

Chapter 4 – Job Interview

Carol looked around at the faces of the other four passengers in the jet with her—well, three and a half, considering one of them was about a year-old baby and the guy with the white hair had to stay back with his team. Tony was flying the jet back toward the tower.

They had all been sitting in silence for the past couple of minutes. It started after Tony finished telling them what happened back at the farm that caused the hole in his shirt. Since then, they had been in shock and silent.

Finally, Carol managed to shake it off and speak, her tone hard as metal. “You have to be s—” Carol was stopped from cursing by Laura, who saw what was coming and cleared her throat with a pointed look. Damn, it had been a long time since Carol had to behave around children. “Kidding me. You had to make a drama instead of just knocking him out with a blast?!”

Tony gave her a weird look and kept staring at her as if waiting for her to realize what she said and correct herself.

When she didn't, Tony frowned and said quietly, “I forget you are not on Earth most of the time. I'm used to most people just assuming the worst about me and moving on. This getting to explain myself is kind of new.”

Carol noticed that Laura was frowning as well toward Tony, but before any of them could comment about his disturbing statement, Tony spoke again. “If I had knocked him out immediately, his hired muscle would have gotten involved, and while you and I are protected, those guys aren't. Also, if he woke up in a holding cell, he would start lying his way out of it, but now he was caught red-handed. It worked out in the best way possible.”

While Carol could see his points and agree his more dramatic plan did pay off, his last comment couldn't go unchallenged. "You got badly injured. Only the Extremis saved you again." She pointed out dryly.

When Tony just shrugged in response as if his well-being wasn't even worth considering, she felt herself getting angry.

When exactly did she start to care so much for this man? This man who cared so much for everyone else, he was willing to throw himself in the line of fire of a madman; the man who, when just recovering from an injury, hurried to save the family of a man who betrayed him only a few days ago; the man who helped her when he didn't even meet her before, just because someone told him she was in trouble. Tony Stark had a big heart. She knew she wasn't the only one who noticed—Laura seemed to trust and care about him very much as well, not to speak about Pepper, Happy, and Fury. This man treats even his AI like his own daughter.

Tony Stark cares about everyone but himself. Fury knew that too; that's why he told her to go with him to rescue the Bartons. So she will have to make sure to watch out for him. She seemed to be in good company as far as she saw.

Carol was still thinking of a way to respond to Tony's comments, but before she could, Cooper changed the tense subject. "So you have cool powers now, Uncle Tony?"

Carol's trained eyes were able to notice the tension in Tony's body at that subject, but he quickly—far too quickly in Carol's opinion—hid it behind a smile and replied with a snarky, "Actually, they are pretty hot, Cop."

Carol smirked and was about to point out how inappropriate the joke sounded, especially in front of three kids. But Laura was the first to react with a scandalized gasp, admonishing, "Tony!"

Tony did send her a sheepish look over his shoulder and said, “Sorry, L. Sounded better in my head.”

“Like BARF?” she asked dryly, which earned her a deeply offended look from Tony. Which confused Carol. What the hell is BARF? She guessed they weren’t talking about vomit; she hoped Tony’s response would clarify it for her.

But Tony decided to ignore what for him was such an offending comment and addressed back to the kids, “But yes, I do have powers now. And glowing eyes!” He finished excitedly as if the glowing eyes were the best part of his powers.

Surprisingly, the kids seemed to agree as they both cheered for this piece of news. Cooper asked, “So now you’re stronger than Captain America?”

Tony gave the kid a smirk. “Oh, I’m definitely stronger than the old Craptain.”

Laura frowned at Tony again, probably about to admonish him, but when Carol caught her eye, she shook her head. That was a very sensitive subject, and Tony should really have all the rights to shit on the American idol’s name.

The kids didn’t seem to notice Tony’s burn on his former teammate. Instead, Lila stared straight at her and asked, “Are you stronger than Uncle Tony?”

Carol raised an eyebrow at the girl. “What makes you ask that?”

