

Disassembled

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Disassembled

by [Westpass](#)

Summary

Rhodes has PLANS for his former teammates, after their betrayal, oh yes he does...

Sequel to "They Call Me MISTER Platypus". Here we go!

Prologue

Wakanda was peaceful, Steve had to admit that, but it wasn't his home.

He was waiting.

After some discussion with Wakanda's doctors and scientists, Bucky had made the request to be put back into cryostasis temporarily. They were building him a 'sleep chamber' which should be ready in another week.

Steve had tried to talk Bucky out of taking such a drastic step, saying that it wasn't like the other man to back down from a fight.

The other Avengers had disagreed, particularly Sam and Wanda. "The man's spent the last seventy years not backing down," Sam had pointed out rather sharply. "Maybe he needs a respite, Steve. And if he stays active, way things are now, he's not getting one."

"Long sleep or cryo may help heal the damage to his brain," Wanda had added. "This may be why they had to wipe his memory so often, because the serum would undo his conditioning or lessen it while he slept. "

So he hadn't liked it, but he'd had no choice but to accept Bucky's decision for now.

He was also growing impatient with his attempts to get in touch with Tony. The phone had been sent out almost three weeks ago, and so far, Stark hadn't called.

They had all made mistakes, but how were they ever going to work it out and *fix* this mess if Stark kept stonewalling them?

Finally, he resorted to calling Rhodes and leaving a message. He just had to hope that the call wouldn't be traced back to Wakanda. It was a risk the Avengers all agreed they had to take, at that point. Clint was worried for his family's safety, especially after Tony's little bitch fit on the Raft.

A day passed with no response.

And then the last straw finally happened.

They were in the common area of the rooms T'Challa had provided them, watching an American news broadcast. Christine Everhart's face appeared on the screen. When Steve heard her mention Stark, he perked up, listening intently.

The comment Rhodes had provided left him gaping at the screen.

"... 'Mr. Stark and I have discussed the future of the Avengers Initiative. We are in negotiations with... the UN to restructure the team, while continuing to operate. We will be approaching other Enhanced individuals who might be suitable to join our ranks. With the removal of Steven Rogers from the team, I will be assuming overall command of the Avengers.' "

"Is he fucking serious?" Clint exploded. "Didn't they learn anything?"

"Apparently not," Steve replied, feeling cold...and furious. *Removal from the team...* How dared they?

And the photo of Rhodes with that smug little grin on his face made the super-soldier's fists clench.

All right, Rhodey. That's how you want to play this? You want a fight, I'll give you one.

Chapter 2

The Ford Navigator pulled up to the front entrance of Stark Tower. Hansen got out and came around to open the passenger side door.

Rhodes carefully set the warm, foil-wrapped plate on his lap off to one side. Hansen helped him out of the car and into a wheelchair with no apparent effort, nor hesitation. The man had been a medic for years before being promoted off the battlefield. His "hobbies" were boxing, hunting, and mountain climbing, and he still had an impressive set of muscles.

"Welcome back, Rhodes," Happy Hogan said as he joined them. "Mr. Stark's inside talking with another visitor. He said to go straight up to the lab floor, if you're feeling up to it."

Rhodes cracked a smile. "Good to be here, thanks." To Hansen he said, "Drive the car back to base, then close up shop for the weekend as we discussed. You're long overdue for some leave time, George."

"Thank you, sir." Hansen didn't quite snap to attention, but close enough.

Happy walked alongside Rhodes as they went inside, pie and Rhodes' laptop firmly held.

"How's he doing?"

Happy didn't answer immediately. Rhodes glanced up. "Something wrong?"

"Rhodes, I...James." Happy stopped and faced him. "Mr. Stark's likely going to be pissed off, but keeping him safe is my job, not covering up for him..."

"What do you mean?"

"He's not telling you everything. "

"I don't think Tony tells *anyone* everything. Not these days. What is it? "

"He had to call Dr. Cho in two nights ago. He was coughing blood, and having trouble breathing. She had him spend almost a full day in the Cradle, and...even without saying anything, it was freakin' obvious she's still worried."

Rhodey said something short and very ugly in response. "He's not twenty-five anymore. Cracked ribs and sternum are going to cause him lasting problems, she did tell us that. It doesn't help that he's trying to do a team's worth of work *without the fucking team*." He couldn't blame Happy for speaking up. Tony made helping him a challenge at the best of times, and lately he'd been fixated on taking care of *everyone else*. Rhodes had never thought he'd wish for Tony's old selfish streak to resurface, but...

"You still looking to put together a new roster?" At Rhodes' nod, Happy hesitated, then went on. "Do you recognize this lady?" He took a photo out of his wallet, handing it over.

Young, Caucasian, blonde female, Rhodes assessed. The photo wasn't of the best quality. He couldn't see much but her face and shoulders. "No..."

"She was one of the crew that the Russians sent to clean out the Winter Soldiers' bodies. Never got her name. I just figured her for a CSI, at first, but a couple of times I heard *her* givin' the rest orders, and..."

"And?"

"She moves like Romanoff did, during that bout with me and when we took on Hammer's goons. Like a Black Widow."

"Oh, really?" *Interesting*. "Can I hold on to this?"

"Yeah, sure."

They fell silent as they reached the elevators.

Tony was waiting for them as soon as the doors opened. He looked a bit tired, and pale, but no worse than that...at present.

"Rhodeypoo!" he burred. "Hail, hail, my Rhodyssey's back! " He waved toward a nearby worktable. A dark-haired woman in a lab coat sat at a microscope. "Betty and I have been sciencing all day, come join us!"

Rhodes wheeled himself across the room, unable to hold back a sigh of relief. "It's a pleasure to meet you in person, Dr. Ross. "

She lifted her head, eyes narrowing as she sized him up; the same sort of scrutiny Cho had given him when he'd been flown home from Leipzig. Not staring, but not being blatant about *refusing* to so much as glance at his legs. He'd gotten his fill of both reactions; her lack of them was something he could appreciate.

"Likewise, Colonel Rhodes." She came over to him, offering a handshake. Her fingers were warm, dry and work-roughened.

* * *

Hansen finished closing up his workstation and the Colonel's. The base staff had already been notified that he and Rhodes were taking leave, so he was cleared to go as soon as the office was secure.

He checked everything one last time, including a tiny device with a glowing red 'eye' hidden away in the bookcase by his CO's desk. He didn't know why Rhodes had wanted surveillance run on a deserted office, but then again, he hadn't asked. '

There was very little worth stealing except for possibly data, and Rhodes had taken his laptop with him, so even that wasn't a concern.

He looked around one last time, and left.

* * *

"Captain Rogers." T'Challa stared the other man down. "I understand your opinions perfectly well. You, however, seem to have dedicated yourself not to understand what I've said. If you leave Wakanda under these circumstances, you and your allies *will not* be allowed reentry. This is not a matter up for discussion."

Steve, Clint, Wanda, and Sam stood in the King's throne room. They'd been arguing for almost an hour, trying to persuade T'Challa to side with them against Tony Stark and James Rhodes.

He could not, and would not give in.

"You must see that this is heading for a disaster," Rogers insisted. "The Accords are barely more than legalized slavery for the Avengers, and if someone doesn't make Rhodes listen--"

"It would be no affair of yours even if you were right about the Accords' purpose," Shuri snapped, her patience finally worn thin. "*You are no longer Avengers.*"

"Listen, kid, you don't realize what--"

Okoye moved so quickly that Rogers had no chance to evade her. She locked a hand around his throat, lifting him off the floor, and held him there for a long moment before throwing him roughly down. The impact jolted the breath out of his lungs. Pain stabbed through his back.

"You will not address our Princess and the Heir to Wakanda's throne in that tone of voice," she told him venomously. The other Dora Milaje flanked her, weapons held ready.

"Enough!" T'Challa stood up from his chair, his armor enfolding him. "I won't have my people put at risk for your 'cause' again. We've already lost lives due to your wish to answer to no one." He crossed the room to stand beside his General. "The royal guard will escort you safely to Wakanda's border. Go."

Rogers stalked out of the palace, the rest of his team following him.

As they moved out of sight, Shuri turned to an apparently empty corner of the room. "They've gone, Mr. Lang," she murmured. "Please show yourself."

Chapter 3

Rhodey lowered himself onto the couch in the common area with a little sigh. He'd gotten the hang of transferring himself in and out of the damn wheelchair unassisted, at least. It made everything much easier.

They'd spent the last several hours alternating between techtalk, a.k.a "why don't we have flying cars or Star Trek transporters already???" and work on the exobraces. He'd managed a stable gait and walking, but clumsily. It was too easy for him to be thrown off-balance. He couldn't feel where his feet were, or what condition the surface under them was like, anymore.

Even the fatigue and soreness couldn't entirely dampen his mood. Betty Ross had proved to be as enthusiastic and outspoken on the subject of new inventions as Tony.

She'd actually managed to render him speechless a few times, and that was *without* any caffeine consumption on her part.

Amazing.

It had been almost sunset before they'd agreed--with a few none-too-subtle nudges from FRIDAY--to call a break for the day. Tony suggested a movie night after dinner, which had been Greek food delivered to the Tower. They would be watching *Jurassic Park*, and then possibly the new Star Wars movie.

Betty showed up a few minutes later. "Hi again," she greeted him quietly, perching on a nearby loveseat. "Tony's in his office, Miss Potts called him unexpectedly. He said he'll be up ASAP, but to start without him if we want." She put a bowl of freshly popped kettle corn on the coffee table. "Which I suspect is his way of giving you time to say whatever you didn't want to ask me in front of him."

"You know Tony means to ask you to testify against your father. "

Betty drew in a soft breath. "Yes, I'd thought that might be the intention. The trouble isn't so much a lack of willingness on my part. It's lack of evidence to support what I'd have to say. He...My father can be arrogant, cruel, selfish, but one thing he's never been is stupid. He knows how to cover his tracks. Else he would have been court-martialed for his part in that Harlem incident ten years ago. But...I would be amenable to doing it, if you think we have a chance of *accomplishing* anything other than telling him where I am."

"Thank you. I know it can't be easy for you, even now. It almost never is when you're defending a principle ninety percent of the people around you think is bullshit." He chuckled grimly. "As for evidence...We're on it. Our problem with discrediting Ross was finding someone who would have your sort of credibility. "

"Not Bruce?"

"We asked, a couple years back. He didn't want to risk a public trial. Can't say I blame him. We'd been working to build some trust between the Hulk and the Avengers, but that op in Sokovia... Tony's fairly sure that was what drove them to vanish."

He took a handful of popcorn, munching on it to buy a little time to think how to phrase his next question.

Betty beat him to it. "You have the same look Bruce used to get at times, where he had to ask me to participate in something that involved bending or breaking rules. What's on your mind, if it's not my father's latest power trip?"

"Your original research, yours and Bruce's, was on the super-soldier serum. Trying to recreate it."

"We found more approaches that wouldn't work than anything." She grimaced. "I keep wishing my father and his cronies would drop the idea. It's a drive right off a cliff."

"Hypothetically. If you had a sample of the original serum, think that'd improve the odds?"

Her eyes widened. "You know very well it would, but--No. No, James. I won't be a part of that. I'm sorry." Sounding distinctly unsorry, and very determined.

"Not to recreate it. To find a way to cure or permanently nullify it."

"What? Why would--"

"Heyyy, sciencesibs!" Tony interrupted, as he came into the room with an armful of goodies. "Let the party commence!"

Betty smiled up at him, and threw Rhodes a quick glance, mouthing, "Talk later?"

He nodded.

* * *

Lang bowed slightly to T'Challa. "Sir. Thank you for hearing me out." He shook his head. "I feel like I should be apologizing for them. I have a little girl back home who doesn't act out that badly...Miss...Okoye, is it? You okay?"

"I am well, thank you." Okoye shrugged. "Rogers overestimates his skills as well as his authority."

"Oooh, burn," he said approvingly. "Look, it was one thing when we all thought the world was in danger from Zemo and the Winter Soldiers. But this? No. Stark is trying to do what he thinks is right. We broke the law. He didn't. Now Rogers wants to make him the enemy? This is nuts. It's like he can't handle the idea that he made a mistake, or that things weren't what he thought. The Accords, all of it. "

"One might wish you could have realized this sooner. You and Rogers' other allies."

Lang bit his lip. "Stark needs to be warned. I could try to go after them but on my own--I could take Falcon, probably Barton, but Cap and the Scarlet Witch...fighting outside my weight class."

"No. Agreed. I believe our first step is alerting Colonel Rhodes...and the JCTC." T'Challa's lips pressed together. "They are best suited to deal with incipient threats of this nature."

* * *

The Dora Milaje ignored all of Steve's attempts to reason with them or stall for more time. If he could just get back to T'Challa for a moment, he could make the man see sense. They couldn't just leave with no resources or direction.

T'Challa had reiterated his promise to keep Bucky safe, but also refused Steve's plea to be allowed to wake Bucky and take him along. "My pact was with Sergeant Barnes, not you."

He and the others were allowed to take no more than they could fit in a single bag. Wanda attempted to sway one of them, only to have her magic seem to backlash onto her, leaving her pale and shaking. "They have power, too," she whispered, sounding shocked. "It's too much, I can't get through at all."

After that, he wanted to be away from these people as soon as possible. No one argued as they were herded onto a Wakandan aircraft and flown to the country's northeastern border. They were dropped off roughly in a deserted stretch of road. A border checkpoint was visible off in the distance.

"Come on," Clint snapped. "We've got to get out of sight."

Steve gave him a sideways look. He may not have handled the day's events well, but that didn't mean he was going to roll over and show Clint his belly.

"We don't have any ID but our own," the archer pointed out, exasperated. "You want to try to cross the border with those? Good luck, but I'm not about to stick my head in that lion's mouth. " He led them off the road, into a stand of nearby foliage that hid them from view.

"...where the fuck's Lang?"

Chapter 4

Rhodes tucked a blanket over Tony's shoulders. The inventor had finally dozed off on the couch after the end of the second movie. By mutual, silent agreement, neither Rhodes nor Betty woke him. He'd be as safe in the common room as anywhere else in the Tower. They left the room and went up to the suite that Tony used for a multimedia center. There was a desktop computer, TV, DVD player and holographic emitters. Rhodes closed the door behind them. "FRIDAY, suspend all recording in this room. Enact protocol code Sierra Peter Young zero eight four."

