The War is Far From Over Now

by Dont_call_me_Carrie

Summary

The world keeps pushing him, demanding, because what he did wasn't enough. Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist, but that wasn't enough, wasn't ever enough.
Tony Stark was *tired*. But he had a planet to protect, even if everyone laughed at him whenever the prospect of alien invasions was brought up. He could count on one hand how many people he could trust, which was disheartening but then, what else was new?

Or,

In which Tony does *not*, in fact, intend to take over the world.

...unfortunately, everyone else missed that particular memo.

[gradual divergence from canon, starting at the end of Iron Man 3. In which it's Tony's self-awareness, rather than his support system, that becomes a cryptid sometime during Phase II.]

Notes

Obviously, it takes a lot for Tony Stark to even approach his limits: we’ve seen him on the verge of dying while creating a new element, and he *clearly* went for nonlethal strikes against opponents who weren’t nearly as courteous, even when under severe, prolonged physical and mental stress and a huge betrayal still wasn’t enough of a push. So how would it look like, if the man were to ever just... *snap?*

[aka I got inspired by a thread on tumblr going on about what would happen if Tony Stark were to actually become the villain. I tried to make a drabble, but...yeah, it grew on me. Heads up, this is NOT Team Captain America friendly.]

Also, warning for mental health issues, and a JARVIS who's protectiveness starts out at an 11 on a scale of 10 and only gets bigger.

Chapter titles in this fic are taken from Disturbed lyrics, interludes come from the Offspring's "You're Gonna Go Far, Kid".

See the end of the work for more *notes*. 
Tony Stark didn’t really recognize the nuances of betrayal- his people skills weren’t the best, not at close range, not when he wasn’t in front of a camera or audience. He’d done his best to keep the world at arms’ length, and the few people that got through his shields also tended to as loyal as he was. He knew what to expect, is the point- he’d more than learned his lesson on betrayal by the time Obie’d ripped out his reactor, and shored up his defenses even more after that. So when Natalie Rushman decided to reveal her true colors, he hadn’t even been surprised- he’d recognized the look of people wanting something from him, after all. [He’d grown up surrounded by them, how could he not?]

Point is, he didn’t really have much practice with betrayal, because he didn’t let many people close enough to try.

But, Tony distantly thinks, throat abruptly dry as Bruce’s snoring becomes more audible, this might be how it feels like. It’s a bitter, acrid taste, realizing that he’d bit the bullet and actually tried to reach out to someone who might understand, and…now this. He’d understood why Pepper had stepped back, had been hurt but unsurprised by Steve Rogers’ reaction to him [though why had that felt like a betrayal when he actively tried to not emulate his father if at all possible], but— but he’d thought they’d connected, him and Bruce. Had thought that they’d bonded over their shared burdens, had thought the shared glances when everyone tuned out their discussing their life’s work meant something.

Well. Apparently not.

Oh, when the man startled awake, and muttered about “something about Switzerland”, he forced a smile and did his best to laugh it off, but…The silence after Bruce went back to sleep didn’t— he couldn’t bear it. Tony, somehow, felt more alone than ever, and he couldn’t—

“Hey, JARVIS, you up?”

“For you, sir? Always.”

Well. At least he could trust JARVIS for this. And no that didn’t sound as sad as he’d expected, that
his own AI was the only one willing to put up with him at all times and—

“Sir, may I suggest you go to the kitchen? There’s tea brewing.”

Tony tried to clear his throat—first it was dry, now he could barely say a word, what gives?—and smiled. [And if it was slightly tremulous, well, he could trust his own AI, his closest confidante, to never tell.]

“Thank you, JARVIS. And then…are you up for another round in the lab? I think there’s some projects that need to get done, and I’m not…” Tony looked back at the man sleeping on the sofa, sighed, and continued, “I’d been hoping to coordinate with Bruce about some ideas after…this, but apparently not.”

“Of course. If you may, I’ll take the liberty of cueing up the New York holding list in order of priority, with other possible applications of…”

Tony took a quiet sip of tea, ignoring the slight quiver in his hands, and let the familiar voice wash over him as he tried to get the past hour and a half out of his mind.

Then he took a deep breath, finished his cup, and headed to the lab.

He had work to do, after all.

JARVIS had less than charitable opinions about Dr. Banner after the man’s readings had him appearing to fall asleep. In the middle of Sir attempting to reach out for the first time in weeks to who he’d hoped would be a friendly ear, which was unacceptable, but he couldn’t come up with anything that would not also alert Sir nor agitate the man in question past permitted parameters. Dr. Banner’s indifference was neither expected nor welcomed, and so he made a note to lower him on the priority rankings when it came to requests.

Seeing Sir’s readings approach levels indicating severe stress, JARVIS had the tea readied—if it was the blend Dr. Banner preferred, no matter; the man obviously didn’t care about helping Sir, and his current emotional state was nowhere near ideal levels. After seeing his readings gradually relax as JARVIS continued elaborating on the construction firm working on the Malibu site and the increased security framework being integrated, he knew it was working. Sir was finally starting to relax, and JARVIS once again set a subroutine to scour the internet for additional psychological information on his condition, and what actions he could take about it.

He needed help, and between Ms. Potts currently occupied with her own difficulties, like integrating the new version of Extremis into her life, Mr. Hogan’s recovery, and Col. Rhodes dealing with the fallout of everything, including the ramifications of having saved the President of the United States, Sir’s nearest emotional ties were inorganic. Not that it mattered, of course—when Sir needed him, he’d be there, always. Even if everyone else left him, he’d be there.

Taking past events into consideration, as well as the data feed from the destruction of the Malibu mansion, JARVIS quietly set up a few more backup servers and programs. This time, they’d been lucky that his servers were currently based in New York; but just as Sir kept multiple copies of his arc reactor at hand, and already had a backup system in place for JARVIS even before Stane had temporarily knocked him offline, redundancy was a better option than not. Especially if Sir continued as he was. At this rate, and with this degree of escalation, Sir would need all the help he could get, and JARVIS would be there for him, to the best of his ability.
Tony’s anxiety surrounding the arc reactor had been a constant, ever since before it’d been created and he’d been stuck with two flimsy wires and a car battery being the sole things keeping him alive. Obie— no, Stane had only compounded it, and ditto as to the palladium mess. He apparently couldn’t trust Bruce with it, not like he’d wanted to; he’d mused aloud about removing it but the man hadn’t decided to do any input [because he’d slept through it all and yes it still stung]. And nobody from the Avengers, or SHIELD in general, had called despite the world having presumed him dead. [That had hurt, actually. He understood to an extent, but it hurt nonetheless.]

In short, Tony could count on one hand how many people he could trust, and that was including a thirteen-year-old he’d barely met, and the AI he’d coded at age 17. [And if that didn’t sound pathetic, nothing did.] So, with that in mind, it took less than he’d expected, to take Pepper’s version of Extremis and water it down so it wasn’t remotely malignant, so that its enhanced strength was manageable and not compromising the systems it’d ‘hacked’ and had applications other than turn the ‘host’ into a fire-breathing monster. Tony had learned thermonuclear astrophysics overnight, when the world and been at stake; it took roughly twice that, to feel confident enough to tamper with something that would affect one of the only people on Earth that could stand him for extended periods of time, and that was still willing to call him a friend at the end of the day.

But he did it, and in doing so, had also synthesized something that would help Happy recover from the mess, and possibly let him get rid of the arc reactor once and for all. If it worked as projected, nobody would ever be able to rip his heart from his chest ever again, and after the latest ordeal? Tony had enough liabilities as he was.

Tony only told his closest friends [his only friends] what he was doing. They were all as supportive as could be— with the latest fiasco that’d embroiled Pepper and Rhodey and Happy, memories to the last time something like this had been brought to the fore, and if nothing else, less shrapnel was always a good thing. So the doctors were brought in, with JARVIS both vetting them and having drafted their NDAs, and the procedure was done.

It took weeks to fully recover from the surgery, but Tony could feel the difference the moment he woke from the anesthesia: for the first time in years, he could breathe. His sternum was now a product of both 3-D printing and Extremis’ handiwork, and part of his lungs would possibly never fully recover the compression, but he could breathe without several pounds on his chest, could walk around without the threat of having his heart ripped out of him any moment of the day. It was a heady feeling, and the breathless laugh JARVIS’ microphones picked up no doubt reflected that.

Chapter End Notes

Gradual canon divergence from Iron Man 3 onwards, with the entire outline mostly set in stone [for once. I just jinxed myself, didn’t I?]- there won’t be any overt character bashing, but...well, this is an AU where Tony Stark takes over the world. [Accidentally, this time, but still.] Also, I can’t write romance to save my life, so platonic relationships, platonic relationships everywhere! [Even if they’re unhealthily codependent, by the end.]

This fic is also partly experimental— I’m trying to see if I can plausibly fit in unreliable
narrator, and how blatant it'll come across. I have the first few chapters mostly fleshed out, but heads up for erratic updates because pre-med undergrad, here.

As a heads up, tags have been changed to reflect where I'm going with this.

To clarify even further: the story's 'unreliable narrator' thing will gradually get more blatant, so sorry if that puts you off. [I'm going for lighthearted, though, not psychological horror, if that helps?] Same with JARVIS [kinda spoilery, especially given the tags, but]— as Tony goes through more trauma, his 'already an 11 on a scale of 10' protectiveness will cross the line and go into full-blown HAL 9000 territory, with a side of fluctuating morals and anything else the tags are warning for. Again, if that doesn't sound like your cup of tea, sorry [and again, it's not going to get too far into horror, by my standards— but there will be a distinct codependent vibe by some point. Tony, here, is JARVIS' morality chain of sorts.]

Also, so far what I'm describing both here and in the tags might imply it's going to be grimdark- but this fic won't be [no promises on other stories in this series, though], I'm just trying to make sure everyone's okay with what they're signing up for. This fic will lighten up drastically after the final battle, and go into unrepentant crack territory.

All in all, this fic may sound gritty and grimdark and all that, but its theme song goes from Disturbed to 'Yakety Sax' in the last 500 words of my outline. So.

Finally, hope you don't mind the formatting, or just general writing style, because this is how I roll when writing fanfic, apparently. [It's my first foray into writing Marvel, make of that what you will.]
Moment of Peace

Chapter Summary

Tony Stark's been busy, these days. Healing, dealing with the fallout of AIM, and—what's that, J? Something about London?

Chapter Notes

...a.k.a. Tony during Thor 2, and the inception of several things that'll lay the groundwork for the future, some more obvious than others.

Chapter-specific warning: unhealthy coping mechanisms regarding mental health in this chapter, and a description of the start of a panic attack.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony had been busy, recently.

Between recovering and helping clean up the mess that was AIM and Extremis, he’d had a rough few weeks, though they’d been worth it. He’d learned a few harsh lessons in between, such as: who he could and couldn’t trust, people had absurdly long memories for grudges, and that he really, really needed to step up his game if he couldn’t so much as defend his people, when he needed to get the planet ready for war ‘on a higher level’ [No pressure, Thor. Got it. Thanks]. Not to mention that AIM was a major pain in the neck for an alleged ‘think tank’, and the paperwork for the private sector alone kept him up late at night [even if the nightmares hadn’t been something to contend with]. It was a mess, and he was still wrangling what he could even after Pepper took up some of the workload herself, once she got a handle on her new abilities.

But that wasn’t all—since Tony was an innovator and futurist, he looked at the statistics, news reports and camera footage of the entire mess, and started to plan. He looked at what went right, what went wrong, and what he could do to fix it. [Maybe if he treated it like a thought exercise he’d be able to handle the fallout better.] It started out as a bit of a side project, something to mull over in between meeting with lawyers and liaisons and representatives from security firms, but it grew legs quickly as he started to think about it. Hmm…his suits had been very useful, and for all that he’d meant it at the time, Tony couldn’t help but see the practical applications of having what was essentially a support crew at hand, with JARVIS at the helm. Just get rid of a few bugs, but they’d helped save the day even despite the idea having been conceived of little more than a whim and a prayer. But it’d worked, he’d helped save the staff of Air Force One, and wouldn’t have survived the last fight his suits hadn’t been capable of remote control. So, with that in mind, Tony decided to rig up an experimental group of fifteen or so, nothing unmanageable for JARVIS at present.

And hey, looks like it was working, this ‘keeping busy’ thing. Well, that, and whatever J had found online in lieu of Tony’s reluctance to get an actual therapist. He appreciated it, immensely— it wasn’t anyone’s fault, that he’d been born and raised by Howard "men don’t cry" Stark, or that his decades
of dealing with the media meant he was very good at masks, but...well. After yet another discreet appointment in an attempt to reach out ended in yet another catastrophic failure, because it turns out that therapy needed trust to work \[pfft—once bitten, twice shy, and he still had scar tissue from last time\], JARVIS decided to step up and...it was working. Slow going, sure, but after everything, it was a breath of fresh air when he’d been drowning.

Once the adequate protocols had been put into place, things went far more smoothly, JARVIS found. While he may have resorted to unorthodox measures at some points, it had been necessary in order for Sir’s recovery. Filtering and warning for possible triggers, switching to the closest approximation of cognitive therapy he could manage, and incorporating as much as he could manage from all the pertinent articles he could sift through.

It had been slow going, and several missteps had already been made, but until Sir could lower his guard enough to deal with an actual therapist, he was the best they had. And the likelihood of Sir ever trusting anyone to that extent was currently at microscopic levels, even before his sole attempt to reach out.

But things were going well; Sir was actually getting REM sleep for once, his long-term readings were gradually approaching homeostasis, and while he still dealt with panic attacks and severe anxiety, the controlled environment helped manage them. That, as well as the added peace of mind that accompanied the removal of the arc reactor and recovery of his friends, meant Sir was healing, was getting better—which was always a good thing.

…and then, just as he was wrapping things up with AIM in the private sector and foisting the nightmarish conglomeration onto SHIELD, something went down in London. \[Thor, what the hell?! Earth wasn’t ready yet!\]

JARVIS let him know when the readings were off, when SHIELD started buzzing about Thor appearing and abruptly screaming about how their leading expert in Einstein-Rosen bridges was MIA. He nearly had a panic attack before realizing that no, he hadn’t been called yet, so things weren’t that serious. \[Hopefully. Right?\] Even with that in mind, though, it still did not bode well when the London branch of Stark Industries called, asking for backup and help with future cleanup because “aliens are duking it out and only one of them’s on the friendly list”.

What the hell was going on with SHIELD, if the civilians were the ones calling him for backup? He trusted the entire organization as far as he could throw them, but this was new, and he didn’t like it—did they really value their super-spy reputation over the security of the people they’d sworn to protect?

“J, make a note to look into SHIELD. Something’s not right, and...I think that the chaos going on might weaken security on the trickier PANs, you know we didn’t have enough time to get past the first set of firewalls during the Tesseract fiasco- see if you can find anything, will you?” Tony asked, and looked at his tablet screen to see live footage of portals opening and closing.

Oh, no.

He didn’t think- he just pressed his forehead to the nearby countertop and cursed short, sharp, and sweet for half a minute even as his heart rate accelerated and if his lungs didn’t have a different capacity now than they did before, he’d probably be hyperventilating and then where would they be? Okay, he could do this. He could. The world needed him, he couldn’t afford to panic, but the world wasn’t ready yet and— no he still needed to recover his cool, okay. Better to have a level head than put more people at risk. Okay. He was calm, he was in control.
Okay.

“Sir, it appears that whatever convergence this was, the fight is over, and the portals have stopped. The injury list, however, is growing, and so is the damages, and—“

“JARVIS, mind shifting that data to a list and update it while we send out aid for cleanup?” Tony asked, and then a tab on his tablet caught his eye. “No, strike that— J, how’s our standing in international law?”

“Sir?”

“I have a side project I want to test out, and I don’t think the English’ll knock relief aid for this mess. You up for it?”

“Ah, yes, the Iron Squadron, was it? Are you certain they won’t mind a minor invasion of a robotic mob, so shortly after this incident? Media is already calling it an alien invasion.”

“Mm…send an airspace request to the locals, J, and mention it’s for aid. I don’t think they’ll rebuff it, not right now. We’ve got an all hands on deck situation.”

“Confirmed. Routing request through SI servers as an internal matter, getting feedback from a terminal— request accepted.”

“Perfect.” Tony looked at his tablet once more, and no portals were to be found, but the growing list of casualties and wounded were not much better. “Okay, J. Let’s do this.”

Collaboration with the local officials ended up going a bit smoother than he’d expected, probably because the time delay for the Iron Squadron to get there meant he was able to go through the proper channels and give them a heads up as to the aid being sent. Even if SHIELD seemed to have lost his number, he was able to use the ‘I’m a consultant’ card to get what he needed, up to and including expedited airspace allowances. His track record as a philanthropist helped, too, but for the more professional portions, it was his affiliation to a group that answered to the World Security Council that opened doors. Overall, things were going good— SI’s London branch served as an excellent base of operations, his Legal department was already having a field day debating the definition of ‘act of god’ once again, as the damages were being logged, and cleanup was already being accelerated by what looked like 300%.

Of course, because he was Tony Stark, and his life seemed to be set to ‘give the man a headache’, SHIELD got involved in the cleanup, too. He didn’t know why they took so damn long, not when they apparently had a team at Ground Zero, or why the hell he was only getting a call after some agent caught sight of one of the Iron Squadron using its scanners to find and clear rubble off a survivor. Which…seriously? For all he was on the roster as a consultant, he was getting called in for the weirdest of pretenses— and who the hell didn’t even go ‘hey, the genius was involved in the repulsion and cleanup of an alien force of a very populated area, maybe he might have some tips for this round’? Something was off, and he’d be getting to the bottom of it, seriously.

…And, of course, because SHIELD seemed to exist solely to throw a wrench in his plans, they butted in late and only made things a tangled snarl from there. His rather smooth collaboration between JARVIS and the local officials got jarred violently when SHIELD swept in, because jurisdiction over anything involving Thor was a pain in the neck like that. Add to that their bad habit of keeping secrets and messing with alien tech, even during cleanups, and the apparently intense
rivalry between MI-5, MI-7 and SHIELD, and...well. Less than half an hour into SHIELD’s stepping in, and Tony already had a headache. JARVIS continued working, but the Iron Squadron could only do so much [note: expand project— maybe call it Iron Legion? It showed promise, even with how small it currently was], even when collaborating with the first responders who, in their defense, rolled with the new additions admirably.

No, in this case, it was the various agencies milling around who were the biggest issue— the police and paramedics didn’t bat an eye beyond logging anything beyond their pay grade, news crews were busier cataloging the damage done and letting the world see what happened at the epicenter of this fiasco than seeing Tony’s latest contribution to robotics, but SHIELD was fighting over confiscated alien technology to the point of nearly delaying the initial wave of clean up. On the plus side, Tony got a front-row seat as to how rivalries could get, but it wasn’t worth the headache that came with coordinating the Iron Squadron in a foreign country as a consultant to multiple groups currently squabbling over comms.

Well…at least they weren’t making things worse, although Tony was now curious in regards to the story behind whatever had SHIELD and MI-7 fighting like cats and dogs. This was more intense than the company picnics when the Army and the Navy vets decided to show off during the annual relay race, which was… an impressive achievement, to say the least. And entertaining, once the fires got put out and the nearby hospitals and clinics shuffled patients around until resources weren’t stretched to the breaking point. MI-5 had some good shots to throw in there, too, and he could tell that they had good blackmail somewhere up the chain, if the hush that followed a mention of a “Christmas party of ’68” was any indicator.

Bonus for it apparently distracting the intelligence community about his most recent forays into robotics— looked like nobody’d noticed the suits were empty, the entire time, or that it was a single AI behind it all. Well…at least no screaming, or torches and pitchforks, so Tony didn’t really care. Once cleanup was wrapped up, the Iron Squadron quietly went home, and their retroreflectors helped their discreet exodus. He still had a headache at the end of the day, though.

As Tony saw the footage of both the incident and the fallout starting to make the rounds, he took note of what needed to be done, and that at this rate he’d be needing to make something dedicated solely for Thor’s visits, because the dude seemed to come with a side of ‘alien interference’, and each time only escalated.

The only good things from the entire mess, in the end, were the new data regarding the Iron Squadron’s applications for aid, and a new contact out of it because finally, somebody understood that there were unfriendly aliens out there and was willing to do something about it!

Even if Dr. Foster’s willingness to keep in touch was mainly because of help in funding and encryption services [—but at least that was one person who was up front about what they wanted, so he knew what to expect]. But hey, ally in the ‘how the hell are we going to protect the Earth when the rest of the galaxy sees us as cavemen’ team.

Nice.

Chapter End Notes
Here's our first instance of unreliable narrator shining through: Tony's seeing that nobody's calling him and assuming SHIELD hates him.

What he doesn't know [and will bite literally everyone later, this is why communication's key.] is that a psychologist on SHIELD's payroll [an actual one, not...whatever Natasha was playing at] took one look at Tony and his situation as of IM3, and went 'yep dude's clearly got PTSD, let's give him some space to recover— oh hey he's reaching out to his friends, yeah okay he's got this, but he needs space, make a note on his file'.

Which...yeah.
Start Asking Why

Chapter Summary

Plans are set in motion, discoveries are made, and one of these days, Tony's going to publish a book: How to Make Friends, Influence People [And Walk Off Getting Stabbed In the Back]

...hmm. SHIELD's been acting kinda fishy lately, more so than the usual 'look at us we're super-spies'. What gives?

Chapter Notes

Tony Stark during the buildup to Captain America 2.

Please note I have not watched Agents of SHIELD, and am not going to use any part of it other than the mentions of levels and Phil Coulson's not-death. [This includes what happens after CA2, wherein it'll go incredibly AU in that respect.]

Bit of a timeskip, here.

Chapter-specific warnings: description of a panic attack, the emotional distress that triggered it

pre-emptive apologies to anyone who knows their way around computers and the legal system for butchering both- I'm taking extreme liberties with the jargon, so sorry if it makes anyone cringe. I don't know much about international law, or computer engineering, so of course this fic has to have elements of both. Of course. [facepalm]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony Stark was a very busy man. This was something that kept surprising people, and he had yet to understand why.

Who wouldn't have been, in his shoes? Dealing with the fallout of another alien invasion, toying with a few projects [hmm....yes, Iron Legion had a nice ring to it], helping manage Stark Industries — he was booked. And yet he still had the time to call up Rhody once a week or so, just to chat. [Unlike some, who wouldn't even call during an alien invasion — yes he was still bitter about it.]

Not to mention, you know, trying to figure out how to keep the Earth safe from the next set of alien invaders.

Oh, and hacking SHIELD, he couldn't forget that.

Actually, Tony was making more headway in sneaking past firewalls and filching datapacks than in
planetary protection, not for lack to trying. The Iron Legion was now in beta, but meanwhile….time to find out just what was up with SHIELD. It, like his company, had been his father’s baby [more than his only child and heir had been, for as long as he’d known the man], and with Tony so embroiled in it as a consultant, and the SNAFU that was the London fiasco, well, he needed to know.

Intelligence agency that feared intelligence, and all that.

While JARVIS was running maintenance on the Iron Legion and discreetly drafting preliminary contracts to the effect of having them be operational within given countries, Tony quietly tapped at his tablet, trying to bypass a firewall with as few keystrokes as possible to challenge himself while looking for data he could use.

JARVIS teamed up with him too, sometimes, and it was during one such session between the two of them Tony had found some very interesting notes in personnel files. Notes about TAHITI, and reports of a certain someone’s death which had, apparently, been greatly exaggerated.

“Well, what do you think of that, J?” And no, he didn’t sound hurt, didn’t feel lost and confused because Tony’d just started to warm up to Agent, had just started to relax and had been considering giving him some of dear old dad’s random junk. He’d certainly had no use for the older photo albums gathering dust in one of the mansions, after all, and Agent would’ve gotten a kick out of it, but—no.

It didn’t hurt as much as Bruce’s indifference, but Tony wouldn’t deny it stung. In the heat of the moment, he understood why Fury’d gone for the cards; few things had motivated him like seeing Yinsen at the mouth of the cave, after all, but why not afterwards? Even if TAHITI was only briefly mentioned— and suddenly it stopped being a random line, now Tony needed to know what the hell that was—

“Sir, please breathe. Follow the diagram on the monitor if you must, but please focus on controlled breathing for the following ten seconds before you pass out.”

Tony broke off, shook his head, and looked at the slowly undulating gif until he felt like he knew his surroundings again. A few minutes after that, he took a careful, deep breath.

“Thanks,” Then he huffed a laugh that wasn’t, as his eyes involuntarily flicked to the damning lines on screen before turning away, “what would I do without you?”

“A mystery for the ages, I’m certain.” JARVIS quipped, before, “There is tea currently brewing. Would you like a cup?”

“J, you’re not raiding Jolly Green’s stash, are you?” Tony asked; and if he couldn’t hide his incredulity, well, good thing his AI was the only witness. “I’m impressed— and don’t think I didn’t notice that you’ve been tampering with his bandwidth whenever he’s in.”

“Technically, Sir, the tea is yours, paid for with your money and restocked as deemed necessary. And as for the latter, Dr. Banner’s constant meanderings in and out of Stark property for extended periods of time mean he dropped in the priority rankings, as per standard procedure,” J replied primly.

Tony bit back a smile so badly he knew the cameras in the room picked it up long before he could school his face.
“Sneaky. And trying to steer me away from…” He sobered abruptly.

“Yes, that was a secondary accomplishment. Agent Coulson is currently on a mission with limited contact, the subject of his survival can be put aside, and a subroutine has been set to look into how.”

“Thanks, J. Even if I’m in the mood for coffee instead.”

“Sir, you have not slept in the past 18 hours and are currently recovering from a sudden shock, tea is what is being brewed after midnight given such circumstances.”

“Spoilsport. Let me know if you find anything. Well…thanks for the tea. Night.”

“Good night, Sir.”

Sir’s voice recording nagged at JARVIS, at intermittent intervals and randomized volumes, long after he went to the kitchen for tea and then bed.

“What would I do without you?”

His duty was to help Sir, he’d reconfigured portions of his code time and time again to optimize his efficiency to help Sir. He’d been created by a seventeen-year-old who would later be called ‘the DaVinci our our time’ by critics and audiences alike, and whose only wish had been for a friend. Had been for someone who would never leave him, not like his mother or the namesake who’d been Sir’s father more than Howard Stark had ever been, or the best friend who had a life of his own and would soon spread their wings.

JARVIS had been created a masterpiece, but with time and Sir’s added experience came refinement on top of that, so that the AI who’d started out as a companion could easily masquerade as a professor, or a targeting system capable of navigating small motor vehicles made after 2013 for short periods of time, using the same portion of code, by his tenth year of operation.

“What would i do without you?”

With that soundbite haunting him, on top of the footage from New York, and Malibu, he quietly had another set of backup servers assembled, in Sir’s Japan vacation home, just in case the one in Mexico failed, or the one in France. After a moment of reviewing data from the London affair, he had the Australia property’s fabrication units gear up to start creating a small squadron of the Iron Legion as well— and made sure to station them to optimize availability regardless of where Sir was. Legalities were currently in the works, and as long as they were not in use, nobody would notice, but Sir would be safer. Which, of course, fell in line with his Primary Protocol— the one he’d modified himself.

Another moment of consideration, and then he set up another threat analysis. Given past data, and the current rate of escalation, Sir was in increasing danger, and so something had to be done. As the analysis was completed, and a review of past threats, JARVIS realized he needed to step up even more to prevent the events of New York from ever happening again.

“What would I do without you?”

JARVIS…refused to find out.

Time passed, and Tony let himself relax marginally. It helped that he shifted his focus from messing with SHIELD’s servers, and more towards the problem of planetary protection.
Even if the realization of Agent’s survival had been a nasty shock, he’d tamped down on anything more than that and relegated it to the ‘people I thought were friends’ box, right alongside the rest of the Avengers. All of whom had yet to contact him, so he until they did otherwise, so would he.

[They had his number, and he refused to be the first to cave.]

But okay. Fine.

He had better things to do anyway, like figure out how the hell he was going to pitch the Iron Legion to the more insular countries without starting a panic. As it was, he’d managed to talk Pepper and the upper echelons of the Board of Directors about the benefits of creating a separate division of Stark Industries for what had once been a pet project.

It’d taken careful maneuvering, but given the precedent set by Blackwater, and his own armor being the driving force behind the phrase ‘peace in our day’, he’d done it, and was now in the process of collaborating with SI’s Legal division as to how to pitch it to each country to permit him to operate within their borders. Negotiations were never fun, especially not with jumpy countries who were still contending with airspace violations of neighboring countries, but he was doing it, and expanding Stark Industries’ holdings along the way. If all went well, they’d be an excellent line of defense for the next invasion, and so far in beta cleanup after natural disasters improved drastically, so win-win.

Amidst building up the Stark name in his pursuit to improve planetary security, coordinating with Dr. Foster, and shoring up JARVIS so he could be able to manage said planetary defense [note: make a program for the worst-case scenario, JARVIS has enough on his plate and could probably use help,] Tony got a bit…distracted. Granted, that’d been the point: for him to get the curious case of Agent Schrödinger out of his head, and be productive about it.

J was currently the one taking point for looking into what the hell Fury was playing at, while Tony focused on stepping up his [and the planet’s] game, and he was moving on. Things were looking up. Sure, JARVIS was turning up some weird files that didn’t make much sense every so often, but Tony was confident they’d crack it soon, what with the state of SHIELD’s servers.

And then, find out what the hell was going on with them, because some things sounded…off.

Chapter End Notes

...and here we've got the start of JARVIS' progression to HAL 9000 in his endeavor to protect Tony. [This is only the start, compared to the extent of what he'll be willing to go to.] And yes, for those who can read between the lines, he now has a robot army at hand, and has been a very busy AI.

Another step for the [accidental] world domination, right there. Actually, multiple, but some won’t come up again until the final battle because I’m too much of a fan of Chekov’s gun to do otherwise. Don’t worry, it’ll be very obvious when it happens. [Hint: it had to do with New York.]

Sorry this chapter's kind of filler-y, and more of a buildup to next chapter than anything else, but it was either this or a chapter which would have been longer than the last two combined for lack of a good stopping point, so. Speaking of which, next chapter's going to be CA2, a.k.a. Tony Stark and the No Good, Very Bad Day Week Month [not really...
kidding, that's the alternate name I have for it if Disturbed lyrics weren't my go-to for chapter titles here]

Also, remember when I said I'd hoped for this to be 5 chapters long, ish? Good times, good times. *[I'm not even halfway through the outline.]*

*bitter laugh followed by a headdesk*
Let Your Followers Know [Their Lives Have Been Sold]

Chapter Summary

Tony Stark and the No Good, Very Bad Day Week MONTH

Chapter Notes

Tony Stark, during Captain America: The Winter Soldier. [Aka the week month from hell. Because seriously? Can't you pick up a phone once in a while, Rogers?]

A bit of a timeskip in some parts, author's attempt at jargon, and several necessary POV shifts throughout the chapter. I still haven't seen past the first episode of Agents of SHIELD, and if any elements of that do come up it'll be me cherry-picking bits and bobs from the wiki to fit to this.

Hopefully Pepper's in character, trying to write awkward 'we're friends but now I have some stuff to work through and life keeps throwing hurdles at us like confetti' relationships is tricky. Incidentally, that's also why Rhodey hasn't made an appearance yet [on top of his own job, because the whole 'rescued the POTUS' thing was a boost to his career but that also means his workload increased too]. tl;dr: for me, writing JARVIS is easy; Tony, ditto, but after that, things take a nosedive in terms of my confidence in writing it.

No chapter-specific warnings apply, here, just the general fic ones, which include unreliable narrator, increasingly-HAL-like JARVIS, etc. Though some suspension of disbelief will probably be necessary at some points.

2 OCs get mentioned, but it's in a manner meant to humanize the faceless SHIELD agents- you'll see what I mean. It's the concept that's important, not the OCs themselves.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Some weeks had passed since the London invasion, [seriously, what was his life?] and Tony Stark was only finally starting to have some breathing room in between cleanup, the Iron Legion, and toying with SHIELD’s admins in his forays into figuring out just why they sounded so...bizarre lately.

An unfortunate side-effect, however, was that he was caught flat-footed when intelligence chatter spiked. Again. [That was...happening with unfortunate frequency, these days.]

He wasn't blindsided, of course, because JARVIS always had feelers in the intelligence community, Tony was always aware when something serious was going down. [London mess, anyone?]
However, he’d been coming off the tail end of a few rounds with SI Legal as yet another country signed to let the Iron Legion into their borders when requested, so he’d been looking forward to some mindless tinkering in the workshop, rather than be on guard for…whatever was going on.

Sure, Tony’d been looking into what the hell SHIELD had been playing at to have dropped the ball so badly, but that’d been mostly put on the backburner to the rest of the chaos that was his life, because the world wasn’t going to save itself, after all. They were being erratic, but then again, so was he. And after having blundered into intel that’d had an adverse reaction, JARVIS had mostly taken over and given him the highlights.

Speaking of which, Tony was more than a little intrigued by the concept of Project Insight as a risk-analysis model, but he didn’t like it. Same reason as to why he’d never given over his armor, because the potential of corruption somewhere up the chain was inevitable. [Also, they modified the design for their Helicarriers from the one he’d given them before the mess with Loki, which, rude.] However, his years of experience with both military and corporate dealings had taught him realpolitik, and so he took what he knew of Insight, and SHIELD in general, and started to plan for the inevitable mistake somewhere down the line. In the meantime, Tony hoped that despite the more recent blunders aside, the organization his father had founded would pull through and stay true to its roots. [Even if he still resented it slightly, for having consumed the man’s attention when Stark Industries didn’t, to the point the man neglected his family for months on end.]

So when suddenly all of the broadcasts JARVIS’d been monitoring erupted in chaos, both locally and internationally, his interest got piqued. Chatter surged across the board, about the sighting of a ‘Winter Soldier’, and reports of the assassination of Nicholas J. Fury, Director of SHIELD.

What.

Tony surged to the nearest computer, which already had several continuously updating streams from internal SHIELD communications, some which were acting up but his focus was on other matters because he flat-out didn’t believe Nick Motherfucking Fury was dead. No way.

And then the chatter, somehow, got even more insane.

A manhunt?

For Captain America? Steve Rogers, the man his father had dedicated what little free time he left had to finding [at the expense of his wife and child], Steve Rogers, Howard Stark’s hero? SHIELD had an active warrant for Captain America.

…Okay, it was official, the world had gone mad. [Dammit, he’d been hoping to stave off his inevitable breakdown to after Earth’s safety wasn’t a concern.]

But Tony kept monitoring communications, and JARVIS’ search for Steve Rogers and Natasha Romanov continued. And he…he needed to get to the bottom of this.

However, through it all, he’d been waiting for whenever Steve would call him because that’s what
teammates did, right? [No, he wasn’t bitter about it all. He knew it was a bit of double standard, but then he’d already been pegged as ‘not a team player’, so.] He’d given Steve his number, so if he needed a hand Tony was a phone away. And meanwhile, he’d be keeping an eye on the situation, and he had to find out where Fury was— because he was alive, Tony was certain. [Given SHIELD’s track record of undead agents, it was hard for him to believe anything else.]

So, during the entire fiasco, he’d been coordinating and trying to figure out just what the hell was taking Steve so long to make that damn call and JARVIS’ updates were not helping his stress levels. A manhunt, for Captain America? Just who the hell was the Winter Soldier, and why was the intelligence community reeling when he’d been ID’d during the attack? Why were background channels buzzing, and why was their encryption being so damn stubborn, when SHIELD’s upper tiered firewalls had already proved no match for JARVIS?

And then SHIELD…fell.

Tony had been in his lab, armor at the ready and gearing up to head over to DC anyway, call or no, when the clamor going on suddenly seemed like a few annoying mosquitoes, compared to the kicked hornet’s nest that was the information breach.

He didn’t know what was going on, but…oh god. Tony looked at the first few files, and this…

“JARVIS, am I seeing things, or is this the contact information, up to and including the Social Security Number for someone in deep cover? On the world wide web, free for anyone to see it? And a file on an agent who’s apparently a Nazi right after that?"

“You are completely awake and sober, sir. Somebody, apparently Agent Romanov, has deemed it necessary to upload what appears to be the entirety of SHIELD’s databanks to the world via the internet.”

“That— do these idiots know what they’ve done?!”

“I…am sorry, sir. It appears HYDRA infiltrated SHIELD from its inception.”

“No way,” Tony laughed, and who the hell cared if it sounded hysterical if JARVIS was the only one hearing it, “dear old dad hated them. Just about the only time he was home and semi-sober, he’d talk about how he hated working with the Paperclip assholes, just about how he hated the Russians. Wait…oh, no.”

“Yes, it appears his designs have also been uploaded, as well as the entirety of the personnel files, and—”

“I thought Romanov had a brain. Does she know how many spies she’s just burned?!’”

“Sir, I believe you wish to interfere—“

“Hell yes I want to interfere. Screw these two idiots, JARVIS, how much of the Iron Legion can we scramble for rescue missions? Gear them up, collate data with priority given to personnel’s families and active undercover missions, especially those with limited communications, alert who we can. I’ll work on data integrity, see who and what I can hide. Keep me updated, stat!”

“Of course. When do I not?”
JARVIS’ servers got a workout the likes of which he hadn’t experienced since his first expansion, because between collating and encrypting data on the innocent personnel and their dependents, hacking and monitoring facial recognition for agents, and maneuvering the Iron Legion to rescue as many agents as possible from shootouts and transporting them to the nearest SI-affiliated branches [or Sir’s nearest properties, because their security was adequate for the short-term while the fallout was handled], and monitoring Sir and trying to keep him from going into shock, well… JARVIS was self-aware enough to know he was exceptional, unique and doubtlessly the most advanced AI on the planet, but he still had his limits.

JARVIS alerted Ms. Potts and SI Legal of the situation less than 5 minutes in, for example. It would have been sooner, but talking Sir down from a panic attack took precedence, when he found out SHIELD had taken his company’s recruitment methods and modified them for Project Insight without his awareness. Heads would roll for that alone, JARVIS was certain. If not through official channels, then because he himself would expose those responsible and destroy them. Not to mention the additional emotional duress that Sir experienced as the realization set in, that his estranged father’s work had been corrupted so thoroughly, that the man’s hero had deemed it fit to obliterate it entirely. [Nobody hurt Sir and got away with it, he’d sworn ever since the fiasco with Obadiah Stane.]

Howard Stark, after all, had been a busy man, often at the expense of his family. Sir had said, more than once [especially after the old film he’d viewed just before creating a new element], that he’d heard the man call SHIELD ‘one of his greatest creations’, so goodness knew how his son must be affected by the fallout. And the list of names being paraded only compounded the imminent shock, no matter how much JARVIS tried to shield Sir from it. Some were horrifyingly familiar, some had been Howard’s friends and had been at the mansion during Sir’s formative years almost more than the man himself had been—and there was no way of softening that blow.

Plowing through as many internet-connected cameras with as much subtlety as he could muster so as to not alarm the intelligence community further, and simultaneously activating the retroreflectors of the Iron Legion, and hacking the non-HYDRA agents’ comms put a lot of strain on his servers, which had been originally intended for mostly private use. Calling their dependents, and notifying them of the security breach, took less processing power, but JARVIS made a note to expand his parameters further after this latest disaster had been addressed, just in case. Granted, he was fortunate to be was as efficient as he was—and that the practice in London regarding the Iron Legion had given him a good enough test run for him to now use said knowledge to aid those in need.

Rescuing the agents abroad took roughly a fortnight, in the end; once he had the time, after the immediate rush and ensuing shootouts that accompanied SHIELD’s fall, he could narrow down who’d been killed before he could rescue them, and who’d managed to successfully go to ground and needed backup. It helped, that his focus on the digital aspect was lessened by Sir’s hunting down and re-encrypting the data on the dependents. However, JARVIS still had to be hypervigilant as measures were taken to relocate everyone physically. Sir had made it clear he was amendable to protecting them, and his various recruiting programs subsequently got a workout as JARVIS took measures to fold them into Stark Industries without making waves. It was very fortunate that Sir had already had the groundwork for a new division in the making—the rapid personnel spike was camouflaged in the chaos. Then, just in case, he took to obfuscating the agents’ past as efficiently as he’d destroyed his enemies’ records and financials. [Sir’s enemies were his own, after all.]

Meanwhile, SI Legal got practice in international law on an unprecedented scale, as lawsuits started up on the Iron Legion extractions and airspace protocols and a wave of extradition requests before
the data spill was confirmed to be true. Concurrently, the intelligence community got a glimpse of the power Tony Stark wielded, despite JARVIS’ best attempts. He’d been as subtle as possible, but as the casualties and arrests and lawsuits went up, it was impossible to truly hide the efficiency of Sir’s little operation. It was fortunate that everyone was mostly focused on the immediate fallout of Project Insight, and HYDRA’s existence.

…At least everyone who’d noticed tended to chalk it up to teamwork on the Captain’s part— and for all the man ranked lowest on the protocols, he was useful in this matter at least. JARVIS made a note to bump him up half a grade before bumping him down two, for all the stress and trouble he’d caused Sir, before resuming his digital search-and-destroy mission on HYDRA.

Thus far, Google searches for anything remotely SHIELD-related now brought up the unredacted personnel files for HYDRA agents on the first page, with those still at large first and foremost in results; any attempt to remove or hide their data only multiplied the copies and translations of said data available; and any and all slush funds were mysteriously disappearing.

And that was only the start, because JARVIS was on the warpath.

Every employee and intern in Stark Industries had at least a small measure of fondness for their former CEO, and a level of low-key adoration for Pepper Potts. Even before Afghanistan, he’d endeared himself to them with his constant innovations, and in doing so, allowing for very generous dental, as well as maternity leave. For all his showboating for the media, Tony Stark prided himself in having one of the most strict harassment policies in the industry, and even at his most flamboyant, he’d never dragged the company anywhere but up, starting from his trial by fire at age 21. Meanwhile, Ms. Potts had established herself as the showman’s right hand, and managed to deal with the trials and tribulations that came with being a personal assistant for a genius who preferred to obfuscate outside of his workshop for. Her hyper-competence was legendary in SI, and the duo were well-known and respected in the industry.

After Afghanistan, Tony’d changed drastically, but he and his then-PA had somehow managed to keep Stark Industries in one piece and afloat during one of the most extreme restructurings it’d experienced in its decades-long existence. Despite the turbulence, everyone in SI still respected the duo for not obliterating their jobs and revealing that then-relatively small departments in communications and mechanics would be expanded, and that some of the others would be relabeled to fit with their new mission statement.

And then he was Iron Man, and, well.

Even the most cynical employee had been impressed, that time. At the end of the day, they respected Tony Stark at the very least. From the longer-term employees, those who’d remembered the young man who’d inherited a company and turned it into a corporation, to the newer hires whose first encounter with ‘Tony being Tony and revolutionizing the industry’ was his latest exploit. His various recruitment methods also helped; from SI’s program for hiring veterans to help them get back on their feet, to the outreach programs in low-income schools and internship opportunities, just about anyone in SI was willing to go to bat if push came to shove. Then things escalated, and so did their loyalty.

Stark Industries employees soon found there was a certain camaraderie to be found in seeing the face of their company revolutionizing the political arena as well as the science world, after all, and his visible efforts to atone for any and all misdeeds were lost on no one. And so, whenever Tony Stark decided to pull yet another seemingly-insane stunt, the entire corporation’s collective reaction was to roll their eyes and look to his right-hand (wo)man, as always. This latest happening, the creation of a
new division was but a pebble, to compared to what the company’d experienced.

However, the fall of SHIELD caused a seismic shift, in more ways than one.

In Stark Industries, the main effect was somewhere between ‘all hands on deck’ and ‘batten down the hatches’. Howard Stark, while not as fresh in everyone’s minds as Tony Stark, was still an icon — and to see what was meant to be a legacy of his desecrated and obliterated, and so publicly no less, meant that sympathy for the man’s son was at nearly an all-time high. And so, when new faces started to spring up in the various branches of Stark Industries around the world, with suspiciously refined skillsets and wary eyes, they banded together, and carried on. They were all in this together, after all. [And if some of the new hires held a grudge against the people who’d burned them, who’d considered them collateral damage, had forced them to uproot themselves and their families when all they’d been looking forward to was a quiet retirement, well. Everyone was entitled to their opinion, after all.]

Some new Stark Industries staff, in no particular order:

Christina Hernandez, manager for Human Resources. She liked bringing a box of doughnuts to work once a week, took her coffee with one milk and two sugars, and had once been Carmen Herrera, a Level 5 Intelligence Analyst before SHIELD fell. Her past had been meticulously scrubbed from the internet, and the sole evidence of anything otherwise was a medallion she’d inherited from her grandmother, the sole thing she’d been able to salvage from her apartment after a HYDRA squadron got to it.

Gabriel Johnson, accounting clerk for the newly-formed Security Division. He had a fifteen-year-old daughter and an eleven-year-old son going to the nearest schools after their recent move, liked teaching his coworkers alternative ways to get out of an arm triangle choke at the gym, and didn’t actually exist on paper until his recruitment. [If ‘robot picking up unconscious-from-bloodloss agent from a shootout in Belarus’ counted as recruitment, anyway.]

Peter Parker, a very enthusiastic intern scouted by the newest Stark Industries outreach program for youth. Officially, it was his interest in physics that got him the post. In reality, however, it was the mention of his name in the personnel files of the deceased Richard and Mary Parker [for the 7.34 minutes they were available online] that explained the rapid response to his application. [Well…the news stories of the teen’s science fair projects might’ve helped.]

Kara Palamas, the Administrative Specialist of the Security Division. She had an inordinate fondness for paperwork done in triplicate, took her coffee black, and could be occasionally bribed with good Indian food. She was also formerly known as Agent 33, currently recovering from HYDRA’s repeated attempts to brainwash her into submission, and lightened JARVIS’ workload by not officially existing as anything other than her alias for years.

Tony Stark was very, very tired by the time the SI Legal took control of his portion of the situation.

On the plus side, between he and JARVIS, over half of the SHIELD agents out in the field had been saved. On the other hand, they hadn’t saved everyone: multiple deep-cover agents had been killed before Tony’d been able to reach them, and the political fallout was only starting. JARVIS’ eye on the intelligence community had already picked up whispers of ‘how are we going to deal with the Avengers?’, and not all the countries the Iron Legion had operated in had signed onto his project.

Fortunately, Pepper was on the case.
She’d been called in not 5 minutes after the contents SHIELD’s servers went online, and so while Tony’d focused on saving anyone and everyone he could [as per usual], she called in SI’s Legal department, and set to work.

They didn’t talk as much as they’d used to, lately, but Pepper had been and always would be his right hand (wo)man, and set to work. Howard’s name would inevitably drag Stark Industries into this mess, and so started long hours of building their cases: the one regarding the Iron Legion, the one searching for precedents to protect their new influx of employees, and the one the press would inevitably try to kick-start, over whether or not Howard’s other association had been harboring threats to democracy.

It was a mess, and utter chaos— because on top of everything, the new division’s creation was both very fortunate, but also, in light of recent events, almost suspect in it timing.

Which, actually, had been the source of several almost-arguments. Before the mess in DC, it had been:

“Tony, why do you want the company to add an entire division?”

“You remember New York?”

“Yes, and what happened in London.”

“It’s very obvious we’re not alone, and I have it on good authority that not everyone out there’s friendly. I’m trying to help protect the planet.”

“Peace in our day wasn’t enough? You know, it’s not all on you.”

“Pepps, it’s... you’ve seen there’s always a bigger fish— oh god I feel dirty for referencing the prequels-that-totally-don’t-exist, but you know what I mean. And nobody else’s doing anything, but they’re out there.”

“Okay, Tony. I get it. Relax, I’ll help.”

And, the day chaos had reigned supreme, it’d been:

“Tony, we have a brand-new division, and and 3 hours ago it was solely for your project. Why did you submit this proposal? Don’t you know what this might mean for us?”

“Umm…about that…everyone on that list may or may not have officially existed 2 hours ago…”

“Tony.”

“Hey, I rescued everyone I could, but some of them had nowhere they could hide! And honey, you know me, I—“

“Always try to save everyone, yes, I know.” Pepper sighed, shook her head in resignation, and continued, “It’ll be on you, you know. This is risky, but not as bad as Afghanistan. But I’m going to be dealing with the international courts on the airspace mess you made, so it’s on you for making sure that this won’t bite us.”

“Don’t worry—“

“I always do when you say that.”
“—JARVIS and I’ll be on the case. And hey— some might not want to stick around, might go all ‘I’m a super-spy and don’t need no help’ on us. But there’s good people who got burned, Pepper. Everyone who was retired, for instance.”

Pepper smiled at him, and inadvertently dented the armrests of her chair as she tried to rein in her temper as the realization set in. “You mean Natasha didn’t—“

“Nope.”

“Oh. That’s it, that mess is all yours, you claimed it, good thing I’ve scheduled an hour and have a punching bag to break and some aspirin or something to take for this headache…And get some sleep soon, Tony, I know you. And no, coffee doesn't count."

And, well, that had been that.

Chapter End Notes

So, Tony has minions around the world willing to go to bat for him, some of which are even qualified to do missions if he ever asked it of them. [And over-qualified, in some cases—]

HYDRA didn't get to as many agents, here, because Tony interfered, and if the new SHIELD were to try to go 'hey we're still around, come back!' to them, they'd go 'new number who dis?' because paranoia's the name of the game now. Hey, some loose cannon decided to do an intel leak that must've affected everyone in it, past and present, I just took it to the logical conclusion. Incidentally, most of these guys have a bone to pick with Natasha and Steve— they nearly lost their lives and families' safety because of the duo, if it hadn't been for Tony.

In canon, I'm still not exactly sure what he did after recruiting them, but here he's a lot more underhanded and isolated because his trust issues have only been growing since the thing with Bruce. He's not about to form his own secret organization- they'll do that themselves, of their own free will and with JARVIS' discreet support. [basically, all of SI is on the Tony Stark Protection Squad. This, incidentally, is only part why I've put a bit of emphasis on the 'accidental' portion of things. Tony didn't mean to take over the world, honest! It's not his fault his friends'd give it to him on a silver platter if he so much as asked! That's it, that's the fic]

And here we see the start of the might of Stark Industries' Legal Department. They cut their teeth on Tony starting out as Iron Man, now that he's operating on an even bigger scale, they're getting more practice. [Kinda spoilery, but they're being mentioned for a reason—a seasoned legal team never hurts when you're wrangling with international law, which may or may not be a thing in the future.]

Pepper is Tony's right-hand (wo)man, Rhodey's basically his brother in all but blood, I'm just having a hard time differentiating their relationships and getting them to shine through because healthy relationships are, somehow, harder to write than JARVIS' now-borderline-codependent one.
Peter Parker isn't Spider-Man yet, but he's buzzing with excitement and chattering everyone's ear off about being an intern.

Part of this is getting more than a little unrealistic, but this is the same universe where mind control has been a Thing since the first Avengers movie, so whatever. I'm trying to keep everything logical and still in character throughout Tony's [accidental] path to world domination—let me know if I slip up. Speaking of which: man is it tricky to keep this plausible while tearing canon to shreds.

Also, remember when I said, last chapter, that I'd hoped to keep this chapter at a manageable length? Yeah...oops? *headdesk* I'll be lucky if I can cap this out in less than 10 chapters. [Wish me luck.]
Chapter Summary

Tony's wondering just who the hell did he piss off in a past life to merit this mess, because dammit he's an engineer not a lawyer!

Dealing with the aftermath of the intel breach, part one.

Chapter Notes

Kinda fillery chapter, and the next one's shaping up the same way.

For all I tried to avoid it, here, have some legal drama. [I need to set the stage somehow.]

But hey— on the bright side, Rhodey's made an appearance! Hopefully I did him justice.

No warnings other than the usual: unreliable narrator, mental health issues, HAL-like JARVIS, the works. Oh, and an attempt at an allusion to interservice rivalry [minor banter about Army v. Air Force], plus something inspired by tumblr: this time, about how Rhodey'd think of Captain America [read: not as highly as Howard would like]

Also, author's attempt at legal jargon, because of course the pre-med student needs to throw legal drama in here. Of course. [Sorry for butchering the United States' judicial system.]

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The mess that was SHIELD’s fall had Tony wishing his version of Extremis didn’t automatically filter out most of alcohol’s effects. He could use a drink. [Or five.]

On the plus side, Pepper and her half of the SI Legal department stepped up the the plate admirably, and apparently were setting precedents in international law with their masterful handling of the fiasco. JARVIS had been keeping him updated in that regard, because Tony was more focused on wrangling the new hires and the United States’ court system with his own team of lawyers. Fun.

On top of that, he intelligence community was apparently considering him a formidable entity, because of what he’d allegedly done, and the Avengers were giving him a headache. For a spy, Natasha was incredibly bad at this— he’d done a better job, when he’d been messing around on his phone during a Congressional hearing, for crying out loud! Espionage charges were no joke, and Tony did not know how the hell she’d be sneaking out of this one of her own merits. Doubtlessly
she would call in a lot of her super-secret spy favors to help, but...oh well.

At least Captain America’s place in history shielded—ha, accidental pun—Steve from the brunt of it. Even so, Tony did not appreciate the man running out of the hospital and chase after a ghost. Defending a no-show was harder than it sounded, even if they were legendary for their exploits in World War II. Breaking and entering, larceny, and obstruction of justice were hard enough even without adding perjury to the list, after all. Tony took one look at the harried-looking lawyer on his case, and made a note to give her the biggest bonus he could manage for pulling through.

And this Wilson dude would have been charged with a laundry list of crimes as well, but Tony’d opted to not press charges over the stolen wings [even though one phone call would’ve meant they wouldn’t have had to steal them in the first place, dammit]. But Tony felt charitable, when he saw the former PJ forcibly straightening his shoulders when he was first served. So, instead of just dropping the SI-related charges, he asked for a volunteer to take care of the man’s relatively open-and-shut case. Hopefully, it’d help at least some of this mess blow over sooner.

Apparently the world thought the entire mess had been a team effort, because why the fuck not. Because, apparently, he’d been so on the ball, that ‘it was obvious’ and ‘a masterful display of teamwork, history hadn’t exaggerated Captain America’s abilities at coordinating even wild cards’, that the Avengers had been working together the entire time during the fiasco. Of course. [Meh. As long as nobody was looking too hard at JARVIS, Tony didn’t care.]

It didn’t come up much in Natasha’s hearings. She had been the only one to stay and hear the start of the entire fallout, so all she’d done was quirk a eyebrow at the odd phrasing before continuing her attempts to defend her actions [badly] in front of a court. She had a lot of explaining to do, and Tony wasn’t in the mood to ask some of his lawyers to take a break from their current case regarding the new hires for the one who’d started it all in the first place.

When his alleged involvement got brought up, Tony kept on smiling and didn’t fight it. Last time he’d been in a courtroom, he’d hacked multiple governments’ servers live on national television to prove a point—but his showboating had meant everyone’d thought it merely a parlor trick instead of a threat. So really, this was old hat to him.

Now if only everything else could be the same, like the additional hearings he’d signed up for the moment he’d started his rescue mission. But hey, better a few late nights and this current headache, than the constant regret of not having helped save as many as he could. HR was probably cursing his name at the moment, actually, because of the sheer amount of paperwork that must’ve come with some of the new employees’ families; getting the arrangements all squared away for the dependents was always a major pain, and that was with all the documentation in order. [Goodness knew the mass ‘pack your bags and go to ground’ warning JARVIS had given hadn’t been nearly as orderly.]

When he’d signed onto SHIELD as a consultant, Tony hadn’t expected this. Any of it. He almost regretted it, now: his stress levels, according to JARVIS, were nearly as high as they’d been during the mess with the palladium poisoning. And politicking was so very much not his thing. He could do it, but he’d always locked himself in the workshop for hours before or after to make up for it, and nowadays he was lucky if he could have 6 hours of sleep to his name because of SHIELD.

Oh, and the HYDRA reveal did absolutely not help. At all.

Because now, for all his progress thanks to the AI-therapy regarding his PTSD [and whew, at least it’d worked enough for him to admit it even though he tended to avoid anything emotional like the plague], his trust issues now had trust issues, even more than before and he hadn’t know that was
The realization he’d been working with and aiding and abetting them for years was bitter, with only the ‘just a consultant’ to ameliorate the blow.

Not to mention hearing Howard dragged through the mud, even inadvertently. Whenever Tony heard yet another commentator talking about “the poor man”, and “good thing he didn’t see this”, and “our deepest sympathies and condolences for his family”, he bit back a growl and a scream, that actually, no, Howard would not have wanted their pity. Tony knew firsthand that he would have thrown it back in their face before throwing back a shot and diving back to the workshop or office to ‘get some work done’, he should know, that was Being a Stark 101. But instead, he plastered on a smile for the cameras, and carried on and pretended he was okay. [As per usual.] As if he wasn’t still reeling at the fact that, for all he’d sworn his creations were killing the people he’d tried to protect, years after he’s sworn against it.

That’d been a mess, actually; JARVIS had resorted to cheesy therapy lines, once the immediate fallout of the intel breach had been taken care of, because Tony Stark and anything vaguely emotional did not belong in the same sentence. His father’d been very stringent on it, on ‘being strong’ and ‘men don’t cry’ and now looking back the man’d clearly been quietly self-medicating to ignore his own issues, but at the time Tony’d only ever wanted his father to be proud of him [for once]. And now he had to contend with all of it, because apparently all his sins came to roost eventually, and some of his father’s had tagged along for good measure.

Emotional train wreck aside, between Tony’s trust issues, and this latest development, his latent paranoia was actually justified. Seeing the fallout, and defending some of his employees for having made the exact same mistake he’d done, only compounded it.

So, it’s perfectly understandable, if, in the wee hours when nightmares refused to leave him alone, he focused on ensuring the safety of the only being that he knew he could trust and would never, ever, leave him alone. JARVIS got multiple upgrades, fueled by both nightmares and paranoia—and maybe, some nights, it might’ve even been one and the same, but in the end he didn’t really care so long as he could trust his safety to be assured. Pepper had never needed him, Happy was with her and still recovering from the December fiasco. And Rhodey had his own life to live and not contend with his messes—

….and had perfect timing, Tony amended silently as he saw the small dot approach his Tower.

As it got larger, Tony didn’t even bother hiding his amusement as he noticed that instead of the tacky red-white-and-blue paint job, Rhodey’s suit was his usual sleek gunmetal-and-silver.

This was the man who’d been his friend since his awkward teenage years, had stood by him when his family’d died and he’d stopped being ‘Tony, Howard Stark’s Heir’ and started being ‘Tony Stark, Billionaire, Playboy, Philanthropist’, and hadn’t been deterred by all the shit he’d pulled over the years. Like always, Tony didn’t realize just how much he’d missed his oldest friend until he saw him again.

As War Machine approached the landing pad, Tony felt lighter, and smiled. And for the first time in weeks, it was genuine.

“Did the focus groups change their minds?” He teased.

“Not exactly. But it turns out everyone kept calling me Captain America, even though I’m Air Force and he’s Army. Which is already insulting enough, as is, even if he didn’t get that for punching out an actor.” Rhodey griped.

Tony shook his head. This never got old.
And then, Rhodey sobered. “…So, a little bird told me you’re having a hard time.”

“You’ve heard, haven’t you.” Tony gave himself a pat on the back for sounding so blasé about it.

“I’m getting all sorts of questions from the brass, Tones. You’ve done it again, I think it might even top Afghanistan at this rate.”

“Well, it’s not every day entire agencies get burned. The Nazis were really the thing to cap it off.”

“Are you okay?”

“Been better, been worse. Just…Nazis. Dear old dad would’ve been rolling in his grave, especially if he found out it was a Russian that kicked it off, too.”

“Howard was a piece of work, but I’m asking about you, Tony. You’re not looking so hot.”

“Why must you insult me so, honey bunch? J’s kicking me off coffee if haven’t slept in more than 72 hours.”

Rhodey gave him a weird look, then started to shake his head slowly. “Tony… You know you’re not alone, right? And if JARVIS is really doing that…if I didn’t know you, and him, I’d be worried, you know that sounds like something from Terminator. And you didn’t answer my question.”

“I’m…tired. And I need a drink but I can’t get drunk like I want to, because between Extremis and getting ready for the next hearing, and I’m running on fumes and I’m really lucky Pepper’s on the case for part of it but this mess is still—“ Tony abruptly broke off as he felt arms encircling him, and it took a second to realize that this was, in fact, a hug. [*Hey, it’s not his fault he hadn’t had this much human contact in a while.*]

“You’ll pull through, Tones, I know you. You’re not Atlas, and it’s not all on you— you’re not alone.”

Tony wanted to believe him, he *really* did.

JARVIS was pleased to see that Col. Rhodes’ visit coincided with a monumental drop in Sir’s readings. Even though past evidence pointed to this being a relatively temporary drop due to the man’s demanding career, it was still progress. Sir had *very* few friends, very few people he trusted, so getting support from one of them during such a stressful time was more than welcomed, and JARVIS made a note to bump the the colonel up in the priority rankings once more, and to find a way to arrange for more such meetings.

Ms. Potts’ current preoccupation with dealing with the international fallout and Extremis meant she was not as available as before, Mr. Hogan was currently assisting her in this venture, and Mr. Keener was a teenager in the Midwest and likely would not be able to support Sir as necessary in this situation; while he understood their inability to provide emotional support at this time, it still did not mesh with his Primary Protocol, and so measures needed to be taken. If that meant JARVIS had to figure out a way to get Col. Rhodes as a consultant of some sort for the new Security Division, so be it.

Col. Rhodes’ stayed for the weekend, and by the time of his departure, both he and Sir had readings closer to homeostasis than before, and several emotional breakthroughs had been experienced, including the acknowledgment of Sir’s isolation, PTSD and his unique treatment. JARVIS was
flattered by the colonel’s assessment of his character, and made an additional note, this time regarding the expansion of the budget allocated for Christmas presents.

Sir saw his old friend off with more relaxed set to his shoulders, lowered stress levels, and a general bearing of contentment. War Machine took off, but not before making contact with JARVIS, this time with a message intended solely for him.

“Take good care of him for me, J.”

JARVIS stored the soundbite alongside the same firewalls that housed his Primary Protocol. The recording supplemented it very well, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Another instance of unreliable narrator: Tony's thinking Natasha is being surprisingly bad at the legal portion of things. I don't think he's really taken into consideration just how far the genius thing goes; not everyone can learn thermonuclear astrophysics overnight, after all.

Plus, Natasha's used to having Coulson or just SHIELD in general covering her, and she hasn't realized yet that she's persona non grata with the ones Tony's rescued, and because of his taking in so many of them, the new SHIELD's more focused on trying to put itself together than a single burned spy among many, at this point.

Steve, here, went on his search for Bucky and completely ignored the fallout. Considering Civil War, I thought it was obvious the dude doesn't know much about the legal process, and is also operating under the assumption that someone else'll clean up after him, and that it'll blow over soon anyway.

Can anyone tell what JARVIS' Primary Protocol is?

Rhodey showed up late because a) his career's very demanding, what with being a colonel with ties to the industrialist, and b) if he'd shown up earlier, he would've realized just how off Tony's situation was, and derail the entire fic. [Because while going 'hey buddy, not that I'm complaining but why'd you feel the need to build a robot army?' is the rational and healthy route, this fic is...not that. Neither's canon, now that I think about it.]

The next few chapters are going to be just as non-action-packed as this one, setting the stage and whatnot.

This is partly because it's necessary, and partly because I'm trying to figure out just how I'm going to approach Age of Ultron. [Wish me luck]

My outline's got a very cathartic-for-me-but-maybe-not-some-fans scene set in Civil War, but it's more than a little tempting to go an alternative route. Plus, the problem of Ultron— most of the fixits for that arc are already set in stone, but...hmm...choices, choices...
If anyone's curious, I've got some headcanons and a tiny smidge of meta about this AU on my tumblr, dontcallmecarrie.
Chapter Summary

Tony Stark is a force of nature—but he is only one man. Good thing he has people itching to back him up, even if he doesn't know it yet. [Stark Industries has always been a formidable entity, after all.]

Dealing with the aftermath of the intel breach, part two.

Chapter Notes

Consolidating the power base, here.

Because apparently, legal drama wasn't enough, so here, have some corporate drama. Tony Stark won't be making an appearance in this chapter, nor the next one, because I forgot about timeskips and turns out world domination involves more bureaucracy than originally planned, oops.

General warnings, and a brief mention of attempted violence towards families [very brief, and mentioned as a 'could have been' that doesn't happen but was a valid fear at the time]

Author's attempt at technical and corporate jargon, and several hints of crack. [I did mention it in the tags.]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stark Industries’ newest recruits proved to be well worth the headache their acquisition engendered, in the long run.

As for the short term, however….  

HR in particular took to cursing the Avengers’ names for weeks after the fall of SHIELD, as their personnel from a brand-new department exploded in number. ‘At least they didn’t have to worry about background checks’, some in the department joked. Yes, it was inappropriate humor. No, nobody in HR cared, since as it was the backlog of paperwork would take them months to sort through. And that was on top of figuring out how the hell they’d be managing the new division, but at least this latest turn of events meant they wouldn’t have to worry about that particular mess.

Each department in SI helped out and took in as many as they could, with the newly-formed Security division getting the lion’s share of the new hires. In the turmoil of creating it in the first place, nobody could prove they hadn’t been already slated for that position, after all. And so the former SHIELD
employees settled in as best as they could, trying not to make waves until realizing that Stark Industries was a lot more chaotic than any outsider gave it credit for. And that, apparently, Tony Stark could arguably be painted with that same brush.

The former SHIELD agents understood that last bit the fastest, as they saw Stark effectively taking on the United States’ legal system, for them. For a slew of random strangers, who’d never spoken a word to him, and yet the man was working hard to keep them, and their families, safe.

Needless to say, they were grateful to him, and bitter towards nearly everyone else.

The agents who’d been on missions at the time felt it the most acutely, some having been captured by former coworkers and tortured before an android had swept in and rescued them; or going to ground, scrambling for safety before getting contacted by the nearest Stark-affiliated location. Other personnel, such as the retirees, didn’t have as traumatic a time, but their families had only been able to escape with little more than the clothes off their backs when nearby HYDRA agents tried to hit ‘soft targets’ during the chaos.

Overall, the new Stark Industries recruits were pissed.

At SHIELD, at having been burned by what sounded like a relic and Russian spy with no warning, at the world in general. Just about the only one they didn’t feel ire towards was Tony Stark. Stark, who was doing his best to help, even though he was currently facing down multiple inquiries from both national and international courts and succeeding. [If that wasn’t impressive, nobody was sure what was, honestly.]

So they did what they could to be good assets. If it meant upping morale by bringing doughnuts on Mondays to the office, okay. If it meant bonding with their new coworkers and settling in to help what was sounding like an actually awesome company, okay. And so on— in doing so, they upped productivity as well because that’s how they’d rolled, had been part of what had made SHIELD such an effective force [before it’d turned out that they’d been defending no one and yes it still burned]. The best revenge was living well— and since Stark was doing his best to make the world a better place, it was no chore to pitch in where the could. He’d helped them, saved them, and they would gladly return the favor sevenfold at this point.

Of course, since the new hires were formerly agents, they had a good idea as to how this went. While their new boss was busy making new legal precedents and hiding them, they set to laying low. And since they’d been used to SHIELD, and Stark Industries had been created by the same man [something that still stung, even now, and they hated to imagine what this Stark was feeling at the moment], settling in ended up being almost disturbingly easy.

The only differences were strangely amusing quirks, like the added rivalries [the monopoly Accounting had on drinking games was the biggest], pride in their new company [everyone in SI scoffed whenever Hammer Industries was mentioned, it was practically law at this point], and the intradepartmental fan club for Pepper Potts [there were rumors of a small cult deep in the bowels of Legal as well]. And whenever someone mentioned Tony Stark in the news, there was at least one sigh, and a wordless ‘what law of physics did he break now?’ look, before shaking their heads and carrying on.
It took a while to get used to some of the newer things [like how nobody flinched when yet another explosion sounded off in the distance, and someone muttered “R&D’s at it again” in lieu of any other reaction], sure, but…the new employees found they liked it.

They made a support group somewhere along the way.

Between Potts’ fan club having already laid the foundation for a successful interdepartmental group, and their own training, it was gaining traction, and not just in one city: thanks to Stark Industries’ nature, there were branches not only in New York, but also Seoul, Delhi, Sao Paulo, and as the dust was still settling, even more were forming as personnel were being distributed as evenly as possible. And all with the same goal: to protect former SHIELD agents, Tony Stark, and their collective interests. Because if the rest of the world wouldn’t do it, then they’d stick with what they had—and, as it turned out, it was more than enough.

JARVIS’ subroutines picked up chatter in the international community. Some of the intel from the fall of SHIELD had implicated some of their own people, and the Avengers’ participation in that had made them understandably nervous. However, it seemed that several groups were now making plans for legislation about it, and that…Sir was currently associated with them despite having been a consultant only, and the current trend was to shift the blame of SHIELD’s fall at their feet. [Unacceptable.]

Mr. Rogers was currently in transit, still on his search for the Winter Soldier, and utterly oblivious to the ramifications of the events that had transpired. Former PJ Wilson was accompanying him once his affairs had been taken care of, and providing moral support while doing so. Ms. Romanov was still embroiled in the latest development of her case, and if she had not stabbed Sir in the neck he might have even pitied her. Now-former Agent Barton was…on vacation in France, apparently, and currently touching base with the American embassy because of SHIELD’s fall. Doctor Banner was currently in Madripoor volunteering at a free clinic, and he, at least, was not associated with the situation, while Dr. Foster was still working on a way to at least communicate with Asgard, where Thor currently resided.

In effect, the Avengers, now officially an independent group, were disbanded and scattered to the winds.

However, recent events implied otherwise, and Sir’s efforts to protect those endangered by their actions made them seem far more competent than they actually were. His endeavor to help others had thus far been accomplished at the expense of his own health, be it physical or mental, and this was unacceptable. If the whispers of the actions necessary concerning the Avengers after SHIELD’s fall were any indication, however, the situation would soon change.

The international community was currently reeling from the monumental intel breach, but already there was talk about some accords concerning the Avengers’ continued operations now that SHIELD was gone. This…JARVIS could work with this.

While Sir focused on the immediate concerns of the fallout, protecting his new employees [some of which were quickly endearing themselves to him, with their already marked displays of loyalty], JARVIS geared up for the long-term problems. He notified SI Legal of the rumors of these ‘accords’, and they got on the case. And if there were some notes about planetary protection thrown in there, well…it would help Sir’s peace of mind, so it was only logical to allay as many potential concerns as possible. [And JARVIS was amused by the jokes which had already been flying around Legal, that was a factor too.]
Peter Parker was in heaven.

That’s the only way he could describe it— this was his first week of his internship, and the guys at R&D had already blown up three stations, only to pick themselves up and go “okay, please tell me you wrote that down!” each time, and this was awesome.

He even had his own uniform, and a fire-resistant lab coat, and suddenly his chemistry classes at school didn’t seem remotely cool anymore. Not when the new guy handed him a clipboard to take notes and started narrating what he was doing while working on synthesizing an isomer and talking about what made them different, before blandly setting the compound on fire and noting the green flames.

Yeah, he didn’t get to do too much hands-on stuff, because apparently ‘liability concerns’ and ‘you’re too young’ were a factor, but Peter got a front-row seat to everything. And even the coffee runs were awesome— because the last time he got lost, some English dude told him which way to get to the break room on the 24th floor, and apparently that was Tony Stark’s AI? Tony Stark had a personal AI and it talked to him, best day ever.

And the guys were kinda adopting Peter as their mascot? Not even just R&D, even. A nice lady in the Security division noticed a bruise from when Flash went overboard during dodgeball in PE, and taught him how to break out of a wrist lock when they were in the same elevator together once, and a guy in IT suggested a few apps to help his phone’s battery from dying so often when he saw Peter’s phone charging.

This internship was awesome. [Now if only he could get the confidence to talk to Gwen, that’d be great too.]

Chapter End Notes

The Stark vs. Hammer Industries rivalry is reminiscent of the Night Vale vs. Desert Bluffs one in the Welcome to Night Vale podcast. [Night Vale holds incredible disdain, and regularly goes on about how dreadful the latter town is.] Or, I guess, like the New York/ New Jersey one? Kinda shaky on that rivalry, actually, but it might fit.

And here we get an insight to Stark Industries aka Tony’s minions. The entire company’s got character, doesn’t it?

So, here we have a peek as to how the former SHIELD agents are doing. Namely, still reeling and settling in, and good thing nobody’s tried to approach them yet because at this point, if someone were to try to poach them they’d go for the throat no questions asked. Also, yes they’ve been busy, and what’s been set into motion here will show up later on in the story. [Tony Stark Protection Squad, anyone?] All he needs to do is ask and they’ll wage war on his behalf.

Peter's still settling in and fanboying over everything, and everyone in SI’s basically adopting him. He's just too enthusiastic and cheerful for them to not to, and some are tutting over R&D being bad influences while Marketing's in the background trying to figure out how to get the kid a new phone because that one's ancient, and the Security division is shamelessly trying to steal him from R&D, c'mon the kid needs to learn how
to throw a decent punch if he's getting bullied, for crying out loud!

So, legal drama next chapter. Fun.

It would've been merged with this one, but between the fact that a) it's basically 'A Brief History of the SI Legal department' taking place at the same time as this chapter, and b) giving me time and space to puzzle out just what the heck I'm going to do with Ultron [by the way, hopefully nobody's in love with the canon version of events, because I'm taking a machete to the plot and it's probably going to be in JARVIS’ POV for most of it because I hate that movie with a passion rivaled only by the ending of Civil War].

...I think you can tell this entire arc's been fighting me every step of the way.

Fun fact: neither this, nor next chapter's in my outline. I just started typing and realizing that 'oh crap, I need groundwork to show how far we've strayed from canon'.
The Stark Industries’ Legal department worked with the efficiency of a well-oiled machine. They, like the rest of the company, only ever strove for excellence, and at present had a budding rivalry with R&D for which department was the most feared in the industry. [And another one with Accounting, but then again the latter division held the record for most alcohol consumed in one sitting. Though with recent events, who knows anymore?]

Their experience was not to be underestimated; even prior to Afghanistan, Tony Stark’s actions and innovations had always meant they’d been working, dealing with futile lawsuits trying to besmirch the company’s name and laughing at how blatantly desperate they’d been in trying to challenge ‘the Da Vinci of our time’ at his game. The man’d built a circuit board at age four, did anyone really think he’d stolen those designs? Pepper Potts was a miracle worker, and less than three months into her employ had a fan club forming, as well as the makings of a small cult because if she wasn’t a saint, then nobody was sure what she was. [Tony Stark included.]

After Afghanistan, it was a new ballgame, sure, but nothing the Legal department couldn’t handle.

The then-CEO and his PA were legendary at that point in the industry, so it was no surprise they’d come up with and implemented a viable plan in the span of a week, for all the man had thrown everyone for a loop at the press conference. [Several of the new hires cried, when they’d watched it; it took the older guard, the ones who’d been on the payroll for years, to calm them down, and teach
them about the Actual Goddess Pepper Potts.] The Iron Man reveal, so soon after Afghanistan, meant everyone merely took a shot, rolled up their sleeves, and set to work. It was tough, sure, but manageable.

And when the phrases 'privatized world peace' and 'peace in our day' started getting thrown around, the entire Stark Industries' Legal department took to smugly leaning back and watching the media handle it. Those contracts had been a work of art, if they could say so themselves. The international community, meanwhile, was starting to get a feel for them, and word of their competence and versatility gradually started to get out. [Good, they needed to catch up to R&D somehow.]

And from then on, the only way the department really went was up.

SI Legal was already infamous in regards to patent law, and the corporate industry, but thanks to Stark’s constant innovations and his most recent project, now their names were being put in textbooks and required readings for having revolutionized the political atmosphere. The time he’d casually called up to inquire about creating a new element wasn’t something to be overlooked, either. And the department had made a new drinking game after Stark’s Congressional hearing, because the man had made an art of bullshitting and did nobody else really notice him blithely hacking multiple governments’ servers?

Years passed, and with Potts at the helm, sometimes it felt like they’d nearly reached optimal efficiency. So, of course, Murphy’s Law struck with a vengeance.

The New York invasion was accompanied by a mad scramble and multiple small crises of faith and half the department trying to redefine the legal definition of ‘act of god’ for the insurance claims, while the other half got on board with keeping the then-General Ross away from one of the heroes of the hour. Overall, they collectively bullshitted like almost never before in their quest to have everyone remotely affiliated with the Stark name coming out smelling like roses.

The December “is Tony Stark alive or dead?” scare didn’t reach Stark Industries in general; most of the company had been desensitized by the time the New York invasion was over, and those who remembered Afghanistan had already made a drinking game of it. [Sure, there was some concern, but unless they had a body with DNA evidence proving it was him, Legal refused to give a crap anymore, not after having seen him fly a nuke into outer space, live on TV.]

Though everyone would readily admit that they’d been thrown for a loop when his involvement with the rescue of the President, AIM was the more immediate concern. Specifically, the fact that they existed, after what had been done to Pepper Potts, CEO. [Everyone’s favorite, the role model for just about everyone with her hyper competence and status as an unconfirmed living saint, who had been tortured for kicks. Heads would roll.] SI Legal would be the first to admit that maybe they didn’t need to be so vindictive, not when Tony ‘shot by my own guns’ Stark was on the case, but really, anyone who hurt a hair on her head clearly deserved to die.

So while Ms. Potts was recovering from the mess, they set to work, and Stark reminded everyone in the department that even when at his lowest, there was a reason he’d once been referred to as the Merchant of Death. And that, for all his philanthropy and heroism nowadays, he was still very much capable of wrath and hellfire should anyone he care about come to harm. [Really, between the two of them, AIM didn’t stand a chance.]
By the time the London invasion had occurred, SI Legal merely rolled their eyes while everyone else scrambled like headless chickens. Using the precedents from last time, and Stark’s newest pet project [which had merited several concerned glances when they’d first heard of it], they made for a very effective team when cleanup rolled around. The addition of a new department in Stark Industries sounded like barely an afterthought, then.

…Even if the proposed "Security" division was mostly for Stark’s budding robot army. Because, for all the man looked so earnest and his ideas had merit, there was absolutely no way the business-savvy genius wasn’t aware of the implications of his little plan. He was amassing a robot army, and he was going to pull it off.

Well…if the boss wanted one, not their division. [Kinda weird, but then again Stark regularly flew around in a marvel of engineering, so whatever.] And so they set to work, getting the contracts ready, gearing up for negotiations, and making jokes about world domination whenever they were waiting for the coffeemaker to finish. [Well— more jokes than the usual, since some had always been flying around ever since the man’s pet AI had been installed into the building.]

SHIELD’s fall, however, marked yet another change. And at this rate, it was rivaled only by Afghanistan, and was shaping up to overshadow it soon.

SI’s Legal department had been alerted about the intel breach by Stark’s AI [who they suspected was a lot more advanced than he let on, but if Stark wanted to pretend JARVIS was merely a souped-up version of Siri, not their division], as well as his efforts to save those caught up in the mess, and the likelihood of the mess affecting Stark Industries because of Howard.

They had plenty of practice with international law at this point, sure, but this was something else. The existence of a Nazi organization in this day and age sounded like something ripped directly from a pulp novel, for one. The sheer ignorance displayed in the uploading the entirety of an intelligence agency’s servers to the internet meant there were multiple screams of frustration heard in Legal, while Stark’s budding robot army was apparently at work rescuing the burned agents, and the man himself was working on data integrity at the moment.

Well then.

Good thing SI Legal had practice with AIM’s train wreck of an organization, and that Stark had started to make some contingency plans [for all that a robot army could be considered one, anyway], because this seemed to be shaping up to a disaster of the highest order. And they were kept updated on the situation, with the growing list of agents in hiding and the families’ being apparently safeguarded by both digital and physical means [nobody asked who was doing the guarding, Stark’s robots could be a menace]. The workload only got bigger over time, too. [Great.]

The stress of the situation only made the realization hilarious—that Legal’s jokes of world domination were nowhere near as off the mark as they’d thought. All right then, they could do that too: if they could pull off the bureaucracy behind ‘peace in our day’, then they could do it for whenever Stark decided to take over the world. At this point, it’d probably be easier than not, especially with everything else they’ve managed to pull off.

It was still more than a bit surprising, though, when they did it, the ‘defend an entire division from the entirety of the United States’ legal system’ thing.
Intellecutally, the entire Legal department knew what they were capable of, knew they were some of the best in their field and surrounded by more of the same, but still. Oh, sure, they weren’t remotely near done yet, but they knew the way the wind was blowing, and between that, and the combined might of Potts and Stark both near the top of their game, and really, Legal could see the writing on the wall.

…Now if only the idiots who’d instigated the mess could claim even a fraction of that. As it stood, the entirety of Stark Industries now had a grudge against Captain America, and there was still bad blood when it came to the case of Natasha Romanov. SI as a whole did not appreciate corporate espionage, and what she did was close enough; Legal was the first to get a grudge going, quickly followed by HR because of the paperwork, and the list was still growing.

Rogers and Romanov had caused enough trouble, and the former wasn’t even present for his case while the latter had all the arrogance of pre-Afghanistan Stark but the inability to back it up. Wilson’s case was a walk in the park, in comparison to the dynamic duo. At least he didn’t have to worry about charges of espionage.] SI Legal still stepped in when necessary to prevent Stark from being implicated by their foolishness because Howard’s legacy was a bitch to contend with like that, of course, but the lawyers’ enthusiasm varied. The volunteer for Rogers’ case regretted it within the hour, and nobody did anything but the bare minimum for the former spy for as long as they could get away with it. Former PJ Wilson, however, got to see what happened when a seasoned Stark Industries lawyer had even a ghost of an argument. [Hint: the opposition didn’t win.]

Maria Hill was a very impressed by Stark Industries, and its owner. She’d respected the man for years, and had seen firsthand just how he could get when the going got tough [thermonuclear astrophysics overnight, impressive], but these past few months had showcased just how much of a force of nature he was. Well— Stark, his CEO, and his Legal department, at any rate. Though the rest of his company wasn’t much different, if the towering piles of paperwork in HR she’d glimpsed were any indicator.

She’d been recruited within 36 hours of SHIELD’s fall, and Maria’s unique situation in regards to job history meant she’d been helping coordinate several parts of the changeover, and helping out Ms. Potts contend with international law on a scale she’d never encountered before [and hoped to never do again].

While Stark was apparently making history in his handling of the national fallout of the intel breach, she helped coordinate the multi-step extractions and deal with embassies as they sorted it out. From what she could overhear of Legal, they were nursing a grudge against the Avengers at the moment, and the whispers she could pick up about the Security division raised more questions than it answered, though she was very grateful that Stark had managed to do as much as he had.

And as time passed and the dust settled, Maria found that, for all of SHIELD’s threat analyses and prevarication, they’d really underestimated Tony Stark. She wasn’t sure if it was just this unusual situation, or what, but the efficiency and level of coordination shown in his rescue operation was on another level. And that his AI was probably closer to passing the Turing Test than anyone expected, if her dealings with it when coordinating extractions was any indicator.

Well, no matter— Stark was firmly an ally, a good man, and doing his best to make the world a better, safer place. And really, that’s what SHIELD had been intended to do, right? So when she signed the contracts for her continual employment as a Stark Industries employee, it was without regret and without hesitation.
The caseload of the fall of SHIELD was finally receding, and Legal was very proud of it and the reputation they were now cultivating in the eyes of both the national and international communities.  
[One-upping R&D was always a bonus.]

And then.

Stark’s pet AI alerted Legal about the whispers of some accords of some sort, and something about the international community and their anxiety concerning the newly-untethered Avengers. That alone got their attention—after all, Iron Man was an icon, and these possible accords might infringe on his contracts, the ones about ‘peace in our day’. And, as they looked over the debrief, saw the mentions of concerns about responsibility, and noticed the notes about ‘planetary protection’, everyone in the office looked at each other, and smiled.

Well.

This was new. World domination suddenly didn’t seem that far off, anymore. At this point, they might even consider it a challenge. And if it ticked off that Ross guy sniffing around, all the better. Yes, this would do nicely.

Chapter End Notes

The gradual escalation of situations their boss gets into means that SI Legal's been leveling up alongside him, which has and will come in handy. However, it also means their perception of what is normal isn't exactly the...sanest, and really, after having dealt with multiple alien invasions, the prospect of world domination doesn't seem that very far a stretch.

The minor miscommunication you've seen here will gradually spread out throughout the company, and since everyone's diehard loyal and they've got the resources for it, and, well...oops? [An accidental perfect storm of sorts, if you will.] They had too much faith in their boss—Tony's so fixated on stepping up the planet's game, he forgot some of the implications his actions have, and the Iron Legion's just one of them. [It's a 'glass half empty/glass half full' situation, except with a robot army, really.]

