say I won’t steal their ideas? Or say that Colonel Rhodes ends up in a military defence research lab of a country the US is currently at war with. An acting serving military member has oaths to their own country, so they could potentially be arrested if they fail to say anything. What happens if we come across proof of a crime being committed? Do we have an obligation to report it? And where do
we even stand as far as giving legally admissible evidence, considering we might be allowed to do things that would be against the law for their own legal enforcement personnel? With all the different legal systems, that isn’t something the Accords can hope to fully answer, but it at least tries to provide some processes for asking the questions. It also defines some hard limits to try to ensure the safety of both parties. Like that superheroes will try to obtain explicit, secondary invitation before accessing secured military buildings and will submit to a review if exigent circumstances prevent that. Section 19 is about the use of local guides and interpreters and under what circumstances they acquire the rights and responsibilities of being part of a registered Accords team. It defines the difference between my deputising of Spider-man, and our co-ordination with the Leipzig-Halle Airport Security. Section 20 is about what equipment may be brought in, and use of things encountered during the mission. Like if I take an AK-47 away from an evil minion, I can’t then be arrested for possession of an illegal weapon.”

Danny chuckled obediently. “I can see how that possibility would really put a crimp in your superheroing zeal.”

“Exactly,” said Stark. “The Accords are long because they’ve tried to think of all those eventualities before they became problems, and I suspect they’re only likely to need expansion.”

So did Scott. Man, he hadn’t even considered half of those things, and he knew how the government could find ways to make people pay when they were feeling bloody minded.

Danny said, “We have time for just one more question. Kevin Macmillan asks, ‘Since you claim the exVengers were just misguided, what do you think they should have done about their disagreements?’ Incidentally, what to call them is one of the biggest debates on social media at the moment, so that was Team exVengers sneaking in some free advertising.”

Scott snuck a look at Steve’s mutinous face, and then quickly focused back on the television.

Stark said, “I’m afraid my answer is going to be very boring. I think they should have challenged it in court. The Accords are a very new -- and largely unprecedented -- set of agreements. A lot of people put a lot of work into them, but they’re still going to have badly worded guidelines and unintended consequences. Just think about how one comma splice has resulted in almost two hundred years of heated argument about whether the second amendment applies to personal gun ownership or not. I encourage everyone who has a valid concern – or even better, a workable solution – to take the legal steps to make the Accords fair and robust, so we can rely on it to help save the world.”

“And why do you think Captain America didn’t take that approach?” asked Danny.

Tony looked down, took a deep breath, and then looked up again. “I suspect it comes down to a matter of faith. I believe that the people in the judicial system, in law enforcement and in the government, are mostly individuals trying to do the right thing and make the world better. Due to Steve’s experiences, I think he’s lost belief in the fundamental decency of human nature. He just doesn’t believe that working within the system would achieve anything anymore. I don’t entirely blame him for that, but I don’t agree with him. When we see injustice and corruption, we don’t just take our ball and go home. We stand up and we try to make things better.”

The studio audience burst into wild applause and hoots. Scott didn’t have much belief in working within the system either, and he certainly didn’t have any belief in the fundamental decency of human nature. Still, he was struck again by how insightful Stark was being. Stark’s words might not have been the most charitable interpretation, but they still matched up pretty well to what Scott had been hearing of Steve’s arguments. That kind of accuracy was not what Scott had expected from someone who’d apparently only thought of himself and refused to consider anyone else’s point of
view.

Scott bit his lip. He himself had had problems when he was younger when people accused him of not listening to them. The thing was, he didn’t need to listen to the entire thought process to see what conclusion they would reach. He’d already considered and dismissed that option himself. *I already understand you; I just don’t agree with you.* His explanations had unfortunately collected him more bruises and enemies than acceptance. It had taken him a long time to realise that what he thought of as saving time struck other people a lot more like Scott rubbing his superior intelligence in their faces. He had learned when to at least *act* like he thought other people could bring something new to the table. Scott rather doubted anyone had been prepared to give Tony the same lesson in quite such a convincing fashion.

“Well, there you have it, folks,” said Danny. “Thank you very much for coming, Tony, and we hope to see you on our show again soon.”

“Looking forward to it,” said Stark, as the theme music began to play over the cheering crowd.

Someone switched the screen off. In the sudden silence, Scott could hear the dull ringing of an insect knocking against a window. The screens Wakanda had may be ingenious, but the group had not fully acquired the habits of using them.

“I cannot believe he managed to say all of that with a straight face,” said Sam.

“Funny how much ‘working within the system’ looks like ‘collaborating with the enemy’, doesn’t it?” asked Wanda.

“I just don’t understand why he’s persisting with this,” said Sam. “It’s already failed. They did a good job fear-mongering, but we didn’t fall for it. Stark has to know that no-one supports the Accords except bigots, cowards and liars.”

Scott didn’t even need to ask to know how people like his daughter’s step-father regarded the Accords. And however much of an ass-hat Jim might have been, he was not a bigot, a coward, or a liar. The supporters they were so casually insulting were good, earnest people who didn’t deserve that kind of disrespect. He did know better than to say anything, but damn it, something needed to be said. “Maybe Stark just honestly, sincerely, agrees with the Accords?”

Barton frowned at him. “Jesus, Scott, what’s wrong with you tonight? You joined us to fight the Accords and now all of a sudden you’re defending them?”

Scott got to his feet and moved clear of the obstacles. “The only thing I thought about the Accords before your call was surprise that they didn’t already exist. I joined because *Captain America* said that Stark was evil and you needed my help to save the world. So I left everything behind, probably permanently forfeiting any visitation rights I might have had to my daughter, and came out. But it turns out it wasn’t about Stark being evil. It was about him ratting you out to The Authorities. And I wasn’t saving the world. I was distracting the guards so that Captain America could beat up the snitch in a dark corner. Sure glad I sacrificed everything important in my life for that.”

Scott left the room, letting the door slam behind him.

“Let him go,” he heard from what sounded like Sam, and walked faster. That had been as stupid as hell. Why did he have to carry on being the same impulsive idiot he’d always been?
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I’m shamelessly appropriating characters from the wider Marvel universe, and taking horrible liberties with both them and their timelines. I’m a terrible person, and they all deserve much more screen time than they’re going to get in this story.

Brian Braddock sat down with his new team in the MI13 lecture room. With his team, and wasn’t that an even odder thought than being so voluntarily within this particular government building? They were even there by his request. Although more accurately, they were there by request of Tony Stark. Oh, the cryptic message he’d received – *Make a subject matter access request for recording FKB39347. Feel free to bring your new friends and popcorn* – hadn’t been signed, but it hadn’t taken any great leaps of inspiration to figure out who it had been from. Brian hadn’t any idea what it was all about, but he wasn’t inclined to disregard the hint.

Brian was a little amused that his team mate Rachel Summers had taken the instructions literally, but nevertheless took a handful of popcorn from the bowl that was offered to him. Faiza Hussain and Dane Whitman accepted as well, but their official liaison, Peter Wisdom, shook his head with a smile when Rachel offered the bowl in his direction. Peter sat on top of one of the desks across the aisle, elbows on knees and hands linked, looking perfectly comfortable from his much higher eye view. Peter cued the recording. It opened with pre-canned section in an appropriately RP accent about their legal rights and responsibilities regarding dissemination of protected data. That first legal warning was followed immediately by a second warning in an American voice. This one, however, was a recording of a real person standing to one side of a large boardroom table.

“Please be aware that this meeting will be recorded for training, compliance, and all other legal requests. Present are Secretary Thaddeus Ross,” said the functionary, listing off another five or six unfamiliar names too quickly for Brian to hope to recall, and ending, “and Doctor Anthony Stark.”

The recording then went black before the time counter skipped forward, so some censoring appeared to have been applied. Tony Stark was now leaning back in his chair, tilting it to its most extreme position, with his feet on the table.

Stark said, apparently to the ceiling. "What about that guy with the giant red cross over his heart? What was his name, the Captain of the United Kingdoms of Great Britain, Northern Ireland, Gibraltar, Bermuda and miscellaneous islands? You know, who I mean, the one with abs that could give Thor’s solid competition."

Brian could feel the heat rising in his cheeks as the rest of his team broke into giggles. Even Peter concealed his reaction in a cough. It wasn’t like Brian was unaware of how absurdly skin-tight his costume was, but he very strongly preferred not to think about it.

"*Captain Britain,*" and Ross emphasised Brian’s real superhero name, "has declined our offer of membership."

Stark swung his feet down in a move so controlled that he must have practiced to achieve exactly that effect. "Really? But I had him convinced about the advantages of working for a team when I left him. How did anybody screw that up?"
Stark was looking better in the recording than he had on the occasion he was referencing. Stark had scared the living daylights out of Brian by stopping by the manor with the apparent impression that Brian’s identity and location were as much public record as Iron Man’s himself. When Brian had stiffly wanted to know if Stark planned on revealing his identity to members of the Accords, Stark had been surprisingly gentle about letting him know that it wouldn’t have been news to anyone. Stark had rattled off a laundry list of ways the government could have found out – following him via CCTV footage or a high-flying drone, listening in on phone or email conversations of either him or one of his friends, a friend intentionally informing on him, facial or movement recognition of existing footage, statistical analysis of his absences of CCTV, or the one Stark thought most likely, that he’d left taken a GPS enabled device carried by Captain Britain too close to one carried by Brian Braddock, and they’d picked up on the connection. When Brian had shamefacedly admitted to carrying the same phone all the time, Stark had face-palmed. “Then everyone knows who you are. Including the major media corporations. And half of them are using that phone to listen in on you.”

The rest of the conversation, knowing that they were being eavesdropped upon, had been even more surreal than the first part.

On screen, Ross reddened. "Oh, you managed to convince him about the merits of a team, alright. You convinced him straight into the arms of the bloody Brits. It wasn’t enough that MI13 declared all native superheroes to be officially be part of their department, they’ve now gone and started their own internationally focused group. Excalibur, of all pretentious names."

"I dunno," said Stark. “I’m a bit jealous. I bet no-one is ever going to ask them who or what they’re excalibur-ing."

“I think I like him,” said Rachel, to a soft smattering of laughter. Brian’s nose twitched at the disrespect being implied to the weapon Excalibur and its distinguished history, but one could hardly expect Americans to know any better.

Ross slammed his hand down onto the table. “We need to recruit more members as soon as possible. I am not leaving the safety in the hands of a bunch of limp-wristed apologists for whenever they decide to take a break from drinking tea!"

Stark talked to the water jug as he nudged it ineffectively with the palms of his hands. “They might surprise you, and be completely up to the task.”

The man sitting next to Stark reached over and refilled Stark’s custom water glass for him. Ross’s glare at them both had the man shrinking back into his chair, but Stark didn’t appear to even notice.

“Oh, believe me,” said Ross. “They won’t. My men will make sure that the appropriate parties are well aware that they’re more of the problem than the solution. We’re just going to have to step up our recruiting game.”

“Well,” said Stark, still somehow managing to avoid looking at Ross. “You’ve refused all of my other suggestions, so I think I’m about done here.”

“Stark!” said Ross.

The screen went abruptly black, and then returned to the warning label without letting them know who had won that particular battle of wills, but Brian was willing to bet on stark. Peter switched off the projector and the lights in the room came back to comfortable levels. The fans swished softly, keeping the room temperature stable, unlike the too-cold at the beginning; too-hot by the end meeting rooms Brian was used to from less generously funded government facilities.

“Short but sweet,” said Dane.
Rachel said, “Nice of Stark to take us around and introduce us to our new co-workers.”

“You mean nice of our anonymous and completely unidentifiable tipster,” corrected Dane.

“Yeah, him,” said Rachel. “Friendly folk we’re going to be working with.”

“I don’t know about you,” said Dane, “but I got the impression that General Ross may not be entirely overwhelmed with admiration and respect for our esteemed new team.”

“Strange,” Faiza said, “I have that sneaking suspicion myself. Perhaps there was a hint in the way he insulted our collective heteronormative masculinity.”

“Or when he outright stated he intended to sabotage any of our missions,” said Rachel.

“Surely not,” said Faiza. “I’m sure all of that has a perfectly innocent explanation.”

“Yeah,” agreed Dane. “Like Ross is an utter wanker.”

Brian didn’t allow his expression to react to the vulgarity. Usually he would have taken the pause as an opportunity to return the conversation to more constructive matters, but he was disturbed by the naked aggression that had just been shown. One knew that Americans tended to loudly indulge their passions, but that had seemed excessive. “How is someone that senior that indiscreet when he is aware that he is being recorded?”

“To be fair to him,” said Peter. “He’s being recorded all the time. Studies do show that if there aren’t any obvious negative consequences, people start acting like it’s not happening. You’d certainly be amazed what even our own covert operators will say on conversations with people they are fully aware we’re monitoring. General Ross is probably under the vague impression that the only people with access to anything he says are inside his in-group. And because he doesn’t think about it, he hasn’t bothered to find out that group of insiders expanded a little under the provisions of the Accords.”

“What a pity,” said Rachel with fake sympathy. “Someone should really say something to him.”

Peter said grimly, “Oh, I’m sure it will come up sooner or later.”

“You know what else struck me?” said Dane, dropping the sarcasm. “Stark and Ross don’t seem to be the best-buddies as the propaganda on both sides tends to make them sound. It looked more like they were desperately trying to pretend they weren’t in the same room.”

Brian’s lips quirked. “Stark informed me that he hates Ross so much he once bought Ross’s favourite pub just so he could schedule it for demolition.”

“Oh, that’s excellent,” said Rachel. “Petty and evil, but excellent. So why are they working together?”

Brian tilted his head. “Temporary alignment of goals, or so I was told. They both want to save lives. Stark claims he’s willing to look for common ground, to see if acting like an adult works out for him.”

“So did Tony Stark really convince you about the merits of being on a team?” asked Dane. “With all that’s been going on for him?”

Brian smiled without humour. “He made a strong case that the so-called civil war only happened because the Avengers were not a team in any meaningful sense of the word. They didn’t trust each
other, and they didn’t trust their support.”

Peter said, “Not that I want to talk you out of anything, but the lack of trust could have been a result of Captain America being right about the dangers of government interference, rather than the other way around.”

“That’s true,” said Brian, “but Stark also made a good point that Captain America’s approach was fundamentally counter-productive. If the man had started by staging a hunger strike in Geneva to protest the treatment of brainwashed individuals, the politicians would have had very little choice but to back down about his friend Barnes. They couldn’t have stood up to the public pressure that Captain America could have brought against them back then. Now, after destroying a tunnel filled with civilians to escape law enforcement officers, Captain America’s sacrificed most of his moral authority for no gain. His friend is still wanted for multiple counts of murder, and the Accords are still remarkably unamused with amateur world-saving.”

Rachel said, “I can’t really deny that Captain America screwed this one up for himself. That, and his complete non-plan when it came to taking care of those Russian super-soldiers, does seem to suggest he might not be the best role model for us to follow.”

“You don’t buy into his whole refusing to alter his stance like a tree being swept away by a flood, or whatever the silly analogy was?” asked Dane.

Brian shrugged. “Compromise is not a dirty word, and Captain America is hardly Martin Luther facing the Diet of Worms. I don’t think he even has a proposal for how governments and superheroes ought to interact. He’s certainly never bothered to make one public. He just repeats that he wants to ‘help the little guy’ while having absolute freedom to do whatever he chooses. He’s as unreasonable as activists who want to save the environment and give everyone an affluent western lifestyle immediately. When they refuse to acknowledge that those are mutually incompatible principles, they just end up sabotaging themselves by turns.”

“Another Stark argument?” asked Faiza.

“Yes, well,” said Brian, feeling embarrassed again. He wasn’t any type of Iron man fan boy, but the man had a lot of presence. “I won’t deny that he has a very adroit turn of phrase.”

“But why MI13 rather than the Avengers?” asked Dane.

Brian lifted one eyebrow. “Tony Stark laid very heavy emphasis on how ‘awesome’ it would be to be part of a team put together under Ross as the representative of ‘the leader of the free world’.”

“Stark really used that phrase?” asked Rachel.

“Yes,” said Brian with a sigh. “He said it quite deliberately. He’s enough of an international businessman to know that we only use it when we’re mocking either American arrogance or American hypocrisy, and it was quite clear that he meant it in both senses.”

Rachel nodded. “But if someone like Ross read a transcript of the conversation, they’d take it on face value. They’re left wondering what they’d done wrong without being able to blame Stark directly.”

“I have to say we were a little surprised when you made contact with us, as well,” said Peter. “Not that we thought you’d abandon your ancient duty to Britain, but frankly we all assumed you’d find a government position like this a little beneath your dignity.”

“Not at all,” said Brian, not entirely sincerely. He was trying to be a better person than that, but ‘government agent’ did edge a little too far into the territory of ‘paid thug’ for him to be entirely
comfortable. “We’re saving the world, here, just as before. Although I will admit that I have been influenced by the extent to which Captain America has poisoned the well for all independents. If I want the ability to meaningfully object to something in future, I will have to build that good-will back up again. Which means distancing myself from the kind of absolutist arrogance that presumes one man’s opinion is intrinsically superior to many. Stark also made it clear that you’d been protecting my identity for months now, without ever asking anything from me. It did seem somewhat ungracious under the circumstances not to offer anything back.”

“The right to swing your fist ends where the other chap’s nose begins,” muttered Peter quietly. Then he said at normal volume, “We’re very grateful that you did, and we all think this will be an excellent team.”

Peter propelled himself from the desktop to land a meter clear of the steps. He picked up a box, and turned back to the team. The venue made him look half way between a lecturer and a roman gladiator playing to the crowds. “That recording makes a good transition to something else that you need to make a decision about. Since our team will shortly complete all the steps defined under the Sokovia Accords to be a fully accredited UN team, we will gain certain subsidies. Amongst them is access to synthetic vibranium-laced armour.”

Dane leaned forward, looking very intense as Peter opened the box and started pulling out clothing.

“They sent us this sample. The armour is without doubt a very fine piece of engineering, but…” Peter paused long enough to make sure they were all paying close attention. “But it includes integrated electronics that record absolutely everything. What we have just watched is evidence of what we’re starting to call the Stark Protocol. As much transparency as humanly -- or even superhumanly -- possible. Before accepting this offer, you will need to seriously consider whether the advantages are worth the loss of privacy. I’m sure it will come as no surprise to any of you that the line about someone who has done nothing wrong has nothing to hide is complete bull. Everyone has bad days, and when you have continuous footage of anyone, you can string together bits to make them look like anything from the second coming to the anti-Christ.”

Peter made eye contact with each of them individually. “I can promise that I, and the people who work for me, will treat those recordings with respect. But I can’t promise the same of every person who might gain access to the records in the future. No one can. These suits will irrevocably create a pool of data that might be used against you. But it will also do what it says on the can. It will protect you from false accusations. It will help with intelligence gathering. It will help to adapt and improve training. It will speed up how quickly we can respond to threatening situations you engage in without you having to be distracted making reports. Finally, we will be more convincing to the public about explaining or asking for assistance if we have real footage to display on the evening news.”

Rachel said, “Since we have the best quality video, the media will be more likely to use ours rather than some mobile phone recordings that might be less flattering.”

“That helps, yes,” said Peter, flashing an honest smile. “I’ll leave you lot to think about it. You don’t need to make a decision today, but it’s one of those things that the sooner the better. We want your gear completely nailed down before asking you to go out and fight alien invasions.”

Brian took an informal vote with his eyes. “I believe we have time to discuss it now, thank you, Peter.”

“The room’s yours for another hour and fifteen minutes, but just yell if you think you’re going to need more than that. And as always, anything you need, just dial ‘0’ on the phones,” reminded Peter before leaving the room.
Brian knew the ‘anything’ wasn’t a platitude either – early on he’d requested a Lambeth Walk just to be otherwise, and the ale had been served minutes later, perfectly presented. The external noise of the bustling agency swelled as the door opened and then cut off again as the vacuum sealed behind Peter.

In that silence, the team descended on the box and the outfit. Brian leafed through the tech specs, glancing up to compare it to the example that was being examined by the others. It was two layers, neither of which looked anything usually described as armour. According to the helpful diagrams, the first was designed to be worn under normal clothing or uniform (or signature costume, presumably), and looked for all the world like stretchy footie pyjamas with an attached hood. The second layer was a lightweight halter to be worn on the outside, containing all the electronic equipment. The halter also presumably contained the recording devices, although those were not identifiable to the naked eye.

“These are going to take a little getting used to,” said Rachel thoughtfully.

"Are you willing to ignore the possibility of future blackmail?” asked Brian. "I would have thought you would be the least trusting of the government of all of us."

Rachel shrugged. “Two things here-- no, three. First is that something doesn't need to be true for the government to use it against us. Governments usually win the battle of being the most convincing liars. Second is that the government doesn’t need the input from the suits. You’re right that I grew up with near-constant surveillance. But that’s true today as well. Kids wander around London knowing someone could be watching them; they write emails knowing someone could be reading them; they search for sex toys knowing that information could be sold to someone. They put up with it because the convenience is worth more than the downside. And so, inevitably, do we. The government will have plenty of other footage of us if it wants to pull a fast one.”

Brian considered the recent revelation about just how monitored his mobile phone was, and reluctantly nodded. He could hardly claim that he would not fall for the convenience trap when he had so recently done exactly that.

Rachel continued, “The third thing, and the important thing, is that unlike the general surveillance, this one is a weapon in our hands as well. The armour explicitly has an option to send copies to a secure location of our own. When they know we’re also keeping a record of everything they ask of us, want to bet they’ll be a lot more careful about keeping it clean?”

“If it was serious enough,” said Dane, sounding more like he was playing Devil’s advocate than sincerely concerned. “Then the government could still prevent us from using it if it wanted to. I mean, once they have us behind bars, our options would become considerably constrained.”

Brian was reminded that Dane had been a full agent with MI13 for some time, and had no doubt already worked out these types of concerns to his own satisfaction.

“Our own government, yes,” said Rachel. “But what about the times when our government might be on our side, against— oh, purely as a hypothetical example-- Secretary Ross?”

There was a soft murmur of appreciation, and Brian returned to the specs with renewed interest. He had been thinking about moving away from such an inappropriately revealing costume anyway, after all. Faiza had been the only one with enough common sense to avoid a costume that would get the superhero thrown out of a family friendly restaurant, and that should really change. They would shortly be an official, professional team. It wouldn’t hurt to start looking and acting the part and accepting the resources that position offered. If Tony Stark was willing to offer such a valuable gift, it seemed hardly courteous to spurn it.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Translating ‘Svartálfar’ as dark elves is absurd. If Marvel wanted to avoid getting into ancient Nordic racism, why didn’t they just use ‘myrkálfar’ or ‘dökkálfar’? They’re valid mythical terms that can be reasonably translated to dark elves.

Another two parter. What happened to those days when I was lucky if a scene hit as much as 800 words?

T’Challa didn’t like being at the UN. It was an entirely different building from the one his father had spent so many hours negotiating the Accords in, but it was still a painful reminder. While the architecture might be different, the atmosphere was very much the same. Even down to the indoor pot plants that were polished to such a degree that they appeared more mummified than alive. It was a reminder of his father’s death, of course, but it was more than that. It was a reminder of the limitations to good intentions. It was a reminder of the lives lost in Sokovia, and how those deaths had resulted in even more deaths as the cycle of vengeance had begun. It was a reminder that T’Challa himself had been, and still was, failing to live up to his father’s faith and beliefs.

It most certainly didn’t help that he was stuck in this entrance hall with a huge screen at the back cycling news of his latest failing. It didn’t matter that no one besides him knew he could have changed anything. He knew, and he knew that he was at fault. T’Challa turned his back on the World24 cycle and walked into the rows of smaller screens. Each had its own miniature directional sound system, creating isolated bubbles of information. The ones on his left were just as problematic, but the ones of the right seemed to be recent news of Tony Stark and Stark Industries. It wasn’t slick advertising displays, or even particularly flattering. That suggested it had not been handled by either Stark Industries itself, or any of the formal media liaison people associated with the new Accords committees. This had more the feel of a UN intern who happened to be a fan. He wondered idly if there was a Wakandan display row in the hall somewhere. His stomach tensed at the thought of what they’d be saying now. He wouldn’t go and look.

"— have released gesture based input before, but this is a quantum leap forward. As expected from Stark, this isn’t just as good as the abled option. This is better than the standard option."

"And all it took was for Stark to have a personal stake in the matter for it to happen."

"He might well be the foremost creative genius the world has ever seen, but he still has limited time he can spend on any one thing. So what if he chooses to make the world a better place by also improving something that directly benefits him? Wouldn't you?"

“IT’s—”

T’Challa paced on down the row, a little disgusted with himself that Tony Stark was now a distraction. Two weeks prior, it would have been a topic he wished to be distracted from. Tony Stark himself had made it clear that he didn’t blame T’Challa for his actions, not before Siberia, not during, and not after. But T’Challa had found it harder to forgive himself. The truth was that Tony Stark had
simply not been a factor in any of his decisions. He could truthfully claim that it was unimaginable that Captain America would have left without saying anything if Tony Stark had been in true danger, but that was after-the-fact justification. At the time, T’Challa had been so overwhelmed by Zemo’s revelations that he simply hadn’t thought about it at all. And he should have been better than that.

“—don’t care if they call it a water filtration device or an aquatic resource harvester drone. It looks like some sort of deadly sci-fi space squid. I don’t want that anywhere near me when I go for a dip in the sea.”

“Well, I don’t care what it looks like. It will remove heavy metals from polluted waters, giving us better water and recycling the use of some desperately scarce resources. It would be criminal if this was denied permissions based on someone’s heebie-jeebies, like so much of the recent life prolonging medicine available only to Russians and—”

Of course, leaving Tony Stark behind hadn’t been the only poor decision he’d made that day. When T’Challa had extracted James Barnes and Steven Rogers from Siberia, he’d expected that it would be a strictly short term matter. He’d protect them until the evidence against Zemo had been confirmed, and then they’d return to their normal operations. After all, Captain America hadn’t run away because he was a coward. He’d evaded incarceration because he’d believed the safety of the world was at stake. As soon as that was no longer true, he’d no doubt be itching to step up and set things right.

“—absolute commitment to no longer producing weapons, what would their contribution to the Global Defence Satellite Network even mean?”

“I think you’re forgetting the major improvements in cheaper and cleaner propulsion that have been so famously pioneered in the Iron Man suit. But even past that, there’s an important place for Stark’s work. There ought to be a good deal more to the defence network than weapons. Yes, we want to have the network in place to prevent alien space armadas from taking the high ground against our planet unopposed. We’ve all seen the sci-fi movies. But we don’t want to create anything that someone could turn around and use against us. This needs to be a true global endeavour—“

As it turned out, T’Challa had been technically correct that Captain America would not simply allow his teammates to answer for his own crimes. T’Challa just hadn’t realised that ‘setting things right’ was not Captain America turning himself in, assuming the bulk of the blame and arguing his position. It was Captain America breaking the rest of his team out of jail and bringing them with him into hiding. In that moment of repentance when T’Challa had realised he’d misjudged James Barnes, T’Challa had missed the opportunity to set a time limit on just how long he was willing to protect them for. After that it had been too late.

“—playing cops and robbers as a kid? This allows modern kids to play with all the physical exercise of our youth, with all the technological sophistication of theirs. The Vesta, which Tony Stark continues to claim stands for ‘Vision Enhancing Source of Truth and Awesomeness’ despite vigorous disagreement from his own marketing team, is a pair of glasses that can provide a semi-transparent three-dimensional overlay. It can show your deck as a castle and your wife’s rose bush as a fire breathing dragon. Each game has a specific set of rules, but they customise themselves on the fly for the environment. Parents can even set it to social mode, which tries to give all participants a fair chance of winning regardless of the kid’ physical speed, dexterity—”

Due to that reckless haste, T’Challa’s honour had been fully engaged before he realised exactly what he was getting himself involved in. The spirit of the panther within was from an old school that did not recognise pig-headed stubbornness as a violation of Sanctuary. Nor did it provide exemptions for wrongs done to others. If Captain America had targeted people under the protection of the panther
that would have been one thing, but the panther had no sacred obligations to other nations. T’Challa
had given his word, and he was required to keep it. Despite the most recent events playing out on
endless loop behind his back, and the commentary to his left.

—nay-sayers of the Vulnerable Driver Program are overstating their point a little. If someone with
a destination restriction -- say they’re only allowed to use the car to travel to work and their local
grocery store -- wants to take their sick child to hospital, it doesn't go all 'I’m sorry Dave, I'm afraid
can't do that.' It raises an alert about that journey, which would be evaluated by a human and
dismissed as a valid—

“Your Majesty!”

Think of the devil. There weren’t many people his security would have permitted to approach
T’Challa with so little ceremony – and fewer still that would have done so without sending their own
security ahead. T’Challa turned to see Tony Stark leading a small group of Avengers.

Stark gave the display a dismissive glance before subtly adjusting his body language to guide
T’Challa away from them. “I was hoping to catch you so that we could all go in together, unless you
have an objection. It’s almost time for the announcement. You know Rhodey and Vision, of course.
Has Thor been introduced to you yet?”

“Your Highness,” T’Challa greeted the alien prince with a deep head nod. “Colonel Rhodes, Vision.
It is good to see you both again.”

Proper etiquette would have been for T’Challa to wait for Thor to greet him first. After all, T’Challa
was a reigning monarch rather than a crown prince, and they were on Earth and not on Asgard. But
T’Challa had done extensive research on Asgard – and he would love to find out how Tony Stark
had managed to procure children’s books of all things from them – and he wasn’t willing to risk
setting off any violent impulses.

Reading the histories had been an object lesson that the one who attacked you wasn’t necessarily
bad, and the one who defended you wasn’t necessarily good. Particularly the latter, if one was
inclined to take Thor’s assistance as an indication of the benevolence of Asgard as a whole. The
stories of the Black Elves were particularly illustrative. ‘We had to wipe out their wives and children
because they were evil, and we know they were evil because they made us wipe out their wives and
children.’ Even the other, more adult, excuses raised disturbing points. The accusation that they
wanted to turn normal matter into dark energy wouldn’t have convinced a human first year physics
student. Dark energy was already more than ten times more common than normal matter. It was like
claiming someone was searching for the way to turn gold into lead. And since the Black Elves were
themselves quite provably made of ordinary matter, how much dark energy could they possibly
need? For the propaganda writers to perpetrate such an obvious lie implied that they expected
average citizen to be virtually uneducated, despite how long the people of Asgard were said to live.
That said no good things about their culture.

“Ah, the noble cat!” said Prince Thor at triple a reasonable volume. “I have observed your battles
with great interest. I would be honoured to fight next to you in the fullness of time.”

“You have—ah… followed the altercation between us, then?” asked T’Challa.

T’Challa been aware that Asgard had the means to spy on anything they chose to, but he’d assumed
Prince Thor’s absence from the events had been a result of lack of knowledge of them, rather than
lack of concern. T’Challa wasn’t entirely sure which side he had expected Prince Thor to have
fought on, but he would have expected him to feel strongly enough to at least be present. Even if it
was just to instruct both sides to cease fighting in the first place.
“I have indeed,” boomed Thor. “I understand Captain America's position well from my own youth. You would not credit how often I reacted in anger against others presuming to tell me where I might go or what I might do. My father has long since dreaded the appearance at his gates of yet another irate land-owner... or father," Thor finished with a rueful smile.

The Vikings had to get their philosophy of raping and pillaging from somewhere, T’Challa supposed. Despite the borderline horror of the conversation, and the fact that it only served to reinforce the reservations he already held, T’Challa felt himself warming to Prince Thor’s obvious good nature. T’Challa wondered at himself.

Out of the corner of his eye, T’Challa noticed a screen go black, and one of the bystanders reach behind it. The unusual movement had T’Challa tensing, readying himself to—he wasn’t sure what. A small flash was followed by the smell of burning plastic. The man stepped well back with a sheepish expression and showed empty hands to the rapidly approaching security. T’Challa forced himself to relax. It hadn’t been a bomb, or a terrorist attack, or step one of some overly complex revenge plot. Just a do-gooder interfering with things he didn’t understand.

Thor clapped Tony Stark on the shoulder. "Like me, Captain America and his followers will no doubt return home soon enough, contrite and ready to face his punishment. He is very young, and at that age it is hard to grasp that the little lives matter as well."

"Good thing that you know better now," said Tony Stark, with a dryness that seemed to pass Prince Thor entirely by.

"Aye," said Thor. “I have much improved. Worry not, our shield-brothers shall return to the good graces of your rulers very soon."

The worst, from T’Challa’s perspective, was that Prince Thor was almost certainly correct. The powerful players in the Western World would care more about what happened in an empty European airport than about what had just happened in some small African country they couldn’t find on a map. T’Challa concealed his sudden anger behind a diplomat’s smile, but he couldn’t help glancing at the other displays. He couldn’t hear the voices, but the banners made their biases obvious enough. Murderous Rogers Kills Again. Chaos descends on Azania. Captain America Steps in for fellow Accords Victims.

