Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs

by language_teacherz_rule (orphan_account)

Summary

Tony, bonded to the All Spark, with his family of baby bots, Pepper and Rhodey by his side goes on to face all that life throws at him...

Notes

Well, here it is finally, the next installment. I can't and won't make any promises on update speed. Can't and won't. I hope you enjoy it, and please let me know what you think! I believe in constructive criticism, so please, let me know. Tissue warning for this chapter. I made myself cry writing it. Then again editing it. Be warned.
Chapter 1

2008

The years had been good to Tony, to Pepper and Rhodey, and to Stark Industries. The company now dominated virtually every tech market that existed - computers, phones, internet, clean energy and more. These projects funded others that would otherwise have been unsustainable - high yield crops, water purification research that was now providing clean water in third world countries around the world, medical advancements that were nothing short of astounding - prosthetics that Tony was able to build because of his deep understanding of fine robotics, and the materials he had (eventually) patented, the metal that was both incredibly strong and able to be worked in incredibly fine ways meant that there were robotic prosthetics that could do so much for their users now.

Pepper and Rhodey had been married for eight years and were starting to talk about children. Rhodey joked that they’d had enough practice now with Tony’s and were ready to try for their own. He had been stable at a job in Weapons R&D with the Air Force for two years, with no sign that he was likely to be moved on. It was possible that that would change this year, and if it did, Rhodey was simply planning not to renew his contract, which was almost up. He had had input in enough of Tony’s projects - official input, in non-military contracts, that he had been paid for - that there would be no way anyone could object to him joining the company, even after Tony put an end to weapons manufacturing. He’d put in eighteen years, and he was prepared to make the change if he had to.

Tony’s family had swelled enormously in the intervening years, growing by at least one a year, with quite a few pairs of twins. There were thirty-four bots in total now, sixteen flyers and eighteen of what Rhodey had jokingly named ground-pounders, which had somehow stuck.

The additions to the family, with all of the additional demands on his time, had meant that Tony had cut back somewhat in other areas of his life. He was still fully involved in R&D and some aspects of administration - mostly board meetings - but he didn’t monitor the company the way he had at the very beginning. This relaxation of control had been assisted by the apparent softening of Obie towards who Tony actually was. He still pressed him to be more involved in weapons - and one area of the company Tony had been very careful about was keeping track of their military contracts, so that he was sure they would be ready to stop production when he planned - but he was willing to admit that Tony was not his father, was not a womaniser or an alcoholic, and to back off on trying to make him one. He did spend some time trying to hook Tony up with a more long-term interest, but he gently rebuffed any and all such efforts. They had, at least, a cordial relationship.

Tony, as he had suspected, hadn’t aged a day in the years since his sudden, terrifying growth spurt. He now grew a van dyke goatee to disguise the fact, but most of his ‘youthful’ good looks could be explained away by his lack of jet-setting lifestyle, so they hadn’t worried too much about it yet. Eventually he would have to consider either outing himself as a ‘mutant’ with healing capabilities or fake ageing himself. The way the political environment was at the moment, fake ageing seemed like a better way to go to avoid damage to the company, but that had to be weighed against the fact that he’d have to come out eventually, and that could be more dangerous to the company’s, and Tony’s, reputation than anything else.

He was on the verge of the final move to shut down the weapons manufacturing arm of SI. The weight of it over the years had been heavy, but he had been able to bear it with the knowledge that there was an end in sight. He smiled slightly to himself as he thought back on the day three years ago almost to the day that he’d presented the idea that was finally coming to fruition to the board, the idea that, although they didn’t know it, would be the death knell of the now least profitable non-charitable
portion of SI. He thought back on the moment when it began.

“Dad liked to say that the best weapon was the one you never had to fire. In this day and age, I think
we need something a little different. I will build you a weapon that you will only ever have to fire
once,” Tony told Obie and the rest of the board, laying out the papers including several sketches on
the table between them, sliding a packet to each board member. He’d decided to do this in front of
the board because Obie wouldn’t be able to say the things he’d probably want to when hearing the
rest of the plan.

“It’s going to take a while, to get all the kinks out. It’s complicated, it’s slated to take three years to
gain through R&D, testing, everything before we can present it to the generals. It will be the only
project in Weapons R&D that I will work on personally in that time.” He didn’t mention that after
any orders for it were shipped, the entire weaponry division of Stark International, which Tony had
been whittling down over the years, would be completely shut down. He wished he could avoid this
particular project, but he needed three more years to prepare for the shutdown. The fact was that
while this project was going to be devastating in its capacity, it would still be better for his continued
mental health than the multiple projects that would have otherwise been squeezed into that time.

Even then, the shutdown of weapons manufacturing would take a certain length of time. He was
going to have to take over all organisation of military contracts, or they would end up with ones that
they couldn’t fulfil, and he wasn’t willing to go back on his decided course. He had put up with the
weapons manufacturing for as long as he could, but he was done. He couldn’t keep making things
that took life. He had no problem continuing working with the military in defensive capacities, but
there would be no new Stark weapons from 2008 onwards, and the current lines would be phased
out of production within another three years, as other manufacturers would (eventually) surpass them
as they turned their R&D in directions that would help the world in different ways.

Tony looked back on that moment from the other end of the path that it had taken him down, and
grinned. He was almost free. He’d fly out to Afghanistan with Rhodey today, and they’d present the
weapon to the generals. They’d take their last contracts - once he reached the US again, he’d hold a
press conference announcing that, once they’d worked through their final contracts, SI would not be
taking any further weapons contracts. They would still work with the military on the other projects
they had - protective gear, vehicle design and so on, they just wouldn’t be creating instruments of
death anymore.

Tony looked around the play room and sighed softly. It was nearly time to leave, but before he went
there were a few of his littlest ones who had to go to sleep, and a few more who while they could
stay awake didn’t like to, preferring to sleep until he came home again.

He crossed to where Sora and Akili, who hadn’t yet been given a pair nickname courtesy of Pepper,
the latest set of twins (one girl, one boy, flyers) where sitting with Fiona (a ground pounder) rolling
balls back and forth between themselves.

