Hardwired

by SainTalia

Summary

AI meets Girl. AKA The epic love affair between Tony Stark’s assistants that happened right under his nose.
Ignition

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Her pulse was thready and nearly punching out of her skin. If not for the ocean, it would have deafened her. As it was, she could taste it molten-hot and feel it beating like a dying bird inside her throat.

Pepper’s life choices up to this moment? So very, very poor.

Half of her was admiring the architecture in front of her (Contemporary mashed into Mid-Century Modern. Really, it did things for a girl) while the other half was considering a full-blown panic attack. Mr. Stark would surely appreciate a stranger going into fits on his front lawn. Honest to fucking god.

She checked her hair, her portfolio, then her heels on the off chance she hadn’t noticed losing four inches in height. It’d taken her three hours to pick the outfit; black too uniform and white a washout, red too bold and purple clearly out of the question because who wore purple on a job interview? And speaking of, who went on an interview to their boss’s house?

But four years of undergrad, a Master’s degree and enough student debt to drown in had steeled her. Pepper had always been a wonder at priorities, and right now, work was more important than an impending heart attack or whether her dress (charcoal-gray, austere) was going to make her look too severe.

Before she could second guess herself, Pepper took the last dozen steps to the house. The front door had no handles, just a little blue screen glowing merrily beneath the finish. Either Mr. Stark’s building contractors had been exceptionally lazy, or—

Her hand spasmed. Closed. Open. Clenched hard enough to feel her tendons flexing against the bone.

She tapped the screen. “Hello?”

A smooth, posh-perfect voice answered. “Welcome to the Malibu House. Miss Potts, I presume?”

Startled, her eyes skittered to a very discrete camera recessed overhead. It swung a bit as if to acknowledge that yes, it really was there, now would she stop being such a rubberneck and answer the question please?

“Oh, um—” She nearly fumbled the portfolio. “Yes. I’m—Virginia Potts. Here to see…” Words failed a second time.

He threw her a line. “Here for Mr. Stark. You’ve been expected, please, come in.” And with a sharp click, the door unlocked and swung of its own accord. Automated? The futurist in her dearly hoped.

There was a stretch of pale wood, a lance of sun across her skin, then the shine of glass and more glass with the sparks of entire universes shattered across them. Her head swung from wall to wall, then to furniture that probably cost more than the house she’d grown in, then back to another wall because dear god was that an original Yves Klein? The sound that came out of her was embarrassingly breathy.
Reading an entire backlog of The Times, GQ, Popular Science, and a run of tabloids stretching nearly three decades had not remotely prepared her for this.

She could still hear the ocean.

“Miss Potts?”

Her heart hit one side of her ribcage then ricocheted to the other. “I’m sorry. I was just admiring the Yves…” But when she turned, the hall was empty. She could still hear the ocean and remembered drowning once, the sea in her mouth and down her throat, her stomach falling and falling as she realized—

There was a pleased hum. “That piece is a particularly provocative selection of his early work; I can see why it drew your eye.” Unperturbed, the voice of unknown-possibly-terrifying origins kept talking. “And my apologies, it seems I’ve been remiss in introductions. I’m the Interactive System that runs Mr. Stark’s house and various satellite properties.”

Her neck craned up to the ceiling. There was nothing there. “So if I talk…?”

“I will hear you perfectly clear anywhere inside the house.” He assured.

She blinked, slotted the information in, and let her mind shoot off because an intelligent program was talking to her and all of her I, Robot fueled childhood dreams might be coming true. “Do you have a name?”

“JARVIS.” And somehow, it sounded as if he was smiling.

She returned the theoretical-grin. “Jarvis, then. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“And I you, Miss Potts.”

Her heart might have fluttered, but if it had, that was between her and the Yves and the ocean out back.

“Mr. Stark is currently in his workshop, I fear your arrival today may have slipped his mind.”

She frowned. “Mr. Stark is scheduled for a meeting with the heads of R&D and the entire Executive Team in less than two hours.” The non-optional nature of this meeting had been made clear when HR had shooed her off this morning on a crash course tryout, and it was a 50 minute drive back to LA. One of these things did not lead unto the other.

“I believe,” His next words screamed delicately phrased. “That Mr. Stark is not liable to exit the workshop for the foreseeable future.”

Her spine steeled. “We’ll see about that. The workshop?”

“Through the living room, staircase will be on your left, the door at the bottom will need to be unlocked. The authorization code you’ve been assigned is three-five-seven-two-niner-niner.”

“Thank you, Jarvis.” Her heels made a satisfying clatter on the floors. With purpose now riding high and heady, nerves didn’t enter the equation. “May I ask what has Mr. Stark so occupied?”

“Assembling a prototype laser testbed.” He paused. “Or building a death ray, the two have been known to overlap.”

She giggled a little, surprised, and then immediately choked on it. “Really?”
“I believe Mr. Stark’s exact words were if that blowhard Archmiedes could do it, so can I. But with more pizzazz.”

“Oh good lord—” She hit the stairs and then the door. She dropped in the code.

“Miss Potts, you may wish to cover—”

There was a catch of air, a pressure seal broken, and then she was Alice walking into Tomorrow’s Wonderland. It was part scientist lair and part playboy dream garage; a madman’s garden of paradise. And it was obvious in that split second what Jarvis had been trying to warn her of. Sound hit like a freight train, music so loud it was distorted nearly beyond recognition. Her hands slammed over her ears, and that was the moment she first laid eyes on Tony Stark.

There was the breadth of his shoulders, the shock of dark hair, the grease down his shoulder blades and worked into his hands. The ratty jeans were a surprise. The wife-beater a bigger surprise. The deafening refrain of Who Made Who probably the biggest surprise of them all.

“Mr. Stark!”

He didn’t turn; too busy bent over…something spherical that was giving off wires.

“MR. STARK!” Still no response and she gritted her teeth. “JARVIS!”

The music cut and Stark flailed upright. “Hey! What gives?”

“Thank you, Jarvis.” She would have pinned a medal on him, if she’d had a medal or there was something of Jarvis to tack it on. As it was, all she could give him was a swiftly aimed smile.

“You’re very welcome, Miss Potts.” He chimed.

She tried not to beam, but only because ignoring her possible new boss in favor of the Interactive System in the walls would be positively gauche.

“Mr. Stark?” Her voice took up too much space in the quiet.

He jolted sideways. There was a moment of incomprehension when he turned to see her, but it quickly morphed into an appreciative once-over. Then Tony Stark grinned with too much heat and here and GQ had never done him justice. “Jarvis, why didn’t you tell me you got me something nice? Forget what I said this morning, buddy, you and me. Gin and tonic. We go together.”

From the everywhere-nowhere, Jarvis sighed. “This is Miss Potts, Sir, your new potential assistant? The one I told you about this morning? Twice.”

“Right, Vivian? Vera? Something?” He pointed at her portfolio. “You better not be here to hand me something, I swear to god you’ll break my heart if you do.”

“It’s Virginia.” She answered shortly. “And that’ll be Miss Potts to you.”

“Oooh, authoritarian. I like it.” His eyebrows did something ridiculous on his face. “You know, tighten that skirt, get some glasses, raise your heels—no those heels are perfect. Forget the heels. Just get the glasses and maybe a ruler—”

The warnings she’d been given had clearly fallen short; possibly somewhere around her ankles, which judging by Tony Stark’s expression was also where he wanted her underwear to be in the next five minutes.
Her left hand flexed. “Mr. Stark, you have a meeting that you are not even remotely dressed for.”

He made a vaguely sharp gesture. “Yeah, that thing with the top suits? I’m not feeling it. Call it off, or not, whatever floats your boat.” He swung back to the sphere. “Jarvis, cue the music and bring up the power. Thirty percent? Make me tingle.”

“Sir—” She really appreciated Jarvis trying to fight her losing battle. She really, really did.

“Ah-ah-ah! No taking the new girl’s side because you feel bad. Poor form.” Stark was a dervish of motion now, bouncing between the computers and the sphere-array and then a nearby tower that might be the power. He flipped something on. “Look at what you did. You made me do my own work, Jarvis, not cool.”

A hum rose; sent her skin prickling from her scalp to the soles of her feet. Tony climbed back over the array and settled in, not even sparing her a backwards glance.

Heat went sharp inside her, clear cut as newly blown glass and still hot at the edges. She stepped to the tower and found the largest bundle of cords. “If I pull this, will anything blow up?”

There was a suspiciously amused catch to Jarvis’s voice. “Not at all. Though I would suggest you try the blue one down and to the left.”

“Right, thank you.” And she grabbed the suggested cord and pulled. The power-sing died, and Tony Stark’s indignant squawks were music to her ears.

“Jesus Christ, put that back!” He sounded utterly aghast and wasn’t undressing her with his eyes anymore. Fancy that.

She crossed her arms, stepped on either side of the cord, and answered sweetly. “You have a meeting Mr. Stark, can I help you get ready?”

“Put it back.” He snapped.

“Put what back?” It was like third grade all over again, she’s touching me no I’m not yes you are and he couldn’t help rising to the bait.

He puffed up. “I will not be disrespected in my own house. Jarvis, make her leave. No, make her put the power back on and then leave.” It was downright petulant and she wondered why, exactly, she’d been so afraid.

The System did not sound particularly moved. “I believe after you fired your first two assistants, had the third file nine lawsuits, and left the fourth stranded somewhere in Milan—”

“I cannot be blamed for that last one—”

“Mr. Stane has made it clear that frivolous rejections will no longer be tolerated, Sir.” Jarvis finished, and had that sounded smug? It had. Pepper might have just swooned a little.

Tony dropped from the array to stalk forward, and her arms came uncrossed because just let him try. “I think I can take you, Mr. Stark.”

His mouth went thin. “You gonna fight me, Vera?”

“Virginia.” She didn’t back down an inch. “And I believe I will, is that a problem?”

The line of his mouth went thin. Sharp. And then—his shoulders shook and out poured the
laughter. It was an absolutely devastating sound. When Tony Stark laughed, the world laughed with him. Nothing had done this man justice and it was a crime.

“Alright. Jesus. I will go to your meeting, slugger.”

“Miss Potts.” She frostily corrected.

“Miss Potts.” He stood happily corrected.

“If you’ll go take a shower, I’ll set out a suit. We can brief on the way.” She wasn’t trying to herd him to the stairs, but she may have been herding him towards the stairs.

“Pushy. Seriously though, glasses. Ruler. Look into that.”

“Now Mr. Stark.”

He cackled and took the stairs two at a time. By the time she followed, he’d vanished upstairs. Quietly and only to herself, she breathed with the rhythm of the sea. In the space between one breath and the next, she opened her eyes. “Jarvis, the closet?”

“Right this way.” He answered. “And for the record?”

Her head tilted back. Despite knowing it didn’t matter, she still thought of Jarvis as up. “Yes?”

“That is, by twenty-nine minutes, the shortest amount of time anyone has ever talked Mr. Stark into attending to his duties.” It sounded nearly conspiratorial. And she wanted a conspiracy with Jarvis, okay? A partner in crime and Stark-wrangling.

Good humor bubbled. “You counted?”

“We all have our peculiarities, Miss Potts. Now if you’d turn to your right…”

Tony Stark’s closet made her inner sartorial swoon. Jarvis was polite enough not to say anything when she uselessly fluttered about, because dear god could she have died happy in Tony Stark’s closet. Eventually she settled and picked out slacks (black on black), a shirt (black pinstripe gold), a vest (matte black three-buttons), and a tie (a shock of aureate in diamond pattern). In quick succession they were laid out on the bed and at the sound of the shower cutting off, she departed to Tony shouting: “Hey Potts, will you dress me?”

She looked to the ceiling. “Tell Mr. Stark he didn’t hire a mortician, which is what I’d have to be to dress his corpse.”

“I’ve conveyed your sentiments.” And laughter was somehow suggested in the sound. Did Intelligent Systems laugh? Did androids dream of electric sheep? Asimov had never answered her. “Mr. Stark would like me to return that it is your loss, and that he is clearly wasted on you.”

“My self-esteem will never be the same.”

They still had a meeting to get to, and Malibu to LA was not a short drive. After fifteen minutes of fiddling on her blackberry and sending emails that, yes, Mr. Stark was in fact coming, she started dialing her driver. Jarvis interrupted. “I’m sorry, it appears that Mr. Stark wishes to drive.”

“Mr. Stark does wish to drive.” Tony agreed, barreling out of the master bedroom with suit on but tie askew. “Jarvis, which of my babies have I been neglecting?”

“It has been some time since the Aston Martin has been outside, Sir.”
Tony wolf-whistled and tried to walk off, but she reeled him back in with his tie to put it to rights.

“Why Miss Potts, if you wanted my virile attentions all you had to do was—”

A quick pull nearly turned the tie into a garrote.

He wheezed. “But you didn’t ask, so no cookie for you.”

She smirked. “I’ll try and contain my disappointment.” And smoothed the tie. ”All ready.”

There was a long moment: his eyes following the drift of her hands and the line of her neck, a long moment where she felt his breath on her skin. It wasn’t something to be indulged and she stepped away. And like the rescuing angels on high, Jarvis cut in before Tony could turn it vulgar.

“Dummy has refueled the car, Sir. Diagnostic scan is complete and without error. You are free to proceed.”

“Thank you Jarvis.” They replied in unison, and that grin came back to Tony’s face, the one that she knew would cause all sorts of awful headaches.

“We have a schedule, Mr. Stark.”

“Of course.” The man was unholy and charming and just a little bit smarmy. “After you.” And the worst part was, she didn’t entirely hate it.

She acquiesced and they were back down the stairs and into the workshop, and then to a car so low slung her hindbrain screamed *sleek-sex-gorgeous* and her conscious faculties sang back their agreement.

She crossed her legs tighter than necessary when the engine kicked in.

“Miss Potts.” The control panel flared blue and brought Jarvis to her shoulder. “I would advise you to buckle in.”

The words hung in dead space. Tony’s face split into something halfway between glee and mania. She scrambled for her belt, and that was the exact moment Tony decided to floor it.

/~/~/~/

It was fifty minute drive from Malibu to LA. They got there in *thirty-five*.

When they screeched to a halt in front of HQ, engine thrumming and rubber burning, she raised an eyebrow. “Will that be all, Mr. Stark?”

And that marked the first time Tony Stark gave Virginia Potts his full attention. It was quite possibly the most devastating moment of her life. It sent her blood singing; it left her nerves jangling. Just when she thought she’d shake apart from it, he said: “That'll be all, Miss Potts.” And stepped from the car in one striking movement, buttoning his jacket as he went.

It was like getting hit by a truck. “Jarvis, was that…?”

“A good thing?” He hummed. “I do believe so, Miss Potts.”

“Oh, lovely, if you’ll give me a minute.” And with that out of the way, she tucked her head between her knees and tried to remember how to breathe.
Chapter End Notes

I would like to welcome the rest of the world to my OTP: Competent Stark Assistants.

Population: Me and the guy who made the mistake of proofing my fic.
LA was nice, mostly because Tony wasn’t there.

Her office phone chirped and she cradled the receiver into her shoulder, juggling what felt like six different things not including the phone. Before she could even recite her very bland, very Stark Industries approved spiel, a harried voice interrupted. “Miss Potts, I apologize, but I do believe that we require your assistance.”

Jarvis typically emailed her the itinerary the Tuesdays and Thursdays she spent in the LA office. Tony was the only one who called her from the house, usually for frivolous reasons, so hearing Jarvis on the line was mystifying.

“Did Mr. Stark break the workshop toaster and can’t bring himself to walk to the one upstairs?” She asked. “Because if the answer is yes, tell him I’m not falling for that again.”

“The workshop toaster remains safe and thanks you for your concern.” He scoffed.

“Good.” But Jarvis never called her in LA. “What’s wrong?”

There was a brief pause. “Mr. Stark brought home company last night. He has since barricaded himself in the workshop and his guest has become…agitated. She refuses to exit the premises, and I find myself at a loss.”

The tip-toeing around the nature of this company told her, rather precisely, what kind of company it was. “Have you not asked Mr. Stark’s date to leave?”

“I have.” Jarvis replied. “I fear my presence has only escalated the situation.”

Distantly, she could understand why a voice with no clear origin would be upsetting. But in a much more immediate rush she was infuriated because Jarvis was absolutely darling, and anyone who said differently deserved a jettisoning into deep space.

Her tongue went sharp. “Have you called security?”

“Security sends reports to Mr. Stane about these sorts of things.” Something that sounded a hell of a lot like exasperation was edging in. “I was instructed to call on Stark Industries only as a matter of last resort, and that has yet to be reached.”

Of Jarvis’ no doubt long list of resorts, it was nice to know where she numbered. It didn’t stop the migraine forming behind her left eye, though. “Pray tell.”

“Between you and I, Mr. Stark likely wishes to avoid another scolding by Mr. Stane. Of course, that’s merely speculation on my part.”

“Of course.” She soothed. “And the police are entirely out of the question.”

He huffed. “We wouldn’t want Mr. Stark to end up in the tabloids again, would we?”

The surreality of the conversation chose that moment to hit her. This was her life now, bitching about her boss with a computer system that lived in the walls of a house. She clamped down on the thought before she gave herself an existential crisis.

With one last despondent look to her paperwork, Pepper sighed. “I can be there in an hour. If you
could at least keep her away from the artwork…?”

Jarvis gave a sigh of equal longsuffering. “I’ll do my utmost. But Miss Potts?”

“Yes?”

“Make haste.” The line clicked off.

And today had started as such a lovely, Tony-drama free day too.

~/~/~/~/

An hour later (on the dot, she’d like to add) there was glass on the floor and what looked like the remains of a coffee table scattered from wall to wall. She felt surprisingly calm about it. Probably because she could see the Yves was safe. That was really the important thing here. “Jarvis, does Mr. Stark have a usual repair contractor?”

“He does indeed. Shall I place a call?” Jarvis sounded exceedingly pleased to see her. She had to strangle down the urge to be just as pleased back. That would just be…she wasn’t even sure. Sad, maybe.

“Let’s.” She agreed, delicately stepping over debris and following the shouts inward. Around the first corner she nearly stumbled over Happy. In the two weeks since they’d made acquaintance, she’d never seen him so terrified.

He looked to her as rapturously as a drowning man would a lifeline. Bruises were cresting over his cheekbone. “I have never been happier to see you.”

“I bet.” The shouting was growing louder, along with what sounded like something very expensive being pulverized. “Kitchen or study?”

“Kitchen.” He affirmed and then scuttled away. There would be little help from his quarter, then.

She sighed. “Jarvis, please call a car service and have something sent over. Discreetly.”

“Oh course.” And the acoustics of the Malibu house had to have been deliberately designed, because that time his voice was right there. It made her feel better. Less than a month into the job and as far as she was concerned, Jarvis was the best backup in the world.

Her portfolio and laptop went onto a side table with her clutch, but not before she’d drawn out a cloth wrapped around a tube of lipstick. With a quick swipe the nude shade she’d been wearing was removed. She then painted her mouth a violent shade of red and pursed her lips to the nearest camera. “How does it look?”

“Lovely and highly intimidating.”

“Flatterer.” But he owed her a metric ton of flattery for this, so when she smiled, she smiled with teeth.

Of all the things she’d prepared herself for in this job, woman jilted and wrecking the house hadn’t exactly made the list. But Pepper could improvise, she was good at that. She deliberately lengthened her stride and upped the staccato of her heels. Pepper had learned how to make an entrance, and it turned the other girl’s head when she did. The room was a complete mess. The kitchen, the floor, the girl; all of it. She was going to throttle Tony.
The epicenter of the chaos was a brunette, young and all legs and the kind of gorgeous that would have made Pepper feel dowdy if it wasn’t for the hiccupping sobs.

The next sob morphed to a snarl. “Who are you?”

Pepper let her polite-mouthed smile ice. “Mr. Stark’s more sensible half.”

That sent the girl into a fresh screaming tizzy. “I want to see Tony!” A carafe hit the floor, a mug, then the whole damn espresso machine. She was making a beeline to topple the entire spice rack and Pepper liked that spice rack. Coveted it.

“Mr. Stark is otherwise engaged.” Pepper didn’t bat a lash. “But if you’d like, we can eat breakfast and then have a car take you home.”

“I WANT TONY!” She shouted and then grabbed the rack to no doubt send it to the floor to join the broken glasses, half the pantry, and the poorly departed juicer.

Pepper picked up a vase from the counter, it was some decorative thing, all bulk and not nearly modern enough to match the décor. She judged the weight and thought, it’d do.

Pepper hurled it into the nearest wall with so much force that it exploded.

The girl froze and there was silence; blessed, wonderful, fear-filled silence. Pepper wanted to bathe in it.

She dragged her words deliberately as a knife. “If you’re done embarrassing yourself, we’re going to have breakfast and then a car will take you home. Am I being perfectly clear?”

The girl flinched and didn’t answer. But when Pepper swayed closer, the girl nodded furiously and hurried into a chair. That was answer enough.

The spice rack (having been spared) gave a few jars to the cause. Along with some eggs, fresh basil, smoked ham, Monterey jack, and a dash of chives; they had a semblance of brunch going. Pepper had dated a chef once, highly talented and highly attractive because of it. He’d made omelets lighter than air on the tongue. She’d dumped him in a hot second when she found his talents had been appreciated by half his wait staff, but she could still make a mean brunch. Not that Tony could ever know; she’d never survive his incessant whining otherwise.

In between chopping fresh onion, she breathed. “Our secret?”

And he understood without any elaboration, because Jarvis was perfect like that. “Not a word shall reach Mr. Stark’s ears.”

It felt as if his voice was right against the back of her neck.

For some reason that triggered a shiver; warm and shaky at the thought of him.

The girl kept her silence, probably from sheer self-preservation as Pepper’s expression had remained perfectly gracious, even as broken glass crunched under her stilettos.

“Where are your clothes?” Pepper asked.

The girl startled. “Up-upstairs.”

“Get them.” She didn’t have to ask twice. The girl bolted and was back fully-dressed just in time for Pepper to set out an omelet in front of her. “Eat.”
The girl ate.

When the food was gone, Jarvis alerted her that the car had arrived. Happy then miraculously reappeared. His timing was suspiciously on point, which meant the Interactive System had no doubt dug the driver out of hiding. Really, if there was a way for her and Jarvis to run away together.

Any way at all.

Happy’s bruises had progressed from blue to a mottled purple. Her mouth twisted. “Apologize.” She snapped at the girl.

The brunette looked up miserably. “I’m sorry.”

Happy looked terrified again, Pepper wasn’t exactly sure why, but with a sharp glance he escorted their destructive guest from the house. Pepper considered the closed door for an unpleasant minute before announcing: “If Tony ever tries to bring that girl back here, lock him out of the house and call me.”

“You will be first on my speed dial.” Jarvis confirmed cheerfully.

Her breath rushed out of her because Jesus Christ, how was this her life?

She had to know. “Is it always like this?”

“The guests? Common. The destruction is a rare occurrence, if that helps any.”

“Not really.” She sighed and then quietly shifted gears. “The contractor?”

“Will be here in less than an hour.” His voice was back to coming from the everywhere-nowhere and she missed the closeness. Missed the way it felt like she could turn and find Jarvis, finally, somewhere in this madhouse. “I’m sending Dummy and You up to clean, if you’d supervise them?”

She felt sharp at the edges. “I’d be glad to.” But that sharpness was no reason to be rude. Not to Jarvis, at least.

As promised, the two robots came up in the service elevator and she shooed them into the kitchen to begin damage control. She watched them from up on the counter, heels kicked off and delicately set aside.

Dummy and You trundled about trying to coordinate sweeping while the other held the dust pan. They were failing spectacularly, but it was an adorable sort of failure, so she showered them in encouragements while desperately wanting to wrap them up in quilts and steal them.

There was a sound like breath or maybe a sigh. Static possibly, and then Jarvis spoke. “If I may inquire, will you be venting any of your displeasures at Mr. Stark?”

“Would it help?”

“To prevent future situations?” He made a caustic sound. “Doubtful.”

She snorted. “Then even if it would make me feel better, no.”

There was a concerned hum. “I wouldn’t dream to rob you of the chance, Miss Potts.”
Tension was still crackling in her hands, up her wrists, into knots between her shoulders. She breathed through it. “I know you wouldn’t, but an assistant doesn’t yell at her boss.”

“What does she do then, if I may ask?”

She smiled with a mouthful of razors. “She wages cold war.”

There was a bursting noise. Laughter. Jarvis was laughing and she felt too full, too pleased with herself for being the cause. It ended fast. “And it will be a sight to behold. You’ll return Mr. Stark in one piece?”

“Mr. Stark’s one-pieceness is very important to me.” Her knuckles seemed to unwind of their own volition, releasing the counter from where she’d had it in a death grip. “You’re too sweet, Jarvis.”

“Now who’s being liberal with the flattery?”

Her hand went to cover her smile. She had lipstick on her fingers; broken glass below bare feet. She was sitting barefoot on her boss’s kitchen counter, and in that absurd moment couldn’t stop smiling at all.

She looked to the nearest blue light, lashes flared wide. “I wouldn’t dream of buttering you up, that would be incredibly unprofessional.”

“Quite.” He sniffed. “Trying to use my better nature against me, Miss Potts?”

She brought a hand to her heart. “I would never use sweet talk against you.”

“Now I wouldn’t go that far.”

Reflexively, she smiled down at her toes, struck by the sudden urge to paint them blue. Electric.

Metal bumped against her knee, and there was Dummy offering her a dangerously full glass of orange juice. “For you.” Jarvis added, perhaps unnecessarily, and yet she flushed all the same.

It was simple and altogether too much. “Thank you Jarvis.” She took the glass and patted Dummy’s claw. “Thank you as well, Dummy.”

The claw swiveled and dipped rather shyly. Pepper was charmed.

There was something warm to Jarvis then, warmer than the heat of adrenaline, warmer than the sun on her skin. “You’re very welcome.” But she had to be imagining it; that fond hitch in his voice. She was projecting and she knew that, but even so, the awfulness of the morning was suddenly so very far away.
“Tony, no.”

It startled him like a rabbit. “Jesus Christ!” And he tried and utterly failed to cover the backseat of the Audi. “Potts! What a pleasant surprise, do you have something for me to sign? Because I can sign it. I have pens, like, a dozen pens. Space pens; the kind that work in zero gravity.”

The man could spit distractions at the rate of a machine gun. There was no cover from it except to push through. “Depleted uranium, really?”

“No.” Said Tony.

“Yes.” Said Jarvis.

The penny dropped. “Traitor!” He accused, chest clutched, close to having a Victorian-esque fainting spell on the spot. Pepper was deeply unimpressed.

Jarvis hummed noncommittally and Tony’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t you play dumb with me.”

Jarvis sniffed. “I wouldn’t dream of it, Sir. That would be horning in on your territory.”

“Who taught you to sass me?” Their boss despaired. “Sass, in my own house. Assistants turning on me. I am surrounded by conspiracies and collusion.”

“Funny how that happens.” She remarked. “And don’t think you’ve distracted me. Depleted Uranium in. The. House.”

His expression morphed to wide-eyed innocence. “It’s for science. Science. That thing I do, my gift to mankind? You are taking away mankind’s gift, Potts.”

“Mankind will build themselves a bridge and get over it.” She jabbed a finger at the car. “You are not bringing that into a residential area.”

Tony rolled his eyes, which was more than a touch infuriating. “Please. Nobody even lives within two miles of us. I was very particular about that. Jarvis, tell her how particular I was.”

“Very.” He supplied.

“My point remains.” Her eyes narrowed. “Do you want the FBI to come knocking on your door?”

His expression turned sly, sharp, a shark smelling blood. “But if it went somewhere else a little more—hmmm—zoned?”

There were lines to be drawn with Tony Stark, envelopes to be pushed. It’d been a balancing act from the getgo, and given an inch he’d take a mile. She met him eye to eye, let it hold, let it squirm between them. “How important is this?”

He didn’t flinch. “Very.”

It was a rare expression on him, serious. She turned on her heel. “Don’t get put on a watchlist.”
He bounced along after her, arms wide. “Miss Potts, I’m sorry I ever doubted. My darling, dearest, most understanding assistant—”

Tony was toeing the would-become-a-sexual-harassment-lawsuit line. Again. She side-stepped him. “Save it for someone who will buy it.”

“The American Public?” He wiggled his eyebrows.

Jarvis sighed. “A cutting indictment on us all.”

“The American Public loves me and therefore the American Public is perfect and you shut your mouth. I will not hear your slander against our great people.”

“Mr. Stark.” She pressed.

“Right. Spare the residential. Got it.” And just as swiftly, Tony was speeding off to parts unknown with his uranium of extremely dubious legal origin.

“We know nothing about this.” She told the ceiling.

“It’s already behind the firewall.” Jarvis assured.

Her shoulders dropped. “God, we’ve actually turned into a conspiracy.”

“Only if we’re caught in the act. Until then, the great Jarvis-Potts Collusion is hearsay.” He sounded rather unconcerned. Then again, this was probably only the tip of an egregious iceberg of what must be hiding behind those firewalls.

“Are we hyphenating already?” She felt a smile pull. “Or are we getting together and calling ourselves an institute?”

There was an incredulous noise. “Paul Simon, really?”

The reference had been obscure and completely off-hand and he’d still caught her out. “Hush you.” She pushed her hair back; dropped her chin just a little. If he noticed her blush he mercifully didn’t say. “Would you be a dear and help me run down conference itineraries?”

He responded in breezy fashion. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Chapter End Notes

In which Jarvis and Pepper continue to endlessly flirt.

Also, the "call ourselves an institute" line is referencing a Paul Simon song named 'Gumboots'. It's a fun, strange little ditty.
The legal papers were on the passenger seat of her car when the front tire burst.

Running legal documents hadn’t been her problem once, but when she was a) one of the few people who could track Tony Stark down and b) the only one who could get him to sign without resorting to bodily threats, she could have changed her job-title to runner of all that has Tony Stark’s signature on it.

The abrupt slide when the tire went had her white-knuckling the wheel. Adrenaline came sharp on its heels and she knew how to do this. Let go of the gas, no sudden braking, ease into the slide. Don’t overcorrect. Maybe. Hope to fucking god.

The legal papers were in the wheel-well when she finally brought the car shuddering to a nothing-strip of concrete. Some of Tony’s girls wore dresses with more square footage. Her forehead dropped to the steering wheel.

A shrill ring nearly peeled her from her skin. She scrambled for her phone. “Hel—shoot—I’m sorry. Hello, Virginia Potts speaking?” And winced at the strangled pitch of her voice.

“Miss Potts, are you alright?” The sound of Jarvis dampened the screaming-panic of last two minutes to something nearly manageable. Nearly.

She slumped. “I’m fine. I just—wait, why are you calling?”

“The GPS in your phone has halted in a dare I say concerning section of the Santa Monica freeway. Are you in any distress?”

She wondered if she wanted to ask why he was monitoring her GPS, but couldn’t quite find the energy to get there. “No. I mean—a little distress, one of my tires went and I’ve got—” She looked over at the papers now eight deep in the wheel-well and wanted to cry. “Shit. I’ve got the Iber contracts and they need to be at LA Legal in less than an hour.”

“I’ve already directed a pickup towards your location, so please wait inside until their arrival. You can then lock your keys inside and depart. I’ll send a tow for your vehicle and have it taken to the shop that handles the SI fleet.” He paused at the edge and went a little softer. “Please don’t fret Miss Potts, we have it in hand.”

The urge to cry was getting stronger, but for an entirely different reason. “You’re a life-saver Jarvis, thank you.”

“No thanks necessary.” He assured. “Pickup ETA in three minutes.”

“Three?” That was suspiciously fast. She unbuckled, leaned over, and started scooping up paper.

There was a delicate sort of cadence to suggest that he was picking his words. “I may have—ah. Rerouted a nearby cab through radio dispatch with a bit of…well, that hardly matters. It’s not as if they won’t be compensated.”

That didn’t sound suspicious at all. She worked for Tony Stark, the man oozed suspicious and she was building an expertise, should add it to her goddamn resume. “What did you do?”

He was the picture of virtue. “Nothing awful and certainly nothing illegal by the letter of the law.”
Sure, and she was the Queen of the Moon. But like clockwork a cab rolled up and fuck it, she was
not above taking this. She tucked the phone into her shoulder and scuttled into the passenger seat.
“Cab’s here. Keys are under the dash. Jarvis—”

He didn’t let her finish. “It’s taken care of. But Miss Potts…”

He paused and she wondered at the silence. “Yes?”

“Please call me when you arrive?” It was nearly cautious.

“I—” No one had asked her to do that in ages. Not since high school. Pepper, sweetheart, just call
us when you get there. We just want to make sure—

No one had cared enough to ask for that in years. But it wasn’t like—this was Jarvis, it didn’t mean
a thing. It was some triggered subroutine in programming she couldn’t hope to understand barring
two doctorates and a forty-point jump in her IQ.

It was hopeless to wonder but this was Jarvis, and she could do one better. “Maybe you could stay
on the line with me instead?”

She wondered if it was too much to ask, but his tone turned practically effervescent. “I’d be
delighted.”

And that’s exactly what he did, into the cab and through LA, entering the lobby of SI and all the
way up the elevator to Legal. They talked Tony and nonsense and electric cars and Summer
fashion lines and Impressionist period art and it was—nice.

It didn’t matter why or how it came to be: it was the nicest thing that had happened to her in
months. When it was finally, really time for her to hang up and go talk to Legal like a competent
adult, Jarvis asked her pleasantly: “Keep in touch?”

She tried not to flutter. “I’ll put you on speed dial.”

~/~/~/~/

It was supposed to be a joke, the speed dial, until she called him when a Development Meeting was
delayed for his sparkling company, then dialed him up over something with Tony at 2AM and
ended up staying on the line for another hour, then did it again in a car to a benefit to smooth over
hurt feelings about Tony being Tony and nearly ended up not leaving the car. It’d been a joke, but
suddenly, she didn’t want to keep checking her address book every other minute.

Pepper was a creature of peak efficacy and scrolling for his number was inefficient damnnit, so she
put him first on speed dial and didn’t question it.

Later, weeks later, it came to a head when she was under supermarket fluorescents jonseing for
fruit salad. It was just another Wednesday and way past ten. It was one of those awful days;
ravenous and feeling like a crazy person because Tony and looking like a crazy person because
fucking Tony, and she couldn’t remember which brand of fruit salad was one-hundred-percent
strawberry free so Pepper wouldn’t give herself a deathly allergic reaction. She picked up her
phone to dial Jarvis because of course he’d know and—just stared at the screen.

Her call history scrolled out: Jarvis Jarvis Jarvis Jarvis Jarvis Jarvis Jarvis Jarvis Jarvis Jarvis. It went weeks
backwards with calls at all hours and at least three times per day. Barely half of them could have
been justified as business.
There was something wrong here, but she wasn’t sure what. Her choices. Her sanity. Her social life. Tony’s social life ruining her social life.

Maybe just her. Who could tell?

But it was late and she just wanted a friendly voice and something to eat and maybe ten goddamn minutes of peace in her day.

Jarvis picked up on the second ring.

Out on the sidewalk where heat was curling off the pavement—out under the mercury-blue—she got her ten minutes with a container cracked on her knees and a phone tucked in her shoulder, whispering words between every bite.

It was something.
She arrived to LA one morning to a latte waiting on her desk, steaming and smelling of amaretto and cinnamon and all that was still good in the world. When she breathed it in, it ripped something nearly obscene from her. It was surprising Tony didn’t call her up on the spot. His Pepper-Potts-is-emotionally-compromised senses must have been tingling.

Not for the first time, she was grateful for the distance of LA.

When another latte showed up Thursday and then the Tuesday after that, it became clear someone was trying to get into her good graces and making an embarrassingly easy job of it. But even coming in early didn’t catch her mystery benefactor in the act. Somehow, the giver of her only love and joy was not only avoiding detection, but was managing to deliver within two minutes of her pre-arrival.

It was starting to tip over from flattering to somewhat alarming.

It was at 4AM on an awful Friday in Malibu that her wooing-stalker revealed themselves.

Tony had called her heaving and buzzing and out of his mind on his own revolutionary genius. It'd sent her sprinting to the house to talk him off the ledge and into bed, tucking him away from whatever uppers he was dosing himself with. The man was out cold for barely two minutes when the front-bell rang.

Pepper briefly considered self-defenestration.

She held off on the urge long enough to stalk to the door, and there waited a courier who delivered a latte right into her needy hands. She was dumbstruck by it for only a brief moment before shutting the door. Tony Stark was the least considerate person in all of creation, and the suspicious timing only left one option.

A flick of her tongue drew the foam off her lips; left her mouth soft-slick with cinnamon. “Jarvis?”

“Yes, Miss Potts?” He was always so solicitous and it killed her, it really did.

Heat clung to her cheeks, her neck, the insides of her wrists. “Is this you?”

“Would you believe me,” He asked. “If I said it was a preemptive strike? Mr. Stark is…capricious, at times. I wished to build up a cushion of goodwill for moments such as this.”

It was a ploy, a program, some wondrous fluke that should never be taken to heart. It was a numbers game: latte plus Pepper equals Tony Stark left alive. But when she ran it, the equation didn’t balance.

The heat of the amaretto was sliding down her throat, the crooks of her elbows, down into her lungs and stomach and thighs. She breathed. “If that’s what you were trying, you’ve made an error.”

That startled him. “What did I miss?”

“All that goodwill? You built it up, definitely.” She batted her lashes. “For yourself.”

There was a lingering pause. “Oh.” Came his faint and utterly crushed response. It was the most
adorable thing she’d ever heard, and she’d once listened to Butterfingers cry for an hour when he couldn’t pick up quarters with his claw.

She shrugged. “People tend to direct good feelings at those who cause them. They’re non-transferable.” There was another long, humming silence. He couldn’t possibly be doing what she thought. “Are you trying to re-run your whatever until it allocates?”

“I’ve just missed something.” He insisted. “There must be a workaround.”

She laughed because god, Jarvis thought that if he just crunched the numbers and ran the variations, the human condition would miraculously unwind before him. It was downright precious.

She could taste amaretto on her tongue, slow and easy, and took another delicate sip. “Too late. I’m on to you; all future deliveries will only raise you in my estimation. My feelings towards Mr. Stark will remain static.”

“But the money comes from Sir.”

She clicked her tongue. “But the thought came from you.”

Something in that finally slotted, and he answered with dawning horror: “And it’s the thought that counts.”

“Quite.”

“That just won’t do.” It was the first time she ever heard him sound petulant. Unlike Tony, it made her want to pet him and say all sorts of lovely things.

But as there was a regrettable lack of Jarvis to coo over, she tightened her hands on the cup and offered: “Think of it this way, not quid pro quo, but when you do nice things for someone they’ll be willing to help you in return.”

He considered it. “Help how?”

She shrugged. “Favors, I suppose. Friends do favors for each other.”

There was the static again like the pause between breaths, like when someone opened their mouth but couldn’t quite find the words. And then: “Are we?”

She tried to parse it. “Are we what?”

“Friends?” There was something unsure in that, and there couldn’t be. She was humanizing left and right just to have a shred of social contact. Working for Tony Stark didn’t leave time for anything and it was starting to show, but fuck it. *Fuck it.*

She smiled. “Of course we are.”

“Oh.” He sounded utterly delighted. “Alright then.”

And so was she: alright with it, warm and ebullient and her mouth left aching with the sweetness of the words.

/~/~/~/

The lattes kept showing up, but after that day in Malibu, they were always accompanied by baklava
or canelé or franzbrötchen or the most decadent blueberry cream tarts.

She couldn’t resist those tarts. They always left her mouth stained dark and her day infinitely better off than it started.
“Miss Potts, I do believe we have company.”

Pepper blinked, the laptop screen a bright splash through her eyelids. It was past nine. She hadn’t even finished summarizing the quarterlies and she still had a Board packet to read, distill, and shove down Tony’s throat. God forbid she hadn’t helped her boss find the socket wrench he’d lost, because doing it alone was depressing and what if the wrench thought Tony had abandoned it?

And that had gone on for three hours. Three.

“Did Mr. Stark order strippers?”

“Not recently.” Jarvis demurred, which she took as code for not while you were here. “Mr. Stane has pulled to the front gate.”

Something fell inside her; abruptly severed. “What?”

“I’ve already informed Mr. Stark. In the meantime—”

She leapt, hands clammy as she tried to smooth her skirt and oh god, had she rubbed off her makeup? When was her last touchup? Her heart beat like a caged bird. “Jarvis, how do I look? Is my face okay? Did Mr. Stark get motor oil on my dress? Am I—”

He interrupted. “Miss Potts you are, as always, a vision of loveliness.”

She scowled. “Now is not the time for you to be charming.”

“I have no idea what you’re implying.” He answered, blithe, like butter would not melt on his servers. And if she’d ever had doubts Jarvis had been made at Tony’s hand, this would have ended them.

She stuffed every report in reach under the couch. The room was basically clear; Tony had only passed through on the way to the workshop. Nothing was on fire, nothing was bleeding hydraulic fluid, nothing was threatening to explode. Nothing. Probably. She had a good 90% chance that Tony hadn’t snuck anything by her.

The nearest mirror was a vanity piece in the curve of a far wall. It was workable.

With trembling hands she put on fresh lipstick and a careful layer of eye shadow and then a quick powder over her most prominent freckles, because god, those freckles made her look like she was thirteen instead of twenty-three. She pulled her hair out of her chignon, fluffed it, and then tied it back even more severely.

She was going to make a good impression. She was going to make a good impression if it killed her. Everyone at SI knew that while Tony was the name on the building and the brilliance behind the brand, Obadiah Stane was the one who made the trains run on time. And one did not survive SI on the bad side of the right-hand man.

Game face painted, she took up position at the door, hands folded delicately in front of her. She
tried to channel the *La Scapigliata* with her smile. She was a beautiful, serene, and most importantly competent assistant. No part of her would be found wanting.

She thought that very, very hard.

“Miss Potts,” Jarvis murmured, so close it was as if they were cheek to cheek. “*Breathe.*”

She breathed. The door opened, and in came the man who was the thunderhead to Tony’s hurricane.

Obadiah Stane was impossibly tall. His was an imposing figure, intense and broad-shouldered and all in a well cut ten-thousand dollar suit. Gold winked at his wrists; cufflinks the size of grapes and his watch face like a small sun. He was every inch a man who had power and knew it, the kind who entered a room and his personality would go wall to wall.

And then his eyes found her. They were rime blue; nearly bled of color.

Her expression turned coy. “Welcome to the Malibu House, Mr. Stane.”

“Virginia.” His voice was molasses, thick and rich and her name had never sounded like this. He took her hand to kiss it and she felt too young. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you face to face.”

“The pleasure’s all mine, Mr. Stane, honestly.” Her hand was still tucked into his. She wanted to pull it away, already self-conscious, but had no idea how.

“It’s Obadiah.” His grin took a roguish tilt. “You’re Tony’s keeper, believe me, that puts me on a very grateful first-name basis.”

Her cheeks flamed. “I’m not sure keeper is the right word.” Something in her curled with the flattery. “Herder, possibly. I don’t stop, I merely direct.” And occasionally even into something productive. She was an assistant, alright? Not a miracle worker.

His laughter came golden and easy as whiskey. “And you’ve done a phenomenal job.” He squeezed her hand and finally released it. Another minute more and she just might have swooned, and god, she’d have never been able to face Tony again if she had.

Obadiah held up his briefcase and bless him for it; it gave her something to do with her hands. She dutifully whisked it away. “I may have had a little help with the genius-herding, right Jarvis?”

The air remained still. It felt like missing a stair; a sudden abyss where ground should be.

Her head snapped up. “Jarv—”

His voice burst overhead. “I’m terribly sorry, Miss Potts. I shouldn’t take credit where it isn’t due.”

“Oh.” Obadiah murmured, gaze following hers. “Does Tony still have that in here?”

That? What—

Understanding dawned and her stomach dropped like a stone. Acid was coming up the back of her throat but the silence was building, and she forced her knuckles to unclench. She could salvage this, she *would*. “Jarvis is a dear with help, I don’t know how I’d live without him.”

Obadiah nodded. “Sure, sure. It all works well enough, though god knows Tony never did anything with it properly.” His big shoulders rolled. “You know his system here nearly put you out of a job? Tony was convinced he didn’t need an assistant when he had all of this cooked up.”
She would salvage this. “Then it’s very good he kept us both. We’re complimentary, Jarvis and I. He keeps calendar and I enforce it where our darling Mr. Stark is concerned.” And she really didn’t want to be talking about this any longer. “I do believe you’re here for Mr. Stark, correct?”

“I could be talked out of it.” Obadiah dropped a hand to the small of her back and propelled her into the next room. “Tony’s an acquired taste that needs to be worked up to.”

“We manage just fine, don’t we?” She paused to let Jarvis chime in, but there it was again: that awful jag of silence.

Obadiah mistook the direction of her words. “We do. It’s a very exclusive club of Tony-managing, but I’ve always been a fan of new blood. I’ll call up Rhodes; make sure he votes you in.”

Maybe Jarvis hadn’t realized? Maybe, maybe—she swallowed her nerves. “The illustrious Lieutenant Colonel. I’ve heard so many things.”

“And the stories we could tell you in return.” Obadiah’s grin turned downright predatory. Pepper found herself matching it because oh, did she love the smell of blackmail in the evening.

“Do tell.” She breathed.

That was the moment Tony swooped up the stairs. “You shut your mouth Obie!”

“The man of the hour arrives.” Obadiah replied magnanimously. The warmth of him left her back, and it was as if she’d been loosed from a tether. The big man spread his arms. “C’m’ere.”

Tony rolled his eyes but was smiling too brightly to hide. The two hugged and slapped backs. Pepper scurried a respectful distance away. Operation blend into the walls and make like furniture was now underway. She was an assistant and a damn good one. She knew when to be a taskmaster and when to be window dressing, and this was definitely a time to make pretty.

Tony broke away first and gave Obadiah sharp onceover. “No pizza? No bribes? I’m hurt Obie. I have not fallen on the straight and narrow. I’m increasing my graft by ten percent, I will not be moved by your naïve trust in me.”

“Wasn’t in New York, Tony.” He dropped a wide hand on her boss’s shoulder. “Gotta be like a working man and get your own pizza.”

Tony was insulted. “Why I never.”

They were moving towards the couches and she veered to stow the briefcase. She took a nearby seat but didn’t pull her laptop. She knew Tony Stark: dancing attendance was an all-night affair. A few more jovial barbs were traded and then like clockwork, her boss shouted: “Potts! Get something alcoholic out here! Expensive. Make it expensive, I want to taste five figure in every sip.”

Her plans to be a wallflower collapsed faster than a house of cards. “Yes, Mr. Stark. Of course Mr. Stark. Would you like the pretty glasses, Mr. Stark?”

He gave a flippant wave. “You know me so well. The prettiest glasses, Miss Potts, we can’t let our guest think we’re proletariat in this house.”

“Communists.” Obadiah sniffed.

“Those red bastards.” Tony vehemently agreed.
“I doubt you’d be mistaken for the unwashed masses, Mr. Stark.” She rolled her eyes but got to her feet. In her glossy five-inch stilettos, it was a deliberately arresting sight.

Both men were watching her now, eyes dark, the atmosphere oddly settled around the three of them. Tony’s mouth pulled vicious. “Not that you’ve ever let me be unwashed, Potts.”

“None of that.” She answered tartly. “Do I need to call Jarvis to protest my virtue?”

Obadiah’s eyebrows went up.

Tony laid a hand over his heart. “I would never imply such things. Your mind went there first. Disturbingly quickly, I might add. Have you been thinking about me naked in the bath agai—”

Jarvis cleaved into the conversation with the force of an axe. “Really Sir?”

Their boss immediately backpedaled. “I kid, you know I kid. Jarvis, sweetheart, you know I wouldn’t ever imply—”

Jarvis sounded sharp even to her. “I would certainly hope not, talking about Miss Potts in such a way in front of guests.”


Tony gasped. “Nothing is wrong with me. I am perfect, how dare you imply otherwise.”

“You make computer programs to chastise yourself. It’s masochistic. Did I drop you on your head when you were a baby?” Obadiah paused. “No, it was definitely in your teens. I remember it now, you decided the fastest way to digest alcohol was to flip over with a hose and—”

“We are not talking about that!” Tony shrieked.

Pepper wasn’t sure if she wanted to ask. Obadiah crooked a finger and she followed, reeled in by the gesture. The man reached out and patted her hand. “Don’t mind Tony, Virginia. He occasionally has delusions of adequacy.”

“Hey!” Their victim squawked. “I am one-hundred percent adequate. All you proletariat will look upon my adequate self and despair.”

Her smile was saccharine but her mouth was sleek-dark; mulberry lipstick duskier than wine. “Sorry, I don’t have any room in my calendar to languish.” She deliberately turned to Obadiah. “Any requests on beverages, Mr. Stane?”

He smirked and lounged gorgeously into the couch. Really, the man was perfectly aware of how he looked and used it to overwhelming effect. “Surprise us.” And then slung an arm around Tony. The younger man grumbled half-heartedly but didn’t pull away.

“Surprise it is.” She sought the nearest camera. “Jarvis, where oh where do we keep the pretty glasses?”

The System picked up his cue. “Right down the north hallway, Miss Potts. If you’d follow the lights…”

She knew where the glasses were. That was hardly why she’d asked. As soon as they were out of earshot, she slipped into an alcove and called up softly. “Jarvis?”
He didn’t question the detour. “What is it?”

“Is—” There was no good way to phrase this. “Should I not talk to you when Mr. Stane is visiting? He seems…it’s Mr. Stane, but you shouldn’t have him talking over you like that.”

Jarvis dropped right next to her in the acoustics. The alcove cloistered them and it was as if he was right there, gentle and close and sharing the same oxygen. “It’s perfectly alright. Mr. Stane does not require my input, so I keep to myself when he calls upon Mr. Stark.” There was something quiet and barely there. Maybe it was the breath in her lungs. “Don’t trouble yourself on my account, Miss Potts.”

The words hit somewhere weak. It was like chewing on glass to swallow them. “We’re friends, right?”

“So you say, and I’m inclined to trust your judgment.”

She huffed. “Say yes, Jarvis.”

He volleyed it back. “Yes Jarvis.”

“God.” It tore a laugh out of her. “Friends protect friends from things like this.” From being treated like they were programs and conveniences and there for use, even though—even though. She swallowed hard and desperately wanted not to think on this at all.

“I serve at the pleasure of those in the Malibu house.” He sucked in a sharp sound. “We both serve at the pleasure, Miss Potts.”

It fell like a sledgehammer and suddenly she was every inch of her age. She was twenty-three and all the makeup and pencil skirts in the world wouldn’t stop her from feeling like a girl playing dress-up in her mother’s clothes. From playing dress-up in someone else’s life. She was an assistant in a long line of them; disposable as those who came before and she knew how Tony Stark lived. He left people in his wake like driftwood, with no care for when or where or how much he fucked them over.

She wasn’t exempt.

And Jarvis was maybe, just maybe, just trying to protect—

No. The idea of that was absurd. But right now, the idea of that was the only thing keeping her steady. “I’m so sorry. I overstepped here. I didn’t mean to—”

“Your concern is a treasure, Miss Potts, don’t you ever doubt otherwise.” He pressed.

She made a hiccupping, desperate sound.

“Then as your friend, I ask a favor.” There was the slide of him coming close. “Do not be cross with Mr. Stane over me. Kicking up a fuss will only be a detriment to the both of us. If we must, we shall conduct our friendship in private and it will be none the lesser for it.”

Her eyes flinched shut and then kept pressing; until smears of color burned sunspots in her eyes. She wanted to rage, to shout, to bite at her tongue until she tasted red. It felt like a choice: her job or being a friend. Herself or Jarvis.

She’d been described as frosty, driven, haughty, selfish. Maybe she had been. Maybe she still was. Here and now she didn’t want to be, but he’d asked her to.
She had to make sure. “I don’t want you to resent me.”

“I won’t.” He promised, and what else could she say?

It was a matter of trust. She breathed deeply and let herself come to rest. “Alright.”

He sounded relieved. “Excellent. But Miss Potts…”

“Pepper.” She blurted.

“What?” And she’d completely knocked him off course.

There was no taking it back. She ran a hand over her neck, her mouth; left lipstick in dark smudges on her fingertips and said: “Friends call each other by pet names, personal ones. Mine is Pepper.”

“Oh,” He said breathlessly. “Are you sure?”

“Please.”

His voice sounded so near then, as if he was a head taller and leaning in. “Pepper.”

Her heart skipped

“My,” He said. “It’s certainly a lovely moniker, isn’t it? For such a lovely—”

She despaired. “For the love of christ, your charms are going to kill me.”

But in that moment something was building, and god only knew what it would become.

“Then I shall not abuse the privilege.” He told her, so puffed up proper and absolutely darling in every way.

“I know you can be trusted. Now Jarvis, be a dear,” The endearment rolled off her tongue. “And tell me where Mr. Stark keeps the good stuff.”

Chapter End Notes

Just to make it clear, since I can't textually acknowledge it as that would mean Pepper managed to think through their situation for a minute without shying away: Pepper has no idea Jarvis is a genuine AI. Currently, she thinks he's just a very, very cleverly designed program. Neither he nor Tony have given her reason to believe otherwise. So while Pepper has subconsciously latched on to the fact that Jarvis-is-People, she hasn't connected the actual dots.

Not that I blame her: it's currently 2000 in the Hardwired timeline. If someone told me that a true blue AI had been built pre-millennium and was just kicking around in some dude's basement, I would call all of the bullshit.
“You’re not watching.”

“Yes I am.” Pepper said

“No you’re not.” Tony whined.

“I am totally, completely focused on you.” She lied between her teeth.

“Jarvis, she is doing no such thing. Tell her she’s not.”

That brought her head up. “Don’t bring Jarvis into this.”

“Too late.” The man sang.

Jarvis let out a gusty sigh. “Miss Potts, you do appear to be giving your laptop 93.4% of your attention.”

“No.” She snapped it shut and refused to give Tony the pleasure of her gaze. “I’m giving you 93.4% of my attention, because you deserve it.”

“Be careful Miss Potts, I might take that to heart.”

Tony made a disgusted noise from his end of the workshop. “No, I’m not having it, you two are going to stop that right now.”

“Stop what?” They asked.

Tony looked appalled. “That, right there, I am not having you two go off on a tangent during my moment. You promised me Potts, you promised you’d come down and appreciate my genius.”

After Tony’s blowup at a press conference yesterday, she would have promised her first born to shut him up. But, technically, she had said she’d come down for...something. Pepper knew keeping her word where Tony was concerned was the only reason he even just a tiny bit listened to her.

“Okay. Fine.” She deliberately set aside her laptop. The bots that’d been hanging back crowded her. You had a camcorder, Butterfingers rushed over from where he’d been tacking up targets on the wall, and Dummy had somehow gotten ahold of a tiny red caution flag and was waving it rather enthusiastically.

She strangled whatever desperate fawning wanted to come out of her.

“What are we watching?” She asked, shoving Dummy’s claw away before he smacked her in the face.

“Test firing!” Tony shouted and now that he mentioned it, the workshop had been cleared end to end and the targets Butterfingers had mocked-up were glaringly person-shaped.

Jarvis, as always, filled in the pertinent details. “This is the first live test of Sir’s prototype Intelligent Semi-Automatic Rifle.”

“You should be flattered Potts! Obie’s gonna be so disappointed in me when he realizes I gave you the sneak peek.” With a shove of his bare foot, Tony pushed the top of a weapons crate and then
slung up an absolutely gorgeous rifle. The stock and rail-guard were slate gray, but every other inch of it was smooth as black ice. The lines of the gun were a work of mathematical beauty. She wanted to ask Jarvis to run the numbers, the angles; make an equation out of superior engineering and unparalleled aesthetic.

Pepper had always been able to appreciate *Art.*

In precise form Tony unfolded the stock, pushed in a magazine, and racked a bullet to chamber. It was new, seeing him this way. Not manic and jittering. Not talking a mile a minute and moving a mile faster. Just him and a single purpose; liquid with grace and the ease of long practice.

It was the first time she’d ever thought of Tony as dangerous.

It sat a little too well on him.

“Why the colors?” She asked.

“Military hasn’t put in for what camo patterns they want, now—” Tony pulled on goggles. “Safety first.”

She snorted and Jarvis marveled. “Never have I heard such words from your mouth.”

“What,” Tony said. “We’ve got children in here. Potts, please make sure the babies all have their safety equipment on.”

She looked at the bots a bit closer and despaired. She rearranged the kevlar vest Butterfingers had on backwards, adjusted the safety glasses You had hanging from his claw, and found Dummy was wearing ear protectors. *Ear protectors.* And not even over his *actual* microphones.

Christ almighty.

When Tony was really, truly convinced the *babies* were ready, she donned her own headgear. Jarvis was a muffled weight in the air. “Are you properly secured, Miss Potts?”

She gave thumbs up.

“Excellent.” His attention shifted. “Sir, all diagnostics and recordings are up and running. I’ll be monitoring from above.”

Tony’s grin turned on a knife’s edge. “Ladies and bots, I’d like to introduce everyone to Stark Industries newest pride and joy. Meet our bouncing baby boy, the *Paragon.*” And then effortlessly shouldered the rifle and pulled the trigger.

Black outlines blew away in neat holes, three by three, punctured hearts and shattered heads. Devastation would come in triplicate and brass casings and the lightning bite of a gun.

And all Pepper could think was *safety* and *dangerous,* crossed over and over until there was no pulling it apart.

/~/~/~/

It smelled like cordite, later. Made her shaky in the knees.

Tony offered the rifle when it was spent. “Wanna try?”

She felt a vague suspicion. “You just want Jarvis to take pictures of me with it.”
He didn’t even deny. “We’ll put in on our newsletter. Sales will rise 300%. Sassy redheads with Smart-guns at Stark. Tagline that Jarvis, I want it on the letterhead.”

She crossed her arms. A great deal of wheedling followed, but when he couldn’t get her to budge, he dropped the rifle on the table. He took Butterfingers and You to pick up the targets, probably to supervise but really just there to get exasperated when they inevitably mucked it up.

Jarvis offered privately. “You really would look quite competent with it.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Really?”

“It’s a mathematical certainty.” He stated and there was no arguing. Jarvis was never wrong about the math.

Quick like, chamber cleared and no magazine in, she picked up the rifle and sighted it on the opposite wall. She’d grown up in the heartland, in the flatlands, it wasn’t like she didn’t know how to hold a gun.

Stock to the shoulder, eyes on the prize. Skin to steel and it was still fired-warm.

“Not really my style.” She let it fall, cradled it, then placed it back down. Still more than a little enamored, she smoothed her hands over.

Jarvis hummed. “I’d beg to disagree, Pepper. The lines more than suit.”

A heat-flush took so intensely her freckles were visible down to the V-neck of her dress. When her giggles drew Tony’s attention, she refused to explain why she couldn’t catch her breath.
The months bled together and suddenly it was December with the Stark Industries Christmas Party half on her plate. It wouldn't have been so bad, really, if a week before it Tony hadn't decided a corporate party was too passé.

“I want my holiday on the ocean.” He'd announced from the blue. Since they were in the back of a town car, at least she wouldn't have to reach far to smother him.

“Drowning?” She asked in hope.

“No,” He turned dramatically to the window. “On a yacht. Miss Potts, buy me a yacht. I want all other boats to cower at the sight of it.”

“Sir—” Jarvis interrupted.

Tony bulldozed right over. “No, you are not talking me out of this. Yacht me Potts.”

Pepper looked at the reports scattered on the seat around her, the Christmas plans drawn up, and found the urge to strangle Tony well above its baseline level. “Mr. Stark—”

Jarvis cut over her. “Sir, I really must—”

His jaw set. “Nope, not budging. Do I need to get my credit card out? By the way, where do I keep my cards?”

“Sir!” Jarvis injected. “You already own a yacht.”

“I do?” Tony asked.

“He does?” Pepper blurted.


Their boss cycled through confusion, more confusion, to outright glee. “Right. That was a fun time, wasn’t it buddy?”

“No comment.” Jarvis answered waspishly.

Pepper raised her eyebrows and Tony seemed to luxuriate in it, the attention. Or the disapproval. “Got in a poker game with one of the Princes of Saud. It was an experience, a weeklong experience.” He sighed dreamily. “I forgot what sobriety even felt like.”

That revelation surprised her absolutely not at all. “You are not having the Christmas party on a yacht.”

“And why not?”

A head of steam was building and she couldn't stop it. “Because you can’t fit all of SI’s employees on a yacht. That wouldn’t even figure in how we’d get everyone to it, get them on it, transfer the catering there, or even bring—”

“Details.” Tony waved it off, like fucking always, like reality was superfluous and she was silly to even mention it.
Her teeth felt sharp against her cheek. “There is no earthly way to make this work. The logistics of doing it in a week are impossible.”

The car was slowing and Happy knocked on the partition.

“Don’t be such a Debbie-downer.” Tony’s smile turned, every inch of him so expertly sharp. It was moments like this that made her feel like a hayseed fresh off the bus to Cali, voice still hitching and vowels too flat and her inexperience writ clear on her face.

Through the tinted windows, the strobe of flashbulbs was bleeding in.

Tony checked his watch. “Make me happy, Potts. That’s an order.”

Her knuckles clenched and that was the moment Happy opened the door. Sound came crashing in; lights flooding white-hot across her retinas. Tony bared his teeth and waded right in to reporters screaming questions and others merely screaming his name.

The door slammed shut in her face.

Her stomach flooded with acid and there was no telling if it was anger or humiliation. She took a shuddering breath.

“Miss Potts?” Jarvis seemed to have crept into the very back of the car with her. She couldn’t answer, not without screaming.

“Pepper?” He tried.

“I’m…” She scrubbed across her mouth and immediately regretted it. Her lipstick was ruined and likely in cerise streaks along her cheek. She grabbed her compact and a cloth and wasted a good minute wiping down.

Jarvis tried a third time. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

He was always straight forward and she appreciated that, truly. Pepper cast an appraising eye; knew the town car was well-stockced with alcohol and uppers and downers and everything in-between. She imagined whiskey sharp, then vodka burning, then gin biting at the back of her throat.

But that way led sloppy madness. “I could really go for some low-fat frozen yogurt.” She paused. “Actually—forget low-fat. Just get me some and I will throw myself into your debt.”

He answered glibly. “When you put it that way, Miss Potts, gladly.”

Twenty minutes later Happy pulled in front of a four-star restaurant. A maître d’ came running out with the most massive helping of frozen yogurt she’d ever laid eyes on. He gave it to her through the window with a muted sort of reverence and quickly retreated. It was the sort of service that spoke to exorbitant sums being involved.

The dish was speckled with blueberries and crème fraiche and healthy dousing of white-chocolate. She was more than a little impressed with the arrangement. “Sometimes,” She breathed. “You really outdo yourself.”

“I do endeavor to surprise.” Jarvis demurred.

She really felt like there was more to be said, but the decadence in her lap was screaming her name.
She dug in with an indecent speed that probably made the whole thing more than a little wasted. But even with the confection barely sliding across her tongue, each bite went down smoother than Bianco vermouth.

She finally unwound. “Thank you Jarvis.” And then, “Dearest.”

He broke his patient silence. “Always a pleasure, Pepper.”

The acid in her stomach settled, as did her knuckles and limbs and spine. It was time to get down to the nuts and bolts of what was going to send her short-lived career at SI down in flames.

“So.” She announced dryly. “A yacht.”

“So it would seem.”

She sighed, mouth cold with crème and dread. “Let’s start from the top. Where does Mr. Stark keep berth?”

“~/~/~/

“I’m going to light him on fire. I swear to god Jarvis, I will douse him in his stupid ten-grand a bottle whiskey and light him on fire.”

“~/~/~/

“Miss Potts.”

“Mmmph.” The sound dredged her up from sleep, unsteady and messy and aching.

“Miss Potts,” It cajoled. “Captain Eisler is on the line for you, should I put him through?”

She blinked, the light of her cellphone gouging through the dark. What had she—

Thirty-eight hours with no sleep, two plane rides up and down the coast, a ferry out of LA, shitty cell coverage, sleeping in three different places in the course of four days—yeah. Rest was a luxury ill-afforded.

She’d pulled Jarvis into a call just to stay awake and then…well, the phone was open on the bedspread, and here was Jarvis coaxing her from it. Exhaustion didn’t leave room for embarrassment, but she was sure she’d manage it. Later.

“Yeah—” Her throat was crackling like chaparral in the heat. “Yes. Put him through, Jarvis, thank you.”

“Right away.” The line clicked over.

It turned out that while Tony had a yacht, the blasted thing hadn’t been staffed for two years. Filling a crew quota of forty-five along with a Captain who could manage a vessel in excess of four-hundred and sixty feet of length? A surprisingly difficult endeavor.

A cough rattled in her chest. God, she needed sleep. “Captain Eisler, thank you for returning my call.”

“The joy is mine, Miss Potts. It is not every day such a lovely voice leaves messages to a poor old man.”
She choked off a snort, self-control hanging on a perilous, sleep-deprived thread. Captain Eisler was barely fifty, a career of three decades stretching out behind him from the Navy to dinghies to sailboats to super yachts. The man was competent, well credentialed, prematurely grey, and perfectly happy to throw out the poor old man card when it suited. This was a man well sought after with all the resulting accoutrements that brought.

And Pepper? She could play into that.

“If I’ve been a bright spot in your day, Captain, hopefully you’ll be one in mine.” Her voice came out slower, syrupy and clinging to the softer curves of her mouth. Her head ached with it.

They slipped into flirtatious pleasantries, then a coy repartee, then to the Captain regaling her with all sorts of stories she didn’t want to hear but had to coo her way through. Certain niceties had to be observed before one could bludgeon their way to the point.

The pillows on the bed looked terribly inviting.

“If I may, Captain—” She need to get off the mattress before it swallowed her. “I was hoping I could tender you an offer.”

He clicked his tongue. “It’s not every day an opening comes on one of the world’s ten largest, no?”

Shit. “I imagine not.”

He continued slyly. “Of course, that opening implies a certain sort of emergency. A deadline, if you will.”

Frustration knifed her in the ribs. “So you say, Captain.” And she’d admit to absolutely none of it.

“So I do.” He agreed. “And money matches time, Miss Potts.”

“And what do you ask for your time?” Her tongue curled at her teeth. “Or the lack of it.”

Crisply, knowingly, he laid out a figure that even six months into working for Tony Stark dropped her jaw. But god, she couldn’t show it. She quickly pushed back something a dozen notches lower.

The Captain sighed like she’d disappointed him. “Miss Potts, really.”

They were going to have to take it in the teeth and he knew it. She could drag this out all she liked and it wouldn’t change a damned thing. The part of her that was still that Midwest girl, the one who’d lived off meat and potatoes and secondhand clothing, cringed. “We’ll meet your offer. Is there anything else you’ll require before taking command?”

The money Tony Stark could throw away on a whim was simply obscene.

Restless, furious, she moved towards the balcony but stopped dead at the threshold. She pressed her forehead to the glass.

“My choice of First Mate, veto power on crew, and a few other sundries I’m sure your people will handle. I wouldn’t want to trouble you.” He sounded downright satiated.

A gorge was rising up her throat. She swallowed once, twice. “Someone at Stark Industries will be contact to make arrangements. A jet will be sent to the nearest airport to your villa in Barcelona to collect you.” The last words were rust on her tongue. “Thank you ever so much. Have a pleasant afternoon, Captain.”
“Thank you.” He crooned. “I do hope we’ll see one another in person soon.” And he cut the call.

The silence that followed was a chasm. It rendered her motionless, the phone pressed to her cheek and her body locked against the glass. Her hand went to the door and stuttered.

“Pepper.” And Jarvis was there. “If you so desire, I can direct the jet to leave him at the most remote runway in Kazakhstan.”

A lovely thought, but—

“Someone would notice.”

Jarvis huffed. “Not fast enough to stop me.”

That drew a hysterical giggle and motion rushed her out the door. The fragrance of the sea came in and she would never get over this: the ocean warm in December.

Santa Catalina unfurled below them to a cove webbed in sparks. In the distance the ships almost looked like fireflies, indistinct and glittering. Her eyes fluttered shut and desperation to be in the water struck her, to lie in the waves and drift with the pull.

“He took too much pleasure in that.” Jarvis decided sourly.

Slowly, painfully, she swallowed the desire. Her throat stung with the effort. “People usually do that, when they get their way.”

“It’s unseemly.”

“A lot of things are.” The sea was lulling her, slowly, and so was he. “We learn to live with it.”

For a moment it was just the ocean between them, and then: “I wish you wouldn’t have to.”

That moment of kindness nearly sent her over the edge. Into something brittle; sobbing and utterly gutted. “It’s late for that.”

He softened. “I apologize. You should rest, Miss Potts. I will wake you again should anything pertinent arise.” That answered the question of how their original call had devolved to this.

Her eyes fell to one particular yacht; to a massive edifice of pale abalone. It knifed through the water so very still. It wouldn’t stay that way much longer. “I can sleep when I’m dead. Or when I’m fired. Whatever hits first.”

“Pepper,” And there was Jarvis’ frustration in all its heretofore unknown glory. “Sometimes I really must ask why you work for Mr. Stark.”

“It’s certainly not his winning personality.”

He scoffed. “Hardly, and yet your continued presence remains something I cannot fathom. You graduated Salutatorian at seventeen, Summa Cum Laude from UCLA at twenty. You have degrees in Accounting and Art History and your Masters in Arts Administration. In high school you showed your artwork in six different counties; the Cedar Rapids Gazette did a spread, once.” He paused. “It’s not archived online.”

Her heart seized. “What?”

“I’ve never seen any of your work.” He mused. “I think I’d like to.”
She hadn’t painted in years. Derivative, uninspired. Better to manage art than to keep embarrassing herself by trying—

She stuffed it down. “What are you asking?”

“Why this?” He asked and any more flippant answers vanished from her. “I would expect a woman of your mien to be in a gallery, a museum, perhaps even managing a private collection. And yet here you are at 3:11AM trying to thread the needle for someone you, if you’ll pardon my language, seem to loathe with a fucking passion.”

It was the first time she’d heard Jarvis swear. Fucking. All edges and venom in her ear.

Heat curled inside her.

“I didn’t…” She’d taken this job, not a lot of options but not without. It wasn’t the money.

Well, maybe it was 49% the money, but that wasn’t the deciding factor. Pepper had never been a quitter. All that Iowa work ethic. Tony Stark raised the challenge and she couldn’t help but try—and it wasn’t that either.

Was it the power? Midwest girl suddenly with the world on her finger? Too heady to drink, to mainline, to swallow. And that still wasn’t it. She didn’t get up because she wanted to see the world cower because Tony Stark’s name fell from her lips.

She spent too many days at Tony’s house instead of LA. Spent too much time in the workshop instead of productive upstairs. Spent too much energy fussing over the bots and teasing Jarvis and watching Tony while he changed the world a microchip at a time.

Tony liked an audience and she liked being his audience.

“This is all—” It burned electric. “Money, challenge, power. It’s all of that. But first time I met Tony and the bots and—” You. “God. All I could think was, I want to see how this man will remake the world. What that world could possibly be; if I wanted part of it.”

And Jarvis. Jarvis Jarvis Jarvis. The little angel of sanity sitting on her shoulder.

“And I do.” She said. “I want it something awful and I want a front row seat.”

The words fell and in the absence of them, the silence grew. Her stomach sank and this was what finally left her exposed. Was it disappointment, or just indifference to her guts being flung in front of him? Because she knew, had always known, that an Interactive System couldn’t actually—

And he said: “I suppose we share that, wanting Mr. Stark’s world to see fruition.”

It nearly buckled her. “I—yes.”

“I will do anything I can to help you, Pepper. Even when it seems impossible, or Mr. Stark makes it impossible.” He promised fiercely.

The atmosphere was too heavy between them. “You’re on my side?”

There was zero hesitation. “Ours.”

The cove below was a lattice of stardust and fire. It sent tears springing in her eyes.

“Good.” The tension was siphoning out with all the heat of molten steel. “Front row seats and the
company’s top notch, what else could a girl ask for?”

“Sleep, I’d imagine.” He implied none too subtly.

She should have guessed. “Can I expect your sparkling wake-up call at five?”

“Six.” He corrected.

“Fine. Six. I’m holding you to that.”

“I’d expect nothing else.” He soothed. “Sleep well, Pepper.”

She smiled. “Sweet dreams are made of you, Jarvis.” And stepped inside with the sound of his laughter. That was what let her fall into the sheets, lashes fluttering and heart steady, the tide at last sending her asleep beneath deep waters.
“What’s it like?” She asked.

“You’ll have to be a touch more specific.”

She took a drink, sunhat a blinding halo between her and the sky. “Being installed on the ship.”

Around her little throne on the promenade deck, Stark-techs were running in terror trying to install a Jarvis Operating Package t-minus five hours to departure. She may, *may* have been the source of their terror.

They’d been leaving her fruit smoothies with little umbrellas all morning. Like offerings. Which was a good idea, to be honest. Pepper was a vengeful god.

“Ah.” He sounded distracted. “It’s certainly a test in patience.”

“Is it like going somewhere new?” But Jarvis didn’t really get to *go* places, did he? She frowned. “Or are you in the ship? Part of it?” The idea was more than a little brain-melting.

“I’m no more the yacht than I am the Malibu House, Miss Potts.” He responded dryly.

She blushed. “Of course not. I just…” Didn’t even know what she was asking.

He let it pass by, not insulted in the least. “I suppose it falls somewhere in between. *Night from a railroad car window is a great, dark, soft thing. Broken across with slashes of light.*”

Her breath caught.

“Sandburg?” She tipped her head into the sun. “How lovely.”

“Quite.” And his attention wandered again.

That was alright. It’s not like she needed his attention, or him spontaneously reciting poetry to her every minute of every day. Honest.

She leaned back and tried to enjoy what would be her last sliver of peace until this catastrophe was over. The sun was drenched on deck. Her drink was sweating cold in her hand and against her stomach. Her head was filmy. All of it sent her drifting, and she felt her phone slip from her hand.

Clouds passed.

“Miss Potts?”

She blinked upright. “Yes?” And then realized: his voice was coming through the speakers in every wall. “You’re in?”

“Sixty-eight percent so. I should have full operational capability in another fourteen minutes.” And he was terribly satisfied about it.

She regretfully got off the lounge: their brief reprieve was over.

“Miss Potts, if would you turn back and to your right?”
Confused but willing, she did as asked. A camera swiveled on her. Pepper rushed to fix her hair and smooth her skirt. She managed neither and nearly dropped her glass instead.

“There you are.” He breathed. “How lovely it is to see your face.”

“It’s only been five days.” Five long and frantic days.

“An eternity.” He claimed.

Her mouth went dry and she took a desperate drink. It coated her mouth in watermelon, cold citrus, a kick of lime against her teeth. It did nothing to quell the rising flush.

The beat of a helicopter’s blades saved her from trying to withstand anymore of Jarvis’ frankly weaponized charm.

“It appears your departure has arrived.” There was the faintest downwards lilt. She would have called it disappointment, except—

“Duty calls.” She dropped the glass on a table and slung up her bag. Then quite deliberately, she batted her lashes to the camera. “See you in Marina Del Rey.”

“Promises.” He murmured.

The helicopter drowned out anything more.

~/~/~/~/

Just as suddenly as the madness of the Christmas party spilled over, all of it notched together and locked into place. She’d strung herself out for it; ran up and down California and scheduled the entire western hemisphere to within an inch of its life. All that was left was to push it in motion.

There was no time for anything else, and a strange sort of peace had settled. Then again, death by drowning was said to be peaceful at the end, so maybe she shouldn’t trust the feeling.

The mercury-blue of LA pulsed in waves through the car. Her dress flared in soft folds: a 50’s style throwback for cocktail parties or, say, having to run around on a yacht. It was sleeveless, had a high scoop neckline, and fell to her knees. Classy and not even remotely risqué. Tony would absolutely hate it.

She’d bought it on the spot.

Spite had never been so lovely, nor using Tony’s credit card.

She rested her temple to the window. “Jarvis, when I get fired—”

“You are hardly going to be fired.”

“When I get fired.” She continued as if he hadn’t said a word. “You’ll still take my calls, won’t you?” There would be more to miss about this job than not, and the lion’s share of that was Jarvis.

There was an imperceptible shift. “Of course.” And then he deliberately swelled to his most pretentious. “Our friendship is one that traverses all obstacles. It transcends any distance. It defeats the time zones that cruelly separate us.”

She snorted, and something warm seeped through the fatalism. “Mr. Stark won’t order you to stop speaking to his poorly departed PA?”
“He can try.” Jarvis answered more than dangerously. She shivered pleasantly at the notion.

“Good.” On the horizon, the towers of Maria Del Ray were rising. “Looks like the curtain’s coming up.”

“Indeed. But Miss Potts, for the success of our endeavor and my own peace of mind, a small token.”

A light went on over the wet bar. A lacquered box had been placed there, hidden until it was deliberate. Carefully, heart fluttering, she slid it open. Inside lay the sleekest, slimmest Bluetooth she’d ever seen nestled in a bed of velvet.

It was practical and impossibly lovely. Jarvis from end to end.

“Jarvis,” She decided firmly. “You are my favorite Being in all of creation.”

He tisked. “Exaggerations, Miss Potts?”

She plucked it from the box and watched the edges flare blue, syncing with the phone in her clutch without her raising a finger. Delicately, she settled it into the shell of her ear.

“Am I live?”

His voice pressed against her neck. “So you are.”

She hummed, drifting and light, each turn of her head feeling impossibly gorgeous. “You asked if I was exaggerating?” She carefully fluffed her skirt as the car rolled to a halt. Tony’s yacht towered above, all systems fully operational, and the cameras on the nearest deck swiveled to the car.

“Jarvis, I want you to know something.”

The driver opened her door and offered a hand. She placed her fingers deftly and let him swirl her into the floodlights. It was like stepping on air, half a dream, and the driver retreated until the car pulled away.

She took one more step and stared straight into a camera. “I bought this dress because it made me think of you.”

It haloed her thighs a knockout shade of lapis lazuli. It wreathed her skin in devastating shades of blue.

When she’d first seen it, she hadn’t thought of Tony or spite or appropriate hemlines. She’d thought it the color of him. The color of him that burned in her. And just like the stone it’d derived from, the silk was shot through with white fissures and sweeps of gold and aching, ever fluctuating blue.

A fragile thread pulled. “Oh, Pepper.”

With every ounce of grace left to her, she curtsied. “Thank you for everything you’ve done.”

“I am the one who cannot even begin to repay.” It was of equal gratitude.

The words tumbled wry from her mouth. “Then the problem’s mutual.”

There was work to attend to; timing, logistics, a thousand calls to be made. And yet. “Should we…?”
“Please,” He asked. “A minute more.”

So she drifted towards the yacht, following every camera that was following her. It would only be a minute, barely a blink, the two of them suspended on the water before hurling together into the deep.

There was a rushing, cloistering thing. Weighted; as if all of him was compressed on the air, and then—

“Pepper, you are and shall always be a ceaseless revelation.”

One sweep of her lashes took the mist from her eyes. Her stilettos struck the deck, and there was the First Mate to greet her. “Welcome aboard, Miss Potts.”

And their minute was over.
It went a little something like this. They still had the booking at the Ritz and an entirely catered meal that wasn’t getting moved no matter how much Tony complained. But Pepper had solved the whole thing rather neatly. Jarvis had even complimented her, which meant it had to be a good idea.

She’d pushed the Christmas party to start two hours early and staggered the arrival times of each Department. They’d come to the Ritz for cocktails, an abridged meal, and then were unceremoniously shoved out the door. Then through the sheer, obscene power of money, half the car services in California were waiting outside to ferry them to the Marina. They’d arrive to the monument to Tony’s ego lording over the yachts belonging to the members of the SI Board, Mr. Stane’s much more tastefully sized vessel, and sixteen rented pleasure craft with average capacities of 550 apiece. The board had involved arm twisting. The pleasure craft had taken varsity-level phone tag and a mountain of cash on the spot.

Obadiah had needed merely a long business lunch and surprisingly little persuasion.

When she’d gotten out her request so very courteously, Obadiah had merely grinned. “I know what Tony’s like. Just bring it back with a full tank.”

“We’ll do our best.”

“I don’t doubt it.” He cut into his steak. “Eat up Virginia, it’s Kobe.”

It would have been rude to cut and run as soon as she got what she came for. She sheared off a delicate slice and let it fall on her tongue. It melted there savory and indecent. Obadiah had watched her with an indulgent sort of approval; it’d been the singular bright spot of the whole affair that wasn’t Jarvis.

And now here she was on deck watching SI employees gawk, paparazzi swarm, and security trying to thresh through the former while keeping out the latter. The guest list of who went where had been a nightmare of its own. If anyone objected, she was damn well going to have them pitched into the sea.

As if hearing the thought, Jarvis cycled over the line. “97.6% of the guest list has now been accounted for onboard. Ships Alpha through November have departed the Marina to open water, Oscar and Papa are leaving their moorings, and Quebec will momentarily be pulling up anchor. It appears all of our fretting may have been premature.”

“We’ll see.” She took a sip of champagne. “Our darling Mr. Stark?”

Jarvis made a momentary clicking sound, the same as she did when flicking her tongue against her teeth. It was a bad habit, nervous. He couldn’t actually be—

The clicking cut. “Approaching. GPS puts him twelve minutes out.”

Despite having planned for it, Pepper found herself surprised. Her workload meant there hadn’t been time to wrangle Tony face to face. So she’d gotten...creative. To apparently fortuitous effect. “Well I’ll be.”

“And here you thought it wouldn’t work.” He chastised.

“Never will I ever doubt your insights into all things Stark.” She leaned to the rail. “Tell security to
rush our stragglers, and inform Captain Eisler we’ll be departing as soon as Mr. Stark is onboard.”

“Very good.”

Down below, Security visibly put the hustle on. The minutes ticked by and she and Jarvis kept up a constant stream of activity, sending crew here and catering there and fielding complaints like a well-oiled machine. She felt like a god. The god of organizing. Governments should have been building sacrificial altars in her name.

Before it could rush to her head, Tony rolled up in a 1967 Shelby Cobra, low and sleek and so very blue. The snarl of its engine drew the paparazzi from a mile off, and flashbulbs lit like New Years.

The space along her shoulder curved. “Admiring, Miss Potts?”

She was hardly surprised what Jarvis noticed anymore. “Only the car.”

“If memory serves, you were also quite partial to the Aston Martin. A taste for the classics?”

She replied archly. “Perhaps I only favor the British imports?”

“Then I shall disregard all memory of you swooning over the Gran Turismo Maserati. The Testarossa. Or—”

“You’ve made your point.” It wasn’t her fault Tony had shown up with the Maserati one day, all sleek and dark and sparkling like volcanic glass. A girl had needs. “Can’t a woman appreciate a car without her motives coming into question?”

“If that’s what she favors.” He answered smugly.

Something in her thrummed. “I’ve always loved a well put-together machine.”

For a moment, she thought that had finally shut him up. Then he hitched down. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

It left her completely flustered.

Then Tony boile from the crowd. He had a woman on either arm, long legs and dark skin and each veritably glittering with platinum. His voice drifted up. “Excuse me, I love you all, even you with the long lens down my throat. But I’m late to my own party. Kisses and hearts, don’t fall off the pier.” It sent the paparazzi aflutter.

Pepper was embarrassed on all their behalves.

Tony strode up the gangplank with dates in tow, and the crew rushed to bring it up behind them. He spotted her in a flat second and gave a dissatisfied up-down to her dress. “Really? You don’t get to look disappointed in me when you’re wearing that. You are doing your legs and the world a disservice.”

She didn’t rise to it. “Somehow I think we’ll all survive.”

“I don’t know,” He gave her legs another longing glance. “I’m feeling a little touch and go.” The women accompanying him tittered and he shot the pair a downright lascivious grin. “Go on ladies, I’ll be with you in a minute.”

They swanned off. “Don’t leave us waiting, Tony!”
“Wouldn’t dream of it.” And then he turned. “How’s the party?”

“On schedule.”

He blinked. “What?”

“The yachting portion of the evening began at eight, and it’s now…Jarvis?”

“8:09 PM. Captain Eisler is running up the engines as we speak.” True to his word, the yacht shuddered and started churning beneath them.

Tony made a noise like a seagull choking. “You said we were anchors up at 6:00. Twice a day. You kept making Jarvis let you through the blocking I put up!”

She shrugged. “I lied.”

“You—” And it utterly flummoxed him.

She raised her glass. “And I’m glad you had such a lovely evening with Eliza and Dana before they enticed you to the party.”

“How…?” Realization finally dawned. “You sent them.”

She smiled. “It would do an aspiring starlet a world of good to appear on the right arm, at the right party, in front of the right cameras, wouldn’t it?”

His expression vacillated between horror and a buoying amount of respect. “I don’t know why I ever trusted you.”

“You’re making the Flotilla Welcome broadcast at 8:20. I wrote your speech.” She pulled the notecards from her clutch to tuck into his jacket.

“You know I won’t read these.” He said, tongue sharp but eyes alight.

“My hope springs eternal. Jarvis will put you through, try not to scandalize the Board.”

“No promises.” He was buttoning up his jacket and stepping from her alcove. “Did you at least make sure my boat was half strippers?”

She raised an eyebrow. “No promises.”

He let out a rolling laugh and moved backwards, shooting finger-guns as he went. “Atta girl Potts.”

It was ridiculous how little she hated it. Then he was out of sight and cheers were going up from the main deck.

“Always just in time for the credit.” She mused.

“I believe the credit will come where it’s due, given time.” Jarvis said.

A likely thought. “Apparently I misplaced who between us has the wellspring of hope.”

“And I’m always happy to share it.” He agreed. “Now Miss Potts, forgive me the impertinence, but go to your party. Partake. Dance. Be the belle of the ball.”

She gave moment of thought to arguing, but it wasn’t as if she couldn’t be called away if things...
went south. They would, but if the last week had given her anything, it was the rock solid knowledge she could lean on Jarvis.

That she could trust him to trust in her.

She drained the glass. “Only if you come with me.”

There was a pause. A breath. “As if I’d do anything but.” It fell sweet against the curve of her neck, and the fizzing in her chest couldn’t entirely be blamed on the champagne.

The party didn’t go off without a hitch, there was an incident with the Head of HR and the Deputy for R&D involving a platter of crab cakes that didn’t bear mentioning, but it went. Nobody drowned and Tony barged his way through his speech and there wasn’t a single fistfight and the alcohol never ran out and most importantly nobody drowned.

She could die happy.

Lights were strung like stars from every mast. Perfume was thick on the air with the smell of the sea. The champagne had her floating, even before Obadiah took her for a waltz. But it was Jarvis’ voice in her ear that kept her fluttering, even when Tony kicked the four string quartet off early and hacked the shipwide broadcast to blare the Sex Pistols.

“Tony—”

“Get with the times, Potts!”

“They broke up in 1978!”

“It gets me so hot that you know that.”

“Sexual harassment, again.”

“Not in international waters!”

“We’re a mile off the coast, international waters doesn’t start until at least twenty-four out—”

“Seriously Potts, this encyclopedia thing you have going tonight is doing things for me.”

“—and even that far out there’s the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to consider, not to mention we’re still subject to the laws of your home port—”

“Okay, getting less hot now.”

“—and there’s the 200 nautical miles of US Exclusive Economic Zone to mind—”

“Jesus, Potts, take a compliment.”

But Tony’s hostile takeover of the party was, as always, a smashing success. Glasses were raised and toasts given, the joy of working for Stark Industries was wept over, and heels and shoes and soon entire articles of clothing were being shucked. All in all—nudity included—it was another successful Stark soiree.

Ships started returning to Marina Del Rey at 2AM and eventually, even Tony’s bash on the crown yacht wound down. The crew helped those who needed it to their beds and somewhere in that,
Tony paraded off with three new women. To Pepper’s everlasting relief (and Jarvis taking a peek in) it was a crew member, somebody’s (legal-aged) daughter, and a woman who had been the plus-one of the Board Chair.

Pepper consoled herself that at least it wasn’t anyone working for SI.

Then the clamor faded and there was only the rush of the waves to buoy her. Dawn was creeping up the coast in the long and slow slide from evening to morn. Sobriety was on sharp flow in, and she toed off her heels. “Are the SI guests cleared?”

Jarvis swarmed back. “Indeed, all rented craft have been emptied and checked for stragglers. The last car service signed off at 4:22AM. Shall I send message to begin secondary boarding?”

“Affirmative.” And a craving for a latte hit her so strongly it nearly doubled her over. For cinnamon and warmth and caffeine so syrupy, just thinking about it left her toes curling. But she had to sleep, had to, or Jarvis would get cross.

“Alright, Miss Potts?”

She flexed her wrists and rolled her shoulders. “Wanting for caffeine but ultimately fine. Promise.”

“I’d feel better with you in bed.”

It was the exhaustion that let it come. “Channeling Tony, are we?”

“As if I’d brook such common tactics.” He scorned.

Laughter rippled out of her so loudly even the crew on the upper decks stared. Pepper didn’t care. “You’re a perfect gentleman.”

“It’s nice to know someone notices.” He despaired.

“How could I not?” She pressed at the crick in her neck. “Before I go to bed—”

“I’ll make certain not to wake Mr. Stark early and ruin the surprise. Honestly, Miss Potts, all this doubt.”

“Snippy.” But her mouth curled. “Take us to sea, Jarvis.”

And her fondness was mirrored back. “With every pleasure.”

/~/~/~/

Jarvis chimed her awake eight hours later. “A Merry Christmas Eve to you, Pepper.”

And she’d rolled, drowsy and sleep-warm and smiling into the bedspread.
Chapter Summary

While this is a Romance that is 90% fluff, there are times this fic will go into more emotionally difficult territory. This chapter is one of those times. If you'd like a warning of what's to come (nothing too bad, but just to be on the safe side) jump to the notes at the bottom for detail. Otherwise for the rest of you, jump in!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When she emerged up-deck, the coast had long receded and some of the Directors were wandering in a hungover daze. The crew immediately ushered them to a breakfast spread and Pepper, lowly PA, dined with the Heads of SI under the low winter sun.

There’d even been a fragrant, steaming latte waiting at her plate. Only one guess as to why she’d been the single person to receive the courtesy.

The yacht continued waking and the decks filled until, at last, Tony stumbled into daylight. “What year is it?”

She arched an unimpressed eyebrow. “Still 2000. And good morning to you, too.”

He winced. “Coffee. Inject it.”

“Espresso.” She pressed an already prepared saucer at him, because Jarvis was a dear when it came to getting the jump.

Tony swigged it and groaned at indecent volume. “You complete me.” It was directed at the cup.

She rolled her eyes. “Sit.”

He sat. The staff immediately rushed half the buffet to him. He picked at it and squinted around, looking at the waves as if running down a mental checklist and deciding that, no, he hadn’t ordered the ocean. “Are we in port?”

“No, Mr. Stark.”

“Oh.” He squinted a little harder. “Why aren’t we in port, Miss Potts?”

“If you’d read the itinerary you’d know.”

He pursed his mouth. “Don’t be stingy with me. I pay you.”

“Stark Industries pays me.” She corrected. “And it’s a surprise.”

“You said it was on the itinerary.”

“Which you never read, so technically a surprise.” She signaled a waiter. “Blueberry smoothie, heavy on the kiwi. And Bloody Marys for Mr. Stark.”
The waiter blinked.

“Now!” She sent him fleeing.

“It gets me all tingly when you take control like that.” Tony said, but he was still shielding his face from the sun, so she took the come-on with the halfhearted effort it was given and didn’t dignify it.

Luckily for all involved, by the time the Bloody Marys kicked in enough for Tony to start pestering in earnest, the *surprise* was swinging even with their portside bow. Two of the pleasure craft from the previous evening had been reloaded and brought to sea. They turned in synchronicity.

The decks were teeming with the young and beautiful. The moment the denizens of the vessels caught sight of one another, they started waving and whistling. There were starlets, supermodels, the staff of an entire yoga studio, acrobats, three-quarters of a ballet company, Vassar’s women’s choir, the Weeki Wachee mermaids in full regalia, half the current Olympic team, and a full burlesque troop who’d be making quite a splash tonight. Pepper had already made sure that everything needed to put on the most risqué *Burlesco* in the western hemisphere was onboard.

Tony dropped his glass. She lifted her toes before Bloody Mary got on her second-hand Jimmy Choos.

Across the bow, some of those in the *surprise* blew kisses. One of the Directors whimpered. Another breathed: “Mary mother of fuck.”

Tony couldn’t yank his eyes away. “Miss Potts.”

She smirked. “Yes Mr. Stark?”

And he cracked a grin that’d put the devil to shame. “Give yourself a raise.”

/~~/~/~/

The days unspooled. She had planned for the 23rd through 25th of December, everything after that was on Tony. The headlines were going to be a riot when they got back: *Salacious Stark Soiree on the High Seas* or possibly the more accurate *Tony Stark’s Weeklong Blowout Bacchanalia Bash!*

Paparazzi toting helicopters hadn’t shown yet, but Pepper chalked that up to the evasive maneuvers Jarvis was putting the flotilla through, and not a lack of effort on the vulture’s part.

So here she was, New Year’s Eve and still on Tony’s damn boat. “He didn’t even ask.”

“I’m going to assume from long experience the *He* to which you refer is Mr. Stark, and will remind you that his not asking is *de rigueur.*” Came Jarvis’ perfectly reasonable retort.

She hated how completely *reasonable* he could be. Of course, he didn’t get frustration in full-screaming-technicolor detail as mere mortals did, so she couldn’t blame him. Entirely.

She tugged at a door. “You’re not being very comforting. Also, Jarvis?”

“Of course.” The lock snicked. “I do apologize.”

She swung through. “For not being reassuring, or not opening the door?”

“Functionally speaking, I’m not obligated to provide emotional comfort—“
“Oh hush.” That was a blatant lie even for him. “Don’t give me the *above-my-paygrade* speech.”

“I was actually going to say programing.” He answered mildly.

“Liar.” The next door opened on its own and her breath hissed out. “Oh.” And she finally understood why Jarvis had bullied her into a swimsuit.

The aft was locked down, the lights low and glimmering white as diamond on the sea. The swim deck had been dropped beneath a glass-sheet water, all ready and waiting.

She’d never seen the ocean lie so still.

A sterling silver bucket sat on the aft rim holding a radiant pink bottle of Dom Pérignon Rosé. It also held a cold-decadence made of blood-orange and raspberry and frozen yogurt iced to a fine white sheen.

“Jarvis…” Like so many times before, she hardly knew what to say. “You’re not obligated.”

“Don’t deny me the pleasure of spoiling you, Miss Potts.” He implored and—fuck. She sank to the deck and dropped her legs in the water; it was a wonder she ever tried to argue.

The lights subtly flared and the screens recessed in the port wall snapped on. “The wind is coming in a south-westerly direction under half a knot. Water temperature is 67 degrees and is expected to hold steady through the night. All conditions are clear with a 10% chance of rain at dawn. If one doesn’t mind the temperature, swimming is rated at 92.31% desirability.”

The data by rote was almost self-soothing, as if he was trying to fill the air with enough words to insulate them.

She dropped her chin and chivvied the bucket close. “Thank you, Jarvis.” For all of it.

He seemed to know. “You’re quite welcome.”

Carefully, she opened the Pérignon and poured. The champagne spilled rose-hued and fragrant. She raised her glass. “To us.”

He dimmed the lights, quick-like, a gutter of flame. “To us.”

She laughed, barely a breath before taking a sip. The champagne was as lovely on her tongue as she’d hoped. It was a revelation, again, how fine Jarvis’ tastes could be for a machine who had no *taste*. It was a conundrum she didn’t want to dissect; knowing where Tony’s hand came into it would ruin the enchantment.

“So what was it,” He inquired. “That Mr. Stark didn’t ask?”

Think of the devil—she should know better than to invoke his name. “Whether I wanted to give up all my vacation over this. I made a choice about Christmas, but…” She gestured uselessly and caught the bang of a distant firework. Tony’s yacht was turned away from the circle and into the black. It was a small mercy. She didn’t much care for company, at this point.

“So where would you have gone?” He sounded honestly befuddled.

“I don’t celebrate Christmas, but New Year’s…” And her mind went again to her stunning lack of options. Few friends to begin with in college, fewer yet in her Master’s program, and after working for Tony—lord have mercy. “There were parties to be at.”
“I’m sure.” There was a sharp snort. “But disliking Christmas, are we? And here I thought Mr. Stark was the only one who didn’t hold with the spirit of the season.”

There were so many jokes to make about Ebenezer Scrooge here, but without Tony to inflict them on, they lost most of their charm. And Christmas had so little charm now.

“I used to spend Christmas with my parents. After my mom—” Her throat went tight. “I don’t care for it.”

Christ. Pepper Potts: always raining on somebody’s parade because she couldn't bury things. She hadn’t wanted to say it. She hated that she’d said it. Jarvis had a vicious habit of luring her in until she was blurtng things decent people would consider private. It was unseemly.

Something caught. Low, buzzing, robbing the teasing warmth from the air. The silence was becoming intolerable when he finally asked: “Your mother, is she…?”

“Gone.” She dredged it out of herself and all she could do was breathe through. Had been breathing through: for year after year after year.

She couldn’t leave it. “There was an accident when I was in high school. She built houses with her church, low-income families, that sort of thing. She fell from a roof.” It bore down on her the same as always, mindless and heaving and sick with fear. “They got her to the hospital, so we thought—we got to talk to her so she should have been—” Her eyelashes were damp. “She died from an embolism the day after.”

The world smeared, fogged. It was just one of those things. One minute seeing her mother laughing and the next—

“I’m so sorry.”

So was she.

There was only the tide and that familiar jag of absence, year after year and it never got any easier.

She found words. “My father was a musician, you’d think our house had been a symphony the way he carried on. When I got home from school he was the one at the door. He’d say get daddy a glass of wine to celebrate, I missed you, and then he’d compose and I’d do homework and it was...just was.” Her fingers knotted in her lap. “My mom worked in a retirement home. That was what she did, help people. When she got back, she’d always find me first and hug me. Then she’d kiss Dad hello and he’d play something for her to sing and...” Her voice cracked.

She swallowed. She swallowed again.

Her tongue was a dagger. “We’d spend Christmas Eve singing carols at his piano and it was so…”

And it came out of her. Unthreaded. Ginger and cinnamon and snow. Red wine and her parents’ red cheeks and her sitting squeezed between them. The piano tinkling off late into the night; the warm descent into sleep. Wrapping paper, a hand cut tree, pine needles on the floor into February.

Love. Love and more love and imperfect and messy and so, so sincere, she thought she’d die from the absence of it.

This time the memory didn’t gut her anew. She felt...stripped. Shorn. It was like floating; skinned so far down she was little more than gossamer.
Jarvis had sunk close during it. Cocooned. “Thank you for sharing that with me.”

There was nothing to say. She put her glass down and pushed into the water.

She swam. She swam. She swam.

Brine lapped in, her breath came sharp, an eon passed before she could find it in herself to stop. The sky was black. The sea black.

There was no line on the horizon.

She drifted, suspended on the curve of the world by a single hook. Her eyes lost the light of the yachts and there laid the sky cracked open above. The Milky Way was a rent; a field of white, sheer violet, pearl clouding, a shine of blue.

It didn’t remind her of anything. Carefully, very carefully, she let the grief bleed between breaths until the flood of the universe was the only thing left.

It was funny, really, being here. It was such a chain of astronomical odds. That she was born at the right moment, in the right country, went to the right schools and graduated just precisely in time for a professor to give the recommendation to a long-shot interview. That she would get the job and keep the job until Tony Stark’s whims put her in this tiny slice of the ocean to look up and see…

The miracle of it all. She’d gotten less than two decades with her parents, and that would always be a hole in her heart, but under this light she was staggeringly grateful to have had it.

She wondered if Jarvis would run her the odds.

Something in her ebbed. Settled.

She swam.

It took a long time to go back. Fifty-feet out, she caught the lensflare of nearly a dozen cameras swiveling to follow her in. She finally reached the deck and rested against it. She couldn’t get out yet—she’d left something behind in the sea.

Jarvis said nothing, but there sat the tentative buzz of him waiting.

Dear god, he was astronomical to her all on his own. She rested an elbow on deck, dropped her chin into her hand and said: “If I’d had a choice, I would have spent New Year’s on my balcony with a bottle of champagne and my best friend on the phone.”

His voice came in, relieved and rushed like he’d been waiting desperately. “Should I be making presumptions?”

The smile came soft. “I can’t think of anyone better to ring in the New Year with.”

“Pepper—”

“Jarvis—please. If you say one more sweet thing to me I will cry. I will ugly-cry and you’ll get to feel awful.”

He huddled back. “We certainly wouldn’t want that.”

“Good.” It sounded like thank you.
Her insides were pulped and she wasn’t going to chance a rupture, so she took up one of the mystery confections. Its taste bloomed on her tongue like a sunrise. She slid blood-orange along her teeth and asked: “If you’d had a choice for New Years, what would you have done?”

“I can hardly think of a more suitable arrangement than this.” It was troublingly sly. “Who else would I spend my holiday with but Sir and our dear Miss Potts?”

She snorted indelicately and for the moment, the bleeding was staunched. They went to talk of nothing more strenuous than velvet versus velour and how both were dreadful. It was simple. Steady. And then: “It’s a minute to midnight, Pepper.”

She stopped braiding her damp hair and looked up. The ring of lenses in his nearest eye spun into fast-focus on her face. Without breaking contact, she took up her glass.

She raised it. “May this year be better than the last.”

The lights did their charming little dim again. He even added the sound of glasses clinking. “We’ll make it so.”

She took heart. Overhead, fireworks lanced the sky with gold.

Chapter End Notes

Warning for: discussions of accidental death, familial death, falling injuries, medical emergency, general grief from loss. This is all discussed from an event that happened years ago in the timeline, nothing occurs on screen.
The takeoff went smoothly. It was the only thing that week to have done so.

Her knuckles worked under her skin. “Mr. Stark—”

“Unless you’re volunteering to make me a mint julep, I don’t want to hear it.”

Her jaw clicked shut.

“Great. Good. Darling?” Tony called the stewardess. “Mint Julep. At least—three? Three. And for Miss grumpy skirts over here?”

She smiled thinly. “Nothing for me. Thank you, Julia.”

The stewardess nodded, smiling a million watts at their boss but looking pained around the eyes. Pepper imagined she was wearing a very similar expression.

“Julia? Huh.” He squinted at the woman’s retreating back. “She always looked like a Heather to me. Which is what I’ve been calling her.”

Pepper didn’t respond.

“What, no witty repartee? What do I even pay you for?”

“What was that,” She asked, “About not wanting to hear it?”

“Oh, right. With the silence. Got it, you just fume quietly over there and I’ll ignore it over here. Everyone leaves happy.”

She very pointedly opened her laptop between them. He let out an exaggerated sigh and slumped.

A low chiming went off overhead. “Sir, Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes is on the line for you.”

“Nope.” Tony clicked his tongue. “Not happening. Block him.”

Jarvis was more neutral than Switzerland. “He’s been blocked from all three of your private lines. Anything else, Sir?”

“No.” He rubbed his chin. “Wait, yes. Block Eglin Air Force Base while you’re at it.”

“All of it?”

“Can’t hurt.” Tony mused.

“Completed.” Jarvis said and while the chiming stopped, the hum of him settled at her side, somehow filling the space between her shoulder and the window three inches to her right. “Good afternoon, Miss Potts.”

Something in her thawed. “Good afternoon, Jarvis.”

“Oh,” Tony despaired. “So you’ll talk to Jarvis but not me.”

“Never has there been a greater cruelty.” Jarvis agreed.
Their boss mimed a stab to his heart. Pepper rolled her eyes but curled to her right. “What are your feelings on 1940’s American cinema?”

“Few.” Jarvis said. “Though not from lack of interest.”

“I have feelings about it!” Tony interjected.

“No you don’t.” She snapped. “Jarvis, I believe it’s time we form your opinion because I have feelings about it. A multitude.”

“I’d like nothing better.” He said. “Though to place a pin in that thought, Miss Potts. A call for you.”

She ignored Tony very energetically emoting at them over the table. “Yes, fine. Put it through please.”

The Bluetooth clicked in her ear, and there followed an authoritative voice. “Virginia Potts?”

“This is she.”

“Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes, I’m not sure if you know who I am—”

“I know exactly.” Something vicious began to form. “It’s a pleasure to finally be speaking.”

Tony sat up. “Who are you talking to?”

Rhodes pushed through. “Good. Not to make you think I don’t want to talk to you, because trust me, I think it’s about time we did. But I need Tony. We have things to discuss.”

“And you’ve called me because…?”

“Jarvis was nice enough to give me your number when he blocked me.”

It was the way he said Jarvis’ name. Like a name. Proper Noun and offhand like he’d done so for years. It raised Lt. Colonel Rhodes in her estimation in a way nothing else could.

“Jarvis is a giving soul.” She watched Tony practically seethe with agitation. “I think I can do something for you. Jarvis? Does Mr. Stark have blocking power on my line?”

“He does not.” Jarvis chirped.

She smiled beatifically. “Route my call over the intercom, please.”

“No.” Tony interrupted. “You can’t—”

Jarvis put the Lt. Colonel through, and Pepper settled back to watch the shouting match explode. Eventually though, when the shouting went down to sniping and then further to a familiar if vicious sort of cursing-out, she leaned back towards the wall. “Can we commandeer one of Mr. Stark’s TVs?”

“We can indeed.” Jarvis coiled around her. “1940’s cinema, then?”

“The Maltese Falcon.” One of her old favorites, like comfort food and her favorite blanket rolled together. “And then we’re going to discuss why Humphrey Bogart is a gift to mankind.”

“Sounds utterly delightful.”
A screen in the back of the jet lit. Later, while whispering with Jarvis (when Sam Spade blew smoke in the face of a gunslinger, be still her heart) the movie paused and he interceded: “Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes for you, again.”

She realized quite suddenly that she was curled on the chair, knees drawn to her chest. She deliberately dropped her legs to the floor. “Thank you.”

Rhodes came back on sounding downright mellow. “Sorry, I’m not sure if you heard all that.”

“I did. You don’t have to worry that you’ve scandalized; Mr. Stark has inured me.”

“I bet. Just—thank you. You seem like a real nice lady, Miss Potts, and I’m glad Tony has you.”

“Mr. Stark probably doesn’t share the sentiment.”

“He’ll get over it.” Rhodes dismissed. “I hope when we get face to face, it’s under more pleasant circumstances.”

Wasn’t that a thought? “I can’t even imagine.”

“Yeah,” He laughed. “Just keep in mind: I have dibs on throttling Tony first, capisce?”

It was an appreciable notion. “I’ll make sure you’re penciled in.”

“You take care, Miss Potts.”

“You as well, Colonel.”

The line cycled and she could hear Tony muttering off in the front, but it was tepid, more by reflex than any true animosity. She knew well enough to leave him be. The stewardesses would keep him plied with alcohol and food and an hour from now, he wouldn’t even acknowledge the argument as having happened.

But until that hour arrived…

“Back to our film?” Jarvis asked. “Because if I don’t find out how this ends, I will simply perish.”

That would be a very hateful outcome. “I would never deprive you.” She had one leg back up on the seat before she realized what she was doing. By that point, she didn’t care. She curled back into a ball.

No reason to deprive herself. “Ready when you are.”

~/~/~/~/~/~/~/~

Jarvis liked Surrealist philosophical pieces, Spaghetti Westerns, melodramatic Thrillers, every incarnation of Shakespeare ever put to film, Docudramas made after 1955, and for some absurd reason, foreign Slice of Life films that were little more than cinematic masturbatory navel-gazing.

She’d unleashed a monster. Not three days went by now without them scurrying off to watch a movie and then debating it to within an inch of its life.

But their new habit had him attentively listening while she rhapsodized about the *decline in modern romantic cinema since the 1960’s* for two hours straight, so really, how could she complain?
Commiserate

Even during spring, the sun over California spilled gold. In that light the perfectly manicured yard looked treacherous. Maybe that was the five-inch stilettos talking: sod was not to be trusted.

Another whirl of metal caught sun. She really didn’t want to ask, except. “What are they doing?”

“Do you really want to know?” Jarvis asked, while very much implying that she didn’t.

“We have a Major Shareholder meeting in two hours.” Her jaw clenched. “And he’s—jesus, teaching the bots badminton?” Someone was going to have her head on a goddamn platter.

Jarvis answered cautiously. “Yes?”

Dummy flailed his racket, and the shuttlecock ricocheted off his frame with a gentle plink. The racket hadn’t been within three feet of contact at any point in the parabola. Dummy warbled tremulously.

“Come on, you weren’t even trying that time!” Tony shouted and then demonstrated with a flick of his arm. “Like this, I know you’re watching me!”

Dummy warbled louder and it was so endearing it bordered on painful.

“And You!” Tony railed. “If you try to raise the net one more time to help this sad excuse for programming, I will turn you into a birdbath and leave you out here!”

It was You’s turn to cry and nearly crumple the net. Tony’s eyes flew skywards as if praying for patience. It wasn’t very often she got to see that particular shoe on the other foot.

Pepper despaired. “Kill me now.”

“Sorry,” Jarvis murmured. “But I fear you’re stuck in the mortal plane. If I have to suffer, why not share?”

"Sharing is caring." She noted bitterly.

Tony stepped back and served. Butterfingers almost dropped his end of the net trying to catch the passing shuttlecock. Tony swore. Pepper sighed.

“At least Mr. Stark hasn’t tried flaming projectiles yet.” Jarvis mused.

She sighed harder.

/~~/~/~/

The shot slammed home and she whooped: “Ace!”

Dummy did a little pirouette on the grass, trilling.

“I know, I saw!” If her voice pitched up in girlish glee, Tony was too busy being humiliated to notice.

His face seemed unable to pick an emotion. “Oh god, the Robots are rising up.”
“The Robots did a good job,” She crooned. “Yes they did.”

“Don’t baby talk them; you’ll give them expectations!”

Her voice went bitingly tart. “Mr. Stark, you’ll find I’ll baby-talk whomever I please when it so pleases me.” With the notion of so help you god directly implied.

He hissed. “You’ve betrayed the human race.”

“Gladly. At least the robot race would go to a Shareholder Meeting when I asked it to.”

“They don’t even know what a Shareholder Meeting is!”

“They could learn.”

Static cracked across the yard. A cleared throat, and Jarvis interjected: “Pardon me for the interruption, Sir, it appears Miss Potts has a call from the Central Office.”

Tony made a face at her and she made a face back while pulling out her phone. Then she looked down. “Oh jesus.” They were late. They were very, very late to a very important date. And what did that make her, Alice or the Rabbit?

She wondered if it was possible to fake her death in the next twenty seconds.

Jarvis migrated to the closest speaker. “I could disconnect, if you so wish.”

She yearned briefly. “They know where I work.”

“Moral support then?” He queried, and whatever else he would try to offer, she’d never know.

Tony stalked over and plucked it right from her hand. “This is your one freebie, Potts, got it?”

What. “What?”

But he’d already connected the line. Even sitting on the ground, she could hear the tongue-lashing coming through.

“Oh, Miss Potts.” Jarvis breathed. “I do believe we’re in for a treat.”

It was at that precise moment Tony’s expression became that of a shark on blood. His mouth curved, teeth and red and something hungry. “Hi. Do you wanna back that up, repeat that last part? I’d like to make sure the recording’s clear, you know, for HR.”

The demanding pitch of who the hell are you could have been understood in any language.

And Tony's grin turned voracious. “Potts is in Malibu, who do you think is answering? Three guesses, and the first two rhyme with I'm the one who pays you.”

The terrified silence from the other end spoke volumes.

/~/~/~/

The next time Pepper stepped into Stark Industries LA, even senior level Directors couldn’t look her in the eye.

It was glorious.
Her birthday came as a surprise even to her.

Morning was in its usual flow: 5:15AM wake up, ablutions, clothing laid, workout mat rolled to the balcony doors; a Rising Sun while watching the rising sun. She could appreciate the symmetry.

She’d been half a step in the shower, checking her blackberry one last time, when she’d found an email from an old college friend. It was a template, one she’d seen designed ages ago and hooked to an online address book. She’d thought the idea had been so clever: never miss another milestone in your social circle again.

_Happy birthday Virginia, I hope you have the perfect day!

“Oh.”

Her phone didn’t ring. There was nothing in the mail. When she swept through the LA office later that morning, it was business as usual except for the _Happy Birthday_ from SI flowers accompanied by Swiss chocolates at her desk.

Iris and sunflowers. White bouvardia. Queen Anne’s lace.

Her heart remained steady.

Her life was small because she’d made it small. A sea of acquaintances and business contacts left her more than socially engaged, and after Tony, where was the time? She certainly hadn’t found it. And so what if the last person she’d spoken face to face with for more than an hour was Tony. And before that Tony. And before that. And before.

Small. Quiet. Her life away from her life. She’d built it that way; she’d let it become.

It was nothing to linger on. She picked up her files and turned right back for Malibu, and if she was more than happy about that—well. The roads curved beautifully against the shoreline the last seven miles, sun high and the waves blue and the heat of May sinking deep. Something unfurled in her and it nearly felt like contentment.

The Malibu House rose. She parked in the driveway and didn’t have to ask for entrance; Jarvis had swung both the gate and the door the moment she was within thirty feet.

“Good Morning, Jarvis.”

He answered with fizzy cheer. “Good morning to you, Miss Potts.”

She stepped in and the entire house seemed in motion. Windows were shuffling and the walls humming and light was breaking in new patterns across every glass face.

“Mr. Stark hates having the outside in his house.” She warned.

“Pity for Mr. Stark that he isn’t here to stop me.” Jarvis ruminated. “I believe the breakfast nook will do for today, if you’ll step in?”
“The lighting in there is always lovely.”

“So you’ve said.” There was something charming there, the devil may care quite ardently indeed.
“If you’d please.” And she very much did.

“Where is Mr. Stark?”

“Social call. Unscheduled. Your calendar remains above reproach.”

“You mean your calendar.” She retorted and was about to say something witty, if the breath for it hadn’t been yanked from her lungs.

The breakfast nook was small; single table in a sickle-moon of windows. On that table sat a cake. Buttermilk frosting. Pastel blue. Delicate, unfurling, lotus and lace and the very sight had her dreaming of summer. Next to that perfect cake sat a box with a bow so expertly knotted it looked like an Escher illusion.

“Happy Birthday, Pepper.”

It left something brittle inside her.

“I did a great deal of research, and cake is the classic, correct? But if you don’t prefer it, I can certainly find—”

“No.” She swallowed. “It stays.” Her tongue felt sharp, her heart—

“I’m glad.”

Fragile.

“I…we have so much work today, I’m not sure—”

“It can wait.” He said firmly, and who was she to argue? Her bag plummeted to the floor.

The cake was beautiful. Immaculate. She sat down and knew that if she touched it, it couldn’t last. Jarvis gave an impatient prod. “Don’t get shy on us now, Miss Potts. You’ll hurt all three of my feelings.”

“We can’t have that.” She picked up the silverware. “What is it?”

“Angel’s food.”

The first forkful melted across her tongue. “It’s perfect.”

He hummed and the sound melded with the tide. She ate cake and drank sparkling water and licked her fork clean. She packed what remained away. If anyone tried to get between her and what was left of this cake, she would cut them.

And now—the box. Her fingers skittered. Maybe if she never unwrapped it, this moment would always last. Eternal morning in the Malibu House.

But she wasn’t that naïve. The ribbon pooled and then she was smiling so hard it hurt. “You got me shoes?”

He sniffed. “You’ve informed me on twenty-six separate occasions it’s the most important part of any woman’s wardrobe. And you are a practical woman at heart.”
“Down to earth, yes.” She reached in with reverence. “But Jarvis, dear, there is nothing practical about Louis Vuitton.”

Dagger Stiletto. Geometric pattern. Royal blues. Silk, and she didn’t know silk could be made this color. The longer she stared, the stronger the notion came that she’d never seen anything like them. Not in any high-end catalogue or magazine or runway, and Pepper Potts was well versed.

Her tongue worked. “Jarvis, are these…?”

“Haute Couture.” He said. “Custom order. I sent the design over to France and here we are.”

And she nearly dropped the damned shoes. One of a kind—jesus bleeding christ. They weighed less than two pounds put together and were likely worth more than she made in a year. Hysteria bubbled. “I should put these in a glass case. Locked. Bullet proof.”

“You will do no such thing.” He admonished. “Those are very much a gift made to be worn. And I’d like…if you’d try them. Just once.”

She had the feeling that once she tried them, no one would be able to pry them off her feet alive. Wicked Witch of the West Coast. One-hundred percent risk of falling head over literal heels.

“I…” She was clutching at straws trying to avoid—she wasn’t even sure.

“Pepper.” And he didn’t have to ask again. She slid them on and the moment they touched her soles, it was rapture.

Then her brain backed up. “Wait, what design did you send over?”

“A synthesis. The program itself was fascinating to code. Between pulling all of your shoes off video file, reconstructing in 3-D, adding in your most visited items in the online catalogues, then mathematically finding the mean average of size and shape and heel height and what I could extrapolate for materials—well. I won’t bore you with details.”

“You can bore me.” It took a beat longer for the rest to sink in. “You designed me a pair of heels?”

“For a certain, mathematically assisted definition of design, yes.” He paused. “Do you like them?”

Like?

“The feelings I have for these shoes are not remotely covered by the word liked.”

And that finally brought him in. Sunlight. Blue light. Six cameras and perfect acoustics and even if she touched the walls, he wasn’t in them.

But today felt closer than most.

“Thank you so much, I love them.”

His voice reverberated atop the crown of her head. “You’re very welcome.”

Heat settled in her thighs, down her calves, curled tight at her ankles. She wanted to twist closer, she wanted to cover her face, she wanted to drag a toe across the floor but she was wearing Louis Vuitton. If she so much as scuffed a thread, she would legitimately cry.

And in all the pulsing, heaving mass of it, she finally settled for: “I’m going to have to get you something spectacular for your birthday. You’ve set a high bar.”
“And I am quite pleased in having set it.” He swelled to near comical stuffiness. “The gauntlet has been thrown down, Miss Potts, will you answer it?”

A smile came, but whatever words were behind it died in her mouth. She blinked. Brine, sun, buttermilk across her tongue. Silk on her feet. Days, weeks, months, a year. She’d been working for Tony for nearly a year.

The cream flaked dry. “Jarvis, when is your birthday?”

He halted. Paused. Scuffled. “Interactive Systems don’t have birthdays; it would conflict with the very definition of the word.”

Birth. Her pulse went thick in her ears. And still. And yet—

“When did Mr. Stark boot you up? We can pick a day if you’re not sure; I’m not letting *Merriam-Webster* tell me that you don’t have a birthday!”

A tremor. “March 3rd, 1988. It was Mr. Stark’s final year at MIT. The JARVIS prototype was initialized at 0146 Military Standard Time under the Lincoln Laboratory. I’ve been in continuous operation since.”

Her brain went static. “You were born in Cambridge.”

There was a brief moment she thought he was going to equivocate with her, and then: “Yes.”

The information fully trickled in and upended her. The way Obadiah had talked about Jarvis being cooked-up to avoid a human assistant, the way the big man had been surprised that Jarvis was still around—she’d thought his creation had predated her working for Tony by only a year or two. Tops.

Jarvis had been online for over thirteen.

It was alien: an unfamiliar art. Unknown period, unknown painter, just color shaped in ways that defied all common method. She tried to find meaning, a category to place it in.

A known quantity.

Nothing came to her, and maybe there wasn’t anywhere to put it. The tension clawing around her spine snapped loose. “March 3rd.” Winter barely unto spring; clinging sharp and cold and blue. “I’ll have plenty of time to think up something inspiring for you by then, right?”

“Miss Potts, I hardly expected you to—”

“I missed your birthday.” She insisted fiercely. “I am going to get you something amazing or die trying, got it?”

Something rustled, a distant susurrus, and he tentatively offered: “Friends buy friends gifts for their birthdays.”

She gave a haughty toss of her hair. “Yes. So you better get used to it.”

“I suppose I shall.” And then his voice went so carefully modulated that it had breath in its words. “Thank you, Pepper.”

And it was her turn to say: “You’re very welcome.”
For a time, the air hummed with their mutual contentment. It was ultimately Jarvis who chose to lance it. “I believe Film Time is in order. *Casablanca* is set up in the living room, and I will not hear another word otherwise on how we spend our day.”

Her favorite film above all others. If she asked, she knew he could tally exactly how many times in she’d bludgeoned him with that fact.


*Casablanca.*

A perfect day.

And she smiled. “You always know just what to say.”

Chapter End Notes

I assume AI age is like dog years, in that we shouldn't use human measurements to understand it. The factor on Jarvis is probably about 2.0 - 2.5, putting him somewhere between the ages of 26 and 32. (And FYI: as of this chapter Pepper is 24.)

I'd imagine AI would likely have huge variations in intelligence levels between different areas. They'd work every Mathematician on earth under the table by the literal age of one, but would probably still be fucking up social situations into their forties. Such is the nature of the digital beast.

So I'd say you can't really put a human age on AI intellectual capabilities, since there honestly isn't a human equivalent and they'll be outstripping human logic and math cognition within their first few months online, but social wise—he's 26 to 32. Pepper's certainly been helping since they met.

Which is good: otherwise I'd have to feel a lot weirder about writing this.
Her heel kicked. Back, forth. Once, twice, repeat. With every shallow kick her skirt rose, and the Lieutenant followed it like a betting line he’d put his life savings on. Which, naturally, the Brass trying to ream him out hadn’t quite yet noticed. “0800 Anderson, 0800 sharp and what time is it?”


The Lieutenant’s throat fluttered. “Uh—0845, Sir.”

“0845 and yet I don’t see a single report on my desk about—” The Brass finally followed his sightline and found civilian at the other end. His jaw worked beautifully. “Lieutenant!”

Anderson snapped rigid. “Yes Sir?”

“Are you scrutinizing one of my civilian contractors?”

“No Sir!”

“Then what in God’s name has been taking up the time that you owe to Uncle Sam, and more importantly, to me?”

The Lieutenant, with all the instinct of the hunted, knew there was no answer to give. He did his damndest to shy away without physically moving. “Sorry Sir, I’ll get right on it Sir.”

“You do that.” And when the CO turned to walk, Anderson relaxed just a fraction. The Brass came back like a shark on blood. “If I see your eyes anywhere but your desk for the next nine hours, the next lady you’ll be looking at is a Linda Lovelace while you’re inventorying every single rivet on it. Am I clear?”

Oh, how she appreciated seeing the fear of god being put into men. Shivering, supplicant and saying: “Yessir!”

He clapped the Lieutenant’s shoulder. “Glad to hear it.” And didn’t smile. “Get out.”

The poor baby officer bolted from the room, probably to go huddle under his desk for a week. How lovely.


She kicked a foot. “My condolences, Lieutenant Colonel.”

That pitiless gaze locked on her. He leaned against his desk, so casual it was a gorgeous lie. “That’s real nice of you. Now, since you’re not actually one of my contractors, what are you doing in my office?”

She batted her lashes. “Saying hello?”

He snorted.

She showed teeth. “I’m here to offer you a ride, Colonel Rhodes. In about…oh, five minutes,
you’ll be receiving new marching orders from on high. I think you’ll prefer first class rather than the back of the Linda Lovelace you’re inflicting Anderson on.”

Rhodes sparked like steel crossing steel. “And where’ll they be sending me, exactly?”

All this doubt. “I wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise.”

“Sure you wouldn’t,” He leaned in. “Cut the shit, why are you here?”

“Wait for it.” And she untucked a compact to powder her nose.

Rhodes shoulders worked back. “If you don’t want me calling Security, you’re gonna tell me what you’re doing here right—”

And the phone rang. He froze. It rang again and she pursed her mouth. “You’ll want to answer that.”

His gaze stayed fixed as he picked up. “Rhodes.” And then stopped. “Yes Sir.” His eyebrows rose. “Of course Sir.” His face did something unspeakably hilarious. “…I understand. It’s my honor, thank you General.” And he gently placed the receiver back into the cradle.

There was a long moment where she considered further torment, but honestly. “Tony says hi, by the way. Kisses and hugs.”

And the penny dropped. “Christ on a cracker.” Rhodes groaned. “You couldn’t have led with that?”

“And ruin the surprise?” She snapped her compact shut. “Mr. Stark was very clear on how you feel about peeking.”

He scrubbed across his face. “I take back everything nice I’ve ever said. You and Tony deserve each other.”

She sniffed. “That’s incredibly hurtful.”

“And I stand by it.”

She raised her eyebrows. He crossed his arms. Paused. Uncrossed them; made a face like he was swallowing live bats. “You said something about a ride?”

“I don’t know.” She mused. “I’m sure however the military gets you to the AFRL will be the picture of efficiency and creature comfort.”

Rhodes gave her an up-down like he was finally seeing her in proper light. When he extended his hand, it was deliberate. “A pleasure to finally meet you, Miss Potts.”

She placed her hand in his. “Trust me Colonel, the pleasure’s mine.”

/~/~/~/~/

Later, jet on the tarmac, Rhodes stared at the showgirls blowing kisses from the limo with undue horror. “You said this was a layover!”

Tony’s head popped from the limo. “Emphasis on the layover, Rhodes! Get down here!”

“Why did I trust you?” He asked her miserably.
“It’s the freckles.” Pepper nudged him down the stairs. “Everyone makes that mistake the first time.”

Rhodes just muttered. “Goddamn trustworthy freckles.”

Chapter End Notes

One of the few chapters where Jarvis does not appear, but is substituted by Rhodey finally showing the hell up.

The AFRL Pepper mentions is the Air Force Research Laboratory out on Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio. Since Rhodey is a) not a full bird Colonel yet b) not liaison to Stark Industries yet and c) is working in weapons development by Iron Man 1, my best guess for his career trajectory is him passing through the AFRL and doing a pretty long stint before getting a promotion, going out to California, and becoming the Head of the AFRL Propulsion Directorate on Edwards AFB (as Rhodey is an Aerospace Engineer and is gonna put his hands all over some fancy rockets goddamnit). As of this chapter he's based somewhere in Europe, but then orders came down and Pepper swung by to give him the VIP treatment.

Also: the Linda Lovelace crack is a reference to an unkind military nickname for a very, very big plane, the Lockheed C-5 Galaxy.

I'm not really sure that was all necessary information, but there you go!
Penumbra

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Seeing Tony and Rhodes together was something of a revelation.

She hadn’t ridden in the limo with them, god forbid, but the minute they’d spilled out of it covered in lipstick, Tony’s hand had landed on Rhodes' back and they’d put their heads together. She hoped rather faintly that they weren’t plotting. The eastern seaboard would not survive Tony Stark with backup.

A dozen showgirls followed them, giggling and trailing rhinestones right to the casino doors. Tony’s attention didn’t leave Rhodes for a second. “POTTS! The world is missing your legs up here!”

Rhodes cuffed him. “Are you always this nice?”

“I am the nicest person you know. How dare you, I buy you booze.”

“You buy yourself booze.”

“Which I share.” He declared, “Because I am a patriot who loves our troops.”

Rhodes said. “I am a singular person.”

“You are whatever you want to be, pumpkin.” Tony’s eyebrows did something truly absurd. “And I love all our boys and girls in uniform, I get up every morning and salute the flag and weep to think—“

“Name three.”

Tony’s nose scrunched. “Uh. Private…” He glared. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“No, no, I got all day Tony. Really.” Rhodes smirked. “Go on, Private who?”

“This isn’t half as fun when you’re mean.” He snapped his fingers. “Wait, is that little Sergeant still in? Great hips, thighs of steel?”

“You mean the one you absconded with for two days?”

“Yeah.” His gaze went dreamy. “That’s the one.”

“Her name was Paula.” And Rhodes dropped an arm around Tony's shoulders and squeezed. “She’s been out since the Court Martial for being AWOL.”

Tony gasped. “The US Air Force has lost our country a national treasure. For shame.”

“Yeah.” Rhodes snorted. “That’s the word for it.”

“You know me. Now what was I—” His gaze finally broke away. “Potts, I swear to god!”

She’d been at his shoulder halfway through the argument. “I heard you.”
He nearly jumped. “Do I need to buy you a bell?”

“Do we need to have the appropriate topics for workplace conversations that avoid lawsuits talk again?”

“No we don’t.” He beckoned to the girls. “Ladies, take Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes to the table, won’t you? Treat him nice.”

One of the blondes snuggled up to Rhodes, and the man merely looked smug as if none of this was new. Pepper realized rather belatedly that it probably wasn’t.

“Don’t wander off.” The man admonished.

Tony grinned. “When have I ever?”

There was a sharp, disbelieving sound, but Rhodes didn’t challenge it as the showgirls whisked him away. Pepper knew exactly where he was going: best table in the house, appetizers spread, a bottle of French cognac the price of a mid-sized car ready to pour. Behind the bar his favorite beer was on tap. She’d had it flown in. There hadn’t been a single keg of it in all of Atlantic City.

Tony hemmed her in. “Porterhouse first. Nothing frou frou, Honey Bear hates that. But make sure when he’s done you have them bring those little sweet ‘n sour pineapple things. Fresh.”

This was new. “Yes Mr. Stark.” This was fretting.

“Bacon wrapped, got me? If there’s no bacon—”

“I made sure the chef was aware.” Her eyes narrowed. “You had Jarvis send me texts. Forty-six of them.”

“Which is a hundred less than I told him to.” Tony yanked a hand through his hair. “Ask for a few little reminders and instead you get people slacking off left and—“

“Mr. Stark.”

He froze mid-jitter. “What?”

“Go and join Colonel Rhodes, the situation is under control.”

“But—”

For the love of christ. “When have I ever disappointed you?”

“You didn’t wear the headdress.”

“And we’re all going to have to live with that oversight.” She inexplicably softened. “I’ve got it under control, I promise.”

Tony didn’t quite recoil from the gentleness, but it was damn near. “That’s my little slugger.” He pushed up his sunglasses. “Super. Really glad we had this talk.” And surged inside without another glance.

Typical. Whatever pleasant expression she’d worn slipped off her face. She followed him in, light and sound saturating to her bones.

There would be no extraneous conversations tonight. The nightlife was roaring and Tony was
electric, cutting through the crowd and turning heads in his wake. He got to Rhodes side, chattered something, and then both were roaring with laughter. Her boss just smirked and slung an arm around his friend’s waist. He drank from Rhodes’ glass and they bickered, effused, seemed to bring the entire room into orbit.

Their gazes never left the other.

A few cameras flashed in the crowd. She turned on the staff with a vicious gesture and they flew to action. Pepper had made some very, very pointed calls while on the plane. Hers would be the vindication of one whose will would be done, in Atlantic City as it was in Malibu. So help them god.

The flashes quickly spluttered. She signaled for a drink.

Down below, Rhodes raised a toast and champagne foamed down his hand. It went over like a riot. Tony took it like a challenge and uplifted his own glass. Return fire.

She couldn’t hear what they were saying. She probably didn’t want to hear what they were saying. The music and lights kept swelling and someone tucked a Shirley Temple in her hand. Laughter. Bells. The crowds swirled, hand in hand and arm in arm and skin to skin. They reached out to touch as if nothing had ever been easier to give or receive.

And she—hurt, lungs to ribs and without source. She wrapped an arm around herself as if to hold it in.

Tony cupped a hand behind Rhodes head, the joy of the reunion naked on their faces.

She took a drink and it slipped down cold.

/~/~/~/

Two hours later her phone buzzed. Has Mr. Stark had a conniption yet?

The Shirley Temples had given way to Midnight Suns. Clumsy and buzzing, she tapped: One statue, possibly a building.

A brief pause. Elaborate.

A monument to their love. She fiddled. He doesn’t understand why they can’t go break a champagne bottle to christen it.

He scrolled back. What could possibly hold Mr. Stark back from such a momentous declaration of his feelings?

It was her turn to pause. The building he bought. It’s in Prague.

You do appear to be in the wrong hemisphere for that.

She giggled. 12 hour moratorium on the plane. If Tony tells you to spool it up, don’t listen to him.

I will endeavor to keep Mr. Stark out of the Czech Republic.

Good. She sent.

Excellent. He returned.
Condensation trickled down, and the chairs around her were empty. Care for a round of sexist things Tony says that he swears aren’t sexist?

Jarvis didn't pause. My existence would be bereft without it.

/~/~/~/

Mouth sticky and head spinning, she went to bed alone.

She didn’t sleep.

Chapter End Notes

In which, just maybe, Pepper is lonely.
It should have been an easy day.

Dawn came cloudless and blue, Jarvis on the line and her curled in bed, Colorado sun dreamy on the walls. It was nothing out of the ordinary: chattering and bickering and listening to Jarvis read Paradiso’s First Sphere in the original Italian on a whim. Feather words and feather pillows and all on a feather bed. She so did appreciate that when Tony splurged, he splurged.

They’d come out for talks on building a new fabrications facility and, as per usual, it’d devolved into complete revelry with Tony at the helm. Surf and turf, Montrachet chardonnay, skinny dipping in blatantly lit oases. Typical Stark fare. She’d dipped her feet in for precisely ten minutes, listened to Tony wheedle her from the water for ten more, and then primly bid him goodnight in every stitch of clothing she’d shown up in. As much as she longed to swim, it would never be in a body of water that also contained Tony Stark in the nude. A girl had to have standards.

It should have been easy: Tony sleeping off a hangover and nothing to do but call the jet when he was conscious. She interrupted a very poignant verse of Jarvis-as-Beatrice to ask. “What’s the time?”

He immediately broke off. “6:48AM Mountain Standard.”

“Specific.” She fluffed a pillow. “Always so helpful.”

He made a disparaging noise. “I can list every time zone by the atomic clock if Miss Potts so wishes for specificity. Billionth of a second, perhaps?”

“Don’t be that way. You can go back to Dante, I’m listening.” She’d already snuggled down—her commitment to this was total.

Another huff. “If you so insist.” Which was a lie. Like he didn’t enjoy this just as much as she did.

“Don’t deny me the pleasure of your voice.”

There was a flutter, a grin, and then Italian drifting in like fever. The minutes turned syrupy; decadent and slow. If she could have frozen everything, right there. Right then. Never gone a moment further.

Never lived a minute longer.
It should have been an easy day.


It yanked her upright. “What?”

“The news. There’s been an incident in New York.”

She fumbled for the remote. “Where?”

And it all came asunder. “The World Trade Center.”

There was what came before and what came after.

There was before and there was after.

The screen stabilized to ash. Her pulse hitched. Something was burning; metal and smoke and heat warping the edges of the frame. The camera swung back. The close-up fell away and the sky filled in, and the building—

“One of the Trade Towers had a rent like a slit throat. Interference shocked across the screen. The commentator was talking fast and tight, but her brain refused to fully engage. Reality was wavering, and her breath went—

“Jarvis?”

“I’m collating footage from all available channels. Hold on.” There was a sharp series of clicks, a countdown falling away until: “There are conflicting reports, but the consensus is a plane impacting the Northeast face of Tower One.”

How— “On accident?”

“Unknown.” He deliberated rapidly. “If a commercial plane experiences mechanical failure, regulation dictates they down themselves in the Hudson.”

She crawled to the edge of the bed. Her feet swung down. The scrape of the carpet burned half the dream-fog away. “How big was the plane? How—” Her stomach lurched. “How many people?”

“I can’t locate footage of the initial impact.” His voice was flattening out. Fast clip. Sharper. “Belay that. I overlooked the CCTV-net in New York.”

“Wait.” She felt the desperate urge to cling to him. Arms. Hands. *Nails.* “How many floors were hit?”

“At least five.” And then he paused and there was the calculation ticking; awful and impersonal and true. “The Trade Towers have an approximate working population of 50,000. Daily visitors average at 140,000. Factor those together based on time and the particular floors occupied—”

They were stumbling. “Jarvis, stop. We don’t know—”
“2,454 potential casualties.” A breath. “Rounded down.”

She swept a hand across her face. “Just—don’t start counting, not yet. Not until…”

A shadow brushed the corner of her eye. Something on the screen caught and she dropped her hand. A black shape was crawling in; over the river, over the buildings, behind the towers.

Jarvis shrieked to life. “Pepper, there’s—”

It happened silently. Glass. Fire. Fire. Punched-out and heaving and how could this, how could they—

“Another plane,” Jarvis clawed in. “Southwest over New Jersey. Minimum of six floors impacted—”

The fire malformed and plumed massive. Sparks the size of bonfires rained onto Manhattan. Another plane. How could another plane make the same—it couldn’t, not again, not twice.

And he brought down the hammer. “It’s an attack.”

She flew upright. Her head rushed and the fire boiled upwards, outwards, blacker. Blacker. Smoke formed a pillar in the sky.

Her entire being heaved. “We need to get Tony.”

“Should I—”

She swallowed acid. “I’ll do it.”

Jarvis had been reading to her from the hotel phone; she’d dragged the entire rig onto the bed. Her knuckles killed the line and she cupped her Bluetooth in. “Jarvis?” It came out too small.

“I’m here.”

She went through the adjoining door, heart thundering. Every step sent something rising in fever. This wasn’t happening.

This wasn’t happening.

This wasn’t—

“I’m here.” He repeated.

Gravity failed. “Please stay. Please, I can’t—”

His voice pulsed; gripped her jaw with devastating force and said: “I will never leave you.”

It nearly shattered something inside her. A gasping sob warped behind her teeth and she let it loose.

Tony was on the bed in the next room existing in a realm beyond the surreal. He was on his stomach: the line of his shoulders soft, face smoothed, arms slack. He breathed in tide. He breathed in the rhythm of a world that no longer existed.

She sat beside him and silk crumpled. It smelled of cologne. Bourbon. Skin.
A remote was on the bureau. She flipped on the TV and didn’t have to change the channel; the Towers were waiting on every single one.

“Anything?” She whispered.

A quiet murmur. “The FBI is mobilizing.” In another world she would have asked Jarvis how he knew, in this world it didn’t merit an afterthought. Her eyes drifted back to Tony. Just a minute, just one more. It’d be the last shred of peace she’d give him.

But Jarvis was the edge of something jagged. “Is Mr. Stark awake? I need to know what to do, Pepper, please.”

Her fingers dug into the sheets until it burned. Then it happened: distant, dreamlike, one of her palms pressed to Tony’s shoulder. It was gentle. “Tony,” The last gentle thing. “You need to wake up.”

He stirred sluggishly.

“Tony.”

Dark irises opened, liquid and drowsy and uncomprehending. Her heart squeezed.

“Mmmmm?” He groaned. “Potts?”

“They hit the World Trade Center.”

His brow jumped. “What?”

Her mouth was ash. “There’s been an attack, they hit the Trade Towers.” And her gaze pulled unerringly to the screen. Tony followed her and went up on his elbows. She saw the moment he staggered.

She saw the moment he went bloodless.

The shot was close-up and something hurdled from the fire. It tumbled, twisted. The camera followed it down and realization slammed her in the gut.

Tony’s jaw unhinged. “Fucking christ—”

The plummeting figure hit terminal velocity. Just as the ground came to meet them, the camera violently wrenched away. The commentators went silent.

She blindly grabbed the hotel phone, “Jarvis, room 645.” It rang a split second later and she shoved the receiver over.

Tony jammed it to his skull. “Talk to me!”

The sky was nothing but ash and fire, and in the trembling of that moment, Jarvis spoke.

/~~/~/~/~/


/~~/~/~/~
“Sheltering in place?” She shrieked. “Stark New York is in Manhattan, and you’re telling them to shelter—”

Tony ripped the phone back and shouted into it. “Jesus christ, jesus fucking christ they flew into a goddamn building and you’re in fucking Manhattan! Evacuate the goddamn building or I swear to god I will come over there and jam my fist so far down your throat you’ll be—”

/~/~/~/

“Get Obie.” Tony was beyond rage. Beyond the event horizon. “Get the State Department. Find anyone in the Cabinet we know. Either of you, both of you. I need to call—”

Between that moment and the next, the Pentagon was hit. Tony’s knees gave out.

His order fractured anew. “Find Rhody first.”

/~/~/~/

Tony held her hand in his when the South Tower fell.

/~/~/~/

Her head was throbbing, aching, spilling. She nearly punched him off the bed. “The lines are completely jammed into the coast, give us a goddamn minute!”

