

## Chapter 7 – Standing Back on Their Feet

The conversation with the Wakandans lasted for another hour, but by the end of it, Tony had finalized the details of Shuri's arrival and gained a new member for the New Avengers program—albeit a part-time member, but a member nonetheless.

With all plans in motion and everyone dealt with, Tony stood from his chair and stretched his limbs. He spoke to Friday, “Hold all my calls, baby girl. And prepare the lab to sanitize more Extremis 3.0.”

“Of course, Boss. I will point out, though, that I can start the process right now, and it will be ready for you to work with by the morning.” Tony snorted at the not-so-subtle hint of what Friday wanted him to do.

“Why, Fri, laying it on kind of thick tonight, aren't you?” Tony's voice was highly amused.

Tony could hear the shrug in Friday's voice. “I believe tonight will be the night I actually win the argument, Boss.”

Tony raised an eyebrow at the closest camera. “And why is that, baby girl?”

A long moment of silence made Tony shrug and leave the room, heading toward his lab. Or at least that was the plan until he noticed Carol sitting on the couch in the living room, a tablet in hand and a frown on her face.

Tony thought he might manage to sneak into the elevator and down to the labs, but suddenly a static voice came from the speaker next to him. Carol obviously heard and saw him.

Friday is a sneaky girl, Tony decided. What he couldn't decide was whether he should punish or praise her for such a cunning plan.

Carol waved him to sit next to her.

Tony groaned inwardly but sat next to the blonde.

"So, how did the calls go?" Carol asked once she put the tablet down.

Tony leaned back on the sofa, his eyes going to the ceiling as he recounted, "I got Peter to tell his aunt the truth, and in return, I promised him constant training sessions with Laura. Which reminds me, where are she and the mini agents?"

Carol frowned at him. "On their floor. Friday took them there over two hours ago. It's past midnight, Tony."

"Oh." Tony shrugged, which for some reason caused Carol's frown to deepen. Tony decided to change the subject back. "So Pete will come to the tower tomorrow. I'm sure the kids will love to have someone closer to their age join in."

Carol's frown turned into a small smile.

Tony returned his gaze to the ceiling. "Well, then I talked to my old friend Hope. I promised to help her boyfriend, and in return, they both join the team. Not to mention I also need to talk with Pepper about merging our companies."

Carol cleared her throat, drawing Tony's eyes back to her. "Merging your companies? I was under the impression that your companies don't exactly get along."

Tony smirked at her. “Someone was talking with Nick. But anyway, with Lang’s stunt, their company will soon have to liquidate, and many will lose their jobs. In the long term, the merger will get SI larger revenue while keeping a lot of people with jobs.”

Carol nodded, but then her eyes softened, her lips forming a thin line as she asked gently, “How was the call with your cousin?”

Tony narrowed his eyes at Carol. Although he supposed it was Nick who gave her all the info, Carol probably took his narrow eyes as a challenge because she then added in an even gentler tone, “I know she helped Rogers during this whole Civil War thing, but still, she is your family. Nick said you are really close.”

Tony let out a heavy breath while trying to keep his tone casual. “Yeah, but I can’t really blame her. Aunt Peggy and Dad always went on about how great Rogers is. Me and Howard had a complicated relationship, but his rambles still affected me to the level I allowed Rogers to get away with far too much. But Sharon—she always admired Peggy, so she took her words to heart.” Tony then shrugged. “Anyway, she apologized, promised to kill Rogers if she gets the opportunity—the whole routine. So we’re good.”

Carol chuckled and shook her head in disbelief. “Can’t say I blame either of you.”

Tony just nodded in response. Then he kept talking. “The meeting with the president surprised the hell out of me. We’re actually on friendly terms now and worked out some details that will make life easier for a lot of people.”

Carol reached for his hand and squeezed it. “I’m glad you finally get the respect you deserve.”

Even Tony couldn’t identify the sound that left his throat in that moment.

For so many years, the only true respect he got was from Nick, Pepper, and Rhodey. Then came Phil, Bruce, and Thor, but the voices of those three were far outweighed by Rogers's group. Now he could feel the support of Laura, the mini agents, Peter, Harley, and, of course, Carol. He wasn't sure what he should feel anymore, but he liked the warmth that it brought him, especially when he was around Carol.