“Okay, guys. Time to go to sleep. Daddy’ll be back in a few days to wake you up.” Fiona held up
her arms first, so Tony lifted her and, humming softly, crossed to the cribs. He pressed his finger tips
to the glow in the centre of her chest and her eyes dimmed. Tony carefully laid her down, then
repeated the process with the other two before looking around for Pali and Shamal, the just-turned-
two twins, also known as Fred and Ginger. They were toddling around the bottom of the climbing
frame, watching their older siblings scramble around on its many interlocking bars. He scooped the
pair of them up together, pressing a kiss to each of their foreheads before repeating his previous
gesture and consigning them to their shared bed.

“Right. Anyone else want to sleep until daddy comes home?” Several others offered themselves up,
and once they were farewelled and soothed into sleep Tony sat down on the floor and gave hugs to each of the bots as they presented themselves, snuggling them up to the warmth that pulsed in his chest, their little Sparks brightening momentarily before he set them down again.

“Go play,” he gently shooed them away, never liking to have them watch him leaving, and after a few minutes he slipped quietly out of the room. Glancing at his watch, he bit his tongue to control it and winced. He was going to be SO LATE for the plane. Rhodey was going to KILL him.

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Tony sat in the Humvee, Rhodey in the vehicle behind him, allowing him to fit as many personnel in his vehicle as possible, for one of his (only) enjoyable experiences when coming to these places: chatting with the kids - and they were kids, they seemed so insanely young to him at thirty five - hearing their opinions on the tech they were equipped with, making notes for new improvements or problems they were having. The kid next to him was expounding on the wonders of his new bullet-proof battle armour - designed with special fastenings that left far fewer and smaller gaps than the old - when suddenly the world went mad, the vehicle flipping and rolling, bright lights and intense noises completing the disorienting ride. Tony was subjected to several very long, very disorienting seconds before something struck his head and everything went dark.

He returned to consciousness to find himself sprawled behind a boulder, his head aching, and as he blinked his eyes to focus them he saw, three feet in front of his face, a missile with HIS name on it, and it didn’t make any sense. He stared at it for the longest moment, and then he didn’t see anything for a very long time.

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Tony came back to himself in agony. It flared through him, bright and hot and all consuming, before coming to settle over his heart. He whimpered, and the Warmth flared in his mind, comforting even as it struggled, and failed, to help him. It was pulsing hard in his chest, and Tony wondered what that was all about. Why was he still in pain? The only time the Warmth hadn’t been able to heal him, there’d still been foreign material inside his body. He’d heard of mutants with healing abilities that just healed up over things, and he was truly grateful that whatever the Warmth was, it had the sentience not to put him through that.

He raised a hand blindly to fumble at his chest, trying to identify the foreign body that was keeping him from healing, and another hand caught his.

“You should not do that, Mr. Stark,” an accented voice told him, and now Tony forced his eyes open, squinting to see who was there. The face was familiar, in an abstract sort of way - someone Tony thought he had been introduced to once. He concentrated for several long moments, and it came back to him.

“Yinsen? Is that you?” The doctor sitting beside him sat back slightly, eyes widening in surprise.

“I did not expect you to remember me, Mr. Stark. We did not meet for long, after all, although it was a very stimulating conversation while it lasted.”

“Indeed it was. I thought you were relocating to work for SI? Your ideas in medical equipment were groundbreaking; I certainly wanted to have you on board.”

“I returned home, to Golmira, to retrieve my wife and daughters,” Yinsen spoke slowly, eyes downcast. “Before we could leave again, I was…taken. They…” he trailed off. “When I leave here, I will see them again.” The sorrow in his eyes was there for anyone with eyes to see it, and Tony knew what it meant.
“They wouldn’t want that, Yinsen,” he said softly. “Believe me, I know. They would want you to go on, doing good in the world, and then to join them when your time is up. Not to throw it away when you have the opportunity to change the world for the better.”

“And what would the great Tony Stark know of such things? You have no children, you do not know what it is to lose them.”

Tony felt his heart clench. He hadn’t thought about what had nearly happened to Dummy in a long time. “I’ve been blessed not to feel the pain, but I know the fear of it,” he said, softly. “It is very little known information, but…I know what it is to be a parent.” He bit his lip, worry spiking through him. They must be terrified by now, no matter that Rhodey and Pepper were there for them, they’d never gone more than a couple of days without him being there, and mostly he was there all the time. He was a parent, and he worked from his home - he basically spent all the time he wasn’t actually doing hazardous things in the playroom, even if he needed to be working rather than playing with them. He mostly had it timed so that he was working while they slept, but sometimes a big project did carry over. “I can’t stay here,” he looked around, and then finally down again at his chest. “What is that, anyway?”

Yinsen explained, and Tony frowned in concern. He didn’t know if he could heal around the obstruction or not, and the shrapnel in his chest…He sent a querying thought to the Warmth, which seemed to consider, then a series of images flashed through his mind. The shrapnel in his chest, dissolving away, then the battery and the ring of metal being extracted. The impression of time was laid over the dissolving image, so Tony knew that the battery would be a necessity for a while yet.

Before he could gather any more information on the situation, the doors to the cave opened and a large, jovial appearing man entered, greeting him in Arabic.

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Tony fitted the small power source into his chest. It was a tiny and incredibly powerful version of the arc reactor which powered all of his industries and so many of his humanitarian works in the world, which would take care of things until the Warmth had sorted the shrapnel. The liquid energy he produced to feed his children worked equally well to power it, and could in fact keep it charged as it sat in his flesh, which made it far more useful than using any of the available fissile materials.

Now he just had to make an armoured suit with passenger space, based on his kids, that would get him and Yinsen out of here, and he had to do it in such a way that it wasn’t obvious that he wasn’t building a Jericho missile until the last possible moment. He’d been working on a layered blueprint that, unless you put the sheets on top of each other, was invisible. It was with drawing these and sorting parts that he tried to distract himself from what was going on with his body.