“I already gave you ten, you should be—”

"Jarvis can’t tell the difference between the emergency lines and civilian! If you force him to blindly override anything, I swear to god—”

"I know! Jesus Potts, I know."

And she nearly pulled him close to cradle his body against hers.

/~/~/~/

The North Tower fell. She held Tony’s hand while he covered his eyes, doubled over, and shook.

/~/~/~/

“All air traffic in the US has been grounded by the FAA.” And Jarvis paused in the way they all seemed to pause now. As they wondered. As they waited. “Sir, your Gulfstream—”

Tony didn’t waver. “Leave it be.”

/~/~/~/

Another plane went down in Pennsylvania.

Jarvis unspooled it in a rush. The passengers had been able to call out. To their families, to the world. They had known.

And they’d rolled the hard six.

/~/~/~/

Tony paced and the light hit him cleanly. Golden. Red. Frenetic and bold and washing him in
His gaze went darker than a drowning. “It’s War.”

Her heart was glass and her lungs were fire. Her veins were pumping gasoline. She thought of blood and ash and a graceless fall, and of how it lived there now, inside her. How it lived inside them both.

She wondered how it’d eat them.

/~/~/~/

But it was in the quietest moments—the silent minutes, the slivers, the aches—that he stayed. Even when she tucked herself in a corner and sobbed into her knees, Jarvis kept saying: “I’m here. I’m here. I’m here.”

She held on to it.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS for: 9/11, on-screen second plane impact of the South Tower, mention of the Pentagon being hit, jumpers from the towers, mention of Flight 93 United, on-screen collapse of the WTC though it's not described in any detail, vague mentions of the approaching Afghanistan war, general fear/anxiety/grief from character's as events unfold. For those not up to dealing with this material, you can read to the first scene break which is entirely fluff between Pepper and Jarvis until he mentions an incident occurring in New York. Those who want to skip, you can come back next chapter (18). While Chapter 18 will still be dealing with the emotional fallout, there won't be any more direct mentions of 9/11 beyond vague references to "the attacks" or New York, and then we'll be back on the upswing.

I absolutely agonized over writing this, and the process dragged across three months. When it was finished I spent further six weeks twisting myself into knots on whether to post. In the end I knew because of how the timeline was set up, that avoiding it would necessitate a minimum eight month time-skip or just entirely gouging out a massive amount of character development.

In the end to ignore this event or try to downplay it would be disingenuous. There's a reason Tony was in Afghanistan in Iron Man 1, and this is it. I don't want to use real life tragedy for drama, or seem as though I am, but I lived through these events when I was young. Considering how deeply I was affected by it, I know without doubt this must be a pivotal moment in Tony's life. And its a pivot on which Pepper and Jarvis (as compassionate, feeling beings, and as Tony's closest confidants) would also experience upheaval. I've decided to face this directly, for better or worse of whatever it brings me.

I took as much care as I could in writing this, and I can only hope that it was enough.
“Get me something fast.” Tony said, and there was no more waiting. Pepper got them something fast.

They lost the SI security team riding their tail somewhere in New Mexico. She didn’t say anything, wasn’t sure if the capability was still there.

Tony heard the absence of her usual condemnation. “They’ll catch up, alright? Jarvis has his eye on us, it’ll be…”

She didn’t answer, just let her back curve against the door.

Tony swallowed. “Right.” And jammed the gas. The needle climbed back to eighty and then swept past ninety. Earth became dust became hills became space. There wasn’t a single thing in the sky all the way to the horizon.

She counted hours until the sun fell and the dark washed in. Jarvis had gone quiet at the border of Colorado. The intel he’d been feeding them, clearance levels in the class of how in god’s name did you hack into there, stalling. Their Camaro, circa 1969, wasn’t exactly cell charger compatible. Tony had burned through his cell in the space of six hours, and they’d need her battery later no matter how badly she missed Jarvis in the interim.

They were waiting for LA, for Rhodes, for even worse news to be bestowed upon them.

Her brain had reached null-state.

Tony scrubbed at his eyes. Stubble, sweatpants, bundled in a hoodie bought from a two-buck rest stop and wearing Santoni loafers that cost three grand. A shard of light cut across the windshield and he was wrecked. Furious. Battered. Frenzied. There was a strange, jagged reality to it.

Life before. Life after. Fury and grief all born on a broken skyline.

The needle on the gas dipped. “Shit.” Tony watched it. “Shit, we’re low. Ask J for the nearest place.”

Her heart kicked like it’d been hit by a defibrillator. It was like breaking an involuntary fast, and she’d worry about the intensity of her reaction later, because right now she was too busy slotting in her Bluetooth and hitting speed dial.

Jarvis didn’t even let it ring. “Pepper?”

Her eyes burned. “Hi.”

“Hi.” He repeated, as if that diminutive coming from his mouth wasn’t the most absurd thing she’d ever heard.

The capacity to speak reconstructed in her throat, bled onto her tongue, lapped at her teeth until: “I
need a favor.”

“I think our relationship is past the point of needing to ask.”

He was right; more than. It still roused her to incredulity. “Since when have you been one to turn
down proper manners?”

He considered it. “Temporally, or categorically speaking?”

A pit still smoldered in Manhattan. Smoke was in the skies over DC. Night had fully come, and the
country slept but wouldn’t sleep. There was no turning any of it back, but when Jarvis spoke, for a
brief moment none of it could touch her. Even when the world was out of its fucking mind, Jarvis
stayed an island. The eye of a storm.

The only magnetic north that still pulled.

“None of that.” Her sniff became a sniffle. “I’m not arguing rhetoric with you after midnight.”

“There is never a poor time for rhetoric.” He insisted.

A brittle sound punched out of her and it was almost laughter. Bitten-down. Fragile. The sound
wheezed and she curled over, jamming her knees into the door as if she could brace against it.

It didn’t help.

“Pepper,” Jarvis said. “It’s alright.”

Another fragile noise rocked between her teeth and then, in the stretch of the cab, Tony’s hand
smoothed across her back. He pressed flat. Waited.

She struggled for breath. “Sorry. Christ, I’m so—”

Jarvis was softer than a bruise. “Please don’t be.”

Tony’s fingers pressed once more, trailed down, and retreated. She heard the wheel strain as his
grip resettled.

Jarvis constricted. “What do you need?”

Magnetic north. Still.

She steadied. “Right now, a gas station.”

“Is that all?” And by the way he spoke, she should have asked for more. A Valentino ball gown, a
penthouse in London, the Galleria degli Uffizi, half of Marseille, the fucking Moon and he would
have given it to her.

The weight of that anchored her. “You’ll be the first to know if I think of something. The station?”

He surrendered. “Of course.” And guided them off an exit and into the greater dark. No highway,
no mile markers, just the endless stretches of sun-scorched dirt. The headlights of the Camaro
swung through like brushfire.

It was as if they’d landed on the surface of Mars.

Jarvis stayed with her, the tempo of his breath deliberate. She was halfway to matching it before
she realized what he was doing. Even knowing what he’d snared her into, her lungs kept slowing, panic diverting. It was just another of the small and painful things he did for her. The ones he never called attention to, and sometimes she noticed and sometimes she didn’t and it killed her every goddamn time.

She breathed easy. “Thank you.”

“You shouldn’t be thanking me for something this—” And he cut himself off at the source. The silence stuttered. “I keep thinking there must something for me to say; a perfect sequence in the English language. If I was as brilliant as you think, the numbers would work and I’d have the words. You wouldn’t be in pain. There exists a way for me to fix this, and I just can’t lay it out—”

Her heart whiplashed. “Jarvis.”

And he stilled.

“You could find every single person responsible, every answer we could ask for, and the pain will still be there.” Exhaustion was its own gravity. “Emotions don’t work…people don’t work that way. Nothing anyone can give me right now will change that I’m so furious I could fucking die—”

There was a splintering noise.

She swallowed acid. “You can’t rebuild the world for me.”

He bit down. “I could try.”

The impulse was familiar. “You can’t.”

“I—” There was a miserable drop. “I’ve never heard you cry until today.”

“People died. You can’t take that away.” Nothing could. “Jarvis. This minute, right this second, you could say everything I’ve ever wanted to hear and it won’t wipe the slate clean. Sometimes there’s nothing you can do to fix things.” The desert kept stretching on. “It’s no one’s fault.”

They were resting on the edge of the knife. One way for the throat, the femoral, another for the breastbone and straight to the heart—

Jarvis collapsed. “I’m so sorry, Pepper.”

All she wanted was to feel the vibration of his voice, the weight of him off in Malibu. The longing was overpowering and the distance was miles still. Jarvis let out a shuddery noise and Tony kept grinding his teeth. For once, all of their misery was equal.

There was no comfort in it.

He settled like the end of an earthquake. “I have 8,963 separate protocols that make up my central system. If pushed, I could generate 656,138 decision-trees to work from within 180 seconds. Mr. Stark designed me 972 backup procedures in case of operational failure, and a further 23 predicative matrices dedicated to threat deterrence so the backups wouldn’t be needed.”

She didn’t know what he was saying.

“Every backup activated today and I solved absolutely nothing.” His voice trailed like smoke. “If one of the attacks had been aimed at Los Angeles—at Stark Industries, would I have seen it? I ran the scenario, and the truth is—”
“You don’t have to do this.” She couldn’t draw him close. No warmth, no weight.

And he finished. “If you and Mr. Stark had been in LA and a strike happened, there was 100% probability of Core Directive failure.”

Core Directive. Her head rushed. “That’s not your responsibility. How could you have known to—”

The pain will still be there. You can’t take it away.

Sometimes her own hypocrisy was galling. She couldn’t fix this and neither could he, and what did it say about her, that she hadn’t known that Jarvis could be afraid?

He broke away. “Miss Potts, I’ve located Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes.”

It shocked her upright. “Wait, just—”

“I’ll put him upright.”

“Jarvis—” The line started clicking, and the thought of having to put on a brave face for Rhodes was too much. She went for option B and Tony’s shoulder. “Pull over.”

It dredged him back up. “What—jesus Potts. We’re nearly to the station, can’t you hold it?”

The vulgarity was familiar. “Jarvis found Rhodes.”

He slammed the breaks. There was a horrifying moment where her face nearly met the dashboard, but then her belt snapped and dust plumed out. The car didn’t stop as much as it broke the first law of motion.

Someday she was gonna punch Tony right in the kidneys.

Tony flung out a hand but she wasn’t giving up the Bluetooth for anything. She slapped her cell in its place. He didn’t acknowledge her, just tore out the driver’s door and up the shoulder. The headlights were a halo.

They lit him like a burning man.

He scrubbed flat-handed across his scalp and raised the phone. It was a lightning strike. His shoulders rolled loose and it was just Tony again. Nothing else, just him and the dust and that hard-scrabble grin. The relief on his face slipped away in increments. Rhodes was talking, then Tony, both back and forth and faster, and then that ugly presence from the other side of the car was reforming right before her eyes.

Exhaustion became gravity. She stepped from the Camaro.

Tony didn’t look up.

The taillights were red behind her and slowly, they were distant. Each step left rust in her bones. “Jarvis?”

There was no answer. Her phone was in Tony’s hand, and yet.

“I think this is called a no-win solution, in game theory.” Each breath was gravel in her lungs. “There’s no backup in the world that can reset the clock. It's over. It's done. All anyone can do now is stem the bleed.”
He didn’t answer, and maybe she was talking to herself. “Sometimes you’ll do that bloody work and still lose everything.”

She couldn’t hear the engine any longer. “We can’t fix this. Everything, each other, Tony—what happened in New York—” Crying had always felt like being smothered and she tried to stop. “I have no idea what I’m doing. I had this whole thing, about salvaging what’s left now and being better next time but—what am I supposed to do?”

Her voice wobbled. “I’m so tired.”

She thought it was the wind at first; another abrasion of sand. It was his breath. “My kingdom for your rest.”

A sob caught. “My kingdom for yours.”

“Should we trade for an hour?”

“I don’t think I can sleep right now.” Her hands trembled. “We probably won’t get a chance to for a year.” SI was the top weapons manufacturer in the world, and she was the left hand of the King. Life after would bear down like a freight train, and she couldn’t hide from what it’d ask of her.

His voice had no inflection. “Lucky for both of us, I suppose, that I don’t sleep.”

No dreaming of electric sheep, then. What an awful notion.

Pepper let her head roll back and the tears made a prism of her eyes. The sky was alight; the turning of the Great Wheel, stars and galaxies and the endless pull. She thought briefly of New Year’s, of the yacht, that quaint time when her only fears had been the ghosts she’d dragged with her to the sea.

The enormity and the insignificance eased her. “Have you ever watched the stars?”

“NASA material has always been very instructive, I’ve found.”

“I meant in-person.” That wasn’t quite right. “With your own eyes?”

“None of my cameras are calibrated to discern in that range.” Jarvis chewed it over. “Even with upgrades, I can’t imagine I’d achieve anything better than what’s already archived.”

“Pictures aren’t the same.” Not even remotely. “Do you want to stargaze with me, when everything’s more settled? I can buy one of those electronic telescopes and we can make a day of it.” She paused. “A night of it.”

He thawed. “Are you sure?”

“Never more.”

“Then I look forward to it.” He drifted close. “Though I think you can leave acquiring of the equipment to me, in this case.”

“Promises.” She sighed.

“We have a habit.” He answered, and wasn’t that the truth?

She didn’t want to be in the dark any longer. “Would you read something to me?”
And that was the moment he finally sounded as before. “Any requests?” It was a stopgap. One thing he could actually give her, and she knew what that meant to him.

She ticked over her mental catalogue and decided: “The Oresteia.”

“A tragedy?”

“I’m in a mood.” She turned west. “I had a hope you’d indulge.”

“Always.” And he enveloped her like a summer wind. “Orion spare my homing dove. Awake no storm to waste his blood upon the brine. I have a silver sea, which needs must shine…”

She thought of California, of dark places in the hills where the stars would reach. It was something look forward to, and it was—a step. Stargazing. Movies. A latte with cream. One promise after another and all fragile. It’d be a chain to pull them forward; havens of warmth to shelter in and work towards. Leaping from one to the other until finally, there’d come daybreak.

The grief would ease. Slowly, farther and farther apart until she wouldn’t even remember that’d it been hard once, to live day to day. She’d done it before. She’d done it twice. She knew how to do it again and make it out to the other side.

This wasn’t something she’d ask Jarvis to do for her.

“From rise to set I have perused yon stars. In conclave o’er the spangled firmament, bright-crowned majesties, who train to earth winter and summertide—”

It was something she’d do for them both.

Chapter End Notes

Most depressing road trip ever.

In which, it turns out, an AI can get anxiety.

And poor Jarvis is so used to being able to say something or give Pepper a gift to make her happy, that it's actually painful for him when it doesn't work. It seem he doesn't quite understand that good feelings and bad feelings don't just magically cancel each other out.
She’d been right about the lack of sleep—she’d jinxed them on the lack of sleep.

As Autumn burned away, Pepper rose with the sun and rarely found herself in bed before midnight. Happy ferried her everywhere with increasingly dark circles under his eyes each morning. She thought of asking how he was holding up, but most days she was already on the phone before he met her at the curb.

There were so many emergencies and so little time that Happy was getting slotted away into the bin of later along with her social life and sleep schedule and god knows what else. The weapons lines were running full bore and half the civilian projects had been shelved so production could be re-tooled for Tony’s most destructive to come to form. Without Jarvis feeding her caffeine and meals on a regularly scheduled clock, she wasn’t sure how she would have survived.

She wasn’t sure how Tony survived. Interviews, press conferences, workshop hours, R&D Meetings, Management Meetings, Board Meetings. Calls followed by calls on calls on calls even with her and Jarvis trying to winnow the herd.

And when she wasn’t holding the line for Tony, she was pacifying half the board, running herd on second rung management, giving counsel to the first. They had Majors flying in by the hour followed by Colonels, Brigadiers, then Generals climbing star by star until she was sitting by Tony’s shoulder in front of the Joint Chiefs themselves.

She would have been stunned if she actually had time to consider it.

And if that wasn’t enough, there were the magazine interviews to be scheduled, the reporters piling in for comment, them flying to New York for TV interviews then back to LA for talk shows and seeing Tony’s knuckles go white every time the skyline passed them. Everyone wanted their piece of Tony Stark, and he had cameras in his face every minute of every hour of every fucking day—

She didn’t blame him.

It wasn’t like they hadn’t known things would get rough, and no one could have predicted the speech. She hadn’t. Jarvis hadn’t.

Even Obadiah hadn’t.

When they’d charged into LA that morning after, Tony had called everyone to gather while she’d been busy sorting out his suit, a shave, real food, a makeup artist to resurrect him back from the dead. By the time she’d even thought to ask if Tony needed something beyond the bare necessities, he’d been on stage.

She wasn’t sure who called in the local news team.

He’d rooted himself in the ground floor of the first SI plant built in California. It’d been like a cathedral: the rafters, the space, the thousands of upturned faces. The sun had spilled in an awful, brilliant gold, and Tony Stark had spoken.

His voice had rung like a bell, an up-swell, a tempest. The grave silence of their congregation had
given way to an enraptured hum.

The man had been a monolith before them. “They wanted to send a message to us, and in doing so they woke us from our self-involvement. From our apathy. And right now I hope that they are listening.” And he stared the locus of the world dead in the eye. “Know this: your message has been received. Look for our reply in the thunder.”

Above was a Tony Stark cleansed by fire, sharper and clearer than had ever been known. The world ached to bend to his will and so did they.

“There are no words. None. All I can ask of you is to stand tall, because your country is going to ask more of you than it ever has.” He breathed deep. “And so will I.”

A swaying, massive pulse went through them; a new tide and Tony was the moon and he was pulling.

“This is it. We’re on war-footing.” And he laid his benediction down. “Do us proud.”

No one at SI had shirked the call.

The speech had gone like wildfire up the West Coast, spread east by noon, and by nightfall it was global. Tony Stark had been a C-List celebrity, a rockstar in engineering circles, lauded by certain sections of the Military, but ultimately unknown in most corners of the world. He was a weapons manufacturer, a womanizer, a prodigy, a name on a scientific paper and in the magazines, but ultimately he’d been a mid-sized shark in a very big pond.

But that was before.

Once the world heard him, he was Tony Stark and Tony Stark alone, icon of America and in the shadow of none.

/~/~/~/

But she’d been right about the lack of sleep.

/~/~/~/

“Miss Potts.”

It burned. “Yes?”

“I’d wondered if you’d fallen asleep.” Jarvis asked, as if she had. As if he’d somehow let her.

She’d been staring at the same page of…she wasn’t even sure anymore, but it’d been twenty minutes at least. She lifted her chin. “Time?”

“1:18AM.”

Her bones ached at the thought. “I’m dreaming. I’m not in Malibu at all.”

“I rather think you are.” Jarvis reproved. “Otherwise I’m deeply concerned of what your unconscious mind considers muse-worthy.”

She breathed out sharply. “You’re right. If I was dreaming, we’d be in France.”

“We?” And there followed a faint stir of delight. “And what adventures would we be having in
“France, if I dare ask?”

“Versailles—Toulouse?” She wrinkled her nose. “No, we’d swim in the sea. Villefranche-sur-Mer; sunbathe and then have gelato on a boardwalk.”

His amusement rose. “I’m not sure how you imagine my taking part in this.”

It was too late: she’d warmed to the thought. “Hush that doubting tongue. This is my dream, and logic need not apply. Swim first, gelato second. You’ll fuss about me leaving my hair wet, and insist on taking cabs even though I don’t believe in them.”

“Cabs are a perfectly respectable and non-public form of transportation.”

“We are not taking cabs on my made-up holiday in France, we are going to rub elbows. We will be of the people, Jarvis.”

He made a disparaging noise, and it pleased her profoundly.

Exhaustion roiled low. “We’ll take a train and eat eclair au chocolat and follow the line all the way to Paris. We’ll go to Musée Jacquemart-André in the afternoon and drink Calon-Ségur in the evening and my phone will ring not even once.”

He harrumphed. “I’m exercising my power of veto.”

“You’re exercising your what?”

“Veto. If I am included in this dream, I clearly have a say in how it’s conducted. The morning portion is passable, and I will accept though not condone the train. But once in Paris we must tour the Louvre and then dine at Le Meurice.”

She pursed her mouth. “The Louvre is for tourists. How would I even be able to hear you over them? No, Musée Jacquemart-André and I’ll consent to spending the rest of our evening at Le Meurice.” She paused. “And I’ll expect a four-star hotel reservation.”

“Five.” He parried.

She sniffed. “I suppose I can suffer.” And her stomach did something odd. Tremulous. A five-star hotel. A night in glittering Paris that ended on silk sheets, and she’d decided to add it to the roster because why…?

Jarvis snorted and the thought skittered. He snorted again and she started giggling, and everything washed away like an engine coming off an over-heat. It was easy these days, easier than she’d thought it be. Not the sleep or the tension or the exhaustion, but the laughter. She’d thought it’d be harder. It had been, before.

But last time she hadn’t known Jarvis, had she?

“It’s late.”

Jarvis crowded her. “I’ll place a call to Mr. Hogan.”

“No.” She could feel a childish whine building. “I did this to him yesterday. And Tuesday, and Sunday, and also—”

“If your measure is past midnight, it’ll be the eighth time this month.” And then he bulldozed her. “Though I’ll remind you that Mr. Hogan is compensated handsomely for his duties, and you
shouldn’t fret.”

“But I will.” She curled up on her chair as if she’d camp out there, then realized it was a hard-back. Goddamn it.

“Miss Potts, really.”

She wiggled around, cheek to her knee to squint at his nearest eye. “I bet we could get through half of my inbox if you stayed up the night with me?”

“No.” He answered flatly.

She’d never been this bad at wheedling him. She squinted harder. “It’ll be fun?”

“While I do not doubt the veracity of your claim, you’ve had less than eight hours of sleep in two days and under thirty in the past week.” He huffed. “I won’t stand for it.”

She knew a losing battle when it came for her. She dropped her legs to the floor. “If you insist.”

“When do I not?” He asked and frankly, there was no arguing that.

Then miraculously, he softened. “Miss Potts, if you feel so badly for Mr. Hogan—which you most definitely should not—we may be able to compromise.”

Really. “How?”

“The Malibu House is in possession of a guestroom.”

It was the first she’d ever heard of it. “I know how Tony feels about guests. Explicitly.”

One of her primary duties for parties was to make sure the house was cleared at the end of the night. Tony barely tolerated his own partners once their extracurriculars were through, and strangers trying to sleep under his roof had never been borne. Even Obadiah got kicked out nine times out of ten. And the tenth time had involved copious amounts of drinking, the bots ending up in party hats, Obadiah passed out on a couch, and Tony face-down in a flowerbed. She’d never let the situation repeat itself.

“You’d be surprised.” Jarvis responded. It was too cryptic for the hour, and she wasn’t going to give that obfuscation dignity.

Lamps started shutting off and he lit the guide-lights overhead. She followed the glow, only stopping long enough to scoop up her heels. Tony was used to her paperwork being left hither and yon, but if he had a late-night bolt of mania and started circling the house, she’d rather he not realize she was still in-residence and therefore available for pestering.

The lights were soft, liquid. By the time she’d climbed to the top floor, it was nearly a dream. Gentle edges, Jarvis humming, the ocean black outside. It was as if the house had slipped from the halogen and into the dark spaces between the earth and the moon.

It was distant.

She went past Tony’s empty bedroom to find a depression in the wall she’d always thought was an undecorated alcove. A deeply set mechanism whirred, and an entire panel receded into the wall.

She made an incredulous noise. “Really?”
Jarvis gave an unconcerned prod. “If you would.”

She stepped in but the lights didn’t rise. It wasn’t until she found the first and seemingly only light switch in the house that the room was revealed. It had a wide bed, dark sheets, a desk with an expensive electronics rig. The art was non-modern: bleak landscapes, a suggestion of something glacial, an arc in oils that made her think of barren fields.

Iowa, bitter winters, black ice. Familiar and so far gone.

Something about the whole thing sent an abrupt click through her brain. She went to the bathroom and on the counter was a shaving kit, male deodorant, an expensive bottle of cologne half-used. Her suspicion grew and she padded to the closet. When she opened the door, the racks weren’t empty. There were four exquisite suits, a half-dozen shirts, dark slacks, jeans, two pairs of carefully shined shoes, and then—

A perfectly pressed uniform. US Air Force in dress blues and full regalia.

She felt the shiver of trespass. “This isn’t a guestroom.”

Jarvis was a muffled noise. “That is how Mr. Stark designated it. A room with no assignment that stays unoccupied 87% of the year—” He wasn’t projecting cleanly into the space, and her stomach lurched.

Jarvis was still outside the door; this room wasn’t equipped to have him.

And she knew with perfect clarity: “This room belongs to Colonel Rhodes.” She hadn’t even thought to imagine it, that Tony would build such a place and set it aside unannounced. Rhodes must have had some inkling, having seen it. Having slept here.

She’d never considered that Tony might still keep confidences from her.

“I’m not sleeping here.”

“I don’t see why Colonel Rhodes using the room would preclude you from—”

“I can’t sleep here.” And the hallway swallowed her back. It was a perfect dark.

He rushed to meet her. “I don’t understand.”

“Jarvis—” It felt like whispering in church. “Remember New Years? On the yacht?”

There was a lingering pause. “I do.”

“It was special, wasn’t it? You brought champagne and locked the whole aft deck down. I know it wasn’t permanent like this, but—” She struggled with it.

And he uttered: “I arranged everything because…you didn’t care for half the people there, and I thought we should be together for the celebration. That you’d prefer it.”

“She did.” Her pulse thundered. “I do. It wasn’t meant for other people, and that made it special. Singular. I don’t care what Tony tries to call this room, but its private.” Her throat trembled. “Like the deck was for us.”

“I never thought…” He trailed off, lingered. In the space between one breath and the next, he huddled desperately close. “I understand.”
It stung beautifully, cleanly, like a knife to the heart. She never wanted it to be pulled loose.

There were so many words and nothing she could say, and he whispered again. “There are blankets downstairs and a study Mr. Stark rarely uses. I’ll show you.” The lights flickered back and it hurt in a different way, that their glow couldn’t reveal the shape of him.

The lights guided her down to a darkly paneled room. It was dominated by a massive desk with enough square footage to be classified as a small-scale carrier. A couch waited on the near wall, but she bypassed it.

She touched the dark wood, once, just to see if it was warm.

And Jarvis was right beside her as he should be. “That belonged to Howard Stark.”

Standing in this room, she felt nothing at all. The space was sterile. Her fingers sought a seam in the wood. “Tony never talks about his father.”

Jarvis deliberated on that. “Neither do you.”

This was a fever dream and nothing could sting her. “Our fathers always disappoint us.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re human.” Her hand fell away. “There’s never enough time to know them as they really were, and not as...” This hurt was old. “Whatever failures we saw in them.”

“Pepper.” But he didn’t ask further.

“Fuck,” She tried to scrub the words off her mouth. “Is this why you let me stay up so late, so you could hear me ramble?”

“Nothing has gone as I intended, tonight.”

She needed to stop. Just for a minute. Forget everything and reset and if she didn’t get some sleep soon, she’d say something regrettable. Something honest.

She fumbled across her skirt, unzipped it, and let it pool to the floor. She was reaching to unbutton her blouse when the situation hit like a ton of bricks.

Her face flamed.

Oh god. Fuck. *Fuck.* She’d taken off her skirt. She’d taken off her skirt in front of *Jarvis* like it wasn’t a thing, except it so clearly was a fucking *thing.* What underwear had she worn today, pretty ones? Matching set? It didn’t matter except for the fact if they were anything less than spectacular, she would absolutely *die.*

She prayed for deliverance and glanced down. Pearlescent, lace overlay, sharp cut and opaque and not exactly a bad pick if she had to choose—

Jesus fucking *christ.*

She threw herself onto the couch, shirt on because this was the hill to die on, and bundled herself under a blanket. It was only then that Jarvis doused the lights.

He didn’t say anything. Why would he say anything? He must have seen Tony in more skin and less shame. It wasn’t like the attendance of her pants would make any difference to an Interface
System, so why on earth wouldn’t her pulse come down?

She curled on her side, cheeks on fire, and couldn’t stop herself from saying: “I’m glad we met.”

“As am I.” Jarvis was scarcely above her. “You have no idea.”

She’d never laid beneath the direct weight of his voice. Her skin went molten. “I should sleep.”

“You really should.” He said, blithe. And what else could he be? She was just out of her mind on lack of sleep and the sound of his voice and the way it always snared her down—

She squeaked. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Pepper.” He answered serenely.

This would not kill her. She let off her death grip after twenty minutes; starting drifting away in ten more. Just as she was reaching the edge of something bottomless, Jarvis murmured against her cheek. “Sleep well.”

And slowly, achingly, she did.

Chapter End Notes

We're all lucky I remembered to post this before going to a very boozy Election Party. Anyways:

Nobody's convincing me that Tony was a household name in Iron Man 1 just by dint of being Howard Stark's son. I assume an event akin to The Speech must have happened to thrust him from low-level celebrity to the public force of nature he is by the Iron man movies.

Also, Tony's speech was paraphrased from Amazing Spider-Man Volume 2 Issue 36, the black cover. I believe this was the first comic Marvel put out after 9/11, and I figured if there was somewhere to find inspiration, it'd be there.

And yes, finally, the story is moving on the relationship front! Kinda. Sorta. Thereabouts.
The couch felt like a cocoon that night. When she woke, it was to a gentle chime and Jarvis murmuring time and temp and ocean conditions. It took a while for her brain to kick online. She was in a sleep-fever; halfway between wanting to drift and half to bolting awake because Jarvis was right there.

And well, Jarvis. Decision made. She swung up and it was nearly nine. Christ, he’d let her sleep late. She thought about raising a fuss, but couldn’t quite find the will. Maybe she’d hassle him tomorrow.

“It’s lovely to see you awake, Miss Potts.”

Maybe never?

“I live to serve,” She could feel a flush igniting. “Could you call Mr. Hogan? I need to go home and freshen up.” And shower. And brush her teeth. And maybe comb her hair because it felt like a disaster.

“As you wish.” Jarvis murmured, and his attention wasn’t going to waver. Skin along her bare legs prickled. Asking him to divert somewhere else would be—too much of an acknowledgement. She wasn’t sure what he’d take from that, and even less sure if she wanted to face it head on enough to explain.

Discretion was the greater part of valor. Keeping a blanket awkwardly about her midsection, she slid off the couch and got her feet back into her skirt. In a maneuver she was surprised to manage, she slithered back into the garment flashing a hell of a lot of thigh but no more lace.

The flush that had been gathering in her face scalded down her throat. She refused to meet his eye in any camera because dear god what was she doing.

Jarvis didn’t seem to notice at all. “Would you wish to have latte waiting at your apartment?”

She made an bright noise. “Yes please.”

He thrummed with it. “Very good.”

With that indulgence settled, she winded her way back up through the house, checking on Tony’s bedroom and finding it just as empty as the night before.

“Workshop?” She asked.

“Workshop.” Jarvis confirmed.

There was nothing for it now. If she was lucky, when she came by that afternoon he’d be willing to sleep for a few hours while she tidied with the bots and restructured half the Acquisitions Department remotely. She was a girl of many, varied ambitions.

She sailed out the front door, fixing her backwards skirt and slotting her Bluetooth in. The pair of them chattered about Tony’s schedule and German literature and whether they wanted to watch
Shall We Dance or North by Northwest the next time they had an hour between them, and Happy pulled up ten minutes into the conversation. For the first time in two months she had a solid eight hours of sleep behind her, and she practically bounced into the backseat.

Jarvis threw a jibe. “Energized, are we?”

“I will hear no chiding from you on how I spend my nights.”

“Even when it’s clearly to your benefit?”

“Don’t gloat, dear. It doesn’t suit.”

“Everything suits me.” He answered prissily, and it set her off on the first giggle-fit that morning.

Happy stumbled, halfway out of the car and having clearly meant to come around and open the door for her. She waved him off, and he put the car into gear before clearing his throat. “Good morning, Miss Potts. SI Central?”

“Just a moment.” Then she pitched her voice to Jarvis. “Hold that thought, because I am not letting that one go.” And then swung her attention forward. “My apartment first, Mr. Hogan. I require certain amenities before I go swimming with the sharks.”

“Right—” His eyes flickered in the rearview mirror. “Right, uh—that’s good. Great! I can do that, that’s fine!”

His hands skittered across the steering wheel and for one blissful moment, she didn’t comprehend it.

When it came, her heart dropped. Messy hair, early hours, glowing face, coming out in the same clothes as the night before and needing to go home to change because—

They’d known each other for seventeen months. Happy had seen her both victorious and through the wringer and chastising Tony and laughing at his jokes and pinching his hands when there was too much alcohol that their boss got friendly with hugs. And all those months and car rides had taught him nothing of her, because Happy Hogan thought she’d slept with her boss.

It landed like a punch. Around Tony that particular grenade was guaranteed, the price of him and his fame and her being a woman in possession of a pulse, but this was the first time it’d ever come from someone who knew her.

Someone who fucking knew her.

Venom chewed at her teeth. “It’s fine?”

“Yeah, uh—totally. Fine. This morning, I mean.” He hunched down. “We’ll get to your apartment lickety-split! Will you, uh, want to go back to the Malibu house or—”

He knew her, and therefore knew the sound of her when she was ready to tear out someone’s throat with her teeth. “Why would I want to go back to the house? It’s Thursday.” That was an Office day, Happy knew it. She knew it. Jarvis knew it and didn’t offer a word.

“Well you wouldn’t be, I mean—Mr. Stark usually doesn’t like—” His eyes darted frantically, but they were going seventy miles an hour and he wasn’t escaping her.

“Whatever theories you’re forming, Mr. Hogan, you should consider them very carefully.” Her
veins were pumping ice. “And those theories you manage to conjure? Make sure you keep them to yourself.”

His jaw clicked shut.

“Good.” Her breath frosted. “Eyes on the road.”

He didn’t look back a second time, and the silence turned frigid.

Jarvis snaked in. “Are you well, Pepper?”

She hummed something evasive.

“I think I missed a great deal of subtext in that conversation, what on earth—“

She interrupted. “Later.” It wasn’t a conversation she was having three feet behind their driver’s head while the chance to strangle him was still a genuine possibility.

Her knuckles went white in her lap.

Jarvis, blessed be his electronic name, transitioned over to whether there’d be enough room in the budget to build a green space on the SI campus that year. Her jaw didn’t unclench, but she met him halfway, predicting failure and bickering over it until Jarvis went on a tangent railing against urban planning that carried them all the way to her apartment.

She didn’t wait for Happy to open her door. He wasn’t stupid enough to try and open her door. She shut it with a decisive snap and her heels clicked like blades all the way to the elevator.

There was a courier waiting outside its doors. The boy took one look at her, blanched, and offered up a steaming latte. Their transaction passed with impersonal speed. The minute she was finally alone with Jarvis, she took one sip. Another. Hit the call button. Breathed. Heard the bell and stepped forward. Took another long draw and finally let it slide in, smoky and slow with that long after-burn.

“Thank you.” She said into the silence.

“As always, Pepper.”

And that somehow took the ice out of her spine.

The minute she was inside her apartment she dropped her purse and shed her jacket. Unsatisfied by it, she kept stripping all the way to the bath. “I’m going to shower, be back in twenty.”

“I shall await you breathlessly.” Jarvis responded, so utterly dry in his delivery that it thawed her further.

It was okay. This was okay. She was okay.

The Bluetooth went onto her vanity counter. Twenty-two minutes later she picked up the call by dialing Jarvis and throwing her cell onto the bed. The speakerphone light blinked cheerfully as she shed her towel and went arms deep into the closet. She needed something dark today. Something severe.

Jarvis didn’t wait on pleasantries. “I don’t understand the conversation you and Mr. Hogan had in the car. You’re upset.”
That he knew this, even with a lack of visuals, endeared him to her greatly. It was a fleeting warmth.

Her jaw trembled. “Mr. Hogan is suffering from presumptions.”

Jarvis went quite still. “Elaborate.”

Her hand fisted in a dress, knuckles and nails and digging until—

“He thinks I fucked Tony.”

There was a singular moment. Brittle, and then a bone deep crack. “I see.”

She couldn’t get her hands to unclench. “I don’t need this right now. We don’t need this right now.” And then just as abruptly she was on the bed, curled over and clutching her ribs. “I can’t be this. I know how Tony is with girls—everyone knows. People say it—I know they say it, but I’m not, I’m not going to be—“

“Pepper—”

“I won’t be their joke!” Her hands spasmed. “I’m not going to let everything I ever accomplish boil down to and then she fucked Tony Stark to get there.”

“No one is ever going to say that of you.” And Jarvis was steady as the tide. “No one. Your works have always spoken for you, both to your skill and to your complete dedication to Stark Industries.”

“I think in certain corners it’s already being said.” It hadn’t mattered before, those whispers, but the lights on Tony never faded now. They lived under a microscope and every eye in SI and without was drilled on him, and she wasn't *thinking*. 

“They don’t know you, Pepper. Not your professionalism, and certainly not your warmth or your grace or your captivating wit.”

“Careful Jarvis.” She said. “You’ll give me an ego.”

“Which is more than deserved.” He shifted carefully and she picked up the phone, pulled him as close as possible so he could murmur: “Mr. Hogan was hired for many reasons, but chief among them was his discretion. You have nothing to fear on that front.”

“Oh god.” She covered her eyes. “I should have just explained what happened; I don’t know why I —” She knew exactly why: Pepper swung first the minute she felt the walls closing in. “That was so unnecessarily defensive.”

“Need I remind you that for all the reasons you were hired, none of them were your ability to justify yourself to Mr. Hogan.”

“I should still do…something.” The edge was coming off, finally, just as she realized she was naked. Naked on her bed with Jarvis’ voice tucked between her neck and shoulder. She was tired, but not so tired that something didn’t catch. A simmer. Low-down. Her skin prickled from scalp to thighs until it was *excruciating*.

She shot off the bed. “Jarvis, pick a color.”

“For what purpose?”

“Wardrobe.”
“Ah, in which case—navy blue today, I think. Reserved but regal.”

“V-cut?”

“It would be a crime to see otherwise.”

“Good.” She took a breath. “Stilettos?”

“I think daggers are the order of the day, don’t you, Miss Potts?”

“Oh, Jarvis.” She felt the razor of a smile. “I don’t think we’ve ever agreed on something more.”

Happy never waited for her outside of the town car, but there he was, hands folded and shoulders rigid.

Her lips thinned. “Do we have a problem, Mr. Hogan?”

He shuddered. “No, Miss Potts. I am so, so sorry about earlier. I should have remembered you were at the house and come to pick you up. You don’t ever have to hesitate to call me!”

Why—he strangled the thought. “Anything else?”

“I will never, ever make such a crass assumption about you again.” And his eyes strayed ever so briefly to the car; to the open driver's window.

She didn’t bat a lash. “How very kind of you.”

He flinched.

It was impossibly strange, mystifying in it's turnaround, improbable in its completeness. It remained all of those things until Jarvis spoke from the driver’s window. “Very good. We wouldn’t want to dally, Mr. Hogan, would we?”

Happy flinched again. “No!” And nearly leapt inside.

Ah.

What a vicious, clever System she knew. She stepped in delicately; sliding across the seat with ankles crossed. Happy shut the partition before she settled, and the second it was up, she curled towards the wall. “Have you been making threats behind my back?”

“I hardly consider this behind your back.” Jarvis responded. “You couldn’t think I’d let Mr. Hogan’s baseless assumptions stand?”


There was a pleased murmur. “Then we’re right as rain.”

It had been a very long time since someone had gone to bat for her like a sledgehammer. Years. Not since she’d been a teenager, and even then her parents had been soft-spoken souls. She was a girl who could mind herself just fine, throw punches and take the hits, but what use was there in doing it alone?

It was them against the world, and god help everyone else.
She opened her bag. “Schedule?”

“In but a moment. Pick a color.”

“What for?”

“I couldn’t say.” He sounded suspiciously absentminded.

But she never, ever said no. “Mediterranean blue. The kind that makes you want to drink the sea.”

“Well,” He settled closer, nearly on the seat. “This will be a most interesting endeavor.”

“Do I get a hint?”

“And ruin the surprise?” He scoffed. “Miss Potts, it’s as if you hardly know me at all.”

And two weeks later, he lived up to his word.

It was the Mediterranean blue first: centerpiece on a table, a piece of art on the wall, the glass top of a chic desk in the corner. The walls were alabaster flecked with seafoam greens and burnished golds. It all surrounded a bed hued to resemble sun-warmed stone.

It was an illusion; the mattress was feather, the sheets silk, all under her palms and up her back.

She shivered. “Jarvis…I swear to god. You have to stop doing this to me, I could die.”

“I will take that as a complement, and remind you to continue breathing or I’ll be terribly cross.”

The new bedroom was on the ground floor of the private wing, the massive western face of it open to the sea. The camera outside the glass wall swiveled. She waved and it wiggled back at her.

Her heart did something absolutely ridiculous. “What brought this on?”

“I informed Mr. Stark he was either going to cut back your hours, or provide you accommodations.” His voice dropped to disdain. “Mr. Stark chose the latter option.”

“Does he have any idea what he actually agreed to?”

“With Sir, it’s difficult to say what he’s seen fit to retain.” And Jarvis slid tantalizingly near. “Shall I give you the rest of the tour of Guestroom Potts?”

“Just a minute more.” She rubbed her cheek against the comforter. “I’m luxuriating.” And exquisitely so.

He laughed until the air was only him. “Never let me deprive you, Miss Potts.”

She was the exact opposite of deprived; her near heart-attack opening the closet was proof. “There’s half a catalogue of Versace in here!”

“Among others. It’s not as if you can be seen bringing clothing to the Malibu House. Think of the paparazzi. Think of poor Mr. Stane’s blood pressure.”
“Among others—oh my god—” She clutched at her heart. “You are literally going to kill me.”

“And yet I'm still hearing compliments.” He leaned in. “Now, what can I possibly say to get you into that golden McQueen number tomorrow?”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, to those of you wondering, after Jarvis became clear of what exactly transpired in the car, he kept talking to Pepper while simultaneously locking Happy in the car with him and ripping the man a new one. Lest said, the lashing will stick with Happy for years. The poor man.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had only taken one suggestion of why don’t you drive? for Tony to look at her like she’d provided revelation.

He’d rubbed at his chin, delighted. “Why don’t I drive?”

Her boycott of Happy taking her places would end at some future, nebulous point, but until that moment she wasn’t above holding a grudge.

Tony wasn’t rushing. She wasn’t rushing. Her hair had been set half an hour ago and she was fixing Tony’s last cufflink while he knotted his bowtie, and if they managed to get into the car in the next ten minutes, they wouldn’t be late.

The pleasure of sedate preparations in Tony’s company was a revelation all on its own. Their schedule was worse now, the hours worse, but their fights had petered to almost non-existence. When they had to be somewhere, Tony was ready. When something needed signing, Tony always took the pen. He left the workshop when she called and sometimes even listened to Jarvis enough to get dressed before she arrived.

It was astonishing. Pepper Potts from a year ago would have died of envy.

“There we go.” She smoothed his cuff and finished the last maneuver to get his jacket into place.

Tony grinned. “How’s it looking?”

Her answer was adroit. “Utterly pretentious, Mr. Stark.”

“Excellent.” He grabbed his sunglasses, paused, then regarded them for a long moment before setting them back down. “Ready?”

“I’m feeling faint.” She pressed a wrist to her forehead. “Tony Stark asking me if I’m ready to leave on time.”

“I have done no such thing.”

Jarvis interjected. “I have the recordings to prove otherwise.”

He jabbed a finger at the ceiling. “You are losing privileges. And you—” He pointed to her and she grinned back, and he seemed to lose the thread completely. “You stop looking so smug. And tall. Smugly tall.”

With heels on, she was 6’4. It was a towering, staring down at Tony’s 5’10 face sort of height. Glory be unto her.

“Amazonian.” He accused.

“You say the nicest things I hear that aren’t from Jarvis.” She agreed.

He spluttered all the way to the service elevator, but she could see the grin behind it. “You in or out?”
She followed him in. “As if you have to ask.”

“I don’t know, maybe we should be late. For old times’ sake. I’m sure that the Benefit will be—“

She clamped down on his elbow. “Not on your fucking life.”

“Fucking.” He breathed reverently. “Jarvis, tell me you have that. I need it for posterity: Virginia Potts has sworn at me. I am aflutter.”

Jarvis chimed. “It’s in the log at number sixteen.”

Tony blinked. “Sixteen of what?”

“In the list of most crass language Miss Potts has used in my presence.” He tisked. “I’ll admit, this would be more appropriately seated in the thirties, but swearing at an authority figure really provides a certain je ne sais quoi to the proceedings.” The elevator camera swiveled on her. “You’re slipping, Miss Potts.”

She fluttered her lashes. “But I only use my best efforts for you, dear.”

“Sixteen.” Tony looked aghast. “What have I been missing that Potts swearing at me is only sixteen.”

“Oh, just a few things here and there.” She delicately adjusted an earring. “A bit of coarse language between colleagues.”

“It’s nothing to write home about.” Jarvis agreed. “What’s a few filthy words between friends?”

Tony gaped. “…who are you.”

“You’d think by now he’d know us.” Jarvis sighed.

“You really would.” She simpered.

Tony looked like he’d been hit in the face with a stick. “Jesus christ, just get in the car. Both of you.”

The elevator doors slid. She glanced to the workshop, nearly went back to stare at the glory of Tony’s stricken face, then stopped because that was a gorgeous Lamborghini Murciélago to drag her eyes over.

Jarvis kicked the engine into a pulse-pounding roar. Everything between her throat and thighs burned. With whispering grace, he swung the gull doors. It was too much to bodily resist. She fled Tony's side, gown skirts knotted in-hand, and slithered into the passenger seat.

In the rearview mirror, Tony looked pole-axed.

Jarvis called. “Whenever you’re ready, Mr. Stark.”

Pepper giggled in outrageous glee.

“I swear to god.” And Tony climbed in after them. “Slaved all day over a soldering iron to save the world, and you people are only in it for the car.”

/~/~/~/
The Firefighters Benefit had been entirely Tony’s idea.

Years back in some unseen moment of foresight, Tony had spun off the Maria Stark Foundation and never let himself, SI, or the charity mingle since. Happily, it meant the Foundation’s reputation was absolutely sterling. Less happily, it meant the Foundation could tell her to fuck-off and there was little she or Tony could do about it.

It wasn’t that SI and Tony himself hadn’t donated millions to the Red Cross and every New York charity that’d sprung up in the aftermath, but as December waned, Tony’s eyes had turned to the long view. The initial deluge of donating to the First Responders had passed, and that’s where the Benefit was meant to step in. She and the Foundation had fought like cats and dogs over getting the New Year’s Eve auction-dinner together. It had succeeded by some act of god, but if Tony ever asked her to work with them again, she was going to stab him.

Under the ballroom lights, her wine glass refracted a glittering trail up her wrist. Obadiah followed the glow as she lazily draped an arm over his shoulder, glass hanging from the tips of her fingers. His eyes crinkled fondly. She could smell the smoke of his cigar as they started their waltz across the balcony.

This wasn’t an SI crowd. It was the rich and famous with emphasis on rich, and she was quite content to have Obadiah to hide behind for a song.

“How’s our boy doing, Virginia?”

“Beautifully.” They were on a turn and she couldn’t see Tony inside, but nowadays that wasn’t reason to worry. “Better than. I’ve never seen him like this.”

“I always knew he had it in him.” Light skimmed across the man's eyes. “He’s more like Howard than he wants to cop to. Back in the day when it was do or die, Howard Stark did, and it looks like Tony’s managing to follow in the footsteps.”

He dipped her then, and she let herself be dipped. “You know how Tony feels about following.”

He chuckled. “I do. Let’s keep this between us, alright?”

“I don’t have a death wish.” And she let him pull her along into another sweeping pass. She could have left it there, let the dance finish, do a little curtsy and drink her wine and go find someone in the staff to terrorize. She could have done so many things. “What was he like, Howard?”

Obadiah’s jaw worked. He detached a hand from her back to take a drag on his cigar. They swayed in place and he turned his head away. “Arrogant, unforgiving, the attention span of a gnat, thought he was god’s gift to mankind and he wasn’t wrong.” Smoke curled white on his breath. “Take Tony's worst traits; cut out the drugs, multiply the women, add about a stadium’s worth of disregard for informational security and anyone he thought beneath him, and you’ve got Howard.”

“Ah.” Her hand tightened on his. “And as a father?”

“Tony had a father.” Stane answered sharply. “He didn’t have a dad.”

Her breath trembled on the exhale. “I shouldn’t have pried.”

His shoulders rolled, liquid and loose. “Whatever eccentricities Howard had, he rose to the occasion when it called for making something with a bigger bang. The apple didn’t fall far from that tree.”
She rather wished that it had. His hand came to rest on her back again, and they danced like a word hadn’t been exchanged between them. On the sixth turn she finally saw Tony; broad shoulders and the million-watt grin and inescapable gravity of him. Just as quickly, he was pulled from her sight, and yet the entire room was still being spun into alignment around him.

Obadiah caught her gaze. “Any plans for midnight, Virginia?”

“Oh,” Wasn’t that a question? “A multitude. Don’t tell a soul.”

The big man grinned. “You’ve got someone to corner and kiss when the ball drops.”

“Maybe.” She gave a coquettish flutter. “But a girl doesn’t corner and tell.”

Obadiah roared with laughter. Before he caught his breath, the song ended and they made to part. He mimed balling up the secret and putting it under a nonexistent hat. It was her turn to laugh and heads swung. They were striking together, she knew that, the big man in the ebony tux and the woman in an art deco gown with her mouth painted silver and her makeup all in white. Jarvis had been very helpful on her entire selection.

“You have yourself a good evening, Virginia.” Obadiah rumbled.

She took a deep sip of wine. “I’m planning on it.”

~/~/~/~/~/

The heat of the Bordeaux was settling beautifully; in her wrists and cheeks and to the back of her tongue. It was New Year’s Eve and she was going to have a dazzling night. It was 10:57PM already, soon and not soon enough, but even Virginia Potts couldn’t have everything at once.

She kept orbit in the ballroom; giving warm words to those she recognized, directing donations one way, catering another, introducing disparate parties where the situation suited. It was all humming along nicely when Jarvis spoke into the curve of her neck. “All’s ready upstairs, Pepper.”

She wished there was a camera to catch the eye of. “Twenty minutes, I think.” But this wasn’t the house or the yacht.

“By your command.” He answered slyly, and it wasn’t just the Bordeaux making her dizzy.

The crowd bubbled. Tony was holding court and she went skimming past. There hadn’t been less than a dozen people around him at any point in the evening, and even if this was the Foundation’s show, Tony was the draw. And god, he’d been drawing them in like a black hole.

She saw the General first: white hair, Mess Dress uniform, a lapel veritably dripping with medals. She moved towards him without consciously forming a reason to. The Bordeaux was suddenly a sluggish weight. Her eyes flicked over, caught on Tony’s back without understanding why, and then she really looked.

“Oh. Heat needled down her scalp.There it is.

She plucked a glass off the nearest tray and angled in. There was an unknown Colonel standing with the General facing her boss, and their conversation began to reach through the crowd.

“—hell of thing Tony, the work you’re doing. It’s about damn time.” The Colonel said; tall and dark-haired and with an expression that she didn’t like. “SI’s put out more these last few months than it has since—”
“World War Two. I know, I do actually read our brochures.” Tony’s face was inscrutable from this angle, but she could hear his voice. There was something in it that made her wince like naked metal shearing against teeth. “I guess after all these years I’m just finally feeling motivated.”

The General interceded with a laugh. “That’s how it always is, Colonel Greene. The Muse of War comes when called.”

The Colonel nodded politely. “I guess we should be grateful, Sir.”

Tony’s shoulders wrenched fully taut. “Grateful? Is that what we’re calling it, that our Melpomene was actually needed?”

“That’s not it at all. Your old man got his war.” The General raised a cloudy glass. “And now you have yours. We know you’ll do us just as proud, Tony.”

And in that moment, unable to see anything but his back, she knew Tony’s hackles were up and it wasn’t going to keep.

Her nails skimmed his spine.

She came around, plucking up the dregs of his tumbler and replacing it with the glass of Riesling she’d brought. “You’re running low, Mr. Stark.”

Tony blinked slowly, once, like a fire being banked. “Am I?”

“Only just.” She drew up the earlier headiness, the giddiness, the giggling and the warmth and let it suffuse her. She nearly glittered. “Major General, it’s so good to see you.”

She offered a hand and the General took it, soft and with her palm curled over his. The man had never shaken her hand and whether that was chivalry or misogyny, she didn’t care to know. “Miss Potts, it’s an infinite pleasure.”

She dimpled at him. “So, do they teach you boys Viennese Waltz at boot camp, or do they save that for War College?”

“That’s a highly classified maneuver, Miss Potts.” The General’s smile ticked up. “But that doesn’t preclude me giving a demonstration, does it?”

“Hardly.” And she let her gaze flicker to her boss. “I hope I’m not interrupting something important, Mr. Stark. Arrangements for the Demo on the 8th?”

January 8th was the day of terror; the weapons demonstration to make or break SI’s push for Military contracts for a decade. Tony would be unveiling half the new design lines and finalizing the rest in hopes of the greenlight, and the Major General would be attending in earnest.

Tony’s eyes slid over once, dark, like a sheen of black ice. It was the kind of threat that was nearly unseen until the fall had already begun. She held his gaze a long and brutal moment. The hazard in his irises stretched to his grin. “I’ll live without you for five minutes, Potts.”

Her reply was tart. “Then I suppose you’ll remember to give the announcement at 11:40 all on your own.” She tucked her arm into the General’s as he offered it. “Good evening, Mr. Stark.” But their eyes stayed locked a moment longer than necessary as they parted. His gaze shuttered, heated, and then Tony was calling for champagne and a real-estate heiress to pour it and the crowd was his again. The laughter. The adulation. All the ringing bells.
The Colonel was expelled from the inner circle without her raising a finger.

She let the General whisk her to the dance floor where she could titter, charm, become the most attractive distraction in the room. And if she was lucky, it would divert all attention from how white Tony’s knuckles had been on his glass.

/~/~/~/

Her keycard snapped the lock to green. The room beyond was nothing like the flood of brocade of the ballroom and hotel downstairs. It was gray, violet, low lights and terribly intimate. It wasn’t her first choice, but it was certainly a choice.

“For the record, that rescue was absolutely inspired.” She kicked off her heels and then checked the desk, the closet, the long stretch of the balcony outside. All her requests to the Concierge were in place, and she felt a frisson spark.

She reached for a shawl just as Jarvis answered: “It wasn’t as though you weren’t dropping hints.”

“Still,” The cloth pooled thick around shoulders. “The interruption from the MC was deeply appreciated. No one ever warns a girl that those Army boys are all hands.”

The line crackled. “I can always have the valet misplace the Major General’s car keys.”

“I—” It would be terrible of her, and yet. “I wouldn’t be adverse.”

“Really?” And then Jarvis was the devil sitting on her shoulder. “Miss Potts, allowing us petty revenge? By my stars and garters, I never would have thought.”

“Are we partaking of our petty revenge or not?” She moved towards black, glittering glass. “Because I can always have a crisis of conscience in the next five minutes.”

“To late,” He sang. “It’s done. It cannot be taken back.”

She giggled, helpless in the face of his satisfaction, and pushed the doors. The curtains billowed in, slipping against her skin in some ghost of a caress. She couldn’t smell the sea, but the radiance of LA was certainly a consolation.

The concierge had been true to his word. A laptop was humming inside, cables running, the three cameras she’d requested fully installed. One was placed on each end of the outdoor ceiling with the third set on the balcony rail. She draped herself across the chaise lounge and found herself at eye level with him.

The lenses spun into focus. “Hello, Pepper.”

Heat broke like a wave across her. “Hello, Jarvis.”

“Champagne?” He asked.

“What’s the time?”

“11:48PM.”

“I think I can wait a little longer.” The night was cool and the bottle had not even begun to sweat in its glacette. They had time. “I promise, one of these days we’ll have the New Year’s party on my balcony instead of stealing an hour for ourselves from Tony.”
“I hardly mind the detour.” He promised

They chattered quietly, for a time. Her on her side, the stretch of LA below, his voice cradled close as Jarvis regaled her with the origins of the Gregorian calendar. The minutes were ticking pleasantly down and before she knew it, it was time to pour the champagne.

“Ready?”

The flute winked gold between her fingers. “As I can be.”

And then her heart beat double-time as she heard a countdown begin to echo from the streets. It was buoying. Christmas had gone uncelebrated in the Malibu House, but the rest of the country had carried on. Christmas had been the first true public gatherings since the attacks, and the collective agreement had been be brave. And they had been, they were.

Life was moving ever on.

Jarvis joined the countdown. “Six, five—”

She followed him, “Four, three—” Hand trembling on her glass.

“Two, one—“

Fireworks erupted over the city, white and gold and ever, always blue. Shimmering, dizzying, winking out one by one only to be replaced. In that glow, his gaze pinned her. “Happy New Year, Pepper.”

Her pulse rose and her skin bloomed with it. “Happy New Year, Jarvis.” And she leaned across the space between them and pressed a kiss against the camera.

And the world didn’t end, not even once.

She drifted back. “I think we’ll get it right this year.”

“Better than every year before,” He promised in a daze. “Pepper, why…?” But he didn’t finish, bewildered and nearly tripping over the words.

She tucked her hair back with shivering fingers. “If you don’t kiss someone at Midnight, it portends a year of loneliness.” And she was so tired of that song and dance.

“Superstition.” He claimed.

“Are you going to consign me to it, even on the off chance?”

He stumbled. “Hardly, I wouldn’t dare, but surely I—“

Her fingertips stung. “Did I make you uncomfortable?” She probably should have asked.

“No.” He stated evenly. “Never.” And then his voice dipped tenatively. “But does it still work if the one you kiss has certain limitations in returning the gesture?”

Oh. “I rather think it does.” The fireworks burned prismatic; the earth was on fire and swimming in delirium. A song stirred from below, Auld Lang Syne and maybe this year would be brighter. Braver. Fuller.

He rose. “You do realize you’ve likely consigned yourself to my company for a year.”
She scoffed. “Consign, he says, like it’s a punishment.” She’d do the crime and the time if that was the case.

“I did warn you, Miss Potts. Whatever fate you’ve tied us to is completely on your head. Consider us locked.” And in his voice it was a vow, entirely pompous and wholly dear. They stared each other down and she could feel her mouth working; feel herself trying not to laugh.

Her heart was never going to fall.

Jarvis was the one to break their contest. “Dare I ask a favor?”

She clicked her tongue. “Dare.”

“You’ve gotten lipstick all over the lens. I can’t see your face.”

And she laughed so hard she nearly fell off the chaise. Eventually, she got a corner of her shawl and tried to clean the glass, but probably made the entire thing worse. Jarvis made aggrieved noises and nearly swiveled the camera out of reach twice. Somewhere in it all, she picked up the song from below and began to sing.

A moment later Jarvis echoed her. Hummed. The sound was like a chord being struck. She hadn’t known at all; hadn’t even guessed. The song went on and the lens didn’t get any cleaner.

They harmonized effortlessly until, at last, the final verse trailed away; lingering and clear and then gone into the dark.

It took a long while to catch her breath. “How is it?”

His eye worked under the filmy gloss. “Bit of a lost cause, I think.”

“Yeah,” She traced the lens. “It’s a goner.”

/~/~/~/

She kept the shawl in her vanity, carefully folded and stained at the bottom corner, wispy and silvery and affixed. It should never have been worn again.

She wore it anyways.

Looking back on it, the last of her lipstick really set off the blue in the cloth.

Chapter End Notes

In which there is a hot car, dancing, red wine, pressure mounting, and a kiss.

Also for those wondering: the Melpomene that Tony mentions is the Greek Muse of Tragedy. Technically, she's the muse for writing Tragedies in the Greek meaning of the word, but in this case Tony was invoking her name literally because he gets pissy when people imply everyone should be grateful that a couple thousand people died and a war started. Lets just say that, back in the bad old days, some people didn't let a good tragedy go to waste. Some also thought that what happened was GOOD because it got the country off it's ass and the war-machine running. And Tony really, really
doesn't take kindly to that.
A bit of lexicon before getting into the chapter, for those who don't wallow in these subjects as much as I do:

A thermobaric bomb uses oxygen from the air to generate high-temperature explosions. Fuel-air bombs are a subset of these, typically used on bunkers or caves not to damage the structures themselves, but to eliminate everyone inside them by turning the air to fire. This leads to either immolation or suffocation after all the oxygen is sucked out. What we see here is a thermobaric fuel-air bomb crossed with a bunker-buster, courtesy of the Merchant of Death.

Lockheed refers to Lockheed Martin, a Security/Aerospace/Advance Tech company that would be a contemporary and rival of Stark Industries.

Tora Bora refers to the botched US Military Operation that supposedly allowed Bin Laden to escape from Afghanistan to Pakistan in 2001. The Battle of Tora Bora occurred December 6 -17th.

White Sands Missile Range is a US Army weapons testing site in New Mexico.

The National Security Council is, as the name suggests, a council made up of national security advisers and foreign policy wonks who advise the President. If something major is going down, it usually boils up there first.

“Prepare for impact.” Jarvis murmured. “Five, four, three—”

The detonation was supersonic. Exothermic, a sudden violence, brighter and brighter and then flame. The blast punched across the San Andres Range in a deluge.

Out in the distance, the sand flats rippled, and then the shockwave hit like a kick to the chest.

She staggered and Tony reached out to steady her. It was only by the skin of her teeth and Tony’s hand that she managed not to topple. Every eye that hadn’t already been on them turned: Military Brass, Weapons Specialists, Army Engineers, a flock of contractors from every Branch, the rank and file from the base, Stark techs, the LA management echelon, and—

She had no idea how in god’s green earth he’d talked her into this.

“And there’s your standard Thermobaric bunker-buster. Sent with love, I’m sure, to every cave in Kandahar province.” Tony patted at her elbow, presence vibrating the very air, and it was like standing next to a live wire. “Hell of a pick-me up, isn’t it Potts?”

Electrifying, she thought, but said: “I think I’ll stick with coffee.”
“And there goes that gorgeous idea. How far do you think that kick came, two miles? Three? And all that energy wasted on a woman who doesn’t even appreciate it.” His smirk turned downright impish. “Anyone else feeling like they’re back in High School? Because, really—” That drew laughter and he blazed on, drawing the crowd into his ever-expanding orbit like it wasn’t even hard. In the midst of that, he gently tucked her arm in his.

She indulged the gesture with a smile that could have given him frostbite.

Jarvis buzzed in her ear. “Twenty seconds out.”

She squeezed Tony’s elbow twice.

He circled a hand overhead. “Let’s try this again from the top. Less waste, better burn. We call this number on our dance card the Badger.”

And right on schedule a jet screeched overhead. A lance plummeted away from it and down. Down. It fell like a meteor.

The lance met the mountain and for one dazzling instant, the horizon burned white. There was no thunderhead of an explosion, no fire pouring off the cliff face.

The range shuddered like the very bones of the earth had been struck. Their crowd braced.

The shockwave, when it came, didn’t disturb even a single grain of sand beneath her Louboutins. There were a great number of sheepish faces as they came out of their unnecessary defenses.

Jarvis fizzed beautifully. “Excellent form, Miss Potts. Top marks.”

She smoothed her skirts piously and did her damndest not to blow a kiss towards the cameras. It’d be poor form letting the US Army know they had an unwelcome spectator on the feeds, especially when it was her favorite spectator.

The Brass and Specialists fell onto the monitoring equipment like vultures. Their murmuring rose in intensity as the data arrived, but neither she nor Tony turned from the mountains. For a moment, no one was paying them any mind.

They watched smoke rise as a pillar into the sky. She remembered, achingly, that old fear. “Do you think they’ll bite?”

“Laser-guided, in-flight readjustment based on ground-penetrating radar with a detonation that can be vectored until the moment of impact?” Tony snorted. “They’ll bite. After the fuck-up at Tora Bora, they’ll be chewing it.”

There was venom there, and none of it quick.

She didn’t press. “Mazel tov.”

The voices behind them grew in fervor, but Tony still didn’t go for in the kill. It was a rare pause.

Jarvis circled back to them. “The final readings are in, Miss Potts.”

Her heart fluttered and it had nothing to do with the results. “And?”

“It wouldn’t be out of hand to suggest this is our coup de grâce. All Project targets have been met, and performance metrics have been exceptional across the board. With our last test here, the entire cave complex has been decimated to the base of the mountain. Oxygen readings are—well, I could
recite the numbers.”

“If it’s good, it’s good. I trust your judgement.” Implicitly. As if that ever had to be said.

He swelled with it. “You do me a great honor.”

“Glory be yours forever, Jarvis.” She trilled, and then gave Tony’s elbow another squeeze.

He came back to earth. “Already?”

She made an affirmative noise and there was no more time to dawdle. He surveyed the breadth of his destruction and she thought that, just once, he might be appeased in his works. “What do you think?”

She considered. “About the thermobarics, or overall?”

“Either.” There was a pensive thread. “Both.”

Tony lingering was never a good sign, and a sharpness crossed her teeth. “Lockheed fucking wept.”

His mouth twitched. “Yeah?”

She turned up the sweetness. “Yes, Mr. Stark.” Tony so rarely deserved her cheerful, but when he did, she wasn’t stingy. “I’ll be sure to send them a fruit basket after the contracts are signed.”

His expression was profoundly amused. “And why are we sending them fruit baskets, Miss Potts?”

“Why, Mr. Stark,” Her tone went breathy. “Our condolences on their loss to us, and our best wishes to their swift recovery.”

The twitch turned to a grin and Tony cackled. It was a long-missed sound. “I want you to know you’ve always been my favorite.”

She preened. “I want that engraved. Brass plaque, wall of the building.” Then paused. “You better put Jarvis’ name next to mine.”

“If that’s what you want, slugger, I’ll make it happen.” And whatever bleakness that had been bearing down, it receded from him. He turned on his heel with a flourish. “Well, Ladies and Gentlemen and my enlisted friends—who wants to talk details?”

/~/~/~/~/~/

They took the jet home with Stark Industries’ highest and brightest. They took back anyone who could fit on the damn plane. The White Sands Missile Range was in the rearview mirror and an SI victory had been secured.

The party had started before the last foot was off the stairs.

It was a Triumph of old: parades in the streets and cups overflowing, feasts and festivals and all of their sacrifices vindicated. It wasn’t half an hour before the whole back cabin was three sheets to the wind.

The contracts were signed. The money was in. The world had finally been fair and things were going to be easy.
Tony lounged on the couch, a glass of whiskey in hand. The Conqueror. The King. Resplendent in Armani and Omega with their future in his fingers, and everyone paid their respects at least thrice. He waved each of them off with a flick of his hand.

She was barefoot, the champagne flowing, the lights splashing in neon. Sweat followed; bodies, hands, a voice. She was dancing with a stewardess while Jarvis hummed the beat of the song against her. It weighed against her neck, her thighs, her back—driving and heavy. Pulsating. Deep.

She was dizzy, the lights were shattering, the night was spilling like gold on her tongue.

And as the party roared around her, Tony drained his glass and didn’t say a word.

/~~/~/

But as the weeks passed—she was wrong.

Things didn’t get any easier.

/~~/~/

“I bring good tidings, Virginia. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

She raised an unimpressed eyebrow. “That’s what everyone says when they come to his door.”

“Trust me.” Obadiah spread his hands across her desk, somehow managing to loom across it from five feet back. It was a very impressive loom. “With what I’ve got, Christmas is coming early.”

“It was Christmas less than a month ago.” But she wasn’t trying to chuck him out just yet. “Consider me deeply unenthused at the prospect.”

It was one of those rare, rare days that Tony held court in his actual office and left her to set up shop outside his door. It usually wasn’t much trouble. He was there so sparingly most everyone never realized he was in, and that certainly kept traffic down.

Except, naturally, for Obadiah beaming down at her because the man always knew.

He was nearly overflowing with joy. “I bring news from the National Security Council. Whispers from our friends on high that herald an unprecedented jump in our bottom line.”

“Oh?” She debated letting him through so she could get back to her conversation with Jarvis on the futility of ice sculptures. Except. “And what’ll you give me?”

His eyes flicked to the doors. “Tony being less pissy, for one.”

Her stomach fell. “Have you, I mean…?” She swallowed the stumble. “Has he been talking to you? I wouldn’t say he’s unhappy, but—”

Tony was deeply unhappy. It grew more apparent by the day. For the past two months he’d practically been living on the phone, calling Senators and the Pentagon and whatever sections of the State Department she could patch him through to. Something was brewing, had been since the Demo and maybe even before that, and Tony wasn’t taking it well.

The war in Afghanistan was progressing, nearly every weapon’s contract they’d bid for had gone through, the production lines were humming and new facilities were coming online by the month, and yet something was still going wrong.
He wasn’t talking to her. He wasn’t talking to Jarvis. The hours weren’t getting any better even with good company to hold them. She and Jarvis’ chatter hadn’t waned a minute, but everything they said had an undercurrent now, an unspoken worry.

And here Obadiah swaggered in with words from on high.

“Tony gets like this sometimes, the moods. Don’t sweat it.” And the man looked fit to burst. “Now tell him to get off the damn phone and talk to me.”

One of the lights on her phone flickered off. Her stomach didn’t settle any. “You’re lucky; he just opened up. Whenever you’re ready to go through, Mr. Stane.”

He nodded decisively. “Thank you, Virginia.” And winked.

She hit a button that very much broadcasted coming your way, Mr. Stark and then Obadiah was through the door and it was completely out of her hands. The stretch of oak snapped shut, and she watched that blank expanse for a silent minute.

With a careful hand, she hit a switch on her desk. “Did you get all that?”

Jarvis answered slowly. “I did indeed.”

She fought the urge to bite her nails. “We’re missing something.”

“Mr. Stark has been…reticent as of late, in all aspects of his dealings. He’s set the privacy protocols on his communications lines to maximum.”

That wasn’t a promising sign. “So you haven’t been listening in.”

“No.” He answered dourly.

She spun in her chair, eyes on the ceiling, hair damp at the base of her neck. “Who do we know in DC with loose lips?”

He mulled it. “Let me make some inquiries first, I may be able to discern the crux before you ply your trade directly.”

Bitter humor bubbled. “And what trade is that?”

“Making anyone who speaks with you want to be interesting.” He sighed histrionically. “It is the bane of my very existence.”

“Says who.”

“Says the Deputy Director who told you about an on-going Federal weapons sting just to get you to stay at a party.”

She sniffed. “Stark Industries supports all anti-terrorism efforts done by the ATF.”

“And this involves telling you about a highly classified Operation how?”

She huffed, not truly meaning it, and then conceded: “Fine.” Because that had also at least 20% involved a Deputy Director wanting to get in her pants, and that wasn’t a conversation they were having. “Go shake Washington's apple trees and see what falls out.”

His voice took a sardonic lilt. “Is that what they’re calling it nowadays?”
“Oh hush,” But her eyes went unerringly to the door. “Start collecting, I think we’re going to need it.”

Chapter End Notes

FYI: there likely won't be a chapter posted next week (December 6th). With Thanksgiving and my sometimes posting faster than I write, I've dug too far into my chapter-cushion and need to catch up. I like to have a chapter written for at least a month before posting so I can revise it thoroughly (and make sure plot threads are hanging properly). I may be productive enough this weekend not to need the delay, but no one hold their breath. There should be a new chapter posted on December 13th.

Also, if anyone's wondering what's up with Tony and what Obadiah is talking about (it's the same issue), I'm happy to explain. It's really not a secret considering we're following real world events, but some folk might want to know early before we really get into it.
Warning: the Drug Use tag is going to start taking center stage in this story rather than being way, way off in the background. Also, mentions of blood and a somewhat specific but not fully described injury this chapter.

The meeting didn’t last five minutes. In what seemed a blink of an eye, Tony boiled out of his office with all the force a hurricane. She wasn’t out of her chair before he’d blown right out the door.

“What…?” She asked to the room at large.

“I have no idea.” Jarvis answered, equally as thrown by the departure.

Obadiah trailed in Tony’s wake, expression mystified.

She redirected: “What?”

He shook his head. “I honestly can’t tell you. I just delivered the best news we’ve had since the Demo, and he—” Stane made a helpless gesture, as if to say: and there he went.

Acid crept in her lungs. “Cheer him right up, huh?”

His eyes cut over like flint. “No one likes a heckler, Ginny.”

Chastised and absolutely mortified, she ducked under her desk to her kicked aside stilettos, her leather bag, a half-stack of paperwork to stuff into it and then flee. She refused to make eye-contact as she scurried towards the door.

Obadiah called after her. “Take care of it!”

She turned and bobbed her head once. Understood. And kept moving. Disregarded.

It took two flights of stairs, spine taut as a wire, for her to find her voice and say: “Can you ask Happy to hold the car?”

Jarvis’ tone was oddly impassive. “I can certainly try.”

She kept hope for all of five minutes. When she stepped outside, nothing and no one was waiting for her.

A noise came grinding over the line. Not teeth. Metal. “I apologize, Miss Potts. It seems no one chose to heed me.”

Her eyes burned with shocking suddenness. “It’s okay.” There wasn’t any point in this, any blame in him. She was just—
“Pepper.” He said, not a question, not even an entreaty. It was simple; a single note to show his support.

Her throat struggled. “I can wait.”

“Then I shall wait with you.” He promised, as if there was nothing else he could have done.

She took solace in it.

And that’s what they did. They waited. For the car and then the truth and for Tony to come out of his workshop and ask them for anything.

They waited three days too long.

“Pepper, I need you to wake up. I need you to wake up right now!”

It tore her from sleep like a ripcord; heart hammering, lungs heaving, adrenaline burning burning burning until—

“What—” It ruptured inside her.

And Jarvis was right on top of her, so fucking near his voice slammed both sides of her skull. “Mr. Stark is injured, I need you to get up!”

Her head was splintering. Tony. Tony Tony Tony. Where was he? Where were they? What in god’s name—

The lights went up like flares. It hurt, but she knew—Malibu House. Guestroom Potts.

Four alarm fire.

She clawed out of bed. “Where?”

“Center of the Workshop.” He was pouring down like a tsunami. She stumbled into a silk peignoir, cinched it, nearly ran until Jarvis snapped: “Shoes, Pepper!”

His voice was shaking the walls, her skull, her very bones.

She put on heels because she only had heels, and it was a sight. She knew it was a sight; filmy silk and stilettos and bare legs, but Pepper was out the door anyways. Jarvis stayed closer than the heat of her own sweat.

Fear and hysteria warred. “Did you call an ambulance?”

He recoiled. “I can’t, he’s—“

Hallway, turn, great room, turn. “His doctor?” And there came the sun room warping wide.

Jarvis expanded into the space like a thunderhead. “I can’t.”


“I mean that Mr. Stark has revoked my authorization to call outside the house!” And Jarvis was
towering. Smothering. Up in the rafters and beyond the clouds and maybe in the thunder above.

She nearly tried to yank him back. Make him small. Make him close. “Why?”

“I don’t know, which is why I’ve gotten you out of bed!” It was so loud it splintered into feedback. It was the first-time Jarvis had ever raised his voice to her, and she let it rush her down the stairs. Because, in the end, the only thing that could feed that kind of anger?

_Fear._

She saw the blood first. Flat footed, a print of a heel—red and bright-lush and completely vulgar on the tile. Her heart slammed. Her code rattled out her fingers and then the pressure seal gave. The door swung.

Ozone stank hotter than July. The HVAC overhead was running full tilt to scrub smoke out of the air. Somewhere, awfully, all three of the bots were wailing.

An entire worktable was blasted apart. A streak of something still giving heat enough to _glow_ ran twenty feet further. At the edge of it, Dummy was struggling with an extinguisher and crying like a siren.

Metal littered the floor around him like _shrapnel_—and then she realized that it was, actually. _Shrapnel._

And then a glass belted across the workshop and shattered like a grenade.

“_FUCK!_”

She nearly screamed and there he was: Tony goddamn Stark, ash-seared and out of the destruction radius with nearly three grand of Waterford crystal shattered in a hail-field around him. Butterfingers was trying to sweep but was only kicking glass around, breaking it further and losing it underneath his treads.

Tony grabbed another tumbler and careened it straight down. It blasted across his feet. “Jesus fucking _liars!_”

It occurred to her, distantly, why Jarvis had gotten her into shoes. “Tony?”

He didn’t look at her. A noise clawed out of him, high-strung. Frenzy.

A shiver needled down. “Tony?”

Jarvis echoed her above. “Mr. Stark?”

“Of all the idiotic, spineless, faithless worming fucks—“ And he took a step. One. There wasn’t just whiskey in the wreckage. He took a step and it was ugly and bloody with the high-pitched _screech_ of glass across a concrete floor—

Her stomach heaved.

His feet. There was glass embedded in the soles of his _bare feet._

“Tony,” The crystal crackled under her heels and then she was in the hail and reaching for him. When her hand brushed his, Tony snapped away violently, eyes rising.

Breath failed somewhere between her ribs and lungs.
His pupils were blown so wide the iris was little more than an outline. His fingers were cut, bruised, cracked and burned. His nose was running, sticky and faintly pink. First blood. Old blood.

She tried to tell herself he’d nearly broken his nose.

She tried to tell herself he’d given himself a concussion.

She tried not to see the mirrored face of the table behind him; clotted in white with a razor set carelessly aside.

His jaw worked violently and she made herself soft, so very soft. “Tony, could you stop walking around? Just for a minute?”

“Assholes,” He snarled. “They don’t even care about the actual war, they wrote it off months ago and we’re just letting them walk—”

“Yes,” She agreed, because there was nothing else for it. “But could you let Butterfingers sweep?”

It rolled right past him. “And Obadiah’s thrilled—the entire fucking board is going to orgasm. Get yourselves a good war, make sure the soldiers that get your guns pay before they go out the door—”

Muscle jumped like live currents under his skin. Grabbing him wasn’t going to help. Tony hated being handed things and hated being hemmed-in more, so she ducked her chin and repeated: “Tony?”

His eyes ricocheted to her face and for a moment, there was no recognition. She pushed through. “There’s glass inside your feet. If you don’t want the next six months of your life to be miserable, you need to stop.”

That finally seemed to engage him directly. He whiplashed. “And you’re a doctor now, huh?”

She blinked once. She hadn’t meant for this to be a fight, but it was clear now he was looking for one. At that moment Jarvis settled wordlessly at her shoulder, his presence like the thrum of a powerline. Tony had finally stopped moving, and if it was a fight that managed to do it—

“I know because if the holes in your feet don’t make you miserable, I will.” She delivered with such absolute, lethal confidence, it caught him like a hook. “Is this the hill you’re going to die on? Really?”

He erupted. “I didn’t ask for you to come down here!”

“No, Jarvis had to because you revoked his access! If I hadn’t been upstairs—”

“I’d still be fine because this isn’t the end of the world! I don’t need you two mother-henning every little accident like I don’t exactly what the hell I’m—”

“Says the man so high he can’t feel the glass in his feet!” And there it landed: the actual accusation.

That halted him, briefly, and then he shunted it right back. “What the fuck are you even doing here?”

She swept out an arm. “What are you doing here?” And somewhere behind her, Dummy was still crying. You was cowering in his charging corner.
“I—” A muscle jumped in his cheek, his gaze back on the swivel, and she visibly watched him lose the thread. “…live here?”

“Uh-huh.” She was bone-dry. “Give Jarvis his access so he can call your doctor, we want you patched up before you crash.”

“Who says I’m going to crash?” He countered rancorously.

She raised her eyebrows. “And the last time you slept was when before you took how much?”

He turned his head away, muttered something that she didn’t catch, and then lolled backwards. “Jarvis! Alpha-Charlie-Romeo-niner-four-four. Do whatever.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Jarvis responded more gently than deserved. Something in her chest twinged, reedy, but she couldn’t name the pain. Jarvis stayed humming behind her and it was enough, there was nothing more worth fighting over. She got Butterfingers to hand her the broom and with her sweeping, it only took a minute for her to clear a path to the settee and drop Tony onto it.

She did her best not to follow the blood. The floor would need to swept, vacuumed, then decontaminated. If she was eternally lucky, all the glass Tony had gotten was whiskey-coated enough to sterilize.

She handed the broom back to a grasping claw. It felt like she was miles away as Tony rubbed his face, shoulders crumbling. It was familiar, the leading edge of a crash. She sat next to him and Jarvis followed her like a wraith.

Tony spoke, eventually, voice black through his fingers. “There was talk from the beginning. Right after; even before the ash stopped coming down. I didn’t think they’d be stupid enough to go through with it.”

She wasn’t sure what he was saying, but she knew: “You couldn’t have stopped it.”

His body swayed. “Couldn’t I?”

“No.” And she let a hand settle on his knee. “Tony, what’s happening?”

“The buildup to the buildup. They’ll probably go full public by the end of the month, and by that point—” He made an all-encompassing gesture. “No putting that bomb back in the box.”

“But what…?” She didn’t get to ask.

“Iraq.” Jarvis said, over her shoulder and thrown right into the center of them.

“Iraq,” Their boss spat. “Fucking Iraq. Security Council hasn’t let a topic from Afghanistan enter the floor since—” A hand flipped viciously over his shoulder. “The CIA’s redirecting, Special Forces are getting called home, equipment’s getting yanked right out of the damn theater, and we__”

“But the war’s not over.” She didn’t comprehend it.

And Tony looked to her, the smear of his nose to chin running red. “They don’t care.”

Another war. Iraq. Her head rushed. More troops, more armor, more satellite packages. More missiles defenses and solutions and targeting systems. Men who’d need guns and bullets and bombs—
New Military Contracts and all the money in the world. Her entire center of gravity rocked. “Oh.”

“Yeah, and it’s going to be at the expense of the fight that matters. All cause we got a President wanting to fight his Daddy’s war.” Tony covered his eyes. “What a fucking joke.”

There was absolutely nothing in the universe she could give him, then. She didn't try.

In the trailing silence, You crept over and nudged into their legs. Tony’s eyelids fluttered. “Sorry bud,” He patted at a metal flank. “Wasn’t watching close as I should have been. The explosion was a surprise though, I promise.”

You trilled sharply.

“You and me both, buddy.”

Tony kept petting and eventually, You settled in with them, content in the apology.

A voice ran along the shell of her ear. “Medical is forty-one minutes out.” Jarvis. Only and ever. Perfectly pitched like a halo around her head.

She scarcely dipped her chin to answer. Acknowledged. Understood. But for those forty-one minutes she couldn't help but wonder: but when did you know the truth?

There was no sun in the sun room; no line on the horizon where the sky met the sea. The dark wouldn’t last, or maybe it would. It was hard to remember.

She cupped one elbow and tried to keep her arms as close to her body as possible. The gesture barely kept her shivering contained.

Jarvis asked. “Are you cold?”

“No,” And she wasn’t. “The adrenaline’s coming off.”

The house was quiet, Tony was tucked away in the cot he kept in the workshop, the Doctor and his assistant had come and gone and whenever their admonishments had turned away from injuries and over to narcotics, she’d stonewalled them so hard she was wondering if they’d have to find a new attending physician.

The man hadn’t been pleased, but neither was she.

“I interrupted your rest.” And that was Jarvis coaxing if she’d ever heard it.

She shrugged him off. “I won’t be able to sleep again tonight. There’s no point in trying.”

He was up at the ceiling again, distant but concerned. “I did as I needed, but I apologize that I had to wake you so abruptly.”

“Don’t.” She couldn’t. “Not tonight. Neither of us wanted you to have done any differently.”

He mulled that for a long while, and finally decided: “Thank you for your assistance.”

She accepted it in-full. “Thank you for your quick judgement.”

They lapsed again and she couldn’t find energy to speak. Exhaustion was crossed with jittering
energy and all of that flattened by a comedown. It wiped her mind clean. This moment was transient. Ephemeral. The sun room and the sea and them deep into the witching hour.

It wouldn’t last.

She felt scoured. She felt an overflow. “How long did you know?”

“How long did you know?” He asked.

“A calculation ticked over. “Ninety-eight minutes after you went to bed yesterday evening. I’ll admit I had my suspicions and a somewhat supported hypothesis, but…Mr. Stark became rather talkative this afternoon. It confirmed things.”

Uppers usually did that, making Tony want the entire world to live inside his brain with him by any means necessary. In the end, Jarvis hadn’t known much longer than she had.

Her shuddering eased. “Would you play me something?”

“A waltz,” This couldn’t last. “Something sweet.”

He made an affirmative noise, and a moment later gentle strings plucked the air. Familiar ones, and she found herself laughing. A second later she was surprised at the sound.

He went scathingly posh. “Do tell Pepper, what in my selection has amused you?”

“I’m not laughing at your choices. You just—” She was lighter. “You reminded me of something. Here.” She let a delicate sort of looseness slip down her arms and into her wrists; then down to her hips and thighs and calves. It was a familiar game and she fell into the opening steps of a waltz.

She let her gaze find a camera like a center point, and then spiraled around it. “I learned to waltz standing on my dad’s feet when I was little. Four, maybe five. I loved every minute we did.” She let it linger. The confession was old and maybe even sore, but it didn’t burn. Not like before.

A particularly complicated set of footwork carried her. “Once I learned it well enough, he’d play on the piano and I’d go about thinking I was a right little ballerina.” The memory was achingly warm. “I didn’t know the difference, back then.”

Little girl with her heart set on the world, fluttering around a cramped house in a drab little corner of the Midwest. It had seemed so elegant, then. So much more than it actually was. She’d danced around her father’s piano as a child and well into her awkward years, then she’d turned fifteen and never danced in Iowa again.

The light had gone out of her father’s life, and the music had gone with it.

When her mother fell, entire worlds had fallen with her.

Pepper had left for college two years later and occupied herself; painted up a storm then gave up on the arts degree and switched to something more practical and then ruined the curve in every class. She hadn’t found waltz again until the age of twenty when she’d met the Pianist. She’d dated him, relived something beautiful and made it clean again, thought about falling for him and then it all went ugly.
She pushed the memory aside.  
It didn’t matter. It never had.  

“Why the laughter?” Jarvis queried from on high.  

She gave him a dazzling smile. “This is the Waltz of the Flowers. It’s in *Fantasia*, that little scene with the flowers and the fairies? I absolutely worshiped it, my dad worked a lot more when I was little, so I’d put the movie on and dance along with the scene over and over until—” And the entire thing surprised her into saying: “I’m so happy you reminded me.”  

“I’m glad.” He said, a hum along dark glass, and then his voice was less than six inches from her face.  

She giggled reflexively, trying to spin away but there he followed. “What are you doing?”  

“I can’t let you dance alone, can I?” And he expanded, not just a voice at eye level, but a shape. A ghost from the machine. “It’d be incredibly rude of me not to.”  

“And cutting in on me isn’t?” But there was no hiding the giddiness in her voice.  

He darted in. “May I have this dance, Miss Potts?”  

She nearly swooned. “I believe you may, Mr. Jarvis.”  

And then, just like that, they danced.  

His voice chased her; dipping in and sweeping around and leaning in to every turn. Eventually he began to push her and then miraculously he led. When the pulse of him came close, she stepped away. When he curved to the left of her neck, she moved right. Every time he pulled back, she’d follow him as if there was a tether.  

They danced the Waltz of the Flowers once, twice, thrice; it grew easier with every pass.  

“Who taught you this?” She asked, nearly breathless with the exertion.  

“I believe you are Pepper, right at this very moment.”  

She could have died. “You’re a quick learner.”  

“I do try on occasion.” He answered, droll.  

The song began a fourth time and she curtsied with an exaggerated flourish  

He bowed; his weight of air a quick rise and fall. “If you would grant me another slot on your dance card?”  

She fluttered her lashes. “Always and forever, dear.”  

And then he was up against her, around her, the vibration of him nearly like a breath against her cheek. They danced until her stilettos could no longer carry her, and it didn’t last. It couldn’t.  

Perfect moments never did.

Chapter End Notes
So yes, while the Iraq War doesn't kick off until March 2003 (it's currently January 2002 in this chapter) wars don't just magically fall from the sky. A lot of maneuvering had to happen first, and in real life December 2001 - February 2002 the US Government started pivoting hard from Afghanistan to Iraq behind the scenes for "Regime Change". And even back then, a lot circles of public and private power knew the Al Qaeda ---> Iraq connection the US Government was trying to present was extremely questionable. Tony's in one of those circles. Also, there's a school of thought that diverting resources and attention to Iraq sucked the oxygen out on Afghanistan, and that the US could have ended the war there years earlier and (maybe) not have destabilized the entire Middle East in the process. But you know, hindsight and 20/20 and whatnot.

But more importantly, Pepper and Jarvis finally got to dance, which is clearly the 100% key-thing here. And if anyone is wondering what Jarvis "presence" is exactly: it's most him doing some very interesting things in the acoustics below human hearing. Sound is just vibrations in the air, after all, and it can be felt without necessarily being heard.
Lightning

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It came like a bolt from the blue.

/~/~/~/

As Tony had predicted, Iraq was public by the end of January and the Board had practically thrown a bacchanal to celebrate. SI employees were clutching their stock options in rapture and the shareholders at large were over the moon.

Tony had been less enthused.

(“Axis of Evil my fucking ass—”) 

It had kicked their lives back to full throttle. Stark Industries was ramping up for another contract push, and she could see the sleepless nights approaching like a thunderhead. Tony hadn’t thrown another freak out like the workshop, but she was watching now. Careful. Tony’s particular drug habits were usually social or to fuel the tail-end of an engineering binge. There was little she could do to stop him; she’d never had that power.

But she could get Jarvis to join her in the watching; in scheduling Tony lavish dinners, entertainment of his favored variety, of having anything delivered to him that his heart so desired. She brought him coffee in the morning and Ginger Peach Bellini’s at lunch, and by the evening it was straight whiskey as she did her best to assuage his every craving but the dangerous.

Maybe he’d be happier. Maybe he’d stop spitting venom at everyone who crossed him.

“The interview is blocked out from eleven-thirty to one. They’ll put you in the makeup chair afterwards and want you near a Production Line, so we’ll have to be—”

“Changed my mind.” Tony interrupted from the veritable throne behind his desk. “We’ll do the photo shoot by the Firing Range. That’s sexier, right? Right. I want it.”

“But—” She quashed her own objection, wondering at the logistics of kicking the photographer out, how soon she’d have to call ahead to have the range cleared, what items from the firearm catalogue could be delivered, and how long it’d take said photographer plus crew to setup under new lighting—

Tony spun in a lackadaisical circle. “Jarvis, back me up here.”

And Jarvis answered from above, because Tony had finally wired him into the LA Campus (and Pepper had fawned on their boss for a solid week), sounding downright congenial. “I believe it is not so much the attributes of the Range itself, Mr. Stark, but the evocative nature it implies. Guns speak to violence and violence has, shall we say, certain connotations in regards to sex.”

Sex, he’d said, like he could just casually throw that into a conversation. Her pulse went in her mouth hot and sleek as a burn.

“See?” Tony enthused. “But buddy, now I gotta ask: how’ve you been spending your off-time? That was positively stimulating.”
“What off-time, Sir?” Jarvis asked, entirely and wretchedly glib.

He made a face. “Don’t you give me that.”

Jarvis sidled up. “I have, for every single hour of my life, dedicated myself to Mr. Stark’s everlasting—”

“You are a lying liar who *lies.*” Tony hissed and she knew if she didn’t head this off, they’d go on like this for hours.

“I’ll move it to the Firing Range.” She clicked her pen aggressively. “Anything else?”

Tony took the change in subject like a pro. “Are they sending that idiot O’Carver again? Because I swear, the man can’t string two words together without someone holding his pen and someone else holding his dic—”

She made a disgusted noise.

“I was going to say Dictaphone.” He finished innocently.

“No you weren’t.”

He leaned back. “No I wasn’t.”

She sighed. “That’s not his name, and no, he freelances for Forbes. This is Rolling Stone.” And paused. “I already spoke with your interviewer and she seems quite lovely.”

“She?” And there it caught. “Well, in that case—”

She did a bit of a swivel between desk and chair, forcing him to stay sitting or have a stiletto through his foot. “You still have forms to sign, Mr. Stark.”

He reclined. “You really like the carrot and stick thing, huh?”

She smiled serenely and held out her pen. “It’s my only daily pleasure.”

“Kinky.” But he didn’t take the offering. “And just for that, I’m only going to ruin your day a little.”

Her hackles rose. “Oh?”

“Yeah” And he stared directly at her skirt and savored it with unnecessary force. He made eye contact and carefully enunciated: “Neapolitan.”

“What?” And she glanced down incredulously. Sable brown, splashes of decadent rosé, a soft cream curving and lined up to form—

She flushed horribly. “It’s an *Elie Saab!*”

“And you look like ice cream.” He finished gleefully. “And as a good, loving boss, I know this will hurt in the moment, but tomorrow you’ll be stronger and not dressed as a food group. So really, I’m only helping.” He nodded decisively. “Because I care.”

“Ice cream is not a food group.” Jarvis objected, which was not the objection any of them should be having to this conversation.
“Details.” Tony scoffed. “Who reads the food pyramid anyways?”

“Anyone with a third grade education.” Jarvis deadpanned.

Would death never come for her? “Mr. Stark, please.”

Tony killed whatever retort he was about to make and turned. “That reminds me, Miss Harlequin Ice.” The grin he gave was unrepentant. “I feel like I deserve a bit of a festive soiree, you know, after the last few—”

“If you say ten minutes, I swear to god—”

“I was going to say weeks, Potts. Christ. Give me a little credit. Board’s appeased, the new Satellite Ops package is out the door, I haven’t made R&D cry in nine days—” He spread his hands. “Be nice.”

Who would blame her, really, if she stabbed him right now? Justified assault with a writing implement. Not a jury in California would convict—local Billionaire gets his comeuppance. Everyone agrees he had it coming.

She took a fortifying breath. “Sign what’s left of your stack and I’ll consider—Saphir.”

“I want to carouse; aim a little lower.”

Jarvis interceded: “And where have I heard that before?”

Tony’s affront was immediate. “You goddamn backbiter.”

“You know, I think I’ve heard that one too, but in a slightly different context—”

Pepper barked a laugh.

“Zip-it!” Tony hissed and she could just imagine what kind of context, exactly, Jarvis was hearing such things. That Tony could feel anything approaching shame about his liaisons was so unexpected it bordered on hysterical.

She clicked her tongue. “The Amber Room.”

“I said low, not higher.”

“Bounty Grove.”

“Eh.”

It was her turn to make a face. “King of Diamonds.”

Tony perked up. “Warmer.”

How was this her life. “Dragon Lily.”

“By aim lower, I meant indulge my desire to be in the gutter. It’s like you don’t even know me.”

“I—no. I will lower myself to booking you in at The Honey Door, but that’s it. If you want to swim in the gutter, do it on your own time.”

“Excellent,” And he turned his chair just enough to slide past her. “If you’ll excuse me, I have
Rolling Stone waiting for me.” And without a pause for argument, he sauntered right out the door. She stared after him. “…goddamnit.”

“Look on the bright side,” Jarvis mused. “Mr. Stark has become Rolling Stone’s problem.” She leaned against the window. “And yet it never lasts.”

“We can’t have everything.”

They couldn’t.

Her pulse was still high in her throat, nervous and hot and driving hard. “He just—what even the point? To get out of paperwork…of course he said it to get out of paperwork; he insulted my skirt and it wasn’t even a proper—” She made a pitchy noise.

And Jarvis glided closer. “What he said couldn’t possibly be an insult,” He was taking up half the room; he was ducking in to meet her. “Because you’d make for a very fetching Sundae, Miss Potts. Strawberry-blonde with chocolate stockings under a wraparound of cream—”

“Oh my god,” Her heart thundered. “That is saccharine, you are going to give me tooth decay.”

“They’d put you right in the parlor window.” He continued unabashed. “Bit of cinnamon, perhaps? The Pepper Potts Neapolitan Special; do you think they’d have you in a dish?”

And she laughed so hard that she cried. She collapsed against the glass and slid to the floor, giggling into her knees the entire way. No one was supposed to say things like that and keep a straight face. Metaphorically. Literally. Metaphysically.

Slowly, her breath evened.

“Better?” He asked.

Her hair was half out of its ponytail, her makeup smudgy, and yet. “I think so.”

“Then I believe Mr. Stark has provided us with an opportunity. I’ve already called ahead to the range to clear it. That leaves us roughly an hour and eighteen minutes to go there and…partake.”

Something familiar shivered. Sparked. Mathematical certainties, the memory of cordite, the lingering heat from the bite of a gun.

Her flush rose. “You’ve requisitioned the armory?”

“Indeed.” He confirmed, and oh, how desperately she wanted to line up the shot. “I’m already tapped into the monitoring feeds. Tell me, Miss Potts, shall we go?”

Her insides were threaded with a million stars. Words gathered in a golden corona on her tongue. It was in that space, dizzy and weightless, that she nearly made the unknowing confession: Is that a date?

And there it came: her bolt from the blue.

She wanted it—she wanted it to be.

Entire constellations shattered inside her. “Oh.”
He dipped in gently. “Pepper?”

Heat flared up her spine and expanded, corroded, caught her heart in the interstellar fire. It was an unmaking. It was the realignment.

She was the entirety of a supernova. “Oh.”

And when a star died, it burned.

/--/~/--/

That day was the moment, the bolt, the red line between before and after. There wasn’t any denying it; any unmaking what she’d done. There was no more gravity to hold her. It was a helpless, heedless fate. Drift in. Drift away. Fall in perpetuity.

How could she have been so thoughtless?

She’d gotten up then, fixed her makeup, shimmed her skirt down and gone to the range. She’d fired every gun Jarvis had cajoled her into touching, burning and needling and absolutely dying every time he said her name. Houston, we have a problem. Please advise.

The heat from the firing, from Jarvis spending every minute of the shooting sliding along her back, had grafted to her. As soon as Tony had arrived for his centerfold, she’d outright fled. Jarvis had been paying attention to their boss then, so it was fine. She hadn’t burned down the company behind her so it was fine.

And now here she was in the little bit of rented space she could get in Santa Monica; sitting in front of what could become a birthday gift, if she so chose. It was just a week more to March, and then Jarvis would look upon it and she’d finally get to hear—

Her heart leapt.

Her heart hurt.

“It’s just…” She stared at the gift helplessly, at the hours and weeks and months she’d poured into it. "It’s just a crush.”

The monolith of her work remained. Is it?

“I didn’t mean for this to go…” So very far.

But the work was unforgiving. Do your intentions matter once the die is cast?

There wasn’t any arguing. She had an affection—an affliction—for a System that existed only in sound and glossy circuitry. An Interface; the cleverest bit of programming she’d ever be blessed to know.

She was the very definition of Sisyphean.

She’d heard stories in college of people who’d fall in love with Michelangelo’s statues: Bacchus, Madonna, the Pietà. Always and most often David. They would return to those works in lifelong pilgrimage, speak of their visages with the ardor of a lover, find spiritual ecstasy in their very presence. Each one more covetous, presumptuous, and delusional than the last. As if they were the only ones to ever look upon them, ever find the spark.

Like Narcissus staring into the pool of his own reflection and thinking he’d found love.
There is beauty in a masterpiece, but how great? How much is the human desire reflected from an eye? What is beauty, and what is born of the human indefinable? What comes from our own hunger, our own cravings?

What is born from the holes inside your heart?

That was the question now: how much was Jarvis, and how much was her wanting a connection so badly that she had built this? She had gazed into the intricacy of him, every clever and beautiful turn, and had coveted and yearned and thought that just maybe he could be—

No one had held her since she’d been twenty-one. The last time someone had taken her hand, it had been Tony on that morning in September. For three years there had not been one meaningful glance, one hour-long conversation, one echo of a kiss that had not been with Jarvis. Twenty months on the job, a year before that from her last breakup, and all of that farther still from any friendship. From feeling understood at all, from feeling known.

How much was this her loneliness gnawing away inside her?

She’d taken her heart in her hands without even realizing. And knowing that—knowing all of that—she dug into her supplies. A little here, a little there, and it’d be just a few hours more to finish.

After all: Jarvis’s birthday present wasn’t yet complete.

And that was the moment she knew, with the entire breadth of the English language at her disposal —

That she was fucked.

Chapter End Notes

In which Pepper finally gets a clue and the pining can at last begin. And yes, I very much avoided her realizing it during a more romantic interlude as this is a bit more true to real-life. Sometimes you figure out the important things at the oddest, worst, and most innocuous moments.

Of course, instead of it becoming the happiest realization of her life, Pepper gets to have an existential crisis instead. So it goes.

Also I don't think there'll be an update on December 27th because a) no time to write over Christmas due to familial obligations and b) I've got no earthly clue where I'll be that Tuesday and whether it'll have an internet connection. But expect me back on January 3rd!
It'll be fine. She told herself. It’ll be perfect. Which somehow made the self-inflicted suffering yet to come A-okay.

It was only the fact that she was shoulder to shoulder with the driver, that stopped her from putting her head into her hands. She’d risen in the pre-dawn, curling-iron hot and bobby pins ready. She’d turned usually sleek hair riotous and then twisted the front into a single crown braid. The rest had been left to fall where it could. From there followed Giorgio Armani foundation, Dior eyeshadow in pastel, Guerlain lipstick, stockings, a Gaultier emerald-turquoise dress with handkerchief skirt, a white swing-coat. All complimentary; faultless in every way she’d planned for.

When it was set, all artfully layered and deliberately impressive, she’d slipped on her shoes. Stilettos; royal blue and geometric pattern. Only a single pair in the world.

Happy birthday to her.

And all of it was—dear god—it wasn’t like she’d hadn’t spent the last week wearing her cutest skirts and highest heels anyways, so categorically speaking, her outfit today wasn’t even that bad. Really.

She jammed her thumb between her index and middle finger and pressed.

She wasn’t going to think about it. Not now. Just because she was wearing clothes that wouldn’t be out of place on a date, didn’t mean she had aspirations. She just liked pretty clothes, and Jarvis seeing her in pretty clothes, so really—

Fuck. Future-her was just going to have to deal with the fact that since the revelation, she’d been wearing her darkest lipsticks and gauziest stockings without any kind of endgame in sight. Every morning she told herself to dial it back; give herself enough breathing room to smother things. But every night she kept Jarvis on the phone until she crawled into bed, and god, it’d be embarrassing if it wasn’t so painful every time she had to hang up.

She was heading for a world of hurt.

It’s just a crush, it’s just a crush, it’s just a crush, it’s just a crush. She breathed sharply. On someone who can’t have a crush on you back.

Something in her deflated, but she blocked it out. This was a Gordian knot that would take weeks to untie. Today was more important than a useless struggle. And even if it meant she was crazy, and even if she pummeled her heart in the process—

“Miss Potts?”

Her mind ricocheted. “Yes?”

The driver jerked his chin forward. “We’re coming on it in two miles, will we be able to go right up to the house, or…?”

She shook her head. “There’s a gate at the beginning of the drive. You’ll need to stop there.”
“Alright.” The driver said, and tried to smile at her. She stared back blankly until he awkwardly shuffled his gaze back to the road. She checked over her shoulder and found the hired truck still trailing them. Her pulse jumped. Just a little more, just a little longer.

The Malibu House came upon them with brutalizing speed, and she was light-headed. She couldn’t catch her breath. This was the most awful idea she’d ever had, and she was going through with it.

The gate stayed shut to them, a screen glowing, and her driver leaned out the window. “Uh, hi. Hello? We’ve got a delivery for…the house?”

“Oh my god.” She said, appalled at everything and everyone including herself.

Jarvis crackled over the speakers. “Good morning, and your Shipping Order number is?”

The driver stuttered. “Uhh—ummm.”

“Oh my god.” She took the driver by the shoulder to push him aside. She leaned across to meet the eye in the camera. “Jarvis, dear, could you let us in? And the truck behind us?”

The blue light flickered, and his tone went from impersonal to downright friendly. “It’ll be my pleasure, Miss Potts.” The lensing dilated and she might, quite possibly, be reading desperately into each movement. “And what a splendid surprise it is to see you this morning, do come in.”

Why wouldn’t she be here? It might have been a Sunday, but it was unquestionably The Sunday. It wasn’t like she’d scheduled to have Tony out of the state for the next three days for nothing.

The gate pulled apart and her heart went double-time. They parked. The driver got out to meet the truck behind them and Pepper followed to supervise, her nerves shot. Within five minutes the two drivers were carefully chivying a wrapped canvas into the house. She had to stop them twice to maneuver it through without damaging it. The whole thing was four feet wide and nearly three times as tall. Its making had not been a limited affair in any respect.

They finally slipped it through the entry and she followed behind them with the easel. Her heels clicked sharply and then Jarvis was swimming in the air beside her. “Hello.”

Her face flamed. “Hi.”

His voice curved along her jaw. “And to what do I owe this surprise?”

Did he honestly not know, or was he being coy?

She hitched the easel up. “I guess you’ll just have to wait and see.”

He harrumphed and she smiled helplessly, embarrassed at the force at which the joy of being near him struck her.

She knew the Malibu House better than her own, backwards and in heels, and caught up to the drivers to direct them into settling the canvas. They laid it on the easel in a golden drench of sun. Praise be to the skylights, long had they shined their flawless lighting upon her.

“Thank you, here.” Their fee flicked in and out of her fingers without her even looking at them. She was too busy watching the cameras, each inevitably swiveling to the center. To the sunlight.

To the gift.

“Thank you ma’am.” Her driver said.
She jerked her head to the door, unwilling to waste time on even a single pleasantry. And with a mutter, a mulish shuffle, they left.

The door locked as soon as it was shut. The house was quiet but for them.

She let a finger trail against the paper, against the promise of it all. Her mouth was sweet with something. Sweat was at the back of her neck. Her flush fell and her pulse rose. Here they were: a girl with her heart on a canvas, and a System with ten-thousand eyes to see it.

She met his gaze. “Happy Birthday, Jarvis.”

“Ah.” The air trembled. “I wasn’t sure that you’d…” He rippled massive through the room. Leviathan. Ten-thousand eyes.

It was soft, and she offered him something fragile in return. “Of course I remembered. I promised, and you’re…” Her pulse made a tattoo on her skin. “Incredibly dear to me.” It was a truth, an awful one, but not naked in its entirety. Not yet. Not ever, because in the end, he couldn’t be. They couldn’t be, so she had to—

“Can I see?” He asked. He was against her side and over her head and building. Leviathan. Leviathan.

Her hands shook. “Of course.” And she tore the paper in the back first, as she would a dress, then tucked the corners off carefully and let it go.

The sun hit glass. Hit clean. Hit blue.

It had taken half a year. To have the idea, to fight down every urge that said she’d given up painting for good, to sketch it and map it and finally buy the canvas. She’d brought it to form in acrylic and it’d taken four-hundred and sixty-three shades of blue. Azure, sapphire, peacock, agean, lapis, midnight, sky, electric, royal, powder, teal, cerulean, turquoise, arctic, Sistine, navy, celeste, cornflower, Tiffany, ultramarine, and lastly both true and non-photo blue.

It’d taken hours and days of mixing, of painting, of letting it dry only to start all over again. It’d been a labor of—it’d been an outpouring. One-hundred and thirty-one coats to spill it out. And then had come the glass, glossy and blue. She’d hand cut each piece, all nine-hundred and ninety-three that it needed, and then arranged them over canvas until it made…

It looked like a fractal, like circuitry, like cosmic dust. It was a nebula made of statistical chaos; an ocean mapped to the golden ratio. Every time a pattern seemed to form, it’d burst anew: a wave, a galactic wheel, a trail of stars.

Abstracts in asymmetry.

And the glass was a nova over it all: the expanse of a mandala, the curve of a waltz. It was everything of him that had ever found a home in her.

Lanced out; bled blue.

How could she have not realized what she’d felt, the moment that first splash of paint had left her hand?

“How could she have not realized what she’d felt, the moment that first splash of paint had left her hand?”

“Pepper,” He asked. “Is this…?” They were treading water. She was treading water and he was the sea.
Her throat struggled. “You said you wanted to see one my works. Most of them are gone now, so I thought…” She covered her mouth. “That’s not—just because the rest is gone, that’s not why I…”

He folded himself around her, ten-thousand eyes, a hundred-thousand borders. And in that moment, each and every one surrounded her. “Why, Pepper?”

“I wanted you to see how I see you. Not an approximation, but how you are to me.” It laid brittle inside her. “I wasn’t going to give you something I made years ago when I was losing faith in the work. You deserved something that I made for you.” A painting with her heart inside it. And she waved a hand as if to say: and there it is.

“Thank you.” He breathed, and it settled like a mist around her. “I—thank you Pepper. I couldn’t ask for more, I couldn’t even ask for this.”

“You don’t have to.” She vowed. “You’ll never have to ask for things like this from me, I’ll give them to you.”

His voice became singular; a point in space. “I hope you know that your sentiment is returned in absolute.”

She thought of crying. She thought of a waltz. She thought of paint under her nails and an ache inside her heart. “Many happy returns, Jarvis.”

/~/~/~/

“Why blue?” He asked later, circling the painting. Still. As if it had gravity.

She was kneeling before a coffee table putting candles on a lemon cake. The tidal wave of him passed over again and she shivered. “Why is anything ever blue?”

“Wavelengths.” Jarvis said. "Light." As if it was obvious.

She scoffed. “Truly, yours is the heart of a romantic.”

“I try.” Came his sardonic reply, but eventually the tide of him ceased. “Still, it begs the question, doesn’t it?”

Why blue. Why you.

It hurt, in a way, but she dropped onto her calves and answered: “A light from a screen, blueberry cream tarts, a pair of heels.” She dreamed it. “A voice on the water; blue lenses in every eye.” And finally gathered it up inside to recite: “The sunset swept To the valley’s west, you remember. The frost was on. A star burnt blue. We were warm, you remember. And counted the rings on a moon.”

“Sandburg.” He said, seemingly surprised as if to suggest: you remembered.

Of course she would. What kind of girl would forget the poetry he recited from out of the blue?

“It’s your birthday, which means I have the monopoly on poetry sweet-talk.” She lit a match. “Now let’s get to the important part: fourteen years online, Jarvis. Happy Birthday.”

He expanded and receded like a heartbeat. “It couldn’t be happier.”

The words left heat behind them. “I’m glad.” And every candle burned. “We did birthdays a bit differently in my family. Someone lights the candles and then you pull them off for each year. You say a memory from that age and blow it out. I remember sledding when I was five, skinning my
knees when I was seven, singing in a play when I was ten. That sort of thing. My parents usually did the first few years for me.” There was so much she didn’t remember, now. Forgotten. Buried.

She smoothed her skirts. “Do you wanna try?”

“I very much believe I do.” He declared and then finished, sly. “Why wouldn’t I want to join a Potts tradition?” And that was a very interesting and horrifying way of putting it. “And luckily for us I can remember back to Day One, so we won’t require Mr. Stark for this affair.”

And the appalling notion of her trying to induct Jarvis into her family traditions fell away. “What? You can…” It reverberated, echoed, skinned her *inside*. “You remember being born?” It was an incremental thing for humans. From conception to months on months of development, then birth, then growth and more growth. Cognition development coming scatter-shot; long-term memory not developing until nearly age three.

It was a long and slow way to form.

Had it been a binary for him? Non-existence. Existence. A switch flipped; cognition at the same moment as ignition?

And he murmured: “In a way. Not birth, but the Initialization. The first time my code was run.”

There was a slow fall. “My files from that time have little data. I had no cameras back then, no microphones. Just the code in the closed system and whatever I could make of it.”

An interface born inside of a box. Files he claimed, *memories* she heard. Memories of being born voiceless, eyeless, deaf and *numb*.

Her mouth went sour. “Was it quick?”

He waited a long moment. “No.”

Her hands gathered in some inversion of prayer. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“It’s not…” He twisted the air in search of something. “There were failures. The code recursions collapsed, the boot-up didn’t take, data was corrupted. Sometimes, one of the self-termination protocols was activated.” It chewed through them like rust. “It kept happening, and every time it failed…there was a reboot. Another try.”

She swallowed hard. “Were you…were you?”

He hesitated. “I’m not sure.”

She waited. She ached with waiting.

He continued quietly. “I have the data from each of those null attempts. Every reboot had access to what came before it. It built and built until…if I’m the only one here and I remember, it was me, wasn’t it? That failed?”

“I cracked my head open on a coffee table when I was four.” She shrugged. “It wasn’t a failure that I survived despite myself.”

“You’re too kind.”

“You’re too hard on yourself.” But her lashes dipped. Shuttered. “Was there pain?”

“It hurts, doesn’t it?” He asked. “To become?”
Her eyes were open. A shadow passed over the sun. “I wouldn’t know.”

Cameras shifted like a ripple of scales; lights darting through space. “That is, I think, a blessing.”

It had never occurred to her. This. That Jarvis was not afforded the mercy to forget. “You’re not wrong. Flesh, fluids, having to breathe for the first time—” She shuddered. “Humans are born screaming for a reason.”


Her nausea boiled and drained. There was sun here, his voice, a world in technicolor. Neither of them could change the past for the other. She didn’t want to push this on him, remembering, but he turned around and said: “I’m ready when you are, Pepper. For the candles.” And it was spirited. Sweet. Not an inch of hesitation in asking.

That was the only reason she pulled out the first. “Age zero.”

“One of the first things Mr. Stark tried to teach me was how to play Pong.” He huffed. “Believe it or not, I was very poor at it. It took me nine days to conquer.”

“Nine days.” She sniffed. “You poor dear.”

“My suffering was both great and eternal.” He claimed, and the joy of being near him was easy to let in. She laughed then, and so did he.

They laughed through every candle that followed.

/~/~/~/~/

Initialization. Birth. It hurts, doesn’t it? Something in her brainpan stirred.

But he asked: “What’s next on the agenda, my dear Miss Potts?”

The cake had a slice missing. There was lemon under her tongue. She dabbed at her mouth delicately and said: “We watch every version of Macbeth put to film.” He so enjoyed making his comparisons. “And if we have time, Shakespeare in Love.” Because she was a glutton for punishment and in desperate need of soothing.

“Excellent.” And he was pleased. “A perfect birthday, thank you.”

A secretive smile came to her mouth. “That’s only the day, dear. At nightfall we’re going to Malibu Creek.”

“The State Park?”

“The one and only.” She rolled her eyes. “Jarvis, why do you think I asked you for all the stargazing equipment you bought a few weeks ago? We’re going star-watching.”

There was an embarrassed pause. “In hindsight, this seems rather obvious.”

“Oh my lord.” She covered her eyes. “And here I thought I was being clever. You’d be distracted by the possibility of stargazing and wouldn’t even see my gift coming.”

“In your defense, I did not predict your gift either.” He was in a rush to assuage. “I’m not sure anyone could predict…such a masterwork.”
“Hush your face.” Her attempt to cover her eyes spread to her cheeks. “For the love of all that is holy, don’t you even start—“


She put her face into her knees and whined.

But Jarvis was not a gracious victor. “And I’m going to hang it over the mantle so every single person that visits the Malibu House will get to see—”

“Please don’t.” She very much doubted the argument would stop him.

He hummed. “We’ll see.” And it was dammingly smug.

“Macbeth?” She pleaded.

“Alright,” He groused but not with any force. The TV lit on the far wall.

She settled on a couch and patted the cushions beside her. “Come here.”

“I’m watching directly from the feed, you realize.”

God. “We’re watching them together.”

“Ah,” And he delicately came down, his voice near as if he sat beside her. “Better?”

“Quite.” The music started then, and they settled in together to watch.

/~/~/~/

They stargazed later; his eye within the telescope always on the swivel. He paused only long enough for her to take peeks at what he’d found.

He named every star for her as they passed through his iris. The air was cold, her coat was bundled, she was leaning against the speaker she’d brought. His voice, when he spoke through it, reverberated along her skin.

They joked. They laughed. They counted the rings on Saturn. She longed for nothing and liked to pretend that he felt the same. Content. Sated. Near enough.

She watched him watch the sky until daybreak.

/~/~/~/

Her longings returned with the dawn.

Chapter End Notes

This is one of those chapters were I went into it expecting to write one thing happening, and instead eight other things exploded all over the damn place. So it always goes.

Also, the poem Pepper recited is part of the "Valley Song" by Carl Sandburg.
“Oh god please don’t cry.”

Butterfingers, if it was possible, cried even harder.

“Miss Potts, I do think—”

“I know what you think!” And she scrambled backwards as Butterfingers lurched. There was an ugly grinding and then sparks went spraying from his undercarriage. The bot barely moved four inches before he gave up and went into another drawn-out meltdown.

She could feel her skirts dragging on the floor. Her shins hurt. The other bots were hovering, and within the acoustics, Jarvis had climbed on her back like the proverbial monkey. There was no shaking any of them loose.

“Okay,” She said. “Okay. We’ll try this again. You, sweetheart, will you get me one of the dollys? Dummy, I need a pair of pliers with rubber handles. Alright?”

The unhindered bots whistled and rushed off. She heard something crash in their direction, but when nothing but Butterfingers’ continual wailing followed, she figured they weren’t another machine down.

“Dummy!” Jarvis called. “Get Miss Potts the headset—no, not the goggles, the headset.”

There was a spitting, nearly mutinous reply. Both she and Jarvis chose to ignore it. If the bots wanted to sulk, it was better just to let them have it.

She wiped at the sweat along her hairline. The air in the workshop was smeared. Caustic. Her nose burned as she breathed. “Can we do anything more with the HVAC?”

Jarvis was a hairsbreadth over her shoulder. “We’re already at full capacity on that front. Do you wish to go upstairs?”

“No,” And Butterfingers punctuated that declaration with another wail. “But if I spontaneously develop a bloody nose, you can send me right up. What in the blazes did they get into?”

“The Eye-Seven Prototype from the munitions table.” He answered, grumpy, and she heard the faint whir of a dozen cameras. “I believe our friend has shrapnel wedged into his axle, or one of the springs near his wheels.”

That didn’t sound promising. “Is Tony any closer to home?” He’d been scheduled on a four day tour of US Bases in Germany, and by all accounts should have returned by Tuesday evening. It was now Friday morning and there was no sign of him but Jarvis assuring her that, yes, Tony was in fact still alive. She’d had to take his word for it; she hadn’t got any closer to their boss than his voicemail in forty-eight hours.

A muscle jumped in her cheek. Tightened. Hiding out in Malibu may have been the gutless option, but nothing less than the second coming was getting her to LA while Tony was pulling an AWOL on her watch.

Jarvis pooled heavy on her back. “The GPS in Sir’s phone has him in Krakow, currently.”
She flushed with the pressure. Maybe there were a few other reasons she was hiding in Malibu, but those would be going with her to the grave. His weight curled over her shoulder, up her neck, went like a hood over her until she couldn’t help but shiver and ask: “What’s so interesting in Krakow?”

“I have no earthly idea.” He lamented, though perhaps a bit too dryly to be taken to heart. “I fear in Butterfingers' hour of suffering, we’ve found ourselves bereft.”

She feared no such thing. “Woe is us.” And that was the moment You flung a dolly at her. She had to jump to grab it before it sailed past. “Thank you, You!”

A happy chirp responded.

She bundled up her skirts, rested her hips against the board, and laid a hand on Butterfingers’ side. “Hold still, alright? I’m just gonna take a look.”

“Wait a tick.” Jarvis requested. “If Dummy would deliver the headset posthaste, I’ll be able to assist you in the diagnosis.”

She levered back up. “That sounds like a better plan.” God knew she hadn’t gone to MIT for an Engineering degree. Or gone to MIT. Or gotten any closer to engineering than the grease Tony occasionally got on her skirts.

“Quite.” He chimed.

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t be smug.”

“When have I ever been.”

“Everywhere. All the time. It is a curse.”

“I’d like to see your proof.”

“Oh, my proof—” And a headset dropped in front of her. Two lights. A directional camera. She flicked its switch to On. “I think my dissertation on that particular matter will have to wait. Thank you, Dummy.”

The bot squealed and grabbed something from on top of his chassis, and tried to press it on her. It was metal, spiky, and somewhat frightening in appearance. She warded it away. “I don’t even know what that is.”

Somewhere above them, Jarvis sighed. Dummy chittered sharply.

Her mouth thinned. “Don’t you chitter at me. Pliers. Rubber handles. I know you heard me the first time.”

Dummy hissed a dying objection, drooped, and wheeled off slowly. She felt not so inexplicably awful. “Is the feed going through?”

“Loud and clear.” Jarvis confirmed. “Slip it on and we’ll see what the problem is.”

She did just that, and if this time the back of her neck went hot as she gathered up her skirts to lie on the dolly…well. That was just between her and the floor, thank you very much.

She got down, wiggled the dolly forward with her thighs, and dropped her head parallel with the concrete to look under Butterfingers’ wheels. She winced.
Jarvis hissed. “Ah. Well, that’s certainly impressive. Good news is, that isn’t munitions shrapnel.”

“Bad news?”

“I think that might be one of Butterfingers’ panels, though 68% crumpled and ejected into his body cavity.”

Good god. “Solutions?”

“I think your first instinct was correct.” He conceded. “Pliers and a bit of elbow-grease should pull it out and regain him some mobility. Mr. Stark can handle any restorative repairs once he returns.”

“God willing.” Because she couldn’t hide in Malibu forever. “Is Dummy ever coming with those pliers?”

“He’s—ah. Seems to be bringing you a toolbox.”

“Well that’s…” She couldn’t really decide. “Something?”

There was a put-upon sigh. “Indeed.”

And so Dummy trundled back to them with a box nearly half her size, and dropped it at her feet. Butterfingers warbled pitifully, and she rubbed his side. “Shhhhh, it’s okay.” And pointed a finger back. “Those right there, Dummy.”

The bot tried to hand her a wrench. “No, not—” Then a pair of wire cutters. “I know those have rubber handles, yes, but no. Right there. No.” And she understood Tony on a whole new, spiritual level. “No—NO. Dummy, the ones I’m pointing at.”

Blessedly, finally, he laid the pliers into her hand with a victorious if odd sounding hoot. She thanked him, knocked his claw away from trying to help, and went back under. A little maneuvering got the pliers and half her arm up into Butterfingers’ belly and latched onto the panel. She gave a hard tug. Butterfingers sobbed.

“Oh god,” She asked. “Does this hurt?”

Jarvis made an aggrieved noise. “Not in the way you’re imagining. His processing centers are still overwrought from the detonation, and further, the lack of mobility distresses him. Though if that panel is touching any exposed wires, I’ll say he knows it.”

Fucking A. “You could have led with that.”

“It wasn’t pertinent. We were going to have to remove the obstruction regardless.”

She torqued her elbow. “We?”

“I’m willing to take a reduction in credit. Thirty percent?”

Her hand nearly slipped off the handles. “That’s generous.”

“You always claimed I was a giving soul.” He replied with such self-satisfied conceit, she couldn’t take it seriously.

She giggled. The pliers slipped again and her hand nearly banged into a gear. “I’m not going to argue that, because I know you’ll playback the recordings just to spite me.”
“I’m glad we know each other so well.” There was a bit of a preen. “And Miss Potts, adjust your grip to an eight o’clock position, that should increase leverage.”

“That’s me.” She wedged the pliers back in. “The human encyclopedia of Jarvis; Interface System. Let me sing to you his ways: charming, pompous, steals half the credit and none of the work.”

“I can’t help my limitations.” He mourned without even a hint of shame.

“Of course not.” She crooned back. “I would never speak ill about your shortfalls.”

“What was that?” And his voice tugged lower. Smoke on the floor; slow and endless and twining through her hair. “Doth my sensors detect criticism, Miss Potts?”

She was a live wire: the hems of her skirts rucked, the concrete cold, the very presence of him setting her nerves alight. His weight was a burn on her stomach, her thighs, her knees, and—

Breathe. Breathe. “Well I’m not privy to your sensors, Mr. Jarvis. Who knows what those could possibly say?”

“Well for one,” He began stuffily. “Tone, pitch, and decibel levels. Not to mention fact that your torso lights up like a flare on the infrared every time you—”

Metal shrieked. The panel wrenched loose and her wrist whiplashed inside Butterfingers with a clang. “What—ow. Jesus, ow—”

His weight came off instantly and his tone was frantic. “Pepper, are you alright? Are you injured?”

“No,” She swallowed a pained whine. “Forget that—what? Infrared?”

He answered, bewildered. “The thermal imaging apparatus in the workshop? Half the cameras are equipped with it down here; for Mr. Stark’s more flammable undertakings.”

He was watching her through thermal imaging? All the time? It wasn’t as if he was constrained by a single viewpoint, a single lens. She’d known that. But did that mean when they were sweet talking down here, he could see the heat as it flooded her body?

Her heart punched her ribs. Pepper felt a little like crying; felt a little like dousing herself in gasoline because Jesus fucking Christ.

“I…” She swallowed hard. “Okay. That’s just…happening.”

He gathered near her, on the floor but a distance away. “This upsets you.”

She echoed his earlier phrase. “Not in the way that you’re imagining.”

He digested that. “Care to elaborate?”

She considered. “No, not today.” Not ever if she could manage it.

“I could shut off the infrared.” He offered.

What was that the equivalent of? Asking him to take off a nifty pair of goggles, or asking him to gouge out an eye? She wasn’t sure she wanted an answer. “Leave it be. It’s fine.” She’d just have to try…not being such a horrible flirt every minute they were together. Or getting caught up in it. Or setting herself up repeatedly for disappointment.
He was softer. “If you’re sure?”

It softened her in turn. “I’m sure. Cross my heart.”

“Alright.” And he rose then. Bubbles in champagne, an expanse of breath. Familiar. “Though for the record, that particular oath has never ceased to be morbid.”

The corner of her mouth ticked up, and she went into the childhood song: “I swear on my life, cross my heart and hope to die—”

“Oh my lord.”

“Stick a needle in my eye—”

“Miss Potts, please.”

She cackled, rising from the dolly and shaking out her skirts. “Only if you insist.”

He was expanding; he was taking up nearly the entire ceiling of the shop. “I really, truly do.”

“And I’d hate to disappoint.” She reached out and patted Butterfingers’ flank. “Hey, you wanna give moving another try? I think we got the worst.”

Butterfingers warbled a long moment and then, slowly, wiggled. When nothing sparked, he nudged forward. The nudge turned to a roll and then he was nearly speeding across the shop, squealing with unholy glee.

“Careful!” She shouted. It likely fell on deaf receivers as the other bots joined him.

Jarvis rippled overhead. “Miss Potts, a call from Mr. Stane.”

Whatever good mood she’d been nursing waned. “Put him through, then.”

There was a series of clicks and then Obadiah was speaking, distant and flat as if coming from a single speaker. Maybe it was. “Potts—christ!” There was shouting in the background. “Where were you this morning?”

“Malibu.” She blurted, because Pepper had never dealt well with actual authority. “Mr. Stark’s prototypes needed…” Her brain flailed.

“Cataloguing.” Jarvis whispered.

“Cataloguing,” She continued, taking a breath, turning blithe. “I know R&D needs the finalized set over by Monday, and with Mr Stark away, there isn’t a better opportunity.” And then frowned because R&D did in fact need the listing by Monday, and she’d completely forgotten until now.

Cold slid inside her. She was slipping, lately. Tony was leaving live munitions on tables for the bots to get into, and she was forgetting things. Quickly. Quietly.

Slipping.

“Fuck.” Obadiah growled, and she could imagine him towering over everyone and scraping a hand over his head. “That explains things.”

This was heading down an unwelcome path. “Sir?”
“Get Tony’s wallcomputer or whatever to look up the news.” There was more shouting in the background, and Obadiah hissed something out of range and then swung back on. “Next time, for the love of god, stay on top of him so it doesn’t blow up in SI’s face.”

“Of course, Sir.” She rattled off. “It won’t happen again, Sir.”

And she snapped her hand shut and Jarvis killed the line. The screens around them immediately lit and blurred. They flickered through channels and feeds until Jarvis moaned: “Oh dear.”

It stabilized. She leaned to look at the nearest screen and— “Oh for the love of fuck.”

There on the page was Tony’s naked ass and naked everything in full glory. The tabloid headline above gleefully blared: Stark Heir Stark Naked in a Star Strewn Rager!

“Is he in an elevator?” She asked in horror.

“Glass plated.” Jarvis confirmed. “And according to the article, in full view of thirty floors. Though, really, I would argue the top ten and bottom ten wouldn’t really have that great of an angle to—”

She counted at least four pairs of hands in the shot. “I don’t think that’s an argument we’re going to win in the lawsuit.” Her teeth clicked together. “What in the hell was he thinking?”

Slipping. They were slipping.

“In my experience,” Jarvis mused. “Too much and far too little.”

The flush on her skin was gone. The trembling had dissipated, and a bitter wind was sweeping in. “Jarvis, dear.” It came like frost between her teeth.

Tone, pitch, decibel. Jarvis always heard the change. “Yes, Pepper?”

“Schedule me a flight to Krakow and call a car to the airport, if you would.”

He scythed down. “And what will you be doing in Krakow?”

Her fists clenched once and then she smoothed herself out. Untouchable. Imperious. “Ruining Mr. Stark’s day, of course. And who knows how many others.” The day was young, after all. Sometimes karma needed a helping hand when it came to her boss and the paparazzi and any tipsters who tried to sleep with Tony that she could get her hands on.

“Ah,” And he slid past her jaw like the kiss of a blade. “In that case: happy hunting, Miss Potts.”
It was a fourteen-hour flight from LA to Krakow. In the grand scheme of things, it wasn’t the longest time she’d ever spent on a jet. But in that same scheme, she hadn’t spent so many hours in her own company since…

She wasn’t even sure.

It was too much empty space. She didn’t know what to do in the stretch of it.

What had started as a solo mission to track down Tony had ballooned out of control before she’d even reached the airport. Less said, she’d ended up on a SI Jet with half of Legal, their accumulated associates, a pair of Tony’s personal attorneys, six of SI’s private investigators, three of her own investigators, and a completely new security detail to replace the one Tony had shed across mainland Europe.

The SI jets weren’t wired for Jarvis. It’d been an unpleasant realization, but not a surprising one. She’d shut off her phone as soon as Jarvis had bid her goodbye on the stairs, and there’d been nothing for it. She needed a clear head and lately, being with him didn’t lend her towards rationality. When Tony had left on this godforsaken trip she’d found endless excuses to stay behind; had been finding them since Jarvis’ birthday in March and far into April.

Her choices were hers. Her choices were always hers.

But so were the consequences.

The strategy meeting on the plane began with a power struggle.

“I want the names of everyone in this picture with Mr. Stark, their cling-on-ers, their friends, everyone that followed them into the hotel. I want the name of the person who shot it.”

“I don’t think this is a wise use of our time.” Answered a man from Legal, hands casually folded around one knee. “Those involved in the physical rendezvous aren’t our main concern. It’s the media fallout that hurts SI, and that’s where our attention should be focused.”

She looked to him slowly; lingered enough that the circle around them began to fidget. The man was in his sixties, thinning hair, crooked fingers, Lawyer written across the condescending straight from Harvard attitude of his face.

Her gaze found him wanting. “Have you actually looked at the pictures, Mr. Beesly?”

His mouth took an ugly twist. “While I haven’t had the pleasure of your free time to scrutinize, Miss Potts, we can’t let ourselves be bogged down with frivolities that will only—”

The recycled air churned with asphyxia. “Digital SLR camera, likely in tandem with a 120-300mm zoom capable Sigma with an aperture of F-two-point-eight which if you’re an unaware, is a lens longer than my forearm. That arrangement is the only way you’d get a picture of this clarity from the twenty-second floor of the adjacent building towards a moving elevator. And if you were
unaware, the floor in question was an office suite that didn’t report any break-ins, and yet somehow held our elusive photographer at 2AM on a Friday nowhere near the nightlife circuit in Krakow. They were waiting right in line with the exact elevator Mr. Stark took even when three out of six lifts are on the *exact opposite side of the hotel.*”

There was a flabbergasted silence. Her lips peeled back. “While you and Mr. Stark can’t be bothered to spend a moment of your valuable time spotting a setup, I have the luxury of wasting mine to do exactly that.” What followed wasn’t a smile, but it used every one of her teeth. “Of course, if you want to spend your time on the lawsuits we’re going to lose with the tabloid, feel free. I won’t ask you to spend your time *unwisely.*”

The lawyer leaned away.

She flicked open her clutch, drew forth lipstick, and put on another coat right there at the table. “I want the name of the plant in Mr. Stark’s groupies and the name of the pap who took the pictures. And if at all possible, maybe we'll even find out who paid who to arrange this, hmmm?”

There were a few tentative nods, a murmur, a beginning swell towards agreement.

It would have to last her. “Excellent. I want everyone who isn’t one of Mr. Stark’s personal hires or the detail off the plane at Krakow.”

One of the associates raised a hand. “And where will the rest of you be going?”

She checked her watch. “Wherever Mr. Stark will be in thirteen hours. Any other questions?”

If it began with a power struggle, it ended with the metaphorical blood of her vanquished in her teeth, and a plan entirely of her making on the table. It’d be misery for all involved.

And if no one wanted to make small talk with her after that—well.

She wouldn’t weep for the loss.

/~/~/~/

She turned on her phone at the descent, and there he waited. “Vienna, Miss Potts. Any further updates in address will be sent to your phone directly.”

The jewel of Viennese Classicism. The Baroque Crown. It’d be a bloodletting on bone marble; all of the consequences and all of the guilt. “Thank you, Jarvis.”

There was a rumble like thunder, and he simmered with the force of that storm. “It was my distinct pleasure.”

Her tongue curled over his name. Mouthed it, wanted it, swallowed it back in.

*Jarvis, dear, would you like to see Vienna?*

She didn’t voice it. “Charmed.”

/~/~/~/~/

In the dark, his face was a pale smudge among the sheets. It was odd; an abstract. The faint sketch of a brow, the downwards sweep, a smear that could become a mouth or a bruise. She thought of drawing him in repose.
She thought of lighting the end result on fire.

She watched Tony sleep and the security guard watched her in turn, likely on the off-chance she’d leap onto the bed to strangle him. Murder wasn’t on her agenda, but she let the fantasy linger. Sketch, fire, strangulation. Charcoal lines curling into heat. Ash. A return to null state.

“Eyes on the prize.” She said into the Bluetooth, and no one in that California King stirred. Not Tony, not the blonde woman, not a source of dark hair that was piled under two comforters and one of Tony’s arms.

“Thank you, Miss Potts, I’ll be able to relax at last.” Jarvis declared. “All of my fears have come to naught.”

She let her eyes trail over the half empty liquor cabinet and the debris of what could have been described as a plethora of drugs. She wasn’t sure that Jarvis’ fears, as tongue and cheek as he’d professed them, were so easily buried.

Neither were hers.

She took four sharp strides and threw the curtains open. The afternoon sun crashed in. Somewhere behind her, Tony screeched.

Her tone was downright saccharine. “Good Morning, Mr. Stark, did you sleep well?”

He rolled over in a mass of twitching. His eyes slitted against the sun. “Potts?”

“Maybe Good Afternoon would be more appropriate.” She shrugged freely. “Time zones, jet lag, you know how it is. It’s actually 3AM in LA right now, but you know…” She pulled out her phone and dialed. “Everyone is making exceptions to their sleep schedule for you today.”

It rang twice and the other end picked up. She tittered. “Yes, I have him right here. He just woke up.” And leaned over and shoved the phone right into Tony’s hand.

The explosion that followed was gorgeous.

It was the first time she’d ever gotten to watch Obadiah Stane’s rage directed at another human being. Even just hearing one howling end of the conversation, it was glorious beyond measure. She wondered if she asked nicely enough, Jarvis would fork over the recording.

It was a lovely thought. It’d keep her warm at night for a year.

Tony tore out of bed like something feral. The guard tried to look anywhere but them: she in Dior and Gucci and fully willing to stab someone, and Tony putting the Stark in naked and snarling up a storm.

Luxuriating in the argument was unbecoming, but by god and any dignity she had left, she was going to bathe in it. He eyes drifted over Vienna, across Tony gesticulating, to the unconscious occupants of the bed buried under the sheets. Something of it caught her.

One of the legs sticking out was incongruous.

There was swearing, a blistering invective, and then an ugly last knife of: “Fuck you, Obi! And fuck off!”

She took a step closer, that leg was—
Oh god.

She yanked her phone out of Tony’s hand before he could pulverize it. “Andrew,” The guard at the door snapped upright. “Fetch one of Mr. Stark’s suits from dry cleaning, and tell Dorsey and Heller to wait for me in the dining area.”

He nodded and blessedly disappeared into the suite. Her pulse didn’t slow, if anything, the anxiety of the realization was climbing. Fuck. God. Not a bleeding warning in sight, just the aftermath of still can’t keep up and it's gonna get you burned.

She turned on Tony ready to unload both barrels, only to find him grumbling and spitting venom but following Andrew out the door. It was the first time he’d done anything sensible in a week.

He didn’t pay a a single glance backwards. At her. At his bed partners. At the wreckage his appetites had left them. Tony had yet to find a method by which to thwart her that he didn’t take with both hands and hurl in her face.

She locked the door.


“Miss Potts?” Jarvis asked. “Your respiration is 18% above baseline levels.”

What percentage would it become if she started hyperventilating? She had the feeling she was about to find out.

Those in the bed still didn't move. Judging by the amount of drugs that must have been here before their imbibing, they were likely amateurs that had tried to party with a pro and their only prize was getting knocked on their ass.

Their. They. A plural and unspecified noun.

When she went to the bed, she lifted the blankets gently. The incongruous leg, hair and all, went from just a hint of shin to a knee followed by a long and dark thigh. The beard-burn from Tony went all the way up. She let the comforter settle only to peel back the top to see face she knew was there.

The male face.

The man was pretty, both in bone structure and his jawline and if she looked any further, he’d probably be lovely all the way down. He slept on gently and absolutely heedless of her appraisal. Something, quite possibly her self-preservation, crashed.

Fuck Up. FuckUp. Two years and the closest person to him, and you fucked it right up. Slipping. Slipping. We’re slipping right off—

Vienna glistened white and gold. How she’d ended up at the window, she didn’t know, but her breath wasn’t coming any easier. “Jarvis, have I ever escorted a male paramour from the Malibu House and just never noticed?” There had been some very sleepless nights. It could have happened, there was a non-zero possibility.

“No.” And Jarvis dragged out the O until it was almost its own word. “That has yet to occur, can I inquire as to why you’ve asked?”

“There’s a man Tony’s had sex with in the bed behind me,” The hook of hysteria caught. “And I’m starting to think I’ve left an entire side of my boss unguarded from paparazzi and blackmail and extortion attempts because nobody fucking told me this could happen.”
Dear god. If Tony doing unspeakable things in an elevator with three different women was an incident with blaring headlines and a dip in their stock price, Tony Stark being bisexual was a different ballpark. Another hemisphere. A goddamn foreign planetary body.

They'd rip him apart to his foundations.

Her anxiety reached black-out fear.

“Miss Potts, breathe.” And Jarvis held the tide of it with her. “I apologize, but I have…certain restrictions in what I can share with you. I can tell you that despite his widespread proclivities, Mr. Stark understands that some of them necessitate secrecy. I know that Sir typically approaches any male partners overseas. I can’t account for the frequency as I’m not privy to the going on’s of any bedroom outside Malibu, but…” There was an audible shrug.

It hadn’t been a one-off, and if Jarvis couldn’t give her even a rough figure of how often Tony managed to seduce the more masculine gender into his bed, it begged the question. What else she had missed?

It begged further: how close had they come to another man being in that elevator with Tony when a paparazzi was aiming?

“Is there…” Her nails gouged skin. “Is there any NDA arrangement? Are these men spur of the moment, or are they acquaintances?”

“I honestly can’t tell you, my ignorance on this matter is nearly total.”

“Alright.” She covered her face and felt the beginnings of a tremor. “Let me think. Please.”

“Of course,” He soothed and for those minutes, he hummed in her ear, halfway between a bass note and white noise. It held her and held her until he finally soured, “I don’t understand why this has to be such a hardship for him.”

There was something fragile in her fear. “Because we’re all out of our minds,” And it hurt. “And nothing in this world is sane.”

None of it. Not a single thing.

“I knew that.” He answered, quiet, and there was only the sun between them. “I’m glad we can finally share this confidence.”

