The Long Road Back to Normal
by topdawg27

Summary

Set immediately after The Snap. Tony Stark's stuck on Titan, his friends turned to dust before his eyes. But he's still got Pepper, his girl Friday. She's not going to sit on Earth and wait for him to return.

An alternate story dealing with how the Avengers would avenge the fallen and defeat Thanos, with Pepper's evolution from Stark Industries CEO to the superhero Rescue.

Notes

One chapter a week because I have another fic to manage.
Visitors from the Stars

Location: Avengers Towers, New York

Day: A day after half of Earth's population turned to ash.

Pepper clenched her fists in anger at the holographic form of General Thaddeus Ross.

The General drawled in that smug, annoying tone of his, "I am afraid, Miss Potts, that finding Iron Man isn't a priority right now. We have other things on our plate."

She argued, "He is an Avenger and he risked his life to go into space to save Dr Strange. Don't you thi-"

"Exactly, Miss Potts." the General drawled. "Why didn't Mr Stark call in this ... this alien attack, when it happened? Not only did he engage the enemy, he took an unidentified human with him. The something called a..." he clicked his fingers, "What is his, hers name, now?"

She filled in, "Spiderman?"

"Yes! Another renegade superhero. This time, one who is aided and abetted by Iron Man. Woo hoo... you know..." he moved towards her, "Mr Stark thinks he's good at hiding. Well... he ain't. I know this here Spiderman, was connected to those incidents in Queens. The ones with that idiot man trying to steal alien tech... he had another silly name... the Vulture! And Iron Man was helping this Spiderthing deal with those events! Off the grid, I want to highlight!"

She gritted her teeth. "With all due respect, General, Spiderman was doing the best he could, to stop a dangerous criminal. And anyways, now isn't the time to discuss Spiderman!"

"Look, Miss Potts, I frankly don't give a damn for any of these superheroes. Mr Stark included."
“They were trying to save us!”

“Well, they didn't succeed, did they! What good was going up into space? How do you know, they all aren't dead anyways? What do you hope to find, up in space? To find a body in a tin can?”

Ross knows my deep, dark fear... Tears filled Pepper's eyes at the thought of Tony's mangled body lying on some distant planet.

Then she steeled herself. "I thought in the Army, no soldier is left behind. Especially those who risk their lives to save innocent beings. Can't you see? They tried, General? Even if they are dead, we need to get them home!"

Ross clenched his jaw. "No soldier is left behind, Miss Potts, but your rich-ass boyfriend isn't a soldier. Neither is that Spiderman or the weird so-called doctor, who was hiding one of the Infinity Stones on his person! And so they deserve no due from me or Earth's people!"

A cold anger filled her. "Fine, General. If Mr Stark does not deserve your due, then you do not deserve his. I shall terminate all ongoing research contracts between Stark Industries and the United Nations, including the ones on biochemical fuels as a replacement for fossil fuels."

The General started to sputter and she shouted into the mike. "AND he was my fiance!! Damn you!"

Then Pepper slammed her fist down hard on the hologram transmitter, ending the call. She sat down on the table and began to cry bitterly, anger and sadness filling her being.

"He's not worth their due!! Tony! Today when you need help, no one is willing to go into space for you... yet you went up there to save a man you didn't even know... and I know you did it, to take the fight away from Earth..."

Pepper raised her head, taking a deep breath. "What about Fury? Friday?" She yelled at the AI. "Can you contact Nick Fury?"

She heard the AI place a call, which disconnected. I am sorry, Miss Potts, the call cannot be made.
"Try Maria Hill."

Again the AI tried. Again with no luck.

Pepper nibbled on her lip in frustration. "I have to find Tony. Dead or alive. I have the resources to go into space but ... I do not know where or what to do. But in my heart, I know he is alive, I just need to ... I have to find him and bring him back. Somehow."

Miss Potts, there is a man who is a monk at the door, asking to see you. Shall I let him in?

She shook her head in confusion at Friday's statement. "A monk!"

Yes maam.

"No! No, Friday, I do not have the time or the patience to entertain strange monks."

Miss Potts, he says it is urgent. And that he is Dr Strange's colleague and that he knows where they are. He wishes to speak with you about getting them back.

She sat up quickly, rubbing her tear-stained cheeks. "He said what!" Her heart began to race with faint hope.

Pepper patted her hair down. "Friday, show him into the living room. I'm going to set a pot of tea to boil. Oh..." she suddenly remembered. "Also, send every ongoing and future research contract we have with the United Nations and the American Government, to my assistant Macy. And tell her to start sending termination notices. Apparently Earth's people do not owe Tony Stark any due. So we should honor this."

Pepper looked up at the clear blue skies. She and Wong were on the flat helipad atop the Avengers Tower, awaiting the people from the stars.
She looked sideways at the dignified rotund monk, clad in simple robes of dark brown, his eyes closed lightly, face serene. She hoped she looked so calm but knew she didn't.

_I hope they come with some news. I hope they can help us. I hope-

"Ma'am, I can hear your thoughts of worry in my head. You have every right to worry, but worry does not solve anything. Let us see what these space people have to say. Take a deep breath please."

The monk smiled gently at her and Pepper decided to obey. After all, the quiet man had already astonished her for the past hour, with his story.

Wong was a Master of the Mystic Arts of a group of magicians or holy beings, calling themselves the Kamar-Taj. He met Doctor Strange, when the doctor first joined the order and assisted him in his studies. Now Wong and Doctor Strange protected the New York Sanctum which was based within New York City.

He had helpfully explained to Pepper, the entire story of how he and Strange met Dr. Banner, about Thanos and the Stones, the fight in Queens with two of Thanos' Children and how one of the minions had kidnapped Dr. Strange.

Tony and Peter (she knew everything about the boy who was Spiderman, Tony would just not stop talking about him) had followed the minion, apparently called "Maw" onto a spacecraft bound for Thanos' home planet. She had seen the spacecraft and had called Tony but their connection had gotten cut off when it entered deep space.

Somehow, Strange had telepathically sent a message to Wong, from the stars, which Wong relayed to her. The message had filled her with hope and dread simultaneously.

It seemed Strange, Tony and Peter had teamed up with some space people, apparently called the Guardians of the Galaxy. And they made a plan to fight Thanos head-on, hoping to defeat him. Strange however, was openly skeptical of their plan. According to Wong, Strange could see into the future using the Time Stone and had seen that their plan would fail.

It had been on the tip of Pepper's tongue, to ask why they had gone through with the plan, if they had known it would fail but she knew it was pointless to think about that now. She just had to accept, that at that time, that was all they could have done.
Anyhow, Strange had messaged Wong to provide him instructions on how to proceed if they did not return. They were to contact a group of space merchants using a specially encoded signal. Friday had transmitted the signal into space and had received a response. The A.I had informed them that the merchants would arrive on Earth, any moment now.

Pepper had noticed she and Wong had a lot in common. He was just as worried about Strange as she was about Tony. He, like her, was feeling helpless, especially since he had not been able to follow Strange into outer space. And like her, he was trying to put a brave face and not really show how close he was to losing his tight control on his emotions. He was also trying to negate his own fear by focusing on helping someone else with their fear.

She gently squeezed his hand as he looked up at the sky and he glanced sideways at her, surprise on his stoic face.

"Thank you, Wong, for helping me and Tony. Thank you."

He smiled widely, his eyes crinkling and said in his soft voice, "We need to get Mr. Stark back. He has invited me to your wedding and I look forward to it with great anticipation."

Pepper couldn't help but laugh with joy at his statement. "Tony nicely avoided any planning duties for said wedding but I am so relieved he has decided to take on invitations as a task!"

They both grinned at each other and then suddenly Friday intoned, Unidentified flying spaceship approaching.

Pepper looked up to see a large black spaceship break into the sky and descend rapidly towards them. She and Wong moved backwards to make way as the spaceship hovered on its thrusters and lowered itself to the helipad.

Thanks to being Tony's assistant, I have met world dignitaries, army officials, scientists and celebrities alike. But... as a door opened on the spaceship and a ramp descended, she felt excitement course through her. This is the first time, I am meeting actual beings from outer space! Oh Tony... I hope they can help us!

She watched with bated breath as five beings, dressed in black, descended the ramp. Pepper walked towards them, a welcoming smile on her face, Wong slightly behind her.
A tall, dignified, seemingly human man with neat salt and pepper hair and a broad physique, stepped away from the group and smiled back at her. He held out his hand and she took it.

In a crisp, surprisingly American accent, he said, "Greetings, Earthlings! I am Stakar Ogord, leader of the Stakar Ravager Clan."

She said clearly, "I am Virginia Potts, CEO of Stark Industries."

She gestured at Wong, who bowed from the waist. "This is Wong, Master of the Mystic Arts of Kamar-Taj and current Keeper of the New York Sanctum."

Starkar bowed back and said, "Let me introduce my fellow clan members."

Pepper tried not to stare as a being with a head like a quartz rock, shimmering with white flecks, stepped forward and placed his hand on his heart.

Starkar said, "My first officer, Martinex."

She adopted a neutral face at the large, bright red lobster-like being with red frills on the side of its head, that bowed to her.

"Fellow Ravager captain, Krugarr."

A large android chirped in a friendly tone, "I am Mainframe, Ravager captain. And this gentle giant," a 7-foot black man with a sweet, child-like face, smiled broadly at her, "is Charlie-27, another Ravager captain. Too many captains, I know, such a problem to navigate, I tell you, one wants to go here, the other wants..."

The android prattled on while the giant waved shyly at her.

She waved back and Starkar interrupted belligerently, "Mainframe, I thought I am giving the introductions!!"
The only female in the group, a petite, slim and finely boned woman, said sultrily, "Starkar, sweetheart, let's not fight in front of the nice lady."

She shook Pepper's hand firmly, with a wide grin. "Aleta Ogord, Ravager captain at your service. And the only captain with sense amongst these idiots."

She looked down at Pepper's engagement ring and whistled, "That's a nice rock you got there. Looks like it cost some space bits. At least you got a ring. I am still waiting for mine and I have been married this hard lump," she pointed her thumb at Starkar, who chuckled, "for 10 years. So where is your lump?"

Pepper felt her control on her emotions slip at the mention of marriage and Tony.

She remembered the romantic and charmingly sappy way, Tony had proposed to her:

Dummy with a package containing his original Arc and a smaller box.

The scribbled note: "you already have my heart, why not take a ring as well and make it official?".

His attempt at nonchalance when she did not respond to his note, she was teasing him

And finally, Tony's patience gave way and he got down on one knee in the middle of the kitchen and pleaded with her to marry him.

She had said yes, he had cried, she had cried and then they made love right there on the kitchen counter. Later, she had gotten Tony a matching ring, because she wanted to stake her claim on the most eligible member of the Avengers. The look of wonder on his face when she gave it to him, had made her fall even more in love with him.

Something must have shown on her face because the Ravager captain, Aleta, squeezed her arm comfortingly and said, "Hey Red, its okay, is he in trouble, is that why you called us? We will get it sorted out."

She gently turned Pepper. The other Ravagers were busy arguing with each other and Wong was staring between them with fascination. Aleta said in a commanding voice, "Alright you idiots, get inside, we need to talk to Red here. Come on!"

Pepper couldn't help but smile as all the men immediately shut up and single-file, marched into the
Tower, to gather in the main living room.

Friday had arranged for some beverages and refreshments and the space beings or Ravagers as they kept calling themselves, settled down quickly, to wolf down food, hungry from their journey. She moved towards the counter, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

Pepper was amused to see that Wong was instructing them on the finer points of Twinkies versus Milk Duds and that the Ravagers were listening to him as if he was instructing them on the secrets of the universe.

Then she heard the soft snarky tones of the female Ravager Captain.

"Men... bring them half away around the universe to a new galaxy but they don't care for any of its wonders. Instead, they are fascinated by a new snack... am I right or am I right?"

Pepper turned to see Aleta at her elbow, shaking her head wryly as the discussion on the softness of Twinkies grew louder.

She smiled and said, "My fiance is the same. To get him to listen to me about any contracts or business, I had to bring him a box of donuts or pizza or something fried and junk. Take him jogging and after that, he wants to eat ice cream."

She bit her lip at the memory of Tony's antics in the park and Aleta shook her gently.

"Red, I cannot bear to see this look of sadness on such a pretty face. I need to know what's happening now! Boys!" She barked out, ending the loud chatter, "Front and center! Red is going to explain why we are here!"

Wong stood up and came to Pepper's side as she began to explain, "It is a little complicated. I do not where to begin."

The monk interjected, "Have you heard of a space being called Thanos?"

There was a loud collective gasp amongst the Ravagers. Starkar slammed his fist down hard on the
coffee table. "That purple giant dildo! He claims to be a merciful conqueror but all he does is wander from planet to planet taking lives!"

Aleta said firmly, "We stay far away from the Mad Titan's trajectory in space. He is unpredictable in his form of justice. Why do you bring him up?" Then she gasped. "Has Thanos come to Earth?"

Wong said sadly, "He did in pursuit of two Infinity Stones, the Mind Stone and the Time Stone. And he seems to have disintegrated half the population of earth."

Pepper added, "People are missing. The stones are gone. Where we need your help is..." she swallowed hard. "Three of Earth's Mightiest Defenders traveled to Thanos' home planet."

"Titan..." whispered Starkar tensely. "A dense burning shell of a planet. Full of broken buildings and dust."

"They went there and met members of this group called the Guardians of the Galaxy. Together they hatched a plan to fight Thanos and get the stones."

Starkar raised his eyebrows and Aleta said, "Yondu's boy? The human boy... what was his name?"

Pepper was confused and looked from one to the other. "I'm sorry, I do not understand."

Aleta explained, "One of our former members, his ward was a terran, a human, Peter Quill or as he liked to call himself, Star Lord. He is a member of the Guardians of the Galaxy. They are defenders of the cosmos and have fought and defeated one of Thanos allies Ronan."

Starkar muttered, "So Peter Quill and his band of rag tag warriors decided to face Thanos. Right on, Star Lord, right on."

The first mate, the sparkly headed one asked, "Taking on Thanos is no easy feat. What happened to them?"

Pepper said slowly, "That's what we do not know. We lost all contact with them. It's been a day and there's been no word of what happened."
Wong spoke, "One of my friends went up there. He sent a telepathic message saying we should transmit this signal into space if they..." he paused and Pepper knew he was looking at her, trying to shield her. "If they didn't come back."

She felt her heart clench at his words. But Pepper swallowed, trying to get rid of the lump in her throat. "Your signal must have been given for a reason. Do you know how to find them? Can you take us to Titan?"

Starkar spoke, "We are connected to the Star Lord, through our dead friend Yondu, may his soul rest in peace. I had given our signal to Peter Quill, to be used if he ever needed our aid."

Aleta continued, "This sounds like such a situation."

The lobster guy, Pepper couldn't remember his name, interjected in a clickety rackety voice, "There is no telling what's up there on Titan. Are we sure we want to do this?"

The android said, "The chances of any of them surviving a fight with Thanos are one to a million. Thanos is no ordinary foe."

"So basically we are going up there to retrieve a couple of bodies." Said the lobster with a snort.

This bald statement broke Pepper's control on her emotions and she felt tears pour from her eyes.

In a voice weak to her own ears, she spoke, "I understand, this may be a waste of your time. But I need to find my fiance. I need to..." she couldn't complete her sentence because visions of Tony lying perfectly still on a dusty dead planet, filled her mind.

She muttered, "Excuse me" and turned, running away to the next room, desperately needing to compose herself.

She could hear Wong say something and the Ravagers arguing back as she stood shaking.
She felt Aleta and the gentle giant Charlie come in behind her and she turned, wiping her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for crying but I just want to find Tony."

Aleta placed her hand on Peppers shoulder and gently clasped it. "There there Red. Don't worry, we will find your... Tony, is it?"

At Pepper's nod, she continued, "I know what is it is like to wait for news about someone you love... the waiting kills you inside. So we are going to help you out."

Charlie 27 offered Pepper a twinky, who took it with a smile. He said with a deep voice, that was at odds with his child-like face, "Sugar helps make life a little sweeter."

Pepper let herself be led back to the living room, from which raucous sounds of cheering could be heard. As she entered the room, she saw to her amusement that Wong and the Red Lobster were having some sort of eating competition.

Aleta smacked her forehead in exasperation as the two opponents stuffed their mouths with Milk Duds, while Starkar, Crystal head and the android cheered them on.

Pepper giggled and Aleta whistled loudly to catch the group's attention. They turned to her guiltily, Wong quickly spitting out a few duds.

"Listen up Dud heads! We have a mission! We need to get to Titan as soon as possible. Deep space. Rescue mission." She winked at Pepper.

The lobster or Kurgarr as Pepper finally remembered his name, said, "And what do we get for it?"

Pepper was now determined to be strong. "Help me find Tony Stark and I am prepared to be generous."

Aleta shook her head sternly and said, "Yondu's boy needs our help. This is a freebie, Red. Is that understood, Ravagers?"

The Ravagers groaned but kept their grumblings to themselves. The first mate, Martinex said, "We
just need to refuel on Quasar to make the jump to deep space. It should take us 4 hours to reach Titan after we fuel up."

Pepper smiled and Starkar came forward to shake her hand. "We will contact you, Miss Potts, once we reach Titan."

She shook his hand and said firmly, "There is no need for that, Ravager Captain. I'm coming with you."

The room erupted into loud murmurings, grumbles and exclamations. Pepper firmed her lips and straightened herself, bracing for an argument.

Wong shook his head. "This is deep space! Miss Potts!"

Starkar shook his head. "Little lady, I'm afraid he's right. We don't have the time to take care of a space newbie on board, the Tatiana."

At Pepper's confused look, he said, "My beautiful ship and the love of my life."

Aleta shoved her elbow into his gut and Starkar wheezed out quickly, "The second love of my life. Second. But it stands that you shouldn't come with us."

She stated simply, "I can handle myself on a ship. Am willing to board and bunk as needed. Besides, gentlemen and Aleta, as the one requesting the trip, I need to be there."

Aleta raised her hands with a smile. "Hey Red, no arguments from me. It will be nice to have another woman on board, the sausage fest, that is the Tatiana."

She turned to Starkar, "Come on, S, it will be fun, you can give Red here, a tour of your ship and engage her with tales of your brave captaincy."

Starker lit up with that and Krugarr objected, "Hey! He's not the only Ravager captain! Miss Potts, you can come on my ship if you'd like!" They all started to argue with each other, on who should take Pepper.
Pepper turned to Wong and said softly, "Wong, you can come too if you'd like. I know you must be anxious to learn of Dr Strange."

The monk's face was filled with indecision. But he sighed heavily and said, "I cannot, Miss Potts. No matter how much I want to. I must go back to the Sanctum. I'm the only guardian left." He clasped Pepper's hand in his soft giant one. "Bring them back, Miss Potts. Please."

She nodded and Aleta said, "Okay Red, you get 1 hour to pack. Then we take off."
Location: Outer Space, 20,000 miles from Earth

Day: Two days after half of Earth's population turned to ash.

*Blackness, blackness everywhere, so dark and so deep, I do not know where it ends or begins.*

She whispered to herself as she stared out at the inky black emptiness of space.

*There are no stars. Except here and there, twinkling in the horizon. Or in clusters...*

Pepper was standing at the large window at the back of the Tatiana, allowing her a front-seat view of deep space. She flattened herself against the reinforced glass, the ship's gentle movement making her feel as if she was floating in the darkness.

They had been traveling for three hours now, towards the space station Quasar, to refuel the ship. Pepper had spent two of those hours, exploring the seemingly endless Tatiana, from its massive cargo hull to its neat medic bay and its cozy eating area. The ship was relatively empty because Starkar had given the crew a few days off before they arrived on Earth.

She could now see the other Ravager spaceships following them, Krugarr's red bottle-like ship, Charlie 27's large dump truck of a ship and the android, Mainframe's sleek grey ship.

Charlie waved at her from the captain's deck on his ship and she waved back with a smile.

Pepper heard a throaty chuckle behind her and saw Starkar and Aleta come down towards her from the front of the ship.

"Earthlings," said Starkar in his deep voice, "always fascinated by their first view of space."
Aleta nudged him lightly and said, "I hope you are not feeling any form of motion sickness, Red. It does happen to first time space travelers."

"I am feeling a little weightless but..." she stomped her booted foot on the metal floor beneath her, "I do as you say and mindfully remember to ground myself."

Starkar and Aleta beamed at her and Aleta said, "That's good, Red, weightlessness is another problem for first time travelers."

Starkar added, "You may want to watch yourself when we approach Quasar. While docking, we turn off the artificial gravity and you will float about then." He smiled widely, "It's a lot of fun once you get used to it, me and Aleta like to dance in mid-air."

He hugged the black-haired woman to his side and kissed her forehead.

Pepper felt something clench in her chest. *Tony used to kiss me that way. Right on the temple. What if he never kisses me again?*

She turned back to the window, trying to compose herself. The sound of retreating footfalls indicated that Starkar had moved away. Aleta came to stand by her side.

"Thinking about your Tony, stuck in space?" She said softly.

Pepper nodded. "It wouldn't be the first time. Space has traumatized him before."

Aleta asked curiously, "What do you mean?"

"Six years ago, an Asgardian prince attacked New York City. With an army of space creatures called the Chitauri."

"Yes, they converged on Earth en masse and the government...", she paused here, "rather the head intelligence agency at the time, called SHIELD, thought all was lost. So in order to contain the threat..."

Aleta continued, "They sent a nuke."

She glanced at Aleta who smiled and continued bitterly, "What's a few thousand lives to save a planet? When needs must and all that ball. Send a nuke, contain the threat, seal the enemy within. It happens. You were saying?"

"Oh yes, SHIELD sent a nuclear bomb to wipe out the part of land, called Manhattan, which was overrun by the Chitauri. Even though the Avengers were fighting right there, even though there were people, women, children etc. stuck in the area. And Tony... he decided to... he caught the bomb midway and flew it towards outer space, trying to save Manhattan."

Aleta gasped and Pepper said thoughtfully, reliving the memory of the fateful day.

"I saw him, red against the blue sky, take that bomb on his back and fly up into a swirling stormy wormhole in the atmosphere. Flying up to certain death in outer space. He spent only 5 minutes, away from view. To me it seemed like eternity, waiting, hoping, praying for him to come back, come back to Earth. Someone heard my prayers. He fell back from the wormhole, limp, lifeless, like a petal from a flower. That was another horror. Thankfully the Hulk caught him and shouted him back to life."

Pepper sighed. "I only got to see him 10 hours later, covered in smoke and space dust and blood, grinning that snarky grin on his, in our ruined home."

She looked down at her feet. "Tony never really told me what he saw up there in 5 minutes. He would mumble it in nightmares, in semi-sleep, quietly to himself as he tinkered and drop loud jokes about it. But there was a hollowness, a despair in his eyes when someone brought up space or New York or the Chitauri. We even had relationship problems a year later, he wouldn't sleep, wouldn't leave his house, would push me away while being paranoid... we nearly ended things but..." she smiled to herself, "Another villain came along and made us realize how much we needed each other and so we stayed together..."

Aleta murmured, "And now, Red, you are scared of how he will get over this latest episode of deep space..."
"Yes." she said simply. "I am worried about too many things. Is he alive, what state is he in, how do I help him..."

Then she swallowed and looked straight at Aleta.

"When I saw Tony fly into that wormhole and then wait endlessly for him to return, I went through hell. Helpless, waiting for god knows what, praying... and then the aftermath. His trauma and again I was helpless, I couldn't understand his grief, his pain, I couldn't help him, just had to watch him struggle alone... Now once again, he's back in space." she shook her head firmly, "This time I won't stand by helplessly. I am done waiting for him to return. I am praying and hoping for something, some sign. I am going to find him and bring him back and we are going to get through this together..."

Aleta clasped her shoulder tightly. "You are damn right, Red, it isn't fair to watch the ones you love, waste away while you do nothing... But I have to say," she smiled shyly at Pepper, "He's a lucky man, Red, he's got you... if you were my girl, damn... I wouldn't leave you behind when I went into space, I'd want you at my back."

Pepper murmured, "Tony has to do this and I understand that... I knew that from the first time... I had to support him, I have to support him because I love him, no matter what he does. But he doesn't need to do it alone. I am going to make him see that."

Aleta bit her lip and muttered, "This Tony has to be some lucky dog, how'd he end up with an amazingly fine princess like you?"

The appreciative look in her eyes made Pepper blush till her ears but she was saved from answering, by the loud jarring ring of the ship's klaxon.

Aleta grumbled, "We are going to dock, so I will have to wait for this story."

Then she grabbed Pepper's hand. "Hey Red, come up top! You should see how we dock!"

They both ran up the steel stairs and towards the front of the ship. When they reached the bridge, the alarm stopped and Pepper felt a curious feeling pass through her bones.

She looked down and gasped in awe. For her feet were no longer on the ground.
She began to gently float upwards, her hands above her, her body completely weightless. Pepper laughed with joy at the sensation and Aleta guffawed.

"Alright, see if you can float towards the captain's chair on your own!"

Pepper floated still for a moment and then moved her hands back and forth in a breaststroke motion. She began to wade towards the chair, kicking out behind her.

Swimming with no water!

Starkar was floating near the controls and grinned at her as she took a turn around the chair and back towards the bridge.

"Enjoying ourselves, little lady?"

"Yes!" she said gleefully, "I have never felt this way before!"

Aleta floated upright towards her and steered her towards the large space deck window. "Come, get your first look at Quasar!"

Pepper floated along with her and they both stopped to watch the bustling spaceport, bright yellow against the darkness of space, seemingly teeming with activity.

The Tatiana suddenly rose high above it, Pepper and Aleta floating upwards with the movement. Pepper raised her hands above her, just in time to avoid banging into the top of the spaceship.

Aleta bumped the ceiling slightly and yelled angrily, "STARKAR! Cut it out! None of us are wearing helmets!"

Starkar yelled back an apology and gently lowered the ship down to the landing bay. Aleta grumbled, "Such a man! Just wants to show off his fancy flying skills! One of these days I will..."
But Pepper didn't pay her any attention. She was engrossed with the view of the spaceport and all the strange beings on it. She whispered in wonder to herself, *Space, the final frontier... I have boldly gone where no man has gone before...*

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They had refueled and made the jump to deep space using a cosmic tunnel, known as the Dravadian Pathway, to reach the outskirts of Titan in an hour.

As they approached Titan's atmosphere, Pepper was in the docking area with Martinex and Aleta. They were helping her to, as Tony liked to put it, "suit up".

She looked down at herself and tried not to squeal with excitement. Her torso was covered in leather with a titanium underlining. She also wore leather gloves and uber-sexy high boots. On her legs, she wore her own Stark Tech neoprene jeans, which the Ravagers had admitted were tough enough, for what lay ahead.

Martinex had handed her a small laser pistol which she could easily fire. Pepper had some weapons training, so she knew how to fire. She put the safety on and then wondered where she should holster the weapon.

Aleta said with a grin, "Red, our weapons are designed to calibrate to our outfits. So just hold the pistol near your arm or leg, wherever you want to holster it and the the force field will affix the weapon to your body part."

Pepper tried it out by holding the pistol near her thigh. To her astonishment, it seamlessly stuck to her thigh and she could easily pull it out and place it back.

Aleta chuckled. "Yeah, it's cool that way. That's the power of Ravager tech." Pepper grinned back at her.

Martinex scratched his crystal head and muttered, "Boss, we have a problem. How is she going to breathe out there? She needs a head apparatus that filters out toxic space dust. We don't have such a device."
Aleta scowled and said, "Check the trunks. We have so much space junk, are you telling me none of it is human friendly??"

Martinex nodded and quickly moved away, only to be stopped by Starkar's entrance. He smiled mysteriously as he came towards them.

Aleta grumbled, "S, we don't have any breathing apparatus... how can we take Red down to Titan?"

He grinned at her and then turned to Pepper. "And here's where the handsome space captain saves the day. Ta da!" He presented her with a plain black head band.

Aleta snorted while Pepper stared at it askance. She smiled hesitantly at Starkar and said politely, "Thank you but I do not need a head band, I am good with my pony tail." gesturing at her hair.

Starkar chuckled and said, "This, Red, is no ordinary head band. Try it on, please."

Pepper took it and placed it on her head, fitting the ends of the band behind her ears. It fit her comfortably.

"Now," Starkar said, "on the left side, there should be a tiny button. Press it."

He folded his arms and nudged Aleta playfully. "Watch this, babe."

Pepper gingerly felt for said button and pressed it timidly. She took a deep breath as she felt the head band move on her skull, as if trying to understand the shape and size of her head.

Then she gasped in awe as a glass visor was lowered over her eyes and face.

"What's happening?" She exclaimed as she felt a hard form cover the back and top of her head, while the visor reached her chin.

Aleta was gaping at her openly and Starkar said smugly, "This is a Dumonos helmet, version 5.0. It is a space helmet fitted with a built-in air filter and collapses to a head band for easy portability."
She noticed tiny vents on the bottom and top sides of the visor. Pepper moved her head gingerly, getting used to the feel of the helmet.

Aleta asked in concern, "Is it heavy? Can you move your head easily?"

"Yes!" she replied with a laugh, "It is amazingly light, it doesn't feel like a helmet! And it has a wide range of vision." She moved her head from side to side to look around her.

Aleta tapped the top of the helmet with her knuckles. "Sturdy too. Good job, S! Where did you find it? I am assuming, in our endless piles of junk."

Starkar tightened his jaw and looked into the distance. He said sadly, "It wasn't in our junk. It was a gift from Peter Quill, he had given it to me after we met at that space brawl on Nebulos."

He rubbed his hands together and Aleta entwined her hand in his. "It is okay, S, we are going to get to the bottom of this. Star Lord has to be okay. He is a tough one, along with that gang of his, the Guardians."

Suddenly Pepper felt the weight of the helmet. She remembered why they were going to Titan in the first place and she swallowed hard.

They all looked up as the voice of Mainframe echoed sonorously over the intercom.

"Ravager Captain Starkar, come in, this is Mainframe. Come in, Starkar."

Starkar flicked his intercom receiver on. "This is Starkar, receiving you loud and clear. Go ahead, Mainframe."

"We have entered Titan's orbit. No signs of hostile defense systems or air-ground missile launchers. We are clear to land. Are you ready?"

Starkar gestured at Martinex, replying, "We are ready to land. Proceed with landing sequence on my
signal." They both ran out of the room.

Pepper looked down at her shiny leather boots and felt slightly sick. She felt Aleta's hand at her shoulder and she looked into the comforting soft black eyes of the space captain.

"Hang in there, Red, just ten minutes and we will be on Titan." She looked at Pepper up and down and said with a wide grin, "I think you need to see yourself, in your space form. Come here."

She gently tugged Pepper towards a mirror on the wall. Pepper took one look and gasped.

She had always thought of herself as Tony's efficient, calm and she hated to admit this, but slightly nerdy assistant. Even after she was made CEO, she just replaced the assistant part with CEO and that was it.

She was a calm, collected, boardroom lady, who used to work for Tony Stark. He was the cool one, the Tom Cruise from Top Gun and she was the nerdy Goose, the wingman. She was happy with this status quo and would have it no other way.

But the woman that stared back at her from the mirror, was no wingman. Instead she seemed like a space-age huntress, sleek and powerful in black-and-red leather, with a deadly laser pistol strapped sexily to one thigh and her sexy leather boots.

*I thought the helmet would look ridiculous but its red visor and neat tailored form tapering to my head... wow... I look mysterious and cool. Sort of like Daft Punk crossed with Han Solo... if either of them had breasts.*

Aleta leaned on her and winked at the Pepper in the mirror. "Whatever is down there, I think you are ready to kick its damn ass to hell, Red. And here's the last touch."

She fixed a brooch on Pepper's jacket collar. Pepper studied it in the mirror. "It looks like a tiny emblem of a flame. What does it mean?"

Aleta grinned at her widely. "It means you are a honorary Ravager, Red... so people know who they are messing with."
Pepper smiled at her gratefully and took her hand. "Thank you, Captain Aleta, for everything. If you ever need my help, you have it."

The space captain grinned at her but just then the klaxxon sounded loudly and they both looked up. Aleta said firmly, "Okay, I just need to put on my jacket and we go down."

Pepper took a deep breath. *Tony, here we come, I hope you are alright...*

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**Chapter End Notes**

I had to include Pepper's reasons for going into space, to rescue Tony. One more chapter tomorrow.
Location: Planet Titan, 70,000 miles from Earth

Day: Two days after half of Earth's population turned to ash.

Pepper turned in place, getting a good look at the empty mass of Titan. Huge stone blocks, concrete slabs, iron rods and building frames drifted aimlessly in the low gravity atmosphere. What seemed like faint, far away moons, floated in the cloudy grainy sky.

The planet was eerily silent, the faint howl of a weak wind was the only sound to be heard. The ground was orange and dusty brown with loose sandy soil that crunched under her booted feet. There was nothing around for miles but broken down abandoned buildings and structures, crumbling in the breeze. She kept her helmet on because the air was breathable but thick and dusty.

*Like toys in a child's sandbox, left out in the sun. Dust, stone and death. This planet reeks of it. Tony, where the hell are you?*

The Ravagers were busy moving all over the place but keeping together as a spread out but cautious unit, with Pepper in their center.

Krugarr was scouting the horizon using a small infra-red telescope while Mainframe took soil samples. Aleta and Martinex were poring over an electronic signal board, at least that's what Pepper thought it was.

Starkar was moving ahead, looking back at them from time to time, his laser gun out. Charlie-27 was the closest to her and was humming softly, so Pepper decided to ask him.

"Charlie?"
"Yes, ma'am." he said softly with a smile.

"What happened to this planet?"

The gentle giant moved his mouth about and looked at her with his soulful dark eyes. "This place..." he said in his slow childish voice, "its actual history is lost to the annals of time. But those who do remember it, say it was once a thriving metropolis of people of different genetic makeups and origins. A land of hills and valleys, of oceans and forests. But its population grew too rapidly for its resources and not enough was done in time, to sustain the limited resources. Then..." he shook his head sadly, "the people turned on each other, desperate for survival. Somehow from that chaos, Thanos survived and left Titan behind as it collapsed into extinction."

His words struck a chord in Pepper. "It sounds like Earth..." she whispered softly, not wanting to disturb the ghostly silence and stillness of the planet. "I hope we do not ruin..." but she didn't voice her dreadful thought.

"Hey, we have got something!" Aleta called out and the group converged on her position. Martinex was holding a flat black board, blinking with multiple orange signals and criss-crossed with electronic lines.

Aleta explained, "This is a electronic map of the land and these orange signals are points of electronic transmissions on this land. All these signals are collected in a single area, in that direction." She raised her hand and pointed towards the northwest, over a small hill of stone.

"This is unusual because this planet is supposedly empty of life." Said Krugarr

"Then from where are the electronic signals coming?" Asked Starkar in confusion.

It hit Pepper so suddenly that she swore loudly, startling the Ravagers. "Could they be transponder signals??" She exclaimed excitedly.

The Ravagers looked at each other.

Mainframe said thoughtfully, "They could be. But who would use them here?"
Aleta smacked herself. "Of course! The Guardians would!"

"And the Avengers!" Pepper added. Then at the confused looks around her, she said, "Peter and Tony would. I'm sure of it! I know for a fact, that Tony has a transponder built in all his suits. So that he can track them and call them remotely. They hone in on his signal. Spiderman's suit is from Stark Technologies! Tony has designed it himself, it has a built-in transponder, so he always knows where Peter is. We have to check this out!"

The Ravagers nodded and Starkar said, "Alright, we move towards the signal, not all at once, spread out. Pair up and start moving."

As the Ravagers began to pair up, Charlie stepped close to Pepper and grinned at her. "Partner?" He asked cutely.

She nodded with a soft smile. Pepper looked at the designated spot in the distance. "That's at least three miles across from here! How were we going to-"

Her question was answered as she saw the Ravager pairs jet off into the air, propelled by their boots. She felt Charlie take her hand in his warm giant one.

"Let us fly, ma'am."

"How?"

"Click your heels together and jump into the air. The jet stream is in your boots."

His comment made Pepper smile as she remembered the hauntingly similar line.

*Click your heels together three times and say 'There's no place like home' and you'll be there. Tony loved that movie... though he would never admit it. I know he thinks he's the Tin Man, incapable of love but in reality, he's the most tender and emotional of all his companions.*

Charlie gently squeezing her fingers, brought her back to the present and Pepper moved her heels together. She felt a powerful thrust underneath her and when Charlie jumped, she did too,
squealing as she rose into the air lightly and then back down.

Charlie said loudly, "The trick is to bounce using the thrusting force. As you descend, move your heels downwards to bounce upwards again. Here try it out!" He let go of her hand.

Pepper jumped high, feeling the force of the jet beneath her. Then as she reached upwards, she remembered Charlie's instructions and moved her heels, directing the boost downwards. Pepper laughed as she rose even higher, above the dusty orange ground. Charlie was now bouncing alongside her and smiling widely.

"Isn't it heavenly?" He yelled, kicking his heels and twirling in mid-air.

She was too excited to reply and looked down briefly. "Oh my, Charlie! We are so high up!" Pepper exclaimed in shock.

He caught her hand. "Don't look down, don't care for the ground. Once you are in the air, you are freeeee..."

He gently moved her upwards and Pepper instinctively spread her legs in a saute position to jump even higher.

*My old ballet training has come back to me!*

She relished the sensation of floating freely, drifting in the breeze and moving ahead in jumps and twirls. The other Ravagers were ahead of her and Charlie but she saw Aleta wave at her as they moved towards the hill.

*Three more jumps and I am there!*

Pepper reached the hill, landing softly on the sandy dune next to Aleta. Charlie landed next to her with a harder plop and they both grinned at each other. She looked back and exclaimed in wonder, "We covered such a large distance in such a short time!"

Starkar said simply, "Once you travel jet, no other way of transportation will do."
Martinex opened up the electronic board. "There! That dip in the valley! That's where the transponders are!"

They quickly bounced down the hill and assembled in a slightly lumpy area, surrounded by piles of rocks. Mainframe immediately started testing soil samples while the others gathered around the board. Pepper saw the orange signals pulse on the board, indicating they were on this very patch of land itself.

"Look! I found one!" Mainframe exclaimed, holding up a small round electric button-like object.

Aleta took it from her and inspected it. "This is a Ravager transponder! See the markings around the groove."

"Here's another one!" called out Martinex, brushing away dust from a second transponder.

Aleta took it from him and handed it to Pepper. "This one is definitely not Ravager. Slightly primitive design. Could this be one of your Avengers?"

Pepper examined the small gleaming button. Krugarr said worriedly, "It is all well and good to find the transponders but where are their owners? And how did they get here?"

"They flew here." said Starkar grimly, joining the group. "Something has landed close to this patch of land. I found ship tracks over there. A smallish vessel with light tracks and thrusters."

"Sounds like the Milano..." said Aleta, "but where has it gone? And what about the Avengers?"

Charlie came into view, puffing. "Maam, didn't you say your Avengers followed the Maw into space?"

"Yes." Pepper replied, her brain trying to keep track of the multiple pieces of information coming her way. "Tony and Peter, Spiderman, they entered an alien spaceship that had kidnapped Dr. Strange. Why?"
He said softly, "There's a lot of hubris over there," he pointed behind him, "something big and alien crash landed badly. The thing is in pieces but I can make out, it is not the Milano or of Earth."

"Maw's spaceship." said Aleta grimly, "That's how the Avengers reached here. But where have they gone?"

"How many transponders are there in this location? Let's spread out and find them." commanded Starkar.

They started to search the ground, with Mainframe still engrossed with her soil sampler.

"Found one!"

"Me too!"

So far, four transponders had been found. Aleta opened the board once again. It was now dark because all the transponders in the area had been found.

"So we have four transponders and no sign of anyone." whispered Pepper, dread filling her.

"I am afraid I have some bad news." Mainframe straightened, her android eyes blinking rapidly at them. "The soil... in this area, the soil composition is different... I am sorry, Miss Pepper..." she looked down at her hands.

Pepper stepped forward, her heart thumping loudly in her ears. "Say it, just say it, tell me!" She cried out, the need to know making her voice harsh.

The group kept silent as the android stammered out, "The soil in this area is not like the rest of the planet, crumbled stone and dust. The soil has been added recently. It is ... is biological in make up... compost soil rich in nutrients..."

"Compost is formed from the decomposition of natural bodies..." whispered Pepper, "this soil... it is made up of biological remains... isn't it?"
The android just nodded.

Pepper sank to her knees, dismantling her helmet. She didn't care that the dusty wind made her eyes hurt or her throat close up. She told herself that it was the wind.

*There is truly nothing left of Tony... not even a body?*

She touched the muddy soft earth before here, running her fingers through it. *Ash to ash, dust to dust, in the end, that's all I have left...*

She lowered her head, the dust so overwhelming, she could not even cry. The urge to vomit was also strong, bile rising in her throat.

Memories of Tony assailed her:

His musky fragrance of motor oil and Hugo Boss.

His focused intensity in his work.

His whiskey brown eyes twinkling at her with mischief or dark and trembling with love.

His lips on her forehead.

And the way he used to hold her and make her feel so cherished... as if she was the only thing he had. A fact which he would whisper to her, when they were under the covers, at night.

The Ravagers were talking around her but she couldn't hear them over the sound of Tony's voice in her head.

*I have no one else but you ...*

*You have taken such good care of me...*

*I love you, I'm lucky!*

*This is just a housing unit... just in case there's a monster in the closet.*

*No more surprises... I should promise you...*
She whispered to the ground, "Tony... I am sorry... I was too late... too late to save you... finally my worst fear has come true. You go away and never come back and I have nothing left but an empty beaten up piece of metal."

She watched the dust pour through her fingers. "This time, I do not even have a piece of the suit to cry over. All I have is soil."

She could hear Starkar's voice exclaim harshly through the dullness in her head. "Are you telling me all six members of the Guardians of the Galaxy are lying here in ashes? All of them!"

Aleta was swearing to herself softly.

Something in Starkar's statement buzzed incessantly in her head. She was still gripping the human transponder in one hand and looked down at it, really looked at it.

Stark Industries was emblazoned neatly on one side. She ran her fingers over the logo, Starkar's words still ringing in her head.

_Peter Parker... Dr Strange... Tony Stark. The Avengers..._

Pepper got to her feet slowly. Starkar was very upset over the death of Peter Quill. Aleta was holding him.

Pepper said loudly, "How many transponders are there? How many did we find?"

"Four." said Martinex sadly.

"And how many are human? How many have Stark Industries emblazoned on them?" She showed him the logo on the transponder she was holding.

Martinex began to examine the transponders and Charlie came over to help.

"Only yours has the logo. Out of the other three transponders, one of them is purely Ravager, so we
know it is Star Lord's. The other two are homemade."

"Homemade??" she asked incredulously.

"One of the Guardians is a technological genius. He calls himself Rocket Raccoon. He could have made these transponders himself." Charlie explained.

Aleta came closer to them. "Red, what's on your mind?"

Pepper said slowly, "I know Tony came here with Spiderman. They must have rescued Dr Strange. That makes two transponders. Dr Strange isn't an Avenger, so he wouldn't have one. But only one of them is human. How many Guardians are there?"

"Six..." said Aleta slowly, "but..."

"But there are totally four transponders, out of which only three are from space. The number of transponders doesn't match the number of people that could have landed here. So where are the other three space transponders and another human transponder? I may be grasping at straws here... but... something doesn't add up."

Mainframe beeped loudly. "You make sense, Miss Potts. Let me calculate the mass of the biological soil and compare it to..."

The android began to mutter to herself, punching numbers in thin air.

Starkar said heavily, "If all 6 Guardians were here, we would have had 6 transponders, plus your human two. And another thing is, where is the Milano? How could it just disappear? Krugarr... what are you up to?"

The lobster-like being was busy examining the ground away from them. He called out, "These spaceship tracks... they seem to indicate a spaceship landing and taking off. The ground is singed in different areas. She was landed in one spot and moved upwards in another spot, close to the first one. Someone definitely moved her."

"Fan out!" yelled Aleta. "There has to be something else. Something we are missing."

Charlie and Martinex went to investigate the other side of the hill, the one away from the signals.

Krugarr came closer and examined the earth around them. "There was definitely a fight. The earth is disturbed heavily and recently. But because of hubris floating around us, we can't clearly make out if anything was damaged or not."

Mainframe exclaimed loudly and they turned to look at her.

She beamed up a laser screen from her arm, displaying a wide range of calculations and numbers zooming all over the screen.
"I could be wrong here but I've managed to get the total weight of the newly decomposed soil and matching it against the average human or alien mass when decomposed..."

Pepper felt her stomach churn as her brain decoded what Mainframe was explaining. She shook herself to focus on the grisly words of the android.

"There is enough soil here to account for five beings. All the Guardians of the Galaxy are not dead. At least 3 had to have survived."

"And one human." Pepper added. "We should have found three Stark tech transponders. But we found only 2."

"Couldn't the soil have blown away? I mean, come on, Mainframe, it's highly possible that the extra mass of soil is missing."

asked Krugarr with a shrug.

Aleta shoved him and he began to protest but shut his mouth at her expression.

Mainframe said firmly, "This soil is so much more denser and thicker than the native soil of Titan. It would not be blown away. It could have been swept away by a large stream of water but there isn't a drop of water on this planet."

Starkar nodded. "Water was the first natural resource of Titan to disappear. The first and major trigger of their extinction. There is no water to wash away such an amount of soil."

Aleta voiced out what Pepper was hoping but too scared to believe in. "People are dead but some may have survived. The number of transponders supports that. Question is...", she turned around and shook her head, "Where did they go?"

"Guys! Over here!", Martinex waved at them from a short distance away. They moved quickly towards his location.

"Look at these tracks!"
Pepper stared at the criss-cross marks in a thick pattern on the dusty earth.

Krugarr inspected the tracks with his feelers, while Mainframe took a soil sample.

The android said softly, "Again a different soil sample. Not from this planet. Not biological. Someone has landed here, trucking in their own soil on their vehicle."

Krugarr hissed. "Luxacites... these tracks are of Luxacites in a large horde."

Starkar cussed and Pepper asked in confusion, "Are those a race of..." she hesitated, using the word 'alien' to describe the horde, seeming very racist.

"No, Red..." said Aleta. "Luxacites are a type of vehicle. Used for moving on planets but not in deep space."

"Sort of like a motorcycle." said Starkar helpfully. "You have those on Earth right?"

"Yes... so there was a fourth set of people? Other than Thanos, the Avengers and the Guardians... what happened here?" Pepper asked in bewilderment.

The Ravagers were looking at each other knowingly and Pepper caught Aleta's eye. "What is it? Please tell me."

"Well..." the petite space captain drawled. "This sort of bike, Luxacites, it is... how should I put this? It's a bike typically ridden by spare part dealers."

"Space rats!" chimed in Charlie.

Pepper was still confused and Mainframe told her soothingly, "I believe the term used on Earth is junkies."
Starkar grinned at her. "Okay Red, here's how it is. There are two main categories of space beings that travel as a large horde. One category is the Ravagers, like us, who move around for a living. You know... merchant-like folk."

His extremely nonchalant expression made Pepper suspicious. But she filed her suspicions away for later.

"The other category..." muttered Aleta wryly, "are spare part dealers."

Pepper raised her eyebrows. "You mean, mechanics who sell spare parts."

Aleta said, "Yes but they sell living human parts. This is a group of mostly outlaws and degenerates who pick up travelers, survivors, basically anyone who can't defend themselves and take them apart and sell their organs, skin, bones etc. to buyers."

Pepper gasped in horror. "Black market organ dealers!"

Starkar said, "We call them spare part dealers or space rats."

Krugarr spat on the ground. "They are the worse kind of space pirates! No honor at all."

Pepper said slowly, "So whoever survived the fight with Thanos, was picked up by these... spare part dealers... and taken where?"

Mainframe said, "To one of their outposts. And we can easily find out which one by tracking the frequency of the Stark transponder! Back to our ships!"

Thanks to their jet systems, the Ravagers and Pepper were soon on board the Rationale, Mainframe's ship. Martinex and Starkar were laying out lunch, while Mainframe and Krugarr were busy doing something with the Stark transponder.
Pepper was slumped over the dining table, sitting backwards in her chair. It was one of Tony's habits that she had hated but unconsciously adopted.

Aleta shoved a flat tray of something brown and lumpy in front of her and commanded, "Eat, Red..."

She opened her mouth to refuse because she had no appetite, the day's events had exhausted her but the space captain glared threateningly and Pepper decided to try to eat.

She dug her spoon into the unappetizing poo-colored goopy mass before her and lifted a small spoonful gingerly to her mouth. Pepper first sniffed it. It smelled good, so she licked the spoonful tentatively. An explosion of tastes bursted on her tongue and she took a proper spoonful and then another, until she was chomping down the space food.

She enjoyed the sticky mass, licking her lips as she ate. Charlie placed his large hand on her head and patted her like a dog. "You got some color back in your cheeks, ma'am... you needed to eat." He told her softly and she smiled at him.

Starkar and Martinex had laid out a number of trays and the group sat down to tuck in. Pepper stared at their trays curiously. Each tray was different, one tray was filled with what looked like blue and red shells, another had small purple rocks in spaghetti.

"What are you guys eating? And what did I eat?" She asked.

Aleta smirked at her. "We are eating space food as you terrans like to put it. You got minced beef and beans blended together. Perfectly normal Earthling food."

Pepper shook her head incredulously. "You could have just told me that!"

Aleta winked at her. "But then we would have missed your cute tasting experiment. And that would have been a crying shame."

She then imitated Pepper tentatively sniffing and then licking the spoon. The Ravagers burst into guffaws and giggles.

Pepper laughed too because Aleta's impression was hilarious.
For some time, there was nothing but silence as the Ravagers ate their food with a frightening enthusiasm.

Pepper stood up and walked towards the captain's chair. She leaned on it and then gasped in awe as she saw a large asteroid blaze across the sky, moving past the left of the ship.

*There is so much to fear and to fascinate. Space truly is a land like no other.*

She looked down at her engagement ring.

*I do hope we can find you in this black mass of nothingness, Tony. I know it might not be you that survived but... I am going to hope and pray it is you... hold on, okay...*

She kissed the twinkling diamond stone tenderly and then something behind her, started to beep loudly.

Pepper jumped because it sounded suspiciously like a ticking bomb.

Starkar swore and Mainframe quickly stood up and moved towards a rapidly blinking console. Pepper moved towards it as well. One of the Stark transponders was being scanned by the console. Numbers were flashing and rolling rapidly across the black screen.

Mainframe smiled and began to beep herself. Pepper stared at her and the android sheepishly chirped out, "I am sorry. I do that when I am happy."

The console beeped loudly once and then 12 numbers appeared on the screen.

"What do they mean?" muttered Pepper.

"Coordinates, Miss Pepper! Coordinates! I ran a search across this galaxy for a signal emitted with the same frequency as the Stark transponder."
Pepper felt her heart race with hope. "So you found Tony! I mean-", she amended rapidly, "you found whoever survived with the second transponder."

"Yes!" grinned the android, "let me punch in these coordinates and let me see..." she printed out a small piece of paper containing the numbers and moved to a large dome in a panel, which was covered in a grid of blue lines.

Mainframe began to move the dome in a sequence, muttering to herself, looking at the paper and then back again at the dome.

Aleta and Starkar joined her at the console.

Finally Mainframe stopped whatever she was doing and straightened. "I've found it!"

Aleta punched a blue button near the dome and Pepper turned to see a holographic image being projected on the ship's main window.

A smallish rock of a planet with a single large structure appeared. She tentatively read out the name displayed on the screen.

"Locis Carce? What is that?"

"Just as we suspected. A spare part trading outpost." said Starkar grimly.

"Sort of an intergalactic marketplace for organs." added Aleta. "We need to get the survivors out of there and fast. There's no telling what harm the space rats will do to him or her."

Pepper swallowed hard, suddenly anxious. "So who do we contact for help? The space police? Some form of space body that deals with justice?"

Starkar and Mainframe stared at her, wide-eyed and then burst into laughter. Aleta smiled and said, "I am afraid, Red, there is no such task force. And even if there was, they wouldn't help folks such as us."
Pepper asked in confusion, "Folks such as you? Why... why wouldn't a justice system help space merchants?"

Krugarr stepped onto the bridge and said cheekily, "Who told you we were space merchants?"

Starkar coughed and made gestures with his eyes as Mainframe looked at her, equally confused. "We aren't space merchants, Miss Pepper..."

Now Pepper had suspected this fact from some time. So she narrowed her eyes and looked at Aleta, who had covered her mouth with her hand.

"Dr. Strange told Wong, you were related to Peter Quill, the Star Lord, who was a Guardian. And that you were space merchants... I assumed, that's why you all have your own ships and so much stuff on them. And such knowledge of space and its inhabitants. But wait a minute... you also seem to know a lot about weapons... What are you then?" she ended on a whisper.

Aleta said slowly, "Don't be alarmed, Red, we are harmless, really."

Starkar snorted derisively but shut up as the petite brunette gave him a stern look.

She continued, "We are... space... pirates."

"Pirates!" exclaimed Pepper.

"Yes... we do steal and plunder..."

"Catch people with bounties on their head and turn them in." continued Starkar.

"Smuggle forbidden stuff across galaxies..." added Charlie.

"In summary, it's a pirate's life for us!" sang Krugarr and the other Ravagers joined in by chanting "Pirates! Pirates!" wildly.
Pepper did not know what to think. Or do.

*Oh boy, I feel a bit like Wendy when she met the Lost Boys for the first time.*

Then she asked the first thing that came to her mind. "So if you are pirates, then what is the difference between you and the spare part dealers? And why are you helping me?"

The Ravagers stopped chanting. Starkar objected, "Hey, we may be pirates but we do not imprison people! Or maim them for life! Unlike the spare part junkies!"

"And we do not perform kidnappings and assassinations! And we never harm kids!" said Mainframe.

Aleta moved closer to her and looked at Pepper appealingly.

"The thing is Red, we aren't the good guys. But we aren't all that bad either. We are just...", she shrugged, "I do not know... in the middle? But we know what it is like to fight against impossible odds, to do the ugly stuff, to lose teammates and search for survivors, even if there is no hope of survival. I guess I am trying to answer your question in a roundabout way but that's why I... we... we want to help you."

She turned around to look back at the other Ravagers. "Am I right?"

"Hell yes!" said Starkar and the others chimed in as well.

"Plus, we need to know what happened to the Guardians." Aleta looked at Pepper. "So I am afraid you are stuck with us."

Pepper took her hand and squeezed it. "No, it's not like that, believe me, I am eternally grateful to you, to you all..." she looked at the Ravagers, "for your help and more importantly, your kindness. No one on Earth was willing to help me. Yet, you... space pirates from the stars, with a heart of gold, you came to my aid. Whatever happens, you have my everlasting gratitude and my thanks."
Aleta beamed at her and squeezed her hand back. Charlie sniffed loudly,

Starkar bounded back to the dining table and banged his fists on it, exclaiming with enthusiasm. "It appears, Ravagers, we have a mission before us! A rescue mission!"

"Fighting the evil spare part junkies and saving some of the Guardians and a helpless Earthling!" exclaimed Krugarr, who hopped onto the dining table and stretched his arms out theatrically.

"Ravagers to the rescue!" whooped Mainframe loudly and suddenly the room was filled with loud whooping and cheering as the Ravagers hopped and jigged on the spot with the joy of a mission.

Pepper giggled as Aleta smacked her head loudly. "Idiots..." she muttered.

Then she sighed loudly. "Come on, Red, I will show you how to set a target destination for the space ship's auto pilot."

"How long will we take to reach there? A day? Two days?" asked Pepper.

"Nah. Two hours tops, if we leave as soon as possible. We will set off in this ship. I will set off the auto pilot for the other ships as well, to follow us automatically."

She gestured at the still celebrating Ravagers behind her. "Till then, this band of baboons should calm down. I hope."

Pepper nodded, feeling a rush of excitement surge through her. A rescue mission... and I am going to be a part of it!
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and commenting!
Tune in next week to see the Ravagers and Pepper take on the spare part dealers in Loce Carcis.
The Ravagers make a Plan

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Location: Moving through space, 90,000 miles from Earth

Time: Two days since the fight with Thanos on Titan.

Pepper's heart was racing. She and Martinex were in a small, grey, bowl-like space ship with a glass dome. They were in the Tatiana's docking bay, ready to disembark and fly towards Locis Carce, a good 15 miles from their current location.

Aleta flashed her a "thumbs up" salute and seemed to be mouthing the words "Kick ass" at her. Pepper waved back at her and at Charlie, who seemed worried.

She was touched that the gentle giant had wanted to be her partner on this mission but he was needed elsewhere.

She and Martinex were dressed in over-sized white cloaks. But underneath, he was in his Ravager fight suit and she was in her leather Daft Punk ensemble, complete with helmet head band around her neck and a huge photon beam gun strapped to her calf. Aleta had even given her a neat tiny pistol that was hidden in her sleeve.

Pepper had been given a quick 1 hour session on warfare: how to fire the photon gun, how to fire a killing shot versus a maiming shot and how to shove opponents to the ground. Aleta had also shown her some easy fighting stances and moves.

Now she was ready, scared out of her wits but ready to fight, come what may and get Tony back to safety. She knew what to do and how to do it, all that was left was to actually get in there and get out with Tony.

"Pepper," said Martinex gently and she turned to look at him. His hand was on the brake but the First
Mate smiled easily at her and said, "Are you ready?"

She nodded.

He flipped two switches, one above him and one below and announced, "Team Clean is ready for take-off."

Starkar's deep voice sounded over the intercom. "Roger that, Team Clean. You can disembark. Remember, proceed to coordinates 21.83.25.18.91.11.12 and wait for our signal. Then proceed towards the special holding cells and engage."

"Roger that, Captain. Over and Out."

Martinex flipped a switch off and then moved the brake forward. The large door of the Tatiana slid open and he pressed down on the motion stick, moving the spaceship out slowly.

"One more thing." Starkar's voice intoned. "Red, you need to be calm. This is your first mission."

"I am calm, Starkar." said Pepper clearly, determined not to let her nervousness show in her voice.

He chuckled. "Tough girl. I like that. But just to ease things along..." She heard the familiar guitar riff of a very fitting song drift over the intercom and fill the tiny spaceship with song.

Pepper grinned widely.

"Starkar, how do you have this song?" she asked as Martinex upped the volume and began to nod his head along to the strains of the guitar.

"It was a tune on one of Peter Quill's old music players from Earth. He gave it to me. I like this song and I thought you might like it too. Good luck out there, Red."

The intercom buzzed off and Pepper's grin grew wider. The dark blackness of deep space loomed before them but she was not scared anymore.
As the spaceship flew towards the coordinates, she tapped her foot as the crisp all-American voice of Norman Greenbaum began to croon "Spirit in the Sky".

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Three hours earlier

Pepper and the Ravagers were aboard the Rationale, Mainframe's ship. The android was the official strategist of the group and had advanced layout and spatial scanning tools for planning heists.

As they traveled on auto-pilot through space, towards the spare part dealers home in the stars, the Ravagers were gathered on the bridge. Mainframe was typing into a console, getting her 3D layout mapper ready.

Pepper looked around the group and smiled. She could see their excitement and enthusiasm.

Charlie grinned widely at her and said, "It has been a long time since we were all on a mission together."

She remembered a similar tone of excitement in Tony's voice, when he had called her to let her know, that he and the Avengers were going to storm a Hydra stronghold in Sokovia.

He was so excited to be part of a team, working together, especially with Bruce and Thor, his two favorites. Then Ultron happened... and then the end of Sokovia... and then the Accords...

She shook herself out of her musings as Mainframe triumphantly joined them, beeping with delight.

They gathered around an empty rectangular table. Mainframe clapped her hands together and announced, "So I have been running some scans on Locis Carce and have formed a 3D model of the area."

She snapped her fingers and a holographic three dimensional view of the planet formed on the table, outlined in red.
"This is the physical outline. I also have infrared and area density."

She snapped her fingers to expose the two views and the Ravagers oohed with appreciation.

Pepper played along but this technology was old to her since she was used to the genius machinations of Tony Stark.

Mainframe continued, "Locis Carce. A dense space rock. Not a planet, too small to be considered as one. Home to a tribe of spare part dealers. And their unwilling subjects."

She moved the model up and down rapidly as she explained it. "Building structures comprise of of a large central building and a two-story secondary building. There is also a single tall tower. Using the signal's frequency, I've managed to lock down the position of the transponder to a particular area."

She zoomed in to a row of multiple rooms on a single ledge.

"From my analysis, these seem to be special holding cells, where the subjects or rather prisoners are held."

"Special?" asked Pepper curiously.

"Yes, there are two types of cells. One for ordinary subjects and these large, specially designated cells for seemingly different subjects."

The android shrugged. "I do not have enough information to conclude what designates a subject as special."

Starkar said musingly, "So we know where the transponder is. Now we need to decide an attack plan."

Krugarr said, "Going in through the front is suicide. The dealers have number on their side, whereas there are only 5 of us."
"Six...", Pepper said with a smile. "I'm coming too."

The lobster looked like he wanted to object but Aleta glared at him, so he shut up.

Starkar beamed with glee. "We need to split up and mount multiple assaults, thus distracting the dealers and sneaking away with the survivors."

He placed a small box on the table and began to lift small objects from it.

"The way I see it, we split up into three teams. And these are going to be our positions."

Pepper clasped her hand over her mouth to stop herself from giggling.

Somehow Starkar had obtained Mattel Trolls and Furbies and was using them to represent the Ravagers on the 3D model of the space rock.

He placed a purple-haired troll and a brown hairy Furby on a narrow corridor towards the row of smaller prison cells.

"Mainframe and Charlie, you two are going to sneak into the prison and look for other survivors, without tracking the transponder."

Aleta snorted as Starkar placed a He Man doll and a Barbie doll at the entrance of Locis Carce. "Me and Aleta are going to knock straight on the main door and enter through there."

"As what?" Aleta asked. "As tourists?"

Krugarr snickered.

Starkar glared at him and answered evenly, "No babe, as people who have something for sale."
"We are going to sell our own organs?"

"Nope." He added a small red Furby between the He Man and Barbie. "With Krugarr. We are selling his organs."

Mainframe raised her hand politely. "I have an objection."

"To what, Mainframe? We can't use you for organ selling. You don't have organs!"

"Not to that. I object to my representation. It is inaccurate. I am not purple or short."

The seriousness of her tone made Pepper bite her lip, trying to suppress her laugh.

Before Starkar could reply, Charlie said solemnly, "I do not like this furry thing either." He picked up the brown Furby. "Too small and too ugly. You think I'm this ugly, Starkar?"

Aleta grinned as Starkar sputtered.

Krugarr said with a whine, "Hey, he's taken the best looking doll for himself."

He picked up the He Man doll. "Starkar, the only thing you have in common with this doll, is that you both are pale colored. You are much fatter than this."

Starkar made a sound of outrage as Pepper couldn't control her giggle anymore. She turned to muffle the sound.

Aleta picked up the Barbie. "Since we are objecting to representation, I do not like being represented by a blonde. White washing is not cool, dude..."

"I am not fat!" Yelled Starkar.
"And I am not as ugly as this thing!" Countered Charlie with a roar.

"Why do I have to be the prisoner? Why can't Starkar be the prisoner? He's so plump and healthy looking, they'd definitely give us a good price for his organs." Whined Krugarr.

The Ravagers began to argue with each other boisterously. Pepper let them argue for a minute. She was now used to their shenanigans and knew how to grab their attention. She put her fingers to her lips and blew a loud wolf whistle, managing to stop the cacophony.

They all stared at her and she gently said, "We were planning a heist?"

The Ravagers froze for a second and then sheepishly turned their attention back to the model.

"So ehum..." harrumphed Starkar loudly. "One team goes in the front, keeping the focus on them by dangling a sale in front of the dealers. The other team engages the prison guards, searching for other survivors. And..." he gestured at Pepper.

"You, Red, you get to track the transponder and break in on its exact location. Free whoever is attached to it and bring them back here to the Tatiana."

"And how do I get in?" She asked, suddenly nervous about what she was going to do.

Starkar erred some more and looked at Aleta for help. She said thoughtfully, "Locis Carce is a space rock, right? Zoom out on the model please."

Mainframe obliged and Aleta studied the slowly rotating 3D model. Pepper could see the transponder signal blinking in the tall tower.

"The special prisoners are held in this tower?"

Mainframe nodded and Aleta said, "A tower this tall... needs a special cleaning unit. One that flies to each window and cleans it."
What if Red could fly directly to the tower, pretending to be a cleaning unit? Then she could easily examine each room, searching for the transponder. And without arousing suspicion.

Krugarr nodded his head in wonder. "That's a great idea, Aleta. But we'd have to capture one of their space cleaning units. None of our large spaceships can masquerade as a cleaning unit."

"That's just it...", drawled Aleta. "We have such a unit. Lying in our giant pile of space junk, aboard the Tatiana. Don't we, Martinex?"

"Indeed, Captain. It is in working order. Just needs a little paint and some fixing."

Starkar rubbed his hand in glee. "I like this plan! It's the perfect cover. The spare part rats will never suspect a thing!"

Aleta added, "But Red can't go in alone. She's going to need some backup, someone to fly the ship, while she cleans the window and investigates. Who is going to... alright Charlie, what do you have to say?"

Charlie had raised his hand high and was waving it like a child. "Me! Me! I want to go as Pepper's backup!"

He grinned at her and she laughed.

Aleta shook her head. "Full points for enthusiasm, Charlie but unfortunately big guy, you will not fit in the cleaning unit. Sorry."

Charlie made a sad face but Martinex chimed in. "I will go with Miss Potts. I know how to handle such a space ship and I can easily fit in it."

He turned to Pepper. "Unless ma'am, you have someone else in mind?"

"No Martinex, thank you!"
They grinned at each other and Aleta said, "Then it is settled."

She clapped her hands loudly, "Ravagers! Sound off with team names and objectives!"

Starkar smirked and pointed at himself. "Me, Krugarr and you, babe, Team Sharkbait-oo-haha, we go in as wanderers with Krugarr as our unwilling prisoner with organs. Distract the space rats with a sale, start a fight or two, who knows, just keep them occupied enough."


They all looked at Pepper, who quickly said, "Team... Clean?"

She looked at Martinex who nodded enthusiastically.

"Okay, Team Clean. Martinex and I, we take the cleaning unit and pretend to clean the windows of the tower, all the while, searching for the transponder. Once we find it, we break in and engage. Wait, I am confused, how do we break in? Shoot the glass?"

"Good question, Red." Aleta replied. "The tower must have space ape glass, a specially toughened glass to handle the gravitational force of space. You can't just shoot your way in."

Charlie chimed in softly, "The cleaning unit needs a battering ram. A small extendable unit that can be controlled from the unit itself. We should have such a machine part on board. Easy enough to add it to the ship."

Pepper's jaw dropped with awe. "A battering ram! Wow!"

Charlie patted her head gently. "Martinex rams the glass, it breaks, you can easily move in. Just be careful of the glass."

"But..." Pepper asked, trying to recall one of Tony's lectures on space and gravitational pulls. "When the window breaks, won't the room's inhabitants be sucked out into space? And die?"

She flushed at the appreciative looks and nods around her.
"That's right, Red," Aleta said, "that's why the battering ram will have a sealant umbrella. Once the glass breaks, the ram will auto-seal the broken crack with an energy field sealant of sorts. No one can leave or enter the sealant unless their suit's signature matches the signature configured on the sealant. And since this is Ravager tech, only Ravager suits will have the matching signature."

She was awed by the level of technology involved.

"So that's Red and Martinex covered. What about you two?" Starkar asked Charlie and Mainframe.

They looked at each other and said in tandem, "Team Avengers. We are Team Avengers."

Aleta laughed loudly but Pepper smiled and clapped them both on the back. Starkar rolled his eyes. "Come on, you two... really?"

"Yup," said Charlie slowly, "We like that name, we want to be the Avengers for one mission. We will enter Locis Carce from the back gate, subduing guards quietly and move towards the prison."

Mainframe continued, "Our aim, searching for any survivors amongst the prison cells."

Starkar nodded in satisfaction. "It is settled then, any questions?"

Krugarr raised a pointed fin-hand. "What about other prisoners stuck in the prisons? Innocent travelers etc. Hey, no one goes to the space rats willingly, everyone is a prisoner in there."

Starkar nodded thoughtfully and said, "You have a point, Krug. I say, we help anyone who needs help. But don't bring a horde back to the Tatiana. We do not know who is friend and who is a sneaky enemy."

Aleta added, "Help people out. Especially if the space rats are up to something sick. But only bring the Guardians or any of the Avengers, back to the ship. I will send the members of both groups to your space comms."
"How do we bring people back?" asked Pepper.

Starkar grimaced. "That's a tricky one. I cannot bring the Tatiana too close to the rock. The space rats might attack her."

Martinex said, "It will be a squeeze but one or two more people can fit in the cleaning unit, with us. We pick them up and hurry back to the Tatiana."

The Ravagers nodded in agreement and Mainframe said, "I and Charlie will bring back any survivors, which we find in the prisons. We can all meet back here at the Tatiana."

Starkar clapped his hands together. "Preparation tasks?"

One by one, the Ravagers began to list out the tasks they would be doing.

Charlie: "Fix the cleaning unit up. Install the battering ram with the sealant mechanism."

Mainframe: "Download scans of the building and add them to everyone's radar. Check all comm equipment."

Krugarr: "Decide on weapons and prepare them for the mission."

Aleta: "Teach Red how to handle a firearm for combat. And how to fight in close quarters. At least how much I can teach in an hour."

Starkar grinned at them widely. "Excellent! Martinex and I will check Team Sharkbait-oo-haha and Team Avenger's ships and suit up. We have two hours to mission time, folks!"

Aleta stretched out her hand, palm downwards. "Bring it in, Ravagers."

They all joined hands. Pepper hung back, not sure if she was included until Charlie gently nudged her forward. "You too, ma'am."
Starkar said earnestly, looking around at the group, "We are going to get our transponder survivor out and kick some space rat ass as well! On the count of three, One! Two! Three! Ravagers!"

They lifted their arms, chanting loudly. The group dispersed and Aleta took Pepper's hand. "Come on, Red. It is time for you to learn the ways of a warrior."

The brunette and her erupted into giggles at the corny statement as they walked towards the docking area.

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter tomorrow...
Location: Loce Carcis, spare parts dealers Outpost, 150,000 miles from Earth

Time: Two days since the fight with Thanos on Titan.

Nothing but blackness for miles around. And emptiness. With twinkling little dots of light.

He swallowed hard, thinking of the stars.

Is that where we go... when we die? Or fade away... like ash?

He felt his eyes fill with tears as he remembered the boy, Peter, the little Spiderling, in his nice new suit, lying in his arms, big brown eyes staring up at him as he slowly turned to ash.

He was so excited about that suit. About being an Avenger. About going into space. About meeting space creatures. So excited.

He blinked and saw the tear drop to the stone floor, landing there softly, a wet stain.

So excited to do something, to be part of a team, to follow me... and I led him straight to his death. Little Spiderling. Peter Parker.
Another tear fell and he took a deep breath, the twinkling lights in the blackness, burning his tear-filled eyes.

What do I tell May? Your loving, bright, intelligent nephew is dead, thanks to his involvement with Stark Industries. Scratch that, thanks to him trusting me, Tony Stark, to keep him safe. All thanks to me.

He angrily rubbed the back of his hand across his cheek, because his eyes were itching. The dull thud of Nebula banging her head against her cell's wall, reminded him of a tune. A tune that Pepper used to hum, when she would tidy up his workshop, while he was busy tinkering away at his suit.

My Pepper... Pick up my coffee mug... tsk at the dishes... take away my clothes... stand perfectly still as I would read a contract... bite her lip because I was chattering and refused to focus... sigh patiently at me... so long ago...

At the thought of Pepper, Tony lowered his hand into his hands, because his tears were falling freely now.

What if she's gone too? Turned to ash... part of that half that needs to be killed... I wasn't even there to hold her one last time...

After a while, he heard Nebula snort and he lifted his head to glare at the purple half-steel, half-organic space being.

"You humans. So weak, with your emotions and your tears. So useless." She sneered at him.

Some part of him knew she was right. Some part of him wanted to lash out, in any way he could.

He gave her a cool look and said quietly, "So you didn't feel a thing when you learnt that your adopted mighty father killed your sister?"

Something flickered in her black android eyes, something harsh and bleak. But it was gone and she turned her back to him, tersely uttering a firm, "No".
Tony knew she was lying. He had heard her whisper her sister's name in her sleep. He remembered the same anguished cry coming from Peter Quill as he had stared at Thanos with horror, when told that his girlfriend was dead.

He now knew that Nebula and Star Lord's girlfriend, were the adopted daughters of Thanos. The term 'adopted' being used loosely. Thanos had massacred their families in the same way that he had done on Earth. The space family politics had been a little difficult to grasp at first but he felt he knew enough.

*A path of destruction... Thanos wreaked on our lives...*

Tony shook his head sadly and went back to his memories.

*After all, what else do I have now?*

Thanos had disappeared into a portal with the gauntlet and the stones, to god knows where. Tony had been trying to catch his breath, trying to breathe through the burning pain in his abdomen, from the stab wound. He had quickly sprayed it with nanobytes, that went to work immediately, trying to heal it.

He had just began to recover when he saw Drax, the large scarred alien fade away. Then he could do nothing but watch helplessly as Strange and Peter and others faded away as well. All who were left, were him and Nebula.

In the ensuing shock, he hadn't even noticed a number of weird looking bikes converge on their position, ridden by weird, zombie-like beings wrapped in rags and stained cloths.

"Space rats!" Nebula had yelled.

He was too weak and broken to fight, his armor had withdrawn into himself, so he just gave up and let them capture him. Nebula had put up a good fight for some time but then even she tired and they had managed to pin her down.

Now he and her were in some sort of space prison, with electric force fields for walls. Nebula had
run into them repeatedly, trying to break them but the force fields had jolted her with energy shocks. She had finally given up.

He hadn't even tried. The rag zombies or space rats seemed to know he had something special in his chest. They had placed, what seemed like an electro-magnetic restrictor, wrapped around his arc like a wide bow.

The restrictor seemed to be imprisoning the nanobytes in an electric energy cage. He could feel them fighting the cage but they couldn't break free. He had casually tried to inspect the band of energy but it had shocked him painfully, so he decided to leave it alone.

Tony sighed and looked out of his cell's wide window. He could see nothing but the inky emptiness of deep space. He did not know what was going to happen to him. Nor did he care.

Location: Coordinates 21.83.25.18.91.11.12, 10 miles away from Loce Carcis

Pepper hummed to herself as she and Martinex waited in the cleaning unit, hovering in outer space. The intercom was now playing "Wild Blue Yonder" and she smiled because it reminded her of Rhodey.

Some distance before them, loomed the giant cubic form of Locis Carce, eerily white and gleaming against the backdrop of space.

They were waiting for Team Sharkbait-oo-haha, aka Starkar, Aleta and Krugarr, to give them the signal. It had been 40 minutes since they had disembarked and fifteen minutes since the trio had entered Loce Carcis, through the main gate.

"What must they be doing?" She asked Martinex, who was chewing some sort of space gum and blowing bubbles lazily.

He chewed for a minute and said with a grin, "Knowing them, they must be spouting all sorts of
nonsensical dialogue and confusing the heck out of the space rats."

The crystal-headed being said comfortingly, "Don't you worry, Miss Potts. Any minute now."

She shook her head wryly. "You must think I'm such an nerd. Waiting desperately for a signal. Excited to be in space."

"No. I can understand your excitement. I was so excited when Starkar told us we were going to Earth. I only wish I could have seen more of the Blue Planet."

"Oh, I see..." she exclaimed softly, "tell you what, when we get Tony back and when things settle down a bit, you and the Ravagers can come and stay with us for a while. It will be fun, I can show you guys around, you can see Earth properly."

Martinex sat up with excitement. "Miss Potts, the monk Wong, he told us there is a terran food called a hot dog. Can we eat that?"

Pepper smiled, trying to contain her giggle. Aleta was right, at heart, they are just space teenagers.

Out loud, she said, "Sure. We can eat all the terran junk food, you want. And please, Martinex, call me Pepper."

"Pe-pp-er..." he said gingerly, trying out the name. "What does it mean?"

She lowered her gaze and murmured more to herself. "It is a nickname given to me by my fiance. For these little sun marks all over my nose and neck."

Then she smiled. "And because I once threatened to face down his security guards with pepper spray. I was lying through my teeth but he seemed to find it hilarious."

Martinex goggled at them. "Fascinating, a nickname you say. Its a nice one, trust me, I've always been called rockhead or stone head."
Pepper was going to ask him some more about his origins but just then the intercom began to buzz and Martinex flipped a switch.

"Team Clean, come in, Team Clean!" Aleta's voice came urgently over the intercom.

Martinex said, "Roger that, Team Sharkbait, we hear you loud and clear, go ahead!"

"This is the signal! Go for the windows, I repeat! Go for the windows, pronto!"

Pepper winced as a loud explosion sounded in the background. She could hear shouts and threats.

"Aleta, are you alright? Do you need any help?" she asked out of concern, as the sound of lasers being fired, was also added to the cacophony.

Aleta laughed evilly and said loudly, "Red, don't worry babe, we are having the time of our lives, I will tell you about it later! Go get your Tony!"

The intercom buzzed off and Martinex slid the brake off, moving the spaceship forward. "This is it, Miss... I mean, Pepper."

She nodded and tapped the headband, as the helmet expanded over her head. "Let's do this."

Sometime had passed, when suddenly the gate to his cell, slowly slid open.

He heard Nebula swear softly but he didn't care. He just continued to stare at the stars. He heard loud clanging footsteps and someone or something now stood behind him.

Two of the bandage-clad space rats from the feel of it.
They uttered something in their alien tongue but he didn't turn around.

Nebula said jeeringly, "It appears the prison's High Inquisitor wants to take a look at the Terran with nanobytes in his chest. He is curious to learn how a human has such advanced technology."

Tony just ignored her and kept his back to the things.

He felt something hard and pointy nudge him but he shrugged, uncaring.

Nebula said softly, "They will hurt you, if you don't listen, Terran..."

"Let them do their worst."

Suddenly he felt the stick poke him once again and then there was pain, electrifying pain moving through his body, making him yell. He was on the floor, he could feel its coldness against his cheek, even through the endless waves of electric current flowing through him.

Tony was dimly aware that his heart was so loud, it felt outside him and he was drooling but the current just didn't stop.

He heard Nebula shout from far away and the current stopped. Tremors still passed through him and his mouth was wet with a metallic taste.

*Blood.* He realized, licking his teeth.

The guards pulled him to his knees but he couldn't stand, he couldn't feel his legs or his hands or his face for that matter. His eyes were burning again and he closed them, to block out the fiery sensation.

*One, two, three, do not look down. Four, five, six, do not look down. Seven, eight, nine, do not look down.*
Pepper forgot what she was muttering to herself and looked down. She was floating towards the first large square window of the tall white tower, connected by a thin zip line to the cleaning unit.

*Oh sweet Iiminy Cricket! There's nothing below me! Nothing but blackness!*

She was wading in pure nothingness, the square glass before her, seeming so damn far away as she stretched towards her.

*I feel as I am swimming in molasses! My arms are so heavy! And there is nothing around me! What if I fall?! What if the line breaks!*

She could hear her heart thumping loudly and deeply in her head, the only sound to be heard in the vast abyss of blackness all around her.

"Pepper... Pepper..." Then she heard Martinex's voice in her ear. He was talking to her through the receiver in the helmet. "Take a deep breath please. Your vitals have risen alarmingly."

She stuttered and began to breathe in and out rapidly, trying to calm the loud thumping of her heart.

"That's it," he said encouragingly, "ten more steps or a short jump. Why don't you try a little jump?"

She shook her head quickly.

"Pepper, look at me please."

She refused to turn, she was too scared. She was frozen in place, the blackness seeming to swallow her whole. Her breathing was harsh and loud to her own ears and she could hear her pulse in her head now.

Martinex's voice was fading out. Her vision was slowly turning dark, cloudy wisps of fog appearing at the corner of her eyes.
What is happening to me?

Am I going to faint?

Something felt heavy on her hand. She looked down at it. Even though it was gloved, she could see the outline of her engagement ring on her finger. She felt the ring with her other hand and closed her eyes.

Is this how Tony felt when he disappeared into that wormhole? The blackness, the emptiness, the pure abject nothing...

She focused on Tony, the memory of his face so clear in her head. She could see his twinkling whiskey colored eyes gazing into her, his hair falling on his brow, his lips pulling back into his cheeky grin, with his dimpled cheeks.

I don't have anyone but you. His words echoed loudly in her head, over her heartbeat.

She swallowed hard, feeling a lump in her throat.

Tony... you are all I have too... It is time for me to get you back.

She opened her eyes and twisted her neck from side to side. Pepper could feel herself sweating but she was calm now, her heartbeat slowing down.

She turned to look at Martinex, whose worried face was pressed to the dome of the cleaning unit. "Pepper! Come in, please! Come back, I will reel you back!"

"No!" she said, then firmed her voice, "No Martinex, it is alright, I just had a little panic attack, that's all. I am fine."

Pepper took two deep breaths, filling her lungs with air. I just need to get a grip.

She straightened herself and steeled her nerve.
Pepper Potts! Now is not the time to go to pieces! We are on a mission!

She decided to take Martinex's advice and jumped towards the glass window.

"Just a little further," she stretched her arm out, "just a little more."

She whooped loudly as she touched the glass and pulled herself towards it. Then Pepper clasped her hand over her mouth.

Martinex said comfortably, "It is alright, no one can hear you except me."

"Alright Martinex, I am at the first window, let me take a look."

She pulled out her cleaning brush from her overall and pretended to wipe it across the glass. Then Pepper looked to her left and her right. She flattened herself right against the glass, trying to look inside.

"I can't see much, It is very dark inside."

"Use your helmet's flash beam, Pepper."

"Oh right!"

She tapped a button on the side of her helmet and a beam of light from the top of her helmet shone into the glass, illuminating the room behind it.

"Let's see here... a flat examining table. A couple of chairs... a gurney... a tool rack.. Oh..." she whispered, "this is not a cell. This is an operating theater!"

"Is there anyone in? Anyone we can save?"
"No... it is empty. I am moving to the next window."

She began to float sideways, using the cleaning wiper to pull herself to the left.

The cleaning ship moved along with her slowly. She peered into the next window and gasped.

"An operation was done recently in this room! It has been cleaned partially! There is blood all over the wall!"

She felt sick now.

"Pepper, move away from the window please!" Said Martinex firmly.

She listened to him and started to shift to the next window.

There was a flat wall in the middle. As she walked, Pepper asked, "Martinex, please can you check if Charlie and Mainframe are okay?"

"Roger that, Pepper. I'll keep you patched in as well."

She heard him flick a switch and say, "Come in Avengers, come in..."

His usage of the word 'Avengers' made her stomach clench slightly.

A faint click came over the intercom. The voices were garbled. Pepper stopped moving.

Please let them be okay. Please.

Martinex said loudly, "Team Avengers, come in! This is Pepper and Martinex from Team Clean. Do
you copy?"

The intercom buzzed and she smiled as Charlie soft voice came over the transmitter. "Loud and clear. This is Team Avengers, reporting from the prisons."

She could hear heavy gunfire in the background and asked with worry, "Charlie, are you alright? What about Mainframe?"

He chuckled deeply. "We are fine, ma'am. Mainframe and I are kicking up a storm here. We have freed Nebula and she's going on a killing spree."

"Nebula?" Asked Pepper, confused. "Who is that?"

"One of Thanos' adopted daughters. She was picked up by the space rats and imprisoned."

Pepper was still confused but she then heard Mainframe shouting her name over the din.

"Charlie, what is Mainframe saying?"

"Oh, fish biscuits! I completely forgot! Pepper! Nebula says Tony Stark was with her!"

Pepper squealed with joy. The confirmation that Tony was alive and here, so close, filled her with joy.

She forgot herself for a moment and let go of the space window, kicking her heels in happiness.

Then Pepper focused on his words. "Wait, what do you mean, he was?"

"Hold on! Wait!"

She heard the harsh pings of a laser being fired and then Charlie breathed heavily down the line.
"Nebula says Iron Man from Earth was in the cell next to hers. He was the only survivor of the fight against Thanos on Titan. But then he was taken away 10 minutes ago. To where??", she heard Charlie yell.

Mainframe came on the line. "Pepper, the space rats wanted to operate on him. They were curious about his Arc. You need to find him!"

She gasped. "He could be in one of these rooms! Take care, you two!"

Pepper began to move rapidly to the left, inching towards the next window as Martinex explained their location to Mainframe and terminated the call.

"Tony, Tony, where are you?? Hold on I'm going to find you!"

A few minutes or hours later, he couldn't make out how much time had passed, Tony realized he was in a dark square room, full of shadows. And he was standing on a small raised platform. His hands were at his sides, bound by bright blue energy to rings on the floor.

He tugged against the energy, pulling his hand towards him. "Must move hand up... gaaah!!! It is too damn strong!!"

He let go, his hand returning to his side, aching with the effort. The taste of blood in his mouth grew stronger and the smoky shadowiness of the room was starting to freak him out.

"So this is the Iron Man..." a disembodied deeply guttural voice said, from somewhere.

Tony turned his head, looking around as best he could. But he couldn't see anything.
"My my, somehow I did not expect you to be so... diminutive." The voice chuckled but Tony felt nothing. He just lowered his head and looked down at the floor.

The voice spoke again, a hint of mockery in it. "I was also expecting ... more fight, more vigor from someone bold enough to take on Thanos... and survive..."

The harsh fact that he was the only survivor, pierced him anew. He said quietly, "I am nothing and no one. Do what you will to me. It does not matter... nothing matters anymore..." Tony ended on a whisper.

Then he fell to his knees, gasping in pain as a large dark being punched him in the gut, hard and quick. He coughed, trying to ease the blinding pain in his stomach.

"You... can hit me.... all you want," he wheezed out, "It won't change.... anything..."

The being, now visible, draped in black wispy bandages and a thick cloak, hissed back at him, "Exactly, Iron Man, nothing can save you now."

From so close, he could see two beady blood red eyes glisten at him evilly. Tony closed his eyes, preparing for another blow, when the entire room shook.

"What is that?" the being exclaimed in shock and turned away. Tony opened his eyes.

Something was banging hard at the end of the room. He heard glass breaking and shattering and then a loud zipping sound.

The being snarled and pulled out a red, jagged sabre from its clock. Tony couldn't see much but he heard a muffled, vaguely familiar voice spoke from the shadows.

"Hey! Why don't you leave him alone and face me, you rat!"

He saw bright flashes of light flash across the darkness as a yellow laser shone from the shadows. The thing that was near him, took two hits to the chest, screaming in pain.
He looked up to see a shadowy figure holding a heavy ballistic laser weapon, emerge from the darkness. The figure was wearing a large black helmet with a reflector visor, so he couldn't see its face. It was clad in black and red leather with some type of weird symbol twinkling on its collar.

Tony realized the laser was aimed straight at him and he tried to stand up.

*I am not going to die on my knees. Stupid sentiment. But I am not.*

Then the figure rushed towards him and he tried to back away. But his bonds held tight, so he was forced to stand still.

He flinched as he saw the laser being warmed up and the figure aiming it for him. Then Tony realized the laser was pointed downwards at the rings on the floor. The figure neatly fired once and then again, destroying the rings.

He was finally free, so he staggered backwards, trying to move away from the helmeted figure. But he was still weak from the electric prod and fell on his back, crying out in pain.

The figure lowered itself to him and then took off its helmet, smiling at him.

He felt his heart race because here was a face he had never expected to ever see again.

Chapter End Notes

So I do not know how obvious this is but.... I miss the GOTG! Horribly! That's why I keep including some or the other reference to them.

Next week, the lovers unite and escape Loce Carcis.
"Pepper..."Tony whispered slowly. "Is it really you?"

He was feeling very dizzy, so he tentatively reached out to touch her reddish gold hair, shining beautifully in the darkness.

"Or are you, an alien apparition, courtesy of those damn bandage zombies?"

"Tony...", the voice was distinctly Pepper's, firm but loving with a hint of exasperation.

"If you are an apparition... or a robot, I must admit you are a damn good replica of the real Pepper Potts."

He patted its soft silky hair gently. "So red. How’d they make it feel so realistic?"

Then he cupped its cheek and said admiringly, "Soft and smooth... Even the freckles are in the right order. Scattered cutely over her nose. But yours are tad darker."
Then he lowered his gaze. "And impressively accurate figure dimensions as well."

"Mr. Stark." She said firmly, her lips quirking. "I'm here to get your bubble butt back to Earth. Kindly stop looking at my chest."

He looked into sky blue eyes that seemed to be looking into his soul. Eyes that he knew so well. Moist with unshed tears.

"What's this? Tears for your long lost fiance?" He whispered, the memory coming back to him.

"Tears of joy. I hate fiance-hunting." She ended with a quiver in her voice.

"Pep..." he said softly, his vision slightly blurry from holding back tears. "Pep, you came to save me... thank you... no one has..." his throat closed up and he coughed.

Pepper held him to her and he leaned on her leather covered shoulder, taking in her lovely smell of vanilla and lilies.

"Even in space, you smell like home...", he whispered. He kissed her lips gently and felt her shiver slightly. "And you taste like heaven." Peace filled his being, with the knowledge that she was alright and in front of him.

"And even in space, you are an incorrigible flirt, who won't keep his mouth shut." said Pepper, grinning against his lips. "Here, have some water."

She brought out a small bottle from her jacket and unscrewed the top. Pepper raised the bottle to his lips and he drank deeply because suddenly he was thirsty.

"Tony..." she said slowly, "I am going to get you out of here. And it's going to be okay."

He shook his head sorrowfully. "Nothing's ever going to be okay, Pepper. Ever again. It's all turned to dust."
She looked at him sadly. "I know, Tony, I am sorry. I went to Titan and saw what had happened." She patted his hair softly.

He stared at her, wide-eyed. "What! You were on Titan! Pepper! How... wait a minute..."

Tony raised himself slightly. "How on earth or rather space, did you get here??"

Pepper said firmly, "Tony, now is not the time to explain. We need to get out of here."

The entire building shook slightly and he looked around him.

"Now." she said firmly. Then Pepper tapped her helmet and spoke, "Martinex, I have Tony. I am coming out."

"Who is Martinex?" he asked quickly and a little suspiciously.

Pepper smiled slowly. "Just one member of the wonderful group of people who helped me."

He was still confused but Pepper rose and helped him stand. Tony tried standing on his own, trying not to show Pepper how weak he was.

He stood shakily and she let him go. Then he felt his stomach quiver with pain from his wound and Tony's knees buckled. He nearly collapsed but Pepper caught him just in time.

"Tony!" she exclaimed, "You are hurt! I'm sorry, why didn't I realize this?" He leaned against her softness, so grateful for her support.

"Hold on Tony. Come on, just this way." She supported him as she guided him towards the end of the room. He could now see it was a large window, with a giant crack on its surface. There was a beige sealant of some sort, covering a large hole.

Then Pepper gasped and whispered, "Tony, what has happened to your arc? What is this?"
He caught her hand quickly before she could touch it. "Pepper, don't! It will shock you!"

"Tony, what is it?"

"It is some kind of electric brace. It keeps subduing the nanobytes... So I can't use my suit. We need to get it off."

"How?"

"It needs a key, I think, to unlock it... or giant crowbar to pry it off. I'm not sure how to remove it. It will take some tinkering."

"Wait, let me ask Martinex."

Tony clenched his teeth at Pepper's reliance on her new space friend but kept his mouth shut as she spoke into her head piece, "Martinex, I need you to come inside. Please."

She held him, saying softly, "It won't be long, Tony. Don't worry, we are going to go home."

He held on to her quietly, still shocked at how Pepper had come to save him and damn grateful that she had.

Then the sealant rippled and he tensed as a tall lean crystal-headed male moved through it and smiled at them.

He smartly saluted Tony, his crystal head shining in the dim light. "First Officer Martinex of the Osgard Ravagers, at your service!"

"At ease, soldier." murmured Tony.

The first office moved towards him. "Pepper, allow me to help." Tony realized what he was offering
to do.

_Uh nooo, Crystal Head, I am not leaning on you!_

He tightened his grip on Pepper and stood up straight. "I am fine, thank you."

Then Tony stepped away from her but possessively took her hand.

Pepper quirked her eyebrow at him but then Martinex asked, "What is the problem, Pepper?"

_Why is he calling her by my nickname!_

Pepper explained and Martinex silently looked at the brace, daring to extend a finger towards it.

_Come on Rock Head, I dare you to touch it!_

But he didn't, much to Tony's disappointment and said softly, "It seems to be an electromagnetic brace. Tailored to his nanobytes energy signal. We cannot pry it off without hurting Mr Stark."

Tony said irritably, "So I guess we need to find the head bandage being, who put this on me in the first place. Unless it was cloaky bastard over here. " He pointed backwards at the High Inquisitor's body.

"Let's take a look." suggested Pepper.

They examined the smoldering body but it had nothing on it, that seemed like a key.

Pepper sighed and said, "We should go down to the jail cells. There should be a head guard or jailer who knows what to do."

Martinex nodded and said eagerly, "Mr Stark, you can stay in the space cleaning unit while we go
downstairs. You will be safe inside it and you won't get hurt. We will find the key and come back to you, never fear."

Tony stared in disbelief at the crystal headed officer, smiling beatifically at him. He looked at Pepper, who was biting her lip, her eyes filled with mirth.

"Sonny, I am not afraid of getting hurt! I am perfectly capable of fighting along with you! And this thing is attached to me, so I think I should come along as I am most interested in getting it off!"

To add to his disbelief, the space officer just looked at Pepper questioningly and asked, "What do you think, Pepper?"

Tony opened his mouth to argue some more but Pepper squeezed his fingers gently. He looked into her gentle blue eyes and felt a calmness wash over him.

She said with a soft smile, "I do not want to leave Tony alone. I will take care of him, Martinex."

He wanted to stress that he could take care of himself but then she continued, "After all, I have been doing such a good job for so long." And Tony smiled back, knowing he had no argument against that.

Pepper watched Martinex inch ahead cautiously, looking around a corner.

She whispered into her ear piece. "This is Team Clean. Come in Team Avengers."

Behind her, she heard Tony exclaim, "Team Clean!?"

Martinex shushed him and he grumbled under his breath.

Pepper smirked but continued, "Team Avengers, come in... this is Pepper and Martinex... we have
found Tony. I repeat... we have found Tony. Looking to rendezvous... come in Avengers."

"Avengers? Are Bruce and Steve here?" She heard Tony ask quickly.

Pepper turned around to look at him. His look of excitement made her heart sink. "No, Tony, I'm afraid not. These are just the teams that the Ravagers have split up into, for this mission."

He nodded quietly and went back to examining the spare laser pistol, that Martinex had given him.

Pepper looked around the corner. All was quiet and still. In the distance, she could hear shouts and gun fire.

"Charlie? Mainframe? Anyone?"

Martinex said softly, "They are not receiving the call. We need to move ahead."

They were out of the tower and in the prison block, where the ordinary prisoners were kept. From the number of space rat bodies around them, there had clearly been a huge fight. The fight was still taking place in the distance and they were moving towards the sound, to find Team Avengers and then find some sort of jailer, to get rid of Tony's electromagnetic brace.

They moved forward, down a long corridor. Pepper looked back at Tony. He was still too pale for her liking and she knew he was in pain.

*But the stubborn man just won't listen and stay in one place! He does not want to let me out of his sight and I ... I don't want him out of my sight either.*

He grinned at her and then raked his gaze down her body. Pepper rolled her eyes at him.

Then Martinex held up his hand and she froze in place. Of course, Tony conveniently bumped right into her.

He whispered against her ear. "You look damn sexy, Pep, I really like this whole lady-Boba Fett
look you have going on. Very kinky, leather, big laser gun and black helmet. Can you bring this outfit back to Earth with you?"

His beard tickled her ear and Pepper suppressed the urge to tremble. Instead she whispered back, "Tony, you have got to focus. We are on a mission."

Suddenly footsteps echoed behind them and they all turned quickly. Two large space rats entered the corridor, guns raised.

Before Pepper or Martinex could react, Tony calmly lifted his gun and fired two clean shots. Both dealers fell where they stood.