Between bouts of torture and while frantically building, Tony told Yinsen about his kids. About the pranks they liked to play, and the way they looked after each other. About the intense codependence the twins had, the silly pranks that the older ones played on each other and on Tony, and the ridiculous level of enjoyment they got from watching the most bizarre TV shows.

He kept quiet about the growing need he had to Spark, though. The triplets’ bodies were only partially completed, back in Malibu, but he’d been here for almost three months now, and it was time for him to be putting the finishing touches on paint jobs, not holding the Sparks tighter and tighter, trying to contain them fully.

If it had been only one, or maybe even two, Tony could have carried longer and created a youngling body, but the strain of carrying triplets was too much. He couldn’t do it, they would have to be sparked soon or he would be in serious trouble.
He hadn’t told Yinsen because they both had enough to worry about with just escaping, never mind that he felt like his chest would explode and he didn’t know what to do about it. The Warmth didn’t seem sure what to do about it either, and Tony was starting to panic, just a little. The bodies back at the house weren’t developed enough to sustain the Sparks, and he was terrified that for the first time his children were going to die, and die before they got a chance to live. He didn’t even know what would happen if it got to the point where he couldn’t carry them any more. He did know that he was starting to look truly awful; he had lost a lot of weight, his arms and legs were thin, his ribs all visible. They were on scant rations, but not enough to explain that, not unless the Warmth was cannibalising him to keep his babies alive. He was afraid of losing these children, but he was also afraid that trying to keep them alive would be his death, and he would leave the rest of his children alone to starve.

He wasn’t sure how long he had been held here - too much time had passed while he was unconscious or delirious to keep close track - and he didn’t know how much food there would even be left for the others. He needed to leave, they needed to leave, as soon as possible.

He lifted a computer motherboard, and suddenly the Warmth surged through him, taking over his body and he was moving fast, far faster then before, hands flying as he assembled and welded and connected, responding to Yinsen’s increasingly concerned queries without conscious input of his own.

The body was fully assembled, and the computer - so much more advanced than he’d planned, the Warmth in its desperation having reshaped and changed them, showing Tony how it was doing it in the same way it had taught him as a child, teaching him to shape and change matter without tools and even at a microscopic level.

Then the Warmth had Tony’s hand pressed to the chest of the armour, and the three Sparks were slipping out of his chest, down his arm, and Tony was terrified, sure that his babies were going to die. Instead, they slipped inside the armour and a glow built where his own was meant to rest, three colours swirling around each other, pale green, blue and lilac and with a pulse the eyes, again tri-coloured, flickered on. Tony, now fully in control of himself, could fully assess the changes made by the Warmth in its outpouring of energy. The body was far from the clunky thing he had pieced together from the rough iron. Instead, a gleaming, giant version of one of his own finely worked Sparkling bodies, enamelled in three colours, approximately one third of the body in each colour and meeting at the Spark chamber. The back was much thicker, obviously an adaptation of Tony’s original design for the protective hold that would take Yinsen while Tony walked them out.

There was a curious chirp, and Tony swallowed the urge to swear, because there was no way he could ever welcome any of his children into the world with swear words. “Hello, darlings,” he whispered softly. “You’re going to need to work with Daddy, now, okay? Open up,” he said in Sparkling speak. “Back first, babies. Daddy’s going to help you guys to walk in a minute, okay?” He turned to Yinsen, who was staring at him, eyes wide, backed away somewhat. “We have to go, now. Come here, climb in, then I’ll get in the front and we’ll go.” Now that Tony wasn’t completely focussed on what he was doing, he could hear yelling from beyond the metal door to their cave, and looking over he saw that Yinsen had applied the electromagnet to keep the door shut.

Yinsen hesitated, and Tony yelled, “NOW, Yinsen!” The man scrambled across and huddled himself into the large back-pack like space, curling his legs up, and the cover snapped closed, the hiss of ventilation letting Tony know that instead of the simple vents he had built in, the Warmth upgraded this as well.

Tony stepped around to the front of the suit and ran a hand along the seam. He chirped to the three - and he could feel all three of them in there - and the suit hissed open, the hydraulics far beyond
anything he had originally designed, since the suit had originally been in multiple pieces. He turned his back to it and carefully stepped back, settling his feet into the boots and his hands carefully into what are now full gauntlets.

With a soft command, the suit hissed closed again, and then Tony tried to take a step. Surprisingly, it all worked, no stumbling, no extreme heaviness. The Warmth flared inside him, running down his arms and legs, and Tony wasn’t sure what exactly it was doing but the suit suddenly seemed to move completely naturally. The triplets chirped excitedly, happily, and he decided to ignore it for now. He’d need to come up with names for them, but that could wait for later. He walked to the door and, removing the magnetic lock, yanked it open.

It startled the terrorists on the far side long enough for the Warmth to yank Tony’s arm up and send a pulse of heat and energy flaring down through the armour at them. It flung them away, clinging like burning pitch, eating into their bodies. The triplets shrieked in pain as it burned through their shared form, and Tony swore violently. ‘Sorry, babies, sorry. It’s okay, you’re going to be okay. We’re getting out of here right now.’ Ignoring the massacre in the cave, other than to bend and grab an intact gun from the floor, he turned and ran, heading down the rough hewn corridor, the fear for his children lending him strength that his starvation and torture weakened body had not had before.

‘Don’t do that again,’ he ordered the Warmth silently. The triplets hadn’t stopped crying, and he clicked and chirped comfortingly to them as he raced through the caves, gun held in front of him. He knew the route out - it was hard to hide things like that from an eidetic memory - and he followed it, shooting a few terrorists along the way.

They exited the cave, and the Warmth once again took over, ignoring Tony’s orders, and blasting energy through the feet of the armour it forced them into the sky, even as the triplets shrieked in pain. The Warmth flew them away from the caves, and the mountains, out into the desert. Tony felt his body weakening as the Warmth drained his remaining strength to escape. Finally, it could continue no further, and they slammed down into a sand bank. Tony rolled with the force of the impact, eventually landing on his side. The armour hissed open, the Triplets falling away into their Sparkling forms, free from the extra parts, whimpering and crying.