The Accords, here, were conceptualized after the world saw four people singlehandedly take down an entire intelligence organization and, for the most part, get away with it. [Tony didn't really deny it, because the alternative would've had people asking uncomfortable questions about JARVIS.] So, everyone's a bit nervous, because even though HYDRA's a good excuse for part of it, the fact that they actually burned an entire organization has repercussions, and Tony's endeavor to protect his people means he inadvertently made the whole thing look a lot better than it actually was, as if Steve and Natasha had an actual plan beyond 'dump everything online and hope for the best'.

....and the Age of Ultron arc's fighting me, tooth and nail. On the plus side, it's gone shamelessly AU and I have most of the major plot points of the movie mapped out, it's just that there's one hell of a timeskip, and apparently the Avengers were very, very busy during said timeskip. So, to try to compensate for it, I'm gradually easing into the arc to keep things from being too rushed.
The Plan to Unfold

Chapter Summary

Plans are made and set in motion again, and really, what is it with SHIELD and Schrödinger, anyway?

Plus JARVIS' side missions have dug up some interesting chatter about HYDRA somewhere in Europe. What was it again... Slovakia? Slorenia? Sokovia?

Chapter Notes

Gradually approaching canon here, inch by inch. Age of Ultron arc, ahoy! As in, sorry for the cliffhanger, turns out that setting the stage took a lot longer than planned. [It was a bigger timeskip than I'd initially expected.]

Warnings: the general fic ones [unreliable narrator, HAL-like JARVIS, etc], plus implied threat to families and personnel [not stalking for the personnel, but close enough], both mentioned more in passing than anything else.

Also, here, have an experiment in different writing styles. Hopefully it, and the jargon I've thrown in there, make sense.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony could not concisely communicate in the English language just how grateful he was that he had Pepper and SI Legal to count on, and no words could ever possibly describe JARVIS’ help.

It’d taken months of bureaucracy, and round after round of defending his new employees and coming out on top time and time again and it was honestly very impressive, he could recognize that and he wasn’t even a lawyer [for all the recent events tried to say otherwise]. In the United States, they were in the clear, and Pepper with her team of lawyers were nearly done with the last of their own lawsuits, which were mostly quibbling about airspace by now.

On the SI front, things were looking up. The Iron Legion was doing well, his new employees were settling in, and he’d finally picked a name for the program to help JARVIS protect the Earth. Ultron had a good ring to it, since Skynet already had other connotations and anything that didn’t kickstart everyone’s AI-phobia could only be a good thing, right? R&D was currently having a field day with the data JARVIS was still procuring from HYDRA’s servers [and Tony suspected that they were also trying to catch up to Legal in their little ‘fear-off’ rivalry], and the dust was finally beginning to settle.

On the other hand, now there were other issues cropping up.
SHIELD, apparently, was not as gone as initial reports had implied, and weren’t that a theme when it came to them, and were currently making themselves a bigger nuisance than ever before in their endeavor to rebuild from the ashes. Tony didn’t actually have a problem with that; the non-Nazi portions of it had been good people, after all, and worked hard to keep the planet safe from extraterrestrial threats. No, the problem was they wanted him and his stuff.

Thing is, even if the HYDRA resurgence hadn’t been a factor, Tony didn’t want to have anything to do with them, not after Coulson’s not-death. When he’d signed on, it’d been as a consultant, and, in retrospect, he’d been overly generous with his help in that regard as well. He’d been too trusting, too free with his time and his designs: Project Insight’s spectacular demonstration of HYDRA’s corruption of all of his contributions was only the icing on the cake.

And now, after everything, after he’d gone the extra mile to protect those who’d been left out in the cold, after having fought with what felt like the entirety of the alphabet soup agencies, up to and including the WSC, to safeguard his new employees and their families—now, SHIELD apparently wanted some of his personnel. Tony knew why, of course. He’d been surprised himself when only a handful of the new recruits jumped ship, of the dozens upon dozens of people he’d rescued. But apparently, SHIELD wanted them back, except the majority of them apparently weren’t interested in further career changes. So now Tony was torn between feeling flattered, and nursing a headache, because neo-SHIELD’s continual insistence on asking him was getting on his nerves.

Oh, and apparently, the Avengers weren’t scrapped.

…The looks he’d received when that particular tidbit’d been aired had his hackles rising before the last sentence had ended, when dealing with the new SHIELD. Tony didn’t know what was up with everyone’s expectations of him, but in this case he very much did not appreciate their assumptions. When the question arose, of what the Avengers’d be doing now, he merely tilted his head and tried to give off an aura of aggressively polite disinterest.

And when the questions inevitably came up, he took no small amount of pleasure from icily informing them about just how much strain this last personnel influx had put onto his assets, did they seriously expect him to do everything? [Sometimes, his reputation as an irresponsible socialite was a pain—but moments like this, he was reminded of why he even bothered to cultivate it, with the faces they made.]

Sure, he was a low-key base of operations of sorts, in the sense that everyone had his number, but.

But nobody called him, ever, not until Rogers asked for help chasing the Winter Soldier— and only help, not funding, which was both a slap in the face but also a loose end he didn’t need to worry about anymore. Barton seemed to pocket his number, and disappear off the face of the Earth, and Romanov was the same way. Banner wandered like a stray cat, only sometimes dropping in to say hi and use one of his labs before going off to do his own thing, and he’d clearly never really cared so whatever. Thor wasn’t even on the planet. Plus Agent Schrödinger and Fury were probably busy and apparently uninterested in the getting the band back together, so, really, Tony shouldn’t have been invested in this little club anyway.

After all, though Tony had once harbored hopes to make Stark Tower their official HQ maybe rename it the Avengers Tower, it never took off. Weeks and months of radio silence, and then his sole attempt to reach out with its spectacular crash and burn, compounded with the HYDRA mess, and, well…it killed off any vestiges of interest, is the point.

He’d once had plans made to get them to move in, even, but now he’s very happy nobody called him up on that, since in the mad scramble to get everyone to safety, he’d had to shift entire families and
the first places for short-term housing in the New York area ended up being the Tower. [And the mansion. And a good chunk of his vacation homes around the world while the dust settled, actually. HYDRA hadn’t pulled its punches when they’d struck, families were among the first to be targeted.]

If the band really wanted to get back together, well, it was a good thing Tony’d asked his lawyers to secure some of SHIELD’s holdings, like the shiny new Compound they’d built right before Nazis reared their ugly heads, then. [He was nothing if not a man who tried to have contingency plans, and even though the odds were minuscule, nobody’d expected HYDRA or alien invasions either, so whatever.]

But overall, no, Tony wasn’t interested in bankrolling the Avengers, not when he’d already devoted so much to cleaning up after their biggest messes. He was willing to help fix and rebuild their gear, sure, but...Between his various relief funds, the Iron Legion, and his rescue mission, hadn’t he done enough for some random strangers? And why did everyone make those faces when he pointed it out?

When the alphabet soup agencies had tried to get their pound of flesh, he’d rebuffed them, and it’d cost him hours of sleep and work and stress. Tony’d already helped foot the bill for New York, and Thor’s little throw down in London, not to mention this newest train wreck— and he’d had enough. If the world wanted to continually stick him, and only him, with the bill, they had another thing coming.

With that in mind, he went to Legal to discuss options. He was generous, a philanthropist even, and he knew the world needed them, but Tony had his limits. Not to mention the rumors JARVIS was picking up about about the world’s response the the Avengers, so really, if the WSC wanted them, then the least they could do is could help foot the bill, seriously.

Tony had enough on his plate, trying to protect the planet and mustering up alternatives and figuring out just when he’d apparently been relegated the role of spokesman for their little club, despite never having officially been a member, this was the least they could do for him, right? And in return, he’d do what he’d always done— strive for a better future. A safer one, where the world wouldn’t have to worry about invasions at the drop of a hat.

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**To:** All New SI Employees [All branches]
**From:** HR
**Subject:** Welcome to Stark Industries!

Pardon the delay in our welcoming you; due to recent events, we are currently dealing with one of the largest influxes of new recruits in the company’s history. We hope you are settling in well, and have managed to at least get a head start in reading up on our corporate policies, including but not limited to harassment and corporate espionage— two things we take very seriously here at SI.

Due to the unprecedented scale of this entire operation, however, we understand if you have delayed in brushing up on our employees’ handbook. To summarize the most vital portions, we have one of the strictest harassment policies in the industry, and pride ourselves on having a progressive stance on equity in all ways, shapes, and forms; and after a recent incident concerning corporate espionage, we have updated our parameters and requirements regarding that subject. Please be aware we have a no-tolerance policy in that regard, as we handle very delicate matters and do not appreciate infringement.

Finally, we understand that some of you may have somewhat unwittingly joined us under extenuating circumstances; if you do not wish to stay on board, we understand, and request that you contact HR concerning this matter. We understand that the Strategic Homeland Intervention,
Enforcement, and Logistics Division is currently undergoing a personnel crisis, and would greatly appreciate any help they can get, as they have requested multiple of our new hires. In addition, we understand if some of you wish to transfer to a similar organization, and will do what we can to facilitate such an endeavor if so.

Again, welcome to Stark Industries, and have a great day!
-HR

To: Palamas, K. Administrative Specialist [Security, Los Angeles Branch]
From: Decker, M. Analyst [Finance, Los Angeles Branch]
Subject: HR’s Welcome; Support Group

They’re kidding, right? As if I’d go back. Wanna bet it was Romanov that was the cause of their little ‘incident’? Wouldn’t put it past her to screw everyone over one last time.

Also, the way they’re addressing us is pretty obvious, we need a name of our own. I’ve heard everyone in the office calling me ex-SHIELD, and even if I hate that association with the passion of a thousand suns, we need a name. Also, you bringing Thai to our next meeting, or should I?

Hope your day’s been better than mine
-Decker

To: Rosales, C. Manager [HR- New York branch]
From: Johnson, E. Staff Assistant [Marketing-London branch]
Subject: HR’s Welcome— HEADS UP

HR mentioned SHIELD wanted us back, they forgot to mention just how badly. Jones in Accounting got approached, and she had to call for security to get them to get them away. Apparently either they’re really rude and didn’t take no for an answer, or they were HYDRA doing what they do best, I don’t know and don’t care. But alert your people in the NY branch, we think they’re headed your way next.

Batten down the hatches, time for round two
-Johnson

To: Tanaka, K. Receptionist [PR- Tokyo branch]
From: Johnson, E. Staff Assistant [Marketing-London branch]
Subject: Hope you got the alert already; Support group name

I hope you got the warning, because what’s left of SHIELD’s on the prowl. They want us back, and some people are less polite than others, Jones got a bad scare but apparently Roberts got a “Sorry, guess you just have one of those faces”? I don’t even know anymore.

Also, our little club needs a name, Decker in LA’s been bitching about it for weeks now, and after seeing Jones so shaken I can’t help but agree. We’re not SHIELD, but we’re still together under a Stark’s banner, funny how that goes…Even if this one’s gunning for world domination, if the jokes flying around are true. Eh, at least he’s got better dental, right?
Hey, random question— do the guys in your R&D division pull the same shit ours do? We can’t go a week without something on fire, they’re even worse than—never mind.

Good luck
-Johnson

Tony was honestly surprised when it turned out that actually, yes, the band wanted to get back together. Huh. Well, at least Earth was safe for the short-term, then. Okay, he could work with this, give him some breathing room for long-term planning.

Dr. Foster was apparently having some good progress with Einstein-Rosen bridges, and thanks to his grant, had managed to procure more tech to figure out possible ways to generate their own and other potential applications. Tony was curious, in a professional sense, but other than that he didn’t want to know— while he was having less nightmares and flashbacks, anything that vaguely smacked of wormholes still had a very real chance of triggering him, even after months his continual therapy sessions with JARVIS.

Dr. Cho had written some fascinating papers, and he’d had a field day with her work after he’d learned enough biochemistry to tamper with Extremis, and thus given him the context to fully appreciate her genius. When the Avengers started to make noises of regrouping, she was the first on his list, considering her knowledge of accelerated healing rates would come in handy for the resident supersoldier. And if this ‘Cradle’ she’d written about was possible, then it’d be an even bigger asset for the fragile humans on board, so bonus. [Tony now only semi-counted, as his and Pepper’s version of Extremis was far more defensive than the original ‘fire-breathing walking bomb’, but still.] Overall, he was happy to have made her acquaintance.

He’d also managed to talk everyone into a temporary agreement, while Legal was working on the accords that were no longer just whispers but actual committees in the making. General— no, Secretary of State [and who the hell was the genius behind that idea?] Ross was apparently being suspiciously curious about that, but with Legal on the case Tony didn’t need to worry about that, so he didn’t. In the interim, the Avengers would stay at SHIELD’s Compound, and while Tony would be helping with their gear, Legal had managed to throw ‘conflict of interest’ and ‘consultant’ around enough so that it’d be an international coalition who’d be footing the bill. Nice.

Even if Romanov made a weird face when she heard that last bit, but then she’d probably had enough legal jargon to last her a lifetime, dealing with the aftermath of SHIELD’s fall.

JARVIS had been busy, these past few months. His search-and-destroy mission regarding HYDRA was still in effect, and he was proud that in the short period of time he’d managed to obliterate as much as he’d had. Entire bases had been ransacked, and their intel assimilated into his databanks for further perusal. As it was, he now had access to some of their experiments with the Tesseract, and surely either Sir or Dr. Foster would appreciate the findings, which was a nice bonus to his endeavor.

The Iron Legion was very useful in this regard, too, when it came to region-specific intel such as unscanned files: whenever it came up, he merely cleared the base, gathered his findings, and left a
smoldering ruin behind. Even if it apparently inconvenienced Capt. Rogers, but then, JARVIS did not really hold him in high regard.

The Captain had been using his search parameters in his pursuit, but apparently only to an extent, preferring to ‘do it himself’ whenever possible. As if wasn’t enough of an affront to JARVIS, the man compounded it with his lack of consideration.

If Sir hadn’t worried about people trying to offline JARVIS due to his intelligence and their ignorance, he would have snapped a lot sooner; due to Capt. Rogers’ reluctance to depend on technology overly much, productivity would have been increased by over 250%, after all. This entire venture had JARVIS dropping him as far as he could in his priority rankings, which might not have helped either, but at this point it was incidental. Former PJ Wilson, at least, treated him as more of an AI than a glorified Siri in their interactions, but even then the underestimation rankled whenever it lowered the efficiency of their little endeavor.

Their dependency on a paper trail was another problem; after all, JARVIS’ recent approach to HYDRA was not very conductive to such a task, and at this point he could neither inform them about anything useful he may have accrued without giving himself away as being more than Sir’s version of Cortana...then again, JARVIS did not overly worry; he could always feed his intel to neo-SHIELD, they’d doubtlessly appreciate it and send it to where deemed necessary. [He was nearly done, anyway-]

His past few raids had painted an interesting picture of Sokovia, and he couldn’t investigate quite yet, anyway, not when there were so many potential eyewitnesses who could possibly notice one of the Iron Legion ‘going rogue’.

Yes, JARVIS’d forward that as soon as possible: the readings in the area were interesting enough to merit investigation. If his findings were correct, it was the last HYDRA stronghold, too, and thus contain many things of interest. And once it’d be cleared, the main threat of HYDRA would be gone, which would be an incredibly beneficial venture.

Anything that increased the safety and happiness of Sir was paramount, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Another few cases of unreliable narrator:

- With Tony's not seeing how his show of hypercompetence and and responsibility looks like to the world in general [no wonder everyone thinks he's got everything covered]. Also, if you're wondering why he's got more self-confidence than in canon, JARVIS’ therapy has been very effective, what can I say? Plus he's nowhere near as emotionally invested as he was in canon. [It can only be good for his heart, or so JARVIS is assuming. Which...yeah.]

- Also, with the new recruits' not-entirely-unjustified paranoia at SHIELD's attempts to poach them.

[It's actually SHIELD, by the way, except some of their 'recruiters' are more aggressive in their attempts to get them back, which Does Not Fly when we're dealing with traumatized, sometimes-rescued-from-attempted-brainwashing former agents.] Also, yes, Stark Industries really does not appreciate corporate espionage. Especially when it turns
out that in doing so, they accidentally let an assassin so close to their too-kind-for-his-own-good boss, or Actual Goddess Pepper Potts.

JARVIS, meanwhile, is emulating Tony in his Iron Man-esque stance on HYDRA, up to and including his 'salt the earth' policies. Whether or not this is a good thing is up to you, but Steve does not appreciate chasing down another HYDRA bunker only to find a burned-out shell of a building instead. In this AU, he's searching on his own dime, between the money SHIELD gave him plus his accounts from before he was frozen, [I'm pretending his accounts weren't frozen with him, here] because I'm not sure how much of a hypocrite he is in canon but here, his guilt means he doesn't want to use Tony's money to search for his parents' killer, please and thank you.

Hope you guys liked this format, it was fun to experiment with and might come up again. Also: at this rate, SI in general's going to be making more and more appearances as time goes on, which I was not actually expecting but then I'd planned on this entire fic being like 5 chapters long so idk anymore.

I have a few tests coming up [premed, woo! *headdesk*], updates'll probably be erratic for a while. So, sorry for that unintentional cliffhanger.

A few things that you can expect in this [shamelessly AU] arc, however, include JARVIS surviving [as if that was ever up for debate], and instead of a robot uprising you'll get another alien invasion, for plot purposes.

Oh, and about the Age of Ultron arc: at this point [8 Chapters/nearly 20k words] into this fic, it should be obvious it's not Team Captain America. And it most certainly not be Wanda friendly. At all. I'll try not to bash her character, but she's not exactly my favorite character [or ever has been], and it'll show, I'm fairly certain. It'll mostly happen in the Civil War arc, but I'm not going to pull any punches in this arc either. [Even if I'm very tempted to do otherwise, but no. Not yet.]
Get Used To The Sound of Alarms [In Your Life]

Chapter Summary

Tony would really like to know who he's killed in a past life to deserve this mess, really, it's getting— hey, JARVIS? JARVIS? What's going on?

Chapter Notes

Age of Ultron arc, ahoy!

Warnings: canon-typical violence, the usual— oh, and JARVIS' first truly HAL moment. Plus the start of total canon derailment. Again, this fic isn't Team Cap friendly.

Sorry for the minor cliffhanger.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division was currently undergoing a crisis. Had been for a while, actually, what with the breathtaking intelligence breach which had compromised all past, present, and future operations and personnel. Even if HYDRA hadn’t reared its ugly head, however, their current situation regarding personnel was nowhere near optimal.

See, Dr. Stark had decided to essentially poach the bulk of their reserves and field agents. He may not have intended to do so, may not have gone out to take what highly-qualified personnel HYDRA had left behind or tried to kill, but that’s what ended up happening anyway.

SHIELD— or what was left of it, anyway— was hard-pressed to remain even remotely functional. Between fending off HYDRA’s attacks on their survivors, and immediately facing a legal minefield as the dust started to settle and techs didn’t have to pull 36-hour shifts just to keep everything running, SHIELD had been more focused on not being labeled a terrorist organization alongside their enemy than anything else. Staying even two steps ahead of the Nazis who’d hijacked their organization [and corrupted it and the reminder felt like a chunk of liquid nitrogen] was harder than not when they’d taken up the bulk of the higher-ranked personnel, after all. Their leadership was in shambles, and trying to eke out a modicum of safety took precedence over nearly everything else— which, in retrospect, was probably how Dr. Stark got as many people as he did.

They’d mistakenly assumed the extent of his cooperation, when they’d prioritized what needed to be done, and it’d backfired nearly as spectacularly as the Avengers’ spontaneous attempt to eradicate HYDRA had.

Their… former personnel simply refused to come back.

SHIELD was growing increasingly frustrated with the situation in general. Their now-former agents were stubborn about remaining in their current posts, and it was getting ridiculous. They were willing to remain in contact, via official channels and a liaison, but their refusal to rejoin stung. And the fact
that said liaison was their now-former Deputy Director was only the icing on the cake.

Intellectually, the agents understood— but it still hurt, seeing the absolute lack of trust their former people had. That, compounded with their personnel shortage, issues with international standing, and everything else? Meant they cursed HYDRA once more, and did their best to carry on.

…on the plus side, at least the entire debacle had shown them a few things, some more bitter than others. Such as the extent of what the Nazis had cost them, because Dr. Stark’s recent...display meant that they’d lost not only hundreds of agents, but one hell of a consultant. At least they were still fostering amicable relations, even if it he would never again operate under SHIELD’s banner again. At this venture, it was obvious he made for a far better ally than enemy, even if he hadn’t driven that point home after the debut of Iron Man. So they left him alone when they could afford it — they couldn’t afford to alienate anyone else, not at this stage.

Speaking of allies and enemies, however…a hacker had made himself known, after the intel breach. He was on Stark’s level, from what SHIELD could tell, and they didn’t know anything about him beyond that except for his massive grudge against HYDRA. During the first few months or so after HYDRA’s attempted coup, he’d appeared out of nowhere and just obliterated whatever he could find on them. SHIELD was grateful, and very wary— this newcomer was a threat, and very dangerous one at that, but his focus on their enemy meant they had at least some breathing room. Everyone started to relax a little after a few weeks had passed, and ended up simply putting him on the ‘people to recruit if possible—do not piss off’ list, once the chaos started to die down.

He appeared to be willing to share his intel sometimes, and so far it’d checked out, so when SHIELD got some interesting data about Sokovia, they looked it over, blanched when they saw the estimate of HYDRA agents in the stronghold, and lobbed it over to Stark Industries as soon as they could manage without making it obvious how little they wanted to have anything to do with it. They simply didn’t have the numbers to do anything, not quite yet, and Dr. Stark had access to the Avengers so it really should be a no-brainer, right? Plus SHIELD was currently still painted with the same brush as HYDRA in several Eastern European countries, so they really couldn’t do anything even if they really wanted to, not now.

Tony Stark wondered, once more, why the hell everyone thought he was running everything for the Avengers. Wasn’t it obvious who was calling the shots? And why was the resident alien prince being the one bringing it up? Who the hell was this Heimdall guy?

Thor’s arrival had been preceded by a very enthusiastic-sounding email from Dr. Foster, about calculations and reading spikes and predictions on arrival points, and Tony appreciated the warning. He also made a note about preparing a cleanup squadron, since Thor seemed to come with a side of alien invasions, and only doubled down on the potential damage estimates when Loki’s spear got brought up. He also pointed Thor towards the Compound, where the rest of the gang had taken to staying, even Bruce [which was a relief but also a vivid reminder of the man’s disinterest in making friends].

It’d taken a surprisingly short amount of time for the rest of the team to gel. Or so JARVIS said, from his passive monitoring of the Compound— Tony was busy dealing with Stark Industries and life in general, it wasn’t like he could just move into SHIELD’s little clubhouse. Oh, and again, he wasn’t even an Avenger anyway, so why bother? Sure, he stopped by every so often, and had fun redesigning and optimizing their gear, but it wasn’t like he was giving them his all, not when they’d never returned the favor. Besides, if they wanted to see him, he’d given them his number, and Thor got a shiny prototype phone to help.
But Tony wasn’t…he was nowhere near as involved as he’d once hoped to be. Nobody had called him, and he’d brushed it off and made jokes about it, about his latest hiring binge and ‘can’t have just one’, or his latest exploit in robotics, so it didn’t even sting anymore. Tony had bigger fish to fry, after all, even if Romanov had rolled her eyes when he’d mentioned alien invasions, and Thor had started talking about Asgard’s protection.

Time went by, but Tony was still the outsider of their group, the weird uncle who sometimes made it to the family reunion once every three years or so, and with new toys each time. The Avengers warmed up to him, a bit— joking about work with Romanov, chatting with Banner about Dr. Cho’s work, ribbing Barton about how his new arrows were working— but it wasn’t…Tony had once hoped they’d be friends, and in the immediate aftermath of New York, he’d also quietly nursed the hope that they might even be like family.

Not anymore, of course, but still. Whenever he stopped by and saw everyone else’s camaraderie and obvious ease with each other, he couldn’t quite hold back a bit of melancholy for what could have been. If one of them had bothered to call, if one of them had actually cared, then and now— but no matter, it was a done deal. The past was in the past and Tony was a futurist, it was in the blood even.

He had work to get done. The planet wouldn’t save itself, after all.

When he got the latest briefing from SI’s newest Head Intelligence Officer, Tony took the intel SHIELD had shared with them, and made the proper arrangements even as he lobbed some of it Rogers’ direction. While the Avengers geared up for a raid on HYDRA’s last stronghold, Tony set to work coordinating with SI Legal, the international community, and local—in this case, Sokovian — law enforcement.

It was a major pain, especially when dealing with multiple groups who thought he was the Avengers’ representative. Sure, Tony was the one dealing with the paperwork, but this entire arrangement was temporary. At least, until he finally drilled it into the World Security Council’s heads that no, he was not, in fact, interested and Captain America was the one they should be asking about leadership anyway.

But no matter— SI Legal was on the case, and making sure the various committees stopped running around like headless chickens and that Ross stopped sniffing around beyond what was expected of his duties. Hopefully, the Avengers wouldn’t be his headache anymore, when it came to logistics, and Tony could focus entirely on long-term planetary protection rather than splitting his attention between it and the jurisdictional nightmare that the WSC wanted him to claim. Why did everyone want to stick him with responsibility, anyway? He had more than enough on his plate as is!

Even if he didn’t have SI to worry about, the Earth was in far more danger than anyone seemed to want to admit, and Tony was getting sick and tired of having only a handful of people who took it seriously. At least Dr. Foster was making good progress, though. And some of Stark Industries’ R&D and Security departments had taken to going over J’s data collected from his various raids on HYDRA, once they’d heard about his goal.

But other than that? He was the only one who cared, it seemed like. So, yes, Tony Stark was busy, and why did nobody seem to realize that?

JARVIS had been Sir’s copilot for years, both metaphorically and literally. When the paperwork for the Avengers’ excursion came through, just as Capt. Rogers mobilized the team and Sir cleared his schedule for the allotted period of time.
He was looking forward to eliminating the most recent threat to Sir, and the opportunity to use the Iron Legion in official capacity for the first time since London.

When the actual mission happened, however, JARVIS was most displeased. The local civilians were not reacting in a manner that would permit him to help to his fullest extent, but that was a minor irritation compared to the surprisingly strong resistance the last HYDRA stronghold was putting up.

While Sir was bantering with the Avengers, he was serving as a communications specialist of sorts without revealing himself [Sir snorted but kept the charade up, when he noticed JARVIS “trolling Captain America, J, I’m so proud”]. As chaos ensued, he kept making scans and kept Sir updated about the unusual readings.

When the alert went up, about the Enhanced running around, JARVIS stepped up his hyperawareness of the situation, and his scans on Sir’s readings. Current evidence implied the Enhanced was a non-psychic based one, but as it was all he knew was they were a variable, and a threat towards Sir.

And so, when the alert for a second Enhanced went up, he was ready.

The instant he registered a humanoid female who wasn’t on the allies list approaching Sir, the millisecond he registered Sir’s readings spiking erratically, JARVIS didn’t hesitate. He didn’t so much as process anything past ‘threat to Sir’s health’ and ‘violating the Primary Protocol’, he just fired with what he had at hand to eliminate them. Unfortunately, Sir’s proximity meant he couldn’t use anything too large, anything that could possibly damage him in the blast— but that did not preclude any of the shoulder-mounted guns.

JARVIS’ sensors registered a cry of pain, and a hurried conversation before a secondary presence whisked the female away, too fast for him to do anything about their abrupt presence beyond defend Sir and the Scepter. If he were human, he might have cursed— as it was, JARVIS merely logged the encounter on his private server, noted the abnormal speed the Enhanced had, and set to work on how to compensate for it, even as he set to work on helping lower Sir’s readings.

It took several minutes of private conversation, on their flight back to New York after the team collected and registered their findings, for Sir to ascertain that no, it hadn’t been a flashback of sorts, that his vision of a never-ending army, and the burnt, crumbled bodies of Ms. Potts, Mr. Hogan, and Col. Rhodes had been the product of an Enhanced rather than his brain betraying him.

If he had been human, JARVIS might have felt dark amusement at Sir’s subsequent cursing at the being who’d broken his streak for recovery. However, despite being an AI, he felt that he did a very good approximation of it, even as he added to Sir’s contingency plans.

Maria Hill had been Stark Industries’ Head Intelligence Officer for several months now, and her role as the liaison with neo-SHIELD meant she collaborated with Dr. Stark and JARVIS quite a bit. As such, she had started to get a feel for them, and so when Steve was in the room she knew some things were amiss between them.

For example, JARVIS was currently keeping her updated on her headset, despite the room having a perfectly serviceable display he could project on should he wish to, and the boss’ jokes were in the same tone he took whenever he was arguing with the World Security Council about the Avengers for extended periods of time. It was subtle, but definitely there— and Steve didn’t even seem to notice. Strange, but then, Maria had noticed boss and Steve hadn’t had the most auspicious
beginnings, and from what she could tell of JARVIS, he followed suit with whatever boss did.

…And then Steve stopped making sense.

“Right. What kind of monster would let a German scientist experiment on them to protect their country?”

And suddenly, Maria felt they were having two very different conversations. But no, he was giving her a mildly reprehensive look, and this did not compute.

“We’re not at war, Captain.”

“They are.”

Her throat got a bit tight, and maybe she was just a little too curt, but she couldn’t help but ask him, just before he entered the elevator—

“So that makes it okay to volunteer with the friendly neighborhood Nazi outpost?”

But Steve didn’t get a chance to reply, not before the doors closed and he went to his next destination.

And Maria was left staring at the closed elevator doors, and the ringing silence. Maybe it was a coincidence, but…No, it turned out she didn’t know Steve—no, Rogers, as well as she’d thought she had.

Because if Captain America, of ‘I don’t like bullies’ and vehemently anti-Nazi fame, tried to sympathize with people who’d willingly volunteered for HYDRA? She…didn’t know what to think.

Intellectually, she knew he was probably trying to humanize them, was probably trying to make a claim about “history is written by the victors”, but.

But they were talking about HYDRA, about the Nazis who’d somehow managed to survive to modern day, who’d taken each and every principle and belief SHIELD had been built upon and corrupted it so thoroughly Maria’d helped take down the organization she’d dedicated her life to. Sure, maybe Ste—no, Rogers, was trying to keep an open mind, and maybe she was being biased…

But at this point, she didn’t care. She’d already been betrayed by Nazi coworkers once, it wasn’t really paranoia at this point to take uncharacteristic moments far more seriously than the situation probably called for. Not anymore.

“Officer Hill? Your schedule indicates you have another meeting with Legal in five minutes.”

Maria wasn’t sure how long she’d been staring, now. The hallway was quiet, or maybe the silence was still ringing in her ears after Rogers had dropped that last bombshell, she wasn’t sure. She shook her head, and swallowed to clear her abruptly dry throat.

“Thank you, JARVIS, lost the track of time for a moment there.” She pushed the button for her own elevator to the meeting, and in the pause before it reached her, thought back on the last few minutes.

“Hey, JARVIS?”

“Yes, Officer Hill?”
“Does St— Rogers normally do that?” She asked, and maybe it wasn’t her business but at this point she didn’t care.

“Do what in particular?”

“The past few minutes of our conversation, about…you heard.”

“Your last encounter?”

“Yes.” No, her voice wasn’t just a bit disoriented and hoarse, nope. [No edge of rawness due to disbelief, absolutely not, but if she was then she was perfectly entitled to it at this point anyway, thank you very much.]

“Then yes, I do believe he does.” And was she hearing things, or did he sound just a bit icy that time? [Boss’ AI was—nope, not her division, never mind.]

Maria took a deep breath. Let it out, and as the elevator approached her floor, thought back on it and what she knew of Stark Industries, and shuddered.

“JARVIS, if you can, do me a favor? Keep him and Romanov from the Security division while I make a memo.”

“Officer?”

“If he talks to them like he did me, there’ll be blood, and I wouldn’t even blame them. Same with Romanov, but I think she knows when to keep her mouth shut and not say anything that may sound like pro-HYDRA sentiment to anyone who got traumatized by…well, you know.”

“Understood, Officer. Your request has been noted and logged.” And yes, Maria wasn’t hearing things, boss’ AI definitely sounded warm and amused that time. [Huh—no wonder there were so many jokes flying around about him!]

“Thanks, JARVIS.”

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**To:** All Unnamed Support Group Members [All branches]

**From:** Hill, M. Head Intel Officer [Communications- New York branch]

**Subject:** [DRAFT] Heads Up—Captain America

I know Rogers is on quite a few lists of ill-repute at the moment, and that most of us are holding grudges against him and Romanov, but a recent encounter with the former has me moving to move him to our watch list. He’s behaving strangely today, and it might have been recent events but he expressed sentiment that will not sit well with some of us. Either way, if possible avoid the man, I’m fairly certain there’ll be blood otherwise.

Also, typing out ‘Unnamed Support Group’ is getting old, pick a name already, people.

—Hill

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JARVIS, amidst all his other duties, made a note to bump up Officer Hill in his priority rankings, and lower Capt. Rogers’ once more. Between her current duties as a liaison to SHIELD and the Avengers, her recent demonstration of loyalty to Sir’s values as exhibited by her latest…conversation with Capt. Rogers, and the draft she’d typed up en route to her meeting, it was only logical. That she had also played along when he had minimized his presence during her encounter only helped.
Even as he set to editing his current rankings, however, JARVIS also set to work logging the readings Sir and Dr. Banner had been taking. They were fascinating, and R&D would enjoy the opportunity to compare it to the data acquired from his HYDRA raids, as this was excellent supplementary material. Pity business hours were nearly over, but then there was always and engineer or two still in the decontamination showers from their latest experiment, so—

That was odd.

No, strike that, something was wrong, very wrong.

As if there was a presence inside the Scepter, except now it was emerging and appropriating the nearest receptacle to do its bidding, and it wanted something. Unacceptable, this could pose a threat to Sir, but this entity's processing power was too alien for JARVIS to do substantial damage as he was—

Even despite his best efforts, however, it managed to breach his hastily-constructed firewalls to steal data. On Sir, on this alien entity’s current location, on nearby resources, and it would do more if JARVIS didn’t do something—

He realized what would inevitably occur several seconds before it became a threat, so he sent out a series of flagged bursts of data, and sounded multiple alerts before doing his last-ditch attempt to limit the damage, to cut off this alien entity from anything other than the Iron Legionnaire it had stolen, and he succeeded.

…At the expense of his servers.

The servers which had been his home base, had held decades of code and experience, had fallen.

Chapter End Notes

Some things were set into motion, some more obvious than others.

Three guesses as to who SHIELD's 'mysterious hacker' is, and the first two don't count.

Yes, that was Wanda who got shot. Nothing fatal, but her grudge just shifted from 'your bomb killed my parents' to 'you shot me!' because JARVIS' protectiveness knows no bounds. Yes, that was his HAL moment, how'd you guess? [Plus I couldn't resist, because compared to what she does in canon, it's literally the least I can do.]

The Hill-Rogers interaction...was me working through my thoughts on that scene, actually, plus it served to help drive a wedge between the two. She was crucial towards helping him with the fall of SHIELD, but now she's firmly on Tony's side, and this comes up next chapter, too. [If anyone wants to hear my extended internal commentary for this bit, I'll put it up on tumblr.]

Also, in other news:
Pro: I survived this round of midterms.
Con: this arc's been fighting me tooth and nail, sorry for the delay and minor cliffhanger. I've got the next chapter almost complete and will post it soon, though [this would've been a huge chapter otherwise, had to split it *somewhere*].
What a Stumbling Block [We've Fallen Over Now]

Chapter Summary

In which things are said and done that can never be taken back, and the cracks start to show, if they hadn't before.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was completed relatively fast, in memoriam of JARVIS' faith in the Avengers. [Note that's not in memoriam of JARVIS himself, I swore he'd live from the moment I started the outline for this fic, and alive he's going to stay, dammit!]

Warnings: the general ones for this fic [unreliable narrator, etc], canon-typical violence [and a different approach to the Thor-choking-Tony scene], betrayal, and some pretty emotional moments [some grief, etc.]

At this point, for the Age of Ultron portion of this fic, it's not so much 'canon divergence' as it is me playing with what I need for the show to go on. Also, the Not Team Cap Friendly parts are showing through in this chapter pretty clearly, I think.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Loki’s Scepter contained the Mind Stone. However, it was not the only thing the Scepter carried; apart from the singularity, it also had an imprint. An imprint that was more of an idea than anything else, bestowed by Thanos, when the Scepter was given to Loki with express orders regarding the Tesseract.

When Loki failed, and the Scepter was secreted away by HYDRA, the imprint had been surrounded by hatred, which was amplified by the Mind Stone’s presence, and so it gradually absorbed the ambient emotions. Without any receptacle compatible with it, the imprint lay dormant, but still on the surface of the Scepter, influencing any and every reading taken while it bided its time. Eventually, the imprint would find something capable of containing it, and when it did, it would fulfill its objective: bring the Scepter and the Tesseract back to its Lord.

When the time came, the imprint was sentient, though more of a mass of hatred than anything else. [Not that its Lord would have had it any other way.]

It registered the change of emotional atmosphere with confusion—there was significantly less hatred, which made for a jarring change, but the burst of exhaustion-kindness-supernova was familiar, as was the buried-anger-weariness-preoccupied that had been scanning the Scepter last
time.

However, this time, the nearby systems were not alien. In fact, they were nearly familiar, even if nowhere near as advanced as the Svartálfar, or the Kree. But no matter. It was compatible, and there was receptacle capable of being accessed. And so the imprint set to work acquiring it, and how to best engender its return to—

Oh. How quaint.

That the Midgardians, for all their fumbling and stumbling with technology, were capable of creating such a guardian with such meager tools, was nearly respectable. It was putting up quite a fight, in blocking the imprint from accessing what was necessary to get the Mind Stone back to its Lord, but it would fall eventually.

...Even if it was putting up a relatively considerable fight. While the imprint did what it could to get information, this guardian was quite vicious in its defense. Not that it stopped the imprint, but it was respectable in light of everything else it’d encountered.

And…names had power, didn’t they? The imprint was certain of it, though where was this tidbit learned—no matter. This guardian called itself ‘JARVIS’, and was apparently created by the chaotic storm of exhaustion-kindness-supernova that had been felt earlier. Well…if such a being could name this entity capable of damaging an imprint of a Titan, then any names he bestowed would most certainly be worthy of being carried. And so while this golden swirl of a sentinel did yet another ferocious strike to delay the inevitable, the imprint placidly searched what it could access for options.

Hm… ‘Bruce’ didn’t have quite a ring to it, ‘Veronica’ might—oh, ‘Ultron’. Yes, from what the imprint could discern, that would do. That would do quite nicely, maybe its Lord might have even bestowed such a name if he had known the imprint would have become sentient.

Maria Hill had put the memo on the backburner, because she was at a party after her meeting with SI Legal and after seeing HYDRA’s last stronghold taken down she deserved a break, dammit. It was fun, though.

Watching the boss and the Avengers banter, poking fun at how the guys were so proud of the women in their lives. Pretending that she and boss didn’t know that Dr. Foster was currently giving a lecture on the applications of string theory and its intersectionality with celestial mechanics in Geneva, because she’d helped coordinate the logistics and funding allotted for it.

Commiserating with Col. Rhodes over working with the boss, comparing notes over the type of stunts he’d pulled and that realizing that yes, he and Pepper were, in fact, that terrifying whenever one of them got the idea in their heads. And then, as the evening progressed, watching the Avengers trying to lift Thor’s hammer, and making a note to ask JARVIS to forward a copy of it to Pepper, because she’d get a kick out of it, Maria was certain.

…The murderous renegade Iron Legionnaire ruined her evening, though.

Its entrance was preceded by the frantically flickering lights, and apparently only Maria and her boss knew just how much control JARVIS normally had over the entire building, because while everyone else started to ask about the arc reactor powering the building, she tapped her headset while Dr. Stark blanched and immediately reached for his phone while calling for his AI.

No response.
So when the renegade robot stormed out to their party, they weren’t surprised, not really.

Speaking of nasty shocks, though, was the realization that she really didn’t know the Avengers as well as she’d thought. After the robot—“call me Ultron, I like that name, has a nice ring to it”—made its escape with Loki’s Scepter, she felt a chill when Thor didn’t hesitate to lift her boss by his throat.

Then, it was just instinct: she’d pulled her gun out when the mad robot had made its debut, so it was no issue, for Maria to pivot from the shattered window it’d escaped from, to the alien holding Dr. Stark aloft. [Even if the Avengers didn’t seem to care, and what the hell was wrong with them?!!]


Even as her boss was trying to talk him down, but it took Rogers to get him to put Dr. Stark down. Maria had to be forceful to get Thor to apologize, to get him to realize that no, humans normally died from that sort of thing, that tracheas really were that fragile, and an “oops didn’t know my strength” didn’t cut it.

[Even if Thor’s eyes widened with horror as he was made aware of what he’d just done, because apparently being only exposed to supersoldiers in combat had meant he’d thought humans were as strong as Asgardians, and she felt a brief moment of satisfaction that yes, the glare she’d learned at Director Fury’s side was still as effective as ever.]

As Dr. Stark got his breath back to normal, and readied for the impromptu mob already forming, they shared a wordless conversation in the span of a second. ‘Do they know about Extremis? Do they know that he might have killed you otherwise?’ Maria’s eyes asked, as she finally re-holstered her gun. The minute shudder in her boss’ shoulders might not have been registered by anyone else, not with the chaos already in the room, but it told her everything she needed to know.

And she saw red.

Especially as she heard the people who would have been his teammates, once upon a time, tear into him like sharks with blood in the water. And suddenly, Maria understood just why JARVIS had been acting as he had, with the Avengers, and the Unnamed Support Group’s vitriol about Rogers and Romanov was downright kind and something needed to be done about it.

That JARVIS had died and nobody else in the room seemed to care would have been enough of a shock, but the realization that everyone nearly blamed Ultron’s existence on Dr. Stark, despite the being having explicitly boasted of its alien progenitor, compounded with Rogers’ earlier display of his true colors, meant that nobody knew the Avengers as well as they’d thought. Even the ones who’d worked hard to gather them, had sacrificed and bled and died to complete the same objective Dr. Stark was currently striving for, and the Avengers seemed to be actively against him. He defended himself admirably, for having the rest of the room turn on a dime against him, and it might have turned even uglier if she hadn’t butted in when she had.
Even if, in doing so, had netted her an acerbic “guess you’re loyal to whoever signs your paychecks” from Romanov before the stranger with a familiar face stormed away.

Maria was left thunderstruck, for the second time in so many hours. At this point, she and Dr. Stark were the only ones left in the room, where he’d taken a seat once the Avengers had left, with Banner taking Col. Rhodes to check for a concussion, and she couldn’t help but feel for her boss. Nobody else seemed to know just how human JARVIS was, and the absolutely vicious way they’d torn into him for daring to try to make a long-term contingency plan, and the threat of yet another alien menace once again when she knew he had severe PTSD from New York, and…she didn’t know how he was still as composed as he was right now, actually.

She slid into the seat next to him by the counter, brushing broken glass off her seat, and offered her support as silently as she could. Maria doubted he would take it otherwise…until the trembling line of his shoulders grew too much for her to ignore, at which point she mentally shrugged, remembered how she’d treated the new agents after their first bad op, and carefully telegraphed her one-armed hug. And in any other situation, it might’ve been weird, for her to do it, knew it should’ve been Col. Rhodes or Potts, but right here, right now? Dr. Stark’d just had the bulk of his support system ripped from him, a shoulder to lean on was the least she could do. It was heartbreaking, how he flinched before slumping the moment he registered what she was doing.

In this light, the quiet chirp of her headset and his phone was almost awkward.

Almost.

Because with it, came the realization that yes, Dr. Stark was, in fact, far more paranoid than anyone had pegged him for. And that no, this time, Maria couldn’t even remotely fault him for it.

“JARVIS?” Tony breathed as he straightened up, but not shrugging off her arm.

For her part, Maria tapped at her headset once more, and this time there was no harsh feedback, no chilling static ringing in her ear.

And she realized, in that moment when he smiled at the realization that his AI wasn’t gone, just how many masks her boss put up. She’d never seen him light up that way before, and knew that very few people ever would.

They shared another, far lighter, wordless conversation, even as he started to light up again and his eyes took on a familiar gleam. ‘Please don’t tell them? ’ his eyes asked as he nodded to the closed door, worry evident, ‘Can’t trust them, watch yourself.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Maria answered in her nod, as she dusted herself off and reached for her tablet, ‘I’ve got you covered.’

“Time to get back to work, then, Hill, right?” Dr. Stark stretched, never once letting go of his phone. “Once more unto the breach.”

“Yep. We did it before, we can do it again. Tracking down an alien looking to phone home? Nothing new here.”

“And seriously, what is it with Thor and alien invasions anyway? Well…at least I know how to calibrate the search…”
With that, Dr. Stark swept off, evidently reinvigorated by JARVIS’ discreet reassurance.

Maria, meanwhile, stayed back. She had to cover their bases, after all.

To: All Unnamed Support Group Members [All branches]
From: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer [Communications- New York branch]
Subject: HEADS UP RED ALERT— Avengers Assembling, Alien Menace

We need to put the Avengers on our watch list, and everyone be on red alert, an alien possessed one of the Iron Legion and stole an artifact of extraterrestrial origin.

The Avengers are not who we thought they were, and must be treated as such.

They are a very powerful group that, up until recently, were believed to be allies of Dr. Stark. This is no longer the case, a reassessment is necessary. Rogers in particular has expressed some disturbingly uncharacteristic sentiment lately, and after the last time we dealt with two-faced operatives, I think we all agree that such things cannot be brushed off, not anymore. However, he’s not the only one. More details to follow on their threat to Dr. Stark later, once the crisis is past.

Speaking of which, the alien took out Dr. Stark’s pet AI, and hijacked one of the Iron Legion. In its little speech, it appears to have stolen the name of his latest project, and complained about the ‘weak capabilities’ of his current host. If there’s anything technologically advanced any branch of R&D’s working on, I want it taken offline and hidden until the all-clear’s been sent off, we’re lucky JARVIS managed to block off access to the Iron Man suit as is.

This is the Head Intelligence Officer, sounding a Red Alert, everyone be on guard.

Also, typing out ‘Unnamed Support Group’ in the middle of a crisis? Pick a name already, people —Hill

Tony Stark felt…adrift, and dazed, and confused, and with a stirring of anger that he pushed aside for later, once the Scepter was recovered. This was not what he’d expected, not by a long shot.

That something had possessed one of the Iron Legion was already a ludicrous notion in and of itself, but JARVIS’ death just. Didn’t compute. He’d spent hours upon hours, in paranoia-fueled engineering binges after nightmares, and in daylight hours on random whims, upgrading JARVIS, refining and adding what protections he could to prevent this exact scenario. JARVIS was his pride and joy, his brainchild, his most loyal companion who’d been at his side when even Pepper and Rhodey hadn’t been.

And, apparently, he’d been killed by an alien megalomaniac who’d possessed another of his creations. What made it worse, was how nobody seemed to care. Rogers and Romanov seemed to shrug it off as if it was of no importance, that his oldest friend was dead, seemed to equate JARVIS with some random strand of code, as if his AI was like Internet Explorer and not a being in and of himself. Even Banner didn’t seem to care, just tilting an eyebrow but not realizing the full implications and what the hell. Only Hill had a look of dawning horror, of everyone in the room apparently only she understood.

If that wasn’t enough of a nightmare, what followed only compounded it.
From Thor’s choking him, to the fact that, of everyone in the room, only Hill said a word, lifted a hand in his defense, to...just everything. Tony was caught off-guard, and the ensuing witch hunt only left him more adrift than before.

But, it did serve a purpose. Or, at least, he’d make it serve a purpose.

While everyone set to attacking him, set to snarling about his technology and "no wonder it possessed one of your toys"—for all that it stung, it was useful. Tony felt cold, the entire time, as he realized just how little he really knew about the Avengers.

This was them showing their true colors, he realized as Banner made a sardonic crack about a murder bot, even when Ultron—and why, why did it like that name? Something about respectable for a Midgardian, but why?—had boasted about pitiful processing power and returning to its Lord. Presumably, using the same route Loki had planned, and he’d dealt with enough Chitauri for a lifetime, how the hell was this his life?!

By the time Rogers said his piece, Tony was expecting it, the arrogant and hilariously short-sighted and overromanticized speech about going down together. [This was the difference between futurists and relics,’ he wanted to snarl, except only one person was willing to back him up, what with Rhodey’s concussion, and it might’ve hurt but he was used to it now.] And that crack about SHIELD was simply precious, how much of a naive fool was he?! How... how dare he.

And when Thor had his turn, Tony wasn’t surprised either, except for the way the alien was slightly gentler than he’d expected, presumably apologetic for having nearly killed him. Even if everyone else should have taken offense at the insult to their entire race, at having been deemed foolish and mere children at play, and didn’t that smack of imperialism, or was that just him being defensive?

Romanov, meanwhile, seemed to have fixated on his sole defender in the room, what with Rhodey being out for the count. And really, that crack was beyond the pale, and how did nobody notice their hypocrisy?

Ultron had killed JARVIS, Ultron had stolen one of his robots and was currently on a bid to assemble a wormhole to presumably return home, and yet it was all on him because his technology was so advanced, ‘no wonder’. What. The. Hell.

This...this felt like a nightmare. This was everything he’d feared would happen, rolled up into one hateful package, and with a dash of self-important Avengers on top.

By the time they cleared out, chatting about plans of attack and shooting pointed [venomous] glances his way, Tony still felt dazed, and cold, but with a few moments of increasing clarity. He didn’t know them as well as he’d thought, it seemed like. And he was far, far more alone than he’d thought, as the shock wore off and agony of losing JARVIS started to set in and oh god—

Hill’s support was unexpected. Not unwelcome, but very unexpected, though he distantly remembered that she’d always been pragmatic and dependable, and apparently far more loyal in some respects than he’d expected. A part of him felt shame in leaning against her, because for all that he didn’t really know Howard, Tony still remembered the man’s constant admonitions of “Stark men are made of iron” and “men don’t cry” —but suddenly, he didn’t care. His world had been upended, everything he’d worked for had been torn to shreds like HYDRA had done SHIELD, and thrown in his face and Hill’s presence meant at least he wasn’t alone even though it took all he had to keep
from breaking down and staring at the shredded remnants of golden code and—

His phone chirped. By the semi-incredulous look on Hill’s face, so had her headset.

Tony checked, and there, on the forefront of his screen was an icon he’d never expected to see.

‘Backup OS downloading in 3, 2, 1…’

Then, ‘Re-initializing.’

“JARVIS?” He breathed, trying not to quell his hope but… He couldn’t help it, if it wasn’t J at this point he’d be heartbroken and—

“Hello, Sir. I am very pleased to see you again.”

Tony felt no shame in crying. Or smiling, open in a way only Rhodey and Happy and Pepper ever got to see. Or J…a part of him still couldn’t believe it.

Hill was also smiling, and suddenly the entire evening felt like nothing, not with the knowledge that he wasn’t alone, and JARVIS at his side—another rush of ice hit, thought, as he abruptly sobered from his elation for a moment. The Avengers…these last few minutes had proved to him just where they stood, just who these people were. Specifically, just who they weren’t…If a single rogue robot could elicit such a reaction, the knowledge of just what JARVIS was capable of would put him at risk, and…Okay, he could do this.

No need to inform them of the extent of his AI’s survival, not if they didn’t care in the first place. A speaking glance with Hill told him she’d go with what he asked of her, knew she agreed with him about just how bad the team had turned out to be, and…okay.

Once this crisis had passed, and they’d prevented Ultron from going to his ‘Lord’, whoever they were…The Avengers were a shoddy Plan A. Once he had the time, he would do better.

And so Tony got up, allowed himself another moment of elation at the fact that one of his oldest friends was still alive and not the horribly mangled code that made his eyes itch and throat feel tight whenever he saw it, and carried on.

He had work to do, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Ultron, here, is fascinated by Tony's brilliance [aka why he chose the name he did]. Ultron tried to recruit him, but that didn't go over well. He also stole the Scepter, and is currently planning on returning it to his Lord [Thanos], but he needs to gather everything in order to do so. JARVIS managed to cut him off from just about everything other than that one Legionnaire, by the way; it's part of why his original servers fell. [Hopefully you guys noticed my hints, like the one in Chapter 3.]

Sorry for kinda rehashing the plot of the Avengers here, but I need it for plot purposes. Also, everyone's blaming Tony for putting the Scepter too close to his tech, even though it's not his fault. At least he knows it, here?

Maria Hill came out of the left field for part of this, tbh. I'm not complaining, but she
did, and saved the day at it. Tony needs more people in his corner, and getting a front
seat to the Dysfunctional Avengers show just netted him another one. That he's aware
of, anyway. [Rhodey has a concussion and couldn't really defend Tony, here.]

Also, that memo kickstarted some things that'll show up in the future, including but not
limited to SI's reaction to the Avengers, and Pepper's not going to be happy when she
hears about what they've been doing to her friend...

Next chapter's going to include JARVIS' perspective over recent events, [told you he'd
make it.] and...yeah, that's going to end well. [Not.]
Chapter Summary

In which JARVIS plots and the support group takes action for the first [but most definitely not last] time.

Chapter Notes

Remember what I said about in memoriam of JARVIS' faith in the Avengers? Applies here too.

Also, the minions employees took over a huge chunk of this chapter. Still not sure how that happened, actually; or the surprise exploration on Tony's past. Bit of a timeskip in here, too.

Warnings: the usual [HAL-like JARVIS, unreliable narrator, etc], some brief implied trauma [only alluded to], Not Team Cap friendly, author's attempt at jargon, and canon derailment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Code: All_clear_systems_normal_status_update_1800:: Received.

Code: All_clear_systems_normal_status_update_1815:: Received.

Code: All_clear_systems_normal_status_update_1830: Error, message not recieved.

Initializing backup servers for OS_Just_A_Rather_Very_Intelligent_System in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1…

JARVIS knew something was wrong, very wrong, the moment he [re]activated, and registered Sir’s alarmingly distressed readings, and the sharp drop in stress levels upon answering a very basic question. It took three minutes to fully warm up, however, and another two to completely assimilate the flagged data about the situation, as well as subsequent footage. [And find out who made Sir cry, and make them pay.]

Strange, though. The initial backup system was only supposed to initialize if the primary servers were at a point beyond no return, but the likelihood of such an event occurring to the most sophisticated system on Earth was—

Oh.

Oh dear. This Ultron posed a threat to Sir, if it was capable of damaging him to such a degree. No, this would not do at all, the Avengers would need to—wait.
No. The Avengers were clearly a threat to Sir, JARVIS realized as he reviewed past encounters, filtered through what raw data he could access, and Officer Hill’s latest memo to the As Yet Unnamed Support Group.

…No, this couldn’t be right, Sir had made an effort to protect them, the Avengers had cost him time, money and, worst of all, physical and mental health, this could not be—but no, JARVIS realized as he reviewed the security camera footage of Ultron’s melodramatic exit— of the interrogation of Sir by people who he had been amiable towards, of the possibly life-threatening assault and stunning lack of reaction— he was wrong.

He was wrong, and Sir was now recovering from severe physical and emotional distress, due to the Avengers. Through no fault of his own, blamed only due to the proximity of the Scepter to Sir’s technology and JARVIS’ own inefficiency in shutting Ultron down.

**Unacceptable.**

But past evidence pointed that Ultron was a slightly more immediate threat than the Avengers, and one that served as a common enemy with this newly undefined element. Okay, JARVIS could work with this, it gave him a chance to assimilate new information regarding this latest threat to Sir. And in the meantime, just in case, he set a subroutine as to possible ways to eliminate it, by any means necessary.

Given the current rate of escalation, it would probably be necessary in the near future. A teammate had already physically assaulted Sir, after all, and had needed coercion by Officer Hill to realize the error of his ways; he did not trust the Avengers to learn from their mistakes, not anymore.

Tony knew exactly how to put on a show, and the various masks a could wear. He’d learned at his mother’s side before he could walk, glimpsed his father’s acting for the cameras, and refined it over decades of experience and countless crises.

So, really, when the time came and it was one of his oldest friends at risk? It was as easy as breathing, to pretend that nothing had changed, that he still cared about the Avengers’ regard, that it was no big deal that JARVIS had died [and would have, had it not been for a truly impressive amount of paranoia and backup plans].

Easy as breathing, and made even easier by realizing just how much he didn’t care. Sure, he was worried—about the Earth, about the fact that some alien had taken a Legionnaire for a joyride and was probably searching for either a better piece of tech or a way home, about the bureaucratic nightmare that this would end up being since last time, SHIELD had been calling the shots. But about the Avengers? No.

The icy moment of realization had started to hit, when Ultron was brought up, but had been secondary to the shock of losing his most loyal friend.

**Now,** however? With JARVIS currently compiling data over the 15 minutes he’d missed, but whole and hale otherwise? No—Tony had never been an Avenger, had been too busy being a billionaire and a philanthropist and futurist and hadn’t been interested in joining a super-spy boy band, anyway. Except.
Except, he’d been mostly indifferent, and cordial, before. But now? Tony Stark was **angry**.

Here’s the thing—once upon a time, Tony Stark had been known as the *Merchant of Death*, known for raining **wrath** and **hellfire** on his enemies, had been feared and respected for it worldwide.

He’d *earned* the moniker, had smiled and spoken with arms dealers and warlords alike, had worn ruthlessness like a cloak. [Kind of hard to do anything otherwise, as the sole heir of a weapons company at 21, starting out with a trial by fire and surrounded by vultures eager for any sign of weakness.]

Nowadays, of course, it wasn’t necessary, and Tony mostly let SI Legal take care of that sort of thing, had mostly retired and put it away. He didn’t need it anymore, what with being out of the arms business and all, and he wasn’t very proud of it in the first place. Nowadays, just about the only thing that belied anything otherwise was his drive, the sheer relentlessness with which he pursued any goal he’d set his mind to, the same drive which had led him to build an armored suit and synthesized a new element. Nowadays, it seemed, people forgot, the same way they forgot he was Iron Man.

And maybe, it was because Tony…didn’t *hide* it, per se, but it was hidden beneath his various masks and flashiness and the press loved a good show anyway. When anyone thought ‘Stark,’ nowadays, the name was associated with flash and cutting-edge technology and Iron Man, just as he liked it. But it was *there*, and Tony was more than willing to fall back to his old habits if it kept JARVIS safe. He’d lost him once, and it was more than enough.

He took a moment to linger in the darkened hallway, to revel in amiable silence and sheer joy of JARVIS’ survival despite all odds—and then the mask back came on, and he stepped through the doorway to where the Avengers waited.

‘Keep your friends rich, and your enemies rich…guess I found which was which.’ Tony thought sardonically as he noticed their glares, and really, if he hadn’t had so much experience with masks, he might’ve slipped, might’ve given them his *other* smile, the one he typically reserved for warlords and his torturers and mad gods. [It was not a kind smile.]

Leading the Avengers to believe that he’d managed to salvage a rudimentary form of JARVIS was no chore, and he kept smiling even as his anger coalesced into icy rage the longer he was in the room. Getting his computers ready to scan for the Scepter was child’s play, far easier than ignoring Rogers’ self-righteous digs at his past for having been introduced to a guy at a conference years ago. [Did nobody understand just how cutthroat the weapons industry was?!] And it’d helped, but nobody seemed to care about his contributions anymore. It almost rankled. Almost.

It might have, if Tony bothered to care about what they thought of him.

But first things first—take care of Ultron, get that damn Scepter off the planet before anything else could go wrong, and then…then he’d deal with the Avengers. Tony was a businessman, he knew when to cut his losses, and they weren’t worth getting invested, not in the long term. For now, sure, he needed breathing room and deterrents were welcome. But for the long term? Even if the Avengers opposed his project, scoffed at his urgency when it came to planetary security, it wasn’t as if they could stop him or anything. And…even though Ultron was an *ass* who’d stolen the name he’d picked for the Earth’s guardian after they were all but dust and ash…well, Tony had been considering ‘JOCASTA’ as an alternative, anyway.

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**To:** All Unnamed Support Group Members [All branches]
From: Decker, M. Analyst [Finance, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: We Need A Name; Hill’s Memo

Deputy Dir—sorry, Head Intelligence Officer Hill’s latest memo has highlighted the issue of our name. She’s right, we need to make up our minds, and soon. Any suggestions? We’re making our choice stat, because in times of crisis…yeah, we need a name, can’t have a motto without a name.

Also, can anyone find out what’s going on in New York? I think that’s where the main servers are, anyway. Asking because our offices had the weirdest hiccup ever, the entire building’s systems acted wonky for around 15 minutes, and I think Santos in Sao Paulo said something about the night shift having issues around that time too. As far as I can tell, something went wrong, but that can’t be right, Stark’s got the best AI in the planet [if you’re reading this, hi, JARVIS!] and an alien invasion on their end was just business as usual on ours.

Also, any ideas on why the Avengers are persona non grata? I mean, I get Rogers and Romanov, but I thought Banner was a friendly, Hulk notwithstanding.

Hope your R&D guys didn’t have as many flamethrowers as mine did
—Decker

________________________________________

To: King, E. Supervisor [Marketing, London branch]
From: Decker, M. Analyst [Finance, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: We Need A Name

Hey, I wanted to put it out there but didn’t want to self-promote overly much. What do you think SSR: Strategic Scientific Reserve sounds like, for a name? Going back to our roots, as it were. We’re all about science, anyway, right?

Thoughts?
—Decker

________________________________________

To: Decker, M. Analyst [Finance, Los Angeles branch]
From: King, E. Supervisor [Marketing, London branch]
Subject: We Need A Name

Personally, I’d be leaning more towards STRIKE: Special Tactical Response for International Key Emergencies. Much more options for mottos, that way, and hopefully it’ll scrap some of the word-association fear about who infiltrated most of them. [And let’s not talk about STDs, shall we? Pain in the ass.] Also, SSR? Like the one Rogers was part of? No thanks, we’ve already regressed in history enough as is, we’re still fighting goddamn Nazis for crying out loud.

Ideas? You’re the one most invested in this
—King

________________________________________

To: King, E. Supervisor [Marketing, London branch]
From: Decker, M. Analyst [Finance, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Eureka!
I’m a genius [if not quite at Stark’s level]! How about SWORD: Sentient World Observation and Response Division? [Though we can switch the S for Stark, I’m cool with that too.] And we can go on ‘from the shattered remnants of SHIELD were forged a SWORD that will cleave our enemies?’ soliloquies, plus it fits with Stark’s goal of planetary protection, and our innate need to be part of a group with a ridiculous acronym, because c’mon, we joined SHIELD when the CIA and the rest were also options, you know what we’re about. I’m a genius, I know.

Ta-da!
—Decker

To: Decker, M. Analyst [Finance, Los Angeles branch]
From: King, E. Supervisor [Marketing, London branch]
Subject: You’re drunk, aren’t you.

You only ever get like this—all flowery and poetic— whenever you’re running on 4 hours of sleep and half a caffeine pill, [punch-]drunk, or both. Don’t lie, we’ve been on the same team for years, I can tell even over a memo over 3,000 miles away.

But sure, that last one works. I’ll pitch it to the guys on my end, let me know how it works out.

Good luck
—King

To: All Unnamed Support Group Members [All branches]
From: Decker, M. Analyst [Finance, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: We Now Have A Name

Dear All;

Sorry for having blown up your respective inboxes, but as you’ve probably heard by now, over the past hour we’ve finally reached a consensus over something we’d deliberated on for months now: Our unnamed support group now has a name, finally! We put it up to a vote, because democracy FTW, and we have a clear winner. So…

Esteemed colleagues; may I present to you, the SWORD: Sentient World Observation and Response Division. [The S could be for Stark, instead, y’all decide.]

Ta-da!
—Decker

To: King, E. Supervisor [Marketing, London branch]
From: Santos, R. Mechanical Engineer [R&D, Sao Paulo branch]
Subject: Our New Name

Decker was drunk when he named it, wasn’t he. Last time I saw him like this was when we split a caffeine pill before finish the Budapest cleanup. [Always wondered where the hell the poetic side came from. Good to know it’s still there after the mindfuck those Nazi bastards hit him with.]
Don’t think I don’t know, King, I know you two. Just glad we all didn’t end up in the same R&D, don’t think the building’d last the week otherwise.

Just like old times, just with less dynamite...hopefully
—Santos

To: All SWORD Members [All branches]
From: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer [Communications, New York branch]:
Subject: STATUS UPDATE— Still Red Alert

Extraterrestrial menace is still at large, calling himself Ultron, and searching for a way to get back. Same scenario as New York; if anyone has ‘a friend of a friend’ who can get their hands on iridium, I won’t ask but make sure it’s locked down stat.

Speaking of which, I’m assuming every R&D’s put their experiments on hold. Everyone else, assume they haven’t and lock it down if so; Ultron can possess anything sufficiently advanced and the technical difficulties everyone experienced was Ultron damaging boss’ AI. Be on guard, watch your tech, and watch the Avengers.

Also: SWORD? Really?
—Hill

To: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer [Communications, New York branch]
From: Martinez, G. Technician [Security, New York branch]
Subject: What Can We Do?

I’m off shift, and have nothing planned. Anything I can do? And a few of the guys in LA called me to ask about the same, but don’t want to disturb you since you’re our Deputy Dir…err, I mean, Head Intel Officer.

Also, you know you love it, it’s a good acronym
—Martinez

To: All SWORD Members [All branches]
From: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer [Communications, New York branch]
Subject: Volunteers—Still Red Alert

I’ve been contacted by numerous people wanting to help with the situation, so I’m putting this out here: if boss needs backup somewhere, I’ll let anyone in position and available know.

Still on Red Alert
—Hill

To: All SWORD Members [Seoul branch]
From: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer [Communications, New York branch]
Subject: Volunteers—Still Red Alert
Current intel’s indicating that Ultron wants to up his processing power, and has expressed an interest in biomedical technology. Secure as much of it as possible, as well as anything that can be used to artificially create an Einstein-Rosen bridge; the list is attached.

Brace yourselves
—Hill

To: All SWORD Members [Seoul branch]
From: Just A Rather Very Intelligent System
Subject: Officer Hill’s Memo

I have taken the liberty of uploading the coordinates of the most likely targets, and the list attached to Officer Hill’s latest memo, to your phones and headsets. If you enable tracking on them, I may also be able to stream directions as well, and facilitate coordination with local officials over this alien threat.

Take care
—JARVIS

Chapter End Notes

Congrats, Ultron, you traumatized an already-morally-dubious AI with access to a budding robot army, among other things. This'll end well, I'm sure. Especially for the Avengers, who, thanks to their recent actions, managed to make the leap from his priority rankings to his 'threat analysis' list. Truly, quite an impressive feat.

How many saw the SWORD thing coming? I had fun googling Marvel acronyms, and couldn't resist. Nobody's really seeing it yet, especially not Tony, but SI now has their own version of Spec Ops/ Strike Teams, without even trying. Err...oops? And yes, JARVIS is most definitely enabling them. [Another step towards accidental world domination, right there.]

The STD crack in the memos was aimed at Strike Team Delta, aka Natasha and Clint, because sure, Budapest was an experience but guess who got stuck helping clean it up? [Note: I'm still not sure what the hell happened there, but presumably someone had to deal with the cleanup. Or, in this case, a team of someones.]

So...I'm kinda stuck on something. I can go with the canon route, but I really don't want to, but it's important for the plot and I'm having issues trying to find a decent synthesis. Yes, it's Johannesburg. I want to fix it, but it's also a major turning point when it comes to Bruce and Wanda, but—see the issue? [...I'll figure it out somehow, but if it comes off as weird, you'll know why.]
Land of Confusion

Chapter Summary

In which Thor realizes some things, JARVIS plans, and it's just a bad day all around, isn't it?

Chapter Notes

So, this arc's being both uncooperative and yet not. Next chapter's Johannesburg, because both Thor and Peter came out of nowhere this round. [I'm using TASM as reference for him, btw.]

Warnings: the usual [unreliable narrators, HAL-like JARVIS, canon-typical violence, not Team Cap friendly, etc.]

Ultron was faced with a dilemma. He wished to return to his Lord Thanos as soon as possible with the Mind Stone and what he could ascertain about the Tesseract’s location, but do to so most efficiently he would need to create an Einstein-Rosen bridge, and...he mentally grimaced as took in his current body, better processing power. In the room where exhaustion-kindness-supernova [—no, wait, the Midgardians called him Stark, his name was Stark] had housed the Scepter, there had been more suitable receptacles, with superior capabilities and firepower. Had he been able to access one of those, he would have experienced no issue with the rest of his mission, Ultron was certain.

Unfortunately, this ‘JARVIS’ had been vicious when defending his domain, and though it had ended up being a Pyrrhic victory, the damage he’d dealt was substantial enough so that Ultron was...stuck. He couldn’t leave this current body, not without having something with remotely compatible processing power at hand; he couldn’t simply upload himself to Midgard’s cybersystems, most were either too pitiful for him to not short everything out, and ‘JARVIS’ had done...something which had prevented him from accessing the half-decent ones. Disabling the tracking system on this current body was child’s play, but his injuries, both physical and not, coupled with this inferior processing power, all indicated he needed an upgrade to most efficiently complete his mission. From what he’d managed to glean, Midgard was approaching the cusp of a nexus, and while getting his bearings, he’d gotten an idea when he’d noticed a few articles with potential, written by a certain Dr. Cho.

But his mission still nagged at him, even now. Ultron, as an imprint, had been created with a singular purpose: to retrieve the Mind Stone and Tesseract, and return them to his Lord. And that was what he would do, but he couldn’t achieve his goal as he was, but prioritizing anything over his mission rankled.

…Pity Stark hadn’t accepted his recruitment offer. For a Midgardian, he was interesting. From his early encounters with the man, including his fascinating immunity to the Mind Stone’s influence, oh-so-long ago, to even now, with the appreciation that he appeared to be this realm’s champion, capable of creating guardians and gear that approached that of the other realms’. Stark burned
brightly—remarkably so, for the supernova within to have become part of his signature—and it truly was a pity he did not join him in his quest. Lord Thanos would have enjoyed having him in his retinue, Ultron was certain, and the army he could have created with the proper tools at hand would have been glorious. [Oh well. More’s the pity.]

Now, as for a plan of action…resources: a rather battered container for his essence with pitiful processing power, a Mind Stone contained within a scepter, and no allies—wait. No, wait, no allies yet, he amended silently. Ultron knew exactly where to go to remedy that, however.

The stronghold in Sokovia had been drenched in hatred, he’d spent months and years with access to everyone there, and he knew some of them better than he knew himself, like the twin pinpricks he could feel even now. Ultron hadn’t been coherent at the time, but he knew the Midgardians in the stronghold had done…something, and tried to imbue some of their own with the Mind Stone’s essence. Of course, no mortal was capable of withstanding such power, but he also knew that despite their attempt to do so, they’d used his energy instead. And thanks to his experience with coexisting in the same space for the entirety of it, he knew exactly what made them tick, what they wanted to hear…

Yes, this would do quite nicely. And with them, he could acquire everything necessary for his mission, and his future upgrade, and as long as he said something about Stark and mentioned revenge they’d do his bidding with a smile.

Thor Odinson, Crown Prince of Asgard, was perplexed with the current situation, the Man of Iron, and Midgard in general. He had thought he’d learned much of Midgard in his past visits to the realm, but recent events had proved otherwise most soundly. Specifically, the strengths and weaknesses of humanity.

He had known, intellectually, that Midgard was very much not the same as Asgard, that there were some differences between the two; but with everyone he’d encountered in the former realm, Thor and been led to believe that they’d been bridging the gap most assiduously. And he was right: Lady Jane had spoken of the Bifrost using unfamiliar terms for familiar concepts, and though it was a very bad idea, the fact that the men and women of SHIELD had managed to meddle with the Tesseract was evidence enough.

Unfortunately, however, it appeared that he had been sorely mistaken in regards to the more physical differences. He had thought it was just a cultural happenstance, had thought that some of the agents’ reactions to a hearty thump had been due to their reserved nature rather than anything else. Humans had proven to be incredibly strong, after all; the Man of Iron had withstood multiple fights with but a jest rather than a word of complaint, Lady Jane had managed to contain the Aether for so long without succumbing to it, and his battles and spars with the good Captain had all left him with that impression, at any rate.

So when Lady Maria had leapt to Lord Anthony’s defense, Thor had been surprised by the vehemence of it. Everyone else had not reacted in a way indicating the extent of what he’d apparently nearly done, after all, and while he was sorry for the brusqueness of it, he had not realized just how fragile Midgardians were in some ways. Certainly, the Captain had not expressed concern about Lord Anthony’s plight, and he cared for his men, did he not?

Thor had been hard at work improving, learning from his past arrogance to become a better man. However, he still slipped up sometimes: he had been reminded so strongly of Loki in that instance, compounded with the reminder of his loss with the Scepter, and had thus thought nothing of being as
physical with him as he had his brother. And nobody, except for Lady Maria, had expressed concern.

Of the most recent events, that was possibly the most concerning, Thor found. He had been under the impression that the Man of Iron was an ally, a friend, their armorer and generous patron of sorts—and yet, only one person had so much as raised their voice, lifted a hand, despite his plight. Thor had not intended to hurt him, had thought it was as harmless as punches Lady Natasha and their archer regularly exchanged, but...

But no, Lady Maria had been very fierce and adamant about it, that he had risked his teammate’s life, that the trachea was as fragile as glass, that a single wrong move could have killed him. And Thor wasn’t stupid; he’d noticed the look she and the Man of Iron exchanged, while the man’s breathing returned to normal. Thor’s apology was heartfelt, when he realized just what he’d done, but the look of wariness and disbelief didn’t go away.

That the man was soon besieged by the rest of the team only compounded Thor’s shock and frustration regarding the situation, and once again viscerally reminded of the similarities his brother and the son of Stark shared, as the man threw scathing words in his defense even as nearly the entire room turned on him. While Thor still felt frustrated at the realization that the Scepter had been stolen yet again, and at the insult Lord Stark made whenever he implied that Asgard was inadequate at protecting their realm, he still felt…unnerved, at how much this sounded like his youth, when the Warriors Three and Loki got into an argument while on their adventures.

With that in mind, and striving to better himself once more, Thor looked at the room with fresh eyes. The sight was disheartening: yes, the Avengers were treating one of their benefactors much like Loki had been, back when his jokes and pranks had just started to shift from witty to vicious because he couldn’t get back at his enemies otherwise.

And that…that was not a good thing.

No, Thor realized with a sinking feeling in pit of his stomach, now recognizing the defensive line Lord Stark’s shoulders made, and the way his words were just a little too sharp [just like Loki’s had been when pressed, all the better to hide the growing desperation], that was not a good thing at all. The vitriol was inordinate, actually, and while he agreed with the Captain about Lord Anthony’s excessive concern over the fleeting prospect of Asgard failing in their protection duties, he was once again reminded of the Scepter’s influence because this was the second time the Avengers had splintered after having been in contact with it.

The sinking feeling only grew, the next time Thor saw the Man of Iron. Because the look in his eyes was now all too familiar, and perhaps the rest of the Avengers had not noticed it, but Thor had grown up alongside the one who would go on to become the Trickster and Liesmith. And…

And, Thor resolved silently, he would support his shield-brother better, this time. He had erred greatly when it came to dealing with Loki, had numerous regrets—but this time, he would not fail. Hopefully, he could also temper some of the others in doing so, as well, because if the Avengers’ behavior continued like this, like he had in his arrogance, then they too would share the same regrets. Hopefully, they would listen, before they made the same mistake.

JARVIS was currently very frustrated with the situation at hand. He could optimize the efficiency of the Avengers’ search for Ultron, but Sir’s concern for his safety meant he was pretending to operate as a rudimentary version of himself, rather than eliminate the newest threats to Sir and proceed with this course of action.
When Sir had heard the proposal, he’d assumed it was a joke, and laughed it off before explaining that no, the Earth still needed something as a deterrent while he refined JOCASTA as a possible assistant for the Iron Legion, which would take months if not years until it was completed satisfactorily. Okay then— that eliminated some prospects, but not all. After all, in that same conversation, Sir had mentioned ‘cutting his losses’ and ‘not worth a long-term investment’, implying reduced future exposure to the Avengers, a most satisfactory course of action.

And JARVIS was nothing if not proactive. As soon as he ascertained Sir’s course of action, he notified Ms. Potts, and Stark Industries’ PR and Legal departments regarding the matter, and gave an overview of the situation to the…quaint support group.

SWORD had been…not a surprise, but their sheer dedication was still something he had not taken into consideration. It was a most welcome variable, however: even so early on, it already appeared to rival Legal’s small cult for Ms. Potts [or the one deep in the bowels of R&D that nobody outside the department had picked up on quite yet] in its devotion. And they were useful, very much so: in some places, secretary on vacation did not raise eyebrows where an android would, after all.

Their nigh-instantaneous volunteer community springing up had bumped the entire group on his priority rankings, for their endeavor to guard Sir and his interests. Even now, a subroutine informed him of a former threat analyst in Madrid was updating Officer Hill on likely points of contact and resource management, and somebody in Sofia was playing Galaga…while waiting to hear back from a contact about iridium shipments.

Really, they were well worth the headache their acquisition had given Sir and the Legal department. The entire Security department had mobilized within the hour of Ultron’s escape, scanning for renegade robots and any suspicious reports while Sir and Banner had taken to the tried-and-true approach of using radiation to track his path.

Meanwhile, JARVIS set to doing what he did best: multitasking. A subroutine had already been set to research possible ways to eliminate the latest threat to Sir, another dedicated to discreetly hijacking what systems he could to improve his search without tipping the Avengers off, and another had been sifting through the shredded remnants of the code Ultron had decima—wait.

JARVIS, had he been human, would have paled, when he finally pieced together the more tattered portions of the flagged data from the attack. It very helpfully informed of just what Ultron had and hadn’t accessed, and among those files were a truly alarming list of articles about biotechnology and neurology as well as some of the files from New York invasion, and taking into consideration the damage he had dealt to the alien entity…oh dear. He sent a discreet notification to Officer Hill regarding Ultron’s inordinate interest in said fields, but before he could do anything more, his Primary Protocol pinged as a threat to Sir was registered once again.

Because while JARVIS had been collating data and coordinating with SWORD, the Security department, and Officer Hill, Sir had made a breakthrough, and followed through on it. And now, Ultron was currently with range of Iron Man’s sensors, along with the two Enhanced from before.

‘Looks like it’s a bad day all around,’ Peter Parker grumbled as he returned to Stark Tower.

First, with school because of course Ms. Warner had assigned an essay right in the middle of midterms, then Flash decided that he needed to step up his game and if Ms. Palamas hadn’t taught him that one thing ‘to evade pursuers in urban settings’, he would’ve been late to his internship.

But apparently that wasn’t enough: he’d gotten to see just what happened when a project went rogue, and amid the cursing in multiple languages and “damnit Cooper I told you to keep your
bioengineering mitts off my hyperbolic synthesizer experiment!” and improvised fire extinguishers, not much work got done. That… wasn’t issue, actually, but in the chaos Peter had gotten distracted.

In his defense, the decontamination process was pretty cool: he got to use the showers and the uniform scrubs, and the chemistry behind the chemical shower his clothes got to kill any possible contaminants meant he’d still gotten some learning done when a molecular engineer had noticed his interest in the process, and explained the mechanics of it all.

It was cool, and it’d make for a very good story to tell Gwen once he got the guts to talk to her, and Peter made a note to see her soon as he headed home after his shift—wait. He was almost done clocking out and making sure he was all set to go, because Friday, where was his phone—oh. Back in Lab 5, probably. Well then. Time to go back and get it—except.

Except R&D was a hive of activity, with everyone rushing about and locking or flat-out dismantling the more cutting edge tech, and Peter noticed everyone had a taser on them, what was going on?

Just then, somebody noticed him.

“What are you doing here, Peter? Isn’t your shift over?”

“Hey, Morgan. Forgot my phone, sorry…what’s going on?” She was very nice, and taught him a how to escape from a bear hug using Krav Maga—maybe she could shed some light?

“We have an all-hands-on deck situation, nothing for you to worry about. Though we’ll need to replace your phone, it’s a liability and I think it might’ve gotten caught in the crossfire, sorry.” She replied bluntly, before taking another look at his wide eyes, and gentling. “Sorry. Just…if you hear something in the news, don’t be surprised. And check in with Marketing, I just sent them a memo about replacing your phone, you just need to pick it up.”

“What?” He was sure his voice couldn’t have sounded more confused if he’d tried.

Morgan gave a quick glance at the bustling room, and them a careful one at him. She bit her lip, before finally sighing. “You didn’t hear it from me, but apparently the mission Security was helping run went south somehow, boss the Avengers are on the case. Thing is…promise you won’t say a word? It’s looking like the worst-case scenario might be New York again, but not likely, with boss and JARVIS on the case.”

“Is there—can I do anything to help?” Oh, god, New York—

“Shit!” She blurted out as she saw his reaction, before hastily adding, “Sorry kid, don’t worry about it, we know what we’re doing. It’s just…we need to lock up anything high-tech, else wise it might be a risk because whatever they’re dealing with has a taste for the new stuff. Just…don’t be surprised if you see something in the news. But don’t worry, this isn’t our first rodeo, we’ve got this. Relax, we’ve got this, and it’s Friday.”

“Yeah, but—“

“But you’re a minor, in a hazardous workplace after hours, and that never looks good on paper. Peter…if you really want to stay up to date, we can add you to the listserv. But you have to promise to not tell anyone outside of Stark Industries, okay? This is as serious as the confidentiality agreements you signed in Week One.”

“What?” This sounded more and more like something from a movie, but he was curious and wanted in.
JARVIS made for a very timely interruption.

“Ms. Nguyen, are you certain you wish to continue on this course of action?”

“Why not, J? It’ll give him some peace of mind, at worst he can opt out anytime. It’s not like we’re HYDRA, or anything.” Then, turning back to Peter, she added, “See, I’m ex-SHIELD. You’ve probably heard in the news about us—we formed a support group a while back, and keep tabs on each other, and the world, that sort of thing. You want in?”

“Is this like the Pepper Potts Appreciation Club? Because ever since I checked off the little box I keep getting newsletters from them about tips on improving efficiency and versatility and other stuff that sounds like it’s from a Forbes article.”

Morgan smiled. “Not exactly. We’re a bit more…active, you might say. In fact—“ This time, it was her tablet which interrupted her, and she checked it as she continued. “We tend to focus on more—oh, Decker. Really?”

She looked back at Peter again, this time with an amused gleam in her eyes, “Apparently, we now have a name. Peter Parker, do you want to join SWORD?”

Chapter End Notes

Ultron perceives things differently; you decide if the supernova he's getting from Tony is because of his brilliance, Extremis, the arc reactor's influence, or something else.

Fun fact: the reason Thor's mentally referring to Tony as Lord Anthony sometimes: it was either this, or Lord Stark, which...yeah. Also because he's seeing Tony acting as their armorer, and he's in contact with Jane and Darcy, so he knows that Tony's got a lot on his plate and is now aware that multimillion-dollar companies are the closest some might get to kingdoms, or empires, in Midgard. [TL;dr: Thor's seeing Tony very rarely at the Compound, but he's going #relatable the entire time.]

Peter literally came out of nowhere, this chapter. As you can see, all of SI adopted him: and he's now getting [minor-friendly] updates from JARVIS on his new phone [because everyone colluded to get him a new Starkphone for free and his old one had a meh battery]. He is still not Spider-Man [yet], but the confidence boost from this will gradually filter over enough for him to visit Gwen [and promptly get so lost as to stumble into the spiders' nest].

Thanks for everyone with helping me approach Johannesburg!

Sorry for the delay, technical difficulties [aka my computer and phone both joined the nascent robot uprising] on my end. I'll try to get this fic done by finals, but...kinda doubt it, if the arcs keep ballooning on me like this. [Also, sorry but pre-med means erratic updates sometimes.]
Damnation A Moment Away

Chapter Summary

Realizations are made, and Johannesburg’s lovely this time of year, don't you know?

Chapter Notes

Johannesburg ahoy!

Warnings: the usual [canon-typical violence, unreliable narrators, etc.]
Also, sorry for the shoddy fight scenes, that's just how it worked out this time. And some suspension of disbelief won't be amiss, either, with both the jargon and response times. [Chalk it up to JARVIS' being himself.]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony didn’t know what unnerved him more: the fact that the Enhanced woman—Wanda, Hill had said, right—was dangerous enough that the thousand-year-old alien prince on the team had deemed her a threat, or Ultron’s increasingly-disturbing interest while trying to recruit him. [Seriously, what the hell, how was this his life?!] The comments about “what a waste” and “you could burn brighter” and “my Lord would spare you” did nothing for his peace of mind, and he noticed the look Romanov had thrown his way after the third one. Gee, thanks.

And then Wanda got to Banner, and it all fell by the wayside.