Victims. T’Challa’s insides curdled like he’d chased a glass of milk with a shot of lemon juice. The application Azania had sent in for Accords intervention hadn’t even pretended to be convincing. It had been a propaganda play, pure and simple. Azania had wanted it to be denied so that they could play the overwhelmed good guys who had no choice but to tighten their grip on the powerless majority in the name ofsecurity. T’Challa suspected not even they had been happy to achieve their stated goals. They hadn’t realised that they weren’t just risking being able to convince a committee. They’d also risked being able to convince just one man, and they’d accidentally succeeded. Tony Stark noticed T’Challa’s distraction and his expression turned as grim as T’Challa’s before smoothing out again.

Thor continued, “It is unfortunate that I will not be able to stay long enough for that joyous event to be realised, but the All-Father and my Lady Jane could spare me only for the announcement of this new communion between our people.”

“Do you know what prompted this now?” asked Tony Stark. The tone of voice was casual, but his focused expression indicated he was taking more care with his words than he seemed. “No offence, Goldilocks, but it seems a little out of character from what you and Jane told me about your Dad.”

“Pray,” said Thor gravely, “Do not judge my father by the appearances he was forced to assume
when interacting with the fair Lady Jane. My father must needs make his mercy private, but his power public.”

“The All-Father,” said Tony Stark to T’Challa in a falsely conversational tone, “told Jane that since mortals die anyway there was no point in prolonging their lives, and that she personally had the equivalent intelligence and importance of a goat compared to the people of Asgard.”

Thor, to his credit, looked uncomfortable. “He was much belaboured with concerns when they met. He has since come to realise that his first impression was ill-judged. Verily, since the passing of my mother and brother, he has been very much affected and has allowed – nay, encouraged— me to cherish her more closely.”

If it wasn’t for Tony Stark’s sudden stillness, T’Challa would have been convinced by the mildness of his interest. “The All-Father has changed a lot since Loki died, then?”

Thor looked thoughtful. “Perhaps it would be unjust to say he has changed. It might well be that it is simply a side of him that he did not allow me to see afore now. That which he would past times have held only unto himself, he has now begun to allow others to oversee. I believe this new outreach comes from that self-same urge.”

“I see,” said Tony Stark, and T’Challa wished he had the opportunity to find out exactly what Stark saw. “So has the All-Father been strengthening ties with other realms as well?”

“Aye,” said Thor. “He has been labouring mightily to bring the realms to peace and prosperity under the guidance of Asgard.”

“Has he been encouraging them to build up their weapons stock, or discouraging them?” asked Tony Stark, which finally gave T’Challa an inclination of where his thought process was headed. It seemed obvious that King Odin seemed to gearing up to fight a war with the other nine realms. But did he mean to fight alongside them, or against them? The distinction could make a very big difference in just how much assistance Earth would be wise to accept from them.

“Why, encouraging,” said Thor. “He is very concerned about our ability to defend ourselves should another group launch a cowardly attack on us, and wishes to make sure we have staunch allies on our sides. Why do you ask?”

T’Challa wondered at Prince Thor’s question, but cautioned himself from reading too much into it. The documents from Tony Stark strongly hinted that Thor was a good deal more intelligent than his words and actions would make him appear. But one could be both bright and naïve, and Prince Thor had never been shown to have the depth of understanding one would expect of his position. The theory that Prince Thor had been groomed as a figurehead rather than a real leader might have more substance than T’Challa had first thought.

“Oh, you know,” said Tony Stark. “I like to stay up to date with things. Shall we head in?”

“Of course!” said Thor. “I have been looking forward to this moment since my father first begun arrangements. Let us hasten in and share the good news with your fellow warriors.”

Prince Thor was speaking as if this would be news to the people around the table. T’Challa decided that had to be some sort of habit. It was clear that King Odin, at least, knew better than to spring a diplomatic meeting on people without warning their staff just what the agenda would be. Tony Stark must have made some gesture that T’Challa didn’t see, because Colonel Rhodes moved smoothly in to distract Thor by enquiring about his ‘Lady Love’. Tony Stark fell back a little, taking T’Challa with him.
“By the way,” Tony Stark said quietly, “I believe I’ve come into possession of a Wakandan cultural artefact. Do you have some time after the arguments to discuss its return?”

“Certainly,” said T’Challa automatically, his lips twitching at Tony Stark’s undiplomatic – but probably accurate – description of the latter half of that day’s business.

T’Challa’s mind ran through the possibilities for that artefact. What had gone missing from Wakanda that Stark could possibly have laid his hands on after all this time? And why handle this personally rather than simply instructing one of his legal team to consult with a Wakandan embassy?

As Prince Thor swept them back to the meeting room T’Challa drifted into the cone of one of the displays – one of the displays on the side he’d been avoiding. Any speculation about Tony Stark’s meaning and intentions were promptly wiped from his mind.

“… 1940s, white supremacy was considered a perfectly reasonable position – even a compassionate one. After all, if blacks were inherently less intelligent and less educated than whites, then wouldn’t it make sense to have someone else look after them? We wouldn’t expect a child or a mentally retarded person to make good decisions for themselves, and many whites at the time regarded blacks in much the same light.”

T’Challa forced himself not to rush. It was only a few steps until he would be out of earshot once again. He was going to make no movement that might reveal his state of mind to the watching vultures. But it was impossible to pretend to himself that he was not affected. The theory that presenter was attempting to sell was wrong, but it was getting increasingly hard to see how it mattered. Captain America’s goals may not have been those of a white supremacist, but that didn’t change the effect of his actions. T’Challa kept telling himself that Captain America had only had the very best of intentions, and very good reasons to believe he was doing the right thing. He kept telling himself that Captain America might even be correct, and that it had not been any sort of false flag operation. He kept telling himself that in the grander scheme of things, something like that might even provoke a real resolution of the area’s problems. In the wake of the victims of Captain America’s actions, however, that consolation was starting to wear very thin.
Prince Thor had declaimed his piece and had then vanished with Colonel Rhodes and Vision. The room cleared of assistants and secretaries without a word needing to be spoken. Nothing that was said in this meeting would be for public record. Even with the extras gone from around the walls, the chairs were still crammed tighter together than was comfortable, although it allowed T’Challa to see the expressions more closely.

“What a bunch of arrogant bastards,” said Secretary Ross. “Prepared to honour us with a fucking legation.”

T’Challa fought to keep his lips from twitching. He didn’t disagree with Secretary Ross; he just appreciated the irony in Secretary Ross accusing anyone else of arrogance.

“What is exactly is a legation?” asked Peter Wisdom, one of the newer British representatives.

“That’s what you call an embassy when you want to make it clear you don’t consider the other party to be your equal,” answered Ross.

“Traditionally,” corrected T’Challa mildly, “an embassy was a personal representative of the monarch, and it was considered rude to send one to a country that couldn’t send one back. It might have been translated as legation purely because Earth as a whole doesn’t have a sovereign. I don’t think we should read any insult into the term.”

The two explanations were effectively the same – only the major powers could appoint ambassadors, and so only major powers would receive them. But T’Challa did not want to risk people digging in their heels because of stubborn pride. No good would come out of anything short of Earth’s apparent whole-hearted and overjoyed acceptance of Asgard’s proposal.

“No?” said Secretary Ross. “He was pretty damn insulting about us not having a world-wide monarchy. Going on about how saddened they all were that ‘Midgard’ did not have a ‘proper king’ to embody its needs. Not that you’d see anything wrong in that, of course.”

T’Challa swallowed his reaction. He was well aware how little respect the other members had for monarchies, viewing them as quaint and unsophisticated. That hard-wired prejudice had perhaps made them dismiss Prince Thor’s words too rapidly. The spirit of the panther wasn’t quite the same thing, but almost all countries had myths where the King was the land – the health and strength of one reflected in the other. If that was true, and a ruling monarch significantly improved a planet’s ability to defend itself, which might explain why those super-advanced realms clung so firmly to such an unstable form of government. But T’Challa could not be the one to make that argument, nor was it important at that moment.

“It’s ridiculous either way,” continued Secretary Ross. “The UN isn’t a government. They can’t send it embassies or legations.”

“Do remind me, Secretary Ross,” said Tony Stark, his formality a weapon. “Just what does the US call the head of its UN delegation?”


Secretary Ross glared at them in turn before snapping, “But the proper title is Permanent Representative of America to the United Nations, because the UN is not a fucking government.”
Tony Stark made a dismissive gesture. “So we make the proper title of the Asgard delegation Permanent Representative, and then just call them High Minister, or Most Awesome Envoy, or Supreme Mugwump, or whatever the hell they want to be known as.”

Peter Wisdom asked, “Are you seriously proposing to induct Asgard as a member state?”

Before Tony Stark could respond, T’Challa said, “Perhaps not as the equivalent of a state. But there is nothing preventing us from making them permanent observers. That’s official enough for people to recognise, and we’ve granted it to a very wide range of organisations over the years.”

“You don’t think they would find that position insulting?”

“We can spin that,” said Stark. “Point out that permanent observer is what we call the groups that are bigger than single countries, like the EU, ASEAN or LAIA. We don’t want it to look like they’re just ordinary members. We want everyone to know that they’re special.”

“I think,” said General Petrov repressively, “that you have all become… ah… a little ahead of yourselves, yes? It will not matter what they want to be called if we do not accept their oh-so-kind offer.”

“And we don’t,” said Secretary Ross absolutely, although he looked a little pained to be supporting with General Petrov. “We’ve done perfectly well without them before now.”

T’Challa’s breath caught. He had to move them off that viewpoint, but he had to be careful. His presence at this meeting was more a courtesy to his super-hero status than his position as ruler. If he went too far, the representatives of the so-called ‘World Powers’ wouldn’t hesitate to ignore him.

T’Challa said neutrally, “The realm of Jotunheim was destroyed because they failed to show Asgard” – Prince Thor in particular, but it would be undiplomatic to say that even in an off the record discussion – “what they considered appropriate respect. I’m not sure that saying no is an option we should consider.”

Secretary Ross snorted in disagreement. “They live thousands of years. For all we know, their idea of a reasonable period for consideration is longer than any of us will be alive. We can put them off until the problem goes away.”

The reduction of urgency around the table at Secretary Ross’s words worried T’Challa. Nothing T’Challa had read gave him any reason to think of Asgard as a patient people, or even ones with an appreciation for the slow speed of a modern bureaucracy. But further fear-mongering was exactly the opposite direction he wanted to take the conversation. Americans in particular had a dismaying willingness to act against their own interests so long as it showed off how strong and independent they were. He’d hinted at the stick, but they’d need to pretend it was all about the carrot to salve their pride.

T’Challa spread his hands. “Let’s not be too quick to dismiss what they can offer us. Some of it we do need rather urgently. The world is changing more rapidly than we have the capabilities to deal with. For instance, the experts in mind powers from Alfheim. Wanda Maximoff would already have been in front of a judge by now if she hadn’t escaped. Does anyone here believe that she would have respected the integrity of their minds?”

T’Challa felt his blood want to rush to his face for that particular piece of hypocrisy, and resolutely did not look towards Tony Stark.

“So you just want to trust some aliens to have that integrity instead?” asked Secretary Ross, but
T’Challa thought he looked tempted. The breakout on the RAFT had re-ignited the criticisms about his abilities to control the super-powered, and having another scapegoat around would only be to his benefit.

Peter Wisdom said, “Elves aren’t known for being trustworthy. Our legends certainly do not show them as being overly interested in the well-being of humans. Changelings taken as servants, and people taken out of their time for entertainment, and the like. I realise those are myths, but at least when it comes to Asgard and the Vikings, we know that the myths aren’t too far off the reality.”

The difficulty in coming up with a convincing counterargument was that T’Challa agreed with him. “We all know, all too well, how much damage those with other motives can do. But that does not mean that they can not also do great good as well.”

It was weak, and T’Challa knew it was weak, but fortunately he wasn’t entirely without allies. Tony Stark nodded agreement, drawing everyone’s attention.

“And seriously, people?” asked Tony Stark. “Does it matter if they’re self-interested assholes? We deal with people like that all the time. No-one’s proposing we give them the right to kidnap our children or suction up all our seawater. King T’Challa is saying let’s give them a few rooms and the right to speak up in a handful of meetings. If you ask me, that’s more punishment than reward.”

A few faces looked a little startled, and then more accepting. Anyone who claimed that Tony Stark was bad at politics clearly hadn’t been aware which political games Tony Stark had been playing.

“In return,” said Tony Stark, “they’re going to be giving us a bunch of stuff we can use or not use on a case by case basis. They want to give us psychic monitors for Accords-level trials. We can use them and a normal judicial panel and use whichever results suit us. They want to run an exchange program for warriors. We can send them anyone from our top experts to our most ignorant recruits. They claim to be able to improve our healthcare. We let them practice on those currently without any and see what the catch is. The time to push back isn’t now, when people are paying attention and taking a stand. It’s bit by bit in the details when we encounter the elements we have a problem with. That's when we'll have more room to manoeuvre.”

T’Challa wondered how many other people realised that Tony Stark had just given away his strategy regarding the Accords.

Tony Stark concluded, “As Wisdom points out, they’ve been doing stuff to us behind our backs for centuries, and frankly, we still don’t know how to stop them. Having them do it in front of our faces can only be to our benefit.”

“Keep your friends close…” said Ross. He didn’t finish the saying, but everyone mentally completed it for themselves.

“Look,” said Peter Wisdom. “That sounds sensible. I don’t deny that it’s less risky for our relationship with them to accept than refuse. But we just can’t. If something like this comes to a vote, that will do far more damage than anything they’ve ever actively done to us. We’ll be spending the next decade trying to hold a debate while religious fanatics burn the world around our ears in their panic about One World Governments and the coming of the Anti-Christ.”

“But we don’t need to present it for vote,” said T’Challa. He hated himself a little for suggesting it, and he wasn’t unaware of Tony Stark’s sharp glance, but in this matter they did not have the luxury of principles. “It’s just a matter of convention for permanent observers to be voted on by the General Assembly. The position isn’t even mentioned in the charter, so there are no legal requirements in any way. If the Security Council along with the rest of the G8 present it as fait accompli, the general
assembly has no recourse."

“I agree,” said Ross. “No need to turn this into a public spectacle. If we have to do this, let us do it as quickly and with as little fuss as possible. Do we all agree that will be our recommendation to our respective leaders and UN ambassadors?”

No one, not even the unhappy looking General Petrov, protested. T’Challa knew that calling it a recommendation was a polite fiction. The decision had already been made. There would be more fights, and further problems, but this time at least nothing would go catastrophically wrong. He took his leave with polite smiles and dutiful congratulations to the others for their insight.

Avoiding that one disaster almost made him forget the previous, but the subsequent meeting with Tony Stark brought it back into frame. Tony Stark had found them an isolated meeting room and closed the door behind them. T’Challa was alone with Tony Stark except for one Dora Milaje trying to blend into the wall.

Tony Stark collapsed into a chair and started fiddling with his phone. “I feel the need to apologise to both you and the world for Steve Rogers’ ignorance. In retrospect, we should have made a considerably more concerted attempt to educate him on modern politics. Sent him to pick up an associate’s degree in history or poli-sci, or something.”

“You have no need to apologise, Doctor Stark,” said T’Challa. “He himself had a duty, and the people who presented themselves as his superiors had a duty, but you were simply an occasional team mate. I am fully willing to believe that you tried your best.”

T’Challa saw too late that he had caused Tony Stark more pain than comfort, but Tony Stark’s expression smoothed as he tapped a few buttons. He looked up with a pained and confused expression. “We’re fully off the grid now, you can say anything you like. Can you tell me… just… what were they thinking? I mean…”

T’Challa took his own seat. In that instant, he decided to trust Tony Stark, both his motives and his technology, and not pretend they weren’t all aware of Captain America’s base of operation. “Steven Rogers claimed he had proof that HYDRA was behind the Bangweulu Separatists. He went in to save the world from their cunning plot to take over the world one farm at a time. He wasn’t entirely clear on what the danger to the world was, but he knew that it was something diabolical. It was HYDRA after all. He was stepping up to do the duty everyone else was ignoring.”

Tony Stark reached up a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose.

T’Challa laughed without humour. “He could even have been right. We know from Sokovia that HYDRA is not above lying to their recruits.”

“Yeah,” said Tony Stark, sounding sympathetic. “I bet that doesn’t stop your average citizen from feeling like Steve just helped Hitler attack Nelson Mandela.”

T’Challa allowed one shoulder to shrug. “I will not deny that is a fair description of their sentiments. My people are not happy with Captain America’s actions.”

“Ouch,” said Tony Stark, reading T’Challa’s understatement for exactly the condemnation it really was.

“Look, do you mind if I’m most undiplomatically blunt?” asked Tony Stark.

T’Challa made a go-ahead gesture, but he wondered what anyone could possibly have said or done to stop Tony Stark. No one had appeared to have had much success in the past. Tony Stark was
always exactly the level of undiplomatic he chose to be.

“We need the Avengers free and healthy to save the world,” said Tony Stark. “We can’t have them back in the States yet without risking them being immediately extradited and serving jail time. We can’t leave them in Wakanda without risking a revolution against you. Agreed?”

“I think you overstated my reluctance to see them in jail,” murmured T’Challa.

“I take it that Steve was stubborn about things?” asked Tony Stark, looking like he already knew the answer.

“When I informed him that the situation was more complex than he believed,” said T’Challa, “and that he might have done more harm than good, he claimed my arguments were a part of some sort of pro-Accords propaganda campaign. He feels he can no longer trust my objectivity.”

Tony sighed. “Yeah, because he obviously understands the people of your own region better than you do. Because you suddenly changing your moral beliefs is just so much more likely than he was tricked by a false-flag operation. Because he’s Captain fucking America, and he’s never wrong. And the others agreed with him?”

T’Challa had to think about that. “Scott Lang and Clinton Barton said almost nothing and claimed they only failed to participate because the mission didn’t lend itself to their talents. Their objections may well have been more ideological than practical, but they weren’t willing to say anything disloyal to Captain America in front of me. Sam Wilson and Wanda Maximoff did participate. They said they were obviously acting in the best interests of the people of Azania, not the government itself. Apparently, the media always misrepresents things like that because that kind of indignation sells newspapers, and hadn’t I learnt anything from the Sokovia Accords? I was also treated to a lecture on how sanctions just hurt the innocent citizens, while the people they’re meant to punish are rich enough to find ways around it. Presumably because they somehow think the two situations are morally equivalent somehow, but I did not entirely follow their logic.”

Tony Stark nodded. “Okay, so classic self-righteousness rather than deliberate malice. I can work with that, given enough time. Could you send them to hide out in some other part of the world? Somewhere like Antarctica, where they’re less likely to trip over people to ‘save’? That would really help me to save them from themselves.”

“I can’t,” said T’Challa. “I have offered them sanctuary.”

“Still?” asked Tony Stark. “I mean, I bet you weren’t thinking of allowing them to continue active missions when you took them in.”

“I wasn’t,” agreed T’Challa. “But I didn’t explicitly state that they could not, either. I can’t force them to leave unless they attack me or one of my own. They must make the decision to leave of their own accord. James Barnes is in no condition to do anything. Steven Rogers will never leave without James Barnes. The rest will not leave without Steven Rogers.”

“I think,” said Tony Stark thoughtfully after a long pause. “I think we might be able to break that chain. I might have a solution for James Barnes. The rehabilitation of his public reputation has been going very well. No one wants to be the first one to set any legal precedents about brainwashing with such a polarising defendant. If he stays quiet and under control, people will let him.”

“And you know a way to achieve that, other than cryo-stasis in my country?” asked T’Challa, feeling the warmth of hope for the first time since the RAFT break-out.
“I believe so, yes,” said Tony Stark. “I’m sure you’re aware that HYDRA has tried a range of methods to keep their recruits under control? Finding ways to treat them has been both an interest and a duty of mine since the collapse of SHIELD. I’ve been collaborating with a hospital in Finland for the patients that mistrust governments, since they’re a historically neutral party between Russia and the US. Some were concerned they were being transferred between owners rather than rescued, you see. The hospital will need bribing in terms of cryogenic and anti-brainwashing technology to accept the Winter Soldier, but I’m confident that they will. Between you and I, we have enough to make it worth their while.”

“Do you believe they can be trusted with that technology?” asked T’Challa, knowing that Tony Stark would understand what he meant better than anyone else alive. When one gave technology away, one assumed some part of the responsibility of how they used it.

Tony Stark nodded firmly. “They have a sincere intention to cure people. And seriously, it’s the most sedate country in existence. It’s fifty percent pensioners, and the highest ranked most stable government, freest press, best treatment of workers, second lowest wage gap. Also, almost no population, but in this case that’s a plus. It’s a nice, uncontroversial choice for Wakanda to open trade negotiations with. If, completely co-incidentally, one former POW anonymously arrives at their shiny new treatment facility, they will not be tracing back his origin.”

T’Challa caught himself in the childish gesture of biting his thumb. “I do not know if Steven Rogers would agree with anything at this point. He is absolutely fixated on his belief that the people ‘behind the Accords’ want to murder James Barnes. He’s seeing plots behind every bush.”

“Then don’t ask Steve,” said Tony Stark. “Unfreeze Barnes, and ask him. This is his best chance of ever being free.”

T’Challa examined Tony Stark’s expression, and then decided to comment. “You sound sympathetic to his position. To be honest, I did not expect that.”

Tony Stark looked down and away. “He gained a lot of points from me when he went into cryo. Part of the reason I was so angry in Siberia was that I’d offered him a way to make himself safe, and as far as I knew, he’d just blown it off. I thought he’d felt no accountability for any past or future deaths, and didn’t care about the risk so long as he could hang on to his independence. It took me until later to realise that most of that… that criminal indifference wasn’t his. Sure, he failed to turn himself in during those three years, but there wasn’t an obviously better way to keep people safe than to hide. I was treating him like he had access to all the resources Steve or I had – but how was he supposed to know he could have come to me? He believed anyone who could freeze him was even more likely to use him. Steve hadn’t been falling over himself to bring Barnes to my attention – of course, now I know why – and it seems likely the silence went both ways. It was Steve who turned down treatment on his behalf before the airport battle. By the sounds of things, Steve never told Barnes that option even existed.”

That did put a rather different complexion on some things T’Challa had been wondering about as well. “I suspect not. It did not sound that way from the arguments he made to me about why we should use cryo-stasis on him. You may well be right. James Barnes himself would be very open to the idea of a permanent cure, and I suspect from his own history that a neutral country would be very appealing.”

They shared a smile, small but more honest than either of them were probably used to, and pencilled in a few meetings to arrange the logistics.

T’Challa leaned back. "Was the cultural artefact just a pretext for this meeting?"
“Yeah, no,” said Tony Stark, and T’Challa was astonished to see that the man was blushing. “Sorry. I’m going to be creating a new problem for you, and one that’s going to really suck right now. Not sure if you know, but I insisted Steve leave behind his shield after… well, after. I’m sure you can imagine the kind of people who would love to get their hands on it, so I researched the ownership so that I could fight it in court if I ever needed to. Unfortunately, I failed. It wasn’t ever listed as official SSR gear. It might have been a loan, or even an outright personal gift to Steve, but for either to be legal, it would have had to have been personal property of my father in the first place. My father certainly crafted it, but the bulk of its value is the vibranium. I searched really, really hard, but I can’t find anything to suggest that either my father or SSR obtained that legally. Unless you do have some sort of paper trail, that means the best claimant for it might well be the country of Wakanda.”

T’Challa made no pretence at royal dignity. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. “This is punishment, isn’t it? You have waited until this moment to take your revenge on me.”

Tony Stark said, “I know it’s the last thing you want on your hands, but it can’t stay in mine. Without that legal claim, I can’t stop the US government from confiscating it from me. Questions are already being asked about why Steve wasn’t carrying it in Azania. It won’t take long for some bright spark to have a close look at inventory from the rescue mission and put two and two together. Can’t you just hide it in an embassy somewhere, until this is all resolved?”

T’Challa opened his eyes so he could glare at him. "Your artificial production of the element might have changed the market somewhat, but vibranium is still a national Wakandan treasure. I am constitutionally required to seek approval from parliament before doing anything with any of it. If you hand the shield over to our embassy, it immediately becomes an issue I am literally not permitted to keep secret.”

"Ah,” said Tony Stark. “Sorry. In my defence, what would have happened if Steve had walked into the country still carrying it?"

T’Challa took a few deep breaths and imagined that exact scene before sighing. “You are right. I was so emotionally compromised at the time that I might very well have irreversibly stained my honour by allowing him to profane it within the halls of my ancestors. It seems I have yet another debt towards you.”

Tony flinched. “Seriously, no. I promise, I wasn’t trying to do right by you or anything when I insisted he leave it behind.”

T’Challa considered him carefully. “But you are trying to do right by me and my government now. Do not pretend that you could not gain many concessions from your Secretary Ross by handing it over to him instead – with the same end result that neither you nor Captain America having use or responsibility for it.”

“I haven’t always agreed with your decisions, Your Majesty,” said Tony Stark, and T’Challa was thrown as much by the formality as by the sincerity of Tony Stark’s voice. “But I believe you have always attempted to make them with compassion. A claim that I cannot make of Secretary Ross.”

“Thank you,” said T’Challa with equal sincerity. “I wish my current situation did not so clearly point out the folly of allowing one’s heart to override one’s intellect.”

T’Challa paused, and Tony Stark let him without false consolations.

“In truth,” said T’Challa. “There’s not much your government can use the shield for, other than perhaps melting it down. The major concern is that Secretary Ross will cause it to disappear, so that he can later use it as a bargaining chip. Perhaps that is the thing we should seek to prevent, rather
than be too concerned about its physical location.”

Tony Stark grinned, his entire body lighting up. “You’re proposing that I make its location very, very public. I display it. No, better, I donate it to a Captain America exhibit with deep pockets for lawyer fees.”

T’Challa nodded. “Donate it to a museum based in Europe. They can hold it ‘for Captain America’. I can tip off a member of my parliament, and Wakanda can sue for its return.”

“Then it will no longer matter if the US government throws their hat in the ring,” said Tony Stark. “It will be tied up in courts for more than enough time for the entire matter regarding Captain America’s legitimacy to be settled.”

“Precisely.”

And hopefully (perhaps even probably) by that time Captain America would be out of his hair, and T’Challa wouldn’t have to care how it turned out at all. In the meantime, the man himself would be nicely distracted while alternative living arrangements were made for James Barnes. T’Challa could make the first few steps into detangling himself and his country from the chaos Captain America brought with him.

They both stood, and Tony Stark clapped him on the shoulder. T’Challa reached out for a proper handshake. For such a bad day, it had turned into a surprisingly well. T’Challa was very aware that he had Tony Stark to thank for most of that. He had not, in any way, been exaggerating when he said that he owed the man.
Chapter 13

Clint knew he’d been a bit of a hypocrite when he'd given Scott a hard time about the Accords. After all, Clint himself didn’t give a damn about any UN paperwork. Clint would be dumbfounded if Natasha felt any differently. SHIELD had spent decades operating directly in contravention of UN resolutions. UN resolutions were precisely as powerful as the people willing to enforce them. No vote by Nowhereistan and Darkest Africanaria was going to make – or stop – America from doing anything it wanted to do. People like Ross might use them as a fig leaf over their own corruption, but they could manage perfectly well without. After all, waterboarding was against international law, and Clint hadn’t seen that stop any ‘Good Guy’ he’d ever met. His problem had never been whether he, or Steve, or Stark, agreed with the words of the Accords. His problem had been Stark’s willingness to help Ross enforce them. Teams had been drawn, and Stark had joined ‘them’.

But over the months of investigation, Laura’s question had proved unanswerable – when Tony Stark had come down on the side of the Accords, why hadn’t it been Steve’s job to show some loyalty and side with Tony? They had been joint leaders back when; it wasn’t supposed to be the Steve Rogers Show. Even if Clint argued that Steve was the most in charge, Steve still wasn’t supposed to make decisions until after he’d listened to the experts. And who on earth would count as experts on political matters within the team if not Natasha and Tony?

So when Laura had pressured him to call Tony, Clint had accepted. It wasn’t like listening to Tony’s side of the story was going to harm anyone. And deep inside of himself, he knew something had to change. Standing up to overwhelming forces to save the world was one thing. But this hanging about in Wakanda, knowing his family was out there, suffering unprotected in his absence? That was something else. That couldn’t go on, and no-one else seemed to be taking the steps to resolve it.

Clint closed the door to his room and engaged the privacy setting he had discovered. Until he switched it off, he would be in an isolated little bubble. No sound would come in or out of the room. The lack of situational awareness had made him twitchy the first few times he had used it, but not anymore. After using it took speak to Laura so often, it now felt more like a impenetrable hiding place. The soft browns and golds of the furnishings blended together into an impression of warmth and safety. It was the outside world that was dangerous.

Clint propped the phone into position, and hit the connect button the second the time ticked over. Tony came into view, standing in front of one of those silly hologram desks. Tony looked terrible. Clint knew the kind of tricks of lighting and setting that would make a man look more ill than he actually was. Tony wasn't using any of them. He also wasn't using any of the tricks to make himself look better. And that said more worrying things about his mental health than his physical.

Clint took a deep breath, and started with the line he had practiced. “Thank you for looking after my family.”

Tony looked startled, and then dismissive. “I did that for their own sakes. You don’t owe me anything.”

“Yeah, still…” Clint trailed off. That’s where he got stuck. He’d promised Laura not to be a confrontational dick about things, but he found it even harder to go on than he’d thought he would.

Eventually, it was Tony who cracked. “Look, I’m sorry I didn’t keep you in the loop when everything started kicking off. I thought I was keeping everyone safe by keeping you and Wanda out of it, but it should have been your choice whether you wanted to get involved or not. If the situations had been reversed, I would have wanted to know enough to make my own decision. I should have
Clint nodded stiffly. He realised for the first time that he had been hurt. Hurt that no-one had cared enough to ask what he thought. Hurt that he’d been pushed out and disregarded just because he’d retired. Hurt that Stark had chosen some petty small-time crook-catcher than his own former team mate to stand next to him.

But Tony’s apology reminded him of another planned piece of conversation he’d promised Laura. “I’m sorry for what I said about Rhodes on the Raft.”

Tony waved that away as well. Tony leaned back against a bar stool, and Clint wondered about his recovery levels. Pain alone could exhaust someone, when it was day in and day out, and Tony hadn’t been a picture of good health even before Siberia. The practical and psychological effects of having to alter every element of his personal life had to be taking a lot out of the man.

“Hell, if anyone understands about lashing out when you feel vulnerable, it’s me. That’s not what—”

Tony cut himself off.

“What?” asked Clint, the ever-present anger threatening to boil up. “What is it, exactly, you think I should be apologising for?”

Tony flinched back a little before steadying. “It’s not that I think you should apologise. It’s just that I don’t understand why things went so badly wrong. If I’d known…”

Tony trailed off with a flappy gesture that drew attention to the gloves he was wearing. Clint tried not to make it obvious he was staring at them, trying to see if he could spot the difference, but he suspected his awkward glancing away was even more obvious.

Tony took a few breaths. “I’d almost managed to salvage things. The only person who was taking me a little longer was Wanda, but that was just house arrest, not the RAFT. With that information in my hands, we could have won everything. We would have come out of it with public support on our side.”

“They still would have insisted on the Accords, though,” said Clint.

Clint's own research had made it perfectly clear that the agreement was the very least the developing worlds were willing to accept, considering that the major powers were refusing to treat superheroes like the illegal combatants. A public relations fiction, but an important one for all of that. Politicians needed something to convince their own support bases that they were doing something and acting strong.

“Yes,” said Tony, without hesitance. “But I might even have gotten Steve, at least, some sort of special status. He could have been covered by the protections of the Accord without as many of the restrictions as the rest of us. Most of the governments had still trusted him before all this. And we could have made it better. I could have negotiated exemptions for anyone participating only in the world-ending shit. I could have argued for amendments anytime the Accords ended up being slightly less than perfect. If we’d shown we were willing to compromise, then we could have made things better. Steve could have had a real seat at the table.”

Clint shrugged awkwardly. They were straying into territory Clint didn’t understand very well, despite all his investigations. He didn’t see why people cared about the words on some pieces of paper, so which words in particular were better or worse than others made very little sense to him. Steve had tried to explain himself, but Clint hadn’t managed to figure out which compromises Steve thought were okay – like the whole Wanda situation – and which were going too far – like the whole
Wanda situation.

Tony sounded terrifyingly fragile as he said, “We were all teammates for years. We relied on each other to save the world and keep each other alive. Why didn’t anyone just tell me about Zemo before you decided to attack the compound?”

Clint imagined it from Tony’s point of view for the first time. He'd had a friend and teammate destroy his building out of nowhere for no apparent reason, when he'd been fighting to get what those friends wanted. Clint cringed. He thought about pointing out that they’d tried to say something at the airport, but he knew that had been long past the point of things going wrong. Whatever political magic Tony could have managed before then, it had all been far too late for him to smooth things over by then.