Tony gathered them to himself, arms shaking weakly as he tried to hold them close. They shook, the pained cries growing weaker as he held them, trying to deny what he could already feel happening. Their shared Spark flickered once, then again, and it went out. Tony wailed, his heart feeling like it was being torn out of his chest as he pressed kisses to their tiny domed heads, breathing hard as he stared down at them.

‘I didn’t even get to name them,’” he whispered, leaning back and looking down at the three tiny bodies in his lap. His lips quivered. He hadn’t wept in the cave, not even once, but now the tears were pressing hard against the backs of his eyes, and he bent his head over them again, rocking as he cried, his children lying lifeless in his lap. His tears rained down on them, and he had no strength left, either physical or emotional, to contain himself.

‘I hate you,’ he whispered silently at the Warmth. ‘I would have died for them. How DARE you make them die for me?’

The Warmth offered him images of the other bots, stumbling around in their playroom, hunting for food that had run out, growing weak and collapsing against each other, whimpering and calling out for him in progressively weaker voices. Tony shook his head, trying to deny the images, but he couldn’t, not completely. They were exactly what he had been fearing since he woke up in the cave, and he knew it.

He didn’t hear the groaning of metal behind him, nor the pained sounds the other man who had made
the trip out of the cave made as he freed himself from the back-pack like portion of the armour.

“Tony?” A hand dropped on Tony’s shoulder, but he didn’t even look up from the bodies on his lap. “Oh, Tony,” whispered Yinsen. “I am so very sorry.”

“They’re dead,” Tony whispered, and uttering the words out loud had such a horrible finality to it that he couldn’t say anything more. He finally stood, arms trembling as he held the bodies close.

He managed to hold them up for a few seconds, before his greatly weakened arms gave out, the bodies falling to the ground, crumpling on impact to lie in a heap. Tony wailed, falling to kneel over them, just as a helicopter soared over the sand dune behind them, circled and lowered itself to the sand, and an African American man exploded out of the door, gun up and pointed at Yinsen.

“You get away from him,” he ordered, and Yinsen’s hands snapped up beside his head, backing away from Tony.

“My name is Yinsen. Mr Stark and I were prisoners together, and escaped together,” he quickly explained.

Seeing him quickly back off, the man relaxed slightly and stepped up beside Tony. “Tones?”

“Rhodey?” the broken tone in that voice yanked Rhodey’s eyes off the potential threat and down to his friend. As soon as he saw what there was to see, his own heart was breaking right alongside Tony’s. “They’re dead, Rhodey. My babies are dead,” the whisper was raw pain.

Rhodey didn’t even think. He dropped to his knees beside Tony and wrapped him in his arms, resting his cheek against the top of Tony’s head. “I’m so sorry, Tony. Come on. Let’s take them home.”

Tony grabbed onto that one word - home. Home meant his other babies, and how much food could they possibly have left? Would he be able to create more? The Warmth felt…soft, for want of a better word, weak and useless. He grabbed onto Rhodey’s shoulders, staring at him with desperation.

“Are they alright? Rhodey, are my babies alright? Did they…did they have enough to eat? I kept thinking…I didn’t know how long the food would last, I kept imagi…”

Rhodey interrupted Tony, stopping his panicked rambling. “They’re fine, Tony. They miss you, a lot. More than a lot. I got Jarvis to ration the food, but really Tony, there was no need. There’s heaps of food. What they need is YOU. So let’s get you home, little brother, okay?”

Tony nodded, breath shuddering on sobs as he scrabbled at the little bodies, trying to pick them up again.

“Shhhh, shhhh,” Rhodey soothed him, even as he helped him pick up the small - although, Rhodey was surprised to note, slightly larger than Sparkling-sized - bodies. “I’ve got you, Tony, and them. I’m going to get all of you home.”

“Yinsen too,” Tony managed, flicking a glance at the doctor. “He saved my life.”

“Yinsen too,” Rhodey agreed easily, and holstered his weapon. The doctor immediately crossed to Tony’s other side and assisted in getting the weaker man to his feet. Tony, pulled away from the Sparklings’ bodies, protested loudly.

“It’s okay, Tony. I have a duffle in the chopper. I’ll get them and we’ll take them home. We can’t let the pilot see them, can we?” Rhodey physically carried his friend, whose eyes hadn’t left the too-still
forms on the ground, over the chopper, where a corpsman was waiting. He handed Tony to the medic, helped Yinsen up, then grabbed a bag and crossed back to the bodies. He had to swallow hard before picking them up, one at a time, and carefully transferring them into the bag. The perfect little bodies were limp and lifeless, no glow in the chest, eyes flat and dead. Rhodey choked on tears as he carried out his macabre duty, then stumbled back to the helicopter, the bag almost too heavy for him to lift. The fact that Tony had managed to hold all three of them in his arms the way he looked right now, for even a few moments, said things about his friend’s physical makeup that astounded Rhodey.

He had to pull hard to get the duffle into the chopper, but he set it down very carefully on the floor next to the stretcher that Tony had been placed on. There was already a drip in his friend’s arm. and he had what looked like a tube of glucose paste in his other hand, grimacing as he sucked it down.

Rhodey sat and rested a hand on Tony’s thigh, feeling something in him relax for the first time in a long time, seeing him here, even if he did look awful. The hand with the IV dropped down onto the bag, and another tear slipped down Tony’s cheek before his eyes fluttered closed, exhaustion winning the battle and dragging him under.
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

Tony returns. Things happen.

Chapter Notes

Here’s the next chapter. Sorry they’ve been so few and far between, life has been crazy. Please let me know if you find any mistakes, this is as always unbeta'd. Please enjoy!

LTR

They landed in Malibu barely a day later, Tony having flatly refused medical attention and Rhodey supporting him. Who knew what the doctors might find in examining his friend, after all?

Tony had barely managed to greet Pepper, and when told of the plans for a press conference he had almost freaked out. He thought about getting up in front of the world media had horrified him, but he had pulled himself together. This had to be done, and better now than later.

He looked at the lectern, but the idea of standing for that long was exhausting, and he edged around it, sinking to the floor at the edge of the platform, leaning back against it.