Martinex openly gaped at him in awe. Tony smugly said, "Focus... who needs to when you have reflexes like mine..."

Pepper just shook her head and sighed. But she was glad he had recovered enough to be his normal cocky self.

Tony gestured ahead. "First Officer, you check out the front and I will keep an eye on our behind."

"Roger that, Mr. Stark." said Martinex obediently and moved ahead.

Tony grinned at Pepper and offered her his hand. "Shall we continue, Miss Potts?"

"Yes, Mr. Stark." But she didn't take his hand, just to bug him.

They walked ahead, Tony behind her, Pepper keeping an eye out for any more attackers, gun raised. Martinex rounded a corner and exclaimed loudly, raising his hands high.

Pepper crept behind him, hoping to surprise the enemy, gun aimed forward. Her heart was racing as she heard the enemy say in a cold, metallic yet slightly feminine voice, "Drop the gun, stone head."

"Pep... Pepper, wait!" Tony hissed at her but she ignored him and stepped out from behind Martinex,
aiming her gun at the attacker.

She said politely, "Drop your weapon please."

She was facing down, what seemed like a robotic humanoid woman, beautifully colored in shades of lavender and light purple, with a slender build and a bald bluish-purple head. It was her cold black pupil-less eyes, shimmering with a deep-set rage, that chilled Pepper to the bone.

But she stood her ground, determined to be brave. The woman was holding a baton in each hand, the weapons crackling with electric energy. She menacingly twirled the batons and then joined them to form one large electric staff, surging with blue ribbons of electricity.

She angled the staff at Pepper and said, "And who the fuck are you supposed to be?"

Then she shrugged. "Doesn't matter. Step out of the way, tell your friend to drop his gun and I won't hurt you... much."

Pepper tightened her grip on her gun, her sight dead set on the woman's chest. "We do not want to fight you. We just want to find a jailer."

The woman smirked at her coldly and raised her staff and Pepper moved her finger on the trigger. Just then Tony came running in, from the other end of the corridor, at the humanoid's side, gun aimed at her, shouting, "Drop it, drop it or I fire!"

Both women turned, Pepper surprised how he ended up there, when he was supposed to be behind her.

He ran in front of Pepper and then he and the woman exclaimed at the same time.

"Stark!"

"Nebula!"
Tony raised his arms to his side, shielding Pepper. "Nebula, we don't want to fight. Please don't hurt Pepper, calm down. Put the weapon down."

She lowered her weapon slightly and then jerked her head in Pepper's and Martinex direction. "Tell your space friends to lower theirs."

Tony turned to them. "She's on our side, lower your guns. Please. I know her."

Martinex listened to Tony but Pepper didn't, still suspicious of the purple humanoid. Tony placed his hand on her hand and gently urged her, "Pepper, sweetheart... please..."

She did so with a nod and took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart.

He asked Nebula, "Have you seen ... what was their name, Pep, your friends team name?"

"Team Avengers."

Nebula snorted. "I do not know that name but there are two Ravagers, far behind me. I am clearing the area of space rats and they are freeing prisoners from their cells. What are you nimrods and stonehead searching for?"

Pepper tensed, aware she was baiting them but Tony said evenly, "I want to get this off." He pointed at his electromagnetic brace.

The humanoid said with mirth, "I get you, Stark. I had to take off my electro-cuffs as well. All you need is a space rat dressed in bright blue with a little cap. Those are the head jailers. They have dozens of keys on them. You can find one if you take this left turn and go downward."

He nodded. "Where are you going, Nebula?"

She replied rudely, "What's it to you, tin man?"

Pepper bristled and was going to take a step forward but Tony caught her hand in his and squeezed
it. He said calmly, "I am just asking. Do you need any help or-

She didn't let him finish. "I do not need any help. I am going to get off this rock and find my father, slit his throat and watch him slowly bleed out."

Pepper widened her eyes at Nebula's vehemence but Tony calmly said, "Alone? You want to take him on alone?"

Nebula sneered, narrowing her beady black eyes, "Do I have a choice? I saw you and your team of pansies fail miserably at trying to stop him."

Pepper made a low growl in her throat and Tony said evenly, "You are right. We failed, he won. Fine. Good luck to you, Nebula. Fly safe."

She snorted again and pushed past him, brushing against Pepper as she left. "Good luck to you too, tin man."

Pepper glared at her departing back and then felt Tony's hand gently pulling her along.

"Come on, Pep." he said sadly. "Leave her be. She's lost a lot too. And she is right."

She was saddened by his bleak tone and the haunted look in his eyes. "Tony," Pepper whispered softly, cupping his cheek, "Tony, we will fix this... somehow."

He just smiled sadly at her and said, "Let's go find a head jailer and get off this damn rock. Come on."

Together they walked down the left narrow corridor in the direction Nebula had pointed at.
Standoff at Checkpoint Auction

Chapter Notes

Sorry for not uploading anything last weekend. I was busy with my other fic.

This weekend, three chapters, Friday, Sat, Sun, starting with this one, detailing how the Ravagers and Pepperony escape the space rats.

_________________________

Tony had taken point this time, Martinex flanking the back and Pepper in the middle. He was very tired now, his chest and back ached but he was determined to be strong and protect Pepper. Especially after she had told him what the space rats really were: organ traffickers in outer space.

As the corridor widened and they seemed to be approaching a sort of central location, he looked back at her. "This could be a bad fight, you want to sit this one out?"

She gave him a cool look and he grinned at her. "I have to ask, Potts, you know that."

Pepper cocked her gun and tapped her headband, the black helmet descending over her face. "I am ready to kick some ass, are you, Mr. Stark?"

Tony nodded dumbly, his blood pooling around his groin. *She’d kill me if I tell her but ... Space warrior Pepper is really turning me on.*

She neatly stepped to his side and he shook his head, to clear it of his lusty thoughts.
There was a large white door in front of them, the sound of voices raised angrily, coming from behind it. They stood against it, trying to make out what was going on inside.

"Pepper, you go left, I am in the middle, Mr Stark, you can be on the right." said Martinex.

Tony shook his head. "No way, to just march in is pure suicide. We'd get shot."

Pepper said thoughtfully, "We need to cause a distraction. Something to grab their attention."

Tony snapped his fingers. "I have an idea! Let me go in! You two stay here. I enter, get everyone to look at me, you both sneak in, one on the left and the other on the right and start shooting."

Martinex nodded excitedly. "Excellent plan, Mr Stark!"
Tony grinned at him. "Hey Officer, you can call me Tony."

Pepper shook her head sternly. "It is a very dangerous plan. You just go in there as an easy target... no way Tony! Let me go instead."

He cupped her chin, looking into her eyes. "Pep, you can't go. I was their prisoner remember, they will get distracted, wondering how I escaped. Don't worry, it will be alright. And I won't be unarmed, I am going to strap this gun," he raised his pistol, "to my back, and go in, hands raised. It worked in Die Hard, it is going to work here."

She just tightened her jaw and lowered her gaze. He stroked his thumb over her satiny soft cheek. "Don't worry, Pepper... I am going to be careful."

Pepper moved away with a nod but he heard her murmur, "You always say that... but I never stop worrying..."

He did not know how to respond to that, so he instead focused on strapping the gun to his back with some sort of space tape, provided by Martinex.

Tony stood before the door, looking at Pepper on his left and Martinex on his right. He said quietly, "Remember sneak in, assess the situation and then shoot."

They nodded at him, Pepper's eyes large and worried. Then he pushed the doors open quickly and entered.

Before him was a large cavernous room, with heavy drapes along its walls. It looked like an old-fashioned 1950’s theater with large plush velour seats. The center of the room was circular and filled with tables, on which multiple glass jars, bowls and vases were placed.

There were things floating in the jars but he couldn't make out what they were. Then he realized he had walked right in the middle of a tense stand-off.

The theater was divided into two arcs. On the left arc of the room, in the middle row of seats, was a sleek steel-grey android holding a large sniper rifle. Behind her was a short Asian lady, dressed in
black leather with a white tank top, glaring menacingly, a vicious looking laser bayonet raised high in one hand.

On the right arc, were a large number of space rats, scattered amongst the rows, all crouching and hiding behind the plush seats, guns aimed at the two beings on the left.

One of the space rats hissed angrily, "For the last time, Ravagers, put the guns down, we have you outnumbered twenty to one."

"Look at it this way, space rats..." said the female Bruce Lee quietly, "You are stuck in here with us. And in space, no one will hear you scream."

The space rats started to screech angrily and the din irritated Tony. He took two steps forward and said loudly, "Hey, that's from Alien right, the James Cameron movie?"

Everyone turned to stare at him. He grinned. *Now I have your attention.*

"Wait, I got it wrong." He snapped his fingers. "Dang it, it was Ridley Scott who directed Alien. James Cameron, he... he did Avatar... I am mixing up the two. Avatar, another great alien movie. Any of you catch it?"

The space rats were talking to themselves in their alien tongue, while Lady Bruce Lee asked harshly, "Who are you, stranger?"

Tony's job was to keep them focused on him. Besides, he was enjoying himself. So he said with a drawl, "I am known by many names. Tin Man, Iron Man, the Consultant, the Mechanic, the Merchant of Death and oh... my favorite: the greatest lover that ever lived."

The lady snorted at that and he grinned at her.

One space rat exclaimed loudly, "Prisoner 616, Terran with nanobyotic chest! How did you escape?"

He was going to reply, when from somewhere up in the balcony seats, a large African American
man stood up and said in a booming voice, "Pepper's man! Tiny Stark!"

Tony dropped his jaw with shock. "It's Tony! Not Tiny!"

Then he realized what the man said. "Hey, how do you know Pepper?"

Lady Bruce Lee said angrily, "Charlie! You were supposed to be hiding!"

A space rat howled angrily and then the room erupted into gunfire.

Tony ducked and ran for cover as both sides fired shots at each other, tearing up the auditorium violently. An orchestra of laser pings, electric bolts and good old-fashioned bullets, filled the room, nearly deafening in its crescendo. The glass objects in the middle, were being smashed by the exchange of gunfire and shards of glass were flying everywhere.

He couldn't see Martinex or Pepper. He began to crawl between the seats, trying to avoid getting shot.

Then he heard the giant from the balcony, shout, "Suppressing Fire!" and the heavy drill fire of a machine gun filled the cavernous room.

*Is he crazy!*

He covered his head with his hands and pressed himself to the floor, scared to move. Then he felt the gun strapped to his back and pulled it off.

*Oh thank god, I have you.*

The machine gun was firing into the space rats with gusto, they were howling and screeching from the endless shooting.

He heard someone, most likely Lady Bruce Lee, yell loudly, "Charlie! Cut it out! You might hit Tony!"
Okay, how do they all know me?

He raised his head slightly and gasped because two rows below him, he could see a space rat inch forward on its belly, a small round ball in its hand. It raised the ball, aiming towards Lady Bruce Lee and the Android.

Tony didn't think. He raised himself into a crouch and lithely jumped down on the space rat, ignoring the jarring pain passing through his body, from the impact of the fall.

They wrestled for control, Tony trying to grab the ball, that he instinctively knew, was a bomb. The space rat was lighter than him but strong, pulling at him, trying to scratch his face with its claws.

They turned, such that it was now on top of Tony. He punched it in the face, once, twice and then saw it open its mouth, a large gaping hole filled with teeth.

The creature had caught one of his hands in a vice-like grip. His gun was in his other hand but he couldn't straighten it to fire a shot because he was busy trying to keep its drooling, teeth-filled mouth away from his face.

"Buddy, no teeth on the first date." He muttered to the snarling space rat.

Suddenly the rat was yanked backwards off him. He sat up and then things seemed to occur in slow motion.

Pepper stood before him, legs akimbo. She had pulled the space rat off him and was holding it firmly by the throat. It struggled, so she punched it hard with the back of her gun and then shot it straight in the face quickly.

Tony swallowed. For some reason, the words Ooga-chaka, ooga-ooga were echoing loudly in his head as he gazed up her sinfully long, denim covered legs, slender torso in black red leather and helmet covered face. She rested her laser pistol on her thigh, staring down at him.

I can't stop this feeling
Deep inside of me
She tapped the side of her helmet and it collapsed into a band around her neck, revealing her delicate porcelain face and sky blue eyes. Then she shook her hair out.

*Girl, you just don't realize  
What you do to me*

He was so dumbstruck by her confident, sexy Amazonian-meets-space warrior avatar, that Tony dimly realized she was holding out her hand and saying his name.

"Tony..." the warrior said to him softly, "Are you alright?"

He nodded, swallowing hard and then took her hand, marveling in her strength as she lifted him to his feet.

Pepper moistened her lips, her little pink tongue darting out between them and his heart began to thump loudly.

*Lips as sweet as candy  
Its taste is on my mind*

He looked into her eyes, so steadfast and firm on him, worry in their azure depths.

*I'm hooked on a feeling  
I'm high on believing  
That you're in love with me*

"Miss Potts, where did you learn to shoot like that?" He whispered incredulously as she reloaded her gun.

Pepper gave him a slow sultry grin that hit him straight in the solar plexus.

"Oh, Mr Stark. I have a lot of hidden talents."
He whistled appreciatively. "I'm grateful for them."

He was going to pull her into a hard kiss, just because she looked so cute but the sound of shots brought him back to the present. Pepper tugged on his hand and whispered urgently. "Tony, this way!"

She moved nimbly between the seats and Tony followed her. Thanks to the machine gun, the space rats were down to just to twenty or twenty five in number. At least it seemed that way. The persistent bastards had gone on the offensive instead of retreating and had aggressively pinned down Lady Bruce Lee and the Android, who were struggling to get a chance to shoot. The giant with the machine gun, was nowhere to be seen.

Then Tony realized they were moving within the right arc and straight for the space rat army.

He hissed at Pepper, "Why are we going towards the space rats? We should be running away from them!"

"I want to end this, Tony! Aleta and Mainframe are injured! We need to finish this now!"

He glanced around her. "What's the plan, Pep? And where is Crystal Head?"

"I told him to circle from the other side. Charlie's coming too. We need to flush these space rats out. And do not call Martinex by that name, Tony, it's rude."

He chuckled childishly to himself but then shut up as Pepper turned to glare at him.

"Alright, I won't make fun of him." Tony murmured, chastised.

She stopped moving and crouched. He took a knee behind her.

They were very close to the space rat army at the back of the theater. From this position, Tony could see the dealers crouching behind seats, guns aimed at the left side of the room. They hadn't noticed Pepper and him.
"Pepper, we are damn close to danger."

"Okay Tony, here's what we need to do. You stay in this row. I move two rows up. We start picking off space rats from here. Either they get up and move downwards or they come at us. In any case, that should give the Ravagers some respite."

"The Ravagers...." he said slowly "and they ..... are...."

Pepper said wryly, "The people in the left arc, Aleta and Mainframe and Martinex and some more... they helped me come here. Helped me find you."

"And what are they exactly? Space superheroes? Intergalactic police?"

Pepper paused and muttered, "Space pirates..."

He raised his eyebrows at that and gave her a look. "You hitched a ride into space with a bunch of space pirates? Okay, who are you and what have you done with my sweet innocent CEO?"

She shrugged and said softly, "I didn't know what had happened to you. I couldn't just leave you in space."

Pepper leaned back against him gently and whispered in his ear, "I love you, Tony Stark and I was not going to lose you."

He nuzzled her and whispered back, "I love you too, Pepper. Thank you for saving my sorry ass... again!"

She grinned and whispered, "Let me check on Martinex."

She put her helmet back on and spoke softly into the transmitter, "Martinex, what is your position?"
Tony watched tensely as the space rats seemed to titter and whisper amongst themselves, snarling and hissing. Then he gasped as he saw where they were looking. A large black robed creature had entered the room, from a back door behind Pepper's friends.

"Shit! Another High Inquisitor!"

Pepper hissed as she saw what had seen, "Fuck! He's right behind Aleta and Mainframe!"

He couldn't resist saying, "Language, Potts!" as she frantically whispered, "Mainframe, Aleta come in! A different sort of space rat has sneaked into the room! From behind! Come in!"

From their vantage point, Tony could see the Android tap the side of her head as if something was irritating her. But she just shook her head and went back to shooting after two taps.

"Oooo..." said Pepper irritably. "I think their comms must be jammed."

Tony muttered, "How do we let them know what-

Then Pepper exclaimed, "Martinex! Shoot the black bogey! I repeat, shoot it down!"

Suddenly from somewhere on their side of the room, a shot was fired that hit the High Inquisitor straight in the chest. It screeched in pain and both Lady Bruce Lee and the Android turned, alerted to its presence.

Tony was still reeling from the surprise shot, when Pepper exclaimed, "That's our cue! Come on Tony!"

She stood up and ran quickly towards the space rats ahead of them, gun raised. "Covering fire!"

"Pepper!" He yelled, running after her, reloading his own gun as Pepper began to shoot down the surprised space rats.

Tony was behind her, stunned at the way she was moving as she fired, picking off the space rats.
where they stood.

Now he could see Martinex and the giant black man advancing on the space rats from the other side of the left arc, firing rapidly into the crowd. The space rats were cornered on both sides and were taken by complete surprise.

He shot a few space rats as well, keeping an eye on Pepper all the while as she literally went on a shooting rampage.

"Pepper! Be careful!" He yelled at her back.

"As if you are careful, Tony!" she called out.

He was about to retort, when he saw a short space rat dressed entirely in blue bandages with a rather cute hat, run away from the battle. The dealer was running towards the other side of the arc.

A blue-robed space rat... a head jailer! He has to have a key!

"Oi! Come back here!" He yelled. Tony took two steps in that direction but then stopped quickly and turned back towards Pepper.

Cover her or run after the jailer....

He stood on the balls of his feet, unsure what to do.

"Tony!" He heard her exclaim. "Tony, leave me, catch the jailer!"

Tony didn't need to be told twice. He ran towards the fleeing jailer, who was practically flying down the seating area.
Tony didn't need to be told twice. He ran towards the fleeing jailer who was practically flying down the seating area.

*Oh god! He's damn fast!*

The side of his chest which had been stabbed, was throbbing now. He clutched it briefly, trying to steel himself.

*Come on Tony, stop being such a baby!*

He aimed his gun at the jailer and fired but missed. A bullet whizzed by him, missing him narrowly. Tony turned and shot the shooter down.

Then he saw that the jailer had reached the bottom of the left area and was running towards the back door, on the other side of the room.

Tony aimed, this time concentrating on the future path of the jailer, by roughly estimating its speed. He fired and hit the jailer in the foot, crippling him.

The space rat fell to the floor and Tony ran down the row of seats he was on, determined to catch it this time. He skipped a few stairs, each jump making his chest ache but he finally ran between the tables, dodging the shattered glass as he approached the jailer, who was wailing loudly.

Tony grimaced because he could now see he had shot the space rat straight in the knee and the limb was nearly severed from its body. He raised his gun and pointed it at the writhing dealer, making sure to keep a safe distance from it.

"Alright buddy, you see this?" he pointed at the electromagnetic restrictor. "I need the key."
The space rat garbled something at him and hissed angrily, catching its torn knee.

"I will take that as a 'I do not understand you'. I'm going to ask nicely once more."

Tony pointed at the restrictor and mouthed "K" "E" "Y". He was busy pantomiming various gestures on how to unlock something, when he saw Lady Bruce Lee come towards him.

Martinex and Pepper were fighting the space rats. In the midst, he could see the giant taking on all comers, tossing space rats wildly in the air.

"She's fine, Stark. Do you need some help?" She said with a grin.

"Sure... if you can speak hissing alien and get this guy to give me a key."

She shook her head wryly. "Let's use the universal language of shake till it drops."

Tony was confused as she bent and caught the space rat by its good leg. Then he realized what she was going to do.

Lady Bruce Lee lifted the space rat straight off the ground. Even though she was short, it was only as tall as a child, so she could lift it, such that it dangled from her hand.

"Erm lady..."

"Calm down, Stark, I got this."

It began to squeal as she shook it lightly.

He tried to object. "I don't think that's the right approach."

"Stark, do you want that thing off your chest or not?" She asked him, one eye brow raised
threateningly.

"I do but I do not want to torture this little guy either."

Lady Bruce Lee snorted. "Are you feeling sorry for this heap of teeth because it looks like a child? I can assure you, it isn't worth your pity."

She twirled the rat and Tony shuddered at the blood red, glowing eyes and snarling teeth glistening at him.

"I... I know it isn't a child but I would like to try and reason with it."

"Alright, go for it."

Lady Bruce Lee lowered the dealer back to the ground. It sat up and hissed at both of them. Tony came a little closer and said slowly, "I am going to put my gun away."

He tucked his gun into his pants. Both the dealer and the lady watching him suspiciously. Then Tony gestured at the electro-magnetic brace and mouthed, "I want this off."

The red eyes blinked at him. Then he pointed at the back door. "You get to leave."

The creature looked at him and looked at where he was pointing. It growled out something.

Tony repeated, "You help with this..., pointing at his Arc, "You can go." He pointed at the door and then waved his hands in that direction.

"Go, you are free!"

The lady said derisively, "Stark, look at his leg. He won't be able to get very far."
"I can heal it with the nanites if it helps me get free."

"Oh. Okay... let me try something."

Lady Bruce Lee came close to him, pointed at his Arc and then gestured at the space rat's wounded leg. The rat squealed and she enunciated, "N A N I T E S".

It wheezed and muttered to itself and then, very reluctantly, pulled something long and sparkly out of its pocket. It offered it to Tony and then pulled its hand back, chattering excitedly and pointing at his Arc.

"Yes, yes!" He said impatiently, "I will help you. Please... just give it to me."

Finally it handed him the key, an obsidian black crystal with a red symbol on the front. Tony brought it close to his Arc slowly, slightly scared that it might shock him.

But the restrictor trembled at the presence of the key and he pushed it into the restrictor, bracing himself for the unknown.

"It's glowing!" Lady Bruce Lee exclaimed.

He felt a gently soothing current pass through him and to his astonishment, the restrictor simply disappeared into the cylinder.

_It was just sucked in ... wow... the key is actually a container for the energy brace._

He was fascinated and wanted to study it more, so he tucked it into his pocket. Then Tony looked at the space rat, who was chattering nervously to itself and seemingly scared.

He smiled reassuringly. "A deal is a deal, buddy." It just closed its eyes as he crouched.

"I am not going to hurt you, little guy. I am trying to help you." He murmured.
Tony could feel the nanites swirling in his chest, as if they were happy to be free.

*Good to have you back, little guys... now you need to help me.*

He touched his Arc, feeling the surge of power flowing through him. Then he pinched his fingers, capturing a few on his hand.

Lady Bruce Lee and the space rat were watching him, wide-eyed.

"Shit, Stark.. what the fuck is that?"

"Nanotechnology that will can construct my armor out of their energy. And heal flesh."

He extended his hand to the injured knee of the space rat, who shied backwards nervously.

"Hey buddy, it's okay. I won't hurt you. Don't worry."

He gently lowered the nanites who bounced off his hand and trickled onto the creature's leg.

It hissed and squealed as the nanites began to move through the torn flesh, working their magic. But its beady red eyes were fixed on him, bright and wide.

He said soothingly, "It will heal soon. Don't worry."

Then Tony remembered Pepper. He quickly looked up at the top of the left seating area. He was relieved to see that the fighting had stopped and she was high-fiving the giant man and the android triumphantly.

*Look at my Pepper. She did so well on her own. Found space pirates, traveled into space with them, went to Titan, tracked me down and saved my broken ass. Thank God for you, Pepper. You are all I have and all I need.*
He was disturbed from his thoughts because the space rat hissed loudly and scrambled to its feet. Before he or the lady could react, it ran past him, squealing and then rounded the corner towards the back door.

Lady Bruce Lee shook her head. "A miracle performed on one of the very creatures that deal with human parts for a living."

He watched as the little blue hat bobbed upwards from the distance and disappeared out of sight.

"There's been too much blood. Too much loss. Too much dust. I have had enough for a lifetime." Tony said tiredly, suddenly feeling the weight of the world on his shoulders, just as he did when Thanos cradled his head.

Then he felt a soft hand on his shoulder. Lady Bruce Lee was looking at him with soft brown eyes and a hint of a smile around her thin lips. "You know... for someone called Iron Man... you are surprisingly soft. Nice of you to do that, Tiny."

He made a loud noise in his throat at her teasing and she laughed.

Then Lady Bruce Lee looked behind him with worry and he turned.

Pepper, the giant, Martinex and the android were running down the stairs rapidly.

"Aleta! Tony!", yelled Pepper as she headed towards them, "we have got to get out of here! Now!"

"What happened?" said Lady Bruce Lee or rather Aleta.

Pepper reached them and took his hand, squeezing it gently. She said urgently, "Krugarr and Starkar have been setting up bombs."

"Yeah, I know. They will go off on my signal, once we are safely in the hangar."
"Yes, that was the plan but trigger-happy Krugarr has set their timers on NOW!" said the android.

"Now!! What the fuck!" Exclaimed Aleta in anger.

"Language..." whispered Tony daringly but she heard him and gave him a quick glare.

"Okay, how much time do we have?"

Maritinex and the giant man reached them, the latter amazingly not out of breath for someone so large.

Pepper spoke into her helmet, "Starkar, how much time do we have to get out of here?"

Her blue eyes went wide with shock as she said, "Ten minutes! That's it?!?"

Aleta swore and Pepper's hand tightened on his. "Alright." she said, still speaking into her head piece, "alright, yes, Martinex and I will keep you posted."

Then she said to them grimly, "We need to reach the main gate where Starkar and Krugarr are... that's all the way on the other side of this rock. And we have ten minutes."

The Ravagers looked tense. The Android said with worry, "That's impossible. We are in the middle of the structure."

She pulled up a holographic map from her arm. A bright orange dot blinked strongly on the map.

"This is us. This is an auction room. We need to get out of here, go past all the jail cells again and then past the main area and then out of the main gate. The odds of us reaching the pick up point in 10 minutes, are nearly nil to-"
Aleta cut her off. "Mainframe, we are going to beat those odds. Somehow."

Tony looked to the left, from where they were supposed to go. Then he looked at the right.

"Can your ships be piloted remotely?"

Aleta looked at him thoughtfully. Martinex said, "Yes Tony, they can be. We have the navigation controls in our comms." He tapped the large console piece on his wrist.

Then Tony pointed at the right. "So why can't we call the ships remotely to this prison's hangar and board them directly from there? Instead of going to the main gate."

They all stared at him quietly for a moment.

"That's a good idea, Sir." said the android, Mainframe, eagerly. "But I am afraid there is no direct route between this room and the hangar. The hangar is only accessible through the lower levels of this structure and that's through the prison cells and onto the processing unit. And we would need a
key card to access the staircase that leads down to the lower processing unit and then onto the hangar! It's just too far!"

Then Pepper snapped her fingers. "We can make our own route!"

Chapter End Notes

Our heroes escape tomorrow!
She pointed at the floor. "Mainframe, would you say, we are right over the hangar?"

The android punched in some numbers and beep booped to herself.

Aleta smiled slowly at Pepper. "Red, I see what you have in mind. And I like it. Charlie! Start warming up please!"

Tony looked from one to the other, damn confused as to what was going on. "Erm... I thought we just had 10 minutes to leave. Why are we all standing here then?"

Pepper gently brushed his hair off his brow in a very familiar gesture. He relaxed, feeling a wave of calmness wash over him as she softly said, "Tony, don't worry. Charlie is going to make a hole in the floor that leads us straight to the hangar."
At first, he didn't process her words because of her soothing touch on his warm aching head. Then Tony realized what she said.

"What!?"

She smiled and pointed at Charlie, who was rotating his arm and flexing it, much like a pitcher before a big baseball game.

"The big guy has a very powerful bionic arm. It is enforced with titanium. He can punch a hole in the ground."

"No way!" Said Tony incredulously.

"Yup. And Mainframe can help. I see your brace is off. Are you feeling better?"

He looked into her clear blue eyes and decided to tell her, a little white lie. "Yes, Pepper, I am."

_Even though my chest is throbbing, my head aches and my legs feel as if they are made of jelly._

Pepper smiled sweetly at him and raised his hand to her lips, kissing it. "Hold on, Tony. We just need to get out. Then you can rest. And I will take care of you."

He nodded and then watched with awe as the giant Charlie crouched low, pulled his fist back and punched the floor with force.

The floor seemed to tremble slightly with the force of the blow. But Tony was amazed to see that a giant crack had formed on it.

"Come Charlie! Let's go! Come on!" The Ravagers began to cheer him on as he relentlessly slammed his fist into the floor, deepening the crack.
The Android was also helping him with her titanium arms, hammering like pistons, into the ground rapidly.

Tony looked down at his own hands. *I could turn the suit on. I think my foot thrusters could help.*

He touched his Arc and waited but the nanites simply swirled blankly and failed to respond.

He took a deep breath, the fact that he was worn out and effectively useless, hitting him hard.

*Come on guys... at least the feet. Just that... come on!* 

He concentrated and felt the nanites encase his feet in his rocket thrusters and titanium casing, up till his knees.

*That's it!* 

Pepper gasped with pleasure. "Tony! Can you help?"

He nodded with a smile and walked towards the growing hole on the floor.

"Guys! We better hurry, we have just 9 minutes left!" Aleta chimed in.

The hole was small enough for a child to fit through but Tony knew it had to be widened, so everyone could pass through easily. They didn't have time for squeezing through, one by one.

Charlie was taking a breather and whistled low as he admired Tony's boots. "So red and shiny."

"Thanks big guy, now watch this." Tony turned on the hover mechanism and flew upwards, then he pushed his legs back down on the hole, slamming it with gusto.

He felt the ground cave under his blow and crumble as he landed on the lower floor, recovering.
in time to land, feet first, on a heap of rubble.

Tony looked up at the sound of cheers and whoops coming from above him. He was trying to steady himself because his entire body was trembling from the effort of slamming the floor.

Then Pepper's astonished face came into view. "Tony! Are you alright?"

"Yes!" He held his arms out. "Jump down, Pepper, I will catch you."

It was Tony's turn to be astonished as she drifted down like a feather, landing next to him on the rubble.

"Whoa! How did you..."

She clicked her heels together with a grin. "The power of jet stream, built into my boots."

He wanted to ask more but Lady Bruce Lee came down the hole and they moved away to make room as the rest of the Ravagers drifted down to the lower level.

"Pepper! We are right there! You are a genius!" The giant exclaimed and patted her head like a dog.

"Guys! Let's celebrate later! Right now, we need to get out of here! Come on!" Aleta said urgently.

They turned and ran through a long, narrow, winding corridor with a metal floor and glass walls.

Tony was alternating between hovering and running because he was feeling weaker and weaker.

Suddenly they stopped and he held out his hands, to save himself from walking right into the wide back of the giant.

The giant turned and beamed at him with a child-like smile that lit up his black eyes. "It's okay, Tiny.
Don't be scared."

Tony sputtered. "Oi! My name isn't Tiny! And I'm not sca-"

He was cut off by Pepper turning back to give him a stern look. She raised her finger to her lips.

Then Tony leaned around the giant's broad back and saw why they had stopped.

Up ahead, was a giant slumbering lizard-like dog with a scaly narrow head and four furry legs. He gulp as he saw multiple razor sharp fangs jutting out of its closed mouth. It was sleeping right at the entrance of the hangar's landing bay.

*Cerebrus guarding the gates of Hell. How fitting.*

"Everybody, be very quiet." whispered the Android softly. "Be as quiet as possible. We mustn't wake it up."

"What are we going to do??" whispered Martinex urgently. "We can't get to the ships without passing it!"

Aleta muttered softly, "I have a plan. It is a dog at heart. Stay here, guys. Do not interfere."

Tony watched wide-eyed as the petite slender lady slowly walked towards the snoring dog.

*What on Earth or rather in space, is she going to do??*

She moved in front of it and he saw two large pointed ears appear at the top of the scaly head before the dog opened yellow diamond-shaped eyes and raised its giant head from its legs.

It started snarling slowly as Aleta pulled out something from her pocket. She raised it in the air and the dog promptly stopped snarling.
Its yellow eyes blinked and focused on the small round object in her hand.

Aleta said slowly, "Who wants to play fetch?"

Tony opened his mouth in shock. *No way is that going to work!*

He closed his eyes tightly, unsure that he wanted to see the lizard dog eat Lady Bruce Lee. Then he heard a soft jingling sound and the sound of claws loudly clicking and clacking on the metal floor.

Tony opened his eyes to see that the lizard dog had bounded away after the jingling ball, leaving the doorway clear.

Aleta looked back at them triumphantly. "All clear! Let's run, we have 3 minutes left!"

He was stupefied as to how that had worked in their favor but once again, there was no time to wonder as the group ran towards the curved doorway, which opened into a huge open bay with a high ceiling and filled with the space rats vehicles, from their all-terrain bikes to large grey spaceships.

Martinex yelled, "Quick, to the end of the hangar! Our ships are past the gates!"

The end of the hangar was made up of two large yellow metallic doors, which were currently closed.

*So damn far away. How am I going to reach the end?*

His legs were trembling slightly and he could feel the nano bytes rippling in his chest.

Then Tony snuck a sideways glance at Pepper, who was running lightly alongside him.

*I can make it. Just a little more and I am off this damn space rock. And I can be alone with Pepper. And we can go home.*
The thought cheered him up and he got a little of his strength back.

They were right at the beginning of the hangar, which seemed as long as a football field and more. He knew that if he was at full strength, he could have easily flown right to the end, carrying the others one by one.

But he was on his last dregs of strength, so he had to rely on his rocket thrusters and his feet.

"How do we open the doors?" Yelled Pepper.

"I am remotely hacking into it as we speak!" piped up Mainframe.

Aleta said, "People! Use your jet streams in spurts for speed! We have just two minutes left!"

He used his thrusters to propel himself forwards. Tony grinned as he saw Pepper jet forward with glee and then turn them off like a pro, to lightly land on her feet, enabling her to take large jumps quickly.

"Looking good, Pep!"

She smiled back at him. Then the building shook hard.

"Uh oh! There's the first bomb! People, hurry!"

The android was taping into her console rapidly and stood still for a minute. The rest of the group moved slightly ahead but he was close to her because he was anyhow moving slower than the rest.

The entire building shook powerfully again and some sixth sense told Tony to look up.

To his horror, he saw a large metallic tower of rods and wires fall from the ceiling, hurtling towards him and the android.
"Hey! Hey! Look out!" He yelled. Tony swerved and pushed her out of the way, just in time, using a mighty blast from his thrusters.

They both stumbled ahead as the tower slammed into the floor behind them.

Tony couldn't balance himself and fell heavily on his chest, the ground rushing up to meet him. The impact shook him to his core, he felt his flesh and bones slam into the ground. As he lay there, he felt the nanites surge around in his chest and go quiet. His thrusters retracted back into his chest and he couldn't move his legs. Or anything else for that matter.

He lay there, feeling the ground beneath him shake and tremble mightily.

*But I do not care. I am done.*

He closed his eyes, a loud ringing noise echoing in his ears endlessly.

He heard Peter's shrill boyish voice in his ears. *Mr Stark. I don't feel so good.*

*I know, kid, I know. I don't feel so good either. Just close your eyes and go to sleep. I will see you soon.*

He felt his breathing slow and something was shaking him but he just didn't care.

Then the smell of lilies filled his senses and he opened his eyes, remembering Pepper. Sure enough, her sky blue eyes were looking into his, filled with worry and pain.

He opened his mouth to try and say something, apologize for dying now after she had gone to so much trouble but he was too weak, too tired.

He could see Pepper open her mouth and say something, gesturing at someone he couldn't see. She seemed so ethereal and so beautiful, his chest hurt just looking at her.
Then he heard her voice from far away, pleading with him to hold on, to stay with her, to hold on. He felt her warm hand tightly squeeze his and then Tony realized he was being lifted in the air, he was no longer on the ground and he was being cradled against a solid strong chest.

He looked up into the friendly black eyes of the giant, who whispered, "It is okay, Tiny, I got you."

Tony swallowed hard. One part of him was horrified that he was being carried by a man because he was too weak to walk on his own. The other part didn't care and just want to get away.

He listened to the other part and closed his eyes, feeling as if he was wrapped in cotton wool because he could no longer feel the tremors or hear the sound of the building being blown apart. The giant floated gently in the air and then he could see a harsh yellow light shining underneath his closed eyelids.

Then the light disappeared and Tony was lowered to something soft and gentle on his cheek and he snuggled into it. The softness made him think of Pepper and he sat up in alarm, ignoring the pain in his chest from the sudden jerk.

"Pepper!" He cried out and opened his eyes with an effort.

"Here, Tony, I am here." He saw her familiar face smiling down at him and he cupped her satiny soft cheek.

"Pepper, where are we?"

"You are safe now, Tony, that's what matters. Lie back down." She gently pushed him back onto the soft gurney. Tony caught her hand and tucked it under his chin.

"You stay with me, Pepper." he whispered mulishly to her, wondering why Pepper's eyes were so moist and shiny.

"Of course, I am not going anywhere, Tony."

He closed his eyes, content to drift away into a dreamless sleep with Pepper's soft delicate hand
stroking his hair.

Chapter End Notes

Tony is alright and safe. No need to worry (I am talking to you here @igotyoufirst) Next week, on board the Tatiana, Tony tells his sad tale to the Ravagers. See you then! Thanks for reading!
Pepper quickly changed out of her space clothes and into a clean Ravager uniform. It belonged to one of the Tatiana's crew members, who matched Pepper's height. It was a little loose for her, so she neatly rolled up her sleeves and tucked the pant cuffs into her boots. She checked her hair and then ran to the medical bay.

She was scared about Tony's health. After saving Mainframe from a metal frame falling from the ceiling, he had collapsed and couldn't stand up. The sight of him lying there so still, barely breathing, his eyes closed, had made her heart stop. Charlie had had to carry him onto their space craft.

As they had flown back to the Tatiana, he had regained consciousness but the lines of pain around his mouth and eyes had frightened her.

She knew he was on his last legs and too tired to argue, because when they reached the Tatiana, without making a sound, he had once again let Charlie carry him off the their space craft and on board.

Now he was in the medical bay, being taken care off by one of the ship's medics. They were all going to meet there because Tony wanted to talk about what had happened on Titan.

She had argued that he should get medical attention and rest but he had insisted on tell the Ravagers everything immediately and she realized then that he just wanted to get it off his chest.

*He's seen too much on Titan. Suffered too much. The strain of being the only survivor and watching them all die in front of him, is eating at him. I have to help him get through this.*

She had reached the medical bay but there was no one there. Pepper looked around in confusion. Then she heard Martinex's voice over the intercom.

"Attention Pepper, if you are looking for us, we are on the bridge."
She swore softly, knowing this was Tony's doing. So Pepper ran out of the bay and down the ship, towards the bridge. She climbed up the tiny staircase and was relieved to find Tony.

He was leaning against the navigational planning board in the center, looking around him like a kid in a candy store. She walked over to him. A short Ravager medic with a neat white uniform and a leafy fluffy head like a cauliflower, was fussing over him, scanning him with a small medical instrument.

Tony started to grumble, especially when the medic firmly strapped a large square packet on his neck.

"Keep that there." It growled menacingly to Tony, who nodded quickly.

As Pepper approached, the medic smiled and said, "Mr. Stark does not have any life-threatening injuries. But he does not want to rest yet. So I've given him an ION pack. It will slowly leak medicinal fluids into his body. Once your meeting is done, we will move him to the medical bay for advanced treatment."

"Thank you, Doctor." She said gratefully, taking its clammy hand.

It nodded gently at her and left. Pepper looked at Tony and then glared at him.

"Tony," she said chidingly as he absently scratched the pack, "do not disturb it. Leave it be."

Of course, he paid her no attention because he was busy admiring the space tech all around him.

"A hyper space drive! Wait, what's that? Thermo nuclear engine! Oh my and oooh! Is that a four chamber thruster! What weapons are built in? I saw at least two missile blasters, are those laser missiles or of something else... and a Furby!"

He picked up the purple Furby kept in one corner of the console. "I haven't seen one of these in years! So who is the McDonald junkie over here?"

"My husband, the studly Ravager captain who thinks the sun shines out of his ass. He loves to pick
up these tiny toys from junk auctions and pawn shops."

Aleta strode onto the bridge, grinning slowly at them. She was wearing a neat black sling, that cradled her right arm.

Pepper rushed to her side, worried for her friend. "How's the arm? Are you in a lot of pain?"

She chuckled and said, "Red, this is nothing. Don't worry, it will be good in a day or two."

Then Aleta caught her hand in hers and squeezed it tightly. "I have to say that was a good fight. Somebody was kicking space rat ass left and right. And didn't receive a scratch."

Pepper was going to object but then Tony said admiringly, "And Pepper rescued me from one of those tall black cloaked things as well. Like a space Amazon. Two shots straight to the chest. It fell over before it could even reach for its gun."

She flushed at the nods of awe and admiration being directed at her. "Guys, it was just a fluke."

"A fluke!" exclaimed Martinex as he walked in. "Pepper, I can assure you, your shooting skills are not a fluke. For a beginner, you did an impressive job."

She was red to her ears now and Tony chuckled. "Well, she shoots people down with cold glares and government citations all the time, so she's a natural dead shot. This time, she just had a gun."

Aleta grinned at him. "So you are Tony Stark, huh? Red's special lump."

Then Pepper realized she hadn't made any introductions. "Tony, this is Aleta Osgord, Ravager Captain and co-captain of the Tatiana."

Tony said musingly, "Lady Bruce Lee, you were scary out there. When I first saw you, I nearly walked back out of the auction room."

"Stark, you weren't so bad yourself. Especially since you were injured."
A shadow passed over Tony's face and he lowered his head. Both Aleta and Martinex looked at Pepper questioningly and she just shook her head, trying to make them understand.

Charlie entered the room and came bounding towards them, smiling widely.

Pepper was going to ask about his health but then Tony beat her to it. He asked, "Big guy, are you alright? Did the meds check you over?"

Charlie placed his large hand gently on Tony's head, patting him like a dog. "I am all good, Tiny."

Pepper giggled and Aleta snorted looking away as Tony said quietly, "Charlie, buddy, we discussed this. I am TONY, not Tiny!"

"But you is tiny as compared to me." reasoned Charlie.

"Pepper is also shorter than you! Why don't you call her Tiny?" objected Tony.

"Because she is Red. Look at her pretty hair..." he said and gently touched Pepper's hair. She smiled and caught his hand.

He shuffled his feet, looking down at them and Aleta said gently, "Charlie, didn't you say you had something for Pepper?"

Charlie nodded his head shyly and Pepper said excitedly, "Oh! What is it, Charlie? Please show me!"

He pulled out a small velvet pouch and offered it to Pepper. She opened it to reveal a thin chain with a grey colored cylindrical capsule on it.

"What is it?" She asked curiously.
"Shake it slightly, Red." He said.

Pepper gently moved it and then gasped with pleasure as the grey capsule was quickly filled with a bright orange fiery liquid that sparkled.

Charlie said softly, "It is a sliver of liquid starfire straight from a comet. It is a light that never fades, no matter how much time passes."

"How did you get this?" She whispered in awe.

Aleta spoke wryly, "A grateful prisoner wanted to thank Charlie for saving him from the space rats. This was all he had on him."

"Oh Charlie! It is beautiful! How thoughtful of you!" she exclaimed, touched by his kind gesture.

"Yes, Charlie, how thoughtful of you to get a gift. For Pepper." Said Tony pointedly and she bit her lip to hide her smile.

Tony is a such dork! He's the playboy, the man with a hundred lovers, the billionaire with a bed mate in every state. But for some reason, he always gets so jealous if some other man pays me attention!

Tony had narrowed his eyes at Charlie, who was looking at him bashfully. "And for you, Tiny..."

"Tony..."

"I found this."

From his coat, he pulled out a medium-sized bright blue titanium donut-shaped object, which was enclosed in a circular glass container. The donut was crackling and sparkling with energy, white flecks and sparks flying from its hollow center.
Tony held out his hands with joy. "What is it?! Give me!"

"Now Tiny," Charlie held the object at safe distance, "This is not a toy. It is a nanobyte accelerator that helps strengthen nanites in living organisms. It is meant to ... how should I put this... oh yes, increase power, speed and strength of contained nanites."

"So basically," said Aleta dryly, "it helps juice up nanites stored in someone's body. Like steroids for nanites, if you will."

Tony's eyes had gone wide with wonder. He looked down at the Arc in his chest and then at the donut.

Pepper realized what he was thinking and said "NO!" so loudly that Charlie nearly dropped the donut in shock.

Aleta and Martinex burst into laughter. Tony said sheepishly, "Pep, I was just going through the possibilities in my mind. And granted, souping up the nanobytes isn't very safe but... hey Charlie, by any chance, do you know the percentage of increase in efficiency that the accelerator would provide?"

Charlie scratched his head with confusion. "I don't... know... sorry."

He shrugged. "I just picked it up from the processing unit that we broke into and showed it to Mainframe. She was explaining the details to me. Sorry, Tiny."

Tony took the donut reverently but Pepper snatched it out of his hands and tucked it into her uniform. "This stays with me until you are alright, Anthony Edward Stark."

Aleta and Charlie whistled at her tone while Tony grinned boyishly at her. "Of course, Miss Potts, I wouldn't dream of doing anything without your permission."

She narrowed her eyes at him, leaned closer and whispered, "I am watching you, Mr. Stark. If I do not see any positive change in your health stats, I am going to strap you to a bed until you recover completely."
He whispered back, "If that means you and I get to play 'Doctor Doctor', then by all means, Potts, strap away."

Pepper rolled her eyes at him and he laughed but inside, she was vastly relieved.

*He's recovered enough to flirt. That's a good sign.*

Then from below, they heard three voices coming towards the bridge, arguing with each other loudly.

"We agreed on setting off the bombs only after a common signal was given."

"No way! we said twenty minutes into the mission, the timer starts."

"No, Krugarr! We agreed that only when I say go, do you set the timer off! You set them off 10 minutes early!"

Aleta sighed loudly. "No Ravager mission is complete without a post-mission argument. And here comes a long argument."

Starkar, Mainframe and Krugarr climbed up the staircase from the other side of the bridge, still shouting at each other.

Starkar tossed his head angrily. "And another thing! You put the bombs in all the wrong places!"

"Yes! It was supposed to be a systematic structural destruction of the building, one part at a time." yelled Mainframe. "Not the whole damn building all at once!"

"Structural destruction, my ass!" Said Krugarr rudely.

"Hey soldier! You do not talk to me and Mainframe that way!" Yelled Starkar, who had gone red in the face.
"Oh yeah!" Krugarr made a rude gesture with his finger while Mainframe gasped loudly. "Krugarr!! How rude!"

By now, Pepper was used to their shenanigans and glanced at Tony, who was watching the Captains fight with rapt attention.

"They really are space pirates!" He said with glee.

Aleta was tapping her foot and muttering angrily to herself. She finally lost patience and yelled threateningly, "Alright, you three clowns! Cut It Out!! We have guests on deck!"

They stopped arguing and finally noticed, that there were others on board the bridge. Mainframe quickly came over to Tony, with a loud beep of delight.

"Mr. Stark, I'm so glad that you are awake. How are you feeling?"

"I am... I am good. Good. Thanks..." stammered out Tony because Mainframe was beeping and booping rapidly.

She took his hand and shook it fervently. "Mr. Stark, you saved my life back there. I can't thank you enough."

Pepper knew that Tony got embarrassed when confronted with his good deeds. Sure enough, he flushed cutely and stammered out, "That's okay. You helped me too. I'm sure at some point." He looked at Pepper. "And you helped Pepper so... oh! Look at them."

Tony nicely diverted attention to Aleta and Starkar who were smooching passionately. The other Ravagers started to hoot and whistle wildly, while Charlie clapped his hands together and went "Awww."

Mainframe didn't fall for his trick and turned back to Tony. She put her arms around him so gently, as if he was made of glass. He held himself stiff as she said softly, "Thank you, Mr Stark."
"Sure. Call me Tony please."

She pulled back and said, "Tony."

Starkar and Aleta finally separated and the burly Ravager Captain came over to Tony.

"So this is the brave Iron Man from Earth, who survived a fight with Thanos. The only survivor, I should say."

Pepper flinched, knowing Tony was sensitive about his surviving the fight but before Tony could react, Starkar slapped him hard on the back, nearly pushing him off the navigational board.

"That was mighty impressive of you, Iron Man."

Aleta smacked Starkar hard on the arm. "Stop being so physical, can't you see the man is injured!?"

Tony had gone slightly pale and Starkar said with worry, "Hey, Iron Man, I am sorry, buddy, you should be resting. What are you doing up here anyway?"

He took a deep breath. "I want to talk. To explain about the Guardians. I understand you were close to them."

Deep sorrow passed over Starkar's ruddy face. He lowered his head and said, "Yes, Iron Man, please... we saw there were no survivors but I would like to know about... Peter Quill."

Tony said grimly, "I am going to start right at the beginning."

The Ravagers moved closer. Pepper gently placed her arm around Tony and he leaned back against her, looking up at her gratefully.

"So... you must know of Thanos?"
Krugarr snarled, "Who doesn't? That violent maniac has wreaked a path of destruction amongst the cosmos."

Starkar said, "Pepper told us that he came to Earth looking for two Infinity Stones, the Time Stone and the Mind Stone. What happened then? How did you end up with the Guardians on Titan?"

Tony sighed. "Well, the Time Stone was in the custody of Dr. Stephen Strange, a Master of the Mystic Arts. He had sworn an oath to protect the Stone at all costs and never let it fall into the wrong hands. Two of Thanos' ugliest minions came to take the Stone from Strange. One was this huge giant with a big axe, what was his name... some type of crystal?"

"The Obsidian Dwarf." said Aleta wryly.

Tony widened his eyes incredulously, "Really? A dwarf? If you say so. And the other was this pug ugly skinny thing with a scrunched up face and the stringiest hair ever. He spoke in a cultured, Shakespearean sort of, snarky British voice."

"The Maw..." whispered Mainframe, "Thanos' right-hand man and interrogation expert. The most devious, cunning and cruel being under Thanos' command."

Tony said softly, "Well, the Maw is dead. So at least one thing is done right."

The entire group gasped and Krugarr said with shock, "You puny humans killed the Maw!"

"Yup. On his own spaceship. Wait, I am getting ahead of myself. So the Maw and the... you said, Dwarf. Well, we fought then in New York. Me, Wong, Strange and Banner, all together."

He looked at Pep. "By the way, Banner's ugly green friend let him down, so Banner wasn't of any help. I do hope he's safe. I told Wong to take him away."

Pepper said "Yes, Tony, Wong told me that he took Bruce back to the New York Sanctum and that Bruce had your phone. Steve's phone. He must have gone to meet the others."

Tony nodded tiredly. "I hope he did and at least he's safe... and not disintegrated..." he murmured to
himself. "Anyways, the Dwarf kept us busy and the Maw sneakily kidnapped Strange and took him aboard his ship, heading for deep space. I knew we had to get Strange back, we couldn't let Thanos get that Stone. So we snuck aboard the space ship and saw the Maw torturing Strange. And we had to stop him."

Starkar interrupted, "Who is 'we'? I thought you said Banner and Wong stayed on Earth."

Tony closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "A fellow... junior Avenger... he... he saw me fighting the Dwarf, so he came over to help and... he managed to sneak on board the spaceship with me. He had the bright idea of stopping the Maw and saving Strange. His name was... Peter Parker. Spiderman."

His voice lowered and he blinked hard, shaking his head slightly. She rubbed his back, understanding his grief and he looked at her.

Then he nodded and continued, "So there we were, Strange, me and Peter. I knew it was no use running, Thanos would find us wherever we went. And we didn't want any more people to get hurt, so we decided to take the fight to Titan, so there would be less casualties. I mean, we thought we could fight Thanos face to face."

"So you decided on a suicide mission..." said Krugarr wryly.

Tony grinned. "You could say that."

Pepper swallowed, thinking over his words and how they hurt her.

_He went willingly to Titan, knowing that he was going to his death. Even after the talk we just had in the park, about... no more surprises. But of course he would. He's Iron Man, one of Earth's mightiest heroes. He doesn't care for his own life. I am the one who cares._

She brought herself back to the present, because Tony was talking about Titan.

He spoke, "When we reached that desolate planet, we met up with the Guardians."
"Hold on," said Charlie, "so you are the ones that crash landed the Maw's ship?"

"Yup, I had no idea how to control it. We landed badly, jumping from the ship in time and had a tense stand-off with the Guardians."

"A stand-off?" asked Starkar. "Why? You were all on the same side."

Tony chuckled. "I know but we didn't know that about each other. But it settled itself out pretty quick. There were three of them..."

"Only three?" asked Aleta. "Where were the rest?"

Tony shook his head. "The one called Star-Lord, who claimed he was from Missouri, he said that they had split up to help some... pirate angel prince or something like that. And then Gamora, his girlfriend, she had been kidnapped by Thanos, that's why they had come to Titan, they wanted to rescue her."

The Ravagers reacted with shock to that, all of them talking at once and Starkar raised his hands to try and quieten them down.

"Hold on, hold on, Gamora was kidnapped! Whatever for! What the fuck? So aside from Peter Quill, who were with you? Groot?"

Tony said hesitantly, "I never caught their actual names. Erm... one was a muscular, no-neck, bodybuilder sort, covered in scars, who took everything said, very literally. Too literally."

The Ravagers said in tandem, "Drax the Destroyer."

"A very primitive being." said Mainframe drolly. "And I use the word 'being' in the highest sense of exaggeration."

"Okay... and the other was this girl... with... eh... antennae sticking out of the top of her head and two beady black eyes with a soft voice. She had some sort of empathy power, I mean, she could touch anyone and know what they were feeling and then even calm them down."
The Ravagers looked at each other and Starkar scratched his head, exclaiming, "Heck! I know whom you mean but even I have forgotten her name!"

Mainframe snapped her fingers. "I have it! The emphatic humanoid Mantis! She was a former companion to Ego. Do you remember now, Starkar?"

"Yes." he said with a smile. "So gentle and calm. I remember now."

Tony added, "Even I was amazed at her ability. And also terrified. She could actually say what emotions a person was going through. Very embarrassing. That's why I avoided getting too close to her."

Aleta said firmly, "So there were three of you, Avengers? And the three Guardians? Peter Quill, Drax and Mantis. Gamora was kidnapped by Thanos and Groot and Rocket were off somewhere else. Have I understood it correctly?"

Tony nodded. "You have. And the six of us hatched a plan. I mean, Star Lord had a lot of plans. And his plan was to separate the Infinity Gauntlet from Thanos, thus weakening him. Then we could smack the shit out of him."

Aleta said gently, "It sounds like a good plan. What happened?"

Tony tightened his jaw and looked out of the ship's window. Pepper could see his eyes darken with emotion, emotion that he was trying to control.

"Too many things, actually." He said softly. "For one, Thanos was too damn strong. I mean, Strange used his portals and this and that to shoot me and Star Lord and Peter through them, all of us trying to get that damn glove off. But he was... he was so powerful."

He shifted slightly and looked at Starkar. "It seemed impossible to defeat him until Nebula showed up. Right from the sky in the spaceship."

Aleta exclaimed, "How and why did she come there?"
Tony said wryly, "Apparently she had been trying to kill Thanos from some time. But he had caught her and had used her as bait to draw Gamora to him. Once he had Gamora, he and her had disappeared and Nebula somehow had escaped from his spaceship. Now she had followed him, intending to find out what had happened to Gamora."

He smiled grimly. "My god, when Nebula started to fight, I had gotten so happy. Her android strength and sheer rage was actually working against Thanos. Thanks to her, we had managed to hold him still with spiderwebs and Doctor Strange's portals. Mantis was on his shoulders, using her empathy power to calm him down, to put him into a near trance-like state. And again, it was working. Me and Peter, Spiderman we nearly had the glove off, but it seemed to be stuck to him. But we were getting it off, we were so damn close."

Tony took a deep breath and looked down at his hands. "And then Peter Quill suddenly had to ask the restrained Thanos where Gamora was. And Nebula mentioned that Gamora and Thanos had disappeared together, to get the Soul Stone. And there on the Gauntlet was the Soul Stone. So Thanos had it. And Thanos ... well, there had been tears in his eyes as he mentioned that Gamora had been his favorite daughter and even he had suffered by losing her."

A sudden hush fell over the Ravagers. Starkar said slowly, "Losing her? He killed Gamora?"

Tony nodded sadly.

Aleta whispered slowly, "He killed his favorite daughter... Poor Peter... oh no... I know what happened next. Peter Quill lost his control."

"Yes," continued Tony, "Quill went ballistic, he started punching Thanos wildly, trying to hurt him and that broke Mantis's trance spell over Thanos."

Starkar sighed heavily and Mainframe covered her face with her hands. Pepper whispered, "Then what happened, Tony?"

He took her hand and squeezed it gently. "Then Thanos broke his restraints and beat the crap out of us, pure and simple. We were really no match for him, even Nebula. I tried my best as well but it was just no good."

He ended on a whisper, "Thanos simply was too powerful. And I think the loss of Gamora made
him just a little more mad as well. Whatever we did, he just beat us down.

He stood up, Pepper helping him and walked over slowly to the large space window, turning away from them.

"We were defeated. I was bleeding out, everyone else was on the ground. And Strange... he had the Time Stone. Thanos was going to squish me like a grape, when Strange..."

He paused here and leaned his head tiredly against the glass. Pepper wanted to stop this discussion. But she controlled herself.

_This is too painful for him. He seen too much, he's still broken and wounded. He's just gone through it... I have to get him to rest. But I have to let him finish._

She caught Aleta's eye and gestured meaningfully at her. Aleta nodded and whispered to Mainframe, to get the medical bay ready for Tony.

"What did Strange do, Iron Man?" asked Starkar harshly.

Tony whispered in anguish, "Strange told Thanos he would give up the Time Stone, if Thanos spared me."

"Why?" asked Mainframe curiously.

He turned to face them and swallowed. "I do not know. Strange had used the Time Stone, before we had started fighting Thanos and had seen that there was only one way to defeat Thanos. He..." Tony paused, "He wanted me to stay alive."

Then he shrugged. "And luckily for me, Thanos agreed. Strange handed over the Time Stone, Thanos placed it in his gauntlet and opened a portal with it. And disappeared to Earth. We were all helpless to stop him."

"And then the Guardians .... then they faded?" whispered Charlie sadly, startling Pepper because he had been listening quietly for so long.
Pepper's heart clenched with pain at the expression on Tony's face. Suddenly he seemed 10 years older, with deep lines of sorrow around his mouth and eyes. But the emotion in his eyes as he silently relived his memories. That's what hit her the hardest.

She took one step towards him but he raised his hand slightly and shook his head.

"Ten minutes later or perhaps even 5, a slow wind began to blow on that dusty planet," he whispered so softly, she had to strain to hear him.

"Mantis sensed it first and was the first to go. Just standing there, the wind blew across her and she blew away as ash with its passing. Drax called out to her and then he started to fade as well. I thought I was imagining things but Strange and Peter could see it too. Quill rushed to Drax and mid-way turned to ash, shouting Gamora's name."

A low groan was heard from Starkar, who lowered his face to his hands.

"Even though I know they died... hearing him say it... seems so... so fatalistic."

"Strange too?" whispered Charlie.

"Yes..." said Tony, looking up at the ceiling, "He just... he just looked at me. And disappeared. And then Peter... my Peter, Spiderman... I caught him in my arms and he just lay down saying..." he swallowed hard, "he said he didn't feel so good and then he just turned to ash in my arms."

Tony crouched down to his knees and she rushed to his side, holding him, suddenly frightened by his pale face and bleak eyes.

He just looked at her mutely and whispered, "I couldn't stop it, Pep, I couldn't do anything. The Spiderling just disappeared into the wind."

Tony clenched his fist. "All that was left was me and Nebula. I do not know how long after the space rats came. I did not care. I couldn't do anything."
She placed her arm around his shoulder and he buried his head in her neck, whispering softly, "I couldn't do anything, Pepper. Not a thing."

Pepper looked up at Starkar, who was murderously glaring at the blackness of space visible from the spaceship's giant visor. Aleta told him gently, "Starkar, baby, take it easy."

He spat out angrily, "That purple dildo is going to pay for this! Yondu's kid is dead! The Guardians are dead! All of them!"

She whispered soothingly, "I know baby, I know, we will make him pay, that is a promise. But first.. Starkar... we must .... pay our respects to the dead. We must see Pepper and Tony back to Earth. Then we go after Thanos."

He nodded with a jerk and then turned to Charlie, "Where the hell is Nebula? Wasn't she imprisoned on Loce Carcis?"

Charlie nodded, scared and Mainframe said quickly, "She was. We freed her and she... she..."

"Well?" exclaimed Starkar, "Where is she? She has to know where Thanos is!"

Tony shifted and Pepper helped him to his feet. Leaning on her, he said quietly, "Ravager Captain, Nebula took down a lot of space rats and escaped Loce Carcis on her own. We met her on the way."

Pepper was alarmed at how quickly Stakar's face turned red with anger. "What! She left! How!"

"She must have taken the Milano..." said Tony softly. "The space rats took it from Titan when they captured us. But I didn't see it in the hangar, when we left. Did anyone see the Milano?"

Pepper did not know what the spaceship looked like but the others nodded in the negative and Aleta said, "Then that's how she left. She must have flown away in it."

Starkar clenched his fists and reopened them. "Charlie! Mainframe! Why the fuck did you let that humanoid escape?! With the Milano, that too!"
Charlie jumped and Mainframe said, "Starkar, you know how powerful Nebula is. She is a force to be reckoned with! It was better to have her on our side than fight us!"

Tony said quietly, "She has suffered too, Starkar. You should let her go. She is not to blame for this."

Starkar turned and strode right at Tony, nearly touching his face. "Oh yeah, Iron Man... how do you know that? And why should I care for her suffering?"

Pepper protectively tried to pull Tony back but in a surprising show of strength, he stood straight and tall, looking the angry Starkar straight in the eye.

He said in a calm tone, "I know you are hurting and right now, you are looking for anything to lash out at, to replace that hurt with anger BUT... Nebula has lost the only thing that she loved and that loved her back. Her sister, who was a war orphan, just like her. So she's suffering just as much as any of us. And I know you were attached to Peter Quill. I know what you are going through. But getting angry isn't going to bring him back."

For a minute, the room stood still as Starkar huffed and stared into Tony's eyes unblinking. But Tony stared right back, calm and controlled.

Then Starkar lowered his gaze and in a very surprising move, shook Tony's hand tightly. "You are right, Iron Man. It is no use getting angry at Nebula. It is just..."

Starkar swallowed and said gruffly, "The Milano was Quill's ship. It was all we had left of him. And us Ravagers, we have a tradition for seeing the dead off. We place them in their ship, in their uniform and let the ship drift away. Then we fire onto the ship, setting it ablaze in a glory of flames."

He lowered his head. "That's why I wanted the Milano. To see off Yondu's kid, in the way of the Ravagers. Because he was one of us. But it doesn't matter."

Starkar moved away, emotion overcoming him. Pepper watched as he stood before the visor, looking away from them, while Aleta stood next to him, holding him tightly.
Then she realized that Tony was weaving slightly where he stood and she called out, "Mainframe! Medical bay now!"

Mainframe sprang into action, stepping to her side and beeping urgently into her com. The medic appeared from out of nowhere with a gurney and Tony was made to lie down on it. The fact that he did so quietly and with none of his typical snark, scared Pepper and she watched as his calm tired face drifted out of view.

She wanted to follow him but then Charlie told her softly, "Red, let him rest. Come stay with us a while. You need to rest too."

"Yes Pepper, please do." pleaded Aleta. "Stay and eat dinner. Then let us all sleep. It has been an exhausting day."

She nodded, realizing they were right.

They all turned to go towards the barracks, to eat. Mainframe held her back and said, "Pepper, I thought you might want this."

She handed Pepper a small tin can with a peeling label that said, "Molten Boron". It was filled with something and Pepper looked at the android questioningly.

"Mainframe, what is this..." Then the weight of the can made sense to her. "Oh.. it is the ashes... from Titan."

"Yes... the soil. I read somewhere once, that humans cremate their loved ones when they die and let the ashes flow freely, so the soul can go wherever it wants."

Pepper was going to mention that the custom of cremation was chosen by a few and humans also buried their dead. But as she held the tin can in her hand, she realized this was all that was left of the Guardians, of Dr. Strange and of young Peter Parker. And how even they needed to pay their respects to the dead.

She clasped Mainframe's cold metal hand and squeezed it. "Thank you, Mainframe. Tony will be happy."
The android squeezed her hand back and turned her gently, leading her towards the barracks. "It has been a long sad day. I will be glad when I rest my head on my pillow and sleep."

Pepper nodded but inside, she still worried about Tony and knew that she wouldn't feel at peace, until he was alright. And not just physically.

Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry that I had to rehash the tragedy that was Infinity War but Tony had to tell his story to someone and the Ravagers and Pepper have a right to know.

I'm sure I must have written some facts or events wrong, so please let me know in the comments.

One more chapter tomorrow, where Pepper gives Tony some TLC (which he deserves)
Pepper was tossing and turning in her bed. She just couldn't sleep.

They were on the outskirts of the galaxy. Unfortunately, the Tatiana did not have enough fuel to jump into hyper drive. This meant instead of reaching Earth in an hour or two, they would need totally 7 hrs, 2 hours to reach the Dravadian tunnel, 5 hours to reach a space station and then only could they hyper-jump to Earth.

Starkar had ordered everyone to sleep as the ship would fly on auto-pilot to the space station. He had kindly lent her a spare room to bunk in for the trip back. Because of the inky blackness of space, it was difficult to understand when day turned into night. But her own body clock was telling her to rest.

She was lying awake, staring up at the ceiling, when she heard a snap and crackle and realized it was coming from her headband.

Pepper rolled over, picked up the band and put it on. She tapped the receive button.

Tony's voice filled her ears, "Pep... come in Pep... are you asleep? Please don't be asleep..."
Tony had been sleeping in the medical bay in a healing pod. After their meeting, once he had been placed in the medical bay, he tried to object, insisting he was fine but Mainframe had taken her aside and told her that he was very weak and the pod would help heal his wounds. Plus, he just wasn't using his nanobytes to heal himself. A fact that was niggling Pepper.

The pod was used by their crew and the Ravagers themselves, to recover from battle wounds. She had wanted to stay with Tony but the minute they put him in the pod, the darkness and the quietness of the chamber had lulled him to sleep. Now he seemed to be awake.

"Yes, Mr. Stark?" She said primly.

He paused and Pepper knew he was smiling at her familiar greeting, even though she couldn't see him. "Potts, how big are your hands?"

Pepper sat up and said threateningly, "Tony Stark! Don't you dare play with your Arc now! What are you up to? You are supposed to be resting!"

"Potts, please... please come and see me... I am bored. Please. Come right now. To wherever the hell I am."

She sighed and said softly, "You are in the medical bay, Tony, I will be there soon."

She collapsed the head band, placed it around her neck and quickly pulled on a jacket. Then still in her pajamas, Pepper left her room and slowly walked down the hall towards the staircase. The medical bay was below deck, near the docking bay. She knew her way there and quietly entered the softly lit area.

There was no one around because everyone was fast asleep. Pepper walked towards the rectangular supine pod and peered into it. It was empty.

"Tony?? Where the heck are you?" She whispered into the shadowy darkness, looking around, trying to see where he had gone.

"Over here, in this bed." She heard him say.
Pepper walked to a large medical bed, where Tony was lying down perfectly straight on his back, arms tightly clasped to his side, looking up at the ceiling.

He was grinning softly at her. "Hey there, Red."

She flushed at his use of Aleta's nickname for her.

"Tony, how did you leave your pod? And why did you leave your pod?"

"Hey! I didn't leave it! I was sleeping and then I woke up and it rolled over to this bed and tipped me onto it. It can hover, did you know that? Amazing medical technology!"

She smiled at him lying so cutely still, bare except for a cloth around his groin. He looked at her and said sheepishly, "Yeah, I am also wondering how I got naked. I think the pod ate the biochemical suit they placed me in. Naughty pod." he said, shaking his finger at it.

That made her giggle and she covered her mouth to stifle the sound. Tony reached out and caught her hand, squeezing it tightly.

"So Red," he said snarkly, "you might want to have a word with Mr. Handsy over here. He keeps touching me inappropriately."

Now Pepper noticed a small tin can-like bot moving alongside the bed and scanning Tony with long, metal feelers. It passed its feelers over his covered groin and he jerked upwards with a growl, saying "Hey! Leave my cock alone!"

She shushed him, still giggling. "Tony... that's just the Medmode bot. It conducts temperature, light x-ray and body demographic scans."

Pepper tapped the bot on the head. "Prognosis, please."

It then began to dictate monotonously
Subject: Tony Stark
Species: Human
Temperature: Normal
Body Fluids: Normal
Blood Pressure: Slightly below normal
Heart Rate: Slightly below normal
Wound Assessment: Still weak, blood loss recovery in place. Tissue repair nearly complete.
Result: Sleep needed. Wounds are healed but rest is needed.

Tony said admiringly, "That's not bad. It did all that in such a short while."

Pepper pushed his hair back from his brow gently. "Tony... you heard the bot, you need to sleep... you need to rest."

Tony huffed loudly and said, "I am perfectly fine. I do not need to sleep any more. I have done nothing but sleep."

But his eyes, they told a different story.

"Soft whiskey brown, darting all over the place, blinking hard. There's a deep sorrow in them. I know he won't sleep if I leave him... and truth be told, I can't sleep without him either."

"What if I stay and talk with you for a while?" she murmured softly, stroking his beard.

He closed his eyes and leaned into her touch, making a deep sound in his throat. Then he looked at her appealingly.

"Pepper, can't I stay with you? Please, Pep, please..."

"Tony!" she exclaimed, "you are supposed to be healing here! How can you come to my room?"
He kissed her palm. "Please Pep... please... I just do not want to be alone... please..."

Her throat closed up at his sad soft plea. She couldn't refuse him like this and not tonight of all nights.

"Alright Tony, come on, let's go. It is late."

He smiled at her, his eyes lighting up and she smiled back. Tony sat up slowly with her help and then gingerly placed one foot on the ground and then the other.

He caught the cloth around his hips and tied it in place. Then he took one shaky step forward and Pepper moved closer to him and lifted his arm, placing it around her and holding her to him.

"Tony, lean on me." she said as they walked out there together.

They climbed upstairs and then walked slowly to her room, keeping quiet, so as not to wake up the sleeping crew.

Pepper opened her door and made Tony sit on the bed. Then she took off her jacket and hung it up neatly. Tony sat quietly on her bed and she glanced at him in worry.

He smiled at her and said, "This is a damn cozy room. I like your bed." He bounced slightly on it and she gave him a threatening look, so he promptly stopped.

Pepper filled a glass of water from the sink and handed it to him. He grimaced and asked, "Can't I have some coffee? I would kill for some coffee."

"No, you cannot." She said firmly and he quietly drank the water, all of it, in one go.

"How are you feeling, Tony?" she asked him softly.

Tony just looked at her silently and Pepper knelt before him. She had wanted to check his wounds for herself, ever since they had found him.
She gently pushed his shoulders back and looked at his bruised body, trying not to show any emotion. There were two ugly burn marks at the top of his shoulders. She gently touched one of the blackened scorch marks with her fingers.

"Electric prod..." said Tony casually. "Space rats used it to get me to walk to the High Inquisitor's office."

She stroked the mark and then trailed her finger down his chest to the numerous cuts and bruises all over his pecs and between his Arc.

"The fight with Thanos, I am assuming..." she whispered tightly.

"Yes... it was a bad one..."

Another viciously purple bruise around the left side of his rib cage. She gently laid her hand on it.

"Now where did I get that from?" murmured Tony in confusion.

She said tiredly, "When you decided to be Rambo and jump on that space rat dealer with a bomb."

"Oh yeah! You saw that, Pep?"

"Yes, Tony, unfortunately I did."

Then she touched the puckered knife wound down his right abdomen, long and curved.

"This is where he stabbed you?"

Tony nodded tightly. Then he flexed his stomach and took a deep breath.
"Am I hurting you?" She asked with concern.

"No, sweetheart, never." he whispered tenderly, taking her hand and kissing her fingers softly.

He let her hand go and she kept stroking the wound, fighting the urge to cry. It was so ugly and deep.

"He could have killed you." she whispered in anguish.

Tony barked out a laugh. "Thanos was certainly trying his best. I nearly had him. Imagine the irony, I tried to stab him but instead he broke my dagger and shived me straight in the stomach."

She barely heard him, the thought of Tony lying there on Titan, bleeding out from the wound in his stomach, dying slowly on that dusty empty planet, making her heart ache.

Pepper lowered her head to hide her tear-filled eyes. She bent further and gently kissed the wound, trying to assure herself that it had healed, that her Tony was alright. For now at least.

She felt Tony's muscles flex under her finger tips and she kept kissing the wound upward, feeling the muscles ripple under her lips as well.

Then she raised herself slightly and kissed the burn mark on his hard tawny shoulder. She leaned into him, breathing in his strong male scent and his warm chest against her face.

Alive. He's still alive. My Tony. She licked the burn mark and then kissed his Arc right on its center.

"Thank you..." she whispered to the nanobites as they lit up brightly at her touch. "Thank you for saving him."

"I thought you hated them... the Arc... the nanites ..." he paused and Pepper looked at him.

"Tony, I never hated them. I just... I just don't want you to keep putting yourself in danger, to save the world. What about you? Who is there to save you? I thought after Steve... after the Accords, you
would reduce your involvement in the Avengers. I thought after you found Peter Peter, you would stop. But now... "

A shadow passed over his face, one of deep pain and sorrow. "Let's not talk about Peter."

"Tony..." she said gently, "You couldn't have done anything. Please do not blame yourself."

"Pepper!" He exclaimed. "Please. I do not want to talk about it... please."

He had turned pale and she realized that Tony was upset and not willing to discuss it. But she didn't want to hurt him further, so she nodded.

Pepper wanted to get rid of the haunted bleakness in his eyes, so she tilted her head up and kissed his lips gently. She had intended, just to kiss him and move away but Tony deepened the kiss, clasping her arms and taking her mouth urgently.

She moaned as his tongue danced with hers and his lips moved hard and fast over her mouth, kissing her as if she was the very air he needed to breathe.

He broke off the kiss but nibbled on her bottom lip, holding her to him tenderly.

"Tony..." she whispered and then trembled as he slowly kissed the corner of her mouth, his beard sensuously brushing against her skin.

"Pepper, sweetheart... I need you..."

She pulled herself back from his arms and looked into his eyes, nearly black with passion.

"Tony, we can't."

"Why not? Don't you... don't you want me anymore?"
Pepper made a rough noise in her throat with annoyance and quickly pulled his head down to kiss him hard.

This time Tony was moaning, eyes dazed, when she pulled back.

"You silly man!" she said raggedly. "Of course I want you. But you are injured, aren't you? I don't want to hurt you with my passion."

Tony looked at her pleadingly. "Pepper please... I just want you to love me... I am strong enough. Please Pepper."

Pepper took a deep breath, filling her lungs with his musky male scent that smelled so clean and wholesome. Then she took a long hard look at the nearly naked handsome billionaire, sitting in front of her, broad hands holding her gently, his molasses brown eyes gazing with love at her.

And suddenly the need to love him back and show him how much she needed him, filled her powerfully.

She reached upwards and kissed his brow, his eyes, his nose and each cheek, holding his face tenderly as she did so.

"Alright Tony, let's make love BUT..." she said firmly, "I am going to do all the work. You cannot exert yourself."

He widened his eyes and opened his mouth to object but she laid her finger against his lips and whispered softly, "Please, Tony. Let me take care of you. Please."

He nodded, eyes lovingly soft and she moved her hand to his tufty soft brown hair, caressing it. Then Pepper gently tugged his head down and kissed him slowly, taking his lips gently between hers. Her tongue languorously rubbed against his and he tried to deepen the kiss but she held back.

"Slow down tiger... we have all night to enjoy ourselves."

"Yes ma'am." He whispered back as she kissed him again. She was crouching between his legs. This
time Pepper moved her hands through his hair as she traced his lips with her tongue and then pulled lightly on his bottom lip with her teeth.

"Pepper...." he groaned out and she left his lips to kiss his prickly bearded chin and his strong firm jaw, pulling his beard lightly with her teeth. She knew his beard was his weak spot and grinned when Tony shuddered against her lips.

She placed her hand firmly on his muscled warm shoulder to hold him still as she kissed a line down his jaw and then moved her lips down his strong neck.

He swallowed as she nipped his throat. Then she licked his collarbone and traced it lightly with her tongue.

Tony shuddered but held himself still as Pepper kept kissing his neck. She bit his shoulder lightly and licked the hurt with the tip of her tongue.

He was so firm and broad and strong under her fingers and lips, his musky maleness making him irresistible to her. She bit him harder and pulled the flesh lightly between her teeth to leave a mark. She liked doing that to Tony, claiming him for her own.

She was mindful of the way his chest was heaving under her hand and his short grunts of pleasure. So she kissed his pectoral muscle and then licked the coppery whorl of his nipple.

Tony gasped and bucked under her touch, so Pepper raised her head.

"You need to relax, Tony."

"Your tongue isn't helping, honey."

"Do you want me to stop?"

His response was to nuzzle her head with his own. She cradled him to her and signed against his hair.
"Tony Stark..." her throat closed up but she swallowed and continued, "I thought I had lost you. I thought I would never feel your strong arms around me. Your soft hair, your prickly beard. Your love."

She tightened her grip on his head and whispered, "I love you, Tony."

Tony whispered back, "I love you too, Pepper. And please..."

He raised his head to look at her pleadingly. His eyes dark with need. "Please love me."

She didn't need to be told twice. She lowered herself back to his nipple and gently sucked on the little nub. Her hands were on his thighs, moving lovingly over them as her mouth made love to one nipple and then the other until Tony clasped her head with a loud moan and she moved downwards.

She kissed each bruise and cut, murmuring comfort to them as she felt his flesh ripple under his smooth skin. She gently stroked the purple large bruise on his left, taking care not to hurt him.

Tony was patting her hair and she took out her scrunchie, so he could dig his fingers deeper into her hair. She sighed with pleasure as his hand massaged the back of her head and touched her scalp tenderly.

"You have such beautiful hair, Pepper, liquid fire shining in the darkness."

His whispered words of admiration made her lips quiver on his stomach. Then Pepper nipped his hard flesh and kissed his abdomen. It flexed and rippled under her lips as she stroked it with her hand. Then she traced his belly button with her tongue and Tony actually squealed.

She sat back on her heels, giggling as he turned a bright red and muttered, "I'm extra sensitive over there."

Pepper smiled and took his hand, kissing his knuckles and then his wrist. "So cute..."
She placed her hands on his knees and gently moved her hands up, towards the towel covering his hips.

Tony's breathing deepened as she untied the towel and took it off. He wasn't wearing any underwear and she could see he was semi-erect.

She held his cock by its throbbing length and felt it pulse in her hand.

Tony whispered harshly, "Pepper, you don't need to, sweetheart..."

"I want to, you idiot." She whispered as she cupped his balls and then squeezed them hard.

He gasped and thrust into her hands. Then he scared her by holding the stabbed side of his stomach.

Pepper exclaimed, "Tony, are you alright?"

"I am perfectly fine, just... I need you to keep touching me, sweetheart." He muttered tightly.

She smiled and continued to move her fingers up and down his cock, her soft touch excruciatingly torturous on his hard member.

"Pepper..." he groaned out, as her fingers explored his staff's head, rubbing the tip and then tracing the outline of it slowly.

She shifted, such that her one hand cupped his testicles and began to massage them while the other kept stroking his cock, pulling at it gently yet firmly.

"Tony, do you like what I am doing?" He heard her say, over the buzz of pleasure in his brain.

He was breathing in pants now, as her hands kept touching him, finding it difficult to focus on her
"Yes, I love what you are doing, harder, harder please."

She tightened her grip and then he felt her lips on his cock’s head, kissing it gently.

"Pep," he growled out, "You... I..." he was trying to object but the words just weren't coming out.

"Relax, baby..." she pushed him back gently, "just relax, let me taste you."

Tony lay back and propped himself on his elbows, closing his eyes as he felt Pepper's soft tongue intimately lick his leaking slit and then trace his cock's head.

He was dimly aware that he was making a lot of noise but he didn't care as her warm moist mouth closed around his cock completely and she began to move her head down and up, sucking him off.

"Oh Pepper! Pepper!" He sat up and groaned out her name like a prayer, winding his fingers in her soft hair as her mouth moved over his cock, licking it and sucking on it like an ice cream cone.

He felt her pull it out of her mouth and he opened his eyes. Pepper was kneeling before him, taking deep breaths, mouth wet and glistening from him, her eyes dark blue.

Before he could say anything, she held his cock in one hand and licked its sensitive underside, making him jerk upwards with sensation. He struggled to control himself from letting go right there and now.

Tony cupped her face and whispered tightly, "Pepper, that's enough, I want to be inside you. Please."

She nodded and stood up, moving to the washbasin to wash her mouth and hands.

He sat up, looking around in confusion, wondering whether if they could even have sex since they didn't have any condoms.
"Tony," he heard his name being called softly and turned to her.

"Tony," said Pepper with a grin, "Look what I found."

She had something in her hand and opened it to reveal a little red condom. He exhaled with relief.

"Thank god! Pep! I was so scared we would have to stop."

Tony reached for the condom but she closed her palm and tsked at him.

"What did I say, Mr. Stark?" Pepper bent and kissed his nose. "I am going to take care of you. Remember?"

He grinned widely as she took off her t-shirt. "I like the way you take care of me, even in space, Miss Potts."

"Well Mr. Stark," she said, standing before him in her pink bra and pajamas. "I am the famous Pepper Potts, after all. Assistant extraordinaire."

He watched as she shimmied out of her pajamas and unhooked her bra. "You are a CEO now, Potts, you shouldn't have to take care of me."

Tony urrped loudly as Pepper stood before him, completely naked and golden, with her red hair all around her chest and her sinfully long legs in little pink socks.

She moistened her lips and said sultrily, "Somebody has to take care of you, Stark. And that's still my job."

Her coral pink nipples peeked out at him from between her hair and he licked his lips because he wanted to feel them under his tongue.
Pepper shook her head at him. "You get to touch me only when you are completely healed, Stark. That's an order from your CEO."

"Pepper..." he whined and she firmed her lips.

She walked towards him and spread his legs gently. "You need to heal, Tony. So till then, you don't get to play with me. Now move up the bed, handsome. Tonight, you need to take it easy and let me do all the work. That's why I am going to ride you, until you cum hard inside me."

Tony gasped, his heart racing. "I love it when you talk dirty, Potts!" he growled out as she gently pushed him to lie on his back.

Pepper knelt on the bed beside him. She looked down at him with a small smirk playing around her lips and her lashes lowered. Then she straddled his hips, keeping herself raised on her knees, so she wasn't putting her weight on him.

She put her hand on his Arc and traced its outline slowly, making him take a deep breath.

Then she said sultrily, "I have you just where I want you, Stark. Now..." he held his breath as she gently rubbed herself against his erect cock, teasing him with her moist warm core.

He raised himself on his elbows as she kept rubbing herself, moistening her pussy with his leaking cock.

"Tony, you are so hard... and big... I want all of your huge cock in me." Pepper said, licking her lips and he pushed himself against her because her words were turning him on badly.

"Pepper! He muttered, stop teasing me and..." then Tony gasped as she slowly rolled the condom over his erect cock.

Then in a quick motion, she impaled herself on his cock. He closed his eyes at the feel of her tight wet pussy enveloping him in its warmth.

"Tony..." she whispered, "Tony... sit still. Let me..." and he gasped again as she moved up, nearly
leaving him and then sank down on him heavily.

Pepper began to ride him hard and fast, moving up and down his dick, her beautiful breasts jiggling with her movements. He pushed his head back hard against the bed, trying to control himself because he was so close to release and she was tightening herself around him wonderfully.

Her soft backside brushed against his thighs with every motion and he reached out to cup them tightly, rocking her against him. Pepper moaned and threw her head back, her red hair cascading down her back.

"Damn it, Pepper, you look so beautiful when you take me like this... so damn beautiful..." he murmured to her raggedly.

Tony dug his hands into her soft flesh and held her firm as he began to thrust his hips upwards, pushing into her powerfully.

"Tony... Tony... harder... please Tony!" she mewled and he increased the force of his thrusting as she leaned forward over him, her hands by his chest.

He looked into her wide blue eyes, dark with passion and he moved one of his hands between them to press against her clit as she moved against him.

Pepper gasped and groaned loudly as she tightened around him powerfully. Then Tony let himself go, closing his eyes as he felt his white-hot release come inside her tight core, his body shaking with the force of it.

He yelled out her name as his release moved through him. Pepper fell on the bed away from him but he wasn't having that. Tony rolled over onto his side and pulled her against him, cuddling her to him.

He nuzzled her warm neck and sighed with contentment. Pepper wrapped her arms around him, kissing the side of his face and whispered, "I love you, Tony."

"I love you too, Pep." He whispered back, tightening his grip on her. "Thank you... thank you for loving me."
"You are an idiot, Tony Stark. Of course, I love you. There's nothing to say thank you for." she whispered primly and he grinned at her tone.

Then Pepper pulled back and asked worriedly, "Tony, are you alright? Do any of your injuries hurt? I am sorry, I hope I didn't-"

He cut her off with a slow long kiss, his tongue playing with hers and she relaxed back against him.

"Miss Potts, that will be all." Tony whispered as he stopped kissing her. "Go to sleep, please. You have had a long day, rescuing me from peril, fighting space rats and floating in thin air."

"Mr. Stark, you should go back to the medical bay..." Pepper whispered sleepily but she moved closer to him.

"No way, Potts." He shook his head. "You can't leave me on my own. This is space, remember. It is dangerous for helpless humans like me."

She giggled and Tony kissed her forehead. "We need to stick together, Space Amazon lady. Please protect me."

"Alright, you big baby. You can stay here with me." Pepper closed her eyes and he did too, snuggling in her arms, finally feeling some semblance of peace.
Life Goes On

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Location: Stark Industries, Malibu, Earth

Time: 1 Week and 1 day since Pepper and Tony escaped from Loce Carcis

Pepper looked up at the clear blue California sky.

"It's a beautiful day, isn't it, ma'am?"

She smiled as her driver, Alex, held the door of the Mercedes open for her. "Yes, it is. One too glorious to spend inside."

Such a beautiful day. So crisp and clear. A walk in Legacy Park would be nice.

Then she remembered the last time Tony and her had gone walking in the park and sighed loudly.

The day everything changed. A portal opened, a magician came out, bringing Bruce Banner along, Tony disappeared and then...

She was brought back to Earth by Alex gently asking her if she was alright. Pepper noticed with a start, that she was sitting in the car and they were moving.

She shook herself lightly and said, "I am fine, Alex. Just lost in thought."

"Alright ma'am, I just wanted to ask if you wanted to go by the highway or the inner city route."

"The Highway, please."
The ocean view may help distract me.

It had been a week since they had returned to Earth after freeing Tony from Loce Carcis. The Ravagers had dropped them straight in Malibu, right in front of their house. Tony hadn't wanted to stay in New York and neither had she.

Pepper had wanted the Ravagers to stay a while and see Earth, as a token of her gratitude, especially after they had refused payment for the mission. But she knew she had to take care of Tony first. She felt he was not alright, no matter how much he had insisted to the contrary.

So she had reluctantly said goodbye to the space pirates, who had become very dear to her, in a short period of time. She had promised to contact them as soon as she heard anything about Thanos or the other Guardians. And they had promised to return for a tour of Earth, some other time.

Then the week had passed in a flurry of activity as Pepper had to catch up with what had happened at Stark Industries in her absence. The biggest disturbance was of course, the mass murder performed by Thanos.

Earth's population had been reduced by half. Across the globe, people were struggling to cope and to grieve. Their struggle was partially due to the fact that their government was unsure how to term the act and how to react. Most were choosing to treat it like a large accident.

In this matter, the US government had the right attitude. They were regarding it as an alien attack on US soil, especially since Thanos' minions had wrecked havoc in Queens and Manhattan. And the Army kept saying, they wanted to retaliate, to bring Thanos to justice somehow.

The problem was the people closest to the incident, the Avengers, had largely disappeared. No one knew where any of them were. Including Tony. And while the government was doing a good job of pretending to be working on a tactical retaliation, without the Avengers, they were rather lost on how to proceed.

General Ross had been calling her during the week. But Pepper was still angry over his refusal to help her find Tony. So she was avoiding his calls. The only government agent she would have spoken to, was Nick Fury and she had been very sad to learn that he had died along with Maria Hill, another trustworthy official, both victims of Thanos' havoc.

So she kept a low profile. She pretended that Iron Man was still in space. Pepper knew that if people
came to know that Iron Man was back on Earth, safe and sound, there were bound to be questions and Tony would be besieged from all sides. And right now, he was not in a mental frame of mind, to deal with the media or the government.

She shook her head with sadness as she looked out at the seemingly endless blue Pacific Ocean, as they drove along the highway.

_The truth is... I do not know what is Tony's frame of mind. Once again, he has been traumatized by space. But it is not just space. He is also trying to deal with loss. We all are. Everyone has lost someone. Was that the warlord Thanos' intention? To make everyone suffer in grief, in order to unite them in sorrow, so they work together for their own betterment?_

She glanced sideways at her driver, Alex, skillfully navigating through the traffic.

_Even our Happy is gone._

Pepper felt tears fill her eyes, as she recalled countless memories of Happy Hogan sitting in the driver's seat and offering her support.

_At least if he was here... he helped so much with his dry wit and his stolid presence. I know Tony is upset about losing Happy as well. But he just won't... he just won't talk to me!_

Now ever since they had returned to Earth, Pepper and Tony had been walking on eggshells around each other. Tony spent all his time in the basement, doing god knows what. He had turned it into his mini live-in cave and would stay there all day, coming up only to eat. Even then, she felt that he was mentally still in the basement and it was just his body, sitting across her.

She had tried to draw him out of his melancholy silence, by talking about Stark Industries, the government, everything under the sun but he would just sit there, munch on his food blankly and answer her in monosyllables, barely meeting her eyes.

He wouldn't even help her clean up, something that had startled her because it was their routine to do the dishes together. He would disappear right back down and stay there all night, leaving her to read and go to bed alone.

She knew he wasn't sleeping well or perhaps even at all, from his bleary bloodshot eyes with dark
circles and his dull face. He would also yawn tiredly and try to hide it behind his hand.

When he learnt about Happy, she had expected some physical sign of emotion but he had just sighed and retreated to the basement.

_This is just like after New York. And once again, he won't confide in me or seek help. I do not know what to do. I know he processes things differently, maybe this is the way he wants to handle his grief? Bruce isn't here... and Rhodey..._

The Mercedes braked suddenly and the newspaper on the seat next to her, fell to the ground.

She picked it up, glancing at the page that she had folded it to. Her grip tightened on the paper and Pepper felt a wave of anger flow through her. She lowered her head and pinched her forehead.

_I have so much to do. I have to deal with the company's Board, the media, Stark employees who are lost or have lost loved ones. I have to talk to Wong and explain about Dr Strange. I need to contact Peter Parker's aunt. And tell her... the bad news..._

She bit her lip at the thought of breaking the bad news to the two family members of the lost heroes. She had never met May but informing the faithful Wong, was something she had been putting off, since she wasn't completely alright herself. Then she refocused.

_But I need Tony Stark, my Tony back. He may have returned from space, his physical wounds healed but... somehow his heart is still on Titan, broken and bleeding. I've got to get him back and we have got to help our friend. Rhodey's all we have left._

Finally the car pulled up in the driveway. Ever since they had lost the luxurious Stark mansion to the Mandarin or rather Aldrich Killian, Tony and her had been living in rented villas and mansions along the East Coast.

They would change houses every year. Every time she would mention buying a house of their own, Tony would change the topic using his usual glib style.

But one day, he had let his guard down and admitted brokenly, that he was afraid of some enemy destroying their home once again, destroying everything that was theirs. In his opinion, it was better not to be attached to a physical structure.
Knowing how much he had lost when Stark mansion was destroyed, Pepper had decided to go along with his need to move to a different house every year, to keep him happy. She did not want to admit it, but somewhere deep inside, she shared the same fear.

Pepper opened the car door and stepped out onto the cobbled driveway. Even while renting, they had always seemed to stay in a distinct type of house, sleek and modern, rich and classy. But then Tony had decided to try something different and had chosen a rustic, two-storey bungalow, with an earthy old-fashioned architectural style.

At the time, she had been shocked at his choice but he had validated his decision by saying that knowing his usual style, no one would even suspect this was the house of Tony Stark.

It was private and cozy with its own by-road and an oceanic view, courtesy of its private beach. In his own words, "It's so overtly not me, that no one will suspect it is me being covert."

And so they had moved in and she had estimated it would take 6 months, for him to once again get bored of the house and insist on leaving. But two years had passed and he had not mentioned moving. Pepper had fallen in love with the cozy home, its small desert garden that she loved tending to and its wooden swing in the backyard, where she and Tony had spent many nights, talking and admiring the starry sky.

She also felt his decision to pick such a house was his change in attitude towards children. This was the sort of suburban house ideal for a family.

Ever since Pepper had known him, Tony had been determined that the Stark name would die with him. Even Afghanistan hadn't changed that decision.

But after he was stranded in Tennessee during the Mandarin's attack, Tony had softened towards children. Pepper suspected it was the time he had spent with young Harley Keener, that changed his mind. Then he had found Peter Parker and had taken the young man under his wing. Again, she had seen how he enjoyed the experience and their relationship. While she had noticed his change in attitude and thoughts, he had never explicitly mentioned children to her.

_Until that fateful day in Legacy Park. That's one more conversation we need to have. Or rather, complete._
She said goodbye to Alex, walked up to the main door, the newspaper folded up under her arm and mentally steeled herself.

_I came home early for a reason. I am going to be patient and calm and get Tony to talk. I need him to get whatever is bothering him, off his chest because we need to help Rhodey somehow. I cannot do this on my own._

Pepper opened the door and stepped inside. The house was eerily quiet.

She called out, "Tony! Tony! I am home early!"

But no one replied.

_He must be in the basement. Let me go down there._

She took off her high heels because her feet were killing her and left her briefcase by the sofa. But she still kept the newspaper folded under her arm.

Pepper walked through the cozy living room and stood at the entrance to the basement. She slowly opened the door.

_I know he has cameras everywhere. So he should have seen me enter. Then why doesn't he answer?_

She could hear the sound of music blaring through the basement but this didn't surprise her because she knew Tony liked to play loud music as he worked. What did surprise her was his choice of song.

_Wait a minute, this isn't AC/DC or Iron Maiden... come to think of it, it isn't even a rock song._

"I close my eyes
Only for a moment
And the moment's gone"
"Friday," she said to the AI, "Friday, turn down the music please. And where is Tony?"

I am sorry, Miss Potts, I cannot turn it down because Mr. Stark has turned off my access in the basement. I am not allowed to record any video or audio. Additionally, the music is being played on an archaic device which is not connected to my network.

Pepper was confused. "He's turned off your access? But why?"

He says he wants to be alone, Miss Potts.

This alarmed her and she quickly walked down the stairs, the melancholic music filling her ears. The basement was not as large as the Stark Mansion basement but it was comfortably cavernous and Tony had managed to do wonders with the reduced space.

It was filled with his soldering and machinery tools as well as a number of monitors connected to consoles. A large TV screen hung from the middle of the basement, which Pepper knew, Tony used for entertainment. Since the nanites lived within him and the rest of the suits were at the Avengers center, the only suits on display, were the iconic Mark 1 and the last one that he had worn, when he went to face Bucky Barnes and Steve Rogers.

Pepper involuntarily shuddered as she gazed upon the deep metallic gash in the Arc piece of the suit, where Steve had viciously thrust his shield into the Arc, to stop Tony.

Tony's vintage car collection had not managed to survive Killian's attack, so there were no classic expensive cars stored in this basement. There were two or three car engines, strewn in one corner, as usual. Pepper had forgotten their versions, even though Tony would randomly gush about them. She knew he liked to tinker with classic vehicles, so she kept pretending to ignore his sneaky hiding of a banged-up and rusty 1972 Norton Commando, hidden under a large tarp in another corner of the basement.

