and snap around your fingers

by orphan_account

Summary

Tony has spent his life trying to fix intangible problems by building things. Somehow, he just can’t be bothered to fix this one.

(Or, five times Tony tries to fix something, and one time he realizes that it's not always his responsibility.)

Notes

Title comes from the Aqualung song "Broken Bones"

See the end of the work for more notes

(I-)

He builds his first circuit board when he’s four and Howard looms over him the entire time, equal parts proud and envious.

It’s not the first thing he remembers doing, but it’s the first thing that matters. It’s not about the circuit board, really, his first one is sloppy work anyways. The plates aren’t as tight as they could be, and
the wires flop out randomly. It’s the first time Howard ever notices him, though.

He spent a week learning how to craft that board before coming forward. His nights were spent down in the low light of Howard’s workshop, because anything is easy to get to when you are a child with no supervision. In the quiet of those nights, the cool metal soothed him. He learned to love the electric burns that littered his hands. He caught cuts and scrapes on scrap metal and pliers, and it was the last time the skin on his hands was soft enough to be considered marred.

If he’d noticed when got hurt, maybe he would’ve cried over it. He’s always been such an emotional being, and his child self was not exempt. But looking in the afterglow of what he’d built, he’d hardly had any thought for his own flesh. Neither had Howard, when he’d shown him.

Howard’s own hand sat rough and calloused, too, on his shoulder while his father’s eyes beamed down at his project. Tony’s hands felt so unlike a child’s, in that moment, when his fingers curled into his palms. He felt, rather than saw, a bridge being laid out- and it was himself tempering the metal.

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(2-)

Things go on like that for a while. He builds boards, he builds engines, he builds anything his mind can dream up. His hands are worn, but it’s a small price to pay to have schematics carved into his skin. Putting parts together is second nature to him, so much like breathing. It’s the only fresh air when the rest of him is a constancy of crowds.

At MIT he is constantly surrounded by people. If they’re not around him because his last name is Stark, then they’re around him for the money, or for the show- Jesus, look how young he is. It’s a shame.

Maybe he had overshot his expectations, but he had hoped to find his people there. His childhood had been lonely enough. Nobody thought fast enough, moved fast enough, was enough to keep up with him. MIT was supposed be a collegiate of people like him- Child prodigies, visionary genius’, pioneers of the future. Most of his peers aren’t that. They’re just different shades of Howard. They’re clever, to a degree, but calculating to a higher one. Their intelligence isn’t innate, it doesn’t sing behind their skin and crawl like a bug behind their eyes. They work hard and claw their way to recognition, and they scoff at Tony for being able to do what no amount of studying could make possible for them.

The other students only came close to what Tony had wanted them to be. Only they hurt more, because they refracted a light at his loneliness that he didn’t want to look at. Sometimes they were so close, but they could never quite touch him. Maybe they didn’t reach far enough; they didn’t aim high enough. Regardless, even they would look at him as if he’s grown a third head when he would try to explain something beyond them. So he stops trying.

He not sure when it started. At some point he started talking a lot, well more, without ever really saying anything. Now he never shuts up, but everybody fucking listens when his lips are moving. He went to frat parties and took whatever and he couldn’t feel his face but he’s confident that his mouth never stopped moving. He hacks the pentagon on a dare one night at one of these, and everybody cheers for him like he’s accomplished something great. His head was swimming too much for him to tell them how easy it was, but the knowledge that they wouldn’t understand him anyways sat hollow in his chest.

The next day he saw a flyer for MIT’s annual robot engineering contest on his way to class, and felt the idea spread like a contagion over the empty bed where his heart is.
He was frantic and manic and it felt like the first time again with the circuit board. Only this time, he notices the cuts on his hands, and the bags under his eyes, and takes pride in them.

When DUM-E comes to life at precisely 3:05 am the day the contest was to take place, the first thing it (he!) did was click the ends of his claw together, and sway in a motion that can only be considered waving. Tony said “hi” back and they went on to win the contest. DUM-E was the most advanced artificial intelligence around for years to come, and also his greatest friend.