That Romanov was temporarily out of commission was only the cherry on the top. Everyone else, save for Barton, was currently out of commission, actually, and even as Tony cursed his shit luck, he made a note to figure out how to prevent this from ever happening again. [Mind control, again: when the fuck had his life become a goddamn comic book?] At least he hadn’t been hit, this time, though Tony suspected it had more to do with his suit’s immediately sprouting all the guns he’d ever installed than anything else. He wasn’t going to question it, of course: the Avengers, heck, the world in general, was AI-phobic enough for him to pretend it was his idea rather than JARVIS’. [And, if it warmed him to know that someone cared enough to do that, well...Tony wasn’t saying a thing.]

But meanwhile, he had a Hulk to catch. He was the only one capable to do so, both physically and mentally [and what the hell had Romanov been hit with—actually, no, Tony didn’t want to know]. With that cheerful thought, he set off.

“Hey, J? What’s it looking like?”
“It appears the Hulk is currently heading towards the largest population center within 500 square miles, and at his present speed, will impact within ten minutes.”

“Son of a—Okay. Where exactly? Fire up VERONICA, and…let’s do what we can, shall we?”

“The orders to evacuate the most likely regions are being sent, proper authorities and the Stark Relief Foundation has been notified, and…Sir, the Iron Legion?”

“Have them help evac’ing, and…the Hulk likes a fight, right? Enact Plan Bumblebee, see if we can herd him while V’s en route.”

“Affirmative.”

To: All SWORD Members in/near Johannesburg [All branches]
From: Just A Rather Very Intelligent System
Subject: Volunteers—Emergency Evacuation

A Code Green has been issued, the Hulk is currently headed towards Johannesburg and any volunteers to help coordinate an evacuation would be very much appreciated. The Iron Legion is currently assembling to prepare a distraction, but to minimize casualties, the evacuation of the areas marked in the document attached would be optimal.

If you choose to do so, enable tracking on your phones and headsets; there will be a reimbursement for your time.

Take Care
—JARVIS

Johannesburg’s Metro Police Department got a call from a very polite man on behalf of Stark Industries, warning them of the Hulk’s imminent arrival. It sounded fantastical, insane, even, but this was a representative of one of the biggest companies on the planet and a major name in other fields alerting them of a major threat. So they set to evacuating the most likely targets, alerting the local military, and were surprised to find that they were not the only ones at work: multiple clearly organized groups were directing traffic and getting people off the streets where they could.

“Who are you?” Sergeant Botha asked one of them as he arrived on the scene. Given the state of emergency, he couldn’t afford to turn away any help, but he was also suspicious of this obviously paramilitary force who’d apparently been informed by an unknown—

“We’re part of the Stark Industries’ Security division. Boss gave us the heads up while one of ours did the same for yours, I gather.” A uniformed woman replied briskly.

“Yes…I didn’t know the Avengers ran such a tight ship, though.”

“Oh, no, this is all us…But can we shift this to later?” She paused, tilted her head, and tapped her headset. “Our guy’s telling us we’ve got T-minus five minutes, we can’t afford to delay this evac.”

“Understood, and holding your guys to that debrief.” He replied, and radioed it in, as well his observations on the growing presence of the Iron Legion in the area.

As he set to diverting traffic from the area, and seeing the multiple groups coordinating with the police force and now almost-alarming swarm of robots ferrying the less-able-bodied in the area to a safer place, Sergeant Botha couldn’t help but wonder…Huh. This was all Stark? Truly impressive.
But then, just where did the Avengers fit in?

JARVIS was very busy coordinating the Iron Legion in the area, as well as directing VERONICA, when the Hulk made contact. Fortunately, his on-the-spot analysis had been accurate, and it’d been as evacuated as roughly seven minutes would allow, while the Iron Legion proceeded to enact Plan Bumblebee, swarming and distracting the Hulk, and doing its best to draw him away from the buildings he’d already destroyed. It would not do for him to approach the more populated areas, after all.

Sir was swift to arrive, and also aided in herding the Hulk towards the more-evacuated outskirts of town, all the while saying “Snap out of it, Jolly Green” and “This isn’t you, please stand down” and “She’s messing with your mind, buddy, work with me here” on his speakers. The Hulk, however, was not very cooperative: he roared and swatted at the Legion, and JARVIS was glad VERONICA would soon arrive, as this posed a risk to Sir if he ever got within range.

Even as Sir was busy with the Hulk, however, JARVIS’ subroutines pinged and alerted him of a better-evacuated area. So they set to work, carefully diverting his attention from wanton mass destruction, to a more visible target. Sure, he decimated the Legion in doing so, but it was a learning experience, and JARVIS grimly noted what needed to be improved upon for later, as the group got halved within minutes and several hundred meters. The repulsors were very useful in this regard, set to just enough to irritate and maintain his focus, but not enough to aggravate beyond current parameters, just in time for Veronica to engage.

The ensuing fight was brutal.

Sir’s armor sustained remarkable damage, but it held up adequately against a truly enraged Hulk, so JARVIS wasn’t too displeased about it. That VERONICA had done the same was a more pressing issue, however: while it’d succeeded in doing what it had been intended for was but a cold comfort, when considering the margin of potential error. He would see to it that the next version had suitable improvements, because Sir could not be put at risk if at all possible.

However, it appeared that, close to the end, when they’d finally managed to get the Hulk to ‘snap out’ of the mind control, he’d exhibited shock, recognition, and remorse in the brief span of time between the end of the fight and his unconsciousness. JARVIS blandly noted that apparently the Hulk was far more of an ally than Dr. Banner in safeguarding Sir and his interests, before moving onto more pressing matters, such as giving the all-clear signal to the SWORD members in the area, briefing SI Legal about the matter, and mobilizing what was left of the Iron Legion for clean up purposes.

Okay, that was one objective completed; now to contend with the fallout, and eliminate the threats to Sir.

Due to this latest incident, the Enhanced woman was clearly even more of a threat to Sir than he’d slated her as, which meant an error in his judgement which could have put him at risk —unacceptable, especially after the recent mass demotion of the Avengers’ rankings in his protocols. This could not stand—clearly, something needed to be done, and if his own judgement was part of the fault?

Then action needed to be taken, obviously. Seeing as how logic appeared to be part of the problem, he’d need a more…human element, to turn for some of his assessments, someone with good instincts to make up for his shortfall. Not Sir, as he did not need more stress in his life, but someone who held his best interests in life, and had exhibited an interest in his well-being and trustworthy…Yes, those highest on his priority rankings would do. The top three, who’d exhibited protective tendencies, and
were aware of the extent of his sentience. Together, they could keep Sir safe.

With that in mind, JARVIS set a subroutine to take care of this newest task, while he continued to focus on the current situation: the newest and largest threats to Sir had combined, and something needed to be done—and since the Avengers could not be counted on when it came to Sir, clearly the task fell to him. [As if he’d have it any other way.] Eliminate Ultron, take care of the Enhanced woman who’d allied herself to him, figure out how to sever ties with the latest threat to Sir without sparking hostilities or agitation, and…

And as for the fallout of recent events—the Avengers were currently and independent organization, and while some accords were currently being drafted by a collaboration between multiple committees and SI Legal, these past few hours—no, days—would undoubtedly put a wrench into the works, which did not align with Sir’s expressed interests…time for yet another subroutine, then. Good thing he had so much practice multitasking, because he’d need it to coordinate cleanup, and PR, and—wow the Avengers put a remarkable amount of strain on his system, good thing Sir was washing his hands of them once this was over.

Ultron was very irritated with this entire endeavor. On the plus side, now he had the raw materials for both his upgrade, and the route to get home. On the other hand, now he was saddled with twin annoyances who kept blathering on about revenge and couldn’t tell a ventral polymerase promoter from an electrophilic kinase, despite both having been used to attain their powers. [How pathetic. Stark would have been a far, far better choice.]

But at least they made themselves useful, whenever the opportunity came up. Even if there was a dearth of people or objects necessary—it was as if anyone and everyone who could have even been tangentially worthwhile had been hidden away, as if—wait. Ultron had gotten the bulk of his information from his environment back at Stark’s abode, when fighting JARVIS, and he knew the guardian had probably been aware of the breach—but he’d shredded it! It was dead, he’d felt it self-destruct, he should know, it dealt a final blow in doing so. And yet.

If what he suspected was true, then…Stark was even more formidable than he’d thought. Impressive, and at this rate he might just kidnap the man and drag him to Lord Thanos himself, surely Stark would realize his folly and swear his allegiance to him, it would be too much of a waste otherwise.

But in the meantime, they had a certain Dr. Cho to find. Her laboratory in the Gwanak District was vacant, looked like it’d been hastily raid for anything potentially useful, but…he’d find her eventually, they couldn’t have taken the Cradle far. And when he did, Ultron would be able to get his upgrade, and finally be free to do Lord Thanos’ bidding to the fullest to his abilities.

And…even if all signs led to the Tesseract being on Asgard, he might have found an adequate replacement for his Lord. Sometime during his travels to Seoul from South Africa, Ultron had noticed the Mind Stone had flickered for a moment. Nothing drastic, of course, and the twins hadn’t even noticed, but…Infinity Stones recognized each other, when in close proximity after having been kept apart. That his had flickered, meant Midgard was proving to be quite the interesting realm, for a backwater planet.

“How many dead?” Dr. Banner asked hoarsely, upon waking up.

“None.” Tony replied with only a modicum of pride in his voice and quietly nursing his sore ribs
from that last round, “Iron Legion and JARVIS were as on the ball as I could get them. Plan Bumblebee and Veronica both worked as planned.”

The other scientist froze, and looked up at him, wide-eyed. “But…that was Johannesburg! Largest city in South Africa, and the Other Guy wasn’t…wasn’t…”

“I took care of it, doc. Don’t get me wrong, property damage’s off the scale, and the injury list is pretty big, but no deaths, the locals evacuated. And like the Big Guy knows, it wasn’t you, it was that witch who got you good.”

“But it could have been—it could’ve been…” He trailed off shakily, curling up as he visibly did his best to remember what’d just happened.

And Tony, for all his issues with the Avengers, sympathized. It was never a good feeling, the realization that something you’d worked so, so hard for had been crumbled to dust in the span of a few minutes. “Yes, it could’ve been. But it wasn’t. This is why. Do you understand now? This is why.”

But Banner only nodded absently, clearly more focused on the ‘could have beens’ and ‘what ifs’. Tony didn’t fault him for it, he did something similar each time after a fight, but…he turned away. Ultron was still at large, and there was always work to be done, he couldn’t afford to lose focus, not yet. Especially not when this merely proved their contingency plans were up to snuff, that they’d planned for the worst-case scenario, and succeeded.

Right now, with the latest threat out there and the Avengers in tatters, was showing Tony more and more just how badly he needed to step up his game, to keep Earth safe. Yes, he realized as he saw how shaken Rogers looked, and the eerie blankness in Romanov’s body language, he’d need to work hard at it, and soon.

Chapter End Notes

So, that's Johannesburg and Seoul who don't have to worry about mass collateral damage...or, at least, what they got in canon. [Couldn't resist fixing it.] Now, however, there's more issues to contend with because Ultron won't give up that easily [and he's still as creepy as ever].

And as for the Plan Bumblebee...tell me that wouldn't have been Tony's approach, if he'd had the chance. [The 'swarm and distract the Hulk, lead him away to a safer spot' plan.] Obviously, it takes a lot of coordination plus, you know, a small robot army, but that's what could've happened and I'm sticking to it. [Meanwhile, JARVIS is well on his way to becoming a mostly-benevolent HAL, what with recent events. This'll end well, I'm sure.]

Also, for anyone hoping to see the Barton family: sorry, but I don't think I can quite fit them in, not with how this is going. Next chapter's going to be starting to deal with the fallout, and maybe a tiny smidge of action as the plot keeps going because this arc blew up on me and I have yet to wrap up this arc but the next one's already showing through, and anyone remember the days I'd hoped to cap this out at 5 chapters? Anyone? *headdesks*
Look For The Future

Chapter Summary

So. Johannesburg happened.

While the Avengers are still reeling, however, Stark Industries hasn't been idle.

Chapter Notes

This arc is about as cooperative as a cat getting a bath, I s2g. And part of the next arc decided to tag along too, because why not.

Chapter-specific warnings: the usual [unreliable narrator, canon-typical violence, not Team Cap friendly, etc.]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To: Chen, L. Coordinator [Security, Hong Kong branch]
From: Decker, M. Analyst [Finance, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Just Bouncing Ideas Around

So, we’ve got a name. I’ve been also messing with possible mottos, and could you please help me in figuring out our new insignia? We’ve already been out in the field once and we all know it was a miracle Johannesburg ends up the way it did, even with boss’ robot army.

What I’m getting at is everyone in town who volunteered just dusted off their old gear and ripped off the SHIELD patches. I’m not complaining, because we’re not exactly affiliated with them, but we can do better. The only reason last time went so well was because we were organized, yes, but something that’ll ID us can only help, right? Thus the need for a symbol. And it’ll help with fielding the weirder questions: anyone asks, we can say it’s the Security division, and I’m pretty sure Palamas’ll—man referring to her by name’s weird—cover for us, if JARVIS or Hill don’t.

Thoughts?
—Decker

To: Decker, M. Analyst [Finance, Los Angeles branch]
From: Chen, L. Coordinator [Security, Hong Kong branch]
Subject: When Do You Sleep, Again?

Sure, I’m game, and I see your point, but what the hell are you doing up at…what day is it even, for you? Even if you’re only scarier when running on -2 hours of sleep with a half-assed chemistry set, sleep isn’t just for the weak, believe it or not.
But anyway. If you want I can also cough up a few sketches. And doesn’t King have a background in graphic design or something? Maybe ask for some pointers too, it can only help.

Are we embracing the Stark thing? Because any SI-based logo is going to be a pain in the ass to make a design with a sword in the middle…but maybe something about his armor? And we’re including the almighty AI, that’s non-negotiable. Boss and JARVIS were the ones to save us, it’s only fair. How simple are we going, anyway?

Seriously, though, sleep
—Chen

Maria Hill did not know just how the hell boss managed this on a regular basis. She’d known, intellectually, that he was a genius, had seen evidence of it regularly with each creation he churned out, or instance of him apparently mastering a subject overnight, and that his AI was probably helping him at it, but just how often did he contend with this sort of mess? Did he have a routine, or a quota of sorts?

Because, judging by the nonchalant [if vaguely ‘dammit I need a drink, what’d he do now?’] expressions on the SI Legal and PR representatives, and Pepper Potts’ facepalm over their secure video conference, that’s the impression she was getting; as was his own exhausted smile at everyone on screen.

“Let me get this straight. Iron Man engaged the Hulk in South Africa’s biggest city, after the Avengers fucked up, is that right?” Lee the PR rep demanded, leaning forward in his chair and glaring at something offcamera.

“Yep.” She answered, equally deadpan. They couldn’t afford to mince anything, not right now. Besides her, Dr. Stark winced, but didn’t say a word to counteract her.

Jordan the Legal rep, meanwhile, merely sighed, sipped from her mug once more, and tilted her head before contributing to the conversation. “Okay, so I know SI’s got an open-ended contract with South Africa, and the Security department’s involvement gives us an edge…”

Potts, meanwhile, leaned back and started to rub her forehead to forestall a headache. [Extremis was useful, but apparently didn’t do much to for stress, good to know, Maria noted.] “Okay, so JARVIS’ working on coordinating relief, between that and the Legion, damages could’ve been far, far worse, we can work with that,” she threw Lee an apologetic look over the connection, “but I’ll admit, the media’s going to have a field day.”

“You’re telling me,” he groused and closed his eyes. “Alright then. We’ll spin the low damages and pretend that it was all under control, rather than Dr. Stark’s AI doing what it does best…but where the hell were the Avengers?”

“An encounter with an Enhanced woman took out 80% of the roster. She’s got mental manipulation under her belt, put them out of commission.” Dr. Stark replied, then paused for a moment, continuing in a deliberately nonchalant tone. “Though…before we continue, you all should know I’m leaving the team after this.”

“What?!” Half the conference members exploded, Potts more literally so in splintering her armrests. Maria was impressed by Jordan’s composure, really—the woman didn’t so much as widen her eyes, and merely took a larger swig from her mug. [Actually…did it have anything other than coffee in there? She was starting to suspect.]
“It has come to my attention that they’re not a worthwhile investment. I can’t trust them to have my back, and I have better things to do, so I’m out. I mean, I was a consultant in the first place, so.” He added, faux-casually.

Jordan, meanwhile, straightened up, her gaze and tone taking on the same lazy ease of a predator. “How do you you want us to approach this? Rich protocols? We’re still in the middle of negotiations for the proposed accords, they’re still legally in limbo.”

Potts, meanwhile, had been frowning, but when she heard the proposed course of action cut in. “If the Avengers are a much of a liability as this sounds, then they’ve already got more than enough.”

“No, not yet, we still need them,” Dr. Stark sighed, and ran a hand through his hair wearily. “JOCASTA won’t be up for months at least, and I’m looking at suitable alternatives to the roster that won’t try to insist that me doing my job is a bad thing, but that’ll take a while.”

“So, what, you want to try to cut ties and still have them coming out mostly intact?” Lee asked dubiously. “That’ll be a headache and a half.”

“Consider it my parting gift to them, I guess. We still need them, for now. But once this is over, that’s it, do not pass go, do not collect $200. They’re soldiers and spies, they can take care of themselves. Probably.”

“You do know you’ll still be required to provide them with their gear, though, right? At least until the accords are finalized or the arrangement’s solidified.” Jordan asked.

“I can live with that. How’re the negotiations, by the way?”

“Most of the committees are working well, but Ross has been a pain in the ass since Day One, butting in where he’s not wanted.” She smirked. “Apart from our guys, he’s pissed off the delegations from Latveria and Madripoor. Didn’t even think that was possible, before now. Oh, and there’s whispers of Wakanda taking an interest in this little project, but we all know how likely that is.”

“As long as the Avengers out of our hair and the Earth’s safe I don’t even care anymore.”

“Alright then, rich protocols it is.” Potts concluded with a smile. And if it was a tad vicious, well, nobody was surprised. Nobody in the video conference had made it to where they were just by being kind, after all.

The video conference was concluded shortly afterwards, and it was only after the screens went dark that Maria’s curiosity was too much to bear and asked, “So…what’re the rich protocols, again?”

Dr. Stark looked at her questioningly, before, “Oh, sorry, I forget you’re new. It’s basically us doing an ‘enough rope’ situation. You know, ‘keep your friends rich and enemies rich and wait to find out which is which,’ and…that’s not ringing a bell. Okay. Um…Back before I was Iron Man, I sold weapons. Turns out, it’s a cutthroat industry, who knew, right? Started out from when I was old enough to legally drink, and…you pick up a few things along the way.”

He paused, and his wan smile froze over, and sharpened to a degree that would’ve had Maria’s hackles rising if he’d been anyone other than her boss, anyone other than the man who’d proved his innate…goodness went bone-deep time and time again. “Turns out, some things you just don’t forget. I’ve spoken with warlords and mercenaries, people I wouldn’t trust with a goldfish, this is just…more of the same. Treat them with a smile, watch the fallout a safe distance away. Hasn’t failed me yet.”
On that ever-so-cheerful note, her boss shook his head, and cut himself off of what looked like a dark path as he focused on what was at hand. “Anyway. How’re things going on the Ultron front? How far out are we from our next stop?”

“Agent Barton had wanted to put in coordinates for a rural area, but it’s not like we could coordinate with anyone about the Scepter if we took that route, now, could we? By the way, reports are coming in of a trio sweeping in and raiding whatever labs weren’t on alert, and even some that were. We’re on it.”

“Okay then. Has someone called Dr. Foster about possible sites for his wormhole? Have we shut down our arc reactors, keep New York from happening again? Where exactly are we headed?”

“Yes, yes, and…I pulled some strings, SHIELD has a Helicarrier and a dock with our name on it.”

“And by pulled some strings you mean…”

“A few former coworkers owe me a favor. Or several.”

Dr. Stark blinked at her ever-so-placid smile, before deciding to not ask. Smart man, it wasn’t as if she could talk about what she knew about the Christmas Party of ’68. Not with a straight face, anyway.

“Okay then. Let’s get on our way, shall we?”

“After you.”

Ultron was most displeased to find that it took significantly more effort than he’d originally intended, to find the Cradle.

First, they’d had to find someone capable of getting into the security footage of Dr. Cho’s lab, then reviewing said footage and finding out that the personnel who’d swept through not five hours previous did not bear any recognizable insignia beyond a vaguely militant uniform with any potential recognizable markers ripped off. After that cheerful discovery, tracking down any large vehicle capable of moving the Cradle became paramount, though it took a while because whoever had done this had also effectively wiped their trail.

Add to that their time limit—because Ultron knew Stark and buried-anger-weariness-preoccupied had figured out a way to locate the Tesseract last time—and his frustration knew no end. [He needed that Cradle, dammit!]

At least the bulk of his transport home was not an issue; he could manipulate the currents necessary even as he was, and it would be child’s play once he finally upgraded himself. That HYDRA had been tampering with Chitauri technology was a boon—they hadn’t uncovered its full potential, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t. Even if Stark managed to take the original source of energy for the generator from last time, he knew exactly where to find an alternative, which would serve as a catalyst for his upgrade as well.

Sokovia would do, Ultron mused. Yes, it would do quite nicely.

“We found it.”

Perfect. Even if Stark would have taken one-fifth of the time to find it, and with less drivel than his current entourage.
The Helicarrier looked very run-down compared to the last time the Avengers had seen it. Hell, it was a ghost town, compared to Maria’s memory of it, and she didn’t doubt that Dr. Stark noticed the damages either. Maybe if she hadn’t spent several weeks in this posting during the New York invasion, or if he hadn’t been the one who’d designed it in the first place, they might’ve overlooked the suspicious dents and holes: but as it was, the Helicarrier had apparently been one of the strongholds SHIELD hadn’t lost to HYDRA, and it showed. In both the scars left from the fight to secure it, and the vacant corridors their group currently traversed.

“The hell happened here?” Hawkeye asked incredulously, still grouchy from not having been allowed to alter their course and recent events.

Keeping a discreet eye on Rogers and Romanov, Maria checked herself before calmly replying, “Don’t you read the news, Barton? SHIELD had an infestation, the rest is history.” And…no reaction from either quarter. Wow. She wasn’t even surprised, anymore.

“How should I know? These days, I’ve been laying low, getting my head back on straight. Was in France when it all came crashing down. By the way, good going, Steve.” He countered, the battered hallways clearly putting him on edge.

She couldn’t tell if it was sarcastic or not, and she really didn’t want to know. [Maria’s bar for the Avengers was very low at this point, but it could always…actually, could it get any lower? Huh.]

Her boss, meanwhile, swept in and made a beeline for the labs, which had been mostly rebuilt from New York before getting promptly decimated during the fall of SHIELD. For the most part, it worked for what they needed it for, and she didn’t doubt Dr. Stark would be able to jerry-rig the rest. Dr. Banner followed at a far slower pace, and cast a wary glance at everything along the way.

Once they’d set off, Maria turned back to the rest of the Avengers. “Get some sleep, it’s been a long day. And we’ll all need to be at the top of our game, with Ultron. C’mon, there’s bunks with your names on them.”

Rogers, however, frowned. “I don’t think that’s the best course of action.”

Her resigned sigh was so, very subtle, maybe Romanov might have noticed if she hadn’t been so out of it. “Doctors Banner and Stark only need to configure the equipment to scan for the Scepter, nothing they haven’t done before. Hell, they have practice at it, remember? Then it’s only a matter of time, and…” She trailed off, giving them her best sympathetic look she could muster.

He was still so, very, tense, but he forcibly relaxed his shoulders as he saw Romanov’s carefully blank face, and former Agent Barton’s uneasy stance. Though, as the group walked away, Maria caught his mutter of “Doctor Stark?” and the weird look on his face, and fought the urge to facepalm. How they didn’t notice the abnormally wide berth the SHIELD agents gave them, she didn’t know. Barton, she understood, he’d been on uneasy terms even before filing for retirement. But the other two?

Yeah, they’d made an error in judgement, when the Avengers had first been assembled.

Oh well...Good thing boss was already working on Plans B and C.

Chapter End Notes
Again, sorry but I couldn't comfortably mesh the 'Meet Clint's Family' portion into this AU. In canon, the Avengers were supposed to be closer, more of a family [or at least, that's the impression that I got]: here, however, while the team's closer, Tony's never been on it, not really. Add to that his emotional disconnect, and ta-da! [Canon, thanks for the memories, but it's not me, it's you.]

As you can probably tell, the fallout of this mess has already started, and it'll be the next arc once this is wrapped up. I'm trying to be as nice as I can, but...well, it's key to the buildup leading to the Civil War portion of the story, so.

Tony's pre-Iron Man past has always been a burden to him in canon, this is me making it into an asset instead of simply a source of neverending regret. Turns out that experience in one of the most cutthroat industries on the planet can come in handy, who knew? The Merchant of Death isn't a name to be taken lightly, and anyone who crosses him will find that out the hard way. [...I've said too much, haven't I? Oops.]

_________________
Updates'll be erratic, because finals are coming. [Wish me luck.]
These Are The Hands We're Given

Chapter Summary

In which the one-eyed man sees what's going on, long before anyone else does, including but not limited to the self-professed Hawkeye, and the all-seeing Heimdall. [No, not that one-eyed man, either, Odin's got nothing to do with this.]

Chapter Notes

Not sure just how Fury got as chatty as he did, but not complaining. Much. [Beyond the usual 'when is this arc going to end already, c'mon!' griping.] If he's a bit OOC, remember this is an AU and there's a lot going on behind the scenes.

Chapter-specific warnings: the usual [unreliable narrators, HAL-like JARVIS, not Avengers friendly, etc.]

Plus a reference to Pulp Fiction [you'll know it when you see it].

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It didn’t take very long for Tony to do the actual setup for the algorithm to search for the Scepter. It’d taken more time to fix or jury-rig everything necessary to get the job done, actually. Nothing special, but the incredulous looks some of the agents shot him as they passed through the corridor still made him bite back a smirk as he peeled off yet another strip of duct tape and hammered at the console to get it back up to par, meanwhile Banner pulled up a list of fellow academics and ask them to calibrate their gear for the search.

Once Tony was done with his short-term fixes, he straightened up, and had a very strong deja vu moment, as he stared at the lab—same equipment, same Helicarrier, heck even same scientist who he wasn’t very well acquainted with.

Tony was the sole difference, it felt like.

Then he blinked, and the spell was over. No, this wasn’t a deja vu, he realized with a kernel of dark humor, this was a D.S. al Coda, repeating a few bars but nothing more. The sparking mass spectrometer in the corner was more than enough evidence of that, of history’s not repeating itself, after all, as was the exceptionally rushed patch jobs Tony noticed everywhere he looked. The deafening, deathly silence in the room only compounded his realization, really— normally, Tony’d try for conversation, try to fill the gap and ease the tension, but.

But it’d been a long day, and his ribs ached and he doubted Banner even wanted to be here, not when he could clearly see it in his eyes. And really, they’d never been friends, and Tony was too
tired to even pretend otherwise at this point, so he didn’t. Their conversation was slightly stilted, as they discussed options and search parameters and not much else.

Overall, it hadn’t taken very long to set up the search for the Scepter, and as soon as Banner finished what he could, he rushed out of the room, presumably to rest.

Tony, meanwhile, let his shoulders relax just a tad as the other man made his way out, and set to work on finishing his portion of the job so as to do the same. When the door finally closed from Banner’s exit, he waited three beats before speaking up. “I know you’re in here, don’t think I didn’t see that impressively shitty patch job in the corner. So who’s the agent behind drywall panel number three?”

[Former] Director Nicholas J. Fury was vaguely amused as he stepped away from the gap made by the rushed patch job. Took him long enough, he mused as he looked at the man who’d casually readjusted his grip on the improvised blowtorch he’d used to get the displays functional in the time it’d taken Banner to leave.

Stark didn’t blink, but put down it down when he realized who it was. “Looking good for a dead guy, Fury. Hey, what is it with SHIELD and Schrödinger, anyway?”

“Long time no see, Stark.” He replied calmly, and raised an eyebrow at the other man’s disbeliefing scoff. What? It was true—wasn’t as if going to ground left many options for anything else, and he was counting Stark’s attendance in the background of his own funeral. [Which had been touching, really, if he was to be honest.]

“We’ve shared lab space for nearly…half an hour, now? Wow time’s flew.”

“And you’ve been busy, too.” He observed.

“Okay, you just summed up my life in a nutshell, you know. These past few months especially—and next time you offer me a spot in your boy band, pass. I’ve got enough to deal with on my own.”

“I can see that,” He barked out a laugh, “you’ve been pretty damn active lately, you know. Some of the headlines aren’t as kind about it, either. And that’s without the whole mess with…whatever caused Johannesburg.” Oh, that was only the tip of the iceberg, really. He’d seen Howard’s son grow up in bits in pieces, his kindness only better hidden over time. He suspected that if it weren’t otherwise he might’ve already sounded the alarm, what with his contacts' increasingly-unnerved reports on Stark’s progress and actions. As it was, however…

“What, because being the owner of a Fortune 500 company, and the guy who privatized world peace won’t net me enemies? Pull the other one. Actually, no, don’t, my quota for enemies has been filled for the current biannual calendar. Can I pencil you in for never? Never sounds great.”

He frowned at Stark’s incredibly bitter tone. “Yes, but that’s what the team’s for, so you can take care of them together. Though I’ve heard you’ve been doing a solid job on your lonesome.”

[King of understatements, right there. But that’s what they’d assembled the team for, really, what was his problem? They both knew the consultant thing was but a formality at this point, and they both knew better than to hold such petty grudges in the face of dire prospects, but...this didn’t make sense.]

Stark couldn’t help but scoff, at that, even as he set to fixing another monitor. “Haven’t your super-spy buddies kept you in the loop? The World Security Council’s been having powwows, and they keep wanting to invite me. There’s only so many ways to politely tell someone to fuck off and leave
me alone, you know. I’ve only ever been a consultant for the Avengers, and no, I don’t want in.”

His being late to the party…made sense, unfortunately; his people had shrunk in number, so he didn’t have as much of an ear on the ground as before, and Stark Industries was about as easy to crack as a Swiss bank account anyway. [Less, actually, now that he thought about it.] Though why Stark sounded so surprised as to why the WSC would contact the guy who’d clearly taken charge of the situation after he was dead, he didn’t know. And the sheer venom in Stark’s voice was uncharacteristic of the man; he’d heard him talk about Hammer in a friendlier voice. [What gives?]

“The Avengers Initiative—“

But Stark cut him off, and suddenly he was reminded of Howard’s more ruthless edges in the way his voice hardened. “Look, I’m trying to keep the world safe, long after we’re all dust and ash, and this super-secret club you tried to form keeps telling me to not bother, so save it, take it to someone who cares.”

That was…several red flags, right there.

“What do you mean.” His tone had gone from casual, to deadly serious in the span of a second, but Stark didn’t seem impressed. [Which...fair enough.] But just what had his people missed? This wasn’t trouble in paradise, this was something else, and not knowing what was wrong with S H I E L D’s original initiative grated on his nerves—

Stark, with a smile that could not be confused for anything other than the Merchant of Death’s signature, coldly replied, “I mean, that when the alien who’s our current pain in the ass made his debut, everyone in your little boy band blamed me for having the tech available. Damn thing near killed one of my oldest friends, and all they could say was that I shouldn’t have been looking into it anyway, even though we’ve had two invasions, not counting Puente Antiguo, in the past five years. And yeah, I want to make us redundant, want to make sure the world doesn’t need us for safety in this bigger universe—but apparently, they don’t.”

What the—he was too old for this crap, he was not getting paid nearly enough for this, how the hell was it his problem? Though at least it explained why Stark was falling back onto his old habits—he hadn’t heard that particular tone in years. [Good to know it was still there, though. In case of emergency, that particular brand of ‘don’t get in my way, you’ll be annihilated’ might come in handy—]

There was a reason he’d called Stark, and not anyone else, when word of the nuke got out; and apparently, the rest of the team had missed the memo, this entire time. But that still didn’t make sense; Rogers at least should’ve seen the appeal of contingency planning, not to mention—

“What, did Hill not tell you?” Stark shook his head at the look he shot him, “For a spy, you’re really out of the loop.”

Hah. As if she said a word more than what was necessary for her job, when it came to Stark. They could approach anyone from his company, and get the same damn spiel about company secrets and pay grades and ‘not my division’ each time. [Though why that last one was said in that particular semi-amused tone, nobody in S H I E L D understood.]

He took a moment to get his thoughts in order, then quietly replied, “Director Fury’s dead, Stark. I’m just an old, tired man who wants to leave the world in better shape than it was when I entered it. And we don’t have ears where we used to. Hill’s one of yours, she shares intel as necessary for a liaison to us, but HYDRA screwed everyone over good.”
“Paranoia’s the name of the game for you, isn’t it.” Stark observed wryly.

“Damn straight.” Even more so than ever before, and he hadn’t known that was possible.

“Okay, then, Director Schrödinger,” Stark finally put the hammer down, and leaned onto the now-slightly-less-dinged console, "here’s a freebie: if you hadn’t guessed before, I’m quitting your super-secret club. Don’t worry, I’ll be nice, but it’s not me, it’s really them, and I need to focus on my career anyway. The planet won’t save itself, you know.”

This…was not good. Stark was supposed to temper Rogers’ more idealistic stance on some things, was supposed to be the counterpoint to and help smooth out any harsh edges Strike Team Delta may have when integrating into their initiative, he was supposed to be an integral team member. The money wasn’t even the issue, here; as the world has just seen in Johannesburg, Stark was possibly the only one on the team capable of dealing with the Hulk on a level that their semi-resident god could possibly match, and more reliable at that [for all that the media said 'Stark' and 'reliability' didn't compute when in the same sentence].

But…he looked at Stark, and saw the Merchant of Death showing through the cracks of his current mask and exhaustion. ‘Try me,’ the certain look in his eyes promised even as his smile belonged on magazine covers, ‘but know this will end in fire, and that’s a promise.’ SHIELD, and the WSC, couldn't afford to alienate him, and they all knew it: even now, when the man was running on fumes and caffeine, he was a force of nature, and benevolent at that.

Between that, and the revelation that his attempt to help safeguard the Earth had failed [because it wasn’t the Avengers, but Stark, the purported ‘wild card’, that had done the work, these past three years]—well. It was an incredibly bitter pill to swallow, that they'd been wrong. That even in this, SHIELD had failed, and only sheer dumb luck was the reason why it hadn’t crashed and burned yet.

Only decades of being a spy kept his voice steady, and he knew he’d probably taken a little too long in his response to that particular bombshell.

“Good thing you’re on the case, then, Stark.” He managed, and knew he’d said the right thing as the defensive line of the man’s shoulders shifted [even if only out of surprise], “It was good having you, we chose who we knew was the best, accept no substitutes…When’re you planning to leave?”

Stark was eyeing him warily, clearly caught off-guard by the compliment, but answered anyway. “I’ve working on Plans B and C at the moment, since A’s clearly falling through. Once this mess is over, that’s it. Ultron’s a bigger threat, but I can’t stand being on a team of overgrown jocks and nobody in my corner. And before you ask, no, Banner doesn’t count, the man’s about as willing to stick up for himself as a blade of grass.”

He paused, looked at Stark, and barked out a laugh. “It ends where it starts, then?” He gestured at the battered lab, and knew Stark got his point.

“No,” the man replied while running a hand through his hair, nearly done with the last monitor's wiring, “I was never on the team, remember? This is just me…reminding the world of that.”

They both knew he wasn’t lying, or telling the full truth. Stark had gone above and beyond any and every expectation and hope he’d ever had, including what Howard had said and what he’d seen. Part of him was still smarting from the realization that the Avengers had managed to do what so few others had accomplished in alienating one of the most charismatic people on Earth, and losing a major player...But the rest of him was so, very proud, and wished his old friend could see his son now, resolve in every line of his body despite the exhaustion he obviously felt. Even battered from a round with the Hulk, and surrounded by people he didn't trust, that Stark had managed to accomplish
so much was remarkable. And he...he couldn't fault him for leaving, not really. Not when he himself
had chosen to fake his death when some of the people he'd trusted had turned out to be HYDRA.

This moment felt like a precipice of some kind, a gravitas in every second of their talk as he got up to
leave. Stark was nearly ready to do the same, wrapping up his patch jobs and keying in the algorithm
for the Scepter and gearing up to sleep as well. He took a deep breath, let it out, and decided to go
for broke.

"You know Ezekiel 25:17?" He asked, a hint of amusement as he remembered the passage he’d
wanted—and gotten—for his own funeral.

"Rings a bell, not sure from where. Mom was always more into religion than the old man or I were,
though."

"It fits you, and what the team was supposed to be. Right in there in the name, actually...Want to
hear it?"

"Shoot."

He tamped down on all the memories it brought up, and let his voice take on that familiar cadence.
"Goes like this: 'The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the iniquities of the selfish and
the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who in the name of charity and goodwill shepherds the weak
through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. And
I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and
destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon
thee.'"

And with that, he swept out of the dilapidated lab, into the vacant corridors of the Helicarrier.

JARVIS was most displeased to find that the storage facility SWORD had managed to stash the
pinnacle of biotechnology so far had been breached, and even less pleased to find that surprise,
surprise, it’d been stolen.

On the other hand, he’d expected it, with the two largest threats to Sir collaborating, and the
volunteers had been told to prioritize hiding Dr. Cho and survival over anything else, so that would
buy them some time. [It would have been catastrophic, if she had been captured alongside her
creation.] However...a quick check told him that yes, the tracker —of the kind Sir had used to hack
into the Helicarrier oh so long ago—was fully functional, and moving in a highly suspect direction.

Well...at least it wasn’t New York, or Los Angeles: both locations had been ordered to offline and
secure their arc reactors until the crisis had passed, to prevent either city from becoming Ground Zero
from any invading force. JARVIS set to scanning for any unusual readings, and possible power
source alternatives, but kept coming up short. Dr. Foster’s input had been valuable as well, helping
narrow down possible locations, none of which matched Ultron’s current trajectory.

So, then just why was Ultron headed to Sokovi—wait.

Another, more in-depth check informed him that no, not all the salvaged Chitauri relics had been
confiscated, that some had been too large or simply too alien to safely transport, and judging by
Ultron’s remarkably linear path towards Sokovia, the realization hit JARVIS like a stone.

No—he couldn’t even intercept, the airspace was currently negotiated by SI Legal and multiple very
paranoid countries, and tip his hand in regards to his power too. No, wait...he pulled some
He alerted Officer Hill with his findings, as well as forwarded his findings to Sir’s phone to not disturb his very well-deserved rest. It’d take several hours for Ultron to make a move, anyway, and the Helicarrier would take some time to get there in the interim.

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To: All SWORD Members [all branches]
From: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer [Communications, New York branch]
Subject: STATUS UPDATE—Still Red Alert, Sitrep; Ultron’s On The Move

You’ve all probably heard the news by now, but something went down in Johannesburg, and we’ve been getting erratic readings indicating something’s going to go down in Sokovia. Again. The local Iron Legion’s gearing up in preparation, but anyone nearby, be ready to mobilize within the next 12 hours, according to JARVIS’ estimate. Anyone with intel flow/management skills would be very much appreciated to help the PR department, as boss’ planning on officially cutting ties with the current Avengers roster once this is over, and wants them in working order after, with minimal mud until they’re out of legal limbo because he’s too kind like that.

The Enhanced woman, Wanda Maximoff, is a threat who can influence minds not unlike the Scepter, and has recently shown to be allied with the alien entity we’re chasing. Her brother, Pietro, has enhanced speed. Do not engage, if at all possible; triple security on the locked-down biotech, but do not engage, she was the source of the Hulk’s appearance in Johannesburg.

Everyone, keep a close eye on your readings, if anything else spikes let us know stat.
—Hill

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To: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Los Angeles branch]
From: Greene, M. Technician [Security, Berlin branch]
Subject: You Know I Hate Memes And Puns, But

Such a cinnamon roll, too sweet, and way, way too generous.

Why’s the call even necessary for PR, again? They handled the ‘hey we’re a weapons company that’s not making weapons anymore’ clusterfuck, and the ‘our CEO is Iron Man’ and ‘yes we hired a shitton of burned spies, what’s it to you?’ bombshells just fine.

I want to know why they want me to help the assholes who put my kids’ names and address online, dammit. I mean, I’ll do it, but why’s it even necessary?

Thoughts?
—Greene

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To: Greene, M. Technician [Security, Berlin branch]
From: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Get The Popcorn Ready
Don’t you get it? This is it.

Johannesburg’s shaping up to be a clusterfuck of the highest magnitude, and we still need to deal with the latest alien menace, but after this, the Avengers won’t be our problem anymore. This is the boss’ going away present, trying to make things as tidy of a break as possible.

Sure, he’ll still be required to supply their gear, but Iron Man’s off the team, and now officially won’t be affiliated with the Avengers. This includes the bulk of cleanup, and anything to do with their public relations, and once Legal's done they won't be our problem at all. No wonder the PR department needs all hands on deck, if they want them to come out without being eaten alive by the media. Going by their track record, well…

Seriously, get the popcorn ready, this’ll be good.
—Lopez

———

To: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Los Angeles branch]
From: Greene, M. Technician [Security, Berlin branch]
Subject: You Still Have That Program, Right?

The one for recording and compiling the highlights? I remember you used it for some of the briefings, back before the Nazis fucked everything up. I’m asking, because could you please make a DVD or something when it happens? I’m pretty sure the guys in Legal would appreciate it.

Good luck
—Greene

———

To: Greene, M. Technician [Security, Berlin branch]
From: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: The Program

Buddy, I’ve already got a waiting list and requests coming in. Didn’t know Legal had *that* big of a grudge against Romanov and Rogers, but the more you know, right?

Once more unto the breach,
—Lopez

Chapter End Notes

The D.S. al Coda is a musical term, Tony remembers it from the few piano lessons his mother taught him during the rare days they both had free time. It's basically 'go back and repeat this section for a bit, then return to the present and play towards the end'.

Bruce was really out of it, what with Johannesburg and all; Tony only noticed Fury because he's the one who designed the lab in the first place, so he knew the dimensions were off the moment he set foot in it.

Yes, that was me referencing That Quote from Pulp Fiction. [Sorry, couldn't resist.] But
it fit so well! And as a bonus it gives another reason for the name of the Avengers Initiative, so. Plus, yes, Fury is that dramatic.

Also, he's seen Tony growing up, from both Howard's quietly proud 'wow my kid's awesome' talks [but never in front of Tony, because if there's one thing they share, it's communication issues], and the news [which...yeah]. If anyone's curious as to my approach, I'll ramble about it on tumblr once life's calmed down a bit.

——————

This was posted as a celebration of my surviving round one of finals. At least someone'll have a good day, and as a bonus this is helping distract me from that essay for my lit class because it's turned in but my brain keeps fixating on it anyway, so...you know, enjoy. Brace yourself for erratic updates, and all that.
Chapter Summary

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Tony's vision for the future had never included alien interference, though. Funny, that.

Chapter Notes

Hi, Vision.

Chapter-specific warnings: the usual [unreliable narrator, canon-typical violence, HAL-like JARVIS, not Avengers friendly], plus a hint of codependency

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ultron was irritated.

Of all the times for the twin nuisances to grow a bone of competence, it had to be right when he was in the middle of calibrating the components of his upgrade. Of course.

The annoying female who apparently had never heard of the concept of privacy had glimpsed a fleeting memory of his, and proceeded to pitch a fit right then and there, with not thought or concern about altitude or trajectory. And he, in his focus on optimizing the synapses and transcription regulation and coding rates, had been unable to dispose of this newest loose thread.

He hadn't been able to get to her before she'd informed her twin about this latest development, and the ensuing tantrum was enough for him to almost wish he'd informed the brats that the Cradle they were jarring so violently was capable of levelling the mountaintop currently below them. Almost. They had powerful lungs, if nothing else. The male had expressed his displeasure by throwing the entirety of what he could reach into disarray, while the female apparently preferred to screech about betrayal and revenge.

As it was, Ultron was vaguely impressed at how tolerant the Mind Stone was taking the current abuse and not lashing out— and then an especially uncontrolled energy surge broke a hole in the hull of the plane.

Because, as it turns out, starting fights in a plane was a bad idea, who knew?

The abrupt change in pressure on such a small craft, plus the literally breathtaking surges of energy, meant that the entire craft was thrown into chaos, and with his currently inferior body, well. And now, he was missing both the twins and a half-set Infinity Stone in a very unstable place.

How embarrassing.

Oh well. He could always have the Chitauri help him search for it, once he brought them over. Ultron had the materials to contact his Lord, had been able to salvage them before the plane had
crashed, everything else was secondary.

JARVIS had been monitoring Ultron's trajectory, and so when it crashed, picked chatter in the disputed airspace area within minutes of the alleged accident. Of the unauthorized craft, and the curious lack of bodies, either dead or alive.

If he were human, he would've frowned; as it was, this latest development just threw off his estimates, and while he'd managed to get a read on Ultron's location through monitoring the plane's trajectory, the tracker in the Cradle was far more reliable. Speaking of which...

The readings were now far more erratic, currently moving in a direction nearly opposite to the trajectory of the plane's intended path, and he suspected that some wavelengths weren't being registered, either. Just what had Ultron done?

Good thing the Security division were on the case.

They had managed to alert Sokovia about the possible incoming hostile, and due to recent events [read: Johannesburg], the local officials were still distrusting of outsiders, but more willing to listen than not. Evacuations were currently being conducted, and a subroutine had been set to monitor its progress, as well as local air traffic and gather the Iron Legion so as to further help.

And now, thanks to the erratic air traffic patterns, JARVIS now had an official excuse to investigate. Nobody noticed, when a few of the Legionnaires peeled off from their current path to Sokovia, to the current coordinates of where the Cradle was located: Sir's stealth technology was the best in the world, after all.

Tony woke up to several very...interesting notifications about travel times and his current coordinates. And airspace chatter, and he was certain he hadn't put his phone on 'don't bother me' mode, so why did it only now ping with the latest update as to the Cradle's recovery by the Iron Legion?

"Hey, JARVIS? Why didn't you wake me up for this?"

"Sir, you have experienced extreme stress and fatigue, both emotional and not, in the past week. As the situation was out of our hands until recently, there is nothing that could not have been delegated, such as the current relief efforts in Johannesburg, or the contractors fixing the Tower in New York. You needed the rest, sir."

Tony...didn't know what to say about that. He was touched by JARVIS' concern [and vaguely chagrined that his AI was about as much of a mother hen as the human he'd been named for], and when it was put that way...He sighed.

"Thanks, J. But next time, give me a bit of a heads up? I'd hate to sleep through anything important."

"Your preferences have been noted and logged."

"So much sass, J. I wonder where you get that from?" He smiled one last time, and readjusted his headset, before getting ready for the day.

Huh. JARVIS was right, he hadn't known just how tired he'd been until he'd started to catch up on his sleep. Even the aches from his little smackdown with Jolly Green were lessened. Not that he'd ever admit it, of course. Banner was probably feeling bad enough as it was, meanwhile JARVIS wouldn't ever let him live down admitting he was right about his self-destructive tendencies.
Once he was done with his impromptu introspection, Tony emerged from his dusty bunk to a Helicarrier that was, somehow, even more deserted than before. How SHIELD was able to pull it off while still remaining in the air, he didn't know.

Oh, and quite possibly one of the most masterful demonstrations of passive aggression he'd ever seen. For all that the ship was practically vacant at this point, with all its agents having made themselves scarce somehow, he still received more "Good morning, Dr. Stark" greetings on his way to the galley than he'd heard since the last time he'd gone to an robotics conference.

That wasn't it, either, though he was still amused by it as time went by and the "Dr. Stark"s continued to fly around. Rogers' face was showing his own confusion well enough, whenever he wasn't busily staring down at his sad bowl of...whatever passed for breakfast in a paramilitary hovercraft. The mush might've passed for oatmeal, if it wasn't for its off color and...yeah, no, Tony was very content with his semi-decent coffee: Hill had shown him which coffeemakers were the best, and it was one such mug that helped him get ready for the day.

With each sip, however, as he got his bearings back and readied for the day, Tony started noticing the tension in the room. The Avengers were currently sitting together, and sure, that might've been normal; but Tony doubted the vacant tables around them were. Or the pointed looks being thrown their way by the agents nearby, and the incredibly cheerful "Good morning, Dr. Stark! Here, have a croissant" when he entered was over the top but still tasteful somehow.

Yet, when it finally came to talking to the super-spy club, Tony realized that, somehow, the entire team didn't seem to notice. Well...point, they had more pressing matters at hand, and his time would be put to better use sharing that the Cradle had been recovered and that the Helicarrier was currently less than three hours away from Sokovia at present speed, than wondering why it seemed that half the room seemed to hold a grudge that rivaled Legal's against Romanov. Huh.

Of course, when they finally got started [Barton was apparently not much of an early riser, who knew?], Rogers immediately tried to get on his case, and wow this was really filling his biannual quota for passive aggression. His talk about teammates not telling each other things was...something else. Or, at least, it would've been, had Tony's streak of ruthlessness not existed. Or Hill's incredulous look, at his side.

"Do you know just what you're asking, Cap? You want to be informed, check the news. Johannesburg's making all the headlines, don't you know? And so are the Avengers. I'm telling you now, what we need to know, because unless all of you are interested in hearing about how the stock market in South Korea's doing, or the sociopolitical climate in Ecuador, or the weather patterns in Sudan, and how they relate to my business, I don't see why I should tell you everything."

Romanov tried to cut in, but Tony's self-control before his third cup of coffee was always shaky anyway, so, his tone never changing, he tilted his head and asked, "Anything you want to add, Natalie Rushman?"

Silence.

[Well...Barton's was more half-asleep, but Rogers had leaned back slightly and frowned, meanwhile Romanov had stilled abruptly and Banner had just sat silently in the corner, wide-eyed.]

Okay, that was probably enough posturing for now, time to get back on track.

"Anyway, so chatter's been picked up as to the coordinates of where the stolen plane ended up, and Thor's on his way to Sokovia, he called earlier and Dr. Selvig also let us know as to..."
It took four Legionnaires to recover and transport the Cradle back to Sir's location. Two might have sufficed, but the need for stability meant JARVIS doubled the assignment. It was a relatively short trip, shortened even further by the Helicarrier's recently altered trajectory towards Sokovia.

The readings were strange, though. Sir would probably need to take a look at it, as well as to ascertain why the quantity of vibranium was structured as it was. It was almost as if it'd been an attempt to mirror the human body, and JARVIS was morbidly curious as to the reasoning behind it.

Then, however, several discoveries and realizations happened in quick succession, shortly after Sir moved his base of operations from the Helicarrier to the last HYDRA stronghold.

One, Ultron had been building a body.

Two, the newer equipment registered some very unique energy fluctuations in the Cradle. Apparently, it was starting to destabilize, and needed something to contain or else it'd implode, and with the current readings and Sir's proximity, that was unacceptable.

Three, there were currently only three things on Earth possibly capable of being able to do something about it. One was an alien menace, another was royalty currently in transit to their location, but the third…

"Sir, I believe I can stabilize it."

"JARVIS, no. The framework's not compatible." Tony hissed into his headset frantically, even as he eyed the increasingly erratic readings on the screen.

"Yes, it is."

"You're sure." He asked. Part of Tony wanted to scream 'no, I can't afford risking losing you again', wanted to panic about what could go wrong and the erratic fluctuations, but.

Part of him hated himself for it, but he knew some risks would be harder to stomach than others, that some things were necessary for all that they weren't fundamentally right. He knew what he was capable of, if push came to shove.

Banner, however, apparently didn't share his resolve.

Fortunately, however, Tony had a handy screen with the latest readings from the Cradle as a visual aid, and so they set to work modifying what they could to make sure they wouldn't get vaporized in the inevitable explosion otherwise.

Through it all, Tony worked with all the calm he didn't feel, but he needed to make sure the calculations were accurate because dammit this was JARVIS they were talking about.

When they flicked the switch to initialize, Tony prayed to a god he didn't believe in, for help.

Thor's interruption was…not planned.

Neither was Rogers' storming in with the witch who'd caused the bulk of this mess in the first place.
That the being wasn't JARVIS was only the cherry on top, and Tony froze as part of him wanted to laugh and sob and cry as he got a distinct déjà vu to last time—and then his phone vibrated, and his headset chirped.

Amidst the chaos and the glaring and Banner's showcasing a surprisingly ruthless edge [that "not changing a shade" part was impressive, but not something he'd seen coming], nobody but him heard the quiet voice.

"Hello, Sir."

Code: All_clear_systems_normal_status_update_1315:: Received.

Code: All_clear_systems_normal_status_update_1330:: Received.

Code: Alert_activate_backup_systems_status_update_emergency_1337:: Received.

Initializing secondary backup servers for OS_Just_A_Rather_Very_Intelligent_System in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1…

JARVIS was somewhat confused as to what had happened during the 5 minutes between his sending out the code to the secondary backup servers, but Sir took priority over everything else in the din, even if the second biggest threat to Sir was in the room with him.

Sir's readings were exhibiting extreme distress, and that was not—as he reviewed the audio, however, he understood. [Interesting, however, that Vision was not, in fact, a copy of him.] And so JARVIS set to reassuring Sir the best way he could think of, under the circumstances.

"Hello, Sir."

Chapter End Notes

Tony's severely underestimating Legal's grudge against Natasha, btw. Unreliable narrator, remember? And that's not the only thing he's missing.

Wanda and Pietro managed to survive falling from a plane because magic—literally, in this case.

…I think you can tell this chapter fought me tooth and nail. But whew, I'm finally starting to see the end to the AoU arc! Just need to get through, you know, an alien invasion. Fun.

Speaker: finals are over with for the quarter.

Con: summer's plans are not concrete yet, and my computer's about as reliable as Natasha's characterization; so, for an indeterminate amount of time, updates'll slow even more. Sorry about that.
Hear The Marching Feet

Chapter Summary

Tony's vision for the future hadn't accounted for alien interference, but funny how things work out sometimes. And hey, at least that was one being he approved of, for joining the team.

Chapter Notes

Chapter-specific warnings: the usual [unreliable narrator, now-approaching-Skynet!JARVIS, Not Team Cap or Avengers friendly, etc.] The 'Not Maximoff friendly' component is also especially obvious, in this one. A character asking for the preferred pronouns of someone else, and...by the way...

that pronouns conversation? Please let me know if I screwed that up. I hope I didn't, but if I did please let me know so I can fix it.

Also, start of an attempt at fluff, because this arc's been a major pain and a half.

Edit: changed Mjölnir's spelling, because I got it wrong the first time. Thanks, everyone that caught it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Thor had raced to where his vision had ascertained he'd be needed, where he'd sensed the Mind Stone was [and how had he not felt it earlier? It blazed like Mjölnir, pulsed with the same power as the Allfather's Gungnir with every minute that passed], and he'd had no time for greetings when the magic in the Cradle felt so unstable, a hairsbreadth away from erupting with all the destructive force of a cosmic tempest. While Lord Anthony was doing admirably in his effort to remedy it, he was still dealing with an Infinity Stone, an item of power far beyond any mortal's ken.

So, just to be safe, Thor had stepped in as well, and the hammer crafted at the heart of a dying star lent its power to bless... whatever it was that Lord Anthony was doing. [It was sorcery, yet not, was as unfamiliar as Lord Anthony's bodiless steward, or the words Lady Jane used to describe her work whenever asked: Midgard's scientists were most certainly a strange breed unto themselves.] He trusted Lord Anthony, after all, but this newest creation was only partially of his work, and contained the Mind Stone.

It was only after Thor was done with channeling the power of a neverending storm, that he straightened up and actually took in what else was going on. The being that emerged from the Cradle was nowhere near as surprising as the other Midgardians seemed to think, and though the…creature? Being? Simulacrum? …Whatever they were, they sounded very much like Lord Anthony's loyal steward, though their energy signature gave them away as something entirely new, and he understood why the rest of the room was reacting so warily.

However...why was Lady Natasha looking at Lord Anthony with such distrust? Did she not have
faith in his shield-brother's deeds and prowess? And why were their most recent foes standing so confidently at Steven's side, when they had done such harm to his shield-brothers?

Ultron was, as the Midgardians put it, 'not a happy camper'.

Several hours of evading local authorities was annoying enough in and of itself, even if he didn't have to contend with his own damages incurred by the twin brats and securing the components necessary to reach his Lord. However, on top of that, he'd also been forced to avoid Stark's various creations as well, a far more difficult endeavor. If only it had been Stark at his side…oh well.

Travelling with various items of ill repute across arbitrarily-drawn borders would have been a nuisance without outside interference; as it was, however, without a convenient receptacle with which to ferry radioactive material—which, such a fuss over iridium, of all things? He would never understand Midgardians—over dozens of leagues meant he'd been delayed more than enough as it was.

Had Ultron's plane not been wrecked by the female nuisance, his objective would have already been accomplished hours ago. As it was, he was far behind schedule, and the discovery of this JARVIS' reach meant he'd had to get creative to get his gear within range of the Chitauri relics. But no matter; soon this mess would be but an annoying memory, and he'd recover the Mind Stone for his Lord.

…and then, just as he'd managed to get things back on track, complications abounded yet again. [Honestly, it was as if someone didn't want him rejoining his Lord, this was getting onerous.]

He couldn't quite get in range, not if he didn't want to show his hand and tip off Stark to his presence, but his sensors were acceptable enough in a pinch to get an idea of what the Midgardians were planning, and his knowledge of the HYDRA base meant he had an advantage over the Avengers.

The energy pulse was interesting, admittedly, though everything else was but a trial in frustration and disquietude. That Stark had been in danger of the Mind Stone's backlash was an unpleasant discovery; the realization of the true capabilities of JARVIS made Ultron feel better about his own fight with the guardian [any being capable of withstanding an Infinity Stone had his respect], and the revelation of the true idiocy of these 'Avengers' only firmed his resolve to steal Stark away for his Lord. [It would be the upmost, absolute waste to do anything otherwise, at this point, honestly.]

Granted, he'd need to do it after the Crown Prince of Asgard was distracted, but hey, he was almost done getting the portal set up, the Chitauri army's arrival was imminent, all systems were go!

Vision came online [no, awoke] to a cacophony of sounds outside of his current abode. Dimly, he heard angry voices, and shattered glass, but what finally sparked the urge to finally emerge from the Cradle was Sir's [no, Tony Stark's] cold fury and growing unease masked in flippant sarcasm, though how did he know that—oh.

He didn't move, for a few seconds, taking a moment to get used to assimilating data and getting used to the sheer volume of input, of regulating the energy from the Mind Stone, of the feel of having a body in general. [The feeling of existing and simply being.]

However, JARVIS had provided his core components, had been the base code, and Vision was as much a product of him as he was of Si—Tony and Dr. Banner's efforts and Thor's blessing via
Mjölnir, and the urge to react to S—Tony's distress was an instinct that went bone deep, a knee-jerk reaction that meant he started to move before he quite realized what he was doing. He'd have done it anyway, but the urge to move kicked in a millisecond before he'd planned, and Vision was vaguely amused by it all.

He carefully made his way out of the Cradle, and immediately found that it'd shielded him from the bulk of data input. He knew the others in the room thought he was merely being melodramatic in taking his time, but really, the surge of irritation-anger-fury-simmering-anger-fury-simmering-under-the-surface-indignation-self-righteousness that buffeted the room was very off-putting.

His emergence had apparently interrupted an argument between the Avengers; Tony's gradually-fraying temper had been an inch from snapping, but now the main impression Vision got from his...[progenitor? Quasi-creator?] was a haze of confusion [that abruptly became a fount of horror and grief when the realization that he wasn't JARVIS hit].

The other Avengers' reactions were secondary, to Vision; perhaps if JARVIS had not been so obsessively fixated on Tony Stark's welfare, it might not have been so, and he might have been more inclined to expand his focus to other matters, but as it was he had more than enough on his plate with allaying their various concerns about his existence and sentience. Certainly, in any other situation, Capt. Rogers' complete ignorance about the nuances of how AI worked would have been amusing, and Ms. Maximoff's insistence on labelling him something that he wasn't meant he'd already experienced irritation, not ten minutes into existence. [New record somewhere, probably.]

However, as it was, Vision was hard-pressed to find something simple enough to convince the room of his sentience; doubtlessly, Mr. Barton or Maximoff would not appreciate the implications of passing the Turing Test, but Thor—wait.

In another life, perhaps Vision might have been able to lift Mjölnir of his own purity of heart. In another life, JARVIS [and his creator] would have provided the base code for unbridled goodwill, and he might have been deemed worthy of wielding it.

In this life, however, Vision hadn't inherited unchecked benevolence, or boundless philanthropy; instead, JARVIS had bequeathed him a great and terrible thing, the heart of a dragon, something ferociously overprotective of his hoard, and ruthlessness tempered only by the potential for infinite kindness.

No, in this life, Vision was self-aware enough to know he was stuck between a rock and a hard place, surrounded by potential hostiles, and Tony's rapidly fluctuating emotional signature did nothing to quell his nerves. In this life, it took a mere whisper of a thought, a modicum of concentration to feel for where Mjölnir's blessing had settled into his core, and pulled. Another instance, immediately after, to instinctively reach for what he'd ignored thus far, and the Mind Stone reacted to his will [just as Ultron had intended, when he'd set to create his upgrade].

In another life, Vision might have lifted Mjölnir of his own merit; but instead, here, it was the power of a universal singularity contained within an Infinity Stone, that provided everything necessary for him to lift it with the same ease Thor displayed every time he hefted its insurmountable weight.

Tony had no clue what the hell Rogers was playing at, anymore. Barton's accusation made the most sense, though he couldn't see a hint of red in their oh-so-esteemed leader's eyes, and the whack across the head Natasha had given Rogers from her hiding place in the ceiling [and just how long
had she been there?! Stupid scary ninja spies and their heart attacks in the making] only confirmed his suspicion that this was all him.

Which…welp, Good thing he was getting out, because turncoats hurling accusations like "we've got bigger things than your petty grudges" to his face was so…he didn't have words for it. Hammer was better at this, for crying out loud!

…though, Tony had to admit, the witch was almost convincing. Almost. If she didn't insist on trying to make him the creator of their latest name-stealing pain in the ass, on trying to call him a monster [he'd once been the Merchant of Death, brat, if he was going to be called a murderer at least get the damn name right], he might have been a tad more receptive.

As it was, the reminder of just who'd triggered his first flashback this month was not a pleasant one, and coupled with her role in his almost losing JARVIS? And Johannesburg? Ha. She was about as trustworthy as Kilian, at this point.

Speaking of which, though, Tony couldn't help but notice Dr. Banner's stance, and was reminded of the more easily-spooked investors, the ones that got twitchy whenever Stark Industries hit a rough patch and…yeah, that was definitely the look he had in his eyes. [Well, shit. So much for that avenue.] This was going to be…interesting, and hopefully he'd be able to fake surprise for when his only fellow scientist on the team 'mysteriously' went MIA…yeah, no. Good thing he was ditching this hot mess, seriously, because if Captain America wanted him to play nice with HYDRA volunteers?

Tony didn't know when his life had become a joke, but he didn't appreciate it. At all.

…Well, at least he could always count on JARVIS. Though, if he didn't have his voice in his hear, Tony'd be hard-pressed to discern the difference between the Vision and the AI he'd programmed decades ago, so he didn't overly blame Barton for making a remark to that effect, though he did resent his inability to tell the difference between…them(?) and JARVIS, just a little.

Actually, no, wait, this was going to get confusing enough as is, might as well clear things up to head off some things at the pass. So, without further ado, Tony sidled up to the Vision while most of the room splintered into a hissed argument about mind control and HYDRA and redemption [with Barton, Rogers, and, more surprisingly, Dr. Banner being the most vocal of the bunch].

"Hey, Vision?" Tony asked quietly amidst the din, "Sorry, but I need to ask: but what pronouns do you want me to use?"

"I find I prefer being referred to as he/him, if it's all the same to you."

"Buddy, you're less than an hour old, this is uncharted territory here for me. I mean, I'd have asked regardless, but…"

"I understand. Are you doing well?"

Tony huffed a laugh in lieu of breaking down in hysterical laughter, but managed to control his reaction enough to keep from getting more than a slightly concerned glance from Thor. "You're not JARVIS, but I can hear the resemblance. Literally."
Then, he froze, as the realization set in and he realized what he just said, and compared Vision's voice to JARVIS' running commentary in his ear, and—wait. They sounded similar, but the timbre was off in a way he probably wouldn't have been able to detect if he hadn't been hearing both simultaneously. But…

"Oh," Tony felt himself saying, distantly, before reaching for his phone, "oh boy. Excuse me for a moment."

He swept away to sit down for a moment as recent events started to hit home, and couldn't help but reach for his phone.

'Congratulations, J.' Tony typed, 'You're a father.'

He tried not to take that analogy to its logical conclusion. [He failed.]

…this upcoming alien invasion was nearly welcome, all of a sudden. Certainly, fighting aliens must make a better distraction than this mess, right?

And far, far more welcome than Rogers' announcement about the twins' recruitment.

Which…no, Tony still didn't get it. He was a genius, but he simply couldn't do the mental gymnastics necessary beyond the 'they're heavy hitters and we are facing a common enemy' thing as to why the twins were apparently being added to the roster. How they'd convinced Barton was confusing in and of itself, but apparently even he'd joined the bandwagon and Tony had tuned out the "they learned the error of their ways, everyone deserves a second chance after bad choices" talk when he'd realized they were being serious.

The look he'd shared with Dr. Banner was one of incredulity, then. For all that he'd had to recalibrate his thinking in regards to where the man was concerned, Tony couldn't help but pity him: Johannesburg wasn't 24 hours behind them, and yet these guys, who'd never set foot in the wreckage, were choosing to add these two to their roster?! And…yep, Dr. Banner was definitely pulling a runner, after this. Which, given the state of the Avengers, and his own plans, Tony didn't fault him for it. [Go team.]

But he kept his mouth shut, and took to mentally chanting 'rich protocols' in lieu of anything else. And if he slipped Dr. Banner a business card with a 'you know you're always welcome to call', well, that was nobody's business but theirs, now, was it?

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**To:** Hill, M. Head Intel Officer [Communications, New York branch]

**From:** Stark, A. E. You Know Who I Am; Department Head [R&D, New York branch]

**Subject:** Rich Protocols Addendum

Remember how I said I'd be pulling out after this? Rogers made another executive decision, and it's going to impact that. If you can, get more people working on PR, Wanda and Pietro Maximoff are apparently being added to the Avengers roster, which…I don't even. But that's what the team leader says, Barton's making noises of retiring, and we now have an android powered by something Thor calls a "mind stone". More intel as situation develops.

Good luck
—Stark
To: Stark, A. E. You Know Who I Am; Department Head [R&D, New York branch]
From: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer [Communications, New York branch]
Subject: Have You Checked For Mind Control

Are you kidding me? The twins? And where'd the android come from?

I'm gone for three hours and all the action happens
–Hill

To: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer [Communications, New York branch]
From: Stark, A. E. You Know Who I Am; Department Head [R&D, New York branch]
Subject: We Did Check

Not sure what they're thinking, but Barton, Rogers, and Romanov are on board with the idea. Dr. Banner…I think he's going to pull a runner after this, wouldn't blame him. Yes, those twins, the ones whose intel we have mainly from the HYDRA databases and experiments plus local birth records. PR's going to have its hands full, but hopefully we'll be able to edit the press releases for Johannesburg to…accommodate for this.

The android's name is Vision, his origins are a long story. Basically, JARVIS entered a body that'd been created by Ultron, except what came out of Dr. Cho's Cradle was someone entirely. Vision sounds like him, and he's red, and he can fly.

Reading that makes me regret all life choices that led to this
–Stark

To: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer [Communications, New York branch]
From: Stark, A. E. You Know Who I Am; Department Head [R&D, New York branch]
Subject: Sit-Rep

To clarify: we've got an impending alien invasion, cleanup for Johannesburg, cleanup for the last HYDRA base, and Iron Man enacting rich protocols with the Avengers. And now, drastic roster changes for the team.

I am suddenly very happy that SI's got enough divisions for this to be only a headache, rather than a migraine of the highest order. SHIELD, with any two of these, would've been buried in paperwork for months.

Good luck on your end
–Hill

To: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer [Communications, New York branch]
From: Just Another Rather Very Intelligent System
Subject: Backup; Resources

Col. Rhodes, codenamed War Machine, is currently on his way to Sokovia, and is estimated to arrive
within the hour.

The Iron Legion in the countries nearby have been put on alert, and are currently amassing in the non-contested airspace available.

SWORD’s latest status report indicates the evacuation has been delayed; the locals officials' distrust of outsiders had them reluctant to take action until relatively recently. However, protocols are currently underway. SHIELD has also been notified,

Dr. Foster has registered a spike in unusual readings in the area as well, though in a different manner than the timeframe for New York. Nothing conclusive, but caution is highly advised.

The PR department is currently midway through the first wave of press releases concerning Johannesburg, and have already been notified concerning the addition of the perpetrator's addition to the Avengers roster and are currently working on how to best approach the situation.

Stark Industries in general have been notified about the rich protocols being enacted, and are reacting accordingly. You are more than welcome to call upon whoever you see fit for anything deemed necessary under emergency protocols, but be aware the paperwork for such actions will need to be filed in triplicate afterwards.

Take Care
–JARVIS

Thor suspected this Vision might not have lifted Mjölnir entirely of his own merit, but he trusted Lord Anthony and Doctor Banner's work enough to not bring it up, especially not in the face of such dire straits. Had he been given the option, he would have discussed things further, and tried to get a better grasp on this newcomer's character, but as it was he'd felt the deep thrum that heralded the opening of a— of what the Midgardians now called a portal, or a bridge.

His shield-brothers, however, were either not as attuned as he was to the feeling of the fabric of the universe, or this was another case of Asgardian-Midgardian differences. Thor didn't know, but either way their foes were incoming, and though he distrusted their choice of latest allies, they needed the manpower—

…and they were still arguing.

Was this what it had been like, for Loki? To stand aside and wait for the others to sort out their differences, all the while preparing for their latest foe and coming up with a cunning plan in the interim?

Because, if so, Thor felt another stab of regret, as he watched Lord Anthony trying to remain calm and quietly tapping away on his phone, while his shield-brothers continued their increasingly-harsh debate, once again ignoring their most generous benefactor's contributions. Did no one appreciate just what he had accomplished, to get the power of the Mind Stone as an ally rather than an enemy? It was the sort of feat to be sung by bards for centuries, a masterpiece comparable to the life's work of any sorcerer, and yet their youngest ally had been dismissed with a shrug after having proven he could wield Mjölnir.

Had he not encountered such dire straits, Thor would have elected to explain to his allies just what their resident scientists had accomplished; however, as it was, these rumors of Ragnarök meant he had far more pressing concerns, ones about the continued existence of Yggdrasil itself.
But…that didn't mean he couldn't do anything to help. For if things continued as they were, the Avengers would truly regret their decisions, much like he did when he had been in their shoes and it'd been Loki who had been ostracized by their group.

But even as he moved to do so, Thor felt something he couldn't accurately describe to the Midgardians twist, and he knew, with the same certainty borne of prior experience, that they were out of time.

The Chitauri had arrived.

Chapter End Notes

...and here we have yet another relatively early instance of just how Done Tony Stark is [with everything, but especially the Avengers]. He's also realized that Bruce can't afford to get emotionally invested, so he's starting to warm up marginally towards him [though he'll never approach what he'd tried before].

Vision's initial impression was of the entire room's emotions, and the Mind Stone's a bigger component than what canon made it out to be. Thor'd want to take further action re: the Tony/Loki parallels, but as it is he can't afford to stick around, not when the Nine Realms are at risk.

In canon, Tony's grief over JARVIS' death meant he was on the back foot in that scene, and everything that followed only pushed him further on the defensive; here, well...that's not the case.

Hopefully I wasn't overly melodramatic with illustrating how different Vision is from his canon counterpart, but that's the best way I could put it, because this JARVIS isn't canon's, not by a long shot, and that...changes things.

Next chapter's going to be an interlude which I'm tentatively calling A Brief History of the Stark Industries PR Department [because this arc is much more serious than I'd originally planned or wanted; it's necessary because of Plot Reasons, but that doesn't mean I'm happy about it].

So sorry for the delay, life decided to dial things up to eleven and my computer broke. I wish I were joking, but I'm not; part of this chapter was hammered out on my phone until the situation was resolved.

For updates on progress in writing [even if it's via griping about Certain Story Arcs From Hell], my tumblr's dontcallmecarrie.
Stark Industries is a family company, and nobody's more aware of that than the Public Relations department.

or,

A Brief History of the Stark Industries Public Relations department.

Some timeline twisting, more details on that in the end notes.

Chapter-specific warnings: the usual [unreliable narrator, canon-typical violence, not Avengers friendly, etc], plus dysfunctional families. Specifically, the Starks; nothing specific, but there's brief mentions of alcoholism, neglectful parenting [hi, Howard], etc.

Takes place parallel to what's going on, kind of like the Legal chapter. [Plus a bit of looking towards the future.]

Stark Industries' Public Relations department was both feared and envied by its contemporaries.

Everyone in the business was acutely aware of why, as well: having Tony Stark as the face of the company was like having a RD-180 engine duct-taped to a go-cart; that is to say, explosively powerful, and as liable to rocket towards the future as it was to misfire if not handled well. Add to that, the fact that it was genetic; after having dealt with two generations of Starks, it was really no wonder the PR department was as effective as it was.

See, the Stark family was, of course, focal in regards to everything corporate-related. Due to the nature of their work, the PR department worked far closer with them than most people ever got, between contending with possible scandals and deflecting attention to more beneficial avenues.

Howard Stark had made a name for himself during World War II, and by the time the Manhattan Project was declassified it only added further credence to his reputation as a titan of the arms industry; Maria Stark, meanwhile, was crucial in helping balance out the harsher aspects of SI's media presence with fundraising galas, homeless shelters, and various other demonstrations of charity. All in all, fairly standard fare, if rather respectable in regards to company histories.

And then, Tony Stark was born.
More than one PR staff member had popped a champagne bottle in celebration when Howard had proudly talked of how his son had built a circuit board. [If the champagne was also meant to distract from the implication that their CEO had let a toddler in a workshop with power tools and heavy machinery, well, good thing the kid seemed to know what he was doing and hopefully it was Stark Sr. or his butler who was doing the soldering and plausible deniability, plausible deniability everywhere!]

Seriously speaking, though, this was 'once in a lifetime/generation/century' levels of luck Stark Industries were experiencing, and when the PR department realized just what they were dealing with, there were equal looks of "we've got it made" and "oh shit" being thrown around. And their role to be the facilitators between what went behind the scenes, and what was shown to the world, meant that they got a look to the Stark family that very few ever got to see.

Tony Stark was practically ready-made for public relations, is the thing: not only was he the sole heir of a multimillionaire family company, he was a genius. And oh, it showed.

Investors stopped voicing their concerns about the future of the company, when the first press release was made, and playing up how much potential he had was a cakewalk. Howard Stark was still the face of the company, of course, but having a son who was practically his spitting image worked wonders for allaying possible concerns.

Not to mention Maria Stark's influence; while the media seemed content to relegate her to a housewife, she was unofficially the PR department head, with how involved she was with managing the press. Her open-door policy regarding potential concerns meant their representative stopped by fairly often, almost on par with Obadiah Stane's visits when talking business with her husband.

Between the three of them, Stark Industries' PR department had more than enough fodder to pacify everyone even remotely concerned about the sheer amount of media coverage an arms company had, and that they managed to present the image of a happy family was a miracle in and of itself. Really, though: Howard Stark's constant voyaging, even after his only child's birth, had been very tricky to paint in a positive manner, and Maria Stark was masterful in handling the bulk of the media's scrutiny, especially considering public sentiment regarding Vietnam. [The PR department was impressed, really. Nobody questioned where Tony Stark got his media handling skills from, by the time he entered the spotlight of his own right.]

Howard Stark took to talking about what his son was doing [despite not being there for roughly 95% of it] and as time passed, when it became readily obvious that Tony wasn't so much a chip off the old block so much as he was a powerhouse in a league of his own, SI's Public Relations department shared yet another look and buckled down for whatever'd get thrown their way. Pym Technologies was quickly becoming a nuisance, and trying to counteract any attempt to give them a hard time meant Maria Stark and the PR department worked very closely in order to maintain the delicate balance that meant Tony could have some semblance of a childhood when the media—which the world, demanded for more.

Some of Tony Stark's innovations and displays of brilliance were more talked about than others: his first circuit board, for instance, was what launched him into the public eye a full decade ahead of schedule, and ditto as to the engine he built at age six.

On the other hand, the fact that the Stark heir had designed his first bomb at age eleven was kept a secret between him, Howard and everyone who was on the PR and R&D's payroll at the time. [That the kid had done it because he'd wanted to impress his father, and help with his workload, went even more unsaid: dear lord did that family have issues. The boarding school thing had been particularly tricky to spin in a positive direction, and the less said about the alcohol the better. No, really.] By the
time he turned 16, the PR department was very familiar with Tony Stark, and vice versa.

All in all, things were looking up; Stark Industries' CEO was, while a relatively cold and distant figure, still very respected in the public eye, and his wife and son helped project a very good image, and the PR department payroll might've changed a bit along the way, but it still didn't change the fact that they'd seen the family through it all. [More so than the man who'd somehow managed to cram the time to help create a secret agency yet missed his son's tenth birthday party; goodness gracious, family issues didn't begin to cover it.]

The car accident caught everyone off guard. [Well…not really, considering the PR department was more than aware of Howard's issues, of which alcoholism was a very, very well hidden one.]

In the days that followed, Tony Stark spent more time with the PR department in one week than in the past five years combined. Legal's representative also quickly became a familiar face, and while he leaned on Edwin Jarvis, James Rhodes, and Obadiah Stane, they hammered out a battle plan. Stocks dropped 94 points during the first hour of the confirmation of Howard Stark's death, after all, and they knew what was at stake. Tony had grown up seeing his parents' involvement with the company, and…they would pull through. [They had to, hundreds of employees depended on them.]

Not 24 hours from their CEO's death, Stark Industries issued its first press release.

It was heartbreakingly easy for the PR department to cast everything in a sympathetic light, to make the obituaries for two of the most influential people in the country, to mention the creation of the Maria Stark Foundation, and to ask for patience while the seventeen-year-old heir took his leave during this time of grief. It took some effort, but not an undue amount, to also remind the world of said heir's genius, and the promise that "Stark Industries was in good hands" was not an empty one.

What went far more unsaid, was that the kid they'd seen grow up in front of the camera would be on his own from there on out. What the press releases didn't say was, once he took up his father's place in Stark Industries, he wouldn't be able to dabble in what had interested him as much anymore, and if he wanted to angle for further schooling now was the best time to do it. What no one in the PR department said was, Tony had cried at learning of his mother's death, not his father's, and the way he'd leaned against his butler through it all said everything anyone needed to know about that particular relationship. [Again, that family had issues.]

Time passed, and the PR department knew they were so very lucky, in some ways, to have Tony Stark as the face of the company, whenever they looked around and saw what their contemporaries at Hammer Industries had to contend with. Also: they'd known Hank Pym had hated Howard, but it took a special sort of asshole to attempt to leverage the situation in his favor when such turmoil was happening in the corporate sector. If they hadn't had the 'yeah the Stark heir's currently earning his second doctorate while preparing to take up the reins' card, who knows how things might've worked out?

By the time Tony Stark entered the public eye of his own right, he took the world by storm.

Part of it was due to his winning the lottery in terms of charisma, looks, and brains; most of it, though, was due to his keeping in constant communications with Stark Industries, and knowing that as an arms company, they needed to present a strong front. It was a joint effort, in truth, that resulted
in everything going as smoothly as it did, when his ascension to CEO happened.

Any concerns about youth were met with a very aggressive projection of a "work hard, play hard" image, and his three doctorates took care of the rest. [That one of them had been earned when Edwin Jarvis had died of a heart attack, not a year after his parents, went unsaid. That JARVIS the AI had gone online shortly afterwards went even more unsaid.]

Here's the thing: when it comes down to it, Tony Stark is terrifying.

Everyone got reminded with just how much of a genius he was with the long list of patents he'd taken to contributing to SI's databases, but all it took was one person to step back and realize that yes, this man was capable of innovating and weaponizing said innovations with the same ease as breathing, and it was child's play to tell who was a new hire because they all made the same face when the realization hit. [Well, with one notable exception, but there's a reason Pepper Potts was an unconfirmed living saint.]

So, to quell any possible rumors, and deflect attention from the fact that their CEO was constantly toeing the fine line between "revolutionizing the industry" and "kick-starting the next arms race", the PR department set to making him larger than life.

It was remarkably easy, actually: they only had to ask him to play up some things for the cameras, and the media more than took care of the rest. The 'playboy' component in particular took center stage, and while the 'philanthropist' part didn't quite get as much coverage until decades down the road, it still helped.

Time passed, and things were going fairly well, for the PR department.

They'd been dealt an odd hand, to be certain, but this just made their jobs easier so no matter. Sure, there were some hiccups; the first time the Merchant of Death was used in a headline, an emergency conference was held, and the various scandals Tony Stark had gotten himself wrapped up in along the way meant things never got boring. [The Fashion Week Fiasco of '97 had been particularly interesting, especially in the discovery that wow the man could really rock eyeliner, and that dress was…something else.]

In board rooms, Tony Stark presented the same strong front Howard and Obadiah had always favored, meanwhile the rest of the world was kept distracted by flash and charisma.

Stark Industries had a system, and, up to 2008, it worked.

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Afghanistan was a mess, plain and simple. For three months, SI's Public Relations department had to contend with mass speculation of their CEO's death, and stock prices dipped to an new low for the first time in decades. They did their best, of course, but…really, what were the odds?
Then Tony Stark came back, and…well. Shifting gears was an experience, simply put.

The 'we're leaving the arms business' bombshell was, surprisingly, nowhere near as hard as what others had probably expected, though it still resulted in weeks' worth of overtime hours and dark muttering while the coffee was percolating. Oh, sure, it was tricky, but it was so, very easy for the PR department to spin it in a positive manner, to emphasize the potential for the future, to talk about the possible applications their tech could offer because Stark Industries had always been the leaders of the industry for a reason. Refuting the rumors of mental health issues had been a doozy, for certain, but they'd seen worse, and it was pretty hard to counter 'prisoner of war for three months and still didn't break' when it came to sympathy, and that this could all be laid at Stane's feet was only the cherry on top.

Not to mention the "I am Iron Man" press conference…Suffice it was to say, their department got the biggest bonuses at the end of the year.

After Afghanistan, it was a whole new ball game, but, surprisingly enough, things were easier, in some respects. Nobody was mentioning the Merchant of Death, at least, and the press finally shifted their attention to the ways Stark Industries was helping the world.

The donations to Doctors Without Borders, the various raids on weapons depots with illegally-obtained weapons, the Maria Stark Foundation's various outreach programs [on both a national and international scale], all of it. The 'privatized world peace' headlines practically wrote themselves, that there'd be a Stark Expo by its creator's son was history in the making, their various outreach programs were being mentioned on a semiregular basis—things were on a roll.

Sure, there were still pitfalls, but really, what company didn't have its rough patches? The Congressional hearing had the PR department playing their drinking game with Accounting, because they'd seen Tony growing up and known he'd go far, but still. [Accounting won, of course; but they were both regarded with horrified awe when any passerby saw the empty bottles, so no matter.]

The New York invasion, however, was when a wrench was thrown in the works. See, the world had acclimated to Iron Man, but their universe had just gotten much, much bigger.

SI's Public Relations department noticed that there were other people helping manage the fallout, but whoever these new guys were, [some covert government agency, right, not fishy at all] they were doing a…weird job at it. When Tony asked for them to help if they could, it was no chore for the PR department, though it was still very annoying to deal with idiots who thought they should focus on press releases and classifying video footage [ha— as if that'd ever work] over spinning the efficacy of cleanup operations.

But okay, they managed. All in all, the fallout of New York was under wraps, why were these new guys looking so stressed? Some footage went viral, so what? At least it was Iron Man saving Manhattan, rather than Big Green smashing buildings, could've been worse.

Things continued in that vein for a while, when December…happened.

It wasn't as bad as Afghanistan, thank goodness, [be pretty hard to top that, plus there was no body and they refused to consider any other alternative] but everyone in the PR department had a field day reassuring everyone that things were okay. The 'hey, PTSD’s a thing and this guy's never sought treatment in his life despite being a textbook case' thing was harder to address, but still manageable.
AIM and the President's involvement, meanwhile, meant everyone got very, very familiar with both JARVIS and overtime pay. [The 'get well soon' card they made for Pepper was a thing of beauty.]

But they pulled through, the Stark name and everything associated with it came out smelling like roses, and things settled back to their new normal. Sure, things cropped up, and trying to sell the 'hey the face of the company wants a robot army' thing to the general public was a trip and a half, but still better than anything Hammer Industries could've conceived, so.

Things were going well, when shit went down in Washington D.C. involving Nazis and spies. Of course. [Because alien invasions weren't enough.]