As she walked towards the other end of the basement, she noticed the donut-shaped nanite accelerator, encased in its glass container.

Funny... I thought Tony would be busy trying to figure out how to use the accelerator to juice up his suit... where is he?
She called out his name but was drowned out by the loud, soulful music. Then Pepper noticed a very old Sony Discman, kept together with masking tape, connected to Tony's expensive audio system. The soft song with a haunting melody and a gentle guitar riff, was coming from the Discman.

"Dust in the Wind
All we are is
Dust in the Wind"

She turned it off and then looked at the far wall. Pepper felt a lump form in her throat.

It seemed to be a shrine to the fallen, filled with newspaper clippings, photos and assorted physical snippets of information all about Thanos' attack on Earth. She could distinctly see pictures of Dr. Strange, Nick Fury and the Queen's neighborhood where Tony had fought Thanos' minions.

Pinned to the corner of the display, was a picture of the Avengers from the last time they were happy together, in the Avengers Tower, with Loki defeated at their feet and New York safe.

But the central part of the wall was all about Peter Parker, from grainy shots of him as Spiderman to a typical high school yearbook photo with his boyish smiling face. On a small shelf below the wall, was the tin can of ashes from Titan, that the Ravagers had given her.

_I had asked him if we should set the ashes free... but he doesn't want to yet... he's still clinging to their memory._

Then she turned and saw Tony slumped on a work table, head nestled in the crook of his elbow. She couldn't make out if he was sleeping or not because he was muttering something to himself. He had his Stark phone open beside him and she could see Peter's profile open on the phone.

Before she could say anything, Tony, without lifting his head, tapped the phone lightly.

The console said in its electronic empty tone, "Playing last message from Parker, Peter."

Peter's shrill boyish voice whispered over the phone,
"Hey Mr. Stark, just wanted to say hi. So hey, hi. Karen says hi too. Oh and Ned, you remember my friend Ned? Well, he says hi too. So I called because... well, I called because... look, I know you are busy and you got a lot of things to do and you have a schedule and all but... well, I was kinda wondering if you were... sort of free... this Friday. Remember I told you, that I was working on a form of elastic webbing material that could be used as a building adhesive... so I'm going to present my prototype at a... uh... a school fair and I was wondering, if you could come. Just for moral support, haha, but hey you can say no! I know you are busy and got a lot of stuff to do... Oh crap! Aunt May is awake! Sorry, I said crap! I'll call you tomorrow, Mr. Stark, I'm supposed to be sleeping! You should be sleeping too. Maybe you are ... shit, it is kinda late.. I am sorry, I didn't think, Mr. Stark."

Then a distinctly feminine voice was heard, saying, "Peter! It is 2 am! Who are you talking too?!"

Peter's voice whispered urgently, "Got to go Mr. Stark, take care, tell me if you will come. Please come. Please, I wil-"

The message was cut off.

Tony's fingers lingered on the console. Pepper said softly, "Tony... wake up, please."

He sat up with a jerk, rubbing his eyes and his scruffy bearded face. Another thing that worried her.

Tony who usually was very meticulous with his grooming. But since they had returned from space, he had just let himself go. He hadn't shaved for five days, badly needed a haircut and would roam around in a toweling robe, his faded Black Sabbath t-shirt and pyjama bottoms.

His brown eyes focused on Pepper blearily and then he stretched and yawned widely. She wrinkled her nose because he smelled of a bitter, stale substance, that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

"Pep..." Tony said slowly, cracking his knuckles, "what are you doing home so early? What's up?"

She said gently, "Tony, we need to talk. We need to he-"

Pepper did not complete her sentence because as Tony stood up, she heard a distinct clink of a glass bottle coming from below the table.
Chapter End Notes

Sorry for no new chapters last weekend. Was busy writing them xD

Three chapters this week, starting from today.

I've taken some liberty with some details, which I am certain you will notice, are non-canonical.
Her heart was screaming with denial but as she bent, her mind told her to face facts and accept her worse fears. She looked under the table and took a deep breath because there was an empty bottle of Johnny Walker Whisky on the floor.

Pepper straightened and just looked at Tony who stared back, blinking myopically at her. She bit her lip, trying to calm herself down.

*I am not going to overreact. I am not going to overreact. I am going to listen to what he has to say.*

Out loud, she said clearly, "Tony, have you been drinking?"

He looked down, covered his face with his hand and then nodded into his hand.

Her heart clenched with pain. "Tony, you... you haven't touched alcohol for the last 6 years. Why... why now... and how much have you been drinking? Is that what you have been doing all these days? Hiding down here and drinking?"

He said in a muffled tone, "No, no, Pep, not everyday... this is just the second day. Second drink. That's it."

"How drunk are you?"

"I just drink... I just want to sleep... no dreams... don't want no dreams..." he said slowly.

She looked at him sadly. "You have been having bad dreams... why didn't you tell me?"

Tony simply shrugged and gave her an empty grin.
"Same old stuff. Nightmares... except now they are actually memories and I get to relive them in my
sleep. Stay awake, no peace. In sleep, no peace. I just wanted... with the alcohol... to go into that
mind-numbing blackness. But no..."

He shook his head sorrowfully. "Just not happening. Maybe I should try vodka instead of scotch?"

Pepper wanted to scream but she settled for catching him by the shoulders. Resisting the urge to
shake him hard, she said firmly, "Tony, I know you are upset about Peter but-"

"Silly kid." He said angrily and she kept quiet. "I told him to stay on Earth. This is not your fight.
Stay out of it. But no!"

He has a lot on his chest, he needs to get it out. I need to get him to let it all out.

His voice rose in anger. "He had to leave his field trip, his school bus, his aunt, his everything. He
had to come after me. And then he had to sneak on board the spaceship. I told him to stay out of it!
He just wouldn't listen to me!"

Tony slammed the table so hard, that the phone shook and fell, replaying Peter's message. "Hey Mr.
Stark, just wanted to say hi. So hey, hi-"

She quickly turned it off as he moved away from the table, muttering to himself, "He had so much
going for him. So bright, so talented, so smart and such a good kid. But no, he had to follow me into
space... wait..."

Tony turned back to Pepper and shook his head. "It isn't his fault. It is mine."

"How is it your fault, Tony?" she asked gently. "He was nearly an adult, he-"

"He was safe in Queens, Pepper!" Tony said harshly. "Doing his friendly-neighborhood superhero
thing. With his cheap elastic suit and goggles. He was safe. Then the billionaire, genius, yours truly,"
he tugged on his robe, "I had to seek him out. I had to go to his home and tell him about the
Avengers. I am the one who involved him in the fight against Steve. That was me. He was hurt there
as well. Why didn't I stop at that time?? Why!"
"Didn't you try to keep him away after that, Tony?" Pepper reminded.

"I did try but then," he smacked his forehead so hard that she winced, "then I had to give him the fancy advanced Stark Spidey suit. With his own AI and webbing and a built-in parachute. And I had told him to stay low and do small stuff. But he wouldn't listen to me even then."

"Tony... you said it yourself, Peter was bright and smart... you think a boy like that is going to sit quietly and watch as others do evil around him?"

Tony wasn't paying any attention to her, he was busy reliving memories. "When he took on that metallic bird man, Pepper... on the Long Island ferry, I took his suit away. I told him he had to do things on his own."

She said firmly, "Tony, he didn't listen to you there either. Later he took on the Vulture without the Stark suit. And he succeeded."

Tony covered his eyes with his hands, his voice quavering, "I was so damn proud of him. He actually listened to me, that the suit didn't matter, that the tech didn't matter... the kid did it on his own. And even when I offered him a place with the Avengers, he was so mature, he turned it down. He just wanted to help the little guys. He finally understood what it meant to be a hero."

Pepper couldn't bear to see him continue to torture himself with memories. "You tried your best, Tony. It just-"

"That's what I told May." He whispered hoarsely, his brown eyes wide and haunted as they met hers. "I told her, I did my best. I put everything into the Iron Spider suit. I did my best to fight Thanos. But I still couldn't save Peter."

She said with shock, "You spoke to his aunt May?"

"I called her the day we came back. When you were working in your office upstairs. I had to Pep," Tony said sorrowfully, "I had to tell her. He was all she had left. And I took that away from her."
"Tony... we should have done that together. You shouldn't have done this alone." She whispered. "I
would have been there for you."

"She was so angry. And so defeated. And so right. You had to make him an Avenger, Stark. You
had to take my boy into space, to die! She was so right, Pepper. Just like Sokovia. Just like that lady's
son, the university student who died in Sokovia, who went there to build houses. Everyone died
around me. Strange, the other Peter, Star-Lord... the big angry alien dude and the weird lady. They
time just died. And I couldn't do a thing."

Pepper lost her patience. She rounded the table and caught Tony by the collar of his robe. He just
looked at her dully and she knew she had to pierce his aura of drunkenness and self-pity.

"Tony Stark," she said tightly, "You have got to snap out of this! You have got to get a grip! I know
they all died up there! But you tried your best! You didn't just stand there and let them die! And you
nearly died yourself, you fool! Did you forget that?"

She had his full attention now. Tony looked at her, wide-eyed. If the situation wasn't so serious, she
would have laughed at the frightened expression on his face.

"Pep..." he murmured, in a low scared tone. "It is alright, calm down."

"Tony, didn't you say that Strange gave up the Time Stone to keep you alive? Why do you think he
did that?"

Tony opened his mouth and then closed it. He shook his head in confusion.

"Think, Tony, think. He could have chosen anyone else. He could have kept himself alive. But he
didn't, he chose you. What do you think about that, Tony?"

Tony babbled out, "Using the Time Stone, Strange could see into the future and examine multiple
outcomes of the same situation. He was doing that, while we were waiting for Thanos. It was so
weird, the way he was rotating in place, trying to move through the multiple results."

She sighed and let him go. "So in one of those outcomes, he must have seen that you guys would
stop Thanos. Tony, don't you see? You are part of that outcome. That's why he saved you. That's
why he told Thanos to keep you alive and take the Stone instead."
Now Pepper wanted a drink badly but she controlled herself and looked for some water. Then she chided herself.

*This is Tony Stark's den. Do you think he will have water lying around?*

She took Tony's hand, determined to get him out of his cave, which was suddenly full of death and alcohol.

"Come on, Tony. I need some water and you need to freshen up and get sober. We need to talk."

He let go of her hand and she looked at him. Tony stood there in his bare feet and looked at her solemnly.

"Pepper... I know what you are going to say. And I don't blame you for it. I understand you need to do what you need to do. Just... come out and say it. For what is it worth, I'm sorry."

For a moment, Pepper was confused. Then from the sadness in his eyes and the way his jaw tightened, she realized what he was thinking.

She walked right up to him, looked into his eyes and said tightly, "Do you think I am going to walk away from you? That I am going to leave you, ending our seven-year relationship just like that! Do you??"

He said sadly, "I wouldn't blame you for doing that. Everything around me, dies. Or disappears. I shouldn't have survived space. I should have died in that fight with Thanos."

Pepper's control on her emotions was wearing thin. She said angrily, "But you didn't, Tony! You are alive and instead of mopping here and drinking, you should be doing something!"

"Like what..."

"Like helping those who survived!" She shoved the newspaper, she had been holding at him. "Like
Tony took the newspaper from her and blinked at it, reading softly, "Decorated Air Force Colonel's trial today." Then he gasped. "Rhodey is on trial! For what?"

Pepper clenched her fists in anger as she said tightly, "From what I learnt through my Army contacts, James went to Wakanda to help the outlawed Avengers, mainly Steve Rogers and Natasha Romanoff. Bruce was also there. The alien force of Thanos converged on Wakanda for reasons no one knows. Not much is known of what happened. You know that Wakanda is a very reclusive country and does not allow foreign press or foreign citizens. But the point is, James came back to the US yesterday."

"And now he is being court-martialed for helping Steve..." whispered Tony.

"Exactly! Our friendly Secretary of State, Thaddeus Ross is out for Rhodey's blood, because apparently James disobeyed his direct orders and went to Wakanda to help the criminal Avengers. That's why he is insisting on a quick court-martial. They will try to prove that James went rogue, just like Steve and Natasha."

Tony rubbed his forehead and exclaimed loudly, "Oh god, Ross and his damned Accords! And Rhodey! Well, I can't really blame him, he would want to do something... but with his injuries, I thought he would stay put! Shit! A trial! That too, led by Ross!? What a cluster fuck!"

Pepper felt hope fill her as she saw Tony's reaction to the news.

She clasped him by the shoulders and said softly, "We can save James, Tony! The trial is going to be held at Fort Irwin, in five hours! We can be there in an hour!"

"And what would we do, Pep? I don't see how..."

"We can take the stand as witnesses! I know the lawyer who is representing James. I spoke to him earlier. He said that everyone is confused about what really happened. If we come in and explain clearly, how James was acting in the interest of the American people and trying to stop..."
Thanos! In a highly publicized trial, where the media will converge on the area like rats! No way, Pepper! Oh no!! I have already gone through one of these trials and I will not do so again!"

He shook his head firmly at her.

Pepper said quietly, "Tony, I know the trial you are speaking of, the one where you faced the Senate. I was there too, you know. I know you are scared of facing the media-"

He surprised her by erupting violently, "Of course I am scared! Once again, Iron Man has to explain how the super-heroes screwed up and let Earth down! First to the Army and then to the media! Once again I am being made accountable! Me! Tony Stark, somehow at the center of the catastrophe!"

"Tony," she said slowly, "No one is asking you to explain the actions of the rogue Avengers. You do not need to go into details of what happened in space. We just need to be there for James."

He sighed loudly and looked at her sadly. "What is the point, Pepper? I would just make things worse. I always do by showing up. I do not see how we can help Rhodes. He will just have to face this on his own."

Pepper swallowed hard, trying to control her emotions. She was angry, sad and rather horrified at Tony's defeatist attitude.

*I thought he would get his fighting spirit back at the mention of James in trouble. Tony... has Thanos broken you?*

She said quietly, "We can't just leave him, Tony. He is our friend, remember? James has been through so much with us. He's also gone through a lot and we do not even know what happened to him in Wakanda-"

Pepper stopped because Tony had raised his hand and looked at her silently, his eyes dark, hard and distant. She had seen him like this before, when Stane was mentioned or his father.

He said tightly, "I do not want to face the world and tell them that... that their heroes failed them. That Thanos won. That six brave people are dead but yet I managed to survive. That countless more, may be dead in Wakanda. I can't do that, Pepper. I am sorry, I cannot."
"This is not about you, Tony Stark. This is about Rhodes! Our friend, if you recall, who had your back many a time. You can't let him down when he needs you!"

Tony's eyes flashed with emotion. "I have let him down before, Pepper. The one time when I had his back, when I was supposed to be looking out for him, I let him down then. That's why he can't walk on his own two legs. I have let him down before. This time will be no different."

Pepper was struggling to control her tears. The deep bitterness in his voice was unbearable to her ears. And words were failing her.

"Tony... you... you have done a lot of good... it wasn't your fault what happened to Rhodey. Besides, let us focus on the current situation. He's depending on us."

He lowered his head and said sadly, "Well he shouldn't. Nobody should. I can't help anyone anymore."

Pain stabbed her heart as she watched him turn his back to her and walk slowly towards the bathroom.

Pepper swallowed once and then once again but the hard lump in her throat just wouldn't go away. She left the basement, controlling the urge to cry, blinking hard to get rid of the moistness in her burning eyes.

Chapter End Notes

I am sure I got some time spans wrong and I also know that some eagle-eyed Tony fans, inclined towards historical accuracy (Hint hint: igotyoufirst) will correct me... please do.
Pepper walked up the basement stairs and then to their bedroom on the first floor. She closed the door and pulled off her jacket, placing it on the bed. Then she rubbed her temples tiredly. Somehow a stray tear escaped her tight hold on her emotions and trickled down her cheek.

She let it fall, her chest heavy with sadness and anger. Then one more fell and then another. She angrily wiped her cheeks with the back of one hand.

*Great! I am crying! What good are tears...*

She took a deep breath.

*He's so sad and angry... angry that he survived... I am trying to help him but he won't see that! And he's drinking! Again! What can I do? I do not know! And what about James?*

Then Pepper shook herself mentally.

*Wait a minute... Why can't I help James? I must try at least! I can go as a witness! He needs his friends and I am going to be there for him! With or without Tony...*

She spoke to the AI. "Friday. Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Miss Potts. What can I do for you?"

"I will be travelling to Fort Irwin in the San Bernandino desert... for Colonel Rhodes' trial. Arrange for a Stark Jet flight in two hours. And inform the airport as well."
"Yes, Miss Potts. How many passengers, should I say, will be onboard?"

"Just me." Pepper whispered sadly. "I am going to do this alone."

Then she walked to her closet, to start packing.

"Oh, and Friday, please inform Mr. Perry Finch, that I will be taking the stand as a witness for defending James. He should let the military court know and also, arrange for my entry to the base."

"Will do, Miss Potts."

"One last thing, can you patch a call through for me? A Mr. Wong, who lives in New York." She sighed heavily. "I need to talk to him about his... his friend, Dr. Stephen Strange."

"There's no need for that, Pepper. I already spoke to Wong."

Pepper turned around in shock. Tony was standing by the door. He looked at her solemnly as she stared at him coolly, determined not to show him any emotion.

"So you also spoke to Wong on your own, Tony?"

"Yes. I called him before calling May."

Pepper nodded. "And how did he take the news?" She asked softly.

Tony stepped into the room. He shifted from one foot to the other. She was slightly distracted as to why his hair was damp and sticking to his forehead.

"Well..." he said slowly. "He was expecting it. He... he could feel a disturbance in the universal alignment of... time or magical strength or something like that. Wong said something fruity. I couldn't understand his mystic arts lingo. Even Strange was talking in riddles. But... but Wong knew that the
Time Stone had been taken and knew that Strange would die protecting it. So...

Pepper looked blindly at her closet. She was trying to appear as if she was deciding what to pack but her mind was racing.

"Let me guess," she said clearly, "He knew that the Time Stone was gone but also knew that Strange would sacrifice it only for a good reason. And that reason is you, Tony. Isn't it?"

She looked straight at him. "You can deny it all you want. But the only person who can actually do something and bring Thanos to justice... is you. And even someone who just met you, Dr. Strange, knew this."

Tony looked straight at her, his brown eyes churning with emotion. "What can I do, Pepper? I cannot bring back the dead."

"No..." she whispered "but you can avenge them."

He tightened his jaw and she continued, "Tony, you have faced your share of trials as have the other members of the Avengers. Something that you keep forgetting. And each trial has made you stronger."

He shook his head to deny it but Pepper said firmly, "Oh yes, what hasn't killed you, has only made you stronger. So why are you giving up now? Why?"

Tony just kept quiet, looking down at the floor.

Pepper continued, her voice quavering because her emotions were getting the better of her.

"You were kidnapped in Afghanistan and tortured but you came back, a better, nobler man. You looked hard at your own legacy and found it evil, bringing down Stane and stopping the sale of mass weapons of destruction. You reinvented Stark Industries as an innovation think tank and a clean energy company. Even after that, Tony, you wanted to do more. You wanted to be more than just a genius billionaire, who indulges in philanthropy and sleeps around. You wanted to help people."
He said tightly. "How much have I helped, Pepper? Half of Earth has gone."

"What about the half that is still alive, Tony? You keep focusing on the dead. What about those who live?"

Pepper said softly, "Rhodey is alive. We do not know about Bruce and the others. They could be alive. Wong is there. There are people still alive, good people, who can help. Together we can face this evil. We can stop Thanos from taking down another planet, another universe."

Tony looked at her, a slight question in his eyes and Pepper said sadly, "Earth is not the only victim of Thanos' so-called justice. The Ravagers were telling me of his cruelty across the galaxy. Just before Earth, he destroyed a noble empire, the Nova Empire of Xandar. He eradicated the intergalactic planetary police, the Nova Corps. He has visited countless other planets and done the same."

Tony said softly, "Nebula and Gamora were also made orphans because of his... justice..."

Pepper said indignantly, "That's right! Thanos not only murdered their parents, he also turned those innocent children into his own personal assassins! Truly a madman! Tony, don't you see... you can't just let things go! You must put a stop to this warlord and his murder of innocent beings!"

She moved towards him and took his hands, saying softly, "Isn't that why you became Iron Man, Tony?"

He looked at her intensely, his eyes haunted and full of sorrow.

Pepper continued, "Didn't you tell me when you came back from Afghanistan, that you were horrified, that people were using your weapons to hurt others? And that you wanted to end that. But you could have just stopped selling weapons, you didn't have to go out there and fight the evil itself. But you did so anyway. Like when we went to Dubai and you flew off to... the village... I cannot remember its name."

He swallowed and whispered almost to himself. "Gulmira... YinSen's village. He helped me build the Mark 1... He was happy in Gulmira, with his family but they all died... at the hands of the Ten Rings... with my weapons... So when I found out that Raza and his men were attacking Gulmira, once again with Stark weapons... I went there to stop the bloodshed. I had too! It may have been too
"Exactly Tony... I know you are grieving. I know that it is hard and you lost so much. But you can prevent the same from happening to others. If you stop Thanos. You can make him pay for what he's done.

Tony came towards her. He took her hands in his and said thoughtfully, "But Pepper, I thought you wanted me to stop. I thought you wanted me to stop with the suits, the Arc... me being Iron Man...I don't understand."

Pepper said softly, "Tony... I wanted you to rest. I felt we didn't need to be so vigilant anymore. I wanted you to relax, especially, after what you went through with Steve. You are the most prominent face of the Avengers and I know that Sokovia and then Steve leaving, was hard on you. You put so much into the Avengers and then, just because of a few turning rogue, everyone pressed you for accountability."

She cupped his cheeks. "And I saw how you were looking out for the next generation of heroes. Peter Parker, Vision, the Black Panther... you were a good mentor to them. I was so proud. I felt you didn't have to keep fighting anymore, you could be there as their support but it didn't have to be you, always throwing your life on the line. That's why I was shocked, when you put the Nano Arc in your chest. I thought you were thinking along the same lines as me..."

Tony said with a small smile, "You know that I'm paranoid Pep... you know that... I am always convinced, there is a monster in the closet."

Pepper took a deep breath. "Tony... I must admit here... ultimately your paranoia was justified. There was a monster lurking... in deep space... and you had those dreams and you predicted this but... I'm sorry, I never took you very seriously. I thought your time in space had traumatized you so much, so that you saw evil everywhere."

"That's why I worked with Bruce and made Ultron." He said sadly. "I knew we weren't always going to be capable of taking down whatever came at us. I knew that we would meet our match someday and I didn't want..." Tony sighed heavily. "I saw everyone I knew, dying. Pepper and that I was the only survivor. I didn't want that nightmare to become a reality. But in the end... it did..."

She moved her hand over his jaw, running her fingers over his prickly but soft beard.

He leaned into her palm and she whispered, "Tony..."
Looking deep into his shimmering brown eyes, she said, "I wanted you to stop being Iron Man, only because you don't always need to be the one saving others. Let other heroes take on evil. But I don't feel that you shouldn't stop like this."

"Like what?" He whispered back, swallowing hard.

"Feeling defeated and guilty, that this is somehow your fault. Drinking to drown your sorrows, living in the past. Bullied into feeling that you failed. You couldn't save them but Tony... you can't always save everyone. You didn't fail."

She squeezed his hands. "Tony, please understand. You didn't fail on Titan. You are a human, underneath all the nanobytes and the suits. Yet you took on a mad alien being, who was armed with inhuman strength through the Infinity Stones. Impossible odds. That doesn't mean Thanos defeated you."

Pepper let go of him and moved towards the side table. She poured herself a glass of water and one for Tony as well. She walked back to him and handed him the glass.

"Here. Drink this. I do not want you to get a hangover. We only have Moltrin and you have made your opinion on it, very clear."

Tony grinned at her and she pushed his hair off his forehead as he drank the water.

"Tony..." Pepper murmured, confused. "Why is your hair damp?"

"Well, I wanted to talk to you. And I wanted to be sober or sort of sober, for the conversation. So I took a tiny shower, just to clear my head."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "That was a very quick shower."

Tony grinned sheepishly at her. "It wasn't a complete shower... I washed my hair over the sink."
She giggled and he shrugged. "It has worked before."

Tony leaned his forehead against hers and nuzzled her face tenderly.

"Pepper..." he whispered. "I'm sorry. I'm such a fool. I've been thinking so much of the dead... I forgot to be thankful for those who are still alive... like you... I do not know what I would have done if you had gone..."

She swallowed hard and whispered back, "Tony, what do you think I went through? I saw you fight that Maw on television. I saw the way it magically threw cars and buildings at you. Then those rings appeared in the sky and you in the suit, dashing into them..."

"And then", she closed her eyes, "I called you because... I was so freaking worried! I was horrified because I knew you would go into deep space! On some alien ship! To god knows where! What was going to happen to you?!"

"Pepper...." he said, touching her hair gently.

She pulled herself back, wringing her hand in his shirt to hold on to him. Tony widened his eyes in alarm but Pepper didn't care.

"Don't you 'Pepper' me, Tony Stark! You always care so much for others! You boarded that damn ship and flew into space to save someone you just met!"

"He had a Time Stone, Pep-"

"I don't care! You went after it, whatever your reasons. Then you flew the ship to some godforsaken dusty planet, just to reduce the casualties on Earth. You took on a space warlord with inhuman strength, got beaten and stabbed..."

"He also threw a moon at me..."

Pepper stared at Tony incredulously, as he clapped his hand over his mouth. "Are you serious? A moon!"
He looked at the floor and nodded.

"Tony Stark, what the fuck? Why didn't you tell me this?"

He grinned at her and said cheekily, "I didn't want to brag. Oh and language, Potts."

She tightened her grip on his shirt and Tony winced.

"Tony!! This is not funny!"

Tony held her arms and said soothingly, "I know, Pepper, I know... you know me... emotions make me uneasy and I try to be funny."

"Well!" she jabbed her finger in his Arc. "Tony Stark, you are just going to have to handle these emotions this time!"

"Alright Pepper, I'm listening. No more jokes, I promise..."

She stared at him, wide eyed. "Did Thanos really throw a moon at you?"

"Yes. He did. I am not sure myself how I survived it. The suit held up to the weight."

Suddenly she saw herself back on dusty yellow Titan, watching as a big huge orb bore down on Tony, crushing him where he stood.

This vision broke the fragile control she had on her emotions. Her eyes welled with tears and she felt one and then another slowly trickle down her cheeks.

Tony said in a panicked voice, "Pepper...honey, please don't cry, please."
She pushed his hands away from her face and said tearfully, "You told me once that you wanted a girlfriend, who would be crazy about you but worry about you like hell. Congratulations Tony... you got what you wanted."

Pepper wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand but the tears just kept on coming, her eyes itching now.

"I am sorry, you do not need this right now but... you could have died up there... and you have... you have no idea what I went through, hoping and praying... how happy I was to see you in space... I thought I had lost you, Tony..."

She pushed her hair back and covered her face with her hands. "you have People may think I'm just a naggy girlfriend, calling you on missions, telling you to stop fighting evil and urging you to come back... but Tony... I can't help it Tony... I care about you! And I love you and I... I don't want to lose you!"

She felt Tony pull her into his arms. She hugged him tightly to her, laying her head on his shoulder and took a deep breath, trying to stop her tears.

"Pep..." Tony said softly. "You know how some people say certain things casually, which actually have a deeper meaning?"

"I know, Tony..." she said on a hiccup. "You do it quite often."

She felt his chest rumble as he laughed softly. Then Tony began to stroke the back of her head gently and Pepper sighed at his soft touch.

He whispered to her softly, "Pepper... when I said that... what I actually meant to say was... that I wanted someone who cared... for me... not for Stark industries or for Iron Man but... who cared that I came back. And who waited for me when I was lost. I am the luckiest Avenger, Pepper... because I have someone who cares for me so deeply. It isn't nagging if someone cares for you and is concerned about your wellbeing. And I have always been lucky because you were always there for me. Even when my being Iron Man hurt you... You were tortured by Killian.. ultimately you are the one who saved me in the end."

She felt his body tense and his grip on her tightened.
Pepper leaned back and looked into his molasses brown eyes, so dear and familiar to her. She felt a powerful wave of love and tenderness flow through her. She softly kissed his cheek

"Tony... that was in the past. Forget about it. And it wasn't your fault. Aldritch Killian was a sick man."

He clenched his jaw and whispered, "Even when I was broken in Siberia and we weren't a couple... you came to me... just to see if I was alright..."

She nodded, the memory of that difficult time hitting her hard. "When I heard about Steve, I had to see if you were alright. And then once I saw you again... I realized I just couldn't leave you, Tony. I love you... I will always love you." She whispered. "I will always care for you."

He kissed her nose. "Pepper... I'm sorry, I know I have done nothing but wallow in self pity and guilt. And I was trying to drown my sorrows in drink, which was so wrong. And you were right, I should do something. But... I just need a little more time... please...." he whispered pleadingly. "I do not want to face the media. Or the world, for that matter."

She nodded and whispered, "Tony, I am sorry too. I didn't mean to push you. I know that... I know that you are suffering, I just want to help you, baby. I don't want you to suffer."

Then Pepper touched her lips to his gently. Tony kissed her in a long slow kiss, one hand on her hip and the other stroking her face.

"I don't deserve you, Pepper...", he whispered against her lips. "I'm lucky I have you. Please don't forget that. I don't have anyone else."

Pepper smiled and whispered, "You are all I have too, you know."

Tony grinned at her as she ruffled his hair. She could make out he was tired and asked slowly, "Tony, did you sleep at all last night?"
He sheepishly shook his head.

She sighed and said, "Go to bed now. Right now, Mr. Stark."

She took his hand to lead him to the bed. He cutely followed her like a child, yawning loudly.

Tony took off his robe and sat on the edge of the bed. He patted the bed, saying mournfully, "Pep, will you lie down with me? Please? Just till I go to sleep."

Pepper was going to object because she had to prepare for her flight. But the haunted look in his eyes made her realize she had to help him sleep.

So she lay down beside him and Tony turned and shuffled backwards to nestle against her. She looped her hand around his chest, placing it on his Arc.

The comforting warmth and feel of the nanites moving under her fingers, made her sigh loudly.

"See, you need to rest too, Miss Potts." said Tony sleepily and she kissed the back of his head, pulling him against her.

"Tony, go to sleep." She whispered against his ear.

"I will but... I am curious."

"About what, Tony?"

"Who are these people, Pepper, that said you are a naggy girlfriend?"

She smiled against his soft silky hair. "Tony... it is not important."

"The faster you tell me, Potts, the faster I will go to sleep."
Pepper sighed and said softly, "Some gossip rags. They ran a whole spread on beautiful but poisonous women who hold their men back. Hey, at least they called me beautiful. And another rag repeatedly mentions my name in their columns as 'The toxic CEO who ruins Iron Man'.

Tony muttered sleepily, "I want names, Potts."

"Whatever for, Tony?"

"I am going to buy these rags out and make them redact their words."

She giggled and hugged him tighter. "Tony! There's no need for that! Don't waste money on them when you can spend it on rebuilding your Norton."

Tony turned slightly and looked at her guiltily. "You know about the Norton?"

"Of course, Mr. Stark. You think you can hide things from me?"

"I thought so, Miss Potts but apparently, I was mistaken."

Then Pepper kissed his ear and said, "Mr. Stark, please close your eyes and go to sleep."

He yawned again and said, "Are you going to Rhodey's trial, Pepper?"

"Yes I am, Tony, he needs one of us to be there. Don't worry. I can handle it."

"Oh, I am not worried about you, honey... just... hurry back okay."

"Okay Tony, now sleep." Pepper said tiredly.
Just five minutes... then I will get up.

She waited as his breathing evened and then closed her eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Angst over... for now...
From IM2, we have seen that Pepper faces a lot of flack for becoming Stark Industries CEO. I think the tabloids are vicious enough to attack Tony and her's relationship and that being human, it does hurt her.
See you next week..
Tony slowly opened his eyes because his back felt cold. He realized he was lying in his bed on his side. He slowly sat up and then noticed that the other side of the bed, which was supposed to be occupied, was empty.

The imprint of Pepper's body was still there on the mattress. He placed his hand on the outline, wondering where she had gone. Then he noticed that the bathroom door was slightly ajar.

Tony breathed out in relief and swung his legs off the bed. He stretched himself and then drank water from the glass on his side table. He gingerly shuffled to his feet and slowly entered the bathroom.

The shower was on and he could see the sensual silhouette of Pepper's body through the nearly translucent bathroom curtain. The room was filled with steam and humidity from the heat of the water.

Tony swallowed hard. He could see the droplets of water cascading down the curtain, Pepper's long endless legs and the curve of her breasts. She was standing right underneath the shower and the water was beating down on her bowed head.

He studied her shadowed form through the curtain and was unsure what to do.

_I want to tell her that ... I am not useless when it comes to her... I am going to be there for her... I know I haven't been doing that lately, I've been a real asshole, wallowing in my own grief, not thinking about her... But I love you, Pepper, I don't want to lose you... please, not you too..._
But he did not know how to take the first step. He stood there, waiting for his nerve to come back, when the curtain gently moved and Pepper peered out from one corner. Her hair was wet and falling around her face, making her look like so innocent and child-like. All he could see were her bare knees and neck. Her blue eyes were soft and questioning.

Tony didn't know what to say or do, so he just looked down at the floor.

*She might need space, she might think I am being too pushy... she needs space and I am just... I am such a dick, we just fought and made up, I was totally in the wrong, yet I made her cry and here I am asking her to love me...*

Then he felt soft fingers barely brushing his arm and looked at her. Pepper swallowed and her eyes deepened in color as they gazed upon him, soft and loving. He knew that look, it was the look she would gave him when she tended to him after he returned from a mission, all broken and bruised. Or when she had found him in space and cradled him as he was too weak to move.

*The color of the sky on a hot summer's day, free of clouds. So bright and blue and vast...*

He moved a little closer and she nodded at him, wordlessly urging him to join her.

Tony took his robe off and pulled off his clothes. Then Pepper pushed the curtain aside and he stepped into the stall behind her. She turned on the water and pulled him closer to her, such that his body brushed against her back.

The hot water beat down on them both and he hesitantly clasped her arms and leaned on her, nestling his head on her shoulder, sighing at the way her soft curves felt against his body. She moved her arms behind her, hugging him to her and leaned back against him.

They stood there for a long moment, quietly leaning on each other, as the shower stall filled with steam, from the water falling onto them.

He closed his eyes and rested his head in the crook of her neck, pressing himself to her and marveling at the softness and warmth of her skin and the smell of vanilla all around.

*I may have lost the others but I still have Pepper. She's all I have left... and she came to save me... like she always does. I can't let her down... Not after all she's done. I am not going to be that stupid.*
Her backside brushed against his cock and it twitched. He swore and apologized but Pepper pushed back again, this time pressing her butt against his member and rubbing it a little.

Tony swore again and caught her arm hard with one hand, holding her in place against him. She sighed then as he spread one of her legs slightly with his and then fitted his cock right into the curve of her butt, pressing himself flush against her. He then lightly rocked his hips forward and she gasped.

Tony looped his arm around her waist, bit her shoulder, and rocked against her once more, deepening his thrust. Pepper moaned and looped her free hand around his back, holding him against her.

"Do it again, Tony..." she whispered, "It feels so good."

He began to thrust himself against her, slowly at first and then quick and hard, holding Pepper still as he did so. She was making little noises in her throat.

Then Tony lifted his cock in his hand and placed it right along the curve of her butt, pressing into her back. He nibbled on her neck, his heart racing because her skin was so smooth and unbearably soft against his throbbing hardness. He willed himself to slow down because he hadn't touched Pepper in a week and the feel of her was overwhelming his senses.

His hand was on her stomach and he moved it upwards to cup her breast and squeeze it hard. She moaned again and pressed back against him, her head lolling on his shoulder.

"Tony ... please..." she whispered. "Please Tony... please love me..."

He took her ear lobe between his teeth and sucked on it gently as he kept moving himself against her backside and squeezing her breast at the same time.

She felt blindly for his other hand that was on her hip and brought it to her other breast. He began to cup and squeeze the soft globes in tandem as Pepper writhed, leaning backwards on his chest sensuously.
"Pepper," he couldn't help but chuckle as she pushed back against him urgently with a loud groan, "Pepper... sweetheart, slow down, I want to take my time and love you... to make up for last week."

She tilted her head and looked back at him, her mouth forming a silent O.

"Tony..." Pepper said softly, "I am sorry, I have a flight in two hours. The flight to Fort Irwin, remember?"

Disappointment coursed through him and he mentally smacked himself.

_I forgot she's going. I had to jump her in the shower, today of all days._

Tony smiled sadly and let her go, stepping away from her. "It is alright, Pepper, sorry for disturbing your shower."

He was surprised when she caught his hand and pulled him back hard against her, turning to face him.

"Mr. Stark," said Pepper firmly, "you can't just touch me, making me senseless with need and then leave me like this. I demand you complete the job you started and do it ahead of schedule."

He was filled with blinding happiness that she wanted him but he just grinned at her stern expression. Tony tapped her lightly on her nose.

"Miss Potts, don't you have a flight in two hours? Do you want to be late?"

She looped her arms around his neck, pressing her slender, soft body to him. He growled low in his throat because every curve and nook of her fit against his frame perfectly and the satiny smoothness of her skin was torturing him. He could feel his dick throb against her soft stomach.

Pepper moistened her lips and whispered sultrily, "Mr. Stark, I know you are good at logic. So help me out here."
"Sure, Miss Potts."

"Who is the CEO of Stark Industries?"

"You are, Miss Potts."

"Correct. And whose plane am I using to fly to Fort Irwin?"

"The Stark Jet. A private plane exclusively for the CEO of Stark Industries."

"Exactly. Kind of my own plane, you could say."

A slow grin broke out on his face because Tony saw where she was going with this.

"It is your own plane, Miss Potts."

"It's funny, I thought with it being my plane and all, that it would just wait for me."

"It will wait for you, Miss Potts."

"Then what are you worried about, Mr. Stark? I just need to shower, get ready, pack lightly and leave."

Pepper looked at him from below her lashes, a look that hit him right in his stomach. She rocked against him lightly and whispered, "That leaves you with 10 minutes to finish the job at hand. Is that enough time, Mr. Stark?"

He lowered his head to kiss her neck. "Yes, that is enough time. And for the record, Miss Potts, this isn't a job, it is my pleasure, do you understand that?" he said firmly as he bit her soft flesh gently.

She gasped and moved her hands restlessly over his back, holding him to her.
Tony held the wet soft woman in his arms as he kissed her shoulders and then kissed the top of her breast. He cupped her other breast as he bent and took one into his mouth, sucking on it gently.

Pepper moaned loudly, trembling against him as he licked and nibbled on the succulent orb with his teeth and tongue. He then shifted his attention to her other breast, licking her coral pink nipple until the bud was erect and taut against his tongue.

Her hands were in his hair, pulling it into tufts restlessly as she whispered raggedly, "More... Tony, more..."

He gently nibbled around and over her moist nipple, the water falling down on their bodies and then sucked on the little nub. Pepper's grip tightened in his hair and he straightened to take her mouth hard with his own.

Their tongues mated wildly and he lowered his hand to her soft core, gently rubbing her mound. Then he dipped his fingers into her pussy and gently stroked her. She gasped, leaving his mouth but he took her bottom lip between his teeth, nibbling on it gently as he kept stroking her with his fingers.

She was already slick with arousal, so he pushed his thumb against her clit, while his fingers kept thrusting within her. Pepper whispered, "Tony, I can't stand. My legs..."

So he gently made her lean back against the shower wall, propping himself against it with one arm. Then he looked into her big blue eyes, watching them darken with passion as he touched her intimately. He lazily stroked her with one finger while his thumb played with her clit.

She tightened herself around his hand and Tony kissed her softly, whispering against her lips, "Pepper, you are so damn beautiful and made for loving... I'm so lucky to have you, sweetheart..."

She mewled and then gasped as he crooked his finger upwards, touching the most deepest part of her, that was swollen and pushing itself against his finger.

"Tony!" Pepper exclaimed loudly, "Tony, keep touching me... please!"
He obliged by thrusting two more fingers into her and began to alternate between deep long thrusts and then, slow casual strokes, all the while his thumb still teased her clit. Pepper pushed her head back hard against the wall, exposing her slender, delicate neck. He lowered his head to bite it gently as he moved his fingers upwards, to softly pinch her clit between their tips.

Tony felt her shudder against his mouth as he stroked her again and again. She was so wet and soft now, that he just wanted to senselessly shove his throbbing cock into her but he controlled himself sternly, determined to take care of Pepper first.

She had closed her eyes and was pushing herself against his fingers. Then Pepper groaned loudly and he thought she would come right there and then.

Instead she whispered tightly, "Take me... take me, please, Tony! I want you inside me!" Tony took his hand away from her. Then he caught the underside of her thighs and lifted them, spreading her.

He thrust into her completely in one smooth motion, right into her tight moist core. With a loud moan, Pepper pressed herself back against the tiled wall and Tony hooked her raised legs around his back, leaning into her body and cupping her backside firmly with his hands.

"I guess I am still young enough to pull this move off." Tony gasped out as he nuzzled her face, her wet, tender body pressed completely to his

Then Pepper looped her arms around his neck and whispered tightly, "Stark, move your young ass please and thrust your big hard dick into me again and again."

"Have I told you, Potts, how much I love it when you talk dirty?"

"Yes, you have, Stark, now...", she tightened herself around his cock, gasping and he groaned, "Move, Tony, please!"

"Yes maam!"

He began to thrust into her heavily, moving his cock in and out of her wet pussy, feeling her tighten and clench around him. Her nails were digging into his back lightly and she bit his neck as he increased the tempo of his thrusts.
"Tony, harder, harder!"

He changed his pace, thrusting hard and then withdrawing completely to push heavily into her once again. Pepper gasped and then tightened around him, crying out. That was his cue and Tony pushed her hard, against the wall as he spilled his seed into her, crying out her name.

He buried his face in her neck and pushed inside her as he came, closing his eyes as his body shook with the effort of his release.

Finally he sank to his knees, still holding Pepper, her legs wrapped around him and her soft pliant body in his arms.

"Oh Tony..." she said breathlessly, "Tony... that was... oh I can't feel my legs..."

Tony gently set her down on the floor of the stall and helped her sit up. Pepper smiled softly at him as he massaged her legs, to get rid of the numbness.

He grinned at her, asking mischievously, "So Miss Potts, would you care to give some feedback on my work here?"

She leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the lips, whispering, "Good driven work, great at initiating and innovation, likes to linger on his assigned tasks for long."

He whispered back, "But Miss Potts, you seemed to like my ability to 'linger'. If I recall, you were so wet by the time-".

Pepper placed her hand over his mouth, blushing furiously at his words. Tony kissed her fingers and she laid her head on his chest, breathing deeply.

He belatedly realized that they had forgotten to something important and said softly, "Pepper, honey, we didn't...".
"I know, Tony, I am on the pill, do not worry."

Tony opened his mouth to ask, when he realized they had already had one intense discussion today. And Pepper needed to leave.

He kissed her forehead and whispered, "Miss Potts, I do not mean to be a smart ass..."

"But you are a smart ass, Tony." she whispered lazily against his throat.

He smirked but continued, "But I feel I must mention, the Stark plane will wait for you but Rhodey's trial won't."

Pepper scrambled to her feet rapidly and he stood up as well.

"Never fear, Miss Potts, I shall make sure you get to your plane on time."

Chapter End Notes

Two more chapters this week.
Chapter Notes

So this week, all chapters are just the preludes to the trial.

The outfit mentioned in this chapter is:

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony stepped out of the stall and quickly pulled a fluffy towel from the rack. Before Pepper could object, he wrapped the towel around her and began to rub her dry.

"Tony!" she giggled, "I can dry myself off, thank you!"

But he paid her no attention and kept toweling her under she was soft and dry. Tony found her bathrobe behind the toilet door and held it out for her, so Pepper could wear it.

He used another towel to wrap up her wet hair. Then he held out his hand. She took it and stepped out of the stall onto the mat. She kissed his cheek softly in thanks.

Then Pepper looked at him critically.

"What about you, Tony?" She looked at him pointedly.

He shook his head like a dog, scattering water everywhere.

"No, Tony, that will not do. I cannot have you dripping water everywhere."

She quickly tied the towel around her hair and then, removing the towel from her shoulders, Pepper buffed him lightly with it.
He took it from her and said, "Pep, I will dry myself, since you insist. You start dressing up."

She opened her mouth to argue when he said, "Miss Potts, may I remind you, that you have a flight to catch? It is already 2:15 and you need to leave by 2:40."

That got to her and he chuckled as Pepper nearly ran out of the bathroom.

Tony quickly toweled himself dry, tied the towel around his hips and went back to their bedroom. Pepper had tugged her small business trolley out from under the bed and was lifting it onto the bed to pack.

He quickly took it from her, saying, "Okay, let's have a little role reversal here. You be the fancy CEO who needs to look her best. And I'm going to be the hapless assistant, who is going to run around for you, helping you dress. How does that sound?"

Pepper bit her lip and he realized she was trying not to laugh at him.

"Tony, it is okay, I have the time to pack. My personal hairdresser and make up artist is going to meet me on the plane."

Tony placed his hands on his hips and said sternly, "But you still need to get dressed, Potts, and dry your hair. So I'm going to pack for you... under your supervision, of course. Now you just sit there and tell me what to do."

"Oh... this should be fun...." she whispered sultrily. "Alright towel boy, go to the closet and open it."

He walked over to the huge, built-in closet that was exclusively for Pepper, at the end of the bedroom. It housed all her suits, dresses, casual wear and what not, that she had collected over the years. Tony opened its pine doors and stood there, waiting.

Pepper was rubbing her hair dry gently. She said, "Now I want you to take the blue suit, the hounds-tooth jacket and the black trousers. Oh and the striped blouse on the right, please."

He scanned the rows of clothes until he found said items. Then Tony took them off the hanging
"Now pack these carefully."

He came back to the bag and did so, taking care not to crumple the clothes.

"Now Tony..." Pepper said over the low hum of her hair dryer, "I need five panties please. From the bottom right drawer."

Tony struggled to keep his poker face on. Inside, he was screaming with joy because he had a real thing for women's underwear, to touch, to admire said underwear and to watch it being worn and definitely being removed.

So he quickly walked back to the closet and opened said drawer, sighing with pleasure.

_Jiminy Cricket! Look at the rows and rows of neatly folded panties and bras, in all the colors of a rainbow. So neat yet riotous..._

He picked up a delicate red thong and buried his face in it but then heard Pepper clear her throat and remembered that she was getting late.

Tony looked at her and asked, "So Pep, you need briefs or thongs or bikinis?"

She grinned widely. "I forgot you were an expert in ladies underwear. Three bikinis and two thongs, please. Oh and I need my stockings as well. There is a small bag on the shelf above. Get the bag please."

He got the panties and the bag and came over to the bed.

"Give me one pair of underwear please. And from the bag, a pair of sheer stockings and you can pack the rest, please."

He still had the red thong, so he gave it to her, just to tease her and handed her the stockings as
well. Then Tony neatly placed the underwear in her travelling bag.

He straightened and asked, "Okay Miss Potts, what to do-"

His question died on his lips as he saw that Pepper had taken off her robe and was sitting on the small stool near her dressing table. Her gleaming, sinfully, long legs were bare and he felt his throat dry up as he saw her gracefully place one slim ankle and then the other, into the thong.

*It had to be red. I had to give her the red one. Be still, don't say anything... she mustn't notice me staring...*

He swallowed as she, oh so slowly, pulled the red scrap up her taut calves and over her knees.

*Oh yes... take them up all the way please. And do it as slowly as possible.*

She stood up and he tried not to swallow his tongue as Pepper pulled the thong over her sexy thighs and with a little shimmy of her curved hips, pulled them on completely. The red triangle of fabric contrasted beautifully with her pale smooth skin and he took a deep breath.

Tony stood there, transfixed, as she sat back down and this time, picked up one sheer stocking.

*Why is this so fascinating to watch? It is just a long tubular clothing item. Made of... hmmm... what are stockings made of... nylon... something synthetic, I bet...*

Then he lost his train of thought and felt all his blood rush to his groin as Pepper delicately rolled the bunched up stocking over her heel and began to pull it up her long lean legs, so gracefully and slowly, gently smoothing it as she moved the material over her calf and above her knee.

Tony forgot to breathe as she pulled it on, right to the middle of her thigh and then let it go with a soft snap, the material glimmering on her heavenly leg like gossamer, highlighting its curvaceous outline.

His breathing quickened and he clenched his fists as she trailed one finger slowly down her calf and then down to her ankle, making sure the material hadn't bunched or snagged anywhere.
I want to do that ... with my tongue... all down that soft, satiny smooth leg...

He felt his cock twitch and he growled low at it, "Not now... she has a plane to catch and we just
made love to her in the shower."

Pepper looked up at him curiously and asked, "I'm sorry Tony, what did you say?"

"Oh nothing. Nothing. Erm..." he was stalling because she had bunched up the other stocking and
was sitting down again.

"Friday." Pepper called out. "Friday."

"Yes, Miss Potts." The AI intoned.

"Can you please call Alex and tell him to be here in 10 minutes?"

"Will do, Miss Potts."

"Thank you. Tony, let me just put this stocking on and then you can help me with my suit."

"Eh sure. Sure. Sure, Pep."

Don't be a pervert and just ogle her! Put some clothes on!

He turned and absently picked up his pyjama bottoms from his bed. Tony turned back towards
Pepper and saw she was nearly done, putting the other stocking on.

The material was around her knee and she neatly pulled it up to her thigh and then smoothed it down.
Pepper stood up and Tony slowly raked his eyes over her sexy semi-naked body.

Ten cute little stocking-covered toes... holy shit, those endlessly long legs... this view never gets old... encased in that silky nude material... so sheer and shiny and curved and soft... and up and up... wow... hot rod red Pepper.

He heard a soft voice gently say, "Hey... Mr. Stark..." and whistle at him.

Tony shook himself and realized that Pepper was looking at him with her lips curved and eyes sparkling with mischief.

She said sultrily, "My eyes are up here." pointing at her face. He felt himself grow warm at being caught staring and quickly looked away, murmuring an apology as he tugged his pyjamas on.

Then he saw her feet come towards him and felt Pepper's hand on his chin. She tilted his head up and then kissed him gently.

"I love the way you stare at me, when you think I am not looking..." She whispered with a smile.

Then she took his hand and pulled him towards the open closet.

"Now be a good assistant and help your boss decide what suit to wear. As I have done so many times for you."

Tony scanned the row of suits before him and pulled out the one, he knew would be perfect.

"The Hugo BOSS metallic suit..." Pepper said musingly and turned to face him. "Not bad, Stark. Not bad at all."

"Well...It is crisp, powerful and professional, Pep. Just what you need to knock those Army folk of their seats."

"Exactly." she said with a smile. "And for my feet, these should do."
She bent and pulled out a pair of blood-red Louboutins with wickedly high heels.

Tony looked at the shoes and then the suit and then at Pepper.

"Interesting color combination, Miss Potts. Red with grey."

"Yes." She said slowly, taking the skirt off the hanger. "I want to be professional but bold and a splash of color will help me warn the Army boys, that I mean business and that I am out for blood."

Tony nodded in agreement.

Then she smirked at him. "Besides... it matches my underwear."

He asked, "Do you always match your underwear and your shoes, Pep?", distracted again as she pulled the slim pencil skirt over her legs.

Pepper giggled. "I like to. It is my little secret kink."

Tony moved behind her and zipped up her skirt.

She looked over her shoulder at him, eyebrows raised. "Okay, so how did you know the zip is over there, Tony? And how did you do that so quickly?"

He said nonchalantly, "I am an observant man, so I pay attention to little details like that, Potts."

Pepper shook her head at him. "In other words, you like my ass in this suit and have stared at it for so long, that you know where the zip is."

Tony grinned at her sheepishly and she smiled, then knelt to put the shoes on.
Pepper straightened and looked at her closet thoughtfully. "I need to put my blouse on, dry my hair a little more and... oh, I also need to apply my cream."

"I'll get it for you, Pep. It's on your dressing table right?"

Tony turned and bounded there quickly. He found what he was looking for, a tiny flowery tub in one corner of the table and brought it back to Pepper.

She took it from him with a smile and he saw she had put her bra on.

Pepper opened the container and began to rub a little cream on her wrists and arms. The air was filled with the fragrance of vanilla and lilies.

Tony took a deep breath, closing his eyes and filling his lungs with the intoxicating aroma.

He felt a soft tap on his nose and opened his eyes, to see Pepper had dabbed him with a splotch of cream.

She grinned at him. "Why not try some since you seem to like it so much?" He rubbed it absently onto his beard.

Pepper shook her head at him, saying dryly, "Tony... you do not put cream on your beard. You need it for your face or hands. Here. Let me put it for you."

She dipped her fingers in the tub and then lightly rubbed a little cream onto his forehead and cheeks. Then she massaged it into his skin, her soft fingers moving over his face.

He closed his eyes, enjoying the attention. Then Friday said loudly, "Miss Potts, Alex is pulling into the driveway and it is 2:35."

Pepper gasped and Tony opened his eyes and took the tub. "Quick Pep, tell me what to do while you put your shirt on."
"Mmm... Tony, there is a small bag of toiletries in my dressing table. First drawer on the right. Pack it and pack the dryer as well."

He went back to the table and did as she said.

Pepper had pulled on a sleeveless black blouse and was tucking it into her skirt. Tony pulled the suit jacket off the hanger and held it out for her, so she easily slipped her arms into it and shrugged it on.

Pepper examined herself in the closet's mirror critically, while he looked at her with a slow smile, admiring her smart sleek figure with the bold shoes. She met his gaze and smiled back.

"Tony. Please pack these as well." She handed him a pair of black high heels and he moved back towards the bag.

"Done, Pep. Next?"

"That's it, nothing's left to pack. Well done, Mr. Stark, your time as my assistant is over." Pepper said as she put on a pair of pearl earrings.

Tony zipped up the bag, took it off the bed and pulled his t-shirt on. Then he saw Pepper slip on her engagement ring and then take out a slender string of pearls.

He stepped in place behind her and gently moved her hair over her shoulder, so he could close the clasp on the necklace.

She sighed and leaned back against him as he kissed the top of her head softly.

"Tony," Pepper whispered as she caressed the pearls with one hand. "Your mother's pearls are so beautiful... thank you for giving them to me..."

Tony squeezed her shoulder.

"Thank you for wearing them with the same grace and dignity as my mother. And thank you... for
just like my mother, you have to put up with a difficult, self-loathing, eccentric genius." He said softly, his jaw tightening as he thought of his father and how his mother had patiently put up with his irritating behavior.

Pepper stood up and turned around to face him. With her Louboutins, she was taller than him, a fact that always annoyed him, when she wore high heels.

She cupped his cheeks and whispered softly, "Tony, you are not your father. You are a much better man. And I love you, you difficult, self-loathing, eccentric genius."

Tony wanted to kiss her hard but didn't want to muss up her nicely done hair or her outfit, so he settled for a soft peck on her cheek.

She smiled and moved towards the door. He quickly darted for the bag and picked it up.

He put on a deferential English accent and said, "I shall put your bag in the car, madam."

Pepper giggled and Tony gestured at the door. "Please proceed, madam, I shall follow."

They walked down to the ground floor and out onto the driveway, where Alex was waiting with the passenger door open. Tony moved to the trunk with the bag and Alex came forward to help him.

But he shooed the driver away, insisting he would do it. Tony placed the bag in the trunk and closed it. Then he waggled his eyes meaningfully at Alex, who took the hint and sat in the driver's seat.

Tony walked back to the main door, where he could see Pepper busy giving instructions to Friday.

"Make sure that the Mrs. Flores is let in everyday, Friday, even if Mr. Stark is sleeping."

"Yes, Miss Potts."

"And also turn off all the lights by 12:00, so that Mr. Stark will try and sleep."
"Miss Potts, he just overrides all your instructions."

"I know, Friday, but I am hoping, he may forget to override one or two."

He interrupted the exchange by saying playfully, "Ah, the mistress of the house telling nanny what to do with the spoiled brat. May my bedtime please be extended?"

Pepper looked at him worriedly. "Friday, tell Mrs. Flores to cook something everyday for Mr. Stark. And ensure that Mr. Stark eats it, somehow. And if it spoils, sound an alarm for him to throw it or tell Mrs. Flores."

"I will, Miss Potts."

Tony tapped his left wrist meaningfully but Pepper, to his surprise, looped her hands around his neck and took his mouth hard, kissing him passionately, her tongue teasing his as she moved her fingers through his hair. He was breathing hard, when she let him go, with a wide grin.

"That was..." he cleared his throat, "that was some kiss, Potts..."

She smirked and asked, "Friday, am I still on time?"

"You are, Miss Potts, if you leave now."

Her sapphire eyes were soft bright blue, looking into his as Pepper whispered, "Tony, I will be back in a day or two. I will try to wrap up my involvement as soon as possible. Take care of yourself, remember to sleep and please... please don't drink."

Tony took her hand and kissed her fingers. "I won't, Pepper, I won't drink. I am not going to be that stupid again."

She nodded and they walked hand in hand, out of the doorway. He held the door open for her as she elegantly sat in the car.
Then Tony closed the door and Pepper rolled down the glass to softly say, "I love you, Tony. Take care."

He whispered the same to her and watched the big black Mercedes drive away, Pepper waving at him from the open window.

Chapter End Notes

So I was inspired to write this chapter... because... like Tony, I have a kink for woman's innerwear and because I was inspired by a snapshot of a lovely long pair of legs in fishnet stockings, sent to me and I will be forever grateful for that act of kindness. You know who you are.

Also, I like writing Tony and Pepper's interactions as a normal couple.

One more chapter tomorrow.
Tony Home Alone

Chapter Notes

So this is a damn long chapter because when I tried splitting it, it lost its impact.

There may not be any updates next week, because I have to write the chapter detailing the trial.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony watched the black Mercedes drive away into the afternoon Malibu sun and sighed deeply.

"Off goes Pepper to save Rhodey... while I sit here and... do what exactly? I need to keep busy... Need to do something."

He scratched his beard absently and then clicked his fingers.

"I know! I can work on my Norton!"

Tony quickly went back inside and ran down to the basement. He pulled the tarp off the motorcycle in its corner of the basement, where he had carefully hidden it from Pepper and then called out, "Friday! The projected specs for the Norton, please and pronto!"

There was no response.

"Oh crap! I turned her access off in the basement!"

He sat on his wheelie chair and swiveled over to a nearby console, quickly tapping commands into it. Friday came online with a loud beep.

"Thank you for letting me in your Fortress of Solitude, Mr Stark."
"Hey Friday, do I detect a hint of disapproval in your voice? Are you mad at me?"

"No Mr Stark, whatever would I be mad at?"

"Okay, I know that's women speak for 'I'm mad at you'. I'm sorry, Friday. I shouldn't have kept you out, old girl."

"Apology accepted, Mr. Stark. Here are the blueprints you projected for the Norton."

He looked at the ceiling thoughtfully. "Okay, how do you know I wanted the blueprints? You weren't online when I said so."

"I saw that you uncovered the Norton and felt you were going to work on it."

"Smart girl." Tony nodded with appreciation. "So let's begin."

He examined the intricate details of the motorcycle's engine, engrossed in the design, when Friday asked, "Mr Stark, I assume you want to restore the motorcycle to its former glory?"

"Yes, Friday, with some enhancements in the engine and suspension system. Speed it up, reduce bumpiness, remove any defects in the original functioning, so to speak."

"I see. You are trying to enhance its performance, to make it work better."

"Yup."

"The same way you enhance or upgrade your Iron Man suit after each mission, be it a success or failure."

Tony looked thoughtfully at the console, where he could see the AI's engaged light blink at him.
"That's right. He said slowly, "Where are you going with this, Friday?"

"I am merely trying to understand why you have chosen to work on a mechanical item not related to your suit, when you have an alien device, capable of enhancing the power of your nanites. I thought you would test that item out immediately when you returned from space. But you haven't. I do not understand."

He tightened his jaw, realizing that even his AI was confused at his lack of interest in anything related to Iron Man.

"I am... taking a break... a sort of vacation from being Iron Man. So I am not interested in upgrading the suit."

"Oh. I did not know, Mr. Stark. May I ask why, you are taking a break?"

"Sensitive topic, Friday. Change the subject."

"Yes, Mr. Stark. Let us return to the subject of the motorcycle's restoration."

"Yes, let's."

"While I understand the need for upgrading the Norton's performance, do you intend to use it in the physical state, it is in currently?"

Tony snorted and ran his hand lovingly over the motorcycle's composite body, which was covered in thick, dark brownish red rust.

"No way, Friday. She's covered in rust! I intend to repaint her and restore her to her original glory. She is going to be one classy beauty when I am done with her."

"Do you want to use the original coloring of the bike or you are going to customize its color?"
"Original coloring, please." He muttered, distracted by a particular area of the design.

"Alright, I would just like to point out that ordering such paint will not be easy. The manufacturer stopped making the paint required for such a bike, twenty years ago. Here. Take a look at what the original coloring of the bike looked like."

Tony raised his head to look at the rendering of the bike in its iconic, gleaming, black and silver colors. The sleek coloring, that added to the graceful contouring of the bike, make him remember someone who wore similar colors and moved equally gracefully.

He scratched his head as he recalled when he had last seen King T'challa of Wakanda.

*Regal, noble and deadly as the Black Panther and as a ruler. The man who would be king. I appreciated his noble intentions to integrate Wakanda with the rest of world, arguing that one would not lose tradition by being more accepting of others.*

Tony put his spanner down and stared at the blueprints absently.

"Thanos went to Wakanda. Rather his forces 'converged upon it', those were Pepper's words. There must have been a fight. Yet Rhodes survived. Who else could have survived?"

Friday spoke, startling him. "No one knows, sir. Wakanda is being tight lipped about it.

"Hmm... and did your trace on the Vision get any results?"

"He was last seen in Dundee, Scotland, in the company of Miss Maximoff. Just as you predicted, Mr. Stark."

Tony grinned in triumph. He had first been alerted to Vision's sneaky disappearances, when he had noticed weird energy anomalies in the security cameras of the New Avengers Facility. The anomalies were found to be a result of security footage tampering, done very smartly. So he had set up a hidden camera, off the main grid and managed to catch Vision in the act doing so.

But instead of confronting the android about it and mainly because Tony was curious, he had
instructed Friday to keep a track of Vision's movements surreptitiously. This meant hacking into Google Earth's camera feed and running scans for the Vision's unique energy signal, so they would know where he was going.

Normally, a being of superior intelligence, like the Vision, would have noticed that he was being tailed. But he had surprisingly not noticed.

Tony had been analyzing the android's disappearances and had noticed he would disappear once in a month, for an extended period of time. He would fly out on his own and Friday had noticed that he would land in Scotland.

He knew deep down, that the Vision would never engage in malicious activity, so the next logical supposition was that the android was meeting one of the rogue Avengers, in secret.

And then Tony remembered the way the Scarlet Witch and the Vision had grown close before Siberia and how anguished the Vision had been, when she had run away with Steve and the other rogue Avengers. So he had given the Vision his privacy and had asked Friday, to notify him every time the android would leave and return.

"And this month, when did the Vision disappear from the Facility?"

"The day you faced Thanos' emissaries, the Maw and the Dwarf in Queens, sir. In fact, I have found a rather interesting feed from the Internet, which seems to be related to the Vision."

"Oh?"

"You may be aware, that there are a number of self-appointed watchmen on the Internet, who actively upload or follow sightings of the rogue Avengers. I found a video from one such watchman, on Reddit, which clearly shows the Vision and the Scarlet Witch fleeing from what appears to be alien assassins, in a nearly empty metro station."

Tony widened his eyes in alarm. "Friday! Play it! I want to see what happened!"

The big flatscreen, mounted from the ceiling, flickered and a dimly-lit video, containing of what appeared to be security footage, began to play.
He gasped as he could clearly see the Vision clutching his stomach, while Wanda appeared to be trying to help him stand up. Tony watched as the Vision seemed to be telling Wanda something.

"He's telling her to run. To leave him, to save herself. She didn't. She won't. Because she loves him." He whispered softly as he observed Wanda shake her head firmly and then stand protectively in front of the Vision.

Then his blood ran cold as he saw two alien beings, slender and tall, with the same bluish grey coloring as the Maw, silently creep towards Wanda, electric blue pulsing spears raised at the girl.

She began to fight both at the same time and Tony grimaced because he was fearful of what would happen next. They were attacking her with all their strength. Then a feminine figure, clad entirely in black leather, burst upon the scene and took on the male alien.

Tony let out the breath he was holding, with relief and then peered closely at the leather fighter.

"Is that... is that Natasha?"

He watched as the figure fought the muscular male alien like a wildcat, with powerful neat punches and kicks.

"It has to be. Who else can fight like that? They must have come to save Wanda."

The video abruptly stopped playing and Friday said, "That's all the footage the uploader had, Mr. Stark. From what I gathered from reading the comments, the security feed stopped recording. Possibly the camera was damaged during the fight.

"Or destroyed to prevent it from capturing more of the outlawed Avengers." He muttered.

Then Tony refocused his thoughts.

"Friday! Pull up anything, articles, pictures, videos etc. from all media sources with keywords,
"Wakanda' and 'Alien attack'."

"Will do sir."

The console closest to him, began to rapidly show multiple media items from all over the Internet. Tony rolled away from the bike and closer to the console. Then he began to read.

An hour later, he was still confused. He stood up from his chair and began to pace.

"Friday, let's outline the facts. It is clear that Thanos' minions attacked Wakanda en masse."

"Yes sir. The alien portal rings appeared over their horizon as well."

"But why would Thanos go there in the first place? Was it due to the presence of Vibranium? Which Wakanda is rich in?"

"I fail to see what interest Thanos would have in a mineral, sir."

"So do I, Friday. So do I. And I am also confused as to why the Vision hasn't come back from Wakanda. Is he scared of falling into legal troubles like Rhodey?"

"Possible, sir. But another possibility is that he could have perished in the mass disintegration process."

Hearing Friday calmly speak of the android's possible demise made his heart twinge with sadness. Tony had always felt a bittersweet sort of attachment to the Vision. After all, the android had the remnants of Jarvis, his faithful AI of so many years. Yet he had forced himself to accept that it wasn't Jarvis, it was a living entity with a distinct personality of its own. And somehow, the solemn, logical and sarcastic being had grown on him.

"Yet another loss..."
Through his pacing, he had reached the wall covered with newspaper clippings. Tony took a good look at them. A grainy shot of the Maw and the Dwarf on the streets of Queens, caught his eye and a thought began to niggle in his mind.

"Thanos sent his minions to Earth to get the stones. They would then meet him... where... on Titan? Well, the Maw was certainly taking Strange there. So two of his children came to Queens. For Strange. And the Ravagers mentioned there were more of them. It is clear they are the attackers in the video in Scotland. But why would they attack the Vision?"

Then it hit him in a flash and he slapped his forehead loudly.

"Of course! Why didn't I see this earlier?? The Mind Stone in Vision's head! A powerful Infinity Stone that affects the way any mind works!"

"Yes Sir. That could be an apt cause for the aliens to attack."

"But why did he go to Wakanda? And more importantly, how? He was clearly injured. And how the hell did Rhody end up in Wakanda too? Did he just go with Natasha and Wanda because I had disappeared into space? And what does his coming back mean? And where did Bruce go?"

He rifled his hands through his hair in frustration. "I am missing so many pieces of this damn puzzle!"

Then Tony shook his head sadly as he looked at the clippings of the Iron Patriot on the wall.

"The current problem is Rhody. Not so long ago, the US government was so happy to get their own suit of armor. And who could be a finer pilot, than Colonel James Rhodes, a fine stalwart officer of the Air Force."

Friday said softly, "Mr. Stark, I have a question."

"Go ahead, Friday."
"Colonel Rhodes is a noble soldier who wouldn't just go with the rogue Avengers. He must have had a good reason to do so."

Tony nodded thoughtfully, looking at a picture of Rhodey in the Iron Patriot suit, standing at attention, a broad grin on his boyish face.

"I know, Friday. I wonder if that reason had something to do with the Vision being attacked."

"But my question is, if the Colonel is a man trusted impeccably by the government and he went to Wakanda to help the rogue Avengers take on Thanos... why is he being prosecuted?"

Tony said tiredly, "Because unfortunately, Rhodes disobeyed the orders of a rather petty man. And he now returns at a very inopportune time, when the government is looking for some scapegoat, to distract the people from the aftermath of the alien invasion."

"But that is not fair, especially to Colonel Rhodes."

"I know, Friday it isn't."

"Sir, I'm sure Colonel Rhodes must have been aware of the consequences of his returning to the USA. Then why did he come back?"

He answered slowly, "Because James Rhodes is a good man who accepts responsibility for the actions he committed. And he won't run away from his demons."

Unlike me. The thought echoed in his head loudly.

Suddenly Tony could see nothing but Rhodey on the wall in front of him. Rhodey and him getting medals from Senator Stern in Washington for taking down Ivan Vanko, then Rhodey with Colonel Ross at Vienna, when the Wakandans came to help approve the Accords and again Rhodey and him at a recent Air Force passing out ceremony, posing in front of a F1 Fighter Jet.
His vision blurred and he dimly put his hand out to touch the shelf and steady himself. As he bent, Tony saw a newspaper clipping with bold headlines "Tony Stark is Iron Man", from the press conference when he announced to the world, that he was Iron Man.

He had to grin because while the main image in the article was him at the podium, there was another image, which had Rhodey standing some distance away from him, his hand covering his face in exasperation.

He could hear Rhodes crisp tense voice in his ears, "Stick to the cards, Tony. Just stick to the cards." The memory made him chuckle. "Hell no! Rhodey! I didn't want to hide behind some fictional 'body guard'. I wanted to be me."

Then Tony sobered as the clipping to its left, said "Decorated War Hero, Iron Patriot, crippled in Avengers fight".

The day he fell... from the sky... his Arc destroyed by the Vision's stray shot.

He pulled the clipping off the wall and stared at the picture of the broken Iron Patriot suit, lying in a deep ditch of mud, surrounded by green grass. Tony closed his eyes and saw Rhodey's still form lying in his arms, blood trickling from his nose and his eyes shut.

He felt his throat close up at the memory and his heart began to thud loudly in his chest like a drum. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead and he felt his knees shake. Suddenly the walls of the basement seemed to be closing on him and Tony looked around wildly.

"Sir," said Friday worriedly, "Sir, your heart rate has increased dramatically and you are breathing rapidly. Should I call for an ambulance?"

"I need some air, I need to get out of here, I need to breathe!"

"Mr. Stark, you need to calm down! You are having an anxiety attack! You..."

He barely heard Friday as he ran up the stairs towards the kitchen. His throat was burning and his face was moist with sweat.
Tony opened the tap of the kitchen sink and ducked his head under it, to let the cold water run over his overheated skin. He shivered at the temperature of the water and the way it trickled down his hair.

He took two deep breaths and straightened, rubbing his wet hair. His heart was still beating hard but not as much as in the basement.

"Oh man... that was scary! I think I spent too much time in the basement. I need to relax. I need some water."

Tony looked around, searching for a glass.

"Pepper keeps a neat kitchen. Of course she must be storing them away in..." he began to open one shelf door and then another.

He finally found where the glasses were kept and reached for one, only to glance sideways and notice the bottle of wine in the corner.

Tony swallowed hard, staring at the bottle because it reminded him that he still had 1 more bottle of whiskey, hidden in the kitchen.

"I better dispose of it now. While Pepper's not here. I do not want her to find it later."

He bent at the waist and opened the cupboard right under the sink.

"Now I know, I hid it here but where exactly in here, did I hide it? Somewhere that I knew Pepper wouldn't find it. But for the life of me, I can't remember where that was."

Tony scratched his beard and thought hard. Then he snapped his fingers.

"With the bug killing stuff! Which Pepper hates!"
He squatted and moved the mop bucket to one side. Then he gently pulled the square plastic container that contained a large Pif Paf can and a smaller bug bomb spray and a brown paper bag. He took the bag, pushed the container back into place and straightened.

Tony turned towards the counter and opened the bag, pulling out the unopened bottle of Johnny Walker whiskey.

He stared at the rich, amber colored liquid, shimmering in the afternoon light. And suddenly he wanted a drink badly.

"I need to calm down. And something stronger than water would help."

Tony looked around him, suddenly scared that Pepper had heard him. But no one was there.

He said firmly to himself, "I need a drink. Just one. What harm can it do? Just to calm down. Just 1 glass to calm down."

He turned to get a glass from the shelf above him and then opened the bottle, taking a deep appreciative sniff as the woodsy smoky alcoholic scent of the liquid filled his nostrils.

"Just one drink. Anyways I do not have anything important to do. And Pepper doesn't need to know."

He swallowed hard and felt his hand shake as he picked up the bottle and poured himself two fingers of whiskey. The liquid swirled and sloshed into the glass.

Tony placed the bottle down on the counter, closed it and picked up the glass, looking into its amber depths. He leaned against the counter and looked around at the neat compact kitchen with its blue shelves and cream counter top.

As he lifted the glass to his lips, a photo on the fridge caught his eye. He swallowed hard as he looked at the image of him, Pepper and Rhodes seated at a table, raising glasses in a toast and
grinning widely at the camera.

*From the day after Pepper accepted my proposal of marriage. I told Rhodey that she said yes. He wanted to celebrate. We went to a fancy uptown restaurant and stayed there till dawn, talking about... well, the last ten years, our friendship and our times together.*

Then it struck him. "Not just ten years. It has been ten years since I became Iron Man. Rhodey and Pepper have been with me since before that..."

He looked down at the whiskey in his hand and said softly, "They have been by my side for so long. Longer than my family."

He rubbed his face with his other hand.

"What am I saying... they are my family. For the last twenty years, it has been only Rhodey and Pepper. Staying with me through all my triumphs and my disasters and... and me becoming Iron Man."

Tony closed his eyes and remembered.

*The searing hot Afghanistan sun in my face... walking through the endless sand for god knows how long... and just when I was going to give up, just when my legs couldn't take another step... there he was, James Rhodes, my friend, stepping off a helicopter... He came for me...*

He stared blindly at his reflection in the metallic surface of the fridge.

"What the hell am I doing? I lost my parents and I couldn't do anything about it. Not even take down their killer, thanks to the good Capn... But today, another member of my family is so close to losing everything he has. His reputation, his life's work in the Army and for what? Because he went to help people? Because that dick, Thaddeus Ross, has a political agenda and will screw Rhodes over just to make a petty point!"

A sudden rush of anger filled him.
"Fuck! It isn't fair! Rhodey is a good man, a good officer and a damn good friend! And he's my friend and he is alive! He has always had my back! And instead of helping him... I am feeling sorry for myself and getting drunk?!"

Tony slammed the glass down hard on the counter with a loud crack. "I can't do this. I can't let my friend down! I owe him this much... hell! I owe him so much more... I need to help him for once. He and Pepper are my family. They are all I have left. I can't just leave Rhodey to his fate! I need to be there! I need to do something! But first..."

With grim determination, he poured the glass and the bottle of whiskey down the sink, watching the alcohol pool in the basin as it trickled down the sink.

"No more drinking!" Tony said firmly to himself. "I've let down enough people for a lifetime! Not Rhodey! Not again!"

Then he barked at the ceiling. "Friday!"

"Yes, Mr. Stark."

"How much time is left for Colonel Rhodes' trial to start?"

"One hour and forty five minutes, sir."

Tony swore under his breath. Then he felt a surge of energy move through him. He looked down at the glowing rounded triangle in his chest and grinned.

"Friday, do you think I can reach Fort Irwin in forty five minutes?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Stark. The combination of the nanobytes and rocket thruster should do it."

"Then I have an hour to come up with an argument strategy and make some appointments but first... first I need to find out what went down in Wakanda... and so I need to talk to the good
I know Tony promised Pepper he wouldn't drink but it isn't that easy to walk away when you have problems and you have used alcohol as a crutch before. I wanted to depict that Tony would realize, on his own, how important Rhodey has been to him and that he couldn't leave Rhodey when his friend needed him and that alcohol certainly wasn't going to help in any way.
Chapter 18: Calling Wakanda

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry, for the very long break between uploads but I've been preparing for Pepperony week and it is taking up most of my time.

Two chapters today and two more over the weekend.

Tony was suddenly ravenously hungry. His appetite was back because of his renewed purpose. So he went back down to the basement, armed with a plate of mini-pepperoni toasties, a bowl of nachos and a tall glass of diet Coke.

"Sir," intoned Friday, "That is a lot of calories. Are you sure you do not want to have the left-over tuna casserole in the fridge?"

He set his food down near the secondary console, a little distance away from the flat screen.

"Friday, this food is going to help me think. And I need to think."

"Really, Mr. Stark, empty calories help you think?"

"Yes, Miss smarty pants, they do. Now shush and help me."

He took a large swig of his drink and munched on a toastie.

"I negded to prgareg four trigl."

"I am sorry, sir, I do not speak 'mouth full of food' garble."
Tony smirked at the AI's snark. "You really are a chip of the old Stark block, Friday."

"Thank you, sir, now what were you saying?"

"I need to prepare my arguments for the damn trial. And I need to do it quickly."

"Weren't you going to call Dr. Banner first, sir? To learn what happened in Wakanda?"

"Oh yes! He tapped in a few commands on the console, bringing up the software he needed. "Thanks for reminding me, Friday."

"Mr. Stark, I am very curious to know just how you are plan to contact Dr. Banner. He disappeared from Earth for two years, stuck on that gladiator planet as the Hulk. I can pull up his old contact details such as his phone and email but I am not sure they will still be in use."

Tony had polished off the toasties and started to crunch on the nachos. He muttered around a mouthful of chips, "Bruce had gone off the standard technological grid for a while, Friday. He did not want to be contacted. But I or rather, we, Banner and I had devised a secret way of communicating with each other, using an old-fashioned transmitting mechanism. Helpful in situations like this, when he does not want to be tracked."

He stood up, wiping his hands on his shirt and went over to the cabinet against the far wall. Tony opened it and the glimmer of the electric blue nanobyte accelerator donut, on the shelf next to it, caught his eye.

He muttered, "I do not have the time right now but I have to come back and play with you. Anyways, what was I looking for? Oh yes, here you are."

He picked up the small wooden telegaph device and the electronic radio transmitter next to it and went back to the console. Tony took another sip of his drink and connected the device to the transmitter.

Friday said incredulously, "Morse Code! You are going to use Morse Code to talk to Dr. Banner! Really, Mr. Stark!"
He couldn't help but laugh as he checked his connections. "Friday, you techno-snob! Before the days of the Internet and the modem, this was THE method of message transmission."

"Still, sir, do you really feel Dr. Banner will be listening to CB transmissions?"

He shook his head as he wrote down his message on a piece of paper.

"I am just using CB to tap out my message, so I can get the required dots and dashes of the code right. I have a program here, that will capture the beeps as a recording. I am then going to transmit the recording as an electronic pulse over the Internet. And I know that Bruce is definitely listening to electronic signals. He has a number of signal trackers and sensors that check for pulse mechanisms over the Internet. Now let me see... just how much I remember of Morse code."

He wrote down the signal codes underneath his message on the paper, double checked the codes with a quick Google search and then began to run the recording program on the console.

Tony quickly tapped out his message on the telegraph and watched as the short and long beeps were recorded. He then replayed the message on the console and satisfied with its quality, he opened the transmission program and began to play the message at a particular frequency, so that it could be transmitted.

Friday asked curiously, "Mr. Stark, why does the message read as 'There she was just walking down the street'? Will that make any sense to Dr. Banner?"

He grinned widely. "This is the passphrase that Banner and I agreed to use, for our messaging in Morse. Now all I have to do, is to wait for his reply. So I know that it is truly Banner, who has received my message."

Tony stood up and stretched himself. "Till then, let us come back to the trial, Friday. What is the best defense for Rhodey? I need to come up with something good!"

"Mr. Stark, Colonel Rhodes' distinguished military career needs to be highlighted. It would stress that he is not a disobedient man and was trying to do what he could, for the greater good."
"Friday, that is a great point. But I am going to need more than just statistics. I need to show the human side of Colonel Rhodes if I want to prove his innocence in this matter."

He turned and began to walk up and down, thinking rapidly, hands behind his back.

"Ross has decided to expose the trial to the public. Because he wants Rhodey to be humiliated. But that works in our favor. I need to get the public on my side. I need to pull at their heartstrings. I also need to engage the military jury. They need to see how much good Rhodey's done by going to Wakanda and why he shouldn't be punished."

Something in his own words struck him. "How much good Rhodey's done... as the Iron Patriot... not just flying in and fighting bad guys... but how much he has helped..."

"Friday!" He barked at the AI. "I want you to find all the military personnel or civilians, Rhodey has rescued abroad and at home. Rescues he's performed in and out of the Iron Patriot suit. And give me a list of those saved and their phone numbers and current location."

"Yes, Mr. Stark."

"Also, call Miss Flores and tell her not to come over as neither I nor Pepper will be home for at least two days."

"Already done, Mr. Stark."

Tony raised his eyebrows at the AI. "Really, Friday? When?"

"When I saw you pour the alcohol down the drain, Sir. I knew then, that you were going to help Colonel Rhodes."

He nodded with a smile. "Thank you, Friday. For having faith in me."

"Indeed sir. I always had faith in you. Now back to the matter at hand, I believe you have got a reply to your transmission."
"What! Bruce!" He exclaimed and ran back to the console. Sure enough there was a blinking indicator on the transmission program and Tony tore off his message from the notepad before him. He picked up his pencil and then tapped the indicator to play the message, ready to write down the code's translation.

As the series of short and long beeps played, a slow grin broke out on his face and he stopped writing because he had immediately understood the content of the message.

Friday said slowly, "The message says, 'Singing do wah diddy diddy down diddy do'. Really?? I am sorry, Mr. Stark, I am struggling to make sense of this passphrase."

"It is a song, Friday, look it up..." Tony said, distracted as another message came through almost immediately.

He wrote the code down and then translated it to English, reading it out, "Man in a tin can? Is that really you?"

Tony smiled and quickly wrote out a reply "Yes, doctor with enormous green rage monster. Are you in Wakanda? How can I call you?"

He tapped his foot impatiently as he waited for Bruce's response and reached absently for his bowl of nachos... which were now empty.

"Dammit... Friday, can you place an order for some doughnuts, please?"

"Mr. Stark, I am afraid you have reached your calorie count for the day. No more empty calories for you."

Tony stared at the ceiling incredulously. "Friday!! Buddy, this is not the time to cut me off! Who programmed this rule?! Are you aware that glucose helps the body concentrate? And right now, I need to concentrate on helping Rhodey!"

"Mr. Stark, while what you say is true, may I remind you that you are a genius, who was a child prodigy and graduated from MIT at 17. You do not need any mental stimulus from a complex
Tony was going to argue some more but the console began to beep rapidly and he looked at it with joy.

"An incoming video call from an unknown VPN..."

"Is it safe, Mr. Stark?"

"It may not be but I don't care!"

He pressed the Receive button and the console screen opened a video call. Tony tilted his head curiously because the video was filled with color bars, similar to those that appear when a TV’s signal was lost.

A distorted, electronically modified voice began to speak. "Am I speaking to Tony Stark of Stark Industries?"

He said slowly, "Yes... you are and who am I speaking to? I thought I was contacting an old friend."

The voice coughed and said, "For security precautions, I cannot reveal my face or my identity. We have been waiting most anxiously for you, Mr. Stark."

Tony sighed with disappointment and moved towards the screen. "I am sorry, I do not want to talk to a mysterious spirit from the Twilight zone. Goodbye."

He was going to terminate the call when he heard a very familiar hoarse voice say, "Tony, wait! Don't!"

"Bruce?"

Then the screen flickered to reveal a bearded and scruffy Bruce Banner, peering anxiously at him.
He's alive! My old friend is still alive!

Tony exclaimed, "Brucey! It really is you!"

"Aw Tony! Don't call me that, please!" said Dr. Banner in his endearingly tired manner.

Tony sat down quickly and said softly, "It is so damn good to see you, Banner. I missed you terribly, buddy."

Banner ruffled the hair at the back of his head, crinkling his eyes as he smiled broadly at Tony.

"Tony! I am so glad you are alive! I saw the news reports of you going into space and..." He swallowed hard, emotion filling his voice, "I thought you were lost too... damn it Stark, you scared me good!"

Tony laughed with happiness. "Banner, you are one to talk! You disappeared in space for two years, buddy! No way, I was going to do the same! But to be honest, I would have been stuck out there if it hadn't been for Pepper..."

"Pepper! Pepper rescued you from space!" exclaimed Bruce, his jaw dropping. "What the hell, Tony?!"

"I know... I know... darn it, we have so much to talk about... and that's partially the reason I called... Bruce... I-"

He stopped talking because the face of a young African girl with pig tails, appeared from the left side of the screen. The girl was grinning widely and waved enthusiastically at him.

Tony instinctively raised his own hand and waved back slowly as Bruce said sheepishly, "Oh yeah! I forgot... Tony, this is..."

"Excuse me, Dr. Banner." said the girl with a twinkle in her eyes, "I can introduce myself."
She gently nudged Bruce to one side of the screen, coming completely into view.

She smiled beatifically at Tony and said, "Tony Stark! I am Shuri, Princess of Wakanda! And I am very pleased to finally meet you!

Though I did not expect you to look so scruffy! What's going on with y'all super heroes and face fuzz?"

Tony couldn't help but chuckle at her impetuous question. "This is only temporary, Princess. King T'challa told me about you. He said even though you were so young, you were a technological genius."

The girl said confidently, "I am one, Tony Stark. And please call me, Shuri, there is no need for titles amongst friends."

Bruce said, "Tony, Princess Shuri and her people have kindly given us rogue Avengers safe refuge in Wakanda."

The Princess said, "It is in repayment for the help you rogue Avengers provided us, Dr. Banner. Against the servants of Thanos. One good turn deserves another. We are all trying to rebuild and recover from the battle against the Mad Titan."

Tony moved closer to the screen. "Okay, there is a lot to talk about and I want to talk but I am pressed for time. Bruce, Rhodey is back in the States. And he is being court-martialed for helping you guys in Wakanda."

Bruce said worriedly, "Oh crap! See, this is why we pleaded with him not to return but he didn't listen to us, Tony, he said he had to be back with the Army, he was damn worried about you and Pepper, he had to see for himself that you guys were okay and he had to get you back, if you were lost in space."

Tony felt his chest twinge at those words and took a deep breath.

Princess Shuri said indignantly, "It is not fair that the American military is punishing Colonel Rhodes for fighting Thanos! How archaic and silly!"
"I know, Princess. I know. That is why I need to explain to the court, in fact, to the American people, what happened in Wakanda. No one can understand why exactly Rhodey went with Steve and Natasha. I was hoping you and Bruce could help me understand."

Bruce said, "Okay Tony. Here's what happened. After Wong took me to the New York Kamar Taj Sanctum, I saw you follow Strange into space. So I called Steve using the flip phone you gave me and told him all about Thanos. I told him to find the Vision, with the Mind Stone, he had to be their next target. He listened to me and they reached Scotland, just in time to fight off two of Thanos' minions and rescue the Vision. Wong kindly opened a portal for me and I reached the New Avengers Facility in no time. And that's where we all met Rhodey."

"Rhodey had been talking to Ross, who had noticed that you were gone and so was the Vision. In fact, he also knew that the Vision was with Steve and Natasha and had ordered Rhodey to arrest us."

Bruce chuckled. "Rhodey cut him off mid-way because he had realized what was at stake. I told them about Strange and the Time Stone. Then we realized that Thanos shouldn't be allowed to get the Mind Stone at any cost. The only right thing to do was to remove the Stone from the Vision and destroy it."

Tony interrupted, "But by removing the Stone, you would be killing the Vision."

Bruce paused and said wryly, "Well, I had pointed that out to the Vision, who was agreeable to it, if it would save humanity. But Steve, Steve knew that Wakanda had the technology and the tools to perform an intricate surgery, that would keep the Vision alive and remove the Stone. Basically, he was referring to the expertise of Princess Shuri here."

Shuri smirked with pride.

Tony held his hand up. "Steve knew? Hold on... Wakanda is an isolationist country. How did Steve Rogers know such details?"

Shuri said softly, "My brother thirsted for revenge against our father's murderer, who he thought was the Winter Soldier. So he followed you to Siberia. He learned the truth. That it was the terrorist Helmut Zemo, who killed our father and that the Winter Soldier was framed for the murder. So he granted asylum to Bucky Barnes on Wakandan soil."
Tony widened his eyes in disbelief. "The Winter Soldier was living in Wakanda all this while?"

"Yes," the Princess said. "Bucky was under treatment to remove his mental conditioning. He was in deep cryo-sleep stasis for a year, which helped him reset himself and then he went to live in a village nearby. Steve and Natasha would come to visit him from time to time."

Tony took a deep breath, trying to process that his parents murderer had been living comfortably in Wakanda while he had thought that Bucky was on the run with Steve.

*I can't... I know that Bucky was mentally programmed to kill, had no free will of his own and has suffered as well but... I can't, I do not know how to handle his living freely...*

Then he shook his head to clear it of his dark thoughts. *Rhodey. Rhodey is important here. Forget about the Winter Soldier for the moment.*

Bruce had sensed his discomfort and quickly added, "So anyway... we all flew over to Wakanda on the Quinjet with the Vision. Shuri was going to perform the surgery on her own, the Scarlet Witch would stay with her, to destroy it as soon as it was extracted from the Vision. Meanwhile, I and the others, we were all going to keep the aliens at bay, with the Wakandan army."

"Like the Battle of New York..." said Tony softly.

"Worse, Tony... these new aliens..." Bruce shuddered,

"They were ugly as shit and there were so damn many! And they were just pouring out of their space ships, here and there!"

Shuri said sadly, "I wish I could have seen the fighting."

"No kid," said Bruce pointedly, "you had enough problems of your own. There was no need for you to be there. It was scary!"

Tony asked, "So Banner, I am assuming since you were there, your angry green friend was at the front and center of the battle."
He was taken aback when Bruce lowered his head in shame and said slowly, "I... I couldn't get the Hulk to come out, Tony. He just plain refused to cooperate. Nothing I said or did, would bring him out. So I piloted the HulkBuster suit and did my best. But it just wasn't enough..."

He shook his head sadly as Shuri placed her hand on his shoulder and continued slowly, "The Mind Stone extraction was taking a long time. Before I could complete the operation, I was set upon by one of Thanos' Children. We fought, he knocked me out but then the Captain and Dr. Banner here, came just in time to help. The Vision killed the assassin and judging by the pace of the battle, it seemed that we were winning. And then..."

"Thanos came." said Tony, suddenly realizing how things might have ended.
"Yes." said the Princess simply. "Even though his army was dead, his assassins slaughtered, the Mad Titan set foot on Wakandan soil and..."

She looked at Bruce who said softly, his eyes full of sadness, "We were all there, Tony, one by one, we stood against him, but..."

"You were no match for his strength." whispered Tony.

"No, we weren't." said Bruce in anguish. "And the worst thing is that the Mind Stone had been destroyed."

"How?" exclaimed Tony. "You said the operation didn't complete!"

"The Scarlet Witch used her powers to shatter it directly on The Vision, killing him. He died where he stood, from her own hand. Poor Wanda... I What she must have gone through, killing the man she loved in order to save the world."

Tony gasped out loud at the horrible act of violence. "But if the Stone was destroyed..."

"Thanos rewinded the situation using the Time Stone. It was horrible, he reversed time so smoothly, resurrecting the Vision where he stood and we all watched as he then... he..."

Bruce sputtered, nearly in tears, "He just pulled it out of the Vision's head, Tony! Killing him again! It was terrible!"

"The Vision is dead..." Tony whispered, saddened beyond measure, even though he had suspected, that since Thanos had got all the stones, the superbeing with the last Stone, must have died.
"Yeah Tony. He's dead. And then Thanos snapped his fingers and right in front of us... he wiped out half of Earth's population."

"People just faded... right before me... crumbling to dust, where they stood..." whispered Shuri, tears welling in her eyes.

Tony swallowed hard, her words bringing up the memory of Peter Parker turning to ash in his arms, this conversation making him relive the painful thought twice on the same day.

Then Shuri covered her face with her hands and whispered tearfully, "My own brother! He fought so bravely and yet... My King is dead and I... I didn't even see him pass, I didn't even get to say goodbye..."

She sniffed loudly and Bruce stood up quickly but Shuri ran off screen, excusing herself.

"Princess!" Bruce called out awkwardly. "Princess!"

Tony said softly, "We lost King T'challa too?"

"Yeah, Tony..." said Bruce sadly, looking away. "We lost a lot of good people."

"So that's why Wakanda is keeping the media out." Tony muttered. "It makes sense now. Their monarch is gone."

"And if the rest of Africa comes to know that the sovereign of a small African country is lost, they will rip this land apart, trying to claim it for their own!" continued Bruce harshly. "Hell! Why blame Africa? Even our government would try to take over. So that's why no one can know that the Black Panther is gone."

Tony shook his head with sadness. "He was a good man. More than just a monarch. And with his death, my one hope for Rhodey is also lost."

"What do you mean, Tony?"
"I thought... I had hoped that since Rhodey had helped the Wakandans in their time of need, King T'challa would speak on his behalf at the trial. The King had pull with the U.S. government. He could have explained how Rhodes was helping them from a humanitarian point of view. It would have worked in Rhodey's favor."

He sighed sadly and then looked up as he heard Shuri say softly, "My brother would have spoken for Colonel Rhodes, who stood by us in our time of need and was a main line of defense."

She smiled gently and said, "Mr. Stark, in how much time does the trial start?"

Tony said slowly, "In an hour and a half but I fail to see what you can do, Princess. If you speak instead of T'Challa, there would be questions about his absence. It would simply arouse suspicions."

"I know, Mr. Stark, I know. Never you fear. I will ensure that Wakanda supports Colonel Rhodes, in his time of need, when he did the same for us. I will call you on this number when I am ready."

Tony was still confused but he nodded as the Princess patted Bruce gently and waved goodbye at him.

When she left, he asked Bruce quietly, "Okay Banner, how exactly is the Princess going to help me out?"

Bruce chuckled softly and said, "Oh she's a damn smart one, the Princess! I have a suspicion of what she is up to but I..." he grinned broadly at Tony, "I want you to be surprised."

"If you say so."

Bruce spoke slowly, "Tony, you should come see Wakanda, it is a small utopia set amongst the wilderness! The people are happy and content. The level of technological advancement is astounding. And they have unlimited resources of Vibranium. I am learning so much from the bright scientists of this land. Perhaps if we had created Ultron in this setting..." he shrugged, "anyways it is all in the past. We have bigger things to worry about."

"Yes Bruce. We do."
Bruce shuffled forward, looking at him critically. "Tony, I can make out you have been grieving. What happened in space?"

Tony shook his head sadly. "Long story short. Six people took on Thanos, only one survived and you are looking at him."

Bruce cursed softly. "Shit Tony, I'm sorry. You spoke about a spider kid once, did he at least..." he fell silent then as Tony just looked at him quietly.

"Tony... buddy, I know you are upset and I don't blame you, I am too. A lot of our friends and allies died. And I was so useless."

"Bruce... come on..."

"No, seriously. The Hulk could have done something, he could have taken down so many of those shitty aliens, hell, he could have faced Thanos and tried to stop him at least! Instead he just... he just sat inside me and cowered... the one time when we needed him the most..."

Then Bruce lowered his head. "It was embarrassing, everyone was looking at me and I could make out they were wondering what was wrong with me... Natasha... I let her down, everyone... I let them down, I was so useless..."

"Hey!" said Tony sharply, upset by the tone of despair in Bruce's voice. "Dr. Banner, you faced a mighty alien and survived! And that's what's important!"

Bruce looked at him mournfully. He said, "Tony, survival isn't enough. What are we going to do? We faced Thanos and ... lost... miserably... We can't let him win. We just can't."

Tony swallowed hard. "I... I do not know what to do, Bruce..."

His friend smiled softly at him. "Hey, Stark, we are a team, remember? Together we can face this evil. I know we can!"
"Bruce... I... well, you have faced him too! You have seen his strength and... now he has all six Infinity Stones at his command. Thanos truly is a god!"