This woman in front of him had all the qualities he loved in Pepper—the fierceness, the unending willpower, the refusal to accept any bullshit, and the ability to kick the ass of anyone who underestimated her. But unlike Pepper, Carol understood the burden of the life they both chose to live. She didn't dismiss his fears and efforts so quickly because she couldn't understand why he was doing them. Carol accepted them and offered to help. Yes, she demanded an explanation later, but that was more than fair enough in Tony's opinion.

Tony shook himself from those thoughts—they were dangerous. They would only lead to more hurt he couldn't afford to deal with anytime soon.

Instead, he changed the subject again to something safer. "I got another surprise call from the king of Wakanda and his sister today."

"Oh." Her voice matched her expression—unimpressed.

He could understand that. "Don't judge them too harshly; they aren't bad people. T'Challa just lost his father. The grief and anger he didn't allow himself to process blinded him until now."

Carol eyed him strangely before pointing out very softly, "It's reminding me of someone else I know."

Tony's eyebrows flew up at this. The irony that for this entire night he was the one causing jaws to drop, and now his own was on the floor, wasn't lost on him. But she couldn't possibly mean what he thought she did... unless...

His eyes flew to the tablet on the coffee table as understanding dawned on him.

Carol seemed to see he understood what was happening. With an apologetic smile, she admitted, "Fury gave me access to everything that happened around the planet since '95. I didn't exactly have time to catch up during my visit in '08, but most things seemed to be happening around you for those years."

Tony flinched. "So you know about the playboy, selfish asshole billionaire. I guess you want your own floor now too," Tony said in a defeated tone. A part of him was happy right now that he didn't entertain his earlier warm thoughts.

But if he expected Carol to just smirk and leave, she instead shook her head before smiling gently and saying in a firm tone, "What I saw was just like you said. A man in grief who lost everything in a single night and never allowed himself to mourn properly." Tony looked at her with wide eyes. He couldn't believe what he was hearing, but Carol wasn't done yet. "You hid behind those masks because you didn't want anyone to get close to you. Because suffering once was enough."

Tony shook his head vigorously. He couldn't admit it, never, because admitting it would mean admitting...

"But it didn't matter. Because even if they didn't care, you did. You still felt the pain but never enjoyed what should have come before it," Carol finished, as if reading his thoughts.

Tony stared at her, fighting down his tears while choking out one word, "How?"

Carol looked outside the window. “You are not the only one who had to hide behind masks like that.”

Carol turned her gaze back to his face and spoke again, no emotion in her voice. Tony could recognize detachment from a mile away, which meant whatever story she was about to tell was hard for her.

“When the Kree kidnapped me and erased my memories, my feelings stayed in place. I kept walking around feeling I didn’t belong in a place I called home and had a hole in my chest I couldn’t understand who left it there. But the planet was tough, so I had to be tough as well. Which meant hiding behind many masks of smirks and smiles so no one would notice the true pain inside. It got easier once I got most of my memories back, but then I had to leave Earth with the Skrulls and had to put on a brave face for them. Even when I was leaving a home I had just rediscovered without knowing for how long.” She didn’t shift her eyes for a moment during the entire story.

Tony felt his connection to Carol grow even deeper. Their shared pain made it easy for them to see through each other’s masks, allowing them to approach the other when they needed someone, even if neither of them would admit it.

Tony wasn’t sure when his face got so close to hers. He debated with himself whether he should go for it—if it would be worth the pain of rejection.

But she was here, wasn’t she? Late into the night, having an even longer day than him, and still waiting to hear about his meetings. Offering him comfort and understanding like no one else ever did.

Warmth like never before erupted from Tony’s heart, and it had nothing to do with the Extremis in his blood. Tony drew courage from this warmth and closed the final space between them for a kiss.

For a few seconds, he didn't feel any reaction, and dejected, he began pulling back.

But then Carol pushed her face forward as well, deepening the kiss.

A few seconds longer, and they broke their embrace, looking away awkwardly.

Until Tony shook himself. It wasn't him! He was never one to be shy. Did he hide from his feelings? Absolutely. But when everything was out in the open, Tony Stark never cowered away.