“Please excuse me,” he said, his voice soft but carrying through the room. “I’m still rather weak.” He knew he looked like death warmed up.

“The irk he looked like death warmed up. “This is awkward angle, but I will leave it up to you how you handle it,” he added. Several of the reporters glanced at each other, then one woman almost right in front of Tony shrugged and lowered herself to the floor, sitting crosslegged. The front portion of the crowd followed suit, with only a few at the back remaining standing.

“Mr. Stark,” one of the reporters started, but Tony held up a hand, silencing them.

“I wish to tell you some things,” he said, slowly. “I may take some questions at the end, if I am not too exhausted. My convoy was taken out by weapons built by my company, as I saw with my own eyes. These weapons, which I helped design and which were built to protect our soldiers, the sons and daughters of America and our allies. There will be a complete investigation of how this came to be. I am opening my company to the scrutiny of the FBI, Interpol and anyone else the investigators deem necessary to discover how this thing was done, how weapons slipped out of our carefully controlled production and delivery pipelines. Until this is done, all weapons production by Stark Industries will be suspended. When it is complete, well… this announcement is actually rather late. I had intended to make it when I returned from Afghanistan. Stark Industries will see out the rest of its weapons contracts, but then we will cease. There will be no more weapons beyond what has already been contracted for.

“I have, for many years, been working my company towards this change. We will still create defensive technologies for our people, all of the things we do now, but there will be no more weapons. It has been my wish for many years to leave this violent path in our past, and now that shall come to pass. We will continue to create the medical breakthroughs, the efforts we make to feed
the third world, the advances in prosthetic technology, and of course, all of our computer technologies. My company is set up to absorb and alter the few factories still set up for manufacturing of weapons within a matter of weeks, once we have cleared our final contracts.” Tony sighed.

“I apologise. I find myself too exhausted to answer any questions now. I will speak with you again at a later date, and I will answer questions then, if it is something I can tell you.” He stood, and staggered, and Rhody was right there to support him, pushing past Obi who was trying to come to Tony’s side. “There will be no further comment from SI at this time,” Tony added, and Obi closed his mouth, apparently deciding not to go against Tony on this statement, at least not to his face. Tony allowed Rhody to help him out of the room and back to the waiting car and their supplies.

Now, they sped towards the house, Tony silent and drawn in on himself, arms wrapped around the duffle bag in his lap. The press conference had exhausted him, but the food he was eating was just as quickly being absorbed by the Warmth and used to restore his strength. Tony’s cheeks had filled back out, not much, but enough to be visibly obvious. He was still much thinner than he should be, but he was also a lot healthier than he had been.

Yinsen had stayed at the hospital in Germany for treatment, and would be brought to America by Stark Industries in a few weeks, provided that was still what he wanted.

Tony wrapped both arms around the bag that he’d propped against the back of the seat. With a few pounds of steak, his strength had been greatly restored, and he could hold the bag against himself, feel the unnatural floppiness of the tiny bodies within. When locked in sleep, his children were stiff, held in one position. They were never loose, nerveless, floppy. The pain burned deep in his heart as he felt them, pressed against his still far too thin body.

They pulled up to the house and Tony was out the door, running towards the house, stumbling, ignoring the cries of his friends in his headlong rush towards his children. He fumbled the door open, slamming the button for the elevator, stumbling in when the doors slid open, Rhody and Pepper right behind him now.

The doors slid open again and Tony stumbled through them, falling to his knees at the homely sight before him. The playroom hadn’t changed much. Different toys strewn about, perhaps, but otherwise, it was as he had left it. Across the room, small heads turned from where the ‘bots were huddled together, drawing comfort from being close to each other as they waited for their daddy to come home.

The high pitched squeals were as close to excited screaming as the bots could produce, and father and children were scrambling across the floor to each other, Tony gathering all those who had stayed awake close, pressing kisses to little domed heads, tears falling from his eyes as he clutched them against him, clicks and chirps falling from his lips like snowflakes in a blizzard. He huddled with the older children for a long time, picking up each in turn, running his hands over them, murmuring apologies and assurances as the rest clustered around, leaning against every part of him they could reach.

Pepper stood, one hand pressed to her lips, the other over the swell of her belly, Rhody’s arms wrapped around her, his lips pressed to her hair, as they watched the tearful yet still joyous homecoming.

Eventually Tony stood and made his way to the cribs of sleeping ‘bots. He reached out a hand and, with a light tap to each chest, he woke them. They squealed with glee and clutched at him, but not with the same desperation as their older siblings, unaware of how long they had slumbered.
Tony pressed gentle kisses to each tiny domed head, then watched as the children all mingled. They crawled, toddled, walked, and ran around each other, and tears flowed down Tony’s cheeks freely as he watched.

His eyes went to the bag he’d set down just outside the elevator, and he moved towards it slowly. He couldn’t decide what to do with their bodies. They couldn’t be cremated, and burying them would be a little odd, really, they wouldn’t decompose, but he didn’t want them just lying around somewhere. He wanted a grave marker to mourn at.

He lifted the bag and moved it up onto a table too high for the ‘bots to see onto, he opened it for the first time since the desert. His heart ached as he lifted each of the lifeless bodies out and laid them on the table, trailing gentle fingers over their faces, their empty Spark chambers. He lifted out the last, the little girl, and laid her by her brothers, resting his hand on her Spark chamber when he realised that it was warm. There was no visible light, but there was a faint heat where there should be none.

He quickly pressed his hand down more firmly, as though he could capture it merely by pinning it in place, then spun a spiderweb thin thread of the Warmth’s energy down his arm and sent it questing. There it was - the tiniest remnant of a Spark. The Warmth tried to balk, but Tony slapped it down.

“You did this,” he snarled at it. “And I’m going to fix it. If I can have her back, I’m going to. She’s not dead yet, and she’s not going to be, dammit!”

He fed energy to that tiny, infinitesimal bit of spark so slowly, so carefully, until suddenly it clicked, and the Spark chamber lit up.

Tony whooped, scooping the ‘bot up and pressed it against his chest. He turned to the others and staggered, legs going weak. He slumped to the ground, blinking in shock.