"He may be one, Tony but we have faced gods before!" Bruce said fiercely. "We have faced them and defeated them! Perhaps you are forgetting our friend Thor's little brother. And are you telling me, you didn't fight that purple giant with all your might? Are you telling me that?"

He shook his head. "Even Gods can bleed, Tony. We just need to find Thanos' weakness and bring him down!"

Something in his words jogged Tony's memory of something that happened on Titan. He scratched his chin thoughtfully as he remembered the fight with Thanos on the dusty yellow planet.

"Bruce... I want to tell you something... when I was fighting Thanos on Titan, his home planet, I punched him so hard at one point, using my fists as sledgehammers, that he started to bleed...very slightly... but... it gave me so much hope at that time. It made him seem... mortal..."

Bruce exclaimed with awe, "Tony, that's good! See! He is very powerful but he isn't invincible! And now I will tell you something. When Thanos came to Wakanda, we all attacked him one by one. And he tossed us away like flies. But Steve... Steve actually locked fists with him! Imagine! Steve caught his gauntlet and pushed him back!"

Tony narrowed his eyes as he tried to picture Steve Rogers holding Thanos at bay. "I would tell you that's impossible if it were anyone but Steve... he is a super soldier... and he is really strong..."

Then he chose his next words carefully, trying to sound extremely casual, when internally he was feeling anything but casual. "So, is Steve... Steve is..."

Bruce said gently, "Tony, Steve is alright. A little bruised like the rest of us but he's okay."

Tony exhaled with relief.
The Captain and I have a lot of differences of opinion. And at some point in the past, I did wish him ill but... truth be told, I don't want to lose Steve Rogers and definitely not to Thanos...

Out loud, he said in that same casual tone, "Oh... that's ah... that's good to know..."

Bruce said slowly, "You know, it is kinda funny. Steve's just as concerned about you as you are about him and just as bad as acting casual about it. He keeps bringing you up in conversations and then changing the subject."

"I am not concerned, Bruce!" Tony exclaimed. "I am just... asking."

He smirked at Tony. "Oh sure, you are... anyway, Steve will be relieved to hear you are alright. I'll tell him."

Bruce ruffled his hair and looked straight at Tony. "So Stark, tell me. As soon as Rhodes trial is over, you and him better get your asses to Wakanda. Me, Steve, Natasha, we can't come back to the U.S. with Ross out to get us."

"Banner... I am not sure that coming to Wakanda is a good idea. I am not speaking for Rhodes. But... I am not so sure.""

"About yourself." completed Banner. "Come on, Tony!" he said pleadingly, "We need to teach Thanos a lesson and we can do it but we need you, we need Iron Man!"

Tony chuckled dryly. "Banner, how come you are so tough on yourself but so optimistic, that I can do something? What can I do differently? I tried in space! And on Wakanda, you guys tried your best!"

Bruce just tilted his head and smiled in that gentle unassuming manner of his. "Buddy," he said, "you think you are just a man in a can, with no powers as such but you have the mightiest power of them all!"
He tapped the side of his head with his finger and Tony grinned, pretending to misunderstand him.

"I have the best hair? Yes, I do agree with that statement. I do have the best hair amongst the Avengers."

He expected Bruce to sigh in exasperation but the doctor just smiled at him and said softly, "God, I missed your snark and poor jokes, Stark! But seriously, Tony, you and me, we are scientists. What do scientists do? We try, we fail, we experiment and try again until we get it right."

"I have seen you tune and fine tune your suits after each mission, aiming to correct its failings. This is no different. We tried facing Thanos once, we failed, we need to try again and do something different. And I know what that is."

"Bruce..." said Tony tiredly.

"We need to face him as a team, Tony. Just like how we faced a God in New York. Just like how we fought Ultron in Sokovia. We need to do this together, Stark and for that, we need the Avengers. And without Iron Man, there is no Avengers."

Tony looked away from the screen, trying to control his emotions.

In his mind's eye, he could see Steve standing in the Avengers Tower control room, looking at him with his clear blue eyes.

*How were you guys planning on beating him?*

*Together.*

Then he remembered the chilly hard floor beneath his bruised body, the bitter cold seeping into his bones as those same clear blue eyes looked down at him.

*Sor* **ny Tony, but he is my friend.**
He cleared his throat and said, "Bruce, you weren't around when Steve and I... fought. It was bloody and violent. The point is... I am not sure we can move past that. He chose to side with his friend, the Winter Soldier and turned his back on the Avengers. Or rather, he took most of them with him and left. Then there's Miss Romanaoff..."

Tony chuckled bitterly. "She did what any good double agent would do, she stayed on my side until the fight and then defected to the side... more suited to her activities. I mean, why would an ass-kicking secret agent used to being in the thick of things, suddenly want to be controlled and governed by a set of rules?"

"Tony..." said Bruce softly. "I know Natasha hurt you..."

"Hurt me!" He exclaimed derisively.

"Banner, Romanaoff did what she was good at... betraying people after winning over their trust. She did it to me once, I should have seen it coming the second time, especially considering how close she and Steve were, being soldiers and all and Pepper always warned me that Natasha couldn't be trusted completely, she was very good at hiding the truth, come on! She passed all the stringent identity checks that Stark Industries conducted on her and yet, she was-"

"Tony." said Bruce. "I spoke to Natasha-"

He held up his hands defensively. "Hey! I know she's your pseudo-girlfriend and you like her and all but she's a real piece of-"

"Tony!" said Bruce firmly. "Let's not talk about Natasha and she's not my girlfriend!"

He muttered to himself, "I never said she was your girlfriend, I said PSEUDO-girlfriend..."

"Tony, I know you suffered. And I know that everyone was fighting amongst themselves and it is not one person's fault and it is not going to be easy but..." he tilted his head, giving Tony a puppy-eyed look.
"Tony, we need to put aside our own differences and get the team back together... there's been so much loss... we can't fight each other anymore. We need to come together. We are all that Earth has left."

Tony sighed loudly. *I know that Bruce is right... in a way but... I can't think about it now... one thing at a time.*

He heard a soft ping from the console and realized he needed to get going.

"Bruce, buddy, I got to reach Fort Irwin in forty-five minutes. For Rhodey's trial. We will talk about this later."

Bruce nodded and said quickly, "Tony, one last thing... the big green guy, he... he says... he agrees with you, space sucks..."

Tony felt his mouth curve upwards slowly. "Really, your angry green friend said that? Come on, Bruce!"

"Well," Bruce shrugged. "I guess, the Hulk is feeling just as insecure as the rest of us. He took on Thanos and got his ass handed to him. That's rarely happened before. So he is sensitive about space."

Then Bruce grinned. "But you guys have your own unique relationship, you are Tin Man to him and I am hoping... I am hoping you can irritate him enough to make an appearance. Bring him out of his shell, so to speak."

Tony couldn't help but laugh loudly at that, especially since Bruce was comically waggling his eyebrows at him. "Bruce, you sly dog, you, you want me to annoy your green friend so much, that he will finally come out just to kick my ass!

Bruce nodded and just then Friday beeped loudly.

"Oh shit, Tony, I am sorry, I am keeping you. Best of luck, tell Ross off from my behalf and please... think about coming to Wakanda, alright?"
Tony nodded and said, "Bye Banner, take care."

Bruce smiled back and the video call terminated.

Tony stood there quietly, for a moment, thinking over Bruce's words. Then Friday said gently, "Mr. Stark?" and he sprang into action.

He ran up the basement stairs, two at a time, and then up towards the bedroom.

"Friday! Find out which is the best men's barber or hair salon in Fort Irwin and make an appointment! Somewhere in the next thirty minutes!"

"Alright Sir, should I."

"Don't give them my real name but insist on discretion. Also, book a car to get me from the barber to the court and..."

Tony had reached the bedroom and had flung open the closet door. He quickly shuffled through his suits, muttering to himself.

"No, too casual... oooo, no, wait, too stuffy... how about..." He pulled one out and examined it critically. "Perfect!"

Tony was going to change when Friday said loudly, "Sir, it is pretty warm and sunny outside. Wouldn't it be better if you change into the suit at the barber?"

He smiled widely at the AI's thoughtfulness. "Friday, whatever would I do without you?"

"I feel we have had this discussion before, Sir."

"Alright then, I will wear this suit later." He put the suit in a suit bag and then tapped his Arc.
"Hey nanobytes, did you miss me?"

He felt an electronic pulse beat against his fingers in response.

"What say we go for a long ride through the skies and then kick some ass... in court."

Tony felt a surge of power move through his body and as his suit began to cover him, he heard Friday say, "Systems check."

"Core Power: 100%.
Auxiliary Power: 200%.
Thrusters Functioning: 100%
Shields: 100%"

All Systems are Fully Operational. We are good to proceed, Iron Man."

As the suit's visor closed over his face, Tony said with a small smirk, "It is good to be back."

I am trying not to be anti-Steve here but... ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

Next chapter on Saturday.

Chapter End Notes

I am not trying to be anti-Steve but... ¯\_(ツ)_/¯
Next chapter, Saturday!
The Trial of James Rhodes - Part I

Chapter Notes

So with this chapter, the trial starts.

My first time writing a trial and damn was it difficult! So much legal jargon to look up.

I am going for a detailed depiction, so it may seem a bit long-winded at times but there's a reason behind my madness, so please bear with me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Pepper looked around the bustling courtroom. The cacophony of people talking, cameras flashing and chairs being pulled and scraped across the floor, was irritating her.

She stood up and walked towards the alternative exit. Standing there in the comparatively quieter corridor, she looked out of the large glass window, onto the lush lawns of the Army base and took a deep breath.

Pepper was in Fort Irwin's military courthouse, where Rhodey's trial was about to take place. She had reached on time and had found a good seat, on the side of the Defense table. The court was rapidly filling with military personnel, civilians and of course, the media.

Rhodey's lawyer, Eugen Finch, came towards her, exhausted from the pre-trial proceedings. He was a tall, brown-haired young man with bright green eyes and pointed facial features, giving him a rather elfin appearance.

"Ma'am, I do not know what to tell you!", Eugen exclaimed in annoyance, leaning boyishly against the wall beside the window. "This trial is officially a circus!"

"Whatever do you mean, Eugen?"

"Well... usually a court martial can only be attended by military folk and certain distinguished civilians. But Secretary of State Ross has insisted that clear transparency with the public is needed in this matter, so he's made the trial public. Every damn reporter in the tri-state area, is in that room!"
Pepper felt her blood boil at the mention of Ross.

"So he seeks to embarrass James by making this as public as possible."

"Exactly!" said Eugen angrily. "He's determined to bury Colonel Rhodes! Sling mud at a good man's reputation by insisting that he disobeyed orders and sided with the enemy! Damn it! I wish I had a cigarette!"

Then he caught Pepper's eye and flushed.

"Sorry ma'am, I... I didn't mean to swear. And I know, cigarettes are bad, I just... I just need to calm down, that's all."

She smiled at his charmingly boyish demeanor and said, "It is alright, Eugen. I know how you feel. Ross pisses me off a lot too. Pardon my language. And please call me Pepper."

The young lawyer smiled nervously at her and asked "I... eh... Ma'am, I mean, Miss Potts, will Iron Man... will Mr. Stark be coming today? He sure could help Colonel Rhodes if he testifies on his behalf."

Pepper schooled her face into an abjectly casual expression but before she could answer, she felt a soft hand on her elbow and turned to look into the friendly, coffee-colored eyes of her dear friend, a broad smile on his chiseled face.

"James!" she exclaimed, quickly hugging the slender colonel, looking sharp and smart in his Air Force Officer Service uniform.

Rhodey hugged her back, whispering, "Pepper! It is so good to see you! I am so relieved..."

He pulled back and caught her hands, squeezing them as he smiled at her. "I am so happy to see that you are alright, Pepper... and Eugen told me that Tony is too. I..." Rhodey lowered his gaze and sighed. "I feared the worst."

Pepper squeezed him back, feeling oddly tearful as she took a good look at Colonel Rhodes. Perhaps
it was his frail stance with his Stark Industries skeletal leg braces or the deep, dark circles around his eyes, that made her realize that just like Tony, Rhodey was grieving deeply.

"Well, Pepper, I wish we could have reunited under..." he looked at the courtroom behind him, "better circumstances. But rest assured..." Rhodey smiled bleakly at her, "after today, I should have a lot of free time on my hands... if I don't get put in jail, that is."

Eugen snorted derisively and Pepper told him firmly, "Now Colonel Rhodes, that is no way to talk! You did what you had to do for the greater good! And this court is going to see that!"

Rhodey nodded, the bleakness in his eyes disturbing her. "Thank you for your faith, Pepper. I really appreciate it. But Ross... is out to destroy me... you know how he hates superheroes," he said with a soft chuckle. "Unfortunately, I had to be the one superhero who came back from Wakanda..."

Then he exclaimed, "Hey, where's Tony? I could use some snark from Stark." Then he looked around and said slowly, "He didn't come?"

Pepper bit her lip and lied. "He is at home, Rhodey, he really isn't well. He's not been well, ever since he came back from space. I am sorry, I knew you would want him to be here."

Eugen shocked them both by groaning loudly. "Oh shit! Mr. Stark isn't coming! We could have used him!"

Then he gulped because even though Rhodey was shorter than the young man, he looked straight at Eugen and said sternly, "Corporal Finch, are you my defense lawyer or not?"

Eugen nodded, his eyes wide and scared. Rhodey said firmly, "I know Mr. Stark cannot make it and I am unhappy as well but I also know what he's going through, so we need to manage without him. Now tell me soldier, are you capable of defending me?"

"Sir, yes, Sir!" barked the young lawyer, saluting Rhodey neatly.

"Alright then." Rhodey said. "Now get your head together and stop panicking. You are embarrassing us both in front of the lady."
He gestured at Pepper, who was pretending not to pay any attention to the young man's taking down and was looking out of the window.

Eugen stammered out an apology to Rhodey, who placed his hand on the young man's shoulder and said softly, "Eugen, you got this. I have faith in you, you are the best lawyer in your class and I trust you. So keep your cool. The Prosecution will try their best to fluster you. But you got to keep your cool."

Pepper turned to see the lawyer nod and excuse himself, saying he needed some water. They watched him stride away, Rhodey shaking his head.

"Water, my ass. Probably off to find a cigarette."

Pepper giggled and Rhodey smiled at her. "I know Eugen is young and a little nervous but I've seen him defend others in court and he's a damn good lawyer. He just has pre-game jitters."

Then he said seriously, "Pepper, please tell me the truth, is Tony really alright? Did he really come back from space? I find it odd that it wasn't reported in the newspapers or on TV. He didn't try to contact me either but then I was in Wakanda, so..."

"Tony is back, Rhodey and he's doing okay... he just doesn't want to speak to the media yet."

She had to lie again and this made her stammer slightly. "He... erm... he was wounded in the fight against Thanos, so he needs to recover physically. That's why he couldn't make it."

Rhodey swore under his breath, saying with concern, "I hope he isn't hurt too badly! Damn that purple giant! Is there no end to the grief he had caused?! And I suppose..." he said sadly, "I suppose he is mourning those lost during the fight. There's been a lot of good people lost in the fight against the Mad Titan. I know that underneath all his sarcastic wit, Tony takes death hard."

She nodded and Rhodey rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Then he took her hand in his and said softly, "But again, I am glad you and Tony are okay, Pepper... At least, I have you guys, if nothing else."

Pepper asked Rhodey, "Are you alright, Rhodey? I mean, you fought Thanos as well."
He grinned sheepishly at her. "Just the standard bruises and scrapes. Nothing serious, Pep. My legs are a bit stiff from the flight yesterday."

She raised her eyebrows incredulously. "Rhodes, you came back just yesterday? And your arraignment is today!! How is that even fair?"

Rhodes shrugged. "Thaddeus wants to speed things up. A quick trial distracts the people from the actual questions ... like what the hell happened with Thanos. Forget about it. I knew it was going to happen. What happened to Tony up there? How bad are his injuries?"

Now Pepper badly wanted to talk to someone about Tony. So she blurted out, "Rhodey, can you believe that Tony got stabbed?"

Rhodey exclaimed, "What? What the hell? And he survived?"

She nodded and was going to explain about Dr. Strange and what he did for Tony, when Eugen came bounding towards them.

"Colonel Rhodes! Miss Potts! The trial is about to start! We need to take our seats!"

Rhodey nodded and Pepper looped her hand in his arm. They entered the courtroom together. The noise level had risen and she heard their names being mentioned in hushed whispers as they strode towards the front of the court, towards the Judge's bench.

Pepper jerked in surprise, when a camera flashed right in her face, the white light nearly blinding her.

A recorder was thrust towards her and she blinked hard to clear her vision as she heard a nasal voice aggressively ask, "Miss Potts, where is Iron Man? Where is Mr. Stark?"

Another one chimed in behind her. "Miss Potts, have you left Mr. Stark again? Is that why you are here with Colonel Rhodes? Are you both together now?"

She heard another say, "Is Mr. Stark even alive? Why won't he reveal himself?"
Pepper turned on the spot as a group of reporters encircled her, like sea gulls hungry for a snack.

She said firmly, "At this time, I have no comments on Mr. Stark or Iron Man. Please leave me alone."

Rhodey put a hand out to push back a few enthusiastic photographers, who were jostling her.

"Hey man, cool it... don't trouble the lady now!"

The reporters kept up the barrage of questions.

"Did Mr. Stark even come back from space?"
"Did you have a secret funeral?"
"When did you break off your engagement? Why are you still wearing his ring?"
"How long have you and Colonel Rhodes been going out?"

Before Pepper could react, two burly military corpsmen came forward and led the photographers away, paying no attention to their objections.

Eugen came towards the reporters and said in a surprisingly firm tone, "Members of the press, you are not allowed to barrage the courtroom members with questions. Now please take your seats. The Judge will enter soon."

A reporter opened his mouth to object and Eugen said sternly, "If you persist, I will have you escorted out. Do not test me."

Pepper was astounded by the change in the young lawyer's demeanor. Rhodes caught her eye and winked at her. Then he turned to look bleakly at the table before the judge's bench, the Defense table, where he would be sitting.

She leaned closer to him and whispered, "It will be alright, James. Don't worry."
He nodded with a sad smile and walked towards the Defense table. Pepper sat down in her seat as the courtroom started to settle down. She noticed that all the photographers had been forced to leave the room but the reporters were still there, all sitting on one side of the courtroom, behind the Prosecution's table.

The bailiff entered and announced loudly, "All rise for the honorable Judge Thomas Mofatt."

Everyone stood up as the judge, a heavyset Asian man with a neat head of grey hair and a full beard entered the room. He sat down in the judge's chair and said sonorously, "You may all be seated."

She sat back down with the crowd. The judge's decision would be the sole say in this case, as Rhodey had opted against having a military panel decide his fate.

The judge spoke, "Bailiff, please read the charges against the accused."

The court official began to recite the charges against Rhodey.

Pepper felt someone's eyes on her and instinctively turned towards the other side of the courtroom. She bristled when she saw it was none other than Thaddeus Ross, looking straight at her, his thin lips curved into an evil smirk. He bared his teeth at her in a menacing grin and she resisted the urge to show him the finger.

Then she resolutely focused on the proceedings of the trial before her.

The lawyers had introduced themselves. Eugen's counterpart, the prosecuting attorney, was a slim, petite brunette, Chloe Sulyvahn. She called her first witness, a Mr. Jimmy Pesto.

After the witness was sworn in, Chloe started her line of questioning.

Mr. Pesto was one of the security personnel, who guarded the New Avengers Facility. She asked him to recount what happened on the day the rogue Avengers had entered the compound.
The swarthy guard with slick-backed hair, said slowly, "Well, my partner and I were making our rounds of the inner perimeter, when we were approached by a woman and man. We asked the intruders to lay down their weapons and stand down. They refused to do so. They insisted on seeing Colonel Rhodes, who was in the communication chamber."

"Did you recognize these intruders, Mr. Pesto?" asked Chloe crisply.

"Yes, Ma'am, the woman was the former SHIELD agent, the Black Widow and the man was the former airman, Sam Wilson or the Falcon... I knew it was him because of his wings. I have seen them both from the news."

"And then what happened, Mr. Pesto?"

The security man scratched the back of his head. "Before we knew it, the Widow female, she knocked us both to the ground, flat on our backs. Then Wilson tied us up and we saw him open the doors to let in the other female avenger, the one with the magical hands, I can't remember her name. She was supporting the Vision, who seemed to be injured and then..." a look of awe came over the security guard's stolid face, "and then Captain America came in behind them!"

The court began to titter and gasp and the prosecutor said sternly, "Mr. Pesto, may I remind you, that Steve Rogers is no longer a Captain. He is a disgraced former soldier, who disobeyed orders, to aid and abet a foreign terrorist and mass murderer!"

Jimmy shook his head. "He may have gone rogue, but Captain Rogers has done a lot of good in the past. He fought in the War, ma'am! You can't just take the good deeds away from the man, even if he has been stripped of his rank..."

A few people at the back of the court, started to clap and cheer in agreement and somebody whistled loudly.

Judge Mofatt said sternly, "Order! This is a military trial! I will have discipline in my court!" The crowd quietened.

Pepper noticed that Rhodey was whispering tensely into Eugen's ear. Chloe walked closer to the witness stand and asked, "After the rogue Avengers entered the compound, then what happened, Mr. Pesto?"
"Well, they all went to the communication chamber, stayed there for about... half hour or forty five minutes and then took off in a Stark Quinjet. Oh and I forgot to mention, there was another man with them, looking a little scruffy, dressed in a leisure suit... I didn't recognize him."

From the way, Chloe narrowed her eyes at this statement, Pepper surmised that this was the first time she was hearing this.

"Can you provide a few more details about this third man, Mr. Pesto?"

Eugen stood up and said, "Objection! Your Honor, the conduct of the rogue Avengers is not on trial here! Where is Prosecution going with this line of questioning?"

The judge looked at Chloe. "I will admit, I do have the same question, Madam Prosecutor."

"Your Honor," said Chloe firmly, "I am trying to prove that the rogue Avengers came to the Facility, knowing they were breaking the law and that Colonel Rhodes let them do so, putting his own staff at risk of injury."

Judge Mofatt said clearly, "I have no objection to proving that. However, I do not see why we need to know who all entered with the rogue Avengers. Objection sustained!"

Chloe nodded tensely and said, "Then I have no further questions, Your Honor."

"Very well. Does the Defense have any questions?"

Eugen stepped out from behind the Defense table. "Mr. Pesto, I have seen the security footage of that day. Is it not true that the Widow and the Falcon explained that they were there for a reason?"

The guard said slowly, "Why, yes, they mentioned that there was the threat of an alien attack and that they needed Colonel Rhodes' help. They had also brought the Vision back to the base for medical attention."

Euguen then said gently, "And you could make out that the Vision was wounded?"
"Yes, he was."

"And so, they were telling the truth in that respect?"

"Yes."

"So they had one of the good guys, one of the Avengers with them, who was wounded. Didn't that justify their presence and their need to see Colonel Rhodes?"

The guard said defensively, "We had our orders and they were to stop intruders at any cost possible, especially the rogue Avengers. The Vision could have been a decoy."

"But if I am not mistaken, part of your orders are also to report any break-ins or intruders to your commanding officer. Isn't that Colonel Rhodes? And you didn't report it, did you, Mr. Pesto? He could have settled the question of letting them in without confrontation."

For a moment, Mr. Pesto seemed to be scanning the crowd as if he was looking for someone. Then he stilled and Pepper realized he was looking at Ross.

*Did Ross encourage the guards to tell him if any of the rogue Avengers showed up? Behind RhodeyJ's back... that would explain how he was coincidentally talking to James on the phone, when they arrived...*

"Mr. Pesto?" Eugen gently brought his attention back to the question.

The guard said sullenly, "It happened so quickly, that I couldn't inform Colonel Rhodes."

Eugen nodded and stepped away. Then he turned back. "One last question, Mr. Pesto, have you seen the Widow in combat when she was part of the Avengers?"

"Yes, sir, I have. I have seen her training with new recruits as well as on television."
"Then you do realize that if the Widow wanted to truly incapacitate you or kill you... she could have easily done so. And since she is no longer an Avenger, she doesn't have to hold back her punches. Yet, she simply swept your legs, pinned you and tied you up. In 10 seconds flat. And the same happened to your partner. So there was no real endangerment to your lives. And isn't it also true, that as Colonel Rhodes left, he told the guards in the other wing, to come and set you free? He also called and spoke to your group, that he was sorry but he has to do this for the greater good. Didn't that happen, Mr. Pesto?"

The guard nodded silently and shuffled in his seat.

"Please answer the question in the affirmative or the negative, Mr. Pesto."

"Alright, alright!" said Pesto grudgingly. "Yes, Colonel Rhodes did ensure we were alright. And yeah, I suppose that the Widow could have really harmed us but she didn't."

Eugen nodded with satisfaction and said, "No further questions from the Defense, Your Honor."

"Very well." intoned Judge Mofatt. "Mr. Pesto, thank you for your testimony. You may step down from the stand. Prosecution, please call your next witness."

"Your Honor, the Prosecution calls Secretary of State, Thaddeus Ross, to the stand."

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter tomorrow and then the second part of the trial will be after Pepperony week.
The Trial of James Rhodes - Part II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The crowd gasped as a collective, with shock.

Furious whispers rang through the court as Ross stood up and walked stiff and straight towards the witness stand. He was sworn in and looked calmly at the prosecuting attorney.

Chloe said deferentially with a small smile, "Secretary of State, you have been working with artificially enhanced beings and superheroes for some time now, haven't you?"

Ross said slowly, "Yes, ma'am, I have. I was one of the first members of the team that worked on bringing down the gamma radiation altered humans, Emil Blonsky and Bruce Banner. And I was also involved with the creation of the Sokovia Accords, working directly with the UN."

"Indeed Secretary Ross, you have been asked to testify because the questions today, all concern the superbeing known as the Vision. He seems to have been the catalyst for Colonel Rhodes' departure to Wakanda. Can you shed more light on this member of the Avengers?"

Ross crossed his legs and drawled, "Now this is mostly classified information but for the benefit of the court, I will provide some background on the android. And the asset that powered him."

Eugen stood up. "Your Honor, I have to object. How is this information relevant to the trial of Colonel Rhodes?"

The Judge looked at Chloe, who said, "Your Honor, in order to understand the gravity of what Colonel Rhodes did by letting the Vision go to Wakanda and disobeying orders, we need to know why the android is so important to the U.S Government. The background that the Secretary of State provides, will be beneficial to this understanding."

The Judge nodded. "Overruled, Mr. Finch. Prosecution has a point."

Ross smirked at Eugen impudently before continuing, "As I was saying, the Vision is not an actual living being or a human or even a humanoid. It is an empty shell or a body, which has been given life
by a powerful alien entity, capable of untold feats."

"When we first came across the entity, it was housed in the Scepter or weapon of the Asgardian God, Loki. Which he used when he invaded New York. Now at that time, we mistakenly assumed the entity was just a power source. Just a stone of infinite energy that could open portals in space, fire blasts of light and energy, teleport objects etc."

"We were so damn wrong," he said, shaking his head. "The Avengers kept the actual purpose or the real secret of the stone, hidden from us. And its actual power was that it could manipulate the mind. It could control other beings and allow the bearer to communicate telepathically. It is a Mind Stone, designed to alter the fabric of a being's mental capacity."

"Alright." said Chloe. "But how did this stone end up in the android?"

"Well... sometime ago, when Stark and Banner decided to," Pepper bristled as Ross used air quotes to emphasize his next words, "help the world out by creating a robotic watch force... they instead, made the despotic android Ultron, with the help of this stone."

"And Ultron, being an evil genius, wanted this stone for himself. In the midst of extraction, erm, well, I am a little fuzzy on the details because the Avengers weren't very forthcoming about what exactly happened, in any case, the Stone was implanted in a vibranium body that... somehow.... was just lying around a SHIELD laboratory. And it gave life to the body. And that's what the Vision is."

The crowd started talking loudly amongst themselves at Ross's declaration. Pepper was seething internally.

Tony and Bruce did not make an evil robot intentionally... they did not know what the Mind Stone would do... and not only that, the Vision isn't just a container for the Stone. Trust Ross to oversimplify things... just to make a point... just to paint Tony and Bruce as these mad geniuses, who didn't care for the consequences as long as they got to experiment with dangerous objects...

She sighed as the Judge banged his gavel down to silence the court. "Order, order. Please proceed, Prosecutor."

Chloe walked away from Ross, looking at the crowd. She turned slightly and asked, "Thank you for the background, Sir. Knowing this, how grave are the implications of the Vision going to Wakanda with the rogue Avengers?"
Ross whistled low. "The implications! Oh my! Well... imagine if a top secret U.S. military-grade weapon just flew itself to North Korea, for them to do as they please! And that too, helped by..." he looked at Rhodey, shaking his head slightly, "helped by a military officer, the very personnel trusted with its well being!"

The court began to titter again and Ross shifted forward slightly. "Let me break this down. The Mind Stone is an extremely powerful alien entity. It is not meant for mortal use. It is the property of the U.S. government. We have seen the devastating destruction, it has wreaked on the innocent, in not one but two instances, the attack on New York by the Chitauri and Sokovia. It is clear that this asset needed to remain under military supervision. It should not have fallen into the wrong hands."

He pointed at Rhodes, his voice ringing in the courtroom. "Colonel Rhodes, the Iron Patriot, was well aware of this fact. He signed the Accords and agreed to be a U.S. military representative in the Avengers. But on that day, he just let this asset go to a foreign country without so much as a notification. He directly disobeyed orders from his commanding officer and let the asset leave U.S. soil. In my eyes, that is brazen defection to a known enemy of the U.S. government."

Again the court reacted with gasps and loud whispering. Ross had locked gazes with Rhodey and was staring him down. Chloe smiled triumphantly and said, "No further questions, Your Honor."

"Alright, Mr. Finch, please go ahead."

Eugen stood up slowly, walked towards Ross and then walked back to the Defense table to take a sip of water. He said in a deceptively calm voice, "Mr. Secretary, your background on the Vision does shed valuable light on this case. However, I do have a few questions on said background."

Ross adopted an extremely bored expression on his face as Eugen turned towards him.

"My first question," the young lawyer said crisply, "is about your depiction of the Vision as a simple housing unit for a malicious power source, with no mind of its own. Yet the same power source created Ultron, who was, by far, a very evil mechanical being, with a despotic agenda and the force of will to exact that agenda on innocent people. So why is there such a difference in the two beings, especially since they were both created by the same people, Mr. Stark and Dr. Banner?"

Ross shrugged, saying, "Hey, I cannot explain the inner workings of the Mind Stone. It is an alien object, which was studied extensively to understand its workings and our scientists couldn't come up with a reasonable explanation as to its functioning."
Eugen nodded and continued, "But part of that scientific research was carried out by Dr. Banner. And though you insist their meddling created Ultron, when they meddled once again, with the same intent and created the Vision, an entirely different being was made, who was not evil."

Ross furrowed his forehead in confusion. "I fail to see where you are going with this, young man."

"Let me explain from another point of view. The Vision was created in roughly the same manner as Ultron. At least this is what we assume, since you pointed that the Avengers were not transparent. If that is so, why did it decide to help the Avengers fight Ultron? It actually fought alongside them in Sokovia. It wasn't fighting them. If it was just a shell, controlled by, as you keep saying, a malicious alien power, then why did it take the Avengers side against Ultron?"

Ross exclaimed, "How the hell should I know?"

Eugen said gently, "That's what I am trying to delve at. Perhaps you are misunderstanding the Vision. It is a complex personality with a mind of its own. It helped the Avengers defeat Ultron because it instinctively knew that it was the right thing to do. It even signed the Sokovia Accords, when the other Avengers wouldn't, because it recognized the rightness of the Accords. It made its own decision, when if it was just listening to the Mind Stone, it would have gone with the rogue Avengers. And..."

He stepped back to the bench and lifted a number of papers. "From what I gathered, speaking to some of the scientists at the Facility, its main strength was that it was very fair in its judgement. It looked at things logically, assessed them and then made decisions. It wasn't just controlled by the Mind Stone or... Mr. Stark's stooge if that's what you are implying, Mr. Secretary."

Ross said rudely, "Why do you keep bringing up the Vision?"

"Because, Sir, you keep stressing that Colonel Rhodes just let it go... like it was an inanimate object that was handed from one party to another. When in reality, the Vision knew what had to be done and did it. I do not see how Colonel Rhodes could have stopped it, if it wanted to go. After all, it is a powerful being, whose strength is matched by a few."

Ross said slowly, "It is a dangerous asset and should not have gone rogue."

"Can we actually say that the Vision went rogue? It never sided with the other Avengers, who did
It could have turned on us, at any time, prior to the alien invasion. But it didn't. It wanted to be a model human and it wanted to help others."

"In fact, most of its time at the New Avengers Facility, was spent in aiding the research and development department. It has the potential, physically and mentally, to be extremely dangerous but all evidence based on its behavior so far, highlights that it was an ally to the United States and wanted to remain as one."

Eugen then looked at the court and then back at Ross. "Let us move on, Mr. Secretary. You mentioned that Colonel Rhodes just letting the Vision go to Wakanda, was equivalent to handing a U.S. nuclear missile over to North Korea... so in your opinion, the sovereign country of Wakanda is just as dangerous as North Korea, and an enemy of the U.S. government?"

Once again, the crowd gasped loudly and whispered violently.

Pepper grinned because Ross had turned bright red and sputtered, "Hey! I never said that! Stop twisting words to suit your own purpose! The U.S. government has no disagreements with Wakanda!"

Eugen said innocently, "But Mr. Secretary, you made the comparison. So if there are no disagreements and Wakanda is an ally, then why is it such a big deal, that Colonel Rhodes let the Vision go to Wakanda?"

Chloe stood up, scrapping her chair back loudly. She exclaimed, "Objection, Your Honor! Defense is trying to argue with the facts presented by Secretary of State! This is needless wasting of the court's time!"

"Overruled, Prosecutor." said Judge Mofatt sternly. "The Defense has a right to question the witness about said facts, since they are pertinent to his client's conduct."

She sat back down in a huff while Ross sighed loudly and said "Now look here, Counselor, the big deal isn't that Colonel Rhodes and the Vision went to Wakanda. The deal is about the company they went with, the rogue Avengers."

Eugen nodded slowly and turned towards the crowd. "Now I am not trying to defend the conduct of the rogue Avengers. But... in this situation, weren't they just trying to help?"
A hush fell over the crowd and the Judge tilted his head curiously at Eugen. Ross said stiffly, "Define help, Counselor."

Eugen said carefully, "Well... the rogue Avengers are enemies of the U.S. government, for refusing to sign the Sokovia Accords, not because they committed any actual crime against the government or the American people. Rogers, Natasha Romanoff and Sam Wilson brought the Vision back to the facility because he was seriously wounded and did so, at great risk to their freedom. They didn't have to bring him back."

"May I remind you, Counselor," said Ross angrily, "that Rogers and his band of rogues, are known cohorts of the deadly Hydra assassin, the Winter Soldier."

The crowd began to titter again but Ross continued, raising his voice, "In fact, we know that Rogers freed the Winter Soldier from imprisonment, helped him escape and caused the Avengers to fight amongst themselves! I mean, come on! You can't seriously be defending the behavior of these fiends!"

Eugen held his hands up. "Mr. Secretary, I did say that I am not defending their conduct. I just want to highlight that... the rogue Avengers could have left the Vision to his attackers. And if they had their own agenda, if they wanted the Stone for themselves, well, then why did they bring him back to the Facility?"

Chloe said loudly, "Objection, your Honor! Defense is theorizing wildly! This is-

She stopped when the Judge raised his hand to calm her.

"Mr. Finch," he said in a booming voice, "we do have to get on with the trial. Please demonstrate how this links to your client, Colonel Rhodes' conduct."

Eugen said simply, "Your Honor, I am merely trying to prove that the rogue Avengers were not the enemy in this situation. They were trying to help Colonel Rhodes and the Vision deal with the alien attack, especially since Mr. Stark had disappeared into space. In such times of need, every little source of help counts."

He turned to Ross. "And, sir, if Colonel Rhodes was the official military representative in the Avengers, then don't you feel it was his absolute duty, to accompany the Mind Stone, wherever it went? Wasn't he just performing his duty and safeguarding the Vision by taking it away from the
very being that was hunting it, especially since he knew they were outnumbered and could not face the aliens on their own."

Ross snorted loudly, exclaiming, "That is just a bald faced lie! Why, Mr. Finch, you are trying to make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear!"

He tilted his chair back and smiled sardonically at Rhodey as he spoke, "James Rhodes is a fine soldier and a good man. But honestly, thanks to the influence of Stark over the years, he has had his head turned by the glamour and power of super heroes and their super powers. It isn't just him, we live in a society that worship superheroes, without realizing how much damage and pain they actually cause, when they try to do good."

"And this infatuation of Rhodes, this clouded his judgement on that day. He forgot that he was a military officer. He forgot that his duty was to protect the asset, the Mind Stone, from external sources and that includes the rogue Avengers. He forgot that he was to attack the rogue Avengers if he saw them. And the fact that he forgot his duty is why we, the military are prosecuting him today. He shouldn't have let the Vision go to Wakanda, end of story."

Pepper dug her nails into her palms at this brazen statement of Ross, tarnishing Rhodey's reputation. Rhodes himself was wringing his hands in his lap, his frame straight and tense. The crowd was whispering once again but soft and low.

Eugen straightened and asked, "Mr. Secretary, I am confused about one aspect of the Vision's existence. If the Mind Stone was so important, so powerful, how is it that the Vision, an android, was allowed to keep it in the first place? Couldn't the stone have been extracted from it earlier? Why did the military let an alien power source, capable of great destruction, be stored in an external being, that was not under their control and was also able to think independently?"

At this question, Ross actually seemed taken aback. He blinked hard and then opened his mouth but didn't say anything.

Eugen continued firmly, "In fact, the Vision was allowed to be free and come and go as it pleased. Can the truth be that it was allowed to keep the Stone because the government or rather, your department, Mr. Secretary, wanted a living scapegoat in case something like this happened? In case an alien power came for the Stone, you could deny all responsibility, saying that it was the Vision's problem to deal with the situation. It was a super hero problem and all damage herein would be the Avengers fault."

He turned towards the court. "Let's look at the facts. Two superior alien beings came to Queens and
attacked a mystical wizard. If SHIELD were around, the wizard would have received some aid. Instead Mr. Stark and the wizard took on the alien beings alone. Absolutely alone with no help whatsoever."

Eugen looked across the crowd. "Didn't we all see it with our own eyes? Iron Man and Dr. Strange fighting the aliens alone. Where were your forces, Mr. Secretary? Iron Man signed the Sokovia Accords. He wasn't a rogue Avenger."

Chloe stood up to object but Ross waved her down.

He looked straight at Eugen and said rudely, "Counselor, Mr. Stark knew the risks involved with being a super-hero. It is not the responsibility of the U.S. government to help him when he is in peril."

Pepper felt her heart thump with anger as Ross looked straight at her and said coldly, "We only protect our own. And Mr. Stark was not our own."

Once again the crowd gasped loudly and a few people started to boo. Ross sneered at them arrogantly while the Judge banged his gavel.

When the court had quietened down, Eugen said, "Mr. Stark may not have been one of our own. But Colonel Rhodes certainly was. And according to you, the Mind Stone is a U.S. government asset, so it was one of our own. Yet when it flew off to Wakanda, with only a single protecting officer, no aid was sent to ensure the safety of the asset. Funny, I would expect such a situation calls for government protection. And especially for an asset so dangerous as the Mind Stone."

Ross leaned forward in his seat, saying clearly, "We know a lost cause when we see one. The minute the Mind Stone left the U.S., I knew there was nothing more that we could do. And I was right. It was ultimately taken by the alien Thanos. If it was meant to happen, it was going to happen."

Eugen nodded quietly. He walked back towards his bench and then turned slightly, looking back at the Judge. "Yet here we sit, Mr. Secretary, trying the only U.S. officer who did his duty and went to protect the asset at all costs. Isn't that the definition of a good soldier? To perform his duty even when he knows for certain, that either he will fail or he will perish."

Ross just kept quiet and looked away while a loud whisper began to pass through the audience. Pepper wanted to stand up and clap but controlled herself.
Eugen said with a small smile, "No further questions, your Honor."

The Judge nodded and said, "We will now have a short break of 10 minutes before the next set of witnesses. Court is adjourned."

Chapter End Notes

We have heard from the witnesses, now it is time for Iron Man but next week is Pepperony week, so no uploads for this adventure.
The Trial of James Rhodes - Part III

Chapter Notes

The moment you have all been waiting for... Alexa, play *Highway to Hell* at maximum volume :P

Just one chapter this week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The minute the break was announced, everyone started talking all at once. People began to stand up and mingle with each other. Pepper was fuming, her fists clenched in her lap. She was still angry at Ross for his slur about Tony influencing Rhodes.

The Secretary was surrounded by media representatives and was giving an impromptu interview. He turned briefly to smirk arrogantly at Pepper.

She stood up quickly.

_I am going to march over there and wipe that smug grin of that asshole's face._

Pepper took three steps forward and was intercepted by Rhodes. He caught her hand in his and smiled at her.

"Come on, Pepper, let's get some air."

She growled low in her throat, "Ross made some pretty lying statements back there. I want to..."

"I know, Pepper, I know but don't counter him now."

James looked at the group of reporters, Ross preening in the middle.

"He wants the attention, he wants you to face him, to fight him, so there will be a scene. Don't give
him the satisfaction."

Pepper realized the simple truth in Rhodes calm, cool words. She nodded and he said, "Let's go outside and see if we can rustle some decent coffee. I could use a drink."

They walked out of the courtroom together, keeping away from the crowded main lawns and towards the inner section of the courthouse.

Military personnel passed by them, saluting James as they did so. He led Pepper to a small seating area which was quiet and secluded.

He gestured at a chair and Pepper said politely, "I'll stand, I've been sitting for so long, I need to stretch my legs."

"I hope you don't mind if I sit, Pepper."

"No, James, please go ahead."

He gingerly lowered himself into a chair, wincing as his knees bent. She asked with concern, "James, are you alright?"

"I am, Pepper. My age is catching up to me. That and I recently had my ass handed to me by an alien warlord."

He smiled but his coffee brown eyes flickered with emotion. "We did our best but in the end... I keep thinking what we could have done differently to win. Perhaps if the Avengers had been there, together, fighting as one..."

"James..." she said softly, bending to take his hand and squeeze it gently. "You did the best you could, in the circumstances you found yourself in. And for what it is worth, I am so glad you came back to us. You came back, James."

He nodded and asked, "Pepper, tell me the truth, please. Is Tony truly alright? Did he really return from space... or are you hiding something from me?"
She said firmly, "James, believe me, Tony is fine. Bruised and banged up like you but he's back."

She looked away, thinking about the way she had left Tony in Malibu and sighed. "Physical wounds are one thing. I do not know how long he will take to recover emotionally and mentally."

James squeezed her hand and smiled up at her. "Pepper, I know with you by his side, Tony isn't going to drown in his sorrows. You are going to help him get through it. You always have."

Pepper shook her head. "James, Tony is tough, he always bounces back."

"No Pep, these last few years, after each catastrophe, you are the reason that Tony Stark recovered. Especially after..." he lowered his tone, "especially after Steve left, taking most of the Avengers with him. If you hadn't been there when he came back from Siberia, Tony would have died of a broken heart."

Pepper swallowed, emotion filling her at the memory of Tony, bloodied and sick with a chest infection after being returning from Siberia.

*His blackened eye, the tired lines on his face, his left arm in a sling... and that look of deep sorrow in his eyes. And he's the same this time, just as sad, just as wounded... I hope Rhodey's faith in me is justified. I hope I can bring Tony Stark back from the brink. I have to... I love him, I won't let the deeds of Thanos kill him slowly before his time.*

Her thoughts were interrupted by James calling her name softly.

"Earth to Pepper... hello, Pepper..."  

She smiled and replied, "Sorry, James, I just... I just got held up in my own thoughts."

"It is alright, Pep... I can't blame you." He wrung his hands and whispered softly, "My own thoughts have been driving me mad ever since I decided to come back to the U.S. I want this trial to get over, so I will finally have some peace... I will finally know what is going to happen to me... and whatever the outcome, at least this waiting, this ordeal will be over."
He looked at her bleakly, the sadness in his eyes making her heart clench. "Pepper, I am resigned to my fate. I know I am going to be punished."

James swallowed hard and stood up slowly. She offered her hand to help but he didn't take it.

He straightened and looked at the way they had come from.

"I know at the end of this trial, I am going to lose my rank. I am going to lose my last twenty years of military service. I am going to be kicked out of the military. But I am going to accept it, I am going to accept the ruling with dignity. Because I won't let them take that from me."

Pepper nodded, unwilling to offer him lies of comfort. Instead, she caught his shoulder and he smiled at her gratefully.

James said softly, "We should count our blessings while we have them. You and Tony are alright. And you are going to make a decent man out of Stark and marry his sorry ass."

She laughed at his words and then he took her hand and led her away from the restrooms. "We have 10 more minutes, Pep, let's see if we can catch a quick bite in the cafeteria."

As the break was nearly over, Pepper returned to her seat. The crowd began to pour back into the courtroom.

She could see the prosecutor, Chloe, excitedly talking alone to Ross. James had returned to his seat and was absently tapping his fingers on the table.

People settled down quickly as the bailiff called the court to order and the Judge took his seat.
He said slowly, "Defense, you are yet to call your first witness. Please do so."

Pepper turned to look at the court door behind her curiously. She could hear a loud commotion taking place on its other side and she wondered what was going on.

Eugen stood up, pulling his coat together. He turned back slightly towards the court audience and said, "Thank you, Your Honor. The Defense calls Tony Stark!"

Except for the sound of necks whipping around in shock, the court had gone deathly silent. Pepper furrowed her brow in confusion.

*I told Eugen twice that Tony would not be able to make it. Then what is he-

She didn’t complete her thought because the court door burst open and in sauntered the man himself, the blinding flashes of cameras illuminating his silhouette.

Pepper's heart began to pound loudly as the audience erupted into shouts, cheers and questions from all sides.

Tony stood there by the door, looking around him, a small smile on his face. Then he nodded gently, looked straight at the end of the court and began to walk forward.

She watched him approach the bench, wearing a jacquard charcoal-grey suit, imprinted lightly with paisleys, paired with a crisp white shirt and a dull red tie. Pepper swallowed because her man looked so damn sexy, his grey aviators hiding his eyes as he strode past her confidently, waving at Rhodes.

*Smart suit and tie but Adidas trainers, typical Stark... damn, he's. .. he's cut his hair... in those short spikes... it looks so good but so soft... and his beard... the perfect lines, the neatness... Tony is his normal rakish self! But how? And why did he come after...

The bailiff held open the gate to the bench and Tony walked through, nodding at Rhodes who was grinning boyishly at him.
He stepped up to the witness stand and stood while the bailiff swore him in. The crowd had gone wild now with excitement, cheering "Iron Man, Iron Man" and the judge was struggling to restore order, threatening to clear the court room if he had to.

But Pepper wasn't concentrating on all that noise. She had eyes only for her devilishly handsome and damn sneaky fiance who was sitting in the witness chair. He took off his sunglasses and then looked around the court.

A slow smile grew on her face as she realized he was searching for someone.

*He's... he's looking for me...*

Chloe was busy arguing with the judge on how the Defense had suddenly changed its witnesses. Eugen was arguing back and the judge was trying to mediate between the two.

Pepper tried to catch Tony's eye and when she did, she felt a jolt of electricity pass through her as he locked gazes with her and smiled at her lovingly.

She smiled back at him, beaming with happiness as he tilted his head to one side and winked at her slowly.

Her phone buzzed in her hand and she looked down at it briefly to see the message, "Surprised to see me, Potts?"

She typed back, "Yes but I am so happy you are here, Tony. You have no idea how happy I am..."

She saw him bend his head to read her message and then she felt her phone buzz again.

Pepper giggled quietly as she read, "Honey, please tell me what is all the fuss about? Is it my new suit? Don't I look good in this suit?"

"Yes, you do." She typed back. Then she couldn't resist typing. "But you look even better, when you don't have one on. If you get my drift."
Pepper sent the message and then grinned as Tony flushed and then waggled his eyebrows naughtily at her.

The argument between Eugen and Chloe was finally resolved and the Prosecutor returned to her seat in a huff.

Eugen looked at Tony like he was his prodigal son that he really wanted to hug but controlled himself and approached the witness stand.

He said briskly, "It is good to see you, Mr Stark."

Tony simply replied, "Thank you, Mr. Finch."

"You are aware of the circumstances of Colonel Rhodes indictment?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good. Now Mr. Stark, you are a founding member of the Avengers. Colonel Rhodes was working separately as the War Machine. Did you recommend that Colonel Rhodes join the Avengers after Ultron?"

"Yes. I did. Colonel Rhodes is a fine soldier and a keen strategist. The younger Avengers and even some of the older ones like myself, could benefit from his advice. Even Sam Wilson, the Falcon, was from the Air Force and looked to Rhodes for guidance."

"But was it a good idea to involve a military man in a outlier group? The Black Widow and Hawkeye were part of SHIELD and not actually military. Didn't the members fear interference from the US Army if Colonel Rhodes joined?"

Tony straightened and said seriously, "I will admit, there were fears of that but we need to remember that the First Avenger was a military man, a captain and a fine soldier himself."
The court began to titter and Eugen asked slowly, "You are referring to Captain America?"

"Of course. He was the official or unofficial leader of the Avengers and during his tenure, he guided the team well. You can't deny the good that he's done."

"I believe most would say that you were the leader of the Avengers, Mr. Stark." Said Eugen with a smile.

"No way! I just paid the bills and according to Secretary Ross here, played Mad Scientist with Dr. Banner."

The court burst into laughter at that and even the judge hid his smile behind his hand as he lightly banged his gavel. Pepper smiled and cast a sideways glance at Ross.

_The man's practically seething with irritation. I bet he didn't expect that Tony would help James. What an idiot._

"Mr. Stark," continued Eugen. "In your opinion, did Colonel Rhodes do the right thing by letting the Vision go to Wakanda?"

Tony cleared his throat and said quietly, "I can't judge my friend for his actions. I understand that he had duties. But I will say this. What else could he have done? It would be impossible to stop the Vision, if he wanted to leave. And could James have sat here safely, while there was a chance to save Earth by facing Thanos?"

"No!" his voice rang in the courtroom. "He wouldn't. No one would. The situation wasn't ideal but James Rhodes knew he had to contribute, he had to do his best, he had to try and save lives. Isn't that what a soldier is supposed to do? Fight the battles that no one wants to fight and save the innocent."

"But..." enunciated Eugen, "didn't he break the Sokovia Accords?"

Tony leaned forward, his face tensing. "See, that's the thing. I signed those accords myself. Because I personally believed that superheroes had to be more accountable for their actions. That there had to be some rules in check to minimize the consequences. I do not recall, the Accords being a contract where James Rhodes was the designated babysitter of the Vision."
This comment made the court burst into laughter. The judge banged his gavel and the giggling stopped.

Tony said seriously, "When Thanos came to Earth, we received no directive from any government or the UN on what to do and what not to do. And I don't blame them. The situation was chaotic. Alien ships landing here and there tearing up the landscape. Earth was under attack. What were we supposed to do as superheros? Wait for orders or help in any way we could?"

He looked straight at Ross as he said this, his jaw tightening.

"So in your opinion, what were the consequences of Colonel Rhodes' actions?"

Tony sighed tiredly and looked at James.

He said bleakly, "The consequence is nothing but loss. Whichever way you look at it. The Mind Stone is gone. The Vision died, trying to keep it out of the hands of a megalomaniac alien warlord. Wakanda was besieged and has lost a lot of good men and women in an epic battle. Half of the Earth has been disintegrated."

Then he looked at the court. "But I ask this court, are these the consequences of Colonel Rhodes' actions? If he hadn't gone to Wakanda, then Thanos would have simply come to the US to take the stone."

Whispers and murmurs filled the courtroom as the audience realized the truth in his words.

"And what if Colonel Rhodes had stayed behind here?"

He paused, looking at James with sadness. "Well then, he would no doubt, have been in better shape and health. Wakanda would have had one less hero to help them. But my friend... isn't the sort to stay away when innocents are being harmed."

Eugen nodded with a small smile and said, "No further questions, your honor."
The judge said, "Very well. Madam prosecutor. Your turn to question the witness."

Chapter End Notes

The hardest part of this chapter was deciding Tony's outfit :P
Thank you all so much for being very patient with the lack of updates... and for sticking with the story for so long.

Pepper tensely observed the prosecutor approach Tony.

Tony's smart, he can take all her deadly questions, he can match her in wits. But if she tries to hurt him with insensitive comments about people dying under his command... she clenched her fists. *I am not going to stand for it!*

Chloe gave Tony a very fake smile and asked solicitously, "Mr. Stark, can you tell us exactly what happened?"

Tony said casually, "Colonel Rhodes and I were in two different places during the alien invasion. I was in space, he was in Wakanda. All that I know of what happened, has been through his narration."

"I'm not asking about Colonel Rhodes. I am asking, what happened on Titan?"

Eugen sprang up from his seat. "Objection, your Honor! This is irrelevant to my clients trial!"

The judge looked at Tony and said gently, "I agree with Mr. Finch but I must confess, my own curiously is eating at me and I'm sure the court has questions too. Would you mind, Mr. Stark?"

Tony smiled easily. "Not at all. I will try to stick to the pertinent facts."

He briefly recounted what happened on Titan, leaving out the part of Dr. Strange saving him in exchange for the Time Stone.
An eerie hush fell over the court.

"You fought the alien warlord, face to face. And all six of you couldn't defeat him?" whispered Chloe.

"No." said Tony simply. "He had five of the six Infinity Stones and was simply too powerful. We tried our best but it just wasn't enough. He traveled to Earth using the Stones."

"And how did you get back?"

He looked at Pepper and she flushed at the warmth and pride in his eyes.

"My CEO rescued me from an alien prison." Tony drawled out and the court gasped loudly. "That's right, she journeyed into space, kicked some alien butt and brought my sorry ass back to Earth."

Pepper's ears were burning because everyone was staring at her with awe. Even Ross looked at her, dumbfounded.

"That's impressive, Mr. Stark. And where have you been all this time? With no word or information of your well being?"

"I was injured badly in the fight and wanted some time to recover. Physically and mentally with peace and quiet."

Then Tony smirked mischievously. "And I was scared that secretary Ross would come breathing down my neck, asking me where the Vision and Rhodes had disappeared to."

Once again, the court started laughing and Pepper observed Ross grumbling to one of his subordinates.

"Mr. Stark," said Chloe skeptically, "Are you saying you had PTSD?"

Pepper bit in her lip in anger at the prosecutor's irritated tone of disbelief.
Tony just looked at his hands and said softly, "I've had it for a long time, ever since Afghanistan, then New York when I went up a wormhole, again when the Mandarin attacked my fiance, Sokovia... this time is no different. In fact..." he whispered, "it is even more intense than before. Somehow I always find myself being pulled from one war into another."

Chloe looked around warily because she realized that mood in the court could turn sympathetic and indeed, judging from the hushed whispers, it seemed to have.

She continued, "Mr. Stark, I know that Mr. Finch already asked you this question but I feel it bears to be repeated. Do you seriously feel, being a senior founding member of the Avengers, that Colonel Rhodes was justified in going to Wakanda?"

Tony raised his head, his eyes dark and focused. "Why do I get the impression, that you doubt that James Rhodes was of any use in Wakanda?"

"That was not my question, Mr. Stark!"

"Actually it is! We lost the fight against Thanos! And it was a universal loss! Every country on Earth, has lost its people. There are entire planets in the galaxy, destroyed in his wake. But you! You are trying this good man," he pointed at Rhodey, "for doing his duty, as a soldier, as an Avenger! If we had won, I don not think Rhodes would have been on trial!"

"Mr. Stark," repeated Chloe, "Was Colonel Rhodes justified in going to Wakanda?"

Tony stared at her point-blank. In a low firm tone, he replied, "Yes! A 100 times yes! He had to help those people! He had to do something! And maybe the U.S. feels he was ineffective and went there to turn rogue but I can assure you, Wakanda is deeply grateful for his assistance! "

Chloe said with a sneer, "Now you speak for Wakanda as well?"

Tony smirked. "You know what, why don't we let Wakanda speak for itself?"

He turned to the judge. "Your Honor, with your permission, I'd like to involve someone who was actually there on the battlefield with Colonel Rhodes and who can vouch for his intentions and his
"What?!" The prosecutor said loudly as the court started to whisper. "Your Honor! I object!"

The judge shrugged. "I don't see the harm in it and frankly Prosecutor, you started this line of questioning, so you need to see it through."

Tony beamed at him and began to tap at his watch. Pepper was confused.

What is Tony up to? Who is this contact from Wakanda? Has he spoken to Bruce or Steve? Is he going to let them speak?

The scene was quite out of the ordinary. Eugen and Chloe approached the bench, the latter gesturing wildly while Eugen just shrugged, a gentle smile on his face. Tony had placed his phone on the edge of the stand and was tapping it now. The court gasped as he projected a large shimmering blue screen from it, hovering in thin air. Pepper giggled at the court stenographer who had stopped typing and was staring up at the screen in awe.

"Mr. Stark," said the judge sternly. "What exactly are you up to?"

"Nothing much, sir, just trying to ..." Tony furrowed his brow in concentration. "Trying to get a signal here and connect to... There!" he exclaimed as the screen flickered to display a number being dialed.

The judge banged his gavel to silence the raucous court and then dropped it in shock as the screen flickered once again.

Even Pepper gasped as the regal, distinctive face of King T'Challa filled the screen, smiling benignly down at them. He had a black eye and was wearing a white tunic with an embroidered collar. The crowd hushed immediately. James had turned pale, staring up at him, with his mouth wide open.

"Tony Stark," said the King in his low, lightly accented voice, "It is good to see you again. You look much better than the last time we spoke."
Tony bowed his head slightly and T’Challa raised his hand, laughing.

"Now, now, Mr. Stark, we do not need to stand on ceremony here." He looked into the crowd. "Greetings, Americans, greetings from Wakanda."

"Your Majesty," began Tony, "actually... we are in court and..."

"Oh I see." The King lowered his gaze. "The trial of Colonel Rhodes, I take it?"

"Yes, yes, your Majesty."

"Well," sighed the King. "I would just like to say this... Wakanda was in mortal peril. The forces of the alien warlord were converging upon us and my people had to be protected. Colonel Rhodes was a tremendous help in this regard. He manned a flank of my army, he defended Wakanda admirably and fought the alien army with all his might. Even though there was terrible loss in the aftermath, I insist that his assistance to Wakanda was immeasurable."

"And indeed," he eerily found Ross in the crowd, "I must extend my many thanks to United States here, for thinking of Wakanda in this tiring time. I understand that Colonel Rhodes broke certain protocols but he came to Wakanda's aid and for that we will always be grateful."

The crowd started to titter and even the judge looked at Ross, who seemed very flustered.

Pepper understood the dynamics at play.

_The element of diplomacy is being questioned here. The King is indirectly asking why is a US soldier being tried for aiding Wakanda, when the U.S. and Wakanda are friendly to each other. And from the King’s words, it is obvious that James' conduct was impeccable. He did not fly there to join the rogue Avengers._

As if he heard her, King T’Challa said with a note of confusion in his voice, "I feel it upon me, to stress that Colonel Rhodes did not come to Wakanda to carry out any underhanded business with the other Avengers. He came to accompany the Vision and we are very thankful that he chose to stay and help Wakanda out, in her time of need."
"Your Majesty," said Chloe nervously, "surely you can see the impropriety of the situation? Colonel Rhodes came there in an official capacity but without permission. Also, it is too much of a coincidence that the rogue Avengers, led by Steve Rogers, all happened to be there at the same time."

The King looked at her quietly. "Madam, while I see your point, I cannot lie and say that I was not aware that Captain Rogers and his team are no longer considered to be official Avengers. But what was I to do? My country was at the brink of invasion. Am I to turn away these heroes, who are willing to lay down their lives to help me? And I can assure you, that Colonel Rhodes was straight to the point. The Mind Stone needed to be extracted from the Vision. That was his utmost aim."

Chloe quickly shot a glance at Ross and then asked hesitatingly, "About that, Your Majesty, there is also the question of why Colonel Rhodes went to Wakanda to perform such a operation. When he could have done it-"

King T'Challa cut her short with a smug smile. "Ah but my dear Prosecutor, the operation could only be possible in Wakanda. Before he came over, Colonel Rhodes spoke to my medical team and me-, I mean, I. To understand the intricacies needed to perform it. And from the discussion, it was ascertained that the operation was too complicated to be undertaken in the United States. We even conference called a couple of experts across the country, to see if anyone was willing. But with hospitals under lock down from the alien attack, no one wanted to operate on an android and remove the Stone. Especially since it was a high risk case."

There was pin-drop silence in the court.

Chloe was visibly taken aback. "You mean to say, that medical experts in the U.S refused to remove the Mind Stone from the Vision? Why, that's... that's..."

"Perfectly normal in the circumstances," completed the King. "There is an immediate threat of alien invasion. And it is very clear that the aliens want the stone at any cost. Why would anyone risk their lives and operate on a being housing the Stone, when at any time the aliens could find them, while searching for the stone..."

"Why did Wakanda do it?" said Chloe aggressively.

Again, King T'Challa gave her a small smile.
"Because the Avengers... be it Tony Stark or Captain Rogers... are my friends. And I, my people, my country, were willing to take the risk. We wanted to stop the aliens from getting the stone at all cost. We knew..." he lowered his head and said softly, "we knew if Thanos got the stone... the consequences would be disastrous... and sadly he got what he wanted."

The court started to whisper and Pepper looked at the drawn faces of Tony and Rhodes, sitting in their respective seats.

*The weight of defeat hangs heavy on them all. But they can bounce back.*

She caught Tony's eye and smiled brightly at him. He smiled back gently, some of the sadness leaving his face.

*At least my Tony is back... and he's going to rally the rest of the Avengers, I'm sure of it!*

King T'Challa said politely, "Are any other questions for me, Miss Chloe?"

She said quickly, "No, Your Majesty. Thank you."

The King nodded at the court and turned slightly to nod at the judge as well.

"Thank you for having me in your court." He said graciously and the judge said, "Thank you for sparing your time for the trial, Your Highness."

The King then flashed a thumbs up at James, who for some reason, was regarding him very suspiciously.

The call ended and Tony put his phone back in his pocket and folded his hands patiently. Chloe and her team were heatedly discussing something.

The judge cleared his throat and asked monotonously, "Madam Prosecutor, do you have any more questions for Mr. Stark?"
She turned and said quickly, "None, your honor. Thank you."

"Very well. Mr. Stark, you may step down."

Tony nodded and left the stand. Pepper looked around her quickly, hoping he would come sit next to her but there were no empty seats nearby.

"Mr. Finch, please call your next witness."

She glanced back at Tony, who made a sad face as he couldn't find a seat close to her. So instead, he sat down near the Defense table. James turned in his seat to take Tony's hand and shake it, his face filled with emotion.

Tony patted him on the back and they both bent their heads, deep in discussion.

Eugen stood up and announced crisply, "The Defense calls former President, Mr. Matthew Ellis."

Chapter End Notes

I know what you are thinking: The Black Panther died in the snap. So who is this? All will be revealed soon but you can guess :P
Finally, the end of the trial!

Everyone, including Pepper, gasped loudly with awe, at the witness' name.

*Former president, Ellis! He is... he's going to testify on James' behalf!*

Judge Moffatt banged his gavel twice, to silence the court but it didn't stop the furious, hushed whispers as a dignified, tall man in a neat blue suit, entered the court quietly, followed by two burly bodyguards.

She peered at the man closely when he passed her seat.

*Thomas Ellis... the very president that Killian had kidnapped from Air Force One! We were both imprisoned together in that deserted shipyard! I was so weak from the effects of Extremis and he was trying to reason with that bastard Aldritch, to let us go. I'm impressed that he agreed to bear witness. Whose idea was this?*

Mr. Ellis stepped into the witness stand and was sworn in. He slowly sat down, his knees obviously paining him and looked around with a small smile. She saw the man look at James and Tony and his smile widened. He nodded at them and Tony gave him a small wave.

Eugen walked over to the witness stand and said clearly, "Thank you for coming here today on such short notice, Mr. Ellis."

The judge added, "Yes, Mr. Ellis, we appreciate you taking time out of your day to bear witness at this trial. We know you are a busy man."

The former president clenched his jaw and said firmly, "I couldn't just stand by and let this travesty take place!"

He pointed at Rhodes. "A good man is being tried for the most ball-ass reasons ever! I just had to step in!"

People started to snicker and suddenly Pepper remembered something she had read a few months ago.

*Ellis was horrified by Killian's reach in the White Office. And he was disgusted by Aldritch's sickening psychological manipulation of those poor military veterans, by taking advantage of their injuries and bitterness. After that, he had worked with Ross for the Sokovia Accords... I am confused, what will be his contribution here?*

Eugen began his line of questioning, giving Mr. Ellis enough opportunity to speak about Colonel Rhodes' fine military career and personal conduct. The former president also brought up how James had rescued him from the Mandarin, putting his own life at risk, since the Iron Patriot suit had been stolen by Killian.
The defense asked a few questions and then the floor was opened to the Prosecution.

Pepper watched Chloe approach the witness stand warily.

*I can't say I blame her. Mr. Ellis is a high-profile witness and he also looks angry enough to to bite steel!*

"Mr. Ellis," she said in crisp, clear tones, "I understand that you feel indebted to Colonel Rhodes for saving your life. But as the former Commander in Chief, do you honestly feel, he was justified in disobeying direct orders and going to Wakanda with the rogue Avengers?"

The older man ground his teeth and said tightly, "Yes, I do, irrevocably and completely!"

Chloe gasped in outrage and said aggressively, "Mr. Ellis, surely you don't mean that! What would happen if our soldiers decided to follow Colonel Rhodes' example and perform actions as they see fit, disobeying orders?"

"Let me explain why I said what I said." He looked at the court audience. "You know from my six-year term as a President, that I am a straight talker, I don't mince words and I don't cut corners. I try to be as honest as possible with the American public because I am their servant. Now I have worked with Colonel Rhodes, I've been saved by him. I've met Captain Steve Rogers as well, another American hero. I've met many fine soldiers, men and women in the US military, both at home and overseas."

"And while I do realize the need to follow orders, I also feel that there are men and women in our military, who are impeccable in their conduct and moral code. And Colonel Rhodes is one such man. He is not, I repeat, he is not the type of man to turn his back on his duty and disobey orders unless they were wrong! And in this situation," he looked at Ross, "I believe they were wrong!"

"Why so, Mr. Ellis?"

He leaned forward in his seat. "The current organization and I have differed heatedly on the treatment of the former members of the Avengers. I for one, feel they could have been negotiated with. And in a time of turmoil, when enemies come pouring out of the sky, when Earth itself is under attack from alien beings, I feel the greater good should be prioritized over..."

He glanced at Ross again, "Over petty arguments. And I feel Colonel Rhodes did, what best he could do in the situation. From what I understand, the Mind Stone easily falling into Thanos' hands, would have been disastrous. And we have seen that for ourselves! The loss to human life is spectacular! But after it is all over, should we now point fingers and say, Hey soldier! You shouldn't have been talking to them in the first place! You did the wrong thing! You disobeyed orders! Shame on you!"

Chloe glanced at her notes and then back at the witness. Pepper could see that she was flustered.

"Sir, I-"

He didn't let her speak. "Madam Counselor, aside from the point of disobedience, you keep mentioning Colonel Rhodes siding with the enemy as another point against his conduct. Well, back in 2016, when Captain Rogers and his companions were trying to escape to Siberia, they were headed off by Iron Man and the Iron Patriot. In the ensuing fight, Colonel Rhodes was critically injured and spent a week in the hospital, fighting for his life."

The crowd started to whisper again and Pepper noticed James shifting in his seat with discomfort, his face tightening.
He doesn't like being reminded of his injury and that fight... that horrible fight where he almost died, falling from the sky. It took a lot of time for James to recover physically and mentally...

Tony clasped his friend's shoulder tightly, saying something to him and the Colonel nodded. She smiled slowly at that.

They both suffered that day. I know Tony's struggle as well... yet they managed to pull each other up from their falls... they've been friends for so long and people always think James is just Tony's handler, just keeping him out of trouble all the time but it isn't that...

Mr. Ellis continued fiercely, "It was a difficult period for Colonel Rhodes yet he managed to recover. So he among us, has the most reasons to loathe his former teammates, the ones who fought against him and nearly killed him. And his anger is justified. Yet when they came to him at the New Avengers facility, he put aside his anger and went with them. Who among us, can say we would do the same, when faced by those who mortally wounded us? If he could trust them after all they had done to him, surely there must be some logic or reason in their need!"

He had managed to rile up the court with his impassioned argument. The audience was now talking loudly among themselves. Ross was glaring at the former president, who smirked at him impudently.

Chloe swallowed, a look of abject irritation on her face.

Pepper grinned to herself.

She simply can't match him in arguments. And Mr. Ellis has raised a number of pertinent points and is sticking to his opinion.

Mr. Ellis said patiently, "Counselor. I understand what you are trying to prove. I truly do. But I simply do not agree with it. You are judging a good man," he gestured at James, "simply because he temporarily joined up with some former team members to fight an impossible war. You are trying to negate all his years of service to this country, to the American people, just because of one incident where he was indirectly doing his duty and trying to save innocent lives. I am sorry but that's just not right."

The counselor went back to her bench, muttering, "No further questions, your Honor."

"Very well." Said the Judge. "Mr. Ellis, thank you for your testimony. You may step down."

The former president left the stand and after nodding at James and Tony, he exited the courtroom.

The Judge looked at Eugen. "Mr. Finch, does the Defense have any more witnesses?"

He stood and said, "No, Your Honor. The Defense rests."

Judge Moffatt raised his bushy eyebrows. "Colonel Rhodes," he said deeply, "Will you not speak in your own defense?"

James stood up. "Your Honor, if it is agreeable to the court, I have prepared a statement explaining my conduct."

"Very well then, Colonel. Please proceed."

James took a sip of water from the glass on his table and straightened himself. Instead of reading something out, he began to speak straightaway.
"When I was first given the honor of manning the Iron Patriot suit, my duties were made clear to me. Venture into dangerous situations, using the armor to protect me and rescue American soldiers and civilians. In time, my duties broadened into protecting the President, nullifying external threats to our country and doing my best to protect the American people. When I went to Wakanda, with Captain Rogers and the other rogue Avengers, I truly felt I was doing that. Thanos wanted the Mind Stone and we had no hopes of hiding it away from him. Our only option was to destroy it, so his quest would remain incomplete."

He swallowed and looked around. "We knew the sacrifice needed. The Vision had known he would be destroyed along with the Stone's destruction. King T'Challa had realized Thanos' army would ravage his land, stopping at nothing to get the Stone. And I... I had known that by going to Wakanda and helping out the rogue Avengers, I would be punished if I survived. But I had accepted this. It seemed the least painful sacrifice, compared to what the other brave men and women around me, would be giving up."

Then James looked straight at the judge. "Whatever the court's decision, I will accept it with dignity. I cannot undo what I've done. And I have to say, if I had to, I would do it again because I couldn't just stand by and let the battle rage on. I had to do something. It was the only thing we could have done to stave off the aliens."

He sat back down quietly.

The Judge said, "Thank you, Colonel Rhodes. Since we have heard from both sides, I shall now deliberate on my ruling. In the essence of time, there will not be a break. I will announce my decision in five minutes. Court is still in session."

He banged his gavel and began to consult his notes. The court audience started to whisper loudly and Pepper noted with irritation that some people were sneakily approaching Tony from the left side of the hall.

*Reporters, no doubt! Can't they leave him alone for sometime?*

Then she felt her phone buzz and looked down to read the new message.

"I hope the Judge hurries up, I wanna pee so badly!"

Pepper covered her mouth in time to stop her giggle at Tony's kiddish statement. She typed back, "Hold on, honey. Just a while longer and then you can be free."

She had hardly sent it when she got Tony's reply. "Rhodey and I want to have chilli dogs for dinner."

This time, she raised her head and looked at where he was sitting. Sure enough, Tony was looking right at her, waggling his eyebrows with his sunglasses perched impudently on the end of his nose.

Pepper sighed and shook her head at him, mouthing "No."

He took off the glasses and pouted at her, then joined his hands together, making a pleading gesture.

She bit her lip, trying to hide her smile. But she was saved from replying because the Judge had cleared his throat and said in his booming voice, "I have come to a decision. Will the Defendant please rise?"

James, Eugen and Tony all stood up. The Prosecution stood up as well, Chloe folding her arms defensively across her chest.
Pepper's heart was now in her throat and she tried to calm herself.

The Judge said slowly, "I have heard a lot of conflicting opinions on the subject of whether Colonel Rhodes should have gone to Wakanda or not. Both sides presented valid arguments. And while I see the reason in both arguments, I must take a stand. In my opinion, a brave soldier disobeyed his orders for the greater good, not for personal gain or fame."

The Judge looked at James and said with a gentle smile, "The Court rules in favor of the Defendant James Rhodes. Case dismissed. Court adjourned."

Chapter End Notes

I know that Ellis' testimony could also have been provided by Tony but I felt that Tony would want to take a backseat at this trial, play it behind the scenes and not draw all the attention to himself. Also, such an passionate opinion coming from a former president, would be more impressive than it coming from the best friend of the defendant, who could be biased.

Next week: Tony, Pepper and Rhodey catch up.

P.S. In the previous chapter, it was indeed Shuri who was masquerading as her brother, to help Rhodes. I should have known you guys would guess that!
The Judge banged his gavel and everyone stood up at once, making a beeline for the defense table. Rhodes was immediately surrounded by officers and reporters, who seemed to have decided that the rule of no questions had ended, once the judge had sounded his verdict.

Pepper sat in her seat, grinning from ear to ear as she saw the obvious relief and joy on her friend's face. His hand was being shaken and he was also being clapped on the back with approval and kudos.

She shook her head at the irony.

Now they want to felicitate James for what he did. Figures. From rogue soldier to hero. And all thanks to...

She looked around, trying to find Tony.

Now where did he go? He was just here in front ... sitting behind James...

Her phone buzzed in her hand and she opened it, to read the new message,

"Potts. There is a huge crowd at the front of the court. Let's leave from the back. Come towards the judge's bench and take the first left and then walk towards the restrooms. I will meet you there."

Pepper stood up. She did as Tony said, passing Rhodes as she did so.

He saw her through the throng of reporters and called out, "Pepper! I am going to call you and Tony! We need to catch up!"

She nodded and James said with a broad smile, "Thank you! For everything!"
Pepper took the first left and walked down a narrow silent corridor to come to an awning with large wall length windows. In front of her, were the male and female restrooms.

She stood there and looked around, waiting for Tony.

Then the hair at the back of her neck prickled and she turned to see Ross walking slowly towards her, hands in his suit pockets, a sardonic smile on his genteel face.

"My, my, my, that was quite a show your fiance put on for the court, Miss Potts."

She replied tensely, "That wasn't a show, Secretary of State. Colonel Rhodes is a good man and didn't deserve to be court martialed."

Pepper watched warily as Ross circled her slowly, his grin widening.

"Come on, Miss Potts, you don't think that was a show? Brave noble soldier, on trial for his conduct and in swoops Iron Man, to save the day with his sparkling wit and amazing testimony. And oh, and the other witness he brought."

"Secretary of State-"

"Oh, I know it was all Stark's doing. That pretty boy lawyer of Rhodes was pulling at straws before he came along. This trial..."

He shook his head. "This had the mark of Stark all over it. And you... jettisoning off to space to rescue your man from the evil aliens... and hiding his presence on Earth from the media... who would have thought the straight-laced CEO of Stark Industries was capable of so much."

Pepper straightened herself and looked at him coolly as Ross moved closer to her.

He said softly, "You know, Miss Potts, I must admit, I underestimated you. I always figured you for a smart gal who managed to snag her playboy boss with her big blue eyes and her endless patronizing of his ego."
His grin widened as he said, "Actually, at the time, I was amazed that you had managed to do so. I mean, you certainly didn't look anything like Stark's preferred type: buxom and sexy."

Pepper stamped down on her temper, bristling at the way Ross was leering at her.

He continued musingly, "But once you became CEO and started running things... Hell! Then I could see the appeal! Even after you became a top dog honcho in Stark Industries... you kept Anthony on the straight and narrow. From mousy assistant to CEO girlfriend to Stark Industries magnate and then Tony Stark's future wife!"

Ross clapped sarcastically. "You sure cleaned up nice, Potts."

Before she could say anything, she felt a strong hand on her shoulder, squeezing it. Behind her, Tony said in a low but tense tone, "Miss Potts is where she is today, because of her ethics, her merit and her damn hard work. And she was always too good for me, Ross. Always."

Ross sighed and absently picked at his suit's lapel.

"Ah, finally one of Earth's mightiest heroes appears... tell me, Stark, do you honestly believe the bald-faced lies that you fed the court?"

Tony moved forward to her side, taking her hand.

"What lies, Ross? I told nothing but the truth about what happened and what I felt about Colonel Rhodes' behavior."

"And what about that... guest appearance from the King of Wakanda?" Ross said lazily but his eyes were focused on Tony.

"What about it? King T'Challa wanted to-"

Ross abruptly took two steps closer, his face nearly touching Tony's.
"You and me both know that the King is dead. Then how the hell did you arrange for that...that call? Was it a hologram? A recording?"

Pepper was taken aback by his statement but Tony stood his ground and said quietly, "You know nothing, Ross. That was the sovereign ruler of Wakanda, speaking up for James Rhodes. For all the good that he did-

Ross exclaimed with annoyance, "The good that he did! Colonel Rhodes disobeyed a direct order! And the smug bastard did it to my face! And you! You Stark! You came in here like a witch doctor and spun the whole trial around, with your fancy words!"

Tony said coldly, "Ross, stop spitting at me."

"You have done this before, Stark! I saw a recording of your appearance at the Senate, back in 2010! I saw how you faced down Hammer and the Senators with the same arrogance and smartass attitude!"

Tony replied fiercely, "I was just one witness and I was asked my opinion and I provided it. You lost fair and square. And you know very well, that targeting James for what happened is damn unfair! He was doing his duty!"

"Duty! What nonsense!" yelled the Secretary of State, who had turned an alarming shade of red. "He and you, obsessive gear heads with your metal suits of idiocy, violated the very Accords you signed!"

"Calm the fuck down, Ross!" said Tony tensely, subtly pushing Pepper behind him.

Ross swallowed hard, his blue eyes glittering with malice as he visibly tried to calm himself. He moved away, turning his back to them and Pepper relaxed, thinking he was going to leave.

But then he turned slightly and lifted one corner of his mouth in an evil one-sided smirk.

"Still so good at keeping up your facade of cool, Stark. You lost none of your overconfidence in space. But tell me something, how does it feel to be the only one who survived the trip back from
Pepper felt Tony's hand tighten and from the corner of her eye, noticed his face spasm with emotion. She couldn't, wouldn't take this quietly and burst out angrily, "At least Tony tried to do something, Mr. Secretary! Against impossible odds."

"Sure..." drawled Ross. "He tried! An alien warlord made Earth his batting cage for a day, destroyed most of it, disintegrated half of the population and disappeared back into space, more powerful than ever! But hey! Iron Man and the mighty Avengers tried!"

He laughed hoarsely and she squeezed Tony's hand, trying to comfort him.

"Pay the Secretary of State no mind. He's just bitter." Pepper said coldly. "For in the end, you were right, Tony."

Ross looked straight at her and said with a sneer, "What was he right about, miss CEO?"

"That the alien threat didn't stop with New York. That there was something out there waiting. Biding its time. Building its strength. And that men should not hold on to alien objects of power and evil unless they have the means to defend their planet against the forces that desire these objects to no end."

She was pleased to see that she had managed to shut Ross up, who was staring at her incredulously.

Tony nodded quietly. "Mr. Secretary of State. There's been a lot of loss and destruction. This isn't the time for us to fight among ourselves. We should be working together, healing and rebuilding ourselves. Instead of pointing fingers, we should be helping each other."

Ross straightened and shook his head.

"We don't need you Avengers anymore. For all the precious little good that you've done. As soon as I return to DC, I am going to grant all US military and security forces, the authority to shoot and kill any rogue Avenger, on sight. Starting with Steve Rogers."
Pepper gasped with outrage. "That's barbaric! They aren't serial killers or escaped convicts!"

"They are as good as those, in my book Miss Potts." Said Ross. "You may have saved James Rhodes but you can't save them all."

Tony said coldly, "Think about what you are doing, Ross..."

"I have. You people are more trouble than you are worth. All of you. The less of you that exist, the better. And..." he said maliciously, "I will issue a special set of instructions for Bruce Banner! He is to be kept alive and once captured, I'm going to have him caged and then shot like a dog!"

Tony lost his temper then. He moved closer to Ross, saying angrily, "You're taking your personal vendetta against Dr. Banner too far! He hasn't done any harm to anyone! And he's suffered a lot on his own, he was lost in space, Ross, for three years! For god's sake, have you no humanity!"

"He's a walking time bomb, Stark. And I'm going to make sure that I break the bomb... permanently."

"You are hungering for blood, Secretary of State." Pepper said coldly. "It isn't right. The rogue Avengers didn't do anything to Earth. But you are anxious to find any excuse to punish them unjustly. It just isn't right."

"I didn't ask for your opinion, Miss Potts. The government pays for the Super-Hero and Super-Being program and hence owns their asses and will do what it feels like to its former members. They must pay for their crimes."

"Ross," whispered Tony, "listen to me."

The two men locked eyes, Tony's brown ones burning with an angry intensity.

"You are doing a very wrong thing here. And I can't just stand by and watch you do it. From now on, you don't own my ass. Iron Man resigns from the U.S. government's Super-Hero program."

Pepper covered her mouth to muffle her gasp of shock. Ross just stared, standing on the balls of his
feet, his mustache twitching.

"From now on, I do not report to you or to any member of your government. I am free to do as I please. I do not need to ask for your permission, for where I can go or cannot go. And I do not need to provide you with any information on technology or research or weapons."

Ross finally spoke, "Stark, now you are an ordinary citizen, so if you interfere in state matters, you will be arrested and tried. The Avengers facility will be sold:"

"It's in my name, Ross." said Tony quietly.

"Fine! Then you will remove the government's name from its listing and will no longer receive any funding from the government." Ross said rudely.

"Don't need it. Never needed it."

"Thank you for your service, Mr. Stark." he said sardonically, "Even though it has done little good all these years."

"Thank you for having me around, Mr. Secretary. Oh and since your contract with Stark Industries is also up, I do not want to see you or your government posses anywhere around my company or my CEO. Leave us the fuck alone, Ross."

"I will, Stark, you just remember that." he looked sideways in anger, "So don't come crying to me when you get lost in space again."

Pepper flushed but kept her calm and stayed silent.

Tony on the other hand, just had to have the last word.

"Yeah, well, Miss Potts ultimately did what she had to do. She saved me. She was the hero and she did it on her own. No fucking thanks to you. So in the end, you and I are the same, Ross. Undependable and useless, couldn't save the day even though people were counting on you. And this isn't the first time you've let down a woman, isn't it? In any case, welcome to the club."
He sarcastically slow clapped, the sound echoing in the empty awning. Ross clenched his fists tightly, looking as if he was going to burst with rage.

Pepper caught Tony's arm instinctively and he said with a nod, "Run along now, Mr. Secretary. I am sure there are some innocent soldiers in another state, that need to be prosecuted unfairly."

As if it was timed, a government agent leaned out from a doorway behind Ross and said, "Sir, we need to leave in five minutes. We need to reach Washington in time for the hearing."

Ross swore something rude under his breath and Tony said gleefully, "Ah, the job of the villainous government agent is never done. How do you sleep at night, Ross?"

The Secretary of State turned and left without a backwards glance. They watched him go, Tony visibly relaxing once he was out of sight.

"You know, Pep, Thanos kept saying that he wanted to bring balance to Earth by taking half of the population away, so the rest could survive..." He sighed loudly. "Then why the hell didn't Ross get disintegrated? Where's the fairness in that?"

She took his hand and leaned on him slightly. "Forget about him, Tony. He's a bitter old man. Let's count our blessings. James is free and still a Colonel."

"And I am free too, Pepper." he said softly, his molasses brown eyes crinkling as he smiled at her. "I am a free agent. I don't work for the government anymore."

She wanted to laugh out loud, shout her thankfulness into the air and kiss her handsome fiance in joy because she was happy about something else entirely.

*My Tony is back... truly back...*

Tony tugged her hand lightly. "Let's get out of here, Pepper."
Hand in hand, they walked towards the back exit.

Chapter End Notes

I may have painted Ross as a villain but... am I totally wrong?

There's been a lot of drama and arguments, so tomorrow we are going to have some fluff.
Tony held the door open for her and Pepper quickly got into the large black limousine waiting by the curb. He then rounded the back of the car.

As the swarm of reporters surrounded them, she expected Tony to get in from the other side but he stood there by the door.

Cameras began flashing at an alarming rate and she could hear nothing but a cacophony of voices all saying, "Mr. Stark! Mr. Stark!"

He held up his hand and astonishingly, the crowd quietened. Pepper rolled down her window to hear him better.

Tony said brightly, "Hi!"

Like kids at a school yard, the crowd of reporters and cameramen said, "Hi" back, in a chorus.

"I guess you guys missed me, huh?"

Some people giggled and he continued clearly, "I know you have a lot of questions and I am willing to answer them but just not now. Not today. The boss and I have to discuss some work-related stuff."

The reporters ignored him and burst into questions. Tony turned and was going to sit in the car, when he paused mid-way.

He turned around again and said, "But I will address one question that someone just asked. Yes, it is true that Pepper Potts saved me. YES, we are still together. NO, she has not decided to instead marry Colonel Rhodes, even though he is definitely a better man than me. I hope I've answered the question satisfactorily."
The crowd burst into laughter and Tony sat down quickly and closed the door. The car began to move away and Pepper raised her eyebrows at him.

"Potts, I think questions like that, should be answered immediately." He said with a smirk, lounging back lazily against the seat.

"I'm sure you do, Tony." She said with a smirk of her own. She stretched her hand towards him because she badly wanted to touch his freshly cut hair.

He closed his eyes as she moved her fingers slowly through the feathery-soft tufts.

"Why did you change your mind, Tony?" Pepper asked softly. "I thought you wanted to avoid the media. Why did you decide to come to the trial?"

He just hummed contentedly and she rolled her eyes at him.

"Toooonnnny..." she said and he opened one eye.

"Coz I owe Rhodey that much. He saved my ass multiple times... and coz of what you said, Potts." He muttered, pushing his head against her hands.

She thought hard for a moment. "Because of what I said...what... what did I say, Tony?"

Determined to get an answer out of her now humming fiance, she lowered her hand to his jaw and began to lightly caress his beard.

Tony quivered and leaned towards her. Before Pepper could react, he lowered his head into her lap and sighed loudly.

She couldn't help but giggle as he took her hand and placed it back on his head.

She idly shifted her fingers and he whispered softly, "You said we should focus on the living, not the dead. And that I shouldn't let Thanos defeat me, not like this. You made me realize my legacy, all
that I've done, how I've changed and how... how I cannot let that purple giant take it away from me."

Tony turned his face towards her.

"You were right about Rhodey needing me, Potts. You made me see what I had to do, why I can't hide away forever. Thank you. You saved me once again."

The deep look in his chocolate brown eyes, made Pepper's heart clench with emotion. She gently pushed his hair back from his brow and didn't say anything because she didn't trust her own voice.

After a few minutes, she looked out of the window at the busy road.

"Tony, can we have lunch together before you leave for Malibu?"

He smirked at her. "I'm not going anywhere today, Potts. I'm staying at the hotel with you. I hope you don't mind me bunking with you. And I hope your room has a single bed. A small bed."

Tony winked at her suggestively but she was taken aback by his words.

"I thought'd you would go back home..."

"Not without meeting Rhodey. We need to talk. A lot. About Wakanda, Thanos and what's next."

She nodded absently, pleased that he would staying.

Then Pepper realized something.

"We?"

Tony had taken out his phone and was busy tapping into it, his head still in her lap.
"Yup. You and me are going to meet Rhodey tonight. I'm just trying to get the good Colonel to decide on the time."

"Tony..."

"I know what you are thinking. The press and the cameras won't let us have any peace. But I've got a solution for that. We are going to sneak out of our hotel incognito."

Tony sat up halfway, saying excitedly, "Think about it, Potts! We get to wear disguises and pretend to be ordinary people and roam around in a crowd! Completely undetected! At least..." he scratched his chin, "at least, I think the disguises are good enough for that..."

Pepper said softly, "Tony, that sounds fun but I can't make it, honey. I got to prepare for the Adoite Energy Conference tomorrow."

He narrowed his eyes at her as she continued, "Stark Industries is interested in the geothermal technology being showcased at the Conference. And..."

She bit her lip, not wanting to trigger any unpleasant memories for him. Tony lay back down on her lap, settling himself nicely and then raised his hand, to gently pull her lip out of her mouth.

"And?" He asked.

She struggled to retain her train of thought as he rubbed her bottom lip with his thumb.

"And David Bohanne was supposed to go to the conference. Do you remember David?"

"Oh yes! He was a former geologist from Harvard, who joined us way back in 2010."

"Well... after Thanos' attack, David was lost... and someone had to go and I volunteered because I was anyways going to be here for the trial. But since I'm new to the technology, I have to do a lot of reading up on the existing trends and features and terms etc. to make sense of it all. Because the
Board expects me to come back with some purchase recommendations."

She looked down at Tony, who was studying her thoughtfully.

Pepper said lamely, "I am sorry, Tony. I want to come with you but you know that I am an early sleeper and so I can't stay up late after meeting Rhodey and then cram all night. You go ahead and meet James. You won't be coming for the conference, so you can sleep in late and go home tomorrow, if you'd like. There's no need to wait for me."

He sat up again and leaned back against the seat, turning his head towards her.

"Potts, instead of you slaving to learn geothermal technology, you need a 'Devil Wears Prada' sort of assistant/nerd to go with you to this Conference!"

Her confusion must have shown on her face because Tony said quickly, "You need a nerd who whispers all the terms and geothermal shit in your ear, sotto voice, your own personal science-speak translator, so you can quickly understand what Stark Industries needs and what it doesn't and make better decisions.

"I agree, Tony." Pepper said patiently, "Such a science nerd would be wonderful and I would have brought one along from Malibu but my decision to attend, was very last minute. It was too late to see if anyone from the science team was suitable and could come at such short notice."

She sighed. "So I've got to do it on my own."

Then Pepper giggled as Tony quirked one of his eyebrows in a very affected manner.

"Why the look, Stark?"

"You don't have a science nerd? Erm... what about me?"

She was stupefied. "You?"
He widened his eyes at her. "Yes, Potts. I am supposed to be a technology genius. Why can't I be your nerd, your own Hermoine, so to speak."

"Tony, this is geothermal technology!"

He shrugged. "Physics, mechanics, geothermal, I can handle it. In any case Potts, I can certainly pull an all-nighter and do a lot more reading than you."

He pushed back a stray strand of hair from her face.

"You came straight from work and traveled and sat through the trial and tomorrow, you got this conference. You need to rest today. I'll do the studying for us."

She sputtered, "But Tony, then you'd have to come for the conference."

"Yes I will, Potts."

"It starts at 10 am sharp and we need to be there on time."

He winced. "Can't we arrive fashionably late?"

"Tony..."

"Okay, okay, 10 am on the dot. Yes Ma'am!" Tony smartly saluted her.

Pepper shook her head, refusing to believe what he was saying.

"Tony, you seriously want to cram all night for a conference and then attend it tomorrow, talking to scientists and CEOs for the next 3 hours? Really? I thought you hated conferences. Except the ones where you are presenting."
He cupped her cheek.

"Pepper, I haven't done anything worthwhile for the last 7 days. But let me try to do this and help you. So that you can be at ease and meet Rhodey today. I want you to be with us. Wait... don't you want me to go to the Conference with you?"

She couldn't hold back anymore. Pepper quickly pulled Tony towards her and kissed him hard, holding him still by his tie. She wound her other hand in his hair, feeling the soft mass as her lips moved over his passionately.

He kissed her back equally enthusiastically and then groaned when she stroked his tongue with hers.

His freshly cut beard was tickling her but she ignored it and loosened the tie with her fingers. Pepper opened the buttons of his shirt and slid her hand inside. She stroked his warm firm skin and Tony shuddered against her.

She let go of his mouth to nip his jaw lightly as she kept petting him and he gasped out "Holy shit Potts!"

"Language, Stark." She purred to him, her mouth moving to his ear and biting it gently.

He made a rough noise in his throat and very reluctantly, Pepper moved back.

She inspected her hair in the divider mirror. Then she leaned back in her seat, smirking at her thoroughly disheveled fiance sitting dazedly beside her.

"Potts..." Ton said reverently, taking deep breaths. "Where did that come from?"

"I wanted to do that ever since... ever since you strolled into court."

"Really?"

Pepper used her fingers to comb his fine hair back into place, smiling at him softly.
"Yes, Tony, really."

"I looked that good? No way!"

She buttoned his shirt up and straightened his tie.

"You looked damn good, Tony, but that wasn't it... I was just so damn happy to see you there."

Pepper clasped his hand tightly. "You came for this trial even though the media was going to be there. Even though you were going to be questioned about what happened on Titan. But you faced it all, Tony, just for Rhody. And you helped save him. I am so damn proud of you. And so damn thankful that I have a man like you."

Tony flushed and she couldn't help but smile. Then she said primly, "Now Mr. Stark, you will have to excuse me. I have some emails to reply to."

Pepper pulled out her Stark tablet from her bag and turned it on, trying not to laugh at the way he was pouting.

"Honey, please don't make that face. I still have work to do."

"I thought we could..." he raised his eyebrows at her mischievously, "fool around some more..."

Tony trailed his fingers along her neck, making her shiver.

But Pepper shook her head determinedly. "Tony, if you want me to come with you in the evening, you have to let me finish up my work now. I know you won't let me work through lunch, so I won't get much time before we meet Rhody."

He said strictly, "Potts! NO! You can't work through lunch! Absolutely not!"
She glanced at him pleadingly. "Then please let me work now. Please. I need to take a call and send some emails and-"

He cupped her cheek softly. "Don't worry, Potts. I'll let you work. I'll be good. I promise."

They smiled at each other and then Tony moved towards the car's window and began to look outside.

Pepper started to read her emails, one by one. Then she winced as she felt her calf twinge. She massaged the muscle slowly, trying to type at the same time.

Suddenly, the car braked and she jerked forward, nearly dropping the tablet. Luckily, Tony caught it in time. She took it from him gratefully and sat back, wincing again as this time her heel twinged in pain.

"Potts, what is the matter?" Tony murmured.

She pushed the shoe off her foot and sighed. "My feet are killing me! I've been wearing these heels for so damn long!"

He glanced downwards at her blood red Louboutins.

Pepper said softly, "They are lovely shoes but not meant for comfort or for walking-"

She stopped mid-way because Tony leaned forward and gently squeezed the back of her aching heel with his firm fingers.

"Tony, whatever are you doing?"

Then she leaned back against her seat, sighing with relief because somehow the pain disappeared.

"Potts." He said sternly, still looking at her feet, "what did Dr. Seed tell you about wearing high-heeled shoes?"
Pepper was now a little too distracted by the way his fingers were moving over her heel.

"Hmmm?"

Tony let go of her foot and she controlled her disappointment.

He looked at her and said patiently, "Didn't Dr. Seed tell you that you need to switch your shoes, that you should wear comfortable flat-soled shoes while travelling and then wear heels when you have to?"

She murmured sheepishly, "He may have mentioned something like that..."

"And didn't he also say that you should massage your feet after you wear stilettos for long hours?"

She looked at Tony incredulously and he shrugged.

"Hey, you may have forgotten what the doctor told you but I remember reading the notes that he had written and I made a mental note of what was in them."

"Why?"

He lightly trailed his hand along her calf and Pepper shuddered, feeling his touch through her stocking.

Tony looked at her, a smile playing around his lips.

"You are so good at taking care of others, Potts but so bad at taking care of yourself. So so bad... that I've got to do it for you."