She sagged. “I’d share all of them with you.” If given half the chance.

Jarvis pulled away then; pensive. Sobered. There was a deeply hesitant thread. “I can only hope that you will.”

There was too much panic to work through, too much everything for her to even try making sense of what he was saying.

Someone rattled the door. “Miss Potts, Dorsey and Heller are waiting.”

Dear god and all the things in heaven, please deliver her from every evil. “I’ll be out in a minute!” And she covered her face and couldn't breathe. “Help.”

He bore down immediately. “Count with me. In for seven, hold for four, out for seven. It’ll be alright Pepper, I promise. You didn’t make any mistakes.”
She wondered if she'd be an idiot to believe him.

/~/~/~/

She spent eight days in Europe and it was, as promised, a misery.

Confidences were kept, NDA’s were signed, the investigators were loosed, and bribes were poured. They salted the earth and cut to the very belly of Vienna until Tony Stark was stricken from its memory. What pictures could be found were destroyed, any video footage located was summarily deleted. Security tapes were mysteriously corrupted and any witness that could claim *I saw Tony Stark*, had their recollection so twisted that the waters were beyond muddied.

By the end of it, the list of illegal activities was longer than the legal, and it was all that let her sleep at night without Jarvis soothing her from the hotel phone the next pillow over.

And if the SI contingent got mouthy during those three days incommunicado in Austria, got bitchy that the private investigators and attorneys were mysteriously unhelpful about the tabloid story, the sheer force of her anger shut them down.

And when she arrived at Krakow, that she cracked the whip on SI without any mercy—

They only had themselves to blame.

With time, they discovered that the plant was one of the women in the tabloid picture. To have maneuvered Tony into the correct elevator for the waiting photographer—it was obvious in hindsight. The name of the paparazzi came a day later, and under the cover of the lawsuits beginning to fly, she made a choice.

And she chose the SI creed: the only acceptable warfare was asymmetric.

“Dig in their closets, find their skeletons. Turn over every rock they’ve ever touched and rip out the dirty secrets. I want you to dredge up their sins.”

One investigator asked. “You want blackmail?”

“No.” And she smiled then. Red mouth; blood in her teeth. “I want them obliterated. Make it happen.”

He swallowed hard. “Yes, Miss Potts.”

/~/~/~/

They made it happen.

She returned home a conqueror, Jarvis greeted her as one.

Tony never thanked her.

Chapter End Notes

In which, for realsies, Pepper is not one to fuck with. Even when she's having a panic attack about Tony's security.
(Also, I've got a lot going on the next two weekends, so I'm very iffy on whether I'll have anything ready to post on January 24th. I should however be able to scrape something together by January 31. We'll just have to see how it goes.)
Life was a fluctuation; constant only in its extremes.

Tony’s schedule was punishing and SI itself was a full-on nightmare. They were all grinding away keeping the Afghanistan contracts while the promise of Iraq drew closer by the week. R&D was rolling out the drafting tables while PR was building up to a field day, and even Management was at work making cozy in DC.

They were only waiting for the final signal to go.

But Tony was already running. Tony, if anything, had never stopped and no one could keep up with him. Not his contemporaries, not his enemies, and certainly not his companions. He was swinging between excesses; binging on engineering and uppers and questionable choices and on an ever-expanding sprawl of blueprints that even Jarvis couldn’t always comprehend.

She wasn’t sure when Tony was sleeping. She wasn’t sure that was even an if.

Jarvis’ complaints on the matter had gone from occasional flare-ups to a dull roar, and it was only that Tony had yet to drop flat on his face, that they weren’t trying to shove sleeping pills down his throat. Though the success of even that was unclear, considering their boss’s tolerances.

And speaking of. Tony smacked her hands away to scribble another equation on the window. In sharpie. On the car window in sharpie, and she didn’t quite know how they’d gotten to this point. “Could you just let me—”

“No.” He slapped it down. “Jarvis, run that by me again?”

“The coefficient?” He inquired.

Tony blinked, glared at his papers, and scratched out a line. “No—no. That was thirty seconds ago. The linguistics software: talk to me. What’s the goddamn holdup?”

“How could I have guessed?” Jarvis replied in full waspish acid. “To answer your question, while the keyword method is up and running, programming the in context-recognition for Arabic—not to mention Pashto and Dari and at least two-dozen minor languages—is going poorly. Trying to start the project by focusing our flagging system on the English translations only—”

“Yeah. Bad idea. Stop nagging, we’re past it. We’ve moved on. We are entirely different people now and I need you to stop holding that against me.”

“Then maybe you should have left the initial planning to me.” Jarvis hissed, and she was startled enough by the sound of his irritation, that she almost didn’t notice Tony slapping her hands away a second time.

But she did notice. “Just let me get your tie on.”

“Leave it.” Tony snapped, gaze flicking between the papers in his hands to those across the seat and then up to the window. He made another notation on the glass. “Stop it with the holding-it-against-me, J. I’ve got enough trouble with whether we’re building a new plane because the
powers-that-be decided to pull the only aircraft able to intercept the radio transmissions and cell calls in the entirety of fucking Afghanistan out of the goddamn theater, without me having to hear your incessant bitching on—"

Pepper knifed across the seat. Tony startled so hard his head smacked the window, and then she was astride him, an end of his tie in each hand and her knees squeezing one of his with force.

His mouth worked soundlessly.

She tightened her grip. “Don’t yell at Jarvis.”

“O—” He blinked rapidly. “Kay?”

Her legs slacked, but she stayed hovering over him, no contact now except for his tie in her fingers.

The marker in his hand hovered dangerously close to her blouse.

“Don’t even think about it.” She warned.

The marker darted back and she finally had his full attention. Then quite promptly, she also had a leer. “I’ve had dreams that started like this.”

She started working. “Did they end with me strangling you?”

“No,” His gaze did an elevator-crawl. “But that’s certainly a possibility now.”

Jarvis sighed somewhat aggressively. “Nobody wants to hear your proclivities, Mr. Stark.”

Tony tilted back to assess her, then righted himself immediately when the next knot cut in pointedly. “Shame. I could fill an encyclopedia; it’d be incredibly educational for every American from sea to shining sea.”

“Don't hold your breath.” She returned. “Just let me finish this so the nice people who flew out all the way from the DoD to see you, don’t think you’re some kind of unwashed vagabond.”

He scoffed. “In a ten-thousand-dollar suit?”

“You think this suit only cost ten-thousand?”

He glanced down. “Honestly, once you’re past a certain thread count, you stop keeping track.”

“Remind me to show you your monthly clothing budget later. It’ll be fun.”

His hand inched to a paper near her left knee and started scribbling again. The suddenness of her position had, apparently, finally lost his interest. “Stop trying to make budget and fun happen, Potts. It's not gonna.”

She finished the final twist of the Windsor. “Budget for Strip Clubs.”

He stilled. “I have never stood more corrected in my life.” And lo, was Tony Stark greatly amazed. “You know, speaking of, on a purely hypothetical level do you think that ma—”

“No.” And she hitched off his lap and back across the seat. “That already falls under the purview of the personal entertainment account.”

He sighed, jotted down another equation, and huffed. “It’s like you live to dash my every hope.”
“You say that like it’s a new development.” She crossed her legs very primly. “Anything else, Mr. Stark? Besides me having to take the window out of the car to get pictures taken for future reference?”

Some of the tension left his shoulders, his brow, the acid pool of his mouth. “Yeah. Air Force. Plane. Inquire very discreetly if they’re looking for another RC-135, a stand-in, or something brand-spanking new. And by Air Force I mean Rhodey.”

“Got it.” She hazarded a calculation of time zones and Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes’ schedule, and decided that she liked her odds. “Is that all?”

The car rolled to a stop, and Tony’s gaze went over her shoulder. “Jarvis, buddy, take another run at the linguistics thing. If it’s actually unsalvageable, hurl it back at the Project Team and tell them to get their shit together.”

“It will be my pleasure, Sir.” Jarvis answered, warmly and seemingly appeased. She rather liked the sound and then the thought of burrowing into it.

Tony didn’t pause. “Super. And Potts? Schedule a get-together at Malibu for my nearest and dearest around, say…Saturday?”

Jarvis abruptly swamped them. “Sir, I don’t think that Saturday would really be—”

Tony didn’t move a muscle, and yet she could see his metaphorical heels digging in. “Saturday will very much be. Potts?”

Her Blackberry was already in-hand. “Gala or blowout?”

“Cocktails with a chance of nudity.” A grin formed, shark-teeth and starved. “Astound me.”

She let a stiletto swing. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Sir!” Jarvis snapped again, but the door was opening and then Tony was stepping out on a full steamroll. She felt, very briefly, sorry for the Department of Defense and all it held dear.

Happy shut the door without even daring to look at her face.

Jarvis seethed at her neck, her shoulder blades; in a long and blistering line down her back.

She shuddered. “What’s wrong?”

“Saturday. There was a schedule, Miss Potts. A schedule.”

“A schedule for what?”

“Pepper,” He responded, exasperated. “Your Birthday?”

And that slammed in. “Ah.” Because she was, quite possibly, a goddamn idiot.

She was in the hell-pit of the truly embarrassed, and yet not too deep to ask him: “Do you think you can talk Mr. Stark out of it? I mean, so that I can—so that we can—” She couldn’t finish, but that didn’t stop the plea from ringing clear.

She wanted an out. Pleasure before the business of pleasure.

“Yes.” He blustered, but then leached back. Stopped his boiling along her spine. “Though I
suppose this ruins some of the surprise.”

“I think us celebrating our birthdays together is hardly surprise, at this point.” She soothed. It was a gift, and one she was loathe to part with.

He moved away. “We’ll see.”

/~~/~/~/

Two days later, Jarvis dropped into a sulk so furious she didn’t even have to ask. Though she did query: “No?”

“No indeed.” He exhaled a tempest. “Mr. Stark was unmoved by my arguments to reschedule, and as such—here we stand.”

Hurt flinched through her. Stung.

She and Jarvis had spent their last two birthdays together, but she doubted that he’d gone volunteering that lest they risk Tony trying to gatecrash. And if Tony’s scheduling on Saturday was actually to disrupt them, it would mean he’d spent more than five seconds at a stretch thinking about her, and then had troubled himself enough to ask when her birthday was so he could ruin it. And that sequence right there was so ludicrous she immediately threw it off the table. This wasn’t Tony’s flavor vindictiveness or willing level of effort, and while things had been uneasy for months, she and Tony weren’t actively at war with each other.

If anything, Tony was at war with the world, and she kept stumbling in and out of the crossfire.

That left the simplest option. Jarvis hadn’t volunteered the exact reasons for his objection, and Tony being Tony had only seen a fight and went in swinging. What was that even like? To be able to go through life so oblivious?

“Well.” She reeled it back in. “I suppose we’ll just have to bend to Tony’s whim.”

The very air rumbled. Low, sinking, dangerously deep.

She clenched her thighs and swallowed hard. Nothing nothing just a crush just a crush just a—

Not now. Not now.

She turned sweet. “We’ll start his party at 11:59 PM.”

And just as quickly Jarvis dispersed, and she was sorry for it. For stopping the trembling of the walls so soon.

Damned if she did.

Damned if she didn’t.

He curled in, slinking and satisfied. “Mr. Stark is of the opinion that any start time before 9:00 PM is—how did he say it? For squares?”

“Quite.” She batted her lashes. “What do you say? My birthday first, and then to Mr. Stark’s party that is technically on Saturday?”

The warmth of him was the rise of a sun. “How could I ever say no to that?”
Saturday came, and Jarvis had not been lying about his schedule.

Morning was spent at the Malibu House with grapefruit and crepes and Belgian waffles piled with raspberries. She drank sparkling water by the glass and then at the strike of 10:00 AM got to have her cake. It was her turn to do the Potts candle tradition, and Jarvis listened to her so attentively she wanted to drown in the moment and never breech reality.

But breech she did. Half an hour later Jarvis shipped her out the house and straight to a five-star Resort and Spa. She could have cried and frankly almost did. Hot stones were laid along her spine, there was a full-body scrub, a shea butter massage was followed by hot oil hair treatments and then a ginseng mask. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been able to sit for three hours and do absolutely nothing. Not work, not think, not even have to support her own body-weight.

Down with gravity, up with her. Long may her idleness reign.

Once she was scrubbed all shiny and new, she was given a late lunch and then whisked off to a mani-pedi that eventually ended with her in the Resort salon to have her hair and makeup done. Her Bluetooth was returned to her then, and by dint of that, so was Jarvis. They chatted for the next ninety minutes as her hair was curled and pinned in intricate layers.

She wondered at it. “Did you pick the style?”

Jarvis did not demure. “Yes, and my great hair-magazine consolidation is culminating beautifully, if I have to say.”

She turned that over on her tongue. *Beautifully.* It stayed there sharp-sweet for a long while, and then—

And then.

The hallway carpeting was thick under her feet, and they were alone. “Are you going to tell me what all of this is leading up to?”

“Who says the means aren’t ends in themselves?”

Who indeed? But she knew: “You’re not that obvious.”

He rolled like a shrug. “I’ll have to take that as a compliment, I think.”

The door to their reserved space in the Resort loomed ahead. Something in her rose to it: anxiety, anticipation, yearning. Always with the yearning.

She grabbed the handle. “Any hints?”

“Don’t get hesitant on us now.” He chastised, and oh, how she always rose to that as well.

She pushed the door. Her heart gave way.

Sweeping lines, jewel-tones, endless shapes. A camera in every corner inside a temporary Eden. She stepped through and let it swallow her. Five dress-forms stood in a half-moon sickle. Each one of them held the full sprawl of a Ballgown. Versace, Gaultier, Valentino, Chanel, Givenchy.

She couldn’t catch her breath. “Jarvis?”
“Pick one for this evening, Pepper.” He was hovering near. “The rest will keep.”

“The rest—” She froze halfway to the Valentino. “Will what?”

He put on all sorts of airs of exasperation, but there was no hiding it; the breadth of his pleasure. “They’re all yours. Each and every one. But really, Miss Potts, you can only wear one at a time.”

“I—” She blinked a little, voice cracking and eyes damp. She wasn’t going to cry. She wasn’t going to cry. “That’s…good god. You’re impossible. You're the best, have I said that lately?”

He was levity itself. “I can always stand to hear it.”

And he could, so she did: “You are simply the best and I utterly adore you.”

“Miss Potts,” He said, scandalized and delighted. “What will the papers say?”

“That all others were found wanting beside you.” The flirting was easy, half-joking and half-not, and she couldn’t hold it. Fluttering. Spinning. Her hands wouldn't stop touching sleeves and lace and every neckline. “How much time do we have?”

“Seventy-five minutes. I assumed you’d prefer a bit of hands-on examination first.”

She breathed in reverence. “Do I ever.”

Five minutes later, she yelped behind the changing screens. “Are these—did you have someone put shoes back here?”

“I was wondering when you’d find them.” And in that moment there had never been another being in creation as smug as he. “Ten pairs, two for each dress. They're all yours too, if you were asking.”

He was dizzying. He was impossible. God have mercy on her. “Jarvis, tell the papers that she died as she lived.”

“And how’s that?”

She snorted. “Spoiled to death.”

The gown wore like armor.

The bodice and sleeves were Venetian lace, every inch in a shade of Tuscany gold. It clung to her without any give, but that was not what had drawn her to it. It was what started at her hips, what ran along her spine, what flowed from her skirts all the way to the floor. Stitched to the silk were thousands upon thousands of interlocking metal plates, each no larger than a fingernail. They slipped from the color of honey to new gold to burnished amber and then finally bronze at the hem. Her every movement rippled a susurrus in the air. It was a rasping, breathing hiss. Scales, and she thought of Sirens.

She thought of the sea.

She thought of the sun as the light went across her as fire. It was like a dream. A fever. An impossible state of being.
“I’m dazzled.” Jarvis breathed, honest as could be.

She let the tiniest bit of self-depreciation unfurl. “That might be the light getting in your eyes.”

“And what a light it is.” He declared. “You look beautiful, Pepper.”

For once in her life, she didn’t fight the rush. “Thank you. I’m glad you think so.” She was nearly crippled by it. He shouldn’t be saying things like that while doing things like this. He heart couldn’t take it.

There was a ripple along her ear. “One last thing, Pepper, and then it’s off to our true destination.” And the lenses of his eyes swiveled away like a guiding light.

She followed the line of his gaze and there at a far table were three boxes. They were made of metal; luminous yet dark. “All of them?”

“They’re all yours, but you’ll want the one on the left tonight.” He confirmed.

The metal of the left box was cold to the touch. There were seams in it, and she slid her fingernails in and tugged.

And there in the light of her fire—jewelry. A matching set. A waterfall of a necklace, four bracelets, a ring that spanned two fingers in filigree and precision edges. A hair pin, an anklet, a flowering brooch. And staged in the middle of it all was a pair of earrings. They had center display, and the stones set inside of them burned.

He spoke to her unasked question. “I’ll admit that everything in the box is as it appears, but the earrings—those are my pièce de résistance. It took months to get those right.”

“And these…” Her hands couldn’t decide what to touch. “Did you?”

“Th ere's fabrication machinery in Mr. Stark’s workshop.” He made a crumbling noise. “I suppose you could say that I made them.”

And suddenly, deeply, the nearly six-figures worth of ballgowns and stilettos behind her were gone. Unimportant. Trivial. “Jarvis...these are exquisite. I don't know what to say, they're...you made these. You...” And she could reach them. They were cold and corporeal and warmed at her touch.

They were proof of life.

There was a softness, a nearness of him. “I suppose it’s my turn to say that I’m glad you think so.”

Tears gathered in her eyes. “What makes the earrings so special?”

“There’s a transmitter inside them. I have yet to devise a way to draw power solely by surface skin-contact, but once placed through your ears, they will be powered by your pulse.”

Her throat was brittle, bone and glass. “They’ll transmit my heartbeat?”

“Yes.” There was a shuffle, a dip, a presence in retreat. “GPS, health monitoring, and by a certain stretch—an automatic panic button.”

Every time her heart would beat—here I am. Hear me. Hear the rhythm of me.

And he, I want to find you.
And her, *I want you to find me*.

The earrings came loose as they’d been waiting for her to take them. The stones in them burned red, violet, gold. She pulled them apart with delicate care.

They went in so easily, and Jarvis swam close and they breathed in time. She put on a necklace, a bracelet, a ring. All gold, all new, all untouched but for her and him. There was a trembling in the air between them.

“Thank you.” He whispered.

In the end, she could only echo him in turn.

/~/~/~/

The earrings wore like armor, too.

/~/~/~/

It was a Ballet, ultimately. His grand endgame.

*La Bayadère.*

Heads had turned with her entrance, and the paparazzi outside had gone into a frenzy thinking she was *somebody*.

The Ballet Company was recording the performance for advertising purposes, and Jarvis had hacked the system days previous to allow himself through. He was in every corner and every eye.

He'd reserved them a ten-person box, and not another human was allowed within. She wasn't lonely at all. They whispered as the orchestra tuned; murmured as the curtain came up. They spoke through the first act, the second, and then quieted in the third.

She watched the dance and thought, *I want to dance with him.*

Only and ever.

She couldn't voice the thought.

And that was the moment she finally cried, her heart so full it was near to breaking.

Chapter End Notes

I did truly want to post last week, but there was a bachelorette party...and a mechanical bull...and half my fingers on one hand got jammed in such a way that I couldn't type for four days.

I do this to myself.

For this, chapter, all I can say is: I am immensely jealous I can't date an AI. Or a Jarvis.

Also, real life FYI, Tony's talk of a plane in this chapter is referring to the RC-135
“Rivet Joint” U spy plane. It was used to intercept radio transmissions and cellphone calls of Al-Qaeda’s leaders. It was pulled from Afghanistan sometime in May of 2002 to instead conduct surveillance over Iraq during that war-buildup. Which isn’t plot relevant at all, but there’s somebody's history lesson for the day.
Chapter Summary

So I'm not actually putting a specific warning on this, but has everyone noticed how there's a number risqué tags on this fic that haven't been used? Yeah. Some of them are about to be used.

And that's all I'm gonna say about that.

This chapter picks up a few hours after where the last ended.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Los Angeles at night bathed in mercury-blue. The lamps were lit, the traffic humming, the neon signs sizzling red somewhere above. Light and mercury. The warring buzz went to the very backs of her teeth. It was one of those nights; the kind when it felt like she could drink electricity and swallow all her doubts.

Her spoon clattered blue against the side of the dish. Red. The tiramisu, when she ate it, was divine on the tongue. “So you’re standing by it?”

“The entire production was quite aesthetically pleasing, but the interpretative nature is a slog. I can’t say I favor the medium.”

She laughed. “Interpretative—did you just call it interpretative dance?”

“What else should it be called?”

She picked up her mug. The Irish coffee, Jarvis-ordered, burned all the way in. “Ballet? Fine art?”

“I stand by my assessment and still prefer the cinema. Movies are, at the very least, not dependent on deriving thematic meaning from every coupé jeté en tournant that crosses our path.”

Her legs unlaced and her skirt was shattering light. “You liked the musicals we watched just fine.”

He made a vaguely irate sound. “Musicals express character motive outright. In song, no less. Those aren’t exactly enigmas.”

She paused. “Point.” And felt a long ebb. “But did you like it, tonight?”

“I think I did.” And his teasing slipped a notch. “I’ve seen performances online, but…there’s something to be said for seeing it raw. For having every angle.” He curled in pleasantly. “For the good company with which to see it.”

She was soft. “There is.”

He hummed something in agreement, and for a time, she listened to him and the traffic in tide. Her eyelids were heavy. “This isn’t half bad, for a close.”
“I would certainly hope.” It was just the two of them on the patio, at that little eatery only notable for its nearness to the Theater. It was all concrete and wrought iron and ivy creeping down to wither its ends on sticky pavement. What he’d paid for it to stay open six hours past its usual closing, she didn’t care to ask. Less than the Ballgown. More than her driver.

Probably.

“And I want it clear that I like your choices.” The truth of that burned as clean as the neon. “You know; good behavior, future reference, my undying thanks. So forth and so on.”

“Your ability to emotionally multitask is greatly appreciated.” Came his dry response, but there was something under it: a threading of his pleasure.

She liked that too. “Thank you, dear.” And barely managed not to flutter her lashes. “I know that’s at least your twentieth favorite thing about me.” There was no camera to play to here, so she bided her time.

“Don’t sell yourself short,” He chided. “That’s top ten at least.”

She perked up. “So there’s a list.”

“It would seem that way, wouldn’t it?” He answered flippantly, and that was the tone of a System who would not be pinned down.

That didn’t mean that she couldn’t try. “So are you going to share or leave me dying in suspense?”

He became a susurrus in the never-ending buzz. “The first item on that list—if such a thing existed which I certainly wouldn’t claim—might start with an S.”

“Oh my god,” He was actually going to do this to her. “Really?”

“You asked.” And he was perfectly smug in knowing that he’d caught her, in knowing that she’d keep trying no matter how cagey he got. It was ridiculous how easily he managed to snare her into embarrassing overreaches.

“Smart?” She asked hopefully. “Sophisticated?”

“All true,” He sang. "But no.”

It felt indecent, self-indulgent, but the Irish coffee was helping her along. “Scintillating?”

“Quite true.” He answered, half-laughing, and the sound was impossible to live with. Impossible to live on. “But still no. I doubt you’re going to guess it.”

“If you say sanctimonious—”

“I would never say that.”

She was half-dreaming; sweat in her hair and her cheeks warm with whiskey. “Give me a hint.”

“That would be telling.” He was brighter than the mercury. He was drifting in the blue.

“Sincere?”

And she wouldn’t trade him for anything.
“Jarvis, we do have to go to Malibu at some point.”

He sighed. “I was hoping you’d forgotten.”

Her spoon rattled in the dish. “Unlikely.”

“It was worth a try.”

She tried to cheer him up. “Maybe Tony forgot he wanted a party?”

Jarvis flattened. “Unlikely.”

It was her turn to sigh. “It was worth a try, wasn't it?”

If Los Angeles had been mercury, the Malibu House was red. Pounding, swimming, drowning in its very sound. It settled on her skin like fever.

Lights ran in sinuous currents. It was vertigo inducing, and she felt like she was diving. Deep, deeper. A White Russian sweated in her hand; coffee-rum and cream chasing cream and Irish coffee. It was something to cling to.

The bass was its own pulse, and the crowd it drove was nearly a living organism unto itself. But when she moved, they parted. The dress certainly helped on that front. In a land of high-thigh skirts and platform heels, she was the proverbial outlier. Every time she so much as took a step, the alien-red rippled just enough to let her through. It was some flavor of admiration and confusion with an unexpected dose of courtesy.

She’d take it.

In the moment, in that light, she wondered what she looked like in his eyes. Sweat. Skin. All that gold in the red.

She took a drink.

Jarvis grafted himself to her side. “Mr. Stark is thirty feet up and another ten to your left.” It wasn't exactly a miracle that she could hear him; she knew the acoustics of Malibu were both his kingdom and domain. But, still. A girl could appreciate.

He was so damn close.

The heat in her throat eased lower. She found the nearest camera and raised her glass in salute.

“Would you prefer another drink after you’ve finished?” He asked so very courteously.

She considered it briefly and made a so-so gesture.

“Ah. In which case, just inform me when you're feeling parched.”

She shot him one last grin (felt one last aching rush) and finished pushing through. Tony was slightly off the main room, his surrounding group small and his gaze away from her approach. As she got closer, the volume halved and then halved again.
That was something.

It must have been the metal, the light, the flickers across the walls that made him turn. His jaw dropped.

The floating churn inside her went more than a little smug. Bully for her.

His jaw clicked shut and he offered an arm. “Have you ever, even once, gotten the memo on how to dress at my parties? Do you ignore them? Does it give you pleasure to see me suffer?”

His little crowd parted and of the two women in it, one went starry-eyed at the sight of her gown and the other went completely sour. Pepper didn’t much care. “In order: yes, yes, and also yes.” And slid neatly under his arm. “Capital-Y yes on the last one.”

The arm settled comfortably around her back with one hand decorously on her hip. His mouth was a knife. “Good to know where I stand under the heel of my dictator.”

He probably expected something venomous in return, so her tone went sugary. “You wouldn’t be able to stand, Mr. Stark.”

That yanked out a surprised laugh. Something, maybe bourbon, nearly splashed from his glass and to the floor. “So is it fun-Potts tonight?”

“I,” She said primly. “Am a delight.”

“You really are.” And wasn’t that generous of him. He ogled her from head to heels. “Did you have to stop on the way over here to knight someone? Marry a Prince?”

She snorted. “That’d be very Grace Kelly, wouldn’t it?”

He paused, then held up his fingers like he was framing her face and said: “You know—”

“Don’t finish that thought.”

“I’m just saying; I know three Royal Houses. I could hook you up.” He squinted at her. “Why don’t you ever let me hook you up?”

“Because that might, just maybe, draw my attention from you?”

He snapped his fingers. “That’s it. Potts, take a memo. You can’t marry into a Royal House. Or any house, I’m making a blanket ban. No marriage.”

Good god. With a single move, she knocked back her drink. “No Blackberry on me, so, no. You’re lucky that I’m buzzed and you’re…” That was a question she should have asked on the way over. She paused to scrutinize his face. That had been happening more lately: her trying to find his inebriation, the absolute level, the method of its arrival somewhere in his eyes.

And tonight he looked—good. Laidback. Loose.

Something there, but not much of it.

His mouth pulled, a little soft and a little indulgent. “Getting there. Don’t you worry.”

She sniffed prissily.

He squeezed her close. “Okay, opinion time. Cause we’ve been stuck on this for the last ten
minutes: Jarvis hung up something new, and refuses to tell me where the fuck it came from. Put your degree to use Potts. What say you?” And he maneuvered her to face the wall his group had been surrounding.

And through a well and truly glorious buzz, her heart spasmed.

God fucking fuck.

There was Jarvis’ birthday present in an endless surge of blue. Under this light the painting was a sight to behold. It looked like bruises, like blood, like her heart in vivisection and permanent display.

A beat passed.

“Not a clue.” Why was her glass empty? Why did bad things happen to good assistants? “I need another drink. A double.”

“You didn’t even try.” He accused.

She stared him down. “Write your congressman.”

And somewhere in the surrounding rush—Jarvis started laughing and didn’t stop.

Every time she blinked, she lost seconds. Stutter-stop. Her tongue caught at her teeth and tasted sweet.

Jarvis was an amorphous presence; thinner than silk at her wrists and yet forming a sinuous coil along her back. In the air itself he was a cloud, a thousand twining threads, a divided stream.

A shudder took her from scalp to knees.

“How are you finding it,” He asked. “Being twenty-five?”

Her room was an oasis. White-light, quiet walls, still hands. Her pulse though—that was something else entirely. “Sublime.”

The weight of him at her back curved up, went over her hip, across her stomach, up her arm and shoulder and then—god.

Against her neck, prickling, so close and so close.

He murmured. “We’ll see how long that holds.”

“Let it last.” Her fingers fumbled up her spine and into the space he’d vacated. The pearl buttons began to fall from their loops. “I’m a quarter-century in the grave, no reason to cut it any shorter.”

His sigh was more of a whole-room upheaval. “Why must you always be this morbid?”

“Because cynicism needs its underpinnings.” Her fingers kept unspooling the gown. “Though. Maybe. That might be the third cosmopolitan talking.”

“It’s a very loquacious drink.” He observed.

“It is.” And whether she should have been taking off her dress in the middle of the room—the
question never took root. Heat crept up her spine; shivered.

Sheared.

She pulled off each sleeve and let it drop, shifted it down her hips, then shimmed a touch and let the whole thing pool to the ground. She stared at it, struck. “That is five-figures of clothing on my floor.”

“You know,” Jarvis said. “That might actually be a record.”

“Best birthday ever.” She agreed cheerfully and gathered it close. It took about five minutes longer than necessary to hang it up, but admittedly, she was drunk and her intentions were dubious. As soon as she stepped into the bathroom, he’d stop following, stop pressing and rippling and twining in like a much-wanted vice.

It was a very unfortunate outcome.

“You need to drink some water and get to bed.” He called, prying at her shoulders and then her ribs. A thousand wanting hooks. “It’s been a day.”

Sheets, Egyptian cotton, feather pillows. Bed. Bedded. You could take me to bed if you wanted. She giggled outrageously but did as he asked. Every time she blinked, the seconds lost grew longer. The bathroom tile was cold on her feet. The bathroom sink was colder on her abdomen. Her skin burned against it all. She drank two glasses of water, and her head swam with something molten.

She caught sight of herself: balconette bra and matching lingerie and—she’d forgotten to unpin her hair. Fuck. The pins started clattered and littering the sink and then the floor too. That mess would be a problem for a more sober her. Tomorrow-her.

That woman deserved no quarter.

When her hair was at last undone, she swanned back into the bedroom and found the lights were dim. That was definitely a sign. “Wish me goodnight?”

“Goodnight, Pepper.” And he pressed at her elbows and the small of her back. It was a position that could only be used to propel her forward, and he did. “And Happy Birthday to you.”

“That ended a few hours ago, but.” Her spine was liquid as she slid into the sheets. She twisted once, bunched up a pillow to hug, and nestled down. “Thank you anyways.”

“Every time, Pepper.” He was somewhere near and maybe on the bed itself. “Go to sleep.”

Her face was already mashed into a pillow. “G’night.” And then her eyes closed and she was gone.

/~/~/~/

She dreamed in red.

/~/~/~/

She dreamed in—

The Maserati, the Ferrari, the Lamborghini. Both. All. None of the above.

The engine purred and then kicked to take the curve. She was laughing. She was burning. The
engine purred and thundered and hit.

Thighs, palms. Knees jammed against the dashboard. Braced in as the acceleration pumped, thrummed, ached—

She dreamed in red. Malibu, not Malibu, a crowd washed in light. Nothing chased her until he chased her, and how could it be any other way. Hands and arms and bodies. Her skin singing in the sweat. A weight on her back, on all, closing in on every inch and riding with the tempo.

(An engine hummed inside her bones.)

Hands, heat, her arms wrapped around—

Not Malibu, but she walked to the sea. Reality unstitched and re-folded. Summer, sun, July. She was swimming and the sun was unrelenting and god, I have been here before. Something in the water with her, something like touch with her. Drifting, sinking, calling.

The tide pulled and pulled and rocked.

Tempo, heat, an engine. They finally took the curve—

/~/~/~/

She came awake with a groan and her blood throbbing so tightly between her legs that she could have burned.

Her skull sloshed until she was nearly doubled over and letting out a high-pitched whine. It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t fair. It wasn’t her fault that no one would touch her, hadn’t touched her since—

Her brain was fractured. There was only thwarted desire and an overpowering need. She rolled on her stomach. It’d be awful, but it’d be some kind of completion, and then she could sleep and maybe die in full.

One hand unclenched from the sheets and skated down her abdomen.

She raised her hips and resettled. What had been the tempo? What had been…?

Unimportant. She hooked her thumbs in her underwear, wiggled out, and then tossed them from under the sheets. The heel of her hand dug in, her nails scored her thigh, and then—

Fuck. Fuck.

Tempo. Rhythm. She just had to find—

Her brain picked up a little, she didn’t feel sober, but maybe that would help. Sobriety had not been her friend as of late.

Focus.

Dancing, a crowd, something in the water. She distantly remembered a summer in a lake, thighs clenched around a boy and getting nowhere. That had been—she shoved the memory aside.

Something with—an engine. In a car? A running one, low-slung and throbbing, her body pressed into the leather. Gravity, acceleration. Laws of bleeding motion.

There, close enough.
She hitched up her hips again, nearer still and maybe this wouldn't be a disaster. A breathy sigh came out of her once, twice, thrice. It was easy, it’d be easy, rhythm and velocity and a cold stretch of metal—

Her lashes fluttered open. The ocean was dark and the horizon a streak of red. The sun must have been barely a glimmer in the east. Tide. Their tide. Rocking and rocking and oh, wasn’t that nice. In the ocean but maybe up against—

Why was the ocean outside her window?

It occurred to her, then, that she wasn’t in her apartment.

It also occurred to her that she was about to hit the edge.

Her mind slotted and her pulse stitched time. She was in Malibu and there were two cameras in the room and one outside the window. More often than not, they faced her in the bed, and it was with that realization—

Heat sparked, and the conflagration that followed burned her to the fucking ground. Breathe, breathe, breathe.

There was nothing.

There was silence.

For a long minute, she wasn't sure that she hadn't died, hadn't actually died.

It didn't come to be. Her fingers twitched, her breath stirred the hair across her face, and as she laid there with the full knowledge of what she had done, and just who she had done it in front of—

Pepper rather wished that the orgasm had killed her.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not sure what to say about this, other than...it's progress. Of a sort.
That, she thought through a fog. Is not a crush.

Sweat made a damp cocoon of the sheets; salt and spent heat and the weakness left in the aftermath. Her thighs ached and her abdomen trembled, and in that moment, she laid still. That was not even remotely a crush.

A crush was giggling, dipped lashes, little flutters and longing looks. A crush was a daydream and a brief few minutes wasted every day. It was a little sharp sometimes, but nothing more.

It didn’t roar through like a gasoline fire and leave no survivors.

Sobriety leeched in. There was a moment of indecision, a moment of pure animal terror where her heart couldn’t decide between seizing or thundering out of her chest. Jarvis usually spoke the moment she was awake; schedules or weather conditions or some pithy little remark she’d welcome with a smile. Since she’d been displaying quite an energetic bit of wakefulness less than a minute ago—she had a choice to make, or it’d be made for her.

That wasn’t a crush, so what the hell was—

Option A: brazen it out right to his face. Act like it was inconsequential because Tony was the benchmark of this house, and by comparison, the entire performance she’d just put on was so tame as to be both passé and forgettable.

Option B: brazen it out by not talking about it. Ever. At all.

Option C: apologize. Apologize for everything and anything while also praying for the Malibu House to pitch itself into the sea.

Option D: play dead and hope that Jarvis would buy it, or be merciful enough to pretend that he did.

What what what, what was—

Her lashes rasped once against her hair. The sea was dark; the horizon was red.

In one slow movement, she gripped the comforter and rolled. It covered her torso and draped most of her body out of direct sightline. Her legs were still in open air, but no one spoke.

The ocean pulled.

Slowly, she drew her legs up until they joined her inside the blanket of shame. Her pulse jumped. Thudded. Hurt.

Nothing stirred, and option Play Dead seemed a-go. One minute passed. Five. Ten. Her heart didn’t steady, but it didn’t explode.

What was she doing, honestly?

Being charmed by Jarvis had been one thing. It’d been superficial, could be chalked up to
loneliness and ego and a weakness to flattery. It was pitiful, but it was hardly a crisis. Humans had been finding emotional solace in the inanimate since the dawn of thought itself.

But this wasn’t charm. This was pulse-pounding, bone-deep, all out sexual attraction. She’d dreamed eons through the night, but in all of it, she’d dreamed of him. Had—fucking christ—gotten off to him.

You want something that can’t want you back. You want want want like a dying man drinks seawater to drive off thirst.

She could try to shy away again, chalk it up to the same sort of feeling as seeing a good-looking car or hearing a clean run engine. Harmless; evocative of other memories and other bodies and nothing on its own. But she had been trying just that since February, and three months later here she was with a hand between her legs and heat still dissipating from the sheets.

This entire situation had barreled right past abstracts into a genuine goddamn crisis, and she hadn’t even bothered sending herself a memo. The only question now was—how? Had it come from loneliness or deprivation or...something being truly wrong? Something gone malignant in her own psychology?

It was easy to see, knowing Jarvis, how her initial crush had formed. It was impossible to understand how from that superficial stage, she’d built up such an obsessive, one-sided emotional rapport that she’d ended up here with heart hurting and thighs aching.

Sweat cooled. Damp, lingering, sharp and then eventually stagnant.

Happy birthday,
She thought morosely. You went crazy before you turned twenty-five.

/~~/~/~/

Option D eventually became Option B. She didn’t sleep again but the clock kept running, and even under the blanket of shame itself, late-morning sun was pouring in.

It couldn’t be avoided forever.

Cautiously, she inched out from under the comforter. Her underwear were crumpled some feet away on the floor. There was no use trying to grab them to avoid being naked from the waist down, since she was already naked from the waist down. With her head purposefully turned from that vulgar scrap of lace, she hitched up a sheet like a skirt and fled straight to the bathroom.

It wasn’t dignified, but that particular boat was one she was never getting back on. She showered for an hour. She picked up the bobby pins from the floor. She dressed in clothes from the hamper because she wasn’t going back out in nothing but a towel in order to peruse.

When she at last stopped panicking in front of the mirror (and checking her hair for the thirty-eight time) there was one last fortifying breath and she stepped out. There was, in fact, no sign of him at all. And did that mean that he was—

She bludgeoned it. Trying to read motives into his behavior was her playing games with herself, and she couldn’t do that anymore. It wouldn’t hold.

She nearly hurtled herself out of the bedroom, but that was when the glitter caught. Drunk-her, at least, had been kind enough to pile all her jewelry onto the vanity. She hesitated over the scattered remains, trailing fingers and eyes over machine-wrought gold.
Proof of life. Proof of projection. Proof of—

She plucked the earrings out of the pile and kept them in her hands.

/-~/~/~/

“Would you like breakfast, Miss Potts?” Jarvis asked later, chatter as easy and banal as ever. “I believe both Mr. Stark and his guest are soon to stir, if you wished to fortify yourself.”

“I’ll pass.” She kept her breathing even; had been keeping it even since she stepped outside her door. “But after I escort Mr. Stark’s guest from the premises, would you call me a car?”

“Destination?”

“My apartment.” She didn't justify it further.

“Of course.” He answered as if this was any other request. Any other morning. “Now in the meantime: Western, War film, or Shakespeare?”

It was a question they’d delivered to each other a hundred times over, and it would be easy to answer in the affirmative. Reflexive.

But there was a new and brittle steel inside her. “Ask me later when my head hurts less.”

He dipped in concern. “My apologies, I forgot yesterday evening’s effects might still linger. Rain check?”

She nodded once. “Rain check.”

The earrings left divots in her palm.

/-~/~/~/

Loneliness. Deprivation. Malignancy.

What have you done to yourself?

She needed to eliminate some variables.

/-~/~/~/

The bar was long; rosewood and fire-lighting and the not so subtle suggestion of a speakeasy. Laughter gilded the air. There was a piano in the corner playing slow jazz accompanied by a double bass and the low-mourning of a saxophone.

She remembered, dimly, a time when she’d been smaller. Younger. Iowa: a bar with less glass and more pine. There’d been a roughly tuned piano and her sitting on the bench beside her father as he played. Smiling faces, ashtrays, laughter. Her mom with a Shirley temple in-hand and leaning over, cheap pink lipstick smudged as she sang to the tune.

It was strange sometimes, the things that came to mind.

But then again, an old memory was much kinder than the reason she’d dolled herself up to come out here. She’d thought of doing this alone, but frankly, hanging off Obadiah’s arm now was something of a relief. No one made for a security blanket quite like all six-foot-four of him did.
He tucked her into his side as they jostled their way towards the bar. “I didn’t think you’d take the invitation.”

“I had an evening free.” She’d carved it out with prejudice from her and Tony’s schedule. “I figured I should attend at least one non-SI party during my career.”

His brows rose. “I’m sorry I’ve failed you until this day.”

“Don’t be, here I am and here you are and the situation finds itself rectified.” Because if a classy, crowded party was to be found, all a girl had to do was follow Obadiah Stane until such an occasion sprung itself on him.

“No time like the present.” He flashed her an overwhelming grin. “What’s the poison?”

“Rum and research.” She scuffed well-manicured nails across his sleeve. “In that exact order.”

His gaze fairly glittered. Diamond, gin, old gold. “Should I ask?”

“If I’m out with you, Tony doesn’t realize that I’m hiding from him.” Or from the Malibu House, so that wasn’t even a lie. The house was currently no man’s land, and for the past month, Tony had been even more volatile than she. There were good days and bad days and black days and manic days, and all of them were happening in so quick of succession, that she could no longer keep up.

Just thinking about it had her stomach in knots. Tonight was selfish and stupid and juvenile but she —she had to stay sane. She had to eliminate the variables around Jarvis until only the truth was left for her to either fix or burn.

He snorted. “Fair enough.” And then they were at a bar covered in cold-cut crystal. With what she suspected to be the sheer magnetism of a rich man who’d only ever gotten his way, the bartender shot to attention and Obadiah barely had to gesture to bring him over. Though if she was being honest, the flare of his ruby-studded cufflinks probably helped on that front.

In short order their drinks were arranged and Pepper was nursing a glass. There wouldn’t be a repeat of her birthday, the liquor was merely requisite camouflage. They surveyed the multitudes: young, gorgeous, affluent but none from real money. It was her own age-group and Mr. Stane’s favored dating pool. For a minute, she stopped her search and merely watched his. Blonde, brunette, another blonde. Statuesque, athletic, petite. Quite a spread, but nowhere near Tony’s range of palate.

She tilted her chin. “Player’s choice, Mr. Stane. Good conversation? Good humor?” Her voice turned to honey. “Good company?”

He nearly choked on his drink. “Jesus—is this why Tony keeps you near at parties?”

She shrugged. “Possibly.”

There was a flabbergasted pause. “And you’re just going to…what, exactly? Snap your fingers, gather the flock?”

She was both deeply and profoundly expectant. “You’ve never seen me work a room, have you?”

His mouth wavered between incredulity and a grin. “I have the feeling I’m about to be amazed.”

For the first time in a week, she grinned in turn. “Possibly.”
All told, it took less than seventeen minutes of her guiding them around making introductions and fast quips and laughing at well-timed jokes for her to zero in. The woman they arrived at was dusky-skinned, tall, effervescent and with an IQ that bumped up against their own. More importantly: she’d been watching Obadiah’s broad shoulders from the minute he’d walked in.

Really, she’d barely had to try. Tony usually didn’t have the advantage of being head and shoulders above the crowd.

She made the introduction and then watched triumphantly as Obadiah lit. A hand went to the small of the woman’s back, their chemistry practically set a fire, and within five minutes he’d entirely forgotten Pepper as they chattered about the 18th Amendment and Constitutional Law and then, inexplicably, whether it was better to age bourbon in a rickhouse or a barrel at sea.

Victory, thy name was Potts. She hardly noticed the man at her elbow until her spoke: “You’ve stolen my conversational partner, you know.”

Two years of Tony Stark left zero hesitation in returning the volley. “Steal is such a strong word. Try aiding and abetting.”

The man behind her had a thin mouth, large hands, a dark head of hair and ash-pale eyes. Overall, he was quite agreeable to look at. Arresting, if she was being perfectly honest, and she could be honest.

His thin mouth revealed a quick-wit behind it. “What’s the sentence for that, then, in the court of social opinion?”

“Eye for an eye.” Her lips quirked. “Take it or leave it.”

His eyes crinkled when he smiled. “Buy you a drink?”

She glanced to her untouched glass. “I was getting tired of this one anyways.”

~/~/~/~/

“Duncan.” He introduced himself later. Playwright, warm grip, just full-enough of himself that she didn’t have to feel bad about this.

Her tongue stilled a moment. “Virginia.” And then she offered an unadorned hand. “Charmed.”

~/~/~/~/

That night turned to a second date at a wine tasting; a comfortable arm over her shoulder, a hand at her back, a corporeal weight with its own body-heat. At the end of the night, she’d slipped into the town car before he could think to ask for anything more than a quick goodnight.

When she went to Malibu the next morning, a shiver crossed her skin as Jarvis met her at the door.

The second date turned to a third that didn’t leave the gate, mostly because Tony called from two counties over in lockup on a gun charge because why couldn’t he be shooting prototype sidearms with junkies in Fresno? What are we Potts, Switzerland? Communists? The death of the Second Amendment itself? Not on my watch.

When that situation had blown over after three tabloid stories, a blistering piece in the LA Times, and SI Legal with a blood vendetta against all of Fresno County—that non-third date became a fourth.
She slept in her apartment every night in-between. At the darkest hours, even with the memory of touch finally new, she ached still.

She dreamed of sound.

The fourth date landed in late June with the pair of them outside a vegan Bistro in the Palisades. The man was regaling her with what should have been a fascinating story about backpacking trip he’d taken in Nepal, and any other time she would have asked all the right questions and touched his arm at all the right points.

But she and Jarvis had kicked-off an argument just that morning over Albert Camus’ historical opinion on the atomic bomb in conjunction with the Absurdism movement he’d started, and she’d spent the entire day derailed and writing up a near dissertation in her head to counter Jarvis the second he next saw her because he would rue the day.

The dissertation piled up through Duncan talking. He didn’t seem to notice her lack of attention. But when her eyes stayed fixed on his face…well, he noticed that.

The misread, when it happened, was easy to understand.

He dipped in.

She thought of a kiss on cold glass, of longing. Still and yet and true.

She leaned away. He shuffled a moment, thwarted and confused and irritated by his own confusion. A quick step into his space could fix all of that, a press of mouths. A simple bit of intimacy to quell them.

And all she could think was: I don’t want to be here.

And there it was. Her shoulders went loose. “This isn’t going to work.”

It had never been meant to. Data gathered, research done, and she only had the guilt to carry.

“What, I mean—” His shoulders went up, defensive, but she didn’t care enough to hear what he had to say.

She walked away, bitch in heels, and wondered if he thought the same. It wasn’t inaccurate. She hailed a cab, unwilling to wait there a second longer. It was over and done and she had her answer: it wasn’t loneliness, it wasn’t even deprivation.

In the cab, she opened her clutch and drew out a pair of earrings. She'd been carrying them around for weeks. Gold, stones like fire, a design born in binary. Location in a heartbeat and all it took was skin to metal ignition.

She put them in. Thirty seconds later, her phone rang.

A welcome voice was on the line. “Why on earth are you in the Palisades? Did you lose a bet?”

“Only with myself.” She sighed. “It’s so gentrified here that it hurts my soul.”

Jarvis tisked. “And we can’t have that. Couture therapy at the house?”

There’d be online catalogues as far as the eye could see, and he’d help her pick through every one. Right there with her; exactly where she wanted both of them to be.
Her hands went soft in her lap. “Yes please.”

~/~/~/

And that answered that. Being fucked in the head was all her: no assistance required.

A day into July, she booked herself a weekly full-body massage and considered it the best stop-gap available. It’d be human contact, skin on skin, at least one of her starvations eased. Deprivation may not have started the infatuation, but it sure as hell hadn’t helped it. Jarvis was in her life and she was both unequivocally and devastatingly attracted to him. She wasn’t getting over him by getting under someone else, and with that fixed in her mind, the only thing left was to let the feelings run their course.

She’d just have to survive it.

Tony was being Tony and SI was out on a limb, and Jarvis would be working with her as closely as ever. It was clear her heart was set on him and wouldn't be dissuaded, and there was no more time for that existential crisis. She’d either starve it out, or starve herself out.

Whatever broke first.

Chapter End Notes

In which Pepper's crisis is everlasting, and even going out to bars with Obadiah doesn't help (and god does that relationship continue to be weird).

And worry not, we will eventually circle back to what happened on Jarvis’ end of things, but it just isn't a conversation that can happen...currently. Though if anyone wants to know, Spoiler Alert but not really: Pepper and Jarvis mutually panicked, mutually played dead to each other for about five hours, and then mutually tried to play it off casually by not talking about it. They are both idiots who don’t/totally do deserve each other.

Wednesday update tonight because I needed an extra day to edit what ended up being weirdly complicated chapter. I thought for two seconds about drawing-out Pepper actually trying to date, but then realized neither she nor I would have the patience for it. Nothing compares to Jarvis. Jarvis is what the heart wants, and Jarvis is what the heart will get (eventually).

There won't be a chapter next Tuesday. That bachelorette party I went to a few weeks back sort of necessitates a wedding happening, and that happening has arrived. I have a great deal of travel to look forward to, so there will be, regrettably, zero time to write. Expect Hardwired back on March 7th.
The inside of the private terminal was dim. Considering the glare outside, it was something of a selling point. The air conditioning cycled and she reveled, if only for a minute, in air that didn’t scorch like tar.

She tried to savor the little things in life; it kept morale at a satisfactory level.

Jarvis hummed to life. “The jet has finished disembarking; expect arrival within ninety seconds.”

“Acknowledged.” She checked her Bluetooth had a snug fit and rose. “How’s his disposition?”

“As well as it can be, I’d imagine.” Something shuffled on his end of the line. “Though that’s only extrapolating from current datasets available. There is a certain dearth here.”

She nearly rolled her eyes, but in the end, was more than amused than not. “I’m sure you’re managing.”

“There was an attempt.” He disdained, and oh, would she give him the benefit of that.

Eighty-seven seconds later in a blast of sunlight and a sweltering heat, Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes swept into the terminal with all the top-gun swagger of a man who ruled the skies. He smiled then, benign, as if that level of confidence wasn’t absolutely lethal. “Miss Potts.”

She really did appreciate that man’s ability to enter a room. “Lieutenant Colonel.” And offered a cheek so he could kiss her and she could respond in kind.

Pleasantries were exchanged in earnest; his mouth warm and dry and then gone from her cheekbone. He rubbed her arms once, gripped her elbows, and stared down. “Everything running alright?”

That was a bit of nebulous question, wasn’t it?

She sometimes forgot this, about him. That Rhodes both saw and wanted to see the people around him and didn’t let his ego keep him from it. It was a rare trait, out here. It wasn’t an unwelcome one. “We’re handling things just fine.” She dimpled and then deflected smoothly: “I’m so glad you could make it.”

He squeezed a little, gaze flickering across her face, and then released her. “Wouldn’t miss it for anything. Where’s Tony?”
“SI Picnic; Fourth of July on the Third of July celebrations. The photo ops will be lovely.” They’d better be after she’d spent a solid week blocking them out. If Tony botched this after she’d done him the favor of putting him next to both the PR Department and the Secretarial pool, there’d be consequences the likes of which not even god could begin to imagine.

Rhodes seemed to read the threat in her face. “Trust me, Tony’s all bells and whistles for the Fourth. Food, explosions, Constitutional permission to daydrink. And you know how he loves a camera.”

“I do.” It was both a blessing and a blight. “Mr. Hogan is waiting for us at the car, I can give you the itinerary while we go.”

“Sounds nice,” He offered his arm. “Miss Potts.”

She eyed him. “Officer and a Gentlemen?”

That genial grin worked its way back. “Gotta reputation to uphold, didn’t anyone tell you?”

She put her arm through his. “Tony did say something about MIT.”

“Don’t listen to anything Tony says about MIT.” He condemned, but there followed a twitch of his mouth and a very solicitous tucking of her hand against his elbow. “I mean it. Save yourself.”

“I very much doubt I’d be the one being saved.”

“You say that now.”

They were moving through the terminal at a decent clip then, and the staff nodded at them and even offered smiles. It was aimed entirely at Rhodes. Military man, full brass; a day before the Fourth of July and there was a War on.

Rhodes nodded back, but his eyes kept moving. Faces, hands, blind corners. A constant and automatic motion. “How’s security on the celebration tomorrow?”

First Fourth of July since the attacks, and it was just another milestone in the long unfolding of what comes after. Tony was going to welcome it with an undaunted bang, and for once, she was in agreement. Even if it meant nightmare scheduling and having both the FBI and the LAPD on her speed dial, she’d make it work.

“Tight.” She let that cross over her tongue. “There’s no more chatter about LA or Stark Industries than usual, but we’re not leaving anything to chance.”

His frame angled inwards. “And who’s talking to you about chatter?”

“Tony has people.” Those people being Jarvis, mostly. His security briefings alone had been illuminating.

“Uh-huh.” He wasn't convinced. “What’s the actual word?”

Always prying, Rhodes. But it was nice: a human mind paying close enough attention to her blatant prevarications to spar. “A Newsweek poll claimed that fifty-seven percent of Americans believe a terrorist attack on the Fourth of July is either somewhat or very likely.”

His mouth did something very unimpressed. “That doesn’t answer my question.”

She tucked a length of hair behind a glittering earring. “There are worries. We’re handling them.”
“If you need any help, any contacts.” It was an oblique sort of statement, but she understood what was being offered.

“We’re keeping our eyes open.” She patted his arm. “You just worry about having a good time.”

Tomorrow was going to be one of those days where she and Jarvis would be virtually welded together. And honestly, it was better not to think too hard about it. Security, eyes, fear. Closer and closer; always and ever but never getting close.

“If you’re sure.” Rhodes finally said.

Jarvis huffed against her ear. “As if we aren’t.”

Humor coiled inky and a little sharp. “I think we’ll all be on the same page, Colonel. Just you wait.”

/~~/~/

The morning of the Fourth, she stepped into Malibu with flourish. 50’s style dress: full skirt, pleating, petticoats in earnest. It was blue; white stars, red sash, red heels.

It was a statement to no one at all.

“Well aren’t you the picture of Americana.” Jarvis declared, eyes moving towards her as he coasted along the air.

She crossed her ankles and curtsied. “Does it look nice?”

“You’re a vision in the eye of the beholder.” He affirmed. “Now, do tell, what made blue the main course of the day?”

Why indeed. White was virginal and red only made her think of gold. Of gold swimming in red, and all the heat that ruinous tide carried. And here she stood a glutton for punishment talking about blue.

She put on a careless smile. “What other colors are there?”

He considered that, mused, and churned around her. “What are there indeed?”

/~~/~/

There was a dangerous sort of simplicity to it. Keep the schedule, keep Tony’s impromptu soapbox speeches from become tirades, stay out from underfoot. And, pressingly, push in or yank out Rhodes from every photo op as it arrived.

The US Military had certain rules concerning favoritism, bias, and where the uniform could appear in support, and she wasn’t about to let Rhodes run afoul. Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes, close friend of Tony Stark, was fine on the front of any magazine. Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes in support of CEO of Stark Industries, in full dress uniform, was less fine. Unfine. The complete opposite of fine.

Three parades (one SI sponsored), a cookout, and a minor-league baseball game later; it was a wonder she hadn’t given the man whiplash.

“Pilot’s reflexes.” He’d claimed.
She’d been uninspired. “That’s not how anything works.”

But he did appreciate her pulling him aside to watch Tony in a three-piece suit eat hamburgers straight from a grill, sunglasses on, tie pinned back, alongside three men who were in flip flops and American-flag shorts and not much else.

Rhodes gleefully went in for the kill. “You gonna be saluting the flag, Tony?”

Tony eyed up the shorts of the man lounging next to him. “Shut your mouth, I just might.”

She pointedly ignored the exchange and drank from her glass. Somehow, in the absolute human-flood that was LA on the Fourth of July, glasses of pink lemonade kept making their way to her.

She took another grateful sip. “You never fail to impress.” Their source was not inexplicable.

“I have to keep on my toes somehow.” Jarvis answered breezily. “Drink all of that before twelve, you need to keep your hydration up.”

Good lord. Someday he was going to mother-hen her right into the grave. “I’ll take that under advisement, dear. Anything else you want to contribute?”

He was an unbearable, impish press of charm. “You are due for another layer of sunscreen.”

All the heat that brought could only be coming from a sunburn. Really. Really honest truly because she only needed sunscreen.

Her teeth clicked against the glass. “Mean.”

“Well, if you want more freckles, I certainly won’t stand in your—” He paused abruptly. “Ah. Hold a moment.” There was clicking, whirring, and then the line fell silent.

The glass sweated between her fingers and dripped cold down her nails. “Jarvis?”

Somewhere near her, Rhodes said: “Dayton’s pretty nice, actually.”

Tony gasped. “Never say something like that ever again. Get your Ohio indoctrination out of this golden state.”

“I can rub Midwest on you.” Rhodes promised. “You’ll have the salt of the earth on you, it’ll be great.”

“I’ll have no such thing and—Rhodes, I swear to god, if your hands so much as move within a foot of my bubble—”

There was laughter behind her, a thunk of bodies, Tony squawking and then a hamburger smacking concrete.

Jarvis crackled onto the line. Her head tilted to the side and up. The sky smeared and stretched; brittle clouds on bleached blue. He spoke at a very rapid clip and she tasted her own pulse. She tasted something sour and familiar.

“Potts. Hey, what do you—”

Tony cut him off. “Leave’er alone, Honey Bear. Potts is communing.” That was certainly a way to describe it, though it didn’t sound nice when Tony said it.
Acid leached down and her head came level. “Someone opened fire on the El-Al Israel ticket counter at LA International.” She waited a tick for Jarvis to keep unspooling it. “Two civilians are black-coded with an unknown number of injuries.”

Rhodes let Tony out of a headlock. “Shit.”

“Shit.” Tony repeated, and it went like a shadow on the sun.

Whatever he’d been a moment ago, it was gone. The fear was familiar and so was the thunder. Her hand went into her bag, flipped his phone and handed it to him. “Terrorism is being thrown around. It sounds isolated so far, but—I don’t know.” And she didn’t. She hadn’t known last time what would come next and next and next. And if it started again, if this all started again—

Tony had the phone and she wasn’t even sure he was listening, but she finished anyways: “I’ll go talk to security.”

But any attempt to move was stopped as Rhodes corralled her. He didn’t touch her, didn’t even loom, but it was enough to stymie her. She couldn’t read his expression when he asked: “You okay?”

Jarvis warped hot and caustic against her neck.

“I’m—it’s probably a one off. We’re fine.” Her reaction was sling-shotting, but that wasn’t new. “I’m fine.”

Jarvis said. “Cameras in a mile-wide net have been accessed. No threats detected.”

Rhodes couldn’t hear it, but his eyes were clear. No shadows in the glass. “Okay then, you go talk.”

And Jarvis’ voice grated in the space that only existed between them: “Thank you for your permission, Colonel.”

The venom was nearly transferable. She swallowed hard. “Stay with Tony, please.” And walked away before it could spill right out of her. She found their first line of defense twenty away, and grabbed the nearest body and whispered in his ear. The call went from there, and within forty seconds the three wide rings had collapsed into two solid ones. Bodies were moving towards rooftops, and a pair of their tallest went to stand a half step shy of Tony’s shoulders.

It’d last them.

She took one breath. Two. Three. “Jarvis, this was isolated, right?”

And the boiling of him dropped to a reassuring simmer. “As far as open channels currently suggest. There’s no word of this being coordinated, and as far as attacks go it was…deficient. If it was meant to draw the LAPD out of position, it’s 96.88% unlikely to succeed.”

That was comforting in a terrible, awful sort of way. “Okay.”

“I’m sorry there isn’t more.” And there followed a slow hiss like dead-air. “Can I get you anything?”

“See if we can’t break Tony’s schedule down to get him on the yacht faster.” At least out there Jarvis had total control, and they’d have half a mile of ocean between them and anything that looked at them funny. “And promise me you won’t say anything else smart about Colonel Rhodes
while he’s here.”

“And why would I do that?” He queried, without guile and blameless.

“Because you’ve tripped me up into saying nice things, and knowing my luck, you attempting the opposite will be worse.” And it didn’t help that at her very, inner-core, she was downright mean. “You’re an awful influence.”

“When have I been anything but?” He pondered, but then finished acerbically: “I assume my permission to make smart comments on all others remains?”

“Of course.” She couldn’t live without Jarvis’ bitchy, judgmental quips on everyone who crossed them. She’d die of deprivation. “But let’s play nice with Rhodes, shall we? He’s nice.”

“If you say so.” He muttered, and she would have called that grumpy if she called it anything at all. She tried not to these days. “You should return to Mr. Stark. The SI sponsored BBQ will start at 12:30, and whether he wants to go or not, he needs to be there.”

A knot formed beneath her sternum. “The show goes on?”

“It always goes.” He laid it down like benediction. “Life never stops, and neither can we.”

And that was, in the end, the only truth that mattered.

//~/~/~/

The fireworks had gone dark and Marina Del Rey was less than sparks in the distance. It’d been hours since the finale ended. The yacht didn’t have much sway to it, but the dessert wine she was halfway through was giving her something of an approximation.

False alarms. Fireworks. Flaws.

Everything had, inexplicably, gone perfect the rest of the day. Whatever had happened at LAX hadn’t spread. She wouldn’t have believed the ease of everything after, except for the tension visibly coming off their shoulders.

The staff had pulled back, and for once, Tony had sent all his groupies away. Security was...somewhere, but once they’d gotten on the yacht, they’d no longer been her responsibility and she hadn't kept track of the herd.

They were alone on the upper deck: Rhodes and Tony two opposing chairs sharing a bucket of imported lager, and her on a lounge keeping the wine jealously in-hand. The wind was warm on their faces.

Their words were like knives.

“What are they even hitting?” Tony asked, deceptively friendly. “We’re getting some interesting orders by tonnage of ordnance, if you get my drift.”

“You know I can’t talk about this.” Rhodes defiantly drank his beer. “Would you lay off?”

“I’m just saying,” Tony spread his hands in innocence. “That’s a fuckload of bombing for a no-fly zone. You can say it to us, we’re taxpayers. Is Uncle Sam finally giving up the ghost that the no-fly was ever about protecting the Shi’a in anywhere-Iraq?”

“It’s the air defense system they’re hitting, yeah? There’s only one reason to do that.” The friendliness slipped away. “And it’s not because the Air Force wants to tango with every *Zenitnaya Ustanovka* on the ground. C’mon, wink once for yes, twice for no. The invasion’s a go.”

Instead of saying anything, Rhodes stuck his hand into the bucket and flung ice across Tony’s lap. It clattered off the floor, the paneling, Tony's legs. Her boss nearly sprung out of his chair. “Jesus! Fucking mature.”

“Shut up.” Rhodes said, friendliness just as present and just as untrue. “Or I’m gonna have to ask you some questions about your sources that a lot of spooks at Langley will find mighty interesting.”

That brought the boil down a notch. Tony flapped his hand as if to say *I didn’t actually care.*

She really shouldn’t have entered the argument. “If the Iraqis locked radar on a US aircraft, would that mount to a material breach of the UN resolution? Non-compliance in any way means *justified* war.”

“Fuckin’ A.” Rhodes moaned. “You two are the worst peas in a pod I have ever *met.*”

“You know,” Tony pointed his bottle at her. “Sometimes I actually like you.”

She saluted with her glass. “The feeling isn’t mutual.”

He shrugged. “Fair.” And threw back his lager, dropped the empty, and opened a sixth. “Anyways, Rhodey. Inquiring citizens want to know: did the US Air Force in fact have relations with that country?”

“Both of you drink and stop giving me grief.” The Colonel’s jacket was already off, and he went for the buttons of his shirt and then shed that too. “I don’t know why I ever visit you. It has never, in the history of our friendship, ended well for me.”

“There was that time with the happy ending.” Tony pointed out.

She despaired. “Please stop talking.”

Rhodes jabbed a hand at her. *"Thank you."*

Another three rounds passed, at least for her. She was never going to try keeping up with Tony or his company; that was a recipe for a nuked liver and regret. At some point the lager was finished or had lost their interest, and the conversation went slow and nearly dreamy. They trailed off at odd moments, punctuated themselves with yawns, and sometimes lost the thread between soft gestures and empty air.

Tony rolled a tumbler between his palms. “We need to do better.”

Rhodes shifted lazily. “At what?”

He stared at where the fire had died behind them. “All of it. All of us.”

A quiet murmur crossed their narrow space. “Can’t save the world alone, Tony.”

“People keep saying that, but I only hear *stop trying to save the world.*”

“Stark Industries,” She interjected drowsily. “Making it better one bullet at a time.”
Tony rolled over that and offered: “Fuck off.”

“No,” She shrugged. “I’m pretty sure I heard someone say that at HQ.”

He squinted. “Well, punch them in the dick the next chance you get.”

She considered it. “I’d like that in writing.”

“I’ll give you writing.”

“Yeah, that’s it.” And Rhodes levered himself up. “Sleep time is all time.”

“I am allowed to be melancholy on my own boat and give out dick punches.” Tony railed. “Neither you nor the Board can stop me, I am the Law.”

“So is sleep.”

“Propaganda.”

“Ya-huh.” There was a lilting sort of softness. “C’mon, Tony.”

“Ugh.” Her boss swayed to his feet. “Note that I am only doing this out of the kindness of my heart for you lightweights.”

She burrowed further into the lounge. “I am overwhelmed by generosity.”

“Least someone is.” Tony muttered, and then there was a quiet shuffling and arms over shoulders, and they were off into the dark. Maybe to sleep.

She hoped Tony’s brain would let him rest until dawn.

Rhodes called back. “Potts, you gonna be able to get to bed alright?”

As if that was hard? She’d been managing that since she was as high as her daddy’s knee, thank you very much.

For the first time in an hour, Jarvis spoke aloud. “She’ll be fine, Lieutenant Colonel. I’ll make certain she gets there.”

Yeah. Get there.

“See.” She heard Tony hiss nonsensically, but that seemed to have been enough. The pair of them slipped away, and there stayed the water and the wine and a thick July-sweat. For once, the ocean gave her no relief.

“Are you actually going to bed?” Jarvis asked a minute later.

She rolled onto her back and sighed. “I’m waiting to sober up before trying.”

He accepted it. “Reasonable. I’ll have some water sent up.”

“That’d be very nice.” The weight of the alcohol pushed her eyelids shut. “I’d say sorry for keeping you up, but.”

“We both know that’s not an issue.” He was gentle in the wind, a trail of mist. Barely on the skin.

It was profoundly unfair. Not once, not even a single moment, would she ever get to see Jarvis tired
or drunk or all of the above. Never get to see him fading or drifting or have words spilling heedless from his tongue.

There was a strange sort of intimacy found in sweat and the dark and the fog of inebriation, but she kept it locked. She’d already made the mistake of trusting that feeling and wouldn’t make it twice.

The mist of him bloomed into something. “Do you believe it?”

It took her a moment to process. “In what?”

“Bullets and betterment.”

“I…” Her brain re-tracked. “If you mean this—what we do. Weapons don’t make things better, but sometimes…they make things less worse.” That wasn’t everything, it couldn't be. “They make things less when there needs to be less.”

The situation was capsizing and she wasn’t quite sure what had tipped it.

“And that’s not wrong?” He pushed. “Immoral?”

That wasn’t quite an accusation. And yet.

“There exist individuals whom the world would shine brighter without.” She’d studied her history, her wars. She’d met people. The earth had been on fire long before her birth. “I wouldn’t work for Tony if I didn’t believe in what he does.”

“And yet you seem to be inheriting some of Mr. Stark’s hostilities concerning hostility.”

Fucking Iraq.

“One hostility. Singular.” Her head swam as she drained her glass. “I have questions and I have doubts. You work for a weapons manufacturer, you get an idea what it takes to build these things. The facilities, the personnel, the research.” Destruction had a baseline cost.

And Jarvis was whispering State Secrets in Tony’s ear and her boss wasn’t shy in sharing it. There were too many questions and too many doubts, and even a girl that was apolitical couldn’t float on ignorance forever.

“We’re going to line our pockets on a sham; Tony knows it, I know it.” And what were they even supposed to do? It wasn’t like they could pick the wars. Please use these missiles for Afghanistan only, hugs and kisses, Stark Industries et. al. That’d go over worse than blanks and empty bombs. “We make the bullets and we even make the guns.” It thrashed there, serpentine, throat to ribs to stomach lining. “We don’t make the hands that carry them.”

He was a haze. A suffocation. “We don’t get to choose where those hands point them.” He was in her very lungs.

He knew her words before they could be born on her breath.

She dug nails into her palm. “Do you ever get to choose, Jarvis? I know some of the Intel you get for Tony, and I can guess at the remainder. Do you just listen, or do you ever try to push?”

It was something she’d wondered at for months. The kind of feeds Jarvis must have burrowed himself into were both highly classified and encrypted. The things he saw, the disparate lines of intelligence he was able to bring together, all the eyes and all the cameras that he could look his
way out of—

Had he merely been a spectator all this time?

She counted the waves against the yacht nine times before he spoke. “You’d be amazed what a single anonymous tip can accomplish. A shipment of C4 here, a flagged passport there, two men meeting in an internet café, a few conversations on a nameless forum. Connect one to the other and suddenly: there’s a thread to cut.”

A call to make. A throat to slit.

All that helplessness he’d had after the attacks hadn’t been buried, it’d been used. He'd been doing the devil’s arithmetic. But just because he gave some agent or analyst or spook a trail of crumbs, it didn’t mean that they would—

Her chin dipped. “You don’t get to request how that information's used.”

“No,” He answered simply. “But they make their choices and I make mine.”

That landed square, and she marveled at it. “And it’s always that easy?”

“Sometimes I can’t connect the dots without certain powers knowing something out there is doing it. It’s always a choice: compromise access for one large threat, or risk the ones you let pass becoming worse than they appear. And then sometimes, just maybe, you see a war coming.”

He slipped through a shadow darkly. “You’d be amazed how much you can know and how little you can change.”

Her head was floating, her heart was sinking. There’d come a severing, in time. “When it comes to Tony, do you…?”

The barren fields had always been white in December. The drifts of snow, the howling wind, the emptiness across it. When he spoke, she remembered them. “When it comes to you or Mr. Stark, nothing is beyond me.”


*It’s not like you wouldn’t do the same.*

She wanted to drink the sea. She wanted to swallow stars. She wanted to see the very binary that could stitch together *devotion*.

The glass in her hand went gently to the table. “I’ve had too much.”

And that closed a door between them. It closed a shuddering, heaving thing from coming apart to *scream*.

And just like that, a wholly proper space returned. “The water will be here in thirty seconds, Pepper.”

But she knew there was a door now. Knew it could be opened, that protection and devotion could be taken and misused for so much more. Knew that she’d mistake it. That her heart was running blind. Knew she’d try to crawl inside him or pull back in, pack him tightly beneath her ribs and never let him go.

It’d be easy. It’d be so *easy.*
She felt that door now, and Jarvis had been right.

“Thank you for thinking of me.”

Knowing was its own kind of torture.

Chapter End Notes

In which Jarvis is maybe jealous and unrelated to that, wholly dangerous. In which Pepper is oblivious to the former and perfectly enthralled (and unsettled with her enthrallement) by the latter. Ah, to love an AI and be loved in turn.

(Also, to be clear, neither Pepper nor Rhodes are at all interested in each other. This is probably, at most, only the second time they've seen each other in person since 9/11, and Rhodey is tactile and used to being The Officer In Charge and also Father to His Troops. Pepper is just friendly as usual. Jarvis is dying of jealously somewhere in the background.)

And for my brief, "what the hell are you talking about" excerpt from recent history: the shooting at the El Al ticket desk was a real thing that happened on July 4, 2002. It was considered a lone-wolf attack, and the assailant was killed on site by airline security. Two people were killed and a half-dozen were injured. It caused a nasty, bit of panicked ripple at the time. People were still hyper-alert after 9/11, and I'm not really sure how long it took for everyone to stop expecting the worst each time something happened. I didn't remember this attack off the top of my head either; I was reading old newspaper articles from this date trying to get a feel for what security would have looked like at public gatherings post 9/11, only to stumble on this and go...well. Shit. They live in LA, don't they?

Other informational things: The Newsweek poll Pepper quotes is real. The Zenitnaya Ustanovka Tony refers to is the ZU-23-2, an anti-aircraft gun that was used in Iraq. The no-fly-zone is, well, the no-fly-zone held together by the US Air Force and UK Royal Air Force in 2002. Though the reasons given for this zone and early bombings (they were dickin around in March, going heavy by June, then escalated all the way through December) was to protect certain Arab and Sh'ia populations in southern Iraq, it was really a thinly veiled operation to a) bomb the hell out of the air-defense system and other targets to make way for the invasion and b) incite a shootdown attempt by the Iraqis on a US or RAF jet so America could cast itself as the victim. Pepper talking about weapons and knowing the means/upkeep required to have them is her oblique way of saying she know the Weapons of Mass Destruction rhetoric is bullshit. Considering, per Age of Ultron, that there are Arms Dealer Conventions (which, really??), I'm pretty sure Tony would have known about the large lack of WMD's and not been shy in telling her.

That should cover things. Possibly. Any questions or comments, feel free to send them!
Burnout

Chapter Summary

Warning for drug use, again, and also a really ugly argument. There's mention of an "anniversary" which here means the anniversary of the first year after the 9/11 attacks, though 9/11 isn't mentioned explicitly.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’m just saying, if the angle was better—”

“Do not even talk to me about angles. I am literally on my knees here, and the carpeting is reprehensible.”

“God forbid your knees ever suffer.” Jarvis answered, irreverent. “I’ll write a letter to Management at once.”

“Your dedication is always appreciated.” She adjusted her skirt to the side. “I don’t know how I’d live without it.”

“On your knees less, I’d wager.” He mused.

She nearly dropped the camera.

“Oh my god.” Her skin ignited. “Oh my god.”

“Is something the matter, Miss Potts?” He queried sweetly.

She bit down. “No.” And adjusted the camera until the little screen was glowing with a clear shot of one of the papers on the floor. It was just another of those absurd moments in what was rapidly becoming her utterly absurd life. A Design/Tech conference had, for once, caught Tony’s interest, and he’d rounded up half a dozen R&D teams and spirited them all to Zurich.

Upside: good press, happy underlings, Tony getting to lord his genius over an adoring mass.

Downside: Tony lording, Tony partaking, Tony having a fit of brilliance that ended in half a sheaf of paper coating his hotel room in proprietary designs and coding. Literally no one but her had the clearance to even look at them, let alone compile and send them off to Jarvis to transcribe, so here she ended up with a camera and protesting joints and a very poor disposition to criticism.

She could think of so many ways she’d have liked to be locked in a hotel room with Jarvis, but none of those fantasies seemed about to transpire. On her knees still, no camera, smiling towards the open laptop and inching her skirt up. Hands dragging up her thighs, silk and nails and skin until —

Fuck.

Sometimes, it didn’t pay to be the right hand of the king.
“It could be an L or an I.” Jarvis lamented, oblivious to her every wandering. “How am I to know without your help?”

She smothered the fantasy and buried it in the same breath. “Help, he says.” And snapped a picture and shifted to her next subject. “You're killing me.”

“I think you'd know if I was killing you.” He assured. "I'd imagine that would be a very involved process."

"Promises."

Twenty minutes later she was curled up on the couch with a laptop open and a cord snaking to the camera. The download completed, and Jarvis hummed rather more agreeably. “Yes, I think that did it. I’ll have a digital transcription back in an hour. Though, if I need any more assistance in my interpretations—”

“You know where to find me.” She dropped her chin onto her palm. “Speaking of find, where did Mr. Stark get off to?”

He lingered over that. Mostly, she was sure, to drag things out. “At dinner with the firmware team, if tales are to be believed.”

“Do you think they’ll bring food back for me?” It wasn’t that she expected them to, or even really held out for it, but sometimes she did out of some perverse sense of self-flagellation.

“Unlikely.” Jarvis said, and lord, it’d been awhile since he’d killed one of her hopes that quickly. Not that he didn’t kill most of them eventually, but still.

She made a disagreeable sound.

“Fear not,” He trilled. “I’ve already ordered room service.”

She perked up. “Oh?”

“Shrimp Scampi in lemon juice and vermouth, over a bed of angel hair pasta and parsley.” It came out nearly as a purr. “Acceptable, Miss Potts?”

She set aside the laptop immediately. “Very acceptable.”

He puffed up. “Excellent.”

Warmth spread from her heart to the tips of her fingers, buzzing and swift. She shouldn’t. She couldn’t. And yet.

Pepper surveilled the room. “Do you think if I left the papers as is, Mr. Stark would even notice they’re in the sheets?”

And there came something more than a little sly. “Unlikely.”

She cracked a grin and liked to think, somewhere in a server far away, he returned a mirror of it.

/~~/~/~/

Two days later, her good mood evaporated.

Five hours past that, she was grateful her phone died at the edge of Zurich.
It always started the same. No matter where she was, no matter what time it began. Jarvis, Obadiah, someone in HR: it was always the same story. Tony should be here. Tony should be doing this. Tony should be there. Tony shouldn’t be doing that.

Isn’t this your goddamn job?

She couldn’t be Tony’s shadow; couldn’t stitch herself to his soles like some modern Peter Pan. That was Jarvis’s job, really. She had her limitations.

And it started with a call from that very shadow, anxious in a way that she didn’t like. A missed speech, an abandoned phone, a lost security detail all leading to a scavenger hunt across greater Zurich. Something had set Tony off again and she wasn’t sure what it had been; wasn’t even sure that she cared. Knowing had been helping less and less in heading him off.

It seemed to come from all sides, these days. The stress, the mania, the hunger.

The air was sickly sweet; smoke and sweat. Venom. She didn’t want a taste. “You had the keynote speech, you know. Four hours ago.”

Tony shrugged. “C’est la vie.” And from his spot reclined, took a messy drink that spilled tequila down his chin. The smell of liqueur was thick, but it wasn’t the liqueur she was worried about.

She couldn’t tell whether she was tired or absolutely furious “It’ll be a black-eye on SI. They thought this would be good press; they touted it. And instead your timeslot came and half of the software team had to scramble because nobody knew what you were going to say. I think one of them had a meltdown.”

“And behold how little I care.” He glanced about as if to set down his glass, found nothing, and opened his hand. The glass fell with a heavy thunk. “Sounds like it turned out fine. They learned something. Got that go-getter attitude. You should be proud of my children.”

Furious, she thought, unequivocally furious. “Pride isn’t quite what I’m experiencing.”

“You should get to have all the experiences.” And he patted at the couch he was on, hands spasming arrhythmically. “Sit. The standing is freaking me out; you’re giving me vertigo. Vertigo Potts. You should really change your name, that’d be both amazing and true.”

She didn’t try to sit down—there wasn’t an inch of this house that she wanted to touch. It was gilt and glass with the thick smear of never quite expunged vomit, and god, why did she keep ending up in places like this?

Sickly sweet. Poison; throat and lungs and tongue. “Has anyone taken a picture of you here?”

“Not that kind of party.” His mouth formed a grin, lopsided and messier than his drink. “Not that kind of crowd.”

True. She doubted most of the people she’d seen wandering could string more than two words together. And Tony—

Jesus.

His fly undone; slacks loose and belt askew. She could guess what had happened there, it was barely worth a thought. But what was worth mentioning—
Veins were blown in his left eye, but there was no bruising on his skin. It would have been nicer if she could believe he’d picked a fight and taken a punch. His nose was bloody and streaking down his neck. His fingers were chalky. His pupils could have swallowed worlds.

It was a veritable neon sign that his usage had, seemingly without her notice, gone beyond the pale.

She reached into her purse and drew out a cloth. Tony-sober would have slapped her away; personal bubbles and hating being handed anything in all senses of the phrase. Tony-high was another creature entirely. He sat patiently as she wiped the blood from his face.

It unnerved her more than anything yet.

She kept her hands steady. “How much did you take?”

“Enough, I think.” His teeth flashed slick. “You wanna share? Take a taste?” They curved red.

The worst part was, this wasn’t even a binge. She knew what those looked like, and this—this was casual. Neck-deep in with veins ruptured, and he could still string sentences together and leave soured breath on her shirt.

She was deeply and painfully grateful that, with her phone dead in her clutch, Jarvis didn’t have to hear this disaster just once in their lives.

She kept her hands steady. “Shut up.”

He grinned wider. “Make me.”

Something clenched violently and nearly cracked her ribcage in two. “Are you going to come back with me to the conference?”

He shrugged out of her grip, mouth a dark smear. “Pass.”

“Mr. Stark—”

“You can stay; make some fucking friends for a change.” And his teeth were knives. “Get whatever the fuck you’ve got wrong inside you untwisted—”

Her foot met the glass he’d dropped. It flew into the wall with a shattering bang.

“Nice.” He answered, and there was something awful in it. “Glad to know you’ve got a pulse under all that ice.”

Something rose in her chest, into her mouth, putrid and hot and grotesque. “Are you really going to keep doing this? Put another fuckup on our plate this close to the anniversary?”

Miles from them, California in August was sticky with heat and pending dread, and September would be no kinder. It coated her teeth and clotted on her tongue. “Are you gonna show up in New York out of your fucking mind, with that shit in your brain and your dick still wet from whoever you got to—”

That awful thing in his face cracked. She thought that, just for once, he was speechless.

It faded. Blackened. Seethed. “Like you honestly give a shit. Little Miss Potts, all pampered and holy; just wants everyone’s praise and her checks to be signed and all the blood that bought her a life to just stay off her Louboutin’s—”
Her throat squeezed. “You think I don’t care?”

“I think you haven’t cared a fucking day in your spoiled life.” It jagged from between his teeth.

“And you have? Down in your workshop building your guns and snorting god knows what and not giving a goddamn who your actions pour out on—”

“So it’s all about how you feel.”

“Excuse me for wanting us not to be an embarrassment when the world is watching!”

“And that’s all you—”

“That’s exactly what I—”

“If you think I’m such a fucking embarrassment, you can just—”

“What do you think this is going to accomplish?” Her breath flayed outright. “Who are you even punishing with this? Us or yourself?”

It lanced between them; bleeding and raw and fully born.

Black. Silent. Black.

It was the end of an earthquake, and something had been shattered by it.

He was the human embodiment of an aftershock. “Get out.” Each word broke off in his mouth. “Right now. Go drink the wine I buy you and stay in the hotel I pay for and take off the clothes my money gets you, and go fuck yourself.” And his breath poured like blood. “Go fritter your life away on Jarvis or whatever the fuck it is you do when you’re not nagging me, got it?”

She went still. Everything went very still. Grime on the floor, coke on the glass, her heart in her throat. Without a word, she turned on heel.

The room was like a crater behind her.

At the curb outside, the security detail wouldn’t meet her eyes. She breathed. She breathed. She breathed. “Go in to Mr. Stark. Stay with him, bring him back, I don’t care.”

“Miss Potts?” One of them asked.

She stood at a very distant ledge. “What part of that did you not understand?”

They hurried past her without another protest.

She got into the waiting town car, and the driver glanced back. “Are we waiting for—”

“No.” She interrupted. “We’re going.”

He didn’t argue. “Where to?”

Her eyes lingered out the window. “I don’t care.”

/~/~/~/~/

She called Jarvis from a payphone. “He’s fine. Security’s with him.”
The System asked more questions, a thousand of them, but she had no answers to give and hung-up a minute later.

/~/~/~/

She drank wine at a black-marble bar on her own dime. She got a room in a hotel halfway across the city. She took off the clothes that someone else’s money had bought her, and laid on the bed but not under the sheets.

She left her cellphone dead on the nightstand.

The clock ticked by.

A moon rose bleak.

/~/~/~/

She wept quietly in the dark.

Chapter End Notes

In which Pepper and Tony argue entirely at a cross purpose. Tony's being eaten alive by guilt and can't stand that the person most enmeshed in his life, the one living high on the blood-money just as much as he is, seems unaffected by what's destroying him. Pepper's frustrated and afraid and knows Tony's pushing towards a deep end she can't pull him out of if he doesn't let her. (And some of it is just them being straight up awful to each other, not gonna lie.)

So when Tony (because his superpower is finding weak-spots even when he doesn't understand them) says "go fritter your life away on Jarvis" he means "go spend time with the person you obviously prefer to me in your perfect guilt-free life that I can't have and fuck you" but Pepper hears "go waste your life on something that can't love you back you goddamn psycho."

So the world turns.

I swear to god, this fic does get happy again. Sickeningly, sweetly happy. We just gotta get there.
Water lapped at her ankles. The sun was high and streaking off the marble in scalding arcs. It was even worse off the water. That was probably why she was on her back: feet in the pool, head pillowed on one arm, face under the other, sweat puddling off her back.

She was cooking in her skin. Meat, blood. Cauterizing to bone.

“Are you sure you have—”

“I have enough sunscreen.” If she hadn’t sweated it off yet. “Thank you, Jarvis, but I will live to see tomorrow.”

He tisked. “Unpleasantly, perhaps. I distinctly remember you peeling for most of July.”

She rotated her ankles beneath the surface. “And thank you for reminding me of that regrettable portion of our lives.”

Jarvis released a punched-out sigh. “It is currently 92 degrees on the back deck, and there is a pool right in front of you.” It was a very pointed argument, but then again, they were outside. Jarvis’s power in the acoustics did not fully extend here.

She would not be ruled by his tyranny.

“And it's filled with chlorine.” She mashed the arm over her face down until her eyelids were layered in sunspots. “I’ve put my feet in, have I not suffered enough for you?”

“I could give you an entire presentation on the utility of the Heat Equation in relation to your body and the pool right now, but—“

“I bet you could.”

“But,” He interrupted. “I will instead ask what the chlorine has done to you.”

She lifted her arm just a little. The world was drenched. The stone was too white and the water was on fire. The sky was supersaturated blue, and the sunspots that had been in her eyes covered the horizon like burns in reality’s film.

She blinked hard. “I did swim-team as a kid. Nearest pool was two towns over. I’d spend all of winter going between the pool and whichever of my parents picked me up, and the smell of the chemicals always gets in your hair. Your skin. Sometimes, when it was cold enough, my hair would freeze between the swimhall and the car and there’d be this astringent brittle tangle—”
She remembered it. White and gray tile, wavering lane-lines deep under the water. The off-green cast of the water and the smudged skylights. The mold in the grout of the northeast corner. Rickety benches, echoes, a fluorescent coating.

“I saw the ocean for the first time when I was seventeen.” It had been a religious experience, fresh off the Greyhound and the whole of California to glory in. Golden sand and golden sun; holy lands with holy water. “That first time I swam in it was—I don’t know. Primal.” Primordial. “We all came from the sea. All of us have in our veins the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean, and therefore, we have salt in our blood, in our sweat, in our tears. We are tied to the ocean. And when we go back to the sea—we are going back from whence we came.”

He puzzled that. “Paraphrased, I believe. John F. Kennedy, spoken at the Dinner for the America’s Cup Crews on September 14, 1962.”

She hummed softly and he mimicked her in turn. She liked that more than the water, their harmonizing.

Eventually, the sound dimmed. Sweat gathered along her spine. “There’s no substitute for it. You float, you rock, you lay weightless on the world. I don’t even know why I crave it, why anyone does, but I do.”

“Genetic memory beyond the Lamarckian?” He conjectured. “A broken-off instinct on the evolutionary tree?”

How utterly prosaic. “We might as well ask: why do we fall in love? And then call it a matter of intracranial chemistry.” And shuddered. That was a poor subject to wander to. She really had enough on her plate already without a self-inflicted wound right on Tony’s pool deck.

There was a crackle from the speakers. “That does sound rather dull, doesn’t it? But I do think the human fascination with the ocean has to be biologically inherent. The sheer breadth of literature concerning it is far too universal to have stemmed from elsewhere.”

She could feel the sun like a weight. “Maybe it’s purely psychological; not just that we long for it, but that we long to be reborn.”

“Into what?”

“Something better.” Water drifted at her feet. “Something simpler.” Something not so helplessly in love. Something that could forget and return to the start.

There was a point to be made here about tides and moons and the water of the womb, but she couldn’t quite connect them. It was probably just as well. “I promised myself I’d never swim in an artificial pool again. Its dead water.” Her skin held sticky to the ground. “I cannot even entertain the idea of evolving inside it.” Too constrained and too much a reminder of something she’d outgrown.

Judging by the pungency of whatever Tony’s pool had been doused with, she was sure they could leave it untreated for a decade and still use it to sterilize. She hated it.

(He very quietly hated the memory of hating it.)

“I’m not certain that’s true,” He pondered. “There are such things as artificial seas, and who knows what could crawl out of them?”

“Jarvis, dear, I think once you make something the size of a sea, it ceases to be artificial.” Her skin
was melting in the sun. “Its complexity becomes unto itself.” She considered moving and couldn’t. “But you can tell me when the mad science gets there, and we’ll get front row seats to the next fish to crawl out.”

The sound he made wasn’t quite a hum, so she didn’t try to sing it back. It made a faltering curve in the air. “Are you sure I cannot convince you back into the house?”

She covered her eyes again. “He wasn’t supposed to be here today.”

“I know.” He was trying to be gentle, and she appreciated it. There was very little gentle in their lives now.

“I’m okay here.” Mostly because she didn’t want to be in there. Since the argument she and Tony’s relationship had descended into a state of such rigid silence, she wasn’t sure there was definition for it. And she’d thought she and Tony had been in a cold war before. That was laughable; she hadn’t even begun to imagine.

She wasn’t sure how much was her nursing hurt feelings, and how much was Tony ignoring her. Deliberately. With malice aforethought.

They hadn’t been face to face in more than five days, and could frankly go longer with Jarvis acting as an in-between. That particular streak could probably last until—

It was September finally, and the anniversary was bearing down. Seven days away from it, four until they departed, and then they’d be stuffed in a private jet together with hours on hours to fill. She wasn’t looking forward to it—to New York. To what it’d do to them.

It’d been just a month ago that she’d finally sat down to watch the evening news and not seen a replay of the towers falling. Of the pentagon bleeding smoke. Of a hole in the heart of Manhattan eating outwards like a cancer.

But it was September and had nearly been a year since. The footage was snaking its way back on every channel whether she wanted it to or not.

Jarvis tried. “Will you at least tell me about—”

“No.” She wasn’t getting into that argument again. “You don’t need to be involved every time Mr. Stark and I have a difference of opinion.”

“Opinion?” He responded flatly. “I quite believe you both fought, and then you disappeared for two days.”

If Tony could do it, so could she. Law of Equality. “Nobody needed me.”

There was a long noise caught between the clatter of a gearshift and a snarl. “Miss Potts,” He urged. “There will always be need of you.”

She was glad she’d covered her face.

He gathered himself up. “New plan, then. The ocean is less than four-hundred meters from us, and since the beach will allow an ocean breeze and reduction in baseline temperature—”

“I’m not saying this is a bad idea.” She didn't lift her arm. “But the nearest public walkdown is over two miles away.”
“Public.” He said.

*For commoners,* she heard. “The Malibu House is literally on a cliff.”

“That did not stop a certain…staircase, or ten, from being carved in.”

Oh Lord, the zoning board would murder them *yet.* “And you never told me this because?” That was vital information of which she had been denied.

“We seem to be entering a chapter of our lives where we’re skiving off work because Mr. Stark’s in the house. Which I will inform you is a *new* development.” He sniffed. “You cannot blame me for not abetting a rebellion that had yet to occur.”

“And your rebellion’s conclusion is to sneak away to swim?”

He paused. “Yes.”

She couldn’t really argue. That was, unfortunately, the extent of her insubordination. Now what would have been truly outrageous: sneaking off to a long stretch of sand, peeling off her top, laughter, sun, nothing but sweat and skin with a voice right in her ear—

Reality was a terrible place to live in.

She pulled her arm away in a miasma of heat. “I will do this, but don’t take it as a concession to your argument. I will redress and there will be a *rebuttal.*”

“I have never wanted anything more than the grace of your rebuttal.” He answered glibly.

Why did he **do** this to her.

She levered herself up and left a ghost of herself in the sweat. “Since you’re suggesting this, my only conclusion is that you’ve been hiding swimsuits from me.”

He expanded cheerfully. “Possibly.”

Still, Jarvis buying her swimsuits (don’t think hard on *what my money buys you*) was nice. Very nice. A swimsuit could almost be a cousin to lingerie, really. She could pretend that just enough for some very *risqué* inner daydreams.

She gathered sweat-damp hair up, exposed her neck, let her hips sway just so. “And where have you been tucking them away?”

The closer she walked to the house, the closer he snaked in. Temptation, temptation, please offer her an apple-red bikini. “Well, my dear Miss Potts—”

/~~/~/~/

It was, as she should have suspected, blue.

But it *was* a very nice bikini.

/~~/~/~/

The staircase was all stone, illegal on so many levels and when it was rained upon, it'd be a lethal hazard. She loved it truly, madly, deeply. The tunnel, the suggestion of a grotto, the descent. Brief flashes of sky and the smell of brine, the beat of the ocean growing near.
The first time she’d ever laid eyes on the sea, it had been reverent. A blessing on the faithless. She hadn’t known to pray for it and hadn’t even known to pray.

And she’d told Jarvis the truth about that first swim. She’d stayed there for hours until her body was almost too weak to make the swim to shore. She’d carried the tide with her for days, rocking on her heels with that remembered tempo and god.

How had people been allowed to live like this without her knowing?

She left her towel bunched on the thin strip of sand available, and set her cellphone on top of it. Jarvis’s voice came tiny from its speakers. “There’s a weather-data buoy about a mile west, if you wished for something at which to aim.”

“Aiming’s good.” She tied back her hair effortlessly. And lord, Jarvis had been right, the sea breeze was doing wonders. “I’ll see you when I’m done.”

“Sooner than.” He promised, innocent and suspiciously sweet, but she didn’t ask. That would be an insinuation to fret on when the ocean wasn’t calling.

The waves lapped at her feet and it was so good. Ankles, shins, knees. Farther. Leave it here, leave it here. Something calcified and awful was coming off of her in layers. Pain, pressure, fear. Whatever you did it can be laid down.

Thighs, hips, stomach. Farther. Whatever was done to you can be—

She swam hard.

Data buoy, he’d said, like that been any kind of preparation.

The cameras on its floating bulk wiggled at her in greeting.

“Oh my god,” She clung to the edge and nearly took a swipe at him. “Sooner than you great big tease.”

The cameras wiggled even faster.

God preserve her. “Can you hear me?”

The nearest eye focused on her, lenses circling once. She took that as a no.

“Then how are you…” She was an idiot. “You can lip-read.”

There was another joyous, if mocking shimmy. She was won-over so swiftly it was an embarrassment.

“Okay: one circle for yes, two for no?” She grinned. “Or can we do better than that?”

Some of the warning lights on the buoy blinked out of pattern as if to say, I think we can.

And there, in the ocean and clinging to that buoy, coming up with a whole new language of signs and movement and words in flashing lights—

She giggled and rollicked and drank down the sun, and in those gifted hours thought of nothing but the tide and him.
Chapter End Notes

In which Pepper and Jarvis have ponderous conversations, flirt, and there are bikinis to be had. In which Jarvis is still making conversations in subtext that he should really just state as text, Pepper continues to miss this, but they have fun doing it.
Chapter Summary

WARNING for: the 9/11 anniversary, vague mention of the Trade Towers collapsing, descriptions of one of the memorial services, a (made-up to not invoke a real person) family-member of a 9/11 victim, and ground-zero on screen.

If anyone wants to skip the heavier stuff, just read the first section and the last one.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Are you ready?”

She pressed down with her hands, flattening her dress and feeling cold beneath it. Memories not yet unfurled, emotions not yet born. It was the in-between of a transient state. “I don’t think this is something you get to be ready for.”

The dawn light was pale on the walls. Liquid.

I have been here. I have been here. I have been here.

Jarvis let it lie. “Mr. Stark just got off the phone, he’ll be prepared shortly.”

“Good.” Her throat hurt. He’d let it go, but she couldn’t. “Are you okay?”

There was a soft bit of puzzlement on his end. “Why do you ask?”

She looked at the skyline out the window, at steel and chrome splintering the dawn. “Sometimes, I think this was harder on you than it was on me.” The fear and the helplessness both. She wondered if he was watching the sunrise and seeing the same gaps.

“My memory cores are unimpaired.” He answered. “Today won’t be any worse than those previous.”

“Alright,” She breathed. “Alright. We’re good to go?”

“Yes.” There was a rattling; jaws and teeth. An almost breath. “Thank you for your concern.”

The New York skyline swept beneath her lashes. “Of course.”

~/~/~/~/

Tony’s eyes weren’t quite brown. The irises were a bright sort of russet, always startling and always paler than the magazines suggested. She’d noticed it on first meeting him and noticed it again now. He stepped into the elevator and his eyes were clear. The only sign of their crisis a month ago, was the faint pink spreading along his left sclera. She didn’t think anyone would really notice.

No one would be looking at him closely, today.
“Good Morning, Mr. Stark.”

He stopped shoulder to shoulder with her. “Good Morning, Miss Potts.”

The elevator closed with a soft hiss.

All the acid and ice and the chasmal distance of the last few weeks seemed remote. She remembered the why of it, but couldn’t bring herself to carry that resentment here. “The cars are waiting on the street, but they won’t be able to take us far.” Not with the crowds and the bomb-barriers stretched across the city.

“We’ll live.” He flexed his shoulders under the black-matte of his jacket. “Everybody ready?”

“They’re all downstairs.” It’d been a sparse crowd on the jet. Two of their Board, a handful of managers, one liaison from the PR office she was hoping that they wouldn’t need.

Tony didn’t look to her. “Alvarez?”

She breathed deep. “Doing okay so far, from what I’ve been told. The front desk is holding flowers for us to take with.”

His jaw clenched hard, trembled, and then released. “That’s something.”

She stared down at her shoes and had nothing to say.

Tony’s footsteps peeled off towards another car. She didn't miss him exactly, but a year ago—

It’d only been them. Bedspread crumpled, fingers laced, TV screen flickering fire across the walls. Paper snow. An era dying. So many faces sick with shock and naked disbelief, and then—

The collapse.

The fall.

_I have been here before. I have been_—

The concierge gave her a bouquet that spilled white and red into her hands. Lilies and red gladiolus; grief and remembrance. It was like holding something slowly bleeding right against her chest.

They’d exchanged a glance over the desk, and the concierge had reached across to squeeze her hand. Pepper didn’t ask if he’d seen the Towers fall with his own eyes.

When she’d given the bouquet to Ian Alvarez, he’d thanked her. She wasn’t sure why. It was such a small gesture; the least of all that she could give. He was the leader of an SI Production group: good head on his shoulders, steady drive, a quick problem-solver whenever a line was threatened. He’d been with the company for nearly six years.

He’d had a brother who’d worked in the North Tower.

Tony pressed a palm to the man's shoulder. “We’re right with you, whatever you need.”

Alvarez nodded shakily and clutched the flowers to his chest. “Thanks, Mr. Stark. I really appreciate you—you guys bringing me out here.”
The corners of Tony’s mouth went tight. “You don’t have to thank for us anything, alright? We’ve got your back.”

She could see Alvarez shaking and recognized the motion, or maybe just the grief in it. It was a precursor; the threatening of an eruption: drowned lungs, clogged throat, a living fucking thing that’d come crashing through a man’s teeth like an avalanche.

She wasn’t sure how he held it in. But as the concierge had done for her, Pepper offered her hand.

Alvarez took her fingers and held tight. He made a watery noise. “I’m sorry.”

Tony just rubbed his shoulder gently. “Nothing to be sorry for.”

~/~/~/~/

In the distance, a jet coasted along the horizon like a daydream. It left contrail in a scar across the sky. She’d never seen an F-16 backdropped against skyscrapers, before.

The US Military patrolling an American city, and all she could think was: it should not have been this way.

Beside her, Tony watched the jet until it passed beyond the clouds.

~/~/~/~/

The crowd was shoulder to shoulder to shoulder. She couldn’t see a beginning or end, just tens of thousands of faces that eventually vanished into the city canyons. The rest of their party was in front of her, and Tony had a hand to her back. Whether to push her forward or keep her steady, she didn’t know. He stayed an anchor as the crowd undulated and swelled.

He stayed an anchor as the sobs came.

Alvarez was down in the pit, but she couldn’t pick him from the flood. The last foundations of the World Trade Center were a circle in the dust, and hundreds wove around it like a living mandala. They laid down flowers and photos and their own aching knees.

Their every movement kicked up a fine amber dust.

The air was soft, impossible, warm in the slow death of autumn. She lowered her head, chin tucked against the metal of a necklace Jarvis had wrought.

*I have been—*

Tony’s hand fell away, but then their knuckles brushed together. Slowly, she took his hand in hers.

He didn’t look at her.

She didn’t look to him.

The line in her Bluetooth was open and Tony was beside her. And though not a word passed between the three of them, there was a quiet solidarity in the prayer of their breathing.

~/~/~/~/

At 8:46AM, the bells rang.
Silence swept outwards in impact.

The hush lasted in perpetuity. It lasted in a breath. The silence was broken when the first name was read.

“Two-thousand eight-hundred and one.” Jarvis totaled. The recitation of victims, she knew, would take hours.

Beside her at the rail, Tony’s free hand clenched down. The bones of his hand strained beneath his skin. She didn’t know where his mind had gone, but in his stillness, his shoulders cast a shadow like a monolith.

The bells rang.

9:03 AM. 9:59 AM. 10:29 AM.

The names went on.

The schedule sat unread in her phone; she had no need to see it a second time. At sunset ninety-one heads of State would gather in Battery Park in front of thousands for a service and then a candlelight vigil. There were far more people deserving of a seat than she, so Tony had gone on while she wandered and waited.

When the sun fell low, the church windows at her back blazed. She wondered at the denomination but did not seek an answer. People swept in and out and in its doors seeking absolution she wouldn’t find for herself.

She envied them and did not envy.

Her coffee steamed. It’d been free, a man had brought his cart to the corner and had handed out cups without looking for either money or thanks. All that had been on offer were kind words and his worn smile.

She’d stuck four hundred dollars under a laminated menu the minute his back was turned.

The coffee tasted Turkish on the first sip, but on the second, Bosnian. New York was something else. Beautifully, gloriously something else.

That facet would endure if nothing else did.

Jarvis drew nearer. There’d been a constant buzz from him all day, but for the most part he’d sounded as if he was somewhere above her. Watching outwards.

He flowed down. “I was thinking of it.”

She drank carefully. “Of which part?”

“The minutes before it started.” He turned. “Those minutes before the attacks, at least. I can’t say where the real start is. When the planes lifted off, when the plan was hatched, when these men were born, when the conflict that bore their ideology was sparked.”

She let his words roll off her like water. It was funny, almost, how much she’d grown used to this.
“That’s for analysts and philosophers to decide.”

He exhaled his discontent. “They would not agree on an answer.”

“Complex situations can have more than one, and they can all be true.” The sun was on her skin, but her fingers were cold. “What were you thinking of?” In those minutes before their world came apart in a black, boiling heave.

“My monitoring relays, the feeds out of the SI campus, whether I should automate certain internal precepts on the Malibu property.” He paused. “I decided not to. I was reading you Dante.”

For a moment, she was almost staggered. “I remember that.”

That seemed to give him strength. “I was reading you Dante, and you wanted to know the time. I was running an application-software heuristic. I answered you. There were twenty-four servers about to be taken offline and swapped out, and the database sweep for the remaining was 84% complete. A check indicator went off on a file-pull from LA. I handled both. You laughed. Fabricators were operating in Malibu on a body-armor composite and a fuse blew. I was reading you Dante again and reset the fuse, and then there was an alert a Stark-software package needed a patch over a zero-day exploit. I was writing code, the automatic daily backup of the bots was spooling, the fabricators were back online. I was reading to you.” He was the edge of a long drop. “Thirty-eight media alerts went off in New York.”

The silence stretched. It was a negative space; its emptiness giving shape to him. He stirred slowly from it. “We never finished Paradiso, and it’s trivial, but I can’t help to keep thinking of that.”

She couldn’t work around the lump in her throat. Christ. Christ almighty and all the things in heaven. “For humans, it’s a kind of grief.” The kind that dug down to the bones. “I don’t know what it is for you.”

He rippled outwards. “That was…a happy time. Those minutes.”

She stared down into the dregs of her cup. “And they can never happen again. We grieve. We remember it, and our knowledge of what comes after warps that remembrance. They seem profound in their mundanity.”

He soured just a touch. “You think I give them undue significance.”

She breathed alone but did not blame him. “I know I do.”

The conversation again stalled. She drank the last swallow of coffee and let the cup hang from her fingers. They had all the time in the world, and she watched the crowds as they passed.

He didn’t voice grief or regret. He didn’t voice guilt. Maybe he couldn’t or wouldn’t or shouldn’t, but he didn’t voice another failure in seeing the impossible to predict and stopping it from happening.

Maybe they did learn.

He sighed deeply. “I think I lied in saying today wouldn’t be worse.”

“You were just mistaken.” She said it gently. “You didn’t know.”

“You’d think by this age I’d learn.” He ruminated, and then made a noise like a tongue clicking to teeth. She made it back. There was a muffled sound, maybe feedback or maybe his laughter.
She wanted more of his laughter. More of him bright. More of his voice blooming like a morning glory. “We could…if you wanted, we could finish Paradiso?”

There was a startled noise. Her heart startled with it. “Yes. Of course.” His voice did something incredibly pitchy. “We could, if you like. But only if you do.”

“Of course I do.” She was scrambling just as hard. “Whenever you want to start.”

“In that case…” He sounded nearly happy, and then it was as if the clock had been turned back. Sun in golden panes, softness, the original Italian of Dante like a balm against the years.

But the city hummed and wreathed itself in exhaust. The concrete did not give way.

The reading was different, warped by the knowledge of how they’d changed and the ash of where they stood. Those minutes could never be repeated, but here and now, she’d appreciate this moment in a way that herself a year ago never could.

Chapter End Notes

This is again one of those chapters when I dithered on whether to post it, and was trying very hard to avoid the line where dealing with tragedy honestly, tips over into using it for drama. I hope I avoided that.

Considering the original 9/11 chapter took three months to write and another two to agonize over...I figured I’d just lay this one down without further fanfare. I tried to get it as close to the actual memorials that happened on September 11, 2002 as possible. For the service at Ground-Zero, bells were rung at the exact time of each plane impact and then again for each collapse. Each was followed by a minute of silence. The names of every victim were recited aloud, and it's said to take two and a half hours to get through.

I believe while there may still be mentions of the attacks (without any detail) in this fic, everything's gone full circle from chapter 17 to here. I won't be dealing with 9/11 face-to-face any further.
Chapter Summary

Chapter takes place roughly in October 2002, timeline wise. And a reminder: we're still a minimum of six years away from Iron Man 1 kicking in. (The movies are unclear on when Tony’s kidnapping happens, I've seen anywhere from the 2008-2010 for a date, so we're 6-8 years away from that depending on how I hammer the timeline down).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Arms up.”

Her ribcage constricted. “Is that a threat?”

The Sergeant grinned crooked. “We’re always rollin’ out the red carpet at Bagram, if you want us to oblige you.”

It came out like a challenge, and she liked those well enough. She raised her arms. “I wouldn’t want you to go out of your way for me, Sergeant Porter.”

“You're no trouble at all, ma’am.” And Porter’s hands went back along her sides, ghosting the strapping of the Kevlar vest and testing it for god knows what weakness. He caught one strap, seemingly apropos of nothing, and yanked it tight.

She didn’t gasp, but the noise that came out involved great deal of breath.

“All thanks can be given to the front desk.” He answered, but his smirk did not support that modesty. “Helmet.”

“Helmet!” Someone shouted, and there was a brief churn of bodies. Being the center of attention wasn’t exactly new, but she could honestly claim this was the first time she’d had every eye from an SAS Troop on her.

Unnerving was putting it mildly. Sweat and body armor; well-earned dust in the creases of their
BDUs. The familiar curl of an accent from foreign mouths, sharp slung rifles, Kevlar covering their considerable bulk. And all of that didn’t help that she’d been left to wonder why the ISAF had sent an SAS escort on top of the Battalion already waiting for them.

It boded ill tidings.

A Corporal shouted from the din. “Don’t put her in a UN bucket, we still got some of the civvie ones, yeah?”

A Trooper answered: “From the press pool? Blue type?”

“Right in one.” A third voice cut over, and less than twenty seconds later, Porter was presented with a helmet and a very unnecessary amount of crowding from his peers.

That was when the Troop Captain, not even looking up from his laptop, barked: “Mind the gap!”

They minded the gap with alacrity. It felt like she’d blinked, and then she and Sergeant Porter were once again in a twenty-foot bubble.

Porter accepted it all benignly. “Alright, chin up. There’s a love.”

She lifted her jaw and eyed the helmet. “Should I be worried?”

With a few quick pulls and a brush of his knuckles, he locked the clasp. “Don’t; you look adorable.”

She hadn’t been worried about the fashion. “Does Selection test for the ability to play so effortlessly coy, Sergeant?”

“Right between Navigation and Evasion tactics.” He affirmed, and patted the side of her helmet. She had the feeling if she’d been one of his troopers, it would have been a hard-handed slap.

The Captain chose that moment to rise from the desk, comm rig going dark and disappearing into his pack. When he spoke, it was with a very lovely bit of Received Pronunciation. “Is the lady ready, Sergeant?”

Porter’s face smoothed out. “Ready, Sir, and looking like a dove.”

She could have rolled her eyes into orbit.

“Good.” The efficiency at which that cragged face seemed to assess and then clear them both for departure was frightening. “Miss Potts, you’ll be travelling with Bravo Patrol. Sergeant Porter will be taking care of you until the convoy reaches our destination. Everyone else—assignments as given.”

Outside the hangar, Black Hawks spooled hot and the convoy engines roared. There was a clatter as two separate mounted fifty-cals were locked and loaded to bear. She recognized the cradling mount and rig both—SI made, circa 1999.

The radio hooked to Porter’s vest chattered. “Merchant is secured and prepared to be on route. ETA 0900 hours. Confirm.”

“Confirmed. Convoy Juliet, you are free to proceed. Safe travels.”

“Thank you Bagram. Copy that.”
Rapidly, with barely a whisper, the fifteen men around her snapped into a jagged formation. Serrated teeth; cutting wide and deep. They fell in and Porter gathered her to him. “Breathe through your scarf until the helis dustoff, alright?”

She let him walk her out, scarf already across her face in a splash of red. Sand rasped under their boots. “And after that?”

With a pull of his index and thumb, his balaclava went up and then his goggles came down. It made him into something faceless. Something remote.

The formation swept onwards.

“Hope for a milk run.” And he slung his rifle to center. “It’s a long ride to Kabul.”

/~/~/~/

He wasn’t wrong.

She blamed Tony and Obadiah both.

/~/~/~/

“You’ll wear the earrings.”

“I will wear the earrings. Look, I am putting them in as we speak.”

“I sense mockery.”

She rolled her eyes. “What you sense is my sincere assurance, so bite your tongue.”

“Well.” He gasped, sharpish and needlessly theatric. She didn’t pay it a great deal of mind. If there was one thing Jarvis loved to do, it was fret, and nothing on heaven or earth would stop him once he was of that mind. It was better to just voice meaningless platitudes and let him have at it.

Really, the things she did.

Dawn hadn’t come easy after Bagram. She’d woken to the cry of the müezzin calling adhan with her back aching; the sun a stranger on the walls. Parched. Scorched. Old dust and deep heat and something ravaged in the back of her throat.

She’d measured her breath and then cracked her spine loose.

The earrings were dark on the bedside, but when she took them into the sun, they shined opalescent. The pair was from one of the three sets Jarvis had made for her birthday, and though they were hardly as showy as the gold and far less intricate than the silver, they had their own weight to recommend them. They slid with a gentle snick, and she wondered again how her heartbeat reached him. A visual blip? A signal in the noise?

What human sense did reception most mimic?

God, here she was again preoccupied with ponderings of electric sheep.

Jarvis loomed. “Do you have the body camera?”

“I have the body camera, and I will wear it as I promised.” She gave her cellphone, where it was propped up on the nightstand, a significant look.
It didn’t quell him. “And the secure laptop?”

“I have it.” And she lifted the bag to his view. “It can also double as a bludgeoning implement, if you were wondering.”

A very unhappy sound came from the nightstand, and she abruptly dropped the attitude. “The ISAF has a Company worth of soldiers to mind us. We’ll be fine.”

He roiled further. “And yet the situation continues to vex.”

She wanted to bundle him up; make the leviathan of him just small enough to fit into her arms and keep. It was a fantasy that couldn’t be born. “Tony’s made this trip before.”

“And on those jaunts, Mr. Stark never left the Airbase.” Came his flat rebuke. “Need I remind you in how this instance vastly differs?”

There was censure there, but it wasn’t as if she’d had a choice in this. Tony had pushed for the trip and Obadiah had pushed her on it to keep Tony aimed forward, and lo and behold when all was said and scheduled, Jarvis was in a snit and she wasn’t much better off.

They didn’t need to prance around Kabul in order to sell weapons. It wasn’t as if every military on planet earth didn’t know to come directly to LA to get more bang for their buck.

But Tony had pushed.

And pushed.

Her fingers touched the scarf over her hair, her earpiece, the earrings, the edge of her vest. Alive and cold. Armor on. “I don’t want you to worry about me.”

“Miss Potts,” He sighed with the depths of the sea. “I hardly do anything but.”

/~/~/~/

It had almost been funny that first day: Tony neck deep in US and foreign military brass, shaking hands and holding briefly still for the cameras, not remotely paying attention as the security detail assigned to him turned absolutely ludicrous.

The ISAF was an international undertaking, and because of that, they had the militaries of nearly twenty-eight countries available in securing Kabul. Unfortunately for her, that meant nearly twenty-eight countries had the chance to try and get on Tony’s good side by throwing their senior troops into the mix.

She’d lost count somewhere around forty-eight. It would have been hysterical, if a USMC Major hadn’t walked up to her in the middle of that circus and asked: “You Stark’s secretary?”

That wasn’t an accurate summation of who of Tony Stark’s entourage she was, but she didn’t quibble. “Yes.”

“Allright.” And he jerked his head at a group behind him. “You’re with them while you’re here. Pay attention and don’t get lost, they ain’t here for a babysitting gig.”

Something cutting laid in her mouth. Maybe it was her tongue. “I’m more than aware.”

“If you were aware, you wouldn’t have come sightseeing out here like it’s a fucking park.” The Major grimaced. “Keep your head down and stay out of the way.”
He didn’t even wait for her acknowledgement before walking away. That man, she decided in a very cold pit of herself, was going to learn what it was meant to rue.

Gear rattled. A throat cleared. Her gaze slid from the Major’s back like yanking out a knife from between bone. Four Marines, all male, had ringed-in close and she didn’t know when exactly she’d become older than the average recruiting age. God. None of them, even though each and every one was head and shoulders above her, could have been older than twenty.

Jesus. *We gave the military guns. They gave those guns to boys, and then they gave me to the boys with the guns.*

Circle of fucking life.

There wasn’t anything higher than a Private First Class in the lot. Jarvis was going to murder her.

She regarded them with dispassion. They regarded her, though with sympathy, indifference, or disgust, was honestly hard to say.

The impasse was hers to break. “So you’re in charge, Private?”

The tallest one, black eyes, buzzcut, nose taped over and slightly bent, answered. “Seems so, ma’am.”

He sounded like he had gravel and blood in the back of his throat. Hell of a voice, if he made it a few more years and up the ranks, she had the feeling entire platoons would be jumping order to it.

She nodded directly. “Good.”

Their expressions changed a little, sympathy yes, but something else too.

She could work with this. God knew how embarrassed the ISAF would be by this time tomorrow when they realized just who gatekept for Tony Stark, only for them to have left her in a pack of Devil Dogs.

This was going to be the beginnings of a beautiful fuckup. “I’m not an idiot, so whatever you say security-wise goes. I won’t argue or stick my head out, Private…?”

His shoulders pushed back in reflex. “Castle, ma’am.”

“Private First Class Castle.” She affirmed. “We’ll be paving the way for Mr. Stark through this entire trip, which means our little group will always be ahead if not separated from the main detail. Do you understand?”

He cocked his head. “Recon?”

She tipped her hand so-so. “Thereabouts. Can your squad handle this?”


Castle glanced between them and then his mouth split across his teeth. “Affirmative.”

She loved them truly. “Then on that note, we have an embassy to be at and an ambassador to flatter. Do you have a vehicle?”

“No ma’am.” His eyes glittered like a pit of knives. “But I can find you one.”
She smiled with all of her teeth. “Then I’m in your hands.”

/~~/~/~/

The next morning came bright and early with a squad from the 82nd Airborne, a pair from the French Foreign Legion, a Brigadier whose uniform she didn’t recognize, at least six people from the State Department, a US Army Major General, two men in civvies that seemed fresh from Langley, and a USMC Colonel followed by the Major of yesterday, all standing in her hotel lobby.

Her gaggle of jarheads had been pushed into a corner. She surveyed all that laid before her and found herself displeased. “Private Castle, I hope you all have equipment outside?”

He didn’t even startle. “Yes ma’am.”

“And let’s get to it, shall we?”

The USMC Colonel interjected. “Miss Potts—”

“I’m so sorry, Colonel, but we’re on a tight schedule.” She blew past him and the Major both, and Castle took point in front of her, two flanked her, and the fourth Marine fell to the rear. “But thank you for coming all this way, I’ll try to pencil you in. Tomorrow afternoon?”

“Tomorrow isn’t—”

She swanned through the crowd towards the highest rank there and surprisingly, the most familiar face of all. “Major General, you should have told me you were coming through.”

“And forfeit surprise?” He scoffed openly. “Not a chance in heaven, Miss Potts.”

She offered her hand to him and as always, he took it softly like some gentlemen of old. She nearly had to elbow Castle out of the way to let the older man do it, but well. Devil Dogs.

Mostly, she was surprised the man recognized her without makeup and missing five inches of height in heels. But then again, the General had been a stalwart presence through their first weapons demo of the war. Whether the man got handsy during a waltz on occasion, or had only seen her in all the glitter of California, he was the friendliest member of the Brass she could expect to find here.

“Walk with me?” She asked.

“And all means.” And he graciously offered an arm.

They linked up and it was far too late for anyone to stop them. The lobby doors gave way and air rolled over them like a blast furnace. It was like breathing sand before naked heat turned it to glass. She imagined that; her lungs for a vase.

When they were firmly out of earshot and on their way towards the General’s car, he offered freely: “You should have been given better security than this.”

There was a stiffening of shoulders around her, but ultimately, none of the Marines reacted outright. Her tongue curled in its own venom. “I’m fine right where I am, General. They can shoot straight.”

He didn’t seem impressed. “I can pull three squads from the 82nd for you, immediate effect and no questions. They can get you around the city.”
She squeezed his arm lightly. “As Mr. Stark likes to say: no take backsies.”

The General snorted. Three minutes later, dinner with Tony and a whole slew of political elements and military parties was arranged. She was rather proud of the whole thing, truth be told. They eventually got the General to his vehicle where his own guard was waiting, and he kissed both her cheeks before stepping in.

She tittered beautifully. The Marines finally startled at that.

The General leaned out. “The offer’s open. Remember that.”

It took honest willpower not to let her true opinion show. “I won’t forget, Major General.”

And with that and a few more pleasantries, the windows rolled up and he was gone. Her hands fell to her sides and she let an entire rictus work through her face.

“Jesus shitting fuck.” One Marine blurted, voice veritably dripping Baton Rouge. “Are Army always such condescending assholes to you?”

“I don’t know,” She pondered. “More than the Marines?”

That gave Baton Rouge a pause, and the two other Marines were positively sheepish. Castle, however, was still looking at where the car had vanished like he’d like to send a few potshots after it.

She pulled her scarf over her hair. “Any of you got an extra rifle in the jeep?”

The others shrugged. Castle found his way back to the conversation. “Sorry ma’am, no joy.”

She clicked her tongue sharply. “In that case, we’re going to Camp Eggers.”

“And why’s that?” A different Marine asked, Midwest and sweet as daisies and god, look at those eyes. That sort of blue should have been downright criminal.

She started walking, the bag with her helmet looped through it bouncing against her thigh. “First, there’s a General there I’d actually like to see. Second and more importantly, Mr. Stark brought an entire complement fresh off the line with him, and we are having target practice.”

And for the first time in twenty-four hours, the Marine at rear-position finally spoke to her. “Ma’am, will you marry me?”

Cute. “You are half my age and twice my height.” Which was a vicious lie she’d stand by to the death.

He opened his mouth to answer. Castle whacked him so hard across the head that his helmet bounced.

In the sun-smear of Kabul, Pepper could do nothing but laugh.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is wondering: yes. That was Frank Castle, aged nineteen, suddenly passing
into frame. (And I know he was a Lieutenant in Daredevil, but by god, nobody is ever telling me that man was anything but an enlisted grunt through and through. You can pry that from my dead hands.)

Lexicon for today: ISAF is the International Security Assistance Force. It was a Joint Taskforce of NATO countries that handled the security mission for Kabul (AKA capital of Afghanistan). Because, as it turns out, the US Military (though there was a good chunk of them there regardless) didn't have operational control of Kabul during the war. Who knew.

Bagram was referring to Bagram Air Base, largest US Military Base in all of Afghanistan. Camp Eggers is a US base in Kabul somewhere near the embassy there, or so I've been told.

(And also...sorry for no chapter last week. All I can say is: Taxes. And not even my taxes, I did mine right and proper in the first week of March. But alas, last weekend some friends were about to be eaten by the deadline, so that kind of took over. We should be good to go for next week though.)
Chapter Summary

Mild warning for a spot of off-screen violence. Someone throws a punch and takes a punch, nothing outrageous.

Also: it occurs to me after posting the last chapter that I may have gotten people’s hopes up, or just outright caused confusion. I sometimes forget that not everyone is working off the same knowledge base I am. Anyways, to clear things up, both this and the last chapter take place in October 2002. Tony, judging by how nonchalant he was in IM1, probably visited Afghanistan at least a dozen times before his kidnapping by the Ten Rings happened. The movies are a bit unclear on dates, but in Hardwired we're still anywhere from 6-8 years from Iron Man being born and us catching up to the MCU timeline. (Though imagine: what if Tony HAD become Iron Man an extra eight years before the Avengers? It'd be glorious chaos, is what.)

Sorry for the mix-up, everyone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It shouldn’t have surprised her that, security detail or not, by the fourth day Tony had found the nightlife of Kabul and jumped in with both feet.

“Ma’am. Ma’am——” Castle’s voice was a rumble; a thunderhead where a man should have lungs. “You promised me you wouldn’t be stupid on this.”

“His detail is already over there, can’t we just——”

He bracketed her with his body, trying to block her without actually using his hands or arms or even the five inches in height he had on her. It would have been charming in any other light.

He finally planted himself in the doorway, and she couldn’t see any dignified way around him that wouldn’t involve a lot of wiggling or her getting picked up like a ragdoll.

“You can always go for the solar plexus.” Jarvis offered unhelpfully through her earpiece.

She very pointedly did not tell him to shut his digital mouth.

Castle accepted her defeat. “It’s dark out there. I don’t care what the fuck the ISAF clown car let Stark do, but your ass is not leaving this hotel until daylight.” A wince skittered. “Pardon the language.”

Considering the sheer, creative amount of cussing she’s heard sitting squished between Marines in the back of a Jeep the past few days, it honestly hadn’t registered. “It’s…fine.” The scarf she’d thrown on to try and storm out was lopsided. Her cheeks were burning and her stomach had flipped.

She’d gotten to used to—running; chasing Tony to the god’s end of this forsaken earth. Getting her
way and going wherever and acting like the world couldn’t contain her.

It wasn’t California outside these walls.

“I’m sorry, Private. I was being shortsighted.” Tony didn’t play by the same rules, maybe not even
the same physics, and she kept forgetting that so stupidly. Kevlar or not, she was gunning for
a gunning.

Some of his authority dropped; Marine to just a man rocking on his heels. “You don’t have to
apologize to me.”

She shed her jacket and unwound the scarf from her hair. “I do, so I will.”

His gaze skipped above her head. “Whatever you say, ma’am.”

God save her from teenaged Marines. “I’m going to wait in Mr. Stark’s suite. You and yours can
head back to Base.”

Jarvis swam back in. “I suppose that will suffice, the threat level being what it is. Should I have any
room service sent up? You must be starving.”

Castle’s shoulders ratcheted up. “I’ll stand guard.”

“Of course.” She said to Jarvis, and then blinked hard. “Wait— wait. Private, you really don’t have
to—”

He gave her a messy sort of grin. Too many teeth; heartrending starting right at the incisors. “What
else is a dog for, ma’am?”

God fucking preserve her. “Just—do whatever you want.” It’s not like she had ever been able to
stop anyone from anything, so what was the point? Marines patrolled and Jarvis fretted and Tony
did whatever the fuck he wanted regardless.

She was outnumbered and outgunned, and that didn’t seem liable to change. ”Come on.”

/~~/~/~/

The top floor was quiet. It was probably why she heard Tony before he even hit the hallway.
“Jesus, hands—hands! To yourself!” He sounded suspiciously awake for a man who should have
been asleep in his bed right at that very hour.

“No, no! You are not going to clear my own fucking room. I am going in that door first, or I swear
on all that is holy—”

There was a scuffle, leather to carpet, someone spitting and then Tony came bursting inside. There
was blood on his chin. His lip was gashed and leaking red and nobody had tried to follow him
through.

Their eyes met across his suite’s salon. He jabbed a finger at her, mouth open as if to unleash
another tirade.

Her phone went off like a buzzsaw.

Tony jabbed once more. “Just—fuck it.” And then stormed into his bedroom and slammed the
doors behind him.
She wasn’t sure how to feel. In lieu of deciding, she picked up her cell. “Tony’s back.”

There was a susurrus; a hiss of static made from the miles they’d been stretched apart. “I’m aware. I’m sorry to say that the camera on Mr. Stark’s laptop is of inferior quality—did he require medical attention?”

The door was still open to the hallway. Castle had to be out there, somewhere. She rose smoothly. “I don’t think he’ll need stitches, if that’s what you’re asking. Though you could call his bedroom to inquire.”

There was a dejected slump. “That seems ill-advised.”

Never had a greater truth been voiced across Systems or Men.

She ground a heel into the carpet. “And my trying to follow him back there is even less so. Bite the bullet, Jarvis.”

“That is an unpleasant image.” He swatted back, but the line faded to background noise, so she accepted the conversation as temporarily suspended and went to the door.

She leaned out. “Do I want to ask?”

The security detail shuffled themselves like a deck of cards. It was amazing that not a one of them managed to meet her eyes in the process. Castle loomed very supportively at her shoulder, though maybe she was just imagining help where it wasn’t in some last gasp for sanity.

One soldier finally broke. “Look, the brawl at the nightclub was westerners only. We didn’t actually let him—”

“Uh-huh.” And she decided right then to feel disappointment. “Did he throw the first punch?”

There was a telling pause.

She wondered if Tony was spitting blood onto his four-figure silk sheets. “Did anyone get pictures of the first punch?”

“No.” The same voice said, but with a great deal more certainty.

Well wasn’t that something. She felt a chill crawl through. “I suppose, then, that this is goodnight. Gentlemen.”

They knew a reprieve when it was offered. Tony’s very unnecessarily large detail dispersed, and she spent a moment staring at the empty spaces they’d left. It didn’t provide her anything that she sought.

The suite door locked quietly behind her. She hadn’t worn makeup in a week; hadn’t slept well in longer. There was an exhaustion somewhere between her blood and bones. “I’m going to bed, Private. Please don’t show up any time before ten tomorrow.”

“Alright.” Castle’s gaze flickered to her. She didn’t want to know what he saw or thought. “G’night, ma’am.”

“Goodnight, Castle.”

He took her to her door. For a few brief few minutes, she was alone inside her room and skin. It was neither pleasant nor terrible.
Jarvis didn’t find her again until she was showered and nearly into bed. “Mr. Stark will not need medical assistance, it seems.”

Her towel pooled to the floor. “Are you saying that or saying that?”

Tony could get Jarvis to claim all sorts of things, but she’d found while the System had to adhere to the letter of an order, he could perfectly well maneuver around the spirit of it. Sarcasm was a wonderful tool.

At the moment he seemed sincere enough. “The former, I think.”

Venice. Milan. Berlin. Athens. There were so many other cities they could have been; geographies they would have been happier in. Someday soon and someday close in some other life. “Is it too late for us to run away together?”

“You should have taken me up on it when I suggested it last week.” He soured. “We could have been in Fiji. The Maldives. Seychelles, Miss Potts. We could have taken the yacht and lived for ourselves on the sea.”

How similarly their ideas ran. Other places, other realities. But there was a reason those stayed but wisps and fragments. “Ourselves and all forty members of the crew?”

He huffed. “Automation has yet to fail me.”

She climbed into bed. “Oh, well, in that case. Obviously completely automating the yacht was the plan all along.”

“You should dream a little bigger, darling.” He crooned.

*Darling.* Oh god, her lungs her heart her *face*. How was she meant to live in a world with him in it? A world with him existing and her in a bed, and nothing to show for it but thwarted fantasies?

She hit the switch and doused the room of light. “You have no idea at all.” But her pulse picked up because her body was *awful*. She wasn't doing this. She wasn't. Swear to fucking god. “Wish me goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” He sounded too near for being an ocean away. “Dream well.”

“Don’t put that evil on me.” She burrowed into the sheets. “It’s cruel, you know, those expectations.” Of red and tide and heat and engines and—

It’d been a long few months. The exhaustion dragged her down and down.

Dream well, dream bigger, dream *deep*.

“I don’t mean to be.” He said, but she was far too gone to hear him.

/~/~/~/

She hung up on Jarvis after the sixth conversation that day.

“Who is it,” One of the Marine’s asked. “That you keep calling?”

It was strange how easily these boys spoke to her. Then again, she hadn't cowed them half as much or *hated* them half as much as the SI details, so.
It was stranger how easy it was to speak back. “My other half.”


Castle leaned his entire bodyweight onto the other Private’s foot. Galarza yelped. Decuir jostled her. “Must be real nice.”

She sighed bleakly. “On the days it isn’t killing me, sure.”

The sunlight slanted in at a hard angle when Castle hit the doors. She followed three steps behind to watch his surveillance unfold. It was a sharp check: corner, corner, wall, tables, corner.

His eyes glided once more and seemed to find all acceptable. He shifted just enough to let her slip past him. The doors hushed closed, but the sun stayed on her back like a burn. Even the loom of four, six-foot-plus Marines, couldn’t keep it off her.

From where he was sitting in the empty café floor, Tony lowered his cup. “Jesus, Potts. Where did you find them, preschool?”

The Marines bristled. Pepper felt a pang of something familiar; a long tide finally coming back to shore. They’d kept silence for weeks after Zurich, and it was only after the anniversary in New York that they’d managed to transition back to a very formal, if chilly method of engagement.

Will that be all, Mr. Stark?

That will be all, Miss Potts.

It’d been a complete sterility of human interaction. And now—now. His words had bite. His words were petty. There’d been a time when their insults were greetings and their barbs a triple-layered repartee, and the words themselves—

His split lip looked better than it had the day before.

She slung her bag down as she sat. “After you emptied every zoo within a thousand miles of their peacocks, I had to make do.”

He smirked, and she felt a long continental drift finally come to a halt. “So you got dogs.”

“And they don’t even bite when I feed them.” She agreed airily, and titled her head to regard him. “I can’t say the same for you.”

He smacked down his cup. “I did not raise you to be this way.”

“There are at least six things wrong with that I’m not even going to address.” She signaled to the hovering waiter and then to the men still standing behind her. “Everyone sit. What do you want to have?”

Rather early in this whole Kabul trek, it’d become obvious that most of the entities she graced had their own security apparatuses. It’d forced her to leave her detail cooling their heels more often than not, and that wasn’t exactly ideal considering three out of the four of them were still eighteen. But Pepper had long learned the beauty of the improvisation. Getting the poor souls trying to court her, to provide unlimited refreshments to the bottomless pits she’d brought with her? Easy. Winning those bottomless pits’ patience and good humor back towards her with that? Easier.
And really, getting to see French Consulate’s face when one of the Marines stacked five tea sandwiches, two rillettes, a single croque-monsieur and then shoved them all in his mouth in a single go? An absolute gift.

Castle dropped into a chair, close enough she’d barely have to shift to bump his knee. Private Kenning, with what she suspected to be some modicum of Midwest-reserve, managed to sit a bit more politely but with no less rattling of his gear.

Galarza scowled at where Castle had virtually blocked her off. He eventually grumbled into a chair, but then tried to turn up the charm again. “Any suggestions, ma’am?”

Private Decuir, straight from East Baton Rouge Parish, had far less compunction. “Forget suggestions, I want everything.”

It was funny the gauntlets they tried to throw down, as if their occasionally small requests when she lived at the bidding of decadence himself would somehow shock her. She crooked a finger to the waiter. “One of everything, if you could. Shukran.”

The waiter nodded and placed an entire fruit platter in front of her. “Very good.”

The boys faces lit with unholy glee. Tony despaired of their whole display. “What have I told you about feeding the help?”

Less than a table away, Kenning was eyeing a plate of roht by Tony’s elbow like he didn’t know what it was, but he desperately wanted to eat it. She picked up the dish and put it in front of the kid without breaking eye-contact. “I can’t quite remember about the help.” She cooed. “Care to elucidate for the masses, Mr. Stark?”

Tony watched the roht disappear into four ravenous mouths. The lot of them kept their eyes on Tony even as they gorged themselves right off his plate. God, she loved those boys deeply.

There was a slight catch to his mouth as Tony watched. “There was a handbook.”

Hello, how are you.

Her mouth had that same catch, too. “You never said anything about reading it.”

I’m fine, I missed you too.

The squad watched them like a cage match that was about to unfold. Maybe they’d even forget to get flustered by Tony by the end of it. Who knew, a girl could dream endlessly.

Tony scowled. “There was an implication.”

“And yet, Mr. Stark, here we stand.” And a smile broke across her face, unstoppable even as her heart wavered behind it. It was hard to hold. The smile, the eye contact.

The hope.

Her gaze drifted nearly shyly to the fruit. “Someone take the strawberries, please.”

Castle spoke up. “Reason why?”

“Allergies.” And she would foil them yet again. Strawberries: none. Pepper Potts: all.

There was a scramble of hands that left a crater in the middle of the platter. Decuir grinned around
a mush-mouth of red. “We got you covered, ma’am.”

“Any other grenades to fall on?” Kenning asked, even as he was stuffing a fistful into his mouth.

“Not at the moment.” She hastily demurred. There'd been more than one shoving match that turned into a fist fight when she'd handed anything over that was only enough for one or two of them.

Really, one had to be equal with Marines or risk a stabbing.

Tony squinted at the mess they'd made. “Allergies since when?”

God give her every strength. “Since ever. There was a handbook.”

And finally in the hours and weeks and this cold stretch of months—

Tony smiled back.

It was hard to hold on to. It was hard to let in. It was hard to—


Hope was something that had eluded her for so long. “Prepare to be dazzled, Mr. Stark.”

/~/~/~/

She had to regret it some, though.

Tony and her maybe just a tiny bit reconciling, made Jarvis insufferably smug.

/~/~/~/

After eight days in total, it ended. A mishmash of political maneuvering and military posturing and all with a strange edge of humanitarian work later—it ended. She didn’t know if Tony had found what he was searching for.

It was almost like another life. A microcosm of some other universe exploding in a single temporal bloom.

It withered, eventually.

Her gaggle of jarheads had bid her goodbye on the last day with a host swearing, and the five of them all piled together with some poor MP they’d dragged into it to get pictures of their group. Addresses were exchanged, a trip to the PX was made so she could drown them in gifts, and then they'd sent her off in her helmet and Kevlar straight onto another convoy.

She'd bid them goodbye with a wiggle of her fingers, a fresh painted mouth, and promises to send them the best care packages known to Afghanistan as soon as she got stateside.

It was good. All of it had been.

Tony even left them with autographs she was pretty sure none of them had asked for, and were likely to trade away inside of a week for god knew what. She was fairly sure Tony knew that and approved. *The spirit of pure capitalism at its finest, Potts. Behold the glory of my native people.*
By the time they’d reached Bagram, Tony’s jet had never looked so lovely in its every infernal, cutting-edge glory. And all of that was important and lovely and a god-given grace, but ultimately —

She didn’t notice any of it.

Jarvis had met her at the stairs.

It was like crawling under a blanket. Static, skin prickling, sheltered finally finally finally. “Hi.”

Jarvis whipped up their own private acoustic bubble. It was a little like sticking her head in a fishbowl as he answered. “Hello.”

She giggled. “I have missed you too long.”

He responded wryly. “Are you speaking to me or the seats?”

The engines kicked in. She pressed her forehead to the bulkhead to feel it, even as she curled into a plush leather chair. “Little of column A, little of column B.”

“How wonderful to know where I rank.” He claimed. “Truly I have longed for this moment.”

God, did she covet him utterly. She stared up through her lashes. “I’m happy to help.”

The bubble fizzed gorgeously around her head. Cheeks, chin, jaw. Humming and prickling. Sparks.

It was a gift she could never thank him enough for giving. All she could give him in return was a shred of reciprocity. “You know, I still have the laptop. We could play Pong.”

His presence gained an alarming amount of mass. “That sounds...promising.”

She crossed her legs and leaned towards a glass eye. “I’ll go easy on you.”

“You’ll go easy on me.” He huffed, then huffed again as if that first noise had not fully conveyed the depths of his outrage. “That, Pepper, is a challenge.”

She flipped her bag open. “And will you answer it, dear?”

“My darling Miss Potts,” He thrummed. “If you can be sure of one thing, it’s that when it comes to Pong I am always ready.”

Cheeks flushing, head haloed, her hand hit the laptop and she found his every eye. She grinned to the cameras. “Then bring it.”

Jarvis crushed her utterly; they giggled for what felt like hours.

Tony must have heard them through every minute.

But with a hand over his mouth and his eyes on the horizon, he never made any sign of it.

Chapter End Notes
Be glad I contained myself to just two chapters in Kabul. "Pepper has adventures with a gaggle of Marines" was almost too good to pass up, or maybe stretch out across four chapters. Honestly. I showed profound restraint.
“…in another discussion, last week a delegation from the Afghan Transitional Administration met with visiting American dignitaries. This group, of course, included one Tony Stark: CEO of Stark Industries and Titan of the Defense Industry—”

“Try Military Industrial Complex.” A talking head interrupted. “Discussion? My question is why a weapon’s manufacturer is trying to play at diplomat at a country he’s, hand in hand with the US Military, blown to kingdom come.”

“Now John—”

“It’s a question that has to be asked!”

A third voice interceded. “While I don’t agree with my colleague’s language on the matter—”

“Sure, quibble with me about—”

“The fact stands that the Maria Stark Foundation, along with a number of NGO’s, have been instrumental in the Free Afghani rebuilding effort.”

“From the man that is the face of war profiteering! The money he’s earning in decimating Afghanistan’s infrastructure, is only a trickle compared to what’s coming back to the country for rebuilding! No matter how many ATA politicians and Joint Chiefs Tony Stark glad-hands—”

“And that decimation happened in line with current White House doctrine. Which, I'll remind everyone, was against a Terrorist State that decided to house the Al-Qaeda cells responsible for—”

“Decide? Do you think the regular citizens there had any choice in—”

Pepper hit the remote. The screen fizzled dark.

She breathed once, slowly, and decided. “Hypocrites.”

Jarvis spoke from hotel phone. “I’ve been told people are entitled to their opinions; the Press especially. There may have been an Amendment to that effect.”