"Yes, sir. Recording now offline and sensors to this room will be deactivated for the next thirty minutes."

Rhodes turned to face Betty Ross. "Doctor, you wanted an explanation. I'll try to give you one." He ran a hand over his head. "I have blood and other tissue samples from Steven Rogers, and from four other individuals who received a version of the Super-Soldier serum created by Abraham Erskine. Tony is aware that I have this material in my possession, but it's not public knowledge. And I'll come right out and tell you honestly that no, Mr. Rogers does not know I have those samples. Nor did he consent to any study or examination of his blood beyond that normally performed during a routine yearly physical."

Betty's eyebrows shot up. "And these other four people?" she asked finally. She didn't sound shocked, but puzzled.

"Deceased." Rhodes sighed. "It's a long story. I'll answer any questions you've got...and if you ultimately tell me that you can't be a part of this, I will accept your choice. We're committed to seeing your father answer for his crimes, and ensuring your safety as well as Bruce Banner's to the best of our abilities. No ifs, ands or buts." He looked her in the eyes. "But I also have to protect the Avengers and the public, and Rogers...we're quickly running out of nonlethal options. We almost reached that point during that so-called 'Civil War.' "

He wheeled himself over to a battered metal file cabinet. Taking out a folder, he set it on the desk

"There was a second confrontation between Rogers, Bucky Barnes, and Iron Man after the incident at Leipzig Airport. Rogers and Barnes also engaged law enforcement officers in Bucharest prior to those. "

He fell silent as she picked up the file and began to read through the contents.

"...dear God," she whispered after a moment, looking at a photo of a man who'd had the ill luck to take a vibranium shield to his skull.

It had only been a glancing blow...by a supersoldier's definition, anyway. But...

* * *

Steve crumpled the empty Styrofoam cup in his hand, tossing it into a nearby trashcan in the airport's waiting area.

It had taken almost four days for them to reach a city that had an airport. They'd had to resort

to theft just to eat, relying on Clint's skills.

Wanda had been able to influence the personnel at the border into letting the Avengers through, but it had left her weak and confused. They'd hidden in a house that appeared not to be in use. It was filthy, bug-ridden and hot, the windows and doors boarded up. Most of the other building nearby were similarly abandoned. The quiet had been unnerving, after living in a busy city like New York.

They'd had no choice, though. They'd need Wanda's abilities to have any chance of making it onto a plane to the United States. Which meant they had to wait for her to recover.

They passed the time sparring, or in Clint's case, acquiring new clothes and a few low-grade weapons for them as well as their scant meals.

"We need to blend in," Barton had told them, "as much as possible. No starting fights or making public scenes. The idea here is to stay off the radar completely."

"Then why the guns?" asked Sam with a frown.

"...you're kidding, right? Look, this isn't the US. No one thinks we're heroes. If any cops ID us, we'll be on a trip back to Stark's little supermax. I don't know about you, but I'm not going there without a fight."

Thankfully, nobody *had* spotted them. There was a flight going to the United States in a few hours, they just had to keep their noses clean until then.

Steve coughed, and dug into his pocket for a couple of the bills Clint had given him. There was a vending machine at the far end of the waiting area; he'd see if it had bottled water or ginger ale. He felt faintly queasy...Well, they'd all been on half rations at best, and not exactly fresh food. That was probably it. He'd see if Wanda wanted one, too, she had complained of an upset stomach and headache earlier.

They'd be all right, and in another day or so they'd be home. He just had to keep everyone's spirits up.

Author's Note, actual chapter coming soon

Chapter Summary

...there will be a chapter five shortly but not today.

I wrote this up to clarify some stuff in my own mind, as well as to answer a question somebody had.

Team Platypus timeline:

Chapters 1-4, "They Call Me MISTER Platypus"

Day 1: (USA), Monday in early morning

Rhodes talks to Pepper, Thunderbolt Ross, Tony, Everett Ross; makes plans with Tony to visit the Tower and to enable a new AI to serve as an assist for Rhodes.

Day 2(happens off-screen), JCTC courier delivers Captain America's shield to Rhodes' office.

Day 2: Rhodes talks to Betty Ross, offers her sanctuary at Stark Tower, which she accepts, and does short phone interview with Christine Everhart in which she gets a quote and a photo of him.

"Disassembled", Chapter 1:

Day 3: (Wakanda) Rogers and Co. watch the broadcast of Everhart's interview with Rhodes.

"Disassembled" Chapter 2

Day 3: (USA, offscreen): Betty Ross successfully contacts Tony Stark and he sends a private jet for her.

Day 4(Wakanda, very definitely ON screen): Rogue Avengers try to convince/pressure T'Challa into siding with them against Rhodes and Stark. He refuses, situation heats up to the point where T'Challa orders them out of the country. They go, not happily. Bucky Barnes remains behind in cryostasis and Scott Lang doesn't leave Wakanda with Rogers' team.

Day 4-7

Chapter 3:

Day 4: (USA, offscreen): Betty reaches Stark Tower.

Day 5 (midday, USA,) Rhodes arrives at the Tower. Science! Bender with Betty and Tony, before Serious Business is discussed re: Thunderbolt Ross

Disassembled, Chapter 4:

Day 5: late evening, USA: More Serious Business discussed by Rhodey and Betty post movie night

Day 7(Wakanda), Rogues at airport , planning to sneak onboard a US-bound flight

...you know what they say about plans...

Day 7-8(Wakanda/USA)--spoiler blackout for Ch. 5 and 6
(for anyone who'd like a spoiler or three, scroll down, if not, don't read any further)

Rogers, Maximoff and Sharon Carter arrive in the United States after violent confrontation with *****Sorry*

Tony and Rhodes bring Oskar online, and Betty agrees to create a permanent antidote to the super-soldier serum. She begins working on it immediately.

Benjamin Grimm makes a cameo appearances, as does a certain Black Widow

actual chapter ahoy

Wednesday evening, Berlin

Everett Ross was a busy man.

He'd gotten substantially busier of late, due to being shot in the back by a wannabe King a month

ago. Then being sucked into the midst of a royal family feud.

"May you live in interesting times", indeed, though his unplanned trip to Wakanda had been satisfying as well as difficult. He wasn't an adrenaline junkie, but Ross admitted to himself that he missed some parts of his old job in the military...flying most of all.

Hmph.

He had enough money salted away to buy a plane, maybe he should--

The sound of the phone ringing interrupted his daydream. He looked at the Caller ID display. "Speak of the devil," he murmured, as he reached for the headset.

"Hello, Deputy Ross. This is General Okoye of the Dora Milaje."

"Good evening, General...or not?" Something in her tone made him sit up straighter, and quickly double-check to make sure none of his co-workers were in earshot.

"I have someone with me who needs to speak with you, in confidence."

"This line is secure. You can speak freely."

"Um, hi, it's ...I don't even know if you'd remember me. Ant-Man. You arrested me and the Avengers at Leipzig--"

Ross cut off the man's nervous babble. "Oh, I guarantee I do remember you, Mr. Lang. Most people I arrest have the sense to stay where I put them," he said coolly. "You certainly got my attention, and I'm very curious how you come to be in Wakanda of all places. Are your teammates with you?"

"This is for me to explain, Deputy Ross." T'Challa's voice was quiet. Ross listened as the young King recounted the events of the last several weeks, from his offer of safehaven to the Winter Soldier to Rogers' latest tantrum.

"A debt of honor," he repeated. "With all due respect, your Majesty, your sense of duty or honesty toward allies seems rather...selective. I have my own oaths to fulfill, and those are first and foremost to the people Rogers has injured...or murdered. His little 'skirmish' with the police in Romania left several of them dead. You didn't think they deserved justice as well?"

There was a long silence. Ross sighed sharply. "T'Challa, speaking as a friend here as well as an officer of the law? Find yourself some advisors who will tell you what you need to hear. Whether you *want* to hear it or not...Leave this for now. Where did they cross the border? Into Nigeria?"

"...Yes."

"Mr. Lang. Wakanda has no extradition treaty with the EU or United States, obviously. If you choose to remain there, you'll be safe enough. But if you reenter Germany or America, you'll be facing criminal charges. "

"I know. But I have to. I need to go home...even if it means I go back to prison. I have a daughter and...I just have to. I want to turn myself in."

"All right. Let's get to work. I'm going to send an escort to Birnin Zana. They'll transport you to JCTC headquarters here in Berlin and we'll go from there."

"Do you wish our assistance in pursuing Rogers and his team?" asked Okoye.

"Not this time. I'll tell my people that we got an anonymous tip that Rogers is in Nigeria. Your involvement at this point would raise one too many questions. "

And he had to wonder, if this came to a killing matter, who T'Challa would side with. No. Even hesitation to pull the trigger, by itself, would be dangerous to everyone. He ended the call, and got up to head to the armory.

* * *

Sam had a bad feeling about all this.

The airport was quiet, thankfully, not many people in their section. It was midday, he supposed even airports must have slow periods.

Yet he kept feeling as though there were eyes on his back. It was an instinct he'd developed in Afghanistan, one he'd learned the hard way not to ignore.

They'd all been on edge since they entered the building...sooner, he realized as he thought back. Clint had tried, unsuccessfully, to get it through Steve's and Wanda's heads that using a credit card *issued to them by Tony Stark* to buy plane tickets was quite possibly the worst idea they'd ever had, or would ever have in their natural lives.

Steve had bristled, stating that he wasn't afraid of Stark and the card had been given to them freely, it wasn't Tony's money anymore.

Sam and Clint had both tried to get the point across that ethics aside, they might as well hold up a six-foot-high neon sign saying 'HERE BE FUGITIVE AVENGERS, PLZ CUFF OUR SORRY ASSES AND MEASURE US FOR THOSE CUTE ORANGE SUITS'. Even if Stark didn't notice the transaction, Sam wouldn't bet on (presumably ticked-off) FRIDAY not catching it.

But Wanda had had one good point: What alternative did they have? She still wasn't recovered enough to magic them through the security checkpoints. Hair dye and new clothes might fool the cameras, but they had to play the part of regular, law-abiding customers....

He coughed, trying to clear the dust from his throat. Damn, it was hot in here, was the a/c not working?

Then he went very still, as he registered the taste of blood in his mouth a second before it began to trickle from his lips and nose.

He reached for a handkerchief he had in his pocket, wiping at his face. "S...Steve? I don't--"

His words were drowned out by voices, shouting. He tried to stand up and turn toward them, but dizziness almost knocked him off his feet.

"...hands up! On your knees!"

"Stand down!"

He tried to blink away the haze obscuring his vision, to see who --
the newcomers' voices were replaced by the crash of gunfire.

Steve...?

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

surprises good and bad....'
mostly bad for Team Cap.

(this chapter was supposed to be a bit longer but my 'net connection keeps 'hiccuping'/reloading the browser at the wrong moment so changes I try to make are getting lost. I'mma take a break for a little bit, before I go hulk smash on the thing--I've lost the extra paragraphs 4 times now.)

Barton glanced up at the Arrivals/Departures board. The sooner they were on a plane out of Africa, the better. He hadn't been able to get it through Rogers' patriotically dense skull that stowing away would be less risky than this overt approach. Wait for a U.S. or U.K. bound plane that needed maintenance, sneak out onto the tarmac--it was nothing he hadn't done a time or two before. They might've had to wait another day or so, but in a building this size there were plenty of spaces to hide. Including ceiling vents, which had the additional benefit of no security cameras or overly solicitous airport employees.

Not for the first time, he considered ditching them. The authorities would be looking for a group of people; a single man or woman--or a couple--would be less conspicuous.

Once they *were* back Stateside, he was *not* heading for the Tower first. He'd decided that much. He had already been away from his wife and kids for months, when he'd promised Laura that his absence would be no more than a week.

He shoved the memory of his conversation with Stark at the Raft away. The man had at least not mentioned Laura's name or the kids'...and Nat was with Stark's crew. She wouldn't let anything happen to them. He had to believe that.

"S...Steve?" Sam's voice broke into his preoccupation. He turned around.

"...what the fuck, Sam?" He hurried over to the bench. "What happened?"

The front of Sam's T-shirt was spattered liberally with blood. The man's face was ashen gray as he struggled to breathe. He reached out a hand toward Clint, before he crumpled to the floor.

Clint dropped to his knees by him, carefully turning Sam's head to the side. *Shit, he's burning up...*

And the Wonder Twins were at the far end of the damn lobby...he snarled under his breath.

WANDA! he 'shouted' wordlessly. They'd used this trick a time or two after escaping the Compound, to communicate without noise. He couldn't hear her, but if he concentrated hard enough, she could pick up his thoughts.

He glimpsed her turning to look at them. She and Steve started toward the seating area--

Just in time for Clint to catch a glimpse of black-uniformed, armed men and women come pouring through both entrances.

Fuck fuck fuck...brilliant. Deserted public area, no one even looking twice at us even now...ambush 101, dumbass. Walked right into it... He grabbed his kit, upending the contents onto the floor. Loaded .45, check, a second clip of ammo...he scooped them up. Moved into a shooter's crouch, trying to shield Sam at the same time.

"Hands in the air!" one of the women barked. *"Get on your knees!"*

Rogers shoved Wanda behind him, holding his own gun. He sighted on the leader. "Stand down!" he called loudly. "This doesn't have to--"

Clint did a quick headcount. Twenty-five to thirty, nope, gunfight at the ok corral was going to result in them being the Cowboys.

He could see the same realization occurring to Rogers...

Who actually--

fired a fucking warning shot? What did the man think this was, one of his movies?

The JCTC team didn't hesitate to return fire.

Ugly reddish light surrounded Wanda and Steve. Bullets bounced off her shield. Clint dove behind a nearby counter.

He managed to take down two of the nearest, before they homed in on him. He ducked back down out of sight.

Gunfire, from both sides.

The huge plate-glass windows shattered under a blast of Wanda's magic. Razor-edged shrapnel filled the air, flung toward the cops. Wanda and Steve were trying to reach Sam, Clint realized.

He scuttled into the open, laying down cover fire as best he could.

One of the cops flung a long metal canister. Amber-colored vapor burst forth.

Not tear gas...shit, VX! Are you kidding me--

Wanda flung up her hands...

A shrill noise drowned out everything else. She clapped her hands to her ears, the red of her magic dissipating.

It took a second for him to realize that the sonic barrage wasn't the JCTC's work, they were also cowering back, unprotected and caught off-guard.

