

Chapter 6 – Growing Company

“Mr. President,” Tony greeted as the screen in front of him filled with the face of Matthew Ellis.

“Mr. Stark,” the president returned, but something in his voice was different. Tony was used to Ellis greeting him dryly, as was their tradition. But today, the man greeted him warmly with a comfortable smile.

Slightly confused, Tony asked, “Is there anything I can help you with, sir?”

The man shook his head, his face losing its smile and adopting a frown and pained look. “I wish to apologize on behalf of the US government for the trouble caused to you by former Secretary Ross. You also have our deepest condolences for the events in Siberia.”

Ah, the formal apology. That made sense. Ellis probably didn’t want Tony to say something that would cost him the coming election, and with his new hard stance against Rogers and his band, Ellis actually had a good chance to win.

But then the man’s face turned genuinely regretful. His eyes were cast down, and his eyebrows tightened in a frown as he spoke with genuine emotion. “May I speak personally, Mr. Stark?”

Tony was surprised by that but had a good feeling. Deciding to take his chances, Tony gave a gentle nod before commenting, “Then you might as well call me Tony, sir. Never liked the ‘Mr. Stark’ thing.”

With a small twitch at the end of his lips, Ellis spoke, true remorse coloring each word. “I owe you an apology, Tony. You saved my life during the Mandarin incident, and all I’ve given you since then is a cold attitude.”

Tony blinked twice. He never really paid it attention before, but now that he thought about it, it was weird that he saved the life of the president and never received an award, while a couple of years before that, he received one for stopping Vanko and Hammer from running amok.

Tony could think of one difference that could cause that. "Let me guess, Rogers."

The man nodded shamefully. "It's not a secret I was a big fan of Captain America. I hoped that with my new status as president and his status as leader of the Avengers, I would meet him often, but I got to meet him very rarely. The first time was right after your defeat of Killian. Cap... Mr. Rogers's opinion of you was... low. And I'm ashamed to admit I allowed it to color my own."

Tony tilted his head to the side and asked, "Not anymore?"

Ellis snorted. "I think we all know Rogers is not the Captain America from the stories. I made a mistake, and I hope we can move past it and work together, Tony."

Tony was starting to think that was the damn theme of the night. First Lang, then Sharon, and now this. But still, Tony was used to working with people he didn't like and who didn't like him to reach an important end goal. Although this felt different. Ellis actually looked like he respected him now.

With a genuine smile, Tony snarked, "Well, doesn't it sound like the beginning of a wonderful partnership?"

The tension in Ellis's face significantly eased. He gave Tony a small smile before speaking. "Well then, you might as well call me Matthew in private conversations." Tony gave him an encouraging nod, and the president spoke again. "Maybe you can help me solve all these problems Rogers and Ross created for me."

Tony snorted and leaned back in his chair. “Lay it on me.”

Matthew leaned back in his own chair before going through some of the paperwork on his table. He looked back at Tony with an exasperated sigh. “Well, I need to appoint both a Secretary of State and a representative for the Accord Council. And then we have the Avengers problem as well as SHIELD.”

Tony closed his eyes for a moment. He was already on the ball with the New Avengers program. SHIELD was more of Phil’s and Nick’s thing, but he did have an idea that would make life easier for them. He didn’t mention it until now because it would require the support of the president, which he has now. And the two positions he needed to fill could be handled in the same breath as helping rebuild SHIELD.

Tony leaned forward with a big smile and said, “I can solve three of your problems with one hit. And about the New Avengers program... Well, I’m working on it. We already have the leaders, and I have a few candidates that I wish to approach soon.”

Matthew leaned in too and said eagerly, “I am listening.”

It didn’t take long for Tony to lay out his entire plan.

It took longer for the president to call in his staff, consult with them, and make another quick phone call to see if the other players in the plan were all game.

Soon enough, Matthew’s attention was back fully on him. A huge smile was on his face as he spoke. “I owe you another one, Tony. This plan works perfectly. It will take about a week for everything to be in place. Will you be ready for a conference then?”