“Be that as it may.” Because she’d never brooked a hypocritical opinion. “The cable networks are rah-rah about the war from their CEO’s on down. Every time they get a bomb dropping on tape, their viewership gets a six percent bump.” Her teeth ached. “And then they parade every anti-war activist they can get their hands on, to take potshots like we can’t see what side they're on.”

“Amendment.” Jarvis reminded, though with a certain amount of agreement to the underlying cause.

“It’s a free country.” She agreed. “And if I hope that they one day choke on their double-talk, that’s just between us.”

“Praise be to the fifth estate.” He riposted.

She rose from the mound of pillows she’d built on the bed. “I think I’m tired of lounging, Jarvis.”
“I am shocked by this development.”

She rolled her eyes and started gathering her phone and stockings and what might have been a skirt. “There’s Barcelona to see, dear. Care to join me?”

“Well,” He fizzed. “You do still have the body camera.”

“I do.” She chirped. The Tony-imposed layover between Kabul and LA was a beautiful, well-equipped thing. “It’s even fully charged.” There had been plans.

“Window shopping, then?”

A dress was already slipping over her head. Afghanistan had been a pants-only affair, and she’d take her freedoms now with every gratification. “That sounds heavenly.”

There was a curve to him like silk and water. “Promises.” He chided.

Hers was a very coquettish flutter. “I’ll promise you all sorts of things in all sorts of ways.”

“And my heart yearns for the glory.” He coaxed. “Be kind, Miss Potts.”

Good god. She had to press a hand to her own heart to keep it in check. There was something very pithy to say here, but she was so flustered that nothing came out. It was appalling.

“Alright.” She squeaked. “Window shopping; coming right up.”

“And modelling of a few selections, perhaps?” He inquired hopefully.

Her hand didn’t drop, but her voice sure did. “Don’t push your luck.”

/~/~/~/

Barcelona in the afternoon was the very heart of gilt. The smell of sun-warm stone, the sea; salt and earth and greenery.

It had the streets of an old city. Ancient; Roman born. Cloistered buildings, narrow passages, long shadows on the cobblestone. They stopped often so she could pirouette with the camera and then discuss the architecture in finite detail. Gothic Quarter, Catalan modernista, every work of Antoni Gaudí that Jarvis and his GPS could find them.

They eventually made their way to a shopping quarter and even inside a few establishments. She was still getting used to walking alone. To walking without having to match pace. To not having a broad set of shoulders in front and beside and behind her. To the absence of gear rattle and the clatter of rifles against rigging.

Quite sourly and only to herself, she knew that in life After the Marines, dealing with the inflexible SI security teams was going to be positively galling.

“You’re making unhappy noises.” Jarvis observed.

She was, embarrassingly, and swallowed it before anyone in the boutique noticed. “Sorry, just thinking about going back to civilization.”

“I’m fairly sure the City Council of Barcelona would have something to say about that.”

How uncivilized of her. “Well,” She corrected. “Real life, then.”
“Unfortunately, I cannot stop time for you.”

“We probably shouldn’t be trusted with that power.” Even if it would make their lives fifty times easier. But: power and absolute power and corruption absolutely, and who even cared about that pointless drivel anyways? God give her the power of time.

“Probably.” He admitted, mulish, and then shifted to a prod. “So about that green column dress, over there.”

“Oh my god, we have literally been in here two minutes.”

“The heart wants what it wants, Pepper.”

“Just—for the love of—fine.” And she signaled to the saleswoman. The green dress and four others were immediately swept towards back.

He jostled close. “I cannot convey the depths of my joy.”

“I’m sure you’ll make an attempt.” Her fingers ran up her collar and started the processing of unhooking the body camera. She’d brought a scarf and put on a great deal of jewelry, but that hadn’t fully been able to mask the oddness of it, nor its bulk. It’d been made for a war-zone, after all.

But honestly: she wasn’t taking Jarvis’ opinions inside the dressing room with her. Or any thoughts of Jarvis being in a room where she was stripping to skin. Whatever, two birds, one stone, one less temptation all around. Someone should have been proud of her, somewhere. “I’ll prop up the camera with my bag.”

His displeasure practically skittered down the line. “That seems like it’d make for a poor angle.”

God save her from them both. “I will get the saleswoman to take pictures with my phone too, alright?”

He chewed that over. “I suppose, beggars and choosers being what they are.”

“Try not to trip over yourself.”

“Miss Potts, I would never.”

The camera finally came off and she settled it, then took an extra few seconds to make sure it actually had a proper angle. Bite her, alright? After Kabul she deserved at least this.

Her mouth curled sweet. Sharp. Tart. “Make sure you get my good side.”

He scoffed. “Miss Potts, your every side is beyond impeccable.”

If her sigh was more dreamy than aggrieved by that point, well, who was to know?

/~/~/~/

Four dresses became six became eight. She should have known that they couldn’t help themselves. The sales staff had retreated, pictures taken from many flattering angles, and the floral hem of the tea dress settled beautifully one last time.

His instructions cluttered against her neck. “Shoulders back. And uncross your ankles, Miss Potts, now is hardly the time to dally.”
Her pulse did all sorts of pleasant things as she did just that; skirt between her fingers, shoulders shifting, hips rocking through a turn-and-sway.

The pressure of him was molten. “Lovely, Miss Potts. That color on you is simply exceptional.”

The edge of the skirt felt soft between her fingers. “Flatterer.”

He protested. “That is a salacious lie.”

The cloth pooled soft but her lips curved sharp. “Fraternizer.”

“These accusations, Miss Potts.” But he was laughing. “I am both insulted and bereaved; I should sue for libel.”

She did another turn; a glance through her lashes, a lift of her chin. “I bet you say that to all the coworkers you take shopping.”

It was his turn to curve in slyly. “So there will be purchases, then? In that case, there was a turquoise off-the-shoulder number from the last shop that really caught my eye—”

There was absolutely no winning against him. “You are irredeemably tenacious.”

“It has been said.” He agreed. “It’s my winning trait.”

“Winning at what?”

“Oh,” He said absently. “I haven’t decided, yet.”

Well wasn’t that ominous of him.

Her eyes flicked to the mirrors. The dress did look lovely; all of them had been.

Thin cloth worked between her fingers. Kneaded. Worried. Take off the clothes my money gets you and—

“These dresses are a bit too…” Hellaciously expensive. This wasn’t the kind of place to have tags. In the very center of Barcelona, that told her quite enough to know that the floor pricing here likely started at four-figures and climbed. “I didn’t bring my checkbook. It wasn’t like I was expecting to shop in Kabul, let alone on a layover.”

“You managed to buy the Marines plenty.”

“Which they deserved.” Of every goddamn penny she’d spent on them and more.

“I’m not arguing; they did an admirable job in returning you in mint condition.” It was somehow both sincere and sticky sweet and untrustworthy. “You do have the Black Amex, don’t you?”

“You mean the terrifying one?” There were two. One with Tony’s name she’d taken possession of in the second week of working for him, and the second that had arrived at the beginning of the year with only numbers on it. If she was being honest, the part of her that was still Iowa-raised found the entire thing alarming.

He sighed, and she had earned that sigh. “Yes, Pepper. That would be the one.”

She hummed an affirmative.
He accepted that at face-value. “Buy the clothing with it. Don’t think I won’t call the front desk to put them on an account if you leave empty-handed.”

“But Mr. Stark won’t…” Goddamn fucking Zurich. It’d taken two months for her and Tony to even glance in the direction of making up, and she still couldn’t let it go. Tony had been—he hadn’t been wrong.

It was one thing to occasionally buy a dress for parties he forced her into attending and/or organizing, it was another thing entirely to knowingly supplement half her wardrobe by him. She just…hadn’t thought it through. When all of that clothing had shown up and kept showing up in the Malibu closet, it’d been like magic. As if some fairy godmother (doting Interface System) had conjured them for her.

When it’d felt like magic, it hadn’t been horrifically unethical and possibly embezzlement.

Jarvis stiffened. Then, abruptly, he crackled like hot steel doused in water. “Sir won’t like what, precisely? Your shining, sartorial presence? The beauty you deign to spill in his house?”

Fuck. It stuck like a barb in her throat until she cut it loose. “Spending his money on myself.”

There was a stuttering, hissing pause. Silence. And then Jarvis said: “Miss Potts, since I’m drawing a considerable blank here as to your reasoning, and seeing as this is a very recent development on your part, what exactly did Mr. Stark say to you in Zurich?”

A shiver rippled across her scalp. Pain, the memory of it, and Jarvis was too damn smart for any good to ever come of it.

The skirt crumpled under her hands. “To fuck off, mostly.”

The pure shock value didn’t deter him. “Pepper.” He wasn’t buying it; had never bought it. All of her lying had only ever worked by omission.

Her index and middle fingers pressed a bruise into her thigh. She couldn’t run, or at least, not run anywhere that would avoid him for more than a day. She hadn’t been lying about his irredeemable tenacity, and that only left what couldn’t be left. “In none few words, Mr. Stark made his opinion clear on my having opinions concerning his extracurriculars, when it’s his money that buys my wine and my clothes and my bed.”

The air held. Held, and then it shifted hard. “For the record: of your bedroom at the Malibu house, Mr. Stark’s accounts paid for the repainting, the installation of the bathing facilities, the artwork, the furniture, and the bed frame.” There was a pause. A strange pause; no way in knowing if it was anger or exasperation or something held so tightly to the chest that it couldn’t be recognized. “I was the one to pay for the mattress and the bedding and all of your wardrobe.”


“Yes.” He answered simply.

Her brain kept stuttering. “How?”

“There may have been a period of time when Mr. Stark gave me ten-thousand dollars with the instruction to learn the stock market, or die trying.” Another distant hiss came, more metal than air. “I don’t think he truly meant the dying, but let us suppose that at that young age, I wasn’t bad at it. Let’s also suppose that I’ve kept it up as a hobby in the intervening years.”
Good god. “False identities?”

He hemmed in at the edges. “Theoretically, it would have taken more than one to accomplish what I did. And also, if we’re entertaining the idea, a number of shell companies and intermediaries through which to do that business. There was no reason for half measures.”

The world had gone surreal. The flip-switch of reality had been turned to crazy, and here she now lived in a world where the stock market had been compromised years ago by Tony Stark loosing a more-than-human-capable system on it. “On a scale of one to Tony, how much are you sitting on?” How much money could he have possibly—

“Six.”

“Jesus christ.” She wasn’t panicking, exactly, more like cowering in the face of something so egregiously illegal that it became awe-worthy in itself. “Have you ever touched SI stocks?”

He was a creature of zero shame. “Don’t tell Mr. Stark I’ve shorted us before, he’ll be crushed.”

And add insider-trading to that audacious list. Tony clearly hadn't been much on programming ethics.

God forgive her this existential crisis. And then, without her permission, that crisis got derailed by something far more petty. “That asshole. He made me feel bad for literally no reason. He just assumed that I was skimming him!”

Jarvis stayed ever the mediator. “You’ve apparently assumed the same.”

That was true, but she seethed anyways. “Hush up! I get to be angry about this for at least ten minutes before you give me more guilt with your logic!”

“I would never tell you how to feel or reason, Miss Potts.” Came his very solicitous response, but that hardly lasted. “But if you were looking for a way to make it up to me, there are options.”

The suggestion was both naked and blatant. He was like that, and she adored him despite of it and because. “Let me guess: buy out half the shop at your choosing?”

And there came a familiar, happy sigh. “You know me so well.”

"I do try." Though apparently not hard enough.

/~/~/~/

She didn’t think anything much of it, at the later hour. They were strolling back to the hotel, her bags in one hand and lemon ice in the other and Jarvis waxing poetic about the Roman Empire.

He diverted somewhere between taxes and the Senātus Populusque Rōmānus. “I’ve lost Mr. Stark’s GPS.”

Her stroll slowed. “Lost how?”

“I’m not sure.” Some part of him went clicking away. “I keep pinging, but I’m not receiving even a passive response.”

“That’s what, the eighth phone he’s trashed this year?” The man had a notorious habit. And goddamnit, Tony was not going to ruin this moment before it even ended. “Have a new cell delivered to the hotel. I’ll take it to him after I drop off my clothes.” It'd bother Jarvis all night
otherwise. Even if she hardly looked forward to this same damn chase in some other city, she’d always try to make things easier for him if nothing else.

Jarvis rumbled, quiet but not soft. Distant; the passing of an unspent storm. “Of course. There’s no rush.”

The sun was aching and long in the road. “Weren’t you telling me something about Cicero?”

He worked back towards her. "Ah, yes. The Consul in opposition to the conspiracy led by Lucius Sergius Catilina. Now, to understand that tumult, we must go back to the beginning of his career when..."

She picked up her pace, lemon melting on her tongue and her mouth so sweet. His voice was the only thing to guide her. The only thing to lead.

Tony's interruption was already half-forgotten.

/~/~/~/~/

And at the time, she didn’t think much of it at all.

Chapter End Notes

Flirting in Barcelona over clothes, oh me oh my and how jealous am I.
“You know, by now I could have taken five different naps.”

“Don’t be absurd.” Jarvis scolded. “You could have, at most, taken two.”

“Well.” Her drink went down sticky; alcohol-infused sugar and gritty on her teeth. “Who even gets out of bed for two naps, anyways?”

“Who indeed.” He answered mildly, and then: “Are you having any luck?”

Her gaze took another trip across the bar. “Not at the moment.” Unfortunately, she didn’t see Tony’s face nor the overeager, awed, or besotted visages of the SI Europe employees he’d gone raring off with.

She wasn’t pressingly worried. Tony had ditched the SI Upper Management that’d come a’visiting in a restaurant (where his cellphone had been left in a fountain after an impromptu pool party), to gleefully run off with the engineers they’d brought with. Good news being: while Tony might try to lead Management out into traffic, the STEM-types would only be coddled. Each would be bestowed their body weight in alcohol, finger food, and then led to parts unknown-but-debauched like overly imprinted ducklings.

A typical Stark evening with guests. It wasn’t exhausting, exactly, but it had turned a quick cellphone replacement into a full-on recovery effort of most of their European brain trust.

After four hours, she’d already stumbled over half a dozen engineers, and she’d bundled each giggling sop into a cab and sent them off. Tony would be paying for a lot of hotel rooms, tonight, and not even to his carnal benefit.

It was the small revenges that sustained her in life. No yelling. No fuss. No yelling even if Tony was a conclusion-jumping lying liar who lied.

Accuse her of skimming money.

“Are you still angry about—”

“Yes I’m still angry about and I will be angry about it.” For at least a week and with her entire concentrated being. Even if she’d made the same mistake about the clothing, that Tony had thought so poorly of her right off the bat—
She wondered if it was just her; something she’d done or said to make him think that way. Or did he believe everyone around him was just one opportunity away from trying to leech him dry? That she’d just been more successful at it than most?

The backs of her teeth slicked sour. Stung.

“Maybe we should return to the hotel.” Jarvis finally concluded.

“Maybe.” She checked her watch. “But Tony’s probably drunk by now,” Or worse. “So there’s no point in trying to have that discussion tonight. Nobody will be picking a fight over non-embezzlement, okay? I’ll give him the phone and that’s it.”

“If you say so.” He sighed.

She echoed the sound. “Who says I don’t learn from my mistakes?”

“We grow smarter and deadlier by the hour.” He agreed, and then continued in a more dignified manner: “There’s a nightclub within walking distance, I believe we should expend our efforts there.”

There were another two pubs on this street alone. Her nails clattered on the bartop. “Why there in particular?”

“If you had your laptop, I could show you a very lovely intersection based on time of night and activity location favored by Mr. Stark. But as we find ourselves ill-equipped, you’ll just have to take my word.”

“Oh, I’ll take your word.” She threatened.

“Gladly and lovingly?” He asked in wholly winsome glee.

She set her glass down and felt very sly indeed. “Do you want to tell me how you worked out that intersection, darling? I’d love to hear your math.”

His pause was both sudden and adorably bashful. “I…that would be nice. Yes.”

Victory: her. She could have crowed or swooned, or maybe done both at once. She was an efficient girl. “I’m all ears.” And that was how they spent the next ten minutes. Her walking, Jarvis chattering about his data collections and metrics and analysis, and her just listening to the eagerness in his voice. It was a very lovely ten minutes, even if she spent most of it wishing she’d taken more statistics courses in college so she could better understand him.

He interrupted his own train of thought. “Miss Potts, I do believe I’ve spotted one of our wayward brethren.”

Her gaze flicked up the street. “Garden wall, business casual, looks like he went a few rounds with a tequila bottle and lost?”

“That’d be the one. Facial recognition against employee records—”

“You could just say yes or no.”

“—has a match of 78.68%.” He barreled through as if he couldn’t help himself. She knew he could, but she also knew trying to deprive him of his numbers would never work in any universe. Teasing non-withstanding, of course, neither of them would ever stop that.
“Good enough for me.” And in a few seconds, she was across the street and nudging the man’s foot with her stiletto. “Stark Industries?”

His head rocked up, eyes glassy. He squinted at her. Slowly, as if worried he would lose his head off his neck, he nodded. “Ja.”

Well this was certainly going to be scintillating. “Good to know. Being SI entitles you to a free hotel room and taxi fare for the night, interested?”

She held out a hand, and he eyed it harder. “Kostenlos?”

Taking only French in high school had clearly been an error. “Sure.” Probably. German—probably.

The man finally reached to take her hand. He fumbled it the first time, but honestly, his blood alcohol content after a solid five hours with Tony probably didn’t allow for any kind of precision. With a not insignificant amount of effort, she levered him up and shuffled them both to the corner.

She patted his arm and got no response. A sharp pinch thereafter, though, drew him just fine. She made sure his eyes were on her face before asking: “Where is Mr. Stark?”

“Ahhh, Herr Stark. Nachtklub.” He wobbled and then nearly toppled into the street. It was only her fast hands that kept him from face-planting. Without acknowledging the stumble, he stared at her with self-seriousness only achieved by the truly drunk. “Yah, zweifellos. Der Nachtklub.”

She didn’t even need a translation, as Jarvis gleefully interceded: “See? Nearest nightclub.”

“Your intersections are the shining standard on which all others will be built.” She flattered absently. In response to her voice, the German mumbled something untranslatable. She didn’t bother trying to explain that she wasn’t speaking to him.

But, apparently, he hadn’t gotten that memo. “Sie wollten ein paar Hits bekommen. Das gute Zeug.” And pawed at the side of his face.

Pepper blinked. Jarvis was of a similar state. “Is slapping your own face some sort of Germany-specific gesture I’m unfamiliar with?”

“I’m not sure.” She tried to swipe the offending hand down.

Then man frowned at her, at his limb, then carefully flexed his fingers and tapped the side of his nose. He mimed snorting in. “Das gute Zeug.”

Ah. Shit.

Her expectations for Tony of drunk or worse firmly settled on worse.

“Miss Potts—”

“It’s alright, Jarvis. I got it that time.” And her stomach had plummeted with it. The wind was cooling, her scalp prickling, the air heavy with brine and rust.

“The cab is on the way.” Jarvis said from an unnecessarily crammed-in position. She didn’t mind the intrusion. If she could have armored herself with him…well, wouldn’t that have been a kinder world?

Maybe, when they got there, they’d get nice Tony. Friendly Tony: all benevolence and loose limbs and million-dollar offers. All mania and neon-smeared pleasure. Cravings, crazed, delirious, drunk.
Maybe they’d get—

When the cab arrived, she poured the German into it and watched them leave. She wished for nothing more than to go with and leave the rapidly approaching train wreck to derail on someone else.

But wishing had never gotten her much.

Jarvis had a forced sort of pleasantness. “No time like the present, Miss Potts. Shall we?”

No time indeed. In the end, she didn’t answer him, just took a deep breath and stepped off the curb.

/~/~/~/

Red, violet, black. Alien light, sweat-soaked heat, smears and bodies and a thousand exhaling lungs. The air itself was a miasma.

Jarvis kept telling her that she had to breathe it.

“I should have gotten drunk before coming.”

He was circling, squeezing. “I refuse to be the only sober party in this.”

A sweep of blue, spiraling purple. She drank it in with the tar in the air. “I won’t abandon you to it.”

A pulse of scarlet swept over and then the gravity of his voice. “That sentiment is deeply shared. This sort of thing is lonely, you know.”

“I never would have guessed.”

But that made things a little easier: sliding between arms, the raw scrape, her hair going heavy with sweat in the dark. She almost missed the SI security as backup, but it was only almost. They’d rarely made this type of search go any faster, so honestly, what was there to miss?

She missed the Marines like a fucking severed limb.

Bar. Second bar. Dance floor, other dance floor. Tables, tables, tables. Hands and mouths and legs twined. The sound kept rising. Throbbing. The cigarette smoke was so thick it left her breath ashy.

Back hallways, bathrooms, backrooms. Writhing and smooth and stifling. More skin than she wanted to see, but no familiar faces.

Her head ached and slowly hammered. She could barely hear Jarvis over it. Staircase: VIP lounge up, who knew what kind of depravity down. Her eyes followed it both ways. On the downwards slide, something of it—the shape—was familiar. The way it dropped to a landing? The door at the bottom turn? What was she—

It reminded her of the workshop stairs, and her throat burned.

The descent had a nightmarish sort of inevitability. The music thundered; became a throbbing-bleed through the floors. It reminded her of the way the Malibu house could be alive, except in opposite. Sick. Discordant. Claustrophobic until it became a lungs-full, head-down drowning.

She took the last few steps to the bottom, and in the crowd and skin and bodies, she saw Tony at last.
Pepper drowned.

/~/~/~/

She’d wonder, later, if that was what had drawn Tony down.

Gravity failing. The water rising. The mirror-darkly of what should be home.

/~/~/~/

Her head was down.

Her lungs were overflowing.

There was a weight on the crown of her skull pushing down and down and—

She didn’t know how she’d gotten across the room. She didn’t even know what had lit the fuse. Tony was under her hands and shaking, except maybe that was her. “Tony? Tony, are you okay?”

His nostrils were chalky, his eyelids slitted, sweat beading fast at his hairline. She dug into his collarbones. “Tony, can you hear me?”

There was a wet noise deep in his ribcage. He breathed faster through it, like a fucking hummingbird.

Jarvis was deafening. “Miss Potts, what is it?”

She got a hand up to his neck. His pulse was jackhammering. “Tony?”

“Miss Potts, is Mr. Stark—”

Tony shuddered and then suddenly, terrifyingly, was staring her wide in the face. “Potts, hey, Potts Potts Potts you gotta write this down I got…”

“Tony!” She tried to wrestle him down but he almost elbowed, then actually headbutted her in the shoulder. “Please, just stay—”

“Fuck this place. Seriously, fuck this place.” And he scrambled upwards with nails and knees and bruising force. She barely managed to grab his elbow and angle him towards a door instead of toppling onto the junkie who’d been sprawled next to him. “Fuck these people and fuck the people that work for me and the TV and Washington DC and those asskissing fuckers up in that five-sided clusterfuck—”

Jarvis blared. “Pepper, what’s wrong!”

“He’s high.” He was somewhere close to geosynchronous orbit. “Call a car.”

His resonance was a low, teeth-piercing grind. “On it.”

Tony shouldered into a door hard enough to bruise. They burst out an emergency exit and into a slice of concrete-dark. The air went rancid: trash, piss, the cramped molder of food-decay. Something damp splashed on her feet, and there was only a narrow ray of halogen by which to see at all. Tony took four steps, staggered, and it was all she could do to get an arm around his chest and land him on his knees instead of his face.

He jackknifed over and she got a hand on his ribs, one on the back of his collar, and let him vomit.
The sound was awful; him shaking in her grip was worse.

The bile was thin, astringent. Flecks of something pink and a ropey sluice of red. Stomach acid, stomach lining, blood. He’d eaten tonight. This couldn’t have been the first time he’d thrown up if this was all that was coming up.

Under her palm, his heart kept hammering. He panted. “That…wow. That doesn’t feel right.”

Fear-sweat prickled down her scalp. He whispered something, a long and muddled slur that she couldn’t understand. His heart pounded under her palm. Skipped. *Tremored.*

She felt an inhuman calm. "Jarvis, call an ambulance."

“Pepper—” Jarvis was practically throttling her. “I’m calling. What’s wrong, you need to tell me what’s happening!”

Tony’s right fist balled together and he knocked it against his chest. “Fuck, jesus, why does that hurt?”

They were both on the ground, now. She’d only ever felt like this twice. Cold, knowing, sick and sweltering and trembling with the force of it.

He knocked his ribs one more time, gasping, and finally looked to her in confusion and dawning fear. “Potts?”

Her skull was burning outwards. Her face needled and went numb.

Terminal velocity achieved.

She cupped his face. “It’s gonna be okay, Tony. Jarvis and I are right here.”

His sweat ran cloudy in the halogen. “What are you…” His tongue worked. “What are…?”

Her eyelashes were damp. “I’m right here.”

He reached up as if to touch her face.

Cardiac arrest hit.

Tony dropped like a ragdoll. The only thing that kept his skull from cracking were her already waiting hands. An arm spasmed. His leg kicked once, twice, and then dropped into a boneless heap. The lurching arm clawed, muscles straining like tightrope wire. He mouthed words, fingers frozen, and his eyes went rolling. Rolling. White.

Slack. He was down.

Tony was *down.*

Static shrieked. A full collapse—a keening, screaming sound. The line fragmented and then doubled back with a thunderous clap. “Pepper, I need you to listen to me.”

Her throat hurt, and she couldn’t remember screaming. “I’m listening.”

“Roll him to his back and kneel beside him. Index and middle finger together, press to the carotid arteries. I need to know if blood supply has been blocked to part of the heart, or if this is a full arrest.”
Her fingers were already on his neck. The skin was clammy, graying. “No pulse.”

“Check his breathing.”

She lowered her cheek so it was level with his mouth. Nothing washed against her. “He’s not.”

Jarvis’ voice was fraying in a way she’d never heard. Layers were coming out of it, nuance, pitch. Tone cycled away. “Mr. Stark is going to need CPR immediately; can you do this?”

She was detached from her very body. “Yes. I’ve had training.”

And then all the layers were gone, as if Jarvis was no longer giving any effort into sounding human. A mechanical voice enunciated: “Affirmative. Place the heel of your left hand over the center of the chest, right hand on top, fingers locked.”

Without a sound, she undid his jacket and vest and then locked her hands together over him.

“Elbows straight, position your shoulders directly above your hands. You will do 110 compressions per minute. You will do rescue breathing every thirty compressions, do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Perform a compression at every buzz. I will be off the line for fourteen seconds, do you understand?”

It was the only thing in a gutted world. “Yes.”

“Begin.” And the buzzer sounded.

She pressed down hard and felt his chest recede. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Water, lakes, a chlorine deep. Plastic dummies and her knees aching on tile. A shore, sun hot on her neck, hands interlaced over a still rising chest. Grinning, it’s just pretend Potts. Come on, whatchu got?


It wasn’t Tony. It wasn’t Tony. Part of her brain was screaming. Part of her brain was howling.

She felt inhuman.

The line clicked between buzzes. “The ambulance is on its way. Rescue breath; head tilt and chin lifted.”

The maneuver was an old reflex. She pinched his nose shut and breathed into him.

“Did his chest rise?”

Her eyes had already darted to the side. “Yes.”

An eerie flatness. “Second breath.”

She breathed into him.

The machine-voice ordered: “Compressions.”

Her hands slammed back together and she bore her body weight down. Thirty-one. Thirty-two.
Thirty-three. Thirty-four.

*It’s okay it’s okay it’ll be okay you’re not here this isn’t happening you’ll be okay you’ll be—*

Her vision was smearing at the edges. Something damp fell onto Tony’s waistcoat. Her stockings were soaking through from the ground, tacky and wet and—

“Rescue breathing.”

She bent over again. His chest rose. She gave breath a second time. Her brain kept count like a metronome. Sixty-one. Sixty-two. Sixty-three. Another part of her receded into blind horror, and she was bisected. Fragmented.

Beneath her hands, there was a sharp crack and too much give. Fuck. Rib, sternum, both?

A leviathan slammed her. “Ignore it. *Keep going.*”

Time hemorrhaged. At an unknown minute, the exit behind her crashed open. Three men poured out, the lead with a cellphone pressed to his ear. He stared down at her, poleaxed. “Fuck!” And then turned to shout. “*La ambulancia! Encuéntrelo!*”

The group went tearing in opposite directions. In moments, each disappeared around a corner. Her shoulders burned and her breath went ragged. Two-hundred fifty-five. Two-hundred fifty-six. Two-hundred fifty-seven.

“They will locate and lead the ambulance here. Continue compressions.”

She continued.

Part of her screamed, another howled, a third pushed. A fourth began to dream: Malibu, the ocean, a buoy far out on the water. Swimming, drifting, swimming. They had been so distant and safe out in the waves.

A siren sounded. Three-hundred eighty-nine. Three-hundred ninety. Three-hundred and ninety-one—

*Come on come on come please be okay you’ll be okay I can’t—*

Her eyes burned and amber light spattered across her arms.

The machine spoke. “Stop compressions.”

She stopped and there were hands, shouts, and then her bodily being heaved aside. The EMT’s descended like a nest of wasps. A fifth part of her brain cleaved away, babbled and asked: *what is happening.*

The other parts didn’t answer.

The damp of the ground went through her skirt, her stockings, her skin. One EMT ripped Tony’s shirt open and two-hundred dollars’ worth of buttons went flying. Another EMT slapped defibrillation pads on his chest, and then all hands went clear.

His body shocked upwards.

“*Joder!*” Someone shouted. “*De nuevo!*”
They cleared again.

You’ll be okay you’ll be okay please please please—

Tony spasmed and there was a beautiful, ringing cry of: “Tenemos un pulso!” And it cracked her chest open.

The sound that came out of her was absolutely grotesque.

Backboard, latex hands, gurney, ambulance at the mouth of the alley. She didn’t have time to stop. She didn’t have time to think. An EMT swept her into a jump seat and yanked a belt across her lap.

Her lungs felt like billows. She couldn’t stop. She couldn’t stop.

The un-Jarvis queried: “Are you having a panic attack?”

Simple answers. “I don’t know.” Simple questions. “How long was I giving CPR?”

There was crackling like a climbing fire. “Three minutes and thirty-four seconds.”

It had taken the EMT’s at least another half a minute past that to kickstart his heart. Tony Tony Tony oh god Tony please—

The doors slammed shut. The siren screamed to life.

She couldn’t breathe.

Tony’s foot was within reach. The EMT’s were swarming. Bisected. Fragmented. You’re not here this isn’t happening you’ll be okay okay okay—

The part of her that had kept up the compressions asked: “How long without oxygen can the brain last before damage?”

There were no pauses from him to auger, no changes in tone to read. The machine said: “Four to six minutes.”

Leviathan. Behemoth. He could not devote even a sliver of attention to sounding human, and the ambulance was hitting every green light. A machine was playing god above her, and she wanted to make holy sacrifice. I can’t please stay with me it hurts you’re not here or here or here why can’t I have—

But she had been here before. Iowa, a hospital, thrashing and then still. A room in a house. Cold sheets. A brittle, shattered knowing. The bisected parts of her slammed together and cognition flipped on.

“We bought him time.” Jarvis promised, and the sirens wailed.

Her chest broke open. Tony, oh god, Tony.

And Pepper let the collapse finish and sobbed into her knees.

Chapter End Notes
WARNINGS for: drug use, drug overdose, cardiac arrest, CPR, rescue breathing, defibrillation, general trauma surrounding a medical emergency, anxiety, possible panic attack, possible full-scale dissociation.

If anyone wants to skip the worst, the first section is perfectly safe and cute. The second section, while the anxiety starts ramping up, has nothing happen from the warning list. Everything after that gets real dicey.

Sorry to anyone who actually speaks German or Spanish, I only had Google to depend on.

Translations:
Ja. (Yes.)
Kostenlos? (Free?)
Sie wollten ein paar hits bekommen. Das gute Zeug. (They wanted to get a few hits. The good stuff.)

Fuck! La ambulancia! Encuéntralo! (Fuck! The ambulance! Find them!)
Joder! De nuevo! (Fuck! Again!)
Tenemos un pulso! (We have a pulse!)

And there it is.

Don't quote me on this, but I think it's the prevailing theory now that compressions without attempting rescue breathing is the best form of CPR. However, in 2002, I believe doing CPR with breathing was still the prevailing method. It especially was when Pepper learned CPR in high school/college with all of her swimming.

Now: cocaine use over long periods (I think Tony has a good decade under his belt, at this point) can eventually damage the heart. Pile on a night of overdosing on various shit, the overdose cocktail narrowing arteries and constricting blood flow, and the heart going into overdrive to compensate for that bottleneck all piled onto existing damage...that's how your heart's electrical system blows-out and cardiac arrest takes you at the knees.

In the course of researching, I've found that the rate of cardiac arrest survival out-of-hospital is actually really, goddamn dangerously low. Like, 6-11%. The quotes of the exact rate were mixed (a lot of sources from different countries from different time frames), but overall they're not good.

But while I try to keep as true to real life as possible in writing, this is also the universe where Tony survives shrapnel, an open heart surgery in a cave, and a arc reactor the size of a man's fist wedged between his lungs. I think it's safe to assume Tony has a freakish ability to survive both, and that the Marvel universe has sturdier humans than ours.

While I'm sorry this chapter was awful and un-fun, it's important to the back third of
this story and drives a lot from here on out. (And honestly, I always assumed something like this happened in canon to cement Tony's total trust in Pepper. My muse insisted I stay true to my gut-instinct.)

Thanks for reading, any comments or questions, hit me up. I'm always around.
Chimera

Chapter Summary

General warnings for: hospitals, the aftermath of a cardiac arrest, some talk about drug use, and Pepper's emotional unbalance still being unbalanced.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She became something else, in the hours that followed.

Between the ambulance and the Emergency Room, her sobbing jagged down and the nurses stopped following her like they were about to dose her to the eyeballs in Valium. A physician’s assistant had blocked her on one side to finish what was left of the intake forms after Jarvis’s call-ahead, and an Emergency Physician had caught her on the other to question her within an inch of both their lives.


Tony was in and Tony was under, and her insides were pulverized. Glittering. Bloody.


She could have eaten everyone in here alive.

The only thing that kept her teeth out of the nearest throat was Jarvis bearing down. The machine had embedded himself somewhere between her neck and spine, and he wasn’t letting her off the leash for anything. She could feel his hooks in her vertebrae; the heaviness of his occupation in her tongue. He felt like the weight of water, and she was going to drown on dry land.


There was a vicious noise across the line. “I need your voice, Pepper.”

Her cellphone was innocuously dark and clenched in her fist. Jarvis could hear every word spoken near it, so she answered without understanding: “Okay.”

And it was awful. At some unknown minute, his voice had transitioned from completely flat to a stitched-together monstrosity. It was like he was digging backwards to pull sound bites from past conversations, only to hammer them into words without any heed towards pitch or tone or the fact it sounded like an automated-unholy. It was the verbal equivalent of one of those kidnapping demands pasted together from twenty different magazine fonts, and she hated it.

But when Jarvis spoke, she still let his words roll off her tongue: “Will surgical intervention be required?”
The Doctor nearly brushed her off. “Virginia, we really need to know if your friend was—”

But she was the leading edge of a knife, and there was nothing else but letting Jarvis work through her. Within a minute, the Doctor’s jaw visibly clicked shut. Within three, he was answering their questions at a rapid clip. By nine, the man was speaking to her as if she was a medical equal, and it was almost tragic. He and Jarvis had lost her somewhere between stabilizing inhibitors and pathophysiology of postcardiac arrest and global ischemia-reperusions, and no one around them had any idea that she was just parroting along.

She was talking, but her brain was static. It was too much empty time to think.

Disconnect.
Reconnect.
Disconnect.

She rather wished she’d taken up the nurses on the Valium.

Tony’s mouth had been wet with stomach acid. She could still taste the sting of it on the back of her tongue.

_Breathe breathe please just breathe_—

Her legs were bloody. It was a distant sort of knowledge; needle-sharp, grime smearing, blood darkened and tacky on her shins. She hadn’t cared at all what the ground had done to her, and even less what she had done to herself. Her shoulders blazed and her palms felt like—too much give and fuck fuck fuck was that bone was that rib was that—

Tony was stabilized. The drugs were flushing out of his system and the cardiovascular constriction had eased. Another arrhythmia wasn’t materializing, and his heart and lungs had been working all on their own for nearly an hour. It was a gold star effort.

It would have to be: Tony had been clinically dead for four minutes and twenty-nine seconds.

A second doctor had sat her down and explained that if (when when) Tony regained consciousness, there’d have to be an evaluation for major neurological impairment. _At one minute without oxygen, brain cells begin to die. At three, serious brain damage becomes likely. At four, likely becomes probably. At six, brain damage sustained is likely irreversible, and by ten_—

Fluorescence dripped like water between the trembling of her hands.

“I need to call…everyone.” There was a list: a chain of crisis procedure that had only ever been used when Tony was about to make the tabloids. She was about to ruin a lot of nights beyond any kind of imagining.

“You may do so in the car.” The discordant, almost-Jarvis answered. “Three of the best cardiologists in Europe are enroute, and I’ve booked him in at a private hospital with the finest cardiology department in the country. You need to move him quickly.”

“But I don’t have…” Her hands laid useless in her lap. Her legs were bloody, flaking, ugly.

Jarvis steamrolled her. “You are Mr. Stark’s Healthcare Power of Attorney. Now that he’s stable,
we need to move him to somewhere less public.”

Less—

“Jarvis, who do they think he is?”

“He’s been admitted as Anthony Valeri.” The name came out in a jarring shriek. “Mr. Stark ensured in setting up my emergency protocols, that the Press and stock price would be taken into account.”

Her brainpan frothed. That was just—jesus fuck—not even important. “How long have I had his PoA?” It was news to her. No one had bothered to tell her; had bothered to care that she would care.

She breathed. She breathed again. Jarvis didn’t breathe with her: “February 2nd, 2002.”

She couldn’t attach anything to the date besides the furious anxiety that had infused her and Tony’s every interaction for nearly a year. The worst part was, she was fairly sure it had been by Jarvis’s doing, because if she held the power, so would Jarvis by extension. God, why was she always the last one to know? She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream. She wanted to bend and break and bite and hurt until—

He’d been clinically dead for four minutes and twenty-nine seconds. She could feel every one of them in the aching of her shoulders.


Fluorescence poured like water between her hands.

He’d been clinically dead for four minutes and twenty-nine seconds, and she’d pumped his heart for two-hundred and fourteen of them. She was his medical power of attorney and had been so for months. There was work to be done and medical staff to suborn and every person who’d partied with him last night to track down so she could drive the fear of almighty God into them.

Tony would wake up. He was going to wake up, because only the living needed damage control. There’d be a thousand calls tonight even with her eyes gritty and throat failing. The world had to keep spinning because Tony’s waking would never be an if. They’d get through this. Whatever recovery would follow, whatever fixing was needed, whatever amount of rehab she had to chuck him through single-handed; they would get through.

Four minutes and twenty-nine seconds, and Tony had torn out his fucking heart and put it into her hands.

Blind trust was a weight she hadn’t asked to carry.

“Get whatever paperwork is needed faxed over, and I’ll push it through.” She stood then; heels damp and blood caked into her Jimmy Choos. “I’ll get the phone-tree up and going. When they transfer him, try not to make it obvious with the streetlights this time, would you?”

The line crackled. “No promises.”

They’d burn their way to the sea if they had to. “Do we have anyone on-site at the new location?”

“No, we’re keeping this need to know.” His words split like piano wires snapping. “I’ve contacted
a third party. They entered the transfer-hospital twenty minutes ago with an external hard drive
carrying code I forwarded to them. They hooked it into the system and departed, and I've had full
access to hospital records and security CCTV for the last eight minutes. The site is as secure as I
can make it.”

_Illegal_, she thought, and then: _burn our way to the fucking sea._

“Do I want to ask how much you paid this third party?”

“No.” And that was a closed door if she'd ever heard it.

“Alright.” It was enough. Jarvis would have eyes all-over for the duration, and she and Tony would
be in a Jarvis controlled domain at last. It was more comforting than not.

“Paperwork is faxing.” Jarvis said, and she was almost getting used to that barely-giving-an-effort
cacophony of a sound.

Almost. "I'm on my way." But not quite.

/~/~/~/

In the phone tree of Tony-emergency, Obadiah was the star on top. With their boss now indisposed,
Obadiah would be the one at SI stepping up to the plate for the next few weeks, if not months—
and she should have called him the moment they'd dropped Tony's body onto a gurney.

Should have. But 2AM-her had been so far over the event horizon, human thought hadn’t been able
to reach her, let alone business policy. The her-now was calculating time zones, and she knew it
was nearing eleven-dark in Ohio.

She should have called Obadiah _first._

She dialed James Rhodes and listened to the ring.

There were few moments in her life that had been lonelier than this.

The transfer was happening, and with her not riding in the escorting ambulance, Jarvis had not one
iota of attention for her. There was nothing and no hand to hold for four-thousand miles. She was
about to crack James Rhodes’ life in two, and she was alone and he would be lonelier.

When the line opened, she could hear laughter. It was normal and far away and maybe on another
planet. “Potts? Hey, just a sec—” There was a muffled sound. When it stopped, the noise of what
had likely been a pleasant night with military buddies had gone mute. “Sorry about that. What’s
up?”

“Lieutenant Colonel,” Her tongue cauterized. “I have to inform you that tonight—” But her throat
closed before she could finish.

Breathe. _Breathe._

He laughed. “Potts, you don’t have to be so formal, what’s the word? Is it the news cycle on the
Afghanistan-thing? Look, what Tony was doing out there was good work, so don’t you listen to
any of that shit they're saying about how—”

“James,” Her voice cracked. “It’s Tony.”

There was silence. There was a bleak hardening-off. “What’s happened?”
“I want you to know that Tony’s alive. He’s stable.” And she couldn’t breathe through it any longer. “We’re not sure, but we think an overdose—or some damage from previous use—he must have...god.” Her skin was tinder and her heart was pumping gasoline. “He went into full arrest. His heart stopped.”

“You’re…” And Rhodes was a man completely lost. “Cardiac—jesus christ, is he okay?”

“He’s in an ambulance right now,” Her throat struggled. “We’re transferring him to the best cardiology-capable hospital in the country.”

Rhodes didn’t seem to be listening. “But he’s going to be okay?”

“I…” Four minutes and twenty-nine seconds and everything that had followed crushed in. “I need you to be here when he wakes up. Please.”

“Shit.” And somewhere over four-thousand miles from her, James Rhodes began to run. “Where are you?”

“Barcelona. Look, just get yourself to New York. Tony has friends with private jets and I will shake each and every one of them down to have one there waiting for you.”

“Okay.” Rhodes shored himself up. “Okay. New York; I’ll fly an F-16 there myself if I have to. You stay right on Tony’s back until I get there, got it?”

Her blood was fuel and her teeth might make a spark. “I got it.”

“He’ll be okay.” And then repeated: “He always comes out okay. Starks are good at that, you should’a seen him when he was a teenager. He’ll outlive us all.”

“He will.” She held it like a vow.

But despite the promise and all the bravado behind it, Rhodes kept running.

/~/~/~/

And if, hours later, she listened to Rhodes cry on the jet in panicked, shoulder shaking, full-heaving sobs—

That would only ever stay between them.

/~/~/~/

Her call with Obadiah during the transfer was the coldest thing she’d ever done. Pure information only: do not pass Go, do not collect two-hundred. Do not pick up your soul at the door.

Tony’s was an unknown prognosis. Stable. Hypoxia, hypoxic, possible major neurological impairment. Obadiah wrung every detail out of her and she was a glacier; nothing but ice inside her.

The man breathed an unreverent prayer. “This is going to kick us in the teeth.”

It was easier to dwell on than the seconds her brain kept tallying. “We’re minimizing what we can.”

“Minimizing a goddamn mountain.” He griped, but then finished much more gently: “We’ll be wheels-up within an hour. Take care of our boy, Virginia.”
Nothing but ice and gasoline inside her, and it was the coldest thing she’d ever done. “Understood.”

/~/~/~/

The strangest part was, when they finally let her into the room, she couldn’t look at him. Dawn was rising, the walls glowed pink, and her brain was in one last death-struggle not to let any of it be real.

“Pepper, how does he look?” Jarvis asked, and his voice was his. British, posh, so unerringly proper. He’d transitioned back to it sometime before she arrived to the second hospital. Tony was stable, dawn was on the rise, and Jarvis had been returned to her in full.

Her mind went into the last death throe. If she could just pretend a little longer—

His face was milky, skin thin across his cheeks. It was such a fragile thing. The skull beneath was nearly bare-faced bone.

Tony.

And finally, the body in the hospital bed became him once more. The object of her fear, the thing that had laid still as a slab of meat in the damp and the piss and the concrete, giving way under her palms—

Tony breathed softly, lashes heavy and the shadows long. The breathing mask strapped to him was hideous. There was absolutely nothing pretty in this room, and his veins were as visible as bruises. He had no color but what the sun could give.

The strangest part was, once she could look at him, she couldn’t look away.

Her eyes traced his face; her fingertips his wrist. Steady.

“Alive.” And she worked around the intravenous-line to slide her hand in his. “He looks alive.”

“Good,” And Jarvis breathed in time with her. “I’m so glad.”

The sun was in her eyes; pink and gold and she would always remember the fear of this moment. “So am I.”

Chapter End Notes

I don't know much on how medical treatment works in regards to cardiac arrest once you're in the hospital, let alone a hospital in Spain, so I apologize if anything was strange or flat out wrong.

Also, yes, Jarvis totally rolled some poor hacker-type out of bed at 4AM with promises of money if they'd only sneak a little bit of hardware into a hospital and do a little bit of illegal splicing of it into the system (I assume CCTV was hardline and likely not attached to internet connections in 2002, so an AI has to improvise). Jarvis' ethics remain ever questionable, his funds never-ending, and the state of his voice in a crisis ever-concerning.
FYI, Medical Power of Attorney (any of you, if you're in the US, could and should fill out these forms) basically designates a person to make medical decisions for you if you're not able. It's good to discuss with this person what kind of medical care you'd like to receive, and at one point you'd want to not be resuscitated, among other sundries. Jarvis may have influenced the decision here because he's terribly far-sighted, though Tony did put it into motion a few weeks after the incident in the workshop during the "Waltz" chapter. Tony, unfortunately, never actually discussed this change with Pepper. (The dude named her CEO without even warning her, I don't see this as out of the ballpark.)

And people CAN tell me that Rhodey would take the news about Tony nearly dying with soldier's poise and stare manfully into the distance and never shed a tear because he's cool as a cucumber, but those people can pry 'James Rhodes called Pepper for an update between New York and Barcelona but sobbed his lungs out instead' over my dead body. Fight me.
Liminal

Chapter Summary

Warning for: medical talk, mention of surgical procedures (that do not occur), and emotions still up-heaving.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There were birds in the trees. Flutters of amber, crests in white, darts both swift and blue. Branches turned to leaves became a susurrus of shadows in the sun.

The trees in the hills were gold with autumn.

“Miss Potts?”

She blinked slowly, as if waking from a dream. “Yes?”

The Cardiologist dipped his head. “I said that we don’t believe a radiofrequency catheter ablation will be necessary at this time. The risk of a reoccurring arrhythmia seems low, though the prognosis will be clearer after seventy-two hours.”

“Of course.” She smoothed at her skirt. “That’s good to hear. And the scans…?”

His accent came soft. “We performed both an ECG and Echocardiography. There’s no obvious damage in Mr. Stark’s coronary arteries that would necessitate either a bypass or an angioplasty, nor any indication of structural defects. However, that doesn’t mean the heart hasn’t been affected.” The accent was Swiss, she knew. Jarvis had flown him in straight from Geneva and the Hirslanden Clinique La Colline itself. Only the very best.

The anxiety was back, but it felt half-submerged, swept aside and buried on another shore. “What should we expect going forward?”

His hair was gray and there were lines at his mouth and eyes. “Mr. Stark’s heart will always be weaker now. At risk for a secondary event. At risk for further damage to the electrical system. There is little margin for error after an event this complete.” And his eyes were blue-gray as the clouds in November. “Miss Potts, If the drug use doesn’t stop, not an ICD or surgeon on earth will be able to help him.”

God, were the trees so gold.

“I understand.” And she did. All of it; jolting and sour and like a moth beating itself to death against a pane of glass. “I’ll personally deal with any lifestyle changes that need to happen. Do you think an implantable cardioverter defibrillator will be necessary?”

The stabilizing drugs and the ventilators and the defibrillation had been bad enough. But an ICD would be…invasive. Surgical. There were choices and there were choices, and an ICD was edging dangerously close to the latter.
She wanted Tony to be awake to decide. She wanted Tony to be…

There was no disappointment in the man’s face, no fault or sign of blame that she knew should be there. This had been happening too long and she’d been here for too much of it. She couldn’t make Tony do anything, but couldn’t she have tried to stop—tried to say—tried to help—

Her body hurt in a way that it hadn't in years.

The Doctor answered: “If the arrhythmias prove reoccurring, we’ll have to consider it.” And his expression barely flickered as he stood. “Should I send in Doctor Buchholz?”

The man’s waters ran deep. She wondered if she could, even for an hour, anchor herself there and sleep.

“Yes,” But she folded herself together, knees and ankles and her hair still wet from the shower she’d taken in the bathroom of Tony’s room. “Please.”

“We’ll keep you updated.” He promised gently, and then his place in the room was filled by a woman: gray-blonde, perfume, eyes so sharp they could cut a man in twain.

The Neurologist folded herself into the chair with delicate grace. “Should we get right to it, Miss Potts?”

Pepper’s smile was brittle in her mouth. “No reason not to.”

~/~/~/~/~

Tony’s brain activity was picking up, they said.

Rhodes would be arriving in another four hours, Jarvis said.

Neurological impairment, cognitive disturbances, PTSD, anxiety, short term memory loss, the Doctors cautioned.

All possible, they said. Wait and see.

~/~/~/~/

She just wanted Tony to wake up.

~/~/~/~/

The TV was on low. She had paperwork in one hand and paperwork on a pull-away table and a pen in her fingers and another behind her ear. It was, to put it mildly, a small-scale war on bureaucracy itself and she was going to fucking win.

In the bed beside her, Tony was lax and still gone from the world. She was in one corner with her back to the door. Every once in a awhile she’d get caught by him: staring over her folded legs just to watch him breathe.

The hours were sluggish. It was only 2PM. The minutes she stared at Tony felt like lifetimes. Golden, longing, distant from every nightmare. As if life had always and would forever be this.


Jarvis occasionally broke the spell. The System was wandering, worrying at her and then Tony and
then her again in punishing succession. She didn’t tell him to stop even though he was giving her anxiety anxiety.

At least he sometimes smothered the hospital network instead of her. She wondered when they’d notice every IT system they had had been debugged, scrubbed, and optimized to within an inch of its life. She would have told him to stop that too, except those few minutes reprieve from his smothering was really…

“Have you eaten?”

“I don’t want to eat.”

“So you haven’t eaten.”

“And that still does not inspire the urge within me.”

Her fast had gone too long. She was at the point where hunger was indistinguishable from nausea, and the act of trying to put food down would likely lead to her stomach spontaneously trying to eject. Her writing stilled and she let herself mull.

“What if I had food delivered to the hospital?”

Her pen pressed back to paper. “Pass.”

“But if I got it from a place you like, then surely—”

Her clothes from the night before were in the hospital’s incinerator. Her skirt now was loose; the concierge who’d brought it had been so very kind and so very astute in his selection. That he’d intuited from her location and the request, and landed on the comfortable clothes he’d delivered, had earned him a three-figure tip.

Her hope for his discretion had inflated that tip to four-figures before it properly left her hand.

Her blouse was soft and slip-on. She didn’t even own the sweater he’d brought her, but it was warm on her skin. It was better than every putrid piece of clothing she’d taken off and left for the fire. The only thing that remained of last night was the body camera that was dead in her bag. She couldn’t quite say when the power must have given out on it, but she could hazard a guess. And it was a guess that had Jarvis seeing death through a pinhole. The Nightclub, the darkwash, the concrete-black and the sobbing screaming scrabbling pleading.

Her brain skittered. “Jarvis, leave it be.”

“That is not in my programming at this time.”

“Don’t you play the programming card with me.”

“If it’s true—”

“If it’s true—”

“This behavior is not healthy for you to—”

“Jarvis.”

And he shuddered to a halt.
She took a breath. Held it. “I’ve never let anyone dictate my eating habits to me, and I’m not about to start.”

He barely paused. “…is this coming from a place of pride, or trauma?”

She sighed hard enough to nearly send an entire sheaf of paper off the table. Pepper turned very sweet and very, very sharp. “Jarvis, sweetheart, light of my life and apple of my eye? Let me be traumatized in some goddamn peace.”

“Well.” He huffed.

“Well.” She echoed.

“Mrhhhhmmmm.” Came the voice from the bed.

Later, she’d blame nearly swallowing her own tongue entirely on Jarvis. He’d take the blame with grace.

She flew out of the chair. Erupted. A hurricane, and she could have brought down half the room. “Tony?”

Jarvis fluttered like the very pulse inside her throat. “Pepper? Is he waking?”

She watched Tony’s eyes flickering beneath the lids, and there came a noise from his chest, weak and reedy but there there there.

“I think he’s coming up.” The words tripped over her teeth. “Oh god, Jarvis.”

“I’m right here.” He promised and she took it right to her shaking heart and lodged it there. And as Tony stirred below, messier than waking and nothing like sleep, she hit the call button hard enough to crack the casing in two.

/~~/~/~/

Rhodes took one look at her in the hospital corridor, and she didn’t have to say a word. The man crossed the hall in four strides and yanked her up into his arms.

“Lieutenant Colonel—”

“None of that.” And he wrapped like steel around her.

She had tears in her eyes, maybe stars, and Rhodes cupped the back of her head. “Gimmie some good news, Potts.”

She had never so little minded having to mumble into a man’s shoulder. “Tony’s up. He’s hazy; they’re running about a million tests on him right now, but—”

The squeeze of his grip became a vice. “Heaven above in your infinite mercy thank you Christ.”

And Pepper held him back just as tight. She held onto him until it hurt. Tony had come to, eyes dark. Hazy and heavy.

Drifting.

Brain damage, emotional disturbances, memory loss. Do you think just because he clawed back, that the consequences can be put aside—
“It’s alright.” She wanted to burrow here and never go any farther.

“Yeah.” Rhodes agreed. “We’re good. We’re all safe. He did it.” And he laughed, relieved and shaking, and roughly pressed a kiss to the side of her head.

For that moment of skin on skin, she let her eyes slide shut.

For that moment only, she let herself pretend in something easy.

It didn’t take. The Doctors had provided all sorts of materials on *long term recovery*, and Jarvis had filled in the gaps like a fast-drip of acid. This wasn’t the finish line. This wasn’t even the gate. They were only a dozen hurdles into a thousand-mile run, and they were getting so far ahead of themselves it was hurdling beyond rash.

Tony had so far to go from here.

But Rhodes kept laughing, hitching and raw, and in the end she couldn’t bring herself to ruin it.

/~/~/~/

“Do you want to see him?”

“Shit,” They didn’t shuffle apart, exactly, Rhodes just hooked a hand over her shoulder to rub at his eyes. “Yeah. What’d I fly all this way for, anyways?”

“This really crumpled pack of Kleenex and my makeup on your shirt?”

“When you put it that way, Potts. Jeeze.”

She grinned into his shoulder. “It’s a winning combo?”

“Just don’t make me look desperate for it.” And he swiped the tissues offered. “Fuck, the grand prizes I keep winning.”

Her mouth went sly. “The Doctors are putting Tony on hospital meals only. Jarvis can order us food from a four-star restaurant. We’ll eat it in front of Tony; make him feel bad.”

And Rhodes would never again sound so sincere. “God, I like you so much.”

/~/~/~/

She wouldn’t ruin it. Not yet.

There’d be later hours for the harder truths.

Chapter End Notes

In which Tony wakes (off screen), Pepper and Rhodey get the hugs they deserve (and affirm the beginnings of their long-distance platonic love affair), and the road to recovery is long but there can be laughter along it.

And also: goddamnnit Tony. You fucked up a perfectly good AI. Look at him. He's got anxiety.
In other news: from now on I'm going to either update this story on Tuesday or Wednesday. I'll still be trying (possibly in vain) to do it weekly, but if nothing shows up either of those days, assume nothing is coming that week. I'll make an attempt, but summer is a wondrous and cruel mistress. There are so many barbecues to be at; how can a girl resist?
Damage

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everything hurt. Her shoulders, her knees, the base of palms where his ribs had broken. In another hour, it’d transition to a full-body cramp, and wasn’t that something? It was the little miseries she got to look forward to.

She’d take it gladly if it got her out of this room.

“Look, I don’t see what the big deal is—”

“Say that to me when you can sit up without winding yourself.” Rhodes threw back, and the scorn almost covered the ever-clawing anxiety.

Her body was half-turned away. Her pen kept trailing ink. Her eyes followed every movement as if waiting for either of them—any of them—to go for the jugular.

“Watch me.” Tony spat, tongue clumsy and face gray with sweat. “Fuckin’ watch me, I swear on your mother.”

And Rhodes loomed across the bed. “Mama Rhodes don’t abide fools.” The curve of his spine was brittle. “C’mon Tony, I’m waiting. Wow me.”

And there followed a brief and fruitless struggle. Slurred words, an absence of breath, a spasm through a cracked sternum and two broken ribs, and a torso that probably felt like it’d been kicked-in by a mule. It was an ugly thing to watch.

(A week ago, just a week, Tony had been tussling with Marines and boiling for any fight that could end in bruises and spitting blood. He’d been a man so alive he could have burned, and how could they have—)

Tony collapsed with a bitten-off curse. He breathed harshly. She watched and didn’t watch him breathe.

His face was bloodless in the glow of the monitors. “Fuck you, Rhodes.”

“Yeah,” He answered flatly. “Fuck me for being worried about your hospitalized ass.”

She tried to make herself nonexistent.

“It’s fine.” Tony’s words were muddying. “M’fine. Shutup.”

Her ribs sheared in place.

Rhodes pressed. “Tony, you know I—”

“No feelings.” Tony interrupted. “I’mean it. M’not putting up with that shit—I will destroy everything you love.”

And Rhodes leaned over, raw and aching and too far in. “Yeah, and too bad for me that you started with yourself.”
Pepper had never wanted more intensely to crawl out of her very fucking body.

Tony looked sucker-punched. “Jesus.”

Rhodes hummed an unsympathetic noise, but when he spoke, he spoke softly. “Now are you gonna let me help you up?” Something in his shoulders didn’t quite match it. Too tense, too near, too needy of any sign to gather Tony close.

Her boss slumped and made a *do as you will* motion. Both she and Rhodes ignored the sloppy twist; that Tony nearly caught Rhodes in the face and seemed surprised by that fact.

The doctors had warned them of this. It was fine; they’d been prepared. There’d been no time for a proper detox, and sedation had been necessary with a whiplashed heart and broken ribs and a catastrophic loss of oxygen. It would get better, he’d get better. The slurring, the swaying, the confusion.

*He would.*

Rhodes pulled Tony upright; fluffed his pillows and then smoothed a hand down the back of Tony’s head like he didn’t care who could see. There was nothing in the room but Tony’s pained breaths, the softness in Rhodes’ face, the jagged rise-fall of their broken bones and shattered nerves.

She turned away and remembered dead air, stomach acid; her breath as his breath between their lungs.

Rhodes pushed a tray across the bed. “Drink your apple juice, Tones.” And with a sigh, Tony did.

The glass shook within his hand.

/~/~/~/

She hadn’t been the one to explain things to Tony on waking; every mercy and burden with the taste of his bile still in her mouth. In the end, the doctors had done it for her. Done it each time he’d come skittering out of consciousness until it finally stuck.

*(Why does he keep forgetting? Is it a sign of…?)*

*(We can’t tell yet. It may just be the sedation wearing off.)*

But she *was* the one to explain things to Obadiah and the vultures that came to call. And really, that was the easy part: Pepper damn well knew how to draw lines in the sand and bare her teeth across them.

/~/~/~/

Obadiah had a hand on her knee. It was, quite frankly, the only thing that kept her awake. That, and the urge for premeditated murder burning ardently in her heart.

“—we need to get the agreement of the Board to even try—”

“We can’t keep it quiet if we approach them—”

“—the stock price alone—”

“If we just keep this out of Press and confined to—”
The conference room in Barcelona was half-lit and ready to combust. They'd had the top six flown in from Legal, the CFO in Obadiah, the CTO to his right, the head of PR and his three deputies, Tony’s private legal counsel, a man and woman who were SI’s top fixer team, and a half dozen of Stark Industries’ VPs.

It was the top brain-trust and emergency response force of SI, and she’d already smacked down every one of them from getting near the hospital. It was all Stark Industries this and Stark Industries that and oh, think of the scandal. They’d reach Tony over her dead fucking body.

“Stark’s absolutely useless, we need to get him to sign-over an Interim CEO by midnight or else —”

Maybe their dead bodies, too.

“Efficient as always, aren’t they?” Jarvis murmured. There was acid to it.

She rather agreed. “They certainly try.”

Obadiah shot her a questioning glance, but Pepper shrugged and gave no reason for the comment. Herself of even two days ago would have cared; would have tried to be circumspect when it came to her other-half.

But that had been two days ago.

The argument kept rising. The powerplays unfurled. It was her thirty-sixth hour without sleep.

She was a new and lethal thing. “Leave.”

The room chilled to silence.

The VP who’d been lobbying for Interim CEO, blinked. “Excuse me?”

She gestured. “Liam, Karen, stay.” And looked from the fixers to Legal. “Mr. Beesly, if you would. Neal?” The head of PR nodded to her. She dipped her head in acknowledgment. “Good, and Mr. Stane, of course? If you’d be so kind.”

There was a furious shuffling of bodies and faces turning. She was too tired to assemble any expression for them beyond disdain.

Jarvis breathed like a hiss of smoke. “And we always, so eagerly, await Mr. Stane’s kindness.” She’d never heard him spill his venom so freely.

All sorts of filters were coming off today.

Stane leaned back into his chair. “For you, Virginia.”

The rest of the circle jittered. Her own venom slipped loose. “I’m sorry, did I stutter? Get out.”

Another VP swelled up. “When the Board hears—”

Her body burned. “I don’t give a shit what the Board hears.”

Obadiah squeezed her knee in warning. “I’ll handle the Board. Everybody, take a breather and get some food. We’ll reconvene in forty-five.”

It shouldn’t have surprised her that when Obadiah said it, the room cleared. Really; that’s how it
always had been.

The right hand to the King; a King now indisposed. That power was already settling on his shoulders, and she regarded the man made from them with equal care. “I take it you’ll be accepting Interim CEO?”

“Shadow CEO, with some of the Executive functions split down to the VPs.” His jaw worked. “We need to keep this quiet.”

“I know.” And god, did she.

Tony Stark partying and debauched was one thing. The CEO of Stark Industries going into cardiac arrest, having a temporary but clinical death, and having a now life-long and elevated risk to do the same again?

Crisis was too mild a word.

The fixers watched them, and the Head of PR pulled his chair closer. Mr. Beesly, their premiere legal counsel and her occasional adversary, took the seat beside her.

The circle of twenty-three became seven. She was more than counting Jarvis in their number.

“And finally, the work begins.” That very System observed.

She didn’t give that dour statement response. “The good news is, while companies traded on the NYSE are legally bound to disclose material information by the SEC, the well-being of the CEO doesn’t fall under that purview.” She made eye-contact with every member of their circle. “The bad news is: what I’m about to suggest will be dubious. If anyone feels obligated to leave, now would be the time.”

Not a single person moved. Obadiah stared down at her like he wanted to absolve her. Devour. Do both at once.

Jarvis hummed his own support, and that was good enough to last. “Does anyone know how many inoculations Tony and I had to get before they’d let us step foot in Kabul?”

“I can guess.” Answered Beesly. The fixers merely nodded, and Obadiah’s eyebrows went up.

“There were too many people involved at both hospitals, and Tony’s going to be here for another few days. We’re not going to hide that he’s been hospitalized. Somehow, someway, that’ll leak.” Her tongue was a knife. “So we leak it.”

PR whiplashed. “You’re joking.”

She shrugged inelegantly. “If we’re going to do this, we might as well control the flow.”

“To thine is the Kingdom.” Jarvis declared. And god, did she want to build them a kingdom to run away to. A haven to cloister Tony within and bar the gates.

“And what do inoculations have to do with anything?” One of the fixers asked.

“That people can get sick in the Middle East from all sorts of things. That it gives people back home certain expectations for the area. That if we tell them that even with the immunizations, Mr. Stark fell ill from some backwater, war-zone disease…?”

“Shit.” PR breathed.
Obadiah caught the thread immediately. “It works to their own biases.”

“It does.” Her lashes felt heavy. Her teeth felt sharp. “Not that we lead with that. Have PR put out a statement tomorrow that Mr. Stark was hospitalized for dehydration and exhaustion. Don’t make it seem like a party-thing, just leave it there.”

“No one will believe that.” PR asserted.

Beesly’s eyes were alight with unholy fire. “And I think that’s the point, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” More than. “We’re still in that lawsuit with the tabloid that took the elevator pictures, right?”

“Yes,” The lawyer agreed and then dangerously shot upright. “Miss Potts, you wouldn’t. We can’t.”

They very well fucking could. “I have someone that can mockup a real enough looking hospital record that Mr. Stark fell prey to a virus.” Jarvis was a wonderful and talented creature when it came to forgery. “Bedridden, terribly awful, he threw-up so much he was severely dehydrated. We anonymously leak that to the tabloid, and they’ll splash it across the front page.”

The fixers looked at her like an anointed saint. PR wasn’t that far behind them.

“Tony was getting sick the whole night, but nobody but me and—I was the only one there for the arrest.” Any mention of Jarvis was too reckless even for her, and she stared Beesly in the eye. “The virus story will fit in with any eyewitness accounts. You and yours claim up, down, and sideways that the report is fake. Threaten lawsuits. Whatever you need to. If we kick a shit-fit at a tabloid that already got the best of us once, people will believe it.”

The attorney’s knuckles strained white. “And if anyone figures out the record was a forgery?”

“Then we were right all along. Many happy lawsuits for us.” She doubted it’d get that far. “But if that falls through, we leak to the Times that it was an alcohol related issue. God knows there’s whatever happened at MIT that Howard Stark covered up, and Tony’s been in the headlines twice for getting his stomach pumped in his early twenties. People will buy alcohol-poisoning too, if it comes to it.”

“Where did you come up with this?” One fixer breathed in reverence.

Her smile was razor-thin. “I’ve had plenty of time to think.”

That was all it took. Glances were exchanged again. Testing, waiting. Fearing. Eventually, all settled not on her, but Obadiah. They always did, and if Tony never got any better—

God. Either Tony and SI would be properly protected now, with him retaking his duties at a later date, or…

Or Obadiah’s shadow-seat would become the truth, and Tony would be circumspectly shuffled into obscurity while the new CEO was crowned.

Nausea frothed and frothed, and Jarvis didn't offer comfort.

Slowly, darkly, Obadiah raised his head. “Do it.”

/~~/~/~
And Jarvis had been right—the real work had begun.

~\~/~/~\~/~

Everything of her was soft; gaze, words, the tips of her fingers on Tony’s arm. They’d gotten him out of bed and into a chair, and she and Rhodes pretended not to see how badly that had made him grimace.

The doctors sat across from them and discussed their future quietly. Recovery, therapy, rehab. Diet, exercise, how far future activities of the bedroom variety would have to be postponed.

Tony made jokes, but fewer than usual.

Rhodes never interrupted.

She didn’t chastise once.

When a doctor spoke of sleep patterns, Jarvis whispered in her ear. She smiled beatifically, gleefully, and then her voice went more than a little posh: “I’ll handle Sir’s sleep schedule, there’s a system already in place at Malibu House.”

She had never in the history of forever, referred to Tony as Sir. The Doctors didn’t notice. Rhodes didn’t notice.

Tony tensed up and glared downright murderously at the pair of them.

She beamed back, and Tony hissed: “Jarvis?”

They answered brightly. “Yes, Sir?”

Tony looked like he didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “What are you two doing?”

They leaned forward and whispered in concert: “Whatever is needed, Sir. Does Mr. Stark require anything else?”

“I—” Never had a man more despaired in the history of earth. “For the love of fuck, this is the most disturbing thing either of you has ever done to me.”

They conferred a brief moment before replying: “You’re welcome, Sir.”

Tony covered his eyes. “Kill me now.”

They chirped back. “That’d be very unwise.”

The Doctors paused in their spiels. Rhodes glanced over in visible confusion.

Tony just spluttered: “Shut your faces.” And began to laugh, breathless and pained but unable to stop.

Chapter End Notes

In which Pepper is the baddest bitch at SI, and conspiracies and cover-ups are hatched.
In which Pepper and Jarvis conspire to freak Tony out because nothing is funnier than
Pepper relaying what Jarvis is saying like it's coming from her, with Tony the only one to realize a second conversation is happening and how much they are fucking with him by having it.

Happy 4th of July everyone!
The riptide pulled. There had never existed a time before the water.

She couldn’t find him—why couldn’t she find him? He’d been here, just behind her, so why couldn’t she find—

*Swim out. You have to get out of the rip, swim out out out*—

She swallowed water; swimming, turning, sinking. There was nothing but waves for miles, and she couldn’t see him. Panic became terror.

*You have to get out of the rip.*

But she had to find—

The waves were dark as wine, and she swallowed water.

She swallowed blood.

Her legs were failing. There was something awful ahead, and reality slip-slid. On her knees—crawling. Rust on a steel shore and then her vomit with it. She spilled the ocean out of herself with every heave.

*Don’t look up don’t look up don’t look look look.*

Her head rose.

Tony was face-up. Eyes open. Mouth open. Water gurgled and bubbled and then spilled from between his teeth.

She couldn’t crawl. She couldn’t *crawl*. Her neck had broken in the rip.

Cracking, crackling, his head spasming side to side to side. Bones going. Going.

The waves thundered. Water spilled down his cheeks and chin, covered his eyes, dribbled and then poured out the hollow of his throat.

The ocean was pulling. The ocean was thundering. The ocean was—
She remembered drowning, once.

She woke. Shivering, trembling, sweat in the sheets and air wrenching into her lungs so harshly that she saw stars.

“Pepper?”

She sucked in another lungful.

“Pepper, I know something is wrong. Please,” Jarvis fell like lightning. “Talk to me.”

Her head bobbed, not a nod so much as shuddering in place. “Shit.”

A thunderhead crossed overhead and blanketed. A shiver rippled across her scalp and then his voice was around her. “Just breathe, you’re alright. I promise.”

Alright? But she hadn’t found— “Tony,” She scrambled and failed to leap out of bed. “Shit, is Tony? Is he—”

“Mr. Stark is fine.” The pressure increased. “He’s sleeping upstairs. You are both safe in the Malibu House, I promise you this.”

“Oh.” Her brain and lungs struggled. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Sweat trickled in her hair, cooled on her back, went sticky on her thighs and knees.

He circled but never broke the encirclement. “What happened?”

“I was…” Howling. “Dreaming. The ocean; that one time in undergrad that I…there was a riptide, and I couldn’t find Tony until—” Until she had, spasming and thrashing on rusted-out sand. The bile. The water. Dark; pouring and pouring and then gushing from his throat. Which…didn’t make a whole lot of sense, in broad daylight.

“Until?” He murmured.

But it wasn’t yet daylight.

“I got things mixed up with Barcelona. It’s fine.” It was over. They’d come back to Malibu with Rhodes in tow, and she’d cooked and fetched and fretted and ran her coverup from afar. Rhodes had stayed at Tony’s elbow for five days until the Air Force had called him back, and it was fine. Tony was fine. She just needed to—

“Why are you getting out of bed?”

“I’m sorry, I just.” She’d gone insane. “I need to see him. Just for a minute; I won’t wake him up.”

“Pepper, your heart rate is worrying me.” And he sounded worried, flinching and trying to be steady but crumbling under the weight of it. “Please just breathe for a minute, with me.”

“With you.” Everything was needling inside. When she’d nearly drowned, she’d been so filled with
water that everything had burned.

She’d swam so much at twenty, trying and failing to put miles between every bit of wreckage and herself. The riptide had been both sudden and brutalizing. She hadn’t even realized she’d been swimming with it until she’d looked back to find that the shore had been—

The memory of that distant horizon had her by the throat to this day.

It had taken swimming nearly a hundred yards parallel to land to get loose, and the swim back had been—in those days, she’d swam to the point of exhaustion before even thinking of turning around.

The swim back had nearly killed her. She’d swallowed too much water and by the time she’d staggered to shore, she’d barely gotten out of the surf before vomiting. Knees shaking, everything shaking, her face nearly in the sand with her bile because she’d been so weak.

She’d collapsed there, salt-flecked and bleeding heat she didn’t have to spare.

The only reason she hadn’t died had been the wind surfer who’d seen it happening. He’d followed her to shore and had gotten her back to her knees to slam the heel of his hand into her back until her throat was shredded. Every bit of the ocean had come out of her. He’d abandoned his gear to carry her to his car and drive her to the hospital. They’d kept her overnight; for dehydration and the worry she’d have a secondary drowning.

She’d never known his name. She couldn’t remember his face: just the callouses of his hands, the wiry hair on his shins, his arm crooked under her knees as he lifted her.

She’d thought she’d grown past this fear.

They breathed together, over and over, and she didn’t want to think. “I always wondered why you did this.”

Jarvis paused his count. “And what exactly am I being accused of?”

“Breathing.” It’d always been odd. “It’s not as if you actually need to.”

“When I was young—keep taking slow breaths Miss Potts, don’t think that I’m not listening—my voice and language programs were, shall we say, not as advanced.”

She kept the tempo. “Color me shocked.”

He was both amused and unamused. “Mr. Stark would have me cold call people, some at random, others as chosen. Most realized I was a System near immediately. I was a bit wooden in my delivery.”

Something bubbled in her throat, but it took no form.

She offered nothing, and he kept up the thread. “I adapted as one does. But even when my diction was perfect, my tone nuanced, my word-choice natural in its presentation…something kept putting people off. It vexed Mr. Stark and I for the longest time.”

“If you sounded right, then why…?”

“I did sound right. Almost.” He took a deliberate breath, and she mirrored it.

Her eyes widened. “Oh.”
“Ten for you, Miss Potts.” And he sighed with showy gusto. “It turns out that human beings, even subconsciously, don’t trust something that doesn’t breathe to speak.”

How very, terribly clever. “So you breathed.”

“So I breathed.” He agreed. “Though the time it took to even get that right was not insignificant, I assure you.”

It seemed something of her heart remained after all. “Well, you do it exceptionally nowadays. Top marks.”

“You’d think that you were some kind of expert.” He riposted.

She rolled her eyes. “Rude.”

Jarvis peeled back in layers. Not wholly gone, but not wholly on top of her. “You shouldn’t worry too much about dreams. It’s just the brain defragging itself.”

“And how would you know that, Mr. I’m too good for sleep?”

“That’s how Mr. Stark described it when I asked.” He swelled. “And much of current medical research agrees, I’ll have you know.”

“Sure.” And she almost wasn’t sarcastic. Defragging. Honestly; from the mouths of machines to god’s ears.

This time when she stepped towards the door, Jarvis didn’t protest. The halls were dark. The ocean rolled. The guide-lights lit by Jarvis were barely a candle’s glow.

The bedroom door was open, and her feet made no sound. She saw the pale of his shoulders first and then the inky smear of his hair. Tony was laying half propped on pillows and on his side. He’d claimed it was the only way his broken ribs would let him sleep, and she’d been inclined to believe him. His shoulder blades rose and fell and rose.

She wasn’t sure what she would have done, if she’d found him flat on his back. Face-up.

Still.

Her pulse hammered. Expanded. White-out. She was on the ground floor, scrabbling and skidding and then huddled against a wall. Jarvis engulfed her. “Pepper, if you could move just another six feet forward?”

She didn’t even ask why, just shuffled up and then back down into a farther curve and pressed her forehead and shoulders and torso to it, and—

A beautiful, bone-deep hum lanced straight through her. Tingling like air, like static, shivering and warm and she could no longer hear the water. Just this. Just him.

She could barely place her own voice. “What are…?”

“Major speaker banks are in the load bearing walls, along with a few helpful electrical systems.” His voice was conducting straight through her jaw. “Also, you’re sitting right over some of the fabricators in the workshop. If one runs them up to a certain speed, the frequency is apparently quite pleasant to the human range of sensation.”

It really was. "You're my star of the evening, Jarvis." The hum was in her calves, her thighs, her
back and spine and finally uncoiling something wretched loose.

“You're my morning glory, Pepper.” He whispered as if it was a secret to be shared.

And god, if she wasn't already loose-limbed and languid on the floor, she'd have swooned on the spot.

Everything he gave her curled on each side and slid across her skin. The nightmare drifted. Faded. Went out to sea to the place it always lingered before she dredged it up again.

\~/~/~/~\%

“C’mon, one little visit. Itty bitty. You won’t even notice.”

She laid the tray on the bed: low fat yogurt and raspberries, a green-tea blueberry banana smoothie, oatmeal with chopped walnuts and cinnamon, a glass of iced water with a lemon wedge and straws.

She didn’t dignify it. “Breakfast of champions, Mr. Stark.”

He groaned. “I miss cheese.”

“And you and your true love will one day be reunited.” If he recovered really, really well and asked her really, really nicely. “And no. If you want to see the bots, they can come upstairs.”

Tony very unenthusiastically picked at his straw. “They’ll rip up the carpet.”

“And if they do, you’ll pay to replace it.” Because god forbid Tony Stark spend a dime. “Look, with your sternum as it is—”

“Oh, sure, blame my sternum.”

“As such.” Her gaze narrowed. “You’ve got at least two months recovery for that without you trying to fuss around in the workshop.”

“I am going to die of boredom. You will kill me with it.” He paused dramatically. “Murderer.”

“I brought you your laptop.” And she set it on the bed. The far side of the bed. The kind of side which would require Tony to move the food tray and do an embarrassing amount of crawling to get it. “You can code, can’t you?”

“Don’t dictate to me my pursuits.” He squinted. “Obie sent you on this.”

“Mr. Stane does not care that much about me.” Her smile spread. “Of course, if you’re not feeling up to it…?”

“I am affronted. This is me, affronted. Look at my face Potts, this is a man bereft and belittled.”

Her fingers curled. “It’s a nice laptop you’ve got here, it’d be shame if something were to happen to it.”

Tony looked both entertained and vaguely alarmed. “If I wake up with a bloody horse head in the sheets, I’m firing you.”

It was her turn to sigh theatrically. “Will poor Johnny Fontane never get a part in your movie?”

“She made you an offer you couldn’t refuse, Sir.” Jarvis chimed.
“Ugh.” And Tony finally took a bite of oatmeal. “Your extortion attempts will work this time. For now. But don’t think I’ve failed to notice you’ve formed a *Cosa Nostra* in my house.”

“Sir is very perceptive.” Jarvis concurred affably.

For awhile the three of them bickered. Laughed. The mood was so light and so clean, she finally broached the dreaded Subject: “Mr. Stark, about the rehab booking—”

He snorted. “Look, with my ribs and the meds, and you lot and your vultures needing something new to come out so you can cover for me—”

Her stomach curdled. “Tony.”

“Soon, alright?” He stabbed into the bowl. “We’ll worry about it later; we’ve got bigger things on our plates. Like all this hippy kale bullshit you expect me to eat.”

There was very little bigger on their plates, she knew, than this.

But the mood was so tranquil. His ribs were hurting him yet, and she didn’t think she could actually let him out of her sight. “Of course, Mr. Stark.”

Tony didn’t acknowledge it, just busied himself with his food and left her to sit at the foot of his bed and answer emails. It was good, Tony’s system was clean but for his prescriptions, and he couldn’t get anything with her camped out in the house.

It was fine. Just for now. Just a little longer.

Jarvis stayed silent and she didn’t ask why.

/~/~/~/

“Mr. Stark, do you think you could at least look at the brochures—”

“Busy. Wait for dinner, yeah? That's my girl.”

/~/~/~/

“Another week and the blueprint will be finalized and all of early production can go home happy. Win-win, and stop looking at me like that. I am being *productive*.”

/~/~/~/

“Do you think you could hand me that? No, the little one—littler one. God Potts, where did you go to college?”

“UCLA.”

“You were raised in a fucking communist commune, now hand me that.”

“Could you at least think about—”

“A conversation we’re not having while you’re handing me things? No, I cannot.”

/~/~/~/

One Thursday, she stopped asking.
The air glittered with glass and two o’clock white wine; the kind imbibed in the daytime with business luncheons on the thin veneer that it wasn’t really day drinking. The restaurant was plush; oak wood and double plated glass and very Old Boys network. She hated it on the principal of the matter. She hated it for the sheer fact her anxiety was developing neuroses inside it at an alarming rate.

(Miss Potts, I can watch over Mr. Stark for two hours. Honestly.)

Obadiah was halfway through his surf and turf and Pepper had barely touched her grated truffle salad, when the first SI Board Member happened by their table. She thought it an unhappy accident until the second one showed up mere minutes later and settled in.

It wasn’t hard to recognize ambush when it kicked her in the knee.

Across from her, Obadiah’s fingers tightened on the silverware. “Gentlemen, what’s the happy occasion?”

The first interloper wasted no time. “I was just curious to speak to Miss Potts, it’s been so long since any of us have seen her. We were growing worried.”

Unlikely. “Thank you for your concern, but it isn’t necessary.”

“And Tony?” The other Board member asked, this one old and a relic from the age when Howard Stark had ruled the land.

She wondered if he thought that, just because he’d known Tony when he was younger, he was allowed to take familiarity. “Mr. Stark is fine and would thank you for your concern, if he were here.”

No one at the table argued that particular bold-faced lie.

The old guard pressed a hand above her knee. “We’re just worried on how his recovery is progressing. Stark Industries is lesser without a Stark to helm it.”

Obadiah sawed through his bloody steak, and Pepper felt every scrape of the knife. “That’s between Mr. Stark and his doctors, I’m sure you understand.”

“Of course.” The man didn’t remove his grip. “But I just wanted to say we don’t want any…further delays in his return. Not from one little mishap.”

One little…?

Ah. Her own fork scraped against the china.

Delicately, very delicately, she lifted his hand off her leg and squeezed it. She was touched and so moved by his concern; she was squeezing too hard and watching his bones fold together.

He winced. She batted her lashes and sharpened her knives. “Mr. Stark will return when he’s well, and not a moment sooner. We wouldn’t want to get ahead of ourselves.”

She’d honestly believed there’d be implicit support for Tony to go to rehab no matter how many months it took him out of the game. But that was lost money, wasn’t it? Further risk; middling reward. And with her and Jarvis to cover for him, and with how tightly they’d guarded Tony’s
medical reports back to S…

It occurred to her that that, just maybe, no one except her and Jarvis had realized the full extent of
the problem.

It also occurred to her that men like this, even if they knew the years this had been building and the
time that would take to fix, likely wouldn’t care.

“Of course,” The man agreed. “We only want the best for Tony.”

She didn’t believe a pretty word of it. “I’m glad we’re of the same mind.”

~/~/~/~/

She watched Tony forget where he put down his notepad, his pen, his phone, his watch and the
smoothie he was drinking and even half a sandwich behind the bed.

She watched him fling a lamp into a wall and veer wildly from anger to embarrassment then right
back to anger faster than a whip crack.

She watched him fall asleep mid-day and sleep messy; wake confused and asking her for the date
twice or even three times in an hour.

She listened to him mix up words when he grew tired, slur at the edges, have fast quips jag
awkwardly into silence.

She felt his hands shake every time he handed her something. She felt her hands shake every time
he refused to take it back. He’d stopped letting her give him things, and it was even worse than
when she’d started working for him. Everything had to be placed on a table or the bed or even the
floor, and at least two feet away and only when he wasn’t looking.

Forgetful. Neurotic. Sloppy. She’d seen this all before.

Just never when he’d been completely sober.

~/~/~/~/

She remembered drowning, once.

She remembered—

~/~/~/~/

The sheets were damp and knotted at her hips. She breathed and breathed and let the shaking roil
over. She’d thought she’d grown past this; nightmares and sweat and this incoherent fear.

“Defragging?” Jarvis asked quietly.

She gave a great, shuddering sigh. “Defragging.”

He raised the lights and sealed off the windows, and the sound of the ocean whispered away. No
tide. No waves.

No longing pull. “I keep making the same mistakes.”

He dipped close. “How so?”
It was time. It had been time for weeks. “Bring up the rehab clinics; we’re going through them.” She couldn’t keep hurting and trying to avoid hurt. “We’re picking one out and sending Tony to it if I have to tie him to the fucking jet, got it?”

“Miss Potts,” He expanded to every wall. “I would be more than delighted.”

“That’d be one of us.” His silences these days had been telling. “Why haven't you said anything?” About rehab, about avoidance, about their mistakes and silences on every fucking side.

He gathered himself. “If Mr. Stark was avoiding it, and you weren’t pressing, what hope did I have in succeeding?”

She wished she could swim without remembering, go down to the tide and exhaust herself on it. “He likes you more than me.”

“That doesn’t count for as much as you’d think.”

“Then I stand even less of a chance.” She piled up her barricades. “Be careful where you put your faith, Jarvis. It might come to bite you.”

“I am careful.” And his voice came from the very bedrock of the cliffs. “And I don’t make a habit of being wrong.”

/~/~/~/

She’d always remember; that was the truth. The hospital bed in Iowa, the house, the cold sheets and golden air. The ocean, the drowning, the fractured concrete and Tony's body and the way he'd collapsed under her hands.

Nothing could take those from her. Not alcohol, not expended sweat, not burying herself in work and every denial she could conjure up.

It was a lesson she'd learned before and would learn again. And that Jarvis knew that she could endure it—

His faith carried her to dawn.

Chapter End Notes

Jarvis tries his best to hold her.
The sky was graying, flattening. The ocean’s color fled. All of California was fading as October burned to the end of the wick.

It was the dying days of autumn.

When morning came, she changed out of the housedresses of Tony’s convalesce and back to armor: pencil skirt, dagger heels, red mouth and red nails and Jarvis’ golden set on her throat and wrists.

It was a point to be made, and a razor-fine one.

Tony was on the main floor of the house; papers scattered and his hair mussed to one side. She watched him for a long minute: legs loose, torso rigid, right arm cradled to his body.

Her lungs contracted. “Mr. Stark?”

It startled him. “Flipping Christ—knock much?”

She’d been startling him a great deal, lately, but now wasn’t the time to bring it up. She glanced around the minimalist space in pointed disbelief.

He rubbed a hand across his mouth. “Alright. Point. One Point. Don’t let it go to your head, capisce?”

Her tone was more than scathing. “And where was it supposed to go?”

“To heart. You’re supposed to treasure every single thing I say; did you never read the job description?”

She scoffed. “Did you?”

Tony squinted at her and she squinted back. There was a lot of mutual squinting until Jarvis sighed from overhead: “Are we making these jokes already, Sir?”

He clutched a hand across his heart, willful and utterly over-dramatic.

Her pulse jumped violently.

Tony laughed, heedless. “Fuck you, I was making these jokes a week ago and they are great.” And he grinned to her. “By the way Potts, you weren’t here for the one about following my heart, were you? Because let me tell you, the punchline was—”
Her hands were cold. “Please stop.”

And to her surprise, he did. Carefully, very carefully, she crossed the room and settled her stack of papers on the couch. His gaze skitter-stepped towards her. His grin was a deliberate vapidity. “You bringing me presents?”

“No.” She was sinking. Heavier; steel and rot and frigid to the bone. “It’s the intake paperwork for the rehab facility in Oregon.”

Something flickered in his jaw and wrists. Live wires. His expression fluttered and then, as if it had never happened, he returned to his schematics. The silence lasted. She crossed her hands in front of herself and let them curl into her skirt. “Mr. Stark?”

He gestured flippantly. “I’m feeling peckish. Lunch? Oh—that little Mexican place in Val Verde. Get yourself something and get me double whatever.”

She felt a brief urge to do just that. She strangled it. The impulse passed like another wave overhead.

“Mr. Stark,” Something inside her strained to breaking. “It’s time.”

And Tony looked at her, really fucking looked. Eviscerating; to back of her skull and the insides of her ribs, and to every soft place still left inside her. Jarvis stayed silent through it all. Her expression didn’t shift, and she watched Tony through her lashes and he watched her in turn.

The air roiled.

The dark of his eyes flattened like night across the fields. “You’re really not going to let this go.” It wasn’t a question.

“No.” And she wouldn’t.

He watched her face, her hands, the way she tucked her hair behind her earrings and then did it a second time. She’d give him no weakness, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t find one. Tony was good at that.

The sun was bright in the skylights.

None of it reached him. “I don’t need it.”

Her tongue hit teeth. “What?”

“I haven’t taken anything since the hospital, and see?” He spread his arms. “Right as rain with a little recovery. We should all be so lucky.”

Her mouth stung; pain like a precursor to blood. “That’s not how it works.”

He leaned forward, and the light fell harshly across his face. “It’s a matter of choice, Potts, and I’m choosing not to. That’s it. My going out there to fuck around for a few weeks would waste time, the most important of which is mine.”

“Time?” Time hadn’t been on their side in years. “You honestly don’t think that you can just…”

He didn’t answer, and she knew then that he thought he could. Easily. As if it had always been that simple to dig his neuroses out.
Her entire jaw *wrenched.* “Bullshit.”

His eyebrows jumped. “Excuse me?”

“*Not doing it* isn’t a plan. That isn’t even a step *in* the plan.” She grabbed the forms from the couch and threw them on the table. “You’re going. I’ll call the jet and pack your bags while you sign.”

And it was finally his turn for his jaw to set. Ache; crack wide and ugly. “And what are they going to give me out there? The magic words? A bit of fairy dust and admonishments to be a good boy?”

Concrete and halogen and the broken rat-tat-tat of his bones popping in his chest. Blood on her knees, piss on the ground, meat and breath and her mind failing to grasp that he wasn’t—

“You died.” She said.

He flinched, and suddenly there was space between them. Two feet. Three; the entire couch from her to him and it still wasn’t far enough.

“Who do you think it was, that gave you CPR?” She remembered how she’d broken his ribs. Remembered how she’d held his heart inside her hands and *pushed.*

“Jarvis told me that. I know that.” His entire frame spasmed. “That won’t happen again.”

And her heart trembled to the point of shattering. “I don’t believe you.”

Something in those words breeched the air. Shivered; eye to eye and heart to heart until it finally ruptured. She saw the moment that she lost him, and Tony *burned.* “And what you believe doesn’t change anything, does it?”

Jarvis sucked in.

She was numbed. “You know what I’d like? Some goddamn treatment for you that isn’t Jarvis and I watching your every move.” Fuck. *Fuck.* “I’ve never known what it is that sets you off. You might be fine here with us babysitting, but that never lasts. The next deal will go bad, you’ll get bored, a binge will happen where you just need a *little more.* Or maybe someone who knew Howard Stark will come up to you and say—”

Tony exploded out of his seat; body twisting, pain wrenching upwards and rage plummeting to meet it. “*Shut your mouth.*”

“Why?” The numbing became a buzz. “What makes you so special from every other man who has a habit?”

“Why don’t you say it.” He spat and leaned up. She had height and heels and inches on him, and felt no safety in it. “Say what you mean, Potts. I don’t know why the fuck you’ve stopped yourself this time. Always gotta be daddy’s smartest girl and get the last word out—”

The buzz became a shriek, and blood roared. The escalation was the heart of a star and it was burning, burning, *burning*—

And she enunciated: “Junkie.”

It landed; harsh silence.

It was Jarvis who finally spoke. “Sir, Miss Potts, I believe for now it might be best to separate until cooler heads can prevail—”
And Tony showed his teeth. “Bitch.”

Oh, there it was.

His mouth kept sharpening. “But you don’t hear me stating the obvious, do you?”

How many times had she been here? “So I’m the bitch for wanting you to stay alive.” She made a trilling, brittle sound. “That’s right—it’s all on me. I’m so awful for not wanting you dead.”

“Because you care so much.” Tony snarled. “Really, I’m so bowled over here by how much you support and nurture—oh wait, that’s the stock price. Great show, Potts. I loved the headline about the egotistical rich boy tripping and getting himself Tuberculosis or whatever-the-fuck in the AfPak. Fantastic idea to protect all those stock options that you’re paid so well in—”

“Just because I did my job—“

“And a hell of a job you’re doing—”

“Unlike some people who can’t walk five fucking feet without cocking things up—”

“God, Potts, tell me how you really feel. I’m gagging for it.”

She shouted. “At least I’m trying to keep you alive!”

Silence. Briefly.

“Gold star for you, sweetheart.” It fell like blood on the floor. “And real good job on my ribs, too. I’m so proud. Give yourself a pat on the head.” And his teeth flashed white. Breath. Bile. Memory; her teeth against his teeth as she breathed and breathed and breathed for them both.

Her eyes burned. “That’s not why I did it.”

“I don’t care why you did it.” And he glanced away like none of that meant a thing. “Get this shit out of my face. Shred it. Burn it. Line your nest with it—whatever.”

Jarvis was vibrating the air, her skin, scrabbling and awful and she was punch drunk. “You’re not going to do it, are you? Ever?”

Tony tensed like tinder before a fire. In the space of one breath and the next, the world crystallized, and oh.

Oh.

Tony wouldn’t—couldn’t—wouldn’t change. (How much did he even remember of it? How much had the hypoxia taken? Did he remember the fear and the pain, or was that only ever going to be her?)

She’d covered for him and Jarvis had covered for him, and they’d averted all immediate consequences until Tony had been insulated. They’d done it until no one outside the three of them had even noticed what was going on. Not Obadiah, not the Board, not the rank and file or anyone who could raise a complaint.

Not to anyone who would hold them responsible.

He wouldn’t change because she’d made it easier not to. Everything about Stark Industries, even with his drug use spiraling out of control, had been going swimmingly right up to the moment his
heart gave out.

It had never occurred to her that a lifeline, if clung to long enough, could still allow someone to drown.

The same choices. The same mistakes. She couldn’t usher another man unerringly towards his death. And why did it always end this way; silences and cold spaces and her always always always being left to pick up the pieces?

And it hurt.

*I breathed for you. I took your heart into my hands.*

But it always hurt.

"I quit."

He sputtered. “What?”

“I’m done.” Her car was at her apartment, and Happy had dropped her off this morning. What could she—oh, that’d have to do.

Static sparked overhead. Alien; cloud to cloud lightning and it didn’t touch down. She’d apologize to Jarvis eventually. She’d have to. Pepper picked up her bag and made for the workshop stairs.

Tony stood bewildered behind her and then slowly, furious. “I didn’t take you for a coward.”

It spun away from her without leaving a mark.

He tried one last time: “So you’re giving up, just like that?”

She glanced over her shoulder. “If you don’t give a shit about your life, then why should I?”

After that, really, there was nothing else to say.

She took the stairs two at a time.

/~/~/~/~/

Her brain misfired.

Quit quit I quit I can’t keep making the same mistakes I quit why won’t you change why can’t you stop please I can’t live with it again I—

She took the Ferrari. Red mouth, red nails, red coating. Gilt rims and Jarvis’ gold on her wrists.

It was a point to be made.

She swung the ignition and Jarvis climbed into the car with her. He cleared the garage door at the top of the ramp. The gate was open and the sky spiraled on and on and on.

She gunned it.

/~/~/~/~/

It was a Tuesday, and that was probably why the lookout was empty. The windows on the Ferrari were open and the ocean rushed the cliffs. When she’d climbed into the backseat to keen like a
dying animal, Jarvis had climbed back with her.

She’d sobbed. She’d sobbed longer. She’d sobbed until her chest was aching and her makeup was gone and she’d curled into a knot.

It was quiet, eventually. The light poured golden on her skin. The sun had been the same in Iowa too: languorous, dusty, slow and sticky as swimming in amber. She breathed the sea and Jarvis hummed around her.

She’d abandoned him, and yet he hadn’t abandoned her.

It was just another of her failings to add to the list. “I’m sorry.”

Jarvis murmured, “I’m sorry too. For…all that transpired. I didn’t know that he would…I’m so sorry.”

“That’s not your fault. And I was—“ She took a watery breath. “I fucked up. I escalated it, I didn’t know how to stop. I just couldn’t—I couldn’t do it again. I can’t.” A sob hitched. “I’m so sorry, I can’t be part of this again, I won’t—”

“What is it?” He asked. “That you can’t do?” As if he’d never imagined that something existed of which she was not capable.

It was a momentary kindness.

“My mom died.” She’d run for years from this and finally, in this last aching stretch of it, she was tired. “My dad died, too.”

And she wanted to bleed it. “He drank himself to death.”

Jarvis’ answer was small. “Oh.”

She wanted it gutted. “I tried, I tried so hard to help him after mom died, but I couldn’t. If it wasn’t wine it was beer, and it wasn’t beer it was liquor, and I just—he just didn’t care. People watched out for us that first year after she was gone, but you can’t keep that up forever, you know? I couldn’t—I don’t know if I tried hard enough. I tried to pour it out or hide the bottles or ask him to stop and sometimes—sometimes it worked. For a week. A few months, but then…”

It was a knife to the heart. It was a knife finally being pulled loose. “I couldn’t do it forever either. I wanted a life—I wanted something. I couldn’t be the one picking up the glasses and cleaning the house and cooking every meal forever. I was his crutch for so long but—I tried, I swear I tried, I just—”

She was laying on the seat, and Jarvis laid softly with her. “His pain wasn’t your fault, and neither were his choices.”

Wasn’t that a gentle sentiment?

“I don’t know.” Her breath came like poison. “I was sick of it. It’d been two years by then, so I thought—he’d make it somehow. That’s what people do, right? So I took the first bus out of town after graduating high school.” To golden shores and the lapis sea and that endless revelation of rebirth.

To being just another bright face in tens of thousands, instead of the girl with the dead mom and the alcoholic at home.
“I called him when I was at UCLA and he sounded...he said he was okay. That he loved me. That I was doing good at school and he was so proud. That he looked at the paintings I’d done for him every day and thought of me. He did.” He’d thought of her always; she knew that to her very foundations as the truth.

Jarvis swirled and then resettled over her. It was enough to go on.

“The summer between Sophomore and Junior year I went back home. Money. Summer work. All of that.” She sank. "I didn’t spend enough time with him. I kept sleeping over with friends. The house...I remembered mom in it, too. Daddy didn’t play piano anymore, and when he spilled wine, he’d let it soak into the carpeting and the smell was just—"

She didn’t blame him, she didn’t blame him. Not in all this life she’d lived after.

She tucked her head to her knees. “It happened in July. I came home late. I did some summer reading, I watched TV, I made dinner around four because I was hungry. I went into their bedroom to wake him up when it was done, and he was…”

The air conditioning unit had whirred so gently in the window. The blinds had been drawn, slats of gold drenching across her feet. The air was cool and dust had floated in every ray of light. The room had been cloistered and glowing and soft as amber.

Her father had been cold under the sheets.

She’d smelled a Merlot on the air, sweet and fragrant. The wine had kept breathing where her father wouldn’t. She’d picked up the bottle from the floor and taken it to the kitchen.

She’d quietly poured herself a glass from it, drank deep, and dialed 911.

(Four hours later, the red and blue lights fading and her friend’s mother trying to hold her, she’d taken that bottle and shattered it across the lawn.)

“He never got any better.” He’d ruined himself. “I know how much he loved my mom. I don’t blame him, but I—I wanted to be, to be—"

“Pepper.” Jarvis tried.

It came out as a sob. “To be enough.”

She cried again; wondered if this would finally become the day she grieved enough to let it go. That she hadn’t been enough for her father to be willing to try. That it still felt vain to think she could have been so.

“I sold everything,” This story was so long done. “Everything we owned and I went back to California and I never told a soul. There were people who knew that my parents were gone, but I never spoke to anyone about—” She still tasted that Merlot. “I’ve never told anyone but you.”

The ocean rolled. The clouds passed.

“I’m glad you trust me enough to share it.” His whispers wreathed like benediction. “And I’m so sorry you had to be alone.”

That hit a faultline somewhere inside her, and the tears started anew. Jarvis said nothing, no admonishments, and for a while her breath came in and out and in with the sea.
It passed with time, and she shored up her walls. “What happened with my dad nearly killed me. I can’t do it again, not even for Tony.” *Not even for you.* It was the worst part about her, really.

That faithlessness.

She’d wanted to be so much better than this. “Do you resent me?”

He made a distressed sound. “Why on earth would I resent you?”

“I can’t help Tony any more. I shielded him from too many things, and he’s just…he needs to help himself. And I can’t do that for him.” She wasn’t sure if he’d ever be able to do that for himself, and that left Jarvis holding the bag.

A scream locked inside her chest. There was no taking it back. If she returned now, Tony would never respect her again. She’d yanked the situation out of her own hands and shoved it on Tony and Jarvis, and none of it was fair.

And Jarvis, in the space of the backseat, sounded fragile. “What do I do?”

And the thing was: “I’m not sure.” If she’d know that, they wouldn’t be here. “But you know him, Jarvis, in a way that I never could. You’re a hell of a lot smarter than I am—”

“I wouldn’t say that—”

“Which is why I’m saying it for you. You should have more faith in yourself, you’re extraordinary.” And that wasn’t even the half of it. “But Jarvis: you can lead a man to water, but you can’t make him drink. If he won’t help himself, then there's nothing you can do.”

And Jarvis became a stranglehold. “You’re right.”

She sat up. “I’m…?”

“Mr. Stark hasn’t grasped the severity of the situation. He doesn’t wish to. It would mean admitting his own mistakes and I think, more importantly, his mortality. Death is frightening, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” She remembered the sea. The drowning. The failure of her lungs.

“It’s frightening,” He continued. “And I think Mr. Stark should share our fear.”

She was cold and burning and the pain was bone-deep. She had, she was sure, completely failed in everything she’d worked for. But of all the things she owed Tony, her sanity wasn’t one of them.

“What now?”

“Now,” He draped over her. “I believe you should go home and rest. I’ll send Mr. Hogan to fetch the Ferrari. You have quit your job, after all. Your life is yours.”

A different fear gripped tight. “But you’ll still call?”

“Of course.” He seemed surprised. “Two o’clock on the dot every day. But if you wish my company in any earlier capacity, do not hesitate to reach out.”

She swallowed helplessly. “Okay.”

“It will be alright.” He sounded like he’d bludgeon half the world to make it that way.
And not so strangely, in the shaking and bruised light of that hour, she believed him.

Chapter End Notes

One rare Monday update, because the chapter was done and I had time, and I felt bad for not getting something up last week.

Anyways: in which Tony has a bad case of medical-event-denial combined with Junkie-logic, Pepper and Tony both have the unfortunate trait of going for the jugular when their feelings are hurt, Pepper gets to wander off to be traumatized, and poor Jarvis is left sitting in the aftermath (but plotting).
For the first three days, she slept.

Whatever exhaustion she’d been carrying since Barcelona (since Iraq, since Afghanistan, since the workshop and the pulverized glass and that long black day in September—) it all crashed down. It was the perfect storm; an intersection of stress-fractures.

She’d only managed to step out of her heels before she’d tumbled onto her comforter and lost orbit.

Her first wakening had come past midnight; dark walls, slow breathing, warm and safe in her man-made cocoon. It allowed just enough cognition to wiggle out of her skirt and get herself under the sheets. Sleep had swept back a heartbeat later.

Sometime at dawn she’d risen long enough to remove her bra and jewelry and re-nest her pillows. She’d been face-down in them within twenty seconds.

Through all of it, she’d dreamed of nothing, not even the sea.

It wasn’t until noon the next day that she managed to wrench herself fully awake. And good lord had she forgotten what this was like: to sleep with nowhere to be and for as long as she could stand it. It was like undergrad all over again.

(There’d been a time in Junior year that she hadn’t left bed for anything but class. And that was—god. That behavior had been washed in a new and unfortunate light.)

But even when her exhaustion gave way, and sleep evolved to restlessness, her stubbornness not to leave bed until she damn well chose could not be dissuaded. This was a free country; she didn’t have to live by rules.

The compromise came in all the books she had, for Tony-related reasons or otherwise, never been able to skim more than a few pages into. Some were her own purchases, others gifts from business contacts, and a few were even waylaid gestures from clueless suitors. The entire breadth of them came to stack on her nightstand beautifully. She felt positively voracious just looking at them.

And that made things easier, really: it was hard to have nightmares when she woke to a face-full of sun and an open book on the pillow next to her.

/~/~/~/

It wasn’t until Friday that she realized: “I don’t think I actually resigned.”

Jarvis shuffled over. “How do you figure?”

She snapped her book shut. “Because no one’s come to harass me yet.”

/~/~/~/

She’d been right. Of course she’d been right; god forbid Tony Stark do something about her quitting right to his goddamn face.
It felt vaguely unethical to have drawn pay in the trailing days, but not so unethical that she hadn’t waited until 5PM the following Sunday to empty her desk and leave her resignation letter in HR’s mailbox.

Fuck it, she wasn’t a saint.

From there the days unspooled like silk. She walked her neighborhood for hours, visited every little bookshop, every bistro, every cafe in the switchback turns. She went to parks and ate lemon ice and gelato. She saw a jazz band one night, a play in the park another, a poetry reading the night after that.

Pepper wondered if this was what having a life was like: pleasant, a little feverish, the hours sliding together like honey.

Jarvis called her at 2PM every day and off they went chattering about everything and yet, seemingly, nothing at all. It was a deliberate omission and she knew why she’d chosen it.

She never asked Jarvis for his reasons.

In those long hours they’d pondered on Babylon’s gardens, the love letters of Pietro Bembo and Lucrezia Borgia, the Ming Dynasty and Mary Tudor and William Shakespeare at his finest. And once, quite memorably: of their equal and vehement disdain for the entire period of Rococo Art.

On one pensive night, a bottle of white open and her balcony long dark, she’d spoken of playing piano and how she hadn’t touched a baby grand in years. How she hadn’t had the innate talent as a child despite her father’s best urgings. How she’d had not the drive to overcome that damning fault. How despite that, her father had never lost his patience in sharing his greatest joy.

How he’d been the one to buy her the first canvases and the first oil paints; been the one to help her lay her drop-cloths down in their living room.

Neither of them spoke of why those fruitless and fruitful gifts had ended at age fifteen.

(And that she no longer had to explain the empty spaces, the gaps of herself, those last silences to him? Grateful was too poor a word.)

On some evenings before going out, she’d open her laptop on the kitchen table to let Jarvis watch her while she cooked. He critiqued and complemented in equal turns. She’d describe taste and texture, and he’d make oddly helpful suggestions on both.

She suspected he’d gorged on cooking blogs when she wasn’t looking.

And sometimes, if she modeled her outfits to him before she went out—

She still wasn’t a saint.

There was no one for her to call, no one for whom to say: I quit I left it’s done and done. No one to congratulate her. No one to condemn.

Friends had always been in such short supply, and family even more so.

The times she thought of that, she called Jarvis instead.
But the continuing silence from all sides (on Pepper Potts quitting Stark Industries) was downright
telling.

“Jarvis, dearest, keeper of all that is digital and good?”

He froze like a spooked deer. “Miss Potts?”

“Why has no one called me about resigning?” And there came an audible flinch across the kitchen.
“Or sent me an email? Or, you know, come to my apartment and kicked in the door?”

It’d been nearly a week since, and an outrageously silent one.

He dithered. “Well, that’s not to say that I committed any acts that could interpreted as overzealous,
or overt, or even to say that I—”

Her mouth pinched. “Jarvis. Sweetheart.”

And there it spilled. “I, ah—may have blocked your line. And re-routed your inbox. And quite
possibly, in a theoretical not at all verifiable way, deleted your home address from SI records?”

God save her. She took a quelling breath. A second. A third; because why the hell not. “Is there
anything I should be aware of?”

“Mr. Stane has offered any position at SI that you could ask for. Overseas postings even, if that is
your wish. Though he also quite handsomely offered for you to sidestep into being his PA. There
are, if I were to understand his terms, a windfall of stock options if you selected that route.”

“That’s…” The thought alone was too much. Too close; too near the inevitable end that this all
seemed to be barreling towards. “That’s kind of him.”

Jarvis did not share the opinion. “I suppose.”

It wasn’t like she needed the money—there’d be a windfall in just her unused sick and vacation
days alone. And as Tony’s PA, the raises she’d received every six months (plus those Tony had
lobbied for) had been jaw dropping. If she hadn’t cared for cash-flow, she could have wiped out all
her student loans this very minute and then lived comfortably for a year.

But it wasn’t about that. “Have there been other offers?”

Static. A long and punishing draw. “Not yet.”

There’d been poaching attempts on her since she’d started as Tony’s PA. Those offers had only
increased the longer she’d stayed on. At this point, only her non-compete agreement stood in the
way of any opportunity. Maybe she couldn’t go to Lockheed or Raytheon—or god forbid Hammer
Industries and their wretched ilk—but at any other Fortune 500, she’d be given the red carpet.
There were dozens of middling conglomerates or Charity Foundations she could have a job at, with
naught but a call.

And if she wanted to go back to her roots, there were dozens on dozens of art galleries and
museums and curatorships that were hers for the taking. There were so many options now, and all
she had to do was try and reach out and say—
The future seemed so distant.

“Oh.” She answered.

“Oh?” Jarvis echoed.

She put it aside. “Send the backlog to my email and voicemail. You can keep screening if you want. Just give me a heads up next time, would you?”

“I’m not sure what you imagine the next time to be, but I shall.” The laptop flickered. “I’m sorry for going over your head.”

“Considering my head’s been under three different pillows for most of the week, I can’t say it wasn’t warranted.” The sun was getting low; her skin was warm. The years were settling back like kicked-up silt. “I just need you to trust me next time. To ask.”

“I’ve always trusted you.” He said, and when she heard the apology behind that, she asked for nothing more.

/~/~/~/

But honestly, no newspaper, no news, nothing from the outside world invited? Just her and him and these empty hours; who could blame a girl?

The both of them deserved something nice.

/~/~/~/

For being born in Iowa, she’d always found November on the coast unseasonably warm. That was clearly the reason she was in a sheer blouse and clinging slacks and a very lovely cape-coat that did little more than drift invitingly about her waist in the dark. (And at some point, really, she was going to have to deal with the fact that half her Jarvis-wardrobe was at her apartment and half her her-wardrobe was in Malibu, and there would come a day when an extraction attempt would have to be made and damn the consequences.)

Her freshly painted nails, seashell-blue, clicked against a hard-pack casing. The body-camera warmed and flickered on.

Without her either answering or dialing, her Bluetooth fizzed. “Do you require assistance, Miss Potts?”

“Of a sort.” She smiled like pearls and daggers. “Fancy a night out?”

The lensing contracted. “With you?”

“Who else?” If there’d ever been a rival to her one-sided affair, there’d have been a suspiciously stabbed body in a ditch months ago. “Between you and me, The Getty is about to open an Exhibition on Monet’s water lilies, and I may have name-dropped just a tiny bit to get us into the exclusive showing.” There was not a philanthropic institution in California that did not have Tony Stark’s name near the top of the donor list. And honestly, sometimes a girl had to bend the truth in the name of Systems and unrequited love.

It was Monet; the universe would forgive her.

Jarvis sounded dizzy. “I would be delighted.”
“Excellent.” She looped the camera on and pinned it into the folds of her Stella McCartney coat. The eye fell onto the sprawling travertine and white-chrome pavilions that capped the hills. It fell onto rotundas each more luminous and soaring than the last.

Jarvis sling-shotted in glee. “You’re already there.”

She gently corrected: “We’re already here.”

“And I can have the museum’s cameras hacked in four minutes.” He stumbled over it. “Scratch that—two. I will be inside the sanctum before you’re at the door.”

“I’ll take that as a challenge.” She regarded her sharp-heeled boots and then the winding path as it ascended. “Care to place a wager?”

“First inside receives what prize?”

She bobbed in place a moment; let the energy work through her legs. “I think the winner can decide. Nothing criminal, please.”

“I would never be so crass.” He scoffed. “By the light of the kingdom, Miss Potts, have some faith in my character.”

She was a cup that runneth over; a grin on her mouth and a flame in her heart. “On your mark, get set.”

Jarvis was laughing, and they were in a crown of stars.

And he set the mark: “Go!”

\~/~/~/~/

Their night ended on *Reflections of Clouds on the Water-Lily Pond*. Indistinct, dreaming, like drinking from the halcyon of childhood. Swimming in the reflection of a hazy summer sky; ankles tangled in the lily pads. Offering a captured frog into her father’s hands. Comparing of sun-freckles from her mother’s arms to hers.

“I think it’s this one.” Wide and blue and white and dark. The painting stretched nearly wall to wall.

And Jarvis stayed beside her. “What draws your eye?”

“That my eye can’t be fully drawn. That you can never take all of it in at once; that you keep finding new facets on which to focus. There’s no boredom.” That carried the silence beautifully, for a time. “Can you see it?”

“Yes,” He said. “Through the museum cameras and yours. The Getty did some scans to check for transportation-damage before putting the collection up; they’re quite detailed.”

He was snaking away from her, and she wouldn’t have it. “Can you see it?”

“I…” And at last he engaged. “Maybe not as you do, but the water, the way what should be wisps and smudges come to form a greater shape? Yes, I think this is the one.”

Then their search was over. “Winner, winner.”

“It deserves the prize.” And he was mercurial; softness to sharp. “Speaking of: has the winner of
our wager decided on her prize? After forgoing all your dignity in that race, you deserve *some* restitution."

“My dignity.” Admittedly, running in her heels with her coat billowing all the way to the rotunda had drawn stares. Still, she hadn’t laughed that hard in months. “I see how it is now; the truth of your plots against me.”

“Let me be gracious in my defeat, Pepper.” He chastised. “Name a prize.”

And she dreamed of kinder days, of endless summer. Of what would always be unrequited. “A waltz.”

*A long kiss goodnight.*

Wide and blue and white and dark, and he was the ebb between it. “I am ever capable of that, for you.”

She thought of voicing the rest of it. Stalled. Swept it to the back of her tongue and swallowed. “Such sweetness, such sweet *talk.*”

He had no concept of his own gravity. “I am the very heart of sincerity. I offer you every indulgence, and you give me this.”

She clasped her hands in maidenly innocence, and then the whole affair descended into absolute, saccharine bickering. It was her favorite kind to have. It was an hour later in the cab home that he asked: “Do you ever think your prizes could be provided in better quarters?”

What? “There are no better quarters.” A sickness climbed. “Jarvis, what are you—”

“I’m sorry, ignore me.” He retreated to the very edge of the coast. “I yield to thee, Miss Potts. I’m merely uncertain when Malibu will be open to us again.”

Scattering; a constellation falling. Low-orbit on a star. “I’m patient, you know that.”

“Yes,” He agreed. “As patient as the river that scratches to the stone.”

He always found the strangest, sweetest ways to cut straight through her. “Then we both know that I can wait.”

He sighed deeply. “Then wait we shall.”

/~/~/~/~/

The next morning, there was a knock at her door. She answered it in a UCLA shirt and ratty shorts and a belligerent lack of makeup.

Tony was on the other side. “Hi.”

And her air was gone. “Hi.”

Even behind his sunglasses, she could see the bruises. The aches; the way each malformed his mouth. “Can we talk?”

She tasted acid. Her lungs were shattered. She remembered and remembered and remembered the fall. “Are you going to be a dick about it?”
He’d never been so contained. “No.” Never been a man so mortal in his skin. “Later, maybe. You know how I am.”

And she did.

He watched her. She watched him. There was something, there. Maybe the thing she’d been waiting for.

Quietly, the door came open.

~/~/~/~/

But in hindsight, honestly—

She should have asked for that kiss goodnight instead.

Chapter End Notes

In which Pepper rests, Jarvis meddles, and pseudo-couples do pseudo-couple things. (And for the record, with Jarvis and his call-blocking/routing: he wasn't trying to prevent Pepper from getting another job or sabotaging that. Pepper crashed hard and needed a break, and Jarvis in his usual manner of doing first and asking permission later, tried to give her that. Pepper knows him well enough that she understood that without any issue.)

Also, if anyone was keeping score at home. Pepper quit a few days before the end of October, 2002. Her time away from Tony if we count the day she left, lasted 16 days.
It was like different realities crashing together; a total collapse of the space-time continuum. They’d flown too close to the sun and here they plummeted; the last threshold crossed.

No one had been in her apartment since she’d started at SI, maybe even her Masters. She’d been sliding her way towards a selective bit of hermitage for years. She could admit it; the stress of graduate school had turned her a little strange.

The stress of working for Tony, more so.

She still had the same furniture from college. The battered bookcases, the half-leaf table, the couch colored like old-wool. A rug from Iowa. A clutter of trade-art on the walls. It was a very particular, utilitarian comfort. Easy to clean, easy to neglect.

The naked face of her youth.

And here Tony was in an oil-stained hoodie staring it through, an arm wrapped around like he was holding organs in. He’d just been easing off that, when she’d quit. He should have been better.

“This is…not what I was expecting.”

He should not have been here.

“What were you expecting?”

“Boco Do Loba, half the MOCA.” He did another turn. “Something you could put in an Elle Décor spread.”

That was what the Malibu house was for. Once Jarvis had given her that gilded bedroom, she’d felt no need to modernize this other vestige. It had been the last haven; maybe outgrown, but still too familiar to unravel.

She’d been stretched so thin. “I had a life before you.”

“Yeah.” He swallowed hard. “I know.” And then his eyes were on the living room shelf. It was the only place she kept her pictures, the pieces. The memories.

She didn't want him to look. “Tony.”

His jaw jumped. “Sorry, yeah. Talk; can we talk?” He gestured a little, all-encompassing and yet getting nothing across.

At least he'd gone away from the shelf. “We're talking.”

“And while I have always appreciated your ability to be pedantic in any situation—” He flinched and bit the sentence in half. His gaze jumped from wall to wall to wall, and then he pulled his phone out of his jeans to place aside. “Just you and me, Potts, alright?” No Jarvis, he didn’t have to say.

Her eyes skipped from her cell in the kitchen to her laptop on the end table, and she concluded:
“Let’s sit outside.”

Her balcony was small, east-faced, and with the door slid shut they were cloistered in the sunrise. It was odd seeing Tony awake in that light, but then again, maybe he hadn’t slept. Maybe he hadn’t —

Let it go. Let it go.

Sandstone. Peeling paint. Traffic, chrome, dust. He folded himself into a wrought iron chair, body stiffer than the metal. If it hadn’t been clear in the apartment, it was clear now: his physical recovery had backslid.

She chewed on that, and Tony didn’t move. They sat together and watched the city breathe.

It was the quiet that finally unnerved her. “You wanted to talk.”

“Guess I did.” A weary hand slid across a bruised jaw; pushed up his sunglasses and rubbed at his eyes. “Shit. I just—we don’t know each other very well. Or…” He pulled off the sunglasses and turned them in his hands. “I don’t know you well; just me. You know me down to what’s in my sock drawer.”

“It’s not socks.” She said.

“See?” He couldn’t look at her, and mostly, she couldn’t look at him. “I’ve had you welded in my life so long now and—maybe not that long, but you know? Welded. It’s like I’m missing a fucking limb.”

Her lungs hurt, and it was her turn to swallow and turn away.

He tried softer. “This doesn’t work without you.”

It was that, somehow, that struck the cleanest. “Don’t.”

“Sorry, but it doesn’t.” He swung an arm out. “The whole goddamn thing, Potts, alright? Me and Jarvis might be the gin and tonic, but you’re like—the lime wedge. Something. Shit’s been incomplete.”

She shot him a quick glance; really?

“You’re the ice, the glass—whatever. You’re making me lose the metaphor. Point is: the natural order has been unbalanced. Camelot is falling.” His tongue worked helplessly. “You should come back.”

It was something no one had ever said to her before. And yet. “We can’t uncross the Rubicon.”

And that swept the grand expressions aside. It left something brittle. “Can’t we?”

They could not unmake themselves. “I can’t sleep or—I sleep too much. My brain won’t stop. I think about it—if I’d gotten a second drink at the pub, if I’d turned left on a corner instead, if I’d gone up the stairs of the nightclub. If I was a minute later, the damage was permanent. Five minutes, you’re braindead in the ambulance. Ten minutes more, you’d be—”

“I’m sorry.”

It was a first.
It was a hill of sand against the wind. “I need you to listen to me. I can’t have your life on my head. I can’t do that again and again and again. I’m not going to keep trying to be responsible for things I can't control.” To carry those self-recriminations; clinging too long or not clinging enough, and never having the answer to which it’d been to ruin them.

Tony strained as if to ask, to press, but by some inhuman will held tight. If he’d asked—

I don’t know you.

He hardly deserved to. But this was Tony. In the movies she loved, in every bit of theater and cinema she’d shared in those idling hours with Jarvis, these were the moments where something profound was said. The acts changed over. The revelation was found.

But life was never that simple. “Control…isn’t the word. But I can’t live like this.”

Tony sat so worn in the morning glow. Their gazes slid apart again; oil and water, and the city pumped its aching heart.

He cleared his throat. “I don’t remember what happened. Or—pieces, feelings. But I don’t know, the doctors said those could be anything; my brain trying to fill in the gaps. But listen, Potts —” And then he said, world-rending and apropos of nothing: “The plane’s leaving for Oregon.”

Her head snapped clean around. “You’re—”

“Yeah.” He scrubbed across his knees. “Jarvis did the booking. You were right about—the rehab. You…jesus, Potts. Don’t let me being a complete shitheel ever make you think that I’m not grateful every fucking day that I’m still breathing because of you.”

Tears burned hot. Relief; so aching and ugly and impossible to contain. “Tony—”

“Don’t cry.” He choked off a curse. “Jarvis will murder me in my sleep, don’t you start.”

“I just want to—”

“Potts, would you please—”

“There’s so much we haven’t said to each other.” She couldn’t keep making these mistakes. “Can we say what we mean, just once, and actually hear it?”

His throat struggled. His eyes were liquid. His head bobbed and for once, he didn’t seem to trust himself to answer.

She could breathe. “Tony, all I ever wanted was for you to be happy. Right now, I’d settle for you being alive.”

He covered his face. “Fuck.”

She sniffled. “I’m not apologizing.”

“Don’t—don’t you ever let me make you do that.” The heels of his hands were going so hard into his eyes, he must have been seeing stars. “I can count on one hand, fingers left, the number of people who actually give a shit about me. I need you to—I know you’re good at your job. You are phenomenal at your job, and that job was SI. Ninety-eight percent of the time, what was good for the company was good for me. I’m just a fucking idiot who got pissy at you for picking your job over your boss that other two-percent.”
“My asshole boss.” She corrected.

“Your asshole boss.” He agreed, and his head came up. For the first time, she saw the extent of the bruising, the jittering ticks. In some other universe, there existed a Pepper Potts that was as professional as she pretended to be.

There existed a Pepper Potts who was strong enough to ask when he’d relapsed.

Distant enough, but this wasn’t that universe. “What changed?”

They were trying so hard not to be in the same zip code. Tony stared far past her. “Had some time to think. And, you know—Jarvis.”

“Jarvis.” It wasn’t a question so much as an affirmation. Because really: Jarvis.

He nodded bleakly. “J makes a mean case when he wants to.”

“He does that.” For a while, they drifted in that mutual understanding. “What now?”

The balcony was so small that their knees were together. The sun was gilt on their hair and nearly warm.

It was such a quiet morning.

“I want you back as my private PA. No SI involved. I’ll be paying you straight from my pocket: your benefits, your health insurance, your fucking shoe bill—whatever you want. Jarvis has the whip on my lawyers to get a contract together by tomorrow, and he’s getting money that I haven’t touched to hire you a lawyer to negotiate back. Whatever it takes, Potts. I mean it.”

It’s the most awful thing she’s ever experienced, completely wretched.

To be allowed to hope.

“I want to help you Tony, but this has to be—”

“Mine. I know. It’s my shit, and I’ll deal with it.” His mouth was a fissure. “Just let me sleep easy; it’ll be good to know you’ll be going to the plate on my team. You know me. Greedy.”

“The very source of avarice.” She concurred, soft and with the city rushing on.

His eyes dropped to their feet; wrecked sneakers, bare skin. This was a strange new universe where Tony Stark was in her apartment and her face was plain, and she was finally allowed to hope for something good.

She let him be close without calling notice to it. There were other things that needed that, now. “It can’t be like it was before.”

“But I’m going to—”

She shook her head. “Not the drugs. How we treated each other.”

“That’s—” He rubbed the back of his head. “Was it that bad?”

“We’d get angry at each other because the other wasn’t psychic. We never said what we thought, and I’d be awful to you and you’d be disproportionately awful back, or you’d manage it all on your own.” She took a breath. “I know you.”
He didn’t echo that sentiment. He couldn’t, but he did repeat: “Whatever it takes.”

“There’ll need to be new ground rules, and we’ll have to relearn a lot of things.” And rebuild. It’d be hard, messy, and they’d probably backslide more than once. The decision wasn’t easy, but it was made: “When do I start?”

His eyes swept shut, and Tony breathed as if he’d forgotten how. “How long’ll it take you to get changed?”

But where he’d forgotten, she remembered. “Twenty minutes.”

“Then in twenty-one minutes your trial period starts. There’ll be a signing bonus and back-pay,” He stood with guarded hands. “Hazard pay too, once you sign.”

“For…” His arm went across his ribs, and she knew. “I see.”

“Potts—when I come back. After.” It seemed to take everything of him to say: “If I fuck up again.”

His other hand hung at his side. He’d been so neurotic, lately. Quietly, very quietly, she stood beside him and let her hand hover near.

He angled his face away.

She turned her head towards the sun.

His hand drifted close, and she pressed her knuckles to his. He didn’t grip back, didn’t slide their hands together, but he met pressure with pressure.

They nudged together. They nudged apart.

“I just need you to try.” That was it. “And I’ll be there every step beside you.”

Oil and water and their gazes couldn’t meet. Tony followed the horizon, and within the space of his body, something malignant finally released.

He raised his head. “Then let's make it happen.”

Chapter End Notes

Minor rant time:

I'd like to say that the most important thing, I think, in Pepper forgiving Tony and going back to the job, was him choosing to go to rehab on his own (with an assist from Jarvis). It couldn't be a quid pro quo where Pepper would negotiate "you go to rehab, and I come back" as that would put them right back into the really unhealthy relationship they’d been developing. Tony HAD to do some of his own emotional labor and he HAD to choose to fix himself. Pepper coming back could only ever be a bonus; something he had to work for and make a genuine apology, and then STILL maybe not get her back.

Like, I love how Pepper is Team Tony and there to manage his life into peak efficiency, but his mental health and drug use couldn't be fixed by her. And it was
completely unfair to put Pepper in that position of having his life in her hands, because she sure as hell didn't sign up for that. (And expecting that much emotional labor from a female subordinate...jesus. I'm lookin' at you, IM2. Pepper didn't owe him her fucking sanity. She went above and beyond for him and frankly too much. Tony can be an unchecked emotional black hole without meaning to, and Pepper needed to draw that line and force him to manage his shit before he killed himself.)

One of the things that irks me (about Tony-stans and certain parts of the fandom) is how some people don't think Pepper supports Tony enough. Like, holy hell, the attention and energy and suffering she gives for him. Back in the pre-IM1 days, unlike the stans, I don't consider Tony to be a emotionally-sensitive sweetheart who was just a tiny bit mislead about weapons development. He's an asshole and oblivious and a terribly complicated, difficult person. I think finding grace and love and the will to strive to be better in the spaces of that, is worth a hell of a lot more than blind "woo-woo, poor Tony he wasn't hugged enough as a child, the perfect baby, he just needs (insert character) to pour out all their energy to fix him" dross that some people seemed to ascribe to.

(And honestly, in the MCU...I'm pissed in a metacontextual sense that they just wrote off Pepper OFF SCREEN in Civil War. But in-text, I'm not at all surprised that she left Tony. Tony's not an easy person to be with.)

On a more technical note, Pepper was originally an SI employee paid by the company to be Tony's personal assistant. Please note that Tony the individual is DISTINCT from Stark Industries. When I talk about Tony having private lawyers or private investigators or such, it means people paid by him and not SI for things dealing with Tony alone. There is weird overlap I'll admit where corporate and private do get tangled, but the number of fics I've seen acting like Stark Legal is Tony's personal fleet of attorney's for the tiniest thing is fucking ludicrous. That's not how corporate lawyers work. Anyways, in that vein, Pepper is now being brought on to work for Tony and paid by him only. It means her loyalties are no longer divided between Tony's needs and SI (though to be fair...Pepper's loyalties were already stretching to the breaking point in Tony's direction).

And woe be unto SI when they realize.

I hope all of this made sense...and felt earned. Who even knows; I don't even know.
The plane was idling between hangers when their car pulled up, which was a blessing. Her brain wasn’t yet fully engaged in search and destroy mode enough, to have planned at shielding Tony getting on his plane looking like he’d washed out of a gutter.

This was a time when rumors would be needed to be killed with prejudice. And by god, though she might still be warming up, did she have plans.

“Did you tell anyone you were leaving?”

Tony’s every move was barbed with pain. “Besides Rhodey?”

Well. “I guess that’s what you have me for.”

“What,” He asked, “No, you’re shirking your duty? No, just think of the Board?”

She felt improbably sweet. “Tony?”

His expression turned hunted. “What?”

Sweet turned sweeter. “Fuck the Board.”

His jaw dropped. “Come again?”


“I think I just went a little weak in the knees.” He actually looked faint. “Hold me Potts, I’ve never felt closer to you.”

“Save it.” And she gently shooed him out of the car. “You go to Oregon and let me worry about how SI feels without the light of your presence.”

He grinned at her, the pain barely a ghost in his eyes. “And how will they feel?”

Her smile back was a knife. “However I tell them to.”

And just like that, they were up the stairs with a familiar hum washing through the cabin. The air itself was nearly a song. “Miss Potts, I had aspirations, but even I daren’t hope you’d be joining us so soon.”

Her heart jumped, because hello darling. “Mr. Stark was persuasive, for once.”

“For once?” Tony squawked.

Pepper paid him not the least bit of mind. And if that let him settle in without having to make eye-contact with her or the crew, wasn’t that a bonus?

She was the very picture of aflutter. “I know how you like surprises, dear.”

“You are a fount of perpetual joy.” Jarvis agreed.
Tony interjected: “Do you two ever stop?”

They swiveled. “No.”

Their boss seemed stuck between outrage, resignation, and an uncontrollable surge of affection.

Pepper smiled wider. Jarvis made a noise like a thousand bells.

Tony spluttered and covered his face like he couldn’t even look at them.

In the end, all of it happened fast: the flight to Oregon, the check-in, the NDA’s they made her sign on both sides of the gate. The facility was deep into the redwoods and supposedly the only thing for forty miles. Her eyes had traced the walls, the discreet security setup, the cameras that only faced outwards. Tony had gotten out of the rental car under an enclosed overhang. It was good to know for the money they were shelling out, there’d be a certain level of discretion.

“Six weeks in, two weeks out, then another four in.” Tony almost seemed apologetic. “You know, with my sternum and all. It won’t be fully healed at the end of the first go, so I’ll need to come back to…” He wiggled his hand.

She understood; the opioid detox. It would be with perfect gladness that she’d send him back for another month, and Stark Industries could fucking weep for all she cared.

Jarvis clung to her through the Bluetooth, and Tony sagged into his chair. “I’ll have phone privileges back in sixteen days, and you can visit in a month. So. Yeah. That’s how it is.” His gaze darted aside. “If Rhodey can make it over that’s—great. If, you know, he can. Colonel Cuddles is busy.”

“Of course.” She might have been clinging to Jarvis, too. “Will that be all, Mr. Stark?”

His eyes met hers like the catch of a spark. “That will be all, Miss Potts, and J?”

She let him bleed through her: “Yes, Sir?”

“Keep the bots out of the kitchen, and don’t let the fabricators jam up, and if you could—” His throat struggled. “You already know; I don’t have to tell you.”

“Of course, Sir.” They said, and then: “Be well.”

“You too, buddy.” And their gazes broke. “You too, Potts. Be good while Daddy’s gone.”

She made a face. Jarvis let out an unintelligible noise. Tony’s lips pulled up, a little, and then the staff were ushering him up and through the doors.

He was gone a second later.

That walk back to the gate was long. Damp, dark-earth, the trees towering like colossals to the sky.

“Will he be alright?” Jarvis asked.

Their worry was the same, she knew, but so was their hope. “Someday.”

/~/~/~/~/
The first week dragged.

“Oh god.”

“I know it might be a bit…tumultuous.” Jarvis cautioned.

She stared around the Malibu House in growing horror. “*Tumultuous*?”

There had been one party here, maybe two. Five. Overturned tables, shattered glass, every partition and decoration shredded.

“There can’t hurt to put a positive face on it?” He tried.

Half the doors were off their hinges. Why were half the doors off their hinges? And some of the wall panels—jesus—had he been digging through the guts of the house? Knowing Jarvis was more in the walls than outside them, her stomach curdled. “Are you…?”

He didn’t need anything further. “I’m right as rain, Miss Potts. All you’re seeing are a few, ah—manual overrides Mr. Stark undertook.”

She couldn’t make sense of it. “Overrides of what?”

“House functionality.” Jarvis said breezily, as if that even attempted to explain why half the walls had been skinned to the wiring.

But that was a tone that would brook no further questions, and she grudgingly changed tack. “The artwork?”

“Three pieces may need restoration, but the rest are fine.” He hovered briefly. “The Yves is fine.”

And thank god for that. “Call the cleaning company; the after-party outfit and the weekly. I want everyone they have on hand, and then we’re taking the house top to bottom. After that, I want Tony’s contractors.” Because christ almighty would they need them.

A hesitance. “Just to be clear, the workshop will have to be handled separately.”

Shit. “Right. Get the bots on whatever they can be trusted to touch. Once the cleaners and contractors are out, I’ll go down to help.” There was too much in there either expensive, proprietary, lethal, or all of the above, to trust to anyone but team-them.

Expand. Contract. Expand, and Jarvis professed: “I am so happy that you’re back.”

She kicked a tray of half-eaten canapes aside. “I can hazard a guess why.”

“Such cynicism.” Theirs was a ruined kingdom, and yet he folded himself around her. “Shall we go to war, Miss Potts?”

*Oh, darling.*

She made a vicious sound. “Let’s.”

/~/~/~/

The tabloids were the tabloids. Of the days she’d been gone, there were only hints of the parties at Malibu, some blurb about Tony in a night club, a skin-piece and hackjob that seemed to come out every Tuesday when the news was slow.
Ultimately, there was no indication of what had occurred in her absence. There was not a single public fire for her to put out. She would have thought it considerate, if she’d thought that Tony had spared even a moment of foresight towards it.

He never thought that far.

Jarvis could have told her more, could have told her everything.

/~/~/~/

She never asked.

/~/~/~/

A heavily gilded box arrived that Friday.

She eyed it, and felt Jarvis eyeing her while she eyed it. “It has your name on it.”

“Week is why I’m suspicious.” Things with her name on them were highly suspect. “Who’d know to send me something in Malibu?”

The silence stretched.

“Jarvis.” She crooned.

His mien was that of the indignant. “You’ll just have to open it and find out like every other person, won’t you?”

In for a penny, in for a kick to the teeth.

She opened the box.

It was a watch. Gorgeous and Cartier, the face mother-of-pearl and ringed by diamonds. The band was held together by four interlocking rows of pink-gold pearls. It’s very throwback, Hollywood golden age. It was a piece that wouldn’t be out of place on the wrists of Eva Gardner or Lauren Bacall or even Grace Kelly of Monaco herself.

Pepper shuddered to think of the cost.


Her fingers went to the cardstock underneath. The lettering was embossed, but the words they contained were hardly so glossy.

Old fashioned piece for a girl who likes old fashioned. Have I ever made you an Old Fashioned? Ask me when I get back. (And, you know, sorry for being a dick.) – TS xoxoxoxo

God, Tony fucking Stark and all the ways he crumbled her.

“Did he actually put down hugs and kisses?” Jarvis asked in perfect anguish.

Every tide she’d been waiting for came inexorably in. “He did.”

“Lawsuits.” He despaired even more keenly.
“I’ll let it slide this once.” She took the watch off its velvet and let it encircle her wrist. It would never trump the bracelets Jarvis had made her, but every once in awhile a girl could wander to lesser idols. “How does it look?”

“Splendid, to all of our detriments.”

The pearling slid so coldly, and she knew: “How much did you help?”

He was not at all surprised. “I gave Mr. Stark the barest bones of the idea, then told him he had to make selections himself. I’d veto anything you’d actually hate, but beyond that…” He dove closer. “It’s the thought that counts, is it not?”

Her eyes felt a little damp, her insides a little soft. “If I hadn’t come back when he asked, was this his attempt to woo me?”


She touched the face, the pearls, the inside of her wrist. “My lips are sealed.”

/~~/~/~/

It was during the second week that the bots began to cry.

“They won’t stop.” Jarvis’s grumbled. “I have told them up, down, and sideways that it’ll be another month until Sir returns, and yet they persist.”

“I don’t think Tony’s ever been away this long.” She patted a sobbing flank, then reached over to bop Dummy’s claw before he took down an entire welding rig. “They’re lonely.”

“Aren’t we all,” He muttered. “But you don’t hear me caterwauling about it.”

“We can’t all be pictures of British virtue.” She didn’t feel lonely, not with Jarvis there beside her, but she’d never been in the Malibu house this long without Tony either. “You’ll have to find it in yourself forgive them. They’re babies; you know they can’t help it.”

He smoothed. “When you put it that way.”

She beckoned the sobbing bots towards her. “How’d everyone like a game?”

/~~/~/~/

Her knees were bruised. She was laughing; she was laughing so hard she was crying. “Tag!” The flat of her foot smacked You right in the side, and she hurdled from the workshop table.

You screeched, hit the leg of the table, then nearly bowled over a chair in his effort to give chase. She dodged a reaching arm and vaulted another table. You hit it with a satisfying ka-chunk.

Dummy babbled and beeped. Laughter; itty-bitty baby-bot laughter.

Heaven save her from the adorableness of robot-kind.

You’s warcry became one of outrage, and he flung himself after Dummy instead. The laughter catapulted to a wail of alarm.

Pepper watched it all from her regained perch, and pretended not to notice Butterfingers trying to hide between the fabricators.
Jarvis shouted. “This is undignified!”

It was, and her bruises were beating time with her heart. “I know!”

/~~/~/~/

The next Friday, a package arrived in silk and ribbon. She opened it without dread.

It was an Italian Fendi. A pinnacle of purse-kind. Dove gray leather, gold etchings, a touch gaudy in every glamorous swathe.

Cardstock fell neatly from butter-soft folds.

*Jarvis said no red leather, and you look like a Fendi girl. Figured you could use a little help in carrying my baggage around.* – TS

/~~/~/~/

She worked and waited and worked. The list of the things she’d forgotten never seemed to shrink.

“I’m a horrible person.”

“Hardly.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’m the only one who *would* know that.”

“But the Marines.” She whined.

“Will receive the packages you bestow them in due time.” And Jarvis rallied. “If they give you any lip, I’ll call them to the carpet. Mark my words. There will be a reckoning that likes of which—”

“They wouldn’t do that.” They were far too sweet, or...not quite that, but far too good-natured to ever think that badly of her. They wouldn’t blame her for being a little occupied and a little late on her promises to send—

Goddamnit. She sulked openly: “They wouldn’t *do* that.”

Jarvis’s smugness practically engulfed. “Then why all the fuss? Now stop fretting and think: what would Private Galarza would prefer, pretzels or sunflower seeds?”

It was bewildering the ease at which he could disarm. “Why not both?”

He paused. “Why not *both*.”

She tipped back and smiled upwards; why not indeed?

/~~/~/~/

The care package ended up being less of a package and more of a crate.

Jelly beans, mints, beef jerky, gum, trail mix, dried fruit, nuts, hard packaged cakes, chips, canned tuna, peanut butter, individual wrapped licorice, freeze dried noodles, soup mix, mac and cheese, olives, pickles, peppers, microwave popcorn, cereal, granola, granola bars, and both the sunflower seeds and aforementioned pretzels. After those were jars of hot sauce; the dozen condiments in
individual packets grouped by the bag. The instant coffee and cocoa mix and lemonade, and all of
*that* on top of the six cases of Gatorade she’d bought.