He cleared his throat and asked with a confident smile and voice, "Would you like to have dinner with me tomorrow night?"

Carol regained her confidence as well, it seemed. She raised an unimpressed eyebrow at him and asked flatly, "A date, Dr. Stark?"

Tony's smile turned into a smirk. He gave a mock bow before responding in kind, "A date, Captain Danvers."

Carol finally broke and smiled softly at Tony. "Then I will gladly accept, sir."

Tony stood up, bowing deeply this time before speaking with genuine happiness, "Then I shall see you tomorrow, madam."

He started advancing toward the elevator again when Carol's voice stopped him. "And where do you think you are going?"

Tony turned to her, confused. "Ummm, the lab."

Carol stood up and started walking toward him, saying, "I don't think so. We both had a hell of a day and need some sleep."

Tony shrugged. "I rested enough during my recovery, Starburst. I need to go to the lab so I can prepare for Rhodey's arrival tomorrow."

Carol gave him a flat look. "You mean your first recovery. Because you needed a second one today, remember? Or has an entire evening of work already erased it?"

Tony was about to protest when Friday's voice cut in. "Also, Boss, while you and Captain Danvers... got deep with each other..." Carol snickered while Tony glared at the nearest camera. But Friday paid it no mind. "I started everything you will require for tomorrow morning. At this point in the process, all you can do is wait."

Tony groaned. He knew all along it was Friday's ploy to make sure he would go to sleep.

And a look from Carol confirmed that his baby girl outsmarted him today.

Carol made sure Tony laid down to sleep before leaving for her own room.

All Tony's attempts to convince her to stay with him went ignored.

Tony was standing on the landing pad of the tower, watching as the jet carrying Rhodey and Vision descended for a landing.

He had one hell of a morning.



First, he had a meeting with Phil, which went a lot better than he expected.

Apparently, Phil was in a relationship with the Director of the ATCU, and he was happy about the promotion Tony arranged for her. Something both of them seemed to think they owed him a favor for.

Phil also promised to talk with Daisy and Lincoln about joining the New Avengers and was positive the recently united couple would agree as long as they got a shared room, which, in all honesty, made Tony's life easier.

At first, Tony was surprised that Phil was so sure Daisy would say yes. As far as Tony knew, she didn't like playing in teams. But Phil pointed out she considered him a good friend of hers and would love to help him. Then he commented that Daisy had been admiring him for a long time, going as far as mentioning she was once one of the fans that used to gather in front of his tower.

Tony laughed at that and promised he would mention it next time he met Trembles, but Phil gave him that unnerving smile of his and gently pointed out that she could and probably would quack his bones apart. Tony shrugged and casually commented that it wouldn't be as easy as they would think.

At Phil's confused expression, he explained to him about the Extremis. Tony almost laughed when, at the mention of Rogers, Phil couldn't stop the snarl that left his lips. The once number-one fan of Captain America had become one of the man's greatest haters since the info dump.

He remembered feeling bad for Phil. He lost a man he admired for so long. But when the man noticed, he smiled at Tony and said, "Don't worry, Tony, I still believe in the best hero I met."

At the time, he thought maybe Phil was talking about Iron Man, but now Tony knew he could also mean Carol. Tony didn't really care. Apparently, as it is, he had a lot more friends than he thought.

After visiting Carol, Laura, and the kids, Phil left the tower to get a handle on the new SHIELD personnel Tony arranged for him.

Then Laura came to him. Apparently, Pepper's PA jumped for a visit while he sat with Phil and handed around the new credit cards for the accounts he asked Friday to open. The woman thanked him from the depth of her heart. He even got two kisses on the cheeks, which caused him to blush madly and Carol to snicker loudly.

Laura then informed him they would get out of his hair for a few hours and go shopping for things they would need for the foreseeable future.

Tony got to snicker back at Carol when she realized she was included in the shopping trip.

Soon the group of four left, and Tony went down to the labs with Helen so they could prepare Rhodey's treatment.

Of course, Tony was never one to stand idly by. So while waiting, he began making arrangements to rebuild the Compound into the new Stark Compound while selling floors of the tower to the UN so they could become the New Avengers and SHIELD HQ.

Two hours later, the jet finally landed on top of the tower.

When the door opened, four people came out.