"I am sorry, Mr. Stark, that you have do so..." she whispered playfully, biting her lip at the tender look in his eyes.
"The next time, I catch you with your feet aching thanks to deadly heels like these, Miss Potts..." Tony said softly, "I am going to hack into the Stark servers and block your access."

"Tony! You wouldn't dare!"

"I would, Potts, if you keep this up... now this foot is paining, the other one's going to start soon, so... nothing to dooo but..."

Then Pepper squeaked with astonishment as Tony lifted both her feet neatly, twisting her in her seat, so he could place them on his thighs.

"Tony!"

"Relax, boss." He drawled out, taking out her other shoe and placing it on the car floor. "I've got this. You just lie back. Here take this and put it behind you."

He handed her a small pillow and she placed it behind her, against the side of the door and leaned back, watching Tony as he seemed to be counting her toes.

"I can assure you, Mr. Stark, I have ten toes." Pepper said, mischievously wriggling them.

He lifted his head and said sternly, "Close your eyes, Potts."

"But Tony!"

"I want you to relax. So close those big blue eyes of yours."

She did so and then sighed loudly as she felt Tony catch her toes of one foot and gently stretch them upwards. Then he pressed his thumb against the underside of the same foot.

Pepper took a deep breath and completely relaxed as he caught the bridge of both her feet at the same time and began to squeeze gently.
"Tooonnyyyy..." she purred and he chuckled.

"I take it someone likes my massage."

"Yes..."

The gentle hum of the AC, the soft pillow behind her head and the tender way Tony massaged her feet, was making Pepper boneless.

She was about to drift off to sleep, when she heard her phone ring. Pepper was going to sit up but before she could, Tony picked up the call.

"Miss Potts phone, how may I help you?" He intoned sweetly and she covered her mouth to muffle her giggle.

Tony listened to the voice on the phone, narrowing his eyes. "You are Mr. Orville from Stark Industries."

Pepper nodded and stretched her hand out to take her phone but Tony didn't give it to her. Idly running his fingers over her ankle, he asked, "What is this about, Mr. Orville?"

He listened patiently and then said, "One moment, please."

He covered the receiver of the phone and said quietly, "Potts, I am going to let you take the call only because this Orville is being damn insistent but I want you to lie back and talk, so I can continue with my massage. And you only get five minutes. Is that clear?"

"So masterful..." Pepper whispered, feeling a shiver pass through her as Tony's dark eyes gazed into hers sternly.

"You have no idea, Potts, just how masterful I can be..." he whispered back sultrily, smirking at her. "Now listen to your masseuse and lie back."
She was highly intrigued by his words but did as he said and then took the phone.

"Mr. Orville, its Virginia. Please go ahead."

The head accountant began to speak about the latest budget meeting and some concerns from the staff and for a while. Pepper listened.

Then she gasped loudly as she felt Tony's hand on her calf, squeezing it gently. With his other hand, he gently pushed her foot forward away from her leg and she felt pinpricks of sensation move through the limb.

"What's that, Mr. Orville? Nothing, no, I just..." she stopped talking as Tony did the same to her other leg.

Pepper closed her eyes, humming to herself as she let Orville drone on while Tony massaged her feet tenderly and thoroughly.

"Don't you dare stop, Stark."

"Wouldn't dream of it, boss lady."

Chapter End Notes

Finally some fluff. Next week, our heroes catch up... also fluffy.

Here's the article I referred to, for the foot massage.
Chapter Notes

This weekend, a loong fluffy chapter.
Next week, Tony and Rhodey talk about the Avengers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony took Pepper's hand as they crossed the street heading towards Seccombe Lake Park, which was a short walk from their hotel. They reached the other side and began to walk along the pavement.

Pepper tugged on his hand lightly and said in a whisper, "Honey, this is amazing! We just walked by that horde of reporters and paparazzi! And now, we're walking down a busy street and blending right in! No one knows us at all!"

He chuckled at her disbelief. The media at the trial had spread the news that Tony Stark was alive and present. So even more reporters and news crews from around the country, had poured into San Bernardino in droves.

To avoid detection and meet Rhodey peacefully, Friday and him had come up with simple disguises, perfect for traveling in plain sight.

Initially Pepper had been skeptical that they could fool the press who were roaming outside their hotel. But she had taken one look at Tony in his disguise and her doubts had lessened.

Then five minutes ago, they had exited the hotel from the side entrance casually and crossed the main entrance, passing at least a dozen prowling reporters and cameramen. And no one had even given them a second glance.

"I told you, Pep." He said smugly, looping his hand around her waist, hugging her to him. "Today you and me are just two ordinary people."
She snorted. "Speak for yourself, Mr. Stark. Your appearance certainly isn't ordinary."

Tony smirked as Pepper said mirthfully, "A fake long beard, red plaid full-sleeved shirt and skinny jeans with suspenders! Suspenders! And..."

She rolled her eyes at him. "You just had to wear your trainers, didn't you, Tony?"

"You haven't mentioned my crowning glory?" He said, touching the back of his head lightly.

"Oh yes!" Pepper drawled. "A pin-on man bun! Of all the hairpieces to choose from... you had to choose a fake man bun!"

"It was a long wave of hair but you're just envious that I could tie it up in a neat bun, Potts."

"Honey, that's fake hair. I'll be impressed when you do it with real hair."

"I'm just trying to keep up with today's trend. You know, the hairy, strong, silent lumberjack type of men you see in magazines nowadays."

Then he tugged on his suspenders lightly. "Besides I like wearing these!"

Pepper nuzzled him, whispering in his ear, "I love the lumberjack look on you, Stark. But I must confess, I do not like you having more hair than me."

He laughed loudly at that. They followed the crowd of people down the pavement, who all seemed to be heading towards the park.

Together they walked down the gentle slope of a grassy hill. Tony cast an appreciative look at her sideways.

"Pep, you look pretty cute yourself. I hope no one thinks I'm your dad or older brother!"
To his surprise, she didn't laugh but clasped his hand and slowed down.

"Tony... I... I want to ask you something... something silly, something..."

He kept absolutely quiet, waiting patiently.

Pepper is insecure about something. That rarely happens. What's more, she's actually going to admit her insecurity. People think that because I'm Iron Man, I'm the tough one who always hides his feelings. I don't hide them, I just... reveal them in unexpected ways... But...

He studied his fiance, biting her lip nervously, her blue eyes clouded with emotion.

Pepper's disguise was elegantly simple. Faded denim jeans, a pink Polo t-shirt and sneakers, with her hair tied loosely in a ponytail and a blue bandanna around her neck. She had also slightly darkened the smattering of freckles along her nose with makeup, giving her an charmingly impish but fresh-faced look.

The real iron person, who keeps things bottled up, who stomps down on her feelings hard and puts on this cool facade, is Pepper... and she's been doing it for years! In her own words, she had feelings for me for a long time but only the threat of my dying made her impulsively admit it... and she had blurted out that my suits are distractions only because she was flustered by the way I was behaving after New York. And now... I left Earth to fight Thanos, flying off to my own doom... I made her go through hell but she only let it out when she saw me drinking...

He cupped her cheek. "What is it, Pepper? Tell me please."

"It's really stupid, Tony."

"Pepper. Tell. Me."

"Well... my disguise isn't really a disguise. I exchanged my business suit for casual clothes, something which I rarely wear, especially in public. But it seems to have fooled the press remarkably. Which... which alarms me... do I seem that uptight and rigid?"
"Peppppper..."

"Tony, I know what's written about me in gossip mags and I know what people think about me and never say openly... But I never thought that a simple change of clothes would make me unrecognizable. That I am such a... a Suit, to put it mildly."

"Sweetheart..." Tony said slowly. "What do people think about you and never say? And why do you care about gossip mags? Wait..." he said suddenly angrily, "Where is this coming from? Are you thinking about what that shit-head Ross said?"

Pepper looked at him, the corners of her mouth lifting sadly.

"I know that I come across as uptight and strict and a control freak. I'm a corporate ice queen and was devious enough to take your company away from you. I got balls of steel and will stomp all over anyone to get what I want. Ross..."

She smiled wryly, "Ross was so damn confused. He couldn't understand how I managed to fool you into falling for me, when I was never good enough to compete with the good-looking showgirls and models that you preferred."

"Ross is a dickwad and his opinion is worth dickshit."

"Tony..."

"Yes, he is and the people who write the gossip mags are just being mean girls. You aren't uptight or a control freak and you didn't take my company away from me!"

Pepper arched an eyebrow at him. "Are you saying that only women work in gossip mags and are mean on purpose?"

"Erm... no, I meant they are mean girls in the general sense... they are being catty and opinionated, just to sell magazines, wait... forget that part!"
Tony took both her hands and looked deep into her eyes.

"Pepper, you are a damn good CEO and that does not mean that you are uptight or a control freak or uncaring. You know, better than I do, that society tends to be hypocritical in the way corporate women are portrayed. Men are tough but fair and powerful businessmen... women..."

He sighed. "Women get the raw end of the deal. They are portrayed as uncaring bitches. But Pepper... you are tough when you need to be... and you are do what you have to do, when it has to be done. That's why you are a much better CEO than I ever was."

"You did the best you could, Tony. Before I came along, you were running the company on your own."

"I didn't notice that my mentor and my CFO was selling my weapons to the wrong people." Tony said bluntly. "I trusted Stane too much, I hated to look at reports or the accounts, I only wanted to work in R&D, I never came for meetings, I pissed the Board off so many many times..."

Pepper said softly, "Honey, you weren't as bad as you are making yourself out to be."

"But I wasn't good either. And people don't see how much good you do. Pepper, you manage the hectic job of being the CEO of Stark Industries and the Chairperson of the Stark Charity Board at the same time. The media ignores all the charity work that Stark Industries sponsors and promotes, all the donations and drives that you oversee personally, all the company volunteer work and groups that you support. That's something that no one gets to see because you are modest and you don't make it about you, you make it about the charity or the people concerned. You don't want to publicize your involvement."

He smiled. "The media and the public do not know you. They just assume things about you and use a stereotype. Which is damn far away from how you really are, Pepper."

She clasped his shoulders and leaned towards him. "I know, Tony, I am just being silly. It doesn't matter what I wear or what people think. As long as... as long as you know the real me, that's all that matters."

Tony tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. They had reached the park's entrance, the colorful stalls and rides of the fair clearly visible now.
"Pepper, you are more than just a suit, you know that right? It is just a distraction, from the real you."

She arched her eyebrows incredulously. "Okay firstly, that doesn't make much sense and secondly, are you just rephrasing what I said to you once... about your suits being a distraction?"

He shrugged and she laughed girlishly, her blue eyes shining in the dim light of the street lamps.

"It was a great speech, Pep... another thing about you, you are so good with words and inspiring people. No wonder Stark employees look up to you. And I do too."

Pepper flushed charmingly and they continued walking, her hand in his.

Tony could see a small smile playing around her lips and lightly nudged her. "Why the secret smile, Potts?"

"So I look cute in this outfit?" she murmured softly.

"Yeah, you look like an all-American sweetheart to me... like Molly Ringwald in Pretty in Pink or Jennifer Jason Leigh in She's All That..."

"Tony!" Pepper stopped and shook her head at him, her eyes full of laughter. "Those are teenagers! I don't look that young!"

"You do so, ma'am." He said firmly, tapping her nose.

She sighed and asked quickly, "If I look cute in jeans, then what do I look like in a suit?"

He leaned towards her and whispered, "All hawt and bossy... strutting around taller than everyone in those killer heels... I love watching you at work... and you know that I love working under you..."

Tony waggled his eyebrows at her suggestively and she giggled.
Then Pepper wound her arms around his neck and whispered softly, "Tony Stark, you are adorable... I am so lucky to have a man like you..."

"I am the lucky one, Pep... you are the best thing that ever happened to me. I love you, honey."

He closed his eyes, touching his lips to hers and she sighed against his mouth. Then Tony kissed her, his hands stroking her soft back.

He kissed her sweetly and slowly, taking his time to enjoy the taste of her lips, her familiar scent filling his nostrils as her body softened against his.

Tony deepened the kiss, uncaring that they were in public and slid his tongue against hers. Pepper gasped lightly and he tightened his grip on her.

He let go of her mouth but nibbled on her bottom lip, drawing the soft flesh into his mouth.

She pressed herself against him even more and he nuzzled her face with his own.

Then he felt a gentle tap on his shoulder and heard Rhodey say dryly, "Hey buddy, that's Iron Man's girl and if my friend catches you smooching her, he's going to be damn mad!"

Pepper squeaked and Tony lifted his head but didn't let go of her. He narrowed his eyes at James.

"Platypus, why the hell do you always interrupt me and Pepper, when we are kissing?"

His friend peered curiously at him. "Dear God! Tony, is that really you underneath all that hair?"

He laughed and turned. "Yes, Rhodes, it's me. How do you like my disguise?" he asked, pulling on his suspenders and preening.

James looked at him critically. "You look like an elderly craft beer maker. Or a hippie Amish man."
Pepper burst into a fit of giggles and Tony scowled. "I'll have you know this is the latest in style."

Rhodes snorted. "In style, sure, for someone 30 years younger and with better legs than yours!"

"Excuse me! I have lovely, muscular, manly legs. Pepper, tell him."

"Don't put her on the spot, Tony. You got skinny chicken-ass legs and you know it. Own it, brother."

"Oh yeah, what about your legs?"

"What about my legs? I do squats and run 6 miles everyday. What do you do, Tin Man? Hammer away at your suit?"

Tony couldn't help but smile at the familiar teasing exchange between him and Rhodes.

"Oh, I've really missed you, Platypus! Come here!"

He quickly pulled Rhodey into a hug. His friend tolerated the contact for two seconds before squirming out of his hold.

"Alright, alright, I missed you too, Tony Stank."

"Rhodey, I told you never to use that nickname again!"

"Make me, tough guy!"

"Oh yeah? How about we settle this like men?" Tony pointed at the stalls before them. "A game of skill, you can choose the game. Winner, that's me, never has to hear the 'Tony Stank' nickname again!"
Rhodey scratched his neck. "A game? Tony, I wanted to talk about Wakanda and what's next and..."

He looked at Rhodey appealingly. "Just one game, James... please... come on, Pepper's here too. She's taking time off her busy CEO schedule to spend some time with us. When was the last time we just relaxed, the three of us together?"

Pepper said softly, "Yes James. Just one game and then we'll talk."

"Over chilli dogs." said Tony eagerly and James nodded quickly as well.

She grimaced and said, "Alright. But I'll have something healthy."

"Boring!" He and Rhodes said in a chorus and then high-fived each other.

Tony placed one hand around Rhodey's shoulder and the other around Pepper's. He said in an exaggerated drawl, "Dudes, let's go have some fun."

Two hours later, they headed towards the picturesque food court at one corner of the fair, arms full of soft toys. Tony and Rhodes had first played a game of darts, where Rhodes had won. Tony had demanded a rematch, this time the game was ring toss. One game led to another and then another and they had lost track of time, moving between the stalls.

At a shooting hoops game, Tony had managed to win a small blue teddy bear for Pepper. Then she had trumped him by playing a round of Shoot-The-Duck and had won a large, fluffy pink elephant, which she had triumphantly handed it over to him.

As they moved through the tables, Rhodes gave away most of the soft toys to kids nearby. Tony was too taken with his elephant and was happy that most kids seemed to be giving him a wide berth.

They found an empty picnic table, a little away from the others and sat down gladly. Then began an animated discussion on what to eat, with Tony and Rhodey enthusiastically urging Pepper to have a jumbo-sized chilli dog along with them. But she held fast to her steely resolve to have something healthy and wanted steamed chicken dimsums.
Rhodey took everything down and left them alone to place the order.

Pepper smiled at Tony and he smiled back.

"Did you have fun, Pepper?"

"I did, Tony, I actually needed this." She sighed, looking around. "Fresh air, a change of scene..."

"A chance to relax..."

"Yes... and it was all possible because I have my very own science nerd coming to the conference with me."

She narrowed her eyes at him mock-sternly. "I hope you aren't going to be too tired after all this, to cram for tomorrow."

"No way! When we go back to the hotel, I'll have 3 or 4 cups of espresso and I'll start studying immediately!"

"Tony, please do not drink too much coffee. I do not want you to stay up the entire night, okay, honey?"

"Sure, Pep, don't worry. I will wake up at 10 am." He raised his hand solemnly. "Scout's honor."

"If I recall correctly, you never were a scout, Tony."

"I started as one... and then got kicked out for being a brat during a camping trip..." he said sheepishly.

Pepper giggled and he leaned towards her, intending to kiss her, when a small voice said, "Excuse me, Mister?"
Tony turned to see a little girl standing by his side of the bench. She couldn't have been more than 6 or 7 years old, with ash blonde hair and chubby pink cheeks. But it was her wide green eyes, shining like green grass under the sun, that captivated him,

He skidded along the bench towards her, bending down and she backed away.

"Hey, hey, it's alright, don't be scared."

She kept those big eyes trained on him, nervously biting her thumb between her rosebud lips.

Pepper said gently, "Don't be scared, little girl. What's the matter?"

The little girl took her thumb out of her mouth and said in a high hesitant voice, "I wanted... I wanted to ask... you something..."

"Go ahead."

"From... from where did you get that?" she said, pointing at the elephant lying on the table.

Tony smiled. "My fiance won it for me. At the hoops stall."

Something inside him clenched when the little girl's lip quivered and she lowered her jade-green gaze.

"Oh... you won it. Never mind then. Thank... thank you, Mister."

She turned away and he reached out quickly, tapping her shoulder.

"Hey! Hey, do you want it?" Tony asked instinctively.
She tilted her head and looked at him sadly. "I... I wanted one like it... but I thought I could buy it... I can't play hoops... I am too small..."

He held out a hand. "What's your name? I'm Tony."

The little girl hesitantly extended her own hand, lightly touched his and immediately pulled it back. "My name is Maria."

He felt his chest constrict with feeling at her whispered name.

*My mother's name...*

Tony said out loud. "That's such a nice name."

"Thank you."

He picked up the pink elephant and held it out to her.

"Here, Maria. Why don't you take it?"

She backed away, shaking her head but her eyes remained glued to the elephant.

"Come on. You can have it." Tony said softly. "I'm a little too old for elephants. And he needs a nice girl like you, to take care of him."

"She..." Maria whispered, a small smile on her face. "It's a she."

"My mistake. He pushed the elephant towards her and she touched its soft pink fur reverently.

"It is so soft..." she whispered with wonder, her green eyes lighting up with joy.
"Yes." Tony whispered, reaching out to pat her soft brown head. "So soft."

Maria hugged the elephant tightly. "Are you sure about this, Mister Tony?"

"Yes, I am. She loves you already."

The little girl smiled at him and he felt his eyes moisten as he realized something.

_She looks just like Peter did, when I told him he could have the Stark Spidey suit. That same aura of childish happiness. So pure and simple. And thankful._

Someone called out, "Maria!" and the little girl whispered, "Thanks" and ran off into the distance.

Tony turned back towards Pepper, who had a soft smile on her face.

"That was so sweet of you. Giving that little girl, your elephant."

"Honey, when we have kids, would you prefer a boy or a girl?" He asked directly, trying to catch her off guard.

It worked for once. Pepper blinked hard and straightened.

_Oh no, I'm not going to let you go blank and distant on me. I'm on to you, Potts._

He caught her hands and stroked the back of one with his thumb.

"I'll confess, initially... I wanted a boy. Someone to follow me around the lab and we could gush about technology and video games and comics."
Pepper just looked at him wide-eyed, so he continued babbling.

"But actually, I was scared. What would I do with a girl? I mean... all I know how to do with women is flirt with them. And ever since I realized I loved you and you were perfect for me, I stopped flirting. So I am kind of rusty."

"Really..." she murmured thoughtfully.

Tony waggled his finger at her. "Don't try to distract me, Potts. Where was I? Oh yes, a girl... I was terrified that she would ask me difficult questions and I wouldn't be able to answer them."

Pepper tilted her head to one side, her blue eyes soft on him. "What sort of questions, Tony?"

"Questions about make-up, clothes, female body parts... and the most dreadful subject of them all... boys..."

She burst into laughter and he grinned.

"Seriously Potts, I was scared! Girls are delicate and fine and sweet and sassy and they grow up into women... and I am not good around women."

"Wait, wait..." Pepper said with a soft laugh. "You aren't good with women?"

"I am good at bedding them... and at disappointing them.", he said slowly with a sigh, "When I would fight with my father, my mother would always watch me with the saddest look in her eyes. A look of hurt and pleading, to give way, to control my temper, to let the argument go. But I wouldn't. The last time I saw them, I had been arguing with my father again. And I had known my mother was saddened by me, once again. But she still kissed me goodbye... and whispered to me... that she loved me..."

He felt Pepper cover his hand with her own and looked at her, his lips curving.

"One day, I was reliving this memory and then it hit me... I shouldn't be scared of having a daughter... coz if I screw up, if I fight with her, if I let her down... she'd love me enough to forgive
me... just like my mother and her mother always do... the only ones who loved me, cared enough to wait for me to come back and forgive me..."

Tony cupped Pepper's cheek and said softly, "Why shouldn't I want a little red-haired angel, my own little girl... who I could teach science to... and build her a treecastle of her own... and have make-believe high tea with her... and tell her how useless boys are..."

Pepper cleared her throat and said gently, "I'm getting the impression that if we had a baby girl... she'd have you wrapped around her little finger, Stark..."

"And I'd have it no other way, Potts... just think about it, baby girl Morganna Stark..."

"Tony! You are still stuck on the name, Morgan!"

He shrugged. "I am open to suggestions, Pepper..."

"How about Jamie?"

"Nah, too boyish."

"Diana?"

"Boring!"

"Rebecca?"

"Too biblical."

Pepper rolled her eyes at him and he said stubbornly, "Morganna sounds perfect."

"Perfect for what? Who is Morganna?" said Rhodey, startling them both.
"Nothing. Just something... never mind..." said Pepper evasively, much to Tony's annoyance.

But he let the subject go, determined to bring it up another time.

Rhodes set the trays of hot food down and for some time, they ate quietly and hungrily. When they were done and the table was cleared, James finished his beer and set his glass down.

Chapter End Notes

I was really conflicted on whether to include Pepper's insecurity or not. On one hand, I felt it was very sexist to show someone like Pepper be insecure about the way she appeared in public. On the other hand, she is human and it is very human to feel insecure, especially when you are being judged differently because you are a woman.
Sorry for taking such a long break from this fic. This is a long chapter to make up for being absent for two weeks. It also has Tony and Rhodey catching up, so it has to be long.

"First things first. Tony, how the hell did T'Challa show up in that phone call, when he is dead?"

Pepper gasped. "Oh my! Tony, is this true?"

Tony said slowly, "Erm... well... Princess Shuri used a combination of archive videos of T'Challa giving speeches, to come up with a suitable holographic image and then she used a voice modulator to speak for him."

He flushed at the way Rhodey and Pepper were looking at him.

"Tony, that was perjury!"

"No, Rhodey, it wasn't because the Princess never swore an oath. I was under oath and I placed the call and then she spoke. She was never under oath directly, so it wasn't that the Princess lied to the court about her identity."

Pepper shook her head at him and Rhodes said, "I knew you'd find some way to wrangle out of this, Stark."

"Well, what was I supposed to do? Ross was baying for your blood! I knew if T'Challa spoke, it would impress the court! But Bruce told me that he had died. I didn't want to reveal that the monarch of Wakanda was dead and force the Princess to deal with the U.S government converging on her, for their own selfish purposes. I was just trying to save you, Rhodey!"
"I know, Tony." His friend said quietly. "I know and I'm sorry if I sound ungrateful. It's just..." he sighed. "So much has happened and I came back here, thinking I had made my peace with it and hoping to find you guys but..."

"You can't help but think over and over again, how you lost the fight, what you should have done differently. You keep trying to make sense of it all."

"Exactly, Tony! It haunts me!"

He placed his hand on Rhodey's shoulder. "Believe me, Rhodes. I get it. I was so destroyed after the fight with Thanos and so damn guilty! Why the hell did I survive? Imagine, I was willing to languish in an alien prison because I felt that I deserved it, that I shouldn't have lived."

Pepper stroked his hair and he looked at her, smiling. "Until my faithful CEO decided to save me."

Rhodes looked at her. "Pepper, when I heard that in court, I was dying of curiosity. Please tell me everything!"

With some coaxing from Tony, Pepper began to relate how she rescued him from prison with the help of the Ravagers. At the end of her tale, Rhodes whistled low with appreciation.

"Holy shit, Pepper!"

"You should have seen her, Platypus..." Tony added proudly. "She strode in, guns blazing with this sexy leather outfit and helmet! And pow! Pow! Head shot here, chest shot there! Aliens falling down like bowling pins! She was so damn quick on her feet!"

"Tony..." murmured Pepper, turning pink at the ears. "It wasn't that exciting."

"Beg to differ, Potts! You even remembered the Stark transponders and tracked my signal! And you adapted to their alien technology so quickly! And the gunfights! They were straight out of a pulp space science novel! Except this time, the woman saves the spaceman."

"Which never happens, Pep." Said Rhodes dryly.
Tony leaned towards her and kissed the side of her temple softly.

"You were amazing, sweetheart. Space kicked my ass so many times but you owned it in your first trip!"

She turned her face towards him and pressed her lips to his lightly.

Tony growled, deepening the kiss as Pepper wound her arms around his neck. Then they heard a throat being cleared loudly and separated sheepishly.

"You two and your PDA." Said Rhodey wryly but he had a wide grin on his face.

"Platypus, we got to find you a woman."

"All the good ones are taken, Tony. Besides, I don't have time for a woman."

"Nonsense, James. You have to make time for yourself."

Rhodes shook his head dismissively and Tony caught Pepper's eye.

We have got to set Rhodey up with someone! He needs some good loving care!

He tried to telegraph his thoughts to her and she seemed to understand, smiling quickly at him before looking back at James, who was regarding them both suspiciously.

"I do not like the way you are looking at each other but I have more pressing questions. Tony, I heard you resigned from the government Avengers initiative."

"Yes, I did. I was tired of listening to Ross and his idiotic threats. Plus, he pissed me off with the needless shoot-to-kill order against Steve and the others. That was not necessary! And to top it all, he's determined to imprison Banner!"
Rhodey nodded and said quietly, "I heard about it from my commanding officer. But Steve and I predicted as much. Public opinion about the government has gone downhill, seeing how they were unable to handle the alien threat. So Ross is looking for any easy targets to publicly destroy, in order to prove that the military is on top of things. He sees threats where there aren't. After the trial, I told Rogers, Natasha and others of the situation and they won't be coming to the States for sometime. They should be safe in Wakanda. Ross has no reach there."

"How do you talk to them? Through Morse Code?"

James laughed loudly. "No way, Stark! I know that's how you and your Science Bro, Banner, talk to each other But the others and I..."

He pulled out something from his jeans and placed it on the table. Tony saw with a jolt that it was a simple Nokia flip phone, just like the one Steve had given him. Rhodey continued, "These operate with SIMS that are on this fake GSM network set up by Princess Shuri."

"That girl is damn smart."

"Oh hell yes! You should see their armory! The weapons, Tony! And the body-dynamic skeletal suits infused with Vibranium and something else, I can't explain it but you should try one on! Somehow they fit the wearer immediately and the suit connects to all the electronic devices you have on you! Wakanda really surprised me! The advancement in technology, the friendly happy people who are blessed in industry and natural wealth..."

"Bruce said it was a utopia, a land like no other..." Tony murmured softly.

James nodded. "Yes it is... and it was a safe haven for Steve and all, these past two years. A peaceful haven. They have been sneaking into Europe and Asia from time to time, doing some mercenary missions undercover, just to keep themselves active. So how much did Banner tell you about the fight in Wakanda?"

Tony repeated whatever Bruce had told him. At the end of it, Rhodey just quietly stared into the distance while Pepper looked at him in horror.
"The young girl, the one from Sokovia, whose brother died, the one whom the Vision was in love with... she had to kill him? With her own hands? In order to destroy the Stone??"

"Yeah, Pepper." Rhodey said grimly. "The extraction couldn't take place in time, so the Vision... he pleaded with Wanda to kill him then and there. It was horrible to witness... the poor brave soul..."

Pepper looked away and Rhodey asked, "Tony, did Bruce tell you about Thor?"

"He didn't but I knew that Thor was travelling to Earth and I am glad that he reached.... even if his plan didn't work out..."

"What!" Rhodey seemed confused. "How'd you know about Thor's plan?"

"When we... Peter, Strange and I were on Titan... we met up with three members of the Guardians of the Galaxy..."

"Oh!"

"Their leader, a human, a man from Missouri... named Quill... he was mighty irritated that two of his teammates weren't helping him find Gamora, instead they were off with some damn handsome god from Asgard, to build a weapon that would kill Thanos."

"You met Peter Quill... but you were the only survivor from Titan."

Tony heard those words echo in his head and shook it slowly to clear it. He nodded and Rhodey continued sadly, "So the Racoon's dark prediction was correct."

"What prediction, James?" asked Pepper, placing her hand on Rhodey's shoulder.

Rhodes sighed loudly. "Well, there were 6 members of the Guardians. Tony says three died on Titan..."
"Gamora... Thanos' daughter... he kidnapped her to find an Infinity Stone. The Soul Stone. And then he killed her."

"So four died in space. And two came to Earth with Thor. And after the snap, one of them, a weird living tree-like being died. So all that's left of the Guardians is the Raccoon... shit... it kept saying that all its friends were dead. That they wouldn't leave him alone for so long on Earth, that they would have come for him, if they were still alive."

Pepper said softly, "When you say Raccoon... that's its nickname? Is it a... human? An alien?"

Rhodey chuckled loudly. "I am afraid not, Pepper. It is an actual talking raccoon. It walks upright like a man, has one of the foulest mouths I've ever heard and has a real mean streak! But it is a demolition and weapons expert! It can build a killing instrument out of thin air! And it bites!"

Pepper opened her mouth and then shut it promptly.

Tony smiled.

"Hey Pepper, you shouldn't be so shocked. Your space pirates were also weird beings. I distinctly remember seeing a red lobster among them, that scared the living heck out of me!"

"You mean Krugarr..." She smiled. "Yeah, he was a real smartass."

"Not to mention your disco ball-head friend."

"Tony." She said pointedly.

"Sorry. Was his name Martinex?"

"Yes. He is the first officer of the Starkar Ravager clan. But James, did this Raccoon... bite someone?"

"Yes." said Rhodey evasively. "It did. It is a real stickler for personal space and someone got a little
too close for its liking."

Tony said worriedly, "I hope Banner stays far away from it. I shudder to think what would happen if he got bitten... you know he has problems with his temper."

Rhodey looked at him and said quietly, "Tony, unfortunately or fortunately, Bruce does not have any more problems with his temper. His 'green friend' hasn't come out since he was in space. The worst thing is that Bruce has no mental peace. He doesn't want the Hulk to come back but he's feeling guilty for being useless that he couldn't help with fighting Thanos."

"Oh no, Bruce... shit.... I need to talk to him! I want to help him with this!"

"Actually Tony, that's what I wanted to talk about." He looked at him directly. "Just hear me out, alright? Then you can let me know what you think."

He smiled, aware of what Rhodey was going to say.

"So Tony... I know what Steve did to you in Siberia. I know that it was hard on you, you were let down by him and... even Natasha and Clint took his side and fought you. Hell, things have been strained for a long time. But... the truth is, Tony... they need you. We need you, buddy. We need to stand together. Coz we are all the Earth has left."

"Okay."

Rhodey said in anguish, "The Guardians are all gone with the exception of the Raccoon. Who does nothing but wander around the palace, drinking and swearing. The newer Avengers, the Falcon, Wanda, the Vision..."

"Peter..." Tony whispered.

Rhodey looked at him and he said softly, "I made the Kid, an Avenger, before we stepped on Titan. He always wanted to be one."

Tony felt Pepper's hand clutch his in comfort and he took a deep breath. "Please continue, Platypus."
"Well... the newer Avengers, they are all gone too."

"Dr. Strange as well."

"The magician? Crap... Tony, do you remember the skinny, scruffy guy who was with Steve in Berlin? The man who could change size? He grew into this giant and the Spider Kid..."

"Took him down with his webbing like in the Return of The Jedi... yeah... what was his name? Sean, Seamus..."

"Scott. Scott Lang. A former burglar. Also known as the Ant Man because of his ability to manipulate space and size. Well, he was on house arrest after Berlin, so Ross' team went to check on him after the snap. They think he survived the snap because we didn't find any... physical evidence to the contrary, if you catch my drift. And he's still got his tracking bracelet on. But it's weird, he... he's just disappeared off the face of the Earth."

"If his bracelet is on, then why can't you find out where he is?"

Rhodey shrugged. "We can't pinpoint the geographical location that he's at. All we know is that the bracelet is active... somewhere off the map."

Pepper said thoughtfully, "Could he have escaped into deep space? Tony, Strange and Peter, they all had Stark transponders. When I tried to track them from Earth, I couldn't find their location. But when I was in space, the Ravagers used their tracking program and could trace the signal because they were doing so from within deep space itself."

Tony was dumbstruck on her logic, then he took one look at Rhodey and burst into laughter at his friend's expression of awe.

"Pepper.. that's a great point." He said in wonder. "Scott could have done just that and it does explain why he seems untraceable. Thank you!"

Tony grinned at her. "Honey, if you ever get mad at me, please don't go and join Ross' team... with someone like you on his side, he would be unstoppable."
Pepper said heatedly, "I would never help someone like Ross out. His bloodthirsty attitude disgusts me. Plus, he was willing to let you die in space! I'll never forgive him for that!"

Tony lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles softly.

"I am so grateful to have someone like you on my side, to come after me, to rescue me, kick space alien butt for me...." Then he whispered in her ear, "Tend to my wounds afterwards and make love to me oh so carefully..."

She blushed deeply and he kissed her cheek, cradling her hand in his.

"Yeah..." said Rhodey. "You guys... you still have each other... you are lucky... not to lose one another. Clint... what happened to him is rough."

"What happened to Clint?" asked Pepper with concern but cold dread filled Tony.

Rhodey said grimly, "He lost his entire family in the snap, in front of his own eyes, his wife and three kids."

Pepper exclaimed in sadness. Tony sighed and rubbed his eyes.

"Fuck... Barton lost his Laura and his rugrats... oh my god..." then he asked, "Is Clint still under house arrest? How is he holding up? Can I go see him?"

"That's the thing, Tony. He... he beat up the military security team who were in charge of guarding him and escaped. Somehow Barton managed to take off his tracking bracelet and stick it on a passing truck. Ross's team traveled over half of America, following the false trail. And by the time they realized the truth, Barton had disappeared. A man matching his description, was sighted in London airport, taking a flight to Japan. But the Japanese authorities couldn't find him."

"Shit! Clint must have just wanted to get away!"
"Yeah. According to his security detail, he was a model prisoner, happy as long as his wife and kids were with him. But after they were gone, Barton just snapped... and he was a highly trained S.H.I.E.L.D operative, with numerous covert mission experience under his belt, so it would be easy for him to go underground and disappear. Banner and Natasha are trying to find him using all their pooled resources, but they have had no luck so far."

Tony asked quietly, "How is Natasha?"

Rhodey shrugged. "Hey man, can you ever tell with her? You know Romanoff is a very closed book. She hides her grief very well but when we learnt about Barton, her control on her emotions have slipped a bit. She seems to be saddened that he hasn't tried to contact her. It is a pity because she was the most together before she learnt about Barton and was trying to pull Rogers out of his depression."

"Depression? Steve? What?!!"

"Yeah... the Captain tried to pretend that he was alright but... he's shaken, Tony... he doesn't sleep, he doesn't eat properly, avoids all company... thank god, he's not a drinker. But he keeps to himself, rebuilding defenses and land destroyed in the battle. He barely speaks and... he's clearly mourning Barnes and Wilson. Rogers has the look of a soldier who has lost too many people from one too many wars. He needs you to remind him how to get back on his feet, to remind him of his sense of purpose."

"Me?" Tony was shocked. "What can I do?"

Rhodes smiled wryly at him.

"Tony, you may have suffered the most out of all the Avengers, in this battle with Thanos. But yet believe me, you seem to have recovered the most. I was scared I'd come back and find you in your basement-cave, depressed and drinking heavily."

Tony flushed. He thought hard for a moment and realized that he couldn't lie to his oldest friend.

"Actually Rhodes, I... I was depressed and drinking... as early as today morning, to be precise. And I have been drinking... since last week... since Pepper and I returned from space."
He noticed Pepper's mouth tighten with sadness as Rhodes widened his eyes in shock.

"Tony! What the hell, man! Drinking! Oh no, buddy, no!"

"I know, Rhodes. But I felt so damn guilty! We had a good plan which should have worked! Yet Thanos won! He got the stones and he... he killed them all... I had to... I had to watch them fade away, the Guardians, Strange, Peter..."

Tony swallowed hard, trying to control his emotions. His friend clasped his shoulder tightly.

"I couldn't understand why I was still alive when all the rest, who deserved to live, who had their whole lives ahead of them... they died... and Peter... I tried to stop him from coming, I told him it wasn't dangerous but..."

Oddly enough, he smiled as he remembered Peter's words to him on the Staten Island expressway bridge after the infamous Ferry incident.

*You just wouldn't listen to me, Mr. Stark.*

"He just didn't listen to me..."

"There was nothing you could have done, Tony." said Rhodes wearily. "Wanda, the Vision, T'Challa... I keep seeing their faces in my dreams and wondering how I have saved them... I should have tried harder, fought harder, done something differently!"

He sighed heavily.

"But in the end, we lost and the weight of this loss hangs upon us all heavily and equally. Everyone has lost someone in one way or the other, Steve lost Barnes... Wakanda has lost their King and their Dowager Queen..."

"The Princess' mother?" asked Pepper.
"Yes, Pep. She's gone too, Princess Shuri is all that remains of the Wakandan monarchy. Clint lost his family, Bruce lost himself in space... and Thor..."

Rhodey rubbed his head slowly, a habit of his that Tony remembered from their days in MIT together. Then he remembered what Bruce told him in New York, after he had stepped out of Strange's warp hole.

"Thor lost all his people, didn't he?" he said softly.

Rhodes just nodded at him quietly, his brown eyes staring soulfully into his. Pepper asked, "Whatever do you mean?"

Tony looked at her. "Pep, Bruce told me that Thor's home planet, Asgard was destroyed. So Thor, his brother Loki and the Asgardian people were coming to Earth as refugees on a transport ship. But their ship was intercepted by Thanos."

She clasped her mouth in shock and he continued bleakly, "Thanos had everyone on board killed, leaving only Bruce, Thor and Loki alive. The Hulk and Thor tried facing him but both were defeated miserably. Thanos was going to finish Bruce off when an Asgardian, one of Thor's loyal servants, teleported him to Earth at the cost of his own life."

"Then..." continued Rhodes. "Loki tried to assassinate Thanos with a hidden dagger but he... he failed... and Thanos killed him too. He left Thor there to die. And in truth, Thor has lost the most of us all. He has lost all of his family, his home and his people. There is nothing left of Asgard but him. But yet... he is determined to bring Thanos to justice. He insists that we can find this Mad Titan and make him pay for what he has done."

Tony lifted his head and looked at him in surprise.

"How does Thor think we can do this?"

Rhodes said firmly, "The Norse God has something up his sleeve, he has been arguing back and forth with the Raccoon for the last two or three days and has been secretly working on something. But... he insists it can be done only if we work together and for that, he wants the Avengers to reunite and that means... Tony, you got to come with me to Wakanda."
Tony smiled and Rhodes continued firmly, "I know you are hurting, I know you want time to heal and I don't blame you for not wanting to reunite with the very people who broke away from you. And Steve... I know facing him again is not going to be easy. I saw what he did to you and I am not condoning his actions."

"Rhodey... buddy, I know you aren't... you were also hurt by what happened after the Sokovia Accords."

"Yes... When Steve and Natasha came with The Vision, I went with them to Wakanda only because I realized that Thanos was bigger than anything we had ever faced before. And I had to put aside my anger and my fear and go with them. And I realize that asking you to do the same is a lot, Tony but..."

"But there is nothing to ask, my old friend." said Tony softly, placing his hand on Rhodey's shoulder. "My physical wounds are healed and though I will never stop mourning the people lost, I will not let despair ruin me."

He looked at Pepper.

"The dead may be gone but the living are still here and we need to ensure that Thanos will never destroy another planet like he has Earth, with those Infinity Stones. We will put a stop to him, together. I will come with you to Wakanda, at the earliest."

Rhodes smiled widely at him, clasping his shoulder in return. "I knew you wouldn't let that purple ass break you, Tony. Thank you, man."

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter tomorrow.
On the Ferris Wheel

They spoke for another fifteen minutes about this and that. Then Rhodey yawned widely. "Shit, I am beat."

Tony patted his back. "Go back to your barracks, soldier and get some rest."

He stood up and rubbed his eyes tiredly.

"I actually should. I have a meeting with my CO at 9 am and then I got to teach an aerodynamics class at the Army college nearby. So Tony, you'll tell me when you plan to fly to Wakanda, right? I'll try to get some shore leave and meet you there."

"Yes, Rhodey. Hey, wait a minute, won't you get into trouble?"

Rhodes looked confused, so he elaborated, "You and I aren't supposed to be working together, remember? The Avengers initiative is disbanded. I am no longer an official super-hero of the United States government."

His friend smirked. "Hey, you and I are still friends and I ain't going to pussy-footing around, trying to hide that from Ross. If he comes at me, I am going to tell him to shove off. I don't work for him anymore, either. My CO is going to bring War Hammer under his division of the Air Force, since the government doesn't have any superheroes anymore. And Ross really can't object to me going to Wakanda, because what I do on my own money and own time, is my business."

Tony smiled at him and Rhodes asked, "You guys going back to Malibu tonight?"

Pepper said, "No, James. We have to attend a conference tomorrow. The Adoite Energy Conference."

"Oh! Wait, we? As in..." he pointed at Tony. "Stark is coming with you?"

Pepper nodded happily, beaming from ear to ear and Tony hugged her to him.

"Yes, I am, JAMES."

"Really?" Rhodey raised his eyebrows and smirked at him. "I know you and conferences, Tony, you are going to be there... after it is all over."

"No way, Platypus! Tomorrow, I am going to be Miss Potts nerd-a-hire for the day. And I am going to be there on time. At 10 am."

Rhodes looked at Pepper. "If he doesn't wake up, call me, so I can kick his ass and get him there."

"That won't be necessary, James, if Tony doesn't wake up on time, I am going to do that myself."

James grinned and shook his head. "I'll see you in Wakanda, Tony."

He kissed Pepper on the cheek and left them.

Pepper leaned her head on his shoulder. "So, what's next?"
"Whatever do you mean, Potts?"

"Don't play coy, Stark, I saw you stare at that Ferris wheel from time to time. You wanna go for a ride?"

"Yes, please! Let's!"

"Okay but just one ride, Tony! Then we go home."

"Just one ride, I promise!"

They walked up to the ticket counter, bought two tickets and approached the ride. The ride operator turned the wheel, lowering an empty seat. Tony handed him their tickets and he opened the safety bar.

Pepper climbed into the seat and Tony sat down next to her. The operator fixed the bar back in place, turned the wheel and they slowly rose into the crisp night air. The bright lights of the park lay below them, sparkling in the darkness.

"It's so noisy down there but so quiet up here." said Pepper, snuggling up against him.

"I know..." he said, burrowing his nose in her hair and taking a deep appreciative whiff.

"Pepper."

Tony looked at her, trying to find the words to tell her what he wanted to say.

I don't want to sound emotional... or corny...

He swallowed hard and Pepper said softly, "What is it, Tony? You can tell me anything, you know that."

"Pep... I... I do not know how to face Steve again. I don't know what to say or what to do or how to behave..."

She caught his hand gently and something burst inside him.

"The last time I met Rogers... things ended badly. I'll admit, I lost my temper. I know I should have thought things through. I should have paused to think. Barnes was obviously being brainwashed. He was being held hostage, well, his mind was being held hostage and I know what that's like. I should have been more understanding. I should have..."

He looked out at the twinkling lights below.

"I lost a good friend in Siberia and I want... I want to mend things between us. We need to stand together, now more than ever."

"Tony..." Pepper said softly. "What happened in Siberia, wasn't entirely your fault. Yes, you lost your temper. But you had just been told that you had been lied to for nearly twenty years. That your parents didn't die by accident, that they were assassinated in cold blood. And your good friend, your teammate, a man you looked up to... he knew about it. And he intentionally kept it from you. It was a lot to take in at that moment. And personally... I feel Steve went about it... rather crudely."

"Pep. Bucky is his friend. Was. His good friend. And Steve was looking out for him. It is just that..."

He lowered his head, unwilling to finish his sentence but Pepper completed it for him.
"You thought you were his friend too and it hurt you that he was willing to fight you, just to keep the Winter Soldier safe. Just to protect the man who murdered your parents."

Tony looked at her as she tightened her grip on his hand.

"You weren't wrong to feel hurt, Tony. But you have to let it go. You have to let your anger and hurt go."

"I can do that! But... but I don't ... I don't know if I can trust Steve again!"

"That's true. You lost your faith in your friend, which is perfectly natural. And rebuilding such faith, such trust is going to take time. My advice to you, is to let it."

"What do you mean?"

"You can't go back to the way things were before Siberia. A lot has happened since then..."

"And we aren't even the same people anymore." Tony said wryly.

"Exactly. So don't go back. Try to build something new."

"I still don't understand, Pep."

"Meet Steve and the others. See what they have in mind. Exchange stories and ideas. But keep in mind that it's going to take time to trust each other again. Accept that and work together for the future. Forge a new friendship from this tragedy brought out by Thanos. And if you want to talk to Steve, to get it out, then definitely do so but do so civilly. Explain how you felt."

He nodded, seeing her point.

"Tony, you lost someone close to you, Steve has too. You both are grieving. Remember that. Unite in your grief. Anger at the past is of no use."

Pepper pushed his hair back from his brow.

"Don't worry, honey. I know the first steps are tough. But think about this. It isn't just Steve you are meeting. You can catch up with Bruce and Thor."

"Yes!" Tony said excitedly. "I want to discuss my accelerator and my nanobyte Arc and my... Shit! Me and Banner have a lot to talk about! And it will be good to see Point Break again."

"And you always wanted to see Wakanda tech."

"Yes! I always felt there was more to Wakanda than meets the eye! And Bruce and now Rhodey just confirmed my hunch! Also, I really want to meet Princess Shuri. T'Challa always spoke about his sister's intelligence and inventiveness and I want to discuss so much with her!"

Pepper smiled and he added, "Whatever has happened in the past, it will be good... good to be part of a team again. To discuss things with others, others who know what it's like to fight... others who have gone into battle, with you before... and knowing..."

Tony stopped and then swallowed hard, trying to clear the lump in his throat.

"Knowing that you aren't the only one still alive."

She kissed his nose and nuzzled him.
He sighed, enjoying the way Pepper felt cuddled against him and then whispered softly, "Honey, will you come with me to Wakanda?"

She just looked at him quietly.

"I know you are busy with Stark Industries but we haven't gone away together in a long long time. This could be like a mini-vacation. This could be like our second trip to Venice... after we got together... Pepper..."

He cupped her cheek. "I just want to spend time with you. Once I go to Wakanda, I do not know what is going to happen, especially since the others can't come back to the US. I may have to stay there for some time. So we could spend some days together and then you could leave. What do you say? Just for a day or two, at least."

She nodded with a small smile and he stroked her satiny skin with his thumb.

Tony kissed her forehead. "We could go on a safari! Or a waterfall rafting ride! But none of those boring official state tours! And no museums. At all."

Pepper giggled. "Tony! We won't go to a museum on our own but if such a tour is arranged by the Princess, I don't see how we can get out of it."

"I'm sure you will find a way, Potts."

"Oh, now I have to find a way out of tours, huh?"

He grinned cheekily at her. "I get us in trouble, you get us out of trouble, remember?"

Then Tony leaned towards her and she placed her hand on his Arc, her blue eyes searching his.

He whispered slowly, "What I really want to do... is find a secluded watering hole or pond... and..."

Tony tilted his head and moved towards her ear. He whispered against her soft skin, "And go skinny dipping with you, Potts..."

She shivered against him and took a deep breath, her chest pushing against his.

He pushed her hair away from the side of her face and whispered again, making sure to brush his lips across her ear.

"Think about it, cool blue water, hot African sun... you and me, floating lazily, you in a teeny-weeny bikini... I know you have one, Potts..."

Pepper moistened her lips with her tongue.

Tony followed the movement with his eyes, watching as her lips curved. Then she whispered sexily, "I do have such a bikini, Stark, and it is in your favorite color, hot-rod red."

He grinned broadly, gazing into her deep blue eyes as her hand tightened against his shirt.

Tony leaned in to kiss her when Pepper said firmly, "But I'll wear my bikini... if and only if... you wear the tiny baby-blue Speedos, that are buried at the back of your closet."

He backed away, shaking his head in the negative and she laughed musically.

"Don't be such a wuss, Stark!"
"Those... those... those are way too small! They hardly cover my butt, Potts!"

She cupped his jaw. "That's why I want you to wear them, Stark..."

"I could be arrested for indecent exposure." Tony protested but he was distracted because Pepper was tracing his beard with her fingers, caressing his skin slowly.

"Don't worry, Stark. I'll make sure to cover your... naked bits... with my body..." she said sultrily and brushed her lips with his, kissing him oh-so-softly.

Tony sat perfectly still as she wound her hands around his neck and kept kissing him, her lips slowly moving over his, while her fingers played idly with the back of his hair.

When her tongue teasingly touched his, he shuddered and held her to him, kissing her back equally slowly.

They kissed slow and soft for sometime, the comforting darkness of the night sky surrounding them as the park sparkled and shone below them.

Pepper finally let him go, her sapphire blue eyes gazing tenderly into his as she stroked his hair.

"Tony. I don't have enough words to express... how thankful I am, that you are back here with me. I don't know what I would have done if you..."

He touched his forehead to hers and whispered back, "I don't know what I'd have done without you either, Potts..."

She closed her eyes and whispered fervently, "Promise me, Tony, promise me!"

"Tell me, Pepper."

"Promise that you won't disappear back into space, leaving... leaving me behind again... Promise..."

He could sense the fear behind her words but whispered his promise and felt Pepper smile against his face.

Chapter End Notes

In Marvel terms, the First Phase of my story is nearly over, :P
So to mark the end and because the trial was damn long, there shall be some fluff and smut... next week, if I can finish it in time. Soft maybe.

And then after that Phase 2 kicks off with Wakanda. And I never planned on this story having a Phase 2 (I was going to end with Pepper and Tony coming back to Earth) so I need to plan that out.

Thank you for sticking with the story so far!
Chapter Notes

Thirty chapters! Wow, I never thought I would go past 25, xD...

This is the first chapter of a mini-arc which showcases one of Tony Stark's most endearing qualities: his inherent jealousy of anyone who captures Pepper's attention.

This mini-arc is for igotyoufirst, who likes this trait of Tony a lot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

9:45 am

Tony opened the newspaper to the comics section and began to read as he sipped his coffee. It was a bright and sunny Saturday morning and he was sitting by the hotel room window. Pepper wasn't there, she had left two hours ago, as she had to attend a breakfast meeting before the Conference.

A discreet beep came from his phone and he tapped it.

"What is it, Friday?" Tony said absently, his eyes still on the newspaper, engrossed with the antics of Snoopy.

"Sir, it is 9:45."

He stood up quickly, slamming the coffee cup down.

"What! The Conference starts at 10!"

"I know Sir, that's why I bee-"
"I am still in my jammies!?!" Tony yelled and ran into the bedroom. He opened the closet doors with a rush.

"Where is it, where is it, where is my uniform?" He muttered, one hand tugging his pyjamas' down, the other shoving clothes here and there.

"Sir! It is on the bed, freshly ironed!"

Tony turned, forgot that his pants were at his knees and nearly fell flat on his face. He stumbled just in time and stood upright, exclaiming with delight, "Here it is! Thanks Friday!"

"I shall call for a taxi, sir."

"Yes, please do!" He said as he pulled on crisp black trousers and belted them up.

---

10:15 am

Tony huffed and puffed as he ran up the steps of the Hancock Lee Convention Center, where the Adoite Energy Conference was being hosted. There was a large crowd milling around the ticketing gates.

Friday said discreetly in his ear, "Sir, you do not need to stand in the line. Miss Potts has secured a VIP invitation for you, since you are part of her team. Please proceed to the leftmost line."

He nodded and walked towards the VIP security line where he handed over his pass to the guard. The guard looked him once over, checked his pockets and waved him on.

Tony walked down the line and entered the large conference hall, decorated with huge red and
yellow banners, all bearing the Adoite logo.

He looked around the cavernous awning, filled with scientists, researchers and business people, collected in small groups and enthusiastically talking to each other.

"I must say, Friday, your choice of clothing is spot-on. I know Pepper is nervous about this conference. So I do not want to attract a lot of attention by coming as myself. I know that everyone will only ask about the trial, Iron Man, the Avengers, space, aliens etc. No one will let us be and Pepper will not be able to ask the questions that she needs to ask or get the attention she deserves as Stark Industries CEO. So I wanted to truly be... her science nerd. Stay in the background, take notes and guide her if she needs it. And thanks to your suggested disguise, I really look the part."

"Thank you, Sir."

Tony had dressed up as a research assistant, complete with crisp white lab coat, black tie and thick wire-rimmed glasses. He had on his fake beard from yesterday, to disguise his face. The result was that he blended in perfectly with the other researchers in the hall.

He walked casually through the throng of people, listening in on conversations and absently staring at his watch from time to time.

*It's 10:20, where is Pepper?*

Then he was tapped on the shoulder and turned to look at three young men, dressed in the same manner as he, all grinning at him myopically.

The tallest of the bunch, an Egon Spengler look-alike, said wheezily, "Hi, I am Melvin, from Dellon Tech and these are my associates, Park and Dev."

The other two nerds nodded at him and he nodded back with a smile.

"We couldn't help but notice that you are the only representative from Stark Industries." Said Park, a pimply Asian.
Tony belatedly realized he was wearing a Stark badge on his coat.

"Yes, I am. I am..." he struggled to think of a nerdy name, "I am Stuart Johnson. Pleased to meet you."

He held out his hand, which each nerd shook enthusiastically.

Dev asked curiously, "So tell us, Mr. Johnson, have you worked on the Stark Bio-luminescence project? We are curious about the research conducted on deep-sea subjects."

"Hey, call me To- Stu... call me Stu and I haven't worked on it directly but I do know..."

For the next five minutes, Tony and the Dellon scientists discussed a variety of scientific subjects, ranging from biodiversity and gravitational anomalies to thermo-nuclear physics. He was surprised to find himself enjoying the discussion.

_Pepper's right! I've been cooped up by myself for too long! I haven't had a chance to meet with other scientifically-minded people and talk technology, talk science! I should visit Stark Industries and talk to the lab scientists more often!_

They were now talking about green-house gases and Park said with a snort, "Hey, want to hear a joke about environmentalists?"

The other two men rolled their eyes at him but Tony said, "Sure."

"Why did the American Greenpeace activist throw out all his spray cans?"

"I don't know, why did he?"

"Because they were a bunch of aerosols! Get it!"

They all groaned as Park dissolved into a fit of giggles. Tony shook his head, trying to hide his smile and then felt his phone buzz in his coat's pocket.
He pulled out his Stark phone and saw that he had a message from Pepper.

"Tony, you better be awake and be at that conference!"

He smirked and typed back, "Way ahead of you, Potts :P! I am there, mingling and talking tech with some fellow nerds. Where are you?"

She replied almost instantaneously, "Nearly there. Breakfast took way too long. Don't go in without me!"

"I won't, Potts, the opening ceremony hasn't started yet. I am in disguise. My fake name is Stuart Johnson."

Tony put his phone back in his pocket and looked up. Everyone had turned towards the entrance of the auditorium as its massive doors were open. A event organizer came forward.

He announced, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the introductory seminar by Dr. Leong is about to commence in ten minutes. Please take your seats."

The crowd began to throng forward excitedly and Tony looked back at the conference hall's door, from where he had entered.

_Come on, Pep... where are you?_

"Hey Stu, you coming with us?" asked Dev and he replied, "I would love to but..." he feigned annoyance, "I got to wait for my boss. She asked me to. Such a bummer."

"Your boss? Oh. We thought you were the only guy from Stark Industries." said Park.

"No, the CEO and I are attending this together."
The effect of his simple statement was astounding. The three lab scientists dropped their jaws and stared at him wide-eyed.

"Wait! The CEO of Stark Industries is coming to this conference!" squealed Melvin.

Dev pulled out his phone and began to speak in a foreign language, while Park pushed his spiky hair down rapidly with his fingers.

Tony said quickly, "It's not Iron Man. It's not Tony Stark. It's Miss-

"Virginia Potts. Yeah dude, obviously!" said Dev with exasperation, while on the phone.

Melvin caught Tony's hands. "Dude! You work directly with Miss Potts! That is so mindbogglingly awesome! You are so damn lucky!"

Tony was confused but before he could say anything, five men came running out of the auditorium to join them.

"Did we miss her? Did she pass by?" asked one anxiously, while the other quickly pulled a notebook out of his pockets.

"No, you didn't! She's on her way! Isn't she, Stu?" said Park with a wide grin.

Tony couldn't take it anymore. He said loudly, "What is going on? From where did you come from and why the heck are you all so excited?"

The lab scientists looked at him as if he was crazy.

"Because..." drawled out Dev, "Miss Virginia Potts, the uber-hot CEO of Stark Industries is going to enter this very conference hall and we want to catch a glimpse of her..."

"I want to meet her again!" said Melvin with a dreamy-eyed look. "I met her once in Singapore, last year. Let me tell you guys, the articles and magazine interviews do not do her justice. She was even
more amazing in person."

Tony couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You all have a crush on Pep, I mean! Miss Potts?"

"Doi! Who wouldn't!" said Park incredulously while Dev said softly, "She's the ideal woman, man. She's so smart with money and management, she holds her own in this male-dominated industry and she's brought Stark Industries to the top of the alternative energy race. Imagine that!"

"Under Tony Stark, the company was a weapons of mass destruction factory!" said Melvin enthusiastically. "But with Miss Potts..."

"It has turned into a paradise for research and development in the energy industry." finished Park.

"You guys sound like a recruiting poster." said Tony dryly.

They tsked at him loudly and he flushed.

"It isn't just that she's smart!" gushed Park. "She's so nice and kind!"

"Yeah, she treats everyone so nicely! It can't be an act!"

"I've spoken to some Stark employees and it isn't! Miss Potts really is that nice in person!"

Tony nodded, smiling to himself as he thought about Pepper. Then he realized the nerds were looking at him expectantly and he said softly, "I know I sound churlish but I have to agree, Miss Potts... is a gem of a woman. They broke the mould when they made her... I bet Tony Stark couldn't tie his shoe laces without her."

Melvin snorted. "That playboy! It's just not fair! He slept around with cheerleaders and showgirls and strippers, how the hell did he end up with someone like Virginia Potts?"

The group muttered angrily in agreement and Tony couldn't help but laugh.
Truth be told... they are right... I am seriously lucky that Pepper stayed with me all these years. And it took a hole in my chest for me to finally realize that she was the one for me...

Then one of the newcomers, a gangly brown-haired man with a long pointed nose, said hoarsely, "To top it all, she's so damn hot!"

Tony blinked at that. He decided to ignore it but then Melvin began to recite, counting items off his fingers, "Those big blue eyes of hers, sinfully pink lips, peaches and cream complexion, cute little freckles..."

Park said dreamily, "And she's got legs that are an engineering marvel on their own... all long and lean and curved in the right places, with slim ankles wrapped in sexy heels..."

His statement made all the lab scientists sigh in tandem and they started to talk about Pepper's legs.

Tony nodded along absently and adjusted his coat collar because suddenly he was feeling warm. He took a deep breath, mentally counting odd numbers in his head as he tried to block the red-hot feeling of jealously coursing through his veins.

I am going to be mature about this. They are just fanboys... talking about Potts... who is my woman... my Pepper...

He ran out of odd numbers and schooled his face into blankness, trying to stop from baring his teeth.

I know I shouldn't feel this way. I was the playboy, I was the one with a bedmate in every state, I was the one who slept with all the Dallas cheerleaders... but damn it! I don't like other people talking about my girl! Especially about her lovely legs! And I don't care if it's irrational!

Then his conscience argued back, talking in a feminine calm soothing tone, that sounded amazingly like Pepper.

Tony, just because you love Pepper, that does not mean that you own her. She is an independent, smart and yes, damn gorgeous woman. But she has her own life and her legs are not your legs.
Tony argued back.

*I am not saying that I own her. I'm just... I love her... and I don't like it when other people talk about her... because I want to be the only one who knows her intimately.*

His conscience whispered soothingly, *Well, you are the only one who truly knows her intimately... think about it...*

He did so and then smirked to himself.

*Well, yeah! I know Pepper... she has this teeny, tiny, sexy scar on the underside of her knee... which she got from a nasty fall when she was ten... and that her left foot is the more sensitive of the two... something these eggheads will never know... no matter how much they admire her legs...*

*And you know a lot about Pepper, not just about her legs. She loves you... not them...*

Appeased by his own thoughts, Tony began to pay attention to the scientists around him, who had moved on from Pepper's legs and were now hotly arguing on how other women CEOs paled in comparison to Pepper.

"Guys, guys!" he said easily. "This isn't a competition. Granted, Miss Potts is a damn good-looking woman but she's more than just her looks and you shouldn't judge women just by the way they look."

The scientists sheepishly murmured in agreement and then Tony got a text.

"We are entering. Are you in the main hall?"

He replied. "Yes."

Then he furrowed his brow in confusion. *Wait... We?*
The door opened and they all turned quickly at the sound of voices.

"There she is..." whispered Melvin unnecessarily because it was very obvious that Pepper Potts was the only being worth beholding.

Tony swallowed hard, suddenly finding his tongue too thick for his mouth.

Incongruously, a soft melodic tune began to play in his head, from a song he had heard a long time ago and the words rang loudly in his ears as she stepped completely into the room.

*There she goes*

*There she goes again*

Pepper was wearing a black jumpsuit, perfectly tailored to her slender build. The sleek material lovingly hugged the curve of her back and hips while the trousers sensuously outlined her long legs in her blood red Louboutins.

As if it wasn't enticing enough, the suit had a plunging, squarish neckline and she hadn't worn anything underneath. So her delicate neck and cleavage were exposed in a wide strip of creamy pale skin, ending just above her navel.

*Holy sh*t in heaven... Pepper has never worn anything like this before... Oh the suit is just held together by a little bow! At one corner! What the hell! Wait, why am I noticing this?*

Tony could see Pepper's red lips curve into a beautiful smile as she lowered her head.

*Racing through my brain*

*And I just can't contain*

In another departure from her signature elegance, she had kept her hair open and the glorious reddish-gold tresses streamed over her shoulders, glimmering in the sunlight streaming into the conference hall.
Tony swallowed again and heard Dev whisper, "Such a fucking lady... kill me, God, kill me now, this is the last thing I want to see..."

He silently agreed as the music reached a crescendo in his head..

\[No \ one \ else \ could \ heal \ my \ pain\]
\[And \ I \ just \ can't \ contain\]
\[This \ feeling \ that \ remains\]

"Yeah man..." said Park softly, "those lucky fucks got to have breakfast with her."

Tony reluctantly tore his eyes away from Pepper and looked at Park.

"What are you talking about?"

"Erm... Johnson, I know Miss Potts is awesome but can't you see the handsome man beside her?"

Tony turned back to look at Pepper and widened his eyes in horror. The music in his head ended abruptly in a loud screech.

A tall, deeply tanned, broad-shouldered man in a crisp blue suit and beige loafers, stood right next to Pepper. He pushed his thick, wavy black hair back from his face with one hand and flashed her a dimpled grin.

Tony dimly realized that someone was growling and that it was him. He took one deep breath and then another as Mr. Bronze opened his mouth and said something, exposing rows of sparkling white teeth and making Pepper laugh with his words.

"Mr. Stark..." whispered Friday in his ear, "Your blood pressure is increasing in intensity. I suggest you calm down."

He ignored Friday, his palms starting to itch as another man walked forward, again tall and handsome but this time, a blonde, dressed in a dark blue Air Force uniform and aviators.
Pepper turned slightly towards him with a wide smile and then Tony saw red as Mr. Officer placed his hand on her shoulder and squeezed it.

Somehow in a blurry haze, he found himself walking towards the trio. Tony stopped just before them, resisting the urge to stand on his toes, just so he could try to match their height because the two men were tall and Pepper of course, was towering above him because of her heels.

Mr. Bronze leaned towards Pepper and whispered something in her ear that made her turn red.

Tony growled. This caught their attention and they all looked at him askance.

He cleared his throat to disguise his growl and muttered, "Potts? I mean, Miss Potts?"

Pepper stared at him but Tony could tell she hadn't recognized him at all.

"Yes?"

Mr. Bronze eyed him with boredom and Tony tapped his identity card. "I am Stuart Johnson from Stark Industries... I am your assistant for the day."

Her blue eyes widened and then softened in recognition.

Pepper smiled widely, catching her lip between her teeth. She said eagerly, "Stu! I am so happy you are here... I am so sorry that I am late."
I hope you liked the first part of this event. One more chapter tomorrow.

Pepper's outfit is an actual Diane Von Furstenberg jumpsuit that Gwyneth Paltrow wore in 2014. You can view it here:
"It is alright, ma'am." Tony muttered out of the corner of his mouth. "I understand that you were delayed because of your breakfast meeting."

"That would be my fault!" said Mr. Officer charmingly. He tucked his aviators into his front pocket and winked at Tony.

"I am Lieutenant Captain Dave Ordal, Westpoint Air Force Academy. Flew in just for this conference."

Tony tried to smile, irritated that Mr. Officer also had beautiful white teeth that went well with his sky-blue eyes. The officer shook his hand in a vice-like grip and he controlled his wince.

"And To- I mean, Stu!" said Pepper. "This is Matteo Andretti Demarcos, the new CEO of Dellon industries, just arrived in America for this conference!"

Mr. Bronze paid no attention to Tony's outstretched hand.

He smiled at Pepper and said in a suave, lightly accented voice, "Now if I had known how much..." Tony clenched his fists as the man lowered his gaze to her chest smoothly and then back up, "promise was there in America... I would have bought Dellon Tech sooner. The company had been languishing for years and their board was just pleading with me to take it off their hands!"

Matteo laughed and shook his wavy hair.

"And if I had know that there were American women as charming and beautiful as you, my dear, I would come to this continent sooner!"

She flushed and he murmured lasciviously, "Virginia, darling, do we have to attend this boring lecture? I am sure you know all about alternative energy anyway. I want to talk to you more about your life and your business escapades and all. Can we not..."
Then he took Pepper's hand and brought it to his lips, kissing it lightly.

"Go somewhere private, just you and I?"

A blurry haze drifted down over Tony's eyes, following by a long ringing noise in his ears.

He nearly took a step forward, only to be stopped by Pepper slightly raising her hand at him as she looked at Mr. Bronze, who was gazing into her eyes.

"Matteo, we just spent two hours talking. Perhaps later?" She said sweetly, tilting her head.

Mr. Bronze grinned at her and Tony struggled to control himself.

*I'll sock you right in those perfect teeth of yours so hard, then lets see how you smile, you dumb ass Armani faker Euro trash-

Then his blood ran cold as someone slowly drawled, "Boys, Miss Potts has a point... besides, we are greatly over the 'fashionably late' limit."

The origin of the voice stepped forward, another tall and broad-shouldered man with a tiny toothbrush mustache. He seemed to have come straight from his country club, with his artfully styled chestnut-and-grey hair, delicate manicured hands and grey Lacoste shirt paired with pristine khakis.

But his cold grey eyes seemed so familiar to Tony, who felt his mouth twist into a scowl as he gazed upon an old nemesis.

*Chad Harrington the Third. Of course, you had to be here today.*

Tony met Chad as a sophomore in MIT. Chad was the scion of a filthy rich Boston Brahmin family, that had their own antique export business. As young men, he and Tony had run in the same circles but had taken a mutual and intense dislike to each other.
Tony had always felt that Chad's bonhomie nature was just an act and that the man was actually loathsome while Chad had simply envied Tony for his intelligence.

They had competed fiercely over grades, sports, friends and of course, girls. He hadn't seen Chad in the last decade, the latter having migrated to France after his graduation, to expand the family business.

*What the fuck is Chaddy doing here....*

As if she had heard him, Pepper said softly, "I agree, Mr. Harrington, it especially imperative that you hear this lecture by Dr. Leong as he will talk about luminescent energy in biological organisms, something I believe your firm is interested in."

In a smooth movement, Chad pushed Matteo to one side and stood alongside Pepper.

"Ma'am..." he said in that irritatingly soft drawl of his, "thank you for keeping an eye out for me. Come."

To Tony's abject irritation, Chad looped his arm around Pepper's waist. His hand was very close to the neat little bow that kept her suit together and Tony clenched his fists.

Chad gently pushed her forward, saying, "Let me be your guide today. You can sit by me during the lecture and I will answer all your questions on the subject. After that, we can walk the floor together."

Pepper said softly, "Mr. Harrington."

"Please call me Chad." He drawled.

"Chad. That's very generous of you but I do have Stuart from Stark Industries, who is going to help me during this conference."

Tony straightened, baring his teeth in a semblance of a smile but Harrington looked at him dismissively.
"My dear Virginia, today you do not need some Stark stooge. Trust me, I am considered an expert in this domain. When I graduated from MIT, Magna Cum Laude, my final year dissertation was on Bio-Luminescence properties in natural bodies."

Not to be outdone, Tony coolly said, "Mr. Harrington, I graduated from MIT myself... Summa Cum Laude and I am also well-versed in this subject as well as other energy topics that are to be discussed at this conference. That's why I was selected to accompany Miss Potts."

He heard Mr. Officer snicker and whisper, "Clash of the nerds."

Harrington said with a sneer, "So you graduated from MIT but are still working as a lab scientist at a big firm instead of your own lab?"

He curled his mustachioed upper lip at Tony derisively and said, "I sure hope the Stark money is worth being a sellout, Stu!"

Tony tried to keep a blank face, controlling his irritation at the slur. Pepper inhaled sharply and was about to say something, when Melvin came running up to them.

"Sirs, Miss Potts," He panted, with a fawning look at Pepper, "the opening ceremony is over and the lecture is going to formally start. I suggest we enter."

Before Tony could react, Matteo quickly took Pepper's hand and exclaimed, "Excellent! Virginia, darling, come! Dellon has the best seats in the house, right at the front. You can sit with me!"

Tony watched dumbfounded as Matteo led Pepper away, quickly followed closely by Harrington, who was trying to take Pepper's other arm.

Pepper looked back at him with confusion as she entered the Conference hall and then disappeared from view.

Tony was now all alone in the main hall, mournfully staring at the entrance to the Conference room. He jumped when he heard a low whistle and the Officer passed him by.
He chuckled, saying, "Well buddy, I guess your boss lady don't need your babysitting today!"

"I am not her babysitter! I am meant to be her guide! I came to this Conference for that very reason!"

"I get you, buddy but..." he smirked at Tony. "Seeing as how your boss lady, Miss Potts, is the finest CEO to grace these halls, I think she's going to get all the guidance she needs."

He walked towards the Conference door and looked back with a wide grin.

"You want my advice? Take the day off. Miss Potts is in good hands..."

"It is no use running after Miss Potts!" Tony said irritably. "She's a damn loyal woman and she's got a fiance who loves her!"

"Well... buddy... that's just it. Right now... her fiance ain't here! And so its open season on Stark's CEO!"

The Officer laughed loudly and entered the Conference hall, waving at Tony cheekily.

Tony glared angrily at his retreating back.

Then he jumped in shock as Friday whispered, "Sir, maybe we should heed the officer's advice. Miss Potts does seem to have a lot of friends here. They will help her out. Your presence may not be needed."

He took one deep breath and then another.

"Friday, do you know what open season means?"

"Yes, sir. It is a hunting term to indicate that all restrictions on hunting a particular type of wildlife are removed."
"Yes. That's it. And these... hunters... feel that because I am not around, they can try to seduce my fiance."

"But sir... wait... let me compute this. Miss Potts is a human being with an independent mind of her own! She is not a thing! Why is there all this talk of hunting?!"

"Because, Friday... that is how humans court each other."

"I am still confused. Why would Miss Potts court them? She loves you. She's committed to you."

Tony scowled darkly. "Friday, that is oversimplifying things. I am insecure but... a man's got to protect what is his."

"And Miss Potts is yours?!"

He had never heard such an expression of incredulity in the AI's voice.

"Mr. Stark, that is a very archaic way of thinking!"

Tony sighed. "You are not going to understand this, Friday. Stand down. Let me deal with this, in a human way."

Friday said with resignation, "Very good, Mr. Stark."

Tony looked at his watch, noted the time and began to walk towards the Conference hall entrance.

*I'll catch up with her after the lecture.*
The Conference hall was cozily dark and thanks to Dellon's insistent CEO, Pepper had a great front row seat.

However, she found herself unable to enjoy the lecture because her mind was busy thinking about Tony. She worried her bottom lip between her teeth as she stared absently at the presenter.

*I shouldn't have gone for the breakfast meeting. I should have just come straight here with Tony. Now I am in the company of perfect strangers...*

She snuck a sideways glance at Lieutenant Dave. He was busy typing on his phone.

*Who are not in the least interested in the Conference... well... the officer did make his lack of interest very apparent during breakfast as well.*

Chad was nowhere to be found. After she had sat down, he had disappeared.

*Which is ironic because he wouldn't let me be with Tony, saying that he wanted to be my guide and sit next to me! Did Chad back off because of...*

Matteo on her right, had a pair of earphones on and seemed to be listening to a translation of the talk.

*Huh... at least he is paying attention...*

Then one of his earphones fell onto his lap and Pepper heard a familiar Usher song before Matteo quickly picked up the earphone and put it back in his ear. He caught her looking at him and smirked.

Leaning a little too close for her liking, the Dellon CEO whispered, "I have heard this all before. It is old hat for me."
It was on the tip of Pepper's tongue to ask if he had heard it all, why was he still attending but she didn't. She just nodded absently and tried not to wrinkle her nose at his strong cologne. Then she realized Matteo was still leaning close to her.

"Mr. Demarcos, if you could move back a little please..." she said politely and he hastily complied.

Pepper turned her attention back to the speaker but sighed inwardly as she realized that he was still staring at her.

*If I am counting the things I shouldn't have done, the first thing should be wearing this stupid suit... whatever was I thinking? A CEO keeps staring at me, so how can I expect the rest of the attendees take me seriously? I am so stupid!*

Then she remembered the look on Tony's face and sighed softly.

*Well, at least Tony likes it...I think... I know he likes it when I bare my legs, he's very eloquent on that subject and I know he likes staring at my ass but this outfit... I wonder if it was a little too risque even for hi-

Her inner monologue was interrupted by Matteo whispering softly, "Virginia..."

"Yes, Mr. Demarcos."

"My darling, please, call me Matti."

"Okay."

"I'd just like to say that I admire you for doing such a good job as the CEO of Stark Industries."

Pepper didn't like the slightly patronizing tone in his voice but murmured "Thank you."

"I mean it... I've met some of your fellow American managers and... " he snorted in derision. "They clearly do not know what they are doing."
Pepper didn't know how to respond or whether she even should, so she just kept quiet and nodded.

Then Matteo leaned closer again, flashing his teeth at her and whispered "So what are you doing after this lecture? Hopefully not attending another one? Come on, Miss Potts, play hooky with me... let's leave this dullard conference and go for a long afternoon brunch."

Pepper couldn't decide whether to sigh loudly or roll her eyes.

*Another invitation. Okay, now I am tired.*

She was about to put the Dellon CEO in his place but but luckily for her, Lieutenant Dave leaned forward and whispered in a firm tone, "Matteo, buddy, if you want to leave, leave. But could you please can it and let others focus on the lecture!"

Matteo pouted and sat back in his seat firmly, staring at the stage. The officer winked at Pepper and she smiled back.

Then she started as Matteo's phone rang loudly and the entire auditorium began to whisper.

"Scusa, I must take this." He stood up and answered the phone as he walked towards the exit.

Pepper shook her head in disdain and heard Dave whisper, "Foreigners... am I right or am I right?"

She nodded at him absently and then looked back at the stage, trying to turn her attention back to the lecture. Dr. Leong was making a very interesting point about trying to grow bio-luminescence from scratch instead of relying on existing species for extraction. Something in what he said, made Pepper remember that she had to message Tony.

She pulled her phone out of her pocket and quickly typed, "Tony, honey, I am in the front row, three seats from the left aisle. Where are you?"

She waited for a minute, hoping he would reply. Then she felt a soft tap on her shoulder and turned
to look into the deep blue eyes of handsome Lieutenant Dave.

"You naughty woman, you are just as bad as Matteo, you aren't paying attention to the lecture."

Pepper whispered pointedly, "Neither are you, Lieutenant. Believe me, I am trying to but no one is letting me be."

He grinned at her, flashing his dimples and looked back at the stage.

Her phone buzzed and she read the short message from Tony.

"Nice seats, Potts. Guess you have friends in high places. Unlike your poor nerd-for-the-day (me). Why is Officer Blonde being so chatty? Tell him to pay attention to the stage."

Pepper turned around quickly, peering into the shadowy darkness, trying to find Tony.

She couldn't see him and typed back, "Tony, where are you?"

"Oh not far, Potts. Close enough to see Blondie making googly eyes at you."

Pepper covered her mouth to hide her giggle.

Oh my! Tony is so jealous! I should have seen this coming! Three attractive men surrounding me and taking me away from him, claiming my attention from him... he's such an idiot!

She looked at her phone, thinking how to reply.

I should assure him that I am going to be with him after the lecture. That should make him happy.

Then Pepper read Tony's new message.
"And now he's staring down your top... or lack of top... great. An Officer but Definitely Not a Gentleman."

This irritated her. Not only because it reminded her of how inappropriate her suit was but also because Tony was highlighting it in his usual snarky manner.

She quickly typed back, "Tony, stop spying on me!"

He replied, "I am not spying on you. It is rather plain to see, that him and that European lothario are busy ogling you, Potts and you don't even care!"

Pepper took a deep breath. Then she typed, determined to needle him.

"Yeah, they really liked this outfit. Everyone does. I've gotten so many compliments from so many different men. And Dave is a perfect gentleman, he just invited me to brunch."

She sent this message and sat back in her seat, trying to control the slow grin spreading on her face.

Chew on that, Stark!

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the comments on this mini-arc!

Next week, the arc continues when Pepper walks the floor with her 'trio' of admirers.
12:45 pm

The Adoite Conference was in full swing and Pepper tried to keep a polite smile on her face as she stood at a stall, listening the presenter talk. This one was about recycling body waste to extract energy, a possibility she felt, was rather far-fetched and disgusting. The scientist in charge of the stall, a Dr. Kalvin Fishodour, was enthusiastically explaining his thesis with the help of his laptop and his 'specimens'.

She controlled herself from gagging as he poked a dark brown mass, floating in a jar.

"How disgusting! That is definitely, as you Americans put it... a turd!" whispered Matteo, with an odd note of awe in his voice.

Pepper did not respond but instead sighed inwardly. The seminar was over but her breakfast companions had still not left her side. The minute they had stepped out of the conference hall, Chad had rejoined them. He had made a vague excuse about leaving in the middle, to talk to his nerds about an urgent matter but from the twinkle in his eye and his flushed face, Pepper suspected that he had stepped out to have a drink.

Matteo had also come back, he had spent the entire duration of the seminar, talking on his phone. They had encircled Pepper and insisted that they visit the stalls together. She had tried to make excuses but her "nerd-for-the-day", Tony had been nowhere to be found, so she had no choice but to go along with them.

That was fifteen minutes ago. Since the beginning of their floor walk, they had been joined by another two CEOs and the MD of a small oil company from Alaska. Pepper was now surrounded by a literal posse of tall men, smiling and making polite conversation with each other as they moved from one stall to the other. Chad had once again disappeared, saying he needed some air.

As Dr. Kalvin began to poke at another turd-like object in another jar, this one yellowish-green in color, Pepper looked at her phone.

No messages. Great. Tony must be off sulking somewhere. Or he might have gone back to the hotel. Just great.

She put her phone back, paying attention to the presenter and then felt a small tap on her shoulder.

Pepper turned around hopefully, thinking it was Tony but then her face fell as she saw it was just Lieutenant Dave.

"Hey, I got thirsty and went over to the concession stand for a drink. You want one?" He asked, offering a grape soda.

She shook her head in the negative and Matteo said with a sneer, "Soda! How unhealthy! That is nothing but chemicals and fizz!"

Dave sneered back, "Having a soda once in a while, doesn't hurt, Mr. DeMarcos. Besides... I also got this..."
He pulled something out of his coat.

"Ma'am, you don't like soda, would you prefer this instead?"

He held out a small carton of mixed fruit juice and Pepper accepted it gladly.

"Thank you so much, Lieutenant! I was thirsty but-

"But you avoid soda at all costs, right? I got ya. Hey, I can't blame you. I mean, to maintain an impressive figure like yours, I bet you make tough culinary choices all the time, am I right? You know, I have to say," he flashed his dimples, looking at her up and down, "you do not look like a woman who starves herself needlessly and works out in a gym. You have got this very natural, toned, lean figure. No disrespect meant at all."

For some reason, Pepper found herself blushing under his appreciative gaze.

Matteo scowled and opened his mouth but Dave said quickly, "Sorry, there was only one juice pack left and it is for Miss Potts."

The Dellon CEO stuck his hands back in his pocket and turned back to the presenter. For five minutes, they listened quietly. Then Matteo whispered aggressively at Dave, "Alright, hand it over."

"I am sorry, what?"

"Hand the soda over. I am thirsty too!"

"Oh! So now you don't mind having chemicals and fizz..."

"Just give it to me!"

"Alright, you are welcome."

He took it quickly from Dave without a word of thanks and opened the can with a loud "POP".

They were in the middle of the crowd gathered around the stall, listening to Dr. Kalvin and Pepper tried to hide her face as everyone turned around to stare at them. Even Dr. Kalvin had stopped mid-sentence, raising his bushy eyebrows.

Her ears were turning warm at the stares and she glared at Matteo.

This is just like third-grade lunch all over again.

The Dellon CEO also seemed embarrassed, especially since the soda had fizzled and was gushing out of the can onto the floor, leaving a dark purplish stain on the carpet. Some of it had also splashed liberally onto his shoes.

Dave smirked at him and said loudly, "Gee, Matti, don't you think you should get this cleaned up?"

Matteo looked at him with confusion and the officer gestured vividly, making a sweeping motion with his hands.

"Matti, get this off the floor!" He exclaimed, gently turning the European around and pointing at the administrative stall.

"Oh yes, scusa!"
The Dellon CEO walked away, muttering to himself and Dr. Kalvin resumed his lecture.

Pepper shook her head in irritation. Then she saw Dave laughing into his hand and put two and two together.

"Lieutenant, did you shake the can and then give to Matteo, on purpose?"

He smirked boyishly and she found herself smiling back.

"Don't rat me out, ma'am. I just wanted to teach that smug annoying ass a lesson." He clapped his hand over his mouth quickly. "Whoops, I swore! Sorry, ma'am."

"Lieutenant, it is perfectly alright. And please, call me Pepper."

"Please call me Dave. Pepper? Why, that's such a cute nickname! Where'd you get that from?"

She smiled softly, remembering the day as if it was yesterday.

"Mr. Stark, I insist that you look at these budget reports! The numbers are all over the place, you are being cheated out of millions of dollars!"

"Whoa! Whoa! Lady, calm down! I am going to have to call Security!"

"Security! Mr. Stark, can't you see that I am trying to help you! They better not lay a hand on me, because... because... I have pepper spray! And I am not afraid to use it!"

The devilishly handsome CEO of Stark Industries, immaculately clad in a grey Armani suit, had been lounging lazily in his chair. In a smooth, lithe movement, much like a panther, he stood up and circled the desk to stand beside her. The fragrance of chestnut, musk and motor oil hit her nostrils and she took a deep breath, trying to clear her head of the heady scent.

"Pepper spray, you say... I am curious. Where is it on you?"

Up close, she could see his soulful whiskey-brown eyes gleam as they raked her body. They lingered over her legs and she felt something ripple through her.

"I... it... I do have pepper spray! I am not bluffing!"

Then he looked at her directly.

"Unless you've hidden it in your shoes, I fail to see how you have pepper spray, Miss..."

"Potts."

She answered dumbly, unable to look away from those deep brown eyes, shimmering with an unholy light, gazing into hers.

"Potts... hmm... got a first name, Potts?" He asked softly.

"Virginia."
"Huh... your parents clearly wanted to punish you for some reason."

At that, she flushed and he murmured silkily, "I've never seen a woman do that before. Today is a day of firsts. I like you, Potts. You are hired."

She was dumbfounded. "Mr. Stark, I already work here. Did you mean to fire me?"

He smirked at her naughtily and she felt a jolt hit her, at the way his sinfully attractive mouth with its cupid bow lips, curved on his face.

"Of course not, Potts! Why would I fire the first honest person I've met in years? You are now my executive assistant. That means you work for me and only me. So take the day off today. Tomorrow, 11:00 am, you come straight here and report to me."

"Mr. Stark..."

"Call me, Tony. And I shall call you, Pepper. It suits you. Pepper. Pepper Potts."

"Pepper. Earth to Miss Potts! Hello!"

She came back to the present with a start and looked at Dave.

"Sorry, I drifted off there for a moment."

He laughed boyishly. "Yeah. I could see that. I was asking where you got your nickname from."

Pepper smiled mysteriously, unwilling to divulge one of her favorite memories of Tony Stark.

"I got it because of these." She tapped her nose lightly. "My freckles."

"You can hardly see them."

"They have become much lighter because..." she sighed sadly, "I haven't spent much time in the sun... something that I should do."

She pushed the straw through the carton and began to sip.

"Oh... I see... that's sad. I just came back from Washington myself and didn't have the time to..."

Pepper listened to him and then felt her phone buzz in her pocket.

"Just a minute, Dave." She said, opening the new message from Tony. She bit her lip, trying not to giggle at his rambling text.

"Okay, I am dying of curiosity here. What did he say that made you smile that way? Is it something funny? Or is it something about you? Wait, is it something dirty!? Is Mr. Officer saying something dirty? But you don't really like dirty jokes, so it can't be that... And why does he stare at you so much? Right now, he seems fascinated by your hair. Look, he's actually staring at the back of your head."
Pepper raised her head quickly and caught Lieutenant Dave looking at her hair with admiration. He flushed at her catching him and stammered, "I wasn't checking you out! It is just... you have such beautiful hair! It shines in the sunlight!"

He ruffled his hair, stepping from one toe to the other.

"Shucks, you caught me staring at you like some lovestruck teen! Darn it!"

She couldn't help but laugh at his sheepish expression.

"Dave, it is alright! Don't be embarrassed!"

Then she got another text.

"And now you are laughing together. So he's not only handsome. He's funny too."

Pepper looked around, searching for Tony.

She couldn't see him, so she typed, "Tony, will you stop hiding and come here? Please."

"No way. I am standing at a safe distance. You clearly do not need my services today. Not when you have Mr. Handsome Military man to keep you company."

Pepper sighed with exasperation but devilishly decided to trouble Tony some more.

_Silly Tony. It would serve him right to fret since he's obviously obsessing about my companions. I know he's close because he can see me... so I have to keep a neutral face... I do not want him to know I am teasing him._

So she typed back, "So even you agree that Dave is a handsome man. Don't you think he looks like a young Tom Cruise? With his smart, tight uniform and aviators. And he even has a chin dimple!"

She struggled to control her smile as she sent the text.

_Tony's going to reply in 5...4...3...2...1_

Her phone buzzed and Pepper read the message, clasping her hand over her mouth to stop her laughter.

"Tom Cruise?! Chin dimple!? Tight!?@##"

"Hey Pepper... who are you texting so much?"

She looked up at Dave and replied, "Oh... just my fiance. He's not here but he's... he's busy keeping tabs on me. Concerned that I am all alone here."

The officer looked at her through his lashes. "Oh my, I forgot. Isn't your fiance, Tony Stark? The founder of Stark Industries."

Before Pepper could reply, she heard Chad speak from behind her, in his slow, cold drawl,

"Oh, he wasn't the founder. That would be his father, Howard Stark, the real genius of Stark Industries."

Pepper looked at him as he stepped forward and slowly circled the two of them.
She said softly, "Howard Stark founded Stark Industries way back in World War II. At that time, it was purely involved in weapons manufacturing for the U.S. government, using technology advanced for its time. Tony may have inherited the company but he did so at a very young age and transformed it. He turned it into a tech conglomerate, focusing on technological research, real-life applications and energy management."

Chad narrowed his eyes at her and smiled coldly. "Ah but Miss Potts, you are leaving out a very important part of this... transformation."

Pepper looked at him curiously.

There is a smile on his face but his eyes are so cold... and empty? No, not empty... there is a quiet rage within them.

Chad said, "You see, Lieutenant, Miss Potts fails to mention, that in 2008, Tony Stark completely shut down the weapons manufacturing division. Which was the backbone of Stark Industries. With this action, he single-handedly kicked a lot of honest workers out of their jobs, left the U.S. govt in the lurch and destroyed his father's legacy. And all because Tony had..."

He gestured derisively,

"A life-changing experience."

Pepper was stunned by his vitriolic words. Dave coughed and murmured, "Okay, this is awkward."

Chad turned towards her. "I'm sure you are going to differ with me, Miss Potts."

"Chad, while it is true that Tony shut down the weapons division, the impact of that decision wasn't as bleak as you put it. No one lost their jobs. All the manufacturing workers in that division, were placed in other departments with the same salary. As for the research scientists, most of them joined the new department of electromagnetic Arc technology. That's right, Tony created a new department to look into the benefits of that technology, seeing how it had helped him. Scientists were also allowed to join whichever department they chose or leave the company with a two-month's salary. And no one left Stark Industries."

He snorted but she continued firmly, "Tony honored all the open contracts that existed between the company and the government at that time. He just didn't renew them for another year. And with regards to his father's legacy, Howard Stark was a genius and his son is one too. Perhaps an even greater genius. Where his father restricted himself to weapons, Tony expanded his horizon to include many technological areas."

"And he went through a lot in Afghanistan! Enough to change the way he looked at the world. Things were simpler in his father's time. There was a World War going on. The country had to be defended and weapons were needed to fight against an evil force. But in 2008, there was a different type of war going on and Tony saw first hand, how his weapons were being used to kill innocent people, not to fight evil. Not only did he stop making weapons, he decided to help the innocent by becoming-"

"By becoming Iron Man, a defender of good and all that blah." Sneered Chad, cutting her off mid-sentence. "Yeah! Sure! Because Stark has done a whole lot of good as a super hero. The people of Sokovia can attest to that."

Knowing that the Avengers activities in Sokovia, were a sensitive topic, Pepper took a deep breath to choose her next words carefully.
But before she could speak, Lieutenant Dave said passionately, "Hey buddy, Iron Man has made some mistakes. Who hasn't? But he has always worked for the greater good. He defended New York so stalwartly against the alien invasion. And don't forget, he nearly killed himself, flying up a wormhole with a nuke on his back, again trying to save people. Sokovia was a mess, granted. But he and the Avengers were trying their best to stop an evil AI with a massive robot army! What if the robots had managed to overrun the US, instead of Sokovia?"

"Oh yeah! Who created the evil AI in the first place? The Avengers! No, I bet it was Stark in all his glory! It is something he does always! Steps in and shows off that his inventions are going to save things!"

Pepper stared at Chad, astounded by his vehemence. 

*He's viciously attacking Tony. There's something afoot here.*

Out loud, she said softly, "Chad, were you in Sokovia? Did you lose... someone near to you? Because of the Avengers in Sokovia?"

Chad stared at her blankly for a moment and then muttered, "No."

"But then... you are saying Tony always steps in and shows off about his genius. Where and when have you seen that happening? The Avengers worked as a team. Any decisions they took, they took together."

Chad opened his mouth and then shut it rapidly. He seemed to realize he had revealed too much.

Then Pepper remembered his words to Tony when they first met. 

"You said you went to MIT... do you know Tony from then?"

Chad clenched his jaw and said bitterly, "Stark and I were in the same class. Thermo-nuclear physics. He was a little prick, running around after girls, getting top in class with minimum effort and showing off about his genius and wealth."

She said gently, "Chad, I understand that Tony's behavior must have seemed difficult but you need to understand that he wasn't as emotionally mature as you and your other classmates. He joined MIT as a precocious 15 year old. He may have been a technological prodigy but he was still a teen and of course, was going to act childishly."

"Stark bought his seat at MIT." He muttered churlishly.

Pepper tightened her jaw but spoke calmly, "You know that MIT's application procedure is stringent and thorough. They accept admission applications, only from the best and the brightest. They would not have taken a 15 year old boy as a student unless he really was exceptionally gifted and could study engineering at such a young age."

Chad waved his hands dismissively. "Whatever. He was a kid, but he's still a vain, egoistic bastard and Iron Man is just another way for him to show off. The suit is just an extension of his ego."

These harsh words enraged Pepper. She had had enough of Tony bashing.

Dave whistled low in shock and started, "Hey buddy, don't-"

She raised her hand and he fell silent.
Looking straight at Chad, Pepper spoke in a low calm tone, "Listen to me carefully. You think you know Tony. But you don't. You do not know all the times, that Tony Stark has put the lives of others before his own. You have not seen all the times, when he has walked into certain death, just to save someone else. You do not know how many sleepless nights he has spent, thinking about the ones he couldn't save, the ones who have fallen because he didn't reach there in time or because of his weapons. You know nothing, Harrington. Absolutely nothing. So don't you dare try to insult Tony Stark by saying everything he does, is for the sake of his ego. Don't you dare!"

She was pleased to see Chad back away, blinking in shock.

But he recovered enough to say jeeringly, "It amazes me that someone as smart as you, Virginia, can't see Tony Stark for what he truly is."

Pepper countered, now pissed off beyond measure. "Mr. Stark is a good man but envious snakes of your ilk will never see that."

Chad aggressively shook his head and she pressed on, "Admit it Harrington, you were envious of Tony Stark as a young man and you remained envious all these years. You may have a nice degree and a fancy career but actually... you haven't grown up at all."

"Fuck you. And fuck Stark."

Pepper advanced on him threateningly.

"You really think you can scare me with language? I am warning you, Harrington. If I catch you walking around, insulting Tony and his deeds, I will kick your ass myself and damn the consequences!"

"You can't say that! I have every right to say what I want!"

She took two more steps forward. "Don't test me, Harrington! I have a good mind to have you thrown out for harassment!"

At this, Chad turned quickly and walked away in a hurry. Dave and Pepper watched him storm off towards the end of the Hall and disappear out of a doorway.

"Wow!" Dave exclaimed loudly. "That was some argument, Pepper! The way you rounded on that guy! Damn!"

She blinked hard, trying to calm herself. Then she ran her fingers through her hair.

"He deserved it. He shouldn't have spoken like that about Tony."

"Yeah! And you were right to call him out on his jealousy! Hey, Dr. Fishy's lecture is over. Want to grab something to eat?"

Pepper looked around and saw that the floor was nearly empty. Dr. Fishodour was putting away his disgusting specimens, other stalls were packing up as well and most of the crowd was drifting away towards the right side of the hall.

She looked down at her phone and sighed with sadness.

_No messages from Tony. Guess I am truly on my own then._

Then she looked at Dave and smiled. "Why not?"
He offered her his arm and she took it. Together, they followed the crowd out of the hall.

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter tomorrow. Where Pepper and Tony finally reunite.
Thank you for all the Kudos and comments so far.

Next week, no chapters because I am participating in Kinktober and need to complete my submission.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

1:30 pm

The tiny canteen outside the Convention Center was bustling with scientists, business people and the workers on their lunch break. Luckily Dave had managed to snag a small high table with two bar stools.

They sat together in a companionable silence, eating tuna sandwiches and salads, while sipping on iced teas.

Dave broke the silence, saying, "Man, this is such beautiful weather."

She looked at him, staring up at the bright sunshine and clear blue sky with admiration.

"The perfect day to go climbing."