Clint shrugged again instead. “Steve told me you’d been compromised.”

“Fucking mind control,” said Tony.

“Fucking mind control,” agreed Clint, gratefully seizing on that excuse.

There was another awkwardly long silence, and again, Tony was the one to break it.

"Look," said Tony. “I think you know why Laura asked us to speak. I can fight for you to come home. But I’m not going to be able to get as good a deal for you as I managed for Sam and Steve last time. That bridge has already been burnt. If you’re not prepared to accept any terms whatsoever, then I need to put more focus into things that will actually do some good.”

“What kind of terms are we talking about?” asked Clint.

“Well, good thing is, you stayed out of the Azania mess. That gives us more options.”

*For me,* thought Clint, going lightheaded. *That gives more options for me.* Stark wasn’t talking about bringing the whole team back. Stark was just talking about him. Clint should have terminated the call that very second. Or at least made it very clear what his position was. He stood together with his team, no matter what. Instead, what came out of his mouth was, “Yeah, I promised Laura.”

Tony tapped the table with the palms of his hand, rather than what would have been his fingertips. “I think I can get you some sort of probation community service deal, but the nature of service will depend on whether you want to continue doing hero-type work. Do you?”

Clint hesitated for a very different reason this time. Answering that question honestly would be admitting the truth not just to Tony, but also to himself. Retirement had *sucked.* He’d gone from being one of the most important men on the planet to his wife’s unskilled assistant, and he’d hated that. He’d spent all those years fantasising about how wonderful it would be out in the open air, spending his entire day with his family. It had been the only thing that got him through the worst of the SHIELD bullshit, some days. But when he’d finally had the opportunity to do it, reality hadn’t come close to matching up. He loved his family just fine, but he had discovered to his horror that he didn’t *like* them enough for that kind of exclusivity. He’d liked his old job. He’d liked making a difference.

When Steve had called him, Clint had been stuck in cycle. He’d felt frustrated at the pettiness of his new life, then felt guilty about being frustrated, then felt angry about feeling guilty, and then felt frustrated about feeling angry. Over and over again, until he thought his mind had transformed into a rabid weasel. In SHIELD, and even in the Avengers, he’d had outlets whenever the stress grew too much. On the farm there was nothing other than physical labour, and that was the source of half of
his stress. If he went back to that now, he knew that he’d very easily fall into the habit of taking the edge off with alcohol. He couldn’t afford to do that. He didn’t put an arrow through a particularly irritating chicken when he was sober. He didn’t blame Laura for his own failings when he was sober. Most importantly, he didn’t replicate his upbringing on his own kids when he was sober.

“Yes. I think... yes,” said Clint.

“Then,” said Tony without judgement, “second question. Approaches emphasising how you’re not super-powered would get you out of the more dangerous Accord-level difficulties, but it would play against you being allowed back on the Avengers. Would you do be willing to do work without Steve?”

“Yes.” Clint’s answer was so quick that he surprised even himself. He wanted the whole team to come back home, safe and sound, but it turned out that wasn’t the same thing as wanting to work with them again.

Clint had volunteered when Steve had called, he wasn’t ever going to deny that. But the goods he’d received appeared a little different to what was shown on TV. Clint wasn’t the only one to bitch about whether Steve made a priority of the well-being of anyone whose name wasn’t ‘Bucky’. There was the RAFT breakout, sure, but even then, that was for the good of Wanda and Sam. Clint and Scott would have been better off staying put.

Steve’s indifference to their long-term maintenance was also growing increasingly worrisome. Clint acknowledged that someone always seemed to step in to handle the care and feeding of the team, the way Tony had when SHIELD fell, and the way T’Challa had when Steve had broken them out. But that hadn’t been a result of anything Steve had done, or could reasonably have foreseen. The net that he’d always trusted Steve to provide was looking increasingly threadbare.

Finally, working with Steve also meant working with Wanda. Clint knew that wouldn't make Laura happy. Bad enough that he wouldn’t be coming home full time without that on top of it. And it wasn’t just that overblown mind control thing she still thought was going on. Clint knew Laura wasn’t jealous of Wanda – not in a romantic sense, at any rate – but Clint’s acceptance of her in the wake of Pietro’s death had been extreme. He could understand now why Laura was so uncomfortable with him spending more time around her.

Clint could see calculations flashing through Tony’s eyes. “Then I can sell it as you want to remain retired, but in recognition of your actions, you’re willing to take your lumps and provide service. The rescuing of cats out of trees type of superhero duties. There’s a lot of work that SHIELD used to do that the government is slowly coming to realise is absolutely vital, and you’d be an excellent candidate. Then when your probation period is over, you’ll be well placed to stay, leave or join any other team.”

“That sounds like something I could live with,” said Clint. He bit his lip, then asked, “but the others?”

Stark rubbed his forehead. “If Barnes continues to keep his head down, everyone will continue ignoring him. I can arrange something similar as you for whatsisname – giant boy. Once I’ve established those precedents, and if it works out well, then it’ll be easier to make an argument for Steve and Sam. Wanda... Wanda will be difficult. Her reputation plays against her. She’d need to show genuine remorse and an intention to change her ways. Hell, you all will. I can’t do anything to help unless you want to be helped.”

Clint felt a surge of fury, but it was drowned by suspicion. What was he getting angry about? All Tony was saying was that even he couldn’t perform miracles. Tony wasn’t at fault for Wanda’s
public image. That was Wanda’s own actions, and Steve’s negligence in explaining any of them. Clint was getting very tired of being angry all the time, and this was a stupid thing to be angry at Tony about. Not that Clint was saying that Laura had been right, but perhaps Laura had been right.

“Thank you, Tony,” said Clint. He wasn’t making any commitments, not until there was something on the table for everyone, but it still needed to be said. “I appreciate that you’re willing to do this for us, considering.”

“Sure, no problem,” said Tony, looking surprised at being thanked.

That made Clint’s breath catch. Arranging this clearly was going to be a large problem for Tony, and Tony had every reason to leave him to rot. And yet, Tony had seemed to expect Clint to take it for granted. When Tony had taken over the support of the Avengers, Clint hadn’t thought much about it. After all, Clint hadn’t felt particularly grateful to Fury for providing equipment either. The obligation to show appreciation went the other way around. But perhaps in all of that, there had been things that Tony had been offering as a friend, and Clint had been acting as if Tony was simply the face of the resources division. That might explain more about why Tony hadn’t carried on reaching out after Ultron than Clint was comfortable thinking about.

Clint cleared his throat. “I’ll let you know about the others.”

They ended the call on that note, as awkwardly as they’d started it. Clint send a brief text to Laura, and then switched off the isolation.

Now all he had to figure out how he was going to convince the rest of them to go along with this. He hadn’t even let any of them know he’d been staying in contact with Laura, and that was going to make explaining his contact with Tony difficult. And he could not deny that this was an escape that was going to be far more immediate for him than for most of them. Clint was becoming far more expert at examining and draining away his anger, but guilt seemed to have firmer foundations.

He followed the voices to the sitting room. Someone had left the door open while steaming broccoli again, and his nose wrinkled at the stench. He pushed aside that irritation and decided it wasn’t worth the effort to complain. They had more important things to talk about. He stepped through the doorway, mentally rehearsing a few openings, but he was brought up sharp by an irritatingly familiar sight. A news show about Tony’s injuries and Steve looking like a kicked puppy.

Someone had leaked pictures of Stark’s hands post-operation, and it was trending on every news program in the world. The pictures looked surprisingly ungory – just smooth skin going around the ends of the fingers, with neat little scars tucked well back from the new edges. But they didn’t look like hands anymore. They didn’t look like Tony’s hands. They didn’t look like an engineer’s hands. Clint felt his own hands involuntarily curl up in response. If he’d lost the ability to shoot arrows, he would never have forgiven anyone involved.

Sam was patting Steve on the arm. “You can’t blame yourself for Stark’s frostbite. He was trying to kill Bucky, and it was a perfectly reasonable reaction to immobilise him and get Bucky to safety.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” said Clint, his repressed emotions bubbling up in this new direction. “Tony was not trying to kill Bucky. I get that guilt is hard for you to handle Captain, but I really don’t think lying to Sam about it is going to help you any.”

Sam looked at him disapprovingly. “Stark explicitly said he was going to take them down. Steve had every reason to take him seriously.”

“Since when do any of us care about what Tony says?” asked Clint. “Tony’s actions were what
mattered, and it was perfectly obvious that he wasn’t. I’ve seen what one of those mini-missiles can do. So has Steve. You might not be as familiar with the suit’s sheer weight of destructive ability to appreciate it, but Steve and I have worked alongside it first-hand. Steve knows he’s talking bullshit with this whole ‘Stark wasn’t going to stop unless I made him’ thing. If Stark had wanted them dead at any point during that argument, Steve and Bucky would both be a fine paste decorating the walls of several nearby rooms. Instead, they walked away unharmed while Stark’s the one who was left with permanent, life-altering injuries.”

Steve looked shocked and on the point of tears. Clint thought about the man who was still trying to help them, even after everything, and pushed on. “Steve got scared and beat someone up to make himself feel better. It wasn’t the first time, and it won’t be the last time. So what if he’s just as much of a bully as every other member of the human race? Newsflash, Steve: you’re not perfect. Grow the fuck up and stop throwing a fucking pity party every time you disappoint yourself.”

“Clint,” said Sam. “I think that’s enough. I understand that you have your opinion, but Steve needs our support right now. If you’re not in a place to provide that, then maybe you should leave us to it.”

Clint crossed his arms. “Are you really fucking sending me to my room right now? Is that what you’re doing?”

"Clint—" said Steve, reprimanding. Whether it was over his language, or over being rude to Sam, or over pointing out the truth, Clint didn’t know. He didn’t much care, either.

"Fuck, fine, whatever," said Clint, turning around and heading back.

He supposed that answered his dilemma over what to say to them. Nothing. None of what Stark had offered for Clint had needed their agreement for anything. They could find out what was happening when it happened. If they wanted him to keep his mouth shut, then Clint was perfectly happy to keep his mouth shut. The only exception he needed to make was for Scott. Scott had gotten the raw end of the deal all around. He deserved the chance to learn what his options were. But Clint could do that without involving any one else in their decisions. It wasn’t like Scott was saying much about anything anymore.

He closed the door and picked up the phone again. Maybe Laura had time for a proper phone call, despite it not being their regular time. Laura deserved to hear what was going on, and they could make some proper decisions for their family if it all went through.
Phil didn’t let his nerves show as he entered Stark’s domain. Officially, Stark had no part in the re-legitimization of SHIELD. Well, none beyond the agreements necessary to transfer back the prior members who had taken refuge with him. In reality, Stark could break them if he was sufficiently motivated. Phil needed to ensure he did not have any such motivation, which was why he had risked making this unofficial appointment through Stark’s latest AI.

At the door was a scrolling list of names that confused Phil until he recognised one of them. A victim of collateral damage in an Avengers operation. If they were all in the same line, that could potentially say very bad things about Stark’s coping mechanisms. Phil tried to judge Stark’s frame of mind as he moved past them. In a rather grim way, it would be better for Phil if Stark was in the middle of an emotional breakdown. Past experience showed that it was far easier to manipulate the man when he was caught up in his own pain.

But Phil thought not. Stark’s actions since being released from hospital had shown the concentration and competence of Stark at his best, not the desperate grasping of a man hanging from a ledge. Phil thought wryly that for once in his life, Stark was reacting precisely the way the SHIELD psychologists had predicted. Stark had been unique in the original Avengers in not being socially isolated. For all Stark liked to play the poor little rich boy card, he was very good at making friends. He had half a dozen people loyal enough to help him hide a body, from a wide range of ages and situations. That diversity became even more obvious when one looked at his friendly acquaintances. Stark had multiple and varied interests, and accumulated circles of people who knew him independently of his other interests. On a day to day level, Stark interacted with more people than all the rest of the Avengers combined. Stark wasn’t dependent on being a superhero socially, financially, or even psychologically. As one analyst had put it - ‘if the Avenger’s fall apart tomorrow, he's the only one who has the capacity to walk away unharmed.’

As Phil examined him now, he decided that ‘unharmed’ was not a fair description of the outcome. Even leaving aside the more obvious problems with his hands, strain lines had etched themselves deep into Stark’s face and his eyes had that hollowed, bruised, look. But it had not incapacitated him either. Perhaps because of the nature of the choices he had made. It was telling that the people who had resisted Steve’s personal appeal to disregard the law were the people who had the most luxury for ethical absolutes. If Phil had to guess, he would say the damage had sharpened Stark’s focus; not distracted him. As painful as standing against the flow was, moral courage came with inherent consolation. It just remained to be seen if that conviction would pit him against the new SHIELD as well.

Stark was making broad gestures at a blue representation rather than the much more mechanical work Phil had interrupted so often in the past. The display was busy, but the lab itself was also much less cluttered than Phil remembered of Stark’s work. It didn’t take much thought to figure out why. It was also more open. The floor to ceiling broadcasts made Phil feel vaguely like they were on the upper balcony of a news room. He felt a moment of unexpected vertigo, and positioned himself to look in the opposite direction.

Without looking away from what he was doing, Stark spoke as if talking to himself. "When you get desperate enough, you'll do something that edges the line. Then if you don't experience any negative consequences, you don't need to be that desperate to do it the second time. And before you know it, it's just business as usual. And you can't afford to think 'maybe this is a bad thing' because that might mean you are the bad guy, and being the good guy is the only thing that justifies everything you've done."
Finally Stark turned and faced Phil. "For obvious reasons, I went through the files very thoroughly since Siberia. The RAFT wasn't a result of General Ross and it wasn't a result of HYDRA. It was all SHIELD. How many people has, say, Clint sent there to rot away indefinitely? More than five? More than fifty?"

Phil shook his head. He honestly didn’t know. Part of that was because he had never wanted to know his own figures.

Stark continued, “People who are still there, for whom none of you has ever come forward to say – hey, now that aliens and super-powers aren’t world-wide secrets, here’s my evidence, so how about they get that trial now?"

“I…” said Phil, then forced himself to stop. “You’re right. All I can say is that, by the time I realised that SHIELD’s anonymity was a lost cause, it was already burning down around my ears. I was too caught up with running for my life to think of others. But that will be change in the future. I can and will co-operate with the relevant authorities to get proper trials for everyone. You have my word on it.”

“Thank you,” said Stark. “That does mean a lot, and I say that quite sincerely. But I can’t help but think that the RAFT is just one of the symptoms, and not even the most extreme example of morally corrupt practices that can be laid at SHIELD’s door."

Stark’s eyes dropped to Phil’s chest, but he didn’t bring up TAHITI. In return, Phil didn’t bring up Ultron, in either word or expression.

Stark said, "I know what changes I’ve made so that I do see negative consequences to borderline decisions. Don’t get me wrong, I’m still prepared to do what needs to be done, and then live with those consequences if it’s the only way to save the world. But having consequences forces me to stop and look for better options. If SHIELD is re-legitimised, is there just going be the same slide of accepting the unacceptable it went through the first time?"

Phil said, "In the years I’ve been semi-independent, I’ve been away from the group-think and realised that we crossed lines too easily. I don’t want that any more than you do. We will be putting many, many more safeguards in place. Both I, and the people sponsoring me, want that."

Stark, almost infinitesimally, lost some tension. He leaned back and said with a faint smile, "Fury set you up for that, you realise."

Phil must have betrayed his incomprehension in his expression, because Stark continued, “To be the trusted semi-outsider? Fury positioned you as the most acceptable candidate to take over SHIELD after the HYDRA fiasco. I think he suspected something wasn’t right since before the Chitauri invaded. Being the ultimate spy that he was, his instincts were to trust only himself until he could expose the full problem, and move his more valuable pieces out of harm’s way.”

“He never liked to act precipitously,” said Phil, without committing to anything.

“But his instincts are wrong,” said Stark. “If he’d just mentioned his concerns to any of half a dozen people – hell, if he’d just dropped a hint to me – we wouldn’t have helicarriers dropped into the bay, hundreds of innocent deaths, dozens of missing or dead agents, and the rest of you having to live the rest of your lives with the stigma of being possible Nazi terrorists.”

Phil’s lips tightened, but it wasn’t like Stark was saying anything he hadn’t wondered himself. If Fury had been just a little less cryptic in any one of half a dozen encounters, just how much better could Phil have done?
Instead, Phil steered the conversation back to an earlier point. “Do you really think Fury was trying to remove me in particular from the splash damage? I can’t help but think that seems a little egotistical of me to believe that.”

“Well then,” said Stark. "Be reassured. I doubt you were either the first or the last. Just the most successful. In fact, that’s precisely what I think he tried to do with the Avengers SHIELD members, but he was too little too late."

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“Really? They seem to have come through with their reputations intact. At least until the more recent activities,” added Phil, a little wryly.

“Exactly,” said Stark. “Fury could remove the agents from the SHIELD-HYDRA culture, but not the culture from the agents.”

“How so?” asked Phil, with marked politeness.

Stark replied, “You don’t think their behaviour after your death was a little concerning?”

Phil bared his teeth. “I agree it wasn’t always wise, but I’m not sure what HYDRA overtones you’re seeing.”

A bot slid into sight brandishing a fire extinguisher, but Phil didn’t let himself react to it. Showing concern for homicidal AIs would send entirely the wrong message.

Stark said with a trace of impatience. "Look, you're not going to believe my opinion about your favourite agents anyway."

Phil just waited him out.

As expected, Stark broke first. "I've seen them in situations where they deal with others who are not supposed to be our enemy. It was obvious early on that they put no moral standard above the personal wellbeing of the people they consider their own. None of that changed just because they were no longer answerable to SHIELD – in fact, it got worse. The Maximoff twins were excused multiple counts of premeditated murder because they helped protect Barton. Later, on the RAFT, Wilson was upset that the place existed at all, but Barton was just upset that they dared to treat him like he was the outsider. I could go on, but I'm sure you get the idea. Barton and Natashalie weren't upset with the actions of HYDRA-SHIELD; they were just upset that one of their own wasn’t in charge anymore."

Phil tilted his head and let it go. He could look through the mission reports and come back for more information later, if he had to work with them again. But it did give him an opportunity to ask something he was curious about. "I was under the impression that Natasha was in favour of the Accords."

Stark laughed. "Not quite. She realised the Accords would happen whether she was in favour or not, and thought that signing them would get more power than not signing them. She wasn't wrong, but she tripped over her own in-group/out-group disconnect. So even though she was the one to invite T'Challa along in the first place, she panicked when T'Challa attacked Steve and attacked T'Challa in return."

"You believe that Natasha Romanoff, that the internationally famous assassin Black Widow, panicked?" asked Phil with a raised eyebrow.

Stark gave him an unimpressed look over the top of imaginary sunglasses. "Natasha's trust issues give my trust issues inferiority complexes. When something threatens her self-concept, yes, she
Phil winced. Steve could be excused a lot of that. It would be reasonable for him to think that would save SHIELD from HYDRA, and he didn’t have the context to know how much damage it would do. Natasha, on the other hand, would have been well aware of just how many loyal SHIELD operatives and true innocents it would get killed as well. Even how many of the HYDRA agents had not deserved the deaths they had received. Not with how many of them were just trying to keep their loved ones alive, or were recruited under false pretences. Phil wanted to make a defence that they’d been under great pressure and limited time, so they’d just done the best they could – but that was practically the dictionary definition of ‘panic’.

Stark let him think it out, and then continued. “So to return to my point – despite best efforts, they never recovered from their training. Can you? When Fury gets on the phone and tells you to trust him and break the law to save the world, what is your answer going to be?”

Phil thought about pointing out Fury’s putative deceased status, but let it go. He didn’t know what Stark knew, but he wasn’t going to lose any credibility over protecting a cover story he didn’t agree with in the first place. Instead, he gave Stark’s question the full and complete consideration it deserved.

Phil said, “I can’t promise I’ll say no. Even if he set it up that way deliberately, it’s still true that he knows a lot of things I don’t. It might be necessary to move too rapidly to correct that secrecy and do things the proper way. But I can promise to come back and face the consequences afterwards. When Fury faked my death – well, let’s say he used up my willingness to back his plays without further information.”

Stark sat silent long enough to start worrying Phil. Then he nodded. “That’s not everything, but I guess it’s still something. More than I’ve received from other parties, at any rate.”

Phil had dithered over whether or not to try an apology for past behaviour. If Stark took it as manipulative, it could backfire on him. But if Stark was holding a grudge against him personally, he wanted to know about it. "Stark – it might not have seemed that way, but we did care about keeping you alive and functional. But I can see that some of our treatment prior to the Chitauri invasion was unnecessarily petty. I apologise for the power games."

Stark waved that off. "I saw the RAFT records, remember? I am well aware of the difference between my treatment and the treatment of people you didn’t care about."

Phil stilled, and then allowed Stark to see he’d scored a point. Phil didn’t know how many others could have worked through their teething problems to become functional super-heroes. SHIELD hadn’t had the resources to wait and see in the majority of cases. One suspicious event like Stark’s birthday party, and they would have been dropped in a hole without anyone taking the time to find out if there had been mitigating circumstances.

Perhaps it was time to stop dancing around the point. “What do you want from SHIELD?”

“Besides you not acting like a dysfunctional mob family, you mean?” asked Stark.

Phil winced. “Yes, besides that.”

Stark smiled in response. “The Powers That Be are considering starting a strictly domestic superhero team that doesn’t have all that pesky Accords mandated transparency. The military is insisting one of their own leads it, a Carol Danvers, I believe, but it has been suggested that it ought to come under
SHIELD’s budget and general management.”

Stark really should not have known any of that. Phil just nodded. “I believe that Secretary Ross has objected to SHIELD’s involvement, however.”

Stark waved that away. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that. Ross’s opinion is not something we need to consider very much in the long term.”

Phil opened his mouth to ask, and then decided he’d rather not know. If Stark was willing to take that particular problem off his plate, Phil was more than willing to let him.

“I suspect that,” said Stark, “should SHIELD be reinstated, it would be in everyone’s best interest that you take charge of such a team. And I suspect that, if you could make space available within that team for Clint Barton and Scott Lang, along with a personal promise to supervise their probation, that offer would be gratefully received. It would, after all, place two vulnerable superheroes close to their families and support groups, in a controlled environment they’re used to and obviously need. Perhaps you could even have them joined by the person who bears such a coincidental resemblance to Natasha Romanoff.”

“But the Avengers…” said Phil, shocked.

This time there was absolutely no humour in Stark’s smile. “I suspect that the major players – well, the major player – will take a little longer to return to us, but I wouldn’t give up hope. Perhaps by the end of the year. But that team would be governed entirely an Accords. It should not fall under the auspices of SHIELD.”

Stark said it all casually, like it was little more than wishful thinking. Phil wasn’t fooled, and he wasn’t meant to be. When Stark said ‘I suspect’, he meant ‘I’ll make sure happens’. Those were Stark’s terms. Everyone could come home, but only half of them could keep the Avengers name. Phil had to let that half go, and take responsibility for keeping the other half in line. It made an interesting kind of sense that it was the most difficult members that Stark wanted to keep under Stark’s own personal control. Phil wasn’t entirely sure which of those proposals Stark had intended as the carrot and which was the stick.

To give himself more time to consider, Phil asked, “You believe that Steve can still be brought back on board? If your arguments failed the first time, I’m not sure there’s anyone who could be more convincing.”

Phil wasn’t trying to be flattering. Stark could literally charm the birds from the trees when he chose. If Steve wasn’t willing to listen to Stark, the teammate who’d been willing to sacrifice his life for the good of the world in front of Steve’s very eyes, just who would Steve consider a reliable source?

Stark dragged both hands down his face. “Turns out I suck at explaining things to people I respect when I feel strongly about something. Steve doesn’t think anything about the Accords, he just feels they’re bad. If the other options he has start to feel worse – and they will, even if he doesn’t realise that yet – he’ll put up with Accords.”

Phil nodded. It made sense of what he knew of Steve. Steve had a very strong sense of right and wrong, but it was instinctive rather than reasoned out. Steve’s conviction that absolute good or evil existed was very appealing to someone caught in the shifting sands of the ends justifying the means. But that also meant that Steve never stopped to consider whether ‘doing the right thing’ was the same thing when you were a powerless sickly boy in the forties, a soldier during war-time, or a powerful super-hero in the modern civilian world.
“You know,” continued Stark, “Humans are fucking ridiculous. Everyone knows you can’t use logical arguments to defeat an emotional position, but we try anyway. I mean, not for the little stuff – no-one tries to tell a mother that her kid, objectively, scores at most a three out of ten compared to other kids of the same age. No-one thinks it would help to bring out pictures of better looking babies, or organise an impartial survey. But the minute someone claims the Earth was created six thousand years ago, or climate change isn’t happening, or that immigration causes unemployment, and we suddenly think that pointing out facts is going to change someone’s mind.”

Phil hesitated. Stark responded better to confrontation than to compassion, but things might have slid too far in that direction. Still— “I believe you’re not as inconsistent on the matter as most people, Stark. You would organise that survey.”

Stark huffed a laugh, but didn’t say anything further. It was Phil’s turn.

“I believe,” said Phil, “that if I was asked to reform SHIELD, then oversight of any domestic superhero teams would be a key responsibility. I would not, unfortunately, have the time or resources available to try to monitor an international group, however.”

Stark didn’t insult him by showing any smugness. He just swung back to his display. “Well, I have work; you have work. Especially if you’re going to get SHIELD all shiny and spring cleaned in time for its re-opening. Have your people call my people to make all the problem kids your people again. They’ve been missing their normal babysitter.”

Phil didn’t grin, but it was a close thing. Stark wasn’t just going to allow SHIELD to restart. He was willing to push for it. Phil said with a light covering of sarcasm over the underlying sincerity, “Gee, thanks, Stark. I can’t wait.”

Phil was almost to the door when Stark spoke again.

“One last thing before you disappear back into the shadows?” asked Stark. ”Can I say that you’re being surprisingly nonpartisan for such an enthusiast of Captain America. This is hardly the first time he’s put his personal conscience above his orders, after all. I thought that was one of the things you admired about him.”

Phil turned to face him. This was too important to downplay. “I admired Steve for being everything I couldn’t be within SHIELD. I wanted to be able to be open, unconcerned and driven to do right by the weakest members of the population. But his recent actions? They were just as secretive and self-centred as SHIELD at its worst. There is honour in doing the right thing no matter what. But to reframe a previous question of yours, part of that is hanging around to accept the consequences. Hurting others and then running away is not my idea of admirable behaviour.”

Stark hummed, then pointedly turned his attention to his holograms. Phil allowed himself to grin this time. The avoidance was a reassuring piece of normality. He was surprised Stark had allowed them to get so close to messy emotions in the first place. But what Phil had said was out there now, and hopefully they’d help Stark to heal.

Phil did indeed take pains to disappear from FRIDAY’s sensors, but it was more as an in-joke than paranoia. SHIELD, with Stark’s backing, might still not be able to walk around in the sun, but shortly they would be able to switch on the lights.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Scott had been a little jumpy when Clint had appeared in front of him and asked point blank whether he would turn himself in if they could get some sort of deal. It wasn’t a new thought for Scott. With his criminal record, he knew that nothing was likely to be sweetness and light, but he wasn’t seeing much in the way of options.

Every day they stayed on the run, they made the Accords seem more necessary, not less. Every day they defied the law, they made the general public more afraid of superheroes – and not all of those superheroes were safely inside palaces. Every day they stayed in that palace, they cost T’Challa both resources and respect. The man had offered to help Steve and Barnes because he felt guilty about his motivations for attacking Barnes. The man didn’t owe Scott shit. Scott didn’t like being the kind of person who took advantage of people like that.

So while he hadn’t said yes, exactly, he had said a strong maybe. Clint had turned out to be in the same boat – except Clint had a plan. Well, Stark had a plan. Scott wasn’t too sure how he felt about that, but at least Stark had volunteered to handle it. Unlike T’Challa who had been presented with results entirely too late to be able to stop it. And it wasn’t like there was much Scott or Clint could do for themselves, with Steve burying his head in the sand. All they could do was watch it play out on television.

“We’ll have to watch later,” said Scott when they realised the living area was already occupied.

Clint had said they didn’t need to keep it a secret. It was just that they didn’t need to go out of their way to tell Steve about it, either. Scott figured that kind of double talk would get him into trouble with one side or other, and most probably both. He would much prefer to avoid the risk entirely.

Clint shrugged.

“I think this is one might be worth it. Stark” – and Clint’s voice dropped when he said the name, like he was a housewife saying the word ‘black’ in a crowded restaurant –“thinks the reaction might be more positive than we were fearing. Besides, it’s not like this lot is going to care.”

Scott bit his lip, but followed Clint as he sat down and found the correct broadcast. Scott put a hand on his leg to stop it from twitching. It was surreal to be perched on the couch, watching people discuss his potential freedom, while Steve and Sam were at the table, working on plans to ‘rescue’ Steve’s shield. The hairs on his neck stood up when he realised that Wanda was just out of his field of vision, perched like a gargoyle on a bar stool she had dragged to between the two groups. He shifted as casually as he could, twisting to lean against the arm rest. Wanda had been paying more and more attention to what was going on, and it hadn’t been doing any good things for her stability.

He breathed out in relief when he confirmed that her attention was on the planned raid, not on them. Scott, personally, had found it hilarious that the Captain America shield was now part of an exhibit of obsolete WWII weaponry in France. As a ‘fuck you’ from Stark, it worked on so many levels. That opinion, however, he was keeping very much to himself.

“This is Matt Thompson, and In On Our Minds Today, Germany is considering pardoning the former Avengers for their actions in Leipzig.”
Scott waited out the applause and the light show, eyes flickering between the others and the screen. It cut to a close up of Matt at his desk without attracting their attention.

“The German Parliament is currently debating whether to drop the criminal charges against the Avengers. Arguing against this move, some members point out that they self-evidently did commit a crime. But the other side is worried that it might make Germany complicit in what they’re calling the illegal incarceration of the Avengers on the RAFT.”

The dropping of charges thing was becoming more than a ridiculous headline, then. Scott turned his head to check the others. Steve was angrily scratching his pen to get it working again, and Scott winced. Sure, the table was sturdy and well made, but that just meant the pen scratches would be on it for a very long time.

“On the face of it, absurd, right? I mean, this isn’t someone getting dragged off to gitmo because they have the same name as a successful suicide bomber ‘Well, you know judge, he might have gotten better’. The Avengers destroyed an airport on live TV, and were caught in the act. They can’t claim they didn’t do it; they can’t claim they didn’t know it was illegal; and they can’t claim they were doing any earthly good. But, like most things legal, it turns out to be so complex that an HBO producer would start to wonder if maybe they had a few too many twists.

“On one hand, the Accords team had international warrants for most of the team that were captured. On the other, that wasn’t true of all of them. But I mean, you don’t have to get a restraining order before stopping your daughter’s ex-boyfriend from pissing on your back door, right? So the team had the right – hell, it had the obligation – to capture all the combatants that were so gleefully engaging in international terrorism. So far, so good.”

Scott could feel his shoulders tensing up around his ears. This was the good news that Stark had promised them?

“But did that mean they could then remove them from German soil? The German experts seem to be coming down on the side of ‘no’. Don’t forget, one of the things that led to the Accords was concerns superheroes were abducting the citizens of foreign countries and holding them without due process. Allowing the Accords team to do the same is like sending your sheep dogs to get attack training against the Colorado State Rams mascot.

“In the same way that courts would rather free a guilty man on a technicality than reward police for violating due process, the argument is that guarding against abuse of the system is more important than a handful of property damage convictions. But is this just a problem that the new guys didn’t complete the proper paperwork? If they had applied for permission, would they have received it? The team in question certainly had every reason to believe that answer would be yes. The Germans, however, are now claiming it wouldn’t have been. Not for the non-super-powered humans at all, and not to a place like to the RAFT for any of the group.

“It’s true that the US has been denied extradition requests from European countries before, at least in part because courts were concerned that our ‘supermax’ prisons are in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights. Going by that it does seem reasonable that extradition would have been denied if it had been known that the US had proposed using the RAFT to imprison them. After all, this is an institution that many think is in violation of even our own rather lax standards when it comes to exploiting and dehumanising prisoners.

“But while some of the leaked footage makes the place look horrific, let us not forget what it was built for. Dangerous, super-powered nutjobs. A straight-jacket and bed restraints looks inhumane on a mental patient as well, but if God was telling Larry Lunatic to bite off everyone’s pinkie fingers, I wouldn’t be the one volunteering for the yakuza look, I can tell you. If the only way to safely contain
someone like Wanda Maximoff violates our current regulations concerning human rights, what are we meant to do? Simply allow her to roam free, skipping from murder to murder, with a little bit of mind-control on the side?"

Scott risked a side glance at Wanda. Her attention was now all on the screen, and she was not happy. She had enough reasons between the reminder of her incarceration and the casual dismissal of her character, but he’d rather she didn’t get upset when she was so close to his unprotected spine.