The first two were members of the medical team sent to ensure the move went smoothly. The third was Vision.

No matter how much Tony tried to reassure his sort-of son that he shouldn't blame himself for what happened at the airport, it took two long days for Vision to finally accept Tony's words as true.

The android now floated protectively behind the New Avengers co-leader. His face relaxed, but Tony was sure that any threat to anyone in the tower would be met with a fury unseen before from the youngest Stark.

Finally, the man of the hour himself came rolling out. It pained Tony to see the resigned look on his brother's face. Well, Tony was not going to let that last for long.

He stepped forward, his arms opened wide, and he called loudly, "Vision. Sour-patch. Welcome back."

Rhodey began smiling, but when his eyes landed on the Arc Reactor glowing under Tony's shirt, they filled with sorrow, and he called sadly, "Tones..."

Tony waved his hand dismissively. "Believe me, a small exchange for what I got in return."

His oldest friend gave him a hard stare. It was a lie; they both knew it. Tony hated being dependent on the reactor. But the other man indulged him and said in a light tone, "Yes, I heard. Glowing eyes, huh?"

Tony smirked. "Oh, that's just the coolest part. Wait until you have some of it..."

Rhodey cut him off, his voice firm. “No, Tones. I love you for offering, but I don’t need to be another super-soldier.”

“Oh, Tony, just excoriating.” Helen appeared next to them as if out of nowhere. She gave Rhodey a reassuring look. “We don’t need to use nearly as much for you as we did on him. We will just inject a small dosage straight to your spine.” Her face took on an apologetic look as she finished, “It will hurt quite a bit for a few minutes.”

The Colonel’s eyes widened with hope. His smile became full and real, his voice a little choked. “I can do pain.” Then he mumbled to himself in wonder, “I will walk again.”

Helen seemed to hear him as well. She gave him a big smile and said, “You will. Tony worked for hours today calculating and preparing your dosage of the Extremis.”

Rhodey looked at him with such gratitude that Tony felt slightly uncomfortable, so he resorted to his usual way with a joke. “Well, it was either this or cybertronic legs. I guessed you would appreciate your own legs back. But if you prefer to go bionic, we still can.”

His brother knew him well enough to see what Tony was trying to do. The injured man shook his head, amused, before he said jokingly, “Well, let’s roll.”

It wasn’t that funny, just something said to lighten the atmosphere. So Tony had no idea why he threw his head back and laughed as they entered the tower.

Rhodey was preparing for his surgery with Helen.

The doctor ordered both Tony and Vision to wait in the lobby, which the former accepted immediately while the latter hesitated for a moment.

In the lobby, Tony turned to Vision, who stood next to him looking out the window. Tony saw the tension in the android's face.

He wished he could help his sort-of son with his guilt and turmoil, but Tony would be the last one to advise on such matters, considering all his problems.

But Tony did remember a suggestion that both Pepper and Nick repeatedly tried to give him. He cleared his throat and said softly, "Vision, did you consider seeing a therapist?"

The android turned toward Tony with a confused look and asked, "Dad?"

It took time for Vision to accept Tony's part in his life, but when he did, he was happy about it and began to call Tony "Dad" when it was just the two of them.

Tony looked softly at him and said, "Someone who will listen to your feelings and try to help you understand them, maybe even get through them."

Vision's expression was exhausted, but his voice was calm. "An interesting proposition; however, I fear I would have no idea where to start such an endeavor."

Before Tony could reply, they both heard Friday's voice. "I have a list of the top three therapists in the area. All very accomplished and very discreet. Might I suggest you start there, little brother."

Tony chuckled mentally, thinking about what would happen if someone else heard Fri calling Vision her little brother. Even in their inside family, where people were used to Tony seeing his AI's as his children, it would raise an eyebrow. They would claim Friday is the younger one because they wouldn't know Friday was activated and learning far before Vision was born.

Vision gave a grateful smile to the closest camera and responded, "Thank you, big sister. I believe I will follow your advice."

Tony just patted his back proudly.

And then Carol and Nick entered the lobby.

Nick looked as usual in all-black clothes and a long coat. But Carol looked very different. She wore a grey T-shirt with a leather brown jacket on top of it, jeans, and sneakers. Tony liked her casual look.