Lila was jumping in her seat as she mimicked Carol’s stance from the farm when the two soldiers came to greet them and said, “Your eyes were glowing like Uncle Tony says his are, but your fists were glowing too.”

Carol smirked at both the girl and Tony, even though she knew he couldn't see it, before saying, "You have a good point, little firecracker. Uncle Tony's power is very new; we didn't have the chance to see who is stronger."

Both children were almost glowing themselves as they repeated at the same time, "Can we watch? Can we watch?" Even the baby joined them with tiny claps.

Laura cut them off with a firm, "We will talk about it later."

Carol just winked at them.

Cooper then turned back to Tony and said with a small trace of envy in his voice, "It must be great getting powers like that, Uncle Tony."

For the first time, Tony turned his chair around and stared Cooper straight in the eyes. "Coop, it doesn't mean anything if you don't earn it. Even this..." He pointed to the reactor on his chest that powered the Extremis inside of him. "...Came from here." He pointed to his forehead.

Tony then looked more somber as he spoke. "I never wanted this power. I preferred to think my way out of things rather than punch my way out of them. Even then, your dad did a pretty good job of it with nothing but skill. That's what you should focus on." Tony then turned his chair back toward the control panel of the jet while adding, "Actually, there are two people I need to introduce you to."

Carol smiled at the pilot. She thought he handled it very well. Cooper looked like he considered Tony's words seriously and already seemed excited by the prospect of new friends. She guessed living on a remote farm doesn't leave many opportunities for friendships.

But Lila seemed depressed about something. With a small voice, she asked no one in particular, “Is Daddy a bad man now? I heard the news saying he is bad. Is that why he left again?”

Carol cursed mentally at Barton. From what Fury told her, he was one of those who treated Tony the worst whenever he stayed in the tower. All because he was jealous of Tony’s money. Didn’t bother him enough to live on the man’s dime apparently, even when there was a family waiting for him at home.

Carol could relate to Lila. Her dad was never home either, always on tours with the army. Her mother never approved of her choice to join the Air Force and would neglect her until she was ‘ready to come back to reality’ as her mother put it. Her mother didn’t realize that the Air Force was a way for her to keep her dreams alive while also trying to make her dad proud, hoping it would make him stay with her.

Laura looked lost at what she should say to the girl, but she didn’t look like she was trying to excuse her husband too hard either. Tony was the one to reply to the little girl, “People make mistakes, Lils. And when they do, they need to pay the price for them. Your dad made a very big mistake, so the price he has to pay is big too. But that doesn’t make him bad, just human.”

The little girl still looked lost, and Carol noticed how similar the expression was to Laura’s. She decided to give both of them what they needed to hear. “None of you have to forgive him or wait for him to come to his senses. My mom and dad were neglectful too. From the moment I turned six, all I got was either an absent father or a disapproving mother. When I finished my flying lessons and was about to deploy to my first big mission, my parents came to the base to visit me...”

Carol had to swallow the bile that began forming in her throat. She couldn’t remember the last time she thought about her parents. It was probably one of the only things she regretted getting back after the Kree wiped her memory.

After calming herself, she finished, "... They wanted to tell me how proud they were of me. But by that time, I found a new family of my own, and their realization of how they treated me came too little too late." She reached out to take the hands of the Barton females. "Don't wait for someone you know has failed many times before to give you the family you always craved. Make your own family."

Lila's brown eyes looked deeply into her own. The girl seemed to process everything Carol said for a long time before asking in a shy and small voice, "Will you be part of our new family?"

Carol was shocked by the question. She had just met them, and they wanted to call her family already? She didn't feel that kind of warmth since Maria handed Carol Monica and introduced her new goddaughter. But kids were naïve and quick to trust, so Carol looked at Laura. The woman had a small smile with tears threatening to fall at any moment, but they were also full of expectation.

Carol looked back into the little girl's eyes and replied, "If you want it, little Firecracker. Sure."

Lila squealed, jumping in her seat again. She turned to Tony. "And you, Uncle Tony?"