“Arguments that she is just an innocent pawn of Captain America in this doesn’t really help. Sure, she might have been brainwashed into attacking on people on his orders, but she is obeying those orders. She has been killing and mind-raping people. Her powers aren’t something you can confiscate from her, and we already know asking her nicely isn’t going to help. The people she hospitalised in the last prison break – from a place that might well be the most secure prison in the world, I remind you – aren’t suddenly going to be less damaged because she might also be a fellow victim of the same master-mind. And Wanda isn’t even unique. We make one law for her, and then what do we do when we capture the next psychically active criminal?”

“No difference to reality, thought Scott, but a big difference to Steve’s internal world view. Steve had clearly expected Stark to hand it back ages before. Probably at the same time Stark had gone down on his knees to beg Steve for forgive him and come home, while the adoring public showered the returning Avengers with rose petals and money.

Alright, perhaps that wasn’t fair. Steve wasn’t precisely arrogant. Just so very convinced of his own rightness that he was surprised by any disagreement.

“It isn’t safe there,” said Steve. “Anyone could steal it.”

“Any thoughts on the plan, Clint?” asked Steve.

“Yes. Let’s leave it exactly where it is.” said Clint, the irritation clear in his voice. “Really, is it any different if it’s in some national monument rather than buried in some Stark lab somewhere?”

In the background, Matt continued. “None of this would have become an issue if they had not been forcibly broken out of the RAFT. They would have been moved to Germany for their bail hearing, and either been permitted to walk away, or been remanded to a German detention facility. After all, Accords or no Accords, there is no question that the German authorities did have the authority to imprison them. But even that has a couple of twists.”

“It’s not a proper pardon,” said Sam. “Even worse, it’s a trap. The only thing they’ve agreed on was that they won’t request UN intervention for the perpetrators of Leipzig under the Sokovia Accords. They still want us to turn ourselves in. Since none of the other countries have promised to do anything like that we’d be extradited so fast they wouldn’t even have time to close the jail cell doors.”

“Scott and I haven’t committed any crimes anywhere other than Germany,” pointed out Clint, rather mildly under the circumstances.

“Wanna bet they won’t get you on charges of aiding and abetting?” asked Sam. “At the very least, they’ll get you for breaking out of the RAFT.”
In perfect timing, the broadcast continued – “I mean, just picture it. There you are, a perfectly normal baseline human I would remind you, sitting in your jail cell. Two super-humans violently break into it. ‘Hey, bud! Remember us? The two guys that beat our other buddies near to death for disagreeing with us? Wanna join us in getting out of here?’ Now, I don’t know about you, but I’d be, ‘absolutely, sir, whatever you say, sir. Everything you suggest is absolute genius. And may I point out how noble you look today? The blood splatter is particularly inspired.’”

Scott clamped down on inappropriate laughter.

Clint opened his mouth, and Scott wondered whether he was going to talk about Stark, but instead he said, “I don’t see the urgency. The shield is safe enough where it is. We can afford to wait until T’Challa gets it for us by legal means. And if something does happen, he could probably make you a new one. I mean, it’s just a metal Frisbee at the end of the day. It can’t be too hard to duplicate.”

Steve managed to look both indignant and guilty.

“What aren’t you telling us?” asked Clint, his tone resigned.

Steve squirmed in his seat, like a toddler who didn’t want to waste time going potty. Clint stared him down, and even Sam didn’t come to his rescue.

Steve said eventually, “Vibranium is sacred to Wakanda, or something. T’Challa says that for him to be able to give the shield back or give me more vibranium, their parliament has to approve. He doesn’t seem to think he’ll manage to talk them into it.”

Scott refrained from rolling his eyes at Steve’s confused tone. Wakandan politicians didn’t like Steve very much. Gee, he wondered why.

“So you see,” continued Steve. “It is urgent. We have to get it before that happens, or I might never see it again.”

Clint had half lifted out of the couch to stare at Steve fully. “Two things come to mind. The first is that a lawsuit like this might take years. It isn’t going anywhere. But more important is the second thing. What happens when you acquire the shield through other means and stroll back in with it? T’Challa just says ‘oh, carry on, then’?”

“I’m sure he would turn a blind eye,” said Sam.

“I don’t,” said Clint bluntly. “His religion means as much to him as it does to his people. If the stuff is sacred, I doubt very much that he’d be okay with us stealing it from them.”

Steve puffed up like a Chihuahua confronting a Great Dane. “I’m not stealing it from them. It’s mine. Howard gave it to me before T’Challa was even born.”

“Does the phrase ‘receiving stolen property’ mean anything to you?” asked Scott without thinking. Luckily, Steve barely spared him a glance.

“Look,” said Steve to Clint. “We don’t have to worry about it. He can’t help us officially, but if we get it, I’m sure we could change his mind about letting me keep it.”

Steve wasn’t very good at being disingenuous, though, and Scott wasn’t the only one to notice his eye movement in Wanda’s direction.

“You want me to change it for him,” said Wanda, her voice shaking. “And let me guess, you want me to come along and change other people’s minds as well on this little trip. Despite knowing that’s
not really how my talents work.”

And couldn’t Scott just see how badly that could go.

“I’d like to avoid violence as much as possible,” said Steve. “You’ll be able to keep people from getting hurt.”

“Yeah,” said Wanda. “You want to avoid violence because people blame you for that. They blame me for implanting things into people’s minds.”

“Wanda,” said Steve. “You know it isn’t like that.”

“Do I?” asked Wanda. “Why did you really break me out of the RAFT?”

Steve looked confused by the change in subject matter. “Isn’t that obvious? They were locking you up. That wasn’t right. They can’t lock people up because they’re afraid of them.”

“Technically,” said Wanda, “they were locking me up because I obeyed your orders. But I guess most of them were afraid of me too. And they were afraid of me because of other things I did when I was obeying your orders. Looking back on it, you know what I notice about all of that fear?”

Wanda carried on without waiting for a reply. “It was all aimed at me. I let you tell me they feared us because we were different. But you weren’t the one they were afraid of. You weren’t the one they were burning in effigy. You weren’t the one they were threatening to drag off to a Nigerian jail. People feared me when I first joined the Avengers, but not very much. Not anything like it is now. That fear built up, layer by layer, every time you asked me to do something. So why did you keep asking me to do things?”

Steve frowned. “We were saving lives. I’m sorry about what happened, but there was nothing I could do about it.”

Wanda snorted. “Wouldn’t it be more accurate to say ‘nothing’ is what you chose to do about it? You did nothing when it came to choosing missions and mission responsibilities so that public perception of me would be more positive. You did nothing when speaking to the public to explain things and take responsibility yourself. You did nothing when people got more and more afraid of me. That much nothing makes a person think that’s the outcome that you wanted.”

Scott exchanged a speaking glance with Clint. Honestly, he’d heard of people being unwilling to take responsibility for their own actions, but Wanda was taking the cake. ‘I shouldn’t have had to think of the consequences of my actions! Steve should have done it for me!’ Scott wasn’t exactly claiming to be amazing in the sensible life decisions department himself, but he hadn’t figured it was someone else’s job to do that since he’d been a teenager.

Wanda continued, “any time I’ve asked – that I’ve begged – to leave the palace, you’ve told me no. That it wasn’t safe. That it wasn’t worth it. But now, all of a sudden, it is worth it. Not just to leave. It’s worth it to commit another crime in a country that hasn’t done anything to us. It’s worth it to try to mind control a very powerful man. It’s worth it to risk getting me thrown right back into jail.”

“It won’t come to that,” said Steve, in a pose that Scott would once have considered heroic.

Wanda crossed her arms. “Just like we didn’t need to worry, once we saved the world everything would turn out okay?”

“It will,” insisted Steve. “We just need to hold on.”
“We just have to hold on for what?” asked Wanda, and for once Scott was in complete agreement with her. “Why are we wasting time worrying about your stupid shield instead of doing something to get the Accords overturned?”

“Public opinion is against us at the moment,” said Sam. “Things will settle down and they’ll realise that they need us.”

Clint’s voice was arctic. “Please tell me you’re not hoping for some sort of global threat just so that they’re forced to use us.”

“No, of course Sam didn’t mean anything like that,” said Steve, like that wasn’t exactly what Sam had just said.

Scott thought of all the footage of Excalibur in action. They weren’t in uniform, quite, but they were obviously unified. In appearance, in equipment, and in tactics. Even as a casual viewer, there was no confusion about which were the superheroes and which were the supervillains. Steve and Sam were still acting like he was the only game in town, but the longer teams operating under the Accords did well, the less reasonable his position seemed. The international media was not ‘coming around’ to Steve’s position. If anything, it was the other way around.

Wanda was equally unconvinced. “Things won’t just settle down if we keep continuing to do things that make people scared of us.”

“I’m just retrieving my own property,” said Steve. “That isn’t going to scare people. It’s a defensive tool, not a weapon.”

Scott thought that if Steve believed that, he’d clearly never watched any footage of himself fighting. Scott didn’t even know how many people were in graves because of that defensive tool.

Wanda was now standing. “They might not fear you. They’ll blame me for anything that happens. Well forget it. You can ‘rescue’ your damn shield without me. I didn’t escape from HYDRA just to become your captive instead.”

Scott wondered at the historical revisionism. Wanda had now been a captive of HYDRA, it seemed, rather than a willing volunteer.

“Wanda, you must see—“

“No, said Wanda. “I don’t have to see anything. I’m not hanging around here so that you can use me to do your dirty work anymore.”

Wanda stormed out like the child Steve so often claimed she was.

“She doesn’t mean that,” said Sam.

Scott wasn’t so sure about that. Wanda had sounded pretty serious to Scott.

“She’s just getting a bit of cabin fever,” continued Sam. “You know how she gets when she feels like she’s been trapped somewhere. She doesn’t really think you’re to blame for things.”

“Our plans won’t work without her,” pointed out Steve, rearranging the papers on the table.

And if Wanda had heard that, wouldn’t she have found that convincing evidence that they insisted she stay with them for her own safety and not for her talents?
“But you’re right,” continued Steve. “I’m sure she’ll see how important this is when she calms down.”

Sure, she’d understand. Just like the world would understand. Scott wondered whether Steve had ever had a long-term plan more complex than ‘hope for the best’. So far, Scott had managed to stay out of any expeditions, but that wouldn’t last forever. At some point Steve would think of ways to use the Ant costume, and Scott would be stuck.

And that was only if T’Challa didn’t rip them all to shreds for proposing to mind control him. Although it would be even worse if they succeeded. To repay the king’s hospitality in such a way just wasn’t right. Scott was increasingly coming to see that it wasn’t a choice between Stark and Steve. It was a choice between Stark and nothing at all. And Scott wasn’t willing to go through the rest of his life with nothing. Not when he had so much to go home to, and so little to stay behind for.

Chapter End Notes

Having computer problems, so there won’t be an update this week. Apologies!
Chapter 16

Jim watched the internet explode in horror. Just when he thought things were finally starting to come around, things managed to get worse. Someone had hacked into Tony’s psychologist’s office, and released all of Tony’s files online. The major news sources were still being careful about how much they said, but the internet felt no such constraints.

There was almost too much for anything to take focus, but one that was very strongly trending was footage very similar to that Jim had already seen, but worse. Jim had mentally and euphemistically labelled it the Siberia footage, but it was trending under #MurderousRogers. And this had FRIDAY’s footage of Tony himself and the exterior action from his point of view as well as the exterior stuff Jim had already seen. It was now that he realised just how much work Tony had done in coming to peace with it, as he lay there, getting colder, in that Siberian hellhole. The Tony who had woken up in the hospital had been hurt but already moving past it, considering the practical implications and the best path forward. There was nothing calculated about his reactions in the video. There, it was all raw pain and grief and disbelief.

Ironically, the extremists on both sides agreed – the footage had to be faked. There was no way their personal favourite could have been as humanly flawed as the footage made them appear. But the mainstream opinion was that it was authentic. Footage from multiple angles like that, coming from both Tony’s suit and Zemo’s personal spyware, would have been impossible to mock up without the assistance of both Tony and Steve. That possibility was even more absurd than the truth. Translations of Tony’s Russian interview were examined line by line, and while understated, didn’t contradict any events as they’d actually happened. The footage was exactly what it appeared to be, and people knew that.

Besides the obvious, what most people seemed to be taking away from the event was that Tony had regarded Tony and Steve as friends, whereas Steve just … hadn’t. The internet being what it was, there were plenty of people who pounced on this to mock Tony as a pathetic loser who was only got what was coming to him. They were outnumbered by the people who were outraged and offended by Steve’s actions, but they were vocal enough to be noticed. They were vocal enough for Tony to notice.

Jim’s news feed flickered – and the top story was now a press statement from Tony. Jim clicked on the video to see Tony in the usual room in Stark Towers. The skin around Tony’s eyes was a dark blue, and his face was pale enough to reflect that shade. He was well groomed, but there was no sign of his usual flash or media smile. He was entirely alone on the platform, and Jim remembered with a pang that Pepper was in China. Shit. Why had he taken this day to be away from the compound?

Tony looked down at his notes and then up directly at the cameras. "Due to the personal and invasive nature of the recent revelations, I will not be taking questions. I have two statements to make. First. While investigations on the origin of the leak are still ongoing, I am satisfied that it was not a result of any malice or negligence of any member of Doctor Haynes’s team. They have all been very supportive of me in my treatment, and I owe them more thanks than I can say."

Tony paused and visibly took a deep breath. "Second. I apologise unreservedly for wearing the Iron Man suit while I was psychologically compromised. I appreciate that it was sheer good fortune that I was not triggered in circumstances that would have been more catastrophic for innocent bystanders. I can assure you that we are all working very hard to bring the Avengers in line with the mental care and psychological clearances suggested in the Sokovia Accords. Everything possible is being done to ensure events such as those recently released on the internet do not occur again. Thank you."
The reporters erupted. “Mr Stark! Mr Stark does this mean—“

Tony disappeared out the back exit without making eye contact with any of them.

“There we have it, Ladies and Gentleman,” said the smarmy presenter. “Tony Stark has confirmed the authenticity of the recent leaks.”

Jim closed the tab with a jerky movement and opened his phone. At the last second he scrolled past Tony’s name, and used it to arrange transport instead. This wasn’t a phone call type of issue. He swapped out his braces for the wheelchair, knowing he lacked the patience for them now. Tony might wince a bit at the sight, but Jim fumbling with the braces instead might provoke another guilt-invention-binge, and Tony wouldn’t have the energy for that now.

When Jim arrived at the compound, Friday directed him towards Tony’s labs. Tony was propped up against a table, watching the news, his smoothie sippy cup hooked negligently by one finger. Jim paused in surprise, because Tony looked better. The shadows around his eyes were less prominent, and his posture was easy. This relaxation wasn’t what he had been expecting. Surely Tony hadn’t resorted to drugs or alcohol over this?

“Rhodey!” said Tony. “I thought you were out playing with your military buddies today?”

“I just saw the news,” said Jim. “I came as quickly as I could.”

Tony waved a hand to bring a headline to the forefront. “This bit about our UN Ambassador comparing Secretary-General to a shy kindergartner being appointed black board monitor? You know, how we give them the position because they and the countries they come from don’t have any power? I love how people keep spluttering about how rude he was, but unintentionally keep revealing that they agree with him.”

“What?” asked Jim.

“You know,” said Tony slowly, like Jim was the one saying things that made no sense. “That bit about how the elves said they might have been able to stop Wanda’s most recent temper tantrum if they had a symbolic focus to cast through? How the Ambassador doesn’t think the UN sec-gen would cut it?”

Jim clenched his hands around the handles of the wheelchair. “No, Tony. Not that news. I don’t give a damn about Wanda.”

“For shame, Rhodey. Innocent civilians died!” Tony threw his arms up in a dramatic gesture, and then winced theatrically as the bottle collided with his arms. “A suspicious majority from bullet wounds that Ross was mysteriously unable to prevent in his arrest attempt, but still—“

“Tony, please. I know you want to pretend like it never happened, but this isn’t going to go away. The privacy of your sessions with that psychologist, and all those personal details about your parents, have been shattered. You aren’t going to convince me that it wasn’t a shock.”

“Oh, that!” said Tony, placing the bottle down on a random table. “Yeah, surprised the heck out of me. I expected it to have been public knowledge months ago. I’d already readjusted my plans to work without it.”

“Are you telling me…” Jim trailed off. His mind couldn’t seem to make the connections it was trying to make. “What are you telling me?”

Tony smirked. “Come now, Rhodey, surely it was obvious? I originally refused to see a professional
because I knew that no third party’s security could withstand the kind of hacking it would be subjected to. So, when I suddenly started seeing one, and helpfully giving them the footage of all the incidents where I lost emotional control…”

Jim crossed his arms to hold the opposite arms of the wheelchair, like he needed to protect his stomach from a blow. “It was because you wanted it to be leaked.”

“Exactly,” said Tony.

All this time Jim had been urging Tony to be more trusting of professionals, and it turned out that Tony had been just the right amount of paranoid after all. But this? “Why all this, then? Why not just leak the actual footage without all that personal pain surrounding it?”

Tony smiled again, but it was sad. “I’m not a very good person. We all know that. If the public suspected that I was behind the leak – and in your scenario, it would have been pretty obvious – it would have looked like I was deliberately trying to ruin Captain America’s reputation. That could have back-fired, and would have messed with the rest of my plans. This way, I can still believably claim that I’m doing my very bestest to forgive and forget and give them all another chance. I had expected this to have been common knowledge before I started working on deals for them, but all of a sudden; everyone has been amazingly well-behaved. None of the governments breathed a word about it. Even now, the major news outlets are still just discussing the leak, not the contents. The press, huh? Never does what you want them to do.”

“Do you think this came from a government? Which one? Ours?” asked Jim.

Tony wrinkled his nose. “The bigger players hacked my records within seconds of finding out they existed. A government, and our government particularly, would have a narrative in place around it to suit their goals if they’d decided to use it. This hasn’t really been spun in any meaningful way. No, this leak has all the ear-marks of an amateur. They may have hacked one of those government sources to get them, of course, but that doesn’t make much of a difference. It works well enough for my purposes.”

Tony often made a good cat when it came to embarrassment – what, you thought I fell? I totally meant for that to happen! – but maybe this time Tony really wasn’t just playing it off. “Your biggest concern about professional mental health treatments being leaked before was because you didn’t want to be seen to be weak.”

Tony half-shrugged, half-nodded. “When you’re fighting terrorists, you want to be seen to be invulnerable. If they think it’ll cost them more than it will gain them to beat you, then eventually they stop trying. What’s that quote about if you can trick them into calling your bluff about being immune to bullets and electricity and fire, they won’t question you when you claim to be immune to water as well? But the Ten Rings isn’t my biggest problem any more. If I want to fight public opinion when it comes to Captain America, I need to be seen as vulnerable instead. Wounded Gazelle Warcry.”

“Sorry?” asked Jim.

“You know,” said Tony, “the Coulson’s Cards Gambit.”

“I’m still lost, Tony,” said Jim, trying not to sound impatient since Tony was actually being very forthcoming for Tony.

Tony leaned back with a sigh, but continued, “People need a victim’s face to care about before they get worked up about a crime. If I was a strong invincible hero, they’d leave it to Steve and I to sort out between us. It’s two lions in the Colosseum, and they’re spectators picking a side to cheer on.
But if I’m a wounded gazelle next to a lion, well… then they might start to think that maybe they should do something about that lion before it wounds any more gazelles.”

A lot of things suddenly made a lot more sense to Jim. “You want people to think you’re more sympathetic to him than you are.”

“As far down that path as I can realistically get away with,” said Tony, cheerfully. “I’d adore it if people to think I’m so biased towards him, that they mentally ‘correct’ anything I say to be even harsher than it was.”

“What about that thing with the shield, then?” Jim had been curious about that since it happened, but both him and Pepper had decided asking about it might be too triggering, considering all the context.

Tony shrugged. “An impetuous, showy demonstration of anger that I later regret is in character, and I do need to stay believable. Besides, in a couple of days I’m going to be accused of deliberately donating the shield to make it easier for Steve to get his hands on.”

“You’re… why?” asked Jim, thrown by yet another complication in the plan.

“Yeah,” said Tony. “We want to encourage them to move the shield to another location for security reasons that King T’Challa isn’t in a position to explain.”

Jim blinked. “Steve really is intending to steal it.”

“’You might very well think that; I couldn’t possibly comment’” quoted Tony.

Jim let it go. Tony and T’Challa’s relationship was a mare’s nest he had no interest in getting tangled in. Instead, he took advantage of Tony’s unusual willingness to explain himself to confirm another of recent suspicion. “And the sympathy thing is why you are constantly asking people to judge him on what he thought was happening, not what was actually happening. I thought it was to remind everyone that he made the wrong call.”

That’s what Jim would have wanted to hammer home. Steve had broken one of the military’s unwritten rules. An idiot could come back the returning hero from pulling dipshit moves if they lucked out and succeeded. But if they failed, or there wasn’t a threat in the first place, then they could expect to be shat out from a great height. A wiser person might also choose to risk breaking procedure as well, but they would go to extraordinary lengths to confirm their suspicions before acting on them. As far as Jim could figure out, Steve had reached his theory from a collection of hints and paranoia, and instantly decided that breaking the law was the only possible solution.

Tony said, “I’m not saying I mind reminding both him and everyone else that there was no great plot to murder his best friend, and no grand conspiracy to endanger the world. It’s the simple truth after all – his judgement was flawed. But that’s actually a lot closer to face value. If we learnt anything, we learnt that Steve never backs down to enemies, even when they’re the ones talking sense. I need him to start thinking of me as an ally – or at least, as an insignificant bystander – if he’s ever going to come in from the cold.”

Jim breathed out. “You’re really going to bring him in.”

Tony looked away. “He’s doing too much damage to the enhanced human cause, out there acting like a youtube commenter with access to nuclear weapons. Natasha was right, in a way. Trying to contain him will just get more people killed. We need to convince him to contain himself.”

“After all of this? He’s just going to get away with everything?” asked Jim, but he wasn’t entirely sure if he was angry at Tony for suggesting it, or angry on Tony’s behalf because it had to be
suggested.

Tony waved a hand. “Have you ever known me not have plans, Rhodey? I just need him to think
he’s winning. Actual success isn’t necessary.”

Friday piped up before he could reply. “Excuse me, boss. Thor is here. He’s just landed on the roof
courtyard.”

“Great,” said Tony, unenthusiastically. “We’d better go up before he gets bored. I don’t want to risk
him activating or attacking anything else in here.”

Jim wheeled after Tony obediently, the journey smooth and easy to navigate.

“My shield brother!” said Thor, descending on Tony.

“Thor,” replied Tony. All of his irritation had disappeared, and even Jim would have believed that he
was delighted and touched by Thor’s appearance.

“I hear you are injured!” replied Thor in his typical outside voice. “The All-father has tried to explain
the nature of it, but I confess I do not follow how such a thing as pain to the mind injury works.
Aesir do not have such problems.”

*I just bet you don’t,* thought Jim.

Thor continued, “They are saying you are experiencing wounds from the past as if a curse had been
cast upon you?”

“In a way,” said Tony, without revealing how tactless and condescending he must have found
Thor’s words. “Perhaps think of it this way. Imagine you take a blow to your shoulder during a fight.
Then afterwards, before it has time to heal, a friend comes and clasps you at that spot. The pain you
would feel was triggered by his friendly gesture, but it was *caused* by your original wound.”

“I see,” said Thor, with a frown of concentration. “Thus it would seem like that friend had grievously
attacked you, when in truth he was merely acting in ignorance.”

If that was meant to be a direct analogy for Steve’s actions in Siberia, Jim would have words with
Thor. Or perhaps Tony.

“But I come bearing good tidings in that respect,” said Thor. “The elves have a method that returns
one’s sense of self to reality. It is often used after magic has been inflicted, but they use it in
circumstances similar to this as well, it seems. They have asked me to offer this to you.”

Jim wondered whether the elves had offered, or whether Odin had offered on the elves behalf.
Having to keep up with interplanetary politics was more than he signed up for. “They have a process
that will show you your real self?”

“It will show you your real not-self,” corrected Thor, who then frowned. “The words do not sound
correct.”

“Instant enlightenment?” asked Tony facetiously.

Thor nodded. “That does sound closer, yes.”

Jim made eye contact with Tony, and they shared a mutual moment of disbelief. Then Tony
recovered, thoughts flashing almost visibly through his head. Tony looked at his hands, then a quick
flicker over Jim’s wheelchair, before looking at his hands again.

Finally, game face on, Tony looked back to Thor. “I am very honoured by the kind offer, but I’m afraid I am not permitted to accept this as a sole gift to me. You see, on Earth, we require that medical treatments first be approved before they can be used. We have no understanding of how alien healing would work with us. Would the elves consider making it available for testing and then open it up to others as well?”

Thor looked grave, but not offended. “I will ask, but there are billions of humans, and only a few of the healers.”

Tony reached up to tap Thor’s shoulder. “Of course. We would not expect them to offer any services for free, and they can of course limit the numbers to whatever they are comfortable managing. We have other treatments that are limited – organ transplants, for example – so we have methods in place for prioritising treatment for people already.”

Thor looked relieved and made earnest commitments to arrange something. He retreated faster than was strictly polite, but Jim believed him when he claimed that he had been in the middle of something sensitive. Thor didn’t have the skills to use rudeness as a weapon.

Once he was again gone, Jim crossed his arms and glared at Tony. “Mental health isn’t regulated in the same way as physical. Taking the elf cure would probably be perfectly legal under the current laws and you know it.”

“Yeah,” said Tony lightly. “I didn’t want to tell Thor that the last thing I want to do now is see the real me.”

“Bullshit,” said Jim, not backing down. “You’re the most self-critical person I know. You created BARF deliberately so that you could see exactly the real you. No personal discomfort would stop you if this had a chance of permanently curing your PTSD.”

Tony dropped the false levity, but looked unmoved. “There’s also a chance it genuinely is unsafe and will turn me into a supervillain. I can’t take that risk unilaterally. More importantly, I can’t be seen taking that risk unilaterally, even if it worked out perfectly. Maybe before all this started... but now I have to be answerable to people.”

Jim shook his head. “This isn’t the same thing as an Avengers mission. Privacy over mental health treatment is one of our fundamental rights.”

Tony actually smiled. “Did you know that a president has to ask permission to play a new sport? And that members of the royal family have to ask permission before they can get married? Once you reach a certain level, you start losing the personal freedoms that Joe Public has. I lost the right to privacy before I was even out of diapers.”

“You don’t have to put up with that,” said Jim. “That isn’t right.”

“If someone can affect their lives,” said Tony, with none of his usual razzle-dazzle, “then they have a vested interest in how they live their life. The man on the street might have to consult with his wife before he buys a new house. I have to consult with SI legal and some combination of local police department, council planning committee, and financial regulatory authority. It’s the way the world works. To pretend otherwise is reckless.”

Jim bit his lip. It just seemed so wrong that now was the time that Tony Stark was forced to care about the opinions of others.
But Jim couldn’t argue with him. Tony had a much better instinct for the political climate than Jim, and if he thought he couldn’t just do it and dare people to complain, then he was probably right. And besides all that, it was too late to undo it now – either to accept the elf treatment, or to keep his parent’s murder private. All Jim could do was support Tony though it. “Well, not right now, we don’t. We’re going to binge watch bad teen vampire series.”

“I need to work the SHRA—“ objected Tony.

Jim was more than prepared to stare him down. “You’ve already tricked them into another round of arguing over funding. It’ll be months before they try to bring it to vote again.”

Tony tried again. “That’s not the same thing as ensuring it will fail—“

Jim didn’t budge. “You’re the one who keeps saying the longer we don’t need it for, the less convincing it will be that we need it in future. It can wait until you’re in a better place to deal with it. You may have planned for the murder of your parents to become public, but I refuse to believe that having it all brought up again doesn’t hurt.”

Jim was ready to settle in for the long haul, so Tony sagging in surrender took him by surprise.

“Oh course it hurts,” said Tony from between his teeth. “But It was out there, regardless. It was going to get used. My choices were to use it myself, or let it be used against me. If I have to feel the pain regardless, then I’m going to get all the value out of it I possibly can.”

There it was. Custom Tony Fucking Stark. Spitting in the face of adversity.

“And I respect your choice,” said Jim, deliberately lightly. “Just like you’re going to respect my choice of which terrible show to make fun of.”

No matter what was flung at Tony. No matter what self-sacrificial thing Tony did to himself. Tony would get through this. Jim would make sure of it.
Sam had started their exile with a firm conviction that they had done the right thing, and that the sacrifices they had made had been worth it. He had known what the end result of following Steve would be. He had known that governments could not simply accept behaviour like that, no matter how much they might agree with them behind closed doors. He even accepted that it was more than just political pride and face saving – they simply could not afford to set a precedent that would be abused by people who were less righteous than Steve. But standing up and being the martyrs other people could rally around would drive the change the world needed.

The first crack in his conviction was realising that none of the others had anticipated that perfectly predictable outcome. All of the rest, even Steve – especially Steve – seemed to believe the world would simply welcome them back with apologies and worship simply because they were Avengers. Steve had warned them all, but seemed to have been given and taken as lip service. It was a lonely feeling that Sam might have been the only person to have fully committed to their path. But it wasn’t really like that. If Steve had fully appreciated and believed that they would not be forgiven, he would still have done the right thing. He was just as committed as Sam where it counted.

The second crack had occurred when Sam learned that Steve had dismissed the full pardon Stark had organised for them all before Leipzig without consulting or even informing Sam. Sam couldn’t deny that had hurt. But Steve had honestly believed at the time that Stark had been holding Wanda hostage. He believed that Sam would have agreed with him if he had been consulted. And the bulk of that lost opportunity was with Stark. Sure, Stark had arranged the pardon to cover Sam as well, but he hadn’t bothered reached out to Sam as individual. He had had no attempt to make Sam aware of the offer. At no point had Stark made any real attempt to ask Sam about Sam's reasons or explain his own. Not until the Raft, when Sam had been the only resource he had left, and it had all turned out to be too late.

The third crack was realising he’d been wrong about Stark’s belief system. It wasn’t that he’d ever thought Stark was evil or controlling. He’d just thought that Stark was the typical rich white boy who thought everyone experienced life the way they did. That the people in power treated everyone with the sympathy and courtesy Stark himself received. That the various governments could actually be trusted with even more power over people. But the news had been full of the trials for people imprisoned on the RAFT, and no-one had missed that their lawyers had been funded by Stark foundations. When Sam had examined the work being done to improve accountability and visibility of superhero detention facilities, and it had become clear that Stark must have been familiar with the underbelly of human behaviour. No one not already deeply cynical would insist on requiring sane behaviour, triple checked by neutral parties. But good wishes didn’t mean much against the might of the governments that had been against them, and it would have been too late for Stark to make changes when one of them was already dead or experimented on.

The fourth crack was how badly Steve had mishandled the situation with Stark's parents, brought back to mind by the recent leaks. He wasn’t going to deny that seeing the footage had been more visceral than Steve’s rather bland description of the events. Clint and Scott had certainly been very unhappy, although Sam suspected that had less to do with them seeing it in person, and more to do with how much their opinion of Stark had changed since they’d first heard about it. The reactions had not been kind to Steve, and Sam couldn’t deny that even he had been disappointed. But Sam knew that was only because they’d had unreasonable expectations. None of the people who found it
so easy to condemn Steve on the internet had ever had to deal with the other victims of PTSD - the friends and loved ones. They’d never had to deal with the frustration of a husband whose wife refused to leave the house, or the guilt of a wife who flinched whenever her husband touched her. They’d never tried to convince an eight-year-old that his Dad didn’t really think he was a weakling who wanted his mother to die because he had retreated from the argument she’d had with a neighbour. They’d never had to worry, when a sufferer said he had no way to interact with people without anger, that the blood of innocents might end up on their hands because they failed to recommend institutionalisation. Shellshock had barely been realised as something more than cowardice when Steve had been growing up. It was a hardly a surprise that Steve didn't recognise it or know how to deal with it.

The biggest crack was Azania. They’d been wrong. Oh, not about the facts. HYDRA had been deliberately stirring up tensions in the area and had been supplying weapons to the Bangweulu Separatists. The rest of the world had tacitly endorsed the terrorists because they considered them the ‘least worst’ local option. They were indifferent to the number of civilian casualties getting caught in the cross-fire in the hopes that a more pro-Western government would emerge over the blood of the innocents. They official international opinion had been self-serving and morally corrupt.

None of that changed the fact that the Avengers had made things worse. They hadn’t reduced fighting in the area; they’d left the entire area open for the government to move in unopposed. And whatever the official Azanian line about how the civilians had been transported to refugee camps to protect them, Sam knew other euphemisms worked as well – like re-education camps. Or concentration camps. They should have realised that would happen, or at least considered the possibility. Sam had seen enough police dramas where they responded to a domestic dispute by confiscating the gun from the wife, only to have to return the next morning to investigate her murder. But they knew now, and would do better the next time.