"Climbing? You climb mountains?"

"Why, yes, Ma'am." He grinned widely at her. "That's my weekend pleasure. I set out at 6 in the morning, find the nearest range and enjoy myself for 3-4 hours."

"That's really impressive. And I thought all Army men do, to keep fit is pushups and pullups."

He laughed loudly, shaking his head at her. "Miss Potts!"
She smirked at him. "I'm just teasing you, Dave, don't mind me."

"Have you ever gone climbing?"

"I have. But only at a local indoor sports arena."

"Oh, I see. So what do you do to keep fit?"

"Yoga and swimming every day. Pilates and cross-training on the weekends."

Pepper smiled to herself. "And recently I started Krav Maga classes."

Then she laughed at Dave's raised eyebrows.

"Wow! And I thought I was fit! What do you do to just relax?"

"Yoga is very relaxing. It helps you calm your spirit while engaging your muscles. You should try it out sometime, Dave."

To her amusement, the officer flushed.

He leaned closer. "Truth is... I have been secretly attending a few classes at the women's club off base. And you are so right, it is very calming. I have become so flexible as well."

"That's great! But why in secret?"

He rolled his eyes. "Won't look good for my tough manly image to be caught wearing tights and going into Downward dog!"
She giggled at the thought and Dave said seriously, "Exactly! The boys at the base will have a field day!"

Pepper placed her hand on his. "Don't worry, Officer. It will be our little secret."

They smiled at each other and then his phone rang loudly.

"Just a minute, Pepper."

He picked up the phone.

"Hello.

Yes, this is Lieutenant Dave Ordal. Who is this?

Oh Colonel! I wasn't expecting your call so early."

He smiled at Pepper.

"This is such a coincidence. I am at the Aodoite Conference right now, having lunch with a good friend of yours. Miss Virginia Potts of Stark Industries."

She looked at him curiously and Dave said, "It is Colonel Rhodes on the phone."

"Oh, Rhodey!"

"Yes, sir, tell me what can I do for you?"

Pepper could hear Rhody's voice in the background, telling Dave something and the officer listened to him gravely.

"Do they need me right now? Really? I thought..." he looked at Pepper and then at his watch. "I thought I'd be here till 5. No, it's alright, I understand. Alright, Colonel. I will do so on the double."
Yes. Thank you. Bye bye."

He put his phone down and sighed sadly. Then he slid off the bar stool.

"What is it, Dave?"

"Pepper, I'm afraid I have to return to the base. As soon as possible. Some high-ranking officials want to discuss my visit to France last month. There are the US-French War Games coming up soon and they want to plan contingents, timings and all that administrative stuff. A meeting was scheduled for 8 pm but they are free now and so..."

Dave shrugged sadly. "I got to go. But I really don't want to."

Pepper said softly, "Which lecture did you want to attend? The upcoming panel discussion or-"

He whispered softly, clutching her hand and squeezing it softly.

"I don't want to go because I want to spend more time with you. I've never met a woman like you, Pepper."

She was struck speechless, especially by the way his sky-blue eyes were solemnly gazing into her own.

"Dave... I..."

He smiled sadly, his eyes flickering with emotion.

"I know, I know, you have a fiance and you love him and I know I don't have a chance in hell but sometimes... some things just have to be said."

Pepper still didn't know what to do, so she just kept quiet. Dave turned towards the stairs and then looked back at her.
"Tony Stark is a damn lucky man. If I had a girl like you, Pepper, I wouldn't fly off into space so often. I'd stay here and do my best to make you happy, any way I could."

She flushed at that and he put his aviators on and walked down the stairs. He reached the bottom, waved at her and then disappeared into the sunshine.

For a long moment, Pepper sat quietly at the table, thinking about what he said.

Then she checked her phone for messages and huffed with exasperation because there weren't any new ones.

She typed, "Tony, I am finally alone. Where are you? I was at the food stand outside the Conference hall and am going back inside. If you are around, please come to the entrance. If you have left... well, tell me and I'll leave too."

Then she stood up and left the stand, slowly climbing up the stairs to the Conference entrance. Some scientists were gathered outside the doorway, engrossed in a loud discussion. They saw her walk towards the entry door and hushed.

Pepper recognized one of them, a thin bespectacled young man with a long nose and wispy blonde hair. She smiled widely at him. He turned red and waved at her shyly. She waved back.

Then the air filled with the smell of a cloying, vaguely familiar cologne and Pepper sighed inwardly. She felt someone behind her and fixed a smile on her face before turning.

"Virginia! Darling! So glad I could find you!" said Matteo effusively, reaching for her hands and holding them tight.

"Hey Matti... I was just having lunch with Dave at the stand."

"Lunch? And you didn't call me?" He raised one perfectly styled eyebrow at her and she said simply, "I'm sorry. We looked around for you after Dr. Fishodour's lecture but couldn't find you."
"No matter. I stepped out for lunch myself. Come. Walk with me through the gardens for a while."

She opened her mouth to object politely but Matteo just took her arm and tucked it into his and once again, Pepper found herself being led away.

They circled the Conference Hall, walking on the green lawn, passing the neatly gardened flower beds and ornamental trees.

Pepper took in the scenery, lost in own her thoughts. It was easy to do so because her companion was just blathering on and on about his self-made entrepreneurial life in Europe, without giving her a chance to talk.

*I wonder what is going to happen in Wakanda. I wonder what Steve and the others have planned to do... wait, from the way Rhodey spoke, it doesn't seem as if they have a plan... except for Thor. He wants to find his people. The poor man... sorry, god. He lost his planet and his people. At least...* 

She took a deep breath, determined to ignore Matteo's strong perfume and focus on the smell of the flowers in bloom.

*At least, we still have Earth. It isn't perfect but its home.*

She looked around her at the flowers in their beds, riotous pockets of bright color against the freshly mowed, green grass, shining in the bright afternoon sun.

*Everything is in bloom... Good things and bad things happen but life... life goes on whether we like it or not. And I know... I know that Tony is going to go back into space... I just know it. And then what? I remain here on Earth, wondering what is happening to him in the stars? Watching the skies, waiting and praying for him to return... the cycle of living in his absence, haven't I done this before? But what choice do I have? I can't stop him from leaving.*

Pepper sighed heavily and looked at Matteo, who was still talking. Now he had moved on to how he managed to acquire Dellon Tech at a huge profit, using his business acumen.

She quietly looked back at the flowers. A lone red daffodil amongst a bed of yellow daffodils, caught her eye. Its bright redness made it stand out starkly against the yellowness of the other flowers and suddenly it hit Pepper.
Isn't that my Tony? Defiantly standing out from the crowd. The lone mortal man working alongside gods and super soldiers and genetically mutated beings. He gets bruised and broken but he picks himself up each time and rejoins the fight. A creator who stays up all night, tinkering away tirelessly in his basement, perfecting his own designs. A civilian who fought his way out of hell and back, enduring torture and shrapnel in his chest. A man born with a silver spoon in his mouth, who turned his back on his wealth, just to right the wrongs his profits had created. A good man who puts himself in danger each time, trying to save the innocent, even when he knows the odds are against him.

She looked back at Matteo, still talking about his exploits and smiled to herself.

And truth be told, I fell in love with that man. And I still love that man and will love him till the end of my days. I can't change him. Nor can I tell him to stop doing good. I just need to think... how I can help him, how I can have his back... how can I protect him?

Then she felt her phone buzz and quickly looked at Tony's message:

"There's a panel discussion on different energy-related problems plaguing industries today and how alternative means of energy could help. It is in Room 23 B and starts in forty-five minutes but you need to sign up now. You could participate as a speaker on Stark Industries behalf. Would you like to?"

Pepper smiled with joy.

Tony is still here somewhere. Oh and he's thinking about me! I've got to be there!

She typed back quickly, "I am in the garden with Matteo. We will circle back. Please meet me at Room 23 B."

Matteo was still talking, so she cleared her throat. When he looked at her, she said gently, "Matteo, I need to go back inside. There is a panel discussion that I am interested in joining."

"Of course, Virginia. Let us go back."

They turned around and began to walk back the way they came. Matteo was silent for once and
Pepper was relieved because she was busy fretting.

*Of course Matteo is going to come with me. No one seems to want to leave me alone! Now what do I do about Tony? I know how he gets when he's jealous. All snarky and scowly and pouty.*

Then she remembered the way Chad had dismissed Tony on meeting him, with the rude slur about being a sellout.

*I hope Matteo doesn't start talking about American companies and their ineffective leaders again... I do not know how Tony will react... and Dave isn't around! He could have helped break the tension!*

She was so lost in her worrying, that she didn't even notice that they had reached the building.

Matteo stopped and turned to her.

"My dear Virginia, I completely forgot to ask what this panel discussion is about."

"It is about the different energy-related problems plaguing industries today and how alternative sources of energy could help. I find such discussions fascinating."

Matteo smiled widely at her. "No doubt you would, my darling but I just wonder if there is any real worth in you participating."

Pepper tensed, sensing she was not going to like what the Dellon Ceo said next.

"Now I always speak my mind, so I am just going to come out and say it. I fail to see what you would contribute to such a discussion. Being who you are."

He paused and she said coolly, "Being who I am? What does that mean, Matteo? Are you implying that because I am a woman, I cannot."

The Dellon Ceo interrupted her disarmingly, "My dear, I would never say that! That's extremely sexist! No, what I meant is that you have no experience in engineering neither have you studied
a scientific discipline. So how could you weigh in on such matters? It is best you leave these sort of
discussions to the experts."

His patronizing tone made Pepper grit her teeth but Matteo had zeroed in on her exact fear.

*These people are so much smarter than I am. Doctorate holders, scientists and engineers... and then
there's me... a bachelor's degree in commerce from a small college in Kansas... I do not like what
he's saying but he has a point... What if I embarrass Tony or Stark Industries by saying something
foolish? Oh I really shouldn't have come for this conference!*

She pushed her hair back distractedly.

"Matteo..." Pepper began and then turned at the sound of a throat being cleared.

There were too many things going through her mind, for her to appreciate that finally Tony was there
beside her.

"Miss Potts," he said solemnly, his whiskey-brown eyes searching hers through his spectacles. "If
you will come this way please. I took the liberty of signing you up."

"Ton-Stuart!" she caught herself in time. "I... well, I do not know if..."

"Your boss won't be joining the panel." Said Matteo directly.

Pepper glared at him for speaking for her but then was distracted by Tony's eyes hardening
dangerously as he looked at Matteo.

"Is that so?" He said quietly.

"I ... I do not know if I am the right person to speak for Stark Industries, on these matters."

Tony looked back at her. "Why aren't you the right person?" He asked softly.
Pepper shrugged, confused by her own thoughts. "I don't know much on this subject. I just..."

She looked at him, willing him to understand wordlessly what she was going through.

*I do not want to embarrass myself. I am not confident about speaking because this is not my area of expertise. I am sorry.*

Tony nodded slightly and she lowered her gaze with a sigh.

Then Pepper heard him say softly, "Miss Potts, you aren't going to embarrass yourself. For the last 8 years, you have been successfully leading a company that handles different projects and uses varied sources of energy for its production. So I think there's no one better placed to talk about energy-related problems in the industry."

She looked up as his warm firm fingers clutched her hand.

Tony's brown eyes had softened to molten chocolate brown pools and she felt her heart clench at the emotion in them.

"Think of all the times you have faced impossible odds and battled through them." He whispered, his lips curving. "Hell, you have faced the Stark Board so many times and explained impossibly difficult things to them. They are so set in their ways but yet you manage to make them see your point of view. In comparison, this is nothing! Just a panel of eggheads debating on energy."

She couldn't help but giggle and Tony grinned at her.

Then he murmured softly, "Mr. Stark always said that you are the most capable, qualified, trustworthy person he's ever met. If he were here... you know he'd insist that you speak. He wouldn't trust anyone else to do so."

Pepper felt something ease and flow through her like a gentle warmth. She instinctively tightened her grip on his, squeezing them in thanks as she smiled at him.
Tony smiled at her in response and raised her hand. She knew he was going to kiss her palm as was his habit and she would have let him do so but he stopped himself in time and lowered it quickly.

Pepper looked sideways at Matteo and struggled to control her laughter at his expression of bemusement.

He looked from her to Tony and said musingly, "Hey, you two seem to be pretty friendly with each other for being boss and employee. How'd you even become friends? You are his CEO and he's just a lab technician."

Tony widened his eyes and stammered, "Well... erm... Miss Potts is pretty nice to all the employees."

She interjected crisply, "Matteo, the truth is that Mr. Johnson isn't 'just' a lab technician. He is one of Stark Industries oldest employees, who joined us straight out of college, thanks to his amazing grades in MIT. And..."

She clasped Tony's shoulder, uncaring of Matteo's shock, "and he is especially very near and dear to me. He has always supported me and has helped me to reach where I am today."

"Really?" asked Matteo skeptically. Tony was just goggling at her like a goldfish, so she turned slightly towards Matteo and said sternly, "Yes. He is my man Friday."

Pepper giggled as Tony laughed out loud and then controlled himself, his eyes sparkling at her words.

"And that is why he is going to speak at this panel with me."

Matteo said with a laugh, "Virginia, come on. That's taking it a bit too far. The panel is for CEOs only."

Tony was also looking at her incredulously, so she retorted, "No, it isn't. The panel is for people who have experience dealing with energy-related problems in their industry. Based on Stu's immense
experience and studies, he is just as ideally suited for this panel as I am, perhaps even more so."

Pepper leaned closer to Tony and whispered, "And then I have him by my side, right where I want him and where I need him."

"I sincerely doubt you are going to need my help, Potts." He whispered back, smirking at her.

"So it is settled."

Saying so, she took Tony's hand and tucked it firmly into her own. Pepper gently led him into the building, aware that Matteo was following them close behind.

"Which room is it in, Stu?"

"Erm... the big one down the hall. I think that's the entrance, over there."

They walked towards a large two-door entrance. A woman dressed in the Adoite Center staff uniform, stood at the entrance, checking off names from a clip board as people entered the room.

When they reached her, she said, "Miss Potts, so glad that you could make it. Please proceed onto the stage and someone will show you to your seat."

"Thank you. Mr. Johnson will also be accompanying me."

The woman seemed flustered at that, looking at her and Tony nervously.

"Miss Potts, I am not sure that is-"

Pepper interrupted with a smile, "I would like it so very much if Mr. Johnson could speak with me. After all, for a lively discussion, we need to consider all points of view, not just CEOs and Managing Directors. Don't you agree, Mr. Matteo?"
Matteo looked as if he was going to disagree but she arched her eyebrows at him and he said, "Yes!" quickly.

The woman thought hard and then said, "Alright, Miss Potts."

She quickly wrote down Tony's fake name on the clipboard.

Pepper thanked her and they entered the large arena and climbed up the stage. They were shown to a table with a placard saying "Stark Industries" placed on it. Tony and her sat down while Matteo stood, looking around indecisively.

"Where is my table?" He asked out loud and from the dimly lit seating area, a young Asian man with pimples, came forward.

"Mr. Demarcos, Sir, I did not know you wanted to participate in this panel discussion! I am afraid you are not signed up."

"What! Well! Go get it done!"

Pepper noticed that the young man paused for a second to exchange looks with Tony. Then he nodded ever so slightly and ran towards the entrance.

She looked at Tony and was immediately suspicious because of the wide-eyed innocent look he gave her.

Before she could ask him what he was up to, Matteo said casually, "So Stuart, is it? I am sure you have met Mr. Stark being such an old employee."

Tony looked at him curiously and replied, "I have. Many a time."

"Well then!" Matteo pulled a chair and sat down right next to her. "So what was it like meeting Iron Man?"
The incongruity of his question and the priceless look on Tony's face made Pepper laugh loudly.

Matteo said jovially, "Virginia, I know it sounds funny but I can hardly ask you this question! You have known Tony Stark for so long. It isn't really fair. I am looking for a fresh opinion from someone who barely knows him but has met him."

He turned back to Tony.

"Come now, Stu, don't be shy to express your opinion in front of Miss Potts here. Tell me the truth."

"Oh! I am not being shy!" retorted Tony. "I simply do not know what to say... I mean..." He cringed. "What can I say, I am a fan."

Matteo nodded eagerly and then surprised them both by saying gushingly, "I have never met a super hero but if I ever got to meet one, I would love to meet Iron Man! I've admired the man for years! A self-made hero who built his own super-powered suit!"

Pepper grinned, amazed at his childish enthusiasm.

*And here I thought he'd be cynical and criticizing, just like he was about other American things.*

Tony said dryly, "I am sure Mr. Stark would have loved to meet you, Mr. Demarcos. Especially..." he paused and cast a sideways glance at Pepper, "since you are getting along so very well with Miss Potts."

Matteo smiled, flashing his dimples at them. He leaned forward and clasped Pepper's hand, which she had placed on her lap.

"I was looking forward to meeting Mr. Stark but when Virginia here, showed up at the breakfast meet, I quickly got over my disappointment. Virginia..."

He raised her hand, his eyes sparkling at her, "Virginia, you are an incomparable, my dear. Behind every successful man, is a woman and that is so true in Mr. Stark's case because he has you. They broke the mold when they made you, darling."
Before she could reply, he brushed his lips across her fingers, his eyes never leaving hers.

Pepper smiled with hesitation, suddenly nervous.

*Oh god, why is this man always so touchy-feely? Tony's right there!*

She lightly pulled her hand out of Matteo's, trying not to be rude.

"Matteo, you... you are too generous with your praise."

"No, my dear! I think not! Wouldn't you agree, Stuart?"

Tony was loosening his tie, his frame tense, his dark eyes focused and gleaming on Matteo like a tiger on its prey. He moved his clenched jaw and muttered, "Oh I definitely agree. There truly is no one like Pep-, I mean, Miss Potts! That Tony Stark is one lucky fiance. Speaking of fiances, are you married, Mr. Demarcos?"

Pepper tried to glare at Tony for the question but Matteo replied easily, "No and I have never felt like something was missing... until..." he grew serious, "I met Virginia this morning and realized exactly what was missing."

She sighed with exasperation but Matteo didn’t take her hint and just continued gazing at her with adoration.

"Matteo..." she began, thinking hard on how to politely tell him to stop flirting,

"Virginia, this weekend, I will be on my yacht 'The Bellisimo' in Laguna Beach. Why don't you and Mr. Stark come over? You live in Malibu, right? It is close, no?"

"NO." said Tony firmly.
They both looked at him, Pepper widening her eyes.

He said quickly, "I meant that Malibu is not close to Laguna Beach. Not at all."

Matteo frowned in confusion. "Huh... okay, no problem. It is a yacht, I... I can drive it up the beach, to Malibu. How far away is Malibu?"

Pepper was at her wit's end.

This is a nightmare, I have a very persistent suitor who now wants to meet Tony as well. And I have Mr. Stark right here, who looks like he is going to explode with rage. When will this damn discussion start?! I need some sort of distraction!

Chapter End Notes

Some of you may not like that I’ve shown Pepper being insecure again, this time about her experience in technical matters. BUT it is a proven fact that women underestimate their abilities whereas men overestimate the same. And it happens to all women, be they college students or CEOs, women experience a lot of self-doubt and take steps back, even if they are more than capable of handling the situation. Why? That hasn't been found yet.

Here's an interesting article elaborating on this fact:
https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/05/the-confidence-gap/359815/

Also, the technology sphere is one of the areas where women feel doubly insecure because it is a male-dominated area. And while Pepper may be a master in financial matters, it is realistic for her to feel less confident about speaking about something she has not studied primarily. Especially to an audience of experts, including Tony Stark.
Additionally, us science folks are reaaaallly good at making people feel insecure about their education. Any argument and their key phrase is "Well, have you studied engineering?" "Have you worked in science?" "What is there to study in literature, darling?" "Have you ever tried coding?". The irony is that sometimes engineers and scientists are extremely insecure themselves, so they should be more sympathetic but they aren't.

I work in IT and studied science, so I can say this :P

Agree, disagree with my PSA? Let me know in the comments. But please no Pepper bashing!
Tony shoved his hands into his pockets as he watched Pepper and Demarcos talk.

*She's an engaged woman, for god's sake! Stop flirting with her!*

He clenched his jaw hard as Demarcos once again, picked up Pepper's hand and squeezed it tightly, like a lover would.

*And stop touching my girl! You do not need to touch her to talk to her!*

His rage was buzzing in his head so loudly, that he could hardly hear what they were saying, even though they were right next to him.

*Do you have to sit so close to Pepper?! Come on, buddy! I'll bet if Tony Stark was here, you wouldn't be so friendly!*

Then a devilish voice whispered in his head, "*Ah but Tony Stark is here, isn't he?*"

Tony shook his head slightly. *Yes BUT I am is in disguise.*

*Why do you need to stay in disguise? You have been hiding in the background long enough... because of this, other men have decided to try and get with your girl... and by the looks of it, their attempts aren't unwelcome...*

He looked at Demarcos, his nostrils flaring as he observed the handsome lothario.
leaning towards Pepper, too close for his liking, their knees touching, him still holding her hand.

*Come off it, Pepper wouldn't...*

*Oh she wouldn't but you can't blame a girl for being tempted, can you, Stark?* hissed the voice silkily. *Thanks to her companions, Pepper hasn't needed you, the entire day. Does that feel good?*

He swallowed hard and looked away from them.

*You can turn away but you can't deny it. First Chad, handsome, debonair and smart, then Officer Handsome, a young Tom Cruise in Pepper's own words, talking to her for so long, a military man... the kind of man that takes care of his woman... who wouldn't leave her to go fight aliens in space... and come back a loser.*

*I am not a loser...*

*But you aren't a winner either, Stark. And ultimately, your girl had to come save your sorry ass. Because no one else would. Don't you think she must be tired of always having to save you and then fix you up? Again and again.*

He looked at Pepper, who was patiently listening to Demarcos.

*Pepper loves me.*

*She does. She really does.* whispered the voice.

*But don't you think an amazing woman like that, would want someone normal? Someone in their prime. Without a hole in their chest, scratched and scarred all over. Someone who didn't stay up all night with nightmares... and who had friends... real friends, not super-soldiers and spies. Someone who would be there for date nights and promised dinners.*

At that, his heart thumped painfully as he remembered all the times he had stood Pepper up for urgent missions.
Look at Demarcos talking to her, complimenting her... a man of the world, smart and rich and handsome... everything you say you are... except that isn't true anymore, is it, Stark? You are just a tired old man rattling in a tin can, getting beaten up by aliens and watching the ones you swore to protect, die in front of you. Ask yourself, do you think someone like you, deserves a girl like Pepper?

Tony didn't know how to answer that and truth be told, didn't want to. He blinked hard to clear his head and then realized that both Pepper and Demarcos had stopped talking and were looking at him.

"What? I didn't say anything."

Pepper looked at him with concern in her blue eyes. She asked softly, "You have been pacing restlessly for the last five minutes and then stopped abruptly. Is something the matter?"

"Erm... welll... I... eh..."

"Hey, buddy." Demarcos said with a smile. "You look like you need to take a walk. Get me something to drink, will ya?"

Tony narrowed his eyes threateningly at him but he just grinned inanely and held out a dollar.

Pepper said to him gently, "Matteo, I-"

She was interrupted by the loud beat of "Talk Dirty To Me" suddenly playing from somewhere on Demarcos' person.

"Escusa, my phone. One moment." He picked up his phone and stood up.

The corners of Tony's mouth twitched as the Dellon CEO turned away from them, talking softly in a foreign tongue. Then he started talking louder and waved his hands about wildly.

An Adoite Center employee came on the stage and pointed politely towards the awning, so
Demarcos stalked off the stage, still talking loudly.

Tony's grin widened on his face.

*Park! You brilliant son of a bitch! I could kiss you!*  

Then he felt his hand being squeezed softly and turned to look into Pepper's brilliantly deep blue eyes, her face so close to him.

"Tony, honey, where the hell have you been all this while?" She whispered, her lips grazing his ear as she kept one eye on the attendant, who was walking around the stage, arranging chairs.

"I was around... here and there..."

*Spying on you with Friday's help...*

Pepper leaned on him slightly, sighing and he smiled with pleasure.

"I am so sorry, Tony, I couldn't spend any time with you today, thanks to all these..." She shook her head and gestured at Demarcos in the distance.

"Distractions?" He completed mischievously and then yelped as she pinched his arm lightly. Just then, some more people joined them on stage and Pepper wound her fingers in his.

"I am holding on to you, Stark. I am not letting you out of my sight this time." She whispered with a smile in her voice and he chuckled.

The staff member came towards them, carrying another table followed by another attendant, carrying two chairs. They set the table down, right next to theirs, followed by the chairs down. A placard was placed on the table, reading "Dellon Technologies".

Pepper sighed tiredly. "Of course, Matteo will sit right next to us."
Tony grinned to himself secretly.

*Don’t worry, Pep. If my plan has worked, which I am sure it has, we will finally be free of that flirtatious pest.*

Out loud, he said, “Pepper, let’s sit down. People are filing in.”

They sat down and he turned inwards to adjust his fake beard surreptitiously.

Pepper gently swatted his hand on his face. "It looks fine, Tony, don't worry."

"It gets a bit itchy from time to time." He grumbled, scratching his jaw. "But I think it is very effective. No one has even the faintest idea of who I am."

"The long beard may disguise your face but it can't hide your beautiful brown eyes."

Tony thought hard for a moment. "But Pep, I don't think my eyes are that distinctive."

Pepper huffed and whispered, "Of course they are but you just cover them up all the time with those fancy sunglasses of yours. That's why no one can completely place you in this disguise. I bet if you wore sunglasses, the beard wouldn't work at all."

She had a playful half smile on her face and he smirked at her.

"Rocking the shades... that's the Tony Stark look, baby... the look that everyone loves..."

Pepper snorted. "Yes, Mr. Stark. Believe me, I am well aware of your look."

He looked around quickly and saw there was no one nearby. Tony tapped her nose.
"But I know, Potts, with great certainty, that you prefer my... other signature look."

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Are you talking about your Iron Man suit? Yes! I am mesmerized by the sight of you in your titanium alloy, hot-rod red suit. Sure!"

Tony laughed. "That ain't it. I am talking about my evening wear look, Potts. You know... black tie, Armani suit, dress shoes..."

For a moment, Pepper looked at him thoughtfully and then leaned closer, placing her hand on his arm.

She moistened her lips and whispered sultrily, "Truth be told, my favorite Stark look is something quite different. The look I love is you in Workshop mode... with your tight, sweaty undershirt and faded jeans... the look you get when you are busy tinkering away at your suit or your cars, your hair all disheveled and your hands stained with grease."

Tony stared at her, dumbfounded. "That's the look you love? Seriously?! But you are such a neat freak, I thought..."

"It is true that I am a fanatic for cleanliness but..." she purred softly, "when I see you all hot and sweaty, I just have the dirtiest thoughts, Stark... I just want to rip that greasy shirt off and have my wicked way with you, right there in the garage."

Tony swallowed hard, suddenly feeling very warm.

"Wow... erm... Pepper... I..."

Her blue eyes twinkled at him and he was thinking of an equally teasingly filthy retort when they heard a loud exclamation of "Merda!"

Pepper lifted her head and they turned towards the edge of the stage just as Demarcos came bounding up its stairs.
She squeezed his arm and whispered, "I know he's an ass but please bear with him for a little while longer, Tony."

He controlled his smirk. "Oh, don't worry, Pep... I will be the perfect gentleman."

Demarcos came towards them, looking extremely flustered.

"Virginia!" he exclaimed, reaching out for Pepper's hands and lightly pulling her to her feet.

"I came to say goodbye, my darling. I must leave urgently. The most horrible thing has happened!"

"Matteo, what is it?"

He shook his head in agitation and looked around wildly.

"I tell you quickly. I told you about my boat, si? The Bellisimo. Well, I just got a call from the Captain. Some US department of the environment and protecting it... protect the environment, oh! What is its name?"

"The EPA?"

"Yes! That's the name! The EPA! They have quarantined my bella yacht and have boarded it forcibly and are tearing my precious apart!" Then Demarcos started exclaiming loudly in a foreign tongue, waving his arms around.

"But Matteo," Pepper asked curiously, "Why?"

He huffed and whispered loudly, "Apparently they received an anonymous tip, that the Bellisimo has been leaking sewage into the Laguna bay! Toxic sewage! And it has been doing so, all the way from the Mediterranean! So it has left a trail of contamination in its wake! But! This is! I mean, it is ludicrous to even suggest to the extreme! And the agency! They aren't listening to my crew, they won't talk to my lawyer, they just want me there, right now! Else they are going to have me arrested!"
Me! This is an outrage! I am a respected man of industry! I should not be treated like this!"

Pepper gasped in shock. Just then Park came hesitantly towards them.

"Mr. Demarcos, sir, your car is outside, waiting for you. Your driver asked me to call you."

"What!" He barked and the young man jumped. "So soon! I told him I need an hour! How dare he! I won't go!"

Park wrung his hands nervously, so Pepper said gently, "Matteo, it is going to be alright. You are innocent, you have nothing to fear. If you want my advice, go meet the EPA. Don't antagonize them, it will make things worse. Talk to them personally and see how this can be settled."

"Oh but that means I am going to have to drop out of this panel! How embarrassing!"

Tony cleared his throat and said smoothly, "Mr. Demarcos, I am sure Park here, can take your place at the panel. This will ensure that Dellon Tech is represented."

Demarcos stared at him blankly until Park said, "He means me, sir. I can speak for the company."

"Yeah... sure whatever."

Park's face lit up with joy and he grinned happily at Tony.

"Thank you, Mr. Demarcos. Ill get Melvin to be my partner!"

He scurried off happily while Demarcos took Pepper's hand and raised it to his lips.

He said theatrically, "Sweet lovely Virginia. I am so sorry we have to part so soon. I wanted to spend more time with you. But I fear I must leave to clear my name and save my divine yacht."
Tony suppressed his growling as the CEO kissed the back of Pepper's hand, lingering on her fingers. Pepper giggled and he let her hand go.

"I have your number. But here's my card. Do think of me, bella Virginia and call me."

Demarcos handed her his card and stood there, sighing softly as he gazed lovingly into her eyes.

"I am so reluctant to leave you... perhaps if I sort this thing out quickly with the EPA... I can return from Laguna Beach, in time for this conference to finish and have dinner with you... since Mr. Stark is not around, I do not want you to be alone."

But Tony's patience had worn thin and he smoothly stepped between the pair, taking Pepper's hand.

He said easily, "Don't you worry, Demarcos. I will take care of Miss Potts. And keep her company, especially since Mr. Stark is not around."

There was a spark of irritation in the Dellon CEO's eyes as he noticed Tony possessively tucking her hand in his arm. He opened his mouth to speak but Tony spoke quickly, "You run along now. Best not to keep the Government waiting."

Demarcos scowled at him, gave Pepper one last doe-eyed loving look and turned.

Tony watched him exit the hall with a sense of satisfaction. Then he heard a muffled giggle and looked at Pepper. She was shaking silently, her eyes dancing with laughter and her hand covering her mouth.

"What's so funny, Potts?"

"You, Tony, simply you."

"Now what do you mean?"

Pepper patted his arm gently. "Nothing. Come, let's take our seats. The discussion is about to start."
Tony's dark voice was inspired by Venom. Yes, I watched the movie and yes, I liked it :P

And I have written a smutty one-shot based on Pepper’s favorite look of Tony's, called "The Mechanic" (https://archiveofourown.org/works/15618240/chapters/36264195)
The discussion had been a great success. The audience had been lively, coming up with interesting questions for the panel of experts. The flow of conversation had been brisk, engaging and often humorous as the experts tried to be as frank as possible.

Tony had thoroughly enjoyed himself and was pleased to see that Pepper had done so as well. He was also proud of the impressive way she had hidden her nervousness. After the discussion was over, he had introduced her to the group of nerds he had been hanging out with, including Park, Dev and Melvin.

True to form, they had acted like a bunch of schoolboys meeting their crush, blushing and gushing over Pepper. She was kind and charming to them and they were extremely reluctant to let her leave. Tony had to finally step in and remind them that Pepper had another Conference event to attend to and that they only had a ten-minute break.

Eight minutes into the break and he was waiting patiently for Pepper outside the ladies washroom. Tony absently fiddled with his tie, then pulled a lint bunny out of his lab coat and examined it curiously.

He felt a soft hand on his shoulder and turned towards Pepper. She tilted her head slightly and looked at him, her blue eyes shining with a curiously soft light.

"Why are you looking at me like that, Potts?"

The glint in her eyes deepened and she murmured, "Because your tie is askew, Mr. Stark. Here, let me."
She moved closer to him and tenderly undid his tie. Tony couldn’t help but grin.

"Some things never change, do they, Potts?" He said on a whisper as she retied the knot in the tie and tightened it around his neck, her soft fingers moving on the cloth.

"No, they don’t, Mr. Stark..." she whispered back, her lips curving into a soft smile as her fingers nimbly adjusted his collar over the tie. "They really don’t. You still fiddle with your tie, forget to eat your meals and get so jealous when a man pays attention to me."

He scowled and she murmured, "And you still find inventive ways to get rid of this man or men and think that I do not notice."

Oh no! Evasive Action! Calm down, we got this! Lie!

Tony put on what he called his "Board meeting" face, extremely blank and neutral with no facial movements. He replied carefully, "I have no idea what you are talking about, Potts."

Pepper burst into riotous giggles. "Oh Tony! You always try to appear as innocent as possible!"

She tapped his nose lightly with one finger. "But I am onto you, Stark."

Tony shrugged, still holding on to his blank expression.

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Potts. I was the perfect gentleman the entire day."

Then he pointed at his watch.

"Break’s nearly over. We should be getting to the next meeting room. Which one is it? Remind me again. Room 12 A? Or was it B?"

To his surprise, Pepper wound her arms around his neck and leaned completely against him, pressing every part of her soft body to his.
He gasped and then swallowed his whimper as her fingers began to move through his hair, lovingly stroking his scalp while she brought her face so close to his.

"Potts! What if someone sees us??"

"Hush, Tony."

She pressed her breasts against his nanobyte arc and he felt tiny jolts of electricity move through him at the contact. Her fingers drew soft circles on his head, moving through his hair and Tony sighed. He closed his eyes, savoring the way she was touching him.

Pepper's fingers gently drifted down to the nape of his neck and began to caress him there. He nearly started purring, his body and mind relaxed beyond measure.

"Now, Tony, it seems too much of a coincidence that both Demarcos and Dave had to leave urgently. Tell me the truth, honey... what did you do?"

"Naww..." he drawled out, blissfully drifting in the gloriously relaxing magic that her fingers were wreaking on his head and neck. "I didn't do nothing."

"Come on, Tony..." Pepper said softly, "I know you have been spying on me from afar. With Friday's help, I am sure."

He shook his head mutinously and she sighed, pressing her curves even harder against his chest. He opened his eyes and was hypnotized by the way her eyes gazed into his, shimmering sapphire blue pools with flecks of light, so deep and endless that he felt as if he was drowning in their blueness.

"Tony." Pepper whispered softly, her fingers now cupping his jaw. "Don't hide it. I know you have been watching me..."

He shook his head again and then held still as her fingers traced the outline of his beard tenderly. Then they touched his lips, lingered on his bottom lip, her thumb rubbing against it gently. He shuddered and they moved to his chin, playing with his beard, pulling and tugging on it lightly.
Stay strong! Don't succumb to whatever the hell she's doing! Don't!

He opened his mouth with great effort, especially since her fingers were now caressing his jaw, leaving trails of tingling sensation in their path.

"I... wasn't. I was here with the guys. That's... it..."

Pepper lowered her eyes to his mouth and he felt his stomach tighten. Then she murmured sultrily, "So you truly didn't know where I was, when you told me about the panel event? You didn't see me come back to the hall, after Dave left?"

Her hands were back in his hair, gently pulling it this way and that and he closed his eyes again, lost in the soothing touch of her fingers.

"Erm... no... I... I just messaged you when you were in the garden... walking among the daisies... you looked so pretty there, the flowers and the green grass and you... that idiot Demarcos was staring at you and I just wanted you to join the panel because you know a lot but you weren't confident enough and I wanted you to see that."

Then he felt her press her lips to his, kissing him gently. Before he could respond, the lips moved away and so did her hands from his head.

He opened his eyes to see Pepper grinning widely at him.

"It is interesting that you weren't spying on me, but yet you knew that I was walking along a flower bed of daisies..."

He widened his eyes in horror.

Oh no! Why did I tell her that!

"Potts!"
Pepper pulled out her Stark phone and spoke into it, "Friday, what was Mr. Stark doing the whole day?"

"Friday! Don't you dare!"

His AI beeped once and then announced dryly, "Miss Potts, there is a grid of security cameras monitoring the inside and outside of the Center. Mr. Stark asked me to break into the Center's network and from there, hack the security camera control system, which was easy enough. Once I was in, he used the cameras to see exactly where you were and whom you were with. There was no audio however."

Tony exclaimed, "Friday, you tattle-tail! Pepper, I wasn't spying on you, I just wanted to find out where you were!"

Pepper just quirked an eyebrow at him. Then she asked, "Thank you, Friday. Could you also tell me how Mr. Stark got rid of Lieutenant Ordal and Mr. Demarco?"

"I am afraid I cannot, Miss Potts. Mr. Stark did not use me for that operation."

"Hey!" He objected. "I did not perform any operation! Okay Potts, you think I got rid of them. Where's your proof?"

She smirked at him.

"Tony, Tony, Tony... do you remember Javier Fernando? The architect from Fernando, Oak and Simon?"

"No..." he was confused. "I don't but what does that have to do with-"

"Let me refresh your memory. It was 2010, a week after the Hammer drones had destroyed Stark Expo. Clean up operations were in place and I had contacted Mr. Fernando to help rebuild the Expo building."
Tony opened his mouth and then shut it.

*Oh Holy Hell...*

Pepper lowered her gaze, smiling softly as she spoke.

"Mr. Fernando was a very attractive man with deep-set hazel eyes and the lean but strong build of an athlete. He also had the face of a Byronic hero—"

"Chiseled and angelic, something straight out of a romance novel." Tony completed, his mood darkening as he suddenly remembered the darkly handsome Latino architect. "And a voice as smooth as chocolate."

She giggled cutely.

"See! You still remember the words I had used, when I had described him to you! Javier and I had got along very well from the start and we started spending a lot of time together. Then one day, you had suddenly shown up at the construction site, asking to see what was going on. And I had observed the look on your face as you saw me and Javier together, his easy camaraderie with me, the way we would joke around and how much we knew each other. Now you and I had just started our relationship but because of my busy schedule, we hadn't had a first proper date. And funnily enough, you were very nervous around me."

"I remember..." murmured Tony. "Hey, Pep, you know that I didn't date and didn't know how, so I was very unsure how to proceed... I didn't want to screw us up!"

"I know, Tony..." Pepper whispered. "I had my own insecurities as well."

"Really? Like what, Potts?"

She shrugged. "At the time, I had doubted that you would actually commit to a relationship with me. I had thought that maybe you would regret our passionate kiss on the roof. And saying that you cared for me. Maybe you didn't really want a relationship but had just kissed me in the heat of the moment. And was scared of hurting my feelings but wanted to break things off before I went too far."
Tony couldn't help but snort and she smiled.

"I know, I know. Looking back, those insecurities seem so silly. Anyways two days later, on the weekend, I was at the site, waiting for Javier to show up. He was late, which was unusual because usually he was punctual. Then you had driven up in your sports car, completely out of the blue. You wanted to go out... I had refused at first because I had had a long week and I had to approve a lot of the construction work done, look at the cost so far and so on. But you kept insisting, so I gave in. Do you remember?"

He said with annoyance, "You had run yourself ragged, Potts! Working 12 hours during the week and four hours on the weekend! You needed to relax and I was determined to make sure that you did!"

Pepper smiled softly. "So you took me to a Thai spa and waited for an hour, while I was pampered with aromatherapy and a relaxing, full body massage. Then we drove to Rodeo Drive, where you had insisted that I buy some new clothes. Casual non-work clothes. And then you had followed me from shop to shop, holding my bags and being so attentive as I shopped my heart out.

Tony shuddered involuntarily. "Yes, I remember. I hate shopping! But I thought it would help you unwind."

She patted his hair softly. "And when it was time for lunch, you took me to this cute Italian mom-and-pop cafe at the edge of Malibu, secluded and hidden away in a quiet street. We were the only customers there and all they had were spaghetti and meatballs."

"Why did they close down?" said Tony mournfully. "I loved their food."

"Yes, it is a pity."

Pepper bit her lip and whispered, "After the wonderful meal, you drove me home and walked me to my door, carrying all my bags. I thought you would want to come in and fool around but you didn't. You insisted that I have a nap and then just kissed me goodbye on the cheek. It was a perfect first date and I was so happy. I fell even deeper in love with you that day."

He grinned stupidly as she nuzzled his face with hers, sighing softly.
"And then the next day, Fernando had called me and apologized at length about missing our appointment. Apparently, his office wanted him to meet a new mysterious client who demanded to see him as soon as possible on the outskirts of Paso Robles. The drive was very long but he couldn't reach me by phone or email for some odd reason. On reaching the meeting place, he had waited but the client never showed up and thanks to the traffic, he had reached Malibu late in the evening, too late for our appointment."

Tony swallowed hard and Pepper noticed, looking at him with a small smile playing around her lips.

"I hadn't thought much about it until a couple of days later when Happy was driving me to work. He was so smug and pleased that we had gone out on a date. And all because Javier had been stuck in Paso Lobles. That had struck me as suspicious. How had he known that exact location and that Javier had been stuck there for hours?"

Tony shrugged, trying to look as innocent as possible. Pepper threw her head back and laughed.

"It is no use denying it, Stark! I confronted Happy and he immediately confessed that you and him had plotted to get Javier away from me, for a day."

He said slowly, "I do not know what Happy told you under duress but I... I deny it all."

"Mr. Stark," she said wryly, "Happy told me how Jarvis had jammed the network signal of Javier's phone, using a little device that you had planted on his car. So I know the lengths that you will go to. And earlier in the panel hall, I saw you and Park exchanging significant looks, right before Demarcos left."

Pepper tapped her foot lightly. "So what did you do this time? Firstly, you used Friday to spy on me, just as I had suspected."

"Not spy. Just find." He countered quickly but she ignored him and began to talk to herself.

"But you couldn't hear me, so you do not know what Chad said..."

"What did Chad say?"
"Nothing, Chad is an asshole. And you didn't hear Dave and me talk during lunch but then... wait a minute!"

She looked at him triumphantly. "James! Lieutenant Ordal received a call from James, telling him to come back to the military base immediately! Did you put Rhodey up to this, Tony?"

_Uh oh..._

Out loud, he hemmed and hawed, "Eh... ah... erm... no... I .... I have no idea what you are talking about, Pep! Do you actually think that Platypus, being a stickler for rules and all that rot, would actually go along if I asked him to do something like this?"

"Yes." She said simply with a soft smile. "James is a very self-disciplined man but I know his biggest weakness is you and he will go along with any of your hare-brained schemes, just because he loves you dearly. Especially since he came so close to losing you."

Tony scowled and she giggled.

"Pepper, he doesn't love me! We are two cool bros, who have a lot of common interests and wear cool suits and fight bad guys."

"Alright, Mr. Macho. So it is settled. James helped you send Dave away."

"You can't prove it, Potts." He said boldly.

"I can, Stark. I can just call James and ask him directly and believe me..." she narrowed her eyes at him. "He will tell me all that I want to know."

_Distract, Tony, distract!_

"Hey, that next session must have started already! Let's go!"
"No way, Stark." Pepper smirked. "I am much more interested in this discussion. Now, confess, how did you get rid of Demarcos?"

"I didn't, Potts!"

"Friday," she said. "Can you please tell me what Mr. Stark has googled today?"

*Oh no! Stay calm, Tony!*

"With pleasure, Miss Potts," said his AI primly, no doubt enjoying itself. "Mr. Stark first searched for Lieutenant Ordal's military history. Then he searched for 'handsome European rich dude new Dellon CEO'."

Pepper giggled and Tony grumbled, "I couldn't remember his name. I was just curious and wanted to find out exactly who he was. It doesn't mean anything."

"After that, Mr. Stark tried 'Demarcos assets' and then 'Demarcos yacht'."

"Aha!" she exclaimed. "So you knew where Demarcos had docked his yacht."

"Yeah...So? That doesn't-"

"Lastly," interrupted Friday smoothly, "Mr. Stark searched for 'EPA hotline number.'"

Tony tugged on his fake beard in agitation, nearly pulling it off.

*Crap on a cracker!*

Pepper looked at him coolly. "I knew it, I knew it... I can't believe you set the EPA on Demarcos. Just because you wanted him to leave... really, Tony..."

She sighed with exasperation.
"Look, Pepper, it wasn't my idea alright." He said quickly. "Park and Dev and Melvin, the nerds from Dellon, they wanted him gone too. Their original plan was to tip off Homeland Security! I stopped them, I felt that was going a bit too far. So I persuaded them to use the EPA instead. And nothing is going to happen to Demarcos, he's just going to spend some time travelling to Laguna. The EPA are going to examine his boat and let him go."

"Why did your friends want him gone?"

"Because the man is an arrogant thieving show-off! He came here and was going to steal the attention from them! When they've been working so hard for this Conference!"

Pepper looked confused. "I do not understand."

Tony said firmly, "Park, Melvin and Dev and the entire Dellon team have been preparing for this Conference for a month. They have a couple of stalls and an upcoming debate. They were told they could handle the whole thing on their own, that they were representing Dellon Tech. But today morning, just when they arrived, they were told that Mr. Demarcos would be there and he would do all the speaking and the talking and they were supposed to write a speech for him and hand over all their material!"

"That's not fair."

"Exactly! That's why I helped them out! They worked so hard, they deserve a chance in the spotlight!"

Pepper smirked. "So you only got rid of Demarcos to help your friends? Why do I doubt that, Tony?"

"Because Demarcos came here because of you!"

"What! That's nonsense?!" She exclaimed, eyes wide and he continued quickly, "Demarcos went to your 8:30 am breakfast meeting just because he happened to be in the area. Did he tell you that?"

"Yes... he did just drop in... somehow out of nowhere. And he didn't seem like he knew what he"
"That's because he wasn't going to come! He went to your breakfast meeting out of curiosity! Because he wanted to see the infamous Pepper Potts of Stark Industries!"

She snorted with derision but he pressed on, "It is true! Dev told me that Demarcos had always been curious of Stark Industries, well... firstly due to me... he has this superhero fascination but also due to you! Apparently he has heard a lot about you since coming to the States and being a man who thinks with his di-"

Tony stopped here because he remembered just in time, that Pepper did not like vulgar language.

"Let me get this straight," She said irritably. "You are telling me that Demarcos, the head of Dellon Tech, came to this Conference only because he wanted to meet me, the CEO of Stark Industries."

"Yup." said Tony. "He is a notorious playboy, famous for his antics in the bedroom and was curious to see what the woman who snagged Iron Man was like."

"Yes," said Pepper dryly, "because I am very attractive to notorious playboys... I seem to be their type."

He ignored her sarcasm and said without thinking, "So I had to help the boys get rid of him because this is all your fault!"

Pepper narrowed her eyes dangerously and Tony gulped, realizing he had gone too far.

"Well, it is not completely your fault. Demarcos also-"

"Mr. Johnson, I would like to talk to you in private." She said, firming her lips.

Tony moved his jaw and pointed back at the hallway. "Don't you want to attend the-"

"Now, Mr. Johnson."
"Yes, ma'am. At once, ma'am."

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter tomorrow.
She took his hand and pulled him back the way they came.

"This way. I saw a smaller lecture hall somewhere... oh here it is."

They entered a large presentation room with a widescreen and a projector in the middle of the room. There was a small group of Japanese researchers huddled in one corner of the room.

Pepper peered at them in confusion. "What are they doing over there?"

"Charging their tablets. That's where the power outlet is." Replied Tony wryly.

"Oh. I see." She walked towards the screen, away from the researchers and Tony followed her.

Once she had reached the left side of the screen, Pepper turned and said softly, "Alright Tony. We are alone. You made a very interesting comment back there. I would love to hear why you think it is my fault that you had to chase off Demarco and Lieutenant Ordal."

Tony nearly smacked himself at his own dumbness.

"Err... well... Pep... I spoke too soon..."

"Really? You spoke too soon? Didn't seem that way. In fact, you seem to have had that thought for quite some time, Stark."

Uh oh... Stark in that harsh tone... I am in trouble.

Then Pepper shifted, crossing her arms across her chest and Tony involuntarily followed the movement. Her breasts were now pushed up, thanks to her arms beneath them and the suit's satiny
front tightened around them beautifully, giving him a great view of her lush porcelain curves. He bit his tongue, anxious to stop it from lolling out of his mouth. His palms were itching to squeeze something but he closed his fists and felt a cold sweat form at the back of his neck.

Then he realized Pepper was saying something.

"Tony. Tony Stark. Anthony Edward Stark!"

"Huh... yes, Pep, what were you saying... I was paying attention!"

"If by paying attention, you mean staring at my chest and growling under your breath, then yes, Tony, you were paying the upmost attention!"

Then she inhaled deeply and he squirmed in place, unable to take his eyes away from those luscious creamy globes of flesh pushing against the suit, with the way her chest rose and fell.

"Tonyyyyy..."

Pepper's tired sigh brought him back to the present.

"Yes, honey?"

"Don't 'honey' me, Stark." She pushed her hair back from her face. "Stop staring at my chest. I've worn skimpy clothing before yet you are looking at me like that cartoon cat looks at the yellow bird in those Saturday morning cartoons you are always watching."

"Hey! I am not a child! I do not watch cartoons!"

She grinned cheekily. "Liar! I have crept down to the basement on many a Saturday morning and found you wide-awake at 9 am, watching Roadrunner and Bugs Bunny and this black-and-white cat..."

Tony flushed because it was true, he still loved watching Looney Toons. He shrugged, saying "I
can't help staring, Potts... its your suit..."

"The suit? You cannot focus because of this suit...this Diane Von Furstenberg suit that I am wearing..."

"Well... you have to admit that it is very distracting. And it...erm.. you aren't wearing a shirt... So...". He swallowed, his eyes involuntarily lowering back to her 'distracting' chest.

"So it is revealing and skimpy... that explains why everyone has been staring at me the whole day... because I look cheap." Said Pepper quietly.

This snapped Tony out of his lustful haze and he looked at her with astonishment.

"Hold on, I never said you look cheap!"

She bit her lip and lowered her gaze, whispering softly. "You don't have to say it, Tony... I knew I shouldn't have worn this suit. Yesterday... when I saw how a simple change of clothing made me unrecognizable... I told you I felt insecure about my image. And I know that we spoke about it and I felt better at the time but today morning, I do not know what came over me. I just felt very daring and wanted to pull off something different. I have never met most of the conference attendees before and so I thought I could show them that I am not a typical uptight ice-cold CEO. I wanted to seem stylish and elegant. But instead..." she lifted her head and he felt his heart clench at her flushed cheeks and shame in her eyes.

"Pepper..."

"Instead, this suit is too damn revealing and I attracted a lot of attention for the wrong reasons." she ended sorrowfully.

"What! No!"

Tony caught her hands and looked into her eyes.

"Pepper Potts, listen to me! You do not look cheap! And the suit is not revealing! I mean... it is
gorgeous and bold! And you do look elegant and stylish! You always do! You attract attention because you are you!"

"Tony... everyone was staring at me and looking at me... Matteo and Dave... and even your new lab assistant friends..."

"Pepper, sweetheart... Melvin and the Nerds were staring at you with awe... they have this big crush on you."

He was pleased to see the look of shame vanish from her eyes. She straightened and looked at him skeptically.

"Crush. Your nerd friends have a crush. On me."

"Yes! And why the hell shouldn't they? You are an amazingly talented, smart and deadly CEO of a Fortune 500 energy conglomerate."

The beginnings of a shy smile appeared on her face. "Tony, what you are saying... is really hard to believe. Are you sure these nerds, I mean, new friends of yours don't actually have a crush on you?"

"No way! In fact, they feel that I am a show-off and desperately need to be taken care off... which is apparently why you keep me around... because I need to be taken care off. They are besotted with your business acumen and your financial management skills and your legs! They also feel and I agree, that you are the thinking man's sex symbol, coz you are a boss in the boardroom yet look like you belong on a runway."

Tony grinned because true to form, Pepper blushed deeply.

"Belong on a runway! Come on, Stark! I know I am decently attractive but when compared to what you've gone out with."

"Hey, do not compare yourself with what I used to go out with!"

"That's true, I forgot your former type was flashy and busty."
He cupped her cheeks gently. "Pepper Potts, you are easily the most attractive woman in any room. You have no idea how desirable you are, how one look from your blue eyes can drive someone crazy... Wait! Have you ever heard of Helen of Troy?"

She blinked and whispered, "Yes, I have, Tony but what does that have to do with..."

"Helen of Troy was so beautiful that her husband launched a thousand ships, just to get her back from the Trojans, who abducted her."

Pepper bit her lip, trying to control her smile.

"What? Its true. I read that somewhere..."

"Tony, are you actually comparing me to Helen of Troy? Wait, don't answer that. Also, I should mention that historians are divided on whether Helen of Troy was really abducted or instead, she chose to run away with Paris, the Trojan Prince. Her husband was supposedly much older than her and married her for political reasons. He may have wanted to use her elopement as an excuse to start a war with the Trojans. So your romantic reasoning is lovely but... may not be true."

He crossed his arms and said mulishly, "It happened a long time ago, Potts. Whose to say what really happened."

This made her laugh loudly, the sound reaching the Japanese scientists in their corner, who turned and looked at the two of them curiously.

"Tony! Is that what happened here?! You felt Matteo and Dave took me away from you! So, like Agamemnon, you came to get me back by chasing them off with your plots of subterfuge! All because I am your Helen and worth launching a 1000 ships!"

He opened his mouth and then shut it, suddenly feeling very dumb.

Pepper stopped laughing and took his hand. "Tony, honey, let's sit down and talk."
She led him towards the second row of seats in the room and then sat down in the aisle seat, patting the seat next to her. Tony sat down beside her. She held on to his hand, idly running her fingers through his and then looked at him through her lashes, murmuring, "Mr. Stark, how long have we known each other?"

"Eighteen years, Potts... We have been together for nearly 8 years and you were my assistant for 10 years..."

"And ever since I've known you, you have always been so damn possessive of me... why is that, Stark?"

Tony didn't want to admit anything, so he just kept his mouth shut.

She smiled and said thoughtfully, "Sometimes I feel that because I was your assistant for so long, you got too used to my constant attention. I mean, we spent so much time together! I was always by your side except maybe a weekend or two, here and there, when I didn't come in to work... and one Thanksgiving when you let me go home... or whenever you went on one of your drinking binges and wanted to be alone."

"Yeah..." he looked at his feet, feeling guilty. "I guess I was very selfish that way, I made a lot of demands on your time, insisted on your presence for the smallest things, never willing to adjust my schedule for yours. I never really let you take time off, I would text you or call you even when you were on holiday, rare as that was and get you to work or help me and I am sure you never had time to hang out with other coworkers after office hours or..."

He stopped when her soft fingers pressed against his lips.

"Mr. Stark, you were a very demanding boss and there were times when I wanted to strangle you for troubling me! But..."

Pepper leaned against his shoulder and sighed softly, her fingers drawing circles on his palm.

"Buuuuut?" He asked curiously and she giggled.

"But I loved working with you! It was fascinating to watch you invent and tinker... and I was such a goody-two shoes and being around you, gave me such a rush, because you were so bold and
colorful! Especially when you harassed Board members during meetings! It was so exciting! You were so different from the other managers, you were a very rich man, you owned the company! But you never treated me like a lowly subordinate... you were good to all the people that worked directly with you and...", she nibbled on her lip, "I could see that even though you were a playboy, you respected me... you would flirt a lot with me..."

He grinned and she punched his arm lightly.

"Shut it, Tony, you flirted with me but never stepped over the line and I slowly grew to cherish that you wanted my opinion so much, that you wanted my time and that you... you trusted me. With your art collection, with access to your lab, with confidential files and information, with going to Board meetings representing you...

She snuggled against his side and kissed his temple lightly.

"I especially appreciated your possessiveness, when it came to Stane."

Tony clenched his jaw at the memory of Obadiah Stane.

"Yeah. Obadiah had this very sexist old-fashioned attitude towards women in the workplace... he felt women were around for serving drinks and taking calls and being pleasant to look at and cop a feel... I had seen the way he acted around his secretary... I didn't want him to mistreat you. I was fond of him but I didn't like that side of him and didn't want him to hurt you or treat you cheaply."

"I know, Tony..." Pepper murmured against his shoulder. "Stane was always polite and professional to me but... he gave me the creeps. He was very subtle about the way he would check me out when he thought I wasn't looking."

This irritated him off so much that he sat up straight in his seat and looked at her. "Obadiah checked you out?! When! What did he do? Did he ever touch you?"

"He used to stare at my legs... and my hips..." She murmured. "And try his best to look down my shirt. Then he would just smile in that creepy dead-eyed way of his... but he never touched me. I think he was too scared that I'd slap him and file a harassment lawsuit."

He was still angry and said tightly, "Which you would have been perfectly justified in doing."
"He wasn't a good man to you either, Tony. He betrayed your trust."

Tony shook his head, trying to forget his anger and looked away. Then he felt Pepper's hand softly stroke his hair and turned back to look at her.

"I am sorry, Tony, I shouldn't have mentioned Stane... I know the thought of him brings up unpleasant memories."

"Surely not just for me, Pepper! He tried to kill you in that damn Ironmonger suit!"

She shivered and snuggled even closer to him.

"I know. I still get the jitters every time I pass by the plot of the destroyed lab. But that's all in the past, Tony. Now tell me, after we started going out... I am curious... why did you pull that prank on Xavier? Was it just to get my attention?"

Tony felt himself growing warm as Pepper lifted her head from his shoulder, to look at him.

"Well... erm... that was a long time ago and I'm sorry, Pep, I was an idiot but he was monopolizing a lot of your time and I was scared that..."

He paused, unwilling to admit his insecurity but she said softly, "You were scared that I would compare you to Xavier and prefer him over you. And why would I do that, Tony?"

"Well, because he seemed like a simple man, not an arrogant billionaire playboy with father issues, who also had a death wish and had recently nearly died from Palladium poisoning."

"Former playboy."

Tony found himself smiling and she smiled back tenderly, her fingers stroking his hair.
"Pep, why didn't you confront me at that time?"

She nibbled frantically on her lip.

"It's embarrassing."

He caught her chin lightly and lifted it, so she met his gaze.

"Spill the beans, Potts..."

She blinked and then said softly, "This is going to seem so childish but at the time... I was so happy that you pulled that prank to get me away from Javier."

Tony was astonished and it must have shown because Pepper continued with a shy smile, "I knew your reputation, Tony, I had seen you first hand with numerous women... the cheerleaders, the strippers, the models, the socialites. You were always the center of attention, you were the most eligible bachelor ever, women chased you for your attention. But when I realized that you wanted my attention and wanted it enough to go to such trouble, just to get it... I was dizzy with happiness! It gave me such a rush, to know that you cherished me that much... the feeling was so heady... and humbling..."

"You weren't like all those other women." He said earnestly. "It took me 10 years to see that but I knew I couldn't let some handsome architect take you away from me... not when I had realized what I was dreaming of, was in front of me all along."

She cupped his cheek. "I wouldn't have left you, Tony... anyhow I found your gesture irresistibly cute. So I kept quiet.... and also because Happy begged and pleaded with me. But..."

Then Pepper said coolly, "But that was 8 years ago, Stark. What happened today?"

Tony grimaced and looked around wildly for any distraction.

"I had hoped you would have forgotten about that."
"No such luck, Stark." She said with a smirk. "I really want to know why you felt such a burning need to get rid of Demarcos..."

"Hey, it wasn't completely my idea! Melvin and Park and Dev were the ones who originally came up with the idea of getting rid of him by calling the EPA!"

"But Tony, I know from the looks you were giving Matteo and the way you were spying on me, that... alright, you were part of a team, but I know you had your own reasons for helping them. And Dave being called away, was all you. Admit it."

"Yeah..." he sighed and ruffled his hair. "Yeah, that was... completely me... I saw the way Mr. Officer was looking at you during the lecture and at the canteen. He was so taken by you and I am sure he told you that you are a woman worth her weight in gold and that he wished he had someone like you in his life. I saw him hold your hand before leaving."

Pepper blushed and Tony murmured, "I knew it... I just knew it. Mr. Officer just had to be all romantic."

"Tony, he was a very sweet guy, who just had a little crush on me, that's all. It was perfectly harmless. But why... Tony, why are you so possessive of me? I know its not because you are envious of me getting attention instead of you."

"Potts! How can you even say that?"

"I know, Tony, I know. I know that contrary to how the media depicts you, you aren't attention hungry at all. You always give credit where it is due. And of course, I know that you are very proud of me and my achievements... I've seen you standing on the sidelines, beaming with pride. And you always make sure that I receive recognition, even when I don't deserve it."

"Pshaw, Potts. You work very hard in whatever you do, honey.. you don't give yourself enough credit, so I gotta do it for you."

She smiled and whispered, "You are my most ardent supporter, Tony Stark. I am glad I have you in my corner..."
He touched his head to hers. "And I will always be in your corner, Potts..."

Then Pepper looked at him with worry. "But if it isn’t that you are envious... what is it, then? Don’t you trust me? Do you think I am going to cheat on you with these other admirers?"

"What! Pepper!" He exclaimed loudly, once again startling the Japanese scientists who started to titter.

She just looked at him quietly and Tony caught her hand.

"Hey Potts, come on! I trust you beyond reproach, honey! Don't you see... you don't, do you? It is not you, its me..."

He swore and ran his fingers through his hair irritably.

"Pepper..." he looked into her eyes as he spoke, "let me put it plainly. They broke the mold when they made you, sweetheart. Women chased after me for money and status. You... your admirers, men like Ordal, Matteo... they don't want money or status... they want you because they are smart enough to see how special you are. You aren't just smart or rich or beautiful. You are everything, Pepper. Simply everything."

"Tony...," she said softly, her eyes shimmering, the blueness in them darkening and he felt her hand tenderly cup his jaw.

"Any man worth his salt, would be lucky to have you... and I am the luckiest son of a bitch of them all... because you decided to stay with me... even after I've put you at risk so many times and been a reckless idiot and... even when I pushed you away... you came back to me, Potts. When I was broken and bruised... you were the only one who came back for me... even now... I was wallowing in self-pity after the fight with Thanos but you... you didn't give up on me..."

He leaned forward and nuzzled her face with his own, whispering passionately,

"Look, Pepper... I am sorry, truly I am. I shouldn't have chased Matteo or Lieutenant Dave. And I shouldn't have childishly spied on you and stayed away... it is just... I think that you are the most beautiful, smart, talented woman in the world and it is no wonder that everyone else is nuts about you. I can't blame them and I shouldn't get jealous. And you are driving them crazy with this suit of
yours and they have every right to compliment you and want to be around you and I am lucky to have you and just want more and more of you. But I shouldn't be selfish and try to claim you for myself. I just... I just think you are mine and all mine and I know that's wrong... but I can't help it, honey. I am an insecure possessive idiot when it comes to you..."

They stayed together quietly for a moment and then Pepper leaned back and just looked at him thoughtfully.

"Potts, say something."

"I am just trying to take in what you are saying, Tony. Because I have always noticed you were possessive but never thought of it in the way... the way you've explained it right now..."

"Are you still mad at me?"

Her face softened and she smiled. "No, Tony. I am not mad at you."

"Ok. That's good."

His phone buzzed and he pulled it out to look at its screen.

"Erm... okay, the Dellon boys are giving a lecture in Room 28 B. Its nearby... somewhere. I promised then I would attend. You don't have to, if you don't want to, Potts. You can go back to the hotel or if you have other friends here, you can go with them."

Pepper looked at him with a hint of skepticism and he said sheepishly, "I'll behave. I promise. No spying, no snarky comments..."

"No setting the Feds or the EPA or any other government agency on them?"

She giggled and he flushed.

"I won't. I am sorry for being such a doubtful ninny. I will let you do as you please. Scout's Honor."
"Were you ever a scout, Tony?" Pepper murmured, her fingers casually stroking his tie, her eyes soft and blue on his.

"I was... once..." He said evasively and she giggled.

"There's a story there and I want to hear it but now," She stood up and patted his head. "You run along to your lecture. I need to go to the ladies room and then I'll just... roam around... I won't go back to the hotel. I will wait for you to finish. Alright?"

Tony nodded and then watched her go.

Chapter End Notes

The Conference isn't over yet! Tune in next week!

I am sure some readers with an *ahem* eye for historic detail *cough, cough* will correct me on the number of years Pepper and Tony have been together

Also, in IM1, I always felt Stane had a "Sexual predator" vibe, especially when he looked at Pepper, so I just used that here.
The One with the Conference - The Store Room

Chapter Notes

Smut ahead. If you do not like smut, you can safely skip the this and the next two chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

2:30 pm

Tony yawned in his seat, right at the end of Room 28 B. Park's event was going on, a debate about the impact of using solar energy for powering farms.

*Park, man... I want to stay awake but... I am being put to sleep.... Such a snore-fest... he thought drowsily. If Pepper was in it... on it... speaking for it... I'd pay attention but she isn't...*

He sighed as he recalled their recent conversation. *I hope she isn't mad. She said she isn't mad, she didn't seem angry... but then... aren't women really angry when they say they aren't... I know I shouldn't have prank-called that Euro-idiot... actually I shouldn't be so insecure but...*

Then his phone buzzed and he looked at the new message.

"Tony, where are you sitting?"

A grin broke out on his face and he quickly typed back, "Right at the back, towards the right side of the hall... there's an broken floodlight in one corner."

Tony looked around as the speakers began to discuss.

*Where is she coming from? From the stage? I can't see her.*
He jumped when he felt someone tap him softly and looked up to see Pepper standing beside him. She sat down and he whispered curiously, "Where have you been?"

"Here and there." She said simply.

Tony looked back at the stage. Then he felt Pepper's hand touch his and he turned to look at her. His drowsiness left him as he felt himself drowning in her deep blue eyes, soft and shimmering as they sparkled at him. Then she lowered her lashes and he felt his breath hitch in his chest.

She had never looked more beautiful to him and feelings welled up inside him, making him giddy. Tony leaned closer and touched his forehead to hers.

"Well... I missed you...This lecture is such a drag. I regret telling Park I would attend it."

Pepper sighed and he felt her slowly place her fingers against his lips. He swallowed at the way they tenderly traced his mouth. Then she moistened her lips and he followed the movement of her tongue greedily.

She whispered softly, "Mr. Stark, I spent this entire morning surrounded by other men and it just made me realize the truth."

Tony raised his eyebrows and she continued, "The truth is... I am irrevocably yours and only yours. So please make me yours... right here, right now."

He couldn't believe what he was hearing and lifted his head from hers, dropping his jaw in shock. Pepper glanced at the stage and then back at him. Then she shoved her hand in her suit's pocket, (something he would never have imagined the suit having, it was so sleek and form-fitting) and pulled out something in her fist.

She pushed the soft something into his hands. Tony looked down at it and felt his heart begin to jackhammer in his chest, like a piston.

"Good God, Pepper..." he whispered in wonder as he studied the bundled-up pair of lacy, tiny and delicate black briefs.
He felt her lips on his jaw as she whispered sexily, "I am all yours, Mr. Stark... and I want you... to stake your claim on me... please..."

Tony clapped his hand over his mouth to muffle his moan of pleasure. He forgot he was holding her briefs and the movement brought the tiny scrap of underwear right against his face. It felt so warm against his skin and he took a deep breath, his eyelids fluttering as he drank in the musky intoxicating fragrance of her skin, which had seeped into the cloth.

"Potts..." he whispered in a bark, trying to hold on to his sanity and his libido, "What? How? Why? Now?"

Pepper lowered her gaze to his lips and whispered, "I just want you, Mr. Stark."

He swallowed hard because she looked at him with wide, pleading eyes, deep dark blue with need.

"Don't you want me?" Pepper whispered and that broke his control.

"I do! Of course, I do! But..." Tony looked at the stage. The debate was still raging on passionately.

She whispered slowly, "I do realize this is a public place and you are right, we probably shouldn't-"

Tony placed his finger on her soft lips and growled low in his throat, "We are going to have to be very quiet."

She grinned and then swept her tongue slowly over her bottom lip. He watched her and hissed, "And you don't get to tease me, Potts."

Pepper smiled shyly at him and he gently pushed her hair back from her ear. He pressed his lips to the soft skin and smiled when he felt her shiver.

"Miss Potts, you are going to just sit here and relax, not make a sound and do exactly what I tell you to do. Is that clear?"
She whispered breathlessly, "Yes, Mr. Stark." and his cock twitched.

"Alright. Now..."

Tony stood up quietly and shrugged out of his lab coat. He sat back down and draped the voluminous coat over her lap like a blanket, covering her thighs and hips.

"Relax, Potts." He murmured, smiling at her watching his movements avidly.

"Yes, Mr. Stark."

"Good. And remember. You can't make a sound and you are going to do exactly what I say. Do you agree?"

She nodded and he smirked.

Tony inched his chair closer to Pepper's, such that the sides of their bodies were touching each other. Then he slowly lifted one edge of the coat and moved his hand underneath it. He moved his fingers across her hips, enjoying the silky texture of her suit against his fingers. Pepper shivered again and he gently nuzzled the side of her face with his.

"Easy, Potts.... easy..." he whispered soothingly as his fingers traced something satiny and wide, belted across her narrow waist.

He followed the satin trail to one end and finally found what he was looking for: the little bow holding the halves of her suit together.

Tony pulled on the bow and pushed the belt away, loosening the suit. Pepper made a small sound as he moved his hand into her suit. He kissed the side of her jaw absently while his fingers caressed soft warm skin.

Pepper swallowed hard once and then again as he stroked her bare stomach with his fingers. Then
Tony lowered his fingers and traced the skin below her stomach lazily.

"Sweetheart, your skin..." he whispered against her ear, "It is so damn soft... even softer than the satin of your suit."

"Mr. Stark, please..."

He nipped her earlobe gently, making her shudder and whispered, "Don't worry, Potts, I am going to give you what you want... You keep your eyes on the stage and let me know if anyone's coming."

Pepper nodded and Tony moved his fingers over her smooth mound. He traced the outline of her pouting nether lips delicately with just the tips of his fingers, making sure not to penetrate her.

He kept teasing the lips, smiling as he realized that Pepper was subtly moving her hips to get him to touch her deeper.

Tony bit her ear a little hard, making her whimper and he growled, "Potts, be patient."

"Yes, Mr. Stark. Sorry, Mr. Stark."

He growled again, distracted because Pepper whispering "Mr. Stark" in that breathless, soft tone, was arousing him to no end.

But then Tony refocused and moved his hand to one side, caressing the top of her thigh. He drew lazy circles on her skin as he began to whisper dirty talk in Pepper's ear.

"Potts, it is a pity I can't touch those long, long legs of yours... you know I love your legs, Pepper... so fine and curved and elegant and heavenly... but you know what I like the most about them..."

He moved his fingers back to her core as he said this and Pepper bit down hard on her lip.

"What I love... is when you wrap them around my hips and I am thrusting hard into you, they feel so smooth and soft against my skin... and then you curl your heels around my hips... and that puts me so
deep inside you... inside your tight, wet self, Potts...

She took a deep breath and he chose that moment to gently push his finger inside her. He felt her core tighten around his finger and was delighted with what he found.

"Potts," he whispered with shocked delight, "you are so damn wet!"

"I am sorry, Mr. Stark."

Tony stared at her flabbergasted, pulling his finger out of her.

"Honey, don't apologize! I wasn't complaining, I am just a little taken aback here!"

Pepper lowered her gaze and he tilted her chin up with his other hand, rubbing her bottom lip with his thumb.

"Now confess, how did you get this wet?"

"I didn't do anything, Mr. Stark." She whispered softly. "After I removed my underwear and walked over here, I... I started to feel very aroused... by imagining what you were going to do to me..."

Then she locked eyes with him. He felt the searing gaze of her blue eyes hit him straight in the heart. She touched her tongue to his thumb on her lip and he swore in a hiss.

Oh good god, I am so turned on, I just want to push Pepper on her back and sheath myself in her until we both come! But we are in public! So I have got to control myself!

Tony removed his thumb from her mouth and she pouted. Then he thrust his other finger back inside her womanhood and began to stroke her up and down slowly.

"Potts, you feel so damn good." He whispered hoarsely against her ear. "So soft and so wet... and you are so tight..."
He pushed his finger in deeper.

"I am scared of putting another finger in you..."

Pepper gasped softly as he thrust one more finger into her and continued his intimate slow stroking.

"But I think you can handle it, can't you?"

"Yes, Mr. Stark. Please, more, Mr. Stark."

"Do you like what I am doing, Pepper?"

"I love what you are doing, Mr. Stark."

"Honey, I am happy to keep touching you but you can't come alright, you gotta control yourself."

Tony tried to control his laughter as the hazy look in Pepper's eyes disappeared and she looked at him sternly.

"Mr. Stark, why can't I come?"

He tapped his finger against her clit and she moaned. Tony looked around quickly but the speakers were arguing with each other loudly and no one had heard them.

He looked back at Pepper, who had turned a bright red.

"That's why, Potts. You are a moaner." Tony whispered, watching the red flush darken on her skin.

"You like to moan and scream my name, especially when I do this..." he pinched her clit lightly and
she bit her lip hard to stop herself from crying out.

"And I must admit, I love hearing your deep throaty moans, Potts." Tony continued. "I especially love it when you scratch my back and groan loudly as I take this little fellow between my teeth."

His fingertips pinched the taut bud again and she whimpered, closing her eyes tightly,

"Please. Mr. Stark. Please." Pepper said softly, touching her head sideways to his and her earnest plea made him realize he couldn't torture her anymore in public.

Tony slowly took out his fingers from her and pulled his hand out from underneath the lab coat.

Pepper whimpered and he whispered with a smile, "Sweetheart, don't worry, we are going to find someplace nice and quiet, where you can scream all you like."

He clumsily tried to tie the belt back but Pepper took over and handed him the lab coat. Tony quickly shrugged himself into it while Pepper stood up gingerly, making a little noise as she did so. Then he stood up, closing the coat around him.

"Why are you catching your coat so tightly, Tony?"

"I need to, Pep. I am, a... eh... a little more obvious in my arousal than you are."

She giggled and then they both crept out of the room from the back door. Now they were in the large hallway, which was quiet and peaceful. Tony took her hand and walked confidently down the carpeted pathway.

"Do you know where to go?"

"Yes, if I remember correctly...." He opened one door, peeped inside quickly and then pulled his head out. "Nope, wrong room. Let's keep walking."

They came to the end of the corridor and Tony took the left, landing at a low-lit dead end with two
"This is the one!" He exclaimed and turned the knob of the left door. Unfortunately, it was locked.

"Tony, we can't get in. Let's go somewhere else."

"No need to, my lady. I shall open it!"

He pulled out his phone and from it, the thin, silver stylus. Tony placed it in the key hole and jiggled it carefully, trying to find the lever of the lock. He turned it this way and that and grinned as with a soft 'click', the lock's lever gave way.

Tony stood and with a flourish, pushed the door open.

It as a storeroom of sorts, filled with chairs, audio-visual equipment and a number of LCD monitors. There was a long circular table in the middle of the room.

"This will do just nicely..." he said, pulling Pepper into the room.

He closed the door behind them and locked it, then for good measure, leaned a chair against the door knob. Then he turned back to Pepper and smiled. She was looking at him with awe.

"Tony, how the hell did you do that?"

"I am very good with my hands, Potts... as you may be aware..." She smiled shyly and he murmured, "Now, we won't be disturbed. So first things first. Come here, honey."

She moved closer to him and Tony quickly tugged on the suit's bow, opening it up and leaving her abdomen and hips bare. He dipped his hand into the crotch of the suit and quickly thrust two fingers into her slick wet warmth.

Pepper gasped and tightened herself around his fingers. Tony held her tightly to him and touched his forehead to hers. He continued to move his fingers in and out, thrusting into her hard and fast. She
was panting hard, her chest heaving as he felt her core clench with each of his thrusts.

"Come on, sweetheart... we are alone now... so make those sweet noises for me, please." He whispered, nuzzling her soft face.

Pepper whimpered and then moaned his name as he added another finger to his thrusting. He kissed her softly and then felt her spasm around his fingers. She clasped his arms tightly and threw her head back, crying out loudly as her release flooded his hand.

He massaged her gently with his fingers, stroking her now swollen mound and she leaned on him, whimpering softly.

"Tony... Mr. Stark... I... I...."

"You need to sit down, baby." He supported her as he led her to a small stool in one corner. Pepper sat down in a daze and sighed.

He couldn't help but grin.

"Feels good to finally let it out, huh?"

She swatted at him and he danced out of reach, chuckling merrily.

"Now, now, Potts, admit it. You are a moaner."

"I could barely control myself in that theater! I wanted to let go so badly but then everyone would have turned around and seen what we were doing!"

He cupped her chin and tilted her face up gently.

Looking down into her beautifully chiseled face, Tony whispered, "That's why I brought you here, Potts. I wanted to you to moan and whimper in peace and not worry about an audience. And especially because I wanted to hear that throaty scream that you make, when you come."
True to form, Pepper flushed and he rubbed his thumb against her lip.

"But now we are alone and I want more. Which brings me to Act II."

"Act II?" Pepper whispered, rubbing her face against his hand.

"Sweetheart, I am not done claiming you. Not by a long shot."

Pepper's eyes darkened and she lowered her gaze to his crotch. He felt his blood pool in his stomach as she drew her bottom lip into her mouth and nibbled on it.

"What about you, Mr. Stark?"

He stroked her silky soft hair and whispered, "Today is all you, honey... all you..."

She smiled slowly and stood up. Before he could even blink, Pepper shrugged and the suit shimmied off her body with a soft whoosh.

Tony stuck his hands in his lab coat pockets and tried to remain calm as she stood before him, gloriously golden and naked, except for a weird black article that cupped the outer sides of her breasts.

"What eh... what is that?" He pointed at it, to distract himself.

"That's a strapless side bra. I didn't wear a shirt underneath the suit, so I had to wear a bra like this to keep my breasts in place."

She reached behind her and unclasped the thingi. It fell away, baring her breasts. Tony watched with fascination as she cupped her left breast in one hand. Then she gently squeezed the lush coral-tipped globe, murmuring, "It was a little tight... it pinched me..."
He heard himself growl and Pepper looked at him from beneath her lashes, a small smirk playing around her mouth.

"Alright Mr. Stark, I can see you are getting impatient. Let me just take off my shoes."

"Please keep them on, Potts."

She widened her eyes but stood still and he gently kissed her nose.

Tony carefully took off his fake beard, Pepper helping him and then shrugged out of his coat. He undid his belt and pulled his shirt out of his trousers.

Then he pulled this tie off his neck, folded it twice and looked at Pepper meaningfully.

"Do you trust me, Potts?"

Chapter End Notes

And Smut tomorrow as well.
Pepper's heart began to thump loudly as she stared at the neatly folded black strip of cloth.

"I do not want to scare you, honey." Tony whispered, "It's just that today, we both have been a little... kinky and I just wanted to... up the ante."

She said throatily, "We? Mr. Stark, I've been the kinky one today."

He grinned at her. "You are right. I take it back. Nothing can beat the 'Here are my panties, now touch me in public' kink."

Pepper felt herself grow warm at the thought of her boldness and Tony laughed. He kissed her forehead, whispering, "Are you ready for Act II, Boss?"

"Yes." she replied and he tied the blindfold around her eyes and knotted it behind her head, enshrouding her in darkness. Pepper felt his fingers gently smooth over the cloth.

"It is okay? Is it too tight?"

"No, Mr. Stark."

"I am right here, am not going anywhere..." Tony caught her by the arms and she was gently pushed back to lean against the cold hard wall behind her.

"Whatever you are feeling, I want you to tell me, alright."
"I will, Mr. Stark"

She felt his warm breath on her face before his lips moved over her ear.

"The way you say those two little words... oh Potts, Potts, Potts..." he whispered tightly and then his hot tongue slowly traced the outline of her ear, making her gasp.

Pepper felt Tony's firm hand clutch her hip, his fingers moving against her bare skin as his tongue teased her ear. She squirmed, wriggling against his hard lean frame pressed to hers and he groaned.

"Potts... stand still... so I can..." then his teeth nipped at her ear lobe and she cried out.

"Yeah..." Tony whispered devilishly, "I know that you are extra-sensitive over there... and here..." she felt his beard rub against her cheek, the delicious friction caused by his raspy hair, making her stomach clench and her legs tremble.

"Mr. Stark!" she breathed out as he kept rubbing his beard against her neck, each rub sending jolts of sensation through her delicate flesh.

"Yes?" He asked teasingly and she sighed as his lips touched her neck gently.

"Mr. Stark... more please..." Then Pepper gasped as he rubbed the base of his bearded chin against the side of her neck.

"Like that?" He purred, his fingers now squeezing her butt.

"Yes! Please! Mr. Stark...Please!"

"No need to beg, Potts..."

She felt him shift and now he was rubbing his prickly jaw against the right side of her face. "I aim to
please." Her neck tingled with every slow caress of his beard, the short stiff hair prickling against her soft flesh, her toes curling as he relentlessly stroked her skin.

Then she felt his warm lips at her collarbone and then his tongue slowly licked a long cool stripe up her warm neck, sending shivers through her.

Pepper was lost in a sea of aroused sensation, thanks to what Tony's jaw was doing to her neck. When he moved his face and body away, she made a rough noise of protest.

"Shit, honey, you are going to get beard burn if I keep this up."

Her hands were at her side but she raised them and blindly reached forward. She found his shirt collar and tugged it lightly, bringing his taut male body back against hers.

"I don't care, Mr. Stark. Keep doing what you are doing."

Then she sighed as his lips once again returned to her neck, nipping at her flesh tenderly. His mouth was driving her wild but Pepper wanted more. So she instinctively raised one of her legs and looped it around Tony's hips, arching into him.

"Potts!" She heard him exclaim in shock and she smiled as she realized the lower half of her body was pressed right up against his crotch.

Pepper thrust her hips lightly at him, gasping with pleasure at the way his semi-erect penis throbbed against her soft mound.

Tony groaned and then growled, "Potts! We are taking this slow! I want to touch you all over before we get to that!"

"Oh, Mr. Stark..." she cooed, winding her hands in his tufty soft hair blindly. "You take all the time you need... I am right here... waiting pat-"

She stopped talking in a rush because she felt the sharp bite of Tony's teeth on a tendon in her neck.
"Mr. Stark!"

"This is me claiming you..." he muttered darkly, raking his teeth across her shoulder. "You are all mine, aren't you, Potts?"

"Yes Mr. Stark. All yours..." She whispered, trembling as he bit the edge of her shoulder none too gently.

"You are so damn beautiful, Potts..." he whispered reverently, soothing the bite with his moist lips. "A veritable goddess of a woman... fiery-haired with eyes of the sea and lips of sin...and the softest skin ever on a body made for loving..."

Each of his tightly muttered words made her even wetter and he rubbed his chin against her breastbone, while at the same time, cupping her backside and holding her firmly against him.

Pepper could do nothing but feel and moan, especially when he rocked his hips against hers.

"Every man here is enamored with you and rightly so. But I am the lucky bastard who gets to marry you." She heard him whisper against her chest. Then she moaned "Tomnnnnny! as his hand cupped her breast.

He suddenly pinched her nipple hard and she squeaked.

"Sorry Pep... sorry .. got a little carried away there...", he whispered soothingly as he massaged the pulled nub gently with his fingertips.

"It is alright, Mr. Stark..."

Tony chuckled and leaned his face against hers. He took her mouth and his hands began to play with her breasts. She sighed against his lips, moving over hers with passion, while his rough callused fingers squeezed and kneaded her flesh until her breasts felt swollen and taut and so damn sensitive.
“Tony...Mr. Stark... Please....”

"Yes, Potts?"

"That feels so good... but..." she tightened her fingers in his hair, because one of his hands was teasing her nipple, "I want... I want..." she cut her sentence short with a loud gasp as he rubbed the base of his thumb against her nipple.

"What do you want, Potts? Tell me in detail..."

His fingers had teased her nipples into painfully erect pebbled buds of sensation on her swollen breasts. She made a loud noise in her throat when they lowered to stroke her stomach lazily.

"I want your mouth! On me!"

She felt his lips curved against her cheek and he whispered devilishly, "Agreed Potts. I want to bite and nibble each and every inch of you..."

She tried to still her heaving chest, tried to stay still as his hands stroked her abdomen slowly, driving her mad with the way they moved against her skin. Then Pepper whimpered as his mouth nibbled on the corner of her lips.

"I want to use my mouth... all over you... would you like that, Potts?"

His dark words whispered against her skin made her tremble uncontrollably and she blindly clutched at his shoulders, holding him tightly to her.

"Mr. Stark..." she gasped out as his fingers were somehow on her crotch, teasingly dancing along her nether lips while his mouth kissed a hot wet path along her cheek.

"I'll take that as a Yes..." purred Tony softly, his teeth grazing her ear. His hands shifted and suddenly one of them was squeezing her butt while the other still played with her pussy.
"Yess! Yesss... yesss!" Pepper cried out dumbly, her body and mind desperately trying to keep up with his passionate onslaught. Because she couldn't see, her sense of feeling was heightened and Tony's clever fingers seemed to be touching her everywhere at the same time. They stroked her backside tenderly and at the same time, kept stroking her crotch and the sensitive vee of flesh underneath her stomach.

Her body was on fire, every touch, every caress so deliberate and slow, every lingering stroke so sensual and firm. His mouth at her ear, wasn't making things easier. His lips gently nibbled on her ear lobe and then she felt his teeth lightly score the shell of her ear.

"Tony!" She cried out, clutching his arm, unable to take anymore of his relentless seduction.

"I know... I know..." He whispered. "I want to play with your breasts... but..." He kissed her cheek softly. "But... I am saving that for Act 3."

Pepper was confused, her senses and brain fully occupied with what his hands were doing to her crotch.

"Isn't this Act 3?"

"No, sweetheart. This is just Act 2. It ain't over until the pretty lady sings and I am going to make you sing my name as you come in my mouth."

Pepper felt her face grow warm at the blatant sexual promise and she felt Tony's lips curve against her cheek.

"That's right... I am going to lower myself to my knees and lick your pretty pink pussy all over...every little corner and I am going to suck on that little tight nub of yours and..."

"Tony!" She exclaimed, her ears burning. She knew he loved talking dirty, especially since it made her blush. He laughed and then she felt him slowly lower himself her body, his lips quickly kissing her belly button before she felt his breath against her mound. He caught her hands and place them on his head. Then she felt his soft hair underneath her fingers and his hands at her hips.

Pepper gasped as Tony's warm lips kiss her nether lips, his beard rubbing against her sensitive skin. She groaned softly and then she felt his tongue lick her slit slowly. His hands firmly held her hips still
while his tongue kept licking and stroking her intimately. She wound her fingers into his hair and held on for dear life, feeling the hard delicious coil of need in her stomach tighten and pulse with each long lazy lick.

Then his tongue thrust inside her and moved upwards towards her clit. Tony pushed at the little bud with his tongue and she felt her knees give way.

"Whoa, Potts! Steady there!" His hands held her up firmly but she swayed in place.

"Tony, I can't! I can't!"

"Hold on, Potts..." she felt him move away from her and she shivered because his warm body was no longer pressed to hers.

Then she felt his hands on her arms, turning her slightly.

"Relax, Pepper... here, baby, I got you a chair..." he whispered softly and she felt something soft push against her knees. Trusting Tony's hands supporting her, Pepper lowered herself to sit on a soft cushioned surface.

She sighed with pleasure and then felt the chair spin and push back against something hard.

"Tony?"

"I am just resting the chair against the wall, so that you won't move about." She felt his hands on her hair, patting her soothingly. "Are you comfortable? Let's take these off."

His hand was on her ankle, lifting the shoe off her heel and then the same for the other leg.

"Honey, should I take off your blindfold?"

"No, Tony... I am alright... I just... I just couldn't keep standing..." She reached around for his hands and clasped them tightly. "Your tongue is just as devilishly talented as these hands of yours..."
Then she felt Tony raise her hands and kiss her fingers, pressing them to his warm lips.

"I can't help myself, Pep... I know I get carried away... but you, Pepper, everything about you, drives me crazy... your sinfully soft skin, your intoxicating vanilla lily scent,"

She gasped as he gently nipped the tip of one finger, "the way your flesh feels in my mouth," then she felt his hand stroking her thigh. "Your curves and long lean lines... Pepper... you truly are heavenly..."

Her hand was still in his mouth, Tony sucking gently on her fingers while his other hand tormented her thighs, lazily trailing over her skin. She shifted restlessly in the chair and moved one of her hands away from his mouth, to blindly caress his strong jaw and touch his ear.

"Mr. Stark, I want your mouth." She pleaded and then she felt the chair dip and Tony's lips claimed hers hotly, gliding and nibbling. His tongue dipped into her mouth and then played passionately with hers, making her breathless and wanton.

Pepper caught him by the collar and they kissed long and hard for a moment, both of them moaning into each other's mouths.

She reluctantly let him go and he whispered, "Honey, scoot a little ahead. I am holding the chair in place, don't worry."

She shifted her hips forward and felt his weight shift from the chair and then a soft rustle. Now his warm breath once again wafted over her legs. Then his fingers were around her ankles, gently raising her legs and spreading them wide.

Then Tony's hands were on her knees, keeping her legs apart and she squirmed as he rested his face against the inner side of one spread thigh, his beard tickling her skin.

"What's the matter, Tony?" she whispered, when he remained silent.

"Nothing, sweetheart..." he whispered back, pressing a kiss to her inner thigh. "I was just admiring the view."
This made her flush and she moved her hands to feel around for his head. He laughed when she tapped his head chidingly.

"Mr. Stark!"

"Alright, alright, I will stop teasing you and get back to using my mouth."

Then she squealed when his warm tongue licked her like an ice cream. Pepper tightened her fingers in his hair as Tony began to nibble gently on her nether lips, his beard rubbing against the soft insides of her thighs.

She felt his hand on her chest, gently pushing her back in her seat and she lay back, bringing her crotch in even closer contact with his devilishly sinful mouth and tongue.

Once again, Tony was everywhere at the same time, his tongue alternating between licking her length or torturing her clit. His hands were on her thighs, stroking her skin and then one of them joined his tongue in teasing her clit.

Pepper's heart was hammering in her chest. She could nothing but writhe and moan as Tony kept up his slow but thorough ravishment with his mouth. The coil of need in her stomach pulsed endlessly and she was unbearably tight and slick and so damn close to the edge of her release.

"Tony... Tony please..." she whimpered, moving her fingers restlessly through his soft hair, pulling it lightly. "Please, Tony."

She felt him raise his head and then Pepper gasped as he deliberately rubbed his beard against her inner thigh.

"Tony!"

"Yes Potts..." he said, kissing her skin.
"Tony, stop teasing me, please!"

"I thought you liked what I was doing, Potts."

Pepper sat up straight and fixed a stern look on her face.

"Mr. Stark, you know perfectly well what I am talking about! Don't make me say it!"

She felt his lips curve against her skin.

"But I want to hear you say it, Potts. I want to hear you talk dirty."

She shook her head in the negative, too shy to talk about her desire.

"Come on Potts!" whispered Tony softly, "I have talked a lot today. I want to hear you now."

"Mr. Stark, I believe I have been very vocal in the last 5 minutes."

Then Tony nipped her thigh gently, making her whimper.

"Yes Potts, you've been making these cute, sexy little sounds, the whimpers and the groans BUT, I want you to ... ARTICULATE... what you want."

His careful enunciation of that word made Pepper snort with laughter. He tickled her thigh with one finger, making her giggle.

"Now I am just going to tickle you until I hear what I want to hear."

"Alright Tony! Alright!"
"Good girl."

She felt him shift his head from her thigh and then he whispered, "Now talk to me, Potts."

"About?"

"Let's start with how do you feel right now."

He gently kissed the top of her hips and she whispered, "I... I feel so tight... and so wet... and..."

"Annd?"

"And I..." she gasped as his tongue licked her hard. "And I want you to fuck me! Fuck me hard and rough! With... With!"

Tony had gently thrust one long finger into her. She clenched her fists tightly around the soft arm rests of the chair as he crooked it and stroked her.

Pepper suddenly felt unbearably tight. She took a deep breath, drawing his finger even tighter into herself and whimpered.

"Wiiiiith..." drawled Tony silkily.

"With!" She felt another finger push inside her core and again, push against that sensitive spot and struggled to remember what they were talking about.

"Tony!"

"You were saying?"

Pepper groaned as Tony excruciatingly slowly pulled his fingers out of her slick, tight crotch. Then
he thrust them back into her heavily and she gasped, screaming, "Tony! You!!"

"You want more. But you got to tell me, sweetheart."

Now his thumb pushed against her clit and his fingers moved inside her in tandem, making the tension swirling within her unbearable.

"Tony! I want your tongue!" She blurted out on a rush. and he stopped moving his fingers.

"My tongue. Good. And what else?"

"Your fingers! I want you to use your tongue and your fingers in me! Now!"

She felt him pat her thigh comfortingly.

"Alright, Boss Lady, I will stop teasing you."

Then his tongue pushed itself into the top of her mound and began to lick her clit. His fingers moved within her and he took her clit between his lips and sucked on it, at the same time.

Peppers felt around for his head and caught it, just in time. She saw bursts of colored lights in the darkness and felt her control slip. She came hard and fast against Tony's tongue still pushing at her, shaking in the chair with the force of her release.

Her heart was pounding in her chest and she absently smoothed and ruffled Tony's soft hair underneath her fingers as she tried to calm herself down. Then her blindfold was pushed off her eyes and she blinked hard, trying to focus on Tony's face before hers.

He stroked her hair and she listened dazedly to him saying softly, "Potts... Potts... I am going to get us some water, alright, baby... you just stay put, don't worry, I will be right back."

Before his words got through the lusty fog in her brain, Tony turned. She heard the click of the doorknob and stared at the closed door in amazement.
Then Pepper glanced at his lab coat, neatly folded on a small desk chair beside her and exclaimed in shock. "He's forgotten his fake beard!"

She stood up quickly and ran to the door and turned the lock. Then she realized she was buck naked and pulled the door shut hard. "Shit, I can't go out like this!"

She moved towards her suit and fished around for her Starkphone. Pepper found it and spoke into it clearly, "Friday, where the hell is Mr. Stark? He's left without his disguise!"

"Miss Potts, he is."

The door opened and Tony stepped in with a smart-ass grin on his face. "Right here! With water, as promised!" He held up two small PET water bottles.

She clasped his arms and brought her face very close to his. "Stark."

He gulped and Pepper suppressed her smirk. "Honey, I just went to get some water, I wasn't leaving you here alone! Honest to God, Pepper, I was coming right back!"

"I am not talking about that, Tony. I know you wouldn't leave me. But you went out without your disguise!"

"Oh..." He shrugged. "I completely forgot about my beard... good thing nobody saw me..."

She sighed with exasperation and hugged him, resting her head on his shoulder. "Tony Stark, you are such a handful. You just don't behave yourself at conferences."

He hugged her back and whispered naughtily, "Yet I am not the one who seduced my Nerd-for-a-day in the middle of a lecture."

Pepper felt her ears go warm. "You aren't going to ever let me forget that, are you, Stark?"
"Not a chance, Potts." He murmured gleefully and she swatted him.

Chapter End Notes

The smut isn't over yet.
Two more chapters to end Phase 1 and this mini-arc. But no uploads next week because I have to write said chapters :P
Tony lay on the floor, propped up on his elbows, grinning from ear to ear, as he looked at his gloriously disheveled fiance, sitting bare-assed in a black office chair before him.

"What are you smiling about, Stark?" Pepper drawled lazily.

She had taken his blindfold off and was wearing it like a bandanna on her head, her reddish gold hair tumbling around her bare shoulders. Her long legs were folded beneath her as she rested her head against the wall behind her, completely naked and relaxed.

"You, Potts. You look like some 70's flower girl!" He said, chuckling as she blew her hair off her face.

"I feel like a pile of mush, Tony... Every bone in my body... has disappeared... I swear, I can't even..." she dreamily raised one hand and then dropped it back to her lap, sighing loudly. "Nope, can't move a thing."