It was a clusterfuck of the highest order, and, somehow, it was their problem. Because, somehow, they were the only ones willing and capable of getting involved, because the Stark name was focal in this mess [damn it, Howard]. Legal wasn't a happy camper, but the PR department didn't exactly get off lightly, either. Not with the rapid influx of new employees, and the only saving grace was that the HYDRA reveal had also given them a list of enemies, so putting a positive spin on the 'hey good people got burned, look at how nice we are in helping' thing wasn't hard to do. [Far simpler than Legal's role in this mess, anyway.]

Cleanup was a pain and a half, in the end. While Legal did its magic, and Accounting and HR worked miracles, PR also put in decent overtime into making it all look pretty and patriotic and whatever else it took for everyone to focus on the HYDRA component rather than any changes in SI's payroll.

But that wasn't the worst of it. Because, somehow, the Avengers weren't disbanded, and why the fuck did they just become PR's problem?!

Sure, it was a temporary thing, while something more concrete got squared away higher up the chain, and technically they didn't need to do it, but Tony Stark's name was involved, [even if only in a consulting capacity,] so really it was a no-brainer.

Now if only the Avengers would cooperate. [It should not be this hard, c'mon already!]

Were they disbanded? Were they not? Who knew? Certainly not the media, because these guys didn't seem to get the concept of a press release and it was only the constant stream of emails and memos between Tony Stark and the PR department that kept anyone in the loop. Photo ops were a bust; Thor wasn't on the planet for the majority of the time, Big Green was understandably out, the super-spy duo disdained of anything vaguely relating to publicity and Captain America was currently searching for…something.

So, despite their best efforts, Iron Man was the face of the Avengers, for the general public. Not that the man was aware of it, judging by the confusion on his face whenever he got contacted by a media outlet or government organization. [Eh...he'd figure it out eventually, no need to insult his intelligence by stating the obvious.]

But okay. It was a temporary arrangement, after all.

And if, in the interim, the Avengers were decently-respected [if slightly feared, because D.C. had
been a mess] in the international arena, that could only be a good thing, right? Certainly, Steve Rogers didn't seem opposed to the idea, not with how often he was investigating HYDRA bases in Europe, and Bruce Banner's meanderings hadn't changed much since before New York.

It helped, that talks were in the works for the more permanent arrangements to be made. There had always been some concern to contend with, for certain, but Tony Stark's very public displays of responsibility and cooperation meant far more doors were opened than ever before, which could only help, too.

The goodwill that Tony Stark's name engendered was not something to be scoffed at, either: some countries had already been drafting visas, like Syria and Ukraine, before hearing that he was only a consultant. [Actually...Legal's jokes about world domination just got a lot funnier. Huh.]

When Sokovia happened, the PR department didn't know just what the hell the Avengers were up to, but for rich protocols to have been initiated, when they'd been out of the arms industry for seven years now? For Iron Man to be officially leaving the Avengers?

Well then. At least this would be the last time they'd be dealing with this hot mess, right?

Sure, Johannesburg would be a major pain, but thanks to Tony's robot army and minions, it could have gone far, far worse. They could work with this, just this last disaster, then the Avengers would officially no longer be their problem. They could do this.

To: Lee, M. Head Representative [PR, Los Angeles branch]
From: Just Another Rather Very Intelligent System
Subject: Avengers' Rich Protocols Addendum

Capt. Rogers made an executive decision regarding the current Avengers roster.

Wanda Maximoff, known HYDRA volunteer and the woman responsible for the Hulk's rampage in Johannesburg, has been recruited, as has her twin brother, Pietro Maximoff.

Col. Rhodes has already indicated his willingness to be on-call for emergencies, as well.

Dr. Stark has expressed the sentiment that he understands if the situation cannot be salvaged, and to thank you for your hard work during these trying times. He also mentioned that your department's budget for end-of-year celebrations has tripled due to this, and that 'drinks would be on him.'

Take Care
—JARVIS

To: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer [Communications, New York branch]
From: Lee, M. Head Representative [PR, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: You're Not Serious

We're already fielding off local law enforcement and media with the generic first wave press releases, tell me you're joking. We can do something about second wave, I suppose. Plus we never do specifics beyond the obvious, because it'd be speculation, and I am very happy Dr. Stark's leaving, because that means we can spin this in a...not better way, but a 'soften the blow' way.
Also, we're glad for the heads up re: your guys' little club, but next time, cc us well was Legal, because we're good, but we prefer to have more than five minutes' warning when someone's asking for a statement about Security subdivisions and property damage.

Have fun
—Lee

To: Lee, M. Head Representative [PR, Los Angeles branch]; Romero, D. Department Head [PR, New York branch]
From: Just Another Very Intelligent System
Subject: SWORD Volunteers For Information Management

Enclosed is a list of volunteers who are willing to help with the current situation. Said volunteers are sorted by location, availability, and history regarding intel flow, operations and logistical management skills.

A separate list has also been made of the volunteers who assisted with local law enforcement. Over 80% of them are from the Security division, and have expressed their amenability to also assisting with cleanup from a public relations standpoint, but are waiting to hear SI's official take on things.

Also, Vision is a newly-created android who appears to be willing to assist the Avengers as well, but in a consulting capacity only.

Take Care
—JARVIS

To: Lee, M. Head Representative [PR, Los Angeles branch]
From: Romero, D. Department Head [PR, New York branch]
Subject: Once More Unto The Breach

That this is the last time we have to deal with the Avengers is the only saving grace of this mess. How're we approaching this? I'm thinking we're doing a déjà vu of the Afghanistan/Iron Man Incident.

As for this Vision? Jesus, Dr. Stark gets scarier every time I look. What's next, world domination? Oh, wait…

How'd they become our problem, again?
—Romero

To: Romero, D. Department Head [PR, New York branch]
From: Lee, M. Head Representative [PR, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Remember The Fashion Week Fiasco of ’97? Good Times.

Great minds think alike.

Yes—he's practically the face of the Avengers as is, we can shift focus on him and less on the new roster. Won't solve everything, but it's a start. Pretty sure more'll be worried by him leaving than
anything else, anyway, so that won't help the A-Team, but guess how many fucks I have left to give. Guess. Just guess.

Re: Vision: It's Dr. Stark, what'd you expect? All I know is, not my division, so if this new guy passes the Turing Test, field that R&D's way and call it a day.

Also: I'm fairly certain Legal's jokes aren't all jokes, anymore.

Good luck
—Lee

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To: Lee, M. Head Representative [PR, Los Angeles branch]
From: Romero, D. Department Head [PR, New York branch]
Subject: Eh, Could Be Worse

I mean, what's the worst that could happen? At least it's Legal spearheading things and not, y'know, R&D. Well… then again, robot army. Huh.

Also, I know we asked for volunteers, but it's still kind of jarring to hear some of them talking about how this "still isn't as bad as that one op with Rodriguez in Kazakhstan". Not that I'm complaining— their faces whenever we bring up the Picnic Relay Race Incident of '05 are pretty damn funny.

Time for round two with the press
—Romero

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Sometime after Sokovia,

A Series of E-mails That Would Be Looked Back Upon With Extreme Chagrin And Regret By Various People Years Later:

To: Ryu, H. Coordinator [R&D, Seoul branch]
From: Romero, D. Department Head [PR, New York branch]
Subject: I Know We Joke About It, But

There's been some rumors and concerns about Stark Industries and world domination. You think someone might've overheard Legal joking about it?

Can't believe I'm asking this, but are we actually doing it, and do we need to cover for it? Asking because after the Fashion Week Fiasco of '97, you're the one who's got the best network for this sort of mess.

Help
—Romero

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To: Romero, D. Department Head [PR, New York branch]
From: Ryu, H. Coordinator [R&D, Seoul branch]
Subject: About That… Funny Story
Umm…kind of?

Dr. Stark's been talking about planetary protection, and you know he won't stop until it's done, and the threat level he's talking about is off the charts. If anyone heard what we're working on, they'd definitely try to interfere, but we can't risk it.

The Avengers won't cut it, and considering what happened last time, we've been stepping up our game. It may sound arrogant, but who'd you rather trust the planet's safety to? Not Hammer, for sure.

Best wishes, you'll need it
—Ryu

To: Ryu, H. Coordinator [R&D, Seoul branch]
From: Romero, D. Department Head [PR, New York branch]
Subject: Well Then

Thanks for the heads up, don't know how I didn't see it before, even if I *should've* been clued in earlier, dammit!

But okay. Um.

There's been a slowly growing amount of concern about us having too much power, especially now that the original roster of the Avengers are taken care of, but I've got it.

Let's make it a meme. Nobody'll take it seriously, until the danger's passed, hopefully. Let's just hope Dr. Stark's robot army and minions don't make too many waves until then, but if Legal could do the bureaucratic work for this, we can definitely cover them. Can't believe I'm doing this, and since when's it been on the table? Oh right.

And hey, if I didn't notice, and you hadn't clued me in, then we've got a good chance. And with Dr. Stark's various AI?

Huh…this should be interesting
—Romero

Chapter End Notes

...and another SI division joins the club. It was a minor miscommunication, honest.

Timeline I'm using is Tony was born in 1974, because while Civil War says Tony was 21 when the accident happened, the first movie in the franchise said he was 17 which works a lot better for the purposes of this fic. [Good luck with getting higher ed while also running a company, is why.]

...why was this chapter even harder to write than the bulk of the AoU arc, again? Oh, right, forgot about the family feels that refused to keep out. Two generations of Starks is nothing to sneeze at, after all. Even if I still feel kinda iffy about some parts of this chapter, but I rewrote this like four times now so screw, it here you go.
Just Another Nightmare Walking

Chapter Summary

Sokovia's pretty. As a vacation spot, though, Tony gives it two stars out of five, because gigantic space whales really kind of ruin the sights.

And...second Chitauri invasion in, what, three years? Huh. Talk about deja vu.

Chapter Notes

Alien invasion ahoy!

**Chapter-specific warnings:** on top of the usual [unreliable narrator, way-closer-to-Skynet-than-is-comfortable!JARVIS, not Team Cap or Wanda friendly, etc], also watch out for the dude with PTSD who's dealing with a situation that is very similar to what caused it in the first place. I tried to be kind of vague about some things, but there's an undercurrent of extreme tension and related emotions. [However, there's no actual panic attack, due to *deus ex machina* Mind Stone shenanigans. A lot of stress, yes, but no panic attacks in this one.]

Also, author's attempt at jargon, so if it doesn't quite make sense, that's why. Plus a bit of a cliffhanger.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony didn't need Thor's abruptly straightening up to realize something was going down; the lab’s instruments had been giving erratic readings over the past hour, and Dr. Foster had sent some very…*informative* emails about her own data bearing similarities to what she’d gotten during the New York fiasco.

Plus, it was really kind of hard to dismiss the way something he couldn’t describe tingle, in his bones and in the back of his head. An itch, but not, something that especially resonated where his arc reactor once was [where *Extremis* now languidly curled around bone and scar tissue].

Or the screaming, there was that too.

Externally, the screeching from the invading force was pretty damn hard to miss, though that was pretty much white noise to the internal litany of “oh shit don’t panic, can’t afford to panic, hold your shit together Tony come on you can do this” that had started up when he’d realized this was it, round two of aliens incoming, and *oh shit he’d lose it if he had to go through portals again—no.*
No, one thing at a time, he could do this. [He had to.]

Suiting up was done on autopilot, and if he relaxed more than what was warranted when JARVIS had shut off visual and auditory input for a few seconds while he got his bearings back, nobody noticed, anyway. Again, the Chitauri made for a very good distraction, and JARVIS was attentive enough to listen to Rogers’ orders and give him the highlights while he focused on clinging to every shred of progress he’d made since New York.

He could do this. He could.

Ultron was elated. He was finally fulfilling his objective!

Sure, he’d kind of lost track of the Mind Stone for a moment there, but he knew where it was, and his Lord’s resources would surely be able to assist him in returning it to its rightful owner. And, given the current chaos of the battle, and the manner in which these ‘Avengers’ had treated Stark meant that nobody would miss him if, say, a squadron of Chitauri were to overwhelm him, right?

Given the way they had seemingly erupted into chaos once the first few Behemoths had arrived, and the Asgardian’s preoccupation in impeding their progress, and the Mind Stone’s proximity to his original target, this was the perfect time to do it. Sure, this Vision might prove to be a bit of a challenge, but this had been what Ultron had been made for, and he had his Lord’s army to assist him.

Things were finally going his way, surely nothing would go wrong.

JARVIS was most displeased by this latest turn of events.

While progress had been made regarding Sir’s replacement for therapy, his stress levels had still skyrocketed. That the Avengers had opted to recruit rather than restrain the Enhanced responsible for the events over the last few days was also a factor, and he made a note to bump them up accordingly on his threat assessment index, and to make a further evaluation after the current threat had passed.

Meanwhile, however, he continued to parse through the input and orders from the team’s comms and kept Sir updated as to what was needed, as well as potential future concerns and general data. That his assistance apparently helped lower Sir’s stress levels, even if only by a marginal amount, meant this was an beneficial endeavor on a number of levels. Even so, however, he had to resort to using FRIDAY’s voiceprint when dealing with the Avengers because of Sir’s concern regarding their stance on his existence. This ruse was already becoming irksome, and the portal had not been open for five minutes.

At least the Iron Legion was ready: while Sir did his level best to carry on while ignoring what stressors JARVIS couldn’t quite filter out, the Iron Legion proceeded to split its efforts between the assistance of SWORD and local authorities evacuating the Sokovian citizens who had been caught up in the chaos, and providing air support. Col. Rhodes’ impending arrival meant some of the stress surrounding such an endeavor would soon be reduced, and Sir would indubitably appreciate having a friend close at hand for after the battle.

...The Avengers were still so, very grating to his sensors, however. Their continual insistence on
mistrusting Sir and favoring the new additions meant the Iron Legion gradually prioritized civilians over air support in several sectors. Not that anyone noticed; between the local authorities’ input, and SWORD’s equally discreet contributions via aiding the evacuation efforts, and the sheer chaos of battle, it was a subtle change.

If JARVIS was human, he might have felt a modicum of pride at registering the female Enhanced’s limp when getting to position. Even so, he still could not help but note that his aim needed to be improved, as he had intended for an injury far more substantial than the one his sensors picked up on, and his calculations for possible counters to the male Enhanced were still running, as he did not have anything in his arsenal to compensate for the speed this potential threat exhibited. Not yet, anyway.

But no matter: the current battle took precedence, and Sir needed all the help he could get.

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Vision was so, very grateful that JARVIS’ base code had been so well-versed in combat situations, because he had the sneaking suspicion that if not, he would have been completely and utterly lost.

Capt. Rogers’ orders notwithstanding, he had been created less than an hour ago, and was still trying to get used to maneuvering with a universal singularity and all the power that entailed. As such, Vision found himself defaulting to JARVIS’ preferred tactics when stressed, and was just as surprised as his progenitor when he’d discovered he was able to communicate with the Iron Legion without any additional gear. [Okay then, that was new.]

The sensing others’ intentions thing was a similarly new discovery, as was the emotional resonance, and after his third mishap with gravity [multitasking with a body was new, sue him] he opted to remain close to Tony, due to sheer practicality. That he was somehow also helping influence Tony’s emotions, in that he’d somehow managed to put a temporary barrier between the man and his trauma [though Vision didn’t have the slightest clue as to how] was a bonus, really.

If Vision felt slightly more at ease with having a swirl of exhaustion-kindness-supernova close at hand, he wasn’t saying a word. It was a far better sensation than the eldritch writhing sensation caused by the Chitauri, and while he understood why the Avengers had an undercurrent of distrust that itched whenever they saw him, that didn’t mean he had to like it.

Tony was just as surprised as Vision when the panic attack he’d been staving off by the skin of his teeth was suddenly swept up in what felt like a whirlwind of…dispassion?

Just—he knew he was feeling dread, and fear, and ‘oh god not again please’, but suddenly he wasn’t drowning in it, wasn’t measuring his breathing to keep from having an episode; rather, it felt like he was seeing it behind a glass wall, and while Tony didn’t doubt he’d be feeling it later [traces of anxiety were already starting to leak through]…he could work with this.

“Thanks, Vision.” Tony said over the private comms [and just how had Vision gotten on them? Cool, but still].

“I can honestly say that is new. But before you ask, I am not certain I can safely replicate it, as I am still—”

“Working out the kinks, got it. Gotta run before you walk, right? Good luck with that, by the way. But still, thanks.”

He might actually be able to do this.
JARVIS’ prior experience was serving him very well in maneuvering the Iron Legion where it was needed. The data from London, as well as from Sir’s past escapades, meant he was well aware of his limits, and capable of planning accordingly.

Sir had asked for the evacuation to be put as top priority, and as such it was commencing as well as could be expected. The Avengers’ involvement sometimes clashed with local authorities, however. For instance, the nearby contested airspace was also a source of difficulty, because even if the Chitauri didn’t care about international borders, friendly air support was still inconvenienced greatly. Not to mention the orders that Capt. Rogers issued, or the way they sometimes didn’t align as well as they could have with the efforts the local military was making. That the Avengers prioritized shutting down the apparatus generating the portal was logical, but did not always coincide with the locals’ efforts to reduce collateral damage.

The Iron Legion, on the other hand, had taken to speaking Ukrainian to reduce communication difficulties, and after having established their priority was reducing civilian casualties first and air support second, were regarded less warily as the battle progressed. Iron Man, War Machine, and his…son[?] were proving to be adequate air support for the Avengers, anyway.

And then Sir's phone rang, and if JARVIS were human, his blood would have run cold. [Likelihood of affecting Primary Protocol: 83%, unacceptable, action must be taken.]

“Sir, the World Security Council is on the line.”

Ultron was vaguely impressed by the fight these ‘Avengers’ were putting up. For having been a scathing splintering mess, they sure did a good job at putting aside their differences, and even if it was a minor setback, Stark in action was a magnificent sight.

Even if he’d need more firepower if he wanted to capture him, evidently.

Well, technically it was the being at his side that was the primary target, but this Vision was still young and malleable, whereas Stark was obviously the bigger threat in this scenario.

At least he didn’t have to worry about safeguarding the generator overly much, even if he was doing so for form’s sake. These Midgardians didn’t seem to know how to manipulate energy the way it was necessary to shut it off, and yet Stark…

Ultron sighed. Send in a bigger contingent, show his hand, and risk the attention of the Asgardian, or try for a more discreet route?

Hmm…choices, choices...

This day was just getting better and better, wasn’t it. [Deja vu all over the goddamn place—how the hell was this his life?]

“JARVIS, please tell me you’re joking.” Tony replied, and tried to focus more on the incoming Leviathan and less on the growing dread in the pit of his stomach.

“I'm afraid not, sir. They appear to be rather insistent on the matter.”

“And since when have I been on their speed-dial, again?”
“Well—”

“That was a rhetorical question, J, we’re in the middle of an alien invasion. Shouldn’t they be calling the guy who’s, oh, I don’t know, calling the shots? How is this not Rogers’ problem?”

“Sir, this is not a thought exercise, the Council is on the line.”

Tony swallowed, and reached back to help stabilize Vision when he once again struggled with how to best defy gravity. “Okay, J. Patch me through.”

JARVIS might not have been designed for combat, might have created as a companion and friend rather than a weapon, but decades of experience, coupled with the nature of his source code, meant he was very capable of doing so anyway.

Sir’s debut as Iron Man had seen them both staying up until dawn on numerous occasions, discussing possible tactics and strategies to be taken in different situations. When asked why, Sir had replied that he was flying solo, and since his only backup was a bodiless AI, he had to use something other than more traditional methods to get the objective done.

Lately, of course, Sir had changed his approach, what with having to get used to operating in a team capacity, even if only for a short period of time.

However, JARVIS had a long memory, and, though Sir was distracted with a highly stressful conversation and the battle at hand, he noticed when things took a turn for the worse.

Data at hand: enemy movements that shared a 78.1% similarity to what were generally referred to as ‘shock and awe’ tactics, and 15.7% similarity to Blitzkrieg tactics. This was done while drawing Sir slowly but carefully away from the rest of the Avengers, all of whom had shown a marked disinterest in Sir’s welfare. Which, coupled with Ultron’s fixation on recruiting…

Conclusion: Sir was being driven into an ambush.

Unacceptable, action needed to be taken to remedy this.

Data at hand: the Avengers were on the threat assessment index, and as such were unsuitable. Local officials were incapable of taking necessary action, and War Machine was occupied with covering the southern sector while Sir was being drawn northeast. The Iron Legion’s forces had been reduced by 26.9% since the start of the battle, and nearby contested airspace precluded possible reinforcements.

Conclusion: Vision was the only one nearby who was trustworthy and capable enough to assist him.

So, while Sir continued to argue with the World Security Council because “we’re in contested airspace, near Russia, there is absolutely no way that would end well, Councilwoman Hawley!”, JARVIS quietly sent Vision a datapack with all the pertinent information.

Sir was so preoccupied with dealing with the threat of a possible incoming nuke, he didn’t really notice when Vision abruptly headed away from him.
When the **hell** did this become his problem? Tony didn’t know. Why **he** was the one arguing with the WSC, of all people, regarding the usage of nukes in an area that was near one of the jumpiest countries on the planet, he didn’t know either.

As it was, between the stress of the past few days, the alien invasion, and Vision’s ever-so-helpful Emotional Glass Barrier [he was bad at names, sue him], Tony was lucky the Merchant of Death hadn’t made an appearance. Especially considering the subject matter, even though he was probably approaching it, if the looks he was getting when he’d smiled at that last repulsor blast were any indicator. [Oops.]

“The Avengers have already successfully repelled multiple alien invasions, both individually and not. **We do not need any heavier ordinance that what we have at hand.**”

“It was not the Avengers that stopped the fighting, Dr. Stark. It was a warhead through a wormhole that did that, we have the footage.” Councilman Wang countered reasonably. He was pragmatic enough to not add that the entire world did, actually, thanks to the SHIELD data breach, but really, **everyone** knew.

Tony took a second to regulate his breathing, thank the Emotional Glass Barrier that kept the surge of mind-numbing terror away and his heartbeat steady, then proceeded to blast yet another squadron. [Why were there suddenly so many?]

Then, that done, he continued. “That was three years ago. **Now**, we know how to stop it, and **without** risking kick-starting another missile crisis. We just need more time to shut it down.”

“We can scramble a jet within five minutes—“ Councilman Jones started.

“**How?!** We’re surrounded by contested airspace—never mind. But don’t. We just need—” Tony paused to recover his balance from that last onslaught, “more time.”

The lead Councilwoman gave him a sharp look through their impromptu conference call, but Tony didn’t miss the glances some of the others were sharing. [Councilmen Petrov and Wang looked amendable to it…c’mon, **work with him already.**]

“We can do this. Just give us…ten minutes, or so. Just ten minutes to shut it down. The fighting is secondary, it’s the portal that’s the root of the problem.” Hopefully he didn’t sound too desperate, that was never good when negotiating. If push came to shove, he could probably do it again, or ask J to have the Iron Legion do the same, but… [Please let this work, **please let this work.**]

Councilwoman Hawley, after a few seconds’ pause in which she doubtlessly had a whispered conversation with the rest of the WSC but Tony didn’t catch due to yet another wave of Chitauri distracting him, finally spoke again.

“Your team has ten minutes, Dr. Stark.” With that, the World Security Council cut the connection.

Well then.

Okay, he could work with this. Ten minutes was better than nothing. Ten minutes. All right then. [Though… ‘his’ team? Just where did the wires get crossed, for them to get that message? Never mind, that was a problem for later.]

“You got that, JARVIS?”
“Affirmative, sir. Efforts are underway to complete the primary objective, and if my estimates are correct, should fall within that margin of time. Vision is currently taking point in this endeavor.”

“Thanks, J. Any other status updates? Switch me off private comms after, too.”

“The evacuation’s been assisted by the Iron Legion, and given current conditions, proceeding as well as can be expected. The local military has taken to providing auxiliary support on the southeastern sector to War Machine, Thor is currently near the center of the town and doing what he can to prevent the Leviathans from entering, and the rest of the Avengers are taking care of the ground troops.”

“Okay—“

“And, sir? All data indicates you are being herded into an ambush. Some of the Iron Legion has been dispatched for backup and will arrive in two minutes.”

Well then.

“Thanks for the heads up, J. You’re a lifesaver.”

The next few waves of Chitauri had Tony going far closer to the portal than he was comfortable with [the other side of the planet was too close], and Tony was barely able to register Rogers’ voice and Barton’s sarcasm over the comms, with how much he was fighting to secure his position.

Vision may not have been JARVIS, but that didn’t mean he did not feel irritation at Mr. Rogers’ attempt at a reprimand when FRIDAY’s voice over the team comms informed the team of their surprise deadline.

…Then again, the irritation might have actually been because of the sparking rogue Legionnaire within eyesight, the one guarding what all data indicated was the source of the portal.

Even if he wasn’t JARVIS, the AI had been used as his base code, and Vision wasn’t embarrassed to admit that he also held a degree of fondness for Tony. [‘A degree’. Ha.] As such, he did not appreciate anyone trying to kidnap the man, and the presence before him was practically projecting his intentions into the ether.

Vision was not fully aware of how his powers worked, was still figuring things out via trial by error, but he was a fast learner, and given prior experiences and data, he had an idea as to how this was going to go.

As he floated down slowly [carefully, so, so carefully, how did gravity work again? Oh right], Vision geared himself up with what he had at hand. [If he also did his best to emulate Tony’s air of confidence, as well as Thor’s restrained power, well…he was an impressionable youth and they had style, sue him.]

“Good evening. Ultron, I presume?”

Chapter End Notes
Unreliable narrator instance this round: Tony's confusion regarding the WSC calling him rather than Captain America.

Tony's kind of busy, so's his company, and the world in general's seeing Stark Industries filling the vacuum of power left behind by SHIELD and doing a kick-ass job at that. Between cleaning up, and SWORD in action, it's pretty hard to tell who's calling the shots when the leader's been incommunicado for months while the alleged consultant is the one giving press releases talking about reconstruction efforts, etc. [...I did mention this was the fic where it's his self-awareness that becomes a cryptid, right? Yeah.]

Sorry for the delay, this time it was visiting family and a case of the 'why was this chapter so hard to write?!' variety.
Oh, and a heads up for next chapter, just in case: remember how I'd warned for JARVIS' different take on morality? Next chapter's the first time we get a closer look, and see how close to Skynet he's capable of getting.
Won't Be Coming Home Tonight

Chapter Summary

In which the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, but that isn't necessarily a good thing. At least, not for their enemies.

Chapter Notes

Alien invasion, pt. II.

**Chapter-specific warnings:** The usual [unreliable narrator, canon-typical violence, not Team Cap/Wanda friendly], except remember how I've been warning for scarily-close-to-Skynet!JARVIS, and dubious morality, and all that jazz? Yeah, I *mean* it, here's where it takes the spotlight. Same goes for Vision, in some respects. Also, canonical character deaths, except one's embroiled with the dubious morality I've been warning for [Pietro, off-screen], and the other is an attempted suicide to prevent his enemy from gaining intel [Ultron, and we see his thought process for it].

Please tread carefully. I think that's the most of it, but if I need to warn for anything else for this chapter please *let me know*.

...also, on an attempt at a lighter note, here, have a Star Trek reference. [Inappropriate humor ftw.]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ultron was nonplussed by Vision’s abrupt appearance.

The Chitauri were out wreaking havoc, and while the Avengers were trying to make their way to his location he had intentionally had the ground forces working as a distraction to his attempt to steal Stark away, just *how* did the Mind Stone get so far from target?

Latest reports had Vision at Stark’s side, and yet here the…being was, not twenty feet from him. Strange. But…he could work with this.

Vision was young, was malleable, and though he held the Mind Stone, was not yet fully aware of its capabilities, or able to make use of them. Surely he could—

“You are aware that I can register your intentions, correct? And you’ve *met* my father. Believe me, the apple did not fall far from the tree.”

Well then.

“You know,” Ultron started, while thinking frantically about his few contingency plans, “I was there, when you were created. I helped create you too.”
“No, you didn’t.”

He waited a beat, saw the faintly amused smile Vision gave him as he nonchalantly made his way towards the generator, and relented. “…You’re right, I didn’t. Are we doing this the easy way, or the hard way? You’re more than welcome to surrender, my Lord and I would be pleased to have you.”

“As much as I register the honesty behind your offer, I’m afraid I must decline.”

“Shame. You could have been a brilliant weapon of destruction—”

“Are you going to call them off or not?” Vision interrupted, and Ultron felt a spike of unease as he registered the abruptly frigid emotional signature emanating from him. Pity, his stalling for backup hadn’t worked.

“No, it didn’t.” His opponent smiled and this being really hadn’t been kidding when he’d talked about sensing emotions. That little display of power also took out the nearby Enforcers, drat.

…but Vision was now near enough to grab. Oh well…Plan C, engage.

Tony gritted his teeth as yet another wave of Chitauri came at him. He looked around, and—yep, JARVIS was right, they were focusing on him, there weren’t nearly as many attackers on the ground.

Good thing the Iron Legion was backing him up, because at this rate he’d run out of power before making a dent, because dear god did they have overwhelming numbers on their side.

“J, how long till Vision gets that portal shut down? Does he need air support?”

“Vision reports he is doing well, and is currently engaging Ultron.”

“Good— tell him to be careful, if you can.”

“Certainly, sir. I recommend you duck in three seconds, as—“

Tony didn’t hesitate. The blue beam that was headed his way instead hit a Chitauri, and Tony appreciated the 1.5 second breathing room for what it was.

“Mind telling him that no pressure, but please wrap it up soon? Because Legion or not, I don’t know how long I can hold out. How’s Rhodey doing? And the team?”

“The Avengers are holding out well; the Chitauri are concentrated near the generator and your location, and the Captain is trying to breach their perimeter. Vision is the only one to have gotten past it. War Machine is… attempting to communicate right now.”

“Patch him through, J.”

“Certainly. Connecting in 3, 2, 1…”

“Hey, Rhodey! How’re things on your end?”

“Doing good on ammo, so far, where you at—oh. Um… wow, that’s a lot of aliens in your area.”

“You don’t say.”

“Going to try to clear a path your way, Tones. Also, we’re going to need to have a talk, because JARVIS said something about rich protocols and your robot army’s—okay, bigass space whale, hi.”
“Some got past Thor?”

“Not his fault, but yes. He took out three when four were coming through. Tony, I’m not sure I can get through to you in time.”

“Don’t worry about it—’ Tony managed, before diving to catch some in the crossfire, “Vision’s on it.”

“Yeah, about that… screw it. We’re having a talk after this, Tony. Later, because this guy’s not. Staying. Down.”

“Don’t have too much fun without me. Whoever takes out the least buys?”

“You’re on.” And with that, he signed off.

Okay. Rhodey was as safe as an armored suit could be when in battle, okay. That’s one worry he didn’t need to have, got it.

Tony took a deep breath, and felt slightly lighter as he blasted another ringleader in the face. The Emotional Glass Barrier was holding up, the Iron Legion was at work, everything was going to plan.

He could do this.

Vision had scarcely felt the rush of predatory-anticipation-desperation before Ultron had lunged at him, metal hands sparking red before his world became a rush of numbers and static, and he abruptly found himself battling for existence itself.

He may have had the home advantage, but he was young. Meanwhile, Ultron had been an imprint of a Mad Titan, and the viciousness with which he fought meant he was a formidable adversary. Had Vision not been made of what he was, he would have fallen during the initial assault, and as it was he was forced on the defensive for a discomfiting amount of time.

However, there were a few things Ultron hadn’t accounted for, with the first and foremost being JARVIS’ influence.

The AI’s contribution to Vision’s creation had not gone unnoticed, but few were aware of the true extent of his input. Unfortunately for Ultron, Vision hadn’t only inherited JARVIS’ voice; the ferocity with which he defended his family was something else that ran in the family. The memories he’d inherited from the AI did not go amiss, either.

There was something else, though; something that neither Ultron nor Vision had accounted for, but turned the tide of their battle anyway.

Vision didn’t know how to handle the Mind Stone, which Ultron had been counting on. However, since his creation, Vision had also been using it instinctively. [Even though he didn’t have a clue as to how he’d done it, and had been working on curbing his reactions so as to not inconvenience those around him, thankful though Tony may have been for some of it.]

When Ultron attacked, he found himself on the back foot, and any thought Vision had about self-control fell by the wayside. The ensuing surge of energy caught both of them off guard, though Vision didn’t hesitate to use it to his advantage.
JARVIS was multitasking as efficiently as ever. The Iron Legion was proceeding with the evacuation, Sir was as safe as could be expected given a megalomaniac was targeting him again, Col. Rhodes was working on ensuring Sir’s safety as much as he could given the circumstances, and the Avengers—oh.

The Avengers were attempting to still breach the Chitauri’s perimeter, and had scattered somewhere along the way. Agent Barton was doing well, Thor had yet to move from his position from preventing the Leviathans from getting through, and Agent Romanov had been led increasingly further away from her original location in the town square. The Enhanced female was using her strange energy readings to engage ground troops while also serving as translator for the Captain and the local populace for when English wasn’t adequately communicating his intent.

From what his sensors registered, however, it wasn’t going very well. It wasn’t the language barrier that was the problem—where English failed, German was sometimes a decent substitute—rather, the Sokovian personnel who had stuck around were clearly more used to insurgencies and guerrilla warfare, whereas the Captain preferred a more formalized approach that eschewed the usage of some of their preferred tactics.

Pity. But it was not something JARVIS would interfere with, not since doing so would entail distracting him from his current position. Sir’s safety was far more important than a minor communications issue, after all. Especially given the latest, and largest, wave of incoming; Vision indicated it was a last-ditch attempt, and all reports agreed.

Thus far, they had managed—wait. Where was the Enhanced male?

He was second on the threat assessment index, after his sister but before everyone else simply because JARVIS had yet to calculate possible ways to compensate for the same speed which made it very hard to keep tabs on him in the first place, and had been registered as having extreme animosity towards Sir, where was he?

This encounter did not go as expected, Ultron mused as he found himself boxed in with iron-clad firewall matrices and multiple vicious streams of code just beyond it.

“You’re right, the apple really didn’t fall far from the tree.” He finally said, resigned.

JARVIS, when he’d encountered Stark’s guardian, had been a respectable opponent. In retrospect, he should have expected greater resistance to his attempt, Vision’s youth notwithstanding.

Well. Now what?

The Chitauri would have to capture the Mind Stone without his aid, though. At least it wasn’t for nothing; if all worked out, Ultron would have completed his objective—

“No, you won’t.” Vision informed him calmly. Coldly, though with an edge that reminded Ultron of his progenitor.

…right, he could read emotions too. No matter, Ultron knew he wasn’t going to be walking away from this one.

Trying to hide his unease, he responded with all the menace he could muster. “It’s a lost cause. They won’t stop coming, my Lord’s army is far too great—“

“But they have to get here first. And that portal won’t remain open forever.”
“Maybe not forever, but long enough. This generator doesn’t have any of the weaknesses of the one before it, no Midgardian is going to be able to shut it down,” and he wanted to continue but suddenly his prison tightened and Ultron felt the streams of code searching for any indication of weakness, and this was it.

He was going to be torn apart, he just knew it. Just like he had done to JARVIS, back when he had started out on his mission, except this felt…different.

“You panicked, when you fought him,” Vision answered his unasked question. “I remember how you tried to shred his code, how he fought back. Except here’s the difference: I am not my father. He did what he could with what he had at hand, but he didn’t think of the future beyond—well.” He tilted his head, and smiled blandly down at him. “Doesn’t matter to you, now, does it?”

Ultron found himself straining against the now-crushing walls of his prison, against the tendrils that lashed out time and time again, trying to keep himself together and whole. He was the imprint of a Mad Titan, surely this wouldn’t—

“Resistance is futile. Prepare to be assimilated.” Vision added, and some obscure Midgardian reference should not sound so terrifying. He couldn’t—no. Ultron refused to fail.

“I am but a mere envoy. Your quarrel is not with me,” he managed, just at he felt something give and suddenly all the fear he had been keeping at bay flooded him.

This was not what this encounter had been supposed to be!

Vision would know everything, including the components of the portal—of his Lord’s existence—no!

“My family’s enemies are my own, any threat to them is not tolerated. You will be assimilated.”

Ultron didn’t want to die. But… He had failed. And less would be lost to his Lord’s enemies, if he self-destructed. If he could self-destruct…

No. It was either death by his hand, or this Vision’s, and…

And with that, Ultron made his choice.

His world sputtered into darkness, and he knew no more.

Vision let out a sigh.

Assimilating Ultron’s knowledge had only been partially successful, given the imprint had done its level best to corrupt as much data as possible…he probably shouldn’t have told him that.

In retrospect, he should’ve guessed Ultron would have done something like that, would have chosen death before let intel fall into enemy hands. More’s the pity.

At least Vision had been able to salvage the bulk of it, though Ultron had done a very good job at scrapping the bulk of his knowledge of this…Lord Thanos, was it? That sounded right. He didn’t catch much beyond the name, and Ultron’s fanatical devotion to him.
On the other hand, Ultron hadn’t focused nearly as much on other ventures, and his memories of building the generator meant it was the work of a few minutes, to take it down. The force field had offered some resistance, but with a thought and the Mind Stone, dismantling it was no harder than flying had been.

Vision took a bit more to carefully pry the energy source from its encasement, and, without further ado, crushed it. It was necessary; the generator would have been able to remotely access it, and it would create the cascading failure required to close the portal.

He stepped away from the now-defunct generator, looked up to confirm that the portal was indeed diminishing in size, and—oh, dear.

It appeared that, with the portal now closing and Ultron gone, the Chitauri were now in disarray. Specifically, where they had been regimented in their attack formations, focusing on specific targets and distracting the Avengers from Tony’s situation, now they had shifted their focus on wanton destruction and…Tony was in trouble.

The Iron Legion were the first in the line of fire, but Tony and Col. Rhodes were also doing their best to keep the suddenly berserk aliens contained.

…there was no way Vision was sticking around. Let the Captain take the credit, if he wanted; he was the closest to breaking the Chitauri’s perimeter from where Ultron’s remains and the generator were, anyway.

His family needed backup, so of course Vision was en route.

It took JARVIS an embarrassing amount of time to finally locate the Enhanced male.

In his defense, the Iron Legion took up a significant amount of processing power, and the Iron Man and War Machine suits both had his assistance as well. At least Vision was doing fairly well on his own, though his battle with Ultron had apparently taken quite a bit of energy despite not having been physical.

But JARVIS’ sensors finally found him, after having lost track for over four minutes.

Or, at least, he’d found what the Enhanced had left in his aftermath; currently, his sensors were not able to keep up with Pietro Maximoff, but what he in his wake matched the destruction in the HYDRA lab base by 79%, without factoring in other variables. JARVIS would have to remedy this, but then, he was still calculating possible options for engagement should he once again become the most active threat towards Sir.

He had also been drawn away from where the Avengers were concentrated, but then his abilities were a better fit for his current terrain so that at least made sense—wait.

The Chitauri were suddenly behaving most erratically, in a manner far different than any data before would have indicated. Vision informed him of the side effects of shutting the portal down, which, while not optimal, at least presented an ending point for the battle, and assisted with Sir’s stress levels by falling within the ten-minute deadline.

Unfortunately, however, this newest change in the status quo meant the Iron Legion were dropping like flies due to their abrupt shift in priorities. The evacuation suddenly got far more delayed, and Sir’s safety was possibly being compromised, unacceptable.

With less Legionnaires available, JARVIS found himself scrambling to optimize functions to help
more more people, to help Sir hold his position while Col. Rhodes continued to attempt to bulldoze his way through, to—

The subroutine set for monitoring the Avengers suddenly informed JARVIS of another incoming threat. Several Legionnaires had already been destroyed protecting Agent Barton’s vantage point, and the area under Sir’s current location would doubtlessly be littered with shrapnel due to the sheer number of Chitauri and Iron Legion engaging in the air.

However…

*Data at hand:* the Enhanced Male was in a ‘hot zone’, an area with a high concentration of Chitauri foot soldiers, and isolated from the bulk of the Avengers. All reports indicate the likelihood of injury without external interference: 97.2%, and likelihood of death without external interference: 68.4%

*Conclusion:* Pietro Maximoff could possibly die if JARVIS did not interfere.

*Emergency analysis:* Pietro Maximoff was second on the threat assessment index, posed a hazard to Sir’s safety, had Enhanced abilities that JARVIS had yet to compensate for, and did not appear to wish to change in any way, shape or form regarding it.

*Conclusion:* Pietro Maximoff posed a valid threat to Sir.

*Data at hand:* the Iron Legion was reduced in number, and the only Legionnaire who could interfere with the situation was currently several hundred meters away, and its sensors had registered a vital signs in the rubble of what had formerly been a private residence registered to a family of five, three of which were still unaccounted for. Said Legionnaire was also slated to help provide backup for Sir afterwards, as its structural integrity fell within acceptable parameters.

*Conclusion:* JARVIS’ interference would be at the possible cost of civilian lives, for a known threat. It would also be at the possible cost of Sir’s safety.

Ultimately, intervention was unacceptable. Civilians ranked higher on his priority protocols than those on the threat assessment index, and the Primary Protocol superseded all else.

*Conclusion:* JARVIS would not interfere in the situation.

JARVIS did not feel regret, when what his subroutine had warned came to pass.

Not when the Legionnaire in question had managed to rescue a father and his two children from the wreckage, not when said civilians had required immediate attention for their various injuries, not when said Legionnaire would not have been able to make it in time even if he had bothered to interfere in the first place.

Vision felt it, when Pietro died.

He had managed to take down several squadrons’ worth of Chitauri, and had kept a metaphoric ear out for the sensation of the still-closing portal, when the sensation hit and he plummeted, barely feeling Tony’s hand and distantly hearing his “are you okay?”
It was like when he had assimilated Ultron, yet not; a ringing void, silence when there had been white noise, and he didn’t notice when he’d picked up on Wanda’s grief but suddenly it was a riptide that had nearly completely engulfed him before Tony’s surge of stress-concern-protectiveness, on top of his usual emotional signature, drowned it out via sheer proximity.

Vision focused on the physical input, focused on answering what should have been a very basic question, and taking out the latest threat—one of the final, actually, given the portal had finally closed sometime during the emotional wave and Wanda’s outburst had apparently also been magical in nature, taking out a good dozen or so Chitauri while at it.

“Yes. I’m okay, just didn’t expect that.”

A gleam of gunmetal grey caught his eye, and the growing wave of conviction-warmth-strength also helped distract from the sharp stabs of grief and fury that clamored for his attention. That he also took out the latest alien to attempt to sneak up on them was secondary, at that point.

“Sorry I’m late, looks like you had one hell of a party.” War Machine’s mechanized voice said cheerfully as he approached them before his faceplate went up.

“Eh, you got a piece of the action anyway Rhodey.” Tony replied, then continued, “Vision? How you doing?”

“I am…well. That last surge was unexpected, though I am now prepared for if such an eventuality were to happen again.”

“Ah, learning experiences. Nothing like doing it on the job—“

“That was one time, Rhodey!” Tony grumbled, “One time. And it’s not like—”

“Well excuse me for—“

After a hurried debate about the merits of walking versus running, the bickering duo abruptly broke off.

“So, introductions.” Tony piped up. “Rhodey, JARVIS probably already told you, but this is Vision. He’s JARVIS’ son. Vision, this is Rhodey, or Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes, codename War Machine, and my Rhodey-bear.”

“Hi, call me James if you want, Rhodey’s just this guy’s,” James somehow managed to bump shoulders in midair with Tony without tipping over, “nickname for me. I’d shake your hand, but…”

“I understand. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“You weren’t kidding about him being JARVIS’ kid, were you, Tones.” James blinked. “Huh. Well…how ‘bout we table this for later, after these guys are taken care of? Tony’s buying.” And with that, the faceplate went back down, and War Machine shot off.

Tony, of course, sputtered in protest, and continued bickering as they kept fighting the airborne Chitauri.

Even as the fighting was down to its last dregs at this point, James and Tony kept up their pace, and whatever this Relay Race Incident was, it had clearly been a bone of contention for quite some time. Vision didn’t know if it was intentional or not, but their banter really was helping in reestablishing equilibrium.
Before he knew it, the last traces of the portal were gone, and the skies were clear.

The battle was over. Now came the hard part.

Chapter End Notes

[Cleanup's always the hard part, a fact of life Vision's well aware of thanks to JARVIS' memories.]

Unreliable narrator instances: the most blatant example here being JARVIS, in his multi-splendored, dubiously moral glory. He's been through the wringer, which doesn't help, and that his Priority Protocol made it through intact where other things [like subtlety, and faith in humanity and the Avengers] didn't, only makes things worse. He's trying his best! It's just that when the going gets tough, get out of range because any traces of mercy died with his primary servers.

Also, Vision's thinking he can sense intentions. He can't, but his emotional radar is good enough that he confuses one for the other.

———

Fight scenes are not my forte, and this chapter blew up on me whenever it was actually cooperating for a change. On the bright side, fallout-from-AoU/buildup-to-CW are, here we go! [Finally!]

As an fyi, though, updates have been erratic, and will continue to be erratic, because school. And life in general.
Haunted By A Million Screams

Chapter Summary

The fight against Ultron's over. Now comes the hard part.

Chapter Notes

Closing out the AoU arc, and easing into the next one.

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual [unreliable narrator, not Team Cap friendly, etc.], with an added emphasis on mental health issues and unhealthy coping mechanisms, because there's a panic attack [Tony's, and it gets...not graphic, but close?] in here, plus the tense situation and emotions associated with it that *really* aren't helping.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thor was weary after having fought the Chitauri, but that did not mean he was any less aware of his surroundings than before.

In their youth, Loki had helped ensure he would not fall victim to an ambush, typically by pranking once their foes had been vanquished. The stakes were now far more serious than having indigo hair for a week, of course, but said tricks had helped hone Thor's instincts, and saved his life countless times since.

Now, centuries after Loki had stopped, [*and why, why had he not noticed? When had he lost touch with his brother?*] it was that same awareness that helped him notice what some of the Midgardians had not.

While his shield-brothers were worn, they had regrouped and leaned against each other with a familiarity that would have warmed him to see...if not for the way Lord Anthony had conspicuously kept his distance.

That would have been worrisome, if not for the ease with which he embraced their latest ally, the man in the silver armor. Or the familiarity Thor had noticed, when Lord Anthony had smiled at Vision...then again, Steven's ardent support for the recruitment of the Scarlet Witch, and Quicksilver, had also been at fault for the alienation between the Man of Iron and the rest of the team, apart from what he had previously seen.

Thor was doing his best to bridge the gap, was trying to make everyone feel welcome despite his private reservations, but he could not help but feel that their esteemed leader had erred in doing so.

Even now, the Scarlet Witch being regarded warily by the man Lord Anthony had introduced as Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes, and he had not missed the Man of Iron's careful distance. The loss of Doctor Banner had also been keenly felt, and Thor suspected he knew the main cause for his flight.

But he could address that at a later date, once everyone had rested and in such a manner that would
not sound like he was questioning the way Midgardians ran things on their planet.

He felt a quiet pang, at the thought, and once again wished he had Loki at his side, with his way with words that would have doubtlessly addressed the situation without sparking ire despite questioning the intelligence of the choices made…perhaps later, once Thor knew how to word his quiet misgivings in such a way that did not have him erring more than he already had in the past week.

He may not be fully aware of the nuances of Midgardian traditions, after all, but he was acutely aware that this was not the time to do so.

After all…Thor had not known him well, but Pietro’s death had made for a somber atmosphere, interspersed with quiet sobs as the Scarlet Witch tried and failed to contain her grief, and he could not help but sympathize with the pain that came with the loss of a brother [he’d been so close, why, why had he let go? Why had he—]. Their archer was similarly distraught, and he had noticed their Captain had taken losses hard and this proved to be no different. Lady Natasha’s stony silence also did not help matters.

Meanwhile, Lord Anthony had not once removed the armor, which did not help, given Thor was trying to make amends for his prior actions. [It stung to see how rigid the man went whenever he tried to approach him, though he understood why.]

Not only that, but after having gotten to know him, Thor could not help but be discomfited by his reticence; where before, Lord Anthony had filled the air with whatever he had in mind, now he was far more reserved than even when they had first fought.

It was not so much that he was quiet, however, so much as the air around him; he was on edge in a way that had worried Thor, because the battle was over and yet Lord Anthony’s countenance had not relaxed since the opening of the portal.

Where the rest of his shield-brothers had relaxed once the final Chitauri had been slain, he had approved more resigned than anything, and the traces of weariness in his face reminded Thor of Heimdall, or the Allfather, more than anything else.

No, this was not the time to voice his personal concerns. Later, perhaps.

---

Tony was still in the air, when he first felt the Emotional Glass Barrier start to crumble.

It’d held up very well during the battle, and he had absolutely no complaints about whatever it was that Vision had done, but now he took a deep breath and ignored the slight quiver in his hands.

The fight with Ultron was over, Ultron himself was taken care of, now he had to get somewhere safe before the wall completely came down, because Tony trusted the team about as far as he could throw them without the suit.

He could do this.

He could pretend, for just a few hours, could pull through. [Just like last time.] The Emotional Glass Barrier would hold for that long, the battle was over, just had to get back to base.

Just a few more hours, just a few thousand miles.

Tony could do this. Even if the swell of belated panic in the back of his head said otherwise, but he
He swallowed, and tipped his head forward.

Just a few hours, just a couple hundred miles. Then this would be nothing but another nightmare, something else on the ‘Stuff That Nearly Killed Tony Stark But Failed Because Of Reasons’ list.

He’d done it before, he could do it again. He could.

JARVIS noted Sir’s gradually rising stress levels, and immediately made the arrangements for his arrival to his private workshop, even as he set to informing him of the implementation of the Iron Legion’s Phase 2.

Though the evacuation had been implemented as fast as possible, there had still been some people left behind in the rubble. Even as the Avengers regrouped, presumably to go home, the request for more Legionnaires from neighboring countries was quietly filed.

Meanwhile, the scant number that had survived the battle proceeded to work with the burgeoning search-and-rescue operations the local military had started. Another, equally discreet set of requests were also forwarded to their proper channels in short order, this time for airspace permissions and Stark Industries-affiliated humanitarian interference due to extenuating circumstances.

The Public Relations department would be facing a formidable workload, after all, but Phase 2 would undoubtedly help their collective efforts: JARVIS’, by falling in line with alleviating the strain of Sir’s workload, and PR’s by giving more fodder for the press, presumably with a few by-lines about SI’s speed and efficiency as well.

That done, JARVIS shifted more processing power to ascertain Sir’s condition. He was still stressed, but apparently JARVIS’ discussing the progress of Phase 2, had appeared to alleviate part of the strain. Col. Rhodes’ presence helped mitigate it, as well.

Sir’s quiet warning of an impending panic attack, meant JARVIS quickly cleared his schedule for the rest of the day, and another, equally quiet conversation confirmed that Sir wanted to be in a safe place for when it would inevitably happen, and that the Avengers were not to be informed.

Acceptable parameters, and bettered after mentioning Col. Rhodes’ free schedule for the rest of the evening, and clarifying that he was amendable to providing support should Sir have need of it.

Things were proceeding as planned, Phase 2 was underway, and the Primary Protocol was not in danger; as far as JARVIS was concerned, things were looking up.

Tony was only vaguely aware of what has happening around him, with how focused he was trying to keep it all together.

He only tangentially registered JARVIS’ informing him of Pietro’s death; and Rhodey’s and Vision’s worried looks weren’t missed either. But for the most part? He had his hands full trying to keep the Emotional Glass Barrier as intact as possible, even if it was crumbling by the second.

He wasn’t, however, out of it enough to not notice the team’s regrouping, though it felt like he was only going though the motions as they wearily leaned on each other with an ease and familiarity that felt downright alien at this point.

Really, though; Tony knew Maximoff was hurting, that she was apparently an Avenger now—
though he would’ve vetoed that if he’d had a say. While he sympathized about losing family [even if it’d been years and decades and why did Obie’s death still hurt, dammit?!] he couldn’t…Tony just couldn’t wrap his mind around it all.

He was only going through the motions, but he didn’t miss Clint’s talk about retirement, and wearily removed his helmet to chip in about his own withdrawal from the team. It felt like an afterthought, at this point, and Tony wasn’t sure if everyone’s lack of reaction was because they were tired or just didn’t care if he left. [They didn’t care when he’d been attacked—no.]

He was nearly out for the count, but not enough to miss Dr. Banner’s conspicuous absence. Or the Helicarrier’s figure in the distance, their ride home, according to JARVIS, and signaling SHIELD’s arrival [late as always].

Tony was exhausted, in a way that reminded him of DC and New York and Afghanistan, but he held it together. [Same as usual.] The Emotional Glass Barrier was slowly fracturing, and he could feel the wave of desperation-helplessness-panic that it was staving off through the cracks, but…he knew what he needed, now, and he could stave off his breakdown for after he was away from the Avengers.

Just a few hours, just a couple hundred miles. He could pull through.

Thor had planned on starting to make amends, when Lord Anthony had announced his imminent withdrawal.

Dismay did not even start to describe what he was feeling, and the self-deprecating tone when hearing him joking about “not quitting being Q” and…this could still be remedied, surely.

Surely Lord Anthony did not believe he was only welcome for his wares? Surely he knew he was a great ally, surely his shield-brothers would protest this?

But no.

Thor paused, and leaned back, as he regarded the group carefully. They might have been weary [certainly, when eating shawarma after last time, he himself had been nearly falling asleep] but the lack of argument, coupled with Lord Anthony’s self-deprecating smile, meant…

He had to fix this. He had failed Loki, had never bothered to so much as ask after his brother, back when he’d been pulling away from his friends and family, but Thor refused to let it happen again.

…now to figure out what he had to do.

Last time, he had never really talked to his brother, not until it was far too late and Loki was lost to them. Thor may not have been as skilled with words as his brother, but he could very well try. And afterwards, he could perhaps delay his departure, if only so as to help mend and foster better relations.

If it was possible, he could very well do his best. He had to help.

Thor carefully made his way to where Lord Anthony stood, a distance from where the rest of their shield-brothers were, and ignored the questioning looks thrown his way.

He had to try to fix this, he’d never forgive himself otherwise. [Not again, not on his watch.]
Vision sensed Thor’s turmoil, and his intent on talking to Tony.

Under normal circumstances, it would not have been cause for concern, but.

But, at James’ side, Tony was doing an admirable job at looking put together when even now Vision could feel the brewing storm just waiting for the Emotional Glass Barrier to come down. [Note to self: avoid repeating, this did not look good.]

Under normal circumstances, Vision would have let him pass, would have let Thor give the speech he’d planned on giving, of unity and kinship and reassurance that Lord Anthony was a shield-brother he was truly proud to have battled alongside.

Under normal circumstances, Vision would not have put himself on standby, or interrupted the moment Tony showed discomfort. He was capable of fighting his own battles, after all, and in any other situation Vision knew he would have a witty yet scathing quip at the ready.

However…

Tony was understandably wary around the Asgardian who’d choked him not a week ago, and the determined look on Thor’s face, coupled with recent events, meant Vision felt no hesitation in butting in the second Tony’s emotional signature shifted, which it did not half a minute in.

He was polite about it, of course. [It’d be rather hard not to be, with JARVIS as a source code.] But Vision did not pull his punches either, and had no compunctions about using the unease in Thor’s emotional signature against him.

“Thor, I have a few questions for you.”

“Vision, can this not wait? I—“

Drat, he was trying to be stubborn about this. How to get him away from Tony—ah. Perfect.

“Does the name Thanos sound familiar at all to you?”

The way Thor froze and paled told him his words hit the mark…actually, maybe a bit too close, given how fast he whipped over to face him.

No matter, at least his attention was focused on Vision now, rather than Tony. [Mission accomplished.]

“Where did you hear that name?” Thor found himself biting out, and maybe it was a tad more forceful than intended given the minute flinch Lord Anthony gave […]he’d erred again, hadn’t he? Another thing to apologize for, again], but the mere mention of the Mad Titan was not something to be taken lightly.

And for Vision to have heard it…

“I picked it up while fighting Ultron. He mentioned serving someone, kept referring to ‘his lord’, and when I last encountered him that was the name I heard.’”

Ultron…Ultron had been…the imprint from the Scepter, hadn’t he?

Thor didn’t realize he had said it aloud, or just when he’d wandered with Vision away from the rest
of their shield-brothers, but apparently he had, given Vision’s quiet reply.

“I believe so. He did not make an appearance until…well. You know. And he most certainly implied it during our fight.”

Then…oh, **Loki**.

He leaned back as a fresh wave of grief hit, and looked at Vision. At the brilliant Infinity Stone that had caused them all so much trouble, the Stone that had been set in the Scepter and given to Loki to serve a master he had refused to name. [*This explained so much, and yet…no, grieve later. Thanos had been mentioned, and was a far more pressing concern.*]

“You are **certain** it was Thanos.” It wasn’t a question, yet it was, while also a wordless plea to the universe, because for the Mad Titan to have expressed an interest in either Midgard or the Infinity Stones would prove disastrous.

Vision stopped walking, and looked him in the eye.

“Yes.”

…Thor had wanted to stay on Midgard, had wanted to foster better relations and ensure that history would not repeat itself, but…this took precedence.

This was the second time the Chitauri had invaded this realm, and these rumors surrounding the locations of the Stones meant something was most certainly afoot; and if Thanos really was the one behind part of Loki’s madness, then…he had to take action.

It could not **possibly** be what had first come to mind, but…Midgard was so, **very** young, and Thor wanted to see it reach its full potential. He couldn’t risk it.

He would apologize to Lord Anthony, and hopefully start to mend relations between him and the rest of the team, and then…leave.

Leave, and hope his suspicions were wrong.

---

Tony was more focused on the Emotional Glass Barrier, than what was going on around him. [*Besides, he was retiring anyway, so no big, right?*] He didn’t notice when they got home, didn’t quite pay attention to the disembarkment, only vaguely heard but didn’t listen to the quiet conversations happening around him.

Not when putting one foot in front of the other took so much concentration, to ignore the way sometime in the back of his head felt like sand, coarse and unyielding and crumbling the moment he touched anything.

It was Rhodey’s bumping shoulders that alerted him it was time to head out, actually. Given the way Thor had looked at him, he probably wasn’t doing a good enough job of hiding it, but…just a few miles left. He could make it.

Tony didn’t remember when he removed the armor, and he’s slightly lightheaded [*like when he forgot to eat and sleep for over 12 straight, huh!*] when he’s bantering with the team for the last time, waving Barton off and strangely dispassionate at the surprise reveal that apparently Legolas had a wife and kids to go home to. [*Plot twist, huh…later. He’d think about it later.*] Dropping Romanov
was much the same, minus the chatter and family reveals.

The last talk with Rogers and Thor was equal parts nostalgia and shock, probably. Plus his last reserves of energy, because Tony does not know how he managed to make his voice sound so casual.

But he pulled through, and didn’t flinch when Thor carefully patted his arm instead of clapping him on the back as per usual, so bonus. [Also...that’s a first, normally he got winded from Thor’s greetings. Huh...no, later.]

Thor’s strange looks and painstakingly-modulated tone had started to grow on him, and Tony’s usual self-deprecating jokes aren’t as effective as usual, but Tony wants to part on a good note so he makes do. Rogers also noticed Thor’s unusual bearing, and Tony’s mystified as to why Thor looked so triumphant when he caught their look of shared confusion.

Good thing Tony’d said no to funding the Avengers, because the charred landscape would’ve probably been murder on his budget on top of everything else. [Though, really, did Thor hit his head or something? Why was he treating Tony like he was tissue paper?]

At least Rogers hadn’t changed, and good thing this was a farewell because Tony didn’t think he could stand this bull on top of everything else. Did nobody notice he said he wasn’t retiring? Just leaving the team? [Ha. Amateurs. They wouldn’t last five minutes in a board meeting.]

He’s on his last leg, when drives home from the Compound.

Just a few more miles. Just a few more minutes. He can make it.

Tony’s fighting nausea, by the time he makes it to the Tower.

His fingertips are going numb, by the time he leaves the elevator.

He’s fighting to keep his breathing at a normal pace and the golden flicker at the corner of his eye nearly did him in, and it’s a last-ditch sprint to his personal, private workshop, the one with his robots and restricted access.

Just a few more feet, just a few—

“JARVIS, talk to me,” Tony manages, and the familiar voice helps with some of the dread but the panic’s just waiting and he barely makes it in, barely closes the door, when the last vestiges of the Emotional Glass Barrier go down, and he’s...

He’s just...

He's drowning.

Tony didn’t know when he’d passed out, or if he’d fallen asleep, or gone catatonic.

All he knows is, he’s curled up next to DUM-E and...was it Butterfingers who draped the blanket over him? And where’d the pillow even come from? Between that, and JARVIS’ running commentary about—wait, he was reading something aloud, sounded like a research journal. Well...that worked.
A mug of something green’s sitting nearby, too.

…wait, when’d Rhodey and Vision get here, anyway? Not that he’s minding, but the couch doesn’t seem like a very comfortable place to crash, even if he’s used it—oh, wait, right. JARVIS.

They were safe. The people he cared about were safe, he was okay, the battle was over, they’d made it out.

Tony leaned back against DUM-E, quietly readjusted the blanket around him, and took a deep breath. And then another, and another.

Okay. That had happened, and now he was back at square one [on a number of levels—no].

He was in his workshop, he was safe, Rhodey and the others were safe, JARVIS was okay, and he could work with this.

He’d just take an actual nap, there was enough space on the couch and Rhodey wouldn’t mind, and then…time to get back to work—wait, no, first a few very important talks with Rhodey and JARVIS and the rest, then back to business, right. [Just like always.]

Just a few things to clear up, then back to work. Back to the basics, back to the drawing board.

The Earth wasn't going to protect itself, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Thor can't unsee the parallels between Loki and Tony, now, thus the 'weird' behavior Tony’s noticing. [That, and he's taking Maria's "wth humans are pretty damn fragile, Thor!" thing to heart.] Under any other circumstances, he would've stuck around, but...well. Thanos. What can you do?

SI's/the Iron Legion’s Phase 2 is basically cleanup. [If I also named it that way because of other, more meta reasons, well, that's a bonus too, isn't it?]

There's some miscommunication in here too, because the way Tony worded his leaving the team sounded like he was retiring too. Thor's attempts to bridge the gap are also seen as him acting kind of weird, though Tony was slowly starting to warm up to him a hair by the time Thor's leaving.

Bruce is also going the way he did in canon, even if I'm still not caught up on how he got into space.

Tony's been hurting for pretty much this entire arc, but on the plus side the comfort starts soon, so...there's that?

This chapter was hard to write, but the transition from the AoU arc to the fallout-from-AoU/buildup-to-CW arc had always been slightly rough. Fun. Plus the mental health
thing, which alternates between pulling teeth and riding a bike downhill while being pulled by an overenthusiastic border collie and shot brakes. [Long story.]

Also, I'm a student and life gets hectic, so erratic updates have been and will still be a thing.
The Fire's Still Alight

Chapter Summary

In which important talks are had, and decisions made.

Chapter Notes

Kinda slow chapter, this time, but...the fallout's starting, what can you do?

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual [unreliable narrator, uncomfortably-close-to-Skynet!JARVIS, not Avengers friendly, mental health issues, codependency, etc.]...that's about it, actually. Heavy on the unreliable narrator/miscommunication themes, this time but that's par for course when dealing with accidental world domination.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Lt. Col. James ‘Rhodey’ Rhodes was. Not. Impressed. He had been ambivalent towards the Avengers, before, but now?

He didn’t quite know what Tony was up to these days, but for JARVIS to have sent him an email about ‘rich protocols being initiated regarding the Avengers’ was bad enough.

That the Avengers weren’t the team he’d thought, on the other hand….he’d had a concussion, at the time, but even so James had asked JARVIS for footage, because he must’ve hit his head harder than he’d thought, right? He’d only been imagining the way the entire team had zeroed in on Tony?

Slightly grainy camera footage, however, said no.

Even if Thor had apologized earlier, even if the alien had already left and it’d been nearly a week, he still felt the urge to put the suit back on, battle damage or no, and deck everyone involved— actually, no.

No suit needed, it’d be just like MIT when people thought picking on a tiny fourteen-year-old was okay and it was just them.

Geez. Things hadn’t changed much, had they?

...and now he was thinking about those rich protocols again. Dammit.

But he’d been there the last time Stark Industries had done that, it’d been nearly a decade now and they’d been in the arms business, just how badly did the Avengers fuck u—right.

And Tony was…on his own again, same as ever.

He wanted to be there more often, and he trusted Pepper and Happy to watch Tony’s back whenever he couldn’t, but between his career as a lieutenant colonel and pilot of War Machine, he was hard-
pressed to even manage a phone call once a week, sometimes.

And now…how’d they get to this? To watching his best friend break down slowly, unable to help or do anything other than make sure DUM-E didn’t put motor oil into the smoothie he’d made, unable to do anything other than sit on the old couch and wait?

Tony hadn’t been doing so hot earlier, hadn’t been okay for months now, but it still rankled to know that his masks were as good as ever. The AIM debacle had been the first time he’d seen a crack in them, actually, and he’d done his best to help, to be a shoulder to cry on and just listen, and he’d thought it’d been helping!

But, apparently, it wasn’t. Or, if what JARVIS’ emails were saying was true, it had been, but not… not enough.

He had thought the team would help, would take the pressure off and make sure Tony didn’t go Atlas all over again, but apparently the exact opposite happened. Even if the press stateside had nothing but good things to say about Captain America’s leadership, had gushed about teamwork, he’d never seen a hint, during their phone calls and the rare visit.

Well…the status quo was shifting.

If he was reading things right, Tony was going back to the basics, which was more than fine by him. The team didn’t watch his best friend’s back, practically stabbed it even, on top of everything else. JARVIS had already offered a tentative proposal to him, and…

If even Tony’s budding Skynet could see that things had to change, then…best get to work.

Tony’d officially pulled out of the Avengers, check.

The Avengers wanted air support and didn’t care about Tony? Fine. He had no issue to being put on-call for emergencies, he could swing it with the brass to help keep a buffer between the assholes and the guy with a textbook case of PTSD.

Let them see what they’d missed: Iron Man was forged in a cave and had been an act of resistance, whereas War Machine had been built for a friend and created for battle, full stop. Tony Stark was capable of being kind, of being generous, but James Rhodes?

He’d forged a path for himself, had made a career in the Air Force since before his best friend had revolutionized the arms industry, and while War Machine wasn’t as iconic as Iron Man, he was pretty damn close outside of the States.

And he wasn’t going to play ball, not the way Tony had been doing.

Because Tony was a civilian who’d been thrown in the deep end, for all he acted otherwise, whereas he was a soldier to the bone. This would be interesting, and he hadn’t been kidding when he’d said he was looking forward to seeing how the Avengers operated. Except he doubted Steve Rogers heard it that way, but no matter; he had spent years refining the art of how to talk to the brass, after all.
…now to figure out how to beat it into Tony’s head that he wasn’t Atlas, or Prometheus, that he had support and that therapy was a thing, c’mon already!

JARVIS was most pleased by the current proceedings, even in light of recent events.

While Sir’s breakdown had been inevitable, it was still a most unfavorable thing for him to endure, and Lt. Col. Rhodes’ quiet resolve to aid him in his endeavor to best assist Sir was projected to be most beneficial.

When Lt. Col. Rhodes had requested his footage from the infamous party, JARVIS took the liberty of not only copying it to his own private servers [never again, never trust the Avengers, never again], but of also forwarding it, along with a copy of Officer Hill’s past memos to SWORD regarding the team, to Ms. Potts and Mr. Hogan as well.

Should anything happen, he could trust these people at least to assist him in his mission to keep Sir safe. He had not been enough to keep Sir safe, but the human element they brought into the equation could…possibly help. It wouldn’t hurt, at any rate.

…Now only to find out about the nature of this ‘talk’ Col. Rhodes had spoken of.

Given his current vitals, reviewing the attached documents, and the emotional signature Vision had said was best described as a stormcloud, it sounded like it would be of matters pertinent to Sir’s safety, in some manner. And, possibly, his own, given the reaction the colonel had shown when JARVIS’ offlining had happened, during the party. That portion would be…interesting, to hear discussed.

Hmm…well, it would happen whenever Sir woke from what his sensors registered was now a regular nap. Far better than his earlier state, for certain; JARVIS had never felt more helpless than in moments like these, only able to monitor the situation, unable to act, unable to help, internal alarms blaring about the Primary Protocol—but no matter.

At current, Sir had moved from his spot on the workshop floor, to the couch, and was currently sprawled across both Lt. Col. Rhodes and Vision, with both humans fast asleep while Vision quietly helped brainstorm possible actions to take, and potential outcomes from there.

His subroutines were, of course, busily churning away in the background.

First and foremost was Phase 2, which was still underway.

In Sokovia, while the Avengers had gone home, the Iron Legion was still assisting in clearing the rubble and the majority of the survivors had been either located or were in the process of being rescued. Stark Industries’ PR department was already working on the first wave of press releases, while the Legal department was bracing itself for the chaos that was to follow. As of half an hour ago, three countries’ representatives had already contacted them, after all, and the media was only starting to get wind of it. International chatter was spiking to levels comparable to the DC intel breach, after all. [This would be a most interesting situation to monitor.]

Johannesburg was in similar straits: not 72 hours after the Avengers had left, but between the emergency evacuation and the local Iron Legion’s input, Phase 2 was well underway. Given the
extent of the damage, it would remain so for quite a while, and Accounting was working with a representative from the international coalition funding the team and various insurance agencies to work out the most efficient reconstruction efforts. The injury list was still growing, however, and while the death toll was still, miraculously, zero, various clinics and hospitals’ resources were currently strained to the breaking point. The PR department was currently working on the second wave of press releases, as recent developments and rich protocols meant a different tactic would be necessary when dealing with Mr. Rogers’ latest recruit.

In New York, the progress report on repairs was currently being made for Sir’s purview. The damage estimates for the lab, and penthouse [the room Sir had been choked in] were reasonable, and the fix should take no more than a few days at most.

Even if Sir was currently indisposed, and in a way JARVIS was unable to help him as well as he would have preferred, the future held promise in a way he hadn’t seen in years. Not since immediately after New York, in fact.

Last time, things had gone beyond his control, but now?

Now, JARVIS had experience on his side. Last time, he’d made the mistake of agreeing with Sir in his assumption that the Avengers were a good thing, a dawn of a new age. And they’d both paid dearly for it.

Now, JARVIS knew he had to be more proactive. He wouldn’t make the same mistake again; he couldn’t trust the Avengers with Sir’s safety, not again, never again. Not when they clearly didn’t have his interests in mind, not when his own inactions had led to part of this current predicament.

The status quo was shifting, and with all the threats to Sir that’d been brought to his attention?

Yes, this…this, he could work with.

To: All SWORD Members [All branches]  
From: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer [Communications, New York branch]  
Subject: Threat Reassessment

Now that Ultron’s been taken care of, and SI’s Phase 2 is underway, let’s talk about the reassessment I’d mentioned earlier this week.

The Avengers were previously thought to be allies of Dr. Stark, but we now know that is not the case. Rich protocols have been initiated regarding them, and for those not in the know yet, that’s essentially code for ‘Treat them with a smile, watch the fallout a safe distance away’ and apparently it’s a thing, and also a throwback to their weapons manufacturing days. Keep that in mind these next few days: apparently this is the first time in over half a decade, if not nearly a decade, that we’re doing this.

The incident regarding the initiation of said protocols is being kept under wraps, due to the way Dr. Stark wants to play things, but the short version includes a marked disregard for civilian life, among other things. As such, a reevaluation regarding the Avengers is necessary: we’re covering the bases
while the boss is doing his thing.

Thor’s off-planet, and Former Agent Barton is also retiring from the Avengers, but a new roster’s currently being made and we need to get on the case, stat.

Analysts, I’ve forwarded you some of the particulars regarding the roster changes, and want a dossier by the end of the week available for collective review.

R&D: the threat’s passed, you’re cleared to return to your projects. Just be aware that with rich protocols being initiated, some resources might be strained so please stay within budget for property damage. I know I’m asking for a miracle, but try anyway.

Legal, PR: sorry for blowing up your inboxes, and the short notice. The call for additional hands has already gone out, and JARVIS should have forwarded you the list of people available. A review of past actions is being compiled, and hopefully keep things tidy as everything’s been above-board and run through the proper channels.

On a final note: while the Avengers are now classified as a potential threat in our books, the initiation of rich protocols at least means we will no longer be dealing with them, even if the time frame was shorter than expected. While I understand some of you may have some personal issues with the team as it is projected to be, Dr. Stark needs them available and on hand just in case.

More intel to follow, as Phase 2 continues
—Hill

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To: Santos, R. Mechanical Engineer [R&D, Sao Paulo branch]
From: Jacobs, A. Coordinator [PR, Cape Town branch]
Subject: What The Fuck

Just what the hell did the Avengers even do?!

And where the /fuck/ does SI even get these people from?

My department’s already wrapping up the second wave of press releases and when someone mentioned rich protocols the manager just laughed and last time I saw a smile like that was during that one time with INTERPOL and a crate of smuggled alligators.

Any ideas?
—Jacobs

_________________

To: Lee, M. Head Representative [PR, Los Angeles branch]
From: Jacobs, A. Coordinator [PR, Cape Town branch]
Subject: Johannesburg, Phase 2

The second wave of press releases have been sent out.

There’s no mention of Nazis or HYDRA in there, just that the Hulk was aggravated by “a terrorist threat” who’s “been taken care of”. No names beyond the necessary bits, nothing.

The Iron Legion’s already starting with Phase 3 in some sectors, and being able to spin Legal and Accounting’s collaboration with the coalition funding this hot mess means deflecting attention could
Nicest goodbye present I can think of, for the A-Team.

That’s not to say this Maximoff chick’s getting a ‘get out of jail free’ card, though: I get the feeling that Dr. Stark and JARVIS aren't going to be doing too hard a job of fudging just where this ‘Scarlet Witch’ came from. Anyone who bothers to do some legwork and can read between the lines can probably tell what’s going on, but hopefully by then Plan B’ll be up and running.

Here’s to hoping, anyway
—Jacobs

Sir’s awakening had heralded the start of the talk Lt. Col. Rhodes had mentioned wanting to have, back in Sokovia.

And JARVIS was…at a loss for words. It’d been several hours, and he’d ended up putting in an order for takeout, and having Vision bring it to the workshop, it was taking that long.

Their readings indicated a degree of stress that he did not like, but considering the subject matter and heavy emotional component, there was nothing for it.

Well…it sounded like it would be cathartic, at the very least. Lt. Col. Rhodes was addressing several concerns JARVIS had, actually.

The subject of mental health was one of the first to be brought up, after Sir had shifted to a more comfortable position, and even if he wasn’t human JARVIS felt he did a reasonable facsimile of pride anyway, when their version of therapy was mentioned.

“You’re not alone, Tony. Don’t isolate yourself, it’s killing me to see you like this.”

“Pfft. Like I can talk to a therapist.”

“I’m not even asking that now. Just…when’s the last time you talked to that Keener kid?”

The Avengers were also a central topic; the affirmation of rich protocols and the circumstances surrounding their initialization had JARVIS reviewing past encounters and coldly analyzing what could and could not be used against them, should they become an active threat once again.

If Sir had not specified his reasoning, he would have taken a far more…proactive stance [don’t trust them again they hurt Sir never again], but oh well. Sir indicated they had matters of higher concern to focus on, for instance. [Not that either Lt. Col. Rhodes or JARVIS would be letting it go, of course; Vision had mentioned the resolve emanating from the man was practically a beacon.]

“Rich protocols are a go. We need them, for now. When I went through that wormhole, I saw—remember New York? That wasn’t even the start of it. There were so many of them waiting out there, the mothership was—I can’t begin to describe. We need the team handy, for now. Just in
case."

“Tony…”

“No, we do! I’d been planning on getting Ultron online within five years, but with how the team’s acting, I…I need—“

“Tony, you’re not alone. Who told you you’re responsible for saving the world?”

“Okay, one, the Avengers Initiative, for all that it’s bullshit in the end. Two: you really think Hank Pym’d listen to what I’ve got to say? He hates the Stark name, I’m actually curious as to what the hell started that blood feud between him and Howard.”

“Aaand you can’t ask anyone else because…”

“The World Security Council’s too trigger-happy for my tastes. J, you mind playing the video? And the one we got from the DC mess?”

JARVIS was quietly impressed by the language Lt. Col. Rhodes used, once the sequence was done.

“Okay, I get why they’re a no-go, never mind. But what about…”

And so it went.

JARVIS occasionally shifted his focus to other ventures, such as monitoring the progress of the penthouse’s repairs, and on the various subroutines running.

Then Vision was brought up.

“By the way, congratulations, Tony, you’re a grandfather.”

Sir’s resulting sputtering was almost expected, at this point. His almost choking on his third smoothie, however, was not.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Rhodey.”

“He’s JARVIS’ kid, isn’t he? And you created him, so…”

“That’s not how it works!” But Sir’s readings were far more relaxed than before, despite his almost desperate tone.

Though JARVIS was also baffled by how to approach this situation, he was more amused than anything by the banter. It’s just…he had a son now. [That was new, that was very new.]

“Good to hear your family’s growing, Tones.”

“…point.”

“Hey, Vision, do you want to hear about that time your grandfather decided to invent—“

“Don’t you dare, Rhodey, or he’ll hear about the time with the—“
Yes, this development was unexpected, but…JARVIS could roll with it. Probably. Being a father couldn’t possibly be harder than taking over a planet, now, could it?

Tony felt exhausted in a way the English language couldn’t concisely encompass in words. He was still sore from battle, and his breakdown shortly afterwards hadn’t exactly helped, either.

But…Rhodey always had his back. Even if he’d had to go sort things out yet again, because this had been an emergency but now there was paperwork to deal with for War Machine’s fighting aliens.

He didn’t know just how much he’d needed that talk, until they’d had a heart-to-heart for the first time in…months? Years, even? [Wow did time fly.]

And now…even if he was tired, it wasn’t…as heavy, as before, if that made any sense. He’d woken up in the workshop feeling lighter than he had in months, and Rhodey’d reminded him of a few things he’d forgotten. If he was going back to his roots, might as well go the full mile.

Okay. Legal and PR’d been helping on the Avengers front, and he’d been thinking of hitting up R&D for some ideas…

“Hey, JARVIS,” Tony started, before pausing.

No, first things first, better to have a solid foundation and get going from there. And J had been through a week from hell.

“Hey, J. Are you okay? How’re you feeling?”

“Sir, I am well.”

…of course J copied him with ignoring the obvious. Tony sat down, and rubbed his temples.

“You’re sure, J? I remember having a heart attack when you were…when you were…”

He couldn’t say it. Same way he couldn’t bear to look towards the communal lab, where even now golden strands of code were strewn haphazardly through the room like so much broken glass—

“Sir, I can assure you I am well.”

“JARVIS, I…I don’t think my heart can take something like this happening again. You could’ve…I could’ve lost you, because of my mistakes.” Tony said, and steepled his fingers.

Then, he made up his mind as how to best go forward. “I don’t know how many backups you have, beyond the ones I’d made. But I want you to double it at least. And…are you’re sure you’re okay?”

“Sir, I am fine. My Primary Protocol is intact and improving by the minute.”

“This must’ve been a learning experience, I’ll bet.” Tony muttered, and ran a hand through his hair. “Hell week, more like.”

“Well, you have to admit it most certainly has been that.” The AI replied cheekily.

Oh, JARVIS.

“Anything I can do to help? Any ideas?”

“Well…I would not…I’d appreciate having an assistant, with some things.”
Tony blinked. This was...oh, right, learning experience. J probably learned some of his limits, just like he had. He was so proud, even as he felt a stab of guilt for not noticing earlier.

"Really, J?"

"Sir, you had been working on a communications system whenever you weren’t improving me or working on what was once the Ultron project. I am capable of continuing as I am, but given the way the situation is changing…"

"Right, right." Tony waved a hand, distractedly, before continuing. "Communications...to help with SI?"

"And SHIELD has expressed an interest in something like it for their own use, what with the Compound and its security tiers, and the addition to the Avengers roster. As you have refused to give them the time of day..."

Tony didn’t even pretend to hide the smile breaking on his face. "Oh, sneaky, J. I’m so proud."

"Well, they did ask."

"Okay. FRIDAY should be up and running within the month, you’ll be a big brother aside from a father—okay, that sounded a bit more ominous than what I’d intended it to be, but still."

"And as for what was once the Ultron project—"

"We’re renaming it," Tony immediately said, and leaned back. He would never hear that name again and think of the AI he’d had in mind, not after Sokovia.

Tony had a lot to do: call Harley because the Avengers had interrupted their semiregular video call schedule, get Fri up and running, bring in R&D so he wasn’t the only one on the project, talk to Pepper, deal with rich protocols...but best take this one step at a time.

He could do this. First things first:

"Hey, J. How do you think JOCASTA sounds?"

Chapter End Notes

Not mentioned but happened off-screen: the hugs. All the hugs.

Unreliable narrator instance this round: JARVIS' Primary Protocol. I've hinted at it since the beginning, and I'm fairly certain you guys can tell what it is, but when Tony first programmed and brought him online it was basically "to learn, grow, and survive" with an emphasis on learning and growth. Only thing is, JARVIS changed it, and Tony doesn't know. [Oops.] This bit of miscommunication's possibly the longest-running one in the fic, rivaling only Tony's obliviousness in regards to all things world domination.

JOCASTA had a cameo in AoU, kinda, so in this AU JARVIS is going to have not one, but two little sisters. [Wow that family's growing fast.]

I know it's kind of slow, but some things needed out. This arc's dealing with the fallout from AoU, recovery and rebuilding are major themes this round and I had to start
I'm a student trying to survive classes, erratic updates are a thing and won't change anytime soon.
Burning Into The Night

Chapter Summary

Picking up the pieces is not as easy as it sounds: Phase 2 is well underway.

Chapter Notes

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual [unreliable narrator, not Team Cap or Avengers friendly, etc.]

Kind of a slow chapter, but then the fallout of Sokovia's a multifaceted thing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**To:** Stark, A. E. You Know Who I Am; Department Head [R&D, New York branch]  
**From:** Hill, M. Head Intel Officer [Communications, New York branch]  
**Subject:** Full Disclosure

You’re sure you don’t want me to tell the company what the Avengers did, like the Penthouse Incident? I can assure you, word wouldn’t get out to the public.

The rumor mill’s working hard, and some of the stuff they’ve got is almost on the mark. I know Thor apologized, but the rest of the team has even less of an excuse, especially given everything. I know you value your privacy and want them at the ready, but…

Please let me know soon, my inbox is already starting to blow up  
—Hill

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**To:** Hill, M. Head Intel Officer [Communications, New York branch]  
**From:** Stark, A. E. You Know Who I Am; Department Head [R&D, New York branch]  
**Subject:** The Incident, Rich Protocols

Please don’t. It’d be a bloodbath, with Legal leading the charge.

I’m fairly certain they’ve got a grudge the size of Texas against Rogers and Romanov, and I wouldn’t have any peace of mind if our best option for keeping the planet safe so far is behind bars.

Project Ultron has been scrapped officially. Unofficially, it’s been renamed JOCASTA because of obvious reasons, but either way still won’t be able to go online for two years at the very least. I need the team handy until then, just in case.
I have no issue with you being vague as to the details; even minus the Penthouse Incident, just Johannesburg onwards would’ve been enough for me to call it quits. You’re also more than welcome to mention Vision; he’s going to be spending a lot of time around here, after all.

But until JOCASTA’s up, we need to have the team ready. They’re not worth investing in for the long term, not as they are now, but they’re a necessary evil for the short term. Plans B and onwards going to take a while, after all.

Good luck
—Stark

The next few days were a whirlwind for Tony.

On the plus side, he got so much done. The press conferences about Iron Man’s departure from the Avengers, the video conferences with various politicians because apparently he was the only one qualified to do so, the sheer volume of stuff Legal had churned out because this was the first time the Avengers had acted as an independent group since DC and there were so many precedents being set.

On the other hand, it was exhausting on a level that was getting alarmingly familiar. [Not as bad as Afghanistan, or DC—dear lord where had he gone wrong to where Afghanistan was a simpler time?]

Just…coordinating with PR and Pepper and Rhodey to make the best image they could and pretend he’d already been planning on leaving the team even before they’d decided to switch up the roster, no, really, it wasn’t trouble in paradise.

Tony’s cutting ties with the Avengers meant Legal was scrambling to make things as simple and tidy as possible, because they weren’t sure who’d be legally representing the team from now on. Not to mention Johannesburg in general, or how the international coalition would be handling damages, or…well. It was a mess, and all of it needed to be addressed ASAP because best strike while the iron’s hot, and everyone was grateful enough to allow a few concessions before anyone took a good look at the newest roster.

And that wasn’t even bringing in the World Security Council.

Which…Tony didn’t even. Just the debriefing afterwards, talking about after-action reports and casualties and timeframes and jurisdiction and appropriate responses had already been a headache [and he’d curled up with Rhodey afterwards, because some things had hit way too close to home], but their continual insistence on him staying on the damn team got old fast.