Carol gave him a wide smile. Then her eyes moved to Vision, but when she looked at his forehead, Carol froze. Her jaw was almost on the floor, her eyes wide for a long moment before demanding, "WHAT THE HELL?!"

All three men looked oddly at her. Tony thought that across all her travels, she had met an android before. He mentioned Vision and who he was before, so he couldn't understand the over-the-top response.

Tony took a careful step forward while saying slowly, "That's Vision. I told you about him being an andro—"

Carol shook her head, pointed to the glowing stone on the android's forehead, and said, "That's an infinity stone! Why the hell is he walking around with an infinity stone?!"

Tony blinked at her twice, then three times. Still no idea what's going on. "Carol? What are you talking about?"

Carol looked at all three of them like they were the ones from a different planet. Then she muttered, “Wow, you really didn’t know. That explains it.”

The blonde shook her head, her face becoming serious, and she spoke calmly. “The infinity stones. They are the physical representation of the aspects that govern the universe. Reality, Soul, Time, Power...” She brought up her fist, which was glowing with her power for some reason, adding, “...Space...” Then the glow disappeared, and she used that hand to point to the stone on Vision before finishing, “Mind.”

“Wait, so you’re telling us that anyone who has one of the stones can control the aspect it represents?” The voice of now walking Rhodey came from the doorway to the medical room.

Tony wanted to cry in relief. It worked, and on the first try too!

Carol just shook her head slightly before answering, “Not so easily. It is extremely rare to find someone who can wield an infinity stone without dying on contact. It’s just too much raw power for most.”

Then she looked out the window with a faraway look and said, “Of course, there is the Mad Titan.”

“You mentioned him before when I talked about Iron Man and the invasion. Who is he?” Nick asked from next to him, a frown on his face.

That question obviously unnerved Carol, which meant whoever this Mad Titan is, it won’t be good. But before Carol got a chance to respond, Friday’s voice intervened. “Boss, yours and Captain Danvers’s reservation is in an hour. You will have to leave soon to beat the traffic.”

A nervous feeling began spreading over Tony's body, but he tried to ignore it. "Thanks, baby girl." Then he turned to Carol with a tight smile. "You were saying?"

Again, Carol didn't get the time to answer as Rhodey stood—stood!—next to him, both his eyes and smile wide, and he asked excitedly, "Wait, Tones got a date with the sparky blonde here?"

Tony looked at Nick, hoping for some diversion. But his godfather just stood there with a smirk.

Tony turned back to the other army man and answered quietly, "Well, yes... But if—"

Rhodey put a hand on his shoulder and said firmly, "Oh no, Tones, there will be time for all that later. You should enjoy your date while me and Fury here catch up a little."

This time Carol jumped in before Tony could reply. "Thank you, Colonel. I am Captain Carol Danvers, by the way."

Rhodey shook her hand and responded, "You don't have to be so formal. Any friend of Tony's is a friend of mine. Call me Rhodey. Yeah, I remember you from eight years ago. I had to make a lot of threats to pull Hale back."

Carol seemed to feel bad after that comment. Rhodey probably noticed because he added with a smile, "You saved my brother from Siberia. We are even. Now get out of here, you two."

Carol looked around the private room in the fancy restaurant they were sitting in, her face full of wonder.



Tony tried to break the ice. “You’ve tested fast food, so now I thought you would like to try some of the more refined food on offer in this city.”

Carol turned back and smiled at him. She was wearing a red business suit that looked so hot on her that all Tony could do when he saw her stepping outside the tower was drop his jaw.

Tony never once considered what she would look like in a dress—it didn’t seem to be her style, and Tony liked that just as well.

Tony’s ice breaker failed miserably. For the next couple of minutes, there was silence in the room. Tony just didn’t know what to talk about.

Then Carol frowned at him and asked, “Since when are you so quiet?”

Tony sighed heavily. He wasn’t sure what happened either. “It’s just that before, when I was on dates, Pepper didn’t like me talking about work, and I’m not sure what else I should talk about...” Tony trailed off, feeling very depressed all of a sudden.

But Carol just sighed. “Look, we are going to work a lot together. Right now, my life is pretty much the new work you got me, you, and the Bart... Bishops. So we will talk about that a lot, but I’m sure we will find more things down the road. What’s important right now is enjoying each other’s company and getting to know each other deeper.”