It couldn’t matter that Sam now suspected they’d taken the wrong path. It couldn’t matter that he now suspected they could have found a common ground with Stark and used his resources to fulfil their goals. It was all too late to do any of it over again, so there was no point in Monday morning quarter-backing. And of course he realised that Steve had become increasingly erratic as his world had spun out of control around him, but that was precisely the reason Steve needed that sense of safety and security from his team. With the rest of the world against them, Steve deserved to have someone in his corner.

The rest of the team was just so involved in their own personal drama that they used Steve as a punching bag rather than realise he was the most fragile member of them all. Especially Wanda, with the way she had walked out on them. Sam knew that she was technically an adult, but with that behaviour, he fully understood why Steve treated her like a child. It had all been 'I'll run away from home, and then they'll be sorry!' without the slightest consideration for what she’d do or how she’d survive afterwards. And perhaps Sam did feel a little guilty for not going after her immediately, but she’d just been so irrational that he’d been impatient with her. Where did she get off accusing Steve of using her like that? Everyone knew that Wanda couldn’t brainwash anyone, particularly Steve. Steve had simply been suggesting that Wanda project a little sympathy at T’Challa, and T’Challa would have had his politician’s excuse for doing the right thing. It wouldn’t have hurt Wanda to get a little more practice sending out positive emotions rather than the anger and fear she seemed to resort to so quickly.

Sam took a deep breath, and reminded himself it was uncharitable to think negatively of her, considering how badly the girl was suffering alone in a world she didn’t understand. And overall, Sam had to admit her absence made things easier. Sam hadn’t realised how tense she’d made the others until she was no longer around. Sam was also a little relieved that their plans for the shield had fallen through, with it been removed for safety concerns. The retrieval itself would bring the worst
of the media attention to the forefront again, and more hysteria was the last thing Steve needed to hear.

Sam was startled out of his depressing thoughts by the sound of the external door opening and people coming down the passageway. Two Dora Milaje entered without asking permission, followed by T’Challa himself. Steve stood up and Sam moved around the edge of the table to stand next to him. The table, damaged in a previous overexpression of Steve’s strength, wobbled back and forth, filling the room with a brief Newton’s cradle of ticking. Scott and Clint drifted over from their game, but stayed on the other side of the floor lamp they had been using as an informal space divider.

“T’Challa. What can we do for you?” said Steve.

Sam wouldn’t have called his tone of voice impolite, exactly, but it was on the chilly side. Sam winced a little internally. Steve had become more and more convinced over the months that T’Challa was part of the problem rather than solution. Steve might have been able to forgive T’Challa for supporting the Accords in theory, but not T’Challa supporting the people behind it when they criticised Steve’s actions. T’Challa’s recent good relations with Stark also hadn’t gone unnoticed. Opinions differed about what that meant for the Avengers, but Steve still felt it as a personal disloyalty. It was a small step for T’Challa to side with Stark to him becoming like Stark.

It wasn’t that Sam disagreed with Steve, it was just that Sam thought they should at least act gracious about the situation. But wasn’t Steve’s inability to compromise on his moral beliefs one of the things he loved about the man?

T’Challa nodded his head in greeting. “There is a letter for you. I thought it best to hand deliver it, to ensure there would be no misunderstandings. Considering the disaster with Miss Maximoff.”

Sam mentally rolled his eyes. It wasn’t as if any of them had wanted Wanda to leave. They hadn’t even realised that she’d planned to leave. There was literally nothing different any of them could have done to have prevented her from going through the Wakandan border in force. T’Challa continuing to complain about it was simply petty.

“A letter?” asked Steve, suspiciously. “From who?”

From whom, corrected Sam mentally. “Is this some attempt by Stark—“

Sam hadn’t been completely oblivious to the political movements in Germany. While no one (except the conspiracy sites) was officially naming Stark as the source, his fingerprints were all over it. It would make sense for Stark to widen his net a little.

“It is not, in fact, from Doctor Stark,” said T’Challa without looking in his direction. Sam bristled at the insult.

“Mister Rogers?” asked T’Challa, taking a few steps forward to hand it over.

Steve took it and T’Challa returned to his place by the door. Steve opened it impatiently, like it was partisan literature the day after the election. The letter fluttered as Steve tried to keep it steady, the breeze making Sam aware that the outside door was still open. Whatever T’Challa wanted, he wasn’t expecting it to take long.

“Bucky?” Steve asked. “Why is he writing to me? Did he write this before he went under?”

T’Challa gestured. “I believe that it is all explained in the letter.”

Steve finished reading, then with a puzzled frown, reread it again. He tossed the letter on to the table
and strode towards T’Challa. The two Dora Milaje moved smoothly between them to intercept him. Scott took a few steps back until he hit the wall as well, and Sam understood why, despite being irritated. Steve’s expression was not reassuring to someone with Scott’s background, even if he should rationally know Steve wouldn’t do anything wrong. The letter continued sliding over the table top and cascaded down to the floor. Sam’s hands twitched to pick it up, but decided it would be an unwise course of action.

“What is the meaning of this?” said Steve, coming to an unwilling halt in front of the Dora Milaje.

“I have not read the contents of the letter, Mister Rogers,” said T’Challa, looking more bored than concerned.

Steve was almost vibrating in place. “But you know what’s in it. You’ve betrayed Bucky.”

The Dora Milaje almost growled, and T’Challa raised an eyebrow. “Are you are referring to the treatment option Mister Barnes has, perfectly voluntarily, chosen to take?”

“Treatment option,” said Steve. “Is that what they’re calling it these days?”

The intention of his words seemed to go over T’Challa’s head, because he just nodded. “I believe so. The Finnish have made great strides in treating the victims of brainwashing, and gave him their opinion on the best long term solution. I was not, naturally, present for the confidential medical portions of their discussions.”

Steve crossed his arms in front of his chest, the floor lamp behind him silhouetting him into a stern figure. “I’m not buying it. If this was all as voluntary as you’re trying to make it sound, then you wouldn’t have hidden this from me. You would have come to me with this before waking Bucky up.”

“Mister Rogers,” said T’Challa, in a tone of mock disbelief that would have sounded perfectly at home in Stark’s mouth, “surely you did not expect me, or any of the medical staff working on this case, to violate Mister Barnes’ confidentiality? Mister Barnes requested to go under until such time as treatment was available. Treatment became available, and thus it become our duty to inform him of it. You are not related to Mister Barnes, nor married to him. If Mister Barnes intended to give you medical power of attorney, then he had plenty of opportunity to complete the proper paperwork before he went under cryogenics. He did not do so. It would have been quite inappropriate to involve you without Mister Barnes’s explicit consent.”

Sam frowned. Had Barnes had been informed of the possibility, and had he been in the right state of mind to appreciate what that meant, before he had been frozen? And if he hadn’t, who did have the power to make informed consent on his behalf, when the governments themselves were the people action against his best interests?

Steve said, “you must have done something. He never would have left without saying something if he’d been in his right mind.”

T’Challa sighed, sounding almost bored. “Just as he never would have hidden for you for the three years prior to the signing of the Accords? Mister Rogers, I know it has been considerably less time for you, but it has been an entire lifetime for Mister Barnes since you were his best friend. The more he remembers his real life; the smaller the part you play in it. The fact that he remembers you as much as he does is nothing short of miraculous, frankly.”

Steve didn’t look convinced. “I promised Bucky that I’d look after him.”
“Sergeant Barnes,” said T’Challa, very deliberately, “is safe and recovering, and exactly where he wants to be. It is insulting—and somewhat horrific—that you think I ought to prejudice his own progress to cater to your juvenile need to be his knight in shining armour. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have other things to do.”

T’Challa turned and took a step into the corridor.

“Don’t walk away from me,” said Steve, pushing one of the Dara Milaje out of the way and moving forward. Sam didn’t have time to even consider reacting before it was all over. Steve was face down, with T’Challa holding him down with his full weight. The Dora Milaje glanced at the rest of them, and Sam followed Scott and Clint’s lead in raising his hands in surrender.

With no emotion in his voice, T’Challa said, “I am going to let you up now, Mister Rogers. If you try to strike me or one of my own again, be aware that a weapon is being aimed at you that will put down even a super-soldier of your abilities.”

“I wasn’t going to hit you,” said Steve, rather undermining his assertion by continuing to struggle.

“Then you won’t object to slowly and carefully moving to the other side of the room,” replied T’Challa.

Steve eventually stilled, then picked himself off the floor and followed directions. His shoulders were raised like an offended cat, but he took a few deep breathes, and Sam could see him counting in his head. In a much calmer tone of voice, he said, “Look, T’Challa, things got out of hand, but surely you have to see why—”

T’Challa made no attempt to meet him half way. “I don’t have to see anything, Mister Rogers. I’m afraid you’ve outstayed your welcome in my kingdom. You have six hours to collect your belongings and be outside of our borders before we will be forced to take official notice of your presence and arrest you. The rest of you may stay or go as you please, but be aware that we will not react as tolerantly to a second offence.”

T’Challa stepped back out the door, and the Dora Milaje followed him, not turning their backs on anyone in the room. This time Steve let them go. The outer door shut, swirling the air with a brief infusion of decaying plant matter before it stilled again.

“Well,” said Clint, sounding too amused for Sam’s tastes. “That escalated quickly.”

“He was deliberately provoking Steve,” pointed out Sam.

Scott snorted. “Didn’t seem to need much provocation.”

“I need to go find—” said Steve, but Sam cut him off. He didn’t doubt that a Dora Milaje had remained to keep an eye out for them, and that mention of a weapon gave him pause. It might have been a pure bluff, but the walls of this apparently simple building had housed too many technological surprises for him to be entirely complacent.

“Do you recognise the handwriting on the letter?” Sam asked.

Steve blinked and then shook his head. He picked up the letter from the ground and opened it again. “Yeah, it looks like Bucky. But they can fake things like that these days, I’ve heard.”

“Clint,” asked Sam, “Could you hack into the records to see if there’s any word of Bucky in… umm… Sweden?”
“Finland,” corrected Clint. “I can try, but I’m not the hacker Tony or Natasha are.”

When he made no move to do anything, Sam hissed, “Then please try.”

Clint shrugged, and pulled out a phone Sam was sure they’d made a calm and mature agreement not to use. One battle at a time, Sam told himself.

“Found it,” said Clint.

“Well done, Clint,” said Sam, bearing in mind the parenting advice for treating rebellious teens: ‘catch them doing something right and reward them for it’. “I guess your hacker skills aren’t that bad after all.”

“I didn’t need to hack anything,” said Clint, walking behind the set of couches.

Sam followed him in irritation, before he realised Clint was simply moving to switch on the television. A few clicks later, and he found a channel with a banner of ‘Finnish anti-brainwashing clinic admits highest profile patient yet – The Winter Soldier’.

Clint presented the screen with a flourish. “They weren’t exactly hiding it. They haven’t exactly been hiding the existence of the clinic, either, it turns out. So yeah, we could have been considering this as a genuine solution all along.”

Sam closed his eyes and ignored Clint’s stirring. He turned instead to Steve. “Okay, that’s good news. We know where he is, and we know he isn’t in any imminent danger. We can leave Wakanda, and regroup to make any future decisions at a later time.”

“T’Challa didn’t kick us all out,” pointed out Clint, still with a disturbing lack of concern in his voice. “He just kicked out Steve.”

Steve looked at them blankly. “He might have said that, but he’s obviously trying to get rid of us all. If we don’t stay together now, then when he does turn around and betray you as well, it will be more difficult for us to co-ordinate.”

Clint had moved back to stand next to Scott. They were both as far as they physically could get away from Steve and Sam, a pattern that Sam realised was well entrenched. The vague suspicions he had been harbouring suddenly crystallised.

“Steve,” said Sam, “they aren’t intending to stay with T’Challa for very long. They’re planning on turning themselves in to the German authorities. The airport affair is the only thing they’re currently being charged with. They think they can go home.”

Neither denied that. Away from the light of the lamp and the windows both, it was harder to read their expressions, but their body language was clear enough. Scott looked guilty and defensive, but Clint just crossed his arms and raised his chin.

“Oh,” said Steve. Then he straightened his shoulders. “Oh. I mean, sure. If they have a chance to get back to their families, they should take it.”

“Gee, thanks, Captain America,” said Clint. “Glad I have your approval.”

Steve blinked at him a few times like Clint had stopped talking English. Looking a little light-headed, Steve turned to Sam. “Sam, if you think you can—”

“What should I pack, Cap?” interrupted Sam. Of course he would be going with Steve. He had left
the United States with the man, and he would stay right next to him until they all returned home. Steve deserved someone in his corner, and there wasn’t anyone else left.

Chapter End Notes

I've fixed two Sam / Scott mix-up, apologies for that, and thank you for those who pointed it out. (This is something I shamefully do in real life to actual people, too). If there's more I've missed, please do let me know.
Chapter Notes

I find Marvel pretty close to random when they ascribe magical powers to characters. I’ve tried to normalise them for both Rachel Summers (Phoenix) and Wanda (Scarlet Witch) in this chapter, but some things (like Wanda ‘sleep-walking’ people) are harder to explain than others. I beg your indulgence for any AU-ness.

All mentions of Ross in this fic refer to Secretary Thaddeus Ross, not Commander Everett Ross.

The Excalibur team waited in silence while they waited. The bunch of teenagers in school uniforms slowly consented to stand up from their shady spot in the middle of the road and move to the side for the car to pass. It was a good sign that things were peaceful, Rachel told herself. The only other indication that they were close to a town was the speed limit signs dropping from national limits to walking pace without any change in the road itself. As they eased themselves round a bend, however, a dirt road spilled onto the tar like the river meeting the sea.

“You’ll have to go alone from here. Are you going to be okay?” asked Brian.

Rachel nodded. She had been chosen to take point on this mission because she was a female magic user, not because she had any skill at negotiation. It wasn’t a decision that led her to much confidence. When a folder containing Wanda Maximoff’s psychological profile and the full details of Ross’s previous disastrous attempt to bring her in mysteriously landed up on Excalibur’s desk, it wasn’t any sort of order – but they weren’t going to ignore the implied suggestion, either.

While they went through final mike checks, she tried to go through the advice she’d been given. Most of it was vague, and half of it was contradictory. ‘Always emphasis what they have to gain, rather than why you think they should do something,’ followed by ‘let them know what your motives are up front, so they don’t become suspicious of you.’ ‘Don’t surprise them with anything. Telegraph your movements and your words,’ just after ‘tell a self-directed joke to startle them out of their confrontational mindset.’

She breathed out sharply. They really should have sent someone else. Anyone else. She knew if she gave the team more details about the way her previous government had forced her to go on hunts much like these for far darker purposes, they would have excused her. None of them would have knowingly cut so close to her personal fear and guilt. But Rachel didn’t want this future to be determined by her past. She wanted to do this to prove to herself that she could believe a better future was possible. To prove that reasoned collaboration could work. To prove that paranoia, intolerance and total war weren’t the only options humanity could hope for.

Deep in her heart, she was angry at Wanda. Wanda wasn’t some poor enhanced unfairly discriminated against by human bigots. She was actively justifying bigots through her selfish actions. Fair enough, the death of her parents had genuinely been horrific. But Rachel knew many people who’d grown up through significantly more hell without deciding that gave them the right to kill people. Wanda was relying on her personal power to protect her, and didn’t give a damn about all the confused kids who would be condemned for their abilities alongside her.
But none of that could matter now. All that mattered was bringing in Wanda quietly.

Rachel steeled herself and followed the directions whispered in her. Wanda was sitting on the side of the road, short of the town itself, propped up against a rock. The buildings were at about the same level on the opposite slope, now visible despite the dense bushes and twisted trees. Rachel could see each single-roomed house, identical to every other single-roomed house, except for the lurid colours each was painted. Rachel didn’t think the twitching of the bead curtains screening each door was just her imagination. Nor did she think it was pure co-incidence that Wanda had chosen just this spot to take a break. But why Wanda had prioritised being able to see them above being hidden from them was a harder mystery to solve.

Rachel actively projected calmness and serenity as soon as she came into sight. Wanda was visibly confused by the time Rachel sat next her, but Wanda’s hands didn’t start showing any red mist and she didn’t startle. Rachel would take that as a win. Rachel leaned back, and then edged forward as the heat from the rock radiated uncomfortably through even the layers of high-tech flexible armour she was wearing.

“You’re one of them,” said Wanda, hissing.

Rachel didn’t react to her tone. “I’m Phoenix from Excalibur, if that’s what you mean.”

Wanda shifted, but settled again without getting to her feet. “How do you people keep finding me?”

Rachel turned her head to answer, and had to prevent herself from flinching. Twenty meters away, previously hidden by the scrub, was a group of young children dressed only in their underwear. They were staring at Rachel and Wanda like they were some sort of museum exhibit. Rachel found their attention creepy, and it surely couldn’t be doing Wanda’s state of mind any good either.

Rachel forced herself to concentrate on Wanda. “Excalibur, or Ross?”

“Either! Both! Is there a difference?” asked Wanda.

Wanda recognised her in the first place, so she should already have known the distinction. If Wanda was resisting believing that information, then it might be a bad idea for Rachel to try to push it.

“Ross and us don’t talk much,” said Rachel, striving for a light tone. “But in this case I can answer both questions. I’m sure you remember Whiteford. When you first got there, you convinced them to give you food and a place to stay. One of the witnesses went to their local priest about demonic possession, and the priest contacted their local authorities, and they contacted Ross. We were asked to go in and help with the victims of the disaster that resulted from that attempt.”

“And finding me now?” asked Wanda, not reacting at all to Rachel’s mention of the recent deaths.

Rachel shrugged. “Fairly simple. You left your links to the people you touched there wide open, and it was easy enough to follow that back to you. You’re very messy, psychically speaking, you know.”

Rachel released a very small, very subtle piece of magic into the rock behind them, and was relieved that Wanda appeared not to notice it. A person better trained in her powers would have, but then a person better trained wouldn’t have needed to ask how she was found. Following the open connections back from a known location was only one of many methods Rachel could have used to track Wanda if she’d needed to. But Rachel felt no need to let Wanda know the full extent of her own powers. Wanda’s lack of control made her easy to under-estimate, but the potential power she could unlock was terrifying.

“You’re lying to me,” said Wanda. “I don’t have a connection to anyone.”
Rachel laughed. “Yeah, hate to break it to you, love, but you have connections to a dozen or more people. You leak all over the show.”

“I’m not mind-controlling them,” said Wanda, scrambling to her feet. “I’m not controlling anyone. My powers don’t work that way.”

“No, you aren’t, and they don’t,” agreed Rachel, standing slowly and taking a step back to give her enough space. “Not quite.”

To Rachel’s relief, Wanda took the bait. “What do you mean ‘not quite’?”

“You aren’t forcing anyone to think anything.” said Rachel, trying for a soothing tone without being too obvious about it. “You’re suggesting they feel certain ways about topics. There’s nothing stopping any of them from thinking things through and realising that those emotions are irrational. Like in that poem about growing anger? You might have planted the seeds, but it was their decision whether to water them or not.”

Wanda frowned, looking honestly confused. “You’re making it sound like it’s ongoing.”

“That’s because it is ongoing,” said Rachel, feeling some degree of sympathy for the first time. “Unless you’ve done something to stop it, those people are still feeling fear, anger or self-doubt or whatever. Not as intensely as they did in that first burst, but still more than they usually would.”

“How do you know?” asked Wanda. “How could you possibly know how my talents work?”

Rachel released another small, tiny piece of magic. An itchy rivulet of sweat run down her spine, and she cursed the heat and the effort both. Time to get Wanda to focus on something other than herself for a bit. What was that stupid piece of advice? Offer personal confidences to encourage her to offer her own in return?

Rachel said, “I’m not from here, originally. Obviously I’m not from Africa, but I mean I’m not from this reality at all. You could say I’m from the future, but it’s a future of a different present. But one thing the presents have in common was a huge surge in people with enhanced abilities. Physics aren’t common, but they are known. It wasn’t difficult to work out what type you were.”

Wanda kept her hands ready by her sides, but at least she seemed to listen. “And let me guess, you’re here to tell me how wonderfully the government handled such things.”

Rachel laughed. “No. Hell, no. My government isn’t what anyone could call the kind and caring type. Any enhanced are taken into control as soon as they’re discovered.”

“And everyone just lets them,” said Wanda, like it was a confirmation of what she already knew.

“Sure,” said Rachel. She was not the one to argue that bigots needed more protection than the people they were persecuting. ‘Psychics are ‘dangerous’, after all. And besides, they don’t want the government to take too close an interest in them, either. But the stories weren’t all government propaganda.”

A rodent of some description darted between them and into the undergrowth. Rachel looked up to see a bird of prey circling high above them. She reminded herself firmly that in this time, in this place, it was just a bird.

“What kind of stories?” asked Wanda, sounding unwillingly interested.

Rachel went through her mental list. It didn’t take long to remember one that fit the situation very
appropriately. “I don’t know if it will turn out to be the same here, but the majority of our psychics come into their powers during puberty. But that wasn’t entirely universal. Some are born with that ability. Like being able to focus their eyes or smile, it takes new-borns a few weeks or months to learn how to it. But in a very few it comes early, and it comes powerful. So this couple I heard of – just a normal, boring, law-abiding couple – fell pregnant and delivered their child in a normal government-sanctioned hospital. As part of the government-sanctioned genetic screening, a doctor picked up that their kid would be one of these rare, powerful psychics. But the doctor didn’t report it as he was supposed to. Some think he was part of an anti-government psychic underground. Others think he was just easily bribed. Either way, he allowed the parents to take their child home with them.”

“But the government tracked them down,” said Wanda, her hands raising in an ominous way.

Rachel kept an eye on Wanda’s hands, but continued talking. “The husband’s paternity leave came to an end, but he never showed up back at work. His boss left a few irate voicemails, but didn’t pursue the matter very vigorously. It wasn’t until a health care worker realised they’d missed the both the two-month and four-month wellness visit that anyone raised any official concerns. Once it was flagged, the police quickly realised that the entire family was missing.”

“The family got away?” asked Wanda.

“No,” said Rachel grimly. “When the police broke in to their house, they found the entire family dead. The bodies of the parents were covered in their own filth, fallen as they tried to cater to the demands of a being too young to know that other people also needed to eat and drink. The baby had died a very short while later.”

Wanda took a step back, then anger flashed across her face. “And here’s where you tell me the moral of the story you want me to be enlightened by.”

Rachel shrugged. “No moral, really. But if you want one, here: just because the government is wrong, that doesn’t make their opponents right. Even the most evil person on earth will occasionally have a point.”

“You want me to sign the Accords,” said Wanda.

*Oh love*, thought Rachel to herself, *it’s way too late for that to solve your problems. "I want to give you options. Options that won’t result in more disasters."*

“Options like locking me back up in that collar in the RAFT?” asked Wanda.

“No,” replied Rachel patiently. “Options like requesting refuge in a country that is committed to ensuring the human rights even of enhanced individuals. Options like appealing for a properly run trial with the elves making sure that everything is above board. Options like finding a path that will allow you to lead a normal life sometime in the future, without worrying about where to get your next meal or whether there’s a sniper rifle lining up to take a shot. Ross isn’t just going to give up. Do you want to run for the rest of your life?”

"He left Banner alone eventually,” said Wanda, lifting her chin.

Rachel raised her eyebrows. "He left Doctor Banner alone because Doctor Banner had the protection of SHIELD."

*And Stark*, but Rachel considered it best not to mention that, considering how irrational Wanda apparently was about the man. Rachel had no strong opinion on how much more merciful this Tony
Stark was to how her own Tony Stark had been, but what they were both undoubtedly powerful. It was almost inconceivable to her that Wanda had had Tony Stark's personal protection and had just thrown it away. Even Stark’s tacit support of Excalibur had made a big difference in how they were treated. But Wanda’s profile made it clear that she was exactly the sort of person to cut off her nose to spite her face. This was not the time to get into an argument about her poor past decisions. Also best not to mention that Banner had been obviously working to prevent appearances of the Hulk, while Wanda had done nothing to convince anyone of her good will. Rachel slowly increased her magic saturation of the area.

Wanda shook her head sharply. “They’re never going to be reasonable. I can’t change the fact that people are afraid of me. I didn’t make them that way.”

That sounded like an argument Wanda was having with someone else, and one she was already afraid she was losing. Rachel had argued both sides herself over the years. There were half a dozen politicians Rachel would gladly have arranged a heart attack for if it wouldn’t make things worse. But that was the point – Rachel knew it would make things worse, while Wanda didn’t seem to care.

“Some of them always will be,” conceded Phoenix. "Just like some people are afraid of larger people, or men, or people in uniforms. But there’s a difference between some people being afraid of you because you have powers, and a lot of people being afraid of you because of how you use those powers.”

“Do you really think things can get better?” asked Wanda, her voice soft and insecure.

*It better*, thought Rachel, *I couldn’t survive the same thing happening again.*

Instead of voicing that, Rachel returned to her pre-scripted lines. “You’re in a bad place now. And if you turn yourself in, then for a little while it might mean you’ll be in an even worse place. But after that, it will start to get better. Those aliens can help you. *I* can help you. You have a real chance of building a stable, happy life, without being overwhelmed by your powers or the fears of others. But you need to stop running away from everything, and start running towards something instead.”

“But none of this was my fault,” whined Wanda. “I never meant for anyone to die. They shouldn’t blame me for it.”

The magic levels had just about reached their required levels, and Rachel had had enough of trying to be understanding. She ditched the script entirely. "Your parents died because the missile bay mechanism of an aircraft malfunctioned. Your house was very much not the target they’d hoped to destroy with that very expensive piece of equipment. Does it help you to know that your parents’ death was completely unintentional?"

Wanda looked stricken, and Rachel was relieved she was finally showing something approaching a conscience.

Rachel pressed home her point. “Children were orphaned in Whiteford. Don’t you think that some of *those* little boys and girls deserve a little closure for the deaths of their parents?”

“That was people firing at me,” Wanda said. “I was doing everything I could to keep them alive.”

“Then tell them that,” said Rachel. “Come in, and tell your side of the story. Because as long as you keep running, the people who were really at fault are getting away with it. Don’t you want the victims to get real justice?”

Wanda’s hands finally relaxed until she was hugging herself. *That was it*, thought Rachel. Forget
about how Wanda’s only hope of things getting better was to turn herself in. Concentrate on how Wanda’s testimony could be used to screw over her enemies.

Then Rachel’s head tipped up again at the sound of helicopters.

“Rachel, abort!” she heard in her earpiece, but it was too late. She could already hear the yelling of American voices from behind the tangled shrub. Her shields came up almost instinctively.

Wanda dropped into a crouch and her hands filled with red mist. In that second, Rachel could hear the thwip of bullets being deflected off her shield. If she hadn’t had her shield up, she would already be collateral damage. Every instinct urged her to use her magic against the people attacking her, but they couldn’t be her first priority. Her first priority had to be the children who were screaming in fear, frozen meters away.

Rachel diverted the original magical intent of her preparations, turning what would have been a cage into protective walls. The added distance meant it wasn’t as high as it previously would have been, but to her relief, all the children dived or were dragged between the two-foot-high fort. Rachel looked around, but it was hard to make out what was going on, and she had only the calm and determined voices of her team to rely on. The strain of keeping the fort intact against bullets pulled at her strength, and she knelt without conscious intent. She leaned against the temporary walls, trying to force more power into them by strength of will.

“Rachel! Can you let a dart through your shields?” came Brian's voice.

What? Oh. Oh, yes, Wanda. If the rest of the team was unable or unwilling to take out the soldiers, the only alternative was to take out Wanda. And that sucked and was unfair, since she wasn’t the aggressor in this disaster, but it was also the best hope they had of preventing civilian casualties. That had to be more important than who deserved what.

“Direction and count off,” she said between breaths.

“Three-thirty from your current direction. Ten… nine…”

Not the same angle as the shooters, and not a danger to the children. Good. She could do this. It wasn’t much more work to bring something back up again than to maintain it.

“Two… one.”

Rachel thinned the barrier, and as soon as the tranquiliser dart was through, raised it again. One ricochet or lucky bullet shot made it into the fort, and Rachel was forced to use more energy to stop it before it bounced against another wall. She collapsed face forward to the ground, feeling the barrier start to lose more and more power to the bullets. The sweat-soaked fabric around her neck pulled as she twisted her head to look at Wanda. There was a beat where she started worrying that it hadn’t worked after all, but finally it took effect. Wanda fall next to her, collapsing slowly to the floor like she’d simply decided to take a nap. The shooting slowly, slowly, died away. Rachel released the barrier, and lay still trying to catch her breath.

“Stay down! Stay down!”

“Nobody move!”

Rachel felt arms grab her and roughly apply hand-cuffs. At least they hadn’t just shot her in the head, she thought. Not yet, at least. Oddly, they left her lying there while they all smothered the unconscious Wanda with any number of anti-magic devices. Since she very much doubted they trusted her, it seemed more likely that they had no idea she had powers in the first place. Perhaps
they could have attributed all the magic in that encounter to Wanda, but they had access to the Accords files that detailed at least superficially how her powers worked. It said interesting things about them that they didn’t even seem to recognise the primary magic user of the Excalibur team.

Although in truth, she was in that moment perfectly harmless. She couldn’t even walk anymore, let alone fight her way out with magic. She’d used up all her reserves. Her ears filled with static and her vision tunnelled in. The team would have to handle the rest without her. But they would, because that was what was awesome about having a team.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

The countries named in this story (Azania and Niganda) are fictional countries from the larger Marvel universe, but there is no intention to include any corresponding story lines.

Bruce opened the connection to Tony. (He was aware that wasn’t quite accurate, but ‘asking the magic mirror’ sounded stupid to him, even in his head.) Bruce gave him a considering once over. Tony didn’t just look good. Tony was vibrating in place with excitement.

“Heya, Brucie-bear!” said Tony. “How’s it going?”

“Fine, thank you, Tony,” said Bruce. “You look like you have something to share.”

“Yes!” said Tony. “I mean, maybe. It kinda depends if you want it. I prepared a nice presentation for it and everything, but you don’t have to say yes or anything. Doctor Haynes tells me that not all people like to glory in the defeat of their enemies. She also said that some people don’t even like the gift of a defeated enemy at all, but I know that’s ridiculous.”

Bruce blinked. “By defeated enemy, do you mean—“

“Ross,” said Tony smugly. “And to your specifications, even!”

Bruce relaxed a little. He knew that Betty disapproved of her father, but she still loved him. Certain things couldn’t help but hurt her. If Tony really had found a way to take Ross off the playing field without any spill-over damage, that would ease a lot of guilt he carried over their strained relationship. That was something that very few people other than Tony ever seemed to realise – if Bruce had wanted to have Ross imprisoned, he could have achieved that himself. If Bruce had wanted Ross killed, it would have been even easier. Bruce had ignored Ross for a reason.

“I would love to see it, Tony.” Bruce wasn’t at all sure that he would, but he didn’t have it in him to slap down Tony when he was being so enthusiastic.

“Tada!” said Tony, propping up a tablet within easy view. “A video presentation of the key moments, provided thanks due to the Stark Protocol. Named for me, not by me, I might point out. I would have come up with something far cooler.”

The screen lit up with the view of an office. The display swapped between each person in turn, revealing the existence of at least two cameras in the ceiling, and any number on the shoulders of the people within an office that looked hastily converted from a meeting room. Ross sat behind the desk looking smug. The British Accords person, Peter Wisdom, was leaning over it, with some others standing on the outskirts. Down the full length of two sides of the room were angled one way windows. Through them, Bruce could see down into a main hall and dining hall, both glaringly lit to ensure the privacy of the office itself. It reminded Bruce vaguely of a Panopticon – a theoretical prison designed to make prisoners constantly fear being under observation.

“Tony…” asked Bruce slowly. “Is this classified information?”

Tony waved a hand. “The day that they get around to manually reclassifying it, I’m sure it will be
something suitably high. But that day is not this day.”

“Tony,” repeated Bruce. He didn’t overly care about details like that, but Tony had gone to too much work establishing his reputation to blow it on something this trivial.

“Relax, Brucie,” said Tony. “As Avenger’s members – and don’t say anything, you’ll always be an Avenger – we have access to the default classifications. It’s not our fault if they’re failing to double check in a timely manner.”

Tony pressed play before Bruce had time to decide whether to continue protesting. On the display, the door opened with a slam, and the American contingent shot to their feet. A new group of people entered and Bruce wanted to face palm when he identified the person in the centre. The President of America himself.

“Tony, who exactly did you bring in to this scheme of yours?” asked Bruce.

“Who, me?” asked Tony, with all proper hand gestures. “I didn’t have to do anything. This was all Peter Wisdom. He’s shaping up to be quite good at pulling strings.”

Tony spoke as if Wisdom was a well performing protégé, despite Bruce knowing that the man had been an enhanced secret agent for decades before coming to Tony’s attention.