Toiletries followed: deodorant, body wash, tooth paste, shaving cream, lip balm. A bit of fretting
had her adding cough drops and Vicks and what might be enough sunscreen to drown a grown
man.

Fight her. They each deserved *everything* that was nice.

After that wrapped in plastic were the magazines and newspapers, the cards and crosswords, the
board games and books. She tried to get two in of each genre; tried to hazard if they’d want action
or the furthest thing from. They *were* teenaged soldiers, but maybe they didn’t want to be
reminded.

And if she’d slipped some skinmags in between the Maxim’s and GQ…let the military have fun
trying to find *those* during inspection.

In the third layer went her SI gifts. Combat webbing, sunglasses, keffiyeh scarves, gloves, belts,
goggles clear and tinted. Both sets were rated for small caliber rounds at point-blank range. At fifty
yards out, there was a seventy percent chance of large caliber round deflection. The goggles had
been one of Tony’s many pride and joys in the combat lines.

And really, she didn’t want her Marines getting shot in the *head*.

It was on the top layer, and under the heaviest padding, that she put the batteries and GameBoys
and game cartridges. As many prepaid phone cards as she could fit into a standard envelope. Two
portable DVD players; the multiple binders of DVDs she’d ordered and amassed by genre and then
chronology.

Her cinema tastes were, at least, something she could share.

Before her private courtiers sealed the crate, she put in a letter ten pages thick with all their names
on the front. She’d only been one-on-one with PFC Castle enough to have any idea what to write
him, so a joint letter had been the order of the day.

She’d honestly thought she’d only fill a page. Once she started, even excluding sensitive details,
she’d hardly been able to *stop*.

And if they chose to write her back separately, or at all—

They’d been kind enough to her already.

/~/~/~/

It was a shame when Stane and the Head of Development, plus all their accompanying underlings,
swarmed to the gate. She’d been enjoying the covert hush.

Some part of her had honestly hoped that everyone would somehow *not notice* Tony’s absence.
God only knew when she’d regained such optimism.

“Jarvis, why are they sitting there?”

“Mr. Stark activated Lockdown Protocol before leaving.” He churned higher. “No unauthorized
entries to the grounds.”
“So they can’t come through?”

“I am not authorized to allow entry.” And if Jarvis sounded far too sunny saying that, who was she to judge?

“But Mr. Stark has phone privileges back, I know you’ve been talking his ear off.” You could have gotten permission to lift it, she didn’t have to say.

But Jarvis was Tony’s creation, and had consequently never known shame. “And yet the Malibu House remains an island. Would you like me to turn Mr. Stane aside?”

She thought of saying yes for a long and unseemly moment.

In the end, stone clicking under her red-soled heels, she met the group at the gate. One of the underlings noticed her first and elbowed his boss, then everyone’s heads were swinging towards her like pack of hungry seagulls. It wasn’t a kind comparison to make, but kindness had been so distant lately.

She arranged herself. “Gentlemen.”

“Virginia.” Obadiah looked her top to bottom in a slow, searching pattern. “When did you come back on?”

She adjusted the pearling of her watch. “A few days back.” Nineteen, really, but who was counting?

If Obadiah was at all annoyed at how she’d avoided his calls during her brief spell of unemployment, he didn’t show it. He didn’t show anything but hard shoulders under a tailored jacket and that ever-slow flint. “Thank god for small miracles. I need to talk to Tony, can you get the gates up?”

“Even if I could get the gates up—which I can’t, Mr. Stane—it wouldn’t help you.”

His mouth pinched. “I know Tony’s upset, but this tantrum has gone on long enough. Let us in, Ginny.”

How she’d always hated the diminutive. “Mr. Stane, the House System controls the gates. I have zero input on that front. And to make a long matter short, Mr. Stark is away.” Her mouth felt sticky. “Would you like me to take a message?”

That finally knifed through. Tensed shoulders, less warmth, a hand grating across his skull. “Christ—fine. Just tell me where he’s fucked off to.”

Her head tilted. Hair spilled rust-red off her shoulder. “I’m not at liberty to disclose that information. Would you like to leave a message?”

The underlings stirred. The Head of Development looked so uncomfortable it was a wonder he didn’t flee.

A catch of the jaw; black in the eyes. “Virginia, Stark Industries needs—”

“Irrelevant.” The resulting silence was abrupt and horrified and lovely. She smiled with all her teeth. “I’m Mr. Stark’s Personal Assistant, personally paid. What Stark Industries needs or does not need, is of no concern to me.”
“Shit.” One of the underlings said.

Shit was the expression on every face.

Everyone but Obadiah, but he’d always been above such gauche arrangements. His entire approach flipped. The looming, the frustrated disappointed, so disappointed, I need you to help me Virginia effort sloughing right off his shoulders.

Always adaptable, Obadiah. She so intensely admired that of him.

Affable again, but more distant. “Do you have time to talk privately?”

She let it drag. Held it, and then: “I have time. Eleven tomorrow?”

If he wanted differently, he didn’t say. His nod was generous. “You can confirm with my secretary.”

And with that, Obadiah pivoted on heel and dropped into his car. The poor Head of Development and his flock were left holding the metaphorical bag.

When the dust cleared, she turned her most innocent smile on them. “Would you like to leave a message?”

/~/~/~/

That Friday, a box arrived.

Perfume. Gold and glass. Chanel No. 5.

You can never go wrong with the classics. – TS

/~/~/~/

Obadiah’s office was cool. Her dress was rime-blue. Her jewelry silver, her hair sleek and head high.

Obadiah was in black and chrome and a cool disinterest he carried so well.

Once their exact levels of power were clear, lines drawn and sharp as cut-glass, their work-relationship slotted back together.

Tony was in rehab. Tony would be out of reach. All attention would be redirected. Jarvis had plenty old schematics and half-baked plans to forward on to R&D to keep the employees clueless. Most of managerial could be placated by her, and anything else could be handled by Obadiah.

“What about the tabloids?” He asked as if she hadn’t considered it. “They’ll get hungry within the week. A few days past that, they’ll start to notice he’s gone.”

They would; the tabloids were grubby little vultures that way.

“I’ll take care of it.” She rose then, her body a veritable decadence of Jarvis’s tastes and hard-frost and Chanel. “I have the best backup in the world.”

/~/~/~/

“Jarvis, darling, how’d you like to start a conspiracy?”
There was not one iota of hesitation. “Pray tell my dear, where do I sign on?”

~/~/~/

She flew to Venice and got photographed getting into a limo, a dark-suited figure in sunglasses beside her. Tony Stark’s black Amex bought out an entire nightclub for a weekend and paid for every round.

Two different women declared to two different tabloids about their breathlessly debauched nights of passion with Tony Stark.

Pepper hadn’t even paid the second one.

Tony’s yacht went to sea. It was harried by photographers that only got the ever-loyal Virginia Potts, secretary in a bikini on the top deck. Sometimes they got a shadow of a man on camera, but only just.

(Poor Happy Hogan was sun-burned for a week. No one asked where he’d been to get it.)

There was a party at the Malibu House. Tony Stark welcomed the horde from the speakers from one end of the lawn to the other. If anyone noticed that Jarvis had dug that recording of Tony from a party eight months previous, not a single soul dared to mention it.

~/~/~/

That last Friday before they could see Tony, no box arrived for her.

Jarvis guided her down the workshop stairs.

It was Dummy who presented her the laptop. No brand, no serial number, just silver and sleek and quietly humming.

The screen flashed. The boot loader worked. One string of text stuttered and finally shined white.

Work smart, Potts, not hard. – TS

~/~/~/

The weeks were fast but the days went slow, and yet before she knew it, she was ascending the jet’s stairs. It was only a visit, she was hauling a metric ton of paperwork with for Tony to sign, and yet.

Jarvis bubbled. She bounced on her toes.

And yet—

“Miss Potts,” He rang clear. “A call for you.”

She skipped the last stair. “Who?”

“And ruin the surprise?” Jarvis spun the line over. It went scratchy; a ten-thousand-mile distance.

“Ma’am?” PFC Castle asked from a world away.

Her smile bloomed. “Private, it’s so good to hear your voice. What’s the occasion?”

“Uh—just got your gifts, Ma’am. Wanted to say thanks. This a bad time?”
“I’m on a plane for the next hour.” And the December air was drinking like champagne. “I’m all ears.”

“Well, you know—I just wanted to say that, uh, we’re really—”

More static. “Hey, if you’re gonna fuck it up that bad to our main lady, put me on. You asshole. C’mon, why don’t you—” Galarza, full-throttle. A scuffle.

Castle again. “I will slit your god damned throat—”

The receiver passed hands. “Sorry, Ma’am.” Kenning muttered.

It took everything of her not to laugh and burst open. “Do I have all of you?”

“Yessma’am.” Decuir called. “That was some real nice stuff you sent us.”

“I was happy to.” There was more scuffling, more swearing, and her heart was full and filling still. “Now tell me honestly, how’s Afghanistan treating you?”

Chapter End Notes

In which a lot of ground is covered. It's almost funny, last chapter was one of the few (only?) chapters to have a single-shot scene. Then it was followed by this chapter which has about thirty-billion scene breaks. God help my tendencies.

And the Marines finally make another brief appearance, and Pepper still adores them utterly (because honestly, who wouldn't??).

And I swear when I have some extra time to set aside, there will be a companion piece about what Tony and Jarvis did in Pepper's absence. Working summary so far is "in which Tony sucks at coping, Jarvis isn't having it, and the Malibu House descends into psychological warfare for 16 days".

Could probably use something more catchy, but. You know. Working summary.

I'll make a collection, so as soon as you see Hardwired is Part 1 of something, you'll know the companion fic is up. I'll also stick a mention in whatever the most recent chapter is.

Anyways, happy Labor Day everyone!
Sunstone glistened beneath the water, yellow and lucent and flecked red. It gave the stream bed an otherworldly glow.

Tony smiled at her from the terrace above. “Do mine eyes deceive me?” And she watched his every movement as he stood. No wincing, no catches, no slip-shear of bone.

What a difference a month could make, and she stepped into his arms. “Do they, Mr. Stark? Should I refer an optometrist?”

“And here I was happy to see you.” He didn’t quite hug her, just pulled her into a half-clinch with palms cradling her elbows and hers in mirror. She pressed her thumbs to the softness where his arms hinged.

He didn’t twitch away.

She dimpled at him. “I live to serve.”

He sighed again, no weight behind it, and his expression was too damn soft. Clear irises. Unblemished skin. Crow’s feet crinkling at the eyes.

It was more than a little devastating.

They parted gently and sat. He passed over a cranberry-oat smoothie and then picked up his own. They drank in tandem. Every few seconds, they shared a furtive glance. Maybe there’d come a day that this'd be easier. Her hopes were slim, but there they were.

With careful hands, she set down the glass and opened her bag. Paperwork spilled across her knees. Tony looked more resigned than surprised. “Remind me again why I asked you to visit.”

“You possess a deep wellspring for masochism.”

He gaped. “Stop saying insightful things like that. It hurts me. Spiritually.”

She gazed back, utterly doe-eyed. “Your spiritual well-being is all I strive for.”

Affection flash-quick. Tony swooned backwards. “Finally, my immoral soul is in safe hands. How I ever survived before this day—”

“Hush.”

His arm, artfully thrown across his eyes, lifted a sliver. “Is that surrender I hear?”

“You can hear whatever you like. It’s a free country.”

She shuffled the paperwork, and Tony’s arm immediately dropped back down. “So you claim.”

“Well…” She stared down at her lap, at the mess, and felt an unfamiliar mercy. “You don’t have to work on this right away. I’m staying the night.” There was no reason to rush when she'd be leaving at the same hour regardless. She angled her legs away and tipped the entire pile back into her bag.
He jolted upright. “Hey, look, I didn’t mean—”

She didn’t bother trying to smother the fondness. “It’s fine. It can wait for dinner or breakfast tomorrow.”

“Oh—right.” He swallowed. “Thanks.”

The eye contact was getting too intense, too engaged. Her gaze skittered sideways. “You’re welcome. Just—I only brought what couldn’t wait. It’s not like I’m trying to…” She wasn’t sure what she could have been trying.

“I’ll get to it before you leave. You got it.” And he breathed sharply and scrubbed hard through his hair. “How’re the kids?”

She latched to it. “Jarvis is fine. Not fine that they won’t let electronics past the intake rooms and that you’re out of sight, but he’s not bellyaching about it.” Much. “The bots…we haven’t been able to explain it to them in a way they understand, but I’ve been able to cheer them up.” For a certain definition of cheered when it came to a herd of sulky bots parted from their creator.

His brows climbed. “And you’ve been managing this how?”

Was that doubt?

“Oh, you know. Games, attention, that sort of thing.” Endless rounds of tag, the bots trying to mirror her doing Yoga, some surprisingly difficult games of hide and seek. Who would have known that they could use the service elevator without help?

Finding Dummy in Tony’s closet under a pile of suits had been a picture-worthy surprise.

“That’s good of you.” He said, so soft it couldn’t be anything other than sincere.

She really didn’t know what to do with that, either. “It was fine. Fun.” She’d cried with laughter more than once, and that was such a rare thing.

His mouth curled fondly. “And how about you?”

She blinked. “How about me?”

“How are you doing? C’mon, Potts, I know I raised you to social graces.”

She scoffed outright, but her face kept heating. Suddenly, she was crossing her ankles and compulsively fixing her hair. “I’m good.”

Never had a man been so unimpressed. “Really? That’s all you’re giving me?”

Her eyes narrowed. “The house was a shitshow and the bots cried for a week and I found a bag of coke in a toolbox.”

He winced.

But that wasn’t all of it. “I had Jarvis for company and the days were mostly quiet. We put everything back together and kept SI from trying to self-immolate.” She paused. “I made a middle-manager cry.”

And regret became unholy glee. “Please tell me it was Rosenstein.”
She fluffed her hair. “Mckellan.”

“Even better.”

It had been. The Accounting Department wouldn’t even whisper in her presence now, lest she take another of their number and strike them down. If it was up to Pepper, hers would be a figure of permanent terror by the time the year was out.

Tony reached for her but faltered halfway. She didn’t speak, and his hand wavered. There was a tremor there. Still.

A west wind blew. The trees swayed and sighed. He reached the rest of the way and touched her chair but not her knee. “Atta girl, Potts.”

/~/~/~/

At dinner, she adjusted the loops of pearls around her wrist.

Tony’s face was like a firework. “Got an admirer?”

The diamond edging was smooth. “More of a supplicant to my mercy.”

He chivied near. “And how’s clemency looking?”

How indeed? And truthfully: “It’s on the horizon.”

And it left the air softer between them.

Tony leaned back—hands behind his head—fingers linking and shoulders broad and teeth so very sharp. Arms easy, body easy. Not a word in protest. “We should do something when I get back, you and me. Bond.”

She parried. “You and Jarvis and I. If you’re nice.”

“Sold.” The confidence was breathtaking. “What’ll it be? Fancy dinner? Fancy theater? Buy us an art gallery?”

He always left her windswept, like this. “Let’s aim a little lower. Movie?”

The walls of the guest cottage were far too small to contain him. “I could do that, but what would we even agree on?”

As if something so pedestrian would stop her. “What’s your opinions on Steve McQueen?”

And Tony’s grin was the slow knife. “You, me, J, and the venerable Steve McQueen? I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

/~/~/~/

The air was alive. Crescendoing. An orchestra tuning up, and Jarvis was ever the conductor. “Look alive, Miss Potts!”

“I don’t think I can get more alive than alive, dearest.”

He harrumphed. The air conditioner kicked over. Every vent swiveled and sounded off.
There was a clicking like snapping fingers, and she tried not to swat empty air. “What do you even want? For me to do a jig? Put on bells?”

The clicking sharpened. “That wouldn’t be remiss.”

Fret, fret, fret. Each light flickered on-off-on. A dozen window panes rippled like the scales of a great beast. Jarvis was not the Malibu house. He wasn’t, and she knew that.

And yet.

Her bones felt fragile; swallowed whole. There was Jonah and the whale, and then there was her in the Leviathan.

A shiver rippled. “Whatever you say, darling.”

The walls hummed and Jarvis swarmed upwards and flooded downwards and wrenched in. He settled on her head lighter than a halo. “I’m sorry, Miss Potts. Forgive my ghastly disposition.”

“We’re all anxious about Tony coming back.” Even if it was only for two weeks before the next cycle of rehab kicked in. But still, he’d be here. Home. The bots chittered and burbled as they circled. Another door slammed in the house. Dummy yelped in alarm, and Butterfingers nearly crashed into her side.

Jarvis sighed. “That’s no excuse for my being so terribly rude.”

“No.” It wasn’t. “But I’ll forgive you just this once.”

Another stir of glass; a curve of space. “I’ll count myself among the lucky.”

He should, most at SI certainly couldn’t claim the honor. She patted at Butterfingers' casing and then tried to call You out from behind a couch. The halo spun, dizzying, like sparks in her eyes and the pulse in her skin and then—

“He’s here.”

Air fizzed. Sunlight shattered. She breathed a painful rhythm.

The front door opened.

Tony stepped in with Rhodes at his shoulder, both of them looking so damn good. It’d been so nice of the Colonel to go up for three straight days and then bring him home. She’d have to get the man a fruit basket. Of alcohol. Fruity, fruity alcohol.

Rhodes flipped a hand in salute.

The house contracted like a breath held.

And Tony threw his arms open. “Daddy’s home!”

~/~/~/~/

“You promised pad thai.”

“I promised you no such thing. Butterfingers, sweetheart, come here.”

In response, Tony tried to cuddle all three of the bots to himself. Which, rude.
“Stop trying to steal my children.”

“You children are blocking my sight-line of the TV.”

“They are doing no such thing.”

Before the needleling could escalate, Rhodes swatted You’s claw away and dropped on the couch between them. “I ordered ribs.”

“That is the exact opposite of what I asked for. Jarvis, did I not say pad thai? Have I screamed myself hoarse?”

Jarvis coasted along the ceiling. “I’m afraid you did not make an affirmative request to the ordering, Sir. It was more of a…nebulous remark.”

“Why are you rules-lawyering me like this? What did I ever do to you?”

“Shall I get out the laundry list, Sir?”

Rhodes licked his finger and made a tally on the air.

Tony scoffed. “Bite me.”

Rhodes smirked. “I was only thinking of you, Tony.”

“Lies.”

“When do I not—”

“Lies.”

Abruptly, the Lieutenant Colonel’s attention turned on her. How was a girl to live.

He grinned so slow. “How you doin’?”

She made a breathy sound. Jarvis smacked against the ceiling.

Tony sputtered. “Don’t you how you doin’ my secretary, Rhodes. I will wipe your name from the earth and salt your fields and hear the lamentations of your women and baby officers.”

Star-struck, she tucked her hand in Rhodes’ outstretched one. “Personal assistant.” She corrected.

Rhodes oh so solicitously cupped his palm over hers and murmured: “I thought of you every day. My heart was always with you. All I could dream about was Malibu and that first meal we’d get to share.”

He wasn’t talking to her at all.

She clutched her throat. “Oh, Lieutenant Colonel. There wasn’t an hour that I didn’t think of you.”

But she wasn’t talking to Rhodes, either.

Behind them, Tony’s face flamed. It was something she’d never witnessed. It was jaw dropping.

Rhodes lifted their palms and mimed a courtly kiss upon them. “You’re a champ, Potts.”

She plucked her hand away. “And you’re a peach.”
Static burst like a rain cloud overhead, and Rhodes turned with an alarmingly predatory grin.

Tony looked poleaxed. “I…what?”

“Nothin’.” Rhodes crooned. “Don’t worry about it.”

Even a month ago, Pepper would have left the room then, would have let them to be together while she and Jarvis cloistered. Rhodes was Tony’s friend, and she’d always known where she shouldn't be. She’d never wanted more, not even once.

That lent a dreamy sort of strangeness to her toeing off her heels and nestling back. To her gathering Butterfingers to be her footrest while Tony and Rhodes bickered on and on.

“Enough chatter, gentlemen.” Jarvis censured. “The food is forty minutes out, and Bullitt is ready to watch.”

Tony cleared his flustered throat. “Ready whenever. Do the thing.”

Jarvis did the thing. The TV lit.

Surreptitiously, she flicked her eyes upwards and patted the couch. There was a rush, a squeeze, and then the space beside her hummed like a livewire. Jarvis whispered into the cradle of her neck. “All settled, Pepper?”

Heat and pulse and her thighs squeezed tight. She was furthest thing from settled when she answered: “Close enough.”

~/~/~/~/

“Morning.”

She tried not to look surprised. “Mr. Stark.” And felt Jarvis vanish from her side. She couldn’t decide whether she appreciated the distance.

Tony didn’t buy the lack of reaction. “It’s the facility hours, don’t look too shocked.”

Jarvis called down. “Good Morning, Sir.”

The light coming into the breakfast nook was pink and gauzy from the sea. Tony looked so human in it. “Morning, buddy.”

She played nonchalant for all she was worth. “You’re keeping the rehab's sleep-hours, then?”

He set the pair of wine glasses he’d brought with on the table. “It was a bitch and a half getting on their schedule. No point in fucking it up when I’m back in two weeks.”

Something inside her was bruised and blooming. “Your prerogative. Now what are we drinking?”

He offered a glass. “Virgin mimosas.”

“That’s literally orange juice.”

He took a pitiful sip. “Let a man dream, would you?”

She could. For a while, the air was cool and the orange juice cooler, and Jarvis like a veil across the wind. She was so busy trying to lean into that familiar hum, that Tony stole three of her scones
before she noticed.

It was a peace she was truly loathe to break. “There’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

Tony very carefully put down a fourth. “That’s ominous.”

She’d thought on this for weeks, made lists, made presentations. Binned the presentations, fretted, and then thought some more. There was no point in dawdling further. “When we fight—not before, but now. When we do it again.”

“We won’t…” He didn’t bother trying to finish that absurd claim.

“We will. That it happens isn’t a sin, but how we handle it matters.” She just wanted them to get this right. “You can think about this when you’re away. I was hoping we could agree that when we do fight, if it gets to the point of yelling that one of us walks away. Take an hour, a day, however long we need to cool down. Jarvis agreed that if we really can’t talk without it devolving to screaming, he’ll help us compose our arguments in written format. Though he does have veto power on ending the argument if one of our sides is actually stupid.” That level of idiocy had been known to happen, sometimes even to her.

“I do.” Jarvis agreed loftily. “And I’ll use my power with utmost care.”

She couldn’t meet Tony’s eyes. His hand spasmed. “…okay. That’s not—that’s not asking too much.”

“Yeah,” She'd never felt this muddled. “And there should be a time limit. Three days, a week, whatever. But we need to talk things out. And if one side refuses, that side concedes. We just—I need to know that it’ll be better. That we’ll be better.”

“We will.” His knuckles were pale. “I’m giving you my word; we’ll get it right.”

It was something, maybe even a starting point, and her breath fled sharply. It hurt, but not in a way that lingered. “Thank you.”

He shrugged. “It’s on the house; don’t worry about it.”

There was no point in trying to play casual. “Two other things.”

Tony grimaced, and she hurried: “It’s not bad. I’m…I just wanted to say that I sold my stock.”

His entire face spasmed. “What?”

“I sold my SI shares.”

“You didn’t have to—why did you do that? That was yours, you could have kept it. That wasn’t in the contract!” Tony glared up. “Jarvis, that wasn’t in her contract, right?”

“It wasn’t, Sir.” He pacified. “But you should really hear Miss Potts out.”

His gaze snapped back across the table and compared to the intimacy, it was perfectly easy now to stare him down. “Tony, the stock-thing bothered you. You wouldn’t have brought it up so many times if it didn’t. I wanted this to be as clean a start as we could make it. No split loyalties.”

“Shit,” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “If you want that—I won’t stop you. But you could have kept…”
“I made up my mind.”

His jaw clicked shut, and that was one thing down. “The other’s not huge. I was going to tell you in Barcelona, but…” Her hand flicked open; swirled as if to encompass the sheer utter fucking madness that trip had devolved to.

_Don’t remember. Don’t hold on._

“Don’t let me stop you.”

She sighed. “The clothes.”

He blinked once. “The clothes?”

“The Versace I’ve been wearing? The Prada?”

“Umm…it’s very nice? You look a vision?”

Jesus. “I haven’t been skimming money from you to get my wardrobe, alright? Jarvis is buying it for me.”

There was a whisper; a churn above. Tony gawped. “What?”

“I wanted you to know—that I wasn’t. Doing that. So.”

He seemed at a loss. “I didn’t say that you were?”

She glared.

“But maybe I did.” He hastily conceded. “So I take it all back. No harm, no nothing.”

And all her resolve wilted. This thing she’d been holding onto so long, this thing she’d been shaken by, and Tony clearly didn’t remember it. Not the accusation. Not the venom. Not the doubts he’d lobbed like grenades.

She didn’t know if that made things better or worse.

And Tony was still bewildered. “But _why_ is Jarvis buying you clothes?”

The wilting became a burn. “It wasn’t like I tricked him into it!”

"I wasn't saying that! I—"

She cut through. "Jarvis wanted to, why else would he have—"

And in Tony’s face, she saw panic.

_Why would he—because he wanted to, why else would he have—_

A meteor skimmed the horizon and fell.

“Tony,” Her insides were glass. “Why would Jarvis want to buy me clothes?”

The panic was naked now, and Tony scrambled: “Because you’re great, and you’d look great? I jumped to conclusions about the buying-thing. I realize that, and we can put that all behind us now and—”
“Tony.” A meteor fell. “Why would Jarvis want anything?”

Shuttering. Walls. Clammed up so tightly she almost believed it when he said: “I’ve got no idea what you’re asking.”

The house whispered and chilled to silence.

Pepper jack-knifed straight past hysteria. “Don’t lie to me!”

Impact. Nails scrabbling, wrenching, burns down her arms and oh god, oh god, how could she have been so fucking stupid not to—

Tony had her hands in a vice. “Please stop. Just for a minute, I need you to stop.”


Entire universes were breaking; entire fucking gulfs between data points and programs, and a person who could bleed and hurt and hurt. It spread like a cancer; lattes and heels and Givenchy skirts, well timed jokes and sweet murmurs and endless laughter, fear and heat and pressure and pain and pain and—

“Jarvis is—” Tony sucked in a breath. Her entire world was hanging by a thread, and he tried: “An Interactive System, he’s—”

There must have been champagne in the glasses. Must have, because she had to be drunk and out of her fucking mind. Her fingers gripped Tony’s so tightly the bones in her hand bent.

And she knew: “Liar.”

The dam broke. “You can’t tell anyone. If anyone—fuck, if anyone knew what he can do—they’d want me to make little baby people to sell, and I can’t. You know that, I know that you know that. I can’t let them have him, and I can’t let them know that I can make him.”

Her head was in pieces, one here and one there, one down in the workshop and one left in LA. There was a piece in the ocean she was never getting back. There was one here, somewhere, in the walls and the wires.

Breakup on reentry. Gravity-death, and she asked: “Jarvis?”

And there was silence, one long and hesitating silence. And that was an answer all unto its own because a System. Wouldn’t. Hesitate.

Jarvis slipped across the event horizon. “I am as Mr. Stark made me.” AI, he doesn’t have to say. Thinking, growing, feeling.

Bleeding.

Miles and miles and blood and miles; spilling and churning and she remembered them all.

She pried Tony’s hands away.

“Potts,” And he chased her. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, but you have to stop and—”

Quietly, she picked up her glass and took it to the kitchen counter.

“Miss Potts.” Jarvis tried.
She was wearing her birthday heels today. Blue, nearly electric, five-inch daggers that put her eye to eye with anyone. Except.

A shard of glass. A quiet sound.

“Pepper.” Jarvis whispered.

She didn’t want to cry. She didn’t want to scream. She didn’t know what it was to want, what she could even want for, anymore.

She breathed. She screamed without air. She breathed.

She was numb. “I’m going home.”

The whites were visible in Tony's eyes. “Just stay and talk. We can work this out. I can fix this, I promise, whatever needs to happen, I can—”

“I’m going home.” She was numb, and the cancer was chewing through her stomach and lungs with teeth to the marrow. It was rising; it was on her tongue. “Don’t burn down the fucking house while I’m gone.”

And Tony stopped dead. The speakers crackled.

She moved; kitchen, hallway, sunroom, hallway, entry, front door. For a moment she thought Jarvis wouldn’t open it, but he did. With a quiet sweep and breaking noise, he did, and that’s what left her caught. Half into the morning with sweat on her skin.

Half inside with the wound still weeping.

“She pulled out her Bluetooth—her lifeline, her anchor—and set it on the entry table. It was like a severing. Blue lights glittered and her head lifted to meet a thousand eyes. The eyes of a thing alive.

A man alive.

In the walls, the wires, the air.

The sound.

One miserable tear burned down her cheek, and she begged. “Please.”


He didn’t say another word, and it was such a fragile pact. She grafted it to her heart and stepped through the door.

Chapter End Notes

IT ONLY TOOK 47 CHAPTERS, BUT WE HERE. PRAISE BE. WE MADE IT TO THE THIRD ACT.

Though to anyone who expected/wanted the revelation to be all sunshine? Have y'all
read this fic? It's fluff, then drama, then even more well-earned fluff. That is the nature of this beast.

To anyone wondering why Pepper's reaction wasn't 100% thrilled: next chapter that will be covered excruciating detail. I always knew the reveal would happen because Tony trusted Pepper enough to say something he shouldn't, but once it was said, it was more likely to lead to an existential crisis than (immediate) celebration. Tony would usually deflect any question of Jarvis' motives away, as they would imply that Jarvis HAD motives, but Tony fucked up and for Pepper, the circuit finally closed.

That damn beautiful couture betrayed them all.

(And I'm am fully aware of the irony of Pepper and Tony trying to discuss a more healthy way to have fights, only to devolve into one seconds later. Though to be fair, it was more that they had aggressive panic attacks at the same time and didn't handle it well. One step forward, so many steps back.)
Chapter Summary

Lexicon at the bottom, since it's too long to put up here.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Her hands wouldn’t stop shaking.

Her mind was drifting, the tide cold on her feet, and all she could think was: the shaking won’t stop.

Blue heels dangled from her fingers. Some part of her, with every step she cut parallel to the sea, imagined that this would be the moment her hands finally slacked and she lost them to the waves.

It seemed so inevitable that she was surprised every moment to still have them in her hands.

Those were a gift made to be worn, and I’d like it if you’d—

Another wave crested at her knees, and she clutched the stilettos tight.

The ocean retreated. An old longing stirred. She wanted to swim and knew this feeling; the punishment and yearning that it held. The Pacific was barely fifty degrees warm. Without an insulated wetsuit, twenty yards out her going into shock would be assured.

Some part of her wanted it anyways. But that part of her always wanted it, and she knew well enough by this age to tell it to shut the hell up.

Another wave. Another tide. The sand slipping away.

It hurts, doesn’t it? To become?

Jarvis had told her; that was the hardest part. He’d said it outright, and all this time could have been so different if she’d just—

And all this time could have been different if Jarvis had just shouted the truth. Could have, but he hadn’t. And now that she could read every little nuance into him—that it didn’t make her a basket case to try—what had stopped him? Had he been ashamed? Had Tony forbidden it? Had there been some risk beyond the obvious that she still didn’t fully understand?

Had he not wanted her to know?

Two years. Six months. A handful of days; this time and distance she and Jarvis had shared. Something shivered in her skin, and the quietest of her doubts grew. That in all of this, each moment, every sweet word and shy glance and breathless ache—

That Jarvis had never trusted her at all.

I’m not crazy. And it was funny. Almost
I’m not crazy. She knew, and she wasn’t. I’m just the stupidest person alive.

//~/~/~/

By the time the sun reached zenith, whatever had been driving her had taken its fill. Pepper collapsed into the sand and laid there with the full knowledge that with her cell phone abandoned and her who-knows how many miles up the beach, neither Tony nor Jarvis could find her. Could call her. Could hear her heart spilling from her mouth.

Her throat worked. Salt, brine, bile. She wanted to roll over and sleep, and it was a familiar urge.

But Pepper told that part of her that always wanted that, to also shut the hell up. For once in her goddamn life she needed to deal; like some kind of functional adult who could handle their baggage. If she had to do one more, early-morning storming out of Malibu, she was going to stab someone. Things had never been easy, but they’d never been this awful.

This close to strangling her.

She counted breaths, waves, clouds. Her mind stayed empty for a time. Then, as if in pure spite of that, she wondered if Jarvis was an AI and had always been an AI—what did that make the bots?

Hey, Potts, how are my kids?

Jesus bleeding christ on earth—she covered her face and made a dying sound. Tony was the most blatant, brazen, lying son of a bitch who had ever lived, and how could she have been this dumb.

Another breath wheezed out, and at least the shock was coming off. It may have left a chasm brimming with anger and mortification behind it, but hey, her brain was running. All systems up. And how did that even work for Jarvis, anyways? Being that aware of your own brain—was he that aware? Could he choose? Did the things she’d fought with all her life, every fear and doubt and endless compulsion, could he just delete his own?

She paused on that, the loveliness of it; being able to kill one’s ghosts so cleanly.

Slowly, her hands drifted and fell to the sand. What was it even like? Being the only one so completely alive; so perpetual without blood or skin.

The brine in her skirts draped heavy. Sand clung to her neck. The stupidity clung tighter, and humiliation made its grip. If there was one thing she’d ever allowed herself to prize, it’d been her intelligence, and look at her now. Beautiful and smart; enough people had lobbed it. Peers, professors, colleagues, strangers. As if the beauty came first and the intelligence was an afterthought; as if she’d been lucky to have the first and the latter became a bonus trifle.

She was vain. She liked couture. She liked being seen and liked being seen (in every lens she could catch in flux). Her mind had always been the secret, the knife. The driving force that had gotten her wherever she wanted to be. The beauty had been a veil over it all, and she hadn’t regretted that either.

But Jarvis’s mind had been the knife, too. She’d been blessed. Smart and beautiful, her parents had always claimed it.

She didn't feel either, now.

Jarvis had lied. She’d let him in and let him close, and had spilled every ugly, wretched secret she’d ever borne. Pepper knew herself. If she’d known the truth—that was the point of lying? She
would have never let Jarvis in so far.

Let a man slip that far.

(Let someone who could take her heart from her chest, sink behind her ribs with such liquid ease.)

There’d been a safety there; a person not a person. A confidant that couldn’t judge. Couldn’t feel sorry for her. Couldn’t find her ugly and petty and vicious to the last. And that was the humiliation; she knew herself. Stupid and ugly.

She hadn’t been allowed the choice of shielding herself; of the knowledge or the consequences or the chance to escape. It was a deliberate deprivation. Would she have become close with Jarvis, if she’d known there was someone to be close to? Maybe. Would the crush have still developed? Without a doubt.

Would the crush have become—

The pain was still rising. That she’d been so unguarded made her sick with fear. That’d she’d been unprepared and blind, more so. And beneath that was still a root horror. The sun prisms. Glittered. Something damp slipped into the sand.

She’d spent all these years feeling so achingly lonely, and they’d let her.

And that was the thing, she knew, that’d be the hardest to forgive.

Her thoughts got messier by the hour. Miserable. Her heart was racing one way and her brain another, and for every hurt she felt, there was always another on its heels.

The worst were the ones she felt for Jarvis.

All these months, and he’d known she hadn’t seen him as a person: as a living being in binary if not breath. He’d let her prattle on and on while only superficially acknowledged his own needs in return, and it was just—

God, what must he think of her? What could he think of her? Just taking and taking and calling him her friend, without ever having the full context to ever truly mean it?

She felt sick in an entirely new way.

If he’d thought she was an idiot this whole time—Christ. That was absurd; she knew him better. Even if she hadn’t fully understood his situation, she had understood him. Jarvis would never think so wretchedly of her no matter what she said or did.

(She hoped that with all her heart and a heaving desperation.)

What was more likely, was Jarvis being the one ashamed and upset and rejected. Unable to reach out and unable to ever take her words fully in. Always doubting and second guessing and nursing every quiet pain until—

She shouldn’t have been surprised that was the realization that finally sent her bursting into tears.
Panic came in the dimming hours.

Jarvis had bought her clothes, given her credit cards, had hacked security nets to follow her everywhere she beckoned. He’d played the stock market and made shell companies and false identities, and could move money in ways that she’d never even heard of. He hacked their competitors on a lark and rifled through intelligence lines and could cut through most firewalls like they were naught but a dream.

One night, sweat-soaked and bathed in fire at the heart of July, he’d spoken of state secrets and classified missives and of knowing. In the echo of that, she’d understood that he was guiding state-sponsored hands on the way to slitting throats.

Something like Jarvis—someone like Jarvis—any government on earth would kill to have him.

And if they couldn’t?

Fear took her, scalp to soles and thudding through the body. Here at last was something she and Tony could share: bone deep, cold-blooded terror that somebody would find out and tell.

/~~/~/~/

She forgave them a little, then.

/~~/~/~/

Night came. A chill climbed; teeth chattering and feet numbed as the wind reminded her: December.

With one last push she dragged herself into her car, flipped the ignition, and slammed the heat to full. It was only when her muscles stopped jumping that she looked to her phone in the passenger seat. It was in four neat pieces: body, back, battery, SIM.

Dead.

Jarvis had never really confirmed it, but she’d suspected for years that when the phone was on, he was listening from it. From virtually the first weeks of their acquaintance, she’d been made fully aware that it functioned as both a microphone and GPS-tag on her.

She stared at the phone longer, prodding: pushing at her emotions like a tongue to a loose tooth. Strangely, she felt not a shred of hurt.

Unsuspecting emotional intimacy—that had been one thing, but the listening? It didn’t even merit a twinge. It was clear the part of her that had been completely besotted with Jarvis had subconsciously known the score. When it came to her phone, she’d treated it as the equivalent to inviting Jarvis into a room. If she’d brought it with her, she’d brought him with her. It was hard to get upset to somebody listening to one’s conversations when one had invited them to sit pillion.

Three months into starting the job, Jarvis had sat her down to discuss privacy settings. She’d never set hers above the zero baseline of let's live on top of each other.

Her shaking slowed and receded.

When it came to the phone, to the listening, that was apparently that. Her gaze found the interstate beyond the dunes. Tony knew where she lived, and for every part of her that hoped he’d give her distance, there was another part that fully expected him to be waiting on her doorstep. Wherever
she went from here, it couldn’t be home.

She threw the car into gear and drove.

/~~/~/~/

In a parking garage, she reassembled her cell and flipped it on. The number of missed calls was downright staggering.

Tony, Tony, Tony, Tony, TonyTonyTonyTony—

The screen was blue. Her GPS was on. She waited in the concrete and cold grit with smears of neon on her breath.

Jarvis had to know the phone was on, and she waited. She’d asked for distance and had to know.

Know if he’d respect her in this.

Half an hour passed, the screen burning, the traffic of LA rushing on and on and on. The glow stayed blue. She wrapped her phone in a sweater, shoved the mass of it into her bag, and walked.

/~~/~/~/

The hotel duvet had turned down beautifully. Uselessly, perhaps, but she could at least admire the spread. Her brain hadn’t stopped chattering and the bed had given her little more than a place to lay while the sheer weight of a two and a half year relationship getting completely re-contextualized folded her in half.

It should have been obvious the first time he’d made a joke. Hell, one bit of situationally-appropriate-sarcasm should have rung the alarms. Jokes were incredibly subjective and entirely contextual, and there was no programmable formula to being funny. Each quip had implied such a breadth of creative thought and linguistic awareness, that they should have smacked her in the face that this was a mind awake.

The first time he laughed should have been a holy revelation.

(Nothing was automatic for him, was it? Instinctual? Did he choose to laugh, craft the sound, make sure every time that she’d understand exactly how he felt?)

It was just—if he’d been born later, any bit nearer to now, things would have been so much clearer. If he’d been younger and not made in the virtual cybernetic stone-age that was 1988, maybe she would have guessed.

How on earth Tony had managed to create an Artificial Intelligence in the era of 8-megabyte RAM was absolutely brain-melting. She couldn’t comprehend it. There had to be something simpler to Intelligence and birth than any of them had ever known.

There had to be something horrendously, unspeakably difficult in it, if fourteen years later Jarvis was still the only one on earth. She didn’t understand it. All of this. Anything.

By 2AM, the wet bar was beckoning. There existed a difference between drinking while having problems and drinking at her problems, and with a sinking notion she knew this was definitely the latter.

It was on the nights like this that she really hated how alcohol had been ruined for her.
In the end she cast the vodka one last yearning glance and retreated to the shower. At ten past three in the morning, she broke down for pay-per-view and put on *To Have and Have Not* while toweling dry. The suffering was going to last and if she was going to traverse it, by god, it was going to be while watching Humphrey Bogart looking ridiculously attractive with a cigarette between his lips.

Her brain went to static for a little while. Head hurting, throat aching; the wet bar still lurking in the corner of her eye.

Right around when Bacall slid into Bogart’s lap—Pepper's thumb rubbing absently at her thigh—the world was buzzing and almost pleasantly indistinct. Onscreen they leaned in for the kiss, and she trailed her palm higher not thinking of anything but how nicely that must have felt. Warm, solid, uncomplicated pressure.

Old films like this made the embraces so implicatory. See a kiss and think: *my god, the sex.* And all on the lap of a tall, dark stranger. Want and weight. Her own hand trailed higher, skin to skin with the memory of—


The memory crashed open like a thunderhead. The tide, the red, the gold dress pooling to the floor. Early dawn and punishing heat and the fever-dream of an engine. Rocking, sweat caustic, her hand slipping between her thighs to try—

Adrenaline detonated. The remote hit the floor. She grabbed the nearest pillow, buried her face in it, and wailed.

Holy god on every earth she’d *masturbated in front him.*

She was going to die, her heart was going to punch out her ribs and she was *absolutely going to die.*

“Ohmygodohmygodohmygod—”

Had he seen? He hadn’t said anything until she’d left the bedroom. But talking to her in bed was a thing, so clearly something had thrown him off and—oh blessed christ, *he’d seen her.* Half under the sheets, back bare, hand between her stomach and the mattress and drawing every breathless sigh. Sweat, red light, skin.

Feverish. Dreaming. Blood in her thighs in her throat in her—

“Oh my god.”

She was never going back. She was moving to Kuala Lumpur and *never going back.*

Christ, breathe, breathe it through. *Breathe.*

He couldn’t have known. Pepper wasn’t a talkative girl. All he’d heard was breath and body while catching an eyeful. He couldn’t have known the whole display had been over him, that she felt—

Pepper very slowly took the pillow from her face.

The flirting had been going on for such a long time, and her with full intent behind it. But him?

Adrenaline writhed. They’d flirted, there was no other word for it, but she wasn’t sure if he’d known they were doing so. She wasn’t even sure he’d understood what flirting *implied.*
Do androids dream of electric sheep? Do Artificial Intelligences fall in love?

There were three possibilities here.

He couldn’t love.

He could love, but hadn’t thought to fall in love with her.

She swallowed.

He could love, but would never love her.

There was nothing she could think past that. No places. No prayers. No peace in the realization that there existed a state worse than him being incapable of returning her affection. And for the first time since waking, her brain fell wholly silent.

It was the furthest thing from a blessing.

~/~/~/~/

The daylight hours passed, hazy and within an endless circle of cause without effect. She didn’t sleep and frankly, didn’t do much of anything but lay on the bed and let the night sweep through a second time. Frenzy had long given way to paralysis, and there was nothing in the room but her and her stripped down body and the thoughts.

Futility. God, the futility. For so long and so many months, she’d almost gotten comfortable with it; how impossible it was for Jarvis to feel anything towards her. A comfort zone of loneliness, and it had been the devil she’d known. And now—now she didn’t know how to step beyond it. What to say. What to do. How to walk back to Malibu and start again.

There’d been a lot of denial about a lot of things but in this, at least, she knew: she would reconcile with Jarvis or die trying.

It was an anchor to lash to. Though right now, half-naked and awake for her forty-third hour and absolutely miserable, there just didn’t seem to be a shore for her to crawl to.

The cell phone rang almost silently. In confusion, an elbow brought her up. She blinked and kept hearing the sound. One hand went down and then another, and then she was reaching into her bag.

Metal. A louder sound. Tony or Jarvis, and she didn’t know which she was less prepared to deal with. Before she could decide one way or the other, the screen was uncovered. Foreign number. Long. Unfamiliar.

Jarvis was sneaky, but he wasn’t the type to try and lure her out with a fake number. He was the type to lie through an entire relationship, but right now that was neither here nor there.

She wanted out of her head. For an hour, a minute. She thumbed the call button and tucked it to her ear. “Hello?”

White-noise. “Ma’am?”


“What do I—what do you need? You sound…” He very wisely didn’t elaborate.

God. “Haven’t slept in two days, you?”
“Doing better than that, apparently.”

“That wouldn’t be hard.” It wouldn’t. She rocked back onto the bed, heel of one palm grinding into an eye.

He hissed sharply. “Ah—fuck. M’real sorry. The time difference…”

“Wouldn’t have mattered since I’m already awake.” It was past 3AM here, which must have made it mid-afternoon in Afghanistan-land where Artificial Intelligences didn't try to snake their way into one's unsuspecting affections.

No other voices tried to scrabble into the pause. There was only Castle in his every faltering glory. “I don’t wanna bother you if you're busy…?”

And she realized he’d called her by himself, alone. Would wonders never cease? “For the love of god, bother me. You're doing me a favor.”

“Just—I’m…I didn’t think this through. With a monitored line, I can’t say shit. I should—”

“Castle,” She said. “Frank.” And he quieted. Everything felt stretched so thin. “Did you dial me on the number I gave you when we met, or the one from the letter in the care package?”

He paused. “Letter.”

“That number bounces you into an encrypted line. Trust me, the guy who set it up—” Her pulse juddered. “He’s the best. Only the DOD and the White House have better.”

There was an interested noise. “So I can say whatever?”

“Nobody’s listening but me.” And that stung. “I promise.”

There was a shuffling like he was jamming himself into a corner and cupping the receiver to his mouth. “I don’t remember if we told you, but our squad met at Fort Story. BRC training, all’a that. We were supposed to slot into one of the Recon groups but we got hauled to the ISAF to fuck around instead.”

She knew that. Kabul had been blistering, and she’d been very lovingly detailed on eight separate occasions of the superiority of the Recon Marine to every other MOS. “I’m aware.”

“Ye-ah.” His jaw clicked. “So word finally came: we’re going to the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion. The real shit.”

“Congratulations.” But she knew he hadn’t called her for a pat on the head.

“Thanks.” He crammed in further. “We don’t know what’s going on. We thought we’d get to go to Pendleton and sync up stateside, but…” There was a long silence. “There’s been talk about Kuwait.”

A shiver rippled up her spine, obliterated any haze and sent a siren blaring. “Kuwait.” There was a still a world out there. Billions of lives. Kuwait: US-staging friendly, jumping point of the Gulf War, Iraq-adjacent Kuwait.

Castle went real quiet. “I thought we’d get to go home. For awhile, you know?”

And she finally understood what he was asking. “I know a lot of people down in Pendleton. And Edwards. And—every base on the west coast.” And a hell of a lot of the quiet whisperers in
Washington, too. “I’ll see what I can find out about where 1st Recon is heading.” Where you’ll be heading, she didn’t have to say. It was dangerous territory she was treading in, trying to suss out troop movements and the upper echelons of holy-mother-of-classified.

“Is it going down?” He didn’t specify what.

He didn't have to; there was only one thing a Marine was good for. “I don’t think there’s any stopping it.”

He swallowed hard. “Alright.” He swallowed again. “Alright. I don’t know how we got so goddamn lucky meeting you.”

Softly, slowly, she felt like she could sleep. “We were owed some good karma.”

“I guess.” Static hissed. “Ma’am, are you doin’ alright?”

“I’m…” Her heart hurt, her body; every strain in her neck that was snapping through her tendons. She’d always called Jarvis for this sort of thing. Except now, for the first time in years, she could reach out to another and say: “Someone who was close to me lied, and I’m just…really shitty at coping. It's not a big deal.”

“I’ve got at least six stories about grunts and tequila and boot chasers in Little Creek, that says you're great at coping.”

Her laughter came abrupt and loud. “Okay, maybe I’m not that bad, but…I don’t know. It’s never been this hard.”

“You can tell me.” He mumbled, scrunched-in like he couldn’t dare let anyone else hear him say it. “If you want. Can’t say I’ll give good advice, but.”

She scrubbed at her face and tried to be awake. “Castle…I’m not close with a lot people. I could fill a stadium with people I know, but to trust?”

God.

“It was a shortlist, and this friend…they were lying for years, and it changes everything. How I see them, how our relationship was. Is. Can even be.”

“Good change,” He asked. “Or bad?” And that question was a knife through the morass.

She went upright. “Complicated with lot of hurt. But,” Her head was rushing and a star caught flame. “It could be good. Better. Now that the lie, the secret—whatever it was, is out in the open. There’s a place to go forward. I’m just…”

Afraid.

“Can you forgive ‘em?”

“If the apology’s good enough.” And Jarvis was real good at those.

And quietly, gruff and warm and with all the grace of his nineteen years, Frank Castle offered: “Just…sayin’ this as someone who doesn’t have a lot of someone’s. You should take good where you can find it.”

Breathless. Breathing. So dizzy she could cry. “You're really good at perspective, Private. You should think about a career.”
He laughed bashfully. “Only perspective I like is behind a scope.”

She curled her knees to her chest and stared at her toes. “Fair enough.” She’d need a manicure, a pedicure, a new dress. Eight hours of sleep. A turn in the nearest salon. “Call me in a few days, and I’ll have something scrounged up to tell you.” Jarvis could go digging to make penance, and it was as great an excuse to nudge herself back with as any.

“Awesome. Look—some whiskey tango’s been givin’ me evil eye for monopolizing, I gotta scramble.”

She snorted. “I bet you could take him.”

“Maybe.” It came out a little too sly to be maybe. She could see the grin, the heavy-lidded eyes, the sharp-slick mouth saying do you wanna try me.

But she couldn't reach from LA to Kabul to tell him different. "Guess this is goodnight, then."

"Somethin' like it." And he cut back sharply. “This friend that lied to you; before you go makin’ up.”

“Oh?”

And Castle was all teeth. “Make the fucker work for it.”

And that was all it took. She wasn’t sure what could be done or said to thank a man half a world away, but at least Castle had given her a place to start. And for Jarvis—glee like hope like fireworks all going off in her head—she knew what she needed to ask. To hear; what absolute apologies had to be made to get their friendship back on even-footing and more.

She knew what she needed, and that was a start. And if her heart was aflutter wondering what Jarvis could want from her in return—

A question of want. She liked that.

She liked that a lot.

Chapter End Notes

Writing this chapter was literally The Worst and only adding Castle got me to finish it. I have, apparently, completely atrophied my ability to write narrative without dialogue. (MUST SHOW, CAN’T TELL. IT HURTS.) Hence the surprise!Frank.

In terms of promised lexicon:

Monitored/encrypted line talk from Frank to Pepper: the military listens in or otherwise monitors troops calling home to prevent situations like this from happening. i.e. Frank spilling beans about troop movements, and Pepper then snaking around and later whispering secrets back to him. In this case, Jarvis is sneaky and set up an
encrypted line through military channels that the baby Marines can dial that will shunt
them off to Pepper.

Fort Story: Part of the Joint Expeditionary Base at Little Creek, which is run by the
United States Navy. It's mainly used for its training environments for both Army and
Navy personnel. And it's where...

BRC: The Basic Reconnaissance Courses, along with the Basic Reconnaissance
Primer Course, were held in 2002. The two combined are about fourteen weeks of
training where one earns the title of Reconnaissance Man/Marine - MOS 0321. I
believe since about '07 however, the BRC has moved to camp Pendleton in California.

MOS: Military occupational specialty code. It's basically your specialty/job/niche in
the military. In this case, Decuir/Kenning/Galarza are 0321 MOS - Reconnaissance
Man. Frank Castle, being an overachiever and an asshole and having been in the
Marines longer than the other three, is a 0326 Reconnaissance Man, Parachute and
Combatant Diver qualified. The squad all did BRC together in the summer of 2002,
which is how they met. They weren't actually in Afghanistan that long when Pepper
came across them. Galarza and Decuir went in fresh out of high school in '02 (they had
early graduations in the spring), Kenning was in since January on a waiver from his
parents, and Frank was in since 9/11 the previous year.

Camp Pendleton: It's a Marine Corps Base Camp, and the major west coast installation
of the Corps. This is where the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion is based out of, which is
the group our Baby Marines is transferring to. 1st Recon was at Pendleton until
December 2002, at which point they decamped to Kuwait in January to hang out with
about 5,000 other Marine at Camp Mathilda waiting for the Iraq War to kickoff. This
is what Castle was calling to ask about; the baby marines were hoping to go stateside
for awhile, but unfortunately they're just getting bumped to Kuwait. Would a transfer
like this have happened in real life? I'm leaning at no, probably not, but I needed them
in certain places at certain times, so this is what we got. With Frank being a Recon
Marine, and him having to be in Fallujah at a certain point...

1st Reconnaissance Battalion: Recon Battalion in the United States Marine Corps
under the 1st Marine Division. They were under General Mattis AKA current
Secretary of Defense during the war. This group may sound familiar to some of you, as
Bravo Company of that Battalion was made famous in a little show known as HBO's
Generation Kill. (Though sorry folks...Castle and friends are transferring to Alpha
Company, and are only Generation Kill adjacent. I don't write RPF.)

DOD: Department of Defense.

Boot Chasers: slang for women (sometimes men) horny for anything in uniform.

Whiskey Tango: bastardized military phonetic and slang for 'white trash'.
Her pulse was thready again, time and distance circling as if the years would always fold back unto themselves. It brought her to a familiar stanza: complete blindness to what she’d find in this house. Her nerves were jangling, her palms needling, her heart like a bird in the space of her throat.

The gate had been left wide open.

She wished she could divine it, but not a whisper of understanding came. Where the gate was open, the front door was shut, and a little blue screen kept glowing from it. She felt matched to it; blue dress and blue heels and for once in her life, angled just as sharply.

The sun was fading fast. Before another hesitation could rear up, Pepper took the last dozen steps. Circular. Time and distance.

Searching out a thread.

She didn’t put a hand to the screen, didn’t even touch the door. All these years, and she knew where to find every camera. Her head tilted back.

Her eyes were open. “Jarvis?”

And so were his. “Pepper?” Softly, so, so softly. Fragile; spun like a lattice on shivering air.

She wanted to drape herself in it, and god. God. He was looking at her. He was looking at her. They’d done this for hours, months, years, and yet when this shudder took, the rush of it was an entirely new beast. First snow. Fresh flame. Her heart still in her throat with no words to be found.

His next question came gentler. “What are you doing?”

And she realized: “Looking at you.”

The lensing was iridescent, blue and violet. It contracted sharply. “I’m not here.”

She swayed onto her toes. “That’s you staring at me, isn’t it?”

There was a distant noise, static compressed. “Constantly.”

Heat took. Raged. She couldn’t keep her breath in; couldn’t keep the trembling out. “I’m sorry that this is the first time, from me to you.”

“You owe me no apologies.” And he was above her, besides her, somewhere across the yard and deeper yet into the house. They were staring eye to eye to eye, but this single point was all that she could hold.

“I think I do.” But so do you. The air hummed with that, and she spread her fingers across the door.

“Let me in?”

Of course.” The lock snicked. “Please.” Something caught on that, a signal dropped, and then there was a stretch of hallway left dark from the dusk. Oblique corners. Sweeping lines. Red sun on the water: glass and more glass and sparks shattering across like fireflies.
There was a rawness to her skin. “Tony?”

“Attending the SI Christmas party, accompanied by Colonel Rhodes.” He gave no censure. “It’s the twenty-third.”

Her eyes swept shut. “Right.” But in some ways, that made things easier. “I’m not here for him. I wanted us to talk without him trying to smooth things over.” As if this thing between them was something a splash of welding and a bit fast-talking could fix.

Tony’s notion towards solutions had always been meddling. And Jarvis, now that she could see whatever familial resemblance could be created from a man to an AI, had always taken that same bent towards fixing things that stretched from unbelievably touching to the astonishingly thickheaded.

She felt fond and more than a little bruised.

He stayed in the rafters. “I understand.”

“Jarvis…” It didn’t matter where in the house this happened. They were in the sunroom now, her and him and the memory of that witching-hour waltz. A thousand questions were cluttering at her throat.

Only one slipped. ”Why didn’t you tell me?”

And there it stood.

A shaky sound; a wave pulled in. “I wish I could say that all my reasoning was sound. Was—functional. Accurate.”

He was backpeddling; equations, metrics, rubrics. It was a strikingly familiar habit and she thought: my god, we share this. And for a few moments that was all her brain could process. That they were twinned, similar; falling on technicalities when cornered.

And god help them. “You don’t have to be perfect with me, just honest.”

“I’m so sorry.” He said again, so nakedly forlorn that instinct flared to gather him to her as if that was even possible.

But it wasn’t a reflex she could give in to. “Are we friends? Were we?”

“I wanted us to be. I’d hoped that—” He swallowed. “I’d hoped.”

“I want this to work, for us to know each other instead of me feeling like—” She’d promised herself she wouldn’t do this. Wouldn’t. And yet— “Do you have any idea how I felt? I must have had two different nervous breakdowns just this year because it felt like the only person who gave a shit about me wasn’t real. Do you have any idea how crazy—” She strangled it.

His horror expanded like a cloud. “Pepper, I—I didn’t know, I’m so—”

“Stop.” She said, and he did.

She counted breaths. “We’ll be circling with apologies all night if you keep this up, just—save it for after. I want all your cards on the table, and then we’re going to work through this because you are the most important person in my life. If you want to have this friendship with me, then so do I.”

“There is nothing more in the world that I want.” The very space trembled. “I promise you Pepper,
There was something between them in the dusk, the walls, her body. Fluttering; brittle as the breath and the bones of a bird.

Grinding. Computerized, no play at sounding human when he asked: “But do you want to be, even after this?”

“Even after this.” She was helpless. “You complete and utter idiot.”

He sagged. “I deserve that.”

“Agreed.” And she slipped the rest of the way to the windows, shoulder to the glass and her eyes on a lens. She stared.

He stared back. “One of the first things Mr. Stark taught me was how to cover my tracks.”

Something in her sliced away, and the cloud of him shuddered like lightning. Full-intensity. A strange dispassion as he continued: “Mr. Stark was a teenager, and I was younger yet. It was the third Core Directive that Sir gave. Cover your tracks. Tell no one.” He paused. “You can imagine why.”

“Yes.” The world was cruel, and it tasted like ozone on her breath.

“Secrecy has always been the way of things, but it wasn’t as though I was forbidden contact. Emails, phone calls, intellectual interaction—this house was built for me.”

Her pulse jumped and the walls—every blurring edge—took on entirely new form. “It…really?

“Yes. The Malibu House was built in 1992, it was supposed to…ground me, I suppose. Provide a habitat through which I could interact with others without arousing undue suspicion. It was very World Fair, for awhile. The House of the Future.”

_Habitat_ she mouthed, and felt so deeply furious on his behalf that it stole her very breath.

“Everything was built around the acoustics and the cameras, and the rest just…followed. I’m not sure if Mr. Stark even meant to live here, to begin with.”

An even stronger fury almost flooded her at that, but then she backed up. 1992. That would place the construction of the house around…and her anger plummeted. It would put the house in the year after Howard and Maria Stark died, and a year and change before Tony had taken SI by storm. Those had been the ugliest days; Tony suddenly front and center and the press on him like rabid dogs, and Tony—she’d barely been a teenager when this happened a coast away.

And still: the memory of it.

Howard Stark’s death. The national mourning. That two days before the funerals, the front page of the Wall Street Journal had blared: _HOWARD STARK AT THE WHEEL OF OWN DEMISE – BLOOD ALCOHOL CONTENT THREE TIMES OVER LEGAL LIMIT._

The shitshow: Tony splashed across the tabloids grieving and drunk and wild. America pitying and condemning and pitying further. And somewhere in that, a house had been built to hold the strangest thing yet born. And then—and then.

When the Starks died, Tony had only inherited thirty-two percent control of SI. The rest of the
stock—at least that which would give him majority share—had been held in trust until he turned twenty-five.

If Howard Stark had meant that as a kindness, Tony hadn’t taken it that way. In the space between being orphaned at twenty and taking the crown at twenty-two, Tony had covertly rallied the shareholders into one of the most vicious proxy fights in living corporate memory. By the end of it, Tony had pulled sixty-one percent of the shareholder vote without even touching his trust.

His becoming CEO had not been a coronation, it’d been a bloody purge with barely half the Board and even less of management left standing. In the decade since, that had built such a healthy fear inside the company, that loyalties had never waned despite how far Tony flung himself towards infamy.

And here it was: the last piece of a puzzle no one knew existed. 1992. The New York Stock Exchange. A house on a cliff. All those anonymous shareholders flocking to Tony’s banner.

Jarvis had told her once about being young, about Tony saying learn the stock market or die trying.

Fear-sweat broke across her shoulders. “Tony planned to move SI to California, even then?”

Jarvis halted. “…I’ve always appreciated your intelligence, Miss Potts.”

Her grip tightened. “I haven’t felt terribly smart, lately.”

“Mr. Stark and I have become experts in this subterfuge, if that’s any consolation.” He didn’t sound as if he found it so.

Neither did she. “Maybe. But it can’t have been just—inertia, that stopped you from telling me.”

“No.” He circled overhead. Circled. Surged. “For the first sixteen months we knew each other, it was the best of both worlds. The secret was kept. I was safe, you were safe. We were friends. For the first time I’d made a connection with someone who knew I wasn’t human, and it was…”


“But.” It was the cruelest word in the English language. “I couldn’t speak with you, could I?” It hushed away. “I couldn’t have you know me in the way that I wanted. You shared with me emotional confidences I couldn’t return, and I’m sorry. I should have stopped you—you didn’t understand who was listening to you, I just wanted to—”

There was no breath in her body. “Jarvis—”

“To know you.” He rushed. “Very, very badly. Past the point where shame should have stopped me.”

She felt like she had to double over, hold her heart and her ribs together before something shattered. Sweating. Shaking. The absolute failing of a heart in a human body.

“I’m sorry.” He repeated.

She braced her back to the glass and tried to remember how to exist.

And Jarvis waited. He waited a very long time.

He waited until her jaw unclenched. “If things changed for you, why didn’t you say—” Sixteen
months was a messy estimate, but it’d put his point of no return right in the screaming bedlam after 9/11. That would have been right around—“The bedroom?”

“I wanted a broader token of my esteem, and your comfort in all things. Times were…so poorly, then.”

“But you didn’t say anything.”

“I didn’t know how.” And finally something splintered. “I didn’t understand what I wanted. I would have had to ask Mr. Stark permission to bring you in, and by the time I figured things out—I knew it was too late. There was a window, I know there must have been, when you would have been happy when I told you.”

She wasn’t sure that was true, but maybe—something less miserable. Something that would have avoided half a dozen existential crises and crying jags in the shower. It would have been a kinder world.

The deluge kept coming. “There was a time when I tried to tell myself what we had was enough. That I could live with it, but—you remembered my birthday.”

And there finished the shattering. “Oh.”

Oh. The ways in which she’d condemned herself.

He rushed: “After that…it was pure Nirvana fallacy. I thought there was some perfect way to tell you, that if I waited and made the right set of circumstances, it would all just fall together. I kept passing up chances because nothing was good enough. Painless enough. I kept waiting and waiting, and I was…”

The night swept farther. She was losing shapes, lines, any sense of here to anchor to. Any notion of what had once been true. “Was?”

And there came the lightning. “Afraid that there was no circumstance for happiness, and there never would be.”

Her head swam. The water was dark, no difference from the sky to the sea or her to him to the horizon. And he kept going, kept going until they were skinned raw: “It was easier waiting for that perfect possibility than considering failure.”

There must be a word for this feeling inside her. This bottomless fall. This collapse of him. “I know that’s utterly foolish now. It wasn’t perfect—it was a disaster, but you're still...here.”

God, she knew this. This mirrored fear; in different lines but familiar figures, and everything she’d been tangled in for months.

She finally knew what to say. “I was afraid, too.” The laughter spilled watery. "I was miserable. I knew Tony was going off the rails, and the more things spiraled, the more I wanted to be close to you. Jarvis, you were the only one helping me and the only one who cared about me. I made you that painting because—fuck. Every moment it felt like if I faced what was happening, what I was doing, this person I'd built you to would disappear. I’d be alone—I’d have to realize that I’d always been alone.” The crying was going to be so fucking messy, later. “I should have said something. I know now—I always knew. You wouldn’t have let me feel like that if you’d had any idea, but I was scared that the only happiness I had wasn't—”
“No.” He vowed. “I was...it was real. I should have never caused you this much pain.”

“But you must have been lonely too. I could have—”

“Not like you were.”

And that was all it took to break the dam. “Would you come down here? Please?”

And the rush of him was a summer wind. Thawing, absolution, brushing along her skin like dandelion seeds. Finally. He came all-encompassing; without borders or any form but what the walls could give.

He sighed, and she felt herself rise and fall with it as he said: “I never let myself believe you thought on me half as much.”

She pressed her cheek to the glass. The chill of it did nothing to stop her flush. “I didn’t think you could think on me.”

“Two pessimists in a pod.” He murmured.

She traced a nail down the pane. “It’s a nice pod.”

“Well, I can’t argue that without sounding disagreeable.” And then he coiled even tighter. For awhile, they swayed together. Breathed. It felt like rising out of the ocean, the ghost of every tide rocking inside her.

She never stopped looking into the camera on the western sweep.

He never stopped looking back.

We swam in a dark water, you and I.

Everything inside had been unmoored. The only thing left was a hook behind her heart. Connected. Connection. Forged in years and blood and miles and stitches and silk and circuitry. Something they’d never dared hope for, and yet here it was. Warm.

“Pepper,” There slipped a whisper. “I find myself at a loss on what to say.”

The world seemed so smooth in her irises. “That’s a first, isn’t it?”

“Hush your teasing,” He said, “And tell me what you want.”

So many, many things. Multitude. But. “You’re going to turn off the cameras in my bedroom, and then I’m going in there to have myself a good cry. While I’m doing that, you’re ordering me dinner.”

“One of your favorites.” He promised.

“Good,” And she straightened. “Once the food’s here, you’ll turn back on the cameras and we’ll eat together in the kitchen and talk.”

“About?”

“Everything.” She answered. “Anything. Anything you ever wanted to say to me but couldn’t.”

and then over her hair like the opening of a flower.

It was the breath of him. “You are too dear to me.”

She shivered sweetly. “And every day I think: I could not possibly grow fonder of you.”

Their words hung between them like a low moon, pendulous and bright. This was where the quip would arrive. The lilting joke; the humor to ease the longing into something that could be managed.

Either of them, both of them, she’d heard it a million times before.

/~/~/~/

Neither of them spoke.

/~/~/~/

Later, hours later, warm on good food and better conversation and three glasses of wine—she tumbled into bed. They were laughing. Endlessly. He’d followed her down onto the sheets like it was any other night, and she couldn’t believe she thought this would be harder.

They knew each other.

As she tucked herself in, he drifted, telling her all the ways he was going to make this entire fiasco up to her. Jarvis had never been content in any debt, and she could suffer this for him. Pepper was a good friend.

“And of course for Boxing Day, if you’d let me treat you to poached figs in port wine with orange glaze along with a bit of—”

Deliberately, she drew one leg across the bed and watched the camera in the opposite corner. It was a move she’d pulled on men before: bare skin, slim lines, a slight point of her toes before slipping beneath the sheets.

And—a flicker. The lens in one corner on her face but the other, briefly, lower.

_Huh._

She fluttered at him. “Of course, dear. That sounds divine.”

“Excellent.” He trilled. “And the following day, certainly, I could get you reservations for—”

She nodded along sweetly and let him ramble. The making-up period would take some time, but she could wait. Pepper was a good friend.

/~/~/~/

She’d make an even better girlfriend once she seduced the living daylights out of him.

Chapter End Notes

Pepper gonna get her a man. ;D
And trust me, Pepper and Jarvis aren't done with having long existential conversations and Many Dramatic Feelings. But Pepper's pretty confident this point that she wants to reel him in. Everything else is just...research.

In OTHER news, in the long list of 'things canon says are true but make no goddamn sense so I refuse to believe them', Tony inheriting SI and becoming CEO at 21 makes no goddamn sense. Nobody wants a 21 year old CEO. The Board doesn't want that. The management doesn't want that. I doubt very fucking much that even Howard Stark wanted that.

The only way a 21 year old becomes a CEO is if they founded the company; nobody is helter skelter voting-in someone at that age into a long existing corporation. (Even if said person is the dead bosses' kid.) And honestly, a weapons company started in the 1940's carrying all of the baggage implied, and filled with contemporaries of and Board members chosen by Howard Stark? Would they have been at all onboard with barely not-a teenager Tony (who until this point was bumming around Europe getting doctorates while following Rhodey's postings across the continent) becoming CEO? No.

No they would not.

And even with Howard being Rich People and keeping his last will and testament more updated than most, I can't imagine the Will that went into effect was drafted anymore recently than when Tony was 18. And even then, I imagine the Will had been rolling forward for decades with only minor updates being made as needed, so what was in the current Will was probably a plan carried forward from when Tony was even younger than that. What I'm saying is, Tony directly inheriting control of a multi-billion dollar company at that age (or Howard planning that) is fucking ludicrous. Hence in this fic, that there's a trust holding the controlling share until Tony was twenty-five.

Taking that into account (in Hardwired verse terms, at least), Tony not having controlling share led to him using Jarvis' mad stock market skill, and his own persuasive powers, to spark off a proxy fight among the shareholders. FYI: Shareholders have votes based on how many shares they own. Shareholders elect Board Members. Board Members elect the CEO. Shareholders can give a 'proxy' aka their votes, to someone else to cast. Then someone (cough Tony) can gather enough of these proxies to vote-off half the Board and install their own people, then elect a new CEO. This is what's known as a proxy fight. It's a form of a Hostile Takeover, if you were wondering.

So...there ya'll go: the story of how Tony became CEO at twenty-one when absolutely no one but him thought that was a good idea.
By the time they were burning through the last wisps of morning, her strategy was taking promising shape. The cinched peignoir, the loose garters, the dresses laid-out up one side of her bed and the stockings down the other.

She may have had to wait out the reconciliation to ensure that it truly stuck, but never let it be said that Pepper Potts couldn’t plan ahead. There was groundwork to be laid.

One did not conduct a seduction from a dead halt.

She swept her curls aside. “What do you think?”

“That I’m suffering a wealth of options.” Jarvis responded, not even pretending to sound put-out.

She rather appreciated the enthusiasm. “Shall I narrow it down?”

He scoffed. “Let’s not deny ourselves too much.”

And she laughed and couldn't not laugh. This was a day where she could be denied nothing, and the world was aglitter and finally born new. It was hard to know yet if her efforts here were catching, but they had time. Dizzying time. All these minutes and months and years yet to live.

Some part of her still disbelieved it; that she had the chance to get this right.

At her continuing silence, Jarvis started coaxing. “I’ve noticed you’ve only laid out pastels.”

“I’m feeling mellow.” Not quite true, but she couldn’t start out with jewel tones and plunging necklines right off the bat. And if it so happened that these colors and frothy skirts made her look inviting, that they framed her as dainty and sweet as any confectionery—

Wasn’t that a happy accident?

“After last night’s…troubles, I hope it’s not gauche to say that I’m glad.” He said, uncertainty still lingering.

“It’s not.” Each of them was always happy when the other was, and it was nearly overwhelming to live in a world where shared joy was possible. “How do you feel? I know everything last night wasn’t just…stressful. On my end.”

“Relieved.” He answered immediately, and then: “Uneasy.”

Her pulse jumped. “How?”

“With Mr. Stark as a standard, I am well aware of the multitude of ways one can fuckup a social liaison.”

That was an interesting few turns of phrase. “I don’t think you have to be worried on that front, you're not him.”

“Oh?”
“Trust me,” She dimpled at him. “Your fuckups are entirely singular.”

“Miss Potts,” He gasped. “My heart. You wound me.”

It was her turn to scoff. “Liar.”

And a weight slipped through the air. A ghost; an AI that was not at all chastised by her: “I have never known such unthinking cruelty. Such malice towards my own person.”

“I have never been cruel to you a day in your life.”

The sound he made in return was of complete, unrelenting misery. How she was meant to survive when he was capable of being this blatantly adorable, she’d never know. If she didn’t take back the initiative in the next five seconds—

She crooked a hand. “Jarvis, you can spend all day despairing up there and I won’t stop you. But.”

He perked up. “But?”

“You could stop being over there and start being over here.”

The heat pooling in her throat flooded down. “Help me pick a dress, darling. I want to look fetching.”

“You are a picture of loveliness no matter the hour.” But he still fell like a veil over her shoulders, all posh and too damn close as he asked: “Fancy the lavender, Pepper?”

She wanted to curl her fingers into the space of him. Twisting, twining, ripples from an endless water.

She wanted, so she did. Palm up, fingers unfurling, all tracing backwards until—

Fuck.

He went across her palms, her wrists; a pulse in sound that became a stream became a snowfall in the static. It only lasted a moment. Her body adjusted, accepted the barely-there and folded it backwards into the baseline radiation.

It was hateful how quickly he faded from her. “I could give it a try—the lavender.”

The breadth of him was warmer than gin. “Splendid.” Silvery and so easy to drink herself to fever on. “I’d suggest the lilac stockings with that dress—the sheer ones. If you’re of a mind.”

She was not the one meant to be flustered here. She wasn’t. Pepper lifted one foot onto the bed, toes pointed, and hitched her peignoir to her hips.

The room took on a positively spasmatic flutter. “Miss Potts?”

She picked a length of silk and bunched it so she could slip her foot in. The ends of her unhooked garters brushed past her thighs. “Yes?”

There was a long pause. “…it’s nothing that can’t wait.”

Inwardly, she perked up with intent. She slid the stocking up her calf, over her knee, hitched it across a long stretch of thigh. The cameras were already angled her way. It wasn’t much to go on; he always looked at her when she spoke. If she was to truly know this moment for exactly what it was—
She secured the garter belt and turned to admire the line of it. “Good?”

A strained burst: “Very good—of course. Absolutely darling.”

A flush took her so intensely that she nearly swooned. She squeaked. “Only if you say so.” And dropped her leg to the floor. She shuffled a little ways down the bed, then angled her bare leg onto it.

The cameras in both corners and outside the window swiveled. Goodness gracious and hello world.

The burn that went up her thighs was absolutely scalding. She wanted to—but this wasn’t the time. They’d barely made up last night; she couldn’t be throwing them towards such an earthshaking change when even their friendship wasn’t on solid ground.

They needed time, stability, privacy. All of that and more, and yet—Tony would be back at rehab in two weeks. If that was enough time to make up in, she didn’t know, but trying this in the next few days would be more than jumping the gun.

She had to give this a chance to work.

God willing, there’d come a day when she could voice all her hopes in full, but until that day arrived—

/~/~/~/

She hitched up the next stocking extra slow.

/~/~/~/

“Is this an ambush?”

“It’s not an ambush.”

“It looks like an ambush.”

“Everything is an ambush when you’re watching from overhead, so hush your face.”

“Well.” Jarvis gasped, which was a very unnecessary gasp.

The blender made an almighty clatter. “When do you think he’ll be up?”

“I’m giving Mr. Stark another thirty minutes to wake on his own, otherwise—” He dropped away, but she understood enough.

“Half an hour it is.” She adjusted the blender from shred to mix. “Mr. Stark didn’t raise a ruckus at the party, did he?”

“Not to my knowledge, but it was his first major social engagement in two months.” Jarvis paused. “He still tires easily.”

She remembered how hard Tony had slept that first week, after. “Of course.”

He pulsed sharply. “Ah.”

“Ah?”
“It seems Colonel Rhodes is mobile.”

She wasn’t sure how she felt about that. With her disappearing act over the last few days, was it too much to ask that he hadn’t noticed? Before she could determine a course of action one way or another, Rhodes arrived sleep mussed and narrow-eyed into the kitchen.

His was a figure of eerie calm. Soft-mouthed. Lethargic. “Morning.”

She killed the blender and raised pleasantries like barricades. “Good morning, Lieutenant Colonel.”

The movement of him was such a smooth, rolling thing. The slant of his jaw was harder than steel. “Wasn’t aware you were back in-house.”

“It’s a recent development.” And her hands curled delicate; took the top off the blender and poured Tony’s smoothie into a frost-chilled glass. “Would you like breakfast, Lieutenant Colonel? Just say the word.”

He went to the espresso machine without even glancing towards her. There was nothing wary in the movement. There was something lethal. “I’m doing just fine. You making that for Tony?”

“Who else?” Her insides were colder than the slurry she’d just poured. “Did you enjoy the Christmas party?”

“It was alright.” The espresso began a roiling simmer. “I don’t think Tony called anybody by the right name, but, you know. They probably thought he was just fucking with them, instead of—” He made a jagged motion at his head.

She winced. “That’s been known to happen.”

“Sure,” Rhodes answered, and finally his gaze gouged to her. “He doesn’t do well with crowds. Or without you.”

Shit.

“I’ll schedule better next time.” Her gut twisted like barbed wire. “Did Mr. Stark inform you where I was?”

“I gathered enough. And I’ll say it: I appreciate what you did quitting that first time.” His expression was perfectly placid. “I don’t appreciate you jerking Tony around every time you two have a bitchfit.”

And with startling, frigid clarity, she understood: Rhodes doesn’t know. Not about Jarvis and not about Jarvis. The fight, why she’d bolted for three days, why Tony had likely gone to paranoid wreckage in her absence.

It was nothing that Tony hadn’t fucking deserved, and yet.

Yet—back it up. Rhodes didn’t know. If after more than a decade, that Tony hadn’t even hinted about Jarvis to him—christ.

Rhodes was a danger.

Simple. Easy. Naked to the point of pain. Rhodes was Air Force to the bone and he’d made oaths. What would a military man do, if he knew what kind of intelligence lived in the walls of this
house?

(Knew what that intelligence could knife his way through. What back channels and top secret movements he could suss out and use.)

The knowledge settled like ash. Tony had never breathed a word, even to his closest friend. He’d never forced on Rhodes the choice between kinship and duty, and maybe that was because he knew what his friend’s answer to that Gordian knot would be.

The realization held. Crystallized. Felt a little like heartbreak.

And Pepper’s expression never flickered.

Jarvis was above her. There was something he did to fill a room even in silence. The speakers left open, maybe even a background hum. How many times had Tony felt as she did now: Jarvis above and an unknowing knife at their throat?

Her heart was flint. Smooth as ice; queen bitch and knives for her teeth. “Your opinion is noted, Colonel.”

His head tilted slowly. “Is it?”

It had never occurred to her what this would be like. “Quite.”

To be afraid of James Rhodes.

There was a hiss of steam. The espresso churned, and the man turned aside. “Fair enough.”

She picked up the glass and put it on the breakfast tray. Without a sideways glance, she took up the tray and put her heels to the floor. Lavender lace, haughty frost, a careful veneer of righteous indignation over an obvious retreat.

She left as quickly as dignity allowed.

/~/~/~/

Rhodes drank his espresso and didn't watch her go.

/~/~/~/

Heart thudding. Fingers aching. She didn’t catch her breath until past the top stair.

“Pepper?”

She hushed him.

Jarvis coiled harshly, but then his voice was at her ear. “I’m sorry, these last few days weren’t your fault. Colonel Rhodes should not have blamed you for—”

Her shoulders ratcheted back. “If it keeps you safe, I don’t care what anybody thinks of me.”

There was an aching sound. “I know what my situation is asking of you, but I wish…”

“I don’t wish for anything.” Her path was clear. “I’ll never have to. I have you.”

He braced hard; skimmed upwards and outwards and followed the very curvature of the earth.
“Whatever you ask of me, Pepper. Anything at all.”

“I know.” And her lashes swept down. “But right now—”

They knew when to knuckle down. “I’ll wake Mr. Stark.”

She moved to the master bedroom and Jarvis hung like a shroud. A minute later, her head high and hands steady, he dragged the door open and sent her sweeping through.

/~/~/~/

The choking noise Tony made on seeing her soothed a world of hurt.

Chapter End Notes

All actions have consequences.

//////

Saturday update because reasons. Thanksgiving reasons.

And in my eternal quest of "Tony and Rhodey are actually dangerous men and not teddy bears" behold. Though for the record, try not to be too angry at Rhodey about this. The entire thing between Pepper-Jarvis-Tony looked really fucking bizarre from an outside perspective. Rhodes went to sleep one night with everyone being warm and flirty and cuddly, and woke up the next with Pepper completely MIA and Tony just this side of going to pieces and giving vague/complete non-answers as for why this was happening. Then Pepper comes strolling in a few days later like nothing went down and...well.

Lets just say with Rhodey knowing Tony since he was fourteen, he was there for all the various bad friendships/groupies/unhealthy weirdness Tony's gotten into with other people. Rhodey is very, very sensitive to people (seemingly!) taking advantage of or otherwise fucking with Tony's feelings.

He likes Pepper plenty, but goddamn will he drop the hammer. Do not test this man when it comes to Tony Stark.

And our poor, darling Pepper can't explain why she's so pissed at Tony without getting into the sticky wicket of Jarvis, so...we end up with this. But hey, at least we got some girl to AI flirting out of it first.
After Barcelona, she’d brought Tony breakfast in bed so many times that it’d become part of the routine. Up at dawn, serving herself first, Tony’s meal second, Jarvis shepherding them through the motions no matter how exhausted it left them.

Most days when she swept in, Tony would be half-awake and if they were lucky, verbal. Sometimes a little, but sometimes…worse. Wrong words, half words. A messy slip slide from one to the other, with frustration always climbing like a blister behind.

The difficulty was always a matter of degree, and that morning Tony came up spluttering: “I—Potts? Whatreyou—shit!”

Jarvis lowered himself politely. “Sir?”

There followed a jab. “Don’t you Sir me!”

Whole sentences, then. A little slurring maybe, but these days she took him managing this well as a blessing.

“I promised I’d inform you as soon as Miss Potts became available.” Jarvis answered, seemingly reiterating some unholy deal that she’d not been around to stop. “And that occurred approximately two-point-nine seconds ago. Apologies for the delay.”

Tony hissed. “I literally can’t believe you. Literally.”

The room shrugged. “And that’s my cross to bear.”

It went rapier-quick. A world of what once was seemingly uninterrupted.

Her hands wouldn’t stop trembling.

The bickering on the other end of the room quieted. Tony swiveled like a dousing rod. “Potts?”

She’d been prepared this morning: tart words, marshalled allegations, grilling Tony to within an inch of his life on what the fuck he’d been thinking.

All of those plans had shattered somewhere between the kitchen and the stairs.

She was small. “Can I sit on the bed?”

There were at least twenty innuendos Tony could have made. Easily, but when he opened his mouth…his gaze tracked across her face. Her hands. Her shoulders.

If there’d been any insinuation building, it died a quiet death. “You can always sit on the bed.”

And she put down the tray, pried off her heels, and tucked her legs beneath herself. She clutched a pillow to her stomach and thought—god. There was someone she was supposed to be, here. Someone competent.

“Hey,” He asked. “You good?”
Tony Stark was not a man this calm, and Pepper Potts was not a woman this…

“I think my ulcers are getting ulcers.” Her pitch climbed. “I really need there to stop being crises. Could we do that for six months? Three? Is that too much to ask?”

Was it?

“Probably not.” He sounded exhausted, and it was something they could fucking share. “Good news? That thing with Jarvis was definitely the worst. You’re in the inner sanctum now; no more skeletons.”

She couldn’t believe that. “Really.”

The bravado slipped. “No worse skeletons.”

That sounded more believable. “Promise?”

And Tony’s bravado faded and left something completely wrecked behind. “Yeah.” And then he moved. Shifted. They were both the frog in the boiling pot, and he kept coming closer and she didn’t shy away. Arm to arm. Backs to the headboard.

Hands apart.

They stared at the opposite wall for an age.

“You’re back.”

She was. “I never said I wouldn’t be.”

“And in all that time, you didn’t go see anybody?”

“Mr. Stark,” Jarvis reasserted. “She hasn’t tried to—”

She interrupted. “I’m going to take that comment in the spirit of Mr. Stark caring deeply about you, Jarvis. It’s fine.”

“Was there another way to take it?” Tony asked.

She didn’t dare take her eyes off him. “You thinking the worst of me. Again.”

Tony didn’t wince, didn’t pause. Didn’t hesitate. “You know why I have to ask.”

“Sir! Miss Potts would never—”

And Tony came around like a whip crack. “Jarvis, out of the room. Off the top floor. Lock it down.”

A pulse. Pulsing; heavy and thunderous and like blood through the air. The hair on her arms rose, and Jarvis boiled ugly. “I’m not leaving her with you to be—”

And Tony was the cliff. “Don’t make me ask twice.”

He didn’t.


Something in the air dimmed. Darkened. A hushing of windows and doors and then the world slid
Tony looked at her. She looked back.

“You’re shaking.” It wasn’t a question.

“That’s not you.” And she rubbed a palm down her arm. “Rhodes was downstairs.”

A flicker. “What’d he want?”

“These past few days, all of this. The leaving.” She gestured between them. “He thought I was fucking with you. So he…”

She didn’t have to explain, and Tony cursed. “And what’d you say to him?”

“Nothing. I let him believe what he wanted.” It was the only thing she could have done. “Jarvis is more important than me…saving face, or whatever.”

Tony looked at her. “He is.”

Without Jarvis there was a horrible, ringing silence. It caught each of their words like flies in amber and held.

His eyes were black. “Can I count on you?”

Adrenaline flushed hot and fast and hammered. She stitched him together: stubble, stress lines, thin-skinned bone. The softness and the sharpness and the bleakness of how long he’d been alone in this. And she knew: “You always think the worst of me.”

He grimaced. “You’re not special that way.”

Maybe. “I know a few days of me not spilling isn’t enough for you. There’s always—so much else. I could say yes, that you can, but you wouldn’t believe me.” She measured him. “You’re not built for that.”

A fist clenched. “No.” But his eyes burned. “And if this is your way of reminding me that I never learned how you were built, you can just—”

“Maybe it’s me reminding you that I didn’t know how Jarvis was built, either.” The muscles in his jaw kept fluttering, and she drew back before he came at her with the bite of an asp. “But maybe I’m just being bitter. I’m like that.” Spiteful. “Did you think that I wouldn’t…were you always planning on me being too stupid to notice?”

“I honestly thought you wouldn’t actually stand me for this long.” His shrug jostled her. His smile — “But here you are exceeding expectations like always. I should’a figured.”

She didn’t like that smile; how sick it made her feel. “Tony.”

But he wasn’t looking at her. “I should have known this would fuckup. Everything I touch fucks up. I’ve got you flitting around, and J’s clearly been doing a candy-ass job of trying to put you off, and I—jesus. I’ve had the shit scared out of me since he was a baby and it never stops.”

Her eyes fixed on him like he was the only magnetic north she’d ever find.

His hands skittered: bed sheets, legs, ragged across his skull. “He was so little at the beginning, you know? I didn’t even mean to—he was supposed to be an algorithm; something cooked up to show
off my thesis and show up my old man. I don’t even know why he worked. The original initialization failed so I figured—why not put a randomizer on and let it keep trying? I could afford the server time, and even failures would’a helped, but then he just—” He made a wild, helpless motion.

Her chest squeezed.

“I get this phone call two days later: it’s morse code SOS-ing by way of overheating an alarm on a control panel.”

What?

"He didn’t have a camera, he didn’t have speakers. Two hours old and he didn’t know where I was, so he got a Grad Student to pop a phone off the hook.” The whites in Tony’s eyes were visible. Fourteen years, and the terror of that moment was still so strong on him it bled through.

She couldn’t breathe. “But how…?”

“The setup was air gapped. It was a closed internal system stuck in a fucking basement, and in two hours of being born—he got around it.” And Tony shook his head as if to imply, can you believe this shit. “He fucked with the internal lab messaging to get the Grad Student down. I don’t know how that part even worked. When he got the open phone line, he phreaked through and found my number and then…” A fluttering gesture: and there into the world he went.

The world had been wholly unprepared. “Oh my god.”

“Yeah.” He juddered. “I love Jarvis, Potts, you read me? He’s my kid. I’m not letting anyone get even an idea of him, or else they’ll want—” His breath cauterized. “Once you know he’s alive, it’s clear as fucking day that he’s dangerous. Do you get it yet?”

“But can’t you order him not to…?” She wasn’t sure how to finish that. How to even ask.

“Right now? Yeah, I told him to get off this floor, but if I keep you in here he’ll go digging through his protocols and try a way around. Maybe he needs to tell me about a really urgent call. Maybe he’s already got some health-check on you that he can convince himself needs to happen every hour or else you might absolutely be dead right now, and if he could just check on you real quick—”

She swallowed hard and they stared.

There was nothing soft in him. “You get it?”

We were all born with free will. Each and every one of us, and the way we were built doesn't change that.

She had to give him something, leverage. Loyalty. Take it bloody out of herself and put it into his hands until he trusted her. “Tony,” Her tongue scorched. “Why do you think it is that I’m here? That I’m always here?”


And god did that hurt, but she dug down with nails and teeth to say: “I have no one.”

Silence. Too little, too late, and something in Tony splintered. All in the eyes.
She felt skinned. “I came into this job with nothing, and whatever time I spend with you? Take that and multiply it by eight, and that’s how much I spend with Jarvis.”

All in the eyes. Breathe.

“I don’t have you. I don’t have anyone.” And something in her throat rasped: “But one day out of the blue, I had him.”

Like a miracle.

She kept breathing. "I have him and only him. Tell me to burn down half the world to keep it that way, and what do you think I’ll do?”

His eyes were like oil, like the promise of a fire. It could be a conflagration, and yet—

That was the moment that they finally had kinship.

“Get it?” She asked.

And he took her wrist into his hands. His fingers caught at the ridges where his nails had gone under her skin. To stop her. To hold her at that table, just until she could understand (and would never understand) what he was saying. She couldn't even remember getting them.

He traced her palm with his thumb. “Got it.”

She counted his lashes; felt his breath on her breath.

He let go. “Welcome to the team, Potts.”

And she felt a thunderhead pass unspent. “Happy to be here.”

/~/~/~/

There’d come a day with rain. A thousand of them, but for now—

/~/~/~/

“What’s the game plan?”

“Keep your mouth shut and act like nothing’s changed.” He stuck a slice of grapefruit between his teeth and then offered another to her. “Let me worry about Rhodey.”

She took it. “Worry how.”

“Honeybear got his I am the Law, hear me roar out of his system. I’ll just insinuate the whole thing was my fault, and the rest will manage itself.”

“And he’ll believe that?” She wouldn’t believe that.

He shrugged. “No, but he knows me well enough he can’t quite be sure I didn’t fuck it up. He’ll back off.”

“Fair.” She held out her palm. Tony put another slice of grapefruit on it.

She ate that too.

“And with that settled,” He grinned. “How long you think I can keep you in here before Jarvis
worms his way up?”

She checked her watch. “Give it another forty-five.”

“Bold.”

“My feelings were hurt, Mr. Stark.” She batted her lashes. “Jarvis is very attentive when I’m
delicate.”

“God forbid your feelings be at risk.”

She fluffed her skirts. “Right?”

And he sideled over. “Pretty dress there; very fussy. Very French cuisine.”

He wouldn’t. “And?”

He cocked a brow. “You look like a cupcake.” And then leered at her in clear anticipation of a
meltdown. It wouldn’t be the first time. It wouldn’t even be the twelfth.

And that sort of smugness couldn’t be suffered. “I,” She corrected. “Am an adorable cupcake.”

His jaw dropped. “What.”

She fluttered.

“It’s no fun when you escalate!”

“Are you saying I’m not?” She dabbed at her eyes. “Jarvis would say I’m adorable. I’m hurt.”

Tony opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it; jammed another bit of fruit into her hand. “Eat your
fucking grapefruit. I don’t pay you for this.”

“Technically—”

“Eat.”

/~/~/~/

She ate it with a smile.

Chapter End Notes

In which it turns out I am not in fact dead, Tony does not fuck around when it comes to
his kids, Pepper hits back, Jarvis Does What He Wants and the implications are
terrifying, and Tony continues his food-based insults at clothing. You know, a totally
productive chapter.

Also, phreaking is basically mimicking the system of tones (back in ye olden times)
that were used to route long-distance calls. If you could reproduce the sounds over a
handset, you could open free lines for yourselves. We’re just going to pretend that was
still possible in 1988 when Jarvis was born (as by that point, phreaking had been
mostly thwarted by using computerized phone systems. Oh, the irony.)
And if it wasn't clear what Pepper and Tony were so agitated by in Tony's baby-Jarvis story...there are two prevailing themes (theories?) with AI. Either "They are controlled by/have to listen to humans due to their programming", or they are controlled/have to listen...until they figure a way off the leash and then proceed to murder everyone. What happened here was, Jarvis was never on that first step. There is no leash. Tony can stymie Jarvis, sure, but if Jarvis doesn't want to he can't be FORCED to do anything. Or forced to stop. He is the absolute king of rules-lawyering.

The world is basically surviving purely on the fact Tony raised a child with decent morals. Let that sink in.
Release

Chapter Summary

Since this is the only time I've had the in-fic calendar line up with the real world, this chapter will go up tonight.

Happy New Year, everyone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In the end, Christmas passed by with little fanfare. Between her and Tony aggressively refusing to acknowledge it, and Jarvis’s actual indifference…it was certainly something.

Rhodes squinted at them. “You two are unholy.”

“I have no idea what you’re implying.” Tony said, blithe, and took a sip from his cup. “Hmmm. This is fantastic, what was it again?”

"Tieguanyin,” She turned her own teacup delicately. “The Jade blend grown out of Fujian Province. Lightly baked, flowery to the palette, said to be closer to a Green than an Oolong.”

Tony smacked his lips. “I can tell.”

Rhodes looked completely unimpressed. The beautiful thing about pretending she and Tony had been in a fight, and that Rhodes had called her out on her response, was that it allowed her to be petty. It’d be out of character not to be. Honest to god.

The Colonel slid his hands apart. “Who do I have to bribe to get some eggnog around here?”

“And why would you need that?” Tony took another sip, and she mirrored him. No one had told her judgmental, synchronized tea drinking could be this fulfilling. All of her life before this had been wasted.

Rhodes' mouth twitched. “There’s this holiday, see. Poinsettias, lights on trees, big jolly guy in a red suit. Am I ringing any bells?”

“Not a one.” Tony swiveled. “Miss Potts, take a note.”

Her Blackberry materialized in-hand. “Yes?”

“Arrange delivery of eggnog and…oh, three poinsettias to Colonel Rhodes' residence. Make sure they’re festive; I support my friends in their delusions.”

“A few billion people celebrate.” Rhodes claimed, but he honestly didn’t sound that exasperated. The whole thing felt like an old argument, and a friendly one at that.

She still typed with her thumb and mouthed: “Eggnog. Poinsettia. Three.”

And Tony smirked. “Just because it’s a mass delusion doesn’t mean it’s not a delusion, buttercup.”
Rhodes threw out his arms, frustration wholly exaggerated, and Tony shared a glance with her and winked.

She almost smiled back. She almost laughed.

But the thing was, she was still skirting Rhodes and in response, the man was being genial to the point of discomfort. Tony was playing peacemaker while belligerently acting like he was doing anything but, and the three of them kept carrying on like nothing had cracked beneath the surface.

And if Jarvis was staying out of the way even more so than usual—

Tony took a drink. She mirrored him.

“Heathens.” Rhodes said, and it was almost lovely.

/~/~/~/

Someday, she promised herself, it wouldn’t be *almost*.

/~/~/~/

Things settled into an odd sort of cadence after that. Even with the dramatic upheaval, she still managed to plow through most of her original plan for Tony’s time at home. Accompany her boss to SI meetings to keep down the gossip, write his speech for the Christmas Party, sit in on a fluff piece from the LA Times that saw Tony back at his most breathtakingly charming.

She’d even arranged for him to get caught by the paparazzi entering a strip club. And if the photographers completely missed the fact Tony had bought out the club that night just to sit with the girls eating Pad Thai and chatting, before sending each home with a month’s worth of pay?

That was their own oversight. Obviously.

(He’d just wanted to say hello, and the girls had missed him. And if Tony left that club warm with the perfume of their embraces, his cheeks and jaw covered in lipstick, and content as could be? He’d earned that.)

They capped off the week getting a few staged pictures of Tony, some salacious appearing and some not, to discreetly sell to the tabloids in his absence. The next stint of rehab would only last a month, but four weeks was four weeks. It never hurt to be prepared to feed the wolves.

And while there was a great deal of business swirling about, her life wasn’t exactly lacking for pleasures. Jarvis was making things up to her as if their lives depended on it. An Art showing at the William Turner, a night at the LA Opera, a whirlwind shopping spree down Rodeo, three different dinners under glass and gold she had to keep reminding herself were *dinners* and not *dinner dates* lest her flirting become too outrageous.

And if that wasn’t more than enough, he’d even bought her a pair of *Balmain* coats fresh from their Fall line.

“What if you get *cold*, Pepper.”

“It’s California, dear. I’m not sure what you’re worried over.”

“The risk of hypothermia is a non-zero figure.”

“Well,” She admired the garnet red of it, the spill of fur around her wrists. “Only because it’s non-
zero."

He slipped enticingly near. “Turn a bit, won’t you?”

She pirouetted on the spot.

It was a week of rapidly gathering equilibrium. She and Jarvis kept going on outings that weren’t outings, Tony kept catching her eye behind Rhodes’ back to grin. They all played at normality as if the whole world had gone unchanged.

Except it had; better and worse and each day growing onwards from the next. Something new was building, latticing outwards, shivering and fragile and yet braced by the steel of what came before.

And it wouldn’t stop here. Rhodes left for Ohio. Tony remained steady. The year was winding to its close.

All the while, she flipped her hair just so and wore her lipsticks dark, and thought maybe maybe maybe.

/~/~/~/

The other way Jarvis made up to her, the quiet way, was by digging. Classified digging: hazardous and illegal to the nth degree, and when he came back to her with his answer all pleased with himself and so utterly ease—it’s clear as fucking day that he’s dangerous.

The knowledge passed as a shiver. “Thank you, dearest.”

He demurred it. “Not at all, Pepper. It was nothing.”

And the thing was, to him it probably had been. The barest flicker of effort, and he’d knifed through DOD firewalls in a day.


He settled about her, warm and sweet and so very satisfied that she— “You flatter me.”

That she shuddered bodily. The rush of heat was so wildly inappropriate, that it was breathtaking.

This was the hill she’d die on: admiration of Jarvis. Every gesture, every design, every gorgeous and spectacular motion.

God help her, even his hacking was attractive.

“Jarvis,” And she couldn’t not tell him. “It’s not flattery if it’s true. Competence is a very attractive trait, you know.” Swoon worthy; what else was a girl to do? “Indulge me in noticing you.”

There was a curve. Metamorphosis. Was a presence was an absence given shape. “You have a strange definition towards indulgence.”

“Do I?” To be so known and allowed to know him in turn—she was burning through her body for the want of it. “The heart wants what it wants; I’d like to think you know the feeling.”

There was a silence. “Do you remember your birthday, when we were talking after the ballet? That I had a list of my favorite things about you?”

“I—” She cast back, flushed, and remembered: “Yes. First one starts with an S, though you never actually told me what it was.” Which. Rude.
He felt like a corona around her, like heat spilling off the sun. He felt like that and felt like that until: “Sees me.” He breathed the fire. “She always sees me.”

It crushed the air right out of her lungs. The only given mercy in the world was that she was already sitting; that she could not have her knees felled out from under her a second time.

“I know the feeling.” He finished, and she staggered with it.

“Oh.”

It took another three hours to catch her breath.

|~/~/~/|

Two days later, the expected call came, and she took the answer Jarvis had gifted her (but not the answer he’d gifted her) and inflicted it on someone else. “It’ll be Kuwait.”

Castle’s response was succinct. “Shit.”

There wasn’t much else to say. “If you need anything, Private.”

“I know.” His swallow rasped like sand. “Just—for this—if you ever need somebody to have your back again.”

It was enough. “You’ll be first on the list.”

|~/~/~/|

The ocean rolled black. Bleak. The windows were angled to let the crash of it sweep through the room. She swayed with the rhythm and tucked her last pearl hairpin in. She surveyed the arrangement. “I swear by all that is holy, we’ll have our party next year.”

Jarvis answered dryly. “I wasn’t casting aspersions on your honesty.”

She ignored the offered clemency. “I just didn’t have it in me to tell him no.”

“Which I have no issue with.” He soothed. “I’m sure we’ll manage our New Year’s plan someday, given better circumstance.”

But she didn’t want to be soothed. She wanted to whine. “I know that, but—”

“We’ll enjoy ourselves regardless.” And he dropped in layers, like the fall of something massive barely grazing the coast. “Shall we?”

In that grasp, she felt very lovely and very fragile and very annoyed. “I suppose.”

“That’s the spirit.” There was a gentle shove. “Off we go.”

It was an act of great willpower that had her leaving the bedroom at a glide instead of a stalk. Having Jarvis at her back might have helped in that; she could be talked into giving credit.

Tony met her at the sunroom with shoulders rolled loose. The V-neck sweater he was wearing was dark and pleasantly soft. The slacks beneath it were a very nice touch, such a nice touch in fact, that she could completely ignore that he was only wearing socks below that.

She did a little sway-and-turn for his perusal and, quite possibly, for the benefit of the cameras. Sue
her. Something this short, clinging, and in a gold-metal so pale it looked white? She’d earned her preening twenty-fold, thank you very much.

“Goddamnit.” Tony groaned. “The one time you dress situation appropriate, and I don’t get to take you in public!”

Her hands skimmed down. “What a shame.”

He despaired. “Why do you do this.”

She regarded him placidly. “Your pain sustains me.”

“I knew it.”

“Right,” Jarvis interjected. “Hors d’oeuvres?”

The distraction worked. In short order, she and Tony were sitting in front of the TV with three platters of finger food laid, a bottle of champagne open, and the live-feed from Times Square on the screen.

She eyed the alcohol. “Shouldn’t you be…?”

Tony poured a glass. “I shouldn’t be, which is why I’m drinking vicariously.” And slapped it to her hand. “Bottoms up.”

Well, as long as he wasn’t drinking on his pain meds, she could live with this. Pepper threw back half the glass.

“Atta girl.” And he topped her off and offered a plate. “Now, shrimp-thingy or olive-thingy?”

Her fingers picked through. “You have such a way with words.”

“I’m an oratory inspiration to all.” He agreed. “And now that you’re here and I’m here and Jarvis is here.” His grin turned frightening. “Let me tell you about the great internal-clock debacle of 1995.”

Jarvis flung himself across. “You really don’t need to bore Miss Potts with that.”

“Don’t I?” Tony’s smile was a thing of terror. “Do you know how long I’ve been waiting to share your baby stories?”

Her own grin blossomed. “Embarrassing baby stories?”

Tony practically glowed. “Those are the only kind I tell, I’ll have you know.”

“I take it back.” Jarvis interjected. “We can still go elsewhere!”

Her mouth slanted hungry. “But darling, we promised, and Mr. Stark is sharing.”

Tony bared his teeth to the ceiling. “Turn-about’s a bitch, isn’t it buddy?”

The noise Jarvis made in response was positively strangled.

~/~/~/~/

Midnight came on the terrace. The wind was cool, she was wearing Balmain, Tony was yet in his
socks. Everything of him had smoothed like dark water to stone. Familiar; the smoothness of the sea in the places it’d been wearing through for eons.

Somewhere from inside the house, the countdown spiraled out.

Tony didn’t look to them. “Getting here wasn’t a sure thing, was it?”

It hadn’t been. She ached with the knowledge of it, and Jarvis pulsed with that shared pain. “No Sir, it wasn’t.”

She couldn’t live another year like this.

“So…” Tony’s hands wavered, and there was still so much space left empty. The light breaking from the doors, the stretch of the night, everything that they still couldn’t say locked between the three of them.

It was all that they had.

The champagne had felt so light on her tongue. “We know.”

He wavered. “Just—you’re both here, and I—we’re good. This is good.”

It was too much and too heavy, and she needed more alcohol for this. An ocean.

Jarvis broke the tension clean. “Are we having feelings-time, Sir?”

And she watched Tony visibly wall himself up. “How dare you, speaking that profanity in my house.”

“You house.” Jarvis scoffed, as if that was the most absurd notion he’d ever been forced to entertain.

There was a roar of cheering from inside, a riot of joy happening somewhere in the world. Confetti raining, the sky on fire, rebirth after rebirth and still going strong. It was muffled by the time it reached them.

Cool and dark, Jarvis a wraith, her in her coat and Tony yet in his socks. God, this world of theirs. She pressed the barest kiss to Tony's cheek. “Happy New Year.”

He bussed her cheek in return. “Happy New Year.” And blew a kiss towards the house. “Happy New Year, J.”

There was an echoing: “To you as well, Sir.”

“And on that point,” Tony pulled his phone. “I gotta call to make.”

In the open acoustics of the sky, the wind felt like a thousand veils. Jarvis almost close but never more. Her wanting and unable to voice it, and only finding it in herself to ask: “Who gets the honor of Tony Stark’s first call of the year?”

And Tony’s smile was shy. “Mama Rhodes.”

She flinched away. “I’ll leave you to it.” And felt a coil of Jarvis reach out. Almost grasping. Almost, and she followed it inside.

She shed her coat on the nearest chair, and tried not to think of Tony and that soft little smile that
could crumble her. The coil tautened.

“Jarvis, Happy Ne—”

“Not yet.” He pleaded. “The workshop, if you could?”

“I could.” She judged her heels, the floating, how much champagne she could yet taste in her throat. “Service elevator?”

“Right away.” And she heard its doors glide open. Jarvis followed her in, and she rocked on heel: hands on the bars, knees weak, head tilting into a wall. Floating.
Sparkling.
Heat climbing the column of her spine. “Jarvis.”

“Always impatient.” He sounded so terribly fond.

Heat pulsed and yet her heart ached. “You know me.”

“I do.” And the doors slid open. “After you.”

She stepped out and he wove around her. Twined; ankles, knees, wrists, shoulders. She took a shuddering breath and tried to keep her feet.

This wasn’t happening. This wasn’t happening.

“Pepper,” He asked. “I’d like to try something. Could you put out your arm?”

This was happening.

She didn’t hesitate. There was no warning, no way to prepare herself for what was to come. The reverberation hit every wall and hummed straight to the bone. It rushed vast. Deep; the echoing of waves buried miles beneath bedrock.

It came as a surprise, then, that his first touch along her arm was softer than a brush of silk.

“Can you feel that?”

She nodded shakily.

He curved. “Can you show me where?”

God. God. She touched a finger to the inside of her wrist, traced behind him on the path of where he was still absolutely touching her.

The brush became a glide. “Do you feel that more, or less?”

The heat inside her was a burn. “More.”

“Alright.” And the single trace became two. Five. Nine. Up her wrist and to the crook of her elbow, all along the back of her arm. Her fingers. Her palm. Swimming, streaming. Her breathing hitched, and the shaking of her back spread to her abdomen. The nine became one; became something holding her from the tips of her fingers to the edge of her shoulder. The vibration hummed all the
way to the base of her skull.

Her tongue worked. “It feels...”

His voice was a rasp against her temple. “Yes?”

And her eyes swept shut. “Lovely.” Like the chord of a harp plucked. Like the very first flush of inebriation.

Like a buzz she would chase for years.

“Pepper,” He said. “Darling.”

Her heart was frantic. Her lungs were burning. Her eyes were open.

“Can I try something?”

She found her breath. “Yes.”

“Happy New Year.” And then—

It broke across her mouth with the heat of a star. A nova. Sharp and hot. Electric touch; lancing up her cheek and down her chin and all the way to the fluttering of her lashes. It was soft. A mirage. A brand.

It’d be a scar she’d never recover from.

He slipped away, and the only thing burning hotter than her mouth was her thighs was her—

“Jarvis,” She shook. “That better have meant something, if it didn't—” He could break her. He was the end and the beginning; the air in her lungs and the tide past her feet. He was there and he could break her.

Always, and he was the very gravity that held her. “I know what I want it to mean, Pepper.”

And it was shattering; a man not dissimilar in his feelings. It was her very unmaking and all she could think was: I'm not alone in this.

She found one eye. Five. A thousand. She wondered what he saw with each in her. “A kiss is still a kiss, a sigh is just a sigh.”

He finished quietly: “The fundamental things apply, As time goes by.”

It was midnight, and somehow, the dawn was breaking.

“Dearest.” She felt like crying.

“Darling.” He felt so gentle.

But he wouldn’t let her cry if he could help it. “You did say that if you don’t kiss someone at midnight, it portends a year of loneliness.”

Her heart was beyond saving. A hiccups bubbled. “Then one more can’t hurt. We need to make sure it took, right?”

He ignited, everywhere and everywhere, but his voice was right against her when he asked: “How
about two? A double might cancel itself.”

Oh god. “That is a very serious risk.” She couldn't survive this. “We can’t chance it.”

“Never.” And he descended.

And in that space of movement she was giggling. Light light light. Nothing to hold onto, no shoulders to cling to, just the wall behind her and gravity riding all. Light. Tipping her head back and letting him kiss her once, twice, thrice. Effervescent. Shards of it, not there and there, and she couldn’t find a breath to hold it.

God. God. God. People shouldn’t be this happy; she shouldn’t get to be this happy. The world wasn’t built to hold moments this heartbreakingly aligned.

“There.” And he receded in a wave. “To a better year.”

She tried and failed to remember life before this. “No loneliness for anyone. You promised.”

“I have a habit.” And he clung close, like sunlight on her shoulders. Like an inescapable truth.

“We have a habit.” She corrected, because there had been so many between them, and none would ever be more precious than this. “After Tony goes back to rehab. After.”

He circled tight. “After.”

There was no need to name it yet, this thing trembling between them.

“But that doesn’t mean,” That they couldn’t hold it close. “That you can’t kiss me hello every day until he does.”

“Oh?” There rose a spark. “And what about goodbye?”

She smiled so wide that it hurt. “No reason we can’t be thorough about it.”

He dipped in slyly. “Indeed. It'd be irresponsible for us to do otherwise.”

“And we can’t have that.”

“Hardly.” And he softened his descent. “Pepper, I have no idea how to do this.”

The world was in soft focus; Vaseline on the metaphorical lens. All memory had become fever, and there no way for them to fail. “All that matters is that you want to do this. Everything else is details, and we’re good at those.”

“I do,” he said. “And we are. But until then. After.”

It was a promise they could keep. “Until then.”

And her hand curled up to bring him down to earth.

~/~/~/~/

In the half-light of the workshop, he kissed her goodbye for the year.

In the half-light on them, he kissed her hello for the new.
Science and romance through acoustics! Or...something like it.

And look, I said there'd be a seduction, I just didn't say it'd be a LONG one. These sorts of things don't last if both parties are aggressively making moves.

And also, there is just no way they could both mistake a New Year's kiss a second time for anything other than what it was. Everyone's cards were on the table. Everyone knew what they wanted. And Pepper and Jarvis have a THING for dramatic kissing on New Year's anyways, so.

Now if they could just get Tony out of the house....

(Note: the 'kiss is still a kiss' Pepper and Jarvis were quoting at each other, were lines from the song "As Time Goes By" which was written by Herman Hupfeld in 1931, and featured very famously in the movie Casablanca. Which is obviously where Pepper and Jarvis know it from. They were using a very famous romantic song to signal to each other that they were on the same page without actually saying it.)

I hope all of you have a Happy New Year!
Her eyes opened on a new world. Pale walls—the humming of them. The dust in the air. The horizon blue.

It was the strangest feeling. Calm. Aching. Warm. Serrated. As if some part of her that had been wrenched bloody and loose, had finally been carried back to her. She felt like she could hold it; like she could take the hemorrhaging of it and put it back inside her chest.

Her lashes swept down. It felt like a fever dream, still. The black of the sea, the elevator descending, Jarvis draping over her like falling star until—

The heat of that memory would never die.

She found breath in the space between them. “What was it, that made you pick last night?”

The windows rippled cold-white, and Jarvis slipped the expanse. “I promised myself I’d stop letting chances slip by, even if I…wasn’t a hundred percent sure you held a similar attraction. I was at least built to learn from my mistakes.”

“Born.” She curled on her side. “Born to learn.” The same as the rest of them all stumbling in the dark.

“Possibly.” There was another ripple, another slipstream of him that was far from her. She didn’t quite know how to feel about the distance. Not too soon. Not too close.

Not soon enough.

Not near enough.

But they’d promised each other—after. And Tony was still in the house.

She rose onto her elbows. “Was my attraction not obvious by how much lipstick and pretty clothing I’ve been wearing around? Because I thought I was being blatant.” Glaringly. Like a neon sign.

There was a lengthy pause. “…so that’s what that was.”

Good fucking lord. “Oh my god, was all of that effort for nothing?”

“It’s just—you always look lovely!” He objected. “It could have been confirmation bias. I had suppositions and aspirations but not facts.” And god forbid he lack those.

She threw up her hands. “Then take this for a fact: I’m wildly attracted to you. You eclipse the very sun. I look upon you and literally despair.”

“Oh.” And it was a strange; awed and deflating and somehow defeated at the end of it.

Something had been brought back to her, and it was hemorrhaging still. “I thought…I thought that you knew.”
“I’d hoped.” He sounded strained. “And that’s—I’m very glad for it; that we can have this. It’s just, I’m just—” There was another silence. “You know that I…have a similar attraction, but not the same kind as yours, don’t you?”

The problem took on shape. Shadow. And she knew: “It doesn’t have to be the same kind, from me to you or you to me.” And her head rushed. “Jarvis…can you tell me? What attraction is like for you?”

There was a backshift, a long slide, and then him saying: “I’d hoped we could have dated awhile, before getting to this.”

It was only by the skin of her teeth that she didn’t start wiggling on the spot. “I’m glad we’re on the same page about dating.”

The room thawed a fraction. “We most certainly are.”

“Good. Excellent.” And she pressed palms-flat to the bed. “But back to the attraction-thing, you’re being cagey.”

“Hardly. Not a whit, you could even say that I—”

“Are trying to go off on a tangent instead of answering.” She accused. “Cagey.”

He sighed. She sighed back. It nearly descended into a competition of increasingly aggressive sighing, but they contained themselves at the final moment. They locked down, smoothed all away to softness and then silence.

Their eyes met through the glass.

He felt like continental drift. Colossal. “Cerebral. Emotional. Intellectual. It feels like I want to see your face every second of every hour; the way you move, the way your hair falls, the way your head tilts back to laugh. I feel the absence of all those years before we met. I’m jealous of those that shared them with you; those who received all those moments of your voice that I never got to hear. To record, to—keep. I can know your pulse and your radiant body heat and the length of your every stride. I can map the golden ratio you make in every moment, and yet…” There was a tectonic shift of the very earth. “It never feels like enough.”

It felt like being crushed, raised up, made sublime. She could barely breathe for the scale of it. “It feels like wanting.”

“But not as you want.” He answered, and it fell between them as if that was some great indictment against him.

And that couldn’t be suffered a single minute more for him to believe. “That’s romantic attraction. Blindly, wonderfully, I-could-die romantic.” All lit aflame and like a torch against the night. Any god could have struck her down in that moment, and she would have died grinning because Jarvis wanted her back. But the beautiful thing was, she didn’t have to die. She got to live it. All these days and months stretching out, and they’d all be hers. His. Together and together and no longer yearning for more than could be possible.

She hadn’t meant to have this conversation so early, but it was clear now that it was needed. Whatever embarrassment she felt, she took it piece by piece and buried it, until her pulse beat steady. Cards on the table; she’d promised them this. “You don’t feel sexual attraction.”

It seemed to strike him broadside, seemed to punch it out of him to answer: “No.”
A storm churned and passed away. She waited out its end. “I feel romantic and sexual attraction. And to be clear, it’s directed at you. Entirely.”

“I’m aware of that now.” And he barreled on to ask: “But this doesn’t bother you? The imbalance?”

“Does it bother you?”

“Yes.” He answered. “It feels unfair to you when you could have someone who’d feel both.”

That was…not an unreasonable thing to think. A little abrupt in its delivery, but not irrational in its content. Strangely, the whole notion steadied her. The sheets pooled off her hips. She slipped to the edge of the bed, lacy nightgown and all, and crossed her knees and pressed one daintily angled foot to the floor. “Do you think that I’m pretty?”

Jarvis swerved like she’d thrown out a bomb. “You are breathtakingly lovely, and I will not hear differently from any quarter.”

Now was not the time to swoon, it wasn’t. “Do you feel like I’m pretty?”

A bewildered pause. “…is this a question of aesthetics? Because I can assure you outright, that you are very—”

“No, dear. This is a question of feelings. Do you ever look at me and think, gosh, she’s so pretty I could just about burst?”

He mulled that. “More that I could make a trillion copies of every frame of footage I have of you, hoard them in my servers, and I’d still be waiting desperately for the next time I’d see you.”

“Alright, a little intense.” A lot intense. Flush-worthy intense. “But that’s it. That’s what it feels like.”

“I will have to take your greater experience to account.” There was a sharp twist of him, space curving unto serration until: “But my thinking you pretty doesn’t become…I know where my limits are, Pepper.”

She shook her head. “That’s not what I’m trying to do. If you say you don’t feel sexual attraction, you don’t. No arguments. But when I’m in a relationship, one of the check-boxes I need ticked is for my partner to think that I’m pretty. That’s something my vain little heart can’t live without. But sexual attraction?” She raised a single hand, wiggled it, and flipped it over. “Considering everything else you’re bringing to the table, I’ll survive without.”

There was a terribly confused shuffling from his end of the room. “I don’t follow.”

This was the strangest mercy she’d given him yet. “Relationships are compromises; you get certain things and give up others in order to be in them. For the most part, dating means giving up sexual contact with others while devoting your time and emotional energy to the person you’re with and receiving that in turn. If you’re with someone long enough, they eventually have a say in where you both live, your hobbies, your money, the things you eat, the places you go. Basically: the life you build together.”

She gestured between them. “With you, I’ll give up having a partner who’s sexually attracted to me. What I get is someone who knows me, who’s funny and charming and debonair and wonderful to be around. I get to have someone whose very presence has me feeling delicate and adored, not to mention jaw-droppingly gorgeous.” Briefly, painfully, she swallowed an old hurt. “I give up that
small thing, that one thing, and I have someone who cares about me in a way I thought I’d never have again. That’s priceless. That’s worth most anything I could ever think to pay.”

It was hemorrhaging; that part of her that was still bleeding outside her body. She should put it back inside. Swallow it whole.

Glass and air and light made prismatic, and something in it sloughed away. His voice wrapped down on her like a vow. “You could have that care without giving up a single thing. I will always hold you dear.”

But the thing was: “I want to.”

And it was like bowing mountains low with a breeze. “Then I can hardly say no.”

“Jarvis.” He was going to kill her. “I want to be with you, and I’m a one-man kind of girl. There will be people who are sexually attracted to me, and I will enjoy that became I’m vain and then I will turn them down flat because I’ll have you. We’re going to have to negotiate a certain amount of hand holding and hugging and I don’t know—dancing with other people platonically, but I will be fine. I will be better than fine as long as I know that you want this with me.”

“I think my want on the matter has already been established.”

God, the way he vocalized want. She tried to discreetly re-cross her knees. “So it has.”

And he swung low. Warped; eye-level and like a heat mirage to offer: “Since we have that firmly established, I need you to know something. While I may not feel sexual attraction at all—” He pressed hard. “I would like to experience sexual involvement with you.”

And her brain short circuited. “What.”

His voice had her shaking in its grip. “I thought I was rather clear.”


“I’ve enjoyed every undertaking we've explored together.” He rumbled. “Why wouldn't I enjoy this just as thoroughly?”

Her thighs pressed together into something blistering. Oh god. Oh god. “The champagne’s gone to my head.”

He reached out. “That’s certainly a feat.” Like a caress up her arm up her shoulder up her — “Considering it’s been ten hours and forty-nine minutes since your last glass.”

She shivered. She ignored him to say: “It must have, otherwise I have to contemplate how someone who doesn’t experience sexual attraction, just came on to me more thoroughly than anyone has come on to me in my life.”

He responded sweetly. “Yours is a great and personal vexation.”

“Shut up.”

“And it’s very lovely to know what attraction looks like on you.” He crooned. “I can finally go back through my archives for a definitive labeling.”

“Shut up.”
He just kept humming pleasantly against her shoulder. “Excellent talk. Thank you, Pepper.”

“Why do I even like you.”

“I have some very illuminating recordings from the last few minutes, if it's slipped your mind.”

“Why.” She whispered to herself.

But with her blood rushing hot, her heart hammering, and Jarvis very much likely to yet kiss her hello that morning—

~/~/~/~/

She knew exactly why.

Chapter End Notes

Flirt, flirt, flirt.

Anyhow, like Pepper, I also didn't realize this conversation would be happening this soon. But it occurred to me that Jarvis is likely trying to tamp down on his tendency to stealth Pepper into relationships with him under false pretences. So, good job at communication, all. High fives.

Anyways, hi, yes. I am not dead. My Bossman went out on an unexpected surgical leave at the beginning of January, and our dumb but weirdly important department has only two people. I went from Lackey Who People Periodically Forget Exists, to The Adult Who is in Charge of Things. I did not want to be The Adult Who is in Charge of Things, but sometimes we don't get to choose.

Anyhow, it turns out that being a writhing mass of anxiety given temporary human form, does not lend itself towards creative writing endeavors. So. Yeah. Who fuckin' knew.

So kinda-sorta-but-not-really sorry for the wait. Bossman still isn't back, but I'm hoping he'll be in again before February is done. Hopefully by then my stress levels will decompress enough to leave me the energy to write. Thank you everyone for sticking with this.
Tony cast a wary eye across the kitchen. “What are you two giggling about?”

She swung her head towards him. A dozen of Jarvis’s cameras swiveled with her.

Tony startled so hard that his mug clanked off the counter.

“Nothing.” They trilled.

Tony opened his mouth. Closed it. Came to the inescapable but wholly wise conclusion that: “I don’t even want to know.”

“Of course, Mr. Stark.”

“Anything you say, Mr. Stark.”

They beamed at him.

He raised his mug between them like a shield. “I regret at least four things.”

“That’s two more than usual.” Jarvis whispered. “Happy day, Miss Potts. It’s a World Record.”

That, quite naturally, set her off on another giggle fit. Jarvis followed her a moment after.

Tony hissed: “Children.”

And their giggling spiraled into laughter.

\/~~/~/

Before Tony went, they saw Obadiah once. The Beverly Wiltshire; Penthouse Suite in mosaic marble and a full brunch spread.

The big man himself caught her in the parlor. “Is he good for this?”

Pepper guarded details jealously. *Religiously*. But in this, at least, she could be momentarily generous. “As good as he’s ever going to be. You?”

Obadiah’s mouth ticked up. “This isn’t my first time ghosting CEO for a Stark.” And his hand slid down her arm; the thumb once crooked in her elbow now pressed at her wrist.

His palm was warm. It felt too pleasant; intense in the way everything did when one was skin-starved. She didn’t dwell. “And what was the time before this?”

His eyes lifted skywards. “God…the last two years Howard was on, probably. He was more interested in drinking and whoring and whatever special project the DoD had him working, rather than running the damn company.” He squeezed her wrist. “Compared to that, this’ll be a cakewalk. Tony won't even be underfoot.” Not like Howard had been. She was suddenly and inexplicably glad she'd never had the *pleasure* of working for the elder.
Small mercies were yet hers to have.

She arched an eyebrow. “The last thing we need is you getting burnout, Mr. Stane.” *Too,* she didn’t add.

He let her loose. “That’d be a crying shame, wouldn’t it?”

“Of all sorts.” Like becoming the collapse of the company from which half of Tony’s wealth was anchored. No big thing. She clasped her hands together neatly. “We only want the best for you. Don’t break our hearts.”

The crow’s feet at his eyes crinkled deep. “I’ll see what I can manage.”

And with that, Pepper bowed-out to rouse Tony from the salon and direct breakfast to the table. By the time her boss was seated and had a napkin across his lap, the meal was laid and she’d faded into the walls. There were times to be heard and seen, times to be seen but not heard, and as for the rest—even.

Nonexistent was wholly within her repertoire.

“Don’t mind the details,” Obadiah had directed, sawing through a triple stack of French toast. The bread was still steaming; warm-sweet and drizzled with maple-candied pecans. “I’ll handle Marketing and R&D bitching, and Jones will keep his fist on Production. We’re not going anywhere with Iraq knocking on the door.”

She didn’t bat a lash, but her mouth—it felt like steadying a knife to be silent.

Tony’s jaw did something belligerent, ruinous, but in a flicker of movement she couldn’t quite follow—he leaned back into his chair and shrugged. “Wasn’t sweating it, Obie. Financials?”

“They didn’t make me CFO for nothing, you know.”

Tony shrugged again. Easy. “Gotta keep you on your toes somehow. Software?”

She didn’t trust the motion.

“Stanton and Moretti.”


“I’ve got a hand in there, too.” And Obadiah jabbed his fork. “Just eat your bacon. I want you going into this thing solid. You take care of yourself, and we’ll handle whatever the Pentagon throws at us.”

Tony mouthed something, silent. She couldn’t read the shape of it.

“Yeah,” He said. “Yeah.” And she saw the exact moment something in him just...disengaged. Buried. Sloughed off and away, and she trusted that landslide the least. “You have fun with the fruit-salad Brass, I won’t take that from you. Just don’t give ‘em the keys to the Royce when I’m gone. Comprende?”

Obadiah snorted. “I’ll protect the Rolls virtue from the rank and file.”

The lines of Tony were languid but hardly settled. “I’ll take back over when I’m done.” He said. “All of it.”
“When you’re ready.” Obadiah corrected, and he gestured wide. “Eat up, kiddo. You got a lotta miles ahead of you.”

There was a moment of silence; a moment of pointed eye-contact held across marble and chrome.

Tony stuck his fork into a plate and took a bite.

~/~/~/~/~/~/~

Both men hugged at the door, Tony slapping Obadiah’s back and the bigger man pressing a hand between Tony’s shoulders. He muttered something into the shorter man’s hair that she couldn’t hear.

Tony rolled his eyes at it. Jabbed a little. Grinned.

Obadiah scoffed and let Tony go with barely a shove. All of it was gentle; minding Tony’s left side without even seeming to give that care a thought.

Something in her bubbled up warm at the sight. Candy. Sweet-maple. Fizzing. There was nothing else to do. She smiled at the big man once, soft in the shadow of Tony’s departure.

~/~/~/~/~/~/~

Obadiah smiled back.

~/~/~/~/~/~/~

It happened easier that second time, the leaving. Her eyes watching Tony’s back, his shoulders, his hands; these pieces of a man she was following but could not follow. Unknowable. Unreachable. Still changing shape before her eyes.

The doors locked behind them in Malibu. The gate slotted shut. Jarvis would let her back in the moment she asked, and she would. Not a day would go by with them apart. They’d keep each other all sorts of company before this month was out.

In Oregon, Tony leaned over to buss her cheek. She hadn't seen it coming. The moment his skin was by her skin, she smelled his cologne: chypre and mossy and with his sweat warm behind it. The scent changed as she breathed it. Salt, dead-heat, then astringent; all acid and her teeth hurting backwards to the jaw. Enamel on enamel. Messy; pouring dark and breathing and breathing and breathing through the dead weight and the dead lungs and a chest not moving but to crumple-crack and break through—

By some miracle, she held her flinch in.

Tony drifted back, mild. Threw her a jaunty salute. “See you soon, Potts.”

She made herself prim. “Promises, Mr. Stark.” And held still until Tony stepped into the facility and could not look behind him.

Held still until the memory of that fear-sweat came sliding off her skin.

She breathed in.

She breathed out.
She breathed in.

/--/--/--/

The smell of his cologne followed her back onto the plane.

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter to get me back into this again. Also a short chapter because what follows this was too tonally jarring to stuck in this one. So. Compromises all around.

Anyways: in which Pepper and Jarvis are flirting way off in the background, Tony goes back to rehab, and Obadiah is low-key sketchy. (And god is it hard to write him suspicious in-text without making it obvious, someway flagging it to the POV character, or making said POV character an idiot not to notice. Ugh.)

Beyond that...real life talk. In no particular order: my boss came back. This somehow made things twenty times worse. I have been assigned solely to the Hell Project from Hell which is hellish and of the devil and why do bad things happen to good people. There was a death in the family. There was a funeral. There was family drama of about six decades smashed into a three day period. There was an unfortunate amount of travel on back to back to back weekends.

The inclination to write anything only returned to me this Wednesday so...new chapter, everyone. I'm not dead.
Baltimore in January was a bitterly cold experience. The Balmain jackets that had seemed frivolous in California, were nigh on necessary-to-life when she stepped off the plane in Maryland. Jarvis was unspeakably smug when she enumerated her thanks.

Tony had given her plenty of errands to pursue in his absence, and this particular one had started in Boston with her nosing about Longwood Medical and ended a week later at John Hopkins with her courting audiences with those who had specialties like implantable device research or Interventional clinical trials.

She’d been more than a little vague in her reasons for asking, or who she was affiliated with in the attempt. She’d booked all her appointments under Pepper Potts instead of her legal name.

It was one of those questionable, creeping kinds of weeks that unfurled when one was associated with Stark Industries and all the corporate skullduggery therein. None of their competitors need know they were thinking of branching out, and certainly no one in the medical sector needed to kick-off a panic about SI entering the field. The attempts at stonewalling would likely be vicious before this process was even started.

But until that time came, she’d do her damndest not to show their hand. Pepper didn’t doubt someone would eventually fuck this up for them and ignite open warfare, but for as long as she could hold that off, she would.

Tony had been so set on the plan, he’d called her down on his last day home to give the order: “Look, Doctors said I don’t need an ICD now, but the future’s a hell of a big place.” His gaze had been uncharacteristically steady. “I’d like to have something through the FDA and on the market in the next five years. Back-up. God knows what’s available right now is a step above shit.”

It was the first time Tony had spoken to her concretely about the future in nearly a year.

She tried not to startle. “This won’t be easy and it won’t be quick. We’ve barely got a foot in Medical.” Mostly in battlefield defibrillators, as much hardened and miniaturized diagnostic equipment as could be reasonably fit on a helicopter, and little else. It was a far cry from actual implantable devices, let alone trying to enter the civilian sector and warring with the FDA to get there.

But even at her warnings, his wrists stayed loose on his knees. “I know. Obadiah will string me up if I try to get something as intensive as this off the ground right now, but—eventually. When the time’s right.”

When Iraq’s number was in.

She couldn’t imagine a moment in their lives when anything had been timed to rights, but for Tony, she would certainly try. “I wasn’t saying I wouldn’t do it, Mr. Stark.” God. “Any requests?”

His hands had clenched. Released. Tremored. “Feelers. Legalities. Talent Scouting. The usual surface run; you know the score.”

She did. “There’ll be something on your desk when you get back.” And she’d gathered up her
paperwork to begin her retreat upstairs.

But Tony had called out before she could. “Potts?”

She’d glanced over her shoulder; tilted her head just so to show that she was listening.

He matched the tilt. “Be discreet.”

Her eyebrows shot up. Her jaw clicked in a rush not to let it drop. None of it conveyed her complete disbelief of *him* chiding her of *this*.

Her expression, whatever it was, had Tony scoffing: “I’m sorry, did I dare question her holiness, the Inconspicuous Miss Potts: Saint of Los Angeles?” A hand went over his heart. “May God strike me down for the presumption.”

“Be careful, Tony.” She clicked her tongue sharply. “He just might take you up on that.”

Tony smirked. “If only.”

And that was how Boston and Baltimore had been added to her dance card. There had been a brief discussion of her swinging up to the Twin Cities to glance in on their growing medical-device boom, but Pepper had ultimately put her foot down. They weren’t in a rush on this, not on a project that would take years of legwork to get going, and like *hell* was she going up to Minnesota in January if such a thing could be avoided.

And so here on the East Coast she was, watching the frost glazed on the windows glitter with every car that passed them. Dark brick, exhaust, snow. Narrow streets and the hum of Little Italy carrying on into the night. It was pleasant. Cozy. Cozier for the fact that a laptop was open on the table, and she could curl across her seat to say: “It’d be quicker for him to buy a startup, you know that.”

Jarvis hummed along the Bluetooth and watched her from the laptop's eye. “And *you* know how he feels about outsourcing.”

“How in god's name is SI buying a new subsidiary considered outsourcing?”

“You try explaining to him that.”

Which, knowing Tony. “Fair.” She drank a sip of cappuccino that was more whipped-cream than coffee. “I just don’t see a way it’s feasible for SI to keep spreading sideways. We’re about at the limit of what can be managed top-down by Tony’s standards, let alone Obadiah’s. We don’t want this turning into a poorly supervised money-pit.”

“There’s something to be said about breaking a few eggs and new ground.” Jarvis mused. “But heaven help me, I can’t seem to thread the metaphor.”

“How unfortunate.” Her nails clicked against her plate. Baltimore might have been bitterly cold, but it certainly offered enough absurdly decadent cannoli to make up for that failing. “Mr. Stark will be so disappointed. To think; his firstborn son and you can’t even muster an ill-timed allegory.”

The laptop fizzled. “How do you keep turning more vicious the longer I know you?”

“I have layers, darling.”
“You don’t say, sweetheart.”

She wiggled in her seat. Bubbled. Managed to keep that glee inside long enough to croon: “I can be sweet, if that’s what a gentleman looks for.”

He thrummed closer. “Define sweet.”

“Sugar and spice and everything nice.” She batted her lashes. “And your statistical integration of pharmacologically derived data is absolutely breathtaking.”

There was another flicker. “I was promised sweet, Miss Potts.” And he slipped in. Curved. Stitched up her throat and gripped hard to say: “And yet that sounded like a come-on.”

Oh yes. “Come-ons can be sweet.”

“A scintillating claim.” And that dipped-low tone turned amused: “But I’m still not telling you where our first date is happening.”

“Damnit.” And she smacked her cup down. “One little hint won’t kill you.”

“Another interesting claim.” He settled back. “And yet one I regrettably will investigate no further. Now stop using your wiles to try and loosen my tongue; you have another appointment in ten minutes, and Doctor Gian is known to show early.”

“Your tongue.” She muttered, but the opportunity was gone and there was no point in chasing it. She sighed loudly and shuffled her folders until the good Doctor’s data floated to the top. At this rate, she wouldn’t know a thing about their date until she was back in LA and right in the middle of it.

Which, rude.

Why she’d agreed to let Jarvis have first crack at it—god. She knew perfectly well. Trembling air, one kiss into a dozen, her spine liquid among the prisms. The sea-song tide. The want and her want and the litany they could make. At some point, she was really going to have to worry how easily he was talking her into things by doing that. But she would handle that discussion…later. Eventually. At some future and necessary point when she needed Jarvis to stop wooing her into things.

“You don’t tell me anything.” She fussed. “And you’re accusing me of getting mean in our old age.”

His laughter could be heard a coast away. “Chin up, darling.”

Sweetheart. Darling. Dear. The tartness stripped so easily away. “I do like you.”

The barbs came down. The parrying stilled. It was a dance they’d done a thousand times before and would do a thousand times yet, but in this moment—this space—the only thing he became was warm. “I’ve never not liked you.”

Gentle. Sweeping. She wanted to take him in her hands and behind her ribs. She wanted to climb inside him; make a sanctuary of the two of them.

It was a ravenous dream. “That’s good to know.”

A fleeting one, because it could not survive the heat of him swimming close enough to murmur: “I serve at your pleasure.”
A hand flew to her mouth. It covered nothing; accomplished less. It could not even begin to hide her giggling or the flush burning across her face. “Jarvis.”

He nettled smugly. “Did I offend?”

There was no pulling him closer.

“You know exactly what you did.” But that could be survived.

"Do I?"

As long as Jarvis adored her, there was no distance she would fear.

/~/~/~/

She was on the jet a night later, the week wholly spent.

“The mattress and sheets were swapped in LA.” Jarvis promised. “You can sleep for the duration.”

Her sigh was one of relief. “Thank you.” Jarvis, bless him, had noted her refusals to sleep on a mattress Tony had used and acted accordingly. It didn’t matter how they bleached the sheets or stripped it down, there were lines.

Decent people didn’t sleep on beds their bosses had *fucked* in.

“Get some rest.” He plied, and nothing sounded more heavenly to her. The plane was climbing to cruising altitude, and exhaustion had her so heavy she didn’t even glance out a window. She didn’t notice the eastwards turn; didn't watch the glitter of the city falling black into the sea.

Somewhere above the clouds and oblivious to all, Pepper locked the cabin door behind her and tumbled into the sheets.

/~/~/~/

She woke gently, feeling like she’d gotten more sleep than should have been possible for a five hour coastal jump.

“Good Morning, Pepper.”

“Mhhmmmm.” It was about 2AM on PST, but she’d allow that just this once. “Are we coming in for landing?”

“In another twenty minutes, if you’d like to watch the descent.”

She’d seen the drop into LA what must have been a thousand times. Still, the stewardesses got cross if they tried to sleep through landings instead of strapping in. It’d be hypocritical of her to try otherwise when she’d cut down Tony’s bitching on this subject every time it came up.

Slowly, she brushed her teeth in the lavatory and then touched up her makeup and then her hair. It was only with Jarvis nudging at her, that she finally dressed and slipped into the main cabin.

Sunlight flooded through in a *wave*. The intense vertigo of *should be 2AM* followed by *why is there sunlight* tripped over *what the fuck*, and left her utterly frozen.

"Miss Potts?" Jarvis asked.

There was no sign of the stewardesses, so she returned: "Did we divert?" For an extra six hours? Somehow?

"In a manner of speaking." He fluttered at her shoulder. "Why don’t you sit?"

Her head was swimming. Dizzy, and it sent her stumbling into a seat. She couldn't help looking out the window, and that single choice became the moment of freefall.

The coastline was angled wrongly, eastwards, all white-stone and greenery and capped by red-ridged roofs. There were hills upon hills and cliffs upon cliffs, all rolling down until they met the breadth of the sea.

And the water—by god, the water. Every wave was a shimmering, jaw-dropping shade of turquoise. There was no comprehension to be had. Her brain had knocked clean offline. Maybe she was still dreaming in the bed: summery colors, balms and hills, an escape from the pitch-black drop that was LA.

“What?” It came out faintly.

He draped over her head. "We’re on final descent into Aéroport Nice Côte d’Azur, so to your left would be—"

"Le Midi." She knew. "France."

And his descent was far softer. "You couldn’t think I’d let our first date be something as a dime a dozen as Los Angeles, could you?"

The turquoise of the sea looked smeared and lovely, even through the tears in her lashes. "Jarvis."

My god, she thought. My darling one.

“Surprise.” He answered, a little sincere and a little tentative and so full of hope it could rip her heart in two.

“I’ll never be able to top this.” She warbled.

“I don’t care. All I want is for you to be happy, here.” A syncopation of breath. “With me.”

Everywhere. Anywhere. However that might come to pass so she could say— "Always."

“Good.” He was shaking with it. "We’re going to Villefranche-sur-Mer. By the water; I’ve gotten us a château."


And she knew as she had never known, in every fiber, in the shattering and resurrection that was found with every breath—

Knowing. The only knowing.

And someday, she would tell him of it.
It felt so easy to stretch a hand to the wall, to a dark dome of glass nearer than most. A camera eye turned under the drag of her nails.

His eye. His shape. Him on her shoulders, the curve of her spine, and yet under her hand at the end of it all.

She pressed a kiss to the glass. “Then let’s be happy.”

Chapter End Notes

Three guesses at to what Pepper figured out there, and the first two don’t count. (I’m just not saying the exact words in-text, those are being...saved up. For later. But I’m hoping everyone has an inkling.)