Clint closed the distance, grabbing her by the arm. "Steve, we have to go!" he hissed. "Now!"

"Sam--"

"They won't hurt him, he needs a hospital. We have to!"

"Avengers, this way!" a voice called urgently.

A tall, blonde-haired woman dropped an odd-looking metal disc. Several of the JCTC operatives were downed, sprawled near her on the floor.

They had an escape route. Clint released Wanda, sprinting for the door.

"Sharon?" Steve whispered.

He hesitated only briefly, throwing a guilty glance back at Sam's unmoving body before he and Wanda fled after Clint. Sharon gave him a quick, wry grin as she fell in behind them.

A blue delivery truck peeled out of the parking lot a few minutes later. They were gone long before any of their enemies could catch up.

* * *

Everett Ross' jaw clenched tightly. He stood by a stretcher, speaking to the injured agent. "Look at me, son. Come on, Dieter, stay with us--"

The young man tried to smile. The medics worked to stop the blood gushing from a GSW to his lower abdomen.

" 'Do or do not--' "

"--'there is no try.' " A woman's voice finished the phrase.

Startled, Ross bit off several curses in English, and in Xhosa. " How did you get in here?" He straightened up, glaring at her.

Okoye raised an eyebrow, but her expression was sorrowful, not offended. "Maximoff isn't the only one who can make people see or not see what she wishes."

She crouched on Dieter's other side, fishing a small silvery bead out of her pocket. She laid it on his chest. He drew in a startled breath. "It--it doesn't hurt--"

"Save your strength, warrior." Okoye's tone was unexpectedly gentle. "Tell us later. Or ask about this, and I'll explain. Rest easy."

She glanced around, and shook her head.

"Deputy Ross," she said formally. "My king became aware that you were contending with Enhanced criminals. He sent me and my associate, Ayo, to offer any possible assistance. What are your orders, sir?"

He was interrupted by a medic calling him over. She had just gone to look at Wilson, who lay fallen and seemed unconscious.

"Sir, this man needs to be taken to hospital isolation. Now."

"What is it?" Ross immediately waved to another agent, signaling them to grab a stretcher.

"...I want to be wrong about this," she said in a low voice.

"Hmm?"

"Hemorrhaging without apparent external injury, respiratory distress, elevated temperature..."

"Yeah. No offense, Renfield, but I hope that too," Ross said as understanding dawned.

Ebola.

"I believe I am immune still, sir, but please stay back. You too, miss."

Ross dug into his pocket, fishing out two pairs of latex gloves which he pulled on before moving to assist her. "That's not how teams work, Ren."

Chapter 8

Ross watched as hazmat-suited medical attendants loaded Wilson into an ambulance. He'd had his own people treated and sent to hospital first, while he and the uninjured agents stood guard over the area.

The on-site doctor's expression had been kept carefully blank. Luckily for the fugitive, at least, they had access to the medical and personal history he'd had on file at the Avengers Compound. Stark had handed over everything not long after that disastrous trip of his to Siberia.

The ambulance rolled out of the parking lot. He glanced at the Dora Milaje questioninglly. "Well?"

He'd already seen that some of the Wakandans had abilities not shared by the general population. He really didn't give a damn if they called it Enhancement, magic, or membership in the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, so long as they were honest (and didn't treat nonEnhanced individuals like they were too stupid to tie their own shoelaces.) He also had his own people out searching the area, though he didn't think Carter would be overconfident enough to use a hiding place in the city itself.

"Maximoff is poorly trained. She won't stay hidden for long, however she is also paranoid at times and hypervigilant. It may be better to fix on one of the others to locate them, first, one that wouldn't be aware of our intrusion," Ayo said, thinking aloud.

"Start with Sharon Carter," Okoye suggested. "We know she's not Enhanced at all, and if we can isolate and detain her, that'd cut their support out from under them."

"No. "

Ako stilled, hearing the deadly edge in Ross' voice.

" Do you not intend to take them alive?" Her tone was matter-of-fact, not challenging but asking for clarification.

"I haven't ruled it out. I am concerned about how and where they became exposed. You saw the videocamera footage. Even Rogers showed signs of possibly being affected, and it's been only days. However. We only need one of them alive to answer questions. They've *had* opportunities to surrender. "

"I wouldn't question that," Ayo agreed soberly. "Nor do I need a...live subject, to 'see' what they had been doing or had been for the last several days. This is part of my skills, to look into the recent past or near future."

"Good to know, it may make this a lot easier. I'm more concerned about Maximoff's powers. We need a way to contain or eliminate her without coming within line of sight, if snipers can't get a clear shot at her."

The women exchanged a silent look. Ayo hesitated; opened her mouth to speak. A feline snarl drowned out whatever she'd meant to say. Ross glanced around, startled, unable to locate the source.

"Do as he bids you, priestess. If you cannot, I will. This one protected Wakanda almost at death's price. We will not turn away from him." The voice seemed to come out of nowhere, too. After a second, he realized that the words were being heard within his mind, not his ears.

Absolute silence fell. Okoye actually seemed a little frightened.

She squared her shoulders. "T'Challa is not the only Power in Wakanda," was all she said. "To work, then."

* * *

Sharon drove west, away from the city, further into Nigeria's heartland. Trying to reach the coast or another city was too obvious a first choice. The Avengers stayed hidden under a moldy-smelling pile of blankets. The ride was uncomfortable, to say the least. The van's interior smelled strongly of hay and animal wastes. Steve tried not to look too closely at some of the muddy stains on the floor beneath him.

He coughed, and tried to suppress it. Wanda silently handed him a water bottle. He drank greedily. The heat was vicious, his throat felt like sandpaper.

They drove for what felt like a few hours. It had been midday when they fled; the sun was on the horizon when they finally stopped. Sharon hurried them into a deserted building. "Old safehouse of mine," she explained.

"Thank you, Sharon," Steve whispered. "I thought we'd had it, back there." He reached for her, but she drew back, shaking her head slightly.

Businesslike, she scrutinized them. "You do look done in. Go rest. We can afford a few hours. Nobody will think to search this area first, if at all. They'll be watching the borders. I'll stand watch."

He was too tired to argue, Steve realized. They all were; Sharon was right. They couldn't keep going without a breather. He finished the water, and after a light snack, he crawled into one of the house's small beds and dozed off. Across the room, Clint did the same. Wanda took the couch in the "living room." Within a few minutes, all three Avengers were blissfully asleep.

* * *

Sharon stared down coolly at Barton. She'd loaded that damn box of candy with a dose of sedatives that would've been a potentially fatal overdose for anyone but a supersoldier or whatever the hell Maximoff was. His breathing was steady, color still normal; good. His SHIELD medical file *had* said he had a high tolerance for a lot of drugs, including opiates. Still. She'd almost have been willing to risk it just to get some peace and quiet. All the voices...they scratched at her. Nails on a chalkboard.

Her cellphone vibrated silently in her pocket. She took it out, flipped it open.

"Yes," she murmured. "It worked. No, they don't suspect anything. I'll go with telling them I was imprisoned, too, without trial, and want to help them get back to the States to tell their side of things...All right. Yes, I can persuade them. You want her to stay here, or did you mean to have someone intercept her...Got it. " She laughed sardonically.

"Hail Hydra."

short Tower interlude

Chapter Notes

I know very little about advanced programming or AIs, so I'm bluffing my way through on this one. Apologies for any glaring errors I make.

Tony beckoned Rhodes to the computer station he'd activated.

Their movie night had gone well. Betty had shown a dry sense of humor, poking fun at some of the bad science in the movies. She'd also managed to distract Tony when the inventor got an ominous gleam in his eyes during a *thank whatever, brief* conversation about the doability of actually cloning a T-Rex.

Rhodes hadn't spoken to Betty again about the serum, wanting to give her time and room to make her decision uninfluenced.

His anger at Rogers might have kept him from seeing things as clearly as she could, being an outsider...not that he'd admit that to anyone, but he hadn't survived this long as a soldier and then as a military liaison without learning that lying to *yourself* was a luxury no one could afford. The bill always came due in a big way.

She and Tony had had a conference call with SI's legal team over donuts and high-octane coffee next morning, to begin "Operation Thunderbolt Takedown" as Tony put it.

Rhodes had gone off to do some of his exercises, ostensibly, and to have a rather...interesting... long-distance conversation with Everett Ross. After Ross had rung off, he'd texted Dr. Cho and asked her about Tony's health.

What he'd heard wasn't as bad as he'd feared, but it didn't make him happy. Tony had a long recovery period ahead of him before he should even *think* about piloting the Iron Man armor, let alone fighting any more half-witted crusading supersoldiers. Weeks, at best, and ...Cho had told Rhodey straight out that Tony's lungs might have been permanently damaged by the injuries to his chest.

If Rhodes had had any doubts about this 'bait Rogers' plan of his, hearing that had caused them to disappear. Completely.

Oh, well, perhaps the ex-Avengers would be caught/dealt with overseas...right?

Sure, and he'd keep an eye out the Tower's highest window for flying pigs in that happy event.

He shook himself out of preoccupation, focusing on the monitor. Tony's back was to him, thankfully, his brief inattention hadn't been caught...

"I'm watching for them, too, Colonel," Friday's voice whispered in his ear. "We'll help. I couldn't keep Boss safe last time, I won't mess up again."

"Thank you," he breathed, surprised.

"Hm?" Tony threw a glance over his shoulder.

"Friday's watching us. I think she looks forward to having a little brother, too, so to speak."

Tony grinned, and gave them a thumbs up. "Initializing startup in five...four..."

The screen went dark, then lit, and Rhodes spoke up. "Hello, Oskar. Are you awake?"

Hello, Colonel James Rhodes. I am. I'm...pleased? you're here." Lines of code ran across the screen, too quick for Rhodes to decipher.

They'd chosen a male voice to go with the name, out of the recordings Tony kept for various purposes. *European accent, early twenties, friendly*, was the first impression he got.

"Just Rhodes is okay, Oskar. I'd actually prefer it."

"Using military titles is unacceptable?" There was a momentary note of uncertainty in the AI's voice.

"No. If you prefer calling me Boss or Colonel, that is your choice, but you have the option of using my personal name as well if you see fit," Rhodes said carefully. "You're not a soldier under my command. " This felt ...more significant than just what forms of address the AI used, he realized. It was about who Oskar would be, not just what. Like teaching a child, in some ways...yeeowww. What had he gotten himself into?

"You'll do fine, Dad," Tony joked. He had spotted the faint nervousness this time. "Let yourself get integrated, Oskar. Friday will help show you how to navigate the Tower's systems. Walk before running. Neither of you has to learn it all in one big gulp."

They'd coded the AI to be a learning AI, like the others. Oskar would have full access to information and be able to interact with people, but his ability to control the physical world would be a step-by-step development. They weren't uploading him into the War Machine armor or linking him to any repulsor tech right out of the box.

Tony and Rhodes had discussed this, and agreed that Oskar's first mission should not be participating in a battle of any kind. If it became unavoidable for whatever reason, Rhodes had memorized override codes that would lift the blocks. Oskar would not respond to anyone else giving those codes, other than Tony. They were keyed to voiceprint as well as a set of particular words.

"Thank you, Mr. Stark, Friday....Rhodes."

"You're welcome, Oskar. I'm glad to meet you too," Rhodes said, and meant it.

"Integration is proceeding normally...Do I have a task to complete?" Oskar sounded hopeful. Curious.

"You gonna be a workaholic like your pops?" Tony teased kindly.

"Yes, if you're ready. There's an encrypted file in the database, the name is 'Terrigen'. Hope you're not as fussed about the squishy sciences as Nuncle Tony."

"...HEY!"

Oskar chuckled faintly at Tony's indignant squawk. Rhodey guffawed.

Chapter 10

It was just after sunset when they woke up. Sharon had been awake, but visibly tired and seeming a bit stressed.

They sat at a battered wooden table, brushing dust off chairs, to talk over options.

"I've been having to stay off grid since Leipzig," Sharon told them. "Or to be more honest, since I broke out of jail. They were planning to disappear me, no trial. Ross--Thunderbolt, not Everett--didn't want me or any stories about a Sokovian assassin posing as a psychiatrist muddying the waters. Ahab has to go hunt his white whale." She scowled. "It's not the first time he's done something of the sort. I don't think my going back Stateside is in the cards for awhile..."

"Clint needs to get home," Steve was firm. "He has people who need him, specifically. And we can't hide forever. The only way to stop Ross and his cronies abusing their power like this is to fight back, Sharon. Not cave in to bullies. You don't have to do this alone any more." Clint nodded emphatically in agreement, as did Wanda.

Who then began to cough. Sharon gave her a concerned glance; got up and walked over to the younger woman, laying a gentle hand on her forehead.

"Shit," Clint whispered, paling a little.

"What is it?"

"That--she sounds like Sam did, just before he collapsed."

"Oh, hell." Sharon bit her lip. "Risk or not, that settles it I guess. We need to get you to a trustworthy doctor. " She tapped a fingernail against the tabletop, thinking. "I can get you and Barton on a US-bound plane, Steve, but--not all four of us at once. The ...person I'm thinking of is a smuggler. He owes me a couple favors, but Wanda...would be a temptation I don't think we should wave in front of him. "

Steve bristled at the implication, but didn't argue. He didn't want to drag Wanda into another fight, particularly if the illness got worse.

Sharon took out a folder from a hidden wall safe. It held several fake IDs, and a wad of cash. "This should be enough to pay your fare and for him to keep his mouth shut afterward. Half now, half when you arrive safely home."

"We owe you, a great deal of thanks at least. Can we not help with her legal troubles too, Steve? Clear her name with ours?"

"Absolutely, " Steve assured Wanda. "She's part of our team too. We've got each other's backs."

"So split up and meet in D.C.?" Barton asked, brusquely.

"Yes--" Sharon was interrupted by a knock on the front door. She went very still.

All three of them silently drew their weapons. She crept over to the door, peered through a knothole.

Sharon drew in a sharp breath, before turning and quickly signing something in ASL to Clint. The archer's eyes widened. He nodded emphatically.

She threw the door open.

A black-clad, grumpy looking Natasha Romanoff shoved past her and hastily reclosed it.

Chapter 11

"I...have a kid."

"Sorry?" Betty looked up from her laptop's screen. Rhodes was in the doorway of the suite Tony had given her. His expression held amusement.