“TONY!” Rhodey scrambled across the room, Pepper on his heels but rather more unwieldy.

“She’s alive, Rhodey. She’s alive.” Tony couldn’t take his eyes off the tiny bot. She was staring at him, as all of them did, but there was something else in her eyes, a grief that matched his, and Tony realised - she was torn, her Spark, which had been one-of-three, was now but one, but it had grabbed hold of him. He could see the connection running into her, from his hand, not his chest. He gathered her close, cooing to her, promising that she would be alright, that she would have him and all her many brothers and sisters for company and solace. And he promised her revenge. Revenge for her brothers, revenge for his sons.

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Tony’s collapse led to a very long fortnight of convalescence, as the additional strain had drained the little reserves he had managed to recoup and then some. Tony had no regrets on this score, though. He spent the time with the ‘bots, comforting them with his presence and comforting himself in theirs.

Liana, as he had named his little survivor, clung to him fiercely. She would occasionally disengage to spend time with the other ‘bots, Dummy in particular was good at drawing her out of her shell, but she mostly huddled against him - but not against his chest, which seemed telling, as every other ‘bot would scramble in there and press close. Instead, she preferred to snuggle against his hip or under his arm, and to chirp softly to him. Several times a day, she would utter a wavering keen, looking around for something that wasn’t there, and Tony felt his heart break a bit each time. He would prop her on the table to look at the holograms as he worked to design armour similar to what he had worn in the desert, but powered by the Warmth charged arc reactor in his chest.

He read the news reports, which were surprisingly positive. He’d expected a much bigger backlash over the weapons manufacturing, but the truth was that he’d already set the company up to absorb
the change, and the market and the general public were well aware of many of the things he did for them.

He heard from several members of the board through the week, and was warned that there were rumblings amongst a few of the board that he was in the wrong, but he had widespread support amongst the rest of them, even after calling for a police review. The changes he had made in the company, the new directions he had pioneered, the amount of money he’d made for the entire board, all of it was in his favour when it came to something that could have lost him a lot of support.

Obi kept trying to come by the house and talk, but Tony refused to see him. It wasn’t that hard - he couldn’t leave the nursery (or the mattress on the floor he was confined to there), and it wasn’t like he wanted to deal with the man he was almost certain he couldn’t trust as far as he could throw Liana, who was decidedly the smallest and lightest of the Sparklings. He and Rhodey had once tried to calculate where and how the little bots accumulated additional mass, but they hadn’t really been able to figure it out. They didn’t grow, but somehow Dummy weighed more than twice as much as Liana, almost as much as Jarvis did.

Pepper was fielding most of the inquiries and helping set up the audits of all the weapons manufacturing facilities. Tony had given phone interviews to several law enforcement agencies, most of whom SI had worked with at some point or other, providing specialized equipment or software. Pepper, who had an excellent relationship with pretty much every agency, was able to use the excuse of Tony convalescing at home to explain why he wasn’t up to giving face to face interviews.

Tony finished the plans for his suit of armor, and set up the fabrication machines under Jarvis’ supervision. The biggest bot enjoyed the act of creation greatly, and once Tony had networked the fabricating machines, he had taken over almost all supervision of the creation of his personal projects.

“Let’s go with something subtle for colouring, Jarvis,” Tony said with a grin. “Hot rod red with gold highlights, I think.”

“Oh yes, father, very subtle,” Jarvis said dryly.

“None of your sass, young man,” Tony told him, bopping him on top of his head. Jarvis grinned cheekily at him, sticking his tongue out.

“This’s going to take a good few hours,” he told him. “You asked me to remind you to get ready for your charity gala. You wanted it to be your return to the public eye, remember? And I think you’ll have to put pretty much everyone to sleep before you go.” He worried his lower ‘lip’ with his teeth, then nodded more firmly. “No one is really ready for you to go yet. I know if I didn’t have this to do I wouldn’t want to stay awake, and I don’t think anyone else will. It…hurt, when you were gone for so long.” Jarvis leant against Tony, who wrapped an arm around him from behind in a hug.

“Oh, buddy. I’ll be upstairs, I’ll see you before I leave, okay?” Pressing a final kiss to Jarvis’ dome, he made his way to the elevator. He took the time to kiss and cuddle each of the little bots before ushering them gently into unconsciousness. Once every little body was laying curled in a crib (some with a partner, some without), he went up to his ridiculously large (courtesy of Pepper) wardrobe and picked out a suit. It was time to start facing the world again, as much as the thought of doing it made him feel flashes of absolute terror, wild grief and fierce anger.

He dressed quickly but carefully and, after checking his appearance in the mirror to ensure that he didn’t have anything on his face (it wouldn’t have been the first time), he made his way back downstairs.

“You sure you’ll be alright?” he asked, pressing a kiss to the top of Jarvis’ head.
“Yes, Father. The construction is most engrossing, it should keep me occupied while you are gone.” Jarvis took his eyes off what he was doing and looked at Tony, then bit his lip quickly and looked away again. “I will be fine. You need to go, or you will be late.”

Tony stormed back into the workshop a few hours later, eyes dark and full of demons. Jarvis startled from where he had been sitting, and Tony stopped and drew in a deep breath, willing his anger down. He wasn’t going to bring that onto his children.

“I have to go, J,” he strode towards the armour.

“Father, I….there is something you need to see,” Jarvis stuttered out. Tony turned to look at him, taking in the concern on his son’s face, and frowned.

“What is it, baby?” he crossed to Jarvis and knelt in front of him. “Did something scare you?”

“Not…exactly,” Jarvis frowned. “There have been some…odd things tonight. A couple of cars have driven past, more than we would normally have. Some have come past more than once, and lingered near the gate.”

Tony nodded thoughtfully. “I really do have to go, Jarvis, there’s something I need to deal with. We’ll look into this when I get back, okay? I don’t know exactly how long I’ll be gone - I’ve got to fly to Afghanistan and take care of some things. I think you’d be better off asleep until I get back, what do you think?”