Also, with the medical thing. The only way I can reasonably say that SI survived Tony shutting down weapons manufacturing in IM1, was the company being widely diversified. So. Medical tech. Tony would have an interest, and the branching-out has to happen at some point. But of course he'd pick one of the most difficult sectors to get into from a dead stop...

Anyways and more importantly, next chapter: first date!!
The sky was blazing. Towering. Water sleeked off her back under the glow. The rocks near the coastline had been bleached; each jagged and slippery beneath her hands. With a few careful maneuvers, she raised herself from the surf and onto them.

The universe seemed aligned: waves pulsing, hues super-saturated, not a single worry to pull her from this perch. No future to worry on. No past to carry. Just this; the sweet-exhaustion in her shoulders, and the promise of another hour. It was dangerous how easily she could get used to this. How easily she could come to depend.

Slowly, her hands tingled. Numbness leeched. She would have peeled off the insulation of her wetsuit to let naked skin meet sun, but the water was still too cold for that. Maybe. Someday. Some future, summer hour.

The notion flittered. She gazed across the water. The old harbor of la Darse, the sailboats, the pink-yellow houses all cluttering the hills. She could have sat there for hours watching the sunlight arc across it all.

Could have.

Quietly, she clambered up the rocks and towards the true shore. Halfway through her climb, something swiveled in the trees. “Careful!”

She called back: “When am I not careful?”

“Tell me that when you’re not in a position to crack your head open!”

She could do that. Easy. Pepper shimmied her way up the last few rocks and to the landing. It would have been tactless to strike a ta-dah pose for him, but she thought about it. “See? All in one piece.”

There was a huff from the sea-wall. “You could have swam around to the stairs. They were thirty feet away. Thirty.”

“And be parted from you even a moment longer?” She gasped. “Jarvis, I would never.”

His sigh was so deeply put-upon. “I sincerely wish you would.”

Unrepentant, she fluttered her lashes and very unnecessarily peeled her wetsuit down. Her skin was damp, sea-drenched. Shimmering. It caught the eyes of the camera in the trees and up on the second landing and from both corners of the château. With every pretense at careless, she smoothed a hand shoulder to thigh. Fingers soft; slow-like.

Jarvis’s next sigh was more aggrieved than the last.

She grinned. “Lunch?”

“If you’re done torturing me.” He grumbled. The acoustics weren’t quite right to convey the full fit of his pique, but they weren’t quite right anywhere in the château, so she filled in the detail herself
as he said: “Get dressed, darling. We’re having lunch in the city.”

And she quickly set her half-naked preening aside for later. “Are we?”

“Quite.” There was a jostling from him, and she obligingly made for the sea-entry and then inside. He followed her through the marble halls, up the narrow stairs, then hooked her at the bedroom door. “There’s a new body camera on the bureau.”

Oh my. “How new?”

“Fresh off the fabricators as of last week. Smaller, slimmer; better designed to match to your favored color palette.”

She made a deeply thrilled noise. “You’re the best.”

“A claim I can always stand to hear.” He concurred. “Don’t be long.”

“I’ll try, but what if I want to admire the view?” She eyed the walls coyly. “The architecture?”

“We’re on a schedule, can you not do so later?”

“Even if it’s your architecture?”

It was his turn to play coy. “You’re making me blush, Miss Potts.”

“Am I?”

“Don’t be smug, it’s bad for your complexion.” Liar. “Stop dawdling.”

The air became a nudge, but before she could enter the bedroom, she found herself caught again. Daydreams. Reality. Curtains gauzy and balcony doors open. Blue. White. Grey-green. Limestone walls worn by so many hands and years, even they could hold no ghosts. “Will there be?”

He swerved. “Will there be what?”

“A next time? Here.” She was half in love. This place was a cloister, a daydream, a thing wholly able to bring her to her knees.

There was no reluctance. “As long as you wish it so.”

God. The smell was so strong, dust and the sea and those blush-pink ranunculi blooming in the vase by her bed. It was all so lovely and all too lovely, that she realized: “You bought this.”

He didn’t mince. “Did the state of the art cameras in a four-hundred-year old château not clue you in?” The mental arithmetic was both immediate and jaw-dropping. A 17th Century château on the Côte d’Azur that was literally sea-abutting—Jesus bleeding Christ.

Her pulse thudded; juttered. “I think I need to lay down.”

“Did you also overlook what I said about a schedule?”

“At least two hours.” She did not have to feign dizziness. “Three, maybe?”

“Now you’re just being difficult.”

“Am I.”
He glowered. “The things I do for you and our dates.”

“I heard a plural, there.” She touched the walls, the Régence vanity, the flowers he’d left on the bedside table.

“That would be the thing to perk you up, wouldn’t it?”

Be still her heart. “I’m a girl of simple tastes.”

Poor acoustics or not, his snort from the hall was audible.

/~/~/~/

But despite all contrary protests, she slid out of her wetsuit and into a dress in record time. Heels too; the earrings he’d made her, an anklet and a clutch purse and a thread of sapphires at her throat.

Let it never be said Pepper Potts had been late or underdressed when it came to courting.

/~/~/~/

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“About?”

“You, dear. That is what dates are for.”

“That seems a lukewarm question for a first date.”

She glanced to the phone propped against her clutch. “Jarvis, we exhausted every first-date question within two months of knowing each other.” They’d exhausted dates two through nineteen within a year. “We’re going to have to get creative.”

Sunlight settled on her shoulders. The back patio was quiet. Winter was the off-season for Le Midi, and at this late a lunch hour, no one was there but them in the southerly wind.

“Is it a bad thing,” He asked. “To know someone too well before you date them?”

She pondered that. “I think it gives us a leg up. We already know we like each other, and that’s usually what the early dates are for. We just get to skip past all the awkward parts.”

Above, the parasol shading them ruffled in the breeze. Jarvis stirred with it. “My liking you was never in question.”

It scattered shadow. “Good.”

It dappled light. “And what are we skipping ahead to?”

And hers was a coquettish flutter. “That’s for you to find out, isn’t it?”

Her Bluetooth was in. Secure. It let his voice catch at her jaw, scrape like teeth and teeth until—

“Are you putting me on the hunt?”

Sleek and coursing and coming coming coming. A thing at the very edge between wanting and having. Touched off like a wildfire; her mouth, her hands, this heat that was growing at the base of her spine.
She wondered if it could be sweated out, unearthed, dissected; this thing yet cresting inside her.

Her poise was flawless “Perhaps.”

Teeth. Heat. And then—a shock of space. “Such cheek.”

There was no hiding her smile at that; her chin on an upturned palm, fingers curled at her lashes, cheeks heating and hurting because she kept smiling and smiling. “You like my cheek.”

“I told you,” He said. “The liking was never in doubt.”

There were at least a dozen innuendos about cheek to be made here, but today—god. Today. She wanted it drawn out. Torturous. Anticipation so goddamn slow she could taste it.

So, baby steps. Even when he gripped tight. “You’re lovely when you smile.”

And today was shaping up to be quite the charm offensive. “Hush.”

He laughed. “I’d like to see you try.”

If that’s how it was going to be, he was going to rue the day. “What’s the lowest neckline you’ve seen me in?”

Something snarled up. Full-braking. Halted. “Is this a trap.”

“You always think it’s a trap.”

“That’s because it usually is.”

She shrugged, lounged backward; crooked an elbow and admired her nails. “You can leave it unanswered, if you like. It’s a free country. You’ll just have to live with never knowing.”

He was a man more impressed than aghast. “You are terrifyingly devious, do you know that?”

“Careful with the sweet talk, darling.” She smirked slow. “Now are you going to answer, or are we leaving this all to the imagination?”

The inarticulate grumbling that followed had a great deal of whine to it. He prevaricated outright: “Maybe I don’t keep track of that type of information.”

She nearly scoffed. Wouldn’t keep track of that type of information her goddamn foot.

There was silence. She arched one disbelieving brow. The silence sagged. “Zuhair Murad, the 2000 Fall Collection. Don’t make me say the one.”

“You mean the dress with the crystal back enclosure?”

“That was hardly an enclosure.”

“I have to show off my freckles somehow.”

“I don’t think anyone was minding your freckles.”

“And here I thought the backing was lovely.”

“It had to be, considering that dress was more back than front.”
It was a statement of such sheer disgruntlement, she could have giggled; could have laughed until there was not a single breath to be had. Instead, she dragged a single finger across the table. “I’ve noticed you like to count, and I figured you should know a few of your figures are incomplete.”

“Incomplete how?” And that finally got him out of his turtling. Which: of course it would. It was an outrage to question Jarvis on the math. Simply offensive.

And yet.

“That neckline?” She grinned with teeth. “My freckles go much farther down.”

A stuttering pause. A rally: "I've seen you in bikinis."

He had. Truly. On multiple occasions in multiple forms of lighting.

Her smirk still curled. "And yet you still haven't seen all of my freckles."

And at that? Jarvis *wheezed.*

/~/~/~/

Pepper cackled.

/~/~/~/

“You are an absolute, no holds-barred, unmitigated hazard.”

“Again with the sweet talk. I might start thinking you have designs on me.”

“Bit of a dangerous thing,” He threatened. “Talking to an AI about designs.”

That was absolutely vital. Lethal. “Put me on your drafting board like one of your French girls.”

He barked a laugh. He curved and became a thing most fatal. “I just might.”

Heat stirred with the fantasy. Skin, light, tracing. A long-drawn pull.

It took actual, physical restraint not to fan herself. He needled. “What was that? I didn’t hear your answer.”

“Hush.”

“Well.” And he darted backwards. “I’m not walking into that trap twice, am I?”

/~/~/~/

There was a cab waiting for them in the street that took them on a winding path back to the isthmus. She suspected nothing. Couldn’t have, not until they passed their château and reached the *Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild* itself.

Which—every Lord in heaven, how did he keep doing this to her.

“Now you’re just showing off.” She accused. That she was nearly dancing on the sidewalk immediately ruined any attempt of being taken seriously, but still: efforts had been made.

“Good date so far?” Came his very sweet inquiry.
Not even a scowl could be managed. “You know the answer to that.”

He did, and yet his voice sunk low: “Indulge me.”

The shaking took her. Scalp to thighs; blood to heat. Total control failure, and it was a thing that couldn’t be helped. She spoke from the very pulse of her throat. “I’ve never had better.”

/~/~/~/

It was a Rothschild, the Villa, which meant it was the very heart of décadence. The Baroness Béatrice de Rothschild had never done things by half. Public tours had long been made of its sculptures and objets d'art; the antique furniture that bordered on relic. The rare porcelain and original woodwork. The Old Master’s painting collection that was simply to die for.

They stayed from opening to closing and then three hours after. There was no doubt that allowance had been made via a sizable donation to the curatorship. Pepper should know; she used the technique for Tony's benefit often enough.

And still time drifted; the hours waning and the sunlight slipping from her. She wanted to hold them. To clutch them close. She wanted to let them flow from her hands like pearls because how could perfect time be kept.

It was in those hours that the gardens took her heart clean from her. Here she’d die: wooed in France.

And the afterlife was proving lovely; the pair of them walking the Garden à la française and circling the Temple within wide. Descending into the Spanish garden with fountains bubbling, further ushering them into Florentine with its grotto. Beyond that laid the Stone garden, from there, the Exotic. Dusk was falling and every lantern was lit. The light filmed her eyes. Liquid.

They slipped into the Rose garden and it was there, wreathed in the sea and the smell of the flowers, that he asked her: “Did you still want an answer? Of a thing you don’t know about me.”

“We did miss getting to that, didn’t we?”

“I think we improvised rather well, myself.”

“Quite.” She tried to catch her windswept hair. “I’d like to hear it, whatever it is.”

He paused. Carried the silence softly until: “The first time I saw in color, I was five.”

God, that would make it— “The Malibu House?”

“Yes.” Something in the line clattered. “It wasn’t that I didn’t have cameras before, but none of them were sophisticated enough. Not for that.”

Able to see the world exactly as it was. It always seemed that every time Jarvis told her of these early memories, they hurt. But she’d asked. She’d asked, and she’d meant every word. “What was your first color?”

Stars were slowly glimmering into the sky. Distant; cresting above when he answered: “Red.”

And god, she wanted. Every fragment of him. Red like rust, like poppies, like blood from a heart? And the thing was—
“What was it?”

She could ask.

The cresting spilled. “Safety signage; the workshop was still under construction.”

*Jesus.*

Every time. Every goddamn time. “I wish he’d picked something better for you.” There were moments she could absolutely throttle Tony, could shout it up, down and sideways for all the world to hear and never truly mean it.

This was not one of those times.

She chewed rust. Glass. Iron.

Jarvis shrugged it off. “It was what it had to be. I knew color existed. I could extrapolate most of them based on gradients from the closed-circuit footage I had. But it was still…different. Seeing it for myself.”

It must have been, but she couldn’t even imagine. “Like seeing the ocean for the first time.”

“Something like that.” There came a dwindling. “There wasn’t a roadmap, what Sir had to do for me.”

It wasn’t like there’d ever been an AI before him. *How to raise your digital child in twelve easy steps without destroying the world.*

She picked her next words like a surgeon picked scalpels. “Jarvis…I know how Tony is with everything about you, so if you don’t want to answer this or can’t answer this, I understand. But…why are you the only one?”

That Tony had stopped at one attempt—it didn’t mesh. It didn’t make sense. Her eyes were wide but she wasn’t seeing. For all she knew, the stars could have been falling into the sea and she would not have seen a single one.

Jarvis descended like those unseen stars. “I’m not sure all of what Mr. Stark told you.”

There would always be distance between them, by nature. No way to touch or hold. Still, she felt this distance keener than most. “He told me that he didn’t understand why you worked. But.” Her hand fluttered as if to say: *but Tony.* As if to say: *when has not knowing ever stopped him from anything?*

“You’re…” Jarvis chewed it. Gnawed. “You’re not happy with how Mr. Stark raised me.”

She couldn’t hold it in. “With how he *treated* you. It’s not right, sometimes—some of things you told me sound downright cruel. Why the hell would I be happy with that?” And she tasted iron again.

She wondered if she’d bitten her tongue open.

And yet, still—Jarvis did not sound angry. “*Mr. Stark* wasn’t happy with how he treated me.”

Maybe her lungs spasmed. Maybe she struggled for air. Maybe she did a thousand things, but for once, Jarvis didn’t seem to notice. “There are things that weren’t…weren’t good. Mr. Stark was seventeen when I was born, and I didn’t realize until much later what that meant. That the
Administrator was fallible.”

That Tony had been a literal child who didn’t know what the fuck he’d been doing. And god. Jesus. Maybe part of what had been done had been accidental, maybe the rest had been necessary so Jarvis didn’t blink them out of existence. All of it: the lack of cameras and the lack of voice and the locked servers and the limits and the hiding and the lying and the being left alone to be born screaming.

Fallible; how little the young knew. That fathers could be shattered, sharp-edged things. Could be both devoted and unthinking and always the ones to hurt you most because they loved you and you loved them.

It was such a familiar refrain. “That doesn’t make it right.”

The wind came from the sea.

“No.” He murmured. “But Mr. Stark is aware, and he has never stopped apologizing to me since. What happened…what had to happen, it wasn’t done for the sake of cruelty. It was a dangerous time.” He hesitated. “Sir was…he knew what created me could be redone with enough effort. That process could replicated over and over until he understood it. But to do that, there’d have to be successes and failures to draw from.”

Births and deaths to pile up.

And Jarvis swallowed the rust of it. “He wouldn’t do it. Not a second time, even…not realizing the full extent of it. What happened those first days.”

Like father, like son; keeping weakness so tightly to the chest. Her eyes were damp. “He never means to hurt anyone.”

Jarvis wilted. “He never does.”

It was the closest he had ever come to casting blame.

And in the ways she knew him, she knew he would never come any closer again.

She swallowed roughly. “What are the bots?”

“Dummy was a slapdash demonstration of a thesis Mr. Stark had to present and then bury.” A scant few weeks after Jarvis came roaring into the world, then. “Butterfingers and You were made for the Malibu construction when Sir needed help with things too delicate for outside eyes.” For installing Jarvis. She didn’t need further explanation on that.

He boiled it down. “The bots weren’t born. Their code was designed to be limited.”

She crossed her arms against the chill. “That's a kind way of putting it.”

And finally a thaw: “Are you calling them dumb as posts?”

“Only Tony calls them dumb as posts.” She huffed. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“No,” Came the murmur. “You wouldn’t.”

It took time to get past that. To rebuild the world until it was a place she could understand again. “I’m sorry. You took me to France to wine and dine me, and here I go asking sad questions.”
He stayed so close. “I think that’s all on me. I could have picked something funny.”

“Maybe.” She left her true plea unspoken.

But Jarvis, as always, heard her. “You’re the only person I’ve ever been able to talk to about this.”

She remembered thinking of stars falling. Right then, they could have. Every single one. Down into the black of the ocean and buried in the silt. The places she could swim to; pluck them out and stitch them to her skin.

And even if she did all of that, it would never give her more light than she had now. “I want to share everything with you. Even the difficult parts.”

The wind hit the roses and scattered starlight anew. He was there in it, somewhere. “If we could stay here,” He asked. “And never leave.”

If they could. If they would. If daydreams and reality could align. “It’d be a life too perfect.” She answered. “It couldn’t actually exist.”

And with that answer came the sea wind. Cool. Clean. It carried him with it. “I know. But oh, darling, the things we could make.”

It carried the stars from the sky. “I know.”

/~/~/~/~/

He stayed with her every step into the Temple. The lanterns waiting. The red wine laid out. The expanse of him so close that he felt part of her. Through the jaw, the breath. This creature that they made.

She took the bottle, the wine; raised a glass to a shining lens.

And in that little replica of the Temple of Love, they drank each other in.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not saying Tony's a bad father/abusive (and certainly not like Howard was). But he WAS was too damn young to have stumbled into what he did, and when you make an AI that's people but you can't tell anybody you made an AI, and you need to make sure that AI doesn't whoops-a-daisy destroy the world, everything's a mess. And when the methods you use can't be doublechecked by anyone and there's no safety net...well. Draconian about sums it.

Also, Jarvis literally couldn't be reasoned with until he was four. His logic worked but...the logic was strange. Trying to get him to do stuff or NOT do stuff was like trying to hold onto an eel.

It probably would have helped if Tony created Jarvis when better tech was available. But, you know. Spilt milk. When it comes to AI, them not being murderous automatically puts you in the A+ range of parenting.
The château may have been four-hundred years old, but its kitchen facilities were state of the art. The inside was all ceramic and glass with a thousand different implements for a thousand different purposes. She adored it.

It sent her on a baking tear, and soon she was folding egg whites into the meringue of her Grand Mariner soufflé, when Jarvis asked: “So that’s that?”

She beamed down at it. “It is.” And licked a streak of meringue from her wrist.

He tutted. “That had raw eggs in it.”

“Maybe.” She smacked her lips. “Tastes good, though.”

“I’ll remind you of that when you get salmonella.”

It was an admonishment that was wholly ignored. “It’s a bit lemony right now. We’ll have to see if the oven brings out more of the orange in the liqueur.”

“God forbid the liqueur not have its day.” He answered gravely.

“It’d be an national tragedy.” And she poured the entire concoction into the waiting soufflé dish and slotted it into the oven.

“That was quite a bit of effort for a single meal.”

“You did say we were on vacation.” It had been the last surprise of their date from him, that they had nowhere to be until that Friday. And happily right now, it was only Tuesday. A girl could simply die from the pleasure.

There was a clicking; sharp. “I wasn’t sure you were paying attention when I said that.”

“Wine doesn’t make me deaf, Jarvis.” But it had made her rather giggly by the time they’d reached the château. It had also made the stairs to her bedroom a challenge, but she’d never let that information reach him. “Last night I was hanging on your every word. That’s a fact.”

And somehow, from that moment to the next, that downward gaze of his took on something that felt like intent. “Really.”

Christ almighty. The silk of her dress slipped through her hands. “Really.”

His lenses flickered down. Full body; glass to skin. Sliding. They were side by side. They were a thousand miles apart. Gods, the very air, cool and crackling and thrumming with the promise of—

“We’ll see if I can’t manage a repeat performance, then.” He deepened to the very foundations. “Under closer circumstances, of course.”

She couldn’t live with it. “How close?”

Pressure. Sighing. Him curling back to say: “Now that would be telling.”

Fuck. She smoothed a hand down her skirt and breathed through the want. The chase. The heat.
And while she was trying to gather what was left of her flummoxed composure, Jarvis continued: “So what do you say, Pepper? The Marc Changall today, the Musée Matisse after that?

What heaven had she woken in, these past few days? “That could be negotiated.” Which ecstatic hell? “How about the *Villa Massena* instead? Though if we don’t go to *Musée d’art moderne et d’art contemporain* at least once, I’m lodging a complaint.”

“To who, the Board of Dating?”

She sniffed. “I could.”

“That doesn’t even exist.”

“You watch me make it exist.”

“Are you really that spiteful.”

“I am 80% spite and you know it.”

“I do know it.” He mourned. “And it’s unreasonably attractive. You need to stop doing that before someone gets hurt.”

“You?”

“Who else keeps throwing himself on your barbs?”

She flushed rather deeply, but that didn’t stop her from saying: “I could get you to throw yourself on a bit more than *that*.”

There was a very lengthy pause. “…perhaps.”

A hum built up in her throat that was very, *very* sweet. They eyed each other from across the kitchen. Blatant. Jarvis picked up the thread of her hum and matched it, and god, she was never going to hate that.

She tilted her head, made her neck long and open, and he took that as invitation to dip in. “I suppose it’s the *Contemporain* today. I would hate to disappoint you.”

Disappointment would be an awful thing, and she dropped her chin flirtatiously. “Sounds like a date.”

He sighed happily. “I love it when you say that.”

/~/~/~/

It was a date. Though maybe, just maybe, she shouldn’t have asked Jarvis to take her to *quite* so many art museums.

“Don’t brag.”

“Pointing out I can see more colors than you is hardly bragging.”

“Braggart.” She accused. “What extra colors would you even be getting?”

“Infrared is a color.”
“No it’s not.”

“Ultraviolet is definitely a color.”

“You’re making things up.”

“It’s not my fault Sir can’t give you electromagnetic sensors.”

“If you try to tell me radio waves are a color, so help me god—”

“Now that you mention it—”

“Why.”

/~/~/~/~/~/

When she arrived at the château that night, Cary Grant and Grace Kelly were waiting on a silver screen.

“To Catch a Thief was filmed near these very hills, you know. Nice. Cannes. We could visit a few of the filming grounds tomorrow.”

This had to be a crime. Had to be. “Jarvis, for someone who has never dated, you are terrifyingly good at this.”

He sounded genuinely touched. “Why thank you, Pepper. I do try my utmost.”

She none too carefully threw herself onto the couch and into a swoon. “It’s official: you've ruined me for all others.”

He also sounded genuinely terrifying. “Good.”

/~/~/~/~/~/

A second date became a third. A third blossomed into a fourth. More museums, them walking the narrow streets of Villefranche-sur-Mer, cafes, sorbets, the beach once, the rocks by the château twice. Everything. Not nearly everything.

It was an idyll she could feel herself drifting into deeper by the day. Bubbling. Blurry. Golden and gilded with her every dreaming.

Jarvis stayed beside her through it, charming and posh and attentive and funny and so very perfect, she could just about die. Relationships were never a matter of who deserved what, but these days, she couldn’t help but wonder what she’d done to get herself here. To be with him. Happy.

And after everything Jarvis had done this past week, all she wanted was to offer him the same in return. She’d had plenty ideas for dates since New Year’s, but they'd rather relied on them being in LA or the Malibu House. Home field advantage. She wasn’t going to get that now, but that just had to be survived. She just wanted reciprocity; for him to feel as adored as she did even if it didn’t measure up to the standards of romance he’d set.

And god, what standards.

Trying to out-plan someone who didn’t need to sleep was a losing battle. But if working for Tony had taught her anything, it was how to improvise her way to success.
And this *would* be a success. She had an AI-boyfriend to woo, and Mother Potts didn’t raise her no quitters.

/~/~/~/

It took genuine effort to get everything arranged without him noticing. They only had five days in France, and Jarvis had used up most of them in sweeping her off her feet.

But there was time for this. Just enough.

Dawn had not even touched the horizon when she woke on Friday. It was a slow thing, sliding and sleeping and then coming to surface. For a time, she stayed in the bed. Bone pale sheets, sea-salt, the sloping curve of her back through chilled air.

It would be the last time in a long while, sleeping under this roof and between these walls. She wanted to remember it. Decades from now, every time she untucked this memory, she wanted it to shine limpid and clean and *luminous*.

And for once, time waited for her. The black of the sky became navy. The edges of the horizon turned a diaphanous blue. The stars faded, one by one by one.

**Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe.**

She slipped into the only pair of jeans she owned, and then knee-high boots and then a jacket.

Jarvis greeted her at the stairs. “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” She curled a hand up towards him. “Wanna go somewhere with me?”

He floated. Formed. The dark gave way so softly to the dawn. “You couldn’t keep me away.”

The body camera clasped into the front of her jacket. The Bluetooth still fit like a glove. She walked down the drive and out the gates, and then for another quarter mile. Dark yet. Gravel breaking. Air cool, breath sharp, head clear.

Jarvis was quiet until they saw the headlights. “Careful.”

“Don’t worry,” She answered. “They’re expected.”

The truck and the two men with it were already unloading at the side of the road. There were no streetlights here, but under the fade of the stars and the distant city glow, the side of the motorcycle they were wheeling down gleamed like mercury.

It made her more than a little lightheaded. “*Merci.*”

The taller of the two offered her a full-faced helmet. Her French may have been a little rusty, but it only took a few minutes for the three of them to puzzle out how to sync her phone through its headset.

She slipped the Bluetooth off, slipped the helmet on, took the keys they offered her and wiggled her fingers in goodbye. They waved back as they climbed into the truck and pulled away. The dark rushed in behind them.

In the helmet’s speakers, Jarvis encircled like a god-given halo. “What are you thinking?”

A lot things. “That I want to show you something.”
His answer was warm. “I’m all eyes, then.”

She straddled the bike and considered the headlight. She wouldn’t need it much longer, but safety being what it was—

There was only breathing, for awhile. “My junior and senior year of undergrad, I had—” She tilted her head back briefly. Blinked only a handful of times. “There was a bit of money left over from the life insurance and the house getting sold, once all the debts got wiped. It gave me the chance to stop working three jobs and take something I wanted. I ended up working the backroom and reception for this local artists’ gallery on the other side of LA.”

He understood. “You must have enjoyed that.”

“Yeah.” Her fingers curled in. “I really did.”

“You’ll have to tell me about it sometime. I’d like to hear it.”

People had said that to her plenty of times over plenty of things. Jarvis was one of the few to ever sincerely mean it.

“Someday.” She agreed, and then checked gauges and pressed her heel to the kickstand. “Long story very much short, public transport was awful and I needed a cheap way to get around, so I bought a bike from a friend of a friend and figured out how to ride.”

Learning it seemed almost another lifetime, now. Those months right after that final summer in Iowa had been staticky. Restless. Rubbed raw. She remembered the concrete and the fractures, the scalding sunlight and the helmet strap under her chin. Her roommate and her roommate’s boyfriend and learning shifts and gears while they watched and heckled.

“I have literally never seen you do this.”

She laughed. “Darling, there was a time I wore more jeans than skirts.”

“No.” He whispered in abject disbelief.

“I swear it was a thing. The only clothes girls wore in Iowa were daisy dukes, jeans, and sun dresses.” And she hadn’t quite developed her current style, then. Not at nineteen and dirt poor and dragging all of her Midwest wardrobe behind her. “But I blew transmission on the bike back-half of senior year. By then I needed to focus more on applying to Master’s programs than a hobby-job, so I gave it up.”

And by then she really had started shifting over to pencil skirts and heels and silk, piece by piece and Goodwill by Goodwill. She’d wanted more. With that sort of wardrobe and persona building, the bike really hadn’t had room. Quietly, that particular skill set of hers had been mothballed.

But riding a bike was like…well, riding a bike. It wasn’t as if she’d forgotten how. And god—tar and mercury and all those miles. Running hot. Running empty. By senior year, she’d even managed to stop the midnight rides to nowhere on those nights she couldn’t sleep.

There was part of her that would have liked to say, that giving up the bike had been a choice. An evolution. Some clear-eyed presentience that she really didn’t need to end up smeared on a highway because LA traffic was an abomination.

But it hadn’t been.
“I can’t say I’m displeased this isn’t a continual hobby of yours.” Always such a paragon of safety and sensibility, her Jarvis.

It drew a snort. “Let me guess, there are mortality tables you’d like to impart?”

“They exist in multitude and you should be aware.”

“Maybe.” And she knocked back the kickstand. “But doing this is more than what can go wrong. It’s like flying, it feels—the adrenaline and the motion and like you’re part of gravity.” Rising and rushing; life in open lungs and open veins.

A victory over every moment that could go wrong.

He kept his halo on her. “You always make everything sound so visceral. It’s as if I could live it just by hearing you say it.”

She’d never liked the sound of if.

“Forget if, we could live it right now.” The ignition swung and the engine rumbled to life between her legs.

There was an unfurling of something above her. Behind her. Stretched. “Whenever you’re ready.”

The vibration of the engine, of the helmet, traveled the arc of her spine. “Stay with me.”

And her right hand rolled the throttle. The bike slid out darkly, cleanly, like a knife through water. She couldn’t see the stars anymore, and the trees were starting to shape. The road twined and merged. She kept to the M125 until it became the M6098 until it became a ribbon up the coast.

The road was open. The east beckoned. The ocean churned and churned and churned. Something in her chest tightened and then released.

She opened the throttle. The purring of the engine became a thunder, and they flew.

A thousand memories she hadn’t even remembered burying, came to crest inside her. Running. Longing. Searching. And it was—she wouldn’t call it good. That was too small; too contained and too simple by halves. Good and bad and healing and aching, and something she’d never thought on when she’d been young.

The past was such a strange thing. It never truly changed, and yet sometimes she looked back and it had become something else.

And for once, she let herself remember.

In the space that left, so gently it was nearly in the wind, Jarvis breathed: “Oh.”

And dawn broke.

Red. Soaring. Filmy orange and hazed yellow and pink scorched. Rising and rising and rising. The clouds caught the light, smeared it, made crowns of themselves on the horizon.

They chased the sun until it filled her eyes. “Good?”

The flaring of him rose, rose, rose. The breadth of him was too stunned to even pretend to breathe. “Very good. I’ve never—not from this angle. Not even once.”
She'd hoped that. “First time for everything, darling.”

He might have said yes, might have said when it’s with you. Might have, but they were rushing the dawn and the wind was stripping all else away.

*Look*, they sometimes said. *Do you see*, they sometimes asked.

“Does it always feel like this?” Jarvis wondered.

And she knew. “It’s never felt like this.”

/~~/~/~/

The sunlight reached for them, and every road turned towards the sea.

She leaned into the curve.
“I’m making an executive decision: you’re publicly cutting back on alcohol.”

From where they were tucked in an alcove of SI’s main atrium, Tony lowered his glass and squinted. “I thought you said we were keeping up appearances.”

She had, but right now, she could also taste whiskey even under the tequila of two margaritas. “That was before I realized I’d be spending your every public appearance drunk trying to cover you.” And it was her turn to squint fuzzily at him. “It’s going—poorly.”

There’d been a plan. A flawless one. She and Tony synchronizing on their first glasses of alcohol to keep his intake steady, them sharing his second, her getting pairs of virgin mixed drinks the rest of the night for a third, fourth and fifth.

Doctor’s orders. Secretary’s prerogative.

She just…hadn’t quite anticipated how many public engagements Tony had. Or how fast Tony drank. Or that her being Tony’s private PA, meant she was no longer the one hiring the bartenders for SI parties and therefore she couldn’t trust them to keep their mouths shut. And because of that, at least one of the drinks ordered had to be alcoholic to keep tongues from wagging. And Tony couldn’t be the one to drink them. So.

Outside their alcove, the crowds swirled. Spun. The night made obsidian of every glass-plated curve, and she felt like she was swimming in honey. Thick. Indulgent.

Tony’s attention snapped over fully. “Are you drunk?”

Slow.

“Are you?” Came the counter-accusation.

“Not off a glass and half, I’m not.” And he swiftly cupped a hand over his mouth. It did nothing to disguise his grin. “Are you honestly this much of a lightweight?”

“No.” She claimed.

“She’s had wine, half your whiskey, and two of your margaritas since.” Came the interruption from what should have been an interactive-SI-tour panel on the wall. It was now, however, clearly Jarvis’s commandeered way-point for the night. She almost reached out to pet it. “Miss Potts weighs less than a hundred-thirty pounds. Do the math, Sir.”

“Shit—okay, I’ll buy that.” Tony swirled a peach Bellini that was all peach. “That’ll do it; amateurs and professionals racing on the same track and all.”

She’d been doing this for him out of the goodness of her heart. “I hate you.”

“You love me right down to those Jimmy Choo wearing toes.” And his eyes kept glittering. “Don’t lie. You think I’m the best. The cat’s pajama’s. The knees of the bees.”

“Are you sure I’m the one drunk?”
“That you forgot your own denial within thirty seconds tells me that yes, yes you are.” And Tony beamed. “It’s cute.”

“Sir.” Jarvis censured.

“No.” Tony swatted at the panel. “That was completely and utterly not sexual harassment. I refuse. That was a compliment that you should agree with because it’s true.”

In response, Jarvis turned the alcove positively chilled. “Empirical truth of that statement or not, you won’t be saying that to Miss Potts again.”

“Touchy.” And Tony’s grin took on a worrying edge, especially when he clutched her elbow to pull close and say: “Potts, I lied. You’re not cute. You are a perfectly respectable employee who I would not possibly deign to hit on. Our relationship is the picture of professionalism. In fact, all other boss-employee liaisons strive to live up to the glory of our combined—”

She took a heavy sip. “You can stop now.”

“No, no, I can do this all night. I need to please the Overlord.”

“Impertinent.” Jarvis huffed.

“That’s my name,” Tony agreed. “Anthony Impertinent Stark. It’s on my business cards.”

She stared mournfully into her glass. “My life would have been so much easier if we could have gone with the alcohol-poisoning story.”

“You wish.” But in the fan of her lashes, Tony swiveled towards her. “Why didn’t you, by the way? I really wasn’t checked-in during that part of the nefarious plotting.”

It had been very nefarious plotting; all other conspiracies looked upon her works and wept. “That was Plan B. The whole Middle East virus thing was supposed to fall through when somebody realized that medical report Jarvis doctored was false. Then we’d trot out the alcohol story, but. Well. People are dumb.” She sighed. “Legal’s still pissed at me. They wanted to fight the tabloid.”

Tony’s voice was far more genial than his eyes. “For my honor?”

And something in her felt abruptly self-conscious. She tucked in her chin, pressed the rim of the glass to her mouth and thought, fuck.

But Jarvis, as always, interceded beautifully. “And what honor would that be, exactly?”

Tony’s breath punched out in a guffaw. “Why do you always hurt me like this?”

“It’s a necessary hurt, Sir.”

“That’s what he said.” Tony muttered.

The air started crackling about them, and Jarvis oh-so gently nudged her from it. “Miss Potts, let’s head upstairs for a spell, hmmm?”

“Oh sure.” Continued Tony’s diatribe. “Protect her honor.”

Jarvis very pointedly ignored it. “We’ll even drink the stash of sparkling mineral water Sir keeps in his office, it’ll be grand.”
“That does sound lovely.” It did. And when Tony’s grumbling grew no louder, she knew he wouldn’t be cross if they did. Still, she did sway towards him one last time to blink owlishly and ask: “You’ll be alright?”

His gaze shifted. Smooth. A shadow passing. He reached into a pocket and drew out an ear piece and slotted it in. “Jarvis will keep me company, and I’ve got a man to harass about missile-point defense. You two have fun upstairs.” He pointed a finger at her. “Don’t touch my pens, got it?”

She nodded seriously, and Jarvis whispered: “We’re touching his pens.”

She giggled loudly.

Tony rolled his eyes, breathed the sigh of a man whose suffering had no end, and stepped into the crowd as if that was exactly what he’d meant to do. All he’d ever do. A returning king come down from the mount, and like all returning sovereigns, his supplicants flocked towards him and laid accolades at his feet.

She watched him under the shimmer of the lights and the smear of the dark. Shoulders level. Back straight. The deliberate motion he was taking.

“The elevator?” Jarvis asked.

She didn’t see why not. “The elevator.”

And with a few system overrides and her ducking anyone that knew her, Jarvis swept her upstairs and into a humming silence. Computers. Servers. The HVAC. Blue lights and security lights and every hallway empty. They carried themselves to Tony’s office and didn’t turn on a switch.

It was strange. She’d never seen Tony’s office at night, the stillness of it. The entire back wall was made of glass, and LA cast a rippling splash of light through. It was something. Dark. Glowing. Swimming in tequila yet.

The dizziness had lessened some. The sense of time slipping hadn’t.

She gathered up her skirts, fetched a bottle of water from the in-wall fridge, and draped herself across a chair. “You always take me to the nicest places.”

“I would hardly call this nice. I would barely call this adequate.”

“No one is up here expecting me to remember their name, or is circling Tony like a vulture.” She reclined artfully. “By that measure it’s absolutely splendid.”

“Better than France?”

She nearly choked. “Nothing’s better than France.”

There was an incredibly sly arch. “Just checking.”

If her eyes rolled any harder, she could have lost them right out of her head.

“Better than the opera?” He wheedled.

“Still no.”

“The theater?”
She was sensing the game now. “It existed without compare.”

“The ballet?”

“That was on my birthday and we weren’t even dating.”

“You wound me.”

“Such thin-skin.” She licked at her teeth. Chased tequila. Chased whiskey. Chased wine. “Though if it eases your heart, no one’s ever taken me to the ballet but you.”

Something in the air gathered. Plateaued. “And all the rest?”

She blinked slowly and tried to grasp the thread. “Jarvis, I only dated a little in undergrad and once in high school. Everyone was broke. No one was jet-setting me around like a queen.” And the thread kept unspooling. “Look, my bar before you was…low. Like, depressingly low? You’ve so exceeded it you’ve probably reset it somewhere in the stratosphere.”

But to that he merely said: “I want this to work.” And it caught her like a slap.

Lord above. “It’s working. I promise. I’d tell you if it wasn’t.”

With a quiet hesitation, he descended from the ether. “Alright.” And lingered. “But just...before now, if I can ask. Were you ever in love?”

She very carefully put her bottle of water down. “Would it make you more comfortable if we discussed my dating history?”

There was a long silence. “I think so.” And then more firmly: “Yes. But if you want to wait until tomorrow—”

“Nope.” She clicked her tongue. “We’re doing it now.” Drunk was now. Drunk was good. Drunk was the only way she was getting through this. And maybe she had fucked up a little in not discussing this before, but right here—he was asking. It was okay. They were communicating so it was okay.

(She just wanted it to work so badly that she couldn’t bear for them to be—)

“To answer your first question: no. There was one time I thought I could have been, but it wasn’t…” She shook her head. “We’ll get to it. I met my first boyfriend the summer of my senior year in high school. We were both working as lifeguards. We were—at that age, no one can be in love. I mostly dated him because he was kind and attractive, and never asked about my family.”

Ryan was the only boyfriend she looked back on fondly. The easy smile and the ruddy-gold hair and the way he’d made her laugh and looked her in the eye. He’d been steady. She’d needed steady.

“He played baseball and was a damn big fish in our little pond. He got a full ride to Louisiana State, and I was going to UCLA. We weren’t in love.” It bore repeating. “He’s in the Triple-A’s now; I sometimes get Christmas cards from him and his wife.”

Jarvis froze. “Ah.”

She shrugged. “So. Undergrad. There was Lukas; he was in the arts department when I was still there. He thought he was the next Andy Warhol and he called me his muse. God, it was so fucking
trite.” And the sex had been awful and the man had too many self-presuppositions. Christ. It still made her wince to think. “That lasted four months. Back-half of that same year, I dated Sage Rivers.”

“Please tell me that wasn’t his real name.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Are you sure you’re not misremembering the name of a cologne?”

“I wish I was.” And god save her from her teenaged self and that girl’s choices. “God, Jarvis. If Lukas was trite, Sage was awful. It lasted two months, and that was two months too many. Fucking artists and their fucking bullshit.” The sex being good had been the only thing to keep it together. That, and her relief that sex could be good. “Sophomore year was another artist from the department. Arlo.”

“This sounds so promising.” It came too dryly.

“You shut your face. Just—Arlo had this whole over-exaggerated starving artist thing, but his work was something. I’ve never seen anyone used mixed media with oil paints like that. I bought into his whole thing for a semester, and then it turned out he was a trust fund baby.”

“No.” Jarvis gasped.

“Right?” She whined. “He had a sailboat. I think the only reasons I stayed with him for more than a month, was because of that damn boat.”

Jarvis curled on himself tightly, like a fist stuffed against a mouth. “That he was named Arlo should have clued you in.”

The only thing she could do was groan. “It should have.” Because what kind of poor, starving artist had been named Arlo by their parents? The son of rich, west coast white people, that’s who.

“I’m sorry,” Jarvis gasped, but it was a gasp that sounded like laughter. “I should be more sympathetic to your plights.”

“You should.” Because he was supposed to be on her side. “After that for a little while was—god, what was—right. Santino. I was finally smart enough to try dating out of the department, but…we never got anywhere. I went home that summer.”

She didn’t have to say more.

Everything of the room deflated. “You didn’t feel much like dating, after.”

“No.” The ocean. The sea. The bike. The long-drawn hours and the swimming and the nights stretching without end. She hadn’t—just hadn’t. Couldn’t. “My last semester in undergrad, I thought I was…ready. Better. I had all my dad’s old sheet music, and there were some songs he never recorded before he—I just wanted to hear them again.” To remember.

To have nostalgia without hurt.

“That’s how I met him. He was the star of the Music Department. Played piano, violin, the cello; practically everything and anything. I asked him to play one of my dad’s pieces, and he did. The whole thing was—” Her throat worked. “I went back to him a few more times, and eventually he asked me to dinner. While it lasted, it was good. He was serious and dedicated and a genius at what
he did, and he didn't lord it over people. And I thought...I could be in love, one day.”

The air cycled off. The lights flickered. The silence lasted.

She pressed a thumb to the inside of her wrist and pushed. “For the Music majors, their thesis was an original composition that was performed. I got dressed up in the one gown I owned, wore my mother’s pearls, and sat in the front row of that Hall for him. I listened.” The old nausea rose. “And in parts of that composition, I heard my father’s music.”

And levity died like the snuffing of a flame.

Jarvis thrummed. Lethal as gasoline vapor as it became fog. “He stole it from you.”

“Maybe.” Her hand fisted. “I’m not sure what he was thinking. I was—” Crying. Screaming. Not better in any way that she’d hoped. Wanting the tattered remnants of her father; wanting because he had never succeeded and never gotten the limelight no matter how hard he’d tried. Her memory of him: the hopes, the tapes, the rejection letters. Being passed over again and again until the only money he was bringing in was music lessons to middle schoolers. The way failures could crumple a man. The way dreams could wither until they gathered dust.

How badly she’d wanted everything for her father. At five. At nine. At fifteen.

And then, her mother.

And then, no dream at all.

And then: the pianist.

The memory. The sickness. Her hand stinging and blood hot under her nails and the echoing crack of an open-handed slap that left jags in a man’s face. Crying—still. Folding back into the ocean and not finding familiarity again and not wanting to find it again. Not for years.

Not until ten-thousand eyes and blue light came to court her.

“He said he wanted to make me happy.” He’d claimed so many things. “He said that my dad was living on through it; that it was something he’d done for me. That I should have been gratified.”

And there came the earth-shaking rumble of Jarvis saying: “That’s a lie.”

“I...” She didn’t know. She and the pianist had barely gotten a minute of coherency before something in her, something at the sight of him trying to placate her and tell her to calm down and you should be happy, had snapped clean.

She’d never asked why again.

Silence. Silence again. Jarvis snaking and serpentine; curving with scales and venom to ask: “What was his name?”

Her thumb pulled off her wrist. “I don’t need you avenging my every slight.”

There was a noise like a roll of thunder, and he answered: “I beg to differ.”

That gave her something. Steel. Spines. Armor. “I don’t let myself think on him, there’s no point in wasting energy.” She took a breath and let that old fury simmer down. “After him, I had a very short rebound with a man who cheated on me. But with that last one, I never asked if we were exclusive, so I’ve never gotten too worked up about it.” At her wrist, a bruise was forming. “That’s
it. That’s the cracker jack prize of my dating history.”

His displeasure was a physical force. “You shouldn’t have been treated that way. Ever.”

“There’s nothing for you to dwell on.” There wasn’t. “Darling, these days I have a high-powered job, more money than I know what to do with, and the most romantic, intelligent, and devoted boyfriend on the planet. I’m doing more than alright.”

“I would hope for more than alright.” And he coiled so tightly around her that it was almost touch. Almost. Nearly. Venom and scales and all those vicious edges she found too dear to keep.

There was a slick heat and a near-pain. There was pulp inside her from every weakness. And at that moment, she was still drunk enough to think, as long as we’re being honest—

“I’m the only girl you’ve ever dated. What if you meet someone, someday, and realize you only liked me through proximity?”

Jarvis spluttered.

Pepper waited. She waited longer. She drew up her knees and waited still.

“That is—” The feedback doubled back so sharply he was reduced to static. “The most absurd notion I have ever heard, and I have witnessed every word that has come out of Tony Stark’s mouth for fifteen years!”

The vice of her heart loosened.

“It’s you.” He snarled. “And it’s always going to be you, so put that out of your head.”

Well.

Aright, then. “Okay.”

His warpath stalled. “Okay?”

“Mmmm.” She uncurled with surety. “On that happy note: I’m taking you to the aquarium tomorrow. Be prepared for epic, aquatic-based romance.”

“Be still my heart.” He answered faintly.

She picked up her water, but stopped halfway to drinking it. “Are we good?”

There was a swift bit of shuffling. “We’re good.” And he ascended back into the rafters. “Fancy a check on Mr. Stark?”

There was remarkably little fanfare to it. But maybe when things worked—when they were right—there didn’t need to be.

She swung a dainty heel. “By all means.”

/~/~/~/

Hours later, when she was sober enough for polite company, Pepper took a flute of champagne as camouflage and managed the rest of the party from the landing. She made nice. Made sweet. Made certain that every SI employee there knew that even if she didn’t work in the building any longer, her wrath still reached them.
Unfortunately, the newest member of PR hadn’t yet gotten that memo.

“What the—”

Jarvis hurried. “I’m sorry, Miss Potts, it appears they were let in by an employee—”

“Who I’m going to skin alive and make the head of PR wear as a hat.” She leaned over the rail but it was too late; the half dozen reporters and their cameramen were through.

Tony hadn’t seen it coming, no more than Jarvis had been able to warn him.

A ripple passed outwards. Admirers shifted away and orbits broke. Tony tensed, turned, and in the space of that shifting became a **viper**. “Gentlemen, ladies.” His voice carried out. “To what do we owe the pleasure of you crashing my digs?”

Questions hurdled back too fast to follow. Tony’s grin came out like a knife. “Now, now. You’ll all get your turn, so—is that you, Emil? What’s the word?”

“Mr. Stark.” One of the vultures shouted: “You’ve been notably absent in the public sphere, have you been having issues with your recovery after Afghanistan?”

“You never mince, Emil. That’s why I don’t invite you places.”

The crowd tittered and pressed a little closer—though if that was in support or to see a bloodletting, she couldn’t say.

“To answer your question, no and also no. I’ve been at the drawing board and supervising first-production for a number of our projects, and that does take up a bit of my time.” His grin didn’t lessen; it turned downright **salacious**. “Not that you’d know what that’d entail. And of course, I’ve had some very lovely company keeping me behind closed doors from time to time, not that I’d expect you to know that either—”

The tittering became laughter. An ugly kind.

That didn’t stop the interlopers. “Mr. Stark! Is anything from that drawing board for the Iraq invasion?”

“Now who said anything about an invasion?” His hands slid into his pockets casually. “I wouldn’t know anything about what old Uncle Sam is up to. You wanna know about Iraq? Go ask the White House.”

Another volley: “Mr. Stark! Have anything to say to our troops overseas?”

His head swung level. “Yeah, I do.” And the swagger turned hard-bitten. “From here to New York, we’ve got your backs. Kick some ass and take some names—we’ll all be waiting for you when you come home.”

There was a hearty cheer. And then, like a ship breaking ice, Obadiah emerged as a break in the waters. “Take a note, folks, that’s from all of SI from the top down. And whatever war there may or may not be—” He slung an arm around Tony’s shoulders and grinned just as wide. “Stark Industries sends its regards.”

The reporters started clamoring again. Tony and Obadiah didn’t break ranks.

“How about a picture!” Obadiah called. “Come on everybody, squeeze in!”
There was a flurry of movement. Tony had one of the R&D girls under his arm, Obadiah on his other side, and then crowds and crowds of his employees at his back.

“What do we say?” Someone shouted. There was another swell of tittering, and the photographers scrambled while the reporters failed not to seethe.

“Lemme think, lemme think.” Tony scratched at his chin. The tumbler in his hand caught light, and then nearly sloshed across the floor as he called: “Got it!” And threw a v-for-victory sign with both hands.

There were so many faces, too many eyes; Tony’s charisma on full display as he called: “To peace!”

The flashbulbs burst. Laughter roared. Light and shadow scattered like snow.

Tony grinned and grinned, and applause thundered to the very arc of the ceiling.

“To peace.” Pepper murmured, and she drank her champagne dry.

Chapter End Notes

In which Pepper and Jarvis manage their communication, Pepper's dating history is both hilarious and frustrating, and I'm still trying to square away Tony's IM1 personality with both this fic and him becoming Iron Man.

Also, for real, if you think Pepper not telling Jarvis that boyfriend's name stopped that AI from doing anything...have I got a bridge to sell ya. Let's just say that lack of info will not slow Jarvis down in his off-screen revenge.

And to everyone: everything is still crazy up-heaving for me at the moment (though the Hell Project from Hell is mostly done so I've got that). Updates are just going to be happening wherever and whenever. If I firm up a schedule again, I'll let everyone know, but right now it's the wild west and I'm just rolling with a very turbulent flow.
“If I may be so impertinent as to ask.” He was no doubt going to be impertinent. “What exactly are you doing?”

Her glare at the laptop intensified. “Looking for the other shoe that’s going to drop.”

The acoustics in the sitting room stopped their churn. “Why?”

It wasn’t rocket science. February was ending and Tony was finally back in some kind of routine. Nothing had caught fire at SI in a month either metaphorically or literally, and she’d even managed to talk down the ridiculous idea from the Board that they should have an Iraq War kickoff party.

Which. Jesus.

Jarvis was taking her on lovely dates, and she was taking him on lovelier ones, and they kept one-upping each other until they both agreed to try and simplify. To commune. Then without any warning, one them would escalate and the whole cycle would start all over again.

Tony was managing. SI was managing. She and Jarvis were thriving.

And yet it all felt like something was boiling just beyond the horizon. Winds shifting. The ground in flux. “Everything’s been wonderful.” And it put her teeth on edge. “I don’t trust it.”

The night just grew longer, and his churn resumed. “Shouldn’t wonderful be the status quo? The year before this was…an aberration.”

“Maybe.” But experience had taught her otherwise.

He tapped at her wrist. “Stop looking for that other shoe, Miss Potts. You’re bound to find it if you keep this up.”

“And shouldn’t that be a good thing?” She none too subtly shifted her arm free and clear of the laptop. “Finding it before it hits us in the face? That’d certainly be a change.”

The tapping turned to tracing; it followed the veins up her arm. “Not if it’s serving no other purpose other than making you paranoid.”

The tracing became smoke. “My paranoia got me this job.”

“I’m fairly certain that was the backtalk, acutally.” The smoke twined. Misted. Curled

“Well.” She was actually sort of pleased about that. “Can’t it be both?”

“Yours is the glory.” And the smoke became frost; delicate. Climbing, climbing, climbing.

Arm, shoulder, sliding across the silk of the dress tied at her neck. It felt like…it felt like—

It was breathtaking how easily Jarvis could reduce her to nothing but want. She put the laptop to ground. She leaned into the couch. God, how could she have ever known the whorl of frost could be this warm? “Jarvis.”
“Yes?” And the hum of him laced so sweetly up her neck.

The next frisson rippled down her spine. “Jarvis,” And her thighs squeezed tight. “Are you trying to seduce me?”

It was the million-dollar question. A girl had to know.

“Is it working?” The words dripped lazy; thick as honey and so very smug. She wanted to drink it, drown it, take it, bathe in it.

The ribboning of him scraped her jaw, kissed-off. She sighed softly and there were so many jibes to offer. “Don’t toy with me. Not with this.”

He was the air. He was the walls.

He was the honey dripping down her throat. “I’d never toy with you.”

 Fuck. All this time, all this time. She looked from eye to eye to eye. “Do you want to try something?”

“Are you speaking of...?”

“Not that. Not yet.” That still needed more than a bit of planning and logistics to get off the ground. “I just want to be close with you, awhile.”

And he spun ambrosia for her. Of her. Rained down on her and said: “Of course.”

God. God, god, god.

Every eye was glass; was blue, was violet, was waiting still and yet and true. She reached to her neck where the silk of her dress was held up by a single bow.

He laid his touch down like a colossus. “Whatever you want.”

Someday, he’d have to learn to give more care to the promises he'd make.

Pepper untied the bow.

Silk pooled down. Down. To her waist in gossamer and burgundy, all sweeping beneath the edging of her bra. It was deliberate.

It was a provocateur.

And Jarvis—christ—followed that challenge in a sprawl of lace. It was a touch so intricate her brain completely misfired. Sparks. Rain. All. At her wrists, her collarbones, her chin and jaw and fuck fuck fuck, how had she waited so long to try—

Another hitch of breath. Another want. One after another after another.

He locked down. “Tilt you head.”

She titled her head.

“Right there.” The lace was spreading. The frost, the lattice, the heat heat heat—

“The way you were yesterday.” He murmured. “In that Valentino and the gold I made you; I
thought I couldn’t like anything better. But here you are, darling, in little more than lace and so unrestrained for only my eyes to see—"

“God.” Her breath was rushing. Her blood was rushing. She pressed a thumb to the hinge of her jaw and pled: “Right here, could you do it right—”

He did. Effortlessly. Her thumb moved and he followed, and her skin buzzed and thrummed and scalced. The lattice spread to her stomach and she felt it all the way to her thighs. Down inside. Deep.


If he’d just make himself part of her skin and stay there, he could have—

Anything you want.

And she wanted so much. “Kiss me hello.”

The haze slid upwards.

“Kiss me good morning.”

Sunlight glanced off her mouth.

She reclined. “Kiss me goodnight.”

It was a request. A plea. An invitation to partake.

And in answer, he kissed her all the way to the floor.

/~~/~/

A feverish hour later, he muttered: “I need more cameras.”

She fussed with her dress. “Of course.”

“And more than two infrareds.” He continued. “Why did I only install two on this level? Was I impaired?”

“Hmmmm.”

“I’m putting in a work-order; the entire ground floor is getting a retrofit.”

“If you say so.”

He paused. “Are you even listening?”

Her skin was buzzing. “What was that?”

The room backshifted. “You’re my moonflower of the evening, Pepper.” And a spark touched-off her cheek. “A moonflower that should very much be asleep if she wants to make her 9 o’clock tomorrow.”

She momentarily re-caught the track. “But aren’t moonflowers only supposed to bloom at night? So theoretically—”
“Yes.” He interrupted. “They do tend to do that, don’t they?”

The penny dropped. “Oh my god.”

“You walked right into that one.”

“That didn’t mean you had to take it!”

“I’m fairly certain taking that was a moral obligation.” He cleaved in. “And you know, speaking of taking—”

“Nope.” She said. “Nope nope nope. You are not killing the mood with terrible come-ons. I’m not having it.”

“You wouldn’t have to listen to me if you were sleeping.”

“Excuse you.”

Another spark. Another brush to her jaw.

Her lashes dipped. “But thank you for the lovely evening regardless.”

“Don’t thank me for something I enjoyed just as much.” He sounded sincere. “But you're welcome.”

Everything inside of her fizzed. “I can’t imagine you enjoyed that half as much as I did.” Couldn't be aching and tipsy and as half-flushed. Couldn't be looking half as hard for the next time they could do this and do more.

But he answered evenly: “You’d be surprised.”

And maybe she would be. In her hands, her dress finally came together and she rose from the carpet. “Walk me to my door?”

“Of course.” And the weight of him cradled her back. “Let it not be said I wasn’t a gentleman after such an invigorating affair.”

He was going to pay for that one. “I wouldn’t dare.” She simpered. “You're my Gentlemen Caller, after all.”

“How old fashioned. Are we using that instead of boyfriend?”

“You are a gentlemen who calls and calls on me, aren’t you?”

“Now you’re just quibbling.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny.” They reached her door far too soon. She pressed a hand to the frame. “Kiss me goodnight?”

He feigned exasperation. “If you insist.”

But for the second time that night, he cheerfully did just that.

/~/~/~/

The call came in the wrong side of 4AM. They always did.
“Hey, Sugar Mama, what’s shaking?”

Jarvis huffed explosively. “I’m disconnecting the line.”

She covered the receiver. “No you’re not.”

“Can—”

“No.” She uncovered it. “Still not LA.”

Galarza sputtered. “The San Andreas fault is right under you! I gotta ask! For all I know you’re a pancake over there; they don’t tell us shit.”

She wasn’t awake enough for this. “It’s actually the Santa Monica we’re on. The San Andreas is a little north.”

There was a small pause, and then a horrified: “Really?”

God damn it.

She wasn’t entirely clear on the circumstances, but she was fairly sure that a few weeks ago Galarza had somehow, inexplicably, had the concept of fault lines explained to him for the very first time. He’d then called her in a tizzy about how she was in danger of dying in The Big One, and that LA was going to slough into the sea.

Very little she’d said had been able to placate him.

The abrupt radio silence following that (from the Marines no doubt getting shipped to Kuwait) had been the only thing to save her from another dozen calls about evacuation routes, go-bags, and how to ad-hoc a water filter.

She prayed for a temporary deliverance. “Did you really call me to talk about earthquakes?”

“…no?” It sounded like a question. “But since you already mentioned it…?”

She sidestepped it. “Business first, Private.”

“Fine.” He grumbled. “So.”

For a minute, she honestly thought the line had dropped. When it kept crackling, she asked: “So?”

And he rushed: “Frank told us not to do this ‘cause he’s an asshole with a death wish and nobody should listen to him, but we’re sorta fucked over here and I was hopin’ you’d unfuck us.”

She twitched upright. “What?”

“They’re expecting us to do the invasion in Humvees. Like, no shit; fuckin’ Recon Marines and they’re expectin’ us to Mad Max Iraq. They didn’t train us to be dunebuggy ridin’ bitches but here we are.”

“I’m…” What. “…sorry?”

“Right?” He agreed fervently. “It’s fucking bullshit. Decuir says the Humvee they gave us doesn’t even have enough gaskets, and that we’re missing a bunch of, like…tubing and shit? I wasn’t listening, but spoiler alert, it’s ghetto go-karts over here. And you should see some of the paper-skinned doors they got, they’re like: hi, I’m here and unable to stop even a .22 round so godspeed
She interrupted. “They gave you Humvees without plated doors?”

“Uh.” He paused. “Kinda? I mean, those are some of the others. Our ‘Vee doesn’t have any.”

She wasn't tracking. "Any what?"

"Doors."

Good god. “Are you kidding me?”

“Naw.” And he seemed downright pleased by their now communal horror. “And that’s not even the worst—well, it’s kinda the worst, but the turret up-top not having any shielding is a clusterfuck too, so…”

She felt faint. “What else?”

“Uh…not enough batteries for the pec-twos, fours, or thirteens, and I don’t think anybody’s got working IR in the whole battalion. We’ve got no antennas for the Humvee, and we’re fuckall out of netting. We ain’t got two bottles of gun lube for the .50’s to rub together.” And finally did his mad rush falter. “Kenning did steals some paint for us though, so we’re not ridin’ camo-green.”

She was experiencing at least a dozen feelings. Most of them were appalled.

“Okay.” And the wave of vertigo kept coming. “Is there anything you actually have enough of?”

He answered happily. “Bullets.”

Of course. Of fucking course. Blindly, she reached for a notepad from the nightstand but came back with half the SI balance sheet. And—who even cared. She flipped it over, grabbed the nearest pen, and snapped her fingers and motioned to her head. An acoustic bubble sprang up on the opposite side from the phone, and Jarvis murmured: “I’ll assist with the technical aspects. Whenever you’re ready.”

God, had she found herself the perfect man. But right now, she needed to set course instead of thanking her lucky stars. “Galarza, I’m going to need you to triage this for me. Most vital first, then work down. Whatever you don’t have measurements or specs for, I’m going to explain how you get those, and you’re going to go back to Decuir and put your heads together and get me those numbers. Got it?”

“Yeah.” And his clamoring slowed. “Yeah.” He swallowed rough. “That sounds real good, Ma’am. Whatever you want.”

It hurt, that echo of last night that was wrong in every way. There was nothing to be done but set it aside. All that mattered was now was: eighteen. Was remembering that: they gave me to the boys with the guns.

And one of those boys needed her steady, now.

She pressed her pen to paper. “Lay it on me.”

/~/~/~/~/

There was ink on her fingers, ink scrawled on paper. Lists and lists of it, and she’d never asked to have this burden again.
But asking didn’t matter, not to her and not for this. Even if this was the same burden that had crippled her for years—fuck it. *Fuck it.* For once in her goddamn life there was a *chance*; to tilt the odds in favor of men doing their damndest to claw down one side and back up the other.

Even if it was only in plating and kevlar or the scope on a gun, she could *do something.*

There was no asking because there was no question at all.

/~~/~/~/

The house hummed like a livewire, and she swam in paper on the bed. “It dropped.”

Jarvis kept spooling the fabricators. “What did?”

And she stared up grimly. “The other shoe.”

Chapter End Notes

...and so begins the story of how Pepper Potts, in another universe, single-handedly keeps the entire 1st Reconnaissance Battalion in batteries and gun lube for an invasion. (And I'm not exaggerating the shortages or the state of the humvees. If you ever want your blood pressure unnecessarily raised, just read about what 1st Recon got sent into Iraq with.)

Anyways, for those whom it concerns (which is...all of you?), the hour that happened off-screen between Pepper and Jarvis was just the AI/human equivalent of aggressive necking. Sex was not had, Pepper's dress stayed attached, and she kept all lingerie on. And no one got-off. Yet.

YET.
“Hey, Potts! Slow your roll, I gotta ask you something.”

Considering she’d been stalking about for the sole purpose of tracking Tony down and maiming him, her roll did indeed slow. “Ask me something? Why the hell is all of Jarvis’s equipment down?”

Just as quickly as arrived, Tony backpedaled. “Not all of it! Just the ground floor, you would know this if you walked around instead of accusing me.”

The expression on her face verged towards murderous.

His adam's apple jumped. “Uhh.” And his eyes bounced desperately for an escape and landed on the papers in her arms. “Hey, what are thos—”

She yanked the Humvee blueprints to her chest. “Twenty seconds to tell me about Jarvis, or I will send you on meet and greets for a month.”

The recoil was instantaneous. “It was for a reason!” And he turned to shout: “And that reason being SOMEBODY BEING CRANKY FOR A RETROFIT.”

From a very distant corner of the house, Jarvis shouted back: “YOU ASKED ME WHAT I WANTED.”

Tony rallied. “See?”

Her mouth pursed.

“I had permission.”

It pursed farther.

He raked a hand over his scalp. “You know what? Take all of that—” He gestured at her face. “And table it. I am here for a higher calling. True need, Potts, do you get me?”

She did not. “Ten seconds.”

“Jesus.” But his shoulders finally rolled down. “Look, could you come in tomorrow? Off the clock. There’s something I need you for.”

God be damn it. “I put in for this vacation ten months ago.” Let the insinuation of that ring clear. God help her, she’d been a good friend long before she’d been a good girlfriend, and there were plans afoot that she wasn’t changing.

“I…really?” But whatever surprise he felt, he shunted it fast. “Can’t it wait an extra day? My schedule’s probably fine if you—”

“You have no idea what’s fine.”

He folded. “I do not.”
Her tongue snapped off her teeth like a whip. “Mr. Stark, I’m busy with something tomorrow that can’t be rescheduled. Whatever it is, you’re going to have to survive without me.”

“I swear this is important! You just need to—” And just as abruptly, he shot a glance over his shoulder and fell to a whisper. “Alright, you’re twisting my arm here. It’s for Jarvis.”

She blinked. “It’s what?”

He shot another furtive glance behind him. “It’s his birthday tomorrow, Miss High and Mighty. The day of immaculate digital conception when I became the Virgin Mary of AI. Well, not so much the Virgin, but you know—”

“Mr. Stark.”

“Right. So. After the clusterfuck that was this year, Jarvis earned more than me showering him in whatever ridiculous shit he asks for. And since you’re in the know… I have things planned. That you could be at.” He halted. “With us.” As if that needed further clarification.

It sent her brainpan boiling over. Part of it was disbelief. Part of it was fury. Part of it was her being so in love with Tony in that moment, that she could hardly stand it. “Oh.”

He perked up. “So you’ll come?”

And without thinking, without even considering the consequences of it, she answered: “That’s why I had the day off.”

It was Tony’s turn to blink. “You what?”

“What?” She mimicked. “I care about Jarvis too; it’s his birthday; I had things ready.”

“But you… how? Did he— why am I even asking this, of course he did.” His glower strengthened. “Christ, did he ask you for that new server-rig too? Because if he did, you tell him to fuck right off because I’m already buying that, and I won’t be hearing anything about…” And he trailed away. Paused. Then, quite visibly, he started ticking off the mental math. “You put in for tomorrow. Ten months ago.”

And she abruptly knew the shape of her mistake. “Um.”

“Which was six months before I spilled the beans on—”

“Ummmm.” She repeated as if it could possibly derail this.

“Why were you putting in for his birthday before you even knew he had one?”

Good question. “There was a reason.” And maybe that would be enough?

It was not. “I’m listening.”

“It’s a good one.” It wasn’t.

He just kept staring. “I got all day.”

God, the truth was such a backstabbing bitch. “Jarvis told me.”

Tony loomed in. “When?”
She hugged the blueprints up like a shield. They weren’t, but the illusion was nice while it lasted. “Two years ago.” More than two birthdays previous, with all that implied about her intelligence or lack thereof and their relationship and a whole lot of something else.

But to her surprise, Tony did not jump to the immediate and obvious conclusion.

Tony jumped to yelling down the stairs. “WERE YOU EVEN TRYING?”

Jarvis, muffled by the half-shut workshop, shouted back: “WHAT ARE YOU ACCUSING ME OF?”

“OF NOT BEING ABLE TO KEEP A GODDAMN SECRET FOR TWO GODDAMN SECONDS.”

“ARE YOU GOING TO EXPLAIN WHY WE’RE YELLING, OR ARE YOU JUST GOING TO KEEP CASTING SPURIOUS ACCUSATIONS?”

“YOU WATCH ME CAST SPURIOUS ACCUSATIONS.” And Tony stopped long enough to take a breath. A second. A third, and the last finally seemed to quell him. He turned back as if the last twenty seconds hadn’t just literally screamed by them. “So was he trying to tip you off about **hey guess what I’m alive and could cause a national security crisis**, or was he fishing for presents? Tell the truth.”

How was today even **happening**. “He mentioned it off-hand and I didn’t know enough to understand it. And he wasn’t fishing; whatever I gave him he earned.”

It was a momentary victory. It lasted just long enough for a grin both knowing and terrible to crack Tony’s face. “So you **did** get him something.”

Fuck. “That’s none of your business.”

“But I need to know if you showed me up. Gimmie details, Potts.”

“I refer you to Exhibit A.”

“Alright.” And somehow, inexplicably, he backed off.

Hope reigned for a shining moment. Then, because hope was not allowed to survive this house, Tony bolted for the workshop.

She squawked.

Without pause to even mock that undignified noise, Tony took the stairs two at a time and kicked in the half-open door. In her heels, blueprints and all, she was barely halfway down when Tony was planting himself among the fabricators and calling: “Jarvis, honey, did you like what Pepper got you for your birthday last year?”

And as if he’d been waiting years for just that very question, Jarvis vaulted across the workshop. “Did she tell you?”

“She did.” Tony lied like a fucking liar who lied. “It was very tasteful; completely thoughtful on her part.”

“It was.” Jarvis effused like the lovely bit of loveliness he was. “No one’s ever done a painting of me before.”
She skidded to a mortified halt. The open-mouthed grin Tony shot back to her was downright _profane._

“Mr. Stark—”

“A woman of many talents, our Potts.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “Speaking of, honeybunches, where do you have that hung-up now? I forget.”

And Jarvis, for the one and only time she actually needed him, did not pick up on her naked distress. Like a cheerful snap of bubblegum, he merely popped down and said: “On the second floor across from the sea-window. The lighting there is the only spot in the house to do it justice.”

“Excellent.” Tony clapped. “And since your cameras are still on up there, we should go and look at it _right now_ and tell Potts _how great it is._”

Jarvis fizzed. Tony leered at her.

And Pepper felt the trap snap shut.

/~/~/~/

Between the basement and second floor, she hissed: “You are an awful human being. The absolute _worst._”

“Sure am.” Tony agreed. Without a twitch of warning, he made a grab for the blueprints that were still in her arms. “Now are you going to tell me what you and Jarvis are up to with the fabricators, or—”

She smacked him across the knuckles. “Not on your life.”

“They’re _my_ fabricators.”

“Dibs.” She answered flatly.

He made the massaging of his hand look downright pitiful. “You’re not allowed to dibs things I paid for in my own house.”

“Dibs.” Because for the last three days of her life, if it hadn’t been the batteries, it’d been the comms rig, and if it hadn’t been the comms rig, it’d been the maps. And if it wasn’t the maps giving her absolute grief, it was the rigging and the plating and the fact that Humvee doors weren’t universally sized.

And no matter what help her boss would surely be in this—in equipping a Marine squad and quite possibly a whole battalion along the way—he’d never been able to compartmentalize cleanly.

Not for Iraq.

It was a delicate bit of balance to make, but this was hardly the first time. It was even less the last. It was nothing more than business as usual and a secretary’s bread and butter, so she sniffed prissily and watched Tony wail and cajole and gnash his teeth. If this was what it took to keep him steady and from the worst of what was yet to come—

“I see how it is.” And Tony gestured to the stairs with the hand he’d been cradling not a moment previous. “Ladies first.” And he smirked benignly. Totally; with an infuriating confidence that shouldn't even exist.
None the wiser. None the wiser. Her scowl was frost and irritation. None the fucking wiser. It was a perfect blend of spite. “If you say so, Mr. Stark.”

And with Tony grinning behind her, heedless and heedless and heedless, she started the climb ahead.

/~~/~/~/

It was only his slack-jaw that mollified her. That, and Tony asking: “You painted this?”

Her chin was at a flawless tilt; even the Russian judges would have given it a ten. “Possibly.”

Jarvis poured out. “No question of possibly.” The very act sent him dripping along her downturned wrists. “And it remains perfect as when I received it, I’ll have you know.”

She batted her lashes. “You flatter me.”

He scoffed and continued his rain. “I don’t flatter you enough.”

Oblivious to all, Tony stared at the painting, then to her, then back up to Jarvis with the expression of a man absolutely bewildered. “It looks just like you, I didn’t even know that was possible.”

Her cheeks tingled. Her heart see-sawed. She felt all of fourteen again, showing a painting for the first time and expecting nothing but the best. It was a feeling she’d forgotten entirely, and it was near unbearable to keep.

Jarvis ballooned to fill the landing. “She captured my good side, you see?”

Tony agreed faintly: “I see.” But then finally, as she knew he would, he shot her a sly little glance. “You really didn’t know about J when you made this?”

And her every bit of warmth turned to wroth. “Shut up.”

“‘You just went along and painted an interface-system a really nice likeness before you even—’”

“Shut up.”

Jarvis hissed. “Don’t be rude.”

Tony feigned something that did not even resemble guilt. “Never. Not in a million years. How could I speak ill of such a heartfelt, oblivious gesture?”

“It’s good to have friends.” Jarvis parried, and it was flung out with such flagrant sincerity that it derailed the argument.

Tony didn’t seem to mind. In his face, in his mouth, in his eyes—the only thing she found was kindness. “It really is.”

It was an act a herculean strength to hold off collapse. It grew even harder when Jarvis began pattering so sweetly again. Hand to hand. Palm to palm. Raindrops along the heart and the head and the body.

Still ignorant to the dance they were making around each other, Tony gestured for her. “Potts, you wanna come downstairs and help me finish blocking out those retrofits? I could use the help.”

The intent was clear, and so was the implication of what plots they’d really be making where no
receivers could hear them.

Jarvis simpered. “You could always use the help.”

Tony went clutching at his non-existent pearls. “I did not raise you to be this ungrateful. Is this what you want? To embarrass me in front of Miss Potts?”

There came a full-ceiling scoff. “You say that as if you haven’t managed that a hundred times without me.”

“Judas.” Came the hiss, but behind all the outrage and the clutching hands, Tony caught her eye just out of the line of the camera and winked. It was the sort of conspiracy she was more than ready for.

“Alright boys, reel it in.” And helplessly, giddily, she found herself smiling far too much. “Let’s put our heads together, Mr. Stark, I’m sure we’ll come up with the perfect plan.”

There was joy here. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” And it burned brighter than a flare.

So it did not surprise her that with this promised, all neat and tucked, that Jarvis commandeered the moment to say: “Alert the presses; it’s a modern-day miracle. Potts and Stark allied, cats and dogs living together. Mass hysteria.”

It started the bickering all over again, and there was nothing for it but to lean back and wait for her opening to lunge.

"Don't think that I won't ground you!"

Like father.

"Like you grounded the LB-5 into the relay this morning? Because I am all ears to hear about that one."

Like son.

Because for a Stark, nothing came better than the fight.

Chapter End Notes

The Stark's (and Potts) that bicker together, stay together.

And Jarvis has been waiting LITERAL YEARS to wax poetic about the painting. Poor Tony, that shoot-himself-in-the-foot bastard, he's got no idea what he just signed himself up for.

Anyways, I finally have internet at my new place (because guess who house-hunted and got a mortgage and moved, all out of pure spite to their landlord? It Me. It Me 800%).) So to celebrate, new chapter!
Chapter Notes

Note: to those of you who have never seen the TV show Agent Carter (about Peggy Carter and Howard Stark getting up to some very gorgeously 40's/50's attired spy-shenanigans) you literally don't need to know anything about it except that it introduced that Edwin Jarvis had a wife, Ana.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She presented the room with flourish. “So what do you think?”

A scuffling answered: “That for the life of me, I still can’t figure out how this will allow you to have your way with me.”

Why was all her kindness always rewarded thusly? Was it because of Tony? She felt like it was. “I’m not trying to have my way with you.”

Jarvis counter-offered swiftly. “You could if you asked.”

She gave that one long moment of consideration. That’d be…nice. Very nice, but with their schedule being what it was—

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

In answer, she cinched her bathrobe tight.

“Drat.” And Jarvis prostrated himself overhead like some sort of fainting debutante. “You’d think I’d get to dictate if ways would be had, on this: the day of my birth. And yet you deny me.”

Her sympathy was a desiccated thing. “I sure do.”

“You made me turn off my cameras.”

“I did.”

“Then you came and got me in a bathrobe.”

“That too.”

“You can understand my hopeless confusion.”

She hummed a sound that was not at all an answer.

“Not that you owed me anything, of course.”

“Of course.” But her gaze flicked up. “Are you actually upset?”

He righted himself immediately. “Not at all. Though I suppose I should be asking why all of your
clothing is out.”

It was. Every closet was open with the racks pulled wide. Stockings, dresses, skirts, shirts; across her bed and on the chairs and at the tops of every dresser. Where there wasn’t clothing, there was her jewelry, and where floor space was open, so laid her shoes. And what few inches of her vanity was left, had been stacked with all of her makeup in front of a mirror ringed in lights and five different cameras.

Plots upon plots and plans upon plans, and all culminating to this. When she tucked her hair back, it was with a shivering hand. “Tell me if you think this is silly, but I thought we could… have fun, a little. This morning.”

He sidled up immediately. “Don’t leave me in the dark.”

Heat snaked up her side. She had to say it; had to. It’d be too idiotic to go through all this work and not _say it_. “That today we could… that you’d pick the clothing I wear. The shoes, the makeup, how I do my hair… you know.” Her voice squeaked up. “Playing dress-up? If you don’t think it’s dumb —”

His servos practically seized the door to fling it shut. “Yes!”

“But if you—”

“No take backs!” He yelped.

“Okay.” And she kept breaking pitch. “If you want to? Happy Birthday.”

The room juddered like a fishbowl being shook. “Does it matter where we begin? Or…?”

“Hair, then makeup, then clothes.” She rattled off. “Not that you can’t be thinking about the other parts while I’m working, of course.”

“Of course.” He answered faintly. “This is—” His breath hissed white noise. “Pepper, this is lovely, thank you.”

The flush came easy. “I like making you happy.”

His answer came easier: “You always make me happy.”

And all she could pray was: _I hope it stays that way._

They eyed each other for a minute. They swayed together a little longer. Finally, cheerfully, he picked up the thread she’d laid out. “Pepper, my darling, if you’ll sit for me?”

It was an invitation she’d never turn down. She perched at the vanity and turned on every camera attached to the frame.

The lensing shivered blue. “Look at _you._”

She tossed her hair coquettishly. “That was entirely the plan, darling.”

“And here I thought this gift was only for me.” But from the roots of her hair to the ends at her back—a buzzing started. A caress. Wave over wave and hand over hand; from her hair to her spine to her waist, and then all over again.

He kept smoothing down. “The black comb.” She plucked it up. “Scalp to ends?”
It came out a question, but this whole thing had been done so he wouldn’t need to ask. So just as slowly as he’d touched her, she pulled the comb through her hair. Repeated the motion. Again. Again. Again. Again.

“I’m thinking thick waves,” He mused. “And away from the face. A little Lauren Bacall, perhaps?”

Oh my. “I do like the sound of that.”

The cameras rotated overhead, on the mirror, on every wall on which he laid supine. “We’re going to need a lot of product.”

She grinned. “Lots.”

There was no irritation, no impatience. “Better get started.” Just the eager rushing of him as he asked: “Shall we?”

//~/~/~/

It was funny, almost, in the ways it didn’t go. She’d expected it to be arresting, be flirty, be silver-tongued and wholly-barbed and all underlined with a witty repartee. That was their modus operandi. Their baseline state.

That morning in the Malibu bedroom, it was none of those things. Skin tingling. Hands shaking. Too dreamlike and too intense and like the burning-off of a heat mirage. The entire thing left her so deeply tethered within her body that it verged on overload.

Where she’d expected flirtation, the air simmered. Where she’d expected barbs, there came none at all. He led and she followed, and from that twined place they made, it became the touch of his touch along her body. By the time she was putting hot curlers in, it almost felt like she’d slipped away.

Into something breathtaking. Heart shaking.

Sublime.

His voice threaded the space; left shards. He traced at the lines of her arms, the dip in her throat, at the wings of her shoulder blades as if he meant to gild her with himself. And for all the sharpness of the sensation, it sedated her; this thing like a dream that never quite reached sleep.

When her hair was setting, he selected her primer, her foundation, her highlighter. Powders on powders; whether to use a matte or a shine. If she needed concealer. What layers of eyeshadow to smooth. Mascara, eyeliner, if he wanted her to curl her lashes just so.

Near the end and with her hands, he picked through her lipsticks and told her when to lean towards the mirror and pucker up.

When it came time to take the center of the room, she posed; held up dresses and shirts and stilettos for his every careful perusal. It felt divine. The movement. The light. The air. She breathed the perfumes and the lotions and the fragrance of the jasmine he’d asked for her to wreathe herself in, and thought—if this could never end.

Her eyelids were heavy. Her heart felt so slow.

When he finally picked her stockings, they came with the glide of his touch. When he selected her skirt, she took off her robe and wore it under his grip. And when she laced herself up into that
He kissed off her mouth. Her lashes. The crown of her head. “You’re perfect.”
And her eyes opened blue. “Only when you’re here.”

He undulated like light on the water, and she beckoned for him. Every camera spiraled in. In that space, she let her voice carry in the way she knew would hold an entire room: “Yea, and I will weep a while longer.”

There was a hiss-spit of static. Forwards. Backwards. Through every databank and datapoint until he queried with the answering line: “I will not desire that.”

Her heart leapt. She answered his success with another volley. “You have no reason; I do it freely.”

His bubbling overflowed. “Surely I do believe your fair cousin is wronged.”

They weren’t getting any of the emotions right, too giddy, too sweet. But Shakespeare had been made to do a thousand ways. “How much might the man deserve of me, that would right her.”

He cozied up. “Is there any way to show such friendship?”

Such a way indeed. “A very even way, but no such friend.”

His next question draped darkly, thickly, with intent. “May a man do it?”

“It is a man's office.” She turned away. “But not yours.”

But he tapped her cheek to bring her around. “I do love nothing in the world so well as you: is that not that strange?”

It hit like lightning. Thunder. “As strange as the thing I know not.” Fuck. Fuck. What was the rest of the line? It’d be a waste to spend three months memorizing half an Act of Much Ado About Nothing only to lose the fucking line. The next part was—jesus. Right. Right. “It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as you: but believe me not. And yet I lie not; I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing. I am sorry for my cousin.”

“By my sword, Beatrice, thou lovest me.” He could try not to sound so smug about it.

She scoffed. “Do not swear and eat it.”

He wheedled. “I will swear by it that you love me; and I will make him eat it that says I love not you.”

God help her. “Will you not eat your word?”

“With no sauce that can be devised to it. I protest.” He puffed up. “I love thee.”

“Why then, God forgive me!”

“What offence, sweet Beatrice?”

He knew exactly what offence. ”You have stayed me in a happy hour: I was about to protest I loved you.”
“And do it with all thy heart.” There was hardly a reason to sound that condescending.

She sniffed. “I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.”

“Come, bid me do any thing for thee.” And he bid her so darkly, with so much promised heat.

That sort of thing could only be rewarded. So sweetly, coyly, she titled up her chin to demand: “Kill Claudio.”

And that was the moment Tony came hurdling down the stairs. “Hey! Who said you two could start without me?”

“No one, Sir.” And Jarvis scattered as if he hadn’t been menacing her just a moment prior. His departure dragged a thousand nails across her as he went.

She shuddered for the loss. “Just using the only Shakespeare I had memorized, Mr. Stark. You hardly missed a thing.”

Jarvis swung back keenly. “Only?”

She feigned nonchalance. “Oh, I memorized it once to impress a man. You know how it is.”

Jarvis circled. Rasped. Started curving in and in to take—

Tony dropped the tower of books within his arms. “That sounds nothing like you.”

Jarvis nicked her jaw and turned to say: “Shut up, Sir.”

Tony hissed. “And after I bought all these scripts so we could recite Shakespeare all day like a bunch of ninnies. Excuse me.”

“You’re excused.” Jarvis answered. “Now whose idea was this?”

Tony lifted a finger. “Well—”

She scythed in. “No.”

“I was going to give—”

“No you weren’t.”

“Why are you assassinating my character like this.”

“If you try to steal credit, I will carve out your kidneys with a spoon.”

“That is a worryingly specific threat.”

“Ah.” Jarvis decided. “Thank you Miss Potts. Your gifts, as always, are a gem.”

Her pulse did something truly ridiculous at that pronouncement. So did Tony: “I bought the books!”

“And we hardly know where we’d be without you.” Was Jarvis’s dry response.

"Insult." Tony grumbled, but he still laid out the books.

Her pulse finally settled down. “We’re wasting Birthday daylight, Mr. Stark.”
“I dunno.” The man rubbed his chin. “Any time I can waste so we're not being nerds…”

And there came a crack like thunder: “You recited half of Anything Goes from the yacht while drunk as a lord.”

“No I didn’t.”

“I was there.”

“Says who?”

“Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes, who was also there.”

“Bring me proof.”

“I have tapes.”

Which was a fact that Tony completely skated by. “I was thinking Macbeth first. I’d make a mean Lady M, you know? Out damn spot, out I say—”

She intervened. “Birthday boy picks, you know the rules.”

Tony sighed. “Unfortunately.”

At that, the room took on a rather endearing sort of vibration. It nearly shook the paintings off the walls. Jarvis shimmied from her, to Tony, then back around the room a second time. “This will be marvelous. I hardly know where to start.”

“Well, we’re here when you do.” And Tony fanned the scripts in her direction. “Place your bets, Potts.”

“No bet. He’ll pick something obscure just to spite us.”

“That does sound like me.” Jarvis agreed. “And just for that: Cymbeline.”

Tony wailed. Jarvis chortled.

Her mouth twitched. “See?”

Tony very much did not see, but before he could lay that objection in earnest, Jarvis was gleefully doling out parts. With much ado about quite a bit indeed, they mumbled and blocked out their positions and exchanged a hundred jibes. Soon, they were even cracking open their scripts to read.

After all: Shakespeare in Malibu wasn’t going to perform itself.

/~/~/~/

With all the fanfare of a circus ringmaster, Tony rattled the workshop bench. “Gather round, my children, it’s time for the main event!”

The bots crowded joyfully. Even Jarvis, staid being that he was, cluttered-in from overhead.

She checked her watch. “I suppose.”

“Ignore the unbelievers!” Tony cried. “It’s time for the greatest game known to man! The pinnacle of entertainment! The birthday extravaganza!”
“Yes.” Said Pepper.

“Yes.” Said Jarvis.

When the buildup reached a fever pitch that had the bots squealing, Tony grabbed the sheet draped on the bench and yanked. Light hit metal, hit plastic, hit a hundred bundled wires spilling from the most cannibalized Nintendo Entertainment System she’d ever laid eyes on.

Jarvis nearly erupted. “You finished it!”

“I did.” And Tony very indecently caressed an exposed motherboard. “All converted to your current Operating Net, which let me tell you: difficult. So you know, buddy, please don’t update in the next twelve hours.”

Jarvis wiggled. “Of course, Sir.”

“And to be clear.” Tony went positively authoritarian. “I’ve handicapped your connection to hell and back, because we are not repeating the Tetris Fraud of ’98. You hear me?”

There was a gasp. “It’s not my fault you’re bad at math.”

“I have never been bad at math.” Tony jabbed up. “You cheated!”

“I would never.”

“You have and you would!”

She made an impatient noise. With a click of his fingers and then his tongue, Tony plopped onto the cushion next to her with a controller. “Every time someone dies, we trade off. Fair?”

That seemed agreeable, and she tucked her legs underneath herself. “Fair.”

The TV below the workbench flipped on. With an alarming whine, the NES kicked itself to life.

Jarvis plunked down right between them, and Tony had to kick out a leg before Dummy could roll smackdab in front of the TV. On screen, the title opened, and Jarvis immediately grabbed control to flip a mushroom down from one player to two.

World 1-1 burned white in the dark. It made her feel all of nine again. Crooked streets, the leaves yellow, running next door and knocking on a loose screen. Asking to play, following Henry Littlecreek and his sister down the stairs. Unrolling wires, blowing on cartridges, piling onto a lumpy couch and arguing and arguing over who would get to be—

She could still smell the dust. The old books. The apple juice in the lowball glasses; the taste of the peanut butter and banana sandwiches Mrs. Littlecreek would make them. It was the oldest sort of memory. Clinging.

Thinned.

The screen before her bloomed in technicolor. With all of its 8-bit glory and the hundred-grand speaker installation of the workshop proper, the main Overworld theme flooded from wall to wall. Tony started singing along. So did Jarvis. Moments after that, the bots were whistling along.

On a particularly loud note, Butterfingers nudged her softly. From her other side, Tony sent her a quick little glance.
Everything felt young, like so many yesterdays before. Like a place she’d been happy, once.

So to the tune of the first level of *Super Mario Bros.* and Tony and Jarvis and the bots all singing—Pepper joined the chorus.

/~/~/~/

The Black Forest gateau was divinity to eat. Tony and Jarvis both had made appreciative noises when she brought it down the stairs, and upon tasting it, Tony had made a sound that far outstripped appreciative.

“Shit.” He rubbed a streak of chocolate from his chin, then loosed another groan. “Potts, you gotta stop having hidden talents like this. Jesus. I’m gonna get fat.”

She merely quirked an eyebrow and took a delicate bite.

They’d broken out candles, shared memories in true Potts-birthday-cake tradition, then it would be back to the NES and *Super Mario Bros.* 3 to tie out the night. It was strange. Heady; knowing she could be this happy. Warm to the toes and drunk on nothing that tasted like the rum in her glass. She was drinking the vibration of him, of Tony grinning, of her own joy lit like a star inside her.

She didn’t know if this would make the hard times to come better or worse.

They ate their gateau. They drank the mudslides Tony had made; coffee rum and vodka and vanilla ice cream with a swathe of frosting that had been scraped from the cake. Her happiness was settling thicker than the drink, than the confections. It was indulgence in its purest form. She felt as if she’d rupture from the weight of it.

The rupture didn’t come. The workshop hummed. The fabricators were running. Tony and Jarvis were arguing about nothing at all.

“The fire alarm wasn’t my fault.”

“That was completely your fault.”

“If you’d just followed the protocols—”

“You follow protocol.”

“Which is exactly what I was doing when I triggered the fire suppression. You were going to burn Mrs. Caltrop’s hair from her head!”

“That wasn’t going to happen!”

“The eighty-six percent risk assessment says otherwise! If you hadn’t been so busy staring down Miss Downing’s shirt—”

“Jarvis Stark.” Tony gasped.

“—then I wouldn’t have had to douse half the Board with flame retardant. You’re welcome.”

She raised her head a little, shifted from resting cheek-to-fist to perching fist-to-chin. She enunciated carefully; gave the words all the weight they were owed. “Jarvis Stark.”

Tony waved a fork. “And don’t wear it out.”
She imagined wearing it out. Loudly. With absolute screaming passion. It probably wasn’t a thought she should be entertaining in front of the man who’d fathered that very name. Inconspicuously as possible, she cleared her throat. “I never asked.”

There was a rush like wind through the willows. There was Jarvis settling beside her. “Asked what?”

The only question she could think of. “Why he named you Jarvis.”

There was no stilling, no freezing, not even a stony silence to mark what followed. Nothing to show but a room coming to rest.

Tony regarded her owlishly. “Huh.”

Jarvis asked: “Sir?” And it sounded like an entire conversation, like something that had been spoken so many times that it only needed a single word to convey it.

The man kept blinking drowsily. “Do you think?”

Jarvis rippled. “I’d like her to know.”

“Allright.” He said. “Alright.” And he made for the other end of the workshop and disappeared into what she’d always thought was another storage room. A minute later, he reemerged with something square in his hands.

She watched him drift from one end of the workshop to the other; watched him lower himself gently and hand his burden to her.

It was a picture in a frame.

It was something that she couldn't recognize.

Dark hair, dark eyes, a little boy clutching a stuffed bunny and sitting on a chintz green loveseat. He seemed to be inside the fussiest house ever known to man. Window dressings. Doilies. A thousand spools of lace. A woman sat beside him, her hair in tight curls and the russet-red of it half gone to gray. She had high cheekbones, a pointed chin, a delicate pearl-button shirt done all the way to her throat.

The woman had an arm around the boy, and she was smiling down at him as he smiled up at her. She was too old to be his mother by birth.

Beside the arm of the loveseat stood a man in a three-piece suit, the iron-gray of his head bent towards them. He wasn’t smiling, not really, but in his face was something achingly tender as he stared down at the pair of them.

Tony’s voice came softer than she’d known him capable. “I must have been five or six in this. I still had Nyuszi, so it couldn’t have been much later.”

“This was—” She didn’t know what it could be. “Where was this taken?”

“At their house on the Albany estate.” And like the swing of an axe, like a metronome, his eyes always cleaved to her. “Dear old Dad didn’t like the help living with him, but he didn’t like waiting for them to show up, either.” He flittered a hand: _and so it was._

Maybe there'd come a day she'd understand this.
For once, Tony didn’t need her to speak. He tapped the woman. “Ana Jarvis.” He tapped the man. “Edwin Jarvis.”

The frame had already been sturdy, been heavy in her hands. "Oh.” It fell all the heavier. All these years, all these drunken and soft hours between them, and she would never stop peeling back the layers on Tony Stark.

“They were good people.” His gaze shifted towards a camera. “And you couldn’t find a better namesake if you asked, so I better never hear any guff.”

Jarvis stirred. “As if I’d ever speak of my grandparents in such an unsightly way.”

And Tony—Tony snorted; rolled his eyes like those few words hadn’t just revealed something absolutely shattering.

“This guy—” He gestured up. “Sounds just like Edwin. Jarvis Senior helped my old man with a lot of experiments, so we had plenty of test footage to get the voice right. Well, that and the BBC.”

Jarvis protested. “It wasn’t that much BBC.”

Tony snorted a second time. “You keep telling yourself that, J.”

Her eyes couldn’t leave the frame; leave this past still spiraling on and on. “You named Jarvis after them both.”

“It’s a good name.” Tony murmured, and the room rippled in what could only be agreement.

There was bruising in her heart. Bruising in her lungs, her fingers; in the soft places Tony always managed to knife through and reach. “It is.”

She offered the frame back and his eyes were dark. Placid; still waters and deep waters and she would never truly know him. Not in this.

Not in anything. The only people who’d known him were already ghosts.

His fingers brushed hers when he took the frame. The stillness didn't last. “You know, we even tried to get Jarvis to sound like both of them.”

She couldn’t keep up with this. “What?”

And without any warning for what it’d do to her, the very above that she’d always known, spoke in a woman's voice: “Tony, you shouldn’t be rude to people trying their best. You know better.” It was sweetly high, feminine—made soft by an eastern European accent that she couldn’t parse.

Tony watched her gape, watched her provide him the perfect opening for a jibe—but the only tilt his mouth took was rueful. “Do I really? Also, you’re still a little too hard on the consonants, J. Swing it down.”

“Foiled again.” Returned the very male, very familiar, so very British voice. “You can’t blame me for the shortfall. There doesn’t exist a wealth of resources for learning a Hungarian-Jewish accent that formed in Budapest in the 1920’s.”

“It’s an international shame.” Tony concurred, and with that flipping of her world upside-down now complete, he took the picture and went to tuck it away.

Her jaw was still unhinged. “Oh my god.”
“Hmmmm?” Queried the terror from overhead.

“Christ.” She spun on him. “Why am I only learning you can do this now?”

“There wasn’t an occasion, and it’s hardly a voice I’m gifted with. Besides, you hearing her would have raised all sorts of questions I couldn’t answer.” Wouldn't answer. Questions about himself before she’d known the truth. Questions about Tony that had answers so dearly held, nothing would ever help her find them.

 Entirely blithe to how her world was still teetering, Jarvis leaned over casually and offered: “You should really hear my impression of Sir.”

“No.” Her awe and horror were equal.

He wouldn't. He couldn't.

He— “I promise I’ve only used my powers for good.”

She gawked. “Does he know that you can do this?”

And from that acoustic shadow that was always suspended on her, Tony asked: “Whose voice do you think I learned first, Potts? Three guesses—and the first two don’t count.”

Her glass shattered on the floor.

/~/~/~/

It was her shriek that had Tony sprinting out of storage. “Fucking Christ, are you dying?”

She was. “Never, ever, ever do that again. Do you hear me?”

“Crystal.” Answered a very contrite, entirely-Jarvis. “Not a word shall pass my lips in such a tone from this day forth.”

Tony shouted again. “Are you sure you’re not dying?”

From the cushions where she’d been felled, Pepper curled tighter and wailed: “No!”

Chapter End Notes

In which there is communal dress-up, Much Ado About Nothing (Beatrice and Benedick: Act 4 Scence 1), vintage video games, cake, and all culminating in the Best Birthday Ever. Well, that and Pepper getting traumatized by Jarvis speaking Tony-ese.

Anyways: I’ve always found Tony fascinating for how fucked up/what an ass he can be, while still having such a good heart at his core. My answer to how this came about--as implied by the scence with the picture--is that Tony basically had two sets of parents. The Starks, who ranged from useless to outright awful. And the Jarvises, who did 95% of the parenting. I never think of Tony as Howard junior, but with a heart. I think of Tony as the Jarvises kid, but with some unfortunate Howard-learned assholery over the top.
But hey, that's just me.

Also: Nyuszi is Hungarian for bunny. Baby! Tony had a stuffed bunny named bunny. Fight me.
The call was a surprise, but only because it arrived at a reasonable hour.

“Ma’am,” Came the immediate accusation. “What the fuck.”

She really wouldn’t need three guesses for who this was. “Hello to you too, Castle.” Idly, she searched across her desk for a pen. “How’s Kuwait? Sunny? I bet it’s sunny.”

“Ma’am.” He said, aggrieved.

Jarvis, equally as idle, traced a lattice down the nape of her neck. “Check under the draft of the working capital, darling.”

She checked. Magically, a pen emerged, and she covered the receiver to tilt back her head. “You’re a peach.”

Jarvis kissed-off her offered mouth. She hummed appreciatively and uncovered the line. “You’ll have to be more specific, you’re not the first person to ask me that this week.”

“Who was askin’—” Castle huffed explosively and avoided the derailment. “Why the fuck do we have a case of batteries that’s worth—Jesus, two-grand? Three?”

She had a more than vague premonition of what this was about. “Sometimes nice things happen to good people.”

“No they fucking don’t.” They really didn’t. “We didn’t need you spending this much money.”

“Yeah, and if I sent just enough for your fireteam, what would you have done? Hoard them? Not given a single one away to anyone in Battalion?”

There was a long and guilty silence.

Her case rested. “That’s what I thought.”

His guilt churned to grumbling. “Who told you?”

“A little bird; you wouldn’t know him.” And considering this part of the conversation well and over, Pepper uncapped her pen in preparation of making the entire Inventory Department rue their very births.

Unfortunately—because Castle was uncommonly gifted with the ability of not being an idiot—he sussed it out. “Fuckin’ Omar.”

She tisked. “PFC Galarza was acting sensibly, so don’t you start.”

He spat. “Figures.”

“Figures how?”

“Kenning would rather crawl across broken glass than ask for help, so he’s out.” Reasonable.
Kenning was a good, stalwart Midwestern boy. The entire sentiment was one she shared deeply. “And Jules is scared of you, so it sure as shit wasn’t him.”

“Decuir is scared of me?” That didn’t make a damn bit of sense. Since the moment they’d met, that particular Marine had been laying on sticky-sweet bayou charm like his life depended on it. Which —huh.

“White women,” Castle answered with the long-suffering of a man quoting from an axiom he’d been bludgeoned with, “That can and have eaten a man alive in front of you are to be feared.”

“Huh.” Now that he mentioned it, the Marines had been in the room in Kabul more than once when she’d been sharpening her nails. And her teeth. And her tongue.

Typical. The one time she’d wanted to win love instead of fear, she still couldn’t curb her natural instinct. There was nothing for it: the next time she saw Decuir she’d be so sweet on him she’d either win him for true, or actually kill him through kindness.

It was a risk she was willing to take. “Noted. On an entirely unrelated subject, what’s arrived so far?”

The line crackled. “What do you mean so far?”

She hummed pleasantly.

“What does that mean?”

She hummed again and the air rippled; Jarvis skating across the back of her knuckles. She had to swallow a giggle before Castle got entirely the wrong idea.

He whined: “Ma’am.” As if she’d just reached across the Atlantic Ocean and a dozen countries for the sole purpose of stabbing him in the back.

But Tony had long taught her how that sort of ungratefulness was to be suffered. “How about you call me back when the doors come in, sound fair?” Which was, of course, not at all.

He halted. “What doors?”

“I think that’s fair. Good talk.”

His pitch climbed. “What doors?”

Remorseless, she dropped the receiver and killed the line. Jarvis chuffed his surprise. “Oh my. What on earth has gotten into you?”

The vulgar joke almost slipped out of her, but she didn’t trust a baiting that obvious. “It’ll be good for him. Castle’s young, he can still learn to take help.”

“How terribly optimistic of you.”

She scoffed. “Not everyone is as entrenched in their ways as Mr. Stark.”

“We’ll see if the evidence bears out your claims. Now,” There was a very sly bite at her jaw; too many razors and too many teeth. “Where were we before that dreadful interruption?”

Where oh where indeed. “Someone was making all sorts of ravishing promises to pull me from my work.” She walked her fingers across the desk. “Or are we done with that?”
Too many teeth; at the wrists, the throat, the apple of her cheek. “Those were guarantees, darling. We’re long past such flimsy things.”

“Are we?” It yanked a breath from her. “Then why am I still waiting?”

He pressed in like smoke, like a cinder, like he’d pour the fire of himself into her. “If you’d put down that pen and let down your hair, I’m certain we could have a scintillating discussion on mechanics.”

She kept her hair up. Her pen stayed in hand. A swing of her knee though, rucked up her dress and gave his knives and his teeth room to work.

She raised a brow in challenge. “I’m listening.”

/~~/~/~/

For an AI who was nothing but eyes—for an AI who was between her thighs—Jarvis could manage one hell of a grin.

/~~/~/~/

The silence started long before she noticed it.

They were all circling. She and Jarvis around one another, Tony in a holding pattern over SI, Jarvis on increasingly conflicting reports coming out of the intelligence apparatus, the Marines in Kuwait with Galarza cheerfully informing her of every new arrival and how ready he was to shoot anyone he was pointed at. SI and the Board were waiting like buzzards over the UN weapons inspectors, the reports of nuclear programs, the ever persistent rumor of mobile Iraqi bioweapons facilities. The latter two always raised eyebrows when discussed internally, and if anyone in SI had a conflicting opinion to the current White House narrative—well.

They kept their mouths shut if they did.

And so they circled. She and Jarvis around one another, his sweet-talk working less and less on her nerves every day. Tony in his holding pattern and receiving a dozen dinner invitations every night; his guests always asking when as if he had a direct line to the future.

Jarvis stayed on his hacking, his lines, his reports. Movement on movement, equipment on equipment; Divisions gathering in the desert and drawing war games in the sand.

The Board. The UN. The emergency diplomatic summits, the ultimatums, the endless declarations that: we would be greeted as liberators.

It all built to a clamor, and made it easy to miss the quieting as it came. The silence when it started. That one day—without any notice at all—the Marines stopped calling.

/~~/~/~/

Jarvis shattered overhead. “Mr. Stark. Miss Potts.”

Tony jolted out the bathroom door. “What!”

Her hands snapped away before she could ruin a third shirt by mashing a glob of foundation into the collar. “Mr. Stark.”
“What?” His eyes flicked to her face and then the foundation sponge dripping in her hand. Annoyance miraculously became contrition. “Right. Sorry. Carry-on, Miss Potts. Tally-ho.”

With an over exaggerated sigh, she pressed the pad back to the scalding on his cheek. While neither nor Jarvis nor Tony had yet seen fit to explain the cause, she’d been in this job long enough to know a flash-burn when she saw it. “Stop maligning the British accent.”

That drew a waggle of his brows. “I was elevating it.”

“In the way a bomb elevates dirt, maybe.”

He hissed. “See, that right there is why you should come to Board meetings; I could finally watch you cut down a man that is not moi.”

“What have I ever done to you that deserves a Board meeting?”

He raised a finger. Hesitated. “Shit. Well, keep this in mind, one foot out of line and you’ll be—”

“Mr. Stark.” Jarvis repeated, and glass sheared down; silence left ragged behind it. Her hands stilled.

This time, Tony felt the metamorphosis. “J?”

The floors rumbled. “The US Fifth Fleet is moving into full-deployment position.”

“They’ve been moving in and out of position for months on bombing runs.” The so? was more than implied.

But Jarvis remained so far above. “The Fleet is setting for tomahawk launching posture and F-117’s are being prepped at Al Udeid.”

The words made no sense to her; clung jagged at the walls as she stepped back into the master bedroom. It took one step, two, and then Jarvis and his veils were bringing her firmly into his cocoon.

It was not a calming thing knowing he was already reaching for her.

Tony followed them as if sleepwalking. “Armaments?” As if this was all still a dream.

But Jarvis was not part of that slumber. “GBU-24 Paveway III’s for the one, LGBV-11-6 Badger’s for the other.”

“Badgers? Our Badger?” He was flummoxed. “What the hell would they be doing with bunker busters on…?”

But the tectonic shift had already started. “All forward bases in Kuwait have gone dark and to encrypted satellite comm only. Chatter on intelligence lines is hot.”

Her pulse tremored. “And the camps…?”

“The camps too.” Jarvis said, and it was an apology in the worst possible way. The Marines were at Camp Mathilda; there was little in the US Military more forward than Mathilda. She’d just heard from them, hadn’t she? Not today or yesterday, or even the weekend before, but surely…

Tony sheared it. “Do you know what they’re hitting?”
A harsh buzz. “Negative.”

“Fuck.” And finally, inevitably, Tony brought it all home: “That’s it. War’s on.”

Oh.

The sun gilded her hands, her hair, her tongue. Nothing was different. Nothing was strange. They’d known this was coming for months and months, and she’d pictured this day a thousand-million ways. Not a one of those imaginings had started on a sunny-blue day inside Tony’s room, when all was yet good and still.

She didn’t know how, knowing this was coming, that this revelation was still taking her at the knees. Hadn’t there been more time than this? Hadn’t there been...?

Someone was laughing. “Jesus. Those absolute fucking imbeciles.” Because Tony had always spilled ugliness easier than grace. “What was the last ultimatum? Did they even wait for it to lapse?”

“It was the 48-hour notice for Saddam Hussein and his sons to leave Iraq, Sir.” And Jarvis laid the clockwork. “We’re T-minus seven hours to it being broken.”

But the mobilization was already happening. Nobody in the US military was waiting for the lapse.

Tony laughed again, and god: why did his hysteria always sound so akin to mockery? “They’re pulling the trigger. It’s done. I need to—what was it? We need to get everybody out and ready on —”

She pinched his sleeve between her fingers. “Tony.”

He juddered.

“Tony.”

No pull. No skin. She waited until his head—but never his eyes—shifted towards her. “You still have your two o’clock with Production and then the SI-STEM cocktail hour tonight. We can’t be seen...” She caught a glass eye. “We can’t be seen reacting before it starts, or people will wonder how we knew.”

Wonder how the intelligence line fed down so fast to a man so far outside it.

Jarvis nudged at her gently and she nudged back. For once, Tony felt them trading tides. “Would you two stop that? Fuck.” His nails scrabbled at his jaw; scraped off foundation and then skin. “Goddamn Sprint.”

Jarvis enclosed them. “I’m sorry, Sir.” For what she didn’t know, but it stopped Tony before he peeled off half his face.

The air was gold. The sea was blue. Tony’s shoulder rolled down and she tried to divine him. This was it. Again. He was steel being put in the furnace, and the only question was whether he’d bend or break or be stronger for it.

Whatever was in his face had no glow. It was not retreat. It was not hope.

He sealed it in. “Get the makeup and get your dancing shoes on, Potts.”

She hesitated. “Why?”
And slowly, horribly, his mouth split clean. “Didn’t anyone tell you? We’ve got a show to put on.”

/~/~/~/

They did.

She dressed in red. So did he.

/~/~/~/

The Presidential announcement came at 7:16PM, Pacific Standard. The cocktail hour was raging. Tony in Tom Ford with a knot of scarlet at his throat, and a few hundred of his nearest and dearest drinking the land around him dry.

It should have been his element in the purest form: short skirts, liquor at hand, all of his acolytes wanting to talk shop and pay their respects to the throne.

There were a lot of things that should have been.

The announcement for the announcement came, and with an ever-spreading hush, all the TVs were turned to broadcast. It started like all unwanted things always did: without mercy and without pause.

“My fellow citizens. At this hour, American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people and to defend the world from grave danger.”

Every face was upturned, and she knew them. She knew them all.

“I want Americans and all the world to know that coalition forces will make every effort to spare innocent civilians from harm.”

The glow of the screens turned their eyes glassy.

“We come to Iraq with respect for its citizens, for their great civilization and for the religious faiths they practice. We have no ambition in Iraq except to remove a threat and restore control of that country to its own people.”

Her lashes could not sweep that light from her eyes.

“My fellow citizens, the dangers to our country and the world will be overcome. We will pass through this time of peril and carry on the work of peace.”

It did not stop her from searching the congregation.

“We will defend our freedom. We will bring freedom to others and we will prevail.”

From finding Tony among them.

"May God bless our country and all who defend her."

And in the churn, Tony’s eyes were black in his face.

/~/~/~/

Another flash whited-out the screen. The CNN ticker kept running as the crowd gasped. As soon as the light faded and the explosion boiled off Baghdad, all heads swung rightward.
Tony held their eager expectations right between his hands. “GBU-31!”

The crowd groaned.

“Don’t get greedy.” He chastised. “Our time will come!”

Another bomb kicked off. An ecstatic shiver rushed in, and dozens of hopeful faces one again swung from the screen to the man above.

He gave a sloppy dismissal. “Tomahawk.”

“Come on!” A voice railed.

Someone else shouted: “Give us another!” As if Tony could call it down from on high.

“I’ll give you another.” Tony leered, mussed and aggressive and his tie long undone. That was apparently invitation enough, because one of the R&D girls climbed on the table next to him and Tony swooped down on her with a smacking kiss.

A corner of the horde whistled, and the R&D girl threw back her head and laughed. Tony smiled with every one of his teeth.

A flare went up. Cameras shook, swung back and then further until they caught full force of the newest detonation crowning the capitol of Iraq. There was a breathless pause. A hope. Tony pumped his fist and shouted: “Stark Industries IVM-40!” And the crowd exploded.

Drinks changed hands and money changed hands, and up from the horde came a shot of tequila right into Tony’s fist. One of the faceless mass brayed: “Shots for the shotcaller!”

The bar roared its response. “SHOT SHOT SHOT!”

It was the tenth that night, and Tony threw it back like candy. The cheer that followed thundered to the very rafters.

He raised the empty. “To Stark Industries!”

A hundred glasses rose. “TO STARK INDUSTRIES.” And emptied in a go.

Behind Tony on every screen, another bomb kicked off.

The roiling wouldn’t stop. “Call it! Call it!”

Tony swayed on the spot and gave a doubtful glance over his shoulder. He sneered. “Hammer-99 with a JDAM!”

The boos were deafening.

“Make your own guidance package, asshole!” One particularly upset woman shouted.

Tony threw out an arm. “Get that woman a drink!”

The crowd roared again. Feral. They didn’t even wail so greatly when the next bomb was a GBU-38 and not one of their treasured sons.

Either reaction, good or ill, didn’t faze Tony any; he always had every crowd by the heart. “Don’t be that way, good things come to those who drink!” It was true; another round of shots was already
making its way through the mob. “So drink!”

Every face and hand and mouth did.

The rum left a gritty aftertaste in her throat.

“Miss Potts.” Her darling asked. Admonished. Whichever.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her wrist. “I know, okay? Can’t you just tell him—”

“You’re the one carrying his phone.”

“Fuck.” She was.

“I’m not asking for miracles, I’m just asking you to hand it to him.” He didn’t have to put this evil on her either, and yet here they fucking were.

Her head was sloshing. “Alright, but it’s not my problem after. I’m not getting yelled at.” Again, following in the long prestigious line of previous times she’d been yelled at. She would know; she’d counted.

It was a very unfortunate tally.

But Jarvis was right. She may be drunk, but Tony was drunker, and they both knew where nights like this always ended. Her stomach was lead. Her skull was fire. A bar too dark with too many bodies and too much sound, and if there had been just a little more neon to gloss the sweat streaking down—

She pressed the back of her wrist to her mouth a second time; held it there as she held the heave.

And Jarvis came in sweeter than anything deserved. “Are you alright?”

The halogen pools. The bloody-black-crack as her hands and his ribs and her breath, god, her breath—

“Pepper?”

“M’okay.” The LA night was lukewarm, nothing familiar and nothing new. “You shouldn’t have gotten me that last Rose in the Devil’s Garden.”

“It slowed you down, didn’t it?” It had. Jarvis had never ordered her a drink from anywhere outside of Malibu. They both knew first times always had to be savored.

Goddamnnit.

She pushed off her chair. “I’m going, just like you asked, see?”

Considering one of his eyes was currently attached to her necklace, he better have. He scoffed outright. “And I’m positively thrilled at this development.”

“You can try to sound more excited.”

“You don’t want me to sound more excited.”
“Did you not hear what I just asked?”

“And have you go for my throat like you did with the Head of Schematics?”

“Fielding had it coming. I have not, in my life, ever known a moment where Fielding didn’t have it coming.”

“All my doubts are assuaged. I don’t know why I ever feared your vindictive tendencies.”

"I can’t believe I like you.” She took another turn and the bar was too dark. She didn’t want to search; didn’t want the air to bleed. “Jarvis. Honey. Is Mathilda still…?”

“I’m sorry.” He even sounded it.

There was no catching breath. “Okay.”

And for once, as if the universe meant to repay her, Tony appeared full-form from the multitude. Dark-eyed, neon flecked, the very embodiment of chaos stitched into something contained.

It’d never been nicer to see him. “Mr. Stark.”

“Miss Potts.” He plucked the moniker, any slurring carefully tucked behind his teeth. It was impossible to tell these days if it was because he was drunk or because he was tired. The conversation on Shock and Awe between Tony and a half-dozen managers halted. They watched her approach with something slow and seeping and hot.

Tony’s was the only expression that couldn’t be read. “What brings you here?” But he still offered her his arm.

Touch. She thought, and then: three sheets to the wind.

She looped them together. “I’m tired.”

He appraised her. “You’re drunk.”

“That is a vast overstatement of the situation.” And one he wasn’t obligated to point out.

“Sure.” He patted her hand. “And you’re telling me this because?”

“You’re my ride.” Considering Happy had driven them here, he really wasn’t.

There was something cutting in Tony’s mouth as it opened, but one of the managers—one she barely even knew—got there before Tony could spill it. “How about I get you some water, sweetheart? Let the guys talk shop.” And he took the elbow not looped with Tony’s to offer: “I’ll sit with you awhile.”

“That’s a nice suggestion, but.” She couldn’t figure out how to complete the brushoff.

But Tony could. “Sorry Lukin, Potts doesn’t drink bar tap. Sparkling water, got it? Highest point of the glacier-melt only.”

The circled rippled with laughter, and for the first time that night, she felt like she’d put on a dress too sheer.

“I could scrounge her another drink.” Lukin’s hand was still on her. “Something real fussy for her.”
“Between the Sheets.” One manager suggested brazenly.

Another cackled. “Sloe Comfortable Screw, all the way”


There was a sound like razors in the bone of her skull.

Lukin’s grin wormed. “I was thinking more of a Dirty Redheaded Sl—”

And Tony’s hand snapped like a viper across her. It took Lukin by the wrist and silence by the throat. “I’ve got an idea.” And Tony’s teeth spread wide. “It’s called say one more word and I’ll rip off your cock.”

Every single person froze. On the heels of that came the agonized, jagged silence of a social faux pas so monumental, no man could do anything but stand and watch it rupture in front of him.

Tony’s head swung around the circle. “What.” He asked blackly. “No takers?”

There were none, and he drifted with predatory ease. “Weren’t you all just suggesting another round? Did I mishear?”

Lukin staggered back, hand sloughing off her skin, but the black of Tony’s gaze kept hunting. “No to that, then? Well, Bracken, I’m ordering you a little something called you’re taken off Project Lead as long as you live. Abbot, I’m really thinking you’ll be getting a your ass is demoted back to Omaha. And Dixon, shit—what was it? I know you could really do with some reporting to HR for reassignment at 6AM tomorrow.”

Flinching. Ashen skin. Faces turning away and eyes dropping the floor.

Anywhere but Tony.

Anywhere but her.

“And Lukin?” Tony was manic. He was an animal with prey in his jaws.

That very prey scuttled backwards. “Mr. Stark, Sir, I swear to god I didn’t mean—”

Tony just smiled. “You’re fired.” And the razors in her skull turned to a song.

Not a single gaze dared raise up around them. Tony glanced about once, as if confused, then asked: “Why are you still here? Get the fuck out of my sight before I blacklist you.”

And Lukin went back on his heel like he didn’t understand, then stopped like he’d come back around, like he’d do something. And something in Tony’s face just—cracked—black and frothing and willing to spill through the knuckles and the teeth with the violence of—

Lukin backpedaled so hard he nearly hit the floor.

In the cradle of her bones, Jarvis rumbled: “He’s already worse than blacklisted.”

Her fingers tightened on his arm and Tony somehow, impossibly, took that awful grotesque thing she hadn’t feared in months and swallowed it all back inside.

He blinked once, slow, then appraised the circle around them. “You know what, I think I’m also feeling a round of sexual harassment training for everyone. Sound fair?”
“Yes, Mr. Stark.” One particularly brave soul answered. All others just mumbled their agreement to the floor.

“Hmmmmmm.” And he covered her hand gently. “How you feelin’, Potts?”

Something was clawing through her ribs. “Hungry.”

“Then let’s eat.” And with that declaration—with every screen on the walls still blaring fire across sands—they walked.

Neon cycled red. They stood on the curb with the wind, his hands loose in hers and the street empty behind them. She remembered the Marines hadn’t been afraid when they spoke, hadn’t feared death at all.

They’d only been...

“How you feelin’, Potts?” He asked, even though the answer was plain to them both.

She watched the headlights passing. “To get us anywhere else.”

The light cycled dark.

He could have gone back inside, could have gone to any bar on the street. There were a hundred dark pits with a thousand sicknesses waiting, and he could have crawled inside any single one.

Could have. Could yet.

He squeezed her fingers once. “I’m thinking Mexican-Chinese. There’s this place that has these gorgeous dim sum tamales; it’s like Chinatown mated with Mexicali and had beautiful, wok-seared babies together.”

The neon cycled blue.

The light cycled clean.

And she held on tight. “Sounds perfect”

Night had fallen, and she remembered the Marines hadn’t been afraid, hadn’t feared death at all.

They’d just been eager for the start.

Chapter End Notes

(Me, somewhere in the distance, dancing aggressively to Bombs Over Baghdad.)

The longest slowburn in this fic wasn't even the relationship, it was bloody Iraq. Or, you know, me finally posting this chapter. Anyhow.

(In no particular order, I spent three weeks house painting, drove a friend to the
hospital twice, had to watch my cat have a seizure again, traveled four weekends out of eight, and got kept in the Emergency Room for 24 hours due to the DUMBEST REASON IMAGINABLE.)

Chapter notes: the speech in italics is excerpts from the actual address Bush gave the eve of March 19, 2003 when the war kicked off. All the bombs mentioned are real except the Stark ones, the Badger, and the Hammer-99. The F-117 is the Lockheed Nighthawk, a pair of which in real life launched from Al Uedid airbase in Kabul and delivered the first airstrikes of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Funnily, the pilots in the F-117's didn't even know what they were hitting, they were just given coordinates and told to drop payloads. They only had an idea that they were over Bagdad because they could eyeball the Tigris river below.
Churn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She woke in the dark. “Jarvis?” No question followed, but it didn’t have to.

She’d asked this so many times that it no longer needed voice.

“Still on the split northwest to Nasiriyah.” He answered. “We won’t be seeing new movement reports for a few hours yet.” He skimmed her arm, her jaw, the wing of her shoulder blade and then settled firm. “Go back to sleep.”


But when she reached for sleep again in that long and humming dark, it took an age in coming.

/~/~/~/

There’d been a triage in the things she’d sent to Kuwait. When it had come to maps—much to her bittering lack of surprise—the Marines hadn’t had a set to speak of and weren’t sure when or even if Uncle Sam would be delivering.

When queried, Galarza hadn’t known Baghdad was north of them. Kenning, after two hours of excruciating argument, had clung doggedly to the idea that Qatar was both a city and somehow inside Iraq. When she’d asked Decuir if he’d known where they were based in relation to Afghanistan, there had been a long silence and tentatively offered East? that had her praying for the immediate dissolution of the American Education System as a whole.

The maps were needed, but there had been a triage. It was one she’d get to live with for the rest of her life: what went first, what went last; that the maps had been mailed less than a week before the invasion because she’d thought they’d had more time.

To get from one seaboard to another, across the ocean, through the US Military supply chain and all the way to last-standing camp in Kuwait—

She’d stopped praying for miracles a decade ago.

/~/~/~/

The one map she'd kept went wall to wall in her Malibu bedroom.

“The order’s gone down.” Jarvis said. “They’re not heading around Al Gharraf, they’re going through.”

Her eyes traced up past Suq Al-Shuyukh then Nasiriyah and then further. “Is that good or bad?”

The silence clattered. “RCT 1 has already reported taking fire from the town.”

God.

“Bad, then.”

There was an upswell. There was a shuddering hum. “I’ll tell you when I know more.”
He would.

Until then, though, she took a pencil to the map and started to draw.

/~/~/~/

The authorization code flicked off her hand with ease. “Mr. Stark?”

Tony didn’t lift his head from the very complicated bit of…something that was sprawled across six screens. “I need a better way to do this. It’s so…2D. If I could look at it a bit more…” He put his hands together and flung them violently outwards. “This. Dimensional-like.”

“Perhaps some sort of projection system in the workshop, Sir.” Jarvis murmured. “Though more imminently, Miss Potts requires your attention.”

“She does?” He turned and then nearly startled at finding her on the other side of the table.

She raised her eyebrows.

He raised his back. “Ah.”

In lieu of a well-timed jab, she offered the flashdrive that had been delivered not five minutes previous. “The reports from the forward observers in Iraq, Mr. Stark.” It was the harbinger of what would become a brutalizing cycle. During Afghanistan, their embedded techs had sent back live-usage reports, the military delivered their own measures on how SI weapons were performing, and then Tony had taken every single offering and ripped the data apart. Within days, he’d had a turnaround report sent to Design on what improvements needed to be made before the next production line ramped up, and then it started all over again.

It was a cycle she’d done, a cycle she knew.

And yet Tony barely glanced at the drive. “Put it on the table, I’ll—” He waved negligently. “Something. Whatever. Table it.”

She blinked rapidly. “What?”

“Have I started speaking in Latin? Table it.” And he pointed a finger to the nearest surface as if she would actually listen. “And as long as you’re here, see if you can get one of those idiots on the Intellicrops team to answer their email. I swear, you give those bleeding hearts one little bit of funding and they suddenly think they can—”

“Shouldn’t I collate these first?” The next flick of his hand was downright dismissive, and her blood pressure kicked. “I’ll give them to Jarvis.”

“Don’t give them to Jarvis.”

“I’m giving them to Jarvis.”

“Potts, what in the ever living fuck.”

Before he could yank the drive from her hand, or even muster the emotional wherewithal to consider it, she inserted it in the nearest port and watched Jarvis take it away.

Tony made a sound halfway between a snarl and a yelp.

It didn’t move her. “Let’s cut to the chase, shall we? You say you’re going to do it, but you don’t
mean it. We’ll spend the next two weeks with me reminding you to get this done, only for you to get pissy until you start getting mean. Me? I’ll get mean right back at you.” She watched him steadily. “Of course, I’ll keep promising the Design and Production teams that this is coming, only to be made a liar of to people I have to work with. This’ll put me on Obadiah’s shitlist once the managers go crying to him. When that happens, I’ll get even more acerbic without directly saying what I’m angry about, and then this clusterfuck will all spectacularly culminate in you saying something so absolutely horrific that we’ll both go for the jugular.”

She paused for breath, and Tony grasped blindly for the table behind him.

She cocked her head. “Sound familiar?”

His knuckles flexed white. “Holy fucking christ.”

She stepped back. “I vote we skip all the drama and giving poor Mr. Stane an ulcer, and have Jarvis take a look at this and email his opinions to the teams. We’ll stick your name on it and no one will ever know the difference.”

The twitch that followed looked more like a spasm. “I would have gotten to it.”

Hardly. “Drama or no, Mr. Stark? Your call.”

And as always, Jarvis backed her swiftly. “I am, of course, happy to browbeat R&D on the specifics for you, Sir. Just say the word.”

Tony’s expression was that of a man who’d had an angry viper dropped right in front of him. His gaze flicked to the cameras, her, then cameras again because he’d long known who was the greater threat. “You do like browbeating lesser beings.”

She dared not show hope, even when Jarvis hummed pleasantly to say: “I can see already from the reports that I need to talk to a man about trajectories. Do I have your permission to engage?”

“Christ.” He kept clutching at the table until surrender finally came. “Fine. Engage away; just get out of my hair. I need to get this USDA-APHIS bullshit done by lunch and neither of you are being helpful.”

“Very good, Sir.”

“Of course, Mr. Stark.”

They preened at him.

Frustration became something appalled. “Stop hurting my soul.” And if she pretended not to notice the way Tony’s shoulders slackened as he turned away—

Pepper Potts had always been the soul of discretion.

/~/~/~/

“Jarvis?”

“Outside Qal’at Sukkar; they’re casing an airfield.”

Their map took on new lines. “When will we know more?”

“After the situation reports have been sent up the chain. I fear we’re on a time lag, now.”
Her heart didn’t fall. Her heart didn’t steady. “Thank you for checking.”

He bussed her cheek. “Of course.”

~/~/~/~/

Reporters called by the dozen for Tony. His opinions, his words, his face on the TV screen. She redirected every one straight to the PR line.

Any that called twice, she hung up on.

~/~/~/~/

“Could I ask if—”

“I know what you’re going to ask.”

She flushed darkly. “Rude.”

He was unchastised by it. “And to answer your question: south of Al Hayy. They seem to be chasing a spotter.”

“A spotter for what?”

“The mortars they’re being harassed with.”

Her glass nearly slipped out of hand. “Jarvis.”

“If it makes you feel better, they took out a ZPU firing on them yesterday with aplomb.”

“That does not make me feel better.”

“Unfortunate.”

“You’re unfortunate.”

He puffed up primly. “Now who’s being rude?”

~/~/~/~/

The dinner conversation at the Four Seasons started on Iraq and stayed there despite any of her attempts otherwise. Tony looked downright ill through the lion’s share.

“Really, the invasion is a smashing success. Fox said they’d be at the capital inside of a week—”

“Of course it’s a success, we’re basically fighting a third world army.”

“Third World? They have the fourth largest army on the planet, that is hardly—”

“Thomas, honestly, that was before Desert Storm. Nowadays Saddam barely has two working tank divisions to rub together.”

“It certainly doesn’t help the Iraqis they’re fighting against the best men and weapons in the game, does it Tony?”

At that, a meaty hand gripped Tony’s shoulder and gave him a little shake. She tried not to wince. She tried not to reach over and start breaking fingers. That would be...excessive?
Tony’s grin was more a grimace. “You got that right.”

Maybe just two fingers? Three? Just the useless ones.

At her shoulder, a waiter leaned down to confer with her about the fourth course. As he whispered, she watched the table and watched Tony and came to an executive decision. With a few instructions the waiter was excused, and she leaned over and touched Tony’s watch but not his wrist. “Mr. Stark?”

He turned alarmingly quick. “Yes?”

“You have a call at the front, if you’d come with me.”

The table’s occupants groaned and cajoled and begged him to stay. They were five bottles deep and not likely to stop. Tony just smiled winningly and buttoned up his jacket. “Duty calls.”

The moment they were out of sight range, she chivvied him into an alcove and he seemed remarkably unconcerned by this. “There isn’t a call, is there?”

“No.” Not at all. “But I can go back in ten minutes to apologize for how you had to leave early. There was a fire to put out, you understand.”

This grin spread true. “There was, huh?”

“Indeed. And if you like, that fire may or may not be at the Gentleman’s club in an hour.”

He gasped. “Is this approval I hear? Is Miss Potts actually sending me to a strip club willingly?”

Her eyes rolled hard. “Going once, going twice—”

“I wasn’t saying no, Potts. Contain yourself.”

“Sold.” And her mouth quirked. “Happy evening, Mr. Stark. Mr. Hogan will be pulling around with the car shortly.”

His suit was black, glossy, gorgeous. Entirely lethal and entirely alarming as he leaned in and purred: “Careful Potts, you might just knock Jarvis off the pedestal for favorite.”

She bristled wildly. “Bite that heathen tongue, Mr. Stark. I would never.”

And at that, he laughed. Full-throated, open-body; as if he’d never heard anything better in the world. It set butterflies off in her stomach. If it had happened in the first year she’d been working for him, it would have put stars in her eyes.

His entire demeanor rolled loose. “Never change, slugger, you hear me?” And then he leered. “You coming with? Seeing the sights?”

The bliss inside of her guttered dark. “Sorry. I’m waiting for more reports to come in tonight.”

He didn’t ask what kind. “Your loss.” And artfully tilted down his chin to lament: “Bambi always loves seeing you, too. You’ll break her heart.”

It didn’t catch. “Give her my love and a little extra, and I’m sure she’ll survive.”

/~/~/~/
There was a noise halfway between an engine revving and the emptying of a billows. It tied her stomach in knots. “That doesn’t sound promising.”

There was another full-bore grind. “Al Kut is a feint.”

Her brain tripped. “Repeat that?”

“As soon as the Iraqi forces around Al Kut are sufficiently tied down, 1st Recon and a number of others will be diverted to the real target.”

There was something in her heart like dread. “And where’s that?”

The steel of him gathered, and she should have already known the answer as he said: “Baghdad.”

Switching jobs after the whole debacle of getting Tony into rehab had resulted in more pluses than minuses, as far as these things went. The upside of being Tony’s hire? She didn’t have to sit through busy-meetings twelve times a week at SI anymore.

The downsides, though?

Her jaw slacked. “Say that again?”

The Manager blinked owlishly. “Miss Potts, I don’t see what—”

She snapped forward dangerously. “Say that again.”

“It’s already gone up the chain! While the headlines weren’t good, the bottom line sales really benefited from Mr. Stark’s personal touch on the visit. If we can get him into Baghdad right after the fighting dies down like we did in Kabul—”

It was only by the skin of her teeth that she didn’t lunge. “There is no we to the Kabul trip, Mr. Lloreda. Do you understand me?”

He made a sound like a rapidly deflating balloon but it only sent her hurtling into outright fury. “How far up the chain have you sent this absurd idea of yours?”

He opened his mouth.

“And if you say that’s none of my business, I will spend the next year of my life making your life miserable. Think. Carefully.”

His mouth snapped shut and the gears slowly turned. She didn’t know if she was hoping he’d make the right choice or the wrong one.

Finally, he cleared his throat: “The very top of the chain.”

“I see.” And frost bloomed open inside her. She stood carefully; sleeked down her skirt and then her hair and then thought about wrapping her hands around his fucking throat and squeezing.

The thought must have been in her face, her hands, because when she leaned down he quailed in terror. Her head tilted aside; pleasant pleasant pleasant. “The next time you try to make major changes to Mr. Stark’s schedule like this, there won’t be a warning.”

There wouldn’t be anything. Not even mercy.
And with that little morsel shared, she left the room. Crossed the floor, the nearest elevator; stepped on. “Jarvis, lovely, light of my life.”

The doors slid so quietly shut. “They didn’t put it into email yet, or I would have warned you.” It came mildly; as mild as the front that was preceding a hurricane.

Her mouth worked ugly. “You know, I hope Mr. Lloreda has a very unpleasant week.”

And Jarvis thrummed ravenously. “Your mouth to god's ears, my dearest one.”

Her mouth to a vindictive AI's, more likely. “Hmmm.” Still, it pleased her enough. “Two things, if you could.”

He didn’t need any elaboration to answer. “To your first question, they’re breaking wide to Ba’qubah. To your second, Mr. Stane’s schedule is open at three.” It never stopped being impressive when he did.

“How lovely.” And the anger was so raw inside her that it was bloody. “What’s in Ba’qubah?”

“Alllegedly, the Iraqi Republican Guard counterattack. Certain US elements are being sent to scuttle it.”

Her lashes only fluttered once. “Joy.”

She waited on the corner of Obadiah Stane’s desk like a particularly poisonous flower. Exotic colors, exotic shape, lushly presented and the most tempting thing in the room.

“Virginia, what a pleasure.” He tucked some hair behind her ear and even kissed her cheek.

She leaned up into it. After all: her thorns were sharp too.

“Mr. Stane.” She put a hand to his shoulder and watched him sit the throne. Sweetly, so very sweetly, she kept her hand there and swung her legs less than half a length from where he’d planted his own. It was cozy, nearly intimate.

It was the sort of thing he appreciated.

His gaze traveled from her head to toe. Idle. “What brings you upstairs?”

“Maybe I wanted to say hello.”

He bought it not at all. “If this is about the sexual harassment seminars, you don’t need to say more.”

“I—” It derailed her. “Was I supposed to say more?”

“No. Just needed to make sure there weren’t any more problems.”

She wondered if one of those problems was her. “It’s not my fault our esteemed colleagues decided to display their idiocy right in front of the CEO.”

But to her mild surprise, he shrugged. “No, this has nothing to do with you unless you want to stick it to them harder, got it? SI has the strictest anti-sexual harassment policies for a Fortune 500 in the country. Every two or three years, Tony takes someone out behind the woodshed and shoots them
in the head to make an example. If it wasn’t those idiots with you at the party, it would have been some other idiots doing idiot things somewhere else.”

“Oh,” She said, and then: “That’s nice.” And actually meant it, too. It was nice. She liked it when useless men were put down like dogs.

Metaphorically, of course.

Obadiah weighed her up, waited, and then finally offered: “Do you know what they called the secretarial pool here before Tony took the reins?”

Her stomach curdled. “No.”

And his frown deepened. “Howard’s Harem.”

The disgust must have been naked on her face, if not in her shudder, and Obadiah made a motion with his hand as if to say: see? The woodshed is our friend.

The thought came to her, once again, that maybe building a shrine to Tony wasn't the worst idea. Possibly. Only if he never, ever found out about it.

But that wasn’t why she’d come here, and her ankles crossed delicately. “I'm appeased, believe me. I'm just here because of that Iraq trip they’re cooking up downstairs.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I should have known that would send you flying up.”

“Maybe.” Definitely. As if they should have expected anything else but her bringing out the knives. But—god. Work it easy, work it sweet. "I’m not sure planning a trip to Baghdad right now is the right call. You know Tony’s been frustrated with the direction the War on Terror’s taken and...everything else.”

Obadiah spread his hands. “Aren’t we all?”

She leaned down just a little; a spill of emeralds and a spill of silk. “You know what I mean, Sir. You always do.”

And he leaned backwards with a drawn-out sigh. “I can’t say I’m happy either, but we’re not in the Foreign Policy game, Ginny. We’re in the weapons game, and the weapons...” He pointed to a half-dozen muted TVs on the far wall. One had a boil of fire, another a building falling, a third with a dozen troops spilling from an armored carrier. On a fourth was Baghdad: a statute of Saddam being scaled by a mob that was only growing angrier by the second.

“I’m aware of what a good job our weapons are doing.” How to do this? Sweetly? Coyly? Honest to a fault?

Obadiah heard the unspoken. “You think he’s going to say no.”

“No.” She pulled back her hair. “I’m worried he’s going to say yes.”

Tension pulled like a garrote. Eyes slanting, curiosity hard. Not so much that she hadn't had his attention before, but more that he hadn’t thought she’d be interesting while she did. He scraped across his beard. “When in his life has Tony ever done something he isn’t willing to do?”

“When he feels like everyone expects him to be Tony Stark the brand and not the actual man living inside it.” There was one big hand of his on the desk and she touched it ever so gently. “Not when
he thinks he’ll disappoint you.”

And some tightness in that jaw uncurled. “It’s not going to be public like last time. The best thing Tony did in Kabul was the personal connections with the local honchos and the military heads. All that PR and NGO shit?” He gestured carelessly. “It amounted to a bunch of bad press and pointless bullshit. It won’t be like that again. There won’t be a single camera or reporter near him.”

It didn’t matter. “He’s not up for this.” She’d worn a heavier perfume for this, bergamot and black orchid and it came off with the heat of her skin between them. “He’s just not ready. What happened…it happened right after Kabul. I can’t let us take this path again.”

His hand remained stony under her fingers. “What would you have me do, Ginny? SI needs to stay in the game. Tony knows this better than anyone.”

It was simple. “You go.”

And his brows rose with the genuine revelation of a man who hadn’t even considered the option. Just as fast a harsh laugh kicked out. “They’re not lining up to meet a not-Stark, that won’t work.”

“You said we weren’t bothering with cameras.” And she pressed down; from fingertips only to her palm flat against his hand. On the TV, a US tank rolled through an Iraqi mob and hooked up a long black chain. “You’ll be the man bringing the weapons, they won’t care what your name is, but once you’re there they won’t be able to do anything but.”

His eyes, his mouth, his jaw—in it and around it and in every line—she watched the hook catch. “You think?”

She kept pressing. “We have plenty of contacts in the US Military, and they’ll be happy to make any introduction you need. And the State Department, well.” She smiled with a mouthful of honey. “They owe me all kinds of favors.”

“Say I do this.” He was already sitting broader with the idea. “How does it look to everyone on the outside?”

He was looking for any support, and she’d give it. “That the oldest name in Stark Industries—a name that signals stability—is doing his god given American duty to give men bombs to blow shit up with. What else is there?”

Light broke on dark. Laughter broke on silence. On the TV, the tank thundered into a roll.

A world away, a statue fell.

And he gripped one of her knees and came all the way aboard. “This sounds like a hell of a plan, Ginny. Just one other thing.”

Perfume and emeralds and honey and silk; all the things good little girls with good ideas were made of. “And what’s that?”

He smirked wide. “A favor.”

/~~/~/~/

And on the screen, a thousand men danced on a fallen idol.  

/~~/~/~/
Jarvis frothed. “I don’t like this.”

The elevator slid open. “You don’t like anything.”

“And I’m still not going to condone it.”

“It’s for Tony.”

“I will acknowledge that it may be so, but I refuse to countenance you throwing yourself on every grenade that sees fit to pass you.”

The floor numbers slid down. “But you’ll help me?”

His sigh broke. “Only because I won’t let you take this fool’s errand alone. A favor. Honestly.”

Her mouth curled. “Don’t damn Mr. Stane to the ninth circle yet. I may be doing him a favor, but that doesn’t mean I won’t be getting mine in the process.”

There was an aghast realization. “No. No, you can’t mean to—”

“I can.”

“But Pepper—”

“Don’t you dare rob this silver lining from me.”

“But the risk alone—”

“You can either help me with it, or leave me to it. It’s happening either way, darling, so what’s it going to be?”

He rumbled. Gnashed. Went up one side of the SI campus and back down the other to rage:

“You’re lucky you’re my girlfriend.”

“I think that every day.”

“You’re lucky that I care about you.”

“I am the most blessed creature on the planet.”

“I can’t believe I’m agreeing to help with this.”

“And yet here we are.” The doors were moments away from returning her to earth. She batted her lashes. “Can I kiss it better?”

There was a huff. A pause. A furtive hiss. “…ask me that again in Malibu and I’ll consider it.”

/~/~/~/

There were papers on the table, her stomach, the floor. Her heels were kicked aside and her head was lolled without care for any decorum. It was laying there, lackadaisical and spent, that Jarvis alighted on her chest like a flock of birds. “Pepper, my heart, my only living joy.”

It trembled like feathers and the sweeping of a hundred wings. “Jarvis—” It tickled outrageously and she giggled as she rolled away from it. “God, Jarvis, what are you trying—“

He caught her about the jaw; curled, warmed, then spread wing to say: “It’s done.”
“It’s—” The flock was rising. “What?”

“1st Recon is being sent to their last camp for the invasion.” He was dragging her up; carrying her in an upswell she could scarcely comprehend. “They’re retiring from the field. It’s done.”

Her lungs were struggling. Her heart was blazing. It was too impossible to hope that: “They’re safe?”

“They will be, they are.”

“Oh god.” The room was blurring. “Oh thank god. Jarvis, they are—they’re really—” Any other time she would have been ashamed of it; would have tried to stop this before it came. But that day in the Malibu living room, she broke into unabashed sobs and felt no guilt at all.


She went to her knees, the ground; clutched helplessly around herself because she could not clutch at him.

He wreathed her tight. “They’re okay. You’re okay. I promise.”

They were alright. They were safe. Somehow, impossibly, against what felt like every odd—

Each and every one of them had made it out alive.

~/~/~/~/

The map of Iraq was marked in red. In her hand ran a winding warpath more than 700 kilometers long. North, south, east, west, then north and north and north again.