Tony smiled over his shoulder at the group and responded with, "You know it, mini agents."

Carol noticed the small tear running down Laura's cheek, and she would have thought the woman was heartbroken by the conversation if not for the bright smile she had on her face.

Carol squeezed her hand a little harder, ensuring the woman that she wasn't alone anymore. The woman sent her a private smile before looking down at the baby in her arms, a look of deep thought in her eyes.

Cooper and Lila were whispering among themselves with mischievous smirks. They turned to Tony and began chanting, “Are we there yet? Are we there yet?”

After their second chant, Tony answered casually, “Yep.”

The kids opened their mouths again, but when Tony’s word sank in, they froze. Both kids exchanged weird looks, at a loss for what they should do now. Tony obviously thwarted their plan to annoy him, and the smirk on his own face confirmed to her he knew it.

Carol felt the jet touch ground before Tony turned his chair around and told the kids, “You are probably the first kids in history with timing like that.”

That comment caused everyone in the jet to start laughing.

Tony led the way out of the jet and into the tower, Carol still carrying his armor with her.

Once they entered Tony’s private floor, Friday’s voice filled the lobby. “Welcome back, Boss. The council asked me to inform you the former secretary is in a holding cell and yet to wake up. The president has asked for an appointment, Director Coulson too. You had a call from Miss Van Dyne, and she asks that you call back as soon as you can. Vision called as well and informed us that Colonel Man is awake and will be moved to the tower by tomorrow afternoon. And Mr. Hogan asked me to note that Mr. Parker is causing him to lose his mind.”

Carol blinked. She knew Tony was a busy man, but if that was his schedule now, she would have hated to see it while he was still a CEO.

Tony just released an exasperated sigh and asked, “What else, Fri?”

Carol was startled by the very thought that the AI hadn't reported everything yet, but Tony looked like it was any other day.

"You also had calls from a few media outlets wanting your take on the so-called Civil War. Ms. Potts asked me to warn you that the board is very interested in a talk with you." The Irish voice responded casually.

Tony shook his head and said, "Pepper can deal with the board for a while. I will get to them eventually. Tell the president we can video conference today at 10 PM for as long as he needs. I will talk with Agent Coulson tomorrow morning before Honey-Bear gets back. Which reminds me, clear my and Helen's schedule for tomorrow evening, Fri. About the media..."

"You will let me handle it." Fury's voice boomed as he entered the room, followed by Dr. Cho with her medical kit.

The Asian woman looked around the group and asked, "Who's first for a checkup?"

Carol and Laura shoved Tony forward. The man turned to glare at them, but Carol shrugged and said to Cho, "He got himself shot by an alien energy weapon in the shoulder and had to use the Extremis abilities."

This time it was Dr. Cho who released the exasperated sigh but accepted the explanation as if it all made sense.

Tony rolled his eyes as Dr. Cho began poking and testing him, and after a moment he spoke to Friday again, "Baby girl, how are we doing with places for our new guests?"

Carol startled for a moment. The past day was so intense and quick she completely forgot about finding a place.

“The floor beneath this one has been prepared for the Barton family, and I made sure that a room on the current floor has been prepared for Captain Danvers,” Friday reported.

Laura looked scandalized again. “Tony! We don’t need an entire floor of the building to ourselves. A couple of rooms will do.”

Tony waved his hand dismissively until Cho grabbed the hand and forced it back to his side, so Tony spoke instead. “Oh please, Laura, you and the kids will thank me for the space in a couple of days. After all, New York Midtown isn’t exactly the wide-field farm you’re used to.”

Laura looked like she was thinking of a way to argue with Tony but could find none. Tony then added, “By the way, L, do you want me to get people to work on rebuilding your house?”

The woman got a faraway look on her face. She stared out the window for a few moments before turning to look back at Tony with a small, sad smile. “I don’t think it will be necessary, Tony. Thank you, but the kids need to live their own lives, and they can’t do it on an isolated farm. The only reason I agreed to live there for so long was because Clint promised we would be safe there.”