* (3-)

DUM-E is the seed that gives birth to a whole new world of artificial intelligence. After him comes U, and after U comes J.A.R.V.I.S.. Each one is more sophisticated than the last. They learn and they grow, and they communicate to each other through lines of code. They are far beyond thinking bots. They are feeling ones, too, and Tony holds on tightly to the secrets of their creation lest they be abused.

He had wanted to go in that direction. He wanted to keep building AI’s, to keep striving towards the future. Then his parents died and it’s not as if he had much choice after that. It’s not as if he could just abandon S.I. to go live some quiet life in the country where nobody knows his name. No, he didn’t take on Howard’s weapons legacy out of love.

He could build weapons just fine. In fact, his were bigger, better, and more explosive than ever. But it’s an aimless cause. There’s nowhere to go with weapons. There’s no goal to stride towards with them, no new knowledge to play with. Maybe that’s why he spiraled so out of control when he took on the company. All his passions left squandered with nothing to direct themselves to. There’s something to be said for idle hands, and all that.

When he was kidnapped, he was living life like a burn out. Partying all the time, sleeping around. With no central goal in mind there was nothing to anchor him.

Afghanistan forced him to reassess his priorities. The first Iron Man suit was built to escape the cave (at the cost of Yinsen, too high, too high-), but Mark II was made to cement his new values in place. It was a reminder of what he knew he had to do, just like the glowing blue hole in his chest was a reminder of how he knew he had to do that. Mark II, and every suit after it, signified his new beginning. Whether anybody else thought they were just Tony Stark playing with his new toys or not was their prerogative. They didn’t have to understand, Obadiah certainly hadn’t. As long as Tony knew what he was meant to be doing then everybody else was just background noise. Nobody else could ever keep up with him anyways.

* (4-)

The suits come and go. They get more advanced all the time and the old versions still sit in his house like guard dogs regardless of whether or not they’ve been retired. The Arc Reactor, on the other hand, just goes.

The technology behind it is still revolutionary. It’s a beautiful, clean, energy source. It’s the only form of power he utilizes- but it was never meant to be a prosthetic. Not even in the early days of it’s conception by Howard was the idea even considered. After Killian, having it removed was an easy decision to make.

Open heart surgery was dangerous of course. There was the very real possibility that something could go wrong. Removing the Arc Reactor so they could get to his heart to even do the procedure
meant that if the surgeons didn’t work fast enough to remove the shrapnel, it would pierce his heart during the course of the operation anyways. Ultimately, though, it was worth it.

The Arc Reactor was a heavy thing in his chest. It took up so much space, pushing his lungs down and forcing him to replace parts of his ribs and breastplate with artificial bones. Both the heat and the cold caused the metal to burn the skin surrounding the reactor. It hurt him everyday. Losing it made him feel like he could finally breath again, but it made Pepper feel like she couldn’t.

Pepper had been with him through everything, and she didn’t trust the seeming ease with which the Arc Reactor came out. It put her on edge, knowing exactly how weakened his heart was. She started watching his diet (which was pretty good to start with), and his sleep schedule (which was not good to start with) with increasing detail. Her attention to his habits, and careful planning to deter them, reminded him once again why she was the perfect choice for CEO- but this time around it was causing her to lose sleep.

He didn’t know how tell her that he was going to be okay, that the surgeons who worked on him were the best money could buy, that he’s survived worse and his heart can hold out a little longer just fine. So he did the only thing he could think to do, and made her a necklace out of the shrapnel from his heart.

He actually hadn’t meant to save the shrapnel. It had just been handed to him as some demented souvenir post-op and he hadn’t gotten around to doing anything with it yet. But when it came down to it, he figured if anybody should have them, it’s Pepper. She once gave him the old Arc Reactor model as proof that Tony Stark has a heart but he no longer needed that as proof when she was standing right in front of him.

Giving her the shrapnel was the best way that he could remind her that if they’re on her, touching her neck, then they’re not in him, crushing his heart. He’d hoped that she could touch it absentmindedly during the day and it would comfort her when he couldn’t be there to do so. Somehow, she understood just fine what he was trying to tell her.

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(5-)

B.A.R.F. was an ambitious piece of tech. Hijacking your own memories to project visually with options to change the outcome is an idea that plays with so many different types of science that it should be impossible. He’s Tony Stark, though, so it’s not.