Tony mentally did the math. Rhodey would be back on his feet by tomorrow evening, and he and Carol would take the load off of him. Nick and Phil would deal with his plan for SHIELD. Freeing Tony himself to do some recruitment and work on his plans with Hope.

Tony gave the president a smirk and said, "A week works for me."

After a quick farewell between the two men, Tony could relax again.

He gave a bitter laugh and said, "I feel like I almost should thank Rogers. Things seem to be falling into place finally."

"I agree with the second sentiment while resenting the first, Boss," replied Friday's candid voice.

Tony sent a smile to the nearest camera; his baby girl has a mean streak sometimes.

Tony opened his mouth to say something when Friday's confused and slightly dismayed voice announced, "You have a call from an unknown caller."

Both Tony's eyebrows jumped up.

Friday has access to programs developed by SHIELD and the CIA to identify any number on the face of the planet, no matter how secure it is. And even if those programs failed, her hacking skills should get her the info in no time.

Finally, a short static voice came from the speakers. Tony recognized it as a sigh from his AI.

He guessed she finally knows who is calling. But still, it's very impressive that it took her so long to figure it out. "The call comes from the Wakandan royal palace," Fri said, very annoyed. Probably because she had to work so hard to figure it out. Millennials, what can you do?

"Accept, baby girl," Tony said. He was curious to see what T'Challa would say. At the same time, he began wondering if he would get any sleep tonight. He still needed to work in his lab once he managed to escape this office.

Tony decided to have the first words in, so even before T'Challa's face finished filling his screen, Tony spoke. "Hello there, your pantherness."

T'Challa looked a little taken aback that Tony could recognize him before the video finished loading. He heard a female voice snickering outside the frame.

The Wakandan king sent a small glare in the direction of the voice before his face became clean of any emotion, and he turned back toward Tony. His voice was as emotionless as his face when the king spoke. "Mr. Stark, I'm glad you accepted my call."

Tony's eyes narrowed at the king. It was obvious the man was trying to recover his pride after having his surprise attempt ruined. Tony wasn't going to let it go; it was time to take this man down another peg. "Grown bored of talking to your American guests, did we? Can't really blame you, they are a delusional bunch. I speak from experience." Tony casually commented and enjoyed what came next.

The king's eyes flew wide open, as well as his jaw. His eyebrows climbed to his hairline, and he looked like he was a moment from fainting.

T'Challa's jaw kept moving up and down, trying to regain the ability to talk. Eventually, he managed to choke out, "H- how?"

Tony aimed his sharpest smirk at him and gave a dismissive shrug. “Same hacker that found out this is your number. Friday.”

The young king scowled and looked to the side, probably trying to figure out who Friday is.

But then the voice that snickered before spoke excitedly, “That’s your AI, right?” The voice was female, and it had the same accent as T’Challa. Soon a young teenager, probably the same age as Cooper, stepped into the frame.

Tony kept his sharp smirk and responded with a simple, “You know it. Princess Shuri, I presume.”

The young woman simply nodded in acknowledgment before returning to speak about his AI, full of wonder. “Can I meet her? How did she manage to hack through my firewalls so fast?”

Tony gave a small nod to one of the cameras in his office. A moment later, Friday’s smug response came through the call. “A pleasure meeting you, Princess Shuri. And to answer your inquiry; it’s quite simple. I didn’t have to deal with your firewalls.”

Shuri’s eyes stayed wide in wonder as she mumbled something about emotions and years ahead of her. Her eyebrows frowned, and she asked indignantly, “What do you mean no firewalls? Then how did you get into the system?”

“I have an in.” His AI replied, still smug and cryptic. Yep, she is definitely his.

Shuri’s frown deepened even further, her eyes narrowed in consideration as she wondered aloud, “What possible in can you...” The princess cut herself off. Her eyes opened wide again, and her lips stretched into a smile before she exclaimed, “The jet the assholes came with!”

Tony just kept smirking without responding.

Shuri threw her head back and began laughing loudly. “Ingenious,” she managed to get out between laughs.