Tony gave the woman a sad nod at the same time Dr. Cho spoke, “You are fine, Tony. But you can’t keep doing things like that. We don’t know what the limit of the Extremis in your system is, and I for one don’t want to find out.”

There were nods of agreement all around the room, but Tony chose to ignore the comment and instead spoke to Laura. “Well, L, make yourselves at home then. Fri, open an account in Laura’s name and make sure to deposit ten thousand dollars right now and another three every month. Do the same for Carol but with five now and one every month. That should take care of anything you need.” He then turned to the kids with a smile and said, “Okay, mini agents, you behave for Dr. Helen and do anything she tells you. Any good kid will get a candy of his choice after dinner.”

With that, the kids ran toward the corner of the large room where Dr. Cho prepared the kids' kit.

Tony was about to leave the room when Laura stopped him. She stood in his way with a firm look on her face as she stated, "We are not going to take your money, Tony."

Tony rolled his eyes and pointed out, "I can more than afford it, Laura, so just take care of yourself and the kids."

Carol chose that moment to add her two cents to the argument. "I agree with Laura, Tony. The fact you can easily afford it is not the point."

Tony's eyes widened. He looked at her like he was meeting her for the first time. Carol wondered what about her words could cause such a reaction, but then Tony shook his head and asked, "I'm sorry, you have other ways to get money?" They both knew the answer to that, and so Tony added, "And correct me if I'm wrong, but you need a new wardrobe. Can't exactly keep going everywhere in your laser-tag suit." Again, Carol had no response for the facts.

There was silence between the three of them for a moment. The two women were trying to find a way to argue with Tony, but he was called a genius for a good reason.

Speaking about genius, the gleam that suddenly appeared in Tony's eyes told Carol the man had an idea. He smiled, but his voice was full of wonder as if what he was about to say was the craziest thing he ever heard himself saying. "So you both want to earn that money fair and square?"

Nonetheless, both Carol and Laura nodded.

Tony still looked surprised by their answer. He turned first to Carol. “The world still needs the Avengers. And the Avengers need a true leader. I thought Colonel Rhodes would do the work, but one thing Rogers taught us is no single man should have that much power without something or someone to keep them in check. So how about it, Captain Marvel, care to be Co-leader of Earth’s mightiest?”

Carol could feel her mind freeze. “Me?”

Tony looked her straight in the eyes and said, “Yes, Carol. You have the military training, unlike Rogers. You will put the world first, and you have a strategic mind that is certainly a boon for the job. Plus, I can see you and Rhodey working well together.”

Carol felt like she was in the middle of an emotional storm.

First of all, while Tony’s offer sounded good, it had one major implication for her. She tried in the military to become a captain, knowing in most likelihood she would have to lead soldiers at some point, so she wasn’t concerned about being a leader. No. What worried her was the fact that if she took the offer, she would be binding herself to stay on Earth.

But would that be too bad? She herself admitted to Fury that ever since the Guardians of the Galaxy began patrolling across the universe, she kept to planets close to Earth.

The point was she didn’t feel at home on Earth anymore. When she visited the last time, things were so different. Fury changed, Monica and Maria grew up and moved on. She felt alone and with no reason to stick around.

She looked at the kids still getting checked by Dr. Cho in the corner, looked at Laura and the baby again. At Fury, now she was reacquainted with her old friend. And finally, at Tony.

She felt a pang in her heart when Tony casually mentioned her and the Colonel working well together. She knew he probably didn't mean it that way, but still, since getting to know the genius—and if she is honest, even before that—her heart keeps being drawn to him. Even though he seemed very guarded, which makes her wonder what the man has been through, she only got the overview until now. That will have to change.

Carol caught herself thinking in terms of a future alongside these people, and she knew her answer. With a smile, she nodded and said, "I'll take it."

Tony looked genuinely happy she accepted the post, which for some reason made her even more glad she accepted.

The man then turned to Laura and asked, "You were a SHIELD agent, right? Specialized in combat."