“Gentlemen. And Ladies,” President Ellis added with an eye sweep. “I’m sure you can imagine how unhappy I am that I was forced to come here. Ross, you promised me you were the only one who I could trust to keep a lid on things. If this is your idea of keeping things calm, I’d hate to see what you’d do when you were intentionally trying to make things worse.”

“Sir!” replied Ross, “I can assure you that everything is now under control.”

“I’m sorry Secretary Ross,” said the president with biting sarcasm, “but my definition of ‘under control’ does not include having the highest level British officials threatening extreme sanctions against us. I have no desire to see the United States lose its strongest and closest allies because a bunch of idiots were unable to reach a reasonable and peaceful conclusion. So, I’m forced to be here. You will all answer my questions. You will not lie to me. You will not waste my time trying to cover your asses. You will not conceal information for ‘security purposes’. You will tell me what I want to know as quickly and thoroughly as the question merits. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir,” chorused the American side, and even some of the more militaristic Brits.

Huh, thought Bruce to herself. Whoever claimed the president was a mild-mannered compromise candidate had clearly never seen this side of him.

The president made his way to the chair behind the desk, and Ross moved away without protest. The president sat, but pointedly did not offer anyone else a seat. His two assistants or bodyguards took position at his shoulders. “First question. Why, precisely, do you have the Excalibur team locked up, Secretary Ross?”

Ross spoke without any sign of concern. “We have only just confirmed their identities, but we encountered them in the course of our operations giving aid and succour to the known terrorist Wanda Maximoff. They proceeded to interfere with our duties, putting the lives of a number of civilian children in danger. We judged that we had no choice but to detain them.”

“Secretary Ross,” said Wisdom through clenched teeth. “Detaining my people for doing their jobs is completely outside your purview. If you wish to file a complaint for their behaviour, there is a procedure for that. Throwing them into jail unprovoked is not that procedure.”
Ross bared his teeth. “You have been watching too much pro-Avengers television. I can assure you, I have the perfect right to treat unlawful combatants any way I see appropriate.”

Wisdom flexed his hand like he wished he could go for a firearm. “They would only be unlawful combatants if you are claiming that my team – an officially deployed Accords sanctioned team – are actually spies, mercenaries or child soldiers who deliberately attacked forces of the United States in an act of war. Is that your assertion, Secretary Ross? That our two countries are currently at a state of undeclared war?”

“Gentleman!” said the president sharply. “Enough. You will have your chance to make your case at the appropriate time, Mister Wisdom.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Ross smugly.

“We will be revisiting the grounds for that detention later, Secretary Ross,” said President Ellis, not losing any of his sharpness. “You assured me that whole thing with the illegal imprisonment of Lang and Barton was an anomaly, but this is starting to make it look like a habit. But first, I would like an explanation as to why the Accords team was in the Democratic Republic of Niganda in the first place, and why you personally felt the need to travel to this base.”

Ross drew himself up. “Due to the deaths she caused at Whiteport, we had prioritised the capture of the known super-powered terrorist Wanda Maximoff. I determined that the matter needed all speed and attention possible to prevent further humanitarian disasters. When we received information about her whereabouts in Niganda, we put significant resources into verifying that. During the course of that investigation, we determined that there was an imminent danger of terrorist activities. Under our exigent circumstances guidelines, we went in to detain her. Thanks to our intervention, we saved the lives of seven civilian children. We are currently in the process of filing the proper paperwork with the Nigandan authorities to inform them of our actions.”

“I see,” said the president. “Mister Wisdom, if you would please tell me why Excalibur was in Niganda?”

Wisdom crossed his hands behind his back. “The Democratic Republic of Niganda is part of the Commonwealth, and Her Majesty was determined they receive any assistance we could offer them. Team Excalibur was one of the Accords sanctioned teams brought in to assist in the aftermath of Whiteport. When one of our members indicated that we could track Wanda Maximoff as a result, we informed the regional Accords Panel. They invited us to attempt a conversation with her. Given the disasters that resulted from previous violent attempts to detain her, they were very keen for us to try a less violent solution. Secretary Ross knew, or should have known, that we were attempting to apprehend her. In fact, I strongly suspect that our pre-announced intention to talk her down is the ‘information’ he claims to have received.”

“I’m afraid,” said Ross, “that I’m a busy man, and I do not have time to track every action of every minor enhanced human on the planet. I was tracking Wanda Maximoff. And we succeeded. Wanda Maximoff has been apprehended, and no civilian deaths occurred.”

President Ellis shot him a quelling look, and turned to Wisdom again. “This does sound like this has been an unfortunate miscommunication, but Secretary Ross has a point. The situation was resolved successfully. I have no reason to believe that any wrong was done by either side. We will look into improving the processes to ensure that something like this does not happen again, but no harm was done.”

“With all due respect, sir,” said Wisdom, not giving an inch. “Processes already exist to ensure that things like this do not occur, and Secretary Ross chose to completely ignore them. He authorised the
use of deadly force against my team with no justification whatsoever. The fact that he failed to achieve his goal does not reassure me that he will not attempt to do so again, processes or no processes.”

“I had plenty of justification,” said Ross, and Bruce pressed a tongue into the roof of his mouth at the man’s anger. “They were defending the terrorist. Any one of my men will testify under oath that they prevented us from taking care of the problem with a single, well-aimed round, leaving us no choice but to expand the hostilities.”

President Ellis rubbed his forehead. “Your reply, Mister Wisdom?”

Wisdom looked Ross up and down, and then ignored him. “Any protection was purely incidental in protecting their own lives. We had already successfully convinced Wanda Maximoff to turn herself in when unidentified soldiers opened fire on both her and us. We defended ourselves and the nearby civilian children until such time as we managed to subdue Maximoff, and could safely de-escalate the situation. Since Wanda Maximoff happened to be standing between our team mate and the children in question, yes, our actions would have prevented her in being shot by Secretary Ross’s men.”

“See? He admits it,” said Ross.

“Which is why,” proceeded Wisdom grimly, “We took her out with our own tranquilising dart. Once they finally stopped firing blindly, Ross’s men insisted on apprehending the team despite the fact that Excalibur were the ones to resolve the situation. We judged it would reduce the risk of civilian deaths to co-operate, rather than emulate the lack of discipline and indifference to human life displayed by Ross’s men.”

“So now you’re claiming that your team were the ones who incapacitated Maximoff?” Ross turned to the president. “This is all obviously after-the-fact inventions so that he doesn’t have to admit his team was assisting a criminal in the pursuit of terrorist activities.”

“It’s an easy matter to determine,” said Wisdom. “Even if you put aside the fact that Secretary Ross’s team was not carrying tranquiliser darts and could not have been responsible. I’m sure the recordings from Secretary Ross’s team will substantiate our account.”

“Why do you think that such recordings would exist?” asked the president, sounding a little wrong-footed.

“It’s an automatic feature of the armour, sir,” said Wisdom. “Everything is recorded and stored for later analysis.”

"How did you know that?" asked Ross, which was completely the wrong reaction if he was going to try to deny their existence.

"We read the manuals?" asked Wisdom, like he was trying to spot the trick question.

If anything, that infuriated Ross even more. “Where did you get manuals for our gear?”

Wisdom was now looking at Ross as if he might have taken a blow to the head while he hadn’t been watching. “They were provided with all the other equipment from Tony Stark.”

“Did you hear them admit that?” asked Ross, slamming his hand down on the desk. “Stark deliberately gave them access to confidential information. I always knew that bastard was a traitor. I am going to eviscerate him for this. He won’t get away with it this time.”

Bruce felt his own breath catch, but was reassured by President Ellis’s expression. It didn’t look like
he was impressed by Ross.

“Secretary Ross,” said Wisdom, speaking very slowly. “Tony Stark didn’t give us manuals to your proprietary armour. He gave us manuals to his proprietary armour that he gifted to us at the same time he gifted it to you. I realise you are attempting to ignore reality on this matter, but we are also a UN approved group for handling of matters under the Sokovia Accords. We all have the same outfitting provisions and we share the same intelligence resources.”

“Why didn’t you mention this footage, Ross?” the president asked. “That sounds like something we should have started with.”

“You know how unreliable technology can be,” said Ross, suddenly backing off and trying to reclaim his position. “After an incident like that, I’m not confident how much usable information can really be gleaned.”

Wisdom smiled. “Then it’s fortunate that I have already checked into the matter, and it is all quite usable. In fact, I had some of my team compile the highlights of both his and my own teams’ for me while I was in transit. Would you care to view it, Mister President?”

The president looked irritated at such an obvious trap, but he sat back with a sigh. “Yes. Yes, I suppose I’d better.”

Tony had helpfully split the screen into the footage being shown, and the major players watching it. He must have played with the light settings as well, as the people continued to be perfectly visible, if slightly more monochrome, even after they’d reduced the lights.

The clip showed the peaceful and quiet scene of a village, a road, and a space where Wanda and another woman were standing. Bruce watched in deliberate detachment as the unknown women convinced Wanda that she had to turn herself in. While Wanda had not agreed to anything, Bruce judged it was fair to assume that it would have been successful. Then chaos erupted as Ross’s men stormed the place.

Bruce gripped the edge of the table and breathed deeply. He would have to watch his strength. This was no longer the heavy wood table Thor had presented to him when he had first arrived. This was a much more practical but much lighter surface that reminded Bruce of a granite kitchen surface. The scene played out pretty much as Wisdom had described, and Bruce waited until the loud noises were over and he could trust his control again.

“As you see, sir,” said Secretary Ross, “It happened precisely as I said. My men did not initiate any action until Wanda Maximoff began using her magic. The British team, who were still at that point unidentified, acted in ways that appeared to be in support of Wanda Maximoff. It became imperative for us to intervene.”

“Just like it was imperative for you to open fire on Culver University some years back?” asked Wisdom with a tight smile. “I find it interesting that as soon as an enhanced person is involved, you suddenly become incapable of finding any solution that does not involve massive amounts of collateral damage and risk of civilian deaths.”

“That was investigated,” said Ross, "And I was full cleared of any wrongdoing.”

“You mean,” corrected Wisdom, “that in the absence of testimony from Bruce Banner to determine the balance of responsibility, the court decided not to press charges against you at that time.”

Bruce winced.
“Mister Wisdom,” said the president. “We are not here to rehash old news. While I agree that the team might have been unwise in startling Maximoff like that, she did begin to use magic. Lethal force at that point was an appropriate reaction.”

“Towards her, perhaps. But not towards Phoenix or the civilian children. There’s another clip that I believe might throw some light on this particular incident, if I might have your further indulgence?”

“Go ahead,” said the President in resignation.

This clip was not of the road. The change of scene was surprising enough for it to take a minute to realise it was footage of the same room as the main screen, just at a different time. Ross was alone, but he was directing his attention to the speaker phone.

“Sir, we have multiple heat signatures, six… seven of them sub-adult.”

“Don’t worry about it, son. Any casualties can be blamed on Maximoff and the Excalibur team. Just make sure that we’re the ones who bring her into custody, and not them. Whatever it takes.”

The room turned to stare at Secretary Ross, even the bodyguards.

“That was taken out of context,” Ross said, after just too long a pause.

Wisdom raised an eyebrow. “We do have the conversation on record, Secretary Ross. If we were forced to sue Secretary Ross for illegal imprisonment of my team or Wanda Maximoff, I would have no reservations about showing them in full. In public.”

President Ellis tilted his head back to stare at the ceiling. “Well, isn’t this a fine cluster fuck.”

“I can explain—” started Ross.

President Ellis cut him off with a gesture. “It’s too late for that Ross. You just lied to me. Right to my face. You stood here and told me that your people had been forced to intervene to save lives, and you had no idea you were involving the Excalibur team. Do you not realise how serious that is? I was willing to go to bat to defend you, and it was all bullshit. It wasn’t just your own career you were risking in this little game of yours. How could you do this to me?”

“Mister President—“ said Ross, horrified.

“Enough, Secretary Ross,” said the President, and Bruce wondered if he had some sort of ice superpower to get the words so cold. “It seems to me that your health may not be as recovered as you originally hoped. I think you need to retire from public life entirely. No interviews, no opinions, no stress of any kind. Do you understand me?”

“I…” Ross looked on the verge of tears, which was an odd look on so angry a man. “Yes, sir. I understand.”

A better man than Bruce would even have felt sorry for Ross, but Bruce could not force himself to go that far. Ross wasn't tortured or killed. He was now just... powerless.

The president turned to look over his shoulder. “Walters, take a note. I need to consult with that new SHIELD guy – Coulson, or whatever his name was. Maybe he has a better idea of who to put it charge of all of this.”

“Yes, sir.”
The president turned to Peter Wisdom. “I assure you, this will not happen again. Your team will be released immediately, with our apologies.”

“And Wanda Maximoff returned to our custody,” said Wisdom

The president grimaced, but nodded. “And Wanda Maximoff returned to your custody.”

The screen faded away, and Tony removed the tablet.

Bruce smiled at his hopeful expression. “Thank you, Tony. I don’t know how you managed it, but thank you. That was a very well handled solution.”

“Eh,” said Tony, waving it off. “I didn’t really have to do much more than give Ross the opportunity to be Ross.”

“Just—” said Bruce with a frown. “Coulson? As in our Coulson?”

“Didn’t I tell you?” asked Tony rhetorically. “SHIELD faked his death. Or faked his lack of recovery, more accurately. They were pulling some Red Skull bullshit, and brought Coulson back to life by torturing a captured alien. Serious super-villain territory. Anyway, we figured Fury was keeping it under wraps because he wanted someone on the outside while the HYDRA stuff was going down. But now that’s mostly resolved, he’s come in from the cold to re-establish SHIELD, or whatever they end up calling the new version.”

Bruce blinked. “That’s both incredibly creepy, and nice to know. I don’t think I’ve ever heard anything bad about Coulson. Is he going to be put in charge of the Avengers again?”

“No,” said Tony. “He agrees with me that he’ll be far too busy for that. We’re going to have more traditional military liaisons. The rest is still in negotiation, but I suspect we’re going to bring the leadership in team with someone who understands both sides. Now that Ross is out of the way, do you think you’ll be coming home any time soon?”

Bruce hesitated. He hadn’t wanted to admit to Tony that he hadn’t precisely been in a rush to re-join the Avengers. It wasn’t that he had disagreed, exactly, with giving Wanda a chance to turn her life around. He had been grateful that so many people had been willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, even after his many disasters. He didn’t want to take that away from anyone, even Wanda. What had upset him was how clearly it showed that the rest of the team did not regard him as important. Captain America and his followers had been entirely indifferent to Bruce’s mental health when they’d casually invited her to join them. Like they’d repeatedly been utterly indifferent about Tony’s mental health. Not even Natasha had stood up for him. He’d thought she’d finally started to see him as something more than just a game piece, but clearly he wasn’t human enough to deny Clint or Steve. It was a toxic mess he had no desire to plunge into once more.

He had felt guilty for leaving Tony to face them alone, but as long as there had been a way for an outside party to trigger an incident, he had felt justified. Now, however…

“Things are looking more positive,” Bruce admitted. “The All-father arranged for a few of their experts to assist me. Turns out that there’s an entire group of people fascinated by human science and the various super-soldier variants. They went through a similar process in their own history, but apparently we’ve managed whole new twists on their paradigms, and they have been eager to get their hands dirty.”

“Asgard scientists?” asked Tony, sounding bemused.

“I know!” said Bruce. “I didn’t even think such a thing existed. They’re all very young for
Asgardians, and I get the feeling they’re a lot lower on the status ladder than the people Thor found for me, but they’re good. Well-informed, creative and enthusiastic. And not just about my little anger problem. If you have any outstanding problems, feel free to toss them this way.”

“Huh,” said Tony, the gears clearly turning behind his eyes. “That might be really useful. I wonder if the ‘All-father’ would be up to allowing them to make field trips when you come back.”

Bruce smiled. “We can always ask.”

The rest of the team might not have wasted much energy on him, but Bruce knew that Tony cared. Cared about all of him, and not just the parts that he found useful. Tony might have had plenty of reasons to hate Ross on his own accord, but this take down had been practically gift-wrapped for Bruce’s tastes. If things went badly, and he was willing to let Tony know about it, perhaps he could trust Tony to take care of the problem for him.

After all, Bruce did miss home. Maybe it was time to look forward to returning to it.
Chapter 20

Clint sat in silence while Scott paced. Scott had become more agitated as the events had proceeded, but Clint had become more still. They were past the point of no return. This was like a sniper job where he couldn’t get back unless the enemy died first, but he wasn’t the one behind the weapon. There wasn’t the option to abort. There was nothing left to do but wait it out and see where they ended up.

The decision to do this had infected his dreams and caused his stomach to tie up in knots for months while he’d been in Wakanda. When it had finally come down to it though, it had proved easy to make. Steve had made it for him. Sam might have been right that Steve hadn’t outright lied to them about Siberia, but he hadn’t been fully honest either. Steve hadn’t run from a powerful opponent who happened to collapse after he was out of sight. Steve had beat Tony until Tony was utterly helpless, and then had simply strolled away without a care in the world. If Steve found it so easy to abandon a team mate, then Clint couldn’t say that he felt the burning obligation to stand behind Steve in return.

Clint snagged Scott as he made another pass. “Relax, Scott. Nothing’s going to happen quickly. They might not even get back with a decision today.”

“I know,” said Scott. “It’s just… why did Wanda have to pick right after we turned ourselves in to get arrested? I know the lawyer dude said it might make things better for us, but it might make things worse too.”

Clint hadn’t fully followed the logic for the delay himself. What difference did it make what the courts decided in Wanda’s case? Clint and Scott were in Germany dealing with normal people crimes, and Wanda was in The Hague being tried under the terms of the Accords. But the signs were positive. Everyone was being very polite to them. The news about them – and enhanced in general – was markedly less vitriolic than it had originally been. And most importantly, they were in a Stark funded hotel suite, not in a jail cell. They’d camped out in the lounge, eating cheeseburgers and watching Wanda’s trial.

The testimony had wiped away any lingering traces of guilt Clint felt about accepting this deal for himself. Wanda had been the driving force behind the entire Ultron disaster, and Steve had just let Tony take the fall for it. Wanda could have influenced Steve to make that choice. But Steve could have just decided to swap out a co-lead Steve couldn’t control for a girl who would do whatever he said. Maybe, not to put too fine a point on it, he’d decided to replace a genius with someone less intelligent than Steve. When they’d first come together as a team, it hadn’t taken long for Clint and Natasha to realise that Steve had difficulty trusting experts. Steve wanted people who looked to him to make decisions, rather than the other way around. Clint and Natasha had both begun playing down their intelligence as soon as Steve’s biases had become obvious, but neither Tony nor Bruce had had that option, even if they’d had the desire. So maybe Steve had been a victim. But maybe he’d preferred a victim, because it made them dependent on him.

If so, Steve had miscalculated. Wanda had turned out to view Steve in the same way that Steve viewed Tony – good enough to pretend to like when they were giving them stuff they wanted, but never trusted or liked. Someone who was easily disposable when that stuff came at too high a price. It was an irony that left Clint a little light-headed.
“Want to watch the opinion pieces?” offered Clint.

“Might as well,” said Scott, dropping next to him on the couch.

Clint pressed the button to lower the ambient lights, feeling odd as he did so. Even after living with Stark for such a long time, he still found rich-people logic strange. Inch-thick curtains so you couldn’t see any light through them when they were shut, and then dozens of recessed lights just so it would look exactly like you’d left them open in the first place. But it did make watching things easier, and it didn’t take long to find an appropriate show to stream – and even the live stuff was streamed, because whoever heard of using a TV screen to show TV. Clint sat back to concentrate. None of it was likely to be new, but it felt like something he needed to pay attention to every time.

“We’re here with Frank Ashton, a lobbyist for the Legal Center for Public Values, who argues that the Accords, as they stand, serve no value. Surely, Frank, the Maximoff hearing shows the exact opposite? This involves not just one, but two, legal arguments allowed only by the Sokovia Accords. The prosecution is attempting to prove that destructive actions were caused by mind control, while the defence is arguing that she’s not guilty by reason of brainwashing.

Brainwashing, and wasn’t that a spit in the face. HYDRA might have lied to get Wanda and Pietro on board, but they hadn’t brainwashed them. They hadn’t had to. All they’d had to do was promise to point the twins at America, and the Arch American himself, Tony Stark, and the pair had come panting like a sixteen-year-old at a nudist beach. Frank mentioned something about diminished responsibility and conspiracy and not needing to overthrow the whole system for one new case, but Clint wasn’t interested in hearing about legal theory that wouldn’t apply to him. He found another link.

“I realise this is going to make me unpopular, but Maximoff had no reason to believe HYDRA was not a benevolent organisation. If your friend tells you they’re starting a job at Volkswagen, you’re thinking about their 30 days paid vacation and their full year maternity and paternity leave. You’re not thinking about the slave labour they used from concentration camps during the second world war. And we know that HYDRA was never particularly pro-Hitler. They were simply pro-organisation. When they tried to create the perfect human being, they didn’t care about how blond or blue-eyed that person was -- unlike the US, I’d like to point out. They wanted people who can lift an eighteen-wheeler or heal from having their heads cut off. Objectively, is there anything wrong with wanting people to be healthier and stronger?”

Clint turned to Scott. “Is this guy really defending HYDRA?”

“That’s one of the ‘is a good dictator better than a corrupt democracy’ bunch,” said Scott. “Ignore him. He’s a troll. This type of show gets viewership by being controversial.”

Clint decided to take that advice. He dealt with enough neo-Nazi bad guys to have any patience for the ones defending them.

“I know a lot of our viewers have been confused about why Wanda Maximoff will not, ironically, be charged for her actions in Sokovia. As we have found out, the terrorist group known as HYDRA was attempting to initiate a so-called ‘death-bot’ using alien technology. When they proved unsuccessful, they arranged for the incomplete product to be placed in the custody of the world’s foremost expert on artificial intelligence, Tony Stark, and sent Wanda Maximoff to mentally compromise the man.”

Finding out that Wanda had compromised Tony had only been a blow because he’d had to find out with the rest of the world. Clint would have excused the action as a restrained strike on Tony when Wanda still hated him. It was a lot less permanent than death, after all. But that they’d then kept it secret? Whether it was just Wanda or both her and Steve? No. It wasn’t just the hypocrisy of letting
him take the blame for Ultron. They’d left Tony entirely alone to heal from that injury without any help from anyone who knew what that was like, and that was just indefensible.

"Let me jump in there quickly. We have no evidence that HYDRA did that deliberately. We have no testimony regarding Hydra’s motivations in those final weeks before Ultron."

“We don’t have testimony about HYDRA’s plans, but I think in this case, the actions speak for themselves. HYDRA already had reason to suspect Wanda Maximoff’s reliability, and manipulating her into this action would have been trivial."

The presenter wasn’t wrong there. Wanda wasn’t really one for looking underneath the underneath. HYDRA was entirely twisty enough to know that their best chance was to make Wanda think she was working against them.

“Why would they risk anything that complex? Everything had to go just right – or wrong – to result in the creation of Ultron. We’ve all now – at long last – seen the full footage of the events that caused Ultron to wake up. Maximoff influencing Stark was a factor, but so were half a dozen other things. Stark had been at a critical point in his research. Doctor Cho had been at a critical point of hers. Thor had created foreign energy indoors.”

Because HYDRA was like that. The more Clint learned about their internal operations, the more it seemed like they were playing a game that gave more points to style than results. The more Rube Goldberg the solution was, the more impressed their co-workers were. Just take the whole insanely dramatic but stupidly wasteful take-over of SHIELD. Clint had no idea whether they had planned Ultron or not, but he knew that complexity would not have been what would have stopped them.

"But Maximoff’s actions were malicious. If the other factors hadn’t been right, then yes, we would have spared that particular disaster. But if Maximoff’s actions hadn’t been effective, she would have simply have moved on until she succeeded at a different disaster."

"Well, that's certainly an argument you can make. But it would have unnecessarily confused the issue, when they already had a far more obvious case in the events of Johannesburg. Prosecutors do it all the time. When they take a serial killer to court, they don't try to prosecute every suspected case that seems probable. They pick the top three or five cases that they have the best evidence for."

The conversation de-railed after that into discussions of court cases Clint only vaguely remembered from conversations with Laura, so he moved on again.

“Let’s discuss the big surprise of Maximoff’s testimony. The prior alleged murder attempt of Stark by Rogers. For those of you unfamiliar with this, Maximoff claims she convinced Rogers that Stark was attempting to recreate Ultron, and Rogers responded by throwing his shield at Stark’s head. Stark was fortunately – and completely unknown to Rogers – partially armoured, so he was able to keep himself alive long enough for even Rogers to realise Maximoff was talking bullshit. Now, we don’t have any confirmation that any of these events happened anywhere other than Maximoff’s head, but if they did, who would you say was to blame for it? Maximoff or Rogers?"

The most eye-opening part of watching the testimony had been the realisation that the Avengers problems had started a long time before the Accords. Like that piece of violence. None of the information was precisely new to Clint, but somehow, he had never placed it in the order everyone else had immediately leapt to – attempted murder based on the word of a terrorist.

It had just been so easy to assume the worst of Tony Stark. Even when they realised Tony had been fully justified in doing the things they’d just attacked him for, there had never been any feeling they’d owed him any kind of apology. It had just seemed obvious that it was Tony Stark’s own fault for
making them mistrust him in the first place. Not their fault for jumping to the worst possible conclusion based on the flimsiest evidence. Tony had constructed an automated defence force, and they’d assumed he must have intended to use if for terrible things. Steve had fought law enforcement and civilians, and they’d assumed he must have had good reasons. The double standards were glaring, and they weren’t anything new.

In retrospect, they’d been side-lining Tony (and to a lesser degree Bruce), since before the Chitauri. How much of that had been Tony’s own fierce independence, and how much had been Steve’s indignation that Tony had refused to worship at his feet?

"Rogers all the way,” said the presenter. “Maximoff has been very forthcoming about her crimes in the hearing, so it seems unlikely that she'd chose to lie just about this. She just told him she didn't trust Stark; she didn't brainwash him. Besides, it's been established that Maximoff can't control actions, just influence emotions."

"I disagree. Emotional influence is enough, in the right circumstances, and Maximoff ensured that the right circumstances existed. She hit Stark with anxiety so that he wouldn't notice the problems with the sceptre. She hit Hulk with fear so that he'd lose control in Johannesburg. Is it too much of a stretch to question whether she hit Rogers with paranoia so that he'd strike out at his team mates? Which is more likely, that Rogers was mentally compromised, or that Captain America attempted a potentially fatal attack on a teammate, the teammate most integral to keeping the Avengers up and running, based only on the unsubstantiated opinion of an ex-Nazi?"

“But don’t forget, as Cathy said, it might not have even happened. The elves admitted that Wanda wouldn’t recognise the truth if it borrowed an eighteen-wheeler and slowly reversed over her."

“When was that?” asked Clint. “I don’t remember that from the testimony.”

“It wasn’t in the testimony,” said Scott. “It was in one of those shows about that psychic mojo they’re trialling. Someone asked whether they could do it for Wanda, and they basically laughed. She’s ‘too adrift in her own mind’ and ‘without the requisite capacity for self-reflection’, or something like that. They tried to be polite and all, but basically they seem to think her mental and emotional development froze at the same time as her parents died.”

Tony had been right. They’d had no business throwing Wanda into the Avengers. At the very least, she should have had time to grief. At the most, she should have been evaluated by the people Hill kept trying to press on them, given a proper education, and allowed to start an entirely new life.

Clint and Scott both leapt to their feet at a knock on their door, and Clint only slowly allowed himself to come out of his defensive position as the person proved to be their lawyer. Clint hit mute on the control and they waited as the lawyer finished putting down his things.

The lawyer said, “I received a heads-up that the panel is just about to return with their judgement for Wanda Maximoff.”

Clint didn’t take long to find a channel, and they waited through some breathless anticipation by newscasters. Clint could feel his heart-rate start to speed, and took a few deep breaths to control it. The panel members filed back into the room painfully slowly, and seemed to take an age to sit down, adjust their positions and give the proper answers to the legal rituals.

“We, as a panel, acknowledge the mental health treatment that the elvish people are offering constitute a major game-changer in the realm of the mental disorder defence. While it is their expert opinion that Wanda Maximoff’s mind would not survive True Vision’s Sight, they have offered other techniques available on their own home world to repair her damaged mind. Given that a genuine
cure is possible, we feel it to be our moral duty to assist that process in every way possible. As such, we find Wanda Maximoff not guilty by reason of mental compromise, and remand her to the custody of the elvish people. They will retain custody until such time as she is fully within her own mind and can convincingly demonstrate that she no longer accidentally mentally influences those around her.”

They moved on to boring technicalities, and Clint switched it off.

“That sounds… good?” asked Scott.

“That’s excellent,” corrected the lawyer. “They’ve just handed us the best defence we could possibly hope for.”

They looked at him a little blankly, and the lawyer continued impatiently, “That bit about accidentally mentally influencing people? They’ve definitively ruled that she was mentally influencing people.”

“But…” said Scott, “Wanda didn’t make me do anything.”

“Do you know that for sure?” asked the lawyer.

Scott hesitated. Clint had wanted to chime in that Wanda had likewise never done anything to him, but he wasn’t sure either. Was the guilt he’d felt at Pietro’s death completely natural? The self-hatred? The anger? The paranoia about his family being exposed without him there to watch them? Why exactly had he decided to retire? It could all have been purely his own reactions. It could have been encouraged. He didn’t know. At least with Loki, Clint had known precisely when he was and was not in control. Now, he was entirely insecure in his mind, and he hated Wanda for that. He couldn’t even figure out what would be worse. That everything he had felt since Ultron had been caused by Wanda … or that it hadn’t been.

“See?” asked the lawyer after a few moments of silence. “You don’t know that for sure. Neither does anyone else. Not beyond reasonable doubt. No-one is going to want to put this in front of jury with that kind of uncertainty. The negotiating position for our proposed deal just got a lot stronger.”

The lawyer’s phone buzzed, and a minute later there was a knock on the door.

“Expecting someone?” asked Clint.

“Someone for you,” said the lawyer, reading the text. “A better deal has landed on the table.”

The lawyer opened the door, and framed in the doorway was someone that couldn’t possibly be there.

Clint reached for the bow he wasn’t carrying. This had to be some sort of scam, or hallucination. “Coulson?”

“Barton,” he replied with a nod.

“Coulson?” asked Scott. “Like in the dude that put together the Avengers before he was killed by Loki?”

“Exactly like that,” said Clint, still wishing he was armed. “Although it seems that the ‘getting killed by Loki’ thing may have been somewhat of an exaggeration.”

“Not really an exaggeration,” said Coulson with a lip quirk. “More like a truth that was more temporary than Fury may have implied.”
Clint’s breathing sped up. “So you were dead, but you got better. You’re honest to God using the ‘I
got better’ line on me.”

Scott snorted. “Perhaps your friend here was only mostly dead?”

Clint shot Scott a glare, and then returned the full focus of his displeasure on Coulson.

Coulson sounded more serious when he explained. “I was still clinically dead when Fury told
everyone. After that, he ordered me to stay under wraps. We suspect now it was to keep me out of
the hands of HYDRA.”

“So you just pretended to be dead, while everything went to shit?” asked Clint.

“By that time, I had shit of my own to worry about,” said Coulson sharply. “And you were supposed
to be in a good place. Stark might be many things, but he’s good at taking care of his own. Forgive
me for expecting you to be a little too cynical to follow a guy on a one-way mission to screw
everything up just because he carries an American flag over his arm.”

And wasn’t that rich coming from Mister Captain America Fanboy himself?

“Because he used to carry an American flag,” said Scott. “Now he just holds up his fist like he’s
cosplaying as Rosy the Riveter.”

They turned to look at him, and Scott put up his hands in surrender. “Hey, I’m just saying.”

Coulson did that cheek twitch thing that meant he felt bad. “I am sorry I couldn’t tell you, Clint. And
I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you when things got confusing.”

“Yeah, well, HYDRA,” said Clint. He’d have to work through how he felt about it later, but they
could wait on more privacy to go into it. Clint knew how to compartmentalise. “So why are you here
now?”

Coulson nodded to acknowledge the ceasefire. “In a short while, I’ll officially be made the director
of the organisation that replaces SHIELD.”

“Congratulations?” said Scott.

“Indeed,” said Coulson. “We’ve been tasked with running a team of local superheroes that handles
matters within the United States. I’m here to talk you, both of you, through a potential job offer.”

“We’re coming home?” asked Clint slowly.

“We’re coming home,” confirmed Coulson. “If you work with me, they’ve agreed that your
sentences will be fully suspended. Keep your noses clean, and you won’t ever have to see the inside
of a jail again.”

The lawyer wanted more details, but Clint no longer cared. He felt like he could finally hear properly
once more. He knew he’d be angry once he got over being relieved, and guilty once he got over
being angry. There was a lot of betrayal in his past, and from all sides. None of that was just going to
go away. But his future? That was starting to look good for the first time in a long time.