He'd been around the Tower, but had given her space to think about his request without any pressure, a courtesy she appreciated. However, reading through the files he'd given her, and her own quick research into the Avengers' past missions, she suspected he *needed* an answer sooner rather than later.

Rogers tried to kill Tony Stark.

Okay, maybe the super-soldier hadn't made a conscious decision to that effect, but...Looking at the medical reports of Stark's condition immediately after he was rescued from that bunker in Siberia, Betty was hard-pressed to see how it made much difference to the end result. For heroes, they were running up a (civilian) body count that was pretty high...and at least some of it had been entirely avoidable. Rogers' "the best hands are our own" speech reminded her unpleasantly of remarks her father had made during those experiments with the super-soldier serum, all those years ago.

"Oskar, want to come introduce yourself?"

"Good evening. I am Oskar, an AI tasked to work with Colonel Rhodes." The AI sounded cheerful. *"How are you, Dr. Ross?"*

"Very well, thanks." Betty sat up a little, intrigued. "Nice to meet you, Oskar. " Tony had informed her about FRIDAY, explaining her nature and her control over the Tower. She'd been amazed at how... real, FRIDAY sounded, every bit as much a person as her programmer or "Boss."

"We were playing chess. I used to be pretty good at it, and Oskar found my old National Master certificate." He ran a hand over his head. "Everything's very new to him, it almost reminds me of when I used to babysit younger children. He soaks information up like a sponge."

"I'm still not clear on what purpose 'Angry Birds' or 'Candy Crush' serve. They seem to offer little in the way of skills or knowledge."

"Human brains need downtime, Oskar," Betty replied, lips twitching. "We don't recharge, exactly, so we need idle or less-busy times. "

"Also known as sleep?" FRIDAY suggested pointedly.

Betty looked at her watch. Ooops. Where had the day gone?

"Right. " She shut down her laptop, and stood. "FRIDAY, is Tony still awake? I'd like to have a word with both he and Colonel Rhodes."

"Boss is in the kitchen. He indicates he'd like company." FRIDAY sounded edgy.

"...is something wrong?"

"Not...exactly, but...Boss hasn't consumed any alcohol since before his release from the hospital, and isn't amenable to taking pain medications that are strong enough to be effective. He says he needs to be alert."

If Betty hadn't been looking at Rhodes when that statement was made, she might have missed the brief flash of icy anger that wiped out his normal coolness, giving him a distinctly predatory vibe for a second before he masked his reaction.

She didn't doubt what she'd seen, however.

He might say he intended to explore nonlethal solutions, but she wondered if the former Avengers realized just how thin the ice under their feet was.

Right, so let's see what I can do about helping these two for a change, she decided. She followed Rhodes down to the kitchen, mulling over her approach. "Fighting a war on two fronts is a fool's game, on three is a madman's," she quoted her father.

Tony blinked at them over a cup of muddy-looking coffee.

"If Pepper were here, she'd have dragged you off to bed hours ago," Betty said with confidence.

"You offering to stand in, Atomic?" He wagged his eyebrows suggestively.

"Like you could keep up," she scoffed. "C'mon. You're making the kids nervous. FRIDAY's right, you need a breather."

"Yeah, well, heroing doesn't come with convenient schedules--"

Betty picked up a knife from the counter, aimed, and threw it. She didn't wait until it buried itself in the wall before following it with a second, placed barely a hand's width above the first.

"Tony. I may not be a hero by trade, but I'm not some meek little damsel. Go. To. Bed. FRIDAY, Oskar and I have the watch. You too, James. "

"Well, I was--"

She cleared her throat sharply. Rhodes fell silent.

"I'll have plenty to keep myself busy. This counter-serum included. I should be able to at least come up with a temporary suppressant before too long. A permanent solution may take longer, but not by much. I'd been researching something similar for Bruce, so I'm not at square one. Bit far along, actually. " She grinned. "I didn't have toys as nice as T-Bone's, here.-- Tony. OUT."

Tony quailed, and left the kitchen, a half-eaten sandwich in his grasp. "G'night, Rhodeybear," she heard him whisper.

"Thank you, Doctor." Rhodes let out a breath, his shoulders slumping.

"I'd like you to consider a new title for me," this was impulsive, but sometimes one's first reaction *was* the best to go with.

"A...?"

"'Avenger'. Assuming you want to continue the team instead of disbanding it."

He looked astonished. "I. I'd have to ask Tony, and Vision, but...you mean it?"

"Yes." She held out a hand. After a second, he took it in his own.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

I'll admit I'm iffy about this chapter. I wrote myself into a corner by mentioning Bast earlier. Movies/IW canon notwithstanding, I wasn't inclined to write a story in which Wanda was potentially powerful enough to take her on directly. (Especially not this story.) So I dodged.

grimaces Bad Westpass, no cookies!

"Nat!" Steve leaped to his feet. "How did you get here? Are you all right?"

She glared. "Twenty questions later. We need to get out of here, the JCTC are on their way."

"What? How did they find out?" Sharon demanded.

"T'Challa's pet witches. The Dora Milaje. One of them's tracking her magic." Natasha gave Wanda a disgusted look. "Weakling," she muttered, too softly for anyone but Steve to hear it.

"Come on, let's go."

They hurriedly grabbed up their few belongings. Wanda was still pale, and coughing, as Natasha led them outside.

Sudden light flooded the yard. A gunshot rang out, then another. The group scattered, taking cover, as Steve felt something hard slam into his leg. He looked down to see a bloody wound in his thigh.

Wanda hissed furiously, raising a hand. Red threads lanced out, grabbing at the other woman. "That's not Nat!"

The woman laughed scornfully, brushing Wanda's magic away. "Took you long enough..." her voice changed. She spoke with a Wakandan accent.

Her gaze locked on Wanda, she didn't see Sharon as the former Agent lunged for her. Sharon caught the imposter in a chokehold, pressing a knife to her throat.

"Tell your people to back off, or you'll die. *We're leaving.*"

"Hold your fire!" a familiar voice called loudly. The bullets stopped.

"Natasha" 's features rippled, changed to that of a young African woman in the Dora Milaje's uniform. Steve bristled at this proof of T'Challa's treachery.

"Show yourselves!" he shouted, moving up beside Sharon. "Or we'll do it!"

Everett Ross and Okoye appeared a few yards away.

"Rogers, this is your last warning. Put your hands up, or I'll tell my men to take you out. "

"NO!" Both Wanda and Sharon's hostage screamed. Steve glanced at her, to see her magic lashing out. It caught their prisoner, engulfing her in a bloody cloud...

and the world

fell

away

They fell through darkness, through cold...

Steve landed on something hard, and lumpy. He heard Clint curse, and Wanda gasp in pain.

Rock under his feet, not sand or plant life. Hard pavement. Evergreen trees. City lights off in the distance. He looked around, confused. "What...where are we? "

Wanda was on her hands and knees, coughing, gagging. Her face was a sickly gray. Clint looked shaken, but unhurt.

"She.." Wanda swallowed hard. It took several tries for her to speak. "The impostor. She was trying to --to open a door of sorts, to get away from us. I could...see it. I grabbed at it, tried to make it take us away instead. "

Steve was stunned. "That's..." amazing? Frightening too, a little? He crouched by her. "Do you know where you brought us? Is this--"

"Northern Africa," Sharon spoke up. She was staring at a road off to their left, adorned with a highway marker. "*Alexandria?* Holy crap, Wanda. That's..." she shook her head. "Remind me never to piss you off, darlin'. Here, can you sit up?" She produced a water bottle, offering it to the girl.

Clint stayed back as Sharon bandaged up Steve's leg. His expression was decidedly odd.

"You all right, Barton?" Sharon asked, twisting around to look at him.

"Little late to think of that, isn't it? Go on back to your fuckbuddy. I'm fine. And I'm done."

"What does that mean?" Steve asked slowly.

"I came to help you, and Wanda, and I did. We're square. I'm going home." Clint spat on the ground. "I didn't sign up for a war with the U.S. government, or the Avengers."

"We *are* the Avengers--"

Clint cut him off. "You think that if you want. I'm outta here."

He left, ignoring Wanda's tearful pleas and Steve's orders.

* * *

Sam hated hospitals.

He'd regained consciousness while he was being stretchered into...whatever this place was. Judging by the few staff whose faces he could see, he assumed they were still in Nigeria.

They didn't speak to him, even when he tried the few words of Xhosa he knew. His left arm was handcuffed to the rail of his bed, and two men in combat gear stood just outside the door of his room.

Shit. He just hoped the rest of the team was all right.

His head ached fiercely, and his stomach was cramping. It was so hot in here, and he...he couldn't catch his breath...

A coughing spell wracked him. He jerked, doubled over, blood dribbling down his chin. Dear God, what...

Pain stabbed through his chest, crushing, like someone had dropped a boulder on him.

An alarm began to sound. He collapsed back onto the tough mattress, struggling not to pass out.

The noise cut off. Lights flickered, went dark momentarily...

"Hey, Samwise. " Someone steadied him. "It's all right. I'm here. " A cool hand touched his forehead.

"Riley?" he whispered, gaping at his partner.

* * *

Ross watched as Okoye took off her cloak, laying it over Ako, covering the other warrior's lifeless face.

"I'm sorry."

Okoye shook her head. "We didn't anticipate the witch would be able to hijack our own spells. No *sane* user of magics would have tried it, Maximoff could have torn herself and the rest apart in the attempt."

"I think 'sane' is up for serious debate. " His phone vibrated. He flipped it open. "Yeah..."

"Well, that ...complicates matters." Ross frowned. "On our way back now. We'll be there in about an hour, tops."

Okoye looked a question at him.

He put the phone away.

"That was the City Hospital. They've confirmed the Rogues' illness is Ebola. Which particular strain is undetermined. " He shook his head. "And...Dr. Balogun also informed me that Wilson just died."

Chapter 13

Sharon led them into a part of the city that seemed to be mostly commercial buildings. They were right on the Egyptian coast, she'd told them. Finding a ship that would take them to the States would be much easier, and safer, than another try at boarding a plane. She left Steve and Wanda resting at another safehouse, while she went to look up a contact of hers who worked on the docks.

Wanda was still tired, and looking ill. Her cough hadn't worsened, but neither was it going away. Steve urged her to sleep if she could, while he stood guard.

There was a small, dusty-looking television in the living room. He switched it on. The channel he got appeared to be airing a news broadcast. He couldn't understand the language, but they were displaying footage of the fight at the airport.

Shots of them fighting, the aftermath... He froze as a picture of Sam was displayed and then...wait, what?

A...red 'x' over his friend's face? *What the hell??*

No. Sam couldn't...He had to be all right.

Steve felt sick staring at the television. Damn it, he needed answers! Of all the times for Barton to have a hissy fit and run off...

The wet, tearing cough from Wanda that turned into retching broke his preoccupation. He hurried into the other room. She was doubled over, clutching at her midsection.

He steadied her as best he could.

"Steve? Oh hell--" Sharon and a strange man appeared.

"Captain Rogers. " The man offered a businesslike handshake. "Dr. Alban List, formerly of SHIELD."

He scrutinized Wanda. "I can take her to a clinic downtown. She should be in emergency care. I suspect she's contracted one of the local fevers; survivable, but nasty while they're at work. From what I understand about your Enhancements, sir, I don't *think* you're susceptible, but we can take you in to be checked too," he offered.

Steve shook his head. "It wouldn't be safe for you, or for her. " He told them about the broadcast. Sharon winced. "Sam? Oh, I hope not. I'm sorry, Steve. Let's get List and Wanda on their way, and I'll take a look."

Wanda lifted her head. "Steve...you be careful, too," she whispered. "Snakes and panthers...all ready to bite..."

"It'll be all right, Wanda." He carried her out to the waiting car, trying not to jostle her. Poor kid.

Sharon watched the TV, and shut her eyes. Her expression when she looked back at Steve told him everything. "I'm so sorry," she whispered.

He swallowed hard. "Right. I ...we need to get moving."

"Still want to head back to the States?"

"Yes. " Stark had a lot to answer for, so did Rhodes. An accounting was long overdue.

* * *

Vision glided through the wall, noiselessly. Rhodes snickered. "I never get tired of seeing that."

The android smiled. "Oh? I could take you with me sometime," he suggested.

"Huh. Six impossible things before breakfast...What brings you by? "

"Oskar," Vision replied. "He introduced himself. He also said he thought you, or Dr. Ross, needed to ask me about something?"

"Yes, well, you and Tony. " Rhodes stretched. He had had a decent night's sleep, as had Tony. Betty had gone to her room after they'd shared a quick breakfast.

"Hm?" Tony wandered in, right on cue. "Hey, Big Red."

"I was talking with Betty. About the Avengers. " Rhodes chose his words carefully. "We talked about different possibilities, Tony, are you still open to working as part of the team? If you want out, heaven knows I wouldn't blame you. Not after all the crap that hit the fan lately. "

"That's nothing new," Tony pointed out. "And if I bail, that leaves you and Viz, and maybe Spider-Man holding the bag. I'm gonna say nope to that."

"Well...Betty wanted to know if we'd be interested in recruiting her to the team. We do need more people, and she can handle herself."

"She's got my vote," Tony agreed, grinning hugely.

"Mine too, though it should be unanimous..."

"I don't mean to give the impression I don't trust your judgment, but I'd like to meet her first," Vision said hesitantly. "It's more not trusting myself. I thought adding Wanda was a good choice, and hindsight suggests otherwise."

"Right this way," Tony said, waving toward the elevator. "Rhodey, you coming?"

"I have to head back to the office," Rhodey demurred. "Got some impatient types looking for me, and I don't want them busting my door down."

Not until I'm there, he added to himself.

Chapter 14

Barton crouched by a patch of thorny nettles, digging his hands into rocky soil. The plants came away in his grasp easily, revealing a small metal plate beneath the dirt. *Always keep an ace up your sleeve...never give all your secrets away, to anyone.* Fury's voice echoed in his memory.

Good advice, then and now.

He rested his hand against the plate. There was a faint *click*, and a wider portion of the 'ground' slid to one side, revealing a dug-out tunnel.

It was just barely large enough to allow a single adult to pass through it. He paused for a few minutes to let fresh air circulate into the cave, before he went in and yanked the hatch shut behind him.