The woman smirked—a smirk that shouldn't be on the face of a woman with a baby in her arms—and replied, "Finally, someone remembers that. I am quite the marksman as well, you know. I caught Clint's attention for a reason."

The mention of her lousy husband seemed to deflate her slightly, but Tony brought the excitement back with his offer. "I have two with potential for more young wanna-be heroes that can use an instructor. What do you say, L, want to try combining your mad mother's skills with old agent's skills?"

Laura's eyes shined with excitement, and her answer came faster than Carol could blink. "I will love to, Tony!"

The woman then stepped forward and hugged Tony tightly, the baby clapping again between their two bodies.

After they pulled apart, Laura looked nervous. With a low voice, she asked, “Tony...” she hesitated for a moment before a glance toward the baby hardened her resolve, and she spoke, “How hard will it be to file for divorce, full custody of the kids, and possibly change the name of this one?”

Tony blinked a few times, clearly surprised by the request. But after a while, he smiled gently at her and said with a voice full of reassurance, “With my lawyers? Just say the word, and it will happen. Ask Friday to pass the order to legal if you choose to go ahead with it.” And before Laura could reply to the generous offer, Tony stepped around them while saying, “Now, if you don’t mind, I have a couple of...”

Friday’s voice, clearly amused, cut him off. “Actually, Boss, Miss Carter called as well and asked you to return her call at your convenience. And the president agreed to your offer for the appointment.”

Carol saw the frown on Tony’s face at the mention of this Carter woman, and she wondered what this was about. But after a moment, he sighed, corrected himself, “Three calls to return and a meeting with the president.” He began walking away toward one of the few rooms on the floor while muttering about a long night.

Carol turned to Fury, who had stood there silently until now, which was odd for him. She narrowed her eyes at him and asked, “Have any idea what that was about?”

The man snorted and responded with, “You will have to be more specific.”

Carol raised an eyebrow at Fury. She was getting annoyed with the man. But Laura spoke first, “Let’s start with his meeting with the president.”

Fury just shrugged and replied in a casual tone, “Tony has an appointment with the president at least once a month. But I will guess today it will be about the video that I made sure was anonymously released to the media.”

The gleam in Fury's eyes made Carol sure she knew what video he was talking about. But Laura frowned and asked in a confused tone, "What video would concern the president?"

Fury was probably about to explain, but Carol knew the kids were within earshot, and that wasn't something they should hear. So Carol spoke quickly first, "Not something the kids should hear probably. You should watch it yourself first."

Nodding, still with a frown, Laura accepted the answer. Carol then turned to Fury and asked, "What's the deal with that Carter girl?"

Fury sighed heavily, and he looked older for a moment before answering, "Tony's cousin, my goddaughter. I sent her the video earlier; she helped Rogers get his gear back during this Civil War. She hopes Tony will give her another chance and won't stay mad at her."

This time it was Laura who snorted before commenting, "We all know Tony won't." Carol and Fury just let a small sad smile show their agreement.

Carol frowned again before asking, "The thing with the money..."

Fury answered her before she even finished the question, probably not the first time someone noticed that then. "The old Avengers, with the exception of Thor, Hulk, and Vision, lived on Tony's dime and took it for granted. They never asked for money, just took it like it belonged to them. Not just that, they would pile work on Tony without asking or thanking him afterwards. I pointed out to Tony a few times how toxic the dynamic was, but he just kept repeating that they will be needed soon."

Carol felt hot as a new wave of anger and even hatred for those rogues washed over her. If she ever gets the chance to lay a fist on them, she won't be holding back.

“Clint was the worst, wasn’t he, Nick?” Laura asked in a small voice.

Fury gave her a sad look and answered honestly, “He wasn’t the worst. No. That honor goes to Rogers and Romanoff. But he wasn’t much better. Most of it came from his jealousy of Tony’s money and Romanoff’s influence.”

Laura’s face contracted in disgust, and she muttered under her breath, “Definitely changing the name.”

Carol tuned everything else out, staring at the room Tony disappeared into. Promising herself she will show Tony how much he is worth one way or another.