Chapter End Notes
If anyone with construction, architectural or structural engineering experience is willing to beta a particular section of this story, please could you email me or let me know in the comments? Thanks!
Steve suppressed a moment of irritation when Sam adjusted his baseball cap for the twentieth time. Even if the cap had come fully loose and revealed his face entirely, that would have been less suspicious than constantly fussing with it. It wasn’t that Steve didn’t understand. It might be easy to convince the mind that being in a busy city was more anonymous than the countryside. It was less easy to convince the heart that the sheer press of people around them were not enemies. And it was a press of people, enough to make even the cars second class citizens on the roads. It might be his memory playing him false, but he didn’t remember New York ever being this crowded, or the people in it being this aggressive.

Steve also knew why Sam was becoming more and more on edge over the last few weeks. Steve could admit it was starting to take a toll on his own state of mind as well. It was that feeling of being lost without a map. They’d almost made their way to where Bucky had been held, when news had come out that Wanda had been captured. By that point Steve had discovered that Bucky had a Yelp channel (of all things), so he knew that whatever was going on, Bucky hadn’t been in immediate danger. They’d reprioritised, and headed back south to rescue Wanda. But everything had all taken him longer than expected, and all of his contacts had been less helpful than he’d hoped, and they’d ended up stranded half-way in the wrong direction when word had come out that Wanda had been taken off planet. It was like those times when they’d been on the verge of rescuing his shield, only for someone whisk it away to a completely different location.

They were currently awaiting news of a guy who could take them back towards Finland, but Steve felt like Sisyphus. If he got close to Bucky, Steve just knew something would happen to make him reprioritise, or Bucky would disappear off to Argentina, or his plane would get diverted to Vladivostok. Steve had always known that he’d succeeded only by God’s grace, and he was starting to wonder if His hand was no longer providing shelter for Steve’s work. If he didn’t know better, he’d think that someone was deliberately predicting Steve’s actions and moving to thwart him at the last minute.

Sam came to a halt, causing an instant eddy in the flow of people. Steve hissed at him. Adjusting a cap was one thing. Stopping in the middle of the road was a guaranteed way to attract attention. Then Steve followed Sam’s gaze to a television. It was perched precariously on a box next to a stall and held in place more by the wires running from it than the stability of the surface. On it was World24’s over-sized logo, and in the channel’s largest font, the banner read, “Alien Invasion Imminent.”

Steve pulled Sam closer to the TV, avoiding the detritus of plastic bags and food scraps. It still wasn’t inconspicuous, but at least got them out of the way of the main stream of traffic. The first few
minutes were incomprehensible, but soon enough the story cycled back to the beginning, and the close captioning began to make sense again.

“We wake today to a world in fear. The Asgardian embassy released information earlier this morning about an invasion headed directly for Earth. The Chitauri, who attempted to gain a foothold in New York before being driven back by the Avengers, are coming again and will arrive within the next two years. This time, they won’t be constrained by a small portal. They’ll be coming by regular space, and in full force. The worst case scenario warned by Tony Stark is coming true, and we are not ready for it.”

“Come on, let’s go back to the hotel,” said Steve in Sam's ear. Getting food could wait.

Sam finally managed to shake himself lose of his paralysis, and they headed back at twice the speed as they’d come out. The place was what Sam referred to as a motel, despite the general lack of cars. Staying at a place like that reduced the rate it drained their resources. They’d originally set up plenty for Steve to retrieve his shield, but that couldn't last forever. Using less of it postponed another painfully careful not-argument from Sam about how theft was still theft, even if the victims were rich and someone else was doing it on Steve’s behalf.

It was fine. Steve could ignore the general lack of amenities. It did, at least, have a television with a handful of English language channels, kept level thanks to a novel donated by a previous inhabitant. That was all they needed now. They switched it on, and it wasn’t difficult to find a channel that told them what they needed to know. Steve suspected it might have been harder to find a channel that didn’t.

“Questions are being asked about why so few preparations have been made prior to this, and why the GDSN has been forced to rely almost entirely on donations from Stark Industries. People point to how many of our so-called protectors – SHIELD, Captain America, JTTF – have been acting like Stark was Chicken Little, running around telling us that the sky was falling.”

The show then flipped through multiple press conferences and candid interviews, each time stamped, alternating between Tony saying that they needed to prepare or detailing steps he was taking to prepare, and other officials reassuring the public that the threat had been dealt with and there was no cause for concern.

Steve hadn’t previously realised just how often Tony had fought about this, but the clip including Steve himself was misleading. It had been an offhand answer to a question after Ultron concerning the original purpose of the robots. That hadn’t been how he’d meant it. Was that why Tony thought that Steve had objected to Ultron? That he thought Steve thought that Tony was inventing the alien threat? Sure, he’d thought that Tony had been letting his fear overcome his good sense more often than not. But Steve hadn’t stopped him because he had thought Tony was wrong about what might happen. He’d stopped him because there were consequences worse than being killed.

They might mock Steve for being out of touch, but he wasn’t impressed with their grasp on how things had changed either. It was like they had read different histories than Steve had. When Steve had gone under the ice, he had been willing to swear on his mother’s life that the US would never, ever, commit a war of aggression. They would defend themselves if people attempted to invade the US, and that was all. As hard as it had been to accept at the time, that was why they hadn’t involved themselves in WWII until they’d been invaded. It wasn’t that they didn’t care about the situation in Europe. Some principles just had to take priority over anything else. And when they were done, they’d stopped. As President Eisenhower had pointed out, ‘Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed’.
Steve had come out of the ice to discover a US that was willing to bomb entire nations just to distract attention from domestic scandals. They had the best, largest, most generously funded military in the world. The stats they’d presented, like proud parents to a doting grandparent, had made Steve sick to his stomach. More than a third of world-wide spending on the military was done by the US alone. They had a better funded military than the next eight countries combined. Ten times more spending on their military than Russia. No one put that much money into something and kept it in reserve. They wanted to show something for their investment. And so they seized any excuse to use it. The protests over Vietnam and Korea might have been handled in a terrible way, but at least those citizens had still realised how wrong it all was. By the time the middle east became an area of decades long war-games, the US citizens were almost indifferent. It was simply the way the world worked.

Which is why he could not permit Tony to create a metal army, and why the Accords sanctioned Global Defence Satellite Network was just as bad. It might start as a defensive line against aliens, but how long would it have taken before people thought it was a waste to leave them unused the rest of the time? How long would it have taken before it was used as a threat against the humans of the world? Would it be worth it to survive aliens, just to fall victim to the monsters they’d created themselves? Because the first generation might have protested the constant presence of machines threatening them, but the second generation would have dismissed it as an unfortunate truth. Something late night talk show hosts decried, not something anyone risked their lives to prevent.

But none of that had meant that Steve meant to abandon Tony to it when the fight – the fight with actual victims and fought by actual individuals – was upon them. He had expected to fight at the forefront, inspiring other people to find those real, human solutions. He had expected the people – not the governments and the military complex – to step up to the plate and take a swing. He hadn’t expected everyone to stand back and ask Tony why he hadn’t done more. Steve sat watching in helplessness as the news cycle continued on.

“The Asgardians and the elves have assured us that they will be providing all the help they can, but we are all aware of the limits of that. The elves in particular will need a focus point to cast their magic through, and Earth has universally resisted the idea of a single unifying leader. And if we look to our domestic enhanced, the situation is in even more disarray. Here with me tonight is the famous author, John Hastings, who has covered many of these themes in his series, Ring Around the Planet, and Barbara Finlock, our top political correspondent for alien affairs. John, what do you think our next move should be?”

Steve shook his head. This was precisely why the world was in the state it was. Instead of talking to someone meaningful, they treated celebrities as if they were experts.

“I think you’ve already given us the clue. We need to start cleaning up at home. I think we’ve all seen Tony Stark’s emotive appeal to Captain America to return to his post, and the world to allow that. If even Tony Stark is willing to forgive and forget, then I think it’s time to consider it. After all, Rogers attempted to kill him on three separate occasions. If anyone has the right to make the decision that Steve Rogers is necessary, it’s him. Stark needs the help, and we should let him get it.”

“Barbara, you look like you disagree.”

“I think that’s precisely why we shouldn’t be allowing Stark to make that decision. Yes, we look at him and agree that he’s a man who can’t do it all by himself. But help from Steve Rogers? How much more could Tony Stark do if he wasn’t reeling under the psychological and physical blow of losing his fingers? Steve Rogers didn’t help with that; Steve Rogers caused that. If a wife told you that her husband didn’t really mean it all those times he smacked her around, and besides it was her fault for making him mistrust her in the first place, would you recommend he be brought back to
help her with her injuries?"

“That’s hardly the same thing.”

“Isn’t it? Think of it as an imbalance in power, rather than as a romantic attachment. A husband is usually physically stronger than a wife. Rogers is enhanced while Stark is a normal human. A husband is usually considered to have the right to control his wife’s finances. Rogers forced Stark to cater to his every material desire and prevented Stark from using his resources to pursue his own solution. A husband usually has social support for his behaviour in ordering a wife around. The media actively encouraged Rogers to ‘keep Stark under control’, and we now know that the rest of the team just sat back and let him beat Stark up whenever he felt like it.”

Steve could feel nausea curling in his stomach. It was purely in his mind, he knew. His body didn’t allow such human weakness anymore. The news broadcast made him sound like a bully. They made Tony sound like a victim. How could people let the media get away with saying such awful things? Tony shouldn’t have to face nonsense like that alone. Steve slipped the flip phone out of his pocket, pushing at buttons.

“Expecting a call from anyone?” asked Sam dryly. “Not a lot of candidates who aren’t in custody or off-planet.”

“It sends entirely the wrong message. Is he just going to be forgiven all his awful actions just because he’s powerful? Some principles are too important to just throw by the wayside.”

“Tony,” admitted Steve. “If he’s making television appeals… I sent him a phone with this number. What if I programmed in the wrong number? Or maybe the phone was broken in transit. Or maybe he didn’t get it at all.”

That would mean that Tony had never even received his apology, and didn’t know that Steve was just waiting to help him. He was sitting somewhere out there, thinking he was going to have to face an alien invasion all by himself.

“As much as I hate to say this, yes. We might like to pretend that we’re above realpolitik, but with alien invasions and the growing threats from super-villains, we just don’t have that kind of luxury anymore.”

“Or maybe,” said Sam, “He thought a phone call lacked the public relations impact of a tear-jerking televised appeal.”

“Steven Rogers might not be the paragon of human decency the comic books made him out to be, but he is manageable. His decisions were stupid and wrong, but he is not a psychopath.”

“Sam!” said Steve. “I expect that kind of prejudice from Wanda and the rest, but I thought you were better than that. The real Tony is a very private person, and he hates revealing his feelings. He wouldn’t be doing something like that if there was any other option available to him.”

“With proper monitoring, we can rely on him to help save the planet.”

Steve caught the tail end of the broadcast. Yes, that was exactly it. They could always rely on Steve to save the planet. He switched off the television and said, “We need to go back.”

Sam considered that, then nodded. “As awful as this all is, it might be the push they need to drop the Accords. Small silver linings where we can find them, I guess.”

“No,” said Steve. “I mean, we have to go back, now. We should be there already.”
“What?” asked Sam. “No. They’re not offering us anything. They could do anything to us. We don’t even know for sure if there really is a threat. This could all be a pretext to get us under lock and key. If we go back before the Accords are revoked, they’re going to force us to sign them. We’ll be right back to playing the part of their tame attack squad as the price of them letting us save the world.”

Steve crossed his arms over his chest and stared at Sam. “Are you really suggesting we wait for it to get so bad that they have no option but to give in to our demands? Just wait around letting people die? That’s exactly what I objected to in the Accords!”

“Of course not, Steve,” said Sam, sounding more long-suffering than he had any right to. “I’m saying we save people ourselves, one on one, the way we always said we would.”

Steve shook his head sharply. “We don’t have the resources. And you were the one to point out that any alternative resources we might be offered will come with just as many strings attached as the Accords. Neither one of us wants to find ourselves beholden to another HYDRA organisation just because they claim to have pretty intentions.”

“Like the people running the Accords themselves?” asked Sam. “Sooner or later, they’re going to ask us to do horrible, awful things. They might wait until after the threat of the aliens is over, but you know as well as I do that they will eventually. And then it’ll be too late. We won’t be in a position to expose them as the selfish power-hungry politicians they really are. We have to prove our resolve now if we want to make a stand.”

Steve turned away from him, going through his bag to dump all the old wrappers and recipes out on the bed and repack the few loose items. “If we sign and return to the Avengers compound, then we can use that power to campaign for modifications from inside the system.”

“For fuck’s sake, Steve!”

Steve felt his jaw drop at Sam’s unexpected and irrational anger. He turned to stare at Sam in disbelief. Steve had become used to how difficult his teammates could be to control, but Sam had been the one person he’d never had to worry about.

“Language,” said Steve weakly.

Sam continued, “If we were just going to do things the Tony Stark way, then we should have done that from the beginning. You’re just throwing away all the sacrifices we’ve made.”

“We made those sacrifices to help people,” said Steve, frowning now in confusion. “But we’re not protecting anyone anymore. You watched the same videos I did. Bucky wants to be in Finland. Clint, Scott and Natasha have already made their own accommodation with the Accords. We don’t have the ability to even think about rescuing Wanda from Alfheim or Asgard or wherever, even if she wanted us to. And to be honest, I very much doubt she does. We can do more good if we go back than if we stay away.”

Sam visibly took a few calming breaths, then said quietly and almost to himself. “You can do more good. You didn’t have anything to lose in the first place. The rest of us? We sacrificed our families, our jobs, and our financial futures. All you did was swap out which billionaire would support you for a while. And now that Mark II is proving less than satisfactory, you’re running back to Mark I.”

Steve zipped up his bag and slung it over his shoulder. “Sam, I don’t know where this is all coming from, but I’m going back to help out. You can stay behind if you want to.”

“No,” said Sam, sounding defeated. “I’ll come with you. It’s not like I have anything better to do.”
Steve clasped Sam’s shoulder with a smile. He knew better than to take what Sam said personally. The alien invasion was terrifying, and Sam was naturally scared. When Sam calmed down, Steve would let him know that he didn’t hold Sam’s outburst against him. In the mean time, his mind spun with ways they could face this threat. When they got back, Tony would be able to help him bring in Bucky and Wanda and the rest. They’d fight this together, like they were always meant to.
Sam still felt numb as they landed at the military base they had been flown to. All this time, he had thought he’d crossed his Rubicon under arms. But now he was forced to swim miserably back in his underwear. It was supposed to be his last stand, his proud moment of standing up for truth, justice and the American way. His chance to really mean something. To make a positive impact on the world in a way that was more meaningful than pointing out the bad guys to some heavy hitters. But his stand had turned into a shameful crawl back under the mocking stares of the people who no longer had to confront the fact that they were in the wrong.

No. Sam couldn’t think about that anymore. There was only ever forward, and they had a world to save. That was what he had to focus on. He had no idea what he had left, but he was determined that he would do it well. They had parked directly on the runway, and as Sam came down the steps, he could see grass growing through cracks in the cement. He walked down with his head up and his eyes clear.

They were met at the bottom by Tony Stark himself, and Sam greeted him with a head nod.

"Steve, Sam," said Stark with a painful looking smile. “Welcome home."

Home. No matter how insincere Sam suspected the words were, they still caused the ice to thaw just a little. Sam knew he could eventually have been happy anywhere in the world. It was helping people that really mattered in the end. But being back in the States just was different. Here, where he wasn't automatically assumed to be the richest person on the street just because of his accent. Here, where he could follow a good eighty percent of the conversations happening around him. Here, where if he was rude in public, it was entirely intentional.

“Tony,” said Steve. “I’m so sorry about your fingers.”

Stark flinched, and then pasted on a smile. “Old news, Cap.”

Now that had been a mistake. Apologies were important, but they had to be the right sort of apologies. Steve should never have apologised for what happened to Tony if he hadn’t been willing to apologise for everything else as well. It wasn’t that Sam thought Steve should assume more guilt than he was rightfully entitled to. It was just that it was both stupid and insensitive to draw attention to the fact that Steve wasn’t sorry for beating Tony up in the first place.

But that kind of cruelty was lost on Steve, and Steve barrelled on. “No, I really am sorry. I had no idea that you didn’t have communications with the rest of the team. I would never have left you there if I had realised.”

An emotion flashed over Stark’s face, and Sam rather suspected it was screaming ‘liar’. Sam wasn’t sure he disagreed with Stark either. Steve’s conversations throughout the affair had made his priorities perfectly clear. Steve hadn’t had room in his head for more concerns than Bucky Barnes.

Stark’s expression cleared back so quickly that Sam almost wondered if he imagined it. “I know, Cap. It’s over now. You’re back and we can start again. The Chitauri are coming, and we need to prepare for them.”

“That’s the important thing,” said Steve with a nod.
Again, Sam sighed to himself. True, but entirely tactless. Anyone would react badly to the implication that their well-being wasn’t the important thing. It would have taken no more than half a sentence to tell Stark that while the safety of the world was important, Stark was important as well. There was honesty, and there was selfish indifference to the feelings of others. How had he never noticed before how often Steve crossed that particular line?

He’d been warned more than once in his training against attempting to diagnose people himself, but some symptoms becoming more and more pronounced in Steve. Like having an attention bottleneck that only allowed him to focus on one thing at a time. Like his lack of shame. Like his failure to learn by experience. Like his failure to follow any life plan.

A lecture video he’d once watched played in his thoughts. ‘The sociopath believes that their own opinions are the absolute authority. The sociopath feels that they deserve the adulation of the world. The sociopath is indifferent to the consequences for themselves or others. The sociopath will change courses without warning or apologies. And do not think that you will never be fooled by them. Everybody loves the sociopath.’

Sam shook off his thoughts. He was letting his bitterness get away from him. That wasn’t fair to Steve, or helpful in the situation. He couldn’t afford to lose his concentration that way. Stark turned to walk alongside them, and they started off towards the only open door to the grimly uninviting building closest to the airfield.

“I agree, but the initial hoops…” Stark trailed off, and rubbed his gloved fists over his chest. “I’m sorry. I tried my best, but this was the minimum they would agree to.”

Sam felt his eyes narrowing, and had to smooth over his own facial expression before anyone looked his way. He was in that uncomfortable position of not being able to tell if Stark was being entirely sincere – or deeply sarcastic. Sam had reason to hope that Stark was on their side, given his generosity to Scott and Clint. He just would have been more comfortable, somehow, if Stark had been more angry about it all.

“Don’t worry, Tony,” said Steve. “Sam’s prepared me for it. We’ll be fine.”

It would have been more accurate to say that Sam had attempted to prepare Steve for it. He hadn’t suggested to Steve that he attempt to fake anything he didn’t feel. That was more likely to backfire than not. He just hoped that Steve had taken his advice to be patient. Steve did the ‘aw shucks’ routine better than any man Sam had ever met, so if he maintained that reaction he might get through the negotiations somewhat intact. Steve had far less chance of gaining anything if he went straight for his ‘it’s my duty to stand up for what’s right’ response.

“I think you’ll be pleased by the person selected to walk you through it, though,” said Stark, as he let them precede him into the building.

“Who would that be?” asked Steve.

“Me,” said a man, appearing needlessly dramatically from the shadows.

“Agent Coulson?” asked Steve, incredulously.

The next five minutes was a chaotic mix of exclamations, explanations and explorations that Sam took no part in. Steve might regard the man as a perfect advocate for them, but Sam felt no such trust. The team had made Phil Coulson out to be some sort of demi-god, but he thought that was mostly rose-tinted glasses and the typical eulogising of the departed. He wasn’t sure he saw much to admire in a man that pretended to be dead to his friends for years, orders or no orders.
At last, however, they ended up on an uncomfortable bench in an antiquated dining facility with most of the tables unbolted from the floor. They’d lost Stark somewhere without realising it, and the base as a whole was noticeably and disturbingly empty of staff. Sam shook it off, opened the folder that had been placed on the table for them, and began leafing through the documents.

“Can you…?” asked Steve, with big eyes, holding his own folder up awkwardly.

“Of course,” said Coulson. “That’s what I’m here for. A quick summary. The first condition is to provide written apologies to all the victims that have indicated they would like one. I assume neither of you have any problems with that?”

“No,” said Steve, “Of course not. It’s nothing short of my duty.”

Coulson seemed very close to rolling his eyes, but Steve didn’t seem to notice. Too caught up in his own self-image, thought Sam meanly, before bringing his thoughts back into order once again.

“The second is that you will be under house arrest except under the specified exceptions. That’s things like Avenger’s related business, pre-arranged publicity activities, medical visits, essential shopping trips and the like. Fortunately for you, the ‘house’ in question is the compound and the accompanying grounds, so it should not be much of a hardship.”

Sam remembered how furious Steve had been at Wanda receiving much the same requirement, and spoke quickly to head that off. “What about these fines they’re talking about for damages? We can’t pay that. No-one could pay that.”

“They are aware of that, Wilson. If you notice, the request is that you contribute 25% of your personal income until the total amount is met. If the total amount is never met, there are no further consequences. They just want to see some good faith effort to make compensation.”

“They don’t expect us to pay. They just expect us to be broke for the rest of our lives,” said Sam, his lips twisting wryly.

“What do they mean by personal income?” asked Steve.

Coulson turned his attention to Steve. “They mean you must pay for it yourself from work you personally do. No-one else can offer to pay it on your behalf, and you can’t start any sort of fundraising activity for it. That’s just for the amounts in the agreement, though. You might want to consider starting a public appeal to compensate the victims over and above what you’re legally mandated to pay. A number of people are in genuine financial distress from your actions, and it doesn’t look good for you to continue to leave the clean up to Tony under the circumstances. Considering that he is one of the victims in question.”

Steve hunched into himself, but Sam didn’t have the energy to worry about what – or whether – Steve was blaming himself for.

“Is requiring it to come from actual personal income legally binding?” asked Sam, "I haven’t come across anything like that before.”

Coulson kept his tone calm, but Sam felt judged anyway. “This isn’t a sentence, Wilson. It’s a contract. It becomes binding because you accept it, not because the punishment is some sort of legal guidelines surrounding your crimes.”

Sam opened his mouth to continue the debate on just how the Accords were playing fast and loose with the law, but Steve had clearly been reading ahead.
“Isn’t a thirty-year sentence a little excessive?” Steve asked with a frown.

Coulson interlaced his fingers. “You’re confessing to a number of very serious crimes, Rogers, including causing the deaths of law enforcement officers and unrelated civilians. Believe me, Tony and I did everything we could, but that was the barest minimum sentences the countries in question would agree to. It was a complete miracle that we convinced them to be suspended until after the alien invasion.”

Sam read through the section himself. “At which point it would be re-evaluated? Not dismissed. We could do everything they ask us to, and they could still lock us up.”

Coulson was unmoved. “If you do keep your noses clean, there is every chance that you will be spared actual jail time.”

Sam laughed painfully. “No jail time, just a conviction for a major felony. They won’t even have to do anything to me. They could just release me, poor, friendless and unemployable, out into the streets. The system would torture me perfectly well.”

“I won’t let them do anything to you, Sam,” said Steve in what Sam assumed Steve thought was a commanding tone of voice.

Sam bit back the words about being curious about how Steve intended to stop them. And how he could trust that Steve wouldn’t just change his mind.

“The important thing is that the Avengers will be back together again,” said Steve, slamming his folder shut.

Coulson nodded, but to Sam’s eyes it looked a little tentative. “You will be integrated into the reformed Avengers, and the first six months is regarded as an experiment in how stable it is. You won’t be allowed to do any heavy lifting until you’ve proved yourselves. It’s not just because of you and Sam. Tony will need to test that his new suit compensates for his lack of fine motor skills. Jim will need to test that his new suit compensates for his difficulty walking. Vision, of course, will resume his normal position, but his legal identity is also still on unstable grounds.”

Sam winced at the reminder of the consequences of the previous disagreement.

“The team leader will be Colonel Rhodes,” said Coulson.

Sam nodded. It was a given that they would be demoted. Anyone could have seen that.

Anyone but Steve apparently. Steve half stood, trapped as he was by the table, before remembering himself and re-seating himself. “What?”

Coulson frowned at Steve, and then shared that frown with Sam. Presumably for failing to prepare Steve for the possibility that he would no longer be in charge of the team. The powers had a very odd belief that Sam had been the one to talk Steve into returning. Perhaps Coulson was right, and this was one more thing that he should have discussed. But Sam had prepared Steve in order to help Steve. It wasn’t Sam’s job to make life easier for other people.

And the truth was that he knew he couldn’t have given Steve the reassurances Steve would have required. Sam did not want to have to go into the field under Steve again. He didn’t trust anyone else to do a better job, fair enough. But this way he wouldn’t have that moment when he had to decide whether to step out into battle and rely on Steve to look after his best interests. He didn’t want to answer the question, even to himself, about whether he’d ever be able to trust the man again.
Steve leaned forward, looking earnest. “Agent Coulson, I understand the concerns people have, but this team was built around my leadership. I can’t help but think that changing that, at least in the field, is going to cause more problems than it solves. I know you have a lot of influence—”

“Let me stop you right there, Captain,” said Coulson. “I’m here to talk you through the offer that has been made to you as a friendly face. I am not a power behind the offer itself. I cannot, and would not, attempt to second guess the people in charge. It is inappropriate and unfair of you to request that I do. If you have a problem or a suggestion, take it up with Colonel Rhodes.”

“I can’t do that if Colonel Rhodes is my problem,” said Steve. “He’s a fine person, but he doesn’t have the strength to stand up to Tony and the politicians. Divided command is going to be a mess in the field, and I don’t want to wait until lives have been lost before other people realise it.”

Coulson looked decidedly unimpressed. “Divided command will only be a problem if you make it a problem. Suck it up, Rogers, and learn to take orders. You want to help, and you want people to stop wondering if you’re secretly a racist asshole? Then you come back to the team under Colonel Rhodes and act delighted about the opportunity.”

“I’m not—his race isn’t the reason I don’t think he’s a good fit for the position,” said Steve, horrified.

Sam unwillingly felt his heart went out to him. There were so many, many people in the world that deserved to be shamed for their unconscious bigotry – including the very people who were pretending such indignation on the internet – but Steve wasn’t one of them.

“He’s a highly decorated, experienced military leader,” said Coulson. “As a normal human, he’s gone head to head with enhanced individuals and won. He’s considered one of this generation’s greatest heroes. If you claim he’s incapable of leading the team, then people will assume you have a problem with either his race or his disability. Neither is the kind of publicity you need right now, Rogers.”

“I don’t care whether it makes me popular or not. I care about doing the right thing,” said Steve. Coulson wasn’t even pretending to look pleasant anymore. “And if people don’t think your definition of the right thing is morally acceptable, they wouldn’t trust your assistance in the coming war. People are no longer going to just assume you have good motives anymore. You have to prove it to them. If you want to help people, then you need to start caring about how your actions look.”

“This isn’t right, Phil,” said Steve. “They have to let me help people. Isn’t there anyone else we can talk to? They can’t all be prejudiced against me.”

“These are not the people prejudiced against you,” said Coulson. “These are the people prejudiced in favour of you, doing their best to let you help people. The people who are prejudiced against you want to use your refusal to allow Barnes to be peacefully arrested, and your near-catastrophic break-in to the RAFT, as sufficient grounds to have you executed outright. And I have to tell you, they’re very convincing. Our best defence for you has been that you were too ignorant to realise just how terrible an idea either of those things were. And that’s not much of a defence.”

Steve was sitting bolt upright, like he would be asked to stand for the anthem at any second. “Surely if I just explain to them, they’ll realise I was doing the right thing. The best hands—“

Coulson put up a hand to stop him. “Did you know that I lost friends after you destroyed SHIELD? Did you even consider the possibility? Friends, often their spouses, sometimes even their children. Good men and women, who had committed their entire lives to helping people. I didn’t lose them to
HYDRA. I lost them because you decided you had the right to act as judge, jury and executioner on them all. And let’s put aside my personal tragedies. Thousands of people have already died in Azania because you decided to destabilise the region still further. Tens of thousands more are dying of cholera and other communicable diseases as we speak. *Hundreds* of thousands of children are going to die from preventable diseases in the next few decades."

Steve looked shocked and hurt. “Why aren’t we doing something about it?”

Coulson levered a very unimpressed look over the table. “Do you think any of them would trust us now?”

The numbness Sam had started the day with returned in triplicate. It was true. It was all true. Instead of proving that the Accords couldn’t be trusted, they’d proved that superheroes couldn’t be trusted. If he left it here, at this, he wouldn’t go down in history as the man who stood against an increasingly oppressive and corrupt system. He’d go down as one of the perpetrators of a massive humanitarian crisis. He’d been so focused on not allowing an organisation to usurp his conscience, that he hadn’t even notice when someone far closer to him had done exactly the same thing.

Steve opened his mouth, but couldn’t seem to come up with a reply.

Coulson shifted backwards, and the screech of the bench against the floor set Sam’s teeth on edge. “You didn’t earn your power, Rogers. You weren’t selected because you were the most deserving person in the United States. You were selected because you would be easy to sweep under the rug if anything went wrong. Nobody except you thinks you were doing the right thing. That should have told you something, but I’m guessing it didn’t. If you want to earn people’s trust, you’re going to have to do it the same way the rest of us do. By putting the interests of other people before your own.”

Coulson stood up, staring down at Steve. Steve looked too surprised to reply. Sam squinted up at Coulson into the bare neon lights hanging above them. The distant white-painted, barred window did not provide enough light to compensate for the glare, and Sam was starting to see residual white spots against his eyelids. Coulson’s presence was more powerful because of the lack of obvious anger in his expression.

“If I was asked who the best hands were?” asked Coulson. “You wouldn’t even make the top thousand. I’m sorry if my presence misled you somehow, but you only have two options here. Take the offer. Or go back to whatever hole you were hiding in. Read it very carefully, and if you have any further questions, I’ll get one of my staff to help you. I don’t think I’m helping by staying.”

Coulson left without letting Steve say another word.

Sam let Steve vent his shock and disappointment at him, going through the motions of reassuring him without thinking about it too deeply. Nothing had really changed except Steve’s awareness of what was happening. To say ‘I told you they wouldn’t trust us’ would just be pointlessly petty. To say ‘maybe they’re right not to trust us’ would just be needlessly provocative.

Instead, Sam set about reading his offer very carefully, blinking as needed to restore his sight. He reminded himself to count his blessings. He wasn’t being shunted immediately into some holding cell. It would be years still until the invasion, and maybe he could find a new standing place for himself by then. With the whole world in danger, maybe people would be galvanised to fix the problems in their own systems without having to rely on inevitably flawed rebels. Maybe everyone would eventually come out of this stronger for the experience.

Despite of how he felt in that moment, he knew he wasn’t alone. There were still people who cared
about him. And while there was life, there was hope.

Chapter End Notes

As suggested by Sam, this isn’t quite how a normal plea agreement would work. On the other hand, we have documented cases of things like a mother being granted the right to withdraw her guilty plea if her son was resurrected, and others including bans on specific types of employment, on association with certain groups of people, and on watching television, so it isn’t quite how they don’t, either.
Tony knew he was losing more sleep than he could really afford to, but it wasn’t as bad as it could have been. Steve was desperately clinging onto his certainty, and that was taking all of Steve’s mental agility. Steve didn’t have the imagination to spare to wonder why Tony was being so accommodating. And Tony was being accommodating. The apologies and non-apologies both had been salt in the wound, but Tony sucked it up. The discussions about the Accords were the typical going around in circles, but Tony could do that in his sleep. And the meetings about getting Clint, Natasha and even Scott to return to the Avengers were too surreal to be painful.

Tony was vaguely aware that this was the type of thing he was supposed to feel ashamed of enjoying, but he would take what he could get. Tony hadn’t had to sabotage anything at all. All he had to do was earnestly assist with Steve’s terrible plans, and suggest nothing of his own. Depressingly, Steve had yet to be upset with him despite the continual failures. If anything, the more Tony appeared to battle, the nicer Steve became. After years of Steve blaming Tony for everything from the political climate to the weather, Steve had suddenly decided Tony was a fragile flower who couldn’t be risked facing those nasty politicians alone.

And all it had taken was some nervous fiddling with his gloves, the occasional inability to open a door, and a few minor breathing problems when a politician made an unsubtle dig about the state of his hands within Steve’s hearing. The hypocritical and patronising concern would have driven Tony to violence if it hadn’t been exactly what Tony had been aiming for. That long, long night in Siberia when he had finally realised that Steve had never been his friend – had never even wanted to be his friend – had been painful but fruitful. Tony knew he had to play Steve, now. Steve would never respect Tony, but he would gather Tony under his ‘protection’ as long as Tony was the most pathetic candidate available.

So Tony could manage this. It wasn’t going to last for long. Steve had never learnt to take an order in his life, and Tony had absolutely no expectation of that changing any time in the future.