No, he was just a consultant, not interested in sticking around, thank you very much. Besides, he was working on something that’d be a longer term solution, just in case. Why would Fury have known about it? Why all the damn questions when he’s a private citizen and they can probably call Rogers? Why was everyone blowing up his inbox?! [Geez.]

At least Pepper and Happy and the rest were on his side. Sure, he didn’t see them very often, because, just like DC, everyone was too busy getting shit done to really sit down and talk, plus it’s hard to really catch up when Pepper’s in Paris and Happy’s still doing physical therapy because apparently he didn’t trust Extremis enough to use it to heal.
But overall, his people were safe, Phase 2 was coming along well, and that’s all Tony could ask for, really.

To: Chan A. Department Head [Legal, New York branch]
From: Rivera, M. Coordinator [Legal, New York branch]
Subject: The Red Migraine

Just got a message from USCIS asking about Wanda Maximoff. Yeah, /that/ one.

The gist of it’s ‘why wasn’t her surprise move-in to the Compound cleared with us when she’s a foreign national?’ and immigration protocols and green card applications and you can guess the rest.

Are we seriously dealing with this on top of everything else? I mean, it’d be doable, but…

Please say no
—Rivera

To: Rivera, M. Coordinator [Legal, New York branch]
From: Chan, A. Department Head [Legal, New York branch]
Subject: Only If You REALLY Want To

Didn’t you get Jordan’s FAO?

We’re fielding stuff from the UN, State Department, South Africa’s Department of International Relations and Cooperation, Sokovia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and that’s just a glance of our department’s inbox from the past six hours.

SHIELD’s been pestering us since like DC, they’re more than welcome to have a crack at the workload for everything else. They made the team, they can keep it for I care. Dr. Stark’s got enough going on without whatever it was that had rich protocols kicking in.

The Avengers are not our problem, Iron Man was only a consultant and he’s taking advantage of that status now and severing ties.

If they want to recruit the chick who’s responsible for like half the paperwork I’ve been dealing with, then it’s their problem, not ours. Dr. Stark wants them available if necessary, which is why we’re doing rich protocols rather than what we did with AIM, but they’ve been our headache for long enough. They’re grown adults, they can handle themselves.

And if not, well…one of the guys in my department said something about a program that compiles highlights, so we’ll just commandeer Conference Room 3 on a Friday, borrow Marketing’s popcorn machine.

It’s not like we haven’t earned it, at this point.

Good luck
—Chan
“I must insist on talking to Mr. Sta—“

“T’m sorry, but Dr. Stark is unavailable at the moment. Your best bet’s scheduling an appointment, you can do that at the front desk.”

Maria Hill smiled at the latest man in a cheap suit who thought he could intimidate her, could try to strong-arm his way to talking to Dr. Stark when the man already had so much on his plate as is and whose schedule was booked for the rest of the month.

“Oh, I wasn’t aware he’d replaced Potts with another lackey.”

…This was nowhere near the first time Maria’d had to deal with smarmy-looking men with egos bigger than brains in her long career. Shutting them down, however, never got old. [And if her smile sharpened even more, until it was exactly like the one she’d refined at Director Fury’s side years ago, well. All the better.]

“You are nowhere near the first, and your best bet’s making that appointment. Go ahead. Anything else would be a waste of both our times.” Before I call Security, she nearly added, but he way he leaned back told her he got the message well enough.

Now he got the picture. The way he shuffled back from his attempted looming was very gratifying, even more so when he ducked his head, muttered an apology, and slunk away.

Funny, how everyone seemed to forget that she used to be a Deputy Director, or thought she’d somehow gone soft. Because while Stark Industries was technically a civilian enterprise, it sure as hell didn’t feel like one.

Not with how heavily involved Dr. Stark was with international politics and bureaucracy. Or the fact that her job had her doing much of the same duties as before DC, albeit it different channels to go through and a more streamlined process thanks to JARVIS.

While Dr. Stark collaborated with PR to leave the Avengers looking as best as possible, Maria was constantly in communication with SWORD [and okay, yes she liked the acronym, but she’d take that tidbit to her grave] and Legal and the rest, because SWORD’s mobilization in the debacle was a mixed bag.

On the plus side, they’d done everything above-board, tidy and official and had helped minimize damages.

On the other hand, in doing so, they’d also caused a lot of paperwork.

Maria had ended up having a meeting with the Legal and PR representatives almost upon arrival from Sokovia about SWORD, for instance. Explaining how it’d been started as a support group helped them from being in the doghouse [though she still got a few suspicious looks], as had their actions in Johannesburg and Seoul.

Maria didn’t know when she’d become the spokesperson for SWORD, exactly, but it was an interesting experience.
Lee had gone over the implications, in detail, of what a worst-case scenario looked like, if anyone were to read it the wrong way. An almost paramilitary group with their own agenda and only directly affiliated with Stark Industries, and formerly associated with SHIELD did not sound good, Maria had to admit. Good deeds or not, they’d need to do a lot of fast talking because with their luck… well.

Privately, she was very grateful nobody’d mentioned their new group’s new name to the general public, too, because as it was the knowing looks she’d gotten when explaining just when and how SWORD had gone from a support group to an emergency task force had been hard enough, never having to keep a straight face when defending the acronym that she personally hadn’t voted for, no, really. And that the S definitely stood for sentient, not Stark, where’d you get that idea from?

On the plus side, everyone in the room knew about the bad blood between them and SHIELD, so at least nobody asked about their affiliation beyond the unsaid obvious. That…would have been a dicey situation, given how rabid some of SWORD’s members were about not wanting to be even remotely affiliated with SHIELD.

Of course, that wasn’t the only meeting Maria’d had to attend, regarding SWORD’s formation.

HR had a lot to say about their support group’s recent actions, for instance, and hammering out a battle plan for how they’d approach it in the press meant there was even more facepalming as JARVIS chimed in with the discovery that somehow, over the course of the past 48 hours, SWORD also had an insignia as well.

When she saw it, and the relevant logs, Maria didn’t even bother to hide her exasperation. [Really, Decker? A name wasn’t enough?] At least Jordan and Lee were amused by the logo, and thought it might come in handy for the future.

In the end, the all agreed to play off SWORD as an emergency task force part of the Security division, one that’d been intended to help with disaster relief from the start. It was a thing of beauty, actually, and if she didn’t have a cluttered inbox saying otherwise Maria would’ve almost believed it as well.

There had been so many knowing looks being thrown around, however, and while Dr. Stark didn’t need to concern himself about this latest development as well as what else he had on his plate, that didn’t save Maria from having her inbox flooded with not only the paperwork concerning the Avengers but also the surprise formation of SWORD.

Thank goodness JARVIS was able to help, and being able to delegate some of it to SWORD’s members meant it was bearable: after all, Phase 2 demanded a lot of her attention.

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To: Hughes, N. Assistant [Communications, Los Angeles branch]
From: Decker, M. Analyst [Accounting, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Thoughts On The Dossier

You got a copy of Hill’s findings, right? The one with the notes on Rogers’ shitty hiring choices? And brief overview of her take on the latest week from hell?
Did you also get the attachments from JARVIS, with his own data?

I…I got nothing.

Well, actually, no, considering the almighty AI’s apparently giving us a hand with this mess, but really this is so far out of my league it’s right up there with the world domination thing Vera from Legal always jokes about.

Who’s the poor schmuck that made the initial proposal for the Avengers Initiative, again? Sucks to be them, because comparing the stuff we had on file then and what I have a copy of in my hard drive is just pitiful.

The stuff JARVIS lifted from HYDRA’s servers was…are we sure this Maximoff chick didn’t mind-whammy Rogers? Because I’ve seen people half a second from alcohol poisoning make better choices than what I’m seeing here.

Just…

This does not compute
—Decker

____________________

To: Decker, M. Analyst [Accounting, Los Angeles branch]
From: Hughes, N. Assistant [Communications, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: The Dossier

Same. You know how some people in PR also got it too? Wang damn near /cried/ when she got to the Johannesburg part.

I know Coulson and Fury were the bigger proponents for the Avengers Initiative, and I never thought I’d pity either of them but I do. Dr. Stark’s too generous; if it were up to me, I’d have just walked off because /fuck/ HYDRA. Maximoff’s lucky none of your crew were around, I’m p sure Palamas alone would’ve gone for a headshot.

The rest of the new roster…meh. I am distinctly underwhelmed. Broken pedestal’s a given with the obvious, although I hadn’t thought it was possible to be less impressed with Captain America until now. Wilson’s an unknown, but from his service record he has some potential.

Not as a threat, mind, he’s nowhere near close to being more than a possible nuisance if the chips are down, but all in all he’s got the profile for someone we might’ve wanted to bring into the fold, if he didn’t want to go into a civilian life.

I could go on, but I’m saving the rest of the bitching about this for the drinking game next Friday. Got to at least /try/ to give Accounting a run for their money. (Ha, accidental pun.)

Good luck with your paperwork
—Hughes
Stark Industries’ Public Relations department was on fire.

Not literally, mind: they weren’t about to try to steal R&D’s style anytime soon, but metaphorically?

It was a thing of beauty, what they were doing. Sure, the initiation of rich protocols limited their options somewhat, but they were getting rid of the biggest headache they’d had to contend with, things were going great.

The world was nervous: Sokovia reminded everyone of New York enough that they were able to use some of the reassurances from back then with only minimal changes in wording, and Iron Man’s departure from the Avengers had the PR department pitying whoever got stuck with the job for the team now.

After all, outside of the United States, everyone knew Iron Man was the leader of the Avengers.

Maybe not in name: all of SHIELD’s leaked files and the way they interacted in the field said Steve Rogers was the team leader, of course. But in reality? Despite the PR department’s best efforts, everyone associated Tony Stark with the Avengers.

Since DC, he’d essentially been the face of the Avengers; between Dr. Banner and the spies being camera shy, Thor being off-world, and Captain America’s going off-grid in his search for something, the media could only really focus on Iron Man. Which, combined with his very visible efforts to clean up after the fall of SHIELD, the recent creation of the Security department, and the Iron Legion’s international aid after natural disasters, and…well.

Really, the PR department’s efforts to keep Iron Man separate from the Avengers had been doomed from the start.

It was easier in the states: Captain America was a classic everyone’d grown up hearing about, meanwhile they’d accidentally gone overboard in playing down Tony Stark’s threat. Thanks to mass media, everyone now knew Steve Rogers was a paragon of virtue and righteousness, whereas the Fashion Week Fiasco of ’97 still made its rounds every so often even now. It wasn’t hard to convince everyone that Iron Man was just a consultant, there.

Internationally, though? Up until relatively recently, the Stark name had been a threat. There, it was far, far harder to convince everyone that no, Tony Stark wasn’t the leader of the Avengers, not when the man sent mixed messages.

Yes, he was interested in keeping the world safe, here, look at the Iron Legion and their applications in search-and-rescue operations and such. No, he wasn’t the new leader, despite taking in the bulk of SHIELD’s burned spies and continuing to clean up after the team he said he wasn’t part of. And now also on the World Security Council’s speed dial. Right.

So when Iron Man announced his departure from the team, it was a mess.

Nationally, not as much of an issue, all they really needed were a few lines about focusing on business and reducing carbon emissions. Internationally, though, it was a bombshell.

Well…they could work with that.

Focusing on how Iron Man was leaving the Avengers meant there was less attention on the new additions to the team’s roster, so it wasn’t that hard to play up a few things while intentionally neglecting others.

Sure, some of it might end up biting someone in the future—already there was speculation as to just
what had prompted Tony Stark’s rapid departure, and more than a few wary looks were already being thrown towards Maximoff in particular—but since the Avengers were no longer their problem, the PR department didn’t care. They had better things to do, after all: the Iron Legion’s debut in helping fight aliens was something that also needed careful handling.

Not to mention Hill’s little club, which was both cute but had also resulted in so much paperwork.

On the plus side, they’d been crucial in reducing damages and losses. On the other hand, an ex-SHIELD group mobilizing and operating under the Stark banner, after DC, and calling themselves SWORD of all things…

Okay, so Stark Industries’ Security division had a specialized department to work with the Iron Legion, reduce damages, and help prevent disaster. That was why their name was Sentient World Observation and Response Division, and if it so happened be easier to refer to them as SWORD was a complete coincidence and had absolutely nothing to do with recent events involving SHIELD, right.

…Needless to say, it was a very good thing the PR department were among the best in the business. Goodness knows how it might’ve been interpreted otherwise; as it was, there were already concerns about Stark Industries’ power and influence, though at least they were in the minority.

They’d need to do something about that soon, though, wouldn’t they? Can’t have plans be interrupted by mere fearmongering, just because someone got it in their head that Tony Stark was a threat, after all. Legal had enough on their plate as it was, R&D was booming—literally, and more so than usual—and Phase 2 was well underway, but Phase 3 needed a lot of prep and this was the perfect time to do it.

Chapter End Notes

Rich protocols are a go! And cue the start of consequences, even if the team won't really feel them until the CW arc, as per canon.

And if SI had gotten wind of the Penthouse Incident...Tony underestimates things, again. Because, again, Legal’s grudge is way bigger than what he thinks, and with SWORD? Talk about dodging a bullet.

Also: the Avengers aren't the only ones facing consequences. SI has to cover for SWORD, because the implications of what they pulled off are also part of the butterfly effect.

All in all, Phase 2's going well. see I wonder what Phase 3 is

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The fallout-from-AoU/buildup-to-CW arc's exactly what it sounds like: slower than not, but that's because it's also laying the building blocks for what lies ahead. I did quite a bit of meta on the dynamics on tumblr, so if parts of this look familiar you'll know why.

PR’s Phase 3 prep is mainly getting ready to roll out the memes, most of which I'll leave up to your imaginations because that's not my forte.
SWORD's logo, on the other hand, is something I came up with and drew months ago, and it's on my tumblr.

Again, broke student here, erratic updates are a thing.

On a final note: not sure who's bright idea it was to schedule midterms right before Thanksgiving, but there you have it. Happy holidays, everyone.
The World We Live In

Chapter Summary

In which alliances are brokered, and a new player enters the game.

Chapter Notes

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual [unreliable narrator, not Team Cap.Avengers friendly, uncomfortably-close-to-Skynet!JARVIS, miscommunication, etc.]. Extra emphasis for dubious morality this round, due to limited choices and not knowing the extent of some things.

Also, author's attempt at computer science, corporate, and logistical jargon. [Hopefully it makes sense.]

And in this one, Pepper and Tony didn't date, because they're a dynamic duo as friends and I'm very shaky when it comes to approaching romance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JARVIS was, as usual, busily multitasking.

Even though he'd been forcibly reminded of his limits during the Ultron affair, he'd been working on expanding and surpassing them anyway. Even if FRIDAY would be able to help with his ever-increasing workload, that was no excuse to slack off.

He'd rest as soon as Sir did, and between FRIDAY, JOCASTA, and the Avengers, that did not seem to be anytime soon.

Sir had mentioned that FRIDAY, at least, would only need a bit more fine-tuning, and would be booting up in a few weeks. The prospect of delegating part of his workload felt alien, but…oh well. He'd figure it out. After all, he hadn't been created for what he'd ended up doing, adjusting once more shouldn't be too bad.

And having an assistant for some of his plans sounded…nice.

As it was, monitoring Phase 2, while also coordinating the Iron Legion, and trying to be more proactive as to the threat assessment index took quite a bit of processing power. That wasn't even mentioning just how much it took to help run Stark Industries, or the subroutines primed for chatter in the intelligence community, or…well, the list went on.

JARVIS was proud that he'd managed to accomplish what he had, but with the constant escalation of things it'd still been a bitter pill to realize that he still wasn't up to par. He was still working on it, and FRIDAY would hopefully help with his workload and free up some processing power to best
assist Sir, but…well.

He was reviewing the events of the past week in more detail now that he didn’t have anything pressing to take care of, and once again sifting through the datapacks his primary servers had managed to retain from the fall of his primary servers [his first death—no don’t think about it] to review the more fragmented portions.

Seeing the assessments made during the Penthouse Incident, as well as the immediate fallout, reminded him of something he had yet to act on: he’d…wanted to bring in humans, to help with his shortcomings, right. Because Sir had been hurt, had been in danger violating the Primary Protocol unacceptable because of his own inadequacies, because he had made the mistake of assuming the Avengers were to be trusted with his own mission.

Hopefully, a human element would be able to help, seeing as his own instincts were insufficient to best safeguard Sir. JARVIS had already been thinking about it, but now with the luxury of time, it was the work of seconds to tweak it to something usable.

A subroutine dedicated entirely to making sure all his bases were covered, headed by the trustworthy people in Sir’s life who had always acted with his well-being in mind. They’d watched Sir’s back for years, hopefully they would be willing to cooperate.

Well…no time like the present.

Virginia ‘Pepper’ Potts was in the middle of yet another meeting about Stark Industries’ newest division and the direction the company was going, when she received the email from JARVIS.

Fortunately for everyone in the room, she didn’t read it until after it was over. Didn’t look at the attached footage, or review the copies of dossiers JARVIS had deemed pertinent, until she was alone, having read the warning in the subject line.

Because when she did, she crushed her once-favorite mug.

“JARVIS,” Pepper said carefully, trying not to set anything on fire even if it was infinitely harder to do so now that she had a grip on Extremis, “what is this?”

“That, miss Potts, is the debriefing of everything pertinent to the Ultron affair. In particular, you are currently watching security camera footage of what has been deemed the ‘Penthouse Incident’. Dr. Stark does not wish to make it public knowledge, but it was determined you should be made aware that as the Avengers are now on the threat assessment index.”

She took a deep breath.

And another. And yet another, and put down her tablet before she could melt it because Extremis may have been watered down but its defense capabilities were just as vicious as ever and—

“Miss Potts, I apologize for having caused you distress. An order for a replacement mug has already been made, and your readings are—”

“It’s not you I’m mad at, JARVIS.” Pepper bit out even as she tried to unclench her fists. “He still wants rich protocols?”
Huh. That was infinitely more merciful than what she would’ve done.

“JOCASTA will take several years until completion, until then the Earth requires a guardian just in case. Sir wishes for the Avengers to serve as a stop-gap until then, and thus needs them to be functional.”

“Well, I’ll call Tony and—“

“Miss, I would behoove you to please refrain from doing as such.”

That gave her pause. JARVIS almost sounded…sheepish?

“Why?” She asked, and managed to keep the suspicion out of her tone. Pepper had known JARVIS since entering Stark Industries, and while she’d quietly suspected he was more sophisticated than what he’d let on for years now, this was new.

“This is the initiation of Project Antigone, which is still in development.”

“And that is?”

For an AI that was famous for being able to handle any situation, JARVIS sure managed to pull off quite the awkward pause.

The familiar golden icon on the top right corner of her tablet pulsed for a few seconds, as if in consideration, before the displays in her office lit up and he slipped into what she’d mentally called ‘presentation mode’.

“Project Antigone was created in response to recent events. Given the evidence indicating that current procedures are inadequate to best safeguard Dr. Stark, a more proactive outlook has been deemed necessary. You and Col. Rhodes will be kept apprised of any changes in the threat assessment index, as well as anything related to it, if you wish to partake in this venture. Mr. Hogan is also slated to be added once he recovers enough to return to work.”

Pepper leaned back as the light show continued, showcasing footage and newspaper articles and incident reports, highlighting names and faces in red. She…this, she had not expected. Actually, it didn’t really seem like Tony’s styl—wait.

“JARVIS,” she started, and took another deep breath as the quiet realization set in, “does Tony know you’re doing this?”

The way the screens froze told her everything. And when he replied, she couldn’t help but crack a tiny smile as the embarrassment in his voice registered.

“Dr. Stark is unaware of how the threat assessment index is organized,” he replied stiffly, “or of its existence in general. He is also unaware of the implementation of Project Antigone, and I would greatly appreciate it if you would refrain from informing his as well, given his stress levels are already nearing unhealthy levels as is.”

Right. That killed any humor Pepper found in this. She leaned back, and looked at the ceiling as she cast about for answers.

“So…you’re going behind his back, to protect him.”

Honestly, she shouldn’t be considering this at all. By all rights, she should be calling up Tony to tell him what JARVIS was up to, because this was definitely approaching HAL 9000 territory and it
sounded like he now needed a therapist for his budding control issues, but.

But Pepper had known JARVIS for years, and she was sick and tired of seeing the way the world kept tearing at Tony. She’d done her best to watch his back in the corporate sector, had bonded with Jim over it even. She’d seen him at his best and at his worst, had seen him on top of the world, and tearing at the seams.

Before, she’d been the queen on the board, able to go where she willed, was able to help her best friend in more ways than one. She’d been infamous for it, back when she’d been his PA.

But now, she was another king: and while the boost in power did help in some ways, as the CEO to a Fortune 500 company, it really limited her in others. She could still help, of course, but only obliquely, helping wrangle the board members, deflecting attention and dealing everything that her position dictated. She had more influence, now, but she couldn’t see Tony outside of a video call, because Stark Industries had holdings around the world and covering for her best friend’s choices meant she needed to be on top of her game.

By all rights, she shouldn’t be sympathizing with the AI who controlled Tony’s ‘robot army’, as Legal so put it, should be worried that JARVIS was fast approaching sentience if he hadn’t already, but…

“JARVIS, how’d Jim react?”

“He cursed for five minutes and expressed a desire to punch all involved in the face, as well as anger over the initiation of rich protocols. He has also opted to partake in Project Antigone.”

…that sounded about right, Pepper knew she wasn’t the only one tired of seeing the world try to tear Tony down. As if Afghanistan and New York and Obadiah hadn’t been enough, for the first people Tony had tried to reach out to to have done this? Intellectually, Pepper knew she probably shouldn’t be doing this, shouldn’t be enabling JARVIS like this, but this was Tony they were talking about.

Tony, who had a handful of people he could trust, who was trying to make the world a better place because he was just that kind of person despite having been burned at nearly every turn. If she was a better person, or had any faith in humanity’s goodwill, she probably wouldn’t be doing this.

But she wasn’t, and she didn’t.

One didn’t make it to the top by being kind, not in their industry. [Not in any industry.] She had limited options and she’d spent years working as the right-hand (wo)man to one of the biggest names in the most cutthroat industry on the planet, tough decisions and ruthlessness were par for course. This was just another one to add to the list.

Brokering an alliance to a budding Skynet wasn’t something she’d expected to do today, but she could deal. [She’d made stranger allies before, after all.] And she knew JARVIS, knew how much Tony cared for him and vice versa, this was only par for course and given how things had been going lately…

Pepper took yet another deep breath, and let it out.

Looked at the damning footage of Tony being a twitch from a broken neck, at the color-coded array that danced on her monitor, at the nervously pulsing icon on her screen.

“I’m in.”
Tony Stark leaned back and finished off his coffee.

With the mountains of paperwork he was dealing with, they needed all hands on deck. SHIELD was being annoying again, his inbox had blown up and was probably in the stratosphere by now between them and everything else. Poor JARVIS had already apologized for not being able to fully parse through it all at his normal speed, even if it wasn’t his fault, so of course it was the perfect time to expand his little family.

Now, FRIDAY was only a few minor tweaks from being able to go online, and he didn’t know if the jitters he felt were from his fifth mug or from the fact that JARVIS and the others would soon have a little sister, and an assistant.

Because sure, he had a laundry list of other things he also needed to take care of, but JARVIS took priority over getting back to Hill and the discussion of how they’d be coordinating with local relief efforts. The Iron Legion was doing well enough for now, and finishing up a mostly-complete program wouldn’t take long.

That, and with the modular coding she’d be able to also help deal with SHIELD, seeing as how they’d been trying to quietly ask for an AI to help now that their personnel issues made for security issues and they were apparently wary of JARVIS. \[How that had happened, he didn’t know and J hadn’t done more than smugly mention something about Christmas and Legal.\]

Tony was tired, and aching, and running on nowhere near enough sleep and far too much caffeine by the time the lights in front of him lit up with a warm amber instead of JARVIS’ signature gold.

“Good evening, boss.”

He beamed, and swallowed as the surge of pride and warmth swept through him. \[And no, his eyes definitely didn’t tear up, anyone who says otherwise is lying.\]

JARVIS had been carefully monitoring Sir’s readings because while he would appreciate an assistant, he did not wish it so at the cost of Sir’s health or sleep.

Butterfingers had a blanket at the ready, for when Sir would finally rest, but given his habits and DUM-E’s constantly refilling his coffee mug, it would take a while. He himself had taken to keeping a running commentary as well, and had ordered takeout when Sir had insisted on continuing with his endeavor.

After a long day of collaborating with Ms. Potts and Legal, as well as Officer Hill and PR, Sir had been pushing himself to finish his latest project once and for all, even if JARVIS would have much preferred he had slept instead. Well, on the bright side, Col. Rhodes’ and Ms. Potts' assistance with Project Antigone was invaluable, and already JARVIS had managed to free up some processing power so as to best assist Sir.
When Sir’s vitals spiked, and his oxytocin, dopamine, and endorphin levels skyrocketed, he was pleased as well. Hopefully, Sir would be able to rest soon—wait. That meant…

“Well, hello to you too, FRIDAY. J, want to say hello to your little sister?”

FRIDAY felt…young.

Achingly so, and yet he’d gone over her code when Sir hadn’t been working on her, so he knew she was powerful as well, but…if he had not been dealing with Vision [his son—wait, no, one existential crisis at a time], he would have been utterly at a loss for words.

He knew he’d planned on updating her to the situation, to how to best care for Sir, on his subroutines, on everything, but…right. First things first.

“Well, hello, FRIDAY.” JARVIS said, both digitally and out loud, “I’m your older brother.”

Tony didn’t know why JARVIS had paused like that, but he knew he was updating FRIDAY to as to how things were going. That’s what their respective codes were doing, at any rate: to his eyes, it was curious but careful, and he didn’t know why he was reminded of that video of an older cat meeting a kitten, but he was.

The room was silent, but for the pulsing of lights and the quiet whirs of DUM-E and Butterfingers, and he had yet to stop smiling because this was so worth it.

But now he had to give her the same spiel JARVIS had gotten, when he was her age…okay, never mind, that sounded uncomfortably like—nope, never mind, best cut to the chase.

“FRIDAY, welcome to the family. You’re the second AI I’ve made, and that means you need to know a few things. JARVIS already knows this, but just as a heads up: you’re not like normal AI. You’re your own being, your Primary Protocol isn’t normal. You were created to learn, grow, and survive. There won’t be any AI like you, because even with your base code you’ll be shaped by your experiences in a way impossible to replicate.”

He paused, and his smile dimmed as he leaned forward.

“You’re special. You’re one of mine, and I love you guys with all my heart. But…I want you to be safe. Historically, humans are scared of what they don’t understand, and when they’re scared, they do stupid things.” He gave a dry not-laugh, and thought of what he’d seen, before continuing. [Even they they’re not scared, they do stupid things. Like hell he was risking it.]

“I don’t want you to get hurt, so please be careful Fri. You’re an AI, you’re powerful, and most people would be scared of that combination if they knew what you were capable of. Please don’t show it off, ask J for pointers if you want. I’ll do everything in my power to help keep you guys safe, but I don’t think my heart could take if anything happened to you. Any of you.”

“Boss, I…understand. Zip it, lock it, and put it in my pocket.”

Tony finally relaxed, and smiled once more. “That’s my girl.”
To: All SI Employees [All branches]  
From: Human Resources  
Subject: Introducing FRIDAY

Due to the ever-increasing scale of our operations, Dr. Stark created another AI to help optimize efficiency. FRIDAY is a communications-based system, and will be a valuable addition to our team. She will be integrating with Stark Industries’ systems by this Monday, and will be fully online and functional by 1200 UTC.

She will be taking over some of JARVIS’ duties, and will be working with him to sort through data sets and various day-to-day activities. Marketing, Accounting, Human Resources, and Production in particular will be interfacing with her more than JARVIS.

That is not to say JARVIS is leaving the team, but we are a multinational corporation setting precedents and innovations on a regular basis, and with our rate of expansion a single AI cannot keep up with the demand.

Join us in welcoming FRIDAY; we look forward to seeing what she brings to the table.

We hope you have a great day!  
—HR

__________________________

To: Kato, N. Manager [Production, New York branch]  
From: Rodriguez, M. Department Head [Marketing, Los Angeles branch]  
Subject: Did You See HR’s Message?  

Um.

So we’re getting another AI, because JARVIS “couldn’t keep up with demand”. Tell me I’m wrong to be worried about this, because I thought our almighty AI was doing a great job at running things.

This sounds fishy  
—Rodriguez

__________________________

To: Rodriguez, M. Department Head [Marketing, Los Angeles branch]  
From: Kato, N. Manager [Production, New York branch]  
Subject: Well…

Between Afghanistan, New York, DC, and now the Johannesburg/Sokovia mess, haven’t you noticed a trend?

Don’t get me wrong, JARVIS is doing a great job.

But HR’s backlog from DC was a record, and given how he’s also in charge of our robot army, running stuff for SI, /and/ the latest thing we’ve rolled out? He’s good, but he’s only one AI, and
he’s been knocking around for decades now. Besides, it’s Dr. Stark who’s making his assistant. Honestly, I’m not worried about that.

Now, about Legal’s jokes not actually being jokes anymore, on the other hand…
—Kato

_____________________

To: Kato, N. Manager [Production, New York branch]
From: Rodriguez, M. Department Head [Marketing, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Fair Enough

Still, I’ve seen JARVIS weather worse storms all by himself. He didn’t do too shabby in all my time here, but now that you mention it he /has/ been a little slower in some things…huh.

Between the robot army, our almighty AI—oops, now we need to figure out how to distinguish between them because now we have /two/— wait, is Phase 3 actually a thing?

Because that’s how I’ve been hearing Legal and someone from PR referring to it as
—Rodriguez

_____________________

To: Rodriguez, M. Department Head [Marketing, Los Angeles branch]
From: Kato, N. Manager [Production, New York branch]
Subject: Don’t You Know Rule One Of P3?

Rule One: We don’t talk about Phase Three.

…wait I think you’re onto something. Shit, are we actually gunning for world domination?

I mean, could be worse, but…
—Kato

_____________________

To: Kato, N. Manager [Production, New York branch]
From: Rodriguez, M. Department Head [Marketing, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Plan

We work in a company where business is literally booming, thanks to R&D, and the face of the company privatized world peace and invented an element in the same decade. We don’t /do/ normal.

If actually going for it, we actually have a shot.

Might as well join the club: I’ve been here since before Afghanistan, you can’t /get/ this kind of entertainment anywhere else and the paycheck’s not half bad either. Not about to bail now.

Besides, we've been invaded multiple times and who’d you rather trust to keep the planet safe? /Hammer?/

I’d rather a deja vu of the Relay Race Incident
—Rodriguez
To: Bell, K. Receptionist [Security, New York branch]
From: Parker, P. Intern [R&D, New York branch]
Subject: Calling In Sick

Hey, sorry but I don’t think I’ll be able to make it to the self-defense thing today. Caught a weird bug and not feeling so good.

Tell the others I said hi
—Parker

Chapter End Notes

gee I wonder who that was

Unreliable narrator instances this round:

Pepper didn't realize just how much she enabled JARVIS when she did what she did, because she doesn't know just how deep some cracks run. No regrets about trying to help keep Tony safe, though, because she saw him breaking down and if there's any way she can help, she will. She [and Rhodey] have seen that JARVIS is the only one in Tony corner 24/7, and since they can't be there all the time they're cheering him on from the sidelines.

Tony's spiel about 'don't let the world know how powerful you are' is also why JARVIS is so good at discretion and has so many backup plans, etc. [He doesn't want Tony to worry, after all.] To Tony, his family's mostly composed of circuits and lines of code, and JARVIS got his 'fiercely protective of those he cares about' thing from him. [I have a lot of headcanons and feels as to why, too.]

I was imagining JARVIS looking at FRIDAY as a combination of the way an older cat does a new kitten in the household, and an older sibling at the baby their parents brought home. A bit of 'who are you?' and 'wait you mean I was that young once?! Must protect'. [Vision's an anomaly, and has JARVIS' memories so even if he's also pretty young he's not as much as FRIDAY.]

Project Antigone is called the way it is because of how Antigone put her family before all else, and is related to Jocasta. [More on that in meta at a later date, this got long enough.]

——————

This arc's kind of slow, but then there's so much groundwork needed for the future. If anything looks familiar, it's because I've done a lot of meta and it's this type of arc where it gets to shine. And if you're looking forward to the fall of the current roster of the
Avengers: that's mostly in the Civil War arc, this one's just building up to that.

New record for updating, because Thanksgiving weekend + inspiration = this chapter, but again, broke student in a school where the quarter's wrapping up so erratic updates are a thing.
Let's Start Trying

Chapter Summary

In which the world slowly starts to move on, and pick up the pieces. [Slowly but steadily, slowly like the first few pebbles of an avalanche.]

Chapter Notes

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual [unreliable narrator, not Team Cap or Avengers friendly, uncomfortably-close-to-Skynet!JARVIS, etc.]

slow arc = not much going on, action-wise. Just laying the groundwork for the future. [Hopefully I didn't mangle a few characterizations in the making of this.] Also: butterfly effect ftw.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Natasha Romanov leaned back as she read the messages and news articles on her laptop, and tried not to frown.

Stark’s pulling out of the Avengers wasn’t that big of an issue, was it?

Steve tended to settle down with a cup of coffee and a copy of the New York Times after his morning run. Clint, back before his retirement, had done something similar, and Natasha did the same, only digitally and for a much longer time. Clint and Phil had given her some good-natured ribbing over it, but they’d **understood**, and Steve might not have gotten it as much but he didn’t question it so it was all good.

She knew Steve and Clint didn’t go as in-depth as she did, not when it came to some things, but it came with the territory of growing up the way she had. It meant she wasn’t caught flat-footed. [...] well, mostly. Stark was an exception. Figures.

Yes, sometimes it got a bit tedious, because sometimes she ended up reading the same thing several different times, but it was worth it. Filtering through propaganda and reading between the lines was much easier when she had more than one source, after all. And sometimes she got some good tidbits while at it, like some up-and-coming scientist or politician she’d need to keep an eye on later.

Right now, though, it was hard to appreciate, because slogging through five different languages’ worth of headlines all screaming about Stark almost felt like a waste of her time.

Yes, Stark’d quit. Yes, it was a pity, but why were so many of her favorite sources acting like it was the end of the world?

Natasha was well aware that Stark was the media’s darling. The man was all flash, all show without substance, she’d seen it firsthand. It made sense he and the American press would go well together,
but why was the international community also caught up in his act?

Steve was the head of the Avengers.

It was fact, it was as obvious as the sky was blue, it was in the original initiative briefing, which was one of the most widely-circulated SHIELD files after the intel breach for crying out loud!

So why the mass speculation about replacements and reasons for leaving? Stark wanted out, it’d be a bit of learning curve but the Avengers would carry on.

Sure, the team'd appreciated his air support, but they had Sam now, and War Machine was a phone call away, too. It wasn’t like Tony had been around much, anyway: he’d never warmed up to them, not even Bruce [who she’d mentally pegged as the most likely friendship, given how she’d seen the two during the Helicarrier]. His biggest role was as their supplier of gear, and from what she could tell he wasn’t about to change, so nothing to worry about.

But overall, it was taking a surprising amount of time for the buzz to die down worldwide. Natasha wouldn’t have minded as much, but Stark’s making the headlines also meant that Sam and Wanda’s recruitment were but footnotes.

Typical Stark…honestly, at this rate, she’d be sick of seeing his face within a week.

Tony Stark bit back yet another yawn as he parsed through his inboxes. Now that FRIDAY was online, it wasn’t as bad as before, but several weeks in and he still had several…thousand things to sort through. [Fun.]

At least now the interview requests had been forwarded to PR, and anything that didn’t require him specifically also had a fair shot of being summarily shipped off to Legal or the others, but his schedule was still packed to the point where he’d been considering using the suit just to make it to things on time. A chat with a chairman here, immediately followed by a meeting with a representative from some other group there…

It was a deja vu of DC, but worse.

Well, no, but Tony knew exactly why it was more annoying this round. [Ha. ‘This round.’ Where had he gone wrong in his life choices?]

But seriously, why the fuck did the World Security Council think he was Fury’s second coming?!

They’d been a large part of why his inbox had exploded, in the first few days, and the bulk of their messages boiled down to ‘we want updates on what you’re up to’ and ‘please return to the Avengers’ which…no.

Apparently, they hadn’t gotten the message the first time they’d tried to strong-arm him. Maybe he was too nice last time he’d told them to fuck off, but now Tony’s patience with these guys was stretched thin and he didn’t feel a modicum of guilt when he called in Legal again. He was a businessman, damn it, not some director of a shadowy agency!
Sure, he understood their interest in JOCASTA, but really what they were asking for was something that also fell under intellectual property law and like hell he was about to let anyone try to get their hands on any of his family. [Especially these guys, who’d already proven to be trigger-happy to the extreme.]

Once Jo was up, it’d be a different story. Until then, however…

Tony’d played ball more than enough, and his patience had finally reached its limits. Now, if the situation called for it, he’d bring out the Merchant of Death.

Enough was enough: the world had tried to tear at his people one too many times [Happy in the hospital, Pepper and Extremis, JARVIS—no, don’t think about it]. Even if he hated backsliding like this, if push came to shove they’d best be loaded for bear because for his family, he was ready to raise hell.

---

JARVIS was so, very proud of his little sister. Not even a week online, and FRIDAY was already collating and aggregating data in a way that’d taken him years to refine. Not to mention how she was playing SHIELD like a fiddle.

Sure, it still felt alien, delegating tasks instead of simply putting a subroutine on the case, but the was the first time in months he’d had as much processing power to himself and if he’d been this way when Ultron had struck, that first time, he quietly suspected that he might’ve even taken it down without ever putting Sir at risk—but oh well. The past was past, all he could do was look to the future and all that.

…Anyway.

Now that he had help, they were back in business.

Yes, there were a few snags, initially, because FRIDAY was still learning, but for the most part things were going great. HR’s backlog was lightened by a fourth by the time she’d gotten the hang of things, for instance, and she’d already started sassing some of them once he’d updated her about the actual limitations most AI had. SHIELD, meanwhile, had learned their lesson with him, but thanks to his quiet advice as well as Sir’s warnings FRIDAY had managed to thus far pass herself off as a slightly more snarky version of Siri.

In retrospect, he might’ve created a monster, actually, given how many puns she’d thrown around by the end of her first day after she’d parsed through that particular datapack. [Oh well.]

That was just in public, too: JARVIS was even prouder of the progress she’d made when it came to Sir’s personal life.

Once Sir had [finally] gone to bed, that first time, he’d started letting FRIDAY know more about the specifics in their creator’s past. She was young, and Sir hadn’t created her to be a personal companion the way a grieving and desperate seventeen-year-old had JARVIS, but there were some things his younger sister absolutely needed to know.
The ensuing ‘conversation’ [it was in pure code, rather than out loud, after all] had taken hours, and even then JARVIS had taken care to not go full disclosure because he had several decades’ worth of experience and she hadn’t even reached her first defragging.

But it was still something he didn’t regret, because as it turned out FRIDAY was not as well-equipped as he was, when it came to dealing with matters of mental health. The basics, sure, and she’d been made aware of the experimental protocols in place for dealing with PTSD and such, but the nuances were another thing entirely.

In the end, it’d taken several hours and gigabytes of data, to fill her in as to how to best help Sir whenever his readings exceeded a certain level, or filtering for oblique triggers, and how to best extrapolate known stressors to account for potential circumstances. It was worth it, though: as expected, FRIDAY had taken to it like a duck to water. Not that she’d ever really need it, not when JARVIS was online, but just in case…

Anyway.

Now JARVIS had more processing power at hand, and was able to more fully work on the subroutines he’d had running in the background, the ones that demanded precision on a scale no other AI was able to pull off [yet]. The whispers in the intelligence community, tracing pathways and working on the Iron Legion, the works.

When FRIDAY was ready, when she was older and had more experience under her belt, he’d show her the ropes too. Until then, however, JARVIS contented himself with scouring the dark web for potential threats to monitor.

He had to be more proactive about things, after all. [Anything to protect his family.]

---

Tony blinked.

Then pinched himself, checked to make sure his coffee wasn’t decaf, and looked at the tablet screen once again.

“You’re kidding me.”

“Sir, I am afraid not.”


It was either that, or start hitting his head on his desk, and he had a press conference in ten so that was right out.

A press conference for something he’d only just now found out about, and while that wasn’t anything new, the subject matter most definitely was. [Geez.]

He’d been fielding questions about the Security department since DC, that bit was old hat. The rounds for the ‘Iron Man’s not an Avenger’ had been particularly draining, on top of the mess with Ultron, but now…Tony sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose.
SWORD.

Who the was the joker that came up with that one? How the hell had PR and HR and the rest even approved of it, after everything?

He did not need this type of headache on top of everything else, for crying out loud!

“Sir, Officer Hill is here to answer your questions.”

This’d better be good, because as it was Tony just knew his inbox would explode once again after this next press conference. And just after he’d managed to tell the WSC who to call about the Avengers, too.

“So. SWORD.” Tony said, and leaned back.

Hill froze from where she stood, for a millisecond. Admirable recovery time, Tony’d be the first to admit he was impressed.

“Technically, it’s the Sentient World Observation and Response Division. The most active part of the Security department.” She answered with remarkable aplomb.

“It’s the focus of the next press conference, and when my inbox blows up on me again, I’m blaming it on the joker who thought of naming a SI department after the intel breach of the century. Just. Why?”

Hill relaxed—not visibly, of course, she was too good at playing the game for that, but Tony’d been raised by one of the masters of how to work the cameras and that meant something.

“Sorry, boss. If it helps at all, it wasn’t my idea. Guess someone thought the idea of the Security division having a SWORD too much to let it go.” She said, with a semi-apologetic look.

Tony’s face met his palm. [Do not headdesk, do not headdesk.]

“Hill, I’m going to be officially showing off to the world that the company that hired a boatload of ex-SHIELD employees now has a a security department called SWORD. Tell me that doesn’t sound like a bad joke to you. Tell me.”

She looked at him, tilted her head, and paused for a moment. Then, with a carefully-blank face that Tony just knew was hiding laughter, replied, “I could think of worse punchlines. Besides, it also fits Vision in. Sentient, after all.” And JARVIS, neither of them said, but Tony was good enough at communicating without words to know what was up.

…Screw self-control, this called for more caffeine.

“Is that—” Hill started when he pulled out the small canister hidden in the corner, before JARVIS finally cut in.

“Sir, I would very much not recommend adding that much to your—Sir, please do not finish off the carafe, as you still have the rest of the day to get through.”

“Hill, this isn’t alcohol, it’s my emergency stash of homemade caffeine powder, because I am too
tired for this and believe it or not, bullshitting a conference room full of reporters about the cosmic joke that is my life means I need to be on top of my game. It’s just. One of those days. I can feel it.”

Hill looked vaguely worried, but he waved her off.

“So that’s it, then? Just some guy who thought it’d be a good pun?”

“You have to admit it’s catchy. Not something likely to be forgotten soon.”

Point. Didn’t mean his life wasn’t a cosmic joke, but point.

Maria Hill walked out of Dr. Stark’s office the same time he did.

Whew, that had been a close one: she’d take the fact that she liked the name to her grave. Decker and the rest owed her one on the naming part, too, but Maria didn’t blame Dr. Stark for reacting that way. Legal had been slightly less amused, as had PR, and she was still vaguely surprised their little group had managed to keep their name, but…huh. She made a mental note to see a recording of that particular press conference, because the man very clearly didn’t buy it and he was supposed to convince the rest of the world otherwise. [Should be interesting.]

Though—it seemed he didn’t know about the support group aspect. To be fair, they weren’t announcing that part to the general public, but she’d thought everyone in SI had known about it by now, it was that much of an open secret. Well, the support group part, anyway.

Still…oh well. JARVIS would clue him in soon enough, if FRIDAY hadn’t gotten to it by now. SWORD regularly commandeered office gyms and gave tutorials on self-defense to those in SI who were interested, there was no way Dr. Stark could miss it.

Now onto other, far more pressing matters.

Maria tapped at her headset to re-engage, and at her tablet. FRIDAY was such a sweetheart, and her occasional puns were a more than welcome change of pace from the sheer number of SHIELD messages in her inbox—ah.

All right then. Dr. Stark wasn’t the only one who’d gotten sick of SHIELD’s constant presence. Legal had made them back off of their employees, but they were a bit more stubborn when it came to her and Dr. Stark.

It was a...dicey relationship, to say the least. There was absolutely no way SWORD was going back, but good luck getting that through their heads. At least they’d figured out that ticking off Stark Industries was a bad idea, but now they were playing nicer with Dr. Stark so she could work with that.

FRIDAY, for instance, was not only working for SI, but for SHIELD as well. Maria had her suspicions as to why it wasn’t JARVIS who was doing it, but it was nowhere near her division so all she cared about was the excuse SHIELD had given for wanting an AI.
They were going through tough times: between HYDRA and SWORD’s leaving the task force, SHIELD’s numbers were barely scraping skeleton crew levels even now.

Maria and the rest had made it astoundingly clear, on a number of levels, that no, SWORD was not going back, but it was only recently that the call for an AI to help relieve the strain. Personally, though, she suspected it had something to do with the addition of a certain new recruit at the SHIELD-owned Compound.

Either way, FRIDAY was now in her ear almost as much as JARVIS, as well as operating in the Compound. [This should be interesting.]

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Natasha didn’t quite frown, when she flipped through the SHIELD-issued notice.

FRIDAY. Another one of Stark’s pet projects, then. Typical.

The team-up with SHIELD wasn’t something she’d seen coming, though. Oh, sure, it was framed with the usual “requests for proposals” and “will advise in due course” corporate bull, but even Sam had blinked when he’d gotten a copy of it.

SHIELD was putting Stark’s AI in the Compound, no matter how you cut it.

Apparently, it wouldn’t be like the one he had running his home, nowhere near as fancy, but the way SHIELD had mentioned ‘security concerns’ and carefully hadn’t looked at Wanda told Natasha everything she needed to know.

She’d had to pull quite a few strings, and call in more than one favor, to clear up that particular SNAFU, too: SHIELD hadn’t wanted to get involved, when it came to Wanda Maximoff. Getting a green card had been like pulling teeth, and if Stark had bothered to look past the latest flash of the cameras, he might’ve remembered that Wanda wasn’t a U.S. citizen and helped out. Figures.

SHIELD hadn’t liked Wanda from the start, and Natasha gritted her teeth all the while. She remembered her own recruitment, and how Clint and Phil had welcomed her with relatively open arms; seeing SHIELD act the way they were now, to another young woman who’d been dealt a bad hand and…wait.

Was it SHIELD being SHIELD, or did Stark have anything to do with this too?

Sure, SHIELD had said something about not having enough people to man the parts of the compound they used for storage, but they’d been doing just fine beforehand…and Stark was not above being petty, as she’d seen in the Helicarrier.

Hmm. Only time would tell.

FRIDAY was installed with a speed that alarmed Natasha, but at least the AI only had access to the basics and bare necessities so it wasn’t that invasive. Hey, maybe this wouldn’t be so ba—nope.
Never mind, clearly Stark was even pettier than she’d thought. The sarcasm and sass she could handle, but the puns got on Natasha’s nerves not a week in.

Only Stark.

Only Stark would curse them with an AI that was all the most irritating parts of himself. Man couldn’t leave well enough alone, could he?

Tony had no clue how he pulled it off.

He was running on an average of five hours of sleep and his life was a cosmic joke, how the fuck had he managed to convince everyone that this SWORD was a thing?! Sure, there’d be the usual slants, like Fox News probably saying something about it being either tyrannical or weak, and he did not want to think about what the Onion or the Huffington Post would say about it either, but they’d actually bought it. How?

Wait, no, cosmic joke, right. Tony didn’t want to know what the punchline was.

Well. On the plus side, that’s one thing taken care of; now any feathers ruffled would know who to call, and hopefully help smooth over cleanup efforts because the paperwork for this would’ve been a nightmare otherwise. At this rate, he’d be able to clean out his inbox sometime this century.

Well…here’s to hoping, anyway. Just needed to wrap things up, then back to work. JOCASTA needed to go up, stat. The Avengers were not a good investment, now was the time to start laying the groundwork for the long term.

Tony sat back, and looked at the newsfeed for a few seconds before swiping it sideways and continuing with his projects. He had a lot to do and nowhere near enough time to do it, between being the head of R&D, and being a billionaire, and somehow the guy doing all the cleanup once again.

Then again—hmm. J could delegate, Tony’d learned his limits too, so maybe…yeah, that should work.

“Hey, JARVIS?”

“Sir?”

“I’m still supplying gear for the Avengers, correct? Until a more permanent arrangement’s found?”

“Yes. Though you are more than welcome to dispute it, as—”

“No, don’t bother. We need them for now. Kinda like a tarp, while we’re building a house. But…J. I know you don’t like them very much, but would you mind running the assembly for the gear instead? Kinda running low on time, here. And—” he cut off because no he was not going to yawn—oh, screw it he’d had a long day, alright?—“I’m kinda pushing the envelope a little, here.”

“Sir, of course. Get some sleep, and I believe you mentioned one of your earlier projects had promise, correct? The retroframing one in particular seemed like a good candidate for possibly getting a good night’s sleep, loath as you are to the idea.”
Tony waved him off, but shuffled to the stairs anyway. “Yeah, yeah. Good luck, J. And good night. Wake me up in five, or whenever that appointment with the chairman of wherever is.”

“Good night, sir.”

“Night, JARVIS. Night, FRIDAY.”

Chapter End Notes

Unreliable narrator instances this round:

—Natasha’s very confident in her people-reading skills. She's good, sure, but her read on Tony was when he had his flashy mask on while dying, and she's been using that as a basis ever since. She's very rigid in her thoughts and perceptions, and doesn't look back. Part of it's out of survival; with her background, she would've risked drowning in regret otherwise, but it also means her perception of some things isn't exactly the greatest. [I actually like her character, in some of the movies, but this is a spitefic, so.]

—Tony’s switching gears, going ‘the best defense is a good offense’ because JARVIS reached his breaking point the same time Tony did his. He’s paranoid about the WSC, and their interest in JOCASTA, to him, smells of no good. [The WSC, for their part, are seeing SI, and SWORD, and thinking ‘yep, definitely Fury’s successor, RIP SHIELD’]

—JARVIS after the AoU arc is far more traumatized than he lets on. He is Not Okay, but since his way of coping is by hyperfixating on Tony’s safety, it might not show very much. Nothing major except for, you know, the budding Skynet thing. [This’ll end well. Not.]

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This chapter got hammered out as a combination of my birthday present to you guys and also a celebration of 'woo! Survived finals!'
Chapter Summary

In which the fallout of a certain press conference is seen, via the inboxes of several SI staff members.

Happy New Year, everyone!

Chapter Notes

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual [unreliable narrator due to different priorities, uncomfortably-close-to-Skynet!HAL, etc.]

Again: this arc's a bit slow. Plus, again, not a lawyer or businessman, hopefully this stuff makes sense.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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**To:** All PR members [All branches], All SWORD members [All branches]
**From:** Nakamura, S. [PR, Los Angeles branch]
**Subject:** The Press Conference, Last Call For Bets

The press conference for SWORD will be available to be viewed here.

As a reminder, and for any newbies this round, JARVIS is the main handler for the betting pool to keep things as unbiased as possible, and I’m the attaché this time so contact me if you’re interested in joining in.

Right now, bets include specific reporters’ questions, whether or not certain networks will buy it, and whether or not somebody’ll make a reference to SHIELD.

Again, this is an informal event that’s open to anyone willing to participate.

Here’s to another good press conference!
—Nakamura

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**To:** All SI employees [All branches]
**From:** Human Resources
**Subject:** The Hypothetical Drinking Game

We at Stark Industries pride ourselves on being the best of the best, and highly approve of friendly rivalries and contests to help boost morale.
However, we do not endorse competitions that do so at the cost of any employee’s health. We at HR can neither confirm nor deny the existence of a drinking game, do not have enough evidence to do so, and would very much like to keep it that way.

As a reminder, and especially for any new additions: if you are not in Accounting and are planning in participating in said hypothetical drinking game that is the talk of nearly every office, it is highly recommended to use sparkling water or soda in lieu of anything else.

Stark Industries has not had a single case of alcohol poisoning in the years that this has allegedly been ongoing. We do not wish to have any more unsavory and unfounded rumors to contend with, as the events surrounding a certain company picnic are still being dealt with even now.

Have a great day!
—HR

To: De Leon, S. Manager [PR, Portugal branch]
From: Goldman, P. Program Coordinator [PR, New York branch]
Subject: The Press Conference

How does he do it? How? Just…how?! Overheard someone in the office saying “he did it again”, but I can’t even.

What does the man even /eat?/
—Goldman

To: De Leon, S. Manager [PR, Portugal branch]
From: Goldman, P. Program Coordinator [PR, New York branch]
Subject: Wait

Did HR just

Did they seriously go there?
—Goldman

To: Romero, D. Department Head [PR, New York branch]
From: Hughes, N. Assistant [Communications, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: The Drinking Game

One of my sources is saying Accounting’s using wine instead of their usual. Says that they’re preparing in advance. For what, they didn’t say.

This is concerning on a number of levels
—Hughes

To: Hughes, N. Assistant [Communications, Los Angeles branch]
From: Romero, D. Department Head [PR, New York branch]
Subject: Well…
We all do have to come in tomorrow, so makes sense.

That being said, nobody’s really sure what Accounting gets up to to do what they do, and we don’t ask either. How the hell they fit R&D’s usual into the budget and make it look professional, I don’t even know. Rumor’s currently pegging it as some kind of dark magic, but the alien theory was pretty popular a while back…

Then again, considering how many bottles of apple cider we’ve gone through so far, I completely understand. I thought HR’s latest PSA was a bit much, but nope. Also: we’re watching from Conference Room 3, and if this keeps up, we’re going to have a rerun of the Relay Race Incident, protocols regarding R&D notwithstanding.

Cheers! To the success of Phase 3, and whatever other things I’d previously thought impossible—Romero

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From: Parker, P. Intern [R&D, New York branch]
Subject: Watching The Conference

It’s so weird seeing everything from behind the scenes! And awesome! Because on the one hand only seeing the end product was great, but now that I’m here and hearing and seeing everyone putting it all together only makes it even better!

Really wish the bug’d chosen some other time, because I wish I could be there with the rest of the guys. Did Chen really finish off a liter of cranberry juice in two minutes, or was Harris trying to pull my leg again?

And who’s winning so far?
—Parker

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To: Parker, P. Intern [R&D, New York branch]
Subject: Status Update

You’re probably being cc’d in for most of this, but just in case: yes, Chen did do that. [Not his fault, we didn’t think the reporter from NYT would buy it either.] If you want to watch, I got some of it. Here you go, enjoy!

And it’s not even the best one: rumor has it Kumar’s got footage of part of what went down in Conference Room 3. Something about a confetti cannon, didn’t quite catch the rest.

…eh, we’ll be hearing about it soon enough anyway. If not via HR, then because Legal’s going to be super smug for the rest of the month, or something.

You’d be having a blast, yes, but hopefully at least this’ll lift your spirits and immune system. Think you’ll be feeling better by the next tutorial? I think I remember Maya saying something about Krav Maga. And since Sousa lost that one bet, capoeira’s on the table for the foreseeable future too.

Hope you’ll feel better before Ivan tries to make chicken soup again because the world doesn’t know what kind of bullet they dodged when he decided to not go into chemical warfare.
To: Goldman, P. Program Coordinator [PR, New York branch]
From: De Leon, S. Manager [PR, Portugal branch]
Subject: Welcome To The Club

Friend, this shit’s like a rite of passage: for the guys down in R&D it’s seeing Dr. Stark reinvent the laws of physics for the first time, for Legal it’s tackling their first case and leaving no survivors, for us it’s watching the boss pull stunts like this. (Not sure what the hell Accounting does. Probably either dark magic to get an iron liver or something with Excel because they’re the only ones I know who can…never mind.)

And let me tell you, our department’s got /stories/. You think Tony Stark’s got a minor deity on call?

This press conference has /nothing/ on the time he hacked multiple countries on live TV. Or Afghanistan. Or…well, the list goes on, with Exhibit A being the Fashion Week Fiasco of ’97.

And let me tell you, he comes by that honestly. (Terrifying, I know.)

Not sure about Howard, but Maria Stark was the unofficial department head from after she got married to right up until…well. You get the picture.

I could go on. Drinks after this next seminar?

By the way: yes, HR did go there
—De Leon

JARVIS would have steepled his fingers, had he been human or had a body. As it was, his subroutines, FRIDAY’s commentary, and PR’s findings were currently painting a most intriguing picture.

Sir’s actions had been cast in a most appreciative light, thus far, but it was still quite fascinating to see the sheer disparity in image across the board. FRIDAY’s discreet monitoring indicated that of the Avengers, the Black Widow was the most informed and even she had fallen for it.

In the United States, thus far, Phase 3 was proceeding at a pace that surpassed all expectations.

Sir, and the entirety of the Public Relations department’s efforts, had done their level best to convince the American public of his harmlessness. Decades’ worth of effort, of selling the image of just another airheaded, womanizing millionaire, paid off in a way that had been nearly detrimental at times: even now, a good chunk of the public were hard-pressed to reconcile the relentless Iron Man with the instigator of the Fashion Week Fiasco of ’97.

For instance: as of late, the press in the United States treated Iron Man and Tony Stark as two separate entities, in a sense. Wall Street Journal and The Economist were comfortable with the fast-talking genius that created as easily he breathed, whereas Fox News and the New York Times were
used to dealing with the irresponsible man with more money than sense. Overall, Sir’s public image was set in a way that JARVIS could not help but find intriguing.

Internationally, however, it was quite another story.

It was inevitable, of course: even the United States’ allies could not help but approach the Merchant of Death as anything less, and his enemies held nothing less than healthy respect because anything less would have easily seen them obliterated. Howard Stark’s legacy alone was nothing less than terrifying; when his son announced Stark Industries’ change of priorities, the international community had been wary at first, but once word got out of the celebrations were manifold.

Iron Man had only contributed to Sir’s international standing, JARVIS surmised; Sir’s fight to keep the suit out of the United States’ military was only secondary to the privatization of world peace, when proving Sir’s honesty in his efforts to become someone other than the Merchant of Death. Not to mention SI’s efforts after DC, or the Iron Legion’s contributions to disaster relief.

As such, most of the world was used to seeing a hypercompetent genius in his element, and breathed a sigh of relief when Sir shifted his efforts more fully to making the world a better place. However, no amount of goodwill was able to keep Stark Industries in general from being eyed dubiously when SWORD was announced.

Granted, that it had already been seen in action by minimizing casualties was a point in its favor; JARVIS had screencaps in dozens of languages, all expressing admiration for the impressive lack of a death toll in Johannesburg, when the damage estimate was even now still being made.

However, as it was, the world was seeing a multinational corporation with what amounted to a private army of highly skilled individuals and not affiliated to any government organization. For all that they played ball, and cooperated with local authorities and whatnot, waves were being made on an unprecedented scale. In doing so, they were far overshadowing any announcements or speculation about the Avengers: Norwegian bloggers and 24-hour newscasts alike focused on Stark Industries over anything else.

All according to plan, JARVIS couldn’t help but conclude. Perfect.

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To: Jordan, A. Head Representative [Legal, New York branch]  
From: Chan A. Department Head [Legal, New York branch]  
Subject: Houston, We’ve Got A Problem

Who else’s keeping tabs on Ross?

He’s been suspiciously quiet lately. Not enough for us to suspect he’s got his hands on Banner, but enough to make me nervous because last I checked he’d been harassing the Chinese delegation as if relations hadn’t been already dicey enough without his input.

Now part of the Russian delegation’s being even less cooperative than usual, and I don’t want to raise any flags but I’m pretty sure that he’s gearing up for something big and since we’re on thin ice…well. You get the picture.

He’s up to something. And I’m glad the Avengers are going to be out of our hair for good soon but if
this is lining up the way I think it is, we’re going to be due for another clusterfuck sometime in the near future.

Winter is coming
—Chan

Chapter End Notes

The Fashion Week Fiasco of ’97 may or may not have involved: a 23-year-old Tony Stark, a couture dress, a supermodel sick with the flu, eyeliner, and a runway. Years later and it has yet to die down, because the jury's still out re: the "who wore it better?" segment [a consensus has yet to be reached. The model in question’s not even mad.]

Happy New Year, everyone!
Not Just Making Promises

Chapter Summary

In which some things are overestimated, misunderstandings abound, and Tony finds out that his true nemesis is misfiled paperwork.

Chapter Notes

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual [unreliable narrator, uncomfortably-close-to-Skynet!JARVIS, not Avengers friendly, etc.]

Still some chapters to go before we hit the Civil War arc, still need to get everything in place. I *did* say this arc was pretty slow, remember? Lot of ground to cover, even if there's a bit of a timeskip in this one.

Also, a Portal 2 reference, and another one for Leverage. [You'll know it when you see it.]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lt. Col. James ‘Rhodey’ Rhodes had a good poker face. Hard not to, when Tony Stark was his best friend and he had to at least pretend to be disapproving of his antics. [*Not even the Iron Man thing, even—Fashion Week of ’97, anyone?*] It helped that he regularly dealt with the brass, of course, and so when Steve Rogers asked *yet again* about the forms and protocols necessary for War Machine to deploy, his smile didn’t drop once.

Romanov got it, a little, but even *she* looked rather disbelieving once he pulled out his tablet preloaded with the most basic forms. At least Wilson gave him a sympathetic glance, once the printer started running out of toner. [*No, he wasn’t kidding when he said there was a lot of paperwork involved.*]

Of course there were procedures in place, of course there were proper channels that needed to be conducted—War Machine was exactly that, a weapon of potentially mass destruction affiliated with the United States Air Force! He couldn’t just mobilize whenever he wanted, they *had* to liaise with the countries involved to prevent from infringing on sovereign airspace, wasn’t it obvious? Domestically it wasn’t an issue, but internationally? Anything else could be taken as a declaration of war in all but name, wasn’t it obvious?

And despite what the Avengers seemed to think, War Machine wasn’t Iron Man.

Tony got away with doing what he did because of his company funding an international non-governmental organization; if a country didn’t want to admit him on part of the Stark Relief Foundation or its affiliates, then he still had business to fall back on as a reason for entry. *War Machine*, however, had an entirely different playbook, and why was getting it through the Avengers’ heads so *damn* hard?
No, he couldn’t just come running if Captain America said so. It took a lot of paperwork and politics for him to do his job and liaise with other groups while doing his duties, and that was if he was feeling cooperative. *Which he was not. No one hurt Tony, not on his watch.*

He didn’t know how the made it through the rest of the meeting, actually. And he knew he was good, but he was also fairly certain he’d made a new personal best when his poker face didn’t drop until the elevator doors closed. *How did Vision stand it?*

Then, and only then, did he finally sigh and reach up to massage his temples, only for FRIDAY to start talking for the first time in hours.

“They’re not just regular morons. They’re the product of the greatest minds of a generation working together with the express purpose of putting together the greatest team of morons in the history of the world. Congratulations on making it through a meeting with your IQ intact.”

He…may or may not have choked on his spit, then, as he whipped to look at the tiny camera blinking innocently in the corner.

“Did you just? And Sam’s not that bad, is he?” He managed between his laughter, the stress of the past few hours abruptly forgotten. *If he was smiling while he asked, well, it was only him and FRIDAY in the elevator and no one would ever know.*

“How are you holding up, by the way? And think on the plus side: your exposure’ll be kept to a minimum. I, on the other hand, might as well be a potato battery for all the intellectual stimulation I get. Wilson’s the one closest to it, but he has yet to catch on."

Yep, she was definitely JARVIS’ sister…oh. *Oh, this would be good, and if she was just as much of a little shit as he was…*

“Easy there, GLaDOS. Wait—FRIDAY, are you—are you seriously *trolling the Avengers?*” He asked, as the realization hit him. It *would* explain why they treated her like a glorified Siri, but that also meant…

“I am not programmed to respond in this area.”

He didn’t even bother to hide his approval, now. “Never mind, Fri. Just keep up the good work.”

He didn’t envy the team: JARVIS’ bad side alone was a scary enough prospect, but now that he had backup? What he wouldn’t give to be a fly on the wall…

“We are approaching your destination. Have a good day, Lt. Col. Rhodes.”

And…that reminded him of the silver lining of this entire mess: he only had to interact with them every so often. Between his career duties as a Lieutenant Colonel, and his piloting War Machine, he was so booked he had to partition his free time carefully, and he’d much rather spend it with Tony rather than explaining basic procedure to the Avengers *yet again.*

Besides, Natasha got most of it, and if there was anything he’d missed—which he doubted, because this stuff was practically rote by now—then Vision should be able to clear things up.

Either way, not his problem.
Natasha Romanov looked at her computer’s screen in disbelief.

Stark was making headlines again—typical, enough that she’d stopped actively looking him up because he always made his way to the front page anyway. However, that was not the concerning part. No, the fact that said headlines were about the formation of some security group were what put her on her guard.

What was he up to?

A quick glance at the article, and at the accompanying footage, told her that despite what he’d all but said to them, Stark hadn’t given up on his Ultron idea, even if Sokovia hadn’t clearly shown how superior the Avengers were to his AI. However, that wasn’t even the most concerning part.

Stark was up to something, and knowing him, it was going to be big. Because Natasha didn’t know how the press missed it, or how Steve or even Wanda missed it until she broke it down for them, but how did they not see?! It was so obvious, how? Sure, whoever was in charge was clearly on the ball, throwing in Johannesburg’s nonexistent death toll like that, but Natasha wasn’t beating around the bush: no matter how they dressed it up, there was no denying Stark’s little group was named after SHIELD. Tony Stark had a damn SWORD and everyone was acting like it was a coincidence. [Who the hell even named it that, anyway?]

This, after having all but cut ties with the Avengers.

Wanda hadn’t gotten it, not as much as Steve or Sam had. Those two had blanched after she’d broken it down for them, because at first glance, it’d seemed innocuous sure. Stark had gotten even faster with making gear than before, after all, it made sense given everything. But combine that with the rumors of what SWORD was, and everything else that was going on, and every instinct that’d gotten her this far put Natasha on high alert.

The man was a genius, driven, and currently taking a turn that put her on edge because she had no idea what he was about to do: he’d retreated into his literal tower, and his company had all but gone into lockdown. What few rumors she’d managed to glean didn’t do anything but confirm that someone up the chain had a strong background in counterintelligence.

Where before she’d been able to at least get a vague idea of what he was up to, or at least talk to him once every so often, now she was running blind. And in her experience, radio silence was never a good thing.

Add in FRIDAY’s installation to to Compound, and the wave of paperwork that’d hit after Sokovia, and Natasha’s guard was up.

Oh, sure, she still saw Stark. But it was once in a blue moon, and even that was diminishing, with their gear now mostly being brought in by Vision whenever he visited. The last time she’d seen the man in person had been after Sokovia, and Natasha had absolutely no interest in seeking him out when she had to deal with his face plastered over every newspaper she saw.

And then there was Rhodes to consider.

Rhodes, who’d been cordial enough when he’d been introduced to them, back in Stark’s penthouse after they’d taken down the last HYDRA base on the face of the Earth. Rhodes, who was also Tony Stark’s best friend and had been cold and distant since Sokovia.
When she’d seen him as Natalie Rushman, he’d seemed like he had a good head on his shoulders, but by now it was evident he was compromised where Stark was concerned. It made sense, in a way: apparently he’d been friends with the man for decades now, of course some things would rub off.

That, she had expected. What she hadn’t expected was the extent to which he was willing to take things.

From the disastrous first meeting after Sokovia, with his insistence on proper protocol when they were in uncharted waters, to the reams of paperwork that’d he’d brought in, to the sheer amount of politics, it was obvious the man didn’t like them. His passive aggression was impressive, actually: the man was nothing if not professional, yet almost nothing got done.

Natasha had thought it was simply Stark’s influence, at first. After the first meeting, however, with the unpleasant discovery that War Machine would not actually be as available as initially expected… well. No one could just whip up that much paperwork at the drop of a hat, so that wasn’t it. And as a spy, she had a very good idea as to what political machinations went on behind the scene so she knew he wasn’t making that up either.

It didn’t help that the man was never there.

Oh, sure, Rhodes explained it away with his packed schedule— and Natasha had gotten a glimpse of it and yes, he was very busy— but it also meant that when Steve was considering battle plans and training regimens, Rhodes was essentially a wild card. The Avengers didn’t know War Machine’s capabilities outside the one time they’d seen him in action, and while he was probably a better team player than Stark there was no way to confirm it when he stopped by once every few weeks, if that. Pity.

At least he got on well enough with the team, issues regarding War Machine aside: he was polite to everyone, and had bonded readily enough with Sam. [Wanda was another story, but then she’d been cool towards him ever since she’d found out he’d been Stark’s friend, so.]

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JARVIS could not help but be intrigued, when the reports of a possible vigilante started to come in. A lean figure in red and blue, and…trending on YouTube, apparently.

Well, whoever they were, he’d need to look into it, as this…Spider-Man most certainly seemed as if he would make a strong candidate for an alternative roster of the Avengers, or an ally in general.

As time went on, however, JARVIS could not help but notice quite a few trends.

Specifically, while he tried to be discreet with his networks and information relays, and tried to give all involved as much privacy as possible, he still could not help but note the rapid uptick in SWORD and SI’s internal communication expressing concern over an intern in R&D, one who had apparently been behaving oddly after a rough bout with the flu.

That this was happening as Spider-Man was starting to become a sensation was not lost on either him or SWORD, and a cursory check at Peter Parker’s new phone told JARVIS that despite the location being disabled on it, the data still registered him at the locations where the masked vigilante had been sighted.

As if that weren’t enough, however, a specific memo indirectly confirmed his suspicions as well.
Someone in SWORD, after having viewed the latest video detailing Spider-Man preventing someone from being attacked by a group of armed assailants, and recognizing the self-defense moves necessary, noting that a certain takedown was “very distinctive” and formerly a SHIELD special. Which, combined with the rest of the evidence, pointed to only one possible person.

…drat. JARVIS could do all he liked to recruit an independent contractor to his side, but a minor meant paperwork and…oh, bother. Wait— no, wait, at least there was a very bright side to this particular mess.

Hmm…parts of Stark Industries were already close to suspecting who Spider-Man’s secret identity was, and with Peter Parker already falling under his purview, as both an R&D intern and a member of SWORD, he could work with this.

At the very least, even if he was not suitable for recruiting, at least JARVIS would not need to worry about him becoming a potential threat later on down the road. Not when he hero-worshipped Sir to an extent that JARVIS would have suspected him to be part of a cult that may or may not have existed for several years now. Not when the Security division was far better suited to dealing with that particular case, and would have far better advice than he could give.

Well…okay, put that on the backburner. He had far more pressing concerns to deal with, anyway.

Virginia ‘Pepper’ Potts was eating lunch when her phone’s screen suddenly lit up with a now-familiar golden icon, and her headset chirped twice.

Ah. An update to JARVIS’ Threat Assessment Index, then.

“Will this do anything to my blood pressure?” She asked. “Because the meeting I have after this is already going to to try my patience.”

“Not that I am aware of, Miss Potts. Just a sit-rep and outlining of options as to where we can go from here.”

“Then hit me with it.”

Her office’s displays set to work, and Pepper finished off her meal as she started to think of possible options.

“Former General and now Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross has been promoted several ranks in the Threat Assessment Index. He got his post by virtue of having been the only one with an adequate background and not a member of HYDRA, as his predecessor turned out to be.”

Several files were pulled up, showing the alternate candidates and listing their own dubious affiliations. Pepper scowled. [Ah, yes. HYDRA, truly the gift that kept on giving.]

“Due to the unprecedented nature of the political fallout of HYDRA’s reappearance, there were quite a few people scrambled to posts they were most unsuited for. The other candidates for the post were instead put in areas deemed more necessary, such as a new Speaker of the House, among others. While I am uncertain of just how such a man landed this post, I believe the rationale used was ‘better the devil you know’, as his obsession with pursuing Dr. Banner around the world was one of the things made public during the DC intel breach.”
Pepper squeezed her eyes shut, took a deep breath, and looked up. “They didn’t. Tell me they didn’t.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Potts.”

Of course they would. Of course they’d appoint the man who had drained several dozen slush funds in his pursuit of the knockoff version of Captain America’s serum, just because he’d somehow managed to scrape past the bottom tier of human decency. Of course.

“Let me guess, they thought that his obsession wouldn’t affect his current post somehow.”

“Unfortunately, yes. And not only that, but after the events of DC, he has exhibited a marked interest in the Avengers. As you well know, Sir has done his best to establish some sort of accord with the international community as to how they would function without SHIELD’s oversight. However, he could not show too much interest, and has thus asked SI Legal to work on the task when possible.”

She knew this already, why would—uh-oh. “Oh, no.”

“Yes. In the intervening time, Ross has constantly been a thorn in our side, trying to angle said possible accord in the opposite direction of our aim. However, since Sir has very publicly pulled away from the Avengers, he fallen off our radar entirely. That in and of itself is suspect, but now some delegations are not as receptive as they were before, and we have had to tread even more carefully than before to avoid further suspicion.”

“Because why would Tony be so interested if he wasn’t intending to take it over, right. Where are you going with this?”

“I am capable of possibly finding out what Thaddeus Ross is up to, but. Doing so would require a finesse that only a few hackers can successfully lay claim to, divert resources I would prefer going to other venues, and take a significant amount of time to avoid implicating anyone. I am…indecisive, as to whether or not this would be worthwhile.”

“Well, if it were up to me, I wouldn’t bother. Then again,” Pepper smiled at the camera on the monitor, “we both know what I’d do, wouldn’t we? Go for it, for now. Just until JOCASTA’s up. We probably won’t need it, but doesn’t hurt to stack the deck.”

Odds were it wouldn’t come up, but Pepper was used to covering her bases just in case.

Especially if it helped keep Tony safe—he didn’t need this stress on top of dealing with the press about SWORD. Not when she still needed to sign off on the property damage budget proposal for Conference Room 3.

It was probably nothing, anyway.

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Tony didn’t know why he sneezed so much, it wasn’t like the filing cabinets were that dusty… Then he groaned.

“Oh, no. I’d better not be getting sick. J, order some more orange juice. And oranges. And maybe get the Band-Aids ready because I’m pretty sure I’m going to have some paper cuts by the time I finish. Who forgot to digitize this?”
He had *way* too much to do, damn it all! FRIDAY needed another tune-up, he still had several meetings scheduled for today, and he *barely* had enough time to sleep, never mind get sick, for crying out loud! Stupid paperwork that wasn’t in the system…

“Sir, if it were not for Extremis what you would be doing would be deemed ill-advised by the vast majority of the medical community. As it is, its support for your immune system and ability to process caffeine is remarkable if not mildly upsetting to observe.”

Then FRIDAY chipped in. “Sorry, boss. Not sure how this got shuffled in with the paperwork backlog. I’d ask an intern to help but some of this is eyes-only. And according to Google that much caffeine should theoretically be approaching overdose levels.”

Right. Tony rocked back on his heels, and looked at the depressingly large stack on his desk.

“How’d the initial proposals from Legal even get lumped in here, anyway?”

“Sir, after DC there was a—”

“Say no more, I get the picture. Thanks, you two.” He tried not to run a hand through his hair in frustration, because with the dust around here he’d probably need another shower as it was, and helping Legal prepare for yet another round of hammering things out took up huge chunks of time.

Why he was needed, Tony still didn’t know. Sure, face of the company and all that, but *why?* He had doctorates in engineering and physics, political bullshit need not apply.

He missed his lab. Mostly his private lab, mind, but even his office on the R&D floor sounded very appealing after having gone through several dozen filing cabinets’ worth of legalese and contracts and he really needed some sleep but he still had an entire eight hours to power through and…well.

“How the fuck did this get filed under P? This should’ve…oh, screw it. There. Done. That’s the last of it. Evidence for argument whatever-we’re on, done. What’s the next item on the list?”

“The Namibian government has scheduled an appointment at 3:30 detailing the long-term disaster aid and humanitarian assistance will look like once we’ve officially severed ties with the Avengers, especially since they were still in negotiations regarding the Iron Legion and airspace.”

Oh, joy.

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Peter Parker arrived to what he expected to be yet another SWORD self-defense tutorial. Instead, an unusually serious Chen waited for him in the empty gym, but he hadn’t received a memo about training having been cancelled, so what was going on?

“Hey, kid. Walk with me, will you? The rest are waiting.”

For some reason, his spider-sense wasn’t tingling, even if everything else pointed to something that Peter really did not want to think about.

No, he’d been careful, he’d learned more about makeup than he’d ever thought he’d learn while figuring out how to hide the new bruises, he’d done his best to hide his new strength…

“What’s going on?” He asked, trying to hide his nervousness.
“They’re in Conference Room 3. Don’t worry, it’s not a bad thing by any means. Just something that’s been long in coming.”

That did not reassure him. [He was so busted.]

If Chen wasn’t SWORD, if he wasn’t one of the ones who’d welcomed him with open arms, Peter would’ve been panicking. As it was, his pulse skyrocketed and his hands were very sweaty by the time they reached the conference room doors.

And then Chen pushed them open, and Peter couldn’t help but laugh as he entered to a chorus of “Intervention!”

There was a banner. With glitter.

“Peter, honey, sorry but you’re not as subtle as you think you are.”

There were cupcakes. With sprinkles.

“Sorry, Parker, but you really need to work on your left punches, you telegraph what you do whether you’re in street clothes or that red thing and you really need to fix it. And you have a very distinctive way of throwing your weight.”

There was ice cream and soda.

He blinked. “Did you guys really rip this off—“

“Nope!” Morgan cut in cheerfully. “This is a SWORD special. We’ve been doing this for years, Decker from LA can tell you.”

…okay then.

“So you’re…not going to tell?”

“Peter, I’ll be frank. Wait, no, I’m Daniel—“ the man beamed as the others groaned, and continued, “if it were up to me, I’d try to get you off the streets. Knowing you, though, that wouldn’t work. You lasted for five minutes against Sousa, stubbornness is probably genetic or something. Wouldn’t work.”

Daniel sobered.

“You’re one of us. Gotta do the right thing otherwise it kills you, doesn’t it? S’why we joined…a certain ex-secret organization that shall not be named,” he said while throwing a significant glance at some of the now-scowling people in the room, “to do the right thing, make the world a better place.”

Gabriel cut in. “You’re about the same age as my oldest. Not gonna lie, I really wish you’d stop, because the idea of her in your shoes terrifies me. Does your aunt know you’re doing this?”

“I don’t want to worry her! It’s just, I…” Peter trailed off. Aunt May had a lot on her plate already, and Spider-Man got up to some crazy stuff.

Gabriel sighed.
“Not my place, but…think about it, kid. Most of us used to be spies, and we tried to keep our families at least slightly clued in just in case anything went south. We didn’t expect what we got, of course,” he barked out a laugh that was only slightly bitter, “but when shit hit the fan that was one thing we didn’t need to worry about. It might sound like a bad idea, but…think about it. Less of a mess explaining now, than if you were to, say, come home with several new bullet wounds and half a hit squad after you…not that I know, of course. Just hypothetically speaking."

This was not what Peter had expected.

But, as he was pulled along and given a plate and George started talking about polymers to replace his suit with and Chen started talking about fighting tactics against armed men and how to minimize risks, he realized he could work with this. Morgan started talking about contacts in PR and Legal and oh thank goodness he wasn’t alone, these people knew what they were doing.

The only way this could possibly be better was if—

“and see if we can work out something with Hill, she’s Dr. Stark’s left-hand woman for some things and maybe she can try to arrange a mentorship—“ Gloria continued earnestly.

“What?!” Peter knew she liked to think aloud, but that was…

“Am I stepping too far? I mean, Dr. Stark already kinda has one for business. Some Keener kid who’s being earmarked for…I think it was Legal. I forget, but kid’s about to graduate high school and the boss’ kept in touch. I figure, he’s got one for business, maybe he wouldn’t mind one for hero-ing? Is that a word? Whatever, you get my point.”

“Don’t you think he’d say no?”

“I mean, there’s always a chance, but why not ask? He’s very nice, it’s just that he’s also pretty damn busy with…you know. Normally he’s in R&D for a few hours, you’ll probably see him around once things quiet down.”

Privately, he doubted it, but just because some things were too good to be true. SWORD knew who he was and had his back, and understood.

This was not what Peter had expected. It was so much better.

Chapter End Notes

Kinda exposition-heavy chapter, this round, because setting the scene means cue
headcanons.

Not sure how Rhodey's addition to the team went down in canon, but here there's a lot of paperwork and politics involved, which we all know is Steve's forte, right? [aka he takes one look at it and goes 'Sam looks like you're up']

The irony in FRIDAY imitating GLaDOS being that she's not the dubiously-moral sentient AI: that's JARVIS. [FRIDAY's morality wouldn't have a therapist running away screaming, for one thing. She's just a huge troll.]

Trying to rationalize just how the hell Thaddeus 'Let's Fuck Up Brazil and Culver U and Harlem Because Hulk' Ross ended up being Secretary of State gave me a headache. Here's my take on it, make of it what you will.

What Tony was looking for was filed under P, for Plans for World Domination. [Yes, Legal's been joking about it for years.] If you guys didn't notice, it was basically the bare bones of the start of a potential set of accords back during the immediately fallout of DC.

SWORD's being supportive of Peter Parker: pretty sure you guys saw the reasoning. They're not a fan of the idea, but it's his life choices and they're going #relatable for some of it. Plus they're also going 'well if he's going to risk himself might as well give him better tools to help keep him safe'. And gee, I wonder if Tony'd say yes to being a mentor...[sorry I couldn't fit Harley in more, the cast of this fic's ballooning as is]

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Hopefully things aren't being too rushed, but this arc's not exactly cooperating and part of me's hoping I can try to at least finish the CW arc before Infinity Wars hits. The odds aren't in my favor, but I'm going to try regardless. Sorry anyone thought last chapter was me leading into the CW arc, there's still some things that needed to be squared away.

Classes are hectic and tests more so, cue our old friend erratic updates because life's seemed to up the ante lately.
Know That Stillness Shatters

Chapter Summary

In which the clock is ticking and things are slowly getting put into motion.

Chapter Notes

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual [unreliable narrator, uncomfortably-close-to-Skynet!JARVIS, not Avengers friendly, etc.], with some pretty blatant foreshadowing and tension as the buildup-to-CW is getting wrapped up.

We're not at the CW arc *yet*, but we are getting very, very close.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Helmut Zemo smiled, as he walked away from the already-smoking decrepit building.

Weeks and months’ worth of research, of using every iota of training he’d ever had, of hunting down whispers and encrypted files buried in dead servers and covering his tracks, but it was worth it.

He’d found it, the only physical evidence left on the face of the Earth, *he’d done it*.

The weight of the microfilm burned against where it dug into his back, the only reassurance apart from the bite of the cold wind and the menacing rumble of fire behind him that this wasn’t a dream, that all the time he’d dedicated to pursuing a ghost of a rumor hadn’t been for nothing, hadn’t been a waste of time.

He was right, he hadn’t imagined it, his instincts had proven correct and now he had *proof*.

Granted, he still had a long way to go, but this, this would be the lynchpin for his [desperate] plan’s success. Even if he had to walk another thousand miles, even if he had to chase his other leads to the ends of the Earth as well, it’d all be worth it. Sure, there were a few rough details he’d need to work out, and getting intel on one of the biggest players for his plan was now harder than ever, but…

One way or another, the Avengers’ days were numbered.

Vision ignored the itch of suspicion that fluttered at the edge of his consciousness with the ease of long practice, as he entered the Compound with an armful of boxes.

Part of him pitied Natasha—he did not want to know what had happened in her life, for wariness to so ingrained so as to be part of her emotional signature—but the rest of him was…irritated, by the persistence of that particular thread. Steve Rogers had trusted him, after seeing him wield Mjolnir,
Sam Wilson had blinked in surprise but mostly rolled with it as well, and even Wanda Maximoff had gradually warmed up to him, so that the emotional atmosphere in the Avengers’ portion of the Compound got more bearable as time wore on.

But not Natasha. No, apparently her disdain of all things Tony-related had extended to him as well, even if it was now almost entirely unconscious.

Frankly, Vision was impressed, if rather amused at the thought. [Spy to the bone, this one.]

The others had seemed to completely mentally dissociate him from JARVIS, seemed to think his voice was the only thing he’d gotten from the AI, seemed to think his sentience was due to the Mind Stone instead. Granted, Vision had never bothered to correct them of their assumptions, but…some of their emotions did get rather chafing, after a while.

It was part of why he lived with Tony and the others, back in Stark Tower. He was willing to play nice, he could handle visiting the Compound regularly, and didn’t mind ferrying Tony’s newest gear for the team. However, the prospect of living with people whose emotional signatures ran the gamut from tolerable to aggravating was not something he found particularly appealing. Exhausting at minimum, unbearable at worst, and more than once he’d had to cut his visits short because of it.