Jarvis had frozen at the word ‘Afghanistan’. His eyes got huge in his face and he began to tremble. Tony, realising his mistake, dropped to his knees and gathered his little boy close.

“Shhhh,” he tried to soothe, even as he felt warm tears begin to soak through his shirt. “It’s okay, baby, I’ll be fine. Nothing’s going to happen to me,” he hummed and rocked, and when Jarvis had relaxed slightly, offered a couple of fingers. His little boy latched on with gusto, suckling to comfort himself, both hands fisted in Tony’s shirt.

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“Don’t go, Daddy, please don’t go,” he begged, and Tony felt terrible for it, but he couldn’t leave the people of Golmira in the hands of the Ten Rings. He had to go.

“I’m sorry, baby, I have to,” he whispered against the warm, smooth dome of Jarvis’ head. “Come on, let’s put you to bed,” he stood, cradling Jarvis against his chest.

“No, no, I’ll stay up,” Jarvis tried to argue, but Tony shook his head gently.

“Do you think I didn’t notice you included uplinks in the suit, baby? You don’t need to see what I’m going to do. I’ll be fine, and I’ll be back before you know it. Come on now,” he pressed two fingers to Jarvis’ spark, and moments later the Youngling was asleep. “There you go,” Tony whispered, although it was unnecessary. He wiped a last tear from the corner of Jarvis’ eye, and lowered him onto his preferred sleeping spot - a corner of the mattress Tony himself used when sleeping in the nursery. Tony picked up a teddy bear - again, Jarvis’ preferred sleeping companion - and placed it on top of his spark chamber. In stasis, Jarvis couldn’t perform his usual manoeuvre of wrapping his arms around it while still asleep, but Tony left the teddy on his chassis anyway.

He headed back downstairs, to the suit, and then out across the sea, before ordering the limited AI that helped run the suit - similar to the one that was included in his phones and computers, but with
much greater capabilities - to take over and getting some sleep. It didn’t matter how fast you travelled - and he went fast - it was a long way from America to Afghanistan. He hadn’t been sleeping well even for him, and there wasn’t much else to do right now, so he decided to try and get some rest.

Tony zoomed away from Golmira, having destroyed the stockpiled weapons and left the man who oversaw his own torture in the hands of the liberated victims.

Suddenly, Tony had…company. Company meaning two of his own jets, flying the American flag, and very interested in what he was, what he’d done and all the rest of it. Tony gave it half a second’s thought, then rang Rhodéy.

“Rhodéy, I might need your help,” he said quickly. “I’m about to seriously freak out the fly boys over here, and I need you to back me up.”

“Tony? What did you do? Did you actually send the piece of tech I’m looking at into a militarized no-fly zone? What the hell were you thinking?”

“It’s not just equipment. It’s me!” Tony dodged one of the planes, which had moved a bit too close for comfort.

“What do you mean it’s…”

“It’s a suit, Rhodéy, and I’m inside it, okay? And I’m about to tell the flyboys so, so if you could please keep them from freaking out on me, that would be good!”

“What were you doing?”

“Destroying weapons made by my company which had found their way into the hands of terrorists,” Tony replied succinctly. “Now, excuse me, I need to talk to these pilots.” He opened his comms to the correct radio frequency and responded to the lead pilot’s hails. “Hi, guys, Tony Stark here. I’d appreciate you keeping it holstered, as I am actually inside what you’re looking at.” He shut down his hand propulsors for a second and raised a hand to wave. “Yeah, hi,” he greets again as one of the now bemused-looking pilots waves back. “Just taking care of some misplaced property. Nothing to be concerned over. I’ll just be leaving.”

“You are to accompany us back to base, sir, and give an accounting of what has occurred here,” one of the pilots informs him.

He made it home in a fraction of the time the trip out had taken, and immediately made his way to the nursery and woke Jarvis.

“See?” he murmured, gathering the youngling close. “I’m okay. Everything went fine. I’m home, I’m here, I’m not going anywhere.”

Jarvis clung for several more moments, but when he pulled back his eyes were different than they had been, and overall it looked like the situation had helped him work through some of the horror of the previous months. Jarvis had been keeping his emotions closed off - which was kind of his normal reaction - but the outburst that had occurred earlier, and the subsequent comfort he had received, had obviously made a difference. Jarvis was much lighter, and when Tony woke the Sparklings, he was even willing to transform and play with them in car form, when he’d mostly been avoiding them other than when they needed help.
Tony smiled at that, even as the pain of what he’d unintentionally done to his children throbbed through him. He was never going to forgive himself for what they’d gone through while he was in Afghanistan.

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The investigation was proceeding apace, with Tony keeping himself up-to-date by virtue of badgering, demanding and outright hacking his way to the information. He ran his own checks on every supply line, and soon realised where the weakness had been - discarded weaponry, things that failed quality testing. Someone had been diverting perfectly good equipment into the ‘failed testing’ lots, then selling it on. It wasn’t much - less than a 0.5% increase in failure, but Tony could see where it had started to creep in, now that he knew to look for it.

He shuddered to think about how many of his weapons had ended up in the wrong hands - even a 0.5% increase was an enormous number when you were talking about the batch sizes SI produced, and whoever was selling them had had absolutely no scruples other than those that lived in his back pocket.

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When Obi finally came by the house - with an offering of pizza - Tony decided to see him. However, he also sent a message to both Rhodey and Pepper that the man was in the house. While Obi had won himself some forgiveness for his behaviour when Tony’s parents died, there was still very little trust there, and finding out that someone was dealing Stark weaponry under the table - well, Obi pretty much topped Tony’s list of who it was who could be doing that.

He sat in the overly modern living room - nothing like the cosy style he would have preferred, but it projected more of the image it was better if the people who came into the house believed about him - with Obi overly familiarly close on the couch, sharing the same pizza they had had in their first relatively civil meeting. Tony was drinking apple juice from a scotch glass - a work-around he and Pepper had come up with so that he could at least seem to drink a little.

He was just going to take a drink when Obi reached around his shoulders, arm resting lightly on him, and a high-pitched squeal began by his ear. His glass dropped from his motionless fingers. He couldn’t move, and Obi was laughing cruelly.