Tony looked at her with wide eyes. This was so different from Pepper, but then again, there was a reason they broke up. Something just didn’t work there, and with Carol, everything just looked easier.

With a smile now spreading on his face, he asked, “Okay, so what’s the deal with this Mad Titan? He clearly made you worried.”

Carol took a deep breath before she spoke evenly. “His name is Thanos. He is the last of his people. His goal, as he sees it, is to save the universe by balancing it.”

Tony was frowning. “Balancing?”

Carol looked again out the window. The view over Fifth Avenue was captivating. Tony almost missed her answer. “Kill half of all life in the universe.”

Tony choked on the wine he was drinking. Once he could breathe again, he looked aghast at Carol. “So what, he’s going planet to planet and slaughtering half the population?”

Carol just nodded. Tony felt sick. “I can see why they call him the Mad Titan.” He mumbled.

Carol sighed heavily. “It gets worse.” Tony almost choked again, but Carol kept going. “He is after the infinity stones. If he can collect them all... he could accomplish his goal...” She snapped her fingers. “As easy as that.”

Tony felt a heavy stone drop in his gut, a realization causing him to start panting. “He will be after Vision.”

Carol nodded sadly. “With the way he is parading the stone around like that, I’m a little surprised Thanos didn’t come to take it yet. Although I have an idea of why he didn’t.” She finished while looking at him strangely.

Her eyes fell to his chest after that, and she asked gently, “Can I ask you something now?” Tony nodded, so Carol went ahead. “This reactor in your chest... What is it?”

Tony looked down at his own chest, debating how much he should tell her. He never told anyone the full story, not even Pepper, but now it felt right. “When I woke up in that cave, I had a hole in my chest filled with magnets running by a rusty car battery to stop the shrapnel that were on their way to my heart.”

Carol was red with fury—why, he wasn’t sure, but he pushed onward. “I had a week to live. I was about to give up when the other man with me, Yinsen, shook me out of my funk and helped me to recreate the Arc Reactor.”

His date looked a little green. Tony didn’t let it stop him. “It was based on a design my father created, but I perfected and miniaturized it in the cave so it would fit my chest. This model is a lot more advanced than the first one, of course. As far as I know, Howard based the tech on the Tesseract.”

Carol almost jumped in her seat. She looked at him wide-eyed. “The Tesseract?” She whispered.

Tony tilted his head to the side and answered, confused, “Yes. Why?”

Carol stared at him with a smile as if she figured out one of the secrets of the universe. “I got my powers from the Tesseract as well! Now I get why I was drawn to your reactor. Well, at least you know I will feel comfortable with it.”

Tony smiled. It was a big plus. He still had some questions about that, but Carol had a calculating look on her face before she began thinking aloud, “We can use you to call for help to fight Thanos when he comes. We will take our stand here and finally put an end to him.”

The plan was actually pretty solid, but Tony was confused about one detail. “Why me exactly? I never left the planet to be known on others.”

Carol gave him a smirk. “The why is easy. It’s because you are the only one the Mad Titan fears.”

Tony didn’t know how to feel. An alien warlord, a crazy one at that, not only knew him but was afraid of him. Why?

His look probably screamed the last question. Carol chuckled. “Destroying a quarter of his army in one strike and being the first one to thwart his plans rings a bell?”

Tony shook his head. What the hell was she talk—The Invasion! The nuke... But “It wasn’t just me. The Avengers...”

Carol shook her head slightly with a smile. “Weren’t the ones to catch the nuke and make the snap decision to use it. Weren’t the ones willing to sacrifice themselves to end the threat to their world. No, Tony, that was all you. And rightfully, the legend of Iron Man grew in the universe. You are the symbol of hope in the fight against Thanos. If you call them, most will answer and join our fight.”

Tony still had a hard time accepting anything Carol was saying. He thought about arguing, thought about asking more questions about that. But when he saw the waiter advancing toward them, he smiled at the blonde and said, “We can talk about it tomorrow. We need to focus on the food now.”

Carol laughed and agreed.

The rest of the evening went perfectly. It even finished with him and Carol in his room, cuddling. Yeah, life is getting better.