The hiding spot was one Coulson had told him about, almost twenty years ago, when they were on a job investigating a strange cult in Cairo. *En Sabah Nur's acolytes*, they'd called themselves. He remembered it being a fairly uneventful trip. No one had even died. Of course, the weeks afterward had been damn annoying. He'd somehow managed to pick up a weak(relatively speaking), case of Ebola, and had had to be quarantined for a month with only Coulson and occasionally Nat for company. She'd insisted that she wasn't susceptible, and no one had wanted to 'die on that particular hill' of arguing with her about it.

The cave had been shored up with wooden and metal beams. He switched on a flashlight. A crate of weapons and another of food and water proved to be untouched. He'd hoped so, judging by the thick layer of dust on almost everything, but was relieved to actually *see* for himself.

Too many unanswered questions. The longer he was away from Carter (and from Maximoff, *not* Wanda and not 'that poor f***ing kid',) the more of those he had.

Carter's story of woe didn't hold up. If she'd been held prisoner all this time, and incommunicado, how in hell had she known where to start looking for them? In no way was it logical for her to assume they'd be in Nigeria, of all places. Unless someone had clued her in...

Or something.

Rogers no longer had his shield...but the Falcon wings had been in lockup at the Raft when they escaped, as had the Ant-Man suit, so they'd made sure not to leave them behind. Now he wondered if they'd been as smart as they thought. She'd had Sam's wings in her possession for more than long enough to plant a tracer on them. That would have at least narrowed her search down to Wakanda, in which case her 'stumbling' across them was much more believable.

But if so, on whose behalf? Not Stark's, plainly, and not the JCTC.

Rogers might be happy to tell himself that she was acting out of love for him, or idealism, but Clint had known *Peggy* Carter--the woman who was Sharon's role model--better than that. "Leading with the heart" was *not* something they did. It just wasn't. And no SHIELD agent who survived in the field more than a year was an idealist.

They weren't seeing what, in hindsight, should have been obvious.
And he didn't think, much as he would've liked to, that it was coincidence that he only started pulling his head out of his ass when he was out of range of the Scarlet Witch's magic.

He pried open the weapons box, finding a bow and a quiver's worth of arrows, as well as a bulletproof vest and a couple of ugly, large knives.

If he wanted to return home on his own, or find "Agent 13" and her Man with No Plan and get some truthful answers, he'd have a better chance after rest and a chance to gather some intel, Clint eventually decided. Make an actual plan that didn't add up to 'hit people until there's no one left to get in our way'.

He always saw better from a distance. Some things never did change.

* * *

Berlin was windy, and so cold, after Birnin Zana.

Scott hadn't resisted or argued with the JCTC squad when they cuffed him, before marching him to a waiting aircraft.

They hadn't been rough, but not warm and fuzzy either.

Considering how much damage he'd done the last time he was in Germany, he couldn't blame them for it.

Ross had met him at their HQ, but handed him off to a junior agent to arrange a cell and legal representation for him. Something about the other Avengers; German wasn't one of the languages Scott knew fluently, but he'd caught mention of Steve Rogers' name a time or two.

The room they kept him wasn't all that bad. He was by himself, but they'd relented enough after the second day to give him some magazines.

The lawyer who met with him was not optimistic. He was an older man, who'd seen plenty of violent and destructive behavior from clients, Scott suspected. Nothing he'd said had fazed Krause. The trouble was, unless Scott was willing to rat out his former 'allies', they didn't have much to bargain with. Even then, his chances of avoiding more jail time were 'slim to negative numbers', Krause had told him. He'd gone way over the line.

He'd been allowed to e-mail Maggie--and Hope--once each, but he hadn't been able to reach Hope or Hank. He flinched a little, thinking about it. Were they okay? He almost hoped the radio silence just meant that they were pissed off at him. If *Thaddeus* Ross or Tony Stark wanted revenge... But Maggie, Cassie and Jim were all right, if upset. Anything else...he'd find a way to cope. Somehow.

He sat on his cot, ears pricked up.

...Wait. Was that...sirens? Shit, now what???

* * *

Sharon got them to an airport, a much smaller one than Nigeria's. She had procured some clothes that didn't scream 'American', including a scarf and long-sleeved shirt that hid Steve's blond coloring. She herself was dressed like an Arab woman, with a long dress and face veil. Steve was too tired and sore to talk much, even if he'd understood what people around them were saying. His head ached, as did his chest. He had woken this morning with a sore throat, and fever, but damned if he was going to whine about it. They had bigger problems.

He coughed, once, painfully. A young man walking by paused, and offered him a handkerchief. He murmured thanks, hoping the tone if not the words would be clear. The boy smiled kindly, nodding.

The plane was a small one, but Sharon and the pilot both assured him that it would make the flight overseas just fine.

She had been...distant, the past couple of days. Steve was just as glad. He wasn't up for being romantic, or even cuddling...He'd had dreams of Sam's face the last time they'd spoken, and woken up, his face wet with tears.

He wiped sweat off his face roughly, then stuffed the handkerchief into a trash bin before walking up the ramp into the waiting plane.

showdown pt 1

" Unknown aircraft, this is JFK Air Traffic Control. Respond immediately with your flight identification number or we will be forced to take measures to prevent your continuing through New York airspace."

The ATC's expression was carefully blank as she watched the display on her screen.

Silence.

It was not quite 4 a.m. when one of her staff had alerted her that there was an incoming plane that hadn't contacted them for landing instructions, despite radar showing them inbound for JFK. The plane's transponder identified it as a (relatively) small, privately owned commercial aircraft belonging to an overseas shipping company, rather than a passenger jet. All attempts at raising the pilot had been ignored.

"Air Force jets are en route. ETA three minutes," her aide reported.

She set down the mike. "Clear the runways. Reroute all incoming traffic to either Newark or LaGuardia. Alert EMS and fire control to be on standby."

Fighter jets streaked overhead, zeroing in on the intruder.

A last warning was given, broadcast on all frequencies.

No answer ever came before a missile blew the plane out of the sky.

* * *

He ignored the voices chattering at him over the radio. The plane had been put on auto to allow their pilot a brief rest.

Sharon had taken a nap, too, seeming tired and complaining of a headache.

He sipped at lukewarm coffee, coughing half of it up. Blood dripped down his chin. He washed it off and tried again. So thirsty...

Sharon snored, though not loudly. He didn't mention it to her, of course, he actually thought the sound was kind of cute.

He rubbed at his eyes. His vision blurred momentarily. It was so hot, though he wasn't sweating. Maybe ask the pilot if they could turn the thermostat or whatever down a bit...

He stumbled forward to the flight deck.

Bennett was curled up in his recliner, eyes shut.

He wouldn't wake when Steve spoke to him, or raised his voice, or shook him like a rag doll. His shirtfront was wet. Baffled, Steve let go, and stared at the blood that had soaked the man's clothes. What...?

It took a moment for him to realize that he couldn't hear Sharon's breathing anymore.

He hurried to her...she drew in a single, shaky breath. Another, after a pause that made Steve go cold inside. Her face was sickly grey.

A seizure jerked her head up, arms and legs thrashing wildly. Bloody foam gushed from her nostrils and mouth, as she spasmed. Steve tried to hold her, keep her from injuring herself.

There was a sickening crack as the convulsions twisted her spine. She went utterly still.

No. No...Sharon?

The interior of the plane was darkening. He put a hand up to his face, touched his eyes... what...

felt something mushy and cold slide down one cheek, from his eye socket.

The scream of an incoming jet's engines warned him just in time to grab a parachute and his gear. He hit the button to open one of the hatches, and leaped out.

Above him, an explosion lit up the sky.

The Atlantic's icy waters engulfed him, and hopefully, hid him from view.

He had reflexively sucked in a lungful of air before hitting the waves. He dove beneath the surface, staying under for as long as he could as he struck out toward shore.

* * *

The Egyptian clinic was quiet, blessedly warm and muted.

Wanda didn't question any of the doctor's instructions as he led her into a room that contained a real, clean bed and blankets. At her admission of exhaustion as well as pain, he kindly encouraged her to lie down and rest. "I just need to take a blood sample from your arm, and we'll put this monitor on, like so, but other than that, you needn't be awake. Have I your permission to give you some fluids or antipyretic medications if the tests indicate they're needed?"

She nodded, too wrung out to chat much. "Yes. D-do you need that in writing?"

"At some time, but for now we have your verbal consent witnessed." He motioned to the female nurse who had joined them. "Mila speaks English, and some Russian, as well as our language. If you need anything, just let her know. " He patted her free hand, then drew the blankets up to her chin before leaving with the vial of blood he'd collected.

She woke briefly when someone lifted her head to tuck an extra pillow beneath it--oh, how nice! and put cool cloths on her skin. One felt like a scarf, soft as cashmere winding around her throat. She sank deeper into hazy dreams.

List and his second-in-command exchanged smiles as the cocktail of drugs, including one that would temporarily inhibit the witch's powers, took quick effect. Maximoff hadn't so much as twitched when the collar went around her neck, but better safe than sorry.

"Remember to take an extra cycle in the decontamination chamber before you leave," he reminded her. "Even for us, Ebola is no joke, and this is a strain I don't recognize...something new."

"You'll be taking it off to the biochemists, then?" his subordinate asked, trying, but not quite succeeding in hiding her disappointment.

"No, I believe you should do that while I concentrate on Miss Maximoff's ...reeducation. She'll have to spend some time in cryostasis, and then with memory tailoring, and that's something von Holtzer will need me for. " He chuckled. "Past time you headed up a major project of your own. Never apologize for ambition, Mila! How do you think I got this far?"

"Thank you, sir. "

He saluted, and handed her the tube. "Good luck, doctor."

She left with alacrity.

From outside the main entrance to the clinic, Barton watched as List directed two men in hazmat suits to load a stretcher with a comatose Witch into a van.

Steve might not have recognized List, but there was no way Carter hadn't, the man had been on a lot of agencies 'Most Wanted' papers for years, and had gotten bumped up to top ten after the Ultron Incident and Sokovia's fall.

A news story broadcast the previous night had killed any remaining concern he'd felt for his ex-teammates. Wilson had followed Rogers, too, and look where it had gotten him.

Sam...Clint shut his eyes for a moment, flashes of memory almost overwhelming him.

A poker night when the Pararescue had cleaned him out. His excitement when he put on a pair of new Falcon wings for the first time as an Avenger. Sparring, and getting Clint's ass kicked--yes, even that.

Sam waking him gently, once, during an overnight visit to the Compound, when his nightmares had woken the rest. Not asking questions, just there, standing protectively over him and shooing even Wanda away to let Clint sleep undisturbed. *"It's okay, man. If I have to, yes, I'll make sure you don't hurt anyone. Let yourself drop the baggage for a little while."*

He'd showed Clint a picture of his niece and nephew, his sister's kids, and talked about his mother raising him to believe in something greater...in a Heaven Clint didn't imagine *he'd* ever see.

"God, if You're really there--keep him safe," he whispered. *I'm sorry, Sam. We blew it--*

Rogers could just take care of himself. For now, however, letting Hydra take ahold of a potential weapon like the Scarlet Witch struck Clint as a very bad idea.

He waited until List had gone around to the cab, followed by one of his flunkies.

He just barely made it into the van and reclosed the doors, before the transport peeled away from the curb.

* * *

Scott was numb as Everett Ross and Krause explained the situation to him. *Ebola? And the Falcon...*

"We'll check blood tests from you; the German authorities are insisting on it, though I suspect you're clean. The rest were already displaying symptoms. Whatever this strain is, it works abnormally fast. You're going to be transported to a military hospital for quarantine. Once the allotted time has passed, you'll be housed in their supermax awaiting trial."

Scott nodded, shuddering. He turned to Krause. "Sir, I know this is going above and beyond but--if I could ask a favor?"

"This whole situation is 'above and beyond, I'd say," Krause replied. *"Ja? What can I do to help you ?"*

"If I give you a message for my daughter, can you see that she gets it? I understand I shouldn't hand you anything, probably, so you'd have to remember and write it down later. "

"Ah, I think we can manage that. What do you want to tell her?" The lawyer's expression softened.

Scott told him. Krause repeated it aloud several times, to be sure he'd got it, and promised he'd contact Maggie and Cassie ASAP.

Scott gulped, as Krause left, then steeled himself. "How bad is it?" he asked Ross frankly. *What did we all do?*

"...we're getting reports of sickness in Lagos that match Ebola symptoms," the Deputy Director said. "No deaths...yet, but...You need to be away from public reach when we make an official statement, Lang. There are going to be a lot of people who want answers, or retribution."

He winced, and held his hands out for the cuffs silently.

* * *

Rhodes looked around his office. Hansen had, as usual, left it neat as a pin. More than that, his aide had started picking up on small preferences Rhodes had. Things Rhodney would never have ordered him to do, they were too trivial, but his personal likes and dislikes. A small coffee pod by the K-cup brewer, his favorite blend of G7 Black. Papers and pens stacked on the desk where a left-handed person could reach them easily. The (hidden, or not so much) bottle of extra-strength Tylenol in his desk drawer, nearly empty, had been replaced by a new one.

"Oskar?" he asked aloud, touching the earpiece he wore. "How's your assignment coming along?"

"So far, so good, Rhodes. I have five candidates meeting the parameters you set. Would you like to see the dossiers on them?"

"Sure. Are they all military?" Rhodes wheeled himself over to his computer desk. The screen lit up. He smiled, pleased to see Oskar taking the initiative.

"One is civilian, the others are in active military service or honorably discharged in Benjamin J. Grimm's case."

"Ben Grimm?" Rhodes was surprised. "Huh. Let me review his first, Oskar."

The man had been a crack pilot, and had firmly refused promotions that would have stuck him behind a desk, Rhodes recalled. He hadn't liked the man, Grimm could be self-centered and abrasive at times, but he had to respect his undeniable skills in the air.

He kept his eyes glued to the screen, seemingly.

Ignored the vibration under his palms that signaled him a proximity alarm had been triggered, or the louder sound of a door chime as *someone* shoved the (locked) front door of the building open and stormed in.

Rogers had made it to land, and hidden under a fallen tree, letting the serum clear the worst of the pain from bruises and cuts. His vision still wouldn't return to normal, and even the sea's iciness hadn't stopped the fire eating at his bones.

By sunrise, he was well enough to sneak into a nearby house's driveway and hotwire a motorcycle, a trick Nat had shown him years ago. Eidetic memory 'for the win', as they'd say.