The good will milk-runs were almost entirely search and rescue, and Tony found them simultaneously rewarding and heart-breaking. The current one, for instance, looked straight-forward on the surface, but might turn out to be anything but. It was, for extra pointed irony, the aftermath of a super-villain take-down they hadn’t been invited to. The Chinese had their own team for that, thank you very much. But during the fight, the enhanced and oversized individuals had slammed each other through a few very densely populated city blocks, and China had reluctantly accepted some assistance in safely evacuating the civilians and stabilising the area.

The plane ride over was on a re-purposed SHIELD ‘bus’ which even Tony found ridiculously excessive and lavish. But it did give Tony, Rhodey, and the military coordinator, a full size holographic table that they could gather around and analyse the incoming data while the rest of the team explored the wet bar and lounge area.

“Oh, now that’s going to be bad,” said Tony to himself, flipping between the building plans and the
"What's concerning you?" asked Rhodey. "And in small words, please, Tony."

"They're pre-stressed concrete buildings, not steel frame. They pretty much created the support beams by pouring concrete over ducts full of steel wires, pulling those wires tight, and anchoring those wires to the elevator shaft in the middle and the external columns on the outside. In the normal course of events, that stress would help those slabs stay up. But in this building—" Tony leaned forward to tap a finger on the display. "—our combatants drove a hole between two beams and those outside anchors on their way up through the roof. See – you can see the exposed wires here, but not there. The whole side of the building is extremely damaged and I really doubt that it will take the strain for much longer. But because of that imbalance, if the structure collapses, it isn't going to pancake down. It's going to topple like a toddler pulling on the edge of a shelving unit. The full weight of that is going to land on its neighbour, almost certainly causing that one to topple as well. And if that one goes…"

They all considered the row of identical high-rise apartment buildings, one after the other with barely any space between them. A giant's domino set, just waiting for the fall.

"What can we do?" asked the coordinator.

Tony tapped the palms of his hands on the table, and then said, "We need to cut the two beams on the inside edge as well. That will release the strain, but at the cost of weakening the structure even further. But we need this half of the building to come straight down, and not at an angle. Even if it means bringing it down ourselves. Otherwise we might end up losing most of the block."

The coordinator didn’t waste any time asking Tony if he was sure, and Tony appreciated that. "I’ll get hold of the teams in place, and prioritise the evacuation of that building."

They sketched and discarded plans as the data came in, watching the status of the evacuation in disturbingly attractive coloured lights. By the time they came in to hover, the problematic building was clear, but its neighbours were still showing a patchwork of orange, uncleared areas, and red, injured needing assistance to evacuate areas.

Rhodey gathered them at the ramp to give them their final orders. "Alright everyone. Iron Man and Captain America, your priority will be stabilising this building if at all possible, or bringing it down safely if not. Take the lead from Iron Man here, Captain. This is your top priority. The casualties will be handled by the other teams."

Tony pouted. Rhodey was supposed to be creating circumstances where Captain America would be tempted to disobey orders. He wasn't supposed to be dropping hints. Tony thought of the composition of the neighbourhood and admitted to himself maybe this wasn't the time to prove the limits of Steve’s sincerity.

"Falcon," continued Rhodey, "I want you to get Captain America into place, and then proceed to this position to direct stretcher teams through the best paths. You have the most familiarity with their requirements. You should have their frequency now."

"Yes, sir," answered Sam.

"Vision, you're with me assisting with the collapsed highway. Everyone clear?" asked Rhodey.

"Yes, sir!"

"Clear."
“Sure, platypus.”

“Good,” said Rhody, ignoring the cacophony of replies. “Let’s go.”

The ramp lowered, and they flung themselves out, one by one. Tony landed carefully, doing his best not to stress the concrete unnecessarily. He positioned himself so he could get his hands directly on the support beam.

"Falcon, put me down by the blue hatch," said Steve over the comms.

"That's the wrong building, Cap!" said Tony. “Two across. You should be able to see me."

"I can see injured people in this building, Iron Man,” said Steve. “They take priority."

"No, they don't! They really, really don't! You were told—“ Tony broke off as he was pushed slightly out of position. “War Machine, the building’s even more damaged than it looked. We're going to need to bring it down soon."

"Captain America, get into position now," ordered Rhody, with a trace of either fear or frustration leaking through his professional tone. “Iron Man, wait for him."

“I will be there shortly, Iron Patriot,” said Steve, the reprimand clear in his voice.

"Captain America—"

The rest of the words were drowned out by a crack of a rifle shot directly next to his ear. Tony didn’t even need to turn his head to see what it was. The third beam with exposed – but previously intact – tensioning cables. One by one, the braided cables unravelled and snapped. Then more together. He pushed his thrusters to maximum to compensate for the increased load they would shortly need to compensate for.

"Cap, where are you?" asked Tony, not even trying to disguise his distress.

"One minute," snapped Steve.

"I don't have a minute!" The roof slab continued to push down on him. Millimeter by millimetre, he could feel the damaged floor beginning to give way beneath him. " Warn everyone. I'm bringing it down in ten..."

Tony counted down as he fired his cutter beam into the seams between the core of the building and the beams. It was going to be quick and dirty, but he couldn't implement anything more elegant without help that wasn't going to reach him in time.

"One," he said, timing it to match his final pass. For a moment, everything seemed to balance perfectly in place. Then, with almost an anti-climactic snap, the concrete gave way. Despite Tony's best efforts, the remaining beams were pulling the core – and the rest of the building – towards him. He threw his hands in front of him to apply counter-pressure. Good news, bad news, he thought, light-headed. Good news, it seemed to be working. Bad news, he couldn’t get himself clear without stopping. The full weight drove into him like a mallet pounding a spike into the ground.

"Iron man? Tony!"

Tony wanted to soothe the distress in Rhody's voice, but he couldn't quite draw breath to respond. There was a vice around his chest and he could hear his pulse pound louder and louder in his ears. This was just a panic attack, Tony knew. It hurt entirely too much to be a real heart attack. Knowing
that didn't help him at all. The armour was keeping him intact, but it couldn't prevent the weight of the roof slab from compressing his chest, a reminder of increasingly many near death experiences. And wasn't it just like him to have multiple choice panic attacks? As his vision closed in on him, he considered the irony of this all having gone exactly to plan.

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The next day, back at the compound and still looking as badly as he felt, Tony stood up with Rhodey and a marginally penitent looking Steve, and faced the press horde. Pepper and Rhodey had fussed about his health, but they hadn't tried to stop Tony from arranging it. They understood the trade of short term pain for long term gain, and they were aware that Tony was approaching the final stages of his game plan.

Unlike previous media halls Tony had organised, this one was minimal and in hard, clean lines. He hadn’t sacrificed any functionality. The chairs for the reporters were comfortable, the feeds to each camera and sound technician were state of the art even for Stark Industries, and the sound proofing had been tweaked to provide perfect acoustics. But it had none of the rich colours or heavy fabrics designers usually indulged in for this kind of room. It was obviously and bleakly functional. Tony walked up to the podium, already set up with the three microphones. They were skipping the introductions.

Tony didn’t smile at the cameras. That was not the tone he was trying to set. “As most of you are probably aware, during the course of yesterday’s recent search and rescue effort, I was injured in such a way as to trigger a panic attack. In light of this, Doctor Haynes, the doctor I have been seeing for my ongoing PTSD symptoms, and I judge that it would be unwise for me to return to super-hero duties at this time. We are all very aware that I need to be ready to face the Chitauri when they once again attack. Unfortunately, I am not in that position now, and I cannot risk the well being of my team mates under the current circumstances. We will continue to work on my treatment with as much effort as is possible. Doctor Haynes has referred my case to the Elves for True Vision’s Sight, their hundred-day mental cleansing treatment, and we are waiting to hear back on where they chose to place me on the waiting list. But mental trauma is never a clear or easy thing to move past, and there are no quick fixes, not even with the elves. Please believe that we are doing everything that we can, but I must announce my temporary suspension from the Avengers roster.”

Rhodey stepped forward next to him to his own microphone. “We will greatly miss Tony on our team during his medical leave, and offer him our grateful thanks for his assistance in this difficult time. We all send him our best wishes in a full recovery. Are there any questions?”

Rhodey managed to pick the reporter Pepper had prepped out of the sea of waving hands without looking too obvious about it.

“Doctor Stark, you claim your panic attack happened only after you were injured. Can you explain why you did not move away before the building collapsed?”

“Certainly,” said Tony. “FRIDAY, dear, would you cue a simulation?”

A 3-D outline of partially transparent buildings appeared on the wall behind them. Tony half turned to point at the relevant sections which highlighted in red as he spoke. “On our way to the site, we realised that these two beams had been badly damaged in a way that risked catastrophic failure. This is the projected result of taking no action.”

The building started collapsing with small blue outlined blocks falling artistically every direction. Then, all at once, it pulled over like a carrot suddenly coming loose at the hands of an impatient gardener. The outline hit outline of the next building. It quivered and then fell over in turn. In the
vastly sped up simulation, it took only minutes to turn the neat representation of the neighbourhood into a mess of individual cubes. The thought of that happening to the real buildings made Tony’s breath catch and fought down the rising emotions. It hadn’t happened, he reminded himself. Everyone was fine. Even Tony himself was fine.

The simulation restarted, and Tony gave the press enough time to capture it and digest it.

“Unfortunately,” said Tony, “Shortly after I arrived, a third beam also began to give way. I was successful in preventing the building from toppling, but I was forced to remain in place to achieve that.”

“Why did you charge in alone?” shouted someone without waiting to be picked. “Shouldn’t you have been working as a team?”

Tony hid his reaction while he took a breath. This was too early in the press conference. He was left with three unappetising choices. Be seen to throw Steve under the bus, cover up for Steve, or send the wrong message by avoiding the question.

In his hesitation, Steve leaned unnecessarily close to his own microphone. “I was sent in with him, but at the last minute I was forced to divert to save the lives of people trapped in one of the other buildings.”

*Oh, Steve*, thought Tony, as the hunger of the audience ratcheted up a notch. *Never drip blood in a roomful of vampires.*

“Are you saying that you abandoned Stark without warning?” asked the reporter, switching targets seamlessly.

"I had to,” said Steve. “I knew that the building we were being sent to was empty, and people have to take precedence over property. But I expected Tony to realise what I was doing and compensate. He's usually very good at anticipating the actions of other team mates."

The last words were almost plaintive, like Steve still could not imagine how Tony could possibly have allowed himself to be injured.

“Doctor Stark, do you have a reply to that?”

Tony looked grave. “Unfortunately by that point, I had no other options. I was aware that leaving the building would endanger a great many lives, including Steve and the people he was trying to rescue.”

“Doctor Stark, did you inform Captain America of the bigger problem?”

Another call out, and another one he could not afford to look like he was ignoring. Tony pinched the side of his thigh in penance for what he was about to do. Rhodey had insisted on taking some of the heat. He’d even guilt-tripped Tony by asking if Tony really regarded Rhodey as the team lead, and if so, why was Tony trying to steal responsibility from him? That still didn’t mean Tony liked throwing any implied blame Rhodey’s way.

“We were working under very tight deadlines,” said Tony. “I informed the leader of the Avengers, Colonel Rhodes, our designated coordinator, and the head of the rescue operation, Senior Colonel Gao. They passed on the orders to concentrate efforts on that building.”

Rhodey didn’t even blink as he followed up. “I informed the team to stick to their objectives and to leave the casualties to the other rescuers, but I did not explain why. That is something we will look into with the aim to prevent future such failures.”
Steve nodded gravely, which was his second mistake of the press conference. Steve was too used to playing the disapproving parent role to realise the penitent child role came with an entirely different set of rules.

“Mister Rogers, do you agree with that?” asked another journalist, to get that more firmly into the record.

“Yes, I do,” said Steve. “We need to work on our communications.”

“So, according to you, the real problem was that Colonel Rhodes and Doctor Stark failed to anticipate that you would disobey orders?” The reporter paused just the right length of time before adding, “Again.”

“No,” said Steve. “I mean, yes. I mean, things change when you get into the field. A team needs to be adaptable and we need all the information possible in order to allow for that.”

Tony thought back to previous lectures after Tony had been forced to make changes in order to salvage Steve’s plans, and avoided raising an eyebrow at Steve’s change of heart.

The reporter was equally as unconvinced. “But in this case, the only thing that changed was that the building became even more damaged. Surely, if the experts all considered that to be the most urgent matter, you should have deferred to their judgement?”

Steve spread his hands. “I had no way of knowing that was a possibility. I mean, I’ve done more damage than that without it ever bringing down the building.”

The reporter tried to look stern, but his lips betrayed his glee. He was about to make a point that would be rebroadcast in prime time news, and he knew it. “Mister Rogers, are you saying that you have been throwing things and people through walls and columns without any appreciation for the fact that damaged buildings can fall down?”

Steve frowned. “Buildings in the States don’t fall down like that.”

Tony breathed in sharply, in concert with the rest of the room.

The irony was that Steve wasn’t entirely wrong. A modern steel-frame building, even when doused with eighty tons of accelerant, would not take out its neighbours. But it was an extraordinarily stupid thing to say, for just so many reasons. Tony could almost forgive Steve for forgetting 9/11. For him, it was just another piece of history; another disaster alongside all those other disasters. Steve hadn’t lived through it. What Tony couldn’t forgive was Steve forgetting that all his fighting hadn’t been limited to the States. A lot of it had happened in countries with much older buildings, and countries that didn’t necessarily have the metals or other resources to spend them on protecting themselves from potential acts of Captain America or Scarlet Witch. Tony couldn’t forgive Steve for forgetting about Lagos.

After a stunned silence, one reporter seemed to follow Tony’s trail of thought. “Are you saying it was the victims’ own fault if buildings collapse on them?”

Steve leaned forward. “You do what you can to save people. Sometimes things go wrong. You can’t always save everyone. That doesn’t mean that you stop trying.”

Tony could read the shifts in the room well enough to know that they were taking that in the exactly the opposite way than Steve had intended. Rhodey waited just long enough to disassociate himself from Steve’s statement before taking control of the press conference again. By picking his reporters carefully, he moved the questions to the fall out over Tony’s imminent retirement, portraying just the
right level of concerned, but not too concerned. They closed out with questions still being shouted after them, but the bloodsuckers had enough to feast on that they didn’t complain too much.

After Steve had been escorted away by Pepper, Rhodey walked Tony back to the workshop, his frame making a faint whine that Tony reminded himself to look into. “I have one further question myself, ‘Doctor Stark’. Why didn’t you just file a complaint with the review board? The terms are perfectly clear. Steve screws up, and he serves that thirty-year sentence immediately. Well, he screwed up. The bastard almost succeeded in killing you again.”

Tony patted his shoulder. “The public might be indignant today, but by next month they’ll be back to being sympathetic to Steve. You know how these things work. It’s always going to be a balancing act to prevent them from turning on me, instead.”

Rhodey lightly shoved him back. “Then what was the entire point of getting the terms written up in such a way that Rogers wouldn’t be able to stop himself from violating them?”

“Letting Steve fail his probation is the worst case scenario, Platypus,” said Tony. “I very much doubt we’ll need the worst case. Best case, instead of having to convince the review committee of anything, all I have to do is convince Steve of something. You think he’s upset with the questions he was asked? Wait until you see how he reacts to the coverage it generates.”

Tony didn’t even need to take any action to leak the audio recordings of the event. With that on top of the interview, the media and internet exploded in fury. Stark begs Rogers for life – again! joined the headlines of Iron Man falls to rust and ‘People don’t kill people; buildings kill people’ claims Cap. It didn’t take much effort on the part of FRIDAY to make sure that Steve always happened to catch the worst and most personal of it. There was plenty of source material.

And it was truly unfortunate that every effort Tony or Steve made to try and explain the real story just seemed to make the coverage worse. Everything Steve touched just seemed to turn to ashes under his fingers, despite all the assistance Tony was providing him. Even with the super soldier serum, Captain America was starting to show signs of wear.
Rhodey and Pepper were waiting for Tony on the airplane when the True Vision’s Sight elves finally let him out of their clutches. Tony stopped in the entrance, but realised that he’d have to surrender himself to their inquisition or arrange alternative transport home. Which would be petty, even for him. Tempting, but petty. Besides, this was the nice plane. The one with the world’s most comfortable seats, decorated in muted patterns of red and gold that declared their allegiance without being tasteless about it. Tony collapsed into his own little cloud of nirvana, and buckled himself in without the usual argument with the attendant. With a strength of will, his hands didn’t even falter as they completed this newly unfamiliar movement.

“What’s the world had to say about us since I’ve been gone, then?” Tony asked. “Rioting over Steve’s exile yet?”

Tony might be willing to surrender, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to try some misdirection first.

Pepper lifted an eyebrow, but replied easily. “They’re reacting pretty well to the exchange program on the whole. The pro-Steve side think he’d make an excellent ambassador to Asgard, and that he’s an amazing choice to figure out how to integrate our military forces with theirs for when Thanos arrives. The anti-Steve side are just relieved that whatever he’s doing, he isn’t doing it on Earth.”

“Hell,” said Rhodey. “Even his supporters don’t really want to support him in their own home towns. Congratulations on getting Steve to agree.”

Tony waved that away. “That was one of the easiest tasks I’ve had all year. Steve was ecstatic to have a chance to go and be a noble warrior in a realm that doesn’t hate him. All I had to do was suggest Thor might be able to help him get visitation rights to Bucky, and give him the deep, solemn task of protecting Wanda from misunderstandings and accidents, and he jumped at the chance. She’s so far away from everything that she is used to, after all.”

“Wait, isn’t she on a completely different planet?” asked Rhodey, “Or realm, or whatever it is they have in place of planets? Will they even be able to meet each other?”

Tony gave a complex shrug, delighting in the feel of his muscles moving smoothly under his skin. “That’s their problem now, not mine. So he didn’t make any last minute fuss? Blame everything on me?”

“Not at all,” said Pepper. “Steve even thanked you for looking after him in his departure speech. Went into how sorry he was that he couldn’t figure out how to work with you after all that effort.”

“Okay,” replied Tony. “Now I’m actually feeling a little guilty.”

He was, too. He had decided the cleanest and best way to succeed was to manipulate Steve, and he’d done it. It was hardly the most morally grey thing Tony had ever done. But usually the people Tony manipulated were aware that he was their enemy… or at the very least knew that Tony had no reason to consider them a friend. That should have been the case here. If Steve had any awareness of others, he would have realised that Tony would not have any reason to be on Steve’s side. But he hadn’t, so Tony’s actions were a little in the same light as taking advantage of a child.
“Don’t be,” said Rhodey, his expression darkening. “He chose to hang himself of his own accord. You had absolutely no obligation to let the man *kill you* before you stop giving him second chances.”

Tony grimaced, and looked away. It was easy to forget, when playing these kinds of games, that it wasn’t just himself that got hurt. The people he loved were subject to splash damage. Everything might have worked out, but there had been a price, and Tony shouldn’t let himself forget that.

After a moment, Pepper said with forced casualness, “What happened about Sam Wilson?”

“I think they found room for him on one of the other teams. Whatever,” said Tony, with another wave of his hand. “I don’t care what he does with his life. So, Operation: Exile, complete without a fuss. Excellent. I love it when a plan comes together.”

“There’s more of a fuss about why you haven’t been announced as Secretary of Defence yet,” said Pepper, with a raised eyebrow.

Tony groaned, honestly irritated. It wasn’t a big problem, but it hadn’t been part of his calculations. That meant he’d have to spend his first night back re-examining everything to see what he’d miscalculated. “I said that I wouldn’t accept that before I even left. What are they on about?”

Rhodey grinned, which sparked the fire of paranoia in Tony’s heart. “Just a word of advice, you might not want to answer questions like that with ‘I have more important things to do’. It sends the wrong message.”

“Hey now,” said Tony. “I picked my words. I said that I had too much on my plate which I *am* uniquely suited for to consider stepping outside my specialities. There’s plenty of experienced government functionaries that would be perfectly good at the job. They don’t need me. In fact, I was downright scarly polite and diplomatic. Besides, I would have thought my reasons would have been self-evident even without me saying anything.”

“Oh, they aren’t upset with your rudeness,” said Pepper. “Or not more than usual. They’re speculating on what exactly those things you’re uniquely suited to *are*. Because they know you turned over the company to me to concentrate on being Iron Man and supervising the remnants of SHIELD. SHIELD is now back in operation, and you’re temporarily benched from the Avengers. The Accords are stable. But you’ve made no move to do anything commercial or military that they can see. All your public work has been charitable. Even your latest round of patents are held by our non-profit medical branches. The media has made a very convincing case that you are systematically divesting yourself of potential conflicts of interest.”

“Conflict of interest with what? Or for what, or whatever?” asked Tony.

Rhodey patted his knee in fake sympathy. “Originally, the speculation was for President of the United States. But if that had been your aim, accepting the role of Secretary of Defence would have been a no-brainer. So when you turned it down because you had more important things to do, they didn’t assume they were wrong. They assumed that they were just thinking too small.”

“They what?” asked Tony.

“Exactly,” said Pepper. “I picked up a souvenir for you.”

Pepper did a soft underhand throw to land the item on the table between them. Tony felt his eyebrows go up when he considered the badge.

*Tony Stark for King, The Duration.*
Well, wasn’t that a thing.

Tony hadn’t missed the fact that the social media had been ramping up discussions about the need for a focal point for all the defensive spells. He hadn’t missed how adroitly their alien allies had been fanning the flames of that little movement. He hadn’t missed how major power after major power had come to regard appointing someone else to be the one responsible as the ultimate ass-covering move, rather than seeing it as a potential power grab. The obvious answer had seemed the correct one: that one particular not-dead-after-all magic user in particular was positioning himself for multi-world domination. (And for real, this time.)

But this – offer? bribe? pricetag? – was something completely unexpected. Tony also hadn’t missed how accommodating the alien embassy had been to his needs at every step. Even anticipating them, at times. Tony had no problem admitting justified skill (even if others preferred him to lie), but he didn’t want to trip over into true delusions of unwarranted competence. The other player in this game was at Tony’s own skill level, and Tony would prefer to maintain their current polite détente than risk losing it all.

“There was a poll,” continued Pepper helpfully. “You’re tied at the top with David Attenborough.”

“And Steve?” asked Tony, unable to help himself.

Rhodey revisited his shark grin. “He was in the poll as well, but he’s way below a bunch of late night comedians.”

“And that’s just in the English-speaking world,” said Pepper, her own enjoyment a little too sharp in her eyes. “The Chinese, Russians and most of Africa threatened a scorched earth policy if anyone even suggested appointing Captain America. He’s still the go-to guy to vilify in their press if they’re having a slow news day.”

“They don’t want any American, naturally,” said Rhodey, “but the feeling seems to be that if it has to be a Westermer, at least let it be you. You’re somewhat of a folk hero to a lot of their people. The deals you’ve been making to fund longevity treatments amongst their elite hasn’t hurt either.”

“And America itself?” asked Tony, uncomfortably aware that he was revealing his neediness. “They haven’t always been my greatest fan.”

“You’re a bastard,” said Pepper. “But you’re their bastard, and they’re very proud of you.”

“Here we go, I bookmarked this for you,” said Rhodey, sliding a tablet across the table. Tony hesitantly pressed play.

“All power corrupts is a truism so obvious as to be worthless. The best prediction of what people will do with more power is to look at what they do with the power they already have. Take Tony Stark. He’s used his intelligence to create life-saving, game-changing products for both the developed and developing world. He’s used his power to campaign for more accountability to the man on the street. He’s used his money to fund huge reconstruction and charitable efforts. Steve Rogers, on the other hand, has used his power to shield multiple terrorists from justice just because he knew them personally. He chose to wreck hundreds of lives because he didn’t approve of what their bosses were doing. He chose to beat up people when he felt frustrated and doesn’t like the boundaries that have been set for him. If we give Tony Stark more power, well, really, what’s changed? He can already do anything he likes. He can’t be bribed, because he already has more money than anyone could spend in a lifetime. He can’t be blackmailed, because he’s already completely shameless. He can’t be threatened, because he’s fucking Iron Man. There isn’t any room for him to become more corrupt. We’re already seeing the worst case scenario. But if we give Steve
Tony put it down very carefully. “I’m a better candidate because I’m already corrupt. That’s an… interesting point of view. And by ‘interesting’, I mean batshit insane. I might not have a very high opinion of the general public, but I still wouldn’t have thought they’d go with that.”

“They haven’t,” said Pepper, giving Rhodey a reprimanding glare. “That’s a fringe alternative news source. You should look up the interview with Clint, instead. He said he couldn’t imagine anyone he trusted more than you. Steve was definitely not on his list.”

Rhodey snorted. “Well, he wouldn’t be, would he? The first draft of Steve’s apology letters were leaked, and Clint apparently read the one that was supposed to be to Clint and his family.”

Tony laughed. “Oh god, really? I have to get hold of those. Steve complained about being forced to write exactly to script, but I didn’t get a chance to look at the originals. If they were anything like the one he wrote to me…”

“Oh, they were,” said Rhodey. “He even reused bits from yours, like the importance of standing up for what you believe in, but some day they’d understand why he was forced to do what he’d done. There have been glorious, glorious news pieces about Steve. The mainstream pieces about you, on the other hand, have been tediously boring. They’re completely enamoured of your hundred-day True Vision’s Sight. See, Steve might be Captain America, but he isn’t elf-blessed. If you’re going to start a religion, Tony, I’d like to put my name in as chief receiver of gifts.”

Tony waited a little while until he realised there wasn’t a punchline coming. That had been the punchline. “I’m not the only guy the elves accepted for treatment. I didn’t even make the first group. I wouldn’t have even made it into the second group if it hadn’t been for all the publicity about my little breakdown during the rescue mission.”

Rhodey stared at him, and Tony had the uncomfortable feeling Rhodey was trying to make A Point. “But the others weren’t super-celebrities who agreed to have every moment of their ordeal released Truman style.”

Pepper nodded, the traitor. “And being later hasn’t helped at all. It’s just given everyone enough time to notice a pattern in just what kind of people the elves have greenlighted to accept. A pattern that frankly made your flighty, capricious persona a lot less convincing. And you were willing to do it even after hearing the reports from the first group about how painful and ego-crushing it was.”

“You have only yourself to blame,” said Rhodey remorselessly. “You could have handled this all in secrecy when it was first offered. Then people would have been willing to believe it was just another over-privileged, semi-experimental, self-centred, indulgence. By playing it the way you have, you’ve managed to convince everyone this was in fact a deep personal sacrifice you made for the good of the people.”

Tony’s mind raced. Pepper and Rhodey might be willing to believe that the movement was spontaneous, but Tony knew better. Bad things happened spontaneously all the time. Some kids on a forum deciding that Tony’s terrible acronyms were code words in an Illuminati plot to kill underprivileged kids with vaccinations just happened. Positive spin didn’t just happen.

Rhodes tapped his fingers against his thigh. “The physical changes go a long way to backing them up. You’ve always been skinny, but you look exactly like a poster child for a deserted island movie. You know the type, where the main character is attractively and improbably ripped, but just gaunt enough that everyone feels sorry for them?”
Tony heard the underlying concern and figured the deserved a little openness from him. “I’ll get better. I’ve had plenty of experience at re-gaining weight.”

“How was it?” asked Pepper, with no snark or filters.

Tony answered her the same way. “Tiring. Terrifying. Enlightening, if you’ll excuse the pun. That guy who said it was like sacrificing half his sense of self to quadruple the other half wasn’t entirely wrong. It was … becoming nothing, and therefore everything. I realised just how unimportant my decisions were, and how important that made everything. Okay, eccchh, enough. I sound like a televangelist. I’m going to need to wash out my mouth with alcohol.”

“So the media was right about your noble sacrifice,” said Pepper

Tony pulled both hands to his chest.

“Perish the thought, my fainting heart! Nah, Rhody had it closer. It was just desperation. I’ve been riding the edge for a very long time, and the conventional treatments weren’t keeping pace with the new shit I keep piling up. It was pretty much this or throw in the towel and retire to Rhodye’s deserted island and wait for the end of the world.” To change the direction of the conversation, Tony put a deliberate whine into his tone. “But they didn’t warn me that there’d be homework. I wouldn’t agreed if I’d known there was going to be homework.”

“Homework, really?” asked Rhodye, the beginnings of a genuine smile edging into his lips.

“Yeah,” said Tony dismissively. “They had a bunch of bad metaphors, like now I’ve seen the sun but I need to light my own candles. I’ve studied the map and now I need to explore the terrain. They’ve taken me on a flight but now I need to grow my own wings.”

And for all his mocking words, he intended to put significant effort into his ‘homework’. He’d need his current stability if he was hoping to keep the world intact. And besides, he quite liked it.

Tony continued, “I will keep you informed about all the grim and disturbing details as they happen, but I’d better get a start on the backlog in case any of it is a ticking time bomb.”

They sighed, but left him to it. Pepper in particular did not want to discourage Tony from what she knew to be a necessary task. He’d let things slide before. It was something Steve had been all too inclined to deny Tony during mission downtime. But a hundred days really was far too long to have been out of contact. Things didn’t just stop because the world was ending or you were having an important emotional moment. Tony was still reading emails and writing critiques of stupid ideas as the plane landed and they’d transferred to the car to the compound.

As they approached, Tony looked up at the sound of thunder. The horizon showed only a handful of clouds, just starting to colour the gold of the setting sun as the buildings in front of them darkened to purple. Asgard was getting better, it seemed.

Pepper frowned. “Where did that storm come from? The forecast was completely clear when we landed.”

“This is going to be great!” said Tony, with a clap. “I wasn’t sure the timing would work out.”

“What’s going on, Tony?” asked Pepper.

Tony grinned in a way he knew made him look a little demented, but he rather thought he’d earned it. “Well, you mentioned about the exchange soldiers, right? Well, I had a little chat with a contact of mine, and we proposed what would be more valuable was getting some exchange scientists from
them instead. And since we would need to prepare for them, it made sense for my contact to join us a little early.”

“Your contact?” asked Rhodey, very slowly and carefully.

Bruce was good natured enough to take his cue. “Hello, everyone.”

“Brucie-bear!” said Tony, bouncing up to him.

“Bruce? Bruce Banner?” asked Pepper.

“Ah,” said Bruce. “Yes. I’m perfectly safe again. With the assistance of Asgard, we’ve modified a shape-shifter charm to prevent any involuntary transformations.”

Pepper looked like she wanted to say more, but Tony wasn’t going to let anything spoil this moment. Tony linked arms with them both, pulling them with him into the new compound where Vision was waiting for them. The time controlled lights swelled slowly to full intensity, bathing them in honeyed warmth.

Everything was awesome.

For the first time in a long time, Tony didn’t dread going to sleep, and he didn’t dread staying awake. A shower was just a shower, not a potential ambush location for kamikaze thoughts. He felt the pain and the fear and the guilt, but they were just emotions, not swamps filled with quicksand and alligators.

Barnes was isolated halfway across the world, recovering somewhere Tony would never be asked to visit. Natasha was completely silent. Clint was almost painfully grateful by the reports. Wanda and Steve weren’t even on planet, and the slow erosion of public support would leave them without a platform by the time they returned. And in a year, perhaps less, Doctor Cho’s breakthrough work would have Rhodey fully put together once again. The media and the public was being the most respectful they’d been of him since he’d turned four years’ old. Now, when he spoke of the threat of invasion and the measures that might be necessary to defend against it, people listened. No one accused him of being an immoral paranoid megalomaniac who would inevitably bring about the end of the world.

The nomination for king thing was something he’d have to navigate, but he had the full support of the Asgard and Elvish embassy. He wouldn’t blindly trust – he would never blindly trust anything again – but he was starting to hope that ‘the All-father’ was just as against the invasion of the nine worlds as Tony himself was. In the short term, that was the most important thing. And in the long term… well, it wasn’t like finding common ground with an unstable genius would be the most unlikely thing he’d ever succeeded at.

With the set of minds he’d assembled, the Mad Titan wasn’t going to stand a chance. No-one was going to have to rely on some thrown shield or fired arrow to have to save the world. And best of all, four of his very favourite people were together with him at the same time, and everyone was happy. Maybe he could give Agent and Spidey a call. They could make a proper welcome home party of it all, and plot out just how to make Thanos regret having ever pissed them off. Because Thanos would regret it.

Just like every other person who had decided to make an enemy of Tony Fucking Stark.

The End
It’s been a long journey, and I’m both saddened and relieved to write ‘the end’. I have a few outtakes I might post, but I’m afraid I have no plans for an AU ‘infinity war’ sequel. I might change my mind when that movie comes out, but I don’t want to get anyone’s hopes up. As Mimime101 pointed out a few chapters back, this story has primarily been a subversion of the ‘fix it fic’ (which I also adore, don’t get me wrong). We have reached the point of everything being ‘fixed’. Tony still has problems to face, but I think he’s in a good place now to solve them.

I want to thank everyone for the wonderful comments you have been leaving for this fiction, and the courtesy you’ve all shown to each other. I’m touched and honoured that you connected to this story, and took the time to let me know. Honestly, people, you’ve blown me away with your responses. Thanks for being there!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!