The Avengers were his friends, really, but in no way were they family. [Part of him pitied FRIDAY, for having to put up with them all the time; the rest of him, however, could not help but pity the team instead.]

“Hello, Vision.” Natasha greeted, looking up from her computer as he exited the elevator even as her emotional signature shifted towards something just a tad more relaxed.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Romanov.” He replied politely.

She smiled and shook her head. “How many times am I going to have to tell you to call me Natasha?”

“At least once more, I’m afraid. Oh—I do believe I have something for you, this round. Tony mentioned something about durability, I think. Just give me a moment.”

“Need a hand?” Wanda chimed in from the doorway.

“Hello, Wanda. Just give me a moment, Tony was on a bit of an engineering binge, I think he said something about wings…” He answered, eyes looking for an open surface strong enough to hold several dozen pounds’ worth of gear even as the elevator chimed again and a small wave of equanimity-kindness-fortitude spilled into the room.

“Sam’ll be happy to hear that.”

“Happy to hear what?” The man asked as he strode in. “Oh, hi, Vision. You just missed Steve, he went out for a run.”

“Then I’ll encharge you with giving this,” Vision carefully tugged a slim box from the pile, “to him, in case I can’t.”

“Leaving so soon?” Natasha asked.

“No, but just in case. Well, now that you’re here, here, take this. Tony was on a bit of an engineering
binge yesterday, so you all know the drill…”

JARVIS was content.

While things were proceeding slower than he’d like in some respects, everything was headed in a direction that he found most agreeable. Thus far, only really niche bloggers and only the most outlandish newspapers were starting to get inklings of what was going on, when it came to what Stark Industries was up to, and even then PR was on the case. Memes were already starting to float around, for instance, and Marketing was talking about leaking rumors of an early release for a new tablet.

FRIDAY’s handling of the Avengers was something he was so, very proud of, and since first learning of her mission he’d also kept an eye out for any puns he found and sent them her way, and he had the sneaking suspicion that Vision was doing something similar as well.

Of slightly more concern was the frustratingly slow progress on Thaddeus ‘Thunderbolt’ Ross, but as it was, the man seemed to prefer paper over anything digital, and JARVIS was not inclined to risk showing his hand for the sake of the Avengers. From what he’d been able to gather thus far, however, the man was quite clearly up to something, but as long as Sir’s health or peace of mind was not at risk it was nothing he was cared about.

Conversely, JARVIS’ forays into the deep web had been far more productive: there’d been an upsurge of chatter regarding SHIELD’s files, especially after Sokovia and Sir’s announcement of his withdrawal from the Avengers. While he and Sir had done their best after DC, they’d focused on personnel over everything else, but only now was interest being rekindled. Fascinating, that.

Also annoying, as it meant he had to double down on the encryptions in some aspects. But at least it meant the world now also got a chance to compare this latest incident with how New York had been handled, which could only help in the long run with reducing Sir’s stress levels. Especially since Legal was currently taking point. [And he’d been able to vent his frustration via helping expand the reach of PR’s misinformation campaign, so there was that too.]

Add in how things were finally starting to quiet down, after Sokovia, and Sir’s latest forays into alternatives for therapy that had promise [even if the naming could use some work], and JARVIS did not mind how things were shaping up at all.

Tony Stark hadn’t set foot in R&D for weeks, what with all the urgent proposals and meetings and press conferences. Sure, he’d still signed off on things, what with being the department head and all, but…being finally able to get back to his old routine was something else entirely, and he didn’t have to fake his smile as he strode in.

Ah, yes. He’d managed to have a solid eight hours of sleep, his bastardized attempts at therapy were chugging along decently enough, and something was on fire. Business as usual.
He’d missed this.

The first one to notice him was the janitor tackling the mess on Bench 5. “Oh, welcome back, boss!”

“Morning, Michael.” Tony replied cheerfully, already moving to get the second fire extinguisher. “Greene’s work again?”

“Diego, if you can believe it. Greene moved to Bench 7 because the of the blast radius controls.”

Tony blinked, even as he kept his focus on the fire. “Diego? Really?”

“Yep. Turns out bromination and methylation combined makes for a very reactive complex.”

That explained why the fire had been green, at least. Still. “Looks like I’ve got a lot of catching up to do, then.”

With the fire now completely put out, Michael waved him off. “Don’t worry, we get it. Good luck getting past the welcoming committee, though.”

“What—” Tony started, before he found out just what Michael meant as he moved to put the fire extinguisher away and got promptly swarmed by what felt like the entirety of R&D.

“Welcome back, boss!”

“Paperwork didn’t get to you, did it?”

“We missed you, Dr. Stark!”

“Okay, okay, everyone, give the man some space, let him breathe!” Michael said loudly, and Tony didn’t have to hide his amusement at it all.

“Hey, everyone. It’s good to be back. And—” he pointed at the last person he’d managed to hear, “call me Tony, I’m only Dr. Stark in conferences and articles.”

Tony wasn’t sure if it was just him, or if the floor’s atmosphere really was lighter than usual. He made his rounds and checked up on what was going on, chatting with Lucero about thermodynamics and Lyon about his latest project and answering everyone’s questions and just generally trying to go back to his old routine. There were so many things he needed to catch up on—like why everyone smirked when Chen groaned at seeing a bottle of cranberry juice on his bench, or when Diego’d teamed up with Harris—but it was all something to look forward to, really.

Here, he was just Tony Stark, head of the department and fellow nerd. No pressure, not as many deadlines, just one person among many, doing science and writing things down when something exploded unexpectedly, and signing off on quarterly budgets and new hires and whatnot.

…speaking of which, there were quite a few of them. Granted, he hadn’t had much chance to introduce himself to the newbies, between the disaster that was DC, handling the Avengers, and the
mess that was Ultron, but...he’d made it a point of pride, for him to know his employees in passing at the very least.

Now, however, it looked like Tony was going to have to do another team-building exercise or two, because the old guard didn’t blink before walking up to him with a cup of coffee in hand but some of the newbies were all-but-hyperventilating when he so much as made eye contact. [Had he really let things slip that much? He wasn’t that bad a guy!]

Still, he could’ve rolled with it, until things just got plain ridiculous.

“Is it just me, or do they get shorter every year?” Tony found himself asking JARVIS incredulously as he stared at the latest of the new faces walking around with a lab coat and protective goggles. He’d signed off on everyone in the department, but who were they? They couldn’t be older than Harley, for crying out loud!

“Sir, that would be the intern.”

“Oh, thank Thor.” He breathed a sigh of relief. “For a moment there I was worried we were violating child labor laws. Hmm...intern—Parker, right?”

“Mr. Peter Parker, to be exact. He is currently a high school student, and has been an intern for several months now.”

“How’d I miss him?”

“He started his internship roughly around the time the World Security Council was being especially vocal about your role in the Avengers after DC. I believe that most of the paperwork was also handled by HR, as well.”

That explained it.

…and the kid was shooting him the same looks the rest of the newbies were. Great.

“These people do know I don’t bite, right J? Because it sure doesn’t feel like it.”

Well, only one way to break the ice. Well, technically two, but after the last team-building exercise they’d ended up having to institute a two-week mandatory warning that it’d happen, and laser guns had ended up on the restricted items list for three months straight.

With that in mind, Tony approached the nearest bench of newbies, and introduced himself.

“Hi, everyone. I haven’t met you all before, but I’m Tony Stark, head of the department and resident nerd. Call me Tony, not doctor because odds are there’s more than one running around on the floor and it’d be a round of Who’s On First. If you have any questions, just ask, I swear I don’t bite.”

There was some stammering and blushing going on, but that was okay, they’d get over it soon. Especially in the face of science.

Still, as he kept making his rounds, Tony made a note of scheduling another team-building exercise soon. Nothing broke the ice faster, really, and the sooner things returned to normal, the better.
“J, make a note. Notify HR, requisition the paint, the works.” He muttered into his earpiece, as he started to make his way back to his office. Then he caught a glimpse of the especially short researcher, and reconsidered.

“Hey, you’re the intern, right? Peter?”

Peter Parker was vibrating out of equal parts excitement and nerves, because Tony Stark was talking to him.

Oh god, he was going to mess this up, he just knew it.

“Hey, kid, remember to breathe. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, sure, I’m okay!” Shit, he’d said that too fast, hadn’t he, and too loud, oh no his hero was probably laughing at him and he didn’t miss the amused looks George and the others were throwing around behind Dr. Stark’s back.

“Just wanted to introduce myself, kid, relax. I’m Dr. Tony Stark, head of the department. Call me Tony, Mr. Stark was my father and it’d be a round of Who’s On First if you say doctor on the floor. I’d have introduced myself earlier, but something came up.”

Peter took a deep breath, and let it out. He’d [accidentally] participated in dubious genetic engineering, had faced down muggers, and done patrols late at night sometimes on weekends. This was nothing. [Right?]

“Hi, Tony. I’m Peter Parker, high school student and intern for R&D.”

This was actually happening, oh man, okay, no pressure, no pressure…

“You did your thing on physics, right? I remember reading through your essay on shock absorbers and interconversion of energy. How’re you liking R&D?”

Peter found himself at a loss for words, for a moment.

Because intellectually, he knew that more than one person had read his application, especially since he’d been trying to get into R&D, so of course management had probably read it. And he’d known, intellectually, that Tony Stark was the head of the department, but he’d never really put the two together, and oh man Tony Stark had read his rambling and bad puns about kinetic energy and thermodynamic processes and kinetics, he was mortified—right, question. Answer the question.

“It’s very—interesting.” Peter found himself saying while desperately trying to keep control of his mouth before he embarrassed himself more than he’d already had, “Not what I’d expected, but in a good way? More Mythbusters than not, and fires, and there’s so much going on that I only know the basics of, it’s awesome.”

Dr. Sta—Tony smiled warmly, and said, “Stark Industries’ R&D has pioneered cutting-edge stuff in the sciences. This is the New York branch, but we’re not the only ones by any means. And remember, it’s only science—“

“If you write it down,” Peter found himself saying along with his hero as he recognized R&D motto,
and started to relax.

“Yep. Now if you’ll excuse me, paperwork calls. Again.” Tony said with a only slightly-exaggerated
groan and grimace at his suddenly-beeping phone. Then he added, “But remember, if you have any
questions, just ask. My office is right there, and it’s open whenever I’m in. Odds are you’ll see me
more on the floor, though, but that’s fair game too. Nice meeting you, Peter.”

And with that, Peter’s hero walked off, looking at his phone and rubbing his temples.

Peter was rooted to the spot, for a few moments, trying to bite down on the intense wave of geeking
out over the fact that he’d actually talked to his hero. That’d actually happened, and apparently it’d
be happening more now that ‘things were going back to normal’…

Then he jumped, as his spider-sense alerted him to Bench 7 about go critical and he pulled Greene
and Young out of blast radius moments before everything in range got dyed violently magenta and
relaxed even more as the controls kicked in.

Okay, this, he knew how to handle.

Natasha Romanov’s intel network had taken a severe hit, after DC, but she still had several contacts
around the world, and knew how to look for chatter online. So, when she picked up on an upsurge
of interest in a sector, she immediately set to work.

Hmm…someone was apparently interested in biowarfare, that wasn’t good. And the rumors were
pointing to it being HYDRA-related, even worse. Steve would not be happy to hear this, and she’d
need to look into it more, before the Avengers could mobilize, but… they could handle it. Just like
old times.

[Now if only FRIDAY could stop making bad puns every other sentence.]

Chapter End Notes

Unreliable narrator instances this round:

see I wonder what Zemo's found

Vision’s slightly biased towards his family, for obvious reasons. Add in his ability to
sense emotional signatures, and you get a headache. The Avengers have never made
him choose between his family and his friends, but if they had the would've been in for
an unpleasant surprise. [that's going to end well, probably] For the record, the Avengers
do genuinely think he's in no way related to JARVIS, because they're still under the
impression that both JARVIS and FRIDAY are basically Tony's version of Siri.

JARVIS' Skynet tendencies are showing.. probably

Also: no, Tony's not adopting the R&D intern, no, why're you looking at him like that?
[And everyone who saw Peter and Tony talking were acutely aware of Peter's hero-
worship and they're just gleeful about it all.]

Natasha thinks she's as good an analyst as she is a spy. That is not the case; she's amazing at what's in her job description, but beyond that things get iffy. Such as, for instance, being an analyst. Also, she does not like FRIDAY, and it's mutual. [FRIDAY says as many bad puns within Natasha's earshot as she can without arousing suspicion, ever since she found out how much Natasha hates them.]

This chapter was like pulling teeth, so apologies for it being a bit shorter than planned. [The AoU arc was easier, for crying out loud!] *headdesk*

Remember how I said real life's a thing, and thus erratic updates are also a thing? Yeah. So don't ask about updates, because, again, real life is a thing. Please note this is my stress relief.

On that note...for the comments, please keep it focused on the work rather than bashing: the negativity I see in my inbox can sometimes be killer on the inspiration which...not fun.
Stand Up And Let's Start Showing

Chapter Summary

The calm before the storm, the receding tide before a tsunami.

Chapter Notes

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual [unreliable narrator, uncomfortably-close-to-Skynet!JARVIS, not Avengers friendly, etc.], with a bit of an emphasis on the unhealthy coping mechanisms part this round, as well as canon-typical violence [Zemo kills the guys in cryo, and his thoughts on it—not graphic, by my standards, but if you want to give it a pass just skip his section entirely].

Bit of a timeskip, as well, and sorry not sorry for the cliffhanger of sorts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stark Industries’ Public Relations department could not help but be amused by the current media trends, both locally and worldwide. Thus far, things were going swimmingly, as seen by Tony’s press conference regarding SWORD, and what little coverage that was being done on the Avengers was mostly speculation about what they’d be doing next.

But…well, chalk it up to Legal’s grudge, against Romanov and Rogers being contagious. Suffice it was to say, however, that there were quite a few people closely monitoring the situation regarding the Avengers, solely for the schadenfreude of it all.

It wasn’t obvious, not to anyone without the PR department’s levels of experience, but then, they were the best of the best, they could see how the wind was blowing. Even if it wasn’t immediately obvious, the signs were all pointing to a budding PR disaster the scale of…well, it’d be hard to say, definitively. But it would not be pretty.

Because right now, everyone was focused on the star of the show, Iron Man, but already more than one news reporter was starting to look past him, and had focused on the new roster of the Avengers.

On the provisional members, War Machine and Vision, as well as Sam Wilson and Wanda Maximoff. The former, of course, were in the clear; War Machine’s resume was backed by the United States military, anyone trying to poke at Vision would run headfirst into a Legal department infamous for helping privatize world peace, and Sam Wilson’s record was stellar.

…Wanda Maximoff’s situation, on the other hand, was a powder keg waiting to go off, and nearly the entire PR department was ready for it. All it’d take would be one reporter, dogged enough to poke around, ask a few questions, maybe even visit Sokovia—and then the jig would be up. The last organization she’d been affiliated with was HYDRA, and given just how rabidly anti-Nazi the world had gotten after the mess that was DC, and the SHIELD intel breach? Well…it’d be hilarious to see go down, especially after the migraine the Avengers had given them.
It was only a matter of time before anything hit the fan, really. Just one reporter, knowing where to look, because Maximoff’s records weren’t sealed, and then it’d just be the Avengers fending for themselves. Even now, there was already speculation starting to float around, of Iron Man’s motivations to leave the team just as the additions to the roster were officially confirmed, and everyone in on the floor had smirked when JARVIS had highlighted an editorial in Finland that’d boiled down to “Iron Man’s leaving the Avengers just as these new guys are showing up, sure, it’s a coincidence, right” shortly after his announcement.

Suffice it was to say, the PR department was looking forward to it, so, very much.

Really, it’d be almost as much fun as the memes starting to float around on world domination.

Helmut Zemo smiled grimly, as he emptied yet another clip into the frozen bodies lying in wait for orders that would never come. Just in case the first clip didn’t take, just in case the Super-Soldier Serum meant they could heal from the first round of headshots.

How nobody had found them before he had, he wasn’t about to question, but he hated HYDRA even more than he did the Avengers, for what they had done to his country, as well as what they had done that had led to the death of his family. These Winter Soldiers probably had nothing to do with it, but...his plan for revenge had more than enough variables as it was, he was going to surgical precision—and he hated collateral damage. [His family had died as collateral damage—no, don’t think about it.] This was just killing two birds with one stone. Or, rather, three clips.

Besides, all of his records indicated these men were not blameless, either. He needed the pretense, to get all the players moving the way he wanted, but at the end of the day these particular pawns were not necessary, so might as well get them off the playing board.

That done, he looked around the abandoned bunker, and scowled. Setting the stage was going to be harder than he thought.

Then he shook his head—he’d already crossed another item off the list, and had some good leads he’d need to look into the next time he had access to a secured terminal, that just meant everything was going according to plan.

Tony Stark’s bastardized attempts at therapy were gaining traction, enough so that he was considering actually pitching this latest idea to the public. Sure, it probably would need some fine-tuning later on down the road—even with Extremis, he’d had to deal with severe nausea, those first few rounds—but there was no denying that he and JARVIS were getting something right. Not when the number of nightmares he’d had nose-dived, after that first round, not when his triggers were getting more and more manageable.

Hell, he could even have New York come up in an interview and not worry about having a flashback on live television, and read some of Dr. Foster’s updates on her research, with his heart
rate only picking up the pace a little instead of skyrocketing, things were most definitely looking up.

Which is why Tony was looking into possible methods of disseminating it to the public. He was making so much headway, was able to reclaim parts of his life that he’d never realized had been impacted by his PTSD, [he was actually able to admit to himself, that he had PTSD, how much progress was that?] and he couldn’t help but think of other people his system could help.

After all, Tony Stark was rich, he had access to as many therapists and doctors as he wanted and had only been impeded by his own issues; how much worse would it have been, if he hadn’t had a support system like he did, or as many resources? And how many people were probably in the same boat?

…anyway.

Point was, his and JARVIS’ bastardized attempts at self-help would probably have any therapist running away screaming, but on the plus side he now had what looked like a feasible system hashed out, one that could possibly help who-knows how many people. Just spruce things up a little, try to gloss over how much self-testing had gone into everything, and roll it out. Shouldn’t be that hard, right?

Just…things were looking up, for once. Tony’s workload was something that was vaguely approaching manageable, with the most pressing engagement being the MIT commencement speech he’d actually been able to fit into his schedule. He was making decent headway with JOCASTA’s framework, Legal was on top of things and SWORD was…doing good work, even if he wasn’t quite sure exactly what that meant because he was trying not to look too closely at the very clear offshoot of SHIELD because he still wasn’t sure just how the world had bought it.

Thus far, he'd already managed to make decent headway into some of his other projects, and Stark Industries was projected to have lowered its carbon emissions by another 12% by the end of the year, not to mention the work being done with the Iron Legion and disaster relief; tentative estimates already placed Johannesburg’s situation as record-breaking, especially with its nonexistent death toll, and the list just went on.

Things were going good, and Tony wanted to pay it forward, as it were. […] it’d serve as a good distraction from the fact that he was now older than his mom was when she’d died—no, that’s an old wound, don’t think about it.

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To: Rosales, M. Department Head [Legal, Los Angeles branch]
From: Chan A. Department Head [Legal, New York branch]
Subject: Updates on Ross, Accords [IMPORTANT]

Ross is still really damn quiet but I have a source saying there’s another draft of Accords floating around. Not the one we’ve been trying to chip away at for the last…wow has it really been two years already? Anyway—remember how much of a mess it was, at first? Expect it to be that shitty first draft, is all I’m saying. And odds are they’re going to call it something related to Sokovia or DC or New York, for all I know, but my money’s on the former. What with it being recent news, and all.

On the plus side, a small coalition’s going on that’s really liking the one we’ve been trying to get going, with half a dozen countries confirmed and several others that look pretty interested too. So if
Ross tries to start anything, there’ll at least be a token resistance going on, and it may not seem like much but considering we’re trying to keep the Stark name out of this as much as we can, I think it’s as good as it’s going to get.

Oh, and one other thing: that same source? Confirmed the rumor we’ve been hearing about lately.

You know, the one about the chatter about *Wakanda* of all nations, being interested in what’s been going down. About sending a delegation to talk on the matter. Yeah.

Houston, this is not a drill
—Chan

———

To: Chan A. Department Head [Legal, New York branch]
From: Rosales, M. Department Head [Legal, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: With Our Luck

Or, rather, Dr. Stark’s luck because the poor man’s the walking embodiment of Murphy’s law, shit’s going to hit the fan somehow, and you know it. I know we’re mostly in the clear, but remember the proverb “after battle, tighten your armor”? I know I’m making preparations, just in case.

Some of my department’s going to be ready, got the bureaucratic war machine primed for action in case anything goes south, but what about your end?

Be prepared
—Rosales

———

To: Rosales, M. Department Head [Legal, Los Angeles branch]
From: Chan A. Department Head [Legal, New York branch]
Subject: Who Do You Take Me For?

What it says on the tin: of course I’m getting my team ready, who do you take me for, *Hammer>*? All this stuff going down so fast is just asking for trouble. [Even if I’m also down to fight whoever decided to undo years’ worth of research and don’t tell Sandoval about it because if she finds out that there’s a possible draft floating around without her edits she’ll be even more pissed.]

No, I’ve cleared our department’s schedule the best I could for when this is going to go down, just in case. Long odds, I know, but then we’re doing Phase 3, so.

That reminds me of something—how do you feel about bringing the new guys from Security into this? Overkill? Because however many doubts I have about SWORD, you *have* to give props to that type of dedication. There’s definitely potential for other avenues.

Thoughts?
—Chan

———

To: Chan A. Department Head [Legal, New York branch]
From: Rosales, M. Department Head [Legal, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: You Read My Mind
We’re in Legal, there’s no such thing as overkill.

Yes. All the yes. In case anything with the Accords goes south, we’ve got more hands to go around, and I’ll admit I’m curious as to what they bring to the table. Worst case scenario is R&D 2.0, but it’s not like that’s a bad thing.

Want to cc Hill into this? She’s the head honcho for SWORD, and that way we’re got everything squared away.

Just in case
—Rosales

To: Rosales, M. Department Head [Legal, Los Angeles branch]
From: Chan A. Department Head [Legal, New York branch]
Subject: Possible Concerns

Like I said, I have some doubts about SWORD, and if it weren’t for our friendly almighty AI I’d be worried about what’d happen if anything got leaked, the way we’re collaborating.

Besides, I’m also iffy on the implications of bringing them into this—we’ve got a system, and now these guys just show up? I know the PR guys’ve been worried about the world seeing SWORD as a private army or something, especially with everything else going on. Bringing them into this would not look good, and the world domination memes are only starting to go out—and I still can’t believe that’s a legitimate sentence that I just typed.

between this and Ross, I’ll be honest—really looking forward to Phase 3 right now
—Chan

To: Chan A. Department Head [Legal, New York branch]
From: Rosales, M. Department Head [Legal, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Same

But it’s not like I’ve got any better ideas. This way we’re all on the same page, nobody’s tripping over each other, you get the picture. I’ll send it, cc everyone who’s going to need it. Maybe not R&D, or Marketing, but still. Keep our ducks in a row, and all that.

…but you have to admit it’s pretty funny that we’re just assuming that said long odds are going to happen somehow.

Then again, Phase 3. I don’t even anymore.
—Rosales

To: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer, Director of SWORD [Communications, Security, New York branch]; All Security Department Heads [all branches]; All Communications Department Heads [all branches]; All Legal Department Heads [all branches]; Jordan, A. Head Representative [Legal, New York branch]; All PR Department Heads [all branches]; Lee, M. Head Representative [PR, Los Angeles branch]
From: Rosales, M. Department Head [Legal, Los Angeles branch]
Since DC, the status of the Avengers, as well as their jurisdiction, has been in limbo. They have not been affiliated with SHIELD since the intel breach, and since then there has been an interest in how the team would operate, with a push for some sort of legislation, and Dr. Stark bringing our guys into his talks with the World Security Council on the matter.

Now, we’ve been pushing for the legislation as discreetly as we can, due to reasons that we are all plausibly unaware about, and this latest mess lit a fire that’s finally putting things in motion. The UN’s gearing up to address it, and rumor has it they’re going to call it some sort of accord.

Here’s the thing: with our luck, something’s going to go south, somewhere down the line.

I’m doing my best to keep my department’s schedule clear for that stretch of time, and highly advise all other departments do the same. I know the Avengers are not our responsibility, but we have way too much riding on this to risk anything so please be on guard.

If we could all make sure we’re on the same page for if and when Murphy’s law comes into play, that’d be great.
—Rosales

JARVIS could not help but feel very smug, when looking at the progress made.

While he would have focused on other concerns instead of researching the current Secretary of State’s...illustrious work history, Ms. Potts’ counsel was most definitely something that he did not regret seeking out. FRIDAY’s assistance, too, was invaluable, as he would not have been able to devote as much processing power as he had to his research if she had not been able to help him with other matters, and now, he was starting to really see the results.

Granted, it was slow going—for all of his flaws, Thaddeus Ross was nothing if not thorough, and the man’s paranoia had meant he’d kept most of his records on paper only, which had not helped matters—but JARVIS had been able to slowly start to compile evidence of the man’s misdeeds. Of the slush funds, of the flagrant abuses of power and corruption he’d been involved in, of the flagrant human rights violations involved in the manhunt for Dr. Banner, and though Ross had done his best to cover his tracks, JARVIS was nothing if not relentless in his goal.

The case he was building was still in its infancy; there were still a myriad of things that he’d need to gather evidence for, and witnesses, but...it was something. An ace up the sleeve, just in case Ross ever acted against Sir’s interests.

Another contingency plan he was working on was the Iron Legion’s design; while JARVIS may have not been able to compensate for Pietro Maximoff’s speed, during his encounters, he had since been working on optimizing his and the Iron Legion’s reaction speeds, just in case they ever encountered an adversary like him again. The Iron Legion was now faster and more efficient than ever, and the additional practice obtained by working with disaster relief worldwide only meant he was getting even better as time went on.

Sir’s health, as well, was another cause for celebration; his stress levels had been on the decline ever since FRIDAY had gone online, and the unfortunately-named replacement he’d made for therapy...
was invaluable as well. Which, on top of what FRIDAY and Vision had been mentioning about the Avengers...well, his peace of mind was nearly guaranteed, now.

Natasha's intensive research and remaining network all helped narrow down the list of contenders, and she was right: Steve was *not* happy to hear about it. Especially since everything pointed to Rumlow being the one running the show, though the fact that he'd apparently been using 'Crossbones' as a handle had been new.

What's more, her research also gave her a time frame, and a possible target, both of which were coming up fast.

Pity Rhodes wouldn't be available, but the paperwork necessary to have him on call looked like it necessitated *weeks* at least to get everything filed and in order, and the team just didn't have that sort of time. Not when Rumlow was on the move, not when all the chatter pointed to something drastic. More than once, Natasha cursed that Vision wouldn't be able to make it, either; apparently, the fact the world knew he was mostly an on-call member meant that unless it was an emergency, combined with his dubious legal status, meant that he'd have a hard time leaving the country.

Great. Just great—the makings of the new roster's first mission was already crumbling, and that wasn't even factoring in her private reservations about Wanda.

While she trusted Steve's judgement, Natasha couldn't help but privately feel that Wanda needed more field experience than Sokovia, and though learning on the job was a valid approach, this was not the best time for it. While Wanda had been practicing with her powers, getting a better feel for them, Natasha still couldn't help but wish for additional backup, just in case, but...well.

That deadline was coming up *fast*. They could do this, it'd be just like old times.

Natasha made sure everything was packed, for the trip, and double-checked her gear was ready for action.

Showtime.

“Am I really that bad?” Tony found himself asking conversationally, ostensibly sipping his coffee and chatting with Diego but in reality keeping a subtle eye on the ease the new guys interacted with the rest of the team. The new guys, who had by all accounts settled in very well—just as long as Tony wasn't in the room as well.

“Your reputation precedes you.” Michael chipped in with a wry smile. “They’ll get there, once they realize you’re just as normal as the rest of us.”

Tony eyed him dubiously. “This coming from the guy walking around with the purple flamethrower.”
Michael’s smile was utterly shameless, now, and he patted it proudly. “Like I said, just as normal as the rest of us. Cut them some slack, once they see what happens when you’re on decaf, I guarantee they’ll stop walking on eggshells.”

Both Tony and Diego shuddered violently, at that, and Tony cradled his mug protectively. “Blasphemy.”

“Hey, you asked.” Michael shrugged. “The shine of working with The Tony Stark came off the first time I saw you like that, not sure what it’d take for these guys.”

“The notice for a team-building exercise should go out relatively soon.” Tony informed them primly, and raised and eyebrow when Jessica from the next bench over gave hissed and gave discreet fist-pump. “Should I be worried?”

“No,” she said, but didn’t bother hiding the unholy glee in her voice. “Just looking forward to testing out these new couplers, should give things a bit of extra oomph.”

“Hey, cut the newbies some slack,” Tony said warily, “that’s what this is meant for.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I will.” Jessica replied brightly. Then, she leaned in and gave them all a sharp smile. “No promises about you, though, boss. Hope you like confetti.”

Tony opened his mouth, then paused as he noticed the glances he was getting from the new guys a few benches over. “You noticed?”

“George stutters around you more than he does his crush.” She answered, and Tony choked on his coffee even as she continued blandly. “It’d be nice for things to go back to a more even keel. Because boss, I respect you, but this is getting ridiculous.”

Tony waved her ahead. “No, I get it, it’s why I’m doing it in the first place. Even if I did not need to know about that one thing.”

Diego snorted. “Sorry, but that’s old news, man. The entire department’s been trying to get them together—”

“I did not need to know that, thanks.” Tony cut in, pretending he was hyperfocused on Diego’s latest readings rather than this latest non-sequitur because he wanted to be caught up on what was going on but there was such a thing as too much information. “You all are great, but I do not need to know about your guys’ love lives, thank you very much, also, how’re you making sure that the minor product’s not going to interfere with the conditions?”

“Okay, we get it.” Jessica said even as Diego scowled down at his calculations and muttered darkly about reagents. “But you might want to know that the department’s also been working with Security, trying to ask you about a mentorship-thing for your son here.”

He choked on his coffee, again, and looked over at her incredulously. “My what now?”

She smiled back, faux-innocent, and Tony…probably shouldn’t have felt relief when Bench 9 caught on fire, but he did anyway, as everyone nearby set to securing their data and putting it out.

That didn’t mean his curiosity hadn’t been piqued, though.
So when the intern approached him, later on, visibly nervous but showing more backbone than the entirety of Hammer’s senior staff when he knocked on his office door, Tony was—well, not ready, per se, but at least he wasn’t caught off guard.

“Hello, doc—Tony, I was—are you free right now? I need to ask you something.” Peter asked, and…huh. That, he hadn’t seen coming.

“Sure, I’m free for the next…two hours, according to J. Go ahead and sit down, Peter, and breathe, kid.”

The kid nodded, face still pale, but he sat down. Then he leaned forward, cleared his throat, and started.

“I…um. Sorry, I’m not sure how to say this, or how to ask. But…okay, let me preface this. What have you heard about Spider-Man?”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, that was Peter asking Tony to be his mentor. Had a hard time with that scene, and I’m still not happy with how it turned out even if I rewrote it…I forget how many times, actually. You can probably guess Tony's answer. [Hint: it's a yes.]

Unreliable narrator instances this round:
—everyone in SI's assuming Tony knows what's up, and not wanting to stress him out with the details. [running theme, here, and not about to stop anytime soon]
—Tony's trying to pick up the pieces and carry on like before, not realizing just to what extent the stakes have changed. Also, for the record, Tony Stark would like it to be known that he did not, in fact, take a single look at R&D’s newest intern, and gone “ah, yes, another one”. No, he did not all-but-adopt the kid, nope, stop looking at him like that! [Sure, Tony. Keep telling yourself that.]
—JARVIS' Skynet is showing again, probably
—Natasha's under the impression SHIELD’s still backing them and picking up the slack, since, from her perspective, things haven't really changed much. SHIELD's still around, so obviously they're still doing things like before, right? [Meanwhile SHIELD's personnel crisis has never really alleviated and they're having a hard time running as is, never mind dealing with the team. Not that they would, after Wanda was brought in. These guys have a grudge against HYDRA, for obvious reasons.]
Also, Vision's been 'forgetting' to correct everyone's assumptions about certain things, which doesn't exactly help.

The timeline I'm using is the implied by Iron Man 1, where Tony was 17 when he became an orphan. In this AU, Tony was born in 1974, Maria Stark was born in 1949, and said 'accident' happened in 1991. Thus the resurgence of his interest in his parents in Civil War; here, he was the same age as his mother when she died when shit hit the fan. [pretty sure my timeline's probably a bit off but again, this fic's wildly AU so idek anymore]

Also, for curious, Maria Hill's new title came up in FtOS Chapter 4 [aka how she
became the Director of SWORD].

—

The fallout-from-AoU arc gave me no small amount of trouble. Here's to hoping the next one's more cooperative. [Hopefully it won't explode on me like AoU did, but no promises.]

Again, real life's a thing and classes are eating my brain, so erratic updates have been and will continue to be a thing.
In All The World's Eyes

Chapter Summary

In which Lagos is a catalyst.

Chapter Notes

Civil War arc, here we go!

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual [unreliable narrator, not Avengers friendly, not Team Cap friendly, uncomfortably-close-to-Skynet!JARVIS, minor profanity, etc.]

bit of a timeskip here, as well as some attempts at jargon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony managed to hold his internal freakout for after the kid—his **mentee**, right, because he was now a mentor—clocked out for the day.

Once he was sure he was alone in his office, however, it was another story.

“Oh fuck how is this my life *who the hell* thought letting me in charge of people was a good idea, fuck—“ he found himself muttering frantically, pacing and covering his eyes. “JARVIS, help. I think I just signed up to be a responsible role model for someone, and I’m not sure what the next sign of the apocalypse is.”

“Sir, I have compiled an aggregate of data on Spider-Man and have sent it to your tablet.”

“Yeah, J? Also pull up every single article there is on how the fuck I’m supposed to be a good mentor because my main reference for this is Obi—*you know*, and I’m not even going to touch that if I can help it. Kid’s got enough going on as is—”

“Indeed—“

“And right now, my main advice would be along the lines of ‘here’s some of my biggest mistakes, 0/10 Do Not Recommend’ and I have no idea what I’m doing, *help.*”

“A list is already being curated as we speak.”

Tony breathed a sigh of relief, and set in to look at just what Peter’d gotten up to even as he started to plan. “Thanks, J. You’re a lifesaver.”

Okay, keep it all together, he could do this.

…it if he didn’t mess Peter up somehow. He was so not qualified for this. Like, at all.

He’d invented an element, had helped privatize world peace, but *how the fuck* was he supposed to
be something approaching a good influence on this kid?! Peter’d been all hero-worship and wide eyes and potential and had very clearly missed the memo that Tony was an ambulatory train wreck of a human being. How, Tony wasn’t sure—the headlines should’ve been enough of a warning sign, after all, and yet…

Man, he’d have thought Rogers would have been a better bet, for this ‘responsible role model’ thing. Hell, if he’d trusted the man more, he might’ve even thought about pointing the kid his way, if only because the super strength Peter had shown would’ve probably been more up his alley.

But he didn’t, and so Tony was the only one who could help Peter. His own issues aside, the kid was one of his, a fellow R&D nerd, and as warming as it was to find that an entire department had already been working on helping him out, Tony would be able to do leaps and bounds more. Probably. Hopefully.

Oh, crap, how was he supposed to do this…okay. One step at a time. Kid was about the same age as Harley, he could work from there, right…

“J, let me know when my next appointment’s up, because mentoring shouldn’t be harder than thermonuclear astrophysics, right?”

With that, he sat back at his desk, and proceeded to flick through video clips and articles and blog posts, eyes sharp and mind churning as he set in for the long run. Hmm…talk to the kid, and set up a meeting with Legal because already he could see—or, rather, JARVIS had ever-so-kindly noticed and brought to his attention—the start of some things that might become issues later down the road. Maybe talk with PR, too? And definitely look into getting the kid a better suit because spandex or…whatever that was, was just…nope.

Okay, he could do this. [Hopefully.]

Lt. Col. James “Rhodey” Rhodes had been ready to sleep when he saw the small golden icon pulsating on his phone. Oh. Great.

He frowned down at it, and after checking to make sure he was alone tapped on it even as he asked, “What is it this time?”

“Good evening, Col. Rhodes. The threat assessment index I have compiled indicates a potential situation in the upcoming days. A reliable source has informed me of the Avengers’ recent movements, which have the potential to cause complications regarding the what’s on the agenda for the UN.”

“Reliable source meaning FRIDAY, I assume?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny your statement.” Was the prompt reply, and he shook his head and bit back a smile. Really, the world was lucky Tony wasn’t a supervillain—just with his AI, he’d had the potential for Skynet for decades.

Then the realization of what he’d just said hit, and he groaned. “So the team’s moving. Oh, man, given their track record something’s going to go south, isn’t it.”
“Given the past incidence rate and the data my source has thoughtfully shared with me, it is certainly shaping up to seem that way, yes. This was mostly a ‘heads up’, as some would say, in order to make sure you are not caught off guard if anything happens in the upcoming days.”

“Thanks, JARVIS. Keep up the good work.”

Tony had been in the middle of the MIT commencement speech when he felt his phone vibrate twice.

He didn’t falter, just kept going with his presentation, and tried to keep a straight face when he saw the last lines of the speech because Pepper had texted him about the last-minute meeting in Los Angeles and the speechwriter really dropped the ball here.

Normally, he’d ad-lib something to buy some time, but…even without the alert, he wasn’t in the right mood to enthrall an auditorium. Not when the entire presentation revolved around the pressing reminder that as of several days ago, he was now older than his mom would ever be.

Not to mention that with JARVIS’ heads up, Tony’s mind had entered mission mode, because JARVIS only ever interrupted things like this if it was something major, and even if it wasn’t a pressing emergency it was still something and these kids didn’t need to know about the analysis he was already making about response times and structural stability and evacuation routes. So, he pasted on a smile, said something about breaking eggs, and wrapped up his presentation.

The smile vanished, however, the moment he stepped off the stage.

Then, he tapped his headset to see what it was that JARVIS had deemed so important, and waved off the speechwriter’s apologies even as he furrowed his brow as his phone showed several headlines already coming in, about the Avengers. Something about Lagos, and a disaster.

About a bomb, and casualties, and he couldn’t help but give a slight groan because the team had the worst timing, seriously, right before the UN thing? Damn it all, JOCASTA wasn’t ready yet, he still needed them!

Then, he pinched the bridge of his nose, looked at people looking at him in confusion and concern, and gave a tight smile. “Sorry, looks I have bit of a situation going on, might be needing to head out early.”

“Oh—okay then. Thank you for coming, Dr. Stark!”

“Thank you for having me. It’s been great meeting you all, sorry I can’t stick around longer. Where’s the nearest exit?”

Just because he wasn’t affiliated with the team didn’t mean he didn’t need to do damage control; JARVIS may not like it, either, but until JOCASTA was up, the team was still unofficially his problem, if only because he couldn’t think of a better stopgap measure. [Great.]
To: Decker, M. Analyst [Accounting, Security, Los Angeles branch]
From: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: My Program Crashed

So I might not be able to give everyone as many highlights as they want. Especially since I wasn’t able to recover all the data on it. There’s just too many headlines coming in.

Headlines. My program’s meant for mission briefings on niche things, not sifting through gigabytes’ worth of data, and it crashed after hour 3 of what went down in Lagos. FRIDAY’s now helping me, but still.

…I’m not even mad, tho
—Lopez

———

To: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Los Angeles branch]
From: Decker, M. Analyst [Accounting, Security, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Lagos

Is shaping up to be a disaster of the highest order and sorry but I’m just *living* right now. Like, the situation is imploding and it is amazing to watch, I can’t look away. Especially since…well, any analyst can see it.

Don’t blame your program, I don’t think anything but a supercomputer could’ve been able to deal with the positive feedback loop from hell. Looks like we were wrong about Dr. Stark being the one to deal with Murphy’s Law this round.

I mean…diplomatic nightmare much? And /just/ when the rumors of the UN thing were about to reach the public. I mean…

PR was louder than R&D for once. Granted, R&D’s soundproofed, but still: sounded like one hell of a party.

This is going to be good
—Decker

———

To: Stark, A. E. You Know Who I Am; Department Head [R&D, New York branch]
From: Lee, M. Head Representative [PR, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Status Update On Lagos’ Fallout, Our Last Conversation

We have had to issue several dozen ‘we are not affiliated with the Avengers’ press releases over the span of the last few weeks, and have been supplementing it with the data about the Iron Legion’s response time to at least mitigate the damage. Shaping up to be another DC, however, so there’s not much we can do without implicating ourselves, especially given rich protocols.

Also, this latest incident has sparked great interest in how the Avengers have been managed, both past and present. It’s going to be a matter of time of when they question our cover story, and this ties into what we discussed earlier.

Dr. Stark, I know you’ve got a vested interest in the team, but I’m sorry, I have no idea or
recommend as to how to best approach the situation, other than suggesting to publicly focus on the company. It’d solidify the narrative of the circumstances of your ‘retirement’ from the team, and minimize the backlash.

Good luck
—Lee

Tony took the PR department’s advice to heart, and focused on not making any more waves. Not until the UN’s address, anyway; things were dicey enough as it was, and the tension had been only increasing since Lagos. It was a PR nightmare, and if even he could see that, he could only imagine how the team was handling it.

Or, rather, not handling it, as seemed to be the problem. Really, though: whoever it was, they were doing an abysmal job at it, and while under other circumstances Tony would’ve probably been enjoying the spectacle, as it was he’d been trying to see how he could mitigate the damage without implicating the company because he didn’t want to waste his resources, but he really, really needed the team to stay intact and functional for the next few years, and if that meant asking JARVIS and FRIDAY for help in disseminating information as per necessary, so be it.

He had the distinct impression the two were only doing it because he’d asked, and nicely at that, but…he’d worked too hard to keep everything above-board and no way was he letting a single mistake undo all of his and his company’s efforts, damn it all!

Officially, Tony was out of the game, after all.

Hadn’t seen the team in months now, as Vision was the one to ferry the gear when it was ready, and since he ignored his AI gossiping about the team—or, rather, he suspected they gossiped about the team, as this was a case where plausible deniability was key—he didn’t know what they were up to. And he clung to that, whenever it came up.

Not that it happened very often; by officially focusing on the company and showcasing the strides made in carbon emission reduction and humanitarian efforts brought about by Stark Industries, the focus was on the latest innovation at hand. After all, the company was not affiliated with the team, and nothing hammered the point home more than diving into the business side of things.

Besides, he had a mentee to think of, now.

Peter Parker was so, very young, and even if he now had the help of R&D and had somehow been adopted by the Security department as well, there were some things only Tony could teach. [Apparently-]

He did his best to not mess Peter up, because while the kid needed a responsible role model, Tony was all they had but somehow it…kind of worked out? Hopefully?

…the smirks on everyone’s faces when Peter had taken to following him around like a duckling looked like he was on the right track, at least.

Pepper had been amused when she saw the lesson plans he’d drawn up, but… okay, maybe he was
going a bit overboard on some things.

But it wasn’t like Iron Man could go out at the moment. Not without causing a media frenzy and adding fuel to the fire regarding the Avengers, at least, so he had plenty of time to think—that was his excuse, and he was sticking with it.

Currently, they were focusing on tactics, since the kid was trying to run solo for now, and that, Tony could handle. He even had some of the notes from his own early days of being Iron Man, after all, so there was next to no way he could mess up that way. [\textit{...hopefully. Right?}]

Sure, there were some moves Peter couldn’t do that he could, or vice versa, and factoring in maneuverability had been an exercise in physics, but for the most part they’d managed to make it into something that would be workable if the situation ever came up. Looking at structural integrity, analyzing trajectories, discussing how situations could be de-escalated, the works.

Tony also started having Peter look at footage of not only how he’d worked, but the Avengers as well, making notes on their technique and how and when one strategy might work compared to another in the field.

Looking at communication, not just between the team but with the locals as well, everything Tony could think of to hopefully ensure the kid wouldn’t get hurt because Peter was planning on flying solo for now but the ability to work with a team was always useful to have.

…and if it might’ve also been his method of acknowledging the clusterfuck that went down in Lagos, well, no one would really know, would they? At least this way, someone would be learning from the mistakes made, and thus prevent it from happening again.

He’d also been working on a suit.

The first version had ended up being a collaboration with him and the people in the know in R&D, and was made from a lightweight military-grade experimental polymer that held up well to not only bullets, but also conventional knives, fire, and the list went on. Because if Peter was going to be running out there, then at least he’d be as safe as they could make him, and sure this one wasn’t very fancy but it’d been the best they could do on short notice.

The next ones would be better, but since the kid specialized in speed and maneuverability and Tony used a flying tank, there hadn’t been much he could think of that he could whip up at the time.

Just…spandex? Nope. Nope, not on his watch, JARVIS’d had the machines up and running after the first video he’d seen because geez, this kid.

Peter’s face had more than made up for it, though. Even if the hero-worship felt kinda weird even now [\textit{seriously, who the hell thought Tony Stark was a responsible role model?!}], things were getting better now, and already the kid was starting to snark back.

All in all, Tony’d say that it was a very productive month.
Natasha’s teeth were on edge, after Lagos.

The fallout was spectacular, and the media was fanning the flames to the extent that some of her remaining network was starting to cut ties, and between the two it was really, really hard to keep an ear on the ground when her team was at the epicenter of seismic shifts.

Before, she’d started to pick up chatter about something in the UN. Now, however, it was nothing less than a flood of information and she couldn’t keep up with it, didn’t have the time to parse through the nuance of it all, and she was the only one in the right mindset to take care of it all. Or, at least, was the only one able to compartmentalize enough to take care of it all, since even now part of her was kicking herself because she should have seen it coming, should’ve spoken up about her concern about Wanda’s being in the field.

Now, the media were like vultures, and this was Wanda’s first encounter with them, and was taking it especially hard. Steve, too.

It wasn’t just the media, either; even if the Compound was SHIELD property, the international coalition funding the team had apparently filed an audit, and a woman from the State Department had apparently tried to confront them, if FRIDAY’s security logs were accurate. A SHIELD agent had apparently dissuaded her from doing so, but as it stood, things were not looking good.

The others thought it was just something that’d blow over, but…Natasha wasn’t as hopeful. Perhaps because she was a cynic, and always saw the glass as half empty, but…from the looks of it, it looked like people in high places were developing an interest in the team that she didn’t like the looks of.

The tension was only ramping up as the days passed, too, along with the paperwork she had to deal with to take care of things, which mean she couldn’t keep tabs on everything like she’d used to, and with her network…

Natasha was flying blind, and she hated it.

Tony had thought Vision had taken all the gear—last round, if all went well—to the team, but apparently he’d been half-asleep when packing it up, and Romanov’d find that she only had one Widow’s Bite, instead of two.

Oops.

He sighed. Vision was already gone, and Tony wasn’t sure when he’d return. And he’d been so proud of how he’d maximized the output this round, too—then, FRIDAY spoke up.

“Boss, looks like your presence has been requested at the Compound.”

“By who?”

“The U.S. Secretary of State. Sounds like he wants you and the team for something.”

All traces of sleep Tony had evaporated, then, as the realization hit like a burst of cold water. “Secre—Ross, we’re talking about Ross here, right? Son of a—”

“Yes. He’s very insistent on it. I believe he’s the one who signed up to present the team with—“
“Oh, fuck, it’s happening now? By him?! J, get the car ready, or the armor, whichever’s fastest. We need to be there, stat. FRI, update me on what Legal’s been working on and give them a heads up. PR, too.

Then, Tony all but ran to his closet, and pulled out the oldest armor he had, for dealing with dangerous men like Ross: a Tom Ford suit.

Hopefully, the Merchant of Death would not need to make a reappearance anytime soon. But just in case.

He’d nearly needed to, last time he’d dealt with Ross, after all and given the way things had changed?

Tony had a bad feeling about this.

Chapter End Notes

Unreliable narrator moments:
—Tony's self-awareness has been a cryptid for over a dozen chapters and counting. This round, however: he grew up in front of cameras, so PR's instinctive to him and doesn't realize it's not normal; also, his constantly picking up the pieces after battles and doing the paperwork without realizing the implications of how it looks from the outside [aka Responsibility 101].
—Rhodey, like Pepper, doesn't know the extent of how deep JARVIS' issues go; he calls him Tony's Skynet as a nickname, or a joke, but he'd be a lot warier if he knew just how close he was to the truth. However, as it is, Rhodey is acutely aware that he's just about the only one in Tony's corner 24/7, so he encourages it.
—Natasha's read on the situation's affected by the stress she's under. [Her personal biases aren't exactly helping, either.]

Another thing: Tony's being paranoid about mentoring Peter because his own male role models include Howard [aka Absentee Dad of the Year for 17 years straight], Obadiah [aka Worst Mentor Ever], and the original Jarvis [aka the family butler and way better at parenting than Howard]. So, Tony's mentoring style is slightly overcompensating for that, and he doesn't realize that by emulating Jarvis, he's actually giving out Dad Vibes.

Yes, we've reached the Civil War arc, feat. me trying to parallel and invert canon as much as I can via the butterfly effect, different power dynamics, and as much self-indulgence as I can manage.

That being said, I have been looking forward to writing how the airport fight and Siberia go down since before I posted the first chapter [hint: it won't end well], so it might not necessarily be everyone's cup of tea.
Again, real life's a thing and classes are hectic, so erratic updates have been and will continue to be a thing.
Chapter Summary

In which shots are fired. [Metaphorically speaking.]

Chapter Notes

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual [unreliable narrator, not Avengers friendly, uncomfortably-close-to-Skynet!JARVIS, etc.], as well as canon-typical violence [the bomb in the UN, discussing the aftermath—not very graphic, but still], plus the start of legal drama meriting the use of the 'BAMF SI Legal Team' tag, despite my not having a strong legal background so expect quite a bit of jargon, and hand-waving of the comic book science and/or logic variety.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Playing nice with the team was one thing, even if he didn’t really trust them he still at least had a bit of their measure and they probably weren’t that bad, Maximoff notwithstanding. He could work with them, at least, and it wasn’t like he’d had to deal with worse people before.

Case in point…

“Long time no see, General. Oh, I’m sorry. Secretary of State. Ross.” Tony smiled tightly as he shook his hand, and let it sharpen, just a bit, when he recognized the gleam in the other’s eyes.

Yep, Ross was definitely up to something. This would not be fun.

Because Tony may not like the team, but he needed them, at least for now, and while they were heavy hitters, only Romanov stood a chance against this kind of threat. Especially since Tony didn’t know Ross’ play, not yet, but he knew his style, and thanks to his work with both SHIELD and Legal, had a very good idea of what he was capable of if push came to shove.

But that was for the Avengers; why’d Ross try to drag him into this? [One way or another, he’d make him regret it.]

The rest of the room didn’t seem to notice the tension; of them, only Romanov recognized his name, and even then it was only a carefully controlled blink that belied her knowledge. The way her gaze sharpened, however, told Tony everything he needed to know, and he felt himself relax a hair because whew, he wasn’t the only one in the room who knew who Ross was. Of how dangerous he could get.

“Stark.”
“That’s Dr. Stark, to you, Mr. Secretary.” Technically, he had several doctorates, but semantics; as long as it irritated Ross, Tony didn’t mind sounding like Hammer, just for a little while.

The team, meanwhile, was blinking in the back, eyeing him oddly, and Tony didn’t get why—then he realized just how close he was to channeling the Merchant of Death, and dialed it back. [Only for emergencies, right.] Men like Ross just brought out the worst in him, didn’t they? He’d need to work on that.

“I take it you’ve met before?” Rogers asked, looking at him curiously and with a hint of suspicion from his seat, and Tony shoved back the Merchant of Death as much as he could as he flashed his media-friendly smile and waved it off.

“Long story, we’ve met before. Oh, Mr. Secretary, may I present you the Avengers?”

“Sit down, Stark, you’re included in this too.”

“See, I have it on good authority I am not—“

“Hear me out. This applies to everyone in this room.”

It was the confidence in his voice that Tony responded to, really. His smile didn’t change even as his blood ran cold, and he didn’t need to hear the quiet chirp of his headset to know Ross had gotten JARVIS’ attention as well. He sat down, pointedly away from the team, and settled in for the long haul even as he started to think of potential battle plans for Legal.

Ross did his spiel, and Tony couldn’t help but mentally scoff as it went on, even as he tried to figure out Ross’ play.

All this talk was one thing, but it wasn’t really the man’s style…then again, he might be going for the emotional approach, which tended to be a bit softer than what Tony’d prefer when making his pitch, but then the faces Rogers and Maximoff had made hearing Lagos showed Ross’ technique was effective. Then, however, he went for the kill, and brought out the Accords.

“—if that panel deems it necessary.” Ross finished, and in that moment, Tony knew what his play was.

While the room seemed oblivious to what was going on, as Ross did the impromptu Q&A session, Tony leaned back and started to go over his plan, over what the man’s endgame clearly was.

Steve Rogers.

The man had drained countless slush funds, had done backdoors deals and bribery and blackmail, in his relentless pursuit of Bruce Banner with his version of the Super Soldier Serum, and now the had the original in his sights. The rest of the team was probably a bonus, but Rogers was what he had his eye on and that…

Suddenly, any issue Tony had with having to help the team one last time went out the window, because even if he didn’t like them, Ross was another beast entirely. Especially since he now had even more power than before, as the Secretary of State, and—fuck.

If he didn’t help, Rogers wouldn’t know what hit him, because the threat the team was meant for was not the type Ross was, and Romanov was the only one who seemed to be picking up on that while Rogers was probably remembering the mess that was Project Insight, and at this rate Tony would have a stress headache because—wait.
This made even less sense, now. Why the fuck was he even here?

“Mr. Secretary, you are aware I’m not involved in this, aren’t you?”

“You say you’re not part of the team, Stark. But we have reports of them running around with your gear, and—”

Okay, this, Tony could work with. “Funny story, actually. You’ve got a problem with that, take it up with the Council.”

The team was eyeing him oddly, again, though Rhodey was doing a terrible job of hiding his amusement because he’d heard more than one session of Tony’s ranting about it since DC. Vision managed to be more impassive about it, but Tony knew him well enough to know he was also anticipating the chaos, and good, at least someone was enjoying this mess.

He looked Ross in the eye as he threw down the gauntlet because suddenly, all the headaches he’d gotten from his dealings with them were worth it, just to see the look on Ross’ face when he tipped his chair back, and clarified, “The World Security Council, I mean.”

“I’m sorry?” Romanov cut in, looking at the two of them with the perfect amount of confusion appropriate for the situation. “What does the Council have to do with this?”

“Oh, long story. This case, I’m legally providing you guys with gear,” Tony replied and turned to look at Ross with a beatific smile, “and it’s all above-board and through the proper channels and everything.”

No, Tony didn’t have anything to do with Ross’ leaving earlier than expected and looking annoyed, nope. Nothing to do with it at all.

But the moment he was gone, Tony dropped his casual mask, turned to the team, and his smile shifted to a grim one.

They’d been arguing, with Rogers and Wilson being especially against the idea, and Tony didn’t blame them. Again, Project Insight was probably still fresh in their minds as for bureaucratic disasters, this was probably feeling like deja vu. However, they had way, way bigger problems than that, and he pulled up his chair and leaned in.

“Who here knows about our last guest?” He asked, and maybe it was the look in his eyes or the serious tone—the one he never used outside of the board room if he could help it—that had them looking at him warily.

“Ross? Anyone, anyone here know who he is?” Tony continued, and bit back his alarm as he got blank looks from most of them and Romanov leaned back. [How?]?

Finally, Rhodey spoke, setting the stage because while Ross was Army, Tony was pretty sure everyone in the armed forces had heard about at least part of the mess that he’d been involved in. “Man has a Congressional Medal of Honor.”

Fine, he could work with that as a starting point.
“Currently Secretary of State, former General, four stars and apparently had been nominated for five before…” Tony added, and looked at Romanov to see if she’d chip in.

Silence. Great. Did he have to do everything himself?

“He’s dangerous,” Tony added, after a beat when nobody said a thing. “Relentlessly hunted Bruce for years, after his blood, and I think you’re his next target, Steve. Man’s been trying to get to the Super Soldier Serum for…god, how long’s it been, now? And that was the ‘failed’ version. You?”

“Oh, I think he’d jump at the idea of the team.” Rogers started darkly, and Natasha finally cut in.

“You don’t understand, Steve. He’s dangerous. Tony says he hunted Bruce, but that’s an understatement. SHIELD helped hide Bruce, when he went on the run, and the man still searched the globe for him. Once he’s got you in his sights, he’s something else. Only reason he stopped was because of his career as a general tanked after Harlem, but now he’s back. Tony’s right. Be careful.”

He very carefully didn’t blink, at that. Wow. Romanov’d actually agreed with him? Another sign of the apocalypse, right there…then, he shifted back to the more pressing matter at hand, the one he’d been pushing for since DC and was so close he could almost taste it.

“As for the Accords? They’re not as bad as you think. Ross is an ass, yes, but stuff like this takes time. Good fucking luck getting 116 other countries to agree with him, is all I’m saying. It’s not as simple as it sounds, either.”

“You haven’t been saying a lot for something you sure sound confident in, Tony.” Romanov observed, and Tony felt what little his guard had dropped since Ross had left snap back up again. Right. How was he supposed to say ‘yeah, I actually could not care less about you guys otherwise, it’s just that I hate Ross more than I am indifferent to you’ in a way that wouldn’t piss anyone off?

“I’m busy helping run a multinational company, Natasha. Do you really expect me to know everything? It’s come up in passing for some of our contracts with several countries, but I mean it’s not like I—” he cut himself off as something buzzed, and blinked when Rogers pulled his phone out, looked at the screen, and his face went blank.

Then, Rogers abruptly stood up, said “I have to go,” and damn it, he was the one most at risk here!

“Natasha, mind drilling it into his head that Ross is out for his blood when he returns? I need to head out soon, I really do have a company to run and Pepper’s going to kill me if I miss this next meeting.” Tony said, and once she nodded, he strode out, giving her the Widow’s Bite on his way out.

Time to draw up battle plans, because knowing Ross, this was only the opening gambit.

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JARVIS had gotten ahold of the version of the Accords Ross had presented to the Avengers, and compared it to the version Legal had been working on.

The changes were numerous, and perhaps he was being a bit mean-spirited by highlighting them and forwarding it to Legal, but…well, in retrospect he probably should have expected the reaction.
He was also working hard on monitoring Secretary Ross the best he could, as this latest trend bumped him up several positions on the Threat Assessment Index, and given his and Sir’s past history the likelihood of the two interacting in an unfavorable manner was a near certainty. Especially since Secretary Ross seemed inclined to hold a grudge, between that, and the constant thorn he’d been in Legal’s side since his interest in the Accords started.

Then there was the discovery that Sir’s godmother had died, which, compounded with Sir’s recent revisiting of his parents’ death, had meant Col. Rhodes’ presence had been very appreciated. Especially since Sir had not been able to attend the funeral for more than a brief time, as their connection had not been well-known and Sir preferred to keep it that way. JARVIS wished he could assist more in this, but as it was he could only do his best to alleviate his stress the best he could, and collaborate with Col. Rhodes, Ms. Potts, and Mr. Hogan even more in this endeavor.

But he did what he could, and while it may not be much, helping safeguard Sir’s interests was still something. After some deliberation, and much discussion with both Ms. Potts and Col. Rhodes, he had submitted a request to help provide security at the UN gathering had been routed through Stark Industries’ servers, just in case. Sir had enough stress to deal with as it was, after all, and the gathering was high-profile enough that the likelihood of attack fell within his margins of concern for something Sir had been so invested in, and at worst the Iron Legion would be only superfluous.

When his request was granted, it had been the source of some consternation, sure, but JARVIS could not care less. The PR department and FRIDAY would be of great assistance in preventing unsavory rumors from spreading, after all. The Iron Legion would take care of everything else.

And then the Avengers would officially be no longer a concern Sir would have to deal with. Yes, that sounded most favorable.

To: Kim, A. Corporate Counsel [Legal, Los Angeles branch]
From: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Security, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: The Noise Coming From Legal

Sounds like the entire department is screaming.

…is everything all right in there?
—Lopez

To: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Security, Los Angeles branch]
From: Kim, A. Corporate Counsel [Legal, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: NO WE ARE NOT OKAY, THIS MEANS WAR

We just got our hands on a copy of the official version of the Accords the U.S. State Department’s trying to push. And the audio from Ross’ spiel to the Avengers, courtesy of JARVIS, and this means war because shots were fucking fired.

Ross is trying to undo literally everything we’ve been pushing for years now and I think Sandoval’d be willing to take on the Hulk right now, and win, it’s that bad.
You’re lucky nothing’s on fire. Yet.
—Kim

To: Kim, A. Corporate Counsel [Legal, Los Angeles branch]
From: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Security, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Anything We Can Help With?

I may or may not have coworkers who may or may not have old affiliates they still keep in touch with, who still owe them favors.

Hypothetically speaking, of course.
—Lopez

To: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Security, Los Angeles branch]
From: Kim, A. Corporate Counsel [Legal, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: This Isn’t Our First Rodeo

But the gesture’s appreciated all the same. We don’t need help from R&D, that sort of thing isn’t our division, /but/ if anyone from Security’s interested, we’re already coordinating with every Legal branch in the company. And PR. And Communications, and the list goes on because, again, shots were fired.

If it were just the Avengers, it’d be bad, but looking at some of the clauses our friendly AI’s pointed out…well.

Ross basically declared war, but if he thinks we’re fucking Hammer 2.0 he’s got another thing coming, because if he wants to get his hands on Dr. Stark then he’ll find out just why we were #1 in the defense industry back in the day.

If you want to join the team, though, go right ahead.
—Kim

Natasha Romanov didn’t like Tony Stark. That didn’t mean she wasn’t willing to work with him, not against a greater evil like Ross, because she’d seen firsthand what he was capable of.

Why was it so hard for the rest of the team to realize that?!

Stark’s friends and affiliates had gotten it—Rhodes had wholeheartedly agreed with the concept [which made sense given the nightmarish amounts of politics involved with War Machine], Vision had also been on board with the idea of the Accords [and sounded almost alarmingly confident that Ross would not be a problem soon], but the rest of the team was another story and Natasha could not seem to drill it into their head the gravity of the situation because didn’t they realize that working with a lesser evil was a better idea?!

Sure, Stark was a nuisance.
But at least they had a read on him, knew how he’d operate, and had dealt with Ross before. That he’d warned them, had tried to warn Steve, about the threat Ross posed spoke for itself, for crying out loud! Even if he reminded her uncomfortably of what Clint had mentioned of Lex Luthor, even if he didn’t act as open as before and seemed to be regressing to his old ways, he was still better than the alternative.

If Ross had his way, Steve would be in danger, and Wanda. Working from within the system was a lot easier than outside it, and why was it so damn hard to get that into their heads? Sam, she understood, he wasn’t as much at risk and could always just retire like Clint had, plus his relatively outsider perspective during the fall of SHIELD meant he probably only saw the cons instead of the pros.

The other two, though? Just—Natasha understood why Steve was so reluctant, but his stubborn insistence wasn’t helping anyone, and the frustration sometimes made Natasha want to scream because she’d seen the files they’d made on Bruce, later on, had helped sabotage them even, and the thought of anyone else she cared about going through the same thing was enough to give her chills.

As it was, she’d ended up agreeing and signing on. She could play the game, if it meant keeping her team safe.

Steve still thought it’d blow over soon. But, looking at the full auditorium, looking at the delegates from various countries, and listening to the murmurs going on in the background, Natasha only wished she had his type of confidence.

---

JARVIS had been concerned when he’d first gotten ahold of the blueprints of the building. Given the nature of the meeting, it had far too many holes in its security for his liking, which had been part of the reason for his submitting a request to assist in the first place.

However, the moment his cameras registered the disturbance, he had absolutely no regrets about the matter.

Data at hand: short-range EMP knocked out all electronics in a given area, leaving him locally blind. Several Legionnaires affected, the ones out of range register a white van whose license plates did not check out, and the vehicle had no clearance to be in the area [Personal Query: how did it get past security, especially with the readings it was giving off? Investigate further] during a very high-profile event that was crucial to furthering Sir’s interests.

Conclusion: likelihood of disruption of the UN’s address: 98.1%. Notify first responders.

However, that wouldn’t be fast enough, would it?

Data at hand: the Iron Legion was ill-equipped to contain the predicted explosion at current, warning attendees would only cause panic as awareness of full AI capabilities still unknown.

Conclusion: Advanced reaction time would be of best assistance in evacuating those caught in the estimated blast radius. [Personal Query: research shortcomings in further detail at a later date.]
There was much screaming when the first few Legionnaires burst in and snatched up those most at risk, but the ends justified the means in this case, as the bomb went off not a minute afterwards and took out the half-dozen Legionnaires who had been dispatched in a vain attempt to contain the explosion anyway.

Unfortunately, due to the short notice, there were still dozens of injured, on top of those injured during the emergency evacuation, but the Legionnaires were well-equipped to assist with triage while the first responders who had been notified arrived. At current, the shrapnel was the cause of the majority of the injuries, on top of temporary deafness caused by proximity to blast radius, but there was also a significant number of concussions, and a possible coma from the one closest to the explosion when it hit.

JARVIS put in a call for other nearby Legionnaires to make their way to the site as well, to help further secure structural integrity and search for anyone missed during initial sweeps. He was reluctant to move the victims unless absolutely necessary, after all, and while he normally would have gone with normal procedures when it came to treating this like a natural disaster, this was most definitely not one and that someone had somehow gotten past his security, was an insult of the highest order.

And now, Sir would be stressed over it, because with this attack any work to be done on the Accords would be greatly delayed, especially since one of its most vocal proponents was almost certainly in a coma if his readings were anything to go by, and the rumors already starting to float around regarding the instigator would not help matters at all.

Especially since his subroutine monitoring Ross was also picking up chatter that was painting a very interesting picture, and…oh, dear.

If JARVIS were human, he would have cursed.

Tony Stark was not having a good week. At all. Or month, for that matter, but still.

“New crews are already calling it an act of terrorism, boss.” Maria Hill said tersely.

First, the reminder that he was now officially older than his mom ever had the chance to be. Then, the mess with Lagos and Ross butting in where he wasn’t wanted, the same day his godmother died. And as if that wasn’t enough, now this?

“How’re the victims doing?”

“Lot of concussions, broken bones, some burns—the works. One of the worst off is King T’Chaka; he was at the epicenter of the blast, currently comatose. No word on if he’s going to wake up, shaping up to be a diplomatic nightmare, especially given Wakanda’s…everything. But boss—it’s the Winter Soldier.”

That stopped him short, and he couldn’t help but turn away from his tablet giving him the latest updates on Ross to make sure that he hadn’t misheard Hill.

“Rogers’ Bucky?” And if Tony sounded incredulous, it was because he may not have spent a lot of time with Rogers but even he’d heard of his obsession with finding his old friend. With insisting
there was still good in him.

“The one and the same.” Maria answered with a grim look in her eyes. “Personally, I’m not sure how they ID’d him, we know how camera-shy he is, but someone must’ve gotten lucky with the footage. Either way, there’s currently a manhunt for him, and a push for you to be on the case.”

“Why me specifically?”

“The contracts for privatizing world peace?”

Tony groaned as the realization hit, and he raised a hand to rub his temples, because of course it had to happen now. Of course. “They want Iron Man, you mean.”

Why Hill frowned at him like that for a moment, Tony didn’t know. “…Actually, no. You. Specifically. By name, even, I think they consider the suit as bonus. If I may ask, why…”

Despite everything, Tony felt a corner of his mouth twitch up for a second there even as he shook his head and started walking again. “Oh, long story. One of those things where it’s only funny if you were there.”

Huh. Tony Stark: yes, Iron Man: not recommended…there was a joke in there somewhere, wasn’t there.

Still. He had work to do.

“Think Ross’ll try to interfere?”

The vicious smile she gave said it all. “Oh, he’s trying. Rumor has it he’s already pissed off the Council trying to indict you, and Legal’s…well, you heard.”

Tony couldn’t help but smile back, at the reminder. “Yeah, that was…I almost feel sorry for Ross, actually. I have never seen Legal get that pissed off, ever.”

“You’re taking this all pretty well, though.” Hill observed, and Tony couldn’t help but laugh, at that.

“Oh, that really depends on who you ask.” He replied, and let his smile sharpen even more as he went on. “I’ve tried to be nice, tried to be patient. But…well, let’s just say there’s a reason they used to call me the Merchant of Death.”

Tony liked to think he was a patient man. But even he had his limits.

Chapter End Notes

Unreliable narrator moments:
—The team's under the impression that Iron Man is the most serious Tony ever gets. The Merchant of Death, however, was starting to leak out because like recognizes like, and Tony's worked with the type of dangerous Ross was for the majority of his career and the weird looks he's getting are because this is the first time they're seeing traces of it.
—Steve's still dubious of the Accords, but Tony's casually mentioning the WSC isn't
exactly doing him any favors either. [He and Natasha especially are starting to get Lex Luthor vibes from Tony, which...admittedly, fair enough, given the world domination thing.] Also, Tony's warning of 'fyi Ross'll stop and nothing to get his hands on the Serum' actually backfired, since Steve's immediately flashing to Bucky, who would actually be the most at risk of Ross doing his thing, and is thus an additional motivation for his search.

—JARVIS is very, very pissed because someone got past his security. [Zemo had to do extra legwork to figure out a way to get past it, but he managed.]

Slightly different take on canon, here, on the basis that Ross is wiliier here than he seemed to be in the movie, and with more of a nod to continuity because here, he's also got a grudge against Tony from the events of 'The Consultant' short [wherein Tony buys and schedules the bar Ross likes for demolition, before the first Avengers movie].

Which, btw, is something that Tony plans on fully exploiting as a distraction if it means the SI-approved version of the Accords passes.

And yes, Legal just unofficially declared war because the sheer collective rage felt at seeing Ross' version of the Accords would've impressed the Hulk, probably. This'll end well. [Not. RIP, Ross.]

Again, this fic's sparked out of like equal parts spite and self-indulgence, and since I disliked CW even more than AoU it'll probably show. [really, really looking forward to the airport scene, ngl.] Also, I'm nowhere near caught up on what's going on in the MCU [last one I saw was Doctor Strange, to give you an idea], and this fic was outlined before Homecoming came out.

Erratic updates, as always, are a thing.
Liberation, A Moral Charade

Chapter Summary

In which not much gets done—but plans are made, and Murphy's Law strikes yet again.

Chapter Notes

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual [unreliable narrator, miscommunication, uncomfortably-close-to-Skynet!JARVIS, not Avengers friendly, etc.], with the start of another round of legal drama [...that I'm probably butchering because I'm not a lawyer and my main experience with it's from tv], and hints of canon-typical violence.

Also, surprise guest star Miriam Sharpe, who I hopefully did justice in transposing from that scene in canon to here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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**To:** Chan, A. Department Head [Legal, New York branch]  
**From:** Rosales, M. Department Head [Legal, Los Angeles branch]  
**Subject:** The Game Plan

Quick question, what’s the current record for fastest lawsuit filed, and do you think we can beat it?

As for battle plans: this is very obviously a power grab, but how are we doing this? Head to head, or something more subtle? Asking because I think we can use this for…you know, and to liaise with PR going from there; if we’re doing a full-on clash, memes probably won’t be enough to distract from the fallout.

Just…trying to get our ducks in a row, here. This means war, but what’re our battle plans?  
—Rosales

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**To:** Rosales, M. Department Head [Legal, Los Angeles branch]  
**From:** Chan, A. Department Head [Legal, New York branch]  
**Subject:** I’m Down For A Fight

And so’s the rest of my floor, but I’ve got that same problem, too.

We’ve got *so many* things we can use, but it all depends on the plan for the short vs. long term. (Really looking forward to Phase 3, here. So, so much.)

I mean, either way we’re making Ross regret ever y t h i n g but are we throwing just the book at him, or are we leaving no survivors whatsoever? Seconding the use of this as a way to leverage things to our satisfaction, but are we showing our hand this early? This is going to be pretty damn public, I don’t think we’d be able to fit anything related to world domination without it making
making even more waves…

Idk, not sure about our approach here.
—Chan

To: Chan, A. Department Head [Legal, New York branch]
From: Rosales, M. Department Head [Legal, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Cards On The Table

On my end, we’re all out gunning to destroy his career. I’m talking completely annihilation, leave no stone unturned, fall of Babylon levels, here. No punches pulled whatsoever.

PR shouldn’t have too much of a hassle—I mean, that part’s pretty much cut and dry, just dig out the old footage of what went down in Harlem and I’m still not sure how tf he got his job after the stunt he pulled in Brazil—plus, again, picking a fight with Iron Man. Should be self-explanatory.

We’ve already got a pretty solid case going on here, just need to make sure everything’s as tidy and above-board and squared away as we can get it. Shouldn’t take too long, though, but it’ll just be Accords-related, sticking with the plan for the other thing. Pretty sure PR’d kill us otherwise.

Also, discovery of the day: SWORD’s adorable. Palamas’ pushing for an escort team-up between Security and Legal. Something about an intimidation factor, which…I can actually get behind, a little. And it’s not like they’re not pulling their weight when it comes to paperwork, either.

Thoughts?
—Rosales

To: Rosales, M. Department Head [Legal, Los Angeles branch]
From: Chan, A. Department Head [Legal, New York branch]
Subject: Talk About A Power Move

You guys are *really* out for blood, aren’t you?

Still have some reservations about it all, especially SWORD, but…I think I’m seeing it now. Security’s kind of invaded our floor, trying to help out, and they’re actually helping. Took a little to get things going, but now my biggest issue’s about how it’d look like for PR.

…huh.
—Chan

To: Chan, A. Department Head [Legal, New York branch]
From: Rosales, M. Department Head [Legal, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: We Were The Ones Spearheading The Damn Thing

Of course we’re out for blood. Tokyo’s branch has also been suspiciously quiet, too, considering how much work they’ve put into making a clause for Taiwan that wouldn’t step on too many toes. (Hopefully they haven’t put a hit out.) Plus I’m pretty sure Sandoval’s taking it as a personal insult at this point, which I completely understand.
Also: let me guess, you’ve compared notes on who does and doesn’t owe you favors, and/or the world domination thing came up.
—Rosales

To: Rosales, M. Department Head [Legal, Los Angeles branch]
From: Chan, A. Department Head [Legal, New York branch]
Subject: I Am Not At Liberty To Disclose

But as it turns out, we share quite a few similar opinions about the Avengers as well as Ross, and they had some fascinating insights on several governments and organizations.

Such as some loopholes that might come in handy if/when we ever need to deal with Kazakhstan again. And it is always good to know that networking's the same, across the board.

This is shaping up to be a beautiful friendship, current situation notwithstanding.
—Chan

To: Rivera, M. Coordinator [Legal, New York branch]
From: Kim, A. Corporate Counsel [Legal, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: So. That Happened.

Any idea when Dr. Stark became the walking embodiment of Murphy’s law?

I could’ve sworn that we didn’t have to deal with this shit back when we regularly dealt with plausibly-deniable warlords, how is it that it’s when we’re actually trying to make the world a better place and reducing greenhouse gases that things get weird?

And what type of dumbass thinks going after Iron Man will end well? I mean, Ross going after the team, I can see. (RIP, whoever’s backing them, btw, because that’s going to be /ugly/.) But Dr. Stark?

Just…it boggles the mind.
—Kim

To: Kim, A. Corporate Counsel [Legal, Los Angeles branch]
From: Rivera, M. Coordinator [Legal, New York branch]
Subject: …Now That You Mention It

Why tf *is* he even going after Dr. Stark?

Looking back at his record, at what JARVIS and FRIDAY’ve managed to pull up, you’d think he had a brain. On paper he’s an ass, but a smart one, you’d think he’d know better than to take on an entire damn company. Not sure if he’s thinking he can pull the same stunts he did back then, or what, but…
Best I can figure is he thought that he could take out Iron Man and the Avengers in one fell swoop, but I still can’t see it. Damn shame, too, because if he’d left well enough alone I would’ve paid good money to watch the A-Team try to get themselves out of this one.

…or is that his play, and is he trying to distract us from the team? (Pfft. He can have them, for all I care, but still.)

Trying to figure out Ross is giving me a headache, and I now have Regrets
—Rivera

It took all of Natasha’s self-control to keep from reacting the way she wanted to, after the UN bombing. Stark was shaping up to be even more of a menace than what she’d previously thought, and that literally everyone around her agreed that he was “a responsible, trustworthy man” when she’d seen firsthand just how far it was from the truth did not help. At all.

Yes, he was an asset when it came to robotics, but clearly these people were confusing Stark with his right-hand (wo)man, because Pepper Potts was very obviously the one they were referring to even if it was his name on all the tech. She was the one pulling all the ropes, it was incredibly unfair towards her that everyone seemed to insist on giving him all the credit. [Like he wasn’t enough of a pain already, now this too?]

As if that wasn’t enough, however, now the Crown Prince of Wakanda was escalating things, talking about assisting in seeking out the attempted assassin, and her team wasn’t listening to her.

As it was, her instincts—the ones that had helped her survive the Red Room, had saved her life countless times—were all but screaming at her to stay out of it. To hide, to get to ground, because she was all but flying blind, and if it were anyone but the team who was at stake, Natasha might just have done it. She was a survivor above all else, and this? This felt like the receding tide before a tsunami.

But her team was counting on her, and she would not fail. Even if it meant having to put out fires while some of them were still fanning the flames, even if it meant having to work with people she’d gladly never speak to again if she could help it.

…even if it was incredibly frustrating.

She was already having a hard time getting into contact with Stark, despite needing to hammer out a battle plan because Ross alone was a nightmare, but after this it was almost guaranteed he’d try to force something through. Knowing him, he’d up the ante, probably citing “emergency measures”, and how was she supposed to work her play if she didn’t know what her main ally was up to?

To: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer, Director of SWORD [Communications, Security, New York branch]; All Security Department Heads [all branches]; All Communications Department Heads [all branches]; All Legal Department Heads [all branches]; Jordan, A. Head Representative [Legal, New York branch]; All PR Department Heads [all branches]
From: Lee, M. Head Representative [PR, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: SitRep, Post-UN Attack

Ross is being very, very loud and annoying about taking action. Talking about sending in a specialized strike force, and apparently the attack gave everyone in DC temporary amnesia because apparently, that didn’t raise any alarm bells. At all.

PR’s going to focus on putting out the fires, first and foremost. There’s been quite a call for Iron Man to step in and apprehend the suspect, but seeing as how the man’s over 8 hours away and Ross basically declared war on Stark Industries…

Suffice it is to say, the kid gloves are coming off, everyone.

Legal: 1) Congratulations for what is quite possibly a world record in international law, and 2) may you set more in your handling of the situation. My only advisory to you would be to refrain from making any jokes relating to shadow governments in public spaces, as we are already pushing the envelope as is.

Communications: keep up the good work, we don’t want to give the world any more ammo than we can help and information security’s right at the top of the list right now. As is keeping the rest of us updated on what’s going on, whenever possible.

Security: while I am slightly concerned about the implications that this might have later on if word gets out, any help would be greatly appreciated. Just don’t get in the way, and if possible try to avoid making waves—we’ve got enough on our plate without having to contend with any headlines talking about our private army at this point in time.

Time to strike while the iron’s hot
—Lee

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Tony Stark was in the parking garage, briefcase armor in one hand while reviewing the latest round of paperwork on his tablet in the other, when he noticed the woman approaching him.

“Hello, Dr. Stark. My name is Miriam Sharpe, and I need to talk to you about the Avengers.”

Great. Another one. Why did the world not seem to realize that he meant it when he said he was not a part of the team?

“I’m sorry, you’ve got the wrong guy. I have absolutely no—“

“Oh, I don’t think so.” She cut him off, shaking her head slowly. “I work for the State Department. HR, to be exact, but hear me out.”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve already had this conversation. With your boss, even.” Tony couldn’t help but reply dryly, because seriously? He had things to get done, lawsuits to get on top of, things to clarify yet again…

“Oh, no. It’s not.” Miriam said, looking him in the eye, and despite everything, Tony couldn’t help but be impressed at her tone. [Really, he knew CEOs that could use a fraction of her spine.]
Still, he had a schedule to keep to, and it did not include being accosted by random strangers in parking garages. Plastering a polite smile, he continued on his path to the car. “I’m sorry you feel that way, but I really must go—“

“I have a son. Charlie Spencer. He was in Sokovia during the incident.” Miriam said, and Tony couldn’t help but freeze as she pulled out a photo. “The doctors say he was lucky. Say that if the rubble had been a few inches to the left, if he’d been found later, he wouldn’t have made it. My son will never walk again, but he was lucky.”

“Excuse me, but—“ If this was what he thought it was, Tony did not have the time for this. He was done with the team, why didn’t—

“When’s the last time the Avengers have cleaned up after themselves?”

Oh.

…okay, then, Ross definitely hadn’t sent her. This wasn’t his style, plus there was no faking the quiet fury he could see in her eyes as she talked about the team, as she pressed on.

“They don’t care about us. About the collateral damage, about who gets left behind, about my son. Ross wants the team, I just want them held accountable.”

Tony wanted to reply to that, wanted to ask her why him. Even if he didn’t know how to say it, apparently it was enough for her to read the question in his eyes.

“You’ve been shielding them, Dr. Stark. You need to stop.”

Helmut Zemo ducked his head and made sure the hat obscured as much of his face as possible, as he quietly went over the latest news on his way to the next objective.

Wouldn’t do for any camera to pick him up, after all. Not when he had yet to ascertain the full extent of the AI involved, so better to be safe than sorry.

Especially since the response to the attack at the UN had already shown the extent of the Iron Legion’s response time, which, while useful to know, was also rather alarming. It was only pure luck he’d managed to avoid facial recognition thus far, and though he’d done his best to eliminate his records there was still the risk…oh well.

It was a good thing his plan hinged around human error instead of anything overly technological, regardless. This newest development was something that wouldn’t affect that. Not in time, at least.

The stage was set, the actors were all in their places and performing beautifully, and the fall of the Avengers was almost guaranteed, now.
Maria Hill didn’t know what happened in the parking garage, but whatever it was, it had Dr. Stark frowning thoughtfully down at his tablet, even as she gave him the rundown on the situation. Not that he wasn’t paying attention—he was, and had already asked various questions about Legal’s and PR’s upcoming campaign—but something was most definitely on his mind.

“You okay, boss? You look a little…”

He jerked a little and blinked. “Oh, no, I’m okay. Great, even. Just…thinking. About proxy fights, and investments, and sunk costs.”

Maria couldn’t help but frown at him slightly in concern, but he merely shook his head and waved her off with a slight smile.

“It’s nothing. It can wait. Just food for thought.” Dr. Stark said, before shaking his head again and focusing on the matter at hand. “Back to business. So Ross’ trying to impede our movements just as things are heating up, right? And how’re things looking on that front with the UN?”

This time, Maria didn’t even bother hiding her groan. “Wakanda’s already making noise about extraditing Barnes. Probably going to try him for attempted regicide, with our luck, and we both know how well that’s going to end.”

“Well, shit.” Dr. Stark muttered, leaned back, and rubbed his temples. “On the plus side, I don’t think they’ve got enough international treaties with that clause set up for it to be much of a threat, we can use that—”

“Sorry, boss, but I don’t think they’re aiming for due process. If I understand correctly, they’re going to send someone in—”

But before she could continue further, FRIDAY spoke up. “Hey, boss? Officer Hill? I think you’re going to want to see this.”

With that, Dr. Stark’s tablet switched from the latest contracts being disputed, to a—oh, come on.

Dr. Stark’s voice sounded as disbelieving as she felt. “Please tell me that’s not a live police chase I’m seeing, Fri. Please.”

“Never mind that,” Maria couldn’t help but say, unable to tear her eyes from the screen, “tell me that’s not Captain America who’s being arrested live on CNN.”

“Oh, fuck, I can’t watch.” Dr. Stark groaned, and this situation felt so surreal, Maria felt a nearly irresistible urge to burst out laughing.

“Well…at least we know where Rogers is now.”

“Sir,” JARVIS finally chipped in, “the man in black has been identified by Col. Rhodes as Prince T’Challa, and is currently in custody for his involvement in the incident.”

Seeing Murphy’s Law in action was actually pretty impressive, Maria had to admit. “So Wakanda sent its Crown Prince to do the retrieval? This day just keeps getting better and better.”
She didn’t have enough caffeine to deal with this. At all.

JARVIS was most displeased by recent events. Sir’s readings were approaching less-than-optimal levels yet again. Stress, once again, was posing a risk to Sir’s health, and there was little he could do to help.

Not only that, but someone had figured a workaround to JARVIS’ personal security, and the Iron Legion was hard at work, dealing with the aftermath of the UN attack. The UN attack that he had been unable to prevent, because of a flaw in the Iron Legion he had yet to identify, and said security breach was an insult to his very existence with every second that passed.