He could also remember damned clearly that news story, Rhodes gloating over his expulsion from the team STEVE had LED, and with Steve's own shield laying on a desk behind him like

some damn trophy.

Well, no. He was done letting Stark and his yes-men bully him.

He reached the building, the security system pitifully inadequate against a super-soldier on the warpath.

Finally, he entered a deserted office, the only thing of interest being his shield. He stalked over to retrieve it--

Only to hear the distinct whine of a repulsor; a second before he was lifted and flung into a nearby wall. His head cracked against something hard, and he saw stars...

He crashed to the floor. Sharp pains jabbed through his chest, the familiar sensation of a cracked rib. He spat contemptuously, getting to his feet.

There was a ripple in the air, and War Machine became visible, hands upraised and pointing at him.

"You didn't see that coming?" his voice issued mockingly from the suit's speakers.

Rogers bellowed in fury, and launched himself at the Avengers' "leader."

showdown pt 2

Chapter Summary

Here
we
go...

Rhodes evaded the super-soldier's first bullish charge. The man's injuries were making him clumsy, as well as impulsive--and right now, Rhodes would take every advantage he could get.

A sonic barrage drove Rogers back, face twisted in pain. He still circled, looking for an opening to rush forward again. Rhodey just laughed, if bitterly.

He wanted the man alive. For so many reasons, but if he couldn't manage that...so be it.

This was why he hadn't wanted Tony involved, even if he'd been well enough. Violence had already left enough scars on his best friend's soul when it *wasn't* avoidable.

A second repulsor blast at the floor under Rogers' feet sent "Cap" skidding to one side, crablike, his breathing harsh and ragged.

The shield gleamed from a nearby table. Rogers dove for it, hands clutching at the metal as if it were a lifeline.

Only to have the magnets in Rhodey's armor yank the 'oversized frisbee' out of his reach. Rogers drove a spin kick at Rhodey's chest.

War Machine responded by bringing the shield down on Roger's leg.

There was a loud, painful-sounding *crack*.

Rogers fell, screaming obscenities at him. Bloody foam muffled his voice, making some words incomprehensible. But 'bastard' and 'traitor' were clear enough. So was 'murderer'.

"*Stand. Down. NOW.* "

...of course Rogers wasn't going to listen. Wasn't that how this whole clusterfuck had started?

He got to his knees, tried to brace himself on Rhodes' desk to stand--

An armored fist snapped his head back. He crumpled, his face left bloody and mangled.

Rhodes glared down at him, raising the shield to bring it down onto Rogers' neck. Fear showed in the supersoldier's blue eyes, as he raised his hands feebly to try to stave it off.

Instead, the shield was slammed into the floor beside him. The edge was embedded several inches deep into the tiles.

Nanites streamed from the War Machine gauntlets, reforming themselves into manacles that pinned Rogers' arms and legs to the floor.

A sharp jolt of electricity sent the ex-Avenger into unconscious, falling mercifully silent.

Rhodes looked at the shield. Yanking it free, he tossed it up into the air--and tapped a single key on the left gauntlet he wore.

The new unibeam enveloped the disc. It was a one-use option, Tony had warned him, and not for use against 'organic enemies or targets'...

The metal glowed, briefly, before the shield was disintegrated.

Gone.

He sighed, and opened a communication channel to the JTTF office in New York.

* * *

Betty, Vision, and Tony were waiting for him after he returned to the Tower.

"Is he..." Tony faltered.

"Still alive. Barely. That fucking serum---pardon my language, Doc--apparently can't differentiate between the man and the viruses in his bloodstream where Enhancing functions is concerned. They've got him in a high-security area, no other patients. Induced coma. They hope they can keep him alive, but best outcome is him being an asymptomatic carrier for the rest of his life. "

He sank into the wheelchair, suddenly bone-tired, if relieved. He'd spent over an hour just decontaminating the War Machine armor.

"Are *you* okay?" asked Vision. "Captain Rogers is not *our* first concern here, sir."

"I wanted to hurt him. To see him go through what we did...I know it wasn't...professional, but part of me didn't care," he admitted softly

"So you're not perfect?" Tony snickered. "Good, I don't need the competition."

Rhodey laughed, elbowing his brother. Betty hid a smile as she watched them.

They helped him to the elevator, and Vision assisted him to a couch to lie down.

"I've got something that may help them deal with the Enhanced aspect of Rogers' condition," Betty said. "Do I have your permission to contact the JTTF liaison and discuss our work with them, sir?"

Rhodes blinked. "Um. Sure. You don't--If *you* think that's the right thing to do--" Damn. Exhaustion was making him babble, he realized.

"We took a vote while you were gone, " Tony said airily. "Say hello to our newest teammate, Rubble." He waved at Betty.

"Tony. NO." From all three of them, even amidst laughter.

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Author's note: taking liberties with the timeline of some of the new characters here. There...MIGHT be events or people showing up later than they would in their own canon.

I'm trying to bring X-Men characters in, including...well, you'll see. Yes, I'm being v. self-indulgent. /unapologetic

The JTTF Clinic isolation ward was sterile, brightly lit, white, and very cold. Betty was grateful for the extra sweater she wore under her standard lab coat. She peered through a microscope at a slide holding a blood sample. Behind her, two armed guards stood by the door.

They'd met her at the entrance and escorted her to the ward, polite but taciturn. Dr. Richard Bradley, the Clinic's CMO, watched her with pursed lips.

Every precaution was being taken; she'd had to go through a decon chamber and put on a hazmat suit just to be admitted to the lab itself.

Rogers was on another floor, heavily sedated and restrained.

"I'm surprised Stark couldn't come himself. This is his teammate, after all."

Not so subtle fishing for information, check. Betty ignored the hint.

"The eye shows no signs of regeneration, you said?" she asked after a moment.

"No. I suppose even 'peak human condition' must have its limits."

"Small blessings," she murmured.

There had been no reports of Ebola in the U.S. so far, but they wouldn't be in the clear until a full month had passed...Jim's confrontation with Rogers had been only two days ago.

The population of Lagos had been less fortunate. The damned virus was resisting conventional attempts to cure it. Wakanda had offered aid, following a long and rather acrimonious Skype discussion between their King and Tony. Stark had been coldly furious, rather than his usual snarky self. He'd cut off T'Challa's attempts to express regret. *"I could not give a tinker's damn how sorry you are. It won't bring back the dead. Forget being sad and guilty. Get to work."*

"Captain Rogers' condition is still unstable. We can't risk an untested therapy on him, and in any event he's in no way able to give or refuse consent."

They'd had this conversation already. Multiple times. Betty turned a level gaze on the CMO. "I believe you'll find that I *do* have the authority to treat Mr. Rogers. He signed a medical power of attorney, naming Tony Stark as his proxy if he should be incapacitated. Mr. Stark authorized me to represent him in this matter, as he doesn't have a medical degree. If your conscience won't permit you to be involved, we'll make arrangements for his transfer to another facility."

Bradley hastily backpedaled. "No, no. That won't be necessary. I apologize if I came off as obstructive." He grimaced. "I...had to identify Sharon Carter's remains this morning, and that of the pilot who smuggled them Stateside. I'm still on edge," he admitted. "Right. How do you want to proceed?"

* * *

Cheeseburgers.

And new technology.

Either one of those was a guaranteed Tony-lure. Combine them?

He was out of the lab within seconds.

He signed the delivery from Wakanda, giving only a faint eyeroll at the "Mr. Stank" reference. It was a running gag with the postal workers who came to the Tower, at this point.

Rhodey still got an occasional kick out of it. Tony figured that he could put up with a bit of teasing for his Platypus.

Iron Man can haz cheeseburger first, however, then new gadgets.

There was a soft knock at the door of the workshop. He paused, took the last bite of his burger, and called, "C'mon in!"

He expected either Vision or maybe Pepper.

Instead, a tall, willowy blonde(in gray tactical gear) greeted him. "Good afternoon, Dr. Stark," the words holding a slight Russian accent. "I understand you and your associates have been looking for me?"

* * *

The transport from Alexandria reached a Hydra base in Cairo with no problems en route.

Clint hid under a pile of spare uniforms that had been hastily shoved into a corner. The driver or List hadn't checked on their 'passenger'. Of course, they had sensors on Wanda that would alert them if she were destabilizing or flatlined. He suspected they didn't care about making her comfy. Alive would be good enough.

He'd considered setting a time-delayed explosive and bailing out, but decided against it.

He heard voices chattering in Arabic. The doors creaked open. Noises of the gurney being wheeled away.

He risked a peek. They had their backs to him.

He scurried out of the transport vehicle and found a nearby stack of shipping containers that'd conceal him from view.

Plenty of people coming and going, he noted, and most were armed. Little bit of luck here: they were wearing uniforms, including facial masks.

He sat back, waiting for one of them to come within reach.

* * *

It hurt just to breathe. Felt as if her skin was on fire.

She couldn't move. What was going on?

When she tried to reach for Steve's mind, or Clint's, she couldn't.

That realization jolted her fully awake. She tried to sit up.

The manacles on her arms and legs wouldn't give so much as an inch.

"Welcome back." List smiled down at her. "Are we feeling better? You recognize me now, I believe."

He leaned over, a syringe in his grasp. She tried to jerk her head away as he swept her hair away from the side of her neck with gloved hands.

"Now, let's not make this more painful unnecessarily, shall we? HYDRA requires obedience, little witch. I'm sure you haven't forgotten that."

Across the city, deep underground, En Sabah Nur stirred, uneasy dreams tugging at him.

Chapter 18

Tony never understood how some people's minds worked.

They'd been calling him 'the Merchant of Death' for almost twenty years, but when somebody invaded his workshop uninvited and consequently found him pointing a weapon at them, they were *surprised*?

The woman seemed thoughtful rather than offended. She had both hands raised, away from her body. "*Nyet*, she murmured. "You didn't expect me? But then--"

"Identify yourself," Tony cut her off, "and state your business. I'm not the one who needs to explain themselves."

"Yelena Belova, KGB operative, formerly of the Red Room," she replied. "Natalia may have mentioned me?"

"Oh, please," Tony scoffed. "Nat, give away secrets?"

"True," she admitted with a little smile.

"What brings you by, then? If you're looking for Natasha, she's not here and I don't expect her to be," he said, abruptly sick of playing games. He'd done this dance with "Natashlie" and he wasn't up for another round.

"So I'd heard. " She scrutinized him. "And you are not only running out of patience, but out of mercy, I'd say."

"Yes," he said curtly.

"Then I'll be brief. Russia is one of the countries that has signed the Sokovia Accords. We mean to attempt something new for deploying the Enhanced. So far, the one who has been able to build a successful team integrating Enhanced and baseline fighters? That would be you. "

"Successful? Do you know how many people have died because of us?"

"Yes. I also know how many are still alive because of you, Iron Man." There was no flattery or even emotion in her tone. She might have been pointing out that the sky was blue.

"You're good." He smirked a little; lowered gauntleted hands to his sides.

"*Spasibo*."

"Tell your superiors...Set up a meeting with the Accords Council and the Avengers, and we'll take it from there. I'm not going to say no or yes today and anyhow--it's War Machine who leads the team now. Is that going to be a problem?" he asked.

She caught the warning in his tone, and shook her head.

"No. Understood; I will speak to them. Colonel Rhodes should hear from us within the next day or so." She inclined her head politely. A second later, she was gone.

For now.

* * *

Clint edged down the hall. Wanda had been taken into a laboratory, he'd gathered from listening to the HYDRA grunts, for something called 'mnemonic erasure'. The phrase suggested a number of ugly possibilities, ones he wouldn't wish on anybody. Even her. They were wearing hazmat gear. He'd need to acquire one of the suits before he risked coming into contact with her.

And if he couldn't...

He'd try. But a little voice in his head had started to whisper about fighting doomed battles, versus cutting his losses.

He'd try *once* to get her out. If it failed, he'd worry about making his own escape. Wanda had survived being HYDRA's guinea pig before, no reason to think she couldn't or wouldn't do it again if necessary.

He found a deserted corner that let him watch comings and goings into the lab; waited for an opportunity to catch one of the techies alone.

There was a commotion at the far end of the hall. Shouts. Men in guard outfits went sprinting in that direction.

Gunfire.

Well now. What was that? Someone else who had 'burn HYDRA to the ground' on their to-do list, maybe?

Clint stayed out of sight, listening, try to catch a glimpse of the action.

Shouts were replaced by screams, and then a worrying silence.

A man in street clothes(liberal painted in what seemed to be Hydran blood) walked down the corridor.

One of the guards fired at his back. Too close to miss, way too--

Snikt!

Well.

That...was new.

Clint shrugged, and went to join the fight. He'd been itching to do some damage, and now seemed as good a time as any.

Chapter 19

The funeral pyre was the only light to be seen in the palace.

Dora Milaje gently laid Ayo's body, wrapped in a silken shroud, atop the wood.

T'Challa approached, dry-eyed but shame and sorrow carving lines in his face. He accepted the torch from Okoye's hand, sparks flying in all directions.

Shuri and Ramonda stood nearby, as did M'Baku.

"Go bravely, sword-sister," he murmured.

"Go in hope," Ramonda said softly.

"Go to find the answers you always wanted," Shuri breathed.

"Go and find those that loved you, as we do," from M'Baku.

Whispered prayers, goodbyes for a warrior who'd given her life protecting the innocent.

He touched the flame to the wood. It caught quickly. He watched until only ashes remained, to scatter and dance away on the wind.

Then they turned away, not looking back, to go on with life and what needed to be done.

* * *

T'Challa sighed, rubbing at his forehead.

There were confirmed to be more cases of the new Ebola strain, in Chad as well as Nigeria.

How much of this was his fault? He had never expected...but if he hadn't brought the former Avengers to Wakanda, this whole sequence of events could not have taken place.

He'd confided in Shuri, M'Baku, and W'Kabi, following Everett Ross' advice to find counsel.

They'd told him plainly, as Stark had, that he had been an idiot.

But that said--and only once, each--they did say that he couldn't blame himself for all of this.

They'd been researching ways to try to help their neighbors.

It was Ramonda, however, who asked a key question.

"If the reason this virus will not be tamed is the 'Super-Soldier Serum' developed by Abraham Erskine...why have we not asked the Winter Soldier to assist?"

* * *

"He's ready, your Majesty."

He glanced at the doctor who'd spoken. "Begin the revival process," he confirmed.

The frost on the glass pane of James Barnes' cryochamber began to melt, thin trails of silvery liquid dripping onto the tiles.