B.A.R.F. was a product built off sleepless nights to combat sleepless nights, that blew up spectacularly in his face.

The original idea was a therapeutic one. He had thought of it as a way to address his harsher memories in-house- for those who didn’t feel comfortable sharing the darkest parts of themselves with other people. As it turns out, trapping yourself in a loop of old memories with nobody else to bounce your feelings off of, isn’t very productive.

Taking responsibility for his part in Ultron was taxing, but he had recognized at least that it couldn’t be done without acknowledging the key issue in Ultron’s creation- which was his PTSD and fear as a result of the Chitauri invasion. So he’d started moving backwards, originally, to there.

Moving backwards meant the first thing to be dealt was the nightmare vision given to him by Wanda, but everytime he touched that memory he felt again as if the red tendrils of her magic were swarming around him ready to choke him down. If somebody else were there, they could’ve told him that he was being irrational, that in the presence of his own mind he was physically safe. But nobody else
was there, so he skipped the memory and decided to change course. He made the decision to move forward from his childhood instead of backwards into it, and that’s when he got stuck on his parents.

He made it pretty fast through the rest of his adolescence. He’d come to terms with his lonely childhood a long time ago. The only snags left there were the Jarvis’, but remembering AI J.A.R.V.I.S., he was able to process his feelings on Edwin and Anna’s deaths in a way he wasn’t allowed to at the time of their passing. However, just a skip and a beat from them, and it was 1991 again, and he could still feel his mother’s lips on his cheek just before they left and never came back.

After hitting that memory, he never moved past it. He replayed the same time frame over and over again, until F.R.I.D.A.Y. begrudgingly acquiesced to just looping it for him.

Some part of him recognized that he wasn’t getting better. His relationship with his team mates was strained, Ultron having given them even more of a reason not to trust him. Pepper had distanced herself from him in self preservation, and he was worrying Rhodey half to death with his behavior. It was only a matter of time before something gave.

If used properly, maybe B.A.R.F. could’ve prevented the fallout. Maybe he would’ve been more prepared for it.

*(I+)*

Time moves slowly after Siberia. He has to play every card he has to get the Accords amended and the rogue Avengers pardoned. He rests easy once it’s done, knowing that he’s done all that he can to reverse the damage that he caused. The rest is up to them.

He hands the compound over to the Accords council without complaint or cost so the old team can move back in. The hole built by Wanda has been repaired, and his lab has been moved to the refurbished Stark Mansion that he grew up in. Rhodey is back to doing tours for the Air Force, so he isn’t staying there either. He has no fond memories of the property, and at this point, no reason to hold onto it.

He’s cordial enough when he runs into his ex teammates. He limits his personal interactions with them, but Iron Man still fights with them when it’s necessary. Like today, for example, he is in the compound- simply because it’s easier to have them all together while they wait on the cryptic attack that Madame Hydra and her goonies have been building up to for months.

He’s hanging in the kitchen to keep his distance. They can’t do much until the actual call goes out so there’s no point in suiting up. They’ve already gone over their plan of attack multiple times so there’s not much point in that either.

He was going to make another cup of coffee when he noticed that there are coffee grounds in the sink again. Looking at it, he’s 100% sure that if they try to run the sink the drain will clog. His fingers itch to fix it, but before he can even roll his sleeves up to start Steve is leaning over the sink to rinse his own coffee mug out.

Steve is already suited up, and the silence between them is uncomfortable. When he sets his mug on the drying rack, Steve finally seems to notice the mess in the sink.

“Sorry about the sink,” may be the only thing Steve has said directly to Tony all day, and it makes him stop in his tracks.

He settles on a careful shrug, “It’s your house.”
A small frown graces Steve’s face at that, but he nods. Tony doesn’t fix the sink, but in two weeks
time he hears from Vision that it has to be replaced and it doesn’t surprise him one bit.

End Notes

I say intangible issues cause I was trying to focus on the inner personal problems, rather
than physical ones which is why the Arc Reactor and Ultron were discluded.

I touched on B.A.R.F. again in another fic. This one takes the same idea from that fic and
attempts to explore it from a different angle separate from Tony's relationship with Pepper.

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