“You rejected this project outright, Tony. Probably thought no one could make it work if it didn’t have your hand in it, either. Still, there are so many uses for temporary paralysis I just couldn’t resist having this prototype made. And now, it’s going to help me take your last golden egg from you.”

The cruel chuckle came again, and then as Tony was frozen against the back of the couch he opened his briefcase and clamped a metal claw around the miniature arc reactor. It shrieked as it cut into the metal, and Obi raised his voice to talk over it. “I saw it coming, you know. You’re a fool, Tony. We’re iron-mongers. You and your father both, fools. I stopped him from ruining this company, from ruining my company. Now I’m going to stop you, and get my company back on track.”

He attached a clamp to the arc reactor and twisted. Tony felt the effects of the Warmth dampening the pain, rather than the pain itself, which was something to be grateful for. The reactor came loose from his chest, but the light - that stayed behind. A tiny, visible part of the Warmth glowed brightly in the raw hole in the middle of Tony’s chest.

Obi stared at the hunk of dead metal in his hands, then at the bright light that glowed from inside Tony’s torn flesh, a light that was quickly disappearing as the flesh healed over it. Several slivers of metal were pushed out of Tony’s skin, then it closed over completely.
Before Obi could fully comprehend what had happened, a furious high pitched yell echoed around the room as a heavy metal body crashed into his side, bearing him down to the ground. “YOU. LEAVE. MY. DADDY. ALONE!” Each word was accompanied by a metallic fist crashing into Obi’s face. By the third hit, the blood was spurtling. By the fifth, Obi most likely had significant brain damage, and even if he didn’t he wasn’t getting up any time soon. Jarvis stumbled across to where the noise emitter had rolled and crushed it underfoot before finally crawling across the floor and draping himself across Tony’s chest, wrapping his arms around his neck.

As Tony’s control returned to him - fast, but not that fast - he wrapped an arm around Jarvis, murmuring comfortingly to him until he heard the front door disengage, and running footsteps approaching. “Under the couch, Jarvis, quick,” he hissed, and Jarvis scuttled swiftly under. Tony pushed himself to his feet with a groan and quickly scuffed his feet through the tiny, bloody footprints, then turned to face the door just as a blank faced agent burst through, dressed in an unremarkable suit, gun extended. He took in the tableau and lowered his weapon, eyes darting around the room briefly.

“Mr Stark, are you alright?” The voice was familiar, and after a moment Tony placed it. “I’m fine, thank you, Agent Coulson.” He’d spoken with the man several times since he’d agreed to give phone interviews during his ‘convalescence’ to allow the various law agencies to start following through on what he’d promised - a full review of his company’s dealings legitimate and not, to track down every weapon that had made it into the wrong hands and destroy it, to root out every hint of corruption. The SHIELD agent had been one of the nicest interviews he’d given. He hadn’t poked and prodded too much about Tony’s time in captivity, and he gave the impression of someone who actually understood what he’d been through at the same time. Several other agents entered, sweeping the room, and two of them quickly knelt by Stane, taking in his condition. Then Pepper and Rhodey were coming in the door, and Tony found himself swept up in a fierce three way hug.

“Keep them away from the couch,” he muttered into their ears. “Jarvis is under there.” They nodded their understanding, then ‘helped’ him back across the room to sit on that exact piece of furniture, providing cover as they sat on either side of him.

It took a while, but eventually the agents left. Fortunately, the arc reactor (which Tony stopped them from taking as ‘evidence’ on the grounds that it was proprietary) was covered in Tony’s blood, so he was able to claim that that had been his weapon in beating Stane to a bloody pulp. They probably weren’t completely convinced - Tony didn’t have THAT much blood on him, and almost none on his hands and arms - but they left, taking Stane’s now dead body with them.

As soon as they were out the door, Tony dropped to his knees by the couch, reached under it and Jarvis scrambled out and into his lap. Tony wrapped his arms around him and crooned softly, tracing a finger over the raised designs on Jarvis’ head. After several long moments he stood and turned to the other two. “I should get him back on the other side of the house. They could come back.” He held Jarvis close as he made his way back downstairs, into the other half of the house, then up to the bedroom. He stepped into the bathroom and, lowering Jarvis gently into the tub, started the flow of specially treated warm water, placing the bot almost directly under the faucet and not putting the plug in yet. The contaminated fluid went straight down the drain, and with quick, practiced movements Tony helped the youngling to wash himself off.

Once they were both clean, Tony picked Jarvis back up, grateful as always for his far greater than human strength. He hadn’t really been aware of it - until Rhodey had seen him lift Jarvis as easily as one of the sparklings, and commented on it. The robot may be no bigger than a seven or eight year old child, but he weighed in at a good few hundred kilograms, not that Tony had ever noticed. Rhodey, on the other hand, had, as he could no longer lift Jarvis, or even hold him on his lap. Jarvis
had been forced to learn gentleness when it came to Rhodey and Pepper, far more than his younger siblings who grew in strength slowly.

Tony carried Jarvis to the sleeping area and sank down on the mattress, and with a chorus of chirps and clicks the Sparklings rolled or crawled from their current sleeping spots to curl up around him, until Tony and Jarvis were almost buried in a sea of sleeping baby robots. Liana, although Tony could only identify her by touch since he couldn’t actually see his own hands, latched onto his fingertip and suckled sleepily before dropping back off with his fingertip still in her mouth. He gently tried to disengage, and the baby woke with a disgruntled squeak, sucked again, then fell asleep. Even though Tony didn’t move, the pattern repeated itself multiple times, and he wished he could see her, because just the sound and feeling was absolutely adorable. The swell of love and affection swelled in him, then suddenly expanded out, encompassing all of them in a soft glow that had contented, soft sounds falling from sleeping lips. Jarvis finally relaxed fully against him and went to sleep, and Liana relaxed, although she maintained her grip on his finger.

Tony relaxed back and closed his eyes, and in so doing, missed seeing more of the light break off from weaving around his family and snake out through the walls and away. He didn’t feel it as the Warmth searched out something it had felt, something it hadn’t felt in a long time.

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