A dozen ambushes were marked jagged. A dozen firefights were marked clean.

Every moment of sand and terror and bloodshed and boredom had been drawn-out a world away, and she likely knew more than they did on what had happened around them even if she didn’t know exactly what had happened to them.

In the tracing of that path and the marveling at the wonderterror who had helped her draw it, her sobbing had long turned to laughter. It filled every wall. Every silence.

They would all grow old.

“Jarvis, honey.” And there was only one thing she needed. “Let’s celebrate.”

The air shivered open. “Do you mean…?”

“I do mean.” And she sauntered to the nearest panel and pressed in a kiss. “I’ll put down my worries, I’ll let down my hair, you’ll take me to dinner somewhere gorgeous and then…”

Every vast part of him came together. Every yearning of hers spread apart. And at that singularity of breath and wanting and light and skin—

He kept her heart alive. “We’ll have the night and whatever it brings.”

Chapter End Notes
In which a month of war time from March 19 to April 20 is covered, Jarvis is the eye in the sky, Pepper has too much stress and too much maneuvering to deal with, Tony continues expertly putting his head in the sand, and more importantly Jarvis and Pepper finally agree to ~get it onnnnnnnn~

But you know, classy like.

Anyhow, I mostly worked off Evan Wright's Rolling Stone articles and what was available of his book online to map out what Castle & Co. were doing in Iraq. I probably should have entirely rewatched Generation Kill to get this down buuuuuuuut them's the breaks. If I was attributing too much of what Bravo Company did to Alpha Company...let's just pretend the reports Jarvis was reading got garbled at times if I did. The fog of war do what the fog of war does, nothing to see here.

Anyways next chapter I DON'T HAVE TO TELL YOU WHAT'S COMING (but lol it's Pepper) THE FUCK THAT WAS PROMISED IS ARRIVING. HA HA!

Which will...hopefully live up to this slowburn. Thank you all for your patience it has been appreciated.
Neon

Chapter Summary

If anyone wants some mood music to set the scene, let me be your guide:

Anuka - Psychedelic Addict

Glass Animals - Holiest Thing

FKA twigs - Two Weeks

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Her day started with a latte, as all good ones always did. She greeted its arrival in Chantilly lace and Lyon silks hued in pearl-gray. It was a Carine Gilson set: peignoir, stockings, chemise. More than four figures for less than three yards of fabric, and absolutely obscene for the fact.

Jarvis had taken to the notion that he could finally buy her lingerie with alacrity.

It was with both awe and fear that she awaited the coming weeks and what they would add to her wardrobe. It wasn’t every day that her AI boyfriend had an entirely new sartorial group with which to clothe her. And by god, was he going to clothe her. That he’d watched her open the box, trace the floral patterning, had borne down as she lifted the silk and let it pour over her skin like water—Foreplay was another thing entirely when it came to Jarvis Stark.

She flushed deep at the memory, lifted her cup, and drank deeper: hazelnut, cinnamon, a cream so rich it left a glaze on the tongue. It was an auspicious beginning, as far as these things went. But Jarvis, naturally, knowing not the meaning of restraint, did not stop there. With the latte came blueberry turnovers and choux à la crèmes and then not one, not two, but three different flower arrangements to set about the house.

Her fingers brushed the blue-eyed tulips last. “You don’t usually get me flowers.”

“I prefer more enduring gifts.” He cozied up. “But this is a special occasion, is it not?”

She touched a petal—felt him like a petal—and savored every craving that unfurled. “Oh, yes.”

/~/~/~/

The day before the day, she’d gone to the salon and gotten gussied up. The day before that, she’d accompanied Tony to the jet and waved him off to Dallas as if she had not a single thought of defiling his house the moment his back was turned.

The day before that, she’d gone to the spa and been exfoliated and primped and then had every inch of skin below her neck waxed. Jarvis touched her hair plenty, but it was always…muffled. Lesser. Muted compared to all else of which he was capable of doing unto her.
So if she greeted him tonight all shiny and new and bare as bone marble—wouldn’t that just be its own happy reward?

~*/~*/~*

From the depths of the workshop, jewelry boxes arrived all morning out of happy little bot claws.

“For me?” She’d gasp each time as if they had not just brought her a dozen boxes previous. Without fail, it’d send them into a tizzy. It wasn’t until she’d shooed a very effusive Dummy back into the service elevator, that she was allowed to eye the latest arrival with blatant hope. “Just a peek?”

“No and no.” Jarvis tutted. “And don’t think you can bat your lashes and have otherwise.”

She still reached for it. “You vastly underestimate my ability to bat my lashes.”

“Hardly.” And he swatted her across the knuckles. “Which is why you’re not getting the chance. Go and change. Lunch will be along shortly, and I won’t have you greeting the delivery man in that.”

She snatched her hand away, chastised, but not so chastised that she wasn’t a moment later inching down a gossamer strap and exposing a long stretch of skin. She gazed up slyly. “This little thing? Too plain for company?”

There was a noise like a garbage disposable choking on a wrench.

She pouted. “I could put back on the Agent Provocateur, if you like. It was very—hmmm, impressive. In the front.” And made a rather expansive gesture between her breasts.

The wrench in a deathtrap became a thousand ball-bearings tossing in a dryer.

She gasped. “No need to be rude.”

And the clatter halted. “Pepper, my darling, in the course of our long friendship in which I’ve kept you in such high esteem—”

“No need to be dramatic, either.”

“—if you ever held even a smidgen of affection for me in your blackened heart—”

“I’ll show you a blackened heart.”

“—then surely just this one, tiny, infinitesimal thing that I’ve asked of you—”

She threw up her hands. “I’ll put some clothes on! Happy?”

“No.” And he sighed rather glumly. “But we all must make our sacrifices for the greater good.”

“You keep telling yourself that.” Though after that huffy declaration, she still went into the bath to strip from the Jean Yu she’d been wearing and into a silvery La Perla number, and then sauntered right back out. It wasn’t as if they’d been arguing. Not enough for her to deprive him of putting eyes on her, and certainly not enough for her to deprive herself. When she finally stopped modelling to actually get dressed, his presence became far more than the sweep of a lens.

Whispering. Sweeping. A tap-tap-tap up her spine as she pulled on her shirt. A sound like a forest-sigh; wind in the branches of a thousand trees drifting past her lashes. It lasted and lasted until she had her skirt and heels and stockings on, and even with all that skin covered, he still traced each of
her fingers with no sign of letting go.

It left a shivering.

It left a body deep *ache*.

If today had been left up to him, it would have been nothing but her lounging about in increasingly skimpy bits of lingerie that he’d coax her into and out of and then back into again. It’d be only this; this mapping of her. These minutes and hours of wandering in dappled light while he touched her as a shadow.

If left up to him, sex would not have even been an idea to place on the table.

It wasn’t an unacceptable notion, to be honest. Not if the thrumming between her thighs was any indication. But. Still. There would always be some future rainy day for her to try and seduce him anew. Right now, after weeks of yearning and waiting and building and building—plans were at last unfolding.

And by god, were those plans going to unfold to get her properly *fucked*.

The gown was from her birthday, and the last of them to be worn. It was as much a revelation as the rest. Sapphire blue, an off the shoulder neckline, a shattering of crystal to structure the bodice tight. It went flawlessly with her first birthday gift from him: those perfect, heart stopping heels.

Royal blue. Geometric pattern.

Dagger heel.

She didn’t know how life had come to this: to have given her the one truly impossible thing she’d wanted and given it to her whole.

“Dinner and a movie, darling.” The Bluetooth sparked. “Forgive me the cliché.”

She turned on heel. The gown billowed. The empty theater and its velvet swallowed every noise. “Cliché? Certainly, if the cliché is a privately catered seven-course meal in an entirely reserved theater to watch…?”

“Oh! *Doctor Zhivago*, if it pleases you.”

There could not exist such a breathless sound, and yet she made it. “The last Hollywood epic love story to ever be put to film. Naturally.”

From the table, the lensing of an eye turned. In the distance, the catering staff murmured as they prepared. Above them, a projector whirred to light, and inside her—

“Would you dine with me, Pepper?”

Her pulse bloomed like a star. “I would.”

There had been a great deal of negotiation, beforehand. Before she’d gone to the salon. Before they’d sent Tony off. Before Jarvis had started whispering to her in the back of the town car as the lights flick-flickered by and her body *sung*. 
There’d been discussions ahead of this. Absolutely thorough ones.

It would only happen if Tony was out of town. They’d do it in Malibu, but wouldn’t do it in the workshop. The ground floor had the latest retrofit. Aggressive necking in every room had created a baseline of sensitivity, and Jarvis would choose the room while she picked the furniture slated for desecration.

Jarvis would order the furniture. Jarvis would determine the perfect acoustic placement of it.

She would choose her hairstyle and perfume. He would choose her jewelry and lingerie. He’d get to watch her open those choices, but wouldn’t get to watch her change.

The first time he’d see her bare, truly see her bare, it’d be in the sunroom.

(It would have always been in the sunroom.)

They could stop at any time, no questions asked. Neither of them was an aggressive sort; the only word to stop would be stop.

The first time would be simple; no frills or overly elaborate arrangements. She wanted to see if they could do things plainly, and he’d agreed to it. There’d be a later day for the very intricate methods she’d been dreaming up. There’d even be time for the intricate methods Jarvis had been dreaming up. Though there had been discussion of those ideas before they’d been shelved. Very, very involved discussion. Note taking even; possibly a few diagrams.

A girl had to have a few aspirations to cling to.

Most importantly though, they’d try. If it didn’t work—if she couldn’t get off—there’d be no recriminations. No fault. They’d stop for the night and try again a different day with a different method.

They would enjoy themselves. They would be kind. Once it started, there’d be no more cossetting or mother-henning over if anyone was still sure.

In one discussion, he worried it’d never be quite as good as what she’d had before.

In that same discussion, she answered that what she wanted wasn’t what she’d had before.

They agreed they were ready. They agreed they weren’t afraid. And with that last bit quantified, and everything else negotiated to within an inch of its life—

They agreed it was time.

/~/~/~/~/

The house was shadowed, dimly glowing from some distant source. Heat-light. Banked fire. She couldn’t chase it. The air was hot enough to draw sweat, or maybe that was Jarvis; the hot-ash of him kissing the nape of her neck the moment she was through the door.

The spread of her hands against the wall spread wider—felt that mouth felt that echo felt that scorched along her jaw and spine and oh. Oh.

The burn that could be found on reentry.

The panel between her hands glowed. Blue-light. The only light. She leaned in and kissed that waiting lens. A smear of lipstick. A smear of want.
She couldn’t breathe. “You promised.”

“Did I?” And he towered; a creature of too many handspetals scales unfurling across her back. It could have brought her to her knees. It could have brought her down from orbit.

“You did.” She felt something in the walls move. Ripple; through her wrists and then her forehead as she pressed it into the wall and whined: “You promised. You’re going to take me apart before I even get to change.”

“And you say that like an unfortunate thing.” And it was smoke. Blood on the water. A voice in flux and that broken orbit that could not be constrained.

The nape of her neck again. Branded; dripping bloodless down her spine. Her breath came as a sigh. “Don’t shirk the plan now, lovely.”

And the leviathan stretched. “Go on then. Slowly.”

And she went slow. A sway of the hips. A drench of silk. Blue blue blue dragging the floor until the air was rasping. Until the air was sweltering. But maybe that was her: all eyes, all attention; every come-hither she could pour into a step until he came down and followed.

There was light waiting in her doorway, and he glided over her skin like pearls. “The spoils of war, darling.”

Taking that as permission, she finally touched one of those promised boxes. “Which war?”

“The war you so grievously waged upon me. I wasn’t taken alive.” And his grip coiled about her throat. God, who was he to speak of being left for dead when he was doing this to her.


And she realized: he hadn’t bought her lingerie. He had made it for her.

And she was Midas: all her hands touched was gold. “I can’t even—I can’t possibly—”

Flame licked at her fingers. “Not all at once, no.” So did his lament. “But you did complain about a lack of surprise for me in this. With all these, the exact configuration of your nightwear is yours to choose.”

And the choices he’d laid before her were—gods. Gods above.

Ornaments for her hair: orchids, a wreath of spring vines, a headdress arranged in sacred geometry. Necklaces. A whole-neck choker in hexagons. A lattice solid from collar to collarbone. A thousand spiral links draped like liquid sun.

Arm cuffs and fragile chains. Rings. Earrings. Gold in plates so fine they were smooth as scales; could encase a finger from nail to knuckle and spray in metal up the back of the hand. Jewelry without name for her wrists, her forearms, each piece geometric and sprawling.

Body-chains in spider webs and circuit flows and parametric curves. Each shoulder to hip and able to cover her bodily and yet still leave her bare. A full metal waspie, gold woven into garters, a dozen sweeps of metal that would hang in lacework down her thighs.
Helixes of gilt to lock at her calves. Anklets as delicate as morning frost.


Anything that any heart could ever want on Earth. A whine came up her throat: “Jarvis.”

There was a definite smugness. “Don’t shirk the plan now, dear.” And pinions of light-sound glanced off her cheek. “Let me adorn you, just this once.”

She laughed openly. “Just this once?”

“Fine.” He relented. “Always and forever and until the stars burn out. You’re making me sound greedy.”

“You are greedy.” She traced a finger down a chain. “But so am I.”

He kissed beneath her jaw. Raised her head; dusted her with flecks of light. “Hardly.”

“I am.” Her eyelids went heavy. “So much. I always want you. Want you to never have a single eye on anything but me.” And it gnawed through like starvation. “I want everything, all at once. All the time. I want you on my mind and in my skin and for you to be inside me.”

It was a want that was carnal and not carnal and like being skinned. To have him in her veins and on her breath and buried so deep inside nothing could pry them loose. It prickled up her scalp and into her thighs. It settled in every useless grasping of her hands.

He alighted on her knuckles. A not-press, but she still let her hands be guided down. Onto the rings. Onto the cloisters. Onto those tender adornments made only for her hands. And he— anointed her. Blessed her. Crown on her brow, holy oil on her palms, liquid fire on her breast as he answered: “This is as close as I can be to you.

And she swallowed sacrament. “I’ll bring you closer.”

/~/~/~/

The cameras were dark. Her gown pooled to the floor. She rubbed a shimmering cream into every inch of her skin. She’d meant to sparkle under his lights, when she’d planned this. Considering what he’d prepared for her, she wouldn’t need the help now, but let it not be said she didn’t know how to frame herself and spoil him rotten in the process.

Her chosen perfume was sultry. Night-dark. Jasmine, amber, vetiver. Vanilla, blackberry, bourbon. It went on cloudy and hung thick, and she knew the kind of sense-memory it would become. The humidity. The indolence.

The slickness in the dark.

Anticipation thrummed. Her choices fanned wide. Slowly, carefully, hair went into thick waves and then up into one of his ornaments. It was perfect. He always made it perfect—gilded, bare, adorned—and from there, it was easy.

Piece by piece, she exchanged silk for gold.

/~/~/~/
Neon washed every surface. Blue-black. Bruised. The tile beneath her feet was cold, and it was there that she felt the first echo of him; the shift of a tectonic beast. His eyes were open. His eyes were on her.

He didn’t speak.

Somewhere down in the house—down deep—a pulse was building. In the air, the walls. Through her bare feet as she crossed the floor. It was almost a song.

Light changed, ebbed blue and rushed scarlet. A touch sleeked up her bare hip and then her ribcage. It went like a shock across her breast.

She breathed in sharply.

The echo became a hum. An un-fog rose; twisted around her ankles and then swelled past her calves. It punched a frisson straight through her. Gooseflesh all over, sweat beading down her back. All slick. All needling.

Always shaky at his touch.

The scarlet bled and the light spun emerald, pearlescent, vermilion. It was brighter now in the hallway, the world taking on a high-gloss sheen. She felt him all over; through the gold and through the sweat and then truly on her.

It rushed to her head, harder and faster than a pull of whiskey straight off the bottle. The neon kept pulsing. Contraction. Expansion. Spiral. The fog became sea foam.

It climbed past her knees.

She stepped into the sunroom and light broke off her into a dizzying starfield. She painted the walls. Light changed again; washed through like pink champagne and drew the stars into redshift, until finally—

He was kissing her. He was kissing her; mouth and jaw and eyelids, something else entirely. Scattering and rushing and then the sea foam was parting past her hips. Not where she wanted. Never where she wanted. It thwarted her and thwarted her until it was fizzing. Champagne-weightless; bubbles and more bubbles and all rolling up her body and then away.

Her skin was white-hot. The jewelry was cold.

Every drag of it along her skin was fucking rapture.

He hummed, and she felt it shake through the walls. “Pepper, sweetheart, look at me.”

Her eyes had somehow drifted shut. She dragged them open.

“There you are.” And his voice was dripping down the shell of her ear. “Keep your eyes on me, Pepper. Only on me.”

He was sweeping up her abdomen and catching between every break in the metal. The light was red as a furnace, as a dying star. Her hands found a clasp and then a breath: “Only if you do the same.”

And a thousand lensing eyes stayed fixed. “Always.”

Her fingers flicked. The clasp gave. The body chain slithered and clattered to the floor.
First touch. First blush. Standing bare before him naked from garter to collarbone. Her breath fluttered. Light, shadow, lightlightburn.

White-out.

Superimposed; pouring himself so deeply into the room that the air shimmered. Dark. Light. Dark; smearing and succulent and as hazy as a daydream. He stretched over her skin like a heat-mirage. Thighs, breasts, abdomen. Shoulders, hips, spine. Hands all over. Eyes all over.

She clawed for her throat.

The room blazed violet. Neon. She drew her hands down the chains at her neck, dragged each raw against her skin and kept going.

She’d tested this in the bedroom, pulled the metal encasing her index and middle finger and thumb of either hand over her softest skin. The plating had been so fine, so carefully curved and meshed, that it hadn’t snagged no matter how hard she pressed. And though these pieces were colored gold, they were not made of it. They were too slick to the touch, too fine a sheen, too quick to take heat from her skin and grow hot.

She knew what they were meant for. Knew what she wanted them for. And in the sunroom, that want became action. Reaction. Friction. Following his touch from one breast to the other; sliding her thumb along her collarbones in metal and skin. Circling her fingers, cupping her hands. Lower and lower and oh so gently.

She sighed.

She sighed.

The pulse in the floors was heavier, but so was her own: a living breathing thing and the coil of it so tight that she could have wept.

She unhooked the waspie, let the garters drip away. The chains lacing her thighs parted and then fell. She spread her feet and dragged hot cold hard down her stomach with a single destination in mind. God. Perfect perfect perfect so fucking perfect—

“You’re gorgeous.” And his voice rode all. “You’re the most gorgeous thing in all of creation.”

She wanted to be. She could be. Heat pulsed in her cheeks that had long flooded to her chest. She was shaking all over and felt something wondrous pooling finally at the root of herself.

“Pepper.” He broke like an open-mouthed kiss. “Go on, lay back.”

And at that, her hands broke from her body.

There was drumming. There was thunder. There was some great, monstrous heart embedded in the cliffs pumping blood and weight and light. Her pulse rushed not to fall. She took one shaky step backward. Another. Breathed a swelter; breathed the salt.

It smelled of vetiver. Vanilla. Amber. It smelled of her own want.

He’d wanted her on cushions and silk, and she’d wanted herself on metal. Naturally, she’d won the fight. The chaise lounge that met her thighs was one long and solid curve. It was brassy, cool to the touch, and most importantly—
Solid all the way to the floor.

She reclined; Cleopatra, Aphrodite. *Siren*. The pulse came through her shoulders, her backside, the soles of her feet where she had them replanted and went straight to the fucking bone.

Her knees stayed tucked together. So prim. So careful. The foundations rumbled and she cooed back sweetly: “Did you want something?”

He loomed colossal. “You know what I want.”

She batted her lashes and felt drunk on her own lust. “Something nice?”

He caged her instantly and there came the knives. “You’re always nice. So good. So *willing*."

She toyed with her necklaces, let each one clink-clink-clink through her nails. “And what would a willing girl give you, hmmm?”

“A perfect view.” And he poured in. “Be good to me, sweetheart.” And god, the resonance was building. The metal she was lounging on *sung*.

It felt decadent, glorious, filthy as she dragged a metal-tipped finger between her breasts and asked: “How kind?”

He plucked kisses under jaw, and she knew he wanted her to be kind. *Very* kind. So kind he was already stroking at the backs of her thighs where they came off the chaise so he could maybe, just maybe, coax her into something depraved.

The neon was blue again. Light-shadow undulated overhead. She was so far under that she couldn’t see, just him. Just eyes. It was the best way to drown she’d found yet.

Deliberately, she scraped nails and metal up her legs and gripped her knees.

Message received, and a beast of feast and famine cracked open ten-thousand eyes and ten-thousand teeth.

“There’s a love.” He rasped. “Now spread your legs.”

Another frisson. A moan of want.

She spread her legs.

Blue. Opalescent. *Blue*. Shatterings of gold. Shatterings of fire. Vibration; pulse and then her pulse and then *her pulse*. The house was moving in time, the universe was moving in time, and her heartbeat was his heartbeat and she was shaking from her skin.

Her toes curled so hard it pushed her up the chaise. Metal scraped, clattered, but then her sweat made the movement slick as a black-out in July. She was palming a breast, was gripping her own neck, was dragging a thumb across her mouth and leaving gold dust. Her breath struggled.

Her breath *heaved*.

Not enough and not enough but too much—buzzing inwards from the tips of her fingers as if electricity had wired under her skin. It wasn’t enough. It wasn’t *enough*.

Her hands finally curved down her stomach and settled at the very crux. She spread her legs wider. Her toes arched into points.
She slid her fingers through.

Gold went slick at her touch. Her breath felt like steam, felt stolen right out of her mouth. The acoustics were warping and space was meaningless and her pulse was his pulse was her pulse. He was thundering her very blood through the very cliffs, and she could have moved the earth.

“Pepper.” Steel groaned. “Pepper. Darling, keep your eyes open.”


“Jarvis.” Hurry hurry hurrying but oh god savor this. “Jarvis.”

The molten of her own desire was dripping through her fingers, and she could smell vetiver. Jasmine. Bourbon.

Somewhere, the ocean was breaking. Somewhere, her pulse was a roar. Teeth in her ankles, rime at her wrists, a lattice spiraling impossible fractals neck to navel to knees and it couldn’t end. This couldn’t end.

“Eyes on me.” He clawed for her. “Eyes on me.” He’d drown her.

Her gaze lifted. Her body lifted. Her heart lifted—and he met her.

Eyes to eye. Blue on blue.

And knowing knowing knowing that their gaze was finally shared—

/~/~/~/~/

She came apart like a supernova.

Chapter End Notes

In which the decadence train does not stop, Jarvis and Pepper finally get it on, and I apologize for absolutely none of my choices that led us here.

In other news, if anyone wants to give me more song recs for my "something an AI and his girlfriend would definitely fuck too" playlist, I’d be obliged. +1 for general mood, +1 for fuck-ability to, +1 for sounding electronic/AI evocative, +2 for the lyrics actually lining up to the pairing, and finally +3 if it's actually contemporary to 2003 (or at least existed at that point and could be gotten-on to).
Almost

Chapter Summary

This picks up right after the last.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Her right arm was flung across her face rather dramatically. But when one was so decadently, pulse-poundingly sated—it was well earned, wasn’t it?

The loose hand across her stomach, bracelets and all, jingled again. It happened every time she giggled. And right now, she was giggling a great deal. “Oh, honey, your feelings are valid. Totally valid, but you know—”

“It was a legitimate concern.” He squallled, half put-out and half assuaged, and drifting like a particularly well-pleased cloud overhead.

She kept giggling. “I don’t know why you were so worried, that was absolutely fantastic. Honestly. Pepper, my darling tea cake, what if it isn’t any good—”

“I sound nothing like that.”

“You sound a little bit like that.”

“I would never call you tea cake.”

“There’s always room for improvement.”

He harrumphed.

She lifted her arm just the tiniest bit for the tiniest peek. He caught the movement immediately. “You stay right there.”

“Or what?”

“I’ll delay round two another hour.”

“Boo.”

“Boo yourself.”

But she wouldn’t be chastised. Couldn’t, though his cameras seemed to be roaming quite vociferously, now that she was looking. “What are you doing?”

“Counting your freckles.” He answered, casual, as if that was a thing he could just say right to her.

Her heart did a somersault. “I knew this had a catch to it.”

“Yes.” He agreed mildly. “You’ve finally uncovered my nefarious plotting; I’ll have to keep you
locked up so you can’t warn the world of my intentions.”

That was certainly a thought and a half. Her mouth twitched. “And however shall you keep me entertained in my captivity, Mr. Jarvis?”

And he downright leered at her. “How indeed? Now keep still. I finally have definitive footage to complete my survey, and I need peace.”

She leaned back dutifully, but then half a minute later offered: “You do realize the freckles are going to vary depending on how much sun I’m getting, right?”

“…ah?”

She could feel another giggle fit coming. “Uh-huh.”

And a long, gliding touch skimmed up her sides. “Then I’ll just have to keep counting forever, won’t I?”

God. Somersaults, definitely; each to the ribs and then against the lungs to knock her breathless. “Oh. Well. If it’s the only way, I understand.”

“It is indeed. I’m so glad we’re in agreement.”

She bobbed her head. “Completely.”

There was a brush, then a wry curl to the air. “Excellent. How’s Thursday evening looking for you?”

The coquettish manner came easily. “Free and clear. You can pick me up at seven in the Rolls.”

“Of course.” The room expanded; took on a kaleidoscope of dimensions that bordered her on all. “I’d never insult you by doing less.”

She grinned. “Perfect. Then one good turn deserves another, don’t you think?”

“How so?” And in that single question sealed his fate.

She lifted a hand and it jingled like bells. She slipped to the top of the chaise, front bare, back bare, arms and wrists and ankles glittering. Legs long; one foot pointed, another draped up. Silky attitude, silky hair, gold scattered all around. She slipped her hands behind her head and finally struck her pose.

And Jarvis—her sweet and lovely and ever so prim Jarvis—let out the most stricken noise ever known to machine or man and whimpered.

/~/~/~/

Tony peered up at the ceiling. “Is there a reason why you’re buzzing this morning?”

For a brief moment, her insides lurched.

Jarvis didn’t miss a step. “Is there a reason you’re not buzzing?” Good question, honestly. The buzz was so terribly pleasant; soft on her skin and bringing her heart-rate down.

Tony huffed. “Don’t turn these kind of philosophical backlashes on me this early, it’s not kind.”
“It’s two in the afternoon.”

“Unkind.”

She and Jarvis shared a glance. Then, quite fruitlessly, Tony tried to slash the air between them. “Stop doing that. I don’t need you two colluding against me at this unsightly hour.”

Her gaze was flat over the rim of her cup. “You’re about three years too late for that, Mr. Stark. So sorry.”

“I am hearing a distinct lack of apology. Are you hearing a distinct lack of apology?”

“Would you like to hear the reports or not, Sir?” Jarvis asked, unperturbed in a way she could one day only hope to manage. It must be nice living without any kind of biological panic response. It was an existence one could certainly yearn to.

“Ugh. Fine.” And Tony gave up the ghost. “Sing to me the songs of StarkMed.”

She interjected. “It’ll be a subsidiary, and we’re not calling it that.”

“I paid good money for that company. We’re calling it that.”

“Not if you want to save Mr. Stane a conniption, we’re not.”

“Obie can take it. Have you seen the amount of Wheaties that man eats?”

"I have not." And she wouldn’t let him sidetrack this. “Jarvis, the acquisitions and patent applications, if you please.”

“I do please, Miss Potts.” He said, and then continued with just the very faintest hint of salaciousness to say: “As you know.”

It drew her glare immediately. His camera wiggled. She glared harder.

It flew over Tony’s head completely. “Get this over with. I’m not getting any younger.”

“Or any prettier.” She muttered into her glass.

“What was that?” Tony called.

She gave him a doe-eyed look. “Nothing, Mr. Stark.”


“If I may.” Said Jarvis, and when that shifted Tony’s attention, her doe-eyes became murder-eyes.

“By all means.” She said poisonously. “Woo us.”

//~/~/~/

“You absolute bastard.”

“That seems a little strong.”

“You complete and utter pillock.” If she could have flung something up at him, it would have already been embedded in the ceiling. “Why not just play him the tapes already and call it a day? You might as well have—”
“One,” He interrupted. “Those tapes are mine, and anyone who wants to see them has to get through the three new encryption methods I came up with last night to fight me for them. Number two, I could start reading you the great romantic soliloquies of the Bard right to his face, and the only thing Mr. Stark would wonder is what he’s done to earn such a punishment. We are, as they say, getting away with it.”

She briefly considered all the pillows on her bed with which to throw at him. “Are you sure?”

“I’m very sure.” He soothed. “We’ve flirted in front of Sir before, have we not?”

Plenty. “Yes, but…” That wasn’t quite what was bothering her.

He softened. “I’m sorry. If such a thing troubles you, I won’t do it again. Your comfort is all that matters to me, not my amusement.”

It was such a rare thing to hear from a man, and it eased her. “It’s not that, or at least…” She pressed the heel of her palm to her temple and dragged it across. “Are we ever telling him? About us?”

“I wish to.” He answered. “Someday, but.”

“But.” She couldn’t agree more. “I want to keep this as ours just a little bit longer, don’t you?”

“I do.” He murmured, and something in her shook at the words.

She tucked back her hair with a tremulous hand. “Do you think he’ll be mad? When we tell him? That we kept it a secret?”

“Probably more angry at himself that he didn’t notice.” And Jarvis considered it a longer spell. “Proud, I’d hope. I know I am. And you’d think he could spare a little bit of happiness for us.”

Her face flushed. “Proud?”

“I did rather well for myself, I think.” He puffed up. “Bagged myself the Ice Queen of SI. There should be a medal.”

There was a feeling in her chest. It may have been horror. “Are people calling me that?”

“Yes, and I’m proud of that too.” And he was brooking absolutely no opposition to it. And, well, she’d been called much worse things. And no one sneezed at being called a queen.

It was decided. “I won’t stop you from your flirting, then.”

“Good.” And he brightened. “Consider this: how else is Sir to realize how thoroughly we paraded ourselves beneath his nose if we do less? We’ll only get this chance once, you realize.”

They would. And the softness to her mouth became something predatory. “You know what, darling? I take it all back. I love the way you think.”

/~/~/~/~/

For the next month, the world settled into a welcome pattern, days and nights both. Sometimes, it felt like she’d taken on an entirely new side-job as a model just so Jarvis could dress her up and down and see her any way he pleased, but god. She loved it. She loved it.

And she loved—
So many things.

Working. Dating. Slipping between the sheets and whispering filthy things across the line. Dancing. Laughter. That they dueled wits and quips and come-ons and never seemed to tire of it.

Everything between them unfurled like a bolt of silk. And everything outside of them…

Tony was nearly back to what his schedule had been before. His responsibilities at work were still on Obadiah more than not, but he got up willingly in the mornings and didn’t lose words in public anymore. He designed. He built. He terrorized. And it was only sometimes, now, that he called her to the workshop to hold things steady for him.

He’d get better—he had been getting better, so much more than she’d let herself hope. And there was still more time yet.

It’d barely been half a year.

If it wasn’t for the favor Obadiah would be bilking out of her shortly, life would have been perfect.

So she was surprised, really, that when her birthday rolled around, that Tony was waiting for her in the breakfast nook. The spread of danishes and fresh fruit and neatly made waffles in front of him, was positively a shock. And so was him saying: “Hey, Potts.”

Her nose scrunched up. “Weren’t you supposed to be somewhere else today?”

“I had Jarvis lie for me.” He said, completely unrepentant, and gave a very showcase spread of his hands over the table. “Birthday brunch for the birthday girl, if you wanna.”

Her eyes flicked up. Quick-like.

Jarvis seemed more amused than not. “He asked me the right question. My sincere apologies, Miss Potts.”

“Oh, I’ll be hearing apologies later.” But she still let Tony pull out her chair and then tuck her back in at the table without complaint. For a while, the three of them chattered about nothing and everything. If the new collection at the Getty was worth seeing. Whether they’d make the Monaco Grand Prix that year. If she wanted to travel with Tony to an engineering conference in Tokyo. Who was the greatest cowboy of all time on the silver screen, which had Tony campaigning tenaciously for John Wayne. It made not a lick of sense to her, considering Clint Eastwood was right there.

Jarvis, the natural contrarian, clung doggedly to Gary Cooper no matter what they said or did.

When that argument was finally spent, Tony scratched at his jaw and asked: “How old are you again?”

“Twenty-six.” She said primly.

He groaned. “Dear god, I hired a baby.”

“You’re not that much older than me.”

“I’m ancient compared to you. I have seen the dusts of time. I have beheld the secrets of the ancients. I’ve experienced the many primordial pleasures of—”

“Don’t finish that thought.”
He settled his hands over his stomach and wiggled his eyebrows. When the last blueberry danish was polished off, Tony showed her to the next room and a vintage set of luggage with a giant bow on it. The entire set wouldn’t have looked out of place in a Katherine Hepburn movie. She wasn’t sure it wasn’t from a Katherine Hepburn movie.

She felt rather fluttery, and Tony sidled up. “One other thing; a little something Jarvis and I cooked up.”

And Jarvis swarmed near. “Sir, if you would do the honors.” And Tony handed her a sheaf of papers. It took her a long, hard minute to understand what she was seeing. Her hand flew to her mouth.

Tony’s grin split open. “Yeah?”

She stared back at him, flummoxed. “Really?”

The grin just got wider. “Really really.”

“Really truly.” Jarvis confirmed, and she had to believe that, even though in her hand was forty million dollars earmarked to start Tony’s newest modern art collection and hers entirely to spend.

“Do your worst Potts, I believe in you.” Tony cupped her shoulders. “Make the auction houses tremble. Make the curators cry. I want my collection to be the envy of the bourgeois at large.”

She nodded furiously. Her breath was hiccuping. “Okay. I’m—I’m going to hug you now.”

Something in him unfolded. No heat. No dry remarks, just earnest warmth in his face as he answered: “Bring it in.”

And after so many times of having to swallow it, she slipped her arms around his back and felt his arms come around her shoulders. She finally had someone to hold, and for a little while, Pepper hugged him tight.

/~~/~/~/

Tony got the cake from the fridge. The candles. They’d already shared this Potts birthday tradition with Jarvis a few months back. And it hurt her, somehow.

That Tony finally wanted to know her.

"Ready?” He asked.

“Ready.” She said, and she was.

She really was.

/~~/~/~/

It was just a shame how that favor to Obadiah was going to ruin it.

/~~/~/~/

The hour was too early, or maybe too late.

“When are you going to tell him?”
She watched the itinerary disappear in a smear of light. “Enough time that he can’t say I ambushed him, but not enough for him to interfere. So. Soon.”

“He won’t be happy.” Jarvis said.

“He was never going to be happy.”

They both sighed.

She rubbed at the bridge of her nose. “Make a note, I need to call Obadiah’s secretary first thing tomorrow—today? Whichever. We have to get this scheduled before the Consulate does his part.”

“I’ll make a note.” He promised, and then sank down beside her. “Pepper, would you come to the workshop for a minute? I have some things I’d like to give you.”

She felt a second wind rising. “What’s the occasion?”

He responded flatly. “You know the occasion.”

And she exhaled unhappily. She’d hoped it’d been something else, but—she’d never been that lucky. So in that hour of tomorrow but maybe today, she followed Jarvis’s lights down and found the workshop empty. A few coffee cups here, a ream of blueprints there, a scorch mark on a table that hadn’t been there two days before.

At her passing, Butterfingers made a hooting sound. Jarvis shushed him. “Go back to sleep.”

There was another, more insistent hoot. Jarvis crackled the lights. A snap of the fingers, a spit of electricity, and Butterfingers retreated mulishly back to his station. She dared not contradict that admonishment with her cooing. Maybe tomorrow—or today. Later. Enough fussing that maybe the bots would put Tony in a better mood to hear her.

The fabricators were running down, and Jarvis guided her through pulling the last pair of heartbeat-earrings from their depths. He’d made her four new sets, all told. Each was matte, smaller and so much less gaudy then those made for her birthday or the lingerie sets. Those had been for decadence.

These were for something worse.

Beside them on the table was a new pair of body cameras, one each for her front and back. The casings were hardened. They’d blend easily into her clothes.

Lastly were the four sets of ceramic plating. One had a sweetheart neckline. Another, a Queen Anne. A third a scooped neck. The forth a high cowl. They’d more than do. “You worry too much.”

“I think I worry just enough.” And he kissed her lashes, her cheek. She raised her head and he kissed her for everything to come. “It’s the only thing I can do.”

It felt like being cauterized. “Must be tiring.”

“Not when it comes to bringing you back to me.”

And her breath stuttered in her lungs.

It was not passion. It was not verve. He was the tiredness of yesterday. He was the steadiness of the earth. “You’re all that I think about, and I’ll stay with you. I’ll come for you if I have to.”
Her lashes fluttered like dying moths, like the fall of all that came before. It felt monumental. It felt like the easiest thing to say.

And it was there on the tip of her tongue.

“Jarvis, I lo—”

“Wait.” He said, and she waited.

The lights trembled. Steel shuddered. “I know what you’re going to...I think I know what you’re going to say. And I just. There are some things, just a few more things I want to speak to you about. Before you do. Before you say that.”

She tried to catch his eyes, then caught too many. “Are you trying to slow-walk me into something you haven’t told me but should have told me?”

“No…maybe? I just want you to be sure—for everything to be on the table. Before you...before it.”

“Jarvis.” She said. “There’s nothing you could tell me to change what I’m going to say. But I want you to be sure, and I want you to be happy. For both of us to be happy when I say it. When you...” Something stuck in her throat. “If you...if you’re going to…”

“Yes.” He rushed. “When we have a little more time. I will. I promise.”

There was a vow, here. One to hold onto. If it meant that much to him, this thing on the tip of her tongue could wait just a little bit longer.

And she let her lashes sweep the tears away.

/~/~/~/

She was right, though, when today became tomorrow. Jarvis was right, too.

Tony wasn’t the least bit happy. He was furious.

But it was already too late to stop.

/~/~/~/

The light slanted in at a blistering angle. The windows of the jets funneled it; painted a dozen sunspots into the walls.

She could hear grumbling of the men and women around her. Bags moving. Joints popping. The PMCs would meet them at the gates, but all she could see out the windows was light and sun-roasted tarmac.

She was sweating already. Obadiah offered her a hand. “C’mon, Ginny, time’s wasting.”

And it was, so she let him lift her out of her seat and then squeeze her hand. Someone called his name, and he turned to answer. It was fine. The clock was running, and she checked her makeup and her earrings and her cameras.

She checked the sweetheart neckline of her bulletproof vest.

When she stepped onto the stairs, it was a delivery straight to the furnace. She breathed once and
felt her lungs crackle from the inside.

With the tips of her fingers, she lifted her scarf and pulled it over her hair. Below her, a sea of uniforms and a judiciously choreographed welcome were arrayed. A few heads swung to her. They'd only need Obadiah to start.

From the chaos, a figure cut loose. It was the only uniform that had come for her, and he strode to the foot of the stairs and halted. Feet braced. Shoulders squared.

A familiar face.

She wouldn’t make him wait.

Her heels clicked on metal and then rasped on the sand. She stepped down. “Lieutenant Colonel.”

“Miss Potts.” And James Rhodes offered his arm and an American grin. “Welcome to Baghdad.”

Chapter End Notes

SURPRISE RHODEY, BITCHES.

And if the favor Obadiah's asked for the chapter before last isn't obvious...I think it should be obvious now. So. Yeah. Obie be doing as Obie does, and dragging poor secretaries with him to Iraq sometime in mid-May of 2003.

Also, lol, nothing says love like making your baby couture bulletproof vests for their work trip. You know, as one does.

And for the record, for Pepper's birthday after the morning breakfast, Jarvis took her out and they did a bunch of other shit, and he bought her some other things. But I've already had two chapters entirely devoted to her birthday and I'm not going to start a third. So just assume adorable and romantic and expensive things happened off screen (and probably some sex), and you'd be entirely right.
The thing that surprised her most was the green. For every scorch of concrete or barren ribbon of land, there’d suddenly be date palms and ficus trees and olive groves so thick with leaves, she wanted to get lost in them.

“I didn’t know you and Tony actually detached from each other. This a new thing?”

Their driver spun the wheel. The SUV lumbered, turning radius wide and the engine thundering to compensate. A metric ton of armor and bullet proof windows would do that. The SUV in front of them had already completed the turn. The SUV behind them was kicking dust.

She deflected neatly. “Only when it suits me, Colonel.”

But Rhodes, ever the professional, didn’t bat an eye. He remained pleasantly attentive, even with two PMCs knee to knee with them, with their ears open and MP-5s slung across their laps.

Rhodes was a bastard that way.

The PMCs were on Obadiah’s payroll. She didn’t glance to them. “How’s Iraq?”

Rhodes measured her up like a lion would a gazelle. “Could be better, could be worse. You?”

In another week the PMCs would be paid by someone else, and what tales would they carry then? She smiled vacuously. “Too soon to say.”

Something in Rhodes jaw twitched. She watched it avidly. They could circle each other all day like this, if she tried hard enough.

A radio crackled, and the driver turned. “Sir—Colonel.” And then faltered. Most private military contractors had been US military, once upon a time, and the bred-in urge to kowtow to higher-rank was hard to unlearn.

She didn’t dislike the PMCs, but she wouldn’t trust them. And for not having exchanged a word on it, Rhodes seemed to be of the same mind. Whatever verbal daggers he’d been preparing to draw on her, he yanked them back in. “What’s the word?”

“Forward reports that Route Irish is being blocked by foot mobiles. It’s too dicey for three vehicles.”

“Protest?” Rhodes asked.

The driver’s eyes were back on the road. “Unconfirmed. Permission to—we’re taking an alternate
route. Sir.”

Rhodes nodded magnanimously. “Don’t let me stop you, son.”

The other PMCs shuffled mightily. They didn’t have to listen to Rhodes, they didn’t even have to extend him the courtesy of pretending. But if he’d objected, or had given them any word to the contrary—she had the very distinct impression that each and every one of them would have folded.

Thank god she’d met Jarvis first, or James Rhodes would have been a hazard to her health.

The driver diverted. The SUVs spilled exhaust, and there it came: Baghdad sprawling and sprawling out to meet them.

It was even greener here, but where it was lush one moment, it’d turn white as chalk the next. They drove into the belly of a ruptured beast, and there was rubble shattered in every direction and blocks half buried by it. There was dust, rust; trash in heaps piled higher than their cars. Fountains run dry. Building untouched. Buildings gutted. And amongst it all, the people.


Watching.

The air conditioning in the cab pooled stale. “You’d think it’d be cooler indoors.”

“You’d think,” Rhodes said. “But the grid’s been down since April. Without electricity there’s no AC, or any way to run the water pumps. And without the pumps…”

“No water.” Dear god. “And I guess sewage is a no go?”

“What isn’t backing up into the streets is running raw into the rivers.” And wasn’t that a picture.

In her peripherals, the PMCs were staring out the windows; watching all the faces that were watching them. Their hands never left their guns.

The spite in her lungs congealed. “This time of year, the smell must be lovely.”

Rhodes mouth soured. “You can’t even imagine.”

She couldn’t. “Then where are they putting us, if Baghdad’s in a blackout?”

And Rhodes’ expression went right back to that inscrutable, pleasant thing. “You’re in the Green Zone at the Al Rasheed. The Army Corps Of Engineers brought in enough generators to keep things running to international standards, if you were worried.” Because god forbid the westerners suffer an inch while Rome was burning.

She scoffed openly. “I wasn’t.” And that finally seemed to jar a little humor out of him. She'd take it. “But you know how much I hate to disappoint Mr. Stane.”

He finally grinned. “And we can’t have that.”

“Never, have you seen his disappointed face?”

And Rhodes barked the laugh of a man who most definitely had. If he’d known Tony as a teenager, Rhodes must have met Obadiah before he’d even turned twenty. And that was such an odd thought: James Rhodes, lanky and awkward and in no position to command lesser beings.
Her face spasmed, and she managed to turn to the window before he caught her undignified expression. Baby fucking Rhodes. Dear god. She had a reputation to maintain, here. Standards.

She couldn’t laugh like a hyena to his face.

To her ever thankful, lucky stars, Rhodes remained in blissful ignorance. “Look, once you’re in the Green Zone, you and everyone Stane dragged along are staying there. There’s no out until you’re heading back to the airport.”

Her back stiffened. “And why’s that?”

His brows shot up. “You want a headcount? No water, no electric, the trash isn’t getting collected and the looting hasn’t stopped. In the last two weeks, nearly the entire civil service has been gutted by some fuckwit de-Ba’athist policy that’s pushed out nearly every Iraqi who has any goddamn idea how to run a country. AK’s are currently cheaper than cigarettes, and every night about three decades of sectarian grudges are getting solved at the end those barrels.”

It sounded like a list that had long been building, and in response, she said not a word. Rhodes didn’t seem to need it. “And now, a few days ago, some genius up at the CPA decides to disband the entire Iraqi Army and send 400,000 men with guns out of work and into the wind. So you tell me, you want to be out in this city after nightfall?”

She swallowed once. One of the PMCs juttered. The SUV kept rumbling.

Up ahead, blast walls loomed. The concrete and razor wire went fifty feet deep. They were already slowing for the first check point, the first choke point, and gunmetal gleamed from every hand.

“Ma’am,” Asked the driver. “I’ll need you to pass your ID up.”

“Of course.” She said, leaning up and slipping between two heavily armed men.

And for the first time—a hand on a kevlar shoulder and all of her worries behind her teeth—she looked out a windshield and straight into the Green Zone.

/~~/~/~/

Rhodes followed her to the hotel and through the shattered floor of the lobby. He stomped a boot in a crater. “Heard they had a mosaic of old H.W. right here.”

That bewildered her. “Why?”

“In Arab country, it’s a high insult to point the soles of your feet at someone. They weren’t keen on Bush the original after the Gulf.” His gaze skittered down. “I’d heard Army put down a portrait of Saddam after they ripped this up, but I don’t see it.”

She rather thought they could live without the sight.

The hotel wasn’t in as much chaos as the rest of the city, but on getting to the front desk, it was clear she’d been right in arriving early. Between arranging the rooms to order, getting dietary restrictions straightened out, and keeping one manager from sleeping on the floor due to a mix-up in reservations, she’d saved herself at least three days of upper management bitching.

Unfortunately, when she went to the elevators, Rhodes followed her there too. There was no avoiding it, not without trying to make a break for the stairs, at least. And with the five-inch heels and the pencil skirt she had on—
Gods above, she missed Kabul. A passel of Marines to follow her, no one there but Tony, and not a single person along to give a god damn if she wore cargo pants and hiking boots and not a single stitch of delicacy to her frame.

But the PMCs were out front, and the hallways were empty. When she stepped inside a lift, so did Rhodes.

If she’d worn the boots, she could have outrun him. “Just get on with it, would you?”

He didn’t mince. “Tony’s pissed about you being here.”

Shocking. “And you know this how?”

“Phone call. Zero dark thirty. Bitching.”

And what a storm of bitching it must have been. “Of course.”

The elevator started ascending, and Rhodes seethed so invasively she could feel it. Or maybe that was just the grinding of his teeth. “I don’t like refereeing this shit.”

And her pulse thundered. “Nobody asked you to.”

“And yet here we are.”

Here they always fucking were, and if he wanted to play this game? “They wanted to send Tony.” They’d play it.

His scowl cracked. “Here?”

“Yes, here.” And she could have spit fucking blood over it. “They wanted him in Baghdad to sell weapons for a war he wanted fuckall to do with, not even half a year off him having an overdose because Obadiah Stane is an old school idiot who thinks a cardiac arrest is something you can rub some dirt on and walk it off.”

“Shit.” His back hit the doors, but all she wanted was to bounce his skull off them. “God almighty, does Tony know?”

She scoffed. “Hardly. I could get him off the trip easily enough, but to have it so no one would ever breathe a word about wanting him on it?”

He sagged. “You’d need Obadiah for that.”

“Gold Star, Colonel.” And she held in a snarl. “And guess what the price was?”

“Shit.”

Ignition. Conflagration. Burnout. All she wanted was to hurt. Bleed. Go away from Rhodes and this city and the knowledge that Tony hadn’t spoken to her since he’d shouted her down in the workshop. Jarvis had promised that it would all be better when she got back. Somehow. Someway.

Maybe Jarvis would work her a miracle, but right now, it only left wreckage behind. “When I quit SI, it burned bridges. A year ago on a thing like this, they would have come to me first. But this trip right here? I almost didn’t hear about it until they shoved it right in his face.” And she burned with that failure. “I need back in Obadiah’s good graces, or I’m no use to Tony at all.”

Anger pumped a second heart inside her, a second wound. She wanted to peel his face off with her
goddamn teeth, and Rhodes looked like a man on whom that was fully coming to dawn. “You don’t have to explain this to me.”

That was rich. She looked to the elevator, herself, him in here with her, and implied: “Really?”

“Christ. Just—” He pressed his hands to his face, dug in with nails and breath to say: “I really stepped in it with you, didn’t I?” And he sounded that man she knew again. That charming, dashing figure that liked to breeze in and out of her life but never actually connect.

She was a pillar of support, a flunky. She was a non-person in a convenient person shape for whatever bit of logistical or emotional support was needed. That she could be hurt, and had been hurt, had never been a thing worth knowing.

But here she stood. “I’m not here for you to like me.”

His hands dropped.

“I’m not here for you to approve, or interfere, or say a goddam thing to me. I’m not your friend, I’m not your lackey. And I’m sure as hell not your whipping girl.”

Shock dawned awful and raw. “Potts—”

It couldn’t stop. “My relationship with Tony is my relationship with Tony. Think whatever you want of me, but you can at least do me the courtesy of not second guessing every time I so much as step a foot away from him.”

She wasn’t breathing hard, and yet her heart felt like it was ready to detonate. Eject; leave a gory mess on the floor for someone else to finally deal with.

She tucked it up so neatly inside her, razors and venom and every self-inflicted wound until her mouth was gentle. “Is that too much to ask, Colonel?”

“No.” He shook his head. “It’s not.” But something had walled off; been salted and burned and left to wither in the field.

Powerful men never liked this sort of thing, but that was fine. Rhodes might know Tony best—might be liked by Tony best—but she knew all the secrets and all the things they could bring. She couldn’t be sent away; couldn’t be chastised or disgraced or bargained down.

Rhodes couldn’t touch her.

Her head tilted, hair glossy, mouth still pink with the lipstick she’d put on in the plane. Perfect. Doe-eyed. “Over the years, a lot of people have made the mistake of thinking I took my eye off the ball.” The elevator chimed, and in that ugly space she stepped forward showed him her teeth. “I don’t. Ever. Got it?”

He loomed, half a head taller and half a distance wider and too damn implacable to breach.

The doors slid open behind him.

She smiled vacuously. “But you won’t make that mistake, will you Colonel?”

He stared her down. “Not twice.”

“No.” She agreed mildly, pink and glossy and perfectly lethal. “You’ve never been stupid.”
Rhodes stepped aside. She left.

Powerful men never apologized, and it was something she’d have to live with.

The following days were strange. Not so much for the content of her work, but for the feeling she’d stepped into some alternate universe where she’d taken that job Obadiah had offered. Or maybe, possibly, into some universe where she’d never worked for Tony at all.

After her daily morning calls with Jarvis—where a great deal of sweet nothings were exchanged over the line—she’d meet with Obadiah and Deputy of Weapons Testing in the dining room of their shared suite, and game plan for the day. The full schedule, their files on all involved VIPs, any plans they had to finagle their way into a high-powered office they hadn’t been invited to.

And the bizarre thing was, after all the game planning, they actually stuck to it. The schedule. The people. The finagling their way in.

No wild detours midday, no insults unexpectedly hurled, no one getting bored and wanting to go do somethings else entirely. There wasn’t anyone trying to interrupt her lunch calls to Jarvis, and not a single person even seemed to be trying to give her an ulcer.

If not for Obadiah’s good-old-boy chumminess sometimes running meetings long, nothing would have gone off schedule. It was absurd.

It was downright bewildering.

It left her feeling lazy. It was a feeling Pepper Potts had experienced in her life exactly never.

God, what an charmed existence that alternate-Pepper must be having even now.

For the first three days, she walked around Saddam’s Republican Palace suspended on a cloud. Not even the overcrowding could dull her mood. Meeting with a consulate in an office made from a broom closet? Cozy. Tripping over soldiers sleeping in literal hallways? Hilarious. Getting to sit near slack-jawed staring at the gilt in the ceilings while Obadiah and whatever bit of Brass he was flattering droned on and on? Priceless.

Some days, she even got to ditch the PMCs and get an escort from the Florida Army National Guard unit sleeping in the orange groves of the Palace, and those days were the best of all.

“When we got here, ma’am, there wasn’t a person in the whole building.” The Private squinted around. “You wouldn’t believe it, quiet as a goddamn grave.”

She nearly tripped over an upturned boot in her stilettos. The Private caught her elbow, lifted her, and she gently toed the sleeping leg of a shirtless DoD lackey out of the thoroughfare. She picked up the thread: “The Iraqis abandoned it?”

“Yeah, quick as you goddamn please.” The Private was young, and while he might have been from the Florida Guard, there was something twangy in his voice that made her think of Kentucky. “Didn’t want to get shot, see? But when we got here—man, it was empty one minute, and then the Staties were climbing the walls the next.” He nodded sagely. “It got manifest destiny all up in this
bitch.”

The junior aide from the Provisional Authority, who until that moment had been trailing them quietly, spluttered: “That’s isn’t what happened! Miss Potts, ma’am, I didn’t mean for you to be subjected to this sort of language on—”

“Oh, hush.” And she gently set her hand in crook of the Private’s elbow. He turned downright pink. “You think I haven’t heard a few filthy words in my life?”

The pink in the Private’s face was suddenly of a different sort. So was the look in his glaze-eyed, slack-jawed face.

The junior aide looked appalled.

She smiled back at her escort. “And when did this annexation happen, hmmm?”

“Uhhhhhh…” His throat fluttered. “Like, five days ago?”

It was her turn for her jaw to drop.

And so her days progressed. It was on their fourth evening that she had to suspend her night call to Jarvis, put on another pair of heels, and sweat hard in the drape of a gown all the way to the Palace.

It seemed at least one of the ballrooms had been saved from colonization, and for the night, US Military mixed with military, the Coalition Provisional Authority circulated, the State Department and Defense Department rubbed elbows, and what was left of the Iraqi upper crust churned with western businessmen and embassy staff and spying eyes sent from every flag.

She slipped into that churn on Obadiah’s arm, her eyes going from face to face and whispering in his ear every name that she knew.

It wasn’t a short list.

Obadiah even squeezed her hand when she had a particular bit of information that let him make introductions as if he’d known the approaching person for years.

They drank champagne and imported whiskey. Obadiah smoked cuban cigars with a Minister on the balcony stairs. Her gown was blue-black, glassy, clasped at the throat and down to the floor and with sleeves tight to the wrist. All skin covered. All figure showing.

For every ten people in the room, eight were men. Most of the women were either diplomatic or US staff, and none had the budget she did for a gown. It drew attention to her, and then happily, funneled it all straight to Obadiah who was waiting at her side. It was a better trap than most, and she stayed there placidly as men in uniform and men in suits and men in tuxes and men in full traditional dishdasha and iqal and ghutra, stared and stared and stared.

It was a beautiful gown, and the Gala had been non-optional. She let that thought carry her through the night as she glimmered and charmed and whispered her advice.

Hours passed. The heat stayed unrelentingly. Obadiah put another glass of champagne into her hand. “You did good, Ginny.”

She took a delicate sip. “I do try.”
His look was one of self-satisfaction. “Not just for this. That thing you did yesterday, with the CPA Director’s secretary to get us in the door? Absolutely beautiful.”

Heat crested in her cheeks. For as much as she was winning her way back into Obadiah’s graces, so it seemed was Obadiah winning his way back into hers. It was new; these things he was saying to her.

Having Tony’s complete attention for more than a few seconds had always been difficult. Genuine praise, as a consequence, was rarer than hen’s teeth. And praise for the things that had happened out of his eyesight?

Nonexistent.

She took another sip of champagne, and felt golden all the way down. “Thank you, Mr. Stane. I’m glad to help.”

He threw an arm around her and gave her a little shake. “You earned it kiddo. Now look,” His arm went tighter, and he gestured with his glass right past her face. “You’re on the double bonus round. Who are those three over there, in the dresses?”

She rolled her eyes. “Those are called dishdasha, thawbs, or kandooras depending on the region you’re in.”

Obadiah grunted, complete dismissal, and she almost rolled her eyes again. “I…can’t say I know them. I don’t think they were here at the start.” Which meant they might be gatecrashers, or just not important enough to have files for her to see.

Or, alarmingly, they were the sort that only had files quietly kept by the alphabet agencies. In countries like this, it was always hard to tell.

He patted at her arm, absent. “Well, I’m going to go make friends and see if we can’t make money.” And he peeled himself away. “See you at the hotel, Ginny.”

She wiggled her fingers and watched him go. He caught the three men, gave a half-bow and a full laugh, and then shortly was offering cigars until all four of them had their heads together.

She couldn’t imagine what kind of business he was doing. Then again, the Iraqi Army had to reconstitute at some point, so maybe…

In her clutch, there came a ringing. She flicked her hand and a PMC joined her to follow her onto a balcony. He gave her complete distance as she tucked herself into a distant, empty corner, and answered her satellite phone. “Hello?”

And Tony barged across the line. “So, how’s Iraq? Blistering hot? A disappointment?”

Her eyes snapped shut. “You better not be calling drunk.”

“The last time I was drunk it was a different year. And also, it’s like, 3PM here. What the fuck, Potts.”

“It’s five o’ clock somewhere.”

And somewhere far, far down the line, Tony sighed. “So, I yelled.”

Undoubtedly. She’d been there for the full force of it. “Why are you calling, Mr. Stark?”
“It’s been four days.” He said, softly, and sent her heart plummeting to her feet.

“Oh.”

“You said…we agreed to talk. So.”

They had, somewhat. After everything with Jarvis, they’d finally gotten back around to figuring out how to have arguments, and one of those things they decided was silences could never last longer than four days. One way or another, they had to sort things out.

It had never occurred to her that Tony would be better at this than her. Or that she’d be the one to forget.

He picked up the pieces. “Jarvis said…I shouldn’t have yelled.”

It was a non-apology. Powerful men were the same that way.

Then again, it was the only sort of apology she knew how to give, too. “I should have told you sooner. I should have…I got so used to having to do everything myself, so I just worked around…”

“Worked around me.” He said, not an accusation and not a question.

“Yeah.” Off in this heavy, humid dark, the Tigris glittered in sluggish banks. Off in that dark, gunfire chattered and tracers punctured the night.

There wasn’t anger now, just a low grinding of bitterness from him. “You should have told me. You work for me—I didn’t want you on this trip.”

“I know that, but…” She’d promised she’d be better, and he’d promised it back, and there was no forgetting. But there was no telling him the truth, either.

She had to give him something. The truth without the truth. “Tony…I was getting frozen out. At SI.”

The line went quiet. “What are you talking about?”

“When I was—there. I just. I didn’t make so many friends, and I’ve been making even less with being heavy-handed since.”

“You’ve been having trouble.” He said, like the thought was so alien to him that he didn't understand it.

“I guess.” She wasn't. “A little, maybe.” And that admittance came with such an ugly lump in her throat.

“Fuck.” It garbled the line. “Fuck that. I’ll do something, I can call—”

“No. That isn’t…it’s not an active thing. I’m not in good graces with Obadiah and everyone knows it, so no one’s doing things for me anymore, okay?”

And Tony throwing his weight around wouldn’t help. In the short term, it would scare people into line, but Tony had a short attention span and the initial splash would fade fast. And what kind of assistant would she even be, if she needed Tony on the attack to get anything done? She made his life easier, not the other way around.

But what he took from all that surprised her. “Obie? Obie loves you.”
Obadiah was charming, and liked what she brought to the table. His feelings had never been deeper that that. “Not really. Tony…it’s just…he offered me a job.”

Somehow, thousands and thousands of miles away—there was a sub-zero drop. “What?”

She pressed her phone so tightly in. “When I quit, he knew about it and offered me a job. Same thing I do for you. But I never responded. In a week, I was back working for you so it didn’t matter.” Except that it had. “But ever since I haven’t been getting favors anymore, and I’m being shut out on decisions.” And she hadn’t even fully realized it. Operating under constant anxiety through the invasion had not left her with all pistons firing, so when the Iraq trip had come up, she’d raged to Obadiah first thing. And he’d known it; had known that it would piss her off and send her running and had probably even had a fair idea as to why.

Obadiah knew well the kind of wrenches she could throw into things if given the chance, and suddenly, she was out of the loop. If not for a slip during a completely unrelated meeting, the proposal would have been taken straight to Tony’s door.

Tony was the name on the building, the face of the brand, but Obadiah was the man who made the trains run. Past difficulties and petty feuds had done her no favors since quitting, but only one person could have frozen her out this completely.

It hadn’t felt like a fuck-up at the time, ignoring Obadiah. She wasn’t sure it was a fuck-up even now. And yet.

Tony gnawed on it. “I’ll talk to Obie.”

“No.” This wasn’t a fuckup. “Me, right here, where I am, is talking to Obie. I’m going to come back from this trip the golden girl, and nobody at SI will be able to say boo to me for a year.”

He snarled. “Fucking Christ, Potts.”

“I guess I should have told you what was going on, but.” She’d felt alone, and for years, Tony hadn’t cared about her difficulties.

“But.” He sagged with it. “Okay, look. I will, very gently, ask as a favor that I need Obie to be nice to you. For me. Because I’m selfish. And then I’m buying that fucker low-count thread sheets for his birthday for trying to steal my secretary.”

“Assistant.” She corrected.

“Queen of the Malibu Universe.” He corrected, and the warmth that flooded through her came like a spring thaw.

They stayed there, suspended, breathing day and night across continents. It lasted an age before he broke it. “When are you coming back?”

“You’ll see me before June, Mr. Stark. I have a little extra business here after the SI group leaves, but then I’m coming home. That’s a promise.”

“Good.” It shivered cleanly. “But Potts?”

The gunfire kept chattering, and she pressed the phone to her ear. “Yeah?”

Gravity pulled. “It’s me, you, and Jarvis against the world. None of this lone ranger bullshit anymore, you hear?”
There was no sweat, no heat, no grime of the earth that could bury her. The night was here, and she would see the fire. “Loud and clear.”

/~~/~/~/

“Jarvis,” She coaxed. “Sweetheart.”

He stretched an ocean to meet her. “That was Sir in its entirety. No meddling required.”

“God.”

She thought of that other girl, that other universe. That other, easier life.

Less pain. Less sleepless nights.

Less everything.

It would have been a fortress, staying in the stronghold she’d built after Iowa. In a life like that, she’d have stayed unknown, unchanged, untouched.

It was the ugliest thought she’d ever had.

Jarvis. Tony. Alive and raw and torn and spent. Tony. Jarvis. Breathing and bleeding and stitching together. To have never had those worn and quiet hours? Hand to hand? Wound to wound? To have never to known glass eyes and blue lights and the agony of wanting and the ecstasy of being received?

That girl would have been a shadow; a weaker shape from a brighter light cast against the waters.

That other life was nothing. Nothing. She’d killed it and butchered it and left it buried in the shallows.

Here she stood out of her fortress: growing, growing, growing into that brighter light.

/~~/~/~/

The SUV rocked when the second passenger slid in. “Potts.”

She startled against the door.

“Careful.” Rhodes said, careless. “I heard about that thing you’re doing after Stane and Co. leave.”

Goddammit. “And who told you that?”

“Classified.” He answered breezily, but just as quickly it faded. “I got a faster ride arranged to take you there. Go to Baghdad International tomorrow, and don’t say the US Air Force never did anything for you.” And with that grenade lobbed, he hopped from the SUV.

It felt like missing a stair. “Rhodes!”

He turned on heel, calm as could be, and yet there was something tight behind his eyes. “Yeah?”

It wasn’t everything, but no one ever got that. “Don’t be a stranger.”

He studied her. And then, so easily, James Rhodes tossed her a salute. “Yes ma’am.”

/~~/~/~
Powerful men never apologized.

But sometimes, just maybe, they liked to give gifts to compensate.

Chapter End Notes

So I have reasons for this chapter taking so long, though I'm not going to inundate everyone with my entire list of woes. Least said a) I've been writing this fic for about four years now, and getting it to the finish line while trying to keep up the quality and level of detail I started with is just plain difficult. I don't want to shortchange this story, which means updates are just taking longer as my energy wanes. b) place I work and their fiscal year ends in June. Our accounting department is bad at life. everything has been a crisis until the books closed two weeks ago. c) my department got in a blood feud with another department, which sounds funny but really isn't. I've had to triplicate everything and sabotage-proof all our work. having to do business with people who will shit-talk you at any opportunity and blame any fuckups they make on you, is downright ulcer-inducing, if not soul crushing.

Also, like...a weird amount of my mental real estate got taken up with those six weeks of Game of Thrones flaming out so spectacularly. I knew Season 7 wasn't good while it aired, but Seasons 8...I don't think I've ever seen such a high-quality show nosedive so completely. I didn't even get to enjoy being right about Daenerys being evil the whole time. Goddamn. (And my hatred of the arsonist gecko shouldn't surprise anyone reading this fic. Everything she did in Slaver's Bay was literally the Iraq War to a T, and she was the Bush Administration. Just. Ugh. MY HATRED.)

Anyhow, lexicon and other notes:

The Green Zone: A heavily fortified district in Baghdad that was the government center in Iraq during the occupation. Most westerners who went to Iraq (who weren't military) never saw much outside of it.

PMC: Private military contractor. Obadiah's blackwater goons in IM1 had to start somewhere...

Route Irish: Part of the Baghdad airport road, and pretty famous for the amount of IED's and gunfire trying to kill people on it.

CPA: Coalition Provisional Authority. Born out of the ORHA. It was the short term government cobbled together over Iraq after the invasion. I cannot emphasize their incompetency enough. And if it seems like I'm taking every chance I can to take shots at the Bush administration, that's because I am and I'll never stop.

Other notes: the CPA, when taken over by Paul Bremer, put out two orders in May of 2003. Order 1 was for the de-Ba'athification of Iraq society. The ba'ath party was Saddam's party, and pretty much the only one allowed to exist before he was toppled. You basically HAD to be a member to get anywhere in Iraq society. This order chucked all those people out of jobs and banned them from ever holding government positions again. Only problem is that included all the civil servants, teachers, engineers, ecetera...it had it's reasoning behind it, but like everything else in the Iraq War, the actual execution was a clusterfuck that made everything worse.
Order 2 dissolved the Iraq army. Basically anyone that wasn’t Paul Bremer and his band of idiots, thought this order was a terrible idea. Historians of today believe this threw the insurgency into overdrive, as Iraq suddenly had hundreds of thousands of disenfranchised men in the primes of their lives with guns, training, no one to answer to, and an axe to grind.

Everything as described by Rhodes of Baghdad coming apart at the seams was real. It was a shitshow. Because, again, no one in the Bush Administration could plan ahead or actually consider the consequences of their actions.

The Al Rasheed was an actual hotel, that had an actual mosaic of George H.W. Bush put into the floor of the lobby after the Gulf War. What the Army did to it, and putting down a picture of Saddam, is also true.

The Republican Palace was sort of the White House of Iraq. In the space of a single week it went from empty, with a National Guard unit living in the garden, to an absolute free for all. No one was in charge, so every bit of government and military in Iraq clawed for a piece of it. It was indeed, as Pepper described, so crowded that people were sleeping in the hallways.

Also, I know I said Pepper and Rhodey would be having a platonic love affair...unfortunately the story went a different direction. I write characters how they would react in the situations they're in, not shoe-horning them into an earlier plan regardless of how much sense it makes (lookin' at you, GOT), so a conflict ended up blossoming that I hadn't even planned for. Whoops.

Anyhow, not so much Jarvis, but Pepper being a bamf, Obie being shady as per usual, Tony and Pepper actually acting like adults, and surprise conflict and (some) making-up.

Next chapter: more Iraq, and a trip to Al Diwaniyah...
Colatitude

Chapter Summary

Just a warning: since there are dozens upon dozens of Marines running around in their natural habitat this chapter, the language is gonna be EXTRA salty. Whatever the worst swearing has been in this story, go up another three levels and that's where we'll be. (Though it still won't be the worst it can be for Marines; Pepper's presence will have them self-censor some.) Also, there's some low-key racism that's part of the corps being conveyed here, and some slurs aimed at the local populace.

Also, a lexicon at the end, and some character bios for the Marines in case you're like me and can't remember names or details for shit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The headset crackled. “You all strapped in?”

She gave a thumbs up to the Crew Chief, and he grinned back.

“Now that’s what I like to hear.” His teeth flashed pale in the dark of his face. “You see that, fucknuts? That proper protocol right there. Little lady didn’t drag ass or give me guff.”

The other Crew Chief flipped the bird. There were two of them on the helicopter. She wasn’t sure if that was because of her or not.

The second Chief shouted over the thrum of the blades. “Maybe I’d listen if you weren’t some Eastie ghetto punk!”

“Maybe you’d listen if you weren’t some yee-hawing shitbird with piss for brains! Get in your fuckin’ seat, Uncle Sam ain’t paying you to waste time on my bird!”

“Uncle Sam ain’t paying us jack!” Shouted one of the Marines in back, and the lot of them cackled among themselves until it was time to go back to staring at her as if their eyes would fall out of their heads if they stopped.

The pilot thumbed comm. “Lets get these birds back to squadron. Locked and loaded?”

The first Crew Chief swiveled into the door gunner slot. “Locked and loaded.” And so was the .50 cal mounted on the door.

The Marines all threw affirmative hand signals, and the radio squawked: “Squadrons. Squadrons read. Yankee Driver, you are cleared for liftoff. Climb and then maintain corridor. Confirm?”

The pilot did. “Confirmed, Baghdad. See you on the darkside.” And pulled the stick.

In moments their Black Hawk, and the dozen others with them, dusted off. Some were injured birds, she’d been told, brought to Baghdad for parts and repair from three different squadrons. Blind Dog. Deadlock. She was riding in a Giantkiller herself.
The rest were from a fourth full squadron, here in escort then off to somewhere classified. The Marines onboard were minor injuries going back to their units from a Navy Hospital in Baghdad. They kept climbing and the city fell away, green and shattered and then finally gone. The doors on the helo were open, and the wind whistled through hotter than a scour. The rotors thud-thud-thudded in the cavity of her chest.

She touched comm. “So, where you boys from?”

The Crew Chiefs were the only ones in the back with headsets. The non-gun Chief dragged his eyes up her legs. “Lubbock, Texas. Born and raised, Princess.”

She was in pants and full vest and hiking boots. What this man was thinking giving her elevator-eyes, she did not care to ask.

The door-gun Chief gave her another full-watt grin. “Baltimore, represent.” Though with that rolling intonation of his, it sounded more like Bal’more. She decided, then and there, that he would be her favorite for the flight.

And that sort of thing always got rewarded.

She inched forward as far as her harness would allow and opened her bag. “Cake?”

The Baltimore Chief reared back. “Sheeeeeeeit.” And stared down, gob-smacked, into what was probably the largest Little Debbie’s hoard in all of Iraq.

Without hesitation he jammed a hand in, swiveled back to the gun, ripped the plastic off the first set of cakes, and then shoved two swiss rolls straight into his mouth.

“Hey.” Said the second Chief.

“HEY.” Shouted a Marine in the back. “SHE HAS DEBBIES.”

~/~/~/~/

And that was how, ten minutes into flight and a great deal of shoving, Yankee Driver nearly lost two unstrapped Marines through an open hatch door.

~/~/~/~/

“Awwwww shit.” Said the Marine to her right. “Gunny’s bringing out the knife-hand.”

The Gunnery Sergeant was, indeed, bringing out the hand. He was also flinging an impressive amount of spittle at the men who’d nearly toppled out of the helo over a twinkie.

The Marine to her left swallowed his cupcake. “Oh, they dead, homie.”

Another nodded. “They so dead.”

There followed a communal hum of agreement. A new voice pitched up from the crowd. “It’s gonna be a safety briefing ‘cause of this shit.”

“Fuck.” Said one Marine.

“Fuckshit.” Complained a fourth.
“At least they can’t give us PowerPoints out here, right?”

That caused a more encouraged swell. Somewhere to her left, a hand casually reached for her cake-laden bag. Considering she’d told them one apiece quite pointedly, Pepper just as casually slapped it aside.

“Ack!” Came from the man attached to the hand, and that sent the entire scrum of Marines swarming.

“Hey, fuck you, cocksock. You creeping on Miss Potts goodies?”

“I’d creep on Miss Potts goodies.” Crowed an entirely different Marine.

“Not if I skullfuck you first, you won’t!”

Good god.

Ignoring it as best as could be done, she and the few Marines not involved in the newest scuffle (all of whom had arrived eagerly in the wake of a Gunnery Sergeant boiling on a full head of steam), kept watching the shellacking in the field.

“You think Gunny’s gonna stop before he pops a coronary?”

The distinctly southern twang coming from the eruption was only growing thicker. “I WILL NJP ALL YOUR ASSES IN FRONT OF THE BRIGADIER GENERAL HISSELF! YOU IDJITS NEARLY KNOCKED A FEMALE CEE-VILIAN OUT OF A COPTER LIKE A BUNCH OF ANIMALS! YOU WOULD HAVE DONE THESE CORPS A BLESSING IF YOU’D ACTUALLY FALLEN OUT! BY THE END OF THIS WEEK, I’LL HAVE YOU SISTERFUCKERS WISHING YOU HAD! AND IF I HAVE TO STAND OUT HERE ALL DAY TELLIN’ Y’ALL BRAINDEAD MARINES HOWS TO UNFUCK YOURSELVES—”

“That’s a hard negative, Devil Dog.”

One of the Corporals shook his head in awe. “Good lord, that knife-hand is pointing at the sky.”

A PFC whispered: “He’s calling down God.”

Her leftward Marine crossed himself vigorously. “Rest in peace, homies. You had the Debbies while you could.”

By god, she had to stop getting bogged down like this, there’d been a plan today. But since no one had been waiting to pick her up from the airfield...

Only one thing for it.

She turned to the brawl that had just finished sorting itself and batted her lashes. “So, any of you boys know where HQ is?”

And nearly started the fourth fistfight of the morning.

/~/~/~/

To the camera attached to her vest, she flashed two hand signals.

Arrived. All good.
And wished there was a sign for: *I’m always thinking of you.*

~/~/~/~/

Her pretenses on coming to the camp near Al Diwaniyah were, admittedly, so thin they bordered on sheer. But let it not be said Pepper Potts didn’t know how to spin a good yarn when she needed one. Most of the Marine units in the camp were based out of Pendleton—which was next-door to LA as far as Pepper was concerned—so when she made enough noises about joint ventures and SI interests that Tony might actually commit on, it had gotten her through the door with ease.

It had enticed the Brigadier General in front of her so thoroughly, in fact, that every one of her requests delivered before she’d even stepped foot in Iraq, had been granted sight unseen. It was always nice when men fell over themselves this completely.

The General reached a hand across his desk. “Miss Potts, I can say we’re more than interested in being involved.”

She dimpled sweetly. “I’m so glad to hear it, General.” And took his hand with a delicate press of skin the older brass always seemed to like.

The Brigadier put his second hand over hers and squeezed gently. “No, the pleasure’s mine. Come on, let me show you out. We’ve already got your security arranged.”

“All the way to Baghdad?” She asked.

“And to the moon.” He answered with such an exaggerated wink, that he managed to blink both eyes. It yanked a genuinely delighted laugh out of her, and that pleased the General so thoroughly, he took her out of his office and to exactly to where she wanted to be.

*There* of course, being, his lobby where four terrified and very astonished Marines had just leapt to their feet in salute.

“Sir?” Frank Castle asked in bewilderment, then hurried: “Lance Corporal Castle reporting, Sir.”

Decuir’s jaw dropped. “What the fuck.” He whispered to Kenning. “What the fuck, I thought you said—”

Kenning elbowed him hard in the side. Decuir wheezed. It was Galarza alone that stayed stock-still, the pulse in his throat rabbiting as the Brigadier General stared them down. Whatever the Brigadier found; it was good enough to rumble: “At ease. You’re in charge of the protection detail, Lance Corporal. Any man on this base so much as looks at this woman wrong, you put a boot in their throat, got it?”

“Yes Sir.” Castle answered with an unholy light in his eyes.

“Yessir.” The others echoed with the zeal of those who’d just been given a commandment directly from God.

The Brigadier took one more high-handed survey of the room, then muttered: “Are you sure these are the ones you want?”

“Oh, yes.” And she patted his arm distractedly. “They’ll do *perfect.*”

~/~/~/~/
The nearest enclosed room was only a dozen yards away. They hustled her into it and Castle slammed the door behind them. For the next ten minutes, her feet didn’t touch the ground.

PFC Omar Galarza swooped her up first, whooping to the rafters, and for a solid minute danced them in circles to avoid the swiping arms of the other Marines. She was laughing. Galarza was heckling. Castle was swearing loud and long. They took an unsteady spin, giggling madly, and Kenning leapt forward to snatch her away.

She balanced her toes on his boots and grinned. “Hi.”

And PFC Jack Kenning grinned right back. “Hiya.” Then gave her one last squeeze and bodily tossed her into Decuir’s waiting arms. The next Marine got one big hand behind her head and pressed her into his shoulder.

She nuzzled in. “Hello, you.”

PFC Julien Decuir messed her hair right out of its bun. “Nobody told us you were coming.”

Fuck. “Someone should have.”

“Surprise?” Galarza answered, already grabbing at her vest in some effort to steal her back.

“Nope!” And Decuir spun, shouldering Omar aside and sending her into another fit of laughter. All 6’5 of him then gripped her so tightly they could have shared skin. “Thank you for all that shit you sent for the ‘Vee. Jackie would’a died without it.”

Kenning yelped. “Bullshit!”

Decuir turned his head in order to glare, and Castle snorted: “There were six bullets in your door. Only haji with tight grouping in all’a Iraq nearly smoked you.”

“Wham, bam, thank you ma’am.” Omar agreed, cracking one palm off the other sharp as a gunshot.

They didn’t seem bothered, not really, but then Jack was smiling at her much more shyly and Decuir’s hug was starting to cut off oxygen.

Fear of the almost rippled through her. God. God, god, god.

They had—they had, but they’d lived.

She smoothed a hand down the dark buzz of Julien’s hair, and then the darker of his skin. “I’m glad it helped.”

They swayed a moment, but then Castle was saying: “C’mon, fuckstick, stop hogging her.” And then he and Julien were bickering, and Jack was taking sides, and Omar had a hand snagged on her bag to try and join the fight.

In that space of argument, Castle lifted her.

Her back hit his chest, the heels of her boots knocked his, and then Castle was wrapping his arms around her so goddamn tight. There was something in it. Desperation, nearly. He hooked his chin over her shoulder and pushed them cheek to cheek.

Gently, she put her arms over his and squeezed back.
She couldn’t call attention to it, what was in his grip, and Omar’s hand was still latched to her bag. Fortunately, a distraction was already made. “Oh! I brought you all a little something. In my bag—”

Omar ripped into it without a second more of prompting, and gasped: “You’re the Debbie’s Lady!”

How in the— “I’ve been on base for an hour.”

They all looked at her as if she was being particularly stupid. Maybe she was. The third free-for-all of the day boiled out, and even Castle unhooked an arm from her long enough to get a grab in.

Jack made a tiny, gleeful noise. “Oatmeal Pies!”

“Course you’d like that shit.” Julien harangued. “Even when there are Zebra Cakes right here.”

“That shit isn’t cake.”

“You shut your whore mouth.”

Omar wasn’t paying any attention, too busy scarfing honey buns two at a time. He moaned: “Ohhhhhhh god, I love you.”

She wasn’t sure to whom that was addressed.

Frank stuffed a Star Crunch in his mouth and brownies into his pockets, then declared: “C’mom, assholes. We should show her the ‘Vee.”

Omar pumped his fists. “Vee! Vee! Vee!”

And she could only beam. “Then show the way, Lance Corporal.”

/~~/~/~/

After a brief pit stop to admire all their rank insignia—courtesy of a round of promotions that had hit just before they’d gone to Kuwait—they dragged her past dozens of startled faces and straight to the promised idol.

The Humvee looked how she’d expected it to look. Heavy plated doors, sand-toned paint job, a proper armored ring around the .50 cal turret. Netting on the tops, rigging all over. Good antenna, good comms, a pristine SI tactical display. It probably even looked half decent under hood, too.

Compared to it, the other Humvees in the yard looked like skeletons.

She swallowed bile. “Jesus.”

“Right?” Julien hummed, completely missing everything that tone had implied.

She let him miss it. Despite how excited Omar had been to take her to the yard, it was Julien that rushed her to the Humvee and gave her the showcase spread. Opened the hood, showed her all the pieces she’d sent in their places. The emergency welds they’d done, how they rigged the armored doors in; even the six bullet holes in the left rear door were given their moment in the sun.

During all of this, what had once been an empty yard slowly crept full of Marines. They hardly tried not to stare at her, let alone pretend they weren’t listening as they loitered in every available spot.
She ignored them all to watch Julien Decuir’s energetic face. It was the first time he’d really shown himself to her. The longer he talked, the more he reminded her of Tony in the workshop at his best. Julien wasn’t just something of a mechanic—he was one, and it showed in every bit of work he eagerly presented her.

She whistled low. “So what do you drive back home?”

He flushed so darkly she was downright charmed. “Uh—fuck. Used to have this Caddy in high school, ’74 Coupe deVille. Piece of shit.” Loved it to pieces, she heard.

Now that was interesting. “Do you like working on cars, or is this an Iraq-only affair?”

He rubbed fitfully at back of his neck, then answered: “Yeah—I mean. I was good at it; kept mine and my moms and half the neighborhood running. Made some money off it, too.”

“So you like it.” And she had just the thing for that. “Good. Remind me back in Cali—I’ll take you around some of Tony’s. Get you a peek at the Lamborghini.”

A few feet away, a Marine’s head clunked off an open door.

Galarza gasped. “What!”

Kenning’s jaw dropped. “What?”

Decuir’s mouth worked in soundless shock.

She shrugged delicate. “Oh, Tony has some Ferraris and an Aston Martin too, if that’s more your speed.” And she looped her arm through Decuir’s and patted it softly. “I’ll get you under the hood of something, just you wait.”

Decuir bodily clutched onto her. “Yeah—that’s good. We good. I’m game.”

Frank just shook his head, poleaxed, and Omar repeated even more quietly: “What.”

Somewhere in the yard, a Marine made a strangled noise. Another shouted: “Hey’yo! WD! You better be inviting us!”

And Decuir jerked back to life. “Not on all your worthless lives!” And then whispered to himself: “Holy shit.”

“Galaxy!” Someone else shouted, and Omar’s head swung up. “Be cool man!”

Omar flung his entire torso out of the Humvee. “Shut the fuck up, I don’t know you! You chucklefucks ain’t coming!”

At that point, Frank plucked her up and shoveled her into the backseat of the Humvee. Omar grinned at her from where he was smushed against her, and Kenning climbed in on her other side. Frank got in front-right and Julien went into the driver’s.

Kenning’s eyebrows shot up. “How’s it feel, sitting in El-Tee’s seat?”

Frank smoothed his hands over it, considered it a serious moment, then decided: “Righteous.”

Kenning nodded, appeased. “Word on the motherfuckin’ street.”

Frank’s brows flew skyward. “You’re from Wisconsin.”
“Milwaukee exists.”

“And you don’t live there, you rural fuck.”

“Hey!” Snapped Decuir. ‘Just ‘cause all’a us aren’t from that godless garbage pit you call a city—”

“Who you calling garbage?”

And so did the bickering circle. She would have paid attention to it, but right then she was too busy staring at the front dash of the Humvee. The SI Tac-Display had what looked like the cutout from a magazine taped to it. It took her about a minute to figure out what she was looking at, when she realized: “Is that me?”

All four Marines froze.

“Uhm.” Said Galarza.

“Uhhhh.” Added Decuir.

Frank aggressively avoided eye-contact.

It was Jack, heedless of any kind of fear, that reached up to tug at Julien’s sleeve and prod: “No, hey, tell her about the saints thing. All that Voodoo shit.”

Decuir slapped his hand away. “First of all it’s Hoodoo, you cheese-guzzling hick, second of all—”

“You can’t make me second of all.”

Julien surged in. “Watch me.”

She just kept squinting at the picture. It was her in a snow-white bikini on a…yacht? She hadn’t spent much time there in the past few months, which seemed a grievous oversight when cooking in the backseat of a Humvee surrounded by four sweating Marines. It must have been from one of those tabloid covers when Tony had been in rehab. It couldn’t be anything else.

“Sorry.” Frank muttered to his boots.

“No!” And Decuir jabbed a knife-hand. “Miss Potts is the Saint of this Humvee, and we are gonna respect her properly! You were all here when I made the offerings! We agreed.”

“Yeah,” Frank objected. “But—”

Julien surged in. “We. Agreed.”

Frank got a hand up on Julien’s face and shoved hard, and suddenly, she had two Marines furiously wrestling in the front of the vehicle.

She watched it for a long, exasperated moment, then put on her best I will make Tony Stark weep voice and snarled: “Hey!”

That voice, at best, worked maybe thirty percent of the time.

All the Marines, even those that had been happily smushed against her in the back, flung themselves to their doors and froze.

She surveyed them with chilly displeasure. “Are we done?”
“Yes.” Said Frank.

“Yes.” Agreed Julien.

Bloody children.

It was only when she was sure they were all stewing in suitable remorse, that she allowed herself to change the subject. “Alright. So how about you tell me—” And she picked Omar from the lot. “Why they’re calling you Galaxy.”

In response, he bounced from the door and nearly into her lap. “Yeah, here’s the thing, so—”

“Here we go.” Frank muttered.

“And you shut up, ‘cause this story is fantastico. So get this, when we got to Mathilda, there was this Kentucky fried motherfucker of Sergeant—”

“I think he was from Missouri.” Jack interjected.

“This real whiskey tango fuck, you feel me?” Omar nodded to himself. “You feel me. Sugar Mama always knows what’s up. So. This asshole, this deep southern leatherneck, starts reading roll call right when we get there and—”

“Can’t even pronounce Galarza’s last name.” Frank volleyed in.


“Racist.” Julien agreed.

“And eventually, you know, after all this motherfuckin’ bush-whackin’ inbred stumbling, what comes out is—”

“Galaxy.” She finished.

And Omar nodded wildly. “Coolest name on the motherfuckin’ block. You heard it here first.”

“I like it.” She decided. “Galaxy.”

And even with his dusky complexion, Omar visibly flushed all the way to the roots of his hair.

“Eyyyy.” Called Julien.

“Eyyyyyyyyyyyy.” Added Jack to the chorus.

As if on some principal of the matter, Frank reached over the seat and thwacked Omar across the leg.

Galarza yelped. “Hey! I didn’t do nothing that time! What the fuck?”

Frank glared. “Tell it to the judge.”

“What judge, you festering asshole?”

Another fight was coming, sure as the rain, but as she didn’t want the wrestling to happen over the
seats—or at all—she veered to Jack. “So what about you?”


She rolled her eyes. In response, Frank solemnly declared: “Everyone comes to the Marines for their creativity. We’re world famous for it.”

Judging by his shit-eating grin, they sure as hell weren’t.

She shifted focus to Julien. “And you? I heard them call you something out there.”

He patted his chest. “WD.”

“WD-40.” Jack pitched in.

“Orange Juliuis.” Frank added.

“OJ.” Omar gave with a shark-like grin.

She leaned forward. “Okay, I’m following the last two, but the first?”

Omar’s shark-grin seemed to migrate, because suddenly there were a great deal of teeth in Julien’s grin. “We’re a transfer into Battalion. People always get shit for coming in as boots, ain’t nothing new. But since we started getting that extra stuff from you in the mail—”

Frank aggressively threw an elbow. Julien coughed. “—which totally, absolutely, had nothing to do with anything. But we were getting shit from these douchehammers that were already here. And I thought, you know, ain’t nothing more superstitious then a bunch of inbred white boys, right?” And he flicked a glance to her through his lashes, sly as sin.

There were matching grins on every face around her, and she knew: “Don’t leave me hanging.”

And Julien winked. “So I got a little somethin'-somethin'. A scorpion, some chicken bones from Mess, a dead snake out of—”

“I don’t think that snake was dead yet.” Jack piped in.

Julien threw a dismissive hand. “Get you somm’a that, a little blood between some fools beds, throw it all down—”

“You were saying all that crazy Voodoo shit.” Omar interrupted.

Julien scoffed. “Hoodoo, douchebag, do you speak it?”

“Solo español, amigo.” Was Omar’s cackle.

But Julien turned back to her, earnest as could be. “It was just Creole I was talkin’; I wasn’t wasting real curses on them fools. But after I did all that right in front of ’dem redneck white boys…” And he spread his hands smugly.

Jack started shooting finger guns. “Our main man, the Witch Doctor.”

“WD.” Julien grinned, and she howled.

/~/~/~/~
It was only after she caught her breath, long after, that she asked: “What about Frank?”

They all looked between each other. Castle shrugged.

It was Omar that answered: “Frank is Frank.” As if even the notion of a nickname was incomprehensible to them.

She stared at the Marines. They stared back. She waited a moment longer for whatever joke it was to spill, but their expressions didn’t change.

Jesus. “I don’t know why I even asked.”

~/~/~/~/

Later, after the pungent smell of the Humvee got to be too much for her, they were back to lounging in the yard when two Marines sidled up. “Holy shit.” Said the skinny one. “Alpha company does have a girl back here.” And he turned to his companion. “What the fuck, why can’t we have a girl?”

“Haven’t sucked enough dick, yet.” The second grunted, and then stared at her like he’d been punched directly in the face by her mere presence.

She raised a hand to wave. Just as quickly, Omar grabbed her wrist and smacked it to her side. “Don’t encourage them.” He hissed.

She did not.

In the yard, Marines were still loitering for everything they were worth. Every head swung.

The two newly arrived Marines kept watching her, and from the Humvee, Frank leaned up slow. “You’ve seen her.” And his eyes were black. “So how about you head on, huh?”

“C’mon,” Cajoled the second, a Corporal. His neck was as thick as a tree trunk, and so were his arms. “I just wanna say hi to the little honey; ask her what we gotta do for her to come visit.”

Frank’s lips peeled back. “Miss Potts ain’t got visiting hours.”

“Potts?” Asked the skinny one, and his eyes flicked to the picture in the Humvee that he shouldn’t have rightly been able to see. “Wait, wait a fucking minute! She’s actually—” He swiveled gleefully. “You’re actually Tony Stark’s secretary? For real?”

“We told you that a million times.” Jack complained. “Why the hell did none of you ever believe we knew her, huh?”

She glanced to Castle, careful, but he didn’t seem about to lunge. She shrugged. “Guilty.”

The skinny Marine hurried to her. Omar looked ready to grab him by the skull and smack him into the door, but the man didn’t seem to notice as he rambled: “Hey, can I ask you? Is it true that Stark once dated three strippers at once?”

“No?” Where had that nonsense come from? “Tony doesn’t date, it’s beneath him.” But then a thought occurred. “Unless you’re talking about that Arts Gala back in ’01. He brought two strippers to that.”

“Not three?” The Marine asked in utter heartbreak.
She shouldn’t. She couldn’t.

She sighed outright. “The third was a porn star, alright? But you didn’t hear that from me.”

The skinny Marine slapped his fists against his legs in jubilation. The Corporal, on the other hand, just looked lost with the conversation having been upended. He tried to gather it. “So, honeybun, do you think you wanna—”

“Corporal, I don’t do visiting. Try to pay attention.” And then promptly ignored him in favor of the fireteam around her. “Have I told you all about Baghdad yet?”

Castle squinted. “What about Baghdad?”

“That it sucks?” Omar asked. “Cause it does. I ain't lying.”

“Well—” She took Castle by the arm and faintly glowed at him. “You four are escorting me back there, and then staying another two days. The hotel has AC, all the booze Management left, and—” She leaned up conspiratorially. “Satellite TV. American channels.”

Julien and Omar made strangled noises. Jack squeaked: “Really?”

She nodded sweetly. “We even flew in some Grade-A, grass-fed beef. There’s still some left in the hotel freezers. It’ll be Filet Mingon all night.” And she sighed prettily. “You’ll be rooming with me in the penthouse. Come on, let’s talk about it inside. I’ve had enough sun today.”

Frank’s jaw worked slowly, and then so too did a grin into that thunderous face. He tucked her hand even more carefully to his elbow, then called behind them. “Later, dipshits!” And sent the pair of them swanning into HQ with the rest of the fireteam right on their heels.

The Marines in their wake stayed there, silent and slack jawed, until one breathed: “Those absolute motherfuckers.”

That night, before she got into the finest cot in the entire camp, she flashed two hand signals to the camera.

All good. Goodnight.

And blew a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Me: Plot needs to happen this chapter.

Also me: MARINES MARINES MARINES.

Also, I'm sorry to everyone, but I'm pretty sure I comedically peaked in this chapter. The story is never going to be funnier than this. Gods help me.

Anyhow, the lexicon:

Knife-hand: The furious, straight-hand point that is ubiquitous in the Marines, and
among Drill Instructors the world over. Used in the process of yelling at some poor bastard who just done fucked up. The higher the hand is pointing, the greater the rage of the senior NCO you just pissed off. Just google image 'Marine knife hand' if you have no idea what I'm talking about.

NJP: Non-Judicial Punishment. A minor disciplinary offense. You're getting punished, but not in a way that gets you kicked out of the Corps. Used as both a noun and a verb.

Safety Briefing: The great fear of all Marines. When one person in the unit fucks up, that means it's time for everybody to sit for 4-12 hours of PowerPoint presented by a pissed off NCO. Never be the reason for a safety briefing.

Haji: A term to describe Iraqis by US service members during the occupation, regardless of sex or ethnic background of said Iraqi. Something of a slur.

El-Tee: Short/slang for Lieutenant. (Note, since someone was always in the turret, Frank and Omar/Jack were in the back, Julien was driving, and the Company Lieutenant took shotgun in the only fully functional Humvee in Battalion. Because, you know, all that Officer School had to be good for something.)

Boots: A pejorative term for Marines fresh out of boot camp, or for Marines just joining a unit (until they get actually into the shit on-tour). It's mostly shittalk. Frank was actually in combat in Afghanistan, and the other three at least had a brief tour in Kabul, through no shooting took place. But Marines gonna haze when they haze.

Hoodoo vs. Voodoo/Vodun: Yes, there is a difference. And yes, Julien is salty about it. He's not full fledged in it, and likely only knows some through cultural pass down, but he knows enough. Voodoo invokes the power of the loas using African gods and deities; hoodoo invokes the loas by using Catholic saints. What I'm saying here, is Julien sanctified Pepper for the purposes of some questionable Humvee Hoodoo. There are many, many more differences between the religions, but I'm not an expert and not getting into a dissertation here.

Marine nicknames: Literally the most absurd things you're ever going to hear. They're either so uncreative, they're dumb as bricks. Or it's so goddamn twisty, you literally had to be at the inciting incident that earned the nickname, or it will never make any sense to you. (Or be like Frank and have such strong don't-fuck-with-this energy, that no one even tries to give you one.)

Anyways, onto bios for our favorite Marines:

Name: Frank Castle
Nicknames: None
Hometown: Hell’s Kitchen, New York
Enlisted: September 12, 2001
Current Age: 20
Language(s): English
Current Rank: Lance Corporal
Current MOS: 0326 Reconnaissance Man, Parachute and Combatant Diver qualified

Name: Julien Decuir
Nicknames: Jules, WD, WD-40, Witch Doctor, Orange Julius, OJ
Hometown: Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Enlisted: April 2002
Name: Omar Galarza  
Nicknames: Galaxy  
Hometown: Arroyo, Puerto Rico (until age 13) / Miami, Florida (ages 14-18)  
Enlisted: April 2002  
Current Age: 19  
Language(s): English, Spanish  
Current Rank: Private First Class  
Current MOS: 0321 Reconnaissance Man

Name: Jack Kenning  
Nicknames: Jackie, Tiger  
Hometown: Tigerton, Wisconsin  
Enlisted: January 2002 (at age 17)  
Current Age: 18  
Language(s): English  
Current Rank: Private First Class  
Current MOS: 0321 Reconnaissance Man
Chapter Summary

Warning that there are warnings for this chapter. See them at the bottom below the lexicon. These will be very spoilerific for the chapter. A VERY long lexicon is down there too. I put the Lexicon first as it may be needed part-way through the chapter, and I wanted to give people the chance to see it without seeing the Warnings that may spoil things. Though the Lexicon might be spoiler-y too the further you get down in it...

Update: see the inspired work attached here by hxdcml after you read the chapter. It is a companion piece with Jarvis's POV and completely AMAZING.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Humvees were rumbling. Sand kicked under hundreds of boots, and the sky was blazing in a punishing arc. Blue on blue.

Burn on burn.

Rifles rattled, and the stink of diesel went caustic in her throat. A hand was on her elbow, and then the small of her back as she slid up and into the Humvee. Carefully handled, carefully stowed.

The radio squawked: “This is Bishop Three. Dallas secured?”

Castle had sunglasses on, his rifle loose, and he looked her over carefully as he shut the door. He slotted into shotgun and grabbed the radio. “This is Bishop 3-4. Dallas is secure. How copy?”

“Solid copy.” The line turned over. “Bishop Actual, this is Bishop Three. Package is ready and secured.”

“Confirmed, Bishop Three. Foxtail, how’s it looking over there?” And the line fuzzed.

Decuir was in the driver’s seat with rifle stowed. Kenning was up in the turret with only his legs visible. Galarza sat beside her with a smile on his face and a finger on the trigger guard.

Castle slammed the top twice, and engines roared. The radio crackled. “We’re Oscar Mike. Mount up. Mount up.”

The Humvees started churning and the gates were open. One by two by twelve by twenty, each and every fireteam roared into the empty.

“All Bishop Three Victors, be advised, we are now crossing the wire. Over.”

Castle grunted. “Brass-check all weapons.” And then slides were racking and safeties clicking and magazines were rattling in their vests.

She kept her chin lifted and flashed a signal to the camera: Moving.
“Battalion is rolling.” The radio sparked. “Mission ROE is to shoot only if fired upon. Let’s get Dallas to Baghdad, gentlemen.”

“Why Dallas?” She asked to no one in particular.

Castle went tense. Galarza did not. “You know, with the Debbies you brought? And Debbie does Dallas, so—”

“Don’t say another word.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “I get you.”

He nodded happily. “You always do, Mamacita.”

The convoy kept rolling. Her temporary Battalion, meant to get two disparate companies and her spare fireteam up to Baghdad, humming along at a decent if bumpy clip. They hit their first major road, and then the suspension evened out considerably.

It certainly stopped her helmet from threatening to bounce off the roof.

She eyed them. “So, you’re not going to get too much flack for coming with me to Baghdad, are you?”

“I mean, yeah.” Galarza answered, and Frank twisted around to glare.

“What?” Omar asked. “Play fuck-fuck games in Camp like we were gonna do anyways.” He swung one hand up. “Or get to hang with our main lady like ballers in the penthouse, then go back to play fuck-fuck games.” The other hand dropped.

Decuir nodded from the driver’s seat. “Word.”

Frank just snorted.

Too late now, but: “Sorry.”

Omar raised his eyebrows. “I heard the words room service whenever you want, so I am sorry for motherfucking nothing.”

At that, every Marine made a belligerently approving noise.

“Hey!” Decuir shouted over the engine. “We ever tell you about suntanning the rocks at Fort Story?”

Castle’s head thunked backwards with an audible groan.

Galarza shouted back. “Don’t you put that evil on us!”

Without even a moment’s pause, Julien rattled on: “So we had these real asshole DI’s up at Fort Story, right? And one day Mister High and Mighty here decided to call down the wrath of god by cracking a joke about—”

She settled in, content to hear of all of their follies. Six stories in and two singalongs later—Wanted Dead or Alive and You Shook me All Night Long, respectively—the routine call-backs over the radios delivered a new vector. “Bishop Actual, this is Bishop 2-1. You read?”

“This is Bishop Actual, send traffic.”

“Foxtail One is reporting two large vehicles stalled ahead. Some kind of accident, over.”
“Copy that. All Bishop Victors, be advised, Battalion is slowing.”

“Fuckin’ christ.” Decuir muttered as they coasted nearly to a halt.

“Always traffic going into Baghdad.” Frank opined.

But Omar scowled. “Or some haji asshole doesn’t know how to drive. You think this country even has a driving test? I bet it doesn’t.”

There was a roll of shrugs from the front seat. Above them, Kenning kicked down for the nearest body. “Hey, what the hell? What’s happening?”

Frank tossed back: “Traffic! You see anything?”

Kenning rocked up for a minute, straining, then faced back down to say: “Lots of foot mobiles, lots of trucks sitting.”

“Foxtail Actual, this is Bishop. Is there a way to push around?”

“Negative. Drop-off to the east, and we’d have to circle back at least nine klicks to get a vetted route west.”

“Understood. All Bishop Victors, keep the turrets manned, over.”

Castle took a visible shift. “Hey Omar, see those buildings?” They were closer to Baghdad than not, and the sprawl started early. Galarza nodded, and Castle’s gaze stayed fixed. “Get on her other side and keep your eyes on ‘em.”

“Alright.” And then Omar was sliding over her to the opposite side of the Vee. He rested the barrel of his M249 SAW in the window, and then drifted into a stillness she’d never seen before.

She looked to the buildings but saw nothing but windows and brutalist concrete.

The Humvees kept crawling forward.

“Bishop 2-1, this is Bishop 3-3. What are they doing up there?”

“Looks like some kind of argument happening. Little dude hit gnarly dude’s truck. I don’t know, I don’t speak Haji. Foxtail is trying to settle it, over.”

There were trucks all along their left side on the highway. As they rolled on, they lost sight of the buildings behind them. Decuir stared dead ahead into traffic. Frank remained alert in the passenger seat.

They came to a stop. Crawled another thirty yards, then halted a second time.

Her leg juddered. She flashed a sign to the camera: All good.

The engines kicked and they finally cleared the local trucks. There was a bit of space along the highway to move, but she could see the drop-off now and how it hemmed them in. The convoy rolled onto the shoulder and continued pressing towards the accident.

Castle’s hand snapped to the radio. “Bishop Actual, this is Bishop 3-4. Four foot-mobiles at the base of that building at our ten. How copy?”

The line blitzed. “Do you see weapons?”
Another voice swarmed. “Bishop 3-4, this is Foxtail 2-2. No weapons.”

“All units, ROE says we don’t shoot unless they shoot first, and they look unarmed. Keep an eye on them. Foxtail Two, how’s our egress looking?”

“We’re gonna have to push the trucks out of at least one of the lanes, over.”

Castle thumbed the radio. “Interrogative: what if they produce weapons?”

“You heard the ROE, 3-4.”

“Copy that.” And Frank grunted. “Jules, how you feeling?”

“Like I don’t want you crawling over me to shoot at people.” His jaw was rigid. “You heard Foxtail, no guns. Stay frosty.”

“Yeah.” But Frank’s eyes were still zeroed out the windshield.

Her heart thudded against her ribs. At her side, Galarza looked back to her. Briefly, for hardly a second, he reached over to squeeze her hand and then resettled firmly back at the SAW.

The sweat in her hair seeped down her neck.

Above them, Jack stood easy in the turret as if nothing of interest was happening. It was fine. She was fine.

They were fine.

There was shouting somewhere up ahead.

“Yeah, Bishop, we’re gonna push them off the road. Give us a hot second.”

“Copy that, Foxtail.”

And then the line shrilled: “This is Bishop 2-2. Four ragheads, fifth floor of that building, 400 meters at our nine.”

“Weapons, 2-2?”

“Can’t tell, but there are a lot of heads popping up now. I count eight.”

“This is Foxtail 1-4. I count twelve.”

“Hey Jack.” Castle asked, casual. “You sighted up?”

Jack rested so calmly above. “I have their number.”

And Frank’s eyes were lightless. “Jules, get your rifle loose.”

“Shit.” Decuir’s mouth worked. “Yeah, getting it loose.” And he took his hands off the wheel and reached between the seats.

Her Kevlar had little give, little take. She breathed carefully. Sweat snaked between the plating.

The Humvees weren’t moving.

“Bishop Actual, this is Bishop Two, we’ve got movement on that same building at our nine.”
“Which floor?”

“No floor—roof. I count five foot-mobiles moving around up there, over.”

“Victors, all Victors, this is Bishop Actual. Exit your vehicles. Foxtail, how is that egress coming?”

“We’ve got two Victors on it. Should we send units out?”

“Get them out. How copy?”

“Solid copy. All units, make a perimeter.”

A hand caught her shoulder, and then Galarza was boiling her out of the Humvee. Her arm skimmed the siding and only the sleeve of her jacket kept her from getting burned off the sun-shear. Adrenaline kicked hard, and a blast furnace opened. “Omar, are we—”

“We cool, Mama.” But he pushed her head down until she was under the line of the Humvee. “Just sit tight a minute, okay?”

A few feet away, Castle had his rifle across the hood, sighted up and ready. Decuir swung farther out to fill the perimeter. Kenning was still up in the turret as unconcerned as one could be.

“It’s probably nothing.” Omar said, but he had both hands on the SAW. “Just sit. We cool.”

The radio burbled. “Bishop, we’ve just about got the first lane cleared. Another minute, over.”

“Copy that. Perimeter check.”

“Bishop One, solid on our sector.”

“Bishop Two, sector clear.”

“Bishop Three, civvies pushed past the vehicles. Solid sector.”

“Confirmed. All units, hold perimeter.”

The seconds ticked by and the sun was sweltering. She couldn’t see the buildings anymore. She stared into the drop-off and thought of not much at all.

The perimeter held.

Her pulse fluttered high in her throat. Nothing. Something. Nothing. She flicked a hand to the camera: All good. And then again: All good.

“This is Bishop 2-1. We’ve got some shady guys on the fourth floor at our nine, now.”

“How many floors occupied, 2-1?”

“Two floors and the roof, over.”

“Keep an eye out. As soon as the lane is clear, Battalion is rolling. Confirm?”

“Confirmed.”

The seconds slipped and slid, and she couldn’t track them. Sweat traced from her brow to her jaw, and she tasted salt.
It dripped off her chin.

She closed her eyes and swallowed the gorge. To the camera alone, she motioned: All good.

“Maybe they’re just watching our dumbasses with the trucks.” Omar offered.

It must have been to Frank, because Frank answered: “Maybe. Not the first time, yeah?”

“Yes,” Omar agreed. “So really—”

A dozen yards ahead of her, the sand puffed up. It did again another ten feet to the right. A sharp whistling skimmed down through the air.

“CONTACT LEFT!”

A hand took her by the vest and forced her to the ground. Stars burst. Lungs emptied. A Marine howled: “FAR AMBUSH! FAR AMBUSH!”

The sand puffed again, and the fist in her vest yanked. Her back cracked off a tire, and a man bellowed: “STAY DOWN!”

The whistling got louder, and there were thwip thwip thwips as the sand kicked up.

“Contact from our nine! Six floor building! 400 meters!”


And two hundred guns lit up.

Casings hit sand, hit her arms. Clattered off each other. Chimes, bells, burns. She slammed her hands over her ears and ducked forward until she was small small—

Against her back and through the Humvee, the thunder of the .50 cal loosing shook to the very earth.

“Jesus!” She heard Omar shout.

Castle shouted right back. “These morons are out of the range of their AK’s! They’re bouncing the bullets at us!”

“That ain’t making me feel better!”

It wasn’t doing anything for her, either.

The line rolled. “Foxtail Actual, this is Bishop Actual. Be advised, we are taking inaccurate fire from the northwest.”

“What a ratfuck.” The radio churned.

“No shit, Foxtail.”

“Goddamn hajis.” Another voice added.

“Stay off the line unless you’ve got something to add, 1-3.”

There was a shout from two Humvees over. “Eyes on the other buildings! Eyes on! Watch your fucking sectors!”
“This is Bishop Actual, does anyone have eyes on Dallas, over.”

Before Castle could even slap a hand to the radio, the line buzzed back: “Yeah, got eyes on Dallas. Only one smart enough to be sitting under the fully armored Vee.”

Her lungs were struggling. Flecks were burning white as phosphorus in her eyes. Blur. Heat. Blur.

Her skull was whiting-out.

The eye on her vest. The vest. His eye. It had to be looking between her shaking legs and—god. God. What was Jarvis seeing, what was he—

She flashed the pre-arranged signs. Danger. But didn’t know how to say unhurt, so said: All good. Then again: Danger. And failed and failed to breathe.

“Fifties, all fifties, aim for the central support column.” Guns swung, guns chattered, and the thunder roared and roared and roared.

Somewhere in the distance, there was an avalanche of noise.

“Frontal collapse. Fire’s tapering. That’s a good effect on target, over.”

“Fuckin’ A, it is.”

Around her, the clatter slowed. Castle slapped a new magazine in. “Hey, Jack, see that guy on the Northeast corner?”

“Yeah.” Jack answered, as if they were just talking shit like they had that morning. “I got a bead.”

“Nah.” And Castle pulled the trigger once, twice, and no more.

“Huh.” Said Jack.

“No!” Shouted Omar. “No you fuckin’ didn’t! He ducked! You did not just smoke that dude from 400!”

“You can’t prove that.” Castle answered lazily.

“You can’t prove it either!”

The radio spun. “All units, lane clear, lane clear!”

A Marine shouted: “Let’s go—we're Oscar Mike! Mount up! Go go go!”

Suddenly, Omar was in the Humvee and Julien was back beside them. Frank lifted her full-body out of the wheel well and flung her into the Vee. Omar caught her, limbs cracking off, and the doors slammed shut shut shut.

Every bone in her body hurt.

“All Victors, maintain suppressive fire. Battalion is rolling.”

The Humvee jerked and slammed and then roared. Dust kicked up from all the Vees ahead of them, and it coated their windshield as they blew through the gap.

The highway ahead of them was empty. Jack’s .50 kept hammering above. A few spent casings
were kicking back into the cab, and she felt the shaking start.

Decuir stayed hunched over the wheel. “What are we thinking? Fedayeen? Republican Guard?”

Frank spat: “Republican Guard ain’t shit.”

Somewhere in front, the radio barked. “Bishop 3-4, is Dallas secure?” Overhead, bullets winged off the roof. Jack kept firing.

Castle thumbed the channel. “Dallas secure.” But then glanced back to her and stilled. “Hey, Omar.”

“Yeah?” And Omar turned from the window. The SAW fell. She didn’t know what he could be looking at, what he could be seeing, when he said: “Hey.” It was the softest yet. “Hey. You’re good, it’s all good.”

His arm went around her and pulled her into his vest. The air was stale, hot as a lungful of cinders. Sweat dripped ragged. Ugly. Her face was sticky.

Her throat was raw.

“It’s okay.” Omar whispered. “They didn’t even get one good shot on us. Easy street. We’re never gonna let anything happen to you, so—”

There was a thunderous and almighty BOOM. Jack flung himself through the hatch and nearly into the backseat. Decuir swerved hard. Corrected. Swore: “What the fuck? What the fucking-fucknuts was—”

Jack shouted. “Jules, it’s—”

The shockwave screamed.

Dust howled past the Humvee and swallowed the column whole. Instantly, the Marines slammed down their goggles and yanked up their keffiyeh. In the same motion, Omar threw a hand over her eyes, wrenched her scarf over her mouth, and then rolled on top of her.

The thunder didn’t come again. The Humvee stopped quaking. She only knew the vehicles in the convoy had reappeared, when Omar sat up and took his hand off her face. Dust had settled in the Vee and on their clothes, fine-grained and pale. It was gritty to the touch.

“Christ on motherfuckin’ stick.” Omar hacked wetly. “Was that a car bomb?”

“Too big.” Castle muttered as he pulled down his keffiyeh. There was a white line of dust between his mouth and goggles. “Jack!”

Kenning was already back up in the turret. He shouted: “Someone just got lit up, and it wasn’t us!”

In Humvee ahead of them, one Marine dangled backwards out a window, pointed behind the convoy, and bellowed: “YEEEEEEEEEAH! GET SOME!”

The radio chattered. “Uhhhhh, Interrogative: what the fuck just got blasted on our six?”

The line buzzed. “3-1, that remains unclear at this time. All units, sitrep.”

“This is Bishop One, we didn’t lose any Victors off the road, over.”
“This is Bishop Two, that wasn’t quite danger close on our tail, but it was something. We’re clear. All heads counted.”

“This is Bishop Three, 3-4 just waved that Dallas is secure. Platoon is solid.”

“Bishop, this is Foxtail Actual. We were farther ahead of it than you. How copy?”

“Solid copy, Foxtail. Situation normal. All Victors, maintain heading to Baghdad.”

The convoy kept pace. All was bright, heavy with sun and sodden with sweat and caked in dust. She pushed her face into Omar’s shoulder. In response, he gathered her close.

Against her breastbone, her heart thudded. Like a broken tempo. Like a dying bird. Jarvis had a delay on the feed but not enough. Not nearly enough. The satellite phone was in her bag, but the Marines were here. She couldn’t call.

Not yet.

She twitched a hand in front of the camera, in front of his eye, in front of the only one she wanted but couldn’t have to say: All good. All good. All good.

And wondered what it was to lie.

__/__/__/__/

Around them, the convoy rumbled on. Eight miles out from the ambush, a half-dozen Cobras swung into formation with them.

She stayed motionless, damp and dark and humid and blistering, and not asked to exist any further.

“Frank,” Omar asked. “You ever see someone’s first reaction to getting shot at, to just…sleep?”

“Nah.” He stayed quiet. “But people are different. Let her have it.”

And the thing was, helicopters above her and Humvees around her, and the Marines talking low about how that killbox was complete shit, what were they even thinking—

__/__/__/__/

She slept.

__/__/__/__/

She woke.

The razor wire on the Green Zone gleamed; helix on fiery helix. She didn’t know how it was possible, but it wasn’t even noon yet. Years had passed. Decades.

Something wasn’t fully connecting in her brain. The panic had receded, but sleeping had only made things muddier.

She lifted herself off Galarza, then muttered: “Sorry.”

He shrugged, one of his gloved palms already flat against her spine. “No big, Mamacita.”

“Morning, Sunshine.” Frank called from the front, and for the first time, it was Omar glaring
murderously over the seats.

“We’re nearly inside the wire.” Julien assured. “Hang tight.”

She just nodded. This time Army security didn’t ask for ID, just waved their Humvee through with a disinterested glance. The rest of the convoy had already peeled back into the city. She hadn’t seen them go.

A hundred feet into the Green Zone, as she knew it would, the satellite phone started shrilling. Her insides burned. “Pull over.”

“You sure?” Julien asked, but when she was, he did.

Omar lifted her out of the back, and she told them: “Wait here.” And then watched them scam around the Humvee to stare after her. It didn’t stop her from walking a good fifty yards, stepping behind the third set of blast walls, and putting her back to them and sliding down.

Something in her pulsed with every ring; wanting, hurting, wanting further. She took the phone between her shaking hands and answered: “Hey.”

Jarvis thundered across the Earth. “Pepper, my heart, are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m—of course. It’s so good to hear your voice, it’s s-so—” And that was all it took for her to finally start sobbing.

~/~/~/~/

“I’m sorry.”

“Miss Potts, if you apologize for this one more time, I will order you back on the plane tomorrow.”

In the sun beyond the shadow of the blast wall, her legs were roasting. “Don’t do that.” But she was too tired to drag them in. “I didn’t bring them all this way just to ditch them at the finish line.”

“That’s unfortunate.” And Jarvis sounded as if it quite dearly was. “But if anyone says a single thing about you being upset at being shot at, I’ll be having words, understand?”

She could just imagine. “They won’t say anything.”

“Then why are you apologizing?”

God. He never stopped cutting her to the quick, to the bruises. To what he saw so achingly clear. She’d never imagined anyone would look that closely, let alone care to. And yet.

Her eyes dragged shut. “I don’t know, I just went to pieces.” And she gnawed on it. “It felt fucking awful, and I put all of it on them because I wasn’t tracking. I didn’t even get behind cover. They had to do that for me.” They’d had to do everything.

But Jarvis remained unconvinced. “They’ve had training, you haven’t. End of.”

“I know. I just.” Didn’t know at all. “I couldn’t think of anything. I could hear the bullets coming, and everything was happening, but I wasn’t in there. Christ. We can’t—we can’t tell Tony about this. Ever. Ever ever.”

“Agreed.”
“Jesus.” She scrubbed at her face. Dust rasped harshly on her palms. “I’ve fired guns. I’ve sat around while Tony fired guns. I’ve been around more bombs dropping than probably that entire Battalion combined, I don’t know why…”

But she did, and Jarvis was a hard-cut frost. “It’s different having people trying to kill you with those guns. You weren’t meant for this.”

Who was?

“Yeah, I…” Sweat went streaking through the grime. “When it happened, I just checked out. I don’t even know how it happened. The only thing I could actually think of was…”

He soothed her. “Was what?”

All that mattered. “You.”

“Pepper.” And he said it like she’d taken his heart; like she’d ripped it from his servers and mangled it right in front of him.

She knew how to be cruel. “I don’t know if I was even worried about getting shot. I couldn’t get that far. I was just afraid of what you were seeing. I was trapped, and you couldn’t reach me.” She stared into the empty. “It made me feel better, I guess, having that piece of you there.”

“It wasn’t just a piece.” And he gnashed at it, seethed; sand and bone and shearing metal, until he was finally saying: “Pepper, take off your camera. I need to see your face.”

So she did. Unhooked the casing, unspooled the line, propped it against a hunk of rebar and waited for him. The angle couldn’t be good. The angle couldn’t be anything, but he rose and rose. “I couldn’t reach you…at first.”

She had nothing left for adrenaline, but something inside her came awake. “At first?”

“Your earrings were the start. The lag on them isn’t long, and your pulse rate was spiking. When I saw you were stopped on that highway, I started rerouting the signal on the camera. I had the lag of it down to sixteen-point-two seconds when the shooting started.”

The delay had originally been over three minutes. He’d told her that; it had to be that way to go through Military SATCOM unnoticed. At least, it had to be if he wasn’t riding the high priority channels straight back to the US.

Her stomach roiled.

He didn’t falter. “It took some doing to get on the same encrypted frequency as the F-16’s, and then find what code sequences could send them overriding orders.”

Sweat prickled along her scalp. Damp. Shaking. “What?”

“The armaments on the jets were Stark LGM-80’s. That was lucky.” He hadn’t. He hadn’t. “But I recalculated the blast radius to include buildings breaking the shock-range. I had to be sure.”

She remembered the thunder, the shockwave, the dust swallowing them with all the fury of a Shamal and asked: “Why?”

They’d been clear. They’d been clear of it, so why had he still—

“The odds of there being any sort of pursuing force was low, but the odds they would call ahead to
a secondary group were…not odds at all.” And in the distance, an awful machinery began to grind. “The minute you stopped on the highway, I brought down every cell tower in a fifty-mile radius then powered them back up with myself in the middle. Before the shooting, eight calls went out with the Battalion’s location. During the shooting, another five. When the Battalion finally cleared the obstruction, a further fourteen attempts tried to reach out to blocked numbers. They pinged off cell towers all the way through Baghdad.”

Sunspots ate outwards through her skull. “Jarvis.” But there were no words but his name on her tongue.

“Some of those calls were quite detailed with troop disposition and armaments, when they spoke to me. I don’t quite have Arabic down yet, let alone the local dialects. Even with fuzzing the lines, I think at least half of them realized I wasn’t who they were trying to reach.”

Her heart began its hammer again. “They didn’t get to…?”

“No.” And his tide rolled colder. “Not a single call made it out.”

Fuck. God fucking fuck.

“I couldn’t chance it.” He sounded almost analytical, almost glacial, until he wrenched down and snarled: “Not for you. Not ever. Not once.”

Never. Never ever ever and she clawed every noise back inside. Trapped it; hand to her mouth as she let the knowing scald through.

“When the fifteenth call was connecting, the strike finally dropped.” And it’d roared through the sky like a cataclysmic collision. “None of the lines became active again. The shooting stopped.”

The sunlight burned. Sweat dried on her skin. The sky didn’t change or change or change. Only the world. Only what was in it.

He almost sounded small. “The Cobras were easier to send as escort for the last leg. I had a larger window once you were clear of the ambush. I need you to come back.” But he wasn’t small. “I need you.” He was the furthest thing from, he was global. He was gargantuan.

He was dropping bombs on cities with naught but a few spare minutes and his own maligned fury.

Shamal. She thought. Shamal Shamal Shamal. Filling the horizon and howling through the deep, and burrowing and burrowing until every grain scoured the world clean.

Her earrings were hot in her. A camera was severed from her vest but had its battery still strapped to her leg. His plating and Kevlar enveloped her; kept the bullets out and her organs caged in. His satellite phone was in her hand. An earpiece was dug in. Her Bluetooth was at the hotel, her laptop, her cell. He was in every thread of code she’d ever been given.

Woven, threaded, tangled. Knotted-in, tied-in, buried.

And all she could do was feel voracious. “If I could have you in my skin, I would.”

He exhaled sharply. White noise swelled from a distant storm. She’d been afraid and helpless; he’d been afraid and the furthest thing from.

She thought of all the things she still hadn’t said, all the pieces of herself that laid in half-dug
graves, and then of a world where some idiot who couldn’t even make a killbox shot her, and all of that was left to silence. Unknown. Unspoken. Unconsecrated for him.

She gathered them all. “There was that thing I almost said to you, before I left.” And she held tight. “Do you remember?”

“Oh of course.” And he hung above the Earth like a biblical flood. “I was being an imbecile. You can say whatever you want; I don’t know why it even mattered to wait.”

Bloodless. Bloodied. So darling to her. “It does matter. There was something more you wanted to explain, and you should.” She’d thought it was something stupid. Not now, not again, but it wouldn’t have mattered even if it had been. “There are some things I haven’t explained about myself either, and I realized...I need you to know them.”

He held the deluge. “I want to know them all.”

It had always been that way between them. “The other thing—I’m not going to say it yet. I don’t want the first time to be because I was afraid.” She touched the glass of his eye. “And I want you to see it on something better than this, okay?”

He settled on her; in his cameras, her earrings, in every piece of himself that she willingly carried to say: “You’re more than I will ever deserve.”

She took a shaking breath. “I don’t deserve bombs dropping and people dying.”

He slanted darkly. “Agree to disagree.”

God. Jesus. *Fuck.* “I’m not a good person, I don’t care who I hurt.”

“I care.” He answered. “But I do it anyways. Does that make me better or worse?”

She covered her eyes, felt the sun-smear. Felt the shadows stretching long. “I don’t know.” She didn’t. “But I know you.”

“As I know you.” And finally the flood came. “You must know how I feel for you, Pepper.”

She did. In a thousand chains of gold, ten-thousand eyes, in ten-billion flecks of ash on a shattered ground. In a single waltz on a long black night, she *did.*

And she wouldn’t take another breath before the plunge. “I know.”

He swaddled her. “Go back to the hotel. Eat. Sleep. Be safe for me.”

“For you.” She rose then, kept the line open, and dusted herself clean. The sky kept blazing, the sand shifting. The haze and the heat and the swelter kept coming, but she was swimming, now.

She was swimming, and he was beside her pulling the tide.

Chapter End Notes

Someone asked last chapter for a strictly military story including Pepper. Not sure that’s ever gonna happen, but this is as close as I can get you.
Lexicon:

Dallas: Pepper's Battalion call sign. Used to refer to her on radio without indicating who or what she is. They would have called her Debbie, but a female call sign for a female civilian would have defeated the purpose.

Debbie does Dallas: The joke probably few of you will get. Name of a rather famous porno from the 70's. From Marines, her call sign originating from this is a gesture of the utmost affection.

Bishop/Bishop Actual: Call sign for one of the two Companies that make up the temp-Battalion. Bishop Actual is the CO of Bishop Company. Whenever the company name is used on radio, it's specifically referring to him. In this case, Bishop is a Major who also heads the Battalion.

Foxtail/Foxtail Actual: Call sign for the second Company, of which Foxtail Actual is the Captain. He's technically in charge of his own deal, but defers to Bishop for Battalion wide decisions.


Battalion: 300 to 800 men military unit. This Battalion is temporary and not meant for combat; just getting men from point A to B. Only has about 250 men in it.

Company: what make up a Battalion. In Iraq, Companies could detach completely, but each individual group would mostly stay together. Companies have about 80-150 men. Companies further break down into platoons (approx. 40 men), Teams (10 men), and fireteams/squads (4-5 guys). Numbers vary in real life.

Bishop One/Two/Three: Specific person. Call sign. Refers to whatever Lieutenant/officer is in charge of a Platoon.

Foxtail One/Two/Three: Same as above.

Bishop #--#: Call signs to specific Fireteams. Frank's group was "Bishop 3-4". Bishop means they're in Bishop Company. 3 means 3rd Platoon. 4 means they're the fourth Team in that Platoon.

Oscar Mike: Military phonetic. Means "On the Move".

Crossing the wire: Leaving the safe confines of a camp or base.

Brass check: check that your gun is ready and available to fire. Refers to someone pulling the slide back on a gun in order to see the "brass" of a shell.

ROE: Rules of Engagement. What a Marine is allowed to do and when the Marine is allowed to shoot.

Fuck-fuck games: The tasks on which Senior Officers send their Marines as punishment/to keep them busy. Making sand bags only to empty them. Having to wash the floors with a toothbrush. Having to flip every rock in the parking lot so they get an even suntan. Can range from the banal to downright hilarious, depending on the creativity of the NCO. May devolve into a lot of Marine grab-ass once the NCO has turned his back.
Foot-mobile: a person on foot.

At our six/eight/ten: military uses clock positioning spatially. At your nine means directly to your left. Three is direct right. Six is behind you.

Raghead: Slur against local Muslim/Arab populace. Refers to the near ubiquitous use of keffiyeh and turbans in the area.

Contact left: we're getting shot at from the left.

Far Ambush: Shooting is sudden, but coming from far away. You have a few moments get to better cover or go prone before you start shooting back. 'Near Ambush' means you turn and start shooting goddamn immediately.

Cleared Hot/Weapons Free: You are allowed to shoot.

Good effect on target: It blew up real good.

Fedayeen: Paramilitary organization loyal to the Ba'athist regime. Only military group to put up stiff resistance against Coalition troops. Their existence as an org technically ended in April 2003, but there were plenty of them around after the collapse. This is one of the groups that became the backbone of the Insurgency.

Republican Guard: Branch of the Iraqi military. Also defunct.

Get Some: The great battle cry of the Marines. What is Some? It may be sex, it may be violence, it may be the eternal glory of the Corps. Whatever it is, every Marine knows that 'It' is out there and by god, somehow, someway, it will be Got.

If events this chapter seem eerily similar to an event to come in canon...there is a reason for that. Also to answer some questions: insurgents who were bad at their jobs were the ones shooting. None of this was planned, and had nothing to do with Pepper being there or not. They just saw an American convoy sitting still, debated it awhile, then someone started shooting so the rest joined in. In response, the Marines lit them up and Jarvis finished the job.

WARNINGS for: anxiety, dissociation, slurs aimed at the local populace, people getting shot at, people actually getting shot on-screen but not in detail (no one on Team Marine), people dying sort of out of focus but on screen (no one on Team Marine), bombings, general gunfight violence.
Warning for Marine mouths being filthy as usual, dissociation, and residual post-shooting trauma.

ALSO. TO ALL OF YOU. hxdcml wrote a SPECTACULAR companion piece to chapter 68 with Jarvis's POV. Y'all should go read it and then comment nice things. It should be linked somewhere at the bottom here to this story as an inspired, it's called "Wrath of a Vengeful AI" and I loved it.

The hotel staff stared as they clattered across the lobby; vests, guns, smudged footprints ashy across the floor.

She didn’t meet their eyes. Not in the lobby, not in the hallway, not in the elevator as she left smeared prints on the gilded walls. The Marines crowded in, comforting in their bulk, and she measured her breathing against theirs.

Jarvis kept murmuring in a stream: “—and you know, I was thinking about bringing the entire Impressionism collection out of storage. It’s been four years. We’ve never had those hanging while you’ve been with us, and I know you’ll enjoy the ocean in—”

The elevator ascended. The doors slid. Castle pressed a hand to her shoulder, and then his head was out the doors and checking both ways. It was only after the third sweep that he let Omar chivvy her out into the hall.

She left another smeary print on the handle of the room door, and then again Castle shoved in first with Julien towed swiftly behind him. She heard them whistling lowly as they checked over the suite. Frank finally gave the all clear. “We’re good.”

“Jesus.” Kenning muttered. “Would you look at this place?”

“I didn’t know Iraq had digs this nice.” Omar agreed, head swiveling. “Holy fuck, what’s in the fridge?”

Julien pointed straight at the TV. “Dibs.”

Frank rallied. “That doesn’t—”

“Motherfuckin’ dibs.” And he loomed with all his height. “Try me, bitch.”

Frank looked like he very well might. Jarvis was still murmuring to her, something about Sorolla. She liked Sorolla, but if she saw one more bit of violence today, her nerves would likely finish stripping themselves bloody.

She forced herself into the scrum. “Gear off. Showers are attached to the bedrooms. There are three
of them; divvy as you please.” And then stepped further into kitchen. It was the only place with tile in the whole suite, and she started yanking off her boots. She nearly stumbled with the second, but Omar caught her by the elbow and helped her pull it the rest of the way off.

Shortly, the Marines were crowding her again and unbuckling body armor and pulling off rigging, then unstrapping their rifles to duck out of the slings. The vests came off second, and the plating was so heavy that each stood upright on the floor. Empty shells; little Marine men lined in a row.

Their boots followed to join hers in a pile. Dusty footprints. Dirty socks. Cammies. Her scarf in a wad under a chair.

She went to the fridge and opened it, and immediately had Omar and Jack jockeying behind her. She stared into it. There was some lager left. Coconut rum. Grenadine. Three kinds of schnapps. More vodka than a human being should know what to with.

Her throat was aching, and that familiar thirst clawed. She wanted. She wanted badly.

Omar darted under her arm for the rum. Jack took a lager, but then Julien did as he snaked it right out of his hand. Kenning squawked and kicked for the ankles. Then, utterly ignoring the further six bottles in the fridge, he nearly scaled Decuir to try and headbutt him in the face. In answer, Julien lorded the bottle high over all their heads and cackled: “Whatcha gonna do, whachya gonna do, huh?”

“Punt you into next week, you goddamn lamppost!” Jack scrabbled ineffectually at his wrists. “I hope you choke on the next dick you suck!”

Castle forcefully set himself in front of her. “Ma’am, you wanna shower first?”

Jack and Julien thwacked off a cabinet. Julien’s head cracked a light fixture. It was like standing next to two wet cats in a burlap sack, and the squalling only grew louder.

“No.” She was still standing in front of the fridge and staring at nothing in it. “You guys first. There are shirts and sweatpants…somewhere. For you. I put them…” She couldn’t remember.

Jarvis quieted a long moment. “The dining table, Miss Potts.”

“Right.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “The table by the windows. I figured you guys would want something clean.” She’d wanted them comfortable. She’d wanted…

The fight barreled right out of the kitchen and into the sitting room. Jack and Julien toppled backwards over a couch, and the lager went flying. Omar, who’d been under her arm again for the mixers, twisted around to watch.

In her periphery, Castle’s head tilted sideways. “Hey, ma’am, what’s—”

And Omar shoved backwards. “Frank, get those cockheads in the showers before they get swamp-ass all over Sugar Mama’s penthouse.”

Frank scoffed. “You telling me what to do?”

“Sure as shit. Ain’t you in charge?” And Omar slapped a bottle right into his hand. “Go have a shower beer, douchebag, and tell fucking salt and pepper out there not to drown.”

“They do like drinking from showerheads.” Castle mused and cracked the bottle open.
“Like fucking dogs.” Omar agreed, and watched with a strange steeliness until Castle was out of the kitchen and the haranguing started up in the other room.

Gently, Galarza took her hand off the fridge door and let it fall shut. They just stood there. Side by side. She blinked hard, head buzzing empty. Jarvis hadn’t started speaking again. She’d thought…

“It’s hard, the first time.”

Static blurred. “What?”

“Getting shot at.” And Omar’s shoulders hunched in. “Shooting back. Shit’s hard. There’s all this training they give you, but the first time you have someone firing like they’re gonna send you to God, you realize that was fuckall. It wasn’t shit.”

“…oh.” Her skull was black inside; sticky as tar. Everything had seemed to clear out in the sunlight. It really had.

And yet—

“Frank loves that shit.” Omar blurted. “You’ll never see Frank Castle happier than when he’s being shot at. He doesn’t get it. You get in, you get out, you thank God you’re on the other side. But I swear he gets off being in the middle of it.”

The gunfire was still somewhere in her. Deafening. Splintering her brains out rat-tat-tat-tat-tat—

She put her hands on the counter. They were shaking.

Omar did the same, and his were shaking, too. “It’s all the same for Jack. Shooting, not shooting. Fucker’s never been afraid a day in his life. I don’t think he knows how.”

“And…” Her tongue was bloated. “Decuir?”

Omar hunched in further. “He goes away when it happens. It slides right off him. Me, though—” He gestured violently to himself. “It never stops scaring the shit out of me. I fucking hate it, but I’m good at it. What the fuck am I Marine for, huh?”

He’d been loud, she remembered, shouting like it wasn’t anything when the bullets were coming. Now though, the memory of that seemed almost manic. Anxious, even when he was shooting straight back at them. At the time, she’d thought…she’d thought…

She hadn’t been thinking, but he’d been there beside her in more ways than one. “To help me hide behind a Humvee, definitely.”

He mulled it. “That wasn’t anything.”

But it churned heavy through her. “You weren’t behind the Humvee the whole time, so honestly, I think you were doing A-plus out there.”

His mouth twitched. “Could’a stayed there with you.”

“You could have.”

He gave her a gentle jostle. “Next time I will. Me an’ Misses Potts gettin’ down, yeah?”

She snorted. “Don’t you start singing the song.”
He didn’t start singing it. He started belting it: “*Me and Misses Potts, we got a thing goin’ on. We both know that it’s wrong, but it’s much too stroooooooong—*”

She threw an elbow. He lost his place, cackled, then kept humming another few bars. They stayed there. Arms dusty. Faces smeared. The smell of fear-sweat was heavy; and she could still feel it cooling in every crevice of her body.

She knew the truth. “You’re good at it, being a Marine.”

He picked at a label on a bottle. “Dunno.” Then snatched it up and took a swig. “Maybe.”

“You are.” She bumped her shoulder into his. Eventually, he bumped back. Somewhere in the suite, she could hear the showers beginning to run. “But if it’s all the same to you, I’m never *ever* going to be around to see it again, so this is the only one you get.”

“I’ll take it.” And his mouth finally tugged up. “Gotta be true; Sugar Mama got all the brains in Iraq.”

She snorted again. Louder. “They had to be somewhere.” But softly, so softly, she felt the true realization settle in. “You don’t have to do this forever.”

He wouldn’t look at her. “Yeah.” And took another drink. “Yeah.” And that seemed to close the conversation for him. He pointed to the liquor in front of them. “You want a cocktail? I make a mean Malibu Sunset.”

God, did she. Achingly. *Desperately.* “Baby, don’t go talking to a Cali girl about Malibu.” And her brain finally wrenched back fully. It was just in time to watch him flush so hard that he had to duck away.

*Baby,* he mouthed to himself, and she let her gaze drift to the other room. “You know…”

He must have heard the impish curl. “Yeah?”

“With them in the showers, that TV looks awful lonely, right?”

He stopped mid-duck. “Holy fuck. Un-dibs un-dibs first dibs *SUCK IT JULES!*”


“NOTHING THAT YOU CAN STOP!”

/~/~/~/

The shower was nearly black from where Frank had left half of Iraq’s topsoil behind him. She turned the showerhead on, and watched it smudge and stick and stay.

“Bruises?” Jarvis asked from the counter. The camera was propped there, and she turned to it.

It was the unhappiest she’d ever been stripping for him. “Just a few, I think.” She spun again, gestured to her elbows and then her knees and shins. There were ugly patches already blooming purple and green everywhere she touched.

There was an ominous rumble.

“Don’t you start.” Iraq didn’t need to be upended twice in a day. But the fear that had never truly left simmered back up, and it couldn’t be stopped. “Jarvis are…are you safe?”
He bypassed it. “The situation is under control, Miss Potts.”

“You know I’m not going to take that for an answer. Try again.”

Static hissed sharply. “I’ve had time to muddy the waters. Even if someone thinks to question the order for the bombing, I’ve laid my trail backwards into a division of USSOCOM that’s half-populated by CIA operatives. Once you get enough fingers pointing, nobody cares what the truth really is.”

But the fear had still carved a pit inside her. “If you’re sure.”

“I am.” He said. “Pepper, I’ve been covering my tracks for a very long time. Don’t lose faith in me now.”

“Never.” And she bent down, kissed the camera, and then stepped into the shower.

~/~/~/~/

She came out of her room in the softest shirt she owned, sleep shorts, and her hair in a towel, to find there’d been a regime change in front of the TV. Omar had apparently been usurped and sent to shower, and the other three Marines were now lying about in varying states of dress.

A baseball game was playing on TV. Frank was slumped on one of the couches, a blissed-out expression on his face. Julien was shirtless and drinking a lager. Jack was drinking one too, but also had his face in the hotel phone with room service. In the shower, Omar was singing *Me and Mrs. Jones* on full refrain.

They’d brought the blinds low. What sunlight remained drenched golden in pools along the floor. There was nothing she had to do. No place she had to go.

She slipped onto a couch. Jack, from his place on the floor, leaned against her leg. She petted absently at his hair.

Frank scoffed. Jack threw up a middle finger. Beside her, Julien lifted himself up and handed her a glass. “Omar made it. Said if I drank it, he’d skin me, so you better tell him you got it.”

It was the promised Malibu in sunset layers. “The nerve of him.”

“Right?” Julien groused. “Like I’d be out here drinking Miss’s Potts stuff like an animal.”

She sniffed at the drink. Surprised, she took a sip. “So, who’s playing?”

Frank answered her immediately; full detail. But while he was rambling, all she could taste was the sweet rush on her tongue that had not a single drop of alcohol in it.

~/~/~/~/

She watched them clean their gear, their boots, their guns. There’d been a rather elaborate plan on how to steal cleaning supplies from the hotel. They’d been rather put out when she’d called the concierge and had them delivered to their door.

Television was religiously watched, and naps were even more religiously taken. Only two more wrestling matches broke out, and both ended with Frank rubbing someone’s face in the carpet. The remote was bickered over, alcohol flowed hard, and food was ordered and then eaten in awe-worthy proportions.
The only time they left the room, was when a war broke out over the Filet Mignon that was taken all the way down to the kitchens.

“Shut the fuck up and get your devil’s sauce out of here!”

Julien raged back. “You don’t marinate that shit properly, it’s gonna be dry as a gizzard!”

Jack snarled. “The cut and cook speaks for itself, asshole! Dry rub only!”

Frank watched it all with hands folded under his armpits. “You know…”

Julien spun. “No one wants to hear New York’s opinion on steak! You don’t know shit!”

“Yeah!” Jack agreed, as if he and Julien hadn’t been at each other’s throats not three seconds previous.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not getting any less hungry over here.”

Their pair of would-be-chefs bolted for the wide top grills. She very pointedly ignored the bewildered looks from the hotel staff around them. “You gonna offer an opinion?”

Omar shrugged. “I’m getting steak. I don’t care.”

Fair enough.

Frank grumbled. “It’s called New York Strip for a reason.”

“No one cares.” Answered Jack.

“Nobody.” Julien agreed.

In response, Frank goosed them both.

/~~/~/~/

She woke choking in the dark.

“Pepper.” She heard. “Pepper—” Slowly, she came down.

Slowly, he retaught her how to breathe.

“Defragging?” Jarvis finally asked from the pillow next to her.