He threw his head back and laughed.

"This is all your doing, Stark. Boy, when you claim... you really conquer, don't you?" whispered Pepper, smiling softly.
"I can't help it, babe... I..."

His words died on his lips as she languorously stretched herself, her long lean frame straightening beautifully with the movement. His eyes were drawn to her arched delicate back, the way it pushed her lush strawberry-tipped breasts out and highlighted her flat abdomen with its little dip above her hips.

"I can't help loving you, you are something else entirely, Potts..." he finished weakly, gulping at the way she drew her kiss-swollen bottom lip into her mouth and nibbled on it, while she looked at him through her lowered lashes, her blue eyes soft.

"I am?" She whispered and he nodded dumbly.

Pepper broke into a wide grin and he felt his Arc pulse in reaction to her smile.

"Mr. Stark, you are too far away for my liking, scoot over, I am joining you on the floor." She said, rising to her feet and he sat up quickly.

"Pep! You can't lie down, the carpet's too rough and you aren't wearing anything!"

She looked around and then picked up his lab coat. "Mind if I use this?"

"Of course not!"

Pepper spread the coat on the floor and elegantly lowered herself down, sitting cross-legged right beside him. She folded one end of the coat over her lap and then patted it invitingly.

He shifted towards her, turned and then lay back, placing his head in her soft lap and settling in comfortably. She stroked his hair softly and he closed his eyes in contentment. Then she ran her fingers through his hair, massaging his scalp in little round circles.

"Potts, that feels so good. A little harder at the back, please." he murmured and she did exactly what he said, her fingers applying just the right pressure at the back of his head. She then lowered her hands to caress his jaw.
Tony sighed as her fingers stroked his beard, moving through the hair on his chin firmly but gently. She traced the outline of his beard slowly and then rubbed her knuckles against the base of his chin, making him groan with pleasure.

"Shit! That's good! More, Potts, Please!"

Pepper massaged his cheeks tenderly and resumed rubbing her knuckles all along his jaw, starting from close to his ear and ending at his chin. Her touch made him feel tingly and relaxed at the same time and he wriggled in her lap.

"Tony, be still!" She said laughingly. "I want to rub your hair too, it is so damn soft..."

Tony made a long deep noise in his throat, unable to control his body from squirming as one of her hands moved back to his hair and began to stroke him there, while she continued to rub his jaw.

Pepper was giggling uncontrollably and he lazily opened one eye. He looked up at her and smiled dazedly as he gazed into the endless sapphire blue sky of her eyes, offset with tiny specks of gold, sparkling with laughter. Her mouth moved and her pink lips curved slowly into a smile, making her blue eyes shimmer and darken.

Shit... Potts... you are so fucking beautiful, baby...

But he tried to collect himself and stammered out, "What... what's so funny?"

"You are, Tony! You are purring!"

"I do not purr, Potts. I merely make manly sounds of pleasure." He said with an indignant sniff and she laughed, her entire body shaking.

Then she whispered mirthfully, "You so were purring, Mr. Stark, loud and clear. Wait, I will prove it to you."
She placed her fingers on either side of his forehead and rubbed them in a circle. Tony suddenly felt every vertebrae in his spine loosen and his legs go limp. His entire consciousness was humming with the circular movement of her fingers. He closed his eyes again.

"Purr for me, honey..." she whispered and he obliged, humming low and deep from his throat. He turned slightly on his side and burrowed himself even deeper into her soft lap, taking a deep breath and filling his lungs with her intoxicating lily-vanilla scent.

"Good Tony..." Pepper said softly, rubbing his cheeks in the same circular manner. He just kept humming, an indistinct tuneless tune as she moved her hands to his shoulders. They squeezed his collarbone and then moved along his shoulder tendons, squeezing and letting go, causing tiny tingles and jolts of sensation to course through his flesh.

"This is the life..." Tony murmured, his shoulders easing and the knots in his flesh disappearing under Pepper's firm fingers. "Damn it, Potts, I forgot that you were so good with your hands...".

"You haven't felt nothing yet..." she whispered back and then he felt one of her hands move over his collar and unbutton it. Her hand moved into his shirt, her fingers trailing over his Arc teasingly. He made a small noise when it pulsed in reaction. Then her fingers stroked his left pectoral. He slowly eased one eye open as her hand caressed his pecs lovingly.

"You are so soft... Potts..." he murmured softly, "how do you keep your hands so soft... do you bathe in milk and honey?"

Pepper snorted and giggled and he looked at her with one eye.

"You are utterly ridiculous, Stark."

He was going to object but gasped with pleasure because her finger lazily traced the outline of his left nipple.

"Hey!" he said, opening his eyes when she squeezed his nipple with her fingers. "Baby, I thought we agreed that today is your turn!"

Tony pushed his head back against her lap as her fingers continued to mercilessly play with his nipple. When Pepper didn't reply, he exclaimed, "Potts!"
"Yes, Tony, today is my turn..." she said with a firm smile, "but that does not mean that I cannot touch you."

He wanted to argue some more but she moved her hand to his other nipple and pinched it hard. Then she flicked it with her thumb and Tony groaned.

"Should I stop?"

"No! Don't you dare, Potts!"

Pepper giggled and then bent over him. She pressed a kiss to his forehead and he felt his shirt being opened, her hand pushed its halves away from his chest. Then Tony squirmed because somehow Pepper's hands were roaming all over his chest at the same time, driving him wild with their soft caressing touch.

"Pep... Pepper... Pepppeeerrr..."

"That's it, baby, just relax." She cooed and he retorted "How can I, Pep, when you are- Ohhh!"

Her hand had lowered to his abdomen and was teasing his belly button. He squealed and Pepper said with a wide grin, "Aha, it looks like I found Stark's sensitive spot."

"Poootts..." he moaned as she dipped her finger into the little crevice, "You don't play fair!"

"Why should I, Mr. Stark, when you never play fair."

She rubbed his abdomen and it tightened with her fingers lingering on his skin.

Tony swallowed hard, trying to keep his control as her hands caressed his stomach and ribs lovingly. She bent once more and kissed his nose and he quickly took her lips, sitting up halfway. He wound his hands into her hair and pulled her head down a little, so he could kiss her, moving his lips against her soft lush mouth.
For a moment, Pepper returned his kiss and then she changed the tempo and took charge, kissing him softly and moving away a little before returning to his lips in soft, slow, drugging smooches. She nibbled on his bottom lip and he groaned into her mouth.

The taste of her, sinfully tender and warm, along with her lily scent, was an intoxicating combination that overpowered his senses. Dimly, he heard a metallic clasp being unbuckled and realizes that his pants were loosened. Tony pulled back, breathing hard.

Pepper's loose billowing hair surrounded his vision like an soft, wavy curtain of red and gold. Her eyes were gazing down into his with love. They flickered and then focused on him and his breath hitched a little. Her fingers cupped his crotch firmly and he shuddered. Her azure blue orbs shimmered and she drew her lip into her mouth as he felt her hand rub him slowly.

"No underwear...." Pepper murmured with a small smirk. "You are the true kinky one, Mr. Stark."

Tony moaned and thrust his hips forward, desperately craving more of her touch. She obliged him with a curve of her lips, rubbing him intimately, pressing the palm of her hand against his hardening cock. He took a deep breath, which only made him more aroused because his cock pushed back against her soft hand.

He struggled to control himself and cupped her cheeks to distract himself. "Pepper! I... whoa!"

It was so damn hard to put words together, when his wonderful heavenly woman was tenderly rubbing him softly and slowly. He kissed her nose blindly, touching his forehead to hers as she closed her fingers around the tip of his cock and stroked his slit.

"Honey!" he panted out, when her hand began to play with his balls, squeezing and cupping them. "Honey, I love what you are doing but!"

"Buuuttt..." drawled Pepper, giving him a particularly hard squeeze, making him forget what he was saying.

"Mr. Stark, it is time for the final act." She said firmly, once again teasing the sensitive slit at the top of his cock. "It is time for you to sing."
"Me?" He said dumbly and she shook her head at him. "Yes, You!"

"I thought..." Tony stammered out, hardly able to think because his cock was so swollen and so damn sensitive, it was nearly painful. "I thought... you want to go back..."

Pepper let him go and he exhaled in a rush of relief. Then he looked at her and laughed at her expression of indignation.

"Go back! Tony!"

He stopped laughing when her hand swiftly returned to his cock and pressed it hard.

"Mr. Stark...let me be perfectly clear..." she said firmly, her hand still palming him, "I want your thick hard cock in me and then I want you to move those sexy hips of yours till we both see stars. Capiche?"

He opened and shut his mouth in bemusement and Pepper smiled widely.

"I shall take your silence as agreement. Now hop to it, Stark!"

"Yes, Boss!" He scrambled to his feet and held out his hand, so that he could pull Pepper up.

Tony stepped out of his trousers and looked around. He immediately singled out the large, flat wooden boardroom table underneath some chairs. He began to take them down from the table, one by one. Pepper helped him and finally, the table was bare and ready for use.

She hoisted herself onto the table and immediately hopped off, squealing, "Ooooh! It is cold!"

"Shit, sorry, Pep... I didn't realize... here!" He picked up his lab coat and spread it over the table. Then he helped her back onto the table and moved between her spread legs.

She looped her arms around his neck and kissed him softly, her fingers playing with his hair. Then she whispered against his lips, "Mr. Stark... where's my blindfold?"
"If you don't mind, Pep... can we keep it off... I... I just like looking into your eyes when I... when I am inside you."

Her lips curved in a sweet smile and she nuzzled his face tenderly.

"Mr. Stark, I swear to God, you are such a kinky romantic... only you can make my heart ache and my knees weak at the same time."

"Just your knees?" He murmured mischievously, "If I remember correctly, I also inspire panty dropping."

Pepper turned red and tightened her grip around his neck. "Stark, stop teasing me or I am not going to drop my panties ever again..."

"Oh yeah..." he titled his head and kissed her ear, feeling her tremble. "Is that a threat, Potts? Because, sweetheart... I know you are bluffing... and I can prove it but not now..."

Tony lowered his lips to her neck and bit her gently. She gasped and he gently pushed her backwards. "Lie down, baby... that's it..." as she lay back flat against the table.

He placed his hands on each of her silky thighs and helped her fold her knees and scoot to the edge of the table, so he could reach her chest better.

"Tony, take off your shirt, please." Pepper whispered, moistening her lips as she propped herself up on her elbows and looked at him.

The sight of her lying before him, seductively moistening her lips, her golden curves gleaming in the soft light of the room, made him desperately impatient. He quickly shrugged out of his shirt, pulling it off his arms and tossing it aside carelessly.

Then he leaned over her prone figure, pressing his bare chest to hers. Her body felt exquisitely soft and warm against his. He burrowed his head in her neck and sighed deeply, just taking in her, the feel of her.
Pepper shifted, the movement causing her erect nipples to brush against his and he moaned.

"This feels so damn good, Tony... please, please, take me now! I want you in me so badly!" she whispered, her hands caressing his back.

He raised himself and kissed her nose. "In two minutes, hon. Just two minutes."

She made a very cute irritated noise and scrunched up her nose. "Tony! What do you need two m-"

He cut her off by closing his lips around one pert strawberry-pink nipple and sucking on it gently. Pepper bucked up against him, her hands scratching his back as he sucked on her satiny soft breast tenderly.

Then he scored the little bud gently with his teeth and she whimpered. He felt one of her hands in his hair, her fingers moving through it restlessly as he licked her nipple, feeling it pebble deliciously against his tongue.

Pepper moaned his name and he lifted his head from her moist swollen breast and looked at her. Her eyes had turned dark with passion and she pleaded, "Tony... please..."

"I got a minute left, sweetheart. Third Act, remember? I promised you my mouth."

"Yes, but!"

He moved his attention to her other breast, tracking her aureole with his tongue slowly, holding her in place with his hands at her hips. She tightened her grip on his head, both hands now clutching his hair desperately.

Tony was struggling to hold on to his own desire. His painfully erect cock kept brushing and moving against Pepper's warm moist pussy, the friction nearly unbearable. The feel of her on his tongue was also driving him mad: he wanted nothing more than to lick her raw until he was sated with her taste. So he continued, torturing the soft globe with his mouth, alternating between licks and nibbles.
Pepper panted out, "Honey! Please! I can't take it anymore! Please Tony!"

He gave her nipple one last long lick and then lifted his head.

Tony stood straight and gingerly held his very heavy dick in one hand, positioning himself. Then he gently eased into Pepper, groaning loudly because her tight wet core enveloped his hard swollen cock so snugly and beautifully. He was right up to the hilt in her, holding himself still, trying to remain calm, so that he didn't embarrass himself.

"Oh!" she moaned out, her eyes closed tightly. "Damn it, Tony... you are so damn hard!"

This made his cock throb in her and they both whimpered.

"Sweetheart... don't move..." he said tightly, right at the edge of his control. "Just... relax..."

Gritting his teeth, he withdrew himself from her slowly and then quickly pushed back into her. She cried out and he felt her loop one leg around his hip, bringing him even deeper inside her.

"Potts! I am so glad that you take yoga!" He yelled and then used his hands to cup her behind and lift her slightly.

Tony began to rock into her heavily, Pepper clenching herself around his cock in time for his thrusts. He tightened his grip on her soft flesh, holding her still as he relentlessly pushed into her again and again. Then he felt her groan loudly and spasm, her entire body shaking against him as she came.

This was his cue to lose control and he closed his eyes, riding out his white-hot orgasm as he let himself go within her. His knees buckled with the force of his release but he held on to Pepper, calling her name. Finally it was over and he weakly clambered onto the table, lying beside her Pepper and him lay quietly for a minute, trying to catch their breaths. Then she turned towards him and gently cupped his jaw, whispering, her eyes twinkling, "Mr. Stark, I cannot believe that we just made love in a storeroom! At a conference we were supposed to be attending!

"Well, Potts, I cannot believe that you seduced me in the middle of a lecture that I was paying
attention to!" She swatted him and he chuckled, catching her arms.

Pepper sighed and buried her face in his neck as he wrapped his arms around her tightly, hugging her to him.

"I have a brilliant idea..." he whispered against her soft hair, "Whenever you have those endlessly long Board meetings, I am open to dropping by the office and giving you a break just like this. I know a number of Stark Industries storerooms which are cozier than this one."

She giggled and wound her fingers in his hair, tugging his head down to brush his lips with hers tenderly. They kissed slowly and softly for a long moment, cuddling against each other.

Then his phone rang, disturbing their peace and he let her mouth go to grumble, "Friday, whoever it is, tell them to call later."

"Mr. Stark. I'm afraid I cannot answer your phone. It is your friend from Dellon Tech, Mr. Park. If I answer, it will give away your true identity."

Tony sat up reluctantly, seeing Friday's point. He scratched his head, looking around for his phone dazedly.

"It is in my suit coat, Tony... on the chair, next to you." said Pepper drowsily and he leaned sideways, to fish the phone out of her jacket.

Tony cradled the phone against his ear and answered the call. "Park, buddy, what's up?"

He quickly lay back down, snuggling up against Pepper as Park said, "Stu! Where are you? I have been searching all over for you!"

"Well... erm... Miss Potts and I needed to step out for a bit to... have a little mid-conference pow-wow. Work stuff, CEO employee chat, you know."

She giggled and he covered the phone's receiver mike to hide the noise, making a face at her. Park said nervously, "Stu, buddy, I really need your help, if you have the time... and if Miss Potts can
Tony waited patiently for Park to finish his request and then looked at Pepper, who was studying him curiously.

"Park, give me a minute."

He muted the phone and said, "My friend has been asked to join a debate on Nanotechnology as a building tool for warfare. A rather controversial and deep topic. And he's nervous and he wants me to be his partner. Because he needs-"

"An expert in the field." She said with a soft smile. "Well, he's called the right man! After all, you single-handedly built a suit powered exclusively by these..." she tapped his Arc with her finger.

"I wanted to go home... relax... cuddle with you some more but Park... he needs me. Can I join him? Would you mind?"

"Of course not!" Pepper said, sitting up. "Please, this is your moment, you love talking about nanotechnology. Let's join the debate."

Tony grinned happily at her and then turned off the mute button. "Park, buddy, what time is the debate?"

He raised his eyebrows in shock at Park's reply. "What! Crap! Alright, I will meet you there!"

He cut the phone and scrambled off the table rapidly, looking around for his clothes. Pepper elegantly stood up and said, "I take it the debate is happening pretty soon."

"Ten minutes, Potts! I need to dress!"

"Hold on, Stark, you need to tidy up as well. Your hair is..." she gestured and he goggled at her.

"My hair!" Tony exclaimed, touching his mussed up, bed hair. "Shit!"
"Hey, sexy, don't worry. I got you."

Pepper picked up his phone and said, "Friday, there has to be a washroom under repairs or closed to the public, nearby."

He and Friday replied at the same time.

"Coincidentally Miss Potts, it is the room opposite this very room."

"Pepper, there is a locked washroom right next door."

"Wow! That's great! Tony, I am assuming from your smugness that you can pick the door's lock again?"

"Of course I can. Let me just put my shirt on, I can't go out buck naked... hey, Pep..." he moved closer to her and stroked her hair. "You don't need to attend the debate, I know you had a long day, you can go back to the hotel, if you'd like."

She nuzzled his hand and smiled at him. "I don't want to leave without you, Tony... besides, I am sure some hecklers are needed for your debate."

Pepper giggled at his scowl and began to collect her clothing. Tony shrugged into his shirt and balled up the rest of his clothes in his hands.

"Let's see, do I have everything? Pants, socks, let me put my shoes on..." He slipped his bare feet into his loafers, "tie?"

"Tony, I have your tie," said Pepper, her clothes neatly folded over her arm. "I want to clean up before I put my clothes back on, so I am wearing your lab coat, alright?"

"Sure." He said, putting the chairs back on the table and looking around for any other things they might have disturbed.
"Are you going to put your pants on?" She asked pointedly and he grinned at her.

"I will take that as a no. You better be quick with your lock picking, Stark."

"Is that a challenge, Potts?" He countered, opening the room's door.

"No, more a request." She said dryly. "You aren't wearing anything underneath your shirt and I do not want your best asset to be on public display."

He drew himself to his full height and said mock snootily, "I am much more than just a beautiful ass, Potts."

Pepper laughed cutely and he couldn't resist leaning towards her and kissing her nose.

Then Tony poked his head out of the storeroom and looked to his right cautiously. They were right at the end of the hall, so he wasn't worried about foot traffic but more about people passing by and seeing them.

"The coast is clear." He whispered and quickly crossed the narrow hall, to kneel in front of the other door. Once again, he used his stylus to jimmy the lock and push open the door. Then he moved down the hallway, shielding Pepper as she quickly ran into the washroom in his white lab coat.

Once she was inside, he closed the storeroom and entered the washroom, locking it behind him.

"Okay, Tony, we do not have much time." Pepper said briskly, taking off his lab coat. "I am going to clean myself up in the first stall. You can use the second one. Then we dress up quickly."

He smirked because he realized she had gone into Business mode. "Yes, Maam!"

She sighed in exasperation and so he quickly ran into the stall. He cleaned himself up and left the stall, critically examining his disheveled hair.

"Now where on Earth, is my beard?"
"Here, Tony, I have it in my suit pocket." said Pepper, coming out of her stall. Tony stared at her in amazement because she was nearly back to her regular impeccable self. All that was missing was her suit jacket.

"How the hell did you?!"

She just smirked and came towards him. "Come on, Stark. Time's a wasting."

She smoothed down his shirt and he buttoned it as Pepper arranged his collar. Then she handed him his pants and he pulled them on.

"Where's your underwear?"

"I didn't wear any in the first place." He said with a cheeky grin and Pepper giggled.

"Tony!"

"These pants are a little too tight for underwear. What's next?"

She held out his coat and he pushed his arms into it. Pepper straightened its collar and back to align with his shirt as he ran his fingers through his hair.

"Mr. Stark, I know you love styling your hair, so here, use this." She handed him a delicate comb and he accepted it gladly, using it to tidy his hair, which was all over the place. Next, he patiently placed his fake beard back on. Pepper pulled on her suit jacket.

"All set?"

"Not yet, Mr. Stark." She said with a soft smile and held up his tie.

Following their years-old ritual, Pepper looped the tie around his neck and arranged it under his
shirt's collar. He studied her lowered head as she tied it into a neat square knot and tightened it against his collar. She arranged it to her satisfaction and then placed her hand on his chest.

He whispered softly, "What would I do without you, Pepper?" tilting her chin up to look into her sapphire blue eyes.

"Tony..." she said, blinking hard and he touched his head to hers, nuzzling her nose.

"I know, I know, I can't help it..." He whispered against her mouth. "After love making, I get emotional. I am growing old. I am sorry."

He felt her smile against his face and she hugged him lightly.

"You aren't getting old, silly. It is alright to get emotional. For the record, I can't imagine living without you either. I love you, Tony Stark."

"I love you too, Pepper..." he whispered back and was going to kiss her when his phone rang.

"Darn it! Park! I am late!"

Pepper giggled. "Your public awaits, Mr. Stark, I mean! Mr. Johnson!"

They left the bathroom together, hand in hand as they walked up the narrow hallway, back towards the main Conference room.

Chapter End Notes

I had planned to finish and upload this chapter next week but... then as you all know (if you don't, do yourself a favor and don't watch it), the Avengers 4 trailer dropped on Friday.
And I got so depressed (the first half of the trailer! Tony's swan song to Pepper) and then, I don't know how, my inner writing Hulk got unleashed and finished this chapter, as a **** you to Marvel. Especially since they ruined Xmas.

One more chapter, possibly on Xmas weekend, to finish Phase 1.
Wakanda Forever

Chapter Notes

After three long months, I am back to writing this fic. I sincerely apologize for the lack of updates, I had too many real-life commitments that did not allow me to write. And I had a crippling case of writer's block.

This chapter kicks off Phase 2. Our heroes are going to spend some time in Wakanda, catching up with the Avengers, so some of the upcoming chapters are going to be very dialogue-heavy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Stark jet flew skillfully around the high imposing peaks of the Virunga mountains. From her window seat, Pepper studied the lush green vegetation that covered the mountains like a verdant carpet.

After a week’s delay, she and Tony were finally flying to Wakanda, to meet the remaining Avengers. The journey had taken a day, they had stopped in London to refuel and now she wondered how long they would take to reach.

She heard Tony ask, "Captain, how much further?"

The Captain's deep voice came over the intercom, "Not long now, Mr. Stark. Thirty minutes tops. I am following the signal provided by your friend and it seems to be getting stronger. Good thing too because this mountainous terrain is confusing."

"Copy that, Captain, thank you." Tony went back to reading his comic. She turned in her seat, to study him better.

Normally on a long flight such as this, Tony would be lounging on the comfortable long settee. Or sitting closer to me and trying to cuddle... instead... he's sitting way over there, in the aisle seat, sunglasses on, shoulders rigid.. he's tense and trying to hide it... but why...

"So Wakanda is a landlocked country?" Pepper asked casually. Tony glanced briefly at her and nodded. "Yup, it is nestled between a lot of mountain ranges, deep in a stone valley... Bruce told me it is very scenic."
Then she noticed he was holding his comic in one hand and his other hand was on his lap.

"Tony, what is that in your left hand?" She asked as gently as possible.

He looked at her through his sunglasses and raised his comic book. "The latest B.P.R.D comic. I picked it up in London. It's been a while since I read one of these."

"Honey, I am asking about your other hand." She said softly, aware that he was deliberately not answering her.

Tony looked at her and then looked away, swallowing hard. He sighed heavily and lowered the comic, while tightening his grip on whatever he was holding in his left hand. Then he pushed his sunglasses up into his hair and her heart clenched at the emotions churning in his brown eyes.

Without saying a word, she stood up and walked over to his seat. She perched on the armrest and he immediately leaned against her side.

Pepper held him to her, one hand gently stroking his hair. She knew Tony well enough, to know that she had to be patient.

_I know it isn't easy for him to be honest emotionally. I know I must not force him to express his feelings... he trusts me, he loves me, he will tell me what's bothering him. And until he does, I just need to support him quietly._

They sat there together, motionless except for her fingers moving through his soft downy locks of hair. Then he raised his fist and opened it to reveal a small rubber ball. Now she was damn curious but held her tongue.

He absently moved the ball through his fingers and murmured, "Did I ever tell you about the time I attended an Embrace Jesus event with Nick Fury?"

"No, you haven't."
"It was just after we had gotten together. You know, after the disastrous Stark Expo and me nearly dying and you trying to quit-"

"Yes, Tony, I do remember that stressful time. Please continue."

He chuckled wryly. "Fury needed my expert advice on how to handle a terrorist group from the Philippines."

She snorted, well aware of what that really meant and he looked up at her with a broad grin.

"Yeah, he wanted Iron Man to step in but he knew I was a stubborn ornery idiot and that I'd say no, just for the heck of it. So he was all cool and showed me the intel, the photos, the problem statements, just enough details to get me hooked. And then he, oh so casually said, but you know Stark, I've taken enough of your time, I'll be going and he got up and I waited for a beat and then called him back because now I wanted to know more! He got me involved like that, every single time!"

Tony sighed again and then looked down at the ball.

"This mission was the first. Actually, it wasn't a mission, he just wanted to scope out a source. And he really wanted some company. Coulson was busy in some other part of the world and surely, I owed him that much. The source was a former member of the group, who had turned to Christianity and had become a speaker at a local church. So I went along with Fury, sat through a two-hour boring preachy lecture and right at the end, they handed out these tiny stress balls with the symbol of the Cross on them."

He raised the ball up. It had once been robin egg blue but was now, faded grey with age. She could see nail marks and scratches embedded in its surface.

Pepper moved her hand from his hair to his prickly chin, stroking his freshly trimmed beard tenderly. He made a low growling noise and closed his eyes with pleasure.

"What happened next?"

Tony said lazily, "Well... it turned out that the source was actually a double agent. He took us to this shady alleyway, saying we needed to meet another contact and then pulled a gun on us. As quick as
a cat, Fury threw the stress ball straight at him, it hit him in the face and then Fury punched him out cold. It was awesome! That’s when I realized that for an old dude, Fury moved like lightning. Then we handed over the agent to a SHIELD squad and Fury asked me to have some coffee. One coffee led to another, we spent the whole night talking and then waited for this tiny French bakery to open, so we could have beignets at 6 am. Finally, Fury let me go home at 8. I kept this as a reminder of that first mission. After New York, I took it out once and squeezed it... just once... then after Ultron, a few times... but after Siberia...

He closed his fist over the ball and exhaled slowly.

"After Siberia... I started carrying it around... squeezing it regularly, it had become a such habit... I am ashamed to admit it helps me... relax. Then today... today just feels so damn strange. Here I am, going back to meet my former teammates, we used to be a team, we used to be friends... but we've... we have lived different lives for so long, it feels... it feels weird... I don't know, I guess I am feeling emotionally overwhelmed... and the thought of seeing Steve again."

She protectively patted his head. "Steve cannot hurt you anymore, Tony."

He looked at her with a soft smile. "No, he can't, Pep. It's just... it's going to be so weird to see him again, that's all. I thought I was over what had happened in Siberia, I thought I had moved on and forgotten about it but today..." he clutched his left arm and sighed heavily. "All those old feelings have come back. The feelings when I... when I returned from Siberia... its stupid, really."

"Feelings such as..." she said, rubbing his back with one hand.

"Despair, cold rage, a numbing sense of loss, frustration... we worked together, we were friends. At least I thought we were friends, good friends who had each other's back. But then... sides were chosen and... sadly there was no one on my side... That hurts me till now."

Pepper gritted her teeth at the deep sadness in his voice. He looked at his hands and said quietly, "I don't blame them, Pep... I really don't... they were unhappy with the Accords and the way Ross was treating them. I am not angry about them taking Steve's side. But it just hurts. That nobody decided to stay on mine... well, except Rhodey... and looked what happened to him..."

This is paining him so much... I wish he didn't have to relive these memories... I wish... I wish there was something I could do to help him forget!
She didn't know what to say, so she slid down onto his lap and wrapped her arms around his chest. Then she hugged him. He buried his face in her neck and took a deep breath.

"Potts... ignore my ramblings, here I am thinking about the past and simply feeling sorry for myself... I may have lost the Avengers but..." he tightened his arms around her. "But I didn't lose you... you came back to me..."

Tony leaned back and looked at her, his brown eyes soft and molten. "You've always been on my side, Pepper. Right from the beginning, when I was a useless playboy genius and didn't deserve you... and today, I still have you at my side... after all these years and all my stupid shenanigans."

"Hey!" She tenderly pushed his hair off his brow. "Your 'shenanigans' saved a lot of lives! You did a lot of good, Tony Stark, that you don't get enough credit for! And I understand how you feel, I know this must be difficult for you, facing your former teammates but Tony..."

She softly kissed his nose and then rested her forehead against his. "For what its worth... you have me, I got your back and I won't let anyone hurt you this time! I mean it!

Tony chuckled and nuzzled her face. "So fierce, but then you have always been defending me... and saving my sorry ass... I love you, Pepper..."

She murmured "I love you too, Tony..." and then closed her eyes, her fingers idly playing with the soft hair at the back of his neck.

"This feels so good..." he said with a sigh. "Honey, let's just sit like this until we land... whadya say, Boss lady?"

She pinched his neck lightly, making him squeak.

"Don't you dare call me that in public, Stark. Else I will spill the beans about exactly how I boss you around. Every explicit detail."

"Oh no, you wouldn't."
"Oh yes I would, now shush for a bit." She sighed dreamily, enjoying the way his warm firm body felt against hers. They just sat there in silence, snuggling up against each other blissfully.

After what seemed like 5 minutes, they heard the Captain announce, "Miss Potts, Mr. Stark, we are entering Wakanda. Please fasten your seat-belts as we will be landing soon."

They both huffed loudly with annoyance.

"Hold on Pep, you can sit on my lap..." said Tony, rummaging around his seat. "I think my belt can fit around the both of us."

"Tony!" She giggled and pushed herself to her feet, dodging his reaching hands. "That's not safe! I am going to sit near the window over here."

Pepper shifted sideways and sat in the window seat in the same aisle as him. She looked out of the window and then gasped loudly.

"Why, the plane heading straight for that mountain peak! We will crash right into it! Tony, do something!"

Tony leaned towards her, grinning broadly. "Relax, boss, that's the holographic projection shroud that covers the border of Wakanda, hiding its advanced technological civilization from planes and drones flying overhead. Only planes that match a particular energy signal, can pass through it."

She clutched his hand tightly as the giant stone face of the peak loomed before them, unmoving and seemingly very real. Then a slight tingling sensation rippled through their jet and the peak disappeared. Now they were flying above a deep forested valley, complete with a large waterfall that cascaded down to a long, winding river that snaked through the hilly terrain. The land now dipped and rose in gentle grass-covered hills. She could to see a large herd of animals grazing peacefully by the riverside.

Then they flew over a large bowl-like depression of Earth, with small sandy crevices and rises. She curiously studied the angry deep scorch marks in the sand.

"This is where they must have faced Thanos' forces." Tony murmured quietly. "Look ahead, Pepper. We are entering the capital, Birnin Zana."
A sparkling metropolis loomed in the near horizon, with high towers and tall stone buildings clearly visible in its skyline. It gleamed gold and bright in the clear sunlight. They neared the metropolis and she noticed the delicate circular rail tracks weaving intrinsically around the towers.

"A bullet train?"

"No, maglev trains, they run on magnets supported by a magnetic field. But I am sure that these trains are powered by vibranium."

As they flew directly over the city, she could see round, tall skyscrapers and huge, concrete buildings with minarets and inscriptions on their walls. A number of structures had overhanging pools and hanging gardens growing from their balconies. The main roads were neat gravel-covered lines that wove through the city but there were also a number of sandy lanes and streets, bustling with people.

"Wakanda has an interesting contrast of old and new architecture." Tony said musingly. "A successful marriage of tradition and technology. And not just in architecture. We should take a tour of the city whenever we are free."

"I agree, Tony."

There was a loud whirring noise as the plane lowered its landing gear.

"Are we going to land at the airport and then go to the Palace?"

"Nope. Being important guests, we are going to land straight at the Palace airstrip. And receive a royal welcome of some sorts... at least that's what Bruce told me."

Pepper looked at him with horror. "We are going to meet the Queen! Why didn't you tell me earlier!!"

She gestured wildly at her strawberry-red gingham shirt and black jeans. "I would have changed into something more suitable!"
"Nonsense, Potts!" Tony kissed her forehead gently. "You look darn cute in this shirt! Besides, I am not wearing anything fancy either."

He shrugged and she rolled her eyes at him.

"Says the man with the 2000$ Nike shoes, Gucci jeans and a god-knows how expensive t-shirt!"

Tony grinned boyishly at her. "These old things... nahhh.... hey, look here we are!"

Chapter End Notes

In Civil War, Tony used a stress ball when he came back to the Avengers compound, after Siberia. This was pointed out and elaborated on, in this Tumblr post: https://rhovers.tumblr.com/post/182350504607/misspotts-tony-using-an-anti-stress-ball-when

Everything else in this chapter, I made up.

One more chapter tomorrow.

If you are reading this, thank you for your patience and for coming back to this fic after such a long hiatus
The Royal Welcome

The plane gently landed on the reddish-gold sandy strip, slowly pulling to a stop before a large, circular castle-like structure, with high rounded minarets. Tony and Pepper disembarked from the plane and began to climb up a long line of golden steps leading up to the entrance.

They reached the top and stood in a circular courtyard. In front of them was a huge golden archway, with two large panther statues on either side. Black tapestries embroidered in gold, were draped all over the walls, glimmering in the sunlight. She squinted up, studying the onyx and gold motif emblazoned right at the top of the structure.

"The home of the Black Panther." murmured Tony behind her. There was a small group of people waiting underneath the golden arches. A smile slowly formed on her face as a lanky, salt and pepper-haired figure broke away from the group and ran towards them, arms outstretched.

"Stark, you son of a bitch! It's you, it really is you, I can't believe it!!" Yelled Bruce as he engulfed Tony in a fierce hug.

"Banner, get off me!" Tony sighed with exasperation but she noticed he returned the hug and didn't move away.

"Tony, Tony, Tony... I can't believe you are alive, buddy..."

"You and me both, Banner. You and me, both."

Then Bruce turned to her and his grin widened, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Jeepers! Pepper, you came too!"

Before she could reply, he quickly hugged her too and she giggled.
"Shit, I am so happy to see you!!"

"Likewise, Bruce, likewise."

He whispered, "I know Tony's here only because of you... he's alive, only coz of you!"

"What, no! Bruce, come on!"

"Hey now, don't be modest, Tony told me that you, you were the one that rescued him from space! Darn it, Pepper, you truly are the best thing that has ever happened to him."

She couldn't help but blush and he held on to her, grinning broadly. Tony took her hand, saying petulantly, "Okay Banner, that's enough of a reunion. Give me back my fiance."

Bruce exclaimed, "Oh shit, I forgot you two are engaged! When's the date?"

Pepper stared at Tony dumbfounded. Then they both spoke at the same time.

"Erm... we haven't picked one yet." "We had a date planned but it was actually a decoy and the real wedding was supposed to take place later and..."

Bruce smiled sheepishly. "Hey, I am sorry, I didn't mean to pry. I just... I remember..." he looked at Tony helplessly and shrugged. "You invited Wong to the wedding for helping you out. I thought you crazy kids would be married by now."

Tony leaned closer to Bruce and whispered, "Buddy, it is a bit too soon... after all this loss. It is just too soon."

Her heart sank at his words.

_I know Tony's right. I know he is. But I just hoped... that he had recovered enough to focus on the future... a wedding would help us move on..._
Then he looked at her and she forced herself to smile.

"I hope that's how you feel too, Pep..." he murmured softly, his eyes searching hers. "I am sorry, I know I was the one pressurizing you before, for an early wedding but after all this... after Thanos...

After losing Peter... the words hung in the air unsaid but she could see the sadness lurking in his eyes.

A wedding was not the only thing that he wanted... but he's still hurting, I need to be patient, I need to give him time... someday, the pain will lessen and then he will be ready to move on.

She took his hand and squeezed it gently.

"Honey, there's nothing to apologize for. I agree with you completely."

It took a lot of effort to lie about her feelings on the subject but the look of relief that crossed his face, made it worth it.

"Hey..." Bruce said, clasping their shoulders. "What's important is that you guys are well and are here. We have a lot to talk about! And we have to meet the others, Steve and Nat are at the wall repair site, they should return in an hour, meanwhile we got to go see Thor, he's holed up with-"

While Bruce prattled on, Pepper saw a young teenage girl sneakily approach them, grinning from ear to ear. She was dressed regally in a black and gold tunic, with her hair tied up in pigtails. She met Pepper's gaze and placed her finger on her lips, her black eyes twinkling merrily. Then she moved right behind Bruce and cleared her throat loudly.

Bruce turned and flushed to his ears.

"Where are my manners, I completely forgot!" He quickly bent at the waist and said, "Your Majesty, I am so sorry. I didn't even realize-"
"It's okay, Dr. Banner, I can understand. You were so happy to see your friends. There's no need to introduce me, I am sure you all know I am Princess Shuri of Wakanda!"

She stretched her hand out towards Tony and he copied Bruce by bowing over it.

The young Princess burst into giggles. "Don't be so stuffy, dude! We know each other, don't we! No need to stand on ceremony! Pump it!"

Tony straightened and stared as the princess offered him her closed fist to bump. He looked at her for a moment and then clenched his fist and gently touched hers with it.

"That's it! Good to meet you in person, Iron Man! Dr Banner insists you are the smartest of the Avengers. I must say, I think you are the best dressed! And those be some awesome kicks, what are they, oh my gawd, are they NIKE AIR Foamposites? Respect man!"

"They are, Princess. Thank you for having us here."

"Dude..." she tapped her heart lightly with her closed fist. "The honor is all mine."

She turned towards Pepper and her jaw dropped in awe.

"I saw it from afar but I still can't believe it! What a shade of red! Is it real? Is that why your suit is red, Mr. Stark?"

Pepper couldn't help but smile at the bubbly young monarch.

"It is an honor to meet you, your Majesty." She put her hand out hesitatingly but the Princess shook it with enthusiasm.

"May I just say, you are so pretty! No wonder, Dr. Banner has a crush on you!"

"What!" Bruce said, flustered. "No! Princess! I! Pepper, its not true!"
She giggled and Tony narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"Hey Tony, come on! Don't look at me like that!"

The Princess just smiled at her winningly.

"You know Miss Potts, I have read a lot about you in the media and the work you do, not just in your company but your humanitarian work as well. You are a great example of female leadership in a male-dominated industry. Would you mind speaking at the Wakanda University, while you are visiting us? About your experiences in management and how you manage to break the glass ceiling? Please say yes!"

Pepper was pleasantly shocked at the offer. "Why, I'd be honored, your Majesty! Thank you for thinking of me!"

The Princess whispered loudly, "Hey, you can call me Shuri... even stuffy Dr. Banner does. He's just being all formal-like, coz you guys are here."

Bruce said quickly, "Whoa! That is not true! I always use the official form of address! I behave with the utmost decorum always! Princess, don't do this to me!"

Tony clapped him comfortably on the shoulder, "It's alright, Brucey, don't get your shorts into a twist. I am sure the Princess is just teasing you."

"Brucey!!" squealed the Princess and burst into peals of laughter. "Brucey! I like that! Imma going to call you that now!"

Bruce shook his head at Tony and sighed. "Did you have to call me that? Did you have to, Stark?"

They all jumped in fright, when a loud stentorian voice shouted, "Your Highness!"

It was the Princess's turn to sigh. She muttered, "Oh great, my babysitter is here." rolling her eyes.
Bruce nervously caught Tony by the arm. "Oh crap man... I forgot to inform her that you were coming. Oh shit. I am so screwed!"

"Inform who?" Pepper asked as she could see a woman appear from the entrance of the building and march towards them determinedly.

"General Okoye!" Hissed Bruce urgently. "The head of the Dora Milaje and the Wakandan Army!"

The Princess groaned irritably. "Dude, don't scare your friends... Okoye's bark is worse than her bite... most of the time."

The woman neared them, her gold epaulets and neck cuff standing out against her stark black uniform. Her warrior's appearance was truly formidable, accented by the huge spear strapped to her back.

"Your Highness!" she said in a strict lightly accented tone, "Why aren't you in the lab? And why is your guard over there?"

"Oh come of it, Okoye..." whined the Princess. "Dr. Banner's friends are here! I had to receive them."

Pepper felt Tony move behind her as the General stiffened and gave them a steely-eyed glare.

"Why wasn't I notified of their arrival? Banner!" She barked, making Bruce shake like jelly. "Why didn't you inform me about the Stark party's arrival?"

"I... erm... I..." Bruce shied nervously and looked at them and then back at the General.

"You know we are on lockdown, yes? Then why didn't you inform me?"

"Okoye!" grumbled the Princess. "We have guests, remember?"
The Captain harrumphed and gestured at Bruce. They stepped to one side, leaving the Princess alone with them.

The Royal Guard stood at attention, watching them like hawks, until the Princess raised her hand authoritatively. She said something in her native language and they retreated to a short distance.

The Princess murmured, "Miss Potts, Mr. Stark, you gotta help me out here. You got to give everyone something to do! They are driving me crazy!"

Tony and Pepper stared at her askance. Princess Shuri continued softly, "After Thanos' attack, after my brother's passing, we have all fallen into a state of limbo! I need your help to shake us out of it! We cannot continue like this!"

"What do you mean, Princess?" Tony asked.

She huffed loudly. "Well, look at Bruce! He has become afraid of his own shadow! He just talks about you and about New York and the Avengers in the past! Okoye and Natasha are such bad-ass women! But all they do, is squabble and nit-pick over every little thing! And they won't leave me in peace! They keep crowding me and following me around!"

She gestured at the guards behind them, who had quietly moved closer to them. "Shoo, you guys, shoo! Give me some breathing room!"

Then the Princess pointed at Okoye, coldly talking to Bruce, who was shuffling and fidgeting nervously.

"Even now, look at Okoye giving the good doctor a hard time! They have become so paranoid! Captain Steve, he's no help, he stays away, just rebuilding the Wall and then improve it and then rebuild it..."

"The Wall?" Pepper asked.

Shuri sighed sadly. "The Wall was a vibranium-powered force field that my scientists and I created. When Thanos attacked, his forces managed to breach it and break it. Since then, Okoye and Captain Steve have become obsessed with trying to make it invincible. Because of their paranoia! They want to keep a sort of electric fence up at all times! That is not practical or good for my people! We cannot
live our lives in fear!"

"And all Steve does, is work on this wall? That doesn't sound like him..."

"The Captain is grieving deeply, I know he misses his soldier friend, Bucky but he isn't doing anything to move on! Then there's the handsome God in the greenhouse, who just stays in there! With the talking rat! And tinker all day long! It is like he's scared of the sunshine!"

"Do you mean Thor?" Asked Tony slowly.

"Yes! Banner tells me, he's a mighty god of some alien world which was destroyed. I just got one look at him once and wow! He's so dreamy and tall and broad! But all he does is hide in the greenhouse! The only one who wanted to do something, was Colonel Rhodes! He was determined to find you! He said you would help us help them!"

She looked up at the sky, her eyes full of emotion. "I know they are grieving, I know I should be patient because they have lost so much. I have lost a lot too. Both my brother and my mother are dead. I am the only surviving member of the Wakandan Royal family. I am the last of my line and believe me, I have not accepted this! Not a day passes by, when I don't think about my family. But I can't just mourn them and do nothing! I have to take care of my people and I have to help my friends, the Avengers, I have to help them to move on too! And for this, I need your help" she took their hands and said earnestly, "both of you, I need your help to motivate the Avengers and do something! Please!"

Pepper could seriously relate to the young girl's anguish. She squeezed her hand in comfort and Tony nodded.

"You are right, Princess. We have to move on, we have to put our grief behind us. Thanos has taken too much from us already. I will do my best to do as you say."

"Thank you, Mr. Stark. A weight has been lifted from my shoulders." The Princess said with a soft smile. "Captain Steve and Natasha are at the Wall, they will return in an hour. Colonel Rhodes should reach Wakanda any minute. Once they are here, I would like us all to meet. Please try to persuade the handsome God to join us."

"Yes, Princess."
"Miss Potts, please feel free to attend, if you’d like."

"Thank you, Your Majesty for including me."

The Princess rubbed her hands together with excitement. "This is going to be good! Finally something is going to get done around here! Oh shit, here comes the Po Po! Be cool, be cool. Don’t let her know what we are up to!"

Much to Pepper's amusement, the Princess made her face absolutely blank with no hint of expression.

"Your Highness," said the General, still eyeing them suspiciously. "You have an address at the Wakanda University. Your escort is ready."

"Okoye, this..." the Princess pointed backwards at the group of guards behind them, "This is not an escort, it is a small army! I do not want to frighten the students! I just need my bodyguards or even just you will do."

The General looked sheepish. "Ah. Well, I... I also brought along some more guards." She pointed at another group of soldiers, smartly lined up a short distance away.

"Okoye! Come on, man! You are killing me here!" Whined the Princess with agitation. "The University's gonna think we coming to attack them!" She looked at Pepper and Tony. "You see! This is what I told you!"

"And what would that be, your Highness?" Asked Okoye pointedly.

"Nothing. Nothing important. Let's get going, Okoye. Miss Potts, Iron Man, I will be back in an hour!"

The Princess departed with a wave, her royal entourage neatly surrounding her like a curtain of red and black.

"Phew!" Bruce sighed, coming back to join them. "That Okoye is a real ball buster. I told her a week
ago that you guys were coming."

He ran his fingers through his hair with another loud sigh. "I guess I should have reminded her... oh crap! James is landing today as well! Shit! Should I have reminded her about that?!"

Tony said comfortably, "Brucey, don't worry. Let Rhodey handle the tough Captain... after all, he's got a suit of armor."

"Yeah..." said Bruce thoughtfully. "The General does act nicer around James. I don't know what it is, perhaps its because he's a fellow military officer and she respects him more?"

He shrugged. Then he exclaimed, "Hey Stark! Stop calling me Brucey! You know I hate that name!"

"Oh yeah!" Tony teasingly poked him in the stomach. "What are you going to do about it? Bring out the Jolly Green Giant?"

Bruce's face crumpled with abject sadness. Tony said quickly, "Hey man, I am sorry, I didn't mean it! I know that's a sensitive topic. I am sorry. Really."

He just smiled sadly at them. "It has been 2 months since the Big Guy was out. At this point, I'd be most happy to see him."

Bruce lowered his head and sighed. Tony patted him on the back softly.

"It's okay, Banner. We will figure something out, to get him back. We will do something."

"Thanks Tone... come on, I will show you to your rooms. You can freshen up for a bit. Steve and Nat are-"

"At the Wall. The Princess told us."

"Yeah... hey, I know who's been waiting for you to show up! Do you want to meet Thor and then
go to your rooms? He's close by! Come on! Here let me take your bag, Pepper!"

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, Tony meets Thor. And then after that, the moment you have all been waiting for... *drum roll* meeting Steve.

Tony's shoes are: https://store.nike.com/in/en_gb/pw/foamposite-shoes/n9kZoi3?ref=https%253A%252F%252Fwww.google.com%252F
Bruce led them into a doorway to the right of the main building. It was clearly an official government office of some kind as it was filled with people bustling to and fro, dressed in smart black and gold uniforms. Then they went down a staircase and entered a long, narrow, brightly-lit corridor.

"Just a little way further now."

They walked down the corridor and Pepper looked around. Thick green vines began to appear on the bronze walls. The plants seemed to be growing from within the walls and some of the vines had tiny purple flowers.

Bruce gestured at the vines as he walked in front of them.

"Because of the abundance of vibranium in the soil, the native vegetation of this land is imbued with the metal's powerful properties. Fortunately for the Wakandans, this means their vegetation has a vast range of healing and strengthening capabilities. There are plants for curing fevers, plants for enhancing the immune system, plants for bowel movement regularization, you name it, there is a plant to cure or enhance. As a result, Wakandan medicine consists of plant-based compositions, similar to Ayurveda. So a lot of care is taken in the cultivation of these medicinal plants. And that's why, you will see a lot of greenhouses and botanical gardens all over the city. One of the largest greenhouses is within the Royal Palace."

They had reached a large square glass panel. It was closed and had no handles or levers. To its right, was an identity scanner system.

Pepper walked right up to the glass and stared through it with awe. She could see nothing but thick green plants of all shapes and sizes, growing riotously. A narrow stone path wound in the middle of the lush plant growth.

Tony took one glance at the glass and asked "Banner, why have you bought us to a jungle?"
Bruce sighed heavily. "Coz this is where our good friend Thor is holed up. Along with his..." he grimaced, "traveling alien companion."

He tapped a button on the scanner and then a red beam of light appeared from the panel. It rapidly moved over his face and then disappeared.

"Hey, are you guys in there? I have guests!"

"We aren't buying anything!" An shrill angry voice yelled out of nowhere, making her jump. Then she saw that it was coming from a speaker on the panel. "We don't want to see nobody!"

Bruce shook his head in exasperation.

Tony mouthed, "Who is that?"

"Rocket-"

"That's Mr. Raccoon to you, old man!" The voice said rudely. "Now go away! We are working!"

Bruce covered his mouth and muttered, "The damn Raccoon has taken over this greenhouse! He won't let anybody in! He's so damn secretive and prickly and so rude! Any day now, the General is going to lose her patience and kick him out! And I wouldn't blame her!"

"Is Thor in there too?" She asked curiously as she could hear voices whispering softly from the speaker.

"He is, Pepper. He and the Raccoon, they are pretty tight. They are both up to something in there..."

"Like what?" Tony asked impatiently, fiddling with the panel's buttons and switches.

Bruce wrung his hair. "I don't know... I suspect, something definitely illegal, knowing the Raccoon."
He caught Pepper's eye and nodded wryly. "The Raccoon is a hardened space criminal! He's been selling weapons illegally across the galaxy and is on the watch list of a number of galactic law enforcement agencies. Plus, he also dabbles in bounty hunting, so he has a number of enemies. But his talent is his devious ingenuity. He can take any mechanical or electronic device apart and either weaponize it or destroy it. I've seen it first hand."

"Awww!" sneered the shrill voice suddenly. "You are too kind, old man! I think the world of you too... NOT!" It burst into wheezy ribald laughter and Bruce rolled his eyes.

Then a deep male voice said softly, "Banner, my friend. Now's not a good time. We have hit a... how do you humans put it... snafu with the-"

The shrill voice emitted a high unpleasant squeal and she quickly covered her ears.

"That noise is most unsettling, Raccoon! Calm down!" Thor roared loudly. "I am just trying to explain to Banner that-

Bruce interrupted, "Thor, buddy. Tony and Pepper are here. I thought you'd like to meet them."

"What! Starkson is here! Why didn't you say so!"

The glass panel slid open with a loud whoosh. They heard the sound of thunderous footsteps and from the green forested depths, emerged Thor, unearthly tall and muscular with a broad smile on his face.

"Man of Iron!" He exclaimed in his deep booming voice and wrapped his arms around Tony, lifting him off the ground.

"Point Break!" Tony yelped. "Lemme down!"

Thor just held on to him, sighing loudly.

"It is so good to see you, Starkson! It has been a very very long time, my friend. I have missed you dearly, your wit, your genius and even your annoying mannerisms."
He finally let Tony go with a hard clap on the back, nearly making him fall over.

Pepper tried to hide her surprise as she looked up at Thor. She had first met him after the alien attack on New York and then briefly at the Avengers facility, after Ultron had been destroyed. To her, it seemed as if the years had taken a physical toll on the Asgardian God of Thunder.

He still had his majestic royal bearing and imposing physical build but his long flowing golden hair had been hacked brutally into a harsh buzz cut. The black eye patch over his left eye was another shock. He had the lean, grizzled look of someone who had been through Hell and back.

Thor turned to her and his smile broadened. "Lady Potts! What a pleasure to see you again!"

He bowed over her hand, kissing it with an other-worldly charm. She giggled and he straightened, his visible blue eye twinkling at her.

"I admire you, my lady, for still staying by the side of the insufferable Stark! And I understand from Banner..." he looked at Bruce sideways. "That congratulations are in order."

"Yes. Tony and I are engaged."

"I hope it is not indelicate of me to ask... when will the heir of Stark be born?"

She burst into laughter and Bruce exclaimed, "Thor! Buddy! I said engaged! Not pregnant!"

Thor looked between them with confusion.

"But with your relations being of many years, I assumed that the engagement was merely a formality. In Asgard, if a betrothed couple has known each other for many years, they conceive a child during their engagement and it is perfectly permissible."

Tony, who for once, was blushing instead of her, said "Thor! That can happen on Earth too but Pepper and I are a little old fashioned, so first marriage, THEN babies. I am too old for a shotgun
"You truly have matured, Starkson." Said Thor with a wide smirk. "I am glad to see it. And you truly deserve such happiness. The importance of family, of loved ones, is often underestimated..."

The Asgardian's blue eye clouded over with a deep sadness. "Until one loses it all... and realizes that it is like to truly be alone."

Tony moved closer to him and clasped his hand tightly. "Bruce told me about... about Asgard. And what Thanos did. I am sorry, Thor. I wish I could have been there to help you. I wish I had known."

He sighed heavily.

"Hela was a force like no other. The All-Father predicted that she would destroy Asgard and that I could not stop her, try as I might. I foolishly thought I could change Fate but I saw for myself that I couldn't. In the end, Hela was defeated, not by my hand but by something older and more powerful. I lost a lot to my sister.... my hammer, my eye, my dignity, my home... but... but I will admit I do not mourn those losses. No.... my true sorrow, my anger, comes from losing my people and my brother to Thanos..."

His eye shimmered with emotion. "All that was left of Asgard, was its people. And all that was left of my family... was Loki."

There was an uncomfortable silence. Tony looked at Pepper significantly. Bruce just looked up at the ceiling.

This is awkward. Loki may have been Thor's brother, so of course, they had a bond and Thor loved him but Loki has also been responsible for a lot of destruction and mayhem with his quest for power... and its clear to see that Thor has forgotten that... so I understand why it is hard for Tony and Bruce to feel sorry for Loki's death...

Thor stared absently at the glass, seemingly lost in memories. Tony cleared his throat, ignoring Bruce who was slowly shaking his head in the negative.

"Thor... how do you know your brother, Loki, is actually dead this time?"
Bruce made a loud noise in his throat, comically waggling his eyebrows at Tony, who just gave him a cool look.

Thor blinked and looked at Tony with puzzlement.

"What do you mean, Stark?"

"Well... erm... hasn't Loki fooled you before? Fooled you into thinking he was dead... and turning up perfectly fine somewhere else... in some hapless galaxy... hasn't he's fooled you at least twice so far?"

Thor scratched his chin thoughtfully and Bruce added, "Tony does have a point. I mean... when you came to New York... you came because you were searching for your brother, who you thought, was dead. And then... you told me, that after you traveled across the Nine Realms, you returned to Asgard to find Loki alive..."

"Pretending to be my father and happily ruling Asgard..." finished Thor quietly. "Loki is, was the God of Mischief, he always was... good at making a comeback... except this time..."

He swallowed hard. "Thanos snapped my brother's neck in two before my very eyes, so I do not know... what I am trying to say is.... I am so fearful of hoping..." he looked at Tony, his face lined with sadness.

"I do not want to hope... if I keep hoping that Loki is alive somehow, I will not move on, I will not be able to put my past behind me...I know it sounds melodramatic but I do not know how else to convey my feelings on the subject."

He lowered his head and sighed deeply. Tony clasped his shoulder tightly and whispered, "Thor, it's alright. No one thinks you are melodramatic. Its okay to grieve."

"I am tired of grieving, Starkson. I truly am tired..." Thor whispered to himself. Banner looked at them and then at Pepper. His shoulders sagged and he gave her a drawn smile.

Pepper wanted to say something, anything to break the sadness but before she could, the whiny
angry voice came out of nowhere, saying "See, this is exactly why you shouldn't spend time with the humans! All they do is bring up bad memories!"

The green foliage rustled and out stepped a scraggly, brown-furred raccoon holding a spanner. Its bright black eyes sparkled as it studied them, its mouth bared in a snarl.

She rubbed her eyes with disbelief, especially because of what it was wearing: an orange bomber vest that reached its feet.

"That's right, everyone stare at the weird alien!" sneered the creature. "Step right up! Take a good look!"

It began to twirl theatrically and Pepper quickly covered her mouth to stop herself from giggling.

"No one is staring, Raccoon..." muttered Bruce.

"Don't you dare 'raccoon' me, old man! This is my territory and you are trespassing!"

"Hey!" Bruce snarled back. "This is the Wakandan Royal Greenhouse! If there's anyone who is trespassing, it's clearly you!"

"Oh yeah!" The raccoon raised itself on its heels and rushed at Bruce quickly. "You got quite a lip on you, old man! I'm going to-"

"Rocket." Thor said deeply, raising his hand. "Behave yourself, please. We have guests."

The little creature muttered something under his breath and folding its arms with a huff. Then it looked at Tony.

"Tin Head, I presume." He said snarkily.

Tony said quietly, "It's Iron Man. And you can call me Tony."
The creature sniffed loudly and then fixed its beady black eyes on Pepper. For a moment, it just studied her, tilting its head with curiosity. Then, to her surprise, it whistled slowly.

"Helllllooo Red... you are a sight for sore eyes.... where have you been all this time?" It said with a leer.

Thor and Bruce both spoke at the same time.

"Pepper, please ignore him, he's always trying to be inappropriate." "Rocket, do not flirt with my friend's fiance!"

"FIANCE?!" The raccoon looked at Tony and smacked its forehead hard. "Say it ain't so! What does a goddess like you, see in a dumbass like Tin Head?!"

Pepper controlled her face, trying not to smile. She sensed that Rocket was intentionally trying to piss off Tony. One sideways glance at her fiance, confirmed that the little guy's mischief had worked.

Tony narrowed his eyes threateningly as he stared down the impudently grinning alien.

"What's the matter, Tin Head? Are you scared that little old me is going to steal your girl away?" Sneered Rocket. "Whoooooo, earth man is soooo scared of the creature from nowhere!"

"Raccoon!" Roared Thor, taking a step forward and the creature danced out of reach, its nails clacking loudly on the stone floor.

"Ah come on, big guy! I am just teasing! You have gone and on about the famous smart great Iron Man! Oh Iron Man can help with this, Iron Man can help with that, oh goody!"

"Yes because my friend's reputation..." Thor placed his hand heavily on Tony's shoulder, making the other man wince. "Is well deserved. He is a genius and thank you for reminding me, Raccoon. I wanted to ask Stark a question. Hand over the device."
He stretched his hand out towards Rocket, who took three steps back.

"Erm, Thor...." said Bruce gently. "Maybe this can wait? Tony and Pepper just took a very long flight to get here. They do need to rest a bit before..."

"Oh yes!" Thor looked at them apologetically. "I didn't think! You must be tired! This can wait-"

"No, no, no! It can't!" Interrupted Rocket bluntly, his eyes hard and focused on Tony. "I wanna see just how smart Tin Head really is. Look! What do you think this is?"

He held up, what looked like a credit-card payment machine, a chrome device with a small LCD screen and a keyboard with buttons along the side of the machine. The screen was cracked but a faint red light pulsed from a LED on the panel.

"May I?" Tony stretched his hand out but Rocket just bared his teeth at him. Then Thor took a step forward and Rocket thrust it at Tony, grumbling angrily to himself.

He looked the device over, turning it this way and that, examining the keys carefully.

"Well, my first impression is... it is a message transmitter of alien origin. Sort of like a pager, you can type out a short message using the keyboard and then get a sent or received indicator on the screen. I need to open it up to see if it can receive messages as well. The language on the keys... is not human, that's for sure.... and it needs charging. Badly. The red light is a battery indicator."

Thor smiled triumphantly. "You are absolutely correct, Starkson! Do you see, Rocket? I told you!"

"So Tin Head can tell a transmitter from a speaker! Big whoop!" Raccoon said sarcastically. "Here's the real question: how can the language of this transmitter be changed?"

Tony turned the device over and examined its back. He tapped the device gently and then murmured, "Open it up and find the computing chip, most likely it will be attached to the keyboard. Get the computing chip out and change the configuration of the transmission output for each alphabet on the keyboard, to the signal you desire."
Pepper looked at Thor, he seemed to be equally puzzled but Rocket was listening keenly.

"The signal I desire.... so I got to come up with a translation key, so I can equate my alphabet to the keyboard's alphabet... in order to transmit the message I want to send in my own language..."

"Yup. That's it."

Bruce looked between them and then raised his hand. "I have a question, how, how exactly would we do that with the chip? Program it to our will? This is an alien chip!"

Tony looked at the keyboard and muttered, "I don't think you need to worry about that so much. I could be wrong but I feel it is very similar in principal to an earthly computer. So using simple assembly language, should do the trick. Instead of focusing on what the keys currently say, just write a small program that would let you set the hexadecimal value of your alphabet for each key. Use hexadecimal and change the output to binary, so you can transmit a sample message to another computer and see if your changes are working."

Bruce widened his eyes comically. "Oh yes! Binary! Why didn't I think of that before! You are so right, Tony!"

"Oh you are so right, Tony!" Rocket mimicked in a high falsetto voice, batting its eyes with exaggeration. This time, Pepper couldn't control her giggles and the creature heard her. He smiled at her and then gave her a long slow wink.

Tony growled and Rocket guffawed, dancing away with a clack of his nails.

"Relax, Tin Head, relax. I am glad to finally meet someone with some intelligence on this miserably dirty planet..." he snorted and gestured at Bruce rudely. "Unlike the DOCTOR here...."

"Well, you didn't figure it out yourself, smarty pants, so I guess you ain't as smart as you think you are!" Bruce said loudly.

"I am a weapons dealer and arms specialist, Bannerbell!" Roared the Raccoon back, "I am not familiar with all this nerdy language transmission shit!"
"Men, men, hear me!" Thor held up his hands and stepped between them. "Let's not tear each other apart. We need to work together if we want to... erm... want to build what we need to build..."

He exchanged a secretive look with Rocket, who nodded.

Tony, curious as ever, asked, "You guys are building something? What? What is it? Something that will work in space?"

Thor opened his mouth as if he was going to say something but Rocket made a loud angry noise and so he just fell silent.

"That information, Tin Head!" said Rocket with a sneer, "is on a need-to-know basis. And YOU! Do not need to know. Now if you will excuse me, I got a lot of stuff to do, I don't have time to waste, standing around and talking. Thor, come on! Chop chop!"

The little alien turned his back to them and strode back into the greenhouse, muttering under his breath. Tony called out, "Let me know how the reconfiguration of the chip works out!" But he got no reply.

Thor said sheepishly, "Please excuse his behavior, he's... a little difficult but once you get to know him, he's not that bad."

"What Thor really means to say, is that once you get to know him, you get used to him." Said Bruce tiredly, rubbing his temples. "You just get used to the snarling and the wisecracks and the rude nicknames and the endless arguing..."

Suddenly, a harsh klaxon-like signal blared from the panel, startling them all. She covered her hands with her ears to block out the irritating noise.

"Rocket, for god's sake, man!" yelled Bruce, "Turn it off!"

Thor solved the problem by simply banging the panel hard with one fist. The signal promptly stopped and then Rocket screeched over the speaker, "I can hear you bitching about me, pendejo! If I didn't have so much shit to do, I'd shove my fist so hard up your-"
Bruce flicked a switch on the panel, turning off the speaker.

Tony looked at Thor incredulously. "The Raccoon can speak Spanish?!

Thor grinned boyishly and then quickly, schooled his face into a solemn expression.

"Rocket is a quick leaner. The fault lies with the short moving pictures that appear in a small window on a monitor. Numerous conversations take place below the window, contributing to a lively discussion. I am told, the window is a popular application available over the interconnected web. Rocket and I have watched numerous such short pictures and they have helped us learn so much about human life."

Try as she might, Pepper just couldn't make sense of what Thor was saying. But she hid her confusion with a polite smile.

Bruce noticed and whispered loudly, "He's talking about YouTube. He and Rocket watch a lot of YouTube."

"Raccoon is a handful but he is grieving. He had to witness his oldest and closest friend fade away... all his other friends died on Titan and he's all alone here, stuck on this strange planet..." said Thor softly.

"I know, I know, I should be more patient..." Bruce rubbed his eyes. "I really should... but he makes it very difficult! It's not easy to sympathize with him, thanks to his abrasive attitude."

She had to ask. "Why does Rocket... Raccoon... stay here? Is it because of you, Thor? Doesn't he want to go home?"

"I do not think he even has a home in outer space. He told me he was built in a lab. And all he had, was his friend and business partner, Groot. They roamed around the galaxies, indulging in one swashbuckling adventure after the other. Now he is at a loss. He does not know what to do and without a spaceship, he cannot leave Earth and that is frustrating him more. In many ways, we are alike, Rocket and I. I too have no land, I have no people, I have no family..."

"Thor... buddy... you are the gentlest soul ever and you aren't alone, you still have us, alright... we aren't going anywhere..." said Bruce gently.
Tony patted Thor on the back.

"Banner's right. Now all we have left, is each other. And we are going to do something about what has happened. We are going to avenge our fallen. I promise you that."

Thor blinked and then beamed with happiness. Without warning, he clasped both men to him in a tight hug, making them groan.

"I feel the surge of happiness flowing through me once again! This camaraderie, this bond of friendship! It renews my strength! It renews me! Thanos may have broken us but he has not defeated us! Not as long as we have each other!"

Pepper giggled, watching as Tony squirmed in Thor's snug grip.

"Thor, I agree and all that but there's no need to make this a Hallmark moment! Let me go!" He whined.

She found herself smiling as Thor's words echoed in her head.

I am so glad my gamble to get Tony to meet his team, has played off. I know Tony has to meet Steve and that's not going to be an easy encounter but at least...

Tony caught her gaze and then rolled his eyes as Thor nuzzled his head like a cat. But he gave her a broad grin.

At least he's with his friends... and they are going to get through this together.

Thor finally let them go, taking one deep appreciative sniff of Tony's hair. Tony straightened his clothing and inched towards Pepper.

"Okay, Point Break, I don't know why you did that but don't! It is weird!"
Thor said thoughtfully, "Your hair, Tony. What elixir do you use to cleanse it? Oil of the palm nut? Liquid from the vanilla bean?"

Tony opened his mouth and then shut it. Bruce said with a wide smile, "Knowing Ritchie Rich here, it must be liquid gold infused with Egyptian cotton."

"Amazing!" Thor exclaimed, clasping his hands to his cheeks with wonder. "What unusual ingredients! It smells so heavenly. Come here, I must inhale more of the fragrance!"

She burst into laughter, especially at the expression on Tony's face.

"It is not liquid gold! It's... it's.... alright, I will confess! It's Pepper's shampoo! Frédéric Fekkai Full Volume! There I said it, I use my woman's shampoo!"

Bruce laughed and Thor just looked at him curiously. "So what if it is Lady Pepper's fragrance... it smells simply wonderful! Let me write that name down, I must have that shampoo-"

A loud snarl emitted from the greenhouse, making them all turn.

"My companion loses his patience." Thor said, shaking his head. "I better go back in, before the little one figures out how to restart the blaring horn. Starkson, thank you for your help with the messaging device... I will have more questions soon, I hope I can come see you then."

"Of course you can, Thor."

He nodded at them both, grinning broadly and then walked into the greenhouse. The glass door closed behind him.

Tony looked at Bruce, eyebrows quirked.

"What, what is it, Tone?"

"Banner, you are a horrible liar, you know what those two are up to! Now tell me!"
"What! No way! I don't know anything about the transmission device those two are building in there!"

"Aha! A transmission device! Banner, I am going to get the truth out of you!" Tony said triumphantly. "What is it going to transmit? And to whom"

By now, the jet lag of the long flight had finally caught up to Pepper and she gently squeezed Tony's arm.

"Honey, let's go freshen up and then you can resume talking to your friends. Please."

"Oh yeah, shit, you are right, Pep..."

"And there's going to be a meeting in 45 minutes, when Rhodes is expected to land." said Bruce.

"Banner, we will talk then, for now, let's go to our rooms."

Chapter End Notes

I've been writing fanfiction since 2017 and yet, this is the first time I am writing about the other Avengers. And it has been so difficult because they have such distinct personalities and physical traits, that I have to make sure I do justice to them. Rocket was another difficulty because of his teasing, snarky style of talking.

Next week, the original five Avengers, well four, finally reunite.
Chapter Notes

A little monologue before the actual chapter.

I started this fic, three or four days after Infinity War released. This fic was meant to be a way to console one of my Tumblr friends, who was traumatized by Tony being left alone in space. It was meant to end with Pepper rescuing Tony, 4 or 5 chapters at a maximum.

Somehow... we are here at chapter 43, Phase 2 in a three Phase story (you can thank igotyoufirst a.k.a Pepperonys, for her endless emotional blackmail + encouragement xD)

And End Game is just around the corner.

I was supposed to finish this fic before End Game but then I couldn't write for 3 months and now, finishing it before the 26th is not going to be possible.

So I will upload this weekend and the next and then from the 20th till 4th May, there will be no uploads.

After End Game comes out, I don't know whether my fic is going to be... relevant or... whether I will be able to write any more, depending on what happens to Tony and Pepper. I want to complete it but I do not know how I will feel after End Game.

Wow that was very depressing, so without further ado, let's go on to the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony stood in front of an ornately decorated door, with a thick copper frame and a clouded glass panel in its center. It had no handle, so he realized it had to slide open and it would do so, only from the inside. He was right on time for the meeting but the door wasn't open, so he took his time and stood before it, waiting.
I wonder where the others are... or are they already inside...

He cautiously put his ear to the glass but couldn't hear anything.

It seems empty... wait, is this even the right room?

He leaned back and looked up at the gold name title above the door.

The Gold Conference Room. Yup, this is it. This is the room. Sooo...

Then he looked at his Jaeger-LeCoultre watch.

Maybe I am early. I can go back to the room and relax with Pepper for a while, then make my way back-

Suddenly the door slid sideways with a soft 'whoosh', revealing a small circular room, with greyish-black stone walls and stone floor. He slowly entered it and looked around. There was a rose-gold round table right in its center, surrounded by plush bronze armchairs.

Tony took a seat in one of the plush chairs and crossed his legs, settling himself in comfortably.

He looked up, straight up at the domed ceiling of the room. A colorful mural depicting a battle between two tribes, was painted on its surface. He absently studied the painted figures and his mind began to wander.

Why does this moment seem so familiar...

He idly traced an etching on the table, with his finger. Then it came to him.

The Helicarrier... before New York. Loki had escaped and he had... Phil was dead... Fury was telling us... about the Avengers Initiative. The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people... shit Fury you one-eyed tough son of a bitch... I wish you were here... you always knew how to get us to work together...
He sighed heavily and lowered his head to his hands, rubbing his temples. Out of nowhere, a deep familiar voice asked, "Tony, are you alright?"

He stood up, tensing in fear and then realized there was someone there, standing right at the back of the room.

"Hey! You scared me! Buddy, you shouldn't creep up on people like-"

His words died on his lips as the figure stepped out from the shadows.

The broad powerful chest, tall noble carriage and classic all-American look was unmistakable. But just like Thor, there was a lurking melancholy in Steve's deep blue gaze and lean tiredness to his strength. He had also grown out his hair, its thick blonde locks touched his collar like a luxuriant mane, supported by an impressively lush beard that just added to his soulful demeanor.

*No longer a soldier but a lion in winter...*

Tony absently clenched his fist, forgetting that he had left the stress ball in his room.

Steve asked softly, "Are your injuries hurting you? The ones you got in space?"

He stared at him, puzzled and then Steve took a step towards him.

Without thinking, Tony backed away, bumping into the chair behind him. He stumbled and then righted himself, instinctively raising his hand in front of him, ready to summon his nano-blaster gloves from his nano-Arc.

A look of hurt crossed Steve's face and Tony said quickly, "I am alright, I am alright, I am just a bit startled, I didn't think anyone else was in here!"

"There's a monitoring panel back there." Steve pointed at a small square screen behind him. "I saw you standing outside and thought I would let you in."
"Yeah." Tony said, shifting around the table, trying to sit as far away from Steve as possible. "Thanks."

He sat down and then looked at his fingers and then at his watch.

*Shit, this is awkward! Where the hell is everyone else!?*

He placed his arm in his lap and tapped out a message out on his Stark Phone. *Banner, where the hell are you? Get in here quick!*

Then he looked up as Steve came closer to the table and pulled out a chair, two seat away from where he was sitting. He then sat down, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees.

Tony quietly studied him.

*Scuffed work boots, plaid shirt... faded blue jeans... wait, what is that reddish brown substance on his hands... is that mud?*

Then he met Steve's gaze, making the other man flush.

Steve said sheepishly, "I came straight from the repair site. Didn't want to keep you guys waiting. Should have tidied up though... a little bit..." he looked down at the floor. "Oh hell! I've left mud marks all over this nice carpet! Damn it! Okoye is not going to like this! Shit!"

Forgetting their awkwardness, Tony automatically said, "Language!"

Steve laughed, shaking his golden head. "You still won't let that go, huh Stark?"

Tony didn't know how to reply to that, so he just shrugged.

Steve looked at the door and then back at him. "Is Pepper here? Did she come with you?"
A strange sense of deja vu, washed over Tony.

_Berlin... the Winter Soldier... Bucky was in custody... I was pleading with Steve to sign those damn Accords... then he asked about Pepper... we weren't together at the time... that meeting ended so badly! Why am I remembering this now!_

He cleared his throat and replied, "Erm... yes she did. She's resting now... the flight was long and this was going to be a ... discussion... so I..." He stopped lamely, sure that saying, Avengers-only meeting, so she stayed away, would sound weird.

"I'd like to meet her later or perhaps tomorrow.... I am so happy you guys got back together and are engaged."

He looked at him wide-eyed and Steve smiled softly. "Come on, Tony, it was all over the news last year! I haven't been living under a rock, you know!"

Tony opened his mouth and then shrugged again, looking down at his hands.

_I do not know how to reply to that either..._

For a moment, there was a strained silence and then Steve sighed loudly. He dusted his hands off.

"I am leaving sand and dirt all over the place.... Nat was right, I should have changed... but then... I got to go back anyways... after this meeting... so I didn't see much of the point."

Tony finally found his voice, so he asked, "Rhodey told me there was this force field device... that was keeping the... erm... the aliens at bay. Is that what you are fixing?"

"Nah. It's a little too complex for a simple man like me. You know I am not so good with all the science stuff, Stark. Banner fixed it once but it keeps breaking down. This Wakandan tech is... something else. Did you see the holographic curtain generator, when you flew in?"
"I did... quite an accomplishment! No wonder, Wakanda was able to keep their wealth and advanced society hidden from the world."

"T'Challa wanted to change that." Steve said quietly, staring off into the distance. "He told me once that he realized that his ancestors and his father, were wrong, that they turned their backs on the rest of the world because they were frightened that their way of life would be stolen from them. He had seen the effects of that behavior, he did not want to make the same mistake... he did not want... to watch from the shadows anymore. He wanted Wakanda to build bridges and use its wealth to help others... he wanted that to be his legacy.... It isn't fair.... it isn't fair that we lost someone like him, so soon..."

Tony sighed inwardly.

_What do I say? What can I say? I have been in his position. I have seen the people who were close to me, fading into dust..._

He remembered Peter's whispered plea, "Mr. Stark, I don't feel so good..." And felt his heart clench painfully.

_What can be said to take away that ache, that deep feeling of sadness and guilt that you lived.... while others didn't... others who should have.... others who had their whole lives ahead of them while you were at the end of yours..._

Then he looked at Steve, who was staring at the floor.

_We have had our differences, but now I see... if nothing else... at least we are united in our grief._

He stood up and walked towards Steve. Steve raised his head, his blue eyes full of emotion.

Tony placed his hand on Steve's shoulder and squeezed it gently. "I am sorry, Steve. The Falcon, Wanda..." He couldn't bring himself to say 'Bucky'. "You trained them yourself, it must have truly been difficult to watch them die. I am sorry."

The Captain sighed heavily. "What hurts me the most, Tony..." he said bitterly. "Is that we were so close. So close to stopping him."
He didn't have to explain who he was talking about. Tony nodded, feeling the same rush of bitterness move through him as he remembered how Thanos broke free on Titan.

Steve stood up and smiled at him. "But for what it is worth, Stark, I am very thankful that you are alright. And that you came here. To us. We need you."

He clasped Tony's shoulder firmly. They just stood there quietly, each taking the other in.

Then the conference room door began to slowly slide open and they both turned.

"I am sorry, I am late... well, we are all late, except for you two..." Bruce said as he entered the room and slid the door shut. "The Princess... well... there was a disagreement..." he looked between them nervously. "You guys are alright, right?"

"Yes we are, Bruce." Said Steve. "What happened to the Princess?"

Bruce grimaced and then ruffled his hair. He looked around and then came closer towards them.

"So the Princess..." he said in a loud whisper. "She wanted us to meet and obviously we were all going to meet coz... you know, Tony's here and all! And she... erm... she wanted to join us. Becoz... you know..."

"I don't see a problem with her joining us." Tony said, puzzled.

"Neither do I." Added Steve. "Her brother was our friend, she is our friend and this is her palace, we owe her that much."

Bruce made eyes at them and then looked at the door and then back at them.

"But her guardian!" He whispered. "Captain Okoye! She stopped the Princess, she said no, you shouldn't join them and then the Princess argued that her brother was the Black Panther and that she needed to go in his place and then Okoye told her that you are just a kid and you are going to get
yourself killed, following these super-powered humans and then the Princess started yelling in Wakandan and Okoye! Okoye just looked at her in that manner of hers, you know what I am talking about, Steve. The Look. And then she gave me the Look and it got uncomfortable, so I hoofed it as fast as I could!"

Tony had to ask, "Bruce, why on earth are you whispering?"

Bruce pointed at the walls and then hissed urgently, "I am pretty sure this room is bugged!"

Both him and Steve burst into laughter.

"Hey, I am being perfectly serious! With the level of advanced technology in this place, they could be scanning us and listening to us and we would never even know!"

"Banner, I think you are talking too much to Thor's alien animal friend." Steve said gently. "The Wakandans would never spy on us. I am sure of it. Besides, we have nothing to hide."

"That's true... I mean, technically we are already in hiding..." Bruce mumbled, looking around. "But I still feel... I don't know... I feel as if someone is listening to us..."

He placed his hands on the table and stared at it suspiciously.

Steve looked at Tony, shaking his head, his blue eyes twinkling merrily. Tony covered his mouth, to muffle his snort of laughter. Then strangely enough, he heard a cute girlish giggle and looked up at the ceiling askance.

"What was that?"

Steve looked up as well but just then, the glass panel slammed sideways with a loud metallic clang. Thor burst into the room with gusto.

Bruce hissed loudly, "Thor! Be careful!"
Completely ignoring him, Thor came straight towards Tony and Steve.

"Excelsior! My friends are here!" He exclaimed in his booming voice and clapped them both hard on the back.

Tony nearly fell over with the force of the blow but quickly regained his balance.

"I can't believe my good fortune that we are all here together again!" Said Thor brightly. "Banner, did you ever think this would happen?!"

"I am just as happy as you, buddy but that doesn't mean you break another glass door!" Muttered Bruce, checking the door.

"Another?" Said Tony teasingly and Thor shrugged.

"Some of the Palace constructions are too delicate for my strength." He said, flexing his impressive biceps.

"I just hope the Palace will not present us with a bill of damages caused by your 'tests' of strength." Said a soft cool voice behind them and they all turned.

Dressed entirely in black, Natasha Romanoff stood by the door, one foot propped up against the wall. She seemed to have not aged a bit since Tony had seen her two years ago. The only thing that was different about her, was her hair: ash, nearly white blonde and straight in a short bob cut.

She slowly walked towards them in her distinctly panther-like walk, her face impassive and serene, not a hair out of place.

"Stark." She said softly, with a quirk of her lips in an almost smile. "Good to see you alive."

"You too, Natasha." He replied curtly, looking straight into her green clear eyes, trying to see if there was actually any actual emotion in them.
Her lips curved sardonically, her eyes shimmering with mirth as she guessed what he was trying to do. She nodded her head at him and he just raised his eyebrows.

"Thor, will your rodent friend be joining us?" She asked.

Bruce made a face and Thor replied, "I am afraid he will not. He prefers to stay in the greenhouse. At all times."

"And it's a good thing too because the damn critter likes to bite. But you seem to have the same aversion for our company, Thor. We hardly see you anymore."

Strangely, Thor flushed and looked around evasively. "I do not dislike your company! I have just been occupied with some... building, repairing work... you know, important tasks! Like what the good Captain is doing!"

Tony eyed him suspiciously.

Wait. The work he is talking about... is this related to what he asked my help for? The weird alien transmitter?

Steve said quietly, "Thor, I thought there wasn't any repair work needed inside the Palace. That most of the damage was external, such as the destroyed communication spires. So what exactly are you working on?"

Thor adopted a look of such blandness, that it was now obvious he was hiding something. He just shrugged and then Bruce said softly, "It's something top-secret related to the Science lab, the one where we...." he paused and sighed.

"The one where we tried to separate the Mind Stone from the Vision. One of Thanos' super children ambushed the Princess during the operation and because of that a complicated piece was equipment was broken and only the Rat has the expertise to try to fix it. Thor is helping him coz... well, you know how the Rat is..."

"The RAT?" muttered Natasha, quirking an eyebrow.
"It is my new nickname for him... I am sure he is going to hate it!" Said Bruce with a naughty grin. "That's why I am going to call him just that."

"Well, progress has been slow. Even Rocket has been struggling. The matter is ... most complex." Said Thor loudly. "but now that Stark is here...." he looked at Tony with a soft smile. "I know we can finish the task at hand."

Tony was puzzled but he just nodded. Just what is Thor up to, that is so complicated? And more importantly, why is he hiding from the others?

He caught Bruce's eye and the other man gave him a pleading look.

*Oh, Bruce definitely knows what is going on! I must get him to talk.*

"I think we are all here." Steve said, "Except for James who should be here any second. And..." he cast a sideways glance at Natasha. "Barton. Who did not respond to our invitation."

"I knew he wouldn't come." whispered Natasha, her eyes on the floor. "It's too soon. He cannot come out in the open yet."

Tony was shocked but Bruce reacted quicker.

"Hold on! You have been talking to Barton? What? Where is he? Why can't we go to him?"

She looked at him coolly. "I am talking to Clint. And his location is on a need-to-know basis and right now, I am the only one who needs to know."

"Come on, Nat!" Exclaimed Bruce. "This isn't the time for holing up alone! He should meet us, together we can-"

"The man lost his family, Bruce!" She said fiercely. "His wife and his children! I'll say, out of all of us here, he has lost the most! No offense Thor...."
Thor just lowered his head.

"Clint is grieving! And we need to respect his need to process his grief in the way he sees fit! After all, different people have different ways of processing their grief! Don't you agree, Captain?" She said pointedly, looking at Steve.

Once again, Tony was puzzled.

*I sense Natasha disapproves... of Steve's behavior? But why? What has he done?*

Steve sighed heavily and rubbed his temples. "If Barton needs time, he should take all the time he needs. But if he needs us, then we are there for him and willing to meet him at any risk. Please ensure he knows that, Natasha."

She just nodded, pursing her lips.

Bruce looked between them, forehead furrowed.

"Rhodes told me that Clint was spotted in London. Can you at least say if that is true?"

Before Natasha could reply, the glass door slid open once again and Rhodes entered.

Chapter End Notes

I was going to write the meeting as one long chapter but it got too long (roughly 7000 words) so today one part and tomorrow, the concluding part.
"I'm sorry, I know, I am late, sorry! There was a lot of traffic at Nairobi airport! I was just telling Okoye that I should have flown straight here with Tony."

He shook Tony's hand, winking at him. "Good to see you here, Stark."

Then he went around the room, greeting everyone with handshakes and smiles.

"The War Machine returns triumphant from his unfair trial by his peers! We are so glad to have you back with us, Colonel!" Thor exclaimed, enveloping Rhodes in a great hug.

"Woah, Thor buddy! I am glad to see you too!"

He stood between Bruce and Thor, grinning broadly at them all. "I know you guys miss American candy, so I brought some with me. Peanut brittle, Hershey bars and... Girl Scout cookies... I will give it to you after we talk..."

"Cookies!" Bruce shouted with childish glee, making them all laugh. "Yaaah! I love Girl Scout Cookies! Did you get samoas?"

"I, for one, am very interested in knowing what you got the General..." murmured Natasha teasingly. Thor wolf-whistled and to Tony's surprise, Rhodes flushed right up to his ears.

"She did ask me for something, so I got it for her, it was all very innocent and above board, she wanted to pay for it but I refused!"

Bruce and Thor went 'oooooooh' in tandem and Rhodes raised his hands. "You guys are nuts! Making a big deal out of nothing at all! Cut it out!"

Tony looked at Steve for an answer and the Captain said with a smirk, "The General is not fond of us but she is damn fond of James here!"

"She is not!" Rhodes objected hotly, "Tony, do not listen to them please! There is nothing going on between me and Okoye!"

"From the way she smiles at you, I would say there is definitely something happening..." said Natasha drolly. Bruce and Thor started hooting even louder.

Rhodes sighed heavily. "You guys are so juvenile, I swear..."

"Alright everyone, settle down." Said Steve gently, "We can tease Rhodes later."

Rhodes asked, "So help me catch up, what are you guys talking about?"

Bruce said, "I simply asked Natasha, where she thinks Barton is."

"And I told him what I tell everyone, that information is on a need to know basis." Answered Natasha quietly.

Rhodes looked between them and said, "Okay guys, please do not, I repeat, do not discuss Barton in
front of me. At All. He is a wanted fugitive on the run from the US government. I do not want to
know anything about him, alright! So that if anyone asks me if I have any intel on Barton, I can
truthfully say I know nothing."

"Aren't we all fugitives?" Said Steve. "Didn't Ross issue shoot-on-sight orders against all of us?"

Thor gasped in outrage.

Rhodes answered, "That is true but... but... ok, I am going to level with you. No one is going to
come after you. One, because there's no time or resources or money, two and most importantly, no
one wants to risk life or limb taking on the former Avengers. So you are safe as long as you keep a
low profile."

"And the Princess has promised that we can stay in Wakanda for as long as we want. There's no risk
of danger here." Steve added.

Rhodes nodded. "That's true. No government wants to antagonize Prince T'Challa. He is regarded as
a valuable ally."

"What happens when the world comes to know that the Prince is actually dead?" Asked Natasha.

"Honestly... I do not know. But I don't think that anyone will come to know any time soon because
Wakanda is carefully controlling all information going in and out of the country. As well as media
reports. Plus, the Wakandans are dead loyal to the Royal Family and to the Princess. So they aren't
going to leak information to any foreign powers or support any insurgents. They have the Princess' 
back."

Thor raised his hand slowly, a solemn expression on his face.

"Yeah, Thor. Go ahead."

"I last visited this realm three years ago. So I am curious to know, if I am also marked to be killed by
this shoot-on-sight command, that has been unfairly leveled against my teammates?"

A slow smile broke on Rhodey's face and Bruce started laughing. Steve patted Thor on the back. "I
am sorry, old friend... I am afraid you are... simply by right of the company you keep... it isn't fair, I
know... but who can reason with a madman like Ross?"

"Steve's right, buddy." Said Rhodes wryly. "Secretary of State Ross doesn't care for super-powered
talk... whoever they are... why, he's even severed all ties with Stark here, his principal military
research ally."

They all looked at Tony, who murmured, "Actually, Pepper severed all contracts and connections
between Stark Industries and the military when I was in space. She was angry that Ross wouldn't
help rescue me. Ross simply took it further by threatening me after the Rhodes' trial."

"Typical Ross! Threatening you is such a dick move!" Said Bruce angrily. "Tony, you have helped
the military so much with their research programs and technological trainings, letting them use Stark
industries tech and resources! How dare Ross ignore all that!? He should be reasonable!"

Tony shrugged. "Ross just wants some scapegoat to blame for Thanos' attack. And we seem to be
the easiest targets."

"Yeah... he's out for blood." Rhodye said softly. "Anyone's blood. That's why you better tell your
archer friend to watch his step. If he is where I think he is, he needs to be careful... that country is a
US ally and would be more than happy to turn him over to Ross... and Ross is really gunning for Barton's guts. If they catch him, I can't help him."

"I am curious". Said Thor, leaning on the table with one hip. "What does this Ross think we could have done to stop Thanos? Did he have a way to defeat the Mad Titan but no one followed his orders?"

Bruce snorted. "Orders! Thor, no one had any idea what to do! When Thanos reached Earth, it was just us, trying to fight him."

"That's true." Said Steve quietly. "We just did what we always do. Stand our ground, push back against the attackers and fight to the bitter end. It... it just didn't work this time."

"Why not?" Rhodes asked and they all looked at him. "So we are all together finally, we have all faced Thanos in some way or the other. Let's do some analysis, let's discuss why we failed."

"Do we have to, James?" Said Steve softly. "I don't see a point in rehashing a painful loss."

"No, James is right!" Boomed Thor. "We should talk about what happened! We all had such different experiences!"

"Thor, you are the one who faced this titan first, aboard your ship. Tell me, is Thanos really strong? Or was it the effect of the Stones? I felt his punch through my suit, I was knocked out cold."

"Thanos is inhumanly strong... I believe it is a trait of his race, he picked me up like a rag doll and held the Power Stone to my eye, threatening to crush my skull like a grape." Said Thor grimly, his one eye flickering. "I tried but I simply couldn't counter his strength with my fists. I couldn't..."

"Even the Hulk was overpowered by him." Said Bruce sadly. "Thanos didn't use the Stones or call on his Children, he just punched the shit out of the Hulk and tossed him aside... it was so humiliating, so damn humiliating..." he sighed heavily and lowered his head. "The Hulk couldn't match him in brute strength, so I guess that's a good enough measure of how strong he is naturally."

Tony felt a shiver ripple through him, making his hands tremble. He clutched one hand with the other, curling his fingers, trying not to remember the way he had fruitlessly fought Thanos, with his suit disintegrating around him like dust.

Steve's quiet voice broke him out of his thoughts. "Aside from physical strength, Thanos also has a keen sense of warfare strategy. He sent his Children beforehand, to face us, one by one, just to test us, just to see how strong we really were. Then he sent wave after wave, of foot soldiers and outriders, to tire us out. And when all the sand had settled, when we thought it was finally over, he came forth, armed with all the Stones and at full strength, fresh and ready to crush us."

"I wouldn't say he was fresh... I mean, I can't judge his recovery time but..." Tony said. "But he teleported to Earth from Titan... where he had been fighting... me, Strange and Peter... three of the Guardians and then... Nebula..."

"The seven of you fought him..." asked Natasha. "How many of those damn Infinity stones did he have at the time?"

"Four... at the end of our fight... Strange gave him the Time Stone..."

"What was your game plan, I mean, attack plan?" Steve asked. "Did you just charge at him from all sides or..."
"Actually..." Tony sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, going through the painful memory in his mind. "Strange came up with the plan... I mean, he saw it, he used the Time Stone to look at all possible outcomes of our fight and saw that there only one way we could win. And that was by Mantis using her powers of telepathy to put Thanos to sleep and then separating Thanos from his gauntlet!"

"Tony, tell them what Strange said to you!" Bruce said with excitement. "The reason why he gave Thanos the Time Stone!"

Tony then narrated the sequence of events on Titan, to a very attentive audience. When he was done, there was pin-drop silence. Steve's clear blue gaze was fixed on him.

Natasha was the first to speak. "Let me get this straight... if this... Quill? Star-Lord, whatever, had controlled himself... you could have taken the gauntlet off Thanos and then with your combined powers, you could have fought him! You had a good chance of defeating him!

"It was a damn fine plan..." said Rhodes. "Tony... I think out of all of us, you came the closest to defeating Thanos."

"I know!" Exclaimed Bruce. "Wait, could Thanos have simply reversed the whole thing with a Stone?"

"No... he didn't have the Time Stone yet." Rhodey said and then looked at Tony. "Am I right? The Wizard had the Time Stone with him. Thanos didn't have it yet."

Tony silently nodded. He felt the side of his stomach twinge, where he had been stabbed and he rubbed it absently. Then he felt Thor's hand on his shoulder.

The giant god looked down at him with understanding glimmering in his deep blue gaze.

"I understand how you feel, Starkson... you were right on the knife's edge of victory... and then fate's cruel whim took it from your reaching fingers... I understand your bitterness and I empathize. I too, had victory snatched away from me..."

"Sure you did, Thor." said Natasha coldly. "After all, you attacked a vicious humongous alien war lord with one of the biggest weapons I've ever seen but instead of going for the kill, you aimed for his chest."

Thor cringed visibly and Bruce retorted, "Natasha, there's no need for that sort of talk alright! Leave the man be!"

"Bruce is right, Natasha." Said Steve quietly. "This retelling of events is bad enough as it is without blame and reproach being thrown around... Thor came down from the skies to help us. We should be grateful he was there."

"I am not being ungrateful, I am just pointing out how small things, in the heat of the moment, can make a big difference. Such as unwanted emotions when striking a killing blow..."

"It wasn't emotion... it was simple training. I never had the bloodlust in me..." whispered Thor, his face drawn and haunted. "I was taught to stun, to attack but never to kill... it is not in my nature... But rest assured..."

He met Tony's gaze, his jaw tightening, "I will not falter again... my axe will reach its target true next time... next time, my foe will not be able to walk away..."
"Next time?" Steve said softly. "What next time, Thor? Thanos's task is over! He wanted to cull Earth's population by half and he did so! We were powerless against him!"

"We were, Captain but we need not remain so!" said Thor excitedly. "We know so much more now, than we did when we faced him! The fact that he is susceptible to mental telepathy conditioning, the fact that he can bleed! Starkson! Surely, you must know what we need to do next!"

Tony stared at him with confusion. "Erm... what do you mean by 'do next'?"

Thor clapped him hard on the shoulder, grinning broadly. "My diminutive friend, you are the smartest of us all, no disparagement meant to you, Banner."

Bruce snorted and shrugged.

"Starkson, you ventured into space to face Thanos on his home planet, you fought him in one-on-one combat and you lived to tell the tale! That is no small achievement! Especially when all your strength is limited to your delicate mechanical exo-skeleton and you are actually a weak, feeble human under that crimson covering!"

Tony heard Natasha and Rhodes snicker, while Steve tried to keep a straight face but failed miserably.

"Thor buddy, that delicate exo-skeleton you are referring to... that is a billion-dollar nanotechnology suit, not a tutu! The Mark L is capable of deep-space flight and equipped with a laser beam, to name a few of its abilities!"

Thor help up his hands. "I forgot that for you humans, your vehicles or your self-created objects, are extensions of your psyche. Starkson, I apologize if you felt I insulted you! That was never my intention! I merely wish to point out that your greatest strength is your mighty brain! You are not genetically enhanced like the good Captain or Banner, neither are you skilled in the art of warfare like the Lieutenant or the Widow! But you have always used your intelligence to match us in power! You have used your smartness to overcome your physical limitations or to handle impossible situations!"

"Thor's right, Tony..." Bruce said. "Think about it... you have always one step ahead. You saw that the Hulk was uncontrollable, when he was enraged. So you came up with Veronica... who proved mighty useful! You flew through a wormhole and learnt that your suit was ill-equipped to handle the change in atmospheric pressure. So you equipped it with rocket thrusters and stabilizers and an instream oxygen supplier!"

"You always said there was something up there, something huge coming for us, that we wouldn't be able to handle... that was bigger than anything we had ever faced..." Steve said sadly. "And you were right, Tony. We weren't prepared for such a threat... we weren't prepared for Thanos... I wish we had listened to you... but its too late to do anything now..."

"No, it isn't!" Thor said brightly. "We are the Avengers! We need to avenge the fallen! Or we can try our best to bring them back!"

"Bring them back?" Rhodes said incredulously. Steve just sighed and stood up.

"Just how would we bring them back, Thor?" Asked Natasha.

The giant god shrugged helplessly and looked at Tony.

"I spoke too soon, I... I do not have the answer to that but my friends! Heed me! The Stones are
mysterious ancient objects, whose effects and workings are still unknown! We do not know what is possible through them and what isn't! There's no telling what we can do, if we get our hands on them, if we can take them from Thanos! But we will never know until we try!