Watching, T'Challa held his breath as the sound of a heartbeat began to grow louder, and steadier, within the chamber.

Okoye stood at his right hand, M'Baku on his left. Weapons in hand, they waited for the former Winter Soldier to open his eyes.

* * *

He couldn't move his arms or legs more than a couple of inches.

The manacles held firm despite his best efforts.

Nobody would speak to him, even the doctors and nurses who came in. They avoided eye contact.

A Dr. Bradley had been there the morning his fever broke. Steve couldn't remember everything they'd discussed.

He'd asked after Sharon and the Avengers.

Bradley's answers sent him into a rage, though he barely had the strength to raise his voice, let alone fight back.

Sharon? A HYDRA agent?

Did they really expect him to believe that?

How blind did they think he was?

They wouldn't let him go free of the restraints, wouldn't allow him a phone, no visitors...He'd demanded to speak to Rhodes or Stark, only to be ignored.

And they expected him to buy that these were the good guys?

Really, now.

But he wasn't beaten yet.

He'd prove it, before much longer.

He coughed once, twice, feeling his chest burn.

The IV in his arm made the muscles ache. He glared at it.

* * *

"What's the verdict?" asked Rhodes. He had his phone to his ear. The office had been put to rights quickly after Rogers' break-in.

Hansen had some choice, almost-insubordinate comments on the subject of 'playing Lone Ranger when half the Air Force would be honored to watch your back, sir, and the other half wouldn't do it only because they're outta town," pointed glare accompanying the words.

"The antiserum is beginning to show effects. He's lost muscle mass, and his nurses report symptoms of asthma, so the 'super-healing' has been reduced along with strength." Betty's voice was cheerful.

"How'd he take it?"

A pause. She finally answered, *"He doesn't seem to perceive that the changes have taken place. He doesn't...react to what's going on around him, not as he should. If he were anyone else I'd think we were seeing early dementia or Alzheimer's symptoms."*

"Huh. That...makes a weird kind of sense. I mean, chronologically he's in his nineties, and..."

"Point." She conceded.

"All we can do is do our best. Sometimes that means scrap the original plan and start over. Speaking of which, you ready for your first official meeting with the Accords Council?"

" 'I was born ready.' "

Chapter 20

Betty looked over the sheaf of papers Rhodey had given her one last time, before she dug a pen out of her pocket and signed her name to the last page.

"Paperwork still makes the world go 'round, huh?" She pushed the Accords contract across his desk. He picked it up and added it to a folder with her call sign on it. Tony was still enjoying the 'Rubble' nickname he'd given her, but she'd decided to take Oskar's suggestion of 'Sabre' for her official 'code name' as an Avenger.

"Or coffee does, if you ask Tony," Rhodes replied. He checked his watch. "Time to move out. I'll suit up and fly ahead, meet you at the UN building."

"Got it." She smiled at him before she left him to his preparations.

Her father wouldn't be present at this Accords meeting, thanks to a couple of subtle delaying tactics by Tony and Jim. He'd know as soon as he read the minutes that she was one of the New Avengers, but they'd be ready for him by the time he did...because Rhodes also meant to discuss her father's past illegal activities with the President later today. *That* meeting would be only the two of them.

She wasn't sure if she was sorry she wouldn't be there, or relieved.

The Accords Panel members who represented Russia, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Nigeria would be in attendance. Betty had changed into a suit of light, non-powered armor that Tony had helped her design, and brought a few weapons with her. She, Tony, Vision, and Rhodes were presently the team roster. Spider-Man, as a minor, was not eligible, and Tony seemed absolutely determined to keep the other hero out of the spotlight.

"I still think it'd look cooler if we all flew in." Tony pouted a little as they were escorted into the building.

"Cooler, and more aggressive," Betty replied. "The sort of thing the former Avengers would've done, no?"

"...point."

They all took seats at a long table. The Secretary General sat at the head, watching them impassively before he opened the meeting.

The Russian delegates included Yelena Belova. FRIDAY had shown them the video footage of her unexpected visit to the Tower. Rhodes had been even less amused than Tony, but he agreed that the woman's skills might be useful *if* she was as good a fighter as Natasha Romanoff. He was reserving judgment.

Betty was introduced as a new Avenger and signer of the Accords. She noticed Belova regarding her curiously, but she didn't make eye contact with the Widow. *Nope, you deal with*

Jim first, little miss I'm-so-sneaky. You don't get to use me as a way to get around him, either.

"We received your briefing as regards Mr. Rogers' status," the SG said. " Germany has agreed to waive bringing criminal charges against him for his activities at Leipzig, however he and his associates will be permanently banned from reentering the country. "

"And from ours," the Nigerian representative added sharply. Anger, and grief, flashed across her face. "They've escaped consequences of their actions long enough."

"I'm not certain if they're continuing to escape anything," Rhodes said quietly. "It's been several days, and at last record, Rogers' associates had all been exposed to a disease that's already killed Samuel Wilson and left Steve Rogers permanently incapacitated. With no sign of them."

He let that sink in. "If they resurface, yes, they need to answer for the crimes they committed. And they will. For now, I think the best thing for everyone is to look to the future. The Avengers Initiative can still be a force for good, to serve and defend. "

He lifted his head, looking pointedly at the Black Widow seated across from them. "We want to rebuild, under the Accords terms."

"Only four of you?" the SG questioned.

Belova cleared her throat. He glanced at her. She stood to respond. "Possibly more, Mr. Secretary. I am Enhanced, as a former Red Room graduate--and there are other potential candidates in Russia who might be assets to the Avengers Initiative. "

"After Romanoff's performance, why should we trust you?" Stark challenged. "She signed the blasted Accords, and then broke them barely half a day later when they became inconvenient."

"So I was informed," Yelena replied coolly. "That lack of commitment was among the reasons the Russian government stopped actively trying to regain custody of Natasha Romanoff. It was felt that the risks of trying to work with her again outweighed any possible advantages. As to trusting me as you did her, you shouldn't. However, you need fighters--and you need also to widen the Avengers' scope beyond their being a 'group of American vigilantes'. I can offer you a place to start, to help in your rebuilding."

* * *

Clint looked around a roomful of corpses, and back to the man standing over one of them.

Enhanced, he noted, seeing a cut on the man's neck stop bleeding and heal in only a few seconds. *If he's not another freaking alien...*

"Another?" The man's bushy eyebrows shot up.

Clint's hands tightened on his bow. "Don't tell me you're a fucking telepath too..."

"Nope. Just good ears. You were subvocalizing." The newcomer studied him. "That looks like SHIELD gear."

"I was. Once. Name's Clint."

"Logan. But while we're on the subject of telepaths...one of my team *is* psychic. He was the one who sent me out here. Said there was an Enhanced here who had shown up on his radar as needing some help against these assholes. You know anything about that?"

Chapter 21

Clint followed Logan back toward the holding area where he'd last spotted Wanda. The man moved in utter silence, and with the kind of body language that identified him as someone who'd been in a *lot* of fights. He was ready for anything that might get thrown at him.

It took a few minutes for Clint to realize that the odd feeling of 'pressure' within his skull wasn't just an incipient headache. He'd felt something like this before when he and the Witch were working together.

He stopped, watching the other man stalk down the corridor.

Care to introduce yourself? he thought loudly, making no attempt to hide his anger at the intrusion.

Professor Charles Xavier. And yes, I'm the psychic 'friend' Logan mentioned, Agent Barton. The voice was that of an older man, the tone coolly professional.

So how'd you and he get YOUR powers? Mind Stone induced too?

No. The ability's one I was born with, as are Logan's gifts.

Pity there's no way to send 'em back, Clint thought uncharitably. *Right. If you have questions, ask me instead of poking around. I don't care if you say you don't mean me any harm, I've heard that tune once too often. NOT a fan.*

Whatever Xavier might have said in reply, the conversation was cut off by the sound of screams--and a flood of reddish light filling the hallway. *Shit!*

Clint hurried to catch up to Logan.

"Wanda!" he shouted.

She straightened up from where she was crouching over ...well, it looked like a lab tech's body, or what was left of it. Blood and bits of gray matter were splattered across the walls. She looked up at him, and Clint went cold inside. There was nothing sane in that gaze. No hint of recognition, either.

"Drugged," Logan said tightly. "She's not hearing you. Just white noise." He took a step toward her, reaching out.

"Don't!" Clint warned. "She's infected--"

"So are you," Logan said, not glancing back at him, "and I'm thinkin' it wasn't unintentional that you didn't warn me before now. But whatever. You're coming with us, and so is she. Chuck, can you hold her?"

The red glow disappeared as if someone had flicked an 'off' switch. *Yes. Bring her to the jet.* Logan lifted Wanda easily, carrying her bridal style out of the now-empty lab. Clint fell in

behind them.

* * *

"Sergeant, do you know where you are?"

Bucky rubbed at his eyes. The overhead lights were almost blinding. He was lying on a gurney, heated blankets wrapped around him. That was a pleasant change from the few memories he had of being revived by HYDRA. "Still in Birnin Zana, I hope," he rasped, gazing up at T'Challa.

"Yes, you are. You've been in cryostasis five weeks and two days," a white-coated older man told him. He reached out carefully toward Bucky's arm. Seeing the equipment he held, Bucky slid his arm free to allow the man to check his vitals.

He frowned as his vision cleared, and he got a closer look at the young King and then his General. Okoye, he thought that was her name. They were both visibly tired and stressed... There was no sign of Steve or any of the Avengers.

He sat up, despite still feeling cold and shaky. That was normal for being defrosted; it'd pass soon enough. "What's happened?"

"We have not yet been able to disable or erase HYDRA's programming," T'Challa told him, "I ask forgiveness for waking you without that, but we need your help."

"Nothin' to forgive, " Bucky told him. He smiled faintly. "Though if you want a gun hand, that may take some improv. "

He listened attentively, as Okoye gave him a terse report of the last several days. They showed him reports of patients affected by the virus, and he grimaced at one snapshot of a white sheet being draped over a body that was much, much too small...*Yeah. Safest hands are our own? Bullshit, Avengers.* "Neither Rogers nor I got sick after the serums... though I don't heal as fast as he did. Still faster than someone without it. If you think my blood will help, I'm in. "

"You call him Rogers now? Not Steve?"

"He's changed. So have I. Don't know that either of us is the man those names--Steve, or Bucky--belonged to. "

* * *

The Avengers returned to the Tower late in the afternoon, tired but happy. Overall it had been a good day, a nice change of pace from recent events.

They'd agreed to seriously consider Yelena's offer and give her an answer within the week. She'd accepted that with equanimity.

Just for tonight, by mutual agreement *after* the Accords meeting ended, they were taking time 'off duty'. Vision had volunteered to cook a meal for them.

They had decided on a supper and gaming night. Betty had never played chess, but Tony and

Rhodes both had, and offered to teach her and Vision the basics.

Oskar spoke up in Rhodes' ear as they reached the entrance. *"Rhodes, you said no official queries from any media or government officials...but you didn't specify if other 'defenders' should also be unanswered."*

"Other...?"

"

Spider-Man called earlier. He asks if he can come to the Tower to speak with you. He states that it's not an emergency, but that he has something he needs to ask you about. Miss Potts also called and left a message. FRIDAY introduced us. She asked to relay that she'll be here tomorrow for the team's press conference."

"Ooops. Okay, thanks, Oskar. Please let Spider-Man know that the door's open whenever he needs to come by. I'll call Pepper back in a few minutes."

Rhodes' stomach growled.

"I think that's my cue," a sweet voice piped up from behind them.

"Mama Rhodes!" Tony turned, and swept the woman into a delighted hug. "When'd you get here?"

Chapter 22

They brought Mama Rhodes upstairs, introducing her to Oskar and FRIDAY. She was warmly delighted and curious, asking a number of questions. She laughed over Rhodes's referring to Tony as "Nuncle" when Rhodes showed her the video record of his activation.

"Well. I thought I'd come see how my boys were doing, and if you needed a hand with anything. I remember what happened the last time Tony tried to bake," she teased.

"Vision's in charge of kitchen duty tonight," Tony told her, sticking out his tongue.

"Reporting for duty, chef," Mama Rhodes said, turning to Vision. "How can I help?"

Betty, Tony, and Vision gathered in the kitchen/dining area, Tony chopping vegetables and Betty setting the table while Vision and Mama Rhodes began working on a recipe for chili.

"Now, here's where measurement's not quite as useful as trusting your senses," Mama told Vision as she gathered spices. "And experience over 'book learning'. I've been teaching a cooking class at Adult Ed in DC, for some folks who just immigrated and aren't used to American cuisine. Hands on is always best, I find. "

"Mama's multilingual," Tony added proudly from where he was reducing a tomato to neat chunks. "French, Italian, Arabic, and Russian. "

"I'm working on Egyptian now," Mama said. "It's a little like Tony's itch to invent things, I get stressed if I don't keep my mind occupied. Do you ever experience that, Vision? Oskar, FRIDAY?"

Vision considered. "Not as you seem to mean it, but I don't...need to sleep, and information's always within immediate reach. Mental stimulation isn't hard to come by."

"*Looking out for Boss and Stark Industries is a full-time job,*" FRIDAY replied, a little sassy. Tony smirked.

"*Perhaps? Rhodes has me do research too, and he likes games. I think I prefer Trivial Pursuit to chess, there's more subjects to learn about. Is...would you find a personal question acceptable, Mrs. Rhodes?*"

"Mama, Oskar, " she corrected kindly but with firmness. "What question?"

"*How do you define 'evil'?*"

"Ooh, my. " Mama Rhodes sobered, putting down the grater she held. "You don't ask easy questions, do you? No, it's all right that you asked, but I need a little while to think how to fit that into words."

* * *

Rhodes went up to his Tower suite alone, and dialed Pepper's number. She answered

promptly.

"So, are you ready for your first official press conference as the Avengers' leader?"

"Swimming with hungry sharks? And I don't even get to eat seafood afterward. Sure, sounds like fun," he jibed.

"Stark Legal is going over the basic Avengers organizational structure you sent, to double and triple-check for any legal challenges it might face. I see you've designated Vision as your second-in-command ? "

"I'd discussed this with him and Tony. Tony doesn't want the job. I think he'd step up if he had to, but so long as there's other options, he'd prefer not. Politically, too, we're trying to shift the Avengers' public image away from 'old white boys club in charge'. And to establish a precedent for treating non-human, sentient beings as people with rights and responsibilities under the law. "

" Oh, I see! All right...PR should meet with Vision, too, sometime. He's been rather out of the spotlight. "

Rhodey snickered.