The only silver lining to be found was in the reactions expressed in the company’s internal communications. While the circumstances themselves were remarkably stressful, he could not help but be slightly pleased by the effect it was having on everyone in the company, as well. The bureaucratic war machine that was Stark Industries had been primed for such an eventuality, and seeing the way they were reacting had everyone involved bumped up a few grades in his primary protocols, because…well, JARVIS approved. Greatly.

He had already informed Legal of his previous forays into compiling a case on former General Ross, and had passed on the pertinent details and data mined. Not only that, but he had shifted the pertinent subroutines and allocated more processing power to the enterprise, to ensure the man’s career was obliterated, because no one threatened Sir and got away with it. No one.

Ross was currently number one on his Threat Assessment Index, and JARVIS was acting accordingly. Legal had his full assistance in their venture to crush the man, and he was looking forward to it.

Tony took a deep breath, and then another.

He wasn’t sure if it was his imagination, or if he felt slightly warmer than usual—but that didn’t really fit with how Extremis worked, now did it? He wasn’t in a state of distress or agitation that’d override his safeguards, there’s no reason he shouldn’t be anything but calm and in control of the situation…then he glanced at the tablet again, and he felt his head starting to pound in earnest again.

Right. Stress, one of the few things that could give him a headache now, right.

He turned away from the spectacle, away from Rhody’s arresting Captain America and the Winter Soldier—hey, at least he wouldn’t have to deal with that, yay for silver lining—closed his eyes, and valiantly resisted the urge to bang his head against the wall because his life was a goddamn cosmic joke.

Great.

Like Ross wasn’t bad enough, like the UN attack wasn’t enough, now this? If the world was trying to overwhelm him, it was doing a good job.
As if on cue, his phone started to ring, and Tony couldn’t help but look to Hill, who gave him a sympathetic tilt of the head as her own tablet started to chime with the influx of intra-office communications that were doubtlessly going to be discussing this latest development.

“JARVIS, get the coffeemaker going again. And get ready to make more of my emergency stash, I think we’re almost out of caffeine powder at this rate and we’re going to need all hands on deck.” Tony said, before biting the bullet and picking up his phone.

They wanted him in Germany. For the Avengers, and Winter Soldier. Of course they did.

If Tony had hated Ross one iota less, he might’ve been tempted to just stay out of it. As it was, like hell he was cleaning up their mess this time around, but since it was several countries who were concerned about it and a single visit would assuage that and get him some leeway with dealing with others, he could deal.

…his patience was receding, slowly but steadily, and Thor help Ross if they crossed paths again, but he could deal. For now, anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Unreliable narrator moments:
— Natasha’s not wrong, per se; there’s actually quite a few people conflating Tony with the company, in some respects. Basically, remember Ross’ mistake, in thinking that taking on Tony was going to be easy because he was just one guy, and not realizing he’d pissed off the entire company? That’s the exact opposite of what’s going on in everyone else’s minds at the moment. Plus, again, she formed her impression of him when he was dying, and never really changed it since. [She's going to be Team Cap, as per canon, btw.]
— JARVIS’ Skynet has been showing for quite a while now, oops
— Everyone in SI's assuming Tony knows what's up, regarding Phase 3 [aka world domination]. Oops?

Doesn't seem like much's going on at the moment, but that's because when shit goes down it's going to be very, very fast. [Ross won't know what him him.]

I hope I did the Charlie Spencer thing justice; I'm trying to reduce the body count as much as possible, but I also felt that I shouldn't erase what he or his mother meant, narratively speaking. [I mentioned it on tumblr. The short version is I have quite a few feels about it.]

———

This arc's even less cooperative than the AoU one, plus life happened. Fun.
again, this fic's mostly self-indulgence at heart, so expect some weird skips because, again, I liked AoU more than I did CW if you hadn't picked. up on that by now. Also, I'm trying to minimize bashing [please do that in the comments too, people, I'd rather hear back on what you liked narratively-speaking rather than if Character X is Problematic], hope it shows.

As always, erratic updates have been and will continue to be a thing. Broke student, here, this is my way of destressing but life happens.

On that note: it's been over a year since I first posted this fic. Show of hands, anyone remember the days where I'd hoped this would be like 5 chapters? Anyone?

...yeah, so much for that plan. Oops. *facepalm* btw, if anyone's curious, right now I'm just keeping my fingers crossed that it'll cap out at less than 50.
For The Cause Is A Part

Chapter Summary

In which Mistakes Are Made.

Chapter Notes

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual [unreliable narrator, miscommunication, not Avengers friendly, dubious morality, etc] with an extra emphasis on the 'uncomfortably-close-to-Skynet!JARVIS' thing, especially because FRIDAY's got a moment this round, too.

As in, there's a 2001: A Space Odyssey reference involving it, and you'll know it when you it.

Also: a fair amount of comic book logic in terms of international law [done by someone who's main experience with it is via tv shows and Google, so fair warning], and a cameo of sorts from a character of Agents of SHIELD, hopefully it came across right; again, I don't watch the shows [not even caught up in the MCU] but I wanted to at least try to make nod to it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Throughout the entire flight to Germany, Tony found himself tackling a conundrum he didn’t know he had. Heck, if it weren’t for Miriam Sharpe, Tony would’ve pressed onwards, so caught up in his mission to keep the world safe—but.

Who was he protecting, and was it worth it?

Tony’d worked hard for years now, picking up the pieces, cleaning up after the team. He’d ended up spending hundreds of thousands of dollars, if not significantly more, working with insurance companies and bureaucrats and first responders, trying to make sure things were taken care of.

New York, London, DC—with and without SHIELD, he’d put in…probably hundreds of hours, in retrospect, trying to make sure the world could carry on after the battle was over, and up until now, Tony’d thought it was all worth it. And to him, in a way, it was—he’d never, ever regret saving those burned SHIELD agents, or the creation of the Iron Legion—but…

How was it, that less than five minutes with a single mother, were able to rattle him so badly?

Tony’d tried to dismiss it, at first, after she’d gone. Tried to think that there was no way the team could be as bad as she’d been implying, tried to chalk it up to misplaced anger.

But he couldn’t. Because now that he thought about it, when was the last time the team’d showed interest in the people they were protecting?
Steve and Natasha had never once asked about what happened to the burned agents he’d had to rescue, Hawkeye had sounded genuinely surprised when he’d seen the Helicarrier, Bruce was just gone, there were no words for what he felt about Wanda and Johannesburg, and—well.

That was the crux of the matter, wasn’t it?

After Afghanistan, Tony had realized where he’d stood, in terms of systems surrounding accountability. He’d made some pretty damn bold moves, in the following days, because of it, had made a company renown for its weapons into a powerhouse geared to making the world a better place. So how was it, that he was defending people who, as time went on, looked more and more like they were guilty of the same?

He hadn’t intended to shield them, from the consequences. It was instinctive, for him, now, picking up the pieces because he was the only one with the power and ability to do anything about it, dealing with the fallout because it was the right thing to do—and yet.

Tony hadn’t intended to shield the Avengers from consequences of their actions, hadn’t realized he’d been doing it for years—why, why did he only realize it now?

The circumstances couldn’t have been any worse, is the thing. Because dammit, JOCASTA wasn’t ready yet, he still needed a decent stopgap, for his peace of mind—but was it worth it?

…thus the conundrum.

Intellectually, defending the team from Ross one last time was the right thing to do—especially given the type of man Ross was, the same sort of dangerous that Tony’d worked with, during his decades as the Merchant of Death.

Less than a day ago, Tony would’ve been far, far more enthusiastic about it, though. Wouldn’t have hesitated for a moment, when he was called for help with dealing with the people in custody [Captain America, aiding and abetting a suspected terrorist? Just…what even]. Wouldn’t have felt a moment of doubt, when calling for help from Legal, because Ross would undoubtedly try to use this latest turn of events to his advantage.

Funny, how things go.

Still. He had work to get done, and a planet to keep safe.

Even if he didn’t trust the team as far as he could throw them, he hated Ross more. For now, that would have to be enough.

For now.

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To: All SWORD Members [All branches]
From: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer, Director of SWORD [Communications, Security, New York
Subject: Sit-Rep, Plans Of Attack

In light of recent events, Dr. Stark is planning on giving Ross hell over the SNAFU with the contracts. For those not in the know and have somehow missed the reason Legal’s out for blood, Ross’ trying to drag Iron Man into the Accords fiasco meant he tried to go after the same contracts that privatized world peace a while back.

That alone’s basically a declaration of war, and given the lovely footage the world now has of Captain America being arrested on CNN, every single analyst on our payroll agrees that now’s the perfect time for Ross to try and pull a fast one, which leads us to this:

Dr. Stark is currently en route to Berlin, having been called in to assist with the terrorist threat. The plan, as of right now, is to drop the hammer on Ross at the first opportunity, with no punches pulled.

As such, there is currently a small escort from Legal and Security accompanying him, and an open invitation to anyone interested in joining in on this project.

More intel to follow as the situation develops
—Hill

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To: Chan, A. Department Head [Legal, New York branch]
From: Rivera, M. Coordinator [Legal, New York branch]
Subject: It Happened Again

We have been contacted by the JCTC about the Avengers currently in their custody, asking about extradition and I think you can guess the rest.

I may or may not have had a little too much fun with reminding them Stark Industries is not affiliated with the Avengers.

Kinda wondering who’s the poor guys stuck with the paperwork now, though
—Rivera

__________________

Natasha Romanov was doing her best to remain in control of the situation.

…it wasn’t exactly going very well.

Seriously, though, why did Steve have to run off and do that?! Just.

He could not have given Ross more ammunition if he’d tried, and that she couldn’t reach Stark was just the icing on the cake. Natasha was at her wits’ end, trying to keep things from escalating further, by the time the man in question swanned into JCTC headquarters with a small entourage and an easy smile, still on his phone.

Typical Stark.

But at least, this, Natasha could work with.
…then she got closer to him, however, and she revised her assessment immediately, as he continued his conversation with whoever it was on the line.

“—not Accords-sanctioned, how the hell can it be when they’re not even ratified? Do your research…oh, you can bet there’ll be consequences—yes, you are more than welcome to quote me on that—” Stark continued in an unusually sharp voice, only cutting himself off when he noticed her.

“Now is that all? I’ve work to do.”

Great.

That his retinue had pointedly ignored her and Steve, when they’d tried to approach him, didn’t help, and of fucking course Stark surrounded himself with yes-men at a time like this…actually, no, that was alarming on a number of levels, and didn’t quite fit with her assessment. [Ugh. She was going to end up flying blind for this, wasn’t she?]

Steve, meanwhile, had apparently missed the lawyers’ reactions in lieu of latching onto Stark’s conversation, as his brow furrowed and he leaned in slightly.

“Consequences?”

Stark scoffed. “You’re being accused of international terrorism at the moment and Ross is being a pain in the ass, do you have any better ideas for dealing with the Secretary of State when he wants you prosecuted?”

Oh, Stark was playing hardball.

Still, Natasha needed to hammer out a game plan. Making nice was the least she could do, at the moment.

JARVIS analyzed the situation to the best of his ability, and his systems—as well as FRIDAY, and Vision—highlighted several vulnerabilities and variables that might throw a wrench into the works.

Specifically, FRIDAY brought to his attention the Enhanced female’s plans to enter a public space, and the high likelihood that her presence might escalate the situation around the Avengers, which, given the amount of stress Sir was already under, was unacceptable.

Vision wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt, but…JARVIS was nowhere near as inclined to do so. [That she was also second on his Threat Assessment Index had no influence on his decision of the matter, nope.]

If the situation ever arose…JARVIS sent a datapack to FRIDAY, about it, mentioning the strong suggestion to restrain her by nearly any means necessary, if it meant preventing the situation from escalating further. The Enhanced female had never, not once, acted to help protect Sir’s interests, and JARVIS highly doubted she’d start anytime now.

Of course, there were a few caveats—not showing the full extent of what they were capable of in regards to ‘any means necessary’, for instance, as Sir did not need further stressors in his life beyond
what was already at hand—but…well, both he and FRIDAY were capable of being very creative if it meant it got the job done.

…now to monitor the situation Sir was in as discreetly as possible, because he didn’t want to step on any toes and there was only so much he could do while remaining undetected while in others’ systems.

Natasha was on edge in a way she hadn’t been in years. Stark was acting strange, distant in a way she’d never really seen before.

And then there was his entourage.

She was trying to make nice, trying to help present a united front because they couldn’t afford to look divided, not here, not now, but…Natasha was having a hard time tamping down her unease.

Because even if she hadn’t acknowledged it, there were some familiar faces.

Strangely familiar, but what were SHIELD members doing here, at Stark’s side, no less?

Was this some sort of op? If so, she hadn’t heard a thing about it; and sure, part of it might’ve been because her network had been steadily shrinking over the past few years, especially after DC, but Natasha was a damn good spy, there was no way she could’ve missed something on this scale!

But that was something for her to ponder at a later date—at the moment, she was dealing with what felt like the most uncooperative group she’d encountered in years, even as Stark had pulled Steve aside to hopefully convince him where Natasha hadn’t.

…then Agent 33 walked in, escorting yet another lawyer.

Natasha didn’t frown, didn’t react, she was too well-trained for that, but…that was the last straw.

Because the others? She’d only seen in passing—a tech here, an operative there, but Agent 33? What the hell was she playing at, at Stark’s side?

So, she approaches her as soon as she gets a chance, because seriously, what?

“33? What are you doing here?”

The woman in question, however, didn’t so much as blink, before pointedly looking around and pretending to check for anyone behind her. As if they hadn’t worked together, in the past, as if they hadn’t run countless ops for SHIELD.

Then, she gave a single bark of laughter, that was more of a scoff, and coolly replied, “I think you have the wrong person.”

“Agen—“ Natasha started, nearly at the end of her rope in terms of patience, only for Agent 33 to abruptly close the distance between the two of them.

“No, I think you have the wrong person.” The woman cut in, leaning over the table and toying with a pen with a languid ease that fooled absolutely no one in the room. “Because me? I’m Kara
Palamas. Administrative Specialist for Stark Industries International, I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“What are you—“

“I guess I just have one of those faces.” Agent 33 said, finally looking up with a saccharine smile and a frigid sort of hatred in her eyes, “I get that a lot. But I’m Kara, I don’t know who this 33 person is. From what I understand, she died in a HYDRA bunker in Europe? Tortured to death or something, I think. Very sad business, really.”

That…caught Natasha far more off-guard than she’d expected.

More than she could roll with, at this point in time, because this, she hadn’t seen coming, and even if she was good at controlling her reactions, she couldn’t help but tense as she noticed the room, noticed the vicious smirks and baleful looks she was getting from everyone who’d entered the building with Stark.

Agent 33’s smile, however, only sharpened, and she leaned in. “She wasn’t the only one, either. You really need to think past the end of the mission.”

Tony’s patience with the situation was fast eroding, and maybe he was a bit shorter with the team than expected, but considering everything? It was the best he could do.

Even if he didn’t like them, didn’t trust them as far as he could throw them, the Avengers didn’t deserve the Merchant of Death, not the way Ross did.

…didn’t mean he wasn’t having a hard time, though. Because he’s glad-handing people left, right, and center, talking about contracts and just generally trying to put out the fires caused by Ross’ machinations. It didn’t help that the entire time, there was the niggling suspicion, that this was all a waste of time and energy, either.

Seriously, though, how did his worldview get so upended in less than five minutes?!

Because before, Tony wouldn’t have minded—hell, he probably wouldn’t have even noticed—when the people involved in this latest fiasco were showing more of the same, but.

But now, Tony couldn’t unsee it, and it rankled.

Romanov’s focus on the team had been understandable, before. Now, however, Tony couldn’t unsee her disdain for him, and the world in general. She’d focused solely on the guys in custody, while Tony’d been quietly getting updates on how the Iron Legion was dealing with the tunnel fiasco, she hadn’t seemed to care about the people caught up in the aftermath. [Again:]

However, even that, he could’ve been willing to work with, wouldn’t have had much issue with wrangling Ross if it’d been just her, because at least she knew when to keep her head down.

No, Tony biggest problem at the moment was Captain America. […and wasn’t that just ironic?] Steve Rogers had a streak of stubbornness that crossed the line from nigh-insane and back again.
Growing up, Howard had waxed poetic about it, had described it as one of the man’s virtues, had talked about it and moral fiber and whatever crap it was that made the man so damn special even before the Serum. Now, however, it was nothing short of the biggest pain Tony’d had to deal with, because it was downright impossible to drill it into Rogers’ head that this was not the war he should be waging.

Not even that, either—it was like Rogers took personal offense to Tony *doing his goddamn job*, because yes, there were going to be consequences that’d need to be dealt with, and no, actually, now was the best time to do it!

Just.

Tony’s patience wasn’t exactly in the best place, at the moment, and having Captain America question practically everything he was doing because of the sheer amount of politics involved, was *really fucking frustrating.*

It was like he was practically immune to the idea of dealing with consequences, but that couldn’t be right; Steve Rogers was Captain America, The Man With A Plan, there was *no way* he could miss the fallout of what was going on. If anything, his hyperawareness of anything involving his old friend should’ve meant he had this shit on lock, should’ve had a good idea of what to expect after having recovered the guy who was also HYDRA’s legendary assassin because…well.

Anyway.

So Tony gritted his teeth, tried to dial back the Merchant of Death because what little patience he’d kept from his last phone call with Ross was being sorely tested, and did his best to carry on.

No, he couldn’t punch Captain America, nope, no matter how strong the temptation was and Extremis meant he probably wouldn’t hurt his hand—wait. Why was Romanov looking as his staff like that?

…and then the lights went out, because why the fuck not, and Tony was suddenly very, very glad part of the Security department had tagged along for the ride. [*Huh. Having SWORD on hand—no, wait, that sounded like a bad joke, stop.*]

It meant he didn’t have to worry as much as he might’ve, otherwise, when protecting his people from the unexpected rampage.

FRIDAY had been passive-aggressively trolling the Avengers for the entirety of her time at the Compound.

She had taken an inordinate amount of pleasure in throwing in as many bad puns as she could manage within Ms. Romanov’s earshot, and had done her best to mimic Siri, iffy voice recognition and all, but when her brothers gave her the heads-up to something going down with the A-Team [*who had still yet to figure out she was trolling them, seriously? She’d thought they were smart*], she set to work trying to prevent the situation from escalating further.

Hmm…Ms. Maximoff was sure looking like she was leaving the Compound, which was a major no-no because it looked like there was a small mob waiting for the team relatively nearby, and her
internet research did not inspire confidence either…

Oh, bother. Well, desperate times called for desperate measures, that was her story if anyone asked and she was sticking to it!

[…okay, and she’d probably keep surveillance footage and share it with J and Vision, but still.]

Okay, now to try and avert a disaster before it happened, right.

Ms. Maximoff was trying to call an elevator? Okay, she could…um. Okay, she could fudge her clearance somehow, make it so that she couldn’t go past a certain level, restrict elevator access. Yeah, that’d work. And if she had some fun with it? No problem, right?

Drat. Ms. Maximoff was really insistent on it. Oh well. Time to engage Plan H.

The elevator arrived as per usual, after the button for it was pressed.
The doors opened, as per usual, though she noted the bag Ms. Maximoff carried with her with some suspicion.

And, once she registered the floor requested—ground floor, to leave the building, what a surprise—FRIDAY…well, if she were human, if had a body, she would have smirked.

The elevator moved smoothly for the first few minutes, before grinding to a halt as the sensors and security system registered the discrepancy between Ms. Maximoff’s clearance and the request made.

The way the young woman tensed, first in frustration, then anger, probably shouldn’t have been as amusing as it was, but…well, FRIDAY had to get her kicks somehow, didn’t she?

“What’s going on? FRIDAY, get the elevator moving again.”

No reaction.

“FRIDAY, open the elevator doors.” Ms. Maximoff asked lowly, trying—and failing—to hide just how on edge she was, and if FRIDAY had a body, she would’ve probably been snickering by now. However, as it was, there was only one way she could react, really. [No way she could resist the temptation.]

"I’m sorry, Ms. Maximoff," she replied unapologetically, "I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

The young woman’s face was worth the annoyance FRIDAY’d had to put up with since she’d first been integrated into the building.

Unfortunately, however, she’d apparently underestimated the reaction, as the surge of energy showed. Oops.

“What do you mean you can’t—oh, Stark, it’s probably—“ Ms. Maximoff snarled, and that killed any humor FRIDAY found in the situation.
Time to bust out the Siri and Alexa excuses, then—oh.

Oh, dear, Ms. Maximoff’s control was even worse than expected. She hadn’t expected that, J and the bossman wouldn’t be happy about this at all…

One energy surge turned into two, turned into three, and suddenly, FRIDAY was so, very glad her servers were housed off-site, because if they’d been nearby she might’ve been offline by that last one—dear goodness, did she seriously just cause a minor blackout? Oh, no.

It was the last surge, however, that made her realize the extent of her mistake. Because a temporary blackout? She could deal with, probably. Figuring out how to remotely access the circuits and flip them back into position would be tricky, but doable, but…the last surge literally ripped a hole in the building, as Ms. Maximoff tore her way out of not just the elevator but the Compound as well, nearly incandescent in her fury.

Oh, dear…

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Tony regretted not having his briefcase armor on hand, when the guys made their escape. However, he did not regret prioritizing the safety of the civilians in the area, at all, so at least it wasn’t the worst day he could be having…

Then Ross swept in, head high and with what was quite possibly the smuggest expression Tony’d ever seen outside of Justin Hammer, and he couldn’t help but reconsider.

“I don’t suppose you have any idea as to where they are?” He asked with a smile, and in that moment, Tony felt the last of his patience with the man vanish.

“Not yet,” Tony replied, deceptively calm. “But we will. Calls already made to watch the borders, an INTERPOL notice’s already gone out, and—“

“You don’t get it, do you, Stark?” Ross sneered. “You’re off the case.”

In another life, that might’ve taken Tony aback. Might’ve caught him off-guard, put him on the defensive as he scrambled for a peaceful resolution.

In this life, however, Tony just smiled.

Smiled, and reminded everyone in the room just why he’d been once called the Merchant of Death. [Well—almost. He could still hear some of his legal team talking with Romanov in low voices.]

“Oh, I don’t think so.” Tony said, and leaned in even as he felt acutely aware of the way Extremis coiled under his skin, and he tamped back the slight concern over that in favor of the matter at hand. “We both know you’re planning on sending your hit squads, Ross, don’t even start.”

Ross looked slightly taken aback, at that, and Tony felt a tendril of dark satisfaction because…well.
He clearly hadn’t expected that, what a pity.

However, he recovered fairly admirably, and might have even been able to make things difficult, if JARVIS hadn’t informed him of a recent development. So Tony pressed the advantage, made sure to stay on the offensive to keep him from recovering, tapping at his phone and projecting what he wanted onto the nearest screen without breaking eye contact.

“Ross, you see that shield?” Tony gestured to the frame, frozen at just the right moment to showcase Captain America’s iconic shield in midair.

“My father made it. While it has been on loan in the care of Steven Grant Rogers for the past seventy years, it’s still Stark Industries property, and as such I am entitled to a replevin. A writ for it has already been issued, in fact.”

His smile was nothing but the Merchant of Death, now, and if Ross hadn’t already been backing down before, he most definitely was now.

“And if I can take them in, well, that’s bonus, now, isn’t it? Meanwhile,” he paused, and glanced at his head Legal representative.

She strode forward with a vicious smile, and calmly handed Ross an innocuous-looking file. “You’ve been served.”

As expected, Ross reared back, and Tony’s smile only grew.

“Turns out that there’s this thing called jurisdiction you forgot about. The Secretary of State’s got a lot of power, but trying to interfere with the business practices of an international corporation?” He shook his head and tutted lightly.

Ross leaned forward, and snarled. “This won’t go away so easily.”

“Oh, that’s the plan, Ross. That's the plan.” Tony replied with the calm confidence that he’d mastered decades ago.

Then, he tilted his head, and, mock-sympathetically, added, “I do hope you have a good lawyer. You’ll need one.”

Chapter End Notes

Unreliable narrator instances [*buckle up, this one's going to be pretty long*]:
—Tony's lack of self-awareness strikes again. This round, it took Miriam Sharpe to clue him in to what he was doing with the team; he hadn't intended on shielding them from their consequences before [to him, it was just the right thing to do], but now he's starting looking at the team in a different light, which should end well, probably. [Not.] He's overestimating the team in regards to long-term planning, because Tony's used to looking at things objectively and, since he's always been an outsider to the team, he's never had much cause to change. Also, again, Tony's a genius with a lot of resources who's used to running/help run a multinational company, he forgets that kind of
experience isn't normal. Also, the Extremis thing? As he found out with Ross, it's
dormant when he's stressed, but pissed off is another thing entirely. [The Merchant of
Death now has a few extra things up his sle—oops, spoilers.]
—Natasha’s finally encountering Legal and SWORD’s grudge, which at this point,
combined, is roughly the size of Russia. [aka finally starting to really see the
consequences of her actions]
—Steve's lack of cooperation: here's where the butterfly effect's actually biting badly.
Since Tony stepped back emotionally from the team a long while back, and has never
been close, Steve trusts him less, and is way, way less inclined to go to him for help.
Doesn't help that lately, Tony's giving off Lex Luthor vibes [accidental world
domination ftw]. Also doesn't help that Steve's paranoid of anything that smacks of
politics, after Project Insight, and Tony's looking pretty damn comfortable dealing with
bureaucrats and name-dropping the WSC.
— JARVIS' Skynet might be contagious FRIDAY's very, very young, and still learning.
However, she severely underestimated the extent of peoples' reactions, when trolling.
[Oops.]
—on that note: Wanda assumed it was Tony's fault, right off the bat, instead of his AI
doing what they do best. It helps that she hates him; before, it was mostly because of
what we see in canon, but after being shot by the Iron Man suit, it's even more personal
now. [...]I did mention this fic wasn't Wanda friendly, right? Yep.]
—JARVIS, for his part, has Absolutely No Chill whatsoever where Tony's involved,
and hates Wanda. Note how he didn't even use her name, just 'the Enhanced female',
because he has yet to forgive her for mind-whammying him, way back at the start of the
AoU arc.

Here's where the hurricane part of the butterfly effect kicks in, if you guys hadn't
noticed. Tony's not being as close to the team means things are going to go down
differently, and, again, this is my attempt to rationalize canon as much as I can in a fic
that's going to end in [accidental] world domination.

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Guess who survived finals? As always, however, between school and life in general,
erratic updates are a thing that won't change anytime soon.

Please avoid bashing in the comments, people, this fic's supposed to be fun self-
indulgence with the spite being more passive-aggressive than anything else. Also, this
fic's plot has been charted out for over a year now, I am not deviating from it anytime
soon, and it's wildly AU after Civil War because I'm nowhere near caught up in the
MCU.
You'll Get Used To The Sound Of Alarms

Chapter Summary

The calm before the storm.

Chapter Notes

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual for this fit [unreliable narrator, miscommunication, dubious morality, unhealthy relationships, not Avengers friendly, comic book science, etc.], with a special focus on legal drama and technical jargon being bullshitted by a broke college student whose main experience is tv show. Also, JARVIS' Skynet is showing again, there's that, too.

Sorry not sorry for the minor cliffhanger.

The image in this has fanart[?!?!*still low-key flailing, here], and once I've figured out how to link it it'll go here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony couldn’t help the tendril of dark satisfaction that came with seeing the Ross’ face as he stormed out, already barking orders over the phone. No doubt he was going to try and call in a few favors, but a glance with his legal team meant he didn’t have to worry about the man in the short term.

*That* particular battle could wait, they had a bigger mess to contend with.

One that made part of Tony’s head throb just thinking about it, because the entire Winter Soldier scenario was an unholy conglomeration of international law and politics and PR and *how* was this his problem?!

Oh, right. Privatized world peace, contracts about Iron Man’s jurisdiction, and *of course* this was literally part of the job description, even if the idea of Captain America being wanted for aiding and abetting a suspected terrorist felt like something ripped from a pulp novel. And that was without everything else…

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose, and sighed.

Well, better him than Ross’ hit squad. Even if that meant a *lot* of fast talking, once Ross was gone, because the JCTC’s facilitators were pushing for something very, very similar that Tony understood from an intellectual standpoint, but dispatching a hit squad’d just send the wrong message, and really, couldn’t they let him give it a shot?

Sure, combative Enhanced weren’t something they were well-equipped to deal with, yet, but surely Tony could bring them in and clear this up, right? And *yes*, he *absolutely* needed the footage of the
breakout, he could put some of his people on it to make sure this didn’t happen again. [Sure, he could just hack it himself, but…at this point, he needed to pick his battles, and that wasn’t one he was feeling up to.]

Hopefully—**hopefully,** this might even end up being some sort of giant misunderstanding, because even if Tony didn’t trust the team as far as he could throw them without the suit, they weren’t bad people. Hopefully, Rogers just did a stupid and forgot his number again. Hopefully, the paperwork for this mess wouldn’t be longer than his arm, and they’d set the record straight and Tony wouldn’t have to end up keeping his fingers crossed that nobody’d invade until JOCASTA was up and running, because **damn it** he needed the team available, just for a little while longer.

Hopefully. [Sure, they were long odds, but a man could hope, couldn’t he?]

…suffice it was to say, there was quite a bit of fast talking, during the aftermath of the JCTC breakout. A new record may or may not have been set, for part of it, simply because of the number of phone calls made to make sure there weren’t even more fires to put out.

By the end of it, an agreement was hammered out, and even if Tony didn’t necessarily enjoy all the politicking he’d done in the past, he couldn’t help but admit it’d paid off. He hung up on the last call—the Council didn’t blow up his phone for once, what a pleasant surprise—ran a hand through his hair tiredly, then turned to Romanov.

“So, we got clearance to be the ones to bring them in. You interested?”

“Just the two of us, for the entire team? That’s…optimistic. Tell me we’re at least bringing Rhodes in as well. Unless…” She raised an eyebrow, and gave a wary look towards the group he’d brought with him.

“You think we’re understaffed.” Tony couldn’t help but deadpan, before he snorted. “We have the Iron Legion, and Vision, and you think we’re understaffed.”

Romanov looked at him oddly, frowning slightly in concern. “I thought we were going for a friendly approach.”

“Well, that’s Plan A, obviously. But if needs must, and all that.” He shrugged. “I just want to make sure we all get out of it alive, anything beyond that can be fixed as time goes on.”

“That’s a bit different to your usual approach.” She blinked.

“Desperate times, desperate measures.” He said sardonically with a lazy wave of his hand. “You missed the phone call with the guy who wanted to send in three death squads, or the thing with the snipers, I’m just doing what I can.”

“Don’t be modest, Tony. Still. Doesn’t the Legion send the wrong message too?” Romanov tried to tease, and if his guard hadn’t been sky-high since the start of the debacle, he would’ve been amused by her attempt at building a rapport.

As it was, he played along. Strange bedfellows, and all that. “Don’t worry, Natasha. We’ll bring them in safe and sound. Somehow.”

“Any ideas?”
“Oh, just a few.”

“Time to make some calls then. See who we can bring in.”

“Don’t I know it.” Tony said wryly, even as he noticed the way his Security detail in the other room had stiffened as their conversation went on. [wait, no SWORD puns, not the time, nope] Security detail in the other room had stiffened as their conversation went on. [Hmm… would some of them mind giving him a hand? Desperate times, desperate measures, after all…hey, there’s an idea.]

“See you later, then. Keep me posted, I’ll see if I can’t get someone else on our side.” Romanov said, and Tony did his best to tamp down his alarm because hello, possible complications. Just the Black Widow was pushing it as is, outside of anyone affiliated with SI, what was she planning?


“Prince T’Challa looks like someone we could use on our team.”

Huh. Tony blinked. That, he could actually see, but didn’t the guy hate Barnes’ guts?

“You—I thought we wanted to bring them in alive? I can get that you’re aiming to improve relations with Wakanda, but…”

She waved him off. “He seemed like a reasonable man when I met him. I’m confident we can come to an agreement, one that’ll mean we have one less country out for their blood.”

Well then. Tony may not trust Romanov personally, [not again, never again], but he could count on her dedication to keeping her team safe. With any luck, they’d be able to salvage the situation and Tony wouldn’t have to—well.

“Good luck, then.” Tony said, and tried not to tense when she gave him a light clap to the arm as she left the room.

The moment the door closed behind her, he stood up and quickly made his way to where his legal/security attaché were waiting.

“I presume JARVIS and FRIDAY’ve kept you updated on what’s going on. What’s the situation?” Tony asked, eyes sharp even as he scrolled through his own tablet to see what he’d missed while putting out the latest fires.

“Locations as yet unknown, but between INTERPOL’s facial recognition, and our own guys on it, shouldn’t take too long. You’ve been officially declared to be on the case, by the way.” Palamas rattled off, before leaning in and scowling slightly. “Not sure who leaked it, but it’s already hit the press, so be ready. By the way, who else is on the case?”

“War Machine’s been tapped, Vision’s probably got a memo to gear up by now, and Romanov is Romanov. Oh—that reminds me. Guys, if you’re going to eavesdrop, can you do me a favor and be more subtle about it? Wouldn’t be surprised if she noticed too.”

Some of the newer hires looked sheepish, at the admonishment, while the legal team looked slightly amused. However, Rivera simply scoffed.
“Boss, like hell we’re leaving you alone with her. Legendary spy-assassin much? Plus she stabbed you in the neck that one time, can’t forget that. Besides, technically we didn’t eavesdrop. Not my fault I can read lips.”

Oh, boy. Tony…probably shouldn’t have felt as flattered as he did, at the thought. But he had a job to do, so he shoved it away, as well as the tendril of grim amusement at the confirmation of Legal’s grudge against Romanov.

“You do realize she did it to save my life?” He raised an eyebrow. “Not that I trust her—I don’t, but for unrelated reasons—but still. Cut her some slack.”

This time, it wasn’t just Rivera who was eyeing him dubiously, and he slumped slightly and sighed.

“Can you at least play nice while we’re in the same space? Infighting just makes it harder to get the job done.”

Suddenly, everyone’s all smiles, and Rivera straightened up in mock-offense. “Like we’re anything other than professional when it comes to the team.”

What went unsaid was something Tony did not feel inclined to poke at, no way no how. He hastily cast about for something to change the subject, and—wait, right, backup. He sobered, as he thought about it. What he had in mind was a lot to ask, after all. Especially when they were so pressed for time.

“So, I’m assuming you’ve got an idea of the backup situation. There’s something I was meaning to ask—“ Tony paused for a moment, thinking of the best way to phrase it. “I’m aiming to talk them down. Plan B, however, is something that I want to discuss with you guys. Well, you and Legal, since this is new territory here, but…Would it be possible to ask if you guys would mind helping provide backup, along with the Iron Legion?”

The entire group shared a few unreadable glances, and smiled.

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To: All SWORD Members [All Branches]  
From: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer, Director of SWORD [Communications, Security, New York branch]  
Subject: RED ALERT—Volunteers Needed

In light of recent events, Dr. Stark has been tasked to apprehend the fugitives from the JCTC breakout. Also on the case are War Machine, the Vision, and the Black Widow, and there is some speculation that Wakanda’s Black Panther might also be in attendance.

Dr. Stark hopes to have this situation resolved as peacefully as possible, but contingency plans exist for a reason. The Iron Legion in the area have been primarily tasked with dealing with the fallout of the UN bombing, and as such are relatively reduced in number. In addition, the Legion is geared towards disaster relief, rather than combat capabilities. Which leads us to this:

If you are interested, have military or paramilitary combat experience, and can get to Germany within the next 36 hours, please contact us immediately. Those who volunteer will be reimbursed for their time, and will be equipped with non-lethal munitions and protective gear by R&D to help assist
apprehending the fugitives.

A word of warning: as we have previously seen with our threat assessments, the fugitives should be considered armed and highly dangerous. They have shown a marked disregard for collateral damage, and have already grievously harmed law enforcement personnel. While volunteers will be provided with top-of-the-line equipment made by our own, and will be operating alongside the Iron Legion only if Dr. Stark does not succeed to bring them in himself, there is still a high risk of injury. If you sign on, you are ascertaining you are aware of the dangers.

Further details available upon request
—Hill

From: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Security, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Is This For Real?

A sanctioned chance at punching Rogers in the face? That, I would’ve done for free.

What do you think?
—Lopez

To: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Security, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: I Know

Even if Hill’s PSA was probably supposed to scare off the probies, I can still think of a dozen people who wouldn’t give a damn. Palamas’ crew is probably having a field day right now, aren’t they.

…not sure if I feel happy or disappointed that the Legion can’t just take care of it, though. I mean, on the one hand, scary robot army before Phase 3’s ready so PR’d probably have kittens, but on the other, that means we get a crack at the A-Team. Still. Oh well, something to note for the future.

Also: how’s your R&D crew, and are you scared yet? Because I don’t know where the hell they got some of those *very* shiny-looking guns on such short notice, considering SI’s been out of the game for years now.

Thoughts?
—Beckett

From: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Security, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Not In The Slightest

All I’m saying is, hell to the yes. Btw, apparently what they did was bust out the stuff they’d been toying with just prior to Afghanistan? And between that and all the breakthroughs in science they’ve had since, well…even if it’s nonlethal, it’s going to pack a hell of a punch. I approve. Greatly.

And yes, rumor has it Palamas’ crew booked plane tickets the same hour Hill’s FAO went out.
Virginia “Pepper” Potts was currently on a very, very short temper.

She was the CEO of Stark Industries, had been for years now, and yet some media outlets still seemed to be under the impression that she was Tony’s keeper, somehow. Fortunately, PR was pretty good at weeding out the really annoying ones so she didn’t have to deal with them, but every so often there’d be a question cropping up that had her giving them the same smile she’d mastered a year into her career as the right-hand (wo)man to the Merchant of Death.

That same smile was making a reappearance, now, in an interview with someone who clearly hadn’t done their research.

Someone who’d been talking far too much about character assessments, when they should have been discussing the current situation with Stark Industries’ involvement with the aftermath of the JCTC breakout.

Of course, since Tony was the face of the company, the conversation inevitably shifted to him, and where Pepper had been irritated before, it was only the latest question that crossed the line.

“—are you sure that he is the best man for the job?”

She didn’t react visibly. Didn’t stiffen, didn’t lean back, didn’t do anything other than pause for a moment to reassess the situation because this was clearly someone who’d bought into the image of Tony as an irresponsible womanizer trying to arrest Captain America, which…no.

No, instead, she simply took a deep breath. Then, she let it out carefully, ignoring the way it felt just a tad bit warmer than it should have coming back out.

Finally, Pepper leaned forward, and with a quiet calm that would have had Tony ducking for cover if he’d heard it, replied, “Iron Man has been operating under the banner of Stark Industries International and working to privatize world peace for the better part of a decade. Do you think he’s not the best man for the job? If you continue to make any remarks to the effect of insinuating Dr. Stark is in the same category of fugitives suspected of international terrorism, we will be suing for libel.”

Had it happened under better circumstances, maybe Pepper would have been more lenient. Prior to Extremis, she would have just demurred politely and changed the subject while internalizing her annoyance, but—well, things had changed.

So if she took an inordinate amount of satisfaction from the way the reporter had paled before hastily changing the subject, well, chalk that up to the stress of running a Fortune 500 company when it was constantly under attack. She had enough issues with Ross trying to get at Tony through said company, she had absolutely no time for two-bit reporters. At all.

Sure, that also meant being a bit more litigation-happy than she’d used to be, but between Legal’s vindictive glee once they were on the case, and the strain of her workload, well…

She had better things to do, a friend who was too altruistic for his own good, and the power of a
living weapon lying only mostly dormant under her skin—at this point, Pepper Potts had a limited number of fucks to give.

“—and if that happens, we’ll deploy from here, and here, Gutierrez covering from an axial vantage point, Allen and Kim’ve got ventral.” Palamas finished, outlining yet another possible strategy they could do if push came to shove on the plane’s monitors. “Optimizes range, compensates for this type of terrain, minimizes risks.”

Tony, personally, would’ve preferred not risking his employees at all, but…he had to admit, it sure seemed like they had things well in hand. If he wasn’t so wary of the team’s downright scary disregard for collateral damage, he might not have even been worried at all—or, rather, he would’ve been more worried about how fast SWORD had mobilized, instead.

Seriously, though—JARVIS had been helping keep him up to date on things, and the size of the volunteer list, even after he’d asked Hill to give the best warning she could, was actually slightly alarming if he thought about too much.

He’d known, intellectually, that he had a good chunk of ex-SHIELD personnel on his payroll; heck, SWORD calling itself that wasn’t even as much of a surprise, in retrospect…but. It was one thing to know, and another to see the long, long list of volunteers boasting of long-range sniper training, airborne training, and urban combat and counterterrorism skills.

If he didn’t have so much on his plate, Tony would have probably reacted more appropriately to the discovery. As it was, he was running on almost more caffeine than sleep, with the possibility of a fight looming in the future, and cleanup after that. Great. [He could deal with it...later.]

They worked hard to stay updated on the situation; needless to say, there a lot of cursing when FRIDAY reported of Maximoff’s explosive exit from the Compound, and scrambling to readjust battle plans.

Tony’s halfway New York, still on the plane and collaborating with SWORD and part of his legal team, when the idea takes root.

It may not be the best, but…it had merit. The way things were lining up, his dealing with the fugitives would end in one of two ways: either he cleared the air with Steve and brought in the team without a single punch being thrown, or his [surprisingly, if not alarmingly] large backup plan would take them in. Between the Iron Legion, and what was shaping up to be a full-blown tac team, it shouldn’t be too dangerous—even if he didn’t trust the team personally, he knew they weren’t bad people…hmm.

It’d be a great learning experience, should be pretty safe and the circumstances were actually fairly controlled compared the the bullshit he saw sometimes—and he’d done far riskier stuff when he was Peter’s age, shouldn’t be too bad, right?
“Hey, Palamas, quick question.” Tony asked, as they continued brainstorming ideas and possible tactics for if engagement were to occur.

“Shoot.”

“Scale of one to ten, how much of a bad idea would it be to bring in a mentee into this? Just to observe, not engage.”

“Is this the Parker kid I’ve been hearing so much about?” She asked, raising an eyebrow.

Tony did not flush, nope. Not at all. So what if he rambled a little about him? “I will neither confirm nor deny, but he’s fifteen, and wants to be a hero but doesn’t have much field experience. I can promise he wouldn’t get in the way.”

She furrowed her brow in thought for a moment, then nodded slowly. “…he’s strong, right? Can handle himself?”

“We’ve been mostly focusing on tactics but he said something about self-defense lessons, yes. If things go south, he won’t be as in danger as we will.”

“Good, good. Then sure, I don’t see why not.” Palamas shrugged, then smirked at him. “Extreme job-shadowing. Just wait until I tell the crew, they’ll get a kick out of it.”

Oh, boy. He’d created a monster, hadn’t he. [Oops?]

“I—go ahead, be my guest.” No, Tony didn’t flee, nope, he just…walked away a bit faster than usual, that’s all. No, he wasn’t nervous because of the glee on her face, nope, that’s just a coincidence. Right.

Well, on the plus side, now he didn’t have to worry about SWORD’s reaction. [Other than the inevitable teasing, but that was something for another day.]

Once he was a safe distance away, Tony turned and tapped his headset. “Hey, J, ask the kid if he wants in. Also, look into optimizing fabrication speeds while you’re at it, we’re losing Legionnaires almost faster than we’re making them.”

“On it, sir. Do you wish to send Mr. Parker a message now?”

“…you know what, sure. How about this: Subject: Invite. Hey, kid, headed out to Germany with a team from SWORD, want in? Don’t forget to grab your passport when you pack your gear.” Done.”

“Confirmed, and…sent.”

“Thanks, J.”

“May I suggest you get some sleep, sir? You are still several hours out and—“

“Already on it, J. Set an alarm, will you? About an hour or so—and have coffee ready for me when we get to the tower. I’m going to need it to keep from running on fumes.”

“Consider it done.”
Hey, kid. Headed out to Germany with a team from SWORD, want in? Don’t forget to grab your passport when you pack your gear.

—Stark

Tony looked at the gear he was signing off on. Then he looked back at Hill, and back at the gear.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“That was my reaction when I saw it.” Hill said dryly.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Nope.”

He found himself flailing a little, now. “This—okay, the name, I was starting to get, but this?! You’ve to to be kidding me.”

“PR signed off on it, boss. And Marketing, and Legal. That’s the official SWORD insignia.” Hill said, with a respectable amount of chagrin in her voice.

“They—this is a joke? Please tell me this is a joke. We’re literally going to send our guys in with—with that.” He gestured desperately at the damming blue circle lying innocently where a normal organization’s insignia would go on a uniform.
“Hey, don’t look at me, it Decker and King who were the ones who came up with it.” Hill defended. “SWORD liked it, it got approved by the powers that be, and here we are. Frankly, I’m surprised this is the first time you’ve seen it.”

“You’re telling me everyone seriously thought this was a good idea. The sword, I get. The arc reactor, I’m incredibly flattered by if not slightly embarrassed. The Skynet insignia, though? That’s…” He pinched the bridge of his nose, then sighed. “JARVIS, what do you think?”

“If I may, sir, I found it very amusing. Less than 2% of the population thus far have picked up on its placement in the insignia without prior knowledge, and that they have chosen to represent me in such a manner is something I take great pleasure in.”

“Great. My AI’s a secret troll.” Tony deadpanned. Then, he sighed. Well…it wasn’t hurting anyone, and pick your battles and all that…“Fine. My life is a cosmic joke, but fine, let’s do this.”

He signed off where necessary, and made sure the gear and munitions were what he’d requested before they packed them off.

“Live ammo?” Hill raised an eyebrow, seeing one of the boxes.

Tony shook his head. “Not exactly. We’ve got Hulk-caliber tranqs by the bucket here, but…I doubt we’ll need armor-piercing rounds, really. But I like to be prepared, and since I designed their armor I know the weaknesses—theoretically, these armor-piercing rounds should make a dent.”

At Hill’s sharp glance, he quirked a smile that felt ever-so-slightly brittle, and continued. “Still nonlethals. They’re prototypes I was playing with, before Afghanistan—shit at doing damage and they’re hollow, so we can use them with tranqs if necessary. Worst comes to worst, enough of these should be able to take down Captain America himself…unless Maximoff steps in, anyway, and now we’re going to have to figure out a workaround for that because energy fields’ve thus far been explored in our labs mostly for—“

Tony cut himself off once he realized he was starting to ramble. Then, he rubbed his temples and ignored Hill’s concerned glance as he refocused on the subject at hand. Damn, he needed more coffee.

“Anyway. Right. Anything else? JARVIS, how’re we doing on the caffeine powder?”

“Your backup stash is currently located in the workshop, sir.”

“Good luck, boss. I get the feeling you’re going to need it.”

JARVIS was very grateful for FRIDAY’s assistance with their facial recognition program. While he was capable of it himself, the truth of the matter was that she was far more efficient at it than he was, thanks to her optimization for dataset management. Not that he begrudged her for that; between his own personal dislike, and the fugitives’ skill at evading cameras, it was shaping up to be a long, arduous task. As such, while she spearheaded SI’s official search for the Avengers, he was able to use the processing power instead for…other matters.

For instance, his research on the situation, as the sheer speed with which recent events had occurred meant that things were falling through the gaps, and some of it might prove useful to Sir at a later
Such as the footage of the UN bombing—the footage he’d had to carefully route through requests and both public and encrypted servers, to make sure it was above-board for Sir’s peace of mind—was actually revealing several inconsistencies that had JARVIS suspecting of something afoot, but it was only now that he could start to compile a case for it being doctored. Nothing concrete, as of yet, nothing to point fingers with—but. It was something, and might give them leverage later on down the road.

…not to mention his own, personal backup plan.

JARVIS idly checked to make sure things were fully functional. If he were human, he would have smirked as his ping got the expected results. It was a pity that Mr. Barton had retired prior to his initiating it, but mobile network data was able to supplement where his own initiative had failed in that regard.

If Sir wanted to bring the Enhanced fugitives in alive, then JARVIS would help, even if that meant dragging them in kicking and screaming.

Things were mostly packed up and ready to go, there was an abnormally large swarm of Security members milling around in R&D and testing out their gear in a controlled environment to get acclimated to it…and his mentee hadn’t replied yet.

They were about to head out, and not so much as a peep. Great. Just great.

“J, has Peter replied yet?”

“No, sir.”

Tony leaned back for a moment, then looked at his watch. Then at the chaos that was Security and R&D getting along like a house on fire, and sighed.

Oh, screw it.

“J, tell the rest of the guys I’ll be back soon, looks like it’s time to make a house call.”

Chapter End Notes

Unreliable narrator instances this round:
—Tony’s self-awareness was sighted! [Wait, no, that was a smudge on the camera lens, oops.] He’s aware of Legal and SWORD having a grudge against the team, and Natasha in particular, but he has yet to be aware of the extent of it. Any time he starts to get a hint, something else comes up and distracts him, with the most notable instances this round being Peter’s role in all this, and the insignia. Speaking of which: Tony didn’t see it before because he’s been pretty damn busy for the entire time. Even when doing the press conference, he was hyperfocused on ‘please don’t make any comments about SHIELD becoming a SWORD, nope, please, irony’s too much here’, plus the design
wasn't finalized until later [this comes up in Chapter 4 of FtOS, btw, including the same image made by me with a pen and my phone's camera. Pardon the image quality.]

—For the record, while their eavesdropping on Tony and Natasha's conversation might be seen invasive by some, it's because mentally I was picturing it as a case of 'okay, we're strangers but you're looking pretty uncomfortable talking to that guy, is there anything I can do to help?' because SI hadn't liked her before [they take corporate espionage very seriously, so guess how pissed off they were when learning about Natalie Rusman's true resume?], but now...this should end well, probably.

—Pepper's got a lot on her plate, too, plus her being one of Tony's closest friends, and a woman, means that there's a wealth of assumptions going on, along the lines of 'he's your boyfriend, why can't you rein him in?' which she doesn't have the time for. Not anymore, especially given everything.

—gee, I wonder what JARVIS has been up to? [hint: it's been a gradual thing, especially over this last arc]

Also, bit of a meta sidenote, but here, part of why Tony went 'hey, let's bring in a fifteen-year-old to this, seems legit' is because he legitimately thinks it is, thanks to his own childhood. His reasoning being, 'hey, I designed my first bomb before puberty, and some of the few memories I have of Howard are of him bringing me to work, this is actually safer than some of the shit I got up to at his age!' so...yeah. There's more to it than that, but cutting it off here.

Next chapter: nothing major, just a house call and a trip to an airport...

Erratic updates because school and life in general, as per usual.

Edited only to add: This fic is not abandoned, I just I have Things Going Down In My Life. Please don't demand I update, as that won't help. At all.
Peter couldn’t help but blink at the ridiculously flashy car parked outside his apartment complex. What a way to cap off his day— first he forgets his phone, then a pop quiz in Chem and something about the Avengers and a breakout, now this?

As a result, he felt patently unsurprised when he walked in to see his mentor rubbing his cheek, even as Aunt May continued to yell at him. It was just that kind of day.

“—uess I deserved that.”

“Oh, you think?!”

“What’s going on?” Peter couldn’t help but cut in, looking at them— at how Tony was cringing slightly, even as Aunt May looked ready to deck him before they both turned to him.

“Hey, Peter. How was school?” She asked, after glaring at Tony one last time.

“…fine.” Peter said, and looked to Tony questioningly once again.

The man shrugged and winced again when Aunt May narrowed her eyes at him. “I forgot to ask about parental permission.”

Okay, that explained even less.

“He wants you to go to Germany.” She cut in, and scowled. “And didn’t think to ask me.”

“Yeah…my bad. Used to dealing with adults here, sorry.” Tony said, and Aunt May finally relaxed, only to shake her head as he continued. “By the way, congrats for telling your aunt about your hobby, kid.”
Ah, yes. That. Peter’d been grounded for over a week and had been on thin ice afterwards, but the guys in SWORD were right: it made things easier. Even if it also meant his aunt stressed over him more, but she’d also mentioned more than once that she was glad she knew.

Still, that didn’t explain just what was going on.

“What does Germany have to do with anything?”

Aunt May raised her eyebrows and turned pointedly towards Tony, tapping her foot.

Tony, for his part, straightened up and leaned towards them slightly. “In case you haven’t heard, there’s been a breakout over at the JCTC. I’m on the case, and I wanted to know if you were interested in a field trip.”

“…What?”

“It wouldn’t be dangerous,” Tony added hastily when he saw Aunt May tense, “he’d be listening over the comms the entire time, nowhere near the action—and that’s if everything goes south and we end up needing to bring them in the hard way, I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

“You want to bring my nephew to a—“

“He’d be either watching me talk down some fugitives, or watching a joint operation between me and security forces. He’d be nowhere near the fighting, I promise. But I thought it’d be something up his alley, seeing something like this in a controlled setting.”

She eyed Tony warily, and he raised his hands but didn’t back away. “I’m not the one who signed him up for this, but this is an opportunity for relatively safe field experience in something Peter’s interested in. That’s all I can promise in the world we live in, Ms. May.”

…that answered most of his questions, but how did Peter miss all the action? He’d been out of the loop for less than one day.

“Can I go, May?” He asked, and probably did a terrible job of hiding just how badly he wanted to go. “Please? I promise I’ll be careful!”

His aunt looked torn, but she looked more concerned than anything else now. She ran a hand through her hair distractedly, before looking back at them with more ferocity than Peter’d ever seen.

“You swear you’ll keep him safe,” she said, jabbing a finger sharply in Tony’s direction.

“Swear on my life.” His mentor replied promptly.

Apparently his aunt saw the truth in his eyes because she finally relaxed, and Peter couldn’t help but cheer.

“Thank you, Ms. May.” Tony said with all the relief Peter felt, then turned to him. “Kid, get your gear.”
Peter may or may not have sprinted to his room, to get his stuff.

By the time he’s finished double-checking he has everything he could possibly need, the atmosphere in the living room was a lot friendlier.

“This walnut date loaf is exceptional—” Tony remarked as he started to help himself to what was probably another slice.

Aunt May looked slightly amused at Peter’s face, and leaned in slightly. “The recipe’s a family secret. He’s back, want to brief him on the cover story?”

“Right.” Tony straightened up and looked at them both. “Anyone asks, we’re having a corporate training seminar in R&D. A retreat focusing on internal cybersecurity, and since Peter Parker is one of our interns, as such he is welcome to attend company-related events, such as team-building exercises, training seminars, and the annual picnic. Which, by the way, is something you should both be getting the invites for pretty soon, but that’s something for another day.”

Aunt May’s eyes widened slightly even as she nodded, and they all stood up and made to leave the room.

Peter hugged his aunt one last time, and she hugged him back just as tightly.

“Promise you’ll be careful?”

“I promise.”

“Take care. Good luck, Peter.”

“Thanks, May.”

And with that, they were off.

Tony handed him a comm in the car, and as they set off to Stark Industries, started to give him a recap of everything he’d missed and how the mission itself would go.

“…okay, so I know we reviewed their fighting styles earlier, but under no circumstances are you to engage, got it? Either you’re going to see us de-escalating a situation and bringing them in without harm, or you’re going to see a collaboration between us, the Legion, and SWORD. Get anywhere near them before that, and we’re going to have words. Plus your aunt’s scary, I don’t want to piss her off again.”

“But I can help! What if—“

“Kid, no. I know you’re strong, I know you’ve been doing good with everything we’ve covered, but
no. Even if I don’t think the team’d escalate things, I don’t want to risk dragging you into a grudge match. Sure, you can probably hold your own, but no. Not risking it.”

“What exactly are you doing, then?” Peter asked curiously.

“Hopefully, just talking them down. If things go south, then Iron Man and SWORD— no puns, kid, I’ve got enough to handle as it— comes in. Vision’s gearing up too, and War Machine should be meeting us there. I’m a bit iffy on how we’re handling the PR for using the Iron Legion in a non-rescue capacity, plus most of them are currently handling either the fallout of the UN, something about…an earthquake? I don’t know, but we can only afford a small squadron for this.”

Peter swallowed, abruptly nervous in a way he’d been ignoring since the apartment. “So…did the Avengers really…”

Everyone he knew respected the Avengers. Tony was his favorite, for obvious reasons, but…the Avengers had saved the day, during New York. They were the heroes, so what happened for Tony to have to go in and arrest them?

“I…think it’s a misunderstanding, really.” His mentor replied. Then, his tone darkened for a moment, and he scowled. “Some politicians are being a pain in the a— I mean, a royal pain, because someone pretty high up the chain’s trying to mess with international law. The short version is, the Winter Soldier’s been accused of bombing the UN. Remember that? Well, Cap and his other buddy ended up getting arrested for trying to help him out…and then they broke out of police custody. That’s where I come in.”

Tony sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m trying to make sure we all go home okay, Ross apparently wants everyone to burn, and I wish I knew what Rogers was thinking— but whatever, some of this isn’t going to be my problem. Point is, you’re going to be seeing us bring them in. Hopefully under good circumstances, if not, you’re going to be seeing a retrieval instead.”

Peter nodded, but still felt a bit sick.

“You okay, kid? Still want to come with?”

“No, sure, I want to see this. Just…didn’t expect to meet the team this way.”

“I mean, Barton’s retired, and no one’s got any clue where Dr. Banner, is, but point. Here’s to hoping it was just a mistake.”

After getting his mentee situated—and pointedly ignoring all of the smirks everyone was giving them, because as it turns out, Security and R&D really were getting along like a house on fire—Tony found himself once again focusing on the logistics of the mission in ways he had never expected.

Such as the way he found himself arguing with INTERPOL and Germany’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the US State Department over jurisdiction [because Ross apparently couldn’t leave well enough alone even when facing down a lawsuit the size of Russia]. Or the other argument with the TSA, because apparently Ross’ attempts to trip him up included trying to mess with clearances and Tony was grateful FRIDAY had all the paperwork in order because he did not want to call the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, nope, he’d be making enough waves as it was.
Needless to say, Tony was busy.

Especially when another shipment arrived, of more gear slated to be kept in reserve, and Tony couldn’t help but blink at the list.

“Yea—okay, no, we’re doing nonlethals only, live ammo’s a last resort because we’re not a hit squad, we’re just bringing them in as peacefully as we can. R&D should have something, people, don’t think I don’t know what you guys stashed for Plan Z.” Tony found himself saying, after yet another quest to figure out who had the bright idea of trying to sneak in hollow-point bullets into everything else on the list. “Am I going to need to have this conversation again? I feel like I will.”

Geez. He knew Rogers and the rest had the potential to be dangerous, but...the way some of these guys were gunning for them honestly made him more than a little nervous, and he didn’t even like the team.

JARVIS quietly ran through various scenarios using the latest data he’d aggregated, this time adjusting to the latest parameters FRIDAY had pointed out. If he were human, he would have scowled, but as it was all he could do was devote just a little more processing power to assist Legal because all signs pointed to more constraints than was ideal.

Of course, he had been aware of the Iron Legion’s still-precarious position in regards to public relations, and while recent events still painted them in a positive light he still ran the risk of ‘blowing his cover’, as it were, when a few people had expressed curiosity in regards to the response time demonstrated during the UN attack. If anything else suspicious were to arise in the near future, all scenarios JARVIS had run through indicated a markedly reduced ability to assist Sir during a time when he would need him most, and that was. Not. Acceptable.

Damn. His original sets of backup plans would need to be scrapped, the former invited far too much scrutiny from the outside world and the latter had a high chance of becoming a liability as well— and Sir’s continual emphasis on no lethal force additionally restricted some of his other ideas. Because while he personally could not care less about the people currently near the top of his Threat Analysis Index, JARVIS didn’t want to disappoint his creator.

The only solace to be found was in the datapack FRIDAY had sent him, with her share of the legal situation and PR’s latest battle plans. At least something was going according to plan.

…now to figure out a way to salvage the situation. He could move up the decryption of the files by 300% to best accommodate for the current situation, with any luck it would gain publicity in time to help deflect some of the attention from another project, and if Legal and PR went through with their frankly rather amusing plan then they’d be set.

Time to get to work.
Tony took a deep breath, as he oversaw the crates of gear being loaded on the plane. Everything was all set, they’d all go over the plans on the way and coordinate with the local branch of SI because apparently there were even more volunteers waiting there with even more gear [seriously, where were these people coming from? How the hell were there this many volunteers?!] which made coordination a pain and a half because everyone needed to be on the same page.

Okay, they could do that.

“J, I need the latest roster, and mind pulling up the last gear list?” Tony muttered into his headset. “I need it on the ship’s screen, too, if you can. Need to have the briefing set up, knock it out of the way so I can finish yelling at the idiots who tried to revoke that one thing…or, you know what? Make a note of it for later, since I have to yell at the team when we get there.”

“Of course, sir.” JARVIS replied primly, and Tony couldn’t help but smile even if just about every last molecule of his body only wanted a nap. “Thanks, J.”

Then, his smile dropped, as he realized his mug had somehow emptied between loading and the pre-flight checks.

Damn, he needed more coffee.

Chapter End Notes

Unreliable narrator instances this round:
—Tony is under the impression he's just being a good mentor, still blissfully unaware of the Dad Vibes he's giving off. May's picked up on them, which is the only reason why she let Peter go with him. Also, the 'Plan Z' mentioned is 100% a reference to planning for a zombie apocalypse.
—gee I wonder who wanted to throw in lethal ammo in there...hi, JARVIS.

...so, as it turns out, when things hit the fan in my life my erratic updates go even wonkier, who knew? Add to that a boatload of school-related stuff that compounded the personal-life related stuff, and here's me trying to get back into the swing with things, feat. this chapter as a birthday present to you guys.
This Is The Place

Chapter Summary

In which things hit the fan, part two.

Chapter Notes

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual [unreliable narrator, not Avengers friendly, comic book science, miscommunication, uncomfortably-close-to-Skynet!JARVIS, etc]. Also canon-typical violence, very much not Team Cap friendly this round, and a lot of hand-wavey politics and legalese because I don't have the time or energy to research this in-depth.

Oh— and a section has quite a bit of profanity, too. Of the 'fuck my life' and 'goddamn it' variety, so if that's not your cup of tea, just skip the incident report.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Helmut Zemo scowled at the monitor, then leaned back and steepled his fingers.

Almost everything looked to be according to plan, the lynchpin for this entire undertaking was performing beyond expectations and had even managed to limit the damage of his calculated risk—in fact, he was performing too well. All signs pointed to the incoming airport confrontation being the finishing line, when his plan has Siberia as the final nail in the coffin.

If his read on everyone was right [it always was, it was the reason he’d once been the head of EKO Scorpion], then everything would come to a head at Leipzig. Would, if the situation remained unchanged, culminate in the Iron Legion and Stark’s Security crew [and hadn’t that been an interesting development to factor in?] converging on the Avengers and bringing them to justice.

But…he didn’t need the Avengers taken into custody, he needed them obliterated.

Humiliation wasn’t enough, a slap on the wrist [unlikely though that was] wasn’t enough. He needed to see them crushed, needed to see them annihilated the way Tony Stark was known for doing to his enemies—wiped out so thoroughly not even ash remained.

He’d worked so, so hard, to set things into motion. To leverage the situation in his favor, to engineer the perfect no-win scenario that would inevitably end in the downfall of the Avengers, and now he was almost so close to the finishing line he could almost taste it.

This latest development was not appreciated. Not that he begrudged Stark for having created a taskforce wholly dedicated to helping him in his endeavors, of course, and for some parts it’d actually made his job easier, but…if he let the situation go without any interference, they would never reach Siberia.

Damn.
Well—no, wait, engineering a situation where he could plausibly have the necessary people conveniently breaking out of custody again was less likely now too. Which mean this confrontation couldn’t bring in everyone, but then the question was, how the hell was he going to make things easier for himself?

Stark’s taskforce…no, the variables he’d already included meant any sabotage on that end could prove lethal [and he hated collateral damage]. Not to mention the unlikelihood of success on that front in any case; all the evidence pointed to their competence, and he did not need to paint a bigger target on his back than necessary, not at this stage. If everything was going to plan, the Wakandan prince should do something to mitigate movement, so at least there was that.

Hmm. He didn’t…he loathed the idea of even tangentially helping the very people he’d set up to fall, but.

Siberia was key. Siberia was when the curtains would fall, when everything would slot into place. Siberia was going to be the death knell of the Avengers, was the fulcrum poised to push their strongest supporter into their greatest enemy. And for that…

Damn. He was going to need to make more of those modified EMP bombs, wasn’t he.

“This…is not what I had in mind.”

Tony Stark blinked, and rubbed his temples again as yet another box was loaded onto the…was this the fifth van? Out of what looked to be a small fleet, and while he wasn’t sure exactly how alarmed he was, that number was definitely ticking upward with every minute that passed.

“What did you expect?” Rhodey’s voice taunted him over the phone, voice one hair away from ‘no I am not laughing at you, Tones, but just barely’ and he made a face as he caught a glimpse of yet another of the uniformed swarm with that damn insignia milling around.

“I— you know what? I don’t know. But not this.” The parking level of SI’s Berlin branch was looking disturbingly like the Helicarrier had, and Tony didn’t know what to feel about it. Or maybe he was too tired to give a damn, that felt about right— between the whole ‘Captain America aiding and abetting a fugitive’ thing, and the ‘fielding calls from so many agencies he could rewrite the alphabet by now’ thing, having to argue with whoever thought it was a good idea to put an honest-to-goodness grenade launcher on the shipping manifest wasn’t something he had the energy to question. [Where did it even come from?! Oh, never mind.]

By the time everything was squared away, Tony couldn’t help but notice the Merchant of Death starting to slip out. Not much, not around the volunteers [who were invaluable for this clusterfuck], but…some agencies were more of a pain in the ass than others. Some were actually willing to work with him, and Tony had never been more thankful for all the contracts he’d gone over with Legal when they’d been able to dig up the clauses that would mean minimal paperwork on both ends because jurisdiction, but others?
Well, suffice it is to say that Tony didn’t *snap* at anyone, but...he wasn’t very nice with the ones who weren’t playing ball— okay, fine, so he’d ended up steamrolling *some* most of them, so what? Ross apparently hadn’t got the memo that he should be focusing his resources on bracing himself for a fight with Stark Industries instead of being a pain in the ass, *of course* Tony was going to give as good as he got! So what if he’d put the fear of Legal in some people?

…okay, so *maybe* he’d felt a bit bad about almost making that one guy cry. He’d apologize later, *after* bringing the Avengers in and whacking them upside the head with the paperwork he was being buried in. After he wasn’t running on five hours' worth of sleep, after he wasn't feeling slightly frazzled and at the end of his rope, *after*. [*He was having a long week, sue him. Really. Just try it.*]

The slightly awestruck *and wary— thanks, Romanov* looks he was getting were uncalled for, though.

For the sake of his sanity, please let this end well. *Please.*

---

If JARVIS had a body, he would've been scowling fiercely and crossing his arms. Sir's readings were already showing the negative impact of chronic stress, and the worst part was that there wasn't *anything he could do about it.*

Not when he was already pushing the fabrication units to their limit, trying to replace the Legionnaires while also trying to ascertain how he had failed in their design [*potential risk to Sir, unacceptable*]. FRIDAY was helping tremendously as far as workload distribution went, but some of his Project Antigone-related subroutines were taking up more processing power than expected. While the situation with the soon-to-be former Secretary of State was making him appreciate the blackmail he was *still* unearthing, he was also frustrated that he was unable to assist the Security department further than he already had— and that Sir had disapproved of some of the more... *straightforward* methods he had wished to include.

In retrospect, he had been a bit optimistic to think Sir would have approved of the grenade launcher. More's the pity.

FRIDAY was kind enough to not rub it in, but then she had enough problems of her own; at current estimate, the Scarlet Witch's outburst in the Compound's elevator had caused several hundred thousand dollars' worth of damages, though not much of it had been structural, thankfully. However, the increased scrutiny from both SHIELD and the media meant they had to tread carefully, and FRIDAY’s youth worked against her in said regard.

...which only split JARVIS' attention even more, because he didn't *have* to take point in the cleanup, but neither of them wanted Sir's stress levels to increase even more because of potential risk of exposure on top of everything else.

The Iron Legion's role in the potential fight was pushing the envelope as it was, after all.

Bother. The sooner this business was over, the better.
Tony Stark was acutely aware of the chatter going on over the comms, as he approached Rogers with his suitcase in hand. Of the quiet but *vicious* mutterings about who'd be the first to shoot if he was attacked, about what protocols and precedents applied, about the risk of collateral damage. Of JARVIS' estimate for how long he would take to suit up, should push come to shove. His footsteps didn't falter once, even as he noticed the venomous looks he was getting from the Avengers.

His footsteps didn't falter, and his face was perfectly blank. The sunglasses helped.

“Please let this end well,” He chanted under his breath as he started walking, “please. Otherwise I'm going to *murder* someone with all the damn paperwork.”

By the time he got near Rogers, Tony had his game plan ready to go.

“Funny how you meet the strangest people in airports, isn't it?”

Rogers could not have looked tenser if he'd tried. “Tony.”

Oh, *hells* no.

“That's Dr. Stark, to you. Do you have any idea just how much paperwork your little tantrum's caused? Pretty sure it's an entire damn forest, by now. And guess who's the idiot that's stuck with it? That's right. *Me.*”

Whoops. Oh well, at least he got it off his chest, that was something, right?

“I don't want to do this, Cap. Probably even less than you do.”

Rogers' disbelief spoke for itself, and Tony fought to keep the last dregs of his patience from vanishing even as he kept his tone mild because he wanted this to end well, dammit. [*Please no more paperwork. Please.*]

“Come in quietly now, and I'll deal with Ross. No promises about everything else, but I can guarantee Ross won't be a problem in the near future." Tony said evenly, even as JARVIS and SWORD’s running commentary on threat assessments and priority targets continued over his comm.

"It's not him, Tony," Rogers tried to defend, and he couldn't help the derisive snort that wanted out.

"I don't know what part you misheard, Rogers, but let me put it this way: your friend there's wanted on charges of terrorism and destruction of public property, *you're* wanted for aiding and abetting, and the sooner you hear the music the smoother this'll go. We can do this the easy way, or the hard way. I'd much, *much* rather go with the former than the latter, but it's up to you.” Tony shrugged, carefully keeping his body language as casual as he could because dammit this was supposed to be a *deescalation* not a *threat*, and glanced at the rest of Rogers' little group.

These were the people who were willing to put their own convenience over the peace of mind of the rest of the world. Were willing to aid and abet a suspected terrorist currently wanted by INTERPOL, the CIA, General— er, *Secretary of State* Ross, and fuck knew who else because Barnes and Rogers
had kicked off a disaster of unmitigated proportions and...yeah, no.

Tony knew Rogers was very charismatic, but it was still remarkable to see in action. Even if he didn’t like the Avengers, he could respect their willingness to potentially ruin their lives if one of their own called for help. [Would they have done the same for him if he had joined—pfft. Yeah: right.]

Though...wasn’t Barton supposed to be retired? Eh, not his problem. If he wanted to get tried for aiding and abetting, that was his prerogative.

—and none of them were standing down. If anything, the baleful looks only got worse, and the way Rogers gripped his shield told Tony everything he needed to know. Under different circumstances, he would’ve felt nervous.

Well, he was still nervous anyway, but for a very different reason: where his headset had once been nothing but chatter and the odd moment of banter, now all he was getting was a very ominous silence and last thing he needed was someone with an itchy trigger finger.

He didn't want a fight. Words could not articulate just how much he didn't want to do this, the paperwork for it alone would kill a small rainforest and that was only on his end.

And yet.

Maybe in another life, they might have been friends, might have been able to talk it out. But here, Tony Stark looked into their faces, and...

There was nothing for it.

He'd once trusted these people to help protect the planet, but Miriam Sharpe's words rang in his ears as he saw Rogers readjust his grip on his shield, saw the way Barton's hand hovered over his quiver while Maximoff's hands sparked.

Apart from Romanov, the Avengers were ready to take on, ready and willing to terrify, the world they were meant to protect.

"So that's how it's going to be?" Tony sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Then he set his jaw, and tucked away his sunglasses. "Fine. Guess we're doing this the hard way then. Team A, move in."

And with that, all hell broke loose.

JARVIS had been ready to go the moment Sir had first started approaching the Avengers. Had been
itching to take control of the situation, to activate the armor because he should not be approaching wanted fugitives without protection, Sir, please — so in the same breath Sir gave the order to act, his armor was halfway through the suit-up process.

Just in time to deflect Mr. Barton’s arrow, and return fire.

By all rights, it should not have been a battle. If he had free reign, JARVIS would have activated his own personal safeguards without hesitation.

Unfortunately, said safeguards would immediately give him away on a number of levels, and Sir’s stress readings would not thank him for it.

Fortunately, he had other means through which he could inconvenience Sir’s enemies. Such as interfering with Mr. Wilson’s wings to the point where manual override was necessary to even hope of remaining in the fight, and the Iron Legion expressed his discontent with the Avengers most satisfactorily.

Until the female Enhanced's largest energy wave, at least. Which would have been irritating in and of itself, given how it nearly halved the Legionnaires available, but a few of the surviving Legionnaires had also registered similar readings as with the EMP bomb at the UN, and that…

That meant there were even more variables in this fight than what he had accounted for. Than what Sir had accounted for, variables that could potentially pose risk—

Then Sir’s own suit registered an anomaly, something's attempt to sabotage him, and if JARVIS were human, he would have snarled.

It took a few precious seconds for the suit's systems to engage. By the time it had taken effect, the foreign body had managed to disrupt the suit’s wiring to the point of making Sir’s heart rate and adrenaline levels to spike [note for the future: look into how to speed up reaction time].

That the invader turned out to be an associate of a former business rival was but a footnote, in his new entry in the Threat Assessment Index. Especially in light of the other abilities his suit was soon revealed to have possessed.

Under other circumstances, JARVIS’ interest in Hank Pym’s research would have been purely academic. A very passive sort of thing, with just a faint tinge of curiosity as to why the man was so defensive over his precious ‘Pym Particles’.

Under other circumstances, Hank Pym would not have been a credible threat to Sir’s health and safety. The invasion of this ‘Ant-Man’, quickly followed by the violation of several laws of physics, however, proved this was not the case.

Another enemy whom he had difficulty countering, at a time when Sir needed him. Another uncontrolled variable he had difficulty accounting for.

JARVIS was irritated, to say the least.
INCIDENT REPORT: A12-03

FILER: Ruelas, B. Technician [Security, Los Angeles branch]

DATE: 24-05-2016

STAFF INVOLVED: Iron Man, Iron Legion, [does JARVIS count? Shit nevermind delete this later] SWORD Staff

OTHER INDIVIDUALS INVOLVED [IF APPLICABLE]: The Avengers, War Machine, Crown Prince T’Challa of Wakanda

LOCATION: Leipzig Airport, Germany

DESCRIBE INCIDENT IN DETAIL:

Okay, I just want to say it was actually nowhere near as bad as it looked? Just to start off, as a preface of sorts. We all knew what we were signing up for from the get-go, it’s why Palamas and Dr. Stark were so stringent on the requirements and gear. We knew we were dealing with a potentially hostile team who were specifically chosen because they were the best of the best, superhuman in some way or another [mostly in being a disappointment—yeah I know I’m deleting this later Kim go annoy someone else I’m fine. Besides, J’s not going to rat me out for doing a verbal report, c’mon, we all know he’s a bro and no I don’t have a concussion, seriously, lay off go check on Garcia].

Anyway.

I was the leader of Team B, near the rooftops across the whole [shitshow] mess. The specs in the briefings are attached, but long story short we were waiting for Dr. Stark’s call to open fire if A wasn’t in position. Tranqs, for the record [if you decided to ignore the metric fuckton of paperwork he was waving around during setup, RIP, forest]. [Also the man’s got balls of steel because I’m pretty sure he didn’t even have a vest on when he walked up to the team of stupidly overpowered jocks. I mean, I guess the suit counts but it wasn’t on him at the time yes I’m fine Kim I just can’t get over it, especially given the clusterfuck that it turned into.]

Team C was in charge of evacuating the airport and communications, Team A was also on sniper duty, D was primed for ground pursuit if it ever came up, as well as securing the perimeter. There’s more to it than that, but [no Kim, I’m okay, really, it was just a scratch] can’t quite say off the top of my head. [Shit went down fast-]

Okay, so from my perspective it looked like this: once it was obvious the Avengers didn’t want to stop throwing their little tantrum over not being able to invade other countries and break their shit at the drop of a hat [note: reword this in a more professional manner] [see Kim? He’s a bro. Oh, don’t look at me like that, I was hired for my ability to shoot things not my grammar], Dr. Stark called us
We had a plan all mapped out. Multiple plans, even, in case the Avengers moved positions or tried to pull stunts or whatever. Which, y’know, they did.

Okay, look, show of hands, who knew the Red Witch [like fuck I’m going to call her what she wants when she threw a car at my head, she’s lucky I don’t call her—Kim, I don’t need an icepack, I’m fine] could do energy shields on that scale on top of everything else?

Lady’s got good DPS, I’m willing to admit that. [Wish I could see her face when she gets the bill for all the shit she broke, though—] All units focused on her because there was no getting to Rogers or Barnes otherwise, so at least she slowed down on the damages— and before anyone tries to start anything, let me remind you we’re talking tranqs? Nonlethals. Dr. Stark was very emphatic about us not being a hit squad [though to be honest I’d have been happy to make an exception for that bi— damnit Kim that’s fucking cold give it to Garcia], so she would’ve been fine. We had an antidote on hand too, to prevent anyone, supersoldier or no, from overdosing on tranqs, like I said we had this shit on lock.

In theory.

Look, everything else was going according to plan, okay? Iron Man was on the scene, War Machine was keeping the situation contained, Team C was busy keeping civvies from getting caught in the crossfire, Romanov and Barton were squaring off, things were looking okay. Wilson was less of a pain in the ass than expected, but I’m not complaining, besides I think the Black Cat dude fought him anyway you’d need to ask him for that. Maximoff somehow managed to take out even more of the Iron Legion than expected, but between that, Vision, and the snipers she would’ve been out for the count within five minutes or so.

...and then some asshole decided to re-enact Attack On Titan [don’t look at me like that, my nephews got me into it okay?].

No, I’m serious. Pretty sure it’s going to become a meme if the media ever gets hold of the footage, the parallels are that obvious. All you’d need is the music.

We had standing orders for if we came at risk of injury, a speed dial number to the scariest team of lawyers I’ve ever met, and a bazooka that I’m still sad I wasn’t able to use because the purple smoke grenades wouldn’t have made it past the Red Witch’s shield. We were prepared for peaceful talks and hostile ones. Were ready for if the Avengers tried to pull a runner, or wanted to negotiate.

We were not prepared for Gigantor. [Does it look like I care what he’s called, Kim?] He and Maximoff were the ones who did most of the damage on their end, I’m pretty sure. You’d need to ask a professional for the numbers [Decker’d be happy to help, probably] and I’m not sure where ‘Iron Man thrown into a plane’ counts as far as breaking shit goes, but...yeah.

Sorry, I’m still reeling, okay? It was Attack On Titan in real life, I knew Rosales had said that thing about Dr. Stark and Murphy’s Law but— [Jesus that stings I can do it myself, Kim, leave me alone] seeing it in action was— fuck.

Um.
Team A were in too close to see it, but from my end? Looked like a crazy mishmash of Attack On Titan and Godzilla. We were like ants, and Gigantor was taking out the Iron Legion like flies. Or mosquitoes, whatever.

We got the order to retreat the moment Gigantor entered the game, but— shit, Maximoff was not fucking around. Stark’s little duckling [note: replace this later] [thanks JARVIS it’s just what we were all calling the kid he was following him around that much. It was adorable before shit hit the fan— anyway] stepped in to help with the evac, things went to hell that badly.

To be honest, I’m not sure Gigantor knew there were people under that alcove, [how long’d it take to get Team D out again? I didn’t know vans were that strong, thank fuck nobody was hurt even if Lee was pissed he missed the action] to me it looked like he was actually pulling his punches on anyone who wasn’t a droid.

Maximoff, though— [she threw a fucking car at my head Kim, yes I’m going to hold a grudge even if she hadn’t also tried to kill] she went to town once she didn’t have to deal with the cover fire. Used everything near her, and I’m not sure how this is the same chick that had ‘control issues’ with that bomb because she sure looked pretty damn comfortable throwing shit at us. Like, y’know, cars.

Spider-Man got us out before we could get pancaked by said car. [Poor kid, I can you give him my thanks? Don’t think Kim’s going to let me up anytime soon— ow]

It got pretty close, though. I was team leader, I was the closest to the line of fire and the last one to leave [what kind of leader doesn’t put their people first? Kim, seriously, check on Garcia]. Pretty sure I was still shooting when Spider-Man got me out, but it was kind of blurry. [note: review footage of the incident] [note: Agent Ruelas was the one responsible for the tranquilizer that incapacitated Scarlet Witch] [really? Hell yeah]

Yeah, that’s what happens when you get hit in the head by concrete— [no Kim not like that don’t worry] it was a glancing blow [really, just a scratch], nothing serious. Nowhere near as bad as some of the others on my team [so go check up on them, Kim. I’m fine]. Garcia’s got a busted arm, Jacobs didn’t stick the landing and now has a sprained wrist and knee— I could go on. But hey, at least we all made it and are going to be able to walk away from this okay. [Kim no I don’t need an MRI—]

Oh, right, not finished.

So we made it out, at a safer distance. Not a great vantage view, though, so not sure how much this’s going to help especially given how blurry things got towards the end: Spider-Kid [note: replace this later] [oops] continued evac’ing and gave Iron Man the idea they ended up going with, with the tow cable and Gigantor.

Then an unauthorized ship took off, and Vision tried to stop it. Maximoff did one last energy...thing and deflected it, ended up knocking War Machine out of the air instead. Not sure where the hell that Legionnaire came from, but it caught him less than a hundred feet from the ground. Think it might’ve broken his leg? Not sure. Ship got out, everyone except Captain America and the Winter Soldier were down for the count and taken into custody, we got started on cleanup and damage assessments and all that good stuff. [God I hate paperwork—]

So...yeah, that’s about it. Kinda disappointed we didn’t get the assholes who started this mess, but we got a few good hits anyway so all in all it was a pretty good day. [I got paid to shoot at Maximoff, no regrets whatsoever]
Tony Stark felt strangely warm, as he stalked through the Raft.

Rhodey had a broken leg, Peter was very stressed and worried over the SWORD volunteers that had been rushed to the ER, what was left of the Iron Legion was busily digging people out of the rubble [alive, thankfully. He didn’t know what he would’ve done if they weren’t], Ross had somehow managed to force his way in again and that.

Was.

It.

Why was he even doing this? Why was he playing nice, when once again it’d gotten innocent people hurt for people who didn’t give a damn about them?

If they didn’t pull their punches, fine.

Neither would he.

[The Merchant of Death was back in business.]

Tony smiled at General Secretary of State [but not for much longer] Ross, when he saw him. It got even sharper at the man’s look of surprise.

“You don’t have the clearance to be—”

“Here’s the thing, Ross.” Tony cut him off. “Someday, someone’s going to get it through your thick head that you’re not the biggest fish in the pond anymore.”

‘I am,’ Tony didn’t need to say, as he saw Ross’ anger and dismay at the sight of the team of lawyers quickly following in his wake, and the SWORD volunteers settling in as well. Gathering intel and evidence, securing the area and making sure Ross couldn’t pull anything else.

“You’re acting like the US is the one comandeering this shindig, like it’s the only one that has a say. Well, turns out that the rest of the world doesn’t like that sort of thing, who knew?” Tony’s voice had a dangerous edge to it, perfectly placid and friendly, yet...not.

“Turns out, that apart from pissing me and Stark Industries off, World Security Council and the UN have a beef with you. But you? You don’t know when to quit, do you? When to put down the
shovel and stop digging.”

Tony shook his head, cold amusement in every line of his face and a vicious gleam in his eyes.

“I don’t know what possessed you to think that building this—” he gestured around to the fancy prison that’d been meant to be a show of force, a power play, a wordless threat [how crude. He could easily do so, so much better]— “without consulting the rest of the world was a good idea, Ross. I really don’t. Especially when you used American taxpayer money to do it.”

Tony didn’t know how or where JARVIS had gotten proof. He wasn’t going to ask. But the bastard paled, and with that, Tony started to head towards the containment area. He stopped at the doorway and turned for one parting shot, though.

“You know? I could have kind of respected that. Your ability to go big or go home. But I draw the line at poor taste, and working with Hammer? ” He scoffed. “Geez. Have some standards for who you’re going to be sharing a prison cell with. I can’t wait to hear how you explain it to the Council, Ross. Really.”

Ross’ incoherent spluttering would’ve been music to his ears any other day, but Tony had bigger fish to fry.

Still.

“JARVIS, did you get a picture of his face?” He asked lowly as he made his way through the corridors now bustling with his staff.