T’Challa, on the other hand, didn’t look amused at all. Quite the opposite. He was glaring at his sister and asked quite rudely, “Why didn’t you think about that?”

Shuri stopped laughing immediately. She glared back at the king and bit out in their native tongue, “I was not aware it is my job to cover your ass every time you make a mistake.”

Lucky for Tony, he had a genius AI that translated the words to him in the form of subtitles. Now he was feeling like he was watching a movie. T’Challa’s forehead deepened even further when he responded, “It is not a mistake to repay a debt. Sergeant Barnes was innocent...”

Tony could practically feel his eyes glowing again, fire flowing in his veins. His hands tightened around the armrests of the chair, and he snarled, “Of killing your father. But not mine or my mother.”

Both royals’ heads turned sharply to him, both with wide eyes and dropped jaws. He wasn’t sure what surprised them more: the fact he understood their language, his tone, or his glowing eyes.

Tony used the silence to take a deep, calming breath. He could feel his blood cooling down and assumed his eyes weren’t glowing anymore. Then in a calmer but still angry tone, Tony spoke, “And mine weren’t the only ones he killed. There are hundreds of families that deserve a closure after all those years.”

T'Challa was obviously still occupied by whatever surprised him to a shocked state moments before, but still, he managed to reply weakly, "Surely Hydra is the one to blame, not the Sergeant."

"It's not for you or Rogers to decide!" Tony snapped. Another breath later, he said calmly, "That's why we have a justice system in place. Yes, he most probably will receive a not-guilty verdict. At least for his actions as the Winter Soldier; whatever he did during the past few weeks is another matter that once again should be discussed in a court of law."

"But my debt..." T'Challa tried again weakly.

Tony rolled his eyes. "If you feel you have a debt to him, you can pay for the best lawyer for him. Not protect him from justice and rob all the other victims of theirs."

Tony sighed and looked sympathetically at T'Challa. "Look, I get you are in the mindset of a noble warrior. This may work for the best when you were simply the Black Panther. But as king, you can't allow yourself to think like that. Your people should always come first."

The king was now glaring at him, and he hissed, "I do think of my countrymen."

Tony raised an unimpressed eyebrow. "Let's begin with the fact you are harboring the very people whom your father accused only a few weeks ago of killing eleven of the countrymen you profess to protect."

T'Challa paled when that was pointed out, but then Shuri glared at the king as well and hissed at him, "I told you the very same thing, brother. Maybe you will finally start to listen instead of sully father's legacy even further."

T'Challa looked like he was about to cry, but Tony wasn't finished yet. "Do you really believe yourself so superior that you think you can defy the will of the entire world around you?"

Tony watched as T'Challa inflated himself with self-importance. Time to burst the bubble, and Tony was about to do it with a smirk. "How long will your economy hold with no trade? I will also guess that after years of mining, you don't have much Vibranium left, and that was why your dad was set on opening your borders to the world. All we have to do is wait for you to run out, probably still in your lifetime, and then what do you think will happen? Most of the countries on your continent will be pretty pissed at you hiding away while they were enslaved. War, death, and eventually the end of Wakanda. That's what will wait for you once the world learns about you harboring international fugitives."

T'Challa was shaking. From anger or fear, Tony wasn't sure.

The king looked at his sister, who was pale and shaking as well. She looked him in the eyes and gave a firm nod, confirming everything Tony just predicted.

The young king dropped his face into his hands and moaned, "So am I to simply accept I brought the end of Wakanda thanks to my misjudgment?"

For once, the princess looked lost. She gave her brother a sorrowful look, and Tony wondered if they allowed themselves to mourn the recent death of their father.

Tony leaned back in his chair. He couldn't believe he was going to do it again, but Wakanda could prove to be a strong ally, both as a voice in the Accord Council and in many other areas.

He let out a heavy sigh. "You don't have to." T'Challa raised his face from his hands, looking at Tony confused. "Look, your pantherness, I much rather be your friend than an enemy."

Shuri actually looked excited at the prospect of being friends with him. Go figure. Meanwhile, T'Challa eyed him skeptically. "I believe the time of pretense came to an end."