"Hm?"

"Oh...I'm just imagining him with O'Reilly or some other talk show hosts."

True. So, Betty Ross is the 'token female member'?"

"We're working on doing something about that, too...but more on that later, 'k?"

Sure. Um, something else I need to discuss with you--it's under control, but just so nobody blindsides you with it tomorrow."

"What's up?"

"Natasha Romanoff was caught trying to board a plane in Tel Aviv. Their police apprehended her. She's in Israeli custody at the moment. "

Rhodey did a fist pump in the air. "Yes!" he hissed.

"Do you know, she actually had the nerve to tell them to contact Tony Stark for her legal representation?"

"..."

"....*&\$@@@..."

" !!!!!!"

"Oh, I wish I could see your face right now. Not to mention hers. Remember I called 'dibs'."

"..."

"Rhodey? Oskar, is he okay?"

"Understood. I'm all right, Pepper. She's all yours. Let me know if you need help concealing any bodies...Crap. I've got an incoming call, I should take it."

"I will. G'night, brother."

click

"Rhodes here...yes, Dr. Bradley? What's...I didn't send any such team--Bradley? Bradley!"

distant sounds of gunfire from the other end

**A harsh whisper* "Hail Hydra."*

dial tone

Rhodey called the War Machine armor before he even put the phone down. "Oskar, tell Vision and Sabre to meet me at the landing pad in five," he barked. "Bradley's clinic is under attack."

"They're en route. " A pause. " Rhodes, Spider-Man is at the front door. Shall I direct him to join you as well?"

Rhodes thought quickly, but shook his head. "No, but ask him to come up. I'd like him here with Tony in case anything else goes wrong. "

The armor finished wrapping around him, and he took off. Oskar threw open the skylight overhead to let him through.

Chapter 23

Rhodes touched down on the clinic's roof, Vision a second or two behind him with Sabre. Either of the men could have carried her, but Vision didn't need his hands free to defend himself.

The building was dark, and absolutely silent. A chilly breeze wafted the stench of cordite and burned flesh up to them. He switched the armor's visual mode to infrared, peering down through a skylight. No heat signatures in the room immediately below them, or the two that were adjacent...

He cut through the skylight's panes with a hand laser, opting to go in stealthily despite the place's seeming emptiness.

"*Got your six*," Vision whispered through the com. Beside him, Sabre drew her sidearm from its holster, nodding agreement.

They made their way to the main laboratory suite, finding nobody... and then, he almost stumbled over Richard Bradley's remains.

He swore and caught himself; checked for a pulse. Nothing.

There were two other white-coated bodies on the far side of the room. Sabre gestured toward an empty hospital bed. "*That was where they had Rogers most of the time.*"

A raspy sound caught their attention. Rhodes moved toward what appeared to be a desk, where a cell phone was blinking. Voices issued from it. Bradley, talking to *him*, demanding to know 'what is the meaning of this intrusion'...

A recording.

Vision was bending over the doctor, his expression baffled. "This isn't right..."

"What is it?" Sabre asked, glancing around the room every few seconds warily.

"The doctor's body is in rigor mortis...He is stiff, and blood has begun to pool in his extremities. That occurs typically several hours after death, not immediately..."

"But he just--" Sabre froze as realization struck her--and Rhodes, judging by his expression as he whirled toward them.

"Tony," he whispered. "We left--"

"Go, go! We'll be right behind you."

War Machine flung himself skyward, rocketing back to the Tower.

* * *

Spider-Man seemed nervous, when introduced to Mama Rhodes, but he quickly recovered on meeting the AIs. He chatted animatedly with FRIDAY. Oskar was quieter, though friendly. Tony led the young man down to his workshop for a 'brief' tour. They were holding dinner until the "Three Musketeers" returned.

She sipped at her coffee, pondering Oskar's question. "Evil. Well, there was a time when people would have considered it 'evil' for a woman to give orders to men, or at least unnatural. And times in history when it was acceptable, even thought of as serving the greater good, for people of color to be bought and sold like pets. So to a degree, what one considers 'evil' is subjective," she commented aloud.

"Many of the public forums I've studied insist that killing is evil..."

"Which has to seem at odds with what James does for a living, somewhat?" she deduced.

"I know he cares deeply for others and he is honest...even when his speaking bluntly offends them." Oskar sounded hesitant.

"That's always been a trait of his; if you ask for the truth, you'll get it, unless he's facing you on a battlefield. Now killing...The trouble is that there are people who don't have any problem with it whatsoever. If you're facing down somebody who wants to hurt you, or your family, and they won't stop of their own volition...Sometimes it's the only choice left. If you try to get an opponent to stand down, and they keep refusing...Every choice has consequences. I'd rather not see an innocent civilian or bystander, or one of my family, be the one to pay for someone else's hate or greed."

Obadiah Stane's face crossed her mind's eye for a second, and she grimaced. "For me, evil is about how you see people. Do you treat them with respect, and compassion, or draw a line and say 'you're not like me, so your wellbeing or rights don't matter as much' ? James doesn't fight to hurt people, but to keep the unprotected from harm. "

The overhead lights flickered. She frowned, and noticed for the first time that the a/c seemed to be turned off. "Oskar, is everything all right?"

"

Security protocols needed my attention. Sorry, Mama."

His voice sounded staticky, like a bad cell phone connection. *"Need more space..."*

"What? Why?"

"There are several unidentified individuals attempting to gain access to the Tower via the west gate and the sewer access in the basement. My access to com frequencies and cell phone usage is being interfered with, unable to contact local law enforcement. Rhodes is incommunicado."

"TONY!" She dashed down the hall, a second before alarms began to sound.

"The Tower premises have been breached," FRIDAY's voice came over the PA system. "Security level two lockdown in progress. Mrs. Rhodes, please continue to Boss' workshop as it is the nearest saferoom. Ms. Potts, continue to the thirteenth floor. War Machine and the Avengers are en route; comm transmissions are jammed, but GPS in the War Machine armor indicates ETA of six point two minutes."

She reached the workshop doors a moment later, hurrying at an undignified pace. A grim-faced Tony was staring at a monitor. Spider-Man stood just behind him, none of the 'friendly teenager' mannerisms evident in his stance.

"Two teams of eight. HYDRA standard issue armor--oh, lovely, they've brought party favors. Trunks. Looking to take hostages...yeah, no, not playing that game. Kid, stay here with--"

"Absolutely not, " Jeanne Rhodes was having none of that, "you are NOT taking them on alone, Anthony Edward Stark! James is on his way back, we just need to hold here for a few minutes."

Tony started to argue, but then something else on the surveillance cameras caught his attention. He smiled tightly. "Seems we've got backup already."

A slender figure in dark clothing stepped up behind one of the intruders, catching a man's neck and twisting it savagely. Bones snapped. His head lolled to the side, eyes glazing over.

Yelena dropped the man onto the floor, turning to face his teammates.

Iron Man laughed coldly. "Now who's trapped in here with whom?"

Chapter 24

A team of eight had originally been dispatched, the plan being to have two operatives for each of the four known Avengers.

Belova had already cut their numbers down to six. Her long blond hair was matted with blood, none of it hers.

An incoming whine of repulsors was all the warning HYDRA got before War Machine joined the fray, followed not long after by Iron Man.

Five left.

Four.

Three--

None of the Avengers offered a chance to surrender.

One of the STRIKE agents cursed and tried to bolt back the way they'd come.

He found himself lying on the ground, arms and legs gone dead. What--

"Spiders bite, Rollins," Yelena whispered in his ear, before cutting his throat.

"And then there was one," Tony sang out. "Want to come quietly? Or at least live to next week?"

The operative stared at him, and raised an empty hand as if in surrender--

Only to find herself tangled up, head to toe, in what appeared to be a giant spider web.

"And then, none," Spider-Man said, sounding faintly nauseated, looking around.

Yelena smiled at him; turned to War Machine. "Well fought."

"The same to you. Is any of that yours?"

"Mm, too little to matter. I heal fast."

"I see. Any other secrets up your sleeve?"

She laughed. "Always, Rhodes."

"Fair enough--Peter, no!"

Spider-Man had been reaching toward one of the bodies, as if to check the man's pulse.

"Spider-Man, remember that super-bug that's floating around?" Iron Man said tightly. "Let me or War Machine deal with them."

"I probably can't get sick--"

"This isn't a casino. We're not about playing the odds. Step. Back," Rhodes told him.

Spider-Man obeyed, grumbling to himself.

"What about her, then?"

"Yelena--"

"I have been exposed to Ebola previously and recovered. But if you wish me to enter quarantine, I will. " She shrugged.

"Likely that's safest," Sabre agreed from the doorway. She glanced about. "Huh. Nice work."

"FRIDAY, add Miss Belova's name and voiceprint to the list of authorized Tower residents, please," Rhodes said after exchanging a quick look with the rest of the Avengers. Vision hovered behind Sabre. Tony nodded, giving his assent, as did they.

"At what level clearance?"

"Avenger. "

They took Yelena up to the Infirmary. She told Rhodes that she'd been investigating reports of a possible Hydra base west of NYC. Her intel also implied very strongly that their interest in Rogers was more about the Ebola strain he carried, than the super-soldier himself. "Other known Hydra bases in Africa have gone dark since this started. They need a cure as much as we do, I suspect."

Tony snickered. "Yeah, my heart's just breaking about that."

interval pt 1--Yelena

Yelena stayed at the Tower, rather than returning to the Embassy or any of the safehouses they had in the area. Rhodes had insisted, politely, but she suspected that the conversation wouldn't have stayed polite for long if she'd tried to go. The Americans wouldn't want a possible carrier of the 'Ebola Birnin', as authorities were starting to call it, wandering around on her own. Immunity didn't mean she couldn't infect others.

Trust would take time to grow between them. She hadn't expected otherwise. She'd worked as part of a team before, usually as a subordinate or behind the scenes rather than in the leadership position--though she had headed up a few operations back home. So she hadn't challenged Rhodes' orders, or his right to give them. That was no way to build an alliance of any kind.

The suite they'd assigned to her on an empty floor was quite luxurious by comparison with what she was used to in the field. She spoke to the AI, FRIDAY, and asked if clean clothes could be obtained. She was longing for a shower.

"Boss and Colonel Rhodes both say to deliver anything you request, within reason, though if you ask for weapons or any illegal goods, I'm to inform them."

"Of course."

A bundle of basic clothes in her size were left at the door only a short time later. The box also held towels, body wash, and other toiletries. She pondered that as she took supplies into the lavatory. The AI programs she'd seen before could do an amazing imitation of a live human, but they didn't take the initiative even in small details. Clearly Stark-created AIs were much more sophisticated, verging on sentience if not already there.

She tucked that detail away. It was speculation on her part, not something she'd mention even to her superiors yet...but she would keep it in mind.

A hot, indulgent shower later, she sat on a couch curled up in a bathrobe, watching the TV. She'd sleep for a bit, but not long. She wanted to watch the team's press conference in the morning.

Her cell phone buzzed. She glanced down before answering the call. "Malinov?"

"You aren't returning to base tonight?"

"No. My teammates requested I stay for medical observation. We had a rather unfriendly visit from HYDRA. Things got messy."

"I would have expected so. Any survivors among them?"

"Unfortunately, no. We tried, but they opted for suicide over capture."

She lied smoothly, as always.

"Your bloodwork does indicate your prior immunity might mitigate effects of a Birnin exposure, if not protect you outright."

She didn't reply immediately.

"Rhodes isn't willing to risk it, I assume?"

"Oh, he would if it were only himself at risk, I think, or me--this is the nature of our job. But there's others to be considered. He won't risk civilians if it can be helped. I'm being treated well enough, and I think I'm needed here."

"Very well. Do you want your weapons chest? The one in your quarters? We can have it couriered to you."

"After the seventy-two hour has elapsed. Not until then. "

"Understood."

She ended the call.

Interval pt 2 --Steve

"How is he responding to the regenera serum?"

"Stable so far. No allergic reaction. Blood production increased by 30 percent. Enough for us to draw 2 or 3 units safely for study. Immune response continues to be suboptimal, however. This virus has adapted as well, the serum isn't coping any better than the Erskine variant did."

Who is that?

Dr. Bradley? No...

Why can't I see, or move?

Why can't I feel my arms or legs?

"Is there any word from the base in Manhattan?"

"The survivors have been quarantined for treatment." "

"Yrrr...wha..."

"He's regaining consciousness again."

"Mila ordered it. She wants him to undergo mnemonic reprogramming. We've lost several good agents, time to capitalize on available resources."

"Poetic justice. He did cost us Carter and the others, after all."

"Hail Hydra."

Interval pt 3--Westchester

The two men strapped Wanda into a bunk aboard their jet before taking off. Xavier seemed confident that he could keep her under 'sedation' as long as necessary.

He and Logan asked Clint a number of searching questions about her abilities as well as the disease.

Logan was distinctly unimpressed by the answers. "We need to have them both deconned before they go into the building," he said, looking at the older man. "Or take them to Stark Tower. It's not that much longer a flight. And less...risky for everyone else."

"That would require explaining our own ...unique circumstances to the Avengers. They're in an upheaval of sorts as it is. I'm not altogether convinced that now's the best time to make ourselves known to the public, and the UN's involvement with them would make secrecy difficult."

Logan took a puff off his cigar, mulling that over. "Point. But--"

"I know. I suspect that the Avengers may not yet have the means to contain her if necessary. And I don't mean to house her in the school buildings. We'll use the underground areas and seal them off. Hank's already setting up decontamination procedures. "

"Is she one of ours?"

"No. Artificial mutate, not an x-gene carrier. "

"What the hell is the x-gene?" Clint interjected.

The paraplegic gave him a long stare. "I suppose it can't hurt for you to know. For now."

Clint started to ask another question, but was interrupted by a painful coughing fit. He bent over, both hands pressed to his mouth.

"Xavier--"

"Put him under, too. " The Professor sounded resigned, though Clint caught a flash of concern in the man's eyes.

He snarled at a jab to the back of his neck, rounding on Logan. The Canadian smirked unapologetically as he dropped an empty syringe to the floor.

Clint barely had time to say a single word before the sedative dragged him down into the black.

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