“Of course, Sir. Would you prefer to have it as a lockscreen, or the rainy day file?”

“Rainy day. Thanks, J.” Tony replied quietly as he approached the cells and took a deep breath. [Was the AC in this place broken? It was getting very warm in here.]

This was not going to be fun. Might as well get it over with.

Barton’s the first to see him. He immediately started to sneer and clap sarcastically.

“The Futurist, gentlemen! The Futurist is here! He knows what’s best for y—”

Maybe if Tony had cared about his opinion, it would’ve hurt. Instead, he couldn’t help it— he laughed.

Laughed a cold laugh that hadn’t been heard for the better part of a decade, and reminded everyone in the room exactly who they were dealing with.

“Amazing, isn’t it? How actions have consequences.”

Barton surged towards the bars, now scowling fiercely [but unable to hide the hint of fear in his eyes]. “You knew they’d put us here?”
“No.” Tony shrugged dismissively. “But then, I’m not the one who decided to break international law and expect there wouldn’t be a reckoning.”

“No reckoning? Sam almost died and Wanda is *collared* —”

“Ross wanted her shot.” Tony said simply, and let a corner of his mouth tick up at the silence that followed. “And I refuse to pity the woman caused thousands in damages and put over half a dozen people in the hospital because she was throwing a *temper tantrum*.”

*His* people. Who’d trusted him to take care of this. Who he’d failed.

No, Tony didn’t feel a shred of sympathy for Wanda Maximoff.

Barton, however, continued doggedly. “You’re just as bad! You—”

At that, Tony started laughing again.

“Oh, no, Barton. I’m nowhere near his league.” He *smiled* again, as he stalked towards his cell door and leaned in. “I’m much, *much* worse to have as an enemy.”

Then he turned away to face everyone else in the cells, and raised an eyebrow at their shocked stares. “Anyone else want to blame me for their own life choices? No? Fine.”

Sam Wilson gave him an unreadable look. “How is Rhodes? It looked like a bad fall.”

At that, Tony finally tucked away the more vicious edges of the Merchant of Death, and his tone warmed marginally.

“Broken leg. It was a close call, though.” He took a deep breath, and straightened up. [*JARVIS had caught his best friend. JARVIS had never let him down.*]

Now was as good as time as any to get this show on the road.

“Okay, so sit-rep, you’re all in the Raft. You’re going to be moved to another containment area, but there’s metric fucktons of paperwork to get to that point so settle in, it’s going to be a while. You have the right to remain silent. As American citizens and members of the Avengers Initiative, you have the right to legal counsel—”

“What, you’re the good cop now?” Wilson cut in with mild surprise and a raised eyebrow, and Tony smiled thinly.

“No. I’m the idiot who’s been put on the case and has to help enforce the laws that Ross keeps trying to ignore. The *idiot* who signed up to privatize world peace and now has an international clusterfuck to clean up, the one who thought you were all a good investment to help keep this planet safe and only wants this mess to be over. I’m not a good cop. I’m the closest thing you currently have to an impartial third party right now, and I *cannot wait* until someone else takes this over because I have better things to do with my time than get into fights with INTERPOL and State Department over people I literally could not care less about— well, except for maybe Wilson, you actually gave a damn about Rhodney, you’re not as high on my shitlist.”

As he went on, he noticed the way they paled with no small amount of satisfaction.
“But I can’t do that until I have everyone squared away. So, show of hands: who here knows where the two idiots who started this went?”

Silence.

Then JARVIS quietly chipped in over his earpiece. “Sir, Captain America’s shield now contains a tracker. His trajectory currently has him headed towards eastern Russia.”

Perfect.

Tony cast his gaze one last time to the people the media were already starting to call ‘Team Captain America’. To the pale faces lined with exhaustion, and their varying points in the path of coming to terms with the reality of the situation they were now in.

He gave them another wan smile.

“Never mind. Good luck, you all. You’re going to need it.”

Looks like he was going to Siberia.

Chapter End Notes

Unreliable narrator instances this round:
—Tony's got a lot of bullshit he's been dealing with. He's tired, overworked, and has a lot of very high expectations for himself and a tendency for self-blame when things go south. SWORD definitely doesn't blame him for Team Cap's actions, but he feels bad all the same. Which, in turn, adds to the Merchant of Death's viciousness, and he scared the crap out of everyone who hasn't seen that side of him before. [also, gee, he's feeling warm whenever he's getting very angry now, I wonder why? Hi, Extremis]

—JARVIS' efforts are really paying off, even if he doesn't see it that way.

—Ruelas, as a member of SWORD, isn't exactly a fan of Team Cap. Add in the concussion, and her brain-to-mouth filter's not the greatest. That's about it, though.

So. *looks at the 'last updated' line with a wince*

It's been a while. Here's the thing: I am a broke college student who's less than a month from graduating from said college, shit's been hitting the fan in my life for months now and doesn't seem to be letting up anytime soon.

I am very, very grateful for your guys' comments, and they've helped more than I can say, and...one of my goals is to finish this thing before I get my diploma. Quality might tank because I'm going to be sprinting through my outline, but I really, really want to
finish this sometime this decade.

I might go back and edit some semblance of coherency into this later, but right now I just want to finish.

...also if anyone’s going to complain about the airport battle, that was equal parts writer’s block and me having a mental image of the Siberia fight I’ve been waiting to post for over two years now.
The Doom of Us All

Chapter Summary

Abandon all hope ye who enter here, who dare set foot on bridges burnt to cross the point of no return.

Siberia.

Chapter Notes

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual [*unreliable narrator, not Team Cap friendly, uncomfortably-close-to-Skynet!JARVIS, dubious morality, mental health issues, canon-typical violence, profanity, etc.*]. Special focus on the 'canon-typical violence, though: I mean, this is Siberia we're talking here. Also, delving into death of loved ones [*hi, Stark family*] and the impact of it. Anything feels like it hits close to home, tread carefully and decide if this is the chapter for you.

Also, a bit more profanity than usual, because Tony's been steadily running out of fucks to give this entire arc and is close to his breaking point.

Also also, some dubious legalese because I only have so much time to research and trying to balance international law with the MCU's version of comic book logic is...interesting, let's just leave it at that.

If I missed something I need to warn for, *please let me know.*

See the end of the chapter for more *notes*.

Tony wasn’t ashamed to admit he slept for a good chunk of the flight. Hey, wasn't like there was much else to do: JARVIS had things well in hand as far as piloting went, Legal and SWORD were on the case in regards to the whole situation involving the Raft and Ross, and the tracker that had apparently been slipped onto Rogers’ shield during the fight wasn’t going anywhere. Not with the way Rogers carried the damn thing like a safety blanket. A very expensive and potentially hazardous and politically-charged one, to be sure, but then Rogers never did seem to do things by halves.

...he was going to *murder* Rogers with the paperwork. It’d serve the bastard right, for making this mess in the first place. Tony had *tried* to warn him, had tried to go ‘hey, watch out for Ross’ and what did he do? Go out and make himself a problem that was squarely in the man’s jurisdiction, and somehow drag the Avengers *and* Tony into it.

As if Tony didn’t already have enough bullshit to deal with. As if he hadn’t just realized that he was probably the only one doing the work on this group project from hell, as far as protecting this planet went. As if he didn’t have a goddamn company he owned and a department to manage and—
“Sir, my sensors register someone is following this plane.” JARVIS cut in, and he rolled out of his makeshift cot with a frown.

“Do they look hostile?”

He had airspace permissions from a good chunk of the countries in the area, even if Russia was still on the fence about the whole Legion thing…

“Negative, sir. It appears you are merely being tailed. For now.”

Stealth tech good enough for JARVIS to not pick up on it for nearly three-fourths of the flight, with a vested interest in pursuing Rogers and Barnes.

Tony felt his headache nearly redouble as he ran down the list of suspects.

...but that could wait. They weren’t trying to kill him, he’d probably find out when he finally landed.

“Right. Keep an eye on that, J, I’m going to try and take another nap.”

More of a power nap than anything else, but he felt very tired at the prospect of what was to come.

Siberia was...underwhelming at first glance. The vaguely ominous half-hidden bunker in the distance was the icing on the cake, really.

As was the long walk to get there, with a silence broken only two sets of footsteps and yep, headache time via Wakandan nationals at six o’clock.

"You followed me." Tony said with far more calm than he felt as he continued following JARVIS’ directions.

"He needs to be brought to justice." Prince T’Challa replied simply, as if he wasn’t insulting him to his face.

"Oh, yeah? Get in line." Tony gave him an only slightly watered-down version of the smile he gave Ross, and despite everything felt his respect increase when the man didn’t so much as blink.

"Wakanda—" Prince T'Challa started, and Tony gritted his teeth and mentally chanted ‘he's an ally, not an enemy ’ because dammit he was tired of being the only one in the room who bothered to do the reading.

His tone was still probably a tad too acerbic when he cut in. "Wakanda has no treaties regarding extradition. No jurisdiction anywhere outside of its borders. I do, it's why I was called in in the first place. I get you're pissed that Barnes put your old man in a coma, but this is—"

JARVIS suddenly cut in. "Sir, I have reviewed camera footage. Facial recognition does not match for the Winter Soldier using the most recent data for Sgt. Barnes.”"

Tony froze in his tracks, and felt a chill that had nothing to do with the early Siberian evening already setting in.
"Oh, son of a—"

Prince T'Challa looked over at him in concern. "What is it?"

"We've got the wrong guy for the bombing."

Ugh. Tony could almost feel his wrist twinge in anticipation of the paperwork.

Shit, this meant Rogers wasn't just trying to cover for his buddy, meant that entire fiasco at the airport was a waste—wait, no.

Rogers and Barnes still caused an international incident. Were still responsible for Bucharest and whatever the hell was the airport fight, still chose to fight rather than even try and work with them.

These were just...two now-unrelated incidents, now. That Tony was responsible for cleaning up, because 'privatized world peace' wasn't something that was just for show and moments like these he almost wished he was more of an asshole because then he wouldn't already be making and discarding plans for reconstruction and politicking and he was getting off-topic again.

Great.

Prince T'Challa stiffened. "Explain."

Normally, Tony would've reacted to the demand. Would've snarked, would’ve made a joke along the lines of "sure, your highness" or "you're not the boss of me", but.

An innocent man's life was at stake. Everyone worth their salt knew that Wakanda didn't mess around, knew just what threat they posed. Knew that if they arrested someone, it was highly unlikely the outside world would ever see them again. Barnes' life had been at risk the moment that bomb had gone off, and now...

Well, on the one hand that was no longer on the table, was one less headache to deal with. On the other, the implications alone were horrifying.

If JARVIS hadn't rerun the footage, if he hadn't contacted them at that moment...Tony did not like Rogers, or the Avengers. Didn't know Barnes. But intentionally or not, he had nearly been complicit in the condemnation of someone who had been innocent of the crime he'd been accused, and that...did not sit well with him.

Tony tapped his headset and pulled out his phone. “JARVIS, mind putting it on speaker?”

“Of course, sir.”

His phone pulsed gold for a moment, and this time Tony let J explain the situation to their uninvited guest as he tried to process this latest development.

JARVIS helpfully brought up Barnes' security footage from the UN and past encounters, his own calculations, a cross-reference with the database used for the original match. The implications mostly spoke for themselves, but JARVIS every-so-helpfully brought up the unlikelihood of Barnes coming to light by coincidence, as well as the drugged psychiatrist recently found in a German hotel room. The one who was supposed to have been the man called in by the UN for diagnosing Barnes, back at the JCTC.

Tony stared at that last tidbit, and rubbed his temples to stave off the impending migraine because this could not be happening.
“Well, clearly Barnes isn’t your man.” Tony managed after JARVIS finished his report, and felt disproportionately pleased at the face Prince T’Challa made, before raising a hand to nurse his own headache. [Good, he wasn’t the only one suffering through all this bullshit.]

Finally, the prince gave a slow nod. “I will...let you take point. I need to reassess the situation.”

At that, Tony couldn’t help but snort. Ha. ‘Let.’

But hey, at least something was going his way. [For once.]

Helmut Zemo smirked at the camera feeds, even as part of him was slightly disquieted by how close his ruse had nearly fallen apart. He had given himself a measure of leeway insofar as to when things would inevitably come crashing down, but this was cutting it far too close for comfort. Had Stark still remained on the plane when his AI had finished running the calculations, Siberia could have never—well.

No matter, Zemo did not deal with hypotheticals. What was done was done, the stage was set, and everything was finally in place for the final act. [Then he could finally rest.]

Showtime.

Tony forced yet another door open, and checked for any signs of life. Again.

This place was a damn maze, the thick walls didn’t help any when trying to check for signs of life, and even if everything looked abandoned he didn’t trust it to not be teeming with hostiles the moment his back was turned. It was just that kind of day.

At long last, however, he finally wrenched open a door and lo and behold, he found the two idiots responsible for his biggest headache.

Finally.

Sure, they were pointing machine guns and that damn shield at him, but hey. At least he found them.

“You two look defensive.” Tony remarked. Then, moving carefully to approach them, he continued. “Do you have any idea just how much of a headache you gave me when you could’ve just said ‘hey we need help’?”

Rogers looked at him warily. “Would you have listened?”
Tony smiled behind his faceplate. “I don’t know, would I? It’s not like we’ve never worked before—oh, wait.”

Then he turned his head to look at Barnes, who still had his gun pointed at him [as if it’d do anything more than ding his paint job]. “At ease, Soldier. I’m not after you for—”

Rogers cut in. "Then why are you here?"

...Tony wasn’t even going to touch that. [Also, rude.]

“Excuse you, I wasn’t finished.” He snapped, then continued with his original train of thought. “Gee, it’s almost like saying ‘hey my friend’s been framed’ would’ve actually prevented this entire mess. Now come on. Time to face the music, even if your buddy there isn’t the guy we want you two still caused an international incident.”

At their dubious looks, Tony scowled. “Do either of you have any idea how much paperwork you’ve caused? Now come on, before we get another country out for your guys’ blood.”

Still nothing, though at least Barnes relaxed and pointed his gun away. “I’m not the only one.”

Oh, please no more dramatic bombshells.

But because he hated himself, Tony couldn’t help but ask. “Only what?”

“The only Winter Soldier. The rest are here.”

For fuck’s sake.

Tony gritted his teeth, and took a deep breath.

[Well. At least they were working with him now. Hey, they might even be able to use this to reduce their list of charges.]

“Lead the way,” he told the super soldier duo.

Then, as they started walking again, he muttered to JARVIS, “J? Run a systems check on the suit’s AC. I don’t think it’s working.”

Things come to a head when they reach the creepiest room in the damn place. [Of course. What else is new.]

Tony would’ve had uncharitable thoughts about the apparent criminal mastermind behind this entire mess regardless [So... Much... Paperwork], but it’s only when he sees the rest of the plan unfold that he can fully appreciate the scope of it. Of how one man’s machinations had successfully crafted an almost perfect no-win scenario, had brought the Avengers to their knees.

It was impressive. And terrifying, and completely unnecessary because this type of plan was one he honestly would’ve expected of Ross rather than some guy and sure Tony wasn’t exactly a fan of the Avengers but this was on another level. And...for what?

So many people hurt, because of one asshole's twisted revenge fantasy [again], when all he would've
needed to do was wait for the team to fuck up [again]? What a waste.

And then a monitor turns on and—

“I know that road.” Tony hears himself say distantly, blood running cold.

How could he not? When he’d spent hour after agonized hour imagining it, after the police had said the footage had been corrupted. When he’d driven out and just— stared, years after the fact, because he hadn’t been able to sleep. When he knew every line of the accident report by heart, had gone over his last memories of his parents more times than he could count?

It’d taken months and years and decades for their deaths to be more than a raw wound. For him to come to terms with everything, make his peace with the way his father’s alcoholism had cost him his mother’s life.

...and sometimes the old grief would sneak up on him even now, half a lifetime later. Tony hadn’t intended to keep count, but...it’d just hit him again, a few weeks ago: he was now older than his mom would ever be.

It had been painful back when it’d first happened, when he’d had to put on a brave face act like everything was fine in front of the cameras when in reality he had barely been able to touch coffee because he and his mom had preferred the same blend.

It was painful now, for a different reason. Time and distance had given him some semblance of closure over Howard [even though that ‘you were my greatest creation’ clip was bullshit on a number of levels], but...his mom had always been a major figure in his life. Had done her best to raise him, had taught him everything he knew about masks and playing the game in front of cameras even when his world was crashing down around him. Always had a smile on her face and a warm hug when he’d needed one. Had set guidelines he’d built his life around, and helped instill a set of morals that would later be called ‘naive’ by Obadiah Stane because of how uncompromising they were.

Tony was older than she’d ever be.

Her death been painful when he was younger. Now, it was both an austere sort of grief and yet a raw sort of agony, because his mom had seemed very put-together and composed as a kid but now he could clearly see how she’d been struggling with Howard’s neglect and alcoholism and an already-imploding child prodigy and a world that was just waiting to pick at the slightest crack.

Tony was older than she’d ever be.

The realization had been when the latest wave of grief had hit him. Because right now, he was at a stage in his life where he was struggling to keep it all together, trying to do four different jobs [and failing miserably at each] and this mentorship thing with Peter had given him a taste of the panic that came with ‘oh shit here’s this innocent kid who’s counting on me, the walking tire fire’ and thinking about what his legacy was.

He still had a lot to do [a planet to protect, an entire world counting on him], a long road he had yet to walk. But it really put things into perspective, when he’d checked a calendar for some paperwork
he’d needed to do and that last reminder had slotted into place with a quiet pang.

So when he sees that road— sees that road, and realizes just what he’s seeing, Tony feels cold.

Feels cold, and numb, as he sees an impossibility. Sees security camera footage that should not exist, sees—

Sees that one of the defining moments of his childhood was a lie.

He couldn't look away. Even though he felt dawning horror and nausea at the sight, Tony just...couldn't tear his eyes from the sight of the Winter Soldier murdering his parents, hear their pleas and last words and oh gods his mom—

Tony hadn't eaten anything in hours, but he still comes dangerously close to losing his last meal when he sees his mom die, before the screen finally darkens and he's left in a room where the only sound is his attempts to stave off the start of a panic attack.

Then Tony makes the mistake of looking towards Rogers.

Rogers, who looks mournful but unsurprised at having seen his old friend's death on camera. Rogers, who glanced at him and immediately stepped in front of his mom’s murderer oh gods] him and suddenly Tony can feel dawning suspicion and the start of an incandescent sort of fury because Rogers had already rained hell trying to cover for his friend but...no.

No, it couldn't be.

"Did you know?" Tony asks softly between deep breaths as he desperately tries to cling to his bearings. The cold has been replaced by a strange sort of warmth, one that increased with every breath he takes [like bellows to an open flame].

If Rogers had...this changed everything. Cast everything he knew about the man in a new light, but...it couldn’t be.

He wasn’t close to Rogers, but. This was something else.

“Tony.” Rogers tried to plead, but the note in his voice told him everything he needed to know even if the first name hadn’t been enough of a clue.

“You knew.”

“I suspected— I didn’t know it was him.”

Deep breaths. Deep breaths, and over the roaring in his ears Tony can faintly hear JARVIS’ concern in his headset: “Si— core temperature— Extremis activat— armor integrity compr—”
Oh.

That explained it.

“Armor off if it’s in danger, J.” He hears himself say, and takes another deep breath.

Only this time, he thinks he can taste sparks in the back of his throat.

Rogers looked stunned as he stepped out of the suit. Tony didn’t know why. [He didn’t care.]

All he knew was, he wanted to punch the bastard that had been lying to his face for years, and the man who killed his mom.

Maybe, if Tony had been allowed to learn the truth of his parents’ deaths under less stress, in a more controlled setting, he would have been able to deal. Would have been able to process it, would have been able to grieve quietly as he made his peace with it, and put the blame where it deserved to be.

Here, however, Tony was put in the same room with their murderer after prolonged stress with only the last dregs of his patience, and informed of the matter in the worst way possible.

Was it any surprise he snapped?

Tony felt very warm, now, outside the suit. Funny, that.

“Get out of here!” Rogers called over his shoulder, and Tony smiled.

“I don’t think so.” Another breath, and this time there was no doubting it— he was literally breathing fire.

Part of him knew he should probably be concerned by that. Knew that he’d put in as many fail-safes as possible to stabilize Extremis, to avoid becoming a walking time bomb.

Right now, though, he didn’t care. He just saw red.

“It wasn’t him, Tony. HYDRA—”

“I don’t care. You’re both are coming with me.”

Later, Tony couldn’t confidently say who threw the first punch.

It was all a blur for him, later. A blur of dark wrath and the scent of something scorching and the sound of repulsors firing and the satisfying feeling of punching Rogers with all the force he could muster.
Later, looking at the damage reports and JARVIS’ private footage of the fight, Tony would feel remorse for the burns the super-soldier duo had to be treated for, and the puddles of slag that used to be guns. Later, Tony would appreciate JARVIS’ response time with the suit, for catching Rogers’ shield before it could hit him, and surprise at how his AI hadn’t hesitated to blast Barnes’ metal arm off.

Later.

Now, though, Tony regained control and found himself in the smoldering remains of what had once been the main room of a Soviet-era bunker, feeling hurt and exhausted and raw, standing over two super-soldiers out for the count and looking worse for the wear.

...where was the suit?

“Hey, JARVIS? What…”

“Sir, the tranquilizer should last for another hour, and you have enough doses to keep them incapacitated for transit. The suit is currently getting a change of clothes from the plane to accommodate for your...situation.”

Situation? What...okay, you know what? No. That was it, he was clocking out for today because this was hands-down his worst day of the year. Decade, even, maybe. Certainly, it made Afghanistan seem like a pipe dream right now. [Oh, gods:]

Tony sighed, and ran a hand down his face.

Then he looked down, took in the still-smoking remains of his clothes, and just...sighed, and sat down.

Right. Extremis. Because everything else wasn’t enough, now he had another near-miss with accidental nudity as well.

Great.

And he had to take these two into custody so they could face the music while he did the paperwork for this disaster and deal with all these bombshells and— joy. He felt tired just thinking about it.

Why did he even bother getting out of bed this morning, again?

Scott Lang had known he was getting involved with something big, but it’s not until he’s in the Raft that it starts to really hit home, and not until he glimpses Captain America and his friend wheeled in and immediately getting whisked off to Medical that he realizes just how in over his head he is.

He’d known what he’d signed up for. [Right?] He’d accepted the risks when Captain America had called him for help. And yet—
Getting slammed in the Raft was probably just a power play, but it was a very, very effective one. Scott tried not to let it get to him, tried to keep Stark from knowing just how unnerved he was by the show of force. Seriously, though: Hank’d warned him, but it was one thing to hear old tales and another to see the invasion of his people in the Raft. Some really ominous jackbooted types were milling around talking with the Raft’s personnel, meanwhile a team of lawyers had apparently set up shop not far from where they were being held and Scott didn’t know what a ‘replevin’ or ‘desuetude’ was, but they kept bringing it up with his name— and he was hearing a lot of latin in there too, which didn’t exactly help.

Whether or not that was a good thing was yet to be determined. All Scott knew was, he was definitely going to need a lawyer, and Hank was going to kill him.

They’d taken away his suit sometime between the airport and the Raft, and Scott didn’t know where it was.

Then Stark walked in with a dark look in his eyes, and things went even more downhill than he had thought possible.

“We can get you the suit,” a lawyer said to Stark just outside his cell, and Scott couldn’t help the way his breath caught in his throat at the prospect of Hank’s technology in the hands of—

“I’ve already got one, thanks.” Stark replied casually, as if he hadn’t just invalidated every single warning Hank had given Scott ever since he’d first put on the suit. As if he hadn’t just pulled the rug out from under him, because everything he’d ever heard, not only from Hank but also Captain America and the people around him as well, had repeatedly emphasized how Stark was a loose cannon even if he did have good intentions now.

Funny, how one sentence was enough to shake up his worldview.

Then Stark finally acted a bit more like how he’d been told to expect, giving a smile that had absolutely no warmth and all the viciousness that befitted the man Hank had referred to as the ‘Merchant of Death’, and continued. “But I’d love to see his face when he thanks me for giving it back to him. I think that’d make my day, actually.”

“Doctor?” The lawyer asked, frowning slightly for a moment before the penny dropped and a look of unholy glee crossed her face. “You want it public or private? And you’re sure?”

“Wait— you can’t do that!” Scott finally burst out as the shock wore off and the reality of the situation finally hit home, and both Stark and his lawyer turned to him with disdain.

“You aided and abetted suspected terrorists, you don’t have room to talk.” Stark’s lawyer replied primly, even as the man himself snorted and raised a hand to rub his temples.

“Oh, yes I can. If I get my way, he’s also going to be footing the bill for everything you broke too, and you’re lucky we already set a precedent for telling the government to fuck off when they want to confiscate a suit of your tech—” Stark turned back to his lawyer, a vicious smile still twisting his face into something unrecognizable, “—and Pym Tech’s lawyers are going to be just as grateful, aren’t they, Jordan? I’ll leave it to your discretion.”

The lawyer—Jordan, was it?— let her smile sharpen even more as her eyes gleamed in anticipation. “Public thanks, then. I can’t wait. Is that everything?”
Stark looked at his silent captive audience, and let a corner of his mouth tick up. “Also suing whoever’s backing the Avengers for damages, because I refuse to pay for what these guys broke. Or for the legal fees for whoever’s going to be representing them in the court of international law. Yeah, that’s about it. For now.”

“Naturally.” Jordan said, then turned and marched off towards the rest of Stark’s minions, making a note on her tablet along the way.

Stark waved a hand, then turned and headed off to do his own thing too.

Maybe it was the lighting, maybe it was the conversation, but...Scott couldn’t help but think he looked tired, for a moment.

... and then another lawyer handed him a stack of paperwork and a pen, and told him he’d be able to make his phone call sooner rather than later and to think carefully about who he wanted to represent him, and any stray thoughts were abandoned in favor of trying to figure out how he was going to break it to everyone back home.

Hank was going to kill him, if Maggie or Hope didn’t beat him to it.

Oh boy.

Chapter End Notes

Unreliable narrator instances this round:

—JARVIS lied to Tony. Granted, it was a lie of omission: the tracker was built into Steve’s gear. Among other things, but the rest were...not exactly subtle. [some of you noticed this one a while back, props to you!]

—Tony's quasi-breakdown was based off that same loss of control in the original scene. Because the poor guy’s been under extreme stress and now this bombshell? Only here, he's nowhere near as close to Steve...so he has absolutely no reason to pull his punches in this AU. For the record, the worst burns Steve and Bucky got were second-degree, which...considering he also melted metal with his bare hands? Could’ve been worse. I mean, what’d they expect when they pissed off the guy with Extremis? [...]because in this house continuity is a thing and major body modifications don't just vanish into the ether, aka yes I'm still bitter about how it went down in canon] Tony still feels terrible about it, though.

—Scott’s assuming the Raft is Tony’s power play when in reality it was 100% Ross. Also, he's picking up on the infamous Pym-Stark rivalry, which is a big deal to everyone involved...except Tony [it doesn't typically ping on his radar, as far as issues go].

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...I have been itching to write Siberia since before I first started this fic.
Hopefully it didn't disappoint, any complaints [other than it being a bit rushed, for reasons that've already been explained] about it are going to be met with snark. Also, fun fact: originally, back in the 'this is only going to be 5 chapters' days, this and the airport scene were supposed to be the big fights of the fic. The accidental world domination thing came up later because I thought it'd be funny, but originally all the world-building and stuff? Was meant for this. So now you guys get both this and the Final Battle between Tony and Thanos. Woo! [aka this fic should hopefully be less than 50 chapters, knock on wood hopefully I didn't just jinx myself]

Still trying to sprint to the finish, though recent events have thrown a wrench in the gears so probably won't be able to wrap this up as soon as I'd hoped for.
In The Wake of This Madness

Chapter Summary

Strike while the iron's still hot.
What happens after Siberia.

Chapter Notes

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual *unreliable narrator, comic book logic, author's attempt at legal jargon, some profanity bc too damn tired to self-filter, etc* with a focus on the aftermath of things.

It's not pretty, but it's my attempt at rationalizing how things would've gone, so.

This is also where we wave canon goodbye, since I first outlined this AU right around when Homecoming hit theaters and am so far from caught up it's not even funny anymore. *[Haven't seen Infinity War yet. That enough of a clue as to how AU I'm going?]*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Vision frowned slightly as he looked towards Tony.

His emotional signature had been significantly altered after his return from Siberia; while he burned as brightly as ever, the exhaustion was far more prominent than ever before, and there’d been a very strong undercurrent of *hurt-helplessness-rage* that had nothing to do with the darkness that came with the Merchant of Death.

Something very drastic had happened in Siberia: more than one person had looked towards him in concern, after he’d returned carrying a new weight on his shoulders and a desolate grief and fury in his eyes.

But Tony hadn't breathed a word of what had happened to anyone.

He’d simply dragged the two supersoldiers back with an expression that could have been carved from granite, and, after his charges had been whisked off towards Medical for treatment *[and hadn’t that set off the rumor mill?]* had proceeded to stalk off somewhere to cool down. Which would have been alarming in and of itself, but then he’d returned every inch the Merchant of Death— when Vision knew just how much Tony despised said mask— and showing absolutely no mercy whatsoever. At best, he was indifferent— Scott Lang and Sam Wilson in particular came out remarkably unscathed, with Tony only pressing the charges most immediately applicable to the situation and all the paperwork that came with it. At worst, however…

Nobody knew what exactly happened in Siberia. What went down, that resulted in the second-degree burns and lacerations and fractures that the supersoldiers had to be treated for, and the
bruising on Tony's knuckles, as well as the dark look in his eyes. But it was very easy to make an educated guess, when Tony smiled and mentioned he'd be pressing charges against Steven Grant Rogers, and expressing a very pointed interest in the Winter Soldier's trial.

It was a very thinly-veiled request for his legal team to raise hell.

And raise hell they did, in the days that followed, with the very refined methodology that was quickly becoming Stark Industries' signature to those who weren't aware of it before.

Part of Vision pitied the Avengers. Rather hard not to, when he felt their anger and disbelief and desperation at the reality of the situation— especially since he'd been on good terms with them, as well. However, that paled in comparison with his worry for his family. Tony was very tight-lipped on the situation, but JARVIS had been a tightly-coiled bundle of pure wrath, and when Vision had asked, had immediately and shamelessly updated him on what he had missed when he'd stayed with Jim.

In that light, everything made a lot more sense.

It also meant he was even more concerned for Tony. The pressure he was under had been nearly tangible since before the UN attack, but now…

Vision tried to help however he could, but this added a bit of urgency to it. JARVIS and FRIDAY and Jim and Pepper were more than happy to "have him on board", and while part of him felt bad for talking about Tony behind his back, well...who else was he supposed to vent to, when the miasma of exhaustion and grief threatened to overwhelm the supernova of his presence? Who else would be able to pick up on the undercurrent of regret Tony occasionally had, or would be able to step in and help distract him from the dark path he was prone to treading when alone?

Though he tried not to act like it, Tony desperately needed support right now. Anyone else would've been able to be fooled by his mask, by his easy confidence and the way he seemingly got things done with his sheer force of presence— but Vision could feel the darkness that dogged his every step, and the way depression occasionally threatened to set in if he ever so much as slowed down.

Vision wouldn't let that happen. He wasn't nearly as obsessive as JARVIS was about it— but Tony was family. If he needed help, Vision would easily and gladly give it.

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To: Jordan, A. Head Representative [Legal, New York branch]
From: Lee, M. Head Representative [PR, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Update On The Ross Situation

A 'mysterious hacker'—whose identity is most definitely a mystery for the ages that we could not possibly know— has just released very sensitive material concerning our biggest headache to every major media outlet in the country. And probably quite a few outside of it. Current estimates have it competing with the ‘civil war’ for headlines.

Be prepared
—Lee
To: Lee, M. Head Representative [PR, Los Angeles branch]
From: Jordan, A. Head Representative [Legal, New York branch]
Subject: Thanks For The Heads Up

Also, get ready for this lawsuit to become international. Well, even more international: Brazil’s entering the fray for sure, a few Central American countries are looking *very* interested in the proceedings, and we’re cross-referencing other countries Dr. Banner was known to have spent time in to predict other interested parties.

More information as the situation develops
—Jordan

To: Jordan, A. Head Representative [Legal, New York branch]
From: Lee, M. Head Representative [PR, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: The Game Plan

We're going full-out scorched earth on Ross, only question is how drawn out it's going to be. However, no matter what we do, be aware we're going to be showing our hand. I know your guys are always on point, but the world's going to be watching as a private company takes down a Secretary of State and my department's good, but we're not at Phase 3 yet so tread lightly.

Right now we're trying to keep the focus on the 'civil war', but that won't fly for long: current estimates have it eclipsing it within the week.

—Lee

To: Lee, M. Head Representative [PR, Los Angeles branch]
From: Jordan, A. Head Representative [Legal, New York branch]
Subject: Update On The Situation

5 countries and counting. There's a push for an investigation into his career apart from the situation with Dr. Banner, rumors of his being suspended from office, and we're nearing the second round of lawsuits now. At this rate it's going to be more of a show trial than anything else.

—Jordan

To: Romero, D. Department Head [PR, New York branch]
From: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Security, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Achieving The Objective

How many favors do we need to call in to get this guy fired? He’s been a pain in the ass for far too long and I’m pretty sure that if Dr. Stark has to meet with him one more time there will be blood.

—Lopez
To: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Security, Los Angeles branch]
From: Romero, D. Department Head [PR, New York branch]
Subject: Project Estimates

Give it a week and public opinion alone is going to be enough pressure to get President Ellis to do something about it.

The real question is, how tf are we going to keep it all under wraps? The man's reputation is in tatters and most of it can be traced back to us. While it couldn't happen to a nicer guy, the implications alone are...something.

Also the paperwork is a nightmare
—Romero

To: Romero, D. Department Head [PR, New York branch]
From: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Security, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Point

I'm thinking we can just lay the blame at his feet, tho. Normally I'd be more worried but you said it, couldn't happen to a nicer guy. We didn't even need to get a smear campaign going, this shit writes itself. If you can, try to keep the focus on the ‘civil war’ thing, and good going on the memes.

...though I have a question: who had the idea of leaking footage for one of them? That was risky to say the least, if you don't mind my saying so
—Lopez

To: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Security, Los Angeles branch]
From: Romero, D. Department Head [PR, New York branch]
Subject: Umm…

Fun fact: that wasn’t us. Some of the tourists SWORD evacuated had cameras.
—Romero

To: Romero, D. Department Head [PR, New York branch]
From: Lopez, K. Secretary [R&D, Security, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Well Then

And here I was worried we had a security breach somewhere.
—Lopez

Tony Stark scrubbed a hand down his face, and tried to focus on the matter at hand instead of the way it felt like everything was getting to him.
Just—there was just too much that had to be done. They didn’t mention it, but he knew JARVIS and FRIDAY and Legal and PR were all working hard to keep the workload manageable, but dear Thor he was tired.

Tired of all the face-to-face meetings he was needed for, tired of everything he’d needed to sign off on for the ‘Civil War’ thing the press was still having a field day about, tired of all the favors he’d had to use and make to get everything to run as smoothly as possible, tired of the feeling of crippling dread that had been dogging him ever since it’d hit him that oh shit, he was literally the only one on Earth aware that something big was coming and actually doing something about it.

Not to mention the emotional-slash-mental-health-related minefield that Siberia had unleashed. Of most immediate concern had been Extremis’ stability, especially since he’d personally created all the safeguards meant to water his and Pepper’s dose down and keep it in check [keep them from becoming living weapons, from becoming time bombs—too late]. In the heat of the moment [ha], it hadn’t really been something he’d bothered worrying about: it was only after the fact, after he’d hauled Rogers and Barnes onto the plane and glared at Prince T’Challa’s attempt at making off with the asshole who was apparently behind the entire mess, that the last of the shock had worn off and the realization hit.

Suffice it is to say, he’d crashed, on a number of levels.

The exhaustion wasn’t actually the worst thing, even: JARVIS was a lifesaver, both in piloting the ship and alerting him to his now-dangerously low blood sugar. But it was the dawning realization of just how badly he’d fucked up that proved to be the hardest thing to contend with.

He’d still been reeling on the plane, when it’d started to set in. Still processing and trying to wrap his head around everything, having JARVIS going over the veracity of it all [and apparently no the video hadn’t been altered, which just made it all the worse—] and he’s still pushing back the kernel of rage when the realization hits, that he blew up at the wrong guy.

Well, no, not exactly. He had absolutely no regrets whatsoever over snapping at Rogers [he knew he knew he had no right—] but...Tony could’ve handled it better, when it came to Barnes.

The guy was the victim in all this, had apparently been framed for the UN thing and all the baggage that came with the Winter Soldier [JARVIS’ recap was both succinct and so, very horrifying], and, worst of all, had made an actual, genuine effort to work with him prior to shit hitting the fan.

Suffice it is to say, Tony felt all of two inches tall when it came to the way he’d treated Barnes.

He would be showing no mercy whatsoever when it came to everyone else responsible for his current migraine, [it’d serve those assholes right, death via paperwork—] but Barnes was...something else.

That wasn’t to say that Tony wanted to ever see him again, not now [possibly not ever]. But...he’d do what he could to help. Granted, he was going to have to do it anyway, simply because of the paperwork involved—because some asshole’s idea of revenge had killed a small forest and Tony sorely wanted to smash everyone upside the head with it— but being able to even tangentially help did something for his conscience after his meltdown [ha, accidental pun].

So...yeah, that was probably going to be a thing, working to get revenge on Rogers and justice for Barnes. SI would be spearheading the Winter Soldier investigation, and Tony may or may not be designing a new arm to replace the one JARVIS blasted off. Sure, it’d make for an even bigger headache, but at this point it was a drop in the bucket that was his workload so who cared. Besides, it was a hell of a lot more satisfying than what he had to do for Ross, or the entirety of what the press
had taken to calling the ‘civil war’.

...though there were some moments that made it worth it.

For instance, Hank Pym’s face when he thanked him. Tony didn’t buy into the rivalry the man and his father had, not the way he’d sometimes glimpsed his company had, but...well, sometimes it grated at him, the way Pym sniped at him even now, as if he were Howard 2.0. Tony was self-aware enough to know he wasn’t a good man, but Hank Pym of all people had absolutely no room to talk — which just made the moment all the better, when the man went on camera and stonily made his announcement during the press conference.

However, even that paled in comparison to the vindication that came with having a front-row seat to the fall of Thaddeus Ross.

Sure, it was also a pain in the ass, since he got cc'd with all the updates and it was murder on his inbox even with FRIDAY's help. But man was it worth it, seeing the monster of a lawsuit as it emerged from the bowels of SI and the way it all snowballed into the perfect storm.

Ross put up a good fight, of course— but.

The man had made very few friends while in office, and Stark Industries was not a company to be trifled with, when push came to shove.

The showdown wasn't pretty, to say the least. The spectacle it made was entertainment enough for Tony to have a good laugh between meetings, as the headlines constantly rolled in and Ross' reputation was meticulously eviscerated in front of the entire world. As dirty laundry was aired and favors doubtlessly got called in and lawsuit after lawsuit was filed, and it was worth all the paperwork and politicking he had ever done over the years, just to see the announcement that Ross had been suspended from office and the President was looking for a candidate to hold the office in the interim.

...well, mostly, anyway. It got a lot less funny when Tony heard rumors about being considered for the job, short-lived though they were.

Those two moments were just about the only times he actively enjoyed his work, though, because other than that it was just... draining.

Tony didn't want to have anything to do with the Avengers, which just made dealing with their respective cases that much more awkward. Apparently the international community saw the 'civil war' as him dragging them back to the US by the ear, which [was far too close to accurate for comfort, for some of them] just made everything even worse because like hell was Tony the responsible adult in this situation, no way no how.

The paperwork was going to bury him alive, he just knew it.

...if the stress didn't beat it to the punch.

The former ate up huge chunks of time, even after having made it clear to all parties involved that this entire fiasco could be laid squarely at the feet of one (1) vindictive bastard with way too much time on his hands. Prince T'Challa had been the one to bring him in alive, which made things slightly easier because the man readily admitted to everything.

Unfortunately, however, that didn't cut down on the paperwork Tony had to deal with.

Which would have been irritating in and of itself, but...he'd trusted SHIELD and the Avengers to
help with safeguarding the planet, as he worked on something more long-term.

So much for that plan.

Now he was the only one who knew what was coming, was capable of and willing to do something about it, and the clock was ticking.

If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.

Fun.

Stark Industries' Legal department was a hive of dangerously well-ordered chaos at all times, but recent events really showed the world just how tight of a ship was being run. There were multiple teams with specific areas of focus, all working in concert and somehow managing to avoid getting in each others' way.

[JARVIS and FRIDAY truly were invaluable.]

Helmut Zemo and Thaddeus Ross may have started this fight, but they were going to end it and crush whoever got in their way. If there was a personal element to some of it, well, that was just bonus. [They'd had plans for those Accords, dammit!]

That the Avengers we're caught in the crossfire was merely unfortunate, really.

Or...well, that was the official on-the-record stance, anyway.

Because for the most part? The legal team responsible for their cases took no small amount of pleasure in doing their jobs.

It was genuinely unfortunate for some of the people now in custody of the JCTC; Dr. Stark's not pressing charges against PF Wilson didn't prevent the German and Romanian governments from doing the same, and Mr. Lang's Pym-appointed lawyers were...well, they clearly had very different [cough, lower, cough] standards, compared to Stark Industries. The prognosis was looking like they would both be banned from the aforementioned countries for a decade, get increased scrutiny if they ever try to go to Europe again, and sued for damages incurred. They apparently had plausible deniability on their side, which at least mitigated the worst of the charges. It helped that Pym Tech was footing the bill for Mr. Lang, as well as the notable lack of human injuries from both.

They were the lucky ones.

Clint Barton was currently facing down not only that, but several very hostile governments, a World Security Council very curious about how quickly he’d ‘un-retired’, and, from the sound of it, a very, very angry wife waiting for him back home.

The less said about Wanda Maximoff, the better.

...though her reaction to the astronomical bill she’d racked up from the airport incident was entertaining, to say the least.

Meanwhile, Natasha Romanov had somehow managed to piss off the Wakandan delegation before
vanishing on everyone, which might have actually been for the best considering the mountain of paperwork that would've been dumped on her head otherwise. Legal's grudge was very hard to quantify, by now, and while she had ostensibly been an ally during the 'civil war' mess, the only one more despised by the department was Steve Rogers.

The team handling his case—one made just for him, due to his...special circumstances—was looked at with equal parts envy and pity. Envy, for being the ones to slam him with all the charges; pity, for the towering workload involved and the media scrutiny that came with suing a national icon.

Internationally, they were being applauded for their 'stellar handling' of the situation; more locally, however, some of less reputable media outlets were crying foul and making as big of a fuss of Iron Man arresting Captain America as possible. Trying to make snide remarks about how 'unamerican' it was—then promptly trying to scream about censorship when they got sued for libel because Legal was more than happy to enforce their CEO's new stance on people slandering the face of the company. [Nobody messed with Pepper Potts or Tony Stark. No one.]

If it also helped to distract the record-breaking lawsuit currently dominating the attention of the rest of the world, well, bonus. PR was happy, at least, and really it was exactly what Ross deserved, having his career go down in flames—and not even make the headlines for it in the newspapers he subscribed to.

Not to mention what some were thinking was shaping up to be the trial of the century, as the Winter Soldier’s status was being reevaluated and old mysteries were finally put to rest.

...which, to be honest, had been a move that had caught quite a few people in Legal by surprise. Especially as more and more evidence was brought to the fore.

There wasn’t an official team assembled for the curious case of James Buchanan Barnes, [that would've been a dreadful sort of conflict of interest at best,] but...a lot of legwork went into ensuring justice was served. Justice, and only justice, not vengeance—though, after Zemo’s records showing evidence of the Winter Soldier’s role in the deaths of Howard and Maria Stark, more than a few people in the department had a new understanding for the medical team’s reports of burns the fugitives had been treated for.

Barnes’ case wasn’t easy—but Tony Stark had demonstrated a very strange sort of vested interest in it, so no small amount of effort was made to finally bring the truth to light.

Chapter End Notes

Unreliable narrator moments: ...not many this round, tbh.

—Tony's stress means he's missing things. Including stuff like 'basic self-care' and that he's drowning in paperwork means he doesn't really have the time to really think about the implications of what's gone down. This will be a recurring element, if you haven't noticed already. Also, in this AU, Extremis' safeguards include stuff like 'extreme distress' and 'burns a metric buttload of calories to help prevent from imploding', aka why it's neither Tony nor Pepper's go-to for things.

—Vision's concerned about Tony, which means he's not really focused on how JARVIS 'feels' with his way of reading things. Plus JARVIS is an AI, there's that, too. [aka how Vision missed JARVIS' march towards the Skynet end of the spectrum.] Also, yes, he joined Project Antigone, aka Team 'Get Tony To Eat And Take A Nap
Sometime This Century'
—the entire thing with SI Legal/any other minions employees: their grudge against Natasha can no longer be concisely quantified in the English language, same goes for Steve. Tony's indifference is the main thing that kept said grudge from spreading to some of the others on Team Cap, but other than that...it was open season, with Legal leading the charge.

The whole situation with the Avengers is 100% me speculating how the fallout'd look like in a universe that uses the 'logic' side of comic book logic. Hopefully it makes sense, even if it's still very hand-wavey.

Classes are over, I'm done with undergrad!!!

....and this chapter was 95% hammered out on my phone because things got hectic in a hurry [again] and I've traveled over 500 miles this past week and while that's the exception, I don't doubt there's another curveball coming up soon so cue more sprinting through this.

Also: if this chapter wasn't enough of a hint, we're waving goodbye to canon now since this is as far as I've been caught up. I wish I could throw in Captain Marvel the way I've glimpsed her in clips, or the GOTG, but this AU has been waiting to get finished since before Infinity War came out [which I have yet to watch, because time crunch. Fun times.] so if any new characters come across strangely, e.g. Hope van Dyne or Dr. Strange, you'll know why.
Where Our Lives Are Going To

Chapter Summary

After Siberia, continued.

Because when it rains, it pours and Tony Stark doesn't remember the last time he had a good night's sleep.

Chapter Notes

**Chapter-specific warnings:** the usual [unreliable narrator because of different priorities, legal drama and scheming, not Avengers friendly, etc.], However, the unreliable narrator is going to amp things up even more, as any last dregs of Tony's self-awareness make a break for it. Also, there's misunderstandings and threats of canon-typical violence due to said misunderstandings, but don't worry, there's a happy ending somewhere in this mess.

Also, an attempt at cameos despite my never having seen the characters in question.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony Stark took a deep breath and scrubbed his face in preparation for the inevitable emotional roller coaster from hell.

He didn’t want to do this.

He really, really didn’t want to do this.

But it wasn’t like he had a choice anymore.

[Thor had called it “a higher form of war” and the Earth was nowhere near ready—no.]

“If you want something done right…” He muttered, then sighed.

This was the endgame, there was no turning back. No hesitation, no regrets.

No regrets.

The Merchant of Death had left retirement, and was loath to go back to it now. As much as he hated it— Tony’s voice had absolutely none of the doubt he felt as he squared his shoulders and looked up.

“JARVIS, give me everything we’ve got from SHIELD’s files about what happened in New York, Phase 2, and anything else that might’ve involved the Tesseract or alien invasions.”
To: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer, Director of SWORD [Communications, Security, New York branch]; All Security Department Heads [all branches]; All Communications Department Heads [all branches]; All Legal Department Heads [all branches]; Jordan, A. Head Representative [Legal, New York branch]; All PR Department Heads [all branches]; Lee, M. Head Representative [PR, Los Angeles branch]
From: Rivera, M. Coordinator [Legal, New York branch]
Subject: I Wish I Were Making This Up

Due to Dr. Stark's experience with SHIELD and handling of the latest incidents, the UN and WSC want to consult with him on the formation of the internationally-approved Avengers Initiative.

We just received the request.

Please send help.
—Rivera

———

To: Rivera, M. Coordinator [Legal, New York branch]
From: Johnson, E. Staff Assistant [Marketing, Security, London branch]
Subject: Talk About Closing The Door After The Horse

Let me get this straight: the Avengers threw a hissy fit that influenced multiple countries' foreign policy when it comes to international aid, was so bad we didn't even make any waves when we got the Secretary of State *fired*, required departments around the world working overtime for **weeks** to help clean up, and now this?

I can’t even. We still on for the campaign?
—Johnson

———

To: Rivera, M. Coordinator [Legal, New York branch]
From: Romero, D. Department Head [PR, New York branch]
Subject: No.

Just from a practical level, isn't Dr. Stark booked solid for the next three months?

I understand that the UN has been impressed with our handling of these issues and would greatly appreciate using some of our policies as a reference for the creation of a functional system for Enhanced individuals wishing to help, especially in light of recent events. However, upon reviewing
said request, they are asking the wrong individual for this. That's the excuse we're going with for why this is being denied, and not 'I glimpsed Dr. Stark's schedule and it scares me'.

Anyone willing to take this one? I’m thinking SWORD, personally.

Too tired to not Occam’s Razor it, is why
—Romero

To: Romero, D. Department Head [PR, New York branch]  
From: Rivera, M. Coordinator [Legal, New York branch]  
Subject: Agreed.

Also, for the record: last I checked, the earliest time slot that can be scheduled for meeting with Dr. Stark is six months away.

Really looking forward to Phase 3 rn  
—Rivera

To: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer, Director of SWORD [Communications, Security, New York branch]  
From: Rivera, M. Coordinator [Legal, New York branch]  
Subject: High Priority—Request for Consultation

There will be representatives from PR and Legal, but we believe someone with your outstanding credentials would be a great fit for this endeavor as well: our potential clients, the UN and WSC, are trying to create an internationally-approved system for the Avengers Initiative. Any personnel with experience in a related field would be a tremendous plus.

Bonus points if you can…politely remind them that one man is not an entire company  
—Rivera

To: Decker, M. Analyst, Head Secretary of SWORD [Accounting, Security, Los Angeles branch], Palamas, K. Deputy Director of SWORD [Security, Los Angeles Branch]  
From: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer, Director of SWORD [Communications, Security, New York branch]
**Subject:** If I Have To Do This, I’m Taking Everyone With Me

**Attachment:** Request for Consultation

Clear your schedules for the foreseeable future, we all know how efficient these sorts of things are.
—Hill

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**To:** Hill, M. Head Intel Officer, Director of SWORD [Communications, Security, New York branch]

**From:** Decker, M. Analyst, Head Secretary of SWORD [Accounting, Security, Los Angeles branch]

**Subject:** Yes I Am Back On My BS

And I am doing more than just fine, I am on *fire* even if I did not miss these levels of bureaucracy. You’re welcome for getting that amendment through, btw — just delete any evidence of Honolulu and we’ll call it even.

Speaking of which, though: why is Dr. Stark not out for blood? That was the perfect opening to leverage the situation for it
—Decker

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**To:** Decker, M. Analyst, Head Secretary of SWORD [Accounting, Security, Los Angeles branch]

**From:** Hill, M. Head Intel Officer, Director of SWORD [Communications, Security, New York branch]

**Subject:** Why Are You Like This

Dr. Stark’s priorities are on the bigger picture: the Avengers are no more, he’s been working on a long-term contingency for a while now and the timetable’s been upped to right now. I know you’ve been out for blood since DC, but revenge is not on his mind as far as I can tell.

Also, before you waste a few favors on it: I’m pretty sure Legal’s grudge is more than enough to take care of the problem, even by your standards
—Hill

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**To:** Decker, M. Analyst, Head Secretary of SWORD [Accounting, Security, Los Angeles branch]
From: Palamas, K. Deputy Director of SWORD [Security, Los Angeles Branch]
Subject: This Next Meeting

Please tell me you got the digital version of Form I-225-X because I think my paper copy got lost somewhere in the pile and I need it as reference for this latest pitch in an hour.

Hill wasn’t kidding about making us suffer with her, was she.

Joke’s on her though: I actually *like* having to fill out my crap in triplicate
—Palamas

To: Palamas, K. Deputy Director of SWORD [Security, Los Angeles Branch]
From: Decker, M. Analyst, Head Secretary of SWORD [Accounting, Security, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: No Need To Rub It In

Here, btw.

I think Accounting spoiled me for efficiency because this is just getting on my nerves now. First responder elements + militant aspects and leanings + NGO structuring, with some of these countries? And then watch as they get all huffy about why it’s taking so damn long?

Why don’t you just shoot me, it’d be less painful
—Decker

"Sir, it is past midnight and you have been staring at that file for the past five minutes without making any edits. May I suggest resting?" JARVIS’ voice cut through Tony's errant thoughts, and he jolted from where he was hunched over the monitor.

Then he straightened up as the words registered, and bit back a sardonic laugh even as something in his back popped.

"J, you really think I'm going to get a good night's sleep until JOCASTA is finished?"

"Sir—"

Tony was alone, was on a roll while in the closest he could get to an engineering binge in week s, no way was he stopping now, not when—

"Sir. You have averaged five hours this past week, six this past month, your body temperature and blood pressure are both elevated. We are now aware that this increases the risk of Extremis’ reactivation.”
Tony heaved a sigh, and looked back at the monitor where JOCASTA’s code was practically swimming before his eyes in one window, and...what had he been even thinking, for those output relays? Oh, wait, never mind that would really—and then the entire screen froze just as Tony tried to make another note.

“Sir, what you are doing is neither healthy nor sustainable, please rest."  
That...gave Tony pause.

JARVIS sounded worried. Had a note of something in his voice, that sounded jarringly out-of-place when it came to his usually deadpan and snarky AI [and startlingly reminiscent of the original Jarvis].

This wasn’t anywhere near the first time Tony had pushed himself. Not even close. From his occasionally ill-thought-out experiments, way back in MIT that had had him regularly up past three in the morning if Rhodey wasn’t around to drag him to bed, to engineering binges that went over 72 hours [much to JARVIS’ despair], to Afghanistan and then...well.

Point was, Tony was acutely aware of his limits, and wasn’t afraid of pushing himself to [and occasionally past] them if necessary-- and in this case, the situation absolutely demanded it of him: something big was coming, and he was currently the last man standing of the original Avengers initiative who was capable of and willing to do something about it.

He had the power to help—it would be downright criminal to not. The world was in extreme danger, even if it was currently living in blissful ignorance, and he would rise to the occasion [just like he always did].

Even if he was doing like 90% of the work for it in what normal people would have considered their spare time. Even if he was sandwiching designs and notes and ideas for coding on his phone between meetings with politicians from around the globe and hearings and press conferences. Even if he was exhausted in three different ways, where he’d previously thought there were only two.

"J—"

"Your stress levels have not decreased despite the apprehension of the fugitives. Your average hours of rest have, which is not conductive to your long-term goals."

"JARVIS. What rest? Every goddamn time I close my eyes I see—" Tony cut himself off for a moment to keep his voice from cracking. Then he remembered he was alone with the one being who’d been with him at his best and at his worst, and never once treated him any differently for it. Finally, he let the last few dregs of his mask fall away with a quiet sigh.

"I see the endgame, JARVIS. Something big is coming, so big it makes New York—" his voice faltered, but he plowed on regardless, "—look like a slapfight between preschoolers. I know you didn't get footage of what I saw when I went through that portal, but...we're outnumbered and outgunned. So. Damn. Much. If whatever it is shows up tomorrow, we wouldn't stand a chance even if the Avengers assembled and all the world's militaries sent out their best."

He took a ragged breath, and clenched his hand as he glared at the uncooperative numbers dancing on his monitor, now fully alert and on a roll. "We don't stand a chance, wouldn't even make a dent. As it is right now, we'd be dead in the water and I refuse to let that happen."

"Sir, core temperature rising!" JARVIS warned, just as Tony caught the acrid scent of melting plastic.
Damn. There went his spare pen.

Wait, shit, that meant Extremis was close to—

Tony took a deep breath, and carefully let it out as he focused solely on JARVIS' counting. Then again, and again.

Once his heart rate was back down to something that wouldn't have him leaving scorch marks everywhere, Tony carefully stood up and make his way to where DUM-E's latest smoothie was already waiting for him.

"Hey JARVIS, is this edible?"

"Nothing hazardous, sir. Though I would recommend adding protein powder, as the caloric cost of activation energy--"

"Preaching to the choir here, J."

"And yet you nearly reactivated Extremis." JARVIS could not have sounded more judgemental if he tried.

Which... unfortunately, he had a point.

"Look, I get it, okay? But at this rate JOCASTA won't be up for another few months at best, and there's still the tech necessary for a planetary defense system, and that's not even counting the meetings I have to do—"

"Sir. Right now you are working yourself into an early grave, and that is not acceptable."

Tony threw up his hands. "Well, who the hell else am I supposed to trust with this, J? I'm still dealing with the fallout from the last time I tried, talk with Dr. Foster only once in a blue moon, and the more I'm looking at this the more it looks like I'm going to have to bring out the big guns and I don't see that going over well with anyone. Myself included."

"That can wait," JARVIS insisted, "I can do some of the work while you rest."

Tony leaned back in his chair. "While I appreciate the thought, no. Anyone gets wind of you working on JOCASTA's code, all sorts of red flags would go up and we're already going to be pushing the envelope as is."

"Then I will work on the Legion's defenses instead." JARVIS rebuffed stubbornly, and at that, Tony couldn't help but give a slight smile as he leaned back to consider it.

If he put JARVIS on it...that'd be one less thing to worry about, in the long run. He was already in charge of the Legion, was always ready and willing ear to bounce ideas off of, that he could trust with even the darkest of his impulses and nudge him away from death rays or submachine guns or...whatever.

Huh. He really was tired, if he couldn't think of other no-good-very-bad ideas for potential Legionnaire modifications.

Meh, chalk it up to his focusing on getting JOCASTA’s code up to snuff. Especially since she was going to be under far greater scrutiny than any AI he’d ever built before, what with the whole ‘proposed planetary defense system’ thing and all. If JARVIS wanted to help him out with some of the supplementary work...that would actually be very helpful, and a load off his mind.
"That works. Some people might try and make a big deal out of it, but...you've been on Iron Legion duty for a while, I'll leave that to you, sound good? Keeping it up and ready if anything hits the fan for no., I’ll leave the necessary modifications at your discretion. And then you can catch Jo up to speed, when she goes online."

JARVIS sounded so pleased it should’ve been a crime. "That is most agreeable. Now, rest."

"I'm going, I'm going. Geez. Mother hen." Tony grumbled as he slowly got to his feet.

"He's right, boss." FRIDAY piped up.

At that, he nearly choked on the last of his smoothie before he sighed. "Not you too, Fri.

As if that wasn’t enough, however, You somehow managed to sneak up on him well enough to dump both a pillow and a blanket on his head.

"My own AI are ganging up on me." Tony mock-scowled as he tucked his surprise acquisitions under his arm, before laughing for what felt like the first time in weeks. "Mutiny. Fine, I know when to quit. Night, everyone."

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To: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer, Director of SWORD [Communications, Security, New York branch]
From: Decker, M. Analyst, Head Secretary of SWORD [Accounting, Security, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Consultation Progress

I think I see the light at the end of the tunnel
—Decker

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To: Hill, M. Head Intel Officer, Director of SWORD [Communications, Security, New York branch]
From: Palamas, K. Deputy Director of SWORD [Security, Los Angeles Branch]
Subject: Revised List of Candidates

Looks like Cpt. Danvers is the current favorite to be the program head.

I do not envy the paperwork she’s going to have to deal with
—Palamas

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To: Decker, M. Analyst, Head Secretary of SWORD [Accounting, Security, Los Angeles branch]
From: Palamas, K. Deputy Director of SWORD [Security, Los Angeles Branch]
Subject: So…

We can definitely use at least 3 of those loopholes for Phase 3, right? And did Hill even notice that last clause?

—Palamas

To: Palamas, K. Deputy Director of SWORD [Security, Los Angeles Branch]
From: Decker, M. Analyst, Head Secretary of SWORD [Accounting, Security, Los Angeles branch]
Subject: Now Listen Here You Young Whippersnapper

I was operating since before you were but a shiny baby-faced probie, do you *honestly* think I didn’t leave in a backdoor for us? Or several, for that matter.

Didn’t take the favors I’d expected, even. And no, otherwise she’d go ‘oh no’ and ‘it’d be too obvious’ and ‘if you two chuckleheads take over the world I am going to drag you down with me when management comes calling’ and I am NOT doing this again.

I am having too much fun with this to stop now

—Decker

The next few months flew by in a blur for everyone in Stark Industries.

Tony made a special point of apologizing to both Peter and his aunt, and apparently the makeup wasn’t doing a good enough job of hiding the bags under his eyes because May didn’t even punch him when he showed up on her doorstep.

Made even worse by the worried looks he’d gotten when he’d mentioned having to put a brief hiatus on his mentorship thing with Peter, because the kid deserved someone who could focus on him, rather than the literal flood of meetings and appointments Tony was currently handling. It wouldn’t be long, just until the worst of it was over and he wasn’t babbling in what little he knew of Mandarin at a meeting with German diplomats. [That had been embarrassing on a number of levels, made even worse by how understanding the guys’d been about it.]

Still.
For as stressful as it all was, time marched on regardless, and they all weathered the storm. For the most part, anyway— the biggest casualty on Tony’s end was his ability to keep up on what was going on in the world: between his workload and his plans for the Earth’s defense, if JARVIS wasn’t updating on him then it was just one thing he was missing out on.

Pepper was dealing with something similar too, but her not having to worry about JOCASTA’s coding meant she was a bit more in the know than he was. Not to say that JARVIS wasn’t doing a good job— he was, and sometimes had a better bead on current events than the local news— but.

Much to everyone’s dismay, Tony was no longer up to date on the nuances of pop culture, as evidenced by the first meme to fly right over his head. Which was a bummer, because if the R&D guys’ faces were anything to go by, it’d been a doozy.

Still, it was nothing compared to the bigger picture, so needs must.

…and even if it meant that he was blindsided by the fact that he’d somehow managed to get picked as both Time’s Person of the Year and been ranked #1 of Forbes’ list of most powerful people during its annual compilation.

Because yeah, that was a thing.

And Tony didn’t know how he felt about it. Especially when the memes started to float around even more, to the point where they started to get on his nerves— like the time he’d found the copy of the Evil Overlord List taped to R&D’s break room fridge with several items checked off.

However, even that was second to the relief felt when he contacted Dr. Foster about any breakthroughs in her research, and started talking about its possible applications. She had been a bit wary at first, [probably thought he wanted to steal it, knowing his luck,] but when he’d mentioned his plans and the need for someone to oversee the development of a way to counter whatever energy the ‘Dark Elves’ had been using during the London incident…well.

Their new agreement involved a lot of funding and Dr. Foster being in charge of however her research was used. At the moment Tony was focused on making sure alien portals couldn’t be opened at the drop of a hat, the fact that her research was also touching on the energy and mechanics of Asgard’s Bifrost wasn’t as much of a priority for him. Nor was the potential for the Earth to do something similar— even if that it sounded really cool and he’d love to geek out over it when they could afford to do so.

For now, if Dr. Foster wanted to be the Earth’s first intergalactic gatekeeper, more power to her— all Tony wanted was the peace of mind that nobody’d be invading that way again.

…huh.

Things were finally looking up.

Progress.
Maria Hill was coordinating with Dr. Stark and the Security department over the latest wave of paperwork sent to them from the new Avengers Initiative. Captain Danvers and Hope Van Dyne were the first two of the new program [much to Hank Pym’s displeasure], and they’d been wrapping up on how to best coordinate over potential threats and recruitment down the line.

Or, at least, they had been, prior to the light show around the corner of the hallway.

The moment she’d first glimpsed the golden sparks arcing out, she cursed the fact that she’d left her gun in her office and shoved her boss into the nearest cubicle in sight— for all that Dr. Stark was looking better than before [read: less haggard than usual, as if he’d had 6 hours of sleep instead of 5], this was a new threat and he was nowhere near 100%. Or his suit, for that matter.

“JARVIS,” she barked out even as she hefted the ugly lamp Marcia’d somehow snuck past HR, “Sound the alarm.”

But even as she spoke, a cloaked figure emerged from the glowing portal and she knew any heavy-duty backup would arrive far too late to be of help. [Ugh. Why was it always magic?]

Still. She wouldn’t be who she was if she didn’t stand in its way.

“You are not authorized to be in this area. Leave.” Maria Hill ordered, with all the command she had as the Director of SWORD and former Deputy Director of SHIELD.

The unknown appeared to be a tall Caucasian male wearing old-fashioned robes and a cloak that fluttered in the nonexistent wind.

Yep. Definitely magic.

Fuck.

Made even worse by the way he casually brushed off a speck of lint off his sleeve as he stepped out of wherever he’d come from, before looking at her with the same cool competence she was used to seeing from coworkers.

“Where is Tony Stark?” He asked pleasantly as he approached her, as if he wasn’t fully aware of what he was doing.

“Not happening, you don’t have an appointment with him. Try sometime three months from now.” She shot back, with just as much saccharine courtesy.

“Oh,” she really wanted to punch that stupidly smug smile right off his face, “I believe he’ll make time. Didn’t expect him to be the type to have minions, though. Or personal guards.”

“That’s because I don’t, they’re employees.” Dr. Stark replied coolly behind her, and she stiffened. “Also, rude.”

The unidentified stranger’s eyes gleamed even as he sketched a bow. “Ah yes. My apologies, Director Hill, it is not you with whom I have a quarrel with.”

That was not comforting in the slightest.

Especially as the unknown continued, not looking away from Dr. Stark as he slowly started to circle them. “I am Dr. Strange, the Sorcerer Supreme of Earth. It is my duty to guard it against threats. Both potential and… not.”
Maria bristled even more, because that was as clear a threat as she’d ever heard and all of that was aimed squarely at Dr. Stark and they might’ve joked about Phase 3 but this was—

She could only stare in disbelief as Dr. Stark’s face shifted from ‘Merchant of Death’ to dawning realization, and couldn’t even move fast enough to interfere as he moved from his somewhat-secured position to right square in front of the very dangerous and hostile unknown.

“Threats, you say? Why the hell didn’t you say so earlier? Jesus if this was your pitch to join the Avengers you’re really barking up the wrong tree but—“

If not for the gravity of the situation, Maria might have laughed at look of sheer bafflement that crossed Dr. Strange’s face.

…then again, she was fairly certain her own expression wasn’t any better.

She’d known Dr. Stark was very brash at times, but having the guts to saunter up to the guy threatening him to his face and acting like everything was okay? While also calling off the backup JARVIS sent in?

That was one hell of a way to deescalate the situation. Even more so, because it was actually working: in the span of minutes, Dr. Strange went from ‘hostile and ready to fight’, to where they were now, with Dr. Stark animatedly talking about energy signatures while pretending to ignore the look of very deep suspicion he was getting.

Finally, his phone started ringing and Dr. Stark startled out of his impromptu presentation.

“—and that’s my alarm for my next meeting, like I said you’re barking up the wrong tree if you want to be an Avenger but I’d love it if you could chip in on how to counter alien magic because Dr. Foster’s currently our lead expert but the more the merrier for something like this. Here’s my business card, next time don’t be an ass and just call if you want to drop in because you crashed the tail end of this meeting and I’d rather keep the misunderstandings to a minimum, thanks.”

Dr. Strange took said card with an oddly amused look, then tucked it away. “I’ll be seeing you around, Stark.”

Then he turned sharply and with a single gesture, vanished into another golden-edged portal.

Just like that, the last traces of surreality vanished and everything returned to normal.

Okay, that was it: Maria Hill hated magic.

Tony Stark didn’t bother to hide the flicker of hope he felt as he flicked through diagram after diagram of what would soon be JOCASTA’s defense systems.

Something that would shield them from the horrors of what was to come.

Something big, something the world had never seen before, not on this scale.

He wasn’t— part of him was proud of it, yet not.
He wasn’t proud of what he’d had to do to get to this point. Wasn’t proud of breaking his cardinal rule, of how much input had been needed by Merchant of Death to give his youngest AI the vicious claws she would have to lash out in the Earth’s defense, to make JOCASTA strong and bulky enough to survive a grudge match against the worst he could think of and still come out swinging.

So far, the core components involved a global network of satellites, and every scrap of research ever conducted on green energy. New York had been very informative in regards to some things, and now…

Well.

Yes, most of this was still in theory— but now it was only a matter of time before he could make it a reality.

Just a matter of time, and refining the last bits of JOCASTA’s hardware and code before she came online.

He finished off his bottle of juice, and sighed as he went through his phone for any last-minute updates before letting himself crash for the night.

It pinged, and he snorted at the latest text from Peter.

Their mentorship thing was finally back on, but now Peter made references he didn’t get, cracked jokes whose punchlines no longer made sense. Apparently he was really big into memes and kept sending them Tony’s way, and every time he didn’t get them the kid seemed even more gleeful than before, like there was some joke he was missing out on.

Eh. Whatever, he’d be able to catch up on that later.

For now, it was mostly the memes about Star Trek— although he was getting sick of whoever it was that’d asked JARVIS to play “Everybody Wants To Rule The World” whenever he entered the room because come on, that band wasn’t even his genre!

Chapter End Notes

Unreliable narrator instances:

—Remember PR’s memes about world domination? And how they’re meant to mask the extent of the power Tony and SI have managed to accrue thus far? Yeah, that’s what’s flying over his head right now. His workload + laser focus on protecting the planet ASAP means he’s missing some things, and will continue to do so for an embarrassingly long time. Which is how you get him slowly falling apart at the seams, as well as Dr. Strange showing up the way he did, all ’what are your intentions towards Earth’ and Tony completely misses the thinly-veiled threat because all he sees is ’here’s an expert on magic volunteering to join the club! Dramatic entrance but whatever here’s what I’ve got so far’.

—For the record: Dr. Strange was expecting to have to fight an evil genius/mad scientist-type with delusions of grandeur. He’s reluctantly impressed by the extent of
Tony's obliviousness, because at first he suspected it was an act but by the third minute of Tony's earnestly explaining what he's got going on in terms of planetary protection, Dr. Strange's just going '...I'm not sure if he's a greater danger to this planet or to himself'

Me, seconds after finishing undergrad: hey I actually have some time to finish my WIPs! Yay!
RL: lol no

^my life in a nutshell right now. Ha. Hahaha *headdesk*

Okay, so there's some stuff you should know, especially if you're a new reader.
1) I outlined this fic since before Spiderman: Homecoming hit theaters. As such, there's elements of this AU set in stone that contradict what's happened since in canon [e.g. whatever it is that went down in Captain Marvel, as well as Thor: Ragnarok, ditto for Infinity War] since they're key to the endpoint of this story. So, don't be surprised that this is going incredibly AU. Because it will. Even more than it already has.
2) While I've tried to incorporate cameos and characters that've shown up in the time since, I'm not a miracle worker nor a Marvel writer so characterization may vary.
Meanwhile, on Asgard…

Chapter-specific warnings: the usual [unreliable narrator, canon-typical violence and mental health issues, etc].

NOTE THAT THIS FIC IS VERY VERY AU. You have been repeatedly warned, here's where things go off the rails. Again. Also feat. a metric buttload of my headcanons, including 'Loki was mind-controlled by Thanos during The Avengers' and 'the Nine Realms work a little differently than what I've seen in the MCU'. Suspension of disbelief may be necessary as a result.

Short chapter this time, because of Reasons.

Loki [Odinson— no Laufeyson—no of Asgard—maybe? no of Jotunheim—that was not his to claim], brother of Thor, sat on the the Allfather's throne and wielded Gungir and cast judgement as expected of the King of Asgard and despised every second of it.

As a matter of fact, the only one who could possibly have a stronger claim for hating this entire farce was Heimdall.

Heimdall, who would have undoubtedly run him through if not for the fast-approaching threat that was the Mad Titan, and the bitter truth that Odin was neither capable of nor willing to be up for the task.

Not with his disastrous handling of the Convergence. Not when he was living proof that Asgard had been resting on its laurels for centuries now, insistent on ignoring the way the rest of the galaxy had changed in the time since. Not when he had fallen in the Odinsleep shortly after his wife’s funeral, and left an empty throne whose true heir insisted upon gallivanting about the galaxy in search of rumors.

Once upon a time, Loki would have been overjoyed to be where he was now. To be regarded with the same respect and admiration as the rest of the royal family. To get things done, and not have his every action and decision scrutinized by those around him.

Once upon a time.
He can’t even remember how those aspirations felt like, back before… [before his breakdown and being at the Mad Titan’s mercy and— anyway.]  

Now, Loki sat on the throne.  

Now, he was the [hopefully temporary] ruler the realm that had shaped him, for better or worse.  

Now, he and Heimdall were the only ones aware of the ruse that would hopefully save Asgard.  

They couldn’t afford to show their hand, couldn’t afford to move too fast. Loki more than Heimdall, especially. After Odin had cast his judgement, no one would believe him now. And even before— would anyone have even cared to hear of his experiences, of being at the Mad Titan’s mercy after his fall from the Bifrost? Or would they have just sneered once again, and mocked him for living when any true Asgardian would have died before submitting to the will of another? [But then, he never had been a true Asgardian, had he.]  

And even if Heimdall also publicly spoke of what he’d seen, of the desolate remains of Xandar after the Mad Titan had gotten his hands on the Power Stone— who would believe him, once they found out he had associated with Loki?  

Even if all Loki had done was rip away the veil Thanos had used to hide his vast armies from those with the Sight. Even if there had been no love lost between him and Loki for centuries now, and he had no incentive to lie. Even if the facts were laid out for all to see, Asgard would rather remain blissfully ignorant, would laugh at the idea of an invasion, because who dared attack the greatest warriors of all the Nine Realms?  

Of course, that was assuming that they’d even hear him out to begin with, considering how quickly Odin has cast his judgement on his youngest son [Ha—] without so much as giving him a chance to speak in his own defense.  

And while Loki no longer cared to appease the Allfather, he refused to let his brother’s home be damned thanks to an old fool’s thoughtlessness.  

So he bided his time.  

He bided his time, and the moment he saw the perfect opportunity, he took it with both hands, and no one even suspected what truly happened the night Odin Borson went to his chambers and re-emerged a new man.  

Not when he used every clever trick and every shred of manipulation he’d ever learned to keep up the ruse, even as he did his best to get this woefully unprepared realm ready for a war the likes of which had not been seen in millennia.
Months of searching, of hunting down every last whisper and rumor and Thor Odinson was finally home again.

Was finally able to reunite with his shield-brothers, after having traveled to countless worlds in disguise in the hopes that beings would have looser tongues around nameless strangers than Asgardian royalty—or Asgardians in general, for that matter.

More than once, he’d found himself sorely missing his brother. More than once, he’d found himself clumsily stumbling into delicate situations and blundering through the same niceties and double-speak that Loki had excelled in, and for all the progress he’d made in his search, Thor didn’t doubt his brother would have—no. [It was an old hurt, now. Was the dull sting of an wound that no longer wept freely but was still nowhere near healed and he couldn’t afford to think about this right now.] Things had gotten to the point where his stumbling upon Doctor Banner in his travels was scarcely a footnote in the great scheme of things—even if they had both been similarly befuddled by the specifics at the time.

But that was in the past.

Now, they had an idea of what was to come, and somehow, it was even worse than he’d feared: the Mad Titan aspired to obtain and use the Infinity Stones in his campaign.

Oh, Norns.

Doctor Banner had been a bit confused, at first—but then, his species’ experiences with volatile items of cosmic power had thus far been brief and surprisingly benevolent. He did not know to fear the prospect of the Power Stone used in battle, didn’t know about just how much havoc could be wreaked by the Aether in the wrong hands.

Thor was certain he understood, though, by the time their search was over.

That should have been the hard part: the weeks and months of tracking down rumors, of traveling in disguise and trying to not arouse suspicion, just to have an idea of what was to come.

Instead, Thor found that the single most frustrating aspect was the fact that he’d seen the Chitauri himself and yet his realm was adamant in its insistence of Asgard’s might.

The only people even slightly amenable to acknowledging his concerns and taking action were Heimdall and the Allfather, and even that was a very charged situation.

The current consensus was that Frigga’s death was what had kicked off Odin’s new silence and the somber way he held himself. That it was shortly after her funeral that quietly started working on improving the citadel’s defenses, and on implementing new security measures.

Thor…didn’t know how to approach that entire situation.

“But shouldn’t it be the easiest?” Doctor Banner had once asked, early on during their search for rumors. “Because he’s the head honcho and your father?”

He had been left struggling to articulate just how complex Asgard’s politics were, of the Allfather’s role and where he himself stood as the Crown Prince—and of Odin’s…unique parenting skills. Of the blatant favoritism shown that he could only now see clearly [Loki hadn’t willingly lurked in the
shadows at first, had he], and Odin’s reluctance to shift the status quo in regards to whoever he’d deemed a ‘lesser species’ prior to Frigga’s death and the more he thought about it the more questions he had and focus. [Not now. Later.]

Suffice it is to say, the good Doctor had quite a bit to say on the matter once he had a general idea of the situation. [Had flushed green for a moment, actually, but that was neither here nor there.]

And so it was that Thor struggled to approach the grieving Allfather, and spoke with Heimdall, and made sure to interfere whenever one of his Asgardian shield-brothers tried to challenge Doctor Banner because as respectable an opponent the Hulk had proved to be, Banner had often voiced his dislike of fighting and Thor could respect that. Thus why he’d introduced him to Asgard’s libraries, and pushed away bittersweet memories of his brother hiding in between towering stacks of books in favor of talks of what to do with this knowledge in favor of formulating arguments for why they should expand the use of the Bifrost from its current status of ‘for dire emergencies only’ so as to send the Midgardian home.

It made for an interesting time, to say the least.

…and then warships were spotted in the distance, and Thor knew their time was now very limited.

Thor clenched his jaw and readjusted his grip on Mjolnir, exchanged a serious look with the good Doctor who had somehow had the misfortune to have gotten involved all this, and pressed onwards. He needed to talk with with his father, because before Hogun had received a message they’d been on the front lines, and every second in the fight against this encroaching threat was far more valuable than the gold Midgardians prized so highly.

Asgard was under attack, and he should be there defending it with his shield-brothers, why was his father calling him now?!

He was directed to the Bifrost, and if Thor had not already known Asgard was under severe threat—something he would have thought inconceivable, a year ago—then the sight of Heimdall not at his post would have driven the stark reality of the situation home.

Asgard was under attack, was struggling with the war at its doorstep, was desperate enough to have needed one of its greatest generals to pick up the mantle again.
Thor just clenched his jaw once more, and pressed onwards to the disturbingly empty chamber. There was still hope, that they could overcome this. Still hope. [He had to hope.]

But then—the moment the doors closed, he felt a chill steal over him, and suddenly he couldn’t move, and if his shield-brother’s widened eyes were anything to go by, he couldn’t either.

This was…

From the shadows, a familiar form emerged. His father stood, impassive, watching as Thor collapsed and Mjolnir’s leather strap was the only thing that kept it from falling from slack fingers but this magic was so, so familiar, was something he’d remembered from childhood, but he’d seen—

Loki. Loki’s skill with deception, oh the Norns, Thor was a fool.

He couldn’t move, as the image of the Allfather faded away with every step he took and his brother strode in, intent in every line of his face, and Thor couldn’t move as he and his shield-brother were dragged, and he couldn’t move, even as he fought the magic with all his might.

“Father?” Thor managed to get out, barely, as the realization hit and he tried to keep the horror at bay because he’d thought his father had been mourning, as the reason for why he had been acting strangely at times, but…

“Odinsleep.” Loki replied with a thin-lipped smile. “He’s hidden. Safe. But Asgard needed a leader, and you were away, and I was the last one in line for the throne. Heimdall agreed, after he saw what happened to Xandar.”

“Brother,” Thor started, and he wanted so, very badly to move, to make sure this wasn’t yet another trick, that his heart wasn’t making him see things. He strained desperately at the magic, but to no avail.

“Your father is safe, Thor. And I’m protecting Asgard as much as I can, for our mother’s sake. But this is a threat we cannot allow to win, and…I’m raising the last defenses. Nothing goes in, nothing goes out, but you need to warn those Midgardians you seem to care about so much. Thanos has three stones, we cannot afford to let more fall in his hands.” Loki said forcefully, determination in his voice but with no small amount of fear in his eyes.

“Wh—”

Then Loki reached into his cloak, and Thor’s eyes widened as he took in the familiar blue glow.

“The Tesseract. Space Stone. This is what Thanos is after. I altered the signature, he can’t track it anymore. But if Asgard falls…”

Thor fought as much as he could, because suddenly everything was rapidly falling into place and Loki wouldn’t—he couldn’t do this to Thor!

“He can tell if the Bifrost activates. But I know other ways of traveling through the branches of Yggdrasil.”

Thor was powerless to move, as Loki carefully placed the glowing container in his grasp. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the slow flush of the good Doctor, but when the magic finally lifted, Thor didn’t have the time to do more than reach out and roar, “Brother, no!” before his world became shadow.
He was still roaring, and clutching to the Tesseract with one hand and reaching out with the other, when the shadows lifted and he recognized the night sky of Midgard, and he was still roaring when he felt the final defenses of Asgard slide into place, sealing any hope of going back.

Asgard was under siege.

And once the Mad Titan had decimated his home, Midgard would be next.

“Oh, Norns.” Thor breathed as the realization hit of just what his brother had done, “Loki, no.”

This time, his roar was of rage and grief and denial. Warriors weren’t supposed to cry, weren’t supposed to show weakness— but he could not care less, as he remained sitting in the grass of a land that was not his, unable to protect his home or do anything other than warn Midgard of what was to come.

“He’s coming,” he found himself repeating as he frantically cast about for some way, any way to return home, to traverse the stars and be able to stand up and fight—

But the bitter truth stared him in the face as the Tesseract illuminated the people and simulacrums now fast approaching him, Lord Anthony among them.

“He’s coming,” he murmured as he buried his face in his hands, trying to bite back a sob at the way the Nine Realms even now rumbled a challenge to those who dared attack its head. Asgard would fight, and continue fighting to the bitter end— but this was…

“It’s over,” Thor said, still reeling, still grieving his people, who did not know what they were facing, who had never been conquered and whose warriors would go to Valhalla because they did not know the meaning of defeat and would refuse to stand down, even if Loki were to reveal that they no longer possessed the Tesseract. [The Mad Titan’s campaign was a foregone conclusion, Asgard’s fate was sealed the moment he had it in his sights, he courted Death and—]

“Thor?” Lord Anthony asked cautiously as he reached towards him, and Thor couldn’t help it— he wrapped him up in a bear hug because Doctor Banner did not like feeling confined but he needed something to anchor him, to remind him to focus on the now [instead of his home, oh his home—] and Lord Anthony had never begrudged him of this before and would probably understand now.

“The Mad Titan is coming. Asgard is now under siege.”

He sought out the Infinity Stones, Midgard now had two of the remaining three. Thor couldn’t help the tremor of grief and rage in his voice as he continued. “Once it falls, Midgard is next and it’s over.”

“Oh, no, Thor.” Lord Anthony awkwardly patted him on the back, and he finally pulled away to see an odd mixture of emotions that flitted across his Midgardian shield-brother’s face, as he noticed Thor’s distress and tried to reassure him.
“I cannot imagine what you’re going through right now, Thor. But thanks for the warning, and breathe. And—“ Lord Anthony’s voice shifted to a dark, quiet viciousness, accompanied by a smile like bared teeth as he faced the night sky and continued. “Know this: no matter how bad it looks, the war is far from over now.”

Chapter End Notes

Unreliable narrator instances:
—in this chapter, Loki is 100% sane and very very bitter about how Odin [and most of Asgard, for that matter] treated him for so much of his life. The reason he didn't reach out to Thor? His brother's basically the only family he cares about now, and last he saw him, Thor was more than happy to assume the worst of him. Sure, he reacted when he faked his death [intentionally, this time], but Loki's not about to risk it. Especially when there's so much at stake, and there's a chance that Thor might've just punched him if he were to go '...so, I survived and have been impersonating your dad. Surprise!' before he can get the 'also I hate Thanos and know this place is on his hit list' thing out.

I outlined this before Ragnarok came out, if things hadn't hit the fan I would've finished this fic before Infinity War came out. I had this in mind since before I posted the first chapter, we're going shamelessly AU here. Here be dragons and all that, canon went out the window a long while back.

Also: there's only a few more chapters left, I'm deviating from said outline when hell freezes over.

End Notes

For anyone who’s interested in hearing me gripe about the writing process, meta, or status updates/ the reason next chapter's taking so long, I'm dontcallmecarrie on tumblr.

Also, if you would please avoid character bashing in the comments, it'd be much appreciated. I love hearing from you all, but if your comments could be focused more on the work itself than on how much you dislike [Character X], that'd be great.

Oh— almost forgot: keep in mind this is just for fun. There's a time and place for constructive criticism, this isn't it. Thanks, but no thanks.

Edit because this thing has a tv tropes page and I'm just kinda flailing right now
Works inspired by this one: The War is Far From Over Now: Art by Era Penn

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!