You are obviously aware I was in Siberia and helped Captain Rogers escape while leaving you behind. So why would you be my friend?"

Shuri was again giving her brother a disgusted look before smirking at him and pointing out, "But who are you talking about, brother? Surely not our guests..." She managed to put so much venom into the word it surprised Tony. "...We have no Captain or Sergeant in Wakanda."

Tony couldn't stop himself from snickering. He really liked this one; she had not only a good mind but one hell of a spark.

T'Challa probably heard his snicker because he turned to Tony. Tony was surprised to see not heat in those eyes but despair and wariness.

Tony took pity on the man. He leaned forward and said calmly, "T'Challa, let me give you some advice. I never ran a country, but I was the CEO that turned his company into one of the most important ones on the entire planet. Delegation is key. I would have drowned in the work a long time ago if it wasn't for Pepper and Rhodey." Tony let out a soft smile at the memory.

He shook his head and gave the young king a hard stare. "You have a brilliant sister who could excel in any task you hand her." He noticed Shuri glowing from the praise in the corner of the frame. "A mother with years of political experience behind her already. Use those skills not for your advantage but for your people's."

T'Challa looked at Tony with a blank expression for a long moment before his entire face contorted into a mixture of pain and exhaustion. "Are you truly willing to forgive me?"

Tony shrugged, never one to be too good with emotion, so he went for a joke. "So far tonight, I am on a roll with three out of three. Why not go for four?"

T'Challa's expression became far more friendly and open. "Then I will gladly accept your offer of friendship, Mr. Stark," the man said in the warmest tone Tony had heard from the king yet.

"Please, Simba. If we are friends, then it's Tony. For you too, Princess," he replied, smirking, knowing the nickname would probably annoy the older Wakandan. Shuri, though, had a huge smile on her face.

Another thought came to Tony. "Tell me, Simba, what do you think about a partnership with Stark Industries?"

Before T'Challa could react to the name or the offer, a certain princess jumped forward. "Are you serious?! Of course we agree. Right, brother?" The last part was said with a side look at the young king.

T'Challa shook his head amusedly. "Are you offering trade, Tony? Because if so, I will gladly accept."

Tony smirked and leaned back. "I had something bigger in mind."

With two very curious looks aimed at him, Tony elaborated. "After Ultron, I studied the Vibranium from both Dad's shield and Vision's body. And I found a way to create artificial Vibranium, even to mass produce it. But I was hesitant for a few reasons. One of them is obviously Wakanda." Tony watched the jaws of the two Wakandan royals drop again. "What I'm offering is for a scientist from Wakanda to work alongside me to create technology with this Vibranium that will benefit the entire world, and in exchange, Wakanda will receive half the earnings from every tech with Vibranium in it."

T'Challa's eyes were wide, but he was frowning in thought.

Tony expected him to agree, of course. After all, Tony was offering to end their economic distress and dependency on a depleting natural resource while still enjoying the benefit of said resource.

T'Challa nodded to himself before speaking. "I will endorse your offer to the council. They will have to approve. Meanwhile, I shall send our representative who will work closely with you on behalf of Wakanda." T'Challa glanced at his sister to make his choice clear.

Said sister beamed before asking, "Are you serious, brother?"

T'Challa smiled at Shuri and said in a calm voice, "A wise friend advised me to delegate. And pointed out my sister was far more capable in most areas than me. You will do well, sister. Not just for Wakanda but for the world. Baba would have been proud." He then turned back to Tony and added, "I also believe I know who shall be Wakanda's representative on the council."

Tony smiled cheekily at T'Challa while imagining what a joy Queen Ramonda would be to deal with in those meetings.

Tony smiled at the princess and said casually, "Then I believe I will meet you at the tower in a few days, Hermione."

Shuri snorted at the nickname but nodded vigorously nonetheless.

T'Challa said, "I am sure the two of you will enjoy each other's company. In case you have not noticed, Tony, my sister is a fan of your work."

Said sister punched T'Challa's shoulder playfully while Tony kept laughing. The tension of the night was slowly leaving him.