Pin-drop silence greeted this statement. Rhodes seemed as if he wanted to say something but shut up at a glance from Natasha. Bruce just studied the floor, clenching his jaw. Tony didn't know what to say.

The sound of Steve laughing softly, broke the silence.

"Hasn't there been enough loss already? A lot of good men and women fought Thanos and his dark army, all for nothing! Then he snapped his fingers and killed half of Earth! In a single blow. He's an invincible being of darkness! We were useless against his might! Facing him again, would be suicide!"

Thor moved towards him and clasped his shoulder.

"I understand your frustration, my friend... I live with it too, believe me... but I must correct you. You weren't useless, Steve Rogers. You went to fist to fist with the Titan and pushed him back... I saw it with my own eyes. We all saw it!"

"You weren't useless, Steve." said Natasha quietly. "We all tried our best, it just wasn't enough... not for this enemy."

"I agree, Widow!" Boomed Thor. "We tried our best but not together! Not us together!

Thor looked around the room. "Are we not Earth's mightiest heroes! We have faced impossible odds before! Recall our first triumph! We faced a god. A god with an Infinity Stone and an army of alien mercenaries, an endless force of wrath pouring in from space! We defeated him!"

A shadow of pain crossed his face but he collected himself quickly.

"Thanos may have beaten us but he has not broken us! If we are all that is left to avenge Earth, I say we must! We must face Thanos and end his reign of terror!"

Steve sighed heavily and shoved his hands into his pockets. "I don't know, Thor. I don't see the point of tracking down Thanos and fighting him again... to what purpose? We have lost everything anyways... wherever he is... he's won."

His words set a memory off in Tony's brain. Thanos's deep voice filled his ears. "I finally rest, and watch the sun rise on a grateful universe."

Then he had a vision.

*Green grass and sunshine. Walking on the soft grass, the blades crunching under his bare feet. There's Pepper, standing under the shade of a huge tree, holding a basket of apples. She's smiling so beautifully, the sunshine gleaming on her reddish-gold hair. He finds himself smiling in answer and quickens his walk, in order to reach her. Then something moves behind her, a shadow forming in the grass. He stops in his tracks, his entire frame tense.*
The something shyly peeks out from around Pepper's legs.

He stares at it dumbfounded.

It is a young girl, at least four or five years old, with tousled long chestnut brown hair, big bright blue eyes and a little button nose, peppered with freckles.

Pepper gently pushes the little girl forward and she takes two hesitant steps towards Tony.

He is filled with an unknown powerful emotion, in his heart, he knows who she is but he can't trust it, he can't believe it, he won't accept it...

Until the little girl's bottom lip quivers.

Suddenly his hesitation vanishes, he rushes towards her, scooping her up into his arms, her joyful shriek echoing in the sun.

She rests her head against his shoulder and wraps her arms around his neck.

The scent of summer and vanilla, her warm soft body, so delicate against his, makes his heart swell with love and tenderness.

"Daddy... can we have ice-cream?"

Something in those words reverberates through his very being.

"Morganna Maria Stark, Don't you dare!" He hears Pepper say as she comes walking towards them.

His daughter lifts her head, takes one quick look at Pepper and then looks back at him.

He stares into an endless deep blue sea, shimmering with flecks of gold.

Then her mouth curves, dimples peeking in her chin and Morganna slowly smiles at him.

"Please, daddy. Please."

Pepper is now standing right next to him and she leans against him, nuzzling his face.

Her arm moves around his waist, hugging him to her.

Then she kisses his cheek softly and her lips curve against his skin.

"She's such a charmer... just like her father." she says softly.

He stands there, just taking it all in, waves of peace and belonging coursing through him.

"I love you, Daddy." His baby girl murmurs softly, placing a soft kiss on his nose.

Pepper laughs musically and tickles Morganna in the ribs, making her giggle. "That's not going to work, young lady! Stay strong, Tony."

"Tony... are you alright?" He hears Thor's deep voice echo around him and blinks.

In a flash, the sunshine, the grass disappears. He was back in the circular shadowed meeting room. Thor was right in front of him, looking at him with worry.
"Earth to Stark..." Natasha said softly. "Are you still with us?"

Tony cleared his throat. "Yes I am... all this talk... of revenge... I just... I just remembered something that Thanos said to Strange on Titan."

He paused, feeling slightly out of breath. Bruce said gently, "Hey, if this is getting too painful, let's stop. Let's just take a break."

"No, that's not it. I just need to catch my breath... Thanos said Earth was his last task of mercy... he wanted to rest. His mission of bringing balance would be complete... he wanted to watch... the sun rise... on a grateful universe."

"That sounds like something you would say, Stark... after all, the world owes you a lot. It is time you take a rest from being Iron Man." Natasha said casually but her green eyes searched his.

"I can relate..." he murmured. "Because I too am tired. Tired of fighting. Tired of taking on enemies and warfare and worrying Pepper to death. Tired of my bones aching from falling down... and calling on all my strength to get up and push back... I am tired. I want the simple life. A farm. A family. A chance to grow old without the need to fight."

Steve nodded but Thor's face fell with sadness.

Tony held up his hand.

"But then... when I think about what... Thanos did... he did not rest until he completed his last task. He got all the stones, he carried out his terrible deed and now he rests somewhere in the cosmos. Content... after leaving our Earth, our home in tatters... and destroying everything we loved."

"And whose to say Thanos will stop with Earth?" Thor said bitterly. "For years, he has wreaked his skewed evil form of justice on many planets across the galaxy, destroying and pillaging and killing innocent souls, justifying it as an act of mercy! Do you think such a being will stop his madness? Especially when he is now armed to infinity and beyond with the Stones. Why, he could destroy another 1000 planets, just like Earth, happy and blissfully unaware of this vengeful purple warlord! Destroying lives, destroying peace!"

Morganna's innocent smiling face, flashed before Tony's eyes. He clenched his fists.

"So as long as Thanos lives... we cannot rest..."

Rhodes asked slowly, "Tony, what are you saying?"

He straightened and said loudly, "I feel we cannot rest, we should not rest, until we complete our last task and that is to avenge the fallen, to finish Thanos once and for all and to protect future generations from such evil. And we should do so together, as a team... Let us reunite the Avengers!"

Thor roared loudly with joy and banged the table hard, making the whole room shake. "Yes, we will avenge our lost brethren!"

Rhodes and Bruce high-fived with a loud whoop. Natasha smiled and nodded at Tony.

"The Avengers are back, baby!" exclaimed Rhodes jubilantly, smacking Tony on the back.

Thor came forward as well, clasping Tony by the shoulders. "Starkson! I know you would rally us with your purpose! This is excellent news!"
"Now hold on!" Tony said gently, pleased by their reaction. "We need to come up with a plan, we need to consider all the possibilities and difficulties... things are just beginning!"

"I know, I know!" Thor said. "But after a long time... I can believe... that the sun will shine on us once again!"

"It will, buddy... it will..." Bruce said, patting the golden giant. "But Tony is right, we need to plan this out. We need to be smart about this."

"We need to find the damn Titan first." Said Natasha softly, joining them. "Flush him out of his retirement hole and then catch him and skin him."

Suddenly a loud buzzing static noise filled the room.

"What the hell?!" Bruce yelled loudly, covering his ears.

"It is coming from the table!" Natasha said and pressed the table hard.

"YASSSS! WE are coming for you, Thanos, you purple shit!" An excited girlish voice squealed from the table. "You better check yo self before you wreck yo self! Cause the Avengers are bad for your health!"

They all stared at each other in confusion.

"Wait a minute, that's the Princess!" Natasha exclaimed and Bruce shouted, "I knew someone was listening to us! I knew it!"

The Princess was now whooping and yodeling loudly, there was someone else with her, talking indistinctly in the background.

The song "Without Me" began to play, just the music and the Princess started to sing, "Guess whose back! Back again! Say they are back! Tell your friends!, making them all laugh.

Steve said, "There's just no controlling the Princess. When she puts her mind to something, she will just do it. And she wanted to come for this meeting." shaking his head as the Princess continued to rap in tune with the music.

"I can't really blame her..." Natasha said with a soft smile on her face, something that shocked Tony. He could count the number of times he had seen her smile, on one hand. "The Princess' gone through a lot for someone so young... she's lost her entire family... so of course she's excited that we are finally doing something."

Steve asked quietly, "What do you mean by finally doing something? We are rebuilding Wakanda, fixing things that were broken and restoring its defenses."

Natasha sighed.

"Steve, Wakanda doesn't need the Avengers to help it rebuild itself. Its people are more than capable of doing that without us... the Princess is excited because we are moving on from our grief... which is necessary and something we have been putting off, choosing instead to wallow in our grief."

"I must say!" exclaimed Thor, clicking his fingers and swaying comically. "This terran tune is very catchy! What musical art is this?"

"Eminem, dawg, Eminem!" said Bruce with fake swagger and Rhodes burst into laughter.
Then the music came to a screeching halt. For a minute, there was pin-drop silence and then they heard Okoye say angrily, "Princess! What is going on?! You are supposed to be in the Meditation Chamber! What are you doing here?"

"Oh Okoye! Forget meditation, man! The Avengers are back and they are going to avenge the fallen, they are going to take on Thanos! Whoppeee! We have so much to do, so much to plan!"

Chapter End Notes

Shuri is dead, according to the End Game posters but... well... I couldn't have known that and I didn't think Marvel was going to kill her off, so she's alive and well in my fic.

Next Sat, the third part to this reunion piece! Thanks for reading!
The Avengers Reunite - Part III

Chapter Notes

It is so hard to remain fluffy nowadays... with all the End Game trailers and spoilers but I am going to do my best here.

Okoye said harshly, "That's good for them! But that is Avengers business, Your Highness! We do not need to bother about it!"

"No need to bother?! Okoye, my brother was an Avenger! This is his team!"

"Your brother was the King! And whatever the King did outside Wakanda, was his own business! It is none of our concern! And it is too dangerous!"

"Oh yea, it is!" Retorted Shuri angrily. "The King is dead, long live the King! But now I am the ruling monarch of Wakanda! And I will take my brother's place on the Avengers! And I will avenge his death by fighting Thanos!"

Tony winced and saw that Rhodey and Steve had done the same. Natasha clenched her jaw and muttered indistinctly in Russian. Bruce looked around nervously as if searching for a place to hide.

"You will do no such thing, your Highness! Leave the Avengers to their work! You have to pay attention to your kingdom! Wakanda survived for so long, by only fighting when absolutely necessary!"

"That can also seem like cowardice!" retorted the Princess fiercely.

Okoye gasped loudly with indignation.

"Your Highness, you could get yourself killed!"

"Maybe we should turn it off..." murmured Bruce. "It feels like a private conversation."

Steve walked over to the table and searched its underside. Then he shook his head.

"There's a small unit but no switch. I think its mainly controlled from the control room... or from wherever the Princess is listening to us."

After a short silence, they heard the Princess say coldly, "Okoye, I would just like to point out that this is a clear case of double standards!"

"Wow, she's not letting go..." whispered Thor, his eyes like saucers. "Tiny little thing like her..."

"Don't let the Princess hear you call her that." Murmured Natasha with a smirk. "Then you will truly feel the wrath of Wakanda."

"Double Standards!" Shouted Okoye. "Princess, I-"

"When my brother was around, I never heard you talk to him about the Avengers like this! You never told him to pay attention to his kingdom or or that's dangerous or that-"
"I am telling you this now because you are all that is left, your Highness!" Exclaimed Okoye brokenly. "You are all that is left of Wakanda! You cannot participate in these alien super-hero matters! You will get yourself killed! I could not protect my king! I had to watch him die and could not lift a finger to help him! I will not let the same happen to you!"

Then she sniffed loudly once and then again.

Bruce's jaw dropped open with shock. "Is she crying?" He whispered. "Shit, I didn't know she could!" He got a hard nudge in the elbows from Natasha and promptly shut his mouth.

The sniffing grew louder and then they heard Princess Shuri sign loudly.

"Oky! This is not fair! You are not allowed to use emotional statements like that against me..."

"Please do not call me, Oky, your Highness..." said Okoye, sounding distinctly tearful. "I detest that nickname!"

"Alright, alright, I won't tease you anymore. Okoye, come my friend, I think you need a break. You've been working too hard! Why don't we go and have some of that coffee you like at..."

Her voice faded away and they heard the loud static beep again and then nothing. There was an awkward silence. Everyone looked at each other.

Thor said brightly, "So the Princess is supportive of our reunion! This is good news! We could use another wild cat hero in our team!"

"Hold up, hold up!" said Rhodes, raising his hands. "Thor, first of all, she's just a kid! Second of all, Okoye is right! Wakanda needs their only ruler alive and present! Thirdly, she ain't a wild cat!"

Bruce said thoughtfully, "She is very young but then such enthusiasm definitely helps."

Thor boomed out, "Yes!" While Natasha and Rhodes, yelled "No!" At the same time.

"Princess Shuri is the last member of the Wakanda Royal family." Said Natasha tightly. If anything were to happen to her, Wakanda would descend into civil war with the multiple tribes of the region, fighting each other to take the throne! We cannot let that happen! And we do not need any new members!"

"I disagree with you on the members part, Nat." Bruce said. "We have lost a lot of good powerful team members... like Wanda... Strange, Sam... the Hulk..."

"And even the Guardians..." said Thor sadly.

"I know but guys... at least we have each other... and we will get Hawkeye back. I am confident of that. He just needs a little time..."

"And I will see to it that the Hulk returns to us as well..." said Thor cheerily, smacking Bruce on the back. "He just needs a little coaxing! Spending some time with Stark and Rocket, will bring the Green Giant out!"

Rhodes laughed and they began to discuss ways to irritate the Hulk into appearing, much to Bruce's indignation.

Tony left the group near the table and walked towards Steve, who was standing by the door quietly.

"I know you have reservations, Rogers, but I don't think we can let things stay the way they are... we
Steve just smiled at him, his blue eyes filled with sadness and some undefinable emotion.

Tony smirked. "You know, when I was younger and stupider, I thought being a super-hero, meant I had to handle everything on my own. But then a wise old man helped me see, that together, we can cope with anything..."

Steve chuckled softly. "We will lose...we will not walk away from this one..."

Tony clasped his shoulder and said, "Then we do that together too."

Steve looked back at the group around the table. Tony turned as well and couldn't help but smile. The topic had changed to weapons, Rhodes and Bruce excitedly arguing with Thor, while Natasha rolled her eyes at them derisively.

"Tony, you have given them hope, purpose, a mission... but I am glad to see them happy... thank you, my friend..."

The last word echoed through his mind loudly, unsettling him. He shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged stupidly. Steve seemed to have realized the reason for his discomfort. He opened his mouth, met Tony's gaze and then looked away.

"Well, I got to get back to work... I will see you around, Tony, bye all!"

Saying so, he slid the glass door open and literally bolted down the corridor and out of sight.

Tony said goodbye as well and slowly walked in the opposite direction, back to his room, a luxurious, two-bedroom guest apartment in the west wing of the Palace. He knocked gently on the door but heard no answer.

So he carefully opened the door using his own key and entered, expecting to find Pepper sleeping. Only the room was empty.

He looked around in confusion and shrugged out of his shirt.

"Friday, do you know where Miss Potts is?"

"I am afraid I cannot disclose Miss Potts whereabouts, Sir." Said the AI apologetically. "I have been sworn to secrecy."

"Friday, Master Override now! Where is Pepper?"

"I am truly sorry, Sir. Miss Potts suspected you would be impatient and used her 'Cheyenne Pepper' override logic that supersedes all later protocols. I simply cannot tell you where she's gone."

He couldn't help but smile with pride.

"She's good! I merely showed her how to use one override protocol and Pepper figured out how to create a master protocol to beat all protocols! Damn it, she's taught my own AI how to keep secrets from me!"

"I am glad you are taking it so well, Stark..." He heard a familiar feminine voice say and turned.

Pepper entered the room, eyes sparkling with excitement, a coy smile playing around her lips.
"I know that look... what have you been up to, Potts?"

"Oh... nothing much." she said airily, moving closer to him, her smile broadening. "I was just exploring the Palace... on my own..."

"Potts... come clean... I know you were up to something!"

Pepper gently pushed his hair back from his brow.

"That was some speech you gave back there, honey. I especially liked the part about you being tired of worrying me with your super-hero antics."

Tony felt his jaw drop with shock. "How did you know I said that... were you eavesdropping... wait a minute! I knew that giggle was familiar! How!" He gasped loudly. "You were with the Princess!"

She burst into giggles and clasped his arms.

"Yes, I was! After you left, the Princess came to see me. She was very angry that Okoye had forbidden her from attending the meeting, so she decided to rebel... and she wanted a partner in crime! We went to this hidden antechamber that is directly below the room you guys were in. Then with some sort of receiver unit..."

"You could hear everything being said! Pepper!"

"Well, the audio was very clear only those standing around the table... so I could easily hear you, Steve... Bruce at times, Thor definitely, he has a deep, loud voice!"

He shifted nervously, unsure of her reaction.

"So what do you think... about what I said... that the Avengers reunite and face Thanos one last time?"

She looked at him in a look he knew too well, worry and wistfulness lurking in her blue eyes.

"Pepper..." he murmured, scared that she was upset. "Pep, talk to me, are you angry? I know I promised no more surprises, then I went up to space after Strange and then I got stuck on Titan..."

He trailed off as she took a deep breath. Then she just hugged him gently. He hugged her back and they just stood there, holding each other.

"It's alright, Tony, I understand that you need to do this..." she murmured, her fingers playing with his hair.

"I am sorry, Pep..." he said lamely.

She kissed his cheek and whispered, "Honey, there's nothing to say sorry for! I wanted you to get back on your feet, I want to help you move on and as I heard the others in the room, I can see the true extent of Thanos' damage... if this is what you have to do... what you all have to do, together as a team... then I am not going to stand in your way."

"I know you are sad. I know you didn't expect this, when you told me to come to Wakanda..."

"Honestly..." she said with a laugh. "I felt that something like this would you all would go on one grand last mission together..."

He pulled back in her arms, wanting to see her face. "You did?!"
"The situation is not ideal... I don't want you to do something dangerous but..." she cupped his jaw and looked into his eyes. "Tony, I fell in love with you, the man behind the suits. That man... I know and love him dearly, he wouldn't let tragedy break him... he never has and he never will. I wanted you to come here, because you had lost all hope. I wanted to show you that you don't have to go through this alone... that you may have lost some good people but there are still people who need you... your friends need you and... there are no Avengers without you..."

Tony didn't know what to say. His heart felt almost painfully swollen with emotions: relief, gladness and mostly, love. He kissed her nose and laid his forehead against hers.

"Pepper... the man that I am today... the man behind the suit... I am all because of you... I do not know what I would have become... without you..."

"I love you too, Tony..." she murmured.

"Hey! I am not just babbling like a lunatic here! I am pouring my heart out to you and I mean it, Potts!" He said indignantly.

Her smile deepened and she giggled. "You are such a sassy drama queen, Stark..."

"Since the Avengers are back, you don't have to worry about me fighting alone anymore... when I go on this last mission..."

Pepper tightened her grip around his waist and whispered softly, "Nice try, Tony but it is of no use... I will always worry about you... worry that you are in pain... that you are hurt grievously... worry that you won't come back...you'd think I'd be used to it by now... but I am not."

Tony didn't know how to respond to that. He just looked at her dumbly, trying to think of something to say. But he couldn't. Pepper smiled sadly at him.

"Pep..."

Friday beeped loudly. "Miss Potts, sorry to interrupt you but the Board members are joining the call."

"Oh, alright, Friday, thank you. I will join them in a minute." She let him go, kissing his cheek softly. "I am sorry, Tony, I have to take this ad-hoc call, I will be back soon, then we can talk."

He was secretly relieved but controlled his expression and just nodded. She entered one of the bedrooms and shut the door. He plopped down on the sofa and idly stared at the smart TV on the wall.

"Now what do I do until she returns..."

15 minutes later

Tony carefully arranged the shirt on the ironing board and then lifted the iron.

"Is it hot enough? Now how do I check... oh yes! I remember!"

He gingerly touched his finger to the iron's surface and then hissed at the heat of the device.

"Okay! That's hot! Now to iron in one smooth motion..." He caught the edge of the shirt and ironed
its flat surface, smoothing out its wrinkles.

"This isn't so hard... just push gently here and there and this corner and hey, there's a wrinkle here! But I ironed this spot... how the fuck did a wrinkle-"

Girlish laughter filled the room and he turned around. Pepper was leaning against the bedroom's door, her eyes shining with mirth.

He set the iron down and quirked an eyebrow at her. "What's so funny, Potts?"

She smiled and walked into the room, setting her laptop down on the coffee table.

"I never imagined I'd see Iron Man ironing. Especially since you know next to nothing about ironing."

He scowled at her and she giggled.

"Potts! I shall have you know, I do know how to iron! I have ironed my own clothes!"

"Yes but when? Twenty years ago?"

"More like thirty..." he said sheepishly. "I was in college, I tried it out once, it was not a good idea. I burnt a number of shirts before Platypus took over and did the ironing for me."

She wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder. "May I give you a suggestion?"

"Please."

"You are ironing the right way but your wrinkles won't go because of your temperature setting. It is at Polyester but you should use the highest setting, so that the heat flattens the typical tough wrinkles that form in shirts, especially cotton ones like yours. You want nice crisp shirts. Change the setting here..."

She tapped something on the iron. "Now try it out."

He lifted the iron and pressed the iron to the shirt. Just as she said, the stubborn wrinkle disappeared with the heat.

Tony felt himself grow warm at his ignorance. "Shit... I didn't know that... such a basic thing... the setting for ironing a shirt. I am such an out-of-touch elitist."

She whispered softly, "Ssh. You know how to restore broken down cars, can change a flat tire in 5 minutes and repair rusty tractor engines with just a spanner. There's nothing elitist about you, honey."

He grinned happily and Pepper sighed, wrapping her arms even tighter around him. She kissed his ear and that gave him an idea.

"Hey Pep... want to have a Ghost moment?"

"Erm... depends... is a Ghost moment, some viral video that you saw on YouTube and want to try?"

"No! I mean the Demi Moore movie! You know, the one where her husband is a ghost and there's that sexy scene, where she's making some putty or pottery and there's this song playing... wait, Friday! You know which song I am talking about, play it for us please!"
"Yes, Sir, the song in question is Unchained Melody."

The familiar haunting tune of the Righteous Brothers, filled the room and he looked back at Pepper.

"Oh, of course I know this movie..." she murmured softly. "How could I not? Patrick Swayze without a shirt, mmmmmh..."

Tony dropped his jaw in outrage, making her laugh. Then she nuzzled his neck and whispered, "My love... my darling... I've hungered for your touch..."

She locked her fingers in his and moved his hand, guiding him to turn the shirt on the board.

"And time goes by... so slowly... " she crooned in his ear and he yodeled "Iiiii neeeeeddd youuuurr loooooovveee", making her laugh.

"Okay, Demi... let's try some ironing. Together now."

He picked up the iron, her hand covering his. Then he ironed the front of the shirt perfectly, leaving not a wrinkle in his wake.

"That's good, Tony... now the collar. Gently does it."

Her hand still guiding his, he pressed the hot iron to the stiff collar and felt Pepper press her soft body even harder against his.

"Potts... that's not fair! I am trying to iron!"

"Can't help it, Stark... you feel so much better than Demi..."

That made him laugh and she kissed the back of his neck, snuggling up against him.

"Potts, I want to know... were you around when Okoye... got emotional?"

"Yes, I was... I tried to sneak out because I felt like an intruder, especially when she started crying and hugged the Princess, who seemed shocked. But I couldn't leave without them noticing, so I just stood there awkwardly, until the Princess left with Okoye."

"Wait, the General actually cried?!" Tony turned in her arms, nearly toppling the board.

"Tony! The iron is on!" Pepper reached around him quickly and steadied the iron. "Yes, Okoye got very upset when the Princess said she wanted to be an Avenger. I can't blame her for being protective but she doesn't realize she's stifling the young Princess. Did you know that the General was offered a chance to participate in a U.S. military training program? And that she turned it down because she didn't want to leave the Princess alone?"

Tony shrugged. "Seems just like something she would definitely do... her loyalties lie with the Wakanda Royal family... but teenagers... do not like being coddled..." he said softly, remembering how Peter turned off all his meticulous safety mechanisms on the Spider Suit.

"Well... one way or the other, the Princess is going to do what she wants to do..." Pepper then burst into a fit of giggles and he stared at her.

He tapped her chin lightly, tilting her face up. "What's so funny, Potts?"

"It is the Princess, she's determined to distract Okoye and she's come up with a very interesting strategy! But it is supposed to be a secret..."
He pouted and she giggled again.

"Alright, Tony, don't make that face! I'll tell you but you gotta to promise, not a word to Rhodes!"

"Rhodes?! Wait, wait, Rhodes and Okoye! What!"

Pepper nodded, her eyes gleaming with mischief. "The Princess feels that Okoye is sweet on James but won't admit it... and she plans on pushing them together as much as possible, so that something will happen between them. And James is such a sweet, charming man, so I am confident that Okoye won't be able to resist him for long."

For a moment, Tony pictured the tough Okoye and Rhodey sitting absolutely straight, watching a movie, while Okoye's large golden spear sat on a seat between them. He felt laughter bubbling up inside him, coughed to hide it and then started laughing at Pepper's glare.

"Tony!"

"I am sorry, Pep! The others were teasing Rhodes about Okoye but I didn't take it too seriously because well..." He shook his head incredulously. "Rhodey and... the General... wow!"

"Well, I think they'd make a cute couple and I am going to help the Princess because I think they both deserve a chance for some happiness, so there!" Pepper cutely stuck her tongue out at him and he couldn't resist kissing her forehead softly.

"Say, Miss Potts... why don't we... get an early dinner somewhere, just the two of us... we can talk more about Rhodey and how he's going to woo his Iron Maiden..."

"That sounds like a good idea, Mr. Stark..." Pepper murmured, nuzzling his face. "And perhaps we can also... sneak away... the Princess told me about this bio-luminescent lagoon, somewhere on the grounds... which is very beautiful at night..."

"Excellent plan as always, Potts..." He gently kissed her lips, winding his fingers in her hair. She softened against him, kissing him back slowly.

Their romantic moment was interrupted by a loud ding.

Friday said apologetically, "Miss Potts, there is an important email that needs your immediate response."

Pepper let him go with an exasperated huff and picked up her laptop from the table. She opened it and groaned in dismay.

"What is it, honey?"

"Time magazine is going to publish an article about the Adoite Conference, in an upcoming issue. So the Stark PR team wants a write up ASAP, of my experience, what lectures I attended, whom did I speak to, what was memorable, how I contributed, etc. etc."

She sighed tiredly and pushed her hair back from her face. "Typical corporate spiel..."

He quickly said, "Hey I was there too, let's write it together! It will be quick."

She looked at him gratefully and sat down on the sofa.

"I will be right there, let me just put this away." He muttered and then wrestled with the board's hinges to get it to shut.
Tony managed to fold the board and put the iron away. He then moved to the minibar and took out a bottle of Coke. He poured himself a glass and walked to the sofa, plonking down beside Pepper. She was busy typing away, so he began to read her screen as she typed.

She stopped typing and looked at his glass.

"Yes, I know it's very expensive to use the mini-fridge but I just had to, Potts, you know I need caffeine at night and room service is over and I-"

She cupped his jaw, cutting him off and murmured sweetly, "Tony, honey, I just want a sip."

"A sip?" He raised his eyebrows in shock. "A sip! Of Coke?! Okay, who are you, beautiful alien and what have you done with my fiance?"

She giggled and reached for his glass with one hand. He held it out of her reach, determined to tease her.

"Now, now, Miss Potts. Don't you tell me repeatedly, that Diet Coke rots teeth and compensates for sugar, with extra caffeine which isn't good for the body?"

She nibbled on her lip, looking at him with big pleading blue eyes and he continued teasingly, "And weren't you the one who told me, nay! Lectured me that when consumed before sleeping, caffeine over-stimulates the body, thus causing insomnia?"

"Alright Tony! I know I have lectured you many a time about the dangers of drinking Coke but today I just need a sip. Just a tiny sip. I am just a little tired, that's all."

He handed her the glass and stroked her hair as she took a small sip and then another.

"Go to bed, Potts. You have had a long day."

"You had a long day too, Tony."

"Yeah but... honey, you were in the office before we went to the airport, you worked for a while on the flight, I saw you! You need to rest!"

She set the glass and her laptop down on the coffee table. Then she leaned sideways against him, resting her head on his shoulder.

"I will, Tony. After this email is done."

He tilted her chin up and whispered, looking into her guileless blue eyes. "Is that a promise, Miss Potts?"

"Well..." she said evasively, "I also have to go over some accounting details with Mr. Orville but then that's it. I swear."

"Pepper..." he growled and was going to argue further, when she shifted and snuggled closer to him.

"It isn't fair. You play dirty." He murmured, wrapping one arm around her waist and nuzzling her back. "Using your womanly charms on me."

"Wrong. I just know your secret weakness, Stark. And that is..." she rubbed her face along his.

"Cuddling."

"Cuddling!"
"Yes... you Tony Stark love cuddling. At any place and any time."

"Is that so?"

"Yup. I've seen it a number of times and--"

With one hand, he quickly lowered himself to her lap, settling his head comfortably on her soft thighs.

Pepper squeaked cutely and then humphed. She leaned forward to reach the laptop, pressing her chest against his face. He idly reached for the dangling strands of her soft fragrant hair with his lips and tugged on one end lightly.

"For the record, you just proved my point, Mr. Stark."

He couldn't help but laugh at her smugness. Then he squealed when he felt her pinch his thigh hard.

"Now that you've got what you wanted, Tony, let's get back to work."

Pepper resumed her typing and he tilted his head sideways to pay attention to her laptop's screen. For five minutes, the room was silent except for the gentle tap tap of her fingers over the keyboard as she jotted down her experiences at the Conference.

She was doing such a good job on her own that Tony's mind began to wander and he turned his gaze upwards, looking up at her. He admired the slender elegant line of her neck and the way she held herself, straight and tall. Then he sat up in alarm as he noticed something strange.

"Tony! Sit still please!" she objected with a laugh but he paid her no mind, he studied her neck, noticing with horror that it was covered in a number of tiny reddish bumps. He gently tugged the edge of her v-neck shirt downwards and then gasped loudly.

The reddish bumps stood out against the pale skin of her chest. The redness was especially severe around her left breast. Pepper caught his hand.

"Tony, what's the matter?"

"Honey, you've got some sort of rash! Look, it is all over your neck and chest! Shit, Pep! It is bad! Does it burn!"

Pepper burst into laughter and he glared at her.

"Hey, Potts, this is not funny! Where did it come from? We need to go to a doctor!"

She just tilted her head to one side and smiled at him sweetly.

"Oh, I know where it came from, Stark! It came from..." she caught him by the chin and caressed his beard with her thumb. "It came from you..."

Tony couldn't believe what he was hearing. "No way! I don't have a rash!"

"It is not a rash, silly! It came from your beard, Tony... well, your stubble, to be more precise."

He just stared at her, so she continued with a giggle, "You know my skin is sensitive to sunlight. Well, it has been bright and sunny ever since we flew into Africa. And I forgot my extra-strong sun cream lotion at home!" she moistened her lips, "And if I remember correctly, two days ago, someone took special care to rub his stubbly chin all over my neck and then my chest. That's why I am a little
"I did this?! I hurt you! Shit, Pepper! I am so sorry! Why did you let me-"

She cut him off by cupping his cheeks lovingly and looking deep into his eyes.

"Tony, you silly silly goose, it has happened before and besides, I love the way you nuzzle me with your beard! The way its raspy growth prickles against my skin. Don't worry, some medicinal cream will soothe it. I just need to keep my chest and neck covered for a few days. Besides, I left my mark on you as well. So we are even. Now settle back down and let me get back to work."

He absently shuffled upright on the sofa, now sitting beside her. As she typed, he pulled his shirt collar to the left and to the right.

"Tony..." he heard her say softly, never taking her eyes off the keyboard. "What are you doing?"

"I am just curious, Potts, where is..." he turned this way and that, "where is this mark you speak of?"

She giggled and turned towards him. "Here, tilt your head completely to the right, that's it!"

He heard a soft 'click' and then she showed him her phone. Right below his ear, was a tiny red pinch mark.

Tony looked at it and then at Pepper. "This is just a scratch! Whereas I've left red splotches all over you, Potts!"

She absently patted his thigh, her attention back on her laptop.

"Tony, did you visit the bio-waste booth? The one where the presenter spoke about recycling body waste to generate energy? Do you remember his name?"

"Dr. Kalvin Fishodour." He said, without even thinking and she gave him a quick smile.
Pepperony All Alone

Chapter Notes

In the devastation of Infinity War and the Snap, there was an idea, by this author, called the Save Pepperony Initiative. The idea was to write a story, to fix the horrible cliffhanger devised by the Russos. How? By sending Pepper to space, to rescue Tony stuck on Titan. The idea was meant to be a short story but so many liked the idea, that the author was inspired to keep writing... and she did... until April 27th 2019, when the Russos unleashed another horror called Endgame and destroyed Pepperony with their "noble-ending, it was his time, he was meant to self-sacrifice" bullshit.

Much like all fans of the MCU and Pepperony, this author too, was devastated. So much so, that she stopped writing her story. But then she realized... with the help of some steadfast encouraging readers and friends... some stories end but this one hasn't...

Just because the Russos told THEIR story... that doesn't mean we must stop telling Ours.

Now 5 months later, she returns, to continue this saga, to give Pepperony, nay, the entire MCU, the happy ending they deserve, the proper and dignified ending they deserve!

Okay, non bullshit version: Yes, Endgame destroyed my writing but I am back and more determined than ever, to finish this fic. I have a lot of ideas and I promise a happy ending for everyone, with all the things missing from Endgame such as a wedding, smut, retribution and redemption. Absolutely no time-travel ball. One chapter a week, every Sat or Sun. Please keep reading :) 

*Smut ahead*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony watched Pepper type for a while, interjecting now and then, as he remembered parts of the Conference. Finally, she stopped typing and began to read aloud from what she had typed so far and he listened carefully. When she reached the part about Park's solar energy debate, she stopped and looked at him. They both grinned naughtily at each other.

Pepper said mischievously, "Well, Stark, what should I say about the debate? You were present from the very beginning, whereas I came in the middle."

"Let's see... I can tell you that both sides were making some very good arguments. Then you came in with the best argument of them all."
She raised her eyebrows at him. "Me?"

"Yes, you used the 'Stake your claim on me, Mr. Stark, here are my panties, Mr. Stark' argument and won the debate hands down."

Pepper blushed and covered her face with a loud groan. He laughed with glee and rubbed her back.

"Tony!!"

"Honey, it is true! I was paying the utmost attention until you sat down next to me!"

She said primly, "I shall just mention that the debate was lively and engaging but I had an urgent call which I had to take, so I was not around for the closing arguments."

The subject of the debate and their passionate sojourn in the Conference hall's storeroom, made him think. He quietly watched her finish her article and when she finished, he took her hand.

"Pepper... I have to say... you really surprised me that time. What you did, was so bold and hot... it just took my breath away."

She looked at him shyly, nibbling on her lip, so he continued, "I mean, I know you have a kinky side, I love your kinky side but that day..." he whistled in appreciation, "Honey, that was something else! In my wildest dreams, I never imagined you'd ever do something like that."

"Was it too bold? I know it would have been very embarrassing if we were caught, I took a terrible risk and it was really unprof-"

He placed his finger on her lips and murmured, "Miss Potts, you are not allowed to feel guilty for your sexy seduction, am I clear?"

She nodded, her lips curving against his finger.
"What you did... you've set the bar too high now. I shall expect kinkier stuff from you. In fact, I have some ideas for the next Board meeting."

Pepper gasped and then burst into laughter. He said firmly, "I want you to up the ante and pause the meeting mid-way, come to the rec room and seduce me on the pool table."

"Tony! No way!" She sputtered.

"Alright then, I want you to sext me during the meeting. Hot sexy messages of lust and seduction."

Pepper pursed her lips sultrily, looking at him through her lashes. "That I can do."

"And I want some upskirt shots too..."

She snorted and turned back to her computer. "Now you are pushing your luck, Mr. Stark."

"I can't help it, Potts, I love seeing you in your corporate power suit getup. It is something I miss about working at Stark Industries."

She looked at him sideways. "Is that the only thing you miss?"

He knew the answer to that dangerous question. "Of course not, I miss working underneath you."

Pepper just looked at him and he chuckled. "And working on top of you..."

She sighed and he said quickly, "Okay, okay, I miss having you around when I work. Really and sincerely I do. I got so used to you coming in between and checking up on me and entertaining me by chasing me with the things to sign..."

She smiled sweetly at him. "That's the correct answer. Now let's come back to the write-up. What happened after the debate?"
"Hey, hey wait a minute. I have a question. Please. Just one question."

"Alright Tony. Tell me."

"I am confused because... welllll...initially when you confronted me... about me setting the ETA on Matteo... you were angry. And then I went to the debate and you came there and seduced my bones off... not that I am complaining! Not at all! But I just want to know what happened in the middle. What made you forgive me?"

"Honey... I wasn't angry..." She said slowly.

"You weren't?" He asked, trying to recall what had happened.

"No, I wasn't..."

"Why not?"

Pepper tilted her head to one side, her sapphire eyes crinkling with her soft smile.

"I really shouldn't tell you this, Tony, because I do not want to encourage you... but truth be told... when you admitted that you did all that for me, because you were jealous... and then you explained how you trusted me... but you were insecure of yourself around these men... shit, hearing it was so heady and powerful... I was so flattered... and so turned on..."

Tony's confusion must have shown on his face for she giggled.

"Mr. Stark... we have been together for so many many years.... I was just so happy that you still felt that way about me..."

"Still? What way? What?"

Her cheeks turned pink and she lowered her lashes, murmuring, "Possessive... jealous... after all these years, you still desire me and you were willing to do so much, to chase those other men off..."
Tony couldn't believe what he was hearing. He narrowed his eyes at her.

"Erm... of course I find you desirable! Pepper, you are so eminently fucking desirable! But... but... I thought women hate it when men get possessive and jealous."

"They do! If the man treats them like an object that he owns or if he's jealous because he doesn't trust her... but you..."

She stroked his beard with her fingers, making a rush of sensation course through him.

"You so passionately explained that it was because of your own insecurities that you got possessive... and the fact that you cared enough to resort to such silly tactics to get rid of my... how did you put it... suitors!" she said with a giggle.

He scowled, remembering the way Matteo had been holding her hand. Pepper smiled and kissed his nose.

"At that moment, I was so happy... so happy that you still felt the need to fight for me... to compete for my attention... to resort to such intricate subterfuge, just to get me alone... I know how impatient you are, Tony.... I thought you would just reveal your identity and get rid of Matteo and Dave that way... but you didn't..."

"Potts... I! I have so many things to say and ask..."

Pepper's smile deepened. He nearly squealed with glee as she closed her laptop and set it down on the table. Then she turned towards him, leaning sideways against the sofa.

"I am all ears, Mr. Stark."

"Okay... first..." he paused, thinking how to frame his sentence. Then he decided to come right out and say it.
"I know there are times when... my reputation... my being Iron Man... I've stolen the spotlight from you. I've stolen your thunder... I've got all the attention and I don't deserve it but believe me, Pepper! I try my darned best not to! You have accomplished so much and are famous in your own right! I would never want to take credit away from you!"

"Tony... you don't do that... I know that... you are a proud man but you are a fair one too... you always give credit where credit is due... but at this conference...you belonged there! You are a scientist and an industrialist and would have contributed greatly to the discussions and the presentations. I wouldn't have blamed you if you had revealed your true identity!"

He caught her hand tightly. "Pepper, I made a promise, I was going to be your nerd for hire and I would never go back on my word. Especially since you are the CEO of Stark Industries. The opinion, the discussions, the takeaways, its all you... my say doesn't matter an iota."

"Beg to differ, Mr. Stark..." she said softly.

He smiled at her and she wound her fingers through his.

"I know you, Tony... and I know that, contrary to how the media likes to portray you at times...you aren't a braggart or an attention seeker. And you are too fond of me to take credit even when you should."

"Fond, yes. But truthfully... I am too proud. You are the best thing that has ever happened to Stark Industries. The best thing that ever happened to me," He said fiercely. "You deserve all the credit, Potts."

"All 100%? Really?" She said teasingly and he flushed.

"When are you going to forget that line?"

"How could I? It is an epic Stark one-liner! One of the top quotes in my collection!"

"Collection!"
"Yup." Said Pepper, grinning broadly. "Right up there along with classics like 'Honey, it's just a big bunny!' or 'I'm...just not the hero type. Clearly.'"

His ears were burning, so he decided to change the subject quickly.

"Moving on to my next question..."

"Sure." she said, her blue eyes twinkling at him.

"You keep saying, still... still desire you, still feel the need to compete for your attention... why still?"

Her face softened and she sighed.

"People grow apart, Tony..."

This sentence made his heart thud hard with fear and he sat up straight.

"You think we have grown apart?!"

"No! No, we haven't... I put that badly! Sorry... I meant to say... that... with the passage of time... the little things in a relationship, fade away..."

"Such as? He asked curiously and she laughed.

"Such as holding the door open or putting the toilet seat down or ..."

"Making in-flight omelettes for you on a long plane trip..." he finished softly, remembering an old tradition.
She giggled and he looked at her abashedly.

"Shit... I used to always make you one when we flew together. But we haven't traveled in flight for a long time and so... sorry, I should have remembered..."

"Honey, its okay..." Pepper said lovingly, reaching out to push his hair back from his brow. "It happens in all relationships, even friendships... it's a part of life... I didn't bring it up to make you feel bad!

Its just... when you admitted that you got rid of Dave and Matteo, just to be with me... it thrilled me... after all these years, you still..."

She moved closer to him her, blue eyes so wide, blue and clear, gazing into his.

"You, my billionaire genius superhero... you still want me all to yourself... it filled me with happiness and ..." she lowered her gaze and nibbled on her lip.

"And?" He whispered, using his thumb to gently tug her lip away from her teeth.

"And it filled me with lust..." she whispered, a most becoming shade of pink flooding her cheeks.

"I wanted..."

"Tell me, Potts..." he growled, watching the color darken against her skin.

"I wanted to rip your clothes off and make you ravish me right then and there. Because I am all yours, Tony. Heart and mind and soul. All yours, Mr. Stark."

He felt a deep thrill of arousal ripple through him and took a deep breath.

"But we couldn't! I couldn't... because we had an audience..."

"We did?" He said dumbly, now captivated by her tongue sweeping slowly across her lips.
Pepper whispered huskily, "We most certainly did! Remember all those scientists in the room... but you had turned me on so much... I was filled with this primal urge..."

She leaned tantalizingly closer to him, her lips barely grazing his, her blue eyes shimmering like sapphires in sunlight.

"This urge... to be claimed by you... to have you and only you around me... touching me and kissing me and..."

He couldn't take it anymore and closed the inch-wide gap between them by kissing her passionately, his tongue teasing hers. She wound her fingers in his hair and he lost himself in the heady magic of her soft lips moving under his. They kissed like teenagers, moaning into each other's mouths. Finally Tony let her lips go, only to rain kisses all over her chin.

"Miss Potts..." He growled against her skin. "Are you trying to seduce me yet again?" his lips moved downwards, nibbling on her neck.

She squirmed and then turned the tables on his seduction, by moving her hands down to his butt and squeezing it hard.

He gasped loudly and she purred, "Yes I am. Mr. Stark...Is it working?"

Tony was finding it really difficult to think because of what Pepper's fingers were doing to his backside. He heard her giggle and determined to regain control, he gently caught her chin, to hold her face still. Then he tilted her head and tenderly rubbed his beard over her soft neck.

Pepper gasped, so he gently bit her collarbone, making her tremble against him.

"After Wakanda... we are going to take a vacation... go somewhere where we don't have to wear much clothing..." he murmured against her smooth fragrant skin. "In fact, clothes are not allowed at all..."

"And we can do this all day..." she said breathlessly.
"Yes... all day and all night..." he said, "In fact..."

He stood up and pulled her up with him, taking her into his arms. Then he smoothly lifted her leg, wrapping it around his hip.

"Let's practice for the vacation now..." he rocked his hips, pushing his crotch against her intimately and she moaned, clutching him to her.

"Tony!"

"Do you like what I am doing, Boss?" He said teasingly, one hand holding her hips in place, the other working on undoing the button of her jeans.

"Yes, yes, yes..." she moaned softly, "Tony, take your pants off... but don't let me go..."

"As you wish, Boss."

With his one hand, he roughly pushed her jeans and panties down to her thighs, kissing her all the while. Then he started undoing the buttons of her shirt and Pepper made a loud noise in her throat.

"I can't wait!"

She surprised him by pulling her own shirt apart, scattering buttons everywhere. Then she shrugged it off her shoulders, took his mouth hard and he blindly fumbled around her bare back, managing to undo her bra.

"Tony... Tony!! Take off your pants!" She muttered, her hands impatiently tugging his shirt out of his jeans.

He was so distracted because his senses were overwhelmed by her seduction: the way her lush soft breasts felt pressed against his chest, the vanilla lily scent of her filling his nostrils and her agile devilish tongue teasing his ear.
"Tony! You are being too slow!"

"Pepper, honey! You are moving faster than a Hennessey Venom F5, which by the way, claims to reach 301 mph."

Her thumb grazed his nipple, sending a wave of arousal through him. He gasped loudly and then moaned as her fingers teased his other nipple as well, rubbing it all over.

"I get so hot when you talk nerd, Stark!" Pepper exclaimed wickedly.

"Nerd talk..." he gritted out, closing his eyes as her fingers moved all over his chest, stroking and caressing him wildly. "Pepper, this is not fair!"

"Coz you are being too slow, Mr. Honda..." she said.

Then he opened his eyes in a rush because somehow his jeans were around his ankles and her hand was in his briefs. She palmed his cock hard and he jerked in place, sensation coursing all over him.

"Pepper..." he whimpered and she giggled.

"I got you, handsome... now why don't you tell me about the fastest cars in the world..."

Tony could barely hear her, over the roar of his heart in his head. Her fingers were teasing him into a state of desperate arousal, teasing and tugging on him with firm but gentle strokes. He could feel himself harden and swell with each caress.

His head cleared for a moment, only to cloud over again, when then she leaned completely against him, pressing every supple curve of her soft body to his, her erect nipples teasingly rubbing against his chest.

"Tony... open your pretty mouth and talk dirty automobile stuff to me..." she said, kissing his cheek.
"It is not dirty!" He croaked out, her hand now playing with his balls.

"You have the art of talking dirty, Stark..." she said lazily. "I know you can turn anything into sexy talk."

He shook his head, trying to regain his senses. Which was difficult because her hand had curled around the tip of his penis.

"Well, okay, aerodynamic sleek body designs and a light weight, are major factors that make a sports car... well... go so fast... there's also the handling mechanism of the car... to... you know, handle tight curves etc."

He knew he was just babbling but Pepper moistened her lips and cooed, "How fascinating...". Then she lowered her head and he tensed, inhaling deeply as her mouth gently kissed his nano-arc.

"You know what I like about fast cars..." he heard her whisper from far away, her lips now tracing the outline of his nipple.

"They are so compact and trim..." Her finger rubbed his cock's slit and he squealed. "Yet, they have so much horsepower under the hood..."

He opened his eyes and blinked dumbly at her. She gave him a seductive smile and lowered her gaze. He looked down as well, down at his erect cock clearly straining against his briefs.

"I think this engine is ready to go for a ride..." she murmured thoughtfully, palming him. "What do you think..."

He quickly pulled her against him and cupped her breasts in his hands, squeezing them tightly. She moaned and they both quickly shucked their pants and underwear off as they tumbled to the floor.

Conveniently, there was a soft fluffy woven rug right beneath them.

Tony lay on his back and pulled Pepper onto him, then he made her shift upwards along his chest such that her breasts dangled before his mouth. He quickly closed his lips around one pink taut
nipple and sucked on it gently.

Pepper writhed and squirmed but he held on to her, determined to taste her to his satisfaction. His hands cupped her satiny smooth backside and he kneaded her lush curves with his fingers, while his mouth continued to nibble on her breasts.

"Tony, Tony...." she said desperately as he laved one nipple and then the other with his tongue. Her naked pussy rubbed against his erect cock, he could feel her arousal increasing with every movement of his fingers and mouth.

But he wanted to give her even more pleasure, bring her right to the edge and then let her ride him hard.

So he lowered one hand, spread her legs and gently traced the edge of her nether lips with one finger. She gasped and tried to rise but he kept her against him with one hand around her back.

"Hold still, honey... its my turn to play with you. Now we were talking about engines, weren't we?"

He licked the ripe taut nipple closest to his face, while he stroked her pussy with his fingers. Pepper moaned indistinctly and he nipped her soft globe of flesh, making her tremble hard.

"I forgot... we were talking about fast cars... their long lean lines..." he stroked the long elegant line of her back. "Their sensuous aerodynamic curves that help them reach great speeds..." he cupped one taut butt cheek and squeezed it tightly.

"Tony! Please baby! More!" She cried out.

"They have extremely comfortable interiors too..." he thrust one finger deep into her.

She arched her back like a bow, moaning.

"Velvety smooth seats... the kind you can lie naked on..."
"Stark!" Pepper said raggedly, "I want... I want..." he added another finger and she panted out, "I want you in me! Right now!"

"In a minute, Boss... where was I... oh yes, seating arrangements..."

He carefully rubbed his jaw against her nipple, making Pepper tremble hard against him.

"Tonnnyy!"

"Alright, alright boss... now just sit up here... I want to kiss you and hold you, when I am inside you, so let's try something new here..."

Tony sat up, supporting Pepper as she settled on his lap, straddling his hips. He stretched his legs out in front of him.

"Wrap your arms around my neck, that's it, now look into my eyes..."

He gazed into her guileless sapphire blue eyes and slowly thrust into her, her soft moist core tightening around him. The blueness darkened and shimmered as he pushed deeper into her, their sweaty thighs rubbing up against each other.

She leaned forward and kissed him softly, her fingers winding in his hair.

"Lift yourself a little..."

Then he groaned loudly as she lifted herself from him and then sank down heavily onto him.

They began to move in tandem like that, thrusting into one and other, brushing their lips against each other with every slow heavy thrust.

"Tony... that's it baby! Harder, harder!"
He gripped her butt hard and ground upwards into her tight wet sheath, making her mewl. She kissed his forehead absently and played with the hair at the back of his neck as he moved his hand between their bodies, to press against her clit as he thrust into her.

Pepper threw her head back and moaned loudly, shaking out her fiery mane of hair.

He pinched the little bud with his fingers, making her close her eyes tightly and bite her lip hard.

"Tony! Tony, move please! Come in me! Now! I want you so badly! Please!"

He could feel sweat trickling down his back and pooling around their joined limbs but he focused only on Pepper. He thrust upwards heavily and she clenched herself around his cock, making him lose control.

Tony closed his eyes, holding onto Pepper's soft hips for dear life as his release burst from him powerfully. He felt her clutch his arms tightly and groaned, then she tensed against him with a loud sigh.

He cradled her to his chest and slowly lay back down, feeling drained and boneless. She rested her head on his shoulder, sighed loudly, her breath wafting over his neck.

He looked up at the beige-colored ceiling, trying to slow his racing heart down, while he absently stroked Pepper's soft hair.

"That was some ride..." she murmured softly against his skin.

"I hope I handled well." He said teasingly and she lifted her head up to grin at him.

"Oh yes, excellent control around the corners and the engine power..." he froze as she lazily trailed a finger over his chest and down to his groin.

"So fast and furiously powerful... my legs are still weak..."
"Flattery will get you everywhere, Potts... but if you want another ride, you are going to have to give this old engine a minute or two..."

She raised her head and kissed him softly and sweetly.

"You don't get old, Tony... you just get sexier..." She whispered, her lips moving against his tenderly. "You are such a silver fox with your slightly grey temples, your devilish boyish grin and your really tight sexy butt that I've seen a number of men envy!"

He preened at her words and she giggled.

Pepper nuzzled his cheek and murmured, "And you still make my heart skip a beat every time you enter a room... you are all I have, Tony Stark..."

"You are all I have too, Pepper Potts." He murmured, tightening his grip on her.

They lay there together, cuddling in a blissful relaxed state. Her fingers gently stroked his nano-arc, he could feel her chest rise and fall with every breath she took and her gloriously long legs were tangled with his as she lay against him quietly.

"Hey Tony..." Pepper whispered and he rumbled in response.

"Why are you so quiet all of a sudden?"

Suddenly a mischievous thought came to him and he grinned.

"I'm just thinking over what you said earlier..."

She lifted her head from his chest and looked at him curiously.

"You know... that you get turned on when I get jealous... I am just working out the possibilities..."
Much to his disappointment, Pepper didn't react to his sneaky teasing. A small smile played around her lips. She shifted, folding her arms and placing them on his chest, then resting her head on them.

"That's not entirely true, Tony."

"It isn't?"

She smiled cutely, her eyes gleaming with mischief. "I actually get very turned on when you admit your feelings. So you baring your soul and saying 'Honey, I am jealous, so help me god!' was very arousing!"

He groaned.

"Yes, it is true, the more you explain your inner thoughts and emotions instead of just hiding it behind a snarky comment, the more I want to jump your bones. Is that putting it plainly?"

"Come on, Pep! You sound like some self-help book! Express your inner turmoil! And I thought you loved my snarky comments!"

"I do, honey but not when you are hurting inside and keeping your emotions suppressed with sarcasm."

She stretched forward and placed a little kiss on his nose.

"So don't go getting any smart-ass ideas with that mighty brain of yours...."

He grumbled to himself and she giggled.

"Now since you brought up the conference and our special time in the broom closer... I remember being impressed by your knot-tying skills..."

His ears grew warm. "I am not as good as I should be... given that I was a Scout briefly and I was taught how to tie all sorts of knots and binds..."
Pepper's eyes went wide with awe and shock. Her jaw dropped.

"You were a Scout?! Tony, why have you never told me this"!

He shrugged. "I was a Scout only for a month or two, so does that even make me a Scout?"

"What happened? Tell me everything!"

He raised his eyebrows. "It is a long story, Potts and you need to go to bed, miss missy! You have had a very long day!"

Pepper giggled. "Are you, Tony Stark, telling me to go to bed? You do see the irony, right?"

"I am nocturnal by nature and besides, I wasn't working all during the flight and just now!"

Pepper seemed about to argue further when she suddenly yawned.

He wriggled his eyebrows and she pouted.

"Tell me the story, Stark and then I'll go to sleep."

"First, let's get in bed, I'll tell you the story there."

"No! It's so nice and comfy here..." She snuggled up to his chest and blinked pleadingly at him. "Please, Tony..."

He could never refuse Pepper, especially when she was looking at him like that.

"Alright, Potts, alright... where do I begin..." He placed his hand on her head and began to gently
stroke her hair. "So the fancy boarding school I went to, they didn't actually have a Scout program... they had the whole stuffy prefect and junior prefect shit going on... but when I went home for the holidays one term, Dad had a surprise for me. One of his accountants had told him all about his son enjoying himself in the Scouts program at the local public school and Dad suddenly had felt that I needed some good old-fashioned outdoor group activity, that would keep me busy in the holidays, so he managed to 'persuade' the local Scoutmaster, to let me join his troop as... an ad-hoc trainee Scout. Mom wasn't happy about it at all... she felt I was finally home and here was Dad sending me off somewhere again but you know my Dad... oh wait, you didn't... but you know he always had to have his way, so on my second day at home, I was rudely awoken at 6 am and Jarvis drove me to this big green field in the hills..."

Tony went on for a good two minutes before he heard a soft snore. He lifted his head only to see Pepper fast asleep on his chest.

"This is why I said I'd tell you the story in bed, Pepper..." he whispered with a smile, pushing her hair back from her face. "I have a talent for putting beautiful women to sleep with my words... wait, that sounds dirty... okay, enough talking, time to put Sleeping Beauty to bed."

He slowly and carefully, turned on his side, making sure to lay Pepper as gently as possible on the carpet, without waking her. Then he got up and tapped his Arc, enabling his gauntlets and his chest armor.

"I am not as young as I used to be, so I need some support to pick her up..."

He squatted on his haunches, gently moved his hands under Pepper's body and lifted her into his arms. Then he stood up carefully, his chest armor bracing his back as he cradled her prone warm body against his chest.

As quietly as possible, Tony carried Pepper to the bedroom and carefully laid her down on the bed. Disengaging his suit, he tucked her in, dimmed the lights and then bent over her.

"Good night, honey..." he murmured, pressing his lips to her forehead lightly. Just as he straightened, Pepper murmured something indistinctly, her eyes closed firmly.

"Pep, shush, go to sleep..."

She opened one clear blue eye. "Come to bed, honey. It's late."
"I know, Pep but I thought I'd watch tv for a while... maybe see if Bruce is up and..."

He trailed off when she raised her hand and tenderly cupped his chin. "Come to bed, Tony. Please."

Tony was going to argue when her fingers lightly stroked his beard. Craving more of her touch, he crawled into the cozy bed from her side and snuggled up against her, wrapping his arm around her waist.

"Five minutes of snuggling, just to help you sleep and then I'll get up..." He murmured, burying his face in her soft downy mass of hair.

Pepper giggled. "Give it up, tough guy, you aren't going anywhere."

Sure enough, he felt a yawn coming and closed his eyes. The warm coziness of the bed, the supple softness of his fiance against him and the long day, he fell effortlessly into a deep sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Oh crap, I just realized where I had stopped this story. Now I am embarrassed 😊😊 restarting a fic with smut.

See you next weekend.
Chapter Notes

I would just like to mention some points about this fic:

Firstly, the Action isn't going to start right away. The Avengers are all together in Wakanda. So the next few chapters are going to be about them interacting with each other, talking about what was going on in their lives. Thor and Bruce haven't seen the others for years! Then there's also Shuri and Okoye and how they interact with Pepper, Tony etc. And all these conversations are leading up to the next phase of this fic. Which is going to be in outer space! Yippee!!

Secondly, I know that many (if not all?) of you are reading this after Endgame, so no doubt, some parts are going to seem familiar. I am trying to avoid that as much as possible, believe me but some similarities are inevitable.

Thirdly, life is going on, so there is going to be some fluff and some smut. That being said, if there are any interactions or conversations that you readers would like to see, let me know in the comments and I'll try to write them :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Pepper stood at the edge of the stone walkway, gazing in wonder at the early morning African vista before her. She was at the other end of the Palace, which overlooked the rugged deep copper red cliffs of Wakanda.

At the Princess' request, she would be presenting a lecture on management skills for the 21st century, at the Queen Ramonda University for Women. The Princess and her were going to drive together to the University, which is why Pepper was waiting by the back entrance of the royal chambers, that overlooked the Palace gardens.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" she heard the General say behind her.

Pepper turned to face her. "It truly is, General." She took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the brisk mountain air. "So pure and pristine."

"Pristine!" The General smiled slowly. "That is a word I must remember, when I think of this view. Natural and pristine and untouched by the devastation..."
She lowered her gaze and sighed. Pepper did not want to disturb her, so she simply looked straight ahead. After a while, she realized that the General was studying her quietly.

The silence was broken by the loud trill of a message notification and the General looked at her phone.

She made an irritated noise in her throat and muttered angrily in her native tongue. Then she rubbed her temples and sighed heavily.

"I am afraid the Princess will be delayed by another ten minutes. I do apologize, Miss Potts. I realize we asked you to be ready ahead of the actual departure time, so that we would not be late but I should have known that my monarch would end up delaying us."

"It is perfectly alright, General." Pepper smiled softly. "The Princess is still a young girl and in my limited experience, young people tend to sleep in late, to compensate for their nocturnal habits. I am anyways, completely at her Highness' disposal, so she can take her time."

The General looked at her with relief. "Thank you for being so accommodating, Miss Potts."

Pepper looked around herself curiously and then noticed, a set of stone steps, some distance from her left, which lead downwards.

"General, if I may ask, where do those steps lead to?"

To her surprise, the General's face softened with wistfulness. "It leads to the Purple Onyx garden... would you like to see it?"

Then she widened her eyes. "We do not have to, it is just a suggestion."

"I would love to see the garden." Pepper said warmly. "Please lead the way."

Together, they descended the stone steps carefully, to reach a small circular landing, filled with green shrubs. An ornate archway stood before them, its purplish-black rock-like columns gleaming in the sunshine.
They walked through the stone archway into a pristine landscape of purple and grey. Bright purple African violets bloomed along a winding dark-grey path of cobbled stones. The air was filled with the soothing noise of gently flowing water. There were no tall trees or plants, just flowers and small shrubs, lending the garden a neat, crisp look. Large and small onyx-like stones dotted the purple vegetation.

"The Palace has a number of scenic gardens." The General began softly, a smile on her usually stern face. "But this one... this is perhaps the most beautiful garden of them all... It was my King's favorite hiding place as a teenager. Many a time, I remember seeing the guards searching all over the Palace, trying to find him but they never thought to search this garden. As an adult, he would often retreat here, to bask in its peaceful solitude."

"Everything is so still and serene..." Pepper murmured, unwilling to disturb the beautiful stillness. "And the purple has such a calming effect. I can see why the King favored this garden."

They rounded a large gleaming crystal rock with purple streaks and came upon a small seating area with benches and stone chairs, surrounded by beds of purple and white Cape Daisies.

The picture-perfect beauty made her gasp loudly in awe. "Oh my... this is a little patch of purple heaven!"

The General smiled and walked over to a bench. "This is my favorite spot. I like coming here, to enjoy the silence of the flowers, after a busy noisy day at the Palace. Come Miss Potts, let us sit for a while."

She sat down and Pepper joined her on the bench. For five minutes, they sat together in a companionable silence.

Pepper was watching a plump furry bee pollinate a daisy in bloom, when the General cleared her throat softly. She turned towards the other woman, who smiled shyly.

"You know Miss Potts, perhaps it is the reflective nature of my surroundings but... but I feel I must apologize for my behavior these past few days. I was very rude to you and Mr. Stark, when you arrived... because I was in a bad mood, a childish excuse but... and also! I must have scared you with my wrath, when I burst in on the Princess and you in the secret chamber, listening to the Avengers."

"General, there's really no need to apologize, I completely understand your concern about the
Princess. She seems most determined to avenge her brother and ready to do anything to achieve that end."

"If it wasn't for her royal duties, the Princess would be halfway in space by now, searching for the evil alien warlord, who invaded our peaceful land." said Okoye tiredly. "I keep trying to reason with her, that we are not superheroes, that she has a royal duty to her subjects but she pays me no attention! She feels I am being unfair and overprotective of her. She just doesn't understand!"

She swallowed hard and looked away. Pepper didn't say a word, she knew the General was wrestling with her emotions.

"I watched my King die before my eyes and for all my might, all my strength... I was absolutely useless! I could do nothing! I cannot..." She took a deep breath, shaking her head. "I cannot lose my Princess too. I know she hates me for stifling her, for holding her back but I am simply trying to keep her safe!"

Pepper said gently, "General, believe me I can relate. When you love something very much, you want to protect it from harm at all costs. Especially when you feel it is being careless with its own life."

"You sound as if you have experience... oh wait!" The General barked out a laugh. "I forgot! You are the headstrong Mr. Stark's fiance!"

"Yes. And I have spent many hours, arguing with Tony and his reckless adventures and his indifference towards his health. His intentions are noble but in his drive to save others, he forgets to take care of his own safety. There was a time... when we split up because I couldn't bear to see him put himself in danger but I couldn't stop him from continuing his work as Iron Man! I know it sounds cowardly but I just did not want to see him die...."

She paused, remembering their break-up two years ago.

"What... brought you back together?" The General whispered. "He did not stop being Iron Man!"

Pepper smiled. "No, he did not. I had a change of heart. It took me some time but I realized that I loved Tony Stark too much, to live without him. I could live but I had no peace. Because I missed him so much. And if I loved him... then I must be willing to accept the risk of losing him. And do my best to protect him and support him by being there for him."
The General furrowed her brow.

"I am confused. Are you trying to tell me that I should let the Princess do what she wants, because I am so very fond of her?"

"No, no! That's not what I meant, General! I was simply stating how Tony and I got back together. I was wrong to make conditions on our relationship, based on my fears and I saw that. But when it comes to Princess Shuri... the situation is different! She is so young and so hurt because she's lost so much in such a little span of time. In my opinion and this is just my opinion... well, you are doing your best to protect her, to shelter her from harm but maybe what the Princess needs right now, is a friend, not just bodyguards or soldiers."

General Okoye winced visibly, looked away evasively and then straight back at her.

"It seems like so long ago but... when King T'Challa was alive... Shuri and I were good friends... we did a lot of things together, we were co-conspirators in a grand scheme to get my King back together with his wonderful ex-girlfriend Nakia, we used to go riding together, work out together..." she sighed sadly.

"For some strange reason, the Princess loved my company. Even when she went shopping, she wanted me to accompany her and she used to harangue me and sometimes I would accept her invitation and we would secretly fly to Nairobi and enjoy ourselves the whole day. Just the two of us."

Pepper kept silent and the General sighed again.

"Of course, all that is over now."

"Why?"

She threw up her hands.

"Well! Shuri, I mean, the Princess is now my sovereign!! Our relationship has definitely changed! Also, I have to protect her at all costs! I cannot be her friend and let my guard down! She is all that
"Wakanda has left! I cannot take chances with her protection!"

"General..." Pepper said softly. Just because the Princess is your ruler, that shouldn't mean you should stop being her friend... don't you see that she needs one now, more than ever? Look at it from her point of view. King T'Challa was groomed for years, to become the next ruler of Wakanda. Yes, his ascension to the throne was tragic due to his father's assassination. But he was always the designated heir to the throne and he was prepared to take over from his father someday. But for the Princess... this is all so horribly sudden! She is a free-spirited young girl, who in the course of one terrible day, suddenly has all this responsibility and duties thrust upon her with no warning! She has had no guidance or preparation and she has to deal with the devastating loss of her mother and her brother! It is a lot for a person to take!"

"I am beginning to see your point, Miss Potts. My King T'Challa... he had already assumed the mantle of Black Panther from his father, he knew his duty and he was prepared for it but for the Princess..."

She exhaled hard. "Well, the Princess has always struggled with the trappings of royal life. Even as a child, she rebelled against what she calls... the stuffiness, the rules and the protocols and the ceremonies!"

Okoye pinched the top of her nose.

"And now all this! Dumped upon her! And I! I realized now, how my attitude has affected the Princess. We barely talk outside of what is needed and she ... she's been very quiet and I thought it was because she was grieving, so I gave her space but now..."

She shook her head slowly. "Now I see she may be holding back her emotions, her thoughts, because of the way I act around her. My poor Princess! I must make amends, I must be more understanding of her turmoil!"

Pepper nodded with a soft smile. "Things have been tough, General. Especially for you and the Princess... I think out of all of us... you both have lost the most..."

To her surprise, the General warmly caught her hands and shook them lightly.

"But it is good, we talked! It is good you made me see this, made me realize how I may help my Princess more! Thank you, thank you Miss Potts!"
"You are very welcome, General. And please call me Pepper... I can understand what you are going through and how tough it is... you are doing the best you can!"

"Please! Call me Okoye!"

"Very well, Oh Ko Ye... am I pronouncing it the right way?"

"Perfectly, Pepper." Okoye beamed brightly.

"If I may..." she paused, "I do not want to interfere but..."

"Pepper, you are not interfering! " Okoye sighed. "I am not a ... genial person, because of my work, because of my role, I have a certain reputation and people... people, they think I am harsh and cold and I do not have emotions but I... I care for the Princess deeply! That is why I worry about her and I do so much to protect her! So it is so good to talk to someone about these worries that I have! Please go ahead!"

"Well... I would also like to offer some advice on dealing with the Princess' ... interest in avenging her fallen... I know it is difficult to hear her talk of fighting and going into battle and wanting to join forces with the Avengers because you want to protect her but... but you have to realize... she is not a child. If the Princess wants to do something, she is going to find a way to do it. And if she sees you aren't listening to her or you are just scolding her, well... then she's going to go to someone who will listen... and will help her take matters into her own hands. Both of which are dangerous."

Okoye stared off into the distance, nodding.

"Yes... it is very dangerous. A young intelligent mind like Shuri's, could be taken advantage of, for all the wrong reasons!"

"Exactly. I know none of the Avengers would lead her astray... but someone else..."

Okoye sniffed. "The furry little alien animal might. He is most determined to leave this planet and he is vile and rude and violent! I fear the effect of his influence on the Princess! She thinks I have not noticed but I have seen her talk to the alien secretly... of course, she might also be trying to learn
more about the handsome god in the greenhouse! Shuri has developed quite a crush on the Norse god!"

Okoye shook her head, exhaling hard.

Pepper struggled to control her smile. She agreed with Okoye's assessment but had been amused by the ornery little raccoon's mannerisms, when she had met him. And the tidbit that the Princess had a crush on the rugged gorgeous Thor, made her want to giggle.

"But I agree with your advice, Pepper. I should not react! I should be calm and listen and offer comfort, not instructions or scoldings!"

Okoye rubbed her hands determinedly. "I can certainly do that! It will be tough for me but I must learn to control myself better! For the Princess's sake!"

"Yes, that's good!"

Then she frowned. "But... but what if the Princess comes up with some hare-brained dangerous scheme for revenge? Such as creating a time-travel machine and going back in time to stop Thanos?"

Pepper blinked. "Time-travel machine?"

"Yes, she was discussing the possibility that day with..." Okoye waved her hands dismissively, "with the nervous American doctor, who isn't really a doctor, I always forget his name. BANNER! Yes, Bruce Banner, he and Shuri were talking about quantum mechanics and relativity and a lot of big words, you know, nerd stuff! I, well, I couldn't follow much of what they were saying but let us consider it, as an example of a crazy mission that my Princess wants to embark on! I cannot allow her to do so!"

"General... Okoye..." She leaned closer. "Say that Bruce manages to figure out time-travel and hatches up such a hare-brained mission... and Shuri joins him and nothing you say, can change her mind... knowing how dangerous and futile it is... would you accompany her on the mission?"

Okoye stared right back at her. "Of course I will! I am the Princess' bodyguard, I would follow her to the very ends of the Earth! Indeed, the Dora Milaje as a unit, would accompany her on any of these missions! We are hers to command and we will not let anything happen to the monarch of Wakanda!"
"Then that settles it..." Pepper said, leaning back. "If the Princess decides to do something dangerous, you are going to be there to take care of her. So why worry now?"

Okoye wrung her hands. "I... I don't know... I doubt my abilities in the face of all this alien superhuman strength... what if I cannot take care of her? What if I cannot save her? Just like I could not save my King?"

Pepper clasped her gently by the shoulders and looked straight into the other woman's brown, worry-filled eyes.

"Okoye, remember who you are. You are the General of the Dora Milaje and the commander of the Wakandan army. You will not let Thanos' devastation destroy your strength. You and I both know... come what may... you will look after the Princess. Whatever it takes. Am I right?"

Okoye nodded tersely. "Look at me, fretting like some... some civilian! As long as I have breath in my body, I will protect the Princess, come what may! And the next time, there is an alien attack..."

Her eyes glittered fiercely. "Wakanda will be prepared. I will be prepared. I will not let tragedy repeat itself."

Pepper observed her instinctively reaching for her sheathed dagger inside her jacket. Then Okoye visibly relaxed and smiled broadly.

"But let us focus on the now. Now, I am better prepared to understand my Princess, not just her protection but her emotional needs as well and provide her with support! A load has been taken off my shoulders..."

She clasped Pepper's knee tightly. "Thank you again! I must find some way to repay you!"

"Really Okoye, there's no need! I am glad to help in any way I can."

"Oh no, no, Pepper, I insist, I-" her phone beeped loudly and she looked at it.

"Aha! Finally, the Princess is ready! Come, let us be on our way!"
They both stood up. Pepper followed Okoye as she walked down the flower-lined path.

"We shall leave by the other exit, so you can see more of the garden! And please feel free to visit the garden, whenever you please!"

"Thank you. I shall."

Together, they climbed up a small flight of stone stairs, to reach a small patch of grass and cobblestones. Pepper looked around curiously at the sound of running water.

"That sound... that is the roar of the waterfall below us. This part of the garden is right by the cliff." Okoye said. "Through the mountain, flows a river and its water falls right from the middle of the mountain's stone face. Come this way, please."

They walked around the tree and stepped onto a long grassy pathway with a neatly trimmed hedge on either side.

"Through here, is an ornamental pond." Okoye pointed into the distance as they walked down the pathway. "It is fed from the underground river but is still and serene."

They reached the end of the pathway, to enter another circular clearing, covered in grass and purple daisies. On the left, was a stone archway leading out towards the Palace.

On the right, was a coin-shaped pond surrounded by thick green grass.

A leafy, seemingly ancient Marula tree loomed by its edge, casting its thick wide branches over the gently rippling water, covering the scene in picturesque shade. Beyond the pond, was the sheer drop of the cliff. A short stone wall lined its perimeter.

"We go through here and come out by the back entrance of the Great Hall. I shall text the Princess to meet us in the Hall... or maybe she is already there, she hasn't said much, just a 'Yo'... wait, I do not know what this means..."

Okoye went on but Pepper was not listening to her. There was someone standing by the wall,
absolutely straight and tall, his broad rugged profile in the shadow as he looked out over the cliff, someone whom she hadn't seen in five years.

Chapter End Notes

Next week, a conversation (or confrontation) that I've been dying to publish: Steve and Pepper talk.

Disclaimer: I do not know if the Wakanda Royal Palace has gardens. I made them up for the purpose of this chapter.
Queen Ramonda is Queen Mother of Wakanda, wife of T'Chaka, and mother of T'Challa and Shuri. I couldn't find a Wakanda University name, so I made one up. If anyone does know the name of the university, let me know.
A Long Time Coming

Chapter Notes

This is a freaking long chapter, so bear with the length and read it through :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Just like Thor, Pepper had last seen Steve Rogers five years ago at the Avengers facility.

But so much has changed since then...

She had not spent as much time as Tony had around the Avengers, so she had different levels of comfort with each of them.

Bruce and Tony collaborated frequently, so she was very fond of the shy soft-spoken scientist, especially since he seemed to have a calming effect on Tony.

She had spent the least time with Natasha and Clint but the latter was always polite to her and Natasha was her usual aloof self.

Thor was a Norse God among men and should have had the most attitude of the lot but he was so affectionate and gentle and charming, like a big golden adult-child, that she had always felt at ease around him. In fact, his company always pleased her because he was extremely courteous and yet so curious and happy.

Which left Steve Rogers.

Out of all the Avengers, Pepper's opinion of Steve had changed dramatically over the years.

Looking back, it is fascinating to notice... how relationships, how friendships form... and how Time affects them. Before New York... Tony knew about Steve from Fury but before he had even met Steve... I knew they were rarely, if ever, going to see eye to eye. The moment I saw Steve's dossier... the man is a natural leader, a born soldier, a commanding presence used to inspiring the best out of his team... and he worked with a good team, who helped us win the War! And then there's Tony.... Tony being Tony... he hates authority, he hates being told what to do and naturally has to be the
rebel. He's always been alone, he's never been part of a team... but after New York... he admitted to having a grudging respect for the man.... a respect much like he has for Fury.... and then... the Avengers started fighting Hydra together, travelling together. Respect grew into friendship... he could see more of the man behind the soldier and liked what he saw. Because for all his rebelliousness and arrogance... Tony admires those who speak their mind and don't kow-tow to him just because he's rich and smart... he respects those who challenge him, contrary as it sounds... and Steve... Steve always challenged him, about his behavior, about his attitude, all the while respecting his intellect... and then Sokovia happened... Tony... Tony felt guilty, all those people dying... just like how in Afghanistan... he saw the impact of his labor... and he took it so personally, he started seeing the Avengers in a different light... they, just like his missiles, were his own but they were also so dangerous... so naturally when Ross proposed the Accords...

"Pepper?"

Her name being murmured softly, startled her out of her thoughts. She quickly turned towards Okoye, who was looking at her with raised eyebrows.

"You have been awfully quiet for the last 5 minutes... is everything alright?"

Pepper nodded and then looked at her watch to hide her embarrassment.

"It's 10 past nine, are we leaving soon? What did the Princess say?"

Okoye exhaled with annoyance.

"That's just it. The Princess needs another 10 minutes." She huffed with exasperation, rolling her eyes. "This child... I swear she will be the death of me... someway or the other!"

Pepper didn't say anything but something must have shown on her face for Okoye flushed. "I know, I know, I must be patient, I must be understanding..."

She sighed, pinching her nostrils. "I must not be her bodyguard, I must be her friend and if I think like her friend... the Princess had a long day yesterday, more meetings and conferences and then her lab work, so she needs her rest, so I must understand that! Did I get it right?"

Pepper simply smiled and Okoye exhaled. "It is tough to be empathetic.. oh! Now I see what you
were staring at! Is that Captain Rogers under the tree?"

"Is that who it is?" Pepper said as innocently as possible. "I couldn't recognize him."

"Yes. This is his home away from his home." Okoye said with a snort. "The man rarely visits the Palace, even though his friends, his fellow Americans are here. But when he does visit, he spends most of his time here in garden... perhaps because my King and him used to have all their discussions out here as well. Together, they would walk around this garden at length before leaving to see the White Wolf."

"The White Wolf?"

"Yes... Sergeant James Barnes... the brain-washed super-soldier. My King granted him asylum in Wakanda and the Princess managed to successfully cure him of his mental conditioning. After his treatment, Barnes spent his days in the village of Zamebi, far from the city. Captain Rogers would fly here every six months or so, to see him."

The mention of the Winter Soldier's name made Pepper tense.

_How could I forget? The Accords were just the beginning of the end... the actual catalyst for the violence in Siberia, was the Winter Soldier! Steve and Tony always had their disagreements but they always found a way to resolve them... or grudgingly accept the other's point of view. They disagreed heavily on the Accords but when it came to the Winter Soldier... and the revelation that Steve had known for some time... that Barnes had assassinated Tony's parents... that's when Tony couldn't control his temper._

"There is a man who has also experienced a lot of loss. Akin to my own." Okoye said softly. "A captain's grief at not only losing the battle but also being the only survivor... is unbearable."

She looked at Pepper sadly.

"Well, it is true is it not? Captain Rogers had a rag-tag band of superheroes under his command. The mouthy young American, the Falcon, the young European girl, Wanda... and his melancholic Sergeant Barnes. He lost them all... in one fell blow. The loss of his companion Barnes, must be especially painful. Rogers is a man out of his own time. Everyone he ever knew... is dead or dying. He lost his good friend, his only friend who had been with him from the beginning, who was a soldier just like him... after doing so much to rescue him."
Okoye's phone rang and she answered it in her native tongue, moving away from Pepper.

Pepper stood where she was, mulling over Okoye's words.

She is right. Steve has lost everything... all over again. I shouldn't feel sorry for him... but deep down, I do... If I ask myself honestly, how do I feel about Steve Rogers... I have mixed feelings... I admire the man for his bravery, for his sacrifice... I used to admire him for his ethics but after he chose Bucky and went rogue. Then there's his dismissive attitude towards Tony, which admittedly, had reduced... and of course, I resent the way he hurt Tony in Siberia! Physically and mentally... the scars of which still run deep...

"Oh that damn rat!!"

Okoye's violent outburst brought her back to the present. The General was mumbling angrily to herself as she tapped rapidly into her phone.

"Is something the matter, Okoye?"

"Yes! That damn little alien has triggered a dozen alarms in the Palace! My soldiers are scrambling to find out what he did but he's done multiple things all over the Palace! And they cannot seem to catch him! I must go back to the Palace and see for myself, what has happened! Come, Pepper! I shall escort you to the Main Hall, you can wait there, while I find that pesky rodent and strangle him!"

Without thinking, Pepper blurted out, "No! I'd like to stay here!"

Okoye raised one eyebrow suspiciously.

"Really?"

Pepper blinked, trying to pace her thoughts.

"I'd like to stay here for another 5 minutes in the garden... if that's okay! I'm just enjoying myself"
amongst the scenery and the flowers... and I do not want to be in your way, while you track down what Raccoon has done..." she finished lamely.

Okoye slowly leaned sideways, looked at Steve under the tree and then looked back at Pepper with both eyebrows raised.

She felt her ears burning but Okoye shrugged and said, "Very well then. If you are comfortable here, I shall proceed post haste! You know how leave the garden, yes? Good! I will send you a message when I am done sorting this out! We will regroup at the Main Hall. Good?"

She didn't wait for a reply, she just turned and left.

Pepper stood in place, her thoughts buzzing like angry bees in her head.

*Okay, what am I doing here? Why didn't I just go with Okoye? What exactly...*


She nibbled hard on her lip in agitation.

*Truth be told... I am not an Avenger... I do not know these people but I do know Tony Stark. I love Tony... anything that affects him, affects me too. And the Avengers... he was always on the outside looking in. But for the first time in forever... he was part of a team... and he was on the team because of his own merit, because of his intelligence and his valuable expertise... I saw how much losing that team, devastated him... I know how much it still haunts him and how... how broken he is by the fact, that most of them sided with Steve and Steve betrayed him...*

A gentle breeze blew across her face, ruffling her hair and scattering the branches of the large tree.

Pepper watched broad, flat green leaves slowly rain down on the still pond, causing ripples to disturb its serene stillness.

*Steve may not have been Tony's oldest friend... nor his closest friend. But Tony did consider him, a*
good friend. He trusted Steve. And for Tony, that's a lot. Steve hurt him with his choices. So I want to say something. I have to say something! I know Tony never will! He's treated this hurt, the way he always does... he wrapped it in a fine layer of snark and smart-aleckiness and buried it deep inside himself... only for it to resurface as nightmares! But I am not Tony! And something has got to be said!

That thought steeled her. She slowly began to walk towards the tree. There was a small path of rough cobblestones around the outer edge of the pond, leading to where Steve was standing.

She stepped onto the path and then walked towards him.

Steve was looking out over the steep drop of the forest-covered cliff. He must have heard her footsteps ringing on the stones, for he lifted his golden head and smiled.

Up close, he was just as she remembered: tall, broad-shouldered with a noble dignified bearing, typical of the war-time generation he had come from.

He was nearly a hundred years old but he still had his classic rugged good looks and thick chestnut gold hair. But his eyes, his ice blue eyes were clouded over with a deep sadness.

"Captain."

"Ma'am. It's good to see you again."

"It has been a long time..." she said and then inwardly cringed at her awkward statement.

Steve nodded. "Yes it has... three years."

Pepper frantically searched her thoughts for what to say next.

"Did you come to meet the others?"

He shoved his hands into his jeans.

"No, no, I... I came to stock up on supplies... I am rebuilding the bionic force-field wall that was
damaged when..."

He swallowed, looking at the ground. "When the alien horde came... I need some of the advanced tools from the Princess' lab and I also need... some building materials and so on..."

"The bionic force-field... isn't that on the outskirts of the land... isn't it far?"

He smiled softly. "It is but I am an early riser and I have a vehicle, a bike actually. I wanted to get here before the Princess left for her duties.

I need her sign-off for the tools and for getting the supplies out of storage."

"Do you stay in a village or..." she asked curiously.

"I have a small cabin right by the force-field generator... there is a village nearby but..." he shrugged. "I don't really want any company."

She noticed the use of the word 'want' but simply nodded.

Steve looked at her and his gaze softened.

"Why are you awake so early, Pepper? Wait... don't tell me... knowing the Princess and her enthusiasm, she must have arranged some lecture or event with you as the chief guest."

"You are absolutely right! The Princess wants me to give a lecture at the Women's University..."

"Oh! I knew it!"

"Yes. The Royal staff are so accommodating and pleasant. They arranged for me to have breakfast in my room because of the early hour. Usually the team... I mean, Bruce and Natasha meet us, Tony and I, in the guest dining area... Thor and Rocket, they..."

"Enjoy the company of their green house too much to leave it." Steve finished wryly. "Though I can
see the appeal.

There's something about this land, this soil, the living things that grow from it... it calls to you..."

He turned sideways and looked at the garden.

"Whenever T'Challa and I met... it was in this garden. Once I asked why, out of all the many gardens in Wakanda, he loved this one the most. So he explained that the elders, the warriors, the ancestors of Wakanda... they never leave, they are here, their essence is still here... all around... and that's why he came here so often... because this is the place where he felt closest to those elders, to those warriors... and when he was troubled, he could feel them imbibing him with guidance, with knowledge, with patience..."

Pain crossed his face and he lowered his golden head.

"I miss T'Challa deeply. He had a wisdom beyond his years and his counsel was invaluable.... I know it sound sentimental and silly but I like coming here because.... I feel his spirit here... along with the elders of his tribe...and if I ask... he will guide me as he has done so many times before."

He laughed softly, lifting his head.

"The curse of an old soldier.... to talk about the young who have fallen... and wonder why...."

Steve trailed off, staring away into the distance. His bright blue eyes were filled with despair and a bleakness that touched her.

Pepper remembered Okoye's words from before. *Not only losing the battle but also being the only survivor...*

Empathy rushed through her and she instinctively reached out to touch his hand in comfort.

"It isn't silly to feel such sentiments, Captain. I can understand. I know how much you fought and did your best... I am sorry truly. You... you shouldn't have to bear such grief after all your years at war."
He said bitterly, "So many years at war... I thought I had grown used... to loss. For every victory, there was always loss in some form or other... friends, teammates, battles... I thought I had seen it all... but this fight... I was helpless... for all my strength, all my power... I couldn't stop Thanos. He snapped his fingers and everyone was gone. Just like that..."

He silently snapped his fingers.

"Gone without a trace in a matter of seconds... turned to dust... they fought so hard... and all Thanos did, was snap his fingers... no matter how many times I go over it in my head... I just can't accept how easy it was for him to decimate the Earth. And how I couldn't stop him..."

"Captain... Steve... you aren't alone... in feeling helpless..."

He blinked and sighed. "I know but... it doesn't hurt any less..."

Then followed an awkward silence. Pepper racked her brains, thinking what to say.

*He's clearly grieving... how can I just bring up Siberia and the Winter Soldier... it is not right! I should just leave him to his grief... I can't just start shouting at him! I don't know what to do....*

She shifted and then looked at her phone.

"Well, I should be getting back...." she lied, not looking at Steve. "Okoye must be waiting for me."

"Yes."

She turned to walk away, when he said, "By the way... congratulations on the engagement."

Pepper looked back at him.

Steve continued with a smile, "I read about it in the newspapers but... but I never got the chance to
say it in person. Tony is a very lucky man."

"I am equally lucky. He's a wonderful man and and my oldest friend...."

Steve said casually, "He's lucky to have a woman like you, Pepper. Damn brave thing you did, going up in space with a group of strangers, to save him. Not many women would do that."

"I had to be brave. I had to save Tony. No one else would have."

Unbidden, the bitterness came back. She could feel it washing over her as she remembered her fear and her helplessness at the time.

"Ross refused to help me, saying Tony wasn't a priority but I should have expected that. After all, he's a government man and Tony's been let down by the government and the military before. Being just a consultant and all."

Steve blinked but didn't say a word and emboldened, she continued, "When I finally found Tony, he was being tortured by alien organ dealers. They kidnapped space travelers and harvested their organs, to sell them across the galaxy. I got there, just in the nick of time. They were very interested in dissecting him to get his nano arc out. The worst part of it was... Tony wasn't even fighting back, he had resigned himself to his fate, resigned himself to dying. Because he had given up. Of course he would. Who would come to save him?"

She lightly tightened her fists. Suddenly she had so many things to say. Her pent-up anger, her bitterness over the years, had come back in full force.

Steve swallowed hard, his clear blue eyes searching hers.

"Pepper, I know you are too well-behaved to admit it but you are actually angry. You've been keeping this anger in you for a while.... and it isn't all about Tony being stranded in space, is it?"

"No, it isn't." She said softly.

"I am guessing, you are also angry about Siberia..."
"Yes. I have a right to be angry, don't I? Two super-soldiers beat up the man I loved within an inch of his life and left him to die."

Steve tightened his jaw. "We didn't leave him to die."

"Oh no? Tony lay in a sub-zero abandoned dusty bunker for god knows how long until he managed to alert a nearby Russian army battalion. When he was admitted in the hospital, he had three broken ribs, a fractured arm and a high fever... they managed to heal him before he developed pneumonia.

To his credit, Steve winced. "I admit we used a lot of force but... but he... Tony's Iron Man! He attacked Bucky, he needed to be stopped!"

"So what? Aren't you a super soldier? Wasn't Barnes one? Are you telling me Tony could have hurt you? Oh, he could have! If he turned on his energy beams, if he used his full firing power, he certainly could have! But he didn't, did he?! He foolishly started a punching match!"

Steve narrowed his eyes. "You sound as if you were there."

"His AI recorded the entire painful experience.... and I saw every bit of how you and your chemically-enhanced friend acted as a tag team and punched the living lights out of Tony!

"I tried to stop him without hurting him! I disabled the Arc with my shield!"

"No.... no, you didn't..." she said, digging her nails into her palms. "You just hammered away at Tony until his suit was disintegrating around him from the violent force of your blows! And your Arc disabling stunt, I saw the vicious bruise across his chest! You could have killed him, Captain Rogers!"

"For God's sake, Pepper!" Steve threw his hands up and she stepped back instinctively. A spasm of pain crossed his face.

"I won't... I won't hurt you!"
"I do not know that, do I." A cold rage had overtaken her completely. She wanted to push Steve to his limits if only to agitate him, so he felt as angry as she felt.

"I really do not trust you any more, Steve! If you can turn on your teammate... well, there's no telling what you can't do, is there?"

He clenched his jaw.

"There are two sides to this situation, Pepper. I had to protect my friend! Bucky had been through a lot! I couldn't let him be taken away again!"

Those words enraged her even more, if possible.

"Tony was your friend too, Steve. Of course, I know he will never be the same as Bucky in your eyes but the fact remains... you were an Avenger, the same as he was! And you turned on your teammate, you turned on the man who had your back and who fought with you, side by side! Is that what the Army taught you to do?"

Some part of her warned her, she was going too far but Pepper stamped the feeling down.

Steve clenched his fists, his eyes darkening dangerously. "Watch it, Pepper."

"No, no, I am not holding anything back! Why should you be left off the hook for what you did! No one ever did the same for Tony! Ultron, it's Stark's fault! Sokovia, it's Stark's fault! The rogue of the Avengers, the egomaniac selfish billionaire who will not stand on the line, to save the man behind him... you'd expect such behavior from him! Not from Captain America! A stalwart icon of military bravery!"

"I made enough sacrifices in my time!" He roared angrily. "I couldn't sacrifice Bucky! Not again!"

"So you didn't hesitate to turn him loose on your teammate! When he trusted you! Tony came to the bunker alone! He could have brought the military with him if he wanted to bring you and Barnes in! But he came alone because he wanted to help you, Steve! He didn't want Ross to kill you! He wanted to help you! And how was he repaid? By learning that he was lied to, about how his parents died! And that you knew all along!"
"It wasn't my idea for Tony to learn the truth about Bucky like that! Helmut Zemo arranged the whole thing, so that the Avengers would turn on one another. And Tony took the bait! Making his plan succeed." Steve said derisively.

For a moment, Pepper's vision turned red. Her palms itched and she wanted to slap Steve. But she controlled herself. Barely.

"So now you blame Tony for having an emotional response! Why? Because yeah, he shouldn't have reacted to the horrible fact that his parents were assassinated 17 years ago! Think about it this way, Captain!" She said with a bite. "Zemo's plan wouldn't have worked if you had told Tony the truth about Bucky beforehand."

Steve's eyes flickered with some emotion but she ruthlessly pressed her point home.

"You knew that Barnes had assassinated a number of high-profile targets for Hydra. He remembered each and every one of them. You learned that he had killed Tony's parents and made it look like an accident, to hide the theft of their cargo. You knew Howard Stark personally! The man was one of the founders of S.H.I.E.L.D, he worked on the super-serum that made you who you are! He made your weapons, your shield, you worked together for years! You knew how Tony was affected by the premature death of his parents. But yet, you didn't see fit to tell him. Why?"

"I was going to tell Tony! But at the right time! I didn't want him to hate Bucky! If he knew, then he would have..."

"So you feared he would have hunted Barnes down with further zeal." She completed softly. "Because you, you noticed that Tony was very reluctant to do Ross' bidding and he didn't want to have Wanda imprisoned either. So you waited... and instead of Tony learning the truth and processing it calmly... he had to watch his parents being brutally murdered by the very man standing in front of him... a man, that his friend and teammate was protecting... don't you see how your delay gave Zemo the victory he wanted?"

Steve lowered his head. "You are making this whole thing, Siberia, all about me, Pepper..." He murmured so softly, she had to strain to hear him. "And I keep trying to tell you... the situation was unprecedented... I know Tony got hurt but... I had to do what I had to do."

"The situation was unprecedented..." She repeated bitterly. "Sure. Sure, it was... after all... of all the people Tony expected to lie to him... he never imagined it would be you."
Steve whipped his head up.

She continued firmly, "Bruises heal. Scars fade. Trust... once it is lost... it never really comes back. What you did, Steve... hurt Tony, because he felt betrayed... that you knew Bucky had murdered his parents... and yet you kept it from him... because you wanted to save Bucky at all costs. You let him down, his trust down."


She felt her lips curve in a sardonic smile. She knew Steve was going to use this argument against her and was prepared for it.

"I did. I left Tony, when he needed me. For my own selfish reasons. I admit it. And I accept my fault. Even now, I feel guilty about leaving him everyday! Because I love him, faults and all! And don't forget, I came back to him! I watched him recover slowly and painfully and that's why I am warning you now, Steve Rogers, if you hurt Tony again... this time, he's not alone!"

Steve narrowed his eyes.

"You... are warning me?"

"It took a long time for Tony to heal physically from what happened in Siberia... and mentally... he may never be completely healed. I've seen him wake up in his sleep, clutching his chest in fear, that this time when you swing the shield, you won't stop at hitting the Arc! No, you will hit him and kill him! He's still shaken up and that's why..."

She swallowed, well aware she was mouthing off on false bravado but she was too far along to stop.

"That's why I won't let it happen again. I will not let you and your personal agendas, hurt Tony Stark again!"
Steve stepped closer to her, ever so slightly. He whispered very calmly, "And just what are you going to do, Pepper?"

For a moment, Pepper was intimidated. He was a chemically-enhanced human, a good four inches taller than her and infinitely stronger.

But then the faces of Obadiah Stane, Ross and Aldrich Killian flashed before her eyes and she remembered: she had faced the impossible, the invincible, the odds before.

And she was determined to make her point.

So she lifted her chin and looked at him as coolly as possible. Her voice was calm and even when she said, "I may not have your strength, Rogers but if you cross Tony again, I'll make sure you regret it. Is that clear?"

Pepper controlled her face from flinching or reacting as Steve stared straight back, unblinking. Much to her surprise, he nodded slowly.

"Good."

Her phone rang loudly, startling them both. She quickly pulled it out and answered it.

"Hello?"

"Pepper, I am finally done! Please come to the Great Hall." Okoye said and put the phone down.

Her heart was hammering in her ears, she still felt the adrenaline of the argument rushing through her veins but she stepped back, turned around and walked away.

It took all of her self-control, not to turn around and look at Steve.

*I cannot look back, I must stay calm, I said my piece and I am leaving!*

She reached the edge of the pond and continued forward towards the exit.
I did it! I finally got all my thoughts off my chest! Ohhh!! I do not know what is going to happen but at least, I did something!

Chapter End Notes

Wow, this was such a tough chapter to write. For starts, in my opinion Pepper is a fair person. Being so, she would understandably be angry at Steve for hurting Tony but wouldn't want to fight with a grieving man. She's also polite, so she isn't the type to go marching up to Steve and say "How dare you!" and start a fight.

So I tried to reach a happy medium and be as pragmatic as possible.

Steve does not apologize. I didn't see him doing that. Neither does he argue much. Again, from what I've seen in the movies, he talks less but says what is needed. Pepper's ranting but she's being a stone-cold bitch about it. And the ending? All she wanted to do, was tell Steve off. And she did that :)

Let me know what you think in the comments.

Next week, no chapter. The week after that, Science Bros time!

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