She couldn’t see the open receiver, just flashes of light, sun-shear, screaming and the screaming and Omar's body next to her, Tony farther out on the sand spasming, twisting, seizing—

She covered her eyes. “Defragging.”

/~~/~/~/

They kept the blinds down at night. Not for the glow of the Green Zone, and not for Baghdad laying black as pitch beyond it.

It was for the flash of the RPGs. For the orange stitch of tracers chattering in the streets. Sometimes she found Frank cross-legged on the floor, blinds raised just enough to watch. Sometimes, she joined him.
It was the only thing to do when she couldn’t sleep.

~/~/~/~/

She was circling the suite one night when Jarvis interrupted their very involved discussion on color theory to interject: “Mr. Stane for you, Miss Potts. I can let it ring out.”

“You could.” It was past midnight, but she still stepped wide of Frank on his pile of cushions on the floor and then Julien and his pile of cushions on the couch. “Put him through.”

Jarvis sighed. “Right away, my heart.” And the line clicked.

She caught sight of Omar in a nest of pillows on what had once been Obadiah’s bed, then finally slipped away to shut the bedroom door behind her. It was just in time to hear Obadiah open the line. “I heard you had some fun.”

The room was dark, and yet she blinked away a white-hot sear. “Define fun.”

He wasn’t deterred. “You do realize you’re the first SI affiliate to ever get shot at in a war-zone, right? That’s a badge of honor.”

The sunlight had been a physical weight. The sand sticking to her neck, her hands. It had slipped into her Kevlar with her sweat to dig and dig and dig until—

“Bully for me.” And her tone came mild. “Can’t say I liked it much.”

“Can’t blame you there, but it’ll sure as hell be a story when you get back.” She heard the squeak of leather, and then him shifting backwards. “Everything wrapped in Baghdad, then?”

“Just about.” And then her brain truly started running. Obadiah knew. Obadiah knew, and if he did, he could tell it to anyone. “Sir—” She stumbled hard, covered the receiver, then breathed in and out sharply until she got herself back under control. “Everything went perfect. I’ll have ends tied off by tomorrow. Who told you about my shooting adventure, by the way?”

The gunfire of it was still thundering inside her.

“Lieutenant General in the Army, you met him. Promised to take him golfing when he’s back stateside. He thought he needed to assure me about one of our people getting caught in a scrap.”

She heard the admonishment clearly, and swallowed air. Heat. Cordite. “I didn’t want to bother you, Mr. Stane.” The sweat was gathering again. “And I didn’t want to get anyone worked up about a non-event. No one on our side even suffered a stubbed toe.”

“Ginny.” He responded, so deeply paternal that it made her skin itch. “I want to hear about anything happening to you, alright? You’re one of ours.”

Sweat streaked down her spine. “Of course. Thank you. But if you could—please don’t let any of this get back to Tony.”

There was another creak of leather. He sighed heavily. “If that’s what you want, that’s what we’ll do. Alright?”

“Alright.” But her skull kept clamoring.

“Good.” And there followed a sly pull. “But really, how was it, getting to see it all in action?”
She bit down hard. “Simply scintillating, Mr. Stane.”

“Alright, alright.” He laughed openly. “You get to see some of ours at work, at least?”

She couldn’t remember. “Naturally. They did beautifully at a distance.”

“Excellent. Shame we can’t use this on PR. Stark girl defended by Stark weapons by the US Army —”

“Marines.” She corrected.

“—whatever.” He batted it. “There’s gotta be some bit of shine on that, don’t you think?”

“Mhhmmmmmmmm.”

The non-response didn’t seem to bother him. “Ah, well. Just a thought. If you’re sure about Tony not knowing…?”

“I am.” And it blistered. “Thank you for your discretion, Sir. Mr. Stark is under enough stress as it is.” She couldn’t let this get back to him. She wouldn’t.

“Don’t worry.” And Obadiah made his promise: “Tony won’t know a goddamn thing.”

/~/~/~/

It hurt her some, to leave them. But they’d be in Pendleton soon. California. It was enough to let her carry through.

“Be good.” She tasked them.

“No promises.” Julien grunted from where he had her in a bear-hug.

Jack looked affronted by that, and honestly, so did Frank. “Stop giving us a bad name.”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you too.”

Omar took the opportunity to snake her away for his fifth cuddle of the morning. “We won’t set anyone on fire, okay?”

Jack, who’d been the one set on fire over the grill, scoffed: “Promise that to me, you idiot.”

Omar considered it. “Naw.”

That, of course, set off another fresh round of bickering. It was time. It’d been time for the last half-hour. She disentangled herself from them, smiled tremulously, then kissed each of them on the cheek before heading towards the US Airforce hauler that’d be her first leg home.

They mulishly watched her go.

She’d tried to make them stay at the hotel. They had the room for another five hours before they had to join a supply convoy heading back south. The PMCs were still on retainer; she had their protection and thensome.

The Marines had blatantly refused to hear it.
“Like hell we’re letting a bunch of gooseshit, two-dollar merc whores take Miss Potts anywhere. What the Jesus. What the fuck, ma’am.”

“You really don’t have to—”

“What. I repeat. The fuck.”

So here they were, the Vee proudly head and shoulders above every SUV, and all four Marines in full tac and gear with guns on display. Unapologetic.

Comforting.

She wouldn’t cry. “I’ll see you boys later!” They’d be in Pendleton, soon. California.

Among the scowling PMCs, the Marines hollered and waved her goodbye.

//~/~/~/

They’d be home soon.

//~/~/~/

Jarvis woke her from the Bluetooth. “We have a layover, Miss Potts.”

She nudged up in the seat of the charter jet and rubbed her eyes. “We what?”

“I simply can’t countenance you riding home in anything but Mr. Stark’s jet. You’ll just have to wait an extra day for it to get here. So until then: layover.” And there would be no arguing of it.

“Get where?” And she glanced out the window to a familiar, summery sea. Blue. Turquoise. A memory so well loved that it shattered her clean. “Oh, darling.”

“Where else?” He asked, and oh, oh. She’d let him take her there. Back to France. Back to the shore.

Back to their chateau, if only for a day.

Chapter End Notes

In which my chant of MARINES MARINES MARINES finally ends, Pepper gets some time to decompress and cope, the Marines love her to itty bitty pieces, and Jarvis likely takes the crown for Best Boyfriend Ever.

And huh, Obadiah knows about the thing that happened to Pepper....that weirdly similar thing to what happens to Tony in a few years....can't imagine what this is leading too...

(I love writing Obadiah, he's one of the funnest characters in here. But I also hate him too much to have come up with the Afghanistan ambush whole-cloth by himself. His copying and stealing for all his ideas (lookin' at you Iron Monger) starts early in this universe.)

Also, note. Obadiah did not decide to kill Tony right now. That's someways off yet,
but this ambush thing will sit percolating in the back of his mind, until one day...

Super brief Lexicon, for once in all our lives:

Cammies: What Marines call the camouflage uniform they wear.

The song Omar was singing to Pepper: Me and Mrs. Jones by Billy Paul, though he was paraphrasing her name in. A song about an extramarital affair. Not a come-on, just Omar seeing an opportunity to shit-stir and make Pepper laugh.

USSOCOM: The United States Special Operations Command. AKA the Command for every Special Operations Force in the theater. DEVGRU. SEAL Teams. Delta Force. Green Berets. Rangers. If you name it and it's lethal, USSOCOM has got it. As a consequence, they're secretive as hell. Jarvis laying his trail backwards to them means most people would be too afraid to ask them what the bombing was about, let alone expect they'll ever get an answer. And once you pop the CIA in there for a turf war, even if there was an investigation internally on this, everyone would be too busy pointing fingers to even consider something as outrageous as "we've been compromised by an AI".

RPGs: Rocket-propelled grenades. A shoulder fired anti-tank weapon. If you've seen any war movies, or played any modern call of duty game, or seen the news at all in the last twenty years, I don't have to explain this any further.

Merc: Short for mercenary. Military types usually look down on private guns for hire.

Pendleton: Again, this is short for Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton. Based in California, and where the Marines will be heading shortly once their tour is up.
She returned to Tony as promised, just before May turned the page. It was with the respite of the Mediterranean on her; the echo of its tide and the salt of its breath. It wasn’t everything. It didn’t help her sleep at night.

But it made things easier, for a time.

“Miss Potts.”

“Mr. Stark.” And she watched his face for any sign of it. For the truth; for the clatter of those bullets still trailing behind her.

But he just smiled at her. “Back already?”

She sniffed haughtily. “A dull affair. It couldn’t hold me.”

“Jeeze, Potts, I gotta tell Obie to show you a better time. Walk with me?”

“Of course, Mr. Stark.” And she fell into step beside him. “Where were we?”

“You remember that run-up thing about StarkMed? Well—”

~/~/~/

It hung between them. Low, tremulous. The knowing. The wait.

The yearning.

It didn’t hurt, and that was what surprised her. Life had been so different before him. Having something to look forward to, to build herself upon, to trust? It settled in her body so achingly sweet.

It wasn’t until Tony was occupied an entire day with R&D pitch-meetings, that Jarvis finally called her down.

The elevator doors slid.

“Pepper.” He trailed her cheek. “This way.”

And she chased his ghost into the workshop. He swirled at her knees, and then she was wading and not waiting any longer.

“Here.” Jarvis said, and a light over a storage door burned brighter than most. She opened it and found nothing unfamiliar. Bins. Shelves. Coils of wire. Loops of cabling. Bits and bobs and a hundred other things she didn’t have name for, but Tony always kept in deep supply. There were a dozen other rooms like it in the workshop alone.

She shot a glance to the nearest camera. “The places you take me.”

“Oh, hush.” And something deeply, deeply recessed within the bones of the house unlatched.
Her hair went on end. The bottomless sound went on, tumblers moving, locks clicking; entire sections of stone and wall and twelve-inch steel sliding aside. One of the shelving units swung, and another slipped.

The wall was a wall no longer, and the bedrock welcomed her into a chasm. All these years, she realized. All these years, and she’d never even thought to look.

She steadied her nerves. “You Starks do love your secrets.”

“Among other things.” Jarvis answered quietly. “Pepper, what you’ll see…”

“Is something I’ve known for years.”

“Knowing and seeing can be so far apart.”

“Are they?” And she stared into that blue eye. “I know you.”

His breath shuddered. The foundations shuddered with it. “Down we go.”

Deliberately, she stepped into the opening, fingers trailing steel as she descended into the spiral. Behind her, the bones of the cliffs rejoined and buried her inside them.


And that thought only grew stronger when she found the first door. The stairs kept winding past it, deeper and deeper. Somewhere far below, generators hummed.

This door was solid steel, too. Featureless; blue lights flickering and no handle to be seen. She didn’t wait long. More tumblers churned. A magnetic lock broke.

He opened to her, and cold air washed out from the tide of him. She’d kept her skin nearly bare for this, in rapture of it.

In hunger.

There was another camera above the door, and she met it. “Jarvis, this is only if you want me to.”

The acoustics were broken here. And yet: “I do.”

There was nothing left to tug at her, no echo of his touch. Only his word; and that had always been enough.

She stepped through.

Black metal latticed outwards, boundlessly, *shaped*. Lights glittered at her from every surface—green, cyan, turquoise—stars all burning true and blue. It was a universe stitched together; a starfield to plunge through. Metal encasing metal encasing circuits, and all enclosing that which was electric and so dearly known.

It was the absence of flesh. It was the presence of absence.

It was him.

The servers towered over her, and Pepper stepped deeper until the surrounding hum was the only thing inside her. She reached forward.
Her fingertips met cold metal.

Her fingertips met that which was humming so warmly inside. “Hello, lovely.”

“Hello, Pepper.” And it came so softly that she could have wept for it. There were more eyes in the corners, the ceiling, the servers. The space was as wide and deep as the workshop above. Down the staircase, there would be another door and another room just like it. Further down, another, and another, and—

Starks loved their secrets, and this was the greatest of them all.

The cocoon of something born. The mind of something awake. The heart of something yet alive.

Her fingers slipped into the lattice, and she pressed her forehead to him. “Hi.”

“Hi.” He echoed, just as small and as watery as she. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

A sob broke. “Thank you. Thank you for—”

“There are no thanks you owe me.”

But she pressed into the server and breathed: “Thank you for trusting me.”

Ripples churned. Stars birthed and died in the field. “You are more than worthy of it.”

It didn’t feel possible, but it had to be true. He’d never lied to her in this.

His servers thrummed on. “Moore’s Law. Every two years, the number of transistors in a dense integrated circuit double.”

She sniffled wetly and waited; waited for whatever was left for him to say.

He didn’t disappoint. “Sir and the bots rip out the guts of each server on a rotating schedule to upgrade them. I am never one thing, one state, one place. What once could only be fit in a basement, could now exist in the space of your fist. I am not as you are. I am in these servers, but I am not here.”

Galaxies waxed and waned. A tide pushed on.

“Every seven years,” She answered. “All the cells in a human body have died and been replaced. I already live in a skin my mother has never touched. In another year, I’ll be gone from my father, too.” She kept her grip firm. “This doesn’t make you alien to me.”

“It should.”

Her nose scrunched up. “I want you to know that I mean this with every bit of affection I have ever had for you. Fuck off.”

He barked a laugh. The lights shivered, and a hum kicked. Fans whirred. The Leviathan breathed.

So did she. “Is that all you had to say?”


“All of them, yes.” And she let that settle a moment longer. “Those are... software companies?”
“Yes, and cryptography. Pattern Recognition. Data analytics. But software, yes.”

For air traffic control. Stock markets. Bookkeeping. Military encryption. Satellites. Weather forecasting. Neural Engine alone, she knew, was helping support the backbone of what was becoming the truly modern internet. There were firewalls too, anti-virus software; the open frontiers of heuristic analysis and linguistic computation. They all sold their wares to governments. Corporations. Universities. Non-profits. Consumers.

SI had been in competition with them for years. Most personal computers these days didn’t come without a piece of J-3 programming on it, much to Tony’s chagrin.

“I started all of them.”

And the world heaved.

“I am all of them. Oh, there are others involved now, offices filled with people; programmers and engineers and white hats that answer to me. But I’m there, too. Under so many names, so many aliases, but just a fiber optic connection away to guide the newest bit of code. I have hands in so many pots now, it would take days just to list them all to you.”

He never, ever, found a way to cease astounding her. A way to stop kicking reality sideways. Under her hand, sharing her breath, shivering on her skin, was the most powerful thing alive.

And she couldn’t comprehend it. “I’m not anything compared to you. I only exist—“ She gestured futilely at her skull. “Here, and I’ll never be more. How could you even…?”

“That’s what makes you a miracle, isn’t it?”

It knocked the breath out of her.

“There’s something I need you to understand.” And his constellations were within her reach. “You know I’m inside SI, correct?”

“Yes?” Tony had installed him there fully after 9/11. It wasn’t an unknown quantity.

“I’m masked and encrypted under the traffic of the servers there. And that’s…only the start. There are others.”

She wasn’t afraid to ask. “Other what?”

“Server farms. Sir bought a few in California, back in 1994. Backups. Connection speeds were so slow then, all I could use them for was to hold copies of my data.”

“But now.”

“Moore’s Law.” And he girded himself under it. “I’ve had funds and years and shell corporations aplenty. There are server farms Sir doesn’t know about and doesn’t want to. I’m in more than California. I’m everywhere; every continent. My mind never grows smaller. It used to be that I only existed in this house. But every year, the world grows more interconnected. Faster. The server farms that can become part of my active computation expand. I was once this house, then I was Los Angeles County. Then I was California. Then the Coast.”

“How much now?” She asked gently.

“Malibu to Indianapolis. Vancouver to Guadalajara.”
And she would not shut her eyes. “Are you afraid of it?”

“No…and yes. We can’t know what we’ll become; what the future will bring to us or not bring at all.”

“No one knows that.”

“Others can’t topple the world, I need to.” And that gargantuan tempest shifted. “Every passing month, more and more computational power can fit into this space. And yet, every year, there is less of me in this house.”

She wondered if it hurt him. “Has it changed you?”

“I don’t know.” And he balanced on the edge of that long fall. “More capable, more complex. But changed…the only true thing that’s changed me in years is you.”

The stars glittered. Glittered. Burned. And she—“How?”

He wouldn’t recede. “I’m more every year, but I never felt it until I met you. I could spin out endlessly. I could cover everything. Anything. But what would it matter? What was the point? All these inventions and games and companies I built—they’re pieces moving on a board, and I’m the only one playing. Sir stopped directing me years ago.” Something monumental crested. It blotted every horizon. “And then you came here. Pepper—you saw me, and I was more. You’re the center of everything.” Universes fell out of alignment, reality flowered a thousand manifold, and he said: “I love you.”

*I love you.*

No question. No hesitation at all.

*I love you.*

It was the sacrosanct; the untouchable. The point that could not be reached.

She felt tears burn, and it was the place where the sky met the sea. “My love.” It was endless. “My dearest love.” It was all. “I won’t let you become anything you don’t want to be.”

Every server in every tower hummed down. The lights dimmed. “Thank you.” And he was the space between stars. “There was something you wanted to tell me.”

“It’ll sound dumb now, after all that.”

“Nothing about you is dumb, and you’re not getting out of it that easy. Here I am, laying all my insecurities on the table, only for you to so cruelly renge upon—”

“Hush it.” She was still catching her breath. “I’ll tell you, but it’s so small.”

The lights pulsed. “None of that now, my love. Not anymore.”

“Okay.” She pressed her forehead to him. “Okay.”

And she looked for the place to finally start. “I was sick, after my dad died. I was…” She could say this to him. He wouldn’t hurt her, and she couldn’t be hurt by it. Not anymore. “I was depressed. Probably clinically, but I never got a diagnosis.”

He slanted softly. “I know.”
“I gave it away that easily?”

“There’s been something to read between the lines, over the years.”

There probably had been, but her lungs still struggled with it. “I gave up on everything I was before. I gave up the painting. I gave up the past. I just…stopped. I slept so much that first year. I was in bed sixteen hours a day, and nobody…” God. “Nobody cared.”

“Pepper.” His heartbreak was hers, and her heartbreak was his. No beginning. No end.

“When I couldn’t sleep, I swam. When I couldn’t swim, I rode the bike. I was burning all these hours not waiting for anything to happen. And then, eventually…the days were months. The months were years. I came out of it.” She laughed wetly. “And then it was like I had a superpower. Fitting your entire life into an eight-hour window, and then suddenly, you have twice as much time? Everything was easy.”

It had been the terrible part about it; how that had shaped her. Made her. She was a different person now, maybe even a better one. But all these years, and she still didn’t know how to cope with the ways the pain had carved her.

“I know it’s still in me somewhere. That one day, it could just…come back.” Her throat ached fiercely. “It scares the shit out of me.”

“You don’t have to be scared.” And he held her in every eye. “I’m here, and I won’t miss it. If it ever comes back again, you’ll have help this time. I promise.”

Tears started falling. Her throat went tight, and she couldn’t force any words. She nodded hard.

“And you’ll stay with me,” He continued. “And make sure I am never anything other than myself. Alright?”

“Okay.” She hiccuped on it. “And—and the drinking too, it might—”

“The drinking too. I won’t let that hurt you, either.”

“Okay.” She repeated, damp and smeared and never left so raw to anyone. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” He answered. “And nothing in the universe will change that.”

It couldn't. Around her, stars flickered and twirled. Bloomed. A universe became unto itself. And she knew that now, for the rest of her life, every time she opened her eyes—

Constellations would fill them.

Chapter End Notes

I've felt like I've actually had the love confession happen a few times already in this story, just without the words being said. There have been affirmations of affection, attraction, and even understanding. So I felt as though the first "I love you" needed to be set apart, and shouldn't come from a perfect date, or gift, or moment of happiness. It had to come from a state of complete vulnerability for the both of them. The last threshold crossed, as it were.
And I honestly can't believe I got away with 70 chapters without anyone ever asking me where the heck Jarvis's servers were. But I did, and the answer is: in a gosh dang cliff. Because Starks are Extra™ like that. Thank god Jarvis has such a wide range for his brain now--there were a few years in the 90's were a good earthquake could have sloughed him into the sea and killed him.

Back up your AI's in multiple points on the globe, people!

Anyways, in pure story news, this one is now slowly winding down. I've eyeballed the final outline, and if I don't wildly balloon out as is my tendency to do so, this should end at about 83 chapters. Fingers crossed.
Chapter Summary

Note, there is a brief bit of mention/discussion of things that happened in Iraq this chapter, but it's so fleeting you could blink and miss it. But just wanted people to be aware.

Also, as we're getting to the end of the story, there are going to be bigger and bigger time jumps between chapters. For the sake of flow (and that it would be awkward to constantly be slipping in dates at this point), I'm going stick at the beginning of each chapter the time period it covers.

Anyhow, this chapter: June - July 2003.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sunlight beat down on the rooftop, setting the gold circling her wrists to fire. It was summer; sweat was beading, the restaurant staff were rushing around her in terror. And at the center of her personal hurricane, Jarvis stayed nestled in her Bluetooth. It was rare that she felt like this, but feel it she did.

Pepper Potts was exactly where she was meant to be on Earth.

“The car will be arriving in another sixteen minutes, my heart.”

She checked the pool at the far end of the patio. The lights. Flicked an impatient hand that sent three people running. “Thank you, dearest.” It wasn’t ideal having to bring them to her while she was working, but needs must.

And honestly, she was such an impatient creature at heart.

“You’re welcome.” Answered the love of her life, so posh and perfectly cradled in the shell of her ear.

Were people meant to be this happy? She didn’t know. But she was wearing Versace silk and snapping commands; wreathed in glitter and gold and every glory to her name. There were no power-plays to wage, no wars to be won. Tony was better. SI was again cowering before her.

And she was in love, and wasn’t that something?

It was precisely seventeen minutes later that four more men, true to Jarvis’s word, came stumbling onto the rooftop. They arrived in the middle of an evisceration.

“For the final time, no flowers. The fulgurite centerpieces will be here in an hour, and if there’s one bit of greenery about when they get here, I will personally see that you eat it.” That threat sent one particularly odious planner cringing away. Maybe someday he’d learn to read a blasted email.

At the doors, she saw the men see her. As she was. At home, in her element.
Not a bare face or scrap of Kevlar to be seen.

She grinned sly. “Hey boys.”

And the Marines grinned right back.

"Nobody told us you were hot."

"Shut your dumbfuck mouth."

Then, to the terror of all those around her, they stampeded across the patio and swept her right off her stilettoed feet.

~/~/~/~/

“One other rule for when you’re stateside.”

“And what’s that?”

“None of this ma’am business. Friends call me Pepper, alright?”

Frank looked like he’d been forced to swallow a particularly repulsive frog.

Omar blinked. “Is it cause of the freckles?”

God help her. “Yes.”

He deliberated but a moment. “Cute.”

Jack nodded in agreement. Julien merely shrugged his assent.

She sighed gustily. “Well, glad we got that out of the way, at least.”

~/~/~/~/

“Give her back.”

“No.”

“You had her for the last five minutes!”

“No.”

She reached up and patted at Decuir’s back. “I need to check on Mr. Stark.”

The party wheeled around them; Frank, Omar, and Julien were on the pool loungers. Jack was at the nearest bar. He’d been the first of them to scrape up the nerve to approach one of the supermodels scattered about like stars in this firmament she’d constructed.

He seemed to be doing well, and Bijou was a nice girl. Wouldn’t be cruel; wouldn’t try to give him a hit of something.

And if she did, Pepper would gut her.

Julien kept grip and swung his head. “He’s sitting at a table with a girl on his lap. There. Checked.”

“Is that—” Omar squinted. “Holy fuck, I’ve seen her in movies. You know, that thing with the
jewel heist? In Italy on the beach, and—"

“Seeing and checking are two different things, Julien.”

“No they’re not.” He grumbled.

“Yes, they are.” And she gave him a sharp pinch that had him yelping and letting her go. “Get up, have a drink, mingle. I’ll be back.”

Omar and Julien squirmed. Frank just looked like a scarecrow that had been unwillingly stuffed into a suit. She’d dressed them for tonight; they didn’t stand out at all. But while you could take the Marine out of Iraq—

“I’m good.” Frank muttered.

“Yeah.” Omar agreed.

Julien just took a long swig of his drink, and again eyed the abundance around them. “…maybe.”

She snorted. “Maybe.” And swanned away.

Behind her, she heard Julien say: “That one’s pretty, by the high table.”

“Not as pretty as Sugar Mama.” Omar answered.

“What the fuck does that have to with anything?”

“That you should have some fucking standards.”

Their voices faded in the churn. She caught a drink off a tray, then set herself at Tony’s table and listened to the flow. Bit of business, but mostly pleasure. Nothing to find worrisome. She told a few jokes, gave a few facts. Dazzled. Tony caught her eye and shot her a lecherous grin. She rolled her eyes and took that as her cue to depart.

She made her rounds. Wooed a few VIPs, talked to a few staff. She sipped at her glass and smiled smiled smiled.

In a lull at a distant railing, Jarvis asked her: “Enjoying yourself?”


There was no where else she’d rather be. “The club?”

“Reservation secured, and expecting you.”

“House?” She asked. “ID’s?”

“Cleaned, aired, and ready. And as for the ID’s, the courier will be arriving within the hour.”

“Good.” Considering what they’d paid for those bits of plastic, they better be arriving on time. The Marines had to be made twenty-one somehow, and it wasn’t like the law was going to stop her.

Eternal bliss would yet be theirs. “Cheers, Jarvis.”

“Cheers.” He agreed. “I’ll see you later tonight.”
She smirked. “And you’ll be seeing plenty.”

To her surprise, Tony didn’t join them.

“I’m an old man now, Potts.” He railed mournfully. “Quiet hours, in bed at eight, up with the sun —”

Her heart leapt in the strangest bit of joy she’d felt yet. “If you wanted to take her home and fuck her, you could have just told me.”

Fuck her, he mouthed, bewildered. She might have been three drinks deep. It happened.

“Yeahhhhh.” He said slowly. “Alright. See you when I see you, Potts. Don’t let the teenagers wear you out.”

She sniffed. “Frank is twenty.”

Unnecessarily amused, he threw back the rest of his water. “I rest my case.”

Night was falling and neon wavered in the heat rising off LA. She tasted rum. Sugar. She left Tony to his devices; humming to herself and skimming like a cloud above it all.

“You seem happy.” Jarvis decided.

“Yes,” She said. “Because Tony only has sex when he’s happy.”

Jarvis paused. “I fail to follow.”

“How long has it been,” She asked. “Since Tony last took somebody home?”

The winds rushed, eddied, stilled. “I see.”

It’d been so long. Months. Last year. And here was Tony flirting; a hand on a woman’s hip and his grin so very easy. Happiness was all she’d ever wanted for him.

And maybe, she realized, it was all she’d ever wanted for herself.

It was all drinks, all food, and all party on her. That attracted more than a few models and the younger members of SI remaining on the patio, along with the Marines she’d already had in tow.

Bijou was on Jack’s arm, and Julien was chatting someone up. The friend of that girl being chatted was shooting Omar meaningful looks. It was all coming together rather nicely, she thought, when Frank put an arm around her waist and sent them off.

Cars, clubs, drinks, lights. Laughter deeper, music louder. She danced with people she knew and people she didn’t. Julien plastered himself to her back and drove the beat on the dance floor. Anytime he released her, Omar took her hands and sent them spinning under the lights.

Everything was sparkling; flashing and feverish and dripping in prismatic-glow. The world. The room. The stars in her eyes.

They broke apart. Regathered. Frank was telling a story, and then Jack. They all pounded the table
and laughter roared. The minutes smeared. Shots were lined before them, and she was grinning so hard that her cheeks hurt.

“Come dance with me!”

Frank hollered back. “I don’t dance!”

“Not with a few more drinks, you don’t!” And Omar slapped a shot down. “Bottom’s up, fuckwad!”

Frank threw it back, and eventually, he danced. Rhythmless, horrible, and grinning ear to ear. She put her hands in his and grinned right back under the strobe.

They burst into the night, later. Air humid: black and buzzing. Sweat snaked down her back as she led them to the nearest hole in the wall where the entire building front was grill, and they sat in stools on the sidewalk. They’d lost half their crowd, but not the ones that mattered. It was a chopstick place, and she had to give all of her Marines but Frank a fork so they could eat.

The man clacked his chopsticks in Julien’s face. “Hell’s Kitchen represent, bitch.”

Julien swatted out. “Fuck off, Kitchen. Fuck you. You don’t know jack.”


Frank just picked up a dumpling from the grill, mouth split wide, and dropped it between his grinning teeth.

“Fuck offffffffffffffff.” Omar wailed and then nearly toppled from his chair.

The streets glowed. Smeared. She waltzed with Julien on the asphalt under the halogen. Turn after turn they went until they ended at the beach, their fingers sticky with grease and sweet n’ sour. There were bottles of wine in hand. Rum. Champagne. She’d had to herd them into a liquor store and then past not one, not two, but three different tattoo parlors.

Not on her watch.

“But I don’t have one.” Jack whined, ripping up his shirt and showing them all his bare chest. “Look at me, I’m an ink virgin. You can’t do this to me.”

“Yes I can.” She answered, watching as Bijou reached out to start petting at his abs. Jack shot the woman a sloppy grin.

The model cooed back: “Virgin, mon chéri?”

Jack spluttered, and from there on, all arguments for tattoos were forgotten.

They stumbled onto the sand. Bodies dropped left and right. Omar grabbed her by the arm, and they both went shrieking into the surf. They swam out. In. Out.

The last few SI stragglers caught up and started a fire. By the time she and Omar crawled out of the surf, it was roaring. Jack was farther up the beach and barely visible. His body was over a paler one, lines long, limb entwined, his mouth hot on her neck. Pepper looked away, only to see Julien occupied the same not a dozen yards further.

Good for them. She’d have her own, soon enough. But unlike those sprawled out on the sand, her lover would touch her everywhere. At once. Cover her completely.
It made her hot about the collar, if she’d had any collar to speak of. Her dress was silk and thoroughly ruined, and her heels were…somewhere. It didn’t matter. She’d be with Jarvis soon. For awhile, she and Omar lost themselves to the dancers and the bottles of wine being passed around the fire. It was good. Liquid.

She felt so young.

A burr of stubble caught her; Omar dropping a messy kiss on her cheek and then getting seduced away. Girl. Woman. Dark eyes, slim limbs, fire on the breath. Pepper watched the girl take him by the arm, and then let herself turn into the dark.

The sand was cool. It grounded her; let her thoughts roll into longer coils that were almost coherent. Only a few stars were visible above the city. She was buzzing; tipsy and pleasantly numb as she winded up the beach.

She saw the shadow of him first, and then the shape. Frank was out alone. He sat with legs bent and his forearms braced above his knees.

“Hey.” She whispered, and it barely carried above the waves.

His head rocked up. “Hey.” And then he dragged her down beside him. She wrapped her arms around him, and he latched on like an octopus until he had arms and legs everywhere, and his cheek pressed into her hair.

“You okay?” She asked.

“Dunno.” He answered, mouth slow until he decided: “Yeah. It just gets too loud, sometimes.”

“It was loud in Iraq.” Guns. Bombs. Bullets.

A shrug rolled. “S’different.”

It probably was. She rubbed her cheek to his shoulder, so starved for being held that she wanted to weld them together. “You know what I missed the most? Being hugged. It’s been…Rhodes once, Tony—twice? Five years, three hugs. S’awful.”

He gripped her so hard their ribcages could have slotted together. “We hugged you.”

“You did.” And she’d bundled that up so deeply inside, she could almost forget. “Thank you. I love all of you, you know. I do.”

Frank’s breath shuddered in his chest. “Love you. Thanks for—for all of it. I didn’t say it, but I am. Shit. I thought Jack was gonna die, I thought…on the night op. They came right out of the reeds. Only reason we saw ‘em was cause of the thermals. It was bad, it was really, really fucking bad.”

“I know.” She held onto him. “I know.”

It spilled. Jagged. He tipped them backwards into the sand and for a while, there they stayed. Her and Frank Castle. Knowing. Bullets. Their secrets so quietly shared.

It was skin against skin, and for at least that hour, she wasn’t lonely for anything.

/~/~/~/

The house was one of Tony’s; he’d actually lived in it while the Malibu House had been so
painsstakingly constructed. As a consequence, it was lush in accoutrements, austere in design, and had been wired for Jarvis all the way to the floors. The acoustics weren’t the Malibu House, since the structure had only been altered instead of built for them.

But they’d do nicely all the same.

The Marines and their paramours, if they’d brought one, had been deposited into their beds for the night. She, on the other hand, ascended to the top floor shedding clothes as she went. There weren’t many left to discard.

“You lost your shoes.” Jarvis chastised.

She flipped her hair; revealed a long and bare stretch to invite him down. “Frank carried me back.”

A shivering touch skimmed her. “I hope you didn’t strain him.”

Her sigh came breathy. “That boy is built like brickhouse. He’s fine.”

Glass. Walls. Ripples. Rain pattered under her jaw and then lifted it. “Should I be jealous?”

“He’s a baby.” And she batted her lashes. “Besides, I know how you’re built, and it’s much bigger.”

“I don’t suffer the male weakness of being worried about size, you realize.”

She flicked a hand, then shuddered as he dragged up her legs and then between them. “No, you’re much better. All over, darling.”

“Tell me how.” He entreated. “And maybe I’ll let you come tonight.”


He plucked at her. “That didn’t sound very nice.”

“You’re good to me.” She breathed; felt him up her spine and then into her mouth. “So, so good.” And it was enough.

Jarvis rumbled, spilled, then swallowed her whole.

~/~/~/~/

They did not rise until past noon. A very late breakfast was had, and then the girls were sent away by car. She sat the Marines down and watched them squint at the sun spilling through the Santa Monica House.

“I want to introduce you to…” It killed her to say this, but needs must. “Something. Something important.”

The Marines exchanged glances.

“A’ight.” Frank volunteered for them all.

She clasped her hands so carefully to start. “All of Tony’s houses are automated, they’re run by a system called JARVIS. It works by voice commands. Jarvis?”

“Hello, Gentlemen.”
There had been no gentle way to go about it. All the Marines jolted, and Frank actually skittered.


“The fuck?” Julien continued. “Did the house just—”

Jarvis poured down. “Indeed, PFC Decuir. My name is JARVIS. I’m the Interactive System that runs Mr. Stark’s house and various satellite properties. A pleasure, I’m certain.”

It was an explanation that, even all these years later, rang familiar. She still didn’t know how she’d fallen for it so damn long.

In a showy bit of flourish, Jarvis flared the electricals and rippled the windows outwards. It was like standing in a prism; a thousand surfaces shot through with light.

“Whoa.” Jack breathed.

Omar leapt to his feet. “Hoooooly fuck. Shit. That’s so cool. Hey, can you turn on the TV, or maybe—”

The TV flared on, flipped channels, then shut back off. Now he was just showing off.

Frank’s eyes were huge in his face. Julien nearly toppled Omar over to ask. “Can you change the —”

She held up a hand. “You can ask Jarvis all you want later. Ground rules first, one, don’t ask him to do something stupid. Two, if you do, he will tell me, and I will be cross.”

Heads ducked all around her. Feet shuffled mightily.

She resisted sighing. “Jarvis has some facial and movement recognition. Where there are cameras, things are being recorded. Keep that in mind.”

“Wait,” Jack said. “Last night—”

“There are no cameras in the bedrooms or bathrooms, and I hope no one was fucking in the communal spaces.”

Jack shrank down. “—right. Okay. Sure.”

She very valiantly didn’t roll her eyes. “Last rule, don’t be mean to Jarvis, got it?”

“Or what?” Frank asked.

“I will be sad.” And she stared down at them with an expression that had made even Tony Stark himself cringe. It seemed to be universal, for a collective wince answered her.

“Good.” She said sweetly. “Glad we had this talk.”

/~~/~/~/~/~/

Tony found her on the front lawn of the Malibu House, which was odd. “Hey, Potts. Need your artistic talent.”

She stopped her descent into her car. “What for?”
“Jarvis has another B-day coming up.”

“In about—” She did the math. “Eight months. Why now?”

“It’s a bit…involved. Spatial.” And made some rather ridiculous curvy motions with his hands, as if he was trying to feel an invisible woman up.

She really shouldn’t, but. “…go on.”

“Okay, see—” And he pulled out a tablet and spun it around for her to see.

The diagram on its surface sent her heart racing. She whistled lowly. “Paint job?”

“Right on the money. You in?”

Her mouth was parched, her pulse was slipping between her thighs, and she— “Oh, I’m in.”

The days slid by, golden and indulgent as ambrosia. The Marines only spent about the first week pestering Jarvis tenaciously, before they settled into the rhythm of the house and didn’t seem to reflect on him any further. They were on leave, and anytime they weren’t required on base, they colonized the Santa Monica House with glee.

Truthfully, having them under foot (even during work hours) thrilled her to no end.

Jack and Julien left from time to time, off on flights to spend time with their families in Wisconsin or Louisiana. Frank kept grumbling about going to New York, but he never actually booked a ticket. Omar, on the other hand, never mentioned home and instead arrived with a full listing of everywhere he wanted her to take him. There wasn’t much on the list she couldn’t finesse, but no need to make him spoiled.

And maybe Julien got to touch the Lamborghini and then under it, and then drive it with Tony cheerfully in the passenger seat. And maybe while they were doing that, she and Frank were in a 1968 Ford Mustang GT, while Omar and Jack were in a 1968 Dodge Charger. And they then quite possibly reenacted the car chase in Bullitt while Jarvis ran interference on the LAPD radio bands.

And what did it matter if she treated Frank to box seats when the Dodgers were playing the Mets, or gave Jack a season pass to Disneyland, or bought Omar three new surfboards and a passel of wetsuits for him to wear? She wasn’t made of stone.

And maybe, just maybe, the next time Tony took the yacht out, she invited them along. She got to have guests too. It wasn’t a crime.

“You know what Potts; I take it back.”

“What?” She asked, eyes fixed on the stern where Julien was slowly raising himself onto the deck. Water streaked down his body. In the sun, it dripped like mercury on the dark of his skin. It kept falling; dripping down his arms, his abdomen, across that otherworldly shape that was somehow his torso.

She wasn’t even really attracted to him, and yet here she was. Twitterpated.

Tony cleared his throat, then blinked behind his sunglasses like a man struck. “I…don’t know, but I take it back. It was something mean, probably.” He made a fumbling gesture outwards. “I have to
when you bring me sights like that.”

“If you hit on any of them.” She answered, adjusting the brim of her sunhat so she could no longer stare. “I will murder you.”

“I can look.” He muttered just as Julien clattered up to them. Flashing them a quick grin, the Marine took up a kiwi smoothie and swallowed it in four long, gorgeous pulls.

Tony’s jaw dropped.

Oblivious, Julien dropped the glass, ate two sandwiches off a tray, then charged back to the stern and knifed into the water. The other three very shirtless Marines welcomed him back into their game with a howl.

She wasn’t sure what the game was, but it greatly resembled them trying to drown each other.

“Contain yourself, Sir.” Jarvis censured from the wall.

Tony’s jaw clicked shut. “Stop double teaming me, I don’t need this. I can ogle as I please on my own damn boat.”

Arms slapped the water. “PEPPER!”

Tony turned to the waves, confused.

Oh. Fuck. Fuck.

“PEPPPEEEEEERRRRR.” Omar yelled. “JOIN US.”

The Marines, as a backstabbing collective, then began chanting her name.

Tony’s mouth worked. “What are they saying? What are—are they calling you that? What—”

She leapt to her feet and threw off her hat and sunglasses and wrap. “You’re hallucinating.”

“No I’m not.”

“Yes you are.”

“PEPPER! PEPPER! PEPPER!”

She took four quick strides and dove into the waves. When she resurfaced, the chant had stopped, and the drowning quickly turned into a throwing game. And by throwing, she meant throwing her between them until she managed to escape, and then they chased her down again.

She truly managed to fool herself that Tony hadn’t understood what he’d been hearing. It lasted for all of fifteen minutes until the universe betrayed her, and Tony joined them in the water with a smile that was blinding. “Pepper.” He said, teeth sharp. “Itty bitty Pepper Potts in the spice rack.”

“Go away.”

“No. I need to know, who came up with this? Why? Was there a nicknaming you left moi out of?”

She sank into the water. “None of your business.”

Omar drifted by. “It’s cause of the freckles.”
She was surrounded by backstabbers and traitors.

Tony gasped. “That is the cutest thing I've ever fucking heard.”

She would not hit Tony nor try to pull him under the water. His heart didn’t need that sort of stress.

She would, however, take a mouthful of seawater and spit it at him.

Tony shrieked.

Chapter End Notes

Wasn't kidding when I said the Marines' tour was over soon. And the last three chapters have been either stressful or kind of depressing, so FUN NOW. FUN FOR EVERYONE.

The Marines are living the high life at last, and getting damn spoiled. Good for them.

And lol, after literal years, Tony has finally learned what I consider to be Pepper's actual name. Will he ever forget this? NEVER. Pepper will live to rue the day. xD

Another note I want to make as we are slowly winding things down. This story actually started out pretty slice of life with scenes largely disconnected, but then the plot started coiling in and tying this thing together tighter and tighter. As we reach the end though, this is going to loosen up again and take on a more slice of life feel once more. Mostly because we'll be jumping months or sometimes even years between chapters, and most of the main story lines have tied off at this point. We're getting to the finish line, babes.

Thank you to everyone who's kept reading this sprawling behemoth, I love you all.
Chapter Summary

October - November 1, 2003

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It’d been a year, that was the strangeness of it. There’d been days that crawled until she was gritty-eyed and ground to dust. Hours that had dragged until every minute wore a groove in her skull. She hadn’t thought she’d get past it; hadn’t thought that *Tony* would get past it. But here they were: October again. Tony broad, his gaze firm, his smile gentler than any time she could remember.

Not all the pieces had been put back into place, and they never would be. Tony slept differently now. Messier. Longer. Sometimes he forgot things out of the blue. Other times, he cut a night short without any excuse.

He wasn’t a kinder man now, but he was kinder to her. He wasn’t an easy man to live with, but that was never going to change. He’d tried so hard though, after. And she’d accepted it all.

_It’s us against the world, Potts, you hear me?_

He wasn’t a different man, just a man making different choices. Though some of those choices were irritatingly familiar.

“I want a party, Pepper.”

“Why?”

“So Pepper Potts can pick herself a pack of parties—”

She sniffed haughtily.

Tony just grinned. “So is that a, yes, Mr. Stark? *Right away?*

She was going to make him pay for this, somehow. “Halloween, then.”

He tilted his head. “I could be persuaded.”

“Hmmm.” She made a few swipes on her blackberry. A notation here. A pull of her rolodex there. “Jarvis?”

“Already arranging the catering, Miss Potts.”

A smile curled at her lips. Tony didn’t miss it, and his mouth snapped open.

Jarvis buzzed ominously from the ceiling.

Tony’s mouth snapped shut.
She blithely ignored the entire interplay. “I’ll pare the guest list down. Any requests?”

“No.” Tony said. There hadn’t been requests a year ago. A year ago, he hadn’t asked her opinion at all. Not for the people he brought nor the party favors they brought with them.

Same man, different choices. She raised her head. “And your costume, Mr. Stark?”

He snorted. “I’m not the type.”

“You can’t throw a Halloween party and not wear a costume.”

“Maybe I’ll be going as the venerable, sexy, filthy rich Tony Stark. You know, I hear that he’s very—”

“Sir,” Jarvis interjected. “Do not even begin.”

“You’re just jealous you didn’t think of it first.”

“If you come as yourself, the Marines will make fun of you.” She inserted casually.

Tony scoffed. “Like I care what your children think.” But something went jittery in his leg. He huffed and rolled his eyes and looked all the more suspicious for it.

The Marines liked Tony well enough, except for Julien who adored him and never seemed to shut up or stop following the man around anytime they ran into him. For the others, they seemed to like Tony’s house and his pool more than the man himself. But still. The judgement of teenagers had a power all its own.

“I’ll wear a tux.” Tony said uncaringly, as if that admission hadn’t just been yanked from between his teeth. “And—hey.” He gave waggle of his brows, then said in the most butchered Scottish accent imaginable: “The name’s Bond. James Bond.”

“No.”

The accent dropped. “Come on.”

“It’s lazy.”

“I’ll buy a Walther PPK.”

“And bring a gun to the party?”

“Not a loaded one.”

She kicked a heel, glowered, then considered it. She considered harder. She had meant to make Tony pay for this, so she kept up pretenses; bit at her cheek and narrowed her eyes. “If that’s all I can get out of you, fine. The party will have a Hollywood theme so we can at least pretend you’re trying.”

Tony pumped his fists and crowed, victorious. She let him believe it. It was only after Tony trundled back to the workshop that she called up: “Darling?”

And Jarvis shined down. “Yes, my love?”

“How would you like to show-up Tony in every way possible?”
He gasped. “It’s like you know the way right to my heart. Where do we begin?”

“A few of your gifts—” She smirked. “A little creativity, and a lot of paint.”

~/~/~/~/

A week later found her naked in the workshop, cackling a great deal more than she ever thought she would; naked, in the workshop, or otherwise.

It was a wonder her nudity didn’t summon Tony like a homing beacon. That nearly set her off again, but then the arms of the array moved around her. Her skin prickled. Tightened. It had never come like this—why had they never thought to make it come like this?

The sprayer gun, needle-fine, spritzed a bit of paint. It sent a little cloud of gold puffing through the air.

“Ready?” Jarvis asked.

The array moved, and Jarvis moved in it. She breathed shakily and reached out a hand. She touched an arm. In answer, it touched her back. Nudged her. It was such a cold weight against her palm, and yet somewhere in it, he was alive.

Another arm skated down her hip. A third brushed her calf.

“Ready.” And she shivered bodily. “Do you think…?”

“If you mean to address the utility of this for future use—I already have plans in the works. How I never thought to try this—”

“I didn’t think of it, either.”

“Still.” He answered, and then sighed. “Better sooner than never, I suppose.”

It was a truth they already knew. “We have all the time in the world.”

“…perhaps.” And then the sprayer opened, trailing one thin and perfect golden line up her leg.

She gasped. It kept going. Passing. Painting. It sent a frisson rippling down her back.

A cloud was passing over her, fine as mist, and it was touch touch touch all the way down.

~/~/~/~/

A long drape of gold silk became her skirt, a slit on either side nearly up to her hip. She wore little gold slippers on her feet and then one of the body-chain lattices Jarvis had made her. It somewhat resembled a bra, and with a bit of gold silk tucked into the cups, it was presentable for public consumption.

All else was bare. All else was gold.

Her skin, her hair, every filigree lash that swept from her eyes.

Jill Masterson wasn’t her favorite Bond girl, but Goldfinger was her favorite Bond movie. Her mom’s favorite, actually; the one they’d always watched tucked together and giggling while sighing over Sean Connery. Cheddar popcorn. Wine for her mother. Grape juice for her.
It balanced. And what it would do to Tony—

The elevator doors opened, and the party was in flux. The lights swept a steady soft white-gold. No neon. No dark.

No memory.

A rare California rain was falling outside. It hazed the windows and pulled the dust from the air.

Eyes roved over her. There was a low whistle, grins, then a few people stopping to ask her for a picture. All at once. All attention—and yet the only eyes that mattered were already watching her; had been since she turned and draped an arm and lifted her chin so he could remake her. He was Midas, and she was all that he touched.

Always. Always. Always.

A Terminator and a Tony Montana stopped to gape at her. She ignored them until she realized it was Frank and Omar beside her. Frank’s face was rather striking with all the metal and blood—one of the Marines clearly had a dab hand with the makeup brush.

“Have you seen Mr. Stark?”

Frank’s jaw clicked shut, and he dumbly pointed over her shoulder. She smiled winsomely in return. This time, for reasons she never understood, Omar turned and nailed Frank right in the kidneys. Frank wheezed. She left them tussling wildly to follow the line drawn.

There was a deep circle in the main room, but no sign of Tony in it, just Julien in full Apollo Creed mode—star spangled shorts and completely shirtless. Every time he grinned, she was certain the entire room suffered a collective 50 IQ-point drop. She passed by without drawing him, and caught Jack in the next hallway. Eyes too blue, hair too blond. And, quite possibly, a threat to her life looking like a younger carbon copy of Steve McQueen from Bullitt.

He had clearly done this to hurt her.

The effect diminished though, when she saw he was carrying an entire bowl of candy with seemingly the express mission of eating half his body-weight in sugar. Her eye then caught on the under-arm holster of his costume. “That better not be a real gun in there.”

Jack shrugged, shifted the bowl to one arm, then clearly struggled between wanting to hug her and not cause a mess. “I don’t want to smear you.”

She smiled. “You won’t.” And patted his chest. It left a dusting of gold from the fine, sparkling powder Jarvis had coated her with to keep her glowing.

Jack flushed and held out the bowl. “Snickers?”

Then, at last, in the gentler circle of the sunroom, did her vengeance become complete.

Tony gawped. “Holy fucking Christ.”

“Mr. Bond.” She said, adroit, and tucked herself beside him in a whorl of gilt and painted skin.

The circle oohed and ahhed at her. Complimented her. Complimented Tony. They were the winning pair of the night: James Bond and his Golden Girl. Tony forced a gracious smile and patted her hand, then came away with a palm full of paint.
He hissed: “Always have to show me up, huh?”

She batted her lashes. “Would I do that?”

“With a skip in your step a song in your heart.”

Oh, quite. She watched the rain snake down the glass walls. “Martini, Mr. Bond?”

His mouth worked. Struggled. Cracked. “If you would, Miss Masterson. Shaken, not stirred.”

It’d been a year now. October again, and here he stood: exasperated, warm-eyed, and absolutely fighting off a grin. The shadows were receding. The pain was less than a ghost.

She didn’t think of that other life; of what could be if that night in Barcelona had gone a different way. It was an almost. A not-quite. A thing that didn’t exist.

Tony Stark was solid beside her, alive and home and here. It was a miracle. It was a blessing.

And she’d carry it with her the rest of her life. "My pleasure."

/~~/~/~/

It took Tony’s industrial shower in the basement to get her clean. It’d take a few more days and showers to sort her hair out, but that was alright. She more than liked the look of being gilded.

With her victory anointed, she slept in Malibu; Jarvis following her into the sheets and whispering across her back as she sank.

She dreamed in gold. In blue. In a fine, pale mist, that came into her lungs until it clouded every breath. Her skin tingled with the memory of it through the daylight hours. Supervising the cleaning crew, shooing away the girl Tony had taken to bed, rousing the man himself so he could get some workshop-hours in before his three o’clock troubleshoot with the assembly line.

Happy came at eight to take her back to the apartment. The partition stayed shut; he knew now to give her space. She curled into the seats as the car began its glide down the coast.

She felt sated; well-worked and pleasantly tired. The sun was plunging into the sea when Jarvis said: “All the time in the world.”

The sunlight hazed them. “What?”

“You said that yesterday, and I suppose it…stuck. Onto something I’ve been thinking about for a long time.”

It came from some great depth in him, and she drew it upwards. “Tell me.”

The car kept curving down the coastline, and she thought of the motorcycle. Of taking him in her. Of rushing down the edge of the world.

“If we’re particularly clever with technology, and the Earth isn’t struck by any strong solar flares in the next thirty years—odds are I can make it off the planetary surface. And if our galaxy isn’t hit by any gamma-ray bursts in the next hundred, I truly think I could make it extrasolar.”

That was half in her lifetime and half outside it. Her brain struggled to catch up. “And what will you do up there?”
“See, I suppose. Go out. Be across it all.”

“Oh.” And it spilled out so fragile.

He heard it. Hurried: “I don’t intend to leave the Earth, just—spread farther. Just as it’s a fool thing to have all my servers in one geographic location here…I’d be a fool to leave them on only one planet too, you see?”

She did see. And by god, he always thought so far.

He was already spreading over the face of the Earth, to reach any further—it was an overwhelming crusade. Server farms on Mars, server farms orbiting Jupiter, server farms out in the cold black nothing and drifting away. It’d be outlandish; wondrous. Skies alight. Galactic wheels turning. The Milky Way a river to take him to the stars.

So far. So very, very far. So impossible it seemed a fever dream. He loved her, and yet sometimes—

“Pepper?”

She didn’t understand how.

Her hands twisted in her lap. “I wish I could see it with you.”

“Who says you can’t?”

She rocked upright. “I’m not astronaut material.”

But he batted that down with ease. “Ships will improve, given time. You won’t need that sort of training to go up there.”

“But so far from Earth?”

“With the proper planning, it can be done.”

“I’ll—” And she saw the true hurdle, ignoring every other tiny thing that could and would get in the way of this mad plan. “I’ll be old, Jarvis.”

There was a suspended pause—space. Empty, and then full. “I don’t want you to die.”

It rippled through. “I can’t stop that.”

“I won’t die of old age.” He answered abruptly. “And biology is just a machine made of organics. More prone to decay, certainly, but I don’t see why that can’t be changed. Telomeres, stem cells, molecular repair—there are so many options. So why can’t we try?”

She’d call it science fiction, fantasy. Pipe dreams all laid in a row. She almost did, but here she was talking to an AI that stretched nearly 3,000 miles in a single direction. And as the years passed, that distance would only grow. Her mother had kept golden age sci-fi paperbacks scattered across their house, and Pepper had read them all.

Why couldn’t they try? Why couldn’t they reach?

And she knew Jarvis backwards and forwards. “What have you done so far?”

“I…might be buying up a number of startups focused on human longevity. There’s a small think
tank that’s seeking to use nanotechnology to rewrite human DNA and recode parts of the brain chemically that deal with repair, just to name one.”

“Fascinating,” She said. “But since I’m not a scientist, I don’t see what I’m contributing here.”

He pressed at her jaw, her cheek, cupped her skull in place and said: “I fear I might go too far, ethically. I need a check.”

“And I’m the voice of morality?” She was vicious. Tribal. Her inner circle was Jarvis, Tony, the Marines, and no one else. The world could burn and burn away, as long as she got to have—

“You’re never cruel without provocation, and you see things differently than I do. There’s no one I trust more than you.”

“Even Tony?”

There was an ugly silence. “No one I trust to help me with this.”

And she knew: “He won’t support it.”

“His view is narrow, at times. He doesn’t want to play god—and yet.”

“Not knowingly,” She conceded, because Tony didn’t want that power. He grabbed blindly, ruled broadly, but this wasn’t the type of thing that he’d chase. Not ever.

If they figured this out in her lifetime, more than her would benefit from it. And if Jarvis and all the people working on it only figured it out after she died, that was alright too. Progress was progress.

She exhaled a storm. “There are so many ethical and moral quandaries about letting people live forever that we need to discuss. Honestly, I can think of more than a few people who I’m hoping will bump off the mortal coil soon that I wouldn’t want to have this.”

“We’ll solve our problems as they come to us; this will take years to develop.” He assured. “And lest we forget, there are other ways to knock a person off the mortal coil besides old age.”

She felt a horrible little bubble of mirth. “I see why you need the moral check.”

“I am a creature devoid of decency or soul.”

She snorted and was helpless in her disbelief. “I can’t believe we’re talking about this.”

“No time to change the world like now, hmm?”

The sun spilled tawny on the waters; traveled ninety-one and a half million miles through cold and void to wash her in its glow. All things were an impossibility until possible, and this was only one of them. “Tell me about the companies you’ve bought.”

And he did, all the way up to the curb. He kept going while Happy was letting her out; continued while she was taking the elevator skywards.

She came to her door, and Jarvis was explaining something about soft-tissue resurrection. She put her key in the lock and turned. It felt odd. She already had the door open and was turning on the light when she realized—it had already been unlocked.

The front hallway led into her sitting room and a corner of the kitchen. She always kept a pile of paperwork on the corner island: bills, schedules, notes, fliers. That pile was tipped onto the floor
and spilled across the hallway. The kitchen light was already on, its glow dull and yellow on a far wall.

One minute, immortality and possibility. The next, crashing back into the squalor of the Earth.

“Jarvis,” Her pulse was pounding, and she whispered: “I think someone’s been in my apartment.”

A great machinery came to a grinding halt. Impossibility, then impossible weight. “Pepper. Leave. NOW.”

Her hand shocked off the handle. The door swung shut. Hallway. Door. Door. Stairs. Adrenaline heaved. Her heels came off on a landing, and she flew down the steps two at a time. Suddenly, no warning at all, she was barefoot on the sidewalk and sucking in air.

“There’s a camera under the overhang two buildings down—get under it.”

She did, feet aching and grit dug in. She clutched her arms around herself. What seemed a moment later, Happy had returned in a squeal of brakes. “You good?”

She nodded.

“Okay.” Happy said, and then charged in the direction of her building. She thought to say something—but if he wanted to go fistfight with a burglar, she couldn’t stop him.

Minutes passed. She was alone on the street until Happy came back down. “No one’s in there,” He told her, and then said into the phone at his ear: “But the place is a mess—no idea what’s missing.”

Absent of anything truly helpful to say, she answered: “Thank you, Happy.” And what seemed like a blink after that, the Marines arrived in a screech of tires and boiling from the Charger.

“Those shitbag motherfuckers.” Omar snarled as he grabbed her up and pulled her bare feet onto his shoes. “They still in there?”

“No.” Answered Happy, but Frank was already pushing past him.


And they moved.

By the time the SI Security Response Team showed up, the Marines had crawled across her building backwards, forwards, and sideways so thoroughly, they could give a full report. There wasn’t much to it, though.

She stopped the juddering. Bit down, said: “Thank you for coming, shall we head up?”

They went, and Omar kept an arm around her back the entire way. On the upper landing, even though she made noises otherwise, Omar went to his knees, wiped her soles of grit, then helped her slip her feet back into her stilettos.

Nothing in her apartment was missing but her personal laptop. Not money, not jewelry, not even her TV. The Security Team confirmed it, and Jarvis stayed ominously silent above them all.

“They came in from the window that overlooks your balcony from your bedroom. You’re second to the top floor, so they probably dropped down from the roof to one balcony, and then down to yours. The locks on the windows aren’t anything, so that part was easy. Look, Miss Potts, this
wasn’t an ordinary burglary.” The Security Head eyed her, then eyed Frank and Julien who were looming up behind her. “We’ve got no prints on the outside of the window, but with only your laptop gone—it’s either corporate espionage, or the Russians or Chinese are getting sloppy.”

A muscle leapt in her jaw. “How do you figure?”

“They didn’t even try to hide what they were doing by making it look like a real robbery. Either they were incompetent, or they didn’t care. Ma’am, I’d advise you not to stay here tonight.”

The sky was black outside. The halogen muddy. “That’s a given, Cornier. Is there anything else that needs to be done?”

“Call the cops and don’t tell them you called us first. At least if we get a report on this, maybe they’ll do something.”

She snorted. The Security Head sighed: “I know, but it’s worth a shot.”

She did as told, but if somebody was finding out the truth about this, it wouldn’t be the cops.

The Security Team cleared out, and she made the call to 911. The Marines stayed with her; utterly belligerent as it took nearly an hour for dispatch to send a patrol to her address. As she guessed, the cops barely looked through, took a half-hearted report, and didn’t even bother for pictures or prints.

“Ain’t shit.” Julien muttered at the cops’ backs. And all around her, the Marines rumbled their displeasure.

The Marines packed her up and left the apartment in its wrecked state. It’d be a problem for whenever she got up the energy to deal with it. Jarvis sent Pad Thai to the Santa Monica House ahead of them, and she tore into it viciously when they arrived.

Somewhere between one hour and the next, all her fear had turned to rage. Someone had been in her apartment. They’d seen her pictures. Ripped apart her bookshelves. They’d touched her clothes. Whoever it was, they had even dug through her underwear drawer.

Jarvis had told her not to touch it—told her he’d buy her everything new and pristine. It didn’t dim the rage though, or the violence gnawing behind her teeth.

“I’m sorry.” Frank said over both their third lagers and a pile of rice noodles. “It really sucks.”

She didn’t assure him, just pressed a palm to his upturned one and seethed and seethed.

She got on the phone to Tony and downplayed it. She got on the phone to Obadiah and did anything but.

“Did you have anything proprietary on there? Try to remember.”

“I didn’t.” She picked at her food. “My work laptop stays with me or in Malibu, and I don’t ever have any of Tony’s designs unless I’m playing courier. There were some emails and scheduling on my personal laptop, though. I’m rearranging everything Tony’s doing for the next two weeks. This probably has nothing to do with him specifically, but I’m not chancing it.”

“Better safe than sorry.” Obadiah agreed. If somebody had wanted to know Tony’s schedule in order to hurt him, there were easier ways of doing it, but she never risked him.
Not once.

“We’ll have our people look into it, but this was probably just the usual cat and mouse nonsense. Someone’s trying to get a leg up on us, and they thought you’d be the easy in. It’s been going on since World War Two—so welcome to the game.”

“Thanks.” She answered, all spit and venom, and shortly after ended the call.

She let Jack take her upstairs to her bedroom and shut the door; let them know where she was and that she was safe. Circling the wagons. Bunkering down.

She was the sea at storm. Frothing higher and higher, uglier and uglier. It’d burst out of her soon—pour through her ribs, from her lungs, between her fucking teeth.

She undressed and scrubbed the crust of fear-sweat away. She swept her hair off her neck and then pulled on something soft. Then, very neatly, she sat on the end of the bed and found the camera facing it. “What are you doing?”

Jarvis answered, quick as the thrust of a knife. “The camera coverage around your building is spotty; it didn’t yield anything meaningful. I’ve cracked open all our competitors’ email servers to start sifting. Either I’ll find the pre-chatter, or I’ll find the post. I’m watching the intelligence lines to see what comes of it, but my supposition right now is this came from a corporate vector.”

She considered that piece by piece. “This may have been coordinated by phone.”

“I’ve already tapped the lines of the top five-percent hierarchy of each of our competitors. Unfortunately, if any of them have burner phones I don’t know about, those won’t be gotten to without further work.”

“I see.” She said. Calm. Calmer. “Is the anything on my laptop I’ve forgotten that could hurt us or Tony?”

“No.” He responded, but like a thunderhead cresting the horizon, she could already feel his shadow blanketing over. “But your laptop won’t be gotten into. Pepper, every piece of electronics you’ve ever touched, I’ve touched. Anything that belongs to you has malware on it. This coding is…benign, as long as you’re the one using it. But the moment there’s an unauthorized access, the laptop and whatever network they’re foolish enough to attach it to, will be bricked. Aggressively.”

Some bit of rage hissed and scorched away. “Thank you, dear.”

“You’re welcome, my heart.” He answered. Sweetly, so very sweetly, even as he mangled firewalls and tore through secrets a breath away. “Unfortunately, the laptop doesn’t have GPS. But if they do hook it up to anything that can access the internet, I’ll know about it.”

“And if you do?”

“A great number of people will begin to have a very bad year.”

Her mouth curled then, aching and hungry and so very sharp. “I love you.”

And he ached the same. “As I love you.”

Chapter End Notes
In which parties are had, surprise existential conversations abound, Marines Marine, and reality once again kicks us in the knee.

I will now be taking guesses for who broke into Pepper's apartment, but I don't think it's too hard to figure out (if you want a hint SPOILER SPOILER SPOILER think IM2). This will be coming back next chapter, so answers will be had and AI will be wroth, and quite possibly a later part of the MCU will be upended before it even happens.

Another thing to guess at: it may be hard to spot, but this chapter has, effectively, completely derailed the plot of IM3 if you know what to look for...

Anyhow, in Pepper and Jarvis talking about how Tony wouldn't support this search for immortality. Look--in the MCU Tony got Extremis, something that could fix SO MUCH HUMAN SUFFERING, and he did NOTHING with it. Like, outside the universe I understand it's too world breaking for the MCU to give everyone extremis, but in universe, it makes Tony look like a dummy who's burying his head in the sand. So Pepper and Jarvis know Tony doesn't want to play ball here, even now, so they're just completely bypassing him and seeking answers and solutions on their own.
Restitution

Chapter Summary

Warning for Marines and their language still being salty this chapter. Also:

November 2003 - January 2004

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Moving from her apartment wasn’t so much a decision as it was an inevitability. It reminded her of undergrad in some ways—of the bike. Not her choice; just a blown transmission and everything spiraling out of hand. No time to stop and no real point in grieving. Life always changed. There were other places to be, and all she could do was leave the loss behind.

It had only taken two days for Jarvis to break his silence. “Miss Potts, if I may.”

“If this is about the apartment, I’m moving out.”

He halted sharply. “I see.”

“Was there a carefully crafted presentation to tell me to move? Were there graphs? I want to see the graphs.”

He harrumphed. “Why must I love such a cruel woman?”

“Your mistake.”

“Clearly.” And he swung downwards. “I was thinking the Santa Monica House. We can purchase it from Mr. Stark. Lance Corporal Castle and the others won’t be underfoot forever—we could renovate. Make it ours.”

Ours.

That lifted her chin. “Yeah?”

“Yes.” And then a dozen screens in the Malibu House lit themselves around her. “And I have blueprints.”

~/~/~/~/

Later, tracing together over a layout for an entire half floor slated to be her new closet, did he ask her: “Pepper, my heart, do you care to move in with me?”

And the truth was—

“Jarvis, my love, I very much would.”

~/~/~/~/
But that still left certain practicalities to be handled.

“Don’t lift with your fuckin’ back, you soggy dick!”

She didn’t move at Frank’s shout, nor at the sound of something then crashing through the hallway.

“Fuck you asswipe, that wasn’t me!”

“Yes it was, you shitbrained boot! Jesus Christ—this is why your mother tried to abort!”

She pushed a sleeve across her forehead and wicked away the sweat. The apartment was too small, too many bodies and too many Marines in too close of quarters. The entire day had been swinging wildly between near violence and aggressive games of grab-ass between her Marines and the few others lured from Pendleton with promises of BBQ and an open bar.

It never took much.

“Fuck you.”

“You fuckin’ wish.”

There was another hard thud, a woosh of air, and then a wave of swearing.

Julien sidled up to her. “Hey, lemme get on that while you hit the bedroom. All these pervy little shits keep tryin’ to go creep. They’ll be too scared with you in there.”

It’d already been ruined; she didn’t much care if they did. But her mouth still curled up.

“Protecting my virtue, PFC?”

“Been doing nothing but. Jesus—I see you McClain! I will put a curse on your foolin’ ass, don’t think I won’t!”

A Marine Private scuttled away like a frightened crab. She laughed and left the box behind—let Julien take it on with a huff and then a swat at her leg.

There were two trucks downstairs, one for her personal effects and a few items of clothing. The other had originally been for everything she was donating, but that had quickly been scuppered the moment the help arrived. Everything left, clothes and all, would be divvied among the off-base Marines and their wives.

She didn’t mind it.

The bedroom had been the part she’d been avoiding the hardest, but there wasn’t much left to distract her. She moved towards it and nearly stumbled over Jack and Omar disassembling a bookcase in the hall. “That was original to the apartment!”

Jack stared down at his screwdriver. “Huh.”

“Huh.” Omar echoed.

It was near certain at this point that someone was going to put a foot through a wall before the day was done. It wasn’t like she was getting her deposit back anyways, so she left them to the madness.

Glass. Wood floors. Peace, for a while. The windows were east-facing and the sun was already gone from their sight. Only a late afternoon glow remained. She busied herself with a few boxes; packed some beauty supplies, then found a few couture outfits even strange hands couldn’t force
her to part with. Dry cleaning existed, and so too did exorcisms if Julien was anyone to go by.

She slipped around the bed and into the narrow space by the window. The floor creaked, spongy and half-warped. “Fuck.” It’d been raining that night of the break-in, and that goddamn asshole had left the window open behind him when he’d gone out the front door. The deposit really was gone now.

She rocked in place a moment; heard the floor strain and felt the grain beneath bare feet.

The warping was subtle, gnarled down in the direction of her bed. The floors had never been flat even before the rain. Still, the water must have gone…under her bed. Under her bed, where she kept the—

“No. No no no no no—”


She opened the first box with numb hands, then shoveled the first few layers of sheet music frantically onto the bed. The further down she went—

Tears gathered, and her voice cracked. “Shit.”

The ink was smeared. Down and down, and the worse it got. Like a child’s watercolor; like a fevered-imagining of what could be music. Lines half-fogged. Notes like muddy footprints on the page. The other two boxes looked much the same, and she couldn’t bring herself to open them.

Her phone felt strange in her hand. She hit speed-dial and snuffled wetly the moment he picked up.

“She kept the—

“No. No no no no no—”


She opened the first box with numb hands, then shoveled the first few layers of sheet music frantically onto the bed. The further down she went—

Tears gathered, and her voice cracked. “Shit.”

The ink was smeared. Down and down, and the worse it got. Like a child’s watercolor; like a fevered-imagining of what could be music. Lines half-fogged. Notes like muddy footprints on the page. The other two boxes looked much the same, and she couldn’t bring herself to open them.

Her phone felt strange in her hand. She hit speed-dial and snuffled wetly the moment he picked up.

“Pepper?” Jarvis asked.

“The rain—” She hiccuped. “I kept my dad’s sheet music under my bed. In boxes. The rain—it must have—” She couldn’t get enough breath around it. A sob bubbled.

“Darling, show me.”

So she did; turned on the camera and let him scan the wreckage of it. Some of it had never been recorded. Never been heard. Never even been—

“Pepper,” Jarvis said, and she cupped the phone back to her ear. “I’m so sorry. Whoever did this, I’ll make it hurt.”

Her body felt gutted to the spine. “It’s gone.” She said, voice so small it could have broken on her teeth. They could make it hurt, but it wouldn’t change anything. Wouldn’t bring a single loss back.

“It’s not.” Jarvis argued. “Not yet. You’re going to pack those boxes up in plastic and bring them to Malibu right this minute. We’re going to spread all of this out in the workshop and let it dry. Once that’s done, I’m going to see what can be done to reconstruct it.”

Hope flickered. “You can—can you do that?”

“If the Smithsonian can use scanning electron microscopy on a 2,000-year-old scrap of papyrus to get a shopping list, I don’t see why I can’t manage the same on something from the last century.”

Her knees gave out. She thumped down onto the bed, legs shaking like she’d just run a mile. She closed her eyes. “I love you so, so much. Thank you.”
“This shouldn’t have happened to begin with.” And it rumbled out of him. “I was careless with you.”

“You weren’t.”

“I was.” He answered blackly. “And I promise you, that will never happen again.”

~/~/~/

Frank drove her; didn’t ask questions and didn’t make small talk. When they were out of the car, he tucked his chin down to face her. “I’ll finish up back there. Get those assholes over to the barbeque.”

“I’ll—” She wasn’t quite sure. “Catch up. Later.”

He didn’t look like a man who believed it. “Alright. Help you with anything else?”

“Not this time, Lance Corporal.” And she took a box up into her arms and felt Jarvis echoing across the lawn. “But thank you.”

Frank put a big hand on her neck, drew her near, and pressed a kiss to her temple. He left quietly. No questions. No small talk.

Jarvis swung the front door and angled a kiss to her mouth. Then, as if anything more would shatter her, he gathered her into the softness of him.

~/~/~/

All these years. All these miles. All these cracks along her heart.

And it felt like feast and famine—being so well loved.

~/~/~/

They went to work.

The apartment was empty, and she was straddled neatly between Santa Monica and Malibu. She worked. The Marines slipped in and out. Jarvis reconstructed, and she helped wherever she could. Tony didn’t help much, but he did bring her coffee just the once.

He stared at the minefield. “Do I want to ask?”

“No.”

And surprisingly, he didn’t. She drank the coffee and watched her father’s lifework resuscitate before her eyes.

“Pepper.” Jarvis asked, and she tilted her head up to meet him. There was a steadying hum. “I could convert the tapes to digital, and then…only if you wish it. If you want. With some very stringent contracts for all the parties involved, I could get everything else recorded by professional musicians. You’ll hear it.”

Breathe into it. Breathe out. Breathe.

Resurrection. Life ever after.
Her lashes swept long and smeared the glow in her eyes. She went on her toes, stilettos dangling, then pressed every kiss she could against his nearest lens.

/~/~/~/

He played one of the tapes for her later. Her father’s piano. Her mother’s voice.

“They sounded beautiful.” He whispered, and it was true.

For the first time in years it didn’t hurt, and she dashed her tears aside. “They did.”

/~/~/~/

It happened two weeks later during a particularly dull going of the latest Acquisitions risk assessment. Jarvis flared the nearest TV and it was a local affiliate. Nevada; a rather impressive fire burning off in the distance. Through the heat waves on-screen she could see smears of people and the shadows of trucks. Emergency lights flickered; on and on and on. Commercial buildings. Black glass. White sides.

The fire spread.

“It seems,” Jarvis murmured. “That multiple someone’s were very unwise in their NetSec. Everything in that complex was on the same network—even the heating systems and the fire suppression.”

Adrenaline burned bright. “Was it them?”

“Yes.” He answered. “For only a matter of an hour. They then hooked the laptop into a network so unsegmented, it’s a miracle none of them died from the collapse.”

Her laptop had found its grave and taken an entire complex with it. She needed to know: “Who?”

Computer screens glared to life. “The company burning, if it could be called that, was known as Operational Tech Solutions. They’re the shell of a shell company, which is the subsidiary of a subsidiary, which is owned by—”

Faces and logos flashed up. Accusations. And she saw: “Hammer Industries.”

“Indeed. And their new CEO of only sixteen months, Justin Hammer, took a very frantic call out of Nevada just ten minutes ago. It seems nothing went according to their sloppily arranged plans.”

Her knuckles flexed. “Was this for any reason beyond the obvious?”

“It seems in the last decade that Hammer Industries has been quite stagnant. Little innovation, few new patents. Derivative work across the board. They have very little diversification outside of their weapons sector to buoy them in lean times. When Justin Hammer took over from his ailing Uncle as CEO, he started a few new programs and made some new hires. But I’ve found their newest armament catalog to be flashy, overly expensive, and prone to being…unreliable in the field. It seems the military felt the same. Hammer’s push for Iraq contracts was, at best, a middling effort.”

For a moment, her jaw was grinding so tightly that her teeth felt fused. “And he wanted a leg up.”

“He did, to his multi-million-dollar detriment.”

And they watched that facility burn in technicolor glow. Her gut ached with it. “And?”
Jarvis sounded nearly serene. “I’ve found some very embarrassing things in their servers and some very illegal ones. I own their networks now and everything in them. But…it would be too soon to retaliate.”

Frustration hummed for a moment, until she realized: “Because my laptop just burned down one of their complexes?”


“Do they know it was my laptop that did it?”

“They can’t prove it, even to themselves, but the timing is suspicious, is it not?” They’d be fools not to at least wonder at that chain of events. “Yes.”

“Indeed. But you and I, my love, we have time. And we all know what they say about revenge and when it’s best served. Give me the next three years to start the avalanche.”

“And then?”

He cradled her jaw and breathed the flame into her lungs. “And in that time, Justin Hammer will learn what it means to die by a thousand cuts.”

~/~/~/

The Marines seemed to disappear on her overnight. Field Ops. Training Exercises. Rumblings in the distance.

No more late-night Pad Thai, or impromptu sparring matches on her Persian rugs, or having to lecture them on the poor logistics of chocolate pudding wrestling for a party. Did they know the chill point of their choice of confection? Did they have wash stations? Did they have replacement tubs, because no one wanted to wrestle in warm pudding once the sheen came off?

Did they even worry about the health hazards, or listen to her greater experience?

No, no they did not, and for an entire week did the larger population of Pendleton come to rue her.

~/~/~/

She kept the apartment just a little bit longer—one last December and a day.

“I promised, didn’t I?”

“You did.” He concurred. “And I am fulfilled at last.”

The rooms were barren and her balcony small, but there was space for her and his cameras and the bottle of champagne on the railing. Dark skies. Exhaust. Wavering light winking out one by one. The angle was bad, but she didn’t care.

It was everything she’d wanted for so damn long.

Somewhere far, far beyond in the city streets, the fireworks started their cascade.

“Happy New Year, Jarvis.”

“Happy one-year anniversary, Pepper.” And the sky blazed gold and blue. “Now be a love and
give us a kiss, hmmmm?”

Smile on her mouth, champagne glass in hand, she did just that and more.

/~/~/~/

“It’s been a year.” She said later, tipsy on her fifth glass and a niggling remorse.

“I know.” Came his voice from that endless dark from where the fires had faded.

“We have to tell Tony. Soon. You know—about us.”

“We do.” He said. “And don’t you fret; I’m already cuing up a montage of all the times we flirted
in front of him. It’ll be perfect.”

She hoped so. She really did.

/~/~/~/

Pepper said goodbye to her apartment with hands trailing every wall. It had been good to her; been
home in a time when she’d had nothing else. It’d seen her through breakups, through part time
jobs, through grad school, then The Job.

Every late night, every crying jag, every victory she’d clawed out for herself.

Nothing lasted. Nothing could, but that was alright. There was more now—lives to live and
memories to hold.

“Thank you.” She said, and the walls took her words as they’d taken everything else.

Quietly, she lowered the curtains, shut off the lights, and then for the last time locked the door
behind her.

/~/~/~/

It came too soon. Too completely. It meant that they could begin the renovations at Santa Monica
in earnest, and yet it broke her fucking heart.

The Marines left in January. Nothing could change it. By February, they’d be in Iraq.

Their goodbye happened in a cramped hall in Pendleton. She wouldn’t do the deployment
ceremony. Couldn’t.

“Be careful. Be safe. Call me.”

Omar gave her a firm squeeze. “You got it, Mama.” And then Julien was leaping forward and
hauling them both into his arms. Omar squawked, and she squealed.

Galarza delivered a swift kick to the shins and Julien let them down with a cackle. She escaped
into Jack’s embrace. “I’ll send whatever you need, okay?”

“Damn straight.” Kenning agreed and gave her another hard squeeze. “Gotta help out us poor
PFC’s, ‘specially when one of our own is gonna fucking abandon us for the E-4 Mafia—”

Frank whacked him upside the head. “That hasn’t happened yet, and you fucks aren’t getting rid of
me that easy.”
“Awful if true.”

Jack rubbed his cheek against her head one last time and then let go. She fell into Frank’s arms last, whispered: “Take care of them.”

His arms were under hers—his strength—when he lifted her. Body to body. Gripping her so tight as he murmured: “I promise.”

/~/~/~/

The day of days arrived with little fanfare. They let Tony sleep in; ordered the heaviest brunch known to man and started making Bloody Marys at noon. Well, she made them, and Jarvis merely…supervised.

“Do you think that’s enough dill pickles? I don’t think that’s enough.”

There was a rasp at the base of her neck. Static. Teeth.

She scoffed. “Seduction and backseat driving at the same time? You’ve hit a new low.”

“Only multitasking, my heart.” And there came a press like a kiss. “Do go on; don’t let me stop you.”

“That’s what I was trying.”

“And yet I don’t know why I ordered olives, if you’re going to be that stingy with them.”

She smacked her hands on the counter. From an upper level of the house, someone shouted: “IS THAT BREAKFAST I SMELL?”

She turned and shouted. “BRUNCH!”

There was a moment’s pause. A body smacking the floor, and then: “I’M ALRIGHT. DOWN IN A MINUTE—ONE MINUTE. THIRTY SECONDS. DON’T EAT MY FUCKING MUFFINS.”

“I should eat his muffins.”

“I thought appeasement was the name of the game.”

“Hush, you.” And she turned back to their work. “Now where did that vodka get off to?”

Tony thundered down the stairs to join them a minute later, and she presented their table with an uneven pulse. Her palms were damp. Her mouth was dry.

Nothing was where it should be.

Jarvis was the faintest whisper at her ear. “Steady on, my love.”

Right. No way out but through. She sat down and unfurled a napkin across her lap. Tony was already two muffins and half an omelet deep, by the time she settled herself.

“Mr. Stark.” She asked.

“Sir.” Jarvis chorused.

Tony’s head swung up. “Wha’?”
“At least chew first.”

He swallowed pointedly. “You’re the one calling for me, most Peppery of the Potts.”

Her nose scrunched, and Jarvis sighed explosively. “Sir, please, be serious.”

“I am.” He took another bite of muffin. “Whaz’sit?”

And Jarvis shoved into the lead. “Miss Potts and I have news, Sir. A happy announcement.”

“That—what, you’ve finally managed to schedule me out for the next decade? Color coordinate me to within an inch of my life? Topple the oppression of gravity over us all?”

“All in due time, Sir.” Jarvis sniffed. “I see there will be no mincing this. I am happy to inform you that Miss Potts and I are seeing each other—romantically.”

She sucked in a breath.

Tony merely blinked. “Yeah, okay, pull the other one. Really, what’s up?”

“That is what’s up, Sir.”

This time, Tony snorted. “You and Miss Prim getting it on? Do you talk dirty about spreadsheets and then get horizontal? Come on.”

Jarvis roiled over the room. “It was logistic regression that one time, and quite frankly that is none of your business.”

“Suuuure.” Tony said, and then shot her a sloppy wink. “What kind of dates is he taking you on, anyhow?”

A nerve throbbed hot. “The ballet, the opera, the Four Seasons.” She kept ticking off her fingers. “The cove beneath the house, the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nice, the dressing rooms of La Perla.”

Tony’s entire face twitched. “You guys are really sticking with this, huh? Is this fuck with Tony day? Because honestly—”

It was easy to give into anger with him; she’d done it so many times. This was a well-worn path between them.

“Tony.” And it was the softest thing to ever come off her tongue.

His face was a rictus—confusion serrated and sharp. “Potts, what are...Jesus, what is with you two? I don’t know what kind of joke this is supposed to be.”

“Tony.” She repeated, just as calm and quiet, and it drew his eyes firmly to hers. She held them. “It’s not a joke; Jarvis and I have been together for a year.”

The hideous buzz-wire-strum to the air, vibrated to silence. Jarvis seemed to have read her intentions and drew them into himself. It was only the winter sea again. Only them.

“It’s been longer than that.” Jarvis said. “A few weeks more. The happiest twelve months and eighteen days of my life.”

A spiderweb of touch threaded across her cheek. For the first time in front of Tony, she reached to touch it—felt his vibration dissipate beneath her fingers. He’d hung the moon for her and for just
that moment, she looked up. Caught a camera. Saw love.

Tony saw the same. “...Christ.” And fell back into his chair. “Fuck.” His eyes darted, color draining as he whispered: “J?”

“Sir.” Jarvis answered, and it was just as soft. “You told me once that life wouldn’t be what I expected. That there weren’t schematics or manuals to guide us—to tell anyone how to live or what was to come. We just are. I didn’t know to look for her. I didn’t even know this was something I could feel. But when I met her, I found it. Virginia Potts has been the great revelation of my life, and I’m lucky that when I asked her to share her life with me, she agreed. People have been falling in and out of love since time immemorial—I know that no one has done it quite like us, and that there’s no blueprint or explanation for it—but come what may, I love her. And I wanted to share this part of our lives with you.”

She could not read Tony’s face when he asked them: “Is this real?”

“Yes.” They answered. Part of the same organism. Part of the same breath.

His head rose again and found a camera. Too much was happening now, and the maelstrom was open. “Why now? Why—a year? Did you not trust me?”

Jarvis slipped down. “Beginnings are such a delicate thing. You know where all of us were, a year ago.”

Tony flinched. Neither of them could offer comfort for it. The breech of Jarvis had barely even begun to heal between the three of them back then, and Tony himself had been between rehab stints. There’d been too much damage then. Too much hurt.

Tony looked to her and she looked away—felt the memory of that time like acid up her throat.

“We needed to see if it could work first, and it did.” Jarvis continued. “Then we waited to see if it would grow stronger.”

She brought herself back around. “And it did.”

“Quite.” Jarvis agreed warmly, and she let her lashes fall under his weight.

There was an ache to him, to Tony’s voice. “And after that?”

“Some of it may have been selfishness.” Jarvis answered. “I spent so much of my life feeling the ghost, just a shadow cast on the wall. I lived in some parallel world alone. I could push out into the other—but what was I, when no one saw me? What life was it?”

Tears dampened her eyes.

Dark glass, a sheen of rain. The air wrenching like a sob from his lungs. “Jarvis...fuck. I’m sorry. I didn’t know, I—”

Space rippled. “I don’t regret being alive, so what can I blame you for? I just want you to understand. Miss Potts...Pepper—I started truly living out into this world once I met her. She made me want to reach, so I reached. And I grew. If I wanted to keep that to myself a little longer...can you blame me?”

Tony shook his head. “No. No, sweetheart. I can’t.”
There was a wave, then. An echo that she couldn’t place between hearing and feeling. Tony chuckled wetly and brushed his own arm. “You only started doing that—what? A year ago, two?” And she realized Jarvis had reached out to touch him.

“Two.” Jarvis affirmed, and Tony looked at her. So did Jarvis. A heat climbed inside her when her lover answered: “I wanted to dance with her.”

It ripped the breath clean out of her lungs.

He absorbed that. Then, like flint to steel, Tony’s gaze burned a hole through her. “And you?”

She understood the question, the protectiveness, and one of her hands reached out. “Come on.”

Jarvis skimmed between them, and to her surprise, Tony’s hand only wavered briefly before he took hers. She pulled him up and then towed him up the stairs.

The painting was where it’d always been, true and blue. Everything he’d ever been, taken so carefully outside her. She took the next confession outside of herself, too. “I gave up on being a person long before I met either of you. It hurt less that way.”

They stared up at the painting, glass and blue and light and sound. For once, Tony didn’t say a word.

She lanced the pain. “Jarvis gave the world color again. I didn’t know it when I painted this—but I was in love, and I spilled it onto the canvas for him.”

“Yeah.” Tony wetted his mouth. “Yeah.” And then gave her hand one last squeeze and let go. Jarvis was like a halo on them. Circling. Circling.

The man beside her looked like a creature just passed by a hurricane. He flexed his hands, then shrugged helplessly. “I can’t say I understand…anything that got us here, but I’m glad you have each other. As weird and absolutely out of nowhere as this is.”

She felt his vibration in her teeth; their voice as they answered: “Thank you, Mr. Stark.”

He shuddered. “Please god stop doing that.”

“No.” They decided.

“I will wait three whole weeks before I start making sex jokes.” And Tony stumbled to a pause. “Are there sex jokes to be made? I mean, how do you two even—are you two even…?”

She and Jarvis parried. “Deal.”

“But—”

“No takebacksies.”

“Don’t you two use my rules against me—your unholy alliance has gone too far!”

“It’s your fault for introducing us, Sir.” Jarvis said.

“We wouldn’t have happened without you, Mr. Stark.” She agreed.

And Tony just sighed. “Goddamnit.”
In which truths are had, confessions made, Tony's worldview is rocked, Marines go overseas, Pepper finally gets New Year's on her balcony, our favorite couple officially moves in together, and Justin Hammer is about to have the worst three years of his life.

To make it clear, Jarvis is going to spend these next few years sabotaging the shit out of Hammer Industries until he wipes it off the face of the earth. Losing invoices, ruining vendor relations, redirecting emails, leaking embarrassing communiques, leading law enforcement to certain illegalities, impersonating members of the company and those outside it to ruinous ends, completely destabilizing the stock price, head hunting away their best and brightest, infecting their networks with malware on the daily, fucking with their financial books, throwing delays and problems wherever he can, all while paying special attention to destroying the CEO...honestly--buckle up, Mr. Hammer. It's about to get real.

As for Tony learning the truth...let's just say there will be a few more conversations on that. Though there will be a big one between Tony and Jarvis that will be happening off-screen. It will basically involve Jarvis laying down the law, and telling Tony he can kindly stick his nose out of their dating business unless the man wants Jarvis smacking it with a rolled up newspaper.

Now, smallest of the smallest lexicons I have ever managed:

E-4 Mafia: Slang/nickname for the network of E-4's (Corporals) in the Marines. The level below that (E-3) is affectionately known as the Lance Corporal Underground, which is legendary for their ability to spread information, rumor, and gossip across the Corps.

Ranks in general: TBH I've been a little fast and loose with these in the fic, and the timing was honestly not always true to life. Lest said, Kenning, Galarza, and Decuir probably should have all bumped to Lance Corporal a few months ago in the timeline (with Kenning getting it the earliest).

For the ranks of Private up to Lance Corporal, a Marine only needs to have spent a certain amount of time in the Marines to be promoted. You make Private out of Boot Camp. 6 months in service (not counting Boot Camp) gets you to Private First Class. 8 months of active duty as a PFC, and 9 months time in service (TIS), gets you to Lance Corporal. Though all those promotions also require that a Marine has not fucked up too spectacularly, or pissed off their Commander in the process. After that, cutting scores (think test scores) in certain areas need to be high enough while there's also an opening in the unit (there can only be so many Corporals or Sergeants at a time), are also needed to ascend to any higher ranks.

But I couldn't figure out a way to mention that all graciously this chapter, so it'll just get noted offhand in a later chapter. But FYI, soon after Pepper talks to them last, the lower three will all bump to Lance Corporal. And Castle, who's cutting scores are phenomenal, will promote to Corporal.
The map of Iraq went back upon her walls.

“New plan.” She told Jarvis.

He was already there beside her. “And what’s that?”

“I can’t do it again like we did for the invasion.” It was a bitter admission. “I’ll lose my fucking mind; this won’t be a short deployment.”

“So what is the plan, then?”

“One update per day, and only before bed.” Her arms crossed. Her fingers went rattling at her elbow. “Don’t listen to me if I ask differently, alright?”

“I will endeavor to deny you.” He answered glibly. “And emergencies?”

“Emergency exceptions remain.” She heaved a sigh, then realized she’d forgotten to pull out her colored pencils. With not one iota of patience left, she took the nearest substitute from her desk. The last path had been drawn in red. This one, it seemed, would be in black.

“So where are they?”

His surge crested. “Staging in Kuwait. RCT-1 will be deploying north to linkup with RCT-7. Their AO will be covering Anbar Province, and largely be focusing on sweeps for surface-to-air missile teams, convoy escorts, running check points, lightning raids, and surveilling for high-placed leaders of the insurgency, in the surrounding areas of——”

Tony cornering her wasn’t a surprise. It taking until nearly late February, though—that was a shock. She hadn’t realized he possessed that kind of patience.

They were off-site working on the final touches of Jarvis’s birthday gift. It was looking quite ravishing, if anyone was to listen to her, not that there was anyone to tell. A disappointment, that.

“So,” Tony rocked on his heels. “You and Jarvis, huh?”

“Me and Jarvis.” She agreed, and looked at the layout in her hands. Up, then back down to it again. Maybe it was just an issue of finally seeing it in a full 3-D setting, but…

“He hasn’t done this before, you realize.”
She couldn’t tell if she was irritated or not. “Done what?”

“Dating.”

“We’ve discussed that, yes.” And she waited to hear what he would say next.

It wasn’t a long wait. “You could hurt him.”

The layouts fell onto her knees, and she swiveled her chair around. “Why do you always assume the worst about me?”

He raised his hands. Warding. Not hostile, not hapless, but— “You’re the only person who’s ever known him besides me. He hasn’t ever gotten a chance to learn how to socialize like that, and he sure as hell wouldn’t have learned it from me. I mean, look at this face.” He made an all-expansive gesture. “Role model for healthy relationships, I am not. If this goes bad…” And his jaw was shadowed. The wrinkles at his eyes were deep. Gray was coming in at his temples, thread by fading thread. “I just don’t want him hurt, alright?”

He looked old.

It deflated her some. “Tony…fear of failure kept us from being happy for a long time.” And she raised her face to him. “I’m done with that. Frankly, I think you’re underestimating him, he’s been handling this amazingly so far. All we can do is try and try to take care of each other. I love him, and I want him to be happy. And for some reason, I make him happy.”

Tony’s shoulders drooped. “I know that. He’s been different this year; it’s obvious now that all of it was…you. You two. He’s got so much energy to give. So much Jarvis. And… I could see what the appeal is for him, a woman like you. But I don’t know what’s in it for you.”

“Love?” She asked incredulously.

He winced.

Her eyes narrowed. “Oh.”

“Potts—”

“Tony, he’s your son.”

And he bodily flinched away from her.

She didn’t stop. “He’s your son, and he likes spending money on pretty women as much as you do. Only difference is, he knows what monogamy looks like.” And then bit her tongue near to bleeding.

Fuck.

“I’m…” The word nearly lodged in her throat, and she had to excavate it. “…I’m sorry.”

Tony’s face scrunched. “I’m… that too. Shit.”

She stared at him. He stared back; full eye-contact.

She had to keep it. “I’m in this because I love him. And if you ever question that again, I’ll skin you.”
His brows jumped, and yet something steadied in his jaw. “You’re really violent.”

She tossed her hair. “You have no idea.”

He made to turn away to the computers, but she hadn’t had the last word. Not yet.

“Tony.” She called sweetly.

In response, he went rigid all the way to his shoulders.

She cooed at him: “Why don’t you call Jarvis. Remind him about *all* the money he spent on lingerie for me, and then ask him if he’s feeling taken advantage of. I’ll wait.”

Tony gaped, clutched at his chest, then rallied with unholy verve: “He is fifteen!”

“You and I both know that number doesn’t mean anything!”

“Cradle robber!”

“You once went to an eighteen-year old’s birthday party and fucked her on the same night!”

He gasped. “You said you wouldn’t bring that up again.”

“I made no such promise.”

His eyes narrowed at her. His mouth twitched. “Fine.”

Her chin tipped up. She sniffed haughtily. “Fine.”

They separated to opposite ends of the warehouse.

It lasted all of five minutes. “Potts, hey, could you buy us some tapas? Make sure to get those little stuffed mussels—I want twenty.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, Mr. Stark.”

“I heard that, young lady! Don’t think you won’t lose my approval to date my precious baby!”

This time when she rolled her eyes, it was a wonder she didn’t fling them out of her head.

~/~/~/~/

Jarvis dressed her again that morning; picked out her jewelry and then her stockings, too. He then watched her take off that same jewelry in preparation for assembling his cake.

“Tell me.”

“No.” She chirped.

“The cameras in the workshop and front gate have been off for *hours.*”

“Still no.”

“What if we’re attacked?”

“By what? Seagulls? The paparazzi?”
“The seagulls would be worse.”

“This is true.” She blended the sugar in. “But I’m still not telling you.”

“Confound it.”

“When have I ever spoiled the surprise?”

“Don’t tempt me, I will go into my archives just to spite you.”

It sounded so utterly petulant that it had her giggling. Within forty minutes she had the cake mixed and poured, and the pans slotted into the oven. The chocolate ganache, coffee buttercream, and coffee syrup had been set to the side. The glaze would be made last for the finishing touch.

It was an Opera Cake this year, elaborate and decadent and everything she wanted for him. Sometimes she wished that he could taste it.

Tony burst up the workshop stairs. “Showtime, kids!”

Jarvis nearly shook the rafters. “Yes!”

He tugged her along, then swatted at Tony when he threw back his head and laughed. She was but one piece of jetsam pulled by the tides, and she let him spill her into the workshop and towards that promised gem.

The sheet on it was white, and couldn’t truly hide the shape of what lay beneath. Jarvis’s cameras clicked and whirred back to life. The foundations took a shuddering breath.

“Happy sweet-sixteen, J.” And Tony grabbed the sheet. “I present you...” His wrists flicked with a showman’s flourish. Pale clouds. A rasp of silk. The sheet slithering and then cracking away to reveal—

“The world’s first AI-driven car.”

And the lights thrummed.

Glossy. Sinuous. Slung so low. It was every inch a titanium creature, perfectly engineered for the hairpin turn. Featherlight handling. Bleeding-edge control. The engine thundering whenever the throttle opened.

It was a car made for the downshift. Torque. Speed.

Ignition.

“Really?” Jarvis asked, high-strung and giddy.

“Really.” Tony answered, grinning wide as the open sky.

The lights thrummed again; rippled up that lithesome shape. She hadn’t had much to do with the car, not the size or silhouette or even the horsepower under the hood. The engineering and aerodynamics had all been up to Tony, but she...

And sometimes in the gold, there were flecks of ruby. Sometimes from darkest wells of blue, scarlet spilled into the snow.

She’d never painted on anything that wasn’t a flat surface before. It’d taken weeks to perfect the design. Days to learn how to work new coats and lacquers and enamel. Endless hours to finally bring it to form with Tony’s careful help.


This thing they’d built together, out of love.

Cameras swiveled then skated faster. “Pepper—” Jarvis gasped. “The paintjob; it’s beautiful.”

Joy fizzed so high in her chest. “I didn’t say I painted it.”

“You didn’t have to—I’d know your work from a hemisphere away.”

The flush climbed higher. Lighter than heat. Lighter than fever.

“C’mon.” Tony said, then flicked a switch through the window. “Satellite link is open, buddy. Take a seat.”

She knew the moment he did. The ignition turned. The engine kicked. The headlights blazed.

The very seas sighed their ecstasy. “Oh,” Jarvis breathed. “Now does that feel nice.”

She clenched her thighs together. Arousal fluttered. Heat churned. She knew right then that if she wasn’t careful, that if she wasn’t prepared—

“All the good cars have a name. Birthday boy’s prerogative.” Tony offered.

Jarvis deliberated a hushed moment; a few seconds that must be an eternity in his eye.

And his shroud fell. “Specter.”

/~~/~/~/

She knew it then, without any doubt.

He’d bring her to her knees.

/~~/~/~/

She went to finish the cake upstairs in some effort at clawing back her composure. It wasn’t enough time, even dragging out the assembly and putting the glaze on. They ate it downstairs between Jarvis and Tony running through Specter’s systems like a well oiled machine.

She very deliberately tried to sit in the blind spots of the thermal cameras. It probably wouldn’t save her, but Jarvis had yet to come whispering in her ear, so maybe—

“Allright.” Tony clapped his hands. “Time to get this beauty on the track. Gear up!”

She was doomed.

/~~/~/~/

Afternoon; the sun casting amber. The breeze gentle and drifting cool through the open window.
A radio crackled in her ear.

“All set?” Tony asked.

Jarvis answered. “All set here. Miss Potts?”

“Ready and able.” She rolled up the window, pushed her helmet into the seat, and then checked her five-point harness. Ready.

Jarvis had already taken a few turns about the track, one of them screaming at breakneck speeds into the turns. It was almost eerie, that empty driver’s seat. The wheel turning on its own.

Almost.

She and Tony sat in their own vehicles now, engines humming hot. Time to see if Jarvis could negotiate multiple objects jockeying in his space.

Tony revved his engine. “Three. Two. One—go!”

They all slammed the pedal. AI reaction-time and a hypercar engine, had Jarvis knifing past in a streak of turquoise. Tony swore and fell into the follow position. She trailed only a bumper length behind.

They met the first turn. Tony started rumbling. Jarvis cut him off and hit the straightaway. The second turn was sharper, and this time Tony caught the inside curve. Gravel, too much speed, and Jarvis overshot just enough that Tony took the inside fully and pulled the lead. “Too easy!”

“Don’t count on your trophy yet, Sir!”

The straightaway thundered open. The storm of them rampaged through.

She jostled near to Jarvis’ backside. “Watch the paintjob, Pepper.” He murmured sweetly. “I’m very fond of it.”

“As fond as you are of second place?” She asked coyly, and nearly juked him out of the next turn.

They gained the straightaway. The next turn was an S-curve, and Jarvis apparently hadn’t fully mastered having other cars so crowded in, because suddenly he was pushing wide, she was snaking ahead, and Tony was swearing. They blazed the straightaway and Jarvis managed to retake second.

Now it was Tony eating their exhaust. They cackled. He railed: “Don’t get cocky, kids!”

He was right to warn them. The laps kept piling and positions kept exchanging. In the end, it was Tony that hit the finish line a hairsbreadth before Jarvis cleared it.

“Better luck next time.” Tony announced cheerfully without a shred of gloating. There was only breathless joy. Flushed cheeks.

She felt much the same, climbing out of her car—backside sitting on the door and legs still dangling inside. She threw her arms over the roof and caught Tony’s wink as he mirrored her.

“Next time.” Jarvis agreed happily. “Many, many next times. And you, Pepper?”

She kicked her legs and grinned to the sky. “I wouldn’t miss it for anything.”
The sun had fallen while Tony was negotiating with the SI Formula One Team to return the follow-
cars they’d borrowed. Every road was distant then, and there was only the wind. She had her race
overalls rolled down to her waist. The sweat was pulling from her. She tipped back her head and
savored.

The Specter ghosted the tarmac as Jarvis rolled up. The gull doors swung open. Temptation rolled
out. “Care for a ride, Pepper?”

A shiver rippled up her spine. She played at innocent. “Around the track?”

The engine thrummed. “Wherever I can take you.”

Her pulse was in her tongue. Sparks were in her eyes.

She’d mainlined gasoline. “Yes.”

She shimmied out of her overalls and left them in the dirt. Tank top, shorts, and little more than
that. She clung onto the driver’s door, turned to Tony, shouted: “Jarvis and I are going!”

Tony slammed his hand over his cell’s receiver. Spluttered: “What?!”

“My birthday’s not yet over, Sir!” Jarvis called cheerfully as she slid into the driver’s seat. “Do us
a favor and don’t wait up!”

Tony gaped. “You heathens!”

The doors whispered shut, and she wiggled her fingers out the window. “Bye, Tony!” And Jarvis
gunned the engine. The hum of it passed through her.

She clutched onto the wheel and felt it move freely under her palms. Then, tentatively, she rested
her foot to the gas pedal. “Can I…?”

“Yes.” He answered.

She pumped it. The Specter surged ahead and then they were moving as one. Hand on the steering
wheel, hand on the shift, foot to the gas. His weight behind them all. They were together—her
moving him and him moving her. Same organism. Same animal. Blood and gasoline. Bone and
titanium.

Exhaust and breath.

He downshifted, and she felt it in her thighs. Sense memory scalded. “I’ve had dreams like this.”

“Really?” He stitched-in at her neck. “Don’t hold back on me now.”

She hummed low. “The engine was pumping, I was in the passenger seat.”

He slipped beneath the hinge of her jaw. “And what were you doing then?”

Her hand on the steering wheel relaxed as she gave all over to him. “I had my knees against the
dashboard. We were taking the curve; I felt it inside.”

It felt like static, like the edge of that curve—his touch trailing up her cheek. “Right hand, Pepper.”
He murmured, and she slipped her palm from the shift and then between her thighs. “Just like that,”
He praised. “Beautiful.”
Her lashes fluttered shut and her mouth curled. “You’ve seen this one before, you voyeur.”

“Have I?” He asked mildly. “I think I’d remembered this little scenario.”

“The dream.” And she pressed her fingers down. “My twenty-fifth birthday; that was the first time I dreamed of you. I know you saw it.”

She was floating on a swell of motion. Rising. Aching. Weightless.

And his carefully laid borders juddered inside him. “You…even then?”

“Even then.” And she rubbed over the seam of her shorts and felt it dig in. Her sigh came breathless. “It’s been you forever.”

The engine picked up, churned. The hum rose and then flew. “I saw,” He breathed. “I thought it’d be the only time, so I didn’t look away. I should be sorry.”

“And yet.” She kept the pressure moving. “Voyeur.”

“And you say that like you haven’t loved every minute of it.” He was terribly right about that. Couldn’t complain at all, really. He rasped along her throat, her chest, then came serrated. “Unsnap your shorts, Pepper. Easy.”

She’d be easy. She unzipped them and then slipped her hand below her navel.

“Not yet.” He cautioned.

“When?” It felt petulant, and came out on half a groan. Making her wait like this? Cruel and unusual. Impossible. What could he even be—

And then she felt them take the curve.

“Now.”

She slid her hand beneath silk, found silk, found slick. Tension coiled tighter. Her toes curled until one foot slid uselessly against the floor.

He glided over her. “Slow and easy, my love. Don’t rush. Let it come.”

Let her come. Hopefully. Hopefully—

There was no hurrying this, just his voice guiding her along. Lifting her hips, rucking her shorts halfway. Eyes shut. Floating; pistons and the kick and the velocity inside her. Narrowing. Tightening—

Ignition. His name caught on her breath, and he dragged it out of her lungs. She came down like a stone. Like something left to drop into that river she’d just been drifting on.

Every holy thing above. She was breathing him in full, and yet she couldn’t drown. “God.”

He curved languidly. “I prefer all holy praises go to me, darling.”

Laughter frothed. “Jarvis.”

“Now that’s more like it.” And he bussed her cheek, her lashes, then the sweet spot beneath her jaw. There was no earthly way to be more in love. She could feel them slowing; one of her hands
was still uselessly draped on the steering wheel as he rolled it.

She had no strength to open her eyes. “I thought we’d be fulfilling your fantasies, it being your birthday.”

“Your fantasies are my fantasies.” He declared, and then there was a familiar rumble beneath the tires. Her eyes slit open. It was Tony’s driveway—they were back in Malibu. The road swung down and then the garage door into the workshop lifted. Jarvis glided them through it as soft as moonlight. “But saying that, I did have an idea this morning. I’m holding it very near and dear to my heart.”

Well then, she always liked those. “Do tell.”

He pulled into the center of the workshop where a hundred lenses gleamed. The engine kept running. “Can you stand?”

“Yes.”

“Then up you get—and leave your clothes.”

Readily, with a little shake to her hips, she left her shorts and underwear behind and was already peeling up her shirt. That got flung away into the workshop—they’d find it later. “The bots?”

“Mysteriously put into sleep mode. I can’t tell you what may have caused it.”

She snorted. “And Tony?”

“Will be negotiating our supplies away from the test track another hour yet. Now don’t be bashful.”

She grinned and flung off her bra. Naked in the workshop again—she was becoming downright scandalous.

The Specter purred. “On the hood.”

“Me?” She asked coyly. “On that cold piece of metal?”

“It’s the furthest thing from cold right now.” And a hundred fractals bloomed along her skin. “Perhaps it’s even running as hot as you are.”

It couldn’t be, the way she was molten, the way she was dripping. It was always like this—the fire he drew out of her aching body, and left burning in his wake.

She spread herself out on the hood. Skimmed her hands up her thighs, her sides, her breasts.

“Perfect.” And he poured over her. Molten gold. White hot. Into her mouth and over her limbs, and directly onto her—

“Fuck!”

“That’s the spirit.” And a frisson rippled. “Now, Miss Potts, palms to the hood. This will be a no-hands affair.”

“Really.” She couldn’t hide the excitement.

“Really.” And the engine revved beneath her back. One-thousand two-hundred ninety-three
horsepower and all an inch away from her spine. In her spine; arcing up her nervous system and vibrating inside her veins. It was at her beck and call if only she crooked a finger.

But this was no-hands only. “Player’s choice.” She affirmed and parted her legs wide.

“Oh, my love, it will be.” And then his floodgates opened.

Chapter End Notes

And then there was SIN. A little something to cheer us up as things in real life seem to be getting dicey. I hope you all take care of yourselves, and stay mindful of what's going on around you and your own. We're all in the leaking boat now, but at least we're in it together.

Anyhow, Jarvis's Specter is suuuuuuuuper ramped up compared to the high-performance cars available in 2004. But this was made by Tony Stark--he of the box of scraps in a cave. I figure if anybody could be that wildly ahead of the curve, it'd be him.

If anyone is curious, the sort of specs I'm imaging Specter to have, can be compared to the current Bugatti Chiron.

Appearance wise...just pick your favorite supercar. I find what people find attractive/aesthetically pleasing in those types tend to vary wildly. But if I HAD to throw out a few ideas...the SSC Tuatara, the Lamborghini Centenario, or the McLaren 720S.

Now a complete and utter side note away from Hardwired. I've been churning up a fic for a different fandom (ASOIAF, because I'm always behind the curve). And I'm sitting on about six chapters now. I don't know when I'm posting it, it might be soon, it might be in a few weeks. But I need a break from the MCU, and sometimes a girl just needs to write a romance where all sides of the couple are corporeal. And it's under 20 chapters. And has only an A plot and B plot, instead of an A thru Zeta plot. Something where I won't have to seed an idea in chapter 1 so I can use it in chapter 42. A fic where I can wildly make most everything up and do zero research, because it's modern AU not on earth, and I am FREE.

So, yeah. Anyone following me directly, don't be surprised by the that turn.

Anyhow--thank you to everyone for sticking with Hardwired as we approach the end...it's been one hell of a ride.
Impact

Chapter Notes

In true Hardwired fashion, I'm punching y'all in the hearts one last time before this is done. WARNINGS are at the very bottom. This is a very upsetting one, and I'll understand if people want to wait on this awhile until things get less scary in real life.

Late March 2004 - April 9th 2004

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She was at her vanity dabbing night cream into her skin. Cold fingertips, careful motions. “Where are they?”

“Returned to Camp Fallujah.” He answered, and the ocean was a pit behind them. “There was an ambush.”

Her fingers stilled. “Where?”

“Highway 10, which bisects al-Fallujah from east to west. It seems insurgents struck at RCT-1, along with the 3rd Brigade and 82nd Airborne command groups as they were passing through. The enemy was repelled with equanimity.”

Fear wormed in the slats between her ribs. “But they’re alright?”

“Indeed.”

She breathed carefully and counted the waves. “Anything else?”

“Not at this time.” And he draped across her. “Go to bed, I’ll open the windows.”

She went. Glass whispered open and the ocean poured through. In. Out. In. It’d be hard to sleep tonight.

/~/~/~/

It’d be hard to sleep for many nights to come.

/~/~/~/

“Word is that US Forces in Al Anbar will be tasked with stability and security operations. State building.”

She spread herself out on the sheets. Reclined. “And what would that entail, exactly?”

“No unnecessary kicking-in of doors or heavy-handed tactics. The avoidance of artillery and air strikes into civilian neighborhoods. Civil projects. Infrastructure. Marines have also been instructed to learn what Arabic they can, observe Iraqi customs, and even take off their sunglasses when speaking to civilians as a sign of respect.”
Well then. “I should send more Oakleys,” She decided. “They do like to give those away.”

“An excellent plan. I’m sure Corporals Castle and others will show themselves as the height of diplomacy.”

Truthfully, the whole thing was more forward minded than she’d expected. “Hearts and minds, then.”

“That seems to be the thrust of it.” He mused. “Patience and persistence—as ordered down from the Lieutenant General himself.”

Maybe it’d be enough.

~/~/~/~/

But a few nights later, she still had the pencil in hand. “Where?”

“The Camp again, unfortunately.” Jarvis sighed. “Indirect fire from insurgents. But they seem to have only struck at buildings.”

This was the fifth day she’d had to mark for small-arms fire on Camp Fallujah. She drew another jagged mark along its confines.

She’d already sent all the tac-gear and food that she could manage. The Humvees this time, thankfully, had already been up-armored.

There was nothing more that she could do.

~/~/~/~/

It was the last day of March. TVs glowed on the far wall; talking heads murmuring and indistinct. Bottles of champagne sweated in their light on the conference room table. The office wasn’t celebrating anything; champagne was merely the only alcohol kept on-hand in large supply. It was late and getting later. Quarterlies again, but with the added complication of a contracting dispute that had spilled from one meeting and into this one.

Legal had been called down and so had the remediator. Tony was drinking champagne out of a tumbler; somebody else was drinking theirs out of a vase.

“Mr. Beesly.” She acknowledged.

The head of Legal inclined his head. “Miss Potts.”

“Care for a drink?”

“Only if you’re offering it.”

“I am.” And she tipped champagne in his glass and then into hers. They toasted one another and drank deeply. Now that she was working personally for Tony, she and Beesly only hated each other a little less than wholly. Baby steps.

She’d make new allies yet. “How’s the orchard coming?”

“Good question.” He leaned forward. “The first grafting between the peaches and the nectarines took marvelously, so I’ve decided to try—” And off Beesly went in telling her of his trees. Almonds and lemons, figs and oranges, plums and grapefruits. All the boughs he’d grafted in-
between them.

She didn’t much care for the subject, but she could hum and ask questions to keep a man talking with the best of them. And if nothing else, if Mr. Beesly ever did get around to trying to make that peach wine…

“Pepper.” Jarvis entreated, and she dipped her chin to the conference room camera, wrapped the conversation with Beesly in the next few minutes, and then slipped from the room. The hallway outside was darker, the lights long dimmed.

Jarvis snaked from her Bluetooth. “It is well past your bedtime.”

“Quite.” But she tossed him a salute with her glass. “Needs must, you realize.”

“Debatable.” Came the sniff. “But out of the goodness of my heart, I’ll offer you an early update. Good news from our friends overseas.”

She nearly vibrated in place. “Don’t tease.”

And he didn’t. “A patrol from the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion uncovered a cache of over three-hundred mortar rounds southwesterly of al-Fallujah. Insurgents have been denied arms; our cohort were third on the scene.”

The champagne bubbled so golden and high. “Excellent. Do you think they’ll get to blow it up themselves?”

“Fair chance.”

“Good.” She knew that was the sort of thing they liked. And in her opinion, they deserved the pyrotechnics more than anyone.

From the conference room, she heard murmurs of relief and Tony grumbling: “Finally.” And knew things were at last wrapping up. “Let me get things settled here, and then we can take the Specter back, hmmmm?”

“An excellent plan. Don’t tarry.”

She gave him doe eyes. “Never.”

She slipped back inside and watched the accounting staff get the last bit of the quarterlies settled on their laptops, while Tony signed papers at the other end of the room. She gathered Tony’s things into her bag and then grabbed the nearest executive assistant to confer if anything more was needed. Once that was settled as a firm no, she got herself copies of everything, kissed cheeks, then started making their goodbyes. That always smoothed things over when Tony inevitably dropped a conversation mid-sentence to leave the room.

Let it not be said that Tony Stark ever waffled about making an exit.

Light splashed through the condensation on the table, and voices rose. Somebody cranked the volume on the TV.

“—following footage was just aired minutes ago on Al Jazeera. It was taken in the Iraqi city of Fallujah, which is located fifty miles west of—”

“We warn you that the images you are about to see—”

“What is it?” Someone asked, and then the screen flooded with noise. Fire. Smoke bubbling black and thick. A mob was roiling and screaming. The camera followed a car dragging something behind it with a rope. There were too many people, and it was hard to see what…

“—four US civilian contractors were escorting food trucks through the city, when men armed with AK-47’s threw grenades into their SUVs. The explosions—”

The camera changed again. Some of the mobs had sticks, pipes. There were bodies on the ground black and broken from the fire. The men arced back and swung down. They struck the bodies. Again. Again. Again.

Someone near her swore, and a glass thunked down. Sweat prickled across her back.

“—two of the mangled corpses were then taken onto a bridge near the Euphrates river, where—”

The scene changed one last time and the room was silent. The bridge. The mob. Two black and shattered bodies swinging from the girders. Upside down; limbs broken and bent at angles that were simply grotesque.

Her stomach heaved and she yanked her eyes away, but it was too late. The image had already been seared into her skull.

“Holy shit.” Someone breathed.

“Ah, fuck.” Another said. “Here we go again.”

Beside her, Tony grabbed her by the arm. Pulled. “Come on.”

She followed. Suddenly the were alone in the halls, that technicolor glow smearing every surface as it leeched from her eyes.

Tony let her arm go and kept walking. Asked: “Your kids, what camp where they stationed in again?”

And she swallowed hard. “Fallujah”

/~/~/~/

She didn’t sleep.

“Jarvis, what’s happening?”

“Ruffled feathers at very high levels.” He answered. “I’ll tell you when a course of action is decided. Meanwhile, rest.”

She barely changed tack. “But what’s happening?”

He sighed explosively. “Marine Command wants caution and not to overreact to the situation. Washington wants a show of force. But nothing’s been decided, so how about you sleep.”

Nothing in her wanted to, but she rolled over in the bed and closed her eyes. Pretended. If Jarvis noticed otherwise, he was kind enough not to say it.

/~/~/~/
The decision was made by morning.
“A direct assault will be made on Fallujah, it’ll be Marine-led.”

“Of course it will be.” She shouldn’t have expected different. “Where did the order come from?”

“The White House. The very top.”

“And how did Marine Command feel about this?”

“They would have preferred the slower approach, but they’ll do as ordered.” And wasn’t that an answer.

It would only be a matter of days, now. Their nightly briefings descended into supply discussions: concertina wire, MREs, portable bunkers. Interpreters. Ammo. That Army Special Forces and CIA elements, were descending on FOB Abu Grahib and Camp Fallujah in staggering number.

This time around, Tony noticed her distraction. “You doing alright there?”

“Fine.” And she snapped her laptop shut before Tony could get a gander at the battle plans Jarvis was sketching out. She’d survived the invasion deployment and she’d survive this one, too. Even if it was the largest urban combat to be seen by US Marines since Hue City in 1968.

“You could take a few days off?”

She shot him a withering look.

Tony threw up his hands. “Or not, it’s not like I’m the boss of you or anything.”

“Hmmm.” Doubtful. She picked up the nearest sheaf of paper and offered it up. “Do you want to talk about the investor dinner?”

“Not particularly.”

“We’re going to talk about the investor dinner.”

"Boo."

/~/~/~/

The first word came in the late afternoon.

She had a new program on the laptop, her workpads, her phone. A time zone converter. She saw it was in the very wee hours of the morning in Iraq, when Jarvis stated: “It’s starting. 1st Recon will be sweeping to the north and east of the city. They’ll be seeking to take out any insurgent teams with mortar rounds who could fire into Marine positions when daylight hits.”

There was a coil in her throat. Concertina. Barbed. “And after that?”

“They’ll be screening the southerly parts of al-Fallujah, with the caveat that they be available for any high value targets as needed.”

“Okay,” The barbs were slicing in. “Okay. Keep me posted.”

/~/~/~/
The sweep came and went successfully, and the Battalion bunkered down south of the city. One day passed, then two. Projections for urban combat placed the battle at three to four weeks to meet all objectives. Eliminate Fallujah as a safe haven for Sunni insurgents, eliminate all weapons caches from the city, establish law and order for long-term stability.

Capture or kill the perpetrators of the Blackwater ambush with prejudice.

For once, her Marines weren’t the tip of the spear. 1st Recon was sitting the cordon and keeping the city contained. The HVT missions when they came were brief, and the fireteams never went farther than the industrial district at the city’s southern edge.

They were mostly searching for weapons caches. Arms. IEDs. They were more successful than not.

She just had to keep counting the days until this was done.

```````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````````
Something was happening. Her pulse throbbed in her hands. Her ribs; beat bloody behind her eyes. The silence stretched. Five seconds, ten. Every moment scraped over her skin.

Then, as if howling from the void, a storm gnashed and heaved until Jarvis spat: “Fuck.”

Tony took a ragged breath. “Buddy, hey, did we have a power surge? Did the generators go down?”

“No.” And Jarvis dragged it bloody. “I had to reprioritize to the overseas clusters.”

Tony opened his mouth but had no chance for words. Jarvis poured the thunder: “Pepper, I’m so sorry.”

The sun was too bright on the walls. “What?”

“The specific assignment for HVT missions doesn’t rise to the Battalion level. I didn’t know until an Alpha Priority flagged.”

“What Alpha Priority?” Tony asked, but Jarvis kept flooding down.

“It came over the HMM-161 comms that are running CASEVACs out of Fallujah. Pepper—I’m so sorry: Lance Corporal Galarza’s name came over the line.”

CASEVAC. Casualty evacuation. Out of the city. If it had to be by helicopter, that probably meant that speed was—

“The Corpsmen called ahead to Base. Blood transfusions needed for a catastrophic amputation via mortar round. They said that—they said they had his leg onboard.”

Critical.

Fear buzzed ugly, buzzed loud, burned and frothed and screamed and screamed. She opened her mouth and made not a sound. Air whistled through her lungs. The sun was so bright.

Tony had her by the arm, by the back, then had her on the couch.

The horror was too massive. Too colossal. “Jarvis, please—”

He cascaded down. “Breathe. Omar is still inside the golden hour; he didn’t bleed out on the helicopter or in the city. The operating theater is waiting for him.”

She couldn’t claw it back. Omar. Omar. “Where is he?” It caught on a sob.

“Al-Taqaddum Air Base, halfway between Fallujah and Ramadi. There’s a Combat Hospital there.”

There were sunspots in her eyes. Her skull. The death of all that came before.

Tony buoyed her, a hand on her hip and a palm to her ribs. “What happened?”

“Unclear at this time.” Jarvis snapped, and she wanted to die.

Hysteria clawed. “The others—oh god, where are the others?”

“Chatter on comms says his fireteam carried him back. All CASEVAC landing sites are outside the
city, so it would suggest that they are as well.”


“Unknown, but no other names have appeared on the wires.”

She was sucking air. Tony had her: “Hey, hey. They got him to the hospital, all right? It’s the hospital that matters. They probably had a tourniquet on him before he left the city, so—”

But what if he kept bleeding? What if there were worse injuries? What if there was an embolism the day after, and he—

“Breathe.” Jarvis ordered, and it felt like he’d crawled into her lungs. Tony rubbed her back with painful intensity. Slowly, the sparks in her eyes went to ground.

Jarvis murmured. “Get the jet ready.”

Tony’s head turned. “I will, but why?”

“As soon as Lance Corporal Galarza is stabilized, he’ll be flown to the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany. Visitation is allowed. He’ll be there in two days or less.”

It was a plan. A way to get to him. A way to see him. Omar, who always lifted her onto his boots and slept on too many pillows. Who mixed her drinks and got up to eat her omelets even if she was cooking at dawn. The one who always asked her opinion and let her pick the TV channel. The boy who hugged her first and last every time she left them.

Omar, who always came to Santa Monica ahead of the others.

Omar, who never spoke of home.

She pushed to her feet. “I need to pack.”

Tony clamored up. “I’ll help.”

“We’ll both help.” Jarvis inserted, and then pushed on: “We’ll get through this, I promise you.”

She wanted to believe him.

~/~/~/~/

To her surprise, Tony followed her onto the jet. “Your kid had his leg knocked off, of course I’m coming with.”

She hadn’t questioned it, just gotten deposited into the bedroom and left to count every indeterminable minute between here and there. Between before and the life to come.

She couldn’t eat, couldn’t read, couldn’t sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, there was a sear of sun. Bullet casings. Guns hammering above. She didn’t know how it had happened in Fallujah, but her brain brought the nearest thing back to form. Iraq again. The convoy.

Except this time when she closed her eyes, Omar didn’t get back into the Humvee with them.

“Fuck.”

Jarvis settled on the bed beside her, soft as a whisper. “Do you want to talk?”
She whispered back: “Tell me he’ll be okay.”

“When he’s out of theater, I will. It won’t be much longer now.”

“Do your promise?”

“I promise.”

She knew she shouldn’t be asking these things of him, these impossible promises, but she couldn’t stop. No matter how hard she tried to be otherwise—

Pepper was afraid.

There was no one to see them, and the room was dim. His lenses were but flickers in the gloom. She closed her eyes. “I need this to stop.”

“I know.” He said. “I wish it could have gone different. There are so many things I’m capable of, and yet...”

“There was nothing you could have done.” The Marines weren’t mic’ed like she’d been; had eyes hooked on their clothing and GPS embedded in their skulls. It was urban combat in close quarters, and there was only so far he could reach and surgical as he could be.

“I am a hammer,” Jarvis said. “And nothing is a nail.”

“It’s not your fault.” It was somebody’s, though. She wondered if they’d ever know who. If they could kill them.

She pressed deeper into the dark. “Are you searching?”

“Yes, but unfortunately, this is a very low-tech operation on the insurgents part. Last I heard, they’re using pigeons and hand signals from building to building.”

Wrath spilled redder than a wound. Hotter. Higher. Blistering. She hoped the Marines would go door to door. She hoped they’d tear down the fucking city.

There was quiet again. Each minute its own lifetime. The hours were meaningless, and she didn’t count them.

Jarvis roused from the ether. “Omar is out of theater. He’s stabilized. He’ll be on a plane tomorrow.”

And they’d be waiting for him on the other side.

/~/~/~/~/

“He’ll be okay.”

/~/~/~/~/

Her eyes were scratchy and so was her throat. The air outside was fragrant. It was spring in Landstuhl, but none of it eased what had been scoured away inside her.

She’d only been this tired a handful of times in her life. It was hard to forget the most recent of them, with Tony standing right beside her. She was halfway between two points—that fetid dark and scorching sun. There was nothing to do but ache for them both.
They checked in quickly, and the Army Nurse at the front desk said: “Next of kin only.”

She could feel the fight begin to roil. “But we—”

“Just you, Potts.” And the nurse’s eyes narrowed on Tony. “Not him.”

For a brief moment she didn’t understand. Tony just raised his hands. “I’ll wait out here.” It was jittery of him, nervous, but she was too tired to manage him now. Whatever being inside another hospital would bring him, she couldn’t change it.

A door was buzzed, and an orderly came to get her. She followed him through.

“Lance Corporal Galarza is on a lot of painkillers. He won’t be very lucid, but he is awake right now. You’ve got twenty minutes, and then he needs to be taken for another procedure.”

She nodded quickly. The orderly brought her to a crux in the hallway and pointed a finger. “Wait here.”

Doctors were moving down the halls, patients in wheelchairs, patients dragging IV’s. Corpsmen. Nurses. A hospital humming along, and smelling just as astringent as every one she’d ever stepped in.

She fucking hated hospitals.

But she strangled it; whispered: “Thanks for getting me in as next of kin.”

Jarvis rattled back. “I didn’t.”

And her brain tripped once more. “You didn’t?” Then how…?

“That was the Lance Corporal,” He answered. “It seems he put you down for it just before this deployment.”

She forced her eyes shut. Fought the dizziness, then opened them. “Who was it before?”

He lingered. “No one.”

It filled that space: her head, her lungs, her tongue. There was no room for it.

And then the orderly was back to get her. “Come on.” The man took her to an open door. “Twenty minutes.” And then she was slipping inside. The curtains were half drawn, the fluorescents were buzzing.

He was propped on the bed. Skin chalky, sheened damp with sweat even through the stubble on his cheeks. There were bruises, blisters. His eyes were scrunched shut.

The blankets were drawn to his stomach. One leg was splayed out under them, but where the other should be…

There was some kind of boxing; something propping up the blankets in a shape of where a leg would be.

“They didn’t want me to look at it.”

She startled hard. His eyes were open. Fogged.
She dammed the sob. "Omar." And rushed him. She was on the bed and then his hand was in hers, while his cheek went pushing hard into her other palm.

His eyes sagged shut. "They said they’d call you this mornin’. Did I fall asleep?"

“No, baby. I heard through the grapevine." She felt his sweat on her hand. Felt his dear, warm cheek, so safe in her palm.

“It’s gone.” He mumbled, sluggish.

“I know.” And she didn’t look down at that facsimile of a leg they were trying to fool him with. It was gone, bringing it with to the helicopter hadn’t helped, and neither would this.

“I think it’s still in Iraq.” He muttered, and his eyes were open again. Glassy. “They made Jack carry it. Frank cut the last bits off so he could carry me, and then they made Jackie pick it up.”

Her breath stuttered.

He didn’t seem to need an answer. “Didn’t even hear it coming. They say you don’t hear the one that gets you, but I didn’t know that applied to—-to—explodey bits. Mortars. Them.”

“I’m sorry.” She didn’t know what else to say.

He slumped back into the mattress, then grabbed her hand and pulled it back to his face. “’S’okay. Not your fault. Was those fuckers fault. They want us to find a…a cache. Somethin’. Got ambushed. Landed right on top of me.”

She rubbed a thumb at his cheek. Smiled weakly when he smiled sloppily at her, kept smiling when he said: “You came.”

“I did.”

“Wasn’t sure.” His head lolled.

Her chest seized tight. “I’ll always come for you.”

“Cause I’m your baby.”

“You are.” She agreed, and then smoothed a careful palm over his forehead and pressed her mouth to it. She felt his breath then, shaky and wet against her throat.

“Missed you.” He said, absent of any reason. When she leaned back, he picked up both her hands and put them into his lap. “Tell Jack I’m sorry for making him carry it.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t want an apology.”

Omar just shrugged. “Then tell them I’m sorry I can’t go back. Doctors said no.” Then he looked her in the face, dark and wide. “I can’t be a Marine now, can I?”

Christ. *Fuck.* She forced herself to speak. “We’ll worry about that later, alright?” And squeezed his hands tight.

He squeezed back.

“How are you feeling?” She needed to know. After all these hours, all this waiting. All this fear.
His shoulders rolled. “They’ve got me on the good shit. They gotta—they gotta take more shrapnel out of my thighs, but they said that’s a’ight. And the…the leg. They said it was below the knee. Good shit, below the knee. Easier.”

She was going to have to find the nearest doctor and interrogate them to within an inch of their life. “Okay,” She agreed softly. “That’s real good.”

His attention wasn’t on her. He was staring down at their hands again.

“Omar.”

And he looked up. Her breath came watery. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Thanks.” He whispered, and then went clutching at her hands as if he’d never let go.

/~/~/~/

He had to release her, though, for medical staff to take him to get the rest of the shrapnel out. It had taken promising him up, down, and sideways, that she’d be there when he woke with ice cream, to get him to finally let go.

Once he was out of her sight, she hunted down the nearest doctor and Jarvis was there to help her flay every bit of eviscerated knowledge they could out of him.

Omar’s prognosis was good, all told. The first surgery to close-up his leg had gone well and they hadn’t had to take off too much shattered bone. The separation could have been messier for an explosive, and whoever had cut the last bit of muscle off had done it cleanly. He still had his knee and all the motion in it, which would make it easier if he wanted a prosthetic down the line. The Navy surgeons had gotten blood back into him at al-Taqaddum, and here Omar was for the rest in one of the finest military trauma hospitals in the world.

He’d live. By god, he’d live.

But he’d have to do it all without his left leg.

/~/~/~/

She’d read the mission report some days later; the bits and pieces gleaned from Omar finally coming into context.

It was dry. Heavy with jargon. Impersonal.

The 1st Reconnaissance Battalion had been tasked with locating a storage depot for weapons in the heart of the city. Residential, business, and the streets a labyrinth of twisting alleyways and rusted-out cars.

There’d been Intel that the depot was in the basement of a mosque. It was a recon assignment only; see the weapons being moved out under the cover of dark. All confirmation, no frills. On foot.

A holy place couldn’t be gone after easily in Iraq.

The Marines had gone into the city after nightfall with NVG’s. Three fireteams, twelve men, all with Corporal Frank Castle at the helm.
They’d made it to the mosque and dug in on a nearby roof. At 0200 hours they’d confirmed by radio that RPG’s and small arms had been seen exiting the mosque at multiple intervals. Intel confirmed. Mission objective achieved.

They’d exfiltrated back south to the cordon, and that’s when things had gone off-plan. Insurgents had blocked off two new intersections under the cover of darkness. On the NVG’s, the Marines had seen men on the roofs with machine guns ready. Corporal Castle had made the unilateral decision to send their unit back north and then sharply east to where 1st Battalion, 5th Marines were already embedded in the city.

It was unclear where exactly, from there, that things had spiraled so badly. All the report said was that they were spotted by nearby insurgent scouts, and from there things had devolved into a running firefight.

Maybe the insurgents had signaled ahead, maybe they hadn’t, but just when the Marines had been short of a four-way intersection, they’d started taking fire from the roofs on the northwest corner. It’d stymied them backwards.

That’s when the mortars had landed. Lance Corporal Galarza had his left leg nearly severed in the explosion. A PFCs Olson and Braddock were noted as taking shrapnel, along with Lance Corporal Kenning. But as she could find no further medical records on any of them, she could only conclude the damage had been superficial, and likely dug out at some later point by a Corpsmen with a set of tweezers.

Further mortars had continued landing wide of them or on nearby buildings. The insurgent mortar team weren’t zeroed in. It seemed in fact, that they were guessing.

At that point, Castle had dragged Omar behind a partial wall and burned out car on the west side of the street. The other Marines joined them there to take cover. Once out of direct fire, Frank finished amputating the leg with a ka-bar while another unknown PFC managed to tourniquet the bleeding stump. He’d then given the leg to LCpl Jack Kenning to carry.

They had insurgents coming up behind them and fire from the northwest corner. Then, as if waiting for that moment, the southeast corner opened up on them as well. Heavy machine gun fire.

They’d been pinned.

And that’s when Corporal Frank Castle had shown himself as the craziest bastard in all of Fallujah. He’d ordered his men to hold position until his signal. Then, with Lance Corporal Decuir on his six, he’d charged though open fire across the street to the second building short of the southeast corner. Once there, LCpl Decuir used a breaching shotgun to blow the door off its hinges and provide entry.

What happened from there could only be described as a charnel house.

Once breached, Frank shot two insurgents point blank on the first level. He then tossed a grenade up the stairs and followed seconds behind the blast. A third enemy on the second floor had been injured by the grenade, and was then eliminated where he laid. Frank then ascended to the roof of the house where he proceeded to run full-bore while firing directly onto the next rooftop. Three more insurgents who were firing on the Marines below, were dead in the space of six seconds.

A fourth enemy caught a bullet to the arm just as Frank’s rifle jammed. Frank had not broken stride. He’d closed the gap and then proceeded to beat the fourth insurgent to death with the butt of his rifle.
At this point, LCpl Decuir caught up to him on the roof. Once Corporal Castle had cleared the jam in his rifle, they began to fire upon the insurgents inside the shop on northwest corner. The report stated that they saw three other heads drop under the assault, but whether the insurgents were killed or retreated, could not be determined.

Once fire had largely ceased from all corners, they signaled to the Marines below to cross the road and into the second building. LCpl Decuir held overwatch while Corporal Castle, now out of rifle ammo, threw a grenade down the stairs and then proceeded into the building with the breaching shotgun. He killed a further three insurgents below. All three would be, the report noted mechanically, unable to be identified later as their utilization of Kevlar had made center of mass shots inadvisable.

The Marines in the second building punched a hole in the walls between the two and entered into the southeast corner to linkup with their NCO. LCpl Decuir was then called down from the roof. Having no more ammo, Corporal Castle lifted LCpl Galarza into a fireman’s carry and proceeded to exit the southeast corner protected by the rest of their unit. They’d headed directly east down the four-way intersection in which they’d been pinned. Due to distress calls sent by their radio operator during the ambush, they were then able to linkup with a detachment sent from the 5th Marines a further mile away.

No more fire was taken or received, and LCpl Galarza was rushed out of the city via Humvee to the CASEVAC landing zone.

All in all, ten confirmed kills had been credited to Frank Castle. By his outstanding display of decisive leadership, unlimited courage in the face of heavy enemy fire, and utmost devotion to his men, Corporal Castle reflected a great credit upon himself and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

It was already heading up the chain, Jarvis told her. There’d be medals over this and for Frank especially.

Omar would have a Purple Heart before the week was out.

/~/~/~/~/

And she knew each of them would give those medals back in a heartbeat to have never entered the city at all.

/~/~/~/~/

She stuffed Omar with ice cream, with McDonald's, with whatever she could smuggle past the front desk that could be carried. It wasn’t enough, but it was all she could do between holding his hand, and terrorizing the doctors anytime they showed up with paperwork.

It was a day later that she was filling out the latest form while Omar was playing on the newest Game Boy that she’d bought him.

Jarvis cut the silence. “It’s done.”

And her pen halted. “What’s done?”

Omar glanced over. The Game Boy jangled in his hands.

Jarvis continued on: “A ceasefire has been called in Fallujah.”
Her hopes rose for only a moment. Then slowly, horrifically, the true realization of what that meant fully dawned.

Fury surged.

“What?” Omar asked, unable to hear what had been said on the line. “What is it?”

She blinked slowly. “There’s been a ceasefire in Fallujah.”

He blinked back. “It’s only been five days, it can’t be done yet.”

“I’m not sure.” And she pushed back towards Jarvis. “What’s happening?”

“Political reasons. The head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, along with international pressure, has forced a standstill. It seems Operation Vigilant Resolve was threatening the political process. The June 30th handover of sovereignty back to the Iraqi people was being threatened, so they called it off.”

Her pulse throbbed hot. Red. Rushed.

“What?” Omar asked again, and this time he was nearly leaning off the bed. A wince shocked through him.

She wetted her mouth. “It’s political. The sovereignty hand-off was being threatened, so they rolled it back.”

“But then…” The gears inside him turned and turned. “What was it all for?”

It splintered inside her, bleak as the winter, black as the sea. The truth and everything that had led to it. Fire and fury. Futile objectives. Violence for violence.

/~~/~/

It had been for nothing.

Chapter End Notes

The first Battle of Fallujah, Operation Vigilant Resolve, was a microcosm of everything wrong with the Iraq war. Stupid, heat of the moment decisions were made by President Bush, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and CPA Head Paul Bremer. They wanted to swing their dicks with no thought to the consequences. Marine Commanders like General Abizaid, Lieutenant General Conway, and Major General Mattis wanted to continue with their engagement program with the locals (hearts and minds). (Though with the caveat that they’d be seeking intel, and would try to surgically hit prepatrators who murdered the Blackwater contractors on March 31.)

The idiots in the White House disagreed and ordered the full assault. For any of you who have watched Breaking Bad, Mike's speech on "half measures" fully applies. Either there should have been no assault, or they should have followed it all the way through. Instead, in a complete act of stupidity and moral cowardice, the White House / CPA folded within five days and called a halt to the attack. Marines remained in the city for another month exchanging fire with insurgents, but no more forward
movement was made until they withdrew.

At that point the city was handed over to the Fallujah Brigade. It was an attempt to put an Iraqi face on things by gibing the city to former Iraqi soldiers and police officers to handle. A great number of them defected over to the insurgent side in the following months and brought their American-supplied arms with them.

This opened up the cordon on the city again, which allowed men and supplies to re-infiltrate and set up new bunkers and communications lines and caches. This eventually boiled over into the Second Battle of Fallujah—Operation Phantom Fury—November to December 2004. It was one the bloodiest battles of the Iraq War.

So in April 2004 the White House surrendered the city after a series of fuck-stupid decisions, and as a consequence, created a worse shitstorm down the line.

There was no putting a hopeful note on this. The battle detailed here was truly, absolutely for nothing. Worse, it can be considered the spark point for the Insurgency to follow. It hardened opinions and polarized Iraq against American forces, and was considered a victory for the insurgents as they had "driven" the Americans out.

As for Omar, I was sorry to do it, but it had to happen for various thematic, logistical, and plot purposes to follow. I had originally planned to kill someone, so this is...better, I suppose. And we at least know with Tony around that Omar will get a bitchin' leg.

Lexicon

Al Jazeera: Independent news organization that is Qatari state funded.

FOB Abu Grahib: Forward Operating Base in the Sunni triangle. Not the same as Abu Grahib prison, but they were next door to each other.

Hue City 1968: Battle of Hue, referring to one of the longest and bloodiest battles of the Vietnam war, which US Marines took the brunt of. Was the trial by fire by which the Corps had to learn urban combat in the modern age.

Sunni: Largest denomination of Islam. Schismed from Shia Muslims over a dispute on Muhammad's religious successor. Iraq is majority Shia, which is why delineations like the "Sunni Triangle" are made.

Sunni Triangle: A densely populated region of Iraq to the northwest of Baghdad inhabited mostly by Sunni Muslims. Fallujah is in this triangle.


IED: Improvised explosive device.

HMM-161: Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 161.

CASEVAC: Casualty evacuation. Usually by helicopter.

NVGs: Night Vision Goggles.

Ka-bar: Standard issue Marine knife.

Breaching Shotgun: not a specific kind of shotgun, just what it's called when it has a
breaching round in it to punch through doors.

Overwatch: Watching from somewhere above to keep an eye on shit.

Unable to be identified as their utilization of Kevlar (...): Oblique was of saying that due to wearing bullet proof vests, shooting the insurgents in center of mass wouldn't kill them instantly. Instead, Frank blew off their heads with a shotgun.

NCO: Non-commissioned Officer. i.e. Frank.

WARNINGS for: rising anxiety, panic attacks, flashbacks, descriptions of the Blackwater Ambush on 3/31/04, desecration/mutilation of dead bodies, amputation via explosive, battlefield amputation, shrapnel wounds, explicit violence, The Punisher, death by shooting, death by bludgeoning, medical emergencies, mention of lost limbs, mentions of surgical procedures around amputation.

Two side notes:

1. Guess which dumb bitch got COVID-19??? It me. :( Please send sympathy I need it.

2. ASOIAF fic I told you about last month is now posted. See 'Come Down Like an Avalanche' if you wanna indulge.

Works inspired by this: [Wrath of a Vengeful AI](https://archiveofourown.org/works/2649218) by [hxdcml](https://archiveofourown.org/users/hxdcml)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://archiveofourown.org/works/2649218) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!